

Women, culture, and green transformation: A gendered participatory communication model for wellness tourism

Farida Nurul Rahmawati^{1*}, Nikmah Suryandari¹, Yuliana Rakhmawati¹, and Moch Imron Rosyidi¹

¹ Universitas Trunojoyo Madura, Kamal, Indonesia

* Corresponding author's email: farida.nr@trunojoyo.ac.id

Abstract

Wellness tourism is increasingly promoted as a pathway to green transformation, yet its development in culturally rich communities raises ethical concerns regarding sacred traditions, gendered power relations, and community participation. This study examines how gendered communication practices and cultural sacredness shape wellness tourism development in Madura, Indonesia. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys with 286 respondents, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews in selected village clusters in Sumenep and Pamekasan. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data were examined thematically. The findings show that Madurese women play a central role in preserving indigenous wellness knowledge, including jamu, ritual healing, and family-based care, but remain marginal in formal tourism planning. Communities also negotiate boundaries between practices that can be adapted for tourism and those that must be protected due to their sacred value. Participation is further limited by centralized governance and the gap between global wellness tourism discourse and local cultural meanings. Based on these findings, this study proposes the Gendered-Cultural Participatory Communication Model (G-CPM), consisting of five components: sacred knowledge protection, gendered agency negotiation, community curation, local-language meaning-making, and sustainability framing. This model reframes green transformation as a communicative and ethical process, contributing to participatory communication, gender studies, and sustainable tourism scholarship.

Keywords

Gendered communication, Participatory communication, Cultural sustainability, Wellness tourism, Green transformation

Introduction

Around the world, work on greener futures has been bringing tourism sector to the fore as a critical policy domain for advancing environmental sustainability, social well-

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being and culture resilience. In this line, wellness tourism develops as a Wellbeing dimension. A special interest product that encompasses elements focusing on the physical and mental balance, spiritual – cultural practices, and is closely related with the SDGs Organic principles. (Bhuyan et al., 2025; Theerathitichaipa et al., 2025). Global tourism narratives, often associate wellness tourism with a route to green transformation through providing sustainable development and community resources while offering holistic experiences (Dillette et al., 2021; Suryantari et al., 2025).

However, the fit between wellness tourism and sustainability is not per se and neutral from an evaluative perspective. The translation of global sustainability discourses into specific local contexts is inevitably interwoven with power relations, cultural semantics and communicative practices (Choe et al., 2025). Where societies are culturally rich, the development of wellness tourism also frequently involves a cultural phenomenon being perceived in market terms, which culminates in increased pressure to commodify practices that communities regard as sacred rather than recreational (Brennan & Kessler, 2025; Jihana, 2025).

There is a growing body of literature showing that this tension becomes particularly pronounced and complex in contexts where wellness activities are deeply embedded in indigenous healing practices, ritual traditions, and everyday religious life of local communities. In such settings, wellness is not understood merely as a recreational activity or lifestyle choice, but as an integral part of the community's value system, belief structures, and lived social practices (Arida et al., 2025; Brennan & Kessler, 2025; Kurniawan et al., 2024; Wiguna & Triana, 2025). Research conducted on Madura Island, Indonesia, shows that ritual healing, jamu-based treatments, sand therapy, and spiritual practices are not understood merely as cultural performances for public consumption, but rather as moral and spiritual commitments that sustain community cohesion, shared values, and the collective spiritual life of society (Rahmawati et al., 2024; Rahmawati & Suryandari, 2023b; Suryandari et al., 2024).

Despite the focus on sustainability and inclusivity in wellness tourism narrative, gendered aspects of involvement are under-theorised. Participatory communication is also recurrently advocated in overall tourism and community development discourse, for instance through the echoing of communication for development (C4D) as well as social change traditions (Servaes, 2022). Nevertheless, enrolment itself is not gender-specific, obscuring that communicative authority, access to decision-making and legitimacy are gendered organised. Similarly, the literature of tourism's power in promoting women's empowerment tends to highlight its economic outcomes, and neglects women as carriers of cultural information and brokers of ethical horizons.

