Reframing gender in rural tourism: a cross-national analysis of official websites in the Mekong Subregion

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Introduction: The rural tourism industry has experienced significant growth in the Mekong subregion, with women playing a crucial role in its development. This sector empowers women by enhancing their societal status and amplifying their voices.

Methods: This study examines the representation of women in rural tourism across Mekong subregion countries, focusing on visual and textual content from Destination Marketing Organization (DMOs) websites. It further assesses the alignment of these portrayals with government-led gender empowerment initiatives. Using content analysis, this research evaluates DMOs websites from the Mekong Subregion to explore comparative insights into gendered representations.

Results: The findings reveal disparities in how men and women are portrayed: women are frequently depicted as active contributors to rural tourism within economic and socio-cultural frameworks, while men, by contrast, are more prominently featured as customers and decision-makers in political contexts. The analysis indicates that textual content downplays gender issues compared to visuals. Additionally, Vietnam and Yunnan (China) prioritize female visibility in rural tourism development, while Laos and Myanmar exhibit more conservative representations. A notable finding is the presence of indirect governmental initiatives promoting gender balance across all websites.

Discussion: The study urges policymakers and DMOs to adopt intentional strategies for equitable gender representation, ensuring women's roles in rural tourism are both visible and empowered. It also calls for stronger alignment between tourism marketing and national gender policies in the region.

KEYWORDS

gender representation, rural tourism, textual information, visual information, official websites, Mekong Subregion, cross-national analysis

1 Introduction

The Mekong Subregion (GMS), encompassing Yunnan and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (China), Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage (Hai and Ngan, 2022), diverse ecosystems, and abundant natural resources (Lyu et al., 2013). Rural life in this region remains deeply intertwined with local communities' livelihoods and traditions (Lois and Kenneth, 2018). These characteristics have fostered the growth of rural tourism, which serves as a catalyst for local development and women's empowerment (Dung et al., 2023).

The tourism industry in the Mekong Subregion is projected to generate up to $7.62 billion in revenue (Statista, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e), accounting for approximately 5% of Southeast Asia's gross agricultural production value by 2025 (Statista, 2024a). Within this sector, agricultural tourism is a key driver of the region's competitive advantage (Biddulph, 2020; Mura and Sharif, 2015).

Recent studies highlight the pivotal role of women in rural tourism across the Mekong Subregion. For examples, in Cambodia, the social enterprise *Artisans Angkor* employs over 800 artisans, predominantly women, to preserve traditional handicrafts for tourism (Biddulph, 2020). Similarly, in Vietnam, women lead community-based tourism initiatives, such as homestays and culinary experiences, adding distinct value to the sector (Quang et al., 2024). In Yunnan (China), women manage homestay businesses (Jin et al., 2024) and educate tourists about the nutritional and culinary uses of geomushrooms (local edible fungi), enhancing visitor experiences while safeguarding local knowledge (Jin et al., 2024).

However, while tourism is a powerful driver of economic growth, it may initially exacerbate gender inequalities, particularly in the early stages of tourism development. In the Mekong River Basin region, the uneven distribution of tourism-related resources among communities risks widening existing gender disparities (Sithirith, 2021). Women from indigenous or ethnic minority communities often face additional barriers to accessing tourism benefits, leading to income and opportunity gaps within the industry (Adnyani et al., 2021).

Scholars emphasize that such inequalities demand further research and targeted initiatives to advance gender equality (Alarcón and Cole, 2019; Araújo-Vila et al., 2021; Bhatta and Ohe, 2020; Bianchi and Man, 2021). Crucially, achieving gender equality in tourism extends beyond increasing women's participation, which requires addressing systemic inequities, including representational biases in communication (Araújo-Vila et al., 2021; Zafar et al., 2024). Studies suggest that positive media portrayals of women in tourism can elevate their societal status (Dong and Khan, 2023; Panić et al., 2024) and that well-constructed destination images, including equitable gender representations—shape travelers' perceptions and visit intentions (Rodrigues et al., 2023). Media platforms also offer women opportunities to amplify their voices within the industry (Damavandi et al., 2022).

Yet research on rural tourism marketing reveals persistent gaps in gender representation. For instance, a study of industrial heritage tourism in Bergslagen, Sweden, identified male-centric narratives dominating media coverage, emphasizing men's roles in cultural preservation (Funk and Pashkevich, 2020). Similarly, an analysis of 394 travel advertisements on social media found pervasive gender stereotypes and biases that reinforce inequalities (Chhabra et al., 2011).

Investigating gender representation gaps in tourism communication enables researchers to advocate for more inclusive marketing strategies that accurately reflect women's contributions to rural tourism (Panić et al., 2024). Such analysis informs policymakers in designing targeted

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initiatives, such as training programs and funding for women entrepreneurs, to bolster women's participation (Dong and Khan, 2023). Additionally, examining media's role in shaping gender representations can help develop strategies to promote positive portrayals of women in rural tourism, challenging stereotypes and advancing equitable visibility (Fajri et al., 2022; Senyao and Ha, 2022).

Prior research employs diverse theoretical lenses to analyze tourism's gendered dynamics such as Feminist Political Ecology (Cole, 2017), the framework for revealing how women's exclusion from governance perpetuates marginalization in tourism planning. Meanwhile, Kuma and Godana's (2023) use Women and Development (WAD) approach to identify socio-cultural and economic barriers to empowerment in rural Ethiopia, while Jabeen et al. (2020) demonstrate its utility in evaluating policy interventions that strengthen women's agency in Pakistan's tourism sector. Parallel scholarship critiques gendered representations in destination marketing, from Marchi et al.'s (2023a,b) deconstruction of DMOs narratives in Europe to Suradin's (2017) analysis of Halal tourism's commodification of gender in Indonesia. However, these strands of research remain largely disconnected.

While media studies have extensively analyzed urban tourism narratives (Marchi et al., 2023b), rural tourism representations, particularly in the GMS, remain understudied in communication research (He and Mai, 2021; Nga, 2024) neglecting qualitative examinations of how media portrayals reinforce or disrupt traditional gender roles. As DMOs serve as powerful channels shaping tourist expectations and local self-perceptions (Lončarić et al., 2013; Omar et al., 2022) there is a critical need for studies that bridge theory and DMOs analysis to interrogate how rural tourism marketing in the GMS constructs gendered narratives.

