AFRICAN JOURNAL OF HOSPITALITY, TOURISM AND LEISURE
2026, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 949-957
https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.797

AJHTL
OPEN ACCESS

Research article

Architecting cultural bonds: How accommodation spatial design catalyzes tourist–community connection in Vietnam

Quang Huy Do[1], Huyen Trang Do[2], and Bao Vy Huynh[3]

[1] Faculty of Tourism, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
[2] Phenikaa School of Tourism, Phenikaa University, Hanoi, Vietnam
[3] Hospitality and Restaurant Management Program, FPT University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This study examines how the spatial design of community-based tourism (CBT) accommodation shapes tourist-community connection (TCC), and whether this relationship depends on tourists' prior visitation experience. Data were collected from 300 tourists at CBT accommodation in Vietnam and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling, followed by a permutation-based multi-group analysis comparing first-time and repeat visitors. Results show that four spatial design elements, local identity-oriented architecture, shared activity spaces, local cuisine, and use of local materials, all significantly and positively predict TCC, jointly explaining 60,9% of its variance, with local materials the strongest driver and local cuisine the weakest. Prior visitation experience moderates only the effect of shared activity spaces, which is significantly stronger for repeat tourists, while other relationships hold equally across both groups. These findings position accommodation design as a prioritizable instrument for building cultural connection, giving CBT operators and planners an evidence-based basis for design investment. The study contributes a novel, empirically integrated framework linking place identity, host-guest interaction, and experience economy perspectives to accommodation spatial design.

KEYWORDS

Community-based tourism; accommodation spatial design; tourist-community connection; place identity; Vietnam

Introduction

Sustainable tourism has become a rising priority in the global tourism industry since its integration into the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Biswas et al., 2021). Tourism is widely portrayed as a key vehicle for advancing SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), positioning the sector at the center of innovation and transformation efforts across the tourism and hospitality industry worldwide (Marin & Bocioaca, 2023). As destinations increasingly compete not only on price or infrastructure but on the authenticity and meaningfulness of the experiences they offer, aligning tourism development with these global goals has become both a policy imperative and a competitive necessity (Y. Chen et al., 2024; Syed Fadzil et al., 2019). Within this broader agenda, Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has gained growing acceptance as a model that centers inclusion and participation from local residents (Do et al., 2024; Long et al., 2021; Marin & Bocioaca, 2023). CBT is a promising approach in which tourism activity generates immediate, tangible benefits for local communities while simultaneously supporting cultural preservation (Do et al., 2024). Prior research has shown that when local residents take an active role in tourism development, they gain not only financial rewards but also the means to safeguard their own heritage (Cai et al., 2025; Himmah, 2025; Long et al., 2021). A strong relationship between accommodation and the surrounding community is therefore fundamental to sustainable CBT, ensuring that the practice generates durable benefits for both hosts and visitors, with accommodation facilities functioning as the central touchpoint through which this interweaving of tourists and local communities actually takes place (Kanchaikham & Takagi, 2024; Osman & Hiamey, 2026). Although previous studies have made considerable advances in understanding tourist–

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR'S CONTACT: Quang Huy Do huy.do@vlu.edu.vn
HOW TO CITE: Do, Q.H., Do, H.T. & Huynh, B.V. (2026). Architecting cultural bonds: How accommodation spatial design catalyzes tourist–community connection in Vietnam. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 15(3), 949-957 https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.797

ISSN: 2223-814X (Online) | © 2026 AJHTL

This work is published by African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Open Rubric

community interactions, a significant research gap remains regarding the extent to which the design and spatial layout of accommodation facilities can facilitate meaningful connection between tourists and local communities. Most existing research addresses either tourist behavior or the broader socio-economic effects of tourism, with comparatively little attention paid to how the physical spatial environment itself shapes Tourist-Community Connection (TCC). This gap is particularly consequential in Vietnam, where CBT is expanding rapidly and accommodation facilities are proliferating across emerging destinations, yet systematic knowledge of how accommodation space should be designed to foster meaningful, lasting connection remains underdeveloped. To address this gap, the present study investigates how spatial design elements of accommodation facilities influence the quality of TCC, guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Which spatial design elements of accommodation significantly predict TCC?

RQ2: Does the strength of these relationships differ between first-time and repeat tourists?

By answering these questions, the study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it bridges Place Identity, Experience Economy, and Host-Guest Interaction perspectives to build a more integrated understanding of how the built environment (not merely service or programming) shapes cultural connection between tourists and host communities, an area that has received limited empirical attention to date, particularly within the Vietnamese CBT context. Practically, the findings offer evidence-based guidance for accommodation designers and CBT managers in Vietnam and comparable emerging destinations, helping them identify which spatial priorities are most effective in strengthening authentic cultural engagement. In doing so, the study aims to support more sustainable, inclusive tourism development and to generate durable livelihood opportunities for local communities.

