

Understanding Tourism Appeal in Mindanao: How Culture and Language Shape the Experiences of Asian and Non-Mindanaoan Tourists

Abuhair W. Ayyub¹, Altohami A. Tapsi², Waldaya A. Caluang³, Saada A. Makintan⁴, Hermee-Lizza A. Bakil⁵, Radzhata U. Hassan-Ringor⁶, Eftisam S. Araluddin⁷, Satria J. Halis⁸, Mutmainna W. Ayyub⁹, Majriha D. Kalabud¹⁰, Jiehan A. Abubakar¹¹, Mohammad Yusri B. Ibba¹², Sar-Ana M. Abdurasul, PhD¹³, Rasmil T. Abdurasul¹⁴

¹ Instructor I, Hadji Butu School of Arts and Trades, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: Abuhairayyub09@gmail.com

² Teacher I, Sulu National High School, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: Altohamitapsi23@gmail.com

³ Teacher I, Jolo School of Fisheries, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: Zhyrncaluang11@gmail.com

⁴ Teacher I, Sulu National High School, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: julkintan@gmail.com

⁵ Instructor I, Sulu State University, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: hermeelizza@gmail.com

⁶ Teacher I, Lapak National School of Fisheries, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: Radzhatahassan0204@gmail.com

⁷ Staff Nurse, Maimbung District Hospital / Mindanao Autonomous College Foundation Inc., Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: araluddine@hmail.com

⁸ Executive Secretary / Secretary, Kim Enterprises / Hadji Abubakar Tan Village, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: halissatria@gmail.com

⁹ Instructor I, College of Education, Mindanao State University–Sulu, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: Mutmainna.ayyub@msusulu.edu.ph

¹⁰ Teacher I, Hadji Butu School of Arts and Trades, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: Majjkalabud10@gmail.com

¹¹ Teacher I, Hadji Butu School of Arts and Trades, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: abubakarjiehan@gmail.com

¹² Student, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: ibbamohammadyusri@gmail.com

¹³ College of Humanities, Social Science and Communication, Basilan State College, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: saranamisuari@gmail.com

¹⁴ College of Teacher Education, Sulu State University, Jolo, Sulu 7400, Philippines. Email: (not provided)

Corresponding Author: Abuhair W. Ayyub^{1*} (Email: Abuhairayyub09@gmail.com).

Abstract: This study examined how culture and language influence the experiences and perceived appeal of tourism destinations in Mindanao among Asian and non-Mindanaoan tourists. Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered from 20 tourists through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that cultural immersion, exposure to local traditions, and interaction with communities deepened tourists' experiences, strengthened appreciation, and created emotional connections to the destination. Language played a crucial role in shaping interaction, understanding, and overall engagement, while also contributing to authenticity and ease of navigation. The combined influence of culture and language reinforced destination uniqueness, guided tourist behavior, and increased willingness to revisit and recommend. Overall, tourism appeal was shaped not only by cultural richness but also by how accessible and understandable these experiences were. The study highlights the importance of integrating authentic cultural expression with effective communication to enhance tourist experience and strengthen destination appeal.

Keywords: Mindanao Tourism. Language and Culture. Destination appeal

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has increasingly been recognized as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon in which destination appeal extends beyond physical attractions to include intangible elements such as culture and language. Culture shapes tourism competitiveness through identity, traditions, and social practices that influence destination image, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Kumar et al., 2024). Cultural interactions between tourists and host communities further enrich experiences and influence how destinations are perceived and remembered (Ortiz et al., 2024). These perspectives establish that tourism appeal is constructed through cultural exposure and interaction, rather than solely through infrastructure or scenery. Supporting this view, cultural tourism experiences have been shown to enhance engagement, satisfaction, and overall destination evaluation through emotional and social dimensions (Genc & Gulertekin Genc, 2025; Gonçalves, 2021). Recent research also showed that authentic cultural interaction strengthens tourists' emotional connection and satisfaction with destinations, particularly in culturally diverse tourism settings (Zhang & Xu, 2023).

