

Living with Overtourism: Community Narratives of Cultural, Environmental, and Social Change in Bali, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Overtourism has become a pressing concern in Bali, where rapid tourist growth has generated cultural, environmental, and social tensions. While much of the literature emphasizes visitor management and economic implications, less is known about how local residents themselves interpret and respond to these dynamics. This qualitative study explores community narratives of overtourism in three high-density tourism areas: Ubud, Kuta, and Canggu. Using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with residents, cultural practitioners, and community leaders, the research examines how everyday life is shaped by issues of crowding, cultural commodification, environmental stress, and shifting power relations between locals and external actors. Thematic analysis reveals that residents perceive overtourism not only as a source of economic opportunity but also as a threat to cultural integrity, social cohesion, and ecological sustainability. At the same time, communities articulate diverse coping strategies, ranging from informal regulation of tourist behaviors to the reinvention of local practices for new markets. The findings contribute to critical debates on sustainable tourism by foregrounding community perspectives, offering nuanced insights into how overtourism is lived, contested, and negotiated in a major Southeast Asian destination.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been central to Bali's economy and cultural identity, positioning the island as one of the most visited destinations in Southeast Asia. However, the rapid growth of international arrivals, which exceeded six million before the COVID-19 pandemic, has intensified pressures on local communities and ecosystems (S. Cole & Browne, 2015). This phenomenon, commonly described as "overtourism," refers to the excessive concentration of tourists in ways that degrade the environment, overwhelm infrastructure, and disrupt social and cultural life (Milano et al., 2019). In Bali, issues such as traffic congestion, waste mismanagement, water scarcity, and cultural commodification have increasingly raised concerns among residents (Hitchcock & Putra, 2007).

While economic analyses and policy reports have emphasized the costs of overtourism, there has been comparatively less focus on the lived experiences of communities who navigate these changes daily. Most existing studies highlight tourism impacts through macro-level indicators such as visitor numbers, environmental degradation metrics, or destination carrying capacity. Yet these perspectives often overlook the voices of local residents, whose narratives reveal complex negotiations of both benefits and burdens (Diaz-Parra & Jover, 2021). Understanding overtourism from a community perspective is critical for developing sustainable responses that are socially legitimate and culturally sensitive.

Community narratives provide a valuable lens to examine overtourism, as they reflect the ways in which individuals make sense of structural changes in their environments. By focusing on narratives, this study foregrounds the meanings residents attach to issues of crowding, cultural authenticity, and environmental stress. This approach aligns with critical tourism studies that advocate shifting the gaze from visitor satisfaction to the social reproduction of destinations and the everyday lives of host communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). In the Balinese context, where tourism is deeply intertwined with cultural rituals and social relations, narratives are particularly illuminating in capturing tensions between tradition, livelihood, and global tourism markets.

This study investigates how communities in Ubud, Kuta, and Canggu articulate their experiences of overtourism. These three sites represent distinct but interconnected tourism zones: Ubud as a cultural hub, Kuta as a mass tourism center, and Canggu as an emerging hotspot for digital nomads and lifestyle tourism. By employing qualitative methods,

including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the study seeks to document the perspectives of residents, cultural practitioners, and local leaders. The focus is not only on identifying challenges but also on uncovering the coping strategies and adaptive practices that communities develop to navigate overtourism.

The study contributes to the growing body of overtourism literature by centering community perspectives from the Global South, which remain underrepresented in tourism scholarship (Tham, 2018). By analyzing the narratives of Balinese residents, it provides nuanced insights into how overtourism is experienced, contested, and negotiated in everyday life. These findings aim to inform more inclusive policy discussions on sustainable tourism management in Indonesia and comparable destinations. Ultimately, the research underscores the need to move beyond quantitative indicators of overcrowding toward a deeper understanding of how communities live with and respond to overtourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism scholarship increasingly conceptualizes overtourism as a place-specific social and ecological condition that emerges when visitation growth undermines residents' quality of life and destination integrity. Foundational synthetic work traces the genealogy of the term and its affinities with tourismphobia and urban contestation, while insisting that overtourism is multi-scalar, historically embedded, and entangled with growth-oriented governance models that externalize social and environmental costs (Milano et al., 2019; Tham, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). These accounts argue that managerial fixes that focus only on visitor numbers or carrying capacity risk depoliticizing structural drivers such as financialization of land, platformization of accommodation, and uneven power between state, industry, and communities. At the same time, critical tourism studies call for re-centring social justice and community well-being as normative anchors for post-growth tourism futures, a position that gained traction during and after COVID-19 (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

