

Research Article

Perceptions of Experience and Tourist Loyalty Towards the Attractions of Sawah Lukis Binjai: A Phenomenological Study From A Destination Marketing Perspective

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Abstract: This study aims to explore in depth how tourists interpret their experiences when visiting Sawah Lukis Binjai and how these experiences contribute to the formation of loyalty to the destination. Using a phenomenological approach, the study relies on personal narratives obtained through in-depth interviews and participant observation to reveal a more authentic understanding of the tourism experience. The results show that Sawah Lukis is not merely viewed as an ordinary tourist attraction, but as a space capable of evoking emotional attachment, cultural appreciation, and spiritual reflection for visitors. The visual beauty, interactive activities, the tranquil rural atmosphere, and warm social interactions contribute significantly to shaping the destination's positive image. Authentic and personally meaningful experiences encourage tourists' desire to revisit and foster an intrinsic drive to recommend the destination to others. Thus, tourism experiences are a crucial element in designing sustainable and value-oriented destination marketing strategies.

Keywords: Destination Image; Phenomenology; Sustainable Tourism Marketing; Tourist Experience; Visitor Loyalty.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the world of tourism has undergone a major shift. Previously focused on mass visits and visual documentation at popular destinations, travelers are now seeking more personal and meaningful experiences, a relaxing atmosphere, and authentic interactions with local communities. Travelers today no longer aim merely to “see” but to truly “feel,” seeking to bring home stories rather than souvenirs. Amidst this shift, nature-based tourism and local cultural values have become increasingly relevant and sought after.

Indonesia, with its rich agricultural landscape and cultural diversity, has great potential to respond to this trend. As man-made destinations begin to feel uniform and lose their meaning, a new form of tourism is emerging that returns to its roots: rice field tourism, village tourism, and tourism based on local wisdom (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). One notable example is Sawah Lukis in Binjai, North Sumatra. This destination packages rice fields as a space for aesthetics and experiential engagement, not only by offering natural scenery but also by providing direct interaction with farmers, local performances, and visual narratives displayed through patterns painted on the rice fields (Wijaya, 2020; Suwena & Widyatmaja, 2017).

Sawah Lukis offers more than just visual beauty. Its appeal lies in the combination of landscape aesthetics, cultural narratives, and warm social interactions. Visitors can engage in various activities ranging from planting rice, making traditional food, to participating in agricultural education activities. This kind of experience creates a new dimension in tourism, which is not only consumptive but also reflective and emotional. This experience is important because it directly contributes to the image of the destination and tourist loyalty. A study by (Kim & Ritchie, 2014) shows that memorable travel experiences have a significant impact on tourists' decisions to revisit and recommend the destination.

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Researchers view Sawah Lukis not merely as a developing tourist attraction, but as a phenomenon that demonstrates how destination planning and marketing can be directed to create powerful emotional experiences. Visitors to Sawah Lukis are not only looking for visual content for social media, but also seeking tranquility, nostalgia, and even personal reflection. Many of them participate in activities such as planting rice, making local crafts, or simply enjoying the natural atmosphere while chatting with the villagers. All of this creates a much deeper travel experience than a typical short visit.

However, despite its growing appeal, there have not been many scientific studies that specifically explore how this experience is perceived by tourists and how these perceptions shape their loyalty to the destination. In destination marketing, tourist loyalty is not only about repeat visits, but also about how they tell and recommend a place to others. Strong and meaningful experiences have proven to be more effective in shaping destination image and word-of-mouth marketing than conventional promotional strategies.

Sawah Lukis is an example of how a simple place can shape a grand narrative in the minds of tourists. This is in line with the concept of experiential marketing introduced by (Schmitt, 1999), where experience is at the core of marketing strategy. It is not just products or services that are marketed, but the entire emotional, sensory, and intellectual experience that consumers have. In the context of tourism, this experience includes interaction with nature, culture, local communities, and even with oneself.

Modern destination marketing must be able to manage not only attractions but also perceptions. In a study (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993), it is stated that destination image is shaped by cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. This means that tourists' perceptions are formed from the information they receive, the emotions they feel, and their behavior or intentions after the visit. In other words, a well-designed experience can be a key factor in shaping positive perceptions of a destination, which then leads to loyalty and recommendations. Support for these findings is also present in a study by (Kim, 2018) which shows that memorable travel experiences can be strong predictors of loyal behavior, including the desire to revisit and voluntarily promote the destination.

