

Social Entrepreneurship as a Sustainability Mechanism in Tourism: The Roles of Business Models and Community Empowerment

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Abstract

Background: Tourism enterprises increasingly function in an environment where economic performance is balanced with environmental responsibility and social equity. Social value creation emerged as a key mechanism through which tourism enterprises contribute to sustainable development. **Objective:** Illustrating the application of Stakeholder Theory and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study examines the influence of Social Value Creation (SVC) on Sustainable Tourism Outcomes (STO), with Sustainable Business Models (SBM) and Community Empowerment (CE) as mediating mechanisms. **Methodology:** A total of 386 samples were collected using a structured questionnaire administered via online survey. The validated questionnaire has been taken and slightly modified to capture the respondents' perceptions of social value creation practices, sustainable business model adoption, community empowerment initiatives and sustainable tourism outcomes. A non-probability, purposive sampling approach was adopted, ensuring the respondents had relevant experience in tourism enterprises with a social or sustainable orientation from the Tamil Nadu region of India. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the study tests the conceptual framework empirically by linking social entrepreneurship and sustainability in tourism. **Results:** The findings demonstrate that social value creation significantly influences sustainable business models and community empowerment, thereby enhancing sustainable tourism outcomes. Community empowerment emerged as the most influential predictor of sustainability. The model explains a substantial proportion of the variance in sustainable tourism outcomes, thereby strengthening the central role of stakeholder-centric, SDG-aligned tourism development. **Conclusion:** This study examined the role of social entrepreneurship, where social value creation embedded within tourism social enterprises contributes to sustainable tourism outcomes and identified the mechanisms through which this relationship operates.

Keywords: Social value creation, sustainable tourism, SDGs, social entrepreneurship, tourism social enterprise

Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has come into sight as a crucial strategy for addressing social, economic and environmental issues through market-driven solutions. The potential lies in its theoretical underpinnings, execution strategies and its impact on community development especially in tourism. Sustainability is a central theme in social entrepreneurship literature. Social entrepreneurship combines entrepreneurial

concepts with social value creation, within the tourism sector, where sustainability in community development is important (Aquino et al., 2018). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have significantly influenced the contributions of social enterprises to economic, environmental and social sustainability.

Social entrepreneurship refers to the process of identification, analysis and exploration of opportunities seeking to create social value through the conduct of commercial, market-type activities and use of a great variety of resources (Bacq & Janssen, 2011). Social entrepreneurs are defined as change agents who initiate and maintain social value, responding to challenges and innovating in the face of them. In contrast to conventional for-profit businesses, social enterprises aim to share holdings evenly and meet the needs of society (Shaw & Carter, 2012). Pol and Ville (2009) emphasize social entrepreneurship as a type of social innovation, being inclusive and creative in solving social issues. Zeyen et al. (2013) further explains how social entrepreneurs elicit sustainable change by utilizing local means and involving people in the co-creation of value. Mair and Marti (2006) define social entrepreneurship as a process of generating innovative solutions to social problems, merging social mission with entrepreneurial approaches. In the same way Martin and Osberg (2007) highlight the social entrepreneurs' role in identifying social issues that are not sufficiently addressed by conventional market or government actions.

Social entrepreneurship in sustainable tourism has been a primary area of research. Lange & Dodds (2017) in their study showcased on the ability of social entrepreneurship in solving sustainability issues in hospitality and tourism sector in Canada. Their study also indicates that this sector lacks recognition and knowledge about social entrepreneurship. Pallock, 2015 proposed the idea of Conscious Travel, calling for a change from extractive economic systems to regenerative tourism. According to this study, tourism businesses should prioritize local empowerment, sustainability and ethical business practices. Karatas-Ozkan, et al. (2024) further examined the role of women entrepreneurs in sustainable tourism. In their qualitative interview study that took place in Turkey, they illustrate how women entrepreneurs overcome socio-economic barriers while redefining existing resources to promote sustainability in the tourism sector. Tourism sectors' contribution to sustainable development was formally discussed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, resulting in the adoption of Agenda 21, which includes a major focus on sustainable tourism. The Charter for Sustainable Tourism (1995) and the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (1999) also reaffirmed the importance of ethical, environmentally friendly tourism (Butowski, 2012). Sustainable tourism has always been associated with alternative and ecotourism,

both are reactions against mass tourism (Krippendorff, 1986). As per Fennel (1999), ecotourism, responsible tourism and green tourism are all encompassed within the general concept of sustainability.

