

Cultural interpretations and influences on responsible tourism and hospitality micropreneurship in Brunei

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine cultural interpretations and influences within the context of Brunei ecotourism operators. This research employs a case study approach to investigate five tourism operators in Brunei as case studies for the intended research aims. The findings revealed that the motivations for their micropreneurial undertaking were influenced by the general desire to enhance the quality of life for local communities, empower women and the youth to develop a greater place identity and engage other volunteer tourists and not-for-profit organisations to support social capital development. This research provides much-needed insights to guide the theory and practice of responsible tourism and hospitality in existing and future environments. This extends current knowledge of cultural influences within responsible tourism and hospitality micropreneurship.

Keywords: Community-based tourism, Agritourism, Ecotourism, Rural tourism, Sustainable tourism, Sociocultural impacts of tourism.

Introduction

Responsible tourism and hospitality (hereafter abbreviated as RTH) are key facets of ensuring that the sector delivers valuable outcomes not only to tourists but also to local communities and environments (Camilleri, 2016; Booyens, 2010; Goodwin and Francis, 2003). As global tourism and hospitality flows have increased leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, several destinations were under immense pressure to curb the deleterious effects of overtourism, which have resulted in negative sentiments of residents toward tourism and hospitality (Musikanski et al., 2021). Then, the COVID-19 pandemic also offered destinations a temporary pause to reflect on how best to create more responsible tourists and guests as countries are now open for global mobility (Ting et al., 2020). At present, most studies remain transfixed on educating or correcting tourist attitudes towards more responsible or sustainable behaviours (see for instance Lin, Gao and Tian, 2022; Patwary, 2023; Saleem, Li and Afzal, 2021). This is not surprising, considering that the tourists are temporal guests in destinations where host communities reside. However, tourism encounters occur through host-guest interactions, resulting in a growth in RTH literature to paint a more nuanced picture of the antecedents, barriers, and outcomes of efforts by destinations and stakeholders to deliver desired futures (Gao, Mattila and Andreu, 2022; Mihalic et al., 2021). However, very little is known about cultural interpretations and influences on RTH. This refers to the role that culture shapes and informs RTH and manifests in unique contextual nuances (Ma et al., 2021). Even in the sphere of RTH, there is hardly any information on micropreneurs - small-scale entrepreneurs who undertake RTH in this context. This research builds on the growing body of micropreneurs emerging from Brunei and dovetails the development of RTH to locate the cultural forces that shape these micropreneurial developments to address the knowledge gaps. Derived from the knowledge gaps are two broad questions that frame this research:

- 1) What are the cultural interpretations and influences on RTH provision in the context of Brunei?
- 2) How do Bruneian micropreneurs approach RTH?

Literature Review

Cultural influences on RTH are the overarching concept where this research is located and hence warrants a critical review of the current body of knowledge. Culture can be expressed as a way of life that symbolises and characterises how a country, region, community or organisation behaves as a result of its ethnic, societal, religious or nationalistic tendencies (Mironenko and Sorokin, 2018). Culture has been well-studied in tourism, as an overarching concept for understanding tourists (Correia, Kozak and Ferradeira, 2011; Kim and McKercher, 2011), organisations (Pollard et al., 2023), and host communities (Amalu et al., 2021). Experiencing different cultures is a strong factor in attracting tourists to a destination (Richards, King and Yeung, 2020; Cetin and Bilgihan, 2016). For this reason, the management of cross-cultural interactions in tourism is key to reducing misunderstandings and respecting local ways of life (Cheok, Hede and Watne, 2015). There are several cultural frameworks in existence to explain cross-cultural differences, including Hofstede and Trompennar (for example Sapuarachchi, 2021; ur Rehman, 2022). However, while culture manifests in terms of how local communities work, live and play, its role as an

influence on RTH, especially within rural micropreneurs remains underexplored. Some studies such as Gong et al. (2019) allude to the role of culture as a demand-side moderator of tourism impacts on local communities, though it is somewhat silent as to how culture manifests on RTH as a supply-side factor.

Nevertheless, a synthesis of the literature can be divided into four streams - typologies of visitors who practice RTH, enablers for RTH, measures, and outcomes of RTH, and barriers to the successful implementation of RTH. Each of these will be discussed in the following sections.

