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Factors Contributing to Formation and Existence of Community Identities in Bangkok Metropolis

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Abstract

In Bangkok, some traditional communities have maintained their identity despite urbanization. This research investigates the factors that influence the formation and existence of identities in three historic communities: Sam Phraeng, Talat Noi, and Soi Prachanaruemit (Wood Street). The research uses surveys, observations, and interviews to examine tangible and intangible elements. The results indicate that community identity originates from tangible elements such as architecture and landmarks, including intangible elements such as economics and society. Participation is essential to maintaining these identities, which requires effective community management, leading to income generation through activities and tourism that reflect the existence of community identities.

Keywords: Formation; Existence; Community; Identities

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1.0 Introduction

The complexity of cities lies in their deep connection to cultural heritage, history, lifestyles, and physical environments (Nursanty E. et al., 2023). Technological advancements, particularly through smart environments and AI, are reshaping urban development, bringing economic and social improvements, but also posing risks like spatial insecurity and the erosion of urban identity (Bashiir, A.A., 2024; Gherbi, A. & Toumi, R., 2024).

In Bangkok, a major development hub in Thailand, rapid urban growth has repurposed various areas for business use, both in central and newly developed districts (Yusuk, A. & Boonchaiyapruet, P., 2022). The city's 20-year plan (2013-2032) seeks to enhance Bangkok's economic position while preserving its cultural heritage (Chansorklin, P., 2021). Historic communities on Rattanakosin Island, for example, have maintained their unique physical and cultural identities despite urban pressures (Chootrakul, P. & Haocharoen, K., 2023; Pongsermpol, C. & Upala, P., 2017). These historic districts, such as Sam Phraeng, Talat Noi, and Soi Prachanaruemit, continue

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to thrive, though they face challenges from urbanization and external influences (Phetruchee, M. et al., 2021; Chimpalee, S. & Haocharoen, K., 2022; Tumkosit, M., 2023).

This study aims to investigate the factors that influence the formation and existence of identities in three historic communities, examining how these factors impact community identity and the ability to preserve unique characteristics amidst globalization. The objective is to identify and compare key issues in the selected case studies to develop knowledge to help other Thai communities maintain their identities. This research focuses on local cultures, traditions, arts, and wisdom, enabling these communities to better adapt to future changes.

2.0 Literature Review

Identity means the sum of the characteristics which make something known or memorable and change over time within a societal context (Bureekhampun, S., 2021). According to Sittirach, C. et al. (2021), identity could persist, disappear, or transform, with humans playing a crucial role. Community members can decide whether to maintain, change, or let their identity fade. Identity differentiates communities, with two key elements: physical characteristics and social relationships, creating feelings of attachment and ownership that connect physical and social elements (Puddifoot, J.E., 1996).

Research by Abdul Kadir, S., & Wilastrina, A. (2023), and Syed Othman Thani, S.K., et al. (2023), supported this idea, showing that place identity came from physical features, historical values, cultural characteristics, and experiential attachments, which all were linked to urban and landscape design. These motivated people to adapt, restore, or express behaviors in an area, fostering attachment. An environment encouraging human's behavioral expression leads to a sense of ownership, affecting the perception and maintenance of the place (Rifaioğlu & Güçhan, 2013). Fan, Y. (2024) found that community identity includes physical and non-physical elements and requires management, supervision, and awareness to coexist with a better quality of life for community members.

Globalization and urbanization have altered settlement and industrial patterns in traditional areas (Abdullah, A. et al., 2022), impacting identity and cultural change (Abdullah, A. et al., 2022). However, this problem could be addressed by understanding how a place has lost its identity and has restored it. Identity, linked to the spirit and sense of belonging, could be leveraged in tourism (Andalucia, et al., 2023). Aldy, P., et al. (2024) also found that identity and attachment to a place could benefit cultural tourism.

The formation of community identities involves both tangible and intangible elements, with a strong emphasis on the connection between identity and the sense of community among its members. This connection fosters awareness and appreciation, leading to the preservation of community identity through effective management as shown in Fig.1.