Literature review

The role of accommodation in tourist-community connection

Accommodation is far more than a place to stay, it is a critical site of interaction between tourists and local residents (Vinh, 2023). The structure and function of accommodation spaces shape their capacity to serve as areas where guests engage with the natural and cultural features of a destination and form a genuine connection to place (Hien, 2022). Increasingly, accommodation facilities operate as key "touchpoints" that facilitate interaction between visitors and the surrounding community; when thoughtfully designed, these spaces can offer both a source of meaning and a more grounded, memorable travel experience. Homestays, boutique hotels, and farmstays are increasingly common points of contact between visitors and local populations (H. Chen et al., 2024; Guspul et al., 2025; Li Yanan et al., 2024). These spaces do more than provide a place to stay, they allow tourists to learn about the life, culture, and values of residents (Cai et al., 2025), enabling close proximity to local families and firsthand experience of indigenous cuisine and lifestyle (Himmah, 2025). Rather than functioning as discrete, transactional service providers, well-designed accommodation spaces can become active mediators of cultural exchange, shaping how deeply and how authentically tourists come to understand the community they are visiting (Osman & Hiamey, 2026; Syed Fadzil et al., 2019; Torabi et al., 2025).

Theoretical foundations: Spatial design and tourist–community connection

The relationship between accommodation spatial design and cultural connection is grounded in several established theories, each contributing a distinct lens. The Experience Economy Theory holds that tourists increasingly seek meaningful, memorable experiences rather than the simple consumption of goods or services (Thuy & Thuy, 2023). From this perspective, accommodation spaces function not merely as functional infrastructure but as "stages" for memorable, interactive experiences. Spatial aesthetics, staff interaction, and purposeful experiential activities all significantly shape visitors' attachment and satisfaction (Juliana et al., 2023; Truong, 2025; Tulung et al., 2025), with strategic spatial design generating experience across four dimensions (education, entertainment, aesthetics, and escapism) that together deepen emotional engagement. The Place Identity Model explains that local communities develop strong emotional connections to their living environments (Quyen, 2023). When accommodation features draw on local identity and cultural characteristics, they can foster stronger relationships between tourists and the surrounding neighborhood, turning accommodation into a venue where visitors learn about, experience, and appreciate local values while simultaneously supporting cultural heritage preservation (Rodrigues, 2025; Syed Fadzil et al., 2019; Torabi et al., 2025). Research on architecture, interior design, and indigenous materials consistently demonstrates positive effects on both visitor experience and local pride.

Hypotheses development

Building on the theoretical foundations and research gaps outlined above, the proposed model examines the relationship between four spatial design characteristics of accommodation: Local Identity-Oriented Architecture (LIA), Shared Activity Spaces (SAS), Local Cuisine (LCU), Use of Local Materials (ULM), and Tourist-Community Connection (TCC), together with the moderating role of prior visitation experience.

H1: Local identity-oriented architecture positively affects Tourist–Community Connection.

Accommodation architecture shaped by local identity strengthens the cultural link between residents and visitors. Grounded in the Place Identity Model, local architecture functions as a metaphor for cultural identity and values (Kanchaikham & Takagi, 2024; Kryvoruchko & Chaban, 2025), beyond simply describing the environment, it reflects a community's worldview, climate adaptation, and accumulated knowledge and practices (Zhang et al., 2024). Architecture that expresses local attributes allows buildings to become the primary medium through which visitors perceive and judge cultural identity, thereby strengthening community connection (Davari et al., 2024; Rodrigues, 2025), connections that hinge on the impressions and memories tourists form within this architectural space.

H2: Shared Activity Spaces have a positive effect on Tourist–Community Connection.

The presence of shared activity spaces with local residents has a direct, positive effect on the degree of cultural connection tourists experience. Research on host-guest interaction shows that spaces designed with social interaction in mind foster deeper human bonds (Y. Chen et al., 2024). Within shared spaces, tourists' understanding of local knowledge, values, and customs is enhanced (Zhou et al., 2025), and authentic communication produces lasting memories and a shared sense of connection, turning these spaces into sites of genuine dialogue, exchange, and appreciation (Y. Chen et al., 2025).

H3: Local Cuisine has a positive impact on Tourist–Community Connection.

Local cuisine offered within accommodation facilities has a direct, positive impact on the connection between tourists and host communities. As an integral part of cultural identity, local gastronomy generates strong memories and emotional resonance (Fathy et al., 2024; Jeaheng et al., 2023), acting as a bridge between visitors and a destination's history, traditions, and values (Erdoğan, 2025). Traditional cuisine provided within accommodation settings therefore serves as both a source of satisfaction and a cultural link between tourists and the local social fabric, with the narratives behind ingredients and culinary origin deepening tourists' understanding of local culture.

