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Positive Environmental Deviants as Catalyst for Responsible Tourism Transformation

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ABSTRACT: This viewpoint article explores the application of the positive deviance framework to drive systemic change in the tourism industry. It argues that by identifying and leveraging "positive environmental deviants" - individuals or groups exhibiting exceptional pro-environmental behaviours - communities can foster responsible tourism practices. The article highlighted that this approach promotes sustainability, cultural sensitivity, and economic viability while empowering local communities. A case study from Indonesia illustrates the transformative potential of this framework in addressing issues like environmental degradation and economic vulnerability. The article emphasises the importance of community engagement and collaboration in identifying and replicating successful practices to achieve lasting positive impacts.

KEYWORDS: responsible tourism; community empowerment; positive deviance; sustainability; transformation

Community Empowerment and Positive Deviance

As the global tourism industry confronts the need for increased environmental sustainability, cultural sensitivity, and equity, the positive deviance framework emerges as a powerful mechanism for driving systemic changes (Lyn et al., 2020). The concept of positive deviance involves making use of the assets and strengths of the community. According to Djosetro and Behagel (2024), local populations were more inclined to devote themselves to long-term conservation efforts if their expertise and opinions were involved into the process involving conservation.

Community participation is recognised as essential for conservation success; however, there has been inadequate focus on initiatives that foster genuine community involvement. Communities and their environments constitute a social-ecological system; therefore, the approach should incorporate the principles of systems theory. A fundamental principle of a systems approach is that the solution to a problem resides within the system itself (Maani & Cavana, 2007). A community empowerment approach should seek solutions from within the community, utilising the resources that are available locally. The positive deviance model of social change emphasises community empowerment through active involvement and the utilisation of existing local resources to ensure sustainability (PDI, 2009). The concept of

positive deviance posits that within any community or organisation, certain individuals or groups exhibit pro-conservation behaviours despite utilising the same resources as their peers. It allows the community to recognise and implement strategies employed by its members that have demonstrated effectiveness. This approach empowers the community by deriving solutions internally, positioning community members as both actors and agents of change.

Empowerment initiatives can be analysed through three dimensions: (1) fostering an environment conducive to the development of community potential (enabling) (Shandas and Messer, 2008), (2) enhancing the existing capabilities or power of individuals (empowering) (Clark et al.,2019), and (3) protecting the vulnerable from increased susceptibility due to power deficits (protecting) (Pigg, 2002), which collectively contribute to the establishment, cultivation, and practice of democracy. Empowerment necessitates specific actions, including the provision of diverse resources and the facilitation of access to opportunities that enhance individual agency. Protecting the vulnerable is essential to community empowerment, as it mitigates unequal competition and prevents the exploitation of the weak by the stronger. Special programmes should be implemented for the less vulnerable community, as many existing initiatives do not adequately address this segment of society. Empowerment should not lead to increased dependence on various donations, as it primarily aims to strengthen the community and enhance their skills for sustainable living.

According to Kulb et al. (2015), the most effective method for assisting communities in evolving into self-sufficient entities is to employ an empowerment strategy rather than ways that result in reliance. The phrase "contribution approach" is frequently used to refer to many types of support; nonetheless, it is essential to make certain that the community has a desire for something and that they discover ways to work or fight for it (Morton, 2015). Approaches to community groups that are based on empowerment entail identifying community groups that are in need and demonstrating to other members how they might attain their goals.

Community empowerment programmes generally began by providing knowledge to change attitudes and behaviour. Conversely, in positive deviance approach, the start would be on identification of existing local practices (behaviours) rather than knowledge. The basic principle is that one would be easier to act in new ways of thinking than to think of new ways to take act. This is also confirmed by Kiptot and Franzel (2015) who highlighted that today's community empowerment programme should follow the progress of development, where an extension officer should be more of a motivator and facilitator to the community rather than as someone who is very knowledgeable. Community empowerment programmes should focus on the internal strengths of the community, including assets and resources, to identify solutions to the problems they face by utilising their own resources.

Positive deviance prompted the local community to recognise, investigate, and utilise their inherent knowledge and resources, thereby restoring their capacity to address the challenges they encounter. This represents an innovation as it diverges from traditional methods of community empowerment, which typically focus on identifying weaknesses within a community through enquiries such as, "What problems are encountered?", "What can we do for you?", and "What issues exist here?". Positive environmental deviance (PED) can thus become an empowerment framework. Engaging communities in activities previously conducted by individuals or organisations within the same community and sharing living challenges would allow faster acceptance by other members.

