



**JOURNAL OF TOURISM,
HOSPITALITY AND
ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT
(JTHER)**

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IDENTIFICATION OF SYSTEM VARIABLES FOR SUSTAINABLE SPIRITUAL TOURISM AT BOROBUDUR TEMPLE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY VIA THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 27.07.2026

Revised date: 19.08.2026

Accepted date: 27.09.2026

Published date: 30.09.2026

To cite this document:

Putri, O. G., Ingkadijaya, R., Arafah, W., & Mariati, S. (2026). Identification Of System Variables for Sustainable Spiritual Tourism at Borobudur Temple: A Qualitative Study Via Thematic Analysis. *Journal of Tourism Hospitality and Environment Management*, 11 (45), 957-977.

Abstract:

Sacred heritage destinations face acute tensions between commercial viability, physical preservation, and ritual sanctity. While previous studies have examined heritage conservation or spiritual tourist psychology in isolation, little empirical research explains how economic independence policies, spatial designs, and multi-actor mandates interact within sacred site ecosystems. This qualitative exploratory case study addresses this gap by capturing multi-stakeholder perspectives at Borobudur Temple, Indonesia. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews across key institutional, commercial, and community actors (N = 10), complemented by field observations and policy document analysis, data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic framework. Eight empirical themes emerged, which were systematically translated into 13 grounded system variables across three dimensions: economic (e.g., accessibility and cost equity, conservation fiscal independence, local supply chain inclusivity), environmental/ecological (physical carrying capacity, environmental comfort and silent zones, cultural-ecological resilience), and socio-cultural/institutional (spatial equity, regulatory synergy, ritual autonomy, philosophical interpretation). Theoretically, this study extends the Social-Ecological Systems (SES) literature to sacred heritage tourism by establishing spiritual carrying capacity and spatial

equity as co-requisites for site sustainability. Methodologically bounded by a single-case design, this work avoids prescriptive generalities and instead offers a preliminary diagnostic framework and an empirical basis for policymakers to achieve an integrated alignment between sacred atmosphere, physical conservation, and community livelihoods.

DOI:10.35631/JTHER.1145058 **Keyword:**

Borobudur Temple, Destination Governance, Heritage Sustainability, Spiritual Tourism, Thematic Analysis



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Introduction.

Spiritual tourism is expanding rapidly as travelers increasingly seek meaningful journeys, inner reflection, and connection beyond self-identity. Unlike religious tourism, which is primarily driven by specific religious obligations, spiritual tourism encompasses both religious and non-religious experiences aimed at transcendence, self-purification, and life purpose (Halim et al., 2021). Consequently, sacred heritage sites serve multi-layered functions as places of worship, cultural heritage, educational spaces, and economic livelihoods for local communities.

However, sacred sites face fundamental sustainability contradictions. Sacral destinations must maintain spiritual sustainability while balancing physical accessibility and local economic growth (Aulet & Duda, 2020; Shinde & Olsen, 2022). Spiritual experiences are not automatically generated; they are co-created by spatial quality, atmosphere, silence, landscape, and basic supporting services such as sanitation, accommodation, and guidance (De Lacy & Shackleton, 2017; Hassan et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Poor service delivery or physical congestion directly compromises a visitor's ability to achieve inner peace and spiritual reflection, making basic infrastructure a vital prerequisite for sacred experiences.

Borobudur Temple is a prime example of these complex management challenges. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Buddhist monument, and sacred space, Borobudur experiences high visitor volumes that threaten its physical structure, atmosphere, and local economic distribution (Wang et al., 2021; Wardana et al., 2023). At the institutional level, governance involves actors with non-interchangeable mandates (conservation authorities, religious bodies, state-owned enterprises, and local communities), often leading to fragmented decision-making (Bichler & Lösch, 2019). The urgency of this issue is reflected in recent public controversies over ticket pricing policies and access restrictions to the temple's summit, demonstrating that current policy decisions often lack a holistic understanding of stakeholder experiences.

Despite growing scholarly attention, existing literature on spiritual tourism and sacred heritage conservation remains theoretically and methodologically bifurcated. Deductive-quantitative studies predominantly test visitor motivation models derived from Western paradigms (Hassan et al., 2022; Shinde & Olsen, 2022), whereas qualitative inquiries in Southeast Asia, particularly at Borobudur, focus almost exclusively on macro-level physical monument conservation (Wardana et al., 2023). Crucially, empirical research has not adequately explained how fiscal pressures from commercial autonomy policies intersect with ritual solemnity, spatial equity, and multi-agency mandates within an integrated system. There is an empirical imperative to derive grounded system variables directly from multi-stakeholder interactions rather than imposing pre-determined theoretical constructs.

To resolve this gap, this study aims to: (1) inductively identify empirical themes emerging from multi-stakeholder lived experiences at Borobudur Temple, and (2) translate these emergent patterns into a structured set of 13 grounded system variables. By capturing emic perspectives from a living Buddhist World Heritage site, this study extends the Social-Ecological Systems (SES) perspective into sacred heritage management and provides a preliminary diagnostic framework for sustainable spiritual tourism governance.

