

Sense of Place Tourist in Visiting Banda Aceh After Conflict and Natural Disaster, Earthquake, and Tsunami Site

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning and subjective experiences of tourists visiting earthquake and tsunami disaster sites. The PLTD Apung Ship Museum in Banda Aceh serves as a reflective space that strengthens place identity, emotional attachment, empathy, and spiritual connectedness, while allowing visitors to more closely experience and reflect upon the suffering endured by the people of Aceh. This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, which is used to explore the phenomenon of sense of place in depth. Data were collected through field observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted interactively by selecting and condensing relevant information, organizing findings into descriptive narratives, and incorporating direct quotations from tourists to identify patterns of meaning and to interpret how tourists construct their sense of place at the PLTD Apung Ship Museum. The findings reveal that tourists' sense of place is formed through three main types of meaning: spiritual meaning, educational meaning, and socio-emotional meaning. This study demonstrates that a sense of place can serve as an important foundation for the development of sustainable post-disaster tourism. Destination managers can strengthen interpretive and educational elements so that tourists not only enjoy the site but also understand its deeper meanings and values. The PLTD Apung Ship Museum has strong potential to serve as a model of an educational memorial destination that integrates the preservation of historical values with the development of tourists' character and awareness.

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1. Introduction

Aceh Province is one of Indonesia's destinations with a unique character shaped by its historical background and tourism development. Two major events, prolonged armed conflict and the tsunami disaster in 2004 have had profound social, economic, and psychological impacts on the Acehnese people [1]. However, following the reconstruction process and the achievement of peace, Aceh has developed into a tourism destination with strong attractions based on history, culture, and humanitarian values [2]. Banda Aceh is a city that holds significant historical importance for both Indonesia and Aceh Province. Two major tragedy prolonged social conflict, and the tsunami disaster have shaped a new identity and image for the city [3]. Today, Banda Aceh has emerged as a unique destination for historical

and humanitarian tourism in Southeast Asia. The city and its surrounding areas feature several well-known attractions, such as the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, the Tsunami Museum, the PLTD Apung Ship Museum, as well as nearby coastal and island destinations that appeal to visitors. In 2023, tourist arrivals in Banda Aceh reached approximately 382,029 visitors, representing an increase of 16.41 percent compared to 2022 [4]. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Banda Aceh experienced a significant increase in tourist arrivals. Among the city's leading tourist attractions was the PLTD Apung Ship Museum. According to the management of the PLTD Apung Ship Museum, in 2019 the number of visitors reached approximately 300–400 people per day [5]. The PLTD Apung Ship Museum is one of the most iconic landmarks of Banda Aceh. The vessel, originally a diesel-powered electricity-generating ship weighing approximately 2,600 tons, was carried by the tsunami waves for about five kilometers from the coast of Ulee Lheue and eventually stranded in a residential area in Punge Village, Banda Aceh.

Relph (1977), Tuan (1977), and Lewicka (2011) [6-8] explain that sense of place is not formed solely by the physical characteristics of a place, but also through individuals' experiences and emotional engagement with that place. In the context of memorial tourism, visitors who initially occupy a position of *outsideness* may gradually shift toward *insideness* through direct interaction with disaster narratives, memorial symbols, and meaning-laden spaces. This indicates that post-disaster destinations such as the PLTD Apung Ship Museum function not merely as tourist attractions, but also as spaces for meaning-making and the development of emotional attachment among visitors. Post-disaster and post-conflict tourism destinations function not only as memorial spaces that represent traumatic tourism, but also as reflective spaces where visitors engage with disaster narratives and memorial symbols. Through these interactions, tourists may develop empathy, moral awareness, as well as emotional and spiritual meanings associated with the places they visit. In the context of the PLTD Apung Ship Museum, such experiences contribute to the formation of tourists' sense of place that goes beyond the destination's role as a purely educational tourism site [9].

The novelty of this study lies in its examination of *sense of place* from the perspective of tourists at a post-conflict and post-disaster memorial destination, namely the PLTD Apung Ship Museum in Banda Aceh. Previous studies have generally positioned *sense of place* within the context of local communities or tourism destinations in a broader sense, whereas this research explores tourists' emotional, spiritual, and social experiences through an in-depth qualitative approach. Consequently, this study offers new insights into the role of memorial destinations in shaping tourists' place attachment and place meaning. The purpose of this study is to examine tourists' *sense of place* when visiting Banda Aceh in order to understand how their experiences are formed through interactions with post-disaster sites, local culture, and symbols of peace present in public spaces. This research aims to describe tourists' perceptions and experiences of Banda Aceh as a post-disaster and post-conflict destination, to identify the key elements that shape tourists' *sense of place*, and to provide new insights into the relationship between tourism experiences and place identity.

