

WHEN VARIABLES ARE NO LONGER SUFFICIENT: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE VOLCANIC TOURISM EXPERIENCE IN EAST JAVA

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Abstract

Quantitative research on tourist behavior in Indonesia has repeatedly found that psychological variables such as attitude and subjective norm explain only a small share of the variance in visitation intention, suggesting that a substantial part of the tourist experience escapes measurement. This study uses Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology to explore the lived experience of ten tourists at Ijen Crater, Mount Bromo, and Madakaripura Waterfall. Drawing on in-depth interviews structured around van Manen's four existential dimensions; lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived relation; thematic analysis shows that the attitudes captured in survey instruments originate in pre-cognitive bodily reactions: goosebumps and silence that recur across all demographic groups. Subjective norms appear weak in statistical models not because social influence is absent, but because it has been internalized so deeply that tourists no longer perceive it as external. Physical discomfort becomes social capital, solitude amid crowds becomes a space for existential reflection, and revisit intention forms ontologically during the experience itself rather than through post-visit rational evaluation. We introduce the concept of "transformation that begins before it ends" to describe this intention-formation mechanism, which the Theory of Planned Behavior cannot account for. The study demonstrates the methodological value of interpretive phenomenology in explaining non-significant quantitative findings and offers practical guidance for developing experience-based tourism attentive to tourists' emotional complexity and personal transformation.

Keywords: *Interpretive Phenomenology, Tourist Experience, Volcanic Destinations, Visit Intention, Ontological Transformation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Volcanic tourism in Indonesia has grown markedly since the Covid-19 pandemic, driven by rising domestic interest in natural destinations that offer extreme experiences and personal transformation. Three East Java destinations exemplify this trend: Ijen Crater, known for a blue-fire phenomenon found in only two countries; Mount Bromo, whose sea of sand and sunrise have become a cultural icon; and Madakaripura Waterfall, set within a 200-metre cliff. Data from the East Java Central Statistics Agency (2025) show a steady recovery in visitor numbers to these sites. Yet rising visitation raises a more fundamental question: what are tourists actually seeking when they hike at dawn, endure extreme temperatures, and accept physical risk at these destinations?

Tourism consumer-behavior research has long relied on predictive frameworks to identify the determinants of visitation intention. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which models attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control as the main predictors of intention, remains the most widely used of these frameworks. Manafe & Anam (2024) applied it to three East Java volcanic destinations and found that attitude and subjective norm together predicted visitation intention, with attitude the stronger predictor. However, the model explained only 27 percent of the variance, leaving 73 percent unaccounted for; a gap Lim (2024) attributes partly to the limited validity of standard quantitative instruments in capturing complex tourist experience.

This gap recurs across recent Indonesian tourism studies. Wahyuni & Yusuf (2022) confirmed the influence of attitude and subjective norm on post-pandemic visitation intention but did not examine how that influence is constructed. Sinambela et al. (2022) confirmed the role of subjective norm at Mount Bromo without explaining why it was weaker than attitude. Ervina & Octaviany (2022) showed attitude mediating the link between destination personality and repeat-visit intention, but only within the measurable cognitive domain, leaving the sensory dimension of mountain-slope experience unexamined. Nur Hidayah & Widanti (2023) likewise confirmed the TPB's continued relevance while acknowledging its limited explanatory power for complex tourism experiences. Together, these studies map relationships between variables competently but stop short of explaining the subjective meanings underlying them.

A related paradox concerns why attitude consistently dominates as a predictor while subjective norm remains comparatively weak. Are these attitudes the product of rational evaluation of destination attributes, or of sensory experience that exceeds verbal articulation? And is subjective norm weak because social influence is genuinely minimal, or because it has become so internalized in tourists' personal narratives that it is no longer recognized as external? Variable-based measurement cannot answer these questions. Creswell & Poth (2017) argue that complex social phenomena require an interpretive lens to surface meaning hidden behind statistical figures, and Osborne & Waters (2019) caution that the linearity assumed by regression analysis often obscures nonlinear, contextual relationships among variables.

Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, as developed by van Manen (2016), offers such a lens. Unlike Husserlian descriptive phenomenology, which brackets the researcher's preconceptions through epoché, the Heideggerian tradition treats the researcher's interpretation as integral to meaning-making. This approach has proven useful in consumer research for understanding experience that resists numerical reduction, from Thompson et al.'s (1989) classic phenomenological work to more recent studies; Zhang et al. (2020) on heritage tourism and cultural identity, and Jung et al. (2020) on augmented reality in art galleries using a TPB framework enriched with experiential narrative. Applied to volcanic tourism, it allows us to examine how tourists construct meaning from the cold dawn air, the smell of sulfur, and the sight of blue flame; how they rationalize physical discomfort; and how they position themselves as consumers confronting a vast and unpredictable natural world.

Volcanic destinations were chosen because the experience they offer differs fundamentally from that of beach or urban tourism, which typically emphasizes comfort and entertainment. Volcanic tourism instead demands physical and psychological sacrifice: pre-dawn departures, strenuous hikes, exposure to extreme weather, and direct confrontation with unpredictable natural forces. These conditions make the experience difficult to understand as a simple consumer transaction; it instead resembles an existential encounter between the individual and the world. The UNWTO (2023) frames tourism as a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon involving a transition from the everyday into a space that is challenging, disorienting, and ultimately transformative. Barykin et al. (2022) similarly note that even as the industry digitizes, demand for authentic, transformative experience continues to grow.

Building on this gap, the study addresses three questions. First, how do tourists experience and construct meaning around their visits to volcanic destinations in relation to their everyday lives? Second, what meanings do they attach to natural beauty, physical discomfort, and social interaction during volcanic tourism? Third, how do tourists reflect on and manage the internal tensions that arise during and after the visit, including the shift from initial intention to emotional attachment or, conversely, dissatisfaction? The study contributes in three ways. Theoretically, it extends the tourism consumer-behavior literature by proposing concepts that explain psychological mechanisms unmeasured by quantitative approaches. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of interpretive phenomenology for explaining non-significant findings

and unexplained variance, following van Manen (2016) and Smith et al. (2009). Practically, it offers destination managers and local governments guidance for experience- and emotion-based marketing strategies, and offers tourists a more reflective approach to their own travel consumption.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology, following van Manen (2016), to explore the lived experience of tourists at volcanic destinations in East Java. Rather than bracketing the researcher's preconceptions through epoché, this tradition treats interpretation as integral to meaning construction, making reflexivity the principal strategy for managing bias. Ten informants were selected through purposive, maximum-variation sampling across age, gender, occupation, marital status, group composition, visit frequency, and destination; data saturation was reached at the tenth interview. Semi-structured in-depth interviews, lasting 45–90 minutes and conducted within two weeks of each visit, were structured around van Manen's four existential dimensions; lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived relation; audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. Credibility was established through source triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking; transferability through thick description; dependability through an audit trail; and confirmability through a reflective journal documenting the researcher's prior experience as a quantitative researcher on a related topic.

This design directly addresses a gap in the tourism literature: the inability of quantitative approaches to capture subjective meaning-making and unmeasurable layers of experience. As Creswell & Poth (2017) argue, and as Osborne & Waters (2019) reinforce in their critique of linearity assumptions in regression, the relationship between experience and visitation intention is more complex than statistical coefficients can represent. Interpretive phenomenology was chosen not to supplant prior quantitative findings but to deepen them; to surface what numbers alone cannot show. Huang et al. (2024), studying impulsive purchasing during e-commerce livestreams, similarly relied on researcher interpretation to understand the awareness–manipulation paradox in digital consumer behavior, illustrating this approach's value in contemporary consumer research.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1.Result

Thematic analysis of the ten interviews produced six themes that together describe the structure of the tourist experience at these volcanic destinations. The themes emerged through coding that moved from concrete units of meaning to abstract categories while remaining close to participants' own language.

Theme 1: Sensory experience beyond words. Nearly all informants described their first encounter with each destination's central phenomenon; the blue fire at Ijen, the sunrise at Bromo, the waterfall at Madakaripura; as a physical reaction that preceded thought or speech. I-01 (24, private-sector employee, visited Ijen with three friends) recalled: *“I got goosebumps. I stood still for a few seconds, just staring ahead. It felt like I couldn't believe I was finally seeing something I'd only seen online.”* I-02 (21, university student, traveling solo) reported a similar reaction: *“I immediately got goosebumps, and my eyes welled up. I don't know why, but I felt deeply moved.”* I-06 (31, civil servant, also visiting Ijen alone) added: *“I got goosebumps. It was a mix of awe and disbelief. I just stood there in silence; I wasn't thinking about anything, just savoring the moment.”* The consistency of “goosebumps” and “silence” across

demographic groups suggests this is less a product of education or social background than a near-universal bodily response to a natural phenomenon that exceeds expectation.