Literature Review

Spiritual Tourism and Meaningful Experiences

Spiritual tourism represents a transformative journey providing individuals with space to seek life purpose, consciousness, transcendence, reflection, self-purification, and spiritual coping. As demonstrated by Halim et al. (2021), these spiritual dimensions operate both within and beyond formal religious frameworks, distinguishing spiritual tourism from conventional religious tourism that strictly relies on religious obligations or specific identities. Meaningful spiritual experiences are dynamically constructed rather than automatically generated; they emerge through the interplay between physical destination attributes, heritage values, site narratives, and an individual's capacity for personal interpretation (White et al., 2025).

In Buddhist cultural heritage contexts like Borobudur Temple, spatial arrangements (such as Mandala structures, Pradaksina routes, and the triadic relationship of Mendut–Pawon–Borobudur) serve as vital instruments for deep interpretation rather than mere historical facts. The philosophical concepts embedded in Borobudur's structural tiers (Kamadhatu, Rupadhatu, and Arupadhatu) possess significant potential to foster transformative spiritual experiences; however, this potential remains underutilized due to insufficient visitor guidance and interpretation (Hermawan et al., 2019). Thus, facilitating meaningful encounters requires a structured alignment between physical site attributes and narrative engagement.

Furthermore, the quality of spiritual experiences depends on the balance between accessibility and preservation of sacredness, known as spiritual sustainability (Aulet & Duda, 2020). Uncontrolled access threatens physical integrity and ambiance, while uncommunicated restrictions diminish visitors' sense of spiritual connectedness (Aulet & Duda, 2020). Therefore, managing mass tourism destinations like Borobudur requires spatial and temporal differentiation, capacity control, and tailored visitor management strategies to protect physical heritage and sacred values.

Sustainability, Equity, and Local Communities

Sustainability in sacred destinations requires a balance between environmental protection, economic viability, social equity, and the preservation of cultural-spiritual values. Because modern pilgrimages inherently combine religious rituals, mobility, and tourism consumption, sustainability cannot be achieved solely through controlling visitor numbers; it requires integrated governance of local service provision and economic practices (Shinde & Olsen, 2022). At Borobudur, uncontrolled overtourism poses a serious threat, leading to physical degradation of the site, a decline in the quality of spiritual experiences, and socio-economic friction. Mitigating the risks of overtourism requires multi-stakeholder capacity management (including academics, businesses, communities, government, and the media) along with targeted visitor education about the site's sacredness (Rachmat et al., 2021).

Furthermore, community involvement must extend beyond operational labor to include equitable benefit distribution, decision-making power, and socio-economic access. Local participation often remains limited to basic employment without sufficient access to capital, training, or business ownership, whereas community support for tourism relies heavily on perceived distributive fairness (Wang et al., 2021). Integrated regional planning is crucial to prevent top-down development paradigms, ensuring that conservation objectives align with active local participation and equitable economic opportunities (Sofianto, 2018). Local supply chains and inclusive spatial economic design are thus integral components of socio-cultural sustainability.

Additionally, sacred spaces are intrinsically connected to the broader cultural ecology and surrounding landscapes. Sacred sites yield interconnected spiritual, aesthetic, ecological, and social benefits that depend on the harmony between the central monument and its surrounding villages, farmland, and local traditions (De Lacy & Shackleton, 2017). Connecting Borobudur to its rural hinterland demonstrates that heritage protection must extend beyond physical stone conservation to encompass the living landscape and cultural practices that sustain place identity (Sari et al., 2019).

Governance of Sacred Destinations

Destination governance encompasses how public authorities, commercial enterprises, religious groups, and local communities manage resources, decision-making processes, and operational execution. Sacred destinations require particularly sensitive governance frameworks due to operating at the complex intersection of religious rights, heritage conservation, public services, and commercial activities. Misaligned roles or poorly integrated management structures often lead to excessive commercialization, bureaucratic bottlenecks, or uncommunicated spatial restrictions on religious rituals.

Effective collaboration in heritage destination governance depends on strong leadership, institutional readiness, continuous dialogue, trust-building, and shared strategic goals (Bichler & Lösch, 2019). Rather than replacing individual organizational mandates, collaborative governance at Borobudur requires clear role differentiation (defining which entities grant spiritual legitimacy, enforce conservation limits, manage daily operations, deliver educational interpretation, and ensure community benefit-sharing). Employing a penta-helix approach, current governance structures often exhibit sectoral fragmentation, leaving decision-making reactive to operational crises (such as peak-season overcrowding) rather than proactive and

strategic. This lack of integration stems from divergent institutional priorities, where central government entities prioritize revenue and preservation, regional authorities focus on local economic growth, Buddhist communities' champion site sacrality, and commercial actors target profit maximization (Rachmat et al., 2021).

Furthermore, strategic appraisals indicate that the absence of a standardized, unified governance mechanism balancing spiritual, commercial, and conservation interests remains a primary structural weakness in positioning Borobudur as a global spiritual hub (Putri et al., 2025). Addressing this governance gap is essential to capitalizing on growing international demand for transformative and meaning-based travel experiences (Putri et al., 2025). Instituting structured, collaborative governance is therefore a critical prerequisite for the long-term spiritual and operational sustainability of sacred heritage sites.

