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THE INFLUENCERS OF TOURIST ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM IN DAVAO DE ORO, PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

Tourist engagement is a complex concept for creating genuine travel experiences and promoting sustainable tourism growth. This study investigates the influence of destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image on tourist engagement in community-based ecotourism (CBET) in Davao de Oro, Philippines. Existing research highlights the important roles of these variables in shaping tourist behavior; however, the combined effects within CBET are less well studied. Guided by the Customer Engagement Fundamental Proposition and Stimulus-Organism-Response Paradigm, the study hypothesizes that the three independent variables influence tourist engagement. A descriptive-correlational research design was employed, utilizing a random sampling technique to survey 377 local tourists across five identified Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) attractions. Data were analyzed using mean scores, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression. The study revealed a high level of tourist engagement, destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image in Davao de Oro's community-based ecotourism sites. While destination quality and destination image influence tourist engagement, ecotourism service quality showed the most influence. These findings bring out the need for collaborative efforts among site operators, local communities, and government agencies to enhance cultural, culinary, and eco-based experiences to strengthen authentic tourist connections and ensure the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of local ecotourism. This study proposes empirical evidence for tourism marketing and business management and supports sustainable community tourism development in the province of Davao de Oro.

Keywords: Business Management, Community-Based Ecotourism, Destination Quality, Destination Image, Ecotourism Service Quality, Tourist Engagement, Davao de Oro, Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The engagement of tourists is a major factor in the loyalty to a destination and the growth of tourism, but is nevertheless very challenging to cope with. Over-tourism is one of the problems experienced by Thailand, Greece, and Seychelles, where it not only impacts negatively on the environment, the local community, and the visitors' experience but also puts the ecosystem at stake (Brajcich, 2024; Sabio, 2024). This also led to habitat loss and wildlife conflicts (Maximova, 2019). Countries such as Montenegro and Turkey have the issue of increased prices in the areas of leisure and recreation, hotels, and restaurants due to tourism (Tkalec & Vizek, 2016). Moreover, commodification takes place in Ethiopia, where cultural events are transformed into tourist-friendly happenings, losing their original meaning (Alimineh et al., 2022). In Kuala Lumpur, the influx of tourists harms cultural identity, and both the tourists and the local people have to adjust to new expectations (Anuar et al., 2021). A continuous flow of staff and the lack of opportunities for professional development greatly affect the quality and competitiveness of the tourism sector in the Philippines (Busalla, 2025). All these problems place the need for the re-establishment of tourist engagement that can lead to authentic experiences (Parilla, 2023).

The interaction with tourists has significant social value, providing substantial benefits to the policy and business sectors. The knowledge of tourist engagement is a key factor for local and national policy makers and business sectors as it reflects the public recognition of environmental benefits and the situation of sustainability strategies, market-oriented improvements, and new project development based on feedback (Ezeh & Dube, 2024; Conti et al., 2023). Tourists' engagement brings a sense of pride in the local community and portrays a positive image of the area, attracting locals to participate in tourism activities (Jackson, 2025). In addition, it creates a strong bond with the place, allowing interaction between cultures and understanding to develop between the locals and the tourists, thus leading to social cohesion and even mitigating the chances of conflicts (Woosnam et al., 2015). Lastly, the investigation of tourist engagement not only provides the practitioners of the field but the researchers as well with the knowledge that is necessary for the understanding of the relationships in tourism marketing management, thus contributing to the establishment of the scientific knowledge base in this area (Chou et al., 2024).

Various studies have been conducted on the relationship between destination quality, ecotourism service quality, destination image, and tourist engagement. According to Putri et al. (2022), tourist engagement is driven by destination quality and can improve their loyalty after examining the tourists in South Sumatra, Indonesia, on the effect of destination quality on tourist engagement. In their study, Paul and Roy (2023) explored the influence of the eco-service model on tourist engagement in ecotourism destinations. Their research demonstrates that higher eco-service quality significantly enhances tourist satisfaction, which eventually fosters engagement among tourists. Moliner-Tena (2023) established a causal relationship between destination image and tourist engagement. He found that destination images are the main antecedent of tourist engagement and suggested that destination management should invest in care, improvement, and promotion of tourism resources.

