

Emerging Trends and Best Practices in Stakeholder Collaboration for Innovation in Cultural Heritage Tourism: Perspectives from Developing Countries

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Abstract

Cultural heritage tourism has become a key area for economic development and cultural preservation in developing countries. However, many heritage destinations face challenges such as limited infrastructure, fragmented stakeholder coordination, and exclusion of local communities from decision-making. This paper investigates how multi-stakeholder collaboration and innovation can address these issues and support sustainable growth in the sector. The research uses a systematic literature review method, analyzing 135 academic and policy documents published between 2000 and 2025. The reviewed studies focused on stakeholder roles, participatory governance, community-based tourism, and the use of digital technologies in heritage interpretation. Results reveal that collaborative models grounded in trust, shared goals, and inclusive planning are more likely to succeed. Technological tools like augmented reality (AR), digital storytelling, and virtual platforms were found to improve visitor engagement and cultural education, especially when developed with local input. The use of AR at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, for example, led to a 25% increase in youth engagement. Case studies from countries like South Africa, Indonesia, and Italy show that community-led innovation and cross-sector partnerships enhance both authenticity and economic outcomes. However, challenges such as power imbalances, limited digital literacy, and governance gaps persist. The review identifies best practices including value co-creation, equitable benefit-sharing, and capacity-building. The study concludes that stakeholder collaboration is not just beneficial but essential for making cultural heritage tourism more resilient, inclusive, and adaptive to global shifts such as digital transformation and climate change.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Tourism, Stakeholder Collaboration, Sustainable Tourism Development, Community-Based Tourism, Digital Innovation, Augmented Reality (AR), Participatory Governance, Developing Countries, Heritage Site Management, Inclusive Tourism, Cultural Preservation, Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships, Digital Storytelling, Resilient Tourism, Heritage Interpretation, Local Community Engagement

Glossary

NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
NMMZ	National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe
CAMPFIRE	Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources
VR	Virtual Reality
AR	Augmented Reality
GCT	Gonarezhou Conservation Trust

Introduction

Cultural heritage tourism, characterized by travel that engages with the historical, cultural, and social fabric of a destination, has become an essential component of the global tourism landscape. It serves as a vehicle for preserving cultural narratives, fostering intercultural understanding, and supporting local economies (Makandwa et al., 2023). Activities in this sector typically include visits to heritage landmarks, museums, traditional festivals, and other culturally significant spaces that highlight the uniqueness of a region's identity and traditions. As highlighted by Eremenko et al., (2025), cultural heritage tourism contributes nearly 40% of global tourism revenue, playing a critical role in protecting both tangible and intangible heritage assets that are increasingly vulnerable to the forces of globalization. In the context of developing countries such as Zimbabwe, cultural heritage tourism represents a key strategic focus within national tourism frameworks (Thompson et al, 2023). Iconic destinations like the Great Zimbabwe Ruins and Victoria Falls attract both domestic and international visitors, underpinning the country's efforts to position itself as a cultural tourism hub (Muchenje et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the sector faces significant structural and operational challenges. These include insufficient infrastructure, inadequate investment, and limited involvement of local communities in planning and governance (Maunganidze, 2025). Comparable issues are evident in both developing and developed nations for example, in Italy and India, authorities must constantly balance heritage conservation with the pressures of mass tourism (Aronsson et al.,

2024). Effective and sustainable development in cultural heritage tourism increasingly depends on multi-stakeholder collaboration. Public agencies, private sector actors, non-governmental organizations, local communities, and tourists each play distinct yet interconnected roles (Gwerevende, 2023). However, diverging priorities, such as the tension between economic gain and cultural preservation, often complicate collaborative efforts. In Zimbabwe, historical patterns of community exclusion from tourism decision-making have undermined social equity and weakened local ownership of heritage assets (Muchenje et al., 2025). Conversely, models of community-based tourism in countries like South Africa demonstrate that inclusive collaboration can lead to more equitable and resilient outcomes (Makoni, 2025). This research investigates how innovation and stakeholder collaboration can serve as catalysts for sustainable growth in cultural heritage tourism, particularly in developing country contexts. Technological innovations, such as augmented reality and digital storytelling, are increasingly being employed to enhance visitor experiences while maintaining cultural authenticity. Examples include augmented reality tools at heritage sites like Great Zimbabwe and digital reconstructions of heritage sites in other regions, such as Japan. The study explores the dynamics of stakeholder cooperation, evaluates the potential of digital tools and community-led initiatives, and identifies effective strategies that align heritage conservation with economic viability. The research is particularly timely given the accelerated digitalization of tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also spotlighted the critical role of local communities in shaping tourism governance. Through this lens, the study aims to generate insights and best practices that can inform the development of more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable cultural heritage tourism frameworks in Zimbabwe and similar settings.

Research Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the current trends and innovations shaping cultural heritage tourism in developing countries, with a focus on digital technologies and community-based approaches.
2. To identify the roles and contributions of various stakeholders, including government entities, local communities, private sector actors, NGOs, and tourists, in shaping sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

3. To evaluate the challenges and barriers to effective stakeholder collaboration, particularly in contexts characterized by limited infrastructure, governance gaps, and socio-economic disparities.
4. To explore best practices in stakeholder engagement and technological innovation that can enhance the appeal, sustainability, and inclusivity of cultural heritage tourism.

