

THE ROLE OF POLICY, DESTINATION MANAGEMENT, AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the impact of Sustainable Tourism Policy and Destination Management, DSR, and Sustainable Tourism on Sustainable Tourism Development. By focusing on key tourism regions and UNESCO World Cultural Heritage destinations, the study addresses gaps in both theory and practice regarding the mediating role of DSR and the integration of environmental, economic, cultural, and infrastructure dimensions in sustainable tourism development. Data were collected from 564 tourists, including domestic, international, and local residents, across the Northern and North Central. A questionnaire based on a Likert scale, adapted from prior studies, was used. Data analysis was conducted using PLS-SEM to test the proposed hypotheses and the mediating role of DSR in the relationships between SPDM, ST, and STD. The findings reveal that SPDM, DSR, and ST all positively influence STD. Notably, DSR not only exerts a direct effect but also mediates the relationship between SPDM and STD, demonstrating that policies and destination management are effective primarily when implemented through social responsibility initiatives. Furthermore, ST encompassing environmental, cultural, economic, and infrastructure dimensions significantly drives STD, corroborating international evidence while providing novel empirical insights from the Vietnamese context. The study strengthens theoretical understanding of sustainable tourism, highlighting the critical role of destination social responsibility and the multidimensional integration of sustainability factors. The results offer important managerial implications for policymakers and tourism businesses in designing strategies to achieve balanced and long-term sustainable tourism development in Vietnam.

Keywords: sustainable tourism policy, sustainable tourism, destination social responsibility, sustainable tourism development, tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is emerging as a potential tourism destination with rapid growth and abundant, diverse natural resources, including numerous scenic landscapes and significant historical sites. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Southeast Asia is expected to become the fourth-largest international tourist destination in the world, with Vietnam ranking among the top 10 countries experiencing the fastest tourism growth. As a key economic sector heavily dependent on natural resources, Vietnam's tourism industry is moving towards green and sustainable tourism over the next decade, aiming to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and social benefits. The current environmental situation highlights the urgency of this approach: Vietnam has a coastline of 3,260 km and over 2,360 rivers, yet plastic waste from inland areas ultimately flows into the sea, directly affecting landscapes and community health.

Recent developments in the sector, with international tourist arrivals increasing by 22.9% in 2018, have positioned Vietnam as a global tourism "hotspot," while simultaneously underscoring the pressing need to develop tourism sustainably, leveraging economic potential while safeguarding natural and social resources (Thuy, 2020). Despite the rapid development of tourism in Vietnam, state policies and management activities still face several limitations. Investment, tourism promotion, visa, and cross-sectoral coordination policies have not fully aligned with the requirements of sustainable tourism. Inter-agency collaboration for managing environmental resources remains weak, while enterprises often operate independently, lacking integration with destination management (Tram, 2024). Moreover, awareness of sustainable tourism among businesses and local communities is still limited, resulting in ineffective resource use and environmental protection, which poses challenges to the long-term development of the sector (Hoa et al., 2020).

Sustainable tourism development in Vietnam requires close integration with state policies and management activities, particularly in planning, investment, tourism promotion, and inter-sectoral coordination. However, current efforts remain limited, especially concerning ecosystem conservation and the sustainability of tourist destinations. Although policies on environmental protection and sustainable tourism development exist, their implementation has not been widespread. Policies on investment attraction, sustainable tourism development, and multi-sectoral coordination have not been

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substantially innovative, while tourism promotion policies have not yet adapted to global standards. Tourism businesses often operate independently, lacking alignment with destination management strategies. Vietnam represents a distinctive and suitable empirical context due to its unique policy reforms, high density of UNESCO heritage sites, and targeted post-pandemic recovery strategies. The country boasts numerous cultural and natural heritage sites, such as Ha Long Bay, Phong Nha – Ke Bang, the ancient capital of Hue, Hoi An Ancient Town, and the My Son Sanctuary, creating a diverse and unique setting to examine how policies, destination management, and socially responsible tourism practices interact to promote sustainable tourism development. From a practical perspective, the insights gained from this study are not only applicable to Vietnam but also inform other emerging tourism destinations globally, particularly in Southeast Asia, helping policymakers and tourism enterprises balance economic benefits with environmental and cultural preservation.

Research is needed to propose practical policies and solutions to promote sustainable tourism development. From a sustainability perspective, numerous studies indicate that sustainable tourism depends on carefully weighing costs and benefits for local communities. While tourism generates economic and social benefits, it can simultaneously produce negative environmental, social, and cultural impacts (Gursoy et al., 2010). Consequently, current research focuses on developing measures to mitigate these adverse effects and promote socially responsible activities. Since tourism destinations rely heavily on cultural and natural resources, their protection and sustainable use are essential to ensure long-term benefits for both communities and the tourism sector (Eslami et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2021). Khanh & Long (2023) also emphasize that destination social responsibility should receive special attention, particularly in developing and implementing policies to protect and enhance social and environmental benefits. Recent studies Pai et al. (2025) suggest that the effects of sustainable tourism are contingent upon destination-specific attributes, such as geographic location, socio-economic context, and local conditions, underscoring the necessity for context-sensitive policies and management strategies. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2024) demonstrates that the positive relationship between sustainable tourism development and the sustainability of cultural, economic, infrastructural, and governance dimensions highlights the critical need for designing tourism policies that explicitly integrate these sustainability considerations.

While many studies have examined sustainable tourism development (Eom et al., 2020; Styliadis, 2020; Thang & Khanh, 2025), limited research has explored its connection with destination social responsibility and the critical role of tourism policies and management practices (Hu et al., 2019a) in fostering holistic sustainable development. Pai et al. (2025) research on sustainable tourism primarily focuses on economic benefits, overlooking the critical roles of policy, destination management, and environmental–social factors. Trišić et al. (2023) examines customer experience and satisfaction but does not provide a comprehensive assessment of sustainable ecotourism and the factors influencing long-term sustainable development. Khan et al. (2021) conducts more in-depth research on policy, destination management, and destination social responsibility (DSR), yet still does not directly evaluate how sustainable tourism practices at specific destinations impact long-term development. These gaps highlight significant potential for future research to integrate policy, destination management, DSR, and sustainable tourism practices to comprehensively assess sustainable development at tourism destinations.

