

¹*Sonu Kumar Katnoriya, Assistant Professor, School of Hospitality, GNA University, Phagwara, Punjab, India | 144401*²*Amit Kumar, Assistant Professor, School of Hospitality, GNA University, Phagwara, Punjab, India | 144401*³*Aashish Samuel, Assistant Professor, School of Hospitality, GNA University, Phagwara, Punjab, India | 144401*⁴*Tanuja, Assistant Professor, School of Business Management (Department of Hotel Management and Catering Technology), IFTM University Moradabad***Corresponding author: ²Amit Kumar, Assistant Professor, School of Hospitality, GNA University, Phagwara, Punjab, India | 144401**Email id: amitamittomar4444@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism is a crucial topic in the 21st century, given the growing concerns about environmental, economic and socio-cultural changes. This research seeks to assess the environmental, economic and socio-cultural implications, as well as opportunities, of sustainable tourism using a qualitative literature review. The study uses an interpretivist approach with a systematic review of academic papers indexed in Scopus to synthesise the main themes and trends. The results show that tourism has a major impact on environmental issues like carbon emissions, climate change and resource scarcity (Lenzen et al., 2018). However, tourism is critical in contributing to economic growth through job creation and regional development (Amin & Budilestari, 2025). In terms of socio-cultural impacts, tourism fosters cultural exchange and supports community development while posing issues related to cultural commodification (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). The research also reveals a disconnect between sustainability and practice, and the need for holistic approaches and governance (Sharpley, 2020). The study concludes that sustainable tourism should be achieved through a harmonious integration of environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects with innovation and policy initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the world's fastest-growing industries, and has important economic, cultural, and environmental impacts. But the growth in tourism has led to concerns about sustainability. Sustainable tourism has emerged as a solution to these problems as it balances economic, environmental and socio-cultural needs.

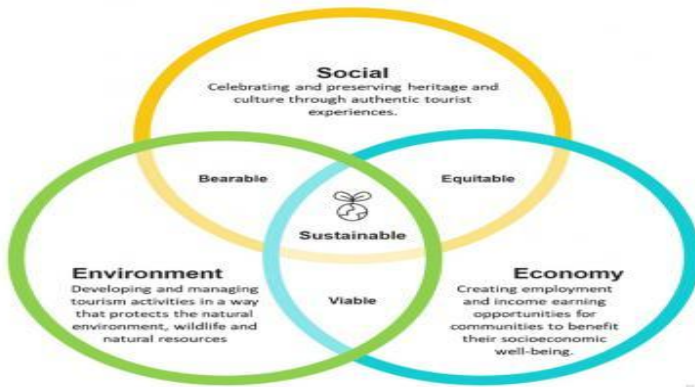


Figure 1: Integrated model of sustainable tourism

Description: This figure represents sustainable tourism as a triangular model integrating environmental protection, economic development and socio-cultural sustainability, depicting their interdependence.

Sustainable tourism is emerging as a holistic notion that brings together environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects (García-García et al., 2023). Tourism plays a vital role in economic development and job creation, but also has a substantial impact on the environment. International tourism is linked with carbon emissions and environmental impacts, contributing to the need for sustainable tourism (Lenzen et al., 2018).

It also promotes cultural exchange and community empowerment, creating social value. But it can also result in cultural commodification and homogenisation when poorly managed (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). The increasing complexity of the tourism system, and new global threats such as climate change and pandemics, have increased the call for sustainable and resilient tourism (Gössling et al., 2020).

Although there is growing focus on sustainable tourism, there is a lack of integration of its key dimensions and a disconnect between theory and practice (Sharpley, 2020). Thus, this research seeks to critically assess the environmental, economic and socio-cultural opportunities and challenges of sustainable tourism in the 21st century through a qualitative review of the literature.

2.1 Sustainable tourism in the 21st Century

Sustainable tourism has become a critical focus in the 21st century as a result of growing environmental, economic and socio-cultural challenges. It focuses on integrating tourism and sustainable development. It's widely accepted as a comprehensive approach that encompasses environmental, economic and social aspects (García-García et al., 2023).

2.2 Environmental aspects of sustainable tourism

Tourism is heavily dependent on natural resources and causes significant environmental impacts such as greenhouse gas emissions, resource scarcity and environmental degradation. Tourism activities worldwide play a major role in climate change and environmental pressures (Lenzen et al., 2018). Irresponsible tourism also exacerbates environmental challenges, especially in popular travel locations (Gössling et al., 2020).