H4: Use of Local Materials has a positive effect on Tourist–Community Connection.

The use of local materials, such as natural wood, stone, and traditional building materials, etc., in accommodation design leaves a direct, positive imprint on cultural connection, as these materials reflect the land and living environment of the local community (Kryvoruchko & Chaban, 2025). Their use also reduces environmental impact while respecting cultural identity and values; as tourists visually and physically engage with these materials, they become immersed in the natural and historical context of the destination, strengthening the psychological bond between visitor and place (Rodrigues, 2025; Syed Fadzil et al., 2019).

H5: The relationship between spatial design elements and Tourist-Community Connection differs between first-time and repeat tourists.

Prior visitation experience is theorized to moderate how tourists respond to accommodation spatial design. First-time tourists, driven by novelty-seeking and limited familiarity with the destination, are likely to rely more heavily on tangible, visually salient cues, such as local-identity architecture and local materials to form initial impressions of local culture (Meleddu et al., 2015; Sodawan & Hsu, 2025). Repeat tourists, having already established a degree of familiarity with the destination, may instead place greater weight on socially interactive elements, such as shared activity spaces and local cuisine, that deepen and reinforce an existing cultural connection (Vada et al., 2023; Ying, 2024). Testing this moderating role allows the model to capture how the relative importance of spatial design elements shifts across different tourist segments, and to assess the stability of the proposed relationships across these groups.

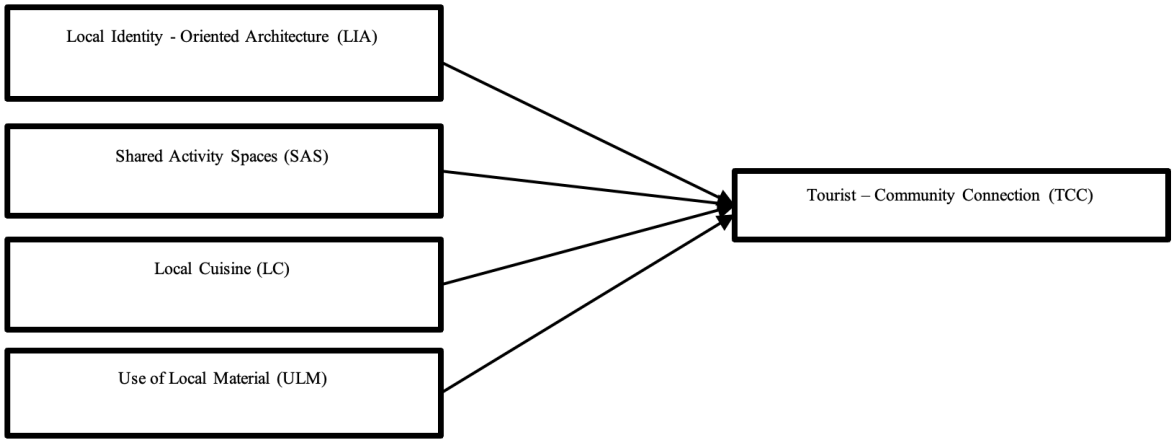

Figure 1. Proposed research model
Source: Authors

Research methods

This study employed a two-stage quantitative research design to examine how the spatial design characteristics of accommodation influence TCC, and whether this relationship differs between first-time and repeat tourists. The measurement instrument was developed through a systematic review and synthesis of the literature on sustainable accommodation, cultural experience, spatial arrangement, and CBT. All constructs were adapted from previously validated scales and subsequently revised to ensure conceptual clarity and contextual relevance for Vietnam. The target population comprised domestic and international tourists who had stayed at community-based accommodation facilities in Vietnam (including homestays, boutique hotels, and farmstays) between August and October 2025. Given the absence of a complete sampling frame for this population, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was used: respondents were screened to confirm that they had recently stayed at an accommodation facility exhibiting at least one of the four spatial design characteristics under study (LIA, SAS, LCU, ULM), ensuring that all responses were grounded in a genuine, relevant accommodation experience. An additional screening item classified respondents as first-time or repeat visitors to the destination, enabling the subsequent multi-group comparison. Data were collected via a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed both online and in person at accommodation sites and nearby tourist areas, allowing the study to reach a broader and more diverse respondent base than either channel alone. A total of 300 valid responses were retained for analysis after removing incomplete or inconsistent submissions. This sample size satisfies the recommended threshold for PLS-SEM analysis in tourism and hospitality research: according to (Hair et al., 2021), a ratio of 10-20 observations per estimated path is sufficient to ensure adequate statistical power, stable coefficient estimation, and reliable results, and the achieved sample comfortably meets this requirement given the number of paths in the proposed model. Data were analyzed using a standard two-step PLS-SEM procedure in SmartPLS. The measurement model was first assessed for reliability and validity, with weak indicators removed to improve psychometric robustness; the structural model was then evaluated via bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to test the strength and significance of the hypothesized paths (H1-H4) and the model's explanatory power. To test the moderating role of prior visitation experience (H5), measurement invariance was first confirmed using the MICOM procedure, after which a permutation-based Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) compared path coefficients between first-time and repeat tourists.

