



Cultural identity for local tourism development: A multiple case study of selected One Town, One Product (OTOP) programs in Iloilo Province, Philippines

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Abstract

This qualitative multiple case study explored how selected One Town, One Product (OTOP) programs in the municipalities of Iloilo Province, Philippines promote cultural identity and local tourism development. Data were collated through key informant interviews with 28 participants from seven (7) municipalities across the five (5) congressional districts of Iloilo Province involving local OTOP implementers, producers, and the provincial directors of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Tourism. Moreover, document analysis complemented the interviews to strengthen methodological rigor. Data analysis was done using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis while trustworthiness was assured through Guba and Lincoln's (2005) validity and reliability criteria. Two emergent themes were unearthed. First, the cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions in the development of OTOP. Second, OTOP identification was framed to have been shaped by government dynamics. The study was limited to local government units (LGUs) with matched OTOP and mapped cultural heritage. Ultimately, the findings imply that a comprehensively institutionalized, culture-centered OTOP framework, collaboratively steered by national agencies, LGUs, and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, transforms into a strategic catalyst for cultural identity safeguarding and inclusive local tourism development.

Keywords: *cultural heritage, tourism development, cultural tourism, cultural identity, tourism governance*

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1. Introduction

As worldwide development persists in transforming the interconnection between tourist destinations and their visitors, tourism and culture have progressively interwoven in shaping the identity and competitive capacity of localities. Tourism and culture are intimately interconnected in the present-day's era of globalization, granting conversation and connection (León-Santiesteban et al., 2023). As a location grows more significant through the destination's touristic requirements, differentiations must concentrate around the tourism destination's explicit recognition and promotion of its identity (Lavaredas et al., 2025), transforming it towards a brand that is distinct.

Hinging on the expanding focus on destination identity, cultural heritage has more and more been perceived as a cornerstone in defining significant tourism experience and nourishing civic involvement. Over the past few years, cultural identity has appeared as a central point in tourism, essential for both authentic tourist experiences and destination marketing. Research from varied locales suggests that cultural heritage remarkably supports visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Li et al., 2025). Eminently, cultural heritage also reinforces practices within local communities and improves cultural awareness (Kanoksilapatham et al., 2023).

Taking into account the apparent importance of cultural identity in tourism development, a number of Asian territories have institutionalized community-established schemes that capitalize on culture and products as catalysts of economic upturn (Solingen, 2018). Smith et al. (2024) argue that economies of Southeast Asian countries are considerably dynamic in the advancement of local communities. Thailand, as an example, formed its own project, the "One Tambon, One Product" (OTOP) program that endeavors to back cooperatives in communities and tambons or sub-districts. The main goal was to raise the incomes of the communities and safeguard the local tradition. Thailand's OTOP project was patterned on Japan's "One Village, One Product" (OVOP) program. This movement was conceived to enliven countryside economic development, especially in the rural highlands, through assisting locals in the upgrade of the value of their local culture, produce, and tourism leading to the probability of employment (Erwan, 2023).

Subsequent to the execution of comparable community-motivated initiatives throughout Asia, the Philippines similarly adopted a localized growth strategy that harmonizes tourism promotion, entrepreneurship, and cultural identity. Existing since 2004, the "One Town, One Product" (OTOP) program is a key government initiative of the Department of

Trade and Industry (DTI) aimed at supporting micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) through tailored interventions designed to promote inclusive local economic development in the Philippines (DTI, 2025). MSMEs play a crucial role and serve as one of the major pillars of several economies. The 2023 to 2028 Philippine NTDP's strategic goal 4, objective 4, emphasizes the strong position of the Department of Tourism (DOT) to involve MSMEs in tourism product development, drives, and marketing toward the fortification of the tourism value chain (DOT, 2023). Aligning with this, the Philippine government enacted Republic Act (RA) 11960, officially known as the "One Town, One Product" (OTOP) Philippines Act, on August 24, 2023. This legislation formally institutionalizes the OTO program as a key government stimulus initiative aimed at promoting the development of MSMEs in rural areas.

Regardless of the long-standing carrying out of OTO programs throughout the Philippines, difficulties affiliate to local prioritization, appreciation, and formalized assistance persist to impact their performance at the grassroots level. As stated by the Philippine News Agency (2010), in the Province of Iloilo, the OTO program has been implemented since 2005. Despite of the presence of support, one of the pressing concerns of the OTO program is its appreciation and implementation in the local government level, which Rocamora and Aguling (2019) cited the inadequate awareness of the Local Chief Executives (LCEs) on the significance of tourism that led to the non-prioritization of tourism programs and lack of support in local government units (LGUs).

