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Regenerative destination brand gestalt: Toward an integrated socio-ecological branding framework

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Abstract

This study advances destination branding theory by proposing the Regenerative Destination Brand Gestalt (RDBG), a relational socio-ecological branding framework that integrates regenerative tourism and brand gestalt theory. Existing destination branding models primarily emphasize image and market positioning, offering limited explanation of how regenerative values are enacted through relationships among communities, ecosystems, and tourism practices. Adopting a grounded theory methodology (GTM), the study utilized multisite netnography of regenerative tourism discourse across five major social media platforms, supplemented by a systematic literature review (SLR). Analysis of 3,552 qualitative data units generated 18 thematic categories, which were synthesized into six higher-order dimensions. The framework comprises two interconnected layers: People, Place, and Purpose as foundational dimensions, and Connection, Coexistence, and Custodianship as relational processes through which regenerative values are enacted and sustained. The findings conceptualize regenerative destination branding as a dynamic socio-ecological system in which destination meaning emerges through reciprocal relationships among people, place, and purpose. The study contributes theoretically by extending brand gestalt theory beyond representational perspectives toward a relational and process-oriented understanding of destination branding, offering a new conceptual foundation for examining how destinations generate long-term socio-ecological value and resilience.

1. Introduction

Contemporary tourism scholarship increasingly questions the adequacy of development models that prioritize economic growth at the expense of ecological integrity, social equity, and cultural continuity. Conventional tourism practices have been widely criticized for reproducing extractive logics that contribute to environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and uneven development outcomes, exposing the limitations of sustainability frameworks primarily oriented toward impact mitigation and efficiency-based management (Dredge, 2022; Bellato, 2022). In response to escalating ecological and social challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and community vulnerability, scholars have called for more transformative approaches capable of addressing the structural dynamics underpinning tourism systems (Pung et al., 2024).

Within this context, regenerative tourism has emerged as a paradigm that repositions tourism as a regenerative force capable of restoring ecological systems, strengthening community capacity, and supporting long-term socio-ecological resilience (Bellato et al., 2024; Dredge, 2022). Unlike sustainability-oriented approaches that emphasize reducing negative impacts, regenerative tourism foregrounds renewal, reciprocity, and co-evolution between people and place. It conceptualizes destinations as living systems shaped by dynamic interactions among ecological, social, and cultural processes (Ateljevic and Sheldon, 2022). This perspective extends sustainability discourse by framing tourism as an integrative practice that actively contributes to the regeneration of socio-ecological systems rather than merely minimizing harm (Bellato et al., 2023; Aquino et al., 2024; Rastegar, 2025).

Despite growing scholarly attention, the integration of regenerative principles into destination branding theory remains limited. Existing destination branding frameworks predominantly emphasize symbolic representation, image construction, and market positioning, often treating destinations as marketable objects rather than living socio-ecological systems (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2025; Prakash et al., 2024). While these approaches explain how destinations communicate value and differentiate themselves competitively, they provide limited capacity to explain how regenerative values are enacted, negotiated, and sustained through relationships among communities, ecosystems, governance structures, and tourism practices. Consequently, destination branding research has struggled to account for the relational and systemic processes through which destinations generate socio-ecological value beyond promotional narratives and performance-based metrics.

This limitation is particularly significant in regenerative tourism contexts, where destination meaning emerges not from isolated attributes or communication strategies, but from the dynamic configuration of social, ecological, and ethical relationships. Such complexity challenges conventional branding paradigms grounded in representational and consumer-oriented assumptions. Understanding regenerative destinations therefore requires a conceptual approach capable of capturing interdependence, relationality, and process-based value creation within tourism systems.

To address this gap, this study proposes the RDBG, a relational socio-ecological branding framework integrating regenerative tourism principles with brand gestalt theory. Rooted in gestalt thinking, the framework conceptualizes destination meaning as an emergent whole produced through the interaction of people, place, and purpose rather than as an aggregation of discrete destination attributes. By extending brand gestalt theory into regenerative tourism contexts, the study reframes destination branding as a systemic and relational process through which regenerative values are embodied, enacted, and sustained over time.

The study contributes theoretically in three ways. First, it advances destination branding theory by shifting branding from a representational and promotional perspective toward a relational and process-oriented understanding of destination meaning. Second, it extends brand gestalt theory by demonstrating its relevance for explaining complex socio-ecological configurations in regenerative tourism settings. Third, it introduces the RDBG as a conceptual framework for understanding how destinations generate long-term socio-ecological value through reciprocal relationships among communities, ecosystems, and tourism actors. In doing so, the study provides a foundation for rethinking how destinations are conceptualized, governed, and evaluated in an era of ecological uncertainty and transformative tourism development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Regenerative Tourism

Regenerative tourism has emerged as a transformative paradigm that extends beyond the sustainability paradigm's emphasis on impact mitigation toward the active renewal of socio-ecological systems (Ateljevic, 2020; Cave and Dredge, 2020; Bellato et al., 2023). Unlike sustainable tourism, which primarily focuses on balancing economic, environmental, and social objectives, regenerative tourism conceptualizes destinations as living systems capable of adaptation, renewal, and long-term flourishing (Bellato et al., 2022). This perspective reframes tourism from a managed economic activity into a relational process grounded in reciprocity, stewardship, and systemic interdependence among people, place, and nature (Bellato, 2024; Mandagi et al., 2021).

The growing prominence of regenerative tourism reflects increasing concern over climate change, biodiversity loss, and socio-cultural degradation, which expose the limitations of growth-oriented and efficiency-based tourism models (Pung et al., 2024; Day, 2024). In response, regenerative tourism foregrounds justice, resilience, and community empowerment as foundational principles rather than secondary outcomes (Aquino et al., 2024; Rastegar, 2025). Simultaneously, tourist motivations are shifting toward value-driven experiences emphasizing meaning, responsibility, and contribution, positioning regenerative tourism as both a normative and strategic tourism paradigm (Alcalá-Ordóñez et al., 2025; Manthiou et al., 2025).

Despite increasing scholarly attention, regenerative tourism remains conceptually fragmented. Existing studies tend to emphasize ecological restoration, governance innovation, or socio-cultural revitalization in isolation, with limited integration into a coherent theoretical framework (Bellato and Pollock, 2025; Iddawala and Lee, 2025). Consequently, regenerative tourism is often treated as a normative aspiration rather than a systematically theorized socio-ecological process. This limitation is particularly evident in destination branding research, where regenerative principles are frequently reduced to sustainability messaging or symbolic representation rather than understood as embedded relational structures shaping destination meaning and stakeholder interaction (Bellato et al., 2023; Luong et al., 2023). Addressing this gap requires a conceptual perspective capable of explaining how regenerative values emerge, interact, and become institutionalized within destination systems.

2.2. Destination Branding

Destination branding has traditionally focused on image construction, symbolic differentiation, and market positioning to enhance destination competitiveness. Conventional branding approaches largely conceptualize destinations as marketable entities whose value is communicated through promotional narratives and experiential representations (Prakash et al., 2024). While such approaches explain how destinations attract tourists and establish competitive identity, they offer limited capacity to explain how destinations embody ethical responsibility, ecological stewardship, and socio-cultural reciprocity within increasingly complex tourism systems.

