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CHINESE SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRACTICES IN THAILAND: A FOCUS ON SDG 8-DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

This present study explores the contribution of sustainable tourism in Thailand to the achievement of SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, focusing on the integration of economic prosperity, environmental protection, and social well-being. Despite growing efforts in policy design, a research gap remains in understanding how sustainable tourism is perceived and practiced by key stakeholders, particularly Thai students and academics who play a vital role in shaping the future of tourism. Employing a qualitative methodology, 34 semi-structured interviews were conducted with university students and lecturers in tourism-related programs to capture their experiences, challenges, and aspirations regarding sustainability in practice. Thematic findings reveal disconnects between national strategies and ground-level implementation, including issues such as stagnant wages, weak stakeholder collaboration, and limited alignment between economic, environmental, and social goals. Participants emphasized the need for youth-led innovation, cross-cultural understanding, and regulatory coherence. The study advances theoretical insights by integrating TALC, EKC, and Doxey's Irridex models, and provides actionable policy recommendations, including inclusive wage policies, eco-tourism incentives, and sustainability education frameworks. These findings offer a valuable roadmap for Thai policymakers, tourism authorities, and business leaders to co-create a more resilient and equitable tourism ecosystem aligned with long-term sustainability objectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thailand has been renowned globally as one of the top tourist destinations. The World Tourism Organization (2020) made this recognition as Thailand is famed for its scenic landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and generous hospitality. But despite this worldwide recognition, Thai tourism is facing an impending challenge of balancing economic growth, environmental sustainability, and sustainable cultural presentation (Hall, 2017), this challenge has been further emphasized in recent studies highlighting the environmental and socio-cultural pressures of mass tourism (Gössling et al., 2020; Gong et al., 2018). In 2019, Chinese arrivals have boosted Thailand's economy up to 27.8% increase (Statista, 202), this corresponds with findings on the growing economic impact of Chinese outbound tourism in Southeast Asia (Li et al., 2020). But as Piuchan et al. (2018) emphasized, this did not come in without a price. The economic progress this tourism expansion brings raises concern on its long-term sustainability and adverse societal impact.

Between 2010 and 2019, Thailand has recorded a staggering 1,614% Chinese arrivals, which equaled to 11 million visitors annually (Thailand Board of Investment, 2020). This has paved way to huge investments especially in the fields of hospitality, transportation, real estate, and entertainment (Choibamroong, 2017), however, recent studies note that this rapid growth has also increased environmental pressures, resource consumption, and waste generation (Gössling et al., 2021). As an effect, economic opportunities have been undeniably enhanced but concerns over the increase in resource consumption and waste generation have also been raised (Zhong et al., 2011). This is also tagged along with the threat of cultural homogenization as businesses are beginning to tailor their products and services to cater to Chinese preferences (Walsh & Techavimol, 2007; Ooi, 2019) not to mention the concerns over the unequitable distribution of economic benefits within the local communities (Chatkaewnapanon & Lee, 2022; Gong et al., 2018).

In this juncture, Thailand is currently facing the tasks of striking a balance between economic prosperity and the preservation of its natural and cultural assets. To realize this, Thailand must leverage economic benefits brought about by tourism with the impact it had and would have towards the environment and society. As Thailand works on to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more specifically the SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, recent research suggests that integrating tourism growth with responsible labor practices, equitable economic distribution, and stakeholder engagement is crucial for long-term sustainability (UNWTO, 2021; Gössling et al., 2020).

This present study hence, explores the dynamics of Chinese tourism in Thailand and its implications towards the attainment of SDG 8. It attempts to identify key sustainability challenges and opportunities by looking into and analyzing the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of Thai students and lecturers. They are considered as crucial stakeholder groups that significantly influence the future of Thai tourism. By integrating economic, environmental, and socio-cultural lens, this present study offers insights and information for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and educational institutions to come up with appropriate strategies to foster more sustainable and inclusive tourism industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Celebrated for its economic contributions, the tourism industry of Thailand is currently standing at a critical turning point. This is in the midst of the significant expansion of Chinese tourism and investments in the country. Due to its obvious influence to Thai tourism, the Thai government should enforce necessary sustainable practices that could safeguard Thailand's environmental and social well-being. This section hence, reviews relevant literatures that could streamline contents related to Thai tourism, sustainability, and cultural preservation at the same time enhance logical transitions that provide better view of the dynamics between Thailand and China in terms of facing global sustainable tourism challenges.

2.1. Sustainable Tourism and the SDG 8 Conundrum

The relationship between sustainable tourism and economic growth has been extensively documented. But the gap remains as to the effective implementation of SDG 8 on tourism-dependent economies such as Thailand. Adongo et al. (2018) and Baixinho et al. (2021) stressed that eco-conscious travelers are looking for sustainable tourism initiatives in places they intend to visit. This type of travelers can mitigate economic instability since tourism operators will no longer rely on mass tourism for sales and profit. However, in achieving this sustainable practice, certain practical barriers hinder the process especially in terms of policy implementation, infrastructure limitations, and stakeholder collaboration.

But Matteucci (2021) suggested that in order to deal with this problem more efficiently, environmental, and social considerations should be put into place as they are the key factors in promoting sustainable tourism. According to Mowforth and Munt (2015), the popularity of eco-tourism did not practically help in reducing tourism-related environmental degradation. This is because the practices and policies remain inconsistent especially in Thailand since regulatory enforcement varies by region.

Furthermore, the impact of SDG 8, which ensures decent work and economic growth, requires deeper examination when implemented in the tourism sector. Choe and Phi (2022) explained that currently, there is lack of systematic analysis when it comes to labor practice, wage disparities, and equitable distribution of the tourism-generated income among the tourism operators. This is in spite of the fact that the promotion of sustainable tourism creates employment opportunities. Bagus et al. (2019) emphasized that community-based tourism operations may aid in equally distributing economic benefits of tourism activities but they are apparently marginalized by large-scale tourism investments that favor international operators.

While previous studies have focused on policy gaps and general economic impacts, few have critically examined stakeholder perspectives, particularly from the emerging professional groups such as students and lecturers, whose insights can reveal operational, social, and cultural nuances of sustainable tourism. This highlights a unique contribution of the present study, situating it within the context of participatory sustainability and cross-cultural engagement that is often overlooked in existing literature (Gössling et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021).

2.2. The Dual Nature of Chinese Tourism and Investment

China's tourism expansion and large-scale investments in Thailand bring in paradoxical direction in implementing sustainable tourism. For one, China's strong presence in Thailand surely generates economic benefits but it concurrently exacerbates socio-environmental vulnerabilities. In a report by Statista (2020), they confirmed that Thailand's GDP is stimulated by large proportion of Chinese tourists' arrival in the country not to mention their large-scale investments. This apparently drives the growth of hospitality and tourism, transportation, and retail. But Fuchs et al. (2024) warned that this humongous surge in Chinese

tourism in Thailand has placed the country in vulnerable position. It exhausts local ecosystems that leads to mounting waste generation, relentless water consumption, and coastal degradation.

Amidst these pressing concerns, another aspect that is quite often overlooked is the impact of China's socio-cultural elements to Thai identity. As this cooperation facilitates cultural exchange, the threat of cultural homogenization is dithering the local business scene since they are compelled to adapt to Chinese preferences (Chen & Yang, 2022). This then raises the concern about the authenticity of Thailand's cultural heritage tourism and its long-term sustainability. Irshad (2015) and Prasad (2009) noted that despite these infrastructure development, foreign investments usually fail to help local communities to thrive. Currently, there is no clear evidence on how Chinese tourism benefits Thai stakeholders economically especially those that run small businesses, and the local workers. This present study hence, addresses this gap by gathering Thai students' and lecturers' opinions regarding the fairness of tourism sector in terms of economic output.

By focusing on the perceptions of students and lecturers, this research uniquely captures the intergenerational and educational dimensions of tourism sustainability, offering a critical lens that contrasts with macroeconomic or environmental-only studies in the field (Aini, 2024; Green, 2005).

