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Integrating Local Culture into Rural Tourism Product Design: A Scoping Review of Strategies and Challenges

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Abstract

Local culture can inform rural tourism products, yet its translation into deliverable experiences raises questions about design, community authority and continuing provision. This scoping review connects design strategies with implementation conditions and evaluation evidence across specific visitor offerings. Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection were searched on 25 September 2026 for English-language records published during 2016–2026. Eligible sources comprised journal articles, conference papers and book chapters. One author screened the records, retaining 24 reports for descriptive comparison and qualitative content grouping. Five strategy families concerned resource organisation, narrative interpretation, visitor participation, spatial and service integration, and connections between digital and physical provision. Coordination, operating capacity and compatibility with community life constrained implementation. Eighteen reports specified design outputs, but only two compared deliberately varied field conditions. None measured comparable outcomes repeatedly across an operating period under the review's criterion. No formal critical appraisal was undertaken. The proposed framework connects cultural interpretation with delivery and separate evaluation of visitor, provider and community outcomes. It offers a basis for testing whether culturally grounded offerings remain workable and acceptable to the communities represented.

Keywords: Heritage Interpretation, Experience Co-Creation, Community Agency, Service Delivery, Evidence Mapping

Introduction

Rural tourism has developed towards experiential activities, while difficulties in governance and product development persist (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). As cultural tourism extends towards intangible heritage and contemporary life, product development draws on knowledge and practices held by local people (Richards, 2018). These developments make cultural integration a practical design problem: providers must decide what visitors can

encounter and how those encounters can be organised. A village recipe, for example, requires decisions about interpretation, participation and hosting before it can support a cooking experience.

A tourism product brings together the setting, services and opportunities for participation that make a visit possible (Smith, 1994). Relationships with residents and meanings attached to place also shape its value (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, & Lima, 2012). Identifying cultural resources therefore leaves important decisions unresolved, including who may interpret them, what may be adapted and how activities can be delivered. These decisions motivate the present review's focus on the connection between cultural content, practical provision and community authority.

Recent studies illustrate why this connection warrants closer examination in rural settings. In Kupiškis, dispersed cultural initiatives had yet to become consistently bookable experiences (Gulbovaitė, Liorančaitė-Šukienė, Dabravalskytė-Radzevičė, & Radzevičius, 2026). In Xidi, promoted folk-cultural products did not fully reflect available resources or visitors' perceptions (Zhang, Nor, & Ramely, 2026). These cases identify different challenges in organising provision and representing culture. They motivate examination of the decisions linking resources to particular activities, alongside the conditions under which those activities can be offered.

Existing reviews trace the changing scope of cultural tourism (Richards, 2018) and the concepts underpinning food tourism (Ellis, Park, Kim, & Yeoman, 2018). Experience co-creation research examines tourists' participation and interaction (Campos, Mendes, do Valle, & Scott, 2018). Creative placemaking connects tourism with local distinctiveness (Richards, 2020), while European rural tourism research examines cultural landscapes and their changing conditions (Joshi, Panzer-Krause, Zerbe, & Saurwein, 2024). These perspectives provide a foundation for a more focused synthesis at the level of specific visitor offerings. The question guiding that synthesis is how cultural interpretation and participation are connected to delivery arrangements, and what evidence supports claims about their consequences. Comparing these connections across cultural resources and product forms can identify where design knowledge is available and where further evaluation is needed.

The theoretical motivation concerns the relationship between experience design, local organisation and community authority. Integrated rural tourism situates offerings within local economic and social relationships (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007). Community empowerment brings control and benefit sharing into that account (Scheyvens, 1999). Participation in an experience and influence over its design are distinct roles (Campos et al., 2018; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). A favourable visitor response therefore cannot establish who controls cultural adaptation or whether providers and communities benefit. Distinguishing proposals, delivered activities and evaluated interventions is equally necessary because each supports different conclusions. Examining these distinctions together provides a basis for assessing what cultural integration means in practice and whose outcomes inform judgements of success.

This scoping review addresses these practical and analytical concerns by examining culturally grounded rural tourism product design in research published during 2016–2026. A scoping

approach allows diverse design practices and evidence types to be mapped without estimating a pooled intervention effect (Munn et al., 2018). Using reports retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science, the review connects design strategies with implementation conditions and evaluation coverage. Its contribution is to organise these relationships at the level of specific offerings and identify priorities for evaluating visitor, provider and community outcomes. Three questions guide the synthesis:

RQ1. What strategies connect local cultural resources with the design of rural tourism offerings?

RQ2. What conditions enable or constrain these strategies, particularly where market adaptation intersects with cultural continuity?

RQ3. What evidence addresses design, implementation and outcomes, and where do evaluation gaps remain for visitors, providers and communities?

Conceptual Background

Local Culture and the Rural Tourism Setting

Local culture refers here to knowledge, practices and meanings associated with a place, including the material settings through which people express them. The term encompasses inherited traditions and their contemporary use. Community recognition and continuing recreation are central to the definition of intangible cultural heritage (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003, Article 2).

Rural tourism extends beyond agritourism and takes different forms across rural settings (Lane, 1994). In this review, rural relevance requires a substantive connection with village life, agriculture or fishing livelihoods. Traditional settlements within urban jurisdictions are treated as boundary cases. Cultural content alone is insufficient to place an offering within the rural tourism context.

Tourism Products and the Design of Experiences

Product design arranges the conditions of an encounter, while visitors develop their experiences through it. Smith (1994) connects production with this experiential outcome; Mossberg (2007) emphasises interaction within an arranged setting. Providers may prepare a programme, but they cannot prescribe how each visitor will understand it. Design and experience evidence therefore need to be examined separately.

Cultural integration occurs when local content shapes interpretation, activities or service arrangements. Merely attaching a cultural label provides little evidence of that connection. Creative placemaking relates resources to meaning and opportunities for involvement (Richards, 2020). Technology can support these arrangements through different forms of co-creation (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014). Its contribution to cultural relevance depends on how it is used.

Participation and Authority in Cultural Adaptation

Participation in tourism experience innovation concerns involvement and interaction (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Campos et al., 2018). Participatory design gives users a role in shaping the offer, beyond supplying information (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). A visitor learning a craft participates in an experience; a practitioner determining its content

participates in design. Neither role necessarily confers authority to approve the final arrangement or revise it later.

