

RESIDENT SATISFACTION IN RURAL TOURISM: PRIORITISING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS IN GOPENG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract. This study investigates the effects of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of rural tourism development on resident satisfaction in Gopeng, Perak, Malaysia. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, the research adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory design to test hypotheses derived from prior literature. Data were collected via purposive sampling from 58 residents living near the popular eco-adventure site of Gua Tempurung. Measurement items were adapted from validated tourism impact scales and rated on a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression were conducted using SPSS Version 29. Results indicate that social and economic effects are significant and positive predictors of resident satisfaction, with economic factors showing the strongest influence. Social benefits such as enhanced community pride and cultural preservation also contributed substantially to satisfaction. In contrast, environmental effects were not statistically significant, suggesting that, at this stage of development, perceived social and economic gains outweigh environmental considerations in shaping resident attitudes. The overall model explains 74.6% of the variance in satisfaction, indicating substantial explanatory power. The study contributes to theory by refining Social Exchange Theory applications in rural tourism, demonstrating the differential weighting of benefit dimensions in resident evaluations. Practically, the findings highlight the need for policymakers and tourism operators to sustain and equitably distribute economic and social benefits while proactively managing environmental resources to ensure long-term sustainability. Limitations include the cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, and a single-destination sample, suggesting directions for comparative and longitudinal future research.

Keywords: *rural tourism development, resident satisfaction, social exchange theory, Gopeng, tourism impacts*

Introduction

Tourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors globally, with rural destinations increasingly recognised for their role in diversifying national economies, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering environmental stewardship (Traskevich and Fontanari, 2023; Nechifor, 2014). In Malaysia, rural tourism has been strategically promoted through initiatives such as the National Ecotourism Plan, aiming to stimulate local economies while conserving natural resources. The Gopeng region in Perak exemplifies this development trajectory, leveraging its rich natural attractions, most notably Gua Tempurung, and community-based tourism activities such as white-water rafting, caving, and cultural heritage experiences. Post-COVID-19 recovery strategies have emphasised sustainable tourism, digital marketing adoption, and resilience-building for rural destinations, aligning with global calls for tourism models that balance economic gains with social inclusivity and ecological integrity. Prior studies on rural tourism have documented its potential to generate employment, stimulate entrepreneurship, and enhance social cohesion (Abukhalifeh and Wondirad, 2019; Jani, 2018). Empirical evidence highlights the importance of residents' perceptions in

sustaining tourism development, particularly where community well-being is a stated policy objective (Stylidis, 2016; Andereck et al., 2005). The Social Exchange Theory (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011; Ap, 1992) has frequently been used to explain why residents support tourism when perceived benefits outweigh costs. However, existing research often emphasises visitor experiences or aggregate economic performance, with limited attention to integrated assessments of economic, social, and environmental effects on local satisfaction, especially in Malaysian rural contexts like Gopeng. Moreover, many studies are case-specific without cross-comparing the weight of different development dimensions on resident satisfaction, leaving a gap in understanding their relative influence.

Despite Gopeng's emergence as a prominent rural tourism hub, questions remain about the sustainability and equitability of its growth. Economic benefits such as job creation and small business growth are well-documented, yet concerns persist regarding rising living costs, environmental degradation, and cultural commodification (Chuang, 2013). Empirical evidence on how these mixed impacts shape residents' overall satisfaction is scarce, particularly in settings where tourism is both a livelihood source and a potential disruptor of traditional lifestyles. Addressing this gap, this study investigates: (1) the relationship between environmental effects and resident satisfaction, (2) the relationship between social effects and resident satisfaction, and (3) the relationship between economic effects and resident satisfaction in Gopeng, Perak. The overarching hypothesis is that rural tourism development positively influences resident satisfaction, contingent on the balance of perceived benefits and costs. This paper contributes to the rural tourism literature by simultaneously examining economic, social, and environmental determinants of resident satisfaction within a single empirical framework, offering a nuanced understanding of their relative impacts. The originality lies in its focus on a high-profile Malaysian ecotourism site undergoing rapid development, coupled with the use of robust quantitative analysis to test theoretically grounded hypotheses. The findings will be relevant to both academic audiences, particularly scholars of sustainable tourism, community-based tourism, and development studies, and practitioners including policymakers, local government authorities, and tourism operators seeking to align rural tourism growth with resident well-being. By integrating empirical insights with policy-relevant recommendations, the study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice in fostering inclusive and sustainable rural tourism development.

