

Tourism Innovation and Sustainable Destination Development: An Integrative Review of Emerging Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract

This study examines how tourism innovation contributes to sustainable destination development by integrating emerging theoretical perspectives across tourism research. An integrative literature review was conducted using Scopus records retrieved in 2026 and targeted verification of article metadata and full-text evidence where available. After deduplication, 34 unique records were screened and 32 were retained for thematic synthesis, comprising 11 core conceptual anchors and 21 supporting studies. The analysis identifies four overarching theoretical perspectives: innovation as transformation, sustainability transitions, innovation ecosystems and collective action, and sustainability-oriented innovation. Six recurrent mechanisms connect innovation with destination-level sustainability: knowledge and network integration, collaboration and co-creation, institutional governance and legitimacy, intermediation and ecosystem orchestration, digital and technological enablement, and place-based resource mobilization. The review proposes that tourism innovation generates economic, social, and environmental value through context-dependent mechanisms rather than through a linear innovation-to-sustainability pathway. The study contributes a mechanism-oriented synthesis for tourism destination research and clarifies implications for destination managers seeking to align innovation with long-term sustainability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism destinations are increasingly expected to generate economic value while simultaneously responding to environmental pressures, social inclusion concerns, technological disruption, resource constraints, and changing visitor expectations. These pressures have repositioned sustainability from a peripheral concern to a central challenge in destination management. Within this context, innovation is frequently presented as a means of improving tourism products, services, processes, competitiveness, resilience, and visitor experiences. Yet the relationship between innovation and sustainability is not necessarily linear. Innovation can create efficiency and new value, but it can also intensify resource use, redistribute benefits unevenly, or remain confined to individual

organizations. The central challenge is therefore to understand the conditions and mechanisms through which tourism innovation can support sustainable destination development.

Research on tourism innovation and sustainability has grown substantially, but the field remains theoretically heterogeneous. A major systematic review by Santos et al. (2021) identified a wide range of theories, practices, methods, levels, and drivers used to study the intersection of innovation and sustainability in tourism. More recent work has extended this literature into areas such as sustainability transitions, innovation ecosystems, digital and smart tourism, social innovation, collective action, and sustainability-oriented innovation (Aransyah et al., 2025; Coelho de Souza Filho et al., 2025; Miedes-Ugarte & Flores-Ruiz, 2025; Wirth et al., 2023). This diversification is valuable because it captures the multi-dimensional nature of tourism change. At the same time, it makes it difficult to identify a coherent explanation of how different theoretical perspectives relate to one another and how their mechanisms operate at the destination level.

The destination is especially important because innovation is rarely produced by a single actor. Tourism destinations comprise interconnected businesses, public authorities, destination management organizations, communities, knowledge institutions, technology providers, and tourists. Recent conceptual work on destination-region knowledge networks argues that tourism innovation increasingly depends on knowledge flows across sectors and regions and therefore needs to be understood as a systemic process rather than as an activity confined to individual firms (Weidenfeld et al., 2026). Similarly, tourism innovation ecosystem research integrates innovation, technology, and sustainability and emphasizes relationships among actors and system-level conditions (Coelho de Souza Filho et al., 2025). Such perspectives shift the analytical focus from the existence of innovation toward the organizational, relational, and institutional processes that allow innovation to diffuse and create broader destination value.

A second stream concerns sustainability transitions. Flood Chavez et al. (2024) show, through the Multi-Level Perspective, how tourism destinations can evolve through interactions among landscape pressures, established regimes, and innovation niches. Their analysis of Margaret River illustrates how incremental innovations historically reconfigured a destination while newer niches, including eco-accreditation and grassroots initiatives, supported an emerging sustainability transition. This perspective is important because it implies that the contribution of tourism innovation to sustainability depends partly on whether new practices can move beyond isolated experiments and alter dominant destination structures. Sustainability therefore should be viewed not only as an outcome but also as an evolving transformation process.

Institutional and governance perspectives add another layer to the explanation. Innovation occurs within rules, norms, legitimacy structures, and coordination arrangements that shape who can participate, how resources are mobilized, and whether collective solutions can be sustained. Melenez-Roman and Font (2026) identify collective action, legitimacy, shared responsibility, and self-governance as central elements in sustainable tourism innovation. Research on tourism innovation intermediaries also points to the importance of organizations that connect stakeholders, provide knowledge and support, and help tourism actors adapt within changing service ecosystems (Roser et al., 2023). In a similar vein, recent research on local tourism hubs emphasizes institutional legitimacy, mentoring, matchmaking, and links to regional innovation networks as enabling conditions for sustainable innovation (Lucia-Casademunt & García-Cabrera, 2026).