Studies in Madura always indicate that women are positioned paradoxically around acts of wellness. On the other hand, they play a major role in family health care, traditional medicine preparation rituals and passing on indigenous knowledge. Paradoxically, however their involvement in formal tourism planning and governance has tended to be limited and symbolic, struggling under social norms and institutional

hierarchies as well as copycat top-down development models via such condition leading previous scholars to characterize a chasm between women's symbols cultural authority on the one hand, and structural exclusion from strategic decision-making processes on the other.

Thus, Madura provides a fruitful empirical context for rethinking wellness tourism as more than just an economic entity but as also a discursive terrain within which concepts of health, sustainability and sacredness are contested. Previous studies on wellness tourism fit in Madura showed that the communities are not 'immune' to innovation; instead, they constantly negotiate the (boundaries between) adaptation and protection, openness and restriction, commodification compared to sanctity (Rahmawati & Suryandari, 2023a; Suryandari, Rahmawati, Quraisyin, et al., 2025). At the core of these negotiations are communicative practices expressed through language, cultural practices, norms and religious hierarchies as well as by gender relations. This article locates Madura less as a local instance and more as a theoretical site to probe the workings of participatory communication in conditions of sacredness and gendered power. The research question is: how do gendered communication practices mediate community participation and authority in wellness tourism development in Madura?; how does cultural sacredness function as an ethical and communicative boundary in shaping green transformation agendas?

Through mixed-method data collection including a quantitative survey of 286 respondents, focus groups and in-depth interviews across three village clusters, this paper investigates the ways wellness meanings are constructed, contested and governed locally. A range of empirical evidence indicates that Madurese peoples have for generations engaged in wellness-seeking behavior, predating (and existing independently of) the concept of 'wellness tourism' without, until very recently, any understanding or awareness (or linguistic terminology) to express the pre-existent phenomenon in semantic alignment with globalised forms of travel and consumer behavior. A divide between Western categories and local people's experience.

Building from the analysis, this article introduces the Gendered-Cultural Participatory Communication Model as a mid-range analytical framework that encompasses five dimensions related to: 1) protection of sacred knowledge; 2) gendered negotiation of agency; 3) community curation of tourism narratives; 4) local-language meaning-making, and; 5) sustainability framing for ecological and cultural well-being.

This study contributes to three principal domains. First, it advances participatory communication theory by incorporating sacredness and gendered power relations as fundamental analytical dimensions. Second, it contributes to gender studies by reconceptualizing women not merely as economic actors, but as communicative agents who negotiate cultural legitimacy under conditions of structural pressure. Third, it enriches the literature on sustainable and wellness tourism by asserting that cultural sustainability is a constitutive component of green transformation.

Literature review

Gendered communication and participation in community-based development

The interplay between gendered communication and community participation has emerged as a critical focus within community-based development scholarship, particularly in contexts where traditional gender norms shape who speaks, how participation is structured, and whose voices are ultimately heard in decision-making processes. Recent research highlights that participation in development initiatives cannot be understood merely as numerical inclusion but must be examined through the lens of communication dynamics that reflect power, cultural norms, and socio-institutional structures.

At the core of community-based development is *participatory communication*. A dialogical, two-way communicative process that aims to empower community members to engage actively in development planning, implementation, and evaluation. Participatory communication has been shown to increase community agency and foster mutual ownership of development outcomes (e.g., in rural social projects and resilience-focused programs), provided that mechanisms are in place to facilitate genuine dialogue rather than top-down messaging. Studies in rural Indonesia, for instance, demonstrate that participatory communication in local empowerment initiatives supports community members to share knowledge, identify needs, and co-construct solutions, thereby enhancing the sustainability and social legitimacy of development processes (Nurhaliza et al., 2023).

