

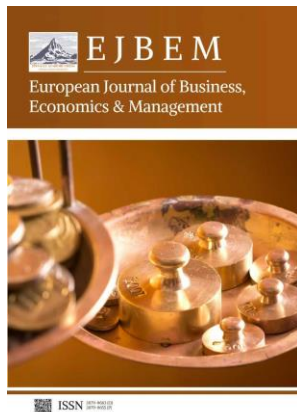
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Navigating the New Normal: COVID-19's Impact on Local Communities and Sustainable Tourism in Phuket

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the tourism-dependent economy of Phuket, exposing the inherent vulnerabilities of local communities. This paper explores the impact of the new normal on Phuket's local residents by examining four key dimensions: employment vulnerability, risk perception of COVID-19 infection, sustainability awareness, and pro-tourism attitudes. Adopting a qualitative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with residents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The findings indicate that employment vulnerability represented a primary challenge, characterized by widespread job losses and significant barriers to re-employment resulting from reduced hiring and more stringent professional requirements. Furthermore, residents expressed heightened concerns regarding health risks, particularly concerning visitors who bypassed safety protocols, which led to an increase in self-protective behaviors. Simultaneously, the pandemic fostered a greater sense of sustainability awareness, as communities recognized the necessity of balancing economic recovery with environmental and cultural preservation. Despite these multifaceted challenges, pro-tourism attitudes remained resilient, with many residents acknowledging the indispensable role of the tourism sector in maintaining economic stability and driving future recovery. By integrating stakeholder theory and focusing on local community perspectives, this study fills a critical gap in the existing literature regarding island tourism during global health crises. These findings offer practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to enhance sustainable and responsible tourism development in Phuket. Future research may benefit from adopting broader, more diverse samples and incorporating quantitative methods to validate and extend the exploratory insights generated by this qualitative study.

Keywords: Phuket; new normal; local communities; tourism recovery; employment vulnerability; sustainability; stakeholder theory

1. Introduction

The global tourism landscape has undergone a profound transformation due to a combination of unprecedented international health crises and shifting geopolitical dynamics. These events have introduced significant layers of uncertainty regarding the recovery trajectories and long-term viability of the industry. In this context, understanding how the "new normal" influences local communities in tourism-dependent destinations such as Phuket has become increasingly critical [1]. While previous academic inquiries have examined various facets of sustainable tourism within the regional context of Phuket, there remains a notable scarcity of research exploring how local communities

perceive and respond to sustainable and responsible tourism development amidst the structural shifts of the post-pandemic era [2].

This paper addresses this research gap by utilizing stakeholder theory to focus specifically on community-level perspectives. The reliance on a single-sector economy often leaves local residents susceptible to external shocks, making their viewpoints essential for designing resilient recovery strategies. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews, this study provides grounded, empirical insights into how residents experience and interpret four critical dimensions: employment vulnerability, the perception of health risks, heightened sustainability awareness, and evolving pro-tourism attitudes [3].

By focusing on these interconnected factors, the research contributes a nuanced, bottom-up understanding of sustainable tourism transitions. The "new normal" necessitates a shift away from traditional mass tourism models toward more localized and responsible frameworks, yet the community's role in this transition has been largely overlooked in the existing literature [4]. Consequently, this study not only explores the immediate socioeconomic impacts on the population but also investigates the potential for long-term community-led sustainability. The findings seek to offer a comprehensive perspective that balances economic necessity with social and environmental well-being, providing a foundation for more inclusive tourism planning [5].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Island Tourism

Academic research concerning island tourism has traditionally concentrated on several core areas. Primarily, a substantial body of literature addresses the inherent diversity of island tourism and the imperatives of sustainable development. Other scholarly inquiries explore the intersection of environmental conservation, heritage protection, and the complex relationships between various stakeholders. These studies emphasize that island ecosystems are particularly sensitive to the pressures of mass tourism, requiring specialized management frameworks that prioritize long-term ecological and social stability over short-term economic gains [6].

2.2. New Normal of Tourism Development

The concept of the "new normal" refers to the comprehensive reconfiguration of economic and social systems following a major global crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic, specifically, brought unprecedented disruptions to the global tourism industry, triggering a critical reflection on its existing structures, sustainability, and resilience [7]. As tourism knowledge and consumer behaviors evolve within this new paradigm, sustainable destination strategies have gained significant prominence. Building resilience in the post-pandemic era requires not only institutional policy innovation but also grassroots participation that centers on community well-being. Modern disaster recovery research increasingly views resilience as an emerging attribute of interdependent systems, where the recovery of one sector is intrinsically linked to the stability of the local social fabric [8].