Studies focused on illuminating visitor typologies for RTH reveal that most visitors tend to understand the broad principles of RTH, though very few perhaps are consciously seeking RTH throughout the entire tourism and hospitality experience (Weeden, 2011). Several scholars argue that the purist form of responsible tourists is a very niche segment, with intentions to practice RTH often exceeding actual behavioural outcomes (Del Chiappa, Grappi and Romani, 2016; Tay et al., 2016; Dolnicar and Long, 2009).

The second stream of literature comprises studies that attempt to uncover enablers of RTH. These include education as a tool to shape awareness, and conviction of why RTH is necessary (Ruhanen and Bowles, 2020; Fennell, 2008), building collaboration, trust, and empowerment among communities in partnership for RTH (Eyisi, Lee and Trees, 2023; Seraphin et al., 2022; Stoffelen et al., 2020), and the importance of having a 'supply-side' service provider involvement in RTH, such as tour operators and hoteliers (Musavengane, 2019; Frey and George, 2010).

The third stream of the literature revealed indicators and measures of RTH to formulate desired outcomes of mutual interests to stakeholders. Given the focus on local communities, RTH was evaluated against well-being and quality of life indicators (Mathew and Sreejesh, 2017), sustainable development (Mondal and Samaddar, 2021), social impact assessment (McCombes, Vanclay and Evers, 2015), environmental impact assessment (Pope et al., 2019) and corporate social responsibilities (Manente, Minghetti and Mingotto, 2012). There is a range of options one can utilise to evaluate RTH and its corresponding benefits to respective communities.

However, the fourth stream in literature pertains to the barriers of RTH. A key barrier to RTH advancement is the inertia to progress a concerted effort towards desired goals due to incongruent ideologies and disagreements towards RTH indicators and measures. Using the case of Cyprus, Farmaki et al. (2014) found that operators were unprepared and disorganised in formulating a coherent RTH strategy to guide operations across the country. Elsewhere, scholars also argue that the barriers to implementation are associated with a mismatch of expectations, unrealistic timelines, and lack of funding or resourcing (Carasuk, Becken and Hughey, 2016).

These barriers notwithstanding, RTH is still a popular approach for destinations keen to portray their destination in a favourable light (George, 2017). Mody et al. (2017) also found that tourists demonstrate loyalty effects to RTH operators aligned with their destination images. This shows that RTH is an actionable step that destinations can take to reach desired goals and objectives (Mihalic, 2016).

Likewise, the review of RTH thus far indicates that the concept can be influenced to foster beneficial outcomes for local communities. It should also be emphasised that RTH occurs across a spectrum of gradations of responsibility and that cross-cultural interpretations exist (Kang and Moscardo, 2006). Yet, studies such as Gong, Detchkhajornharoensri, and Knight (2019) remain focused on the demand side of tourists, rather than the supply-side perspective of operators.