Social entrepreneurship is defined by (Bacq & Janssen, 2011) as the process of discovering and leveraging opportunities to generate social value through commercial means. It combines economic and social objectives, which differentiates it from conventional entrepreneurship. Austin et al., 2012 contended that social entrepreneurship alleviates market failures by tackling social problems left behind by both the public and private sectors. There are various theoretical bases that underpin research in social entrepreneurship. To illustrate, Weber's Theory of Substantive and Formal Rationality describe entrepreneurs' motivation for activities beyond profit-making, including values, beliefs and social justice (Kummitha et al., 2021).

The current study examines how social enterprises in the tourism sector create social value and translate it into sustainable tourism outcomes. The study specifically addresses how social value creation embedded within tourism social enterprises influences sustainable business models and community empowerment and how these mechanisms contribute to sustainability. This study employed stakeholder theory and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals; empirically investigating these relationships using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

Tourism social enterprise is a divergent organizational form that integrates entrepreneurial logic with a clear social mission to address persistent sustainability challenges. Unlike conventional tourism firms that prioritize profit maximization, tourism social enterprises embed social value creation as an inseparable dimension of their business purpose. This embeddedness differentiates social enterprises from corporate social responsibility initiatives, keeping social value creation as a primary driver of organizational strategy and operations. Aquino et al., 2018 provided a conceptual framework in this segment, arguing that tourism social entrepreneurship functions as a sustainable community development strategy. They aligned tourism activities with local socio-economic and environmental priorities. Subsequent research on social value creation in tourism social enterprises emphasizes inclusive employment, local entrepreneurship support, cultural preservation and environmental stewardship (Mair &

Marti, 2006; Martin & Osberg, 2007). These forms of value creation respond directly to market and governance failures commonly associated with mass tourism, such as economic outflow, community marginalization and ecological degradation.

Stakeholder theory provides a theoretical lens for examining tourism social enterprises, as tourism destinations operate as complex socio-ecological systems involving multiple interdependent stakeholders. According to stakeholder theory, organizational success and legitimacy depend on the ability to balance and create value for diverse stakeholder groups, including communities, employees, tourists, governments and the natural environment. Tourism social enterprises are inherently stakeholder oriented. They operationalize stakeholder theory by involving host communities in governance processes, redistributing tourism benefits locally and aligning business decisions with environmental limits. Recent tourism research increasingly emphasizes that stakeholder collaboration, rather than firm-level action alone, determines sustainability outcomes, particularly in ecotourism and community-based tourism contexts

While studies confirm the positive sustainability potential of tourism social enterprises, they also highlight the need for stronger empirical models explaining how social value creation translates into measurable sustainability outcomes (Zhang et al., 2024). Systematic reviews further consolidate this perspective by framing tourism and hospitality social entrepreneurship around four dominant themes: antecedents, processes, outcomes and constraints. The adoption of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has become the dominant global framework for conceptualizing sustainable tourism. Tourism is clearly linked to multiple SDGs and the literature increasingly calls for empirical research that moves beyond symbolic alignment toward operational and measurable SDG contributions (WTO & UNDP, 2018).

Tourism social enterprises are relevant to the agenda because of their hybrid structure, which enables them to pursue economic viability while advancing social and environmental objectives. Empirical and policy-oriented studies consistently associate tourism social enterprises with contributions to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through inclusive employment and entrepreneurship,

SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) through community-based tourism and cultural preservation, SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) through sustainable operations and SDG 13 (Climate Action) through conservation-oriented tourism practices (Khizar et al., 2023). The growing focus on sustainable business models (SBMs) is a tool for implementing sustainability within tourism enterprises. Sustainable business models integrate economic, social and environmental value creation into the firm's value proposition and revenue. Tourism social enterprises are particularly well-positioned to adopt sustainable business models because their long-term social mission and stakeholder-oriented strategies often take precedence over short-term profit maximization. Tourism business model research emphasizes that sustainability-oriented innovation, such as community-based supply chains, ethical employment practices, circular resource use and reinvesting profits in social objectives, enhances both competitiveness and legitimacy. Community empowerment is widely regarded as a pillar of sustainable tourism. It incorporates economic participation, capacity building, decision-making authority and psychological ownership of tourism development. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that tourism initiatives lacking meaningful community empowerment face resistance, legitimacy challenges and long-term sustainability risks.

