

Enhancing Festival Event Quality Through Trend-Driven Innovation in Regional Indonesia

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Abstract

This study investigates the stagnation in the conceptual execution of the Sagarurung Festival in the PALI Regency (Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir), which has remained largely unchanged over time and failed to incorporate contemporary trends and innovations. This lack of novelty has reduced visitor engagement, particularly among the younger demographic. To address this, the research explores how trend-driven innovation, operationalized through four core variables: strong festival atmosphere, harmonious interpersonal interaction, distinct cultural symbols, and rich festival activities, can enhance the attractiveness and quality of regional festivals. A quantitative approach using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed, with data collected from 285 festival attendees. The analysis revealed a statistically significant influence of a strong festival atmosphere on the three other variables. These findings support the development of a comprehensive event model that integrates emerging trends into local cultural contexts to revitalize festival experiences. Theoretically, this study extends event management literature by introducing trend-driven innovation as a strategic framework for enhancing the relevance and competitiveness of regional festivals. It offers a scalable model that can inform policy and practice in similar socio-cultural settings, contributing to increased tourism and sustained cultural preservation.

Keywords: Festival Event, Event Innovation, Festival Attractiveness, Regional Tourism, Trend-Driven Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is renowned for its rich diversity of cultural festivals, which play a central role in preserving heritage and fostering community engagement. In 2019 alone, the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy supported over 100 festivals in the National Calendar of Events, underscoring the importance of such events in promoting cultural identity and regional development (Iwan & Widiyanto, 2018). Festivals serve as platforms for cultural communication and strategic tools for tourism promotion and economic stimulation. For instance, the Sriwijaya Festival in Palembang attracted more than two thousand domestic and international visitors through its vibrant performances of Malay music, traditional dances, culinary showcases, and musical dramas rooted in the Sriwijaya Kingdom legacy (Lian & Harahap, 2021). Such festivals have demonstrated their potential to preserve intangible cultural heritage while contributing to local economic ecosystems (Winangoen et al., 2020).

A notable case is the Sagarurung Festival in PALI Regency (Penukal Abab Lematang Ilir), South Sumatra. This annual event celebrates local culinary heritage, particularly the preparation of *sagarurung*—a traditional dish made from freshly caught and smoked fish such as catfish and snakehead. Beyond culinary traditions, the festival also features cultural performances, fun walk events, and appearances by regional artists aimed at drawing broader public attention. Despite these efforts, recent editions of the Sagarurung Festival have failed to resonate with younger audiences due to the repetitive nature of its programming and lack

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of innovative elements. Field interviews confirm that the younger generation perceives the event as monotonous and disconnected from contemporary trends.

This phenomenon highlights a growing challenge: many regional festivals continue to operate as static, ceremonial events rather than dynamic, trend-aware experiences. While festivals can create lasting impressions and stimulate economic growth (Laing, 2018), research shows that without meaningful innovation, they risk becoming routine and losing relevance (Juraschek et al., 2020). Furthermore, the digital behavior of younger audiences—heavily shaped by social media trends—demands visually engaging, interactive festivals that align with current cultural aesthetics (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015). The 2023 Sagarurung Festival exemplifies this disconnect. It failed to differentiate itself from previous editions, lacking novelty and contemporary appeal. Innovation is not merely a complementary feature but a critical determinant of a festival's long-term sustainability (Purchase et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2021). However, most literature on festival innovation tends to focus on urban contexts or generalized models, leaving a significant research gap in understanding how regional festivals, particularly in emerging economies, can strategically incorporate trend-driven innovation to enhance event quality and audience engagement. This study addresses that gap by applying and extending the Festival Attractiveness Model proposed by Li et al. (2020), which comprises four interrelated variables: strong festival atmosphere, harmonious interpersonal interaction, distinct cultural symbols, and rich festival activities. These dimensions capture a festival's experiential and cultural appeal and offer a robust framework for analyzing its attractiveness (Lee & Huang, 2012; Rihova et al., 2015; Neves, 2012).