This study contributes to the development of the *Sense of Place* theory in the context of post-disaster destinations and enriches the literature on nature- and culture-based tourism. Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for the management of the PLTD Apung Museum and support local government efforts in designing disaster interpretation strategies that are educational and experience-based. Ultimately, this research also assists academics and researchers in understanding tourist behavior in post-disaster contexts.

The objectives of this study are, firstly, to analyze the *sense of place* of tourists visiting the PLTD Apung Ship Museum as a post-conflict and post-disaster destination in Banda Aceh, secondly, to identify the emotional experiences, place meanings, and place identities formed through tourists' interactions with post-disaster sites, local culture, and memorial symbols and the third, to explain the key elements that shape tourists' *sense of place* within the context of post-disaster memorial tourism.

This study contributes to the development of the *Sense of Place* theory in the context of post-disaster destinations and enriches the literature on natural and cultural tourism. Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for the management of the PLTD Apung Ship Museum and aim to support local government efforts in designing disaster interpretation strategies based on education and meaningful visitor experiences. Ultimately, this study also assists academics and researchers in better understanding

tourist behavior in post-disaster contexts. Furthermore, the study focuses on tourists visiting the PLTD Apung Museum, and research emphasizes the *Sense of Place* aspects, including *place attachment*, *place identity*, and *place meaning*. Data are collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, but it does not examine economic impacts in depth.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, which was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of tourists' subjective experiences in forming a sense of place at a post-disaster memorial destination. The case study of the PLTD Apung Ship Museum was chosen because it represents a memorial space rich in historical, emotional, and symbolic meanings for visitors. The research participants consisted of 30 domestic and international tourists who visited the PLTD Apung Ship Museum. Data were collected through field observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation, aiming to explore the emotional experiences, place perceptions, and identity constructions perceived by tourists during their visit. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through data reduction and thematic interpretation to identify patterns that shape the sense of place, encompassing the dimensions of place attachment, place identity, and place meaning. This approach enables the researcher to understand how tourists' interactions with space, narratives, and memorial symbols contribute to the formation of a meaningful tourism experience.

History of the PLTD Apung Museum

The PLTD Apung Ship is one of the material witnesses of the 2004 Aceh Tsunami. This diesel power generation ship, weighing approximately 2,600 tons, was carried by the tsunami waves for about 5 kilometers, from Ulee Lheue Port to a residential area in Gampong Punge Blang Cut, Banda Aceh. This event has made the ship a powerful symbol of the magnitude of the disaster as well as the resilience of the Acehnese community in the aftermath of the tsunami. Since its official inauguration as a museum in 2008, the PLTD Apung Ship Museum has functioned not only as a disaster tourism attraction but also as a memorial space and a site for disaster mitigation education. Historical narratives, the ship's unusual location, and the symbolic elements presented within the museum area play a crucial role in shaping visitors' emotional and reflective experiences. In the context of this study, the history and transformation of the PLTD Apung ship into a museum constitute key elements in the formation of tourists' sense of place at a post-disaster and post-conflict destination.

PLTD Apung Meseum Located in Gampong Punge Blang Cut, Kecamatan Jaya Baru, Kota Banda Aceh, Provinsi Aceh.

Time of research was conducted during Oktober-November 2025



Figure 1. The location of the PLTD Apung Ship Museum within a residential area, reinforcing the character of the site as a memorial space integrated with the daily lives of the local community

Sense of Place Theory

Sense of Place is a concept that explains the emotional connection, meanings, and identity that individuals experience in relation to a particular place [6][7]. In tourism studies, this concept is used to understand how tourists' experiences are shaped not only by the physical elements of a destination but also by historical narratives, collective memory, and the emotional experiences associated with the place. Relph (1976) emphasizes that sense of place emerges through direct experience and human closeness to a place, while Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) views place as space that is given meaning through human experience, perception, and emotion.