Statement of the problem

Cultural heritage tourism is globally recognized as a vital contributor to economic growth, cultural preservation, and community development, generating nearly 40% of worldwide tourism revenue (Rodríguez-Morales et al., 2025). In Zimbabwe, while this sector accounts for approximately 12% of national tourism income, its potential remains largely underutilized. Only 30% of the country's heritage sites offer adequate visitor infrastructure, underscoring critical gaps in service provision and strategic investment (Muchenje et al., 2025). Despite the sector's recognized importance, several systemic barriers continue to undermine its sustainability and inclusiveness. Challenges such as fragmented governance structures, unequal stakeholder influence, and the marginalization of local communities in decision-making processes have impeded progress toward resilient cultural tourism models. For instance, top-down planning approaches have sidelined local custodians of heritage, weakening both community empowerment and site stewardship. Technological innovations, such as augmented reality and digital storytelling, have shown promise in enhancing visitor engagement, evidenced by a 25% increase in youth interest at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. However, broader implementation is constrained by inadequate digital infrastructure, limited human capacity, and poor inter-institutional coordination. At the same time, climate-related threats, including accelerated erosion at sensitive sites like Matobo Hills (a 15% increase reported in recent years), further highlight the need for adaptive and collaborative solutions (Chiwaridzo et al., 2024). While case studies from regions such as South Africa and Indonesia demonstrate that inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships can foster more equitable and sustainable tourism development (Basyar et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2024), Zimbabwe and other developing countries' progress remains limited by fragmented collaborations and inconsistent policy frameworks. Without deliberate efforts to integrate innovation and stakeholder engagement, Zimbabwe's cultural heritage tourism risks stagnating, jeopardizing not only economic opportunity but also the integrity and continuity of its cultural legacy. This study addresses these concerns by exploring how stakeholder collaboration, combined with

innovation, can be harnessed to improve the resilience, inclusiveness, and appeal of cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe and comparable developing contexts.

Literature Review

Stakeholder Collaboration in Cultural Heritage Tourism in developing countries

Cultural heritage tourism has become a dynamic field where the intersection of heritage conservation and sustainable development necessitates inclusive, well-structured stakeholder collaboration (Frederick et al., 2024). In this multifaceted ecosystem, government agencies, local communities, private enterprises, NGOs, and international organizations interact to safeguard cultural resources while simultaneously promoting socio-economic advancement (Iwasaki et al., 2023). The success of such initiatives often hinges on the quality of collaboration, particularly the establishment of equitable partnerships that address the sometimes competing objectives of cultural preservation, economic development, and community empowerment (Ottaviani et al., 2024). Contemporary discourse advocates a shift from symbolic participation to authentic power-sharing frameworks, emphasizing governance models where decision-making is decentralized and reflective of the rights, knowledge systems, and aspirations of local stakeholders (Aronsson et al., 2024; Munyima, 2023). This shift recognizes cultural heritage as a living, evolving tradition rather than a static product for tourist consumption, an understanding essential for fostering sustainable, resilient tourism models. In Zimbabwe, heritage sites such as the Great Zimbabwe Monument and Victoria Falls offer instructive examples of the promise and pitfalls of stakeholder collaboration. Co-management efforts at Great Zimbabwe, led by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), have included community representatives in planning processes (Muchenje et al., 2025). However, studies highlight ongoing friction over benefit-sharing arrangements and restricted access to ancestral lands, reflecting deeper tensions between institutional mandates and indigenous cultural rights (Simakani et al., 2024; Tapfuma et al., 2024). Similar tensions have surfaced at Victoria Falls, where the interests of private tourism developers sometimes conflict with local spiritual and ecological values (Hurombo et al., 2022). Such challenges have fuelled calls for improved conflict resolution mechanisms, transparency, and inclusive dialogue. Digital platforms have started to bridge communication gaps community radio, mobile apps, and social media tools now enable rural voices to be heard in national and regional heritage governance debates (Moyo et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the adoption of digital tools, including augmented and virtual reality applications, is reshaping visitor experiences. Yet, these innovations also raise questions around cultural authenticity,

intellectual property, and access inequality (Chitima, 2025; Muchenje et al., 2025). At the Khami Ruins, for example, digital storytelling initiatives have engaged local youth in documenting oral traditions (Mlilo et al., 2024). While these efforts empower communities and attract new audiences, disputes over content ownership and commercial use persist. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated digital transformation in heritage tourism, with platforms like Google Arts & Culture enabling remote engagement and alternative revenue streams (Mutanda, 2022). Nevertheless, the digital divide remains a barrier, especially for rural communities lacking adequate infrastructure or digital literacy. Climate change presents another layer of complexity. Increased weather volatility and environmental degradation pose existential risks to heritage sites (Dube et al., 2024). At Matobo Hills, collaborative climate adaptation initiatives involving meteorologists and traditional spiritual leaders exemplify how blending indigenous knowledge with scientific insight can yield contextually relevant strategies (Chiwaridzo et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2016). These examples reinforce the importance of inclusive and culturally grounded approaches to environmental and heritage management.

Globally, several models demonstrate the value of inclusive stakeholder engagement. South Africa's !Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre showcases how cultural tourism can be a vehicle for indigenous empowerment, combining heritage interpretation with skills training (Makandwa et al., 2023). Similarly, India's Taj Mahal conservation program integrates community-based artisan cooperatives and smart tourism tools like time-based entry to manage mass visitation (Ichumbaki et al., 2023). In Portugal, regenerative tourism models are pushing the frontier beyond sustainability toward ecological restoration and social renewal (Ramaano, 2024). For Zimbabwe and other developing contexts, to harness the full benefits of stakeholder collaboration, enabling policy and governance reforms are essential. These may include the legal recognition of traditional custodianship, the design of equitable benefit-sharing frameworks, and long-term capacity-building investments for community-based tourism enterprises (Dube et al., 2024).

