

## Psychological Contract and Retention in Community-Based Tourism Co-ops: The Role of Customary (*Adat*) Norms

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### ABSTRACT

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives have emerged as an important mechanism for empowering rural communities in Sabah and Sarawak. However, these cooperatives face persistent challenges in retaining active members. Retention issues often arise when members feel overburdened, perceive unfair distribution of benefits, or believe that cooperative practices violate cultural expectations. In indigenous contexts, customary (*adat*) norms strongly shape perceptions of fairness, reciprocity, and communal responsibility. Yet, little research has examined how *adat* influences the psychological contract of cooperative members and how this relates to burnout and intent to stay. This study aims to explore (1) how *adat* expectations shape psychological contracts within CBT cooperatives, (2) how organizational justice mediates the relationship between *adat* expectations and retention, and (3) how burnout influences members' intent to stay. A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed across six CBT cooperatives in Sabah and Sarawak. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 cooperative members, including elders, leaders, and younger participants, supplemented by focus group discussions and field observations. Data was thematically analysed using NVivo software, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Findings revealed that *adat* norms defined fairness as communal balance—equal workload rotation, respect for elders, and reciprocal contribution. When *adat*-consistent practices were upheld, members perceived strong organizational justice, reinforcing loyalty to the cooperative. Conversely, perceived violations of *adat* weakened psychological

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contracts, leading to disengagement. Burnout was a critical moderating factor; even members with strong cultural obligations considered leaving when overwhelmed by dual responsibilities. This study concludes that CBT retention strategies must embed *adat* values in management practices while addressing workload distribution to reduce burnout. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach or examine gender differences in *adat* expectations.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes originality by integrating psychological contract theory with *adat* norms to explain member retention in Community-Based Tourism cooperatives. It extends organizational psychology into indigenous cultural contexts, offering a culturally embedded framework for retention while highlighting burnout as a boundary condition, thus bridging management, psychology, and cultural sustainability.

## 1. Introduction

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has gained global recognition as a sustainable development model that simultaneously promotes economic growth, cultural preservation, and community empowerment (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Scheyvens, 2011). Unlike conventional tourism models that prioritize profit maximization for external stakeholders, CBT emphasizes local ownership, participatory decision-making, and the equitable distribution of benefits (Asker et al., 2010). This approach positions tourism as a tool for fostering not only livelihoods but also social cohesion, cultural continuity, and environmental stewardship.

In Malaysia, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak, CBT has become a key strategy for rural and indigenous community development. Through cooperative structures, indigenous communities organize tourism activities such as homestays, cultural performances, and nature-based excursions. These cooperatives not only create income-generating opportunities but also serve as platforms for safeguarding indigenous knowledge, strengthening cultural identity, and facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer (Hamzah & Khalifah, 2009; Kayat et al., 2016). In many villages, CBT represents one of the few formalized economic ventures available, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation and rural resilience (Jamaludin et al., 2019).

Despite these contributions, CBT cooperatives face serious retention challenges. Participation in cooperative activities is largely voluntary, and members frequently juggle tourism responsibilities with subsistence farming, household care, and other informal economic activities. Dropout rates weaken operational stability, reduce service quality, and undermine the long-term sustainability of cooperatives (Suansri, 2003; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2017). Previous research highlights several drivers of disengagement, including heavy workloads, uneven distribution of benefits, unclear leadership roles, and limited incentives (Kayat, 2002; Salazar, 2012).

In the context of Borneo's indigenous societies, however, customary norms, known as *adat*, play an equally important role. *Adat* encompasses local systems of customary law, social regulation, and moral expectations that govern communal life (Hooker, 1978; Nah & Bunnell, 2005). These norms determine how fairness, obligations, and reciprocity are

perceived and practiced within the community. In many indigenous villages of Sabah and Sarawak, adherence to *adat* is considered essential for maintaining harmony and legitimacy. When CBT cooperatives are managed in ways that align with *adat*, members are more likely to view participation as a cultural duty and a form of collective reciprocity. Conversely, when *adat* is violated for instance, through favouritism, inequitable workload distribution, or disrespect for elders, trust erodes and members may disengage (Jamaludin et al., 2019; Colchester, 2013).

This study positions *adat* as a cultural lens through which the concept of the psychological contract can be examined. Psychological contracts refer to the unwritten set of expectations and obligations between members and organizations (Rousseau, 1995). While most studies of psychological contracts focus on corporate or formal employment settings, there is growing recognition that psychological contracts also operate in community and cooperative contexts, where obligations are often shaped by cultural traditions rather than written contracts (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008). In CBT cooperatives, *adat* expectations may form the foundation of these psychological contracts, influencing members' perceptions of fairness, justice, and ultimately, their intention to remain engaged.

Therefore, this research investigates how *adat* expectations interact with psychological contracts to influence member retention in CBT cooperatives in Sabah and Sarawak. By linking management theories, organizational psychology, and indigenous cultural norms, the study contributes a culturally embedded framework for understanding retention challenges in CBT. Such a framework not only advances academic discourse but also provides practical insights for cooperative leaders, policymakers, and development agencies working to strengthen community-based tourism in indigenous contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Psychological Contract Theory

The concept of the psychological contract has become a central theme in organizational behaviour and employment relations literature. It refers to the unwritten and implicit set of expectations, obligations, and promises that exist between individuals and organizations, which go beyond the formal, written employment contract (Rousseau, 1995). Unlike legal contracts that specify explicit duties, psychological contracts are subjective and based on perceptions. They encompass beliefs about fairness, respect, recognition, reciprocity, and mutual support (Conway & Briner, 2005). Because they are based on individual interpretations rather than written agreements, psychological contracts are dynamic and can vary significantly across individuals and cultural contexts (Guest, 2004).