Authenticity involves judgements about both objects and experiences, as Wang (1999) explains. Cultural meaning can survive commoditisation (Cohen, 1988), although the authority to authenticate an attraction remains consequential (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Visitor feeling and fidelity to inherited forms offer only part of the assessment. Judging an adaptation's cultural acceptability also requires the views of the people it represents.

Implementation and the Interpretation of Outcomes

Integrated rural tourism locates an offering within local economic, social and cultural relationships (Saxena et al., 2007). Such networks do not necessarily empower everyone involved (Saxena & Ilbery, 2008). Even willing participants may encounter operational or structural barriers (Tosun, 2000). These constraints make coordination, access and delivery resources relevant to the analysis of design.

Outcome measures need to match the change that a design claims to produce. Empowerment has economic, psychological, social and political dimensions that visitor responses alone cannot capture (Scheyvens, 1999). These concepts guided attention to design roles, delivery conditions and the distribution of outcomes across visitors, providers and communities. Full-text reading informed the refinement of synthesis categories.

Methods

Review Design and Eligibility Criteria

A scoping approach was used to map design practices and their evidence, without estimating a pooled intervention effect (Munn et al., 2018). JBI guidance informed the methodology (Peters et al., 2020). Reporting drew on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018). The review was not prospectively registered. Its questions and thematic organisation were refined during full-text reading.

Eligibility was structured through Population, Concept and Context (PCC; Peters et al., 2020; Table 1). Sources had to connect local culture with a recognisable visitor offering. Demand or supply evidence qualified when it informed the development of that offering.

Table 1
Eligibility Criteria

Dimension	Inclusion	Exclusion or qualification
Population / focus	Providers, residents, cultural practitioners, visitors or cultural resources.	A participant sample was not required for design-focused work.
Concept	Substantive cultural content linked to a specific visitor product, activity or service.	Incidental cultural references, generic promotion or souvenir styling alone.
Context	Rural, agricultural or fishing communities and traditional villages.	Generic urban tourism excluded; relevant urban administrative boundary cases flagged.
Evidence	Diagnosis, proposals, development, implementation or evaluation.	No exclusion solely for absence of an outcome evaluation.
Publication	2016–2026; English-language filter; articles, conference papers and book chapters.	Original language recorded separately for translated texts.
Availability	Full text sufficient to assess thematic eligibility.	Unavailable reports counted separately from full-text exclusions.

Note. PCC structure follows Peters et al. (2020). One Spanish-original report was retained in English translation as a language-eligibility exception.

The context covered rural settlements and communities connected with agricultural or fishing livelihoods. Traditional villages within urban jurisdictions were flagged when their offerings remained tied to local livelihoods or cultural practices. Both proposals and implemented projects were eligible, with anticipated benefits distinguished from observed outcomes. One Spanish report was retained in English translation as a documented exception to the language criterion.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection were last searched on 25 September 2026. The executed queries combined rural tourism, cultural content, tourism offerings and design or development (Table 2). Searches covered 2016–2026 and used English-language filters. Eligible publication types were journal articles, conference papers and book chapters. Earlier scholarship informed the conceptual background but fell outside this contemporary review period.

Selection counts refer to the two database exports, without additional records from citation searching. Table 2 reproduces the executed queries and recorded filters. It also identifies gaps in the archived Web of Science metadata.

Source Selection

The exports were merged and deduplicated using digital object identifiers (DOIs) and titles. Bibliographic inconsistencies were checked against publisher records before duplicate entries were resolved.

Screening proceeded through titles, abstracts and full texts, with unretrieved reports counted separately. The retained exclusion record contains aggregate counts and a broad reason of thematic mismatch. Reasons for excluding individual reports could not be reconstructed from that record.

One author screened the records and assessed full texts to determine eligibility. Figure 1 presents selection using an adapted PRISMA 2020 flow format (Page et al., 2021).

Table 2
Executed Database Search Strategies

Database and field	Boolean search string
Web of Science Core Collection Topic (TS)	TS=(("rural tourism" OR "village tourism" OR "tourism village" OR "tourism villages" OR "countryside tourism" OR agritourism OR agrotourism OR "agri-tourism" OR "agro-tourism" OR "farm tourism" OR farmstay OR farmstays OR "farm stay" OR "farm stays") AND (cultur* OR heritage OR tradition* OR folklor* OR craft* OR handicraft* OR gastrono* OR cuisine* OR "local food" OR "local foods") AND (product OR products OR experience* OR service* OR itinerar* OR route*) AND (design* OR develop* OR innovat* OR creat* OR codesign* OR cocreat*))
Scopus Title, abstract and keywords (TITLE-ABS-KEY)	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("rural tourism" OR "village tourism" OR "tourism village" OR "tourism villages" OR "countryside tourism" OR agritourism OR agrotourism OR "agri-tourism" OR "agro-tourism" OR "farm tourism" OR farmstay OR farmstays OR "farm stay" OR "farm stays") AND (cultur* OR heritage OR tradition* OR folklor* OR craft* OR handicraft* OR gastrono* OR cuisine* OR "local food" OR "local foods") AND (product OR products OR experience* OR service* OR itinerar* OR route*) AND (design* OR develop* OR innovat* OR creat* OR codesign* OR cocreat*))

Note. Last search: 25 September 2026. Recorded filters: 2016–2026, English, journal articles, conference papers and book chapters, applied separately. Exports: Web of Science 845; Scopus 968. Web of Science language, document-type and component-index fields were blank. One imported record has a 2027 issue year and September 2026 early access; it is absent from the included corpus.

Data Charting and Synthesis

One author extracted and coded the data, checking all extracted information against the full texts. Charting was organised around the research questions (Pollock et al., 2023). It recorded settings, methods and sample units, followed by cultural resources, product forms and design actions. Implementation conditions and evaluation findings were also extracted, with page anchors retained for checking. Sample counts kept their original units, and ambiguous values were flagged rather than combined.

Descriptive comparison and qualitative content grouping formed the basis of synthesis. Categories were refined by comparing design actions across the reports. Food-related accounts, for example, were grouped by visitor tasks and practitioner roles; one offering could involve several strategies. Coding separated reported observations from source-author

proposals and interpretations developed in this review. Contradictions were retained, and second-hand findings were distinguished from each report's own research.

