



Constructing Community-Based Tourism Identity Through Gender Practices: A Case Study of Women on Thieng Lieng Island, Can Gio, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the process of constructing community-based tourism identity through women's gender practices on Thieng Lieng island, Can Gio, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Rather than treating identity as a pre-existing concept, the article conceptualizes identity as a dynamic process shaped by a series of practices related to labor, gender roles and interactions within the community-based tourism context. Through activities that serve both as a means of livelihood and a form of communication, local women emerge as active agents in the creation of identity in their daily lives. This study contributes to understanding the role of gender practices in shaping destination identity and their impact on community-based tourism development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As community-based tourism is increasingly recognized as a sustainable direction for many localities in Vietnam, destination identity has become a strategic factor in positioning images and attracting tourists. Identity is now understood as a dynamic process; rather, it is understood as a dynamic process formed through social practices, shaped by the actions, emotions and participation of specific individuals within the community.

Gender plays a central role in shaping these practices, influencing not only the roles women assume but also how they engage with and perform identity within the tourism context. On Thieng Lieng island, women's contributions extend beyond mere participation; they actively shape the destination's identity through the repetition of everyday tasks, emotional exchanges and the creation of narratives that resonate with both locals and tourists. These gendered practices, which encompass caregiving, hospitality and the transmission of cultural stories, not only sustain the community's social fabric but also carve out a unique and authentic tourism identity. As these practices are intertwined with women's lived experiences, they help to solidify a compelling, enduring image of the island that attracts tourists while preserving local cultural heritage.

However, much of the existing research continues to view identity as a static outcome of cultural and tourism activities, without fully addressing how gender practices, particularly those of women, contribute to the formation of identity as a dynamic and ongoing social process. This article aims to examine community-based tourism identity through the lens of gender practices, specifically focusing on the women of Thieng Lieng Island, to uncover the mechanisms through which everyday activities within the community shape the destination's appeal. By exploring the intersection of gender, labor and tourism practices, the study seeks to highlight how these seemingly mundane yet significant actions contribute to the creation and evolution of a unique destination identity that resonates with both locals and visitors.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of tourism identities, gender practices, community-based tourism (CBT) and women's roles has garnered significant attention from scholars, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia and indigenous communities. Research underscores how tourism serves as a platform for shaping community identities and gender practices, often reflecting broader socio-cultural dynamics. Dolezal et al. (2015) emphasize the growing role of tourism in Southeast Asia, highlighting its potential to promote local, community-led development and empowerment through participatory initiatives such as CBT. These initiatives aim to redistribute benefits more equitably and foster sustainable practices, with particular emphasis on empowering local women. In countries such

as Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, CBT is positioned as an alternative to mass tourism, fostering local ownership and cross-cultural understanding (Dolezal, 2014; Boonratana, 2010).

Such approaches are increasingly recognized for their capacity to influence gender roles, with women actively participating in tourism activities that challenge traditional gender expectations (Trust, Traditions and Indigenous Women's Leadership, 2024). The role of women in community-based tourism is further examined through a gendered lens, revealing how participation can serve as both empowerment and a means of strengthening community identity. For example, the politics of agroecology and community sovereignty are closely tied to women's involvement in CBT, thereby enhancing their agency and fostering community resilience (Women Sustaining Community, 2018). Similarly, gendered perspectives on tourism highlight how women's roles in heritage and cultural practices can serve as powerful sources of empowerment, cultivating a sense of belonging and community identity (Tracker, 2022; 'A Place Where I Belong', 2024).

Further research explores how traditional gender roles are negotiated within tourism contexts. Transformed gender relations in CBT, such as those seen in homestay development, illustrate how women navigate and reshape traditional gender expectations through place-making and tourism activities (Transformed Gender Relations, 2022). These processes often result in greater visibility and recognition of women's contributions, challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality (Enhancing Gender Equality Through CBT, 2024).