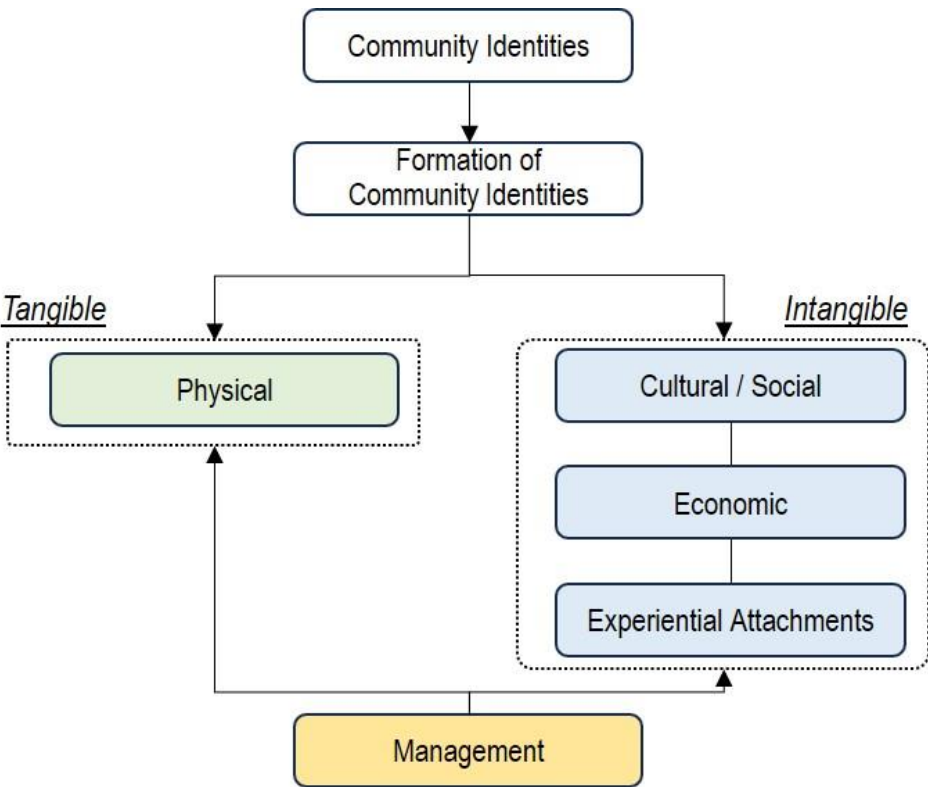


Fig. 1. Flowchart of community identities formation from literature review
(Source:) The authors

To sum up, the literature review identified tangible and intangible elements, such as cultural, economic, experiential attachments, and management as key factors. These factors shaped the research framework, focusing on the formation and existence of community identities as shown in Fig. 2.

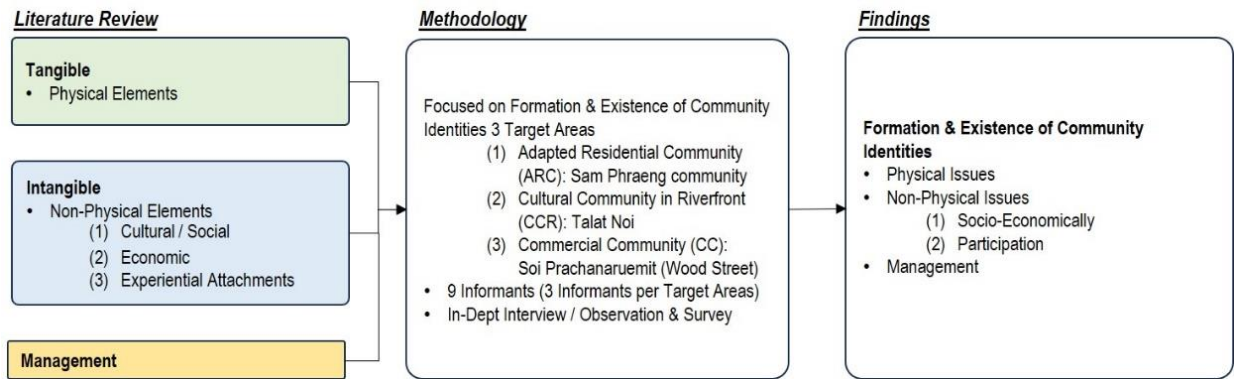


Fig. 2. Research framework shows relevant issues
(Source:) The authors

3.0 Methodology

This research is qualitative methodology. The target area is located in Bangkok. We search for case studies with three types of communities: (1) Adaptive Residential Communities – (ARC), (2) Cultural Communities in Riverfront – (CCR), and (3) Commercial Communities – (CC). First, for adaptive residential communities, we surveyed Sam Phraeng¹ Community, which is a historically prominent area because it is an old palace. Second, for cultural communities in riverfront, we selected the Talat² Noi Community, which is a Thai-Chinese cultural community along the Chao Phraya River. Third, for commercial communities, we studied Soi³ Prachanaruemit Community, which is an old wooden community in the heart of Bangkok. The locations of all target areas are shown in Fig. 3.