This study investigates gender representation in GMS rural tourism marketing media through three primary objectives: (1) Critical Analysis: To examine how women's roles and contributions are portrayed in official tourism promotions (both visual and textual content); (2) Policy Alignment Assessment: To evaluate the congruence (or disparity) between these media representations and existing gender empowerment initiatives in the region; and (3) Framework Development: To construct an evaluative framework for improving equitable representation in tourism communication, offering actionable recommendations for DMOs and policymakers to enhance women's visibility and counter restrictive narratives in agritourism.

By integrating feminist media theory with destination communication studies, this research provides a critical analytical lens for current representation gaps and practical guidelines for gender-sensitive agritourism media in developing contexts. The findings will equip DMOs, policymakers, and media practitioners with evidence-based strategies to foster authentic, empowering portrayals of women in rural tourism development. This study addresses three key questions:

RQ1: To what extent do DMOs websites in the Mekong Subregion reflect gender-equitable representations in rural tourism?

RQ2: How visible are government/DMOs-led gender equality initiatives on these DMOs platforms?

RQ3: What actionable strategies can DMOs implement to improve gender media representation and advance SDG 5 (Gender Equality) goals?

2 Literature review

2.1 Gender equality in rural tourism in the Mekong Subregion

Gender equality is defined as a state where individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities (UNICEF, 2017). In tourism, gender equality is a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and multi-actor concept that extends beyond women's empowerment alone (Alarcón and Cole, 2019; Ferguson and Alarcón, 2015; Su et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). It encompasses equitable access to resources, decision-making processes, and opportunities across economic, political, and social spheres (Ferguson and Alarcón, 2015; Su et al., 2024). As a core pillar of sustainable development, gender equality is critical for the long-term viability of tourism (Alarcón and Cole, 2019; Su et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). The industry can enhance women's socioeconomic status by fostering employment and entrepreneurship (Peña-Sánchez et al., 2020; Su et al., 2024; UNWTO, 2010, 2022b; Zhang et al., 2022). In agritourism specifically, women have transcended traditional roles through improved social and economic standing (Sulaj and Themelko, 2024), assumed leadership positions, reshaping community dynamics (Mwinnoure and Dzitse, 2024). Consequently, the interplay between tourism and gender equality has garnered significant scholarly attention (Alarcón and Cole, 2019).

Research aligns gender equity in tourism with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 5 (Gender Equality)—Equal opportunity creation; SDG 8 (Decent Work)—Reducing economic disparities; SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)—Empowering marginalized groups through inclusive policies (Ferguson, 2011; Ferguson and Alarcón, 2015). In rural settings, these dynamics manifest distinctively, such as in Andes, agritourism has enabled women to shift from domestic roles to income generation and community leadership (Arroyo et al., 2019). In the Mekong Delta, homestay tourism challenges traditional norms while equipping women with practical skills (Quang et al., 2024). Globally, women's participation in rural tourism, from Iran's Kurdistan to Greek ecotourism, correlates with more sustainable resource management and culturally sensitive development practices (Ghanian et al., 2017). These cross-regional findings highlight rural tourism's unique potential to advance gender equality through integrated economic, cultural, and environmental pathways.

Rural tourism encompasses all tourism activities conducted in rural areas (Nair et al., 2023). In the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)—where approximately 80% of the population resides in rural areas (Singh, 2007)—rural tourism has grown significantly since the 1990s. This growth has been driven by increasing international interest in eco-friendly tourism practices and greater emphasis on local community participation (Bouchon and Rawat, 2016; Giang, 2024; Nair et al., 2023). Rural tourism in the GMS typically features by homestay experiences, eco-tours, agricultural immersion activities (Diep and Duong, 2022; Lalisan et al., 2024). While rural tourism serves as the overarching framework, it encompasses several specialized forms, such as agritourism—Combines agricultural activities with visitor experiences; farm tourism—focuses on farm visits and related tourism; agricultural tourism—involves visiting agribusinesses as travel experiences; agri-tourism—features farm stays with rural life experiences (Petroman and Petroman, 2010; Santosh

et al., 2023). Given that GMS tourism typically combines agricultural activities (Gia, 2021; Phuong, 2019), farm visits and local homestay (He and Mai, 2021; Quang et al., 2024), this study employs all these terms interchangeably to describe rural tourism activities in the region.

Research demonstrates that agritourism provides multiple benefits such as generating supplemental income for farmers (Alampay and Rieder, 2008; Gia, 2021), promoting sustainable agricultural practices (Alampay and Rieder, 2008), facilitates community engagement and enables cultural exchange by sharing heritage, traditions, and natural environments with visitors (Gia, 2021).

Governments across the Mekong region have implemented strategic initiatives to promote sustainable tourism development and local community benefits. Notable examples include the collaboration between governments and NGOs have improved water resource management and community well-being (He and Mai, 2021) and the initiatives have empowered women by generating sustainable income while enabling them to remain in their villages (Quang et al., 2024).

However, both vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal (sectoral) discrimination against women remains prevalent (ADB, 2022; Alampay and Rieder, 2008). Moreover, current tourism policies show limited efficacy in advancing gender equity (Adnyani et al., 2021). Investigating gender disparities in the Mekong region could identify specific barriers to women's advancement and inform targeted educational and vocational training programs Investigating the gender disparities in the Mekong region (Campos-Soria et al., 2011; Hillman and Radel, 2022). In addition, it could reveal discrimination patterns through women's lived experiences and aspirations (Ferguson, 2011). Thus, there is critical need for further research on gender equality in GMS tourism, development of strategies to ensure women's participation in tourism governance and sustainable tourism outcomes.