Literature review

Conceptual background and core constructs

Rural tourism refers to tourism activities taking place in non-urban areas, typically leveraging natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and community-based initiatives (Traskevich and Fontanari, 2023; Nechifor, 2014). In Malaysia, rural tourism has been framed as a strategic tool for economic diversification and cultural preservation, particularly in areas such as Gopeng, Perak, where eco-adventure tourism has accelerated. Resident satisfaction, in this context, denotes the overall evaluation of tourism's impact on one's quality of life, reflecting perceptions of economic, social, and environmental change (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011). This construct is critical because positive resident attitudes are a precondition for sustainable tourism development (Andereck et al., 2005). This study is grounded in Social Exchange Theory

(Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011; Ap, 1992), which posits that individuals evaluate tourism by weighing perceived benefits (e.g., income, infrastructure, cultural pride) against perceived costs (e.g., congestion, cultural commodification, environmental damage). When benefits outweigh costs, residents are more likely to support tourism development; when costs predominate, opposition emerges. SET has been extensively applied to explain resident attitudes in tourism contexts (Stylidis, 2016; Gursoy et al., 2010).

Social effects of rural tourism

Social effects encompass changes to community life, cultural preservation, and social cohesion resulting from tourism. Tourism can strengthen community identity, create opportunities for cultural exchange, and improve social infrastructure such as recreational facilities (Abukhalifeh and Wondirad, 2019). For instance, cultural preservation initiatives in tourism destinations increased local pride and participation. However, rapid tourism growth may lead to overcrowding, privacy loss, and cultural commodification, which can undermine resident satisfaction (Sharpley, 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that positive social effects are strongly associated with higher resident satisfaction. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011) demonstrated that community involvement in tourism planning enhanced both satisfaction and support for tourism. Accordingly, in Gopeng's context, where heritage and eco-tourism are core attractions, social effects are expected to be a significant driver of satisfaction. (H1): There is a positive relationship between social effects of rural tourism development and the overall satisfaction of local residents in Gopeng, Perak.

Economic effects of rural tourism

Economic effects include job creation, business opportunities, infrastructure investment, and income stability arising from tourism activities. Rural tourism can stimulate local entrepreneurship, especially in sectors such as handicrafts, homestays, and traditional food services (Traskevich and Fontanari, 2023). In Malaysia, Abukhalifeh and Wondirad (2020) reported that tourism-related income and employment opportunities significantly improved rural household welfare. However, economic benefits are not always evenly distributed. Economic leakage to external investors, inflation in property and living costs, and seasonal employment patterns can create discontent among residents. The balance between tangible economic gains and these drawbacks determines tourism's net contribution to satisfaction. SET suggests that when economic returns are visible and equitable, residents are more likely to support tourism development. (H2): There is a positive relationship between economic effects of rural tourism development and the overall satisfaction of local residents in Gopeng, Perak.

Environmental effects of rural tourism

Environmental effects relate to tourism's influence on local ecosystems, natural resources, and conservation practices. Well-managed tourism can support biodiversity conservation, improve environmental awareness, and fund preservation projects. For example, eco-tourism initiatives that integrate waste management systems and restrict visitor numbers have been shown to improve both environmental outcomes and resident satisfaction. Conversely, unregulated tourism growth can lead to pollution, habitat

destruction, and resource depletion. Studies show that environmental degradation can erode community support for tourism if residents perceive that conservation is neglected. In Gopeng, where Gua Tempurung and surrounding forests are major attractions, the quality of environmental management is likely to influence satisfaction. (H3): There is a positive relationship between environmental effects of rural tourism development and the overall satisfaction of local residents in Gopeng, Perak.