Emerging strategies such as blockchain for revenue transparency, AI for crowd flow management, and participatory cultural impact assessments signal the potential for technological tools to strengthen accountability and stakeholder alignment (Amadu et al., 2025). Ongoing developments like the proposed Cultural Hub at Great Zimbabwe, supported by UNESCO, represent efforts to institutionalize such innovations. However, successful

integration depends on embedding these technologies within ethical frameworks that prioritize cultural sovereignty, intergenerational equity, and participatory governance (Gohori et al., 2024). True collaboration necessitates treating local communities not as passive beneficiaries but as equal partners throughout the design, implementation, and monitoring phases. This principle is exemplified by the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust, which emerged from a decade-long trust-building process and now serves as a benchmark for inclusive heritage governance in Zimbabwe (Zhou, 2024). Ultimately, the sustainability of cultural heritage tourism will not be measured solely by visitor counts or economic returns but by its ability to fortify cultural resilience, promote social inclusion, and foster environmentally responsible practices (Frederick et al., 2024). As globalization intensifies, so does the urgency to reconcile modern development pressures with the need to honor local traditions, cultural integrity, and long-standing stewardship systems (Gwerevende, 2023). Navigating these tensions requires flexible, transparent governance structures that reflect a diversity of voices and values. Zimbabwe and other developing nations stand to benefit greatly by learning from both domestic trials and global innovations. At the heart of this transformation is a paradigm shift: one that positions collaborative stewardship, inclusive innovation, and cultural respect as pillars of a truly sustainable heritage tourism future.

Methodology

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to investigate emerging trends and best practices in stakeholder collaboration and innovation within the domain of cultural heritage tourism, particularly from the perspective of developing countries. The methodology was structured in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, ensuring transparency, replicability, and rigor throughout the review process. A comprehensive and strategic search was conducted across ten prominent academic and scholarly databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online. The time frame for publication was limited to the years 2000 to 2025, capturing both foundational and contemporary literature relevant to the study's objectives. Search terms were formulated using Boolean operators to enhance precision, combining keywords such as "cultural heritage tourism," "stakeholder collaboration," "community engagement," "technological innovation," and "sustainable tourism development." These terms were selected to reflect the study's core themes and filtered to return only English-language publications. While this language criterion supported consistency in analysis, it is acknowledged as a

limitation that may have excluded valuable contributions published in other languages. To ensure the relevance and quality of sources, the screening process followed a multi-stage protocol. Initially, titles and abstracts were reviewed based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1), which prioritized studies focusing on collaborative governance models, community participation, digital tools in heritage interpretation, or innovation in tourism sustainability. Grey literature, including government reports, UNESCO case studies, and policy briefs, was also included to enrich contextual understanding, particularly where academic data was limited. Eligible studies were then subjected to full-text analysis to extract data on stakeholder roles, collaboration mechanisms, technological applications, and contextual challenges in cultural heritage tourism. Attention was given to documenting patterns across regions, especially within the Global South, and identifying interventions with proven or potential scalability. The data synthesis phase involved thematic coding and comparative analysis, aimed at identifying emerging models of practice, cross-cutting barriers, and policy-relevant insights that inform sustainable and inclusive heritage tourism development.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Topic Focus	Studies exploring stakeholder collaboration, innovation (for example, digital technologies), and best practices in cultural heritage tourism, particularly in developing countries.	Studies not related to cultural heritage tourism or lacking focus on stakeholder dynamics or innovation.
Type of Study	Empirical or conceptual studies, including peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and case-based research relevant to cultural heritage tourism.	Opinion pieces, blog posts, promotional content, or non-scholarly commentary lacking academic merit.
Timeframe	Studies published between 2000 and 2025, capturing both historical context and recent innovations in stakeholder collaboration and tourism development.	Studies published prior to 2000 or post-2025, falling outside the defined analytical scope.
Language	Publications written in English to maintain analytical consistency and accessibility of content.	Studies in languages other than English without reliable translations.

Methodological Rigor	Research employing clear methodological frameworks (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) and providing empirical data or theoretical insights.	Studies lacking transparency in research design, data sources, or analytical approach.
Relevance	Studies addressing digital transformation, community-based tourism, cross-sector partnerships, sustainability, or ethical governance in cultural heritage contexts.	Studies that do not examine emerging trends, innovation, or collaborative practices in heritage tourism.
Geographic Scope	Research focusing on developing countries or emerging economies, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with cultural heritage relevance.	Research focusing solely on developed nations or tourism types unrelated to cultural heritage.
Grey Literature	High-quality reports, policy briefs, and strategic documents from recognized organizations (for example, UNESCO, UNWTO, ICOMOS) related to cultural heritage tourism.	Informal, unverified, or non-institutional sources (for example, personal blogs, non-reviewed online articles).

Source: Secondary Data (2025).

Following the selection of relevant sources, the full-text articles underwent a structured thematic analysis guided by a standardized data extraction framework. This framework was designed to identify recurring patterns across several analytical dimensions, including geographic distribution, research design, and thematic concentration. A particular emphasis was placed on African case studies, for example, especially those pertaining to Zimbabwe's cultural heritage sites, such as the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, due to their relevance to the study's context and objectives. In terms of geographical focus, the literature predominantly addressed contexts in the Global South, where stakeholder collaboration often operates under unique socio-political and infrastructural conditions. Within these settings, cultural heritage tourism is deeply intertwined with issues of access, equity, and localized forms of knowledge. These contextual factors made African examples particularly insightful for exploring stakeholder engagement and innovation (refer Table 2).

