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Preserving Cultural Identity in Sustainable Tourism Development in Vietnam: A Sociological Perspective

Le Thi Bich Phuong ^{1*}, M A Nguyen Thi Hoa ²
Trade Union University, Hanoi, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Le Thi Bich Phuong**

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Abstract

Vietnam's tourism sector has experienced unprecedented expansion, becoming a foundational pillar of the national economy and a vital catalyst for regional development. However, this rapid growth increasingly imposes severe challenges on the preservation of cultural identity and the long-term authenticity of indigenous traditions, often leading to a paradoxical 'commodification' of heritage for market consumption. This paper adopts a sophisticated sociological lens—drawing upon Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and Goffman's dramaturgical perspective—to critically examine the dialectical tensions between sustainable tourism development and the imperatives of cultural conservation. By deconstructing the relationship between the 'front stage' of tourism and the 'back stage' of communal life, this study argues that achieving genuine sustainability necessitates a fundamental paradigm shift from a profit-centric approach toward a community-empowered framework. This framework grants local populations agency over their own cultural assets, ensuring that heritage remains a living social entity rather than a static product. Ultimately, the research provides a strategic roadmap and evidence-based policy recommendations to assist policymakers and practitioners in fostering a balanced tourism ecosystem that rigorously respects cultural integrity while simultaneously promoting robust socio-economic prosperity.

Keywords: Vietnam tourism, cultural commodification, cultural identity preservation, sustainable tourism development, heritage conservation, Bourdieu cultural capital, Goffman dramaturgical theory

1. Introduction

Since the initiation of the *Doi Moi* reforms in the late 1980s, Vietnam has undergone a profound structural transformation, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a more integrated, market-oriented global participant. Within this national development trajectory, the tourism sector has emerged as a cornerstone of socio-economic strategy, recognized not only for its contribution to GDP but also for its capacity to generate employment and foster regional development. With its diverse ethnic tapestry—comprising 54 distinct ethnic groups—and a profound historical legacy spanning thousands of years, Vietnam possesses immense potential for cultural tourism. This natural and cultural endowment has made the country a burgeoning destination on the global map, attracting millions of international travelers annually.

However, the rapid and often aggressive expansion of the tourism industry has precipitated a growing paradox. While tourism is celebrated for its role in poverty alleviation and infrastructure modernization, it simultaneously poses significant challenges to the preservation of cultural identity and the long-term authenticity of indigenous traditions. In many tourism hotspots, the intrinsic value of cultural practices—which were historically embedded in the daily rhythms of local life—is being systematically recontextualized. These traditions are increasingly transformed into "staged performances" to cater to the gaze and expectations of the global tourism market. This phenomenon, often referred to as "cultural commodification," involves the stripping of rituals, handicrafts, and communal activities from their original social contexts to serve as consumable goods for external consumption.

From a rigorous sociological standpoint, this transition illuminates a critical and persistent tension: how can a nation effectively harness the economic advantages of international tourism while simultaneously safeguarding the intricate social and cultural fabric that serves as the fundamental bedrock of its national identity? The challenge is not merely about preserving artifacts or monuments; it is about protecting the "living culture"—the social interactions, local knowledge, and communal solidarity that define the authenticity of a community. When culture becomes a commodity, the power dynamics between the host community and the tourist industry are fundamentally altered, often disenfranchising the local stakeholders who serve as the primary guardians of this heritage.

This study seeks to address this sociological dilemma by examining the dialectical relationship between sustainable tourism development and cultural conservation in Vietnam. It argues that the current profit-centric model, which often prioritizes immediate economic gain, is fundamentally unsustainable in the long run, as it risks eroding the very cultural capital that attracts visitors in the first place. The research aims to move beyond standard management discussions and instead engage with the structural sociological implications of tourism. By employing key theoretical concepts such as Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital" and Erving Goffman's "dramaturgical perspective," this paper interrogates the social mechanisms through which cultural identity is either preserved or diluted in the face of rapid market integration.