Within regenerative tourism discourse, destination branding is increasingly understood as a relational and value-based process through which destinations articulate identity, purpose, and responsibility. Moving beyond promotional logic, regenerative destination branding integrates image, experience, and

ethics into a coherent meaning system reflecting ecological care, cultural continuity, and community well-being (Pung et al., 2024; Ravichandran, 2023; Yen et al., 2020). Branding therefore functions not merely as communication, but as a socio-ecological mechanism through which destinations express and enact regenerative commitments.

The strategic significance of regenerative branding lies in its capacity to reconcile destination competitiveness with long-term socio-ecological responsibility. By articulating distinctive regenerative identities, destinations can attract tourists seeking ethical, transformative, and place-based experiences while strengthening community resilience and environmental legitimacy. Empirical studies demonstrate that regenerative branding enhances perceived value, emotional attachment, and long-term loyalty, reinforcing destination sustainability and stakeholder trust (Yen et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2025). Importantly, regenerative branding reframes competitiveness not as short-term market advantage, but as the capacity to generate shared value for communities, ecosystems, and visitors simultaneously (Garanti et al., 2024).

However, existing scholarship remains fragmented, often examining sustainability communication, experiential design, or stakeholder participation separately. As a result, destination branding research has struggled to explain how regenerative values become integrated into coherent destination meanings and lived tourism experiences (Gün, 2025). Existing frameworks also remain predominantly representational and consumer-oriented, offering limited understanding of branding as a relational and systemic process embedded within socio-ecological interactions. This highlights the need for a theoretical framework capable of capturing the holistic, emergent, and processual nature of regenerative destination branding.

2.3. Brand Gestalt and Regenerative Destination

Brand gestalt provides a theoretically robust foundation for addressing this gap by conceptualizing brand meaning as an emergent whole rather than an aggregation of isolated attributes. Rooted in gestalt psychology, brand gestalt theory argues that consumers perceive brands through integrated configurations of sensory, symbolic, emotional, and experiential cues (Mandagi et al., 2021; Mandagi and Centeno, 2021). In tourism contexts, this perspective explains how visitors synthesize stories, experiences, physical environments, and community interactions into a coherent and meaningful destination perception (Mandagi and Centeno, 2024).

The explanatory strength of brand gestalt lies in its ability to capture higher-order outcomes such as attachment, loyalty, advocacy, and emotional resonance. Empirical studies demonstrate that gestalt-based destination perceptions strongly influence tourist satisfaction and behavioral intentions, underscoring their importance for destination competitiveness and long-term relationship building (Pongoh and Mandagi, 2025; Mandagi et al., 2024; Walean et al., 2024). More importantly, brand gestalt theory moves beyond attribute-based branding perspectives by emphasizing the relational and holistic processes through which destination meaning emerges.

This perspective is particularly relevant within regenerative tourism contexts, where destination meaning cannot be reduced to individual sustainability attributes or promotional claims. Regenerative destinations embody complex socio-ecological relationships involving community agency, ecological stewardship, ethical responsibility, and long-term system vitality. Such multidimensional and interdependent characteristics require a conceptual framework capable of explaining how regenerative values are collectively perceived, internalized, and enacted through integrated destination experiences.

Despite its relevance, brand gestalt theory has rarely been extended to explicitly regenerative tourism settings. Existing applications primarily focus on conventional tourism and service environments, with limited consideration of regenerative principles such as reciprocity, custodianship, coexistence, and socio-ecological renewal (Mandagi and Centeno, 2025; Pongoh and Mandagi, 2025; Rantung et al., 2025). Consequently, current branding theories remain insufficient for explaining how regenerative destination meaning emerges through dynamic interactions among people, place, and purpose. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes the RDBG framework as a relational socio-ecological branding model that integrates regenerative tourism principles with brand gestalt theory. Through this integration, the study advances destination branding theory beyond representational and market-oriented perspectives toward a systemic understanding of how destinations generate long-term socio-ecological value and regenerative legitimacy.

3. Method

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design to examine how RDBG is constructed, communicated, and interpreted across diverse tourism contexts. To capture both conceptual foundations and lived expressions of regenerative branding, the study employed an integrative methodological approach combining a SLR and multisite netnography. The combination of these approaches enabled the study to bridge theoretical discourse with naturally occurring digital narratives, providing a richer understanding of how regenerative destination meanings emerge through socio-ecological interactions and online tourism experiences (Mandagi et al., 2025; Mandagi and Centeno, 2025; Zarkada et al., 2024).

GTM guided the overall research design due to its suitability for developing emergent theoretical frameworks from complex and relational social phenomena. Rather than treating regenerative branding as a predefined construct, the study adopted an inductive orientation that allowed conceptual categories and relationships to emerge iteratively from both scholarly and experiential data sources. The integration of SLR and netnography was therefore intended not to validate existing theory, but to facilitate theoretical abstraction across conceptual and empirical domains

3.1 Data Collection

The SLR followed a structured three-stage procedure consisting of identification, screening, and refinement. Searches were conducted in Scopus and Web of Science using the keywords “regenerative

tourism” and “brand gestalt” across titles, abstracts, and keywords. The review covered publications published between 2010 and July 2025 and included peer-reviewed journal articles within tourism, business, management, economics, and social sciences. After removing duplicates, non-English publications, and irrelevant records, 122 articles were retained. To enhance rigor and transparency, article selection and screening were independently cross-validated by multiple researchers.

The SLR was complemented by multisite netnography to capture naturally occurring digital expressions of regenerative tourism and destination meaning. Netnography was selected because regenerative values are increasingly communicated, negotiated, and experienced through digital tourism platforms and user-generated narratives. Data were collected from Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and TripAdvisor due to their high user engagement and relevance to tourism discourse. Both archival and immersive netnographic approaches were employed, enabling analysis of existing content alongside ongoing online interactions and community discussions (Kozinets, 2023; Kozinets and Gretzel, 2024).

[Insert Fig. 1]

A purposive and theory-driven sampling strategy guided the selection of five Indonesian tourism destinations: Penglipuran Village, Komodo National Park, Wakatobi National Park, Tanjung Puting National Park, and Tangkahan. These destinations were selected because they demonstrate key regenerative characteristics, including community-based governance, ecological stewardship, integration of conservation and livelihoods, and active local participation. Indonesia provides a particularly relevant empirical context due to its ecological diversity, cultural plurality, and long-standing traditions emphasizing harmony between humans and nature, such as Tri Hita Karana. The selected destinations also vary in governance arrangements, ecological conditions, and tourism development trajectories, enabling comparative exploration across diverse socio-ecological contexts. Figure 1 presents the spatial distribution of the selected destinations, while Table 1 summarizes their regenerative characteristics.