In the context of post-disaster destinations such as the PLTD Apung Ship Museum in Banda Aceh, sense of place serves as an important framework for analyzing how tourists interpret and experience memorial spaces. Tourists' interactions with physical artifacts, tsunami narratives, and social experiences at the site encourage the formation of emotional attachment and spiritual reflection. Therefore, the concept of sense of place is highly relevant in this study to explain the process through which meaningful tourist experiences are formed and how the destination is perceived as a symbol of resilience and recovery of Acehnese society.

Edward Relph (1976)

Relph argues that a *sense of place* emerges from direct experience and emotional closeness between individuals and a place. He introduces the concept of *placelessness*, which refers to a condition in which places lose their distinctive meanings due to modernization, globalization, or cultural homogenization, causing different places to feel increasingly similar.

According to Relph, there are several levels of human-place relationships:

1. Incidental contact or brief visits, in which individuals visit a place without developing a deep emotional connection.
2. Emotional involvement, where individuals begin to understand, appreciate, and form memories associated with the place.
3. A strong sense of place, in which individuals perceive the place as an integral part of their personal identity.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1977)

Tuan views place as a product of human experience and perception of space. According to him, *place* is formed when *space* is endowed with meaning through human activities, memories, and emotions. In this perspective, space becomes place as individuals interact with and interpret their surroundings.

Tuan explains that the *sense of place* develops through several key components:

- **Experience**, referring to direct encounters, such as visiting tsunami sites or interacting with residents.
- **Meaning**, which involves the emotions and interpretations associated with the place, including feelings of awe, sorrow, or empathy.
- **Attachment**, which emerges when a place becomes personally significant and emotionally important to an individual.

Dimension of Sense of Place

Based on subsequent studies such as Scannell and Gifford [1], the *sense of place* consists of three main dimensions:

1. **Place Identity**, which refers to the extent to which individuals identify themselves with a place. For example, tourists may perceive Aceh as a symbol of resilience and humanity, leading them to develop a value-based connection with the city.
2. **Place Attachment**, which denotes the emotional bond formed between individuals and a place. This may include feelings of empathy, emotional reflection, or spiritual closeness experienced during visits to the Tsunami Museum.
3. **Place Dependence**, which reflects the extent to which a place satisfies an individual's needs or goals. For instance, tourists may seek reflective experiences and perceive Banda Aceh as providing such experiences more effectively than other destinations.

Relevance in the Literature Review

In the context of tourism studies, the *sense of place* is highly significant because it:

1. Explains why tourists develop emotional connections with a destination beyond merely enjoying its attractions.
2. Assists destination managers in understanding the meanings tourists construct from their experiences, thereby enabling more meaningful interpretation and promotional strategies.
3. In post-disaster or post-conflict destinations (such as Banda Aceh), a *sense of place* reflects a combination of feelings of loss, remembrance, and renewed hope.

Analysis of the PLTD Apung Ship Museum in the Context of Sense of Place Theory

The Symbolic Meaning of the PLTD Apung Museum

The PLTD Apung Ship Museum is one of the most iconic tourist destinations in Banda Aceh. The vessel was originally a diesel-powered floating power plant weighing more than 2,600 tons, which was violently carried approximately five kilometers inland from the sea to the city center during the 2004 tsunami. Today, the ship stands as a silent witness to the disaster and a powerful symbol of the resilience and recovery of the Acehnese people. As such, the site functions not only as an educational tourism attraction but also holds profound emotional and spiritual significance for visitors. In this context, the concept of *Sense of Place* becomes highly relevant.

As a Meaningful Place

Based on the theories of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) [6] and Edward Relph (1976)[7], *sense of place* emerges from the interaction between humans and the physical environment, involving emotional and social experiences. When tourists visit the PLTD Apung Museum, they do not merely observe physical artifacts (such as the massive ship, informational panels, and memorial monuments), but also experience meanings derived from the site's historical context. For many visitors, the site evokes:

- A sense of awe toward the power of nature,
- Feelings of empathy for tsunami victims,
- Respect for the resilience of the Acehnese people, and
- A sense of spirituality related to the power of God.

This integration of physical and emotional experiences is what shapes the *sense of place* in visitors' perceptions.

Dimensions of Sense of Place at the PLTD Apung Ship Museum

Referring to Scannell and Gifford (2010) [10], *sense of place* consists of three main dimensions: *place identity*, *place attachment*, and *place dependence*.

Place Identity

The PLTD Apung Museum represents Aceh's identity as a region that has experienced a major disaster yet has been able to recover through strong humanitarian values and deep spirituality. For tourists, this identity shapes the perception of Aceh as a resilient and religious region, encouraging greater appreciation of local values and historical narratives.

