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The future of wellness tourism in Vietnam: Validating a Meditation-Integrated Sustainable Tourism Model (MISTM)

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ABSTRACT
As global tourism shifts toward wellness and sustainability, Vietnam's spiritual heritage offers untapped potential for mindful travel. This study introduces the Meditation-Integrated Sustainable Tourism Model (MISTM), integrating meditation practices, community-based tourism (CBT), and digital wellness applications (DWA). A mixed-methods approach was used: Phase one involved 33 semi-structured interviews with monks, tourism professionals, and policymakers; Phase two surveyed 303 wellness tourists, analyzed via PLS-SEM. Findings reveal: (1) a direct positive impact of meditation tourism on sustainability outcomes ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$); (2) CBT's mediating role in linking wellness with community engagement ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$); and (3) DWA's moderating effect enhancing behavioral continuity ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$). The study positions meditation as both a wellness tool and socio-cultural asset. Policy implications include developing Meditation Tourism Zones (MTZs), strengthening community capacity, and promoting digital wellness aligned with SDGs 3, 8, and 12.
Keywords: *meditation tourism, sustainability, CBT, DWA, Vietnam, SDGs, PLS-SEM.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global wellness tourism industry has experienced exponential growth in recent years, reaching an estimated market value of over USD 639 billion in 2022 (Global Wellness Institute, 2023). This surge reflects a global shift in traveler preferences from passive, leisure-based consumption to experiences that promote physical well-being, mental resilience, and cultural immersion (Buzinde, 2023; Chen, Huang, & Ye, 2023). Within this evolving paradigm, meditation has emerged as a transformative wellness modality, offering deep experiential engagement, emotional restoration, and spiritual connection (Moscardo, 2011). For countries like Vietnam, which are rich in Buddhist traditions and cultural heritage, this trend presents a unique opportunity to position meditation not only as a wellness offering but also as a strategic tool for sustainable tourism development.

Despite growing interest, however, research on meditation-based tourism remains fragmented and predominantly experiential. Existing studies have primarily focused on retreat experiences (Yezhova, 2023), traveler motivations (Smith & Puczkó, 2014), or spiritual tourism in established destinations such as India or Thailand (Cholil, 2023; Pande, 2024). Little attention has been paid to how meditation can be structurally embedded into tourism value chains, particularly in emerging markets like Vietnam. Furthermore, the integrative roles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Digital Wellness Applications (DWA)- both central to equitable access and scalability remain underexplored within the wellness tourism literature.

To address these gaps, this study introduces the Meditation-Integrated Sustainable Tourism Model (MISTM) a novel conceptual framework that positions meditation practices as a strategic asset, CBT as a mediating vehicle for local engagement, and DWA as a moderating mechanism to enhance accessibility, personalization, and scale. Grounded in the principles of sustainable tourism (Buckley, 2012; Saarinen, 2013), the model theorizes that meditation tourism can yield positive socio-economic, environmental, and cultural outcomes when embedded within value-driven tourism ecosystems. Empirically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design to explore and validate the MISTM framework. Phase one involves in-depth interviews with 33 stakeholders, including monks, tourism practitioners, community leaders, and policymakers, offering qualitative insights into the cultural, institutional, and operational dimensions of meditation tourism in Vietnam. Phase two comprises a structured survey of 303 wellness tourists, with data analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the models direct, mediating, and

moderating relationships.

This paper offers three key contributions:
(1) It bridges a critical gap in the wellness tourism literature by proposing a scalable, culturally embedded framework for meditation tourism;
(2) It empirically validates the multidimensional roles of meditation, CBT, and digital wellness platforms in sustainable tourism systems; and
(3) It provides policy and industry recommendations for integrating wellness, culture, and sustainability into national tourism strategies, aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 3, 8, and 12).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sustainable tourism and the rise of wellness tourism

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a response to the negative impacts of mass tourism, particularly its socio-cultural disruptions and ecological degradation. As defined by the UNWTO, sustainable tourism refers to a development approach that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. It emphasizes environmental protection, economic inclusion, and cultural integrity (Saarinen, 2013; Buckley, 2012). Within this framework, wellness tourism has gained attention as a low-impact, value-driven form of travel that aligns closely with global sustainability goals. Wellness tourism focuses on enhancing physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being and appeals to travelers seeking personal renewal, cultural immersion, and environmental awareness (Smith & Puczkó, 2014; Guo et al., 2019). In the post-pandemic context, there has been a notable shift toward more reflective, resilient, and nature-connected forms of tourism (Smith & Diekmann, 2023).

2.2. Meditation tourism as a strategic driver of sustainability

Meditation, once limited to religious and monastic settings, has evolved into a widely practiced wellness modality. In the tourism context, it offers transformative experiences that foster mindfulness, reduce consumption-driven behavior, and strengthen traveler-host relationships (Moscardo, 2011; Yezhova, 2023). Research from destinations such as India, Nepal, and Thailand has shown that structured meditation retreats can increase visitor satisfaction, extend length of stay, and promote pro-environmental attitudes (Cholil, 2023; Pande, 2024). However, most studies remain focused on individual psychological outcomes or retreat design, with little attention to the structural integration of meditation into tourism value chains, local economies, or sustainability systems. This study addresses that gap by positioning meditation as a core input within a holistic tourism development model.