Table 1
Regenerative tourism destinations used as study sites

Destination	Location	Regenerative Focus	Key Regenerative Characteristics
Penglipuran Village	Bali	Cultural and spiritual regeneration	Community-owned tourism guided by *Tri Hita Karana* philosophy, strong local governance, reinvestment in cultural preservation and environmental cleanliness
Komodo National Park	East Nusa Tenggara	Biodiversity conservation and visitor governance	Controlled visitor numbers, zoning systems, conservation education, protection of endemic Komodo dragons
Wakatobi National Park	Southeast Sulawesi	Marine ecosystem regeneration	Coral reef conservation, community-based marine protection, sustainable tourism supporting marine biodiversity resilience
Tanjung Puting National Park	Central Kalimantan	Wildlife rehabilitation and environmental education	Orangutan rehabilitation programs, rainforest restoration, conservation-oriented river tourism and learning experiences
Tangkahan	North Sumatra	Community-led conservation and livelihood transformation	Local initiative-based eco-tourism, elephant conservation, transition from extractive activities to sustainable community enterprises

Source: Authors' own work (2026)

[Insert Table 1]

Netnographic data collection was conducted between October and December 2024 and generated 3,552 units of user-generated content (UGC), including posts, captions, comments, reviews, and visual materials related to tourism experiences and destination narratives. Content was screened for thematic relevance to regenerative tourism, sustainability, place meaning, and destination branding. Duplicate and non-relevant entries were excluded from analysis. User-generated texts written in Indonesian and local languages were translated into English with attention to preserving semantic and cultural meaning.

Archival netnography involved systematic extraction and analysis of publicly accessible digital content associated with the selected destinations. Complementing this, immersive netnography included prolonged observation of online tourism communities and discussions to understand how regenerative destination meanings were interpreted, negotiated, and shared among users. This unobtrusive approach preserved the natural flow of online interaction while minimizing researcher intervention and influence on participant expression.

Ethical considerations guided all stages of data collection and analysis. Only publicly accessible data were used, no personally identifiable information was recorded, and participant anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. The study did not involve direct interaction with users or

intervention within online communities. These procedures align with established ethical standards for digital ethnography and netnographic research (Dillette et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2015). Table 2 summarizes the final dataset, consisting of 3,552 UGC entries collected between 2021 and 2025, ensuring post-pandemic relevance and contextual consistency. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, indicated by the absence of substantively new themes or conceptual insights during subsequent coding iterations.

Table 2
Summary of qualitative data across platforms and rural tourism destination

Destination	Facebook (A)	Instagram (B)	TikTok (C)	TripAdvisor (D)	Total
Penglipuran Village	73	127	91	73	364
Komodo National Park	116	203	145	117	581
Wakatobi National Park	111	195	139	111	556
Tanjung Puting National Park	101	176	126	100	503
Tangkahan	310	543	388	307	1,548
Total	711	1,244	889	708	3,552
Source: Authors' own work (2026)					

[Insert Table 2]

3.2 Data Analysis

Qualitative data derived from the SLR and multisite netnography were analyzed using NVivo following the principles of the GTM. GTM was adopted because of its suitability for developing emergent theoretical explanations from complex and relational social phenomena rather than imposing predetermined conceptual structures on the data (Corbin, 2021; Strauss and Corbin, 2014). This approach enabled the study to inductively identify how regenerative destination meanings, relationships, and practices are constructed across both scholarly discourse and user-generated narratives. The analysis also employed constant comparison and iterative abstraction to identify recurring patterns, relational dynamics, and higher-order conceptual structures associated with regenerative destination branding (Akcam et al., 2019).

The analytical process consisted of three sequential coding stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, qualitative materials from the SLR and netnographic dataset were examined line by line to identify recurrent meanings, experiences, interactions, and symbolic expressions related to regenerative tourism and destination branding. This stage generated 108 first-order codes representing diverse dimensions of ecological stewardship, community participation, ethical orientation, place attachment, and relational tourism experiences.

Axial coding was subsequently employed to identify conceptual relationships among the first-order codes through continuous comparison across data sources. Related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories reflecting shared relational and socio-ecological characteristics. This process resulted in 18 thematic categories that were further consolidated into six higher-order dimensions representing both foundational and interactional components of the RDBG. Throughout this stage, memo writing and iterative comparison were continuously conducted to refine conceptual boundaries, clarify emerging relationships, and strengthen theoretical coherence.

[Insert Fig. 2]

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the analytical process reflects a progressive movement from empirical observations toward theoretical integration. The integration of SLR and netnographic data enabled triangulation between conceptual discourse and lived tourism experiences, strengthening the analytical robustness and contextual grounding of the framework.

Selective coding constituted the final stage of analysis, during which the six higher-order dimensions were theoretically integrated around a central explanatory concept representing regenerative destination branding as a relational socio-ecological system. This stage focused on identifying the dynamic relationships through which regenerative values are embodied, enacted, and sustained across destination contexts. Rather than treating dimensions as isolated constructs, the analysis conceptualized them as interdependent processes collectively shaping regenerative destination meaning and long-term socio-ecological value creation.

Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently until theoretical saturation was achieved, indicated by the absence of substantively new categories, relational patterns, or conceptual insights during subsequent coding iterations. To enhance analytical rigor, coding decisions and category refinement were periodically reviewed across the research process to ensure consistency and conceptual clarity. The resulting framework therefore reflects a coherent, empirically grounded, and theoretically integrated representation of regenerative destination branding. Table 3 provides illustrative examples of the coding process across the three coding stages.

Table 3
Example of coding process

Sample Cues	Open Coding	Axial Coding (Theme)
“Tourism here doesn’t change how people live, it helps them protect it. Feeling grateful to be a guest, not just a visitor.”	Respect for local ways of life	Community Stewardship
“Wearing traditional clothing and joining rituals felt meaningful, not performative.”	Participatory cultural engagement	Cultural Continuity
“Everyone here treats each other with respect, whether you’re local or visiting.”	Mutual respect in host–guest relations	Social Cohesion
“The calm atmosphere and slow pace make you feel connected, not rushed.”	Emotional connection to place	Relational Experience
“Knowing that our visit supports village programs and conservation made the trip meaningful.”	Awareness of shared benefit	Ethical Responsibility
“Before arriving, we were asked to learn about local customs and rules.”	Pre-visit ethical orientation	Responsible Tourism Practice
“Traveling here feels like being part of something that protects nature rather than harms it.”	Tourism as regenerative action	Ecological Reciprocity
“You don’t just observe nature here; you become part of it.”	Human–nature interconnectedness	Human–Nature Reciprocity
“The way the village welcomes guests makes you feel accountable for how you behave.”	Moral accountability in tourism	Ethical Engagement
“It feels like everyone, locals and visitors, shares responsibility for this place.”	Shared responsibility and care	Collective Stewardship
Source: Authors’ own work (2026)		

[Insert Table 3]

4. Results and Discussion

The findings conceptualize the Regenerative Destination Brand Gestalt (RDBG) as a relational socio-ecological system emerging through the dynamic interaction of People, Place, and Purpose. As illustrated in Fig. 3, these dimensions operate not as isolated destination attributes, but as interdependent structures through which regenerative destination meaning is collectively produced. People represent the socio-cultural sphere, Place reflects the ecological and spatial domain, and Purpose embodies the ethical and future-oriented direction guiding tourism development. Their intersection signifies the emergence of regenerative destination meaning through the alignment of community agency, ecological stewardship, and moral commitment.