The experiences of indigenous women within tourism further underscore the complex interplay between identity, gender and community development. Research stresses the significance of indigenous women's leadership and the need to address discrimination and cultural expectations that limit their participation (Trust, Traditions and Indigenous Women's Leadership, 2024). Acknowledging the rights of indigenous women and incorporating their perspectives into tourism planning is essential for fostering inclusive and sustainable development (Recognizing the Need to Bolster Indigenous Peoples' Rights, 2023).

Additionally, studies on diverse gender identities in tourism point to a broader understanding of how diverse gender and sexual identities navigate tourism spaces. Ong et al. (2020) advocate for more comprehensive research into the experiences of queer communities, which can inform the development of more inclusive tourism practices that respect gender diversity and promote social acceptance.

In conclusion, academic literature demonstrates that tourism, particularly community-based initiatives, plays a pivotal role in shaping gender practices and community identities. Women's participation in tourism is increasingly recognized as a pathway to empowerment, social inclusion and the redefinition of traditional gender roles, contributing to the development of equitable and culturally enriched communities (Dolezal et al., 2015; Women Sustaining Community, 2018; Transformed Gender Relations, 2022). Nevertheless, persistent challenges related to discrimination, cultural expectations and power dynamics continue to influence women's experiences in tourism contexts, underscoring the necessity for inclusive policies and participatory approaches.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopts qualitative methods with a case study design to explore the process of constructing community-based tourism identity through the gender practices of local women. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and participant observation on Thieng Lieng Island, where women are directly involved in spatial organization, tourism communication and community livelihood activities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with women engaged in various roles within the tourism activity chain, ranging from welcoming guests and preparing meals to storytelling and coordinating interactions with tourists. Concurrently, participant observation was carried out in everyday living environments to identify manifestations of gender practices within tourism-related spaces. The data were thematically coded and analyzed interpretively to reconstruct the mechanisms through which gender practices contribute to the formation of destination identity as a dynamic and symbolic social process

4. THEORETICAL BASIS

4.1. Concepts

Community-based tourism identity is not merely a collection of specific socio-cultural elements of a locality, but rather the outcome of a social construction process in which the local community plays an active role in presenting, negotiating and shaping the image of the destination for tourists and the broader tourism market. According to Richards and Wilson (2006), identity is not an inherent entity to be "discovered" but is constructed through interactions between visitors, residents and space. This approach shifts the perspective of identity from being essentialist to seeing it as an open, mutable structure, continually reconfigured through cultural practices, discourse and experience (Salazar, 2012).

In this context, gender is not solely a biological characteristic, but a socially constructed framework that operates through norms, behaviors and power structures (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2002). Gender practices, therefore, are understood as repetitive sequences of actions that can either maintain or challenge the existing gender order. Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) emphasize that all practices consist of connections between materials, skills and meanings, which together form recurrent social behavior.

Within the space of community-based tourism, gender practices not only reflect the structure of social roles but also become a means of creating destination identity, particularly through often-overlooked actors such as women. From organizing accommodation spaces, preparing meals and telling cultural stories to performing greeting and farewell rituals, women not only provide services but also convey cultural messages and shape tourists' experiences. As Nash (1996) asserts, tourism identity is not a static semiotic system but rather the product of continuous negotiation between actors of different genders, emotions and power.

Linking the concept of identity to gender practices in this study allows for an analysis of the identity formation process as a symbolic, social-gender process, rather than merely the preservation of tradition. Consequently, community-based tourism identity is understood as a dynamic phenomenon, reflecting the evolving nature of local society and the central role of women in shaping the destination's image.

4.2. Social Practice Theory

This study applies Social Practice Theory as the primary theoretical framework to analyze the creation of community-based tourism identity through the daily gendered behaviors of local women. According to Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012), social practice is understood as the sustained connection between three elements: things, skills and meanings. Each action is not simply an individual reflex but part of a chain of social operations, where individuals repeat, maintain and transform the world around them through what they do, know and believe.

