

Community Capabilities, Cultural Capital, Social Participation, Cultural Identity in the Economic Empowerment of Samosir as a National Super Priority Tourism Destination

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Keywords: community capabilities, cultural capital, social participation, cultural identity, super priority tourism destination.</p>	<p>This study examines the roles of community capabilities, cultural capital, social participation, and cultural identity in driving the economic empowerment of local communities in Samosir as a National Super Priority Tourism Destination. The rapid development of tourism in strategic destinations often creates economic opportunities while simultaneously posing risks of social exclusion and cultural commodification if local communities are not actively involved. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research integrates quantitative data obtained from surveys of local tourism actors, micro and small enterprise owners, and community leaders, with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The findings indicate that community capabilities—particularly skills, knowledge, and organizational capacity—have a significant positive effect on local economic empowerment. Cultural capital and cultural identity function not only as economic assets that enhance destination attractiveness but also as social resources that strengthen community cohesion and bargaining power. Furthermore, social participation mediates the relationship between community capabilities and economic empowerment, ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed more inclusively. This study contributes to the literature on community-based tourism by highlighting an integrated model of economic empowerment that places local culture and collective participation at its core. The results offer important policy implications for sustainable tourism development in Samosir and other super priority destinations, emphasizing the need to strengthen community capacity, protect cultural identity, and promote participatory governance to achieve inclusive and sustainable economic growth.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has increasingly been positioned as a strategic sector for accelerating regional economic development, particularly in areas designated as National Super Priority Tourism Destinations in Indonesia (Sugiarti, Rahman and Rosadi, 2025). Samosir Regency, located at the heart of Lake Toba, represents a unique case where tourism development is closely

intertwined with rich cultural heritage, strong communal traditions, and local socio-economic dynamics (Abreu *et al.*, 2024). While large-scale tourism investments have the potential to stimulate economic growth, create employment, and improve local welfare, they also raise critical questions regarding inclusivity, sustainability, and the extent to which local communities are genuinely empowered as primary beneficiaries of development. Without deliberate efforts to strengthen local capacities and safeguard cultural values, tourism development risks marginalizing indigenous communities and reducing culture to mere commodities (Purba *et al.*, 2024).

Community empowerment in tourism development is increasingly understood as a multidimensional process that extends beyond income generation to include enhanced capabilities, social agency, and cultural resilience (Sihombing and Nasib, 2020). Community capabilities—encompassing skills, knowledge, leadership, and organizational capacity—determine the ability of local actors to participate effectively in tourism value chains and decision-making processes (Simorangkir *et al.*, 2024). In destinations such as Samosir, where traditional livelihoods coexist with emerging tourism-based economies, the development of community capabilities is essential to ensure that local residents can adapt to changing economic structures without losing control over their resources and social institutions (Purba, 2021).

Cultural capital and cultural identity play a central role in shaping the sustainability and competitiveness of cultural tourism destinations. The Batak Toba cultural traditions, expressed through rituals, architecture, music, and customary institutions, constitute valuable cultural assets that differentiate Samosir from other destinations (Sihaloho, 2025). However, cultural capital is not merely an economic resource; it is also a source of collective identity and social cohesion. When cultural identity is weakened or exploited solely for commercial purposes, tourism development may undermine the very foundations of community life (Purba, Sudarso, *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, understanding how cultural capital and cultural identity contribute to economic empowerment is crucial for ensuring that tourism growth reinforces, rather than erodes, local cultural integrity.

Social participation acts as a critical mechanism that links community capabilities and cultural resources with tangible economic outcomes (Purba, Rofiki, *et al.*, 2020). Active involvement of local communities in planning, implementation, and evaluation of tourism development fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, while also promoting more equitable distribution of benefits. In the context of Samosir, social participation through customary institutions, cooperatives, and community-based tourism initiatives has the potential to strengthen collective bargaining power and reduce dependency on external actors. Nevertheless, disparities in participation often persist, influenced by factors such as education, access to information, and power relations within the community (Tan *et al.*, 2024).

Despite growing scholarly attention to community-based tourism and local economic empowerment, empirical studies that integrate community capabilities, cultural capital, social participation, and cultural identity within a single analytical framework remain limited,

particularly in the context of super priority tourism destinations in Indonesia. Most existing studies tend to examine these variables in isolation, thereby overlooking their interdependent and reinforcing relationships. This study addresses this gap by proposing an integrative approach to analyze how these dimensions collectively influence economic empowerment in Samosir (Ulfa, 2022).