Building on previous research on the drivers of sustainable tourism, this study focuses on sustainable tourism destinations in Vietnam, including ecotourism sites, heritage tourism, and nature conservation areas in the Northern, Central, and North Central regions, as well as UNESCO-recognized cultural heritage sites. Developing and implementing sustainable tourism strategies is essential to enhance the resilience of the sector ahead of the recovery in international demand. This study examines the main challenges in sustainable tourism development and proposes solutions to strengthen sustainable destination management, DSR, and sustainable tourism practices, particularly regarding environmental, cultural, infrastructure, and local economic aspects. The paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review that informs the development of the hypotheses; second, the research methodology and data analysis; third, a discussion of the results based on theoretical development and managerial implications; and finally, conclusions, limitations, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism has become a key strategy for balancing the economic benefits of the tourism sector with the need to conserve environmental, social, and cultural resources. Emerging as a prominent concept since the late 1980s, sustainable tourism aims to minimize the negative impacts of tourism while maximizing benefits for local communities and the economy (Guo et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2011). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2015), sustainable tourism refers to tourism that fully considers its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, while addressing the needs of visitors, the tourism industry, host communities, and the environment. Sustainable tourism development emphasizes not only ecological preservation but also economic viability and social–ethical equity, aiming to balance the interests of tourists, businesses, and local communities, while safeguarding cultural and environmental values for future generations. Recent studies emphasize that the goal of sustainable tourism is not only to minimize negative impacts, such as environmental degradation and increased waste, but also to optimize the quality of visitor experiences, enhance the well-being of local communities, and preserve biodiversity and cultural heritage (Santos et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023).

Thus, sustainable tourism serves both as a tool for economic and social development and as a mechanism for protecting the environment and cultural values, providing a foundation for the long-term development of destinations.

Sustainable Tourism Policy and Destination Management (SPDM)

Sustainable tourism policy is understood as a set of principles, guidelines, and governance instruments issued by governments or organizations to shape tourism development in a way that ensures a balance between economic growth,

environmental protection, and socio-cultural benefits in both the present and the future. According to UNWTO (2013), sustainable tourism policy serves as a framework for integrating sustainability objectives into national tourism strategies and development plans, with a focus on optimizing economic, social, and environmental outcomes. Hall (2008) emphasizes that policy is a crucial tool for governments to regulate the relationship between tourism growth and resource conservation, while also fostering coordination among stakeholders in the development process. Bramwell & Lane (2011) approach sustainable tourism policy from a governance perspective, arguing that it constitutes a complex field of public policy that requires the involvement of multiple actors to balance development interests with the protection of ecosystems and cultural heritage. Thus, the concept not only refers to the establishment of regulations but also reflects strategic orientation and coordination mechanisms aimed at ensuring comprehensive sustainability in tourism development.

The concept of destination management first emerged in tourism literature during the 1980s and was further refined in the late 1990s (Morrison, 2013). It has been widely defined as the process of bringing together and integrating the various components of the “destination mix” within a given geographic area, guided by clearly defined tourism strategies (Khan et al., 2021). Destination management is regarded as a critical determinant of destination competitiveness (Knežević Cvelbar et al., 2016). However, traditional approaches to competitiveness often measured in terms of market share or tourist arrivals tend to overlook sustainability considerations (Croes, 2011). Consequently, contemporary perspectives emphasize that destination management should not merely focus on increasing tourist numbers, but rather serve as a mechanism to balance economic growth, resource conservation, and the enhancement of visitor experiences. According to UNWTO (2007), destination management is a key instrument for integrating and coordinating the different elements of a tourism system within a region to foster harmonious and sustainable development. In the 2025 joint report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and UN Tourism, one of the core governance principles underscores the importance of stakeholder collaboration and the adherence to the rule of law in tourism governance. The report also highlights the environmental and socio-cultural dimensions as essential pillars of sustainable tourism development (*Guiding Principles for Sustainable Investment in Tourism*, 2025). From a destination marketing perspective, Pike & Page (2014) argue that destination management is a multidimensional field closely linked to the activities of destination marketing organizations, playing a pivotal role in branding, attracting visitors, and ensuring stakeholder benefits.

In short, sustainable tourism policy provides the strategic direction at the national or regional level to ensure that tourism develops in balance with economic, social, and environmental goals. Destination management, on the other hand, translates these directions into practical actions at the local level by coordinating stakeholders, managing resources responsibly, and enhancing visitor experiences. The two concepts are closely connected: policy sets the framework, while destination management delivers the implementation, together making sustainable tourism development achievable.

Hypotheses

Sustainable tourism practice and sustainable tourism development

Early studies on sustainable tourism were grounded in the broader concept of “tourism development,” with a primary focus on economic aspects. This focus reflected the recognition that, while tourism development can generate significant economic benefits, it can also produce unintended negative impacts such as pollution, resource depletion, and habitat destruction (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005). In response to these challenges, tourism scholars emphasized the need to integrate environmental sustainability into tourism development (Hardy et al., 2002). Over time, and in alignment with international policy trends, the concept of sustainability has been further expanded to encompass not only environmental protection but also social, community, and economic dimensions, aiming to promote a balanced and long-term approach to tourism development (Yoopetch & Nimsai, 2019). Tahiri et al. (2022) also emphasizes that, in addition to the three traditional pillars of sustainability—social, environmental, and economic—the cultural dimension should be considered an essential component (Zamfir & Corbos, 2015). Compared to previous studies, Nguyen et al. (2024) proposes evaluating the promotion of sustainable tourism development by including factors such as infrastructure, and government policies and regulations. However, to ensure consistency and provide a comprehensive assessment of how sustainable tourism attributes contribute to sustainable tourism development, this study identifies key factors including the environment, economy, culture, and destination infrastructure. The environment refers to the use of natural resources and the management of human activities in a way that conserves and protects the environment for present and future generations (Mensah, 2019; Wang et al., 2021). Environmental sustainability promotes responsible resource use, reduces pollution, maintains ecosystems, and protects biodiversity, thereby preserving the long-term attractiveness of a destination. Simultaneously, the economic dimension of sustainable tourism management ensures the equitable distribution of economic benefits, creates employment, enhances quality of life, and increases community support—an essential factor for sustainable tourism development (Cohen & Cohen, 2015; Su et al., 2018). Furthermore, respecting and preserving cultural heritage, combined with effective infrastructure management, helps reduce overcrowding, minimize pollution, and improve visitor experiences (Nguyen et al., 2024). Thus, sustainable tourism integrates environmental, economic, social, and cultural dimensions to foster sustainable tourism development (Nguyen et al., 2024). Therefore, based on this foundation and the related theoretical frameworks, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis **H1**: Sustainable tourism has a positive influence on sustainable tourism development

