

ARTICLE

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

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism in Vietnam has often been framed through green growth, environmental protection, and destination competitiveness. While these priorities remain important, they are insufficient for addressing the social tensions generated by rapid tourism development, including unequal benefit distribution, symbolic community participation, heritage commodification, labor vulnerability, digitally mediated tourist behavior, and fragmented governance. This article rethinks sustainable tourism in Vietnam through the lens of social transformation. Drawing on a conceptual qualitative approach that combines directed literature review, academic discourse analysis, and interpretive synthesis, the study develops the ISTTF. The framework consists of five interrelated dimensions: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. Rather than presenting these dimensions as separate themes, the ISTTF conceptualizes them as relational processes through which tourism reshapes agency, memory, norms, capacity, and institutional coordination within destination systems. The article argues that sustainable tourism should not be understood only as environmental management or green economic growth, but as a broader process of social restructuring involving justice, cultural legitimacy, responsible behavior, adaptive learning, and collaborative governance. By clarifying the theoretical distinction between green growth and social transformation, the study contributes to sustainable tourism scholarship and offers a context-sensitive framework for Vietnam and other emerging destinations facing similar tensions between tourism growth, sustainability, and social justice.

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

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism has become a central development orientation in global tourism studies and policy. It is commonly understood as an approach that seeks to balance economic viability, environmental protection, and social well-being [1,2]. In Vietnam, this orientation has been reflected in the promotion of ecotourism, community-based tourism, green destinations, heritage conservation, and destination competitiveness. These initiatives have contributed to raising awareness of environmental protection and responsible tourism development.

However, the rapid expansion of tourism in Vietnam has also revealed the limitations of sustainability models that remain primarily framed through green growth and environmental management. Although green growth is important, it does not fully address the social tensions produced by tourism development. These tensions include unequal benefit distribution, symbolic community participation, heritage commodification, labor vulnerability, digitally mediated tourist behavior, and

fragmented governance. A destination may be environmentally managed and economically successful, but still socially unsustainable if local communities lack decision-making power, cultural meanings are commercialized, tourism workers experience precarity, or governance remains disconnected across actors and institutions.

This problem reflects a broader critique in sustainable tourism scholarship. Scholars have argued that sustainable tourism should not simply aim to sustain tourism as an industry, but should address deeper questions of justice, ethics, power, participation, and social change [3,4]. Similarly, transformative tourism scholarship suggests that tourism can reshape identities, values, relationships, and social futures [6,7]. These perspectives indicate that sustainability should be understood not only as environmental preservation or resource efficiency, but also as a process of social transformation.

In this article, social transformation in tourism is understood as a multidimensional restructuring process through which tourism reshapes community agency, cultural memory, tourist behavior, educational capacity, labor conditions, and governance relations. This concept extends social sustainability by moving beyond the maintenance of community well-being toward questions of structural change, participatory justice, cultural legitimacy, adaptive capacity, and institutional coordination. It also extends tourist-centered understandings of transformative tourism by focusing not only on individual change, but also on destination-level and system-level transformation.

Vietnam provides a valuable context for rethinking sustainable tourism through this lens. As an emerging tourism destination, Vietnam faces simultaneous pressures of growth, environmental protection, cultural representation, community participation, workforce development, and governance reform. Existing studies have examined these issues separately, including community-based tourism, heritage interpretation, responsible tourist behavior, tourism education, labor sustainability, and destination governance. However, these discussions remain fragmented and have not yet been sufficiently integrated into a unified conceptual framework for understanding sustainable tourism as social transformation.

Responding to this gap, this article proposes the ISTTF. The framework consists of five interrelated dimensions: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate themes, the ISTTF conceptualizes them as relational processes that interact within destination systems. Community agency depends on governance mechanisms; heritage interpretation depends on community voice and educational capacity; tourist behavior is shaped by digital norms and destination regulation; and educational transformation strengthens the capacity of communities and workers to participate in sustainable tourism development.

