

METAPHORS IN TOURISM PROMOTION: A CASE STUDY OF A THAI VILLAGE AND THE BEEHIVE CONCEPT

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Abstract: Metaphors are effective tools in tourism promotion, simplifying complex local features for tourists to appreciate. Sustainable tourism, by encouraging responsible habits, allows travelers to engage in environmental conservation while immersing themselves in local cultures. In this context, the primary aim of the research was to seek ways of promoting the unique features of Ban Nong Bua, a Thai village, while addressing global sustainability issues. A further aim was to develop educational material that would make sustainability attractive to local young children and familiarize them with local sustainability practices. During an 8-day stay, a multicultural team conducted action research through observations, interviews and interactions with local people with a focus on sustainable livelihood and tourism promotion. The fieldwork was complemented by regular brainstorming sessions, during which the concepts and plans that led to the final research product were developed based on the material collected and personal experience. The result of the research is the beehive metaphor as a conceptual framework that highlights the harmony and sustainable practices of the local community. The further result of the research is the creation of a booklet for both tourists and local children. On one hand, for tourists, the booklet provides an engaging introduction to the seaside village of Ban Nong Bua, enhancing its appeal as a sustainable destination. It is a complex metaphor that represents the way of life of the inhabitants of the settlement on several levels, such as the close relationship with water, the use of local resources, the division of labor, the high degree of social organization, cohesion and connectedness, or dancing as a specific manifestation of communication. Bees can also be seen as a symbol of sustainability. On the other hand, for local children, it serves as an English language educational tool, fostering an appreciation of sustainable practices through an interactive format. Although the short-term impact of the booklet cannot be measured, the research illustrates how tools such as metaphors can achieve multiple goals in sustainable tourism and sustainability education. The research promotes cross-cultural understanding, supports community sustainability and demonstrates the value of metaphor in tourism promotion. Future research could further explore the use of metaphors in tourism marketing and sustainability education.

Keywords: action research, metaphors, sustainable tourism, tourism promotion, sustainability education

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INTRODUCTION

Travel is an integral part of our lives; it not only brings joy and a sense of accomplishment but also broadens our horizons. Nowadays, tourists' interests are shifting towards in-depth experiences (Mihelj, 2010) to gain a better understanding of local lifestyles and to appreciate diverse cultures and values. To effectively promote such rich and varied experiences, metaphors serve as powerful tools in attracting the interest of tourists. McQuarrie & Mick (1996) noted that “[a]dvertisements often make use of metaphors.” Similarly, Semino (2008) claims that metaphors in advertising discourse are used “as attention-grabbing devices.” Furthermore, metaphors play a crucial role in communication.

As tourist destinations compete to attract visitors, their success depends significantly on their regional competitiveness, shaped by their unique attractiveness characteristics (Cracolici & Nijkamp, 2009). However, as Morgan & Pritchard (2012) point out, the increasing number of accessible tourist destinations has diluted established destination identities, with many relying on similar imagery such as blue seas and golden beaches. To stand out, it is crucial for destinations to project a unique identity (Morgan & Pritchard, 2012). This is where sustainability has emerged as a vital promotional tool, not only enhancing a destination's appeal but also encouraging responsible tourism practices. To explore how metaphors can effectively promote sustainable tourism, this study focuses on the Thai village of Ban Nong Bua, located in the south of Hua Hin with a population of 1,752 people. Ban Nong Bua is a vibrant village where agriculture, fishing, and tourism are the main sectors of the local economy. Farmers use organic fertilizer on their farms to protect the food consumed by the villagers. The ocean, in particular, plays a vital role in this village, supporting the livelihood of 16 fishing families and attracting around 200,000 tourists annually. In response to environmental challenges, the community has initiated sustainability projects, such as beach clean-ups, to keep the cleanliness of the beaches. These efforts highlight the

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villagers' commitment to maintaining a sustainable lifestyle, not only to protect their environment but also to ensure the continued success of their tourism industry, which is essential to their economic stability. During an eight-day stay in the village, a group of university lecturers, undergraduate students and tourism professionals took part in action research focusing on sustainability. One dedicated research circle collected the unique features of the village and sought to address these issues through the use of metaphors. Specifically, the metaphor of a beehive was found as a concept that encapsulates the harmony, commitment, and cooperation experienced within the community. This metaphor was then used to compile a booklet aimed at helping tourists understand and remember the unique charm of Ban Nong Bua.