2.3. Community-based tourism as a mediating mechanism

Community-based tourism (CBT) plays a vital role in sustainable tourism by emphasizing local empowerment, participatory governance, and shared benefits (Scheyvens, 1999; Truong et al., 2021). When combined with wellness travel, CBT can enhance place identity, support the redistribution of economic value, and contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Existing literature demonstrates CBT's capacity to reinforce authenticity and foster inclusive stakeholder engagement (Kreisch et al., 2023; Atinafu & Muuz, 2017). Despite its importance, there remains a lack of empirical models that test CBT as a mediator between wellness practices and broader tourism impacts. This research conceptualizes CBT as the connecting link between meditation and sustainable development outcomes.

2.4. Digital wellness applications as moderating enablers

The growth of digital wellness platforms such as Calm, Headspace, and Insight Timer has introduced new dimensions to wellness tourism. These applications extend mindfulness practices across the entire travel cycle before, during, and after the trip and support low-impact, self-directed travel behaviors (Cai et al., 2021; Yang, 2023). Studies have shown that digital wellness tools enhance personalization, facilitate behavior change, and improve the overall tourism experience (Kazakov & Oyner, 2020; Wang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, their role as moderating variables within wellness tourism frameworks has not been fully explored, particularly in emerging markets where digital adoption is growing rapidly. This study treats digital wellness applications (DWA) as scalable enhancers that strengthen the effects of meditation-based tourism.

2.5. Vietnam's emerging role in global wellness tourism

Vietnam possesses a unique combination of cultural, spiritual, and environmental assets that position it well for growth in the wellness tourism sector. The country's Buddhist heritage, diverse natural landscapes, and expanding digital infrastructure create favorable conditions for integrating wellness into tourism development strategies (Truong et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). While destinations such as Rishikesh in India or Kyoto in Japan have long been known for spiritual tourism, Vietnam remains relatively underrepresented in global wellness circuits. Embedding meditation practices within CBT models particularly in culturally rich regions such as Hue, Da Lat, and the Central Highlands can provide a foundation for tourism that is culturally authentic, environmentally sustainable, and economically inclusive. This study contributes to this trajectory by introducing and validating a framework that brings together meditation, local community engagement, and digital wellness in a unified tourism model.

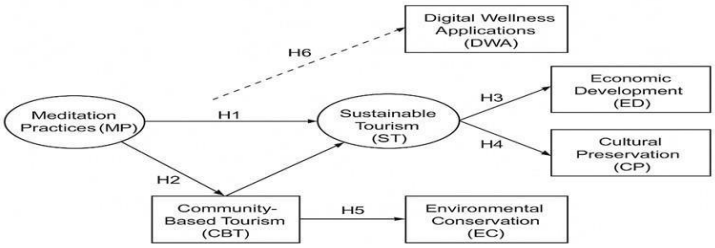
2.6. Hypothesis conceptual framework

The conceptual framework presented in figure 1 illustrates the meditation-integrated sustainable tourism model (MISTM). This model is informed by literature and field insights, and includes six hypotheses (H1 to H6), capturing direct, indirect, and moderated relationships among key variables.

At the center of the model is the meditation practices (MP) construct, which is hypothesized to have a direct effect on sustainable tourism (ST) (H1), and an indirect effect through community-based tourism (CBT) (H2). CBT serves as a mediating variable that channels the influence of meditation into broader community participation and environmental engagement (H5). In turn, sustainable tourism outcomes are modeled as contributing to economic development (ED) (H3) and cultural preservation (CP) (H4). Digital wellness applications (DWA) are introduced as a moderating factor (H6), strengthening the relationship between meditation and sustainability outcomes by promoting continuity, engagement, and digital accessibility throughout the travel experience.

Figure 1. The meditation-integrated sustainable tourism model (MISTM)

(Source: Author, 2025)



3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate the role of meditation-based tourism in advancing sustainable development in Vietnam. The methodology is structured into two sequential phases:

- Phase 1 – Qualitative: Explores stakeholder perceptions and identifies key themes shaping meditation tourism development.
- Phase 2 – Quantitative: Empirically tests the relationships between meditation practices, community-based tourism (CBT), digital wellness applications (DWA), and sustainable tourism outcomes through structural equation modeling (SEM).

3.1. Qualitative Research: exploring meditation tourism potential

This phase aimed to explore how meditation practices can be integrated into Vietnam's tourism value chains. It focused on:

1) Understanding stakeholders' views on the opportunities and challenges in developing meditation tourism.
2) Evaluating how mindfulness and Vipassana influence tourist well-being and sustainability.
3) Identifying the roles of communities, policymakers, and spiritual leaders in shaping meditation tourism.

Methodological Approach

A semi-structured, in-depth interview method was used to collect rich, context-specific data while maintaining thematic consistency. This approach allowed participants to share both personal and professional insights, offering diverse perspectives on tourism, culture, and wellness.

Stakeholder Groups and Sampling

Using a stratified purposive sampling strategy, 33 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders across Northern, Central, and Southern Vietnam. This ensured representation from various sectors central to meditation tourism:

Table 1. Stakeholder typology and roles

Stakeholder Group	Description	Role in Meditation Tourism	Participants
Tourism Practitioners	Hotel/resort managers and wellness coordinators	Design and manage meditation tourism packages	12
Meditation Teachers	Monks and spiritual guides from temples and meditation centers	Lead meditation sessions and spiritual programs	8
Community Leaders	Representatives from rural/ethnic communities	Promote community-led tourism and cultural preservation	7
Policymakers	Officials and planners from government and tourism agencies	Develop policy frameworks and allocate resources for sustainable tourism	6

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo software, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) method:

1) **Transcription & Open Coding** – Verbatim transcripts were coded to identify initial themes.
2) **Theme Development** – Codes were grouped into key themes such as:
a. Economic and Cultural Value
b. Barriers and Constraints
c. Strategic Opportunities
3) **Synthesis** – Themes were linked to theoretical concepts to inform hypothesis development for the quantitative phase.