Resident-centred research provides the principal empirical lens for evaluating overtourism, drawing on a robust tradition that links perceived benefits and costs to community support for tourism through social exchange mechanisms. Classical models show that perceptions of economic gain, place image, and life satisfaction shape support, while distance from hotspots and experience of externalities influence perceived costs (Ap, 1992; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011; Styliadis et al., 2014; Woo et al., 2013). Recent reviews and updates emphasize that residents are not passive recipients but active agents who adopt coping strategies, mobilize collective action, and negotiate ambivalence toward tourism's mixed outcomes, especially in crisis periods. This literature strengthens the methodological case for qualitative inquiry that can capture meanings, ambivalences, and everyday practices that elude survey instruments in high-pressure destinations.

In Bali, research documents how tourism growth intersects with water scarcity, land conversion, overcrowding, and cultural commodification, making the island a paradigmatic Global South case of overtourism pressures. Human-ecological analyses of the tourism–water nexus show structural inequities in access and governance, with tourism infrastructure deepening stress on shared resources and amplifying conflicts with agricultural systems like Subak (S. Cole & Browne, 2015). Impact-oriented scholarship further illustrates how engaged research catalyzed public discourse and policy debates on Bali's water crisis, evidencing the value of praxis-oriented knowledge in politically charged tourism spaces (S. W. Cole, 2014). Emerging resident studies in Bali's urban and peri-urban hotspots, including Ubud and Canggu, report growing sensitivity to noise, crowding, and perceived loss of cultural order, while also noting differentiated attitudes conditioned by livelihood dependence and exposure to externalities (Suyadnya et al., 2025). Taken together, these works justify a qualitative, community-narratives approach that can surface how Balinese residents interpret and act within the contradictions of tourism-led development.

Beyond local socioecologies, broader sustainability and climate scholarship underscores that destinations like Bali confront compounding risks from climate change, extreme weather, and infrastructural vulnerability that intensify overtourism dynamics. Global and sectoral assessments identify tourism's exposure to water stress, flooding, and heat, and call for preparedness and transformative mitigation that moves beyond incremental efficiency measures (Gössling et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2019). The pandemic literature similarly reframed debates about degrowth and quality tourism, opening discursive space for demand management, new social contracts, and resident-first governance, which aligns with calls from overtourism research for redistributive and participatory approaches (Gössling et al., 2021). These strands strengthen the case for examining how

communities narrate environmental stressors alongside social and cultural change, and how they envision alternative trajectories for destination governance.

Methodologically, qualitative designs are well suited to advance theory on overtourism's lived complexity in Bali's distinct zones. Thick description and narrative analysis can capture how residents articulate trade-offs between income, rituals, spatial order, and ecological stewardship across Ubud's culture-led economy, Kuta's mass tourism, and Canggu's platform-mediated lifestyle scenes. While managerial literatures often privilege indicator dashboards and carrying capacity estimates, leading syntheses warn that indicators without voice can obscure distributive conflicts and everyday burden shifting from visitors to residents (Milano et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). A community-narratives approach can therefore contribute conceptual refinement by linking resident meanings to governance debates about taxation, zoning, and behavior regulation, while also illuminating adaptive practices on the ground. Such an approach is consistent with the latest resident attitude reviews and aligns with Bali-specific socioecological evidence on water, land, and cultural governance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate how communities in Bali narrate and negotiate their experiences of overtourism. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for this research because it prioritizes depth, context, and meaning rather than numerical generalization. The focus is on understanding the lived realities of residents and the ways in which they interpret cultural, social, and environmental pressures generated by high levels of tourism activity. Narrative and thematic analyses are chosen to explore both the individual stories and the collective patterns that emerge from local accounts.