Furthermore, this paper posits that a transition toward a "community-empowered framework" is not merely an ethical preference but a functional necessity for sustainable development. Such a framework advocates for the decentralization of tourism planning, ensuring that local stakeholders possess the agency to curate their own cultural narratives. As Vietnam stands at a crossroad of development, the need for a comprehensive sociological inquiry into the ethics and sustainability of its tourism sector has never been more urgent. This paper will serve as a bridge between theoretical sociological frameworks and empirical local challenges, providing a strategic roadmap for policymakers and practitioners to foster a tourism ecosystem that rigorously respects cultural integrity while promoting robust, inclusive socio-economic prosperity. Through this lens, the research aims to contribute to a broader academic discourse on how nations can successfully navigate the complexities of globalization without sacrificing the unique cultural signatures that define their existence in the modern world.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Cultural Capital and Sustainable Development

To understand the preservation of cultural identity within the tourism sector, it is essential to utilize the sociological lens of "cultural capital," a concept pioneered by Pierre Bourdieu. In the context of Vietnam, cultural heritage—ranging from tangible architecture to intangible practices such as oral traditions, rituals, and traditional crafts—functions as a form of non-financial cultural capital that provides community members with a sense of identity, belonging, and social distinction. When this capital is integrated into tourism development, it acts as a primary resource for market attraction; however, when the commodification process is

driven purely by short-term economic gain, this invaluable capital risks significant devaluation and erosion.

The devaluation occurs because commodification often strips cultural practices of their original social context, transforming profound communal rituals into mere performance pieces for the tourist gaze. From a sustainable development perspective, this necessitates a paradigm shift: heritage must no longer be viewed as a depletable economic resource to be extracted for profit, but rather as a "living social asset" that is fundamentally tied to the community's social structure. True sustainability in this framework requires the implementation of inclusive governance mechanisms. Such governance ensures that local communities possess the authority and resources to define how their heritage is interpreted and shared, thereby protecting the integrity of their cultural capital against the homogenizing pressures of mass tourism. By acknowledging that cultural identity is the very bedrock of tourism's long-term viability, policymakers can transition toward a model that prioritizes the conservation of social assets, ensuring that tourism acts as a vehicle for cultural preservation rather than an instrument of its systemic depletion.

2.2. The Commodification of Culture

To critically examine the mechanisms of cultural erosion within Vietnam's tourism landscape, one must turn to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, which offers a powerful framework for understanding the performance of culture. Goffman's distinction between the "front stage"—the area where performers interact with their audience—and the "back stage"—where performers retreat to be themselves and shed their roles—is particularly salient when applied to the experiences of local communities in tourism-dependent regions. In the context of Vietnamese tourism, this perspective elucidates how local traditions, ceremonies, and even daily communal life are increasingly staged, sanitized, and packaged to meet the aesthetic and experiential expectations of international visitors.

When cultural practices are relegated to the "front stage," they undergo a process of simplification to ensure they are easily consumable and aesthetically pleasing to the tourist gaze. This often necessitates the removal of complex, contradictory, or "messy" elements of traditional life that do not align with the romanticized image of the exotic "Other" that tourism marketing seeks to project. Consequently, the "back stage"—the site of authentic, lived experience and internal meaning—is frequently sacrificed or modified to accommodate the performance requirements of the tourism economy. From a sociological viewpoint, this dynamic creates a profound form of alienation between the local community and their own cultural heritage. As the boundary between the performance of culture and the actual practice of culture blurs, the community may experience a sense of detachment from their own traditions, which are now being dictated by the demands of the market rather than the internal evolution of the society itself. This alienation is not merely a psychological byproduct; it is a structural consequence of turning heritage into a commodity, whereby the cultural actor loses agency over their own identity and becomes a passive participant in the dramatization of their own history for external consumption.

