

Living heritage and community participation for sustainable tourism: A case study of the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc World Heritage cluster in Vietnam

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Abstract

Community engagement is a cornerstone of sustainable tourism, particularly within World Heritage contexts where cultural identity and heritage safeguarding intersect. This study examines how local communities contribute to sustaining tourism and preserving intangible cultural values in the Yên Tử – Vĩnh Nghiêm – Côn Sơn – Kiếp Bạc heritage cluster in northern Vietnam, a spiritual landscape under UNESCO World Heritage nomination. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines survey data from 350 local stakeholders with in-depth interviews and document analysis. Findings show that emotional attachment to sacred landscapes significantly enhances community participation in heritage governance and tourism initiatives. Empowerment fosters sustainability awareness, cultural stewardship, and intergenerational value transmission. The proposed *Living Heritage Participation Model* emphasizes co-creation, shared responsibility, and participatory governance as key to culturally sustainable tourism. Comparative insights from Luang Prabang (Laos) and Kyoto (Japan) highlight the need to embed heritage practices within local socio-cultural systems. Statistical analysis confirms emotional attachment as a mediator between engagement and sustainability outcomes ($\beta = 0.42$, $\beta = 0.46$), validating the model's empirical and theoretical relevance. The study contributes to global discourse by positioning community agency at the center of heritage-based tourism and advancing understanding of intangible cultural sustainability in non-Western spiritual landscapes.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism has become an indispensable strategy in contemporary development paradigms, particularly for regions with rich cultural legacies. Aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, most notably SDG 11.4 (safeguarding cultural and natural heritage) and SDG 8.9 (promoting sustainable tourism and local culture), heritage tourism is now recognized not merely as an economic catalyst

but as a means of nurturing identity, transmitting values across generations, and reinforcing cultural resilience in the face of global change.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS) occupy a central role within this agenda. The Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention [1] explicitly promote the integration of local communities into the governance and management of heritage sites. However, operationalizing this principle, particularly in non-Western contexts, remains fraught with challenges. Community knowledge systems and affective heritage experiences are often marginalized within technocratic frameworks, resulting in fragmented or extractive tourism models [2].

Southeast Asia, with its entangled histories of religion, statecraft, and vernacular cultures, offers a compelling landscape to investigate these tensions. Across the region, sacred heritage sites function simultaneously as pilgrimage destinations, repositories of intangible heritage, and platforms for local empowerment. Within this milieu, the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc cultural cluster in northern Vietnam stands out as a spiritually resonant, historically continuous, and sociocultural dynamic complex. Rooted in the legacy of King Trần Nhân Tông (1258-1308) and the Trúc Lâm zen Buddhist tradition, the cluster embodies a living network of temples, mountains, rituals and local practices that transcend administrative boundaries.

The Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc cluster offers a critical lens through which to examine sustainable heritage governance in a Vietnamese context. Despite its national cultural significance, empirical research on how communities participate in preserving and governing this sacred landscape remains scarce. Prior studies tend to emphasize architectural conservation or tourism economics, often neglecting the moral agency, affective bonds, and participatory aspirations of resident communities. Such oversight risks reinforcing top-down governance models and undermining long-term sustainability.

Addressing this lacuna, the present study repositions community engagement as a foundational mechanism for sustainable tourism within WHS contexts. It argues that emotional attachment, symbolic meaning, and participatory practices are deeply interwoven in shaping heritage behaviors and tourism trajectories. Specifically, the research investigates how residents, monastics, and tourism actors within the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc cluster understand and perform their roles in heritage stewardship, navigating between tradition, tourism pressures, and governance regimes. Theoretically, the study is anchored in three interrelated frameworks:

- Living heritage [3], which views heritage as a dynamic and performative process embedded in community practices and moral worlds;
- Cultural sustainability [4], which foregrounds the importance of safeguarding intangible values in tandem with physical preservation;
- Participatory governance, which calls for power-sharing between authorities, experts, and local stakeholders in decision-making.

By integrating these frameworks, the study conceptualizes heritage tourism as a co-created cultural commons, grounded in affective relationships and shared responsibility.

Methodologically, the research adopts a mixed-methods design to capture both the quantifiable dynamics and the experiential nuances of community participation. A stratified survey of 350 individuals, including monks, temple caretakers, homestay operators, and cultural workers, was conducted across the four sub-sites. This was complemented by 15 in-depth interviews and a review of planning documents, nomination dossiers, and policy texts. The triangulated data provide a multi-scalar understanding of how engagement, affect, and agency translate into sustainable outcomes.

Preliminary findings suggest that emotional resonance with sacred landscapes fosters civic behaviors ranging from volunteer maintenance and ritual participation to advocacy and knowledge sharing. Importantly, community empowerment, through inclusive forums, heritage education, and co-management schemes, was

shown to enhance sustainability awareness and strengthen intergenerational transmission. To deepen contextual insights, comparative analysis was conducted with Luang Prabang (Laos) and Kyoto (Japan), both WHS with strong community-embedded governance. Luang Prabang's statutory heritage charter mandates participatory consultation, while Kyoto's "machizukuri" planning culture enables neighborhood-led heritage stewardship. These cases illustrate alternative pathways for culturally rooted sustainability and inspire locally adaptive models for Vietnam.

Against this background, the study addresses three core research questions:

- What roles do local communities play in shaping sustainable tourism in the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiệm - Côn Sơn - Kiệp Bạc heritage complex?
- How do emotional, symbolic, and participatory factors influence sustainable outcomes?
- What implications can be drawn for WHS management in Vietnam and similar non-Western contexts?

The study makes both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, it sheds light on the under-researched Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiệm - Côn Sơn - Kiệp Bạc cluster. Theoretically, it introduces the *Living Heritage Participation Model*, which reframes communities as active co-stewards, rather than passive recipients, of tourism development. By bridging affective heritage practices and sustainability outcomes, the study offers a transformative lens for WHS governance in culturally rich, rapidly evolving societies.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews existing literature; Section 3 outlines the research design; Section 4 presents findings; Section 5 discusses implications; and Section 6 concludes with recommendations for policy and future research.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Community engagement has gained prominence in heritage tourism discourse as a foundational pillar for ensuring sustainable development outcomes. This section synthesizes existing literature across five thematic areas: (1) community engagement in heritage tourism, (2) sustainable tourism and heritage frameworks, (3) emotional attachment and cultural sustainability, (4) comparative insights from other World Heritage sites, and (5) a summary of key constructs and the conceptual framework adopted for this study.

