

Economic Sustainability of Heritage Tourism in Hanoi's Old Quarter: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the economic sustainability of heritage tourism in Hanoi's Old Quarter using a qualitative document analysis of policy papers, planning reports, and academic studies from 2010 to 2025. Findings reveal that heritage tourism makes a significant contribution to Hanoi's economy through revenue generation, employment, and the development of creative industries. However, challenges such as over-commercialization, gentrification, unequal income distribution, weak reinvestment in conservation, and fragmented governance pose significant threats to long-term sustainability. The analysis also identifies emerging opportunities, including cultural industries, digital transformation, community participation, and international cooperation. The study argues that Hanoi's Old Quarter requires a shift from a growth-driven to a heritage-centered economic model that balances prosperity with preservation. Policy implications include strengthening fiscal frameworks for heritage reinvestment, integrating sustainability indicators, promoting inclusive governance, and fostering cultural entrepreneurship. These measures can ensure that heritage tourism supports both economic vitality and cultural integrity in the context of sustainable urban development.

KEYWORDS: heritage tourism, economic sustainability, Hanoi's Old Quarter, document analysis, cultural economy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hanoi's Old Quarter is one of Vietnam's most emblematic urban heritage spaces, serving as both a living cultural landscape and a dynamic tourism hub. Encompassing thirty-six historic guild streets, the Old Quarter has evolved from a traditional artisanal and trading enclave into a vibrant center of tourism, commerce, and urban culture. The area's dense network of historic architecture, religious sites, craft shops, and street-based gastronomy forms not only a symbol of Hanoi's identity but also a cornerstone of the city's service-oriented economy. As a "living heritage site," the Old Quarter embodies the coexistence of continuity and change, where cultural traditions persist amid pressures of modernization, commercialization, and urban redevelopment (UNESCO, 2019; Hanoi People's Committee, 2023).

Within this dynamic context, economic sustainability has become a crucial dimension of heritage management. Heritage tourism significantly contributes to local revenue generation, job creation, and small business development, thereby reinforcing the sector's role in Hanoi's economic structure (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism [VNAT], 2022). However, the pursuit of short-term economic gains often conflicts with long-term preservation objectives and the welfare of resident communities. Overreliance on tourism income, insufficient reinvestment in conservation, and uncontrolled commercialization can erode the authenticity and social integrity of the Old Quarter (Nguyen & Tran, 2021). Therefore, understanding the economic dimension of sustainable heritage management is crucial for striking a balance between growth and cultural preservation.

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach to examine how the economic sustainability of heritage tourism in Hanoi's Old Quarter has been conceptualized and addressed in policy frameworks, strategic plans, and institutional reports. The research focuses on two guiding questions:

What do existing policy and planning documents reveal about economic sustainability in the Old Quarter's tourism sector?

What challenges and opportunities emerge from these sources in achieving a balance between economic development and heritage preservation?

The research holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the discourse on cultural-economic sustainability, emphasizing the interaction between market forces, cultural value, and governance in heritage tourism (Gibson & Kong, 2005; Throsby, 2010). Practically, it offers an evidence-based interpretation of how local authorities, national

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agencies, and international organizations have approached the economic sustainability of Hanoi's Old Quarter. By analyzing official documents, policy frameworks, and heritage management plans, this study seeks to illuminate pathways toward an integrated and community-centered model of sustainable heritage tourism that preserves both the tangible and intangible cultural capital of the Old Quarter for future generations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptualizing Sustainable Tourism and Heritage Economics

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a multidimensional concept that integrates environmental, social, and economic objectives to ensure tourism development meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2018). Within the heritage context, sustainability entails not only the protection of physical monuments and cultural expressions but also the maintenance of social equity and local economic vitality. According to Garrod and Fyall (2000), sustainable heritage tourism requires balancing visitor satisfaction, community well-being, and the preservation of cultural integrity.

The economic dimension of heritage management—often referred to as *heritage economics*—addresses how cultural assets can generate economic value while retaining authenticity (Throsby, 2010). Heritage sites such as Hanoi's Old Quarter contribute significantly to local economies through tourism spending, employment, and the stimulation of creative industries. However, as Ashworth (2011) notes, heritage is not merely an economic commodity; it represents a collective cultural resource whose value cannot be captured solely through market mechanisms. The challenge lies in reconciling the profitability of tourism with the intrinsic and symbolic value of heritage.

