Natural Space and Social Space of Community Interaction in the Dynamics of Tourism Economy

Original Article

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Abstract

This research aims to examine how natural and social spaces are interpreted and managed by the people of Paniis Village, Kuningan Regency, within the framework of community-based tourism economic development. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research was conducted through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and field documentation. The findings show that the development of village tourism has encouraged significant social transformation, ranging from changes in economic patterns, shifts in social identity, to the emergence of new forms of community collaboration. The utilisation of potential natural spaces such as waterfalls and mountain landscapes not only brings economic benefits, but also forms an arena for social interaction and local cultural expression. However, challenges such as unequal access to benefits, cultural commodification, and ecological pressure are important issues that need to be managed collectively. In conclusion, tourism in Paniis Village is not only an economic practice, but also a space for the production of values, solidarity, and identity that can be a model of community-based sustainable development.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism, Natural and Social Space, Village Tourism, Sustainable Rural Development.

1. Introduction

Village tourism has developed into a local development strategy that relies on the utilisation of the potential of natural spaces and the active involvement of communities in destination management. This phenomenon reflects the transformation of the role of space, which is no longer just a passive setting for human activities, but rather an interactive arena full of social, economic and cultural meanings. In this context, the relationship between humans and space, both natural and social, becomes increasingly complex, especially when the space helps shape community identity and becomes a source of collective livelihood (King, 2011). Paniis Tourism Village in Kuningan Regency, West Java, is an interesting example of this dynamic. Known for its natural treasures such as waterfalls and pristine mountain landscapes, the village is experiencing changes in the structure of community life as community-based tourism develops. Residents not only maintain traditional practices related to agriculture and local wisdom, but also begin to position themselves as actors of the tourism economy through the provision of homestay services, local cuisine, and guiding activities. This transformation signifies a process of negotiation between the preservation of natural spaces and adaptation to the market economy that comes with the flow of tourists (Wolf et al., 2017). Along with the change in spatial function, a new configuration in the village's social structure

has also emerged. Communities form solidarity-based working groups, such as the Tourism Awareness Group (*Pokdarwis*) and youth tourism pioneer communities, which provide a means of cross-generational and inter-household cooperation. However, this process is not without its challenges. Inequality in the distribution of economic benefits, the risk of environmental damage, and the dilemma between cultural commodification and preservation are crucial issues that need to be studied in depth.

Using a qualitative approach through participatory observation and interviews, this study seeks to contextually understand how Paniis villagers interpret and manage their living space within the framework of the tourism economy. The main focus is on the interaction between natural and social space, as well as the reciprocal impact of the tourism-based development process on social relations, community identity, and environmental sustainability. This research not only aims to capture social practices in tourism villages, but also to explore the possibility of a more inclusive local development model rooted in community power. Within the framework of sustainable development, the involvement of local communities is a key factor in the success of community-based tourist destinations (Mtapuri et al., 2022). The participation of residents is not only limited to technical implementers, but also as decision-makers in designing the direction of their village development.

Therefore, it is important to highlight how local communities organise resources, form social networks, and manage conflicts of interest that may arise. This study also places attention on how information technology, particularly social media and digital reservation systems, has influenced patterns of community interaction and expanded the reach of tourism promotion. Through an in-depth understanding of these dynamics, the research is expected to contribute to the development of social space theory and sustainable tourism practices. This phenomenon shows that tourism not only creates economic impacts, but also stimulates significant social reorganisation.