In the context of community-based tourism, activities such as preparing traditional meals, welcoming guests, organizing agricultural and fishery experiences and telling heritage stories are not simply consumer services—they are symbolic practices that are intrinsically linked to the expression of local cultural identity. Women in the community play a central role in these practices, not only because they make up the majority of the tourism workforce, but also because they create the emotional tone, rhythm and meaning of the entire tourist experience.

The application of this theory enables the decoding of the identity formation process, not through external declarations or impositions, but through specific gender practices. Here, space, objects, language, bodies and emotions all participate in constructing destination images. As such, community-based tourism identity is seen as a dynamic social structure, marked by gender and maintained by everyday cultural forces.

Social Practice Theory, therefore, offers a valuable tool for analyzing the socio-cultural depth of behavior, clarifying the role of women in the creation of community-based tourism identity. This analysis avoids one-dimensional or conclusive interpretations and situates women's contributions within the vibrant, practical context of local life.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Overview of Community-Based Tourism in Thieng Lieng

Thieng Lieng is an island hamlet located in Thanh An Commune, Can Gio District, Ho Chi Minh City, situated within the core zone of the Can Gio Mangrove Biosphere Reserve, which was recognized by UNESCO in 2000. Approximately 70 km from the city center, Thieng Lieng is home to about 243 households, with the majority engaging in salt production, fishing and forest conservation. Since the end of 2022, Thieng Lieng has officially been designated as the first community-based tourism destination of Ho Chi Minh City. This development is grounded in the local cultural identity and the unique mangrove and estuarine-sea ecosystems. Initially, the tourism model involved 13 participating households, but it has since expanded to include 22 households, each hosting a destination, offering a diverse range of experiences for visitors.

Tourists visiting Thieng Lieng can participate in various activities such as touring the salt fields, experiencing the salt-making process and sampling local cuisine with traditional dishes, including cooling ginseng, banh it tra (a type of sticky rice cake) and syrup made from locally grown fruits. Additionally, visitors can explore nostalgic spaces filled with historical objects, learn about cultural beliefs at Ba Ngu Hanh Temple and engage in cultural activities such as amateur music performances.

The development of community-based tourism in Thieng Lieng has significantly contributed to improving the local economy. However, challenges remain, particularly in relation to transportation infrastructure and connectivity, as the area is only accessible by waterway due to its isolated terrain. Despite these challenges, Thieng Lieng's pristine natural environment, unique ecological space and active community participation—especially from local women—have been key factors in its success. According to the 2024 report from the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Tourism, Thieng Lieng has become a model for community-based eco-tourism development in suburban areas, diversifying the range of experiences offered through community-based tourism.

Simultaneously, Thieng Lieng stands as a place that vividly illustrates the relationship between livelihoods, living spaces and the construction of destination identity through gender practices—providing a foundation for further analysis in subsequent sections of this study.

5.2. Gender Practices in Creating Community-based tourism Identity in Thieng Lieng

The community-based tourism identity in Thieng Lieng is not an inherent or pre-existing entity, but rather one that is created and maintained through a series of gendered practices embedded in the daily life of the community. Research findings indicate that it is women, through their roles as organizers, preservers and presenters of local life, who have emerged as the primary agents in shaping

the destination's identity. This identity is not constructed through marketing strategies but through labor, communication and community memory.

Data collected from in-depth interviews with female household heads directly involved in the tourism service supply chain in Thieng Lieng, along with participant observation at various experience points associated with the households, have revealed three key groups of gender practices.

