

A Co-Generated Analysis of Thai Homestays: Overcoming SERVQUAL Deficiencies and Sustainability Barriers

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Post-COVID-19, international travelers have brand assurance expectations that often surpass the benchmark set by the *Thai Homestay Standard*, leaving some operators struggling to position with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thai homestays face significant challenges due to the lack of clear transitional pathways toward sustainability and alignment with international (ASEAN) standards for 'service quality' (SERVQUAL). This study critically examines these SERVQUAL deficiencies and analyzes Thai homestays in comparison with the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*, using frameworks derived from SERVQUAL and the SDGs. It identifies barriers within the standards and proposes actionable tools to bridge these gaps, enabling homestays to support sustainability objectives better. Adopting a reflective and co-creative methodological approach, the research engaged a rural community in Northeastern Thailand to co-generate insights towards homestay quality. Findings show community-identified barriers across three core SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibles, Responsiveness, and Assurance. However, external observations on SERVQUAL of homestays identified all five dimensions, including Reliability and Empathy, albeit against different items. The internal/external gaze juxtaposition suggests a precarious role of sustainability within Thai ethnic homestays. The study's novelty lies in its longitudinal fieldwork and applying a mutual gaze to embed SERVQUAL principles into homestay practices via a refined standards matrix. Findings highlight the pressing need for revisions to the Thai Homestay Standard, equipping hosts to transition effectively toward internationalization while achieving higher service quality and sustainability.

Keywords: Community-based Tourism (CBT); Ethnic Homestay; SERVQUAL; Service Quality; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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INTRODUCTION

As global borders fully opened after the COVID-19 pandemic, nations are rebuilding their tourism markets – with Thailand no exception, as its economy relies heavily on international tourism. The Thai government’s recovery plan, thus, includes revitalizing and transforming tourism through internationalization toward greater inclusivity, responsibility, digital integration, and ‘sustainability’ (Bangkok Post, 2022; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). Subsequently, lodging operators are encouraged to focus on premium travel experiences, catering services and products for high-value¹ and foreign² tourists, thereby delivering *local* to national SDGs. However, of critical note, within the lodging mix of rural Thailand is *homestay*, a model often framed upon ethnic community-based development through tourism (CBT) (Department of Tourism, 2022). Thus, CBT homestay, representing a cluster of village homes, is not solely about accommodation but also community development. Mapjabil et al. (2015) argue that the uniqueness of active interaction with the host family – sharing the house in a traditional ethnic village setting – can offer social, cultural, educational, and economic benefits. However, we argue that advancing SDGs through *local/ethnic* homestay necessitates more significant planning and education interventions at the CBT social-enterprise level.

The CBT approach to homestay tourism recognizes opportunities to disperse burdens more evenly than private operations, fostering awareness of what sustainable tourism can offer to enhance resilience among participating stakeholders (Tran Huu Thuy & Caldicott, 2022). This paper does not purport to present an exposition of resilience or sustainability in tourism, as others do (see Cheer & Lew, 2018; Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Sroyetch et al., 2018; Trupp et al., 2024; United Nations, 2018). However, we recognize that ‘cultural sensitivity’ (Viken et al., 2021) informs cultural expectations toward baseline ‘service quality’ in visitor accommodation choices. In the wake of COVID-19, such judgment must consider perspectives beyond *Thailand Homestay Standard* to reflect global and, not least, Western attitudes (Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024). Visitors’ different perceptions of acceptable standards have always provided critical challenges to hosts in meeting customers’ satisfaction (Wahid et al., 2017); thus, the implications of ‘standard’ enhancement on homestay sustainability in Thailand remain ambiguous.

Although the Thai Department of Tourism established the *Thai Homestay Standard* in 2012, compliance is voluntary, and registration is not mandatory. Homestay, particularly in rural areas, often fall short of the comfort levels that contemporary visitors expect from sustainable operations (Escolar-Jimenez, 2020). The problem, thus, remains with Thai homestays falling into national policy, practice, and international visitor perception voids specific to lodging standards. Without adequate policy and practice redress, homestay operators may not achieve international ‘service quality’ nor ‘sustainability’ in line with their *local* CBT or National government sustainability

1 High-value travelers will likely spend more, stay longer, and disperse beyond hotspots. ‘Value,’ thus, is not restricted to finances, as travelers can offer a community a social, cultural, or educational benefit (Haugen, 2023).

2 Foreign visitors expect ‘new-normal’ travel protocols that address safe and sustainable tourism principles (BBC, 2022).

ambitions. One cause of the ‘barriers’ stems from homestay remaining accredited under a decade-old guideline focused on authentic simplicity, whereas superseded COVID-19-induced lodging protocols influence new normal visitor perceptions of service quality and sustainability. Hence, addressing sustainability requirements is foundational to homestay meeting ‘international demand’ standards (Pinichchan et al., 2022; Thananusak & Suriyankietkaew, 2023).

Thus, the juxtaposition between homestay ‘supply standard’ and ‘demand expectation’ exposes operators to sustainability risk. Hence, uncovering the service quality dimensions that present as ‘barriers’ for Thai *local/ethnic* homestays to grow and develop their service delivery is essential. A common approach for examining service quality is SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al., 1988), which compares customer expectations before a service encounter and their perceptions of the service delivered. Even though homestay studies have touched upon service quality over several decades, the nexus between homestay delivery in Thailand, SERVQUAL, and SDGs is generally void. Additionally, practice variation between Thai (domestic) and ASEAN (international) homestays further highlights a standards’ misalignment around SERVQUAL that needs addressing.

Therefore, to understand SERVQUAL deficiencies in Thai *local/ethnic* homestay, we aim to identify the ‘barriers’ and propose potential solutions. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Analyze the current capacity of *local/ethnic homestay* to meet the *Thailand Homestay Standard*.
2. Explore community-identified ‘barriers’ to improve *local/ethnic homestay* standards, aligning them with the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*, and provide SERVQUAL reflections on such ‘barriers’.
3. Offer recommendations for supporting *local/ethnic* homestays in advancing SDGs, specifically through the application of SERVQUAL.