Integrated effects of rural tourism

While individual dimensions: social, economic, and environmental; have been widely studied, fewer works examine their combined influence on resident satisfaction. SET suggests that residents form an overall assessment of tourism development by integrating perceptions across these domains. This holistic evaluation influences not only satisfaction but also behavioural intentions to support or oppose tourism expansion. (H4): There is a positive relationship between the combined effects of rural tourism development and the overall satisfaction of local residents in Gopeng, Perak.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory, and deductive research design. A cross-sectional approach was chosen because data were collected at a single point in time, enabling the assessment of relationships between variables without the need for longitudinal tracking. The explanatory orientation aligns with the study's objective of testing causal relationships between social, economic, and environmental effects of rural tourism development and residents' overall satisfaction. The deductive approach is appropriate as the study builds on established theories, particularly Social Exchange Theory, to derive and empirically test specific hypotheses. This design is widely applied in tourism research to investigate the determinants of resident perceptions and behavioural intentions. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising four sections: (1) language preference, (2) demographic profile, (3) perceptions of tourism development impacts, and (4) overall resident satisfaction. Measurement items for the independent variables (social, economic, and environmental effects) were adapted from validated scales in prior tourism studies, while the dependent variable, overall resident satisfaction. All constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, a format known for its reliability in capturing attitudes and perceptions in social science research. Content validity was ensured through expert review by two tourism academics, who assessed item clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. A pilot test with 25 respondents confirmed internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended 0.70 threshold.

The study population comprised residents of Gopeng, Perak, particularly those residing near Gua Tempurung, given their direct exposure to tourism development. The inclusion criteria required respondents to be aged 18 years or above and to have lived in Gopeng for at least two years, consistent with tourism impact studies emphasising the importance of long-term residency for informed perceptions. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants had relevant experience with the phenomenon under study, while also allowing for targeted recruitment across key stakeholder groups (e.g., villagers, tourism operators, guides, business owners). Data were collected through a hybrid approach combining online surveys (Google Forms)

and face-to-face distribution to reach both digitally connected and offline populations. In total, 58 valid responses were obtained, providing adequate statistical power for regression analysis given the number of predictors. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 29.0, a widely adopted statistical software in tourism and hospitality research. The analysis followed a multi-step process: (1) Descriptive statistics were used to summarise demographic characteristics and provide mean and standard deviation values for all constructs, (2) Reliability analysis (Cronbach’s alpha) assessed internal consistency of measurement items, (3) Correlation analysis examined the bivariate relationships between independent and dependent variables, and (4) Multiple regression analysis tested the hypotheses, assessing the relative contribution of social, economic, and environmental effects to overall resident satisfaction.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics

A total of 58 valid responses were collected from Gopeng residents. The sample was slightly female-dominated (56.9%), with males representing 43.1%. The largest age group was 31–34 years (32.8%), followed by 23–26 years (27.6%), 27–30 years (19.0%), and above 35 years (12.1%), with the smallest group being 18–22 years (8.6%). Educational attainment was diverse: 43.1% had completed high school, 19.0% held undergraduate degrees, and 20.6% had postgraduate qualifications (Master’s or Doctorate). Respondents’ community roles varied, with the largest proportion reporting “Other” occupations (32.8%), followed by villagers (20.7%), tour guides (19.0%), campsite/resort/chalet owners (8.6%), and tour operators (8.6%). Smaller groups included food and beverage operators, attraction staff, and transportation service providers (each 3.4%). This diversity ensured representation from multiple tourism-related stakeholder groups. Descriptive analysis revealed generally positive perceptions of tourism development across all dimensions (*Table 1*). Social effects scored the highest mean values ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.79$), followed by economic effects ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.87$) and environmental effects ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.12$). Overall resident satisfaction was also high ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.70$), indicating widespread community approval of tourism growth in Gopeng.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations.