Each report was counted once per evidence field and could contribute to several fields. Demand/perception covered visitor surveys of desired offerings, expectations or cultural perceptions, excluding post-activity feedback alone. The design field captured a specified new or revised offering, service or development model. Action denoted delivery of a development activity, beyond descriptions of existing offers. Identifiable visitor evaluation or assessment of a route trial qualified as post-activity assessment. Field comparison was restricted to deliberately varied on-site conditions. Repeated outcomes meant comparable measurements across an operating period. Development histories, workshop sequences and Delphi rounds alone did not meet that definition. Codes distinguished reported evidence, its absence under the definition, and uncertainty. They described coverage and were not used to score methodological quality.

Illustrative resource–product connections were drawn from explicit source accounts covering contrasting resources and offerings. These examples were not treated as a frequency distribution. Post hoc checks separately excluded the urban-context reports, the translated report and the coffee-grower report with conflicting bibliographic metadata. Strategy coverage and evidence-field counts were reassessed after each exclusion.

The synthesis mapped evidence without formal critical appraisal, meta-analysis or effectiveness ranking (Munn et al., 2018). Source limitations guided interpretation, and the proposed framework remained untested as a causal model.

Results

Selection and Characteristics of Included Sources

The exports contained 1,813 records, comprising 968 from Scopus and 845 from Web of Science. Deduplication removed 484 records, leaving 1,329 for screening. Title screening retained 110 records, and abstract screening identified 49 reports for retrieval. Two reports were unavailable, leaving 47 for full-text assessment. Of these, 23 were excluded for thematic mismatch and 24 were included (Figure 1).

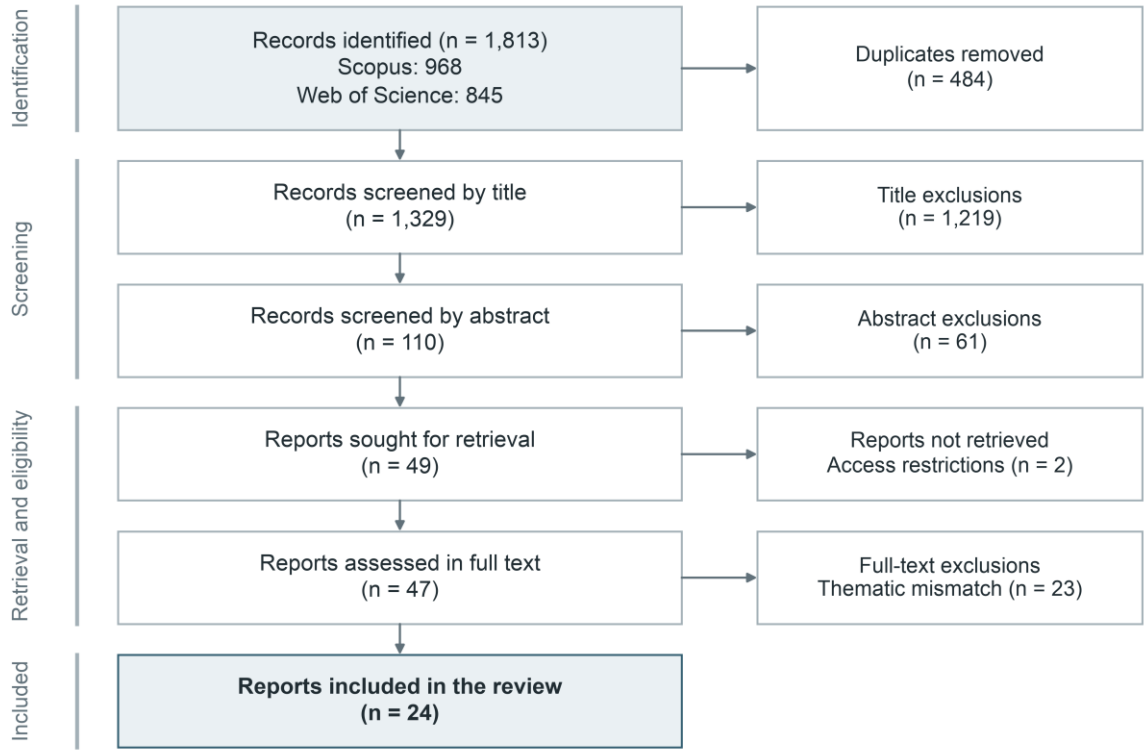

Figure 1. Selection of reports for the scoping review.

Note. Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 flow format (Page et al., 2021). Title and abstract exclusions total 1,280. Included units are reports, not a verified number of independent studies.

The corpus comprised 21 journal articles and three conference papers or proceedings chapters. Fifteen reports were published from 2023 onwards. China accounted for five reports; Thailand and Italy each accounted for three. Two reports covered two countries, yielding 26 geographical occurrences across the corpus (Table 3). These distributions describe the selected reports rather than research activity or geographical balance across the field.

Table 3
Publication Profile and Study Locations

Publication year	n	%
2016	1	4.2
2017	1	4.2
2019	1	4.2
2020	2	8.3
2021	1	4.2
2022	3	12.5
2023	5	20.8
2024	4	16.7
2025	4	16.7
2026	2	8.3

Location / publication type	n	%
China	5	20.8
Thailand	3	12.5
Italy	3	12.5
Croatia	2	8.3
Indonesia	2	8.3
Taiwan	2	8.3
Nine other locations (each)	1	4.2
Publication type		
Journal article	21	87.5
Conference / proceedings	3	12.5

Note. N = 24. No report was published in 2018; 2026 is incomplete. Nine locations each occur once: Colombia, Cuba, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Malaysia, Slovakia, Spain and Vietnam. Germany–Italy and Hungary–Slovakia reports give 26 location occurrences; geographical percentages therefore exceed 100%. Years, locations and publication types are separate distributions. Percentages are rounded.

Methods ranged from resource surveys and interviews to design proposals and comparative field studies (Table 4). Sample units differed across reports and were not pooled. The report by Sánchez Sosa, Ramírez Pérez, and Pérez Hernández (2020) was read in English translation. Diejiao and the Taiwanese fishing communities were contextual boundary cases, combining traditional livelihoods with urban administrative settings.