When psychological contracts are fulfilled, individuals typically report greater levels of commitment, trust, and loyalty, resulting in higher job satisfaction, stronger organizational identification, and lower turnover intentions (Bal et al., 2008). The mutual exchange of obligations reinforces a positive relationship between the organization and its members. However, when these expectations are not met referred to as a psychological contract breach, negative consequences often follow. Breaches may involve unmet promises regarding workload fairness, opportunities for growth, recognition, or respect. Such violations can reduce trust, generate dissatisfaction, and

increase the likelihood of withdrawal, disengagement, or even conflict (Zhao et al., 2007). Meta-analyses show that breaches have strong links with lower organizational commitment and higher turnover across contexts (Cassar & Briner, 2011).

In the context of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives, the psychological contract extends beyond material or transactional expectations. Unlike corporate employees, cooperative members often join with relational and communal expectations, such as fair distribution of responsibilities, recognition of their cultural contributions, and the preservation of indigenous traditions (Atkinson, 2007). The cooperative is not merely an economic entity but also a cultural and social space. Therefore, unwritten expectations are shaped both by modern organizational norms (e.g., leadership transparency, workload equity) and indigenous cultural traditions (e.g., respect for elders, adherence to *adat* customs).

If cooperative leadership fails to uphold these dual sets of expectations such as showing favouritism in task allocation, neglecting cultural practices, or failing to respect community protocols, members may interpret this as a breach of the psychological contract. Such breaches can have severe consequences, including loss of trust in leadership, reduced willingness to participate, or even total disengagement from cooperative activities. Over time, widespread breaches can threaten the stability and sustainability of CBT cooperatives (Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008).

Understanding psychological contracts within CBT is therefore essential, as they highlight how cultural traditions intersect with organizational expectations. By recognizing that members' loyalty is influenced not just by economic rewards but also by cultural respect and fairness, CBT cooperatives can foster stronger engagement, minimize dropout, and ensure long-term sustainability.

## 2.2. Retention in Community-Based Tourism

Retention of cooperative members is a critical factor in sustaining Community-Based Tourism (CBT) initiatives. The success of CBT depends heavily on the consistent participation of local community members, as they are both the service providers and cultural custodians (Manyara & Jones, 2007). High turnover or dropout rates threaten the continuity of tourism services, disrupt knowledge transfer, and weaken the cooperative's credibility with visitors and external stakeholders (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2017). In contexts where CBT serves as a primary vehicle for rural livelihood diversification, poor retention can jeopardize not only tourism operations but also broader community development goals (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009).

Several studies have identified determinants of retention within CBT cooperatives. Economic incentives such as monetary benefits, profit-sharing, and tourism-derived income are often viewed as primary motivators (Kayat, 2002; Salazar, 2012). However, unlike in conventional corporate organizations, financial rewards alone are insufficient to guarantee sustained participation. The seasonal and uncertain nature of tourism means that income may fluctuate, and when monetary benefits decline, members often rely on noneconomic motivations to justify continued engagement (Zapata et al., 2011). Beyond financial factors, training opportunities and capacity building have been found to enhance retention by improving members' confidence, skills, and sense of empowerment (Stone & Stone, 2011). When individuals perceive CBT as an avenue for personal and professional development, they are more likely to remain engaged.

Similarly, leadership quality including fairness, inclusivity, and transparency, significantly influences retention outcomes. Leaders who respect local customs, distribute tasks equitably, and foster participatory decision-making can strengthen members' commitment (Blackstock, 2005).

Importantly, relational and cultural factors often outweigh monetary rewards in shaping retention in CBT settings. Research emphasizes that community pride, social cohesion, and cultural identity preservation are central motivators (Okazaki, 2008; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017). Many members remain involved not simply because of financial gain but due to cultural obligations and the moral responsibility to sustain traditions and pass them on to future generations (Zapata et al., 2011). The sense of reciprocity, whereby individuals contribute for the collective good, reinforces long-term participation even when immediate economic benefits are limited.

Thus, retention in CBT must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by a complex interplay of economic, relational, and cultural factors. While income generation is essential, sustaining cooperative membership requires attention to cultural legitimacy, fair leadership, and the social fabric of the community. Retention strategies that integrate both economic and cultural dimensions are more likely to ensure the long-term sustainability of CBT initiatives.

### 2.3. Adat Norms in Cooperative Life

Adat, a Malay-Indonesian term, refers to the body of traditional laws, customs, and social codes that regulate community life among indigenous groups in Southeast Asia. In Borneo, *adat* is deeply embedded in social institutions, guiding not only kinship and land tenure but also systems of governance, reciprocity, and conflict resolution (Hooker, 1978; Colchester, 2013). Unlike statutory laws introduced during colonial and post-colonial governance, *adat* represents a community-based normative system that is continuously negotiated and reproduced through social practice (Nah & Bunnell, 2005). It is not merely a set of rules but a living tradition that provides legitimacy to leadership, decision-making, and communal responsibilities.

In cooperative life, including Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives, *adat* shapes expectations of fairness, responsibility, and reciprocity. Decisions about task allocation, resource distribution, and dispute settlement are often expected to reflect customary norms. For instance, the principle of turn-taking (*giliran*), commonly found in Bornean indigenous communities, dictates that responsibilities such as hosting visitors or providing services must rotate fairly among members, thereby preventing monopolisation and ensuring equitable participation (Amster, 2009). Similarly, respect for elders is central to *adat*, with their voices carrying moral authority in decision-making processes.

