

# Structural Barriers, Community Participation, and Sustainable Tourism Development: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Khmer Ok Om Bok Festival

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how structural power relations, cultural meanings, and tourism development interact to shape community participation in the Khmer Ok Om Bok Festival in Tra Vinh, Vietnam. Situated within an ethnic-minority context where ritual practices carry profound spiritual significance, the festival is undergoing increasing transformation as heritage-tourism initiatives intensify. The research adopts a qualitative-driven mixed-methods design integrating descriptive survey data ( $n = 328$ ) with 20 in-depth interviews. Findings reveal a pronounced participation gap: while cultural attachment and ritual involvement remain strong, community participation in festival governance is limited. Through an integrated CBT–Arnstein–TPB framework, the study demonstrates that tokenistic governance structures, uneven benefit distribution, and concerns about cultural authenticity suppress perceived behavioral control and diminish local agency. The study contributes to debates on cultural change, festival transformation, and minority heritage politics by explaining why cultural centrality does not translate into institutional power, and argues that sustainable festival-based tourism requires redistributing authority, formalizing community roles, and safeguarding ritual integrity amid commercialization pressures.

**Keywords:** festival tourism; intangible cultural heritage; community participation; cultural authenticity; Khmer minority

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnic minority festivals play a crucial role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, reinforcing collective identity, and transmitting cultural values across generations [5][37][32]. In recent years, festival-based tourism has been increasingly promoted as a strategy for cultural preservation and local economic development, particularly in regions characterized by ethnic diversity and heritage richness [9][25]. However, recent international policy discussions emphasize that while festival tourism enhances cultural visibility and economic opportunities, it often raises concerns regarding community exclusion, uneven benefit distribution, and governance asymmetries, especially in ethnic minority contexts [35][28].

Within this broader context, ethnic minority festivals are increasingly shaped by tourism commercialization, state-led heritage promotion, and market-oriented cultural representation [14][18]. While these processes may generate new economic value, they also risk transforming ritual practices into performative spectacles detached from their original spiritual meanings [5][19]. For minority communities whose cultural labor sustains the symbolic core of festivals, such transformations raise critical concerns regarding cultural authenticity, equitable benefit-sharing, and institutional inclusion in decision-making processes [10][28].

The Khmer Ok Om Bok Festival in southern Vietnam exemplifies these tensions. Deeply rooted in Khmer cosmology and lunar worship traditions, the festival encompasses sacred rituals, communal offerings, boat races, and cultural performances that hold profound spiritual significance for the local community [37]. While the festival has been officially recognized as national intangible cultural heritage and increasingly promoted as a tourism attraction, tourism development has intensified the involvement of governmental bodies, commercial actors, and external stakeholders [31]. As a result, Khmer community members face a dual challenge: maintaining ritual integrity and cultural meaning while navigating tourism-driven transformations and complex governance arrangements [4][24].

Existing studies on festival tourism and community-based tourism (CBT) have largely focused on economic impacts, visitor experiences, or cultural commodification [22][17]. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they often pay limited attention to governance structures and power relations that determine who participates in decision-making, who benefits from tourism development, and how cultural authenticity is negotiated in practice [8][33]. At the same time, behavioral approaches such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) have been widely applied to examine residents' attitudes or support for tourism development [30]. However, these approaches frequently conceptualize perceived behavioral control (PBC) as an individual psychological attribute, without sufficiently accounting for structural constraints such as governance exclusion or tokenistic participation [21][29].

A key conceptual tool for understanding participation and power relations is Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969). Although developed more than five decades ago, Arnstein's framework remains highly relevant because the forms of tokenistic participation it identified such as consultation without decision-making power continue to characterize many contemporary governance arrangements in tourism and heritage contexts [6][33]. Rather than being outdated, the persistence of these participation patterns suggests that the structural problems Arnstein highlighted remain unresolved, particularly in ethnic minority festival governance [21][8].

