

OVERTOURISM AND THE AUTHENTICITY DILEMMA: A BRANDING PERSPECTIVE ON NATURE-BASED TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze the effect of overtourism and local community engagement on Destination Brand Equity (DBE) through authenticity as mediating variable. The data of this study taken from 200 tourist of nature tourism destination choosen by nonprobability sampling method (purposive sampling). After data analysis is carried out using SEM AMOS, result shows that overtourism has negative effect on authenticity while local community engagement has positive effect on authenticity. Other result shows that authenticity itself has positive effect on destination brand equity and then also can mediated the effect of overtourism and local community engagement on destination brand equity. This study has an impact on the destination manager to managing their overtourism well so it won't erode place authenticity and then decreasing destination brand equity. It also important for them to improve local community participation with the intention to preserve authenticity and increase DBE on nature destination object.

Keywords: overtourism, local community engagement, authenticity, destination brand equity

INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector is one of the important sectors in the Indonesian economy because Indonesia is one of the countries with great tourism potential with abundant natural resources. After the end of the pandemic in 2022, Indonesia's tourism sector began to recover. This is evidenced by the increase in the contribution of the tourism sector to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2022 from 2.4 percent in 2021 to 3.6 percent, the increase in the value of tourism foreign exchange in 2022 from 0.52 billion US dollars in 2021 to 4.26 billion US dollars, and the increase in the added value of the creative economy from IDR 1,191 trillion in 2021 to IDR 1,236 trillion (BPS, 2022). One of the tourism sectors that is experiencing rapid development is nature based tourism (ecotourism). By the end of 2023, the market value of ecotourism will even reach around IDR 45 trillion with more than 30% of foreign tourists (<https://www.tracedataresearch.com/industry-report/indonesia-eco-tourism-market>, December 2024). Furthermore in the future, Indonesia's sustainable tourism market is even expected to grow to \$ 195 billion by 2034 (<https://www.futuremarketinsights.com/reports/indonesia-sustainable-tourism-market>, May 2024).

The rapid increase in the performance of Indonesia's tourism sector, one of which is indicated by the increasing number of tourist visits to various popular destinations, has given rise to the phenomenon of overtourism, which is a condition when the number of tourists visiting exceeds the carrying capacity of the destination, both physically, socially, and environmentally (Milano et al., 2019). The phenomenon of overtourism has become a global concern, where the surge in the number of tourists causes overcrowding, environmental damage, and degradation of authentic tourism experiences. This phenomenon has increasingly come under the spotlight in recent decades due to its far-reaching impact on the sustainability of tourist destinations, especially nature-based destinations.

Overtourism has serious consequences for the authenticity of natural tourist attractions. One of its main impacts is the commodification of cultural and environmental heritage, where elements that previously had intrinsic meaning are transformed into products consumed by tourists (Cerisola & Panzera, 2024). As a result, the original values of local culture and the natural character of a destination can be eroded. In addition, excessive visitor pressure causes environmental damage, including erosion, pollution, and disruption of biodiversity (Kruczek & Walaś, 2019). This not only threatens the preservation of nature, but also reduces the quality of the tourist experience itself.

Furthermore, overtourism also triggers social and cultural changes among local communities. Intense interaction with tourists can shift traditional values to be more commercial and tailored to the preferences of the global tourism market (Tiwari et al., 2021). These changes often cause communities to lose their cultural identity, which is the basis of the tourist attraction itself, so that the destination experiences a degradation of authenticity (Pawłowska & Pawłowski, 2020).

The phenomenon of overtourism not only has an impact on the authenticity, but has also begun to be noticed in the context of destination marketing, especially regarding destination brand equity (DBE)—which includes perception, loyalty, and brand image of the destination in the eyes of tourists (Kladou et al., 2017). Although several studies have investigated the impact of overtourism on tourist satisfaction or the quality of the destination experience (Seraphin et al., 2018), there has not been much research that directly links overtourism with aspects of destination brand equity in a comprehensive manner. In fact, the results of existing studies show inconsistent findings. For example, while a study by Koens, et al (2018) showed that overtourism leads to a decline in destination image, another study stated that despite overtourism, some destinations maintain their brand equity due to the strength of other factors such as heritage value or strong marketing campaigns (Gössling et al., 2020).