[Insert Fig. 3]

Within this framework, regeneration is conceptualized not as a static sustainability outcome, but as an ongoing socio-ecological process shaped through reciprocity, participation, and long-term relational interaction. The findings indicate that each foundational dimension activates a corresponding interactional mechanism. People foster Custodianship through collective responsibility and stewardship practices. Place enables Coexistence by reinforcing interdependence between tourism activities and ecological systems. Purpose generates Connection through emotional, ethical, and value-driven relationships linking visitors, communities, and environments. These processes operate recursively, such that interactional experiences simultaneously reinforce the foundational dimensions from which they emerge. For instance, participatory stewardship strengthens community agency, while experiences of coexistence deepen ecological attachment and ethical commitment. Regenerative destination meaning therefore develops through continuous socio-ecological feedback loops rather than through symbolic branding communication alone.

This dynamic configuration extends conventional destination branding perspectives in several ways. Unlike image-based or market-oriented branding models that primarily conceptualize destinations as objects of representation and differentiation, the RDBG explains how destination meaning emerges relationally through lived interaction, collective participation, and ethical engagement. In contrast to sustainability branding approaches that often focus on communicating environmental responsibility, the RDBG conceptualizes regenerative branding as an embedded socio-ecological process through which destinations enact renewal, reciprocity, and long-term value creation. Regenerative branding therefore functions not merely as a promotional strategy, but as a relational system through which destinations cultivate socio-ecological legitimacy, resilience, and collective meaning.

At the same time, the findings reveal that regenerative branding is not free from tension and contradiction. While the selected destinations demonstrate strong regenerative characteristics, user narratives occasionally reflect concerns regarding tourism pressure, uneven participation, and the challenge of balancing conservation goals with growing visitor demand. These tensions suggest that regenerative branding remains vulnerable to symbolic adoption in cases where regenerative narratives are not fully supported by governance capacity or equitable stakeholder involvement. Consequently, the findings reinforce that regenerative legitimacy depends not only on branding narratives, but on the extent to which regenerative values are consistently enacted through participatory governance, ecological stewardship, and ethical tourism practice.

4.1. Foundational Dimensions: People, Place, and Purpose

The findings identify six interrelated dimensions organized into two complementary clusters. The first cluster, consisting of People, Place, and Purpose, represents the foundational structure of regenerative destination branding. These dimensions establish the socio-cultural, ecological, and ethical conditions through which regenerative destination meaning is formed. The second cluster, comprising Connection,

Coexistence, and Custodianship, represents the interactional processes through which regenerative values are enacted, experienced, and sustained. Figure 4 illustrates the structural integration between these foundational and interactional dimensions.

[Insert Fig. 4]

4.1.1 People

The findings reveal that community agency constitutes a central foundation of regenerative destination branding. Across the data, local communities are consistently positioned not as passive beneficiaries of tourism development, but as active co-creators shaping tourism practices, destination identity, and long-term development trajectories (Tabatabaei et al., 2025; Mandagi and Centeno, 2025). User-generated narratives frequently emphasize collective participation, local decision-making, and shared ownership, reinforcing the idea that regenerative tourism depends upon community-led governance and social inclusion (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025). Visitors commonly interpret such participation as evidence of authenticity, resilience, and local empowerment:

This place grows because the community decides together what kind of tourism they want. Visitors are welcomed, but the direction always comes from the people who live here.

These findings extend conventional destination branding perspectives that typically position local communities as supporting actors within promotional narratives. Instead, the People dimension demonstrates that regenerative destination meaning emerges through active community participation and relational governance structures. In this sense, branding becomes embedded within everyday social practices and collective stewardship rather than external communication alone.

Beyond participation, the findings indicate that social equity functions as an essential component of regenerative legitimacy. Narratives frequently highlight the inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups in tourism activities, portraying equity as integral to destination vitality rather than a peripheral social objective (Turčinović et al., 2025; Tariq, 2025). Such representations suggest that regenerative destinations derive legitimacy not solely from economic performance, but from their ability to strengthen social cohesion and collective well-being (Berbekova et al., 2022; Peypoch et al., 2024).

What stands out here is how everyone has a role. Women, young people, and elders all seem to be part of the story, and that makes the place feel genuinely welcoming.

The findings further demonstrate that cultural continuity reinforces regenerative destination identity by embedding tourism within everyday community life. Traditions are represented not as commodified attractions designed for tourist consumption, but as living cultural practices sustained through collective participation and intergenerational transmission (Mandagi et al., 2025; Rantung et al., 2025). This distinction is theoretically important because it positions culture as an evolving relational resource rather than a symbolic branding asset:

What makes this place special is that the traditions aren't put on for show. They are part of daily life and being able to witness that feels meaningful and real.

At the same time, the findings also suggest potential tensions within community-centered regenerative branding. While participatory governance strengthens authenticity and local ownership, increasing tourism visibility may also create pressures for cultural performance and selective representation of local identity. This indicates that regenerative branding requires continuous negotiation between cultural preservation, tourism demand, and community autonomy.

4.1.2 Place

The findings indicate that regenerative destinations are experienced not as passive scenic environments, but as living ecological systems actively shaped through restoration, stewardship, and reciprocal human–nature relationships. Across user-generated narratives, ecosystems are frequently described as recovering through intentional regenerative practices such as reforestation, habitat rehabilitation, and conservation initiatives (Mathisen et al., 2022). These activities are interpreted not merely as environmental management strategies, but as visible expressions of long-term ecological commitment and responsibility (Fatima et al., 2024; Ebisi et al., 2025; Mathisen et al., 2022). In this context, tourism becomes associated with ecological renewal rather than extraction, aligning with regenerative tourism perspectives emphasizing restoration and socio-ecological repair (Dredge, 2022; Lemarié and Bellato, 2025):

"You can really see how the forest is coming back to life here. It feels good knowing that tourism is helping restore the land rather than damage it." [A20]

The findings further reveal that biodiversity and ecological vitality generate emotional and relational responses among visitors. Encounters with wildlife, forests, and intact ecosystems frequently evoke feelings of wonder, attachment, and interconnectedness, reinforcing pro-environmental awareness and ecological empathy (Buckley, 2022; Huynh et al., 2025). Rather than functioning solely as tourism resources, landscapes are perceived as living systems characterized by continuity, interdependence, and shared existence:

Walking through the village feels like being part of a living ecosystem, everything feels connected and alive.

Importantly, the Place dimension demonstrates that regenerative branding extends beyond environmental imagery or sustainability communication. Ecological integrity becomes embedded within destination meaning through lived encounters with restoration, biodiversity, and environmental reciprocity. This extends sustainability branding perspectives that often emphasize symbolic environmental positioning rather than relational ecological experience.

However, the findings also indicate that ecological regeneration remains vulnerable to tourism growth pressures. Several narratives implicitly reflect concern regarding overcrowding, environmental carrying

capacity, and the challenge of balancing accessibility with ecological protection. These tensions reinforce that regenerative branding cannot rely solely on environmental narratives, but must continuously negotiate the relationship between tourism development and ecological limits.