2.2 Theoretical framework

In the rural context, a woman's position is determined by factors of education, income, participation in the decision-making process, and participation in the leadership process (Jabeen et al., 2020; Kuma and Godana, 2023). The representation of women in rural areas in the media is shaped by various theoretical and methodological frameworks, including the Women and Development (WAD) Approach (Abdullah and Hamid, 2024), Framing Theory (Li et al., 2022; Weder et al., 2019) and Feminist Realism (Mooney, 2000). WAD is a feminist approach that emerged in the 1970s and focuses on the relationship between women and development processes (Brahma, 2022). WAD emphasizes that the role of women in and out of the household is essential to the development of society (Brahma, 2022). Previous studies stated that a lack of rural women's representation in media might affect their position in society (Abdullah and Hamid, 2024; Rae and Diprose, 2024). However, in the previous study, Sirakaya and Sönmez studied state travel advertising flyers, finding out that women are often portrayed through traditional stereotypes, such as subordination and dependency (Sirakaya and Sonmez, 2000). In a research on destination imagery, authors stated that travel marketing often follows the expectations of Western men, maintaining gender roles that have been established in stereotypes (Stoleriu, 2016). Therefore, many scholars argue that the roles of women in rural development need to be acknowledged (Abdullah and Hamid, 2024; Rae and Diprose, 2024).

Framing theory argues that the way information is presented can significantly affect audience perception and interpretation, including travel media (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Sullivan, 2023; Weder et al., 2019). Framing theory provides critical insights into how media narratives and destination marketing strategically highlight specific aspects of experiences to influence traveler perceptions and behaviors (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Li et al., 2022; Satriya et al., 2024). By emphasizing positive attributes—such as authentic cultural encounters or sustainable practices—tourism marketers can consciously shape tourist expectations and decision-making processes (Man and Yu, 2024). This selective presentation creates cognitive shortcuts that make certain destinations or activities appear more appealing, ultimately driving visitation and engagement (Hansen, 2020). In a study of the scope of media coverage of medical tourism, authors found how women as tourists or stakeholders can be represented in ways that emphasize vulnerability depending on the narrative constructed by travel marketing (Jun and Oh, 2015). Mooney explores the different ways that travel marketing frames women's participation, whether as empowered entrepreneurs or passive consumers, to create a more equitable environment (Mooney, 2020). Another study found that when travel information frames stories to benefit both travelers and local communities, it increases participation and support for women-led initiatives (Li et al., 2022). Soulard et al. discuss framing women in dark travel experiences, which revolve around historical events, which can influence public perceptions of women's role in consuming and reshaping dark travel narratives (Soulard et al., 2023). This study also integrates Feminist Realism, a theoretical lens that foregrounds the material and structural realities of gender inequality (Binetti, 2019; Mooney, 2000), to critically assess how systemic barriers and uplifts shape women's agency and representation in Mekong Delta agritourism. Similar to Critical Realism, this framework acknowledges an objective reality beyond discourse, emphasizing how institutional power dynamics constrain or advance women's participation in tourism (Binetti, 2019). Empirical evidence reveals persistent patterns: women are overrepresented in low-wage, stereotypical roles (e.g., "cleaning ladies") yet underrepresented in leadership, a disparity exacerbated by crises like COVID-19 (Je et al., 2025; Li et al., 2023; Opoku et al., 2024). For example, in tourism, previous studies examine barriers to promotion and discrimination, sexual harassment and assault to women in tourism (Je et al., 2025; Opoku et al., 2024), overrepresented in stereotypical, low-paid roles while under-representation as leaders (Je et al., 2025; Li et al., 2023; Opoku et al., 2024), lack of recognition and support (Je et al., 2025; Opoku et al., 2024). Furthermore, Feminist Realism highlights how institutional and systemic factors limit women's agency (Binetti, 2019; Li et al., 2023). For example, Li et al. (2023) found out how structural systems, such as positional power and meritocratic myths, naturalize inequality, as seen in Guilin's tourism sector, where women face diminished wages and restricted access to public services despite industry growth. In addition, Feminist Realism exposes root causes of women's underrepresentation in tourism (Je et al., 2025). For example, Je et al. (2025) stated that ambivalent sexism and internalized biases among both leaders and female workers perpetuate these inequities, discouraging collective challenges to the status quo. Widiastini et al. (2021) found the female tourism workers in Bali often occupy lower-middle-class positions due to traditional gender roles, limited access to higher positions, and the impact of crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affect women workers.

In recent studies, scholars found out media actively construct gendered narratives of place and identity, necessitating feminist critiques to expose power dynamics in tourism representations (Figueroa-Domecq and Segovia-Perez, 2020; Frohlick and Macevicius, 2023). Furthermore, digital platforms amplify these gendered discourses, with feminist media analyses revealing how short videos, podcasts, and other formats challenge patriarchal norms in tourism marketing (Saputri, 2021; Wang, 2024). Besides that, feminist tourism research advocates for theoretical and methodological shifts, proposing frameworks to integrate intersectional, decolonial, and reflexive approaches that disrupt traditional paradigms (Munar, 2017). Interdisciplinary studies highlight the intersection of media, gender, and embodied practices, emphasizing how tourism spaces and policies can be reimagined through feminist-cultural collaborations (Díaz-Carrión and Vizcaino-Suárez, 2019; Yang et al., 2018). In addition, the Women and Development (WAD) approach critiques Western-centric models and highlights women's active roles in development, offering media studies a lens to analyze how gender representations in media, from advertisements to news, either reinforce or challenge structural inequalities (Brahma, 2022). By emphasizing patriarchy, capitalism, and women's agency, WAD encourages scrutiny of biases in media portrayals, particularly regarding marginalized voices in the Global South (Brahma, 2022; Ricke, 2022). This framework also connects to studies on alternative media and grassroots movements, examining how media shapes or disrupts narratives of women's socio-economic participation and collective action globally (Ricke, 2022).

This study employs Goffman's framing theory (Sullivan, 2023) to analyze how Mekong Delta agritourism websites construct and reinforce gendered narratives (Objective 1), while WAD approach (Brahma, 2022) bridges the gap between these mediated portrayals and on-the-ground gender empowerment efforts (Objective 2). The research further adopts Feminist Realism (Binetti, 2019; Mooney, 2000) to propose actionable communication strategies for DMOs, aligning their practices with SDG 5 (gender equality) in GMS rural tourism (Objective 3). Applying these frameworks to rural tourism, this study analyze how DMOs construct narratives that either reinforce or challenge traditional power dynamics. This approach not only aligns with global gender equity goals but also offers actionable insights for media practitioners to create more inclusive narratives that reflect women's agency in sustainable tourism development.

