

Rethinking Sustainable Tourism in Vietnam: From Green Growth To Social Transformation

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500710>

Received: 11 May 2026; Accepted: 16 May 2026; Published: 11 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism in Vietnam has traditionally been framed through the priorities of economic growth, environmental protection, and destination competitiveness. However, the rapid expansion of tourism in emerging destinations has generated increasing social tensions related to community inequality, heritage commodification, labor precarity, digital behavior, and governance fragmentation. These challenges reveal the limitations of environmentally centered sustainability models and suggest the need for a broader transformative approach. This study rethinks sustainable tourism in Vietnam by proposing a transition from “green growth” toward “social transformation.” Conceptually, social transformation is understood as a multidimensional restructuring process through which tourism reshapes community relations, cultural identity, governance systems, and collective well-being beyond conventional environmental and economic objectives. Methodologically, the study adopts a conceptual qualitative approach combining directed literature review, academic discourse analysis, and interpretive synthesis. Drawing upon international tourism scholarship and recent Vietnamese tourism studies, the article develops the Integrated Sustainable Tourism Transformation Framework (ISTTF), consisting of five interconnected dimensions: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. The study argues that sustainable tourism should be understood not merely as environmental preservation, but as an integrated social process involving justice, participation, adaptive resilience, cultural legitimacy, and ethical destination development. The proposed framework contributes to transformative tourism scholarship by integrating fragmented dimensions of sustainability into a unified conceptual model applicable to emerging tourism destinations in Vietnam and other developing-country contexts.

Keywords: sustainable tourism; social transformation; transformative tourism; tourism governance; community-based tourism; heritage tourism; Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism has long been positioned as a major development orientation in global tourism studies, with emphasis on balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being (Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Butler, 1999). In Vietnam, this orientation has been reflected in policies and practices related to ecotourism, community-based tourism, green destinations, and heritage conservation. However, the rapid expansion of tourism has also generated social tensions, including unequal benefit distribution, symbolic community participation, heritage commodification, labor precarity, fragmented governance, and changing tourist behavior in the digital era.

These issues reveal the limitations of sustainability models that remain primarily centered on green growth and environmental management. Although environmental protection is essential, it is insufficient if tourism development continues to reproduce social inequality, weaken community agency, commercialize cultural

memory, or marginalize local voices. As Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) argues, sustainable tourism should not merely sustain tourism as an industry, but should address broader questions of justice, ethics, and social change. Similarly, transformative tourism scholarship emphasizes that tourism can reshape identities, values, social relations, and community futures (Ateljjevic, 2020; Sheldon, 2020).

In this article, social transformation in tourism is defined as a multidimensional process through which tourism restructures community relations, cultural identity, heritage memory, tourist behavior, educational capacity, and governance arrangements. This concept differs from social sustainability, which often focuses on maintaining social welfare and stability. Social transformation places stronger emphasis on structural change, redistribution of agency, participatory justice, and adaptive resilience. It also differs from tourist-centered notions of transformative tourism by focusing not only on individual change, but also on wider social and institutional transformation within destination systems.

Recent studies in tourism have increasingly highlighted the importance of community empowerment, ethical governance, heritage memory, emotional sustainability, and responsible tourist behavior (Tosun, 2006; Cole, 2006; Stone, 2012; Farmaki, 2013; Han, 2021). In Vietnam, emerging studies have examined community-based tourism conflicts, heritage interpretation, community English, Generation Z's sustainable behavior, tourism education, and stakeholder collaboration. Nevertheless, these discussions remain fragmented across separate research areas. Previous Vietnam-based studies have examined community-based tourism conflicts, heritage interpretation, community English, Generation Z's sustainable behavior, tourism education, and stakeholder collaboration; however, these discussions remain fragmented across separate research areas (Nguyen & Chung, 2025; Chung, 2025b; Chung et al., 2026; Dao et al., 2026; Trung et al., 2025).

Responding to this gap, this study rethinks sustainable tourism in Vietnam by proposing a conceptual transition from green growth to social transformation. It develops the ISTTF, consisting of five interconnected dimensions: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. Through this framework, the article argues that sustainable tourism should be understood not only as environmental preservation, but also as an integrated social process involving justice, participation, cultural legitimacy, adaptive capacity, and inclusive governance.

The article makes three contributions. First, it clarifies the concept of social transformation in tourism and distinguishes it from social sustainability and transformative tourism. Second, it integrates fragmented debates on community, heritage, tourist behavior, education, and governance into a unified conceptual framework. Third, it offers a Vietnam-based theoretical model that may also be relevant to other emerging destinations facing similar tensions between tourism growth, environmental management, and social justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Tourism and the Limits of Green Growth

Sustainable tourism has traditionally been understood as a development approach that seeks to balance economic viability, environmental protection, and social well-being (Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Butler, 1999). Within this framework, tourism development is expected to reduce negative environmental impacts, conserve resources, and maintain long-term destination competitiveness. In many developing countries, including Vietnam, this orientation has often been translated into green growth strategies, ecotourism development, environmental management, and destination branding.