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

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sustainable Tourism and the Limits of Green Growth

Sustainable tourism has long been understood as a development approach that seeks to balance economic viability, environmental protection, and social well-being [1,2]. In many destinations, this idea has been translated into green growth strategies, ecotourism, resource conservation, low-carbon development, and destination competitiveness. These approaches remain important because tourism depends heavily on environmental quality, landscape protection, and the long-term resilience of natural and cultural resources.

However, recent scholarship has increasingly questioned sustainability models that are primarily organized around environmental management 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 [3]. Similarly, Gössling and Hall (2019) suggest that growth-oriented sustainability approaches may fail to address deeper questions of justice, labor vulnerability, uneven benefit distribution, and governance responsibility. From this perspective, a destination may be considered “green” in terms of environmental branding while still reproducing social inequality, weak community agency, and cultural commodification [4].

This critique is especially relevant to emerging tourism destinations such as Vietnam, where tourism growth has generated both economic opportunities and social tensions. Green growth is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Sustainable tourism must also be examined through questions of who benefits, who participates, who controls cultural representation, and how tourism reshapes local communities, workers, visitors, and institutions.

2.2. Social Sustainability, Justice, and Transformation

The critique of green growth has led scholars to pay greater attention to social sustainability. In tourism studies, social sustainability generally refers to community well-being, social cohesion, cultural continuity, quality of life, and equitable participation. Woo, Kim, and Uysal (2015), for example, emphasize that quality of life and stakeholder well-being are central to sustainable tourism development. This perspective expands sustainability beyond environmental indicators and highlights the lived experiences of communities and tourism workers [5].

Nevertheless, social sustainability often focuses on maintaining or improving existing social conditions. Social transformation goes further by asking whether tourism can restructure unequal relations of power, participation, representation, and governance. Transformative tourism scholarship has shown that tourism can reshape identities, values, relationships, and social futures [6,7]. However, much of this literature focuses on individual transformation, especially tourists’ personal growth or consciousness. For sustainable tourism in Vietnam, the more urgent issue is not only whether tourists are transformed, but whether destination systems themselves become more just, inclusive, adaptive, and culturally legitimate.

In this article, social transformation is therefore understood as a multidimensional process through which tourism reshapes community agency, heritage memory, tourist behavior, educational capacity, labor conditions, and governance relations. This approach extends social sustainability by emphasizing structural change, participatory justice, adaptive capacity, and institutional coordination.

2.3. Community Participation, Agency, and Destination Justice

Community participation has been widely recognized as a core principle of sustainable tourism and community-based tourism. Tosun (2000, 2006) argues that participation in developing countries is often constrained by centralized decision-making, limited local capacity, and unequal power relations [8,9]. Local residents may be invited to participate in tourism activities, but their role is frequently limited to providing labor, services, homestays, food, or cultural performances. In such cases, participation becomes operational rather than strategic.

Cole (2006) similarly emphasizes that information, empowerment, and access to decision-making are essential for sustainable tourism [10]. Without genuine empowerment, community-based tourism may reproduce dependency rather than strengthen local agency. This distinction is important because sustainable tourism cannot be achieved simply by including communities as visible participants. It requires communities to have voice, authority, and fair access to benefits.

Vietnam-based research reflects these tensions. Nguyen and Chung’s study on conflicts in Cai Lay district, Tien Giang province, shows that community-based tourism can generate disputes between local residents and stakeholders over benefit distribution, resource access, and development expectations [11].

This study is important because it demonstrates that community-based tourism is not automatically socially sustainable. Similarly, research on Thieng Lieng Island shows that domestic tourist satisfaction is shaped not only by infrastructure or services, but also by community interaction and local experience [12]. These studies suggest that community transformation requires a shift from participation as presence to participation as agency.

2.4. Heritage, Memory, and Cultural Legitimacy

Heritage tourism is another important field for rethinking sustainable tourism as social transformation. Heritage is not merely a resource to be conserved or consumed; it is also a field of memory, identity, emotion, and power. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) argue that heritage is often dissonant because different groups attach different meanings to the past [13]. Smith (2006) further suggests that heritage should be understood as a cultural process rather than simply a collection of monuments or objects [14].

