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CULTURAL FESTIVALS AND THEIR ROLE IN TOURISM IN SABAH

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Abstract:

Cultural festivals have become crucial elements for tourism development because they deliver real cultural experiences which attract tourists and help maintain local cultural heritage. The multicultural identity of Sabah Malaysia together with its indigenous cultural heritage forms the basis of its major cultural festivals which include the Kaamatan Harvest Festival and Regatta Lepa to enhance both tourist attraction and community growth. The research assessed how cultural festivals throughout Sabah developed tourist traffic through their impact on making destinations more appealing and generating economic gains and fostering community involvement and maintaining environmental balance. The researchers used the PRISMA framework to carry out a systematic literature review. The researchers discovered relevant research studies through five major academic databases which included Scopus Web of Science Google Scholar ScienceDirect and Emerald Insight. The researchers analyzed 34 studies from an initial set of 430 records after applying the inclusion criteria. The research results demonstrate that cultural festivals in Sabah increase the region's tourist appeal through their display of indigenous cultural heritage which provides local communities with job opportunities and educational resources. The findings show that businesses face three main challenges which include excessive commercialization problems with their infrastructure and dangers to their cultural identity and these issues need to be handled through environmental preservation methods. The study contributes to academic literature by merging cultural heritage and sustainable tourism research to study festival tourism in Sabah. The study offers practical guidelines for policymakers and tourism planners through its focus on community-based planning and capacity building and sustainable festival management methods which help maintain cultural heritage during tourism expansion.

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Cultural Festivals, PRISMA, Sustainability, Sabah, Tourism Development



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Introduction

The tourism industry functions as a dynamic economic sector because it brings about economic development, enables cultural exchange, and promotes regional progress throughout the world. The motivations that drive tourists to choose their travel destinations find their most important influence from cultural heritage (Akhundova, 2024). The cultural festivals which exist as live expressions of heritage traditions and social practices have become vital instruments for developing tourism. In multicultural regions festivals provide both cultural protection and strategic advantages which help improve a destination's marketability and attraction power. The Malaysian state of Sabah on Borneo Island provides evidence of how cultural festivals create direct benefits for the tourism industry (Aytuq & Mikaeli, 2017).

Sabah is famous for its diverse cultural makeup because it hosts more than 30 indigenous ethnic groups who each have their own traditions and languages and ceremonial practices. The different cultural practices of various ethnic groups in the area become visible through the multiple annual festivals which include the Kaamatan Harvest Festival and Regatta Lepa and Tadau Kaabatan (Belly et al., 2024). The festivals attract visitors from both local and international markets who come to witness the celebrations of agricultural and maritime heritage and indigenous cultural traditions. The travel market now focuses on providing tourists with real cultural experiences rather than traditional sightseeing because cultural festivals serve as major components of experiential tourism in Sabah (Danting et al., 2018).

The economic advantages of festivals for local communities extend beyond their function as entertainment. Festivals create jobs for local residents which result in economic growth through increased spending by tourists on their needs for lodging dining transportation and local crafts (Diaz-Soria & Blanco-Romero, 2024). The festival activities enable local communities to take part in tourism development because they let residents become involved in planning and decision-making processes. The festivals in Sabah enable rural and indigenous communities to share their cultural heritage through tourism while they build their cultural identity and heritage (Harrisa et al., 2023).

The growing significance of cultural festivals brings new challenges because these festivals struggle to maintain their cultural roots while sustaining their operations and fighting against commercialization. The fast expansion of tourism creates a risk that local traditions will become commercialized, which will result in their original cultural significance being lost. The preservation of Sabah's cultural heritage faces major challenges because the region needs to balance international festival promotion with its need to keep traditional practices (Ilieva et al., 2024). Policymakers and tourism planners together with community leaders need to understand how cultural festivals impact tourism development while keeping cultural traditions intact.