Results

Measurement model assessment

Indicator reliability was assessed through outer loadings, with the recommended threshold set at 0.70 (Hair et al., 2021). ULM5 loaded at only 0.322 and did not conceptually align with the other Use of Local Materials (ULM) indicators; it was therefore removed, and the measurement model was re-estimated using the final sample (n = 300). All remaining items loaded between 0.728 and 0.874, satisfying the recommended threshold. Table 1 summarizes internal consistency and convergent validity for the refined model. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.825 to 0.899, and composite reliability (ρc) ranged from 0.877 to 0.925, indicating excellent reliability across all constructs (Hair et al., 2021). Average variance extracted (AVE)

ranged from 0.588 to 0.712, exceeding the 0.50 threshold and confirming adequate convergent validity for all five constructs.

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity (n = 300)

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (ρc)	AVE
LCU	0.866	0.903	0.650
LIA	0.825	0.877	0.588
SAS	0.863	0.901	0.647
TCC	0.899	0.925	0.712
ULM	0.856	0.903	0.698

Source: SmartPLS 4.0 (PLS Algorithm Results)

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), regarded as a more reliable criterion than the Fornell-Larcker approach (Hair et al., 2021; Henseler et al., 2016). As shown in Table 2, all HTMT values ranged from 0.304 to 0.679, well below the conservative 0.85 threshold, with the highest value observed between ULM and TCC (0.679). These results were corroborated by the Fornell-Larcker criterion, in which the square root of each construct's AVE (0.767-0.844) consistently exceeded its correlations with other constructs (highest inter-construct correlation: TCC-ULM = 0.597). Together, both criteria confirm strong discriminant validity across all five constructs.

Table 2. Discriminant validity (HTMT)

	LCU	LIA	SAS	TCC	ULM
LCU					
LIA	0.330				
SAS	0.484	0.362			
TCC	0.594	0.613	0.608		
ULM	0.378	0.469	0.304	0.679	

Source: SmartPLS 4.0 (PLS Algorithm Results)

Structural model assessment

The structural model was evaluated using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples. As shown in Table 3, all inner-model VIF values (1.267-1.309) were far below the threshold of 5.0 (Hair et al., 2021), confirming collinearity is not a concern. All four hypothesized relationships (H1–H4) were supported. Use of Local Materials exerted the strongest effect on TCC (ULM: $\beta = 0.353$, $t = 9.286$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Shared Activity Spaces (SAS: $\beta = 0.274$, $t = 6.737$, $p < 0.001$), Local Identity-Oriented Architecture (LIA: $\beta = 0.246$, $t = 5.972$, $p < 0.001$), and Local Cuisine (LCU: $\beta = 0.227$, $t = 5.454$, $p < 0.001$). Effect sizes followed the same ranking: ULM showed a medium-to-large effect ($f^2 = 0.250$), SAS a medium effect ($f^2 = 0.149$), LIA a small-to-medium effect ($f^2 = 0.122$), and LCU the smallest, though still meaningful, effect ($f^2 = 0.100$).

Table 3. Structural model results

Hyp.	Relationship	β (O)	t-value	p-value	VIF	f²	Decision
H1	LIA → TCC	0.246	5.972	0.000	1.267	0.122	Supported
H2	SAS → TCC	0.274	6.737	0.000	1.289	0.149	Supported
H3	LCU → TCC	0.227	5.454	0.000	1.309	0.100	Supported
H4	ULM → TCC	0.353	9.286	0.000	1.273	0.250	Supported

Source: SmartPLS 4.0 (PLS Bootstrapping results, n = 300)

The model explained a substantial proportion of variance in TCC ($R^2 = 0.609$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.604$). This result approaches the "substantial" range, indicating that the four spatial design constructs jointly account for a strong share of tourists' perceived connection with the local community (Hair et al., 2021).

