

Enacting Sustainable Tourism through Cultural Storytelling: The Role of Tour Guides

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how tour guides enact sustainable tourism through cultural storytelling practices. While sustainable tourism discourse has largely focused on macro-level policies and destination governance, the everyday professional practices of frontline actors remain underexplored. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with tour guides operating in cultural tourism destinations to examine how their narrative practices contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural values. The findings reveal that tour guides consistently maintain the authenticity of local narratives, avoid distorting stories for commercial purposes, and balance myth and historical facts in their interpretive delivery. Communicative strategies, including the use of humor to sustain visitor engagement, are employed without compromising cultural substance. Although many guides do not explicitly articulate their work within the conceptual framework of sustainable tourism, they demonstrate a strong commitment to cultural preservation and continuity. Differences emerge in the ability to conceptualize sustainability, particularly among guides with higher educational backgrounds. These findings suggest that sustainable tourism can be enacted through culturally grounded storytelling practices, positioning tour guides as key agents in sustaining intangible cultural heritage through everyday interpretive work.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Cultural Storytelling, Tour Guides, Interpretative Guiding

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism has become a key focus in the development of the global tourism industry, as awareness grows regarding the negative environmental, social, and cultural impacts of tourism activities. Sustainable tourism is defined as tourism that meets the needs of tourists, the industry, the environment, and local communities while taking into account current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts [1]. This approach aims to ensure the sustainability of tourism resources through the protection of natural, cultural, and historical values, while providing economic benefits to local communities [2].

In its implementation, sustainable tourism encompasses three main dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. The economic dimension focuses on improving the well-being of local communities through the equitable distribution of benefits, while the environmental dimension emphasizes the conservation of natural resources and the reduction of negative impacts on ecosystems. On the other hand, the socio-cultural dimension plays a role in preserving cultural identity, local values, and improving the quality of life for communities [3], [4]. These three dimensions

must be integrated in a balanced manner to ensure that sustainable tourism is achieved optimally.

The success of sustainable tourism implementation is inseparable from the involvement of various stakeholders. One of the key actors in the tourism system is the tour guide. According to the [5], a tour guide is an individual who guides tourists while communicatively interpreting cultural and natural heritage. In practice, tour guides have direct contact with tourists and act as mediators between tourists, destinations, and local communities [6].

As tourism evolves, the role of tour guides is no longer limited to conveying factual information but has expanded into a more complex and interactive role. Today's tourists tend to seek deeper experiences that involve an understanding of culture and history, as well as emotional engagement through the narratives presented [7]. In this context, tour guides serve as storytellers or interpreters who convey cultural stories, legends, and local values as part of the tourism experience.

In the context of sustainable tourism, tour guides make a significant contribution. Through their

educational role, tour guides are able to influence tourists' behavior to be more responsible toward the environment and culture [8]. Furthermore, tour guides also serve as a bridge between tourists and local communities, as well as agents who can promote cultural preservation and improve community well-being [9]. Therefore, tour guides are often regarded as the vanguard in creating quality tourism experiences while supporting destination sustainability [10].

However, previous research indicates a gap in the literature regarding the role of tour guides in sustainable tourism. Some studies suggest that tour guides' contributions to the development of sustainable tourism remain relatively low [11]. Furthermore, a number of studies indicate that although tour guides have great potential to support sustainable tourism, this role has not yet been fully optimized in practice. Many tour guides have not yet consciously integrated the principles of sustainable tourism into their guiding activities, whether in the form of information delivery, destination interpretation, or managing tourist behavior during the tour [6]. On the other hand, other studies emphasize that tour guides play a crucial role in shaping tourists' experiences [1]. Furthermore, research also indicates that a tour guide's level of education and work experience influence how they communicate sustainable tourism practices to tourists. This suggests inconsistencies in the understanding and practice of the tour guide's role within the context of sustainability.

Furthermore, most research still focuses on the conceptual role of tour guides and their level of understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism, and is primarily conducted in the context of nature-based tourism. Meanwhile, studies on guiding practices in cultural tourism particularly through storytelling as a form of cultural preservation remain relatively limited. In practice, however, storytelling is one of the approaches most frequently used by tour guides to convey cultural information to tourists. Through storytelling, tour guides not only convey information but also preserve the authenticity of the stories, balance myths and facts, and foster tourists' emotional engagement with local culture. This practice has the potential to be a significant form of contribution to cultural preservation, which is an essential component of sustainable tourism.