However, recent scholarship has increasingly questioned the adequacy of sustainability models that remain primarily centered on environmental protection and economic efficiency. Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) argues that sustainable tourism has often been reduced to sustaining tourism as an industry rather than transforming the unequal social relations produced by tourism development. Similarly, Gössling and Hall (2019) suggest that technologically driven and growth-oriented sustainability approaches may fail to address deeper issues of inequality, labor vulnerability, and uneven benefit distribution.

These critiques indicate that green growth, while important, cannot fully explain the social consequences of tourism expansion. A destination may be environmentally managed but still socially unsustainable if local communities lack decision-making power, cultural meanings are commodified, or tourism workers experience precarious employment. Therefore, sustainable tourism needs to be reconsidered not only as an environmental management strategy, but also as a social and political process involving justice, participation, identity, and governance.

Social Sustainability, Justice, and Transformative Tourism

The growing critique of green growth has led scholars to pay greater attention to social sustainability and transformative tourism. Social sustainability in tourism generally refers to the capacity of tourism development to support community well-being, social cohesion, cultural continuity, and equitable participation. However, social sustainability is often framed in terms of maintaining welfare and stability rather than questioning the structural conditions that produce inequality.

Transformative tourism scholarship offers a broader perspective by emphasizing tourism as a force capable of reshaping values, identities, relationships, and social futures (Ateljevic, 2020; Sheldon, 2020). Rather than viewing tourism merely as an economic sector, transformative approaches understand tourism as a social practice embedded in ethics, power relations, and human development. This perspective is particularly relevant for emerging destinations where tourism growth often produces rapid changes in community life, cultural representation, and institutional arrangements. In this study, social transformation is positioned as a concept that extends both social sustainability and transformative tourism. While social sustainability focuses on maintaining social well-being, social transformation emphasizes structural change, redistribution of agency, participatory justice, and adaptive resilience. Unlike tourist-centered approaches to transformative tourism, social transformation in this article focuses on wider destination systems, including communities, heritage, tourist behavior, education, labor, and governance.

Community Participation and Destination Justice

Community participation has long been considered a key principle of sustainable tourism, especially in community-based tourism. Tosun (2000, 2006) argues that community participation in developing countries is often constrained by centralized decision-making, limited local capacity, and unequal power relations. Although local residents may be involved in tourism activities, their participation frequently remains operational rather than strategic. In such cases, communities provide labor, services, or cultural performances but have limited influence over planning, benefit distribution, and destination governance. Cole (2006) similarly emphasizes that information, empowerment, and access to decision-making are essential for achieving sustainable tourism. Without genuine empowerment, community-based tourism may reproduce dependency and inequality rather than promote local agency. This critique is important because it shifts the discussion from participation as presence to participation as power.

In the Vietnamese context, studies on community-based tourism have shown similar tensions. Research on conflicts between local residents and tourism stakeholders in Cai Lay, Tien Giang, for example, highlights issues of unequal benefit distribution, contested resource access, and divergent expectations in tourism development (Nguyen & Chung, 2025). Meanwhile, research on Thieng Lieng Island suggests that tourist satisfaction is strongly shaped by social interaction and community experience, not merely by physical infrastructure or service quality (Chung et al., 2024). These studies indicate that community transformation is central to sustainable tourism because destination sustainability depends on local agency, social equity, and the ability of communities to participate meaningfully in tourism governance.

Heritage, Memory, and Emotional Sustainability

Heritage tourism provides another important dimension for rethinking sustainable tourism as social transformation. Heritage is not simply a cultural resource to be preserved or consumed; it is also a contested field of memory, identity, and interpretive authority. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) argue that heritage is often

dissonant because different groups attach different meanings to the past. Smith (2006) further suggests that heritage is not merely a collection of objects or sites, but a cultural process through which identities and power relations are produced.

This issue becomes particularly significant in destinations associated with war, colonialism, imprisonment, or collective trauma. Stone (2012) notes that dark tourism sites involve complex relationships between education, remembrance, commodification, and mortality. Farmaki (2013) similarly emphasizes that post-conflict tourism requires careful attention to memory, reconciliation, and ethical interpretation. In such contexts, sustainability cannot be reduced to conserving buildings or increasing visitor numbers. It must also involve protecting the dignity of memory and the emotional integrity of affected communities.

In Vietnam, heritage sites such as Con Dao demonstrate how tourism development intersects with postcolonial memory, national identity, and the commercialization of traumatic history (Chung, 2025b). This suggests the need to extend sustainable tourism toward the concept of emotional sustainability. Emotional sustainability refers to the capacity of tourism development to preserve collective memory, respect community emotions, and maintain ethical interpretation while allowing heritage sites to participate in tourism economies. This dimension reinforces the argument that sustainable tourism must address not only material conservation, but also symbolic justice and cultural legitimacy.