*Adat* also plays a critical legitimising role in cooperative governance. Leadership that is consistent with *adat* by being inclusive, transparent, and fair, is perceived as culturally legitimate. Leaders who consult widely, respect hierarchy, and adhere to communal customs are trusted, while violations of *adat* undermine cohesion. Practices such as favouritism, inequitable benefit-sharing, or marginalisation of certain families are widely regarded as breaches of justice, eroding trust in leadership and weakening member commitment (Colchester, 2013; Li, 2007).

In the context of CBT cooperatives, *adat* provides a cultural framework that reinforces the collective psychological contract. Members are bound not only by economic interests but also by a moral and cultural obligation to uphold community solidarity and safeguard heritage. Participation is therefore framed not simply as a means of livelihood but as part of an enduring responsibility to maintain the community's identity and values (Doolittle, 2011). This dual role as both economic actors and cultural custodians, distinguishes CBT cooperatives from conventional business models.

Crucially, the influence of *adat* also extends to how organisational justice is perceived. While Western management theories often categorise justice in distributive, procedural, and interactional dimensions (Colquitt et al., 2001), in Bornean cooperatives these dimensions are interpreted through the lens of *adat*. For example, fairness in benefit-sharing may not only concern monetary equality but also reciprocal obligations embedded in customary practice. As such, adherence to *adat* strengthens trust, while its neglect is equated with injustice, often leading to disengagement or even conflict within the cooperative (Nah & Bunnell, 2005; Bissonnette, 2011).

Thus, *adat* norms provide the cultural glue that sustains cooperative life in indigenous settings. They ensure that CBT cooperatives function not merely as economic entities but as social and cultural institutions where obligations, reciprocity, and fairness are embedded in the community's moral order.

#### 2.4. Organizational Justice as Mediator

Organisational justice is a core construct in organisational psychology, broadly defined as the perception of fairness in organisational decision-making, processes, and interpersonal relations. It plays a pivotal role in shaping employees' or members' attitudes towards their organisation, including commitment, satisfaction, and intention to remain (Greenberg, 1990). Colquitt et al. (2001) identify three key dimensions of organisational justice: distributive justice, which concerns the fairness of outcomes and resource allocations; procedural justice, which focuses on the fairness and transparency of decision-making processes; and interactional justice, which relates to the quality of interpersonal treatment, including respect, recognition, and honesty. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how fairness perceptions influence organisational behaviour.

In Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives, organisational justice takes on unique characteristics because fairness is not only judged by modern managerial standards but also interpreted through cultural frameworks such as *adat*. For instance, distributive justice may be judged not only by the equality of financial benefits but also by whether benefit-sharing reflects customary expectations of reciprocity and balance. Procedural justice, in turn, is closely tied to decision-making processes that respect elders, rotate responsibilities equitably, and follow *adat*-sanctioned rules of participation (Amster, 2009). Similarly, interactional justice within CBT settings may be assessed by the degree to which members are acknowledged, respected, and treated with dignity in line with customary norms of politeness and communal respect (Colchester, 2013).

The literature consistently demonstrates that perceptions of justice have strong predictive power in shaping commitment, loyalty, and retention. Cropanzano et al. (2007) argue that organisational justice fosters trust and enhances the social exchange

relationship, thereby reducing turnover and promoting long-term engagement. In cooperative settings, where participation is voluntary and members often juggle multiple roles, the presence of justice perceptions can be decisive in determining whether individuals remain active contributors. When members perceive that leaders uphold *adat*-based fairness, they are more willing to contribute their time and labour, despite limited financial incentives (Kayat, 2002). Conversely, perceived violations of justice such as favouritism or exclusion erode trust and weaken the cooperative's cohesion.

For this study, organisational justice is conceptualised as a mediating mechanism that links *adat* expectations with cooperative retention. *Adat* shapes the standards by which fairness is judged, while justice perceptions determine the psychological responses of members. When *adat*-consistent practices are upheld, members perceive justice, which strengthens their psychological contract and increases their intention to stay. However, when *adat* expectations are ignored, justice perceptions decline, weakening trust and raising the likelihood of disengagement. By framing organisational justice as a mediator, this study highlights the cultural embedding of fairness perceptions in CBT cooperatives and provides a nuanced understanding of how retention is shaped by both psychological and cultural factors.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design, considered suitable for examining complex socio-cultural issues such as *adat* norms, fairness perceptions, and retention experiences in Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of lived experiences that cannot be fully captured by surveys alone. The use of a multiple-case study further enabled comparison across different cooperatives, highlighting both shared and distinctive practices (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2006). The study followed an interpretivist research approach, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent. This approach was deemed appropriate as *adat* is not a static rule system but a living cultural framework that cooperative members interpret in diverse ways (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The population of this study consisted of members of registered CBT cooperatives in Sabah and Sarawak, including cooperative leaders, respected elders, and youth participants involved in daily operations. To capture these perspectives, six cooperatives were selected, with a total of 36 participants (6 from each cooperative). The distribution across roles is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Size Distribution

Cooperative	Leaders	Elders	Youth	Total Participants
Coop A	2	2	2	6
Coop B	2	2	2	6
Coop C	2	2	2	6
Coop D	2	2	2	6
Coop E	2	2	2	6
Coop F	2	2	2	6
Total	12	12	12	36

The sample size was determined using the principle of thematic saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes emerged. Previous research indicates that 30–40 participants are generally sufficient for reaching saturation in multi-site qualitative studies (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010). A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure the inclusion of leaders, elders, and younger members, thus capturing generational and role-based perspectives on *adat* norms, fairness, and retention (Patton, 2015).