Construct	Mean	SD
Social Effects	4.45	0.79
Economic Effects	4.33	0.87
Environmental Effects	3.94	1.12
Resident Satisfaction	4.58	0.70

Regression analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the hypothesised relationships between social, economic, and environmental effects (independent variables) and overall resident satisfaction (dependent variable). The model was statistically significant (F-test, $p < 0.001$) and explained 74.6% of the variance in resident satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.746$), exceeding the threshold for substantial explanatory power in social science research. *Table 2* presents the standardised beta coefficients (β), t-values, and significance levels for each predictor. Social effects ($\beta = 0.779$, $t = 9.296$, $p < 0.001$)

and economic effects ($\beta = 0.807$, $t = 10.233$, $p < 0.001$) emerged as significant positive predictors of resident satisfaction. Environmental effects ($\beta = 0.238$, $t = 1.489$, $p = 0.072$) were not statistically significant, suggesting that while environmental concerns are present, they are not a primary driver of satisfaction in this context. Effect size analysis indicated that economic effects ($f^2 = 0.652$) and social effects ($f^2 = 0.607$) had large effects on resident satisfaction, following Cohen's (1988) guidelines. Environmental effects had a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.057$), consistent with its non-significant path coefficients.

Table 2. The standardised beta coefficients (β), t -values, and significance levels for each predictor.

Hypothesis	Path	β	t -value	p -value	Result
H1	Environmental → Resident Satisfaction	0.238	1.489	0.072	Rejected
H2	Social → Resident Satisfaction	0.779	9.296	0.001	Accepted
H3	Economic → Resident Satisfaction	0.807	10.233	0.001	Accepted
H4	All Effects → Resident Satisfaction	0.863	3.606	0.001	Accepted

This study examined the effects of social, economic, and environmental factors on resident satisfaction with rural tourism development in Gopeng, Perak. The findings reveal that social effects significantly and positively influence resident satisfaction ($\beta = 0.779$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with prior research indicating that tourism enhances community pride, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. These results align with Social Exchange Theory, suggesting that when residents perceive meaningful social benefits, their support for tourism increases. Economic effects also emerged as a strong predictor of satisfaction ($\beta = 0.807$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing previous findings that tourism-driven employment, business opportunities, and income stability are critical for sustaining positive resident attitudes. This underscores the economic dimension as a cornerstone of resident support in tourism-dependent communities. Conversely, environmental effects did not significantly influence resident satisfaction ($\beta = 0.238$, $p = 0.072$). This contrasts with studies emphasising environmental quality as a determinant of satisfaction and suggests that in Gopeng, economic and social benefits may currently overshadow environmental concerns, or that environmental degradation is not yet perceived as severe enough to affect satisfaction. The study advances the application of Social Exchange Theory in rural tourism contexts by demonstrating that not all perceived benefits contribute equally to satisfaction. While SET posits that residents weigh all costs and benefits, our findings indicate that economic and social gains may carry more weight than environmental considerations in certain developmental stages. This nuance enriches theoretical models by highlighting the need to account for contextual prioritisation of benefit dimensions. Additionally, the strong explanatory power of the combined model ($R^2 = 0.746$) supports integrating multidimensional benefit assessments in tourism impact frameworks.

Conclusion

For tourism operators and policymakers, the results underscore the importance of maximising visible economic and social benefits to sustain resident support. In Gopeng, initiatives such as expanding local entrepreneurship programs, promoting community-led cultural events, and ensuring equitable distribution of tourism revenues can strengthen satisfaction. At the same time, proactive environmental management should not be neglected, as emerging ecological concerns could erode long-term sustainability

and resident approval if left unaddressed. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality, as relationships were measured at a single point in time. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, where respondents may overstate positive perceptions. Third, the sample size ($n = 58$) and focus on a single Malaysian rural destination limit the generalisability of findings to other contexts. Future studies should adopt a longitudinal design to track changes in resident satisfaction over time, especially as tourism development progresses and environmental impacts potentially intensify. Comparative research across different rural destinations, both within Malaysia and internationally, would enhance generalisability and reveal context-specific patterns. Finally, integrating additional variables such as governance quality, resident participation in decision-making, and perceived cultural authenticity could provide a richer understanding of the determinants of resident satisfaction in rural tourism development.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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