Table 4
Characteristics and Product Focus of the 24 Included Reports

Source and setting	Methods and sample units	Product focus and interpretation
Arkarapotiwong & Chindapol (2023) Thailand; Sukhothai and surrounding communities	58-community frame; 204 tourists; 12 communities examined with 30 key informants.	Festivals, pottery and storytelling; proposed management model without long-term evaluation.
Bai (2024) China; Qingkou	Interviews, observation and case analysis; participant count unreported.	Farming activities and Hani-themed stays proposed; outcomes untested.
Bakan et al. (2021) Croatia; Slavonia farms	10 farm-owner interviews; supply and cooperation inventory.	Food, farming and craft provision; provider diagnosis, not a visitor trial.
Ding et al. (2022) China; Diejiao	User-needs work and service-design proposal; survey sample unreported.	Dragon-boat routes, events and touchpoints; urban boundary case; proposed effects untested.
Guillén-Peñafiel et al. (2024) Spain; Extremadura dehesa	102 visitor surveys; two Delphi rounds with 26 practitioners/experts.	Pastoral visits, tasting and wool crafts; self-reported learning and practitioner concerns.
Gulbovaitė et al. (2026) Lithuania; Kupiškis	19 focus-group participants; eight interviews with 12 people; overlap possible.	Educational activities, routes and events at different development stages.
Jian et al. (2025) China; Liugou	Village diagnosis and AR platform proposal; empirical sampling detail limited.	Digital guides, workshops and experience centre; user outcomes untested.
Kaewuthai et al. (2025) Thailand; Sakhu	400 demand-survey respondents; stakeholder design work, training and route trial.	Farming, fishing, cooking and craft routes; trial-evaluation sample not separately specified.
Leanza et al. (2016) Italy; Ragusa, Sicily	46 traditional buildings selected from 120; architectural survey, GIS and earlier visitor data.	Material-and-technique itinerary with panels and mini-guide; post-tour evaluation pending.

Source and setting	Methods and sample units	Product focus and interpretation
Liang (2017) Taiwan; Farm setting	224 valid responses across four conditions (41, 61, 56, 66); 16 activities on different weekends.	Farm-service blueprints and participation; non-random, activity-specific comparisons.
Liang et al. (2023) Taiwan; Cieding; Yongan	Two field studies: valid response groups of 34/68 and 40/52.	Fishing/salt-culture experiences; confounded comparisons; urban boundary case.
Liu & Wang (2020) China; Xintian	Resource investigation and application of a conceptual design model; no outcome sample.	Farming and food experiences; model effectiveness and health benefits untested.
Muangasame & Tan (2023) Thailand; Sapphaya	15 workshops, approximately 20–30 participants each; 68 social-media posts.	Market, storytelling and hybrid events; workshop counts are not unique participants.
Parlato et al. (2022) Italy; Fegotto, Sicily	Building survey; questionnaires distributed at 40 accommodation facilities; visitor sample unclear.	Tasting, education and stays linked to a wine route; reuse benefits prospective.
Pécsek & Halajova (2022) Hungary; Slovakia; Rural cemeteries	Desk research, visits and autoethnography; ten cemeteries selected.	Funerary heritage route; neither visitors nor residents evaluated the proposal.
Rashid et al. (2019) Malaysia; Menchali; Rantau Panjang	Ethnographic observation, interviews and resource/facility analysis; sample unreported.	Fishing, cooking and traditional-treatment packages; prices and content proposed.
Sánchez Sosa et al. (2020) Cuba; Guanahacabibes	Interviews at 25 farms, manager interviews, observation and workshops.	Agritourism design procedure; full implementation unestablished; translated Spanish report.
Shakya & Vagnarelli (2024) Germany; Italy; Bad Hindelang; Le Marche	Two exploratory cases; interviews, project records and historical material.	Pastoral hospitality and memory-based visits; tour-feedback assessment details unclear.
Trung & Mohanty (2023) Vietnam; Tra Que	71 households; interviews and discussions; visitor tables based on 100 tourists.	Cultivation, cooking and craft visits; sample units and item denominators differ.
Tubić et al. (2025) Croatia; Slavonia	385 potential domestic tourists; survey and ordinal regression.	Participatory gastronomy attributes; visit intentions, not intervention outcomes.
Vélez-Ochoa et al. (2025) Colombia; Antioquia	78 semi-structured surveys; practical training with 15 growers; other counts differ.	Training and reported farm visits/tastings; no visitor outcomes; conflicting bibliographic metadata; examined in a post hoc exclusion check.
Vitasurya et al. (2024) Indonesia; Bayan	26 homestays mapped; complete data for 15 families; 123 reported respondents.	Accommodation typologies preserving domestic spaces; post-design outcomes untested.

Source and setting	Methods and sample units	Product focus and interpretation
Wijanarko et al. (2023) Indonesia; Bakas	100 tourist questionnaires; observation and interviews about an existing package.	Market, cooking and shared-meal experience; scale percentages are not respondent proportions.
Zhang et al. (2026) China; Xidi	62 valid visitor questionnaires, resource records and social-media material.	Folk-cultural product proposals informed by perception gaps; redesign untested.

Note. Counts retain their reported units. AR = augmented reality; GIS = geographic information system. Author–year labels link directly to the reference list. Proposals are distinguished from evaluated outcomes.

Cultural Integration Strategies

Reported design actions fell into five overlapping strategy families (Table 5). Figure 2 illustrates explicit connections between cultural content and visitor offerings. Each example retains its reported development status, distinguishing proposals from activities already delivered.

Resource organisation linked inventories with themes or decisions about development. In Xidi, this involved diagnosing gaps between cultural resources, visitor perceptions and promoted products (Zhang et al., 2026). Xintian combined theme, activity, image and management (Liu & Wang, 2020), while the Cuban procedure connected inventory with commercial design and monitoring (Sánchez Sosa et al., 2020). Kupiškis assembled educational sessions and routes at different stages of development (Gulbovaitė et al., 2026). Qingkou proposed farming and accommodation experiences with greater visitor participation (Bai, 2024). Outcome evaluations of the proposed changes were not completed in these accounts.