Fieldwork will be conducted in three key locations in Bali, namely Ubud, Kuta, and Canggu. These areas were selected because they represent distinct forms of tourism development. Ubud is primarily recognized for cultural and spiritual tourism, Kuta is associated with mass tourism and its infrastructural burdens, and Canggu has rapidly developed as a hub for digital nomads and lifestyle-oriented tourism. Together, these locations offer a comprehensive picture of how overtourism manifests across different socio-spatial settings.

Participants will include residents, cultural practitioners such as artists and temple caretakers, individuals directly employed in the tourism sector such as guides and homestay owners, and community leaders including customary village authorities. A purposive sampling strategy will be used to capture diversity in occupation, age, gender, and tourism dependence, complemented by snowball sampling to reach participants who may otherwise be inaccessible. It is anticipated that between forty and fifty individuals will participate in interviews and focus group discussions, ensuring a rich and varied dataset.

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Interviews, lasting approximately one to one and a half hours, will elicit detailed personal accounts of how overtourism is perceived and experienced. Focus groups with six to eight participants each will be used to capture collective perspectives and to allow discussion of contested issues. Participant observation in rituals, tourism encounters, and public meetings will provide contextual insights into the interplay between tourism and everyday life. All interactions will be conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or Balinese depending on participant preference, audio recorded with informed consent and complemented by field notes.

The data will be analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework of iterative coding, theme development, and interpretation. NVivo software will assist in managing transcripts and codes. In addition to thematic analysis, narrative approaches will be applied to trace how residents construct stories of change, resilience, and adaptation in the face of overtourism. Triangulation between interviews, group discussions, and observations will enhance the credibility of findings. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking with participants and peer debriefing with academic colleagues will be undertaken. Ethical approval will be secured from an accredited institutional review board. Participants will be guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage will be respected. A reflexive journal will be maintained to account for the positionality of the researcher throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Everyday Life under Overtourism

Residents across Ubud, Kuta, and Canggu consistently described how overtourism has altered the rhythms of daily life. Accounts reveal that the most immediate and tangible impacts are linked to mobility, space, and cost of living. Traffic congestion was frequently cited as a daily burden, with participants emphasizing how short journeys between villages or markets now require significantly more time due to tourist buses, private cars, and motorcycles. For some, this disruption is framed as a minor inconvenience that has become normalized over years of exposure, yet others articulated a sense of frustration and powerlessness. One Ubud resident expressed that “the roads belong more to visitors than to us,” highlighting perceptions of displacement in the everyday use of space.

In addition to mobility, rising costs of basic goods and housing were described as another dimension of pressure. Long-term residents in Canggu, for example, noted that the influx of digital nomads and expatriates has driven up rental prices, pushing some local families to relocate further inland. This dynamic reflects what participants perceive as an uneven distribution of benefits: while property owners may profit, those without landholdings experience heightened precarity. Several participants used the term “double burden” to capture the paradox of being economically dependent on tourism while simultaneously struggling with its costs.

The narratives also pointed to subtle transformations in social interactions. In Kuta, residents described how crowded public spaces have reduced opportunities for community gatherings, as temples and beaches are frequently occupied by large numbers of tourists. Younger participants expressed ambivalence: some appreciated exposure to global cultures and employment opportunities, while others lamented the erosion of a sense of neighborhood intimacy. These accounts suggest that overtourism is not experienced as a uniform hardship but as a complex negotiation between opportunity and disruption.

Taken together, these stories underscore that overtourism in Bali is lived most acutely through the mundane dimensions of everyday life. The themes of mobility, affordability, and social belonging recur across sites, revealing a shared sense that tourism has become a structuring force in local existence. These narratives highlight the importance of considering not only macro-level indicators of visitor growth but also the embodied experiences of residents whose daily practices are reshaped by the presence of mass tourism.