The authors reviewed and analyzed the theory of neighborhoods, the formation and existence of community identities, using secondary data, along with collecting primary data through fieldwork. This included interviews with community leaders and stakeholders. The informants were selected based on specific characteristics related to community management using the snowball sampling technique, with 3 individuals selected from each community, totaling 9 informants. Each informant had over 20 years of experience in community management. The data collection activities are shown in Fig. 4. Additionally, the authors conducted surveys and observations in all three target community areas. The study results were analyzed using content analysis to find relationships between the studied issues, and to conclude and interpret the factors affecting the formation and existence of community identities. The results are presented in a narrative format.

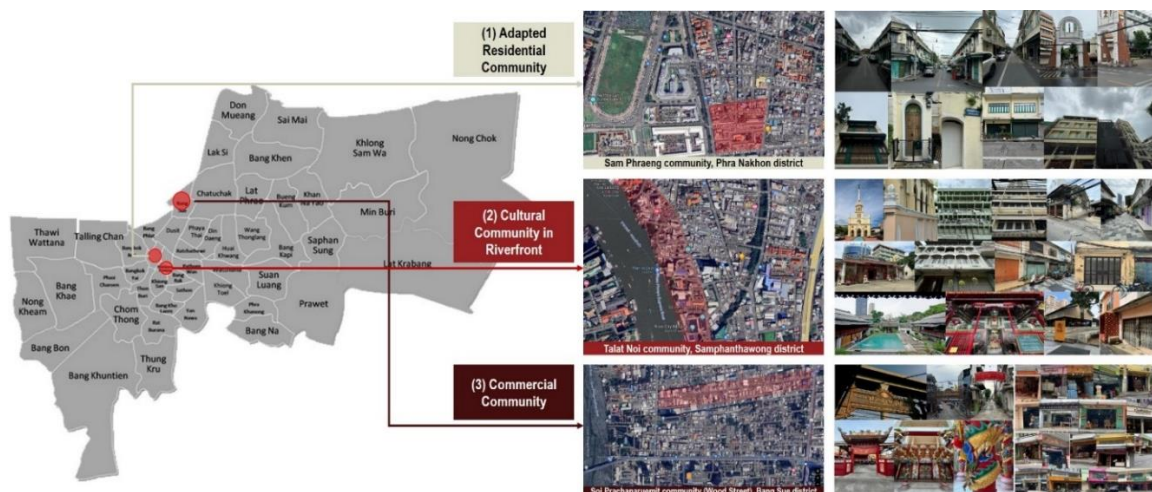


Fig. 3. A Map of Bangkok Metropolis with three locations of the target community areas
(Source:) The authors

¹ 'Phraeng' means Land crossroads (in Thai)

² 'Talat' means Market (in Thai)

³ 'Soi' means Alley (in Thai)



Fig. 4. Interviews with informants from the case study communities.
(Source:) The authors

4.0 Findings

4.1 General data of target areas

Sam Phraeng community, located in the Phra Nakhon district near the Grand Palace, consists of Phraeng Phuthon, Phraeng Nara, and Phraeng Sanphasat. Originally, these were royal palaces belonging to members of the Chakri Dynasty and became residential areas managed by the Crown Property Bureau. Historically, Sam Phraeng was a thriving commercial hub known for its wisdom and handicrafts. Notable sites include Thailand's first health station in Phraeng Phuthon, the Predalai Theater in Phraeng Nara, and a famous goldsmith area in Phraeng Sanphasat. Over time, the area had evolved to cater to government officials, but as agencies moved out and a fire destroyed parts of Phraeng Sanphasat the area became less vibrant. Today, despite uncertainties regarding land use, Sam Phraeng retains historical significance with preserved architecture and renowned restaurants. The community also hosts art festivals to promote tourism.

Talat Noi is a historic area along the Chao Phraya River in Samphanthawong District, near Yaowarat and Sampeng areas. Initially settled by Chinese immigrants, it also became home to Portuguese people who moved there after conflicts in the Kudi Chin area. One of Talat Noi's interesting places is the Rosary Church (Wat Kalwar), which is significant for Christians, and has been a hub for international trade since the early Rattanakosin period. Post-World War II, it gained fame for automotive mechanics and parts. The Zhou Sikong Shrine, an ancient spiritual site for Chinese residents, gave the area its nickname "Xiang Kong". Today, Talat Noi attracts tourists with its cultural and artistic festivals, cafes, hotels, and the River City Bangkok project. It has been a creative economic district since participating in the Bangkok Design Festival 2018.