As academics with backgrounds in tourism planning and marketing, the researchers consider it important to incorporate a qualitative approach in exploring travelers' personal narratives. The phenomenological approach allows researchers to understand the deeper meaning of travelers' experiences without reducing them to numbers or statistical data. These narratives, if analyzed carefully, can provide rich insights into how a destination is perceived and how that perception influences post-visit behavior.

In addition to its theoretical contribution, this research also has practical value. For destination managers such as Sawah Lukis, understanding what tourists truly feel can be the basis for designing more authentic and memorable experiences. This can strengthen the destination's positioning, expand its market reach, and enhance the destination's sustainability through the involvement of the local community. Positive and meaningful experiences can also encourage tourists to return and recommend the destination to others, which ultimately enhances the destination's image and loyalty.

In other words, this study aims to explore the meaning and perceptions of tourists regarding their experiences at Sawah Lukis, as well as how these experiences contribute to destination loyalty and positioning. Through a phenomenological approach, the researcher will delve into the personal narratives that emerge from tourists' interactions with nature, the community, and the atmosphere offered by Sawah Lukis. It is hoped that the results of this research will not only enrich academic literature but also serve as a strategic reference for the planning and marketing of experience-based tourist destinations in Indonesia.

2. Literature Review

Experience Based Marketing

(Schmitt, 1999) developed five dimensions of experiential marketing, namely: sense, feel, think, act, and relate. This theory emphasizes that tourists do not only purchase products or services, but also a comprehensive experience that encompasses the five senses, emotions, cognition, physicality, and social connections. (Mathwick et al., 2001) divides the value of experience into playfulness, aesthetics, service excellence, and return on investment. This is particularly suitable for evaluating tourist perceptions in nature-based destinations. (Piedade

et al., 2024) emphasizes that a strong destination experience shapes positive emotions that significantly influence tourist loyalty.

Destination Image

Destination image consists of cognitive (facts), affective (emotions), and unique (symbolic characteristics) dimensions. This model helps to understand tourist perceptions (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). (Guerreiro et al., 2025) states that destination image is now influenced by tourists' aesthetic, emotional, and memory experiences.

Tourist Loyalty

Loyalty develops from awareness, affection, to commitment. In tourism, this includes the intention to revisit and positive recommendations (Oliver, 1999). (Wahyono et al., 2021) asserts that perceived value and emotional experiences are key factors in creating loyalty in natural destinations.

The Relationship Between Marketing and Tourism

(Udurawana, 2022) states that experience-based marketing can be an important tool for shaping sustainable tourism image and loyalty. (Butarbutar et al., 2023) emphasizes the importance of integrating experience marketing strategies with integrated communication to encourage loyalty.

The Phenomenological Approach in Tourism

The phenomenological approach is used to explore the essence of the personal experiences of subjects who directly experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). (Smith et al., 2021) emphasize that IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) focuses on the subjective meaning of human experiences, which is suitable for experience-based tourism studies.

3. Materials and Method

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how tourists construct and interpret the meanings of their experiences when visiting Sawah Lukis Binjai, a rural tourism destination in North Sumatra. The phenomenological method seeks to capture the essence of visitors' lived experiences, emphasizing emotional, reflective, and relational dimensions rather than quantitative measures (Creswell, 2014).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria:

1. Having visited Sawah Lukis within the past six months;
2. Willingness to share personal and emotional reflections; and
3. Representing diverse demographic backgrounds.

A total of 8 – 12 participants were involved, following the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection ceased once no new themes emerged.

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2021), involving iterative steps of reading, coding, thematic development, and synthesis of shared meanings. Emerging themes such as tranquility, nostalgia, and escape from urban life were clustered into broader experiential categories reflecting tourists' emotional and cognitive engagement.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail, guided by the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and respecting the right to withdraw at any stage.

The conceptual framework illustrates how natural aesthetics, emotional resonance, and social interaction collectively shape the essence of the tourist experience, positioning Sawah Lukis Binjai as a space of reflection, authenticity, and emotional connection within Indonesia's rural tourism landscape.

4. Results and Discussion

Results

The Attraction of Lukis Rice Fields

Sawah Lukis is located in Tanah Tinggi Village, East Binjai District, Binjai City, North Sumatra Province. It is about 28 km from the center of Medan City and can be reached by private vehicle. This destination was born from the initiative of a community of young farmers and local artists who wanted to revive the values of agriculture and nature as a means of education and a source of economic income.



Figure 1. Map of Lukis Rice Fields.

Source: Google Earth, 2025.