Previous research has highlighted the economic potential of tourism villages or community involvement, but there is a lack of in-depth studies on how natural and social spaces are negotiated collectively in the context of community-based economic development (Herdiana, 2019; Nirmala & Paramitha, 2020). Not many studies have linked these dynamics to local governance and the distribution of justice in space utilisation. Therefore, this research is important to fill this void and provide a new perspective on inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

2. Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to explore in depth the social dynamics that occur in the context of the utilisation of natural and social space in Paniis Tourism Village. This approach was chosen because it is able to capture social reality holistically, and allows a complete understanding of the meanings, values and social practices that live in society. In this framework, researchers do not only focus on quantitative data or statistical figures, but rather on the process of interaction, residents' experiences, and meaning structures formed through daily activities related to tourism. The research location was conducted in Paniis Village, Pasawahan District, Kuningan Regency, West Java. The location was determined intentionally based on the consideration that this village is one of the real examples of a community-based tourism area that prioritises environmental preservation and the active involvement of local residents. The geographical characteristics of the village, which is surrounded by mountains and has strong natural tourism potential, provide a rich natural

setting for analysis. In addition, the existence of social institutions such as tourism awareness groups, youth communities, and the practice of gotong royong in the management of tourism facilities are important reasons for choosing this location as the object of study.

Data collection techniques were conducted by combining direct observation of residents' social lives with in-depth interviews with key figures who have knowledge and involvement in the dynamics of village tourism. Field experience gained through participatory observation became the main basis in understanding interaction patterns, adaptation strategies, and forms of social cooperation that emerged in response to changes in the local economy. In addition, semi-structured interviews were used to explore informants' personal views and experiences of changes in their living space. Documentary data was also utilised as support, including photographs of activities, maps of the area, and informal documents from the community that are relevant to the research issues.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study used source triangulation techniques, by comparing the results of interviews from various key informants such as community leaders, tourism actors, and village officials, and matching them with the findings of observations and field documentation. Informants were purposively selected by considering their active involvement in the development of village tourism. Data analysis was conducted interactively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was conducted by selecting relevant information from field notes and interview transcripts, then presented in the form of a thematic matrix to identify emerging social and economic patterns. Subsequently, conclusions were drawn gradually by considering the local context and theoretical frameworks on social space and community-based development.

3. Results and Discussion

Research findings indicate that the development of tourism in Paniis Village has led to a dynamic relationship between natural and social spaces, directly forming a new economic structure at the community level. Natural assets such as waterfalls, cool air, and mountainous landscapes are the main attractions used by residents to draw tourists. But beyond that, natural space in the village is not seen as static; it is socially produced and given meaning through collective activities involving residents in planning, management, and preservation of the tourism area.

Field observations show that spaces formerly used as farmland or private family areas have transformed into semi-public economic zones. This reflects a shift in the local economy from agrarian subsistence towards service-oriented activities. This change has raised household incomes and expanded economic participation in informal sectors such as homestay provision, guide services, and local product sales (Ashley, 2006).

The transformation of natural space has also directly affected the village's social structure. The emergence of tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis) and youth communities like Pewisda reflects a new social cohesion oriented towards sustainability and collaboration. Young people are no longer limited to agricultural work; they act as digital promoters, content creators, and agents of local culture preservation. Kompasiana notes that youth empowerment through ecotourism and digital marketing training has encouraged entrepreneurial spirit and a sense of village identity.

However, this evolving economy also presents significant challenges. One is the unequal access to economic benefits. Observations reveal that residents with strategic land or external connections benefit more than marginalised groups such as the elderly or women without business capital. Jamal and Dredge (2014) warns that without fair distribution mechanisms,

community-based tourism can perpetuate social inequalities. Environmental challenges also appear, especially in waste management and land-use change. Waste volume increases with visitor numbers, while management capacity remains limited. Unplanned facility development also risks environmental degradation, particularly in water catchment zones and natural habitats. Addressing this requires participatory spatial planning that includes residents as key actors.

Beyond economic and environmental effects, cultural aspects are also evolving (Soraya & Refangga, 2024). Residents' identities, once tied to traditional professions, are now becoming hybrid identities as "tourism actors". This not only impacts social status but also work values and norms of interaction. Lanfant et al. (1995) records that social identity mobility in tourism communities is an adaptive response to external pressures and economic opportunity, opening the way for redefining the roles of women and youth. Local creativity is a prominent adaptive response, with community members turning cultural and environmental elements into educational tourism offerings (farm tours, craft workshops, and traditional food services) for both economic and cultural regeneration. Giampiccoli and Saayman (2016) sees community-based innovation as a form of resistance to tourism capitalism while preserving local values.