Soi Prachanaruemit, known as Wood Street, is located in the Bang Pho area of Bang Sue district in northern Bangkok, near Nonthaburi province. Spanned approximately 1.1 kilometers, it was originally agricultural land and became a hub for woodworkers and craftsmen from various regions due to its advantageous location near the Chao Phraya River. Over time, sawmills and woodworking shops were established, making it a center of carpentry expertise. Although many entrepreneurs have since moved out, Soi Prachanaruemit remains renowned for its woodworking skills. The community's significance was highlighted by the "Wood Street" activity initiated by the Bang Sue District Office in 1999, which ran for over a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, the area has been redeveloped with condominiums and electric train lines and is easy to access. The community also hosts businesses like coffee shops and restaurants and has been a part of the Bangkok Design Festival since 2022. Soi Prachanaruemit maintains its woodworking heritage while evolving into a creative economic district.

4.2 Comparative the Identities of Case Study Communities.

From the study of the general conditions of the case study areas through surveys and observations based on the concept of old communities with three types of identities, the following findings were made:

4.2.1 Type of Identities

- (1) Sam Phraeng Community - Adapted Residential Community (ARC): This community evolved from being a royal residential area to a general residential area with a prosperous history, retaining architectural and cultural elements from its past.
- (2) Talat Noi Community - Cultural Community in Riverfront (CCR): Originally settled by Chinese and Portuguese immigrants, Talat Noi retains a strong cultural identity with historical sites like the Rosary Church and the Zhou Xi Kong Shrine, along with a history of trade and craftsmanship.
- (3) Soi Prachanaruemit (Wood Street) - Commercial Community (CC): Known for its woodworking industry, this area developed from agricultural land into a hub of carpentry and woodworking expertise, evolving into a modern commercial and creative economic district.

4.2.2 Physical Issues

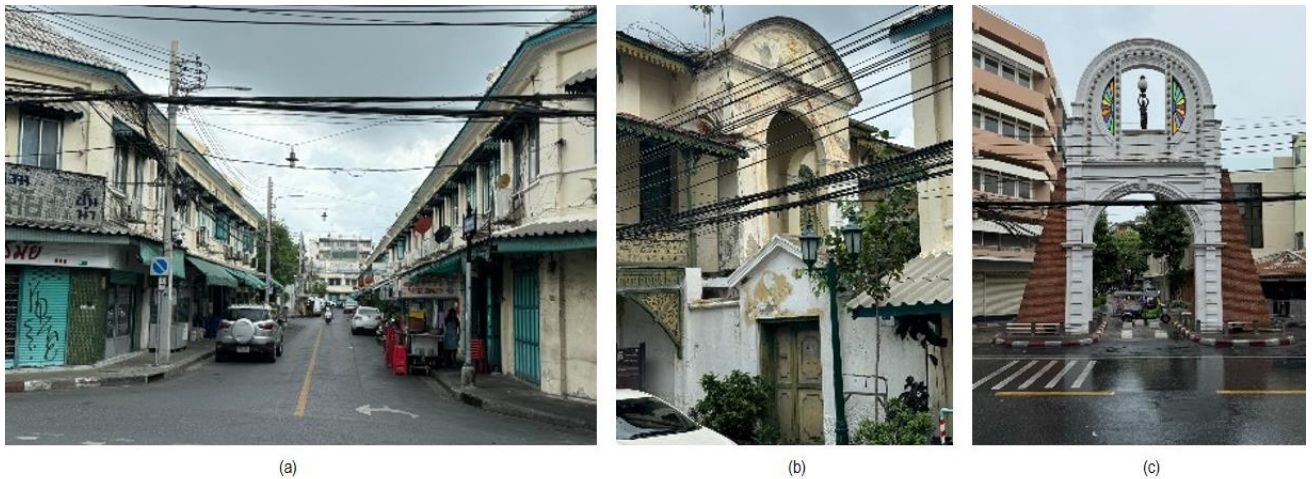


Fig. 6. (a) Phraeng Puthon; (b) Phraeng Nara; (c) Phraeng Sanphasat
(Source:) The authors

The Sam Phraeng community, formed through land transfers, remains a primarily residential area with a clustered settlement pattern. Physically, it features old houses and landmarks, originally royal palaces, with distinct colonial architecture. Phraeng Phuthon is notable for its well-preserved colonial buildings, featuring stucco gables, decorative elements, window frames, and functional awnings, with a health station serving as a key community landmark. Phraeng Nara, although renovated and lacking stucco decorations, still retains its colonial architectural identity, highlighted by the Worawan Palace. Phraeng Sanphasat, after a significant fire, retains only the entrance arch of the palace, now an ancient site registered by the Fine Arts Department, with modern commercial buildings replacing many dilapidated architectures. The community is interconnected by walkways and small alleys, facilitating cultural activities and gatherings, especially around the health station in Phraeng Phuthon.