For instance, sustainable tourism offers a chance for environmental protection through green practices and resource management practices (Budeanu et al., 2016). But there is a disconnect between sustainable tourism theory and practice in tourism systems (Sharpley, 2020).

2.3 Sustainable Tourism in the Economic Context

Tourism plays a significant role in economic development in terms of job creation and regional development (Amin & Budilestari, 2025). The use of digital technologies has also enhanced tourism's economic value by increasing efficiency and effectiveness of operations and institutions (Rausser et al., 2021). However, tourism is not without its issues - including economic leakage and tourism dependency - which can have implications for sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, 2013).

2.4 Social Cultural Aspect of Sustainable Tourism

Tourism is a vital cultural exchange and preservation activity. Cultural tourism plays a role in enhancing social value, and environmental sustainability through involvement of the community (Li et al., 2022). Community-based tourism is also recognised as a sustainable development that empowers communities (Dangi & Jamal, 2016).

But cultural commodification and loss of cultural values, impacting social structures and identities, may be a consequence of tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

2.5 Governance, Policy and Innovation

Good governance is critical to sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism planning involves policies and multi-stakeholder partnerships (Hall, 2019). Also, innovation helps to overcome challenges to sustainable tourism development (García-García et al., 2023).

But there are also tourism businesses that under-communicate their sustainability efforts, reducing transparency and knowledge among stakeholders (Font et al., 2017).

2.6 Challenges and Opportunities

Sustainable tourism is challenged by environmental, economic and socio-cultural issues. These challenges point to the need for sustainability measures (Sharpley, 2020).

However, there are also opportunities through sustainable policy, innovation and sustainable tourism practices (Rausser et al., 2021).

2.7 Research Gap

While there has been a proliferation of research in the area of sustainable tourism there are also gaps.

- Non-Integrated Perspectives:** Research often considers sustainability from environmental, economic and socio-cultural perspectives, with little work on their interconnectedness to achieve sustainability.
- Theory–Practice Gap:** The literature discusses sustainability, but there is a deficiency in implementing and assessing sustainable tourism approaches (Sharpley, 2020).
- Lack of Research on Governance and Policy:** Although policies are mentioned, few critically assess the policy's effectiveness to promote sustainable tourism (Hall, 2019).
- Limited Focus on New Global Issues:** There is a need for more recent and in-depth analysis on issues such as climate change, pandemics and overtourism (Gössling et al., 2020).
- Innovation-Driven Research is Lacking:** There is a lack of studies on how digital and innovation processes can promote sustainable tourism (Rausser et al., 2021).

3. Research Methodology

A qualitative research design has been chosen for this study to assess the environmental, economic and socio-cultural impacts and opportunities of sustainable tourism in the 21st century. The study uses the interpretivist approach to interpret patterns and meanings in the existing literature. The study adheres to criteria of credibility, dependability and confirmability, with only peer-reviewed literature being used. Ethics are upheld by referencing and using publicly accessible academic data.

4. Findings

4.1 Environmental Findings

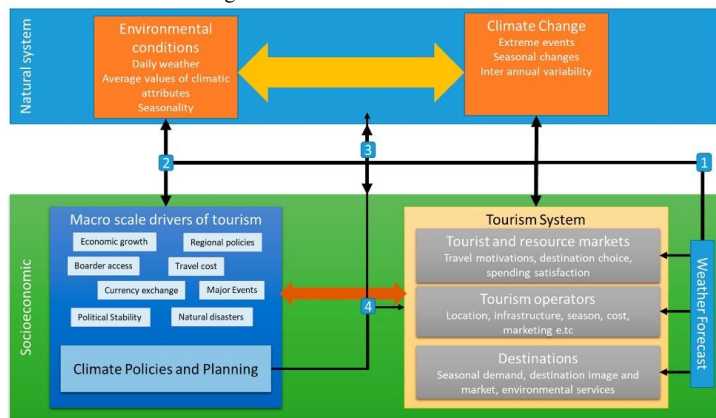


Figure 2: Tourism's environmental impact

Description:

This figure shows the environmental impacts of tourism in terms of emissions, resource use and pollution.

Tourism has a notable impact on environmental issues including carbon emissions, global warming and environmental degradation (Lenzen et al., 2018). Tourist activities and resource use impact ecosystems (Gössling et al., 2020). But sustainable tourism activities, such as eco-tourism and resource management, can help reduce environmental costs (Budeanu et al., 2016). However, there is still a disconnect between what is theorised and what is practised (Sharpley, 2020).