Positive Deviance in Responsible Tourism

Initially applied in health and nutrition (Lavine, 2012; Sarnkhaowkhom et al., 2022), positive deviance has been adapted to promote sustainable practices across various disciplines. This approach identifies exceptional behaviours that deviate positively from community norms and focuses on highlighting and expanding these successful practices within communities and businesses. By employing positive deviance, the tourism sector can leverage established successes to catalyse a phase of sustainable and regenerative development, emphasising local empowerment and grassroots innovations (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003; Marsh et al., 2004). This promotes sustainable, culturally sensitive, and economically viable tourism practices.

Herrington and van de Fliert (2018) believe that positive deviance in theory and practice can make an important contribution toward understanding the nature of social change and addressing many complex social problems confronting society in the twenty-first century'. It is a contextual concept, which means that there is a context of specific problems or conditions for a person to be labelled as a positive deviant (PDI, 2019). Responsible tourism seeks to change people's behaviour toward more environmentally friendly (or pro-environmental) behaviour (Ting et al., 2020). It involves social changes, as environmental problems are not the sole responsibility of a particular individual or organisation. In relation to responsible tourism, the positive deviant behaviour should be related to environmental management, which means that the behaviour should have a positive impact on the environment. Therefore, the term 'positive environmental deviance' would be more appropriate for this specific type of deviant behaviour (Sunkar, 2013). Studying positive environmental deviants may help us discover the factors that have influenced their dedication to environmentally responsible behaviour. The factors may be used to create a learning environment that motivates learners to adopt the behaviour over a long period such that it eventually impacts the environment positively.

The concept of positive deviance helps identify practices that enhance environmental sustainability and cultural respect, offering insights that expedite the transition towards responsible tourism. Tourism planners and development authorities can better understand critical success factors and replicable methods by examining these outliers (Lavine, 2012). In responsible tourism, positive environment deviants can be evidenced through actions taken by local community members and businesses to promote environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and equitable economic growth. Often, these positive environmental deviants act as inadvertent models of sustainable tourism by challenging unsustainable norms.

A key feature of positive deviance is its recognition by a referent group that values these actions. In tourism, this group might include local communities, conservation authorities, NGOs, and other stakeholders. Interestingly, positive deviance can arise unintentionally, driven by survival instincts rather than deliberate conservation alignment (Lavine, 2012). Increasing the visibility of positive deviants can inspire broader adoption of effective practices, enhancing the scalability of sustainable tourism through an asset-based community approach (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003).

Applying positive deviance approach in responsible tourism, nevertheless poses challenges, particularly in defining appropriate referent groups and managing tensions between community perspectives and conservation objectives. These dynamics require a balanced and inclusive approach. Nevertheless, positive deviance remains a potent tool for fostering responsible tourism by building on community strengths and promoting culturally appropriate solutions.

In areas facing overtourism, positive deviance and its positive environmental deviants, can pinpoint effective, small-scale innovations. For example, visitor caps or off-peak promotions implemented by specific operators can inform broader solutions. This bottom-up approach often yields more relevant and effective results than top-down policies. Similarly, positive deviance in environmental conservation highlights successful stewardship practices, such as effective waste management and guest involvement in conservation initiatives.

The approach also contributes to economic sustainability by identifying practices that retain local tourism revenue, supporting more equitable resource distribution. Moreover, it aids cultural preservation by showcasing authentic ways to share cultural heritage without commodification. Positive deviance further enhances resilience during crises by identifying adaptable practices, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, where quick adaptations improved industry resilience.

Furthermore, positive deviance fosters collaboration among stakeholders in the tourism industry by promoting successful practices. It informs policy development by providing concrete examples for decision-making beyond traditional regulations. Additionally, it enriches educational and training programmes with practical examples of responsible tourism practices.

In responsible tourism, community involvement in decision-making significantly boosts conservation efforts. Although local communities may have limited management capacity, granting them rights to operate tourism fosters responsibility and ownership (Ting et al., 2022). Trust, capacity enhancement, and accountability are essential for effective participation (Yusrini et al., 2022).

Steps in Identifying Positive Environmental Deviants

Identifying positive environmental deviants involves a systematic process that encourages community engagement and focuses on behaviours and practices that effectively address challenges in a sustainable and impactful way. This process aims to capitalise on the innovative solutions that specific individuals or groups within a community have developed to resolve environmental issues. Communities can identify strategies that are already effective in real-world settings by concentrating on these outliers who achieve substantially better outcomes than their peers.