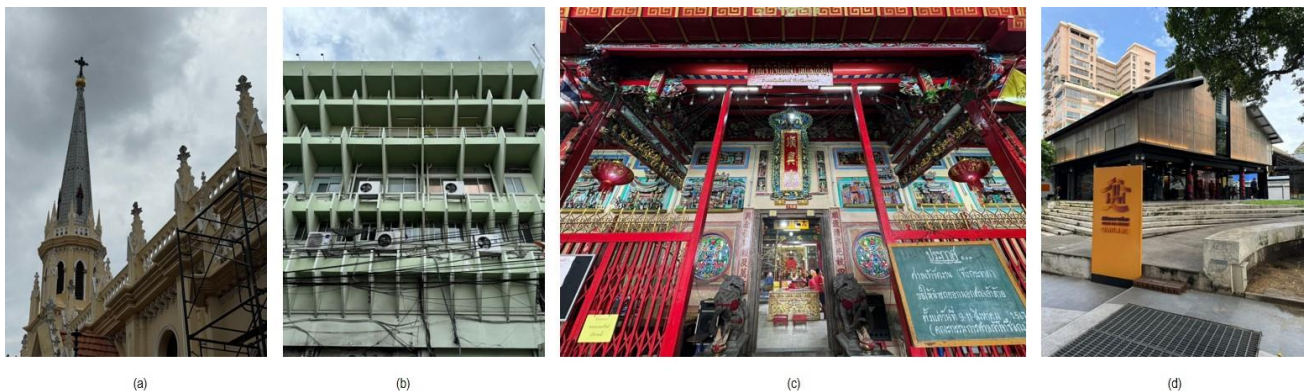


Fig. 7. (a) the Rosary Church (Wat Kalwa); (b) Samphanthawong District Office; (c) Zhou Xi Kong Shrine; (d) Talat Noi Museum
(Source:) The authors

The Talat Noi community is a multicultural area with a diverse mix of residents from places like Sampeng, Yaowarat, and Kudi Chin. Its settlement pattern includes groups of people and linear settlements along the road, reflecting Bangkok's urban development. The tangible elements in Talat Noi showcase this cultural diversity, such as the Rosary Church (Wat Kalwa) with its Gothic architecture influenced by Europe, various shrines, and the So Heng Tai Mansion with Chinese architecture. The area also features government buildings, hotels, art exhibition centers, restaurants, and modern commercial buildings, with traditional wooden houses along the river by the community. These diverse architectural styles, including religious buildings, houses, and commercial spaces, highlight the area's cultural prosperity.

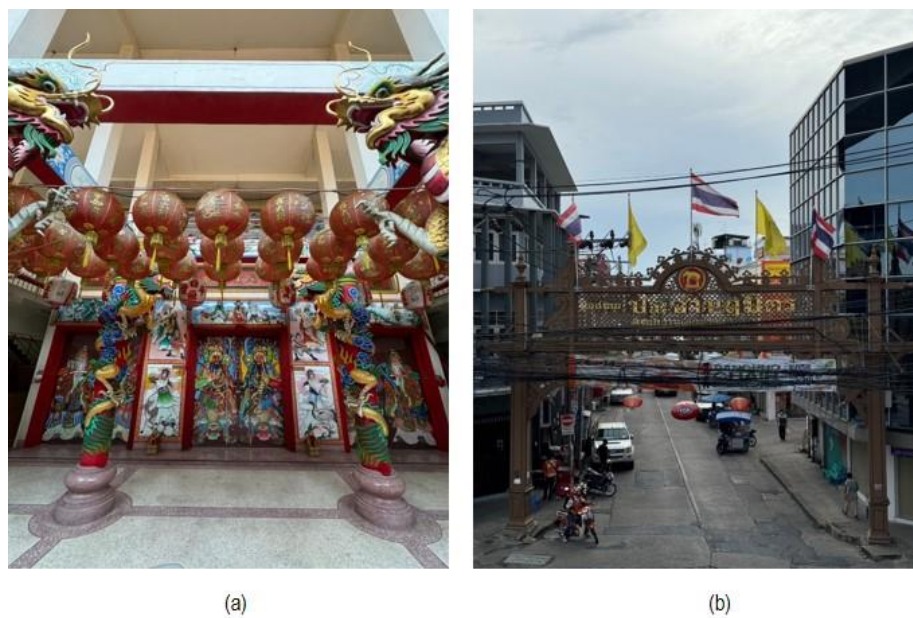


Fig. 8. (a) Thap Thim Shrine; (b) Prachanaruemit Community Gate
(Source:) The authors

The Soi Prachanaruemit community, known as Wood Street, was established by migrating carpenters during the city's urban restructuring. Physically, the community, characterized by its linear settlement along a 1.1-kilometer alley, features the Prachanaruemit Community Gate, a prominent teak gate reflecting the identity of the Bang Sue District. The Thap Thim Shrine, a central meeting place for community activities, further highlights the area's cultural significance. The community primarily consists of 2-5 story shophouses, with businesses on the ground floors related to wood and carpentry materials. Some buildings still function as sawmills, maintaining the historical connection to the community's origins. These tangible elements align with the community's lifestyle, culture, and societal structure.