Table 2: Selection Criteria and Document Group

Selection Criteria	Document Group	Number of Documents
Years	2000–2010	10 (for example, <i>Mind the Gap</i> , <i>Global Production Networks</i>)
	2011–2020	20 (for example, <i>Green Grabbing</i> , <i>Smart Cities in Europe</i>)
	2021–2025	100 (Majority of entries, for example, <i>Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in Binjai City</i> , <i>Building Information Modelling</i>)
Total Authors	Single-authored	25 (for example, <i>Orbelyan</i> , <i>Gevorg</i> ; <i>Galli</i> , <i>Antonio</i>)
	Co-authored	105 (Most entries have 2+ authors)
Geographical Areas	Zimbabwe	12 (for example, <i>Great Zimbabwe</i> studies)
	Other African countries	15 (Nigeria, Tanzania, Ethiopia, etc.)
	Asia	50 (Indonesia: 25+, Malaysia: 8, India: 10, etc.)
	Latin America	5 (Peru, Mexico)
	Europe	20 (Croatia, Italy, Norway, etc.)
	Global/Transnational	10 (Multiple countries, UNESCO studies)
Research Design	Qualitative	90 (Case studies, stakeholder analyses)
	Quantitative	25 (Surveys, choice experiments)
	Mixed methods	15
Thematic Focus	Stakeholder collaboration	60 (for example, titles with "multi-stakeholder")
	Cultural heritage preservation	50
	Sustainable tourism	30
	Innovation in tourism	20 (BIM, digital tech)
	Community resilience	10
Area of Use	Academic research	110
	Policy development	15

Source: Secondary data (2025)

The methodological characteristics of the reviewed studies revealed a strong orientation toward qualitative case-based approaches. Many articles employed ethnographic methods, in-depth interviews, or participatory research, which are especially suited for examining the complex social and institutional dynamics that underpin stakeholder collaboration in heritage tourism. These qualitative insights allowed for a nuanced understanding of how various actors, ranging from local communities to government agencies, navigate issues of power, benefit-sharing, and cultural integrity. The literature also consistently reflected three overarching themes: the integration of digital technologies to enhance heritage experiences, the rise of community-driven heritage management models, and the role of collaborative financing mechanisms in sustaining large-scale heritage projects. To ensure analytical rigor, peer-reviewed journal articles were given precedence due to their methodological transparency and academic credibility. However, these were supplemented by grey literature from authoritative sources such as UNESCO and the UNWTO, which provided practical insights into policy implementation, capacity-building initiatives, and international best practices. To deepen the analysis, three illustrative case studies were selected for their diverse approaches to stakeholder collaboration. The first focused on Zimbabwe's use of augmented reality at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, which illustrates how digital partnerships can enhance both preservation and visitor engagement. The second explored the !Kwa ttu San Heritage Centre in South Africa, where indigenous leadership and community empowerment form the basis of the site's tourism and education model. The third examined the Colosseum restoration project in Italy, a prime example of public-private collaboration that leverages cross-sector investment for heritage conservation. Each case offered unique insights into different collaboration mechanisms, ranging from technological integration to grassroots management and strategic funding, and together, they provided a comparative lens for evaluating current practices and identifying adaptable strategies for Zimbabwe and similar developing contexts. The analysis employed mixed methods: qualitative thematic coding of collaborative practices and quantitative mapping of publication trends, supported by reference management software (Mendeley Reference Manager) and weekly team verification to ensure consistency. While providing comprehensive coverage of recent developments (2021-2025 publications constituted 77% of

sources), the methodology's limitations include potential English-language bias and the exclusion of non-traditional knowledge sources, suggesting opportunities for future multilingual and participatory research approaches.

Results

The systematic review revealed four overarching themes that collectively underscore the critical role of multi-stakeholder collaboration in fostering innovation within cultural heritage tourism. These themes emerged consistently across the selected literature, offering insights that are particularly relevant to Zimbabwe's evolving tourism landscape while also holding broader applicability to developing country contexts. The findings demonstrate that collaborative partnerships, whether between governments and local communities, public and private sectors, or cultural custodians and digital innovators, serve as catalysts for transformative practices in heritage management. Such collaborations not only enhance visitor engagement through digital tools but also improve governance structures, promote cultural equity, and support sustainable development goals. Analysis of the literature, informed by a bibliometric overview of high-impact studies (see Table 3), reveals a mix of foundational contributions and emerging perspectives. The relative citation frequency of these sources illustrates both the maturity of key theoretical frameworks and the growing interest in new models of participatory tourism governance and technological integration. Across the dataset, a clear pattern emerged: successful stakeholder collaboration is most effective when underpinned by equitable power-sharing, context-specific innovation, and sustained community involvement.

Table 3: Major Contributors to the Emerging Trends and Best Practices in Stakeholder Collaboration in Innovation in Cultural Heritage Tourism

Author(s)	Year	Topic	Country	Citations
Kollmuss, A., & Agyeman, J.	2002	Barriers to pro-environmental behaviour in sustainable practices	Not specified	5097
Henderson, J., et al.	2002	Global production networks and economic development	Not specified	1394
Fairhead, J., Leach, M., & Scoones, I.	2012	“Green Grabbing” and appropriation of nature	Not specified	1185

Scoones, I.	2009	Livelihoods perspectives in rural development	Not specified	1095
Berkes, F., & Ross, H.	2012	Community resilience and integrated approaches	Not specified	1046
Caragliu, A., et al.	2011	Smart Cities in Europe	Europe	2319
Dwyer, L., & Kim, C.	2003	Destination competitiveness indicators	Not specified	963
Sims, R.	2009	Local food and authentic sustainable tourism experiences	UK	842
Aas, C., Ladkin, A., & Fletcher, J.	2005	Stakeholder collaboration in heritage management	Laos	881
Liu, Z., Zhang, M., & Osmani, M.	2023	BIM-driven sustainable cultural heritage tourism	Multiple	17
Suryani, W.	2024	Cultural and heritage tourism trends for sustainability	Multiple	5
Mandic, A., et al.	2024	Stakeholder insights for post-crisis cultural tourism resilience	Croatia	1
Scholtz, M., et al.	2024	Unlocking intangible heritage's tourism potential	Belgium/Netherlands	0
Prasetyo, Y., et al.	2024	Cultural heritage sports tourism design (bibliometric analysis)	Indonesia	2
Shakya, M., & Vagnarelli, G.	2024	Intangible cultural heritage and innovation for rural tourism	Germany/Italy	3
Woyo, E., & Woyo, E.	2019	Cultural tourism growth in Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	16
Gurira, N., & Ngulube, P.	2016	Sustainable heritage tourism at Great Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	15

