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Multiculturalism and Local Entrepreneurial Development: A Collaborative Communication Model for Community-Based Tourism in Bukit Lawang, Indonesia

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to develop a conceptual model of collaborative communication for strengthening the local entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Community-Based Tourism (CBT) destination of Bukit Lawang, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. **Theoretical Framework:** The study integrates collaborative communication and entrepreneurial ecosystem perspectives, emphasizing social relationships, trust, information exchange, resource sharing, and social learning. **Literature Review:** Previous studies have examined community participation, tourism collaboration, and local entrepreneurship separately. **Methods:** Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations involving local business actors and tourism stakeholders, and analyzed thematically. **Results:** The findings show that collaboration develops through interpersonal relationships, trust, informal communication, customer referrals, and information exchange. Tour guides act as key intermediaries connecting tourists with accommodation providers, restaurants, craft producers, and other local enterprises. However, cooperation among small businesses remains largely dependent on personal networks and individual initiatives. These interactions also facilitate social learning through knowledge exchange, experience-sharing, and mutual support, strengthening local capabilities and community empowerment. **Implications:** The findings indicate that the presence of numerous local businesses does not automatically create an integrated entrepreneurial ecosystem. Its development requires stronger coordination mechanisms that connect social relationships, trust, resource exchange, and shared economic value. **Novelty:** This study proposes a collaborative communication model in which interpersonal networks provide the foundation for collaboration, reinforced by structured, inclusive, and sustainable coordination mechanisms to strengthen the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Keywords*:* social learning, multicultural, community-based tourism, entrepreneurial ecosystem, trust, local business networks.

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INTRODUCTION

Bukit Lawang is one of the important ecotourism destinations in North Sumatra, offering natural attractions, conservation value, and opportunities for the local economy. As part of Gunung Leuser National Park (GLNP), Bukit Lawang is known not only as a conservation area for Sumatran orangutans but also as a socio-economic space where local communities depend on tourism activities for their livelihoods [1]. Tourism activities in this area involve various local businesses, including tour guides, homestay operators, food service providers, transportation providers, souvenir vendors, and other supporting businesses [2]. The presence of these businesses indicates that Bukit Lawang is not merely a natural tourism destination but also a space in which a local entrepreneurial ecosystem develops, supported by an interconnected network of tourism services.

Within the framework of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), local communities are positioned as key actors who not only participate in tourism activities but also manage and control tourism development and benefit from community-based tourism initiatives[3]. Nevertheless, community involvement cannot be understood solely in terms of the presence of local businesses in tourism activities.

Beyond their economic roles, tourism communities can also function as spaces for social learning, where individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies through social interaction, shared experiences, mentorship, and collaboration. Social learning in tourism communities develops through collective practices, knowledge exchange, and interactions among individuals who share common interests and activities [4] [5]. In community-based tourism settings, learning processes are also closely associated with the development of community capacity, particularly through experience-sharing, training, and active participation in tourism management [6]. In the context of Bukit Lawang, interactions among tour guides, homestay operators, food service providers, and other tourism-related entrepreneurs may facilitate the exchange of practical knowledge regarding tourism services, customer relations, business management, and entrepreneurial practices.

Furthermore, tourism communities provide social spaces in which individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds interact. These interactions may involve local residents, domestic and international tourists, tourism business operators, and other social groups. Previous research has demonstrated that interactions among different groups in tourism destinations are influenced by cultural backgrounds, social networks, and opportunities for interpersonal communication, which may either facilitate or constrain social integration [7]. Therefore, stakeholder communication and collaboration are important in establishing mutual understanding and maintaining relationships among communities, tourism businesses, and other external actors [8]. In this multicultural setting, collaborative communication can facilitate knowledge exchange, cultural understanding, and the development of cooperative relationships that support local tourism activities.

Participation becomes meaningful when local business actors are able to establish collaborative relationships that enable service coordination, role distribution, information exchange, and the joint management of resources [9]. In CBT practice, the issue is therefore not merely whether communities are involved, but also how such involvement is communicated, coordinated, and sustained through collective action [10]. Existing studies on tourism communication tend to position communication as an instrument for destination promotion, product marketing, or influencing tourists [11]. Although these approaches are important, they are insufficient to explain the internal communication processes among local business actors within CBT destinations.

In the context of CBT, communication should be understood as a relational mechanism through which local business actors build trust, coordinate services, manage differences in interests, recommend one another's services, and exchange resources [12]. In Bukit Lawang,

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this perspective is particularly important because the presence of tour guides, homestays, food businesses, transportation providers, and souvenir vendors does not automatically constitute an entrepreneurial ecosystem unless it is supported by coordinated and sustainable relationships.

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to address the research gap concerning how collaborative communication among local business actors contributes to the formation of a local entrepreneurial ecosystem within a Community-Based Tourism destination. Previous studies have highlighted participation, collaboration, promotion, and local economic potential as important elements in Bukit Lawang's development. However, they have not yet provided an adequate conceptual explanation of the communication mechanisms through which the presence of local businesses is transformed into an interconnected system of economic relationships. The novelty of this study lies in positioning collaborative communication as a relational process through which trust, coordination, and resource exchange among local business actors are continually established and sustained.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-Based Tourism and Collaborative Communication

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is a tourism development approach that positions local communities as the primary actors in the management, benefit derivation, and sustainability of destinations [13]. Within this approach, communities are positioned not merely as recipients of tourism impacts but also as subjects involved in service provision, resource management, cultural and environmental preservation, and the creation of local economic value [14]. CBT is also conceptualized as a sustainable tourism approach oriented toward community empowerment, since tourism development should ideally uphold community rights and avoid positioning communities solely as objects of development [15]. Furthermore, CBT emphasizes social justice, equitable distribution of benefits, local ownership, capacity strengthening, and holistic community development [16]. In this context, local communities should not only be involved in tourism activities but should also have the space to manage, control, and make decisions regarding tourism, as well as to derive economic benefits from it.