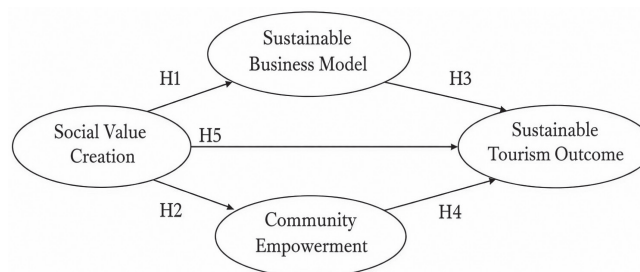
Tourism social enterprises place community empowerment (CE) as a core operational logic by involving residents as co-creators of tourism value. Empirical studies show that social enterprises enhance empowerment through employment generation, skill development, local entrepreneurship support and participatory governance structures. These outcomes strengthen social capital and promote community resilience, which are essential for long-term destination sustainability. Empowerment is most effective when communities are engaged from the early stages of enterprise development and when social enterprises invest in long-term education and capability building. Contemporary tourism emphasizes that sustainability should be assessed in terms of economic performance, improvements in community well-being, cultural preservation and environmental stewardship. Therefore, sustainable tourism outcomes are increasingly conceptualized as a balanced integration of economic resilience, social equity and environmental protection. Destinations with active tourism social enterprises experience enhanced local employment quality, stronger

community support for tourism and improved environmental practices. The outcomes align closely with SDG-oriented sustainability metrics and the relevance of social enterprises as vehicles for translating global sustainability agendas into localized action.

Sustainability research and sustainable business models as a mechanism for implementing sustainability within tourism enterprises. These business models integrate social, economic and environmental value creation into the firm (Butler & Szromek, 2019). Hence, tourism social enterprises must be well-positioned to adopt sustainable business models that align with their long-term social mission, stakeholder-oriented strategies and a short-term maximization of profits, among other objectives. The Tourism business model, on the other hand, emphasizes sustainable innovations such as community empowerment, ethical practices, circular usage of resources and reinvestment of profits into social objectives. Reinhold et al., 2018 highlight the need to explain how tourist organisations configure value proportions, resources and revenue to generate sustainable tourism outcomes (STOs). Latest business models in tourism emphasize innovation, resilience and coordination as necessary implications for sustainability-based competitiveness. A nature-based tourism review by Abreu et al., 2025 underscores that the literature remains fragmented in terms of sustainability and innovation within the tourism business model research.

Studies reveal three persistent gaps. First, despite strong conceptual support for tourism social enterprises, there is limited empirical testing of integrated models that explain how social value creation translates into sustainable tourism outcomes. Second, sustainable business models and community empowerment are often examined independently, despite their interdependent roles in social enterprise-driven sustainability. Third, while SDGs are frequently referenced, few studies empirically operationalize SDG-aligned outcomes within tourism social enterprise research. Addressing these gaps, the present study conceptualizes social value creation as an inherent attribute of tourism social enterprises and empirically examines how it contributes to sustainable tourism outcomes through two complementary mechanisms: sustainable business models and community empowerment. Employing the stakeholder theory and aligning with the SDGs, the study responds to recent calls for mechanism-focused, theory-driven empirical research in sustainable tourism and social entrepreneurship.

Figure 1
Proposed Model



Source: Author's Work

This study proposes a conceptual model in which social value creation embedded within tourism social enterprises influences sustainable tourism outcomes (Figure 1) directly and indirectly through sustainable business models and community empowerment.

H1 – Social value creation has a positive effect on the sustainable business model.

H2 – Social value creation has a positive effect on community empowerment.

H3 – Sustainable business models have a positive effect on sustainable tourism outcomes.