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Data collection

Website content analysis has emerged as an essential research method in tourism studies, allowing researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how destinations and travel organizations express their identities, attract visitors, and communicate important information about their services (Ip et al., 2011; Suradin, 2017; Zaim et al., 2022). Website content analysis help to assess how digital platforms reflect and reinforce societal gender norms (Hallett and Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Parasnis, 2022). By examining textual and visual elements, such as images, narratives, and promotional materials, researchers can decodes how websites identities are generated and promoted through content (Hallett and Kaplan-Weinger, 2010), and how women are represented in tourism narratives (Hallett and Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Parasnis, 2022). For instance, Parasnis (2022) use this

method to uncover how women are often sexualized and exoticized in tourism marketing, as seen in the study of Jamaican tourism images. Similarly, the study on tourism promotional content found that women are frequently associated stereotype gender norms (Sun, 2017).

Data collection was conducted in February 2025, focusing on available rural tourism content from official Mekong region tourism boards. Six national DMOs in GMS were selected to ensure representativeness, as these sources reflect institutional perspectives on gender roles in regional tourism. Name of the DMOs, the number of analyzed webpages and pictures for each country are listed in Table 1. However, two exceptions necessitated exclusion: Cambodia's official tourism website lacked gender-related content, emphasizing only destination promotion, while the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region's site was inaccessible during data collection, with no viable alternative available. For consistency, the study analyzed English-language versions of these websites.

Searching for rural tourism content in DMOs were conducted via: (1) Internal website search functions of these DMOs; (2) Google's site operator (e.g., site:tourismlaos.org "rural tourism"); and (3) Manual navigation of "Experience" or "Destination" sections these DMOs. Focusing on rural tourism, we prioritized keywords from previous studies: *"village tourism"* (Ayazlar and Ayazlar, 2015); *"agro-tourism," agritourism"* (Giang, 2024; Thea and Mardy, 2023), *"agricultural tourism," "farm tourism," culture tourism* (Hau and Tuan, 2017), *"rural tourism," "ecotourism"* (Rosalina et al., 2021; Nair et al., 2023), *"community-based tourism (CBT)"* (Müller et al., 2020).

Textual references to gender were extracted using text mining technique with a predefined lexicon for the roles and demographic: *"mother," "father," "wife," "husband," "girl," "boy,"* and *"family."* Later, each article underwent a manual review to validate its relevance to the topic of gender. For example, text mentioning "family" without gendered roles were excluded, while those describing "women-led weaving workshops" were retained.

All images of rural tourism on these DMOs were collected, then filtered by: (1) exclusion of non-human subjects (e.g., landscapes, logos); and (2) removal of duplicates (via manual checks). Images were coded for presence (male/female/non-binary) and roles (e.g., laboring, caregiving, guiding).

3.2 Data analysis

Each picture and text were analyzed using a pre-designed codebook (Appendix 1), which was adapted from previous studies (Marchi et al., 2023a; Picazo and Moreno-Gil, 2019), with three core indicators (Figure 1): (1) Physical space (e.g., farm, marketplace); (2) Subject demographics (gender); and (3) Subject action (e.g., laboring, guiding, caregiving). The codebook uses media framing to examines the tone of gender portrayals, the division of gendered labor in tourism settings, and the extent to which media narratives reinforce or challenge traditional roles. Applying WAD approach, the research assesses gendered agency in rural tourism economies and identifies policy gaps in government initiatives. Through a feminist realism lens, the study evaluates whether state-led programs result in meaningful empowerment or merely symbolic inclusion, where women are featured prominently yet lack real influence.

Two researchers (male and female) independently coded 20% of the dataset to pilot-test the codebook. Discrepancies (e.g., classifying "leadership" roles) were resolved through discussion. Cohen's Kappa confirmed high agreement ($\kappa = 0.92$).

Quantitative text analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) was paired with image analysis (Rose, 2001) to capture both prevalence and nuanced gendered narratives. Following the data collection phase, statistical test including *T*-tests—to compare the frequency of male/female portrayals (text versus images), Kruskal-Wallis Test – for investigating the difference in gender representation across countries, Chi-square – for comparing gender framing in different themes (socio-cultural, political, economic), McNemar's Test – for comparison men/women in different roles, Mann–Whitney U Test – for country-level comparisons. These tests would provide the comprehension picture of gender framing on the DMOs in GMS. Besides that, qualitative analysis (with the software NVivo) for the depth insights of the gender representation, the stereotype gender roles and the grassroot reasons for the difference in gender framing.

This methodological approach highlights the dynamic relationship between government-mediated tourism narratives and sociocultural representations of gender. While the study provides valuable insights into institutional portrayals, it also identifies key limitations, such as the exclusion of local languages and grassroots perspectives, that warrant further investigation. Subsequent research should expand beyond state-sanctioned sources to incorporate community voices, multilingual content, and alternative media platforms, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in Mekong Delta agritourism. Regarding to the ethical concerns, this study used publicly available DMOs content, therefore no formal Institutional Review Boards approval was sought, as the study did not involve human subjects directly. Besides that, ethical issues were implicitly addressed by excluding identifiable individuals (e.g., close-up portraits without consent) and focusing on aggregated data rather than individual representation.

TABLE 1 Representation of rural tourism and gender in GMS DMOs.

