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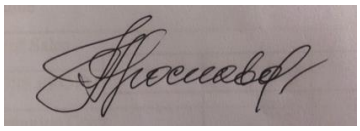
Signature of research student: 

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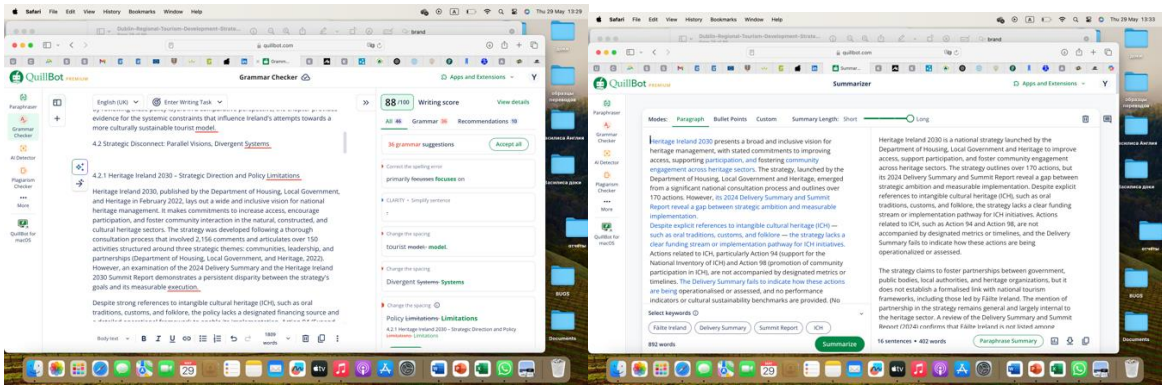

Abstract

This study explores critical gaps in cultural sustainability within Irish tourism policy, where heritage is often instrumentalised for economic growth at the expense of community agency and intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Through qualitative analysis of national heritage strategies (Heritage Ireland 2030), regional tourism frameworks (e.g., Wild Atlantic Way), and county-level plans, supplemented by the case study of the Burren Ecotourism Network, the research reveals systemic fragmentation: policy silos, spatial inequity, and the marginalisation of ICH persist despite rhetorical commitments to sustainability. Findings demonstrate that community-led initiatives sustain cultural vitality but lack institutional integration. In response, the study proposes the Renaissance of Heritage framework—a conceptual intervention reframing cultural sustainability as a dynamic, participatory process centred on four principles: (1) Community Agency in governance, (2) Institutional Recognition of ICH, (3) Spatial Equity, and (4) Institutional Coordination. Rather than rejecting tourism, the proposed paradigm reinterprets it as cultural exchange that promotes local continuity. While operational indicators require further development, this framework offers the critical foundation for realigning tourism policy with living heritage practices, advocating for institutional collaboration and community authorship as essential for authentic sustainability.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Sustainability is often perceived as an environmental concern, emphasising efforts to combat climate change, preserve resources, and safeguard ecosystems. However, its essence lies within creating a long-term balance of environmental health, social well-being, and economic stability - a mission and responsibility to both current and future generations (Brundtland Report, 1987). Within these dimensions cultural sustainability is crucial yet often overlooked pillar. It aims to preserve community traditions, identity, and heritage ensuring their transmission across generations. Recently, cultural sustainability has attracted increasing attention from researchers, industry leaders, and policymakers, as reflected in global initiatives such as UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) and various national programmes that aim to protect and promote local cultural traditions. In the context of tourism, cultural sustainability holds both promise and risk: while sustainable tourism can offer a powerful platform for protecting and revitalising local heritage, it can also endanger it through over-commercialisation and the erosion of authenticity.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)—including storytelling, festivals, crafts, and oral traditions—is especially vulnerable, as it often lacks formal protection or institutional representation. While tourism can be used to express cultural identity, it also has the potential to reduce live traditions to marketable products.

Ireland provides a compelling example for investigating these dynamics. Initiatives such as Fáilte Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way, support for Gaeltacht areas, and national frameworks like Heritage Ireland 2030 and the National Inventory of ICH demonstrate policy commitment to heritage. Yet, many of these efforts prioritise tangible over intangible heritage, and focus on high-profile regions, leaving peripheral communities underserved (OECD, 2022).

1.2 Rationale

Despite increased policy attention to heritage in tourism, cultural sustainability remains inconsistently defined and weakly embedded within tourism planning frameworks in Ireland. References to community engagement and cultural heritage are often remain

rhetorical or instrumental, with little structural or budgetary follow-through. Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tends to be under prioritised, lacking legislative backing, sustained funding, or meaningful integration into tourism strategies.

In parallel, Irish tourism policies reveal territorial disparities, with flagship destinations receiving most of the investment and promotional attention. Peripheral or culturally diverse areas are often excluded from strategic branding, leading to structural imbalances (OECD, 2023; 2024). These inconsistencies raise concerns not only of policy efficiency, but also of cultural equity and long-term resilience.

At the same time, community-based initiatives such as the Burren Ecotourism Network (BEN) and the Irish Community Archive Network (ICAN)[1] demonstrate how local agency can foster dynamic, place-based models of cultural sustainability. These examples highlight the potential of grassroots efforts but also expose their vulnerability in the absence of strong policy integration and institutional support.

These challenges highlight the need to rethink existing approaches to cultural sustainability in tourism. In response, this study introduces the concept of a Renaissance of Heritage—a framework that redefines heritage as a living, participatory process rooted in place and practice. Moving beyond preservation, it calls for the active revitalisation of cultural traditions, the equitable integration of heritage across regions, and the institutional recognition of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as central to sustainable tourism planning. This approach centres community empowerment and cultural justice as essential components of long-term sustainability.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore how cultural sustainability can be more effectively integrated into tourism planning and policy in Ireland. It focuses on the intersection of national strategies and local community initiatives, with particular attention to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and spatial disparities in heritage recognition. By doing so, the study seeks to propose a conceptual framework that reinterprets cultural

[1] ICAN is coordinated by the National Museum of Ireland but serves as a platform for community-generated heritage content. Its inclusion here reflects its bottom-up character and relevance to local cultural continuity

sustainability as a dynamic, participatory process embedded in place, practice, and policy.

To guide this inquiry, the research pursues the following objectives:

- To critically examine how national and regional tourism and heritage strategies define and engage with cultural sustainability.
- To analyse the role of community-based initiatives in sustaining cultural practices at the local level.
- To identify whether there are any institutional gaps that limit the integration of ICH and fair regional inclusion in tourism policy.
- To propose a conceptual framework that addresses these challenges by promoting participatory governance, institutional accountability, and spatial inclusiveness in heritage planning.

While this study acknowledges the crucial role of tourists as co-shapers of cultural meaning, it does not undertake a behavioural or perception-based analysis of tourism demand. Instead, it focuses on structural policy frameworks and community practice, offering a foundation upon which future research may build to explore the visitor side of cultural sustainability more thoroughly.

1.4 Research Questions

The dissertation is guided by four research questions:

1. To what extent is cultural sustainability—particularly intangible cultural heritage (ICH)—integrated into Ireland's national, regional, and local tourism strategies?
2. What are the key institutional or conceptual gaps between policy intentions and actual practices regarding cultural sustainability?
3. How do selected community-based initiatives such as BEN and ICAN reflect locally rooted cultural sustainability?
4. What governance principles could underpin a more effective, inclusive, and integrated approach to cultural sustainability in Irish tourism?

1.5 Methodological Overview

To address these questions, this study employs a qualitative research design grounded in document-based policy analysis. It examines cultural tourism strategies at three levels of governance: national (e.g. *Heritage Ireland 2030*), regional (e.g. Fáilte Ireland's strategies), and local (e.g. county heritage and development plans). The research also incorporates illustrative case study of a community-driven initiative—*the Burren Ecotourism Network (BEN))*—to explore how community-led practices contribute to cultural sustainability and how they might inform future policy. *The Irish Community Archive Network (ICAN*) is briefly included as a secondary example, due to its community-led structure and potential relevance to cultural tourism policy. Additionally, the study draws on expert insights from the Heritage Officer of Offaly County Council, offering a practitioner perspective on local governance, tourism coordination, and the meaning of cultural sustainability in practice.

1.6 Dissertation Structure

Chapter 2 presents a critical literature review on the theoretical foundations of cultural sustainability, focusing on the treatment of ICH and critiques of dominant policy frameworks. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, including case selection and analytical approach. Chapter 4 presents the findings, structured by policy level and supported by case material. Chapter 5 engages in discussion, introduces the *Renaissance of Heritage* framework, and reflects on the contribution of the study. The conclusion outlines recommendations and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Economic-Centred Models and Their Limitations

2.1.1 Cultural Capital and Economic Valuation

Cultural sustainability in tourism has become a critical area of study as destinations strive to balance economic development with preservation of their cultural heritage. Throsby (1999) introduces the concept of cultural capital, which highlights the dual intrinsic and economic value of cultural heritage. Cultural goods, such as heritage sites, artworks and traditional practices, generate economic returns through tourism,

employment, and local industries. Simultaneously, they hold non-market benefits, including historical significance, identity preservation, and community well-being. This framework emphasises the need for sustainable investment to ensure the preservation of cultural assets while fostering economic viability.

Throsby's model has influenced policies that integrate cultural heritage into tourism development. For example, UNESCO's World Heritage Sites often use this framework to justify conservation funding while also encouraging tourism. However, critics argue that Throsby's emphasis on economic valuation risks commodifying cultural heritage, reducing it to a marketable product rather than a living, evolving tradition (Barthel-Bouchier, 2016). This critique highlights the tension between leveraging cultural heritage for economic gain and preserving its authenticity and intrinsic value.

This tension between cultural meaning and economic value is central to the current study, which evaluates how Ireland's tourism policy frequently defines heritage through a commercial perspective. Although this approach can enhance visibility and attract funding, it might overlook less "marketable" cultural expressions, particularly intangible and community-centred traditions.