The booklet also emphasizes the cultural identity and community spirit of the villagers and highlights their efforts to live sustainably. Beyond tourism promotion, the booklet also serves an educational purpose, particularly for the village's children. Tobing (2018) emphasizes that understanding metaphors is a systematic thinking process, which can be a highly useful exercise in primary education. By illustrating the parallels between a beehive's organization and human society, the booklet aims to teach children about sustainability and environmental stewardship, encouraging them to appreciate cultural heritage and contribute meaningfully to their community.

The purpose of this study is to discuss how metaphors can effectively promote tourism while simultaneously serving as an educational tool for sustainability awareness. Specifically, through the development and application of a booklet (a chosen promotion media), the study aims to enhance the understanding and appeal of Ban Nong Bua to potential tourists while supporting sustainability education within the community.

To achieve this goal, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How can metaphors be applied as a communication tool to enhance tourism promotion and destination branding?
2. What is the role of the beehive metaphor in reinforcing sustainable tourism concepts among visitors?
3. How can metaphor-based tourism materials contribute to sustainability education for local communities?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The role of metaphors in tourism

Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 5) argued in their book *Metaphor We Live By* that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.” People employ metaphorical language not just to convey metaphorical meaning, but to concretely achieve various social, pragmatic goals (Gibbs, 2023). In the field of tourism, metaphors help to visualize experiences, making them more concrete and appealing to potential tourists. This approach is particularly effective in tourism advertising, where metaphorical language can foster a stronger intention to visit a destination compared to straightforward promotional methods (Yang et al., 2024).

Jaworska (2017) discusses Dann's (1996) view that one of the main reasons for the increased use of this kind of figurative language is its ability to reduce what he calls the effect of strangeness by turning an unfamiliar phenomenon into something familiar and recognizable. Metaphors can evoke emotions and create vivid mental images, which are often automatically activated, enhancing the impact of creative metaphors (Carston, 2018). They also carry immense persuasive potential, often deliberately exploited by marketers to influence people's thinking and actions (Jaworska, 2017).

Metaphors are frequently employed in the marketing and promotion of tropical tourist destinations. A common example is the use of the word "Paradise" to describe tropical islands. Dewi (2016) explores this phenomenon in her study on tourism promotion materials from Sumedang, Indonesia. Her research identifies various types of metaphors used in this context, including phrases like "foot of the mountain" and "hot springs," which are categorized as dead metaphors according to Newmark's (1988) classification. These metaphors, which utilize human body parts, enhance promotional messages by making the destination's physical features more relatable and attractive to tourists. Additionally, Dewi highlights the use of standard metaphors such as "clusters of large rocks" to describe the mountain's landscape, further drawing tourists to the area. Likewise, Wijanarto (2020) investigates the use of metaphorical expressions in an article about Raja Ampat on the Indonesia.travel website. The study identifies 13 metaphorical expressions used to describe Raja Ampat, creating vivid imagery and emotional connections for potential travelers. For example, “living library” is used to describe the diverse marine life and coral reefs in Raja Ampat as a library, indicating that there is a wealth of knowledge and beauty to explore beneath the water. And “meeting list” refers to the variety of fish species, which suggests that encountering these marine creatures is akin to checking off items on a list, making the experience of visiting Raja Ampat feel organized and fulfilling. By employing these metaphors, the article effectively brings the destination closer to travelers, especially those living in urban environments, making it more relatable and enticing.

Similarly, recent research on rural tourism marketing in Indonesia suggests that the combination of natural and cultural attractions plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions of authenticity (Firstianto et al., 2024). The study highlights that nature-based tourism remains a dominant attraction, while cultural experiences further enhance the appeal of rural destinations. This aligns with the idea that metaphors in tourism promotion often capitalize on authenticity and a deep connection with nature, reinforcing the emotional and experiential aspects of rural tourism. According to the study by Muhammad & Rashid (2014: 336), “[t]he animal kingdom is a source domain that can provide rich metaphorical expressions, possibly due to the close relationship between humans and animals since ancient times”. For example, lions and bulls are commonly used to represent courage and strength (Rodriguez, 2009). In the metaphor used in this research the source domain is the beehive, and the target domain is the village, so the metaphor is: VILLAGE IS BEEHIVE.