State of the Art: Previous Studies on Spiritual Tourism at Buddhist Heritage Sites and Borobudur

Research on spiritual tourism across Buddhist heritage sites has generated valuable insights through diverse methodological traditions. Utilizing the DHARMA model, White et al. (2025) quantitatively demonstrated how destination identity, heritage values, and memorable experiences contribute to emotional connection and spiritual enrichment at Khao Chi Chan, Thailand. While that quantitative framework effectively validates pre-defined relationships, it leaves room to further explore how local stakeholders subjectively experience and interpret site sacrality in their daily lives. Regionally, Narajettho (2024) offered a rich qualitative exploration of participatory cross-border Buddhist cultural networks between Thailand and Laos, highlighting world heritage connections while opening avenues to systematically structure these insights into operational system variables for destination management.

In the specific context of Borobudur, scholars have established a strong baseline across various management dimensions. Early research by Hermawan et al. (2019) provided crucial foundation on Buddhist religious identity and promotion, which can be further expanded by integrating multi-dimensional sustainability and governance models. Addressing operational pressures, Rachmat et al. (2021) examined overtourism through a penta-helix perspective, offering a clear diagnostic of current challenges that paves the way for formulating actionable management systems. Additionally, while Putri et al. (2025) utilized a strategic SWOT analysis to position Borobudur as a global spiritual hub, their structured approach creates an excellent opportunity for complementary inductive research to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of spiritual guides, managers, and local residents. Similarly, valuable spatial planning studies (Sofianto, 2018; Sari et al., 2019) have enriched the physical and economic literature, providing a firm groundwork upon which subjective spiritual experiences can be integrated.

Synthesizing these scholarly contributions highlights an important opportunity to build upon existing literature. While current studies offer rich perspectives on quantitative modeling, macro-conservation, and strategic planning, there remains a valuable opportunity to inductively integrate spiritual tourism, multi-dimensional sustainability, and destination governance in the context of Borobudur. Consequently, this study complements previous works by employing thematic analysis to formulate a grounded system of variables directly rooted in empirical field data.

Research Methodology

Research Approach and Strategy

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-exploratory approach using a single-case study strategy. The descriptive orientation systematically depicts stakeholder conditions, lived experiences, and perceptions regarding spiritual tourism at Borobudur Temple. Concurrently, the exploratory nature facilitates the discovery of emerging problem patterns and system elements without imposing rigid, pre-determined frameworks, making it well-suited for deriving empirical themes directly from field data. The case study strategy is appropriate because the research focuses on a bounded system (the spiritual tourism ecosystem of Borobudur) where site sacrality, ritual practices, physical conservation, operational management, and socio-economic dynamics closely intersect within a real-world context (Yin, 2014).

The primary unit of analysis is the Borobudur spiritual tourism system, defined as an integrated network encompassing spiritual values, ritual activities, destination operations, heritage preservation, community involvement, and multi-actor governance. Meanwhile, the units of information comprise the personal experiences, operational mandates, resource needs, and relational perspectives articulated by both directly and indirectly involved stakeholders. To maintain a rigorous qualitative boundary aligned with the study's primary objectives, the scope is strictly focused on identifying empirical themes and formulating grounded system variables, deliberately excluding quantitative ranking, statistical impact measurement, or inter-variable hypothesis testing.

Participants and Data Corpus

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on direct involvement, institutional authority, professional expertise, and lived experience in spiritual practices, heritage conservation, destination operations, cultural preservation, or local community livelihoods at Borobudur. This targeted selection ensures that informants possess the rich, specialized knowledge required to address the core research objectives (Patton, 2015). Participant inclusion criteria required: (a) direct engagement in Borobudur's spiritual tourism ecosystem, (b) verified authority or contextual knowledge, and (c) voluntary consent for in-depth interviews. Individuals lacking direct involvement or possessing superficial knowledge were excluded. The final data corpus comprises 10 interview transcripts representing six key stakeholder categories, summarized in Table 1. Inclusion of secondary perspectives (such as spiritual practitioners, local transport operators, and cultural leaders) facilitates a balanced, multi-faceted analysis capturing both service providers and end-users.

Table 1. Participant Groups and Data Corpus Distribution

No.	Participant Group	Stakeholder Representation	Information Focus
1	Government	Directorate of Buddhist Community Guidance	Religious policy, activity legitimacy, facilitation, and institutional coordination.

2	Government	Museum and Heritage Agency (Borobudur Unit)	Physical conservation, heritage utilization, site carrying capacity, zoning, and protocols.
3	Commercial Enterprise	PT Taman Wisata Candi Borobudur	Visitor operations, ticketing, facility management, services, and marketing.
4	Commercial Enterprise	Spiritual tour operators / Guides	Itinerary design, market profiles, costs, narrative interpretation, and participant experiences.
5	Community	Buddhist communities and practitioners	Rituals, sacred space requirements, spiritual solemnity, and site sacrality.
6	Local Society	Cultural figures, local managers, transport operators, and residents	Local involvement, spatial economy, cultural preservation, amenities, and regional ecology.

source: processed data (2026).

Data Collection Techniques

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and moderate participant observation (Rachmat et al 2021). Semi-structured interviews explored stakeholder interpretations of spiritual tourism, operational processes, pricing structures, facility needs, ritual requirements, heritage conservation, community involvement, marketing strategies, spatial arrangements, and inter-actor relations. This flexible interview format allowed probing into emergent topics beyond the initial interview guide. Complementing the verbal accounts, moderate participant observations were conducted during spiritual activities and within supporting environments (including site access protocols, the usage of upanat sandals, guided tours, pradaksina, meditation sessions, noise atmosphere, and the connection between temple activities and surrounding village spaces). Field observation notes served to cross-verify the alignment between informant accounts and actual observed practices.