2.1.2 Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and Its Vulnerabilities

Building on Throsby's work, Estefani and Albrecht (2016) highlight the role of intangible cultural heritage (ICH)—such as traditions, rituals, and oral histories—in enriching tourism experiences. They argue that ICH strengthens community identity and encourages environmental awareness, making it a key part of sustainable tourism. ICH is often more vulnerable to erosion than tangible heritage, as it relies on intergenerational transmission. Over-commercialisation can weaken its authenticity, as seen in the commodification of Irish folklore in some tourism campaigns (O'Connor, 2010). For instance, commercial events that reduce traditional storytelling, music, or dance to staged entertainment for international audiences risk stripping these practices of their social and intergenerational meaning. This transformation reframes heritage as a product rather than a lived cultural expression, aligning it with consumer expectations rather than community continuity.

This vulnerability is worsened by funding inequalities, as noted in the Economic Impact of the Heritage Sector report (2024). Popular tourist spots, which tend to focus on

tangible heritage, get more support, while rural and community sites—important for maintaining Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)—are often neglected (The HERITAGE COUNCIL, November 2024). This imbalance not only poses a risk to the intergenerational transmission of ICH but also illustrates that economic sustainability alone is not enough to protect cultural heritage, and a transition to a more holistic sustainability framework is needed.

The evident shortcomings of economy-centred approaches in addressing the complexity of ICH and community needs have led scholars to explore alternative sustainability paradigms. The next section discusses two such models – degrowth and doughnut economics – assessing their conceptual relevance and limitations for cultural sustainability in tourism.

2.2 Alternative Models for Cultural Sustainability

2.2.1 Degrowth and Its Challenges in Tourism

The degrowth movement challenges the growth-centric paradigm and advocates for a prioritising well-being, equity, and cultural preservation over financial growth. (Latouche, 2009). This approach questions traditional tourism models that focus on continuous visitor growth and revenue generation.

However, this shift away from traditional growth-focused policies has made it challenging to adopt in mainstream tourism strategies, where economic expansion remains a key priority. Governments and tourism stakeholders often resist degrowth due to its perceived economic risks, particularly in regions heavily reliant on tourism for employment and revenue.

This resistance is visible, for example, in Ireland's post-pandemic tourism strategy, where recovery efforts continue to prioritise growth in visitor numbers. Despite environmental and cultural concerns, policy documents emphasise increasing international arrivals and revitalising volume-based tourism along routes like the Wild Atlantic Way (OECD, 2024). Such growth-centric focus illustrates the challenge of integrating degrowth principles in regions economically reliant on tourism.

2.2.2 Doughnut Economics and Its Experimental Applications

Similarly, Raworth's (2017) doughnut economics introduces the idea of balancing societal needs within ecological boundaries. While conceptually robust, its application in tourism remains largely experimental. Nieuwland's (2023) workshops with Dutch cities represent one of the few practical attempts to align urban tourism with doughnut economics principles. While these workshops fostered community-centred solutions, such as limiting short-stay tourism in Amsterdam, there is limited data on their long-term success or adaptability to rural and cultural tourism contexts like Ireland's. Additionally, the study focused on Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and municipalities, excluding businesses, residents, and tourists, which limits broader stakeholder engagement. Without political commitment and multi-stakeholder cooperation, degrowth principles remain difficult to implement beyond pilot projects, leaving mainstream tourism strategies largely unchanged. However, with strong institutional support and inclusive collaboration, such frameworks can transcend their experimental status. When governments, communities, and the private sector co-develop tourism strategies rooted in shared cultural and environmental values, even ambitious models like doughnut economics become more than theoretical. In these conditions, cultural sustainability is not seen as a constraint but as an opportunity: to empower communities, enrich visitor experience, and ensure long-term resilience. This study builds on this logic by proposing the Renaissance of Heritage framework, which aims to reconnect tourism policy with cultural depth, spatial equity, and community agency.

2.3. Lack of Practical Implementation

Despite widespread recognition of cultural sustainability's importance, its theoretical discussions often lack actionable frameworks for implementation. While degrowth and doughnut economics offer compelling critiques, they provide limited actionable strategies for tourism professionals. For example, how can Ireland's tourism-dependent regions transition to degrowth without worsening economic inequalities?

Legrand et al. (2022) highlight the lack of practical methodologies for applying sustainability in tourism, particularly in managing over-commercialised heritage sites. Their research underscores the need for structured frameworks to address challenges such as overtourism and unequal economic benefits for local communities. However,

their findings primarily focus on urban European heritage sites, overlooking the distinct sustainability challenges faced by rural and peripheral destinations.

This gap in application remains a key problem for governments and tourism operators seeking to incorporate cultural sustainability into their strategy. As Duxbury et al. (2021) argue, many cultural sustainability strategies remain "normative and abstract," lacking contextual grounding or place-based frameworks. The authors emphasise the need for locally adapted, community-driven approaches that reflect cultural diversity, rather than applying universal models across different tourism Without clear implementation criteria, sustainability discussions are primarily conceptual, with no measurable outcomes to drive policy and industry practice.

2.4 Policy Gaps and Governance Limitations

Dr. Aíne Conaghan (formerly of Letterkenny Institute of Technology) has examined sustainable tourism management in Ireland, focusing on balancing environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. Conaghan, Hanrahan and McLoughlin's study (2015), "The attitudes of the key stakeholders on sustainable tourism in Ireland", highlights the importance of addressing structural barriers such as unequal funding, inadequate community training, and limited awareness of sustainable tourism certification programs. The study emphasises that while stakeholders recognise the value of sustainable tourism, practical implementation remains constrained, particularly in underrepresented regions like the Midlands. For instance, while initiatives like the Wild Atlantic Way contributes over €3 billion annually to Ireland's economy and supports 121,000 jobs, smaller communities within the Midlands and other regions struggle to attract visitors. This uneven distribution exacerbates regional disparities, leaving some cultural assets underfunded and neglected (Fáilte Ireland, 2023; Dunne, Sprince & Griffin, 2020).

While Conaghan et al. (2015) identify structural barriers, Hanrahan and McLoughlin (2025) reveal how governance failures exacerbate these challenges. In a later study, Hanrahan and McLoughlin (2025) shift focus to governance dynamics in Irish tourism planning, revealing a disconnect between policy ambitions and financial execution. Despite strong institutional support for sustainability—including from Fáilte Ireland—their research identifies chronic underfunding and staffing shortages as key obstacles.

These issues result in fragmented policy application, where well-resourced urban areas receive disproportionate benefits, while rural regions with significant cultural heritage lack the capacity to implement sustainability frameworks. The study argues that without addressing these systemic governance gaps, cultural sustainability will remain secondary to economic and environmental priorities in Ireland's tourism strategy. However, authors do not propose concrete policy solutions to address these gaps. Furthermore, their emphasis on institutional issues at the Local Authority level ignores the perspectives of enterprises, local communities, and tourists, all of which play important roles in creating cultural sustainability outcomes. Without integrating these voices, the research provides an incomplete picture of the practical challenges in sustaining cultural heritage alongside tourism growth.

Despite its commitment to sustainable tourism, Fáilte Ireland's strategies remain largely focused on economic growth, prioritising visitor numbers and economic output. In 2022, Fáilte Ireland received €288.5 million in funding, with additional marketing allocations of €15 million in 2023, yet most resources were directed toward revenue-generating initiatives rather than cultural sustainability efforts (OECD Tourism Trends and Policies Report, 2024).

Even adaptable frameworks face challenges due to Ireland's fragmented governance. Inconsistent data collection and reporting mechanisms create obstacles in assessing cultural sustainability. This limits the ability of policymakers to track progress and enforce standards effectively. For example, the Midlands' Hidden Heartlands initiative struggles with inconsistent heritage data, as only 18% of communities conduct annual audits (Heritage Council, 2024).

The OECD Tourism Trends and Policies Report (2024) further highlights that while Ireland has established regional tourism development strategies (e.g., Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, Hidden Heartlands, and Dublin), their implementation varies significantly across regions. There is a reliance on local area action plans, but enforcement and accountability mechanisms are weak. This challenge is particularly evident in counties like Sligo, where cultural and tourism strategies aim to enhance regional appeal but face structural and operational obstacles. Sligo's Culture and Creativity Strategy 2023–2027 recognises these gaps, emphasising the need for stronger collaboration between local and national organisations to ensure that culture

and creativity contribute effectively to economic and tourism development (Sligo County Council, Culture and Creativity Strategy 2023–2027)

Without standardised reporting and enforcement, cultural sustainability remains a goal rather than a reality, deepening regional inequalities and policy gaps.

2.5 Measuring Cultural Sustainability: Challenges and Greenwashing Risks

A major challenge in cultural sustainability research is the absence of standardised empirical measurement tools. Existing sustainability indices predominantly assess economic and environmental factors, often overlooking cultural resilience as a key dimension.

The Wealth Economy Report (2019) critiques traditional economic indicators like GDP for failing to account for social and cultural capital, which are essential for long-term sustainability. To address this gap, the report proposes an alternative measurement model incorporating social capital, natural capital, and cultural assets, arguing that sustainability cannot be assessed purely through financial metrics (Coyle, 2019).

The OECD Tourism Trends and Policies Report (2024) highlights similar concerns, emphasising that many current sustainability metrics in tourism policy fail to sufficiently capture cultural dimensions (OECD, 2024). Additionally, while the European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS) and the EU Tourism Dashboard have attempted to establish comprehensive sustainability frameworks, cultural indicators remain underdeveloped in comparison to environmental ones (OECD, 2024). Similarly, research within the Irish context provides insights into these challenges. Dr. James Hanrahan's work at the Atlantic Technological University (Sligo) highlights the social and cultural impacts of tourism, particularly in sustainable destination management. His leadership of Ireland's first UNWTO Sustainable Tourism Observatory has advanced monitoring practices by tracking tourism's economic, environmental, and social impacts. However, while the observatory sets up robust metrics, such as those explored in his work on the carbon footprint of inbound tourism in Ireland, its focus remains largely environmental, with limited emphasis on cultural sustainability.

The UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators provide a framework for evaluating cultural heritage protection, sustainable tourism, and community participation. However, the framework's voluntary nature makes application of these indicators inconsistent, and they are not systematically integrated into tourism policies in Ireland.

Similarly, existing tourism sustainability certifications—such as Green Key and the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)—reveal the same challenges by primarily emphasising environmental standards, with only limited criteria addressing cultural authenticity, heritage conservation, and community participation. Businesses and destinations may receive sustainability labels without proving meaningful cultural preservation efforts, resulting in challenging issue as greenwashing, where sustainability claims are exaggerated or misleading. Legrand et al. (2022) warn that tourism operators sometimes use sustainability certifications or eco-labels for marketing purposes without fully committing to environmental practices. For example, initiatives like the Wild Atlantic Way promote eco-tourism but lack transparency in measuring carbon reduction or community benefits. To build trust and credibility, stricter accountability measures and more rigorous certification standards are necessary (Dunne, Sprince & Griffin, 2020). The prevalence of greenwashing in Irish tourism erodes public trust in sustainability initiatives. If communities perceive certifications as superficial branding efforts rather than genuine commitments to sustainability, they may be less inclined to participate in tourism policies or support local tourism initiatives.

Should be considered that cultural sustainability varies significantly across local contexts. This suggests that rigid, universal metrics may not be suitable. As a result, any empirical model for cultural sustainability must be flexible enough to accommodate site-specific variations, particularly in a diverse tourism landscape like Ireland's. For instance, Gaeltacht regions define locality through language, while Dublin's heritage is tied to architecture. A hybrid model could balance standardised metrics with localised adaptations and provide more accurate assessments.

2.6 The Risk of Commodification and Staged Authenticity

Barbara O'Connor (Dublin City University) provides a cultural lens by analysing how tourism intersects with Irish identity. Her research critiques the commodification of Irish

culture in tourism campaigns, highlighting the risk of losing authenticity in representing local traditions. She argues that while heritage tourism plays a key role in national branding, it often results in staged authenticity where local culture is curated to meet tourist expectations rather than preserved as a living tradition (O'Connor, 2020). This is evident in commercialised Irish dance performances, folklore-based attractions, and traditional music sessions, which cater more to visitor demand than to local cultural expression. Author discusses how stereotypes of Irishness are reinforced through tourism campaigns, sometimes at the expense of more diverse or localised cultural narratives.

While her findings are critical for understanding the contradiction between economic expansion and heritage preservation, they do not provide a realistic plan for balancing these interests. While O'Connor's work provides valuable insights into the consequences of commercialisation, more research is needed to determine how cultural sustainability can address these challenges.

Additionally, her observations on the rise of dark tourism underline the ethical dilemmas in capitalising on sites associated with tragedy, such as Kilmainham Gaol, yet there is minimal discussion on practical strategies to mitigate potential harm.

2.7 Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

Okazaki's (2008) community-centred approach offers a practical solution for cultural sustainability, emphasising the transformative potential of inclusive participation in sustainable tourism development. The framework shows that involving local stakeholders in decision-making helps them feel a sense of ownership, making cultural sustainability efforts not only successful but also fair for everyone involved. Rather than allowing market forces and external tourism stakeholders to dictate cultural narratives, CBT empowers local residents to actively shape and benefit from tourism while ensuring that heritage remains a living tradition rather than a staged product.

However, this approach requires institutional support, and there is limited research on how well it functions in destinations where tourism management is divided, like Ireland.

Building on this idea, Turner & Mason (2020) argue that cultural sustainability is more than just policy or economic investment—it is a community-driven process. They emphasise that social relationships, traditions, and local knowledge play a key role in sustaining culture over time. Their critique aligns with concerns about policy-driven sustainability approaches, which often fail to integrate bottom-up, community-led cultural initiatives. This is particularly relevant in Ireland, where national tourism strategies like the Wild Atlantic Way focus on branding Irish culture for visitors but often overlook local, grassroots sustainability efforts. Turner & Mason (2020) warn that when top-down policies dictate how culture is presented, it can lead to staged authenticity rather than real cultural sustainability.

Emmet McLoughlin's research on County Clare, including the Burren Geopark, offers a more grounded example of community-driven sustainability efforts. Initiatives like the Burren Ecotourism Network demonstrate the potential of integrating cultural pride with environmental stewardship. The Burren has adopted sustainable tourism principles by promoting local traditions, crafts, and cultural experiences, such as the annual Burren Winterage Festival, which celebrates traditional farming practices unique to the area (Burren Winterage Weekend, 2024). However, reliance on volunteerism and limited funding has hindered the scalability and long-term viability of these models. This raises questions about how similar initiatives can be effectively supported and expanded at a national level.

2.8 International lessons for Ireland

International practices provide additional lessons but reveal similar gaps. Canada's Integrated Community Sustainability Plans (ICSPs) emphasise community-led development, yet their focus on urban areas often neglects the unique needs of rural or culturally distinct communities (BC Climate Action Toolkit, n.d.). New Zealand's Long-Term Council-Community Plans (LTCCPs) have sought to integrate Māori heritage into tourism by protecting culturally significant sites and fostering co-governance arrangements. While some successes have been achieved, these efforts rely heavily on governmental support and funding, making them challenging to replicate in less resource-rich contexts. UNESCO World Heritage Sites, while offering global visibility and conservation funding, have been critiqued by Barthel-Bouchier (2016) for prioritising international tourism over local community needs. The

researcher further highlights that over-tourism often transforms cultural heritage into "staged authenticity," where local traditions are tailored to meet tourist expectations. This process risks discouraging local communities and undermining the authenticity of cultural experiences. This critique resonates with Ireland's experience, where initiatives like the Wild Atlantic Way have brought significant tourism revenue but also exacerbated issues of over-tourism in iconic destinations such as the Cliffs of Moher, which received over 1.1million visitors in 2022 (Fáilte Ireland, 2023).

2.9 The Role of Education in Cultural Sustainability

Another significant aspect of cultural sustainability in tourism lies in the role of education in shaping tourist behaviour. Educational initiatives can promote greater awareness of cultural heritage and encourage responsible tourist practices. For instance, interpretive programs at heritage sites, workshops on local traditions, and interactive digital content can help visitors understand the cultural significance of their destinations. Recent studies, such as Della Lucia et al. (2021) and Thomas (2023), show that cultural tourism, when supported by structured educational programs, can foster sustainable development by encouraging visitors to engage respectfully with local traditions and reduce exploitative behaviours. Their research on historical sites in Europe highlights how education-based approaches can enhance tourists' sensitivity to cultural heritage and support long-term preservation efforts. Legrand et al. (2022) stress the importance of educating not just tourists but also local tourism workers. They highlight that training in cultural sensitivity and sustainable practices can help employees become ambassadors for their heritage. This fosters stronger connections between visitors and local cultures. However, these ideas are not fully applied in Ireland's tourism policies.

Fáilte Ireland's learnFI platform offers training in customer service, digital marketing, and business operations, but cultural sustainability is not a primary focus. The Progression Pathways Initiative focuses on environmental aspects, with limited attention to preserving intangible cultural heritage (Fáilte Ireland, 2024). Heritage education initiatives like Heritage Ireland's school visit programs and interpretive resources aim to enhance cultural awareness at key heritage sites but lack systematic integration into broader tourism education frameworks (Heritage Ireland, 2023). Gaeltacht areas serve as centres for Irish language and cultural preservation, but

educational programs promoting Gaelic language and folklore remain limited (O'Connor, 2020). Without structured national integration, these initiatives remain fragmented and fail to reach broader audiences (Regional Tourism Development Strategies, 2023–2027). Furthermore, community-led tourism efforts are often hindered by insufficient educational resources and training, limiting the role of local communities as active heritage stewards.

Should be considered a growing need for innovative, immersive approaches that make cultural learning more engaging and accessible. Gamification, the use of game-like elements like interactive storytelling, rewards, and digital tools, offers a promising solution for enhancing cultural sustainability education (Fraga et al., 2025). One successful implementation is at Newgrange, where augmented reality and live-streamed solstice events expand accessibility and enhance visitor understanding of prehistoric Irish heritage. However, similar technological advancements are largely absent from lesser-known cultural sites, limiting their broader impact.

Nonetheless, concerns remain about balancing technological mediation with authentic heritage experiences, as over-reliance on digital enhancements could distance visitors from direct interactions with cultural sites.

2.10 Conclusion and Future Research Directions

In summary, the literature highlights significant progress in advancing cultural sustainability in tourism but reveals persistent gaps in translating theory into practice. Frameworks like degrowth and doughnut economics, while conceptually robust, require further adaptation to address the specific challenges of cultural tourism. Existing initiatives in Ireland showcase valuable efforts but often lack scalability, equitable representation, and actionable integration of local voices. This research seeks to bridge these gaps by critically analysing Ireland's current tourism practices and proposing a practical, scalable framework for cultural sustainability. By focusing on actionable strategies and evaluating their feasibility, this study aims to contribute to both academic discourse and practical implementation in the field of sustainable tourism.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions of the Research

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm with elements of critical realism. It recognises that cultural sustainability is shaped not only by local traditions and community practices but also by broader institutional frameworks, funding mechanisms, and political priorities (Pickering, 2008). Interpretivism supports the study's aim to explore how policies, communities, and organisations interpret and apply cultural sustainability in different contexts, rather than to quantify outcomes or test predefined hypotheses.