Dưới đây là phần mở rộng cho mục

3. The Erosion of Social Cohesion, được thiết kế với độ sâu phân tích xã hội học phù hợp cho khoảng 1/2 trang A4.

3.1. The Erosion of Social Cohesion

In many prominent tourism hotspots across Vietnam, the rapid influx of both domestic and foreign capital has catalyzed a process of gentrification within traditional spaces, fundamentally reshaping the local socio-spatial landscape. Sociologically, this transformation transcends simple physical renovation; it aggressively disrupts traditional community structures that have historically fostered solidarity and collective identity. As property values rise and commercial interests dominate, long-term residents—who are often the carriers of intangible cultural heritage—frequently face economic displacement, being forced to migrate to the periphery of their ancestral homes.

This displacement is particularly corrosive to the breakdown of established communal support systems, which functioned as the "social glue" of these neighborhoods. In traditional Vietnamese village structures or ancient urban quarters, residents relied upon mutual aid, shared public spaces, and informal social networks to navigate economic and personal challenges. However, as these areas are restructured to cater to transient tourist populations, the social character of the space shifts from a communal environment to a service-oriented marketplace. This erosion of social cohesion results in a "hollowed-out" community, where the traditional social fabric is replaced by impersonal transactional relationships. Consequently, the community loses its capacity for self-regulation and collective action, as the shared values that once defined their communal existence are marginalized by the individualistic imperatives of the tourism economy. The resulting social fragmentation not only diminishes the quality of life for the remaining residents but also degrades the authentic social character that constitutes the very essence of the destination's cultural appeal.

3.2. Community Agency and Empowerment

Evidence consistently indicates that top-down tourism development models, which prioritize state-led or large-scale corporate planning, frequently fail to incorporate local knowledge and nuanced socio-cultural insights. This structural oversight often leads to a disconnection between the intended goals of tourism projects and the actual needs or aspirations of the host population. To rectify this imbalance, a necessary sociological shift toward "Community-Based Tourism" (CBT) is essential, as this approach reconceptualizes the community not merely as a site for tourism activity, but as the primary architect of their own development trajectory.

By intentionally placing the community at the center of the value chain, the local population is empowered to actively manage their cultural and environmental resources rather than being subject to external, often commercial, directives. This transformation is profound: it moves residents from the roles of passive, low-wage laborers—whose primary function is to serve the demands of the tourist—into active stewards of their own cultural identity. Empowerment in this context signifies the acquisition of agency, where locals are given the platform to curate their own cultural narratives, determine the pace of development, and establish the boundaries of what aspects of their heritage should be shared and what should remain private.

When local knowledge is integrated into the decision-making

process, tourism products become more authentic and resilient because they are grounded in the actual experiences and values of the people who live them. Furthermore, fostering community agency serves to mitigate the alienation described in earlier sections, as the alignment between traditional practices and the tourism economy is restored through participatory governance. Ultimately, this shift does not merely promise economic improvement; it provides a mechanism for social sustainability that respects the dignity of the local people and ensures that their cultural identity remains a dynamic, self-determined force rather than a static, commodified relic.

4. Challenges in the Vietnamese Context

The integration of tourism into the Vietnamese socio-cultural landscape is hindered by several structural challenges that threaten the long-term sustainability of cultural identity.

- **Rapid Urbanization and the Erosion of Space:** The accelerated pace of urban development has led to the widespread loss of traditional communal spaces and unique village architectural forms. Sociologically, this represents more than a physical change; it is the destruction of the spatial environment where communal bonds and traditional social interactions were historically nurtured.
- **Mass Tourism Pressures and Cultural "McDonaldization":** Increasing volumes of mass tourism exert immense pressure on local customs, forcing a standardization of cultural products. This process, mirroring the concept of "McDonaldization," strips traditional practices of their unique, site-specific meanings, rendering them uniform and easily digestible for global consumers.
- **Institutional Policy Gaps:** A critical challenge remains the disconnect between national heritage protection mandates and the practical sustainability of local livelihoods. Weak policy integration often results in situations where conservation efforts are enforced without providing viable economic alternatives for the residents, leading to local resistance or the further commodification of heritage for survival.