The novelty of this research lies in its holistic model that positions social participation as a mediating variable between community capabilities, cultural resources, and economic empowerment within a super priority tourism context. By combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, this study not only advances theoretical understanding of empowerment-based tourism development but also provides practical insights for policymakers and stakeholders. The findings are expected to inform more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and sustainable tourism policies that place local communities at the center of development, ensuring that Samosir's transformation as a premier tourism destination translates into long-term economic and social benefits for its people.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively analyze the influence of community capabilities, cultural capital, social participation, and cultural identity on economic empowerment in Samosir as a National Super Priority Tourism Destination. The mixed-methods approach was chosen to capture both measurable relationships among variables and in-depth contextual insights into community experiences within tourism development (Sugiyono, 2010).

The quantitative component used a cross-sectional survey method. The study population consisted of local residents actively involved in tourism-related economic activities, including micro and small enterprise owners, tourism service providers, cultural performers, community leaders, and members of tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis). A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure respondents possessed direct experience with tourism development. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale, covering indicators of community capabilities (skills, knowledge, organizational capacity), cultural capital (cultural practices, local knowledge, traditional institutions), social participation (involvement in planning, decision-making, and implementation), cultural identity (sense of belonging, cultural pride, value preservation), and economic empowerment (income improvement, employment opportunities, business sustainability, and economic independence). A total of valid responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential analysis, including multiple regression and mediation analysis to test the direct and indirect relationships among variables (Makbul, 2021).

The qualitative component complemented the quantitative findings through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with selected community leaders, customary elders, local government officials, and tourism practitioners. Participants were selected using snowball sampling to capture diverse perspectives on community empowerment and cultural dynamics. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving data

reduction, coding, categorization, and interpretation to identify recurring patterns and explanatory themes related to empowerment processes, cultural preservation, and participatory practices.

To ensure data validity and reliability, the quantitative instrument was tested for construct validity and reliability using factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Triangulation of data sources and methods was applied to enhance the credibility of the qualitative findings. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality of respondents, and respect for local cultural norms.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study provides a robust methodological framework to examine the complex interactions between social, cultural, and economic dimensions of community empowerment in tourism development, offering empirically grounded insights relevant to Samosir and other super priority tourism destinations.

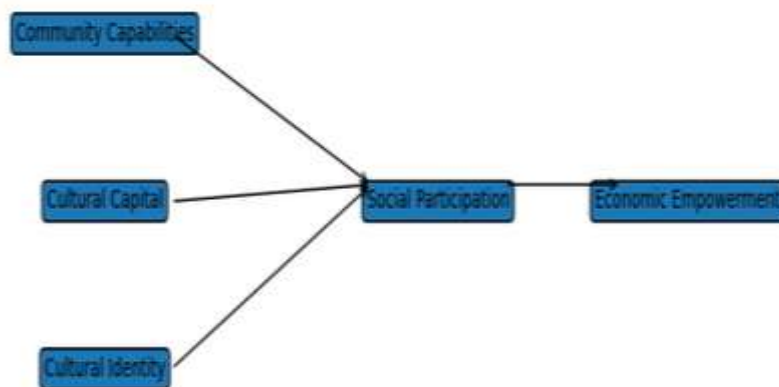


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Diagram

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationships among the key variables examined in this study. Community Capabilities, Cultural Capital, and Cultural Identity are positioned as independent variables that represent the social and cultural resources of local communities in Samosir. These variables are hypothesized to influence Social Participation, which functions as a mediating variable.

Community capabilities reflect the skills, knowledge, leadership, and organizational capacity of local actors, enabling them to engage effectively in tourism-related activities. Cultural capital and cultural identity represent the cultural assets and shared values that shape community cohesion and destination uniqueness. Together, these factors encourage active involvement of local communities in tourism planning, decision-making, and implementation processes, which is captured through social participation.

Social Participation plays a crucial mediating role by translating community capabilities and cultural resources into tangible economic outcomes. Higher levels of participation enhance collective ownership, strengthen local networks, and improve access to tourism benefits. Ultimately, social participation exerts a direct influence on Economic

Empowerment, reflected in increased income, employment opportunities, business sustainability, and greater economic independence of local communities.

This framework emphasizes that economic empowerment in super priority tourism destinations is not solely driven by market forces, but by the interaction between community capacity, cultural strength, and participatory governance, ensuring inclusive and sustainable tourism development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate that community capabilities, cultural capital, cultural identity, and social participation play significant and interconnected roles in fostering economic empowerment in Samosir as a National Super Priority Tourism Destination. Quantitative analysis indicates that community capabilities have a positive and significant effect on economic empowerment. This finding suggests that improvements in skills, knowledge, leadership, and organizational capacity enable local communities to better access tourism-related economic opportunities, manage businesses more effectively, and adapt to the dynamics of the tourism market. These results are consistent with empowerment theories that emphasize human and social capacity as foundational elements of sustainable local development.