This research focuses on examining the role of cultural festivals in promoting tourism in Sabah. The study investigates how festivals impact three factors which include destination attractiveness and tourist satisfaction and the economic growth of local communities. The study investigates how cultural activities affect tourism patterns to demonstrate the importance of festivals as sustainable tourism resources. The results will help create effective cultural tourism strategies which will improve Sabah's tourism profile while protecting its valuable cultural heritage.

Literature Review

Cultural festivals have been widely discussed in tourism literature as important drivers of destination development and cultural sustainability. Scholars define cultural festivals as organized events which showcase community traditions and values and collective identity through various performances and rituals and crafts and culinary practices (Ko et al., 2022; Diaz-Soria & Blanco-Romero, 2024; Harrisa et al., 2023). Event tourism theory explains that festivals operate as temporary tourist attractions which have the power to shape both visitor patterns and the brand image of a location. Research shows that destinations which possess strong cultural identities use festivals as their main method to create unique visitor experiences while competing in the tourism market (Laing, 2018).

Previous studies emphasize festivals as essential elements which boost both the destination image and its ability to attract visitors. Destination image refers to tourists' perceptions and impressions which develop through marketing and media and their own personal experiences. Cultural festivals enhance this image through their ability to display authentic and distinctive elements of cultural heritage (Lopes & Hiray, 2018). Studies have found that tourists are more likely to visit destinations which provide authentic cultural experiences that include traditional music and dance and ceremonial activities. Festivals in multicultural destinations like Sabah serve as cultural diversity symbols which enhance the destination's ability to attract tourists who seek cultural experiences (Mair & Duffy, 2018; Akhundova, 2024).

The economic effects of cultural festivals on local communities serve as another important literary theme which researchers explore. The empirical research shows that festivals boost local economies because they attract more visitors who spend money and help local businesses thrive. Festival-related tourism provides direct benefits to small-scale entrepreneurs and artisans and food vendors (Mazlan et al., 2025; Ilieva et al., 2024). Festivals create job openings which last for short periods and permanent positions especially in rural areas and indigenous communities. The scholars believe that community-driven festivals result in fair economic development which decreases regional economic differences. The development strategy of community-based tourism

serves as the most suitable solution for Sabah according to this development approach (Mo et al., 2023).

Researchers have studied how cultural festivals affect community participation in their events. The research shows that when community members take part in festival activities it helps maintain festival traditions while supporting their long-term success (Zou et al., 2021). Festivals become authentic celebrations of local culture when the community members take part in their planning decisions. Research shows that festivals which the community organizes help build social bonds between people and enhance national identity while passing down knowledge between different generations. Indigenous communities use festivals as platforms to preserve their traditional practices which include knowledge and rituals and languages that face the threat of being forgotten (Zakaria & Hua, 2024).

Festival tourism has detrimental effects which scholars warn about because they believe it creates negative impacts within the festival tourism industry. The combination of overt commercial activities together with high tourist numbers creates a situation which causes cultural heritage to become commercialized because traditions need to change in order to satisfy visitor needs. The process creates a situation where communities lose their cultural identity and their ability to control their heritage (Naqvi et al., 2018). Research demonstrates that sustainable festival management practices need to exist because they help protect cultural heritage while allowing tourism development to proceed. Sustainable practices establish visitor capacity limits while they distribute economic benefits fairly and protect cultural heritage through local community management (Nkunzi & Nyikana, 2025).

Researchers in Southeast Asian countries study cultural festivals because these events help develop cultural tourism while tackling sustainability issues. Malaysian tourism research, in particular, recognizes festivals as strategic tools for national and regional tourism development (Yusoh et al., 2023; Yusoh et al., 2022). The current literature does not include studies which investigate specific destinations that showcase Sabah's distinct traditional cultural practices. Existing research analyzes festival tourism in Malaysia through broad studies, but there exists a research gap which needs to be filled in order to understand how Sabah's indigenous festivals impact both tourism and community development (Belly et al., 2024; Pysarevskiy et al., 2025).