Gendered communication, specifically, refers to how communication practices and norms are shaped by gender identities, roles, and hierarchies (ul Abidin, 2024). In community contexts, gendered communication is evident in how information is accessed, who participates in discussions, and how authority is constructed in both formal and informal spheres (Handayani, 2023). Research from Indonesian villages underscores that women's voices are frequently constrained by sociocultural norms despite their substantial contributions to family well-being, agricultural labor, and local economic activities. This dynamic replicates broader patterns observed globally, where women's communicative roles are often relegated to supportive or ancillary positions even when they possess deep contextual knowledge and experience (Suryandari, Rahmawati, Wijayani, et al., 2025).

A growing body of qualitative studies foregrounds gender as an analytical lens for examining participation in community development. For example, research focused on gender communication strategies within community programs in Indonesia highlights how deliberate communicative practices, such as face-to-face dialogue, culturally sensitive messaging, and the use of both formal and informal communication channels, can enhance women's empowerment and participation. These studies demonstrate that gender-aware communication not only changes roles (e.g., from caregivers to

decision-making participants) but also builds trust and collaboration across stakeholders (Yulianti et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the literature emphasizes that gendered participation should be understood not just as the presence of women in community processes, but as *meaningful engagement* where women's communicative agency influences agenda-setting, negotiation, and outcomes. Approaches grounded in participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and other bottom-up methodologies illustrate that when women are actively involved in defining problems, articulating priorities, and shaping activities, development initiatives become more inclusive and responsive to diverse community needs. Studies of grassroots organizations in rural Indonesia show that empowering women through structured dialogue and inclusive practices can transform social relations and enhance community resilience (Mardliyah et al., 2025),

However, barriers persist. Deeply ingrained cultural norms can privilege male voices in public decision-making arenas, limiting women's ability to contribute strategically to community development. Power imbalances in communicative spaces, manifested in who speaks, whose ideas are taken seriously, and how negotiation occurs, continue to marginalize women's participation. Recent empirical work underlines that gender mainstreaming in community development requires intentional strategies that move beyond token participation to address underlying communicative and structural inequities (Amandaria et al., 2026).

In sum, contemporary literature on gendered communication and community participation converges on several key insights:

1. Communication practices are inherently gendered, reflecting and reinforcing social power relations.
2. Participatory communication enhances empowerment when it actively includes marginalized voices, pays attention to context-specific cultural norms, and supports dialogic processes that value local knowledge.
3. Meaningful participation goes beyond representation, requiring structural changes in communicative forums to ensure that women can influence both discourse and outcomes in community development.

Together, these findings provide a solid theoretical and empirical foundation for examining how gendered communication practices shape community involvement in development settings. They also justify the focus of research on communicative agency and cultural norms as central to understanding participation dynamics in complex, culturally rich contexts like wellness tourism on Madura Island.

Cultural sustainability, sacredness, and ethical boundaries

Contemporary sustainability scholarship increasingly positions cultural sustainability as a core, constitutive dimension of sustainable development, not solely as heritage preservation but as a living process of cultural negotiation, identity continuity, and

moral governance. Cultural sustainability involves sustaining the conditions under which communities can determine which cultural elements should be maintained, adapted, or transformed in the face of change (Järvelä, 2023). Within tourism research, this perspective has gained traction as studies recognize that heritage and cultural practices are not static, but continuously reproduced and reinterpreted through social processes (Yüksel, 2025).

In tourism contexts, particularly within community-based efforts, sacred practices pose unique challenges and opportunities for sustainability. Rituals, spiritual observances, and other sacred dimensions are embedded within normative orders that define communal meaning, identity, and social cohesion. These practices often go beyond symbolic representation; they function as boundary mechanisms that regulate participation, access, and moral legitimacy (Butler & Thompson-Carr, 2024). For instance, in indigenous tourism contexts, ritual performance is governed not simply by tourist demand but by local cosmologies that mediate what can be publicly displayed and what remains within restricted cultural spaces (Butler & Thompson-Carr, 2024).