4.1.3 Purpose

The findings indicate that regenerative destinations are strongly organized around ethical and future-oriented purpose. Across the data, tourism is framed not merely as an economic activity, but as a moral practice guided by responsibility, care, and long-term socio-ecological commitment. User-generated narratives frequently emphasize ethical conduct, community well-being, and ecological responsibility, reflecting broader regenerative principles grounded in fairness, reciprocity, and accountability toward both human and non-human stakeholders (Lazic et al., 2024; Omma, 2024). In this context, destination legitimacy is evaluated not only through visitor satisfaction or market success, but through the integrity with which destinations uphold regenerative values (Butler, 2022; Costa et al., 2022).

What impressed me most is how everything here feels guided by values, not profit. You can tell that the community truly cares about doing tourism the right way.

The findings also reveal that regenerative destinations are commonly understood as interconnected socio-ecological systems in which environmental, cultural, and economic elements function relationally rather than independently. Visitors frequently describe tourism as embedded within broader cycles of community life, ecological balance, and cultural continuity, reflecting systems-oriented understandings consistent with regenerative tourism theory (Bellato et al., 2022; Dredge, 2022; Hartman, 2023).

Everything here feels connected. The forest, the people, the traditions. You can sense that nothing exists on its own; it all works together.

A strong future-oriented orientation further distinguishes the Purpose dimension. Narratives frequently emphasize intergenerational responsibility, continuity, and long-term stewardship, positioning tourism as a mechanism for protecting ecological and cultural systems for future generations (Bellato et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2024). This orientation contrasts sharply with extractive tourism models focused on short-term growth and consumption (Becken and Kaur, 2021).

What makes this place special is that everything they do seems to be for the future, not just for today. It feels like they are protecting something for the next generation.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that Purpose functions as the ethical anchor connecting community agency and ecological stewardship within the broader regenerative destination system. Unlike conventional branding models emphasizing differentiation and competitiveness, the Purpose dimension positions tourism development within broader moral and socio-ecological responsibilities. Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that maintaining ethical consistency across governance, tourism operations, and stakeholder interests remains a continuing challenge, particularly as regenerative tourism becomes increasingly institutionalized and commercialized.

4.2. Interactional Dimensions: Connection, Coexistence, and Custodianship

The second cluster of the RDBG, consisting of Connection, Coexistence, and Custodianship (3Cs), represents the interactional processes through which regenerative values are experienced, enacted, and sustained within destination systems. While the foundational dimensions of People, Place, and Purpose establish the structural conditions of regenerative branding, the 3Cs explain how regenerative meaning becomes operationalized through lived experiences, reciprocal relationships, and ethical engagement. Together, these dimensions illustrate that regenerative destination branding functions not as a static identity, but as a continuous socio-ecological process shaped through interaction among visitors, communities, and environments. Figure 5 illustrates the structural integration of these interactional dimensions.

[Insert Fig. 5]

Importantly, the interactional dimensions also reveal the recursive dynamics through which regenerative destination meaning is reinforced over time. Participatory experiences strengthen emotional attachment and stewardship, which subsequently deepen community engagement and ecological awareness. These reinforcing feedback loops demonstrate that regenerative branding emerges through ongoing socio-ecological interaction rather than one-directional destination communication. In this sense, the RDBG extends conventional branding perspectives by explaining how regenerative legitimacy is continuously co-created through participation, coexistence, and shared responsibility.

4.2.1 Connection

The findings indicate that regenerative destinations are increasingly experienced through active participation that positions visitors as contributors rather than passive consumers. Across the dataset, tourists are frequently depicted as engaging in conservation activities, community programs, and place-based learning experiences, becoming directly involved in regenerative processes. This participatory orientation reflects a shift from observational tourism toward experiential contribution, where visitors invest time, effort, and emotional engagement in the places they visit (Park and Widyanta, 2022; Fonseca et al., 2021). Such involvement aligns with regenerative tourism perspectives emphasizing co-responsibility and participatory engagement as mechanisms for strengthening relational bonds between people and place (Bellato et al., 2022; Pawłowska-Legwand et al., 2024).

Joining the tree-planting and cleanup activities made me feel like I was part of something bigger. I wasn’t just visiting, I was contributing to the place and its future.

Beyond physical participation, the findings reveal that connection is fundamentally relational and co-created through interaction between visitors and local communities. Tourists frequently describe learning local traditions, participating in community routines, and sharing everyday experiences as

central to meaningful tourism encounters. These interactions foster mutual understanding and blur conventional distinctions between hosts and guests, reinforcing tourism as a collaborative social process rather than a transactional activity (Valderrama and Polanco, 2024). This relational dynamic reflects broader perspectives on co-created tourism value, where meaning emerges through interaction and shared experience rather than consumption alone (Fu, 2025; Eggli et al., 2025):

Spending time with the local families, learning how they live and work, made the trip feel personal. It wasn't just sightseeing; it felt like being part of their world, even if only briefly.

The findings further indicate that connection produces emotional attachment extending beyond the immediate tourism encounter. Immersive and participatory experiences foster feelings of belonging, care, and personal transformation, strengthening long-term emotional bonds between visitors and destinations (Weizman et al., 2023; Mandagi et al., 2025b). These emotional responses reinforce regenerative values by encouraging ongoing support for environmental conservation and community well-being:

I didn't expect to feel so connected, but leaving this place felt like leaving something that had become part of me.

4.2.2 Coexistence

The findings reveal that regenerative destinations are increasingly framed as spaces of reciprocal coexistence between humans and nature rather than sites of extraction or environmental domination. User-generated narratives consistently emphasize a worldview in which nature is regarded as an active stakeholder deserving care, respect, and ethical consideration. This perspective aligns with regenerative and socio-ecological theories positioning humans as embedded within interconnected ecological systems rather than existing separately from them (Paddison and Hall, 2024). Within this relational framing, tourism is understood as a mutually beneficial process in which environmental stewardship and human well-being are interdependent (Dwyer, 2023; Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025).

Being here made me realize that nature isn't something we use, it's something we coexist with. You feel responsible for it, not above it.

The findings further indicate that ecological balance constitutes a central narrative through which regenerative destinations are interpreted and communicated. Visitors frequently reference conservation initiatives, low-impact infrastructure, renewable practices, and ecosystem restoration as evidence that tourism contributes positively to environmental health rather than merely minimizing damage (Rastegar, 2025). This reflects a significant conceptual shift from sustainability as maintenance toward regeneration as enhancement and renewal (Shengrui et al., 2024):

What impressed me most was how everything here works in harmony, energy use, waste management, and conservation all feel thoughtfully connected.