In the context of cultural tourism, this issue becomes increasingly important to address because sustainability is not only about environmental protection but also about preserving cultural values and the authenticity of the stories conveyed to tourists. Tour guides have a responsibility to maintain the authenticity of cultural narratives, convey accurate information, and balance the elements of myth, history, and fact in the stories they share with tourists. Thus, storytelling by tour guides can serve as a concrete practice in supporting cultural sustainability at tourist destinations.

Based on this, this study aims to examine the role of storytelling by tour guides as a mechanism for supporting

sustainable tourism, particularly in the aspect of cultural preservation. This study highlights how the storytelling practices carried out by tour guides can be understood as a form of contribution to sustainability, even though in some cases they are not always accompanied by an explicit conceptual understanding of sustainable tourism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is a concept that emphasizes a balance between meeting the long-term needs of tourists, the industry, the environment, and local communities. The [1] defines sustainable tourism as tourism activities that take into account current and future economic, social, and environmental. This concept aims to ensure that the use of tourism resources does not compromise sustainability for future generations, while continuing to provide benefits to local communities [2].

In its implementation, sustainable tourism encompasses three main dimensions: environmental, socio-cultural, and economic. The environmental dimension focuses on the conservation of natural resources and the reduction of negative impacts on ecosystems, while the socio-cultural dimension emphasizes the preservation of cultural identity, local values, and the improvement of the quality of life for communities [3], [4]. Meanwhile, the economic dimension aims to improve community well-being through the fair and sustainable distribution of benefits.

In addition, sustainable tourism also seeks to minimize the negative impacts of tourism activities and raise tourists' awareness of the importance of preserving the environment and culture [12]. Therefore, the success of sustainable tourism implementation heavily depends on the involvement of all stakeholders, including the government, local communities, and tourism industry players [8].

Cultural Storytelling in Tourism

Storytelling in tourism is an interpretive approach used to convey information, values, and cultural meanings to tourists through engaging and communicative narratives. In the context of cultural tourism, storytelling serves not only as a tool for conveying information but also as a means to foster tourists' emotional engagement and deepen their understanding of local culture [7].

Through storytelling, tour guides can package historical information, legends, and cultural values into a more meaningful experience. Research shows that storytelling can enhance tourist engagement by providing context, building emotional connections, and strengthening appreciation for cultural heritage. Tourists tend to understand and remember information more easily when it is presented in the form of a story compared to a purely factual presentation [12].

In addition, storytelling also plays a role in preserving and transmitting cultural values to tourists. In this process, tour guides often draw on various sources of information such as local stories, history, and community beliefs which they then convey in an interpretive manner. This makes storytelling a form of cultural preservation in tourism, particularly in the context of cultural tourism [13].

The Role of Tour Guides in Tourism

Tour guides are key players in the tourism system who play a strategic role in shaping the tourist experience. According to the [5], a tour guide is an individual who guides tourists and communicatively interprets cultural and natural heritage [5], [14]. In practice, tour guides serve not only as information providers but also as mediators between tourists, destinations, and local communities [13]. The role of a tour guide is multidimensional, encompassing functions as an educator, leader, cultural ambassador, environmental steward, entertainer, and economic promoter [6]. In their role as educators, tour guides provide information that is not only factual but also shapes tourists' understanding and behavior. As cultural ambassadors, tour guides play a role in representing local cultural identity to tourists, while in their role as environmental stewards, they encourage tourists to behave responsibly toward the environment and culture [15].

In the context of sustainable tourism, tour guides play a significant role in influencing tourist behavior and raising awareness of sustainability issues [12]. Tour guides also serve as a bridge between tourists and local communities, thereby holding the potential to support cultural preservation and improve community well-being [1]. However, several studies indicate that tour guides' contributions to sustainable tourism remain suboptimal [11]. Furthermore, tour guides' educational levels and work experience also influence their ability to communicate sustainable tourism practices to tourists. This suggests that while tour guides hold a strategic role, the implementation of this role varies in practice.

3. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive approach using qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of tour guiding practices within the context of sustainable tourism. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a more comprehensive and contextual exploration of the experiences, perspectives, and practices of tour guides [16]. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with tour guides who have experience in guiding activities. This technique was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and practices carried out by participants in a real-world context. The participants in this study consisted of 10 tour guides operating in the West Java region. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, taking into account

their experience in guiding activities as well as their involvement in cultural tourism. All participants were interviewed until sufficient data was obtained to describe the phenomenon under study [16].