Table 5
Cultural Integration Strategies and Their Product Applications

Strategy	Design action	Illustrative sources and evidence status
Resource organisation	Translate an inventory into a coherent theme or offer.	Xidi: perception–resource diagnosis (Zhang et al., 2026); Xintian: design model (Liu & Wang, 2020); Cuba: development procedure (Sánchez Sosa et al., 2020). Full-procedure effects untested.
Narrative interpretation	Connect material settings with practices and memories.	Sicilian itinerary: installed interpretive media (Leanza, Porto, Sapienza, & Cascone, 2016); Le Marche: memories used in visits and digital stories (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024).
Participation design	Specify visitor tasks, interaction and levels of involvement.	Sakhu: route trial (Kaewuthai et al., 2025); Bakas: existing cooking package (Wijanarko, Febianti, & Arcana, 2023); farm and fishing cases: field comparisons (Liang, 2017; Liang, Tung, Wang, & Hui, 2023).
Spatial and service integration	Arrange access, facilities and the sequence of encounters.	Bayan: homestay typologies (Vitasurya et al., 2024); Malaysia: village packages (Rashid, Ahmad, Jamaluddin, & Prabhakaran, 2019); Diejiao: routes and events (Ding, Ning, & Pu, 2022). Redesign outcomes untested.
Digital and physical connection	Use technology for a defined interpretive or service function.	Liugou: AR/platform proposal (Jian, Zhu, Li, & Deng, 2025); Sapphaya: implemented training and hybrid adaptation (Muangasame & Tan, 2023). No equivalent non-digital control.

Note. Strategies overlap; membership does not establish effectiveness. Figure 2 illustrates source-supported resource–product connections.

Interpretation connected encounters with knowledge associated with their settings. Donnafugata organised an itinerary around building materials and techniques, using panels and a mini-guide (Leanza et al., 2016). Fegotto proposed educational and hospitality uses for its buildings (Parlato, Valenti, & Porto, 2022). Sharecroppers' memories shaped guided and gamified visits in Le Marche (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024); local histories linked the cemeteries on a Hungarian–Slovak route (Pécsek & Halajova, 2022). In these examples, interpretation informed visitor activities as well as the information presented.

Participation design defined what visitors would do and how they would interact. Sakhu connected livelihoods with cooking, crafts and storytelling (Kaewuthai et al., 2025). The Bakas package joined a market visit with food preparation and a shared meal (Wijanarko et al., 2023). Farm and fishing-community studies organised participation through service blueprints and visitor journeys (Liang, 2017; Liang et al., 2023). Dehesa visits combined pastoral knowledge with tastings and crafts (Guillén-Peñafiel, Hernández-Carretero, & Sánchez-Martín, 2024). Actual provision varied: participation was uneven in Tra Que (Trung

& Mohanty, 2023), while Slavonian farms offered food more often than educational or collaborative activities (Bakan, Tubić, & Jaković, 2021).

Spatial and service integration concerned access and the sequence of encounters. Bayan distinguished accommodation shared with households from separate provision for guests (Vitasurya et al., 2024). Malaysian packages linked livelihood activities with assessments of available facilities (Rashid et al., 2019). In Diejiao, routes and events brought dragon-boat themes into a service proposal (Ding et al., 2022). None of these accounts reported outcomes following the proposed redesigns.

Digital connections appeared at different stages, from technical proposals to implemented activities. Liugou proposed augmented reality (AR), a mobile platform and an experience centre (Jian et al., 2025). Sapphaya documented digital training and adaptation towards online and hybrid activities (Muangasame & Tan, 2023). Le Marche incorporated digital storytelling into its cultural work (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024). None assessed a digital offering against an otherwise equivalent physical experience.

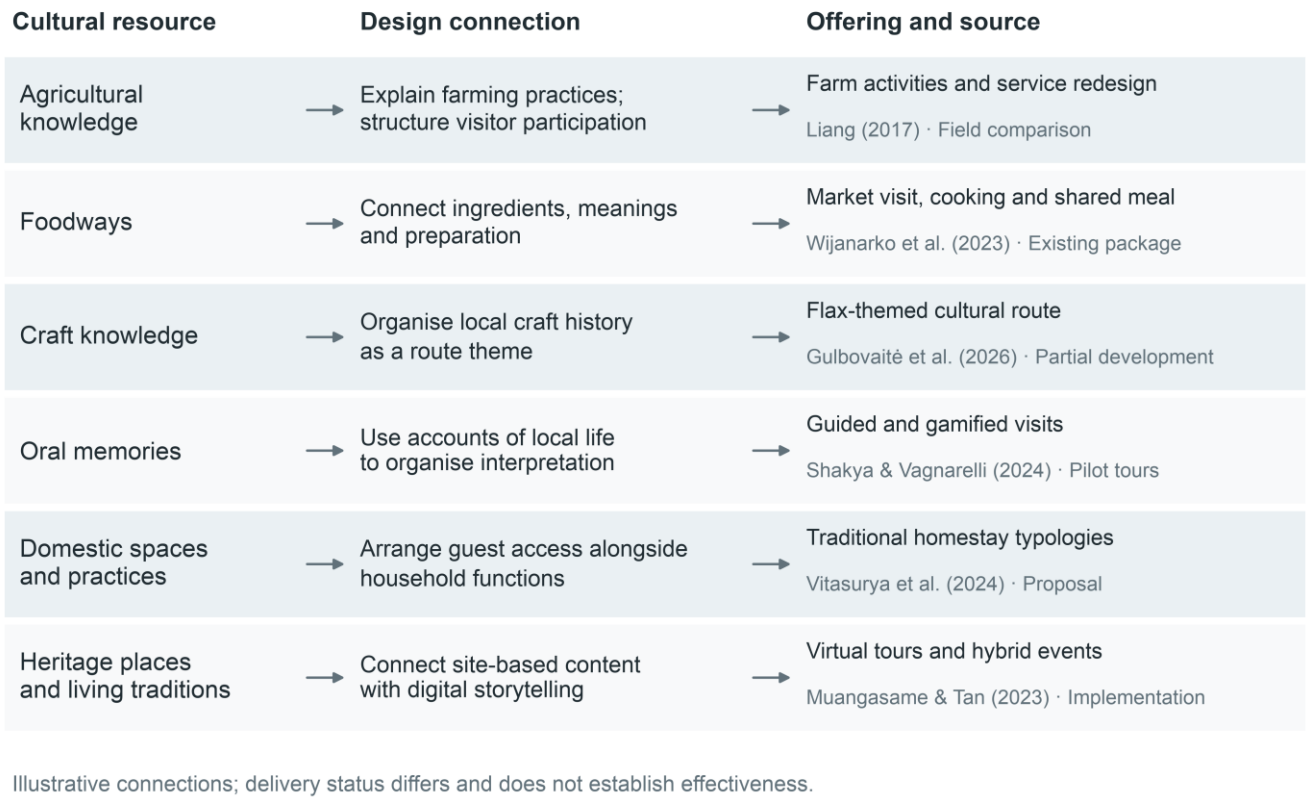

Figure 2. Illustrative connections between cultural resources and visitor offerings.

