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Unpacking Youth Agency in Community-Based Rural Tourism: Student Perceptions and Sustainable Development Strategies in the Tabagsel Region, Indonesia

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Abstract

Community-based rural tourism is increasingly recognized as a pathway for sustainable development, cultural preservation, and local economic resilience in developing countries. However, limited studies have examined how educated youth perceive rural tourism development in culturally rich but digitally marginalized destinations. This study explores university students' perceptions of rural tourism resources, development challenges, and sustainable strategies in the Tabagsel region of North Sumatra, Indonesia. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed through semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight university students originating from tourism-potential villages across the region. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in participants' perspectives. The findings revealed three major themes. First, students considered natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and community-based resources as key assets for sustainable rural tourism. Second, they identified inadequate infrastructure, limited institutional collaboration, and weak digital promotion as major barriers to tourism development and youth participation. Third, students supported environmental sustainability and community empowerment while acknowledging the need for selective modernization, reflecting the balance between preserving rural authenticity and meeting contemporary tourism demands. This study demonstrates that youth perspectives are valuable for participatory rural tourism planning and can contribute to strengthening sustainable community-based tourism initiatives in developing regions.

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Introduction

Village tourism is increasingly receiving attention as a strategic sector in encouraging sustainable development, preservation of cultural heritage, and revitalization of the local

economy, especially in developing countries (Burton et al., 2025; Sengoz et al., 2025; Trabelsi, 2025). In Indonesia, rural areas have a wealth of beautiful natural landscapes, unique cultural traditions, and diverse communities, so the potential for village tourism development is very large (Diswandi et al., 2025; Perangin-Angin et al., 2025; Putera et al., 2025). In recent years, the development of tourism villages in Indonesia has shown significant progress, along with the government's increasing attention to the community-based tourism sector (Nofrion et al., 2023). Based on data from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia in 2023, there are more than 4,000 tourist villages that have been registered throughout Indonesia, with 300 of them already included in the category of independent tourism villages (Hendriyani, 2023). The Indonesian Tourism Village Award (ADWI) program, which has been held since 2021, has also encouraged the acceleration of infrastructure development, promotion, and human resource capacity in tourist villages. In addition, tourism villages contribute to the improvement of the local economy, with average village income increasing after the village actively develops its tourism potential (Abdurakhmanova & Ahrorov, 2025; Jaya et al., 2022a; Ma, Su, et al., 2025a).

Several challenges such as limited accessibility, low service quality, and dependence on external support are still obstacles in maintaining the sustainability of tourist villages in various regions (Lukman et al., 2025). Studies have found that the success of tourism villages is highly dependent on the active participation of local communities, government support, and environmental sustainability (Hamdan & Basrowi, 2024). Meanwhile, other research revealed that many tourist villages in Indonesia still experience obstacles in terms of destination management, human resource capacity, and limited access to markets and information technology (Imran et al., 2024). Other research highlights the importance of tourism product innovation based on local wisdom to attract tourists and differentiate tourist villages from other destinations (Kusumastuti et al., 2024; Legowo et al., 2024). This confirms that although tourism villages have great economic and social potential, the success of their development requires a holistic approach, involving collaboration between the community, government, academics, and tourism industry players (Gustaman et al., 2024).

It is not much different from the condition of tourist villages in the Tabagsel area (an acronym for Southern Tapanuli) of North Sumatra Province. Tabagsel is an area that is awarded various tourism assets that have not been optimally developed, ranging from cultural sites, traditional crafts, to ecotourism potential (Batubara & Hardana, 2024; Napitupulu, 2019). Despite having great potential, the development of village tourism in Tabagsel still faces various challenges, such as limited promotion, lack of supporting facilities, and low awareness among both local communities and visitors. Napitupulu (2019) found that the weaknesses of tourism management include not utilizing information technology and the internet in developing businesses. Meanwhile, human resources who are less skilled in utilizing information technology, internet, and increasingly high operational costs are a threat to developing businesses in the tourism sector in the future. In addition, Batubara and Hardana (2024) identified that external

factors can affect tourism development in the Southern Tapanuli area, especially in South Tapanulis Regency. Some of the factors that are weaknesses include skills in managing tourism, difficult accessibility, seasonal tourism activities, and inadequate facilities (Batubara & Hardana, 2024).

Addressing the multidimensional challenges of rural tourism development in the Tabagsel region requires more than improvements in infrastructure; it also demands innovative human capital capable of integrating local knowledge, digital technologies, and community participation. Within the quadruple-helix framework, universities represent key stakeholders, while students constitute a strategic group due to their digital literacy, innovative capacity, and active engagement in research, entrepreneurship, and community service initiatives. As local educated youth, they possess a unique dual perspective as both community members familiar with the region's tourism potential and future professionals who can critically evaluate existing challenges and propose sustainable solutions. Therefore, examining students' perceptions is not arbitrary but provides valuable insights into how the next generation can contribute to strengthening community-based rural tourism and enhancing the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of tourism development in the Tabagsel region.

Understanding students' perceptions of the development of village tourism potential is important, given that they are future potential leaders, policymakers, and entrepreneurs who can bring innovation and sustainable practices to the sector. Previous research on tourism villages has shown diverse thematic focuses. Several studies highlight the importance of ecological environments, pro-environmental behaviors, and the emotional interactions of tourists and residents in maintaining the sustainability of rural tourism (Zhang et al., 2025), and reveals the relationship between rural tourism experiences and the formation of national identity (Liu & Chen, 2024). Meanwhile, another study examines the educational aspect in tourism through the role of farmers as educators (Henzel et al., 2024), Children's Memorable Experience in Rural Tourism (Sojasi Qeidari et al., 2024), and the development of the image of slow tourism in tourism villages (Li et al., 2024). In addition, the involvement of tourists in collaborative tourism governance (Reina-Usuga et al., 2024), Integration of smart technologies to build brand equity of rural destinations (Sustacha et al., 2024), and the development of cultural heritage-based cross-border tourism (Novotný, 2025) also get attention. In the theme of socio-economic development, a number of studies discuss the migration of lifestyle entrepreneurs in encouraging rural development (Torkington et al., 2025), Transformation of Local Identity in the Face of Tourism Gentrification (Ma, Zhao, et al., 2025), and how urban migration to villages shapes new destinations in the context of neoliberalism (Yamagishi & Doering, 2025). The aspect of social conflict in rural tourism communities is also raised through the study of implicit conflicts based on social capital (Zhu et al., 2025). In addition, the establishment of the role of tourism entrepreneurs based on knowledge transfer (Ma, Su, et al., 2025b) and the coordinated development relationship between rural tourism and ecological agriculture on the islands (Hainan