Tourist Behavior, Education, and Governance as Transformative Dimensions

Tourist behavior has become increasingly important in sustainable tourism debates, particularly in the digital era. Social media platforms now influence how tourists choose destinations, construct travel identities, and perform tourism experiences online (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). For younger generations, tourism is not only a form of mobility or leisure, but also a mode of lifestyle expression and digital self-presentation. Studies on sustainable tourist behavior show that personal norms, environmental awareness, and social influence play important roles in shaping responsible travel practices (Han, 2021; Verma et al., 2022).

In Vietnam, recent research on Generation Z suggests that social media engagement and personal norms significantly influence sustainable tourism behavior (Dao et al., 2026). This indicates that sustainability must be understood not only through destination management, but also through the transformation of tourist values, digital practices, and consumption cultures. At the same time, digital tourism creates new challenges, including check-in culture, image-oriented consumption, and pressure on local spaces.

Education and labor also represent important but often underexamined dimensions of sustainable tourism transformation. Tourism workers and local communities require not only technical skills, but also communication capacity, digital literacy, intercultural competence, and adaptive learning. Studies on tourism education and internships in Vietnam reveal gaps between academic training and professional practice, suggesting that labor sustainability is closely connected to destination sustainability (Trung et al., 2025). Similarly, community English and storytelling capacity may function as forms of social infrastructure that enable local residents to participate more actively in tourism value creation and cultural interpretation (Chung et al., 2026).

Finally, governance is central to connecting these dimensions. Sustainable tourism requires coordination among local communities, state agencies, tourism enterprises, visitors, and educational institutions. Bramwell and Lane (2011) and Hall (2011) argue that tourism governance must move beyond top-down management toward more adaptive, collaborative, and participatory arrangements. In the Vietnamese context, fragmented governance can intensify community conflict, weaken heritage protection, and limit the effectiveness of sustainability policies. Therefore, governance transformation is necessary for integrating community justice, heritage memory, behavioral change, and educational capacity into a coherent sustainable tourism framework.

Taken together, these bodies of literature show that sustainable tourism can no longer be adequately understood through green growth alone. Community participation, heritage memory, tourist behavior, education, labor, and governance all point toward the need for a broader framework of social transformation. This study therefore

proposes the ISTTF as a conceptual model for connecting these fragmented dimensions within the context of sustainable tourism development in Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual qualitative research design to rethink the theoretical foundations of sustainable tourism in Vietnam. Rather than testing hypotheses or measuring causal relationships, the article aims to develop a theoretically grounded framework for understanding sustainable tourism as a process of social transformation. This approach is appropriate for conceptual studies that seek to synthesize existing knowledge, clarify theoretical concepts, and propose new analytical frameworks (Jaakkola, 2020).

The study combines three methodological components: a directed literature review, academic discourse analysis, and interpretive synthesis. The directed literature review was used to identify key debates related to sustainable tourism, social sustainability, transformative tourism, community-based tourism, heritage tourism, tourist behavior, tourism education, and governance. Academic discourse analysis was employed to examine how sustainability has been framed in tourism scholarship, particularly the shift from green growth and environmental management toward justice, participation, identity, memory, and governance. Interpretive synthesis was then used to integrate these debates into the ISTTF.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted through major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters, and selected empirical studies relevant to sustainable tourism in Vietnam and other developing-country contexts.

The search process used combinations of the following keywords: “sustainable tourism,” “green growth,” “social sustainability,” “transformative tourism,” “social transformation,” “community-based tourism,” “community participation,” “destination justice,” “heritage tourism,” “dark tourism,” “heritage memory,” “emotional sustainability,” “tourist behavior,” “Generation Z tourism,” “tourism education,” “tourism labor,” “tourism governance,” and “Vietnam tourism.” Additional searches combined these terms with “Vietnam,” “developing countries,” and “Southeast Asia” to identify studies relevant to emerging tourism destinations.

The literature was not selected to produce a systematic review in the strict quantitative sense. Instead, the purpose was to construct a theoretically informed and context-sensitive conceptual framework. Therefore, priority was given to works that were conceptually influential, frequently cited, or directly relevant to the social dimensions of tourism sustainability.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection of literature followed four main inclusion criteria. First, studies had to address sustainable tourism, transformative tourism, social sustainability, community participation, heritage tourism, tourist behavior, education, labor, or tourism governance. Second, the selected works needed to contribute to understanding tourism as a social, cultural, ethical, or institutional process rather than merely as an economic activity. Third, priority was given to studies that discussed justice, participation, identity, memory, empowerment, adaptive capacity, or governance transformation. Fourth, empirical studies conducted in Vietnam were included when they provided concrete illustrations of social issues emerging from tourism development.

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on tourism marketing, destination promotion, tourist satisfaction, or economic performance without engaging with broader sustainability or social transformation issues. Technical studies dealing only with environmental measurement, infrastructure planning, or tourism revenue were also not central to the analysis unless they contributed directly to the article’s conceptual argument.