CBT can be understood as a form of community-based governance, in which communities act as the drivers and principal actors of tourism in their regions and contribute to sustainable local development [17]. Accordingly, CBT is interpreted not merely as general community involvement but as a socio-economic process that demands active participation, cooperation, ownership, local control, and the equitable distribution of benefits for the community. Collaborative communication can be understood as a process of information exchange directed toward creating and strengthening dynamic relationships among actors within a tourism area. In the tourism context, a collaborative communication approach is important because it helps stakeholders build shared understanding, manage divergent interests, and strengthen cooperation in destination management [12].

In the context of Community-Based Tourism, collaborative communication is essential because destination development involves numerous actors with different roles, interests, and resources. Azwar et al argue that CBT requires multi-stakeholder collaboration, clear role allocation, and cooperation among communities, government, business, academia, and the media [18]. Such collaboration is necessary so that CBT development does not proceed in isolation among actors but instead advances through synergy of roles, utilization of local wisdom, and strengthening of community capacity. Within this framework, local communities are not merely implementers of tourism activities; they also have space to

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interact, voice their interests, manage resources, and take part in decision-making processes. However, community participation in tourism development does not always occur optimally. In developing countries, participation often encounters operational, structural, and cultural barriers, including limited access to information, weak spaces for discussion, unclear decision-making mechanisms, low transparency, low trust, unequal power relations, and conflicts of interest among actors [19]. These barriers indicate that participation cannot be understood solely as the physical involvement of communities in tourism activities; it also requires communication mechanisms that enable local actors to understand one another, build mutual understanding, and resolve differences in interests. Consistent with this, community participation in sustainable tourism should also involve communities in decision-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation so that tourism development becomes more inclusive and equitable [20].

Conceptually, CBT functions as a means of ensuring that local communities participate in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of tourism development, particularly so that tourism benefits are not concentrated among certain actors. Meaningful community participation in sustainable tourism requires not only community involvement in tourism activities but also the strengthening of social, economic, and political capacities at the local level. Accordingly, collaboration in CBT should be assessed not by the number of actors involved but by how those actors communicate, allocate roles, build trust, and generate collective action that benefits the community [21].

Social learning and Multicultural Interactions in Tourism Communities

Social learning refers to a process through which individuals develop knowledge, skills, and understanding through interaction, observation, shared experiences, and collective practices. In tourism contexts, social learning can occur through communities of practice in which individuals exchange knowledge, reflect on their experiences, and collectively develop solutions to common challenges [4]. Experiential learning also plays an important role in strengthening the capacity of rural tourism communities, as practical knowledge and skills can develop through direct involvement in tourism activities and continuous interaction among community members [5].Furthermore, community participation and capacity development provide opportunities for local residents to improve their knowledge, skills, and involvement in tourism management [6].

In addition to social learning, multicultural interactions represent another important dimension of tourism communities. Tourism destinations bring together individuals from different cultural and social backgrounds, creating opportunities for interpersonal communication, cultural exchange, and the development of social relationships. However, such interactions do not automatically result in social integration, as cultural differences, group perceptions, and existing social networks may create communication boundaries among individuals [7]. Consequently, effective stakeholder communication becomes essential in facilitating relationships between local communities, tourism businesses, and external actors. Collaborative communication can help establish mutual understanding, strengthen community-business relationships, and support cooperation in community-based tourism development [8].

In this study, social learning and multicultural interactions are considered complementary processes that may strengthen collaborative communication among local tourism business actors. Social learning explains how knowledge, skills, and entrepreneurial experiences are developed through interaction and shared practices, whereas multicultural dynamics provide a broader social context in which individuals with different backgrounds exchange perspectives and establish relationships. Together, these processes provide a conceptual basis for understanding how collaborative communication can contribute to the development of a local entrepreneurial ecosystem in Bukit Lawang.

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Local Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

A local entrepreneurial ecosystem is a system of relationships that connects actors, resources, values, institutions, networks, and business practices within a region so that entrepreneurial activity can emerge and grow. This concept originates from the view that entrepreneurship is determined not only by the capabilities of individual entrepreneurs but also by the surrounding social, economic, institutional, and resource environment. An entrepreneurial ecosystem consists of interdependent actors and factors within a region that can either support or constrain entrepreneurial activity [22].

An entrepreneurial ecosystem is not a collection of isolated businesses but a system formed by the interconnections among its elements. In local and rural contexts, entrepreneurial ecosystems have more specific characteristics because they are closely tied to local potential, natural resources, culture, community networks, and community capacity. The components of rural entrepreneurial ecosystems are grouped into actor components, such as academia, business, government, and community, and non-actor components, such as human capital, networks, entrepreneurial culture, financial systems, governance, infrastructure, environmental resources, and markets [23].