In the local context, despite the OTO program's 20-year-establishment in Iloilo Province and the reinforcement of the OTO Philippines Act, there is a notable absence of OTO hubs across the Province of Iloilo. A reality affirmed by the DTI Iloilo Provincial Office, even with the potential of the OTO program to promote local products and stimulate economic growth through SMEs, implementation remains limited in the area. Supplementarily, the initial document analysis made on the acquired official list of the identified OTO in Iloilo Province from the DTI Provincial Office vis-à-vis the official mapped cultural heritage of the municipalities from the Iloilo Provincial Tourism Office revealed that out of the 42 municipalities and one component city in the province, only eight LGUs have matched OTO and mapped cultural heritage. Ultimately, the absence of studies centering on the OTO program in Iloilo Province utilizing a qualitative research method exhibits geographical, literature, and methodological gaps. All these signals a significant and solid gap in program

accessibility, awareness, and reach, which suggests further research on the low uptake and limited presence of OTOP initiatives in the province.

This study focused on the municipalities per congressional district with matched OTOP and mapped cultural heritage, as well as the contribution of the OTOP programs of the selected municipalities in Iloilo Province to the promotion of cultural identity and local tourism development. In line with this, the study sought to answer the research question: “How do the selected OTOP programs in the municipalities of Iloilo Province contribute to the promotion of cultural identity and local tourism development?” The following multiple case study questions were asked:

1. How are local traditions, heritage, and indigenous knowledge integrated into the OTOP initiatives?
2. How did the LGUs identify the OTOP products?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Identity in Local Tourism Development

Within the extensive global framework of society, the environment, and the economy, tourist destinations maintain a key position, effectively functioning as meaningful catalysts for both cultural exchange and regional development (Tang et al., 2025). The symbiotic relationship between tourism and culture is a fundamental consideration in destination planning and development (Dionísio et al., 2024). As posited by Seyfi et al. (2019), cultural tourism, which allows tourists to encounter and comprehend cultural meanings, is primarily shaped by their desire for cultural interaction and attractive cultural products. According to Gumede and Ehiane (2025), heritage and culture in domestic tourism strengthen national pride in one’s history, while heritage and culture in international tourism promote awareness and appreciation of diverse cultures and foster nation-building, communal solidarity, understanding, and peace between hosts and tourists. The pivotal role of local culture in tourism denotes its substantial impact on the advancement and long-term sustainability of destinations (Qiu et al., 2024). The local culture encompasses the unique traditions, practices, and customs of a distinct region or community. As describe by León-Santiesteban et al. (2023), cultural identity is the distinct assemblage of traditions, customs, and values that represent a particular community. This shared identity is central to a community’s understanding of itself and shapes its perspective on the world.

Recognizing the importance of cultural identity in shaping tourism destinations, Mitchell and Eagles (2001) and Yaja et al. (2024) pointed out that improving local tourism development in a destination requires encouraging the integration of local communities and their resources into the formulation and implementation of tourism products and services. The success of tourist destination development is directly associated with the presence of tourism potential (Desembrianita et al., 2021), encompassing both physical attributes and non-physical features. Arici et al. (2025) and Song (2024) assert that a strategic framework for enhancing destination competitiveness involves community-led initiatives intended to effectively leverage a tourist destination's cultural heritage and unique local resources.

Within the framework of the global perspectives on culture-driven and community-based tourism development, the Philippines, one of the ASEAN member states, possesses significant opportunities within its tourism sector, primarily due to the country's rich cultural heritage, abundant natural resources, expanding community-based tourism initiatives, and growing eco-tourism programs (Busalla, 2025). Eslit (2024) further emphasized the abundance of cultural groups and languages that contribute to the country's vibrant cultural diversity. This diversity is not only a source of pride but also a critical component in shaping the collective identity of Filipinos. Given the Philippines' vibrant cultural heritage and rich natural landscapes, the archipelago provides a strong foundation for the development of local tourism (Kazmina et al., 2021). The DOT (2024) declared that the Philippine tourism industry has become a vital driver of economic growth and post-pandemic recovery, which significantly contributes employment opportunities for Filipinos.

