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Nothing About Us Without Us: reimagining tourism research through participatory and decolonizing methodologies

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Tourism research has increasingly recognized the importance of participation, inclusion, and social justice. However, knowledge production remains dominated by researcher-led, expert-centered approaches that often marginalize the lived experiences of those most affected by tourism. While participatory and decolonizing methodologies have gained momentum across social sciences, their collective contribution to tourism research remains synthesized. This perspective article argues that the principle "Nothing About Us Without Us" provides a compelling foundation for reimagining tourism research through more inclusive and epistemically just approaches to knowledge production. Drawing on scholarship from childism, disability studies, Indigenous research methodologies, and community-led approaches, the article reviews recent methodological developments that challenge extractive research practices and reposition participants as collaborators, co-researchers, and knowledge holders. Although these traditions have emerged from diverse disciplinary and cultural contexts, they share a commitment to relationality, reciprocity, self-determination, and co-producing knowledge. It argues that these approaches collectively represent a broader methodological shift from conducting research on communities toward research with and increasingly by communities. Rather than proposing alternative research techniques, this article advocates transforming how tourism research conceptualizes expertise. It concludes by proposing six guiding principles for participatory and decolonizing tourism research that support more ethical, culturally responsive, and socially transformative knowledge production.

KEYWORDS
childism, co-production of knowledge, empowering research, epistemic justice, foundational principles, Indigenous methodologies, participatory methodologies

1 Introduction

> *"If research is to be transformative, it must be done with people, not simply about them."*

Tourism research has undergone significant transformation over the past decades. Following the critical turn in tourism studies, scholars have increasingly questioned whose knowledge is represented, whose interests are served, and whose voices remain

absent from research and decision-making (Ateljevic et al., 2007; Chambers and Rakic, 2015; Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2022). Contemporary debates on sustainability, social justice, Indigenous rights, accessibility, children's rights, and community wellbeing have reinforced that tourism is not merely an economic activity, but a social practice embedded within relationships of power, culture, and knowledge (Aquino, 2019; Scheyvens et al., 2021). Consequently, tourism researchers are increasingly challenged to reconsider not only how tourism is studied but also how knowledge is produced and whose perspectives are recognized as legitimate (Pritchard et al., 2011).

Despite these developments, tourism research continues to privilege researcher-led and expert-centered approaches, where expertise is commonly equated with institutional authority, professional status, or academic credentials. Although these perspectives provide valuable insights, they frequently overlook the experiential knowledge of those most directly affected by tourism, including Indigenous peoples, children and young people, people with disabilities, and local communities (Canosa and Graham, 2023; Dickson et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2023). Such practices risk reinforcing existing power asymmetries, reproducing dominant narratives, and limiting opportunities for more inclusive and socially responsive tourism research (Aquino, 2019; Wijesinghe and Mura, 2018).

These concerns align with broader debates on epistemic justice, which examine how knowledge is valued, whose voices are heard, and whose experiences are excluded from knowledge production (Fricker, 2007). As knowledge is socially situated and shaped by historical, political, and cultural contexts, research methodologies influence not only what is known about tourism but also whose realities become visible. Increasingly, scholars advocate moving beyond extractive research practices toward approaches that recognize participants as collaborators, knowledge holders, and agents of change (Chilisa, 2011; Kovach, 2010). This shift matters in tourism, where communities have historically been researched on rather than with, often through methodological frameworks developed outside the cultural contexts in which they are applied (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

The principle "Nothing About Us Without Us", originating in the disability rights movement (Franits, 2005), offers a compelling lens for rethinking tourism research. More than a call for representation, it challenges assumptions about who holds expertise and argues that those affected by research should actively participate in generating the knowledge that informs decisions. Similar principles underpin childism, Indigenous scholarship, and community-led methodologies, all of which challenge hierarchical relationships between researchers and participants. Childism recognizes children as competent social actors capable of contributing to research concerning their own lives (Wall, 2022; Young-Bruehl, 2012), while Indigenous methodologies emphasize relationality, reciprocity, accountability, and self-determination (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Community-led approaches such as Thai Baan (Heis and Chayan, 2020) and Talanoa (Ponton, 2018) similarly demonstrate that local knowledge, lived experience, and collective interpretation are central to understanding tourism.