Table 3.1 Research Informants

No	Initials	Genders	Ages
1	DP	Male	47 yo
2	AN	Female	30 yo
3	HM	Male	42 yo
4	CM	Female	26 yo
5	DR	Female	28 yo
6	DD	Male	37 yo
7	IR	Male	48 yo
8	FM	Male	40 yo
9	DH	Male	38 yo
10	RO	Male	37 yo

Sources: research data processing

In table 3.1. above, there are 10 informants who participated in the research process, with the same background as tour guides in West Java but with different ages and genders. Data collection took place from July to August 2025. Before the interviews were conducted, participants were briefed on the research objectives and assured that the data they provided would remain confidential. The data obtained were then analyzed using thematic analysis. This analysis was conducted in several stages, namely data coding, grouping codes into themes, and interpreting findings based on patterns emerging from the data [17]. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is capable of identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data and providing a systematic understanding of the phenomena under study [17].

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Tour Guides' Knowledge of Sustainable Tourism.

The research findings indicate that tour guides' understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism remains limited and has not yet been articulated conceptually. Most informants do not explicitly link their guiding practices to the framework of sustainable tourism, even though in practice they have implemented a number of principles consistent with that concept, particularly in the socio-cultural dimension.

As expressed by informant DP:

"...whether I've been doing storytelling correctly or not, I don't really know because I haven't delved into it..." (DP)

This statement indicates a gap between practice and conceptual awareness. Tour guides actively engage in cultural interpretation through storytelling, yet they do not always understand these practices within a broader theoretical framework. In other words, the professional practices they carry out are more intuitive and experience-based than grounded in an academic understanding of sustainability. These findings indicate that sustainability practices in the context of tour guiding do not always stem from formal understanding, but can develop implicitly through direct interaction with tourists, field experience, and the internalization of local cultural values. In this context, the knowledge possessed by tour guides can be understood as a form of tacit knowledge that is, knowledge formed through practice and experience, yet not always conceptually explicable.

Nevertheless, this study also found differences in the level of understanding based on educational background. Tour guides with higher education tend to have better abilities in understanding and articulating the concept of sustainability, while other tour guides interpret the practices they carry out more as a form of cultural preservation without explicitly linking them to the concept of sustainable tourism. These findings align with [1] research, which indicates that educational level influences tour guides' knowledge regarding the impacts of tourism and sustainability practices. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that work experience alone is not always sufficient to foster conceptual understanding; therefore, more systematic educational support or training is needed to strengthen such understanding.

When viewed in light of the definition of sustainable tourism put forward by [18] which emphasizes a balance among environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions the practices employed by tour guides in this study tend to focus more on the socio-cultural dimension. This is evident in their efforts to preserve the authenticity of stories, convey cultural values, and avoid distorting local narratives. Meanwhile, environmental and economic aspects do not explicitly emerge in the storytelling practices they engage in. This situation indicates that the implementation of sustainable tourism at the micro level, particularly in guiding practices, tends to be partial and does not yet encompass the entirety of the sustainability dimensions. Nevertheless, practices focused on cultural preservation still make a significant contribution to maintaining the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage.

Thus, the findings of this study point to the existence of the phenomenon of implicit sustainability practices carried out without explicit conceptual awareness, yet still providing tangible contributions to cultural preservation and the creation of meaningful tourism experiences. This phenomenon demonstrates that sustainability in tourism is shaped not only through policies and theoretical understanding but also through the daily practices of actors on the ground.

2. Tour Guides in Preserving Cultural Narratives through Storytelling

Research findings indicate that storytelling by tour guides serves not merely as a medium for conveying information, but rather as a complex and multidimensional interpretive practice. In the context of cultural tourism, storytelling serves as the primary means for tour guides to transmit cultural values, meanings, and knowledge to tourists. Thus, storytelling not only plays a role in shaping the tourism experience but also indirectly contributes to cultural preservation efforts.

