

Research Article

Warmth That Cannot Be Bought: Farmer-Visitor Interaction as a Word-of-Mouth Communication Channel in Indonesian Agrotourism

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Abstract. Destination marketing communication in agritourism is generally analysed through paid channels and social media, while direct interaction between farmers and visitors is rarely treated as a communication channel in its own right. This study aims to explain how the warmth of farmer-visitor interaction triggers word-of-mouth communication and how it relates to revisit intention in Indonesian agritourism. A qualitative approach using Straussian Grounded Theory procedures was applied. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with twenty-four informants across five agritourism destinations, namely Agro Rakyat, Hortimart Agro Center, Jatiluwih, Arjuna Farm, and Agrowisata Sodong as a contrasting comparison, complemented by observation and document tracing, then analysed using NVivo 14 through open and axial coding. Findings show that warmth and emotional closeness in interaction appeared in 23 of 24 data sources. What visitors found memorable was not standardised friendliness but farmers' willingness to share the difficulties of their work and the feeling of being received as a guest. The observed pathway consistently follows the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, with the encounter as stimulus, satisfaction and emotional attachment as internal state, and revisit intention, recommendation, and social media storytelling as response. The study concludes that encounter quality constitutes a communication investment, and proposes sincerity as a candidate service quality dimension requiring further testing.

Keywords: Agritourism; Farmer-Visitor Interaction; Revisit Intention; Stimulus-Organism-Response; Word-Of-Mouth Communication.

Received: July 22, 2026;

Revised: July 30, 2026;

Accepted: August 01, 2026;

On Available: August 05, 2026;

Curr. Ver.: August 27, 2026.



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1. Introduction

Destination marketing communication is generally discussed through channels that managers can control, namely paid advertising, public relations, and social media management. Such a framework is adequate for destinations whose appeal lies in designed facilities or attractions. It is less adequate for agritourism, however, because most of the appeal of agritourism arises from activities that were never designed as a performance: everyday farming work and the direct encounter between visitors and the people who carry it out.

(Choo & Petrick, 2014) have shown that social interaction within agritourism service encounters is associated with the intention to revisit. That finding opened an important line of inquiry, yet it has rarely been followed up with qualitative investigation of the content of the interaction itself: what is actually exchanged, why it is memorable, and how it turns into a story that visitors tell others. (Liang et al., 2021) demonstrated the role of experience design in revisit intention in agritourism, while (Lin et al., 2022) highlighted tourist-to-tourist interaction as a source of value co-creation. The space that remains largely unfilled is the interaction between visitors and farmers as the actors of production.

The same gap is visible in the research landscape of Indonesian agritourism. (Prasetyanto et al., 2025) note that agritourism studies in Indonesia remain concentrated on area development and economic impact, while (Arenas et al., 2023) show that visitor preferences in agritourism have largely been examined through attributes of the offering rather than through the quality of the encounter. (Wu et al., 2024) add that farm diversification through agritourism produces synergies that depend on the farmer's capacity to perform two roles at once, that of producer and that of experience host.

This gap carries practical consequences. Agritourism managers who concentrate on adding physical facilities and running social media campaigns risk neglecting the most productive and least expensive communication resource available to them, namely a high-quality encounter between visitors and farmers. Conversely, once that encounter is lost, no campaign can replace it, because what has been lost is not the message but the material from which stories are made.

This study poses three questions. First, which elements of farmer–visitor interaction do visitors find memorable? Second, how are those impressions related to revisit intention and to the passing of recommendations to others? Third, to what extent can the resulting pattern be explained through the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework commonly used in studies of tourism experience?

The objective of the study is to describe the content and the mechanism of that interaction on the basis of field data. The scope of this article is limited to the socio-economic and communication dimension, and does not cover the experience-dimension framework or the theory construction that belong to the wider umbrella research.

2. Literature Review

Social Interaction and Revisit Intention

(Choo & Petrick, 2014) treat the agritourism service encounter as a space of social interaction that shapes the intention to revisit, with emphasis on the quality of the relationship between provider and visitor. (Hu & Xu, 2021) add that the memorability of a previous experience is related to revisit intention, with nostalgia as one of its explanations. (Manosuthi et al., 2020) show that revisit intention can be predicted through a merged model of the theory of planned behaviour and the norm activation model, indicating that moral considerations also operate in the decision to visit.