At the same time, technology has become an increasingly visible component of tourism innovation. Smart destination research identifies digitalization, technology adoption, and data-driven tools as important elements of contemporary tourism management (Sustach et al., 2022). Emerging applications such as virtual reality, blockchain, and data-supported environmental assessment illustrate how technological solutions can change visitor experiences, business models, resource management, and destination planning (Folgieri et al., 2025; Talukder, 2026; Zhang & Huang, 2025). However, the literature also indicates that technological innovation is embedded in broader social, institutional, and territorial settings. Recent research on local resources in smart destinations, for example, combines digital tools with stakeholder collaboration, participatory governance, and place-based assets (Ristanović et al., 2025).

The sustainability-oriented innovation perspective further suggests that innovation should not be assumed to be sustainable by definition. Aransyah et al. (2025) synthesize tourism research through Ecological Modernisation Theory, Diffusion of Innovations, and the Triple Bottom Line, emphasizing that sustainability-oriented innovation addresses economic, social, and environmental challenges. Related studies link innovation with destination value chains, regional development, agricultural tourism, visitor satisfaction, and environmental management (Berdugo Morantes et al., 2025; Kritikos et al., 2025; Sangnak, 2025; Vargová & Matušíková, 2025). The implication is that the key analytical issue is not simply whether innovation occurs, but how innovation is organized and translated into multidimensional value.

Against this background, an important research gap emerges. Existing literature offers strong but often separated explanations based on innovation theory, sustainability transitions, institutional governance, ecosystems and networks, digital tourism, social innovation, and sustainability-oriented innovation. Earlier reviews have established the breadth of the innovation-sustainability field, while newer studies have deepened individual perspectives (Santos et al., 2021; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023). What remains insufficiently synthesized is how these perspectives can be integrated around the mechanisms through which tourism innovation contributes to sustainable destination development. This study addresses that gap by asking which theoretical perspectives underpin the relationship, through what mechanisms innovation is translated into destination-level sustainability, and how these perspectives can be brought together into an integrative conceptual framework.

Accordingly, the study has three research questions: (1) What theoretical perspectives underpin the relationship between tourism innovation and sustainable destination development? (2) Through what mechanisms does tourism innovation contribute to sustainable destination development? and (3) How can these theoretical perspectives and mechanisms be integrated into a conceptual framework for sustainable destination development? The study contributes theoretically by connecting fragmented perspectives, conceptually by proposing a mechanism-oriented framework, and practically by clarifying the organizational and governance conditions that destination managers may need to consider when aligning innovation with sustainability.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Tourism Innovation as a Multidimensional Concept

Tourism innovation can be understood as the introduction or implementation of new or significantly improved products, services, processes, organizational practices, marketing approaches,

or technologies within tourism contexts. Jelinčić and Tišma (2022) demonstrate that tourism innovation may include product, process, logistical, and market innovation, while Aires et al. (2025) show that what tourism entrepreneurs conceive as innovation may not always correspond to what is ultimately operationalized. This distinction is important because it places implementation and contextual adaptation at the center of innovation analysis.

At the destination level, innovation is even broader because the object of change is not a single firm but a networked tourism system. Weaver (2018) illustrates how peripheral destinations can contain opportunities for sustainable tourism innovation shaped by local characteristics, while Dinh et al. (2025) link innovation with destination choice and destination image. These studies suggest that innovation can affect both the supply side of tourism and the way a destination creates and communicates value to visitors. However, the sustainability implications depend on how innovation interacts with destination governance, resources, and stakeholder relationships.

2.2 Sustainable Destination Development

Sustainable destination development requires attention to the economic viability of tourism, the social well-being of host communities, and the protection of environmental resources. The literature increasingly treats these dimensions as interconnected rather than as separate policy silos. Chen et al. (2023), for example, model the coordination among tourism development, technological innovation, and ecological environment, while Ristanović et al. (2025) emphasize the role of local natural, cultural, human, and technological resources in operationalizing sustainability within smart destinations.