This perspective is particularly relevant to destinations associated with war, colonialism, imprisonment, religion, or collective trauma. Stone (2012) and Farmaki (2013) show that dark tourism and post-conflict tourism involve complex relationships between education, memory, commodification, and ethical interpretation [15,16]. In such contexts, sustainability cannot be measured only by visitor numbers, conservation status, or tourism revenue. It must also consider whether tourism protects the dignity of memory, respects local emotions, and allows communities to participate in interpreting their own past.

In Vietnam, heritage tourism development raises similar questions. Cultural and historical sites are often promoted as tourism products, but the process of tourism development may simplify, commercialize, or depoliticize complex memories. Therefore, heritage transformation requires moving from material conservation toward emotional sustainability and interpretive justice. Sustainable heritage tourism should protect not only physical sites, but also cultural meanings, collective memory, and community authority over representation.

2.5. Tourist Behavior, Digital Practices, and Responsible Consumption

Tourist behavior has become increasingly important in sustainable tourism debates. Traditional studies of responsible tourism often focus on environmental awareness, personal norms, and pro-environmental behavior. Han (2021) notes that consumer behavior in tourism and hospitality is closely connected to environmental sustainability, while Verma, Chandra, and Kumar (2019) highlight the role of values and responsibility in shaping green consumption intentions [17,18].

In the digital era, however, tourist behavior is also shaped by social media, online reviews, influencer culture, destination images, and peer interaction. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) show that social media plays an important role in travel information search and destination decision-making [19]. This means that tourists do not only consume destinations physically; they also produce and circulate destination meanings digitally. Check-ins, photographs, hashtags, and short videos can influence how destinations are imagined, visited, and valued.

For sustainable tourism, this creates both opportunities and risks. Digital media can spread sustainability messages and encourage responsible behavior. At the same time, image-oriented tourism may produce overcrowding, superficial engagement, disrespectful behavior in sacred or heritage spaces, and pressure on local communities. Behavioral transformation therefore requires more than encouraging tourists to behave responsibly in a general sense. It requires ethical digital practice, respectful representation, and awareness of how online behavior affects destination sustainability.

2.6. Education, Labor, and Adaptive Capacity

Education and labor are often treated as supporting issues in sustainable tourism, but they are central to social transformation. Tourism workers and local communities require not only technical skills, but also communication ability, digital literacy, intercultural competence, environmental

awareness, ethical judgment, and adaptive learning. Without these capacities, communities may remain dependent on external actors, and workers may remain vulnerable within unstable tourism labor markets.

Research on employee engagement in the tourism sector shows that workforce commitment, organizational support, and quality of working life are important for tourism sustainability [20]. This is significant because sustainable tourism depends not only on destinations and visitors, but also on the people who operate tourism systems. If tourism workers experience low engagement, limited career development, or insecure employment, destination resilience becomes fragile.

Education also matters for community participation. Local residents need communication and storytelling capacities to explain cultural meanings, negotiate with stakeholders, and participate in tourism value creation. In this sense, education is not merely vocational training. It is a form of social infrastructure that enables communities and workers to become active agents in sustainable tourism development.

2.7. Governance, Coordination, and Institutional Transformation

Governance is central to sustainable tourism because tourism development involves multiple actors, including state agencies, local communities, tourism enterprises, heritage managers, educational institutions, workers, and visitors. Bramwell and Lane (2011) argue that sustainable tourism governance requires more than top-down planning; it requires coordination, collaboration, and adaptive institutional arrangements [21]. Hall (2011) similarly emphasizes that policy learning and governance change are essential for addressing sustainability failures [22].

In Vietnam, governance fragmentation remains a major challenge. Tourism development often involves overlapping responsibilities among government agencies, businesses, communities, and educational institutions. This can weaken community participation, heritage protection, workforce development, and responsible tourist management. Therefore, governance transformation is necessary to connect the social dimensions of sustainability into a coherent destination system.