The first step is to define the focus area clearly, outlining the specific issue or challenge to be addressed within the community, such as environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, or economic development. Engaging community members early in the process is crucial for building trust and ensuring that their perspectives and knowledge are considered; this fosters a sense of ownership and collaboration.

Next, it is essential to identify the referent group that will define what behaviours or practices are considered "positive." This group may include local leaders, community organisations, conservation authorities, and other relevant stakeholders. A baseline assessment should then be conducted to gather data on existing behaviours and practices related to the defining issue. This assessment can include surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations to better understand the community's current context.

Once the baseline is established, the process involves spotting positive environmental deviants—individuals or groups within the community demonstrating exceptional behaviours or practices that lead to positive outcomes. These behaviours should diverge from the established norms while providing admirable examples of success. Utilising both qualitative interviews and quantitative data collection methods can offer comprehensive insights about these identified positive deviants. Understanding their motivations, strategies, and the context in which their behaviours occur is key.

Following the identification of positive environmental deviants, the next step is to analyse the motivations driving their actions and the factors contributing to their success. Identifying common themes in their practices can provide valuable lessons for replicating these behaviours more broadly. It is also important to document and share findings with the community and stakeholders to raise awareness and inspire change. Organising workshops or training sessions to disseminate the successful practices of positive environmental deviants can encourage other community members and organisations to adopt similar behaviours.

Finally, establishing a system for ongoing monitoring and evaluation to track the impact of replicating positive environmental deviant practices is essential. Gathering feedback from the community will help refine and improve the approach over time. Sustaining engagement through continuous discussions about the positive deviance framework ensures that it remains relevant and effective. By following these steps, communities can effectively identify and leverage positive deviants to foster sustainable behaviours and practices that contribute to their overall well-being and resilience.
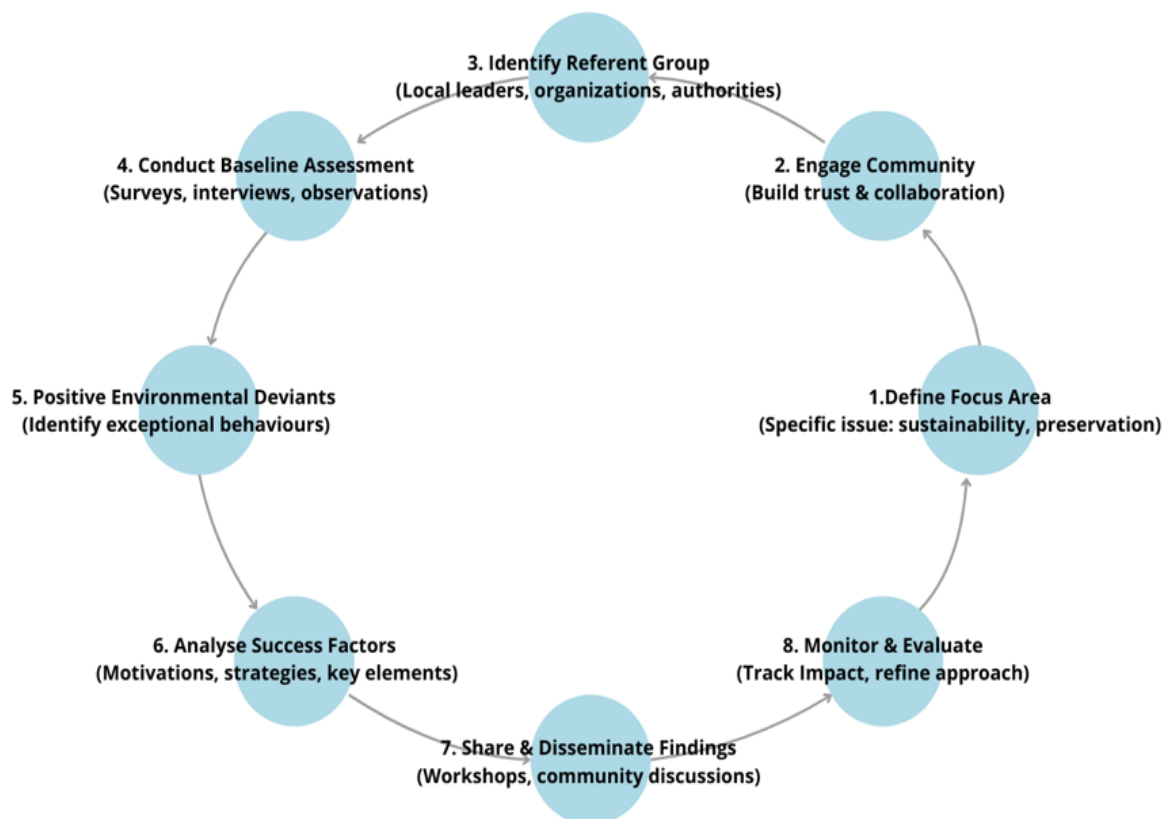
Figure 1: Identifying Positive Environmental Deviants