The relationship between sustainable tourism policy and destination management with DSR and sustainable tourism development

Sustainable tourism requires careful management and the sustainable competitiveness of destinations (Su et al.,

2020; Su & Swanson, 2017). Khelashvili & Okroshidze (2025) emphasize that demand management is a critical factor for maintaining destination competitiveness. In this context, well-structured tourism policies serve as a foundation for promoting sustainable development, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas and rural communities.

Aslam & Bin Awang (2016) highlight that comprehensive tourism policies provide a strategic planning framework, address regulatory gaps, and promote responsible resource management. This perspective is further reinforced by Chiwaridzo (2024), who underscores the crucial role of government policies in shaping the tourism supply chain and directly influencing the social sustainability of the sector by enabling or constraining sustainable practices. Tourism policies and destination management are critical factors determining a destination's competitiveness, not only by ensuring high-quality tourist experiences but also by providing stakeholders with comprehensive knowledge and information (Khan et al., 2021). Active involvement of local communities enhances the positive socio-economic impacts of tourism and improves residents' quality of life (Hwang et al., 2016). Conversely, a lack of engagement and support from residents can reduce the effectiveness of tourism activities and hinder sustainable destination development (Strzelecka et al., 2017). Sustainable tourism policies and destination management play a critical role in promoting sustainable tourism development. When effectively designed and implemented, they not only enhance destination competitiveness but also ensure quality tourist experiences, protect natural and cultural resources, and foster local community engagement, thereby amplifying the positive impacts of tourism on long-term socio-economic sustainability.

A tourism destination is a geographical area that provides the necessary infrastructure and facilities for visitors to experience, stay, and explore (Khan et al., 2021). The success of a destination is measured not only by the commercial benefits to stakeholders but also by its ability to enhance the economic and social well-being of the local community (Bornhorst et al., 2010). Moreover, the sustainable development of a destination depends on alliances, collaboration, and coordination among stakeholders, as political, economic, cultural, social, and environmental factors directly influence its long-term potential (Hall, 2011). Tourism development not only brings economic benefits but also poses significant negative impacts on the economy, society, and environment, including rising commodity prices, cultural degradation, increased crime and conflict, environmental pollution, overcrowding, and ecosystem deterioration (Grilli et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2018). Therefore, sustainable tourism development must balance maximizing economic benefits for local communities with minimizing negative social, cultural, and environmental impacts. To achieve this balance, the design and implementation of sustainable tourism policies, together with effective destination management, are crucial to ensure that tourism activities deliver economic value while preserving natural and cultural resources for the long term (Cucculelli & Goffi, 2016; Khan et al., 2021).

In this context, destination social responsibility is viewed as a mechanism that safeguards the economic, social, and environmental aspects of a destination while ensuring the rights and interests of all stakeholders. DSR refers to the obligations and commitments of all parties involved at a destination including government, tourism businesses, local communities, organizations, and tourists to protect and enhance the economic, social, and environmental benefits of the entire destination (Azinuddin et al., 2023; He et al., 2022). It emphasizes not only minimizing risks such as negative environmental, cultural, or economic impacts but also promoting sustainable benefits for local communities, improving residents' well-being, and ensuring that tourism activities are conducted according to ethical and socially responsible principles (Lee et al., 2021; Su et al., 2020). In other words, DSR serves as a foundation to balance the economic interests of organizations with the collective interests of the community, contributing to sustainable tourism development. Previous studies highlight that tourism policies play a crucial role in promoting sustainable tourism development (Neger et al., 2025). At the same time, other research emphasizes that integrating these policies with effective destination management enhances competitiveness and ensures the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations (Khan et al., 2021). Based on this foundation and the underlying theories, the author proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis **H2**: Sustainable tourism policy and destination management has a positive influence on sustainable tourism development.

Hypothesis **H3**: Sustainable tourism policy and destination management has a positive influence on destination social responsibility.

Destination social responsibility and sustainable tourism development

DSR extends the broader notion of CSR into the tourism and destination management context. While CSR primarily refers to an organization's voluntary commitment to ethical, social, and environmental responsibilities within its operations, DSR focuses on the collective responsibilities of tourism stakeholders such as local authorities, businesses, and communities in maintaining the balance between economic growth, social well-being, and environmental protection at a destination (Su et al., 2020). DSR thus emphasizes minimizing negative tourism impacts, fostering equitable community benefits, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of local environments and cultures. It further incorporates social standards that safeguard labor rights and cultural heritage, as well as environmental standards that promote responsible resource use and preserve ecological diversity within the destination (Su et al., 2018).

In contrast, policy constructs represent the institutional and regulatory frameworks that guide or enforce CSR and DSR practices, ensuring alignment with national sustainability objectives. DSR has been studied in relation to various antecedents and outcomes, including economic development, community identification and commitment, environmentally responsible behavior, trust, community satisfaction, destination sustainability, and tourism development (Hu et al., 2019b; Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017; Su et al., 2017). Previous studies indicate that tourism destinations have implemented a range of DSR, including engaging local communities in tourism activities, executing environmental initiatives, applying sustainable management, and conducting public relations efforts (Su et al., 2018).