Importantly, coexistence is not limited to isolated environmental actions but extends toward systemic understandings of destinations as interconnected socio-ecological systems. User narratives frequently describe tourism as embedded within broader cycles of environmental renewal, cultural continuity, and community resilience. Such interpretations align with regenerative systems theory emphasizing adaptability, feedback loops, and continuous socio-ecological renewal (Yunibandhu and Hallinger, 2025):

You can feel that everything here is connected. The land, the people, and the way tourism works together to keep the place alive

4.2.3 Custodianship

The findings indicate that custodianship functions as the ethical extension of regenerative destination branding, translating relational engagement into sustained responsibility and stewardship. Across the data, visitors frequently describe themselves not as temporary consumers of place, but as participants sharing collective responsibility for environmental protection and cultural preservation. This sense of stewardship is cultivated through participatory activities, interpretive learning, and community-led tourism initiatives emphasizing care for place as a shared moral obligation (Hughes and Scheyvens, 2021; Tariq, 2025). Such narratives reflect regenerative tourism perspectives that reposition tourism from consumption toward co-responsibility and ethical stewardship (Alhitmi et al., 2024; Mathisen et al., 2022; Dredge, 2022).

Being here made me realize that taking care of this place is everyone’s responsibility. You don’t just visit, you become part of protecting it.

The findings further demonstrate that ethical responsibility strongly shapes how visitors interpret their tourism behavior and broader relationship with destinations. User-generated narratives frequently frame travel decisions as moral choices involving mindfulness, respect, and accountability toward local communities and ecosystems. Rather than prioritizing convenience or entertainment alone, visitors express increasing awareness of how tourism practices affect environmental integrity and social well-being (Kalogeras and Mejri, 2025; Morshed, 2025).

Traveling here made me rethink how I travel everywhere else. It’s not just about enjoying the place, but about behaving in a way that respects the people and the environment.

In addition, regenerative destinations are portrayed as transformative learning environments fostering ecological awareness and long-term behavioral change. Through direct experiences, storytelling, and interaction with local communities, visitors develop deeper understanding of environmental challenges, sustainability practices, and socio-ecological interdependence. Importantly, this learning extends beyond knowledge acquisition to influence values, attitudes, and everyday behaviors, reinforcing long-term ethical engagement (Bellato et al., 2023; Dredge, 2022; Figueira and Fullman, 2025):

I didn’t just learn about sustainability here, I felt it. It changed how I think about my everyday choices and my relationship with nature.

Collectively, the findings suggest that custodianship transforms regenerative branding from symbolic sustainability discourse into lived ethical practice. Through stewardship, responsibility, and transformative learning, regenerative destinations cultivate enduring commitments to socio-ecological care that extend beyond the tourism experience itself.

4. CONCLUSION

This study advances regenerative tourism and destination branding scholarship by conceptualizing the RDBG as a relational socio-ecological branding framework through which destinations generate long-term socio-ecological value. Drawing on GTM of SLR and multisite netnography, the findings demonstrate that regenerative destinations are not defined solely by environmental performance, symbolic sustainability narratives, or cultural assets, but by the dynamic interaction of community agency, ecological stewardship, and ethical purpose. Through the integrated dimensions of People, Place, and Purpose, and their interactional extensions of Connection, Coexistence, and Custodianship, the study explains how regenerative destination meaning emerges through lived socio-ecological relationships rather than promotional representation alone.

The findings further demonstrate that regenerative branding operates through mutually reinforcing relational processes. Community participation and shared governance strengthen collective ownership and social cohesion, while ecological stewardship fosters reciprocal relationships between humans and nature. Ethical orientation simultaneously guides how tourism is practiced, experienced, and sustained over time. Together, these processes position regeneration not as a symbolic branding claim, but as an embedded socio-ecological practice through which destinations cultivate resilience, legitimacy, and long-term place-based identity.

The study contributes theoretically in several ways. First, it extends destination branding theory by shifting branding from a predominantly representational and market-oriented perspective toward a relational and systemic understanding of destination meaning. Second, it advances brand gestalt theory by demonstrating its relevance for explaining complex socio-ecological configurations within regenerative tourism contexts. Third, the RDBG provides a conceptual framework explaining how regenerative destination meaning emerges through the interaction of social, ecological, and ethical relationships rather than through isolated destination attributes. In doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions on regenerative development, relational tourism, and socio-ecological value creation in tourism systems.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that regenerative destination branding requires substantive alignment between branding narratives and regenerative practices. For destination managers and policymakers, this involves moving beyond promotional sustainability discourse toward governance approaches emphasizing community participation, ecological restoration, ethical stewardship, and long-term socio-ecological well-being. The framework also highlights the importance

of positioning local communities not merely as tourism beneficiaries, but as central actors in shaping regenerative destination identity and resilience.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is contextually grounded in Indonesian tourism destinations and relies primarily on qualitative and user-generated data, which may limit broader generalizability and underrepresent less visible stakeholder perspectives. In addition, the study predominantly captures positive regenerative narratives, while tensions, governance conflicts, and potential contradictions within regenerative tourism practices remain underexplored. Future research could address these limitations through quantitative validation of the RDBG framework, comparative cross-cultural studies, and longitudinal research examining how regenerative branding evolves across different socio-political and ecological contexts. Further investigation into issues such as power asymmetries, performative sustainability, and stakeholder conflict would also strengthen critical understanding of regenerative destination branding and its implications for equitable tourism development.

Declarations

Declaration of funding

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Ethical approval

Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants or animals and was based exclusively on secondary data obtained from published scholarly articles.

Author Contribution

Danny Ivan Rantung: Conceived and designed the study; contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the data; assisted in drafting and critically revising the manuscript; and approved the final version for publication.Deske W. Mandagi: Conducted the analysis and interpretation of the data; drafted the manuscript; revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content; and approved the final version for publication.Andrew C. Aseng: Contributed to data collection and management; assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the data; provided critical feedback on the manuscript; and approved the final version for publication.