Theme 2: Physical discomfort transformed into meaning. I-01 described sulfur-induced breathlessness at Ijen: *"I felt short of breath because of the sulfur fumes. At that moment I thought, 'Why did I choose a place like this?' But after seeing the crater, that discomfort became the part I talk about most with my friends."* I-02, also breathless and traveling alone, said the experience afterward *"made me feel braver."* I-09 (23, graduate student, visiting with three friends to celebrate graduation) noted that the same discomfort *"became a running joke whenever we get together."* Rather than being avoided or forgotten, discomfort became material for humor, bonding, and pride. Physical aftereffects showed a similar shift: I-01 and I-02 both reported that sore legs in the days after the trip brought back happy memories rather than complaints, and I-06 described feeling that, despite bodily soreness, *"my mind actually feels lighter and calmer."* Where a utilitarian view would expect soreness to register as a cost, informants instead treated the body as storing and recalling the experience more reliably than photographs.

Theme 3: The self as guest in nature's presence. Across age groups and group compositions, informants spontaneously described themselves as guests rather than visitors. I-01: *"I feel like a guest. Nature feels so vast, and I feel I must respect the place."* I-03 (35, high school teacher, with wife and children at Bromo): *"I feel like a guest. Nature there feels so vast, while I'm just a small part of it."* I-05 (42, homemaker, at Madakaripura with husband and three children) and I-08 (54, entrepreneur) used nearly identical language, describing an obligation to *"take care of the place"* and *"conduct myself appropriately."* I-02 added a temporal dimension: an initial sense of unfamiliarity gave way, after a few hours, to the place becoming *"a space for me to get to know myself."* The spontaneous, cross-cutting recurrence of the *"guest"* metaphor suggests it arises directly from encountering nature's scale rather than from environmental education.

Theme 4: Productive solitude amid crowds. Several informants described feeling alone in a meaningful, generative sense despite being surrounded by other tourists. I-01: *"Even though there were many people around, I felt like I was talking to myself."* I-04 (28, entrepreneur, at Bromo with partner) and I-06 used almost identical phrasing; *"having a conversation with myself."* I-07 (26, content creator, with a photography community) described standing apart from friends at sunrise to think about *"work, life, and what truly makes me happy."* This solitude was not isolating; it functioned as a space for introspection made possible by, rather than despite, the crowd's presence.

Theme 5: Others, beyond social pressure. Shared experience strengthened existing relationships and created new ones. I-03 recalled his young child remarking on the sunrise's beauty; I-05 described joy at watching her children's excitement; I-09 reflected, while waiting with friends, that *"in a few years our lives will change, and we might not be able to gather like this again";* I-04 recounted a partner's reassurance during the cold climb that became a shared joke once the sunrise arrived. Connections also formed with strangers: I-01 spoke with a sulfur miner and came away recognizing the site as someone else's daily workplace; I-02 was encouraged by a fellow solo hiker; I-05 was assisted by another tourist; I-09 shared stories with a group of hikers from Jakarta. These exchanges suggest a form of social influence not captured by the conventional notion of subjective norm as external pressure.

Theme 6: Transformation of intention and motivation. Several informants reported their stated likelihood of returning rising over the course of the trip; I-01 from 7 to 9, I-02 from 8 to 10; while also describing a shift in what motivated that intention. I-07 explained: *"Before, I wanted to come out of curiosity; now I want to return because I feel connected to the place."* I-09 similarly noted that the reason for wanting to return was *"no longer the blue fire or the*

scenery, but the memories I've made." This pattern indicates that revisit intention forms during the experience itself rather than through post-visit evaluation.

Asked to summarize their experience in a single word, informants chose terms reflecting this shift: I-01 "*transformation*," I-02 "*courage*," I-03 "*togetherness*," I-04 and I-05 "*gratitude*," I-06 "*self-reflection*," I-07 "*awareness*," I-08 "*gratitude*," I-09 "*the journey toward adulthood*," and I-10 "*pause*." The recurrence of transformation, awareness, and gratitude across these summaries indicates that the volcanic experience functions as a life milestone; a transition that is remembered and valued well beyond the visit itself.