2.2. The One Village, One Product Concept

According to Ndione and Suzuki (2019), the concept of OVOP movement was initially introduced in Japan approximately five decades ago. The underlying principles of Japan's OVOP movement can be traced back to Oyama Machi in 1961, then considered the poorest village in Oita Prefecture. In this village, Hirumi Yahata, President of the Oyama Agricultural Cooperative, developed the "New Plum and Chestnuts Strategy." This innovative initiative aimed to shift agricultural production from traditional rice cultivation to the more profitable crops of chestnuts and plums, with the ultimate goal of improving local livelihoods. It embodies a distinct local development approach, primarily envisioned in 1979 by Morihiko Hiramatsu, the former Governor of Oita Prefecture. Hiramatsu sought to address the severe

economic decline affecting the rural areas of Oita. At its core, the OVOP initiative endeavors to develop products that are competitive in global markets while simultaneously nurturing a spirit of self-sufficiency and emphasizing local value. The three principles of OVOP, as identified by Ndione and Suzuki (2019), are: self-reliance and creativity; human resource development; and thinking locally while acting globally (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2022).

The success of the OVOP model in promoting local enterprises encouraged numerous nations (Soriano, 2019), particularly in South Asia, including the Philippines, to adopt and implement their own versions of the initiative, known as the OTOP program. The OTOP program was introduced in the Philippines in 2002 and gained further momentum in February 2006 with the promulgation of Executive Order No. 176 by former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Furthermore, the OTOP Philippines strategy serves as a major government initiative aimed at strengthening the development of MSMEs. This initiative represents a customized intervention designed to promote inclusive local economic development. It empowers local communities to identify, develop, and promote distinctive products or services that utilize local resources, cultural heritage, established networks, creative potential, and competitive advantages. These offerings, often referred to as “pride-of-place” products, represent areas in which localities can achieve recognized excellence or distinction. The principal objective of OTOP Philippines is to enhance the capabilities of “OTOPreneurs,” or entrepreneurs operating within the OTOP framework (DTI, 2025).

Despite the recognized potential of cultural identity and heritage in strengthening tourism destinations, cultural identity has also been widely acknowledged as a significant driver of tourism growth, particularly in differentiating destinations within competitive markets. Nevertheless, while several scholars emphasize its role in destination branding and visitor experience, others highlight the risks of commercialization and cultural dilution, indicating the need for more context-sensitive approaches.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The qualitative research design was employed in this study. According to Frankel and Cottingham (2024), qualitative research is a term used by social scientists to describe a variety of primarily non-quantitative approaches for describing, examining, and explaining

individuals' lived experiences in their daily lives. This design was appropriate for the present investigation because it allowed the participants to explain and describe the OTOP program based on their personal perspectives in a comprehensive and detailed manner. The OTOP program, as an instrument for strengthening local identity and supporting MSMEs among municipalities in Iloilo Province, was better examined through qualitative indicators because it involved changes and variations in perspectives and approaches that needed to be understood and interpreted.

The case study methodology was employed in this qualitative research, specifically the multiple case study approach. In a multiple case study, the focus shifts from understanding a single case to examining the similarities and differences among cases (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). Hence, it is considered appropriate for this investigation because it sought to explain how participants across selected municipalities in the Province of Iloilo engaged in the development of the OTOP program. To fulfill the case study requirement for multiple sources of information, the researcher conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) with 28 participants and carried out document analysis.

Moreover, this multiple case study employed the inductive approach. The inductive approach, often regarded as bottom-up reasoning (Barrett & Younas, 2023), involves recognizing patterns and collecting data to generate broader hypotheses or theories. Through the use of the inductive approach, the study was able to uncover emerging themes based on the data gathered from the OTOP participants.

3.2. Participants of the Study

This study involved diverse participants to ensure the representativeness and comprehensiveness of the findings. During the KIIs, 28 participants were interviewed. The participants included seven LGUs, with at least one from each congressional district of Iloilo Province, that had matched OTOP products and mapped cultural heritage, as well as seven OTOP MSMEs from the identified LGUs that had matched OTOP products and mapped cultural heritage and had either availed themselves of or not availed themselves of support from the Department of Trade and Industry Iloilo Province. Specifically, the local government participants included the Local Chief Executives (LCEs) or their representatives, Municipal Tourism Officers (MTOs), and Local Economic Development and Investment Promotion Officers (LEDIPOs). It should be noted that one LGU from the First Congressional District of

Iloilo declined to participate in the study. In addition, the Iloilo Provincial Directors of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Tourism also participated in the study.