Grounded in pre-research observations at the Sagarurung Festival and supported by qualitative and quantitative data, this study seeks to analyze the influence of a strong festival atmosphere on the three other components of the attractiveness model—harmonious interpersonal interaction, distinct cultural symbols, and rich festival activities. The objective is to develop a trend-responsive regional festival development model that aligns with contemporary audience preferences while preserving local identity. This research contributes to the field of event management and regional tourism development by 1) Bridging the gap between innovation theory and festival practice in rural contexts, 2) Proposing a scalable model adaptable to similar cultural settings, and 3) Offering empirical insights into how festivals can integrate trends without compromising authenticity. Focusing on regional Indonesia, this study offers a critical perspective that expands the current discourse beyond metropolitan-centric paradigms and into the realities of culturally rich but innovation-lagging localities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Festival innovation has increasingly become a central focus in event management studies, particularly as festivals evolve from mere cultural rituals to strategic instruments for tourism and regional development. One of the most widely adopted frameworks in this domain is the Festival Attractiveness Model proposed by (Li et al., 2020), which conceptualizes attractiveness through experiential and symbolic dimensions. This model identifies four key constructs—strong festival atmosphere, harmonious interpersonal interaction, distinct cultural symbols, and rich festival activities—as the primary variables influencing engagement. These variables are interrelated and foundational to understanding how festivals can evolve in response to emerging cultural and social trends.

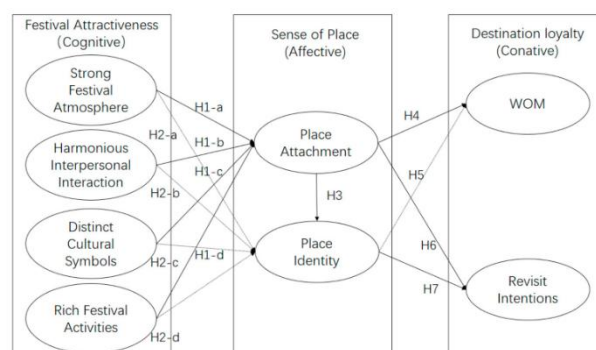


Figure 1. Festival Attractiveness Model

Source: Adapted from (Li et al., 2020)

As visualized in Figure 1, the model positions "strong festival atmosphere" as the central driver that directly influences the remaining three variables. A vibrant atmosphere shapes visitors' emotional connection with the event and sets the stage for deeper interpersonal and cultural experiences. This atmosphere encompasses

sensory and psychological dimensions, ranging from spatial aesthetics and crowd dynamics to emotional resonance and symbolic meaning (Neves, 2012). In festivals, such an atmosphere often acts as the emotional scaffolding upon which all other experiences are built.

The second construct, harmonious interpersonal interaction, is particularly crucial in festival settings, as these events are inherently social. According to (Rihova et al., 2015), meaningful interactions among attendees foster a sense of belonging and co-create value during the festival experience. These interactions often occur in communal spaces or through shared activities and rituals. Equally important are the distinct cultural symbols, which serve as communicative artifacts that reflect a community's identity, values, and aspirations. These symbols—whether expressed through traditional attire, performances, crafts, or culinary practices— attract visitors and function as mechanisms for cultural transmission and pride (Lee & Huang, 2012). Finally, rich festival activities refer to the curated programming and content diversity offered to participants. The more diverse, inclusive, and innovative the activity offerings are, the greater the opportunity for attendees to find personal relevance and enjoyment (Lee & Huang, 2012). Moreover, when festivals incorporate current trends— such as sustainability initiatives, digital engagement, or pop-culture collaborations—they enhance their visibility and appeal, particularly to younger demographics. Collectively, these four constructs offer a holistic framework for understanding festival quality and participant engagement.

