Analysis of tourism development indicators and their relationship with communication at cultural heritage sites

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Abstract

Destinations are devoted to ruling them under sustainable development principles given by institutions such as UNWTO, UICN or ICOMOS. In this aim, strategic communication appears to reinforce them and bolster sustainable tourism development within the cultural tourism sphere. Nevertheless, in the field of communication, it is not always clear what is interesting to present to boost tourism development. In this sense, this study evaluates the opportunities for cultural heritage conservation, preservation, and promotion by analysing tourism development indicators and their relationship with communication. The methodology involves an in-depth exploration of cultural heritage interpretation and communication to achieve this aim, identifying good practices in communicating sustainability. The findings reveal promising avenues for utilising cultural heritage as a primary sightseeing vehicle for sustainable development using strategic communication. The implications of this study extend to fostering a symbiotic relationship among cultural tourism sites, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), local communities and stakeholders to encourage visitor perception of cultural heritage for sustainability, thereby contributing to a more harmonious and sustainable tourism ecosystem.

Keywords: strategic communication, sustainability dimensions, cultural tourism, sustainable development, heritage preservation, heritage interpretation.

1. Introduction

The global tourism sector is developing dynamically, and the turnover of funds in this area is increasing yearly. While tourism was considered the central sphere that suffered after the Covid-19 pandemic at the same time, it has been showing a significant recovery rate after the pandemic period, reaching 88% of the recovery rate of international tourist numbers (direct GDP share of the Global market evaluated at 3% in 2023 as well as in 2019). It is supposed to be a total recovery in 2024 (United Nations World Tourism Organization - UNWTO, 2024). However, tourism is considered a significant potential source of profit; it causes serious problems such as overcrowding, cultural appropriation, and the loss of authenticity, among others (Hamú et al., 2004). Tourism brings money and jobs to cities and regions, but it can also damage residents' day-to-day lives and the area's culture and heritage. Under this scenario, sustainable tourism development at cultural sites offers a new perspective, as it places cultural heritage and local communities at the centre of decision-making processes (EU Commission[1]). That means it involves local communities and other stakeholders in the decision-making processes as a key to ensuring the benefit of both cultural heritage and the local population. In this context, sustainable cultural tourism aims to provide good conservation practices and authentic interpretation that supports the local economy production by tourist services enhancement, contributes to poverty reduction by creating job places, makes aware of environmental conservation and encourages cultural diversity by presenting a variety of traditions of destination (Brooks, 2011).

Cultural heritage tourism is one of the suitable types of tourism where visitors intend to support the preservation of the local cultural heritage and the economy with high spending (Richards, 2001). Cultural tourism is a vital catalyst for regional development, yet it necessitates meticulous oversight to mitigate adverse effects (Girard, 2008). However, the sustainability of cultural tourism is a complex issue, requiring a balance between economic benefits and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage (Murzyn-Kupisz, 2012; Hong Van, 2020). Rakitovac & Urošević (2017) and Hong Van (2020) both stressed the significance of cultural heritage for well-being and the quality of the local community by increasing new job places, raising visitor perceptions and improving the image of the destination, making it more attractive for regional investment leading destination to well-being. Still, other issues regarding the preservation of cultural heritage require a look at carrying capacity limitation, climate change damage to heritage and conservation of original heritage conditions for future generations.

The multisectoral tourism sector involves many stakeholders, such as public authorities, tourism businesses, local communities, NGOs, academic and research staff, and media organisations. Communication takes an essential role in sustainable tourism development, acting as the means of connecting tourism stakeholders based on sustainability principles. Principles for the implementation of efficient communication must be filled by the next: a) integration of the idea of sustainability anywhere, not just as a goal but as an ongoing process; b) clear and understandable communication (explanation through storytelling) showing different channels (ads or websites) of tourist companies and being a vehicle for knowing all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations Agenda 2030[2]. It is crucial to consider that sustainability is not just environmental and climate protection. Still, it is a social and economic issue to avoid stereotypes and to provide a comprehensive view of the progress made and prospects in the relationship between communicational tools and sustainable tourism. Tourism activity at this destination belongs to the service sector and is customer-oriented. Therefore, the effectiveness of

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[1] European Commission, Culture and Creativity: Sustainable cultural tourism, https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-heritage/cultural-heritage-in-eu-policies/sustainable-cultural-tourism)

[2] Commission Communication, 'Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism, Brussels, 19.10.2007-https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/agenda-for-a-sustainable-and-competitive-europeantourism.html#:~:text=This%20Communication%20is%20the%20official,and%20environmental%20and%20cultural%20protection.

communications that link the government, the producer of tourism services (tour operator) and the consumer (tourist) is crucial.