A relativist ontological stance underpins this research, recognising that there is no single, fixed definition of cultural sustainability. Communities, policymakers, and tourism businesses may have different understandings of what it means to preserve cultural heritage, depending on their priorities and experiences. However, these interpretations are not entirely independent of external influences. Tourism policies tend to emphasise economic growth, often prioritising commercial success over cultural authenticity. Similarly, heritage funding is often concentrated in well-known tourism destinations, leaving smaller or emerging cultural initiatives with fewer resources. While a purely relativist view sees all perspectives as equally valid, critical realism recognises that some communities face real disadvantages—such as unequal power or limited support—that affect what they can realistically do to preserve their cultural heritage. This position supports a critical examination of power imbalances embedded in policy discourse, allowing the study to explore not just what is said in documents, but also what is omitted or marginalised.

This study adopts a post-positivist epistemology, recognising that while policy documents and strategic frameworks offer structured knowledge, they are also shaped by institutional priorities and may only partially reflect on-the-ground realities. Policy texts are viewed not as neutral reflections of reality, but as structured representations of how cultural sustainability is envisioned and operationalised by governing bodies, yet their interpretations require contextual understanding (Scotland, 2012).

To address this, the study incorporates interpretivist elements—drawing on limited stakeholder input—to explore how cultural policy is experienced at the local level. This dual perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of the gap between formal policy narratives and lived heritage practices.

The analysis follows a deductive logic: established sustainability frameworks and theories of cultural governance guide the reading of selected national and regional documents. This structured approach allows the research to critically examine the extent to which policy texts reflect key concepts such as community agency, intangible heritage, and cultural equity within tourism governance. In particular, the study explores whether there is meaningful coordination between cultural heritage bodies and tourism departments—a relationship that is critical for ensuring that heritage is supported not only as a visitor attraction but as a living and community-embedded practice. Understanding how institutional structures enable or limit such collaboration is central to evaluating the practical implementation of cultural sustainability.

3.2 Research Design and Approach

This research employs a qualitative design centred on documentary analysis to explore how cultural sustainability is framed and operationalised within Irish tourism governance. The study's aim is not to measure outcomes or test hypotheses but to examine how national and regional policies conceptualise and prioritise culture within tourism development, and whether these frameworks support community-led heritage practices.

A documentary strategy was chosen for both conceptual and practical considerations, as this method enables researchers to extract meaning, intentions, and values from public documents, particularly where direct access to stakeholders is limited (Bowen, 2009). From a theoretical standpoint, the research examines how institutional, and policy documents represent and prioritise cultural sustainability in tourism planning. Instead of evaluating implementation or public perceptions, the study focuses on uncovering implicit assumptions, discursive gaps, and structural inconsistencies within tourism and heritage policy.

The document sample includes national strategies (e.g., Heritage Ireland 2030, National Inventory of ICH), regional tourist plans (e.g., Wild Atlantic Way Strategy,

Dublin Tourism Strategy), and selected county heritage plans. Additionally, community-led materials from organisations such as the Burren Ecotourism Network (BEN) and the Irish Community Archive Network (ICAN) serve as illustrative examples of grassroots responses to cultural sustainability challenges.

These resources were selected to ensure institutional diversity while also reflecting Ireland's multi-layered heritage and tourist governance system. The collection contains both tourism-centric and heritage-led documents, as well as cases from popular tourist destinations and less-visited rural areas, allowing for regional comparisons. Documents were purposefully chosen to illustrate diverse levels of engagement with cultural sustainability, which vary from explicit strategic commitments to omission, allowing for a critical analysis of institutional priorities and silences.

Importantly, the term “cultural sustainability” is not consistently or explicitly defined in these documents. As a result, the analysis uses a dual strategy. First, it examines substitute categories (such as authenticity, cultural heritage protection, intergenerational transmission, intangible heritage and community engagement) to explore how cultural sustainability is indirectly expressed. These terms often appear where cultural sustainability is assumed but unnamed and help to reveal how institutions frame cultural continuity. Second, the analysis highlights the presence (or absence) of the term “cultural sustainability” across the reviewed documents. The study aims to assess its application: as a guiding principle (articulated in vision statements), rhetorical technique (used without concrete implementation strategies), or operational commitment (linked to specific actions, resources, or institutional responsibilities).

This dual technique allows for a more in-depth examination of how cultural sustainability is articulated—both discursively and structurally, through policy language and framing, and the extent to which it is supported by implementation mechanisms.

The initial research design included a semi-structured interview component to complement the documentary analysis with practitioner perspectives. The interviews aimed to explore perceptions of cultural sustainability, alignment between policy and

practice, and coordination between heritage and tourism bodies. While access constraints ultimately limited this part of the study, the approach remained consistent with an interpretivist logic. Insights from the single completed interview were used to support document interpretation and provided a useful point of reference for understanding the local implications of national strategies. The use of a single, high-quality respondent is methodologically valid in interpretivist, case-informed research and can be critical for theoretical refinement and contextual sensitivity in qualitative studies (Yin, 2016). The responses were not statistically generalised but served as theoretical and contextual validation of findings derived from policy review.

Given the low response rate, a strategic decision was made to focus more intensely on documentary analysis. This ensured that the study remained methodologically rigorous while staying within practical constraints.

By focussing on documentary sources and incorporating one stakeholder response with relevant secondary resources, the study provides a balanced, critical view on Irish tourism governance and the increasing role of cultural sustainability. This approach enabled the systematic identification of patterns, silences, and contradictions in how cultural sustainability is represented and operationalised (Pickering, 2008).

This method supports the dissertation's broader aim: to introduce the Renaissance of Heritage as a conceptual framework that reframes cultural sustainability as a participatory, place-based process. It synthesises theoretical insights and policy observations but remains exploratory, requiring further empirical development beyond this study.

In summary, this methodological approach is consistent with the study's two goals: (1) to identify structural and policy-level patterns that influence cultural sustainability, and (2) to propose a grounded conceptual model. Despite its limitations, the fieldwork offers an empirical layer to the study, increasing its contextual depth.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This research is based on a qualitative documentary analysis aimed to understand how cultural sustainability is represented in Ireland's tourism and heritage strategies. The primary data sources included publicly available official documents: national heritage strategies (e.g., Heritage Ireland 2030, the National Inventory of ICH),

regional tourism strategies (Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands, Dublin Tourism Strategy, Ancient East), as well as selected county heritage plans and community-level initiatives (notably the Burren Ecotourism Network and the Irish Community Archive Network).

Documents were purposefully selected according to the following criteria: (1) strategic relevance (national, regional, or local level), (2) presence of direct or indirect references to cultural sustainability or related concepts (e.g., intangible heritage, community engagement, authenticity), and (3) public accessibility and formal publication status. The aim was to include perspectives from national, regional, and local levels to explore variation across governance levels. All documents were publicly available, which contributed to transparency and reproducibility.

As part of the initial research design, semi-structured interviews were planned to complement the analysis of documentary materials with the opinions of practitioners. Invitations were sent to key stakeholders, including representatives of Fáilte Ireland, the Cultural Heritage Council, the Burren Ecotourism Network, and cultural heritage officers in the Midlands. The interviews were designed to explore how cultural sustainability is understood and applied in practice, particularly in terms of the degree of institutional coordination, community involvement, and the relationship between tourism and cultural heritage management.

Due to access constraints and limited availability of respondents during the research period, only one stakeholder provided a detailed response: the County Offaly Heritage Officer. The exchange of views was conducted via email and covered both initial and follow-up questions. Despite its limited scope, this contribution provided valuable information on local engagement with heritage policy, the nature of coordination between heritage and tourism departments, and the practical interpretation of cultural sustainability.

Although limited in scale, the interview anchors the policy analysis in a specific local context and offers practitioner insight that complements the documentary findings. Thematic elements raised during the exchange, such as community-first heritage planning, informal coordination structures, and concerns about the commodification of cultural practices, were used to interpret national and regional documents. The

interview does not serve as a standalone empirical source but strengthens the documentary analysis through local insight.

Data were analysed through a combination of thematic and discursive approaches. Using a deductive logic, key concepts drawn from the literature, such as cultural sustainability, intangible heritage, community agency, authenticity, and inter-institutional coordination, were identified as guiding categories. The documents were then analysed for how these concepts were represented, whether explicitly or implicitly, and how they were operationalised (if at all). Special attention was given to the use of the term “cultural sustainability”: whether it appeared as a guiding principle, rhetorical device, or actionable commitment. The analysis also tracked absences and contradictions between stated objectives and practical provisions.

This method enabled the study to construct a structured understanding of how cultural sustainability is articulated, supported, or overlooked in Irish tourism and heritage governance. The inclusion of one local expert response further enriched the analysis and provided a grounded perspective and highlighted potential disconnections between strategic intentions and everyday cultural work. Overall, this approach supports the research’s broader aim—to propose the Renaissance of Heritage framework as a conceptual framework that reframes cultural sustainability as a participatory, place-based process embedded in both policy and community practice.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in alignment with ethical research standards to protect the rights, dignity, and integrity of all participants and data sources. As the project involved documentary analysis and one expert interview, ethical risks were minimal. The main ethical concern related to obtaining informed consent from the participant.

The interview was conducted via email with a local heritage officer. Before sharing any answers, the participant was informed of the research purpose, how the information would be used, and their right to anonymity. Written consent was obtained via email, and the participant agreed to be referenced as “Heritage Officer of Offaly” in the dissertation. This title was used with their explicit permission and without including personal identifiers. Participation was fully voluntary, and the participant had the right

to withdraw at any point. The interview questions were shared in advance, and all responses were handled respectfully and confidentially. The content of the interview was used to provide context and local insight, not to make general claims.