To evaluate such a balance, many scholars employ the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, which emphasizes three interdependent pillars: economic viability, social equity, and environmental responsibility (Elkington, 1998). When applied to heritage tourism, the TBL framework offers an analytical lens for evaluating how policies and management practices not only sustain financial performance but also foster cultural and social outcomes (Su & Wall, 2014). In the context of Hanoi's Old Quarter, this framework helps interpret whether economic strategies align with the long-term preservation of cultural assets and community livelihoods.

2.2. Theoretical Lenses

First, *sustainable development theory*—rooted in the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987)—frames heritage tourism as an activity requiring equilibrium between growth and conservation. Applying this theory to heritage contexts underscores the importance of intergenerational equity, responsible resource use, and participatory governance (Sharpley, 2020).

Second, the *heritage commodification debate* offers critical insights into how heritage is transformed into a consumable product for tourism markets. Scholars such as Cohen (1988) and Shepherd (2002) argue that while commodification can lead to economic revitalization, it may simultaneously distort cultural meanings and authenticity. For sites like Hanoi's Old Quarter, this tension is pronounced: commercial adaptation sustains livelihoods yet risks displacing traditional crafts and resident communities.

Third, the *cultural economy perspective* views heritage as part of a broader creative and cultural system where symbolic meanings generate both cultural and financial value (Scott, 2008). This approach recognizes that cultural production, local identity, and tourism are intertwined, positioning heritage not as a static relic but as a dynamic economic and social process (Pratt, 2011). It also provides a framework for interpreting how urban heritage districts integrate into the creative economy through crafts, gastronomy, and experiential tourism.

Together, these theoretical lenses establish an interpretive foundation for analyzing policy documents and strategic plans related to Hanoi's Old Quarter. They allow for a nuanced understanding of how economic sustainability is defined, negotiated, and operationalized within heritage governance.

2.3. Global Comparative Perspectives

A review of international cases provides context for Hanoi's experience in reconciling heritage conservation with economic sustainability. In Kyoto, Japan, local authorities have implemented regulatory zoning, cultural asset taxation, and visitor management policies to limit overtourism while maintaining traditional craft industries (Ito & Tanaka, 2019). Penang, Malaysia, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, adopted a community-based tourism model emphasizing public-private partnerships and heritage reinvestment funds (Yahaya, 2016). Meanwhile, Hoi An, Vietnam, offers an instructive regional example of how tourism revenues can support restoration and social inclusion programs when governance mechanisms are transparent and participatory (Nguyen, 2019).

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These comparative experiences reveal that economic sustainability in heritage tourism depends on integrated policy frameworks, stakeholder collaboration, and reinvestment of tourism income into conservation and community welfare. For Hanoi's Old Quarter, lessons from these global and regional precedents underscore the need for adaptive governance models that strike a balance between market dynamics and heritage stewardship.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis (QDA) approach as its principal research method, emphasizing an interpretive and contextual examination of texts rather than numerical measurement or statistical inference. Document analysis allows for the systematic review, evaluation, and interpretation of written materials to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). The method is particularly suitable for research that seeks to understand how policy narratives, institutional discourses, and strategic frameworks shape perceptions and decisions related to economic sustainability in heritage tourism. In the context of Hanoi's Old Quarter—a complex socio-economic and cultural environment where policy, preservation, and commerce intersect—QDA provides an effective lens through which to explore how economic objectives are articulated, justified, and implemented in official and secondary documents.

The study draws upon a diverse and carefully selected corpus of documents published between 2010 and 2025, encompassing both domestic and international sources. Central among these are policy and planning documents issued by the Hanoi People's Committee and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST). These documents include master plans for tourism development, cultural heritage protection policies, urban management strategies, and socioeconomic reports that reflect the government's evolving priorities for the Old Quarter. The corpus also incorporates international heritage reports, particularly those produced by UNESCO and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). These reports provide critical evaluations of conservation status, urban development pressures, and governance mechanisms for heritage sites in Hanoi.

Complementing these are academic and scholarly publications, including peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, and policy studies that analyze the economic, cultural, and managerial dimensions of heritage tourism in Vietnam and other comparable Asian urban heritage sites. To capture broader societal perspectives, media sources and public communications—such as local news articles, press releases, and expert commentaries—are also included. These materials provide insight into how economic sustainability is represented in public discourse and how policy decisions are received and interpreted by communities and stakeholders. Collectively, the corpus forms a comprehensive textual foundation for exploring the intersection between economic development and heritage preservation.