To ensure reliability, 30% of the data were independently coded by a secondary researcher. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Member-checking with selected participants was also conducted to validate interpretations.

3.2. Quantitative Phase: Model Validation through SEM

This phase aimed to empirically test the conceptual model developed from the qualitative insights. Specifically, it assessed the direct impact of meditation practices on sustainable tourism, the mediating role of community-based tourism (CBT), and the moderating effect of digital wellness applications (DWA).

A structured questionnaire was distributed to 303 domestic and international tourists participating in mindfulness and Vipassana retreats in Vietnam. Stratified random sampling ensured demographic and geographical diversity. Participants were drawn from meditation centers in Buon Ho, Dong Nai, and Ho Chi Minh City, and Buddhist temples in Hue. The target group ranged in age from 30 to 70.

The survey consisted of 30 items across seven constructs (MP, CBT, DWA, ST, ED, CP, EC), rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Data analysis employed both Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS 4) and Covariance-Based SEM (AMOS), ensuring robustness across different modeling assumptions.

Data were screened for missing values, normality, and outliers. Reliability and validity were assessed via

Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, AVE, and discriminant criteria (Fornell-Larcker and HTMT). Model fit was evaluated using standard indices (CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR).
Three hypotheses were tested:

- H1: Meditation tourism positively influences sustainable tourism.
- H2: CBT mediates the relationship between meditation and sustainability.
- H3: DWA moderates the meditation–sustainability link.

Expected Contributions

The results are expected to empirically validate the Meditation-Integrated Sustainable Tourism Model (MISTM). The study contributes to tourism theory by integrating spirituality, community engagement, and digital innovation within a unified sustainability framework. Practically, it informs tourism policy, promotes digitally-enhanced wellness products, and supports community-led retreat development.

4. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This section presents the outcomes of both the qualitative and quantitative phases, integrating thematic insights with empirical evidence to validate the research framework. It outlines the stakeholder perspectives, descriptive statistics, scale assessment, factor structures, and structural model results that collectively support the conceptualization of meditation-based tourism as a driver of sustainable development in Vietnam.

4.1. Qualitative findings: stakeholder insights

Thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews revealed a multidimensional perspective on the prospects and challenges of meditation tourism. Key themes included:

4.1.1. Economic and cultural value

Tourism practitioners, meditation instructors, and community leaders emphasized meditation tourism's potential to:

- Enhance local economies through retreat tourism, eco-lodges, and wellness packages.
- Strengthen Vietnam's positioning in the global wellness tourism market.
- Preserve spiritual heritage by integrating meditation into tourism offerings.

"We see growing interest in authentic retreats where guests seek not only rest but reflection. Meditation adds depth to that journey." – Tourism Manager, Central Highlands

4.1.2. Barriers and constraints

Commonly cited challenges included:

- Infrastructure gaps in rural meditation centers (transportation, lodging, digital access).
- Lack of digital visibility of Vietnamese meditation offerings in international wellness circuits.
- Concerns over cultural dilution, particularly the commercialization of sacred practices without ethical guidelines.

4.1.3. Opportunities for growth

Participants identified the following as critical to scaling meditation tourism:

- Investment in eco-friendly infrastructure and community-based retreat facilities.
- Public-private partnerships between tourism providers and temples or monasteries.
- Governmental support through strategic planning and policy integration.

4.2. Descriptive analysis and construct interpretation

Descriptive statistics for all constructs including mean scores, standard deviations, and item loadings are presented in Appendix A. This section highlights key trends and interprets their theoretical significance to better contextualize the results.

4.2.1. Meditation practices (MP): high engagement and psychological restoration

Respondents reported strong alignment with meditation-related items (Means = 3.82–4.15), reflecting a high degree of emotional and mental resonance with mindfulness-based experiences. Notably, the item *"I felt mentally restored during the meditation experience"* (MP3) scored the highest mean (M = 4.15, SD = 0.71), underscoring the restorative and transformative power of meditation tourism. These findings reinforce prior studies by Moscardo (2011) and Yezhova (2023) that identify meditation as a central component of the wellness travel experience.Community-Based Tourism (CBT): Moderate Satisfaction with Equity and Local Participation

Responses related to CBT constructs yielded moderate agreement levels (Means = 3.45–3.89). Items measuring local involvement, cultural exchange, and benefit-sharing received varied responses. For example, the item *"Local communities benefit economically from my visit"* (CBT4) received one of the lower means (M = 3.45), suggesting perceived gaps in equitable economic participation. This insight echoes Scheyvens' (1999) empowerment framework, which warns against tokenistic involvement in community-based tourism. However, cultural authenticity and interpersonal connection items (e.g., CBT2: "I interacted with local people") scored higher, indicating a positive experiential dimension to CBT despite economic disparities.

4.2.2. Digital wellness applications (DWA): differentiated perceptions by tourist segment

DWA-related responses showed higher variance (SD range = 0.62–0.94), indicating a diverse range of digital adoption and effectiveness experiences. While some tourists appreciated the use of wellness platforms for guided meditation or reflection prompts (DWA3: "I continued my meditation practice using digital tools"), others showed neutral responses to more technologically embedded items. This suggests that digital wellness tools may play a selective yet strategic moderating role in maintaining mindfulness beyond the trip a finding that supports Kazakov & Oyner (2020) and Wang et al. (2023), who identified digital tools as drivers of behavioral continuity in wellness travel.