Within agritourism specifically, (Liang et al., 2021) found that experience design and the variety of activities are related to revisit intention. That study, however, focused on activities as variables rather than on the quality of the human encounter that accompanies them.

Another explanatory strand that has developed more recently concerns factors outside the destination. (Deng et al., 2023) show the influence of media coverage on revisit intention in a post-pandemic urban context, while (Guerreiro et al., 2025) identify cross-cultural differences in the way international and domestic tourists interpret experience and destination image. Both findings indicate that revisit intention is formed by a combination of direct experience and circulating information, which makes an inquiry into the source of that circulating information relevant.

The Stimulus–Organism–Response

The Stimulus–Organism–Response framework explains behaviour as the outcome of environmental stimuli processed through an individual's internal state. (Guleria et al., 2024) use this framework to explain how memorable tourism experiences drive tourists' intention to tell others about them. The framework is relevant to the present study because it positions storytelling as a behavioural response rather than as a promotional activity designed by management.

Research on electronic word-of-mouth reinforces this relevance. (Damayanti & Indrawati, 2023) demonstrate a link between social media quality and credibility and revisit intention, with destination brand awareness and satisfaction as intervening variables. (Borges-Tiago & Avelar, 2025) review co-creation dynamics in tourism and hospitality and note the shift in the visitor's role from message receiver to message producer.

Applications of the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework in other contexts show that the internal-state component generally functions as a mediator. (Kumar et al., 2021) found pleasure and arousal to mediate between stimulus and revisit intention. Chang et al. (2025) offer an engagement model that places attention, attachment, and absorption as

pathways towards tourist well-being. Both studies strengthen the expectation that encounter quality operates through the internal state rather than directly upon behaviour.

Service Quality and Its Limits in the Agritourism Context

The service quality model formulated by (Parasuraman et al., 1988) measures five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The model was designed for commercial service settings with trained personnel and standardised procedures. The question that arises in agritourism is whether these dimensions are adequate to capture the quality of service delivered by farmers, who are not trained service staff and do not work from service protocols.

(Pine & Gilmore, 1998) advanced the idea of the experience economy, which positions experience as an economic offering in its own right, while (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) frame value creation as a joint process between provider and customer. Both ideas help explain why an unstaged encounter can carry economic value, but neither yet accounts for the particular quality within that encounter which distinguishes agritourism from other services.

3. Materials and Method

Approach and Scope

The study employs a qualitative approach using Straussian Grounded Theory procedures as formulated by (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), rooted in (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and further developed in the constructivist tradition of (Charmaz, 2014). Its adaptation to the Indonesian tourism research context follows Ihalaui et al. (2023). This article forms a small part of an umbrella study on sustainable agritourism in Indonesia (Mistriani, 2026) and is confined to the socio-economic and communication dimension.

Sites, Informants, and Data Collection

Data were collected at five agritourism destinations across four provinces: Agro Rakyat in Malang City, Hortimart Agro Center in Semarang Regency, Arjuna Farm in Tasikmalaya City, Jatiluwi in Tabanan Regency, and Agrowisata Sodong in Semarang City. The first four are in active operation and serve as the principal source of findings, while the fifth ceased operating in 2023 and is used as a contrasting comparison. Data collection was carried out between 2025 and 2026.

The informants numbered twenty-four, comprising twenty-one at the active destinations and three at the comparison site. The composition of roles is presented in Table 1. Diversity of roles was required so that the interaction could be examined from both sides, that of the party hosting it and that of the party experiencing it.

Table 1. Composition of Informants by Role and Destination.

Category	Agro Rakya t	Hortima rt	Jatiluwi h	Arjuna Farm	Sodon g	Total
Manager or owner	3	1	1	1	1	7
Operational staff	1	2	1	—	—	4
Visitors	2	2	2	1	—	7
Stakeholders and community	—	—	3	1	2	6
Total	6	5	7	3	3	24

Source: Authors' field data, 2025-2026.