The participants were assured that their identities and other personal information would be kept confidential and private. Anonymous labels were assigned to all recordings and documentation through the use of code numbers for each participant to protect their identities. Table 1 presents the tabular summary of the participants' codes.

Table 1
Summary of the participants' code

Municipality	Local Official	Assigned Code
Santa Barbara	LCE	A.1
	LEDIPO	A.2
	MTO	A.3
	MSME	A.4
Janiuay	LCE	B.1
	LEDIPO	B.2
	MTO	B.3
	MSME	B.4
Miagao	LCE	C.1
	LEDIPO/MTO	C.2
	MSME	C.3
Banate	LCE	D.1
	LEDIPO	D.2
	MTO	D.3
	MSME	D.4
Ajuy	LCE	E.1
	LEDIPO	E.2
	MTO	E.3
	MSME	E.4
Maasin	LCE/LEDIPO	F.1
	MTO	F.2
	MSME	F.3
Lemery	LCE	G.1
	LEDIPO	G.2
	MTO	G.3
	MSME	G.4

For LGU Officials, the qualified participants were (a) male or female, (b) 25 years old to 70 years old, (c.) LCEs or his/her representatives, MTOs, and the LEDIPOs, and (d.) free willing to participate. For OTOP MSMEs, the qualified participants were (a) male or female, (b) 25 years old to 70 years old, (c) length of OTOP MSME operation for at least 2 years, (d) availed and not availed support from the DTI Iloilo Province, and (e) free willing to participate. For the DTI and DOT Officers, the qualified participants were (a) male or female, (b) 25 years

old to 70 years old, (c) Provincial Director, and (d) free willing to participate. Participants who were unable to meet and satisfy all the prescribed inclusion criteria were excluded from taking part in the study.

The purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the participants of the study. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is a technique widely used for identifying and selecting information-rich cases for the most effective utilization of limited resources (Campbell et al., 2020). The OTOP MSMEs, local government officials, and officials from the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Tourism were deliberately chosen as participants because they could provide the most valuable insights regarding the OTOP program in Iloilo Province, particularly their personal experiences with the program's development and challenges. By selecting a smaller yet intentional sample, the study aimed to generate an in-depth qualitative understanding of the participants lived experiences rather than generalizing the findings to a broader population.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

Multiple triangulations, through the use of different data sources for comparison, specifically KIIs and document analysis, were utilized in this study. In gathering the data, the KIIs were primarily conducted by the researcher. The researcher scheduled personal appointments with the identified interview participants and ensured that the interview conditions were calm and comfortable. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were employed using a combination of the English language and the local dialect, Hiligaynon, throughout the interview process. Once an interview was completed, it was transcribed for interpretation. The KIIs were conducted using a voice-recording device and lasted for a maximum of 45 minutes, with the use of probing questions to further explore the subject matter.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis method employed in this study was thematic analysis. Specifically, the study utilized the reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2022), which included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the developed themes, and producing the report.

To establish validity and reliability and ensure methodological rigor, the following criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (2005) were applied: credibility (in place of internal

validity), transferability (instead of generalizability or external validity), dependability (rather than reliability), and confirmability (in place of objectivity).

3.5. Research Ethics

To evaluate the ethical and technical dimensions of the study, the researcher formally sought approval from the Central Philippine University Research Ethics Review Board (CPU-RERB). A thorough explanation of the ethical considerations and informed consent was also provided to the participants, who were required to signify their agreement by affixing their handwritten signatures prior to the interview. In addition, the researcher emphasized that the participants had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time if they found the questions to be uncomfortable or distressing.

4. Findings and Discussion

The succeeding themes unearthed not only the integration of culture into the OTOP programs in the selected LGUs in Iloilo Province but also the process of OTOP identification and selection. This study involved seven LGUs with matched OTOP products and mapped cultural heritage that had either availed themselves of or not availed themselves of support from the Department of Trade and Industry Iloilo Province.