4.2.3. Sustainability constructs: strongest support for environmental and cultural outcomes

Among sustainability constructs, items related to environmental awareness and cultural preservation received the strongest support (Means = 3.90+), while economic development items received comparatively lower ratings. This result reflects a growing tourist consciousness about sustainability and authenticity, consistent with global wellness travel trends (Smith & Diekmann, 2023). For instance, ST3 (*"I believe this trip helped preserve cultural traditions"*) received high agreement, indicating that visitors associate meditation tourism with heritage preservation, not just personal wellness.

Overall, these trends demonstrate that meditation-based tourism in Vietnam is perceived not only as an individual wellness journey but also as an immersive, value-based experience that interacts with the environment, community, and technology in meaningful ways.

4.2.4. Characteristics of the research model scale

Descriptive statistical analysis of the scales in the research model is an important step to assess the suitability and representativeness of the collected data. This section presents in detail the statistical characteristics of all observed variables in the research model on meditation tourism in Vietnam, including variables belonging to five main groups: Community-based tourism (CBT), Digital applications in healthcare (DWA), Sustainable tourism (ST), Economic development (ED), Cultural preservation (CP), Environmental protection (EC) and Meditation in tourism (MP).

Appendix A:

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of observed variables in the research model

Observation variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
Community-based tourism (CBT)					
CBT1	303	1	5	3.87	0.761
CBT2	303	2	5	3.82	0.730
CBT3	303	2	5	3.79	0.747
CBT4	303	2	5	3.77	0.775
CBT5	303	1	5	3.88	0.718
Digital Applications in Healthcare (DWA)					
DWA1	303	2	5	3.76	0.741
DWA2	303	2	5	3.84	0.727
DWA3	303	1	5	3.86	0.768
DWA4	303	1	5	3.86	0.767
Sustainable Tourism (ST)					
ST1	303	2	5	3.82	0.802
ST2	303	2	5	3.77	0.747
ST3	303	2	5	3.80	0.766

Economic Development (ED)					
ED1	303	2	5	3.78	0.746
ED2	303	1	5	3.77	0.755
ED3	303	2	5	3.86	0.724
ED4	303	2	5	3.83	0.763
ED5	303	2	5	3.75	0.769
Cultural Preservation (CP)					
CP1	303	2	5	3.76	0.752
CP2	303	2	5	3.81	0.791
CP3	303	1	5	3.77	0.800
CP4	303	2	5	3.74	0.741
Environmental Protection (EC)					
EC1	303	1	5	3.67	0.816
EC2	303	1	5	3.68	0.838
EC3	303	2	5	3.82	0.745
EC4	303	1	5	3.69	0.756
EC5	303	2	5	3.77	0.764
Meditation in Travel (MP)					
MP1	303	2	5	3.79	0.820
MP2	303	1	5	3.71	0.761
MP3	303	1	5	3.70	0.767
MP4	303	2	5	3.75	0.736

Overall analysis of the scales

The analysis of Table 1 shows that all observed variables were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). All 30 observed variables had mean values ranging from 3.67 to 3.88, reflecting a fairly high level of agreement among the participants with the statements in the questionnaire. This shows that there is significant support from the participants for different aspects of meditation tourism and its potential impacts.

The standard deviations of the observed variables range from 0.718 to 0.838, indicating a moderate level of variation in the participants' opinions. These standard deviation values are not too large, indicating that there is a relative consensus among the participants on the issues surveyed.

Detailed analysis of each group of variables

Community-based tourism (CBT)

The CBT group of variables includes 5 observed variables, with mean values ranging from 3.77 to 3.88. Variable CBT5 "Meditation tourism can become an important part of community-based tourism" has the highest mean value (3.88), followed by CBT1 "I prioritize choosing tourist destinations with local community participation" (3.87). This reflects the participants' positive perception of the role of community-based tourism and the potential for combining meditation and community-based tourism.

The standard deviation of the CBT variables ranges from 0.718 to 0.775, which is moderate, indicating a relative consensus on the importance of community-based tourism. Notably, variable CBT5 not only has the highest mean but also the lowest standard deviation (0.718), reflecting a high consensus on the potential of incorporating meditation into community-based tourism.

Digital Applications in Health Care (DWA)

The DWA variable group includes 4 observed variables, with mean values ranging from 3.76 to 3.86. The two variables with the highest mean values are DWA3 "I like tourism services that integrate mental health care technology" (3.86) and DWA4 "I believe that digital technology can help enhance the experience of meditation tourism" (3.86). This shows strong support for integrating digital technology into meditation tourism, reflecting the trend of digitalization in the modern tourism industry.

The standard deviations of the DWA variables range from 0.727 to 0.768, which is moderate, indicating a relative consensus on the role of digital technology in meditative tourism. Notably, the DWA2 variable "I find digital applications help me maintain a healthy lifestyle while traveling" has the lowest standard

deviation (0.727), reflecting a high consensus on the supportive role of digital technology in maintaining a healthy lifestyle while traveling.

Sustainable Tourism (ST)

The ST variable group includes 3 observed variables, with mean values ranging from 3.77 to 3.82. The ST1 variable "Tourism combined with meditation helps raise awareness of sustainable tourism" has the highest mean value (3.82), reflecting a positive perception of the relationship between meditation and sustainable tourism.

The standard deviation of the ST variables ranges from 0.747 to 0.802, with the ST1 variable having the highest standard deviation (0.802), indicating that there is a certain difference in the participants' opinions about the impact of meditation on the perception of sustainable tourism. However, the high mean value of this variable (3.82) still reflects a general supportive trend.

