



Professional Cultural Identity as Boundary Work: Front Desk Practices in Eco-Accommodation Systems in Northwest Vietnam

Tran Hoang Tam¹

¹ Faculty of Tourism, Thai Nguyen University of Sciences, Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam.

Article Info

Article History:

Published: 31 May 2026

Publication Issue:

Volume 3, Issue 5
May-2026

Page Number:

640-653

Corresponding Author:

Tran Hoang Tam

Abstract:

This paper examines the professional cultural identity of front desk staff at eco-accommodation establishments in Northwest Vietnam. Drawing on eight weeks of ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with 18 front desk staff, and interviews with six contextual informants, the study explores how frontline workers understand, perform, and negotiate their roles in culturally sensitive accommodation settings. The findings show that staff construct their identity not merely as operational employees, but as service professionals, cultural interpreters, emotional mediators, and representatives of place. Their work is shaped by tensions between hotel-like tourist expectations, local community values, cultural authenticity, and the material conditions of eco-accommodation. To manage these tensions, staff use soft explanation, selective cultural translation, emotional mediation, and boundary protection. The study contributes to tourism and hospitality scholarship by showing how this identity is produced through everyday boundary work in sustainable tourism settings.

Keywords: Professional cultural identity; Front desk staff; Eco-accommodation; Ethnography; Northwest Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Eco-accommodation has become a significant form of sustainable tourism in Vietnam, especially in mountainous and culturally diverse regions where hospitality services are closely tied to local livelihoods, ethnic identity, environmental resources, and community-based tourism. In the Northwest region, eco-lodges, homestays, and community-based guesthouses are not only places of accommodation but also cultural contact zones where visitors encounter local customs, landscapes, and everyday practices. Within these settings, front desk staff play a central role as first-contact employees, service coordinators, cultural interpreters, and representatives of both the establishment and the destination.

Recent studies on Vietnamese tourism highlight the importance of sustainable tourism, community participation, host-guest interaction, and culturally grounded destination development. Research on ethnic minority tourism in Dien Bien and Cao Bang suggests that community-based tourism can support local economic growth when it is linked to cultural resources and local participation (Ho & Nguyen, 2025). Studies on host-tourist encounters further show the importance of local voices in understanding cultural negotiation, tourism interaction, and community concerns (Nguyen et al., 2024). These findings are relevant to eco-accommodation, where service work is shaped by both professional hospitality standards and local cultural expectations.

However, the professional cultural identity of front desk staff remains insufficiently examined. In this study, professional cultural identity refers to how front desk staff understand themselves simultaneously as hospitality workers and cultural representatives in their everyday service practices. What remains less clear is how such identity is produced in the ordinary moments of front desk work: greeting guests, explaining local rules, responding to complaints, translating cultural meanings, and negotiating inappropriate requests. This study therefore treats front desk work not as a background service function, but as a key site where sustainable tourism, cultural representation, and

professional identity are made visible in practice. Existing research in Vietnam has discussed service encounters, guest satisfaction, sustainable development, and community-based tourism, but limited attention has been given to how frontline employees understand, perform, and negotiate their own professional identity in culturally sensitive accommodation environments. Front desk staff are expected to provide standardized service while also embodying local hospitality, explaining cultural practices, mediating guest expectations, and preserving destination authenticity. This creates complex identity negotiations at the intersection of professionalism, locality, ethnicity, sustainability, and commercial service.

This issue is timely because Vietnam's tourism policies increasingly emphasize sustainable, responsible, and high-quality tourism. The *Law on Tourism No. 09/2017/QH14* provides the legal foundation for tourism activities, services, and accommodation operations (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2017). More recently, *Decision No. 509/QĐ-TTg* approved the national tourism system master plan for 2021–2030, with a vision to 2045, reinforcing sustainable tourism development and regional tourism planning (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2024). These policy directions call for greater attention to tourism workers not only as service providers, but also as cultural actors who shape the quality, authenticity, and sustainability of visitor experiences.

This study therefore examines the professional cultural identity of front desk staff at eco-accommodation establishments in the Northwest region of Vietnam through an ethnographic approach. Ethnography is appropriate for this inquiry because staff's sense of professionalism is not merely stated in job descriptions or training manuals; it is produced through everyday interactions, workplace routines, language practices, guest encounters, and negotiations between local culture and service standards. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do front desk staff at eco-accommodation establishments in Northwest Vietnam understand their professional cultural identity?

RQ2. How do they perform and negotiate this identity in everyday interactions with guests, colleagues, local communities, and accommodation managers?

RQ3. What tensions arise between standardized hospitality service and local cultural representation, and how do front desk staff manage these tensions in their everyday work?

By answering these questions, the study contributes to tourism and hospitality scholarship by shifting attention from tourists, destinations, and communities to frontline employees as professional and cultural subjects. Practically, it offers implications for staff training, human resource development, and sustainable destination management in culturally diverse eco-accommodation settings

2. Literature Review

2.1. Eco-accommodation in Northwest Vietnam as a cultural-service setting

Eco-accommodation in Northwest Vietnam should not be viewed merely as an environmentally oriented form of lodging. In this region, where mountainous geography, ethnic diversity, local livelihoods, and community-based tourism are closely intertwined, eco-lodges, homestays, and community-based guesthouses operate as cultural-service spaces. They provide accommodation, but they also mediate encounters between visitors and local landscapes, customs, languages, foodways, and everyday practices. The value of eco-accommodation therefore lies not only in physical facilities or environmental claims, but also in how local culture and hospitality are made meaningful through service work.

Recent studies on Vietnamese tourism provide an important foundation for this view. Ho and Nguyen (2025) show that community-based tourism among ethnic minorities in Dien Bien and Cao Bang can support local economic growth when tourism development is connected to local participation and cultural resources. Similarly, Nguyen, Nguyen, and Thanh (2024) argue that sustainable tourism development depends on a combination of destination resources, infrastructure, governance, and community participation. These studies suggest that sustainability in tourism is not only ecological, but also social, cultural, and institutional.