4.1. Cultural, Economic, and Institutional Dimensions of OTOP Development

Table 1

Themes and subthemes

Data Source	Major Theme	Sub-theme
Provincial Directors	Culturally Anchored OTOP	
LCEs, LEDIPOs, MTOs	Cultural Integration and Preservation through Design, Craft, and Generational Livelihood	OTOP as the Town's Identity Culture and Livelihood Intertwined
OTOP MSMEs	Culturally Integrated Local Industry and Traditional Livelihood	Practice of Generational Livelihood OTOP associated with their Place
Document Analysis	Institutionalization of OTOP through National and Local Policies and Governance Mechanisms	RA 11960 as a Catalyst for Local OTOP Development Enactment of Local Ordinances Supporting OTOP Ordinance Requiring Bamboo Planting as a Prerequisite for Marriage

Theme 1: Culturally Anchored OTOP

The provincial directors underscored that OTOP initiatives serve as a platform for a locality to culturally identify itself. Participant A narrated, “*Anchored on culture. What are we? How do we tell other people that this is who we are? So, it is really cultural.*” In addition, participant B supplementarily stated, “*the OTOP is very vital because it gives character to the towns. Like in terms of their cultural celebrations, production of souvenirs might be a possible product of the OTOP identified.*” Absolor et al. (2025) corroborate the findings and asserted that the OTOP program provided an avenue to demonstrate the distinctiveness and ingenuity of community-based products across diverse market segments.

Theme 2: Cultural Integration and Preservation through Design, Craft, and Generational Livelihood

Participants expressed that product development is intentionally grounded in cultural knowledge and traditionally rooted livelihoods. Through their designs, they also preserve their culture, emphasizing how decorative elements are consciously inspired by community symbols, narratives, and craftsmanship.

OTOP as the town’s identity. The interview findings revealed an important narrative: Iloilo’s OTOP program has evolved into a channel for local pride and identity. Participant A.2 explained that “*OTOP is like the identity of a town.*” This statement was reinforced by Participant F.2, who declared that “*bamboo is really part of our identity,*” and Participant B.1, who expressed that “*we were really rich in abaca here.*” Likewise, Participant B.3 emphasized that “*our OTOP is our face value, our face card, our identity.*” These assertions that OTOP has become a town’s defining identity or “face card” find strong legal support in Republic Act No. 11960, or the OTOP Philippines Act of 2023, which institutionalizes this concept by requiring that OTOP-related products be rooted in “culture, community resources, and connection.” Section 7, Paragraph C of the OTOP Philippines Act of 2023 explicitly defines “connection” as the capability of a product to evoke a sense of pride or emotional connection among the locals. This provision legitimizes the interviewees’ perspectives that OTOP products embody the identity of a town.

Culture and livelihood intertwined. Based on the interviews, OTOP products are not merely commodities; rather, they are living chronicles of a locality’s struggles, adaptations, and achievements. As shared by Participant B.3, processes practiced “*100s of years ago*”

remain at the core of their OTOP products. This narrative reflects how the craft is deeply embedded in the cultural identity of the locality. For the participant, lanot farming and production are not simply commercial activities but heritage-based practices passed down through generations. Participant G.3 likewise stated that OTOP-related products have become “*part of the daily lives of the people,*” which was complemented by Participant B.3, who explained that “*tradition binds together. It’s intertwined with the planting process.*” In practice, the production of lanot is clearly integrated into the locality’s cultural identity through its continued presence in local customs. This enduring practice demonstrates historical resilience and highlights the integration of culture into everyday life.

In accordance with De Villa et al. (2022), when a craft is “*intertwined with the planting process,*” it transcends mere production and becomes a ritual. In the selected LGUs in Iloilo, the fact that these practices have been “*practiced for more than 20 years*” and are considered “*generational,*” as recounted by Participant E.3, indicates that the OTOP program professionalizes existing cultural resources to ensure their continuity in the contemporary market.

Theme 3: Culturally Integrated Local Industry and Traditional Livelihood

The interviews elucidated that the OTOP mechanisms, rather than functioning merely as profit-driven enterprises, serve as stewards of cultural heritage that sustain heritage-based livelihoods.

Practice of generational livelihood. The findings suggest that heritage-based economic practices and culturally embedded industries remain firmly rooted in the identity and socio-economic framework of selected OTOP localities in Iloilo Province. Data extracts such as “*even before I was born, this was already the livelihood of our ancestors,*” expressed by Participant E.4, and “*passed down through generations... this is really our livelihood,*” stated by Participant C.3, demonstrate that economic activities such as tabagak drying, abaca weaving, amakan crafting, and bamboo production are not merely revenue-generating endeavors but also represent a continuum of inherited cultural knowledge. These practices embody communal memory and shared identity, aligning with the perspective of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2022), which recognizes traditional livelihoods as living traditions that sustain social cohesion and continuity across generations.