Despite the relevance of these theoretical perspectives, few empirical studies have systematically integrated CBT, Arnstein's participation framework, and TPB to analyze community participation in ethnic minority festival governance. In particular, there is limited research examining why strong cultural attachment and active ritual participation do not necessarily translate into meaningful involvement in festival planning and decision-making [31][10]. This gap is especially evident in the context of the Ok Om Bok Festival, where Khmer community members remain culturally central yet institutionally marginal within existing governance structures.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how structural governance arrangements, cultural meanings, and tourism development interact to shape community participation in the Khmer Ok Om Bok Festival. By adopting a qualitative-driven mixed-methods approach and integrating Community-Based Tourism principles, Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the study seeks to explain the persistence of a participation gap between ritual involvement and governance engagement. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of power, participation, and cultural sustainability in ethnic minority festival tourism contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and community empowerment

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) emerged as a development-oriented approach that emphasizes local participation, community empowerment, and equitable benefit-sharing in tourism development [22][17]. At its core, CBT asserts that tourism should be planned and managed in ways that enable local communities to exercise control over resources, decision-making processes, and the distribution of tourism benefits [10]. Rather than viewing communities merely as labor providers or cultural performers, CBT positions them as legitimate stakeholders with the right to influence tourism trajectories affecting their livelihoods and cultural heritage.

Despite its normative appeal, empirical studies consistently show that CBT initiatives often fall short of their empowerment objectives. Structural power asymmetries, elite capture, weak institutional arrangements, and market dependency frequently limit the extent to which communities can exercise real control over tourism

development [10] [39]. In many contexts, local residents continue to provide cultural labor while economic and decision-making power remains concentrated among external actors or state agencies [13].

In festival tourism contexts, CBT has been applied to examine issues of benefit distribution, cultural commodification, and community participation [22][17]. However, much of this literature focuses on economic outcomes or participation in service provision, while paying comparatively less attention to governance arrangements and the quality of community involvement in decision-making. This limitation is particularly salient in ethnic minority festivals, where communities may be culturally central yet institutionally marginalized.

In the present study, CBT provides a foundational lens for examining empowerment and benefit distribution in the Ok Om Bok Festival. Specifically, it is used to assess whether tourism development aligns with CBT principles of community control and equitable benefit-sharing, and to contextualize community perceptions of uneven economic outcomes identified in the empirical findings.

### **Governance and participation: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation**

Understanding the depth and quality of community participation requires analytical attention to power relations embedded in governance structures. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) remains one of the most influential frameworks for conceptualizing participation as a gradation of power, ranging from nonparticipation and tokenism to genuine citizen control. The ladder highlights that not all forms of participation are equal; participation without decision-making authority may serve symbolic or legitimizing functions without redistributing power.

Although developed in the context of urban planning, Arnstein's framework has been widely adopted in tourism and heritage studies to analyze governance arrangements and community involvement [6][33]. Numerous studies demonstrate that tourism governance often operates at the lower rungs of the ladder, characterized by informing or consultation without meaningful influence, particularly in developing-country and minority contexts [16][20].

In heritage and festival tourism, governance structures are frequently dominated by governmental bodies or commercial actors, while local communities are invited to participate in consultative processes that have limited impact on final decisions [8][31]. Such arrangements produce what has been described as tokenistic participation, where community presence is acknowledged symbolically but substantive authority remains centralized.

In this study, Arnstein's Ladder is employed to analyze the governance position of the Khmer community in the Ok Om Bok Festival. It provides a conceptual tool to differentiate between participation in ritual practice and participation in decision-making, thereby clarifying the distinction between "the right to practice" cultural traditions and "the right to govern" festival development that emerged from the qualitative findings.

### **Behavioral perspectives on participation: Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)**

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offers a behavioral framework for explaining individual participation intentions through attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [1]. In tourism research, TPB has been widely used to examine residents' support for tourism development, willingness to participate, and pro-tourism behaviors [30].

Among TPB components, perceived behavioral control (PBC) is particularly relevant for understanding community participation. PBC reflects individuals' perceptions of their capacity, resources, and opportunities to perform a behavior. While often treated as a psychological construct, recent studies suggest that PBC is strongly shaped by structural and institutional factors, including trust in governance, access to decision-making processes, and perceived fairness [21][29].

In contexts characterized by governance exclusion or tokenistic participation, structural constraints may suppress PBC even when attitudes toward cultural involvement remain positive. As a result, individuals may disengage

from governance processes not due to apathy, but because participation is perceived as ineffective or inconsequential [20].