Recent studies also indicate that sustainable destination development is shaped by local participation and inclusion. Partanen (2024) and Partanen et al. (2025) place community inclusion and social innovation at the center of locally grounded tourism development, while Maiurro et al. (2026) show how participatory governance and organizational intermediation can connect community actors, public institutions, and private stakeholders. Sustainability therefore involves not only the outcomes of tourism activity but also the quality of the processes through which destinations make decisions, distribute benefits, and respond to change.

2.3 Emerging Theoretical Perspectives

Four perspectives provide the main theoretical lenses for the integrative synthesis. First, the innovation perspective views tourism innovation as a process of creating and implementing new solutions. Second, the sustainability transitions perspective views innovation as part of a longer-term process in which niches interact with established regimes. Third, the ecosystem and institutional perspective emphasizes networks, collective action, governance, legitimacy, and intermediation. Fourth, the sustainability-oriented innovation perspective evaluates innovation in relation to economic, social, and environmental value. The perspectives overlap but are not identical, making integrative synthesis necessary.

Table 1. Emerging theoretical perspectives identified in the literature

Theoretical perspective	Central analytical focus	Typical mechanism	Destination-level implication	Representative studies
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Innovation perspective	Nature and implementation of tourism innovation	Product/service/process change; entrepreneurial action	New value propositions, experiences, capabilities	Jelinčić & Tišma (2022); Aires et al. (2025)
Sustainability transitions	Systemic change over time	Niches, regime interaction, pressures	Reconfiguration of dominant destination practices	Flood Chavez et al. (2024); Miedes-Ugarte & Flores-Ruiz (2025)
Ecosystem and institutional perspective	Interdependence among destination actors	Networks, collective action, legitimacy, governance, intermediation	Coordination and diffusion of innovation across the destination	Roser et al. (2023); Melenez-Roman & Font (2026); Weidenfeld et al. (2026)
Sustainability-oriented innovation	Innovation directed toward sustainability outcomes	Economic-social-environmental value creation	Balanced and durable destination development	Aransyah et al. (2025); Ristanović et al. (2025)

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative integrative literature review. The choice of an integrative review follows the principle that literature from different methodological and theoretical traditions can be combined to develop a broader conceptual understanding (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Snyder (2019) further argues that literature review can function as a research methodology when searching, evaluation, synthesis, and interpretation are undertaken transparently and systematically enough to support trustworthy conclusions. The present study therefore treats published research as the secondary data source and does not involve questionnaires, interviews, experiments, or human respondents.

3.2 Search Strategy and Data Source

Scopus served as the primary bibliographic database because the retrieved export provided structured metadata, abstracts, author keywords, DOI information, and reference lists. The searches were organized around two thematic combinations: tourism innovation plus sustainable destination/tourism development, and tourism innovation plus theoretical perspectives, ecosystems, governance, collaboration, capabilities, and sustainability. The analyzed export files were retrieved in

2026. The final working corpus therefore reflects literature available to the review at the time of retrieval and verification.

The core search logic combined terms such as "tourism innovation", "innovation in tourism", "tourism service innovation", "tourism digital innovation", "destination innovation", "sustainable destination", "sustainable destination development", and "sustainable tourism development". A supplementary conceptual search combined tourism innovation with terms such as theory, framework, ecosystem, capability, governance, collaboration, and sustainability. The search period was set broadly enough to capture the recent development of the field while emphasizing 2015–2026.

3.3 Screening and Selection

Across the two Scopus export sets, 36 records were retrieved. DOI and title matching identified 2 duplicate records, resulting in 34 unique records for screening. Two records were removed because their focus was insufficiently aligned with the tourism innovation–sustainable destination problem. The remaining 32 records formed the working evidence base for thematic synthesis. Within this set, 11 studies were prioritized as core conceptual anchors and 21 as supporting studies used to elaborate mechanisms, contexts, and outcomes.