Island study) enriches the understanding of the dynamics of tourist villages in the modern era. Based on the literature that has been presented, the findings of the study show that tourism villages are not only tourist spaces, but also arena for complex interactions between ecology, social, cultural, economic, and innovation.

Previous studies on rural tourism have primarily examined tourist experiences, resident–tourist interactions, environmental sustainability, local entrepreneurship, digital technologies, migration, and community socio-economic dynamics (Henzel et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024; Liu & Chen, 2024; Ma, Su, et al., 2025b; Sustacha et al., 2024; Torkington et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2025). However, limited attention has been paid to how educated local youth perceive and can contribute to addressing the structural challenges faced by rural tourism destinations in developing countries. Existing studies also rarely examine culturally rich yet digitally marginalized destinations where tourism development is constrained by limited infrastructure, technological capacity, and destination governance. This gap restricts our understanding of how younger generations can support sustainable tourism development in rural regions confronting persistent systemic barriers.

Accordingly, this study explores university students' perceptions of the potential, challenges, and development strategies for rural tourism in the Tabagsel region of North Sumatra, Indonesia. Rather than presenting Tabagsel merely as a geographically underexplored area, the study positions it as a representative case of culturally endowed but digitally marginalized rural destinations in developing countries. By examining how educated local youth perceive tourism development within this context, the study extends the rural tourism literature by highlighting the role of human capital and youth participation in overcoming structural constraints and advancing community-based sustainable tourism. The findings therefore provide insights that are relevant not only to Tabagsel but also to other rural destinations facing comparable development challenges across the Global South.

Literature Review

Sustainable Rural Tourism and Community-Based Development

Rural tourism has evolved beyond its traditional role as a leisure activity into a strategic instrument for promoting sustainable development, community empowerment, and regional resilience. Contemporary rural tourism emphasizes the integration of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental objectives, positioning local communities as active participants rather than passive beneficiaries of tourism development. This perspective aligns with the principles of community-based tourism, which advocate inclusive governance, equitable benefit-sharing, and the conservation of local cultural and natural resources as fundamental prerequisites for long-term destination sustainability (Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). Consequently, the success of rural tourism should not be measured solely by visitor arrivals or economic performance but also by its capacity to strengthen community well-being, preserve local identity, and enhance environmental stewardship.

Recent scholarship consistently demonstrates that sustainable rural tourism depends on collaborative governance involving multiple stakeholders, including local communities, governments, academic institutions, and the private sector. Rather than relying exclusively on infrastructure development, successful destinations are characterized by participatory decision-making processes that encourage local ownership, strengthen institutional capacity, and foster collective responsibility for tourism resources (Nugroho et al., 2021). Such collaborative approaches enable communities to participate actively in tourism planning, resource management, and policy implementation while ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed more equitably across local populations. This growing emphasis on stakeholder collaboration reflects a broader shift in rural tourism research from destination-centered development toward community-centered governance.

The importance of adaptive governance has become even more evident following the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the vulnerability of tourism-dependent communities worldwide. Rather than focusing solely on economic recovery, recent studies argue that resilient rural tourism requires destinations to diversify local livelihoods, revitalize cultural assets, regenerate ecological resources, and strengthen domestic tourism markets as complementary strategies for long-term sustainability (Adams et al., 2021). Similarly, Wan et al., (2024) contend that adaptive governance should prioritize community participation and locally driven innovation to enhance the capacity of rural destinations to respond to future economic and environmental uncertainties. These studies collectively suggest that sustainable rural tourism is not a static development model but an adaptive process that requires continuous collaboration, institutional learning, and community resilience.

Although previous studies have substantially advanced the understanding of sustainable rural tourism, they have primarily concentrated on institutional arrangements, governance mechanisms, and community participation as the principal determinants of destination success. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how different stakeholder groups contribute to these collaborative processes, particularly educated young people who possess the knowledge, skills, and innovative capacity to support community-based tourism development. This limitation indicates the need to broaden the stakeholder perspective in rural tourism research by considering the contribution of human capital alongside governance and institutional factors, thereby providing a stronger conceptual foundation for examining the role of university students in sustainable rural tourism development.

Innovation, Human Capital, and Destination Competitiveness

In addition to collaborative governance, contemporary rural tourism research increasingly recognizes innovation and human capital as fundamental drivers of destination competitiveness. The rapid advancement of digital technologies, changing tourist preferences, and growing awareness of sustainability have transformed the way

rural destinations create value and maintain their competitiveness. Rather than relying solely on natural attractions or cultural heritage, successful rural tourism destinations are expected to continuously innovate by integrating local resources, technological capabilities, and sustainable management practices into destination development strategies. This perspective reflects a broader transition from resource-based tourism development toward knowledge-based and innovation-driven tourism systems.

Recent studies consistently demonstrate that innovation in rural tourism extends beyond technological adoption to encompass organizational learning, resource efficiency, and community creativity. Hanjaya and Putri (2025), for example, argue that the integration of circular economy principles into tourism village management enhances destination competitiveness by promoting efficient resource utilization, environmental sustainability, and stronger local branding. Similarly, sustainability-oriented destination branding has become increasingly important in differentiating rural destinations within highly competitive tourism markets. Mardiana et al. (2025) emphasize that effective branding should not merely promote tourism attractions but also communicate authentic local identity, ecological responsibility, and cultural values that resonate with visitors seeking meaningful and sustainable travel experiences. Together, these studies suggest that innovation represents a multidimensional process involving technological adaptation, environmental stewardship, and value creation through local knowledge.