The study on halal tourism destination evaluation in Vietnam using Delphi and AHP methods is relevant here because it shows the importance of systematic criteria, expert judgment, and multi-dimensional destination assessment in tourism planning [23]. Although halal tourism is a specific field, the methodological implication is broader: sustainable destination governance requires clear criteria, stakeholder-informed evaluation, and integrated planning mechanisms.

Taken together, the literature shows that sustainable tourism can no longer be adequately understood through green growth alone. Community agency, heritage memory, responsible tourist behavior, education, labor, and governance are interconnected dimensions of tourism transformation. However, these issues are often studied separately. This article responds to that gap by developing the ISTTF, which conceptualizes sustainable tourism as a relational process of social transformation rather than a collection of isolated sustainability themes.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual qualitative research design to develop a theoretical framework for rethinking sustainable tourism in Vietnam through the lens of social transformation. Rather than testing hypotheses or producing statistical generalization, the article aims to clarify concepts, synthesize fragmented debates, and construct an analytical framework that moves beyond green growth and environmentally centered sustainability. This approach is appropriate for conceptual studies that seek to integrate existing knowledge and generate new theoretical perspectives [24].

The study combines directed literature review, academic discourse analysis, and interpretive synthesis. Relevant literature was identified from 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 Vietnam-based empirical studies related to

sustainable tourism, green growth, social sustainability, transformative tourism, community-based tourism, heritage tourism, tourist behavior, tourism education, labor sustainability, and tourism governance. Literature was selected based on conceptual relevance, citation influence, empirical relevance to Vietnam, and its contribution to one or more transformation domains of the ISTTF. Priority was given to works that address tourism as a social, cultural, ethical, behavioral, educational, or institutional process rather than merely as an economic or environmental activity.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the literature was reviewed to identify the limitations of green growth and dominant sustainability discourses in tourism studies. Second, recurring social transformation issues were coded across the literature, including community agency, heritage memory, responsible tourist behavior, educational capacity, labor conditions, and governance coordination. Third, these issues were synthesized into five interrelated transformation domains: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. These domains were not treated as separate themes, but as relational processes that interact within destination systems.

The ISTTF was therefore developed through cross-synthesis rather than simple thematic grouping. The framework explains how community agency depends on governance mechanisms, how heritage interpretation depends on community voice and educational capacity, how tourist behavior is shaped by digital norms and destination regulation, and how labor and education influence destination resilience. In this sense, the ISTTF is designed as a relational framework for understanding sustainable tourism as social transformation.

As a conceptual study, this article has limitations. It does not empirically test the proposed framework. Future research may apply qualitative case studies, stakeholder interviews, Delphi methods, or quantitative modeling to validate and refine the ISTTF across different tourism contexts in Vietnam and other emerging destinations.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of the reviewed literature indicates that sustainable tourism in Vietnam cannot be adequately explained through green growth alone. 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. These tensions include unequal benefit distribution, symbolic community participation, heritage commodification, labor vulnerability, digitally mediated tourist behavior, and fragmented governance. Therefore, sustainable tourism needs to be reconsidered as a process of social transformation.

This study proposes the ISTTF to explain this transition. The framework consists of five interrelated dimensions: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation. These dimensions were not developed as a simple thematic summary. Rather, they emerged from a cross-synthesis of debates on participation, memory, behavior, education, labor, and governance. The ISTTF conceptualizes these dimensions as relational processes through which tourism reshapes agency, identity, norms, capacity, and institutional coordination within destination systems.

4.1. Theoretical Logic of the ISTTF

The theoretical logic of the ISTTF is based on the argument that sustainable tourism is not only an environmental or economic issue, but also a social and institutional process. Conventional green growth approaches tend to emphasize environmental protection, resource efficiency, destination branding, and economic competitiveness. These priorities remain necessary, but they do not explain how tourism redistributes power, transforms community roles, reshapes cultural meanings, influences tourist behavior, affects labor conditions, or reorganizes governance relations.