Multi-group analysis: First-time vs. repeat tourists (H5)

Before comparing groups, measurement invariance was established using the three-step MICOM procedure (Henseler et al., 2016), comparing first-time tourists (n = 83) and repeat tourists (n = 217). Step 1 (configural invariance) was satisfied by design, as identical indicators, algorithm settings, and data treatment were applied to both groups. Step 2 (compositional invariance) was supported for all five constructs, with permutation-based correlation values close to 1 and non-significant differences ($p > 0.05$ for all constructs; Table 4). In Step 3, equal variances held for all constructs ($p > 0.05$), while equal composite means held for four constructs (LCU, LIA, TCC, ULM; $p > 0.05$) but not for SAS ($p = 0.049$). These results indicate partial measurement invariance, per Henseler et al. (2016), partial invariance is sufficient to proceed with comparing structural path coefficients between groups. A Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) using the permutation-based approach (5,000 resamples) tested whether the LIA, SAS, LCU, and ULM → TCC relationships differ between first-time (n = 83) and repeat (n = 217) tourists. As shown in Table 5, the SAS → TCC relationship was substantially stronger among repeat tourists ($\beta = 0.321$, $p < 0.001$) than among first-time tourists ($\beta = 0.131$, $p = 0.108$, not significant), and this between-group difference was statistically significant ($\Delta\beta = -0.190$, permutation $p = 0.043$). No other path showed a statistically significant difference

between the two groups (LCU: p = 0.571; LIA: p = 0.135; ULM: p = 0.312), indicating that these three relationships remain stable regardless of tourists' prior visitation experience.

Table 4. PLS-MGA path comparison: First-time vs. repeat tourists

Relationship	β (First-time, n=83)	β (Repeat, n=217)	Δβ	Permutation p-value	Decision
LIA → TCC	0.350	0.216	0.134	0.135	Not significant
SAS → TCC	0.131 (n.s.)	0.321	-0.190	0.043	Significant
LCU → TCC	0.278	0.220	0.058	0.571	Not significant
ULM → TCC	0.283	0.372	-0.089	0.312	Not significant

Source: SmartPLS 4.0 (PLS-MGA, Permutation test)

Discussion

All four hypothesized main effects (H1–H4) were supported, confirming that Local Identity-Oriented Architecture, Shared Activity Spaces, Local Cuisine, and Use of Local Materials each exert a significant, positive influence on Tourist–Community Connection. The four constructs jointly explained 60.9% of the variance in TCC ($R^2 = 0.609$), a result that approaches the "substantial" benchmark proposed by Hair et al. (2021) and confirms that spatial design, rather than service quality or programming alone, is a powerful driver of cultural connection in Vietnamese community-based accommodation. Beyond simple confirmation, however, the relative strength of the four paths: ULM (β = 0.353) > SAS (β = 0.274) > LIA (β = 0.246) > LCU (β = 0.227), offers a more nuanced picture than the hypotheses alone predicted, and it is this ordering, together with the partially supported moderating role of visitation experience (H5), that forms the core of the discussion below.

Local materials as the strongest predictor: Reassessing the place identity pathway

Consistent with H4, the use of local materials emerged as the single strongest predictor of TCC, with a medium-to-large effect size ($f^2 = 0.250$) that clearly outperformed every other construct in the model. This finding lends strong support to the Place Identity Model and to prior arguments that indigenous materials root accommodation in the land and lived environment of the host community (Kryvoruchko & Chaban, 2025; Rodrigues, 2025). What is more revealing, though, is the contrast with H1: local identity-oriented architecture, though also grounded in Place Identity theory and also supported, produced a smaller effect (β = 0.246, $f^2 = 0.122$), less than half the effect size of ULM. Both constructs draw on the same theoretical logic that the built environment functions as a "metaphor" for cultural identity (Kanchaikham & Takagi, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024); the results suggest, however, that this logic operates unevenly across different physical elements. Architecture is typically apprehended holistically and at a distance, guests register the overall form, roofline, or layout largely at arrival and thereafter treat it as a fixed backdrop. Materials, by contrast, are encountered at close, repeated, multisensory proximity throughout the stay: guests touch wooden surfaces, walk on stone floors, and interact with the same textures at every point of contact with the building. This continuous, tactile exposure may explain why materials translate into stronger perceived cultural connection than architectural form alone, extending the Place Identity literature by suggesting that the sensory intimacy of a design element, and not merely its symbolic authenticity, shapes how strongly it registers with tourists.

Shared activity spaces and local cuisine: Comparing the experiential pathways

Shared Activity Spaces were the second-strongest predictor of TCC (β = 0.274, $f^2 = 0.149$), confirming H2 and reinforcing the Host-Guest Interaction perspective that deliberately social spaces generate the informal, spontaneous exchanges through which cultural understanding deepens (Y. Chen et al., 2024, 2025; Zhou et al., 2025). Local Cuisine, while also significant and consistent with H3, produced the smallest effect in the model (β = 0.227, $f^2 = 0.100$). This is a notable point of comparison, since the literature review treats gastronomy as one of the most emotionally resonant carriers of cultural meaning (Erdoğan, 2025; Fathy et al., 2024; Jeaheng et al., 2023). A plausible explanation is that, unlike shared spaces or building materials, local cuisine is not exclusive to the accommodation: tourists in Vietnam can and typically do sample local food at markets, street stalls, and restaurants throughout their trip, which may dilute the extent to which any single meal experience at the accommodation itself is attributed as the source of cultural connection. Shared activity spaces, in contrast, are largely accommodation-specific and cumulative-every communal meal, workshop, or courtyard encounter reinforces the same relationship-building process in the same physical setting - which may account for the stronger, more concentrated effect of SAS relative to LCU.