Secondary data were gathered through document analysis of relevant regulations, conservation and utilization guidelines, visitor numbers, ticketing and package information, program documentation, and related publications. Rather than replacing primary interview data, document analysis provided essential contextual background and facilitated data triangulation. Integrating interviews, field observations, and document analysis ensured a comprehensive data collection process capable of capturing the complex realities of Borobudur's spiritual tourism ecosystem.

Thematic Analysis

Data analysis followed the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher achieved data familiarization through repeated readings of transcripts, observation notes, and documents. Second, statements addressing the research questions were assigned initial codes, such as package pricing, spiritual solemnity, time limits, stone degradation, guide certification, sanitation, parking flows, and multi-tiered permitting. Third, codes possessing shared meanings were logically grouped into broader categories.

Fourth, these categories were organized into candidate themes that explained cross-informant patterns. Fifth, the candidate themes were reviewed against the original excerpts and the entire data corpus to ensure they were not overly broad, overlapping, or merely representative of a single statement. Sixth, the final themes were named, defined, and subsequently translated into system variables alongside their empirical indicators. The analytical approach was predominantly inductive, as initial codes emerged directly from the data; sustainability dimensions were utilized strictly as sensitizing concepts when organizing the final results, rather than as a forced a priori framework.

The analytical trail was maintained through an excerpt–code–category–theme–variable matrix. This matrix enabled the formulation of variables to be transparently traced back to the empirical evidence. Ultimately, themes were determined not solely based on their frequency of occurrence, but on their overall relevance and explanatory power regarding the spiritual tourism system.

Data Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure methodological rigor, this study applied the four qualitative trustworthiness criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through source triangulation (comparing perspectives across regulators, commercial entities, communities, and residents), technique triangulation (cross-verifying interview data against observation notes and official documents), and member checking (confirming key analytical interpretations with key informants to ensure accuracy of meaning).

Transferability is achieved by providing in-depth descriptions of Borobudur's physical, cultural, and institutional contexts, stakeholder dynamics, and surrounding socio-economic conditions, allowing readers to assess the applicability of these findings to similar Buddhist heritage sites across Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, reliability is ensured through a transparent audit trail that documents the entire analytical trajectory from data collection and initial coding to thematic synthesis and variable formulation.

Confirmability was maintained through active researcher reflexivity, ensuring interpretations remained grounded in empirical data rather than researcher bias. Discrepancies in informant perspectives were deliberately retained rather than smoothed over, serving to illuminate systemic tensions such as those between heritage conservation and ritual needs, or commercial professionalization and local inclusivity. Additionally, ethical considerations were upheld by anonymizing personal identities, assigning functional stakeholder labels, and selectively utilizing verbatim quotes to illustrate broad patterns rather than judge individual participants or institutions.

Results and Discussion

Empirical Themes from Qualitative Interviews and Field Observations

Tension between Destination Economic Orientation and Sacred Value

The first theme emerges at the intersection of Borobudur's dual identity as a sacred pilgrimage site and a commercially managed destination requiring financial self-sufficiency. Informants

highlighted that prior government subsidies afforded greater flexibility in regional heritage management. However, recent policy shifts requiring state enterprise managers to achieve fiscal independence directly influence pricing strategies, package designs, and service priorities.

"In the past, the government poured in significant subsidies, including constructing local homestays and Balkondes. Now, the situation is reversed; the managing state-owned enterprise must hit profit targets without state subsidies." (Government Regulator)

This fiscal demand generates a noticeable disparity between official spiritual ticket prices and the actual package rates charged to tourists. Stakeholders do not oppose commercial profitability in principle; rather, they demand alignment between pricing, service delivery, and experience quality.

"The base price for an official spiritual ticket is only IDR 75,000. For IDR 100,000 to IDR 150,000, visitors should reasonably receive basic amenities like sarong rentals, incense, flowers, drinking water, and lunch." (Spiritual Tour Operator)

"Spiritual tourism should follow an internal reflective journey. If visitors simply arrive, pay an expensive ticket, and ascend the temple, that is not a pilgrimage." (Cultural Expert)

Cross-quote analysis confirms that this issue extends beyond mere affordability to encompass the delicate balance between conservation funding, pricing transparency, and spiritual integrity. This finding reinforces Aulet and Duda's (2020) assertion that sacred site accessibility must be evaluated alongside spiritual sustainability. Initial codes—including package pricing, facilities, subsidies, revenue, transparency, and accessibility—directly inform the system variables Accessibility and Cost Equity and Conservation Fiscal Independence.

Gap between Commercial Packages and Meaningful Spiritual Experiences

The second theme reveals that offering ritual activities does not automatically guarantee a meaningful spiritual experience. Experts categorize spiritual experiences along five dimensions: ambiance, contemplation, mindfulness, healing, and enlightenment.

"A visit can only be categorized as a pilgrimage if visitors experience at least one of five dimensions: ambiance, contemplation, mindfulness, healing, or enlightenment. Without these, it remains regular tourism." (Spiritual Expert).

Participants echoed this concern, noting that while they joined religious processions, they received insufficient explanation regarding underlying philosophical symbols.

"The concept felt underdeveloped; I couldn't connect with the experience. During the floating ritual, I didn't grasp the underlying philosophy. It needs maturation so participants understand its essence." (Pilgrim Participant).