Data collection techniques comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation of encounters between visitors and farmers during visits, and document tracing. Interviews were recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Informants' names are not disclosed; identification uses destination and role codes.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted with NVivo 14 through open coding and axial coding, accompanied by constant comparative analysis across destinations. The empirical weight of each category was measured by two indicators: the number of references, which signals the intensity with which a theme is discussed, and the number of source files, which signals how widely it is discussed across informants. The second measure was treated as the primary indicator because it better reflects the extent to which a theme is voiced broadly rather than repeated by a single informant. The use of qualitative analysis software follows the recommendations of (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Data trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and independent re-examination of the coding results.

4. Results and Discussion

Empirical Weight of the Categories

Ten categories were assembled within the socio-economic and communication dimension. The six categories with the highest weight are presented in Table 2. The most striking finding is warmth and emotional closeness in interaction, which appeared in 23 of the 24 source files. This figure places it as the category with the second-highest source spread in the entire research database, even though it is the category most difficult to measure objectively.

Table 2. Empirical Weight of Categories in the Socio-Economic and Communication Dimension.

Category	References	Source Files	Destination Spread
Marketing and promotion strategy	35	21	All destinations
Warmth and emotional closeness in interaction	29	23	All active destinations
Quality of service received during the visit	29	20	Four active destinations
Natural, family-like atmosphere at the production site	24	23	All active destinations
Visitor segments	23	14	Four active destinations
Revisit intention	19	19	Four active destinations

Source: Authors' analysis using NVivo 14, 2026.

The distribution pattern in Table 2 displays a character different from that of the other dimensions in the umbrella study. There is no single dominant category; the weight is distributed relatively evenly. This indicates that the social experience of agritourism is layered and cannot be reduced to one explanatory factor.

This distribution is visualised through a project map produced with the Maps feature of NVivo 14, presented in Figure 1. The radial configuration spreading out from a single central point shows that every category connects directly to the socio-economic dimension without intermediaries, and that no category stands alone without relations.



Figure 1. Project Map of the Socio-Economic and Empowerment Dimension Resulting from Source Triangulation.

Source: Authors' Analysis, NVivo14, 2026; 10 categories from 24 interview files.

Figure 1 reveals the feature that distinguishes this dimension from the others in the umbrella study, namely the most even distribution of categories and the most widely dispersed connections. That feature reinforces the reading that the socio-economic experience of agritourism is flat, in the sense that it does not rest on a single dominant factor but on a set of factors of closely comparable weight.

What Makes the Interaction Memorable

The data reveal a consistent pattern regarding the element of interaction that visitors find memorable. That element is not standardised friendliness but the farmer's willingness to share the difficulties of the work. Staff who deal directly with thousands of visitors each month noted the pattern explicitly.

"Visitors are happiest when they can talk directly with the farmers rather than with a professional guide. Farmers who tell them about the difficulty of planting, about the pests that attack, about the unpredictable seasons that is what stays with them most. It is more memorable than every attraction we have designed." (HM-S1, Staff of Hortimart Agro Center, 2025)

That statement contains an important comparison: the unstaged encounter is judged more memorable than the designed attraction. The finding is consistent with the idea of value co-creation (Creswell & Poth, 2023), though with a different emphasis. Value is not created in the buying and selling transaction but in a conversation that carries no direct commercial purpose.

From the visitors' side, what is valued is the feeling of being welcomed rather than the quality of the facilities. An international visitor to Agro Rakyat expressed this through a comparison between the position of a guest and that of a customer.

"We were treated as guests, not merely as customers. The service was simple but extremely warm. We felt welcomed and at ease. The farmers greeted us, explained the apples to us, and even helped us choose the best ones to pick. That is something we cannot get anywhere else." (AR-W2, International Visitor, 2025)

Managers are aware that this is precisely what constitutes their selling point, and that it cannot be replaced by adding facilities.

"We have no swimming pool and no resort. What we have are friendly farmers, a green orchard, and apples that can be picked straight from the tree. It turns out that is more than enough. Visitors who come here are not looking for hotel comfort; they are looking for an experience they cannot buy in the city." (AR-P1, Manager of Agro Rakyat, 2025)

At Jatiluwih the interaction carries an additional layer, that of an encounter with a community rather than only with individuals. This layer was described as the element that brings visitors back.