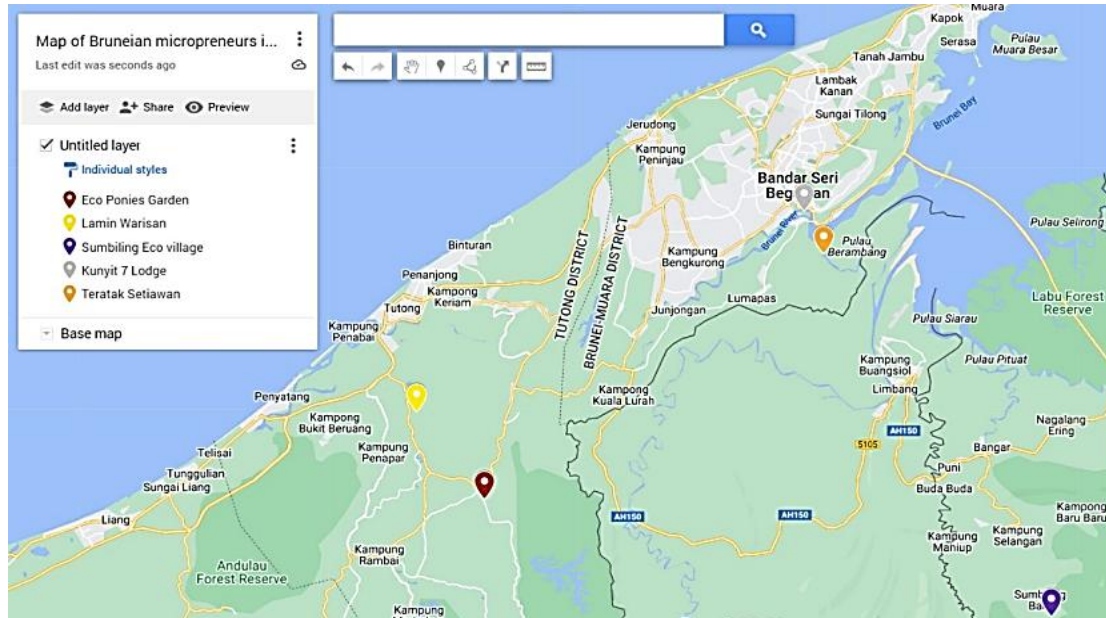
RTH literature has also mostly been studied at a destination level, or within a given community. Few studies have approached RTH from the perspectives of small entrepreneurs, or micropreneurs. Outside of tourism and hospitality, micropreneurship refers to the small-scale entrepreneurial activity undertaken by an individual where the risks of operating are willingly absorbed (Sadeghiani et al., 2023). Likewise, micropreneurs are less likely to pursue rapid growth and instead focus on microfinancing options to deliver desired priorities (Patel, Lenka and Parida, 2022). Such micropreneurs are also more likely to be reliant on family support to manage their operations (Xiong, Ukanwa and Anderson, 2020). The characteristics of micropreneurs are at the heart of the tourism and hospitality sector, as many RTH initiatives are driven toward small operators to ensure that they too benefit directly from being involved with tourists and guests. The work of Wang et al. (2022) and Guzel, Ehtiyar, and Ryan (2021) lend indicative evidence to suggest that micropreneurship occurs in tourism rural areas, though these studies again remain implicit as to how culture influences and shapes operator attitudes and behaviour. Related to the Southeast Asia context, RTH is linked to the triple bottom line of economic, socio-cultural and environmental indicators that target different levels of performance linked to stakeholders, priorities and contexts (Yusrini et al., 2022). Following the pandemic, literature also emphasises the need for close collaboration among stakeholders across the Southeast Asia region (Utama et al., 2023), as well as other Asian contexts (Baloch et al., 2022). Subsequent studies (see for instance Liu et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024) also point to how environmental consciousness is an antecedent for RTH, though these studies are largely devoted to analysing tourist attitudes and behaviours. These studies allude to the role of national and societal cultures as an influence on responsible and sustainably conscious tourism, but how culture influences tourism operators in RTH production and operationalisation remains underexplored. This lends a strong justification for undertaking this research.

The Case Study Context

This case study was conducted in Brunei, a small nation (land area less than 6,000 km²) located on the island of Borneo in Southeast Asia. Brunei is a late developer in tourism with its first tourism master plan officialised in 1996. Micropreneurs are predominant in Brunei, especially in nature-based or community-based rural tourism locations. The five study sites conducted in this paper comprise micro-businesses managed by entrepreneurs who are owner-operators with most of them involving their families in their businesses. The five cases are located across different districts in Brunei namely Case 1) Eco Ponies Garden; Case 2) Lamin Warisan in Lamunin and Tanjong Maya within the Tutong district respectively; Case 3) Sumbiling Eco Village in Temburong district; Case 4) Kunyit 7 Lounge; and Case 5) Teratak Setiawan, both in the water village in the Brunei-Muara district. A map of the locations of these five micropreneurs is depicted in Figure 1. These five operators are classified as being in rural villages, characterised by a small pool of residents, and in areas with basic

infrastructure (e.g., wooden stilt houses and farming land) (Adli and Chin, 2021; Musa and Chin, 2022).

