

Cultural sustainability in hospitality and tourism: toward a holistic framework

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper proposes a holistic framework that identifies factors at micro-, meso- and macro-levels and their impacts on the development and evolution of cultural sustainability in hospitality and tourism.

Design/methodology/approach – A thorough literature review is conducted to construct a conceptual framework for cultural sustainability in hospitality and tourism.

Findings – Their conceptual framework identifies critical micro-, meso- and macro-level factors. When considered together, these elements offer a comprehensive lens for understanding the complex dynamics shaping cultural sustainability in hospitality and tourism.

Research limitations/implications – Theoretically, the propositions extend the existing literature by offering high-level insights into the complex relationships among various factors and their effects on cultural sustainability.

Practical implications – This conceptual paper discusses a critical aspect of sustainability – how hospitality and tourism developments impact cultural sustainability and the aspects that policymakers should prioritize.



Theoretically, the propositions extend existing literature by offering high-level insights into the complex relationships among various factors and their effects on cultural sustainability.

Originality/value – This research advances the discourse on sustainability by bringing timely attention to the often-overlooked dimension of sustainability – cultural sustainability. Additionally, this research offers a strategic framework to guide future endeavors in protecting and promoting the rich cultural heritage of destinations around the world.

Keywords Cultural sustainability, Stakeholder theory, Micro, Meso and macro factors, Research propositions

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

The sustainability concept was first advanced on a global scale to tourism by the [World Commission on Environment and Development \(1987\)](#). Though the notion of sustainability in hospitality and tourism was investigated extensively over the subsequent three decades, considerations of cultural sustainability and its relationship to tourism and hospitality have taken root only recently. The Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism is a notable reference – an internationally agreed approach to measuring the economic, social and environmental aspects of tourism ([Dwyer, 2024](#)). The document signals the extent of outstanding work and the challenges ahead – cultural dimensions remain stubbornly subsumed within social aspects.

The current paper proposes a novel structured approach to the role of cultural sustainability and how it relates to sustainable tourism and hospitality. Whilst the United Nations Economic Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has long championed the pursuit of sustainability in the cultural sphere, the momentum to pursue cultural sustainability accelerated as the UN sustainable development goals (UNSDGs) gained traction across the various agencies. Recognizing that the conceptualization and measurement of cultural sustainability are lagging behind economic and other metrics, the authors have drawn on stakeholder theory and have deployed a macro-, meso- and micro-level analysis to pursue a holistic understanding. Adopting a three-layered approach provides the framework with structure and acknowledges the multiple levels of influence on hospitality and tourism activities. For example, many small and family-run hospitality enterprises are micro in scale. However, macro-level understandings become more important as global mobilities create inter-connectivity. There is an evident need to adopt a more sophisticated conceptual framework to connect sustainable hospitality and tourism at multiple levels.

This paper presents a thorough discussion of the factors at various levels and lays out four propositions that extend the cultural sustainability concept beyond the descriptive. The resulting framework can be applied both universally and in local contexts. The authors explain the sequence of constructing four propositions and propose a starting point for future empirical research that considers culture as a unique dimension rather than being subsumed under society. The content is novel because the hospitality and tourism literature has given scant attention to the cultural sustainability concept. This is particularly the case with hospitality where considerations of cultural issues in the leading scholarly journals have been largely divorced from sustainability.

2. Literature review

2.1 Cultural sustainability

The preservation of cultural attributes and/or appeal has been widely recognized as a foundation for sustainability in hospitality and tourism settings ([Terkenli and Georgoula, 2021](#)). While the economy, society and environment have long been acknowledged as

cornerstones of sustainability (Pop *et al.*, 2019), some scholars and practitioners have started to refer to culture as a fourth pillar of sustainability (Crofts *et al.*, 2022). According to the World Commission on Culture and Development, cultural sustainability ensures inter- and intra-generational access to cultural resources (Järvelä, 2008). The concept encompasses tangible cultural assets such as books, artistic creations and buildings, as well as intangibles such as traditions, linguistic expressions and folklore (Loach *et al.*, 2017). Culture represents the most fundamental and cohesive elements of society (Terkenli and Georgoula, 2021). It encompasses all aspects of human existence and thought, and manifests through products, meanings and symbols (Terkenli and Georgoula, 2021). Historically, culture has been viewed as particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of tourism, with residents often being fearful and suspicious about the impact of tourism on their cultures (Lepp, 2008). Nevertheless, researchers have recently shown that tourism can sustain, rejuvenate, enhance and even advance cultures in destinations (Martínez Yáñez, 2022).