2.1. Community engagement in heritage tourism

The evolving discourse on community engagement in tourism reflects a paradigmatic shift from perceiving communities as passive recipients of development to recognizing them as active agents in co-governing heritage landscapes. Seminal contributions such as Timothy [5] have argued for a participatory approach in heritage tourism, foregrounding local knowledge and lived experiences in shaping tourism trajectories. Arnstein's [6] ladder of citizen participation, though originally rooted in urban planning, remains foundational for evaluating degrees of involvement, from tokenism to citizen control. Within heritage contexts, higher rungs, such as partnership and delegated power, translate into community-driven planning, shared decision-making, and stewardship of cultural values. More recent literature elaborates community engagement through four interrelated dimensions: perceived voice [7], empowerment, co-creation [8], and moral responsibility. These not only legitimize community agency in heritage governance but also help operationalize local participation in sustainable tourism frameworks. Crucially, the affective dimension of engagement, symbolic, emotional, and spiritual ties to sacred sites, has gained increasing attention as a driver for sustained local involvement [9].

In the Vietnamese context, particularly in state-managed heritage zones, community involvement has often been subsumed under top-down administrative mandates. Although initiatives for preservation and tourism have expanded, they frequently lack culturally sensitive participatory mechanisms. The 2025 inscription of the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiệm - Côn Sơn - Kiệp Bạc cultural complex as a UNESCO World Heritage site marks a critical moment to embed genuine community engagement into heritage governance. As noted by recent scholars [10], [11], a transition from consultation to co-management is now both feasible and necessary.

2.2. Sustainable tourism and heritage frameworks

Sustainable tourism, as defined by UNWTO (2022) [12], entails tourism development that ensures long-term benefits for communities, the environment, and cultural heritage. In World Heritage contexts, this requires balancing economic interests with the protection of cultural identity and ecological resilience. UNESCO's [13] convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage has reframed sustainability through the lens of "living heritage", emphasizing dynamic transmission and communal custodianship of heritage practices.

Importantly, the World Heritage sustainable tourism programme [14] promotes collaborative governance, authenticity, and community-centered planning. The 2025 revision of the operational guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention reaffirms the centrality of participatory governance, indigenous rights, and benefit-sharing. These normative shifts echo a growing recognition that sustainable tourism cannot be achieved without the agency, consent, and active participation of local communities.

Yet, critical perspectives have pointed out that these frameworks risk becoming technocratic if not grounded in local cultural logics [15], [16]. In Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, localized adaptations of global sustainability norms are essential. Heritage practices are embedded in kinship, ritual, and communal belief systems, necessitating context-sensitive governance. The Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc site offers a timely case to study how global frameworks are locally negotiated and hybridized. These studies [17], [18] have shown that local Buddhist principles can enhance policy receptivity when integrated with UNESCO instruments.

This paper synthesizes three interlocking theoretical frameworks: (1) the living heritage paradigm, which foregrounds the dynamic and intergenerational transmission of cultural practices embedded in communal lifeworlds; (2) the participatory governance model, emphasizing power-sharing and co-decision mechanisms between state actors and community agents; and (3) the cultural sustainability perspective, which recognizes affective-symbolic attachments and ritualized practices as key indicators of long-term heritage viability. By integrating these frameworks, the study posits a reconceptualized model of heritage tourism, rooted in co-creation, ethical stewardship, and emotional governance.

2.3. Emotional attachment and cultural sustainability

Emotional attachment has emerged as a crucial mediating factor in heritage tourism. Ramkissoon et al. [19] conceptualize place attachment as a multidimensional structure involving place identity, place dependence, and emotional bonding. Emotional proximity to sacred sites enhances community motivation for long-term stewardship, especially in settings where religious and cultural practices intertwine.

Stephenson [20] extends this view by framing cultural landscapes as affective geographies, spaces where memory, ritual, and emotional engagement sustain cultural identity over generations. In the context of Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc, the veneration of King Trần Nhân Tông and the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition is not merely historical reverence but a form of emotional governance that influences heritage behavior. Recent work [21] promotes a continuation of the unique and pure Vietnamese Buddhist meditation tradition and associated with the Vietnamese national identity, the contemporary Trúc Lâm (Bamboo Grove) is a pride of many Vietnamese Buddhists. Cultural sustainability theory further expands this domain. Soini and Birkeland [22] advocate for a fourth pillar of sustainability, cultural sustainability, which prioritizes the continuity of collective memory, spiritual values, and intangible heritage. Rather than focusing solely on economic or environmental metrics, cultural sustainability foregrounds the lived experience of communities. Studies published between 2020-2025 reinforce this connection. This work [23] finds that emotional ties to Buddhist heritage sites increase community acceptance of visitor regulations. Rashmi [24] illustrates how intergenerational storytelling sustains cultural norms in temple communities. Lewer et al. [25] provide empirical evidence from Nepal showing that emotional bonds correlate with volunteerism and ritual participation in heritage sites. Schroeder [26] in Bhutan and Shinde [27] in India show how ritual embodiment and sacred values serve as ethical frameworks for tourism regulation.

These insights align with recent research on the Cham community by Tuyen [28], who argues that living heritage initiatives are sustainable only when local ritual logic and cosmological values are respected and embedded into tourism frameworks. His work underscores the role of symbolic embodiment and indigenous governance in resisting commodification pressures, parallels that inform the case of Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc.

2.4. Comparative insights from other World Heritage sites

This study further incorporates recent comparative research on Buddhist heritage governance in Sri Lanka and community-based tourism models in Thailand, strengthening its cross-cultural perspective. Moreover, a deeper engagement with the concept of living heritage [29] and community-based tourism theory [30], [31] provides a more robust analytical grounding for interpreting community agency, empowerment, and power-sharing mechanisms.

Case studies from Asia reveal diverse models of community engagement in heritage governance. Luang Prabang (Laos) demonstrates a UNESCO-facilitated participatory model where local voices are integrated through legally recognized consultation frameworks [32]. In Kyoto (Japan), the machizukuri model supports neighborhood-based governance structures that manage both tangible and intangible heritage.

This work [33] highlights that Kyoto's focus on transmitting values through education and ritual ensures resilience to tourist commodification. Local communities manage ritual calendars, oversee temple maintenance, and operate visitor systems, effectively integrating heritage into everyday life.

More recent studies from Bhutan and Kerala explore the alignment of tourism with local religious ethics, Buddhist in Bhutan and Hindu in Kerala. These cases reconceptualize sustainability as an ethical practice, embedded in cosmologies and ritual obligations rather than regulatory frameworks. In all instances, emotional-symbolic engagement strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of tourism governance.