Sustainability tourism and sustainable tourism marketing

Sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and

environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities (Burgoyne & Mearns, 2019). The evolution of sustainable tourism can be traced back to the late 1980s, with increasing recognition of its importance in tourism policy and practice (Guo et al., 2019). This approach aims to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of cultural and natural resources, ensuring that tourism development is possible in the long term (Štreimikienė et al., 2020). Recent studies emphasize that sustainable tourism development must consider various dimensions, including environmental conservation, social responsibility, and economic viability (Kumari & Thakur, 2023).

Sustainable tourism marketing plays a vital role in promoting these practices by raising awareness among consumers and encouraging responsible travel behaviors. Sustainable marketing strategies focus on building relationships with loyal customers while emphasizing the importance of sustainability in tourism activities (Li, 2024). Research indicates that sustainable tourism certification programs can significantly enhance the sustainability performance of tourism operators, improve their reputation, and create new business opportunities (Bozdaglar, 2023). This highlights the potential for sustainable marketing to not only promote responsible tourism but also drive economic benefits for businesses.

The rise of digital marketing and social media has transformed the landscape of sustainable tourism marketing. These platforms provide opportunities for tourism businesses to engage with consumers, share their sustainability efforts, and influence traveler behavior (Li et al., 2023). Studies have shown that travelers are increasingly seeking sustainable options and are willing to support businesses that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability (Sangkhaduang et al., 2021). The concept of Sustainable Destination Preference (SDP) has become a key determinant of traveler behavior (Musa et al., 2024). It reflects the increasing tendency of travelers to favor destinations that exhibit strong commitments to environmental stewardship, cultural sensitivity, and socioeconomic responsibility (Grandi, 2023). This shift in consumer preferences necessitates that tourism marketers adapt their strategies to highlight sustainable practices and foster a culture of responsible tourism. In addition to marketing strategies, education and awareness-raising actions are essential for promoting sustainable tourism. Educational programs can equip both tourists and industry stakeholders with the knowledge and skills needed to engage in sustainable practices (Adams & Sanchez, 2020).

For example, tourism education can help mitigate issues such as overtourism by fostering a deeper understanding of the impacts of tourism and the importance of sustainability (Sharpley, 2020). Furthermore, community-based tourism initiatives can empower local populations, allowing them to take an active role in tourism development while preserving their cultural heritage and natural resources (Giampiccoli et al., 2020). Furthermore, the tourism industry must address issues such as environmental degradation, social inequities, and the impacts of climate change on tourism destinations (Dzyad et al., 2020). As the industry continues to evolve, ongoing research and collaboration among stakeholders will be essential to develop innovative solutions that promote sustainable tourism and enhance the overall visitor experience.

Although existing literature often emphasizes the marketing-driven demand for sustainable tourism, it lacks a thorough analysis of how local communities actively shape their sustainability narratives through education. Therefore, one of the main research aims of our paper is to identify practical examples of how tourism and education can be seamlessly integrated, while promoting sustainable tourism and fostering sustainability education at the same time.

Additionally, despite the growing role of digital marketing in sustainable tourism (Sangkhaduang et al., 2021), there is limited research on how small communities without a strong digital presence can leverage alternative promotional strategies. This study contributes to bridging this gap by examining how metaphorical storytelling in a rural context can serve as both a tourism promotion tool and an educational medium for sustainability awareness.

Innovative model and action research

A case study on the Ulytau State National Nature Park in Kazakhstan highlights the importance of innovative management models in balancing cultural heritage preservation and tourism growth (Seidualin et al., 2024). In the study, the author demonstrates how integrating cultural narratives into branding strategies—such as the ethno-aul concept—can enhance destination authenticity and visitor engagement. On the other hand, metaphor-based branding, as explored in this study, serves as an alternative innovative approach by shaping how tourists perceive and interact with a destination's identity. Furthermore, the study also stated that sustainable tourism development relies on collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, businesses, and researchers (Seidualin et al., 2024). This aligns with the action research methodology adopted in our research, where participants from multiple countries engage directly with local stakeholders to co-develop tourism promotion strategies. By embedding community values into metaphorical storytelling, this research seeks to contribute to both sustainable tourism branding and educational outreach, reinforcing the role of participatory approaches in destination marketing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this research, the research team adopted the method of action research. Reason & Bradbury (2008: 4) define it as “a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (as cited in O’Leary & Coghlan, 2022: 238).