Although some tour operators attempt to educate guides about Buddhist teachings, these efforts remain ad hoc. This finding aligns with Wang et al. (2023), who position narrative

interpretation as a primary medium for spiritual engagement. At Borobudur, cultural heritage interpreters must actively connect the physical mandala structure, circumambulation routes, and ritual symbols with personal reflection. Key codes (such as narrative quality, ritual symbolism, pre-tour education, guide capacity, and contemplative depth) form the system variables Philosophical Interpretation Quality and Human Resource Capacity.

The Dilemma of Physical Conservation versus Ritual Solemnity

The third theme highlights the friction between physical capacity (stone degradation, visitor volume, safety) and spiritual capacity (silence, ritual rhythm, unhurried contemplation). Management enforces strict protocols (such as mandatory upanat sandals) to reduce wear and tear on the materials.

"Wearing upanat footwear is an absolute requirement for all visitors climbing the temple structures to prevent wear and tear on the stones." (Destination Manager).

However, rigid operational rules can disrupt spiritual practices when applied without flexibility toward worship rhythms.

"Meditation and worship should not be constrained by rigid time limits. Achieving deep meditative stillness requires uninterrupted focus." (Spiritual Practitioner).

"As we attempt to establish an internal connection with the sacred space, external ambient noise shatters the solemn atmosphere." (Spiritual Practitioner).

This tension need not be framed as an insoluble conflict between conservation and religion; adaptive measures like low-power acoustic systems, designated silent zones, and tailored time slots offer viable solutions. This finding supports Wardana et al. (2023) regarding physical carrying capacity constraints and De Lacy and Shackleton (2017) regarding environmental quality in sacred settings. The resulting codes map to the system variables Temple Physical Integrity and Regional Carrying Capacity and Environmental Comfort and Silent Zones.

Local Community Participation: Opportunities, Standardization, and Capacity Barriers

The fourth theme indicates that local residents participate throughout the value chain as local guides, upanat footwear artisans, homestay operators, and transportation providers. Mandatory use of local guides promotes regional equity and quality assurance.

"Guides must be local Magelang residents registered with the Indonesian Tour Guide Association (Himpunan Pramuwisata Indonesia/ HPI) and certified by the National Professional Certification Agency (Badan Nasional Sertifikasi Profesi/ BNSP)." (Business Manager).

However, high certification costs create structural barriers for local community members.

"Local residents are enthusiastic about becoming guides. However, mandatory HPI membership and BNSP certification costs burden their personal finances." (Local Operator).

While upanat footwear production demonstrates positive synergies between conservation and local employment, meaningful inclusion requires subsidized training, fair contracts, and participatory dialogue. This finding aligns with Wang et al.'s (2021) findings on perceived distributive justice as a driver of community support. The key codes are translated into the system variables of Local Supply Chain Inclusiveness and Human Resource Capacity.

Economic Spatial Design and Benefit Distribution

The fifth theme illustrates that spatial design acts as an economic distribution mechanism. Visitor routing, entry gates, parking hubs, and commercial plazas determine local transaction volumes.

"Borobudur was historically conceptualized as 'one circle' so merchants across all sides shared economic spillover. Current flows concentrate visitor movement at a single entry point, leaving other commercial zones dormant." (Local Community Leader)

Transport operators experience similar spatial friction regarding drop-off protocols and parking levies.

"When dropping off guests, we may use the main lobby; however, for pickups, we are forced into distant parking hubs and incur extra levies." (Transport Operator).

Rather than implying central management is inherently flawed, these accounts underscore the need for equitable spatial design linking visitor flows directly to surrounding village enterprises. These codes contribute to the variable Economic Spatial Equity, defined by business spatial access, visitor flow distribution, local enterprise protection, and policy burden.

Institutional Fragmentation and Mandate-Based Coordination

The sixth theme emerged from overlapping mandates among various institutional actors: the Museum and Heritage Agency (MHA) focus on physical conservation, while the Directorate General of Buddhist Community Guidance (Direktur Jenderal Bimbingan Masyarakat Buddha) oversees religious legitimacy. The Borobudur Temple Complex Management handles daily operations and ticket sales, and tour operators understand market dynamics.

"The MHA focuses on physical maintenance and conservation regulations, while the Directorate General of Buddhist Community Guidance plays a key role in religious regulations and pilgrim legitimacy." (Commercial Company Informant)

Borobudur Temple Complex Management often hesitates to directly manage ritual details due to religious sensitivities.

"Borobudur Temple management avoids direct intervention because they lack a thorough understanding of the ritual details, such as prayers and the tawaf (circumambulation) route. Religious issues are sensitive, so implementation relies heavily on the Buddhist community and specialized institutions." (Spiritual Tour Operator)

This institutional division creates operational friction when not coordinated by shared protocols and information systems. As emphasized by Bichler and Lösch (2019), collaborative governance requires clear institutional design and mutual understanding. This theme yields the variables Institutional Regulatory Synergy and Bureaucratic Licensing Decoupling, as well as Diplomacy and Marketing Networks.

Amenity Readiness and Service Standards

The seventh theme demonstrates that spiritual experiences do not occur solely at the temple's summit. Accommodation, sanitation, vehicles, food, hospitality, and safety shape the physical and psychological condition of participants. A government regulator noted complaints from international tourists regarding local homestays.