Note. Examples were selected to show contrasting resources, design connections and product forms. Author–year labels identify the sources. Arrows denote reported design connections; the examples do not constitute a frequency distribution or an effectiveness comparison.

Enabling Conditions and Implementation Challenges

Implementation accounts described constraints in hosting skills, coordination and operating resources. They also identified tensions between cultural adaptation, everyday life and the scale of provision.

Preparation for hosting accompanied product development in several settings. Sakhu paired routes with reception and guiding preparation (Kaewuthai et al., 2025); Sapphaya combined mentoring with digital upskilling (Muangasame & Tan, 2023). Colombian workshops addressed enterprise, finance and media skills, while family accounts described farm visits and tastings (Vélez-Ochoa, Muñoz-Sánchez, & Castellanos Polo, 2025). Inconsistent workshop and participant counts prevented an assessment of competence gains. Sukhothai linked knowledge holders with facilitator and leadership roles, although these changes lacked longitudinal evaluation (Arkarapotiwong & Chindapol, 2023).

The extent of provision was also shaped by coordination. Kupiškis reported weak information flows and delays in bringing sites into use (Gulbovaitė et al., 2026). On Slavonian farms, cooperation in purchasing was more common than joint activity development (Bakan et al., 2021). The comparative heritage study described collective arrangements linking German farming, landscape maintenance and tourism (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024). Wider economic value remained limited in its Italian case. These accounts did not quantify transferable effects of cooperation.

Facilities and finance constrained delivery in the Malaysian villages (Rashid et al., 2019). Elsewhere, Fegotto assessed whether buildings suited proposed uses (Parlato et al., 2022), and the Cuban procedure specified business planning and service coordination (Sánchez Sosa et al., 2020). These proposals set out requirements, but the reports did not establish that the necessary resources had been secured.

Adaptation brought cultural content into contact with everyday domestic arrangements. Bayan retained spaces for household and shared use (Vitasurya et al., 2024); Bakas adjusted ingredients while explaining the meanings of its food (Wijanarko et al., 2023). Some Kupiškis providers preferred small-scale operation because direct host involvement defined their offer (Gulbovaitė et al., 2026). Comparable evidence on authority over adaptation was absent from these accounts. The cemetery-route proposal also lacked an assessment of residents' feelings (Pécsek & Halajova, 2022).

Participation sometimes conflicted with the rhythms and demands of existing livelihoods. Dehesa practitioners raised concerns about remuneration and succession, while visitors preferred some low-intensity activities to pastoral labour (Guillén-Peñafiel et al., 2024). Sukhothai reported reliance on a few knowledgeable people and shortages of younger successors (Arkarapotiwong & Chindapol, 2023). Whether tourism could ease these pressures remained unresolved in the reports.

Evaluation Practices and Evidence Gaps

Evidence was concentrated on specifying designs rather than evaluating their consequences. Seven reports assessed demand or cultural perceptions, 18 specified a design output, and nine documented development action. Six included identifiable post-activity assessment. One further account reported favourable tour feedback without enough detail to classify its assessment (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024). Two reports compared deliberately varied field conditions (Liang, 2017; Liang et al., 2023). These categories overlap because reports could contribute to several evidence fields (Figure 3).

Demand assessments examined intended experiences or perceptions of existing cultural provision. Slavonian gastronomy attributes were associated with visit intentions (Tubić, Kelić, & Bakan, 2025), while Xidi perceptions informed development recommendations (Zhang et al., 2026). Sakhu's demand survey involved 400 respondents and was distinct from its route trial (Kaewuthai et al., 2025). Fegotto distributed questionnaires through 40 accommodation facilities; this number described distribution sites, not sampled visitors (Parlato et al., 2022). Post-activity assessment focused on suitability and visitor responses, using measures that required different interpretations. Bakas presented scale scores as percentages, rather than proportions of satisfied visitors (Wijanarko et al., 2023). Dehesa assessed self-reported knowledge and appreciation (Guillén-Peñafiel et al., 2024), while valid response totals differed across Tra Que questionnaire items (Trung & Mohanty, 2023). Sakhu's evaluation addressed the suitability of its proposed routes (Kaewuthai et al., 2025). Sustained community benefits were outside what these measures could establish.

The farm comparison yielded 224 valid responses across four service conditions, with results differing by activity (Liang, 2017). Fishing-community comparisons changed content and interaction together and lacked an untreated baseline (Liang et al., 2023). That report also contained a discrepancy between its narrative and table on revisiting. Given these differences, effects were not pooled across the comparisons. The findings did not establish a consistent advantage from greater interaction.

Reported evidence (reports / 24)

	Demand / perceptions 7 / 24	Design 18 / 24	Action 9 / 24	Post-activity assessment 6 / 24	Field comparison 2 / 24	Repeated outcomes 0 / 24
Arkarapotiwong & Chindapol (2023)	●	●	●	–	–	–
Bai (2024)	–	●	–	–	–	–
Bakan et al. (2021)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Ding et al. (2022)	●	●	–	–	–	–
Guillén-Peñafiel et al. (2024)	●	–	–	●	–	–
Gulbovaitė et al. (2026)	–	●	●	–	–	–
Jian et al. (2025)	–	●	–	–	–	–
Kaewuthai et al. (2025)	●	●	●	●	–	–
Leanza et al. (2016)	–	●	●	–	–	–
Liang (2017)	–	●	●	●	●	–
Liang et al. (2023)	–	●	●	●	●	–
Liu & Wang (2020)	–	●	–	–	–	–
Muangasame & Tan (2023)	–	●	●	–	–	–
Parlato et al. (2022)	●	●	–	–	–	–
Pécsek & Halajova (2022)	–	●	–	–	–	–
Rashid et al. (2019)	–	●	–	–	–	–
Sánchez Sosa et al. (2020)	–	●	–	–	–	–
Shakya & Vagnarelli (2024)	–	●	●	◇	–	–
Trung & Mohanty (2023)	–	–	–	●	–	–
Tubić et al. (2025)	●	–	–	–	–	–
Vélez-Ochoa et al. (2025)	–	–	●	–	–	–
Vitasurya et al. (2024)	–	●	–	–	–	–
Wijanarko et al. (2023)	–	–	–	●	–	–
Zhang et al. (2026)	●	●	–	–	–	–

● Reported – Not reported under the definition ◇ Unclear

Figure 3. Evidence coverage across the 24 included reports.