This orientation is consistent with Vietnam's policy framework. The *Law on Tourism No. 09/2017/QH14* provides the legal basis for tourism activities, services, and accommodation operations (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2017),

while Decision No. 509/QĐ-TTg reinforces sustainable tourism development and regional planning for the 2021–2030 period, with a vision to 2045 (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2024). However, both academic and policy discussions often focus on destinations, communities, tourists, and development outcomes. Less attention has been paid to the frontline workers who translate sustainability, locality, and cultural value into actual guest experiences.

2.2. Front desk staff as professional and cultural intermediaries

Front desk work is commonly associated with operational duties such as welcoming guests, managing reservations, providing information, solving problems, and coordinating services. In eco-accommodation establishments, however, this role becomes more culturally complex. Front desk staff are not only service employees; they are also interpreters of place, mediators of host–guest expectations, and representatives of both the accommodation establishment and the destination. The front desk is thus a threshold space where professionalism, local culture, and visitor expectations meet.

Research on host–tourist interaction in Vietnam helps illuminate this role. Nguyen, Murphy, Chen, and Pearce (2024) emphasize the importance of ethnic villagers’ voices in understanding tourism encounters, especially where cultural misunderstanding, unequal expectations, and community concerns may emerge. Although their study focuses on villagers rather than front desk employees, it is relevant because front desk staff often stand at the point where such tensions must be explained, softened, or resolved. They help guests understand local practices while also protecting the dignity and expectations of the host community.

Cross-cultural service encounters further complicate this work. Nguyen, Yankholmes, Ladkin, and Osman (2025) show that hospitality encounters in Vietnam are shaped by national stereotypes and culturally framed expectations. This means that front desk staff do not serve guests in a neutral environment. They must manage assumptions about politeness, service style, communication, efficiency, and cultural difference. In eco-accommodation, this task is even more demanding because guests may expect staff to be both professionally competent and culturally “authentic.” Front desk staff therefore occupy a boundary position: they translate services, but they also translate culture.

2.3. Professional cultural identity in hospitality work

Professional cultural identity refers to how front desk staff understand themselves simultaneously as hospitality workers and cultural representatives in everyday service practice. This identity is not fixed by job descriptions or training manuals. It is formed through repeated interactions with guests, colleagues, managers, and local communities, as well as through the expectations attached to tourism in culturally distinctive destinations.

In conventional hospitality settings, professionalism is often associated with efficiency, politeness, responsiveness, emotional control, and service quality. These qualities remain important in eco-accommodation, but they are insufficient. In Northwest Vietnam, front desk staff may also be expected to explain local customs, recommend community-based activities, communicate environmental values, and present local hospitality in ways that visitors can understand. Their professional identity is therefore inseparable from cultural representation.

Quang and Vo-Thanh (2025) argue that tourism and hospitality development in Vietnam must be understood through the country’s specific social, cultural, economic, and institutional conditions. This perspective challenges the simple application of universal hospitality standards to local tourism settings. Likewise, Walia (2021) highlights that community-based tourism involves local participation, cultural representation, visitor management, and benefit sharing. These issues directly shape the workplace in which front desk staff construct their professional cultural identity.

Such identity is negotiated rather than simply possessed. This negotiation can also be understood through the lens of emotional labor and interactional performance. In hospitality work, employees are often required to manage not only what they do, but also how they feel, speak, and appear in front of guests. Emotional labor refers to the regulation of feeling and expression in order to produce an appropriate service encounter, while interactional performance highlights how individuals present themselves differently across social situations (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983). For front desk staff in eco-accommodation, this means that their work identity is enacted through controlled politeness, calm responses to complaints, culturally appropriate explanations, and the ability to appear both professionally competent and locally authentic. A receptionist may need to appear modern, skilled, and service-oriented while also being locally grounded and culturally expressive. They may be trained to satisfy guests, yet feel responsible for preserving local norms, avoiding cultural simplification, and maintaining the dignity of the community. These tensions make front

desk staff analytically important because they reveal how the ideals of sustainable and culturally based tourism are lived in everyday work.

This study therefore understands professional cultural identity as an interactional and affective process. It is interactional because staff continuously present themselves differently across guest encounters, managerial expectations, and community relationships. It is affective because staff must regulate tone, patience, facial expression, and emotional response in order to maintain hospitality even when facing complaint, misunderstanding, or cultural discomfort. This theoretical position allows the study to analyze front desk work as identity work, not only as service performance.

2.4. Authenticity, guest experience, and cultural performance

Eco-accommodation depends strongly on the promise of authenticity. Guests often choose homestays, eco-lodges, and community-based guesthouses because they expect experiences closer to local life than those offered by standardized hotels. Yet authenticity is not simply given. It is produced through architecture, food, language, storytelling, gestures, service style, and host–guest interaction. Front desk staff are deeply involved in this production because they guide how guests interpret the accommodation, the community, and the destination.

Quang, Tran, Sthapit, and Garrod (2025) show that guest satisfaction and dissatisfaction in rural homestays are closely related to service quality, host interaction, authenticity, and perceived experiential value. Their findings indicate the importance of frontline service work, but they also reveal a limitation of guest-centered analysis. When research focuses mainly on satisfaction, it may overlook the labor required to create the feeling of authenticity. Front desk staff may have to perform warmth, patience, cultural knowledge, flexibility, and emotional control so that guests experience the stay as both professional and locally meaningful.

This pressure is not merely technical; it is cultural and ethical. Nguyen, Phan, Doan, Chau, and Doan (2025) argue that tourism-related cultural revitalization should be understood from the perspectives of local and Indigenous actors rather than treating culture as a product for visitor consumption. This insight is crucial for the present study. Front desk staff may participate in cultural representation, but they also make everyday judgments about what to explain, what to protect, what to simplify, and how to respond when guests misunderstand local culture. Their work therefore involves not only service delivery, but also cultural judgment.