In the present study, TPB is used to explain why strong cultural attachment and positive attitudes toward the festival do not translate into governance participation. Specifically, the concept of PBC helps interpret how governance arrangements and power asymmetries influence community members' perceptions of their ability to meaningfully engage in festival decision-making.

### **Integrating CBT, Arnstein, and TPB: a structural-psychological framework**

While CBT, Arnstein's Ladder, and TPB each offer valuable insights, they are rarely integrated to examine community participation in ethnic minority festival governance. Existing studies often address empowerment, governance, or behavioral intentions in isolation, without systematically linking structural conditions to psychological mechanisms [8][6].

This study integrates these three frameworks to develop a structural-psychological perspective on participation. CBT provides a normative and developmental lens focused on empowerment and benefit-sharing; Arnstein's Ladder conceptualizes the distribution of power within governance structures; and TPB explains how these structural conditions shape perceived behavioral control and participation intentions. Through this integration, the study explains how tokenistic governance arrangements and uneven benefit distribution suppress PBC, thereby producing a persistent participation gap between cultural engagement and governance involvement.

By applying this integrated framework to the Ok Om Bok Festival, the study advances theoretical understanding of participation in minority heritage tourism contexts and offers an analytical foundation for interpreting the mixed-methods findings presented in subsequent sections.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design and theoretical orientation**

This study adopts a qualitative-driven mixed-methods design to examine community participation in the Khmer Ok Om Bok Festival. This design is appropriate because the research aims not only to describe participation patterns but also to uncover the cultural meanings, governance experiences, and structural constraints underlying those patterns. Mixed-methods research enables the integration of quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, thereby enhancing contextual interpretation and analytical rigor [7].

In this study, qualitative inquiry is prioritized due to the culturally embedded and governance-oriented nature of the research problem. Quantitative survey data serve a descriptive and contextual function rather than an inferential one. This approach aligns with previous tourism and governance research emphasizing triangulation and interpretive explanation over statistical generalization in exploratory settings [8][27].

The theoretical orientation of the study is informed by an integrated framework combining Community-Based Tourism (CBT), Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). CBT guides the examination of empowerment and benefit distribution; Arnstein's framework informs the analysis of governance participation and power relations; and TPB provides a behavioral lens to interpret how structural constraints shape perceived behavioral control and participation intentions [1][2][22].

### **Study area, sampling, and data collection**

#### **Study area**

The research was conducted in Tra Vinh Province, southern Vietnam, where the Ok Om Bok Festival is annually celebrated by the Khmer community and officially recognized as national intangible cultural heritage. This setting provides a suitable context for examining governance asymmetries, cultural authenticity concerns, and

minority participation in festival-based tourism, as similar dynamics have been documented in other heritage tourism contexts in Vietnam and Southeast Asia [31][24].

### **Sampling strategy and participant selection**

The quantitative component targeted Khmer residents aged 25 years and above. This age threshold was adopted because individuals in this age group are more likely to have sustained engagement with the festival and sufficient experiential knowledge of both ritual participation and tourism-related changes. Younger residents may participate sporadically, whereas individuals aged 25 and above typically hold more stable social, economic, and cultural roles within households and community networks.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Khmer Respondents (N = 328)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	158	48.0
	Female	170	52.0
Age group	25–35	118	36.0
	36–45	91	27.7
	Above 45	119	36.3
Occupation	Agriculture	112	34.1
	Small business	87	26.5
	Informal tourism	98	29.9
	Other occupations	31	9.5

Age categories were further grouped into 25–35, 36–45, and above 45. These categories reflect locally relevant social roles and life-course stages rather than arbitrary statistical divisions. Individuals aged 25–35 are generally considered younger, economically active participants, while those aged 36–45 and above often assume greater household responsibilities, community roles, and cultural obligations.

A convenience sampling strategy with basic stratification by gender, age group, and occupation was employed due to the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame and the contextual constraints of festival-based data collection. While this approach does not permit statistical generalization, it is appropriate for descriptive and exploratory mixed-methods research focusing on underrepresented minority communities [7].