This study adopts the Festival Attractiveness Model as a theoretical foundation but extends its application by incorporating trend-driven innovation, particularly in regional settings like the Sagarurung Festival in the PALI Regency, South Sumatra. Initial field observations indicate that while the festival is culturally rich, its repetitive programming and lack of innovation have diminished interest, especially among younger audiences. This stagnation reflects a broader issue in regional festivals that continue to follow ceremonial scripts without evolving to meet contemporary expectations. To bridge this gap, the study proposes a localized adaptation of Li et al.'s framework by analyzing the influence of a strong festival atmosphere on the three other constructs — interpersonal interaction, cultural symbolism, and activity diversity—while integrating trend-responsive elements relevant to regional audiences. As illustrated in Figure 2, the conceptual thinking framework positions the strong festival atmosphere as a mediating force that triggers enhancements in the three experiential domains. This framework is informed by empirical field data and designed to be adaptable for other regional festivals facing similar challenges in innovation and audience renewal.

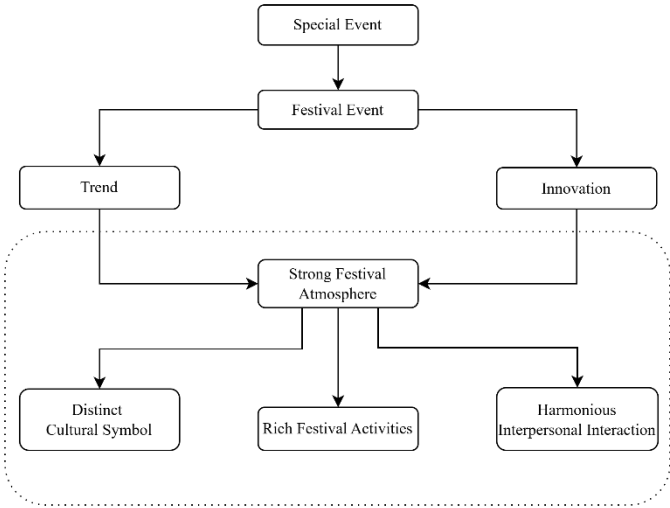


Figure 2. Conceptual Thinking Framework

Source: Author's illustration, 2025

Through this theoretical lens, the research aims to generate a trend-aware development model that aligns with the cultural fabric of local communities while embracing contemporary design, communication, and participatory strategies. In doing so, it contributes to the refinement of event innovation theory in non-urban settings and offers a replicable blueprint for cultural festivals seeking both relevance and sustainability in an era of shifting audience expectations.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative strategies to comprehensively examine the factors influencing festival attractiveness in a regional Indonesian context.

While the primary emphasis was on quantitative analysis, qualitative data were incorporated to enrich contextual understanding. The quantitative component was framed within a positivist paradigm, aiming to objectively measure the relationships among key variables: strong festival atmosphere, harmonious interpersonal interaction, distinct cultural symbols, and rich festival activities. The qualitative component, grounded in phenomenology and ethnographic observation, triangulated the findings and provided deeper insights into the lived experiences of festival participants and organizers (Creswell, 1999). The study population consisted of local, domestic, and international visitors attending the Sagarurung Festival in 2023, which attracted approximately 1,000 attendees. Participant selection followed a purposive sampling technique, in which respondents were deliberately chosen based on specific inclusion criteria, such as active attendance and engagement in the event. This approach was further supported by initial consultations with the Head of the Department of Culture and Tourism of PALI Regency, who served as a key informant. Using Slovin's formula to determine a representative sample size with a 95% confidence level, the final sample included 285 respondents.

In addition to the survey respondents, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four categories of key stakeholders: festival organizers, cultural officials, festival enthusiasts, and general visitors. These informants were selected for their involvement in the planning, execution, or participation in the Sagarurung Festival. The qualitative data, derived from field observations and interviews, were analyzed using phenomenological and ethnographic interpretation to uncover emergent themes and validate survey findings. The measurement instruments for the four core variables were adapted from Li et al. (2020), using a series of Likert-scale items developed and contextualized for the Indonesian festival setting. Each construct—Strong Festival Atmosphere (SFA), Harmonious Interpersonal Interaction (HII), Distinct Cultural Symbols (DCS), and Rich Festival Activities (RFA)—was operationalized through three observable indicators. Table 1 presents the measurement matrix, including code labels, indicators, and item formulations.