Data were collected using multiple methods to ensure triangulation. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes were conducted face-to-face in the participants' villages to elicit individual experiences. In addition, one focus group discussion (FGD) was held in each cooperative with 5–7 participants to capture collective perspectives. Observation complemented these methods, as the researcher took field notes while participating in daily cooperative activities such as meetings and hosting visitors. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with prior consent and transcribed verbatim. The overall data collection strategy is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Data Collection Methods

Method (s)	Description	Duration/Format	Recording Approach
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in participants' villages	45–60 minutes each	Audio-recorded + transcripts
Focus Groups	One focus group per cooperative with 5–7 participants each	60–90 minutes per group	Audio-recorded + field notes
Observation	Participation in meetings, hosting activities, and daily operations	Ongoing during field visits	Field notes + reflective log
Recording	All interviews and FGDs conducted with prior consent	Digital recorder & manual notes backup	Transcribed verbatim

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: data familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo 12 software was used to manage the coding process, facilitate cross-case comparison, and enhance transparency and reliability.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from The Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed about the objectives of the research, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant identities, and details of the cooperatives were anonymised. Cultural sensitivity was also observed by engaging community gatekeepers, seeking permission from elders, and adhering to *adat* protocols throughout the data collection process.

#### 4. Findings

The analysis of interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and field observations produced four dominant themes. These themes highlight how *adat* shapes perceptions

of fairness, organisational justice, and retention within Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives, while also revealing the moderating role of burnout. Each theme is explained below, with supporting examples from participants' narratives.

#### 4.1. Theme 1: *Adat* as the Standard of Fairness

Members consistently described fairness in terms of adherence to *adat* principles. Fairness was not framed in purely economic or procedural terms but was understood as alignment with long-standing cultural norms. For example, the equal rotation of hosting duties (*giliran*) was emphasised as a way to prevent monopolisation and ensure everyone shared responsibilities. Elders' voices were also regarded as vital in decision-making processes, with younger members acknowledging their authority as custodians of cultural traditions.

One participant explained:

*"We take turns in receiving guests, because that is our adat. If one family gets more than others, it will not be fair and will bring dissatisfaction."*  
(Elder, Cooperative C)

Another elder highlighted the importance of equity in workloads:

*"Adat teaches us that every household must carry the same responsibility. If someone avoids their turn, the others will feel burdened, and this creates disharmony."* (Elder, Cooperative A)

A youth participant expressed agreement with the principle of respecting customary processes, even though they sometimes required more effort:

*"Although it can be tiring, I accept that we must follow giliran. It is not only about fairness but also about showing respect to our traditions and to the elders."* (Youth, Cooperative D)

A cooperative leader also stressed that fairness is culturally legitimised through *adat* rather than imposed externally:

*"When we follow adat in decision-making, people trust the process. But if we make decisions without consulting the elders or community, the members will complain and say it is not fair."* (Leader, Cooperative F)

Taken together, these responses indicate that *adat* acts as the benchmark for fairness, legitimising cooperative governance and ensuring social cohesion. It is not simply a procedural requirement but a moral and cultural obligation, deeply tied to collective values and identity.

**Table 3** highlights the key indicators through which fairness is interpreted and practised within Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives guided by *adat* norms. Fairness in these communities is not defined solely by modern organisational standards such as efficiency or equality of income but by cultural expectations of balance, respect, and mutual obligation.

Table 3: Key Indicators of Fairness under *Adat*

Indicator of Fairness	Example in Practice	Effect on Members' Perceptions
Equal rotation of duties	Turn-taking in hosting tourists and meal preparation	Prevents monopolisation and disputes
Respect for elders	Consultation in decision-making	Enhances legitimacy of cooperative rules
Reciprocity in contributions	Collective participation in festivals and meetings	Reinforces sense of shared responsibility

The first indicator, equal rotation of duties, reflects the *adat* principle of equitable participation. Members take turns (*giliran*) in hosting tourists, preparing meals, and performing daily cooperative tasks. This system of rotation prevents monopolisation of benefits or responsibilities and reduces potential conflicts among members. It promotes transparency and collective accountability, ensuring that everyone contributes proportionately to the cooperative's success.

The second indicator, respect for elders, represents an essential dimension of *adat*-based governance. Elders hold moral authority and are traditionally consulted in decision-making processes. Their involvement legitimises cooperative actions and reinforces trust among members, as decisions made with elders' endorsement are perceived to align with communal ethics and cultural propriety. This respect also preserves intergenerational harmony, bridging traditional wisdom with modern cooperative management.

The third indicator, reciprocity in contributions, underscores the cooperative spirit inherent in *adat*. Members are expected to participate collectively in festivals, meetings, and community events, fostering a sense of shared responsibility. This reciprocal system ensures that cooperation extends beyond economic activity, strengthening social cohesion and reinforcing cultural continuity.

In sum, these three indicators illustrate that fairness under *adat* is a dynamic blend of equity, respect, and reciprocity. Together, they foster legitimacy, harmony, and cohesion within CBT cooperatives, making cultural integrity the foundation of organisational sustainability.

#### 4.2. Theme 2: Justice Perceptions Strengthen Retention

Findings reveal that organisational justice, framed through *adat*, strongly influenced members' intentions to stay. When cooperative practices were *adat*-consistent such as fair workload rotation, transparent decision-making, and respect for elders, members felt a heightened sense of fairness, which translated into stronger loyalty and commitment.