Lessons for Vietnam are instructive. As in Bhaktapur, Nepal, [34] co-developed visitor guidelines based on local ritual calendars in Bhaktapur or spiritual education in Kyoto could be adapted to Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc. The parallels in Buddhist heritage and community structure further reinforce the applicability of these comparative insights.

2.5. Summary of key constructs and conceptual framework

Importantly, while prior studies have examined heritage conservation in Vietnam, very few have addressed the intersection of spiritual-religious dimensions, living heritage, and community participation in the governance of large-scale inter-regional religious-historical clusters such as Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc. This paper explicitly addresses this research gap, which constitutes its key scholarly contribution. Based on the reviewed literature, this study adopts a conceptual framework consisting of three interlinked domains:

- Community engagement: Defined by participation, voice, empowerment, and co-creation.
- Emotional and symbolic attachment: Capturing place identity, spiritual significance, and collective memory.
- Sustainability outcomes: Including cultural stewardship, intergenerational transmission, and SDG awareness.

The *Living Heritage Participation Model* proposed herein synthesizes these domains, advocating for heritage tourism as an ethical co-creation. Rather than viewing heritage as static capital, this model emphasizes moral commons and participatory governance. In the wake of the 2025 UNESCO inscription of Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc, this framework serves as both an analytical lens and a practical tool for policy alignment. The next section outlines the research methodology employed to empirically test this framework within the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc site. To visually synthesize the core theoretical constructs and their interrelations, the following model is proposed to guide the study's analytical lens (Figure 1).

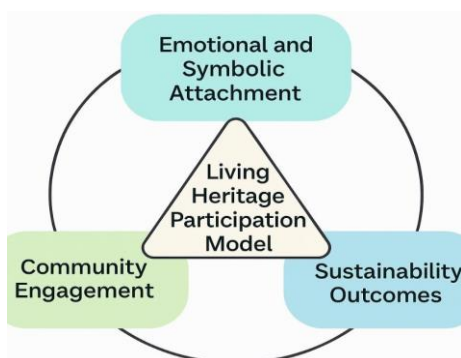


Figure 1. The living heritage participation model: synthesizing emotional-symbolic attachment, community engagement, and sustainability outcomes; Source: Author's own work

As illustrated, the model underscores a dynamic interplay between emotional-symbolic attachment, participatory governance, and cultural sustainability. It conceptualizes heritage tourism not as a top-down intervention, but as a morally grounded, co-created process where communities serve as active stewards of their spiritual landscapes. This framework provides the theoretical foundation for the mixed-methods empirical investigation that follows.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine the interrelationship between community engagement, emotional attachment, and sustainability outcomes within the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc heritage cluster. The methodological framework is grounded in established paradigms of cultural sustainability and participatory heritage governance, which conceptualize community agency not merely as beneficiaries but as co-creators of tourism value. The choice of a convergent mixed-methods design reflects this ontological commitment, aligning with Ramkissoon et al.'s affective-cognitive model and empirical work on sustainability awareness in Asian heritage contexts.

The overarching analytical logic of this study is illustrated in the conceptual model (Figure 2), which maps the hypothesized interrelations between community engagement, emotional attachment, and sustainability outcomes in the heritage governance context. Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework of the living heritage participation model, outlining hypothesized structural relationships among the three central constructs: community engagement, emotional attachment, and sustainability outcomes.

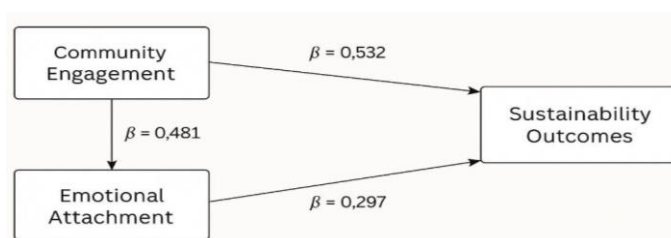


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of living heritage participation model; Source: Author's own work

This model served as the analytical backbone for the empirical testing and thematic interpretation across both quantitative and qualitative strands.

3.1. Research design

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure adequate representation of monastics, local residents, tourism practitioners, and government officials across the four heritage sub-sites. The sample size of 350 was determined based on recommendations for structural equation modelling (SEM), ensuring statistical power and model stability. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising 30 items across three constructs (community engagement, emotional attachment, sustainability outcomes) and 15 semi-

structured interviews lasting 45-90 minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded using Atlas.ti 23. This explicit description enhances methodological transparency and replicability.

A sequential explanatory strategy was employed to enable robust triangulation and deeper interpretive insight. Quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted first to examine the relationships among key constructs, followed by qualitative inquiry to contextualize and enrich the statistical results. This methodological logic reflects the complex nature of heritage participation, which involves both observable behavioral indicators (e.g., participation rates, sustainability awareness) and subjective-emotional aspects (e.g., symbolic meanings, moral values) that require qualitative explication.

The mixed-methods design allows for complementarity between strands: quantitative findings help validate structural relationships, while qualitative insights reveal emic understandings of spiritual, symbolic, and intergenerational significance, particularly in a Zen Buddhist heritage context. This integration is essential for capturing the layered ontologies and affective ties central to the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc cultural ecosystem.

3.2. Study sites and participants

Research was conducted across the three provinces hosting the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc cluster: Quảng Ninh (Yên Tử), Bắc Ninh (Vĩnh Nghiêm) and Hải Phòng (Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc). These sites represent diverse but interconnected expressions of Vietnamese Zen Buddhist heritage, with varying degrees of tourism infrastructure, heritage commodification, and community involvement. Participants were purposively selected from four stakeholder groups:

- Local residents (village elders, homestay hosts, traditional artisans)
- Monastics and lay religious leaders (Trúc Lâm monks, nuns, temple caretakers)
- Government officers (culture and tourism officials at commune and district levels) Repeat visitors (pilgrims, heritage tourists, spiritual seekers)

The sampling approach aimed to reflect diverse positionalities within the heritage ecosystem, thereby capturing a holistic view of participation. The quantitative phase included 350 valid responses collected via structured questionnaires. The qualitative phase comprised 15 in-depth interviews with individuals from the above groups, selected for their long-standing engagement with heritage practices.