These practices have been shown not only to enhance destination competitiveness but also to promote long-term sustainable tourism development (Khan et al., 2021). Moreover, DSR plays a critical role in increasing community support for tourism, aligning local activities with global sustainability principles (Sheldon & Park, 2011). Therefore, DSR is essential for fostering stakeholder collaboration, environmental stewardship, and community engagement, forming a comprehensive foundation to advance the sustainable development of tourism destinations. DSR is considered a key factor in promoting Sustainable Tourism Development by aligning the responsible behaviors of stakeholders, protecting the environment, and fostering community engagement, thereby helping maintain a long-term balance between economic, social, and environmental benefits at the destination. Moreover, this relationship is supported by previous studies such as Khan et al. (2021), Su et al. (2017). Based on this foundation, it can be proposed:

Hypothesis H4: Destination social responsibility has a positive influence on sustainable tourism development

Conceptual model development

After synthesizing prior studies and theoretical models related to sustainable tourism development, the authors conducted both preliminary and formal qualitative research through expert interviews. The findings indicated broad consensus among experts on the need for an integrated model that incorporates the key factors illustrated in Figure 1 for deeper investigation. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), community support or opposition to tourism depends on the balance between perceived benefits and costs; when economic, social, and environmental benefits outweigh potential costs such as pollution or cultural loss, communities are more likely to support sustainable tourism development (STD). At the same time, the Destination Competitiveness and Sustainability Model (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) highlights that Destination Sustainability Responsibility (DSR), along with environmental, economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors, forms the foundation for enhancing competitiveness and ensuring long-term development. Drawing on these theoretical foundations and prior research evidence, this study proposes an integrated model that examines the role of sustainable tourism policy and destination management in promoting DSR, thereby strengthening community support and improving destination competitiveness. The model is empirically tested using the PLS-SEM approach, in which sustainable tourism is conceptualized as a second-order construct (environmental, economic, cultural, and infrastructural dimensions), while the remaining constructs are measured at the first-order level.

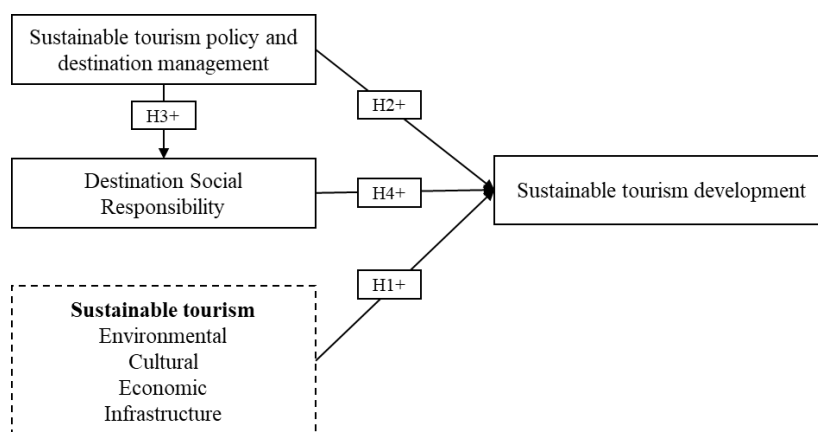


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

RESEARCH METHOD

Data collection

According to Hair et al. (2010), an effective exploratory factor analysis (EFA) requires a sample size 5–10 times larger than the number of observed variables, which in this case indicates a minimum of 80 observations. For studies employing regression analysis, Tabachnick & Fidell (2001) suggest a minimum sample size calculated using the formula $50 + 8m$ (where m represents the number of independent variables). With seven independent variables, the minimum required sample size is 106 observations. However, to minimize potential risks in online data collection through Google Forms and to enhance both reliability and representativeness, this study adopted a larger sample size of 550 respondents. A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed, focusing primarily on ecological and sustainable tourism destinations across the Northern, Central, and North Central regions of Vietnam, as well as UNESCO-recognized cultural heritage sites.

The demographic data collected from 564 respondents reflect a balanced and diverse sample, suitable for analyzing the impacts of SPDM, ST, and DSR on sustainable tourism development from the perspective of tourists. In terms of tourist type, the sample includes 197 international tourists (34.97%), 272 domestic tourists (48.23%), and 95 local residents (16.83%). Regarding gender, there are 300 females (53.19%) and 264 males (46.81%). The dominant age group is 21–35 years old with 220 respondents (39.01%), indicating a predominance of young travelers. In terms of education, 341 respondents (60.46%) hold a college or university degree, 124 (21.99%) hold a postgraduate qualification, and 99 (17.55%) have a high school diploma or lower. With respect to monthly income, 268 respondents (47.52%) earn between 10–20 million VND. Geographically, the sample covers major tourism regions and World Cultural Heritage sites: Northern Vietnam (117, 20.74%), North Central Vietnam (103, 18.27%), Central Vietnam (105,

18.62%), Southern Vietnam (137, 24.29%), and the Mekong Delta (102, 18.09%). This distribution strengthens the representativeness and reliability of the findings in analyzing sustainable tourism development in Vietnam.

The research was conducted in two main stages. First, the qualitative stage aimed to review, refine, and preliminarily validate the measurement scales, thereby establishing a solid foundation for developing the survey instrument. During this process, the study adopted and adapted measurement items from prior research to capture independent, mediating, and dependent variables. Second, the quantitative stage was carried out using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which is considered appropriate for examining higher-order structural equation models. The quantitative analysis was executed in two steps. In the first step, lower-order constructs (LOCs) were tested in the model and directly linked to other constructs without incorporating higher-order constructs (HOCs). In the second step, the structural model was re-estimated, where higher-order constructs (HOCs) were treated as first-order latent variables, and the observed variables (LOCs) were transformed into latent indicators (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

Measurements

In this study, the observed variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”), which is widely adopted in behavioral and management research for its effectiveness in capturing participants’ attitudes and perceptions (Hair et al., 2019). The questionnaire was designed bilingually (English-Vietnamese), with an introduction to the research objectives, response instructions, and a confidentiality statement to ensure transparency and adherence to ethical standards (Dillman et al., 2014). The survey instrument consisted of two sections: (1) demographic information (e.g., occupation, gender, economic status, tourist type); and (2) measurement scales of the research constructs. Specifically, Sustainable Tourism (ST) was measured across four dimensions: Environment (ER), Economy (ES), Culture (CS), and Infrastructure (IF) (Nguyen et al., 2024; Trišić et al., 2023).