This study contributes to theory, policy, and practice, with recommendations for local and national homestay administration. First, unlike existing demand-side research (Franisal, 2020; Voon et al., 2017), we focus on the supply-side, co-generating community solutions for aligning Thai homestays with international standards for sustainability. Second, we provide evidence for amending national homestay accreditation criteria. Third, we propose mechanisms to enhance community resilience and raise household incomes, thus aligning with SDG No. 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities. Such alignments can make communities more competitive in present and future crisis recovery (Pinichchan et al., 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is abundant on studies about tourism sustainability (Scheyvens & Cheer, 2022; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020), the effects of COVID-19 on tourism (Lew et al., 2020; Pham Minh & Ngoc Mai, 2023), particularly on the lodging sector and health protocols (Ongsakul et al., 2022). However, less research focuses on homestay operations (Zulkefli et al., 2021), specifically homestay service quality and its nexus with SDGs. Notwithstanding, there are three distinct surfacing themes within the

literature: First, post-COVID-19 era tourists prioritize cleanliness, hygiene, and safety measures within their accommodation choices (Chalupa & Petricek, 2022). Second, foreign tourists often display different perceptions, expectations, tolerances, and willingness to pay (WTP) (Müller et al., 2020) concerning pandemic-driven protocols and global environmental sustainability (social, ecological and economic) practices. Foreigners may also be more critical of their homestay experience, especially the frequent ‘surprise’ (authentic) hygiene and comfort deficits (Escolar-Jimenez, 2020; Naumov et al., 2021). Third, homestay is often presented as an economic pillar for sustainable CBT development, albeit with little empirical evidence of how tourism, and specifically homestay, can contribute to reaching SDGs (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020). Such themes highlight the importance of homestays pursuing SERVQUAL, which has the potential to close the sustainability juxtaposition between traditional homestay delivery and contemporary customer expectations.

SERVQUAL

With recognized difficulties in defining and measuring service quality, no one measurement consensus emerges (Akhmedova et al., 2021; Wisniewski, 2001). However, the generally accepted theory of SERVQUAL, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985), conceptualizes perceived service quality as the degree and direction of the discrepancy between customers’ perceptions and expectations. It measures practices through five quality dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance (combining communication, credibility, security, competence, and courtesy), and Empathy (combining understanding and knowing the customer with accessibility and management) (Zeithaml et al., 1988). The founding authors argue SERVQUAL provides a functional skeleton through its product/service expectations/perceptions format. The frame, hence, can be adapted or supplemented to fit the characteristics or specific research needs of a particular destination, organization, or program (Business Bliss Consultants FZE, 2018). With noted relevance to our study, the SERVQUAL dimensions are not too dissimilar in content to the *ASEAN Homestay Standard* criteria. Thus, we deem the model sufficient for this study on ‘standards’ concerning Thailand’s homestay program, specifically the effects of accreditations on homestay sustainability. Economically, an elevated homestay standard may generate and justify premium pricing, increasing host revenues (Qiao et al., 2021). Phongthanapanich and Ouparamai (2021) note that the premiums are generally higher for standard certified than uncertified accommodations. A publicized standard can indicate intangible benefits or attributes to customers to signify status, quality assurance, and adherence to sustainability principles (Sutherland et al., 2021), hence increasing willingness to pay (WTP) (Müller et al., 2020). WTP represents the consumer’s evaluation of economic value over product/service utility (e.g., facilities and standards).

The Homestay Concept

Homestay has no global definition because it differs from country to country (Mapjabil et al., 2015). However, generally adopted ‘economic’ perspectives mainly refer to various independent-entrepreneurial or community-collective-based

lodging types involving guests staying with or near the hosts. Each style allows consumers to “live like a local” (Paulauskaite et al., 2017, p. 625), a theme with significant resemblance and original appeal to Western concepts of Bed and Breakfasts – local hospitality in a “homely atmosphere” (Grandidge, 2023). Similarly, Airbnb promotes the ideal of “living like a local” (Spinks, 2019). However, from a ‘socio-cultural development’ perspective, homestay within the ASEAN context is a ‘top-down’ program (Theerapappisit, 2012) of government origin framed upon community development through tourism. It is often classified as ethnic homestay, heritage homestay, or educational homestay (Mapjabil et al., 2015). Visitors are culturally immersed in the local way of life by “living with a host family and understanding community life on a personal level of comfort, rest, and relaxation with the simplicity of a ‘homely’ atmosphere” (Escolar-Jimenez, 2020, p. 13). Hence, the setting or ‘place’ (Muschter et al., 2021), inclusive of community-based tourism settings, becomes a third defining factor of homestay beyond hosts and guests (Munasinghe et al., 2022).

Notwithstanding, the nexus between homestay delivery in Thailand, SERVQUAL, and SDGs remains elusive. Tourism promotion agencies neglect the topic, and promotional materials pre- and post-pandemic do not address it. Hence, the perspectives of homestay sustainability through a lens of ‘service quality’ and ‘standards’ remain largely overlooked (Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024), with standards’ deficiencies often masked by claims of authenticity (Mura, 2015).

Homestay (or Similar Accommodations) and SDGs

Economic, socio-cultural, and environmental attributes are generally accepted as the trilogy pillars or the triple bottom line (TBL) of sustainability (Arowoshegbe et al., 2016; Caldicott et al., 2020). To retain the sustainability balance, all stakeholder roles must be identified with present decision-makers using natural resources wisely to ensure continued provision beyond current users to future generations (Brundtland, 1987). Subsequently, in 2015, following decisive shifts in global concern for the environment (climate change) and socio-cultural inequality (poverty), the United Nations World Tourism Organization adopted 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to guide the development agenda to 2030 (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). Initially, tourism was only explicitly mentioned in three SDGs: 8, 12, and 14.7. Herein, Trupp and Dolezal (2020) argue that its potential to support all SDGs is underutilized. However, other studies (Muschter et al., 2021; Trupp et al., 2024) also warn that while tourism brings benefits, it can also cause unintended socio-cultural and environmental impacts. In this regard, Müller et al. (2020) question the viability of the classical ‘top-down’ CBT model, suggesting that a ‘bottom-up’ approach is more suitable to promote sustainable tourism development.

Specifically referencing homestay tourism, Pasanchay and Schott (2021) question homestay’s actual capability to advance SDGs through a sustainable livelihoods perspective. These valid questions persist as tourism operations often contradict sustainability principles. Operators have long been condemned (Dahles, 2000; Hinch & Butler, 1996) for focusing solely on economic outcomes. This concern is particularly evident in least-developed countries where CBT is often heralded as a community panacea for broader societal deficiencies. Others further argue that CBT can present

‘growth without prosperity’ (Janjua et al., 2021), as ‘top-down’ agencies only provide lip service to social and environmental development while prioritizing economic imperatives. In challenging this lopsided system, the CBT-homestay model, as a component of the broader tourism and hospitality industry, encourages rural communities through the threefold sustainable community-based tourism goals of local environmental, socio-cultural, and economic prosperity (Reimer & Walter, 2013). Hence, developing a rural tourism village (CBT) is mostly inseparable from homestay as an accommodation supplier, and often the only local offer (Franisal, 2020). Müller et al. (2020) further caution that CBT homestay sites should grow organically within resource and capacity limits to remain sustainable.