H4 – Community empowerment has a positive effect on sustainable tourism outcomes.

H5 – Social value creation has a positive effect on sustainable tourism outcomes.

Objectives:

- To examine the influence of social value creation on sustainable business model adoption in tourism social enterprises.
- To analyse the effect of social value creation on community empowerment within tourism destinations.
- To evaluate the impact of sustainable business models on sustainable tourism outcomes.
- To assess the role of community empowerment in achieving sustainable tourism outcomes.
- To investigate the direct influence of social value creation on sustainable tourism outcomes.
- To examine the mediating roles of sustainable business models and community empowerment

in linking social value creation with sustainable tourism outcomes.

Methodology

Research Design: The study employed a quantitative and cross-sectional design to investigate the relationships between social value creation embedded in tourism social enterprises, sustainable business models, community empowerment and sustainable tourism outcomes. A quantitative approach has been chosen to test and validate the theory. The design enables the empirical examination of hypothesized causal relationships derived from stakeholder theory and SDGs.

Locale: Tamil Nadu region of India.

Sampling Design: A non-probability, purposive sampling approach was adopted, ensuring the respondents had relevant experience in tourism enterprises with a social or sustainable orientation. A total of 386 samples were collected.

Tools and Technique: Data was collected using a structured questionnaire administered through an online-based survey method. The validated questionnaire has been taken and slightly modified to capture the respondents' perceptions of social value creation practices, sustainable business model adoption, community empowerment initiatives and sustainable tourism outcomes. The respondents were assured of confidentiality and the participation was voluntary. All constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

Data Analysis and Statistical Analysis: The study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling [PLS-SEM] using smart PLS 4.0 software to analyse the data. The analysis followed a two-step approach. Initially, the measurement model was assessed for indicator reliability, internal consistency and convergent validity. Later, the structural model was evaluated by examining the path coefficients, significance level, f^2 for effect size and R^2 for explanatory power. Bootstrapping procedures were also applied to assess the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Respondents: The respondent profile reflects a balanced and diverse sample, supporting the robustness of the study findings. The gender distribution

is nearly even, with 52.8% of respondent's male and 47.2% female, minimizing potential gender bias. Most respondents fall within the 26–34 years (36.8%) and 35–44 years (28.2%) age groups, indicating strong representation of economically active and professionally experienced individuals. The sample is relatively well-educated, with 49.7% holding postgraduate qualifications and 23.4% possessing doctoral or professional credentials, suggesting that respondents are well-equipped to assess complex issues related to social entrepreneurship and sustainability. From a stakeholder perspective, social entrepreneurs (32.1%) form the largest group, followed by tourism professionals (25.4%), community members (23.8%) and policy makers/NGO representatives (18.7%), ensuring a comprehensive multi-stakeholder viewpoint. In terms of experience, most respondents have 6-10 years of sectoral involvement (34.7%), while a substantial proportion also reports over 11 years of experience, indicating informed and practice-oriented insights. Organizational representation is led by social enterprises (40.4%), complemented by private tourism firms, non-profits and public sector entities. Geographically, the sample spans urban, semi-urban and rural contexts, enhancing the contextual relevance and generalizability of the findings.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographics	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	204	52.8
	Female	182	47.2
Age group	Below 25 years	58	15.0
	26 - 34 years	142	36.8
	35 - 44 years	109	28.2
	45 - 54 years	57	14.8
	55 and above years	20	5.2
Educational qualification	Undergraduate	104	26.9
	Postgraduate	192	49.7
	Doctorate / Professional	90	23.4
	Social entrepreneur		
Stakeholder category	Tourism industry professional	124	32.1
	Community member	98	25.4
	Policy maker / NGO representative	92	23.8
		72	18.7
Years of experience in the tourism / Social sector	Less than 5 years	96	24.9
	6-10 years	134	34.7
	11-15 years	94	24.3
	More than 15 years	62	16.1

Model Fit Indices: The SRMR values (Table 3) for the saturated model (0.049) and the estimated model (0.059) are both below the recommended threshold of 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), indicating an acceptable model fit. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) values (Table 3) of 0.883 for the saturated model and 0.875 for the estimated model indicate a reasonable fit (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). The results confirm that the specified relationships among social value creation, sustainable business models, community empowerment and sustainable tourism outcomes are empirically supported and that the model is appropriate for hypothesis testing and interpretation.