In this context, local community involvement is crucial to maintain and strengthen the authenticity of the destination. Active community participation in tourism management not only helps preserve natural landscape but also ensures that the tourism experience remains authentic and sustainable. Research shows that community participation can increase a sense of belonging and cultural identity, which in turn strengthens tourists' perceptions of destination authenticity (Nursanty, et al., 2023). However, the interaction between overtourism and local community involvement in influencing perceptions of authenticity has yet to be comprehensively studied. Therefore, this study aims to explore how these two factors interact and influence perceptions of authenticity of ecotourism destinations, in order to provide insights for the development of more authentic and sustainable tourism strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

Overtourism and Authenticity

Overtourism is a condition where the number of tourists exceeds the social, ecological, and cultural capacity of a tourist destination (Milano et al., 2019). This phenomenon not only has an impact on environmental sustainability, but also has the potential to erode perceived authenticity—tourists' perceptions of the authenticity of local culture, traditions, and experiences at a destination. In the context of natural tourism, authenticity or the originality of a destination is an important element that is the main attraction for tourists. However, the uncontrolled increase in the number of tourist visits, known as overtourism, often triggers negative impacts such as changes in spatial planning, urbanization of tourist destinations, and adjustments to local culture to meet tourist expectations. The phenomenon of overtourism, characterized by tourist visits exceeding the carrying capacity of the destination, has become a serious threat to the authenticity of natural tourist attractions. The surge in the number of visitors causes physical pressure on the environment such as vegetation damage, pollution of natural resources, and disturbance of local flora and fauna. In addition, overtourism also causes social change and excessive commercialization, which gradually erodes the original character of a place (Seraphin et al., 2018).

Furthermore, overtourism can make the tourism experience less personal and shallow, thus reducing the perception of authenticity, both from the objective (physical authenticity of the environment) and existential (personal experiences of tourists) sides (Rickly, 2019). When natural destinations are developed massively to meet market demand, cultural symbols and local values are often replaced by artificial attractions that no longer represent the original identity of the destination (Phi, 2020). Thus, overtourism directly and indirectly contributes to the decline in the perception of authenticity in natural tourist attractions.

H₁ : Overtourism has negative effect on authenticity

Local Community Engagement has positive effect on authenticity

The involvement of local communities in the development of nature tourism plays a vital role in maintaining and enhancing the authenticity of a destination. The active participation of local communities not only ensures that local cultural and environmental values are respected, but also strengthens the identity and authentic experiences offered to tourists. A study by Ali et al., (2022) showed that community participation in nature-based tourism positively contributes to the quality of life of communities and the sustainability of destinations. This involvement allows communities to play an active role in decision-making, which in turn strengthens their sense of ownership and responsibility for preserving the authenticity of their environment. In addition, a study by Wondirad et al., (2020) highlighted that community participation in tourism development in Bale Mountains National Park, Ethiopia, helps prevent destructive tourism practices and ensures that tourism activities are aligned with local values and environmental conservation. Local community involvement in responsible tourism practices has raised awareness of the importance of preserving local natural and cultural resources, as well as strengthening the authenticity of tourist experiences (Md. Salleh et al., 2021).

H₂ : Local Community Engagement has positive effect on authenticity

Authenticity has positive effect on destination brand equity

In the increasingly competitive landscape of tourist destinations, excellence is no longer determined solely by natural beauty or facilities, but also by the destination's ability to offer authentic experiences. The concept of perceived authenticity, which is the tourist's perception of the authenticity of a place's experience, culture, and identity, is now a key factor in building deep emotional connections between tourists and destinations (Ramkissoon & Uysal., 2011). Perceptions of authenticity influence how tourists evaluate, remember, and recommend the destinations they visit. Research shows that perceived authenticity has a positive and significant influence on various dimensions of destination brand equity (DBE), such as brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Kladou et al., 2017; Kim & Kwon., 2018). When tourists believe that a destination reflects authentic culture, local traditions, and authentic identity, their perception of destination quality increases. This strengthens the destination's brand image and drives loyalty, both in the form of repeat visits and recommendations to others (Lu et al., 2015). When tourism authorities and local communities are able to maintain an authentic narrative—whether through architecture, cultural activities, or social interactions—DBE will grow sustainably. Therefore, destination branding strategies should place perceived authenticity as a main pillar in forming a strong and authentic brand value in the eyes of tourists.

H₃ : Authenticity has positive effect on destination brand equity

The effect of overtourism on destination brand equity with authenticity as mediating variable

Not all destinations experiencing overtourism immediately experience a decline in DBE. One important variable that has the potential to bridge this relationship is perceived authenticity or perception of the authenticity of the destination. Perception of authenticity is at the heart of the tourist experience, especially in the context of culture, history, and interaction with the local

community (Chhabra., 2010). Destinations that are able to maintain or manage the perception of authenticity despite being under pressure from overtourism tend to maintain a positive image and tourist loyalty (Zhou et al., 2021). Thus, perceived authenticity acts as a mediator explaining how overtourism affects DBE. When overtourism leads to excessive commercialization, loss of local cultural values, and shallow experiences, the perception of destination authenticity will decrease, which in turn can decrease the destination brand value (Seraphin et al., 2018). Conversely, destinations that successfully manage the pressures of overtourism without losing authentic elements can maintain or even increase DBE.