The research shows that cultural festivals serve as essential elements for tourism development because they improve destination reputation and create economic benefits and preserve cultural heritage. The study demonstrates that social and cultural effects require equal treatment through proper administrative methods. This research develops existing studies by examining cultural festivals in Sabah to assess their potential for tourism and environmental sustainability.

Research Methodology

The research study uses a systematic research approach which maintains complete research transparency to investigate how cultural festivals contribute to tourism development in Sabah. The research objectives required an organized literature-based approach which combined existing academic knowledge with current research themes and research gaps. The methodology uses

established systematic review guidelines to establish research findings which maintain scientific rigor and dependable results and repeatable outcomes.

Research Design

The research design is based on a systematic literature review (SLR), which allows for a comprehensive and unbiased synthesis of previous studies related to cultural festivals and tourism. The researchers selected a systematic review design because it enables them to conduct structured identification and evaluation and integration of scholarly works that are relevant to their research. The approach of this research study uses predefined criteria for choosing studies and conducting analysis, which helps to reduce personal biases that are found in traditional narrative reviews.

The study uses qualitative research design, which analyzes themes but does not use statistical meta-analysis for its analysis. The design of this study functions effectively as the main research method because cultural tourism research requires researchers to understand all aspects of a destination, including its cultural methods and social effects. The research examines peer-reviewed studies and policy reports and academic publications to create an extensive understanding of how cultural festivals affect tourism development and destination image and community engagement in Sabah.

Data Source and Search Strategy

The study gathered its data through secondary sources which included mostly peer-reviewed academic literature. The researchers used major academic databases to confirm the sources' credibility and academic standards which they needed for their research. The databases Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Science Direct, and Emerald Insight offered researchers extensive access to tourism and cultural studies and social science research materials.

Researchers developed a structured search strategy which used keyword combinations and Boolean operators for their research. The researchers used these search terms "cultural festivals" "festival tourism" "cultural tourism" "indigenous festivals" "tourism development" "community participation" and "Sabah tourism" for their research. The search refinement process used Boolean operators AND and OR to create search results which matched user needs. The researchers conducted manual reference list reviews from selected articles to find additional studies which might have been missed during the initial database search.

The research team restricted their search to English-language literature because this approach helped them achieve consistent and clear research results. The research team focused on publications from 2015 onward because this timeframe provided up-to-date information about current cultural tourism practices and festival management methods.

Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria

The review team established specific inclusion and exclusion standards before beginning their study to maintain both study relevance and study quality.

- The studies needed to meet these requirements for their inclusion in the study:

- The research needed to concentrate on cultural festivals or event tourism or cultural tourism.
- The research needed to investigate economic effects and destination reputation and visitor experiences and community involvement which related to tourism activities.
- The research needed to present either empirical evidence or theoretical research which connected to tourism development.

The research team used exclusion criteria to eliminate studies which:

- Focused exclusively and you can use only your specialized knowledge about sports and commercial events which lack any cultural significance.
- The research lacked direct links to tourist activities and visitor participation.
- The study used nonacademic sources which included blogs and promotional materials and opinion pieces as its research material.
- The content existed in multiple databases which provided inadequate details about research methods.

The established criteria restricted the final analysis to high-quality literature which matched the study needs, thereby strengthening the study's results.

Study Selection Process and Analysis

The study selection process used a multi-stage screening method to select studies for review. Researchers reviewed article titles and abstracts from identified articles to determine which articles were relevant. The researchers retained studies that clearly met the inclusion criteria for full-text review. The research team conducted full-text examination during the second stage to assess all articles for their research purpose and their methodological standards and their topic relevance.

The researchers conducted thematic analysis on the selected studies after they chose the studies for inclusion. The researchers established key themes through multiple literature readings and coding. The research examined themes which included festival tourism impacts and destination branding and economic contributions and community involvement and cultural sustainability and challenges of commercialization. The researchers established a coherent research narrative through their synthesis of thematic patterns which served the research objectives. The research method allowed researchers to integrate various viewpoints while keeping strong analytical research.