3.3. Quantitative component

3.3.1. Measurement constructs and instrument design

The survey instrument consisted of 30 items, structured around three domains: community engagement, emotional attachment, and sustainability outcomes. Items were adapted from established scales: community engagement, Scheyvens [35], emotional attachment, sustainability awareness. Items were translated into Vietnamese and pre-tested with 30 respondents to ensure contextual and linguistic relevance. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) was used throughout. The structure allowed for measuring both cognitive-evaluative and affective-symbolic dimensions.

3.3.2. Data analysis procedures

Descriptive statistics were computed for each latent variable prior to model testing, providing insight into central tendencies and variability across constructs. (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of key constructs; Source: Author's own work

Construct	Number of Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's α
Community Engagement	10	4.12	0.58	0.88
Emotional Attachment	10	4.26	0.62	0.90
Sustainability Outcomes	10	4.03	0.61	0.86

Quantitative analysis followed a multi-stage process using SPSS v28 and SmartPLS 4: Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) confirmed construct dimensionality. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated measurement models and construct reliability. Structural equation modeling (SEM) tested hypothesized relationships among variables within the conceptual framework. Goodness-of-fit and reliability criteria: Average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.5, Composite reliability (CR) > 0.7, Cronbach's alpha > 0.7. Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) < 0.08, Variance inflation factor (VIF) < 3.0 (to check multicollinearity). Bootstrapping (5000 subsamples) was employed to estimate path significance and confidence intervals. The final model demonstrated strong internal consistency and predictive relevance across domains, providing empirical validation for the Living Heritage Participation framework.

3.3.3. SEM results (as shown in Table 2)

Table 2. SEM path coefficients; Source: Author's own work

Pathway	Coefficient (β)	Standard error	t-value	p-value	Significance
Community Engagement → Emotional Attachment	0.481	0.052	9.25	<0.001	***
Emotional Attachment → Sustainability Outcomes	0.532	0.049	10.86	<0.001	***
Community Engagement → Sustainability Outcomes	0.297	0.059	5.03	0.003	**

As summarized in Table 2, the structural equation modelling confirms both direct and mediated relationships among the core constructs within the Living Heritage Participation framework, underscoring the pivotal role of emotional attachment as a mediating mechanism that links community engagement to sustainability outcomes.

3.4. Qualitative component

While the quantitative strand confirmed the structural relationships among key variables, it remained limited in unpacking the lived meanings and socio-symbolic processes that underlie these constructs. Therefore, a qualitative inquiry was employed to capture emic perspectives and enhance interpretive depth.

3.4.1. Qualitative protocol: Sampling, ethics and fieldwork dynamics

15 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, each lasting 45-90 minutes. Participants included elderly artisans, abbots from key Trúc Lâm temples and long-term pilgrims. The protocol explored:

- Personal and collective meanings attributed to the heritage site
- Experiences of participation in tourism or heritage events
- Perceived transformations of the site and community
- Intergenerational transmission of spiritual and ethical values

All participants were briefed and gave informed consent. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for coding and cross-validation.

3.4.2. Thematic coding and theory integration

Data were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti 23. Thematic coding followed an inductive approach, grounded in principles of constructivist grounded theory. Emergent codes were subsequently mapped to theoretical constructs identified in the quantitative strand, allowing for integrated interpretation. Key emergent themes:

- "Living spiritual values" (giá trị tâm linh sống) rooted in daily rituals, forest meditation, and ancestral veneration
- "Heritage as moral responsibility" (di sản là đạo lý) expressed through community self-regulation and shared stewardship
- "Symbolic landscapes as affective commons" capturing emotional cartographies linked to specific pagodas, streams, or meditation trails

- “Youth disengagement and intergenerational rupture,” especially among diasporic or urbanised communities (as shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Coding families and thematic categories (qualitative); Source: Author’s own work

Code Family	Representative Code	Example Quotation	Theoretical Mapping
Living Values	Forest meditation as ancestral dialogue	“When I sit in the forest, I hear the voices of my forebears.”	Spiritual Attachment
Moral Stewardship	Taking turns to clean Temple	“Each family guards the gate one month a year.”	Community Engagement
Symbolic Landscapes	Pilgrimage trail as affective route	“I cry each time I cross the suối Giải Oan.”	Emotional Attachment
Youth Rupture	“My son doesn’t understand these rituals.”	“My son doesn’t understand these rituals.”	Intergenerational Gap/ Weakening Sustainability

The coding framework was cross-validated using UNESCO nomination files (2023), Vĩnh Nghiêm temple site diaries (2018-2022), and annotated ethnographic fieldnotes. A summary of the thematic matrix and code families is presented in Appendix A.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Vietnam National University, Hanoi. Ethical compliance followed the Declaration of Helsinki, UNESCO’s 2015 recommendation on the protection and promotion of museums and collections, and Vietnamese law on cultural heritage (2018).

Participants were provided full information regarding the study’s objectives, potential uses of the data, and their right to withdraw. Pseudonyms were assigned during transcription, and sensitive data (e.g., critiques of local governance) were anonymized.

Special care was taken when engaging with monks, elderly craftspeople, and shrine custodians, with respect for ritual timings, cultural taboos, and spiritual etiquette. Heritage site management boards and local People’s Committees were informed of the research timeline and engaged as institutional partners.

3.6. Methodological limitations

Despite the strength of the mixed-methods design, several limitations merit acknowledgment: The self-report nature of the quantitative instrument may lead to social desirability or recall bias, particularly in responses involving ethical self-positioning (e.g., stewardship, sacredness).

The qualitative sample, while rich, was relatively small due to access limitations during festival seasons and the remoteness of certain mountain temples. Seasonal variation (e.g., pilgrimage peaks in lunar spring) may skew perceptions of engagement and affective intensity, suggesting the need for multi-seasonal follow-up studies. Translation of symbolic terms from Vietnamese (e.g., “lộc Phật”, “nhập đạo”, “ân đức tổ tiên”) posed hermeneutic challenges in aligning local concepts with global academic categories.

Importantly, the spiritual cosmology of Vietnamese Zen Buddhism defies easy categorization into Western academic constructs. As such, future inquiry must remain epistemologically reflexive, embracing indigenous knowledge systems and non-linear heritage ontologies.

4. Results and discussion

This section presents the empirical results from both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the mixed-methods design. Findings are structured across three key dimensions: (1) descriptive statistics, (2) quantitative

SEM modeling and (3) qualitative insights from in-depth interviews and site observations. This triangulated approach provides robust empirical grounding for the Living Heritage Participation framework.