2.3. Corporate Social Responsibility: A Panacea?

It has been acknowledged that to encourage sustainable tourism, corporate social responsibility (CSR) should be used strategically. This means that for the organization to properly channel issues on sustainability in the tourism sector, CSR initiatives should be created and implemented within the tourism organization. But this is not yet the case in Thailand; the CSR initiatives in its tourism sector remains to be ambiguous. Pereira-Moliner et al. (2021) commented that the empirical evidence of CSR benefiting local communities is still missing or lacking solid evidence. Many CSR projects remain voluntary, and it works on very limited long-term accountability mechanisms (London, 2009). To respond to this concern however, systematic review is necessary to determine how CSR aligns with SDG 8. This identifies whether CSR truly fosters sustainable tourism or it only serves as a public relations strategy for corporations.

Unlike prior research emphasizing corporate-level CSR reports, the present study investigates stakeholder perceptions on the ground, thereby

providing empirical evidence on how CSR initiatives are experienced by local actors and integrated with SDG 8 goals (Li et al., 2023).

2.4. *The Belt and Road Initiative and Sustainable Tourism in Southern Thailand*

The tourism industry of Thailand has been significantly influenced by the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China in 2013. The southern part of Thailand has become a key strategic region for this development because of its location and abundant tourism resources.

2.5. *Tourism Growth and Economic Impact*

Several studies (i.e., Chen et al., 2021; Dobbs, 2018) documented the expansions covered under BRI initiatives that have given way to the unprecedented rise of Chinese tourism in Thailand. The airport construction and improved transportation networks have contributed to the attainment of SDG 8 through the creation of employment opportunities but the question remains about its long-term sustainability.

2.6. *Environmental Concerns*

Environmental concerns regarding the footprint tourists left behind become an important point of concern under the BRI framework. Sakolnakorn et al. (2013) and Taengkliang et al. (2022) highlighted that due to this easy access to tourist places, increased pollution, deforestation, and habitat destruction have been noted in some tourism-heavy areas such as Phuket and Nakhon Si Thammarat. This calls for the urgent enforcement of policies and environmental regulation to safeguard the sustainability objectives against the backdrop of BRI initiatives (Zhuang, 2022).

2.7. *Cultural Impacts and Community Involvement*

The socio-cultural landscape of southern Thailand has been reshaped by Chinese tourism. This is the form of local traditions being overly commercialized for the benefit of foreign tourists specifically the Chinese visitors (Sheng et al., 2023). As this allows cultural exchange and fosters mutual understanding, this local tradition should also be safeguarded by involving local industry players to manage and suggest ways to preserve their local cultures at the same time, offer alternative ways to deal with mass tourism more efficiently.

2.8. *Infrastructure Development and Policy Implications*

The BRI has given ways to new, and more innovative infrastructure developments. This includes new hospitality hubs and transport links, which accordingly enhanced the accessibility and convenience of the tourists (Chen et al., 2021). But Chowdhury (2023) warned that there is a looming threat to environmental degradation and displacement of locals if these infrastructure projects are poorly managed. Therefore, sustainable development policies should be created and integrated into Thailand's long-term tourism planning to mitigate these potential risks.

This literature review navigates through the challenges and opportunities stimulated by the concerns over sustainable tourism in Thailand. While SDG 8 provides a guiding framework for its realization, this concern is marred by economic inequalities, environmental risks, and daunting cultural changes. Thus, this present study seeks to expand on previous research by soliciting the perspectives of Thai stakeholders on how to create a balance between economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social equity.

By situating the BRI framework within Thailand's sustainable tourism challenges, this study extends prior research by critically comparing economic benefits with environmental, social, and cultural consequences, a multi-dimensional perspective rarely addressed in the current literature (Hung, 2024; UNWTO, 2025).

3. RESEARCH GAP

Current research on Chinese tourism primarily focuses on its economic impact and environmental outcomes especially to that of Thailand. However, these investigations failed to include the perspective of its relevant stakeholders who would become key players in its tourism industry in the future. As emerging professionals, Thai students and lecturers help reshape the future of tourism in Thailand by initiating dynamic cultural exchange with China and upholding its sustainability efforts. Therefore, this present study deals with the question of how these stakeholders perceive the economic, social, and environmental implications of Chinese tourism in Thailand. Their responses were analyzed and drawn out with useful insights to help address the question on how and what sustainable tourism policies should be created and how to address issue related to creating better cultural understanding between the two nations so that they can devise better educational strategies aligned with SDG 8.

Unlike previous studies that focus predominantly on macroeconomic or environmental indicators, this research uniquely integrates stakeholder perspectives, emphasizing the voices of future

professionals in the tourism ecosystem. This approach not only identifies practical sustainability challenges but also generates actionable recommendations for policy and educational strategies, bridging a critical gap in the literature.

3.1. Research Objective

This present study aims to understand Thai university students' and lecturers' perceptions and attitudes towards Chinese sustainable tourism practices in Thailand, focusing on economic, environmental, and cultural impacts.

1. To explore Thai university students' and lecturers' perceptions of the economic impacts of Chinese sustainable tourism practices in Thailand, focusing on job creation, local business growth, and overall economic development.
2. To assess Thai students' and lecturers' attitudes towards the environmental and cultural impacts of Chinese sustainable tourism practices, including views on environmental conservation, resource management, and cultural heritage preservation.
3. To use insights from Thai students and lecturers to recommend strategies for enhancing sustainable tourism in Thailand, aligning with SDG 8 to support economic growth and environmental sustainability, while offering suggestions for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and educational institutions.

By attaining these objectives, this present study hopes to provide a balanced understanding of the influence of Chinese sustainable tourism practices on Thailand's tourism industry taken from the perspective of young Thai adults and professionals.

3.2. Research Questions

The research questions listed below serve as central points for discussion as regards the intricacies of Chinese sustainable tourism practices, and how they influence tourism practices in Thailand. This is seen through the lens of the university students' and lecturers' perceptions and attitudes towards these matters.

How do Thai university students and lecturers perceive and respond to the economic and environmental impacts of Chinese sustainable tourism practices in Thailand?

To address this research question, the following sub-questions will be explored:

1. How do Thai students and lecturers perceive the economic impacts of Chinese sustainable tourism practices in Thailand?
2. What are the attitudes of Thai students and lecturers towards the environmental and cultural impacts of Chinese sustainable tourism practices?
3. How can Thai students' and lecturers' views on Chinese sustainable tourism practices contribute to improving sustainable tourism strategies in Thailand, particularly in promoting decent work and economic growth?

Thus, these inquiries intend to clarify and identify the trade-offs brought about by the economic prosperity, environmental preservation, and cultural sustainability of Thailand's tourism industry. Through a multi-layered exploration of these questions, this present study aims to contribute in forming strategies that could help achieve sustainable and resilient tourism landscape in Thailand.

3.3. Conceptual Framework

This present study adopts a comprehensive conceptual framework that could examine the complexities of the sustainable tourism of Thailand, especially with the involvement of Chinese tourism policies. Based from the review of relevant literature and theories previously discussed, this conceptual framework tries to work on the essential components, mediating factors, external influences, and anticipated outcomes that relate to sustainable tourism development. At its core, the framework identifies three fundamental components: economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social equity, which accordingly capture the economic, ecological, and socio-cultural dimensions of tourism, respectively.

To further explore the complex interactions within the tourism ecosystem, the framework (Figure 1) also includes mediating factors that relate to policy and governance, stakeholder engagement, and education and awareness. As gathered from the literature review, these factors serve as crucial determinants that shape the relationship between the core components and the desired outcomes. Moreover, the framework acknowledges the influence of external factors like global trends and market forces towards sustainable tourism practices and outcomes as well as the impact of cultural and socio-political context of the tourism area.

With this elucidation, it is the intention of this framework to provide a roadmap that analyzes and evaluates the sustainability of tourism initiatives in Thailand. In other words, the conceptual framework

serves as a theoretical lens through which the research objectives are pursued and processed. This facilitates a more structured and systematic exploration of sustainable tourism dynamics in the Thai context.