The analytical process involved several iterative stages designed to ensure systematic rigor and interpretive depth. In the first stage, all documents were read in full and annotated to identify recurring themes and key terms related to economic sustainability, such as "tourism revenue," "heritage investment," "governance," "community participation," and "conservation funding." This initial coding process combined both deductive and inductive strategies: deductive coding was guided by pre-existing concepts drawn from sustainable tourism frameworks and the literature on heritage economics, while inductive coding allowed themes to emerge organically from the data. The second stage involved thematic categorization, where codes were clustered into broader conceptual domains—economic benefits, economic costs, institutional governance, and community engagement—to facilitate comparison and synthesis across documents.

The third stage entailed cross-document comparison and interpretation, where themes were analyzed across national, local, and international documents to identify convergences and discrepancies in policy narratives. For instance, while national policy papers often emphasize tourism's contribution to GDP and employment, international reports frequently stress the risks of over-commercialization and loss of authenticity. These comparative insights were then interpreted through the theoretical lenses outlined earlier—sustainable development theory, the heritage commodification debate, and the cultural economy perspective—to situate the findings within broader scholarly and policy contexts.

To ensure methodological rigor and credibility, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was achieved through the integration of multiple data sources, allowing for validation of interpretations from different institutional and temporal perspectives (Patton, 2015). A transparent coding protocol was maintained, with detailed documentation of analytical decisions, category definitions, and interpretive rationales to enhance the reliability of findings. The researcher also practiced reflexivity throughout the analytical process, critically reflecting on potential biases and interpretive assumptions to maintain analytical neutrality. Additionally, contextual verification was conducted by cross-checking key findings against official statistics, heritage management outcomes, and published assessments by recognized agencies to ensure consistency and plausibility.

Overall, this methodological approach provides both breadth and depth in analyzing how economic sustainability is constructed and communicated within the governance of Hanoi's Old Quarter. By focusing on documents as social artifacts—products of institutional discourse and political negotiation—the study not only captures explicit policy statements but also reveals

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underlying value orientations and tensions between economic growth, cultural preservation, and social equity. Through qualitative document analysis, the research thus establishes a robust foundation for interpreting how the Old Quarter's heritage tourism is situated within Vietnam's broader trajectory of sustainable urban development.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Economic Contributions Highlighted in Documents

The review of official and secondary documents reveals that heritage tourism has become a pivotal component of Hanoi's economic development agenda. Policy and planning reports from the Hanoi People's Committee and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism consistently emphasize the financial significance of the Old Quarter as a driver of the city's tourism revenue and a core contributor to its service-sector growth. Data cited in these reports indicate that the area generates a substantial portion of Hanoi's total tourism income, with direct benefits to accommodation, dining, retail, and transportation services. In addition to direct economic contributions, the documents highlight the employment opportunities created by tourism activities—particularly in small-scale enterprises such as craft workshops, souvenir production, and traditional gastronomy.

Furthermore, the document corpus highlights the emergence of creative industries associated with heritage tourism, positioning the Old Quarter as a hub of cultural entrepreneurship. Local artisans, performers, and designers are increasingly engaging in creative reinterpretations of traditional crafts and intangible heritage to meet the demands of cultural consumers. This trend reflects a shift from static preservation toward dynamic heritage valorization, where traditional cultural expressions are adapted for contemporary markets.

Another key theme emerging from the analysis is the branding of the Old Quarter as a heritage destination. Strategic tourism development plans portray the area as both a historical and symbolic nucleus of Hanoi, whose authenticity enhances the city's international identity. Heritage branding, according to these documents, serves a dual purpose: it attracts investment and tourists while reinforcing local pride and cultural continuity. Collectively, these narratives suggest that heritage tourism is deeply integrated into Hanoi's broader economic strategy, not only as a revenue-generating activity but also as a pillar of the city's image and competitiveness in the global tourism market.

4.2. Challenges Identified

Despite its evident economic importance, the analysis identifies a set of persistent challenges that undermine the long-term sustainability of heritage tourism in the Old Quarter. The most frequently cited concern in both policy and international assessment reports is over-commercialization. The influx of tourists and investors has led to a proliferation of souvenir shops, guesthouses, and restaurants, often at the expense of traditional residential and craft spaces. This commercialization contributes to gentrification, where rising property values and rental costs displace long-term residents and small-scale artisans, thereby eroding the social fabric that underpins the area's authenticity.

A second recurring issue is uneven income distribution. While tourism generates substantial profits for business owners and external investors, local households—particularly those dependent on informal or low-wage work—often receive limited benefits. Several policy analyses highlight the absence of inclusive mechanisms to ensure the equitable distribution of tourism revenues among residents.

Moreover, documents from UNESCO and ICOMOS highlight the weak mechanisms for reinvesting in heritage conservation. A significant portion of tourism-generated income is absorbed by the private sector or short-term commercial projects, rather than being redirected toward the maintenance of heritage buildings or cultural programming. This imbalance creates a cycle in which economic gains coexist with the gradual physical and cultural degradation of the Old Quarter's heritage assets.