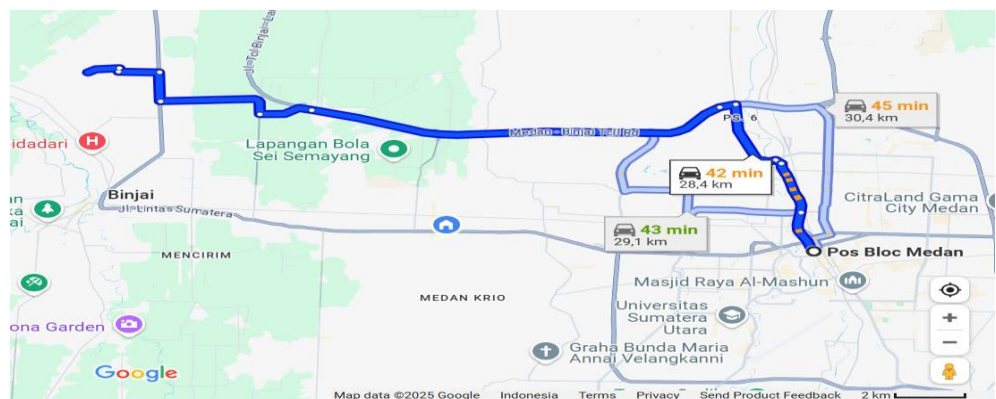


Figure 2. Distance from Sawah Lukis to Pos Bolc Medan.

Source: Google Maps, 2025.

Now, this area is equipped with various tourism support facilities such as an MSME gallery, coffee shops, selfie areas, and a cultural stage. This project is supported by the Binjai City Tourism Office and a number of local organizations. More than just a recreational area, Sawah Lukis is also an environmental and agricultural education space, as well as a forum for creativity for the local community.

As the number of visitors increases, Sawah Lukis is becoming increasingly known as a place that offers a refreshing atmosphere amid the hustle and bustle of the city. Many families, students, and local tourists come to enjoy the soothing green scenery while learning about the importance of agriculture and environmental sustainability. Some schools even use this place as an educational visit location because of its concept that combines nature, art, and learning.

Beyond agriculture and art, the community managing Sawah Lukis regularly organizes various cultural activities and skills training for the surrounding community. These range from painting workshops and handicraft classes to harvest festivals involving local residents. Furthermore, these activities not only enhance the tourist appeal but also strengthen the community's sense of togetherness and ownership of the place.

Sawah Lukis is an example of how a tourist destination can grow organically from community spirit. Without relying entirely on large investors, this area has developed with the support of mutual cooperation and collective work. This proves that if managed with heart and a clear vision, a simple open space like a rice field can be transformed into a creative, useful, and sustainable destination.

The Meaning of Tourist Experiences during Visits to Sawah Lukis Binjai

This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how tourists interpret their experiences when visiting Sawah Lukis Binjai. The main focus of the study is to explore the aspects that influence their perceptions of the destination's appeal and image, as well as how these experiences encourage their loyalty as visitors. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 informants who were selected purposively, based on certain criteria such as frequency of visits, age background, and travel motivation.

The interview results showed that a visit to Sawah Lukis had a deeply personal meaning for each individual. Most informants referred to this place as a space for self-reflection and emotional healing. The calm atmosphere, fresh air, and expansive view of green rice fields provide a soothing escape from the city's hustle and bustle. Rina, Budi, and Lina, for example, stated that they felt more relaxed and peaceful after spending time there.



Figure 3. Sawah Lukis Binjai.

Source: Researcher, 2025.

Several other informants, such as Siti and Pak Hasan, described their experiences as more spiritual. Direct interaction with nature and the lives of farmers gave them a new perspective on simplicity, hard work, and sustainability. Meanwhile, Ayu and Andi, two young informants, revealed that they were inspired by the artistic aspect of Sawah Lukis. According to them, the patterns created on the surface of the rice fields are not just beautiful scenery, but also a form of living art that evokes admiration and stimulates creativity.

In addition to being a place to escape from routine, several informants also mentioned Sawah Lukis as a space to strengthen social relationships. They come with family or friends and feel that the atmosphere of this place encourages warmer and more intimate interactions. The absence of the hustle and bustle typical of cities makes moments of togetherness feel more complete and meaningful. Some even called this visit one of the best experiences they had spent with their loved ones.

The experience at Sawah Lukis also sparked curiosity and a desire to learn. Informants who previously had no background in agriculture claimed to have gained new insights into the planting process, the role of farmers, and the challenges they face. Direct interaction with farmers and seeing the activities in the fields firsthand provided a dimension of learning that cannot be obtained from books or social media alone.