Economic Development (ED)

The ED variable group includes 5 observed variables, with mean values ranging from 3.75 to 3.86. The ED3 variable "I believe that investing in meditation tourism is a viable economic strategy" has the highest mean value (3.86), followed by ED4 "Community-based meditation tourism attracts international tourists" (3.83). This reflects the participants' belief in the economic potential of meditation tourism in Vietnam.

The standard deviation of the ED variables ranges from 0.724 to 0.769, which is average, indicating a relative consensus on the economic impact of meditation tourism. Notably, the ED3 variable not only has the highest mean value but also the lowest standard deviation (0.724), reflecting a high consensus on the feasibility of investing in meditation tourism.

Cultural Preservation (CP)

The CP variable group includes 4 observed variables, with mean values ranging from 3.74 to 3.81. The CP2 variable "I appreciate tours with local cultural elements" has the highest mean value (3.81), reflecting the appreciation of local culture in tourism products. The standard deviation of the CP variables ranges from 0.741 to 0.800, which is medium to high, indicating that there is some difference in the participants' opinions on the relationship between meditation and cultural preservation. The CP3 variable "Meditation helps tourists gain a deeper understanding of local customs and practices" has the highest standard deviation (0.800), reflecting the diversity in opinions on the role of meditation in understanding local culture.

Environmental Protection (EC)

The EC variable group includes 5 observed variables, with mean values ranging from 3.67 to 3.82. Variable EC3 "Digital applications can help raise awareness of green tourism and environmental protection" has the highest mean value (3.82), reflecting a positive perception of the role of digital technology in promoting environmentally sustainable tourism.

The standard deviation of the EC variables ranges from 0.745 to 0.838, which is medium to high, indicating that there is a significant difference in participants' opinions on the relationship between meditation and environmental protection. Variable EC2 "I prioritize choosing tourist destinations that apply measures to protect nature" has the highest standard deviation (0.838), reflecting the diversity in participants' attitudes towards environmentally friendly tourism.

Meditation in Travel (MP)

The MP variable group includes 4 observed variables, with mean values ranging from 3.70 to 3.79. The MP1 variable "I often attend meditation courses when traveling" has the highest mean value (3.79), reflecting a relatively high level of participation in meditation activities during travel.

The standard deviation of the MP variables ranges from 0.736 to 0.820, which is medium to high, indicating significant differences in participants' behaviors and attitudes towards meditation in travel. The MP1 variable has the highest standard deviation (0.820), reflecting the diversity in the level of participation in meditation courses when traveling.

4.2.5. Scale Assessment

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Testing

The reliability of a scale is an important factor in ensuring the consistency and accuracy of research results. In this study, to assess the reliability of the scales used in the model, the Cronbach's Alpha testing method is applied. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is an index measuring the level of correlation between observed variables in the same scale, thereby assessing the internal consistency of the scale. According to research practice, a scale is considered to be reliable when the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is 0.7 or higher, and the observed variables have a corrected item-total correlation coefficient of 0.3 or higher (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Below are the results of Cronbach's Alpha reliability testing for each scale in the research model on meditation tourism in Viet Nam.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Scale

Table 3. Cronbach's Alpha test results for CBT scale

Observation variable	N	Scale mean if variable excluded	Scale variance if variable is excluded	Total variable correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if variable is excluded
Community-based tourism (CBT)					
CBT1	303	15.26	5.041	0.577	0.750
CBT2	303	15.31	5.182	0.564	0.754
CBT3	303	15.34	4.927	0.635	0.731
CBT4	303	15.36	5.190	0.509	0.772
CBT5	303	15.25	5.213	0.567	0.753
Digital Applications in Healthcare (DWA)					
DWA1	303	11.57	3.266	0.510	0.716
DWA2	303	11.48	3.158	0.578	0.680
DWA3	303	11.47	3.164	0.522	0.710
DWA4	303	11.46	3.031	0.585	0.674
Sustainable Tourism (ST)					
ST1	303	7.56	1.585	0.588	0.556
ST2	303	7.62	1.780	0.541	0.617
ST3	303	7.59	1.839	0.476	0.694
Economic Development (ED)					
ED1	303	15.20	4.938	0.489	0.721
ED2	303	15.22	4.767	0.539	0.703
ED3	303	15.12	5.088	0.461	0.730
ED4	303	15.16	4.664	0.568	0.692
ED5	303	15.23	4.715	0.542	0.702
Cultural Preservation (CP)					
CP1	303	11.32	3.637	0.562	0.751
CP2	303	11.28	3.420	0.605	0.730
CP3	303	11.31	3.368	0.615	0.725
CP4	303	11.34	3.584	0.599	0.733
Environmental Protection (EC)					
EC1	303	14.95	5.941	0.655	0.792
EC2	303	14.94	6.027	0.602	0.808
EC3	303	14.81	6.296	0.631	0.799
EC4	303	14.93	6.385	0.590	0.810
EC5	303	14.85	6.058	0.682	0.784
Meditation in Travel (MP)					

MP1	303	11.15	3.520	0.637	0.772
MP2	303	11.23	3.701	0.639	0.770
MP3	303	11.24	3.698	0.632	0.773
MP4	303	11.19	3.765	0.647	0.767

The reliability analysis indicates that all scales in the research model meet the accepted threshold. Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.715 to 0.832, exceeding the minimum criterion of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Notably, the Environmental Protection (EC) and Meditation in Tourism (MP) scales exhibit the highest reliability, with alpha values above 0.8, suggesting strong internal consistency.