### **Survey administration and data collection**

Survey data were collected during the festival period and through community networks, including pagodas, cultural associations, and local gathering points. Questionnaires were administered in Vietnamese and Khmer to ensure cultural clarity and inclusiveness. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, of which 328 were retained for analysis.

Twenty-two questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete responses, inconsistent answers, or missing key variables related to participation and governance. These invalid responses did not meet the minimum criteria required for descriptive analysis and were therefore removed prior to data processing.

## **Survey instrument and quantitative analysis**

Survey items were adapted from established scales in festival tourism, community-based tourism, and participation research to enhance content validity. Specifically, items related to cultural value and authenticity were informed by Cohen (1988) and Wang (1999); perceptions of tourism benefits and empowerment drew on Okazaki (2008) and Manyara and Jones (2007); and participation and governance-related items were adapted from Su and Wall (2015). Components of the Theory of Planned Behavior, including attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, were informed by Ajzen (1991) and subsequent tourism applications [30].

Responses were measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and crosstabulations. No inferential statistical tests were conducted, as the purpose of the quantitative component was to provide contextual patterns to be interpreted through qualitative findings rather than to test causal relationships [7].

## **Qualitative interviews and data analysis**

### **Interview sampling and data collection**

The qualitative component comprised 20 in-depth interviews conducted using purposive sampling. Participants were selected to represent diverse stakeholder roles within the Khmer community, including elders, monks, youth participants, small-scale vendors, service providers, and households involved or excluded from festival governance. This diversity allowed for the exploration of multiple perspectives on cultural meaning, governance experiences, and participation constraints.

Interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was reached, consistent with qualitative research standards. Interviews were semi-structured, enabling participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions in their own terms while ensuring coverage of key thematic areas relevant to the research objectives.

### **Analytical approach**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis proceeded through open coding to identify initial concepts, axial coding to link cultural, governance, and psychological dimensions, and selective coding to synthesize themes into a coherent explanatory framework.

Throughout the analysis, qualitative findings were deliberately connected to descriptive survey results to enable triangulation and explanatory integration. Distinctions such as “the right to practice” versus “the right to govern” emerged inductively from interview narratives and were not imposed a priori. These concepts reflect participants’ own interpretations of participation and governance, rather than externally defined categories.

## **Integration of quantitative and qualitative components**

Integration occurred at the design, analysis, and interpretation stages. Quantitative data provided a macrolevel profile of cultural attachment, perceived benefits, authenticity concerns, and participation levels, while qualitative narratives offered insight into the structural and cultural mechanisms underlying these patterns. This triangulation strengthens the interpretive validity of the findings and aligns with mixed-methods principles emphasizing complementarity rather than methodological hierarchy [7].

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university review board prior to data collection. All participants were informed of the research purpose, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Written or verbal consent was obtained depending on participant literacy and cultural protocols. Sensitive cultural and ritual issues were approached in accordance with community norms and guidance from temple representatives.

## FINDINGS

### Cultural value and festival attachment

Survey results indicate a consistently high level of cultural attachment to the Ok Om Bok Festival among Khmer respondents. The mean score for perceived cultural value is 4.1 on a five-point Likert scale, and 65% of respondents reported participating in at least one ritual component of the festival each year. These findings suggest that ritual participation remains a stable and meaningful cultural practice rather than a discretionary leisure activity.

Table 2. Perceptions of Cultural Value, Authenticity, and Tourism Impacts

Construct	Item examples	Mean	SD
Cultural value	“The festival is spiritually important for the Khmer community.”	4.1	0.62
Authenticity concerns	“Tourism activities are affecting the authenticity of rituals.”	3.9	0.71
Perceived tourism benefits	“Tourism provides additional income opportunities.”	3.8	0.77
Governance participation	“I am involved in festival planning/decision-making.”	2.1	0.84

**Note.** Items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Qualitative interviews reinforce this pattern. Participants frequently described the festival as a spiritual obligation and an inherited cultural responsibility, using expressions such as “our ancestral duty” and “a spiritual dialogue with the moon.” These narratives confirm that cultural attachment is deeply embedded in Khmer identity and persists despite the growing presence of tourism-related activities. The convergence between quantitative and qualitative findings strengthens the credibility of this result.