Culture, Environment, and Community Change

Beyond the disruptions of everyday life, participants frequently reflected on how overtourism reshapes cultural practices, environmental resources, and the cohesion of community life. In Ubud, residents emphasized the ambivalence of cultural commodification. On the one hand, rituals, performances, and traditional arts attract global attention and generate economic value. On the other hand, many participants expressed concern that ceremonies once held primarily for religious devotion are increasingly staged for tourist consumption. One cultural practitioner noted that “we still pray, but now we also perform,” capturing the tension between maintaining spiritual authenticity and responding to market expectations. Such accounts illustrate how cultural identity becomes both a source of pride and a site of negotiation under tourism pressures.

Environmental concerns emerged as another recurring theme, particularly in Kuta and Canggu. Participants described challenges related to waste management, water scarcity, and coastal degradation. Several residents highlighted how tourism development has accelerated the conversion of rice fields into hotels and villas, leading to visible declines in agricultural land and water availability. Narratives of environmental stress were often interwoven with moral critiques of governance, with participants emphasizing the lack of accountability in regulating large-scale tourism infrastructure. For many, the ecological strain was not merely an abstract concern but a lived reality, especially for those whose households faced irregular water supplies or flooding linked to overdevelopment.

The impacts of overtourism were also seen to extend into the social fabric of communities. Residents noted that the influx of foreign visitors and investors has altered patterns of social interaction, with some communities experiencing weakened bonds due to commercialization and increased social stratification. In Canggu, participants described a growing distance between locals and expatriates, reinforced by rising costs and differentiated access to space. In contrast, some residents in Ubud saw tourism as providing opportunities to share cultural traditions with outsiders, which they framed as a form of cultural diplomacy. These contrasting

accounts illustrate that community change is not experienced uniformly but rather reflects diverse positions within the tourism economy.

Taken together, the narratives reveal that overtourism operates simultaneously on cultural, environmental, and social registers. Residents perceive their heritage and environment as both valuable assets and vulnerable resources, and they articulate ambivalence about the ways in which these domains are transformed by global tourism flows. The findings highlight that overtourism in Bali is not only about physical crowding but also about deeper shifts in meaning, belonging, and resource distribution within communities.

Local Responses and Coping Strategies

While residents often framed overtourism as disruptive, their narratives also revealed a range of coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies. These responses reflect both individual creativity and collective action, illustrating that communities are not passive recipients of tourism pressures but active agents navigating its complexities.

One recurrent theme was the informal regulation of tourist behavior. In Ubud, local leaders described how banjar committees occasionally set guidelines for appropriate conduct in temple spaces, such as dress codes or restrictions on photography. These community-led interventions were framed as necessary to preserve respect for sacred practices, especially when formal regulations were seen as weak or inconsistently enforced. Similarly, in Kuta, residents recounted how shop owners and vendors adjusted opening hours or diversified their offerings to accommodate fluctuations in tourist flows, thereby exerting some control over their engagement with mass tourism.

Another coping strategy involved the adaptation and reinvention of cultural practices for tourism markets. In several interviews, cultural practitioners explained that they consciously modified performances to appeal to international audiences while retaining core symbolic elements for community members. Although some expressed ambivalence about this commercialization, others emphasized its role in sustaining livelihoods and funding temple activities. These narratives highlight the dual function of cultural adaptation as both a protective and a pragmatic response to overtourism.

Participants also described forms of resistance and critique, ranging from community discussions about limiting villa construction to protests environmentally harmful developments. In Canggu, younger residents voiced concerns about the loss of agricultural land and used social media to campaign for more sustainable planning. Such accounts suggest that digital platforms are becoming spaces where local voices can challenge dominant narratives of tourism growth and advocate for alternative futures.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate that coping strategies are multifaceted, blending accommodation with subtle forms of resistance. While some responses seek to mitigate the most immediate disruptions, others reflect broader aspirations for reasserting community agency in shaping tourism development. These accounts underscore that the lived experience of overtourism in Bali is not only marked by loss and vulnerability but also by resilience, adaptation, and negotiation of power.