Snis, U., et al.	2021	Smart old towns and stakeholder collaboration	Norway	40
Xin, W., & Chia, L.	2015	Tourism motivation and loyalty in Macao's heritage tourism	Macao	42
Kudinova, I., & Terzi, S.	2024	Cultural heritage as Ukraine's tourism brand	Ukraine	3

Source: Secondary Data (2025)

However, the results also highlight persistent challenges, such as infrastructural limitations, digital divides, and power asymmetries, that can hinder the scalability of otherwise promising initiatives. These barriers are especially pronounced in developing regions like Zimbabwe, where resource constraints and institutional fragmentation often limit the reach and effectiveness of collaborative tourism strategies. Overall, the results affirm that meaningful innovation in cultural heritage tourism is not merely a product of technological advancement but of inclusive processes that empower all stakeholders to contribute to and benefit from tourism development. This underscores the importance of rethinking traditional governance models in favour of adaptive, cross-sectoral approaches that prioritize cultural authenticity, resilience, and shared value creation.

Collaboration as a Strategic Response to Resource Constraints

This study confirms that multi-stakeholder collaboration is not merely a theoretical ideal but a critical strategic response to persistent resource limitations within cultural heritage tourism, particularly in developing countries. In contexts such as Zimbabwe, where only 30% of heritage sites possess adequate visitor infrastructure despite the sector contributing approximately 12% to national tourism income (Manwa et al., 2024), collaborative governance emerges as both a necessity and a potential catalyst for innovation. The analysis of literature reveals that partnerships involving the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), local communities, NGOs, and private tourism operators have played instrumental roles in sustaining key heritage sites such as Great Zimbabwe and Khami Ruins (Gwerevende, 2023; Muchenje et al., 2025). These collaborations, though promising, continue to face constraints linked to uneven power dynamics, limited funding, and fragmented institutional support. The findings resonate strongly with Berkes & Ross's (2013) influential framework on community resilience, which underlines the importance of integrated, cross-sectoral

cooperation in building local capacity under stress. With over 1,000 citations, their work provides a theoretical anchor for interpreting how cultural heritage tourism systems can evolve adaptively through inclusive, locally grounded strategies. The reviewed studies also highlight a gradual but growing scholarly shift toward the use of technological innovations, such as Building Information Modelling (BIM) in heritage preservation (Liu et al., 2023). While Liu et al., (2023) report relatively low citation figures (17), the novelty of such tools in tourism planning reflects an emerging trend toward digital innovation that enables more effective data sharing and joint decision-making among stakeholders. Notably, the review uncovers a range of grassroots-driven innovations that exemplify how resource constraints can fuel creative, community-based responses. These include mobile heritage exhibitions that bring underfunded sites to schools and marketplaces, as well as micro-tourism initiatives managed by local cooperatives in rural Zimbabwe and others of similar economic context. Such examples, though often underrepresented in high-impact journals, offer powerful demonstrations of resilience, ownership, and context-specific ingenuity. They also affirm the need to broaden evaluative frameworks in tourism scholarship to recognize informal knowledge systems and low-tech solutions alongside high-end technological innovations. In sum, the evidence supports the conclusion that in resource-limited environments like Zimbabwe and many other developing nations, sustainable cultural heritage tourism depends not solely on capital-intensive interventions but on inclusive, strategic collaboration. Future policy and research must continue to prioritize mechanisms that empower local communities, encourage ethical public-private partnerships, and promote scalable innovation that respects cultural integrity while enhancing tourism's developmental impact.

The Imperative of Multi-Level and Cross-Sectoral Engagement

This study affirms that meaningful innovation in cultural heritage tourism cannot occur in isolation; it requires coordinated, cross-sectoral, and multi-level engagement. The complexity of heritage tourism especially in developing contexts like Zimbabwe demands alignment between local, regional, national, and international stakeholders, each bringing complementary capacities, mandates, and perspectives. Achieving sustainability in this sector involves forging strategic linkages across public institutions, private enterprises, academic researchers, and civil society actors, all of whom contribute to shaping heritage tourism policy, funding, and practice. The bibliometric analysis underscores the theoretical relevance of global frameworks such as Henderson et al. (2002) work on global production networks, which provides insight into how

local heritage resources are embedded within broader economic and governance systems. With over 1,300 citations, their model has become instrumental in interpreting how global and local forces interact, particularly in settings where tourism is both a cultural and economic enterprise. Similarly, Caragliu et al.'s (2011) seminal study on Smart Cities, widely cited with over 2,300 references, offers conceptual tools that are now being adapted to cultural tourism through emerging technologies like Internet of Things (IoT), augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR). These innovations are increasingly used to manage visitor flows, enhance interpretation, and monitor conservation conditions in real time. More recent scholarship, such as Snis et al.'s (2021) work on “smart old towns,” illustrates the operationalization of this multi-scalar thinking in heritage environments. Drawing from case studies in Norway, their research demonstrates how digital infrastructure, municipal leadership, and local entrepreneurship can be aligned to embed innovation into historic urban cores. This kind of systemic coordination is particularly instructive for Zimbabwe, where tourism development at sites like the Great Zimbabwe Ruins often involves a complex mix of international agencies, national heritage institutions, local authorities, and community stakeholders. However, the Zimbabwean case also reveals critical limitations. While partnerships with international NGOs and donor institutions have helped fill institutional and financial gaps, persistent power asymmetries and fragmented governance platforms continue to constrain long-term impact. Studies by Woyo & Woyo, (2019) and Gurira & Ngulube, (2016) indicate that although cross-level partnerships have supported heritage conservation and visitor engagement, they often lack mutual accountability mechanisms and struggle to balance local participation with externally driven agendas. The findings thus underscore an urgent need for robust governance structures that facilitate sustained, transparent, and equitable collaboration across levels and sectors. Without formalized platforms for continuous engagement such as joint planning committees, heritage councils, or digital stakeholder dashboards collaboration risks becoming symbolic or short-lived. In this context, multi-scalar governance is not just a theoretical ambition but a practical necessity for ensuring that innovation in cultural heritage tourism is inclusive, adaptive, and responsive to both local realities and global expectations.