Note. Columns follow the definitions in Data Charting and Synthesis. Counts include reported evidence only; one post-activity assessment is unclear. Trial suitability is included alongside visitor responses. Action can denote an implemented component, including training. Bakan et al. (2021) contributes a supply diagnosis despite no positive code in these six fields. Categories overlap and do not rank quality.

No report met the criterion for repeated measurement of comparable outcomes across an operating period. Some nevertheless examined change over time: Sapphaya and the comparative heritage cases described development phases or histories (Muangasame & Tan, 2023; Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024). Provider and community evidence mainly concerned roles, constraints and experiences of implementation. It did not trace comparable changes in net returns, decision authority or cultural continuity to a particular design strategy.

All five strategies remained represented in each post hoc exclusion check. Excluding the urban-context reports reduced comparative field evidence from two reports to one. Excluding the coffee-grower report reduced development-action coverage from nine to eight, with the other evidence-field counts unchanged. These checks examined dependence on the flagged reports; they did not verify source validity or search completeness.

Discussion

From Cultural Resources to Designed Experiences

The synthesis addresses the motivating problem by showing how cultural interpretation and the organisation of provision enter the same design decisions. In Slavonia, interest in participatory gastronomy sits alongside limited provision (Bakan et al., 2021; Tubić et al., 2025). Different samples prevent these findings from being combined into an estimate of unmet demand. Kupiškis and Xidi likewise identify challenges in connecting cultural resources with particular offerings (Gulbovaitė et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2026). Tourism product theory and integrated rural tourism help explain why access and coordination belong within design (Saxena et al., 2007; Smith, 1994). The comparison makes delivery arrangements part of understanding cultural integration, alongside the content and meaning of the experience.

Interpretation can guide practical decisions about routes and spaces. The Sicilian cases show how cultural meaning informed itineraries and building functions (Leanza et al., 2016; Parlato et al., 2022). Such decisions connect what an encounter communicates with the arrangements that make it possible. Their value still depends on whether hosts and visitors can use those arrangements as intended.

The comparative studies warrant caution about the benefits attributed to participation. The farm study compared redesigned and existing services; the fishing-community studies changed cultural content alongside interaction (Liang, 2017; Liang et al., 2023). These designs leave the general benefit of increasing interaction unresolved. Co-creation scholarship distinguishes participating in an experience from influencing its design (Campos et al., 2018; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Evaluation needs to identify which of these roles has changed. Dehesa interests and Tra Que participation patterns favour allowing different levels of

involvement (Guillén-Peñafiel et al., 2024; Trung & Mohanty, 2023); greater intensity should not stand for cultural value.

A proposal can contribute to design by specifying an experience clearly enough to test. Qingkou, Xintian and Diejiao illustrate this preparatory role (Bai, 2024; Ding et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2020). Trials would then need to examine cultural credibility, workable delivery and host workload. Claims of continuing benefits would require follow-up beyond those initial assessments.

Cultural adaptation need not imply the loss of meaning, as work on commoditisation has argued (Cohen, 1988). Bakas illustrates the distinction through ingredient changes accompanied by interpretation (Wijanarko et al., 2023). Visitor satisfaction can inform adjustments to a service, but practitioners' judgements are needed to assess the cultural acceptability of those adjustments.

Community Agency and Conditions for Implementation

Distinguishing participation from decision authority clarifies the review's use of community empowerment as an interpretive perspective. Community agency depends on whose decisions shape an offering and remain effective during delivery. In Sukhothai, movement towards facilitator and leadership roles leaves control over prices, narratives and access uncertain (Arkarapotiwong & Chindapol, 2023). The political dimension of empowerment directs attention to these decisions (Scheyvens, 1999). It includes the ability to withhold an activity from tourism, even when visitors express interest. Participation arrangements therefore require examination of decision rights before they can support claims about community empowerment.

Bayan shows how hosting decisions determine visitors' access to domestic life (Vitasurya et al., 2024). Respecting cultural boundaries the therefore requires practical arrangements for sharing space. The cemetery proposal raises a related question about access to sites of remembrance (Pécsek & Halajova, 2022). Anticipated low visitor numbers cannot substitute for residents' views when assessing whether that access is acceptable.

Support for implementation needs to address the constraints in each setting. Training alone would leave the facility and coordination gaps identified in Malaysia and the Cuban procedure unresolved (Rashid et al., 2019; Sánchez Sosa et al., 2020). Nor does support always require expansion. Kupiškis providers' commitment to direct hosting instead favours making provision dependable at a small scale (Gulbovaitė et al., 2026). Recurring costs and responsibilities deserve attention alongside the content of activities.

Digital services add continuing work to the task of hosting. Sapphaya documents supported implementation, whereas Liugou sets out technical possibilities (Jian et al., 2025; Muangasame & Tan, 2023). In either setting, providers would need to maintain content and respond to enquiries. Evaluation should test whether the digital function resolves a service problem at an acceptable cost. Comparison with simpler arrangements would help establish when that investment is justified.

Cultural and economic value may develop along different paths. Le Marche's cultural outputs coexisted with limited wider returns (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024). Dehesa visitors' appreciation also coexisted with concerns about remuneration and succession (Guillén-Peñafiel et al., 2024). Visitor experience and livelihood viability therefore need separate assessment. Sales alone offer little insight into whether cultural knowledge continues to be practised and taught.

An Evidence-Informed Framework and Research Priorities

Figure 4 translates the review's focus on design, implementation and evaluation into a framework connecting resource identification, interpretation, delivery arrangements and small-scale implementation. The reports describe these processes, but their combination here remains a synthesis to be tested. Community authority and operating capacity shape each stage; digital support has a role where it serves a defined purpose. The framework makes these relationships explicit for planning and evaluation, while its arrows indicate possible dependencies rather than established causal relationships.

For a cooking experience, practitioners would first decide what food preparation should communicate and which elements could be adapted. Visitor tasks and host preparation would then be arranged before a limited trial. Sakhu illustrates how design, training and trial assessment can be connected (Kaewuthai et al., 2025). Evaluation during regular delivery would extend this work to costs and revisions across seasons.

Assessing outcomes separately would make trade-offs easier to identify. Visitor learning might accompany unpaid preparation, while modest sales could coincide with renewed teaching of local knowledge. These possibilities are research questions rather than effects established by the review. Records of preparation hours, net returns and decisions about cultural content would offer more insight than a single satisfaction score.