Case Study: Hanjeli Edu-Tourism Village, Indonesia

The community development project in Desa Waluran Mandiri, Indonesia, exemplifies positive deviance within the context of sustainable tourism and rural development. The village, previously characterised by a decline in *Hanjeli* (a local grain) production due to rampant illegal gold mining ("Gurandil"), faced significant environmental degradation and profound socio-economic challenges (Setiawan et al., 2020). These included decreased household incomes, familial disruption due to neglect of children by parents involved in mining, and considerable safety risks associated with the unstable mining conditions. According to the residents of Waluran Mandiri Village, several decades ago, their village was known for producing hanjeli. However, as the community's perspective shifted towards gold mining as a preferred livelihood, the hanjeli fields were gradually abandoned, becoming unproductive fallow land. In recent years, concerns have arisen about potential safety issues due to erosion risks, particularly for fields located on hillsides, which could lead to landslides if left unattended. This initiative represents a deliberate departure from these destructive norms, instead embracing a holistic approach to community transformation focused on revitalising hanjeli cultivation and establishing an edu-tourism model. This multi-pronged strategy included:

- **Agricultural Revitalization:** The project focused on reviving traditional Hanjeli farming methods using sustainable techniques, and developing high-value Hanjeli products. This addressed the decline in Hanjeli production due to the community's shift towards illegal gold mining.
- **Participatory Community Engagement:** The project employed a participatory approach, utilising Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to actively involve diverse community members – women, youth, and elders – in decision-making processes, thereby directly addressing the issue of familial neglect by providing alternative income-generating opportunities for women.
- **Edu-Tourism Development:** Leveraging the village's unique *hanjeli* heritage, the project integrated agricultural experiences, cultural performances (through the Dangiang Sari arts group), and culinary tourism to create a multifaceted edu-tourism destination.
- **Mitigation of Safety Hazards:** The shift from inherently dangerous illegal mining activities to the relatively safer pursuits of agriculture and tourism directly mitigated the significant safety risks prevalent in the community.

This initiative constitutes positive deviance as it deviates from the destructive path of unsustainable resource extraction and embraces a sustainable, community-driven approach to economic development and environmental restoration. The successful implementation demonstrates that communities can effectively transition from destructive practices towards more resilient and prosperous futures.

The broader implications of this project underscore several key aspects of positive deviance within the framework of sustainable tourism and community development:

- **Environmental Sustainability:** The project demonstrably reverses environmental damage caused by illegal mining, restoring agricultural lands and promoting environmentally sound farming methods.
- **Social Capital and Empowerment:** The participatory methodology fosters community empowerment, actively involving all segments of the population in decision-making and creating opportunities for inclusive economic participation. This addresses the social challenges related to child neglect and fractured family structures.

- **Cultural Preservation and Promotion:** The project integrates the preservation and promotion of local cultural heritage, showcasing traditional arts and culinary traditions.
- **Economic Diversification and Resilience:** It facilitates a transition towards a more diversified and resilient economy, reducing reliance on unsustainable practices and creating a stable source of income for the community.

The Hanjeli Edu-tourism project thus serves as a compelling case study illustrating the transformative potential of positive deviance concept. Its success highlights the viability of community-led initiatives that integrate sustainable agriculture, cultural tourism, and environmental restoration, offering a replicable model for other communities facing similar challenges of unsustainable resource exploitation and socio-economic vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

The positive deviance framework is a powerful mechanism for driving systemic changes in the tourism industry and promoting responsible tourism practices. The approach has practical applications in community-based tourism development, in which the positive deviance framework can be used to identify and replicate positive environmental deviant behaviours that promote environmentally responsible behaviour. The positive environmental deviants demonstrate that communities can effectively transition from destructive practices towards more resilient and prosperous futures, and highlights the viability of community-led initiatives that integrate sustainable agriculture, cultural tourism, and environmental restoration. Positive deviance has practical applications in promoting environmental sustainability, social capital, and cultural preservation, and in addressing social challenges.

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