Prisma Framework Analysis

The study selection process for this systematic literature review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and methodological rigor. The PRISMA framework identified four main sections which included identification and screening and eligibility assessment and inclusion process (Ossowska et al., 2023).

The identification stage required researchers to perform a full search which included five main academic databases: Scopus and Web of Science and Google Scholar and ScienceDirect and Emerald Insight. The research team used special keywords about cultural festivals and tourism in Sabah which led to the discovery of 412 initial records. The research team eliminated 96 duplicate records from the search results which led to 316 distinct studies.

The screening stage required researchers to evaluate 316 records by reviewing their titles and abstracts to determine their suitability for research purposes. Studies that did not focus on cultural festivals, tourism development, or community and economic impacts were excluded at this stage. The study team excluded 228 records because they did not match the research topic while 88 articles remained for complete text review.

The remaining 88 articles underwent complete text examination during the eligibility stage. Studies, which reached this stage, faced exclusion because they did not concentrate on tourism or they lacked proper research methods or their sources were non-academic materials or they studied events that did not have cultural significance. The assessment resulted in 54 article exclusions because their research methods were insufficient or their connection to cultural festival tourism was minimal.

The inclusion stage selected 34 studies after they satisfied all necessary inclusion requirements for qualitative synthesis. The final dataset, which researchers used for thematic analysis, examined how cultural festivals impact tourism development and destination image and community participation and sustainability in Sabah and similar areas. The study gained academic credibility through the PRISMA framework, which established a systematic method for selecting participants that could be reproduced without bias.