The growing importance of innovation has also shifted attention toward the role of human capital in rural tourism development. Human capital is increasingly viewed as a strategic resource that enables destinations to adapt to changing market conditions, adopt digital technologies, and generate innovative solutions to local development challenges. Rather than functioning solely as beneficiaries of tourism, local stakeholders are expected to actively contribute knowledge, creativity, and entrepreneurial initiatives that strengthen destination resilience and competitiveness. Consequently, tourism development is increasingly understood as a knowledge-intensive process in which learning, collaboration, and innovation become essential determinants of sustainable destination performance.

Despite this growing recognition of innovation and human capital, existing rural tourism studies have predominantly examined these issues from the perspectives of governments, local communities, tourism entrepreneurs, and destination managers. Comparatively limited attention has been given to the contribution of educated young people, particularly university students, as strategic human capital capable of facilitating knowledge transfer, digital innovation, and community engagement. Considering that younger generations generally possess higher levels of digital literacy, creativity, and adaptive capacity, their perspectives may provide valuable insights into how rural tourism destinations can respond to contemporary development challenges while strengthening long-term sustainability. This observation highlights the need to explicitly examine the role of university students within the broader framework of sustainable rural tourism development.

Youth and University Students as Strategic Stakeholders in Rural Tourism Development

The increasing emphasis on innovation and human capital in rural tourism development has broadened the range of stakeholders considered essential for achieving sustainable destinations. While earlier studies primarily focused on governments, local communities, entrepreneurs, and tourists, recent perspectives on sustainable development recognize that higher education institutions and young people also play an important role in generating knowledge, fostering innovation, and strengthening community resilience. Within the quadruple-helix framework, universities are regarded as strategic actors that facilitate collaboration between academia, government, industry, and local communities, thereby supporting knowledge exchange and sustainable regional development.

Among the various actors within higher education, university students represent a distinctive form of human capital because they combine academic knowledge with digital literacy, creativity, and strong adaptive capacity. As members of the younger generation, students are generally more familiar with digital technologies and contemporary communication platforms, enabling them to contribute to destination promotion, digital marketing, and the dissemination of sustainable tourism practices. Furthermore, through research activities, entrepreneurship initiatives, and community engagement programs, students frequently interact with local communities and provide practical solutions to local development challenges. These characteristics position students not merely as future beneficiaries of tourism development but as active contributors capable of supporting innovation, strengthening community participation, and enhancing destination competitiveness.

The contribution of university students is particularly relevant for rural destinations in developing countries that continue to experience structural constraints, including limited technological capacity, inadequate tourism management, and insufficient access to information networks. Under such conditions, educated local youth may function as knowledge brokers who facilitate the transfer of ideas, technologies, and sustainable development practices between universities and local communities. Their understanding of local culture, combined with their exposure to academic knowledge and digital innovation, enables them to identify development opportunities while proposing contextually appropriate strategies for improving rural tourism governance. Consequently, students' perceptions provide valuable insights into how rural destinations can better integrate local potential with emerging opportunities for sustainable tourism development.

Despite the growing recognition of youth participation in sustainable development, empirical research examining university students' perceptions of rural tourism remains limited. Existing studies have predominantly explored tourism development from the perspectives of local communities, governments, entrepreneurs, and tourists, with comparatively little attention given to educated young people as strategic stakeholders in community-based tourism. This limitation is particularly evident in culturally rich yet digitally marginalized rural destinations, where the innovative

capacity of local youth has the potential to complement conventional tourism development approaches. Addressing this gap, the present study examines university students' perceptions of rural tourism development in the Tabagsel region to better understand how educated local youth perceive tourism resources, identify development challenges, and propose sustainable strategies that support community-based rural tourism.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that sustainable rural tourism is shaped by collaborative governance, community participation, innovation, and human capital. While previous studies have substantially advanced the understanding of destination management, sustainability-oriented branding, and community empowerment, they have predominantly focused on governments, local communities, entrepreneurs, and tourists as the principal stakeholders in tourism development. Consequently, limited attention has been given to the perspectives of university students as educated local youth who possess digital literacy, innovative capacity, and the potential to contribute to community-based tourism through knowledge transfer and community engagement. This limitation is particularly evident in culturally rich yet digitally marginalized rural destinations in developing countries, where human capital may play a crucial role in addressing persistent challenges related to governance, technological capacity, and sustainable destination development.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines university students' perceptions of rural tourism development in the Tabagsel region, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Rather than treating Tabagsel merely as an underexplored geographical setting, the study positions the region as a representative case of culturally rich but digitally marginalized rural destinations confronting structural development constraints. By integrating perspectives on community-based tourism, stakeholder participation, and human capital, this study extends existing rural tourism literature by highlighting educated local youth as strategic stakeholders in sustainable destination development. The findings are expected to contribute to broader discussions on how youth perspectives can support community-based rural tourism in developing-country contexts facing similar development challenges.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate university students' perceptions of the opportunities, challenges, and strategies for sustainable rural tourism development in the Tabagsel region, North Sumatra, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to explore participants' subjective meanings, experiences, and interpretations of social phenomena within their natural contexts rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given that the study sought to understand how

university students perceive rural tourism development in their local communities, an exploratory qualitative design provided the flexibility required to generate rich, context-specific insights into tourism potential, development challenges, and sustainable development strategies.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a widely adopted strategy in qualitative research for selecting information-rich individuals who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the Islamic Community Development Program at a university located in the Tabagsel region. This study program was deliberately selected because its curriculum emphasizes community empowerment, participatory development, and sustainable local resource management, which are closely aligned with the principles of community-based rural tourism.