Figure 1: Map of micropreneurs in RTH within Brunei



Eco Ponies Garden is a farm-to-table homestay recognised for its unique permaculture-based agricultural system, nestled within the rainforest in Lamunin. The farm-to-table initiative represents a significant aspect of their agritourism activities, catering primarily to independent tourists or volunteer tourism. Notably, the cuisine offered showcases the culinary heritage of the indigenous Dusun people, the predominant ethnic group in the district. The business is run by the owner and her mother and their farm-to-table concept of passing the knowledge of farming, and the jungle coupled with a passion for cooking authentic ‘kampung’ (village) cuisine has gained popularity with backpackers around the world. They have hosted events involving the surrounding communities such as the farmers market, developing a brand for their community called ‘Eko Kampung’, and also partnered with international chefs on using local spices and dishes.

Lamin Warisan is the former home of the village chief and is now a museum or ‘cultural centre’ that aims to preserve and showcase Tutong’s culture, heritage, and history. It is currently run by the son and his granddaughter. Activities such as culinary and traditional cultural activities are offered during the tour ranging from making local sweet treats to playing traditional games.

Sumbiling Ecovillage is a renowned ecotourism destination situated in a remote Iban village located in the Temburong district. The owner-operator runs Sumbiling with his wife and has involved the local Iban community in building the ecovillage since 2007. The ecovillage is highly regarded for its exceptional culinary offerings rooted in the Iban food heritage. Tourists can experience traditional foraging practices, discover edible plants, and also learn about the medicinal properties of wild plants as well as their proper methods of harvesting.

Both Kunyit 7 Lounge and Teratak Setiawan are located in Kampong Ayer, the water village of Brunei. Both offer homestay experiences, offering a peek into Brunei's past. Both places are small and micro family businesses run by mother and son. Micro businesses that invariably involve families operating within the tourism and hospitality industry have been vital and noticeable in recent tourism development in Brunei.

Methodology

To explore the under-investigated lens of cultural interpretations and influences on micropreneurship in RTH within Brunei, a case study research design was undertaken. A case study is an investigation of a unit of analysis and can take the form of a business or micropreneur as described in the context of this research (Brown, 2008; Johansson, 2007). Related to this research, case studies are useful in investigating underexplored phenomena to provide a more nuanced understanding of the cultural influences at work in RTH. Likewise, employing a cross-case study analysis also enhances the methodological rigour of the research in the form of data triangulation (Schlunegger, Zumstein-Shaha and Palm, 2024). Consent was sought and approved at one of the author's primary institutions. Before selecting the five cases, the authors shortlisted several possible micropreneurs and sent out expressions of interest via email to participate. These five cases were the ones that volunteered to participate and continued to engage with the authors before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was conducted longitudinally to examine the five cases during the COVID-19 pandemic and when borders reopened, so that data will not be considered obsolete, but also provide better comparisons of how these micropreneurs evolved over the last few years.

In the case of Brunei, the five micropreneurs were approached and engaged with over the COVID-19 pandemic, and this was then followed up by a physical visit to the businesses in early June 2023. The interactions with the micropreneurs lasted at least one hour each, where owners shared the cultural interpretations and influences on their RTH approaches. Broad open-ended interview questions were developed around the notion of responsible tourism and hospitality and locating the role of cultural influences upon their business decisions and operations. These questions were informed by the work of prior scholars in the context of responsible tourism (Camilleri, 2016). Interviews were transcribed, checked for accuracy between the authors, and subsequently coded independently before finalizing outcomes as a proxy for intercoder reliability (Clarke et al., 2023). Then, following the guidelines prescribed by Williams and Moser (2019), three phases of open coding, axial coding and selective coding were applied iteratively to the data. Thematic analysis of the findings is subsequently presented and discussed.

Results

Cultural Interpretations of RTH

The five micropreneurs concurred that what they are attempting to deliver is a vehicle to inculcate among their ecosystems (suppliers, visitors, government officials) a

mindset that tourism should be aligned with local community needs. This was especially evident from 2020 to 2022 when the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a pivot to focus on domestic markets while international tourism was almost non-existent. As with many countries, Brunei embarked on tourism marketing campaigns to stimulate domestic tourism, leading to valuable opportunities for these micropreneurs to impart RTH principles among its visitors and other stakeholders (Chin, Hassan and Yong, 2023). The explicit ties to RTH were prominently displayed or conveyed as part of tourism interpretation including sustainable sourcing of food, ethical payment to local suppliers, and heritage preservation of local sites and natural environments. These aspects of self-efficacy are consistent with the practices observed elsewhere in Southeast Asia (e.g., Chiengkul et al., 2023; Aquino, Luck and Schanzel, 2022). Some of these examples from the cases are depicted in the images below.

