

Startup Experience Trip in Strengthening Social Capital and Empowering the Economy of Partner Village

Ronald Tri Pamungkas¹, Ravik Karsidi² and Rahesli Humsona³

^{1,2,3}Sociology, Faculty Social and Political Scinces, Universitas Sebelas Maret
✉ Jl. Ir. Sutami No. 36A, Ketingan, Jebres, Surakarta, Jawa Tengah
E-mail: ronaldtripamungkas9@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of the startup Experience Trip in enhancing social capital and empowering partner village communities in Klaten Regency. Employing a qualitative case study methodology, the research analyses Experience Trip's function as a bridge among stakeholders involved in the development of community-based tourism (CBT). The findings indicate that Experience Trip not only provides alternative tourism packages including empowering, live-in, and travel options but also serves as a facilitator of community empowerment through training and mentorship programs for village communities. Utilising Robert D. Putnam's social capital framework, encompassing networks, norms, and trust, this study reveals that Experience Trip has effectively cultivated bridging social capital among different groups, fostered experience-oriented tourism, and established trust through a community involvement approach that tends to be top-down, facing challenges related to lower community participation. The implications of this study underscore the importance of inclusive collaboration and the integration of sustainability principles into tourism startup business models to reinforce long-term socio-economic benefits.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a tropical country, and tropical nations possess inherent advantages that can be effectively harnessed for tourism development. (Soma et al., 2022). The country is endowed with diverse resources that can serve as attractions for tourists. Tourism significantly influences economic growth within the nation. (Buchori et al., 2023). Cultural diversity, natural landscapes, and historical heritage sites serve as potential destinations for both international and domestic visitors. (Fahrurrozi et al., 2024). The establishment of tourism objects within a region can confer social and economic benefits to the local community. Nonetheless, the management of tourism must be conducted by competent stakeholders to ensure the equitable benefit of the community. (Usman et al., 2024). Therefore, comprehensive resource assessment is imperative prior to the development of tourism sites. (Wardiyanta, 2006).

The 1998 reform marked a significant milestone in Indonesia's historical development. The delegation of authority has become a vital component of the nation's strategic progress. This decentralisation, formalised through regional autonomy, has empowered regions to utilise their unique potentials, particularly through tourism initiatives. In accordance with Indonesian Law Number 25 of 2004 concerning the National Development Planning System, efforts to promote community economic activities are required to prioritise the enhancement of tourism capacities. Moreover, policies focused on the preservation, development, and appreciation of local wisdom, an essential aspect of regional identity, are fundamental to the advancement of regional tourism.

The social tourism business model constitutes one of the emerging frameworks within rural tourism employed in developing and less developed nations (Kummitha et al., 2023). Social entrepreneurship distinguishes itself from

traditional entrepreneurship by prioritising positive social impacts over solely financial gains (Amruddin et al., 2024). In contemporary tourism enterprises, the scope extends beyond economic development to include environmental conservation. The sector is advancing towards a phase characterised by increased sustainability, attributable to environmental degradation associated with tourism activities, namely resource exploitation, waste generation, and the greenhouse effect (Neupane et al., 2025). Consequently, tourism organisations are compelled to reevaluate, reflect, and redefine the entire industry through innovative processes and services tailored to customer needs (Aquino & Boluk, 2025).

Within the domain of tourism, social capital assumes a crucial role in the development of tourist destinations. Social capital is defined as the relationships among three fundamental elements: networks, norms, and trust, which are cultivated within a community. (Putnam, 2011). The importance of social capital in the tourism sector is supported by numerous scholarly investigations. Research conducted by (Abdillah et al., 2024) indicates that social capital is essential for the growth of the Labuan Bajo tourism region as a premier destination, with the goal of enhancing services and destination features to deliver high-quality experiences to visitors. Additionally, research by (Usman et al., 2024) demonstrates that social capital facilitates collaboration among stakeholders involved in tourism development, including local entrepreneurs who contribute to product diversification.