The researcher has gone through various published research studies and literature on the dynamics of destination quality, ecotourism service quality, destination image, and tourist engagement. Although considerable research has focused on the individual components of these variables, there is a noticeable lack of studies that comprehensively explore their interaction and combined effects on tourist engagement, particularly in the context of community-based ecotourism (CBET) in the province of Davao de Oro. For instance, research has explored social media's influence on tourist in Davao de Oro (Pataganao et al., 2020), destination attractiveness affecting tourist intention in ecotourism sites in Davao City (Jimenez et al., 2023), Davao City tourist preferences during the pandemic (Alcaraz et al., 2023), and the impact of ecotourism performance in Davao City (Olivar et al., 2023). These research studies, for the most part, focus either on Davao City alone or on the broader issue of tourism. However, they overlook the unique community-based ecotourism (CBET) context, especially in Davao de Oro province. Hence, this study will examine how destination quality, eco-service quality, and destination image influence tourist engagement in community-based ecotourism in Davao de Oro. This study aims to identify key factors that will aid in enhancing sustainable tourism practices while establishing connections between tourists and local communities.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine the influence of destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image on tourist engagement in community-based ecotourism (CBET) in Davao de Oro. Specifically, it sought to answer the following:

1. What is the level of local tourist engagement as rated by the respondents in terms of enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction, and identification?
2. What is the level of destination quality of ecotourism sites as rated by the respondents in terms of ecosystem health, historical and cultural attractions, amenities, accommodation, food, and safety and security?
3. What is the status of ecotourism service quality of ecotourism sites as rated by the respondents in terms of reliability and responsiveness, assurance and empathy, tangibles, eco-activities, eco-learning, and eco-friendly practices?
4. What is the status of the destination image of ecotourism sites as rated by the respondents in terms of infrastructure, attraction, value for money, and enjoyment?
5. Is there a significant relationship between destination quality and tourist engagement, ecotourism service quality and tourist engagement, and destination image and tourist engagement?
6. Which of the destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image significantly influences the engagement of the local tourists of Davao de Oro?

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the integration of the Customer Engagement Fundamental Proposition and the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Paradigm to explain the direct influence of key destination factors on tourist engagement in the context of ecotourism.

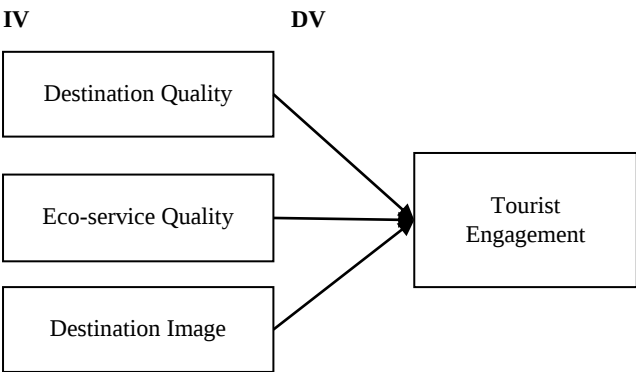
The Customer Engagement Fundamental Proposition of Brodie et al. (2011) provides the structural and dimensional foundation of the engagement construct, defining it as a multidimensional psychological state consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Following Rasoolimanesh et al. (2019), tourist engagement is relatable to Brodie et al.'s proposition specifying its five dimensions: enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction, and identification, representing the full spectrum that a tourist may psychologically experience during their interaction with an ecotourism site.

According to the S–O–R T Paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), the external environment (stimuli) influences individuals' internal psychological states (organism), which subsequently determine their responses (Hochreiter et al., 2023). In this study, destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image serve as the stimuli (S) that evoke an internal organismic response (O), conceptualized as tourist engagement. Although the S–O–R paradigm often extends to behavioral responses, this study limits its scope to the stimulus–organism link, focusing on how environmental attributes directly stimulate engagement.

1.4 Conceptual Framework
Reflected in Figure 1 is the interplay between independent variables – destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image – and the dependent variable – tourist engagement. This study aims to determine the influence of destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image on the local tourists' engagement.

Tourist engagement is the dependent variable of this study and is defined as a psychological condition that emerges from interactive and co-creative experiences with a central agent or object, such as attractions, activities, or services, within key travel destinations (Parilla, 2023). The independent variable destination quality is defined as the combination of features that constitute the tourism product at the destination level, it can be attractions, facilities, and other services (Rajaratnam et al., 2015). It is also defined as the overall visitor's objective perception of the quality of experience and the evaluation of a destination (Cong, 2016). Ecotourism-service quality, on the other hand, is the quality of service provided by an ecotourism destination or a measure of how well a destination meets the expectations of its visitors (Thao et al., 2019). Finally, destination image refers to the overall perception or set of impressions that visitors hold about a destination (Hunt, 1975, as cited in Byon & Zhang, 2010).

Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework



2. METHODOLOGY
2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative method, specifically a descriptive-correlation approach, to statistically explore the relationship between destination quality, ecotourism service quality, destination image, and tourist engagement. This approach fits this study well because it measures the level, status, and relationships of tourist engagement, destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image. The study uses a survey instrument for data collection. Then, the results are analyzed using the appropriate statistical tools.

2.2 Research Locale
The study was conducted in the community-based ecotourism (CBET) attractions in the province of Davao de Oro. The province is blessed with stunning natural landscapes, a diverse ecosystem, and a rich cultural heritage. Davao de Oro has been raising awareness among residents about the importance of environmental conservation and actively involving the people in protecting the natural beauty of the province (Hortizano, 2022). To be more specific, only those identified by the provincial tourism office of Davao de Oro that are categorized as top-performing community-based ecotourism destinations were included in this study, namely: Lake Leonard in the municipality of Maco, Salvosa Falls in the municipality of Pantukan, Tagbibinta and Pyalitan Falls in the municipality of Maragusan, and Awao Falls in the municipality of Monkayo (K. V. Magalona, personal communication, April 3, 2025).

2.3 Research Respondents
From the year 2020 to 2024, Davao de Oro received over 4 million tourists visiting the province's highland, coastal, and wellness loops (Davao de Oro Tourism Office, 2025), averaging at least 800,000 tourists a year. In 2022, 25% of tourists, or almost 20,000, opted to visit community-based ecotourism sites (Palicte, 2022). The respondents in this study comprised 377 local tourists who visited ecotourist sites in Davao de Oro, determined using Raosoft's online sample size calculator based on the estimated average annual number of tourists.

This study utilized a random sampling technique wherein each tourist with firsthand experience from the identified five community-based ecotourism attractions will have an equal chance of being chosen, since the scope of this study is province-wide. To be included in this study, chosen respondents must be at least 18 years old who have visited at least once or have direct and personal experience with the ecotourism site, and be capable of understanding and responding to questions about their ecotourism experiences. Having an informed perspective, the researchers ensured that the respondents could differentiate ecotourism from other types of tourism. Those individuals who do not have any ecotourism experience, adolescents or children, or those who cannot reliably recall or articulate their ecotourism experiences, are not considered to take part in this study.

2.4 Research Instrument
The study utilized four adapted survey questionnaires, and it contains four parts. For Part I, tourist engagement is from Rasoolimanesh et al. (2019) with a 5-point Likert scale and a Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.86 to 0.92. While Part II is for the destination quality, it is an adapted questionnaire from Huong and Grande (2022). The indicators of this study have a Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.70 to .95. Moreover, Part III of the instrument is adapted from Ban and Guruge (2021). In their study, Cronbach's Alpha ranges from 0.78 to 0.89. A 5-point Likert Scale

was used in this study, in which 5 - Strongly Agree and 1 – Strongly Disagree at all.

2.5 Statistical Tools

To ensure a thorough interpretation and analysis of the collected data, the researcher employed several statistical tools, including the mean, which was used to determine the level of tourist engagement, the level of destination quality, the status of ecotourism service quality, and the status of destination image in Davao de Oro ecotourism sites; the standard deviation, which assessed the consistency and dispersion of responses across these variables; the Pearson r correlation coefficient, which identified the relationships between destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image toward tourist engagement; and multiple regression analysis, which examined the extent to which these three independent variables significantly influenced the tourist engagement of local visitors in the province of Davao de Oro.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This study strictly followed ethical research standards by securing approval from the UIC Research Ethics Committee under Protocol Code GS-ER-08-25-0348, ensuring compliance with key principles such as social value, informed consent, protection of vulnerable participants, risk–benefit assessment, privacy and confidentiality, justice, transparency, researcher competence, adequacy of facilities, and community involvement.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the results of the study. Presented in Table 1 is the level of local tourist engagement at ecotourism sites in Davao de Oro across five dimensions: enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction, and identification. It can be observed that the overall mean of tourist engagement is 3.92, which is described as high. This result generally connotes that the engagement of the local tourists towards the ecotourism sites is manifested.