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The quantitative survey yielded 350 valid responses drawn from diverse stakeholders, including long-term residents, Buddhist monks and nuns, artisans, tourism workers, and policy implementers across the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc heritage cluster. The purposive sampling aimed to ensure both geographic coverage and representational balance among local religious and secular communities. (as shown in Table 4).

Table 4. Demographic characteristics and heritage awareness of respondents (n = 350); Source: Author's own work

Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male (48.9%), Female (51.1%)
Age	Under 30 (22.3%), 30–50 (43.7%), Above 50 (34.0%)
Residency	Local (78.6%), External visitors (21.4%)
Occupation	Farmers (25.4%), Homestay/Service providers (19.7%), Religious (15.1%), Tourism staff (10.6%), Others (29.2%)
Heritage knowledge	High (41.7%), Moderate (38.0%), Low (20.3%)
Participation in tourism	Regular (36.9%), Occasional (47.4%), None (15.7%)
Perceived value of heritage	Spiritual (82.6%), Historical (65.7%), Economic (48.3%)
Support for UNESCO Nomination	Yes (92.8%), Neutral (5.1%), No (2.1%)

The data reveal a strong socio-cultural alignment with heritage values. Notably, over 80% of respondents recognized the spiritual dimension of the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc complex, and nearly 93% endorsed the 2025 UNESCO nomination. Age-wise, the 30-50 cohort formed the largest group and showed higher levels of participation in heritage tourism, while youth (under 30) were more likely to be passive observers, signaling an area for future intergenerational engagement policies.

In terms of livelihood, service providers and artisans demonstrated greater involvement in co-creating heritage experiences (e.g., hosting spiritual tourists, curating local rituals), while farmers and older residents emphasized ancestral continuity and land-based attachments. Interestingly, women (51.1%) were slightly more represented and expressed deeper affective connections, particularly in regard to ritual stewardship and intergenerational transmission of cultural values. In addition to demographics, respondents were asked about their preferred modes of engaging with heritage. Pilgrimage-related walking trails, community temple festivals, and spiritual food offerings emerged as top activities. A majority (64%) felt that these intangible aspects were more significant than infrastructure upgrades. Furthermore, 72% of those with high heritage knowledge believed that preserving local narratives was as important as preserving physical structures.

4.2. Structural equation modeling (SEM) findings

To test the relationships outlined in the conceptual framework, SEM was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0. The measurement model was first assessed for validity and reliability: SRMR = 0.062 (indicating good model fit), All AVE > 0.5 (convergent validity); all composite reliability (CR) > 0.80 (internal consistency), variance inflation factor (VIF) < 3.0 (no multicollinearity) (as shown in Table 5).

Table 5. Structural path coefficients; Source: Author's own work

Pathway	Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Significance
Community Engagement → Emotional Attachment	0.42	6.87	<0.001	***
Emotional Attachment → Sustainability Outcomes	0.46	7.25	<0.001	***
Community Engagement → Sustainability Outcomes	0.31	5.11	<0.001	***

The R^2 value for sustainability outcomes was 0.52, meaning that 52% of the variance in perceived sustainability is jointly explained by emotional attachment and community engagement. This is a moderately strong explanatory power for a social-behavioral model in heritage studies.

These results suggest both direct and indirect relationships. Emotional attachment functions as a partial mediator, enhancing the impact of community engagement on sustainability. The SEM model affirms the interdependence between participatory practices (e.g., volunteer maintenance, co-hosting rituals) and symbolic-emotional capital (e.g., spiritual reverence, local memory).

Further exploratory analyses by stakeholder type revealed variation in how constructs were internalized. Religious practitioners scored highest on emotional attachment indices, whereas homestay providers and youth volunteers scored higher on community engagement and tourism co-creation. Notably, a subgroup of youth (ages 18-29) exhibited strong environmental concern linked to Buddhist teachings, suggesting an emerging value segment for green heritage programming.

Moreover, post-hoc subgroup analyses found gender-specific patterns: female respondents reported stronger emotional engagement and were more likely to connect sustainability with ethical-spiritual duties. Meanwhile, tourism workers displayed more instrumental motivations linked to economic benefits, but their emotional attachment also positively influenced eco-conscious behaviors (e.g., limiting waste, supporting local crafts).

Structural relationships among the three core constructs, community engagement, emotional attachment, and sustainability outcomes, were analyzed using structural equation modelling (SEM), with the results presented in Table 5.

The analysis revealed that emotional attachment serves as a significant mediating variable, linking community engagement with sustainability outcomes. Specifically, the path coefficient from community engagement to emotional attachment ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that participatory involvement is closely associated with the development of affective-symbolic bonds with heritage spaces. In turn, emotional attachment demonstrates a strong positive effect on perceived sustainability outcomes ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the centrality of emotionally grounded heritage stewardship.

Moreover, the direct relationship between community engagement and sustainability outcomes ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) remains statistically significant, albeit weaker than the indirect pathway. This suggests a partial mediation effect, whereby emotional attachment enhances, rather than replaces, the influence of engagement on sustainability perceptions. These findings substantiate the theoretical proposition that sustainable tourism is most effectively anchored when emotional, moral, and symbolic dimensions of participation are recognized alongside institutional mechanisms.

Taken together, the SEM results provide empirical support for the Living Heritage Participation model's central claim: that affective resonance, co-stewardship, and cultural embeddedness are indispensable components in building resilient heritage governance systems. The numerical strength of these pathways validates the integration of intangible cultural aspects, such as emotional bonds and spiritual commitments, into evidence-based heritage policy.

4.3. Qualitative insights: Interviews and narratives

In parallel, 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders across the heritage cluster. These included senior monks, temple caretakers, women artisans, youth volunteers, local historians, and commune-level administrators. Transcripts were coded thematically using Atlas.ti, revealing recurring patterns of cultural discourse and symbolic reasoning.

Emergent themes and illustrative quotes:

Sacred attachment and “Living spirituality”

“Chúng tôi không chỉ gìn giữ chùa chiền, mà là giữ gìn linh hồn của tổ tiên trong từng gốc cây, phiến đá. Di sản là đạo lý, không chỉ là tài sản.” (Resident, Côn Sơn)

“We are not just preserving temples but the soul of our ancestors in every tree root and stone. Heritage is a moral principle, not merely property.”

This narrative underscores that heritage is viewed not as static property but as embodied ancestral ethics, a site where rituals, spirituality, and moral responsibility coalesce. These views reflect the Trúc Lâm Zen Buddhist ethos, where nature, silence, and emptiness are sacred.