In Indonesia, a significant phenomenon has been observed among startups operating within the tourism sector, exemplified by Experience Trip. This startup not only offers tour packages but also acts as a catalyst for empowerment and facilitates the development of tourist destinations. Prior research on community-based tourism has predominantly focused on established villages, thereby neglecting the examination of startup actors who serve as primary drivers of change in village-based tourism. The success of Experience Trip is influenced by both the attractiveness of the destinations and the social capital inherent among stakeholders. This study explores the implementation of the empowerment model by startups, investigates the nature of relationships between startups and other stakeholders, and examines how the capacities of partner villages and tour participants are enhanced, utilising Robert D. Putnam's social capital theory. Employing Putnam's conceptualisation of social capital as an analytical framework, this research aims to understand the roles of networks, norms, and trust as mechanisms supporting community empowerment and capacity building within partner villages. The study positions startups as initiators in establishing a tourism ecosystem. Additionally, this social capital analysis is contextualised within the development of community-based tourism (CBT).

The positioning of this study can be clarified against three closely related strands of prior research. First, studies on social entrepreneurship and rural tourism in China, such as Wang et al. (2024), examine how social enterprises build legitimacy and social capital to advance sustainable development goals in a single village, but treat the enterprise as an internally embedded community actor rather than an external startup entering a network of partner villages. Second, Indonesian studies on rural tourism entrepreneurship, such as Utami et al. (2023), identify success factors: income management, collaboration, innovation, and resource management across award-winning tourism villages, but do not examine the specific mechanism by which networks, norms, and trust are built between an outside startup and multiple partner communities. Third, studies on tourism-based social entrepreneurship organisations, including Dahles et al. (2020) in Cambodia and Peredo and Wurzelmann (2015) in the Bolivian Amazon, typologize community engagement models but are not framed through Putnam's social capital dimensions applied specifically to a startup village relationship. This study departs from these strands by positioning a single tourism startup, Experience Trip, as an external initiator that simultaneously operates across several partner villages, and by using Putnam's networks-norms-trust framework as an integrated analytical lens rather than a background reference. This combination of a startup-as-initiator perspective, a multi-village case, and an explicit Putnam-based analysis of both the achievements and the limitations (namely the top-down tendency and the empowerment paradox) of the resulting social capital constitutes the novelty of this research relative to prior work on community-based tourism and social entrepreneurship.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative methodology with a case study approach. Qualitative research was selected to comprehend the phenomena experienced by the research subjects through descriptive sentences derived from data

collection and analysis techniques (Moleong, 2011). The case study conducted was an intrinsic case study, focusing on a particular case within a specific context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009). The qualitative methodology utilised in this research aims to examine the social capital of the Experience Trip startup in conjunction with other stakeholders involved in tourism development and community capacity building in Klaten Regency. Klaten Regency was purposively selected as the research location because it is the operational headquarters of Experience Trip and the site where the startup's empowerment model with partner villages, including Balerante, Delanggu, and Jatinom, has been implemented the longest, making it the most information-rich setting for observing the startup village relationship over time. The informants comprised a total of 12 individuals, consisting of 2 founder(s)/management staff of the Experience Trip startup, 3 village government officials, 4 representatives of village business groups (including the tourism awareness group/Pokdarwis), and 3 members of the local community who have participated in Experience Trip's programs. These informants were selected through purposive sampling, a technique employed to determine research subjects and objects aligned with the research objectives (Satori & Komariah, 2012).