In analysing publicly available documents and case study materials, the research respected intellectual property and citation standards. Although these sources do not involve direct human participation, care will be taken to present policies and initiatives accurately and responsibly, especially where interpretations may reflect broader institutional or community interests.

Finally, the research will adopt a reflective approach, recognising the potential for researcher bias in interpreting interview data and case study materials. Efforts were made to represent different perspectives fairly and to remain critically aware of the researcher's own positionality throughout the project

3.5 Limitations and Feasibility

The study's conceptual and documentary focus introduces several limitations. Most notably, the study does not include wide-ranging primary data from tourists, cultural practitioners, or multiple institutional actors. As a result, it cannot fully capture how cultural sustainability is experienced or negotiated in everyday practice. The use of publicly available documents, though enables transparency and replicability, may not fully reflect the complexities or informal dynamics of cultural sustainability practices at the local level.

Although the original research design included a plan for semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders—from Fáilte Ireland, the Heritage Council, regional tourism officers, and community leaders—access proved challenging. Most requests went unanswered, and only one heritage officer from the Midlands region provided a written response. This exchange, though limited, helped to contextualise the policy findings by offering a grounded local perspective.

Another limitation relates to the nature of documentary analysis itself. Policy documents often use broad or inconsistent language when discussing cultural sustainability, which makes interpretation challenging. This introduces challenges in

determining the practical impact of certain policies or frameworks, especially where data is fragmented or unevenly distributed across regions (Pickering, 2008).

Despite these limitations, the chosen method proved effective within the time and resource constraints of this dissertation. Relying on publicly available materials ensured transparency and allowed for a structured, comparative analysis across national, regional, and community documents. The manageable scope also enabled the research to maintain critical depth and policy relevance.

Although the study does not provide a comprehensive mapping of all community perspectives or tourism behaviours, it offers a valuable theoretical and institutional critique that can serve as a foundation for future applied or mixed-method research.

The proposed framework should therefore be understood as a preliminary conceptual contribution—a first step toward reframing cultural sustainability in tourism policy. It is not intended as a fully developed or operational model, but as a foundation for future empirical exploration and collaborative refinement, to advance theoretical dialogue on cultural sustainability.

Chapter 4: Policy Analysis – Cultural Sustainability in Irish Tourism: Promises, Silos, and Missed Opportunities

This chapter provides a critical examination of Irish policy frameworks and strategic initiatives related to cultural sustainability in tourism. It primarily focusses on two national-level mechanisms, Heritage Ireland 2030 and Fáilte Ireland's Regional Tourism Development Strategies (RTDS), which have a substantial impact on heritage governance and tourism development. While both express support for cultural engagement, their application of cultural sustainability principles is limited, scattered, and inconsistently operationalised.

Cultural sustainability, as defined here as the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage in ways that empower communities and ensure intergenerational continuity (Throsby, 1999; Barthel-Bouchier, 2016), demands cross-sectoral collaboration and measurable implementation. This chapter examines the extent to which Ireland's

national and local policy instruments enable or hinder such cooperation. It also investigates how local authority plans and engagement mechanisms mirror or diverge from national aims, highlighting implementation gaps, evaluation challenges, and the devaluation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

By reviewing these policy layers in a comparative perspective, the chapter provides evidence for the systemic constraints that influence Ireland's attempts towards a more culturally sustainable tourist model.

4.1 Strategic Disconnect: Parallel Visions, Divergent Systems

4.1.1 Heritage Ireland 2030 – Strategic Direction and Policy Limitations

Heritage Ireland 2030, published by the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage in February 2022, lays out a wide and inclusive vision for national heritage management. It makes commitments to increase access, encourage participation, and foster community interaction in the natural, constructed, and cultural heritage sectors. The strategy was developed following a thorough consultation process that involved 2,156 comments and articulates over 150 activities structured around three strategic themes: communities, leadership, and partnerships (Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage, 2022). However, an examination of the 2024 Delivery Summary and the Heritage Ireland 2030 Summit Report demonstrates a disparity between the strategy's goals and its measurable execution.

Despite strong references to intangible cultural heritage (ICH), such as oral traditions, customs, and folklore, the policy lacks a designated financing source and a detailed operational framework to enable its implementation. Action 94 (Expand the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage) is marked as "ongoing" in the 2024 Delivery Summary but lacks indicators, lead agencies, or publicly known implementation structures. Action 97 (Enhance engagement with practitioners, communities, and key stakeholders) has resulted in some project-level activity, such as the establishment of the Irish Community Archive Network (iCAN) and grant support from the Heritage Council. However, these efforts are project-based and do not integrate into a broader safeguarding plan. The Delivery Snapshot of Activity provides informative updates, but it does not present a coordinated national framework or action plan. The ongoing lack

of strategic delivery tools exacerbates the gap between declared objectives and practical implementation. This worry was also expressed by heritage practitioners, including Dr. Tomás Mac Conmara, at the 2024 Heritage Ireland 2030 Summit.

While the strategy encourages collaboration between government, public agencies, local governments, and historical institutions, there is little indication of formal links to national tourism policy. The Delivery Snapshot mentions a strategic cooperation with Fáilte Ireland under Action 31, which aims to improve tourist explanation at selected national monuments and historic buildings. However, the document does not specify which exact sites are included, nor does it provide criteria for selection. Moreover, tourist-related measures, such as measures 34 and 35, which aim to improve the visitor experience and support tourism investment, provide no independent updates and instead rely on Action 31. These developments suggest that while partnerships exist, they remain narrowly transactional, lacking the integrated governance structures needed to embed culture as a strategic pillar of sustainable tourism Furthermore, the 2024 Summit Report, while rich in stakeholder viewpoints, highlights contributions from the Heritage Council, Creative Ireland, oral historians, and educators, but does not include engagement from tourism authorities, Fáilte Ireland, or economic development organisations. This omission could represent a persistent siloing of policy domains, with heritage and tourism operating in parallel rather than as linked policy sectors.

The strategy's practical emphasis appears to continue on the conservation of tangible heritage, such as protected structures, archaeological monuments, and natural landscapes, whereas ICH is only acknowledged conceptually. The reviewed data provides limited evidence of institutional mechanisms for incorporating community-driven or intangible cultural activities into tourism development, rural planning, or creative economy frameworks. This omission points to a larger structural bias in Irish cultural governance, in which culture may be managed for interpretation rather than supported as a dynamic, living system.

The 2024 Delivery Summary includes projects like the Wonder Wander Trails and educational partnerships, however they are presented as separate case studies rather than components of a coordinated national framework. Similarly, while the Delivery Snapshot includes further examples of local involvement and oral heritage activities,

these are presented as standalone projects rather than being integrated into a national ICH protection or tourist plan. No accountable departments are defined, no resources are specified, and no cultural sustainability targets (such as SDG 11.4) are mentioned (Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage, 2024). This absence of policy accountability instruments further undermines the strategy's ability to coordinate actions across heritage and tourism sectors.

In conclusion, while Heritage Ireland 2030 expresses a strong rhetorical commitment to cultural inclusion and sustainability, the absence of published implementation tools, measurable outcomes, and cross-sectoral alignment in the reviewed materials suggests difficulties in putting this vision into action. Establishing more institutional links between heritage and tourism could have significant benefits, not only for preserving ICH, but also for advancing sustainable rural development, reinforcing place identity, and expanding Ireland's tourism offering beyond high-volume attractions. Without a clearer integration of cultural sustainability into planning and investment frameworks, there is a risk that heritage will be praised in rhetoric but under supported in practice (Legrand et al., 2022).

4.1.2 Tourism Strategy in Ireland: Cultural Challenges and Strategic Gaps

While Heritage Ireland 2030 positions itself as a cornerstone of national heritage governance, the absence of institutional alignment with tourism frameworks becomes evident when examining Fáilte Ireland's regional strategies.

Failte Ireland's four Regional Tourism Development Strategies—Dublin, Ireland's Ancient East, Hidden Heartlands, and the Wild Atlantic Way—all promote culture as a key component of the visitor experience. These strategies leverage culture to build emotional resonance and destination distinctiveness. This aligns with global tourism narratives that value authenticity and sense of place (UNWTO, 2024). However, a critical evaluation of these initiatives finds inconsistencies in how cultural sustainability is supported in practice with limited evidence of systematic mechanisms, funding structures, or monitoring tools across the reviewed documents.

The Wild Atlantic Way Regional Tourism Development Strategy (2021-2025) includes cultural identity protection as a strategic goal, particularly under Strategic Objective 4, which attempts to "protect the cultural authenticity and 'wildness' of the Wild Atlantic

Way". The approach recognises the risks of over-commercialisation and emphasises the necessity of preserving local character, such as Gaeltacht culture and community-based experiences. It encourages the development of "small-scale" and "low-impact infrastructure" in environmentally and culturally sensitive areas. However, a closer look at the paper reveals that sustainability is largely seen through an environmental lens. Cultural aspects are mainly presented as experiential assets that add to destination uniqueness and branding, rather than as living systems that require systematic support, which risks reducing culture to a commodified backdrop. There is no mention of Heritage Ireland 2030, Creative Ireland, or the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Furthermore, the strategy emphasises the importance of "authenticity," but does not provide a clear definition or specify procedures for evaluating or supporting it in practice. The lack of formal references to cultural policy or ICH protection measures indicates that cultural sustainability is symbolically present but operationally weak in this approach. This gap suggests that authenticity may be designed primarily for visitor experience rather than long-term cultural resilience.

Ireland's Ancient East strategy identifies culture and community as "key assets", with heritage defined as central to regional difference. The strategy's section on community engagement explains the rationale for local involvement and how initiatives such as community-based enterprises and local storytelling contribute to the brand narrative. Like other regional strategies, this one references the Tourism Approval Rating (TAR)—a national metric used by Fáilte Ireland to assess local perceptions of tourism. Despite this framing, systems for cultural safeguarding, co-designing visitor experiences, and transmitting intangible heritage are still underdeveloped. While the strategy mentions collaboration with stakeholders, it does not specify partnerships with cultural organisations or connect with national heritage strategies. This raises concerns about the depth of cultural integration.