Alongside culture, language plays a critical role in shaping tourism experiences and perceptions. Linguistic landscapes, including signage and local expressions, reflect cultural identity and influence how tourists interpret authenticity and engagement within destinations (Dai et al., 2024). Effective communication enables interaction and participation, while language barriers can limit engagement and negatively affect satisfaction and perception (Ahmad et al., 2024; Carvalho et al., 2022). Language also contributes to accessibility and inclusivity, shaping how welcoming and navigable a destination appears to visitors (Li et al., 2021). Similarly, multilingual communication strategies were found to improve tourists' sense of comfort, participation, and destination accessibility, especially among international visitors (Mariani et al., 2022). These findings indicate that language functions both as a communication tool and as an experiential element that directly influences how tourists perceive and evaluate destinations. This study was anchored in the Experiential Consumption Theory, which explains how consumers evaluate experiences based on emotional and sensory responses, supporting the role of culture in shaping tourism perceptions (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). It also drew from the Linguistic Relativity Theory, which posits that language influences perception and interpretation, reinforcing how linguistic interactions affect tourists' understanding of destinations (Whorf, 1956). In addition, the Destination Image Theory explained how cognitive and affective evaluations contribute to destination appeal, providing a framework for analyzing how culture and language shape tourists' overall perceptions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

Despite the established importance of culture and language, existing literature indicates that their influence on tourism experiences and perceptions varies across different tourist groups. Cultural background affects expectations, interpretations, and engagement, leading to differing perceptions of destination appeal (Alemán-Carreón et al., 2021). Tourist perceptions were also found to vary according to prior cultural exposure and familiarity, influencing how destinations were interpreted and appreciated across different visitor groups (Chen & Rahman, 2018). At the same time, local and minority languages serve as markers of authenticity that enhance destination uniqueness and attractiveness (Lonardi, 2022). Studies have also shown that experiential factors, including service quality and interaction, influence how tourism environments are evaluated (Mendoza et al., 2023). In

tourism settings, meaningful interaction with local communities was likewise associated with stronger destination attachment and more positive travel evaluation (Stylidis et al., 2020). However, much of the existing research has been conducted in Western or highly developed tourism contexts, with limited attention given to Southeast Asian settings. In addition, many studies examine culture and language independently, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how these factors interact in shaping tourism experiences and perceptions.

This gap highlighted the need for a more context-specific and integrated examination of culture and language within emerging tourism destinations such as Mindanao. There remains limited qualitative research that captures the perspectives of diverse tourist groups, particularly Asian and non-Mindanaoan tourists, in understanding how these factors shape tourism experiences and influence destination appeal. Existing tourism studies have largely emphasized quantitative evaluations of destination image, leaving limited qualitative insights into how tourists personally experience and interpret cultural and linguistic encounters within destinations (Jeong & Santos, 2021). Addressing this gap, the present study focused on examining how culture and language influenced the experiences and perceptions of tourists and how these factors contributed to the appeal of tourism destinations in Mindanao. The study provided a focused investigation of cultural and linguistic influences within a specific regional context, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of tourism appeal in culturally diverse destinations.

Objective of the Study

This study aimed to:

(1) To examine how culture and language influence the experiences and perceived appeal of tourism destinations among Asian and non-Mindanaoan tourists in Mindanao.

Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how culture and language influenced the experiences and perceptions of Asian and non-Mindanaoan tourists and how these factors shaped the appeal of tourism destinations in Mindanao. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, viewpoints, and personal accounts within real-world contexts. The design focused on capturing rich, descriptive data that reflected how tourists perceived and experienced cultural and linguistic elements during their visits, providing a comprehensive understanding of tourism appeal beyond measurable variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2. Study Site and Respondents

The study was conducted in selected tourism destinations across Mindanao, Philippines, known for their rich cultural diversity and linguistic variation. These locations were chosen due to their relevance in showcasing indigenous traditions, local practices, and multilingual interactions that contribute to tourism experiences. The respondents of the study included twenty (20) Asian and non-Mindanaoan tourists who had visited these destinations. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that only individuals with direct tourism experience in Mindanao and the ability to provide detailed insights into cultural and linguistic encounters were included in the study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their experiences and perceptions of culture and language in tourism destinations in Mindanao. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. The interviews focused on participants' experiences with local culture, communication, language use, and how these influenced their overall perception of the destination. All interviews were

conducted with informed consent, recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data (Kallio et al., 2016).