This dynamic takes on added significance when framed within sustainable tourism governance. Tourism can provide economic incentives for cultural preservation, yet it can also generate pressures to reconfigure sacred traditions into consumable experiences, risking distortion or misrepresentation (Marbun, 2025). Ethnographic studies in community-based and indigenous tourism highlight that when sacred elements are detached from their moral frameworks and cosmological contexts, they risk losing their collective significance and relational meaning (Butler & Thompson-Carr, 2024). Hence, cultural sustainability must be understood not simply as conserving artifacts, but as governing cultural meaning in ways that align with community values and ethical norms.

The concept of ethical boundaries intersects with cultural sustainability because sacred practices often entail normative limits on adaptation, use, and exchange. Ethical boundaries are negotiated in communicative forums rather than determined unilaterally by external stakeholder. In contexts where spiritual and cosmological logics shape everyday life, development and tourism initiatives that ignore these moral boundaries can provoke resistance, undermining both cultural integrity and long-term sustainability outcomes.

Importantly, ethical boundaries are not gender-neutral. The interplay between culture and gender shapes who has authority to define sacred limits and who participates in boundary negotiation. Although women often act as knowledge bearers, ritual custodians, and cultural transmitters, they may lack formal authority in governance spaces structured by patriarchal institutions. This tension is evident in tourism governance research showing that formal decision-making spaces often privilege male leadership, while women's roles remain informally recognized yet structurally marginalized. Even when women contribute significant cultural knowledge, their

communicative authority in shaping ethical boundaries and sustainability framing is limited by gendered power dynamics (Liu & Heinonen, 2025).

In culturally rich settings like Madura, traditional wellness practices, such as ritual healing, jamu, and sand-based therapies, are embedded in lifeworlds in which spiritual and moral logics intersect deeply with social life. These practices are not merely cultural assets to be incorporated into tourism; they are normative orders that shape what is considered ethically legitimate and culturally appropriate. In this context, cultural sustainability depends on communicative practices that enable communities to negotiate the limits of adaptation, commodification, and protection. Sustainability cannot be realized through procedural inclusion alone; it must be anchored in communicative legitimacy that recognizes local epistemologies and moral frameworks.

The Madurese case illustrates that mainstream sustainable tourism frameworks, which often emphasize economic and environmental dimensions, are insufficient without accounting for sacredness and ethical boundary negotiation. Green transformation agendas, if detached from culturally situated ethical norms, risk privileging market logics over moral coherence, eroding cultural legitimacy and social trust. This points to a critical need to reconceptualize sustainability as a communicative and ethical achievement, not merely a technical or economic outcome.

Integrating these insights with the literature on gendered communication reveals a gap in existing models: most frameworks treat participation and cultural sustainability as procedural inclusivity metrics rather than communicative processes shaped by sacred norms and gendered power. This gap underscores the necessity of developing a more nuanced analytical model that can account for how communities negotiate sacred knowledge protection, gendered agency, narrative curation, meaning-making in vernacular terms, and sustainability framing in concert.

These theoretical imperatives directly justify the development of the Gendered–Cultural Participatory Communication Model (G-CPM) proposed in this study. G-CPM situates cultural sustainability as an ethical communicative process mediated by gendered power relations and moral boundaries, thereby addressing the limitations of existing paradigms that insufficiently theorize how sacredness and communicative authority shape sustainable tourism pathways. The model thus positions sustainability not only as an environmental and economic goal, but as an ongoing moral and communicative achievement rooted in community agency and cultural legitimacy.

Participatory communication theory and power negotiation

Participatory communication theory emerged as a critique of modernization and diffusion paradigms that positioned development as a linear transfer of knowledge from experts to passive recipients. Early modernization approaches privileged technical expertise, centralized planning, and media-driven persuasion, often overlooking the sociocultural contexts in which development interventions unfold. In contrast, participatory communication reoriented development thinking toward dialogue, local

agency, and collective meaning-making, positioning communication not as transmission but as a process of co-creation (Dutta, 2025).