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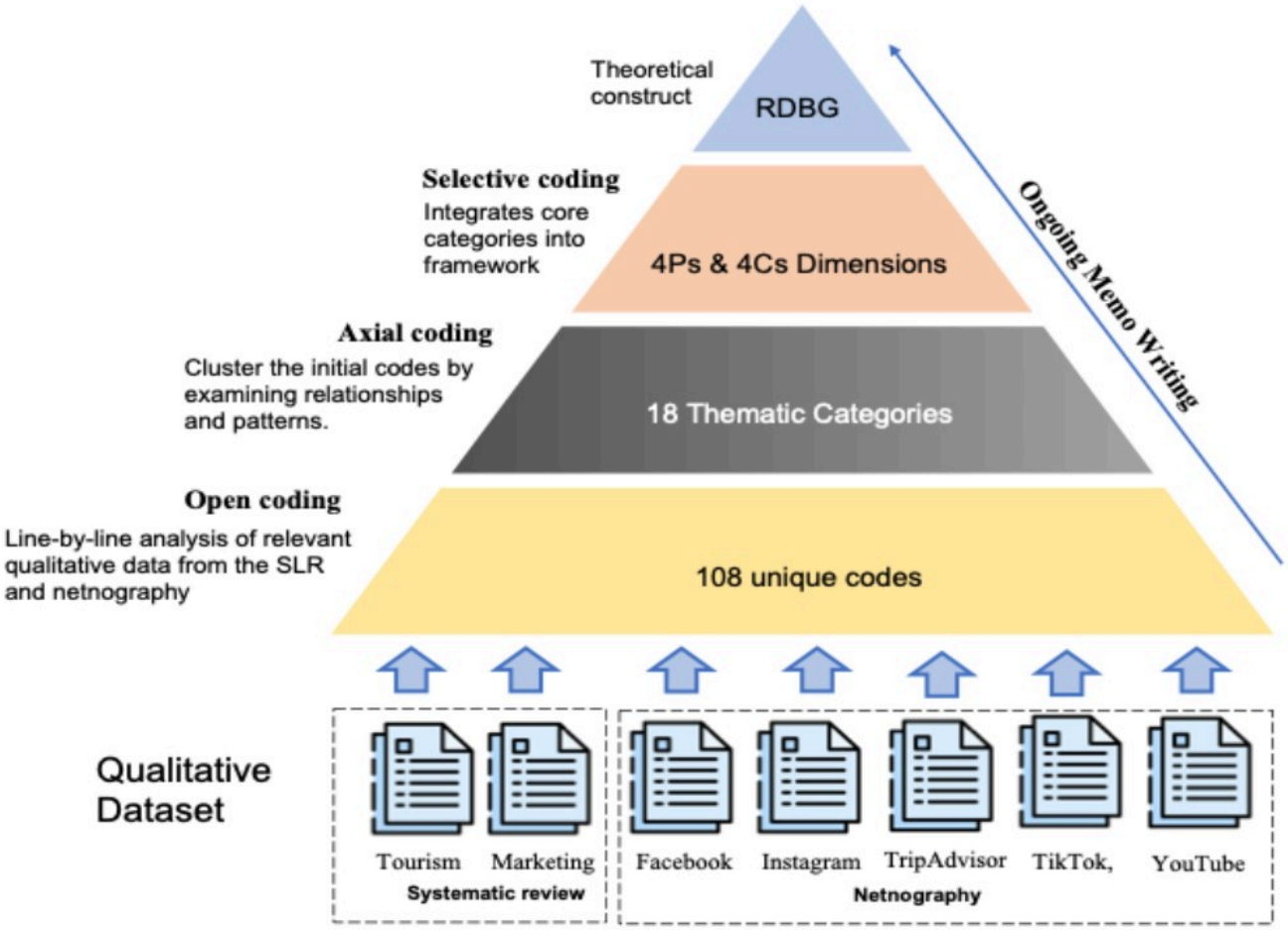
Figures



Source: Authors' own work (2026)

Figure 1

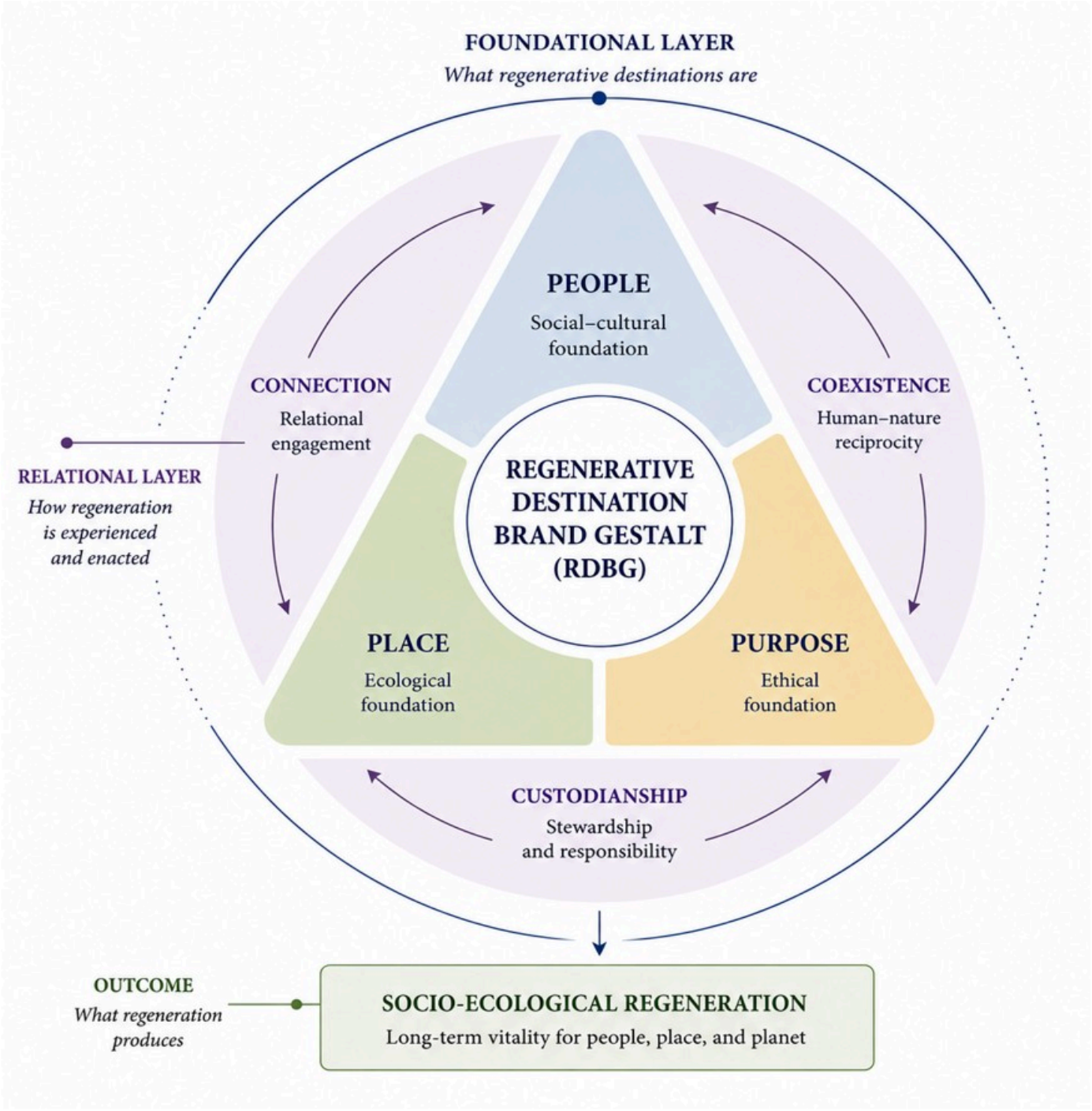
Spatial distribution of selected regenerative tourism destinations across Indonesia



Source: Authors' own work (2026)