First, spatial organization and social interaction practices. Women are the driving force in organizing and transforming everyday living spaces into tourist reception areas, often with professional advice from experts. While training and professional development may not be extensive, female heads of households have created intimate and welcoming spaces through the careful arrangement of tables and chairs, traditional items and the choice of language used in communication. These decisions are not arbitrary but reflect a clear understanding of the importance of reaffirming cultural identity tied to specific living environments. As one female householder shared:

My house has just been renovated and slightly modified to welcome guests, so they can see how we live. We just clean it up and add a few handwoven trash bins made from coconut leaves; we don't buy them. (Excerpt from in-depth interview: female, 52 years old, 2024)

This illustrates that the process of identity creation is not formalized but rather emerges through the choice to live in accordance with one's values, thus creating a form of indigenous aesthetics in the tourist experience.

Second, labor practices associated with cultural expression. Tasks such as preparing traditional dishes, brewing syrup from homegrown plants and guiding tourists in salt harvesting are predominantly carried out by women, often in the presence of or with the participation of tourists. While these activities are labor-intensive, they simultaneously serve as vehicles for conveying personal and collective memories. A female head of household expressed the following:

Making salt is very hard, but we do it to remember the past, so that the children can still see the occupation of their grandparents in reclaiming this land of Thieng Lieng. It has great spiritual significance to honor the ancestors who came here to explore this land. (Excerpt from in-depth interview: female, 50 years old, 2024)

This demonstrates that labor practices in Thieng Lieng are not merely a reproduction of livelihoods, but also a form of cultural expression. Here, the destination identity is shaped through the connection between the people, their living space and the community's history.

Third, storytelling practices as a means to preserve community memories and establish emotional connections with visitors. In the community-based tourism space of Thieng Lieng, women are not only hosts but also key figures in discourse, storytellers, guides and carriers of collective memories through emotional everyday narratives. They introduce Ngu Hanh Ba Temple as a symbol of folk beliefs tied to the history of coastal residents and describe wedding and funeral customs through vivid, emotion-filled voices, often infused with coastal folk performances.

Thus, identity is not conveyed through mere facts, but through lived experiences, imbued with feminine nuances and local emotional rhythms. Female household heads also share personal experiences related to the salt industry, the monsoon season, large floods or sudden rains that washed away entire salt fields-small stories that highlight the vulnerability and resilience of the community. Whether joyous or sorrowful, these memories are transformed into vibrant cultural material, enabling visitors not only to see but to "feel" the destination's identity.

It is through the flow of storytelling that a deeply emotional, humanized and sustainable community-based tourism identity is gradually forged-not through orchestrated communication strategies but through the depth of memory, lived femininity and existential life. Women, therefore, are not merely the keepers of the past, but active subjects who transform that past into experiential material-where emotions, knowledge and memories intertwine to create a living symbol of the destination.

In their role as storytellers, female householders create a form of memory-based discourse where visitors not only "hear" and "see" but also engage with sympathy. Everyday stories about the salt season, the monsoon season, weddings in the fishing village or memories of rains destroying the salt fields-although seemingly small-gradually construct the collective image of the Thieng Lieng woman as "gentle, tolerant" filled with pride even at the edge of survival.

Thus, the destination's identity does not emerge through graphic symbols, slogans or promotional materials, but rather through the bodies, voices and expressions of the female subjects-the people who live in that space, create it and narrate it through their entire lives.

In conclusion, through the three practice groups outlined above, it can be asserted that women in Thieng Lieng do not simply participate in community-based tourism as laborers; they are key cultural agents-individuals who, through their work, communication and memory, construct the destination's identity. This identity is not staged or standardized but is instead formed from the very rhythm and breath of the community's life, making community-based tourism in Thieng Lieng authentic, cohesive and rich in cultural depth.

5.3. Negotiating Identity in the Community-based tourism Space

In the context of community-based tourism, identity does not exist as an immutable entity to be presented, but rather as the result of a process of negotiation. This negotiation is a continuous cycle of selection, adjustment and interpretation occurring at the

intersection of interactions between the local community and external actors such as tourists, media and management agencies. Stuart Hall (1996) asserts that identity is a discursive practice that is not fixed, but is always constructed within specific cultural, social and power conditions. From this perspective, the identity of Thieng Lieng can be understood as a “moving field” where traditional values and the needs for new adaptations are reconciled through flexible negotiation.