2.3. Stakeholder Theory and Local Communities

Stakeholder theory emphasizes the necessity of balancing the interests of all parties involved in tourism development, including tourists, local communities, private enterprises, policymakers, and the natural environment. Effective collaboration among these stakeholders is regarded as essential for achieving sustainable tourism outcomes and minimizing socio-economic conflicts [9].

Local communities play a dual role; they are crucial participants in the tourism value chain but also bear the brunt of its negative external effects. Based on their level of involvement and economic dependence, residents can be categorized into various clusters ranging from staunch supporters to vocal critics. Their attitudes are frequently shaped by

factors such as place attachment and psychological empowerment. Empowered communities, which feel a sense of agency over their local resources, tend to contribute more positively to tourism development [10].

Conversely, tourism development profoundly impacts community perceptions. While it facilitates economic growth, employment generation, and infrastructure improvements, it can concurrently lead to environmental degradation, inflation of living costs, and social dissatisfaction [11]. Consequently, community participation is a cornerstone of sustainable tourism, as it enhances social cohesion and collective well-being. Effective empowerment involves ensuring local voices are integrated into formal planning processes, improving access to vocational training, and building the institutional capacity necessary for meaningful participation in the tourism economy.

2.4. New Normal in Local Communities of Phuket Island

Employment vulnerability has emerged as a critical theme in assessing the impact of global health crises on tourism-dependent regions. Empirical evidence suggests that job losses, income reductions, and limited re-employment opportunities are prevalent among residents whose livelihoods are tethered to the tourism sector. These challenges highlight the risks of economic over-dependence and underscore the importance of understanding labor market dynamics in the context of recovery [12]. This theme is central to identifying how the new normal specifically reshapes the socio-economic security of Phuket's population.

Risk perception regarding infection was another widely discussed factor during the pandemic. Residents expressed a complex duality of concern; while there was anxiety regarding the influx of visitors who might carry the virus, reopening was simultaneously viewed as an economic necessity [13]. This creates a persistent tension between health-related anxieties and the community's reliance on tourism revenue. Within this research, analyzing risk perception is vital to understanding the conditions under which local communities perceive tourism activities to be acceptable and safe.

Pro-tourism attitudes have remained notably resilient in many tourism-dependent communities. However, this support is often conditional. Scholars have noted persistent concerns regarding the long-term environmental and social costs of unregulated expansion, even among those who advocate for its economic benefits. These ambivalent perspectives suggest that while tourism remains economically indispensable, there is an increasing expectation for the industry to return in a more responsible and sustainable form [14].

Sustainability awareness has gained renewed attention as a direct consequence of the pandemic. The temporary cessation of international travel led to visible ecological recovery and a reduction in pollution levels. This interval of restoration served as a powerful reminder of the environmental costs associated with mass tourism and sparked critical reflection on future developmental paths [15]. This awareness is an essential lens for understanding how local values have shifted toward a preference for high-quality, low-impact tourism [16].

By building upon established frameworks of post-crisis impact, this paper integrates stakeholder theory by incorporating the perspectives of local workers and private merchants. This approach provides a comprehensive view of the "new normal." Based on the literature, four interrelated themes-employment vulnerability, risk perception, pro-tourism attitudes, and sustainability awareness-form the analytical framework for this research, guiding the design of the qualitative interviews and the subsequent thematic coding process [17].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Phuket has a total population of 418,785 residents. Located in the southwest of Thailand, Phuket Island covers an area of 543 square kilometers and is bounded by Phang Nga Province. The province is administratively divided into three districts, seventeen sub-districts, and 103 villages. While the official language of the country is standard Thai, the southern dialect is more prevalent among the local population. In professional and tourism-related settings, English is widely understood and utilized [18].

This study employed a qualitative research approach, conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 19 local community members aged between 25 and 50. Participants were selected from various administrative areas of Phuket to ensure geographic representation [19]. The cohort included individuals from diverse professional backgrounds, such as tourism industry employees, small business owners, and residents in non-tourism sectors, providing a comprehensive socio-economic perspective. The specific profiles of the participants are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. List of interviewees.

Number	Gender	Occupation	Age
1	Female	Front desk worker in hotel	27
2	Male	Hotel owner	32
3	Female	Restaurant manager	25
4	Male	Optical shop owner	46
5	Male	Public sector	41
6	Female	Water park worker	29
7	Female	Volunteer group leader	40
8	Male	Restaurant owner	30
9	Female	Restaurant manager	36
10	Male	Souvenir shop owner	30
11	Male	Owner of a traditional Phuket clothing store	42
12	Male	President of the Phuket Old Town Tourism Community	50
13	Female	Homestay owner	30
14	Female	Owner of language training schools	28
15	Male	Travel agency company owner	37
16	Male	Local tour guide	42
17	Female	Teacher of Confucius Institute	32
18	Female	Logistics Manager	37
19	Female	Professor, Faculty of Environment	41

Source: Adapted by the author.