Heritage as moral commons “Không phải di sản của nhà nước hay của khách du lịch, nó là của cả làng, của từng người dân.”

(Elder monk, Yên Tử)

“Heritage does not belong to the state or tourists; it belongs to the whole village, to every villager.” Rather than state-centric patrimony, interviewees envisioned heritage as a moral commons, shared, co-governed, and emotionally owned. This aligns with recent redefinitions of “living heritage” in UNESCO discourse.

Youth disengagement and intergenerational tensions

“Giới trẻ giờ đi du lịch là để chụp ảnh, ít ai còn hiểu nghĩa lễ.” (Local teacher, Bắc Ninh)

“Young people now travel just to take pictures; few understand the meaning of rituals.”

Concerns about ritual disconnection and visual consumerism (e.g., selfie tourism) highlight a generational drift. Yet some interviewees saw this as a call to design intergenerational learning, such as digital storytelling workshops or ritual reenactment festivals.

Participation and empowerment gaps

“Mọi kế hoạch đều do cấp trên đưa xuống. Người dân ít được hỏi ý kiến.” (Homestay operator, Hải Phòng)

“All plans are handed down from above. Locals are rarely consulted.”

Respondents voiced frustrations about top-down governance, with little participatory input in heritage planning. Co-creation, they stressed, must move beyond consultation to genuine affective and strategic ownership.

Multiple narratives described tourism not merely as sightseeing but as transformative engagement, pilgrimage, meditation, mindful eating, and dialogue. For instance, a monk narrated a tour program where visitors practiced sitting meditation and forest cleaning as acts of ecological mindfulness.

Additionally, several interviewees emphasized that the power of heritage lies in its experiential transmission, not through museums or monuments, but through lived practices: reciting sutras, cooking vegetarian meals, and communal silence. These experiential modalities sustain affective bonds and motivate long-term care.

4.4. Integrated interpretation

By triangulating SEM outputs with rich qualitative narratives, the findings affirm the Living Heritage Participation framework as both empirically valid and ethically robust. Emotional-symbolic capital functions as

a key enabler, bridging material practices (e.g., conservation, tourism services) and intangible values (e.g., spirituality, memory).

Sustainable heritage in Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc is thus less about financial returns and more about cultural continuity, ethical tourism, and communal well-being. In the wake of the 2025 UNESCO inscription, this study proposes that policymaking should prioritize spiritual empowerment, youth inclusion, and bottom-up participation to preserve both the form and spirit of the sacred landscape.

Finally, this integrated framework highlights that heritage sustainability is not a technocratic outcome but a moral process. Its endurance depends on shared meaning-making, not just infrastructure funding. The role of women, elders, and spiritually inspired youth deserves more attention in future participatory planning. These actors embody continuity, resilience, and ethical stewardship, the real pillars of living heritage.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and deepen the theoretical understanding of community engagement as a critical pillar of sustainable heritage tourism. Drawing on the lived experiences and symbolic attachments of local residents within the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc cultural cluster, the research highlights how community-driven approaches extend far beyond procedural participation to embrace emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions of heritage.

5.1. Reaffirming the role of emotional and symbolic engagement

The quantitative results demonstrated statistically significant pathways linking community engagement to emotional attachment and subsequently to sustainability outcomes, validating the conceptual framework drawn from Soini and Birkeland [36]. Importantly, the interviews enriched these findings by revealing a profound sense of sacred responsibility among residents, often articulated through metaphors of guardianship (“giữ linh hồn tổ tiên”, guarding the ancestral soul) and intergenerational continuity (“giá trị tâm linh sống” - living spiritual values).

This underscores that sustainable tourism in heritage sites is not merely a matter of economic planning or environmental protection but is deeply rooted in moral commons, shared values, rituals, and identity claims that bind communities to their landscape. Such symbolic dimensions cannot be engineered from above but require authentic recognition of local cultural systems. The affective infrastructure of heritage is as vital as the physical one, and emotions constitute a legitimate epistemology in heritage governance.

Furthermore, these affective bonds appear to generate what we term resonant stewardship, a form of care grounded in both ancestral reverence and future responsibility. This mode of engagement is both spiritual and strategic, producing durable networks of cultural resilience. As one interviewee reflected, “mỗi mùa lễ, mình không chỉ phục vụ khách mà là đang dâng lễ tổ tiên” (during each festival season, I’m not just serving tourists but making offerings to our ancestors).

5.2. Aligning with UNESCO’s living heritage approach and the SDGs

The case of Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc aligns strongly with UNESCO’s 2003 convention on the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage and resonates with sustainable development goals (SDGs) such as SDG 11.4 (Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage) and SDG 8.9 (Promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products).

The findings show that heritage as a living process, involving rituals, storytelling, spiritual practice, and intergenerational dialogue, can foster local capacity for sustainable development if communities are meaningfully empowered. Rather than viewing heritage as static property to be preserved, the study affirms a processual view: communities not only preserve heritage but continuously reinterpret and transmit it. This interpretation aligns with the proposition that cultural sustainability involves nurturing dynamic cultural reproduction and moral belonging.

In particular, Trúc Lâm Zen Buddhist teachings serve as a cultural-spiritual foundation that guides environmental ethics, non-violence, mindfulness, and community cohesion. These localized philosophies offer culturally embedded pathways to implement sustainability, grounded in local knowledge systems rather than exogenous metrics.

This also implies a revision of conventional “capacity building” schemes: rather than injecting technical tools, development actors must co-design processes that valorize local cosmologies and vernacular ethics. Thus, Trúc Lâm ethics offer a unique sustainability framework, rooted in the epistemology of “tùy duyên bất biến”, adaptation without losing essence.

5.3. Comparative perspectives: Luang Prabang and Kyoto

Comparison with international heritage sites reveals both convergence and divergence. In Luang Prabang, King (2010) highlights how UNESCO-supported participatory governance frameworks enabled community involvement in zoning, tourism planning, and site maintenance. While successful at a formal level, critiques suggest that local voices were sometimes marginalized by elite actors and donor-driven agendas.

In Kyoto, the focus has been on sustaining intangible cultural practices (e.g., tea ceremony, Zen rituals), and community education programs emphasize the transmission of "cultural mindsets" to younger generations [37]. Unlike Luang Prabang’s externally mediated participation, Kyoto demonstrates endogenous cultural resilience driven by social institutions and religious networks.

Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc lies somewhere in between: it lacks the institutionalized participatory architecture of Luang Prabang but possesses strong endogenous symbolic resources akin to Kyoto. The spiritual centrality of Trần Nhân Tông and Thiền phái Trúc Lâm offers a unique moral axis around which participatory heritage tourism could be built, provided that policy frameworks are receptive. Hence, future strategies could hybridize institutional tools from Luang Prabang with value-centric education from Kyoto.

Moreover, this comparative insight urges policymakers to embrace site pluralism, a recognition that heritage governance models must be adapted to specific cultural ecologies rather than exported wholesale.

5.4. Challenges in local empowerment and policy disconnect

Despite widespread local support for the UNESCO nomination, interviews revealed a gap between formal recognition and actual empowerment. Many stakeholders felt excluded from top-down planning, echoing lower rungs of participation (“tokenism” rather than “citizen control”). This mismatch erodes trust and limits the long-term effectiveness of sustainable tourism programs.

The findings suggest that genuine empowerment involves not only inclusion in consultation but also the transfer of decision-making authority, heritage knowledge valorization, and capacity building. Without these, “participation” risks becoming a rhetorical device rather than a transformative practice.

This gap also reflects broader challenges in the decentralization of heritage governance in Vietnam, where provincial and central bodies often dominate agenda-setting. The institutionalization of local voices requires reforms in planning law, funding structures, and monitoring frameworks that currently favor technocratic control over bottom-up agency.

As one elder in Đông Triều noted, “Chúng tôi được mời họp, nhưng ý kiến có được lắng nghe không thì chưa chắc” (We are invited to meetings, but whether our opinions are actually heard is another matter). This disconnect diminishes the legitimacy of participatory processes and weakens community morale.

5.5. Policy implications: Toward a moral commons approach

This research calls for a *Living Heritage Participation Model* grounded in five key principles:

1. Recognizing emotional ownership: Formal heritage planning should incorporate mechanisms to acknowledge and institutionalize residents’ symbolic claims, especially in sacred landscapes.

2. Decentralized co-governance: Empower local communities through heritage councils, spiritual advisory boards, and participatory monitoring tools that reflect local ontologies and rhythms.
3. Intergenerational education: Design programs that foster youth engagement with heritage not as consumers (e.g., tourists) but as inheritors and co-stewards of living culture. School curricula, ritual apprenticeships, and digital storytelling can be effective vehicles.
4. Cultural entrepreneurship support: Create inclusive platforms for local artisans, monks, and community groups to benefit economically and symbolically from heritage tourism. Support policies could include microgrants, co-op branding, and tourism-linked value chains.
5. Cross-site learning and regional collaboration: Establish policy dialogues between Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc and other World Heritage sites in Asia to exchange best practices in participatory governance and cultural sustainability. Mechanisms such as regional forums, joint research, and heritage diplomacy could enhance collective resilience.

To visualize the integrative framework proposed by this research, the following diagram illustrates the five foundational pillars of the *Living Heritage Participation Model* and their dynamic interconnections within the context of Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc heritage governance (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Living heritage participation model: a community-centered framework for cultural sustainability;
Source: Author's own work

This model highlights that sustainable heritage tourism emerges not from isolated interventions but from the synergistic interaction between emotional ownership, decentralized governance, intergenerational transmission, cultural entrepreneurship, and translocal collaboration. It affirms the need for policies that go beyond technical planning and embrace the affective, symbolic, and moral dimensions of heritage stewardship.

Ultimately, this study advances a redefinition of sustainable heritage tourism not as a product to be consumed but as a moral commons to be co-stewarded. The case of Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc demonstrates that symbolic values, emotional resonance, and spiritual ethics are not “soft” variables but foundational forces in making heritage development equitable, durable, and dignified.

As Vietnam steps into a new era of cultural policy following the UNESCO inscription of Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc in 2025, there is a unique opportunity to institutionalize participatory and spiritually anchored governance models. This would not only fulfill global sustainability mandates but also honor the profound ancestral vision embedded in Vietnamese Zen traditions.

Comparative insights from other Asian sacred heritage sites reinforce this study's findings. For instance, in Bhaktapur (Nepal), ritual calendars structure visitor access, while in Kyoto (Japan), machizukuri practices decentralize heritage governance. Similarly, the Cham communities in Ninh Thuận have adopted community-based tourism to safeguard intangible religious identity amidst development pressures [38], [39]. These cases

underscore that heritage sustainability depends not merely on infrastructure or funding but on lived cosmologies and communal ethics, highlighting the broader applicability of the *Living Heritage Participation Model* developed herein.

By integrating lived spirituality, symbolic stewardship, and intergenerational ethics, this model offers not only a roadmap for Vietnam but also a globally relevant blueprint for sustaining heritage in the Anthropocene.

6. Conclusion

This study advances the theoretical discourse on participatory heritage governance by validating the *Living Heritage Participation Model* through a robust mixed-methods design. It enriches the literature by integrating emotional-symbolic dimensions into sustainability studies. Findings support the institutionalization of co-management councils, participatory monitoring systems, and youth-focused heritage education. Further research should explore multi-site comparisons and longitudinal impacts of community empowerment on cultural transmission. The geographic focus on a single cluster may constrain generalizability; seasonal timing may bias perceptions; future research should address these limitations through cross-site studies and multi-seasonal fieldwork.

This study has established that community engagement, when rooted in emotional attachment, symbolic resonance, and collective moral responsibility, functions as a cornerstone of sustainable tourism in World Heritage contexts. Focusing on the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiệm - Côn Sơn - Kiệp Bạc cultural landscape in northern Vietnam, the research offers substantive empirical and theoretical contributions to participatory heritage governance, the concept of living heritage, and the evolving discourse of cultural sustainability.

The quantitative findings underscore that emotional bonds between local communities and sacred landscapes significantly influence their willingness to engage in heritage stewardship and tourism co-management. These bonds are not merely affective or nostalgic but are deeply grounded in the spiritual, ancestral, and moral imaginaries of place. Complementing this, qualitative insights revealed that local actors, including monks, homestay owners, and long-term residents, frame heritage not as an artifact of the past but as a “living spiritual value,” sustained through ritual continuity, place-based ethics, and communal narratives. This mixed-methods design substantiates a shift from heritage as a static object of preservation to a dynamic, locally-embedded process of meaning-making, ethical commitment, and intergenerational transmission.

