

Determinants of community participation in community-based tourism: A theory of planned behaviour study in rural Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of global tourism, the shift toward Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and creative tourism has emerged as a vital strategy for sustainable rural development (Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2024). Community-based tourism emphasizes the empowerment of local residents, allowing them to manage their own natural and cultural resources while ensuring that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed (Jackson, 2025). For rural areas such as the Lampi Subdistrict in Phang Nga, this model offers a significant opportunity to leverage local assets—including the Ton Plai Phrao waterfall, local fruit orchards (notably its famous mangosteen), and existing foundations projects.

Despite the high potential of these resources, the transition into a systematically managed tourism destination is often hindered by complex psychological and structural barriers. Previous studies (e.g., Tonnam et al., 2025) suggest that successful tourism development is heavily dependent on the willingness of the local population to participate. However, residents' intentions may be influenced by their internal perceptions of their own capabilities, the social pressures from their community, and their concerns regarding the potential economic or environmental costs of development.

This research addresses these challenges by applying the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to examine the causal factors driving community participation. TPB is highly effective in community settings because it systematically links individual cognition to observable actions. The theory postulates that an individual's actual behavior is primarily determined by their behavioral intentions. These intentions are, in turn, shaped by three core constructs, which encompasses both their self-assessed capabilities and external structural constraints. In addition, Lampi Subdistrict, located between some of Phang Nga's major tourist routes, is used as a setting area and has been identified as a community with significant but underutilized tourism potential. While Lampi possesses significant spatial attributes and a history of hosting specific study groups, there remains a gap in understanding how residents' perceived capability and social norms translate into actual management behavior.

By utilizing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), this study advances existing TPB and CBT literature in two distinct ways. First, it bridges the well-documented 'intention-behavior gap' by measuring concrete, on-the-ground management behavior rather than stopping at mere intention. Second, it introduces perceived tourism impact as a direct antecedent to behavior, testing whether high impact awareness acts as a motivational catalyst or a behavioral deterrent.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine factors influencing residents' participation in community-based tourism in Lampi Subdistrict, Phang Nga Province, Thailand. The target population comprised 5,151 registered residents aged 18 years and above who had lived in the area for at least five years. A quota sampling strategy ensured representation across the seven villages, followed by convenience-based public interception for questionnaire distribution. While the quota strategy ensured geographic representation across all seven villages, the subsequent use of convenience-based public interception introduces potential self-selection bias. Consequently, while the findings provide deep insights into Lampi, generalizing these results to broader, distinct demographic contexts should be approached with caution. Based on SEM sample size guidelines (Hair et al., 2014), a minimum of 100–300 cases was required; a total of 397 valid responses were collected, exceeding the recommended threshold.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of demographic information, TPB constructs (Attitude, Subjective Norms, Perceived Behavioral Control), perceived tourism impacts, and levels of community participation. Items were measured using a five-point Likert scale. Content validity was confirmed by three tourism experts, with Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) values ranging from 0.74 to 0.95. A pilot test indicated high internal consistency, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.97.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and SmartPLS. Preliminary screening addressed missing data and outliers. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were performed to validate the measurement model, with factor loadings ranging from 0.65 to 0.92, composite reliability between 0.81 and 0.93, and average variance extracted between 0.56 and 0.78, indicating satisfactory reliability and convergent validity. SEM was then applied to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs and assess the causal pathways between participation intention and actual participation behavior.

FINDINGS

The evaluation of the theoretical model against the empirical data confirms a high degree of compatibility. The relative Chi-Square (X^2 / df) was found to be 1.00, which is well within the acceptable threshold of less than 2.00. Other indices further supported the model fit, including a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.031, a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.978, a Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) of 0.970, and a Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) of 0.038. All these values meet the established criteria for a good fit, demonstrating that the measurement and structural models are consistent with the empirical data.

The analysis of path coefficients reveals significant positive relationships between the latent variables and the community's intention to participate in tourism management, with all significant paths validated at the 0.001 level. Perceived Behavioral Control emerged as the most influential factor, showing a strong positive direct effect on the intention to participate. This was followed by the influence of Subjective Norms or reference groups, which also significantly impacted participation intentions. Additionally, the residents' Attitude toward community-based tourism (CBT) was found to have a significant positive influence on their participation intentions.

Finally, the study confirmed that the intention to participate is a significant predictor of actual participation in tourism management, with a path coefficient of 0.307. However, perceived impacts regarding economic, cultural, social, and environmental factors did not show a positive influence on participation, yielding a coefficient of -0.205. Overall, these findings align with the research hypotheses, indicating that psychological and social factors are primary drivers for community engagement in the Lampi Subdistrict.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It was found that Perceived Behavioral Control (Capability) is the primary driver of residents' intention to participate in tourism management. This finding aligns with established literature which suggests that in emerging or rural destinations, the availability of resources and personal skills often outweighs pure enthusiasm (Attitude) when predicting behavior.