Table 2. Review corpus and screening structure

Stage	Records	Purpose
Initial Scopus export sets	36	Raw retrieved records across two search exports
Duplicates removed	2	Duplicate DOI/title matches
Unique records	34	Records entering relevance screening
Excluded after initial screening	2	Insufficient fit with tourism innovation and sustainable destination focus
Working synthesis corpus	32	Studies retained for qualitative thematic synthesis
Core conceptual anchors	11	High-relevance studies used to structure theoretical synthesis
Supporting studies	21	Additional evidence used to elaborate mechanisms and outcomes

3.4 Data Extraction

Each retained article was coded into a structured extraction matrix covering author and year, tourism context, innovation type, theoretical perspective, drivers, mechanism, sustainability

dimension, destination outcome, methodology, stated research gap, and theoretical implication. The extraction process was designed to distinguish evidence reported by individual studies from the integrative interpretation developed by this review. This distinction is important because the corpus includes qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, conceptual, bibliometric, and case-based studies.

3.5 Thematic Analysis and Synthesis

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across the extracted material. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a flexible approach for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative material. In this study, initial codes were clustered into theoretical perspectives, enabling mechanisms, and destination-level outcomes. Similar codes were then compared across studies to identify convergences, differences, and explanatory gaps. The final step integrated the thematic clusters into a conceptual framework that explains the pathway from tourism innovation to sustainable destination development.

The synthesis was iterative rather than purely deductive. Initial categories were informed by the research questions, but the final mechanisms were retained only when they were recurrent across the reviewed studies or provided a strong bridge between otherwise fragmented theoretical perspectives. This procedure helped avoid treating technology, collaboration, governance, or social innovation as isolated explanations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Thematic Structure of the Evidence

The literature reveals four broad theoretical perspectives and six recurrent mechanisms. The first perspective treats innovation as multidimensional transformation; the second frames innovation within sustainability transitions; the third emphasizes innovation ecosystems, institutions, and collective action; and the fourth evaluates innovation according to sustainability-oriented outcomes. Across these perspectives, the evidence converges on the idea that destination sustainability is produced through interactions among actors, knowledge, institutions, technologies, and place-specific resources rather than through innovation alone.

4.2 Tourism Innovation as Transformation

The first theme concerns the nature and implementation of innovation. Jelinčić and Tišma (2022) demonstrate that tourism innovation includes several forms of change, while Aires et al. (2025) show that the idea of innovation and its operationalization can diverge. This suggests that innovation should not be reduced to the existence of a new product or technology. Instead, innovation is a process of organizational and market reconfiguration through which new practices become embedded in tourism activity. Dinh et al. (2025) further indicate that innovation can influence destination image and choice intentions, while Pirnar and Altın (2024) show the relevance of innovation within specific tourism domains such as health tourism.

For destination development, the implication is that innovation needs to be evaluated in terms of its capacity to alter value creation, organizational capability, or destination positioning. Weaver (2018) emphasizes that opportunities for sustainable innovation can be shaped by peripheral and place-specific conditions, while Ramos et al. (2026) illustrate how innovation can emerge from culturally embedded tourism activities such as gastronomy. Thus, innovation is both a process and a place-dependent phenomenon.

4.3 Innovation as Sustainability Transition

The second theme explains innovation through transition dynamics. Flood Chavez et al. (2024) show that destination development can be understood through the Multi-Level Perspective, in which landscape pressures, established tourism regimes, and emerging niches interact over time. Miedes-Ugarte and Flores-Ruiz (2025) similarly conceptualize hospitality communities as niches for regenerative tourism innovation. The common insight is that sustainability-oriented change may begin as localized experimentation before gaining broader institutional and market relevance.

This perspective complements the innovation-process view by explaining why some innovations remain peripheral while others reshape the destination. It also introduces time into the framework. Pappas et al. (2023) connect innovation with resilience under uncertainty, while Kritikos et al. (2025) connect innovation with regional development in the post-COVID-19 period. Together, these studies imply that innovation can serve as an adaptive capacity when destinations face shocks, structural pressures, and changing market conditions, but transition outcomes depend on whether innovations are supported and scaled within the wider destination system.

4.4 Innovation Ecosystems, Knowledge Networks, and Collective Action

The third theme is the strongest cross-cutting explanation in the reviewed literature. Coelho de Souza Filho et al. (2025) explicitly integrate innovation, technology, and sustainability within the concept of a tourism innovation ecosystem. Weidenfeld et al. (2026) further argue that tourism innovation increasingly depends on knowledge networks that span sectors and regions. These perspectives shift the unit of analysis from the individual innovating organization toward a system of interconnected actors and resources.