H₄ : Authenticity mediates the effect of overtourism on destination brand equity

The effect of local community engagement on destination brand equity with authenticity as mediating variable

In sustainable tourism development, local community engagement is a key element in creating added value for tourist destinations. Local communities that are actively involved in service provision, cultural preservation, and direct interaction with tourists contribute significantly to meaningful tourism experiences (George, 2010). This has important implications for destination brand equity (DBE), which includes perceptions of quality, loyalty, and destination brand associations (Kladou et al., 2017).

However, the relationship between local community involvement and DBE is not linear. Perceived authenticity or the perception of the authenticity of the experience is an important mediator in this relationship. When tourists feel that their interactions with local communities reflect authentic culture, an uncontrived lifestyle, and traditional values that are still preserved, their perception of the authenticity of the destination will increase (Richards, 2018). This perception then strengthens the brand value of the destination in the eyes of tourists. On the other hand, if the involvement of the local community is only a formality or presented artificially without authentic value, then the perception of to

urists towards authenticity can decrease. This will have a negative impact on DBE because inauthentic experiences tend to weaken the emotional bond and trust of tourists towards the destination (Chhabra, 2010). Therefore, the success of local community engagement in strengthening DBE depends heavily on how the involvement is able to build the perception of authenticity in the eyes of tourists.

H₅ : Authenticity mediates the effect of local community engagement on destination brand equity

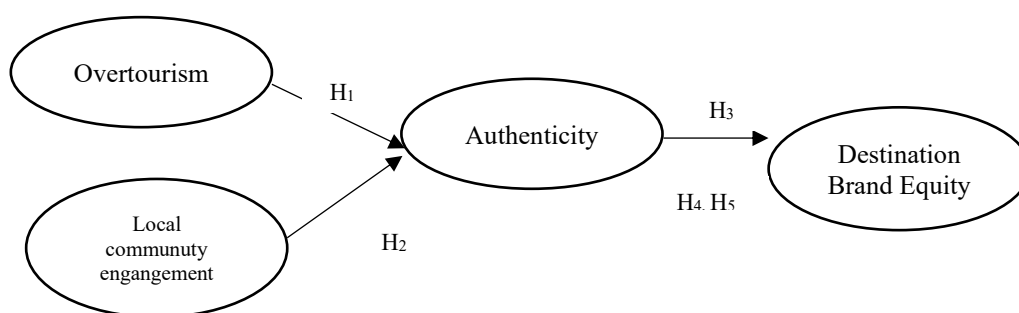


Figure 1. Research Model

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is a quantitative research with survey method. Data was collected by distributing questionnaires to 200 respondents who were visitors to cultural tourism objects using a non probability sampling method (purposive sampling method). Data analysis method used to test the hypotheses is SEM-AMOS. To asses overtourism, this study adapted scale from Milano et al., (2019). Second independent variable which is local community engagement measured using scale from Chan et al.,(2021), while authenticity was measured using scale adapted from Kolar&Zabkar (2010).

Dependent variable (destination brand equity) in this syudy was measured using scale adapted from Kladou et al (2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The number of returned questionnaires was 215 and then 200 questionnaires were declared suitable for further analysis. Total respondents in this study consists of 138 male (69%) and 64 female (31%). Respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 60 years, with the highest proportion (43.92%) falling within the 27 to 36 age range.

All indicators in this study was tested using SEM AMOS to determine whether all indicators considered valid and reliable for further analysis. The result of validity and reliability testing is shown in Table 1 :

Table 1. Measurement indicators and the result of validity and reliability test

Variable	Indicators	Reference	Standard Loading	AVE	Construct reliability	Result
Overtourism	High tourist density	Milano et al (2019)	0,733	0,680	0,864	Valid and Reliable
	Negative Environmental Impact		0,654			
	Social and Cultural Disorders		0,774			
	Negative Economic Impact on Local Communities		0,741			
	Decreased Quality of Traveler Experience		0,859			
	Changes in the Use of Space and City Functions		0,745			
Local Community Engagement	Participation in tourism activities	Chan et al (2021)	0,789	0,610	0,886	Valid and Reliable
	The destination is easy to reach		0,758			
	Access to Training and Education		0,859			
	Involvement in Decision Making		0,767			
	Economic Benefits Felt		0,640			
	Perception of Tourism Impact		0,708			
Authenticity	Genuine cultural object	Kolar & Zabkar (2010)	0,841	0,624	0,892	Valid and Reliable
	Maintain the physical characteristics of its original culture		0,792			
	Becoming part of the local culture		0,5668			
	Reflecting local cultural values and identity		0,740			