"We received complaints from international tourists concerning local homestay sanitation, odor, dirty toilets, and insects. While standardization guidelines have been socialized, capital support stalled after subsidies were withdrawn." (Government Regulator)

These findings do not imply that local communities are incapable of providing hospitality services; rather, they highlight the necessity of phased mentoring. Integrating surrounding villages into spiritual tourism will only be sustainable if standards are formulated realistically, accompanied by capacity building, access to financing, and evaluation mechanisms.

Hassan et al. (2022) showed that basic supporting services and guidance are closely related to the spiritual experiences of religious tourists. Therefore, amenities cannot be decoupled from spiritual quality. This theme yields the system variable Amenity Readiness and Service Standards, while reinforcing the variable Human Resource Capacity.

Integration of Spirituality, Local Culture, and Regional Ecology

The eighth theme expands the locus of spiritual experience from the physical temple monument to the broader living landscape. A cultural expert explained that a spiritual journey can be structured sequentially through Mendut, Pawon, and Borobudur temples as progressive stages of philosophical interpretation. Meanwhile, indigenous traditions such as Merti Desa or Bakti Bumi connect spiritual gratitude directly to environmental stewardship of trees, rivers, irrigation channels, and rice fields.

"Local communities have practiced Merti Desa or Bakti Bumi for hundreds of years. Gratitude and prayers for safety are expressed through tree planting and communal work to clean rivers and paddy irrigation channels." (Cultural Expert).

These findings demonstrate that local spirituality is inherently practical: internal values are translated into communal cooperation (gotong royong) and environmental care. De Lacy and Shackleton (2017) highlighted the relationship between sacred sites and socio-spiritual ecosystem services. At Borobudur, development that focuses exclusively on the central monument risks severing the spiritual experience from its surrounding cultural and ecological context.

This theme yields three system variables: Regional Infrastructure and Cultural-Ecological Resilience, Ritual Autonomy and Cross-Faith Inclusivity within Conservation Limits, and Quality of Philosophical Interpretation. Inclusivity is conceptualized as openness to visitors from diverse backgrounds to engage in contemplative experiences without diluting Borobudur's core Buddhist heritage and local cultural roots.

Summary of Empirical Themes and Evidence

The eight empirical themes were not derived from isolated informant perspectives, but through rigorous cross-source comparative analysis. Table 2 summarizes the analytical focus, representative empirical evidence, and qualitative meaning of each theme.

Table 2. Summary of Empirical Themes from Interviews and Field Observations

No.	Theme	Representative Evidence	Empirical	Analytical Meaning
1	Spiritual Value versus Economic Orientation	Shifts in subsidy policies; profit targets; discrepancies between base ticket and package prices; criticism of packages lacking spiritual progression.		Pricing and financing mechanisms must balance accessibility, transparency, physical conservation, and experiential depth.
2	Tourism Packages versus Meaningful Experience	Five core experiential dimensions; participant lack of understanding regarding procession symbols; need for guide education.		Ritual activities require philosophical interpretation, ambient quality, and reflective facilitation.
3	Physical Conservation versus Ritual Solemnity	Mandatory upanat sandals and access limits; meditation duration constraints; external noise; low-power loudspeaker usage.		Physical site carrying capacity must be balanced with spiritual carrying capacity.
4	Community Participation versus Capacity Barriers	Local guide requirements; mandatory HPI/BNSP certification; upanat sandal production; training fee burdens.		Formal inclusion opportunities require targeted capacity building and enhanced local bargaining power.
5	Economic Spatial Design versus Benefit Distribution	Shifts in visitor entrance flows; dormant commercial areas; parking levies and drop-off point restrictions.		Spatial policies dictate visitor movement patterns and determine equitable economic benefit distribution.
6	Institutional Fragmentation versus Mandate-Based Coordination	Divergent mandates across conservation agencies, religious bodies, site operators, tour markets, and local communities.		Governance coordination requires clear role division, shared information systems, and standardized procedures.

7	Amenity Readiness versus Service Standards	Foreign tourist complaints regarding homestay sanitation; standardization needs; capital constraints following subsidy withdrawal.	Basic service quality directly underpins physical comfort and overall spiritual satisfaction.
8	Integration of Spirituality, Culture, and Ecology	Sequential Mendut–Pawon– Borobudur journey; Merti Desa tradition; tree planting; river and irrigation maintenance.	Spiritual experiences are intrinsically connected to the broader cultural landscape and ecological practices.

source: processed data (2026)

Coding Process, Categorization, and Derivation of System Variables.

The transition from the eight broad empirical themes (Table 2) to operational system variables was driven by an inductive synthesis of thematic disaggregation and cross-thematic convergence, deliberately avoiding a rigid one-to-one linear mapping. Thematic disaggregation occurred where overarching tensions contained distinct operational mechanisms requiring separate governance tools. For instance, Theme 1 (Spiritual Value vs. Economic Orientation) was unpacked into micro-level visitor affordability (Accessibility and Cost Equity) and macro-level management self-reliance (Conservation Fiscal Independence). Similarly, Theme 3 (Physical Conservation vs. Ritual Solemnity) yielded two distinct variables—Physical Temple Integrity and Environmental Comfort and Silent Zones—to clearly separate physical carrying capacity from acoustic and contemplative quietude.