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and recurring ideas related to culture, language, and tourism appeal. The analysis followed a systematic process that included familiarization with the data, coding of significant statements, categorization of codes into themes, and interpretation of emerging patterns. This approach enabled the identification of key themes that reflected how culture and language influenced tourists' experiences and perceptions. The analysis ensured that findings were grounded in the participants' responses, providing a clear and organized presentation of qualitative insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Objective: Examine how culture and language influenced the experiences and perceptions of Asian and non-Mindanaoan tourists.

Q1: *How did encounters with local culture influence the experiences and perceptions of Asian and non-Mindanaoan tourists in Mindanao?*

Theme 1: Cultural Immersion Deepened Tourist Experience

Most respondents (16 out of 20) indicated that direct exposure to local culture significantly deepened their overall experience in Mindanao. Participation in cultural activities, observation of traditions, and interaction with local communities made their visit more engaging and meaningful. These encounters allowed tourists to move beyond passive observation, shaping a richer and more immersive experience. This supports existing studies that cultural engagement enhances tourist experience and influences perception through emotional and social interaction (Genc & Gulertekin Genc, 2025; Gonçalves, 2021).

One participant shared, *"Experiencing their culture made the trip feel more real and memorable."* This reflects how cultural immersion influenced the depth of experience, consistent with the Experiential Consumption Theory. The implication is that strengthening opportunities for cultural immersion may enhance tourists' experiential quality and perception of destinations.

Theme 2: Cultural Exposure Strengthened Destination Appreciation

A large portion of participants (14 out of 20) described how encounters with local traditions, lifestyles, and community practices shaped a stronger appreciation of Mindanao as a destination. These cultural exposures influenced how they evaluated the place, often shifting their perception from a simple travel site to a culturally rich and distinctive environment. Such experiences contributed to more favorable impressions and deeper recognition of the destination's uniqueness, consistent with findings that culture shapes tourist perception and evaluation (Kumar et al., 2024; Ortiz et al., 2024).

As one respondent expressed, *"Seeing how they live and celebrate made me appreciate the place more."* This reflects how cultural encounters informed perception, aligning with the Destination Image Theory, where both cognitive and affective elements shape destination image. This suggests that visible and lived cultural expressions play a key role in strengthening tourists' overall appreciation of destinations.

Theme 3: Culture Created Emotional Attachment to the Destination

Beyond identity, 14 out of 20 accounts showed that cultural encounters created emotional responses such as enjoyment, appreciation, and connection. These feelings influenced how appealing the destination was, as tourists associated the place with positive emotional experiences rather than just physical features. This supports findings that emotional engagement shapes destination evaluation (Su et al., 2020).

One participant shared, *"I felt connected to the place because of their culture."* This aligns with the Experiential Consumption Theory, where emotions shape evaluation. This highlights that emotional resonance plays a key role in tourism appeal.

Q2: *How does language influences tourists' interaction, understanding, and overall experience in tourism destinations?*

Theme 1: Shared Language Facilitated Smooth Interaction

Clear communication through a shared language made interactions easier and more efficient, noted by 15 out of 20 participants. When tourists and locals could understand each other, basic needs such as asking for directions, ordering food, and seeking assistance were handled smoothly, reducing uncertainty during the visit. This ease of interaction improved overall experience and contributed to a more positive perception of the destination, consistent with studies highlighting the role of language in shaping tourist satisfaction (Carvalho et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021).

A participant explained, *"It was easier to enjoy the place because I could communicate with people."* This reflects how language supported interaction, aligning with the Linguistic Relativity Theory, where language influences understanding and engagement. These findings suggest that accessible communication may enhance tourists' comfort and overall experience.