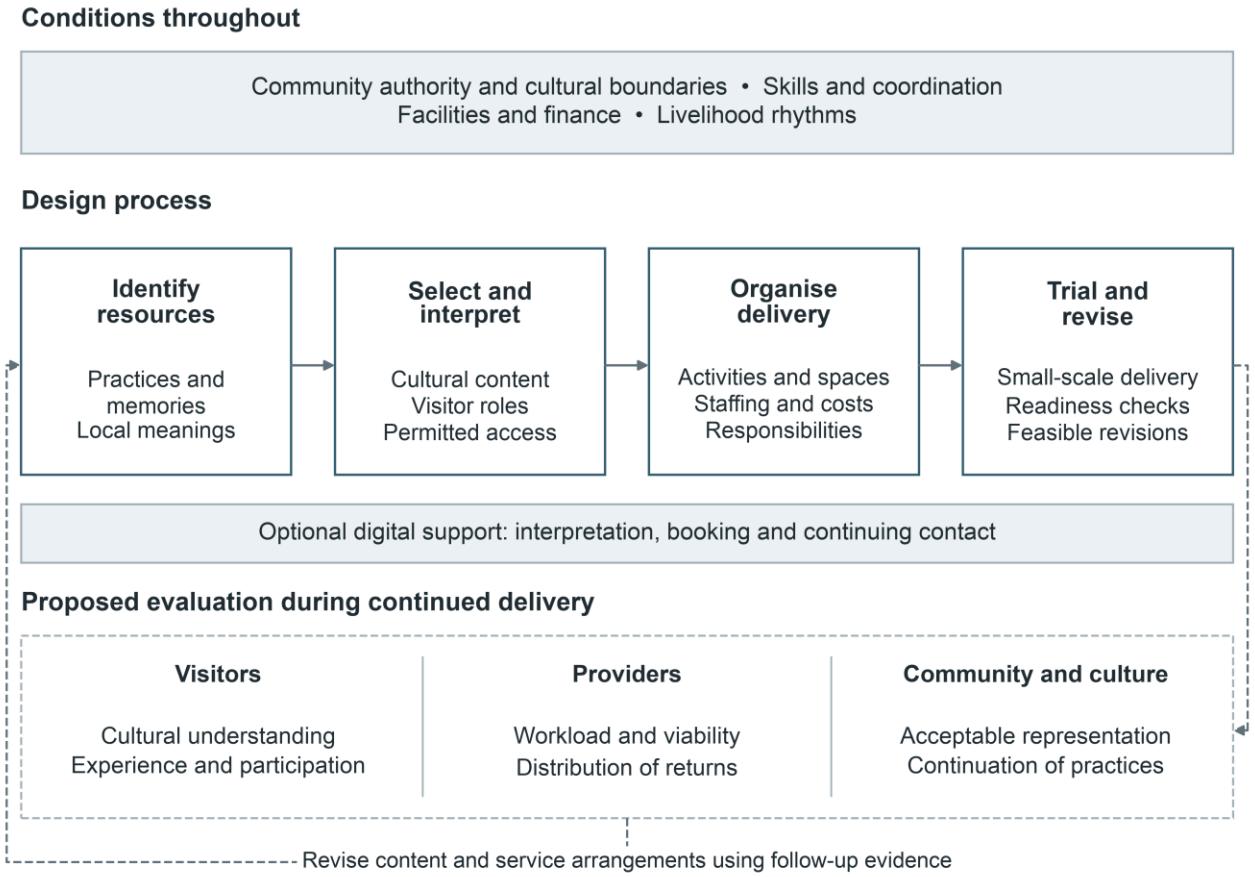

Figure 4. Proposed framework for culturally grounded tourism product design.

Note. The synthesis connects reported design processes with proposed evaluation priorities. Arrows indicate a suggested workflow and feedback, not demonstrated causal effects. Community authority and operating conditions apply throughout; visitor, provider and community outcomes require separate evaluation.

The evidence gaps point towards two complementary research designs. Field comparisons could hold cultural content constant while varying participation arrangements, where feasible. Following the same offering across seasons would allow workload and returns to be tracked alongside visitor responses. Practitioners' accounts should include those who decline involvement, helping to clarify whose preferences guide adaptation. Describing livelihood and institutional conditions would allow readers to judge whether findings could apply elsewhere.

Limitations

The search was limited to two databases, English-language filters and publications from 2016 onwards. Requiring all four search concepts may have missed work using other terms, especially accounts not described as product design. The selection flow comprised records from the two database exports, and two reports were unavailable. Retaining a Spanish-original report in English translation was an eligibility exception; it did not extend the search to other languages.

One author conducted screening, data charting and coding. Although extracted information was checked against the full texts, no second reviewer independently verified these decisions.

The available full-text exclusion record gives aggregate information rather than reasons for each report. An unregistered approach and categories refined during synthesis also leave scope for interpretive bias. Without formal critical appraisal, evidence coverage cannot establish methodological quality or comparative effectiveness.

Including traditional villages within urban jurisdictions broadened the contextual boundary. Excluding those reports preserved strategy coverage, although fewer field comparisons remained. Related regional reports may share settings or investigators, so they cannot automatically be treated as independent replications. Testing the proposed framework across livelihood and institutional contexts remains necessary.

Conclusion

This review examined how local culture is translated into rural tourism offerings and what evidence supports their implementation and outcomes. Across 24 reports, design strategies involved resource organisation, interpretation, participation, spatial arrangements and digital connections. Bringing these strategies together with delivery conditions shows why hosting capability, coordination and responsibilities belong within the analysis of cultural integration. At the level of a specific offering, these considerations connect cultural meaning with the practical arrangements and community decisions that shape visitors' access.

Reports more often specified designs than assessed the consequences of those designs. Eighteen reports described design outputs, two compared field conditions, and none met the criterion for repeated outcomes. This imbalance leaves the continuing viability and cultural acceptability of strategies uncertain; it does not show that they are ineffective.

The proposed framework responds to this evidence gap by connecting interpretation, delivery and separate evaluation of visitor, provider and community outcomes. It provides an organising basis for product development and research, while requiring testing through specific design changes and follow-up across operating seasons. Such work could clarify when cultural participation sustains local practice and when its demands exceed what hosts can support.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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