

Social Dynamics and Tourist Experience at Wakila Peak, Muna Island: A Sociology of Tourism Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to analyze the social dynamics and tourist experiences at Wakila Peak, Muna Island, from a sociological perspective on tourism.

Method: This study uses a qualitative case study design, with field observations, in-depth interviews with visitors and local actors, and documentation of tourism activities.

Result: Wakila Peak serves not only as a recreational destination but also as a social space that facilitates interaction, collective identity formation, and the production of experiential tourism meaning. The tourist experience is shaped by a combination of natural landscapes, social practices, and symbolic interactions among visitors that strengthen the destination's appeal.

Contribution: Theoretically, this research contributes to the sociology of tourism by positioning the tourist experience as a dynamic social construction within the context of local destinations. The practical implication of this study is the importance of strengthening community-based tourism management that considers social and cultural aspects as integral to sustainable destination development.

Keywords: Tourism, Social Dynamics, Tourist Experience, Sociology of Tourism, Community-Based Tourism

Introduction

Contemporary tourism is no longer understood solely as a leisure activity but as a social practice that involves the production of meaning, symbolic interaction, and the construction of experiences by the actors involved. From the perspective of the sociology of tourism, the tourist experience is not an objective entity, but rather the result of social processes influenced by relationships between individuals, cultural contexts, and the structure of the space that surrounds them (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Campos et al., 2018). This shift marks an important transformation in tourism studies from a destination-based to an experiential (tourism) approach, where social interaction is a key element in shaping a destination's attractiveness (Morgan et al., 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Neuhofer et al., 2012).

In line with this, the concept of the tourist experience has become a major focus in modern tourism studies. The tourist experience is understood as a multidimensional construct that encompasses emotional, cognitive, and social aspects, shaped by tourists' interactions with the destination environment and other actors (Kim et al., 2012; Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Campos et al., 2018). In this context, social interaction between tourists and between tourists and local communities is an important factor that not only affects tourism satisfaction but also forms the collective meaning of a destination (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014; Prebensen et al., 2010; Eusébio et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the sociological approach views the tourist space as a social arena produced and reproduced through social practices. The concept of social production of space shows that tourism space is not neutral, but is shaped by power relations, cultural values, and the daily practices of the actors who use it (Lefebvre, 1991; Edensor, 2001; Bærenholdt et al.,



2004). In the context of local tourism, natural tourist destinations often transform ordinary social spaces into economic and symbolic spaces with tourism value through intensive social interaction processes (Su et al., 2020; Saarinen, 2016; Boley et al., 2014).

On the other hand, the development of community-based tourism increasingly emphasizes the social dimension in destination development. This model emphasizes the participation of local communities in tourism management, while integrating the interaction between tourists and communities into the tourism experience itself (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Okazaki, 2008; Tasci et al., 2013). Empirical studies show that local community involvement not only improves the sustainability of destinations but also enriches the tourist experience through the social and cultural authenticity it offers (Okazaki, 2008; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2017; Lee, 2013).

In Indonesia, especially in rural areas and local tourist destinations, social dynamics are often underexplored. Many studies still focus on economic aspects and infrastructure development, while the dimensions of social interaction, tourism experience, and the construction of destination meaning remain relatively underdeveloped (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015). In fact, understanding this social dynamic is important to explain how a destination develops and is perceived by tourists.

Wakila Peak on Muna Island is one of the local tourist destinations that develops through social interaction between visitors and the surrounding community, and are supported by an attractive natural landscape. This destination is not only a recreational space but also a social arena where meaning is exchanged, collective identity is formed, and distinctive tourist experiences are produced. However, studies that specifically analyze the social dynamics and tourism experience in this location from a tourism-sociology perspective are still limited.