The scale for Sustainable Tourism Policy and Destination Management (SPDM) was adapted from Khan et al. (2021), Destination Sustainability Responsibility (DSR) from (Khan et al., 2021; Su et al., 2018), and Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) from Khan et al. (2021), Firman et al. (2023) and Nguyen et al. (2024). The adoption and refinement of these established scales ensured both comparability with prior research and enhanced measurement reliability and validity within the present context. The full set of measurement items is presented in Appendix A.

RESULTS

Measurement model

Phase 1 model evaluation

At this stage, we assessed the lower-order constructs based on outer loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and the HTMT ratio to ensure validity before constructing and measuring the higher-order constructs. According to Hair et al. (2010, 2019), CR and AVE are employed to establish convergent validity, while HTMT is considered a reliable criterion for evaluating discriminant validity among constructs. In addition, the reliability of the measurement scales was examined using Cronbach’s alpha and CR. As emphasized by Hair et al. (2019), convergent validity reflects the extent to which indicators measuring the same construct demonstrate consistency, and it is evaluated through factor loadings, AVE, and CR. The results (Table 1 and Figure 2) show that all constructs achieved CR values ranging from 0.911 to 0.955, which are well above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017), indicating very high reliability. For the SPDM construct, although some outer loadings were below 0.7, they were still greater than 0.5 and thus acceptable according to Hair et al. (2010) guidelines, allowing the construct to be retained for subsequent analysis. Furthermore, the indicators of the other constructs all demonstrated satisfactory outer loadings. Despite the presence of SPDM items with loadings below 0.7, they remained above 0.5, which is still considered acceptable for measurement scales as suggested by Hair et al. (2020), thereby reinforcing the overall reliability and validity of the model.

Table 1. Evaluation of the Reliability of the LOC

(Note: SPDM: Sustainable tourism policy and destination management; ST: Sustainable tourism; DSR: Destination Sustainability Responsibility; ER: Environment; ES: Economy; CS: Culture; IF: Infrastructure; STD: Sustainable Tourism Development)

	Outer Loading	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
CS	0.887 – 0.938	0.927	0.948	0.821
DSR	0.681 – 0.925	0.918	0.940	0.762
ER	0.859 – 0.918	0.933	0.949	0.789
ES	0.924 – 0.942	0.927	0.954	0.873
IF	0.883 – 0.934	0.936	0.954	0.840
SPDM	0.657 – 0.842	0.943	0.950	0.593
STD	0.847 – 0.892	0.921	0.940	0.759

The AVE values all exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity. In addition, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranged from 0.918 to 0.943, surpassing the recommended level of $\alpha > 0.70$ (Hair et al., 2010), which demonstrates strong internal consistency. With respect to discriminant validity, all heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios were below 0.90, confirming that the constructs are clearly distinct and non-overlapping. Overall, the measurement model fulfills the three essential criteria—reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. These results provide a solid foundation for the subsequent structural model analysis and ensure the necessary conditions for conducting higher-order construct analysis in phase 2.

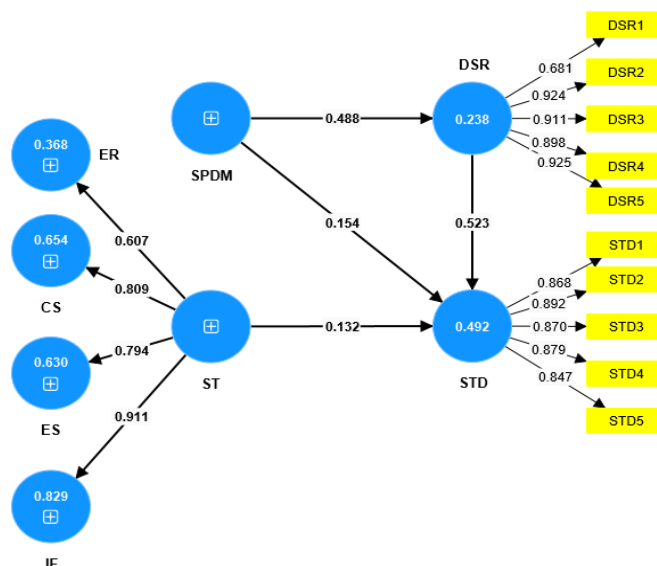


Figure 2. Results of the PLS-SEM Measurement Model for the LOC Variables Phase

(Note: SPDM: Sustainable tourism policy and destination management; ST: Sustainable tourism; DSR: Destination Sustainability Responsibility; ER: Environment; ES: Economy; CS: Culture; IF: Infrastructure; STD: Sustainable Tourism Development)

Phase 2 model evaluation

Table 2 presents the indices of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity for the four latent variables in the model. In phase two, the first-order latent constructs (LOCs) were standardized using the weighted average method based on latent variable scores (Sarstedt et al., 2019), providing the basis for estimating higher-order constructs. The results in Table 2 and Figure 3 indicate that the measurement scales exhibit high reliability. Specifically, all Cronbach’s alpha coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.787 (lowest - ST) to 0.943 (highest - SPDM), thereby demonstrating strong internal consistency. In addition, the composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.862 to 0.950, surpassing the recommended cutoff of 0.85 and confirming the high stability of the scales.