The development of rural tourism entrepreneurship depends on the interaction of economic, social, and environmental factors, including business development, mutual cooperation, collaboration, innovation, resource management, and visitor management [24]. These factors demonstrate that local entrepreneurship is embedded within a broader network of relationships rather than operating independently. Similarly, collaborative governance in rural tourism emphasizes the importance of social networks, trust, coordination, and the exchange of resources among interdependent stakeholders in sustaining tourism initiatives[25]. Therefore, the development of a local entrepreneurial ecosystem requires not only the presence of different business actors but also the ability of these actors to establish and maintain collaborative relationships.

Community participation also influences how tourism resources are managed and how economic benefits are distributed among local stakeholders. Research on community participation in tourism development highlights the importance of maintaining local involvement and decision-making authority in destination management [26]. Furthermore, community empowerment and life satisfaction are associated with sustainable tourism strategies that consider the needs and contributions of local communities [27]. The relationship between tourism development and local livelihoods also demonstrates the importance of strengthening community-based economic institutions and livelihood resilience [28]. In the context of local tourism entrepreneurship, community independence and empowerment can further support the sustainability of tourism businesses and community-managed resources [29]. Community participation in green tourism initiatives also illustrates how collaboration among government, academia, business, media, and local communities can contribute to destination development and sustainability[30]. Moreover, sustainable rural tourism development requires the active contribution of local communities and tourism stakeholders, alongside the preservation of local culture and environmental resources [31]. These perspectives reinforce the understanding that a local entrepreneurial ecosystem is sustained through interconnected relationships, collective participation, and the coordinated use of local resources.

Environmental resources are an important distinguishing feature of rural entrepreneurial ecosystems because they reflect a region’s uniqueness and local economic potential. In this study, this perspective is relevant for understanding Bukit Lawang as an ecotourism destination that relies on natural resources, conservation, local tourism services, and community involvement in tourism-related economic activities.

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At tourism destinations, a local entrepreneurial ecosystem forms when various business actors are interconnected within the tourism service chain. Tourism entrepreneurship is a complex field because it involves interactions across multiple levels, ranging from the institutional environment, infrastructure, culture, and social and market conditions to resources and business strategies [32]. Tourism business actors do not operate in a vacuum; they are always connected to other actors, regulations, markets, tourist needs, infrastructure, and local resources. A local entrepreneurial ecosystem at a tourism destination can be observed in how actors such as tour guides, homestay operators, culinary providers, transport providers, souvenir vendors, and other supporting services are interconnected in shaping the tourist experience.

A local entrepreneurial ecosystem is not merely a collection of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) or business actors located in the same area; it is a system of relationships formed through interaction, cooperation, information exchange, shared use of resources, service innovation, and the creation of local economic value. The success of sustainable tourism village entrepreneurship is influenced by several factors, including income management, business unit development, economic growth, mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), collaboration, innovation, creativity, environmental awareness, resource management, and visitor management [24]. This finding reinforces the understanding that local tourism entrepreneurship concerns not only selling products or services but also the ability of local actors to build cooperation, manage resources, innovate, and create sustainable economic benefits.

Trust, Coordination, and Resource Exchange

Three linking concepts are used to explain how collaborative communication shapes local entrepreneurial ecosystems: trust, coordination, and resource exchange. These concepts are adopted because local entrepreneurial ecosystems do not emerge merely from the presence of many businesses in an area but from relationships that enable actors to connect, cooperate, and create shared value. In Community-Based Tourism destinations, collaborative communication serves as an essential mechanism that connects local business actors through dialogue, information exchange, role alignment, and collective action. Trust is the foundation of collaborative relationships among local business actors.

Collaboration among stakeholders in Community-Based Tourism is strongly influenced by social capital and trust, particularly because CBT often involves many actors with differing interests [33]. Trust enables business actors to be open with one another, share information, and cooperate in addressing destination problems. In tourism activities, trust is required when business actors refer customers to one another, cooperate in providing services, or share information about tourists' needs. Without trust, business actors tend to work individually and are reluctant to build sustained cooperation.

Coordination refers to the ability of local business actors to align their actions, allocate roles, and organize services so that the tourist experience proceeds smoothly. Developing a sustainable tourism industry requires collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, systemic support, and open innovation because organizations and stakeholders in the tourism sector are interdependent [34]. In this study, coordination is understood as a process of alignment among local actors so that tourism services do not operate in a fragmented manner. Coordination may take the form of designing tour packages, referring guests from homestays to guides, recommending places to eat, arranging transportation, or cooperating to address destination problems.

Resource exchange encompasses the exchange of information, customers, networks, skills, facilities, business opportunities, and other economic resources. Tefera and Dlamini show that knowledge sharing and a culture of trust contribute to the growth of hotel SMEs [35]. Similarly, Olabosinde et al state that networking and partnerships in tourism entrepreneurship

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can expand access to markets, resources, knowledge, and business opportunities [36]. In CBT destinations, resource exchange enables local business actors to reinforce one another. For example, tour guides can connect tourists with homestays, homestays can recommend local cuisine, and souvenir vendors can gain customers through referrals from other tourism actors. Thus, resource exchange is not solely economic; it also encompasses the flow of information, networks, experience, and support among local business actors.