The ISTTF addresses this limitation by placing social transformation at the center of sustainable tourism analysis. Social transformation refers to structural and relational changes in how tourism actors participate, represent, behave, learn, work, and govern. In this sense, sustainability is not treated as a fixed balance among economic, environmental, and social pillars. It is understood as an ongoing process through which destinations negotiate justice, cultural legitimacy, behavioral responsibility, adaptive capacity, and institutional inclusion.

The five dimensions of the ISTTF are analytically distinct but practically interconnected. Community transformation concerns the redistribution of agency and benefits. Heritage transformation concerns memory, identity, and interpretive justice. Behavioral transformation concerns responsible and digitally mediated tourist practices. Educational transformation concerns adaptive capacity, labor resilience, and community communication. Governance transformation concerns institutional coordination and collaborative decision-making. Together, these dimensions form a relational framework for understanding sustainable tourism as social transformation.

Table 1. Green Growth and Social Transformation in Sustainable Tourism

Indicator	Green Growth Approach	Social Transformation Approach
Main concern	Environmental protection, resource efficiency, and destination competitiveness	Justice, agency, cultural legitimacy, adaptive capacity, and governance inclusion
Community role	Participants, beneficiaries, or service providers	Co-creators, decision-makers, and holders of local agency
Heritage	Cultural resource to be conserved and marketed	Memory, identity, emotional sustainability, and interpretive justice
Tourists	Responsible consumers	Ethical and digital actors who shape destination meanings
Education and labor	Technical training and service skills	Adaptive capacity, labor resilience, and social infrastructure
Governance	Regulation and destination management	Collaborative coordination across actors, sectors, and institutions

Source: Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature.

4.2. Community Transformation: From Participation to Agency

Community participation has long been considered a key principle of sustainable tourism. However, participation does not automatically produce empowerment. In many destinations, local residents may participate in tourism by providing homestays, food services, guiding, craft products, or cultural performances, while remaining excluded from planning, investment decisions, benefit distribution, and destination governance. This reflects the difference between symbolic participation and substantive agency.

Community transformation therefore requires a shift from participation as presence to participation as power. Local communities should not be treated merely as beneficiaries or service providers. They should be recognized as co-creators of destination value and active agents in tourism decision-making.

This requires mechanisms for community voice, transparent benefit-sharing, cultural representation, and negotiation among stakeholders.

Vietnam-based studies illustrate this issue. Research on conflicts in Cai Lay district, Tien Giang province shows that community-based tourism can generate tensions between local residents and stakeholders when benefit distribution, resource access, and development expectations are not properly negotiated [11]. Similarly, research on Thieng Lieng Island indicates that domestic tourist satisfaction is strongly shaped by local interaction and community experience, not only by infrastructure or service quality [12]. These findings suggest that communities are not peripheral actors in sustainable tourism; they are central to destination legitimacy, visitor experience, and long-term resilience.

Within the ISTTF, community transformation is therefore defined as the process through which local residents gain greater agency over tourism development, cultural representation, and benefit distribution. It provides the social foundation for sustainable tourism because destinations cannot be sustainable if local communities remain structurally marginalized.

4.3. Heritage Transformation: From Conservation to Emotional Sustainability

Heritage tourism is often associated with conservation, interpretation, and cultural consumption. However, heritage is not simply a physical resource to be preserved or marketed. It is also a field of memory, identity, emotion, and power. Heritage sites may carry different meanings for local communities, visitors, state institutions, and tourism enterprises. Therefore, sustainable heritage tourism must address not only material conservation, but also cultural legitimacy and interpretive justice.

Heritage transformation refers to the shift from conservation-centered heritage management toward emotional sustainability. Emotional sustainability means the capacity of tourism development to respect collective memory, protect cultural dignity, and maintain ethical interpretation while allowing heritage sites to participate in tourism economies. This is especially important for sites associated with war, colonialism, imprisonment, religion, or collective trauma.

In the Vietnamese context, heritage tourism often involves complex relationships between historical memory, national identity, local community meanings, and tourism commercialization. If heritage is treated only as a tourism product, its symbolic and emotional meanings may be simplified or commodified. Conversely, when local voices and historical complexity are included in interpretation, heritage tourism can contribute to education, remembrance, and cultural continuity.

