

Developing Cultural Products to Enhance Tourism With Cultural Capital in Betong District, Yala Province

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Abstract

This study had three objectives: creating value from cultural capital and local wisdom, strengthening the capacity of entrepreneurs and personnel involved in tourism, and expanding tourism marketing channels through soft power strategies embedded in cultural products. The study employed a participatory action research (PAR) approach, collecting qualitative data from 37 key informants and quantitative data from 399 participants in Betong District, Yala Province. The findings revealed that Betong District's diverse cultural heritage provides a strong foundation for developing five distinctive cultural product categories rooted in local identity. Quantitative results showed relatively high scores for value creation from cultural capital ($\bar{x} = 4.09$), entrepreneurial capacity ($\bar{x} = 3.80$), and soft power marketing channel effectiveness ($\bar{x} = 4.17$). Key challenges included insufficient digital marketing skills and packaging design capabilities. These findings support the sustainable development of the creative economy in the southern border region.

Keywords: cultural products, cultural tourism, cultural capital, Betong district, soft power

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Introduction

Betong District, Yala Province, is the southernmost district of Thailand and possesses a unique identity as a multicultural area where people of diverse religions and ethnicities live together peacefully, including Thai Buddhists, Thai Muslims, Thai Chinese, and Thai Christians. This peaceful coexistence has shaped Betong's local identity and earned it recognition as an area of cultural diversity and social harmony. The context of contemporary creative economy and tourism development, the concept of cultural products has garnered significant attention. These products and services are imbued with cultural meaning in their form and function. When consumers choose such products, they not only receive the physical object but also the underlying cultural value (Rungsan Thanapornphan, 1996). Furthermore, the application of soft power concepts through cultural products can effectively enhance their popularity and attract both domestic and international tourists (Nai, 2021). However, despite Betong District's high potential in cultural capital, most community products have not been systematically developed in areas such as design, value creation, and integration into the tourism value chain. Yala Rajabhat University, as an institution with a mission to promote local development, initiated this research project using Participatory Action Research (PAR) to ensure that all relevant stakeholders participate in the sustainable upgrading of cultural products. The Research Objectives To create and enhance the value of goods and services based on cultural capital and local wisdom that reflects unique local identity. To strengthen the potential of entrepreneurs and personnel in the tourism industry by providing skills and knowledge throughout the tourism supply chain. To promote tourism marketing channels through the concept of soft power by showcasing the unique identity of Betong District through cultural products and creative storytelling.

Related Concepts and Theories

Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital explains that cultural capital plays a crucial role in determining social status and can be accumulated, transmitted, and transformed into economic resources. Bourdieu categorizes cultural capital into three forms: tangible forms such as linguistic skills and forms of expression; material forms such as traditional handicrafts and costumes; and institutional forms such as certification standards and geographical indications (GI).

In the context of Betong District, cultural capital is evident in many dimensions, including the Jok Asura tradition, the Chakkraphra Song Phaen Din Festival, the Vegetarian Festival, and the Mawlid Sampan celebration, as well as well-known local dishes such as Betong chicken, Betong noodles, and Shogun oranges. These are all cultural resources with high potential for further development into economic value.

Cultural Products

UNESCO (2009) and Trosby (2001) define cultural products as goods, services, or activities rooted in the cultural heritage, identity, way of life, and beliefs of a community. What distinguishes cultural products from ordinary products is their reflection of local identity, symbolic values that cannot be measured solely by economic figures, and their potential for commercialization (UNCTAD, 2008). Such cultural identity creates product differentiation, which can effectively stimulate market demand.

Cultural Tourism

The UNWTO (2017) defines cultural tourism as “tourism in which the primary motivation of the visitor is to learn, discover, experience, and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions of the destination.” Richards (1996) emphasizes that cultural tourism encompasses activities in which tourists interact with cultural resources to enhance their knowledge and experience. Timothy and Boyd (2003) further argue that cultural tourism must be properly planned and managed in a way that allows local communities to take ownership of the tourism process.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR), developed from the concepts of Lewin (1946) and Freire (1970), is an approach that emphasizes collaboration and participation of stakeholders at every stage of the process, from problem identification and planning to implementation, reflection, and improvement (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). PAR views stakeholders as co-constructors of knowledge, thus enabling research to create meaningful and tangible impacts on society.

Research Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods within the framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR), as follows:

Target Groups and Sample

For the qualitative research portion, key informants were selected using chain sampling. Participants were divided into four groups, totaling 37 people: a group of researchers and experts (10 people), a group of producers/entrepreneurs (12 people), a panel of experts (8 people), and government officials (7 people).