In this context, the importance of communication and interpretation in enriching the tourist experience and safeguarding the cultural significance of heritage sites has arisen recently (Köhler, 2020). Enhancing and marketing historical and cultural tourism sites represent pivotal priorities within the tourism sector. In this sense, Hana et al. (2023) stressed the importance of proficient communication strategies and engaging stakeholders in advancing sustainable tourism, as it was done at Kupang City, where the lack of promotional activities was considered the main reason for low interest in tourism and supposed relevant actions by the side each of participant. This viewpoint is reinforced by Musthofa (2021), who underscores the significance of digital technology in fostering the growth of cultural tourism, particularly in augmenting promotional and marketing communication for sustainable tourism development in cultural heritage sites.

At the same time, lack of communication leads to failure, and it can be approved in case the most problematic province of Cambodia in Angkor was accepted by 'The Angkor World Heritage Area Tourism Management Plan, 2012–2020' (United Nations for Education, Science and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, n.d.) based on the community opinions to minimise the damage. According to Bramwell & Lane (2000), communication also includes "how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media".

For all these reasons, communication is presented as a powerful tool to support sustainable tourism development in a destination, although it must be used in an orderly and strategic way (Teruel, 2016). The first step is understanding the interpretation international organisations and other researchers gave to tourism sustainability indicators. Once analysed, the aim will be to address communication to support the sustainable management of destinations. To this end, this work has focused on studying tourism sustainability indicators. Identify and extract those that can serve to publicise the good practices a destination is doing regarding sustainability.

Moreover, regarding the role of cultural sites, communication includes heritage interpretation, which is a crucial factor in strategic communication for sustainable tourism development (Tatarusanu, 2018). Linking cultural heritage with cultural tourism development can help achieve sustainable tourism by considering economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects (Hong Van, 2020). Furthermore, heritage can contribute to and stimulate development in the modern world, with tourism being a significant factor in building public awareness and support for heritage conservation (Brooks, 2011). However, there needs to be more interpretation purposes, as most of them are intended to present historical value to heritage through interpretation.

After this introduction, this article will consider the importance of strategic communication for sustainable development in the cultural heritage sites based on good practices of different destinations to identify the conceptual framework of sustainability of heritage sites and how they can communicate through them using various strategic communication means.

1.1. Sustainable communication at cultural tourism development: A theoretical approach

Several studies have investigated the establishment of criteria for sustainable tourism applied to cultural tourism and heritage communication aspects from different points of view. First, the contributions given by Ngamsomsuke et al. (2011) highlighted the architectural character and urban design as pivotal indicators of cultural tourism sustainable development. They supposed sustainable cultural heritage tourism indicators are divided into four groups: economic activities, social support, management of cultural heritage sites, and the surrounding environment of cultural heritage sites. In total, they presented 20 relevant indicators highlighting the importance of social and management dimensions, which were considered the most communication-related. In this sense, Social Support indicators regard tourist satisfaction, tourist attitude towards culture, public awareness, and public prints. On the other hand, the management of cultural heritage sites includes indicators that consider attraction promotion activities, knowledge and beliefs from the visit, advanced information and communication technologies (ICT), and principal site narration.

Lozano-Oyola et al. (2012) introduced an indicator system for sustainable tourism in cultural destinations, stressing the necessity for practical guidance in interpreting and integrating the collected data. Jelinčić (2021) introduced a framework for evaluating the influence of cultural and creative industries on heritage and tourism, giving attention to stakeholders' involvement process. Nocca (2017) emphasised the significance of empirical evidence in illustrating the role of cultural heritage in sustainable development, especially concerning climate change awareness raising and the tourism sector's economic growth.