Although these methodological developments have gained increasing recognition, they have largely evolved within separate disciplinary traditions. Tourism scholarship has yet to synthesize these approaches into a coherent discussion of participation, power, and knowledge production. Existing articles tend to focus on specific methods (e.g., Devaney and Henchion, 2018 on the Delphi method), participant groups (e.g., Dickson et al., 2024 on disability communities), or theoretical traditions (e.g., Canosa et al., 2026 on childism), rather than the broader methodological transformation occurring across critical tourism studies.

This perspective article argues that "Nothing About Us Without Us" provides a unifying framework for reimagining tourism research through an epistemic justice lens. Drawing on scholarship from disability studies, childism, Indigenous methodologies, and community-led research, it synthesizes methodological innovations that challenge extractive approaches to knowledge production and reposition participants as collaborators, co-researchers, and knowledge holders. Rather than advocating individual methods, it argues for a broader methodological transformation in which expertise is understood as plural, relational, culturally situated, and co-produced. It concludes by proposing six guiding principles for advancing more inclusive, ethically grounded, and socially transformative tourism research.

2 Rethinking expertise: from expert authority to epistemic justice

Expert knowledge has long shaped tourism research, particularly in studies of governance, destination management, sustainability, and policy. Interviews with policymakers, industry leaders, and academic specialists, together with expert elicitation techniques such as Delphi studies, have made important contributions to understanding complex tourism issues (Bolger and Wright, 2017; Devaney and Henchion, 2018). However, these approaches often equate expertise with institutional authority or professional status, privileging some forms of knowledge while marginalizing others.

This hierarchy of knowledge has important implications for tourism research. Although technical expertise remains essential, many contemporary tourism issues, including climate change, accessibility, Indigenous rights, children's participation, and community wellbeing, are deeply embedded in lived experience. Relying primarily on institutional or professional perspectives risks overlooking the situated knowledge of those most directly affected by tourism and reinforcing existing power asymmetries (Aquino, 2019; Lewis et al., 2023). These concerns reflect broader debates on epistemic justice, which question whose knowledge is recognized as credible and whose voices are systematically excluded (Fricker, 2007). Within tourism research, children are often represented through adults, people with disabilities through service providers, Indigenous peoples through external agencies, and local communities through tourism organizations rather than their own lived experiences. Such practices privilege representation over participation and risk perpetuating testimonial and interpretive injustice.

Participatory and decolonizing scholarship offers an alternative by reconceptualizing expertise as plural, relational, and context-dependent. Rather than replacing technical expertise, these approaches recognize lived experience, cultural knowledge, and

community perspectives as complementary forms of expertise (Canosa and Graham, 2023; Chilisa, 2011; Dickson et al., 2024; Kovach, 2010). The principle "Nothing About Us Without Us" captures this shift, arguing that those affected by research should actively help define research questions, select methods, interpret findings, and determine how knowledge is used. Expertise thus becomes a collaborative process rather than the preserve of recognized specialists.

Reconceptualizing expertise this way shifts tourism research from extracting knowledge to co-producing it through dialogue, reciprocity, and shared interpretation. The following section reviews methodological innovations that operationalize this transformation through childist, Indigenous, community-led, and participatory research approaches.

3 Participatory and decolonizing methodological innovations

Growing attention to epistemic justice has stimulated methodological innovation across the social sciences. Although childism, Indigenous methodologies, and community-led research originate from different intellectual traditions, they share a common goal: transforming research from an extractive process into one of collaboration and knowledge co-production. Rather than treating participants as data sources, these approaches recognize lived experience, cultural knowledge, and collective interpretation as legitimate forms of expertise. Together, they signal a broader shift in tourism research toward more participatory and decolonizing approaches to knowledge production.