To ensure consistency with the geographical scope of the study, only students who originated from villages within the administrative boundaries of the Tabagsel region were included in the analysis. These administrative areas comprise South Tapanuli Regency, Mandailing Natal Regency, Padang Lawas Regency, North Padang Lawas Regency, and Padangsidempuan City. Participants were required to meet three inclusion criteria: (1) they were active undergraduate students in the Islamic Community Development Program; (2) they originated from villages with recognized natural, cultural, or religious tourism potential within the Tabagsel region; and (3) they had demonstrated interest in or experience with community-based tourism activities through academic, community engagement, or local development initiatives.

A total of 8 students fulfilled these criteria and participated in the study. Participant recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, whereby successive interviews no longer generated substantially new codes, themes, or conceptual insights relevant to the research questions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which are particularly suitable for exploring participants' experiences while allowing researchers to probe emerging issues and adapt follow-up questions during the interview process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Interviews were conducted between March and April 2025 through face-to-face and online meetings, depending on participants' availability and accessibility. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Before each interview, participants received an explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations, after which written informed consent was obtained. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity and completeness of

participants' narratives. Field notes documenting contextual observations and preliminary analytical reflections were also maintained throughout the data collection process to support subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This analytical approach was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible procedure for identifying, interpreting, and reporting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively by identifying meaningful words, phrases, and statements reflecting participants' perceptions of rural tourism development. Following Saldaña (2021), coding was conducted through an iterative process in which similar codes were continuously compared, refined, and grouped into broader conceptual categories. These categories were subsequently synthesized into overarching themes representing students' perceptions of tourism potential, development constraints, and strategies for sustainable rural tourism development in the Tabagsel region. Throughout the analytical process, themes were repeatedly reviewed against the original interview transcripts to ensure conceptual coherence, analytical consistency, and faithful representation of participants' perspectives.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The trustworthiness of the findings was established following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), encompassing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Source triangulation involved comparing perspectives among participants originating from different districts within the Tabagsel region to identify convergent and divergent viewpoints. Member checking was undertaken by returning summaries of the preliminary interpretations to several participants to verify the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations, while peer debriefing with fellow researchers helped strengthen analytical consistency and minimize potential researcher bias. To facilitate transferability, detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures are provided.

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants provided written informed consent before the interviews commenced. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. To protect confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from the interview transcripts, and pseudonyms were used throughout the analysis and reporting of findings. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants, their districts of origin within the Tabagsel region, and the tourism development initiatives identified during the interviews. To protect participants' confidentiality, all interviewees were assigned anonymous identification codes (P1-P8)

throughout the analysis and reporting of findings. Any identifying personal information was removed from the interview transcripts before analysis.

Participant Codes	Region/Location	Proposed Tourism Potential
P1	Siuhom Village, West Angkola District, South Tapanuli Regency	Religious Tourism
P2	Natal Beach, Mandailing Natal Regency	Beach Tourism
P3	Aek Badak Jae Village, South Tapanuli	Natural caves
P4	Bargot Topong, South Tapanuli	Hills View
P5	Salambue, Southeast Padangsidempuan, Padang Sidempuan City	Hills View
P6	Huristak Godang, Huristak District, Padanglawas Regency	Garden
P7	Lumban Dolok Village, Siabu District, Mandailing Natal Regency	Hot Springs
P8	Batuhorpak, Tantom Angkola District, South Tapanuli Regency	Rivers and Rice Fields

Table 1. Research informants, villages of origin, and village tourism proposals

Results

Analysis of the interview data generated three overarching themes concerning students' perceptions of rural tourism development in the Tabagsel region. These themes encompass (1) students' perceptions of rural tourism resources, (2) barriers limiting students' contributions to tourism development, and (3) proposed strategies for sustainable rural tourism development. Each theme comprises several sub-themes that emerged through the inductive thematic analysis. A summary of these themes is presented in Table 2.

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Representative quotation	Participants
Tourism Resources	Natural attractions	"This beach attracts many visitors..."	P3, P8
	Religious tourism	"Many visitors come to our mosque..."	P6
	Educational and local economy	"Salted fish could become village souvenirs..."	P1, P7

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Representative quotation	Participants
	Community recreation	"Unused land could become a night market..."	P2
	Hot spring tourism	"More people are visiting the hot spring..."	P4
Barriers to Student Contribution	Poor infrastructure	"The road still needs improvement..."	P5
	Limited collaboration	"Students cannot work alone..."	P3
	Financial constraints	"Without village funding..."	P4
	Weak digital promotion	"Social media should be used..."	P4
Development Strategies	Infrastructure improvement	Improve roads, toilets, parking	P5
	Community participation	Village deliberation and collaboration	P3
	Digital promotion	Social media and destination branding	P4
	Balancing rural authenticity and modern facilities	Cafés, Wi-Fi, playgrounds while preserving local identity	P2, P4

Table 2. Summary of Themes Emerging from Students' Perceptions of Rural Tourism Development in Tabagsel

Students' Perceptions of Rural Tourism Resources

Analysis of the interview data revealed that students perceived their villages as possessing diverse tourism resources that could support sustainable rural tourism development. Across the interviews, participants identified five major categories of tourism resources: (1) natural attractions, (2) religious tourism, (3) community-based recreational tourism, (4) educational and local economic tourism, and (5) health tourism represented by hot springs. Among these categories, natural attractions emerged as the dominant theme, indicating that students viewed the natural landscape as the principal comparative advantage of rural tourism in the Tabagsel region.

Natural tourism was consistently regarded as the most valuable tourism resource. Participants highlighted beaches, hills, caves, rivers, rice fields, orchards, and agricultural landscapes as distinctive assets capable of attracting visitors. Rather than viewing these landscapes merely as environmental resources, students perceived them as opportunities for community-based economic development. One participant emphasized the uniqueness of the coastal landscape in her village:

"This beach attracts many visitors because not every place has this kind of natural resource." (P2).