This selection strategy allowed the study to engage with both international theoretical debates and Vietnam-based empirical research. The combination of these two bodies of literature was important because the article seeks to avoid applying global theories uncritically while also situating Vietnam's tourism development within wider scholarly discussions on sustainable and transformative tourism.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, the selected literature was reviewed to identify dominant discourses in sustainable tourism research. Particular attention was paid to how sustainability has been conceptualized through green growth, environmental management, social sustainability, transformative tourism, justice, participation, and governance. This stage helped clarify the limitations of environmentally centered sustainability models and established the conceptual need for a broader social transformation approach.

In the second stage, the literature was coded thematically according to recurring social transformation dimensions. Five major dimensions emerged from the synthesis: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. Community transformation refers to the redistribution of agency, participation, and benefits within tourism development. Heritage transformation concerns memory, identity, interpretation, and emotional sustainability. Behavioral transformation refers to changing tourist values, norms, and digital practices. Educational transformation includes tourism labor, professional capacity, communication skills, and adaptive learning. Governance transformation concerns stakeholder coordination, institutional participation, and collaborative destination management.

In the third stage, these dimensions were integrated into the ISTTF. The framework was developed by comparing international theoretical debates with Vietnam-based empirical studies and identifying how different social dimensions interact within destination systems. The analytical focus was not only on listing separate themes, but on explaining their interconnections. For example, weak governance may intensify community conflict; limited educational capacity may reduce local participation; digital tourist behavior may reshape heritage interpretation; and heritage commodification may weaken cultural legitimacy. The ISTTF was therefore constructed as a relational framework rather than a set of independent categories.

Methodological Limitations

As a conceptual qualitative study, this article does not aim to provide statistical generalization or empirical testing of the proposed framework. Its contribution lies in theoretical synthesis and framework development. Although Vietnam-based studies are used to illustrate the relevance of the argument, the ISTTF requires further empirical validation across different types of destinations, such as heritage sites, community-based tourism areas, coastal destinations, and urban tourism spaces.

Future research may apply qualitative case studies, stakeholder interviews, Delphi methods, or quantitative modeling to test the relationships among the five dimensions of the ISTTF. Such empirical work would help refine the framework and assess its applicability to different tourism contexts in Vietnam and other emerging destinations.

FINDINGS

The synthesis of international tourism scholarship and Vietnam-based studies reveals that sustainable tourism in Vietnam is undergoing a conceptual shift from green growth toward social transformation. While green growth remains important for environmental protection and destination competitiveness, it does not fully explain the social tensions emerging from rapid tourism development. Issues such as unequal benefit distribution, symbolic participation, heritage commodification, changing tourist behavior, labor vulnerability, and fragmented governance suggest that sustainability must be understood as a broader social process.

Five interrelated dimensions of sustainable tourism transformation emerge from the analysis: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. These dimensions form the basis of the ISTTF. Rather than treating sustainability as a fixed balance among economic, environmental, and social pillars, the findings suggest that sustainable tourism should be understood as a relational process through which destinations continuously negotiate justice, identity, memory, participation, capacity, and governance.

Community Transformation: From Participation to Agency

The first finding concerns the transformation of local communities from passive beneficiaries into active agents of tourism development. Community participation has long been regarded as a core principle of sustainable tourism, particularly within community-based tourism. However, the reviewed literature indicates that participation alone does not necessarily lead to empowerment. This reflects Arnstein's (1969) classic distinction between tokenistic and substantive participation. In many tourism destinations, local residents may be involved in tourism activities without having meaningful influence over planning, investment decisions, benefit distribution, or destination governance.

This distinction between participation and agency is especially important in developing-country contexts. Local communities are often encouraged to participate in tourism by providing homestays, food services, guiding, craft products, or cultural performances. Yet these forms of participation may remain operational and instrumental if local residents are excluded from strategic decision-making. In such cases, tourism development may appear participatory on the surface while continuing to reproduce unequal power relations between communities, enterprises, and state authorities.

Vietnam-based studies reflect these tensions. Research on community-based tourism conflicts in Cai Lay, Tien Giang shows that tourism development may generate disputes related to benefit distribution, access to resources, and differences in expectations among stakeholders (Nguyen & Chung, 2025, 2026). These conflicts suggest that community-based tourism is not automatically socially sustainable. Without transparent mechanisms for benefit-sharing and decision-making, tourism may intensify local tensions rather than strengthen community resilience.

Similarly, research on Thieng Lieng Island indicates that tourist satisfaction is strongly shaped by social interaction, local hospitality, and community experience (Chung et al., 2024). This finding suggests that communities are not merely supporting actors in tourism production; they are central to the symbolic, emotional, and experiential value of destinations. The sustainability of community-based tourism therefore depends not only on infrastructure or service quality, but also on the quality of relationships between residents, visitors, and tourism stakeholders.

Community transformation thus requires a shift from symbolic participation to substantive agency. In the context of the ISTTF, community agency refers to the capacity of local residents to participate in decision-making, negotiate development priorities, control cultural representation, and share fairly in tourism benefits. Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved simply by including communities as labor providers or cultural performers. It requires the redistribution of voice, authority, and developmental benefits within destination systems.