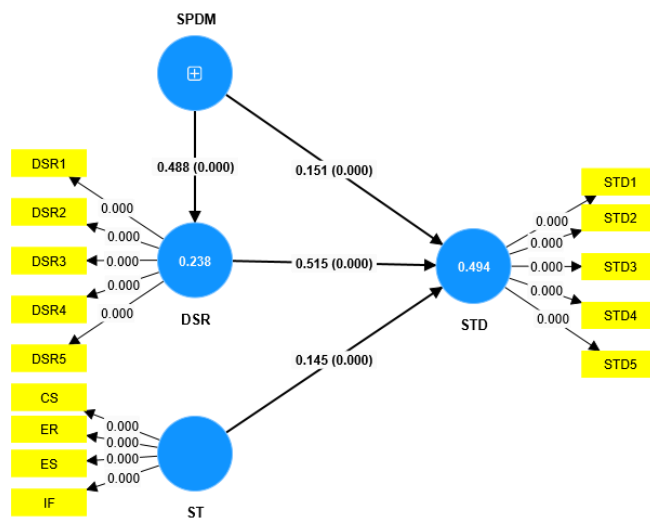


Figure 3. Results of the PLS-SEM Measurement Model for the HOC Variables Phase

(Note: SPDM: Sustainable tourism policy and destination management; ST: Sustainable tourism; DSR: Destination Sustainability Responsibility; ER: Environment; ES: Economy; CS: Culture; IF: Infrastructure; STD: Sustainable Tourism Development)

With respect to convergent validity, all AVE values were greater than 0.50, with SPDM recording the lowest (0.593) and DSR the highest (0.762). These results confirm that the indicators appropriately and effectively capture the underlying latent constructs they are intended to measure.

Table 2. Reliability, Discriminant Validity, and Convergent Validity Testing of the Model (Note: SPDM: Sustainable tourism policy and destination management; ST: Sustainable tourism; DSR: Destination Sustainability Responsibility; STD: Sustainable Tourism Development)

	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE	DSR	SPDM	ST	STD
DSR	0.918	0.940	0.762				
SPDM	0.943	0.950	0.593	0.506			
ST	0.787	0.862	0.620	0.697	0.437		
STD	0.921	0.940	0.759	0.737	0.477	0.588	

The results in Table 2 indicate that the highest HTMT value is 0.737, which is below the threshold of 0.85, and all other HTMT coefficients are also lower than 0.85, consistent with the criterion suggested by Henseler et al. (2015). This confirms that the constructs in the measurement model exhibit discriminant validity, meaning that the concepts are clearly distinguished and not substantially overlapping. These findings are further supported by the Fornell-Larcker criterion results.

According to Hair et al. (2017), the variance inflation factor (VIF) is employed to assess the potential occurrence of multicollinearity among variables in the measurement model. While VIF values below 10 are generally considered acceptable, values below 5 are recommended to ensure higher reliability (Hair et al., 2014). The results in Table 5 show that the VIF values range from 1.000 to 1.793, all well below the threshold, indicating that multicollinearity is not an issue in the model. In addition, as noted by Hair et al. (2019), the f^2 coefficient reflects the effect size of each construct in the structural model after standardization. The results reveal that all f^2 values exceed the minimum threshold of 0.02, with some even surpassing 0.35. This demonstrates that the variables exert substantial effects on the dependent variable, thereby reinforcing the robustness and plausibility of the hypothesized relationships in the model.

Furthermore, the R^2 coefficient was used to evaluate the explanatory power of the model for the dependent variable. The findings indicate that the variables in the model account for 49.4% of the variance in tourists' revisit intention, while the remaining variance is explained by factors outside the model. Thus, the model not only ensures measurement reliability but also demonstrates a relatively strong explanatory power, providing a solid foundation for subsequent analyses.

Table 3. Results of model fit testing (Note: SPDM: Sustainable tourism policy and destination management; ST: Sustainable tourism; DSR: Destination Sustainability Responsibility; STD: Sustainable Tourism Development)

	f^2	VIF		R^2
DSR → STD	0.292	1.793	DSR	0.238
SPDM → DSR	0.313	1.000	STD	0.494
SPDM → STD	0.033	1.347		
ST → STD	0.025	1.638		

Structural model test

Based on the results of the structural model assessment (Table 4), all hypotheses (H1–H6) were supported with p-values < 0.05, indicating that the relationships in the model are statistically significant and highly reliable. According to the guidelines of Hair et al. (2017, 2019), the evaluation of path coefficients together with t-values and p-values obtained through bootstrapping provides a critical basis for confirming the proposed hypotheses. The findings reveal that Sustainable Tourism (ST) has a positive and statistically significant effect on Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) ($\beta = 0.145$, $t = 3.526$), suggesting that ST is one of the key drivers of sustainable development in the tourism sector. In addition, Sustainable Tourism Policy and Destination Management (SPDM) not only exerts a direct influence on STD ($\beta = 0.151$, $t = 4.412$) but also indirectly affects it through Destination Social Responsibility (DSR) ($\beta = 0.488$, $t = 12.985$). Furthermore, DSR itself demonstrates a strong and positive effect on STD ($\beta = 0.515$, $t = 9.891$). These findings highlight that the integration of policies, destination management, and social responsibility plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable tourism development, thereby reinforcing the robustness and plausibility of the hypothesized relationships in the model.

Table 4. Structural model results (STT: Smart Tourism Technology; TE: Travel Experience; TH: Travel Happiness; TS: Travel Satisfaction; RVS: Revisit Intention)

Relationship	Beta	STDEV	t-value	P-values	Remarks
H4: DSR → STD	0.515	0.052	9.891	0.000	Supported
H3: SPDM → DSR	0.488	0.038	12.985	0.000	Supported
H2: SPDM → STD	0.151	0.034	4.412	0.000	Supported
H1: ST → STD	0.145	0.041	3.526	0.000	Supported

Mediating Role Testing

The results of the mediation analysis indicate that SPDM influences STD through DSR with a coefficient of $\beta = 0.251$, $t = 6.987$, and $p < 0.001$. This confirms that the indirect relationship is highly significant and strongly supported. Moreover, the total indirect effect of SPDM on STD remains at the same level ($\beta = 0.251$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the entire effect of SPDM on STD is fully mediated through DSR. This implies that sustainable tourism policy and destination management (SPDM) can only foster sustainable tourism development (STD) when implemented through destination social responsibility (DSR). In other words, the mediating role of DSR is critical, emphasizing that policies and destination management must be integrated with social responsibility initiatives in order to generate a sustainable impact on tourism development.