Digital technology integration is a prominent aspect of tourism management in Paniis Village. Social media is used primarily to promote the destination, with visual storytelling emphasising cultural authenticity, natural beauty, and residents' hospitality. This approach builds an emotional connection between tourists and the village (Agustina et al., 2024), underlining the importance of cultural narratives in place branding. Yet, digitalisation also brings tension between commercial demands and cultural authenticity. In some cases, culture is packaged superficially for market appeal. To prevent cultural commodification, some young residents have drafted a local cultural digital code of conduct to guard against meaning distortion online (James, 2009).

Natural spaces in Paniis also serve as social meeting points between residents and tourists. Waterfall areas and agri-tourism farmland are social nodes where novel interactions occur. Tourism brings open communication and introduces new norms and practices into daily life. The local community has shown remarkable adaptability, adjusting services, working hours, and language skills to meet tourist demands.

This social adaptation is also seen in increased collective spirit in maintaining tourism spaces. In several regular gotong royong (mutual cooperation) initiatives, residents voluntarily clean the environment, repair footpaths, and decorate public space to enhance visitor appeal. This cooperative culture emerges not only from tradition but also from awareness that tourism success brings direct and indirect economic benefits. Mayaka et al. (2018) indicate that successful Community-Based Tourism depends on collective spirit, resident participation, and shared ownership. Cooperation is arranged both formally through organisations such as Pokdarwis and informally among families: one family provides homestay services, another supplies food, while neighbours provide transport or guiding. This horizontal division of labour forms an inclusive and socially empowered tourism ecosystem, reflecting the local social capital. Altinay et al. (2016). describes as collaboration based on trust, common values, and collective goals.

Nevertheless, tourism has also reshaped residents' perception of digital space. The internet and social media are now vital tools for managing information, promoting village potential, and shaping a positive image for prospective tourists. Young people's use of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to share local activities: harvesting, adat rituals, or craft making with compelling visuals and narratives reflects a shift from conventional to digital

storytelling promotion. However, rapid digital transformation raises concerns about portraying culture artificially for market consumption. In response, local communities have begun drafting digital cultural codes to guide ethical representation in online spaces. These strategies indicate the emergence of critical digital awareness from within the community, rather than under external pressure.

Occupational structures in Paniis have diversified. Residents are no longer solely farmers but include tourist guides, homestay operators, baristas at local coffee shops, and content creators. This tourism economy stimulates identity mobility and fluid roles aligned with market demands. Women, once primarily domestic, now manage tourist eateries, create souvenirs, facilitate cultural events, and oversee group finances. This development offers new opportunities and bolsters women's positions in public village life. Inclusive tourism can be a tool for social transformation, especially for elevating roles of previously marginalised groups in community decision-making.

Nevertheless, economic benefit distribution remains a core concern. Observations show that some groups, those with initial capital, strong networks, or strategic land, dominate access to business opportunities, while marginalised groups (the elderly, youths without digital devices, women without family support) lag behind. This inequality demands planned and inclusive social interventions such as digital literacy training, micro-enterprise incubators, and intensive assistance to marginal groups to realise the ideals of community-based tourism. Guo and Jordan (2022) caution that social exclusion in rural tourism can provoke horizontal conflicts if transparency and broad participation are absent.

Environmental carrying capacity must be considered in space management. A surge in tourist visits without strict regulation can cause ecological pressure: vegetation damage, water source disturbance, and rising waste. While Paniis has implemented some mitigation through cleanliness patrols and visitor education, efforts are sporadic. A long-term strategy requires a structured community-based environmental management system including zoning, quota-based ticketing, and participatory surveillance.