Variable	Indicators	Reference	Standard Loading	AVE	Construct reliability	Result
Destination Brand Equity	Brand image	Kladou et al, (2017)	0,702	0,654	0.883	Valid and Reliable
	Perceived quality		0,790			
	Brand loyalty		0,538			
	I will speak positively about this destination to other people		0,721			

Hypothesis testing in this study was conducted using SEM AMOS, following a three-step analysis. First, we assessed the goodness of fit index to determine whether the sampled data aligned with the model. Second, we tested the acceptance of the proposed hypotheses, and finally, we performed mediation analysis. The results of the goodness of fit testing for the research model are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Goodness of Fit Testing Result

Goodness of Fit Index	Result	Cut off Value	Conclusion
Chi Square	392,992	Expected Small	Marginal
Significance	0,000	$\geq 0,05$	Marginal
RMSEA	0,008	$\leq 0,08$	Good
GFI	0,958	$\geq 0,90$	Good
AGFI	0,810	$\geq 0,90$	Marginal
CMIN/DF	2,768	$\leq 2,00$	Marginal
TLI	0,939	$\geq 0,95$	Marginal
CFI	0,949	$\geq 0,95$	Good

According to the model accuracy test results in Table 2, the Chi-Square value is 392.992 with a significance level of 0.000, indicating that while the model is acceptable, it does not represent a good fit. This is evident from the significance value, which is less than 0.05, suggesting that the model falls into marginal fit category. The measurement indices—RMSEA, Cmin Df, CFI, GFI, AGFI, and TLI—are within ranges that indicate a marginal fit, likely due to variations in the data that are spread out and not normally distributed, resulting in a low fit or marginal fit for the studied model.

Second step of the data analysis involves testing the acceptance of hypotheses, as illustrated in the table 3 below:

Table 3. Hypotheses testing result

Hypotheses	B	t stat	p value	Result
H1: Overtourism →authenticity	-0,330	-5,095	0,000	Accepted
H2: Local community engagement →authenticity	0,439	7,137	0,000	Accepted
H3: Authenticity→destination brand equity	0,232	2,929	0,000	Accepted
H4: Overtourism →authenticity→destination brand equity	-0,077	-2,404	0,017	Accepted
H5: Overtourism →authenticity→destination brand equity	0,102	2,691	0,007	Accepted

Data analysis indicates that overtourism have a negative influence on authenticity. This finding is supported by a t statistic of -5,095, which exceeds the threshold of -1.64, along with a significance value of 0.000 ($p \leq 0.05$), allowing us to accept the first hypothesis. Additionally, the testing of the direct influence of local community engagement on authenticity yielded a t statistic of 7,137, also greater than 1.64, with a significance value of 0.000 ($p \leq 0.05$), confirming the acceptance of the

second hypothesis. To test the hypothesis asserting an influence of authenticity on DBE, the results revealed a t statistic of 2,929 (greater than 1.64) and a significance value of 0.000 ($p \leq 0.05$), leading to acceptance of the hypothesis that authenticity significantly influences DBE.

To evaluate the mediating influence of authenticity on overtourism and destination brand equity, we utilized the Sobel test analysis. The results indicated a mediating effect of authenticity on the relationship between overtourism and DBE, with a calculated t statistic of -2,404 (greater than -1.96) and a p value of 0.000 (less than 0.05). Therefore, the fourth hypothesis, which posits a mediating effect of authenticity on the effect of overtourism on DBE, is accepted. This result mean that higher the level of overtourism, the lower the perception of authenticity, then it will decrease DBE.

Furthermore, the mediation analysis regarding the influence of authenticity, including the local community engagement on DBE, is also confirmed. The Sobel test produced a calculated t statistic of 2,691 (greater than 1.96) and a p value of 0.007 (less than 0.05).