These three concepts serve as the basis for constructing the study's conceptual model. The initial conceptual proposition of this study is that collaborative communication shapes local entrepreneurial ecosystems through the production of trust, the strengthening of coordination, and the exchange of resources among local business actors. In other words, collaborative communication is understood not merely as a process of message delivery but as a social mechanism that enables local business actors to build relationships, align actions, share resources, and create shared economic value in the Community-Based Tourism destination of Bukit Lawang.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine and understand the collaborative communication model underlying the formation of a local entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Community-Based Tourism (CBT) destination of Bukit Lawang. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of communication processes, inter-actor relationships, collaboration mechanisms, and resource exchanges among local business actors and tourism stakeholders. In qualitative research, measurement and observation parameters are not intended to quantify variables numerically but rather serve as analytical dimensions that guide data collection, identify field phenomena, and interpret the meanings of informants' experiences and interactions [37]. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the experiences, perspectives, and collaborative communication practices of local business actors and stakeholders involved in community-based tourism development in Bukit Lawang [38]. The interview guide was developed based on seven observation dimensions derived from a synthesis of literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems and collaboration among tourism stakeholders. Entrepreneurial ecosystem literature provided the conceptual foundation for understanding interconnections among actors, networks, resources, and value creation [22] studies on tourism collaboration informed the analysis of communication, trust, and coordination among stakeholders [39].

Based on this synthesis and the focus of the study, seven observation dimensions were established: local business actors, collaborative communication, trust, coordination, resource exchange, shared economic value, and the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. Each dimension was further elaborated into several indicators that served as the basis for developing interview questions and observation guidelines. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to obtain focused information while allowing informants the flexibility to describe their experiences, perspectives, and the dynamics of relationships among actors in the actual field context [40]. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, whereby participants were deliberately chosen based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in business activities and the development of the CBT destination in Bukit Lawang. The informants included local business actors, managers or groups involved in community-based tourism initiatives, and members of the local community. Informant selection considered their involvement in tourism activities, interactions with other business actors, experience in establishing collaborative relationships, and knowledge of local economic development. Where necessary, the number of informants

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could be expanded progressively based on the relevance of the information obtained and the adequacy of the data for addressing the research questions.

Table 1. Research Method Used in This Study

Aspect	Description
Type of Research	Qualitative research with a case study design.
Approach	An in-depth qualitative approach focusing on collaborative communication processes and interactions among local business actors and tourism stakeholders.
Research Objective	To examine collaborative communication in developing a local entrepreneurial ecosystem in Bukit Lawang.
Rationale for Approach	To understand interactions, collaboration, and resource exchanges among local actors.
Key Figures Analyzed	Local business actors, tourism managers, stakeholder groups, and local communities.
Main Data Sources	Semi-structured interviews and field observations.
Method of Analysis	Qualitative descriptive and thematic analysis.
Theoretical Framework	Entrepreneurial ecosystem theory and tourism stakeholder collaboration.
Focus of Analysis	Seven dimensions: business actors, collaborative communication, trust, coordination, resource exchange, shared economic value, and local entrepreneurial ecosystem.
Expected Outcome	A conceptual model of collaborative communication for strengthening the local entrepreneurial ecosystem in Bukit Lawang.

RESULTS

The landscape of Local Business in Bukit Lawang

The interview data reveal that the local entrepreneurial ecosystem in Bukit Lawang encompasses a diverse range of businesses that support tourism activities, including accommodation providers, restaurants, coffee shops, handicraft producers, painting businesses, and souvenir vendors offering products made from locally sourced materials. The presence of these businesses demonstrates that entrepreneurial activities in a community-based tourism (CBT) destination extend beyond core tourism services, such as accommodation and trekking, to include complementary products that enrich the visitor experience. One local business informant, Gawe Art, reported that the business had been operating for approximately 25 years, producing handicrafts from driftwood collected from the river, coconut shells, and animal bones. Meanwhile, Oke Art Shop had been operating for approximately 15 years, combining accommodation, restaurant services, and painting sales. These two cases reflect the considerable entrepreneurial experience of local business actors and their capacity to develop products that align with the characteristics of the tourism destination. In destination development, local business actors serve not only as providers of goods and services but also as integral members of the tourism service network. Tour guides interact directly with visitors and can promote local businesses by recommending products, arranging visits to production sites, and providing information about restaurants and souvenir shops. Accordingly, local businesses and tour guides play complementary roles in enhancing the visitor experience while creating economic opportunities for the local community.

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Forms of Collaborative Communication among Tourism Actors

The finding showed that collaborative communication in Bukit Lawang operates through two primary patterns: direct communication grounded in social relationships and communication based on work-related or business interactions. Direct communication is particularly evident in interactions among tour guides, trekking managers, and local business actors who have established friendships or prior working relationships. Business-oriented communication, meanwhile, occurs through interactions between tour guides and local businesses involving product recommendations, referrals of tourists to local businesses, and marketing collaboration.

Among tour guides, communication serves as a mechanism for operational coordination. One informant explained that the head guide and second guide need to discuss relevant information beforehand to ensure consistency in the information provided to tourists. Such coordination is also necessary to allocate positions during trekking activities, monitor tourists, and provide assistance when challenges arise in the field. These findings indicate that collaborative communication is embedded in the delivery of tourism services, particularly in maintaining visitor safety and the quality of the tourist experience.

Communication also takes place through organizational networks and interorganizational relationships. A tour guide informant explained that guide staffing needs can be coordinated through the Indonesian Tour Guide Association (Himpunan Pramuwisata Indonesia, HPI), while relationships with hotels enable trekking activities to be offered as part of the services provided to guests. Another informant noted that information about tourism activities can be obtained through friendship networks, hotels, and social media. These accounts demonstrate that interpersonal networks, professional associations, and digital media serve as communication channels that facilitate relationships among tourism stakeholders. Nevertheless, these communication patterns do not indicate equal participation among all local business actors. The informant from Oke Art Shop stated that relations with tour guides were positive and mutually supportive; however, the business was not affiliated with any micro, small, and medium-sized enterprise (MSME) group or association and did not participate in regular meetings among local business actors. This account suggests that collaborative communication can occur at the individual level without necessarily involving participation in formal organizations. However, excessive reliance on personal relationships may constrain broader information dissemination and coordination when not supported by shared communication mechanisms.