2.5. Ethnography and everyday identity negotiation

An ethnographic approach is appropriate because professional cultural identity is produced in everyday practice. Surveys or managerial evaluations may show what staff are expected to do, but they are less able to capture how staff make sense of their roles in specific service situations. Ethnography allows close attention to ordinary but meaningful details: how staff greet guests, explain customs, switch languages, handle complaints, negotiate with managers, and talk about their work. This makes ethnography suitable for examining identity as an interactional accomplishment, where staff continuously adjust their speech, emotions, gestures, and role performance according to the situation. This focus is consistent with recent tourism studies that emphasize local voices, situated interaction, and Indigenous perspectives in understanding cultural encounters (Nguyen et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2025).

For this study, everyday practice is not background information; it is the core site of analysis. Professional cultural identity becomes visible when front desk staff recommend a local market, explain a cultural rule, ask guests to respect community norms, translate between visitors and local people, or manage uncomfortable encounters. These moments show how staff move between being service providers, cultural interpreters, and local representatives.

The ethnographic lens also prevents a narrow managerial reading of front desk work. Instead of treating staff only as instruments of guest satisfaction, it allows them to be understood as social actors whose work is shaped by biography, locality, aspiration, pressure, cultural belonging, and moral responsibility. This perspective helps shift the analysis from service performance alone to the everyday identity work through which hospitality labor becomes culturally meaningful.

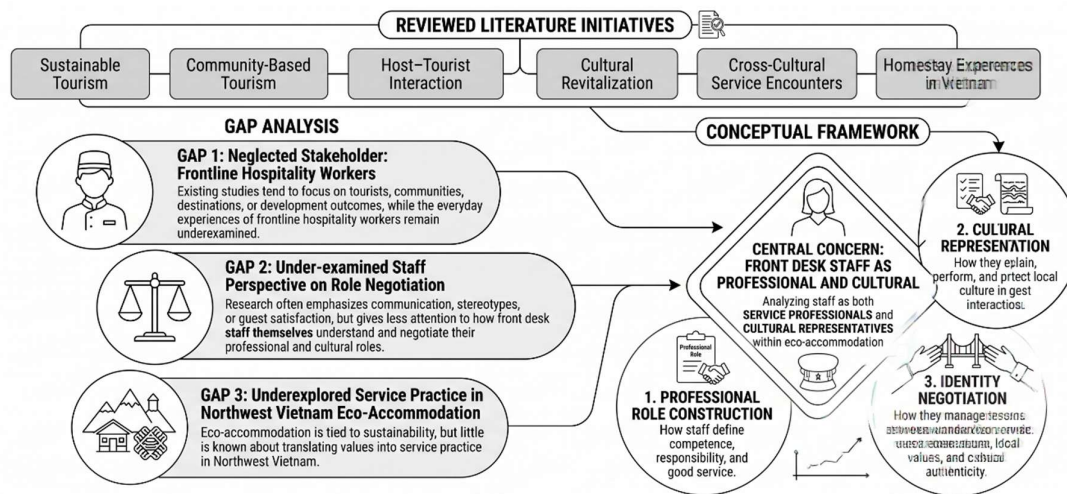
2.6. Research gap and conceptual orientation

The reviewed literature offers valuable insights into sustainable tourism, community-based tourism, host–tourist interaction, cultural revitalization, cross-cultural service encounters, and homestay experiences in Vietnam. However, three gaps remain. First, existing studies tend to focus on tourists, communities, destinations, or development

outcomes, while the everyday experiences of frontline hospitality workers remain underexamined. Second, research on service encounters often emphasizes communication, stereotypes, or guest satisfaction, but gives less attention to how front desk staff themselves understand and negotiate their professional and cultural roles. Third, although eco-accommodation is closely tied to sustainability and local culture, little is known about how these values are translated into service practice in the Northwest region of Vietnam.

This study addresses these gaps by examining front desk staff as both professional and cultural subjects. It focuses on three interrelated dimensions: professional role construction, or how staff define competence, responsibility, and good service; cultural representation, or how they explain, perform, and protect local culture in guest interactions; and identity negotiation, or how they manage tensions between standardized hospitality service, guest expectations, local values, and cultural authenticity.

Figure 1. Research Gaps and Conceptual Framework of the Study



Source: Compiled by the author, 2026

The central concern of this study is therefore not eco-accommodation as a business model alone, nor sustainable tourism as a policy agenda alone. Rather, it is the everyday identity work through which front desk staff become both service professionals and cultural representatives within eco-accommodation establishments in Northwest Vietnam. This focus brings frontline workers into the center of analysis and clarifies how professional self-understanding is formed, performed, and negotiated in the lived realities of sustainable tourism.

3. Case and Methodology

3.1. Research case and design

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic case study design to examine the professional cultural identity of front desk staff at eco-accommodation establishments in Northwest Vietnam. The region is selected because eco-lodges, homestays, and community-based guesthouses are closely connected with mountainous landscapes, ethnic diversity, local livelihoods, and culturally immersive tourism. This selection is consistent with recent research showing that community-based tourism among ethnic minorities in northern Vietnam is shaped by local participation, cultural resources, and regional development conditions (Ho & Nguyen, 2025). In this setting, the front desk is not merely an administrative service point; it is a boundary space where guests, staff, managers, local communities, and destination meanings meet. Fieldwork was conducted in small-scale eco-accommodation settings where reception work was often spatially and socially open rather than separated behind a formal hotel counter. In several establishments, the front desk was located near shared dining areas, courtyards, or common rooms, allowing staff to move between administrative tasks, guest conversation, local explanation, and informal coordination with hosts. This spatial arrangement made front desk work especially suitable for observing how professional service and cultural mediation overlapped in practice.