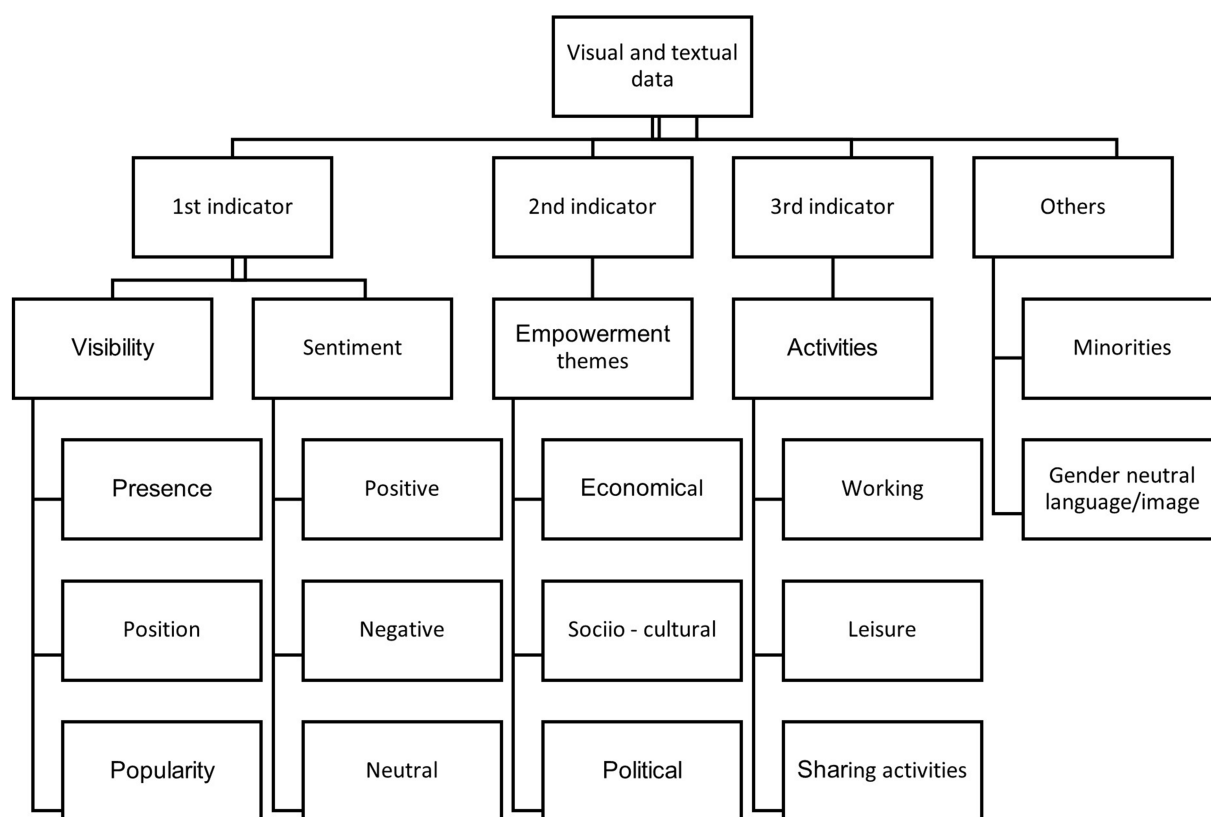| Country	Website	Analyzed webpages (total)	Text mentions (%)	Analyzed images (total)	Image mentions (%)
Cambodia	www.tourismcambodia.org	32	0%	37	0%
Yunnan (China)	www.visityunnanchina.com	135	9%	276	3%
Laos	www.tourismlaos.org	18	33%	35	54%
Myanmar	tourism.gov.mm	33	33%	42	86%
Thailand	www.tourismthailand.org	8,972	1%	158	6%
Vietnam	vietnam.travel	19	11%	115	12%

FIGURE 1
Indicators to analyze pictures and texts.

4 Results

4.1 Gender representation in textual and visual information

The textual and visual mentions of gender in each countries reveals a clear divide. Laos and Myanmar emphasize gender in both text (33%) and visuals (54–86%), while Thailand and Vietnam show moderate-low representation (1–12%). Yunnan demonstrate minimal engagement (9% text, 3% photos). Myanmar stands out with the most balanced high representation across both formats (33% text, 86% photos). When communicating about agritourism on government tourism websites, coverage of gender issues in textual information is less than visual data, except in Yunnan (China). This information is similar to the finding of Guilbeault et al. (2024) and Jaworska (2016). Chi-square test shows both women's visibility and men's visibility show statistically significant variation across countries. The *p*-values <0.05 confirm that gender representation is not independent of country context, media framing differs by location (Table 2). Besides that, Kruskal-Wallis Test (*p* = 0.000) also confirm that women's visibility in rural tourism media is not uniform, some countries emphasize women more than others. In particular, China portrays women far more visibly than Laos, Thailand, Myanmar. China's media consistently highlights women in rural tourism, possibly due to the roles of women in rural economy is increasing in that country (WAD perspective) (Chen and Barcus, 2024; Matthews and Nee, 2000). Lower visibility in Laos may reflect traditional gender norms in media,

where men dominate tourism narratives (Flacke-Neudorfer, 2007), similar with Thailand (Çakmak and Çenesiz, 2020). Besides that, men's visibility in agritourism media varies significantly by country, similar to women's visibility but with different patterns. Myanmar portrays men far more visibly than China and Vietnam, could reflect the extremely male dominated society in this country (Minoletti, 2017). This pattern contrasts sharply with China's low male visibility, where women are more highlighted. The significant results for both genders imply media actively constructs divergent roles for men/women.

In addition, there is a statistically significant difference in how men versus women are depicted in positive contexts. Women are more likely to be shown with culture ambassador such as smiling while wearing traditional clothes, leading cultural activities (for example, in Yunnan, Vietnam). Men are also positively framed but possibly in different contexts, such as in the meeting or when they are working (in Myanmar, Laos) Media reinforces the images of women as warm, welcoming hosts, while men is tied to productivity and achievement. Women are portrayed as positive sentiment but in passive roles also mentioned in many previous studies (Banaszkiewicz, 2014; Sirakaya and Sonmez, 2000).

Regarding to minority representation, media content related to agricultural tourism showcases minority communities at a rate of 9% in both gender, suggesting equal but low representation. Notably, in Thailand, images of transgender individuals are linked to tourism, whereas other countries in the region lack both visual and written representations of this community. Religious groups, particularly

TABLE 2 Key gender gaps in tourism representation.