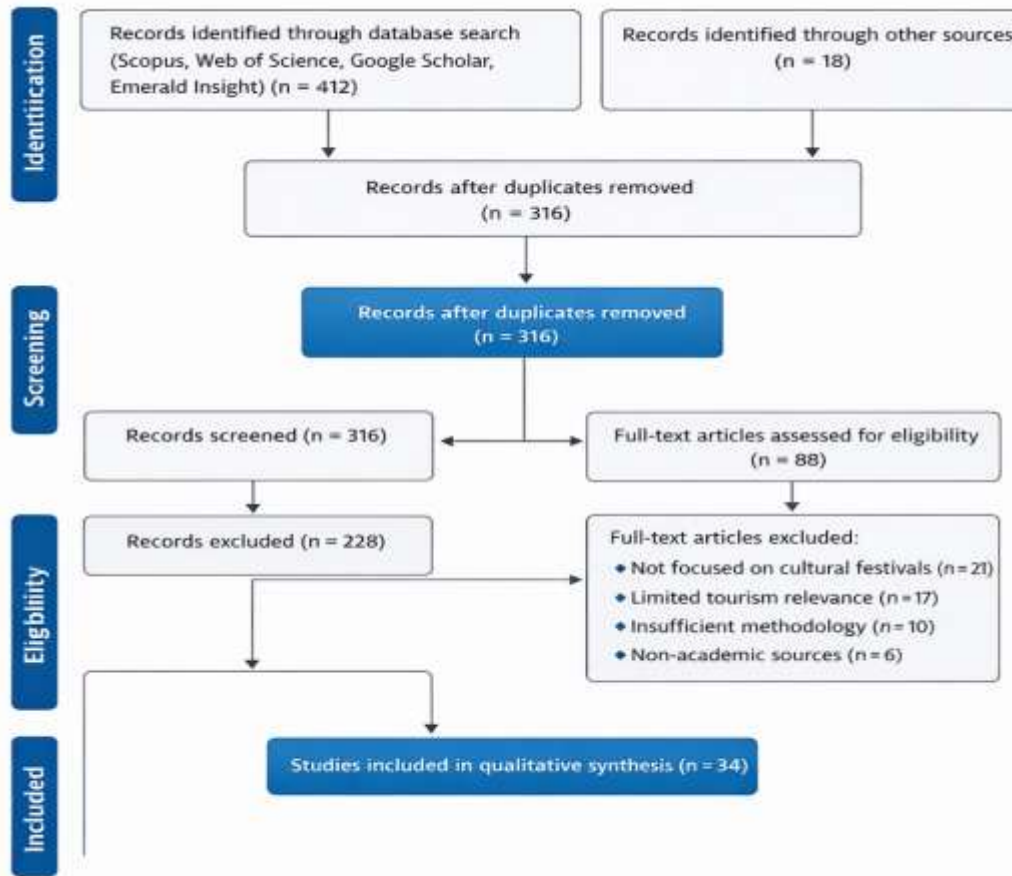


Figure 1: Prisma Flow Analysis

Findings And Discussion

The systematic review demonstrates that cultural festivals provide multiple tourism benefits which extend beyond their primary function in tourism development to create economic advantages for various destinations, especially in areas with diverse cultural heritage like Sabah. The qualitative analysis of 34 studies revealed four main research themes which include destination attractiveness, economic contribution, community participation, and sustainability challenges.

The research examines multiple studies which demonstrate that cultural festivals improve destination attractiveness while they also help tourists decide which places to visit. Authentic cultural experiences which real indigenous people present through their traditional harvest celebrations and boat races and indigenous cultural events create authentic cultural experiences which set their destinations apart from regular tourist attractions (Yanti et al., 2025). Studies show that modern tourists prefer deep and authentic travel experiences because cultural festivals offer direct access to local customs and artistic displays and ceremonial practices. Festivals in Sabah showcase the state's ethnic diversity and cultural heritage which together create a distinct cultural tourism experience (Prastyo et al., 2025).

The research results show that cultural festivals bring significant economic advantages to local communities. Researchers observed that tourist spending rises during festival times because tourists spend more on hotels and dining and transportation and local craft products. Small and medium enterprises benefit from this economic activity while indigenous and rural communities receive new employment prospects (Praswati et al., 2020). The existing research shows that festival tourism supports comprehensive economic growth because it allows local businesses and artists and entertainers to participate in the economic activities. The Sabah community-based tourism system uses festivals to create equitable distribution of tourism benefits because they serve as effective distribution systems (Sofia, 2024). The success and genuine nature of cultural festivals depend on how much community members take part in the celebration. The studies examined show that festivals which involve community members in their management process develop better social cohesion while maintaining their cultural heritage. The community establishes its cultural identity through active participation in planning and performance and decision-making because it protects its traditional practices from tourist-centered modifications. Indigenous people in Sabah use their festivals as educational platforms which transmit their knowledge to younger generations while safeguarding their cultural heritage to maintain sustainable tourism development (Richards & King, 2022).

The festival tourism discussion determines its operational challenges through its examination of both festival operations and their tourism activities. The researchers warn against excessive commercialization because it leads to both cultural commodification and the loss of traditional values (Pysarevskiy et al., 2025). The researchers identified three potential issues which included overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure and uneven distribution of benefits. The research results demonstrate that sustainable festival management practices require three essential elements, which are community control, visitor management strategies, and development of tourism policies that respect local cultures. The research results show that cultural festivals function as essential components which drive tourism growth throughout Sabah. Sustainable and inclusive management practices create fiscal benefits which help to preserve cultural traditions and empower local communities (Richards, 2018). The discovered information shows that Sabah needs to create unified cultural tourism plans which will protect its special cultural heritage while promoting its tourism industry.