It is important to note however, that in this present study, the focus is primarily on SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). As it is acknowledged that SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) are also considered as critical components of sustainable tourism, their implications are beyond the scope of this present study.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Tourism Dynamics in Thailand.
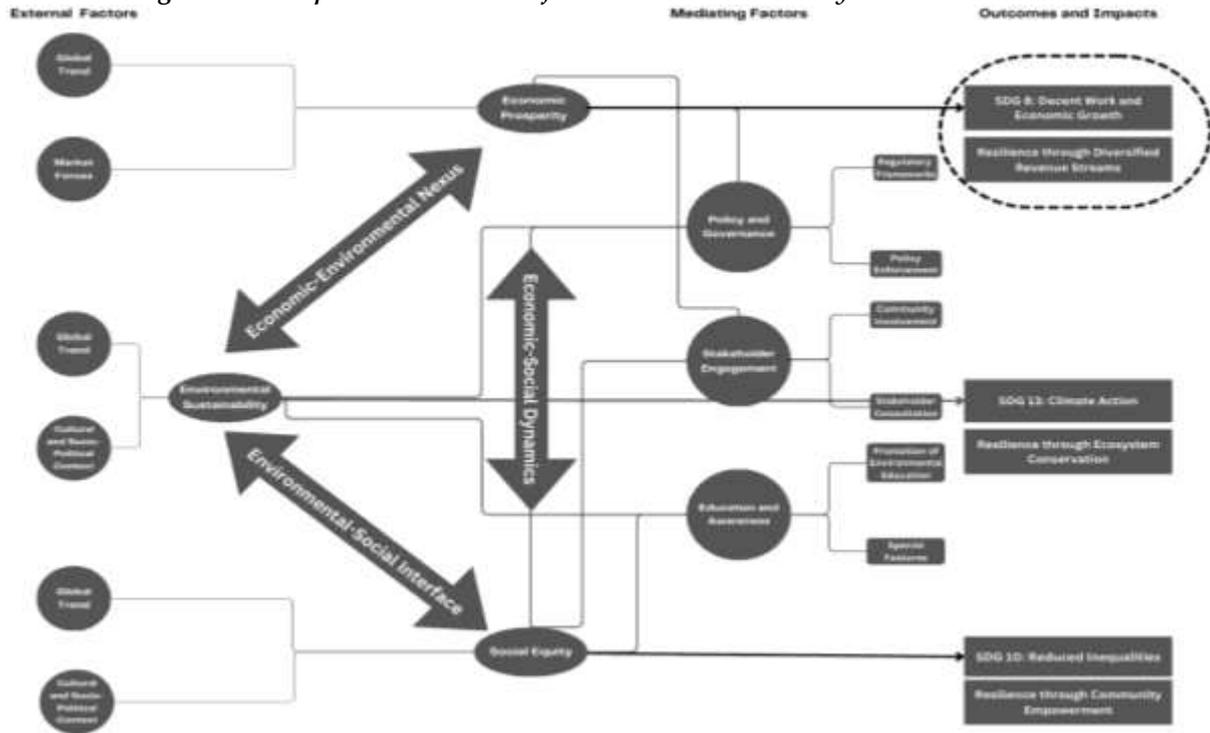
To sum, this literature review emphasizes on the multifaceted nature of sustainable tourism in Thailand. This is specifically analyzed and evaluated against the increased involvement of Chinese tourism in Thailand's tourism activities. As sustainable tourism brings about a striking balance between economic growth and environmental and social well-being, achieving and maintaining this balance remains to be a complex process. Therefore, the review points to the challenges that are inevitably encountered in reconciling economic imperatives with environmental conservation and social equity. This is also analyzed against the backdrop of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of the industry to implement more sustainable tourism practices. But the inclusion of Thai students' and lecturers' perspectives changes the game. Their thoughts, opinions and views emerge as crucial aspects in crafting future strategies and initiatives that are aimed at promoting sustainable tourism aligned with SDG 8. By integrating their insights within the conceptual framework, this present study intends to contribute to the deeper understanding of sustainable tourism dynamics in Thailand. This, hopefully could pave way to a more informed and effective policymaking and industry practices.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach that pimproarticularly used semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. This approach offers flexibility in exploring the stakeholder perspectives on Chinese sustainable tourism practices in Thailand and provided rich qualitative data to fully understand the issue (Bryman, 2016; Willig & Rogers, 2017). This design was chosen over quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to prioritize subjective meanings, contextual interpretation, and participant-driven insights, which are especially relevant in sustainability and cross-cultural tourism research.

4.1. Research Design

This present study adopted a qualitative

phenomenological approach that sought to understand participants lived experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method as it allowed the participants to share insights in a flexible yet structured format. This ensured an in-depth take on their answers while maintaining comparability across their responses (Hennink et al., 2020).

Additionally, the study is anchored on Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), which emphasizes iterative data collection and analysis. This ensures that themes emerged inductively from the data, and not from pre-existing theoretical frameworks. This dual-layered design (phenomenology + grounded theory) enables both depth of experience and openness to conceptual emergence, enhancing analytical rigor.

4.2. Data Sources

The primary data source consisted of 34 semi-structured interviews. These were transcribed, translated, and analyzed to extract emerging themes. No secondary data, archival documents, or surveys were used in this study.

4.3. Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

This present study's samples included 34 Thai university students and lecturers, who were selected through purposive sampling. This guaranteed the inclusion of individuals with relevant knowledge and experiences with the tourism sector (Patton, 2014). A snowball sampling element was also applied, where early participants referred others within their networks who met the criteria, enhancing access to information-rich participants.

4.3.1. Participant Characteristics

- Students (n=20) Undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in tourism, business, and sustainable development programs that represent future professionals in Thailand's tourism industry.
- Lecturers (n=14) Faculty members with expertise in tourism management, environmental policy, and business strategy that provide an academic and professional perspective on sustainable tourism challenges.

Inclusion Criteria:
1. Students must be currently enrolled in a tourism or business-related program and have experience or academic exposure to sustainable tourism practices.
2. Lecturers must have at least five years of

experience in tourism research, policy, or education.
3. All participants must have knowledge of or direct engagement with Chinese tourism trends in Thailand.

The selection of these groups of respondents has been intentionally made to guarantee that their responses are both practically and academically relevant to the matter under investigation specifically towards the exploration of sustainable tourism under the SDG 8.

4.4. Data Collection

The interviews were conducted between March and May 2024 in university settings and online platforms. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was conducted in Thai, with translations into English for analysis. Informed consent forms were given to the participants prior to the interview to allow them to fully understand the purpose of the study as well as to let them know the parameters of the privacy and confidentiality of their responses. The form also ensured that the participants voluntarily join in the study, and could withdraw from the process anytime. After careful evaluation and consideration, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study as it followed and complied the ethical research standards (Leavy, 2022). Interview guides were pilot-tested on two individuals (not included in the final sample) to improve clarity and flow before full-scale data collection.

4.5. Data Analysis and Thematic Development

Thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2021) was used to analyze the data. It followed the systematic coding process shown below

1. **Familiarization with Data** The interviews were manually transcribed while the researchers read the transcripts repeatedly in order to identify key patterns and emerging insights.
2. **Initial Coding** Open coding was also manually conducted. Researchers highlighted recurring words, phrases, and concepts in the transcripts, and they were categorized into preliminary themes based on their relevance and relationship to sustainable tourism practices.
3. **Theme Development** When codes were identified, they were then grouped into broader categories. This helped establish major themes from the participants' responses that also ensured that they are aligned with the study's objectives.

4. **Review and Refinement** To organize the relationship between themes, thematic maps and written summaries were used. Another reviewer was invited to verify the consistency of the coding to ensure inter-coder reliability.

But to further enhance the credibility and consistency of the data, a cross-validation was performed by an independent researcher to ensure that everything is in the right place. A member checking was also conducted that allowed the participants to review their transcripts for accuracy and intended meaning.

4.6. Ensuring Data Saturation

After 30 interviews, data saturation was reached where no new themes emerged. But additional four interviews were conducted to confirm stability in the findings, which worked congruently with the saturation principles outlined by Guest et al. (2006).

Justification for Student and Lecturer Participation

The participation of the students and lecturers play significant roles in shaping the future of the tourism industry of Thailand. **Their views and opinions offer fresh insights into the following** How future professionals perceive sustainability challenges in tourism?