Within the ISTTF, heritage transformation connects sustainability with memory and identity. It shows that a destination may be physically conserved but socially unsustainable if its meanings are detached from community memory or reduced to commercial display. Sustainable tourism therefore requires heritage interpretation that is ethical, participatory, and emotionally responsible.

4.4. Behavioral Transformation: From Tourist Consumption to Responsible Digital Practice

Tourist behavior is a central but changing dimension of sustainable tourism. Traditional approaches often focus on responsible consumption, environmental awareness, and pro-environmental behavior. These remain important, but they are no longer sufficient in the digital era. Tourists now experience and represent destinations through social media, online reviews, photographs, videos, hashtags, and influencer culture. As a result, tourist behavior affects not only physical environments, but also symbolic meanings and community spaces.

Behavioral transformation refers to the shift from tourist consumption to responsible digital practice. Tourists are not merely consumers of tourism products. They are also producers and circulators of destination images. Their online practices can promote sustainability, raise awareness, and support local destinations. However, they can also encourage overcrowding, superficial check-in culture, disrespectful behavior in sacred or heritage spaces, and pressure on local communities.

For sustainable tourism, this means that responsible behavior must be understood both offline and online. It includes how tourists move, consume, photograph, post, narrate, and evaluate destinations.

Ethical digital practice requires tourists to recognize that their online representations can influence destination reputation, visitor flows, cultural meanings, and community well-being.

Within the ISTTF, behavioral transformation expands sustainable tourism beyond destination management. It highlights tourists as active participants in social transformation. Sustainable tourism depends not only on what destinations provide, but also on how tourists behave, represent, and circulate destination meanings.

4.5. Educational Transformation: From Technical Training to Adaptive Capacity

Education and labor are often treated as supporting elements of tourism development. However, they are central to sustainable tourism transformation. Tourism workers and local communities need more than technical service skills. They require communication capacity, digital literacy, intercultural competence, ethical awareness, environmental understanding, crisis response, and adaptive learning.

Educational transformation refers to the shift from technical training to adaptive capacity. In this perspective, education is not limited to formal tourism programs or vocational training. It also includes community learning, storytelling ability, language competence, workplace learning, and professional development. These capacities allow tourism workers and local residents to participate more actively in tourism systems.

Research on employee engagement in the tourism sector shows that workforce commitment and quality of working life are important for sustainable tourism development [20]. This suggests that labor sustainability should not be separated from destination sustainability. If tourism workers face insecurity, low engagement, or limited career development, the resilience of destinations will be weakened.

Educational transformation also strengthens community agency and heritage interpretation. When local residents have communication and storytelling skills, they can explain cultural meanings, negotiate with stakeholders, and represent their own heritage more effectively. Thus, education functions as a form of social infrastructure. It supports community participation, ethical interpretation, responsible tourist communication, and destination resilience.

Within the ISTTF, educational transformation provides the human capacity that enables other dimensions to operate. Community agency, heritage interpretation, behavioral change, and governance participation all depend on the knowledge, skills, and adaptive capacity of tourism actors.

4.6. Governance Transformation: From Fragmented Management to Integrated Destination Governance

Governance transformation is the connecting dimension of the ISTTF. Sustainable tourism involves multiple actors, including local communities, state agencies, tourism enterprises, heritage managers, educational institutions, workers, tourists, and civil society organizations. When these actors operate separately, sustainability efforts become fragmented. Community participation may remain symbolic, heritage interpretation may become commercialized, tourist behavior may remain unmanaged, and education may be disconnected from destination needs.

Governance transformation refers to the shift from fragmented management to integrated destination governance. This does not mean replacing state management. Rather, it means creating more collaborative, transparent, and adaptive mechanisms that connect state agencies, communities, enterprises, educators, workers, and visitors. Governance should enable participation, coordinate responsibilities, resolve conflicts, and align tourism development with social justice and cultural legitimacy.