Table 1. Variable Measurement Matrix

Variable	Code	Indicator	Research Statement
Strong Festival Atmosphere (SFA)	SFA1	Bustling festival atmosphere	I observe a bustling festival atmosphere
	SFA2	Joyful and peaceful ambiance	I see a joyful and lively festival atmosphere
	SFA3	Unique environment	I observe a unique festival environment
Harmonious Interpersonal Interaction (HII)	HII1	Gathering people	Some activities bring visitors together
	HII2	Shared happiness	Some activities involve sharing happiness
	HII3	Collective future outlook	Some activities anticipate a beautiful future
Distinct Cultural Symbols (DCS)	DCS1	Symbolic meaning and blessings	I feel the good wishes brought by auspicious symbols
	DCS2	Cultural connotation understanding	I understand the cultural symbol connotations of this event
	DCS3	Cultural transmission and development	I experience activities that inherit and develop cultural symbols
Rich Festival Activities (RFA)	RFA1	Diverse activity content	I see a wide range of activities
	RFA2	Variety in form	There are various forms of activities
	RFA3	Innovation in programming	There are innovative elements integrated into festival activities

Source: Adapted from (Li et al., 2020)

Data from the questionnaires were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the support of IBM SPSS AMOS version 24. This method enabled the examination of latent constructs and the structural relationships among the variables in a single unified model. Descriptive statistics were first computed using Microsoft Excel 2010 to assess central tendencies and data normality. Subsequently, SEM was applied to test the model's goodness-of-fit, confirm the reliability of the constructs, and validate the research hypotheses. SEM provided both confirmatory and exploratory insights into the causal pathways linking the festival atmosphere to the enhancement of interpersonal, cultural, and activity-related dimensions of the event experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study are the result of a mixed-methods approach that combines phenomenological analysis with structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS software. The quantitative results offer robust statistical support for the model's constructs, while qualitative insights from field observations and interviews provide contextual grounding. Together, these data sources confirm the influence of trend-driven innovation,

particularly the role of a strong festival atmosphere, on other experiential dimensions of the festival. The Goodness of Fit Model, as shown in Figure 3, presents a satisfactory model fit across five indices—CFI, AGFI, GFI, IFI, and RFI—each exceeding the minimum threshold value of 0.90 (Wijanto, 2016), indicating that the model is well-suited to explain the data patterns observed in this study.

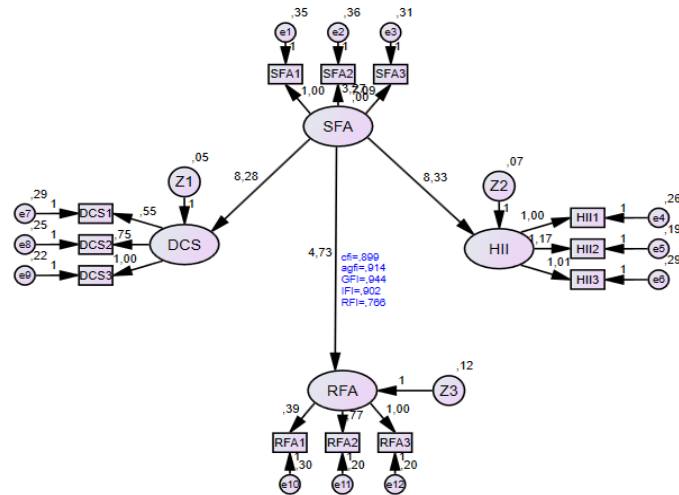


Figure 3. Goodness of Fit Model

Source: Research data, 2025

The factor loading test further reinforces the model's validity. All indicator variables within the four core constructs—Strong Festival Atmosphere (SFA), Harmonious Interpersonal Interaction (HII), Distinct Cultural Symbols (DCS), and Rich Festival Activities (RFA)—demonstrated significant loadings at $p \leq 0.05$ (Hair et al., 2017). These results indicate a strong correlation between latent constructs and their corresponding manifest indicators, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Loading Factor Results