Thai and ASEAN Homestay Standards and Certification

Homestay’s often-stated deficits are commonly described through lower-tier criteria like hygiene, sanitation, safety (see Sangpikul, 2023; Sroyetch et al., 2018) and authenticity (Rickly et al., 2023). However, despite the decisive pull factor of authenticity, the experiential barrier of poor sanitation and environmental degradation prompts Mura (2015) to caution that “authenticity-triggering experiences should not last for long periods as guests seem to be keen to compromise their comforts only for short periods” (p. 230). One could, therefore, extrapolate ‘comforts’ to encompass elements of all five SERVQUAL dimensions in various manifestations. In particular, Mura (2015) notes that city guests do not want to “replace their comfortable lives with less comfortable ‘authentic’ experiences” (p. 230). Despite the 2012 formation of the Thai homestay standard, many *local/ethnic* operators may still not reach basic hospitality standards, and not least aspire to the National government’s ambition for post-COVID-19 tourism recovery through attracting ‘high-value’ (Haugen, 2023) and international visitors. Notwithstanding, the *Thailand Homestay Standard* certifies 195 operations (Department of Tourism, 2022), inviting consideration of a suite of 10 items, whilst the *ASEAN Homestay Standard* is divided into nine criteria (Table 1). Each item within the suite is assigned a weighting of importance toward the final accreditation outcome (Singh et al., 2018).

Thailand Homestay Standard	Weight (%)	ASEAN Homestay Standard	Weight (%)
1) Host	10	1) Host	5
2) Accommodation	10	2) Accommodation	10
3) Tour program/ Activities	10	3) Activities	20
4) Management	20	4) Management	15
5) Public Relations	5	5) Marketing and promotion	10
6) Value creation and value of products	5	6) Hygiene and cleanliness	15
7) Safety	10	7) Safety and security	10
8) Natural resources and environments	10	8) Location	5
9) Culture	10	9) Sustainability principles	10
10) Food	10		

Table 1. Comparative criteria between the Thai and ASEAN Homestay Standard (adapted from (Singh et al., 2018))

Superficially, the *ASEAN Homestay Standard* appears to have one less criterion than the *Thai Homestay Standard*. However, a closer analysis reveals other differences, notably ASEAN's higher weighting towards 'hygiene and cleanliness' and 'sustainability'. These indicators closely align with the post-COVID-19 'new-normal' lodging protocols (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2022) and, thus, United Nations (2018) sustainable development goals (SDGs). In contrast, the *Thai Homestay Standard* lacks specific SDG directives.

Without specific regulations governing homestay businesses in Thailand, they often fall short of the standards set by the domestic Hotel Act B.E. 2547 (Lamaiwong, 2014), and international accommodations like Bed and Breakfasts and Airbnb. This lack of legal framework hampers the ability to meet the expectations of high-value visitors who demand clear communication of standards, a robust digital presence, and visible sustainable practices throughout all operations (Lopez Escobar, 2022). Consequently, if the *local/ethnic* homestay product sold to an international audience is not on par with contemporary consumer expectations, the sector will struggle to maintain its brand. Loss of reputation (Janjua et al., 2021) may fail hosts pursuing community SDGs and undermine the Thai government's post-pandemic revival strategy.

ASEAN Homestay Standard – A 'Barriers to Entry' Snapshot

The *ASEAN Homestay Standard* was introduced in 2016 to provide a base-level understanding of homestay, potentially establishing a minimum standard across all ASEAN member states, Thailand inclusive. The *Standard* also facilitates a coordinated approach to the SDGs (United Nations, 2018). It encourages partnerships with relevant stakeholders, creating a positive environment while revitalizing the rural economy and reducing poverty (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). However, despite the successes of many homestay programs, several ASEAN nations beyond Thailand (i.e., Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines) continue to experience challenges with the notion of SERVQUAL and SDGs regarding the internationalization of lodging standards (Adie et al., 2022; Mahato et al., 2021; Zulkefli et al., 2021).

Though the brief purview of the above authors, the ASEAN snapshot exposes a reoccurring lack of 'product and service quality' associated with homestay. As Bhat (2012, p. 1) reminds us, "the complexity and globalization of today's competitive business environments have made quality one of the most important sources of competitive advantage for the tourism [business/enterprise] destination". Homestay in Thailand often face the same common problems as their ASEAN neighbors - "low product quality and service failure" (Saraithong & Chanchaoenchai, 2011, p. 112). The ASEAN Secretariat (2016, p. 1) indicates that "homestay program success depends heavily on a deep understanding of the basic needs of a quality visitor experience". Bhat (2012) further cautions that merely maintaining a business is no longer sufficient; continuous improvement is necessary to achieve a sustainable future. Subsequently, accumulative SEVQUAL deficiencies lead to homestay vulnerability – it remains on a sustainability precipice (Phunnarong, 2021), deserving an immediate response.

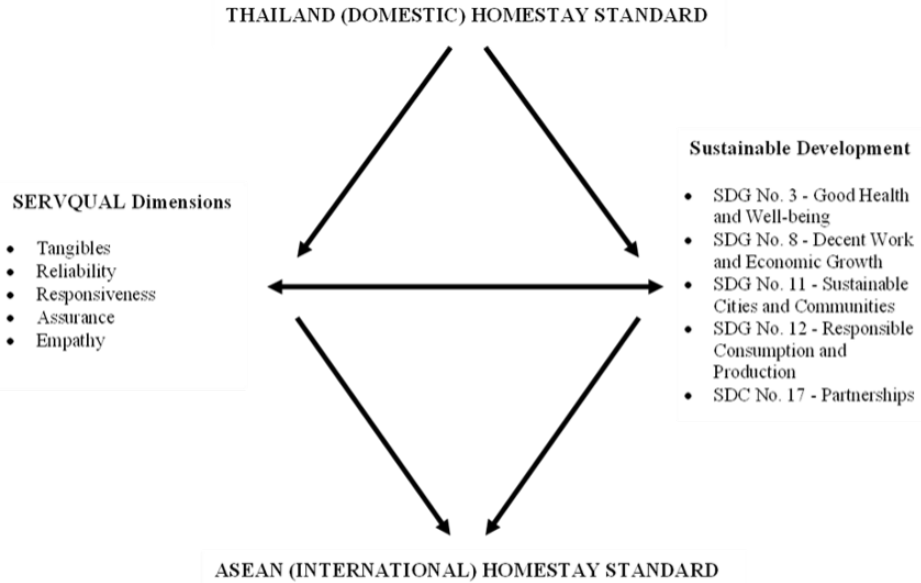


Figure 1. Conceptual framework – transitional pathways for homestay sustainability (figure by authors).

METHODOLOGY

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 guides this study towards homestay internationalization, creating transitioning pathways for Thai *local/ethnic* homestay to embrace SERVQUAL and SDGs on their journey toward sustainability and the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*.