The research data encompasses both primary and secondary sources. Primary data pertains to information obtained directly, as delineated by (Darmawan, 2013), through methods such as in-depth interviews. Secondary data refers to information acquired indirectly from other individuals and documents, in accordance with (Sugiyono, 2013). In this study, secondary data were collected from Experience Trip's social media platforms and documentation of its activities. The data analysis techniques employed included data collection, data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and data verification, following the methodology outlined by (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data collection involved gathering information from Experience Trip's social media and conducting interviews with key informants. Data reduction entailed processing and refining the data to align with the research focus, verified as consistent with the research findings. The researcher subsequently analysed and compiled the curated data into a comprehensive report. Data validity was established through source and technique triangulation: findings from interviews with the Experience Trip founders were cross-checked against interviews with village government officials and community members (source triangulation), and interview data were further compared with secondary data from Experience Trip's social media documentation and field observation notes (technique triangulation). Verification was conducted to ensure the accuracy and validity of the research data, ultimately leading to the formulation of conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Startup Experience Trip

Indonesia, a nation profoundly interconnected with advancements in technology and information across various sectors, has witnessed the emergence of new enterprises operating under the framework of start-up companies. These startups are characterised as new businesses that utilise information technology in their product offerings. (Zulkifli, 2023). Among these emerging entities is Experience Trip, a start-up engaged in the tourism industry. Headquartered in Klaten, Experience Trip collaborates with several partner villages, including Balerante Village, Kota Gede, Delanggu Village, Gari Village, Kahuman Village, Krikilan Village, and Tibayan Village. Over time, the company has maintained a focus on Balerante while continuing to serve its other partner villages. Its services encompass a diverse range of tourism options, such as nature tourism, cultural festivals, and historical tourism. Initially, Experience Trip operated as a tourism intermediary, organising open trips, recreational field trips, children's excursions, couples' trips, and walking tours. The organisation has evolved from merely functioning as an organiser to also serving as a catalyst for youth empowerment within the villages by involving and strengthening the communities of its partner villages. The organisation is founded upon three core pillars: empowerment, residence, and tourism. Furthermore, Experience Trip actively employs social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok for promotional activities. Its Instagram profile is accessible at <https://www.instagram.com/experiencetrip.id>, and its YouTube channel at <https://youtube.com/@extripid>.

Tourism Options

Tourism, as delineated in Law No. 10/2009, is characterised as activities supported by facilities and services provided by the community, entrepreneurs, the government, and local authorities (Rohmad & Probohudono, 2015). Experience Trip offers three distinct packages for engagement in tourism activities, namely empowering, live in, and travel. These

packages encompass three diverse activities. The empowering package involves initiatives that commence from the ground up, eventually establishing a tourist destination. The live-in program is akin to a community service initiative (KKN), involving participation in tourism activities while residing in a partner village affiliated with Experience Trip for several days. The travel package constitutes the final offering, involving participation in activities comparable to general tourism while visiting a partner village of Experience Trip.

The activities conducted by Experience Trip correspond with research findings indicating that the three examined locations substantially enhance the attractiveness of tourist destinations. Product innovation facilitates the delivery of unique and authentic experiences for visitors, thereby increasing satisfaction and fostering loyalty. In contrast to traditional tourism, these activities promote greater engagement by inviting participants to partake in routine community activities. Participants will engage in actions that foster meaningful and participatory experiences, thereby reducing the gap between local communities and tourists. Through these initiatives, practices of mutual respect between tourists and residents are likely to develop.

Experience Trip collaborates with partner villages in Delanggu, including the Rojo Lele studio, which hosts the Mbok Sri festival annually as an expression of gratitude from farmers for their harvest. Each participant is personally encouraged to contribute to each festival activity. Similarly, in Jatinom, through collaboration with a cultural community, participants are invited to engage in gamelan training. These activities undoubtedly offer tourists memorable experiences from every event they partake in.

Empowerment Model

Experience Trip, a startup operating within the tourism sector, is not solely focused on generating profit but also undertakes empowerment initiatives. The empowerment efforts conducted by Experience Trip concentrate on partner village communities and tourism participants. Consequently, tourism becomes an activity that directly engages and involves the community, thereby providing benefits for the local population. (Rohmad & Probohudono, 2015). The empowerment initiatives executed by Experience Trip function as a mechanism to enhance the capacity of partner village communities involved in village tourism programs within their respective regions.