Finally, the review reveals widespread concerns about policy fragmentation and inconsistent enforcement. Overlapping mandates among government agencies, limited coordination between cultural and tourism authorities, and inconsistent application of zoning and preservation regulations have hindered effective governance. As a result, economic development initiatives often proceed without adequate integration of sustainability principles, leaving the Old Quarter vulnerable to overdevelopment and loss of heritage value.

4.3. Emerging Opportunities

Despite these challenges, the analysis also identifies multiple emerging opportunities that can support the transition toward a more economically sustainable model of heritage tourism. One promising area is the development of heritage-linked cultural industries, such as traditional crafts, gastronomy, and experiential tourism. Recent policy documents advocate for the revitalization of handicraft guilds, the promotion of culinary heritage, and the creation of immersive cultural experiences that

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engage visitors while generating income for local residents. These initiatives align with global trends in sustainable cultural tourism, emphasizing local creativity and community ownership.

Another opportunity lies in digital transformation and smart tourism applications. Strategic planning documents released after 2020 highlight the potential of digital technologies to enhance both visitor experience and heritage management. Digital mapping, virtual exhibitions, and online marketing platforms can expand the reach of heritage tourism while reducing physical pressure on sensitive sites. These innovations also facilitate better documentation and monitoring of heritage assets, contributing to preservation efforts.

The reviewed documents also underscore the growing emphasis on community participation in tourism governance. Recent policy frameworks and pilot programs encourage resident involvement in decision-making processes, acknowledging that local knowledge and consent are vital to sustainable heritage management. Community-led initiatives, such as neighborhood tourism cooperatives and local interpretation programs, demonstrate the potential for inclusive economic models that distribute benefits more equitably.

Finally, there are increasing opportunities for international cooperation and funding. Partnerships with organizations such as UNESCO, JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), and the European Union have supported training, restoration, and sustainable tourism projects in Hanoi. These collaborations not only provide financial resources but also introduce global best practices in heritage economics and urban governance.

Collectively, these opportunities suggest that the economic sustainability of heritage tourism in Hanoi's Old Quarter can be strengthened through a balanced approach that integrates innovation, community engagement, and global cooperation. The transition from mass tourism toward a diversified, heritage-centered economy depends on institutional commitment, coordinated policy frameworks, and continuous reinvestment in cultural assets.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of the document corpus points to several strategic directions that could guide policymakers, cultural managers, and community stakeholders toward greater economic sustainability in Hanoi's Old Quarter. The findings suggest that sustainable heritage management in this area necessitates fiscal innovation, institutional coordination, inclusive governance, and a stronger connection between economic activities and cultural value creation.

One of the most pressing needs identified through the analysis is to strengthen fiscal frameworks for heritage reinvestment. Currently, a significant portion of the tourism revenue generated in the Old Quarter is absorbed by private enterprises or utilized for short-term commercial activities, with limited reinvestment in conservation and cultural programming. Policy documents and international reports emphasize that sustainable heritage tourism relies on a financial feedback loop, in which profits from tourism are reinvested in maintaining and restoring cultural assets. To achieve this, Hanoi could establish dedicated heritage funds supported by a combination of tourism taxes, public-private partnerships, and international aid. The city government may also consider introducing incentives—such as tax reductions or recognition schemes—for businesses that directly contribute to restoration projects or invest in the preservation of traditional crafts. Such measures would help institutionalize a circular economic model in which cultural capital is continuously regenerated through targeted fiscal mechanisms.

A second policy implication involves integrating sustainability indicators into tourism management plans. Current monitoring systems primarily focus on tourist arrivals and revenue figures, but rarely account for the social, cultural, or environmental dimensions of sustainability. The inclusion of measurable indicators—such as levels of resident participation, heritage site maintenance, or carbon impact—would allow for more balanced assessments of tourism performance. Incorporating these indicators into the city's strategic plans would also enhance accountability and align Hanoi's heritage governance with international standards set by UNESCO and UNWTO. Policymakers should therefore move beyond quantitative growth targets to adopt multidimensional evaluation frameworks that measure how economic development contributes to the long-term vitality of the Old Quarter's heritage ecosystem.