For the quantitative research portion, a convenience sampling method was used, selecting 399 respondents from consumer groups, tourists, business operators, and relevant agencies in Yala province.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Qualitative research tools included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Reliability was ensured by validating data sources, researchers, and theories.

For the quantitative component, questionnaires were used. Content validity was assessed using the Index of Content Validity (IOC = 0.80–1.00), and reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Ten-Step Research Process

The research process is conducted in ten steps, beginning with product exploration and selection, followed by participatory packaging design, prototype selection, entrepreneurial capacity building, workshops, networking, knowledge exchange, public relations, cultural market organization, and marketing channel promotion.

Research Findings

Cultural Capital and Local Wisdom of Betong District

Betong District possesses diverse and distinctive cultural assets resulting from the cultural blend of three main groups: Thai Buddhists, Thai Muslims, and Thai Chinese. Significant cultural resources include four major traditions and festivals: the Jok Asura Festival, the Chakkraphra Song Phaen Din Festival, the Vegetarian Festival, and the Mawlid Celebration. Famous local food products include Betong chicken, Betong noodles, Shogun oranges, and black jelly. Local handicrafts such as bamboo weaving and the production Jarokangkha's fabric are also preserving the district's heritage.

Five Cultural Products With Distinctive Local Identity

Through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) process conducted in collaboration with the community, five unique local cultural products were developed: Jarokangkha Fabric Bag (Cost: 1,200 THB / Selling Price: 1,800 THB): A bag made from local fabric with patterns inspired by kites, reflecting the diverse cultural identity of Betong. Kite Pattern Scarf (Cost: 800 THB / Selling Price: 1,000 THB): A scarf produced using natural dyeing techniques and decorated with patterns inspired by local birds. Betong Cultural Pattern Keychain (Cost: 590 THB / Selling Price: 790 THB): A convenient souvenir. Patchwork Fabric Bag (Cost: 350 THB / Selling Price: 550 THB): A recycled product reflecting the circular economy concept. Bamboo Woven Lamp from Betong Hot Spring (Cost: 1,200 THB / Selling Price: 1,800 THB): A bamboo handicraft product that preserves local wisdom in bamboo weaving.

Quantitative Findings

The majority of respondents were female (58.4%), aged 31–35 (26.3%), held a bachelor's degree (50.4%), and were tourists (51.2%). The primary channel through which they obtained information was social media (82.9%). The most sought-after cultural products were local food and snacks (49.6%), and 83.2% of respondents had purchased cultural products before. The majority of respondents reported a purchase budget of 100–299 baht per item (61.7%).

Overall analysis of value creation and added value from cultural capital was rated highly ($\bar{x} = 4.09$, S.D. = .580). The item with the highest average score was transparency regarding the source of raw materials and ethical production practices ($\bar{x} = 4.22$), followed by the perception that local wisdom stories embedded in products add value in the eyes of consumers ($\bar{x} = 4.21$).

Overall, the level of entrepreneurial potential throughout the tourism supply chain was rated high ($\bar{x} = 3.80$, S.D. = .527). A key strength was expertise in processing local raw materials ($\bar{x} = 4.11$), while a key weakness was the ability to design packaging that matches the target consumer group ($\bar{x} = 3.40$, moderate level), indicating an area that urgently needs improvement.

The overall effectiveness of soft power marketing channels was assessed as high ($\bar{x} = 4.17$, S.D. = .590). The most supported point was that government agencies, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, and municipalities should continue to work with local communities ($\bar{x} = 4.24$). This was followed by opinions that online platforms are an effective marketing channel ($\bar{x} = 4.23$) and that communicating cultural stories helps attract tourists ($\bar{x} = 4.22$).

Qualitative Research Findings

Perspectives on Cultural Capital and Local Wisdom

The research findings indicate that most respondents agree that Betong District is distinguished by its cultural diversity and the peaceful coexistence of people from various religions and ethnic groups. This has given rise to a unique local identity. These groups include Thai Buddhists, Thai Muslims, Thai Chinese, and Lahu people, all of whom have inherited long-standing customs and traditions. Examples include the “Jok Asura” (demon porridge) tradition, the Chakkraphra Song Phaen Din festival, the Vegetarian Festival of the Thai-Chinese, and the Mawlid celebration of the Muslim community. These traditions not only reflect the district's cultural capital but also make Betong a place of diversity and harmony.

In terms of local wisdom, well-known local foods and products such as Betong chicken, Betong noodles, Shogun oranges, black jelly, and river tilapia are considered cultural assets that can be further developed to generate income and create a unique identity for the community.