ICOMOS[3] considered the contribution of cultural heritage in the promotion of SDGs: 11, 8, 12, 4, and 16, remarking on its role in responsible consumption through, role in awareness raising and knowledge sharing, it's contribution as the way of local business support and employment, and raising the sense of pride through belonging and cultural identity, moreover, understanding of culture is the key to peace and tolerance in the multicultural universe.

UNESCO World Heritage and Sustainable Program[4] highlights cultural heritage tourism promotion through the following objectives where communication plays a pivotal role in each step:

- Interpretation means of heritage (integration of sustainable tourism principles)
- Sustainable tourism policy (advocating strategies, policy, framework and tools)
- Stakeholders awareness raising and capacity building (involvement of stakeholders in preservation of cultural heritage)
- Fostering the local community's sense of pride (by involvement and local community empowerment)
- Responsible tourism promotion (provide stakeholders with tools and capacity for managing cultural heritage responsibly)
- Raising visitor understanding and awareness (promoting quality services)

Sustainable communication for cultural heritage tourism development is crucial to bond objectives, principles, and steps in establishing management plans and sustainability activities. Further, after identifying the role and importance of communication in sustainability, the following points are made regarding the communication establishment's effectiveness and practical approach.

1.2. Strategic communication applied to sustainable tourism development

In the context of sustainability communication, there are complicated cases between economic growth objectives and sustainability principles, replacing them with economic benefits and drawbacks in sending messages about sustainability activities for awareness raising (Jones et al., 2017). By properly establishing effective strategic communication using visitor awareness-raising purposes in cultural tourism, there can be a significant positive change in many tourist perceptions, encouraging them to learn more about traditions (Wang, 2022). At the same time, there can be drawbacks in communicators' competency and lack of sustainability content in the communication process, intending communication not participatory but just announcing final reports, leading to the sense of absence of all sustainability activities even if they exist in the sites (Hamú et al., 2004). However, communication serves as the supporting instrument in sustainable tourism development (Galvin et al., 2012); it has a direct and indirect role in the organisation process of each other instruments such as sustainability indicators, economics (fee and taxes, job, etc.), management (legislation, policy, etc.) and voluntary instruments (guidelines, certification, etc) and others (capacity building, infrastructure improvement, etc.).

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[3] ICOMOS - International Council on Monuments and Sites online source "Arts and Culture -
https://artsandculture.google.com/story/ewVBpE8qiz0gUQ

[4] Official web site of UNESCO World Heritage Convention organization -
https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-669-7.pdf

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study was qualitative and comprised three steps to identify the relevance between sustainable tourism development and its application to cultural tourism. To achieve this aim, a case study technique of good sustainability practises of cultural heritage sites and identify communicational means used for sustainability practises enhancement based on general research questions "What are sustainability actions in heritage sites?" and "How heritage sites communicate sustainability through various means".

Firstly, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify the main aspects of sustainability within cultural heritage. This involved synthesising existing knowledge and practices related to sustainable tourism development and cultural heritage preservation and promotion. This first step was a clue to create the theoretical framework and this study's introduction to strategic communication's role in tourism.

Secondly, content analyses of the most relevant sustainability indicators in cultural heritage sites based on the works of several authors allowed the identification of essential fields of action where sustainability could be interpreted through cultural heritage. Moreover, the documents' revision of good primarily practises of sustainable development at eight heritage sites completed this second step, presented in the subsection "Results".

Finally, to better understand the sustainability communication of cultural heritage sites, case studies were used to identify sustainable development practices at cultural heritage destinations by finding links with the sustainability indicators. The sources used to afford this third step were:

- World Heritage Manuals: *Managing Tourism at World Heritage Sites* (Pedersen, 2002)
- The good practices of protected areas strategic communication approaches presented by Hamú et al. (2004).
- ICOMOS guidelines (Brooks, 2011) and the *ICOMOS charter for the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites* (ICOMOS, 2008)
- *Practical, profitable, protected. A starter guide to developing sustainable tourism in protected areas* (Galvin et al., 2012)
- The *World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Online Toolkit* (UNESCO, n.d.)[5]

3. Results

First, based on a literature review on sustainability principles and activities, the key findings were presented as the framework of strategic communication, which related the fundamental sustainable tourism indicators with the practices endorsed by local communities and stakeholders through the communication means to ensure the messages (Figure 1).

