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REVITALIZING LOCAL CULTURE IN SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Sugiharto

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of local cultural revitalization and the use of digital technology in supporting sustainable ecotourism development. A qualitative approach with a case study design was used in this research, which was conducted in Penglipuran Village (Bali) and Nglanggeran Village (Yogyakarta) from March to May 2025. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies, then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The results indicate that revitalized local culture, such as traditional art performances, crafts, and local mythological narratives, plays a significant role in strengthening destination identity and creating educational tourism experiences. The use of digital technologies, such as social media, village websites, and audiovisual content, enables local communities to promote their culture more widely and independently. The younger generation plays a role as content creators and bridges between generations in cultural preservation. The integration of culture and digitalization has been proven to increase tourism competitiveness and encourage the empowerment of a locally-based creative economy. However, challenges such as the risk of cultural commodification and low digital literacy remain obstacles that need to be addressed collaboratively. This study emphasizes the importance of a participatory and culturally sensitive approach in ecotourism development in the digital era.

Keywords: sustainable ecotourism, local cultural revitalization, digital technology

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1. Introduction

Sustainable ecotourism is a tourism development approach that prioritizes the principles of environmental conservation, local community empowerment, and educational and responsible tourism experiences (Fennell, 2021). In Indonesia, this concept has been developing since the late 1990s, driven by increasing awareness of environmental damage and social inequality resulting from mass tourism exploitation (Sunarta et al., 2018). However, a major challenge in ecotourism development is maintaining a balance between the commercialization of destinations and the preservation of local culture, which serves as the region's identity and main attraction (Rahmawati & Santosa, B., 2022). Local culture in the context of ecotourism is understood not only as intangible heritage such as dance, music, rituals, and folklore, but also as a system of values, lifestyles, and ecological knowledge inherent in the lives of local communities (Kartodihardjo & Prasetyo, L. B., 2021). This culture plays a crucial role in shaping regional identity, strengthening social cohesion, and serving as an educational instrument in introducing the philosophy of living in harmony with nature (Maulana et al., 2020). Therefore, revitalization of local culture in ecotourism practices is not merely symbolic preservation, but becomes a substantial strategy in sustainable development.

However, the dynamics of globalization and digitalization bring new challenges. The influx of foreign cultures, the homogenization of tourism products, and changes in local lifestyles have led to a shift in values and weakened intergenerational cultural transmission (Susanti, 2021). Many once-sacred cultural practices are now displayed as mere attractions, losing their spiritual significance (Putra et al., 2019). On the other hand, the development of

digital technology presents opportunities to document, disseminate, and adapt local cultural values in formats that are more relevant and engaging for the younger generation (Prayogo & Latifah, M., 2023). Several studies have shown that cultural digitization can increase the competitiveness of ecotourism destinations through strong local narratives and creative promotional media (Wijayanti et al., 2022). For example, the use of augmented reality (AR) applications to showcase local legends or create culture-based virtual tours is a form of educational innovation that supports destination sustainability. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and tourism village websites are also utilized to document and promote local traditions (Nasution & Daulay, R., 2021). However, the integration of digital technology with cultural revitalization has not been comprehensively studied from the perspective of community empowerment, youth involvement, and the long-term sustainability of cultural values.

Several previous studies have focused more on tourism digitalization from a promotional and marketing perspective. A study by McKercher & du Cros, H., (2020) revealed that the use of social media can increase the number of tourist visits to tourist villages in Central Java. Research by Damayanti, (2023) emphasized the importance of creative content training for village youth as part of a digital tourism transformation strategy. Meanwhile, a study by Ginting A., (2022) highlighted the strengthening of cultural narratives in destination branding through video storytelling. Although useful, this approach has not fully addressed the aspect of cultural revitalization as a core value in ecotourism development. On the other hand, studies on local culture and tourism largely focus on the potential and preservation of traditional values in the tourism context (Rosiana, 2021; Rukmana A., 2019). However, the integration of cultural revitalization and digitalization strategies to support ecotourism sustainability remains minimal. This indicates a research gap in three main aspects: (1) the lack of conceptual integration between local culture, ecotourism sustainability, and digitalization; (2) the limitations of empirical studies that explain community-based cultural revitalization practices in the context of the digital era; and (3) there has not been much research that examines the role of the younger generation and local actors in managing culture through digital media.