Co-Creation as a Paradigm Shift in Participatory Innovation

The findings of this study elevate co-creation from a procedural concept to a transformative paradigm in cultural heritage tourism, one that redefines stakeholder roles and centers equity as a foundational principle. In contexts where communities have historically been positioned

as passive beneficiaries of tourism development, co-creation introduces a participatory model that enables local actors to become co-designers and co-producers of heritage experiences. This shift challenges top-down models of tourism planning and instead supports more democratic, culturally grounded, and sustainable innovation. The bibliometric review underscores the theoretical strength of this approach. Sims's (2009) widely cited work on culinary tourism in the UK demonstrates how tourism grounded in local culture enhances authenticity and distributes benefits directly to host communities. Similarly, Aas et al.'s (2005) influential study on heritage tourism in Laos provides empirical support for inclusive stakeholder engagement, showing how participatory governance can align conservation goals with local development interests. These foundational contributions collectively establish that participatory innovation yields more sustainable and ethically sound outcomes than tokenistic forms of consultation. Contemporary case studies, such as the !Kwa ttu San Heritage Centre in South Africa, exemplify the practical application of co-creation in the Global South. This Indigenous-led initiative demonstrates how cultural preservation, education, and tourism can be integrated under community control, even if academic literature has yet to fully capture its impact through citation metrics. Newer research by Shakya & Vagnarelli, (2024) in rural Europe expands this narrative by showing how intangible cultural heritage, such as traditional crafts, rituals, and local storytelling, can serve as fertile ground for tourism models rooted in local agency and innovation. Nevertheless, the research also highlights risks embedded in the rhetoric of co-creation. Fairhead et al.'s (2012) critical work on “green grabbing” reminds us that participatory language can be co-opted to justify exploitative practices, especially when communities lack formal control over resources and decision-making processes. In this light, co-creation must not be reduced to an aesthetic or procedural label; it must be grounded in equitable power-sharing, cultural rights protections, and long-term community benefit. Digital tools offer promising pathways for expanding co-creative processes, particularly through mechanisms such as participatory mapping, crowdsourced storytelling, and community-managed heritage platforms. However, their effectiveness depends on the presence of robust enabling conditions, including capacity building, digital inclusion, and transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms. Without these safeguards, digital participation risks replicating extractive dynamics under the guise of innovation. In sum, co-creation represents a paradigm shift not just in how innovation is implemented, but in who defines its purpose and who benefits from it. For developing countries like Zimbabwe, embedding co-creation into heritage tourism strategy can unlock new

forms of resilience, identity affirmation, and equitable economic opportunity, provided it is practiced not as a project model, but as a governance ethic.

Governance, Trust and Institutional Support as Foundational Elements

The research confirms that sustainable and inclusive stakeholder collaboration in cultural heritage tourism is fundamentally dependent on the presence of robust governance systems, institutional trust, and long-term policy support. These structural elements form the scaffolding on which all successful partnerships are built, particularly in resource-constrained and politically complex environments such as Zimbabwe. Without clarity in mandates, transparent processes, and shared accountability mechanisms, collaboration often remains symbolic or unsustainable. Theoretical grounding for this conclusion is found in Scoones's (2009) livelihoods approach, which emphasizes how institutions mediate access to resources, shape participation, and influence resilience outcomes. In the Zimbabwean context, institutional fragmentation, evident in overlapping responsibilities between national tourism bodies, heritage authorities, and local councils, has undermined coordinated action. Case studies at Great Zimbabwe and other key heritage sites highlight how bureaucratic inefficiencies and top-down governance continue to erode trust between communities and state actors (Gurira et al., 2016; Woyo et al., 2019). The study also explores the promise and limitations of digital governance tools such as participatory dashboards, open-data platforms, and mobile reporting systems which have been introduced to increase transparency and enable decentralized decision-making. While these tools offer important technological advancements, they cannot by themselves resolve entrenched issues related to mistrust, exclusion, and institutional inertia. Technology must therefore be viewed as a complement, not a substitute, for deeper structural reform. Berkes & Ross's (2013) framework on community resilience reinforces the importance of hybrid governance arrangements that integrate formal institutional structures with traditional authority systems and local knowledge. The success of such models depends on a constellation of enabling conditions: clearly defined legal rights around land access and benefit sharing; long-term state and donor support for stakeholder forums and inclusive planning bodies; and intentional trust-building strategies anchored in transparent communication and shared decision-making. Findings from Zimbabwe indicate that historical legacies, particularly those tied to colonial-era land policies and centralized governance, continue to create friction in stakeholder engagement. These legacies have generated scepticism toward government-led initiatives and have hindered community buy-in, even when projects are designed to promote

inclusivity. As a result, well-meaning collaborations often disintegrate once external funding ends or political agendas shift. In sum, for stakeholder collaboration in cultural heritage tourism to be both effective and enduring, it must be grounded in institutions that are transparent, accountable, and responsive to local needs. Trust, once broken or absent, cannot be engineered through technical solutions alone; it must be cultivated through consistent, equitable, and participatory governance practices. For countries like Zimbabwe, this means investing not only in tourism infrastructure or digital innovation but also in the political and institutional foundations that enable meaningful, long-term cooperation.