When engaging in empowerment programs, communities are systematically provided with training tailored to the specific capabilities of the village community. Initiatives aimed at empowerment, such as tourism documentation, leverage the resources of partner village communities, collaborate with tourism organisations, and coordinate with camping groups to supply tents. These empowerment initiatives are also subject to evaluation to identify any deficiencies within the development of the programs. Experience trips in empowerment are distinguished from other initiatives because they additionally empower the participants involved in tourism. According to research by (Falk, 2016), visitor experiences are cultivated through collaboration between visitors and the tourism environment. Empowering tourism participants will consequently influence the development of experiential tourism.

Empowering tour participants also involves enhancing community capacity through programs provided by Experience Trip within tour packages. The concept presented by Experience Trip aims to connect tourists more closely with the lives of villagers, fostering an emotional bond between guests and residents. In addition to establishing emotional connections, this approach is designed to improve the overall visitor experience. Such initiatives are anticipated to significantly increase ecological and social consciousness. Experiential tourism emphasises the active participation of tourists in local activities that generate shared value, ranging from raising social and environmental awareness to bolstering the sustainability of community-based tourism. (Richards, 2018). Tourists are not merely visitors seeking services but are also engaged in sharing, learning, and contributing directly through conservation efforts, cultural preservation, and local economic development.

Community-based tourism, commonly known as CBT, advocates for the advancement of tourism development through the empowerment of indigenous communities (Hidayanti & Fitrianto, 2022). Experience Trip enhances partner villages by positioning the community as the primary agent rather than merely a recipient. This transformation yields a positive impact, as the community can actively participate in tourism activities. Community involvement in tourism is of

paramount importance because such activities occur within the local community's territory. Through participation, the community assumes a vital role in fostering tourism development within their own village. Community-based tourism is anticipated to generate a multiplier effect; however, this effect is contingent upon the proper implementation of empowerment initiatives. The resulting multiplier effects include the creation of employment opportunities for the village residents, a reduction in unemployment rates, and supplementary income for the local community.

The projected open unemployment rate (TPT) in Klaten Regency for the year 2025 is 3.88% (BPS Kabupaten Klaten, n.d.). Unemployment primarily originates from inadequate human resources. (Fadillah & Arbarini, 2022). Social issues have increasingly become a significant factor in engaging youth in productive endeavours, notably through the development and management of local tourism initiatives. (He et al., 2022). Youth constitute a vital asset for development efforts at the village level. However, some villages lack a comprehensive understanding of the potential inherent within their young populations. The involvement of young people at the village level plays a strategic role in fostering social, economic, and cultural transformations. (Nadila, 2023).

Enhancing the capacity of the community, particularly among local youth, constitutes one of the primary objectives of the Experience Trip initiative in partner villages. In this context, Experience Trip functions as a facilitator. It designs tourism villages grounded in conservation principles and youth collaboration. Local youth serve as the principal agents in the empowerment activities conducted by Experience Trip. As a facilitator, Experience Trip provides training to young individuals. Youth empowerment is crucial, as young people are not only fulfilling their personal development but also preparing to confront future challenges. Through capacity building, young people will play a vital role in the advancement of local tourism and, ultimately, in the sustainable enhancement of the community's economy and general welfare.

Capacity building through empowerment was also conducted via an Experience Trip to one of the partner villages situated within a disaster-prone zone, specifically Balerante Village. This Experience Trip transformed Balerante Village into a community-based disaster mitigation living laboratory. The capacity development of the Balerante Village community is undertaken as a measure to mitigate disasters. Law No. 24 of 2007 stipulates that disaster mitigation must be executed appropriately to decrease associated risks or threats, involving both physical and social enhancements, to augment community understanding and awareness in confronting natural disasters. (Wirawati et al., 2025). The activity conducted through the Experience Trip was emergency response training in Balerante Village, aimed at enhancing the community's capacity by imparting fundamental knowledge and skills related to disaster management.