Ethnography is appropriate because professional cultural identity is formed through everyday practice rather than through job descriptions alone. The study therefore focuses on how front desk staff understand, perform, and negotiate their roles through routine service encounters, cultural explanations, emotional mediation, and responses to guest expectations. This methodological focus also reflects the importance of local voices and situated host–guest interactions in understanding culturally sensitive tourism encounters (Nguyen et al., 2024).

3.2. Participants and data collection

The study is based on fieldwork conducted over eight weeks at selected eco-accommodation establishments in Northwest Vietnam. Data were collected from 18 front desk staff and six contextual informants, including accommodation managers, local hosts, and community members.

Table 1. Participant profile

Participant group	Number	Role in the study
Front desk staff	18	Main participants; provided accounts of service work, cultural interpretation, and identity negotiation
Accommodation managers	3	Provided workplace expectations and service management perspectives
Local hosts/community members	3	Provided contextual views on local norms, community boundaries, and cultural representation

Source: Compiled by the author, 2026.

Data collection combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Observation focused on guest greetings, check-in conversations, information giving, cultural explanations, complaint handling, and staff interactions with managers and local actors. Interviews explored how staff defined good service, understood local hospitality, represented culture, and managed tensions between standardized hospitality, guest satisfaction, and community values. Field notes recorded workplace routines, informal conversations, spatial arrangements, and researcher reflections. During fieldwork, particular attention was given to repeated front desk situations rather than isolated incidents, including check-in conversations, guest complaints, explanations of local rules, and staff responses to culturally sensitive requests. These recurring situations allowed the researcher to observe how professional cultural identity was enacted in practice, not only described in interviews.

Table 2. Data sources and analytical use

Data source	Scope	Analytical use
Participant observation	Eight weeks at selected eco-accommodation establishments	To observe daily front desk routines, guest encounters, and cultural mediation
Semi-structured interviews	18 front desk staff	To examine how staff understand and describe their professional cultural identity
Contextual interviews	6 managers, local hosts, or community members	To understand workplace expectations and community values
Fieldnotes	Recorded throughout fieldwork	To capture informal interactions, spatial context, emotional atmosphere, and researcher reflections

Source: Compiled by the author, 2026.

3.3. Data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethics

Data were analyzed thematically around three dimensions: professional role construction, cultural representation, and identity negotiation. Professional role construction refers to how staff define competence, responsibility, and good

service. Cultural representation concerns how they explain, perform, or protect local culture in guest interactions. Identity negotiation refers to how they manage tensions between service standards, guest expectations, local norms, and the authenticity associated with eco-accommodation.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across observation, interviews, and field notes, supported by thick description of workplace and cultural contexts. Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymization of participants and establishments, and careful handling of sensitive information related to ethnic identity, community norms, and workplace tensions. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through reflective field notes after each observation session. Particular attention was paid to moments when the researcher's assumptions about professional service, language use, or cultural explanation might have influenced how interactions were interpreted.

Coding was conducted in two stages. The first stage identified recurring meanings in participants' accounts and observed practices. The second stage grouped these codes into broader themes corresponding to professional role construction, cultural representation, and identity negotiation.

4. Results & Analysis

4.1. Overview of findings

The ethnographic analysis shows that front desk staff at eco-accommodation establishments in Northwest Vietnam construct their professional cultural identity through everyday service encounters, where hospitality work is shaped by cultural expectations and cross-cultural interaction (Nguyen et al., 2025). They understood themselves not merely as receptionists, but as service workers, cultural interpreters, emotional mediators, and representatives of the destination. Three themes emerged from the data: locally responsive professionalism, everyday cultural interpretation, and identity negotiation between service standards, authenticity, and community values. These themes structure the analysis and correspond directly to the study's three research questions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes mapped to research questions

Research question	Main theme	Analytical focus	Evidence source
RQ1. How do front desk staff at eco-accommodation establishments in Northwest Vietnam understand their professional cultural identity?	Locally responsive professionalism	How staff understand professional cultural identity	Interviews, observation
RQ2. How do they perform and negotiate this identity in everyday interactions with guests, colleagues, local communities, and accommodation managers?	Everyday cultural interpretation	How staff perform identity in daily service encounters	Fieldnotes, interviews
RQ3. What tensions arise between standardized hospitality service and local cultural representation, and how do front desk staff manage these tensions in their everyday work?	Identity negotiation	Tensions and strategies in balancing service, culture, and community values	Observation, interviews, fieldnotes

Source: Compiled by the author, 2026.

4.2. Locally responsive professionalism

In response to RQ1, the findings show that front desk staff understood professionalism not only as efficiency, politeness, or procedural accuracy, but also as the ability to respond appropriately to the local context. Check-in, booking management, information provision, and complaint handling were important, yet staff repeatedly linked "good service" with knowledge of local customs, environmental conditions, community expectations, and guest

sensitivities. This finding is consistent with the view that tourism and hospitality development in Vietnam should be understood through specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts rather than through universal service standards alone (Quang & Vo-Thanh, 2025).

One receptionist explained this dual responsibility as follows: *“If I only give the room key and smile, that is not enough here. Guests ask about the village, the food, the road, the people. I have to explain so that they feel welcome but also understand where they are”* (Interview excerpt, front desk staff).

This account shows that professional identity was constructed through three closely related qualities: service competence, local knowledge, and situational judgment. Staff needed to solve problems quickly, but they also needed to know how to explain the place. They needed to satisfy guests, but not by ignoring local norms. Professionalism was therefore understood as locally responsive service. This was also visible during observation. During one morning shift after overnight rain, a receptionist moved between checking a booking, explaining a delayed vehicle transfer, and advising guests not to take a muddy trekking route without a local guide. The staff member did not present the delay as a service failure, but linked it to road safety, weather conditions, and local knowledge of the terrain. The episode shows that locally responsive professionalism required technical coordination, environmental awareness, and careful communication at the same time.