5. Strategic Recommendations

To address these sociological challenges, a multifaceted approach is required to realign tourism development with the principles of sustainability and cultural preservation.

- **Institutional Reform and Decentralized Governance:** Policymakers should implement decentralized frameworks that empower local communities to take the lead in tourism planning. This ensures that development decisions reflect local needs and cultural values rather than top-down bureaucratic mandates.
- **Implementation of Cultural Impact Assessments (CIA):** It is imperative to integrate mandatory Cultural Impact Assessments into the approval process for all major tourism projects. These assessments will function as a regulatory mechanism to monitor and mitigate potential negative impacts on social structures and community traditions before they become irreversible.
- **Integrated Education and Capacity Building:** Developing targeted educational initiatives is vital to raise awareness regarding the intrinsic value of cultural integrity among both the younger generation in host

communities and the tourism workforce. By fostering a deep-seated pride in local heritage, communities become more resilient against the pressures of cultural homogenization and are better equipped to curate authentic, identity-conscious experiences for visitors.

6. Conclusion

The trajectory of Vietnam's tourism industry stands at a critical juncture, where the urgency of economic progress must be reconciled with the imperative of cultural safeguarding. This study has underscored that the sustainability of the tourism sector is not merely a matter of environmental management or infrastructure development; rather, it is inextricably linked to the nation's ability to preserve the vibrant cultural essence that constitutes its fundamental appeal to the global community. As Vietnam continues to position itself as a premier destination, the sociological lens reveals that the prevailing profit-centric models—often characterized by the commodification and "staged authenticity" of local traditions—pose a systemic risk to the very cultural capital that drives the industry.

A sociological perspective illuminates a profound truth: tourism development can no longer be viewed as an external economic intervention but must be recognized as a deeply embedded social process. To ensure long-term viability, future strategies must transition toward a paradigm that is inherently community-driven, transparent, and profoundly respectful of the "back stage" realities of local life. This requires a shift in power dynamics, where the local population is empowered as the primary custodian of their heritage, rather than remaining passive participants in a market-dictated performance. By centering the voices, knowledge, and agency of indigenous communities, Vietnam can mitigate the structural alienation caused by mass tourism and foster an environment where cultural identity is allowed to evolve organically, rather than being preserved as a static, commercialized relic.

Furthermore, the synthesis of economic growth and cultural integrity serves as more than an ethical mandate; it is a strategic necessity for maintaining global competitiveness in an increasingly discerning travel market. As international tourists become more conscious of the ethical dimensions of their travels, destinations that demonstrate a genuine commitment to social equity and cultural authenticity will naturally command greater value and loyalty. Vietnam possesses the unique opportunity to set a global example by pioneering an identity-conscious model of sustainable tourism development—one that proves that robust economic prosperity and the preservation of national soul are not mutually exclusive, but are instead mutually reinforcing.

Ultimately, the successful future of Vietnamese tourism depends on a holistic institutional commitment to decentralized governance, rigorous cultural impact assessments, and a national educational agenda that celebrates cultural heritage as the nation's most precious asset. By weaving these sociological insights into the fabric of national policy, Vietnam can navigate the complexities of globalization while ensuring that its rich cultural tapestry remains an authentic, living testimony to the resilience and dignity of its people. As the nation moves forward, the ultimate measure of success for its tourism industry will not be found in arrival statistics or GDP contributions alone, but in its capacity to protect the intangible "spirit of place" that defines Vietnam in the hearts and minds of its own citizens

and the world at large.

Đề bài báo của bạn đạt độ dài 9-10 trang với tính hàn lâm cao, danh mục tài liệu tham khảo cần đa dạng, bao gồm các lý thuyết kinh điển và các nghiên cứu thực tiễn về du lịch tại Việt Nam.

Dưới đây là 10 tài liệu tham khảo được lựa chọn kỹ lưỡng, tuân thủ chuẩn APA, bao gồm cả tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt:

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