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[5] Official web site of UNESCO World Heritage Convention organization -
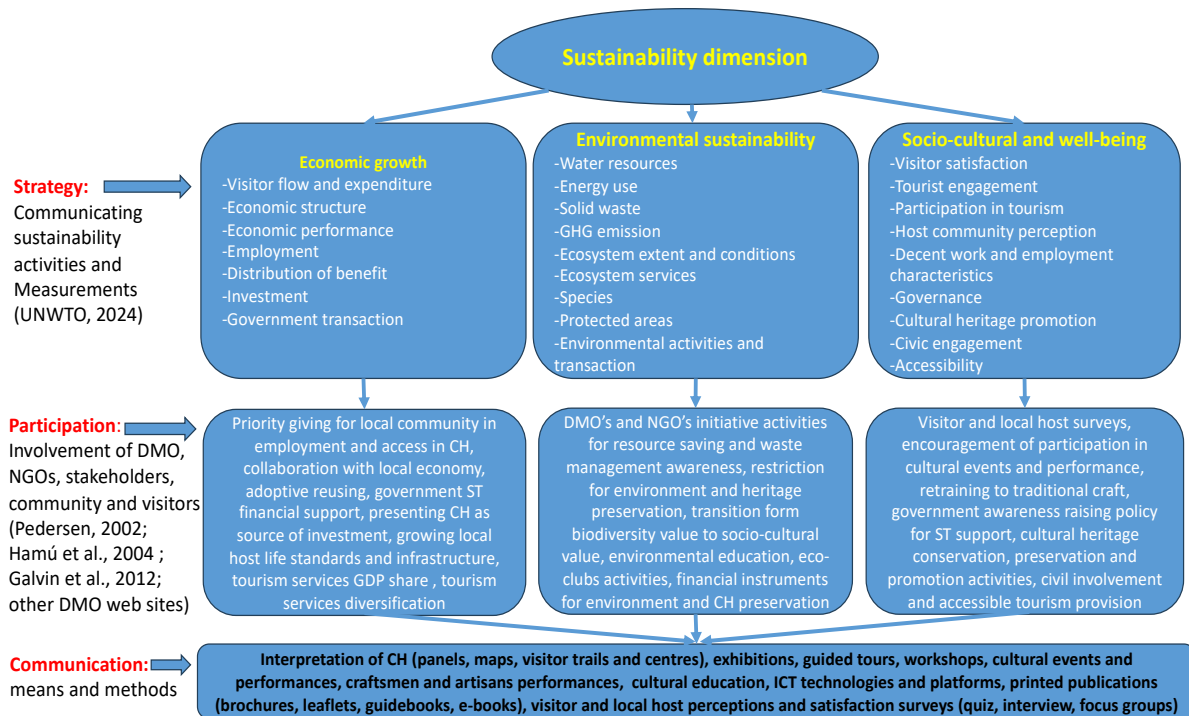https://whc.unesco.org/en/sustainabletourismtoolkit

Figure 1. Communicating sustainability applied to cultural heritage sites

This first approach to the issues and indicators (in case) is contained in Table 1.

Table 1. Issues and indicators of sustainable tourism development

Authors	Sustainable tourism issues/indicator's themes
Durovic & Lovrentjev (2014)	**-Social:** Socio-cultural effects of tourism on host Community, Local public safety, Conservation of cultural heritage, Social carrying capacity of the destination, Safeguarding cultural identity of local Community, Quality of life in general; **-Economic:** Economic benefits of cultural tourism for the host community and destination, Sustaining tourist satisfaction, Cultural facilities, Institutional regulation, Seasonality of tourism activity, Tourism related transport, Cultural routes; **-Environmental:** Protection of the natural ecosystem, Energy Management, Water availability and management, Wastewater treatment, Waste management, Atmospheric pollution, Management of the visual impact of facilities and infrastructure, Intensity of use, Environmental management;
Agyeiwaah et al. (2017)	**-Economic:** Revenues and profitability, Employment, Visitor satisfaction, Tourists arrivals, volume and numbers; **-Social:** Residents involvement, participation and awareness, Congestion and overcrowding, Community satisfaction; **-Environmental**: Water quality and management, Solid waste discharge and management, Recycling rate, Air/atmospheric quality; **-Cultural:** Retention of local customs and language, Maintenance of cultural sites, Actions and events taken to promote indigenous culture;
Jelinčić (2021)	**-Heritage vibrancy:** Heritage attractions, Heritage participation and attractiveness; **-Creative economy:** Creative and knowledge-based jobs, Heritage innovation, Internationalization of heritage; **-Enabling environment:** Human capital and heritage education, Quality management of heritage; **-Heritage preservation and protection** **-Enhancement:** Research, Preservation, Preservation; **-Heritage revival and livability:** Revival, Livability **-Financial, environmental and**