Trust-Based Social Relationships and Collaboration

Trust among tourism stakeholders is reflected in their willingness to provide mutual assistance, make recommendations, and cooperate in economic activities. Interviews with the owner of Gawe Art indicate that relationships with tour guides are based not solely on business transactions but also on friendship and social ties among individuals involved in tourism activities in Bukit Lawang. The informant described how an individual who acts as a tour guide in a particular context may also serve as a business partner while maintaining a friendship in everyday life.

These relationships are evident in the practice of recommending products to tourists. Tour guides introduce visitors to handicrafts, paintings, souvenirs, and other local products. Under one form of collaboration, guides receive commissions when tourists purchase the products they recommend. This practice illustrates how trust and social relationships can underpin marketing collaboration that generates benefits for multiple parties.

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However, trust and cooperation have not yet been fully institutionalized within a collective collaboration system. Several local business actors indicated that relationships among micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) remain largely individual and are not supported by active associations or communication forums. In addition, differing perspectives on business competition were identified. Some informants regarded competition as a normal aspect of business, whereas a tour guide informant suggested that an emphasis on operating independently may discourage some business actors from engaging in collaboration. Thus, trust in Bukit Lawang can be understood as a form of social capital that facilitates day-to-day cooperation, although it has not consistently developed into organized collective commitment. Interpersonal relationships have enabled collaboration to take place, while stronger shared mechanisms are still needed to ensure that cooperation extends beyond personal ties.

Coordination and Role Distribution in Tourism Service

Coordination practices within the local tourism network are most evident in activities directly related to visitor services. In trekking activities, the allocation of responsibilities among the head guide, second guide, and supporting personnel is essential to ensuring that trips proceed smoothly. The head guide is responsible for leading the trek and providing information, while the assistant guide helps monitor tourists and address needs that arise during the journey. Coordination also takes place with hotels or companies responsible for managing bookings and arranging trekking activities. Coordination between tour guides and MSME operators tends to be more flexible. Guides may direct tourists to local businesses, recommend souvenirs, introduce local food and beverages, or provide opportunities to learn about community-based production activities. One informant explained that tourist itineraries may include visits to a village to observe the production of palm sugar and tempeh, as well as stops to purchase young coconuts. These practices illustrate how coordination can occur through the organization of tourism activities that connect visitor experiences with local economic activities.

Formal coordination among MSMEs, however, remains limited. Several informants reported that they were not affiliated with business associations and did not participate in regular meetings with other local business actors. This situation contrasts with the tour guide network, which has a professional association and coordination mechanisms for specific operational needs. This difference suggests that coordination in Bukit Lawang varies across stakeholder groups: it is relatively structured in core tourism activities that require a clear division of responsibilities, but tends to remain informal in horizontal relationships among complementary local businesses.

The findings also indicate that cross-stakeholder discussion forums have been used to address destination development, increases in visitor numbers, parking, levies, and various tourism management issues. However, according to one informant, these meetings took place approximately once or twice a year, depending on prevailing circumstances. This suggests that collective coordination has occurred, although the frequency and continuity of these forums cannot be assumed to be consistent across all local business actors.

Resource and Information Flows within Local Business Networks

Resource exchange in Bukit Lawang occurs through information flows, customer referrals, access to tourist networks, and the use of services provided by other local business actors. In this context, tour guides occupy a strategic position because they interact directly with tourists and can connect their needs with the products and services available at the destination. The interview data indicate that tour guides do more than offer trekking activities; they can also introduce tourists to handicrafts, souvenirs, restaurants, and local

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community activities. During village-based tourism activities, visitors may be directed to purchase products made by local residents. These practices illustrate how economic opportunities generated through guiding activities can reach local businesses through information sharing and product recommendations. Resource exchange also occurs through relationships between tourism businesses and local suppliers.

One informant explained that increased activity among hotels and restaurants can generate demand for local agricultural products, such as vegetables sold through local markets. This relationship suggests that the economic benefits of tourism may extend to businesses that do not interact directly with tourists, through food supply chains and the provision of operational necessities. Nevertheless, resource and information flows are not yet fully integrated. Marketing collaboration between tour guides and MSMEs is evident in everyday practices, but some local business actors remain outside formal communication networks. Consequently, access to customer referrals, promotional opportunities, and information about business prospects may vary between those who have established connections with tour guides and those who operate more independently. Overall, resource exchange constitutes an important mechanism linking collaborative communication with local entrepreneurial activities. However, the distribution of its benefits remains influenced by the extent to which individual business actors are connected to the tourism network.

Mechanisms of Shared Economic Value Creation

Shared economic value emerges when collaboration among actors benefits more than one party. In this study, this process is most clearly reflected in tour guides' recommendations of local products, tourists' souvenir purchases, the provision of supporting services, and the way hotels and restaurants draw on community-made products to meet their needs. In the relationship between tour guides and craft producers, product recommendations can increase sales opportunities for business owners, while guides receive commissions or other benefits from the resulting business relationship. This practice illustrates a form of shared economic value creation grounded in mutual dependence rather than in simple seller-buyer transactions.