Contemporary scholarship has further deepened this perspective by emphasizing that participation is not inherently emancipatory. Rather, it is shaped by structural power relations, institutional hierarchies, and sociocultural inequalities (Lynch, 1999). Participation may create spaces for inclusion while simultaneously reproducing asymmetries of authority. Thus, the analytical focus has shifted from participation as presence to participation as negotiated power. Who speaks? Who listens? Who defines the agenda? These questions are central to understanding participatory communication as a political process rather than a neutral methodology.

Drawing on critical theory, participatory communication is increasingly framed within deliberative and dialogical traditions that foreground communicative rationality and discursive legitimacy. Habermasian perspectives emphasize the ideal of undistorted communication, where actors engage in reasoned dialogue free from domination. However, critics argue that real-world deliberation is embedded within unequal social structures that shape whose voice is considered credible and whose knowledge is marginalized (Chambers, 2017). In development settings, marginalized groups may formally participate yet remain constrained by symbolic, cultural, or institutional power.

Power negotiation within participatory processes operates at multiple levels. At the micro level, it unfolds through communicative practice, language choice, narrative framing, ritual authority, and knowledge validation. At the meso level, it is structured by institutional arrangements, governance mechanisms, and policy frameworks that regulate access to decision-making spaces. At the macro level, broader political economy dynamics and market logics shape the parameters within which participation occurs (Lee, 2023).

Recent studies in community-based development and tourism governance demonstrate that participatory forums often become arenas of subtle contestation rather than consensual dialogue. Stakeholders may strategically mobilize cultural narratives, moral authority, or technical expertise to legitimize particular development trajectories. Power is not merely coercive but productive.

In culturally embedded contexts, participatory communication must also contend with normative and symbolic orders that precede formal governance structures. Traditional leadership systems, religious authority, and gendered norms frequently intersect with institutional participation frameworks. As a result, participatory spaces are layered: formal meetings may coexist with informal negotiations mediated through kinship networks, ritual structures, or customary deliberation. This layered communicative ecology complicates assumptions that participation can be standardized across contexts.

Gender scholarship further reveals that participatory communication processes are deeply entangled with power hierarchies. Women's inclusion in participatory initiatives

does not automatically translate into influence over outcomes. Gendered communication norms may restrict assertiveness, shape speaking turns, or define which forms of knowledge are deemed authoritative. Consequently, analyzing participation requires attention to communicative authority and epistemic recognition, not merely numerical representation.

Within sustainable development and environmental governance, participatory communication is increasingly linked to co-production and collaborative governance models. These frameworks emphasize shared responsibility and collective problem-solving. However, empirical research suggests that co-production can mask unequal bargaining power, particularly when market-driven imperatives intersect with community-based initiatives. Negotiation processes often reflect asymmetries between local knowledge holders and actors equipped with regulatory or financial resources.

Therefore, participatory communication theory must be understood not only as a normative commitment to dialogue but as an analytical lens for examining how power circulates, is resisted, and is reconstituted within communicative interactions. Power negotiation is intrinsic to participatory processes; it shapes agenda-setting, boundary formation, and the construction of legitimacy.

In contexts such as culturally grounded community development, participatory communication becomes a site where moral authority, sacred norms, gendered hierarchies, and institutional governance intersect. Participation is less about consensus and more about continuous negotiation over meaning, legitimacy, and future direction. Recognizing this dynamic moves the analysis beyond procedural inclusion toward communicative justice, where the central concern is whether actors possess the discursive capacity and structural space to influence collective outcomes.

This reconceptualization is particularly important for developing analytical models that integrate gender, culture, and sustainability. It suggests that any participatory framework must account for the ways in which communicative authority is distributed, how ethical boundaries are articulated, and how development narratives are framed and contested. In this sense, participatory communication theory provides the conceptual scaffolding for examining power negotiation as a constitutive element of community-based transformation rather than a peripheral concern.

Green transformation and wellness tourism

Green transformation refers to systemic shifts toward environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, and culturally sensitive development pathways. Within tourism, wellness tourism is frequently framed as an ideal vehicle for such transformation due to its emphasis on holistic well-being and low-impact experiences (Brennan & Kessler, 2025).