This finding challenges a narrow view of front desk work as routine administrative labor. In eco-accommodation settings, front desk staff are positioned at the boundary between the guest world and the host community. Their professional identity is built through the ability to make this boundary understandable, respectful, and workable. Such a role reflects the broader logic of community-based tourism, where visitor management, cultural representation, and community values are closely connected (Walia, 2021).

4.3. Everyday cultural interpretation

In response to RQ2, the study found that front desk staff performed their professional cultural identity through ordinary service practices. Cultural representation did not occur only in staged performances or formal tourism activities. Rather, it appeared in small but meaningful interactions: greeting guests, explaining local rules, recommending food, describing village life, arranging community-based activities, interpreting customs, and responding to questions. Through these everyday practices, staff translated local culture into forms that guests could understand within the service encounter. This finding aligns with research emphasizing that host–tourist interaction in culturally diverse destinations must be understood through local voices, everyday negotiation, and community concerns (Nguyen et al., 2024).

A fieldnote from an evening check-in illustrates this point: *“A group of guests asked why they should avoid loud music after dinner. The receptionist did not simply say it was a rule. She explained that nearby households wake early for farming and that quiet evenings are part of village life. The guests nodded and lowered the speaker volume”* (Fieldnote excerpt). In another observed interaction, a receptionist corrected a guest who wanted to photograph an elderly local woman without asking. The staff member did not openly criticize the guest. Instead, she smiled, lowered her voice, and said that “people here are happy to welcome visitors, but they should be asked first.” The guest then put down the phone and asked the receptionist to help translate the request. This small exchange showed how cultural interpretation often occurred quietly, through tactful correction rather than formal explanation.

This example shows that front desk staff were not merely enforcing rules. They were turning local norms into cultural understanding. Such work required tact because direct correction could make guests feel blamed, while silence could lead to disrespect toward local practices. Cultural interpretation, therefore, was not a simple act of information delivery; it was a careful form of mediation between guest expectations and community values. *“When guests complain, I cannot show that I am tired or uncomfortable. I have to explain slowly, because if I react too quickly, they may think the place is unprofessional or the local people are unfriendly”* (Interview excerpt, front desk staff). This supports the argument that tourism-related cultural representation should be approached from the perspective of local actors rather than treating culture simply as a product for visitor consumption (Nguyen et al., 2025).

The analysis also shows that cultural interpretation was selective. Staff did not explain everything to every guest. They adjusted their explanations according to the guest’s curiosity, behavior, language ability, and cultural sensitivity. Some practices were simplified to make them accessible, while others were left unspoken to avoid turning local culture into spectacle. This selectivity reveals that staff were active cultural interpreters, not passive transmitters of fixed traditions.

Such selective interpretation is also important because guest evaluations of rural accommodation experiences are closely linked to perceived authenticity, host interaction, and the quality of cultural experience (Quang et al., 2025).

To clarify how cultural interpretation fits within the broader construction of professional cultural identity, Table 4 summarizes the three analytical dimensions used in this study. These dimensions connect the observed service practices with the conceptual framework developed in the methodology section.

Table 4. Dimensions of professional cultural identity

Dimension	Meaning in this study	Ethnographic indicators
Professional construction	role How staff define competence, responsibility, and good service	Problem solving, calm communication, service coordination
Cultural representation	How staff explain, perform, or protect local culture	Explaining customs, recommending local activities, interpreting village norms
Identity negotiation	How staff manage competing expectations	Soft refusal, selective explanation, emotional mediation, boundary protection

Source: Compiled by the author, 2026.

The three dimensions show that this identity is not a single role that front desk staff simply possess; it is a layered identity produced through practice. In eco-accommodation settings, staff must first establish themselves as competent service workers, because professionalism remains the basic condition for guest trust. However, competence alone is insufficient in Northwest Vietnam, where accommodation is closely tied to local culture, community life, and the meaning of place. Staff are also expected to make culture understandable without reducing it to a simplified tourism product. This requires judgment: they must decide what to explain, how to explain it, and when certain cultural meanings should be protected rather than displayed. More importantly, identity emerges most clearly in moments of tension. When guest expectations conflict with local norms, staff cannot rely only on fixed service procedures. They must negotiate between hospitality standards, commercial pressure, cultural sensitivity, and responsibility toward the community. Thus, their professional cultural identity is best understood as a form of everyday boundary work. They become professional not by separating themselves from local culture, but by learning how to translate, manage, and protect that culture within service encounters. This makes front desk work central to the lived operation of eco-accommodation.