This study aims to fill this gap by holistically examining how local culture is revitalized and integrated into sustainable ecotourism development using digital technology. The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to combine cultural, technological, and sustainability perspectives within a single analytical framework, and in positioning local communities as active subjects in the cultural revitalization process. This approach differs from previous studies that have primarily positioned culture as a promotional object or passive attraction. Furthermore, this study contributes to community-based tourism by demonstrating how cultural revitalization can strengthen the bargaining position of local communities amidst the dynamics of the global tourism market (García, 2021). By examining two case studies in Indonesia that have developed culture-based ecotourism and utilized digital technology (Penglipuran Village and Nglanggeran Village), this research provides an in-depth empirical understanding of the strategies, challenges, and opportunities in developing sustainable ecotourism rooted in local cultural values and open to digital innovation. In a theoretical context, this study also adopts a cultural ecology approach and a local-based sustainable development paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of the relationship between humans, culture, and the environment in shaping a sustainable system (Berkes, 2018). Through this approach, local culture is positioned not merely as an identity or tourist ornament, but as an adaptive system that develops dynamically and can innovate with digital technology to survive and thrive in the modern era. Based on this information, the purpose of this study is to analyze the role of local cultural revitalization and the use of digital technology in supporting the development of sustainable ecotourism.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of local cultural revitalization practices and the integration of digital technology in sustainable ecotourism development. This approach was chosen based on the

aim of exploring the meanings, processes, and social interactions that occur in the local context in a naturalistic and participatory manner. The research was conducted in two tourist villages that have been recognized nationally as models of ecotourism development based on local culture and digital transformation: Penglipuran Village, Bangli Regency, Bali Province, and Nglanggeran Village, Gunungkidul Regency, Yogyakarta Special Region Province. The locations were chosen purposively because they have implemented local cultural preservation in tourism management, as well as adopted digital media in tourism promotion and education. This research was conducted from March to May 2025.

5 The data in this study were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews were conducted with various parties directly involved in cultural and ecotourism management, including traditional leaders, tourism village managers, local artists, creative young people who produce digital content, and representatives from village government institutions and the tourism office. The interviews were designed to explore their experiences, perspectives, and strategies in integrating local culture with the use of digital technology to support ecotourism development. Furthermore, participant observation was conducted by directly participating in cultural activities that were part of the ecotourism package, such as dance performances, traditional rituals, and digital training for villagers. These observations enabled researchers to understand social dynamics and community participation contextually. Meanwhile, documentation studies were conducted by reviewing village archives, local regulations, culture-based tourism promotional materials on social media and the village website, and documentation of cultural digitalization programs previously implemented by external partners. The combination of these three techniques aimed to enrich the data and strengthen the validity of the research findings.

13 Data analysis was conducted qualitatively using a thematic analysis approach. Data collected from interviews, observations, and documentation were reduced to filter the information most relevant to the research focus, namely cultural revitalization and the role of digital technology in ecotourism. Next, the data were coded and categorized into key themes such as forms of cultural practices, digital promotion strategies, youth participation, and the challenges and impacts of digitalization on cultural and tourism sustainability. Each theme was then interpreted in depth, linking it to the theoretical framework of ecotourism, cultural preservation, and community-based approaches. The validity of the research results was strengthened through data triangulation techniques across sources and methods, member checking by respondents, and discussions with experts in the fields of tourism and culture (peer debriefing). With this approach, it is hoped that the resulting analysis will provide a comprehensive, critical, and contextual picture of the reality being studied.