Figure 2: Commissioned artwork at Sumbiling Eco Village painted by local ethnic artists (Authors' photograph)



Figure 3: RTH mural on-site at Eco Ponies Garden (Authors' photograph)



Figure 4: The Bruneian national dish Ambuyat served with the traditional bamboo tool Chandas at Teratak Setiawan (Authors' photograph)



Figure 5: Lamin Warisan heritage house preserved for tourists to experience traditional dwellings and artefacts (Authors' photograph)



A noticeable pattern across each of the five micropreneurs is the focus on supporting local communities, despite the small-scale enterprises that they operate. Owners of the Sumbiling Eco Village and Eco Ponies Garden emphasised how they continue to partner with local communities to enable the premises to be sites of celebration or ethnic group meetings, whilst also supporting local youth to be empowered with skills such as hospitality, carpentry, and environmental conservation so that these individuals can become more employable, either in their local villages or when they move to the city. Such efforts reiterate the important role of young people in RTH, as espoused elsewhere (Eyisi et al., 2023; Seraphin et al., 2022; Ting, Yusrini and Sita, 2022). In doing so, there is a groundswell effect to encourage local youth to stay and be part of a sustainable community and reduce rural-urban migration, aligning with SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). This reiterates the importance of community engagement across micropreneurship, especially in a Southeast Asian context, as supported by other scholars (see for instance, Dahles et al., 2020; Tresiana and Duadji, 2018). Collectively, the cultural interpretations of RTH are a combination of tangible and intangible products and services that are carefully curated to form a rich insight into Brunei's heritage. The tangible elements include Eco-Ponies' community-centric farm that draws upon seasonal produce to infuse sensory elements of culinary delights for its guests. Intangible culture is evidenced through the

knowledge transfer of how to prepare traditional dishes and crafts from generation to generation, exemplified by Lamin Warisan and Teratak Setiawan. These showcase how culture is interpreted and manifested in RTH practices, contextually relevant and meaningful to each case. These outcomes distil clarity into cultural interpretations of RTH practices in Brunei, from the perspectives of micropreneurs. This amplifies RTH operators' actions to foster a holistic dissemination of cultural artifacts to visitors and next-generational leaders (Samaddar, Mondal and Sharma, 2022).

Cultural Influences on RTH

While local cultures are embedded in the way micropreneurs offer RTH experiences, there are nevertheless other influences that may somehow inhibit potential development towards desired sustainable goals. In the case of Brunei, there is still a prevalent perception that national development is led by incumbent industries such as oil and gas (Sidhu and Dosch, 2022). For this reason, resource endowment to the tourism industry is perhaps less evident as compared to other Southeast Asian countries. Even in the future strategic national plan underpinned by Wawasan Brunei 2035, the investment in tourism and hospitality has not yet witnessed a strategic and coherent approach to formulate RTH outcomes.

While ecotourism and nature-based tourism are promoted on the back of large-scale infrastructure such as the Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Bridge (also known as the Temburong Bridge), the micropreneurs acknowledge that they still operate within a bounded rationality approach of working with limitations. For example, the Kunyit 7 Lounge owner mentioned that her intentions to expand the premises for hosting small-scale RTH experiences such as textile weaving were thwarted by governmental legislation requiring land title evidence when such documents did not exist when the Kampong Ayer (water village) was built. These developmental challenges were also identified by Sumbiling Eco Village, when the proposal to feature eco-lodge facilities required the existing premises to fulfil the health and safety criteria, including fire evacuation and building codes that are used for hotels and service apartments. Likewise, the owner of Lamin Warisan's intention to make the building more accessible was not yet approved due to a lack of funding and building plan clearances from government agencies. Hence, it can be seen that RTH intentions are not always matched by governmental support, a trait that has been alluded to elsewhere (Carasuk et al., 2016; Farmaki et al., 2014).