3.1 Child-inclusive methodologies

Childism has emerged as an important methodological development within childhood studies by challenging adult-centered assumptions that position children as passive research subjects rather than competent social actors (Wall, 2022; Canosa and Graham, 2023). Grounded in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, childist research advocates children's right to participate in research affecting their lives. Methodologically, this involves moving from research on children toward research with and increasingly by children (Canosa et al., 2026). Participatory methods such as child-led interviews, photovoice (Power et al., 2014), and LEGO® Serious Play® enable children to contribute to research design, interpretation, and dissemination (Ju et al., 2024). Beyond children's participation, childism challenges broader assumptions about expertise by demonstrating that knowledge should not be determined solely by age, status, or professional authority.

3.2 Indigenous methodologies

Indigenous methodologies similarly challenge the dominance of Western research paradigms by advocating approaches grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, values, and ways of knowing (Chilisa, 2011; Kovach, 2010; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). While culturally diverse, these approaches share common principles of relationality, accountability, decolonization, and self-determination. Research is understood as a reciprocal process that strengthens relationships and supports community wellbeing rather than simply generating academic knowledge. Pacific methodologies such as Talanoa and Teu le Va (Ponton, 2018) exemplify these principles through dialogue, reciprocity, and collective interpretation, positioning communities as partners and knowledge holders rather than research subjects.

3.3 Community-led methodologies

Community-led approaches further democratize knowledge production by enabling communities to define research priorities, generate knowledge, and interpret findings. The Thai Baan methodology conceptualizes local people as researchers of their own communities, producing knowledge grounded in everyday experience and collective dialogue (Heis and Chayan, 2020). Similarly, the Baraza methodology, informed by the African philosophy of Ubuntu, promotes collective deliberation, reciprocity, and shared ownership of knowledge in tourism (Robinson et al., 2024). Although developed in different cultural contexts, both approaches illustrate a shift from community consultation to community-led knowledge production.

Across these methodological traditions, participation is not simply a research technique but a redistribution of epistemic authority. Researchers become facilitators of dialogue rather than sole producers of knowledge, while participants contribute throughout the research process. Together, childist, Indigenous, and community-led methodologies demonstrate that methodological innovation is less about adopting new methods than about rethinking expertise, power, and participation. They provide complementary pathways toward more inclusive, culturally responsive, and socially accountable tourism research.

4 Participatory co-design

Participatory co-design extends collaboration beyond data collection to involve participants in decision-making, implementation, and governance. Originally developed in design research, it is increasingly applied in tourism planning, accessibility, destination management, and policy by involving users directly in designing solutions rather than simply evaluating them (Dickson et al., 2024). The disability movement's principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us" has been particularly influential, challenging professional assumptions by positioning people with disabilities as partners in shaping research, policy, and practice. Similar approaches are now evident in children's participation, community planning, and Indigenous tourism governance. Across these methodological traditions, participation is understood as engagement throughout the research process,



FIGURE 1
The foundations of participatory and emancipatory tourism research.

from defining research questions and selecting methods to interpreting findings, disseminating knowledge, and implementing change. Researchers become facilitators rather than sole producers of knowledge, while participants contribute as collaborators and co-researchers.

Collectively, childist, Indigenous, community-led, and participatory co-design approaches represent a broader methodological shift from extracting knowledge to co-producing it. Their shared contribution lies not in introducing new research techniques, but in redefining expertise as plural, relational, and culturally situated. This transformation provides the foundation for more inclusive, ethically grounded, and socially responsive tourism research and informs the guiding principles proposed in the following section.