Conversely, favouritism, inequitable benefit-sharing, or disregard for *adat* norms were interpreted as serious breaches of fairness. These practices weakened members' trust in leaders and reduced their motivation to participate actively.

As one youth member remarked:

*“If the leaders respect adat, we are willing to follow. But if they start to favour their own relatives, then people will not want to continue.”* (Youth, Cooperative F)

Other members echoed similar concerns. A female member noted the importance of equal benefit-sharing:

*“When the income from tourists is shared fairly, everyone feels encouraged to keep working together. But when some get more than others, people lose interest.”* (Female Member, Cooperative B)

An elder further highlighted the importance of consultation and respect in decision-making:

*“Adat says leaders must listen to the voices of the community, especially the elders. If decisions are made secretly, it is seen as unjust, and people will not support the cooperative.”* (Elder, Cooperative D)

Another youth participant pointed out how transparent communication reinforces justice perceptions:

*“When the leaders explain clearly how the money is used and who gets what, we feel respected. If there is no explanation, people start to doubt and may withdraw.”* (Youth, Cooperative A)

Taken together, these responses underscore how *adat*-driven justice perceptions act as a mediating mechanism between cultural expectations and cooperative retention. Members remain engaged not only because of the material benefits but also because they perceive fairness in the way *adat* norms are respected in leadership and cooperative management.

### **4.3. Theme 3: Burnout as a Limiting Factor**

Despite the strong influence of *adat* in promoting fairness and justice, burnout consistently emerged as a limiting factor within CBT cooperatives. Many members reported that the combination of tourism responsibilities and everyday livelihood activities such as farming, childcare, and household duties created an unsustainable workload. This often resulted in physical exhaustion, emotional strain, and reduced willingness to participate. Importantly, even though members recognised the cultural value of *adat* and the importance of communal duty, fatigue at times overrode these obligations.

A cooperative leader emphasised how members’ enthusiasm was often undermined by competing responsibilities:

*“We want to follow adat, but sometimes the work is too much. People get tired, and they prefer to stay home. This is why some members stop participating.”* (Leader, Cooperative B)

A youth participant described the tension between motivation and exhaustion:

*“At first, I was very motivated to join. But after many late nights cooking and preparing for tourists, while also working in the fields during the day, I felt drained. It became difficult to continue.”* (Youth, Cooperative C)

The burden of gendered roles was also evident, as highlighted by a female member:

*“Women in the cooperative carry double work—we manage the tourists and at the same time take care of the children and the household. Sometimes it is just too heavy.”* (Female Member, Cooperative E)

An elder noted the limits of cultural commitment when confronted with physical fatigue:

*“Adat teaches us to continue, but when the body cannot, the person will withdraw. If people are exhausted, they cannot give their best, and this affects the whole cooperative.”* (Elder, Cooperative F)

These findings suggest that burnout is not merely an individual issue but a structural challenge that undermines the sustainability of CBT cooperatives. Without systems for workload distribution and member support, cultural values alone cannot guarantee long-term retention.

From [Table 4](#), burnout among CBT cooperative members was found to stem from overlapping and competing demands.

Table 4: Factors Contributing to Burnout in CBT Cooperatives

Contributing Factor	Example in Practice	Impact on Retention
Excessive workload	Balancing farm work, family care, and tourism duties	Reduces willingness to participate
Seasonal intensity	Peak tourist seasons requiring long working hours	Creates physical and emotional exhaustion
Limited manpower	Few active members shouldering majority of tasks	Leads to disengagement and dropout

The excessive workload created by balancing traditional farming, household duties, and tourism responsibilities often resulted in fatigue, leaving members less willing to participate in cooperative activities. This was particularly visible during seasonal intensity, when tourist arrivals peaked, requiring members to commit long hours to hosting, cooking, and guiding, on top of their daily responsibilities. Such intense periods placed strain not only on physical stamina but also on emotional well-being, causing frustration and stress. Finally, limited manpower was a recurring problem: a small pool of active members frequently bore the majority of cooperative responsibilities, leading to unequal workload distribution. This imbalance triggered dissatisfaction and disengagement, with some members choosing to withdraw altogether. Together, these factors show that without deliberate workload rotation, recruitment of new members, and stronger support mechanisms, burnout will continue to undermine long-term retention in CBT cooperatives.

#### 4.4. Theme 4: Reciprocity and Cultural Obligation

Retention within CBT cooperatives was strongly shaped by the principle of reciprocity, which is a core element of *adat* and communal life. Members emphasised that their involvement was not solely for personal or economic benefit but was framed as a cultural duty to contribute to the well-being of the cooperative and the sustainability of the wider community. This sense of obligation was described as both a moral responsibility and a legacy for future generations.

One elder articulated this clearly:

*"We continue because this is for our children and our community. Even if the money is small, we must not let our traditions disappear."* (Elder, Cooperative A)

A youth member also expressed the importance of reciprocity, highlighting how their participation was tied to communal solidarity:

*"For us, joining the cooperative is about helping each other. If I do not participate, I feel like I am not fulfilling my duty to the community."* (Youth, Cooperative D)

A female member explained that even though financial incentives were limited, cultural duty compelled her continued engagement:

*"Even if I don't get much money, I stay because it is our responsibility as women to keep our culture alive for the younger generation."* (Female Member, Cooperative B)

Similarly, a cooperative leader described reciprocity as an act of cultural representation:

*"I remind the members that this is not only about income but about showing the world who we are as a community."* (Leader, Cooperative E)

These responses illustrate that reciprocity reinforced the psychological contract within CBT cooperatives, where members viewed participation as a means of preserving culture, strengthening social ties, and ensuring intergenerational continuity. Cooperative involvement was thus more than an economic activity; it was a symbolic practice rooted in *adat* that sustained loyalty even in the absence of significant material rewards.