The Dublin Regional Tourism Development Strategy adopts a more urban lens, which aims to mix international appeal with citizen-centred planning. Strategic Objective 4 emphasises the need to ensure that tourism "contributes to the protection of our cultural and natural heritage," while also encouraging net-zero transitions and regional distribution. However, cultural elements are primarily viewed as promotional assets,

linked to "the development of new or enhanced city quarters to create new brand stories and visitor experiences". The strategy emphasises destination branding and visual identity, but shows little indication of consultation with heritage professionals, language activists, or local tradition bearers. Compared to the other strategies, there is less emphasis on community tourism enterprises or grassroots participation in developing the visitor offer. The lack of references to the Heritage Ireland 2030 or Creative Ireland implies a preference for curated cultural experiences over long-term cultural continuity. As a result, while Dublin's strategy has strong sustainability and inclusivity goals, its approach to culture risks prioritising staged authenticity (O'Connor, 2020) above more participatory methods of representation.

The Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Strategy (2023-2027) is among the explicit in its commitment to regenerative tourism principles and community empowerment. Strategic Objective 5 specifies a wide range of feasible initiatives, including early-stage local consultation and co-design, organised mentoring programs, and collaboration with national institutions like Irish Rural Link. In the context of the Just Transition, the policy positions tourism as a mechanism for long-term development, connecting climate adaption to rural revitalisation. It advocates using demonstration projects, such as the Rathcroghan landscape initiative, that aims to harmonise sustainable agricultural practices with the preservation of this rich cultural heritage and serve as testing grounds for community-led cultural tourism. The Ireland's Hidden Heartlands Strategy explicitly references Fáilte Ireland's Tourism in the Community Toolkit as a key support for community-based initiatives, particularly in delivering mentoring, operational planning, and cultural interpretation (Fáilte Ireland, 2023). The toolkit's strong business focus, while beneficial, needs to be supported by policies or frameworks that explicitly address cultural sustainability, particularly the preservation and transmission of local traditions beyond visitor-facing experiences. Although Hidden Heartlands does not provide metrics for assessing cultural sustainability, it does offer a more developed framework for institutional support and participatory governance than the other three strategies. This suggests that culture is increasingly being recognised as a driver of territorial equity and rural resilience and not only as a visitor-facing asset. But this divergence raises critical questions about why such models have not been more broadly adopted.

In summary, while all four strategies incorporate culture as part of tourism development, they do so to varied degrees of depth, coherence, and strategic alignment. The reviewed papers consistently fail to reference national cultural policy frameworks or identify effective techniques for measuring cultural impact. Furthermore, the instrumental framing of culture as a resource to drive emotional connection and branding is still widespread, especially in the Wild Atlantic Way and Dublin campaigns. In contrast, Hidden Heartlands has the most promise for incorporating community-based cultural practices into regional tourism governance. These findings highlight the need for greater cross-sectoral collaboration, capacity building, and the use of integrated cultural indicators to ensure that tourism growth does not come at the expense of Ireland's living heritage.

Furthermore, focussing strategic initiatives and branding on a few flagship regions promotes structural imbalances, as peripheral or culturally diverse areas receive little investment or governmental attention. This territorial disparity limits the national reach of cultural sustainability while also raises broader questions of cultural equity and inclusive heritage development.

4.1.3 Local Authority Disparities

A review of county heritage and development plans reveals differences in how local authorities incorporate cultural sustainability into tourism planning. This section examines selected Heritage Plans and strategic frameworks to identify disparities in five thematic dimensions: strategy alignment, community engagement, representation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), operational capability, and evaluation approaches.

These findings are supplemented by stakeholder insights from a Midlands county, which illustrate how community-first heritage work operates in practice and highlight both the informal overlaps with tourism and the structural gaps in cross-sector coordination.

Strategic Alignment between Heritage and Tourism

While national tourist policies tend to employ culture as a branding tool, other municipal governments follow a more participatory approach. Clare's Heritage Plan 2024-2030 connects local narratives to tourism through initiatives like the Wonder

Wander Trails and digital storytelling. Donegal's Plan 2023-2030 is especially notable for incorporating traditional skills and oral history, particularly in Gaeltacht areas, into broader cultural and tourist objectives. In these counties' plans, culture is recognised as a dynamic, community-based system.

Conversely, Heritage Plans of counties such as Meath and Wicklow mention tourism in their strategies but provide few concrete links to national frameworks such as Heritage Ireland 2030. Westmeath's HCP, for example, is focused on built heritage, with little emphasis on ICH or tourism. These gaps often arise by a lack of coordination between Heritage Plans (HCPs) and County Development Plans. Meath HCP 2023-2030 supports ICH rhetorically, but the CDP Monitoring Report (2024) shows little engagement with cultural indicators or cross-sector implementation. In contrast, Dublin City's Strategic Heritage Plan 2024-2029 incorporates culture into regeneration and tourist policies, with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and active community storytelling. While not a county, Dublin is a great urban comparison for demonstrating the importance of coherent cross-policy alignment.

Notably, insights from local heritage professionals suggest that even where relationships between heritage and tourism departments are positive, structured strategic alignment remains limited. As the Heritage Officer of Offaly explained, “There is a great relationship between heritage and tourism and we do touch base on certain projects – however much of my work does not cross over into the tourism area and similarly much of their focus is promotion.” Contact with tourism agencies was described as “informal” and mostly project-specific, such as proposals in Birr town. In two instances, Fáilte Ireland-funded initiatives to install interpretive signage did not proceed due to concerns about visual intrusion on the historic streetscape. The lack of resolution highlights how the absence of coordinated planning frameworks can prevent tourism investments from being effectively aligned with heritage protection priorities.

Community Engagement Practices

Despite community participation being frequently considered as a priority, its execution differs significantly. Clare and Donegal exemplify effective co-designed initiatives and heritage forums that have significant influence. Dublin City likewise promotes cultural forums and inclusive narratives, which significantly influence policy processes.

Conversely, counties like Meath, Wicklow, and Kildare favour consultative events that do not incorporate systematic meaningful community participation in the decision-making process. Likewise, Kilkenny's 2025 Heritage Strategy consultation sessions, advertised as "engaging and fun," may exemplify an episodic engagement paradigm. Although positive in tone, they provide less clarification regarding how involvement will influence strategy results (Kilkenny Heritage Office, 2025). In the Roscommon Heritage Strategy (2025–2029), actions such as "Encourage and support local communities to develop heritage projects" (5.1.1) reflect a supportive but top-down model, where community involvement is promoted primarily at the delivery stage rather than through shared strategic planning. Barthel-Bouchier (2013) warns that symbolic engagement may serve primarily to legitimise institutional processes rather than truly empower communities, thereby undermining the basis for long-term cultural viability.

Offaly illustrates a distinct, community-rooted model. According to the Heritage Officer, "projects are anchored in the community" and heritage work focuses on helping groups "to explore, research, conserve and present their natural, cultural and built heritage for their community." The Heritage Officer explained that "if visiting tourists are interested that is great but it is not the motivating factor." Project success is evaluated through "goals agreed with the community group at the start of the project," with outcomes ranging from "a conservation project, a book, an event etc." One example mentioned was a new walk along the River Camcor in Birr, which was "arranged… for local use but all visitors to Birr are welcome too – but it was not designed as a tourism project." This reflects a locally rooted approach where "the focus… would always be for heritage and then if tourists want to visit what the community have done they are welcome."

While Offaly offers a locally embedded, heritage-first approach shaped by community needs, national initiatives like Adopt a Monument demonstrate how structured support can empower similar community-led projects across Ireland – a notable example that is managed by the Heritage Council. This initiative enables community organisations to take custodianship of local heritage sites, accompanied by training and expert assistance. More than 30 initiatives around Ireland, such as conservation efforts at Doon Fort and Kilbarron Castle, have involved educational institutions and local organisations, incorporate storytelling, archaeology, and community heritage

(Heritage Council, 2024). Although not officially associated with tourism plans, these projects frequently stimulate visitor interest, public events, and cultural prominence. They illustrate the capacity for community-driven heritage to enhance tourism options while promoting lasting stewardship.

The majority of the reviewed county plans lack formal platforms for co-governance, and community participation is rarely tied to tourism planning. The absence of mechanisms for evaluating the impact of engagement—on either cultural vitality or tourism development—further limits its strategic value. Without such integration, the rhetoric of participation risks remaining a compliance gesture rather than a foundation of cultural sustainability.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Representation

Based on the findings, the treatment of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) across county-level heritage plans further demonstrates uneven levels of institutional support and strategic vision.

References to ICH are often broad and descriptive, with limited evidence of strategic integration into planning processes or links to visitor interaction. For example, Meath and Wicklow reference oral traditions and community knowledge but provide no concrete implementation paths. Offaly's strategy emphasises community-based placemaking and recognises the importance of ICH, however it does not specify how such heritage might reshape tourism offerings. As revealed in Offaly's strategy and interview insights, heritage projects are community-driven and not designed with tourism in mind. While this protects authenticity, it also illustrates the lack of coordination that could help support and scale such efforts. Even in counties like Clare and Donegal with strong cultural identities and recognised ICH practices, heritage plans are frequently separated from tourism development.

Despite these limitations, community-led initiatives provide insightful examples of the integration of ICH and tourism into practice. The Irish Community Archive Network (ICAN), that is coordinated by the Heritage Council, supports local communities in documenting oral histories, customs, and place-based memory through digital platforms. A notable instance is the Ballinrobe Community Archive in County Mayo, which created a self-guided heritage tour based on community-curated content.