Tourism has strengthened social cohesion in Paniis but may also test social resilience if unfairly managed. Minor tensions arise as some groups feel underrepresented in decision-making, particularly regarding space use and benefit sharing. Inclusive deliberation and leadership rotation in management bodies are vital to prevent dominance by certain groups. Manaf et al. (2018) emphasise that social sustainability in village tourism depends on community capacity to resolve conflicts through dialogue and fair institutional arrangements.

An important field observation is that social space in the village has been reorganised through intensified tourism. Previously shaped by kinship and agrarian cultural practice, social space has grown more open, formed by interactions among individuals in services and transactions. This change does not destroy but shifts social relations into more flexible patterns. For example, residents from different hamlets who rarely interacted now work together in homestay management, logistics, or guiding tourists. Social networks now extend beyond family and local boundaries to external business actors, government institutions, and digital consumers from outside areas.

Changes in social space also influence perceptions of work. Where work was once associated with physical labour, long hours in the fields, and harvest output as success indicators, today it includes service, digital, and creative sectors. Residents have adopted time efficiency principles and service quality standards demanded by modern tourism. However, these transformations remain grounded in local values. Honesty, courtesy, and hospitality remain highly valued and are themselves cultural selling points in tourism.

Amid these social shifts, women's roles have become increasingly central. Women are not just support staff but micro-business leaders and key service providers. They facilitate traditional food provision, homestay arrangements, cultural guiding, and manage group finances. This shift shows an increased centrality of women in public life and opens new avenues for negotiation in community decision-making, including official forums like village meetings and Pokdarwis assemblies. This reinforces Abukhalifeh and Wondirad (2019) view that successful community-based tourism correlates strongly with gender inclusivity in socio-economic roles.

In cultural terms, village tourism has become a medium for revitalising previously hidden or marginalised traditional values. Local performance arts, communal cooperation, and indigenous environmental wisdom are re-emerged as part of tourist attractions. This process has created collective pride in village identity, especially among the younger generation, who now view heritage as living assets, not relics. Educational offerings such as bamboo weaving workshops, traditional games, and farm tours are cultural adaptations welcomed by both tourists and the community. Yet revitalisation faces dilemmas. In some cases, cultural events are formatted for performative effect to meet tourist expectations, risking commodification if curation is driven solely by commercial considerations. To preserve authenticity, internal screening mechanisms are needed, such as strengthening the role of traditional leaders, integrating cultural education into village schools, and establishing local cultural forums to safeguard meaning.

Regarding economic sustainability, the village shows signs of dual economic structures. Not all households rely solely on tourism income. Some maintain agricultural activities for main subsistence while using tourism as supplementary income. This dual-economy model supports social resilience: when tourism dips due to rain or national economic shocks, residents still have a familiar local resource buffer. However, not everyone benefits equally. Skills, capital, access to information, and social networks still hinder marginal residents from engaging. The elderly, digitally excluded youths, and unsupported women remain vulnerable. Planned, inclusive interventions such as digital literacy training, microenterprise programmes, and mentoring are essential to ensure community-based tourism does not leave anyone behind.

Politically, residents of Paniis Village have shown maturity in participating in decision-making over tourism development. Open forums include religious leaders, customary figures, youth, women, and informal actors (e.g. homestay operators, local ojek drivers). The resulting discourse indicates democratised deliberative space where power is not monopolised by local elites but distributed via egalitarian consultation. This demonstrates the vital role of local institutions in governance. Ecological awareness among residents has also increased with visitor presence. Environmental initiatives include non-organic waste recycling, tourist education about ecosystem conservation, and monitoring risky activities like illegal trails to waterfalls. The village is even exploring an eco-edutourism model that combines natural beauty with environmental learning, in line with Fafurida et al. (2023) view that successful village tourism balances ecological and educational dimensions.