Research Setting

First, we introduce the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* in Northeastern Thailand to examine the ‘real-life’ *local/ethnic* tourism-enterprise experiences before reporting fieldwork reflections from their long-term CBT initiative, including homestay. Pho Tak Village (pop. 4480) is the largest in Pho Tak District, Nong Khai Province (Department of Provincial Administration, 2022). The province is along the Mekong River, partially forming Thailand’s northern border with Lao PDR. As a strategic trade and tourism link between Laos and Thailand, Nong Khai City will soon welcome the Sino-China high-speed railway, linking Beijing to Singapore through Lao and Thailand (Cai, 2017; Scott, 2022). Pho Tak’s cultural heritage is of Puan ethnicity originating from Muang Puan, Chiang Kwang Province, Lao PDR, with the migrant group fostering ambitions to preserve their ethnic culture, costume, and dance through tourism. Although villager occupations primarily relate to rice farming and small-crop horticulture, with some retired from education—teaching, and administration, they wish their culture to be known beyond the local to international markets. Hence, they initiated the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* in 2019 to fulfil the development of a One Town One Product (OTOP) Program. They received the *Thai Homestay Standard* in January 2021 with a

six-homestay cooperative under a CBT Thai Puan Cultural Club umbrella. Further, the Club invited a partnership with Khon Kaen University to support their management committee through a further CBT initiative: *Tourism Security in the COVID-19 Era - 'Raising Household Incomes.'* The objective was to enhance their ethnic homestay operation to meet international ASEAN standards aligning with the United Nations' sustainable development goals: SDG No. 3 - Good Health and Wellbeing; SDG No. 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG No. 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities; SDG No. 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production; and SDG No. 17 - Partnerships. Understanding the gravity of such ambition, the university research team acknowledged the need and planned for long-term engagement with this community.

Research Approach

The longitudinal qualitative design (Figure 2) allowed the researchers to engage the same participants over time through multiple data collection points to understand how different actors in Thai homestay evolve. Through 'reflective practice' (Visser, 2010), we endeavored to comprehend and compare accumulative knowledge through continuous CBT engagement. We conducted four qualitative data collection and reflection stages from 2021 to 2022, recurring for 2023 to 2024. The four-stage cycle fosters reflective activity.

We employed co-generation of data (Nowotny et al., 2003; Russ et al., 2024) through participatory inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997) involving all nine Pho Tak Thai Puan CBT management committee members profiled through Table 2, including homestay hosts and our team of four researchers. All four authors (Thai and foreign) engaged in participant/practice observations and reporting of community engagements through eight field visits to understand the real-life context (Fossey et al., 2002). We conducted three workshops, two semi-structured focus groups, multiple interviews with literature-informed protocols/guidelines, and attended the National

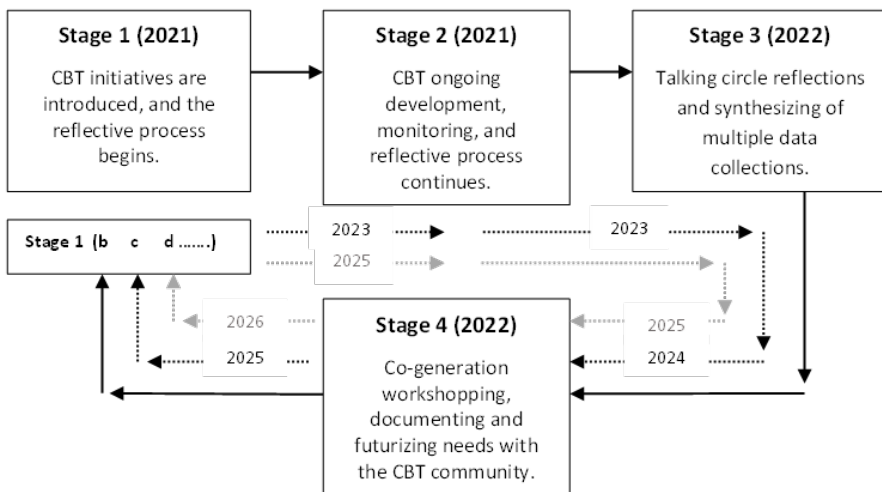


Figure 2. Longitudinal, participatory, and reflective research design (Figure by authors).

Participants	Gender	Age (years)	Function/role/position in CBT community
P1	Male	63	CBT Program Chairperson
P2	Female	61	CBT Program PR Officer
P3	Female	65	Homestay Operator & Group Chairperson
P4	Female	62	Homestay Operator
P5	Female	58	Homestay Operator
P6	Female	58	Homestay Operator
P7	Female	70	Homestay Operator
P8	Female	58	Homestay Operator
P9	Male	51	CBT Arts and Crafts Producer
P10	Female	40	CBT Arts and Crafts Producer

Table 2. Profile of focus-group participants (compiled by authors)

Thai Paun Cultural Festival. All engagements were open and transparent, with the community participants' full knowledge and signed consent. Voluntary attendance records were recorded (signed) at every engagement. Notably, the Thai Puan Cultural Club philosophy of 'sharing for their common ethnic prosperity' was exhibited through the participants' eagerness to volunteer in the co-generation processes.

Notably, the community/researcher partnership has been extended to 2026, which is significant as SDG 17 (Partnerships) stresses the need for comprehensive, ongoing processes and reflective monitoring for effectively implementing sustainable development (Adie et al., 2022). Our methodology aligns with several authors (Rangsunnoen et al., 2024; Tran Huu Thuy & Caldicott, 2022) who argue that CBT enterprises must foster a culture of continuous learning. Hardy et al. (2022) criticize methods that fail "to prioritize longitudinal resident involvement" (p. 2).

Data Collection

Stage 1 (see Figure 2) brings the partners together, allowing for the introduction and discussion of initiatives, goals, opportunities, and barriers to their CBT (homestay) enterprise. Stage 2 supports observations and interviews around current practices. Stage 3 is the chance to reflect and synthesize the multiple data collections. Stage 4 supports shared learnings, identifies enduring issues, and plots action paths for further practice improvement and potential research needs. Recognizing the capacity constraints of a small rural village, the research team understood that desirable outcomes are not always achievable within a single cycle, hence the need for recurrent cycle(s). Thus, our reflection-in-action approach explored initiatives with the CBT management committee members (Table 2) to build strengths from challenges over time (Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2009; Missingham, 2017).