4.2.3 Non-Physical Issues

(1) Socio-Economic Issues

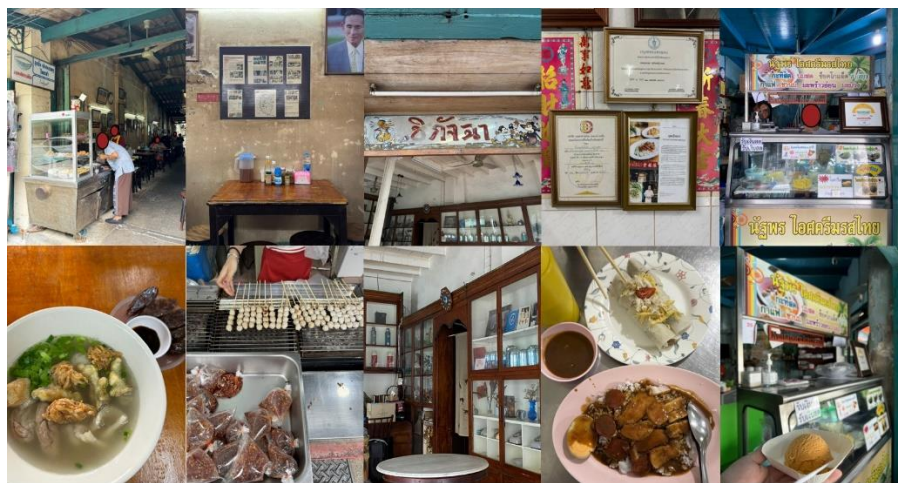


Fig. 9. Socio-Economic at Sam Phraeng community
(Source:) The authors

Sam Phraeng is known for unique foods such as pork brains, traditional Chinese dishes, tea shops, and Thai-flavored ice cream. However, globalization has led to economic stagnation, prompting food vendors to adapt by opening hotels and modern coffee shops, especially along Tanao Road, a new economic hub. Adjustments around the Tiger God Shrine have also impacted economic opportunities. Despite these challenges, the Sam Phraeng community continues to maintain its identity amidst volatility and uncertainty.



Fig. 10. Socio-Economic at Talat Noi community
(Source:) The authors

In terms of the socio-economic of the Talat Noi community, the community has adapted original buildings for new uses, like converting old structures into coffee shops and restaurants retained their historical heritage. These adaptations blend original materials like auto parts and steel with Chinese-Thai interior decoration styles, preserving the community's identity in a modern context. Furthermore, Talat Noi's adaptation has led to various activities, such as participating in Bangkok Design Week since 2018 and introducing outsiders to the community. Festivals like the Yuan Xiao Festival, Bah Chang Festival, and Christmas reflect the community's cultural and social characteristics. This blend of tradition and modernity has supported Talat Noi to thrive in the creative economy through tourism and food. The community's attractive decorated coffee shops, restaurants, and hotels have become popular attractions, drawing Thai and international tourists, influencers, and bloggers. As a result, many areas in Talat Noi have become important scenes for Thai films as well.