- How academic discourse and policy discussions align with industry realities?
- The gaps in current sustainable tourism education and workforce preparedness.

Their dual perspectives provide a bridge between theoretical knowledge and applied industry experience, contributing nuanced interpretations of SDG 8-related issues.

By incorporating these statements, this present study enables to bridge the knowledge-practice divide that has given comprehensive understanding to educational institutions, policymakers, and tourism stakeholders as regards the effective mechanism on how to integrate sustainable tourism principles into real-world applications.

This present study utilized a robust qualitative method in analyzing the perspectives of the stakeholders about sustainable tourism. By using semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis to process the data against the backdrop of Grounded Theory principles, this present study provides a more rigorous, in-depth, and credible take on how Thai students and lecturers engage with the sustainability challenges posed by Chinese tourism practices. This offers valuable insights that contribute to future tourism policies and strategies to be implemented in both countries.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

The institutional ethics committee for human research has reviewed and approved this present research, which shows that it is in full compliance with international standards for the protection of human participants.

However, to minimize any potential risk of harm, this present study made use of non-invasive, voluntary interviews conducted in secure and comfortable environments, either in person or via trusted online platforms. Sensitive personal information of the participants was not asked, and anonymity of the transaction process and analysis were maintained in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants and the information they furnished.

Prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained from the participants to allow them to fully understand the purpose of the study and ensure that their rights are protected. The informed consent also gave the participants the idea on how the data gathering process is to be conducted, and offered them the consent to withdraw anytime from their participation without any consequence.

On hindsight, the potential benefits of this research outweighed the minimal risks involved. The participants' contribution could go a long way as it could potentially help improve tourism policies at the same time enhance educational strategies that promote tourism sustainability. Participants somehow obtain a platform where they can share their views and become instrumental in infusing meaningful change in the tourism industry.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

From the interviews gathered among Thai students and lecturers, the analyses of this present study are directed towards identifying several key themes that substantiate deeper understanding on the impact of Chinese tourism in Thailand. Each theme is introduced briefly to set the context and to provide background information of the constructs under investigation. This analyses specifically examine viewpoints shared by the stakeholders and the underlying power dynamics that influence their perspectives and navigate through their potentialities for policy making. In this manner, the research questions are effectively addressed as to the impact of Chinese sustainable tourism practices in Thailand.

Table 1 shows the overall findings, which are broken down to the identified themes. However, they are masticated on their similarities and differences specifically on issues related to the

economic benefits of tourism, its environmental impacts, concerns on cultural preservation, and the distribution of tourism benefits. By highlighting these issues, this present study does not only clarify the intricacies of sustainable tourism development but it also offers actionable insights for stakeholders who could make use of it to craft policy frameworks and to strengthen arguments that environmental sustainability should work efficiently alongside economic growth.

Themes and Perceptions: the interviews conducted among the participants have generated central themes that encompass wealth of issues pertinent to the impact of sustainable tourism practices in Thailand. For each theme however, the prevailing student perceptions are summarized, which are further dissected to form a theme of the most common viewpoints expressed during the interviews. In addition to these prevailing views, the analysis also explores the variations in their perspectives, which then provided a more salient understanding of their attitudes.

Lecturer Perspectives: the analysis also navigates the opinions and views of the lecturers, who are considered experts in the field. Their viewpoints are also summarized to form a comprehensive picture of the contexts that surround each them especially with those that relate to the academic or tourism profession. This is juxtaposed with the students' perspectives in order to explore deeper understanding of the theme identifying along the way their agreement and divergence.

Power Dynamics: the crucial take on the analysis is the investigation of the influence of power dynamics to both the students' and lecturers' perspectives. By navigating through these dynamics, this present study could generate valuable information as to how power relations within the educational and tourism sectors shape attitudes and opinions of its stakeholders. This understanding is instrumental in crafting strategies that could deal with the causes of these differences in opinions so that it could foster more equitable dialogues.

Policy Implications: from the information shared by the student participants, this present study has recognized that that there are potential policy initiatives that could be developed and fittingly put into place to better implement sustainable tourism practices. Backed by the insights given by the lecturers, these policy implications could align with the values and priorities stipulated by the students that could lead to the attainment of economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation.

Students-20

Lecturers-14

Table 1: Thai Students and Lecturers Perceptions on Chinese Sustainable Tourism (Appendix B).

Theme	Student Perception (Prevailing View)	Student Perception (Nuances)	Lecturer Perspective	Power Dynamics	Policy Implications based on Student Perceptions
Economic Benefits	Increased job opportunities and local business growth.	Some students worry about competition for jobs, while others see opportunities in new tourism sectors.	Focus on ensuring fair wages and upskilling locals for higher-value tourism jobs.	Students might prioritize immediate job prospects over long-term sustainability (lecturer focus).	Develop training programs for Thai workers in the tourism industry to improve their competitiveness and access to higher-value jobs.
Environmental Concerns	Worry about waste management and environmental impact.	Limited awareness of specific environmental impacts (e.g., water consumption by large resorts).	Emphasize infrastructure development for waste management and responsible resource use by tourists.	Students might lack knowledge of industry practices compared to lecturers.	Implement environmental impact assessments for tourism operations and educate tourists on responsible resource use.
Cultural Preservation	Importance of respect for Thai culture by tourists.	Limited discussion about potential cultural homogenization due to mass tourism.	Highlight the importance of promoting cultural exchange alongside preservation.	Students might prioritize cultural preservation over lecturer focus on economic benefits of tourism.	Integrate cultural sensitivity training into tourism curriculum and develop initiatives promoting cultural exchange with tourists.

Economic Benefits: A Double-Edged Sword: Generally, the students view that the presence of Chinese tourism in Thailand could generate more job opportunities at the same time stimulate growth for local businesses (Student Quotes 1, 4, 7). However, what the students are concerned about especially those who just recently graduated is the competition they may face in finding employment (Student

Quotes 2, 6). This is aggravated by the fact that they are at the crossroads whether taking short-term gains or tracking along long-term sustainability. But responding to this imminent problem, lecturers have suggested that there should be appropriate policies to be enforced to ensure fair wages among the vendors, and upskilling programs should be available to Thai workers who wish to upgrade (Lecturer Quotes A, B). Additionally, the participants also expressed caution to the risk that Thai workers may be confined with low wages, and succumbed to what is called the "golden goose" metaphor (Student Quote 2).

This tension between short-term employability and long-term equity aligns with the SDG 8 concern for "decent work," revealing contradictions in how tourism growth may reinforce structural labor inequalities. The concept of decent work is thus not merely about job quantity, but job quality something students perceive as threatened in a competitive, externally-driven tourism market.

5.1. Environmental Concerns: Beyond Surface Management

When it comes to waste management and environmental impact of tourism, students expressed grave concerns about it (Student Quotes 8, 11, 14) although it was also apparent that there are those who are not aware of specific challenges of tourism such as water consumption by large resorts (Student Quotes 9, 12). This gap in the knowledge between what is sustainable tourism against what is profitable tourism should be addressed through intensive educational initiatives that promote responsible tourism practices among all the stakeholders. Lecturers moreover, suggested for better implementation of necessary infrastructure to infuse a more sustainable resource use among the tourists (Lecturer Quotes C, D).

This finding demonstrates the "surface-level sustainability" trap while students are aware of visible issues (like litter), they may lack systems thinking about deeper ecological imbalances. This disconnect illustrates the need for environmental literacy embedded in tourism education especially regarding carbon footprint, biodiversity loss, and water-energy nexus in resort operations. Lecturers' responses serve as a call for institutional intervention rather than isolated awareness.

5.2. Cultural Preservation: Striking a Delicate Balance

Respecting Thai culture among visiting tourists strikes utmost importance for Thai students (Student Quotes 15, 17, 20) but discussions regarding the potential cultural homogenization is yet to be fully given attention (Student Quotes 16, 19). This suggests that when the focus of tourism efforts is only directed towards cultural preservation, it is feared to overshadow the negative impact that tourism brings to the area. Lecturers stressed that there should be a mechanism where the promotion of cultural exchange will effectively work alongside preservation efforts (Lecturer Quotes E, F). This means that tourism should foster intercultural understanding while at the same time safeguards customs and traditions. Thus, achieving this balance promises a sustainable and enriching cultural tourism experience.