Furthermore, the participants' narratives highlight that these livelihoods are deeply embedded in daily life, as reflected in the statement, "*catching and drying tabagak is truly our way of life*," shared by Participant E.4. Similarly, the transmission of weaving skills through family heritage, as evidenced in the statement, "*the work of splitting and weaving amakan came from their parents... It has been passed down through generations*," narrated by Participant F.3, reinforces the contention of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023) that traditional industries strengthen community identity and foster resilience in local economies.

The participants likewise emphasized the historical role of traditional industries in shaping local economic development. The statement of Participant G.4 that "*bamboo became a livelihood... the very first way people earned income*" underscores the foundational contribution of traditional resources to economic growth and community survival. This perspective echoes the view of the Asian Development Bank (2021), which recognizes heritage-based industries as drivers of economic diversification and long-term rural development. Moreover, the symbolic and emotional connection to OTOP products is evident in the statement of Participant B.4: "*We really don't want it (abaca) to disappear because this is the pride of Tuburan and the pride of the whole of Janiuy*." This reflects a strong sense of identity and ownership associated with cultural production. As highlighted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022), this sense of pride enhances community participation in tourism and supports sustainable destination development.

OTOP associated with place identity. The findings emphasize how certain products are deeply anchored in the identity of the community and serve as recognizable symbols of place in both local and external contexts. Participant B.4's statement, "*In our municipality, once you say abaca, people immediately think of us*," illustrates the concept of place-product association, wherein a locality becomes synonymous with a particular product. This aligns with Lemmetyinen et al. (2021) that place branding is rooted in identity construction through symbolic and tangible representations.

Similarly, the statement of Participant A.4, "*Whatever our product is, that is what we bring, and we also carry the name of our town with it*," underscores the strategic use of locally produced products as representations of the locality. This supports Richards' (2021) argument that cultural tourism increasingly relies on heritage products and indigenous narratives to create meaningful visitor experiences. In addition, Participant E.4's perception that "*It is truly*

part of us. It has been there since the early days” highlights the role of indigenous products in sustaining communal memory and cultural continuity. This finding parallels the perspective of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2022), which recognizes indigenous industries and traditional crafts as essential in preserving intangible cultural heritage while promoting sustainable local development.

Theme 4: Institutionalization of OTOP through National and Local Policies and Governance Mechanisms

Document analysis of national and municipal policies revealed that certain LGUs have institutionalized their OTOP programs by integrating culturally embedded practices and products into formal development frameworks.

RA 11960 as a catalyst for local OTOP development. The enactment of the “OTOP Philippines Act” demonstrates a strong national policy framework that anchors cultural identity within local tourism development. For LGUs, the legislation formalizes mechanisms that enable localities to transform cultural traditions and indigenous resources into competitive local products.

At the policy level, the Act defines OTOP as a strategy for inclusive local economic development. Section 2 declares the commitment of the State to “*develop a self-reliant and independent national economy effectively controlled by Filipinos through policies and programs that drive inclusive local economic activity and boost national economic growth.*” Importantly, the Act provides support mechanisms that allow localities to develop products “*rooted in their culture, community resources, creativity, connection, and competitive advantage,*” thereby legitimizing the use of cultural identity as a basis for identifying OTOP products within municipalities.

The cultural foundation of the program is further reinforced in Section 4, which institutionalizes OTOP as a nationwide stimulus program that promotes MSME development “*through the development of indigenous raw materials, utilizing local skills and talents and featuring local traditions and cultures across the country.*” This provision clearly positions indigenous traditions, skills, and local resources as essential elements in the development of local products.

Enactment of local ordinances supporting OTOP. Municipality D’s enactment of Ordinance No. 2009–03, entitled “An Ordinance Declaring the Month of December Every

Year Hereinafter as Cultural-Tourism Month and Kasag Festival in the Municipality and Providing Funds Thereof,” demonstrates how the LGU formally integrates cultural identity, indigenous resources, and tourism promotion into its OTOP initiative. The ordinance specifically links the OTOP initiative with the locality’s cultural and economic policy direction. It recognizes that *“one of such milestones was in December 2006 when the Municipality adopted OTOP policy program and considered the blue crab as its product that could symbolize its aspiration for progress and development as a municipality.”* This provision illustrates how the municipality intentionally identified an abundant indigenous marine resource as its flagship OTOP product, reflecting both the locality’s economic foundation and its cultural connection to marine-based traditions.