4.2 Economic Findings



Figure 3: System of economic contribution of tourism

Description: This diagram illustrates the economic contribution of tourism in terms of job creation, GDP and infrastructure development

Tourism contributes to economic development, creates jobs, and develops regions (Amin & Budilestari, 2025). Technology has also increased the efficiency and effectiveness of tourism (Rausser et al., 2021). However, issues like leakage and tourism dependency impact sustainable development (Bramwell & Lane, 2013).

4.3 Socio-Cultural Findings

Tourism, Culture and Commodification

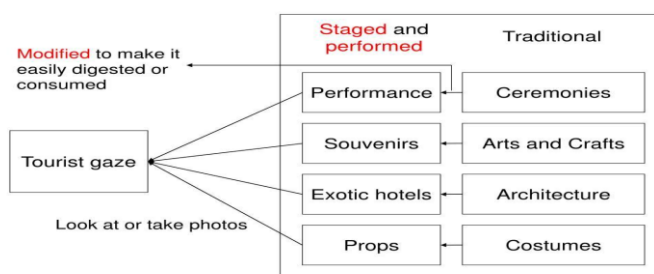


Figure 4: Socio-cultural interaction model of tourism

Description:

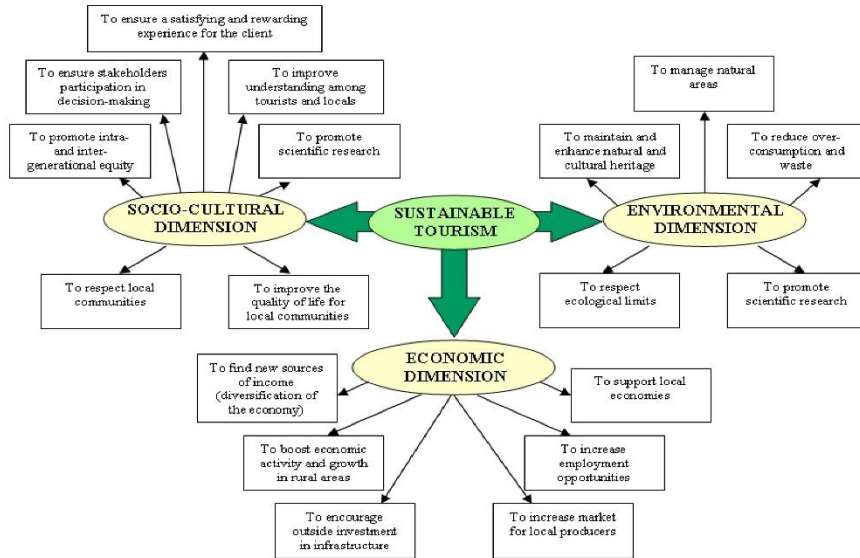
This diagram shows positive and negative socio-cultural impacts of tourism such as exchange and commodification. Tourism enables cultural exchange and benefits communities (Li et al., 2022). Community-based tourism leads to greater local involvement and sustainable benefits (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). But challenges such as commodification and authenticity are important (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

4.4 Summary of Findings

The results show sustainable tourism needs to be approached from an integrated perspective, considering environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion



The research conducted a qualitative literature review of the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of sustainable tourism. The results show that tourism is a source of environmental issues including carbon emissions and environmental degradation (Lenzen et al., 2018). However, it also contributes to economic development and job creation (Amin & Budilestari, 2025).

On the socio-cultural front, tourism promotes cultural interaction and development but can also result in cultural objectification (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). According to the study, for tourism to be sustainable, it's essential to integrate the three dimensions. But there is a gap between sustainability theory and practice (Sharpley, 2020).

5.2 Recommendations

Recommendations include the development of better sustainability policies and environmental laws to reduce impacts. Businesses in the tourism industry should implement sustainable practices and encourage sustainable tourism choices (Budeanu et al., 2016).

Local engagement should be promoted to improve socio-cultural sustainability and to support inclusive growth (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). Also, the use of technology can enhance tourism efficiency and sustainability (Rausser et al., 2021).

5.3 Limitations of the Study

This research is based on secondary data and the literature reviewed, which may limit empirical evidence.

5.4 Future Research Directions

We recommend future research should include primary data collection and studies in specific regions to gain more insights on sustainable tourism.

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