Heritage Transformation: From Conservation to Emotional Sustainability

The second finding concerns the transformation of heritage tourism from material conservation toward emotional and interpretive sustainability. Conventional approaches to heritage sustainability often emphasize the preservation of monuments, buildings, landscapes, and cultural artifacts. While physical conservation remains essential, the literature shows that heritage is also a contested field of memory, identity, emotion, and interpretive authority.

This issue becomes particularly significant in destinations associated with war, colonialism, imprisonment, or collective trauma. In such contexts, heritage sites are not merely tourism resources; they are memory landscapes

where historical suffering, national identity, political meaning, and community emotion are continuously negotiated. Tourism development may contribute to heritage preservation and historical education, but it may also simplify, commercialize, or depoliticize painful memories.

In Vietnam, Con Dao provides an important illustration of this dynamic. Research on Con Dao Prison shows that the site functions not only as a historical attraction, but also as a space of collective traumatic memory, commemoration, and postcolonial identity (Chung, 2025b). Tourism in such a context cannot be evaluated only through visitor numbers, revenue, or conservation status. It must also be assessed in terms of how historical narratives are represented, whose memories are prioritized, and whether tourism practices respect the dignity of the past.

The concept of emotional sustainability emerges from this finding. Emotional sustainability refers to the capacity of tourism development to preserve collective memory, respect community emotions, and maintain ethical interpretation while allowing heritage sites to participate in tourism economies. A heritage destination may be physically preserved but socially unsustainable if its meanings are excessively commercialized or detached from the lived memories of affected communities.

Heritage transformation therefore expands the meaning of sustainable tourism. It shows that sustainability is not only about protecting material resources, but also about protecting symbolic legitimacy, cultural dignity, and interpretive justice. Within the ISTTF, heritage transformation connects sustainability with memory, identity, and ethics. It also demonstrates why tourism development must be sensitive to the emotional and historical dimensions of place.

Behavioral Transformation: From Tourist Consumption to Responsible Digital Practice

The third finding concerns the transformation of tourist behavior in the digital era. Tourism behavior is increasingly shaped by social media platforms, online images, digital reviews, influencer culture, and peer interaction. Tourists no longer encounter destinations only through physical travel; they also experience, evaluate, and represent destinations through digital media. This transformation has important implications for sustainable tourism.

For younger generations, particularly Generation Z, tourism often functions as a form of identity expression and digital self-presentation (Dao et al., 2026). Travel experiences are frequently shared through photographs, videos, check-ins, hashtags, and online narratives. As a result, destination consumption becomes closely connected to visibility, lifestyle performance, and symbolic value. This changes the meaning of tourist behavior because travel is no longer only about visiting places, but also about producing and circulating digital representations of those places.

Vietnam-based research on Generation Z suggests that personal norms, environmental awareness, and social media engagement influence sustainable tourism behavior. This indicates that responsible tourism cannot be understood only as a result of destination regulations or environmental campaigns. It is also shaped by social norms, peer influence, digital communication, and the values that tourists attach to travel experiences.

However, digital tourism also produces contradictions. On the one hand, social media can promote environmental awareness, encourage responsible travel, and spread sustainability messages quickly. On the other hand, check-in culture and image-oriented consumption may encourage superficial engagement with destinations, overcrowding at visually attractive sites, disrespectful behavior in sacred or heritage spaces, and increased pressure on local communities. Thus, digital media can support sustainability while simultaneously undermining it.

Behavioral transformation therefore requires more than managing tourist flows. It requires the cultivation of responsible digital practices, ethical destination representation, and sustainability-oriented tourist norms. Within the ISTTF, behavioral transformation highlights the role of tourists as active participants in destination

sustainability. Sustainable tourism in the digital era depends not only on what destinations provide, but also on how tourists consume, perform, and circulate destination meanings online.

Educational Transformation: From Technical Training to Adaptive Capacity

The fourth finding highlights education, labor, and community capacity as essential dimensions of sustainable tourism transformation. Traditional approaches to tourism education often emphasize technical and vocational skills, such as service delivery, tour operations, hospitality management, and professional etiquette. While these skills remain important, the changing nature of tourism requires a broader understanding of educational transformation.

In contemporary tourism, workers and communities need adaptive capacity. This includes communication skills, digital literacy, intercultural competence, ethical awareness, environmental understanding, crisis response, and the ability to learn continuously. Sustainable tourism cannot be maintained if the human resources supporting destinations are poorly trained, unstable, or excluded from professional development opportunities.

Vietnam-based studies on tourism internships and workforce quality reveal a persistent gap between academic training and professional practice. Many tourism students lack sufficient practical experience, while tourism workplaces often involve high pressure, unstable employment, and limited career development. These conditions contribute to labor precarity and weaken the long-term resilience of the tourism sector. Employee engagement and quality of life are also important for sustainable tourism development because they influence workforce stability, service quality, and destination resilience (Le et al., 2024; Woo et al., 2015). If tourism workers experience insecurity and limited professional growth, destination sustainability will remain fragile.