"Here visitors do not only meet farmers as individuals. They meet a community that has been together for hundreds of years. There is solidarity there, there is mutual respect, there is a way of speaking that differs from the city. Visitors who are attentive can feel it, and that is what makes them come back." (JT-S1, Management Staff of Jatiluwih, 2025)

From Impression to Story: The Word-of-Mouth Pathway

The next finding concerns the way that impression turns into a message conveyed to others. A stakeholder from an industry association observed that successful agritourism destinations hardly need to advertise, and that the content of visitors' stories concerns not the facilities but the encounter.

“Successful agritourism destinations hardly need to advertise. Satisfied visitors tell their friends, their families, and their own social media. And what they talk about is not the facilities; they talk about the friendly farmers, about the apples they picked, about the calming atmosphere. That is marketing that cannot be bought.” (HM-ST1, Central Java Agritourism Association, 2025)

This statement carries a sharp implication for marketing communication practice. The content of the circulating message is determined by the quality of the encounter, not by the message formulated by management. Investment in encounter quality therefore functions as communication investment, even when it never appears as a marketing budget line.

The pathway read from the data can be mapped onto the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework as used by (Guleria et al., 2024). That mapping is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mapping of Findings onto the Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework.

Component	Empirical Manifestation in the Field Data	Supporting Categories
Stimulus	Warmth of the farmers' greeting, the natural atmosphere of orchards and rice terraces, the sensory quality of fresh produce, the opportunity to take part in production activities	Emotional warmth (29 references), natural atmosphere (24 references), sensory quality
Organism	Satisfaction with the visit, emotional attachment, a sense of being welcomed, admiration for the farmers' work, a changed outlook on food	Satisfaction with the experience (12 references), emotional warmth (29 references)
Response	Revisit intention, recommendation to family and friends, purchase of local produce as a keepsake, storytelling on social media	Revisit intention (19 references), marketing and promotion strategy (35 references)

Source: Authors' analysis using NVivo 14, 2026

The pathway is presented schematically in Figure 2. It should be emphasised that the arrows in the figure denote the sequence read from the informants' narratives, not causal relationships tested statistically.

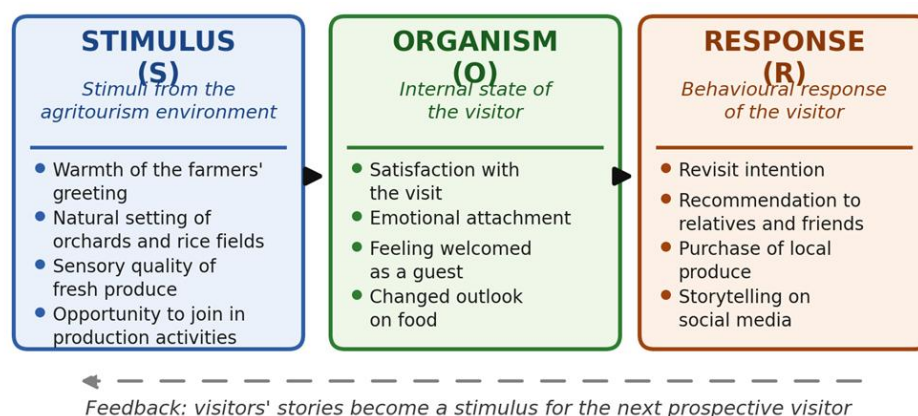


Figure 2. The Stimulus-Organism-Response Pathway in Farmer-Visitor Interaction.

Source: Authors' construction from field findings, 2026.

The element to underline in Figure 2 is the feedback arrow at the bottom. The storytelling generated at the response stage does not end the process; it returns as a stimulus for the next prospective visitor. This recursive property explains why destinations with high encounter quality can survive without large promotional spending, as noted by the association

informant. A similar observation on the shift in the visitor's role from message receiver to message producer is made by (Borges-Tiago & Avelar, 2025).

The consistency of this pathway is legible across the four active destinations, which have different ownership models: a farmer group, an integrated corporation, a customary communal arrangement, and a technology-based company. That diversity strengthens the expectation that the observed pathway does not depend on institutional form but on whether or not a quality encounter between visitors and producers takes place.