This finding supports Rather et al. (2019), who concluded that co-creation experiences increase the engagement of tourists, provided that the place is real and fun. In addition, this also backs the research of Rasoolimanesh et al. (2019) that tourists who are highly engaged are the ones who create satisfaction and loyalty.

Table 1.

Level of Local Tourist Engagement

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description
Enthusiasm	4.02	.59	High
Attention	4.03	.76	High
Absorption	3.85	.60	High
Interaction	3.92	.60	High
Identification	3.79	.55	High
Overall Mean	3.92	.46	High

The data in Table 2 refer to the level of the destination quality of the ecotourism sites in Davao de Oro in terms of ecosystem health, historical and cultural attractions, amenities, accommodation, food, and safety and security. The level of the destination quality is high, as can be observed by an overall mean of 3.46. This result signifies

that the destination quality of the ecotourism sites in Davao de Oro is satisfactory.

This finding agrees with Syahbudiman et al. (2024), who claim that a high destination quality will attract tourists to return often, enhance the reputation, and create unforgettable experiences. Additionally, this conclusion is supported by Campos et al. (2015), who highlight that one of the key factors indicating destination quality is the memorable experiences gained through engaging with local culture, participating in meaningful activities, and gaining new insights.

Table 2.

Level of Destination Quality

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description
Ecosystem Health	4.20	.59	Very High
Historical and Cultural Attractions	3.04	.70	Moderate
Amenities	3.27	.54	Moderate
Accommodation	3.65	.65	High
Food	2.73	.69	Moderate
Safety and Security	3.83	.59	High
Overall Mean	3.46	.41	High

Table 3 is the descriptive result on the status of ecotourism service quality of the ecotourism sites in Davao de Oro. This is determined by reliability and responsiveness, assurance and empathy, tangibles, eco-activities, eco-learning, and eco-friendly practices. It can be gleaned that the overall mean score of the ecotourism service quality is 3.68, which is described as high.

This result conveys that the ecotourism service qualities of the province's ecotourism sites are satisfactory. This situation concurs with Sadiq et al. (2022), who assert that top-notch service fills the attitude-behavior gap in tourism. It also supports Tjiptono and Diana's (2015) assertion that accurately delivered service quality is essential to meet customer expectations and ensure competitiveness. Moreover, the result corroborates Huda and Setyowardhani's (2023) findings that integrating quality ecotourism services positively influences tourist engagement and intentions to revisit.

Table 3.

Status of Ecotourism Service Quality

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description
Reliability and Responsiveness	3.91	.52	High
Assurance and Empathy	4.06	.54	High
Tangibles	3.27	.58	High
Eco-Activities	2.97	.65	Moderate
Eco-learning	3.83	.59	Moderate
Eco-friendly Practices	4.05	.67	High
Overall Mean	3.68	.39	High

Depicted in Table 4 are the ratings of the respondents on the status of the destination image of Davao de Oro's ecotourism sites in

terms of infrastructure, attraction, value for money, and enjoyment. It can be collected that the overall mean rating is 3.84, which is described as high. The result shows that the tourists' perceptions of the ecotourism sites were favorable.

These results are in line with the work of Kutlu and Ayyidiz (2021), who state that the destination image is a significant factor in the tourists' feeling of meaningfulness, understanding, and involvement. Moreover, the results are consistent with Saryatun et al. (2024), who point out that a positive destination image is a factor in making tourism experiences more memorable, visitor engagement, and self-congruity.

Table 4.

Status of Destination Image

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description
Infrastructure	3.69	.55	High
Attraction	3.49	.63	High
Value for Money	4.03	.57	High
Enjoyment	4.17	.58	High
Overall Mean	3.84	.45	High

The result of the correlation of variables is shown in Table 5. The data presents the significant relationship between destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image toward tourist engagement. It means that when each of these factors strengthens, tourist engagement is also heightened.

Table 5.