Variable	Indicator	p-value	Significance (α)	Decision
SFA	SFA1–SFA3	0.00	≤ 0.05	Significant
HII	HII1–HII3	0.00	≤ 0.05	Significant
DCS	DCS1–DCS3	0.00	≤ 0.05	Significant
RFA	RFA1–RFA3	0.00	≤ 0.05	Significant

Source: Research data, 2025

The SEM hypothesis testing further revealed that the strong festival atmosphere significantly influenced all three dependent variables: interpersonal interaction, cultural symbolism, and activity richness, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	p-value	α Standard	Conclusion	Effect
SFA \rightarrow HII	0.00	≤ 0.05	H_0 rejected	Significant
SFA \rightarrow DCS	0.00	≤ 0.05	H_0 rejected	Significant
SFA \rightarrow RFA	0.04	≤ 0.05	H_0 rejected	Significant

Source: Research data, 2025

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the pivotal role of festival atmosphere as a central mechanism in shaping the experiential, cultural, and interactive dimensions of regional festival attractiveness. While the Sagarurung Festival exhibits all four dimensions—strong atmosphere, harmonious interpersonal interaction, distinct cultural symbols, and rich festival activities—their current implementation reflects a lack of strategic alignment with evolving audience expectations and trend-based innovation. This misalignment undermines the festival's potential as a dynamic platform for cultural communication and economic activation. The qualitative and quantitative data indicate that although the festival incorporates traditional visual elements and encourages public participation, its atmosphere is fragmented due to inconsistent spatial design, ineffective crowd control, and suboptimal scheduling. These operational inefficiencies disrupt the sensory and

emotional coherence required to construct an immersive experience. Notably, the festival's branding fails to capitalize on local iconography in its promotional strategy, diluting its distinctive regional identity.

More critically, the study validates a strong festival atmosphere's significant and positive influence on harmonious interpersonal interaction ($p = 0.00$), highlighting how affective environments facilitate social cohesion. Music, performance rituals, and collective culinary practices serve as entertainment and social lubricants that dismantle interpersonal barriers. These findings support prior work by (Chang and Tsai, 2016), emphasizing that emotionally charged environments foster openness, tolerance, and prosocial behavior. In culturally pluralistic contexts like PALI Regency, such atmospheres can promote intercultural dialogue and a shared sense of belonging—an outcome central to public cultural events' long-term sustainability. The influence of festival atmosphere on distinct cultural symbols is similarly pronounced ($p = 0.00$). In the case of the Sagarurung Festival, symbols such as traditional dress, culinary practices, and localized aesthetic motifs are revitalized when embedded in a vibrant and celebratory context. Rather than functioning as static displays, these cultural elements become experiential conduits, allowing visitors to engage with heritage in ways that are sensorial, affective, and dialogical. This aligns with (Neves, 2012), who argues that festival atmospheres can function as semiotic amplifiers, elevating the symbolic salience and narrative accessibility of cultural assets. Importantly, the findings suggest that the atmosphere is not merely an environmental variable but a mediating force that converts symbolic representation into embodied meaning.

The third dependent variable, rich festival activities, is also significantly affected by a strong festival atmosphere ($p = 0.04$). A vibrant setting encourages greater audience participation and organizer innovation, leading to more diverse and interactive programming. Field observations revealed that when the ambiance was engaging, visitors were likelier to stay longer, explore more deeply, and participate more enthusiastically. However, logistical shortcomings—particularly in transitioning between activities and managing space—limited the overall coherence of the festival program. These operational gaps underscore the need for professionalized event design that integrates atmospheric planning with program flow, a best practice advocated in contemporary event management literature (Lee et al, 2012). These findings reinforce the notion that the festival atmosphere is not a passive backdrop but a strategic resource capable of activating multiple dimensions of visitor engagement. Its capacity to influence interpersonal dynamics, elevate cultural representation, and stimulate programmatic diversity positions it as a central lever for enhancing festival quality, especially in regional contexts where festivals serve cultural and economic functions. However, the data also reveal that this potential remains underleveraged in the case of Sagarurung due to the absence of trend-driven innovation. The event's current form appears anchored in preservation rather than evolution, restricting its appeal to younger, experience-oriented demographics.