2.2 Stakeholder theory

Progress toward sustainability involves a multiplicity of parties and any framework will be needed to accommodate the interrelationships between them. Consumer groups, industry players, governments, NGOs and scholars have increasingly advocated sustainable forms of tourism, taking account of economic, social and environmental impacts (Edgell, 2019). Many empirical studies have adopted a stakeholder perspective, addressing local governments (Kapera, 2018), industry practitioners (Ruiz-Ortega *et al.*, 2023) and host communities (Cheng *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have also examined the variables that shape sustainability in particular regions or destinations from a stakeholder perspective, defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Successful business operations require an understanding of how stakeholder activities impact the business, are influenced by it, and how such influences change over time (Parmar *et al.*, 2010).

Researchers and practitioners with an interest in sustainability are increasingly recognizing the merits of including various stakeholders in sustainable development (Song *et al.*, 2021). When their expectations are overlooked, residents tend to develop negative attitudes toward tourism. For example, Song *et al.* (2021) applied stakeholder theory to Chinese traditional villages and concluded that sustainable economic, environmental and socio-cultural development can only be achieved when residents are involved and offer support. Overall, researchers contend that sustainable tourism development requires the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, encompassing an integrated consideration of the attitudes and interests of multiple parties (Hung *et al.*, 2011; Khan *et al.*, 2024).

2.3 Micro-Level factors

An examination of cross-cultural, acculturation and cultural heritage studies in hospitality and tourism reveals three major players: tourists, local residents and diasporas groups. Their impacts on cultural sustainability are reflected across various hospitality and tourism practices (Molina-Collado *et al.*, 2022). These include using traditional art, architecture and handicrafts in hotel construction and interior design (Ali, 2022), promoting cultural hospitality with locals who serve as tour guides (Pu *et al.*, 2023), and empowering local communities to share their culture through interactions and service delivery (Dolezal and Novelli, 2022).

2.3.1 Tourists. Tourists have a substantial impact on cultural sustainability. On the positive side, tourist demand can support cultural preservation, enhance the appreciation of

traditional practices and promote cross-cultural understanding. Their expenditures generate revenues for destinations that can support the preservation of cultural sites and traditions (Lussetyowati, 2015). Heritage tourism prompts the conservation of culturally significant sites and investments, while financial influx maintains cultural artifacts and supports traditional artisans, thereby preserving cultural heritage (Timothy and Boyd, 2006). Hospitality and tourism often support the revitalization of cultural practices by encouraging the revival and transformation of traditional ceremonies, festivals, food and crafts consumed by tourists (Choi *et al.*, 2020). Such resurgence retains cultural traditions for future generations. Ideally, hospitality and tourism foster cross-cultural exchange, promoting respect and mutual understanding between hosts and guests and advancing appreciation of cultural diversity. The protection of cultural heritage contributes to cultural sustainability (Mele *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, scholars have also documented the negative impacts of tourism on cultural sustainability, including the commodification and erosion of cultural authenticity and identity (Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos, 2004).

2.3.2 Local residents. Local residents play a crucial role in cultural sustainability through their effects in preserving, adapting, transforming and transmitting cultural heritage. Innovative approaches to resident engagement are essential for maintaining cultural diversity, identity and heritage, despite challenges such as globalization, commercialization, internal conflicts and social changes (Nasser, 2003). Local residents are custodians of local traditions, languages, crafts and rituals and help preserve their cultural identity through daily life practices and generational knowledge transmission within families and their communities (Hoang *et al.*, 2020; Jaafar *et al.*, 2015). Knowledge transfer through storytelling, traditional practices and formal education helps to sustain cultural traditions and practices across generations (Ruan *et al.*, 2024). Local residents are empowered to preserve their cultural assets by participating in community-led initiatives such as local festivals, cultural rituals and heritage projects (Robinson, 2021). Meanwhile, local residents contribute to cultural sustainability by adapting and innovating traditional practices to contemporary contexts (Choi *et al.*, 2020), ensuring relevance while maintaining their unique identity (Robinson and Smith, 2006).