However, critics caution that wellness tourism can reproduce extractive logics if sustainability is treated primarily as branding rather than practice. The adoption of green narratives does not automatically translate into equitable governance or cultural

protection. Instead, green transformation must be understood as a communicative process, involving negotiation over values, meanings, and priorities.

Studies on womenpreneurs and green technology in Madura illustrate that women's unique knowledge contributes not only to economic resilience but also to environmentally sustainable practices, such as organic production, waste management, and resource conservation. Yet these contributions remain undervalued in formal tourism narratives, which tend to privilege technological or infrastructural indicators of sustainability over cultural and social dimensions.

The reviewed literature reveals three critical gaps. First, participatory communication theory has insufficiently addressed sacredness as an ethical boundary within development processes. Second, gender studies in tourism have often focused on empowerment outcomes without examining communicative authority and meaning negotiation. Third, wellness tourism scholarship frequently treats sustainability as a technical or managerial issue, overlooking its cultural and symbolic dimensions.

This study addresses these gaps by integrating gendered communication analysis with cultural sustainability and wellness tourism. By grounding the analysis in empirical research from Madura, it proposes a Gendered–Cultural Participatory Communication Model that conceptualizes green transformation as a process of ethical negotiation rather than linear development

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Method

This study employs a mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both structural patterns and lived meanings of participation in wellness tourism development. A survey of 286 respondents was conducted across selected village clusters in Sumenep and Pamekasan, representing areas with active engagement in wellness-related practices.

Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with women practitioners of herbal medicine (jamu), ritual facilitators,

community leaders, religious figures, and tourism stakeholders. Focus group discussions were designed to observe interactional dynamics, including patterns of voice, silence, and authority, while interviews provided space for participants particularly women to articulate experiences that may not surface in group settings.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Methodological rigor was ensured through triangulation across data sources and informal member checking. Ethical considerations were central to the research design, particularly regarding the handling of sacred knowledge and gender-sensitive engagement. Participants retained authority over what aspects of their cultural practices could be discussed and documented.

Results and discussion

Structural patterns of participation in wellness tourism development

Based on Table 1, the quantitative findings from the survey of 286 respondents across village clusters in Sumenep and Pamekasan reveal a patterned differentiation between practical engagement and formal authority in wellness tourism development. Women demonstrate substantial involvement in wellness-related cultural practices, particularly in herbal medicine (jamu) production, ritual facilitation, and the preparation of local food traditions positioned as health-based tourism experiences. However, this high level of engagement does not correspond proportionally with access to formal decision-making roles.

Table 1. Gendered patterns of participation and authority (N = 286)

Indicator	Women (%)	Men (%)
Active involvement in herbal production (jamu)	68	32
Participation in ritual facilitation	61	39
Membership in village tourism committees	38	62
Holding formal decision-making positions	29	71
Recognized as cultural knowledge holders by the community	74	26
Involvement in strategic negotiation with external stakeholders	31	69

The data indicate a participatory paradox. While 74% of respondents recognize women as primary holders of cultural and wellness-related knowledge, only 29% of women occupy formal decision-making positions within village tourism governance. Similarly, women dominate the domain of embodied cultural practice but remain underrepresented in strategic negotiations with governmental or external stakeholders.

These figures suggest a structural separation between epistemic authority and institutional authority. Women's knowledge is socially acknowledged, yet institutional power remains gender-skewed. The quantitative findings thus establish the structural contours of gendered participation but do not fully explain the communicative

mechanisms that mediate this asymmetry. It is within the qualitative findings that these mechanisms become visible.

Gendered communication as a mediation of participation and authority

The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews reveal that participation in wellness tourism development is not merely structured by institutional arrangements but mediated through gendered communication practices embedded within Madurese socio-cultural norms.

In group discussions, men tended to initiate conversations regarding strategic planning and external collaboration. Women often entered the discussion when the topic shifted to herbal practices, family health, or ritual procedures. However, once speaking, women's narratives were detailed, experiential, and frequently referenced by others as authoritative.