Correlation Between Variables

Variables Paired with Local Tourist Engagement	r	p	Remarks
Destination Quality	.417**	.000	Significant
Ecotourism Service Quality	.528**	.000	Significant
Destination Image	.357**	.000	Significant
**Correlation Significant at the 0.01 level			

The significant correlation results revealed that destination quality ($r=.417$, $p=.000$) has a statistically significant and moderately positive relationship with tourist engagement, indicating that better destination quality enhances engagement. This is supported by the findings of Putri et al. (2022), who stated that the quality of the destination was the main pull factor for tourists and by Zhou et al. (2023), who stated that the characteristics and mood of the destination were engagement-facilitating factors. Similarly, ecotourism service quality ($r=.528$, $p=.000$) showed a significant, moderate positive correlation with tourist engagement, suggesting that higher ecotourism service quality increases engagement. This is in line with Paul and Roy (2023), who mentioned that better service quality boosts engagement, and Zameer et al. (2018) mentioned that service quality is one of the main factors influencing tourist engagement. Finally, destination image ($r=.357$, $p=.000$) also exhibited a significant moderate positive relationship with tourist engagement, implying that a favorable destination image promotes engagement. This supports the research of Moliner-Tena (2023), who considered destination image as a major antecedent of engagement, and Dandotiya and Aggarwal (2023),

who noted that a place's image is a critical factor in enhancing the attachment of tourists to a destination.

As presented in Table 6, it is clear that all the independent variables significantly influence local tourist engagement ($p<.05$). The beta coefficients mean that the respective unit increases in destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image will result in the respective increases of local tourist engagement by .115, .389, and .156, respectively. Regarding the regression model, the R^2 of .303 indicates that the combined influence of destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image accounts for 30.3 percent of the variation in local tourist engagement. Thus, other factors not investigated in this research are responsible for the remaining 69.7 percent of the variation in local tourist engagement.

Table 6.

Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	β	t	p	Remarks
Destination Quality	.115	2.030	.043	Significant
Ecotourism Service Quality	.389	6.608	.000	Significant
Destination Image	.156	3.264	.001	Significant
$r^2 = .303$ $F = 55.247$ $p = .000$				

The findings of this study support the Customer Engagement Fundamental Proposition by Brodie et al. (2011), which states that engagement is inherently a multidimensional psychological state. In this study, the five dimensions of tourist engagement demonstrated that engagement is multidimensional in nature, and these dimensions contribute to the connection between tourists and ecotourism attributes. The findings also affirm the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Paradigm of Mehrabian and Russell (1974), which explains that an individual's internal psychological state is influenced by the external environment. Here, destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and destination image act as stimuli influencing tourists' internal states, leading to engagement as a behavioral response.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study demonstrate that local tourist engagement within the province's ecotourism sites is consistently high, manifesting strong enthusiasm, immersion, and connection among visitors. This high engagement corresponds with satisfactory assessments of destination quality, ecotourism service quality, and favorable observations on destination image, all of which met tourist expectations. Respondents perceived the sites as well-maintained, culturally rich, service-oriented, and enjoyable, suggesting that these ecotourism destinations are performing at a satisfactory to strong level in delivering meaningful and memorable experiences.

The relationships among destination quality, service quality, destination image, and tourist engagement were found to be significantly moderate, indicating that improvements in any of these areas can yield meaningful increases in visitor involvement.

Among the three predictors, ecotourism service quality emerged as the strongest influence on engagement, stressing the important role of reliable service, guided experiences, environmental learning, and positive staff interactions in developing trust and emotional connection. These results support both the Customer Engagement Theory and the S–O–R Paradigm, confirming that destination attributes function as external stimuli shaping tourists' internal states, which subsequently contribute to engagement.

Based on these results, several actionable recommendations are proposed to strengthen engagement and overall ecotourism performance. Community leaders and site operators are encouraged to design community-hosted eco-experiences, such as cultural crafts, culinary demonstrations, and guided nature walks, to cultivate deeper emotional and cultural connections. Enhancing cultural programs, promoting local cuisine, standardizing staff appearance, and integrating new eco-friendly recreational activities can further enrich the visitor experience. Additionally, establishing accessible tourist information centers and considering the development of small cultural or historical museums may compensate for limited heritage features and add interpretive value to the sites. Sustaining long-term engagement and competitiveness requires institutionalizing a sustainable service quality program rooted in eco-friendly operations, community-led tour guiding, and structured visitor feedback systems. Strengthening these mechanisms ensures consistent service delivery while empowering local communities.

In line with the S–O–R Paradigm and Customer Engagement Theory, future research may examine additional psychological or contextual factors influencing engagement and may adopt mixed-methods approaches to provide richer insights into tourist behavior. Exploring these directions can deepen theoretical understanding and guide more effective ecotourism development strategies across similar destinations.

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