Figure 2

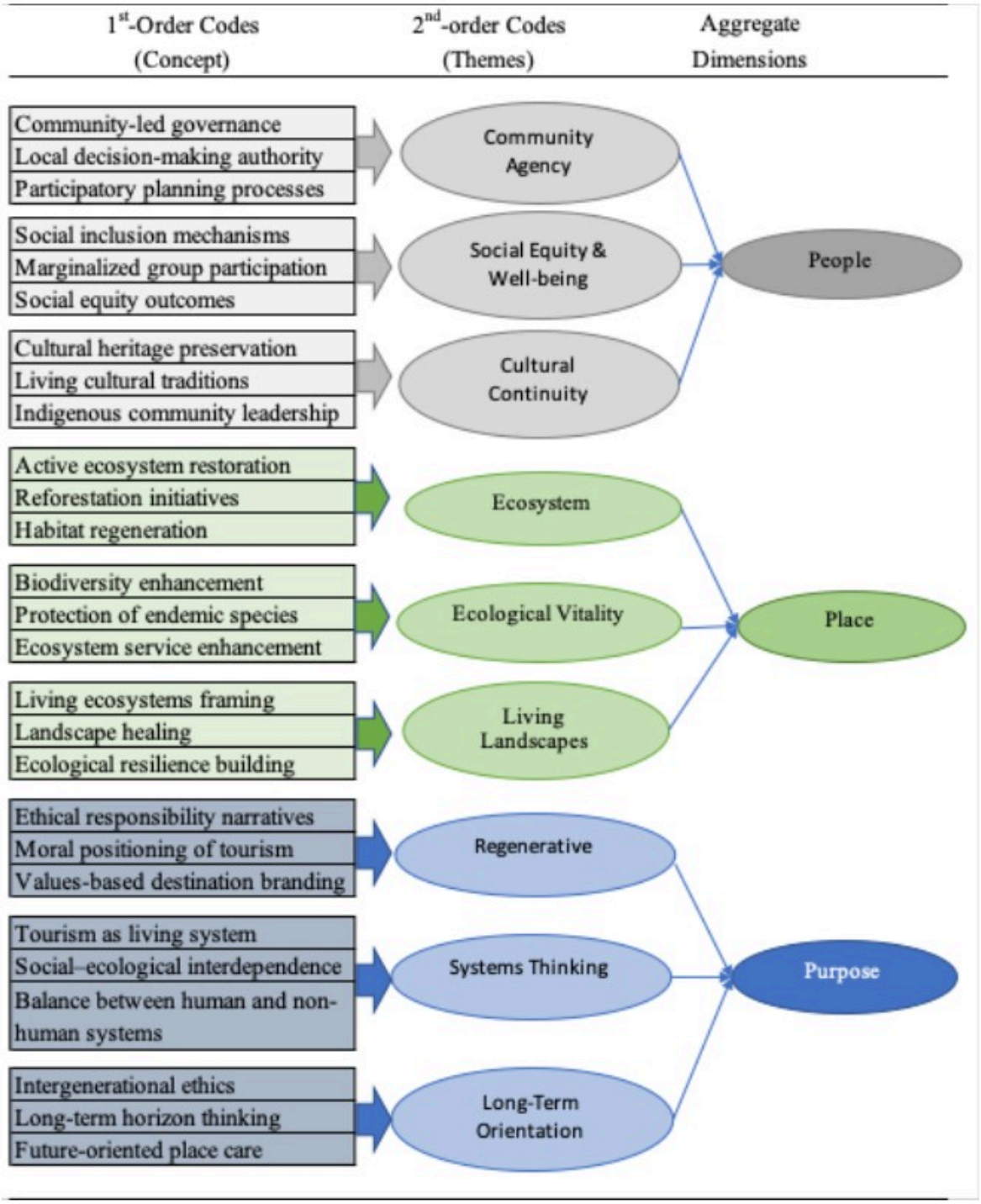
GMT–Based Data Analysis Process



Source: Authors' own work (2026)

Figure 3

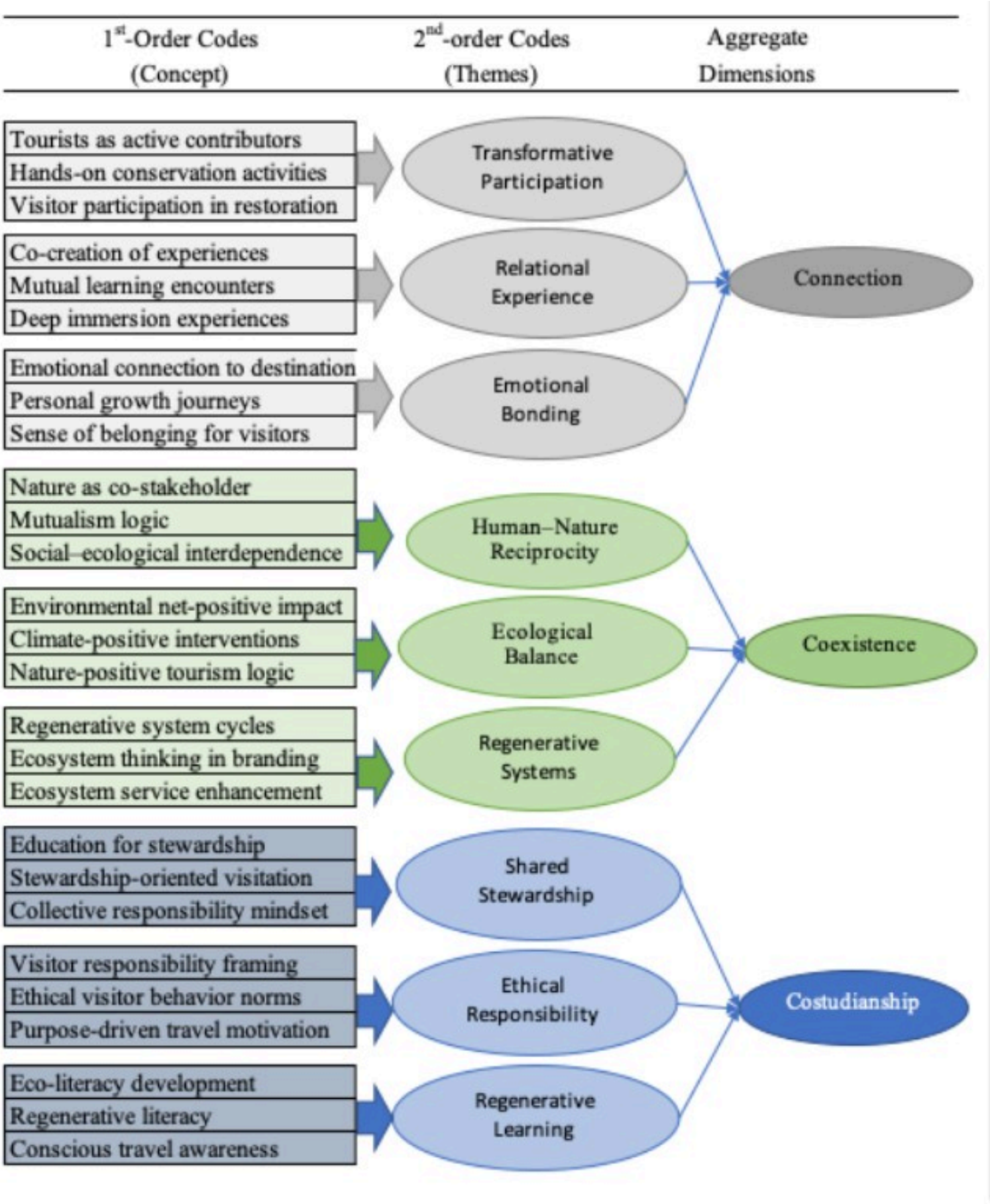
Dimensional Structure of RDBG



Source: Authors' own work (2026)

Figure 4

Foundational dimensions of RDBG (3Ps)



Source: Authors' own work (2026)

Figure 5

Interactional dimensions of RDBG (3Cs)