Furthermore, this visit also touched on a deep emotional side. Some visitors stated that visiting Sawah Lukis made them appreciate simple life and local values more. They felt more connected to their surroundings and gained a new understanding of the importance of maintaining balance between humans and nature. From all the stories shared, it is clear that Sawah Lukis is not just an ordinary tourist destination, but a space rich in meaning and value.

Tourism Experience Aspects that Influence Perceptions of the Attractiveness and Image of sawah lukis

There are four main aspects of the tourist experience at Sawah Lukis Binjai that shape visitors' positive perceptions of the attraction and image of this place.

1. Visual and Aesthetic Aspects

All informants highlighted the visual uniqueness of the rice fields, which are shaped to resemble paintings, as the first thing that immediately attracts attention. The initial impression is one of admiration for the beauty of nature packaged with an artistic approach, which not only soothes the eyes but also triggers curiosity and appreciation for art.

2. Participatory Activities

Various activities that visitors can participate in directly, such as harvesting crops and tasting coffee served directly by local farmers, provide a real and memorable experience.

These activities make tourists feel directly involved, not only as spectators but also as part of the story that lives in this place.

3. Social Interaction Aspect

The friendliness and familiarity of the local community are added values that distinguish Sawah Lukis from other tourist destinations. Many informants mentioned that interacting with farmers and fellow visitors made their experience warmer and more down-to-earth, creating lasting memories not only because of the place but also because of the people they met.

4. Atmosphere and Sensory Environment Aspect

The natural ambiance, the sounds of insects and birds, the cool breeze, and the smell of damp earth after rain are part of a sensory experience that is difficult to find in the city. These elements come together to create a profound atmosphere and make tourists feel truly connected to their surroundings.

These four aspects do not stand alone but complement each other and enrich the overall tourist experience. The artistic visualization of the rice fields is the first point of entry that arouses curiosity, which is then reinforced by activities that allow tourists to directly experience the life behind the beautiful landscape. Through this multisensory experience, visitors not only see beauty, but also feel it physically and emotionally. This shows that the appeal of a destination is not only determined by what is visible, but also by the involvement of the senses and emotions in the overall experience.

The presence of local communities who are friendly and open to tourists also contributes greatly to the positive image of Sawah Lukis. Spontaneous interactions, such as casual conversations with farmers or sharing stories with fellow visitors, create a sense of togetherness that is rarely found in commercial tourist destinations. It is this human touch that distinguishes Sawah Lukis from other tourist attractions—it is not just a place to take photos, but a living space that builds connections between individuals.

The atmosphere created by the rural natural surroundings has a calming effect that cannot be replaced by artificial entertainment. The sounds of nature, the smell of wet soil, and the gentle breeze create a kind of natural meditation that refreshes the soul. Some tourists even admit that they find it difficult to forget the simple moments they experienced here, such as sitting on the edge of a rice field while sipping hot coffee. It is experiences like these that leave a deep impression and make Sawah Lukis a destination that is not only visually beautiful, but also emotionally and personally meaningful.

The Contribution of Experience to Tourist Loyalty to Sawah Lukis Binjai

All interviewees showed signs of loyalty to Sawah Lukis Binjai through three main indicators.

1. Revisit Intention

Almost all informants expressed their intention to return. The reasons varied, but generally stemmed from previous experiences that were considered enjoyable, relaxing, and left a lasting impression.

2. Positive Recommendations (Word of Mouth)

Several informants had shared their experiences with friends and family, and some even actively invited others to visit. This shows that the experience at Sawah Lukis is strong enough to be shared voluntarily as a form of natural promotion.

3. Emotional Attachment

Some respondents admitted to feeling a special bond with this place. For them, Sawah Lukis is not just a tourist attraction, but a space that holds memories and provides emotional comfort. They even refer to this place as one of their favorite locations that has personal meaning.

The strong loyalty of tourists to Sawah Lukis Binjai is also reflected in how they perceive the personal value gained during their visit. Many of them mentioned that the visit provided an experience that they could not find anywhere else. The authentic impression offered, ranging from the natural rural atmosphere to the warm interaction with the local community, creates an emotional closeness that prolongs memories and builds long-term attachment to this destination.

In addition, the emergence of a new habit of recommending Sawah Lukis to others is not merely a social obligation, but a sincere desire to share something that is considered valuable. This is an important indicator that the experience is not only personally satisfying, but also has value to be shared. Informants tend to feel proud when they successfully invite others to visit this place, as if they are part of the process of introducing local potential.