Cultural capital also shows a significant positive influence on economic empowerment, both directly and indirectly through social participation. The strong cultural heritage of Samosir, including traditional practices, local wisdom, and customary institutions, functions as a key economic asset that enhances destination attractiveness and competitiveness. However, the findings indicate that cultural capital generates optimal economic benefits only when communities are actively involved in managing and presenting their cultural resources. This supports the view that culture should not merely be commodified for tourism consumption, but must remain embedded within community control to ensure long-term economic and social benefits.

Similarly, cultural identity has a significant positive relationship with social participation and economic empowerment. A strong sense of cultural identity fosters pride, belonging, and collective responsibility, which in turn motivates community members to participate more actively in tourism development initiatives. The qualitative findings reveal that communities with a strong attachment to Batak Toba cultural values are more inclined to engage in collective actions, such as community-based tourism management and cooperative enterprises. This reinforces the argument that cultural identity is not only a symbolic asset but also a social force that strengthens resilience and agency in the face of external economic pressures.

Social participation emerges as a crucial mediating variable in the research model. The mediation analysis shows that social participation significantly strengthens the effects of community capabilities, cultural capital, and cultural identity on economic empowerment. Active involvement in planning, decision-making, and implementation processes allows communities to exercise greater control over tourism development, ensure fairer distribution

of benefits, and reduce dependency on external actors. These findings highlight that without meaningful participation, improvements in capacity and cultural resources may not translate into inclusive economic outcomes.

The qualitative data further enrich the quantitative findings by revealing persistent challenges, such as unequal participation, limited access to information, and power imbalances between local communities and external stakeholders. Despite these constraints, community-based initiatives supported by local institutions and customary leaders have demonstrated the potential to enhance participation and economic outcomes. This underscores the importance of participatory governance frameworks that recognize local knowledge and cultural institutions as integral components of tourism development (Setyosari, 2016).

Overall, the results confirm that economic empowerment in super priority tourism destinations like Samosir is a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of community capabilities, cultural capital, cultural identity, and social participation. The discussion emphasizes that policies focused solely on infrastructure and investment are insufficient. Instead, sustainable and inclusive tourism development requires strengthening local capacities, protecting cultural identity, and institutionalizing participatory mechanisms that place communities at the center of development processes.

Table 1. Summary of Quantitative Results

No.	Relationship Tested	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
1	Community Capabilities → Economic Empowerment	0.312	4.85	< 0.001	Significant
2	Cultural Capital → Economic Empowerment	0.276	4.12	< 0.001	Significant
3	Cultural Identity → Economic Empowerment	0.241	3.98	< 0.001	Significant
4	Community Capabilities → Social Participation	0.354	5.27	< 0.001	Significant
5	Cultural Capital → Social Participation	0.298	4.61	< 0.001	Significant
6	Cultural Identity → Social Participation	0.269	4.03	< 0.001	Significant
7	Social Participation → Economic Empowerment	0.389	5.89	< 0.001	Significant
8	Community Capabilities → Social Participation → Economic Empowerment	0.138	3.76	< 0.01	Mediated
9	Cultural Capital → Social Participation → Economic Empowerment	0.116	3.41	< 0.01	Mediated
10	Cultural Identity → Social Participation → Economic Empowerment	0.105	3.12	< 0.01	Mediated

Table 1 shows that all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant. Community capabilities, cultural capital, and cultural identity have both direct and indirect effects on economic empowerment. Social participation demonstrates the strongest direct influence on economic empowerment and serves as a significant mediating variable, confirming its central role in translating social and cultural resources into inclusive economic outcomes in Samosir as a super priority tourism destination.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that community capabilities, cultural capital, cultural identity, and social participation are critical and interrelated determinants of economic empowerment in Samosir as a National Super Priority Tourism Destination. Community capabilities significantly enhance the ability of local residents to engage in tourism-based economic activities, while cultural capital and cultural identity function not only as key attractions but also as social resources that strengthen cohesion and collective agency. Social participation plays a pivotal mediating role by translating these capacities and cultural assets into inclusive economic outcomes, ensuring broader benefit distribution and greater community control over tourism development. These findings underscore that sustainable tourism development cannot rely solely on infrastructure investment and market-driven strategies, but must prioritize strengthening local capacity, safeguarding cultural identity, and institutionalizing participatory governance. By placing local communities at the center of development, Samosir's tourism growth can become more inclusive, resilient, and economically empowering in the long term.

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