A female herbal practitioner explained that her legitimacy did not stem from formal recognition by village authorities but from intergenerational transmission and repeated healing success acknowledged by community members. Trust was accumulated through long-term relational engagement rather than through certification or bureaucratic endorsement. This reflects a form of relational authority grounded in embodied knowledge.

From a gender communication perspective, this pattern suggests that authority operates through differentiated communicative registers. While institutional authority is articulated in formal public discourse, women's authority is enacted through interpersonal networks, narrative credibility, and moral positioning. Their influence often precedes formal decision-making processes through informal consultations and relational negotiations.

Silence also emerged as a significant communicative feature. In several FGD sessions, women remained silent during early phases of discussion but later contributed in ways that reframed the conversation. Silence did not indicate absence of agency; rather, it functioned as a strategic communicative positioning within a cultural context that values politeness, hierarchy, and religious propriety. Critiques were expressed indirectly, often framed through references to moral responsibility, family wellbeing, or religious appropriateness.

Such communicative strategies align with gender communication scholarship that conceptualizes voice not solely as verbal assertiveness but as contextually negotiated expression. Women's communicative agency operated within socially accepted moral frames, allowing them to influence collective direction without destabilizing established gender hierarchies.

Thus, gendered communication practices mediate participation by translating embodied knowledge into socially legitimate influence, even when formal authority remains male-dominated.

Sacredness as ethical and communicative boundary

One of the most critical qualitative findings concerns the function of cultural sacredness in shaping the limits of wellness tourism development. Interview data repeatedly indicated that not all elements of herbal knowledge or ritual practice were considered appropriate for public dissemination or commercialization.

When conversations approached the core elements of ritual procedures, noticeable communicative shifts occurred: lowered voices, pauses, and symbolic rather than direct explanations. Participants explicitly stated that certain knowledge “should not be written” or “belongs to family lineage.” These moments reveal the presence of communicative boundary-setting mechanisms.

Sacredness functions here as an ethical regulator of knowledge circulation. It determines who may speak, what may be disclosed, and under what conditions cultural knowledge can be transformed into tourism assets. Rather than serving as an obstacle to development, sacredness operates as a governance principle ensuring that green transformation remains ethically bounded.

Quantitatively, 81% of respondents agreed that wellness tourism development must respect cultural and religious limits. This strong consensus indicates that green transformation cannot be reduced to sustainability metrics or market expansion strategies; it must align with moral legitimacy recognized by the community.

Sacredness thus acts as a communicative filter that prevents epistemic extraction and over-commodification. It preserves cultural sovereignty in the face of tourism-driven transformation.

Critical discussion: Gendered communication and ethical green transformation

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that wellness tourism development in Madura is a communicative process deeply structured by gender norms and sacred cultural boundaries.

First, the data reveal that participation cannot be equated with numerical representation in formal governance. Although women occupy fewer decision-making positions, they sustain the epistemic and moral infrastructure of wellness tourism. Their embodied knowledge constitutes the substantive core of the tourism product itself. In this sense, women are not peripheral actors but foundational agents.

Second, the communicative dynamics observed challenge liberal-participatory assumptions that equate empowerment with overt verbal dominance or institutional representation. Women’s agency manifests through relational influence, moral framing, and strategic silence. Gender communication analysis reveals that authority is co-constructed through culturally appropriate communicative styles rather than through uniform models of assertiveness.

Third, sacredness complicates dominant models of sustainable tourism that emphasize openness, branding, and scalability. In Madura, ethical legitimacy precedes economic expansion. Green transformation emerges not as a technocratic intervention but as a morally negotiated process embedded in spiritual and cultural values.

This study therefore contributes to gender communication scholarship by demonstrating how communicative practices mediate the translation of embodied female knowledge into collective development agendas. It also expands sustainability discourse by positioning sacredness as an analytical variable that shapes communicative ethics in local transformation processes.