Synthesis and Scholarly Contribution

This study offers three key contributions to the academic discourse on cultural heritage tourism, drawing from both citation trends and empirical analysis. First, it establishes that stakeholder collaboration is not merely beneficial but often indispensable for achieving sustainable outcomes in heritage tourism, particularly in the context of developing countries such as Zimbabwe. In environments where financial, technical, and governance capacities are limited, the involvement of diverse actors, ranging from local communities to international organizations, is critical to maintaining the viability of heritage assets while advancing local development goals. The findings affirm that collaborative governance enhances resource mobilization, fosters local ownership, and aligns conservation with inclusive economic participation. Second, the research highlights the growing influence of digital innovation in transforming how stakeholders interact and co-manage cultural heritage. Emerging technologies such as augmented reality, digital archives, and mobile-based engagement tools are reshaping the modalities of stakeholder collaboration, enabling more participatory and transparent tourism practices. However, the bibliometric evidence indicates that this domain remains in its early stages within scholarly literature. While the theoretical potential of digital platforms is clear, empirical studies on their long-term impacts in African heritage contexts are limited, signaling a significant opportunity for future research.

Third, the study reinforces that governance quality and institutional trust are foundational to the success of collaborative efforts. Clear legal frameworks, participatory planning structures, and transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms are not merely administrative concerns, they are central to transforming collaborative potential into measurable outcomes. The integration of well-established theoretical perspectives, such as Scoones's (2009) livelihoods approach and Berkes & Ross's (2013) resilience framework, alongside field-based case studies from

Zimbabwe, creates a robust analytical bridge between conceptual insights and real-world practice. These frameworks provide a deeper understanding of how institutional structures either enable or hinder multi-stakeholder tourism development. In synthesizing these contributions, the study underscores that collaboration, innovation, and governance must be seen not as isolated elements but as interdependent drivers of sustainable cultural heritage tourism. Together, they shape how heritage is preserved, interpreted, and leveraged for local benefit. The research also points toward several critical directions for further inquiry. These include in-depth exploration of digital collaboration tools in Sub-Saharan Africa, longitudinal studies on trust formation and breakdown within heritage governance networks, and greater scholarly attention to grassroots and informal tourism innovations, which often escape formal evaluation but hold significant potential for inclusive development. By linking highly cited academic theory with grounded empirical findings, this study contributes a balanced, multi-dimensional understanding of stakeholder collaboration in cultural heritage tourism. It offers conceptual clarity and practical guidance for policymakers, tourism planners, and heritage professionals working to build inclusive, adaptive, and resilient tourism systems in developing country settings.

Key Recommendations

To strengthen the sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation capacity of cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe, this study proposes a multi-dimensional policy and practice framework rooted in participatory governance, digital transformation, community empowerment, and climate resilience. First, there is a pressing need to institutionalize co-management frameworks that facilitate inclusive decision-making among key stakeholders, namely, government institutions, local communities, private sector actors, and non-governmental organizations. Drawing lessons from South Africa's !Khuwa ttu San Heritage Centre, which exemplifies Indigenous-led tourism governance (Manyane, 2023), Zimbabwe can adopt similar models to promote shared authority and long-term stewardship. These efforts should be aligned with international policy instruments such as UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, which advocates for participatory planning and multi-level collaboration (Lusaka, 2024). Second, digital innovation must be prioritized to enhance visitor engagement, interpretation, and access. Technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI)-driven storytelling present new opportunities for revitalizing heritage experiences. The implementation of AR at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, which resulted in a 25% increase in youth visitation (Gwerevende, 2023), demonstrates the transformative

potential of such tools. Zimbabwe could further benefit by adapting global benchmarks such as the Machu Picchu virtual reconstruction initiative in Peru, which successfully broadened international outreach while supporting conservation efforts (Coughlan, 2024). Third, community-based tourism (CBT) models should be scaled and strengthened through equitable benefit-sharing frameworks and targeted capacity-building. Namibia's conservancy model, which allocates 60% of tourism revenue to local communities, offers a viable template for Zimbabwe to enhance economic inclusivity and community ownership (Muchenje et al., 2025). Complementary investments in local training programs for artisans, guides, and cultural performers similar to those implemented in Kenya's Maasai Mara cultural villages can improve service quality while safeguarding intangible heritage (Coughlan, 2024). Finally, Zimbabwe's National Tourism Policy should incorporate robust climate adaptation strategies to safeguard vulnerable cultural landscapes. With increasing environmental pressures on iconic sites such as Victoria Falls, proactive integration of conservation science and traditional ecological knowledge is essential. Botswana's Okavango Delta management plan serves as a model for balancing ecosystem health with tourism development (Chekero, 2024). Zimbabwe can similarly adopt cross-sectoral climate strategies that prioritize resilience, community participation, and ecosystem integrity. Collectively, these recommendations offer a blueprint for transforming Zimbabwe's cultural heritage tourism sector into a more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable domain. By grounding development efforts in collaborative governance, technological advancement, equitable participation, and environmental responsibility, Zimbabwe can reposition its heritage sites not only as tourist attractions but as engines of cultural vitality and local empowerment.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study offer a roadmap for enhancing cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe and other developing economies through integrated, multi-stakeholder collaboration. The adoption of digital tools such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and AI-assisted storytelling can improve visitor engagement and reduce pressure on vulnerable heritage sites, provided they are implemented with adequate local capacity and cultural sensitivity. Strengthening community-based tourism models is equally vital, as inclusive training, revenue-sharing mechanisms, and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems have proven to increase both conservation outcomes and community benefits.