O’Leary & Coghlan (2022) noted that action research values practical knowing, involves stakeholder participation, and acknowledges context and complexity, making it an ideal approach at the regional level. This view is supported by Fricke and Hofmaier (1996). From O’Leary and Coghlan’s study, it can be concluded that the collaborative nature of action research helps bridge the gap between theoretical ideals and practical realities.

A group of university lecturers, undergraduate students and professionals all interested in sustainability and community development spent eight days in the village of Ban Nong Bua, actively engaging with the community. During the stay, the members of the group interviewed the mayor and fishermen, visited local farms, led activities for children at the local primary school, participated in locally held meditation and massage workshops, and conversed with local villagers and tourists from other parts of Thailand. These activities fostered active participation and collaboration with stakeholders to generate actionable knowledge. Based on the special interests of the participants, right at the beginning several research teams were formed. The team consisting of the authors of this paper and creators of the educational booklet focused on the educational aspects of sustainability as it is related to tourism and the local community. To progress with the research, the team held regular brainstorming sessions and sought symbols and concepts that best represented the village, ultimately arriving at the idea of a beehive. This metaphor reflects the co-construction of knowledge and the instigation of actions to address local issues. With this metaphor in mind, the participants considered ways to enhance tourism promotion, decided on the appropriate promotional media, and chose to create a booklet, demonstrating the practical application of knowledge generated through action research.

This process is participatory, reflective, and aimed at creating positive change, embodying the key elements of action research. The flowchart below Figure 1 shows the steps taken by the research team to carry out the action research.

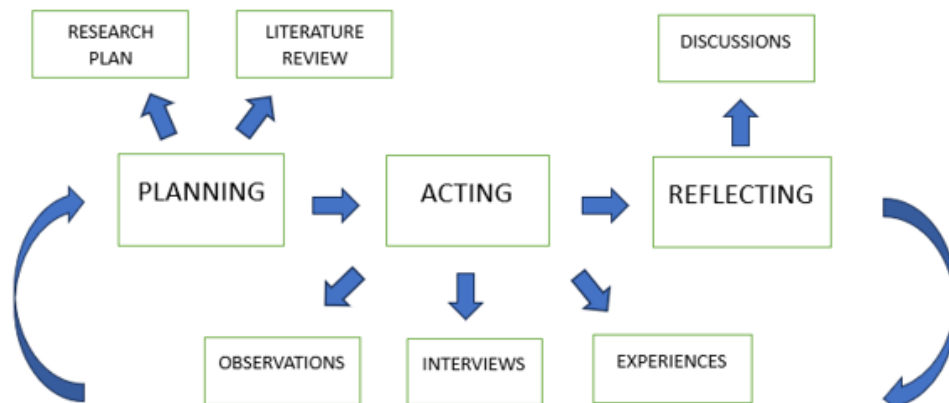


Figure 1. Flow chart of the methodology (Source: created by the authors)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The beehive metaphor for the village is rooted in the numerous similarities between the two, which makes it a comprehensive, expanded trope having a strong explanatory and illustrative power. Like a beehive, the village thrives on cooperation, unity, and a strong sense of community. The villagers resemble a large family, where everyone knows each other and maintains close relationships. In fact, they all came from the same ancestor.

Additionally, the villagers are committed to supporting their local economy. The mayor's resort, for example, uses ingredients from nearby farms and sells locally produced goods, reflecting how bees gather nectar from their surroundings to sustain their hive. This kind of act also achieves sustainability.

Much like bees that always return to their hive, the villagers rarely leave the community. If they do, they often return, bringing back knowledge and skills, as exemplified by the mayor, who studied abroad and returned to help his village.

Just as bees have distinct roles—such as queens, drones, and worker bees—every villager has a specific role that contributes to the community's success. The people here mostly grow crops and fish for a living. For tourism, some provide beach resorts, restaurants, and massage services. And the mayor, like a queen bee, oversees and guides the village.