Educational transformation also applies to local communities. Research on community English in heritage tourism suggests that language capacity and storytelling skills can function as forms of social infrastructure. When local residents are able to communicate with visitors, explain cultural meanings, and narrate local histories, they gain greater control over destination representation. Conversely, when communities lack communication capacity, interpretive authority may shift to external tour guides, enterprises, or institutions.

This finding expands the concept of tourism infrastructure. Infrastructure should not be understood only as roads, hotels, transport systems, or visitor facilities. It also includes intangible capacities that enable communities and workers to participate meaningfully in tourism development. Within the ISTTF, educational transformation refers to the development of adaptive human capacity that supports community agency, heritage interpretation, responsible behavior, and destination resilience.

Governance Transformation: From Fragmented Management to Integrated Destination Governance

The fifth finding concerns governance transformation. Sustainable tourism development involves multiple actors, including local communities, government agencies, tourism enterprises, heritage managers, educational institutions, tourists, and civil society organizations. However, the literature indicates that these actors often operate through fragmented structures, competing priorities, and uneven power relations.

In Vietnam, fragmented governance can be observed in several tourism contexts. Community-based tourism may suffer from weak coordination between residents, local authorities, and enterprises. Heritage tourism may face tensions between conservation goals, commercial interests, and memory politics. Tourism education may not fully correspond to industry needs. Tourist behavior may be influenced by digital platforms that are difficult for destination managers to regulate. These issues show that sustainability problems are rarely isolated; they are often governance problems.

Governance transformation requires moving beyond top-down destination management toward more collaborative, adaptive, and inclusive governance arrangements. This does not mean that the state becomes less important. Rather, it means that state agencies, communities, enterprises, educators, and visitors must be connected through more transparent and participatory mechanisms. Governance should create conditions for

community voice, fair benefit distribution, ethical heritage interpretation, responsible tourist behavior, and labor development.

Within the ISTTF, governance transformation is the connecting dimension. Without inclusive governance, community participation may remain symbolic, heritage memory may be commodified, tourist behavior may remain unmanaged, and educational reforms may fail to meet destination needs. Governance is therefore not simply one dimension among others; it is the institutional mechanism that enables the other dimensions to interact productively.

This finding suggests that sustainable tourism in Vietnam requires integrated destination governance. Such governance should be capable of coordinating environmental goals with social justice, cultural legitimacy, behavioral change, and human capacity development. In this sense, governance transformation provides the institutional foundation for moving from green growth to social transformation.

Synthesis: The ISTTF as a Relational Framework

Taken together, the five findings demonstrate that sustainable tourism in Vietnam cannot be adequately understood through environmental protection or green growth alone. Community agency, heritage memory, tourist behavior, educational capacity, and governance relations are all central to destination sustainability. These dimensions do not operate separately. They interact continuously and shape one another within tourism systems.

The ISTTF is therefore proposed as a relational framework rather than a simple list of sustainability components. Its purpose is to show how different social dimensions of tourism development are connected. For example, community transformation depends on governance mechanisms that allow local residents to participate in decision-making. Heritage transformation depends on community capacity and ethical interpretation. Behavioral transformation depends on education, communication, and destination governance. Educational transformation strengthens the ability of workers and communities to participate in tourism systems. Governance transformation coordinates these processes and provides institutional support for long-term sustainability.

This relational understanding is important because many sustainability challenges in Vietnam are interconnected. Unequal benefit distribution may weaken community support for tourism. Weak community capacity may reduce local control over heritage interpretation. Digital tourist behavior may intensify pressure on heritage and community spaces. Labor precarity may reduce service quality and destination resilience. Fragmented governance may prevent these issues from being addressed in an integrated way.

The ISTTF responds to these challenges by repositioning social transformation at the center of sustainable tourism. It argues that tourism sustainability should be evaluated not only by environmental indicators or economic outcomes, but also by the quality of social relations, the legitimacy of cultural representation, the responsibility of tourist behavior, the adaptive capacity of tourism actors, and the inclusiveness of governance structures.

In this sense, the framework contributes to sustainable tourism scholarship by integrating dimensions that are often studied separately. Community-based tourism, heritage memory, tourist behavior, tourism education, and governance are not independent research topics; they are interconnected dimensions of a broader transformation process. The ISTTF therefore provides a conceptual basis for understanding sustainable tourism in Vietnam as a multidimensional social ecosystem.

For emerging destinations, this framework has practical significance. It suggests that sustainable tourism policies should not focus only on green infrastructure, environmental standards, or destination branding. They should also invest in community empowerment, heritage interpretation, responsible tourist education, tourism workforce development, and collaborative governance. Such an approach would allow sustainable tourism to move beyond the narrow logic of green growth and toward a more socially just, culturally legitimate, and institutionally adaptive model of destination development.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that sustainable tourism in Vietnam should be understood not merely as a strategy of green growth, but as a multidimensional process of social transformation. While green growth remains important for environmental protection, resource efficiency, and destination competitiveness, it does not fully address the social tensions generated by rapid tourism development. This section discusses the theoretical meaning of this shift, clarifies how social transformation extends existing sustainability debates, and explains the contribution of the ISTTF as an integrated and relational framework.