### Perceptions of cultural authenticity and commercialization

Survey data reveal a high level of concern regarding cultural authenticity, with a mean score of 3.9 for items related to perceived tourism impacts on ritual authenticity. Respondents commonly expressed concern that certain festival elements have become overly staged or entertainment-oriented.

Qualitative findings clarify the nature of these concerns. Interviewees consistently distinguished between sacred ritual components, which they considered non-negotiable, and tourism-oriented performances, which they viewed as increasingly commercialized. Terms such as “excessive commercialization” and “loss of sacred space” emerged inductively from interview narratives rather than being imposed by the researchers. Participants referred to loud performances, sponsorship-driven programming, and time constraints on rituals as evidence that tourism priorities sometimes override spiritual considerations.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Interviews (N = 20)

Theme	Description	Illustrative quotation
Ritual centrality	The festival is perceived as a spiritual obligation and a core element of Khmer cultural identity.	“Participating in the ritual is our ancestral duty and a way to honor the moon.”
Commercialization pressure	Tourism-related performances and sponsorships are seen as diluting sacred meanings.	“Some activities are now for visitors, not for the spirit of the festival.”

Governance exclusion	Decision-making processes are dominated by external authorities, with limited community influence.	“We are informed after decisions are made, not before.”
Uneven benefit distribution	Economic benefits are perceived to accrue mainly to non-local actors rather than Khmer households.	“We provide the culture, but others gain the profits.”
Participation gap	Cultural participation remains high, while involvement in governance is minimal.	“We can perform rituals, but we cannot decide anything.”

**Note.** Themes were derived inductively through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with Khmer community members.

These qualitative insights explain why authenticity concerns coexist with continued ritual participation: community members remain committed to sacred practices while simultaneously expressing dissatisfaction with tourism-driven modifications.

### Perceived tourism benefits and benefit distribution

Survey findings indicate moderate perceptions of tourism benefits, with a mean score of 3.8 for items related to income opportunities and local economic stimulation. While respondents acknowledged that the festival generates economic activity, these perceptions were not uniformly positive.

Qualitative interviews reveal a consistent pattern of perceived uneven benefit distribution. Many participants emphasized that economic gains tend to accrue to external vendors, urban businesses, or non-local operators, while Khmer households primarily contribute cultural labor. Statements such as “we provide the culture, but others profit” illustrate a perceived imbalance between contribution and reward.

This perceived inequity provides important context for understanding later findings on governance disengagement. From a CBT perspective, limited benefit-sharing undermines perceptions of empowerment and reduces incentives for community involvement beyond ritual participation.

### Participation in festival services and activities

In addition to ritual participation, Khmer residents engage in various festival-related services, including food preparation, small-scale trading, craft sales, and logistical support. Survey data suggest that approximately 35–45% of respondents participate in these activities, often on a temporary or seasonal basis.

Qualitative data indicate that such participation is driven largely by economic necessity or cultural obligation rather than long-term entrepreneurial opportunity. Younger respondents and low-income households were more likely to engage in service provision, yet interviewees noted that access to profitable locations, permits, and resources is often controlled by external authorities or business entities. This reinforces the distinction between participation as labor and participation as governance.

### Participation in governance and decision-making

Only 11% of survey respondents reported any involvement in festival governance activities, such as planning meetings, consultations, or decision-making forums. At first glance, this proportion may appear small; however, its analytical significance lies precisely in its low value.

Qualitative interviews provide a clear explanation for this pattern. Participants consistently described governance processes as top-down and predetermined, with limited opportunities for meaningful input. Consultation was often perceived as symbolic rather than influential. Phrases such as “we are informed, not consulted” and “decisions are made before we are asked” were repeatedly articulated across interviews.

Importantly, the low participation rate should not be interpreted as a lack of interest or engagement. Instead, qualitative evidence indicates that community members refrain from governance participation because such involvement is perceived as ineffective. In this sense, the 11% figure reflects structural exclusion rather than apathy, lending credibility rather than weakness to the finding.