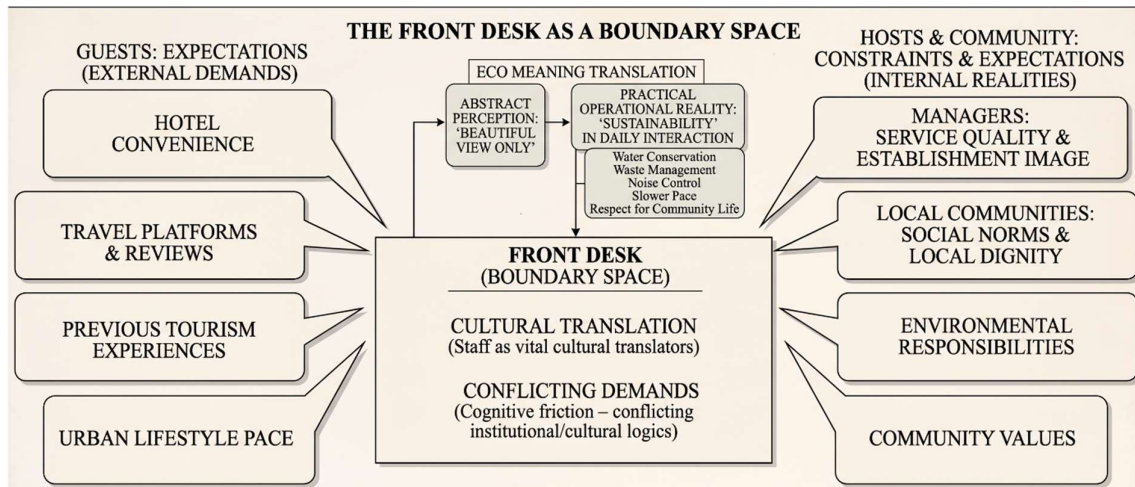
4.4. The front desk as a boundary space

The front desk functioned as a boundary space where different expectations met. Guests often arrived with expectations shaped by hotels, travel platforms, online reviews, and previous tourism experiences. Managers expected staff to protect service quality and the image of the establishment. Local communities expected tourism to respect social norms, environmental responsibilities, and local dignity. This boundary position reflects the complexity of cross-cultural service encounters in Vietnam, where hospitality interactions are shaped by cultural expectations, assumptions, and different understandings of appropriate service behavior (Nguyen et al., 2025).

This boundary position made front desk work culturally demanding. Staff had to translate not only words, but also expectations. When guests expected hotel-like convenience in remote eco-accommodation settings, staff had to explain local limitations without appearing unprofessional. When guests misunderstood customs, staff had to correct them without causing embarrassment. When business priorities conflicted with community values, staff had to maintain balance.

As one staff member noted: *“Sometimes guests think eco means beautiful view only. But for us, it also means saving water, respecting the village, and accepting that things are slower than in the city”* (Interview excerpt, front desk staff). This statement shows how eco-accommodation creates a specific form of professional identity. Staff must make the meaning of “eco” practical in daily interaction. They do this not through abstract sustainability language, but through explanations about water use, noise, waste, local routines, and respect for community life.

Figure 2. Empirical model of the front desk as a boundary space



Source: Compiled by the author, 2026.

This empirical model illustrates the front desk not merely as a physical service point, but as a boundary space where different service and community expectations meet. Positioned at the intersection of external consumer demands and internal community constraints, front desk personnel function as cultural translators. This interpretation is consistent with recent research showing that hospitality service encounters in Vietnam are shaped by cultural expectations, assumptions, and differences in how appropriate service behavior is understood (Nguyen et al., 2025).

The core operational challenge lies in the tension between urban consumerism—characterized by expectations of hotel-like convenience and rapid service—and local eco-centric realities, which require resource conservation, waste management, and a slower operational pace. Staff must constantly explain what sustainability means in daily practice, converting it into practical daily interactions without causing guest embarrassment or compromising service quality. Consequently, the front desk acts as a mediating point that protects local dignity and environmental integrity while neutralizing friction, establishing this repeated emotional and practical negotiation as the foundation of professional identity in eco-tourism.

4.5. Tensions in identity negotiation

In response to RQ3, the findings show that staff identity negotiation was shaped by recurring tensions embedded in everyday front desk work. These tensions were not exceptional incidents; they were routine situations through which staff had to balance professional service, local meanings, business demands, and responsibility toward place.

The most visible tension appeared when guests brought hotel-like assumptions into eco-accommodation settings. Some expected immediate service, stable internet, hot water, flexible meal times, or quick transportation, while staff had to work within the realities of mountainous tourism, including weather changes, limited infrastructure, village routines, and environmental constraints. Such situations reflect the broader complexity of hospitality encounters in Vietnam, where appropriate service behavior is shaped by cultural assumptions and different expectations (Q. Nguyen et al., 2025). Staff therefore had to help guests reinterpret inconvenience not simply as poor service, but as part of the local eco-accommodation context.

Another tension concerned authenticity. Guests often sought “authentic” experiences, yet those experiences had to be organized, interpreted, and sometimes softened before they became accessible. Staff had to present local culture in ways that were meaningful without turning it into a staged or simplified product. This tension matters because rural accommodation experiences are strongly shaped by host interaction, perceived authenticity, and the quality of cultural engagement (Quang et al., 2025).

A further tension emerged when commercial service demands conflicted with local boundaries. One fieldnote captured this during a guest request for an immediate private visit to a nearby household: “The guest asked whether the receptionist could arrange a visit to a nearby family immediately. The receptionist paused, then explained that visits needed to be agreed in advance because the family might be busy or uncomfortable receiving guests without preparation” (Fieldnote excerpt). The pause before responding was analytically important. It showed that the receptionist was not simply retrieving a rule, but assessing the social consequences of the request. In that moment,

professional service required delay, explanation, and protection of household privacy. This episode shows that staff were not simply fulfilling requests; they were judging whether a request was culturally appropriate. Such judgment is consistent with the view that cultural representation in tourism should be grounded in local perspectives rather than treating culture as a product for visitor consumption (T.-S. T. Nguyen et al., 2025).

Overall, identity negotiation was both practical and ethical. Staff had to support the business while safeguarding the cultural and social conditions that made eco-accommodation meaningful. Their professionalism was therefore formed not only through politeness and responsiveness, but also through the capacity to redirect expectations, set limits, and protect local boundaries while maintaining hospitality.

4.6. Strategies of negotiation

The findings show that front desk staff did not rely on fixed service scripts when responding to these tensions. Their strategies were grounded in situated judgment: the ability to read the guest, the situation, the local context, and the possible consequences of each response. This judgment made their work both professional and cultural. Staff maintained service quality, but they also protected the social and moral boundaries of the destination.

A central strategy was soft explanation. Staff avoided direct refusal whenever possible. Instead of saying that a request could not be met, they explained the local reason behind a limitation: weather, road access, water use, electricity, meal timing, or village routines. This strategy allowed them to preserve politeness while reframing inconvenience as part of the accommodation's ecological and local setting. In this way, explanation became more than communication; it became a way of converting potential dissatisfaction into contextual understanding.