Knowledge exchange is one of the mechanisms repeatedly implied by this ecosystem perspective. Tourism innovation depends on the ability to access, combine, translate, and circulate knowledge. Sustach et al. (2022) identify technology and smart-destination research as an area in which data and information infrastructures reshape destination management. Intakarn et al. (2026) extend this logic by combining local wisdom, the creative economy, supply-chain relationships, and smart tourism technologies within sustainable cultural tourism. In both cases, innovation is a relational process in which knowledge becomes useful through integration with local capabilities and institutional arrangements.

Collaboration and collective action constitute a second mechanism. Melenez-Roman and Font (2026) show that sustainable tourism innovation is shaped by rules, legitimacy, shared responsibility, and self-governance. Akbari et al. (2025) similarly emphasize collaborative tourism leadership as a means of strengthening ecosystem development and innovation in Indonesia. Partanen (2024) highlights social innovation for inclusive tourism development, while Wirth et al. (2023) examine the phases, actors, and tipping points through which social innovations evolve. These studies indicate that collaboration is not simply a desirable managerial practice; it is a mechanism through which fragmented destination actors can coordinate experimentation, learning, and implementation.

4.5 Institutions, Governance, and Intermediation

The fourth theme concerns the institutional conditions that enable innovation to become sustainable. Governance determines the rules under which actors interact, the legitimacy of new practices, the allocation of responsibility, and the capacity to coordinate collective action. Roser et al.

(2023) demonstrate the potential role of tourism innovation intermediaries in supporting stakeholder adaptation and sustainability transitions, while Lucia-Casademunt and García-Cabrera (2026) show how tourism hubs can operate as catalysts when they are institutionally embedded and connected to mentoring, matchmaking, and regional innovation networks.

Recent work on participatory governance extends the argument to community-level institutions. Maiurro et al. (2026) show how organizational intermediation can connect community associations, private actors, and public institutions around social innovation for sustainable destination development. Partanen et al. (2025) similarly illustrate how community inclusion can generate social innovation propositions that challenge established tourism planning practices. These findings support an institutional reading of innovation in which sustainable destination outcomes depend partly on who is included, how decisions are coordinated, and whether new practices gain legitimacy beyond the original innovation site.

4.6 Digital and Technological Enablement

Digital and technological innovation form a fifth mechanism that cuts across the broader ecosystem. Zhang and Huang (2025) demonstrate how virtual reality can create new tourism experiences while potentially reducing some environmental pressures associated with conventional travel. Folgieri et al. (2025) examine blockchain and NFT applications through a decision-support framework, illustrating how emerging digital architectures can create new governance and value-creation questions. Talukder (2026) extends the technological perspective into environmental risk assessment and life-cycle analysis, showing how digital and analytical tools can support ecotourism sustainability.

However, the reviewed evidence indicates that digitalization should be treated as an enabling condition rather than a universal explanation for sustainability. Ristanović et al. (2025) explicitly integrate digital tools with local resources, stakeholder collaboration, participatory governance, and territorial assets. The implication is that technology contributes to sustainability when it is aligned with destination-specific needs, institutional capabilities, and broader value-creation objectives. Digital innovation therefore belongs inside the destination innovation system rather than outside it.

4.7 Place-Based Resources and Sustainability Outcomes

A sixth mechanism concerns the mobilization of place-based resources. Tourism destinations rely on natural, cultural, human, and institutional assets that cannot be easily separated from their local context. Ristanović et al. (2025) emphasize local resources as a foundation for smart and sustainable destinations, while Intakarn et al. (2026) connect local wisdom and the creative economy with sustainable cultural tourism. Sangnak (2025) shows how agricultural tourism and government support can contribute to rural revitalization and sustainable tourism development in Thailand. These studies suggest that innovation often emerges through recombination and repositioning of assets that already exist within the destination.

The outcome side of the synthesis is multidimensional. Chen et al. (2023) link tourism development, technological innovation, and ecological environment, while Berdugo Morantes et al. (2025) examine innovation and sustainability across the tourism value chain. Vargová and Matušíková (2025) show that sustainable initiatives and quality management can be connected with visitor satisfaction and destination loyalty. Kritikos et al. (2025) and Sangnak (2025) connect innovation with regional and rural development. Taken together, the evidence supports a destination outcome structure that includes economic value, social value, and environmental value.