The owners of Gawe Art also regard handicrafts as a supporting product that can enhance the appeal of the destination. Although these products are not the main reason some tourists visit Bukit Lawang, handicrafts and souvenirs can enrich the tourist experience and generate additional income. Informants further explained that certain craft products depend more heavily on the international tourist market, since domestic tourists do not always share the same purchasing power or preferences. This suggests that shared economic value is shaped by market characteristics and by the extent to which a product fits tourists' needs.

Beyond economic benefits, shared value creation is also linked to efforts to preserve natural attractions. One tour guide emphasized the importance of protecting the forest as the main tourism product of Bukit Lawang. This perspective shows that the sustainability of the local economy is inseparable from the sustainability of the natural resources on which tourism depends. However, the available interview data mainly reveal the forms and perceptions of economic benefits, rather than measurements of transaction values or income. Accordingly, these findings describe the mechanisms of shared economic value creation qualitatively and cannot support conclusions about the magnitude of the economic impact of collaboration on the income of all business actors.

Communication Barriers in Collaboration and Gaps in Institutional Support

One of the main findings of this study is the gap between the informal collaboration that has developed among some tourism actors and the limited institutional support available for

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MSME development. Several business owners stated that their relationship with the local government has not been felt directly or has not been intensive. The informant from Oke Art Shop, for example, said that the business has not received government support in the form of outreach programs or projects that specifically support its activities.

This does not mean that no government programs exist at all. The Gawe Art informant acknowledged outreach activities on digital marketing, cleanliness, and conservation. However, according to this informant, these activities were not accompanied by intensive and sustained MSME mentoring, and did not address business development needs comprehensively. These differing experiences show that the existence of government programs or activities does not necessarily mean that the support has been felt equally by all business actors.

Another barrier concerns limited infrastructure and supporting facilities. Business owners cited poor road conditions and power outages as factors that disrupt their operations. Meanwhile, tour guides highlighted the need for adequate health facilities to deal with the risk of accidents during trekking. These findings suggest that the formation of a local entrepreneurial ecosystem is shaped not only by communication among actors, but also by the availability of basic facilities that support the smooth running of economic activities and the safety of tourists.

A further barrier lies in differing interests and work orientations. One informant stated that the government tends to work on a project basis and to fulfill administrative requirements, whereas business actors are more oriented toward the operational needs of their businesses. This difference in orientation can cause mentoring activities to be misaligned with business actors' needs. In addition, some actors' tendency to run their businesses individually may reduce their willingness to share information and engage in collaboration. Overall, barriers to collaborative communication in Bukit Lawang are not limited to difficulties in conveying information. They also include the lack of shared forums, irregular coordination, differing interests, and the suboptimal relationship between business actors and supporting institutions.

Emerging Patterns: Collaborative Communication in the Formation of a Local Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Across the aspects examined in this study show that the formation of a local entrepreneurial ecosystem in Bukit Lawang proceeds through interrelated links among communication, trust, coordination, resource exchange, and economic value creation. Direct communication and social relationships lay the foundation for interaction; trust supports the willingness to help one another; coordination enables the division of roles in tourism services; and customer recommendations and information exchange connect tourism activities with local business opportunities.

Nevertheless, this pattern of collaboration still reveals differences in the degree of connectedness among actors. The relationships among tour guides, trekking managers, and tourism service providers are relatively visible in operational activities. In contrast, horizontal collaboration among MSME actors and institutional relationships with the government do not yet show a consistent pattern across all informants. This indicates that the local entrepreneurial ecosystem has a foundation of collaboration based on interpersonal networks and business practices, but is not yet fully supported by institutionalized cross-actor coordination mechanisms.

These findings point to an understanding that collaborative communication in Bukit Lawang serves as a link between social networks, tourism service activities, and local economic opportunities. However, for these relationships to develop into a more integrated entrepreneurial ecosystem, it is necessary to strengthen cross-actor communication forums,

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improve connectedness between tour guides and MSMEs, achieve more equitable information exchange, and provide institutional support that fits the needs of business actors. This conclusion is an analytical synthesis of the available interviews and provides an empirical basis for developing a collaborative communication model in the context of the Bukit Lawang CBT destination.

DISCUSSION

Collaborative Communication as an Informal Practice Rooted in Social Relationships

The findings show that collaborative communication in Bukit Lawang's local entrepreneurial ecosystem develops mainly through interpersonal relationships, friendships, and everyday business practices. The Gawe Art informant regards tour guides as both business partners and friends who can support one another. Meanwhile, tour guides explained that recommending craft products to tourists is done pragmatically and is not always based on written agreements. This pattern shows that collaboration takes place through informal relationships embedded in local economic activity. This finding is consistent with Czernek-Marszałek who showed that the social embeddedness of tourism entrepreneurs can facilitate cooperation, access to resources, and knowledge exchange [41].

These informal relationships also provide opportunities for social learning among local business actors. Through everyday interactions, discussions, and the exchange of practical experiences, business actors can acquire knowledge and skills from one another without necessarily participating in formal training programs. For example, the practice of recommending local craft products to tourists may provide opportunities for tour guides and craft producers to exchange information about products, tourist preferences, and potential customer needs. Such interactions can be understood as forms of informal learning, in which knowledge is developed through social relationships and shared business experiences. Therefore, collaborative communication functions not only to maintain business relationships but also to facilitate knowledge transfer and the development of individual capacities within the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Social closeness can thus serve as capital for collaboration among business actors. However, excessive dependence on personal relationships may also limit cooperation, including through interpersonal conflict and behaviors that are unfavorable to collaboration [41]. In the Bukit Lawang context, this finding indicates the need to understand how informal relationships can be sustained and, at the same time, expanded so that opportunities for collaboration do not depend solely on personal closeness.