Place Attachment

This emotional attachment emerges when tourists feel emotionally moved or connected to the stories behind the site. For example, visitors who watch tsunami documentary videos at the museum often experience strong emotional responses. Many leave messages in the guestbook expressing prayers or empathy, while others express a desire to revisit or recommend the site to others. These forms of attachment illustrate how the place remains vivid in tourists' memories.

Place Dependence

The PLTD Apung Museum functions as a reflective space where tourists can contemplate the meaning of life, disasters, and human resilience. The site fulfills tourists' needs for learning (*educational tourism*), honoring history (*memorial tourism*), and enhancing spiritual awareness (*reflective tourism*). As such, the museum provides unique functions that are difficult to replace by other destinations, thereby creating a strong dependence on the place in terms of meaning and experience.

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual relationship between the main elements of the *Sense of Place* theory and how the theory is applied to understand tourists' experiences at the PLTD Apung Ship Museum in Banda Aceh. *Sense of Place*, which encompasses the dimensions of *place meaning*, *place identity*, and *place attachment*, serves as the foundation for the formation of tourists' perceptions and experiences of the research site [6]. When tourists internalize the historical, emotional, and symbolic values of the PLTD Apung ship as a disaster monument and a symbol of the resilience of the Acehnese people, they begin to construct cognitive and affective representations of the place [11].

This process of internalization generates visitor experiences that are not merely recreational but also reflective and educational in nature [12]. Such experiences include an understanding of the tsunami event, empathy for the victims, and personal interpretations of the meaning of the disaster and the recovery process [13]. At the subsequent stage, these meaningful experiences strengthen tourists'

emotional bonds with the place, which in theoretical terms are referred to as *place attachment* [10]. This attachment may manifest as a sense of connectedness, deep appreciation, or an intention to revisit and recommend the destination to others [14].

This emotional connection ultimately influences the level of *tourist satisfaction*. In the context of post-disaster destinations, tourist satisfaction is not solely measured by physical comfort or facilities, but rather by the extent to which the visit provides new understanding, authentic emotional experiences, and reflective values related to history and humanity [15]. Thus, the diagram demonstrates that the *Sense of Place* theory is able to comprehensively explain the process through which perceptions, experiences, attachment, and satisfaction are formed among tourists at disaster-based heritage destinations [16]. This framework also highlights the relevance of the theory in analyzing the characteristics of nature- and culture-based tourism that emphasize learning and meaningful experiences [17].

**Using Sense of Place Theory
for Enhancing Tourist Satisfaction**

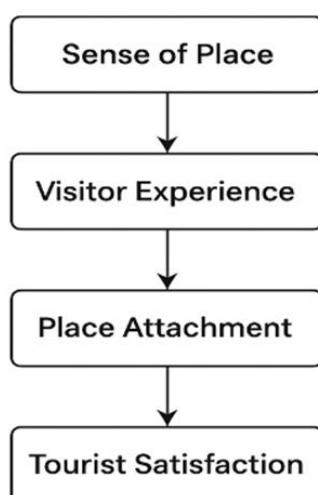


Figure 2. Framework of Thinking

3. Result & Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that *sense of place* can serve as an important foundation for the development of sustainable tourism in post-disaster contexts. Destination managers can strengthen interpretative and educational elements so that visitors not only enjoy the site but also understand the deeper meanings and values embedded within it. In this regard, the PLTD Apung Museum has the potential to become a model of an educational memorial destination that integrates the preservation of historical values with the development of visitors' character and awareness.

The PLTD Apung Museum is one of the most significant tourism sites in Banda Aceh, holding substantial historical value in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. The vessel was originally a power generation ship owned by the national electricity company (PLN) that was carried approximately five kilometers inland from the sea to the city center by the tsunami waves. Today, the ship has been transformed into a monument and museum that symbolizes resilience, spiritual strength, and the collective memory of the Acehnese people. The vessel also serves as an important reflection of Aceh's historical journey during the period of conflict, particularly highlighting the electricity crisis that occurred between 1976 and 2005, which led to the ship being brought from West Kalimantan to support Aceh during the conflict period.