The study on halal tourism destination evaluation in Vietnam using Delphi and AHP methods demonstrates the importance of systematic criteria and expert-informed assessment in destination planning [23]. Although halal tourism is a specific field, the broader implication is that sustainable destination governance requires clear criteria, multi-stakeholder evaluation, and integrated planning.

Such approaches can help destinations move beyond fragmented decision-making toward more coherent and inclusive governance.

Within the ISTTF, governance transformation provides the institutional mechanism that links the other dimensions. It enables community agency, supports ethical heritage interpretation, regulates tourist behavior, connects education with destination needs, and strengthens labor and community resilience. Without governance transformation, the other dimensions remain isolated and may fail to produce meaningful sustainability outcomes.

4.7. The ISTTF as a Relational Framework

The main contribution of the ISTTF lies in its relational logic. The framework does not simply list five dimensions of sustainable tourism. It explains how these dimensions interact and mutually shape one another within destination systems.

Community transformation depends on governance mechanisms that allow local residents to participate in decision-making. Heritage transformation depends on community voice, educational capacity, and ethical interpretation. Behavioral transformation depends on tourist education, digital norms, and destination regulation. Educational transformation strengthens the capacity of communities and workers to participate in tourism development. Governance transformation coordinates these processes and provides institutional support for long-term sustainability.

Table 2. Theoretical Distinctiveness of the ISTTF

ISTTF Dimension	Existing Concept	What the ISTTF Adds
Community transformation	Community participation	Agency, power redistribution, and benefit justice
Heritage transformation	Heritage conservation	Emotional sustainability, memory, and interpretive justice
Behavioral transformation	Responsible tourist behavior	Digital ethics and destination representation
Educational transformation	Tourism training	Adaptive capacity, labor resilience, and community storytelling
Governance transformation	Destination management	Integration across actors, sectors, and social tensions

Source: Author’s synthesis from the reviewed literature.

This relational understanding responds directly to the limitations of green growth. Green growth approaches may improve environmental performance, but they often leave deeper social relations unchanged. The ISTTF argues that sustainable tourism requires transformation in how communities participate, how heritage is interpreted, how tourists behave, how workers and residents learn, and how institutions coordinate development.

For Vietnam and other 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, ethical heritage interpretation, responsible digital behavior, tourism workforce development, and collaborative governance. In this sense, sustainable tourism must be not only greener, but also more socially just, culturally legitimate, behaviorally responsible, educationally adaptive, and institutionally inclusive.

5. CONCLUSION

This article 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 tensions such as unequal benefit distribution, symbolic community participation, heritage commodification, labor vulnerability, digitally mediated tourist behavior, and fragmented governance.

The study defines social transformation in tourism as a multidimensional process through which tourism reshapes community agency, heritage memory, tourist behavior, educational capacity, labor conditions, and governance relations. Based on a conceptual qualitative synthesis, the article develops the ISTTF, consisting of five interrelated dimensions: community transformation, heritage transformation, behavioral transformation, educational transformation, and governance transformation.

The main contribution of the ISTTF lies in its relational logic. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate themes, the framework explains how they interact within destination systems. Community agency depends on inclusive governance; heritage interpretation requires community voice and educational capacity; tourist behavior is shaped by digital norms and destination regulation; and education strengthens labor resilience and community participation.

The article contributes to sustainable tourism scholarship by clarifying the distinction between green growth, social sustainability, transformative tourism, and social transformation. It also integrates fragmented debates on community, heritage, behavior, education, labor, and governance into a unified framework relevant to Vietnam and other emerging destinations.

Practically, the framework suggests that sustainable tourism policies should move beyond green infrastructure and destination branding. They should also promote community empowerment, fair benefit distribution, ethical heritage interpretation, responsible digital behavior, workforce development, and collaborative governance.

As a conceptual study, this article has limitations. Future research should empirically test and refine the ISTTF through case studies, stakeholder interviews, Delphi methods, or quantitative modeling across different tourism contexts in Vietnam and other emerging destinations. Overall, sustainable tourism should be understood not only as greener development, but also as more socially just, culturally legitimate, behaviorally responsible, educationally adaptive, and institutionally inclusive.

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