Implications

The findings of this study carry important implications for tourism scholarship, destination governance, and community-centered policy design. By foregrounding residents' narratives, the study extends overtourism debates beyond managerial approaches focused on visitor numbers and carrying capacity. The narratives of everyday disruption, cultural commodification, and coping strategies highlight that overtourism is fundamentally a social phenomenon rooted in contested meanings of place, culture, and belonging. This aligns with the argument that overtourism should be analyzed not only as a technical issue of overcrowding but also as a structural consequence of growth-oriented tourism models (Milano et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the need to integrate resident perspectives into overtourism research, a call echoed in recent reviews of community attitudes (Stylidis et al., 2014). While much scholarship has emphasized quantitative measurement of perceived impacts (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon (2011) and Woo et al. (2013), this study demonstrates the value of qualitative approaches for capturing ambivalence, emotion, and everyday strategies that are often invisible in survey-based work. In particular, narratives of

adaptation and resistance suggest that residents are not passive but negotiate agency within the constraints of tourism development, resonating with findings from other global destinations (Koens et al., 2018; Tham, 2018).

For policy and practice, the study underscores the urgency of designing governance mechanisms that respond to community concerns about cultural integrity, environmental sustainability, and social equity. Bali's residents identified waste management, water scarcity, and land conversion as pressing challenges, echoing broader evidence on tourism's ecological vulnerabilities (S. Cole & Browne, 2015; Scott et al., 2019). Addressing these issues requires integrated policies that regulate infrastructure expansion, incentivize low-impact tourism models, and strengthen accountability in land-use decisions. Importantly, the narratives show that top-down interventions may be insufficient without active community participation, supporting calls for participatory governance in tourism management (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

Another implication lies in recognizing tourism's dual role as both a source of economic opportunity and a driver of cultural and environmental vulnerability. The ambivalence expressed by Balinese residents illustrates that overtourism cannot be reduced to a simple negative outcome but must be understood as a complex negotiation of gains and losses. This resonates with global debates on degrowth and sustainable transitions, which advocate for moving beyond growth-centric models toward quality-focused and resident-centered tourism (Gössling et al., 2021). Incorporating local voices into destination planning can therefore help reframe success not in terms of tourist arrivals but in terms of community well-being, cultural vitality, and ecological resilience.

Finally, the study contributes to the comparative literature on overtourism in the Global South. Much of the existing research has been dominated by European urban cases such as Barcelona or Venice (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019). By centering Bali, the study highlights how overtourism manifests in contexts where tourism is deeply intertwined with cultural rituals and agrarian systems, and where governance frameworks are shaped by unique intersections of customary authority and global capital. These insights broaden the geographical scope of overtourism research and point toward the importance of context-sensitive approaches in both academic inquiry and policymaking.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how communities in Ubud, Kuta, and Canggu narrate their experiences of overtourism, foregrounding the lived realities of residents in one of Southeast Asia's most prominent tourism destinations. The findings reveal that overtourism is felt most immediately through everyday disruptions such as traffic congestion, rising living costs, and the loss of communal space. Beyond these practical inconveniences, residents articulated deeper concerns about cultural commodification, environmental strain, and social transformation, reflecting the multifaceted ways tourism reshapes community life. At the same time, the study highlights that communities are not passive in the face of these pressures. Instead, they deploy a variety of coping strategies, ranging from informal regulation of tourist behavior to the adaptation of cultural practices and collective mobilization against unsustainable developments.

By situating these narratives within broader debates on tourism growth and sustainability, the study contributes to an enriched understanding of overtourism as both a structural and experiential phenomenon. It underscores that the challenges facing Bali extend beyond visitor numbers to encompass issues of equity, governance, and cultural integrity. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that sustainable tourism management must prioritize resident voices, recognizing communities not only as stakeholders but as co-architects of more just and resilient tourism futures.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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