Based on this, this study aims to analyze the social dynamics and tourism experience in Puncak Wakila, Muna Island, from a tourism sociology perspective. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of the sociology of tourism, especially by advancing understanding of the tourism experience as a social construct, and to provide practical implications for the sustainable development of community-based tourism.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative case study design to understand in depth the social dynamics and tourism experiences in Wakila Peak, Muna Island. This approach was chosen because it can capture the meaning, interaction, and social construction that occur in the context of tourism practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case studies allow for intensive exploration of phenomena in a specific location by considering the complexity of existing social relations (Yin, 2018).

Location and Research Subject

The research was conducted at Wakila Peak, one of the local tourist destinations on Muna Island, Southeast Sulawesi. This location was chosen purposively because it demonstrates characteristics of a nature-based tourist destination that has been transformed into an interactive social space with increasing visitation. The study's subjects include tourists, local business actors, and the surrounding community who are directly involved in tourism activities.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three main techniques: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to directly examine social interactions, tourist activities, and visitors' use of space. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling to obtain a comprehensive understanding of tourist experiences and the social dynamics involved. The key informants consisted of three main groups: (1) tourists visiting Wakila Peak

(both first-time and repeat visitors), (2) local community members involved in tourism activities, including small-scale vendors, parking attendants, and site managers, and (3) community leaders or local stakeholders who have knowledge of the development and management of the destination. This categorization allowed for the capture of diverse perspectives on social interaction, experience formation, and community involvement. Documentation in the form of photographs, field notes, and visual materials was used to reinforce and validate the field data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis is carried out thematically through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The analysis process involves open, axial, and selective coding techniques to identify patterns of social interaction, forms of travel experiences, and meanings constructed by actors. Data interpretation involves linking empirical findings to the sociological framework of tourism, particularly the concepts of tourism experiences, social interactions, and space production.

Data Validity

To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses triangulation of sources and methods, as well as member checking with informants, to ensure the suitability of the researcher's interpretation with the experience conveyed. In addition, the researcher conducted prolonged engagement in the field to gain a deeper understanding of the social context under study.

Result and Discussion

Wakila Peak as a Social Space and Production of Tourist Interaction

The results of the study show that Wakila Peak not only functions as a natural tourist destination but also as a social space actively produced through interaction among visitors. Activities such as taking pictures, gathering, talking, and sharing experiences through social media are the main practices shaping the space's dynamics. One of the informants stated:

“If you come here, not only to see the scenery, but also to meet new friends, take pictures with each other, and sometimes chat with new people.” (Tourist informant, 2026)

These findings indicate that the tourist experience is not only shaped by the physical landscape but also by the social interactions that occur within it. From the perspective of the sociology of tourism, this aligns with the concept of the tourist gaze, which is not only visual but also social, in which tourists actively construct experiences through relationships with others (Urry & Larsen, 2011). These interactions create a co-created experience, an experience formed through collective involvement among actors (Campos et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the practice of sharing experiences on social media strengthens the production of tourist spaces as symbolic spaces. Visitors not only consume space, but also reproduce it through digitally disseminated visual representations. It strengthens the argument that tourist spaces are the result of social construction that continues to undergo reproduction through daily practices (Lefebvre, 1991).

Tourist Experience as a Social and Symbolic Construction

The tourist experience at Wakila Peak is shaped by a combination of natural elements, social interaction, and the symbolic meanings visitors attach to it. Many tourists interpret their visit not just as recreation, but as an emotional and social experience. An informant revealed:

“This place makes it calm, but also exciting because it is crowded. We can relax but also feel part of that atmosphere.” (Tourist informant, 2026)

This statement shows that the tourist experience is multidimensional, encompassing emotional, social, and cognitive aspects. It aligns with the concept of a memorable tourism experience, which emphasizes that tourism experiences are shaped by complex interactions between individuals and their social environment (Kim et al., 2012).