While many studies in mature Western destinations identify Attitude as the strongest predictor, the results here show that Subjective Norms and Attitude have nearly identical, secondary influences. This consistency with research in collective and indigenous societies underscores how community leaders and peer pressure significantly shape individual engagement in local development projects.

The negative relationship between residents' perceived tourism impacts and actual participation suggests that heightened awareness of tourism-related consequences does not necessarily translate into stronger community engagement. In the context of Lampi, where natural and cultural resources are environmentally sensitive, residents who are more cognizant of potential economic leakages, environmental degradation, or social disruption may adopt a protective or risk-averse stance, leading to reduced willingness to engage directly in tourism management.

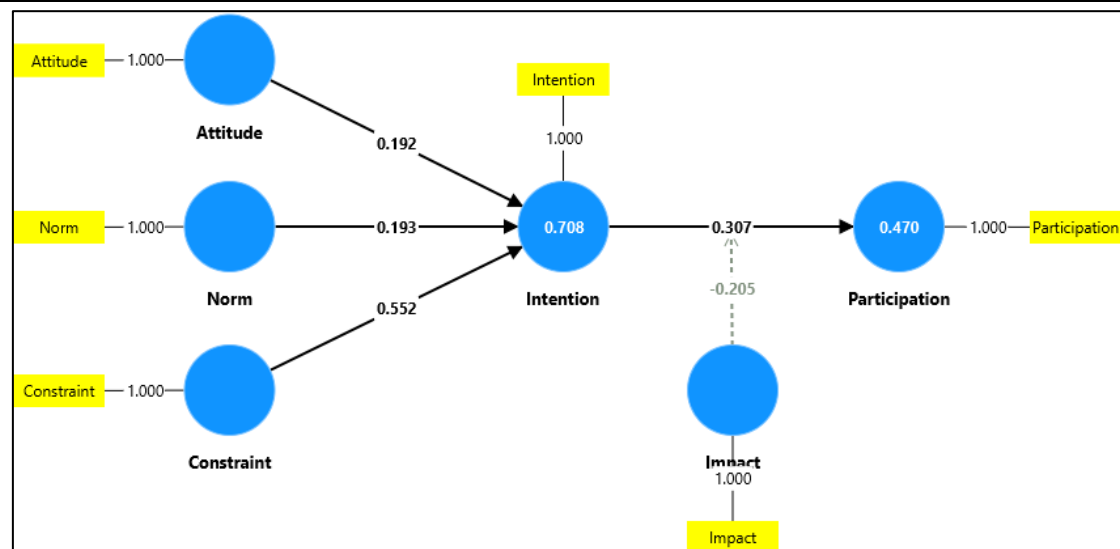


Figure 1. Structure model

Rather than functioning as a motivational factor, perceived impacts appear to act as a cognitive filter, moderating the intention–behavior relationship by amplifying concerns about long-term sustainability and loss of local control. This finding challenges the prevailing assumption in CBT literature that positive impact recognition uniformly fosters participation, and instead highlights the importance of trust, governance assurance, and perceived safeguards in encouraging community involvement, particularly in early-stage or emerging rural destinations.

This study advances existing TPB–based CBT research in several important ways. Theoretically, this study advances the TPB framework in CBT literature by empirically distinguishing between cognitive intention and actual participation, thereby bridging the intention–behavior gap. Furthermore, it introduces the concept of 'protective withdrawal,' demonstrating that heightened awareness of negative tourism impacts acts as a behavioral deterrent rather than a motivator in environmentally sensitive destinations, challenging overly optimistic assumptions in mainstream CBT literature. Practically, the study provides evidence that perceived behavioral control—rather than attitude alone—is the dominant driver of participation, highlighting the need for policy interventions that focus on capability building, resource access, and social support structures. These insights offer actionable guidance for local authorities seeking to transition resource-rich rural communities into sustainable, community-led tourism destinations while managing residents' development concerns.

Practically, the Lamphi Subdistrict Administrative Organization must prioritize overcoming residents' structural constraints. Local authorities can translate these findings into concrete strategies by 1) implementing hands-on capacity-building workshops in hospitality, digital marketing, and storytelling to elevate perceived capabilities; 2) engaging village elders and local champions as liaisons to normalize CBT management as a shared social goal; and 3) establishing transparent governance structures, equitable revenue-sharing models, and strict low-carbon carrying capacities. These visible safeguards will mitigate residents' fears of commodification, directly addressing the 'protective withdrawal' effect and translating supportive intentions into active management.

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