Findings on loyalty reinforce this expectation. The data do not show price as the principal reason for returning. What recurs is a reason of distinctiveness: an experience unavailable elsewhere. This pattern is consistent with (Hu & Xu, 2021) on the role of the memorability of previous experience, and with (Kim et al., 2022) on the characteristics of travel memory.

Contrasting Case: When the Interaction Disappears

The comparison destination provides evidence from the opposite direction. Once farming activity ceased, there were no longer farmers to talk with and no activities to join. What remained were the physical facilities. As a result, no story material was available for visitors to take home.

"Visitors used to come because they could interact with the farmers and the orchard. Once farming was no longer active, there were no farmers to chat with and no activities to join. All that remained were the physical facilities and the water rides. Visitors come briefly, play in the water, and go home. There is no story to take home." (AS-P1, Manager of Agronwisata Sodong, 2025)

The final sentence of that quotation summarises the core finding of this article. The absence of a story to take home means a severed response component within the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework. When the stimulus in the form of an encounter disappears, no adequate internal state is formed, and no response in the form of storytelling or a return visit emerges. The decline in visits at that destination therefore cannot be explained as a failure of promotion.

A Proposal: Sincerity as a Dimension of Service Quality

The data consistently show that visitors' assessment of service does not follow commercial service standards. The service judged best is in fact the one that is simplest procedurally yet most sincere relationally. In the model of (Parasuraman et al., 1988), this quality comes closest to the empathy dimension but is not fully contained within it. Empathy in that model is attentiveness trained into service personnel, whereas the quality observed in the field grows out of the farmers' willingness to share their lives and out of pride in the results of their work.

On that basis, this study proposes sincerity as a candidate dimension of service quality in the agritourism context. It has three distinguishing features: its source is not training but the actor's attachment to the work; it cannot be formed in a short time; and it declines when the actor loses the role or the ownership of that work. This third feature explains why the quality vanished at the comparison destination even as its physical facilities increased.

The proposal is offered with caution. It derives from qualitative data at five destinations in Indonesia and has not been tested through instrument development procedures. Further testing is required to examine whether sincerity constitutes a dimension in its own right or a specific form of empathy in contexts where the service provider is not a service worker.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that the warmth of interaction between farmers and visitors functions as a communication channel in its own right in Indonesian agritourism. That warmth appeared in 23 of the 24 data sources, indicating that it is not the experience of a small subset of visitors but a theme voiced by nearly all stakeholders. What is judged memorable is not standardised friendliness but the farmers' willingness to share the difficulties of their work and the feeling of being received as a guest. That impression turns into a story conveyed to family, friends, and social media followers. The pathway consistently follows the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework, with the encounter as stimulus, satisfaction and attachment as internal state, and revisit intention and storytelling as response.

The practical implication is that investment in encounter quality should be treated as marketing communication investment. Managers who add facilities without sustaining the farmers' role risk losing their most credible source of messages. For local governments, the development of agritourism destinations needs to include strengthening the farmers' role within the visit experience, not only training in digital marketing.

The limitations of the study should be stated. First, the findings derive from five destinations in four provinces and are therefore not intended to be generalised to all Indonesian agritourism. Second, revisit intention was measured through informants' statements rather than through verified repeat-visit data. Third, the proposal of sincerity as a service quality dimension remains preliminary. Further research is recommended to test the Stimulus–Organism–Response pathway identified here through a quantitative approach with a larger sample of visitors, and to develop and test an instrument for measuring sincerity in contexts where service providers are not trained service workers.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: N.M. and J.J.O.I.I.; Methodology: N.M. and S.H.P.; Validation: J.J.O.I.I. and S.H.P.; Formal analysis: N.M.; Investigation: N.M.; Data curation: N.M.; Writing—original draft preparation: N.M.; Writing—review and editing: J.J.O.I.I. and S.H.P.; Visualization: N.M.; Supervision: J.J.O.I.I. and S.H.P.

Funding: This research received no external funding

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study, consisting of interview transcripts and the NVivo 14 project file, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, with certain restrictions to protect the confidentiality of informants' identities.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank the managers and farmers of Agro Rakyat, Hortimart Agro Center, Jatiluwih, Arjuna Farm, and Agrowisata Sodong, as well as all the visitors who agreed to be interviewed.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

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