#### 4.5. Summary of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate the central role of *adat* in shaping member retention within Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives in Sabah and Sarawak. *Adat* not only functions as a standard of fairness guiding how workloads are distributed, benefits are shared, and decisions are made but also acts as a cultural glue that binds members together through shared values and collective obligations.

When cooperative practices were consistent with *adat* principles, members perceived fairness and organisational justice, which in turn strengthened their trust in leadership

and willingness to remain engaged. These perceptions were particularly enhanced by practices such as equal rotation of hosting duties, transparency in financial distribution, and respect for elders' voices in decision-making. In contrast, violations of *adat* such as favouritism or lack of consultation, were interpreted as breaches of fairness, undermining trust and weakening retention.

At the same time, reciprocity and cultural obligation were found to sustain participation even when financial rewards were modest. Members often viewed their involvement not simply as an economic activity, but as part of their responsibility to preserve traditions, support the community, and ensure intergenerational continuity. This cultural framing encouraged loyalty and long-term commitment to cooperative activities.

However, the study also revealed that burnout significantly undermines the protective role of *adat*. Excessive workloads, seasonal intensity, and limited manpower created fatigue and stress that weakened members' capacity to participate consistently. Even when motivated by cultural obligations, members who felt overburdened were more likely to disengage, suggesting that retention is not guaranteed by *adat* alone.

Taken together, these findings suggest that sustainable retention in CBT cooperatives requires a balance between cultural values and practical workload management. Respecting *adat* strengthens fairness and cohesion, while addressing burnout ensures that members can participate meaningfully without jeopardising their well-being.

Table 5 presents a synthesis of the four key themes that emerged from the study and their respective influence on member retention within Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives. Each theme highlights a distinct but interconnected factor that shapes how members perceive fairness, justice, obligation, and sustainability within the cooperative structure.

Table 5: Summary of Themes and Their Influence on Retention

Theme (s)	Key Insight	Effect on Retention
<i>Adat</i> as the Standard of Fairness	Fairness is judged through adherence to <i>adat</i> principles such as rotation and respect	Enhances legitimacy, cohesion, and trust in cooperative governance
Justice Perceptions Strengthen Retention	<i>Adat</i> -consistent practices build perceptions of fairness and transparency	Reinforces loyalty, commitment, and willingness to remain engaged
Burnout as a Limiting Factor	Excessive workload, seasonal intensity, and limited manpower create fatigue	Weakens cultural obligations, reduces participation, and risks dropout
Reciprocity and Cultural Obligation	Participation framed as cultural duty and responsibility for future generations	Sustains long-term involvement despite limited financial rewards

The first theme, *Adat* as the Standard of Fairness, demonstrates that fairness within CBT cooperatives is not evaluated through financial or procedural measures alone but through the observance of *adat* principles. Practices such as equal rotation of duties, communal decision-making, and respect for elders serve as cultural benchmarks that legitimise cooperative operations. When these values are upheld, members perceive the

cooperative as just and trustworthy, which enhances legitimacy, cohesion, and collective trust in governance.

The second theme, Justice Perceptions Strengthen Retention, shows that when cooperative leaders follow *adat*-aligned practices such as transparent communication and equitable benefit-sharing members experience organisational justice. This perceived fairness strengthens their sense of belonging and commitment, leading to increased loyalty and a stronger willingness to remain active participants. Conversely, perceived injustice or favouritism weakens engagement and trust, potentially leading to withdrawal.

The third theme, Burnout as a Limiting Factor, highlights the practical constraints that can undermine cultural cohesion. Excessive workloads, high tourist demand during peak seasons, and limited manpower lead to physical and emotional exhaustion among members. Despite their commitment to *adat* and communal duty, burnout reduces participation and threatens long-term retention. This indicates that while cultural values sustain engagement, they cannot entirely compensate for operational strain and fatigue.

The fourth theme, Reciprocity and Cultural Obligation, underscores the moral and cultural dimensions of participation. Members view their involvement not as an individual pursuit but as a responsibility to the community and future generations. This deep sense of reciprocity motivates continued engagement even when financial incentives are limited. By linking participation to heritage preservation and social continuity, *adat* reinforces intergenerational loyalty and cooperative sustainability.

In summary, [Table 5](#) encapsulates how *adat* and organisational justice create the foundation for trust and cohesion in CBT cooperatives, while reciprocity sustains long-term participation. However, burnout emerges as a counterbalancing factor, revealing the need for cooperative leaders to harmonise cultural obligations with practical workload management to ensure enduring retention and wellbeing among members.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that psychological contracts in CBT cooperatives are deeply embedded within *adat* norms, highlighting the importance of cultural values in shaping member retention. Unlike conventional organisations, where fairness is typically assessed in terms of material rewards or procedural transparency, members of CBT cooperatives interpret fairness primarily through the lens of cultural obligations. Adherence to *adat* such as equitable rotation of duties, respect for elders' authority, and reciprocity in contributions, provides the benchmark for fairness and legitimacy in cooperative governance. This confirms earlier arguments that the psychological contract is highly contextual and must be understood in relation to the social and cultural environments in which organisations operate ([Guest, 2004](#); [Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008](#)).