Furthermore, the ordinance institutionalizes cultural preservation and product promotion through policy mechanisms grounded in local governance. As explicitly stated in Section 3, Declaration of Policy, the LGU commits *“to institutionalize a comprehensive and integrated program for the revival, development, and promotion of One Town, One Product and preservation of culture and the arts under the auspices of the Municipality.”* This provision highlights the municipality’s deliberate effort to integrate OTOP into its broader cultural development agenda, ensuring that community heritage, local arts, and traditions are actively promoted alongside indigenous products.

Ordinance requiring bamboo planting as a prerequisite for marriage. Municipal Ordinance No. 2020-001 of Municipality F, entitled “An Ordinance Requiring Soon-to-be-Married Couples of the Municipality to Plant at Least Five (5) Bamboo Seedlings to Encourage the Promotion of the Bamboo Industry in the Municipality,” illustrates how the municipality institutionalizes the long-term development of a culturally and economically significant local resource that supports its OTOP initiative.

The ordinance establishes a community-based mechanism that integrates cultural traditions and civic participation into resource development. As specified in Section 3, Scope of the Policy, *“this ordinance covers all individuals who intend to enter into marriage and secure a pre-marriage counseling certificate from the Office of the Local Civil Registrar.”* By linking bamboo planting to a significant life-cycle event such as marriage, the municipality embeds environmental stewardship and resource restoration within a culturally meaningful community practice.

4.2. Governance Dynamics in OTOP Identification

Table 2

Themes and subthemes

Data Source	Major Theme	Sub-theme
Provincial Directors	LCE-Dependent OTOP Identification	Consultative Identification
LCEs, LEDIPOs, MTOs	Varying Processes of OTOP Identification	Absence of a Defined Identification Process Inherited from Previous Administrative Decisions
OTOP MSMEs	Non-Consultative Identification Process	

The findings demonstrate that the identification of OTOP does not adhere to an identical procedural structure but rather materializes by means of locally identified governance systems.

Theme 5: LCE-Dependent OTOP Identification

The identification of OTOP products is often conditional upon the preferences, discretion, and leadership orientation of the LCEs, rather than on formalized or collaborative systems. Provincial Director A explained that “*if you take it on the side of the LGU, frankly, sometimes it’s only the decision of the LCE, not even the whole.*” Provincial Director A further added, “*Not only abundance, but also preference (of the LCE).*” As indicated by Brillantes and Fernandez (2011, as cited in Patiam, 2025), the decentralization framework enables LGUs to exercise autonomy in program implementation; however, this also creates variability in institutional procedures, often resulting in leadership-driven decision-making processes.

It is likewise noteworthy that the absence of formal procedures, workshops, or standardized approaches, “*There’s no really specific workshop for the identification of OTOP,*” as articulated by Provincial Director B, aligns with the statement of Provincial Director A, who remarked, “*It seems that we did not really have a formal process like that.*” These observations reveal institutional gaps in local OTOP planning. According to the Asian Development Bank (2021), many LGUs lack standardized frameworks and technical capacity for industry identification, which consequently leads to ad hoc and informal approaches.

Theme 6: Varying Processes of OTOP Identification

The participants pointed out that certain LGUs adopt participatory and consultative approaches. Conversely, the findings also indicate that governance structures and leadership directions significantly shape how OTOP identification is carried out.

Consultative identification. The results indicate that the identification of OTOP products in selected LGUs is driven by collaborative and consultative mechanisms involving various stakeholders. These mechanisms are evident in situations where “*the tourism council was organized*” and “*consultations*” were conducted, during which the “*majority chose abaca as the One Town, One Product,*” as explained by Participant B.1. This suggests that product identification is not solely a leadership-driven undertaking but rather a consultative process shaped by the collective agreement of stakeholders. The participation of the Department of Trade and Industry, as mentioned by Participant C.2, “*the DTI... academe... Local Culture and Arts Council...*” further reinforces the role of institutional collaboration in guiding product development. The involvement of NGAs in community consultations aligns with decentralized governance principles, which emphasize intergovernmental collaboration in enhancing the cultural relevance and competitiveness of localities, as outlined by the World Bank (2023).