4.1 Toward participatory tourism research

The methodological developments reviewed here point toward a broader transformation in tourism research, one that extends beyond adopting participatory methods to fundamentally rethinking how knowledge is produced. While childist, Indigenous, community-led, and co-design approaches differ in their philosophical origins, they converge in promoting more equitable relationships between researchers and participants. Building on this synthesis, this article proposes six guiding principles for advancing participatory and decolonizing tourism research (see Figure 1).

Pluralizing expertise recognizes lived experience, cultural knowledge, and local perspectives as complementary to academic and professional expertise. Participation extends beyond consultation to involve communities throughout the research process. Relationality positions knowledge as emerging through dialogue, trust, and reciprocal relationships. Cultural responsiveness ensures that research methods are grounded in local values, contexts, and ways of knowing rather than assuming universal applicability. Co-production reframes participants as collaborators who contribute to research design, interpretation, and dissemination. Finally, community benefit emphasizes that research should generate reciprocal value by supporting empowerment, capacity building, and more equitable tourism outcomes. Together, these principles reposition tourism research from knowledge extraction toward collaborative, culturally grounded, and socially accountable knowledge production.

As illustrated in Figure 1, participatory tourism research represents a shift from conducting research *on* communities to research *with* and increasingly *by* communities. Guided by the principles of pluralizing expertise, participation, relationality, cultural responsiveness, co-production, and community benefit, this approach broadens who is recognized as a legitimate knowledge holder. Thus, it strengthens the rigor, relevance, and social impact of tourism research while supporting more inclusive and equitable knowledge production.

5 Discussion

This perspective article argued that tourism research is undergoing an important methodological transformation, driven by growing recognition that knowledge production is inseparable from questions of power, participation, and social justice. While expert-led and researcher-centered approaches have contributed substantially to tourism scholarship, they have also tended to privilege institutional authority over lived experience. As tourism increasingly addresses complex issues such as climate change, accessibility, Indigenous rights, children's participation, and community wellbeing, relying on a narrow conception of expertise is no longer sufficient. More inclusive approaches to knowledge production are required to better reflect the diversity of people, cultures, and experiences that shape tourism.

Across the methodological traditions reviewed, a common direction of travel is evident. Childist methodologies, Indigenous research approaches, and community-led methods promoting participatory co-design have developed independently. However, they converge around shared principles of relationality, reciprocity, participation, and shared ownership of knowledge. Although these approaches differ in their philosophical origins and cultural contexts, they collectively challenge extractive research practices by recognizing participants as knowledgeable actors rather than passive data sources. Their shared emphasis on collaboration demonstrates that methodological innovation is not simply about adopting new research techniques but about transforming relationships between researchers, participants, and the knowledge they co-create.

The principle "Nothing About Us Without Us" provides a unifying framework for this transformation. Rather than viewing participation as a procedural requirement or ethical add-on, the principle repositions it as an epistemological commitment that recognizes the legitimacy of multiple ways of knowing. This perspective shifts tourism research beyond consultation to genuine collaboration, where communities help define research priorities,

select methods, interpret findings, and shape how knowledge is applied. Thus, it broadens conventional understandings of expertise by recognizing lived experience, cultural knowledge, and community wisdom as complementary to academic and professional knowledge.

Realizing this transformation will require continued methodological innovation and institutional change. Researchers need to develop culturally responsive approaches that are flexible enough to accommodate diverse participants, while journals, funding agencies, ethics committees, and universities must also recognize participatory and community-led research as rigorous scholarship. Advancing participatory tourism research therefore depends not only on methodological choice but also on reshaping the structures that determine whose knowledge is valued. Ultimately, reimagining tourism research is not about replacing expert knowledge but about broadening the knowledge base on which tourism scholarship is built. Moving from research on communities toward research with, and increasingly by, communities offer an opportunity to produce knowledge that is more inclusive, culturally grounded, and socially accountable. By embracing epistemic plurality alongside methodological rigor, tourism researchers can contribute to a more equitable and reflexive discipline in which those most affected by tourism are recognized not merely as participants, but as essential partners in creating knowledge.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

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