These findings point to a cultural paradox while students stress pride and respect for Thai culture, there is limited recognition of the subtle forms of cultural dilution occurring through hyper-targeted tourism marketing and commercialization. This tension mirrors what critical tourism scholars call "performative authenticity," wherein the preservation of culture is itself staged for tourist consumption. Lecturers, in contrast, frame culture as living and evolving, favoring policies that support mutual learning over rigid protectionism.

5.3. Critical Considerations: Uneven Distribution and Knowledge Gaps

The uneven distribution of tourism benefits also becomes a concern among the students (Student Quotes 3, 5, 18). They expressed fears that there might be certain segments of the society that could be marginalized and could not reap economic benefits of this intercultural tourism. This then calls for policies to be enacted to promote a more inclusive economic growth within the tourism sector. Furthermore, the gaps identified on these challenges require comprehensive educational programs that cater to both students and industry professionals, so that they could be well-informed and trained on the complexities of the tourism industry.

This section surfaces broader structural issues in tourism governance, particularly how benefits are spatially and socially concentrated. Students' concerns echo critical literature on tourism leakage and exclusion, where marginalized groups remain peripheral to decision-making. The finding reinforces the need for inclusive stakeholder frameworks and social impact assessments in future tourism planning.

5.4. Contribution to Sustainable Tourism Strategies

The insights gathered from the participants offer actionable recommendations to enforce sustainable

tourism

For economic growth, it is imperative that relevant policies are to be implemented in order to ensure that Thai workers receive fair wages and undergo necessary upskilling programs. As to environmental sustainability, it is needed to develop educational initiatives that could deal with the knowledge gaps regarding tourism operations at the same time promote responsible resource management. In terms of cultural preservation and exchange, incorporating lessons and training on cultural sensitivity in tourism curricula could be helpful in facilitating respectful cultural exchange that can enhance tourism experiences. These contributions resonate with broader debates on stakeholder-driven sustainability models. Rather than viewing tourism sustainability as a top-down regulatory exercise, participants envision a hybrid system one where education, regulation, and intercultural cooperation co-produce ethical and resilient tourism.

By giving enough consideration to the participants' concerns as well as combining their varied perspectives into a more actionable pieces, policymakers and industry leaders should develop sustainable tourism strategies that could generate decent work among tourism workers while minimizing the environmental impact it brings. Additional research on the distribution of tourism benefits and crafting of environmental education programs can strengthen efforts towards a more sustainable tourism in Thailand.

Moreover, Table 2 presents a structured analysis of the key themes taken from the participants' perspectives. Each theme centers around the deeper understanding of the synthetic perspectives and insights shared by participants.

Thus, this analysis explored the perspectives of the stakeholders, who are composed of Thai students and lecturers, on the impact of Chinese sustainable tourism practices in Thailand. This is carried out in two approaches. First, by combining data generated from the interviews of both the students and lecturers, which are reflected in Table 2. It provided a comprehensive view of the dominant perspectives, potential biases, and knowledge gaps across the stakeholders. Second, Table 1 courses through the perspectives of the students and lecturers in separate manner. This analysis revealed nuances in student views and the potential power dynamics that could influence the perspectives of the lecturers against the best practices in the industry. This dual approach gives a more in-depth understanding of the concerns of the stakeholder concerns, which in turn, facilitate

the development of solutions and educational programs that target to the promotion of sustainable tourism.

This two-layered analysis also enhances theoretical richness by allowing for cross-group triangulation. It enables interpretation beyond descriptive coding providing comparative insight into where stakeholder views converge or conflict regarding SDG 8 principles. As shown in Table 2, the column under Theme succinctly outlines the central topics that were generated from the interviews. It showed there that themes revolve around economic impacts, environmental concerns, and cultural preservation of tourism in Thailand. This only shows that within the topic on sustainable tourism, multifaceted aspects are drawn out.

The Dominant Perspective column summarizes the viewpoints that are predominantly expressed by the students and lecturers as regards a certain theme. It captures the overarching consensus of their statements, which include both the positive and negative aspects. In contrast, Divergent Perspectives shows the contradicting views within each theme. This seemingly reveals variations in the perspectives of the participants when it comes to issues on tourism.

To further substantiate the analysis, the Potential Biases column is included as it sifts through the partialities of the participants' dominant perspectives such as personal experiences, professional roles, or educational backgrounds. Undoubtedly, these biases create certain prejudgment from the participants that shape how they perceive and interpret sustainable tourism practices. The column under Knowledge Gaps reflects areas that the participants have limited awareness or knowledge. This helps in finding the right strategies and mechanism where these gaps or lack of awareness could be addressed.

Actionable Strategies column outlines the possible strategies that could be undertaken in order to deal with or address the issues concerning the identified themes. These actionable insights however, are specifically aimed at policymakers, industry stakeholders, and educational institutions to devise systems or plans to educate all the industry players in promoting and upholding sustainable tourism practices.

This structured interpretation framework ensures transparency and replicability in how data was interpreted. It moves beyond simple summarization and enables an analytical reading of stakeholder logic, values, and future orientation contributing to a grounded but transferable understanding of

sustainable tourism dynamics in Thailand.

Concertedly, Table 2 offers a comprehensive framework on how the data are interpreted and duly analyzed. Through this, it provides valuable insights into the complexities of sustainable tourism development in Thailand and how they could be managed in order to benefit all the stakeholders.

Students = 20

Lecturers = 14

Table 2: Holistic Analysis of Thai Students and Lecturers Perceptions on Chinese Sustainable Tourism.

Theme	Dominant Perspective	Divergent Perspectives	Potential Biases	Knowledge Gaps	Actionable Strategies
Economic Benefits	Increased job opportunities and local business growth are crucial.	Concerns about wage stagnation and limited job variety for locals catering primarily to Chinese tourists.	Short-term economic benefits might overshadow long-term sustainability concerns.	Lack of awareness on responsible tourism practices that ensure fair wages and local skill development.	Develop industry standards and training programs to promote upskilling locals for higher-value tourism jobs.
Environmental Impacts	Waste management and responsible resource use are critical for sustainability.	Limited discussion on specific environmental challenges like water consumption by large resorts.	Focus on visible issues like waste might overshadow resource depletion concerns.	Lack of knowledge on the environmental impact of specific tourist behaviors.	Implement environmental impact assessments for tourism operations and educate tourists on responsible resource use.
Cultural Preservation	Respect for Thai culture by tourists is essential.	Limited discussion about potential cultural homogenization due to mass tourism.	Focus on cultural preservation might neglect the value of cultural exchange within tourism.	Lack of awareness on responsible tourism practices that promote respectful cultural interaction.	Integrate cultural sensitivity training into tourism curricula and develop initiatives fostering respectful cultural exchange.

This analysis moves around the perceptions of Thai university students in tourism programs, which comes in multi-dimensional levels since it encompasses issues related to tourism's economic benefits, environmental impacts, and cultural preservation especially with regard to the integration of Chinese sustainable tourism practices in Thailand. Through the examination of these key themes as well as the incorporation of students' quotation in the analysis, this present study able to highlight both the challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable tourism development. The findings point to the importance of coming up with comprehensive strategies that deals with the economic, environmental, and cultural dimensions of tourism in order to ensure long-term sustainability of the Thailand's tourism sector.

By drawing out the intersections among these themes, the analysis also advances a stakeholder-centered model of sustainability one that centers lived experience as a foundation for policy innovation, particularly in the Global South context.

5.5. Economic Benefits: Job Boom or Bust?

For the economic implications of Chinese tourism in Thailand, the discussion revolves around the issue on job creation and local business growth.

As its Dominant Perspective, the analysis points to the notion that both students and lecturers acknowledge the critical role of tourism in generating job opportunities and stimulating local business growth. However, there are certain concerns raised with regard to wage stagnation as well as the limited variety of jobs available to locals especially those who directly deal with Chinese tourists.