Conversely, cross-thematic convergence emerged when complex variables synthesized codes across multiple domains. A prominent example is the variable Quality of Philosophical Interpretation, which integrated narrative gaps from Theme 2, local guide capacity constraints from Theme 4, and the sequential Mendut–Pawon–Borobudur circuit from Theme 8. Through this systematic coding procedure, the 8 empirical themes were translated into 13 grounded system variables distributed across three core sustainability pillars: economic (6 variables), environmental/ecological (3 variables), and socio-cultural/institutional (4 variables). Table 3 details the analytical audit trail linking the initial codes, categories, and derived system variables, establishing the empirical foundation for the integrated framework presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Analytical Audit Trail: Coding, Categorization, and System Variable Formulation

Empirical Theme	Initial Codes	Category	System Variable	Concise Indicators
Spiritual Value versus Economic Orientation	Pricing, facilities, transparency, visitor access groups	Cost Equity	Accessibility and Cost Equity of Spiritual Visits	Affordability; transparency; cost equality; additional fee transparency

Local Community Participation	Local products, homestays, culinary businesses, suppliers	Local Supply Chain	Inclusivity of Local Supply Chains	Local business inclusion; local product usage; equitable benefit distribution
Spiritual Value versus Economic Orientation	Subsidies, revenue targets, operational costs, conservation	Preservation Financing	Conservation Fiscal Independence	Operational funding adequacy; conservation funds; subsidy reliance reduction
Tourism Packages versus Meaningful Experience	Competency, guide certification, philosophy, ritual leaders	Service Capacity	Human Resource Capacity and Service Professionalism	Guide competency; certification; philosophical depth; visitor facilitation
Amenity Readiness versus Service Standards	Sanitation, accommodation, transport vehicles, hospitality	Amenity Readiness	Amenity Readiness and Service Standards of Sacred Destinations	Accommodation quality; sanitation standards; transport reliability; service consistency
Institutional Fragmentation	Promotion, travel agents, Buddhist networks, overseas markets	Market Networks	Global Spiritual Diplomacy and Marketing Networks	Promotional reach; agent partnerships; international market alignment; institutional synergy
Physical Conservation versus Ritual Solemnity	Upanat sandals, pathways, capacity limits, stone wear, equipment	Physical Carrying Capacity	Physical Temple Integrity and Regional Carrying Capacity	Structural preservation; visitor volume control; conservation rule compliance
Physical Conservation versus Ritual Solemnity	External noise, meditation duration, loudspeakers, monitoring	Spiritual Carrying Capacity	Environmental Comfort and Silent Zones	Acoustic silence; temporal flexibility; meditation comfort; proportional monitoring
Integration of Spirituality, Culture, and Ecology	Rivers, paddy fields, irrigation, infrastructure, Merti Desa	Cultural-Ecological Resilience	Regional Infrastructure and Cultural-Ecological Resilience	Land use; water resources; environmental risk management; living ecological traditions

Economic Spatial Design versus Benefit Distribution	Entry gates, parking hubs, visitor flows, commercial space, levies	Spatial Equity	Economic Equity	Spatial access; visitor flow distribution; local enterprise protection
Institutional Fragmentation	Licensing, mandates, information sharing, coordination, procedures	Institutional Synergy	Institutional Regulatory Synergy and Licensing Decoupling	Clear authority division; policy alignment; streamlined permitting; inter-agency coordination
Physical Conservation versus Ritual Solemnity & Inclusivity	Flexibility, sacred space, cross-faith access, conservation limits	Ritual Autonomy	Ritual Autonomy and Cross-Faith Inclusivity within Conservation Limits	Worship flexibility; sacred access; interfaith tolerance; conservation compliance
Tourism Packages versus Meaningful Experience	Narratives, symbols, relief stories, pradaksina, pre-tour education	Philosophical Interpretation	Quality of Philosophical Interpretation	Narrative clarity; ritual symbolism; pre-visit education; contemplative depth

source: processed data (2026).

System Variables of Sustainable Spiritual Tourism

The final output of the qualitative thematic analysis comprises 13 interconnected system variables. For clear presentation, six variables are categorized under the economic dimension, three variables under the environmental/ecological dimension, and four variables under the socio-cultural and institutional dimension. This categorization serves an organizational purpose rather than implying that variables operate strictly within a single dimension. Table 4 outlines the final system variables along with their grounded empirical indicators.

Table 4. System Variables of Sustainable Spiritual Tourism at Borobudur Temple

No	Dimension	System Variable	Empirical Indicators
1	Economic	Accessibility and Cost Equity of Spiritual Visits	Cost affordability; package price transparency; equal spatial access; transparency of additional charges.
2	Economic	Inclusivity of Local Supply Chains	Engagement of local micro-enterprises; local product usage; homestay and culinary involvement; equitable benefit distribution.