Table 3. Integrated mechanisms linking tourism innovation to sustainable destination development

Mechanism	Interpretation across the literature	Illustrative evidence	Potential destination outcome
Knowledge and network integration	Innovation depends on knowledge flows across sectors, organizations, and regions.	Weidenfeld et al. (2026); Sustach et al. (2022)	Learning capacity, coordination, capability development
Collaboration and co-creation	Stakeholders jointly develop, test, and legitimate new practices.	Akbari et al. (2025); Wirth et al. (2023); Partanen et al. (2024)	Inclusion, collective problem solving, shared value
Institutional governance and legitimacy	Rules, norms, legitimacy, and shared responsibility condition innovation adoption and persistence.	Melenez-Roman & Font (2026); Maiurro et al. (2026)	Institutional alignment, trust, continuity
Intermediation and ecosystem orchestration	Hubs and intermediaries connect actors, knowledge, finance, mentoring, and implementation.	Roser et al. (2023); Lucia-Casademunt & García-Cabrera (2026)	Diffusion, scaling, regional transformation
Digital technological enablement	Technology expands the options for experience design, data use, environmental management, and new business models.	Folgieri et al. (2025); Talukder (2026); Zhang & Huang (2025)	Efficiency, experience, monitoring, innovation capacity
Place-based resource mobilization	Local natural, cultural, human, and institutional resources shape innovation pathways.	Ristanović et al. (2025); Intakarn et al. (2026); Sangnak (2025)	Local value capture, resilience, contextual fit

4.8 Integrative Conceptual Framework

The thematic synthesis suggests that tourism innovation should be conceptualized as a mediated and context-dependent pathway rather than a direct linear driver of sustainability. Destination context

shapes the resources, pressures, institutional conditions, and innovation capabilities available to actors. These conditions influence the emergence of tourism innovations. The subsequent translation of innovation into sustainable value occurs through knowledge networks, collaboration, governance, intermediation, digital enablement, and place-based resource mobilization. The resulting value can be economic, social, environmental, or a combination of all three.

Figure 1. Integrative framework of tourism innovation and sustainable destination development

DESTINATION CONTEXT External pressures institutions market change environmental challenges
INNOVATION CAPABILITIES / NICHEs Capabilities knowledge entrepreneurship emerging sustainability niches
TOURISM INNOVATION Product service process organizational social digital environmental innovation
ENABLING MECHANISMS Knowledge & networks collaboration & co-creation governance & legitimacy intermediation technology place-based resources
VALUE CREATION Economic value social value environmental value
SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT Long-term viability inclusion environmental responsibility resilience and adaptation

The framework also implies a feedback relationship. Successful sustainable outcomes can strengthen destination capabilities, legitimacy, learning, and stakeholder support for subsequent innovation. In this sense, sustainable destination development is both an outcome and a condition for future adaptation. This interpretation is consistent with transition-oriented research and with evidence on innovation, resilience, and regenerative tourism (Flood Chavez et al., 2024; Miedes-Ugarte & Flores-Ruiz, 2025; Pappas et al., 2023).

4.9 Discussion: Toward a Mechanism-Oriented Understanding

The main theoretical implication of this review is that the tourism innovation–sustainability relationship should be understood as a mechanism-oriented system. The literature does not support a simple assumption that more innovation necessarily produces more sustainability. Instead, the contribution of innovation depends on whether destinations possess the capabilities, governance arrangements, networks, intermediary structures, and place-based resources needed to translate innovation into broader value. This position extends earlier review work, which documented the diversity of innovation and sustainability research, by organizing the diversity around mechanisms and destination-level outcomes (Santos et al., 2021).

The ecosystem perspective provides a useful bridge between firm-level innovation research and destination-level sustainability. Innovation can begin with an entrepreneur, business, community initiative, technology provider, or public program, but its destination significance emerges when

knowledge, resources, and legitimacy move across organizational boundaries. This is consistent with the emerging knowledge-network perspective (Weidenfeld et al., 2026) and empirical tourism innovation ecosystem model (Coelho de Souza Filho et al., 2025). The destination therefore appears less as a passive location for innovation and more as an evolving system that shapes how innovation is created, diffused, and institutionalized.