The study further shows that organisational justice operates as a mediating mechanism between cultural expectations and cooperative retention. When cooperative leaders adhered to *adat* principles, members perceived distributive, procedural, and interactional justice ([Colquitt et al., 2001](#)). This alignment strengthened trust and reinforced loyalty, thereby increasing members' willingness to remain engaged. Conversely, breaches of *adat* such as favouritism or inequitable benefit-sharing—were

interpreted as violations of fairness, weakening psychological contracts and reducing retention. This extends the work of [Cropanzano et al. \(2007\)](#), who argued that justice perceptions strongly predict organisational commitment, by showing that in indigenous cooperative contexts, justice is not only procedural or distributive but also culturally framed.

Importantly, the study identifies burnout as a boundary condition that weakens the protective role of *adat*. Even when members strongly valued cultural obligations, excessive workloads, seasonal intensity, and limited manpower created fatigue that led to disengagement. This finding aligns with broader research on burnout, which shows that prolonged physical and emotional strain reduces organisational commitment and increases turnover intentions ([Maslach et al., 2001](#); [Jalonen et al., 2020](#)). However, this study adds new insight by illustrating that burnout can override strong cultural and moral obligations, suggesting that even highly cohesive communities require mechanisms for workload distribution and member support to ensure sustainability.

By situating the psychological contract within an indigenous cultural framework, this study extends existing theory in two important ways. First, it challenges the assumption that psychological contracts are universally based on transactional or relational dimensions ([Rousseau, 1995](#)). In CBT cooperatives, the contract includes cultural dimensions, rooted in *adat*, which shape how fairness and obligations are defined. Second, it demonstrates the intersection between cultural norms and organisational psychology, showing that cultural values not only influence but also structure the very mechanisms such as organisational justice through which retention is achieved.

These findings resonate with research emphasising the role of culture in community-based tourism, where participation is often motivated by identity preservation, social cohesion, and moral responsibility rather than financial incentives alone ([Okazaki, 2008](#); [Zapata et al., 2011](#)). They also contribute to the literature on indigenous management practices by showing that *adat* functions as both a governance mechanism and a psychological contract framework, binding members to collective obligations.

At the same time, the identification of burnout as a limiting factor raises practical considerations. Cooperative leaders and supporting agencies must recognise that cultural values alone cannot guarantee long-term retention. Strategies such as workload rotation, inclusion of more members, gender-sensitive task allocation, and provision of rest periods are necessary to prevent fatigue and ensure that cultural obligations remain sustainable in practice. This highlights the need for a balance between cultural legitimacy and organisational effectiveness, ensuring that *adat* values are upheld while also addressing the practical realities of member well-being.

In summary, the study illustrates that psychological contracts in CBT cooperatives are culturally embedded, justice-mediated, and burnout-constrained. By situating psychological contract theory in an indigenous context, it provides new insights into how cultural norms and organisational psychology intersect, offering both theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for strengthening CBT retention.

**Table 6** summarises the central arguments of the discussion by integrating the theoretical and practical dimensions of member retention in Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives. It encapsulates how psychological contracts, organisational justice,

*adat* norms, and burnout interact to influence cooperative sustainability within an indigenous cultural framework.

Table 6: Discussion Summary – Cultural and Organisational Dimensions of Retention in CBT Cooperatives

Key Construct	Interpretation in CBT Context	Implications for Retention
Psychological Contract	Embedded in <i>adat</i> , expectations go beyond material benefits to include fairness, reciprocity, and respect for elders.	Upholding cultural obligations strengthens trust, commitment, and sustained participation.
Organisational Justice	Mediates between <i>adat</i> expectations and retention, with fairness judged in distributive, procedural, and interactional terms.	Transparent decision-making and equitable workload rotation enhance loyalty; breaches weaken engagement.
<i>Adat</i> Norms	Function as the cultural glue legitimising cooperative governance.	Provides members with a sense of moral duty; strengthens cohesion even when economic rewards are modest.
Burnout as Boundary Condition	Excessive workload, seasonal intensity, and gendered responsibilities reduce capacity to participate.	Cultural obligations alone cannot prevent dropout; members disengage when fatigue outweighs commitment.
Theoretical Contribution	Extends psychological contract theory by situating it in indigenous cooperative settings.	Shows how cultural norms and organisational psychology intersect to shape fairness and retention.
Practical Contribution	Highlights the need for balance between cultural legitimacy and workload management.	Suggests strategies such as workload rotation, gender-sensitive task allocation, and inclusion of more active members.

The first construct, psychological contract, captures how member expectations in CBT cooperatives extend beyond formal or material obligations. Unlike in corporate organisations, these expectations are deeply embedded in *adat*—a customary system that values fairness, reciprocity, and respect for elders. When these cultural and relational expectations are honoured, members experience trust and a sense of belonging, which strengthens their long-term commitment to cooperative activities. This finding reinforces the argument that the psychological contract in indigenous settings is inherently cultural, relational, and moral rather than purely transactional (Rousseau, 1995; Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008).

The second construct, organisational justice, operates as a mediating factor that links cultural expectations to behavioural outcomes such as loyalty and retention. Members assess fairness not only through formal mechanisms but through culturally defined indicators such as transparent decision-making, equitable workload rotation, and respect for communal hierarchy. When these justice principles are observed, members perceive legitimacy and cohesion within the cooperative; when they are breached, trust deteriorates, leading to disengagement. This supports prior research suggesting that justice perceptions are critical in fostering commitment and cooperative stability (Colquitt et al., 2001; Cropanzano et al., 2007).