19 The following is a research diagram of the research that will be carried out:

Diagram Metode Penelitian

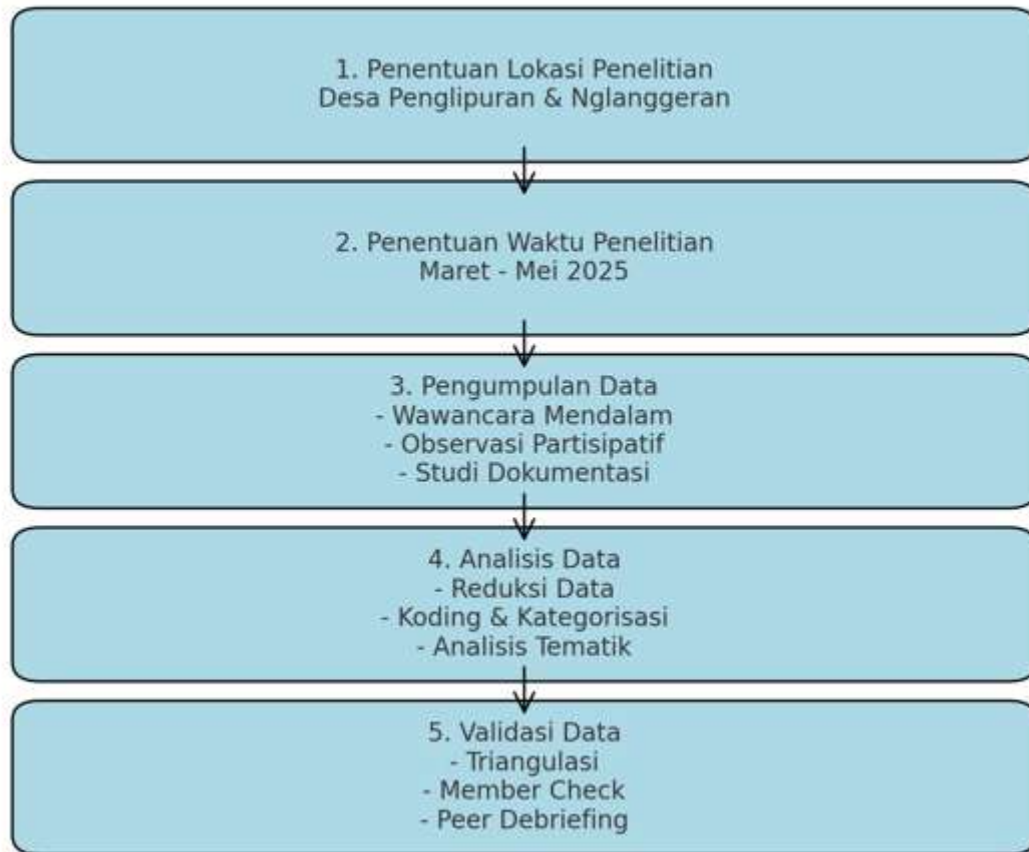


Figure 1. Research Method Diagram

3. Results and Discussion

a. Local Cultural Revitalization Practices in Ecotourism

The research findings show that revitalizing local culture is the primary foundation for ecotourism management practices in both Penglipuran Village (Bali) and Nglanggeran Village (Yogyakarta). Local communities actively preserve traditional values, symbols, and practices through a variety of culture-based tourism activities, such as religious ceremonies, traditional arts performances, local architectural development, and arts training for the younger generation. In Penglipuran Village, the banjar system serves as the center of communal life, regulating traditional rituals and shaping the organizational structure of village tourism. The preservation of intact traditional houses is a major tourist attraction. These findings reinforce previous studies that suggest that involving indigenous communities in tourism management can simultaneously maintain cultural and environmental sustainability (Cole, 2007). The research shows that revitalizing local culture serves as a fundamental pillar in the management of ecotourism in both Penglipuran Village in Bali and Nglanggeran Village in Yogyakarta. The local communities actively engage in preserving their cultural heritage by organizing various cultural tourism activities. These include religious ceremonies, traditional art performances, the preservation of local architecture, and cultural training for younger generations. In Penglipuran Village, the banjar system functions as the core of communal life, overseeing traditional rituals and shaping the structure of tourism governance. One of the main attractions for visitors is the presence of intact traditional houses, which reflect the community's commitment to maintaining their cultural identity. This approach highlights how community involvement plays a vital

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role in ensuring the sustainability of both cultural values and the surrounding environment.

The community acts as a preservation agent and the primary actor in presenting cultural values to tourists. This approach aligns with the principles of community-based tourism, which positions local communities as subjects, not objects (Tolkach & King, B., 2015). In the context of Nglanggeran Village, revitalization is carried out by strengthening local narratives about the origins of the Ancient Volcano and cultural practices related to local myths. These stories are included in educational tourism packages and used as the basis for developing digital promotional content. Traditional dance training and craft production based on local symbols are other ways to maintain culture amidst the rapid pace of modernization. This strategy aligns with the findings of McKercher & du Cros, H., (2020), who stated that cultural tourism will be sustainable if communities are given space to create based on their own culture, rather than simply following the tastes of the tourist market. This bottom-up approach to cultural revitalization creates a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for preservation.

b. The Role of Digital Technology in Supporting Cultural Revitalization

Digitalization has proven to be a strategic tool in supporting the revitalization of local culture. Both villages utilize digital platforms to document cultural practices, build tourism branding, and expand their reach to the tourist market. In Penglipuran Village, a team of village youth members, the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), creates visual content on YouTube and Instagram. They highlight historical stories, traditional philosophies, and the process of making cultural products such as songket and bamboo weaving. This aligns with a study by Leung et al. (2013), which showed that social media plays a role in creating emotional connections between destinations and tourists through authentic narratives. Digitizing cultural content allows communities to narrate their own values without relying on external media. Nglanggeran Village has even developed an official website and online booking platform for community-based cultural tours. Through this platform, visitors can choose cultural education packages, access folklore, and book art performances.