	socio-cultural sustainability of cultural heritage: Financial sustainability, Environmental sustainability, Socio-cultural sustainability; **-Heritage products/services enhancement.** Heritage marketing improvement: Distribution, Pricing/sales, Branding, Promotion - **Heritage interpretation enhancement:** Interpretive media, Visitor satisfaction, Heritage awareness and education; - **Enhanced human resources:** Management: Employees, Volunteers; -**Visitor management improvement:** Tools, Visitor number and satisfaction; -**Local community**: Access, Participation
Trišić et al. (2023)	-**Institutional Aspects:** Trained guides and community representatives, Local brands, The manager's directions for visitor activities, Information about the history of the reserve; -**Dimension of Ecology:** The protection of the environment, the service provides facilities, services, and events that benefit tourists and the local community, Facilities for tourists exist that do not harm the environment; -**Economic Dimension:** Residents in the destination gain from tourism, tourism industry boosts the regional economy, an increase in tourism in tourism keeps locals employed, Visitors can purchase local goods, and The costs of domestic goods are supported by tourists; -**Socio-cultural Aspects:** Crafts and household items, the residents and guests interchange, Tourists are curiosity about regional customs and traditions, Tourists attend local cultural venues and events, Historical sites pique the interest of visitors;
Kadir & Chew (2024)	-**Cultural value:** The uniqueness of the way of life, wisdom, and knowledge, Continuation of traditional cultures, Cultural beauty, Continuation of the way of life, wisdom, and knowledge, A searchable historical culture, Local commitment, strengthened to maintain cultural identity, Cultural conservation groups network; -**Physical potential and activity:** Accessibility: Ease of access, Accessibility: Access route signs, Safety and security, Safety and security: The frequency of the dangers of external factors such as crime, epidemics, etc. The frequency of the dangers of natural disasters in the past year, Diversity of tourism activities
UNWTO (2024)	-**Economic:** Visitor flow, tourism expenditure, economic structure, economic performance, employment, distribution of benefit, investment, government transaction -**Environmental**: Water resources, energy use, Solid waste, GHG emission, Ecosystem extent and condition, Ecosystem services, Species, Protected areas, Environmental activities and transactions; -**Social:** Visitor satisfaction, Visitor engagement; Participation in tourism, Host community perceptions, Employment characteristics, Decent work, Governance, Civic engagement, Accessibility

Source: Own elaboration from Durovic & Lovrentjev (2014), Agyeiwaah et al. (2017), Jelinčić (2021), Trišić et al. (2023), Kadir & Chew (2024), and UNWTO (2024)

The above mentioned authors and institutions remarked on the significant role of cultural heritage in Sustainable Tourism development, where culture is considered one of the dimensions and key points of sustainable tourism development. Most were oriented to general tourism sustainability indicators following the main pillars such as economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability. At the same time, Kadir & Chew (2024) and Jelinčić (2021) focused on exact indicators relating to cultural tourism development, remarking on its cultural and physical value through technical conditions and accessibility of heritage. According to the authors, visitor flow, visitor expenditure, stakeholders' involvement, employment, tourism services, and infrastructure are the main points of economic sustainability. The socio-cultural dimension includes visitors' satisfaction, local community perception and participation, civic involvement and cultural heritage preservation and its role in local community well-being. Overall, it is clear from the authors' works that economic and socio-cultural indicators are more relevant to built heritage, and there is more opportunity to reflect through communication than environmental indicators, which have an indirect influence on cultural heritage development.