The moderating role of prior visitation experience (H5)

The MGA results provide only partial support for H5. Of the four paths, only SAS → TCC differed significantly between first-time (β = 0.131, not significant) and repeat tourists (β = 0.321, $p < 0.001$; Δβ = -0.190, p = 0.043); the LIA, LCU, and ULM paths were statistically stable across the two groups. This pattern

refines, rather than confirms wholesale, the moderation logic proposed in the hypothesis. As anticipated, first-time tourists did not show a significant SAS effect, consistent with the reasoning that novelty-driven visitors lean on immediately perceptible, tangible cues such as architecture and materials to form initial cultural impressions (Meleddu et al., 2015; Sodawan & Hsu, 2025). What the data add, however, is that this reliance on tangible cues is not exclusive to first-time visitors: LIA, LCU, and ULM remained equally influential for repeat tourists as well, indicating that architecture, cuisine, and materials function as baseline expectations that tourists draw on regardless of how familiar they already are with the destination. Only the social dimension of spatial design appears to compound with repeated exposure, consistent with the proposition that returning visitors, having already absorbed the more visible cultural markers, invest relatively more in the socially interactive elements that deepen and sustain an existing connection (Vada et al., 2023; Ying, 2024). However, because SAS achieved only partial measurement invariance in the MICOM procedure (Henseler et al., 2016), this particular between-group comparison should be interpreted with some caution, even though it does not affect the validity of comparing the structural paths themselves.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer two research questions: which spatial design elements of community-based accommodation significantly predict Tourist–Community Connection (TCC), and whether these relationships differ between first-time and repeat tourists. RQ1 is answered unambiguously: all four hypothesized elements: Local Identity-Oriented Architecture, Shared Activity Spaces, Local Cuisine, and Use of Local Materials, are significant, positive predictors of TCC, jointly explaining 60.9% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.609$). Use of Local Materials emerged as the strongest driver, followed by Shared Activity Spaces, Local Identity-Oriented Architecture, and Local Cuisine, indicating that tourists derive cultural connection most strongly from continuous, tactile contact with the physical environment rather than from a single symbolic or transactional cue. RQ2 receives a more qualified answer: prior visitation experience moderates only the path from Shared Activity Spaces to TCC, which is significantly stronger for repeat tourists, while the paths from architecture, cuisine, and materials to TCC hold equally for first-time and repeat visitors alike. Together, these findings confirm that accommodation is not a neutral backdrop to community-based tourism but an active, measurable instrument through which cultural connection is built. Theoretically, the study contributes to tourism and hospitality research by empirically integrating three literatures that are usually examined separately, the Place Identity Model, the Host–Guest Interaction perspective, and the Experience Economy framework, within a single structural model of TCC. By decomposing spatial design into four distinct, measurable constructs and testing them side by side, the study moves beyond the common practice of treating "authenticity" or "servicescape" as a single undifferentiated construct, showing instead that different design elements contribute unequally, and that this ranking itself is theoretically meaningful. Practically, the findings offer a prioritization logic for community-based accommodation owners, designers, and tourism authorities in Vietnam operating under real budget constraints. Where resources are limited, investment is likely to yield the greatest return when directed first toward authentic local materials and craftsmanship, and second toward deliberately designed shared activity spaces: communal kitchens, courtyards, or workshop areas, that generate informal host–guest interaction, since this element also carries the added benefit of strengthening loyalty among repeat visitors. Identity-driven architectural form and local cuisine remain necessary, baseline cultural cues that guests consistently expect regardless of how many times they have visited, and should therefore be maintained even where they are not the primary driver of differentiation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the cross-sectional design captures tourists' perceptions at a single point in time and cannot establish the causal direction or temporal dynamics of the relationships tested; a tourist's sense of connection could, in principle, also influence how favorably they subsequently evaluate the accommodation's design. Second, the data were collected from community-based accommodation guests within a single national context, Vietnam, so the relative ranking of the four spatial design elements, particularly the comparatively modest effect of Local Cuisine, may not generalize to CBT settings in other cultural or culinary contexts. Third, the sample was obtained through convenience and self-administered distribution rather than probability sampling, and the first-time ($n = 83$) and repeat-tourist ($n = 217$) subgroups used in the multi-group analysis were unevenly sized, which may have limited statistical power to detect smaller moderation effects. Finally, because Shared Activity Spaces achieved only partial rather than full measurement invariance in the MICOM procedure, the between-group comparison involving this construct, while still valid for comparing structural paths, should be interpreted with some caution. Building on these limitations, several avenues for future research are proposed. Longitudinal or pre-post experimental designs, for example, comparing tourist perceptions before and after a renovation that changes an accommodation's use of local materials, would allow stronger causal