The focus on local communities, rather than solely on corporate tourism entities, stems from their dual role as primary participants and the main bearers of tourism's socio-economic impacts. Their perspectives are vital for understanding the reciprocal relationship between industry development and community well-being.

Given the initial hesitations regarding engaging with researchers, a snowball sampling method was utilized. The first interviewee, a hotel front desk worker and alumna of Prince of Songkla University, was selected based on established criteria. Following her interview, she recommended additional participants, who were subsequently contacted. This iterative process continued until the target sample size was reached, ensuring inclusivity and fostering a necessary level of trust. Participants were contacted via email or telephone, where the researcher introduced the study's objectives, guaranteed confidentiality, and requested consent for audio recording [20].

3.2. Data Collection

To ensure research integrity, each session began with a formal restatement of the research goals. Participants were provided with an informed consent form and an official cover letter from the faculty, emphasizing that the data would be used exclusively for academic purposes. Before proceeding, participants signed the consent forms. In instances where audio recording was not permitted, the researcher maintained comprehensive written notes. Participants retained the right to skip questions or withdraw from the study at any point without penalty [21].

The use of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews allowed for a flexible yet consistent exploration of subjective viewpoints. The interview protocol was organized into four primary inquiry areas:

- 1) The impact of the pandemic on personal and professional life.
- 2) Perceptions of the positive and negative effects of tourism on local communities and how these have shifted post-pandemic.
- 3) Changes in attitudes toward sustainable and responsible tourism.
- 4) Perceived opportunities and barriers to achieving sustainable tourism development in Phuket.

Interviews typically lasted approximately one hour. Data collection was carried out in Phuket between August 2022 and November 2022, capturing insights during the transition period of the pandemic. Following the completion of the sessions, all data were transcribed and managed in strict accordance with ethical research standards to ensure total confidentiality [22].

3.3. Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were then emailed to the participants for validation to ensure accuracy. Following approval, the researcher reviewed the notes multiple times to identify recurring themes.

The study follows a qualitative data analysis framework consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction phase, information was organized and categorized to extract key insights relevant to the research objectives. A two-level thematic analysis was employed, utilizing basic themes and organizing themes to facilitate a systematic examination [23].

The analysis was guided by a preliminary coding framework derived from the literature review. This established a theoretical foundation for interpreting the data within a structured knowledge framework. Basic themes were generated to capture core ideas, which were then consolidated into higher-level organizing themes to reveal significant patterns. The relationship between research objectives and these themes is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of research objectives, codes, basic themes, and organizing themes.

Research Objectives	Organizing themes	Basic themes
To identify the impact of the new normal on local communities in Phuket	Employment vulnerability	Unemployment
	Risk perception of COVID-19 infection	Influx of tourists with COVID-19
	Sustainability	Hygiene
	Pro-tourism	Balance of economic, environmental and cultural benefits
		Hope tourists go back to Phuket

Source: Adapted by the author.

As shown in Table 2, the analytical framework links the research objectives directly to the categorized findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

The interview data were processed using thematic analysis to identify the primary impacts of the "new normal" on the Phuket community. The analysis revealed four core dimensions: employment vulnerability, risk perception, sustainability awareness, and pro-tourism attitudes [24].

4.1.1. Employment Vulnerability

The pandemic significantly heightened employment vulnerability in Phuket, leading to widespread job losses. Respondents noted that the situation was particularly dire for those in the hotel and hospitality sectors. One respondent stated, "After the epidemic, many locals lost their jobs, especially in communities reliant on tourism." Beyond total unemployment, many workers faced reduced income or hours [25]. A water park worker shared that her salary was reduced and her working hours were cut to only 3-4 days a week. Conversely, businesses primarily serving the local population, such as an optical shop owner who owned his premises, reported being under significantly less pressure. These findings highlight that re-employment remains difficult due to reduced hiring and heightened job requirements in the post-pandemic market [26].

4.1.2. Risk Perception of Infection

There was significant concern among residents regarding the influx of tourists potentially carrying the virus. A language school owner emphasized that some tourists did not follow safety measures, such as wearing masks, which increased local anxiety. This perceived risk led many residents to avoid popular tourist hubs like Patong. Furthermore, the pandemic has left a lasting impact on hygiene awareness; residents reported sustained behaviors such as constant mask-wearing and frequent hand sanitizing even as the industry began to reopen [27].