According to Hair et al. (2021) and Baron & Kenny (1986), the simultaneous presence of both direct and indirect effects demonstrates that DSR function as partial mediators in an additive form.

Table 5. Results of specific and total indirect effects testing

Relationship	Beta	STDEV	t-value	P-values	Remarks
<i>Specific indirect effects</i>					
SPDM → DSR → STD	0.251	0.036	6.987	0.000	Supported
<i>Total indirect effects</i>					
SPDM → STD	0.251	0.036	6.987	0.000	Supported

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that sustainable tourism policy and destination management (SPDM) has a positive effect on sustainable tourism development (STD). This result is consistent with prior studies such as Khan et al. (2021), which emphasized the critical role of policy in shaping the sustainable development of the tourism sector. However, a distinctive point of this study is that the impact of SPDM is relatively weaker compared to other factors, suggesting that while policy and destination management are essential, they are not the sole determinants of sustainable tourism development. This finding is also in line with Neger et al. (2025), who argued that sustainable tourism policies provide an important guiding framework, but their practical effectiveness largely depends on the degree of implementation and the cooperation of stakeholders.

In addition, SPDM also has a positive effect on destination social responsibility (DSR). This indicates that policies and destination management practices not only focus on infrastructure development or marketing strategies but also promote social responsibility, thereby contributing to the formation of sustainable awareness and actions among stakeholders. This finding is consistent with previous studies such as Khan et al. (2021), Su et al. (2018). The relationship highlights the mediating role of DSR in translating policies into tangible outcomes, reinforcing the argument that sustainable tourism development can only be truly achieved when policies are closely integrated with social responsibility practices.

At the same time, DSR exerts a strong and positive impact on sustainable tourism development (STD) ($\beta = 0.515$, $t = 9.891$), indicating that destination social responsibility plays a crucial role in promoting sustainability goals at sustainable tourism destinations in Vietnam. This result emphasizes that when destinations and tourism enterprises engage in social activities such as environmental protection, support for local communities, or the enhancement of social welfare, these efforts directly contribute to the improvement of sustainable tourism development. This finding is consistent with the work of Khan et al. (2021) and Azinuddin et al. (2023) although it differs in terms of the degree of mediating effects observed. Furthermore, DSR mediates the relationship between SPDM and STD ($\beta = 0.251$, $t = 6.987$) indicating that policies and destination management measures achieve their full impact only when operationalized through social responsibility practices. Theoretically, this extends global sustainable tourism frameworks by integrating policy, management, and social responsibility into a single mediating mechanism, demonstrating how strategic orientations (SPDM) translate into sustainable outcomes via DSR. Compared with prior research, which has occasionally found weak or nonsignificant mediation effects, these results provide empirical evidence supporting the centrality of DSR, suggesting that the inclusion of social responsibility as an intermediary construct can enhance the predictive power and explanatory scope of sustainable tourism models in diverse contexts beyond Vietnam.

Finally, Sustainable Tourism (ST) - which encompasses dimensions such as environment, economy, culture, and infrastructure was found to have a positive and statistically significant effect on sustainable tourism development (STD) ($\beta = 0.145$, $t = 3.526$). This result confirms that the components of ST, including environmental protection, economic development, cultural preservation, and infrastructure improvement, play a crucial role in shaping the sustainable trajectory of the tourism sector. The positive effect of ST is consistent with prior studies such as Khan (2021) and Neger et al. (2025), Awan (2020), Nguyen et al. (2024) which emphasized that sustainable tourism development can only be achieved through a balanced integration of environmental, economic, cultural, and infrastructural aspects. This finding suggests that the harmonious integration of ST's four constituent dimensions environmental, cultural, economic, and infrastructure not only generates immediate economic benefits and enhances tourist appeal but also sustains cultural identity, protects environmental resources, and strengthens infrastructural foundations for long-term development. Theoretically, these results extend global sustainable tourism frameworks by demonstrating how the simultaneous and coordinated implementation of these dimensions can reinforce sustainability outcomes, rather than treating each dimension in isolation. Compared with prior studies that often examine these components separately or report mixed effects, the present study provides empirical evidence supporting the synergistic role of the four dimensions, highlighting the importance of coordinated strategies in achieving balanced and sustainable tourism development, both within Vietnam and in comparable emerging tourism destinations worldwide.

Managerial implications

Firstly, Destination managers play a pivotal role in translating sustainable tourism policies into concrete actions, thereby directly contributing to the sustainable development of destinations. To achieve this, they should actively engage in mitigating the environmental and social impacts of tourism through regular monitoring, implementing waste reduction initiatives, promoting the use of renewable energy, and ensuring that benefits are fairly distributed to local communities. At the same time, enhancing the quality of human resources is essential, which requires close collaboration with government agencies, training institutions, and tour operators to design targeted training programs that improve professional skills, service quality, and overall tourist experiences. Crucially, tourism planning should align with the natural environment and cultural heritage, preserving resources, safeguarding cultural identity, and creating distinctive tourism experiences that enhance destination competitiveness in the global tourism market. Including a geospatial perspective, such as maps or figures showing surveyed heritage sites and tourism clusters, would further strengthen the analysis and illustrate spatial patterns of sustainable practices.

Secondly, strengthening destination social responsibility (DSR) is essential for achieving sustainable tourism development. To achieve the goal of sustainable tourism development, destination social responsibility should be approached as a comprehensive management mindset rather than a set of isolated activities. Destinations need to integrate environmental protection with tourism development through waste management, the use of renewable energy, and the promotion of green tourism, thereby minimizing negative impacts while creating a foundation for long-term growth. At the

same time, local communities must be actively involved and directly benefit from tourism activities, which not only helps preserve cultural values but also generates social motivation and strengthens collective responsibility for sustainability. Social responsibility also requires transparency, including the disclosure of tourism impact reports, the dissemination of sustainability messages, and the encouragement of tourists to participate in responsible activities. This approach will foster a sustainable tourism ecosystem in which governments, businesses, local communities, and tourists work together to protect the environment, preserve cultural heritage, and promote local economic development.