inference than the present cross-sectional approach. Cross-cultural replication in other CBT contexts, particularly destinations where cuisine plays a more central role in the tourism product, would help establish whether the comparatively weak effect of Local Cuisine observed here is context-specific or a more general pattern. Future studies could also adopt qualitative or mixed-methods designs to explore the underlying mechanisms identified in this study in greater depth, for instance, why tactile exposure to local materials appears to generate stronger connection than the perception of architectural form. Incorporating additional mediating variables, such as place attachment or memorable tourism experience, and additional moderators, such as nationality, length of stay, or accommodation type (homestay, eco-lodge or boutique CBT resort), would extend the explanatory power of the model. Finally, future work should aim for larger, quota-balanced samples of first-time and repeat tourists to increase statistical power for multi-group comparisons, and could expand the spatial design construct set to capture other elements of the built environment not examined here.

Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT to assist with language editing, proofreading, and improving the clarity and readability of the manuscript. The authors retain full responsibility for the content, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this study.

References

Biswas, S. S., Ahad, M. A., Nafis, M. T., Alam, M. A., & Biswas, R. (2021). Introducing "α-sustainable development" for transforming our world: A proposal for the 2030 agenda. *Journal of Cleaner Production, 321*, Article 129030.

Cai, L., Yusoff, Z. M., & Adnan, N. A. (2025). Community engagement as a mediator between land suitability and investment in facilities on tourism potential in Huangma Village, China. *Journal of Environmental & Earth Sciences*. https://doi.org/10.30564/jees.v7i7.9625

Chen, H., Fu, S., & Lyu, B. (2024). Homestays in China: Mediator effects of brand perception upon host-guest interaction and tourist behavior intention. *Heliyon, 10*(8). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e29820

Chen, Y., Jiang, Z., & Liu, Y. (2024). Effect of sincere social interaction on tourist inspiration: An affective events theory framework. *Current Issues in Tourism, 27*(14), 2268–2286. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2023.2226385

Chen, Y., Lin, Y., Su, X., Chen, P., & Song, H. (2025). Multiple effects of agricultural heritage identity on residents' value co-creation—A host–guest interaction perspective on tea culture tourism in China. *Agriculture, 15*(1), Article 57. https://doi.org/10.3390/agriculture15010057

Davari, D., Alaedini, P., & Cai, L. A. (2024). Conceptualizing destination-community hospitality: An illustrated framework leveraging Persianate culture. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 36*(7), 2327–2346.

Do, A. K., Nguyen, T. T. N., & Tran, Đ. K. (2024). A qualitative study on local residents' perceptions and support for community-based tourism development. *Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science, 21*(5), 946–956. https://doi.org/10.54607/hcmue.js.21.5.4198(2024)

Erdoğan, Ç. (2025). Destination plate: The relationship between place identity and gastronomic landscape in the context of deterritorialisation, homogenisation, and McDisneyisation. *Gastroia: Journal of Gastronomy and Travel Research, 9*(1), 84–96. https://doi.org/10.32958/gastoria.1641126

Fathy, E. A., Salem, I. E., Zidan, H. A. K. Y., & Abdien, M. K. (2024). From plate to post: How foodstagramming enriches tourist satisfaction and creates memorable experiences in culinary tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2024.2405625

Guspul, A., Hermawan, H., & Zaim, Z. (2025). Homestay management models in tourism development: Case studies of Java and Sumatra, Indonesia. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 14*(4), 925–932. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.677

Hair, J. F., Jr., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., Sarstedt, M., Danks, N. P., & Ray, S. (2021). *Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using R: A workbook*. Springer Nature.

Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2016). Testing measurement invariance of composites using partial least squares. *International Marketing Review, 33*(3), 405–431. https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-09-2014-0304

Hien, L. T. (2022). Organizing the architectural space of traditional houses of the Black Thai ethnic group in Hieu, Pu Luong, Thanh Hoa villages to serve community tourism. *Journal of Construction Science and Technology, 16*(4V), 83–97.