The empowerment facilitated by Experience Trip can be characterised as a top-down model. The top-down approach is one that employs authority at the highest level without engaging the community. This approach often involves elements of self-interest. (Sfitri & Syahara, 2021). Strategies of empowerment employing the top-down model frequently face failures attributable to low community participation. Similarly, Experience Trip experienced comparable challenges related to the top-down empowerment model, specifically limited engagement from the partner village community. Nevertheless, in the case of Experience Trip, the low participation was primarily due to the absence of guidance from the Village Government to help the local community understand the tourism potential of their village.

The empowerment activities consist of training sessions for the community. The training materials are provided by Experience Trip to the community, such as how to serve tourists. However, Experience Trip does not limit itself to what is needed by the community, so that it knows what the community needs. Experience Trip, in collaboration with the Village Government, conducts evaluations of the programs that have been implemented. These evaluations are conducted monthly and are interspersed with new materials from Experience Trip to support the capacity of the community. The collaboration between Experience Trip and the Village Government that has been established will foster trust. This trust is important for stakeholders to ensure that empowerment remains sustainable.

Challenges and Development

Within the realm of tourism development, numerous challenges have been identified, each presenting distinct difficulties. Experience Trip is likewise subject to these issues, as it encounters obstacles in its endeavours to promote

tourism. A primary concern concerns limited accessibility; in certain partner villages near tourist attractions, transportation and supporting infrastructure remain inadequate. Such infrastructural deficiencies are likely to negatively impact tourist visitation (Rohmad & Probohudono, 2015). It is imperative for the government to prioritise support for facilities within regional tourism, as this initiative possesses the potential to significantly strengthen the regional economy.

The absence of these facilities may adversely affect tourists' interest in visiting attractions. (Kiriman et al., 2023). Infrastructure constitutes a fundamental component in the development of tourism destinations. (Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007). A well-established infrastructure is expected to generate employment opportunities, stimulate economic activities, and provide numerous additional benefits. According to the study by (Kanwal et al., 2020), a positive correlation exists between road and transportation infrastructure and community support for tourism. Enhancing road infrastructure will improve mobility and consequently increase the influx of tourists to various destinations, thereby fostering economic growth.

The deficiency of human resources presents a significant challenge, particularly within the tourism sector. Communities limited by scarce human resources may also encounter adverse effects on the sustainability of tourism endeavours. In the context of tourism, human resources are defined as the inherent potential within individuals to serve as adaptable and transformative social actors, capable of self-regulation and utilising natural resources to attain prosperity in a manner that is both balanced and sustainable. (Rohmad & Probohudono, 2015). It is imperative for local communities to actively participate in capacity building initiatives at all stages of the tourism industry, including planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Enhancing the capacity of local human resources undoubtedly plays a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of tourism. One aspect of improving human resource capacity pertains to ecological understanding. According to research by (Lee & Jan, 2019), it appears that the community exhibits a lack of concern for environmental conservation. Environmental conservation is essential not only for the sustainability of tourism but also for the community's survival. Consequently, it is imperative for the community to enhance its human resource capabilities to recognise the significance of environmental conservation. The understanding of conservation within the local community must be complemented by awareness among local institutions, specifically the village government. Research by (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008) indicates that strong local institutions enable the community to better adapt to change. These findings suggest that the village government and the local community cannot operate independently in capacity building; rather, they must collaborate towards a shared objective.

Through empowerment with a network of stakeholders from Experience Trip and the village government, the community can collaborate with external parties such as NGOs for conservation. One initiative that can be undertaken is to raise funds for environmental education programs to enhance public awareness of environmental issues. (Peredo & Wurzelmann, 2015). A positive environmental setting will also foster increased environmental consciousness and encourage eco-friendly behaviours within tourist destinations. (Sakata & Prideaux, 2013). Experience Trips aim to augment the community's ecological capacity and concurrently improve education regarding waste management. Additionally, the village conducts regular clean-up activities as part of a new cultural practice.