Community support is a core value in Ban Nong Bua, where villagers regularly visit and assist the elderly, monitoring their health and living conditions, much like the nursing bees that care for their hive. They also engage in spiritual practices, such as giving alms to monks, which adds a layer of spiritual nourishment to their communal life.

In terms of communication, bees perform dances to convey information to one another. In Ban Nong Bua, the villagers' favorite free-time activity is dancing aerobics, which strengthens their bonds and fosters a sense of togetherness. These late afternoon dance sessions communicate their unity without words as the participants perform the same movements.

Water, an essential resource for both villagers and bees, plays a vital role in sustaining life. The ocean supports Ban Nong Bua's fishing industry and tourism, just as water is indispensable to bees for hydration, cooling their hives, softening nectar, and feeding their larvae. On the other hand, honey, which is a primary product of bees, symbolizes sweetness and nourishment. Similarly, the village's warm, inviting atmosphere embodies these qualities, making it an attractive destination for visitors. As the ultimate promotional media aimed at both tourists and local schools, the booklet is designed to be both informative and educational. It uses clear, straightforward language and incorporates rhymes, much like a children's storybook, to make the content engaging and enjoyable.

For instance, "Welcome to Ban Nong Bua, our place so grand, together we thrive in this beautiful land". The booklet features illustrations and additional information to help readers connect with the beehive metaphor and better understand the unique qualities of the village. In this paper most illustrations are AI-generated, but the ultimate goal is to make this booklet a work of art. The research team had an art student member who has already started painting the scenes for the booklet pages. Figure 2 shows a painting depicting one of Ban Nong Bua's beaches with fishing boats.



Figure 2. Fishing boats and bees in Ban Nong Bua, Khao Kalok Beach
(Source: painting by Dorina Lehdorfer, 2024, with the permission of the author)

The booklet includes several special design elements. For example, the lotus is used for numbering the pages, symbolizing the village's past when lotuses were abundant a hundred years ago. Another feature is that bees are the main characters instead of humans, since it is more neutral to draw animals to avoid stereotypes.

The booklet consists of eight pages, each highlighting a distinctive feature of the village: “One Big Family”, “A Convergent Community”, “A Caring Community”, “A Helping Community”, “A Happy and Fit Community”, “A Spiritual Community”, “A Water Community” and “A Sustainable Community.” Each page introduces a bee character that shares factual information about the village. The names appearing next to the bees are the names of the children that we collected in the local primary school. For children, seeing familiar names helps them feel a stronger connection to the story, enhancing their learning experience about bees and sustainability in an engaging way. For tourists unfamiliar with the local language, the inclusion of the visually appealing Thai words adds an aesthetic and cultural element, allowing tourists to “get a taste of the language.” Figures 3 and 4 show two pages as examples.

The topic of the page in Figure 3 is “Sustainable Community”. The illustration of this page would be three bees happily eating locally-grown potatoes, mangoes, and other foods. The accompanying text would read: “We farm and eat what’s fresh and sweet, sustainable living, what a treat!” In the corner, a bee figure would explain, “We mostly consume local products, achieving sustainability. We serve food using ingredients from nearby farms and sell products from the neighborhood. See the snacks on the table? Buy a package!”



Figure 3. The page illustrating “Sustainable Community” (Source: AI generated illustration based on the authors’ ideas)

Another topic is “Caring Community” depicted in Figure 4. The illustration of this page would be several bees doing their daily tasks, some fishing, some farming, and some giving massages. The accompanying text would read: “We

contribute to society in every way, like bees who work in a busy array.” In the corner, a bee figure would explain, “We mostly grow crops and fish for a living. For tourists, we provide beach resorts, restaurants, and massage services.” This gives the tourist a concept of how the local economic system works.



Figure 4. The page illustrating “Caring Community” (Source: AI generated illustration based on the authors’ ideas)

The cover page (Figure 5) will display a giant beehive beside the beach with the title “Our Beehive,” emphasizing again the importance of the ocean to the village. The booklet will also include an interactive page (Figure 6) at the end, featuring elements of color and counting to help teachers lead educational activities with the children.



Figure 5. The cover page (Source: AI generated illustration based on the authors’ ideas)



Figure 6. The interactive page (Source: painting by Dorina Lehdorfer, 2024, with the permission of the author)

On the back cover, a map of the village will be included, highlighting recommended restaurants, hotels, and tourist attractions. This reinforces the tourism promotion theme while showing visitors that the village offers not only beautiful beaches but also a variety of fresh experiences and attractions to explore.