Himmah, M. (2025). Integrating community-based ecotourism into educational development: Empowering local communities and enhancing sustainable practices. *Journal of Educational Management Research, 4*(4). https://doi.org/10.61987/jemr.v4i4.1118

Jeaheng, Y., Al-Ansi, A., Chua, B.-L., & Ngah, A. H. (2023). Influence of Thai street food quality, price, and involvement on traveler behavioral intention: Exploring cultural difference (Eastern versus Western). *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 16*, 223–240. https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S371806

Juliana, Sihombing, S. O., & Antonio, F. (2023). The experience economy and marketing approach in rural tourism that creates memorable experience: A study in Cikolelet Tourism Village. *Ilomata International Journal of Social Science, 4*(2), 199–210. https://doi.org/10.52728/ijss.v4i2.691

Kanchaikham, C., & Takagi, M. (2024). Frequent design concepts for conveying cultural identity toward accommodation architecture in Chiang Mai heritage district, Thailand. *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13467581.2024.2373817

Kryvoruchko, N., & Chaban, Y. S. (2025). Architectural and urban strategy for developing glamping as ecotourism systems. *O. M. Beketov National University of Urban Economy in Kharkiv*. https://doi.org/10.33042/2522-1809-2025-1-189-100-112

Li, Y., Ismail, M. A., & Aminuddin, A. (2024). How has rural tourism influenced the sustainable development of traditional villages? A systematic literature review. *Heliyon, 10*, Article e25627. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e25627

Long, H. P., Ngo, H. T., & Pham, L. T. (2021). Community-based tourism: Opportunities and challenges: A case study in Thanh Ha pottery village, Hoi An city, Vietnam. *Cogent Social Sciences, 7*(1), Article 1926100. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1926100

Marin, A., & Bocioaca, L. (2023). Exploring the relationship between tourism and sustainable development goals: Evidence based on content analysis. Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence. https://doi.org/10.2478/picbe-2023-0043

Meleddu, M., Paci, R., & Pulina, M. (2015). Repeated behaviour and destination loyalty. *Tourism Management, 50*, 159–171. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.01.032

Osman, B., & Hiamey, S. E. (2026). Design, comfort, and perceived value as mediators between hotel servicescape and customer loyalty. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 15*(2), 388–397. https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.747

Quyen, L. T. H. (2023). Measuring residents' place attachment: The case of Thanh Noi area, Hue city. *Hue University Journal of Science: Social Sciences and Humanities, 133*(6A). https://doi.org/10.26459/hueunijssh.v133i6A.6859

Rodrigues, A. (2025). Architecture as identity: Preserving Goan vernacular in the age of globalization. *Advanced International Journal for Research*. https://doi.org/10.63363/aijfr.2025.v06i05.1666

Sodawan, A., & Hsu, R. L.-W. (2025). First-time versus repeat travellers: Perceptions of the destination image of Thailand and destination loyalty. *Tourism and Hospitality, 6*(5), Article 278. https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp6050278

Syed Fadzil, S. F., Aun, W. T., Poh, R., & Min, K. W. (2019). Globalization or localization—Factors to be considered by architects in their architectural practices. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 2019*(Special Issue), 1–8.

Thuy, H. T. D., & Thuy, P. T. T. (2023). Exploring aspects of Hue culinary experience of domestic tourists. *Hue University Journal of Science: Economics and Development, 132*(5C). https://doi.org/10.26459/hueunijed.v132i5C.7223

Torabi, Z.-A., Rezvani, M. R., Hall, C. M., Davani, P., & Bakhshaei, B. (2025). Place identity and environmental conservation in heritage tourism: Extending the theory of planned behavior to Iranian rural heritage villages. *Tourism & Hospitality, 6*(3), Article 150. https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp6030150

Truong, T. L. H. (2025). Psychological empowerment and place identity: Enhancing resident support for sustainable tourism in a highland retreat, Vietnam. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Insights*. https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTI-01-2025-0139

Tulung, L. E., Lapian, S. L. H. V. J., Lengkong, V. P. K., & Tielung, M. V. J. (2025). The role of smart tourism technologies, destination image and memorable tourism experiences as determinants of tourist loyalty. *Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental, 19*(4), Article e011822. https://doi.org/10.24857/rgsa.v19n4-013

Vada, S., Filep, S., Moyle, B., Gardiner, S., & Tuguinay, J. (2023). Welcome back: Repeat visitation and tourist wellbeing. *Tourism Management, 98*, Article 104747. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2023.104747

Vinh, N. X. (2023). Study on the satisfaction of household tourists with the quality of accommodation services in Da Nang. *Dong A University Journal of Science, 2*(2). https://doi.org/10.59907/daujs.2.2.2023.171

Ying, S. (2024). Guests' aesthetic experience with lifestyle hotels: An application of LDA topic modelling analysis. *Heliyon, 10*(16), Article e35894. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e35894

Zhang, F., Sun, X., Liu, C., & Qiu, B. (2024). Effects of urban landmark landscapes on residents' place identity and perceived destination image. *Sustainability, 16*(2), Article 761. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16020761

Zhou, H., Huang, L., Guo, Y., Jiang, Y., & Wu, K. (2025). Customer tolerance in homestays: The influence of interpersonal interaction and motivation attribution. *PLoS ONE, 20*(10), Article e0334636. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0334636