Category	Metric	Women	Men	Neutral	Sig.
Visibility	Overall Photo Rep	61%	74%	28%	$p < 0.001$
	Text Rep	54%	64%	50%	$p = 0.004$
	Group Photos	49%	38%	–	$p < 0.001$
Emotional Framing	Positive Portrayal	31%	53%	11%	$p = 0.015$
Activities	Domestic Labor (Text)	61%	60%	38%	$p = 0.139$
	Adventure Tourism (Photos)	26%	21%	16%	$p = 0.012$
Leadership	Visual Representation	12%	36%	14%	$p < 0.001$
Economic Roles	Visual Representation	Varies	Varies	–	–
Marginalized Groups	LGBTQ+ Visibility	–	–	2%	$p = 0.159$
	Ethnic Minorities	9%	9%	–	$p = 0.111$
	Religious/Cultural (Photos)	2%	2%	–	$p = 0.988$
	Shared Responsibilities (Photos)	–	–	29%	$p = 0.017$
	Explicit Neutral Language (Text)	–	–	52%	$p = 0.001$
Country highlights					
China	Women: Highest text (100%) and visual (86%) representation				
	Men: Low visual (43%)				
Myanmar	Women: 64% visuals				
	Men: Extreme male dominance (92% visuals)				
Thailand	Women: 89% visuals (highest)				
	Men: Balanced (44% visuals)				
Vietnam	Women: 64% visuals				
	Men: 50% visuals				
Laos	Women: Moderate (32% visuals)				
	Men: Highest male visuals (84%)				

Buddhists, are consistently referenced at a rate of approximately 4% within the region. Additionally, the narratives surrounding agricultural tourism in the Mekong River Basin often adopt gender-neutral language when referring to individuals. Remarkably, up to 52% of gender-sensitive media content opts for gender-neutral terms when addressing people (see Table 2).

4.2 Gender representations across economic, political, and socio-cultural themes

There is no significant difference in portrayal of women versus men in labor roles ($p = 0.139$) (Table 2). Both genders are depicted in work duties, but the type of labor differs. Men are portrayed in the important, high paid job such as "*chef*," "*shop owner*," "*presidents*" while women are portrayed more frequent in the less paid position such as "*embroidered craft work*," "*coffee picking*" or" *performer*." Regarding to the tourists role, men are more likely to be depicted as adventurous tourists ($p = 0.012$). On the other hand, examining with (Kruskal-Wallis Test), when being portrayed as a tourists, there is strong cross-country variation in women representation ($p = 0.000$) and significant but less pronounced in men representation ($p = 0.041$). In particular, China as the lowest as China's media rarely depicts

women in leisure, aligns with its focus on women as economic actors. Another noticeable information is shared responsibilities between two genders are rare (29%).

However, while women may be visible, they are portrayed in passive symbols in many countries. For example, in Vietnam, women is mentioned in the passive role as "*the wife*," or the female coffee pickers in the farm. In Thailand, women is rarely mentioned but when they were mentioned, the are placed in positive view, such as "*the star in the kitchen is the owner's mother*" or "*well-trained granddaughter*." They also mentioned as the shop owners or the founder of a business group. In Yunnan (China), women is featured as the one who preserved traditional culture, such as "*Wa ethnic women in traditional costumes*," or "*the clothes of Huayaodai women are gorgeous*." However, they also linked with gender roles such as the one who washing clothes or vegetables, who welcomes guests or who makes the cake. This finding aligns with a previous study that suggests women are portrayed as a more submissive gender in visual media compared to textual descriptions (Guilbeault et al., 2024). Laos, on the other hand, has positive images of women, as the expert "*she is also an ecologist and environmental journalist*," or women take up to half of the tourism workforce. On the contrary, fewer articles mention men, but when they do, roles are rigid. For example, in Thailand, majority of article mentions about men in the important role, such as the chef, "the businessman, the restaurant owner, or the founder of a

business chain, similar with Myanmar, where the men is mentioned in political important position such as "*union minister*," or "*deputy minister*." In Laos, the men is also mentioned as an important person, such as "*chairman*," "*president*" or "*minister*," similar with Vietnam, where the man is rarely mentioned but when they do, they are connected with important position such as "*famous artist*." In Yunnan (China), men is described as the peer with women, who do works together, like "*men and women drag wood together*" or "*Hani women are busy making Ciba (Rice Cake), while Hani men cut bamboo and set up swings*" However, in some circumstance, men also take the important role, such as "*men take the lead on the first day of the new year*." Furthermore, according to Table 3, the difference between man and women in political themes show significant disparity ($p < 0.001$). The result suggests women are systematically excluded from agritourism narratives tied to power, policy, or leadership, aligning with feminist realism critiques of structural inequality. As the reference category, socio-cultural themes likely dominate coverage, potentially reinforcing traditional gender roles. This finding is similar to the findings of Mwinnoure and Dzitse (2024) on ecotourism in Ghana. Research indicates that women remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making roles within the tourism industry, frequently holding only a small proportion of senior positions compared to their male counterparts (Adnyani et al., 2021; Gutierrez and Vafadari, 2023).

Furthermore, Table 3 reveals stark gender disparities in rural tourism representations across the Mekong Subregion. Politically, women are significantly underrepresented (B = −1.172, $p = 0.024$), with China showing 0% visual depictions of female leadership, while men dominate, especially in Myanmar (82% textual leadership references, $p = 0.000$). Economically, women's roles are highlighted more prominently, particularly in China ($p = 0.000$) and Vietnam (100% visual economic roles), whereas men show no significant thematic variation ($p = 0.476$). Socio-culturally, women are the most consistently represented ($p = 0.000$), with Laos depicting them in 53% of group visuals, while men's representation lacks thematic coherence ($p = 0.907$). This observation suggests the leadership bias in men, women's economic visibility is foregrounded in certain countries (Vietnam, China), and women are homogenized as "cultural bearers" in all examined countries.

In general, for RQ1, the analysis reveal limited gender-equality representation on Mekong Subregion DMOs, with women often depicted as laborers but rarely as decision-makers, while men dominate political and leisure narratives. Yunnan (China) and Vietnam lead in women's visibility, reflecting their strong agricultural roles, whereas Laos and Myanmar show significant gaps. Thailand presents moderate balance but still associates women with economic roles and men with political power. Minority representation remains low, with Thailand uniquely including transgender imagery, while gender-neutral language appears in 50% of gender-sensitive content. These findings highlight a disconnect between women's economic participation and their portrayal in leadership.