3.2. Discussion

The first theme challenges the assumption, common in consumer-behavior research, that attitudes form through cognitive evaluation of an object's attributes. Attitude was the dominant predictor of visit intention in Manafe & Anam (2024), but the present data suggest it does not originate in rational calculation; it originates in bodily sensation that precedes cognition. The consistency of "*goosebumps*" and "*stillness*" across demographic groups suggests that the sublime; as articulated by Burke (2008) and Kant (2016); is not a rare aesthetic category but a recurring phenomenological event in volcanic settings. More notably, the sublime here functions less as a passive response to beauty than as an active one to natural force, suspending the ego's habitual regulation of perception. I-02's being "*moved*" without knowing why, I-06's "*not thinking of anything*," and I-07's losing track of work all resemble what Heidegger (1993) calls "*open existence*": a Dasein that no longer seeks mastery but accepts what is given. This may explain why attitude dominates prior quantitative findings; not because it is measured precisely, but because the underlying bodily encounter is too powerful to ignore, even as survey instruments capture only its shadow.

The second theme helps account for the unexplained variance in earlier quantitative work. The 73 percent left unexplained by attitude and subjective norm may partly reflect psychological mechanisms invisible to Likert-scale measurement: discomfort accepted rather than minimized, risk sought rather than avoided, physical traces enjoyed rather than treated as cost. Festinger's (1962) cognitive dissonance theory, which assumes individuals act to reduce tension from inconsistency, does not fit this pattern, since informants maintained and even valorized the tension rather than resolving it. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow is closer, though it requires modification: rather than flow from a narrow balance between challenge and skill, this is flow from confronting a challenge that exceeds one's skill, pushing the individual past a previously assumed limit. Here the body is not merely an object the subject possesses but becomes a subject of experience and memory in its own right. Merleau-Ponty (1962) treats the body as the subject of perception; these data extend that claim to memory, with the body proving a more intimate and durable mnemonic device than photographs or video. This is consistent with Togawa et al. (2019) finding that sensory experience shapes preference and memory in ways that bypass rational cognition.

The third theme contributes to the literature on environmental ethics and sustainable tourism. The spontaneous, cross-cutting emergence of the "*guest*" metaphor suggests that an ethics centered on respect and responsibility; rather than rights and control; can arise directly from encountering nature's scale, without formal instruction. This complicates the common critique of mass tourism as inherently extractive: at least in this volcanic context, a different ethic appears to emerge organically. I-07's description of nature as "*too vast to be treated merely as a photo subject*" suggests this construct can override even the commercial pressures of content-creation work. The finding echoes Leopold & Kingsolver's (2020) land ethic, though the mechanism differs: not education or policy, but the body's response to natural scale. Practically, this implies destination managers need not invest heavily in environmental

education campaigns; designing experiences that bring tourists into direct contact with nature's scale may be sufficient, a view consistent with Ibnou-Laaroussi et al. (2020) on green tourism and Boguszewicz-Kreft et al. (2020) on medical tourism, both of which find direct experience more attitude-forming than secondary information.

The fourth theme helps explain why subjective norm registers as weak in prior quantitative work. Ajzen (1991) treats subjective norm as perceived social pressure; an external, measurable factor. These data suggest social influence in volcanic settings operates differently: the presence of large crowds creates anonymity that frees individuals from the obligation to interact, enabling withdrawal into reflection, consistent with Simmel (2015) notion of collectivity enabling individuality, applied here to tourist crowds rather than the modern metropolis. The content of that reflection; I-06 on *"life, work, and what I'm really looking for,"* I-08 on family and the passage of time, I-10 on his children's futures; suggests the volcanic experience catalyzes existential reflection rather than simple sightseeing. Subjective norm may therefore appear weak in survey data not because social influence is absent, but because it has been internalized to the point of no longer registering as external, and because the personal transformation underway is more salient than the influence of others. This aligns with Zhang et al. (2020) finding that cultural identity and consumption intention in heritage tourism are shaped more by deep personal experience than by external social pressure.