Similarly, another participant explained that the hilly topography of the village offered scenic value that could become a tourism attraction if managed properly: *“Our village is located on a hill with beautiful scenery that has great tourism potential.”* (P3). Other participants highlighted unique geological attractions. One student described a cave located within the village forest, emphasizing its distinctive interior:

“The cave has colorful rocks that look like a rainbow. It is beautiful, but the road leading to it still needs improvement.” (P5).

Several participants also identified rivers, estuaries, rice fields, and agricultural plantations as tourism assets that could simultaneously support recreation and local livelihoods. One participant suggested that riverside areas could become attractive gathering places for visitors, while another viewed watermelon plantations as destinations that could combine recreational and educational experiences. These responses indicate that students perceived natural resources not as isolated attractions but as interconnected assets capable of supporting multiple forms of tourism activities.

Beyond natural landscapes, students also recognized religious tourism as an important component of the local tourism portfolio. Participants referred to historical mosques and other places of worship that regularly attracted visitors from neighboring districts. One participant explained:

“Many visitors come to our mosque, even from outside the city, because of its architecture and its location overlooking the surrounding landscape.” (P6).

The attractiveness of these sites was not limited to their religious significance but also included their architectural characteristics and surrounding natural environment, which participants believed enhanced visitors' overall experience. Community-based recreational tourism emerged as another important theme. Rather than relying exclusively on existing tourism assets, several students proposed utilizing unused public spaces to create simple recreational facilities for local residents and visitors. One participant suggested: *“Unused open spaces could be transformed into small night markets and playgrounds for children.”* (P2). Participants generally viewed these facilities as opportunities to stimulate local economic activities while creating social spaces for community interaction. Their responses suggest that recreation was perceived not only as entertainment but also as a means of supporting small-scale village entrepreneurship.

Students also identified educational and local economic activities as complementary components of rural tourism. Instead of focusing solely on sightseeing, participants emphasized the importance of introducing visitors to village livelihoods, traditional food production, and local products. One participant proposed that home-based industries, such as salted fish production, could be promoted as distinctive village souvenirs, while another highlighted the importance of creating positive interactions between visitors and local traders to enrich the tourism experience. In addition, participants suggested that village governments should play a greater role in integrating

educational activities with tourism development so that visitors could gain a better understanding of local culture and everyday rural life.

Another tourism resource frequently mentioned by participants was natural hot springs. Students considered these sites to possess strong potential for family recreation and health tourism. One participant explained that although the hot spring had not initially been developed as an official tourism destination, increasing visitor numbers demonstrated its growing attractiveness: *“Originally, this hot spring was not considered a tourist destination, but more and more people from outside the village have started visiting it.”* (P2). Participants believed that better management, maintenance, and community participation could further enhance the attractiveness of these sites while generating additional economic opportunities for local residents.

Overall, the interview findings demonstrate that students perceived rural tourism resources in the Tabagsel region as highly diverse and extending beyond conventional nature-based attractions. Their perceptions encompassed natural landscapes, religious heritage, community recreation, educational experiences, local economic activities, and health tourism. Although participants differed in the specific tourism assets they emphasized, they consistently viewed locally available resources as the foundation for future tourism development within their respective villages.

Students' Perceived Barriers to Contributing to Rural Tourism Development

Although participants expressed strong optimism regarding the tourism potential of their villages, they consistently acknowledged that transforming these resources into sustainable tourism destinations would require overcoming several interconnected barriers. Rather than questioning the availability of tourism resources, students emphasized that their ability to contribute as young initiators of tourism development was constrained by structural, institutional, financial, and technological limitations. Four major themes emerged from the interview data: inadequate infrastructure, limited collaboration with local stakeholders, financial constraints, and weak digital promotion.

The most frequently discussed barrier concerned inadequate tourism infrastructure. Participants explained that poor road conditions, insufficient public facilities, and the limited maintenance of tourism sites reduced both visitor accessibility and the feasibility of implementing new tourism initiatives. Several students believed that even well-designed ideas could not be realized without basic infrastructure capable of supporting tourism activities. One participant explained:

“The cave has great tourism potential, but visitors cannot reach it easily because the road is still in poor condition.” (P5).

Similarly, another participant highlighted the lack of supporting facilities around tourism sites:

“Many people come to the beach during holidays, but there are still very few supporting facilities such as toilets and parking areas.” (P2).

Other participants also referred to neglected tourism sites that had gradually lost visitors because routine maintenance was not carried out. These findings suggest that students viewed infrastructure deficiencies not merely as physical problems but as obstacles that prevented local tourism ideas from being translated into practical development initiatives.

A second barrier involved limited collaboration between students, local communities, and village authorities. Although participants expressed enthusiasm for contributing ideas to tourism development, many believed that successful implementation depended heavily on collective participation and institutional support. Several students observed that tourism development often remained the responsibility of village governments, while opportunities for youth involvement in planning and decision-making were still limited. One participant stated:

“Tourism development cannot be carried out by students alone. The community and village officials also need to work together.” (P3).

Another participant emphasized the importance of community awareness in maintaining tourism destinations:

“People need to realize that tourism belongs to everyone, so everyone should help maintain and develop it.” (P2).

These responses indicate that students perceived collaboration as an essential prerequisite for implementing tourism initiatives and regarded community commitment as equally important as physical development. Financial limitations also emerged as a recurring concern. Participants acknowledged that many proposed improvements, including infrastructure development, tourism facilities, and promotional activities, required financial resources beyond the capacity of individual students or local communities. Consequently, participants frequently referred to village governments as important partners capable of allocating village funds to support tourism development. One participant explained:

“We have many ideas, but without financial support from the village government, it is difficult to implement them.” (P2).

Several participants similarly suggested that village development funds could be directed toward improving tourism infrastructure, maintaining existing attractions, and supporting community-based tourism programs. These findings indicate that students viewed financial support not only as a resource requirement but also as an important mechanism for transforming local ideas into tangible tourism initiatives.