### Distinguishing “the right to practice” and “the right to govern”

A key conceptual distinction emerging from the qualitative analysis is between “the right to practice” and “the right to govern.” This distinction was not derived from existing theoretical categories but emerged inductively from interview narratives.

Participants frequently emphasized that while they are encouraged or expected to perform rituals, cultural demonstrations, and symbolic roles, they have little authority over festival planning, budgeting, or program design. This led to a recurring differentiation between cultural participation (the right to practice) and institutional authority (the right to govern). This distinction helps explain why cultural attachment and ritual participation remain high even as governance participation remains low.

### Validity of the quantitative sample and data quality

A total of 350 questionnaires were collected during the survey phase. Of these, 22 responses were excluded due to incomplete answers, inconsistencies, or missing responses to key governance and participation items. The final sample of 328 valid responses therefore represents questionnaires that met the minimum criteria for descriptive analysis.

The age threshold of 25 years and above was applied to ensure that respondents possessed sufficient experiential knowledge of the festival and its governance arrangements. Younger participants often engage intermittently and may lack long-term exposure to festival planning processes. Age groupings (25–35, 36–45, and above 45) reflect locally meaningful social and economic roles rather than arbitrary statistical classifications.

### Summary of integrated findings

Taken together, the findings reveal a clear participation gap within the Ok Om Bok Festival. Cultural attachment and ritual participation remain strong, supported by both quantitative indicators and qualitative narratives. At the same time, governance participation is minimal, not due to indifference, but due to perceived structural barriers, tokenistic participation, and uneven benefit distribution.

Table 4. Integrated Triangulation of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Key dimension	Quantitative pattern	Qualitative explanation
Cultural attachment	High mean score for cultural value ( $M = 4.1$ ).	Ritual participation is framed as a spiritual obligation rather than a leisure choice.
Authenticity concerns	High concern regarding tourism impacts ( $M = 3.9$ ).	Community members differentiate sacred rituals from tourism-oriented performances.
Perceived tourism benefits	Moderate perception of economic benefits ( $M = 3.8$ ).	Benefits are viewed as unevenly distributed, favoring external vendors.
Governance participation	Low level of involvement in decision-making (11%).	Participation is perceived as symbolic and ineffective due to top-down governance.

**Note.** Quantitative patterns are based on descriptive survey results ( $N = 328$ ), while qualitative explanations are drawn from in-depth interviews ( $N = 20$ ).

Qualitative interviews play a central explanatory role in this analysis. They illuminate how community members interpret their roles, articulate concerns about commercialization and governance exclusion, and differentiate between cultural responsibility and institutional authority. By triangulating survey patterns with qualitative mechanisms, the findings establish a robust empirical foundation for the discussion of structural power relations and perceived behavioral control in the following section.

## DISCUSSION

### Interpreting the participation gap: cultural centrality versus institutional marginality

The findings reveal a clear participation gap in the Ok Om Bok Festival: while cultural attachment and ritual participation among Khmer residents remain consistently high, involvement in festival governance is markedly low. This gap is not contradictory but structurally produced. Quantitative results show that only 11% of respondents reported participation in festival planning or decision-making, while qualitative narratives consistently attribute this limited involvement to top-down governance arrangements and symbolic consultation.

Importantly, the low proportion of governance participation should not be interpreted as unreliable or insignificant. Rather, it functions as a meaningful indicator of structural exclusion. Qualitative evidence demonstrates that community members refrain from participating in governance not because of disinterest, but because such participation is perceived as ineffective. As interviewees repeatedly stated, decisions are often predetermined, rendering community input inconsequential. In this sense, the 11% figure reflects the limited accessibility of governance spaces rather than the absence of community willingness.

This interpretation aligns with Arnstein's conceptualization of tokenistic participation, where consultation exists without power redistribution. The persistence of such participation forms helps explain why cultural centrality does not translate into institutional influence in the Ok Om Bok Festival.

### Governance structures and perceived behavioral control

The integration of governance analysis and behavioral perspectives offers further insight into the observed participation gap. Despite strong cultural commitment and positive attitudes toward the festival, perceived behavioral control among community members remains low. Qualitative findings indicate that access to decision-making arenas, control over resources, and influence over program design are largely restricted to governmental bodies or business entities.