Absence of a defined identification process. Several participants explicitly expressed uncertainty and a lack of procedural clarity, as reflected in statements such as “*I don’t have an idea (of the OTOP identification process)*” (Participant B.2) and “*I don’t know... Maybe...*” (Participant A.3). These responses indicate inconsistencies in organizational awareness, suggesting that OTOP identification is not anchored in a systematic and policy-driven framework. This lack of certainty is further reinforced by Participant E.3, who stated, “*There was no specific process. There were no detailed steps or a formal procedure,*” and Participant E.2, who similarly remarked that “*there was no formal process in place.*” These findings are consistent with the observations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022), which emphasized that community-based cultural economy initiatives are often constrained by weak institutional structures, resulting in reactive and informal decision-making rather than systematic planning.

Inherited from previous administrative decisions. This observed pattern reflects broader governance mechanisms in local and cultural tourism development. As narrated by Participant C.1, “*The OTOP... was already identified by the previous administration.*” Participant D.2 shared the same perspective, stating that “*it was already decided by the*

previous administration.” Torfing et al. (2021) argued that maintaining inherited programs enables governments to preserve stakeholder trust and sustain collaborative networks. In addition, Participant G.3 expressed that “*when we assumed our positions, that was already the case...*” Pierre and Peters (2022) emphasized that continuity in government programs reduces the risk of policy fragmentation and reflects responsible governance.

Theme 7: Non-Consultative Identification Process

The study further reveals a non-consultative identification process in selected OTOP programs, as evidenced by the limited engagement and awareness among MSME participants. Statements such as “*I do not think anyone asked me... I am not aware of it*” and “*I am not aware of the process,*” expressed by Participant A.4 and Participant E.4, respectively, imply that several entrepreneurs were neither consulted nor adequately informed during the selection of their OTOP products. Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2015) emphasized that community-based tourism programs often exhibit tokenistic participation, wherein stakeholders are consulted only superficially or are entirely excluded from the decision-making process.

In this study, communication deficiencies also emerged as a significant concern. Participant A.4’s statement, “*To be honest, we were never really called,*” and Participant E.4’s statement, “*I was not really informed or made aware that our tabagak were already being identified or designated as the OTOP,*” demonstrate the limited dissemination of information among stakeholders. These findings are likewise consistent with the observations of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2021), which highlighted that cultural development strategies often prioritize institutional agendas over grassroots participation, potentially resulting in limited alignment with local cultural identity and entrepreneurial capacities.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the selected OTOP programs in the municipalities of Iloilo Province promote cultural identity and local tourism development by embedding community-driven initiatives rooted in culturally anchored traditions, products, and heritage-based livelihoods. The implementation of OTOP initiatives is significantly grounded in cultural identity, wherein local traditions, heritage, and indigenous knowledge serve as essential foundations for product development. Across NGA leaders, LGU implementers, and MSMEs,

the OTOP program is consistently positioned as a symbol of local identity, embodied through artisanal crafts, culturally rooted designs, and the continuity of generational livelihoods strongly associated with indigenous practices and raw materials. In addition, the identification of OTOP products is predominantly leadership-driven and administratively determined, with considerable influence from the Local Chief Executives (LCEs). Although certain municipalities adopted consultative mechanisms involving local stakeholders, the process across the cases remained inconsistent and often lacked a clearly institutionalized identification framework. Consequently, OTOP products were either inherited from previous administrations or identified without formal consultative processes involving MSMEs.

Based on the findings, it is imperative that OTOP MSMEs actively participate in LGU-led cultural mapping initiatives, consultations, and collaborative OTOP planning mechanisms to ensure that local product selection and development are grounded in indigenous cultural practices and community-based knowledge. In addition, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) should prioritize the development and implementation of a codified national policy framework for participatory OTOP identification and monitoring. Such a framework should require LGUs to integrate cultural mapping, stakeholder consultations with OTOP MSMEs, and formally documented product selection criteria aligned with Republic Act No. 11960. Moreover, the Department of Tourism (DOT) is encouraged to strengthen the proactive implementation of province-wide cultural mapping and tourism capability programs, particularly in LGUs with limited or absent cultural mapping documents and insufficient technical readiness.

Future researchers may expand this qualitative inquiry through broader methodological and geographical coverage by conducting mixed-methods and comparative studies that build upon the present qualitative findings.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the Central Philippine University. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearances by the Central Philippine University – Research Ethics Review Board.

AI Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Gemini AI, ChatGPT, and Grammarly in searching appropriate literature, summarizing key points, and paraphrasing ideas. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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