On the column of Divergent Perspectives, it shows that students basically worry about the low wages that they could obtain once they join the tourism industry. This is especially true among the recent graduates who also are concern about the tough competition they might face in the industry. Among the lecturers, they expressed the need of having sustainable long-term economic growth, which they said that focusing on low-wage jobs at the moment will not be beneficial to the overall economy in the long run.

The Potential Biases that were identified relate to the short-term economic benefits of tourism, which significantly overshadows the call for better and stronger sustainable practices. In this theme, students pose biases towards the acquisition of immediate job prospects while lecturers on the other end, stress the importance of long-term industry sustainability.

As to the Knowledge Gaps, it has been recognized

that there exists a significant gap in the participants' awareness of how responsible tourism practices could guarantee fair wages and local skills development. Both the students and lecturers suggested stronger educational strategies should be designed to educate tourists and industry players on the proper implementation of sustainable economic practices within the tourism industry.

In terms of Actionable Strategies, policies should be drafted that increase the number of tourism jobs at the same time promote fair wages and upskilling programs. This implies that the industry should develop its standards and relevant training programs to elevate locals into higher-value tourism positions. To realize this, educational institutions and industry players should collaborate to integrate practical training and sustainable tourism principles into the university curriculum, which could bridge the knowledge gap of the students.

As one student remarked, "Increased tourism jobs are great, but some of us worry about low wages and competition for recent graduates." This is further clarified by a lecturer who said, "We need to look beyond immediate job creation and focus on long-term economic sustainability and skills development."

The issue of "quality versus quantity" in job creation underscores a developmental paradox while tourism expands employment, it may perpetuate precarity if not tied to protections and value-added opportunities. These findings echo global concerns in tourism studies about the rise of low-wage, seasonal, or informal employment. Thus, a policy response must move beyond job counting and toward job dignity, rights, and mobility.

5.6. Environmental Impacts: Beyond the Bins

Another theme identified in this analysis is the environmental impacts of tourism. This is particularly pointing to the issues of waste management and resource consumption.

The Dominant Perspective under this theme is that responsible resource use and waste management are considered as crucial in the implementation of sustainable actions on tourism. Both students and lecturers agree on this matter however, at the moment, there is a lack of depth in the discussions regarding specific environmental challenges such as water consumption by large resorts.

Conversely on the Divergent Perspectives, students are observed to pay more attention to tangible issues such as waste management, but lecturers consider more the broader environmental concerns that include resource depletion and ecological balance.

As to its Potential Biases, concerns were raised when the focus of the tourism efforts is only directed towards visible issues like waste management. This might overshadow more pressing concerns such as resource depletion and ecological imbalance. Lecturers opined that in this note, students have certain biases as to their perceptions of environmental impacts.

This could also be gleaned from the identified Knowledge Gaps, where it is found that students have limited understanding of the broader environmental impacts of tourist behaviors. Lecturers however, emphasized that there is an urgent need to comprehensively come up with education plans and strategies that could mitigate risks in all aspects of environmental sustainability issues in tourism.

For the Actionable Strategies, it is hence essential that assessments are to be conducted to determine the environmental impact of tourism operations. This is to be carried out alongside the proper education of both tourists and industry professionals on how to enforce responsible resource use. This means that educational programs should be expanded to include comprehensive modules on environmental sustainability.

As one student admitted, "Waste management is crucial, but I never thought about water usage by resorts." This is echoed by a lecturer who commented, "We need to address all facets of environmental sustainability, not just the visible ones like waste."

This theme reflects what some scholars label "cosmetic sustainability," where aesthetic actions (like visible waste cleanup) mask deeper ecological blind spots. The findings reveal a cognitive gap between environmental awareness and systems understanding. To close this, Thai tourism education should incorporate place-based learning and scenario modeling that connect micro-level behaviors with macro-level environmental outcomes.

5.7. Cultural Preservation: Respectful Exchange or Erosion of Identity?

Cultural preservation is another theme that emerged in the analysis. It courses through the discussion whether the cultural impacts of tourism foster respect to Thai culture or it brings risk of cultural homogenization.

The Dominant Perspective on this matter relates to the notion that giving respect to Thai culture is essential. But even if both students and lecturers

agree on this contention, there is still a limited discussions about the risk of cultural homogenization due to mass tourism.

However, when it comes to Divergent Perspectives, students expressed their concern regarding the immediate impact of tourists on cultural sites while lecturers are more concerned about the long-term effects of cultural homogenization and the potential loss of Thai cultural identity. As to its Potential Biases, students usually draw out their views in their direct interaction with the tourists thus, they feared that cultural preservation might neglect the value of cultural exchange within tourism. But for the lecturers, they have a broader perspective on cultural dynamics of this cultural interaction.

The Knowledge Gaps points to the lack of awareness of all stakeholders as regards the practices that promote responsible tourism and respectful cultural interaction. Both students and lecturers call for better education on this topic.

The Actionable Strategies that could potentially mitigate these issues is for the stakeholders to take initiative in bringing balance between cultural preservation and the benefits of cultural exchange, mutual respect, and understanding. One of the measures that could be undertaken is to strategically incorporate the topic on cultural sensitivity into tourism curricula and develop adherence to cultural respect between the two countries.

One student questioned, "Tourists respecting our culture is important, but are we losing our own identity with mass tourism?" This viewpoint is reinforced by a lecturer who explained, "We need to encourage cultural exchange while ensuring that our cultural identity is preserved."

The concerns raised also resonate with literature on cultural commodification, wherein heritage is rebranded for tourist consumption. The distinction between cultural appreciation and appropriation was largely unarticulated by students, suggesting the need for reflexive education on intercultural ethics. Moreover, lecturers' insights push for policy frameworks that acknowledge cultural fluidity while resisting erosion of authenticity.

This analysis indicates that both students and lecturers acknowledged the economic benefits of increased tourism but they express concerns regarding the potential stagnation of wages and lack of variety of jobs that tourism workers could acquire. Moreover, environmental problems are primarily focused on tangible issues such as waste management, but there is less attention given to other concerns such as water usage. This is also aggravated

by the concerns on cultural homogenization, which is discussed sparingly as it is overshadowed by the topic on cultural preservation.

The triangulated findings suggest that while awareness of sustainability exists, it is unevenly distributed and often filtered through personal experience rather than structural analysis. This highlights a need for transdisciplinary curriculum reform that incorporates labor justice, environmental systems, and intercultural literacy.

As a means to deal with these concerns, policies that promote fair wages and skills development should be implemented to ensure long-term economic benefits for all stakeholders. In the academic field, educational programs and training courses should involve lessons or topics that make students become more aware of the environmental impacts of tourism. But in order to realize this, initiatives should also work on balancing cultural preservation with the benefits of cultural exchange. Through this, stakeholders can enhance sustainable tourism practices in Thailand, and achieve what is stipulated in SDG 8.

Ultimately, this study contributes not only descriptive insights but also a stakeholder-led blueprint for ethical and inclusive tourism development in Thailand. It bridges policy, pedagogy, and practice an essential integration for meaningful alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The conceptual framework developed for this present study illustrates the intricacies and complex interplay of the issues that surround sustainable tourism in Thailand. It particularly examines the economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social equity within the tourism industry and how Chinese tourism influences its dynamics. By considering policy and governance, stakeholder engagement, education and awareness as mediating factors, the discussion presented below explores the nuances of sustainable tourism that is expected to align with the assigned SDG. Here, the perspectives of Thai students and lecturers are synthesized and further analyzed against the insights drawn from the conceptual framework and explored for their theoretical implications and policy interventions.

Economic Prosperity: The primary benefit of involving Chinese tourism in the realm of Thai tourism is the huge possibility of attaining economic prosperity. But in as much as this brings about economic opportunities, this collaboration is marred by the issue of long-term sustainability and

inclusivity. Job creation and business growth are the issues voiced out by the students as the by-product of this integration but wage stagnation and lack of career advancement become their utmost concern. **One student stated**

"Tourism jobs are increasing, but the wages remain low, and there's little career progression."