Repositioning Sustainable Tourism Beyond Green Growth

The first major implication of this study is the need to reposition sustainable tourism beyond the dominant logic of green growth. Conventional sustainable tourism models have often emphasized environmental management, economic viability, and destination competitiveness. These dimensions remain necessary, particularly in the context of climate change, resource degradation, and increasing pressure on tourism destinations. However, the findings suggest that environmental protection alone cannot guarantee sustainability if tourism development continues to produce inequality, cultural commodification, labor vulnerability, or weak community participation.

In the Vietnamese context, this issue is particularly important because tourism development has expanded rapidly across coastal, heritage, urban, and community-based destinations. Many destinations have adopted the language of green tourism, eco-tourism, or sustainable destination branding. Yet social problems such as unequal benefit distribution, symbolic participation, fragmented governance, and unstable tourism labor continue to shape the lived realities of local communities and tourism workers. This indicates that sustainability should not be evaluated only through environmental indicators or economic outcomes.

By shifting the analytical focus from green growth to social transformation, this study argues that sustainable tourism should be understood as a process of restructuring relationships within destination systems. These relationships include those between local communities and tourism enterprises, heritage sites and collective memory, tourists and host communities, education systems and labor markets, and state institutions and local stakeholders. In this sense, sustainability is not only a matter of protecting natural resources, but also of transforming the social conditions under which tourism development takes place.

Social Transformation as an Extension of Social Sustainability

The second implication concerns the conceptual distinction between social sustainability and social transformation. Social sustainability has contributed significantly to tourism studies by emphasizing community well-being, quality of life, social cohesion, cultural continuity, and equitable development. However, social sustainability is often used to describe the maintenance or improvement of existing social conditions. While this is important, it may not be sufficient in contexts where tourism development is shaped by structural inequalities, uneven power relations, and limited community agency.

Social transformation extends this discussion by emphasizing change in the structures, relationships, and institutions that organize tourism development. It asks not only whether tourism improves community welfare, but also whether it redistributes agency, strengthens participation, protects cultural legitimacy, and enhances adaptive capacity. This distinction is important because a destination may appear socially sustainable in terms of income generation or employment creation, while still maintaining unequal decision-making structures or commodifying local culture.

In this article, social transformation is therefore understood as a deeper and more dynamic process than social sustainability. It involves the reorganization of community roles, the ethical reinterpretation of heritage, the reshaping of tourist behavior, the development of adaptive educational capacity, and the creation of inclusive governance arrangements. This approach allows sustainable tourism to be examined not as a fixed balance among economic, environmental, and social pillars, but as an ongoing process of negotiation, contestation, and institutional learning.

This conceptual shift also contributes to transformative tourism scholarship. Much transformative tourism research has focused on personal transformation, such as changes in tourists' consciousness, values, or self-understanding. While such changes are important, the present study expands the focus from individual transformation to destination-level and system-level transformation. It argues that tourism becomes truly transformative only when it changes not merely individual attitudes, but also the social and institutional arrangements that shape tourism development.

The ISTTF as an Integrated and Relational Framework

The central contribution of this study is the development of the Integrated Sustainable Tourism Transformation Framework. The ISTTF is not intended to function as a simple checklist of sustainability dimensions. Rather, it is proposed as a relational framework that explains how different social dimensions of tourism sustainability interact within destination systems.

The five dimensions of the framework - community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation - are analytically distinct but practically interconnected. Community transformation emphasizes agency, participation, and benefit-sharing. Heritage transformation emphasizes memory, identity, and emotional sustainability. Behavioral transformation emphasizes responsible tourist norms and digital practices. Educational transformation emphasizes human capacity, labor sustainability, and community communication. Governance transformation emphasizes coordination, inclusion, and institutional adaptability.

The relational nature of the ISTTF is important because many sustainability challenges emerge from the interaction between these dimensions. For example, community participation cannot become meaningful without governance mechanisms that allow local voices to influence decisions. Heritage interpretation cannot remain ethical if communities lack the capacity to narrate their own histories. Responsible tourist behavior cannot be sustained without education, communication, and destination-level regulation. Tourism labor cannot support destination resilience if education systems remain disconnected from industry and community needs. Governance, in turn, cannot be effective if it treats these issues as separate policy areas.

Thus, the ISTTF offers a way to understand sustainable tourism as a multidimensional social ecosystem. It moves beyond fragmented approaches that examine community-based tourism, heritage tourism, tourist behavior, education, and governance as separate fields. Instead, it shows how these dimensions collectively shape the long-term resilience, legitimacy, and justice of tourism development.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes three theoretical contributions to sustainable tourism scholarship. First, it clarifies the concept of social transformation in tourism. Rather than using the term broadly or metaphorically, the article defines social transformation as a multidimensional restructuring process involving community agency, cultural memory, behavioral norms, educational capacity, and governance relations. This clarification helps distinguish social transformation from related concepts such as social sustainability and transformative tourism.