Data Co-generation

The study's iterative processes, reflections, and longitudinal nature allowed us to look beyond snapshot (hot) problems to consider long-term sustainability against the

objectives of the CBT initiative. Reflective synthesizing of community perspectives (internal gaze) and researcher observations (external gaze) were documented for ease of workshopping with, rather than presenting to, the participants. To de-Westernize the standard workshop format, we chose sharing-circles (Drawson et al., 2017) to operationalize the data/knowledge co-generation theme (Bandola-Gill et al., 2023). Such public ‘talking/sharing-circle’ style knowledge generation facilitated immediate member checking and is considered an acceptable approach to Indigenous/tribal research (Drawson et al., 2017; Lavallée, 2009). Herein, acts of sharing all aspects of the individual – “heart, mind, body, and spirit” - as cultural norms can rebalance power dynamics between participants and between participants and researchers (Lavallée, 2009, p. 29). Sharing, checking, reflecting, and resharing directly with the communities of interest achieved group consensus, thematically consolidating outputs against the five SERVQUAL dimensions. The open-process thematic analysis strengthened reliability, validity, and generalizability allowing the closure of the first research-in-action cycle (Cohen et al., 2017; McNiff & Whitehead, 2016).

FINDINGS

Local Tourism Structure and SWOT

The *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* can accommodate 60-120 visitors. During high-demand seasons (e.g., the Cultural Festival), the members solicit ‘open homes’ through other village residents who are not necessarily permanently engaged in the ‘accredited’ homestay program. Most visitors are educational tourists as employees of governmental organizations (officers, retirees, etc.) and, thus, not truly representative of genuine ‘free and independent tourists’ (FITs) seeking an authentic Thai village experience. Some authors label this as a fake homestay experience (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). Subsequently, the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* seeks to attract broader target markets, particularly youth and foreigners, recognizing that some hosts may need to improve their Tangible (accommodation) and Reliability (communications) standards to be attractive. Despite the management committee’s overall enthusiasm to achieve the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*, some individuals had mixed views regarding their capacity to develop beyond the *Thailand Homestay Standard*. Such insecurity about raising standards exposes present-day homestay delivery challenges. Notwithstanding any shortcomings stated or observed, it is essential to applaud Pho Tak Homestay’s current capacity and acknowledge the strengths of the Thai Puan Club management, not least its promotion of inclusivity, notably demonstrated through the majority female committee. Notwithstanding, we heed the members’ concerns, and, critically, if left unchecked, they pose significant barriers to group unity and their likelihood of meeting the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*. To document internal and external capacities, Table 3 displays their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT).

The SWOT analysis exposes several criteria that need further consideration from the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay*. Specifically with the hosts (growing confidence in communication with foreigners), location (developing convenient access), activities (creating memorable experiences), marketing and promotion (providing up-to-date

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outward-facing cooperation among members • Unique culture (food, language & custom) • Service-minded hosts • Safety (police and health infrastructures) • Foreign language skills by some members • (Mandarin, Korean & English) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inward-facing divisions over standards' achievement • Lacking destination marketing and promotion • Tourism and hospitality supply-chain knowledge • Lacking public transport access • Limited foreign language skills by most members • Lack of youth involvement (sustainability)
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support from external organizations • Sino-China speed train • The Provincial tourism policy promotes CBT • Wellness tourism package development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External support dependency • Turnstile of governmental tourism officers • Competition from neighbouring villages

Table 3. SWOT analysis of Thai Puan Pho Tak Homestay (compiled by authors)

information and more responsive direct marketing), and sustainability principles (relying less on external organizations and planning for succession).

Local Views Towards SERVQUAL Dimensions (Internal Gaze)

Through continuous engagement with the participants and listening to their concerns, narratives mainly pertained to three SERVQUAL dimensions: Tangibles (activities), Responsiveness (communications, marketing), and Assurance (sustainability principles). Villagers expressed mindfulness of their inadequate knowledge of tourism and hospitality - theory and practice. Additionally, they lamented their location's lack of immediate natural attractions and feared for their succession (sustainability). These aspects, each as a significant barrier to meeting the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*, are unpacked against the five SERVQUAL dimensions.

Tangibles (Activities)

During a focus group, several participants agreed they needed to develop a more dynamic tour package. This would help deliver memorable experiences for tourists, as a participant voiced, summarizing several opinions:

We still need to create new tourism activities that are more exciting and make them enjoyable and memorable for tourists. (P5)

Other participants voiced the recommendations they received from external stakeholders, such as tour companies:

Recently, a tour company told us to capitalize on our location by bringing in international tourists coming through the Sino-China speed train [China-Singapore route via Lao and Thailand] to stay at our homestay. (P1)

While participants identify the need to develop new activities and tourism services, they also are aware of and highlight their strengths, including their unique cultural capital:

I think we are good at wellness tourism as we have herbs and massage here. We always provide guests with our cultural cuisine. (P2)

Overall, the participants agreed that their existing tour program narrowly focuses on cultural activities due to the unavailability of natural attractions. They acknowledge the need for more vibrant tour itineraries with English language interpretations to cater to new tourism demands. Inviting new tourist markets, however, brings further implications regarding Responsiveness.

Responsiveness (Marketing)

Some villagers acknowledged the benefits of using social media such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook for marketing. However, they lamented their inability to harness these free and influential tools, specifically in English language formats. Representing the committee, one participant voiced:

The marketing efforts, mainly social media, that we do now are not yet successful. This is because we have insufficient skills to make it more effective. (P 7)

The results reveal that the current marketing system needs some improvement and updates. It is ineffective in its messaging, mainly due to the limited language skills of the elders in charge. Subsequently, they desire more youth, specifically those with language skills, to join marketing activities, thereby fostering greater Assurance.

Assurance (Sustainability Principles)

The participants identified two main concerns regarding the sustainability of their ethnic tourism and program in Pho Tak. First, for homestays, there is a high dependency on external organizational assistance, and second, the village youth need to be more actively engaged. One participant's voice represents the committee's general expression concerning external assistance:

We experience extensive bureaucratic processes of the public organizations, high turnover of tourism department staff³, and a lack of continuous engagement, making the support quite fragmented. (P1)

3 A personal communication (14 April 2022) with a provincial officer confirmed that a current key staff member was moving to a new position outside the province.

Another participant critically addressed the questionable role of external organizations for the sustainable development of the village:

Some organizations bring aid to our village but always look for the return benefits. If they evaluate that the benefits aren't good enough or not worth it, they won't return. Some organizations just come and go - not continuous support. In the end, we do need to help ourselves.