As an educational and reflective destination, the site provides tangible evidence of the destructive power of the tsunami, demonstrating how a 2,600-ton barge could be transported over a distance of five kilometers. The PLTD Apung Ship Museum continues to attract both domestic and international tourists who seek to understand the tsunami event and the process of recovery and resilience of the Acehnese community. Physical elements such as the massive ship structure, viewing tower, and exhibition spaces play a crucial role in shaping the *sense of place* and reinforcing the meanings associated with the site.



Figure 3. Interview tourist domestic

Description of Result

Physical Setting Aspect

Visitors perceive the PLTD Apung Museum area as an extraordinary and monumental place that goes beyond ordinary human logic. The massive ship located in the middle of the city evokes a strong sense of awe and admiration. Physical elements such as the remains of houses crushed beneath the ship's hull, the tsunami wave monument, and the video exhibition depicting the arrival of the tsunami provide a powerful historical context. The cleanliness and spatial arrangement of the site are generally well maintained; however, some visitors suggest improvements in interpretative facilities, such as the introduction of digital guides or interactive multimedia features.

Emotional Aspects and Place Attachment

Most visitors exhibit deep emotional responses when visiting the site. They experience feelings of sorrow, reflection, and gratitude for their own survival and for the greatness of God. The PLTD Apung is perceived not merely as a tourist attraction, but as a place for remembrance, prayer, and learning about human resilience. This emotional attachment becomes stronger when visitors interact with guides who are also tsunami survivors in the PLTD Apung Museum area, as well as through interactions with local community members.

Meaning and Identity

The PLTD Apung Museum creates a distinctive place identity for Banda Aceh as a “Serambi Mecca City that rose from disaster.” For visitors, the site reflects spiritual values, social solidarity, and the strength of Acehnese society. Many tourists associate their visit with personal experiences of loss or life struggles, transforming the museum into a space for spiritual and social reflection.

Functional Aspects and Place Dependence

For visitors, the museum serves both educational and memorial functions. Some visitors come with the motivation to learn about disaster mitigation, and many are newly informed that Aceh has experienced multiple earthquakes and tsunamis before 2004. Disaster mitigation practices recognized by UNESCO are derived from the indigenous knowledge of the Simeulue community, known as *Smong*. This knowledge has been transmitted orally through songs and local wisdom since 1907, and in 2004, the *Smong* song played a crucial role in saving nearly the entire population of Simeulue Island [18].

Results of Main Meaning Analysis

Based on the results of observational analysis and in depth-interviews with visiting tourists, several meanings were identified and grouped into thematic findings. Tourist visits reveal significant meanings, patterns, and in-depth understandings, which can be summarized as follows:

Spiritual Meaning – Seventeen respondents stated that their visit to the PLTD Apung Ship Museum evoked profound spiritual reflection. The site is perceived as a symbol of God's power and serves as a reminder of His greatness.

"I see this ship as a reminder of how small humans are. At any time, we must be prepared." (Interview, Respondent 13)

This spiritual meaning fosters an emotional attachment between tourists and the space, strengthening feelings of awe and respect toward the history of the disaster and the resilience and recovery of the Acehnese community.

Educational meaning

Six respondents stated that the PLTD Apung Ship provides highly engaging information on disaster mitigation and the geographical conditions of Indonesia and parts of Southeast Asia, which are located along the Ring of Fire and are therefore highly prone to natural disasters.

"I only recently learned that Aceh had experienced a tsunami known as Smong in Simeulue in 1907, and that this local wisdom has even received recognition from UNESCO." (Interview, Respondent 6)

The educational meaning highlights that this site functions not only as a tourist attraction but also as a medium for learning and raising disaster awareness, contributing to the development of disaster awareness tourism.

Social-Emotional

Seven respondents indicated that their visit fostered a sense of solidarity with the people of Aceh. Tourists who observed the ship bearing the inscription *WKB (West Kalimantan Region)* interpreted it as a symbol of unity and resilience during periods of conflict and the devastating earthquake and tsunami.

"I cannot imagine what Aceh was like before the tsunami, when the region was still experiencing conflict, facing prolonged power outages, and enduring such difficult times." (Interview, Respondent 3)

This social-emotional meaning emerges through interactions between tourists and local guides, many of whom are survivors of the tsunami and conflict, as well as through communication with local communities at other heritage sites. These interactions become a crucial component in shaping tourists' **sense of place** in post-conflict and post-disaster destinations.