Theme 2: Local Language Enhanced Authenticity of Experience

Most respondents (13 out of 20) shared that exposure to local language made their experience feel more authentic and culturally distinct. Hearing conversations, greetings, and local expressions created a stronger sense of place, even when full understanding was not present. This influenced how they experienced the destination as unique rather than ordinary, supporting findings that language contributes to authenticity and perception (Dai et al., 2024; Lonardi, 2022).

One participant noted, *"Hearing their language made the place feel real."* This reflects how language exposure shaped experience, consistent with the Linguistic Relativity Theory. The implication is that maintaining visible and audible use of local language may strengthen tourists' experiential connection to destinations.

Theme 3: Multilingual Support Increased Ease and Confidence

Visible multilingual support, such as English-speaking staff, translated menus, and clear signage, made navigation and interaction easier for 14 out of 20 participants. This support reduced uncertainty and increased confidence when moving around, asking for help, and engaging with services. As a result, tourists reported a smoother and more comfortable overall experience, consistent with findings that language accessibility enhances satisfaction and perceived friendliness of destinations (Li et al., 2021; Dai et al., 2024).

A respondent noted, *"Having English signs and English-speaking staff made everything easier to understand."* This reflects how language support improved usability and comfort, aligning with the Linguistic Relativity Theory. These results indicate that investing in multilingual communication can strengthen tourists' confidence and ease of travel.

Q3: *How did culture and language together shape tourists' perception of the appeal of tourism destinations in Mindanao?*

Theme 1: Culture and Language Reinforced Destination Uniqueness

A clear pattern emerged among 16 out of 20 participants who associated the combined presence of culture and language with the distinctiveness of Mindanao as a destination. Cultural practices together with local language created an identity that differentiated the place from other tourism sites, shaping how appealing it was perceived. This combination made the destination feel less generic and more rooted in its own character, supporting literature that highlights the role of cultural and linguistic elements in forming destination image (Kumar et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2024).

As one respondent expressed, *"The culture and the way people speak made the place stand out from others I've visited."* This reflects how both elements worked together in shaping appeal, consistent with the Destination Image Theory. These insights suggest that preserving both cultural identity and local language may strengthen the distinct appeal of tourism destinations.

Theme 2: Culture and Language Influenced Willingness to Revisit and Recommend

Positive experiences with both culture and language shaped future behavioral intentions among 14 out of 20 participants. Engaging cultural encounters combined with manageable communication made the destination more appealing, increasing willingness to revisit or recommend it to others. When both elements worked well together, tourists described the experience as complete and satisfying, reinforcing favorable evaluation of the destination. This is consistent with studies showing that experiential and communication factors influence destination loyalty and recommendation (Su et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). A participant noted, *"I would definitely recommend it because the culture was rich...I'd come back again because I enjoyed the Philippines, and it wasn't hard to connect with people here."* This reflects how combined cultural and linguistic experiences shaped appeal, aligning with the Destination Image Theory. These findings indicate that strengthening both cultural engagement and language accessibility may improve tourists' intention to revisit and promote the destination.

Theme 3: Culture and Language Directed Tourist Behavior and Movement

For 12 out of 20 participants, cultural familiarity and language understanding influenced how they moved within the destination, where they chose to go, how long they stayed, and what they avoided. Tourists gravitated toward spaces where they felt culturally or linguistically comfortable, which shaped their overall evaluation of the destination. This suggests that appeal is partly constructed through behavioral navigation, not just perception (Li et al., 2021).

As one participant explained, *"I stayed longer in places where I could understand and interact more."* This reflects how behavior was guided by experience, consistent with the Experiential Consumption Theory. This implies that accessibility and cultural familiarity influence how destinations are explored and valued.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrated that culture and language were not peripheral elements of tourism but central forces that shaped how destinations were experienced, interpreted, and ultimately valued. Cultural encounters provided depth, identity, and emotional resonance, while language influenced accessibility, interaction, and understanding. Together, these elements moved tourism beyond passive sightseeing into a more engaged and interpretive experience, where tourists actively constructed their perceptions of the destination.