Though not officially part of tourism strategies, this effort demonstrates how digital heritage interpretation can encourage meaningful visitor engagement. Similarly, the Burren Winterage Festival in County Clare, which focusses on traditional cattle herding, combines cultural education, storytelling, and performance in a tourist-friendly format. However, both examples are largely disconnected from official tourism strategies, relying on local dedication rather than policy support. While intangible heritage is increasingly acknowledged in national discourse, its institutional embedding remains limited. Unlike built heritage, ICH lacks statutory protections, dedicated funding streams, or integration into formal educational and planning frameworks—leaving its safeguarding dependent on temporary initiatives rather than systemic support. A notable example of such vulnerability was highlighted in Offaly's conservation planning. The Lemanaghan monastic site, where locals still pray at the holy well on Fridays, was intentionally not promoted for high visitor numbers. As explained by the Heritage Officer, overexposure to tourism could result in these sacred practices being "photographed or diluted by visitors and then loose its significance for those praying." This case underscores the importance of culturally sensitive tourism frameworks, particularly for safeguarding living traditions that may be easily disrupted by external attention.

To maintain cultural sustainability, tourism frameworks must interact more deliberately with ICH—not just as a branding tool, but as a dynamic system rooted in community participation. When approached responsibly, tourism can assist to preserve and revive intangible heritage. However, without careful design, such integration risks commodifying practices and isolating them from their cultural context (Duxbury et al., 2021). A balanced strategy that respects the authenticity of ICH while allowing for its transmission through tourism can benefit both host communities and visitors, strengthening heritage as a living and evolving value.

Evaluation and Monitoring

As outlined in earlier observations, the strategic ambitions expressed in heritage and tourism planning are often not matched by concrete monitoring or evaluation mechanisms.

Evaluation mechanisms for cultural sustainability remain limited and inconsistent across the local plans reviewed. While most County Heritage Plans articulate broad

strategic aims, they rarely include performance indicators, baseline data, or outcome-oriented monitoring tools. For example, Meath's Strategic Heritage Plan 2023–2030 outlines thematic actions but provides no indication of how progress will be measured or reviewed. Similarly, Wicklow's Draft Heritage Plan 2024–2029 and Kildare's 2019–2025 Plan refer to implementation phases but omit key indicators or clearly defined responsibilities for tracking outcomes.

Some counties demonstrate greater attention to evaluation, though practices remain uneven. Donegal's Plan 2023–2030 mentions an annual review and public reporting process, while Clare's Plan 2024–2030 includes a mid-term evaluation commitment. Dublin City's Strategic Heritage Plan 2024–2029 provides the most robust example, with dedicated staff capacity and performance indicators embedded in annual workplans. These variations suggest that urban or better-resourced authorities are more likely to implement formal monitoring systems.

Across County Development Plans, measurable indicators for cultural sustainability are largely absent. Tourism-related metrics typically prioritise visitor numbers, accommodation capacity, or economic outputs, with limited focus on cultural continuity, heritage resilience, or community benefit. None of the documents analysed refer to UNESCO's Culture|2030 Indicators or comparable international frameworks. Even where cultural engagement is promoted—such as through Clare's Wonder Wander Trails or Dublin's creative infrastructure—evaluation is seldom linked to learning or strategic adaptation.

A final point worth noting concerns institutional capacity. While not explored in depth in this chapter, several of the reviewed plans—as well as existing academic literature—suggest operational limitations in terms of staffing, coordination, and resource allocation at the county level. These constraints are likely to affect the ability of local authorities to implement, monitor, and adapt cultural sustainability strategies effectively. This observation is reinforced by insights from Offaly, where the Heritage Officer noted that "when the national budgets are tight, heritage projects have often had budgets reduced," pointing to systemic vulnerability. Although a detailed investigation of these dynamics lies beyond the scope of this study, the evidence points to a structural challenge that warrants further research.

4.2 Burren Ecotourism Network

The Burren Ecotourism Network (BEN) is an association of more than 60 tourism enterprises in the Burren and Cliffs of Moher region, including hotels, farms, craft workshops, guides and cultural organisations. The network aims to advance sustainable tourism that benefits local communities, the economy, and natural heritage.

BEN operates as a registered entity with a Board of Directors comprising representatives from various sectors of the region's tourism industry. In 2019, the network appointed a CEO, becoming as they declared "the first independent tourism network in Ireland to make this step-change". Network members actively participate in its activities through meetings, training and joint initiatives, ensuring the involvement of local communities in sustainable tourism processes.

A key element of participation is the commitment of members to comply with the Geopark Code of Practice for Sustainable Tourism, developed in partnership with the Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark. This code addresses environmental sustainability, heritage interpretation, community engagement and collaboration. Membership in BEN requires training and the implementation of an environmental policy at the organisation level.

BEN actively collaborates with the Burrenbeo Trust, an independent non-profit organisation that plays an important role in heritage interpretation and educational activities. Together, they organise events such as the Burren Winterage Festival and the Burren Food Fayre, which highlight the network's potential to strengthen local traditions and community engagement (www.burrenwinterage.com).

Despite the high level of local integration, BEN is not mentioned in strategic documents such as Heritage Ireland 2030 or People, Place and Policy: Growing Tourism to 2025, indicating limited vertical integration between local initiatives and national strategies. At the same time, its contribution is officially recognised. For instance, in the Strategic Environmental Assessment Monitoring Report published by Fáilte Ireland, BEN is included in the system of indicators for sustainable tourism. This confirms the institutional significance of the network within the framework of national monitoring of sustainable tourism.

BEN has also achieved a number of national and international awards, including Lonely Planet's Best in Travel Community Award (2021) and the recognition at the European Destination of Excellence level, which testifies to its high standards of work. At the same time, the organisation's communication rhetoric remains largely visitor-oriented and environmentally focused, and not all aspects of cultural heritage are equally represented in the strategy. Despite its active participation in local forums and coordination with Clare County Council and the Geopark, BEN remains on the sidelines of broader national strategic planning processes, which limits the scope of its influence.

While the Burren Ecotourism Network offers a promising model of community-based, culturally rooted tourism, the absence of policy frameworks for replication or upscaling leaves such innovations isolated. Their marginal position within national strategy documents suggests a lack of feedback mechanisms between grassroots success and policy formation.

The findings from the Burren Ecotourism Network emphasise the greater structural constraints highlighted in this chapter. The following discussion will combine these findings with the theoretical perspectives indicated in the literature review, as well as critically consider the implications for future policy and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion – Reframing Cultural Sustainability in Irish Tourism

This chapter critically interprets the research findings in relations to the research questions and key theoretical perspectives presented in the literature review. Going beyond descriptive analysis, it shows how institutional narratives, political structures, and grassroots initiatives jointly shape the potential—and limitations—of cultural sustainability in Irish tourism. The discussion progresses to the proposal of a new conceptual model—the Renaissance of Heritage—that reimagines cultural sustainability as a participatory, place-bound, and equity-focused process.

5.1 Institutional Gaps and Structural Fragmentation

The analysis of national and regional tourism and heritage strategies indicates that cultural sustainability in Irish policy remains conceptually vague and institutionally marginal. Although the term sustainability is widely used in policy documents, it predominantly refers to environmental aspects and economic resilience. The specific term cultural sustainability is practically absent or mentioned superficially, lacking clear definitions, evaluation methods, or implementation mechanisms. Even in forward-looking strategies such as Heritage Ireland 2030, cultural sustainability appears more as a value statement than as a structured management category. This aligns with Duxbury et al. (2021), who argue that without coordinated institutional frameworks and evaluative tools, cultural sustainability risks becoming a rhetorical ideal rather than an actionable policy objective.

Despite this institutional vagueness, Ireland possesses considerable potential for cultural sustainability, particularly through its vibrant community networks and diverse cultural traditions, especially in rural regions. However, this potential remains strategically underutilised and fragmented. Key tourism policies, such as People, Place and Policy and Failte Ireland regional strategies, prioritise destination branding, investment attraction, and visitor volume, while heritage strategies remain focused on preserving and archiving cultural resources. These two policy streams – tourism and heritage - operate in silos, without shared planning tools or coordination. This lack of coordination is also reflected at the local level. As Heritage Officer Offaly has highlighted, the Heritage Office works with tourism departments only indirectly, prioritising community-based heritage conservation over tourism development. This confirms the study's observation that policies often lack common management tools.

Fáilte Ireland’s regional strategies, such as Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland’s Ancient East, and Ireland’s Hidden Heartlands, define success using economic and quantitative indicators: return to pre-pandemic revenue levels, increases in visitor stay, brand awareness, and job creation. As a result, opportunities to position culture as a living, evolving driver of sustainable tourism are repeatedly missed.

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) remains especially vulnerable within the current policy landscape. While initiatives such as ICAN and local archives demonstrate

considerable community engagement, they remain largely disconnected from tourism strategies and development frameworks. This marginalisation is intensified by the absence of robust cultural indicators, making such practices institutionally invisible. As noted in previous research, these omissions often reflect systemic preferences for quantifiable economic outcomes over cultural resilience (Conaghan et al., 2015; Barthel-Bouchier, 2016). Moreover, as O'Connor (2020) argues, when heritage is shaped to meet tourism expectations, it risks losing its social meaning.

These patterns are not unique to Ireland. Ireland follows a broader international trend in cultural governance, where policy rhetoric around cultural sustainability is not matched by institutional mechanisms or strategic integration. As Barthel-Bouchier (2016) illustrates, this disconnect often arises when heritage is instrumentalised for economic or branding purposes, rather than positioned as a foundational component of sustainable development. In this context, Ireland reflects rather than diverges from a global pattern of cultural marginalisation within sustainability agendas. Thus, in its current form, the Irish tourism model demonstrates not a lack of interest in culture, but a lack of a systematic approach to its sustainable development. Without a redefining of priorities and a development of shared objectives and coordination mechanisms, the role of cultural sustainability risks being reduced to vague references or mentioned briefly, if at all, and rarely operationalised within tourism policy frameworks.