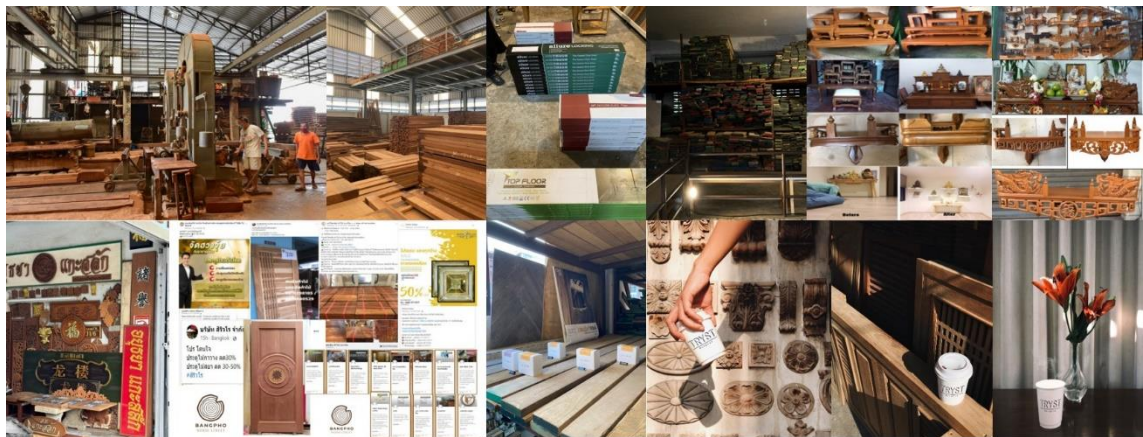


Fig. 11. Socio-Economic of Soi Prachanaruemit community
(Source:) The authors

Socio-Economic of Soi Prachanaruemit, The Thap Thim Shrine also participates in the Bangkok Design Festival, fostering cultural activities linked to multicultural beliefs. These beliefs manifest in various aspects of community life, including the economy. Local restaurants offer menus blending Chinese and European culinary traditions, alongside rare Thai-Chinese dishes. A coffee shop enhances its offerings by connecting menu names, plate decorations, and ingredients to the woodwork theme. The community also supports a thriving carving business, wood trading, and comprehensive woodworking equipment supplies, preserving its unique identity in a modern urban context.

(2) Participation Issues

Talat Noi community is another community that clearly shows its participation by adapting and expressing itself through cultural tourism while also being a part of the creative economic zone, which has a positive effect on generating income for members of the community. However, they still maintain their cultural identity through important festivals, making this community full of interesting activities through effective community management.



Fig. 12. Public relations media of Wood Street community in BKKDW 2022
(Source:) Tumkosit, M. (2023)



Fig. 13. Organizing activities within the Wood Street community.
(Source:) The authors

Soi Prachanaruemit community is another interesting community in terms of community participation. They faced problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, causing their annual “Wood Street” event, which has been held for over 10 years to be canceled. However, with their strong vision and community management, they were able to transform the Wood Street event into a new context by becoming part of the Bangkok Design Week in 2022, focusing on presenting the wisdom of woodwork through cultural tourism, responding to the lifestyles of the new generation. In addition, this community also manages a 1-day trip activity within the area to promote and generate income within the community. Moreover, this community has collaborated with educational institutions in the area such as

King Mongkut’s University of Technology North Bangkok (KMUTNB). There is a promotion from universities in the area for students to learn outside the classroom. This community management has had an immediate positive effect from the difficult situation in the past, reflecting that the persistence of the community identity is still an important variable in terms of community management with participation by community members.

Unfortunately, the case study of the Sam Phraeng community lacks the participation of its members because the community faces the problem of land security. They are in the status of tenants of the Crown Property Bureau, which makes community participation and management slow. However, they still struggle with unpredictable future problems by presenting themselves under the advantages of spatial history, such as being an old palace, architectural identity, or organizing an art festival in the area. Unfortunately, some projects are not managed effectively due to organizing activities and public relations, causing the festival to lack continuity, and negatively affecting the existence of the community identity.

4.2.4 Management

The management of the three case study communities impacts member participation, especially in the context of globalization. Communities that adapt quickly and maintain a broad vision can preserve their identity. The Sam Phraeng Community struggles due to weak management, leading to poor participation and lack of economic benefits. In contrast, Talat Noi and Soi Prachanaruemit communities have strong leadership and management that fosters participation, economic growth, and the preservation of their cultural identity. Effective management boosts community engagement and positively influences the economy, income, and existence of community identities.

Finally, the authors found that community identity is closely tied to occupation. Migrants often settle where they can work in jobs suited to their skills, forming communities based on these occupations and spiritual relationships. These communities create significant architecture and symbols that reflect local behaviors and beliefs. Despite modern challenges such as globalization and security concerns, some communities, like Sam Phraeng, maintain their historical and cultural significance through architecture and landscapes,

fostering economic growth and showing resilience. The study emphasizes that community identity is shaped not only by tangible and intangible elements but also by effective management and active participation. When these factors are present, they help blend architecture, lifestyle, culture, and belonging, enabling communities to adapt and exist their identity in an ever-changing world as shown in Fig.14.