Table 3
Model Fit Indices

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.049	0.059
NFI	0.883	0.875

Source: Author's Work

R² and Adjusted R² Values: The explanatory power of the model was evaluated using R² and adjusted R² Values (Table 4) for all endogenous constructs. The R² Value for CE is 0.700 with an adjusted R² Value of 0.699. This indicates that 70% of the variance in community empowerment is explained by its antecedent construct, which is social value creation embedded with tourism social enterprise. Similarly, the R² value for SBM is 0.705, with an adjusted R² of 0.704, indicating that 70.5% of the variance in sustainable business model adoption is explained by social value creation. This high explanatory power confirms that socially driven tourism enterprises are more likely to integrate sustainability principles into their business models.

The R² value for STO is 0.823, with an adjusted R² of 0.821, indicating that the combined effects of social value creation, sustainable business models and community empowerment account for 82.3% of the variance in sustainable tourism outcomes. This represents an exceptionally high level of explanatory power, indicating that the proposed model captures the key determinants of sustainability in tourism enterprises. The minimal differences between the R² and adjusted R² values across all constructs suggest that the model is parsimonious.

Table 4
R² and Adjusted R² Values

	R-square	R-square adjusted
CE	0.700	0.699
SBM	0.705	0.704
STO	0.823	0.821

Source: Author's Work

Hypothesis Testing: The hypothesis testing results (Table 5) indicate that all proposed relationships in the structural model are statistically significant and supported. H1 demonstrates a strong positive effect of social value creation on sustainable business models ($\beta = 0.839$, $p < 0.001$), with a very large effect size ($f^2 = 2.386$), indicating that social value creation embedded within tourism social enterprises is a dominant driver of sustainability-oriented business model adoption. Similarly, H2 confirms that social value creation has a strong and significant influence on community empowerment ($\beta = 0.837$, $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 2.336$), highlighting the stakeholder-centric nature of tourism social enterprises.

H3 shows that sustainable business models have a positive influence on sustainable tourism outcomes ($\beta = 0.189$, $p < 0.001$), though the effect size is small ($f^2 = 0.046$), suggesting that firm-level sustainability initiatives alone are insufficient to generate comprehensive tourism sustainability. In contrast, H4 reveals that community empowerment has a substantial impact on sustainable tourism outcomes ($\beta = 0.576$, $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.435$), emerging as the most influential predictor in the model. Finally, H5 confirms a direct but modest effect of social value creation on sustainable tourism outcomes ($\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.046$), indicating that its influence is largely indirect through sustainable business models and community empowerment.

Table 5
Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Beta (β)	p-value	f-square	Decision
H1 (SVC \rightarrow SBM)	0.839	0.000	2.386	Supported
H2 (SVC \rightarrow CE)	0.837	0.000	2.336	Supported
H3 (SBM \rightarrow STO)	0.189	0.000	0.046	Supported
H4 (CE \rightarrow STO)	0.576	0.000	0.435	Supported
H5 (SVC \rightarrow STO)	0.185	0.000	0.046	Supported

Source – Author's Work

The results provide strong empirical support for all hypothesized relationships and offer several important insights, both theoretical and practical. The findings reveal that social value creation has a very strong influence on both sustainable business models ($\beta = 0.839$) and community empowerment ($\beta = 0.837$), with large effect sizes. These results confirm that social value creation is not a peripheral outcome of tourism social enterprises but rather a foundational organizing principle that shapes both firm-level strategies and stakeholder relationships.

This finding aligns with contemporary tourism social entrepreneurship literature, which conceptualizes social enterprises as hybrid organizations where social mission is embedded in core business logic rather than treated as an adjunct responsibility (Aquino et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2024). In tourism contexts, where enterprises heavily depend on community acceptance, cultural authenticity and environmental integrity, social value creation becomes a critical mechanism for achieving long-term viability (Altinay et al., 2016). From a stakeholder theory perspective, the strong influence of social value creation supports Freeman and McVea (2001) argument that value creation for multiple stakeholders enhances organizational effectiveness and sustainability. Tourism social enterprises that prioritize social value actively align the interests of communities, employees, tourists and the environment, thereby reducing conflict and fostering cooperative relationships among stakeholders. This aligns with SDG-oriented tourism development, where enterprises are expected to balance economic growth with social inclusion and environmental protection (WTO & UNDP, 2018).