Value Creation and Value Addition

The analysis reveals that products and services developed in conjunction with cultural capital can create and enhance value in multiple dimensions. Firstly, in the social and cultural dimension, cultural products contribute to the transmission of local wisdom from generation to generation and foster pride among community members. Secondly, in the economic dimension, unique products can be sold at higher prices and encourage repeat purchases from tourists. Furthermore, tourists gain deeper experiences, such as sampling authentic local cuisine and purchasing souvenirs with meaningful stories, creating emotional connections and making Betong more memorable than typical consumer experiences.

Capacity of Entrepreneurs and Personnel in the Tourism Supply Chain

The study found that local entrepreneurs still face several limitations, particularly in marketing and technology adoption. Many still rely heavily on brick-and-mortar sales and have not fully utilized online media. Packaging designs are often outdated and fail to clearly communicate the community's story. Furthermore, language barriers hinder effective communication with international tourists. However, many entrepreneurs expressed a willingness to improve and view digital marketing training, branding, and quality improvement as key strategies to enhance their capabilities.

Communication and Soft Power Marketing Channels

The study results indicate that soft power communication is a key mechanism for building Betong's image. Researchers stated that festivals, trade shows, and night markets effectively create tangible experiences and attract tourists. Simultaneously, online media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube are crucial tools for disseminating Betong's story to a wider target audience. Integrating these two channels strengthens the sustainability of marketing efforts.

Supporting Factors and Recommendations

The most frequently emphasized issue by informants was the need for support from government agencies and external networks, particularly in terms of budget, knowledge, technology, and the provision of space for product promotion activities. Suggestions included establishing an entrepreneur network, conducting workshops on packaging design and digital marketing, and developing tourist attractions into interconnected routes to attract tourists and expand economic opportunities.

Summary of 5 Key Points

The qualitative research results can be summarized into 5 main points: (1) Betong has strong cultural capital, especially in food, handicrafts, and traditions, which clearly express local identity. (2) Cultural products can create value in social, cultural, and economic dimensions simultaneously. (3) Entrepreneurs need support in digital marketing, branding, and packaging design. (4) Integrating online and offline marketing through festivals and cultural markets is highly effective. (5) Key factors for success include support from government agencies and the establishment of an entrepreneur network.

Discussion

This study's findings are consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) argument that cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital. Betong District, a multicultural area, possesses diverse and robust cultural capital that can be effectively developed into commercially valuable products. These findings are also consistent with the study by Laeheem et al. (2023), which found that Betong's cultural resources have high potential for developing tourism routes.

The finding that consumers place great importance on the transparency of raw material origins ($\bar{x} = 4.22$) aligns with current consumer behavior that values sustainability and ethical production (UNWTO, 2017). Simultaneously, the demand for “stories” embedded in products reflects the concept of storytelling marketing, which Richards (2001) identified as a key factor in differentiating cultural products.

The weakness found in packaging design skills ($\bar{x} = 3.40$) is a significant problem and aligns with the study by Apsorn E-sor et al. (2023), which found that developing product identity within the pandan leaf weaving network in Yala Province faces similar challenges. Therefore, integrating design curricula at universities can be a crucial supporting mechanism.

Research findings related to Soft Power are consistent with Nye's (2021) concept, which emphasizes creating appeal through food, culture, and lifestyle. Furthermore, they support the study by Laksanapeeti and Kharuhabodee (2024), which found that the Ngor Yuan cultural heritage of the Thai-Chinese community in Betong is a powerful Soft Power tool. Therefore, the integration of multi-ethnic cultures is a unique and difficult-to-replicate selling point.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrates that Betong District has high potential for developing commercially valuable cultural products. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) process

actively engages community members and entrepreneurs in product design and development, resulting in products that reflect local identity while meeting market demands. Key outcomes of this study include five prototype cultural products, an online marketing system utilizing YouTube and Facebook, and the establishment of a network of cultural entrepreneurs within the community.

Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendations are 1. Government agencies should establish a cultural product development fund for community entrepreneurs, focusing on supporting packaging design and product certification. 2. A digital skills and online marketing development center should be established for local entrepreneurs, with Yala Rajabhat University serving as a mentoring institution. 3. The registration of Geographical Indications (GI) for unique Betong products, such as Betong chicken and Betong noodles, should be promoted to ensure long-term protection and value addition. 4. An integrated cultural tourism route should be developed, linking natural, historical, and cultural attractions into a comprehensive tourism network.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should track the long-term impact of cultural products developed from this project to assess their long-term economic effects on the community. Furthermore, comparative studies with other multicultural areas in the ASEAN region should be conducted to develop models for upgrading cultural products that are adaptable and scalable in comparable contexts.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT (GPT-4) in order to improve the English language quality and readability of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final content of the article.

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