2.3.3 Diaspora. Diaspora refers to ethnic minority groups relocated from their homeland to different parts of the world, yet strongly attached to their original cultures (Huang *et al.*, 2016). Diasporas play an important role in sustaining cultures through their efforts to preserve, innovate and transmit heritage (Davari and Jang, 2023). Diasporas are vital as both cultural ambassadors spreading their root culture and enthusiastic tourists eager to connect with their cultural roots. Diasporic communities provide knowledge about their countries of origin and create transnational networks that connect people across different cultures (Davari and Jang, 2023). Such transnational networks promote the sharing of cultural practices and ideas, creating a sense of global cultural identity (Davari and Jang, 2023). From an acculturation perspective, diaspora communities often blend their native cultural practices with those prevalent in the host countries, leading to cultural integration and innovation. This process creates new cultural forms that reflect both traditional and contemporary influences on the sustaining of cultural heritage (Cohen, 2022). Members of diasporic communities may become influential inbound tourists to their homelands, contributing financially to cultural sustainability by supporting local economies, funding cultural projects and maintaining heritage sites and events (Adams and Page, 2005). Many seek to reconnect with their roots (Huang *et al.*, 2018), reliving past experiences or those of their ancestors while enjoying sightseeing in their home countries (Mohammed *et al.*, 2023).

2.4 Meso-level factors

Meso-level cultural sustainability factors often focus on communities and organizations, including local businesses, governance, influencers, architecture and infrastructure and special interest groups. Collectively these factors shape how a culture is preserved, presented and promoted within hospitality and tourism.

2.4.1 Local businesses and communities. Local businesses play a crucial role in cultural sustainability by offering hospitality products and services that reflect and promote local culture albeit to different degrees. Providers of accommodation, food and beverages, transportation and entertainment, are often the primary interface or medium between tourists and local cultures. Local businesses may act as cultural custodians by embedding local values and traditions within their business models (Timothy and Boyd, 2003). The merits of involving local communities in tourism development have been well documented. Locals not only contribute to the preservation and representation of cultural authenticity but also make assessments and influence the impacts of tourism on their cultural heritage. Prior studies have underscored the pivotal role of local communities in fostering cultural sustainability within their regions, underpinned by their unique cultural practices and perspectives on tourism (Seddighikhavidak and Jamal, 2022). In the Cycladic Islands (Greece), local residents, tourists and business representatives have acknowledged the significance of culture as a key element of tourism and local development, albeit voicing concerns about some tourism impacts on cultural management and authenticity (Terkenli and Georgoula, 2021). While exploring different aspects and settings, these studies suggest that effective cultural sustainability involves a collaborative approach where local insights and experiences guide tourism practices to the benefit of both the community and the cultural heritage.

2.4.2 Policies, practices and local governance. Organizational policies and practices within hospitality and tourism are paramount for preserving and showcasing culture. Organizations shape how culture is presented and sustained when they prioritize preservation and cultural respect. Contributing initiatives may involve training staff on cultural heritage, promoting local experiences and developing informative hospitality and tourism products and experiences through collaborations with cultural institutions (Tong and Lian, 2021). It is important to educate both employees and tourists about local culture to foster understanding and respectful interactions. Sustainable hospitality and tourism practices that consider economic, environmental and cultural aspects can contribute positively to the preservation of cultural heritage. This may involve supporting local artisans and minimizing the ecological footprint. However, effective cultural preservation within tourism relies on support from regulatory frameworks and local governments. Government policies are pivotal for ensuring the preservation of cultural integrity since cultural preservation initiatives are influenced by regulations aimed at sustainable development (Wang et al., 2022).

The importance of effective destination governance on cultural sustainability is well documented (Ghirardello et al., 2022). Vidović and Žuvela (2015) outlined new models of participatory governance emerging in Croatia's cultural sector, focusing on grassroots cultural centers in repurposed buildings managed by civil society organizations. By aligning with community identities and needs, these models promote cultural (and social) sustainability. Meanwhile, Ghirardello et al. (2022) examined how cultural sustainability intersects with tourism development in South Tyrol, Italy. By emphasizing the role of culture in sustainability discussions, they aimed to guide governance strategies for preserving cultural heritage while promoting sustainable hospitality and tourism. Conversely, Wang et al. (2022) shed light on the impact of hierarchical governance structures on heritage tourism sustainability in China, uncovering conflicts that hinder effective destination management at both vertical and horizontal governance levels.

2.4.3 Media and influencers. Social media influencers have exerted a growing impact in the contemporary era of digital mediation, particularly on consumer impressions of destinations. A key role for influencers is crafting and disseminating images and stories that will influence consumer expectations and behaviors. These may alternatively support or detract from cultural sustainability. [Loisa et al. \(2023\)](#) observed that the social media proficiency of younger Indonesians has been a catalyst for sharing cultural phenomena, boosting tourism activities and showcasing a diversity of ethnic traditions.