Analysis of interview data indicates that storytelling practices are carried out through several key dimensions: performative, interactive, adaptive, and reflective. These four dimensions demonstrate that storytelling is a dynamic process involving interaction between the tour guide, tourists, and the cultural context being interpreted. Tour guides emphasize the importance of the performative aspect in storytelling, which is reflected through the use of intonation, facial expressions, eye contact, and body language in conveying the story. These elements do not merely serve as supplements but are integral components in building the story's appeal. As expressed by informant DP: *"...intonation, expressions, eye contact these are essential... to make the guests curious... if you just speak flatly... there won't be any interaction..."* (DP)

This statement indicates that the effectiveness of storytelling is largely determined by the manner of delivery, not merely the content of the story itself. Storytelling in this context is performative, in which tour guides "perform" the story through communication techniques that engage tourists' interest and curiosity. This finding indicates that storytelling is a form of performative communication practice, in which meaning is not merely conveyed but also constructed through an expressive communication process. This aligns with the concept of interpretation in tourism proposed by [13], who emphasize that effective interpretation must be able to create emotional and cognitive engagement among tourists, rather than merely conveying factual information.

In addition to being performative, storytelling is also carried out interactively and adaptively. Tour guides do not merely act as information providers but also as facilitators of interaction who actively involve tourists in the storytelling process. As stated by informant AN:

"...it's not just about telling a story, but encouraging interaction... it depends on the audience... if they want information, give it fully; if they want entertainment, weave it in... observe the tourists' interests... don't force it..." (AN)

This statement indicates that storytelling is dialogic and contextual. Tour guides actively gauge tourists' responses, interests, and characteristics, then adapt the narrative accordingly. Thus, storytelling is not a one-way process but rather a two-way communication process that

involves tourist participation. This finding leads to the understanding that storytelling is a co-created experience, in which the tourism experience is shaped through interaction between the guide and the tourists. This reinforces [7] view that effective interpretation must be interactive and capable of adapting to the needs and characteristics of the audience.

Furthermore, this adaptive nature also indicates that tour guides rely not only on knowledge but also on social skills and the ability to read situations as part of their professional practice. One key finding in this study is how tour guides position themselves in balancing mythical narratives, historical facts, and local cultural values. In practice, storytelling is not presented raw but through a process of selection, adaptation, and validation. As expressed by the informants: “...myths are told, but they must be validated...” (AN) “...don’t let it stray from the narrative...” (DP) “...you must not alter the truth of the story...” (CK)

These findings indicate that tour guides serve as “cultural curators,” tasked with maintaining a balance between the authenticity of stories and the need for interpretation for tourists. On the one hand, they convey folklore and myths as part of cultural heritage; on the other hand, they provide clarifications to prevent misunderstandings. Thus, storytelling can be understood as a process of negotiation between various forms of knowledge whether historical, cultural, or symbolic. This practice reflects the tour guide’s responsibility to maintain the integrity of cultural narratives while making them relevant and understandable to tourists.

This finding aligns with the concept of cultural interpretation proposed by [8], who emphasizes that tour guides have a responsibility to convey information accurately yet engagingly, without diminishing the cultural value embedded within it. In addition to serving as a medium for cultural interpretation, storytelling also plays a crucial role in shaping an immersive and meaningful travel experience. Through the stories shared, tourists not only receive information but are also invited to imagine, feel, and connect with the cultural context being described. As expressed by informant CM: “...tourists start to imagine... fantasize... the experience becomes more memorable...” (CM)

This statement indicates that storytelling has the power to stimulate tourists’ imagination and foster their emotional engagement. This process enables tourists not only to “see” a destination but also to “experience” the meaning embedded within it. These findings reinforce the results of previous research showing that storytelling contributes to enhancing cultural immersion that is, the degree to which tourists engage with and experience local culture through a deeper, more meaningful experience.

3. Tour Guides in Promoting Sustainable Tourism through Storytelling

Research findings indicate that tour guides play a significant role in promoting sustainable tourism, particularly through storytelling practices focused on cultural preservation. Although this contribution is not always conceptually recognized by tour guides, their practices demonstrate a strategic role in preserving the sustainability of local cultural values and shaping meaningful travel experiences.

One of the primary roles of tour guides identified in this study is that of cultural preservers. Through storytelling, tour guides strive to preserve the authenticity of local narratives and avoid distortions that could obscure cultural meaning. As expressed by an informant: “...you must not alter the truth of the story...” (CK) “...you must preserve and promote culture...” (HM)

These statements indicate a normative awareness among tour guides to maintain the authenticity of stories as part of their professional responsibility. In this context, storytelling functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a means of cultural conservation, particularly in the form of intangible cultural heritage.