Tourism, as articulated by (Rohmad & Probohudono, 2015), possesses the capacity to induce transformative changes across various domains. Experience trips, which also empower partner village communities, have yielded contrary outcomes, exemplified by diminished community participation. Residents involved in tourism startups are regarded as principal stakeholders, given their necessity throughout the entire tourism development process. (Dahles et al., 2020). The engagement of local communities in tourism startups is pivotal to the success of tourism development, as they interact directly as the subjects of tourism, thereby leaving an impression on tourists that fosters repeat visitation. (Bhave, 1994). It is essential for residents to be actively involved at every stage of tourism development, from planning to evaluation. Furthermore, participation should not be limited to selected communities; all local communities possess the right to access capacity-building initiatives and engage in tourism activities.

Throughout the empowerment process, spanning from the planning phase to the evaluation phase, the community shall accumulate valuable experience. This experiential knowledge shall be disseminated orally, based upon the residents' own encounters. Consistent with the findings of the study (Dahles et al., 2020) it is evident that community participation is significantly influenced by residents' perceptions. With active engagement from the local community, it is anticipated that residents will recognise the potential inherent within their village. Furthermore, it is expected that such involvement will foster a sense of ownership among community members. This sense of ownership is likely to positively influence their participation in empowerment initiatives and capacity-building efforts within the community.

Less attractive tourist destinations also pose a significant obstacle. Nonetheless, tourism promotion can be utilised to attract visitors. Enhancing efforts in tourism promotion will undoubtedly increase tourists' interest in exploring various destinations. Tourism promotion plays an essential role in the development of tourism. (Rohmad & Probohudo, 2015). The integration of digital technology into marketing strategies serves as a key driver for expanding the influence of businesses, thereby enhancing operational efficiency and market access for small and medium-sized enterprises. The Krealogi program exemplifies how digitalisation empowers creative SMEs in Indonesia, with participants receiving technology-based training through this platform, including marketing via social media, cloud-based inventory management systems, and e-commerce. (Amruddin et al., 2024). The implementation of technological solutions will improve operational efficiency and facilitate broader market reach. Additionally, Experience Trip leverages various platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to promote its tourism services.

Community empowerment through the Experience Trip has encountered a paradoxical challenge. This challenge, stemming from the empowerment process, manifests as an empowerment paradox. The initial stage of this paradox can be observed in the Experience Trip initiative, which provides valuable learning opportunities while preserving strategic oversight. The empowerment paradox describes a scenario wherein interventions aimed at enhancing community capacity inadvertently render the community reliant on external entities. Naturally, this presents a challenge for the community. As evidenced in the research findings by (Dahles et al., 2020), certain community-based organisations serve as facilitators for village development but remain dependent on foreign donations. To mitigate the empowerment paradox, the Village Government may serve as a counterbalance to the influence of the Experience Trip, thereby ensuring that the relationship is not entirely under the control of the startup.

Inter-Stakeholder Relations

Numerous villages across Indonesia lag behind in development and community welfare, partly owing to inadequate coordination among stakeholders. (Kumala et al., 2024). Experience Trip collaborates with stakeholders at various levels to implement its programs and benefits from a robust local foundation. By leveraging local potential and wisdom, this program involves the village government, local youth as field activists, tourists and volunteers as external partners, community networks, and social media as tools for program promotion. Multilevel collaboration fosters an inclusive and adaptive system that engages diverse parties. Comprehensive and sustainable development is essential for maintaining relevance and competitiveness in an increasingly complex tourism market. (Setiawan et al., 2024).

According to (Soekanto & Sulistyowati, 2013), relationships can be classified into two categories: associative (positive) and dissociative (negative). Associative relationships, characterised as positive, are formed based on the strengthening of solidarity. Research on stakeholder relationships has demonstrated the presence of associative interactions among stakeholders. The Experience Trip, the Village Government, local communities, volunteers, and community networks promote continuity through their engagement activities. Tourism stakeholders actively communicate and coordinate efforts to develop the village's potential. Each stakeholder functions in accordance with their respective duties and responsibilities. Direct communication among stakeholders facilitates ongoing dialogue, thus maintaining continuous interaction and solidarity. By maintaining a high level of engagement among stakeholders, the Experience Trip initiative seeks to integrate the concept of sustainable tourism into village regulations. This initiative is anticipated to contribute to the enhancement of the local community's economy through the development of business units owned by local residents.