As homogeneity has advanced in the face of globalization, cultural sustainability describes the forces seeking to maintain cultural uniqueness and hence security. The sharing of cultural memories can foster societal integration, particularly through media ([Deng et al., 2023](#)). Cultural sustainability can be developed by constructing media memory. The “Korean wave” cultural phenomenon manifests how media memory disseminates and preserves cultural heritage. It advanced rapidly across Asia transmitting K-dramas and K-pop ([Deng et al., 2023](#)). Platforms such as Instagram have also facilitated a revolution through digital culture, where fashion influencers transform everyday life into a creative space for cultural expression, fostering sustainable cultural content ([Suh, 2020](#)). Influencers also play a role in promoting sustainable consumption patterns, by leveraging their importance and credibility to sway consumer decisions toward more environmentally conscious choices ([Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024](#)). [Gössling et al. \(2019\)](#) discussed how influencers can promote sustainable tourism practices by highlighting culturally sensitive approaches to travel and by educating followers on the importance of preserving cultural integrity in their chosen destinations.

2.4.4 Architecture and infrastructure. The interplay and integration between architecture and infrastructure through design and maintenance are a mechanism for preserving cultural heritage and promoting sustainability. Cultural sustainability is promoted through a balancing of contemporary needs, traditional values and environmental considerations. For instance, [Gharibshah and Mahdavinejad \(2018\)](#) identified lighting architecture as crucial for sustainability in destination settings, with its influence on ergonomic and aesthetic aspects while supporting economic, social and environmental development. The application of cultural sustainability in architecture necessitates a conceptual framework that acknowledges and respects cross-cultural contexts and values, avoiding an exclusive reliance on Western architectural paradigms and constructs ([Memmott and Keys, 2015](#)). [Memmott and Keys \(2015\)](#) called for architectural professionals to respect cultural variety and incorporate local values and behaviors. They stressed the importance of culturally sensitive designs for the sustenance of cultural identities. Similarly, [Liu et al. \(2019\)](#) examined the impact of rapid urbanization on contemporary cities, noting a proliferation of buildings with low cultural value and high energy consumption. The authors concluded that traditional construction methods and design principles in these villages have achieved both sustainability and artistic excellence, highlighting their potential to inform contemporary architectural practices.

Given rapid technological advances and innovations, [Johnson \(2023\)](#) highlighted the use of virtual reality in architectural and building design to incorporate social and cultural sustainability, enhancing accessibility and inclusivity. [Santos and Marinheiro \(2024\)](#) described a smart tourism toolkit architecture to manage overtourism through the monitoring of mobile devices, thereby enhancing crowd management and sustainability. These preceding studies have advocated the integration of sustainable, culturally informed design principles in architecture and urban planning to preserve cultural integrity and ensure environmental sustainability. Taken together, sustainable architecture not only conserves cultural heritage but also provides tourists with an authentic cultural experience.

2.4.5 Special interest groups. Special interest groups, encompassing NGOs, associations and heritage organizations, can wield influence over cultural sustainability policies and

practices. Such groupings often advocate for the ethical promotion and preservation of cultural heritage, mobilizing local communities and policymakers to prioritize cultural sustainability (Richards and Munsters, 2010). They lobby for legislative protections, educational initiatives and awareness campaigns to shape tourism developments aligned with the needs of cultural preservation, ensuring that cultural integrity remains central to sustainable hospitality and tourism practices. Though education plays a pivotal role in pursuing the SDGs, traditional methodologies are deficient in fostering the necessary global awareness for progress to occur. To promote sustainable values and enrich personal development, a shift is needed toward more active methodologies rooted in experiential learning. Gutiérrez-García *et al.* (2020) used the example of botany content to highlight the efficacy of non-formal educational methods. Students engage directly with scientific methodologies through hands-on workshops and fieldwork, fostering a participative attitude and ongoing interest in sustainability. Such initiatives can relate educational experiences to local contexts, imparting knowledge and instilling a sense of responsibility and professional engagement in research, thereby contributing to a sustainable future.