The transition perspective adds temporal depth to the ecosystem argument. A tourism destination can contain multiple innovation niches at the same time, and their long-term significance depends on how they interact with dominant regimes and external pressures. This helps explain why some sustainability innovations remain isolated, while others become part of broader destination reconfiguration (Flood Chavez et al., 2024). Regenerative tourism, grassroots initiatives, and community-driven social innovations can therefore be interpreted as mechanisms of experimentation that may challenge existing patterns when supported by institutions, networks, and legitimacy (Miedes-Ugarte & Flores-Ruiz, 2025; Partanen et al., 2025; Wirth et al., 2023).

The institutional dimension also helps explain uneven outcomes. Sustainable innovation is shaped by who can participate, whose knowledge is recognized, and which rules influence resource use and decision-making. Collective action research, participatory governance, and leadership studies converge on the importance of coordination, legitimacy, shared responsibility, and intermediary functions (Akbari et al., 2025; Maiurro et al., 2026; Melenez-Roman & Font, 2026). Thus, governance is not merely a background context; it is part of the mechanism through which innovation becomes collective and durable.

Finally, the review suggests that the outcome of sustainable destination development should remain multidimensional. Economic performance matters because destinations require viable enterprises and livelihoods. Social sustainability matters because tourism development can generate unequal benefits and exclusion. Environmental sustainability matters because destinations depend on ecological assets and carrying capacity. Studies of value chains, agricultural tourism, visitor satisfaction, local resources, and environmental assessment illustrate different pathways to these outcomes (Berdugo Morantes et al., 2025; Sangnak, 2025; Vargová & Matušíková, 2025; Ristanović et al., 2025; Talukder, 2026). The integrative framework therefore places value creation—not innovation itself—at the center of the sustainability question.

4.10 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the study contributes by connecting theoretical streams that are often examined separately. Innovation theory explains what changes; sustainability transitions explain how change unfolds over time; ecosystem and institutional perspectives explain how actors coordinate and how innovation becomes embedded; and sustainability-oriented innovation explains the multidimensional value that should be pursued. Their integration provides a more complete explanation of destination development than any single perspective alone.

Practically, destination managers and policymakers can interpret the framework as a set of interdependent management priorities. Innovation initiatives need access to knowledge and networks, opportunities for collaboration and co-creation, legitimate governance arrangements, intermediary support, appropriate digital infrastructure, and mechanisms for mobilizing local assets. This is consistent with current evidence on tourism leadership, local tourism hubs, smart destinations, and sustainable cultural tourism (Akbari et al., 2025; Lucia-Casademunt & García-Cabrera, 2026;

Ristanović et al., 2025; Intakarn et al., 2026). The practical implication is not to maximize innovation indiscriminately, but to align innovation processes with destination-specific sustainability goals.

5. CONCLUSION

This integrative review examined how tourism innovation can contribute to sustainable destination development by synthesizing emerging theoretical perspectives and recurring mechanisms across a Scopus-based corpus of 34 unique records, of which 32 formed the working synthesis corpus. The review identified four overarching perspectives: innovation as transformation, sustainability transitions, innovation ecosystems and collective action, and sustainability-oriented innovation.

Across these perspectives, six mechanisms were consistently useful for explaining the translation of innovation into destination sustainability: knowledge and network integration; collaboration and co-creation; institutional governance and legitimacy; intermediation and ecosystem orchestration; digital and technological enablement; and place-based resource mobilization. These mechanisms connect tourism innovation to economic, social, and environmental value creation. The resulting conceptual framework positions sustainable destination development as a mediated and context-dependent process rather than an automatic consequence of innovation.

The study has limitations. First, the working corpus is based on Scopus export records available for the present review and therefore does not represent all possible databases or publications. Second, the integrative approach prioritizes conceptual synthesis and does not estimate effect sizes. Third, the proposed framework is a theoretically derived synthesis and should be examined through future empirical studies across different destination contexts. Future research can test specific pathways, such as the role of intermediaries, governance quality, collaboration, digital capability, or local resource mobilization, using longitudinal or comparative destination research.

Overall, the review suggests that the key question for sustainable destinations is not whether tourism innovation occurs, but how innovation becomes embedded in networks, institutions, capabilities, and place-based systems that allow economic, social, and environmental value to be generated over time.

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7. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The bibliographic records used in the review were obtained from Scopus export files and secondary literature. The cleaned screening and extraction workbook supporting the review process can be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to database licensing conditions.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declares no conflict of interest.

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