In this context, loyalty is no longer measured solely by the intention to return, but also

by how deeply visitors feel involved with the values offered by the destination. Some informants even stated that their visit to Sawah Lukis had influenced their perspective on the importance of preserving nature and local culture. The experience became a meeting point between tourism and social awareness, which ultimately strengthened loyalty not only at the individual level but also at the value level.

Thus, it can be concluded that tourist loyalty to Sawah Lukis is not formed solely by promotion or facilities, but rather by experiences that are emotionally touching, intellectually enriching, and personally memorable. These factors make Sawah Lukis not only a place that visitors want to return to, but also a part of their life narrative. Therefore, the true strength of this destination lies in its ability to bring meaning to every visit.

Discussion

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was used in this study to understand the subjective meanings formed from the personal experiences of tourists during their visit to Sawah Lukis Binjai. The results of the study show that the tourist experience has complex and profound dimensions, encompassing not only physical activities but also emotional, aesthetic, social, and reflective aspects. Tourists not only observe the scenery, but also experience an emotional connection with the environment and the local community.

The tourist experiences of the informants provide the basis for the formation of their perceptions of the destination's attractiveness. Through powerful visual experiences, educational participatory activities, and warm social interactions, tourists consider Sawah Lukis to be a unique, authentic destination that is different from ordinary nature tourism. This shows that perceptions of attractiveness are formed through affective and cognitive processes that originate from personal experiences.

Furthermore, positive perceptions of these attractions directly impact the formation of the destination's image. The image of Sawah Lukis is not solely shaped by visual promotion or external branding, but rather through the direct experiences of tourists who create emotional and cultural narratives. Informants describe Sawah Lukis as a place that is not only beautiful, but also educational and emotionally touching. It is this image that then sticks in the memory of tourists and influences their future behavior.

The connection between the perception of attractiveness and the image of the destination reinforces the argument that in the context of destination marketing, an experience-based approach is crucial. The image of a destination formed from real experiences has stronger emotional endurance than an image built visually through the media. Therefore, authentically managed travel experiences are a key strategy in building a long-term image of a destination.

The results of this study also show that the positive image formed from these experiences contributes significantly to tourist loyalty. The loyalty that emerges is not only in the form of the intention to return, but also in the form of recommendations to others and strong emotional attachment. Tourists consider Sawah Lukis a special place that gives them peace, learning, and inspiration. This shows affective loyalty that is not only tied to the physical location, but also to the values it embodies.

Interestingly, the interpretation results also reveal that the travel experience has a direct influence on loyalty, regardless of perceptions of the destination's attractiveness and image. When the travel experience provides emotional satisfaction and deep personal meaning, travelers tend to form loyalty directly, even before they fully process the destination's image rationally. These findings support the IPA approach, which emphasizes the importance of subjective experiences in shaping meaning and attitudes.

Tourists who feel cared for, valued, and actively involved during their visit tend to show greater commitment to the destination. In the context of Sawah Lukis, the role of the local community in warmly welcoming visitors is one of the triggers for this loyalty. The process of intersubjectivity that occurs between tourists and hosts strengthens emotional and social bonds.

In the context of destination marketing, tourist loyalty is an important asset that supports the sustainability of promotion through positive word of mouth. Tourists who have had a pleasant experience become unofficial ambassadors who help spread a positive image of the destination. This is reinforced by the finding that most informants have voluntarily recommended Sawah Lukis to others or posted their experiences on social media.

These findings also reinforce the understanding that meaningful travel experiences need to be developed not only to attract repeat visits, but also to build long-term relationships between destinations and tourists. Experiences that involve education, aesthetics, spirituality, and social engagement can be distinguishing elements that strengthen the identity of a destination in a competitive market.

Therefore, it can be concluded that travel experiences that are designed and delivered authentically and with value play a central role in shaping perceptions of attractiveness, building a strong destination image, and creating sustainable tourist loyalty. These findings support the importance of a phenomenological approach in understanding the psychological and social dynamics of tourists in the context of value-based destination marketing.

5. Conclusion

The meaning of tourists' experiences during their visit to Sawah Lukis Binjai is profound and personal, encompassing dimensions of emotional reflection, spiritual connection, and appreciation of local aesthetics and values.

The aspects of the tourist experience that shape perceptions of the appeal and image of Sawah Lukis include visual uniqueness, active participation in local activities, social interaction with the community, and an environment rich in sensory nuances.

The tourist experience contributes to tourist loyalty, both directly and through the formation of positive perceptions and images of the destination, which are reflected in the intention to revisit, recommendations, and emotional attachment to the place.

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