Lecturers echo these concerns, and suggested that there is a need to craft policies and implement strategic interventions to ensure that there is an equal distribution of these economic gains among the stakeholders. Thus, the policy and governance component of the conceptual framework underscores the importance of the following

- strengthening labor regulations to promote fair wages and prevent employment exploitation.
- encouraging tourism diversification into sectors such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and digital tourism to reduce dependency on Chinese mass tourism.
- providing incentives for local entrepreneurs to ensure that the benefits of tourism extend beyond large-scale investors and multinational corporations.

Compared to other international tourism models, such as Japan's emphasis on local community-based tourism or Australia's labor rights standards in tourism employment, the influx of Chinese group package tourism in Thailand often prioritizes volume over value. Many Chinese-operated businesses (e.g., restaurants, tour agencies) cater exclusively to Chinese tourists, creating enclaves with limited economic spillover to Thai locals. This contrasts with models in New Zealand, where foreign tourism is explicitly linked to local employment and regional development mandates. Therefore, Thailand must consider recalibrating economic engagement with Chinese tourism to align with more inclusive global standards.

6.1. Theoretical Implications and Generalizability

The findings generated from this present study are in accordance with what the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model posited that rapid tourism growth without sustainable policies can lead to stagnation and decline (Butler, 1980). This is true in the case of Bali and the Maldives, which are considered as tourism-dependent economies. What happened in their case is that their , over-reliance on mass tourism curtailed their supposed economic development that could have helped them achieve greater economic success. Thus, for Thailand to avoid experiencing the same condition, they should learn how to diversify their tourism strategies and focus on

prioritizing long-term sustainability over short-term gains.

Nowadays, infrastructure development has penetrated much of Thailand especially in the southern part. This due to the implementation of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which accelerates tourism-driven economic shifts. But scholars warn that without clear policies, it can instigate economic disparities that could exacerbate social inequalities. Therefore, policies should be put into place to enforce regulatory frameworks that could help balance economic development with cultural integrity.

Environmental Sustainability: One of the emerging concerns that is identified in the analysis is environmental sustainability. It continues to matter in promoting sustainable tourism as there remains a gap between its awareness and the actionable solutions for the environment not to be exploited. This is the case since both the students and lecturers admitted that mass tourism brings about undesirable impact towards the environment. But the discussion so far only revolves around waste management, often neglecting and overlooking other pressing matters such as water consumption, carbon footprints, and ecosystem degradation.

One student admitted

"We talk about plastic waste a lot, but what about the energy and water that tourism consumes?"

This analysis underscores the critical need for education and awareness, which is gleaned as the key mediating factor in the conceptual framework. **To bridge this gap however, sustainable tourism initiatives should be prioritized, to wit**

- Integrating environmental literacy into tourism education, ensuring students understand the full scope of tourism's ecological impact.
- Strengthening regulatory enforcement to ensure hotels, resorts, and tour operators adhere to sustainability standards.
- Promoting eco-certifications for businesses to incentivize sustainable practices.

When comparing Chinese tourism practices to international green tourism models, a disparity becomes clear. For instance, Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark embed carbon neutrality and ecological integrity into their national tourism strategy, mandating eco-labeling, low-carbon transport, and circular waste systems. In contrast, many Chinese tourist operations in Thailand especially those linked to BRI are characterized by high energy consumption, minimal sustainability oversight, and limited adherence to local environmental laws. This contrast raises

concerns about policy enforcement gaps when international tourism operators bypass domestic regulations.

In light of the discussion regarding the promotion of sustainable tourism specifically in Thailand, the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) was taken into account since it suggests that what comes along with economic growth is the potential degradation of the environment. But this negative effect could eventually vanish if the territory will enforce better environmental regulations and sustainable innovations (Grossman & Krueger, 1995). At the moment, Thailand is in the state of vulnerability as policy interventions have been deemed to be not especially helpful in accelerating environmental sustainability and they are feared to eventually incur ecological damage.

Thailand should adopt models from that of New Zealand and Norway that have successfully implemented strict environmental policies in their economies, which include carbon offset programs and sustainable tourism levies. This could help Thailand ensure that Chinese tourism will not create adverse impact towards their tourism system yet it should contribute to them in terms of economic prosperity.

Furthermore, local resources such as the local communities or tourism operators may be strained if for instance, the BRI's expansion of infrastructure projects in Thailand is not paired with stringent sustainability policies. Research should be conducted to determine the impact of BRI-related tourism projects towards regional environmental resilience and to identify if China's own green tourism policies can be adapted in Thailand.

Social Equity: Another critical yet often overlooked dimension of sustainable tourism is social equity. This points to the concerns that students and lecturers raised when it comes to the threat of cultural homogenization and the possibility that tourism's economic benefits could not be equally distributed to local communities.

One student reflected

"Tourists love our culture, but sometimes it feels like we are changing too much to accommodate them."

This sentiment resonates the stakeholder engagement, which is a key mediating factor in the conceptual framework. **To enhance social sustainability, tourism policies must**

- Encourage community-led tourism models, ensuring that local voices are included in decision-making.
- Promote cultural sensitivity training for both

tourists and tourism operators.
- Develop localized tourism taxation models, where a portion of tourism revenue directly benefits local communities.

Unlike Japanese or Bhutanese tourism models, which impose tourist caps or daily fees to protect local culture, Thailand's open-door approach to Chinese tourism sometimes facilitates superficial cultural engagement. Chinese tour operators often control itineraries, limiting tourists' exposure to authentic local customs or minority communities. In contrast, Western backpacker or experiential tourism often encourages deeper cultural immersion. This comparative lens highlights the need for Thai policymakers to reassert cultural sovereignty through stronger regulation and community involvement.

In the Doxey's Irritation Index (Irridex) Model, local communities may initially welcome tourism but there is a high tendency that they may become hostile towards it if the cultural and economic pressures increase (Doxey, 1975). Currently, Thailand is moving towards the so-called "annoyance" phase, where the external pressures of mass tourism apparently overwhelm local communities but Thailand can learn from Spain and Italy that faced similar challenges in the past. In Barcelona, stricter rules in wearing of visitor caps have been implemented and community-based tourism was prioritized to mitigate socio-cultural tensions. In Thailand, similar approaches could be undertaken to ensure that the cultural exchange remains mutually beneficial for both China and Thailand rather than exploitative.

In the midst of all these, BRI's long-term cultural implications also require further examination. This means that if Thai government prioritizes Chinese investors over local businesses especially to matters related to infrastructure development, it could potentially displace culture and instigate inequality in terms of the socio-economic aspects.

Moreover, the lack of cultural reciprocity in Chinese-led tourism narratives where Thai culture is consumed but rarely dialogued with raises deeper postcolonial questions about soft power, identity, and national representation. Embedding intercultural competence into Thai tourism education may help rebalance this dynamic and foster more ethical, two-way cultural flows

6.2. Recommendations for Promoting Sustainable Tourism in Thailand

Building upon the valuable insights gathered from the interviews of Thai students and lecturers,

the following are the recommendations to follow so that Thailand's tourism industry could attain a more sustainable future, **which is aligned with SDG 8**

1. Empowering Youth-Led Sustainability Initiatives

- **Project Incubators and Funding** Project incubator programs could be established within universities or through partnerships with NGOs. The main purpose of these projects is to provide seed funding to tourism groups at the same time provide relevant mentorship among industry players from tourism professionals. A good access to resources could also help students design, implement, and scale their sustainability initiatives.

- **National Youth Sustainability Awards** There should be a sustainability awards on a national level that are to be given to youth initiatives on sustainable tourism. This allows outstanding student-led projects to be recognized while attracting media attention to inspire future actions (Youth Climate Activism Award, 2024).

2. Multi-Tiered Sustainable Tourism Certification Programs

- **Develop a framework with multiple tiers** A certification program should be created that comes in with progressive levels (bronze, silver, gold) that are solely based on the company's commitment to sustainable practices. This encourages participation among businesses, which are in various stages of sustainability adoption.

- **Transparency and Public Recognition** In order to enforce the certification process efficiently, clear, and transparent criteria should also be created. This includes publicly recognizing certified businesses via online directories, promotional campaigns, and partnerships with travel booking platforms (Wadmin, 2024).