To move beyond ritual repetition and foster sustained engagement, regional festivals must integrate trend-sensitive strategies that are culturally adaptive yet forward-looking. This includes aligning festival content with digital behaviors (e.g., social media aesthetics, influencer participation), embracing sustainability and inclusivity as design principles, and curating experiences rooted in tradition and reflective of contemporary cultural currents. Such integration would improve the visitor experience and enhance the festival's role in regional branding and tourism development. This study affirms that the interplay between festival atmosphere and the experiential variables of interaction, symbolism, and activity richness offers a powerful explanatory model for festival attractiveness. While the Sagarurung Festival possesses strong cultural capital, its lack of trend-responsiveness limits its transformative potential. The proposed framework, centered on the atmosphere as a mediating variable, provides a diagnostic lens and a design roadmap for festival planners aiming to elevate local events into culturally resonant, economically viable, and socially inclusive experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that a strong festival atmosphere significantly influences the three key dimensions of festival attractiveness: harmonious interpersonal interaction, distinct cultural symbols, and rich festival activities. By applying structural equation modeling alongside qualitative field observations, the research demonstrates that the atmosphere is not a passive background element but a central, activating force that shapes visitor experiences. The Sagarurung Festival, as a case study, reflects both the potential and the challenges of regional cultural events, particularly those that have yet to integrate innovation with tradition fully. Conceptually, this research extends the Festival Attractiveness Model by introducing trend-driven innovation as a critical strategic layer. Contemporary design, digital engagement, and evolving visitor expectations situate the festival within a more dynamic, future-oriented framework. This hybrid model is applicable in the Indonesian context and offers transferability to other cultural festivals globally, especially in emerging regions with untapped tourism potential.

From a managerial perspective, several practical strategies emerge. First, to cultivate a stronger festival atmosphere, organizers should incorporate immersive and aesthetic elements, such as lighting, eco-friendly materials, and visual storytelling, that blend local identity with current global trends. These visual cues enhance the physical environment and shape emotional responses. Second, promoting harmonious interpersonal interaction can be achieved by leveraging digital tools such as mobile apps, real-time feedback platforms, and interactive social zones that encourage casual yet meaningful engagement. Staff and volunteer training should also emphasize inclusive, trend-aware communication styles that foster a welcoming festival climate.

Regarding distinct cultural symbols, the study recommends revitalizing traditional elements through modern interpretations—for example, by collaborating with local artists to reimagine heritage in digital or wearable forms. Storytelling should be emphasized through multimedia content, such as short videos or social media reels that humanize and contextualize cultural expressions. Finally, organizers must curate programs that reflect current interests, such as wellness, sustainability, and creativity, for rich festival activities while maintaining a coherent thematic flow. Engaging influencers or cultural ambassadors can increase outreach and participatory engagement, while real-time data analytics can adjust programming in response to visitor behavior and preferences.

As global festival landscapes continue to evolve, regional festivals must balance authenticity with adaptability. This study provides a robust empirical foundation and a scalable conceptual model for event managers, policymakers, and cultural stakeholders seeking to position local festivals as competitive, inclusive, and culturally meaningful experiences. Future research should explore complementary variables, such as brand identity and co-creation, and adopt more immersive qualitative methodologies to deepen the understanding of how the atmosphere operates across different socio-cultural contexts. In doing so, we move closer to a model of event design that is as rooted in place as it is responsive to change, ensuring that festivals remain vital spaces of celebration, connection, and innovation.

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