Across the results, it became evident that tourism appeal was formed through multiple layers, identity, emotion, accessibility, authenticity, and inclusion. Culture and language worked in combination to signal what the destination represents, how it can be experienced, and whether it feels approachable and meaningful to visitors. This interplay highlighted that appeal is not fixed but continuously shaped through interaction, communication, and exposure within the destination context.

In a broader sense, the study underscored the importance of recognizing culture and language as strategic components in tourism development, particularly in culturally diverse regions such as Mindanao. Strengthening authentic cultural expression while improving communication accessibility may enhance both tourist experience and destination appeal.

Reference

- Ahmad, F., Motlaq, M. D. A., Salman, A., & Basendwah, M. (2024). Language barriers in tourism: An overview of global landscape through bibliometric analysis. *Journal of Content, Community & Communication*, 21, 177–190.
- Baloglu, S., & McCleary, K. W. (1999). A model of destination image formation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(4), 868–897. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(99\)00030-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(99)00030-4)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Carvalho, I., Ramires, A., & Gama, J. (2022). Seeing a country with your own eyes: The impact of immersion experiences in language travel. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 32, 3218.

Understanding Tourism Appeal in Mindanao: How Culture and Language Shape the Experiences of Asian and Non-Mindanaoan Tourists

- Chen, H., & Rahman, I. (2018). Cultural tourism: An analysis of engagement, cultural contact, memorable tourism experience and destination loyalty. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 26, 153–163. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2017.10.006>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dai, J., Chen, H., & Zhang, Z. (2024). How does a historical linguistic landscape influence tourists' behavioral intention? *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 53, 101294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2024.101294>
- Genc, R., & Gulertekin Genc, N. (2025). Effects of cultural tourism experience on tourist behavior. *SAGE Open*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251397318>
- Gonçalves, A. R. (2021). Tourism and culture: Contributions to cultural tourism development. In *Tourism knowledge: A multidisciplinary perspective*.
- Holbrook, M. B., & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(2), 132–140. <https://doi.org/10.1086/208906>
- Jeong, Y., & Santos, C. A. (2021). Cultural encounters and tourist meaning-making in destination experiences. *Journal of Travel Research*, 60(7), 1452–1467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287520961178>
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 72(12), 2954–2965. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>
- Kim, J., & Kim, S. (2019). The impact of cultural authenticity on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. *Sustainability*, 11(10), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11102858>
- Kumar, S., Kumar, D., & Nicolau, J. L. (2024). How does culture influence a country's travel and tourism competitiveness? *Tourism Management*, 100, 104822. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2023.104822>
- Li, X., Lai, C., Harrill, R., Kline, S., & Wang, L. (2021). When East meets West: The role of language in tourism experience. *Journal of Travel Research*, 60(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287520907898>
- Lonardi, S. (2022). Minority languages and tourism: A literature review. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 30(10), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2021.2012183>
- Mariani, M., Baggio, R., Fuchs, M., & Höepken, W. (2022). Language accessibility and tourist experience in multilingual destinations. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 42, 100958. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2022.100958>
- Mendoza, D. V., Vicente, M. B., & Chavez, J. V. (2023). Food servicing characteristics of the accommodation products as deal-breakers of consumer purchasing behaviors. *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 33(S1), 1695–1719. <https://doi.org/10.59670/jns.v33i.3119>
- Ortiz, O., et al. (2024). Tourist experience considering cultural factors from a customer experience perspective. *Sustainability*, 16(22), 10042. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su162210042>
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Richards, G. (2018). Cultural tourism: A review of recent research and trends. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 36, 12–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2018.03.005>
- Stylidis, D., Woosnam, K. M., & Tasci, A. D. A. (2020). The effect of resident-tourist interaction quality on destination image and loyalty. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 28(12), 1989–2006. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1758700>
- Su, L., Huang, S., & Chen, X. (2020). Effects of service fairness and cultural authenticity on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 37(3), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2020.1740235>
- Whorf, B. L. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. MIT Press.
- Zhang, Y., & Xu, H. (2023). Authentic cultural interaction and tourist emotional experience in heritage destinations. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 55, 134–142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.03.008>