In all these dynamics, Paniis Village presents a complex picture of how space, culture, society, and economy intertwine in a living entity. In terms of education, community-based tourism in Paniis offers vast potential as a non-formal learning space supporting contextual and experiential education. Activities like ecotourism training, cultural guiding, and homestay management serve vocational learning for youth and women, strengthening digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and environmental awareness. Additionally, children and adolescents involved in educational tourism activities (agrotourism, organic waste processing, and

documenting local culture) support intergenerational learning that reinforces community and cultural values. This opens possibilities for integrating community-based education into local curricula, particularly in social studies, citizenship, and environmental education. Thus, village tourism contributes economically and acts as a social laboratory that builds community-wide educational capacity.

The village is no longer a static space awaiting external assistance but a producer of meaning, values, and social innovation that responds to change while preserving identity. In this context, Paniis's community-based tourism model can serve as a reference for other areas seeking to build tourism not only as an economic industry but also as a socially equitable and sustainable project. In other words, Paniis Village exemplifies how a local community can play a central role in shaping its own development direction and identity.

In the face of globalised and commercialised tourism that often marginalises indigenous communities, Paniis presents an alternative grounded in participatory, reflective, and long-term rooted development. Through collective mechanisms such as village councils, youth forums, and cross-generational collaboration, the village crafts a development narrative inseparable from inherited local values. The village's self-reliance in balancing natural and social resources demonstrates its adaptive capacity to face modern challenges without abandoning traditional roots. Its success lies not in natural wealth alone, but in the quality of social relations, cultural sensitivity, and collective responsibility in maintaining harmony between people and their environment. Therefore, the approach in Paniis Village is worth considering in national tourism policy formulation that is more inclusive, ethical, and supports community resilience to ongoing change.

The development of community-based tourism in Paniis Village has not only impacted economic and social aspects, but also created an alternative learning space that reflects the principles of experiential learning. Activities such as ecotourism training, homestay management practice, handicraft production, and nature guiding have become real-life platforms for residents, especially youth and women, to learn directly through active participation in everyday contexts. In the experiential learning approach developed by (Kolb, 2014), The learning process does not occur solely through the transfer of knowledge, but rather through a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This process is clearly reflected in the dynamics of the Paniis Village community, where residents learn from hands-on experiences, reflect on challenges and successes, form new understandings, and then apply them again in the management of the tourism destination.

This learning takes place organically and informally, yet it contributes significantly to strengthening social competence, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and cross-cultural communication skills. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of community-based education, an educational approach that places the community as the subject of learning by drawing on local resources and lived experiences as core teaching materials (Furco, 2010). In this context, tourism activities are not merely economic practices but also serve as educational tools with the potential to be integrated into the school curriculum, particularly within subjects such as social studies, citizenship, and environmental education.

Thus, the practice of experiential learning in Paniis Village demonstrates that community activities can be developed into social laboratories to support contextual and relevant project-based learning. If formalised through collaboration between schools and the community, these local experiences can become an empowering alternative educational model rooted in the realities of society.

The success of Paniis Village also highlights the importance of building local capacity, not only in terms of the economy and infrastructure but also in social, cultural, and technological literacy. Empowerment that emerges organically from community awareness and initiative lends strong legitimacy to every form of innovation that arises. In this regard, the success of tourism is not measured solely by visitor numbers or income, but by the extent to which the community can maintain autonomy, expand participation, and strengthen social solidarity.

This aligns with Paulo Freire's theory of critical social education and the approach of community-based education, both of which emphasise the role of education as a means of social transformation grounded in active community participation. (Freire, 1970) emphasises that education must be liberating, not one-directional, and should encourage learners to critically reflect on their social realities (conscientisation) through dialogue and collective action. In the context of Paniis Village, activities such as ecotourism training, youth-led homestay management, and cultural preservation by women's groups can be understood as forms of community-based non-formal education that facilitate the strengthening of digital literacy, environmental awareness, and social empowerment.