So far, the authors have developed the main content, booklet format, illustration concepts, and gathered the names of the village children. The next step is to finish the illustrations. Once completed, the booklet will be published online in line with the sustainable concept. Tourists will be able to access it through a QR code available at the mayor’s resort and local hotel receptions. Additionally, the code will be shared with teachers at the local primary school. With simple, rhyming words, the booklet will also help children learn English easily. Eventually, the authors hope it will become a project that intertwines sustainability, tourism promotion, and education.

Metaphors as a communication tool to enhance tourism promotion and destination branding

The beehive metaphor captures the essence of Ban Nong Bua’s communal life, serving as a powerful tool in promoting the village as a unique and appealing destination. By linking the village’s social structure and environment to the familiar and positive imagery of a beehive, the metaphor effectively bridges the gap between the local culture and tourists’ perceptions. By focusing on cooperation, unity, and a deep connection to the local environment, the metaphor not only attracts visitors but also encourages them to engage more deeply with the village’s way of life. As highlighted in the 2021 research by Isakova et al. (2021), tourism acts as a powerful stimulus for cross-cultural communication. By promoting positive cultural images through educational and tourist brochures, these texts facilitate better understanding and appreciation of various cultures and traditions, thereby enhancing cross-cultural awareness.

The role of the beehive metaphor in reinforcing sustainable tourism concepts among visitors

The principles of sustainable tourism are illustrated through the booklet utilizing the beehive metaphor. By embracing environmental, social, and ethical economic practices, both the host community and visitors can derive mutual benefits. The objective is to highlight sustainable tourism practices, inspire visitors to adopt a new lifestyle during their stay in Ban Nong Bua, and ultimately equip them with the knowledge necessary to integrate sustainability into all aspects of their visit.

The booklet itself embodies sustainability by being available in a digital format, accessible through a QR code that allows tourists to view the content on their smart devices instead of using printed materials. As Happ stated, “the use of the smartphone as a marketing tool cannot be ignored in today's marketing activities” (Happ, 2013: 8). By eliminating the use of paper, this eco-friendly approach reduces distribution costs, enhances accessibility, and minimizes environmental impact. Additionally, it functions as an educational resource, raising awareness about responsible travel behaviors and the importance of sustainable practices—both essential for fostering a culture of responsible tourism.

Metaphor-based tourism materials contribute to sustainability education for local communities

The beehive metaphor transcends its promotional function by serving as an effective educational tool for the local community. The booklet, structured around this metaphor, is specifically designed to engage local children by presenting sustainability concepts in a relatable and interactive manner. By incorporating familiar elements—such as the names of local schoolchildren and culturally relevant symbols—the material not only simplifies complex ideas like environmental stewardship and sustainable practices but also instills a sense of pride and responsibility among the younger generation.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the significant role that metaphors can play in tourism promotion, particularly in capturing and conveying the unique cultural and environmental aspects of a destination. The beehive metaphor, representing the village of Ban Nong Bua, successfully captures the essence of its lifestyle and sustainable practices, making it more accessible and attractive to potential tourists. Moreover, this metaphor serves a dual purpose by not only enhancing tourism promotion but also contributing to sustainable education for local children. Furthermore, sustainability itself can serve as a competitive advantage to distinguish the destination from other places, and a sustainable tourism approach can not only raise stakeholders' awareness of the environment but encourage responsible tourists' behaviors and deeper engagement with the local community. The action research approach employed in this study highlights how sustainability can be addressed through simple yet impactful tools, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted applications of metaphors in tourism.

However, a key limitation of this research is that the long-term impact of the beehive metaphor on tourist engagement and community development cannot be fully assessed at this stage. The outcomes of the booklet and its influence on both tourists and the local community will require further observation and analysis over time.

Future research should focus on quantitatively and qualitatively measuring the impact of metaphorical frameworks like the beehive on tourist behavior and community dynamics. Additionally, exploring the broader application of such metaphors in global tourism marketing strategies could uncover new ways to promote destinations with distinct cultural and environmental characteristics. The potential for metaphorical thinking to enhance sustainability education, both within and beyond the context of tourism, presents another promising avenue for further investigation.

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