2.5 Macro-level factors

Various scholars have sought to promote the importance of strategic orientation in sustainable practices, using theoretical frameworks and a comprehensive perspective (Yang *et al.*, 2022). Usman Khizar *et al.*'s (2022) literature review examined prevailing methodologies while highlighting prominent theoretical foundations such as the resource-based view, upper echelon theory, institutional theory and stakeholder theory. Meanwhile, Nguyen *et al.* (2019) proposed a conceptual framework that integrates stakeholder theory, social network analysis and actor-network theory (ANT). This was a new consolidation of stakeholder roles in tourism networks, explaining their dynamics and operations in pursuit of SDGs. Another literature review by Rasoolimanesh *et al.* (2023) highlighted the use of sustainable tourism indicators in pursuit of the SDGs. The authors concluded that the various studies primarily emphasized economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection and less on governance. As stakeholders, residents exhibited high engagement, and compared with government and businesses, tourists demonstrated the lowest involvement. Though the various empirical and theoretical investigations have merit, there have been few examinations of the variables impacting cultural sustainability in either the broader tourism domain or specific destination contexts (Swanson and DeVereaux, 2017). Furthermore, while certain theoretical works on cultural sustainability have deployed strategic environmental assessments (SEAs), they have not encompassed all possible environmental factors that could affect cultural sustainability in hospitality and tourism settings.

2.5.1 Environmental variables that impact cultural sustainability. Although several studies have investigated the influence of SEA on cultural sustainability, the primary focus has been internal destination-specific factors rather than their external counterparts. To conceptualize macro-environmental impacts on cultural sustainability, it is necessary to examine the variables impacting destinations and any efforts by other destination constituents to maintain cultural integrity and authenticity. Adopting a process of strategic analysis can contribute when making continuous assessments of external influences and internal attributes when developing strategies to achieve the objective of cultural sustainability. This approach has proven effective in strengthening destination competitiveness (Kontogeorgis *et al.*, 2022).

Aguilar (1967) proposed the classic PESTLE model which introduces six external factors that influence organizations – Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and

Environmental. For instance, technologies can contribute to the cultural sustainability domain by shaping destination cultural resilience. Uses of technology include developing cultural tourism products and experiences (Costantino *et al.*, 2022) and deploying digital tools that preserve and document cultural heritage archives, virtual museums and/or online databases (Kim *et al.*, 2019). They may also analyze the business performance of cultural destinations and measure sustainability (Ivars-Baidal *et al.*, 2021). Cultural exchange can be facilitated by linking tourists with host communities through Apps, social media, video conferencing and/or online communities (Liang *et al.*, 2021). Alternatively, they may facilitate cultural innovation by providing platforms for artists, cultural performances, digital imaging on monuments or storytellers to share with a global audience (Pantano and Corvello, 2014). Other PESTLE-related environmental pillars have impacted cultural sustainability at destinations. These include politics (Mihalič *et al.*, 2016), legal and ethical concerns (Jamal and Camargo, 2014), and sociological aspects (Han *et al.*, 2023). Though the deployment of PESTLE offers an enhanced understanding of the macro-environment, it often lacks comprehensive evaluation criteria and analysis beyond the six pillars. To ensure the required depth for environmental assessments of cultural sustainability in destinations, it is worth considering other macro-environmental variables beyond the immediate territory. Such contexts may generate unique opportunities and challenges for achieving cultural sustainability.

A variety of environmental conditions are likely prevalent across different destinations and tourism establishments, leading to unpredictability, volatility and hostility. Adjustments will be needed when adapting to such variations. For example, safety and security may be key external variables impacting tourist arrivals at cultural destinations confronted by political unrest, while depressed economies or unfavorable exchange rates may impact international travel to cultural destinations and may impede financial flows needed to preserve and protect cultural attractions. The multiple environmental factors and their interrelationships may exacerbate the complexity of managing destination attractiveness, resilience and cultural sustainability. The current authors propose the use of contemporary environmental variables as offering prospective opportunities and threats to cultural sustainability in destinations and can supplement the various factors outlined in PESTLE and similar frameworks (Kjaer *et al.*, 2015). Examples of supplementary environmental variables are presented in Table 1.

The proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) suggests that factors at the micro, meso and macro levels impact significantly on developing cultural sustainability. Noting the increasing recognition of cultural sustainability as a determinant of both success and survival at local and global levels, the research propositions in the following section call for empirical examination of the conceptual framework.