This aligns with the principles of community-based education, which assert that the learning process should be relevant to the needs of the community, grounded in local experiences, and promote collective participation in the design and implementation of the learning agenda (Sujarwo et al., 2017). This process not only enhances individuals' economic capacities but also strengthens social cohesion and cultural identity. Therefore, a tourist village such as Paniis has the potential to become a model of a learning society, where education occurs organically through social interaction, community cooperation, and reflection on local values. Within this framework, the social transformation taking place in Paniis can be interpreted as the result of social education practices integrated sustainably into local economic and cultural dynamics.

This study demonstrates that tourism development in Paniis Village has impacted not only the economy but also reshaped social relations, work patterns, and the community's cultural identity. The utilisation of natural spaces as tourist attractions, combined with residents' participation in managing social spaces, has given rise to a community-based economy that is adaptive, inclusive, and grounded in local values. This process is supported by the strength of social capital, particularly solidarity among residents and the spirit of mutual cooperation, which remain intact amidst the ongoing transformation.

However, these dynamics also bring serious challenges, such as unequal access to economic benefits, the potential commodification of culture, and ecological risks stemming from inadequate environmental planning. Therefore, a tourism development strategy is needed: one that not only focuses on economic growth but also ensures equitable distribution, cultural preservation, and ecological sustainability.

Furthermore, the findings of this study hold important implications for education. The practice of community-based tourism in Paniis Village can serve as a contextual and practical learning source for both formal and non-formal education. The community's activities, including ecotourism training, digital promotion, and cultural preservation, reflect the principles of experiential learning and community-based education. This opens up opportunities to integrate local values and community wisdom into school curricula, particularly within subjects such as Social Studies, Citizenship, and Environmental Education. By using community social practices as learning material, education in schools can become more contextual, meaningful, and empowering.

The experience of Paniis Village stands as a concrete example that villages can become centres of social and educational innovation when given the space to craft development narratives based on local potential. This model of community-based tourism development is worth adopting as a reference in efforts to build tourism that is just, sustainable, and supportive of educational transformation that is value-driven, contextual, and participatory.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that tourism development in Paniis Village has had an impact not only on the economic aspect but also on the restructuring of social relations, work patterns, and the cultural identity of the community. The utilisation of natural spaces as tourist attractions, combined with residents' participation in the management of social spaces, has given rise to a community-based economic system that is adaptive, inclusive, and rooted in local values. This process is supported by strong social capital, particularly the solidarity among residents and the spirit of mutual cooperation that has endured throughout the transformation.

However, these dynamics also give rise to serious challenges, such as inequality in access to economic benefits, the potential commodification of culture, and ecological risks stemming from the lack of planned environmental governance. Therefore, a tourism development strategy is required, one that does not merely emphasise economic growth, but also ensures equitable distribution, cultural preservation, and ecological sustainability.

The experience of Paniis Village serves as a concrete example that a village can become an independent centre of social innovation when given the space to formulate development narratives based on local potential and values. This model of community-based tourism development is worthy of consideration as a reference in building tourism that is just, sustainable, and culturally grounded.

It is important to note that the success of tourism in Paniis Village cannot be separated from the community's capacity to maintain harmony between the preservation of natural spaces and the living social values. The balance between economic, cultural, and ecological aspects is key to ensuring long-term sustainability. In this context, the role of young people, women, and local figures is highly strategic in preserving community identity while promoting innovation. Thus, strengthening local capacities and participatory management must be prioritised in every effort to develop tourist villages in Indonesia so that they genuinely reflect social justice and sustainability.

This research still has several limitations, including the absence of a quantitative approach for accurately measuring economic impacts, limited exploration of vulnerable groups in depth, and the lack of a comparative study with other tourist villages. Future research is encouraged to integrate mixed-methods approaches, expand the scope of the study, and examine in more detail the policy interventions and the role of government institutions in supporting the sustainability of community-based tourist villages.

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