Discussion

The Startup Experience Trip exceeds the boundaries of a mere tourism initiative; it serves as a catalyst for transformative change by promoting the development of new social relationships among startups, rural communities, local institutions, and tourism participants. Putnam, who regards social capital as being constructed through repeated social practices, agrees with the goal of the Startup Experience Trip to foster stakeholder relationships. The Experience Trip functions as a mediating platform that consolidates economic, social, and cultural interests within the community-based tourism ecosystem. Furthermore, the trip acts as a conduit for establishing a cross-group network through collaboration with stakeholders such as Pokdarwis (tourism awareness group), camping communities, local documentation and photographers, local communities, and village administrations. This network connects two previously unconnected entities that previously lacked direct engagement with each other within the same domain. Their convergence at a common point facilitates intensive communication among stakeholders, especially when driven by shared objectives. The findings by (Kummitha et al., 2023) suggest that community participation in social entrepreneurship-oriented tourism is influenced by the strength of cross-actor networks. Maintaining this level of communication enhances stakeholder solidarity and promotes sustainable engagement based on shared values and objectives.

The network built among stakeholders, ranging from the Experience Trip startup, tourism groups, camping communities, local documentation/photographers, local communities, and village governments, has enabled local communities in partner villages to transform from being mere objects of tourism to becoming subjects of tourism. Collaboration among these actors is particularly important in terms of social capital. The results of the research from (Usman et al., 2024) show that social capital plays an important role in accelerating collaboration between tourism stakeholders in developing regions. Collaboration between actors based on relationships and networks has resulted in the strengthening of local communities. The strengthening of local communities that have transformed into subjects of tourism in partner villages is reinforced by the transfer of knowledge related to the management of tourism villages. The strengthening of local communities is not only limited to the management of tourism villages for communities engaged in tourism, but in one of the partner villages, the community is also strengthened to face disaster preparedness because it is still within the disaster radius. This transfer of knowledge is facilitated by the Experience Trip startup to local communities engaged in tourism. The village government acts as a medium to bridge the gap between startups and local communities. Promoting the potential of villages through tourism and making local communities the subject creates a collective identity, with villages becoming new tourist destinations and people becoming independent and participating in the development of their villages. The vertical relationship between the Experience Trip startup and stakeholders gives stakeholders in the village access to resources that they did not have before.

Within the established network, certain norms are unquestionably obligatory. Robert D. Putnam's social capital norms serve as guidelines for regulating activities and ensuring the stability of cooperation. Experience Trip develops norms that are not solely centred on consumption. Empowering and live-in programs foster a norm that tourism functions as an educational environment for all stakeholders. The community is no longer regarded as an object but has evolved into an active subject that benefits from capacity-building initiatives. The village community transforms into a partner, extending beyond mere cooperation and service provision. Experience Trip maintains a reciprocal relationship with stakeholders, considering not only immediate profits but also engaging in capacity-building activities aligned with Robert D. Putnam's social capital theory. The relationship between Experience Trip and stakeholders in partner villages is cultivated gradually over an extended period. Norms that become unwritten rules, according to Putnam's social capital, are fragile if not supported by a moral orientation. Experience Trip implements empowerment and capacity-building programs for local communities and promotes the planting of native seedlings within tourism activities, reflecting a commitment to sustainable tourism. It recognises that its operations are not solely profit-driven but also attentive to the environmental and social impacts of tourism, supporting sustainable practices. According to research by (Neupane et al., 2025), tourism startups that incorporate sustainable tourism practices tend to exhibit stronger social resilience in comparison to those focused solely on profit. The strength of such social resilience within tourism startups invariably influences their long-term viability.