Regarding the second concern of under-participation by the village youth, several participants expressed worry about younger generations' lack of stepping up to sustain the village's fledgling *local/ethnic* tourism and homestay program. The committee's desire for youth involvement in the program, such as for marketing, promotion, and encouragement of a *local* English-speaking tourist guide, has not come to fruition, as one participant states:

I would like to see our promotional site continually updated. So, it would be better to have the younger generation in charge of our marketing system. (P2)

Although some younger individuals engage meaningfully through dance performances within the Pho Tak CBT Cultural Club program, the management committee consists mostly of senior females over sixty years old (see Table 2). In Thai culture, seniority is highly regarded in decision-making and power influence within a community (Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024), hence often a 'barrier' to youth participation. As such, a participant expressed:

The youth don't want to engage much as some of us were their teachers in the past - I think they are kind of scared of us. But we need their help in developing the marketing system. As we get older, we tire easily. Unlike youth, they have more energy, creativity, and talents in many ways. (P2)

As several authors allude (Ditta-Apichai et al., 2024; Tran Huu Thuy & Caldicott, 2022), such (under)resourcing can severely impact a community's future development, resilience, and sustainability. Notwithstanding the valued participant voices (internal gaze) from the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* and their genuine concern, several external gaze aspects deserve attention.

Researchers' Observations to Homestay Capacity (External Gaze)

In addition to general CBT homestay observations and the SWOT, the researchers participated in a two-day, one-night familiarization as a 'dummy' tour group (demand-side perspective). Several authors (Fossey et al., 2002; Thananusak & Suriyankietkaew, 2023) advocate such engagement to strengthen understanding of the real-life context. Consequently, our researcher reflections focused on essential accommodation and service development aspects relevant to all nine *ASEAN Homestay Standard* criteria. Specifically, we observed the homestay hosts in their homes overnight to determine if they adhered to *Thai* and *ASEAN Homestay Standard*

criteria. Table 4 exhibits the collected data and its treatment itemized against the nine ASEAN homestay standard criteria.

ASEAN Homestay Standard Criteria	Indicators	Position of Thai Puan Pho Tak Homestay
1. Host	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome • Friendliness • Engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosts are friendly, genuine, and enthusiastic about providing guest service • Communications are mostly limited to Thai language
2. Accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • House (general) • Bedroom • Bathroom • Toilet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all houses reflect the traditional architectural style • No air-conditioners but pedestal fans in most bedrooms • Room amenities are basic, often without a bed lamp, working table, privacy curtain/blind, wardrobe/cloth hangers • Mostly communal bathrooms have water heaters, but they don't always work or have very low pressure • Some over-basin taps are not working • A mix of squat and flush toilets in various conditions.
3. Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Village-based activities • Surrounding activities • Authenticity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of immediate natural attractions with tour packages based on cultural activities (Temples & Puan ethnicity) • Engaging in traditional performances, ceremonies, and food • <u>Note</u>: Nearby areas have natural attractions/activities, i.e., dam, river, waterfall, and floating (raft) dining
4. Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Organization • Database • Capacity- building • Collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of tourism knowledge and leadership skills • Social enterprise not practising within a 'Quality Management' paradigm • No database of past tourists • Villagers active in capacity building • Some collaboration with public and private organizations
5. Marketing and promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion and web marketing • Partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inefficient marketing and promotion • Facebook page plus indirect marketing via external pages • Limited local tour operators promote the tour packages
6. Hygiene and cleanliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • House (bedroom, bathroom & kitchen/ food prep area) • Surroundings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cleanliness of some houses needs to be improved, e.g., first appearances, maintenance, spider webs, dust, & mold • The surrounding compound, in some instances, is untidy, e.g., overgrown & rubbish scatterings • Food preparation areas sometimes poorly kept and lack fly/dust covers to protect food preparations and utensils
7. Safety and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety and emergency procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The village has an adequate hospital, police, and local municipal office presence • No manual or SOPs regarding safety and security measures
8. Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of public transport limits visitor numbers
9. Sustainability principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic • Socio-cultural • Environmental 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homestay generates additional village income • Low youth involvement and high external dependency • Fostering Thai Puan culture through tourism activities preserves culture and raises local pride • Low-level environmental protection measures

Table 4. Summary of Thai Puan Pho Tak Homestay's capacity and position against the ASEAN Homestay Standard. (compiled by authors)

Co-generated Knowledge - Barriers to Improving Local/Ethnic Homestay Standards (Mutual Gaze)

The SWOT analysis (Table 3) and researcher reflections (Table 4), supported by photographic evidence (Figures 3), were workshopped with the CBT/homestay participants through the talking circles. This gave rise to the additional opportunity to explore SERVQUAL dimensions as growth tools for sustainability and international standards – thus continuing data co-generation through a mutual gaze (Maoz, 2006; Sroypetch, 2016) – homestay hosts and researchers (as guests).

Subsequent consensus discussions centered on consolidating the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* position against the nine *ASEAN Homestay Standard* criteria. Through collaborative engagement, all five SERVQUAL dimensions – Tangibles, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, and Responsiveness – were identified as critical areas, expanding the community-led ‘barriers’ perspectives. As unpacked below, the specific content of this mutual gaze extends rather than repeats the specific internal/external gaze items reported above. Therefore, while the SERVQUAL dimensions provide the common framework for our presentation, the individual ‘need’ (bracketed items) may differ from items raised earlier.

Tangibles (Accommodation)

Thai homestay operations are collectivist, promoted, and managed as a single product entity. Despite the multiple participating hosts, *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay*



Figure 3. Homestay bedroom (top left), homestay bathroom (top right), homestay kitchen (bottom left), and homestay public space (bottom right). (all photos by Supattra Sroypetch)

is a sub-program of a broader community-based tourism (CBT) initiative. Though outwardly presenting as a unified and authentic product, the *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay's* current form and delivery do not sufficiently reflect contemporary international tourism accommodation demand—certainly not matched with the Thai National COVID-19 tourism recovery strategy promoting high-value tourism, and subsequently, it is not resilient to future shocks.

Reliability (Host Language Constraint)

Some *locals* exhibit various proficiency with foreign languages such as English, Mandarin, and Korean. However, in host communication between them and the guest, they admit a lack of confidence. As expressed by a participant – “Our [hosting] inability to interact meaningfully with the guests hinders the immediate homestay experience”. (P8) However, broader communication strategies highlight a Responsiveness deficit as discussed in a later section. Thus, an essential factor in improving *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay's* sustainability is improving the service quality mindset, which extends to communicating confidently in foreign languages (Nomnian et al., 2020). The village management committee has acknowledged language development as an area for improvement and is anticipating necessary adjustments, primarily through greater bilingual youth involvement. The homestay hosts openly desire to grow their household incomes by adapting their service to meet the demands of both the new-normal and foreign markets. Thus, they contribute significantly to their success in aligning with SDG No. 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth.