Staff also used selective cultural translation. They adjusted explanations according to guests' interest, behavior, and sensitivity. Local customs were made understandable, but not overexposed or simplified to the point of spectacle. This strategy shows that cultural representation involved judgment about what should be shared, adapted, or protected. It also positioned staff as active interpreters rather than passive transmitters of culture.

Another important strategy was boundary protection. When guest satisfaction conflicted with household privacy, village routines, environmental responsibilities, or local dignity, staff redirected requests, delayed arrangements, or limited access. These actions were not failures of hospitality. Rather, they showed a form of professionalism grounded in responsibility toward the host community. In this sense, front desk staff acted as cultural gatekeepers who made tourism possible without allowing it to override local norms.

Staff also relied on emotional mediation to manage complaints, confusion, and disappointment. They absorbed pressure while maintaining calm, politeness, and hospitality. Seen through the lens of emotional labor, this mediation was not merely a personal communication skill; it was a professional requirement through which staff regulated frustration, uncertainty, and cultural discomfort in order to maintain the expected atmosphere of hospitality (Hochschild, 1983). Their calmness, patience, and careful wording became part of the identity work through which they appeared both service-oriented and culturally responsible. One staff member described this emotional work as follows: *"When guests complain, I cannot show that I am tired or uncomfortable. I have to explain slowly, because if I react too quickly, they may think the place is unprofessional or the local people are unfriendly"* (Interview excerpt, front desk staff). This account shows that emotional control was not simply an individual personality trait, but a professional practice tied to the public image of the establishment and the host community. A manager described the same expectation more directly: *"At the front desk, one impatient answer can make guests think the whole village is unfriendly. So staff have to be careful, even when the problem is not their fault"* (Interview excerpt, accommodation manager). This comment shows that emotional mediation was not only an individual burden. It was also an organizational expectation placed on front desk staff because their behavior was taken to represent the establishment and, at times, the wider host community.

These strategies demonstrate that identity negotiation was not an occasional response to difficult guests, but a routine feature of front desk work. In practice, this meant slowing down the interaction. A rule was rarely stated as a rule only. Staff usually added a reason, a local example, or a softer explanation so that guests could accept the limitation without feeling blamed. Their professional cultural identity was therefore produced through continuous acts of explanation, translation, protection, and emotional regulation.

Table 5. Tensions and negotiation strategies

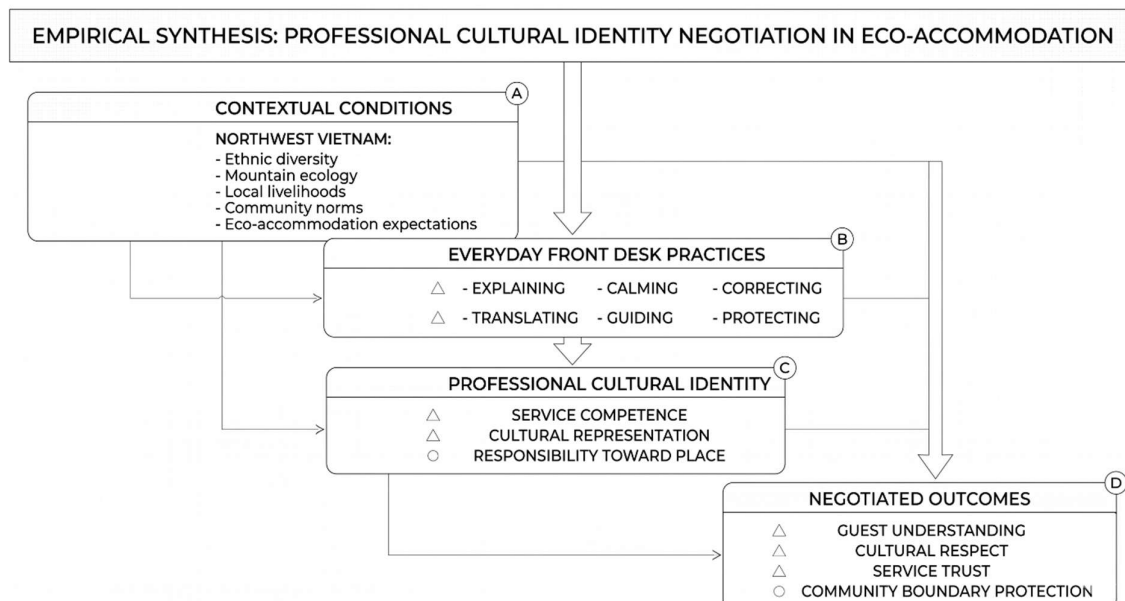
Tension	How it appears in front desk work	Negotiation strategy
Guest comfort vs. local conditions	Guests expect hotel-like convenience in remote eco-settings	Soft explanation
Authenticity vs. tourist expectation	Guests seek “authentic” culture but may simplify it	Selective cultural translation
Commercial service vs. community values	Guest satisfaction may conflict with local norms	Boundary protection
Emotional pressure vs. professional calm	Staff absorb complaints and maintain hospitality	Emotional mediation

Source: Compiled by the author, 2026.

4.7. Analytical synthesis: An empirical model of professional cultural identity negotiation

The findings can be synthesized into an empirical model of professional cultural identity negotiation. The model is not proposed as a prior analytical framework; rather, it emerges from the ethnographic findings. It shows how front desk staff’s professional cultural identity is produced through the relationship between local conditions, everyday service practices, identity work, and negotiated outcomes.

Figure 3. Empirical synthesis of professional cultural identity negotiation



Source: Author’s synthesis from ethnographic findings, 2026.