The final barrier concerned limited digital promotion and technological capacity. Participants recognized that social media and digital communication had become increasingly important in attracting visitors; however, they believed that many villages

had not yet utilized these opportunities effectively. Although several students proposed promoting tourism destinations through digital platforms, they also acknowledged that coordinated marketing strategies and digital skills remained limited. One participant commented:

“Tourism promotion should make better use of social media because many people now search for destinations online.” (P4).

Other participants suggested that improving digital promotion would enable villages to reach broader markets while increasing public awareness of local tourism potential. Overall, the interview findings indicate that students did not perceive the principal challenge to rural tourism development as a lack of ideas or motivation. Instead, they believed that their capacity to contribute as young actors in tourism development was constrained by structural conditions beyond their direct control, including inadequate infrastructure, limited institutional collaboration, financial dependence on village authorities, and insufficient digital capacity. Despite these barriers, participants consistently expressed a willingness to contribute to the future development of tourism in their respective villages.

Students' Proposed Strategies for Sustainable Rural Tourism Development

Participants proposed a wide range of strategies to enhance the long-term development of rural tourism in the Tabagsel region. Although the proposed initiatives varied across villages according to local tourism resources, the interview data revealed four broad strategic orientations: improving tourism infrastructure, strengthening community participation, expanding digital promotion, and integrating modern tourism facilities with existing rural attractions. Together, these strategies illustrate how students envisioned tourism development as a collaborative process involving both physical improvements and community engagement.

The first strategy emphasized improving basic tourism infrastructure. Participants consistently argued that accessible roads, parking areas, public toilets, resting facilities, and clear directional signage should be prioritized before introducing additional tourism attractions. They believed that adequate infrastructure would not only improve visitors' experiences but also increase the feasibility of developing local tourism resources. One participant stated:

“The road should be improved first because tourists will not come if access remains difficult.” (P5).

Similarly, another participant explained:

“Tourism facilities such as toilets, parking areas, and clean public spaces are essential because they make visitors feel comfortable.” (P2).

These responses indicate that students viewed infrastructure development as the foundation for sustainable tourism rather than as a complementary investment.

A second strategic orientation focused on strengthening community participation and local governance. Participants repeatedly emphasized that tourism development should involve collaboration among village governments, local residents, youth organizations, and community groups. Several students suggested that tourism planning should begin with village deliberations to ensure that development reflected local priorities and encouraged community ownership. One participant remarked:

“Tourism development should be discussed together with the village government and the community so that everyone feels responsible for maintaining it.” (P3).

Other participants proposed that village funds could be allocated to support tourism management, environmental maintenance, and local entrepreneurship. They also highlighted the importance of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) in maintaining tourism sites and preserving village cleanliness. These findings suggest that students regarded community participation as an essential element of tourism development rather than merely a supporting activity.

The third strategy involved strengthening destination promotion through digital media. Participants recognized that social media had become an important platform for introducing rural tourism destinations to wider audiences. Several students recommended creating attractive digital content, promoting village attractions through online platforms, and improving the visibility of local tourism products. One participant explained:

“Social media should be used more actively because many people now look for tourism destinations online.” (P4).

Others proposed developing visually attractive tourism experiences that could encourage visitors to share photographs and online reviews, thereby increasing destination exposure. Although participants differed in the specific promotional strategies they recommended, they consistently viewed digital communication as an increasingly important component of tourism development.

An interesting pattern also emerged regarding students' aspirations for future tourism development. While participants consistently emphasized the importance of preserving natural landscapes, maintaining village cleanliness, and protecting local identity, many simultaneously proposed the introduction of facilities commonly associated with urban tourism destinations. These included aesthetic cafés equipped with Wi-Fi, children's playgrounds, night markets, recreational facilities, and dedicated photo spots intended to attract younger visitors. One participant suggested:

“There should be cafés with Wi-Fi near the river because young people like places where they can relax and stay connected.” (P4).

Another participant proposed transforming unused public land into recreational spaces:

“Unused open spaces could become small night markets and playgrounds for children.” (P2).

At the same time, participants repeatedly stressed that tourism development should not damage the natural environment or diminish the cultural identity of their villages. Instead, they expected new tourism facilities to complement existing landscapes and community traditions rather than replace them. These findings reveal that students simultaneously valued environmental preservation and modern tourism amenities, reflecting a tendency to combine contemporary visitor expectations with the distinctive characteristics of rural destinations.

Overall, the interview findings demonstrate that students envisioned rural tourism development as a multidimensional process requiring improvements in infrastructure, stronger community collaboration, more effective digital promotion, and innovative destination development. Rather than proposing a single development model, participants articulated strategies that sought to enhance tourism competitiveness while maintaining the distinctive environmental and cultural characteristics of their villages.

Discussion

This study identified three interrelated findings concerning university students' perceptions of rural tourism development in the Tabagsel region. First, students consistently perceived local natural and cultural resources as the principal foundation for sustainable tourism development. Second, despite demonstrating strong motivation to contribute, they recognized that institutional, infrastructural, financial, and digital constraints limited their capacity to act as agents of change. Third, students proposed development strategies that combined community participation and digital innovation while simultaneously expressing aspirations for modern tourism facilities. Together, these findings provide new insights into how educated rural youth conceptualize sustainable tourism development within culturally rich yet structurally constrained rural contexts.

Youth Perceptions of Rural Tourism Resources: Recognizing Endogenous Assets for Sustainable Development

The findings demonstrate that university students perceive rural tourism resources not merely as recreational attractions but as strategic local assets capable of supporting sustainable rural development. Rather than focusing exclusively on the economic value of tourism, participants consistently emphasized the importance of natural landscapes, cultural heritage, religious sites, and locally embedded economic activities as the foundation for future tourism development. This suggests that students understand rural tourism as a multidimensional development process that integrates environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and community welfare. Their perceptions reinforce the argument that the competitiveness of rural destinations depends primarily on the ability to mobilize endogenous resources that reflect local identity and distinctiveness rather than replicating standardized tourism models (Liang et al., 2023; Mayaka et al., 2019; Sharma, 2025).