The fifth theme adds nuance to this account of subjective norm. Togetherness in this context is not passive co-presence but a shared experience of novelty, challenge, and transformation; evident in I-03's memory of his child's remark, I-05's joy at her children's excitement, I-09's anticipation of future change, and I-04's shared laughter with a partner. This resembles Turner et al. (2011) concept of lived community, though formed here through ongoing embodied ritual; shared effort, discomfort, and wonder; rather than fixed ritual structure. The recurring connections with strangers (a sulfur miner, a fellow hiker, a helpful tourist, a group from Jakarta) suggest that shared vulnerability under extreme conditions renders status, age, and origin largely irrelevant, consistent with Bauman (2013) notion of a community formed by shared experience rather than pre-assigned identity. This also extends Jung et al. (2020) finding that subjective norm and attitude interact in complex ways, with shared experience strengthening bonds that resist reduction to separate variables.

The sixth theme offers the study's most direct theoretical contribution to the visitation-intention literature. Shifts from curiosity to connection, and from scenery to memory, indicate that revisit intention forms ontologically during the experience rather than through post-visit rational evaluation; tourists report missing the place before they have even left it. This resembles Batcho (2013) anticipatory nostalgia, though here it is active and committed rather than passive and melancholic; a desire to return rooted in the experience having become part of one's personal narrative. It also resembles Kyle et al. (2003) place attachment, modified to form not through accumulated familiarity but through the intensity of a single experience sufficient to alter how an individual exists in the world. These findings align with Das & Tiwari (2020), who found that pandemic-era travel intentions among Indian tourists were shaped by factors beyond standard TPB variables, including emotional experience and identity transformation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that interpretive phenomenology can access dimensions of tourist experience that quantitative methods cannot. The 73 percent of variance left unexplained in prior research is not an empty space but one occupied by bodily sensation, embodied memory, an ethics of hospitality, existential reflection, transformative togetherness, and anticipatory nostalgia; dimensions that resist Likert-scale measurement because they operate at a level that can only be inhabited, felt, and narrated. This study does not contradict earlier quantitative findings but extends them, showing that the statistical pattern of dominant attitude and weak subjective norm is the visible surface of a much deeper experiential structure.

This supports Osborne & Waters (2019) critique of linearity in regression analysis: the relationship between experience and visitation intention is considerably more complex than regression coefficients alone can represent.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experience of tourists at volcanic destinations in East Java through interpretive phenomenology, an approach that reaches dimensions of experience inaccessible to quantitative methods. Five interconnected patterns emerged: an encounter with the ineffable, in which extreme sensory experience triggers pre-cognitive reactions beyond verbal description; a speaking body, in which physical discomfort becomes cherished memory and bodily traces serve as emotional cues; a guest in a home not built by humans, in which the relationship to nature is one of reverence rather than control; gathering solitude, in which crowds create space for existential reflection; multiplying togetherness, in which shared experience deepens relationships beyond what subjective norm alone predicts; and transformation that begins before it ends, in which revisit intention arises from ontological change rather than rational evaluation.

Theoretically, the study proposes “*transformation that begins before it ends*” as a mechanism of intention formation that the Theory of Planned Behavior does not capture: intention forms during the experience itself, through an ontological shift in how tourists exist in the world, rather than afterward through rational evaluation. Methodologically, the study shows that non-significant findings and unexplained variance in prior quantitative research are not measurement failures but signals pointing toward layers of meaning accessible only through subjective narrative. Practically, the findings suggest that volcanic-tourism marketing should foreground narratives of transformative experience rather than destination attributes or price promotions, in recognition of tourists' emotional and existential complexity.

This study is limited by its context-specific scope: findings from ten participants are not intended for statistical generalization, and readers should judge transferability against the contextual detail provided. The researcher's background in quantitative research, although managed through a reflexive journal, may still have shaped the interview questions and interpretations in ways self-report cannot fully capture. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design tracking tourists' transformation across repeated visits, or comparative phenomenological studies at other volcanic destinations to test whether these themes are specific to East Java or more broadly characteristic of extreme tourism. A sequential mixed-methods design, as recommended by Creswell and Poth, could also more directly link measurable variables to the unmeasurable dimensions of experience identified here.

AI Usage Statement

In drafting the Introduction, Research Method, Result and Discussion, and Conclusion sections of this paper, an AI language model was used solely for: (a) structuring the narrative and organizing paragraphs, (b) language editing and grammatical correction, and (c) clarifying methodological standards in phenomenological research. All research ideas, the theoretical framework, research design, data collection, transcription, coding, thematic analysis, interpretation of findings, and scientific arguments were developed independently by the researcher. No AI tools were used to generate empirical data, participant quotes, or original scientific findings. The researcher bears full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of all content presented.

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