3. Public-Private Partnerships for Sustainable Infrastructure

- **Focus on Locally Owned Businesses** To foster community ownership and economic empowerment, partnerships with local operators and businesses should be given priority to pave way to a more collaborative action towards sustainable tourism. This partnership could sustain and inspire infrastructure projects that could be both beneficial to operators and tourists.

- **Impact Investment Funds** To efficiently finance sustainable infrastructure projects, an investment fund should be established. This could also attract the private sector to invest in mechanisms that focus on social and environmental awareness (The GIIN, n.d.)

4. Enhanced Cultural Exchange Programs

- **Volunteer and Community Engagement Opportunities** Cultural exchange programs should be integrated with volunteering opportunities to allow tourists to contribute directly to community development projects and conservation efforts. By doing this, it could foster a deeper sense of connection between the two countries at the same time promote the sense of shared responsibility.

- **Homestay Programs with Cultural Learning** Cultural learning experiences could also be incorporated in an expanded homestay program to provide tourists authentic interactions with local communities. This instigates appreciation of the local cultural heritage sites and products.

5. Incentivizing Eco-Friendly Practices

- **Financial Incentives for Businesses** Business that have demonstrably adopt eco-friendly practices should be given due financial incentives such as tax breaks, reduced permit fees, or low-interest loans. This could provide them better motivation in dealing with certain sustainability issues such as waste reduction, renewable energy use, and local sourcing.

- **Consumer Reward Programs** Consumer reward programs could also be developed to incentivize tourists who opt to have eco-friendly choices in their trip. This could be in the form of redeemable points for discounts or experiences as this encourages responsible behavior.

6. Integrated Sustainable Tourism Planning

- **Data-Driven Decision Making** When planning for sustainable tourism, emphasis should be given to the data collection process and data analysis to generate useful and practical information to use. This includes utilizing data to check on the progress of the plan, identify areas for improvement, and ensure effective resource allocation.

- **Stakeholder Collaboration Platforms** To bring the stakeholders together such as the local communities, government agencies, NGOs, and private sector, platforms should be established so that they have a common ground to work on. In this manner, each one could have a hand over a decision that could be relevant and significant to their

development.

7. Green Marketing Campaigns with Influencer Partnerships

- **Targeted Content for Chinese Tourists** Green marketing campaigns could be targeted towards a specific audience, and in this case the Chinese tourists. To carry this out, tourism operators and vendors could partner with Chinese social media influencers who can help promote sustainable travel.
- **Highlight Eco-Friendly Options** Eco-friendly accommodations, tours, and attractions could also be showcased as marketing materials. Tourism operators could partner with sustainable businesses to offer exclusive deals and experiences for environmentally conscious travelers.

These recommendations' success largely depends upon a well-defined implementation plan. The plan however, should outline clear timelines, responsible entities, and budget allocations for each initiative. A sturdy monitoring and evaluation framework is needed to assess the effectiveness of these strategies and identify areas for improvement. Closely checking on the key metrics that could include the tourist behaviors, waste generation, and energy consumption, the stakeholders can see progress towards the attainment of sustainability goals and accordingly adapt relevant approaches when needed.

7. CONCLUSION

This present research has extensively probed the complexities of sustainable tourism in Thailand specifically with the increasing involvement of Chinese tourism in the process. It hopes to offer insights and recommendations that are valuable to promote sustainable practices that are aligned with SDG 8. With the use of a comprehensive conceptual framework that encompasses economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social equity together with the identified mediating factors and external influences, this present study provides a well-rounded understanding of the multifaceted impacts and challenges associated with sustainable tourism development. The findings however, substantiate the current theoretical discourse making models like Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) (Butler, 1980) and Doxey's Irritation Index (Doxey, 1975) to be relevant and useful in understanding tourism behaviors and operations. This further indicates that there is a need for a more proactive policy interventions that could prevent stagnation of tourism-related jobs and alleviate socio-cultural

tensions in high-tourism areas.

The complementary views of Thai students and lecturers on the concept of sustainable tourism have enriched the analysis, and their insights reinforce their critical role in promoting and advocating for sustainable tourism. But the findings' most important contribution relates to the fact that there is a need to balance environmental conservation with social equity so that it could have a long-term viability. Undeniably, the contribution of Chinese visitors to Thailand's economy has been felt and acknowledged but for this to be efficiently managed, proactive measures should be put into place to mitigate potential environmental degradation at the same time promote community engagement, and preserve cultural heritage. This proposition aligns with what the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) (Grossman & Krueger, 1995) suggested that economic development must come with regulatory frameworks to ensure sustainability.

This study makes a clear scholarly and practical contribution by offering a stakeholder-driven understanding of sustainable tourism and its link to international policy mechanisms such as SDG 8. Unlike previous macro-level studies, this research highlights the micro-level perceptions and challenges faced by Thai tourism students and lecturers those most likely to shape the future trajectory of tourism governance and innovation.

In line with this, students and lecturers called for the realization and enforcement of fair wages, job diversity and responsible resource management. This means that in order to promote equitable economic growth through comprehensive environmental impact assessments, relevant policies and initiatives should be instigated. On the management aspect, the findings direct tourism businesses to respond to the urgent call of integrating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and environmental compliance measures into their operations. This suggests that companies should be given appropriate incentives if they follow environmental regulations such as adapting or adhering to the requirements of eco-certifications, prioritizing ethical labor practices, or engaging in local community development projects that ensure fairer distribution of tourism benefits.

For policymakers, this research recommends adopting participatory tourism zoning models, enhancing fiscal transparency in foreign-invested tourism enterprises, and embedding sustainable tourism principles into national curricula. For tourism authorities, it emphasizes the need for better enforcement of environmental codes, stricter quality

control of foreign-operated tourism businesses, and capacity-building for community-based tourism. For businesses, the findings suggest integrating green innovation, local hiring practices, and community co-ownership models to build resilient and inclusive tourism economies.

But the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) adds another layer to this complexity as it potentially increases tourist inflows and infrastructure development that could potentially affect environmental conditions especially in the southern part of Thailand. On hindsight, this move allows a boost to Thailand's economic growth but its potential threat to environmental sustainability and cultural integrity is imminent. To address these challenges however, there should be a duly designed educational programs that target relevant stakeholders so that they could be properly informed about the impact of tourism to the environment. There should also be a strong collaboration among the stakeholders so that they can come up with strategic spatial planning to address these issues. For example, zoning regulations and eco-tourism corridors can help equally distribute tourism benefits to the operators, which at the same time reduce environmental pressure on popular tourist destinations. Thailand could also gain from the experience of other high-tourism regions such as Bali and Barcelona that implementing certain mechanisms such as visitor caps, community-based tourism, and conservation zoning regulations can mitigate the negative externalities of mass tourism.

Furthermore, this present study also identified the need for robust knowledge-sharing actions from the stakeholders that are composed of government agencies, businesses, communities, and educational institutions. By leveraging youth-led initiatives, giving incentives to sustainable practices, fostering public-private partnerships, promoting cultural exchange, and adopting integrated planning approaches, Thailand can craft a better path towards the attainment of a more sustainable tourism future. International audiences particularly nations facing a similar influx of mono-cultural tourism segments can also draw lessons from Thailand's case by recognizing the need to rebalance tourism flows, prioritize cultural equity, and regulate foreign-dominated sectors through a sustainability lens.

Additionally, Thailand can position itself as a global leader in responsible tourism that set precedent for other destinations to follow if they will harness the insights generated from this present research. For instance, integrating sustainability principles into national tourism policies will ensure that economic growth can take off not at the expense of the environment and society.

Thus, this present study contributes to the deeper understanding of sustainable tourism dynamics in Thailand. It provides a roadmap for informed policymaking, industry practices, and community engagement. This leans towards prioritizing sustainability to safeguard Thailand's natural and cultural heritage that could foster inclusive economic growth, and promote well-being for both present and future generations. The journey towards sustainable tourism is complex yet with Thailand taking strategic interventions and initiating collective action, it can achieve what others already have a balance between prosperity and environmental preservation that locks its status as one of the world-renowned tourism destinations in the years to come.

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