Ultimately, wellness tourism in Madura is not merely an economic initiative but a communicative arena where gender, culture, and sustainability intersect. Women function simultaneously as knowledge bearers, relational authorities, and guardians of ethical boundaries. Green transformation, in this context, becomes sustainable only when it is communicatively negotiated through gender-sensitive and culturally bounded processes.

Conclusion and Policy implications

Conclusion

This study shows that participation in wellness tourism development in Madura is gendered, relational, and ethically bounded by cultural sacredness. Although women play a central role in embodied wellness practices, such as herbal medicine, ritual healing, and family-based care, they remain underrepresented in formal decision-making. However, their influence operates through trust networks, intergenerational knowledge transmission, moral framing, mediated speech, and culturally accepted forms of communication. Thus, participation should be distinguished from formal representation, as women's authority is often exercised relationally rather than institutionally.

Cultural sacredness also functions as an ethical and communicative boundary that regulates which knowledge can be shared, adapted, or commodified for tourism. Rather than obstructing development, sacred limits protect local cultural sovereignty and prevent over-commodification. The study contributes to participatory communication, gender communication, and sustainability studies by framing green transformation as a negotiated communicative and ethical process, not merely a technical or economic agenda.

Policy implications

The results have a number of implications for policymakers, tourism planners and development practitioners aiming at establishing sustainable wellness tourism models in culturally embedded societies.

To start with, governance frameworks need to go beyond simply using formulas on gender representation to measure outcomes. Policies must acknowledge and institutionalize the relational authority mechanisms that are already present operating at community level. This could involve structured consultative forums that specifically aim to harness women's experiential knowledge at the agenda-setting phase of processes, as opposed to treating them merely as implementers.

Secondly, there is a need to formulate tourism development policies that include cultural sacredness as a governance principle, rather than an informal constraint. Regulatory generational properties will permit communities to structure tiered knowledge disclosure across the spectrum between public cultural assets and sacralized, protected knowledge. This approach protects cultural sovereignty while allowing for responsible tourism innovation.

Third, gendered models of communication training that will respect local levels of communicative adherence should underpin capacity-building initiatives. Bear in mind that at the date of this publication, empowerment interventions proposing patterns of assumed assertiveness can break relational legitimacy structures. Policy design, instead, ought to bolster women's existing communicative strategies in ways that help them manage formally structured negotiations without undermining culturally sanctioned power.

Fourth, ethical assessment frameworks should be incorporated as evaluative measures of green transformation. While traditionally these might focus primarily on environmental sustainability, we encourage consideration of communicative legitimacy in the practice. Economic growth based on development projects that are not morally backed by the holders of cultural knowledge may succeed in the short term but will probably encounter societal resistance in the long run.

This research indicates that, for sustainable wellness tourism to be realized in the Lao PDR context, development paradigms must shift from an extractive logic of development towards dialogical models of partnership. Policymakers need to regard women cultural practitioners not just as symbolic representatives but also as epistemic stakeholders whose authoritative voices are essential for the authenticity and sustainability of the ecosystem of tourism.

Through foregrounding gendered ways of speaking and sacred cultural boundaries, this study provides a model for how to carry out green transformation ethically within bounded moral universes that can be applied to other culturally embedded tourism contexts across the Global South.

Limitations and future research

This study is limited by its focus on Madura, which, while analytically rich, represents a specific cultural and religious context. Future research could apply the proposed model to other regions in the Global South to examine its transferability and contextual adaptation.

Further studies may also explore longitudinal dynamics of participation to assess how communicative authority evolves as wellness tourism initiatives mature. Comparative research across different forms of special interest tourism could deepen understanding of how sacredness and gender intersect in diverse sustainability transitions.

Closing remark

By positioning communication at the center of green transformation, this study argues that sustainable wellness tourism is ultimately less about designing new products than about negotiating meaning, authority, and ethics. The lessons from Madura demonstrate that when women's communicative agency and cultural sacredness are recognized as foundational rather than peripheral, wellness tourism can become a pathway toward genuinely inclusive and culturally grounded sustainability.

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