Within Bourdieu's framework, these experiences can also be understood as part of social practices influenced by the habitus and social capital individuals possess (Bourdieu, 1984). Travelers with certain social backgrounds tend to interpret the travel experience differently, depending on their preferences, values, and social networks. Thus, the tourist experience is not universal, but is socially and culturally constructed.

Social Dynamics and the Formation of Temporary Cohesion

Other findings show that social interaction at Wakila Peak produces a temporary form of social cohesion. Visitors who do not know each other can easily interact, collaborate on activities such as taking pictures, or share space. One of the informants stated:

“Even though we do not know each other, we usually get along quickly here, especially if we both ask for a photo.” (Tourist informant, 2026)

This phenomenon demonstrates the existence of bridging social capital, a social relationship that connects individuals from different backgrounds in the context of relatively short interactions (Putnam, 2000). This kind of interaction enhances the travel experience, increases visitor satisfaction, and fosters an inclusive social atmosphere.

However, this cohesion is temporary and does not always continue outside the context of tourism. It shows that the tourist space functions as a social arena that allows the formation of intense but not permanent short-term social relationships. In this perspective, tourism can be understood as a liminal space that allows individuals to step outside the everyday social structure and build new relationships flexibly (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014).

The Role of Local Communities in the Production of Tourist Experiences

The local communities around Wakila Peak play an important role in shaping the tourism experience by providing services, managing facilities, and engaging directly with visitors. This involvement is not only economic, but also social and cultural. One of the local actors stated:

“We are trying to make visitors comfortable, not only for sales, but also for helping them enjoy this place.” (Local business actors, 2026)

These findings suggest that travel experiences are also produced through the relationship between tourists and local communities. In community-based tourism, local community involvement is a key factor in creating authentic, sustainable experiences (Okazaki, 2008). In addition, this interaction contributes to the formation of the destination's identity as a lively and dynamic social space. Destinations are not only understood as tourist attractions but also as arenas of social interaction involving various actors with different interests and roles.

Theoretical Synthesis

The results of this study show that the social dynamics and tourist experiences in Wakila Peak are the outcome of a social construction process involving interactions among tourists, symbolic practices, and local community involvement. These findings reinforce the argument that tourism cannot be understood simply as an economic activity, but as a complex social phenomenon.

The main contribution of this research is to expand the understanding of tourism experience as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by interaction, rather than solely by

landscape consumption. Thus, the sociological approach to tourism is important for explaining how local destinations develop and are interpreted within a broader social context.

Conclusion

This research confirms that Wakila Peak not only functions as a natural tourist destination but also as a social space actively produced through interaction among tourists, symbolic practices, and local community involvement. The tourist experiences formed in this location are multidimensional—involving emotional, social, and cultural aspects—and cannot be separated from the social construction process that takes place within the tourist space. Thus, tourism is understood not only as landscape consumption, but as a dynamic and relational social practice.

The main novelty of this research lies in treating tourism experiences as socially co-constructed within the context of locally developed destinations. This study shows that social interaction between visitors, the practice of sharing experiences (both directly and through digital media), and relationships with local communities play a key role in shaping the meaning and attractiveness of destinations. This finding expands the study of the sociology of tourism by emphasizing that the production of tourist spaces is not determined solely by physical or economic factors, but also by the intensity and quality of the social relations that occur within them.

Practically, this research has important implications for the development of sustainable tourism. First, the management of destinations such as Puncak Wakila needs to integrate a community-based tourism approach that is not only focused on increasing visits but also on strengthening inclusive and authentic social interactions. Second, the destination development strategy must prioritize the dimension of the tourist experience by providing interaction spaces and social facilities, and by strengthening local identities to improve the quality of the visitor experience. Third, local governments and stakeholders need to encourage the strategic use of digital media to strengthen destinations' representation without eroding the social and cultural values that are their main attractions.

However, this study has limitations, including a single-location focus and a contextual qualitative approach. Therefore, further research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across destinations and to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of social dynamics and tourism experiences in diverse local tourism contexts.

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