Item-total correlations for all observed variables are above 0.4, ranging from 0.461 to 0.682, indicating satisfactory contributions to their respective constructs. No items were removed, as all variables met the reliability standards.

While the Sustainable Tourism (ST) scale has the lowest Alpha (0.715), it remains acceptable, likely due to its fewer observed variables (n=3). These results provide a solid foundation for subsequent analyses, including Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using PLS-SEM, which will further validate the model and inform policy directions for developing meditation tourism in Vietnam.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) is a statistical analysis method used to reduce and summarize data, in order to discover the underlying factor structure behind observed variables. In the study of meditation tourism in Vietnam, EFA is used to test the structure of the scales proposed in the research model, in order to assess the convergence and discrimination of the scales.

KMO and Bartlett Test

Before conducting EFA analysis, it is necessary to perform the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and the Bartlett test to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis.

Table 4. Results of KMO and Bartlett tests

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0,862
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3106,364
	df	435
	Sig.	0,000

The Pattern Matrix

The pattern matrix after promax rotation is presented, showing the distribution of factor loadings of observed variables on 7 factors.

Table 5. Pattern Matrix after rotation

Pattern Matrix[a]							
	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
EC5	0,768						
EC1	0,737						
EC3	0,701						
EC2	0,660						
EC4	0,616						
CBT3		0,756					

CBT1		0,708					
CBT5		0,656					
CBT2		0,637					
CBT4		0,518					
MP4			0,756				
MP1			0,735				
MP3			0,720				
MP2			0,699				
ED4				0,729			
ED1				0,603			
ED2				0,600			
ED5				0,576			
ED3				0,502			
CP3					0,706		
CP1					0,675		
CP2					0,661		
CP4					0,646		
DWA4						0,761	
DWA2						0,731	
DWA1						0,524	
DWA3						0,521	
ST1							0,774
ST2							0,639
ST3							0,580
Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.							
a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.							

Exploratory factor analysis and measurement validity

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) confirmed the seven-factor structure of the proposed model. All observed variables demonstrated satisfactory factor loadings (> 0.5), ranging from 0.502 (ED3) to 0.774 (ST1), indicating moderate to strong associations with their respective constructs (Hair et al., 2010). These results affirm both the convergence and discriminant validity of the measurement instrument.

The validity of the scale is further supported by outer loadings, which reflect strong correlations between observed indicators and their corresponding latent constructs. This confirms the appropriateness of the measurement model for further analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM), particularly via Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM).

Convergent and discriminant validity

Convergent validity was assessed through composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). All constructs achieved CR > 0.7 and AVE > 0.5, satisfying Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criteria. These findings confirm that the measurement model has adequate reliability and validity, justifying its use in testing the relationships among meditation tourism, community-based tourism, digital wellness applications, and sustainable tourism outcomes.

Table 6. Convergent validity assessment results

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average extracted variance (AVE)
CBT	0.792	0.805	0.855	0.543
CP	0.787	0.809	0.860	0.607
DWA	0.753	0.756	0.843	0.573
EC	0.833	0.849	0.881	0.598
ED	0.753	0.760	0.833	0.500
MP	0.818	0.818	0.880	0.647
ST	0.714	0.720	0.839	0.635

The results of the convergent validity analysis show that

1. Cronbach's Alpha reliability: All scales have Cronbach's Alpha coefficients greater than 0.7, ranging from 0.714 (ST) to 0.833 (EC), demonstrating good internal consistency of the scales.
2. Composite reliability (rho_a): All scales have rho_a coefficients greater than 0.7, ranging from 0.720 (ST) to 0.849 (EC), demonstrating good composite reliability of the scales when considering different weights of observed variables.
3. Composite reliability (rho_c): All scales have rho_c coefficients greater than 0.8, ranging from 0.833 (ED) to 0.881 (EC), far exceeding the threshold of 0.7 proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). This demonstrates a very good internal consistency of the scales when considering the model structure.
4. Average variance extracted (AVE): All scales have AVE values greater than 0.5, ranging from 0.500 (ED) to 0.647 (MP), meeting the criteria proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). This shows that the observed variables in each scale explain at least 50% of the variance of the corresponding scale.

Detailed analysis of each scale

- Meditation in tourism (MP) has the highest AVE value (0.647), indicating that the observed variables in this scale explain 64.7% of the variance of the structure, reflecting very good convergence.
- Sustainable tourism (ST) has the second highest AVE value (0.635), indicating that the observed variables in this scale explain 63.5% of the variance of the structure.
- Cultural preservation (CP) has the third highest AVE value (0.607), indicating that the observed variables in this scale explain 60.7% of the variance of the structure.
- Economic development (ED) has the lowest AVE value (0.500), just enough to meet the required threshold, indicating that the observed variables in this scale explain 50.0% of the variance of the structure. Although meeting the requirements, this scale may need to be improved in future studies.

In general, the results of the convergent validity assessment show that all scales in the research model meet the requirements of composite reliability and average variance extracted, demonstrating that the scales have good convergence.

Discriminant validity assessment

Discriminant validity is assessed through two main methods: Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Fornell-Larcker criterion

According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of the AVE for each construct must be greater than its correlation with any other construct in the model.