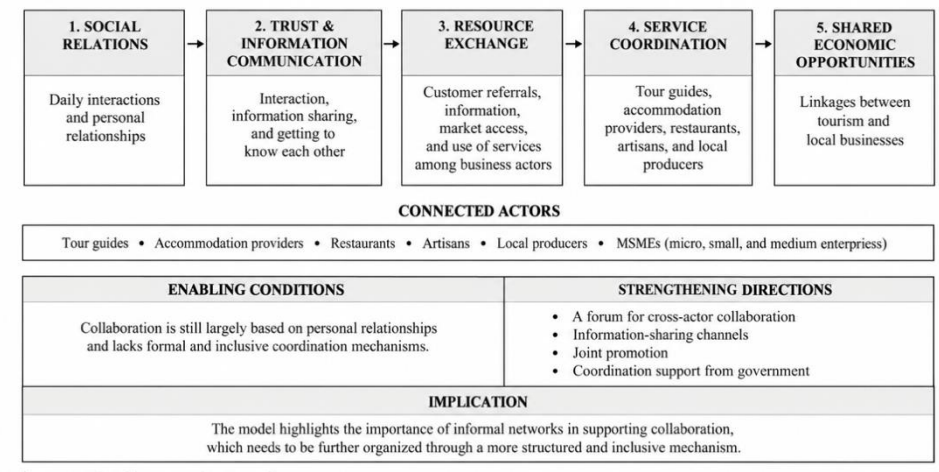
Trust and Resource Exchange in the Tourism Value Chain

Trust in collaboration is evident in tour guides' willingness to recommend local products and bring tourists to visit community businesses. This practice shows that communication functions not only as a means of conveying information but also as a mechanism that connects business owners with potential customers. In rural tourism business networks, trust and social interaction play a role in shaping engagement among business actors [42]. Meanwhile, Schott and Nhem showed that distribution channels and the role of intermediaries are important in linking community-based tourism (CBT) businesses with markets[43]. In the Bukit Lawang context, the relationships among guides, accommodations, restaurants, and craft producers can be understood as an informal collaboration network that facilitates information exchange, customer referrals, and market access.

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Another important finding is that the tourist experience in Bukit Lawang is not centered solely on the forest and orangutans. Guides also offer visits to villages, brown sugar and tempeh production sites, and young coconut vendors. This practice shows an opportunity to connect tourism activities with the products and economic activities of the local community. Accordingly, tour guides can act as a link between tourist demand and the supply of local products. Nevertheless, the available data are not sufficient to determine how evenly these economic benefits are distributed among all business actors.

Figure 1. Collaborative Communication Model in the Local Entrepreneurial Ecosystem of Bukit Lawang



Source: Author's analysis (2026).

From a community empowerment perspective, these interactions have significance beyond immediate economic transactions. The exchange of information, recommendations, and practical experiences can help local business actors improve their understanding of tourism markets and identify opportunities to develop their products and services. In this sense, social learning becomes one of the processes through which collaborative communication can support community empowerment. Rather than viewing empowerment solely in terms of external assistance or financial benefits, this finding highlights the importance of strengthening local actors' knowledge, capabilities, and opportunities to participate in the tourism value chain. However, the extent to which these learning processes lead to measurable improvements in business performance or the distribution of economic benefits requires further investigation.

The tourism environment also provides opportunities for interactions among individuals with different social and cultural backgrounds, including local residents, tourism business operators, and domestic and international visitors. Such interactions may involve differences in language, cultural expectations, communication styles, and preferences regarding tourism services. In this context, communication is important for helping individuals understand one another, adjust their interactions, and manage potential differences. These encounters may also broaden local business actors' perspectives by exposing them to different expectations and experiences. From a social learning perspective, cross-cultural interactions can create additional opportunities for knowledge exchange and mutual understanding. Nevertheless, the extent to which these dynamics occur in the daily practices of Bukit Lawang's tourism businesses should be interpreted in relation to the empirical evidence collected in this study.

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Operational Coordination Not Yet Matched by Institutional Collaboration

The findings show that coordination is relatively clearer in the delivery of guiding services and in relations with the hospitality sector, including the arrangement of guide needs through the Indonesian Tour Guides Association (Himpunan Pramuwisata Indonesia, HPI). In contrast, horizontal cooperation among micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) actors is not yet fully organized. Several informants stated that they do not join any association or take part in regular meetings, while one informant mentioned a cross-actor tourism forum held about once or twice a year.

This condition shows a difference between operational coordination and collaborative coordination at the destination level. Operational coordination sustains tourism services, whereas collaborative governance requires connectedness among stakeholders to build shared understanding, goals, and action. Bichler and Lösch position stakeholder collaboration as an important aspect of community-oriented destination governance [44],[45].

A governance network perspective also emphasizes the importance of identifying linkages among actors so that destination development can be coordinated more effectively [45]. In the Bukit Lawang context, the limited frequency of forums and the non-involvement of some MSME actors indicate that mechanisms for linking individual collaboration with collective action still need to be strengthened. This condition may limit opportunities for information exchange, discussion of shared problems, and the development of collective promotion. However, this study does not conclude that infrequent forums directly cause weak MSME performance; rather, the finding is better understood as an indication of limited formal coordination spaces, based on informants' accounts.