These findings are broadly consistent with the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which emphasize that tourism development should be rooted in local resources and community participation to generate sustainable economic and social benefits (Bahçelerli & Sucuoğlu, 2025; Mendoza-Moheno et al., 2021). Previous studies have generally highlighted the importance of local communities, tourism entrepreneurs, and government institutions in identifying and managing tourism resources (Gutierrez, 2023; Mayaka et al., 2019). However, comparatively little attention has been paid to how educated young people perceive these resources before they become directly involved in tourism governance. The present findings therefore extend the existing literature by demonstrating that university students possess a strong awareness of locally embedded tourism assets and are capable of recognizing development opportunities that align with community-based tourism principles.

An equally important finding concerns the way students conceptualize the relationship between tourism and local development. Rather than treating tourism solely as a mechanism for increasing visitor numbers, participants viewed tourism as an instrument for strengthening village economies through the utilization of local products, cultural practices, and community participation. This perspective reflects an understanding that sustainable tourism should create value for local residents rather than benefiting external stakeholders alone. Such perceptions resonate with recent discussions on sustainable destination development, which argue that rural tourism should simultaneously generate economic resilience, reinforce cultural identity, and enhance social cohesion (Bahçelerli & Sucuoğlu, 2025; Sharma, 2025).

Nevertheless, this study also offers a contribution that extends beyond the existing rural tourism literature. Whereas previous research has predominantly examined the perceptions of local residents, tourism entrepreneurs, government officials, or visitors, this study positions university students as an emerging stakeholder whose perspectives deserve greater scholarly attention. As educated members of rural communities, students occupy a distinctive position between local knowledge and contemporary development discourse. Their ability to identify tourism opportunities while simultaneously reflecting on broader development challenges suggests that youth should not merely be regarded as future beneficiaries of tourism policies but as active contributors to rural tourism planning and innovation. This finding reinforces the growing recognition of youth agency as an important dimension of sustainable rural development, particularly in culturally rich yet institutionally constrained rural destinations.

Structural Constraints and the Limits of Youth Agency in Rural Tourism Development

Although participants demonstrated strong motivation to contribute to rural tourism development, the findings indicate that their capacity to act as agents of change remains constrained by structural and institutional conditions beyond their direct control. Rather than perceiving inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, weak institutional

collaboration, and insufficient digital promotion merely as general challenges facing rural tourism, students interpreted these conditions as barriers that restricted their ability to transform ideas into concrete development initiatives. This finding suggests that youth participation in rural tourism should not be understood solely as a matter of individual motivation or creativity but as being strongly influenced by the broader governance environment in which young people operate.

This interpretation reinforces previous studies arguing that successful community-based tourism depends not only on community participation but also on institutional arrangements that facilitate collaboration among multiple stakeholders (Bahçelerli & Sucuoğlu, 2025; Mendoza-Moheno et al., 2021). While existing research has emphasized the importance of local governments, tourism entrepreneurs, and community organizations in creating enabling conditions for tourism development (Gutierrez, 2023; Liang et al., 2023), the present findings demonstrate that these institutional conditions are equally important for empowering educated youth. Students perceived themselves as capable of contributing innovative ideas, yet they also recognized that without support from village governments, local communities, and tourism stakeholders, many of these ideas would remain aspirational rather than actionable.

The findings also contribute to emerging discussions on youth agency in rural development. Existing literature frequently portrays young people as drivers of innovation because of their higher educational attainment, digital literacy, and openness to new ideas. However, this study reveals that such potential does not automatically translate into meaningful participation. Instead, students experienced a mismatch between their perceived capacity to contribute and the institutional opportunities available to do so. This mismatch reflects a broader governance challenge in many rural destinations, where participatory tourism planning continues to prioritize government institutions and community elites while providing relatively limited space for youth involvement in decision-making processes.

From this perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening rural tourism requires more than improving physical infrastructure or increasing financial investment. Equally important is the creation of governance mechanisms that actively integrate young people into tourism planning, destination management, and community decision-making. Universities, village governments, and local tourism organizations should therefore move beyond treating students as external observers or future beneficiaries and instead recognize them as strategic partners capable of contributing knowledge, digital competencies, and innovative perspectives. By positioning youth as active collaborators rather than passive supporters, rural tourism governance can better harness the transformative potential of educated young people while strengthening the long-term sustainability of community-based tourism.

The Paradox of Youth Perceptions: Between Rural Authenticity and Tourism Modernization

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in revealing an inherent paradox in students' perceptions of sustainable rural tourism development. While

participants consistently emphasized environmental conservation, community participation, and the preservation of local culture as essential principles of rural tourism, they simultaneously advocated the introduction of tourism facilities commonly associated with urban destinations, including cafés equipped with Wi-Fi, aesthetic photo spots, recreational playgrounds, and other commercial attractions. Rather than viewing these seemingly contradictory perspectives as inconsistent, the findings suggest that rural youth negotiate two competing development paradigms: preserving rural authenticity while responding to the expectations of an increasingly digital and experience-oriented tourism market.

This finding extends current debates within rural tourism scholarship. Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and rural ecotourism literature generally emphasize the protection of environmental integrity, local identity, and community empowerment as the foundations of sustainable destination development (Bahçelerli & Sucuoğlu, 2025; Liang et al., 2023; Sharma, 2025). Conversely, studies on smart tourism increasingly highlight digital connectivity, technological innovation, and visitor-oriented services as critical components of destination competitiveness in contemporary tourism (Sustacha et al., 2024). The findings of this study indicate that these two perspectives are not necessarily perceived as mutually exclusive by young people. Instead, students envision a hybrid model of rural tourism that combines selected elements of modernization with the preservation of local environmental and cultural assets.