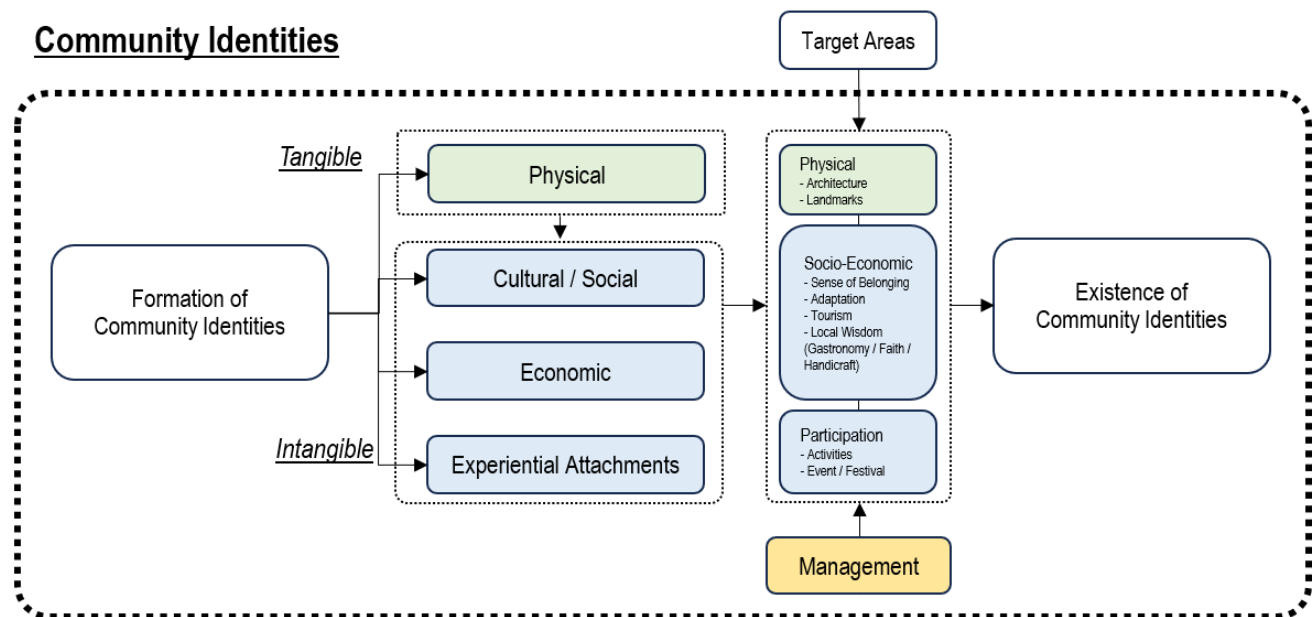


Fig. 14. Factors Contributing to Formation and Existence of Community Identities.
(Source:) The authors

5.0 Discussion

The literature review revealed that the formation and maintenance of community identity involved both tangible and intangible elements, with management playing a key role in sustaining this identity. Tangible factors, such as settlement, architecture, and symbols, vary across communities but effectively reflect their identity, as supported by Abdul Kadir, S., & Wilastrina, A. (2023), and Syed Othman Thani et al. (2023). These elements connect with local feelings, fostering preservation, and aligning with Mert Nezh Rifaoglu & Neriman Şahin Güçhan. (2013). For example, Soi Prachanaruemit's symbolic archway embodies its identity.

Intangible factors, including social and economic aspects, are interrelated with tangible ones. For instance, Zhou Sikong Shrine has influenced Talat Noi, intertwining social and economic dimensions.

Participation stems from effective management, as seen in Soi Prachanaruemit, where community members engage in activities, reflecting Fan, Y. (2024) idea that good management enhances community well-being. This management approach has also guided Talat Noi towards creative tourism, as described by Andalucia et al. (2023).

Conversely, the Sam Phraeng community lacks participation due to a weak sense of belonging, as the land is rented under the Crown Property Bureau. Due to current challenges, the community attempts to survive by emphasizing historical identity, though this conflicts with Aldy et al. (2024)'s concept of rooted community identity.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

Community identities are dynamic constructs influenced by tangible and intangible elements and develop with social change. While the two communities studied, Talat Noi and Soi Prachanaruemit (Wood Street), engage in activities to maintain their identities, Sam Phraeng faces challenges due to territorial instability. Sam Phraeng adapts by exploiting its historical significance for economic gain, although this strategy does not foster strong ties to the area, which may weaken community identity in the long run. The factors can be concluded as follows:

Physical: Architecture and symbols are the way of life and culture of the community, which they can apply to benefit both residential purposes, employment, as a spiritual center, and tourism.

Socio-Economic: Society, economy, and culture are harmonious. These are created from a sense of place, wisdom, and application to create opportunities for income generation through community identity.

Participation: It is created through systematic management. Such management helps to promote community identity through participation, to generate income for the community through identity.

This research is limited by the level of long-term community engagement, which is crucial for understanding the deeper and evolving dynamics of community identity. The rapid pace of urban development further complicates this, as it causes constant shifts in community identity, making it difficult to capture and assess stable trends.

In Thailand, many residential communities face ongoing challenges in preserving their identities amid urbanization, while social opportunities and economic power continue to influence control over specific areas. Future research should explore the complex relationships between these factors and the sustainability of community identity. Additionally, studies should focus on communities with multicultural identities, as well as specific populations such as the elderly and LGBT communities, to better understand the diverse dimensions and dynamics of community identity.

Acknowledgment

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research is related to urban planning, built environment, and culture-based design arts.

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