Institutional and Infrastructure Barriers in Ecosystem Development

Beyond communication patterns among actors, the study identified issues related to institutional support and infrastructure conditions. The Oke Art Shop informant stated that government support for the business is still lacking and emphasized the importance of promotion. Another informant cited road conditions and power supply as factors that disrupt business activities. At the same time, the Gawe Art informant acknowledged government outreach on digital marketing, cleanliness, and conservation, although the informant did not feel any sustained, direct collaboration with the government.

These differing accounts show that institutional support needs to be understood not only in terms of the existence of programs, but also in terms of business actors' access to, and experience of using, them. Liu et al. explained that formal and informal institutions influence community access to resources and participation in small-scale tourism enterprises [46] . Meanwhile, Lebambo identified limited information, business infrastructure, and access to mentoring networks as constraints on rural tourism entrepreneurship development. Together, these perspectives help explain the possible gap between the programs provided and the support actually felt by business actors [47].

In the Bukit Lawang context, the differences in informants' experiences cannot be taken as evidence that government support is entirely unavailable, nor that it has reached all business actors. Instead, these findings indicate the need to pay attention to communication mechanisms, information dissemination, access to programs, and the continuity of mentoring. Accordingly, developing the local entrepreneurial ecosystem requires not only support programs and infrastructure improvements, but also institutional mechanisms that enable business actors with different needs to obtain information and opportunities to participate.

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Collaborative Communication Model in the Local Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Based on the overall findings, the collaborative communication model in Bukit Lawang can be understood as a process that begins with social relationships, develops through trust and informal communication, and is then realized in customer referrals, information exchange, and service coordination, thereby opening opportunities for shared economic value. This process is consistent with the concept of social embeddedness, which explains that social relationships can facilitate cooperation, access to resources, and knowledge exchange among business actors [41]. In the CBT context, intermediaries and distribution channels also play a role in linking local businesses with markets [43]. Based on this study's findings, guides, accommodations, restaurants, craft producers, and local producers form a network that has the potential to connect tourism activities with the community's economic activities.

However, this process is not yet fully supported by regular and inclusive institutional coordination. Therefore, strengthening the ecosystem should focus on linking the informal networks already in place with more organized collaboration mechanisms. Bichler and Lösch emphasize the importance of dialogue, trust-building, shared understanding, and institutional support in collaborative destination governance. In the Bukit Lawang context, more consistent cross-actor meetings, information-sharing channels, joint promotion, and coordinated government support can be considered as steps to strengthen relationships among actors. These steps are practical implications derived from the study's findings and the literature, not effects that have been directly tested in this study.

Overall, the findings confirm that the local entrepreneurial ecosystem is shaped not only by the presence of businesses but also by the quality of the relationships and communication that connect them. This integration shows that informal networks in Bukit Lawang have provided a foundation for everyday collaboration, while more structured coordination mechanisms have the potential to broaden connectedness among actors. Nevertheless, the formation of a collaborative network cannot be equated directly with an equitable distribution of economic benefits, because this study did not measure how those benefits are distributed among all business actors.

Based on the overall findings, the collaborative communication model in Bukit Lawang can be understood as a process that begins with social relationships, develops through trust and informal communication, and is realized through customer referrals, information exchange, and service coordination. Beyond facilitating business connections, these interactions also create opportunities for social learning through the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and practical skills among local business actors. This process illustrates how collaborative communication can contribute to community empowerment by strengthening local knowledge, individual capabilities, and opportunities for participation in the tourism value chain. In this respect, the local entrepreneurial ecosystem is not merely a network of economic relationships but also a social environment in which business actors can learn from one another and develop their capacities through everyday collaboration. This interpretation is consistent with the concept of social embeddedness, which explains that social relationships can facilitate cooperation, access to resources, and knowledge exchange among business actors.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that collaborative communication plays an important role in the formation of a local entrepreneurial ecosystem in the community-based tourism (CBT) destination of Bukit Lawang. Based on the interviews, collaboration among local business

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actors, tour guides, and tourism service providers has taken place through informal communication, social relationships, trust, information exchange, and customer recommendations. These practices open opportunities for cooperation and connect various local businesses within the tourism service chain. However, the collaboration that has formed is not yet fully institutionalized and is not evenly distributed among all business actors. Coordination is relatively more visible in tourism operations, whereas horizontal cooperation among MSME actors still tends to depend on personal relationships and individual initiative. In addition, limited sustained coordination, business mentoring, and infrastructure, as well as unequal access to institutional support, pose challenges to strengthening the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. Accordingly, the main findings of this study show that the local entrepreneurial ecosystem in Bukit Lawang is already supported by networks of communication and social trust, but its development still requires collaboration mechanisms that are more structured, inclusive, and sustainable. Strengthening communication forums among business actors, cross-stakeholder coordination, market information exchange, and the development of tour packages that involve local products can serve as strategic steps to broaden shared economic benefits and reinforce the sustainability of community-based tourism.

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Author Contribution

All authors contribute equally to the publication of this paper, all authors read and agree to this paper, and all authors declare no conflict of interest.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI assistance was used during revision for language editing, organization of the manuscript, clarification of conceptual distinctions, and checking selected bibliographic details. It was not used to generate participant accounts, field observations, consent records, or research results. The authors remain responsible for verifying the manuscript against the original research records and approving its scholarly interpretation.

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