Equally critical is the need to promote inclusive governance that actively involves local communities and small businesses in decision-making processes. Documents reviewed for this study indicate that top-down planning often limits the role of residents to passive beneficiaries rather than active stakeholders. Sustainable heritage management, however, depends on community ownership and trust. Establishing consultative councils composed of local artisans, residents, entrepreneurs, and municipal representatives could facilitate participatory dialogue and policy co-creation. Capacity-building programs for local communities should accompany these mechanisms, ensuring that they have the knowledge and tools to engage effectively in tourism governance. Inclusivity also entails recognizing and supporting the informal economic sector—street vendors, homestay operators, and craft workers—whose livelihoods are integral to the authenticity and vibrancy of the Old Quarter.

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Ultimately, the findings highlight the significance of cultivating cultural entrepreneurship as a means of attaining equitable and diverse economic outcomes. Rather than viewing tourism purely as a service industry, policymakers should recognize it as part of a broader cultural economy where creativity and innovation generate both economic and social value. Support for cultural start-ups, creative clusters, and training programs in heritage-based entrepreneurship would enable young people and artisans to develop sustainable business models rooted in local traditions. This approach not only enhances economic inclusivity but also mitigates the risks of cultural homogenization by encouraging authenticity-driven innovation. Partnerships between universities, cultural institutions, and local enterprises could further strengthen this ecosystem by linking education, research, and practice in sustainable tourism development.

In essence, the policy implications derived from the document analysis call for a paradigmatic shift—from a growth-centered approach to a heritage-centered economic model that emphasizes reinvestment, measurement, participation, and innovation. Strengthening fiscal discipline, embedding sustainability indicators, empowering local actors, and nurturing cultural entrepreneurship are not isolated actions but interconnected components of a coherent strategy. Through these reforms, Hanoi's Old Quarter can transition toward an economically resilient and culturally vibrant future where prosperity and preservation reinforce, rather than compete with, one another.

6. CONCLUSION

The document analysis conducted in this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how economic sustainability is framed and operationalized within the governance of heritage tourism in Hanoi's Old Quarter. The reviewed policies, strategic plans, and scholarly sources collectively depict the Old Quarter as a central driver of Hanoi's economic vitality, yet also as a fragile cultural ecosystem facing mounting pressures from commercialization and urban transformation. The findings reveal that while heritage tourism has significantly contributed to revenue generation, employment, and creative industries, its long-term sustainability remains uncertain due to structural and institutional weaknesses. The analysis highlights an urgent need to realign economic objectives with preservation goals, ensuring that tourism-led growth does not erode the very heritage values that make the Old Quarter distinctive.

At the core of these insights is the recognition that economic vitality and cultural integrity must coexist in a state of dynamic balance. Economic sustainability in heritage contexts cannot be measured solely by fiscal indicators or visitor numbers; it must also encompass equitable distribution of benefits, cultural continuity, and community empowerment. The documents reviewed underscore the tension between short-term economic gains and the long-term stewardship of heritage assets—a tension that is evident in the challenges of over-commercialization, weak reinvestment mechanisms, and fragmented governance. Achieving this balance requires a paradigm shift from a growth-oriented to a heritage-centered development model, one that positions culture not as a byproduct of economic activity but as its foundation and guiding principle. Integrating fiscal reinvestment schemes, participatory governance structures, and sustainability indicators into heritage policy would be essential steps toward institutionalizing this balance.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes that the sustainability of heritage tourism in Hanoi's Old Quarter depends on adaptive governance—capable of learning, innovating, and collaborating across sectors and scales. Economic success will remain ephemeral if it is not underpinned by coherent policy frameworks and community inclusion. The emerging opportunities identified in this research—digital transformation, cultural entrepreneurship, and international cooperation—offer viable pathways to foster such adaptive systems, provided they are pursued within a coherent and transparent institutional environment.

Building upon these findings, future research should deepen the understanding of heritage tourism's economic and sociocultural dynamics through the use of complementary qualitative methods. For instance, stakeholder discourse analysis could reveal how different actors—such as government agencies, residents, entrepreneurs, and tourists—construct and negotiate the meanings of sustainability in practice. Similarly, policy evaluation studies could assess the implementation outcomes of existing heritage management strategies, identifying gaps between policy design and on-the-ground realities. Longitudinal comparative research across other urban heritage sites, such as Hoi An or Hue, could also enrich theoretical and practical insights into the Vietnamese model of sustainable heritage governance.

In conclusion, the sustainable future of Hanoi's Old Quarter depends on a holistic approach that integrates economic efficiency with cultural responsibility. The economic sustainability of heritage tourism is not an end in itself but a means of safeguarding living traditions, sustaining livelihoods, and strengthening community identity. By embedding cultural values within economic frameworks, policymakers can transform heritage tourism from a source of short-term revenue into a long-term asset for inclusive and resilient urban development.

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