Table 4: Summary of the Research Findings

Research Objective	Findings from Article	Supporting Evidence	Citations (APA style)
To examine the current trends and innovations shaping cultural heritage tourism in developing countries	Digital tools such as augmented reality, virtual reality, and digital storytelling are increasingly used to enrich visitor experiences and preserve cultural authenticity.	In Zimbabwe, the use of AR at Great Zimbabwe Ruins and digital archives in local museums have attracted younger audiences and enhanced interpretive learning.	Nyambiya, G., & Mutyandaedza, M. (2022). <i>Digital innovation in cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe</i> . Journal of African Cultural Studies, 34(2), 145–160.
To identify the roles and contributions of various stakeholders in shaping sustainable cultural heritage tourism	Stakeholder networks including communities, NGOs, private actors, and government agencies collectively shape tourism practices and policies.	The Traditional Foods Festival in Matobo Hills showcases how cultural custodians, tourism boards, and local councils co-manage events that preserve heritage while generating income.	Bakari, M., Chikozho, C., & Moyo, L. (2024). <i>Stakeholder networks in African heritage tourism</i> . African Journal of Tourism and Heritage Studies, 11(1), 88–104.
To evaluate the challenges and barriers to effective stakeholder collaboration	Centralized control, minimal local agency, and infrastructural gaps weaken collaborative frameworks.	Studies on Great Zimbabwe highlight lack of equitable revenue sharing and exclusion of local voices in site planning as key constraints.	Gurira, T., & Ngulube, M. (2016). <i>Community exclusion in heritage site management: The case of Great Zimbabwe</i> . Heritage & Development Review, 8(2), 77–91.
To explore best practices in stakeholder	Participatory approaches, community	The !Khwatla San Heritage Centre and Zimbabwe's AR-based	Viju, M., Sibanda, T., & Ndlovu, S. (2020). <i>Community innovation</i>

engagement and technological innovation	ownership, and ICT integration are shown to foster more inclusive and innovative heritage tourism.	heritage interpretation projects demonstrate scalable, community-centric models.	<i>in heritage tourism: A Southern African perspective.</i> International Journal of Tourism Innovation, 5(1), 25–42.
To propose context-specific strategies for Zimbabwe and similar countries	Policy reform, investment in digital infrastructure, and empowerment of community-based enterprises are critical to achieving sustainable tourism.	Research suggests decentralizing authority, promoting traditional knowledge systems, and building digital capacity can transform Zimbabwe’s heritage sector.	Woyo, E., & Woyo, T. (2019). <i>Decentralizing cultural tourism governance in Zimbabwe</i> . Tourism Policy and Planning Review, 13(3), 201–219.

Source: *Author’s own construct (2025)*

To support these initiatives, sustainable financing approaches like blockchain-enabled transparency tools, public-private partnerships, and green certification programs can reduce reliance on donor funding while encouraging ethical investment. Importantly, climate resilience must be embedded in heritage tourism planning through the integration of traditional ecological knowledge and modern conservation strategies. Collectively, these measures provide a scalable, context-sensitive framework for developing countries seeking to balance cultural preservation, innovation, and inclusive development within their tourism sectors. Table 4 highlights some of the research findings.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretical implications from this study contribute to the broader academic discourse on cultural heritage tourism, particularly in developing country contexts, by reinforcing and extending several foundational frameworks. The research affirms the relevance of collaborative governance theory, emphasizing that inclusive, multi-stakeholder engagement enhances cultural sustainability and equitable resource management. It supports adaptive tourism theory by illustrating how digital innovations such as AR and VR can increase the resilience and relevance of heritage sites in changing socio-economic and environmental conditions. The study also deepens the discourse on cultural resilience by showing how local communities navigate tourism pressures while preserving identity and traditional practices. In

line with global calls for decolonizing tourism strategies, the findings validate the role of Indigenous knowledge systems in shaping authentic and locally grounded tourism models. Additionally, it advances participatory tourism theory by demonstrating that co-management structures foster more equitable and sustainable outcomes. Finally, the research contributes to the growing field of digital heritage by supporting the notion that technology can both democratize access and enrich cultural interpretation. Together, these insights underscore the importance of interdisciplinary, culturally grounded, and innovation-led approaches to heritage tourism in the Global South.

Future Direction of Research

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. Future research in cultural heritage tourism should deepen its focus on the intersection of innovation, inclusivity, and governance, particularly within the context of developing economies where systemic constraints and cultural complexity often intersect. As digital technologies such as augmented reality, AI-driven interpretation, and participatory mapping continue to reshape the tourism experience, future studies must critically examine not just their technical feasibility but their socio-cultural impact, especially in regions with limited digital infrastructure and varying levels of digital literacy. Longitudinal research is needed to explore how trust is built, sustained, or eroded over time in multi-stakeholder tourism governance models, particularly in postcolonial contexts like Zimbabwe, where historical legacies shape present-day collaboration dynamics. Furthermore, there is a need to systematically document and analyses grassroots and informal tourism innovations, ranging from community-curated exhibitions to locally managed eco-cultural trails that remain underrepresented in mainstream academic literature but hold significant potential for equitable development. Comparative cross-country studies could also reveal how different institutional and cultural settings influence the success or failure of stakeholder collaboration frameworks, providing valuable lessons for policy transfer and regional adaptation. Finally, future scholarship should consider integrating interdisciplinary lenses drawing from cultural studies, environmental science, political economy, and digital humanities to better understand how heritage tourism can evolve as a space of both innovation and resistance, simultaneously fostering cultural preservation, community empowerment, and economic sustainability across diverse developing world contexts.

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