3	Economic	Conservation Fiscal Independence	Operational funding adequacy; dedicated conservation funds; reduced subsidy reliance; balance between revenue generation and heritage preservation.
4	Economic	Human Resource Capacity and Service Professionalism	Tour guide competence; professional certification; philosophical comprehension; ritual leadership capacity; continuous training.
5	Economic	Amenity Readiness and Service Standards of Sacred Destinations	Accommodation quality; sanitation standards; transport reliability; service consistency; cross-cultural hospitality readiness.
6	Economic	Global Spiritual Diplomacy and Marketing Networks	Promotional reach; tour agency networks; international market targeting; Buddhist community partnerships; synergistic marketing strategies.
7	Environmental / Ecological	Physical Temple Integrity and Regional Carrying Capacity	Structural monument protection; visitor volume management; conservation compliance; mitigation of high-risk activities.
8	Environmental / Ecological	Environmental Comfort and Silent Zones	Noise pollution control; designated silent zones; meditation comfort; temporal flexibility; proportional surveillance.
9	Environmental / Ecological	Regional Infrastructure and Cultural-Ecological Resilience	Agricultural land and river protection; living ecological traditions (<i>Merti Desa</i>); drainage systems; sustainable infrastructure development; flood risk management.
10	Socio-Cultural / Institutional	Economic Spatial Equity	Spatial access for local businesses; visitor flow distribution; protection of local micro-enterprises; impacts of regional routing.
11	Socio-Cultural / Institutional	Institutional Regulatory Synergy and Licensing Decoupling	Clear division of institutional authority; regulatory alignment; streamlined permitting procedures; inter-agency coordination; centralized service points.
12	Socio-Cultural / Institutional	Ritual Autonomy and Cross-Faith Inclusivity within Conservation Limits	Flexibility for religious rituals; sacred space access; interfaith inclusivity; compliance with conservation thresholds; mutual tolerance.

13	Socio-Cultural / Institutional	Quality of Philosophical Interpretation	Narrative clarity; ritual symbolism; Mendut–Pawon–Borobudur sequential itinerary; pre-tour education; facilitation of deep contemplation.
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source: processed data (2026).

Discussion of Interrelationships Between Variables

All system variables form a network of interrelated management issues. Accessibility and cost equity directly interact with fiscal independence of conservation and facility quality. Achieving financial independence through price increases risks limiting visitor access if implemented without transparency and service differentiation. Conversely, setting prices too low without alternative funding streams reduces a destination's capacity to maintain its physical heritage and provide quality services.

Human resource capacity serves as a crucial link across nearly all empirical themes. Tour guides with a deep philosophical understanding enhance narrative interpretation, uphold ritual ethics, promote conservation-appropriate behavior, and bridge the gap between participants across religious lines. However, professional standards must be designed inclusively to prevent certification costs from excluding members of local communities.

Physical carrying capacity and spiritual carrying capacity must be managed simultaneously. While restricting visitor volume protects physical stone structures, the quality of a spiritual experience continues to decline if ambient noise, mixed activities, or intrusive monitoring disrupt contemplation. Implementing designated silent zones, tailored ritual schedules, and clear rule interpretation effectively bridges conservation objectives with sacred needs.

Spatial economic design, local supply chains, and amenity readiness collectively shape community sustainability. Concentrating visitor flows into a single-entry point simplifies crowd management but severely restricts local business opportunities. Integrating surrounding villages, accommodation, culinary services, tour guiding, and local transport requires balancing realistic service standards with equitable spatial distribution mechanisms.

Institutional regulatory synergy functions as an enabling condition, as every strategic initiative requires cross-actor approvals. However, this variable does not imply centralizing all institutional authority. Instead, qualitative interview evidence highlights the necessity of preserving each actor's distinct legitimacy while streamlining information flows, procedural sequences, and multi-agency coordination.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that sustainable spiritual tourism operates as an interconnected socio-ecological and institutional system. Spiritual solemnity cannot be sustained in isolation from conservation financing mechanisms, spatial routing equity, and multi-agency regulatory protocols. Rather than seeking a subjective harmonic equilibrium, management strategies must pursue an integrated alignment across conservation mandates, commercial realities, and ritual requirements. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in extending the Social-Ecological Systems (SES) framework to sacred cultural landscapes by conceptualizing spiritual carrying capacity alongside physical carrying capacity, supported by a transparent empirical audit trail rather than imported constructs.

Conclusion

This study identified eight empirical themes characterizing spiritual tourism at Borobudur Temple, which were synthesized into 13 grounded system variables organized across economic (6), environmental/ecological (3), and socio-cultural/institutional (4) dimensions. These findings reveal that authentic spiritual experiences are structurally contingent upon cost transparency, acoustic management, equitable spatial flow, and decoupled inter-agency licensing.

Theoretically, this research extends sustainable sacred heritage tourism literature by proposing an integrated socio-ecological systems perspective where spiritual solemnity and physical preservation are co-dependent variables. Practically, given the single-case qualitative design involving 10 key institutional and community informants, this study does not claim universal generalizability; rather, it offers a preliminary diagnostic framework and provides an empirical basis for heritage authorities (e.g., Ministry of Tourism, conservation bodies, and state enterprise operators) to audit multi-stakeholder policy impacts before executing operational interventions.

Acknowledgements:	The authors extend their sincere gratitude to Sekolah Tinggi Pariwisata Sahid Surakarta, Indonesia, and Trisakti Institute of Tourism, Jakarta, Indonesia, for their institutional support throughout this research.
Funding Statement:	The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.
Conflict of Interest Statement:	The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Tourism, Hospitality And Environment Management (JTthem).
Ethics Statement:	This study was conducted in full accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all individual informants involved in qualitative data collection prior to conducting interviews.
Declaration of Generative AI Use	During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools solely to assist with English language translation and grammatical and linguistic improvement. AI tools were not used to generate research findings, analyze data, develop the research design, or formulate the scientific conclusions. The authors reviewed, verified, and revised all AI-assisted text and remain fully responsible for the content, accuracy, interpretation, and conclusions presented in this manuscript.

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