Despite these setbacks, these micropreneurs persisted in reflecting RTH principles and practices in their operations. For instance, Kunyit 7 solicited support from the local communities to organise an art and craft carnival at the communal hall of Kampong Ayer. Similarly, Eco Ponies Garden hosted several volunteers on-site to have more workforce at her disposal, while ensuring that the ethos of RTH extends beyond the boundaries of local communities. Lamin Warisan also solicited the assistance of external agencies such as schools and universities to research best practices to harness heritage tourism potential for the premises. These fervent efforts are a stark contrast to the findings of Chan and Tay (2016) who found Borneo tour operators did not reflect RTH principles in their tourism experiences. A plausible explanation may be that such micropreneurs had full control over their enterprises and so this autonomy facilitated a greater immersion of RTH into their product and service design. Another possible reason may be that there are fewer RTH operators in

Brunei than in the case of Sabah, as Chan and Tay (2016) found that price competition led to some operators adopting less sustainable behaviour to access price-sensitive markets.

The findings outline those cultural influences that shape how Bruneian micropreneurs responded to RTH. The push factors towards greater resilience are attributed to a few factors. First, the perceived inertia from government funding may not occur in a timely or sufficient manner, resulting in more proactive measures to work collaboratively with one another and support the RTH ecosystem as a community (Eyisi, Lee and Trees, 2023). Second, the opportunity presented to Bruneian youth to learn more about their heritage during COVID-19 sparked greater passion to step up and be part of succession plans, supporting the argument for youth empowerment (Seraphin et al., 2022). Several of the cases revealed how their children took on business short courses or higher degrees to learn more about how to manage their parents' businesses sustainably. Third, technocultures afforded by digital and social media platforms facilitated greater dissemination of RTH from a Bruneian perspective, while remaining authentic through in-person experiences. Collectively, these findings reveal the cultural bricolage that shapes Brunei micropreneurs and their RTH endeavour.

Bruneian Micropreneurs Approach to RTH

The five micropreneurs' approach to RTH can be summarised by their quest to do their best and exhibit RTH behaviours. The owner of Sumbiling Eco Village expressed *"As a micropreneur, I try to do what I can to be a good steward to this site - all the wood used to construct the building is sourced locally, and we only use what we need. I also train the local youth so they can earn a living where we pay market rates too."* This focus on the next generation is also reflected in the value placed on succession planning. For instance, the Kunyit 7 Lodge owner mentioned *"I am now training my son to take over the business...He has already started learning the ropes and one day be an ambassador for RTH in Kampong Ayer."* This view is also echoed by Teratak Setiawan, where the young son revealed that *"I am doing my best to learn the cooking skills as much as I can from my mother...I am not there yet, but one day I want to carry on the tradition of making Ambuyat and other traditional delicacies, and for my future generations to learn these skills too..."*.

This reveals a unique attribute of Brunei micropreneurs involved in RTH to actively consider succession planning as a core feature of their operations. Unlike larger organisations, smaller businesses are often at risk of survival due to the next generation unwilling to continue the family business (Gagne et al., 2021). This is because younger generations may shun low-paying long hours doing laborious tasks or are attracted to higher-paying occupations in urban cities. For this reason, the focus on youth within entrepreneurship in Southeast Asia is crucial to give them a sense of identity and place of belonging as espoused by Singgalen et al. (2022). Nonetheless, the research also revealed a slight difference from the traditional Asian culture of patriarchal business structures, where succession planning is usually passed on to men (Anggadwita et al., 2020).

Arguably, succession planning in Brunei micropreneurship within this research stems from the strong motivations to realise RTH, and in some cases, happens regardless of

gender. This can potentially be attributed to the quiet leadership qualities displayed by the women in their roles and responsibilities and a good grasp of where their respective micro-businesses helped to weave the social fabric of local communities. This finding validates the outcomes found in previous studies on female leaders in Brunei (Chin, Tham and Noorashid, 2023; Abd Rahim, 2021) and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Lionanda, 2023).