Tourism social enterprises are well-positioned to adopt sustainable business models in tourism because their long-term social mission and stakeholder-oriented strategies align with, rather than prioritize, short-term profit maximization. The results suggest that enterprises driven by social value creation are likely to invest in ethical employment practices, community-based supply chains, environmentally responsible operations and reinvest profits in social objectives. These practices correspond closely with SDG 12 and SDG 8. The study shows a strong relationship between social value creation and community empowerment. The large effect associated with H2 confirms that tourism social enterprises that prioritize social value actively empower local communities through participation, capacity building

and shared decision-making. This finding is consistent with empirical studies demonstrating that community involvement is a defining feature of tourism social entrepreneurship (Kummitha et al., 2021). From a stakeholder theory standpoint, community empowerment represents a shift from transactional engagement to relational governance. Empowering communities, tourism social enterprises reduce power lopsidedness and adopt more equitable value distribution, addressing long-standing critiques of tourism industry.

Sustainable business models have a positive but relatively small effect on sustainable tourism outcomes. While sustainable business models are widely promoted as solutions to tourism's environmental and social challenges, recent scholarship cautions against over-reliance on firm-centric approaches (Reinhold et al., 2018; Fennel, 1999). Tourism sustainability is inherently collective and place-based, meaning that isolated organizational innovations may have limited impact unless they are embedded within broader community and governance systems. This insight initiates integrative approaches that combine organizational innovation with community engagement and stakeholder collaboration.

Community empowerment emerges as the most influential determinant of sustainable tourism outcomes. The strong effect of community empowerment confirms that sustainable tourism outcomes such as social equity, cultural preservation, environmental stewardship and long-term destination resilience are deeply rooted in community participation and ownership. This aligns with extensive literature emphasizing that tourism initiatives lacking meaningful community engagement are unlikely to be sustainable in the long run (Kummitha et al., 2021). Empowered communities are more likely to support conservation efforts, resist unsustainable tourism practices and actively contribute to destination development. In SDG terms, this pathway highlights the interconnectedness of SDG 8, SDG 11 and the social dimensions of sustainability (WTO & UNDP, 2018).

From a practical view, the findings suggest that policy makers and tourism entrepreneurs prioritize community empowerment along with business model innovations. Investments in participatory governance, capacity building and equitable benefit-sharing are likely to yield greater sustainability returns than firm-centric sustainability

initiatives alone. The results also highlight a need to design supportive institutional frameworks that enable tourism social enterprises to scale their impact.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of social entrepreneurship, where social value creation embedded within tourism social enterprises contributes to sustainable tourism outcomes and identified the mechanisms through which this relationship operates. From a theoretical perspective, it advances the sustainable tourism and social entrepreneurship literature by empirically integrating social value creation, business model innovation and community empowerment within a single explanatory framework. It also extends stakeholder theory by demonstrating how stakeholder-oriented value creation mechanisms operate within tourism social enterprises to produce sustainability outcomes. Finally, the study confirms that sustainable tourism outcomes are most effectively achieved when social value creation is integrated into an enterprise's strategy and implemented through empowered communities and sustainable business models. By highlighting the primacy of community empowerment and stakeholder-oriented entrepreneurship, the research contributes to a more holistic and inclusive understanding of sustainability in tourism, offering a meaningful pathway for advancing SDG-aligned tourism development.

The cross-sectional research design restricts causal inference and the reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, comparative destination analyses, or mixed-method approaches to further unpack the dynamics of social value creation and sustainability in tourism. Additionally, incorporating contextual moderators such as governance quality, institutional support, or cultural factors could enrich the understanding of how tourism social enterprises operate across diverse settings.

Conflict of Interest

The Author(s) possesses no conflict of interest and had equal contributions in this research work

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