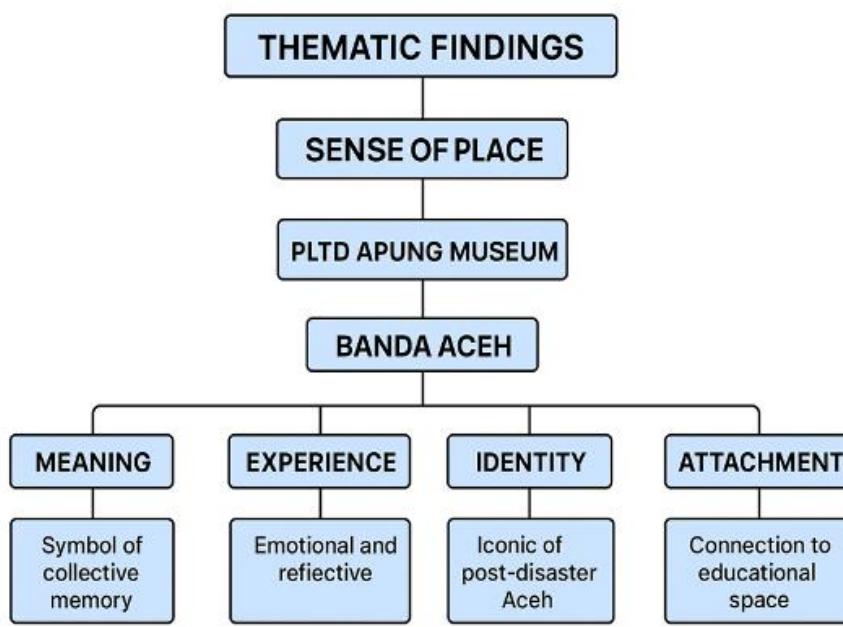


Figure 4. The Diagram of Thematic Findings

4. Conclusion

The thematic findings diagram represents the relationship between visitors' experiences, environmental factors, and the process through which a **sense of place** is formed at the PLTD Apung Ship Museum. The thematic structure presented in the diagram directly addresses the three research questions by mapping the findings within each analytical category.

First, the research question concerning how domestic and international tourists interpret their emotional experiences is addressed through the overarching theme of "**Visitors' Sense of Place**." Within this category, the diagram highlights key components such as personal meaning, emotional connectedness to the tsunami event, and perceptions of Acehnese community resilience. This finding confirms that tourists' emotional experiences are shaped through a **cognitive-affective process** that emerges as they interpret the spatial setting and historical narratives presented at the PLTD Apung site.

Second, the research question regarding which emotions and values emerge most strongly during the visit is also captured through the subthemes identified within this category, such as feelings of compassion, empathy, admiration, self-reflection, as well as values related to humanity and community resilience. The diagram illustrates that these emotions do not arise in isolation; rather, they are triggered by the interaction between the site's historical narratives, visual artifacts, spatial conditions, and visitors' personal interpretations. Therefore, the thematic findings visually confirm that tourists' emotional experiences are deeply rooted in their encounter with the collective memory of disaster and the social resilience of the Acehnese community.

Third, the research question concerning which elements shape the sense of place or encourage visitors to recommend the destination is addressed through the relationship between the categories of "Environmental and Contextual Factors" and "Impacts on Experience and Preservation." The diagram illustrates that elements such as the quality of historical interpretation, accessibility and spatial layout of the site, environmental atmosphere, and weather conditions contribute to the formation of place attachment. The third category further demonstrates that when these elements align with the emotional meanings perceived by visitors, they are more likely to experience a deeper engagement, feel connected to the site, and ultimately recommend it to others. Thus, a sense of place is formed through a combination of emotional experiences, symbolic meanings, and the quality of space presented by the destination.

Overall, the thematic diagram explains how the three key aspects of the study—emotional meaning-making, dominant types of emotions, and the elements shaping sense of place—are interconnected in forming a comprehensive tourist experience at the PLTD Apung site. The diagram not only addresses each research question separately but also demonstrates the integration of these concepts within a cohesive relational framework.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the implications of this study indicated that the management of heritage, disaster, and education-based destinations requires an approach that strengthens positive emotional experiences, enhances the quality of interpretation, and clarifies place narratives. This is particularly important for sustainable tourism, especially in Aceh, where the historical legacy of the tsunami represents a highly valuable collective memory asset. Thus, the thematic findings diagram serves as a strong transitional point for developing comprehensive conclusions as well as practical recommendations for destination managers, policymakers, and future researchers.



Figure 5. Malaysia tourist took photos in front of PLTD Museum Monument

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