4.3 The government's initiatives for gender equality in development on the websites

Table 4 reveals that while Laos and Vietnam explicitly include women in tourism development (e.g., Laos' digital skills training for women and Vietnam's farming village upskilling) Cambodia and Thailand omit gendered strategies despite CBT growth. For instance, in Cambodia, Community-Based Ecotourism initiative documentation lack documented female leadership, mirroring previous observations that CBT often invisibilizes women's labor (El-Manhaly and Taha, 2024; Jackson, 2025; McCall and Mearns, 2021). Similarly, Thailand's OTOP (One Tambon One Product) program promotes MSMEs but does not address structural barriers for women entrepreneurs in rural tourism, although their contribution for this program have been demonstrated in many previous documents (Acharya, 2019; Tamrongterakul and Ocha, 2021). Although the initiatives do not explicitly encourage gender equality, various studies have suggested that community-based training (CBT) can indirectly enhance employment opportunities for women and enable them to assume leadership positions within their local economies (McCall and Mearns, 2021; Vujko et al., 2024). Furthermore, ecotourism has demonstrated its potential to contribute positively to the psychological, social, and economic development of women in the region (Mwinnoure and Dzitse, 2024; Xaba and Adanlawo, 2024). Similarly, the Yunnan region of China has

TABLE 3 Thematic gender representation analysis.

Theme	Gender	Key findings	Significance
Political	Women	Significantly underrepresented	B = −1.172, $p = 0.024$, Exp(B) = 0.310
		China: 0% leadership visuals	$p = 0.024$
	Men	Leadership varies by country Myanmar highest, 82% text leadership	$p = 0.000$, Exp(B) = 5.020
Economic	Women	China emphasizes most	61.429, $p = 0.000$
		Vietnam: 100% visual economic roles	
	Men	No significant thematic variation	$p = 0.476$
		Thailand: 33% visual representation	
Socio-Cultural	Women	Strongest representation	$p = 0.000$ across countries
		Laos: 53% group visuals	
	Men	No thematic pattern	$p = 0.907$
		China: 29% cultural visuals	$p = 0.907$

TABLE 4 The government's initiatives for tourism on websites.

Country	Government's Initiatives								
	CBT development	Tourism infrastructure	Cultural preservation	Environmental preservation	Digital marketing	Health and safety measures	International cooperation	MSME support	Women empowerment
Cambodia	Various Community-Based Ecotourism sites	Construction of various bridges		Various conservation efforts			Development of border checkpoint		
Laos	Joint promotion with Cambodia	Upgrading tourism infrastructure waterfall	Highlighting traditional festivals	Asia Zero Emission Community (AZEC)	Promoting "Visit Laos Year 2024"		"Two Countries, One Destination" promotion	Enhancing digital skills	Training digital skills for women in tourism
Myanmar	"One Township, One Village Project," Development	Renovation of traditional bakeries, old cities	Promotion traditional festival,	Environmental preservation at various waterfalls and lakes	Digital marketing systems, QR codes,	Enchanting Myanmar Health and Safety Protocol (HSP)	Signing of MoUs and agreements	Support micro, small, and medium-scale enterprises	
Thailand								The OTOP (One Tambon One Product)	
Vietnam	Development of various eco-tourism attractions	The construction of bridges, roads, and other facilities	Promote the cultural traditions of the indigenous peoples	Support for multiple biosphere reserves and national parks.	Promote the use of digital features for travel		A joint initiative between WWF and the Vietnam Administration of Forestry	Training the farming villagers in tourism skills	
Yunnan, China	Highlighting ancient village and towns	Promotion of high-speed train travel; Improving access to remote areas	Promotion traditional dances arts and crafts of the indigenous peoples	Promotion of the forest; rice fields; lakes			Hosting the World Rice Culture Tourism Festival.	Supported enterprise, local businesses	

introduced various programs to develop ancient villages and towns. This type of tourism fosters significant community involvement, empowering women and amplifying their voices within the community (Liu, 2022). The region has been a focal point for various governmental initiatives supporting indigenous communities.

Laos may have fewer initiatives than neighboring countries like Vietnam and Cambodia, but these initiatives are diverse and span multiple fields. One notable effort highlighted on the country's website is to empower women by equipping them with digital skills in the tourism sector. This initiative seeks to connect local tourism products to the global market. Previous research indicates that integrating digital technologies significantly enhances the visibility and marketing of women-led enterprises on social media and various online platforms (Acharya, 2023; Sujarwo et al., 2022). According to Table 4, Vietnam has introduced an initiative to equip farming communities with essential skills in tourism, basic English, and marketing. While the primary focus of this initiative is not specifically on women, they are considered an integral part of the target audience.

Conversely, Thailand's website emphasizes the introduction of restaurants, eateries, shops, hotels, and resorts to domestic and international tourists. As a result, only one initiative is highlighted, which is OTOP. Launched in 2001, this program aims to stimulate the local economy by encouraging the 7,255 tambon (sub-districts) in Thailand to produce and market distinctive products from their regions, ultimately enhancing the tourism experience (Sitabutr and Pimdee, 2017). The initiative has played a vital role in creating markets for rural products through tourism channels, enhancing rural communities' incomes, and attracting tourists who seek authentic cultural tourism experiences (Manirojana, 2022). While not explicitly stated, this program is frequently highlighted by researchers for its positive impact on women's empowerment. For instance, it stimulates the local economy and fosters women's empowerment through capacity-building and skills training, thereby enhancing their status and capabilities within the community (Nitsch and Vogels, 2022; Sitabutr and Pimdee, 2017).

For answering RQ2, government and DMOs initiatives for gender equality appear inconsistently across Mekong Subregion tourism websites, with most programs. However, CBT (Cambodia, Vietnam) and ecotourism initiatives, while not gender-specific, demonstrate measurable impacts on women's economic participation and leadership, aligning with SDG 5 targets. Yunnan (China) stands out for its ancient village programs that actively amplify women's voices, whereas Thailand's OTOP initiative, though not gender-focused, has inadvertently empowered women through local product markets. These gaps suggest a need for DMOs to explicitly link policies to gender outcomes in their communications, ensuring visibility matches on-the-ground progress.