Nevertheless, the findings also expose an important conceptual tension. Some proposed interventions, particularly highly commercial entertainment facilities, risk transforming rural destinations into simplified replicas of urban leisure spaces rather than strengthening their distinctive characteristics. Such development trajectories may inadvertently reduce the authenticity, tranquility, and cultural uniqueness that constitute the comparative advantage of rural tourism. Previous studies have argued that excessive commercialization can weaken local identity and gradually replace place-based experiences with standardized tourism products designed primarily for market consumption (Li et al., 2024; Novotný, 2025). The present findings therefore suggest that modernization should not be equated with urbanization. Instead, innovation should be selectively integrated in ways that reinforce rather than diminish the environmental and cultural values that distinguish rural destinations.

This paradox reflects broader socio-cultural transformations experienced by educated rural youth. As digital natives, students are continuously exposed to urban lifestyles, social media trends, and contemporary tourism imaginaries that shape their understanding of what constitutes an attractive destination. Consequently, their development aspirations are influenced not only by local knowledge but also by broader digital representations of successful tourism destinations. This helps explain why participants simultaneously advocated environmental sustainability and modern tourism amenities. Their perceptions illustrate an ongoing negotiation between local identity and global tourism trends rather than a simple rejection of traditional rural values.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the growing literature on youth agency and rural tourism by proposing that sustainable rural tourism should not be conceptualized as a binary choice between preserving authenticity and embracing modernization. Instead, the findings support a more nuanced understanding of smart rural tourism, in which technological innovation, digital promotion, community participation, and cultural preservation are integrated through context-sensitive governance. Such an approach allows rural destinations to remain competitive in contemporary tourism markets while safeguarding the environmental and cultural assets that constitute their long-term sustainability. This conceptualization extends existing Community-Based Tourism literature by demonstrating that educated youth perceive rural tourism as a dynamic process of negotiating, rather than opposing, tradition and modernity.

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of rural tourism literature in several important ways. First, while previous studies have predominantly examined rural tourism through the perspectives of local communities, tourism entrepreneurs, government institutions, or visitors, this study demonstrates that university students represent an important yet underexplored stakeholder in tourism governance. The findings show that educated rural youth possess not only an awareness of local tourism resources but also the capacity to generate development ideas that integrate environmental sustainability, community participation, and digital innovation. By positioning students as emerging actors rather than passive beneficiaries, this study extends Community-Based Tourism (CBT) literature and broadens current discussions on youth agency in sustainable rural development.

Second, this study advances the conceptual understanding of rural tourism by highlighting the coexistence of two competing development aspirations among young people. Rather than perceiving rural authenticity and tourism modernization as mutually exclusive, students attempted to reconcile these perspectives through a hybrid development vision that combines local identity with selected forms of modern tourism infrastructure. This finding contributes to ongoing debates regarding the future of smart rural tourism by suggesting that technological innovation should complement, rather than replace, the environmental, cultural, and social characteristics that distinguish rural destinations. Consequently, the study proposes that sustainable rural tourism should be understood as a process of continuously negotiating tradition and modernization within locally specific contexts.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the findings also provide practical implications for rural tourism governance in developing countries. Universities can play a more active role by strengthening community engagement programs that enable students to participate directly in tourism planning, digital promotion, and destination innovation. At the local level, village governments should establish participatory governance mechanisms that create meaningful opportunities for youth involvement in tourism

decision-making rather than limiting their role to consultation. Furthermore, policymakers should recognize that investments in tourism infrastructure alone are insufficient unless accompanied by institutional support that empowers young people to contribute their knowledge, creativity, and digital competencies. Such collaborative governance is essential for building rural tourism destinations that are economically competitive while preserving their environmental integrity and cultural identity.

Finally, although this study was conducted in the Tabagsel region of North Sumatra, its contribution extends beyond this particular geographical setting. Many rural destinations across developing countries experience similar conditions characterized by abundant cultural and natural resources, limited institutional capacity, uneven digital transformation, and underutilized youth potential. Accordingly, Tabagsel should be understood not merely as a unique local case but as an illustrative example of broader challenges confronting culturally rich yet digitally marginalized rural destinations. This broader perspective enhances the transferability of the findings and positions the study within international debates on sustainable rural tourism and youth participation.

Conclusion

The development of sustainable rural tourism is shaped not only by the availability of natural and cultural resources but also by how local actors perceive and envision the future of their communities. This study shows that university students in the Tabagsel region regard rural tourism as more than an economic opportunity; they associate it with environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and community well-being. At the same time, they recognize that transforming local tourism potential into sustainable destinations requires stronger institutional support, improved collaboration, and greater opportunities for youth participation.

An important insight emerging from this study is the coexistence of two aspirations that are often viewed as contradictory. While students value the authenticity of rural landscapes and local traditions, they also express a desire for selected forms of modernization, particularly digital connectivity and contemporary tourism facilities. Rather than interpreting these aspirations as inconsistent, the findings suggest that young people perceive rural tourism as a continuous process of balancing local identity with changing visitor expectations. This perspective enriches current discussions on Community-Based Tourism (CBT) by highlighting the role of educated youth as contributors to locally grounded yet forward-looking tourism development, especially in culturally rich but digitally marginalized rural areas.

The practical implications extend beyond the Tabagsel context. Creating meaningful opportunities for young people to participate in tourism planning may strengthen the long-term sustainability of rural destinations, particularly when universities, local governments, and community organizations collaborate in developing tourism initiatives. Instead of proposing a definitive governance model, this study offers conceptual insights into how youth perspectives can be more systematically incorporated

into participatory rural tourism policies and future community-based development strategies.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The study involved a relatively small number of participants drawn from a single university and therefore reflects the experiences and perceptions of a specific group of students rather than those of rural youth more broadly. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than universally representative. Future research could broaden this perspective by involving students from multiple institutions, comparing different rural regions, and incorporating the views of local communities, tourism entrepreneurs, and policymakers. Such comparative and multi-stakeholder approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how youth participation can contribute to the governance and sustainability of rural tourism in developing countries.

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