From a behavioral perspective, this structural exclusion suppresses perceived behavioral control, thereby discouraging governance participation even when subjective norms and cultural motivations are strong. This finding extends existing applications of the Theory of Planned Behavior in tourism studies by demonstrating that perceived behavioral control is shaped not only by individual capacity but also by governance arrangements and power relations.

The distinction articulated by participants between "the right to practice" and "the right to govern" illustrates this dynamic clearly. While cultural participation is encouraged and even expected, institutional participation is constrained. As a result, community members continue to perform ritual and cultural roles while disengaging from governance processes perceived as inaccessible or symbolic.

### Uneven benefit distribution and its implications for empowerment

Findings related to perceived tourism benefits further contextualize governance disengagement. Survey results indicate moderate perceptions of economic benefit, while qualitative narratives consistently highlight uneven benefit distribution. Most respondents are engaged in agriculture, small-scale trading, or informal tourism services, yet interviewees emphasized that significant economic gains are captured by external vendors or urban-based actors.

From a Community-Based Tourism perspective, such patterns undermine empowerment by weakening the link between cultural contribution and economic reward. When communities perceive that they bear cultural and labor responsibilities without commensurate benefits or decision-making authority, incentives for deeper participation diminish. This helps explain why service participation remains moderate while governance participation remains minimal.

Thus, economic inequity and governance exclusion reinforce one another, contributing to the persistence of the participation gap identified in this study.

### **Authenticity concerns as a driver of selective participation**

Concerns about cultural authenticity further shape participation patterns. Qualitative findings show that community members differentiate clearly between sacred ritual elements and tourism-oriented performances. While ritual participation remains high due to spiritual obligation and cultural identity, dissatisfaction with tourism-driven modifications reinforces skepticism toward governance processes associated with commercialization.

Rather than withdrawing from the festival altogether, community members adopt a strategy of selective participation: they continue to engage in ritual practices while distancing themselves from planning and managerial roles perceived as aligned with commercial priorities. This selective engagement underscores the complexity of participation in heritage tourism contexts, where cultural preservation and institutional participation may follow divergent trajectories.

### **Implications for sustainable tourism and cultural futures**

For the Ok Om Bok Festival and minority festivals globally to remain culturally sustainable, governance must shift toward shared authority, transparent benefit distribution, and community-defined authenticity standards. Empowerment in festival contexts cannot depend solely on economic participation; it must include cultural decision-making power, symbolic recognition, and institutional legitimacy.

Ultimately, sustainable festival tourism requires not only economic planning but a reimagining of cultural governance that acknowledges how communities navigate global cultural currents while striving to preserve meaning, identity, and ritual sovereignty.

### **Policy implications grounded in empirical findings**

Policy implications must be derived directly from the empirical profile of respondents and their reported experiences. Given that most participants are engaged in agriculture, small-scale trading, and informal tourism services, recommendations should focus on modest, context-sensitive governance adjustments rather than broad institutional restructuring.

First, governance mechanisms should move beyond symbolic consultation toward structured representation of Khmer community members in festival planning committees. Even limited forms of shared decision-making, such as participatory scheduling of ritual events or transparent allocation of vending spaces, could enhance perceived behavioral control.

Second, benefit distribution mechanisms should prioritize local households through small-scale, accessible opportunities rather than capital-intensive tourism investments. Measures such as preferential access to trading permits, transparent vendor selection, and support for community-led services align more closely with the economic realities of the respondent population.

Third, safeguarding ritual integrity should be formally integrated into governance processes by recognizing the authority of cultural custodians, such as monks and elders, over sacred components of the festival. This does not require full community control but rather institutional acknowledgment of cultural expertise in decision-making.

These recommendations are deliberately limited in scope and grounded in the empirical findings, avoiding assumptions about capacities or roles not supported by the data.

## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

In summary, the discussion demonstrates that the participation gap identified in the Ok Om Bok Festival is structurally produced through governance arrangements, uneven benefit distribution, and authenticity concerns. Low governance participation reflects constrained access and limited influence rather than apathy. By linking quantitative patterns with qualitative explanations, the analysis underscores how cultural commitment can coexist with institutional marginalization.