This approach reflects the adaptive and inclusive digital transformation model developed by Sigala, (2020), in which local communities become key actors in managing tourism digitalization. They not only produce content but also manage data and develop promotional strategies. Furthermore, digitalization facilitates the documentation of culture, which was previously passed down orally. This practice strengthens cultural conservation and the transfer of knowledge between generations (Gordon & Beilby-Orrin, H., 2021). However, the use of digital technology is not without challenges. In several interviews, communities cited limited internet access and low digital literacy as key barriers to cultural digitalization. These challenges emphasize the need for digital transformation to be accompanied by increased community capacity through technical training and infrastructure strengthening. This aligns with the view of Schegg & Stangl, B., (2017) Schegg and Stangl (2017), who stated that digital literacy is a key element in promoting the digital sustainability of culture-based tourism.

c. Collaboration and the Role of Youth in the Revitalization Process

The role of the younger generation is a crucial element in the success of cultural revitalization in the digital era. Research shows that youth involvement extends beyond activity implementation to innovators and creators of digital cultural content. In both villages, youth are actively involved in technology training, cultural video production, and managing the village's social media accounts. Many have educational backgrounds in multimedia, communications, or tourism, enabling them to bridge local traditions with modern delivery styles preferred by digital tourists. This youth participation supports a study by Choe & Kim, J., (2018), which emphasized that youth involvement in cultural promotion creates a bridge between traditional values and contemporary technology. They play a role as agents of cultural change, remaining

grounded in local roots. Furthermore, youth involvement also strengthens socio-cultural sustainability by ensuring the long-term regeneration of cultural actors (Ramkissoon, 2020). Youth involvement has also proven effective in bridging the communication gap between the older generation, who carry traditions, and new digital platforms. In Nglanggeran Village, a two-way mentoring program operates, where traditional leaders guide youth in understanding cultural values, while youth assist with digitalization and promotion. This model strengthens social bonds and creates a collaborative ecosystem across generations, as outlined in the intergenerational knowledge transfer model by Trinh & Ryan, C., (2021).

d. The Impact of Revitalization and Digitalization on Ecotourism Sustainability

The integration of cultural revitalization and digitalization has had a positive impact on the sustainability of ecotourism in both study locations. Economically, cultural preservation encourages the diversification of tourism products and creates local business opportunities, such as souvenir production, traditional culinary arts, and art performances as part of tour packages. Socially, local culture strengthens community identity, increases local pride, and strengthens social relations between residents. These findings support the argument of Saufi O'Brien, D., & Wilkins, H., (2014) that culture-based tourism encourages community empowerment if local values are positioned actively and productively. Furthermore, ecologically, local culture often includes nature conservation practices internalized in customs, such as prohibitions on excessive resource extraction, sacred zone systems, or the practice of mutual cooperation in maintaining environmental cleanliness. The study reveals that the success of ecotourism in these two villages is strongly rooted in the revitalization of their local culture. Communities in both locations play an active role in maintaining their cultural identity by organizing tourism activities that reflect their traditions and way of life. These include religious events, artistic performances, architectural preservation, and cultural education for youth. In Penglipuran, the communal structure known as the banjar is vital in coordinating cultural events and managing tourism operations. The traditional houses, which have been carefully preserved, offer a unique and authentic experience that attracts many visitors and serves as a symbol of the village's heritage.

Cultural revitalization also enriches destination narratives, selling not only sights but also experiences and values. Within the logic of sustainable tourism, values-based experiences are more likely to encourage responsible and non-exploitative tourism (Sharpley, 2020). When tourists understand the meaning behind the culture they encounter, they are more likely to appreciate and engage ethically. However, research also suggests the risk of cultural commodification if not carefully managed. Some cultural practitioners have expressed concerns that digitalization and market demand could lead to the simplification of symbols or the manipulation of values for tourism purposes. Therefore, ethical and regulatory mechanisms are needed to ensure that revitalization upholds the spiritual and moral values of the culture. As suggested by Smith & Richards, G., (2013), cultural tourism must always involve the community in every process of cultural curation and representation. Transparency, participation, and local control are key determinants of the success of sustainable revitalization programs.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This study concludes that revitalizing local culture plays a crucial role in supporting sustainable ecotourism development, particularly when combined with the strategic and participatory use of digital technology. The study in Penglipuran and Nglanggeran Villages shows that local communities have successfully revived cultural values through active practices such as art performances, craft production, traditional training, and strengthening local narratives in tourism packages. The use of digital platforms such as social media, village websites, and audiovisual content enables the transformation of traditional values into more communicative and relevant forms for today's generation. Young people play a crucial

16 role as bridges between culture and technology, encouraging intergenerational knowledge transfer and expanding the reach of cultural promotion globally. The integration of local culture and digital technology not only enhances the attractiveness of destinations but also strengthens community identity and creates opportunities for a culture-based creative economy. However, challenges such as the risk of cultural commodification and the digital literacy gap still need to be addressed through participatory training and regulations. Therefore, community collaboration and the use of culturally sensitive technology are key to creating adaptive, sustainable, and locally wisdom-based ecotourism.

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