3. Research propositions

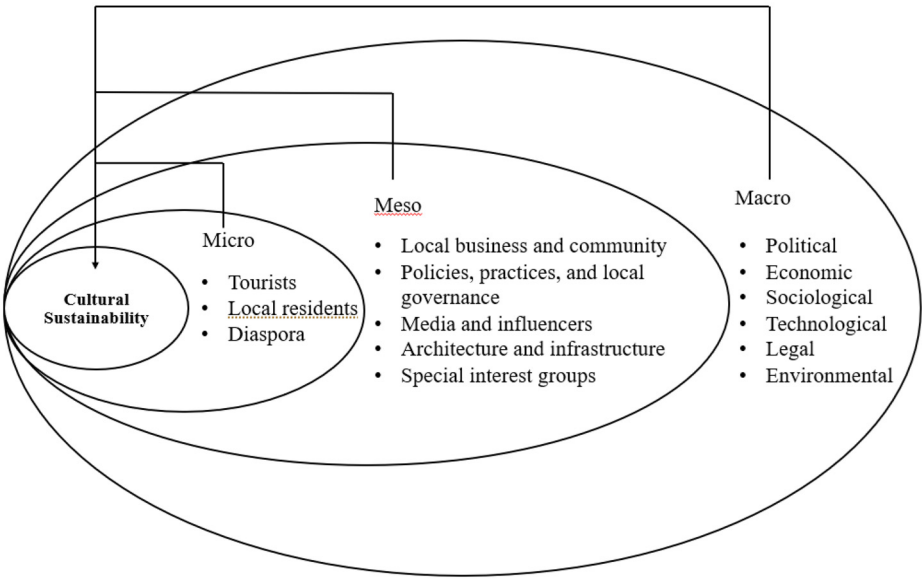
3.1 Proposition 1. The relationship between cultural sustainability and the other three pillars

As mentioned in Section 2.1, there is a strong case to be made for four sustainability pillars: economic, social, ecological and cultural. While the first three have been discussed extensively and are well-established in the literature, the emergent cultural sustainability concept is often subsumed within the social sustainability domain (Dessein *et al.*, 2015). Many contributions have combined the social and cultural sustainability pillars into socio-cultural sustainability. Though the latter view advanced scholarship by recognizing cultural sustainability as a separate strand of social sustainability, it still implies that the two pillars should be considered as being inextricably interlinked. Two other popular streams of thought

Table 1. Examples of additional macro-level external variables

Environmental variable	Examples of recent contributions
Current trends such as globalization, climate change or mass tourism	• Haid et al. (2021) • Stalmirska (2023)
Global and domestic emerging markets	• Hussain (2021) • Zeng et al. (2021)
Digital tourism and artificial intelligence (AI)	• Gonçalves et al. (2022)
Risk assessment and contingency planning	• Alvarez et al. (2022) • Mihardja et al. (2023)
Heritage and cultural legislation and governance	• Mandić and Kennell (2021) • Wang et al. (2022)
Financial resources and funding	• Jelinčić and Šveb (2021) • Liu et al. (2020)
External monitoring and evaluation of cultural landscapes	• Dharmiasih (2020) • Petti et al. (2020)
Partnerships and collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, private sector actors and local communities	• Dolezal and Novelli (2022) • Scheyvens and Cheer (2022)

Source(s): Compiled by the authors' based on the sources indicated in the table



Source(s): Developed by authors'

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

also address the relationship between cultural sustainability and the other three pillars. Some researchers have suggested that cultural sustainability may play a mediating role in achieving the other pillars. This perspective views culture as an essential resource for economic development at the local, regional and global levels. Furthermore, culture and its associated

values can contribute to the promotion of ecological and social sustainability (Soini and Birkeland, 2014). An alternative view considers culture as the overarching concept for economic, social and ecological sustainability, serving as the foundation for achieving SDGs (Soini and Dessein, 2016). All these propositions highlight the interlinked and reciprocal relationships between cultural sustainability and the other pillars.

Researchers have recently proposed recognizing cultural sustainability as an independent pillar (e.g. Dessein *et al.*, 2015). Throsby (2001) examined economic sustainability and cultural sustainability as two separate pillars. He later discussed the importance of building a theory of cultural sustainability and of recognizing parallels between the processes of ecological and cultural development, contributing to sustainable development (Throsby, 2008). Furthermore, Dessein *et al.* (2015) explored the relationship between cultural and social sustainability, suggesting that while culture shapes society and society influences culture, their different roles lead to a clear distinction between the two when considering sustainability. Consequently, the authors propose that cultural sustainability should be considered as a fourth pillar. The current authors echo the suggestion by previous researchers that there is a need for more science-based studies to conduct systematic analyses and to elaborate the meanings of cultural sustainability (e.g. Soini and Birkeland, 2014). This is especially true regarding how cultural sustainability connects to and is distinct from the ecological, economic and social dimensions of sustainable destination development:

- P1. Future researchers should explore the relationship between cultural sustainability and the other three pillars (ecological, economic and social) of sustainability development.