Secondly, this research continued with the analysis of good practices taken by governments and institutions at 8 heritage sites to highlight the importance of communication for raising awareness and inspiring people to develop

goals. Table 2 matches sustainable indicators with the actions they did and communicates the institution or enterprise responsible at each heritage site.

Table 2. Good practices cases for sustainable cultural heritage development

Heritage site	Sustainable indicators	Actions	Promotor
Angor, Cambodia	-Decent work and employment -Governance	Cooperation of local stakeholders Tourism industry stakeholder workshop and community, Monks and NGO workshop for tourism management plan (TMP)	Royal government, Destination management organisation (DMO), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)
George Town and Meleka	-Adoptive reuse for tourism services	-Reused places were intended for cultural heritage interpretation based on Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)	Local stakeholders
Vigan, Philippines	-Local community perception (sense of pride) -Decent work -Using local building materials	-Education for value raising (brochures, e-books, films, newsletters, postage stamps, children's books, tourist web opportunities, and table books) -Retraining of locals for craft and city guide services -Using local materials for street signs	DMO with international Spanish professionals
Avebury, UK	-Local community perception (sense of pride)	-Involvement of local community in preparing promotional materials by interview docs and sharing their private photo archive of place (leaflets, maps and others)	DMO and NGOs
Roros, Norway	-Heritage conservation -Local economic support	-Involvement of young people against vandalism by education -supporting collaboration of local food economy and hotel, restaurants service	DMO, schools and stakeholders
Wadded Sea, Denmark	-Heritage interpretation	-low-cost social media and involvement of local hosts for storytelling through education	Schools
Cornwall and West Devon, UK	-Heritage interpretation	-using world heritage status in interpretation and information facilities by value-adding strategy	Stakeholders
Wadi Al-Hitan's	-Heritage preservation	-restriction on visit using awareness raising for heritage preservation	Stakeholders

Source: Own elaboration from https://whc.unesco.org/en/sustainabletourismtoolkit/

4. Conclusions

Strategic communication in sustainable tourism is an ambitiously organised practical activities system based on the purpose of supporting sustainability indicators through awareness raising, community involvement, and collaboration for general goals. Communication must be strategic (must have achievable objectives) and must be based on a two-way method (Galvin et al., 2012). Communicating sustainability strategically means knowing how sustainability indicators can be transmitted through tourism types. That is, the sustainable practices taking place in a destination must be well identified and measured, if done, to make communication efficient. Moreover, Strategic communication for sustainable tourism development requires more integration between the public and private sectors and visitors. Using communication strategically with high efficiency provides proper information and stimulates consumers for day-to-day actions and decision-making. The lack of integration and promotion activities between stakeholders and other tourism participants can decrease the attitude towards the preservation of cultural heritage due to the low interest of the local host and government (Hana et al., 2023).

The research findings present general and special indicators systems for assessing sustainable tourism development in destinations with cultural heritage, focusing on utilising cultural heritage for sustainability and sending a message of sustainability through heritage communication means and ways.

Establishing efficient strategic communication within a destination can enable cultural heritage sites to convey sustainability principles effectively. Cultural heritage interpretation, local community and tourist perception analysis, education of tourism services, and improvement of other communication methods such as social media, web websites, and applications can foster the awareness-raising process. Moreover, It can be channelled through cultural heritage, which is vital in raising awareness among local communities and tourists and fostering mutually beneficial relationships. This entails engaging tourists with local traditions and involving the community in tourism activities.

While the primary aim of sustainable tourism is to preserve and pass on cultural heritage to future generations, collaborative efforts in cultural heritage management can benefit Destination management organisations by reducing economic burdens associated with heritage preservation. This, in turn, frees up budgetary resources for other heritage sites within the destination, with tourism serving as a significant driver for local economic growth.

These findings hold value for further research endeavours, serving as fundamental variables for measuring sustainability in cultural heritage sites. Based on the findings, it is helpful to identify sustainable cultural tourism measures and investigate them through these measures to determine whether heritage sites endorse sustainability or not.

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