The third construct, *adat* norms, represents the cultural foundation of cooperative governance. *Adat* functions as the moral and social glue that legitimises authority, regulates behaviour, and maintains community harmony. Even when financial rewards are modest, members' adherence to *adat* principles fosters moral duty, social responsibility, and intergenerational continuity. This finding aligns with earlier ethnographic studies in Borneo that identify *adat* as a central mechanism for maintaining social order and collective well-being (Hooker, 1978; Colchester, 2013).

The fourth construct, burnout as a boundary condition, highlights the practical constraints that limit cultural cohesion. While *adat* and justice foster loyalty, excessive workloads, gendered divisions of labour, and seasonal pressures can diminish members' capacity to participate. Burnout weakens the otherwise protective effects of cultural obligations, indicating that even strong cultural bonds cannot compensate for unmanaged operational strain. This insight resonates with the broader organisational literature on work stress, which demonstrates that fatigue undermines engagement and commitment (Maslach et al., 2001; Jalonen et al., 2020).

The final two rows of the table outline the study's broader contributions. The theoretical contribution lies in extending psychological contract theory into an indigenous cooperative context, showing how cultural norms and organisational psychology intersect to shape fairness and retention. This bridges Western management theory with indigenous social systems, enriching the conceptual understanding of workplace behaviour in non-Western settings. The practical contribution focuses on strategies for improving cooperative sustainability particularly the need to balance cultural legitimacy with effective workload management. This includes adopting workload rotation, gender-sensitive task allocation, and member inclusion policies to ensure equitable participation and reduce burnout.

Overall, Table 6 demonstrates that retention in CBT cooperatives cannot be understood through organisational factors alone; it must be viewed as the outcome of a dynamic interplay between culture, justice, and well-being. By integrating psychological and cultural perspectives, the study offers both conceptual advancement and actionable recommendations for strengthening community-based tourism governance and sustainability in indigenous contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

This study concludes that member retention in Community-Based Tourism (CBT) cooperatives is shaped by the interaction of psychological contracts, organisational justice, and *adat* norms. Unlike conventional organisations, where retention is often linked to financial incentives or formal policies, the findings demonstrate that in indigenous cooperative contexts, retention is strongly embedded in cultural frameworks. *Adat* functions not only as a standard of fairness but also as a cultural glue that legitimises cooperative governance, reinforcing trust, loyalty, and cohesion among members. The psychological contract in this setting goes beyond material expectations, encompassing obligations of reciprocity, respect for elders, and shared responsibility. These cultural expectations are mediated through organisational justice, as members evaluate fairness in decision-making, workload distribution, and interpersonal treatment through the lens of *adat*. When cooperative leaders uphold these norms, members perceive fairness and are more likely to remain engaged, but when they are violated, trust erodes, and disengagement increases.

At the same time, the study reveals that burnout serves as a boundary condition that weakens the otherwise protective role of *adat*. Members balancing multiple roles in tourism, farming, and family life reported fatigue that undermined their ability to fulfil cultural obligations. Even when motivated by reciprocity and communal duty, excessive workload and limited manpower created disengagement. This suggests that cultural norms alone are insufficient to sustain retention if the practical realities of member well-being are not addressed. This finding echoes wider literature on burnout and turnover, which highlights that organisational commitment declines when physical and emotional strain becomes overwhelming (Maslach et al., 2001; Jalonen et al., 2020).

Based on these insights, several practical recommendations emerge. First, embedding *adat* principles into cooperative governance is essential for strengthening fairness perceptions and ensuring cultural legitimacy. Cooperative leaders should ensure that decision-making processes are inclusive, respectful of elders, and aligned with customary norms, thereby reinforcing the psychological contract between members and the cooperative. Second, rotating workloads and ensuring more equitable task distribution can help prevent burnout, especially during peak tourism seasons, and reduce the risk of dropout. This should include gender-sensitive practices that recognise the disproportionate burden often carried by women. Third, leadership training is critical to equip cooperative leaders with the skills to balance *adat* expectations with modern cooperative management practices. Leaders need to combine respect for cultural values with transparent financial management, conflict resolution, and capacity building to ensure both cultural and organisational sustainability.

Beyond its empirical insights, this study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends psychological contract theory by situating it within indigenous cooperative contexts, showing that cultural norms such as *adat* fundamentally shape how fairness, obligations, and organisational justice are interpreted. This expands existing models of the psychological contract, which have often prioritised transactional and relational dimensions, by adding a cultural dimension that is particularly salient in community-based settings. Practically, the study provides guidance for CBT cooperatives, leaders, and policymakers by emphasising the need to embed *adat* values into cooperative governance, ensure equitable workload distribution, and build leadership capacities that balance cultural legitimacy with modern management skills. By doing so, CBT initiatives can enhance member retention, preserve cultural heritage, and secure their long-term sustainability.

In conclusion, this study extends psychological contract theory by situating it in an indigenous cultural context, showing how cultural norms and organisational psychology intersect in shaping retention. It demonstrates that sustainable CBT requires a balance between cultural legitimacy and practical workload management, ensuring that *adat* values are preserved while also safeguarding member well-being. Future research could build on these findings by adopting a mixed-methods approach or examining gendered differences in cultural obligations to provide a more nuanced understanding of retention in CBT cooperatives.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from The Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). All participants were

informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and the names of cooperatives were anonymised. Sensitivity to *adat* was also observed by engaging community gatekeepers and respecting customary protocols during the research process.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the design, implementation, or reporting of this study.

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