3.2 Proposition 2. Interconnections between the micro-, meso- and macro-level factors

Building on the above discussion which explored the micro-, meso- and macro-level factors of the service ecosystem, we propose that these levels do not operate in isolation. Instead, they are interconnected, with cultural sustainability being jointly influenced by factors from each level. This highlights the need for all stakeholders to work together to establish, maintain and evolve cultural sustainability. For example, the meso-level factors discussed above are integral to promoting cultural sustainability in hospitality and tourism. Each plays a unique role in ensuring that tourism development enhances rather than exploits cultural heritage. Effective management of these meso-level influences is essential for achieving sustainable outcomes that respect and enrich local cultures. The interactions among these meso-level factors can jointly enhance cultural sustainability. Muliani and Krisnawati (2022) examined the potential of local wisdom in Desa Wisata Wates Jaya for cultural and gastronomic tourism. To optimize development, they proposed a modified Pentahelix model, emphasizing the roles of community, government, academics, business and media in sustainable tourism management. For another example, to actively integrate local cultures into guest experiences, lodging and accommodation can offer family-friendly craft workshops led by local artisans, host cultural festivals or performances and engage local communities to stage authentic culinary experiences. The synergies amongst these various factors are crucial for the effective sustainability of cultural heritage within tourism and hospitality. The current paper provides a robust framework by highlighting the multifaceted influence on cultural sustainability of multi-level factors that enables further scholarly exploration and practical application in hospitality and tourism. This is the background to Proposition 2 as follows:

- P2. Interactions are evident among factors across the three levels (micro-, meso- and macro-), and require the combined efforts of all stakeholders to establish and maintain cultural sustainability.

3.3 Proposition 3. Preserving/protecting culture or developing/evolving culture

Drawing on the discussion in Section 2.1, which emphasizes preservation and evolution as dual imperatives of cultural sustainability, we propose a nuanced view of the influencing factors such that some factors play a pivotal role in the preservation of cultural sustainability, whereas others are more integral to its development and evolution. The preservation and protection of culture typically rely on residents and their deep-rooted connections to heritage (Hoang *et al.*, 2020). Residents who experience their cultural traditions daily are custodians of cultural practices, rituals and languages (Jaafar *et al.*, 2015). Their continued adherence to and practice of these traditions help to ensure that cultural heritage remains intact and is passed down through generations. Governance also plays a part in cultural preservation by enacting policies and providing funding to safeguard cultural sites, promote traditional arts and support cultural education (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Ensuring social equity and economic viability (Jha-Thakur *et al.*, 2021) fosters inclusive and resilient communities that support sustainable practices. Addressing capital leakage and criminal activities (Aydin and Alvarez, 2020) helps maintain financial resources and safety, essential for cultural integrity. Moreover, local businesses and communities play an important role by maintaining traditional foods, lodging, crafts and festivals, creating a living tapestry of cultural continuity (Seddighkhavidak and Jamal, 2022).

Cultural sustainability should, however, expand beyond the preservation and protection of traditional culture. It should embrace the “develop and flourish” mantra, making traditional culture more sustainable in a fast-evolving and increasingly globalized world. One case in point relates to the growing popularity of “culturally immersive” boutique hotels. Rather than simply showcasing traditional décor, these hotels blend traditional elements with contemporary amenities and eco-friendly technologies and create spaces for locals and visitors to engage in meaningful cultural exchange. Through these initiatives, these hotels not only preserve cultural heritage, but also enhance their appeal to modern consumers, ultimately safeguarding the continued relevance of local culture in an increasingly globalized world. Visitors to destinations bring diverse perspectives. They often act as catalysts for cultural exchange, introducing new ideas and customs that blend with local culture, leading to its evolution. For instance, diasporic groups influence cultural development by spreading their home culture and integrating new influences, leading to cultural fusion. Media and influencers shape modern cultural trends and narratives (Deng *et al.*, 2023), often amplifying certain aspects of culture globally. Architecture and infrastructure contribute to cultural evolution by blending traditional and modern elements like smart technologies (Santos and Marinheiro, 2024). Macro-level factors can lead to the adaptation and evolution of cultural practices, such as technology as suggested by the PESTLE model (Aguilar, 1967). By evaluating internal attributes and external factors through strategic analysis (Kontogeorgis *et al.*, 2022), destinations can develop adaptive strategies to enhance cultural sustainability and competitiveness in a changing global environment.

In taking these various considerations together the authors propose Proposition 3 as follows:

- P3. Cultural sustainability relies on both the preservation and the evolution of culture. Some factors may be more influential in preserving/protecting culture while others may be more impactful in developing/evolving culture.