Second, the study integrates several research streams that are often discussed separately. Community-based tourism, heritage memory, digital tourist behavior, tourism education, labor sustainability, and destination governance are frequently treated as independent topics. By bringing them together under the ISTTF, this study demonstrates that they are interconnected dimensions of a broader transformation process. This integration responds to the need for more holistic frameworks in sustainable tourism research.

Third, the study contributes a Vietnam-based perspective to international debates on sustainable and transformative tourism. Much tourism theory has been developed from Western or highly institutionalized destination contexts. Vietnam, as an emerging tourism destination, provides a valuable context for examining how sustainability is negotiated under conditions of rapid growth, uneven governance capacity, community dependence, cultural complexity, and labor vulnerability. The framework developed in this article may therefore

be relevant not only to Vietnam, but also to other developing-country destinations facing similar tensions between growth, sustainability, and social justice.

Practical Implications for Sustainable Tourism Development in Vietnam

The ISTTF also has several practical implications. First, sustainable tourism policies in Vietnam should move beyond a narrow focus on green infrastructure, environmental standards, and destination branding. While these remain important, they should be accompanied by policies that strengthen community agency, social equity, cultural legitimacy, and institutional participation.

Second, community-based tourism should be evaluated not only by the number of participating households or tourism revenue, but also by the degree of local decision-making power, fairness in benefit distribution, and community control over cultural representation. This requires more transparent mechanisms for participation, negotiation, and co-management.

Third, heritage tourism development should include ethical interpretation and emotional sustainability as core management concerns. In heritage sites associated with trauma, war, colonialism, or national memory, tourism planning should consider how narratives are constructed, who has authority to interpret the past, and how commercialization may affect the dignity of collective memory.

Fourth, tourist behavior should be addressed as part of sustainability governance. In the digital era, responsible tourism requires not only visitor codes of conduct, but also media literacy, digital communication strategies, and educational campaigns that encourage respectful representation of destinations online.

Fifth, tourism education and workforce development should be treated as central to destination sustainability. Training should not be limited to technical service skills, but should include intercultural communication, digital literacy, sustainability awareness, heritage interpretation, and adaptive learning. Community English and local storytelling capacity should also be recognized as forms of social infrastructure that support community participation.

Finally, governance reform is essential for integrating these dimensions. Sustainable tourism in Vietnam requires collaborative governance mechanisms that connect state agencies, local communities, tourism enterprises, educational institutions, heritage managers, and visitors. Without such integration, sustainability efforts may remain fragmented and unable to address the complex social realities of tourism development.

Overall, the discussion shows that the transition from green growth to social transformation is not a rejection of environmental sustainability. Rather, it is an expansion of sustainability thinking. Environmental protection remains necessary, but it must be embedded within a broader framework of social justice, cultural legitimacy, behavioral responsibility, educational capacity, and inclusive governance. The ISTTF provides one possible conceptual pathway for achieving this broader understanding of sustainable tourism in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

This study rethinks sustainable tourism in Vietnam by shifting the focus from green growth to social transformation. While green growth remains important for environmental protection and destination competitiveness, it is insufficient for addressing social issues such as unequal benefit distribution, symbolic community participation, heritage commodification, labor vulnerability, changing tourist behavior, and fragmented governance.

The article defines social transformation in tourism as a multidimensional process through which tourism restructures community agency, cultural memory, tourist behavior, educational capacity, and governance relations. This concept extends social sustainability and transformative tourism by emphasizing structural change, participatory justice, cultural legitimacy, adaptive capacity, and inclusive governance.

Based on a conceptual qualitative synthesis, the study proposes the ISTTF, consisting of five interconnected dimensions: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. The framework shows that sustainable tourism should not be treated as a set of separate environmental or managerial tasks, but as a relational social ecosystem.

The study contributes to sustainable tourism scholarship by clarifying the concept of social transformation, integrating fragmented debates on community, heritage, behavior, education, and governance, and offering a Vietnam-based framework relevant to emerging destinations. Practically, it suggests that sustainable tourism policies should move beyond green infrastructure and destination branding toward community empowerment, ethical heritage interpretation, responsible tourist behavior, workforce development, and collaborative governance.

As a conceptual study, the proposed framework requires further empirical validation. Future research may apply case studies, stakeholder interviews, Delphi methods, or quantitative modeling to test the ISTTF across different tourism contexts in Vietnam and other developing destinations. Overall, the study argues that sustainable tourism must be not only greener, but also more socially just, culturally legitimate, behaviorally responsible, educationally adaptive, and institutionally inclusive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing, grammar correction, and improving the clarity of academic writing. The authors carefully reviewed, revised, and approved all AI-assisted outputs and take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and content of this publication.

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