These findings align with the socio-cultural dimension of sustainable tourism outlined by [18], which emphasizes the importance of preserving local cultural values, traditions, and identity as part of sustainable tourism development. Thus, the storytelling practices employed by tour guides can be understood as a tangible contribution to cultural sustainability in tourist destinations.

In addition to being cultural preservers, tour guides also serve as mediators who bridge understanding between tourists and local culture. In this process, tour guides not only convey stories but also provide context, clarification, and interpretation so that tourists can understand the meaning behind the cultural practices being presented. As expressed by informant IW: “...it must be explained so there is no misunderstanding...” (IW)

This statement indicates that storytelling also functions as an educational tool aimed at preventing misunderstandings regarding local culture, especially when tourists come from different cultural backgrounds. In this regard, tour guides act as cultural mediators who interpret cultural values so they can be understood in a more contextual manner.

This role aligns with the findings of [13], who emphasize that tour guides serve an educational function in shaping tourists’ understanding through meaningful interpretation. Thus, storytelling not only conveys information but also fosters tourists’ awareness and appreciation of local culture.

This study also indicates that tour guides play a role in shaping tourists’ behavior and experiences through

storytelling practices. Through interactive and engaging delivery methods, tour guides are able to encourage tourists' active participation in the cultural learning process. As expressed by informant DD: "...*you have to be able to make tourists interested in asking questions...*" (DD)

This statement indicates that storytelling aims not only to convey information but also to foster tourists' curiosity and engagement. In this context, tour guides serve as facilitators of experiences that encourage tourists to be more active in understanding and appreciating local culture. This role reinforces the tour guide's position as a behavioral change agent, influencing not only how tourists acquire information but also how they respond to and appreciate the cultural environment they visit.

This is consistent with the literature, which states that tour guides can influence tourist behavior through effective interpretation and communication [19]. Although previous literature suggests that tour guides' contributions to sustainable tourism remain limited [11], the findings of this study indicate that such contributions are already being made in practice, even if not always accompanied by explicit conceptual understanding.

Through the practice of storytelling, tour guides indirectly perform various important functions in sustainable tourism, ranging from cultural preservation and tourist education to the creation of meaningful experiences. This indicates that the implementation of sustainable tourism depends not only on policies and planning at the macro level but also on the daily practices of actors at the micro level.

Thus, this study offers the perspective that sustainable tourism is realized not only through policy frameworks and destination governance but also through daily interpretive practices such as storytelling carried out by tour guides. This finding simultaneously affirms that tour guides are key actors in safeguarding the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage and serve as a bridge between tourists, local culture, and sustainability values in tourism practices.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that tour guides play a significant role in supporting sustainable tourism, particularly through culturally-based storytelling practices. Although most tour guides lack an explicit conceptual understanding of sustainable tourism, they consistently engage in practices aligned with sustainability principles, especially regarding cultural preservation.

The research findings reveal that the storytelling performed by tour guides serves not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a complex, interactive, and adaptive process of cultural interpretation. In practice, tour guides preserve the authenticity of local narratives, avoid distorting stories, and strike a balance between myths and historical facts. Additionally,

communication strategies such as humor and interaction are employed to enhance tourist engagement without diminishing the cultural substance being conveyed.

Furthermore, this study highlights the phenomenon of implicit sustainability, where sustainable practices are carried out without explicit conceptual awareness. Tour guides indirectly serve as cultural preservers, mediators between tourists and local communities, and shapers of meaningful travel experiences. However, there are differences in the level of understanding regarding the concept of sustainability, which is influenced by the educational background of the tour guides.

Theoretically, this study contributes by expanding our understanding of the implementation of sustainable tourism at the micro level, particularly through the daily practices of frontline actors such as tour guides. This study confirms that sustainability is realized not only through macro-level policies and planning, but also through interpretive practices such as storytelling rooted in local culture.

Practically, the findings of this study highlight the importance of enhancing tour guides' capacity, particularly in their conceptual understanding of sustainable tourism, without disregarding the good practices they have already implemented. The integration of conceptual knowledge and field practices is expected to strengthen the role of tour guides as key agents in supporting sustainable tourism.

This study has limitations regarding the relatively small number of participants and the geographical context, which is focused on the West Java region. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more participants and examine guiding practices in various destination contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of tour guides in sustainable tourism.

Future research is also recommended to more explicitly explore how tour guides integrate environmental and economic messages into their storytelling practices, in order to make the multidimensional benefits of sustainable tourism more clearly evident.

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