3.4 Proposition 4. Positive and negative impacts on cultural sustainability

While most discussion in the preceding literature review section has centered on the positive effects of factors contributing to cultural sustainability, some factors may also negatively impact cultural sustainability. Previous researchers have shown that social media influencers can promote cultural sustainability (e.g. [Vilkaite-Vaitone, 2024](#)) by helping customers gain insights into the cultural and historical background of products and services ([Dong, 2024](#)). However, it is worth noting that social media influencers not only motivate people to travel more, but also promote specific destinations and businesses as trendy and socially desirable, which can lead to crowding and overtourism ([Gretzel, 2019](#)). Though earlier researchers focused primarily on the damaging effects of overtourism on the environment and on residents ([Mihalič, 2020](#)), [Santos-Rojo et al. \(2023\)](#) indicated that there has been more recent documentation of the detrimental impacts of overtourism on the destination's economic situation (e.g. prices charged for services and real estate) and cultural aspects (e.g. heritage and traditions). From a cultural sustainability perspective, overtourism can lead to several negative impacts such as a loss of cultural authenticity, excessive commercialization of cultural representations and standardization of the cultural experience ([Capocchi et al., 2019](#)). Future researchers should acknowledge how the factors discussed in the conceptual model might impact cultural sustainability in destinations and businesses:

- P4. Factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels can influence cultural sustainability in both positive and negative ways.

4. Conclusions

Proposed as a fourth pillar of sustainability, cultural sustainability aims to preserve and continue unique cultural practices, traditions, languages, identity and heritage ([Crotts et al., 2022](#); [Wiktor-Mach, 2020](#)). Given rapid global developments, maintaining cultural integrity involves preserving the past and also ensuring its long-term sustainability and exclusivity. This conceptual piece has underscored the importance of integrating cultural sustainability into the broader sustainable development in hospitality and tourism, which has previously emphasized the economic, environmental and social dimensions over the cultural dimension. This oversight of cultural dimension risks homogenizing hospitality and tourism offerings, thereby eroding the uniqueness that serves as a core value proposition in our industries. Culture fosters a sense of identity and continuity within communities, ensuring that local traditions, customs and heritage are not eroded by external influences. Disregarding cultural sustainability may lead to the homogenization of hospitality and tourism products, where the uniqueness that initially attracted tourists is lost, ultimately undermining the visitation appeal.

This paper has suggested four propositions and recommendations for relevant stakeholders in collaboration – researchers, policymakers, practitioners and local communities – to develop and implement strategies that balance economic benefits with cultural preservation. Effective cultural sustainability strategies should be inclusive, involving various stakeholder groups in decision-making to ensure that hospitality and tourism development aligns with the values and needs of those most impacted. This

paper has also highlighted the need for a balance between growth and preservation: uncontrolled or unthoughtful hospitality and tourism development can lead to the commercialization and commodification of culture, diluting the authenticity and significance of mere entertainment. A key recommendation of this research is the adoption of a holistic approach to sustainable development that gives equal weight to cultural factors alongside environmental and economic considerations. Accordingly, policymakers and developers should implement infrastructure, regulations and solutions that support the protection and promotion of cultural assets, both tangible (e.g. monuments, landscapes and artifacts) and intangible (e.g. languages, rituals and knowledge systems) through legislation, community-led initiatives and collaboration with international bodies dedicated to heritage conservation.

Moreover, the paper has highlighted the need for ongoing research into the dynamic relationship between cultural sustainability and hospitality and tourism practices. As hospitality and tourism trends evolve, so do the associated challenges and opportunities. Future researchers might focus on longitudinal analyses that track the impacts of hospitality and tourism development over time, providing insights into how cultural sustainability can be maintained in the longer term. Meanwhile, there is also an increasing need for comparative and empirical studies across different regions and cultures to understand the varying impacts of tourism and the effectiveness of various sustainability strategies. Additionally, this paper emphasized the important role of education and awareness in promoting cultural sustainability. Both consumers and industry stakeholders need to understand the importance of respecting and preserving local cultures. This can be achieved through targeted campaigns, interpretive programs and the inclusion of cultural sustainability topics in hospitality and tourism education curricula.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the discourse on sustainable development of the hospitality and tourism industry by highlighting the often-neglected dimension of cultural sustainability. It calls for a more integrated and inclusive approach to hospitality and tourism development, where cultural preservation and involvement should be a fundamental component of sustainability. The propositions and recommendations proposed here serve as a guide to inspire future policy and practice, aiming to protect and promote the rich cultural heritage around the world. By doing so, we can ensure that hospitality and tourism development not only benefits the economy but also supports the cultural fabric of the communities it touches, creating a more sustainable and enriching experience for both residents and for visitors as well as for future generations.

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