Assurance (Hygiene and Cleanliness)

The homestay operators must improve primary international standards, not least in bedrooms (beds off the floor), bathrooms (hygiene and functioning amenity), kitchens (prevent vermin intrusion), and public spaces (safety and cleanliness) (see Figure 3). Through the talking circles, the homestay participants suggested continuing the now-well-established international COVID-19 safety protocols introduced and regulated by the government Safety and Health Administration (SHA) program (TAT News, 2021). They agree that such collective aspiration for change is a positive way to generate ‘confidence’ among tourists concerned about their choice of homestay as an alternate lodging mode and hosts concerned about furthering their sustainable succession. Such compliance aligns with Mohamed and Aminudin (2016), who stress that the “issue of successors, or the next generation, needs to be addressed” (p. 1076).

Empathy (Management Practices)

The management criteria within the *ASEAN Homestay Standard* concern five sub-aspects: leadership, collaboration, organization, database, capacity building, and training. Homestay members in Pho Tak identified their struggles through attempts to set up basic systematic operations such as a members database, a visitors database, and standard operating procedures (SOPs) or guideline manuals to support their operations. Acknowledging these critical challenges, the research team workshopped

business excellence principles through the management committee, co-developing a business performance excellence manual to address their lack of specific tourism leadership and entrepreneurial skills (see Rangsunnoen et al., 2024).

Responsiveness (Online Presence)

To avoid disrespecting the community's expressed wish for a more significant marketing effort, the research team facilitated a further specialized workshop to explore targeted marketing and promotions issues with the committee. By engaging them in the discussion, they grew in awareness of the 'new normal' consumer demands, and hence, acceptance for specific marketing to take a lower priority until their homestay enterprise – accommodation, pricing, quality, amenities, service - matches SERVQUAL dimensions. Product supply, including responsive and secure online access, must meet 'new-normal' market trends⁴.

To summarize the internal, external, and mutual gaze perspectives, the evidence exposes elements of all five SERVQUAL dimensions as central areas considered 'barriers' for *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* to meet *ASEAN Homestay Standards*. Subsequently, our discussion ventures beyond our original thesis of questioning which SERVQUAL attributes are deficient in Thai *local/ethnic* homestays and their causes to further reflect on *why* some dimensions are more problematic.

DISCUSSION

This study purposely juxtaposes a community-based *local/ethnic* homestay program in Thailand against the *ASEAN Homestay Standard*, exposing 'barriers' for Thai operators in satisfying contemporary consumer SERVQUAL demand. In unison with Escolar-Jimenez (2020), we argue that authenticity as context can no longer masquerade ahead of homestay conformance to international 'new-world' standards. The ultimate goal for Thailand in building back from COVID-19 and developing resilience against future crises is to promote a tourism model where "everyone involved 'eats well', 'fits well', and 'provides well', resulting in tourism sustainability" (BBC, 2022, p. 6), thereby mirroring the ethos of 'leave no one behind', the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). Following such approaches, as prescribed through the Thai National pandemic recovery strategy (National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023), it remains incumbent on the tourism industry to drive change. As Thailand's key service sector, it must transform into a "quality-focused and sustainable force by promoting quality, value, and sustainability over quantity" (p. 8). Such a change can create added value for services that align with contemporary market directions and trends. Specifically, all five SERVQUAL dimensions require greater attention at the *Thailand Homestay Standard* level for the Government's tourism recovery strategy to have contributable meaning in rural areas.

4 Notwithstanding the broader recommendation to de-prioritize marketing per se, the research team continues to facilitate student engagement with the community to develop a secure homestay booking, payment, and receipting interface that would link through the Pho Tak Village CBT Facebook page and the Thai Ministry for Tourism and Sport.

Researcher Reflection on Why Certain SERVQUAL Dimensions Present as Problematic

Thailand is not unique in its continuing challenges with SERVQUAL and SDGs regarding lodging standard internationalization. Many of their ASEAN neighbors experience the same common problems of low product quality and service failure (Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Saraithong & Chanchaoenchai, 2011; Trupp et al., 2024).

Our long-term engagement within the Pho Tak Thai Puan village exposed cultural influences on SERVQUAL delivery. Thai culture, specifically less educated rural/ethnic culture, often adopts the *Sabai Sabai* (take it easy) approach to life and hence shows indifference to (does not recognize) the many tangible aspects that an educated society may theorize as failed SERVQUAL attributes. Further, the peaceful nature of the Thai people, greatly influenced by the precepts of Buddhism, guides them in steering away from conflict. Hence, offering a sweet smile with a gesture of apology for any customer-expressed shortfall will often allow Thais to retreat without losing face, but sadly, and frequently, with no remedial action.

Specific examples were raised directly through the participant comments reported earlier, which included a common thread of language and ICT deficiencies. As reinforced by Nomnian et al. (2020), language and tourism are intrinsically interconnected in cross-cultural exchanges, often conducted in the hegemonic *lingua franca* English vocabulary. Janjua et al. (2021) contend that the benefits of ITC competency in tourism are indispensable, with Nomnian et al. (2020) furthering the importance of multi-lingual competency to enhance back-of-house communications development (data-based), customer-facing presence (web-based), and personal communications skills (listening and speaking).

Implications for Local/Ethnic Homestay 'Standard' Development

With the study's hindsight, we provide recommendations against the five SERVQUAL dimensions to assist *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* in reversing 'systemic barriers' to their advancement.

Tangibles (Homes and Tours)

We recommend that homestay introduce a grading (multi-tiered) system where existing and 'new' houses can conceptually position along an 'accommodation standard' spectrum. Such grading offers scope for individuals as 'micro-entrepreneurs' (Rangsunnoen et al., 2024; Trupp et al., 2024) to envision their home within a two-axis matrix (Figure 4). The horizontal axis relates to facilities and services standards - minimalist through premium. The vertical axis refers to price points - low through high. Naturally, the high price will correspond to premier standards.

Conceptually, *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* currently presents within 'A' (Figure 4) a narrow 'existing product constraint' bandwidth - virtually along the horizontal axis. The facilities/standards' range sits toward the lower end even though tariffs (prices) edge into the upper field with the product/service offering not always commensurate with the price. Much homestay pricing is arbitrarily and uniformly set 'top-down' through the CBT cooperative internal system rather than 'bottom-up' by individual hosts premised on external market service delivery drivers (Müller et al., 2020; Theerapappisit, 2012).

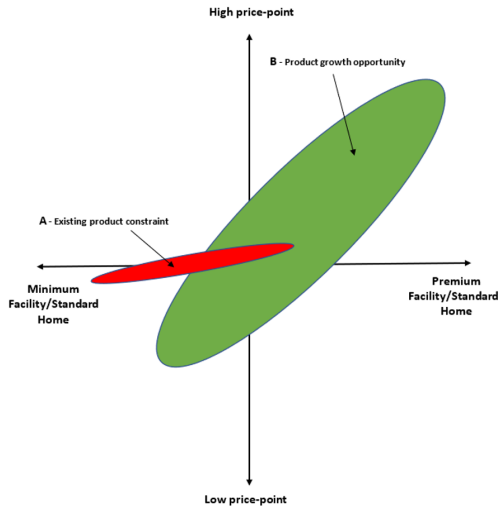


Figure 4. Conceptual homestay growth matrix informed by SERQUAL principles (Figure by authors).