This discussion provides a focused interpretive bridge between the findings and the theoretical contributions outlined in the subsequent section, reinforcing the study's central argument that sustainable festival tourism in minority contexts requires attention to power, participation, and perceived behavioral control rather than symbolic inclusion alone.

### Theoretical Contributions

This study offers several theoretical contributions to the fields of cultural tourism, festival studies, and community participation in minority heritage contexts.

#### **Integrating CBT, Arnstein's Ladder, and TPB into a structural-psychological framework**

A primary contribution lies in synthesizing three theoretical strands CBT, Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, and TPB to explain why culturally central groups may remain institutionally marginal. While previous research has examined these frameworks separately, the present study demonstrates how structural governance conditions mediate psychological constructs, particularly perceived behavioral control. This integrated perspective advances a more holistic understanding of participation in heritage tourism settings.

#### **Conceptualizing the participation gap in minority festival governance**

The research introduces the concept of a Participation gap, defined as the disjunction between high cultural commitment and low governance involvement. By articulating this gap, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of marginalization to theorize the mechanisms through which political asymmetries, symbolic consultation, and uneven benefit distribution suppress community agency. This model is transferable to other minority contexts experiencing similar patterns of cultural centrality but institutional exclusion.

#### **Extending authenticity theory through a power-sensitive lens**

Building on debates surrounding staged and existential authenticity, the findings illustrate that authenticity concerns in minority festivals are shaped not only by market pressures but by power relations embedded within state-led heritage-making processes. The study therefore reframes authenticity as a negotiated cultural practice conditioned by governance structures, expanding theoretical discussions beyond commodification to include authority, control, and cultural sovereignty.

#### **Advancing cultural globalization theory in festival contexts**

By situating the Khmer Ok Om Bok Festival within broader cultural globalization dynamics, the study demonstrates how minority rituals are reinterpreted, curated, and sometimes reconfigured as they circulate in tourism markets. This contributes to theoretical dialogues on how global forces interact with local cultural systems, highlighting the tension between cultural visibility and cultural vulnerability. The findings underscore the need for theories of cultural change to account for the politics of representation and institutional mediation within festival tourism.

## Reinterpreting community empowerment in heritage contexts

Finally, the study deepens conceptualizations of community empowerment by showing that empowerment must include not only economic participation but also symbolic, cultural, and decision-making authority. This extends CBT scholarship by positioning empowerment as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by both structural conditions and cultural meaning-making processes.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how cultural attachment, governance structures, and tourism development interact to shape community participation in the Khmer Ok Om Bok Festival. Drawing on a qualitative-driven mixedmethods design and integrating Community-Based Tourism, Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, and the Theory of Planned Behavior, the analysis identified a pronounced participation gap between ritual involvement and governance engagement.

The findings demonstrate that Khmer community members remain culturally central to the festival through strong ritual participation and symbolic stewardship. However, their involvement in decision-making processes remains limited due to structurally constrained governance arrangements, tokenistic participation mechanisms, and uneven distribution of tourism benefits. Importantly, low governance participation does not reflect apathy or lack of cultural commitment, but rather perceptions of ineffective participation and limited influence.

By contextualizing perceived behavioral control within governance and power relations, the study extends existing behavioral approaches in tourism research. It shows that psychological willingness to participate is closely shaped by institutional access, perceived fairness, and the credibility of participatory mechanisms. The distinction articulated by community members between “the right to practice” and “the right to govern” provides a culturally grounded explanation for why strong cultural attachment does not automatically translate into governance engagement.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights the need for modest, context-sensitive governance adjustments rather than broad institutional restructuring. Structured representation of community members, transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms, and formal recognition of cultural custodians’ authority over ritual components may enhance perceived behavioral control and foster more meaningful participation. Such measures are particularly relevant in contexts where livelihoods are primarily based on agriculture, small-scale trading, and informal tourism services.

Overall, the findings contribute to broader debates on cultural sustainability and minority participation in festival-based tourism. They suggest that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires not only cultural recognition but also governance arrangements that meaningfully include cultural custodians as legitimate partners in shaping the future of their heritage.

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