The model clarifies the central finding of the study: professional cultural identity is not something front desk staff simply possess, nor is it fully prescribed by job descriptions or service standards. It is continuously produced through everyday boundary work. Staff become professional not by separating themselves from local culture, but by learning how to communicate, manage, and protect it within hospitality encounters. In doing so, they turn accommodation into encounter, service into interpretation, and local culture into a negotiated guest experience.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the professional cultural identity of front desk staff at eco-accommodation establishments in Northwest Vietnam through an ethnographic approach. By focusing on everyday service encounters, it moved beyond

a conventional view of front desk work as administrative or operational labor. The findings show that front desk staff are professional and cultural actors who translate local meanings, mediate guest expectations, protect community values, and make eco-accommodation socially meaningful. Three main findings emerged:

- Staff understood professionalism not only as efficiency, politeness, and service accuracy, but also as local knowledge, cultural sensitivity, emotional control, and responsibility toward place. This supports the view that tourism development in ethnic minority and community-based contexts depends on cultural value, local participation, and the connection between tourism and community life (Ho & Nguyen, 2025).

- Staff performed their professional cultural identity through ordinary service practices such as greeting guests, explaining local rules, recommending food, arranging activities, responding to complaints, and correcting inappropriate behavior. These practices confirm that cultural representation in eco-accommodation is produced in daily interaction rather than only through staged tourism products.

- Staff negotiated tensions between service expectations, authenticity, business needs, and local boundaries through soft explanation, selective cultural translation, emotional mediation, and boundary protection. This extends guest-centered studies of rural homestay experiences by showing that perceived authenticity and satisfaction depend heavily on the cultural and emotional labor of frontline staff (Quang et al., 2025).

The study contributes to tourism and hospitality scholarship by bringing frontline workers into the center of analysis. While much research on sustainable and community-based tourism focuses on destinations, tourists, communities, or development outcomes, this study highlights the everyday labor through which sustainability, authenticity, and cultural value are made practical. Eco-accommodation depends not only on environmental design or community participation, but also on the situated judgments of staff who connect guests with place.

Practically, the findings suggest that training for front desk staff should go beyond technical service skills. It should include cultural interpretation, guest communication, conflict mediation, environmental awareness, and ethical representation of local communities. Managers should recognize front desk staff as cultural mediators rather than treating them only as service employees. Supporting this role can improve guest experience while protecting local dignity, community boundaries, and the authenticity of eco-accommodation.

This study is limited by its qualitative and context-specific design. Its aim is not statistical generalization, but analytical depth. Future research could compare front desk staff across different regions of Vietnam, examine differences between locally owned and externally managed eco-accommodation establishments, or explore how ethnicity, language ability, gender, and professional training shape hospitality identity work.

Overall, the study concludes that front desk staff are central to the lived operation of eco-accommodation in Northwest Vietnam. Their professional cultural identity is formed not outside local culture, but through continuous engagement with it. By explaining, translating, calming, guiding, correcting, and protecting, they turn accommodation into encounter, service into interpretation, and local culture into a negotiated guest experience. In this sense, the front desk is not merely a point of service; it is one of the key sites where sustainable tourism becomes real in everyday practice.

Funding Details

This research received no external funding.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that they have no known financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix 1. Illustrative coding process

Raw data excerpt	Initial code	Analytical theme
“If I only give the room key and smile, that is not enough here.”	Service beyond reception	Locally responsive professionalism

“Guests think eco means beautiful view only.”	Explaining eco-practice	Everyday interpretation	cultural
“Visits needed to be agreed in advance.”	Protecting household boundaries	Identity negotiation	
“I cannot show that I am tired or uncomfortable.”	Emotional self-regulation	Emotional mediation	

Source: Author’s synthesis from interview excerpts, fieldnotes, and thematic coding, 2026.

References

1. Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.
2. Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
3. Ho, X. L., & Nguyen, Q. V. (2025). Assessment of influencing factors and development directions for economic growth through community-based tourism of ethnic minorities: A case study of Dien Bien and Cao Bang, Vietnam. *International Journal of Geoheritage and Parks*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgeop.2025.04.001>
4. National Assembly of Vietnam. (2017). *Law on Tourism No. 09/2017/QH14*.
5. Nguyen, K. T. T., Murphy, L., Chen, T., & Pearce, P. L. (2024). Let’s listen: The voices of ethnic villagers in identifying host–tourist interaction issues in the Central Highlands, Vietnam. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2023.2259512>
6. Nguyen, Q., Yankholmes, A., Ladkin, A., & Osman, H. (2025). National stereotypes in the cross-cultural service encounter: Empirical evidence from Vietnam. *Tourism Review*, 80(7), 1413–1426. <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-09-2023-0612>
7. Nguyen, T. D., Nguyen, N. T., & Thanh, N. N. (2024). Factors affecting sustainable tourism development: Evidence from the Central Highlands of Vietnam. *SAGE Open*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241240816>
8. Nguyen, T.-S. T., Phan, D.-H. T., Doan, D.-H. L., Chau, M.-N. T., & Doan, T.-T. T. J. (2025). Cultural revitalization for tourism development from an Indigenous perspective: The case of Ta Oi people, A Luoi District, Thua Thien Hue province, Vietnam. *Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism*, 4, Article 1510934. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsut.2025.1510934>
9. Prime Minister of Vietnam. (2024). *Decision No. 509/QD-TTg dated June 13, 2024 approving the tourism system master plan for the 2021–2030 period, with a vision to 2045*.
10. Quang, T. D., Tran, N. M. P., Sthapit, E., & Garrod, B. (2025). Exploring guests’ satisfaction and dissatisfaction with homestay experiences: A netnographic study of a rural tourism destination in Vietnam. *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15256480.2024.2350005>
11. Quang, T. D., & Vo-Thanh, T. (Eds.). (2025). *Routledge handbook of tourism and hospitality development in Vietnam*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003464082>
12. Walia, S. K. (Ed.). (2021). *The Routledge handbook of community-based tourism management: Concepts, issues, and implications*. Routledge.