In summary, the research has illuminated the cultural interpretations and influences on RTH through the lens of five Brunei micropreneurs. Despite their heightened level of risk absorption and withstanding crises and disasters such as COVID-19, these micropreneurs develop a sense of resilience through their shared commitment to local communities, engagement with young people, and leveraging on external agencies to tap best practices to overcome potential legislative and financial barriers to their operations. Leadership was also not limited to male heirs but instead imparted to women who likewise exhibited the passion and capability to inherit the business. This outcome offers a novel contribution to existing knowledge surrounding micropreneurship that often suggests patriarchal succession plans (Ibanez and Guerrero, 2022). Instead, Bruneian micropreneurship in RTH is reframed as an extension of familial brands and legacies, and hence stewardship is mentored and passed on to the next generation, regardless of gender, validating the work of Xiong, Ukanwa and Anderson (2020).

Discussion

The contribution of our study to the current state of discussion in the field of RTH in the context of Brunei is that the motivation behind micropreneurial endeavours was primarily driven by a collective aspiration to improve the quality of life within local communities, empower women and youth in fostering a stronger sense of place identity. We have shown that in a small country setting like Brunei, micropreneurs have not only established their network or ecosystem among stakeholders to incorporate RTH practices within their community, but they have also actively prioritised succession planning and involving women in leadership as a fundamental aspect of their operations. There is also an unwavering commitment to support local communities such as empowering local youth, despite operating on a small scale within their enterprises.

Our findings also suggest that regardless of a discrepancy between the intentions of RTH and the level of support provided by the government, micropreneurs remained determined to embody RTH principles and practices in their operations. They demonstrated resilience and ingenuity through barter trading and other forms of diverse economies amidst the COVID-19 landscape to ensure business sustainability. This study provides valuable insights that contribute to the refinement of micropreneurial theory and the unique role that culture plays in the realm of RTH within the Southeast Asia context, both in current and future settings. These nuanced findings offer a deeper understanding of the complexities and intricacies involved, aiding in more effective strategies and approaches for RTH initiatives. At a practical level, micropreneurs can better navigate the challenges they face to realise RTH outcomes through working with para-regional networks and alliances such as the Asian Development Bank to raise funds for much-needed infrastructure or human

capital and potentially overcome regulatory barriers by forming partnerships to leverage best practices and knowledge transfer, as advocated by Mahato, Phi and Prats (2021).

While the case study qualitative approach provides a deep insight into participants' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs on the essence of the cultural interpretation, influences, and micropreneurial approach, the findings cannot be generalised as this study has only been conducted in Brunei. One may also argue the small sample size conducted in this study is a limitation. However, Brunei, being a small nation has only a handful of tourism micropreneurs. The authors have attempted to include most across the three districts to be representative of the country. The stark contrast demonstrated by the conclusions drawn by Chan and Tay (2016) and our study, calls for more RTH studies within the Borneo and Southeast Asia context. Further research could explore the reasons for the discrepancy between stakeholders such as the government and micropreneurs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges. Other scholars may wish to illuminate key success factors for women micropreneurs elsewhere undertaking RTH. Studies exploring the relationship between youth empowerment for micropreneurship and community well-being are also warranted. This helps to provide some tangible outcomes to reduce rural-urban migration and give younger generations a greater sense of ownership and identity by staying in their villages and yet achieving noble RTH outcomes in the future.

Practical Implications for Asian Business

The paper provides a few practical implications for Asian businesses. Given the large presence of micropreneurs in community-based ecotourism, knowledge of cultural influences on responsible operations is crucial. The research shows how such cultural influences manifest over a long time and are developed out of trust in various stakeholders in the ecosystem. This implies that there are no shortcuts to interacting with local communities and that new or potential operators must invest time and resources to build up trust and support with key parties (Pahari, 2024).

In addition, culture varies from context to context, and hence what works in Brunei may need to be modified elsewhere. Community norms and village ethos will need businesses to respect and avoid tokenism approaches, to bring desired outcomes to fruition (Griffiths, 2024). In this vein, training and development needs of women and young people should be done in consultation with local communities. Outcomes of social impacts and well-being should likewise be measured over time to examine if responsible tourism has led to cultural preservation and a greater sense of place identity (Schonherr, 2024).

Responsible tourism micropreneurs should also periodically work with villages, government agencies and other associations to hold forums and share best practices regarding local cultures and how businesses can work together (Dos Santos, Lugosi and Hawkins, 2025). These dialogues offer wider insights and knowledge transfer to support the meaningful work undertaken by the micropreneurs to give back to their respective communities.

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