A clear manifestation of this negotiation is the practice of storytelling, a discursive space in which local women play a central role. Participant observations show that, in the process of welcoming visitors, female household heads not only guide tours of the salt fields and introduce the salt-making process but also convey deeper cultural aspects, such as the Five Elements belief tied to the worldview, wedding customs associated with human outlooks, indigenous knowledge of fishing and the experience in forest preservation and afforestation passed down through generations.

However, the content shared during these storytelling sessions is not an untouched memory, but one that has undergone “editing” to fit the context of interactions with tourist groups. From simplifying mysterious elements to emphasizing emotional details, the narrative is tailored according to the visitors’ capacity to absorb it. As one female householder shared:

There are stories my grandparents lived through that I didn’t think I would tell, but now guests want to hear them, so I choose to share something fun, easy to understand and memorable so they can remember Thieng Lieng for a long time. (Excerpt from in-depth interview: female, 47 years old, 2025)

In this context, storytelling becomes a process of symbolic negotiation, where women not only restore memories but also assume the role of crafting the community’s image through the lens of tourism culture.

The process of identity negotiation also occurs through the adjustment of physical space. Households actively “perform” their living space by reconstructing the salt-making area, displaying traditional items, placing nostalgic-style nameplates and creating designated “check-in” zones.

These actions are not merely displays of the past, but acts of selecting and shaping the community’s image to suit tourist preferences. Edward Said (1978) points out that identity is not only “seen” but also “performed” - a response to the gaze of others through the discourse created by the subject on-site.

Notably, the image of Thieng Lieng women is also reproduced in the space of popular culture and cinema. In the movie *Hai Muoi*, inspired by the salt industry life on the island, scenes of a woman carrying salt under the sun with a hunched posture but calm eyes have shaped an aesthetic symbol of both simplicity and resilience in the coastal region. The involvement of some female residents in acting for public roles further affirms the subjectivity of the community; they are not merely “observed” but actively contribute to the cinematic discourse about their own identities.

Upon the movie’s release, it not only spread the image of Thieng Lieng to the wider public but also enhanced the cultural value of women’s practices in the development of community-based tourism.

I was deeply moved after watching *Hai Muoi*. I felt so sorry for the women and girls of Thieng Lieng. Even though they are also citizens of the city (Ho Chi Minh), they are so miserable. The salt job is truly exhausting. After watching the movie, my friends and I decided to visit Thieng Lieng to experience that journey. When we got there, we saw that the salt industry was truly unique. (Excerpt from in-depth interview: male, 27 years old, 2025)

From this analysis, it is evident that the identity of community-based tourism in Thieng Lieng is not a static or essentialist structure, but rather a dynamic system created through multidimensional cultural interactions. Women not only play the role of “custodians” of tradition but also act as cultural mediators; they express, negotiate and adjust the image of the community in relation to outside forces. This process enriches the tourism experience and enhances the position of the local community within the broader cultural and tourism ecosystem.

6. CONCLUSION

The case of Thieng Lieng demonstrates that community-based tourism identity does not exist as a fixed entity, but rather as a moving process - formed, expressed and reconstructed through a series of gendered practices in everyday life. In this dynamic, local women are not just workers or storytellers, but cultural subjects who actively create destination images.

The practices of spatial and labor organization associated with cultural expression and memory-laden storytelling not only shape the tourist experience but also generate indigenous forms of discourse, beyond the conventional symbolic frameworks of tourism. Rather than being defined as passive objects, women become active participants in the process of identity negotiation, selecting, editing and presenting memories, emotions and knowledge according to the context of interaction.

In the community-based tourism space, identity is thus not “displayed” but “lived”; not copied, but continually created by the community itself, with women playing a central role. This study affirms that gender practices are not only the cultural foundation of the local community but also the driving force behind the humane, sustainable and identity-aligned development of community-based tourism.

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