Thus, operators must apply social-entrepreneurial competence within their micro-businesses and collectivist CBT programs. Such a mindset can serve individual- and community-based tourism interests and model sustainable development outcomes (Qu et al., 2022; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024). By repositioning disparate operators across the matrix region marked “B” (Figure 4), motivated individual homestays would diversify and improve their accommodation and service standards accordingly. Offers toward the premium-service/high-price quadrant can more aptly position their homestay to realize local/community sustainable ‘product growth opportunity’ while delivering on the national government’s pandemic recovery strategy through high-value tourism. Regarding tours, *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* should consider collaborations with neighboring Thai Puan villages to expand their offer, delivering greater diversity through ‘special’ tourist experiences. Such specialties’ can extend to health and wellness as tourists in this COVID-19 longtail era continue to prioritize safety, service quality, and sustainability in their tourism purchases (Hekmat et al., 2021).

Reliability (Host Communications)

Language development for *Homestay* is critical. For example, the Sino-China speed train, now terminating in Vientiane (Lao PDR), will imminently continue into Thailand. This central *One Belt And Road* enabling infrastructure (Cai, 2017; Scott, 2022) will come closer to Pho Tak Village, providing opportunities for their *Puan Homestay* to capture a share of new international audiences. To capitalize, thus, ‘language’ development (Nomnian et al., 2020) in Chinese and English is something *Pho Tak Homestay* can pursue as the medium of marketing, conversation, and tour guiding, potentially through further youth involvement.

Responsiveness (Marketing and Promotion)

Our research recommends prioritizing ‘accommodation, activity, and service development’ processes with embedded ‘quality’ and ‘sustainability’ dimensions to enhance the product suite making it more marketable through electronic media and external agents.

Assurance (Sustainability)

Homestay and CBT programs in Thailand, currently dominated by the elderly, must take more proactive measures to engage the youth. Without planned succession (Mohamed & Aminudin, 2016), sustainability gaps widen, not least in culture and economics. Hence, homestay businesses can falter (Samsudin & Maliki, 2015). Accordingly, we advocate for initiatives like ethnic Puan and cultural tourism awareness programs in local schools and enhanced tourism management strategies in the CBT to improve succession and profitability in the homestay business, thus appealing to and incentivizing the younger generation.

Additionally, external aid must produce internal skills, weaning reliance on outside parties. To become a sustainable social enterprise with a solid future, *Pho Tak Thai Puan Homestay* must work harder on its sustainability and resilience strategy (Trupp et al., 2024), and inner empowerment (Talmage et al., 2022). Subsequently, all homestay operators (not least Thai) must receive training to understand the importance of incorporating SERVQUAL and SDGs into all management and operations to shape experiences differently and target evolving ‘new-normal’ markets anticipating future crises.

Thus, we recommend inviting a ‘youth representative’ to the management committee to demonstrate genuine inclusion and empowerment. Connecting young and old in the committee facilitates two-way skill development, knowledge transfer, and sustainable succession while dissipating power imbalances.

Empathy (Management Practices)

In following the above, a lack of leadership skills for tourism and management systems surfaces as a Pho Tak challenge – [dis]encouraging equity with empowerment. The SDGs offer new hope for greater ‘inclusion’ and ‘empowerment’ of marginalized communities (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022). Many communities often experience internal marginalization (intentionally or not) due to hierarchical power relations. Subsequently, the Pho Tak Thai Puan Club management committee and homestay operators should encourage and support broader community engagement incorporating various ages and statuses, specifically youth.

Summarizing, our reflections offer tri-level perspectives for immediate and future homestay providers, other stakeholders (including local administrators), and national policymakers. Though some hosts may choose to remain with bare minimum standards, our novel findings reveal evidence suggesting others may aspire for accelerated growth by delivering higher standards and moving from A to B on the conceptual homestay growth matrix. Hence, we further the calls of others (Janjua et al., 2021;

Nomnian et al., 2020), who found that essential topics like language and ICT proficiency, homestay branding, operator training, and advocacy for sustainability should be addressed immediately.

We propose that savvy *local/ethnic* homestay operators receptive to the higher standards can present premium products and services to earn greater economic rewards, confirming previous studies (see Kimaiga et al., 2018; Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Qiao et al., 2021) which suggests correlations between CBT and SDGs can improve community welfare (SDG: 3). Subsequently, this study's significance is its demonstration of essential differences in 'service quality' perspectives and thus acceptable 'standards' as viewed through a tri-focal—internal, external, mutual—lens. Further, the conceptual homestay growth matrix provides a practical and theoretical building block for a high-value homestay sector wishing to exhibit resilience and inclusive growth, steering it on a preparatory and sustainable path to responsible production and consumption (SDG: 12) and the 'next' new normal.

CONCLUSION

Our study partially contributes to literary and practice voids. Its novel contribution is the co-generated advancement of 'homestay' knowledge developed through a mutual lens to address SERVQUAL in homestay across all five dimensions as foundational sustainability tools. While such findings further previous studies, including the supply lens (Nomnian et al., 2020; Priatmoko et al., 2021) and the demand lens (Franisal, 2020; Voon et al., 2017), it theoretically advances the mutual lens perspective (Maoz, 2006; Sroyetch, 2016). Such an approach accords with Pasanchay and Schott (2021), who advocate that a holistic livelihood perspective is required for CBT homestays to advance the SDGs. Hence, the study can benchmark further homestay research in other developing countries aspiring to better serve the SDGs.

Notwithstanding the rich empirical evidence, the single destination case study has its limitations – it may not be generalized. Nonetheless, the methods can be replicated across homestays in Thailand and other ASEAN countries, particularly those with some common characteristics, not least in desiring to attract international customers through the homestay brand. More research is needed across Southeast Asian countries to continue narrowing the gap between supply-, demand-, and policy-side perspectives on meeting 'service quality' and SDGs. Subsequent research should extend to canvassing quantitative perceptions and qualitative reasons from post-stay international tourists regarding their experience with ASEAN region *local/ethnic* homestays. Further, a Delphi study facilitated through tourism policy advisors across all ASEAN member states may help them foster sharing-circle decision-making internationally to support *local/ethnic* homestay transitioning toward a genuinely unified *ASEAN Homestay Standard*⁵.



5 During the research period, Thai Puan Pho Tak Homestay was assessed for the ASEAN Homestay Standard which was officially granted on 22 November 2024.

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The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.