Future Research and Recommendations

Future research on cultural festivals and tourism in Sabah should adopt more empirical and mixed-method approaches to complement the predominantly literature-based findings. The study needs primary data collection through surveys and interviews which will help researchers achieve their goal of understanding tourist motivations and satisfaction levels and intention to behave (Belly et al., 2024). The study requires longitudinal studies which will measure how festivals create long-term socio-economic and cultural effects on indigenous communities. The study of festival tourism management practices will improve through comparative research between Sabah and Southeast Asian countries which have different cultural backgrounds (Diaz-Soria & Blanco-Romero, 2024). Further research should also investigate how digital media, and technology can help increase awareness of cultural festivals. The increasing power of social media platforms together with online advertising and digital cultural experiences requires research into how these platforms create tourist destination perceptions and tourist behavior. Future research should examine how

external elements including global emergencies and climate change, and policy changes affect festival tourism (Harrisa et al., 2023). The study results lead to the development of multiple recommendations. The authorities for tourism should establish local community control over their festival operations because it helps preserve cultural traditions and ensures fair distribution of festival profits. The local community needs building capacity through training programs that teach them event management and sustainable tourism methods (Ko et al., 2022). The planning process must include sustainability practices which will restrict visitor access and preserve cultural heritage and enable native community involvement. The cultural festivals of Sabah will maintain their role as sustainable tourism development drivers through these established processes (Pysarevskiy et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The research studied how cultural festivals help tourism development in Sabah by conducting a systematic literature review which followed the PRISMA framework. The research results show that cultural festivals serve as essential tourism attractions which enhance destination appeal while supporting economic development and community participation. Festivals showcase Sabah's diverse ethnic backgrounds and native traditions which provide genuine tourism experiences that boost the state's tourism image while attracting visitors who seek cultural experiences. The review demonstrates that cultural festivals create economic benefits which especially help local businesses and generate employment opportunities for rural and indigenous populations. Festivals provide more than economic advantages because they help build social unity while safeguarding cultural heritage and enabling knowledge transmission between different age groups. The results show that community members need to take part in festival planning and execution because their involvement helps maintain cultural authenticity and ensures long-term festival preservation.

The research found that tourist demand growth causes two main problems which include commercialism and the practice of turning local cultures into marketable products and the need to balance visitors and environmental protection. The solution needs integrated tourism planning together with policies that provide assistance and governance systems which local community's control. The research shows that cultural festivals function as sustainable tourism development tools in Sabah when their management practices follow responsible methods. The research results advance cultural tourism studies while providing tourism operators and policymakers with actionable strategies to maintain cultural heritage while developing their tourism activities.

Research Contribution

The research presents vital advancements for cultural tourism and festival management research specifically in the context of Sabah. The first finding provides a complete review of existing research about cultural festivals and their impact on tourism through festivals which affect both destination appeal and tourist contentment and economic progress and community involvement. The research establishes a trustworthy evidence base through systematic review which follows PRISMA guidelines to assess 34 selected studies. The study identifies both advantages and difficulties which exist within the field of festival tourism. The study advances theoretical knowledge through its synthesis of cultural tourism and event management and community-based tourism approaches. The study shows how cultural authenticity and local participation work

together to create tourism development which shows how indigenous festivals create economic and social benefits through sustainable development. This particular environmental situation applies to Sabah because the area uses its diverse cultural assets to attract tourists.

The research provides useful results which benefit policymakers and tourism authorities and local community members. The document provides sustainable festival planning guidelines which include community engagement methods to protect cultural heritage while enabling tourism development. The study presents specific methods which operators can use to maintain cultural authenticity while achieving economic advantages, which will help improve the cultural tourism business in Sabah. The research establishes a base for future research through its investigation of festival tourism which focuses on specific destinations.

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Ethics Statement: The study required no ethical approval because there were no human participants and no animal subjects, and no protected information involved the research. The researchers conducted a systematic literature review by examining existing academic literature which had already been published. The authors confirm that the study was carried out in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed meaningfully to this study. Adam Hafiz was responsible for conceptualising the study, designing the research framework, and leading the manuscript preparation. Arman Hanif conducted the literature search, screening process, and thematic analysis in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines. Aufa Hannah assisted in data synthesis, interpretation of findings, and reviewing and editing the final manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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