5 Conclusion

This study examines gender representation in rural tourism marketing across the Mekong Subregion, revealing significant disparities in how women and men are portrayed on official Destination Management Organization (DMO) websites. China's Yunnan province emerges with particularly high visibility of women, significantly surpassing portrayals in Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. The opposite trend appears in Myanmar's coverage, where male visibility dominates the tourism narrative, as this disparity likely mirrors the country's traditionally male-dominated social structures. Besides that, women are predominantly depicted as "cultural ambassadors" or low-wage laborers, whereas men occupy political and high-status positions. This underrepresentation of women in political narratives reinforces patriarchal norms, despite their visible economic participation in rural tourism. Additionally, ethnic minority and transgender communities remain marginally represented. While Laos emphasizes women's economic training initiatives, Cambodia and Thailand lack gender-specific strategies, even though programs like Thailand's OTOP have demonstrably benefited women. Although ecotourism and community-based tourism (CBT) indirectly empower women, DMO communications fail to explicitly address gender equity.

This study has several limitations, including its reliance on English-language DMO content, which excludes local-language narratives and grassroots perspectives. The focus on institutional media also overlooks participatory platforms such as social media and community-led campaigns. To advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality, the Mekong Subregion must shift from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation in rural tourism development. By prioritizing women's agency in policy and media representation, DMOs can position rural tourism not only as an economic driver but also as a platform for social justice, ensuring the region's cultural diversity aligns with its commitment to inclusivity. Future research should expand beyond official media to analyze alternative sources (e.g., influencer content, NGO reports) to better understand narrative disparities. Incorporating grassroots perspectives is essential to bridge the gap between media portrayals and on-the-ground realities. Longitudinal studies tracking the impact of policy interventions on women's empowerment would further strengthen these initiatives. Additionally, more research is needed to explore how ethnicity, class, and rurality intersect with gender in tourism media representations.

6 Theoretical implications

These above results lead to three significant implications. First of all, under the media framing framework, the information on DMOs across nations and regions in GMS consistently frames women within cultural/domestic roles and men as economic leaders or tourists, perpetuating traditional stereotypes. In particular, in China, the website highlight the role of women as "cultural bearers" or economic agents may reflect state-controlled narratives celebrating rural development, yet men are depoliticized in agritourism discourse. In Laos and Thailand, women's labor is often erased in favor of male-dominated development narratives. Myanmar focus on masculinity society men as innovators and political leaders, reinforcing patriarchal governance norms. In addition, positive portrayals of women often mask their exclusion from decision-making roles. Second, under the lens of Feminist Realism, disparities in leadership highlight systemic inequities in rural tourism governance, particularly in patriarchal social systems or the development of society (the case of China). Besides that, media normalizes gendered suffering (low paid jobs; glass celling paradox) without critiquing systemic causes. In China, high female economic visibility without mentioning male political invisibility, suggesting state propaganda co-opts "empowerment" imagery without challenging patriarchy. On the contrary, Myanmar high-visibility of men in politics reflects institutionalized gender hierarchies. Third, applying the WAD

approach, women's economic participation is often confined to low-value sectors, while men dominate entrepreneurship may reflect the problem of "add women and stir" (Dharmapuri, 2011) in WAD approach, which adding visibility without structural change. Besides that, high labor visibility of women in Southeast Asia countries romanticizes poverty rather than addressing transformative empowerment. There are mentions of government initiatives to uplift the women empowerment but there are the need for more active strategies. Finally, compound marginalization of ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ individuals further exposes the limits of WAD'S universalist assumptions.

7 Practical implications

Based on the findings, the following practical solutions are proposed to enhance gender-inclusive tourism communication in GMS, particularly in rural tourism. These suggestions are also the answer for RQ3.

7.1 Increase gender-sensitive content in text and visuals

Government tourism websites should deliberately incorporate more gender-related discussions in textual content while maintaining balanced visual representations. Given that visuals currently outperform text in gender representation, integrating narratives that highlight women's leadership, economic contributions, and decision-making roles can counteract existing biases. Unlike generic diversity policies (UNWTO, 2022a), this approach tailors content to regional disparities, ensuring Laos and Myanmar improve representation while Vietnam and Yunnan (China) maintain their progress.

7.2 Promote women in leadership and political narratives

Since men dominate political and decision-making themes, tourism media should actively feature women in these roles, showcasing female entrepreneurs in rural tourism, policymakers, and community leaders. Case studies and interviews can reinforce this shift. While existing direct initiatives, such as Laos' digital skills program for women, should focus on capacity-building, media representation remains passive. A proactive framing strategy, as suggested by framing theory, would amplify real-world progress in perception.

7.3 Strengthen gender-neutral language with thematic balance

Although 50% of content already uses gender-neutral terms, this should extend to thematic areas where stereotypes persist, especially in political information. For English language, the global could be utilized (EIGE, 2019; UNDP, 2015), but for the local language in the GMS, there would be initiatives and funding to support for developing similar toolkits.

7.4 Highlight women's contributions to sustainability

Women are portrayed positively in economic and social sustainability, a strength that should be leveraged. Tourism campaigns could spotlight women-led eco-tourism projects or indigenous farming practices. Thailand showed balanced representation aligns with global best practices. Besides that, China with the highlight of women's role in rural economic development could be a model for other countries in the region.

7.5 Integrate empowerment initiatives into tourism marketing

There should be more direct linked gender empowerment programs, similar with Laos' digital training, to tourism promotions. Feature success stories of women benefiting from these initiatives to inspire participation and investment. This initiatives outcomes should be specific such as number of media representation, number of engagements, help to creating a feedback loop that reinforces real-world impact.

7.6 Regional collaboration for consistent standards

Establish a GMS-wide working group to share best practices and address gaps. A unified gender-inclusion guideline for rural tourism content could harmonize disparities. While there are policy in ASEAN focus on gender in tourism (Secretariat, 2020), a sub-regional focus on rural tourism would be more actionable.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in the article/Supplementary material.

Author contributions

MH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TM: Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Supplementary material

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