4.1.3. Sustainability Awareness

The findings suggest a growing recognition of the need for a balance between economic, environmental, and cultural benefits. A restaurant owner underscored this by stating, "We can only make money if we have the environment." Similarly, a local tour guide noted that Phuket's natural beauty is the foundation of their livelihood and must be protected to ensure long-term stability. This awareness extends to cultural preservation, with residents expressing pride in local traditions and a desire for recovery models that do not erode the local way of life.

4.1.4. Pro-tourism Attitudes

Despite these challenges, the hope for tourists to return to Phuket remains strong. The pandemic highlighted the critical importance of tourism to the social fabric. While residents acknowledge challenges like overcrowding, the severe financial hardship experienced in the absence of visitors has reinforced a pragmatic, pro-tourism stance.

4.2. Discussion

The findings suggest that the pandemic accelerated a shift toward more responsible tourism. This section explores how these changes align with or diverge from the existing social, economic, and environmental landscape of Phuket.

The acute employment vulnerability observed reflects the inherent risks of an island economy reliant on a single industry. The data confirms that economies dependent on one

sector face severe instability when that sector collapses. However, the relative resilience of businesses with local customer bases suggests that economic diversification is a necessary strategy for future recovery.

Regarding risk perception, the tension between economic survival and health-related anxiety remains a defining feature of the "new normal." The sustained vigilance in public health practices suggests that Phuket's recovery involves not just economic adjustments but a permanent shift in community behavior. Managing this tension is crucial for the long-term acceptability of tourism growth.

The heightened sustainability awareness among locals aligns with global trends where the pandemic served as a catalyst for environmental reflection. Residents now advocate for a departure from the "growth-at-all-costs" model, favoring a "building back better" approach. This involves adapting to new realities and prioritizing community well-being alongside environmental and cultural stewardship. Consequently, any future development in Phuket will likely face higher local expectations for responsible management, ensuring that the industry serves the community's long-term interests.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes several contributions to the literature on post-pandemic tourism recovery and sustainable community development. First, it fills a gap in existing research by focusing on the perspectives of local host communities during the COVID-19 crisis, an aspect that has been underexamined in prior tourism studies. By centering on Phuket's residents, this research extends stakeholder theory into the context of a global health crisis and offers a bottom-up understanding of the "new normal" in tourism.

Beyond addressing this literature gap, the findings enrich theoretical discussions on resilience. The study reveals how a tourism-dependent community balances economic vulnerability with a growing awareness of sustainability. These insights illustrate that local communities are not passive victims of external shocks but active agents who adjust their values and behaviors in response to crisis. Methodologically, the use of semi-structured interviews demonstrates the value of community-centered approaches for uncovering complex social dynamics during unprecedented events.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings translate into concrete recommendations for policymakers, tourism authorities, and community organizations.

Local government authorities are encouraged to strengthen support systems that help residents adapt to the post-pandemic landscape. This involves incorporating community feedback into policy decisions and investing in programs that bolster socio-economic resilience. Integrating health safety protocols remains essential; public agencies should maintain clear guidelines and sanitation infrastructure to protect both residents and visitors, thereby sustaining public confidence in the tourism sector.

Tourism management organizations and industry stakeholders should proactively promote responsible tourism. This includes collaborating with local communities to co-create products that emphasize sustainability and cultural respect. Certification schemes for businesses regarding waste reduction and energy efficiency can help prevent a return to unsustainable mass tourism. Furthermore, tourism agencies should facilitate digital innovation to diversify offerings and build a more resilient economy.

Grassroots community organizations, such as village councils and local cooperatives, should be empowered and included in decision-making processes. Establishing collaboration platforms ensures that local voices shape the direction of development. Community leaders can also initiate workshops to improve skills in hospitality and digital marketing, while organizing environmental conservation activities to protect the resources upon which tourism depends.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has inherent limitations, including a qualitative design and a relatively small sample size of 19 residents, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The snowball sampling method, while effective for building trust, may have introduced selection bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional data collected in 2022 provides a snapshot that may not capture long-term structural changes.

Future research should consider a mixed-methods approach with a quantitative component to enhance the breadth of the results. Survey-based studies with larger, more diverse samples across different regions would help generalize the patterns observed in Phuket. It is also recommended to incorporate the perspectives of a wider range of stakeholders, including international tourists and policymakers. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable to explore the long-term effects of community participation on sustainable tourism outcomes in the "new normal."

5.4. Summary

The study provides a holistic and human-centered view of sustainable tourism development. The case of Phuket underscores that successful recovery is not merely about restoring visitor numbers, but about enhancing community resilience and committing to a balanced growth path. The adaptive responses and forward-looking attitudes observed among residents illustrate a community prepared to champion a more sustainable model. Ultimately, tourism development in the post-pandemic era must evolve beyond traditional frameworks to align deeply with the needs and values of host communities.

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