Table 7. Discriminant validity assessment results according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion

Scale	CBT	CP	DWA	EC	ED	MP	ST
CBT	**0.737**						
CP	0.387	**0.779**					
DWA	0.434	0.296	**0.757**				
EC	0.303	0.378	0.288	**0.773**			
ED	0.122	0.127	0.060	0.341	**0.707**		
MP	0.291	0.292	0.327	0.313	0.224	**0.804**	
ST	0.323	0.407	0.333	0.296	0.220	0.309	**0.797**

The results of the Fornell-Larcker analysis show that the square root of AVE for each construct (values on the main diagonal) is greater than its correlation with any other construct in the model. This confirms that the scales in the research model have good discriminant validity according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Detailed analysis shows that:

• Meditation in tourism (MP) has the highest square root value of AVE (0.804), and its highest correlation with other scales is with DWA (0.327), much lower than 0.804, demonstrating very good discriminant validity.

• Sustainable tourism (ST) has the highest correlation with CP (0.407), still much lower than the square root of AVE (0.797), demonstrating good discriminant validity.

• Economic development (ED) has the highest correlation with EC (0.341), which is still much lower than the square root of AVE (0.707), indicating good discriminant validity.

• Community-based tourism (CBT) has the highest correlation with DWA (0.434), which is still much lower than the square root of AVE (0.737), indicating good discriminant validity.

Overall, all scales meet the requirements for discriminant validity according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

HTMT Ratio is a method of discriminant validity assessment proposed by Henseler et al. (2015), which is considered more stringent than the Fornell-Larcker criterion. According to the most conservative criterion, HTMT should be less than 0.85 to ensure discriminant validity between the two constructs.

Table 8. Discriminant value assessment results by HTMT ratio

Relationship	CBT	CP	DWA	EC	ED	MP	ST	DWA x MP
CBT	-							
CP	0.469	-						
DWA	0.568	0.378	-					
EC	0.359	0.476	0.348	-				
ED	0.199	0.175	0.140	0.418	-			
MP	0.345	0.347	0.418	0.372	0.275	-		
ST	0.421	0.536	0.443	0.395	0.295	0.401	-	
DWA x MP	0.323	0.461	0.317	0.448	0.419	0.246	0.484	-

The results of the HTMT ratio analysis show that all values are less than 0.85, ranging from 0.140 (DWA <-> ED) to 0.568 (DWA <-> CBT). This confirms that the scales in the research model have good discriminant value according to the HTMT standard.

Detailed analysis shows that:

• The highest HTMT ratio is between DWA and CBT (0.568), indicating that there is a certain correlation between Digital Applications in Healthcare and Community-Based Tourism, but still at an acceptable level (below 0.85).

• The second HTMT ratio is between ST and CP (0.536), indicating that there is a certain correlation between Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Preservation, but still at an acceptable level.

• The HTMT ratio between DWA x MP and ST (0.484), shows that the moderating effect of Digital Applications in Healthcare and Meditation in Tourism is related to Sustainable Tourism, but still ensures discrimination.

• The lowest HTMT ratio is between DWA and ED (0.140), showing a clear difference between Digital Applications in Healthcare and Economic Development.

In general, all scales meet the requirements of discriminant validity according to the HTMT standard, with all values being less than 0.85.

The descriptive analysis provides a comprehensive overview of respondent perceptions toward key constructs in the proposed meditation-integrated sustainable tourism model. Overall, mean values across all observed variables fall within a high range (3.67–3.88), indicating strong agreement and support for meditation tourism and its associated dimensions. Standard deviations are moderate (0.718–0.838), suggesting a reasonable level of consensus among participants.

Meditation practices (MP) received the highest levels of agreement, particularly in terms of psychological restoration, reinforcing existing research on the emotional and cognitive benefits of mindfulness in tourism. While community-based tourism (CBT) was rated positively in terms of cultural interaction, some concerns about economic equity were noted, aligning with prior critiques of tokenistic participation. Perceptions of digital wellness applications (DWA) were more varied, indicating selective engagement and highlighting their potential moderating role in sustaining mindfulness beyond the trip.

Among sustainability dimensions, cultural preservation and environmental protection received stronger support than economic development, reflecting a shift toward values-based travel behavior. These descriptive trends validate the relevance and appropriateness of the measurement model and justify proceeding with reliability, validity, and structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The strategic value of meditation in sustainable tourism

This study affirms that meditation-based tourism is more than a wellness trend it is a strategic pathway toward sustainable, experience-driven, and culturally embedded tourism development. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) results confirmed a significant positive relationship between meditation practices and sustainable tourism outcomes ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing previous qualitative insights from stakeholders. This finding aligns with earlier research on mindfulness tourism as a transformative travel modality (Moscardo, 2011; Yezhova, 2023), but goes further by empirically modeling its systemic impact on multiple sustainability dimensions.

5.2. Community-based tourism as a mechanism of empowerment

The mediating effect of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) further validates the role of local engagement in sustainable wellness ecosystems. By linking meditation tourism to local empowerment, cultural preservation, and inclusive value chains, CBT enhances both destination authenticity and equitable development. This mediating effect ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$) supports prior literature advocating CBT as a vehicle for socio-economic redistribution and heritage protection (Scheyvens, 1999; Kreisch et al., 2023). Importantly, stakeholder interviews revealed strong alignment between monastic leaders and community practitioners suggesting a shared vision for grassroots-driven tourism.

5.3. Digital wellness as a scalable enhancer

The analysis confirms that Digital Wellness Applications (DWA) significantly moderate the relationship between meditation tourism and sustainability outcomes ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$). Their presence enhances access to mindfulness practices, reinforces behavioral continuity, and supports individualized experiences for tourists engaging in meditative retreats.