Finally, to promote sustainable tourism development, it is essential to strengthen sustainable practices across four key dimensions: environment, culture, economy, and infrastructure. From an environmental perspective, destinations should maintain clean landscapes, implement waste reduction and recycling measures, and mitigate negative impacts such as pollution, while local authorities enforce green policies to ensure long-term resource protection. In terms of culture, preserving local heritage and traditions, preventing cultural erosion caused by tourism, and ensuring that tourism activities respect and maintain local identity are crucial. Economically, tourism benefits should be distributed fairly to local communities, creating income, employment, and long-term development, thereby fostering greater support and engagement from residents. Regarding infrastructure, investments should focus on improving transportation systems, accommodation facilities, and accessibility to tourist attractions, while ensuring alignment with sustainable development principles. The integrated implementation of these factors not only enhances tourist satisfaction but also strengthens long-term competitiveness, thereby providing a solid foundation for sustainable tourism development. When compared to other Southeast Asian destinations, such as Thailand and Indonesia, Vietnam's approach demonstrates unique challenges and opportunities, particularly in balancing heritage conservation with post-pandemic tourism recovery, highlighting context-specific lessons that can inform sustainable tourism strategies across the region.

Limitations and future research directions

This study still faces several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the sample size remains relatively small and lacks strong representativeness, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to the broader context of sustainable tourism development. Future research should expand both the scale and scope of the survey, incorporating data from a wider range of stakeholders, particularly tourism managers, destination management authorities, and tourism enterprises, in order to strengthen the robustness and applicability of the results.

Second, the current research model focuses primarily on a limited set of factors and does not fully integrate other critical dimensions such as technological innovation, destination governance, or the impacts of climate change. Including these aspects in future studies would contribute to a more comprehensive theoretical framework and enhance the practical relevance for sustainable tourism development.

Third, this study largely reflects the perspectives of tourists and certain local stakeholders, while other key actors such as policymakers, local communities, and tourism businesses—have not been adequately considered. Their inclusion in subsequent research could provide valuable insights and enrich the multidimensional understanding of sustainable tourism.

Fourth, the current study relied on convenience sampling, which may limit the representativeness of the findings and reduce the generalizability of the results.

Lastly, by emphasizing only a few determinants, the current model overlooks other potential drivers such as climate adaptation strategies, innovation ecosystems, and governance mechanisms. Expanding the scope to encompass these factors in future investigations would not only refine the theoretical model but also offer more actionable implications for advancing sustainable tourism practices.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the role of sustainable tourism development through the dimensions of environment, economy, culture, and infrastructure, thereby addressing key research gaps in both theory and practice. The findings provide robust empirical evidence that the adoption of sustainable practices not only enhances tourist experiences but also contributes to long-term community development and heritage preservation. By examining destinations across regions such as the Northern, Central, and North Central areas of Vietnam, as well as UNESCO World Cultural Heritage sites, the research highlights both the distinct characteristics and significant potential for building sustainable tourism models. These insights not only strengthen the theoretical foundation but also deliver practical implications for destination managers, policymakers, and tourism enterprises. Accordingly, this study represents a valuable contribution to advancing knowledge on sustainable tourism and offers a solid basis for future research and practice in Vietnam and beyond.

Appendix A. Survey items

	Questionnaire items
SPDM1	The government is committed to minimizing the negative environmental impacts of tourism.
SPDM2	The government is committed to minimizing the negative social impacts of tourism on local communities.
SPDM3	The government is concerned with training and education in the tourism/hospitality sector.
SPDM4	Local tourism development requires cooperation between the public and private sectors.
SPDM5	Government agencies should collaborate with each other in tourism development.
SPDM6	Partnerships between government and tourism businesses should be promoted.
SPDM7	Local tourism businesses should cooperate with each other for development.

SPDM8	Tourism planning should ensure harmony with the natural environment.
SPDM9	Local communities should be involved in the tourism planning process.
SPDM10	Tourism impacts should be regularly monitored and managed.
SPDM11	The current destination management structure operates effectively.
SPDM12	Tourists are provided with adequate information and guidance.
SPDM13	The destination is capable of creating quality tourism experiences for visitors.
DSR1	The destination pays attention to environmental issues in tourism development activities.
DSR2	The destination makes positive contributions to the local community.
DSR3	The destination ensures economic efficiency and sustainable profitability.
DSR4	The destination treats its stakeholders fairly and responsibly.
DSR5	The destination operates based on ethical values and goes beyond minimum legal obligations.
ER1	Tourist sites and natural landscapes are maintained in a clean condition.
ER2	This tourist destination applies sustainable practices (waste reduction, recycling).
ER3*	This tourist destination causes negative environmental impacts (littering, pollution). (Reverse coded)
ER4	Local authorities prioritize and protect the environment.
ES5	This tourist destination focuses on green practices and reducing environmental impacts.
CS1	Local traditions and cultural heritage at this destination are well preserved.
CS2*	Tourism changes the cultural practices of the local community. (Reverse coded)
CS3	Tourism activities respect and maintain local customs and traditions.
CS4	Local authorities actively promote and protect cultural heritage at the destination.
ES1	Economic benefits from tourism are fairly distributed to the local community.
ES2	Tourism provides income and job opportunities for local people.
ES3	Tourism contributes to community development and long-term economic growth.
IF1	The transportation system at the destination is tourist-friendly and convenient.
IF2	Accommodation facilities (e.g., hotels, resorts) at the destination meet tourists' needs and quality standards.
IF3	Tourist attractions at the destination are easily accessible and convenient.
IF4	Infrastructure at the destination is developed to support sustainable tourism.
STD1	Destinations maintain and develop local socio-cultural values, traditions, and heritage.
STD2	Environmental education and conservation are strongly promoted at the destination.
STD3	Tourism planning initiatives aim to develop the local economy and create employment opportunities.
STD4	Environmental standards are implemented to minimize the negative impacts of tourism.
STD5	Tourism promotes and enhances the marketing and consumption of local products.

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