Adherence to established norms will foster trust. Trust in Robert D. Putnam's concept of social capital represents a crucial aspect, as the lack of trust hampers the effectiveness of networks and norms. Research conducted by (Abdillah

et al., 2024) indicates that trust is fundamental to the quality of the tourist experience and to tourist loyalty within community-based tourism destinations. The establishment of trust between Experience Trip and stakeholders in partner villages enables the organisation to deliver trips that provide authentic and meaningful experiences, including empowering and live-in programs. Such trust is cultivated through community engagement in managing tourism villages and collaboratively assessing programs, thereby positioning the community as the central focus. With this trust, the community becomes more receptive to hosting tourists, adjusts cooperative patterns, and dedicates their time and effort, thereby assuming an active role. This is particularly significant given that Experience Trip has advantages in tourism services, especially live-in programs. With tourists' confidence, Experience Trip will enhance its reputation as a competent startup in tourism activities within Klaten and the surrounding areas, ensuring its sustainable existence.

Read together, the three findings on networks, norms, and trust suggest a more complex relationship with Putnam's theory than a simple confirmation. Putnam's original formulation treats networks, norms, and trust as mutually reinforcing elements that accumulate through voluntary, horizontal association. The Experience Trip case shows that these elements can also be generated through a vertical, startup-initiated relationship: the startup builds the network by design, the norms are introduced by the startup rather than emerging organically from the community, and trust follows from the startup's consistent delivery of training and evaluation rather than from pre-existing communal ties. This suggests a boundary condition for Putnam's framework when it is applied to externally initiated development interventions: bridging social capital can be manufactured by an outside actor, but its durability appears contingent on whether the Village Government develops sufficient independent capacity to sustain the network, norms, and trust once the startup's direct involvement recedes. The top-down tendency and the empowerment paradox identified in this study are therefore not incidental weaknesses of the Experience Trip model but a structural consequence of building social capital vertically rather than horizontally, which qualifies the applicability of Putnam's community-centred account of social capital formation to startup-led rural tourism development.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the results of this study that the Experience Trip startup has a significant role not only as a tourism business actor, but also as an agent of change in strengthening social capital and empowering partner villages in Klaten Regency. Using a community-based tourism (CBT) approach, Experience Trip has successfully built a multilevel and cross-actor collaborative network (bridging social capital) by involving the village government, local youth, village business groups, communities, and tourists. This network strengthens the social relationships that have been built, opens up access to resources, and encourages the transformation of the community from objects to subjects of tourism.

Utilising Robert D. Putnam's social capital perspective as an analytical framework, Experience Trip has effectively established inclusive networks, norms fostering collaboration, and trust through active participation of local communities in the management of tourist villages and joint program assessment. The empowering, residential, and travel initiatives offer participatory tourism experiences that significantly improve the quality of the tourist experience while concurrently strengthening the social, economic, and ecological capacities of the partner village communities.

Nevertheless, research consistently endeavours to address the challenges associated with empowerment strategies that employ a top-down approach, which indirectly results in limited community engagement. The conditions related to empowerment also give rise to the empowerment paradox, wherein initiatives may inadvertently encourage community dependence on external entities, such as startups. The role of the village government is crucial in balancing power dynamics to ensure that the empowerment process is more inclusive and sustainable.

The Experience Trip demonstrates that tourism startups founded on social engagement possess significant potential to advance village development by augmenting social capital and empowering local communities. The ongoing social and economic advantages can be optimised through improved collaboration among stakeholders, careful selection and implementation of empowerment strategies, and the systematic incorporation of sustainability principles into the operational and regulatory frameworks of tourism villages.

The policy implication is to integrate community-based tourism into village regulations to ensure the sustainability of village tourism programs despite changes in external actors and villages so that they can manage their own tourism autonomously and sustainably. For researchers in subsequent studies, the results of this study can be used as an expansion of the location and comparison of cases in different regions and to strengthen the perspective of linking social capital to see the extent to which policies from institutions strengthen or limit the space for local community participation.

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