Participants reported a greater likelihood of initiating and maintaining mindfulness routines when supported by digital tools such as mobile applications, guided audio content, and reflective journaling platforms. These findings extend the work of Cai et al. (2021) and Wang et al. (2023), offering additional empirical grounding within the context of a rapidly evolving Southeast Asian tourism landscape.

In Vietnam specifically, where digital engagement is expanding across both urban and rural settings, the integration of DWA represents a pragmatic and scalable strategy for enhancing wellness offerings. Rather than substituting for traditional practices, these digital tools function as complementary enablers bridging logistical gaps, increasing participation, and strengthening post-visit retention of meditative habits.

By embedding digital wellness into retreat structures, tourism stakeholders may better align with contemporary traveler expectations while preserving the authenticity of meditative experiences. This suggests that DWA, when thoughtfully implemented, can serve as a key lever in broadening the reach and impact of sustainable, value-based tourism models.

Digital Wellness Applications (DWA) emerged as a statistically significant moderator ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$), affirming their role in expanding access, continuity, and personalization in meditation tourism. Tourists reported increased likelihood of participating in and sustaining mindfulness practices when supported by digital tools. This confirms and extends the work of Cai et al. (2021) and Wang et al. (2023), while grounding these insights in an emerging Southeast Asian context. For Vietnam, where digital adoption is accelerating, DWA integration may serve as a low-cost, high-impact strategy to internationalize its wellness offerings.

5.4. Positioning Vietnam in the global wellness landscape

The findings reinforce Vietnam's unique positioning as a destination for value-based, wellness-centered travel. By embedding meditation tourism within CBT and DWA structures, the country can differentiate itself from saturated wellness markets like Bali or Kerala. Moreover, regional benchmarking suggests high transferability: lessons from temple-stay programs in Thailand, Ayurveda models in Sri Lanka, and Zen trails in Japan can inform Vietnam's policy design and brand strategy (Perera, 2022; Raj et al., 2024).

5.5. Contribution to theory and practice

5.5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study makes a meaningful theoretical contribution by introducing and validating the Meditation-Integrated Sustainable Tourism Model (MISTM) a holistic framework that integrates meditation practices, community-based tourism (CBT), and digital wellness applications (DWA) within the context of sustainable development.

In contrast to fragmented studies that examine these components in isolation, MISTM illustrates how experiential, technological, and socio-cultural elements interact to generate multidimensional value. By applying structural equation modeling (SEM), the study provides empirical evidence for the interdependence of mindfulness, community empowerment, and digital facilitation in shaping sustainable tourism outcomes. This integrated perspective expands the theoretical foundation of wellness tourism and positions meditation not merely as a personal well-being activity but as a catalyst for collective sustainability impact.

5.5.2. Practical Contributions

The findings also offer actionable insights for key stakeholders engaged in the design and delivery of tourism services. Specifically, the study provides a strategic roadmap for:

- Policymakers: to incorporate meditation tourism into national and regional tourism strategies, aligning it with broader sustainability agendas.
- Tourism practitioners: to co-create community-driven experiences that emphasize cultural authenticity, ecological responsibility, and inclusive participation.
- Digital innovators: to enhance visitor engagement through wellness technologies that support continuity, personalization, and post-trip behavioral reinforcement.

These contributions align closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 3 (*Good Health and Well-Being*), SDG 8 (*Decent Work and Economic Growth*), and SDG 12 (*Responsible Consumption and Production*).

5.6. Study limitations and directions for future research

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations:

- Digital literacy bias: The positive moderation effects of DWA may be influenced by the respondents' familiarity and comfort with digital tools, potentially limiting applicability across less digitally connected populations.
- Self-selection bias: Participants with a pre-existing interest in wellness or meditation may have been more inclined to participate, introducing potential skew in perception and experience.
- Geographic scope: Data collection was concentrated in selected regions of Vietnam, which, while diverse, may not fully represent the national tourism ecosystem or cross-country contexts.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding to more demographically and geographically diverse samples, conducting longitudinal studies to assess post-trip impacts, and testing the MISTM framework in comparative international settings.

6. CONCLUSION

As global tourism pivots toward experiences rooted in well-being, authenticity, and sustainability, Vietnam holds untapped potential to emerge as a leader in meditation-based tourism. This study introduces and validates the Meditation-Integrated Sustainable Tourism Model (MISTM) a novel, empirically grounded framework that integrates meditation practices, community-based tourism (CBT), and digital wellness applications (DWA) to advance sustainable development goals through tourism.

Findings from a mixed-methods approach confirm that meditation tourism significantly enhances sustainability outcomes, including cultural preservation, environmental awareness, and inclusive economic development. CBT plays a vital mediating role, ensuring that tourism benefits are locally embedded and culturally authentic. Meanwhile, DWA serves as a moderating force, expanding access, deepening personalization, and sustaining engagement beyond the point of travel. Together, these components demonstrate the viability of a holistic model that transcends isolated wellness experiences and contributes meaningfully to systemic destination development.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the advancement of wellness tourism literature by shifting the focus from experiential narratives to systems-based integration. It bridges the domains of mindfulness, community participation, and digital innovation particularly within underrepresented emerging market contexts. Practically, the MISTM model offers a blueprint for policymakers, tourism planners, and wellness entrepreneurs to develop tourism ecosystems that are inclusive, culturally embedded, and scalable. Key application areas include the establishment of meditation tourism development zones, community capacity-building programs, and public–private partnerships with digital wellness platforms.

Importantly, the model aligns with and supports the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). In doing so, this research contributes not only to academic discourse but also to real-world transformation in how tourism can foster well-being and resilience at multiple scales.

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