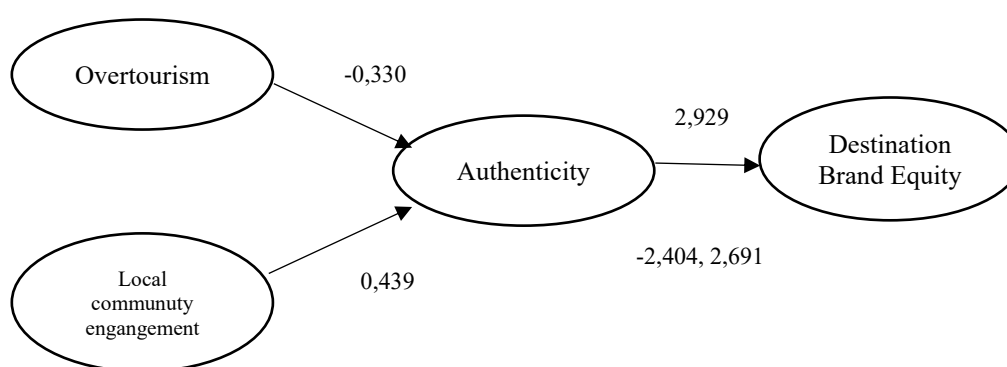


Figure 2. Full structural research model

DISCUSSION

The results of this study found that overtourism negatively affect authenticity. Overtourism has posing significant threat to perceived authenticity in ways that it changed tourists' perceptions of the genuineness of local culture, traditions, and experiences at a destination. In the context of nature-based tourism, authenticity or the originality of a destination is a fundamental component that serves as a primary attraction for visitors. *Overtourism*, characterized by visitor numbers that exceed a destination's carrying capacity, has emerged as a critical threat to the authenticity of natural tourism sites. The surge in tourist presence exerts substantial physical pressure on the environment, manifesting in vegetation degradation, pollution of natural resources, and disruption to local flora and fauna. Furthermore, *overtourism* catalyzes social transformations and excessive commercialization, which gradually erode the original character and intrinsic values of the destination. This result aligned with research result by Seraphin et al (2018), Rickly (2019) and Phi (2020) which stated that overtourism can threatened place or even experience authenticity felt by tourist in nature based destination.

Other result shows that local community engagement has positive effect on authenticity. This is because of their willingnes to preserves natural view from an object has keep the destination authenticity itself. As Ali et al (2022) said in his research that community participation in nature based destination even can contributes significantly on the sustainability of destinations. One form of community involvement is to play an active role in the decision-making process, which in turn strengthens their sense of ownership and responsibility for preserving the authenticity of their environment. In a study conducted by Wondirad et al. (2020) showed that community participation in tourism development has contributed to preventing destructive tourism practices and ensuring that tourism activities remained in line with local values and environmental conservation efforts. The

involvement of local communities in responsible tourism practices has raised awareness of the importance of preserving local natural and cultural resources, while strengthening the authenticity of the tourism experience (Md. Salleh et al., 2021).

Authenticity is one of the most important element in building strong and genuine value in the eyes of tourist. Perception of authenticity can significantly affect various aspects of DBE, such as how destination managers can manage the authenticity to create a good destination image, how it can increased perceived quality from the tourists and leading to tourist repeat visits and recommendation to others (Kladou et al., 2017 & Lu et al, 2015).

In this study, perceived authenticity acts as a mediator explaining how overtourism and local community engagement affects DBE. Overtourism will decrease destination authenticity which in turn it will also impact on destination value which it is one of the element of DBE. Conversely, destinations that successfully manage the pressures of overtourism without losing authentic elements can maintain or even increase DBE. In other way, authenticity also proven has mediated the effect of local community engagement DBE because high involvement of community on nature based destinations will lead to authentic experience felt by tourist that it will also affect the value of destination. This result is aligned with the result by Richards (2018) and Chhabra (2010)

CONCLUSIONS

This study prove that overtourism negatively affect authenticity which in turn also will affect DBE. The other variable, local community engagement also has positive effect on authenticity and DBE. The result also shows that authenticity has mediated effect between overtourism and DBE and also has mediated the effect of local community engagement on DBE.

Based on the result of this study, destination manager should maintain overtourism level at their destination. Normally, destination manager expected high tourist traffic on their site, but they are also has to considered the tendency of overtourism in eroding destination authenticity and DBE. Destination manager can arrange the tourist number by limiting their visit on peak time, meanwhile they also can set up rule for visitors for not to disturb or damaging nature destination site. Otherwhile, improvement of local community participation in maintaining nature based tourism site is needed so the authenticity of the place will remain and can create sustainable tourism performance for the good of society.

This study has some limitations that can be addressed by further research to improve the results. First this study is conducted only on nature based tourism destination. Next researcher can expanding the research scope on another tourism sectors so the result can be generalized. Second further research can be carried out on bigger respondents number considering that Indonesia is one of major tourism destination in the world, the study also can carried out by comparing the attitude of local and foreign tourists.

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