In conceptual terms, the research advances the Living Heritage Participation model, which foregrounds five interdependent pillars: emotional ownership, decentralized co-governance, intergenerational education, cultural entrepreneurship, and translocal collaboration. This framework reflects a reorientation of sustainable tourism from transactional models focused on economic return or visitor numbers toward relational models centered on shared values, co-creation, and cultural resilience. In the Anthropocene, where material vulnerabilities intersect with cultural fragmentation, such a model affirms that sustainability is not solely infrastructural or ecological but also symbolic and ethical.

The model also aligns with broader theoretical movements advocating for the recognition of heritage as a moral commons, a shared reservoir of values, rituals, and responsibilities. By positioning local communities as co-stewards rather than passive beneficiaries, the framework strengthens discourses of cultural rights, decolonization, and participatory development. Furthermore, by integrating spirituality and emotion into heritage governance, it challenges dominant paradigms that prioritize technocratic planning and quantifiable outputs over affective investments and lived ethics.

Practically, this study recommends that policy frameworks for World Heritage management adopt inclusive governance mechanisms that institutionalize emotional and symbolic claims. These include heritage councils with community representation, spiritual advisory boards, and participatory monitoring systems rooted in local cosmologies. The research also highlights the need for heritage education initiatives that reposition youth not as passive consumers of tradition but as active transmitters and co-creators of heritage meaning. Tools such as

ritual apprenticeships, vernacular storytelling, and intergenerational digital archiving are especially valuable. To translate these insights into actionable strategies, this study recommends the establishment of formal co-management councils comprising local authorities, monastic representatives, and community leaders to jointly oversee heritage governance. Capacity-building workshops should be organized to strengthen local skills in participatory planning, tourism service quality, and heritage interpretation. A dedicated community heritage conservation fund, co-managed by local governments and temple boards, could be created to finance maintenance, restoration, and cultural programming, ensuring shared ownership and financial sustainability.

The comparative lens further reinforces these insights. Cases from Luang Prabang, Kyoto and Bhaktapur show that heritage sustainability is most enduring when communities are recognized as moral agents embedded in long-standing symbolic systems. These examples demonstrate that heritage governance cannot be universally templated but must adapt to local cultural ecologies. In each case, the vitality of heritage arises from its resonance within community life, not from its commodification or external aesthetic.

Methodologically, this study contributes a validated mixed-methods approach that bridges the epistemological divide between quantitative structural equation modelling (SEM) and qualitative thematic analysis. This allows for the triangulation of “soft” constructs, such as affective resonance, spiritual stewardship, and moral engagement, that are often marginalized in mainstream tourism and heritage discourse. It also offers a pathway to integrate intangible cultural dimensions into evidence-based policymaking without reducing them to abstracted indicators.

Nonetheless, limitations remain. The geographic scope, focused exclusively on the Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc cluster, may limit the model’s immediate applicability across other sociocultural contexts. Future research should consider multi-site comparisons or longitudinal case studies to assess the adaptability of the model, particularly in areas where religious cosmologies and spiritual landscapes form the core of local identity. Potential sites include Buddhist heritage clusters in Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal, where similar dynamics of sacred geography, ritual practice, and cultural continuity are present. Future research should also explore comparative longitudinal studies on the socio-cultural impacts of sustainable tourism, incorporating other Vietnamese sacred heritage clusters as well as Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal, to evaluate the adaptability and global relevance of the Living Heritage participation model.

The study also recognizes structural constraints in the realization of participatory governance. While community commitment is demonstrably strong, its institutional translation depends on political will, legal reform, and the redistribution of resources and decision-making authority. The research surfaces persistent gaps between community expectations and current heritage governance structures. Bridging these divides necessitates more than technical fixes; it calls for epistemic humility, ethical listening, and a sincere engagement with local knowledge systems by both governmental and non-governmental actors.

Ultimately, this study affirms that the sustainability of World Heritage sites is not merely an outcome of institutional mandates, funding mechanisms, or global recognition. It is contingent upon the lived attachments, ethical commitments, and symbolic investments of those who inhabit and interpret the cultural landscape. As Vietnam enters a new phase of heritage policy following the UNESCO inscription of Yên Tử - Vĩnh Nghiêm - Côn Sơn - Kiếp Bạc, there lies a timely opportunity to institutionalize a governance model that is spiritually grounded, socially inclusive, and ecologically attuned.

By adopting the Living Heritage Participation model, Vietnam can pioneer an integrated framework for cultural sustainability, one that is rooted in indigenous spiritual grammars, adapted to local governance ecosystems, and resonant with global sustainability goals. This approach has the potential not only to advance domestic heritage preservation but also to offer globally relevant insights into the role of affect, ritual, and co-stewardship in sustaining cultural legacies.

In conclusion, the study contributes to a growing scholarly call for the decolonization and humanization of heritage governance. It proposes a shift in paradigm from heritage as a managed asset to heritage as a moral

commons; from procedural consultation to intergenerational co-authorship; and from technocratic optimization to cultural flourishing. Through this lens, sustainable tourism becomes not merely a tool for development but a stage for ethical renewal, community empowerment, and the ongoing re-enchantment of place.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that she has no known financial or non-financial competing interests in any material discussed in this paper.

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This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this study.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Survey instrument

Section 1: Demographics

Age Gender
Place of residence educational background Occupation
Duration of residence in/near the heritage site

Section 2: Awareness of heritage values (5-point Likert scale: Strongly disagree – Strongly agree)

I am aware that our heritage site holds national and cultural significance.
The values of the site are integral to our community’s cultural identity. The heritage site plays a role in shaping our collective memory.
I understand the spiritual meaning embedded in the site’s traditions.

Section 3: Community engagement

My community has opportunities to participate in decisions related to heritage governance.
I feel that my voice is heard in matters concerning heritage preservation. Community members are involved in co-managing the heritage site.
There is a sense of shared responsibility toward safeguarding the site.

Section 4: Emotional and spiritual attachment

I feel spiritually connected to the heritage site.
The site is a vital part of my personal and cultural identity. I have strong emotional bonds with this sacred landscape.
Participating in heritage rituals enhances my sense of belonging.

Section 5: Perceived sustainability outcomes

I am loyal to the values that the heritage site represents.
I believe that sustaining the site benefits future generations. The site contributes to strengthening our local identity.
The governance of the site reflects principles of fairness and inclusivity.

Appendix B. Interview protocol (Semi-structured)

Background of respondent Age, gender, education

Role in the community (e.g., monk, homestay owner, youth volunteer) Interview domains

Perceptions of Heritage Significance

How do you define the meaning of this heritage site?
What values does the site represent to you personally and collectively?

Emotional and spiritual connections

Can you describe any emotional, spiritual, or symbolic bond you feel with the site?