These observations underscore the need for alternative models. The proposed Renaissance of Heritage framework challenges the dominant product-based and growth-driven models of tourism by repositioning culture as a process based on relationships and participation. Rather than asking how heritage and culture can serve tourism, it asks how tourism governance can support cultural life. It is not merely a rebranding of sustainability, but a shift in thinking: from managing heritage assets to supporting shared meaning and intergenerational continuity.

In this light, the lack of cultural sustainability in Irish tourism planning is not just a policy gap but a missed opportunity. Tourism could be reimagined as a system that is created together with communities and grounded in cultural life. As Duxbury et al. (2021) emphasise, cultural sustainability requires place-based frameworks and integrated approaches that reflect the lived realities of communities, rather than generic top-down models. The findings call for not only institutional change, but also conceptual

realignments, where heritage and tourism are no longer seen as parallel systems, but as interdependent dimensions of place-making.

5.2 Community Initiatives and Regional Disparities in Cultural Sustainability

While recent tourism policies increasingly refer to community engagement and regional distinctiveness, this study finds little evidence of structural integration. Initiatives such as the Burren Ecotourism Network (BEN) and the Irish Community Archive Network (ICAN) show that communities actively sustain local culture through their own efforts. However, these attempts remain on the periphery—not due to their lack of value, but because they are not meaningfully integrated into strategic tourism frameworks.

Policy often presents communities as passive stakeholders or as resources to be mobilised, rather than as equal contributors to strategy-making. As highlighted in the literature (O'Connor, 2018), inclusion is often symbolic: communities may receive short-term grants or appear in consultations, but they are rarely given ability to shape long-term planning or define success criteria. This limits their influence and undermines the continuity of cultural practices they support. Yet the example of Offaly offers a contrasting model of cultural governance based on community-led heritage projects. While these initiatives are not formally integrated into tourism strategies, they reflect genuine cultural agency. Rather than passive stakeholders, communities in Offaly define their own heritage priorities and success criteria. This approach offers an alternative to dominant policy framing and points to pathways for cultural sustainability in tourism grounded in place-making and community-defined value, rather than tourism metrics or promotional agendas.

ICAN further illustrates this disconnect. Despite its success in collecting and sharing local knowledge through digital platforms, ICAN receives little mention in regional tourism plans. There is no clear relationship between its work and tourism development strategies. This reflects what Throsby (2009) describes as a failure to institutionalise cultural value, where community knowledge and practices are recognised informally, but rarely embedded in policy frameworks due to a preference for economic metrics. BEN faces a similar challenge. Although it is often recognised

as an ecotourism model, its cultural dimensions, such as traditional ecological knowledge, local food practices, and storytelling, are rarely included into national tourism or heritage initiatives.

This paradox—active cultural sustainability attempts on the ground, institutional invisibility at the top—reveals a systemic gap. Even festivals, which appear more frequently in strategy documents, are framed largely as visitor attractions, ignoring their roles in transmitting identity and cultural memory. Other informal cultural practices, particularly those tied to place-based knowledge or oral tradition, remain largely unaddressed. This is not to argue that tangible heritage is absent from Irish tourism policy, but rather that intangible and community-rooted practices, which are harder to quantify, receive significantly less attention.

This pattern exposes a deeper institutional limitation. Policy frameworks tend to prioritise market-based or scalable outputs, which excludes many non-commercial forms of cultural continuity. Without mechanisms to identify and support these contributions, tourism governance risks reinforcing narrow models of value that overlook essential forms of resilience and cultural expression.

This problem is exacerbated by regional inequality. Across Ireland, counties differ widely in how they interpret and apply ideas of cultural sustainability. Some focus on event-based tourism, others promote archival projects or environmental heritage. There is no shared conceptual language or national framework to guide or compare these efforts. This may create institutional limitations, where some regions receive more recognition and funding not because their cultural practices are more sustainable, but because they align more closely with the terminology and priorities of national tourism policy.

These findings underscore the need for a shared national framework that provides common principles and indicators for cultural sustainability, while remaining flexible enough to accommodate regional diversity. Future policy should combine nationally agreed indicators (e.g. community participation, transmission of intangible heritage, governance cooperation — such as those outlined in UNESCO's Culture 2030 indicators) with context-specific considerations. This dual approach would allow to evaluate and support initiatives based on local logic, such as Camcor Walk or

community-organised festivals, within the broader framework of tourism, without forcing them to conform to externally defined outcomes.

5.3 Addressing Gaps Through the Renaissance of Heritage Framework

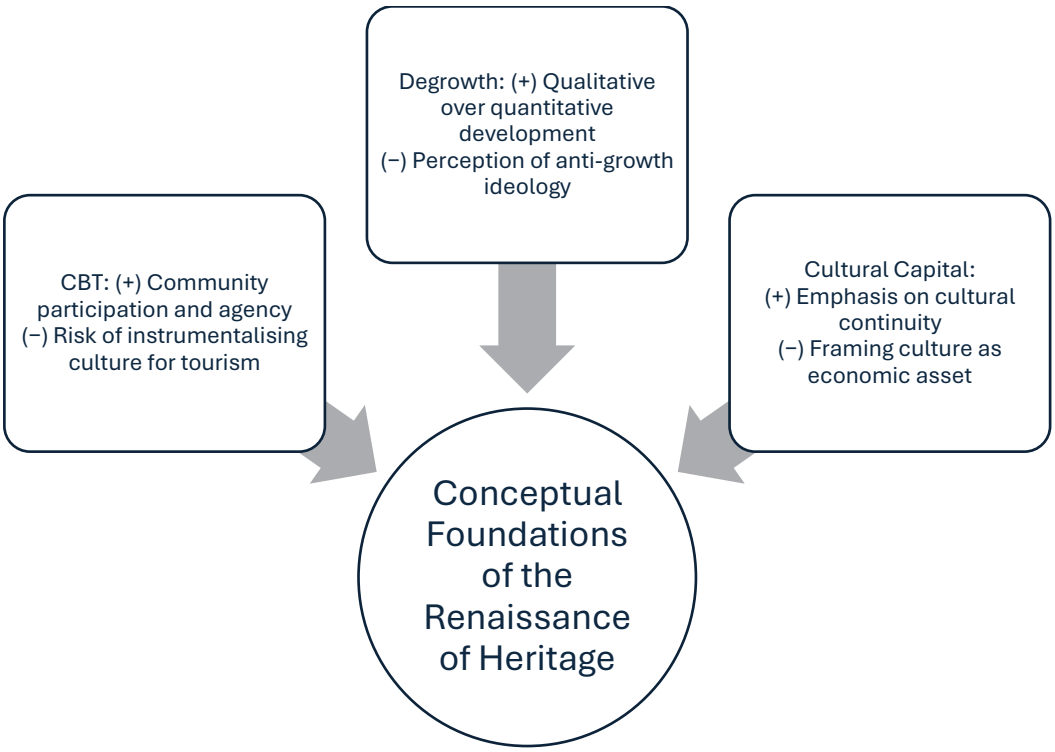
The final objective of this study is to propose a conceptual framework aimed at overcoming existing limitations in the field of cultural sustainability. The Renaissance of Heritage framework is not a ready-made solution, but rather a critical intervention —a reframing of cultural sustainability grounded in policy analysis, community-based examples, and established academic discourse. This framework aims to offer a renewed interpretation of the role of culture in sustainable tourism.

Rather than adding culture as another box to tick, this model challenges dominant paradigms that treat culture as a product in tourism practices. It instead presents heritage as a living process shaped by place, memory, and community.

The theory of cultural capital (Throsby, 2001) provides a conceptual foundation, underscoring the need to safeguard cultural values across generations. However, the proposed model consciously departs from the framing of culture as capital —because that language risks turning culture into a measurable, growth-oriented asset. Instead, it emphasises the revitalisation of cultural vitality as a dynamic social process, rooted in continuity, participation, and meaning making.

Degrowth and Doughnut Economics inspired the idea of shifting the paradigm from quantitative growth to qualitative depth. However, Renaissance of Heritage avoids the frame of rejection and emphasises not decline, but a reformulation of meaning — not a rejection of tourism, but its reinterpretation as cultural exchange.

The community-based tourism (CBT) model is similar in terms of values such as community participation and local empowerment, but Renaissance of Heritage seeks to move away from the tourism-first logic. The focus is not on adapting culture to tourism, but on recognising local cultural practices as self-sufficient values. Tourism, in this context, is welcomed when it aligns with and supports the continuity of local cultural life, rather than directing or shaping it.



Four core principles underpin this framework:

Community Agency as a Governance Principle

The first priority is recognising communities not just as participants, but as co-authors of policy. While some counties have developed heritage forums or community networks, their roles are predominantly consultative rather than strategic. which limits continuity and trust. Long-term collaboration and distributed authorship are needed to build durable, inclusive planning processes (Okazaki, 2008). The proposed model calls for a step beyond consultation: the formalisation of shared decision-making processes through elected or rotating community representatives, with defined roles in tourism and heritage governance.

Institutional Recognition of Intangible Heritage

Irish tourism strategies often favour tangible heritage or cultural events, but intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is often treated more as a symbolic value or aspiration than a concrete area of policy implementation. This model calls for institutional tools that capture dimensions such as transmission, continuity, and intergenerational engagement, rather than just visibility or visitor metrics. This includes using mixed

indicators that capture not only visibility but also continuity and cultural agency. For example, levels of youth involvement, presence of oral traditions in interpretation, or regularity of community-led practices. To ensure coherence, these indicators should be aligned with the National Inventory of ICH, which can serve as a reference point. Heritage officers, historians, and cultural practitioners should play a leading role in co-developing and validating such indicators. Their expertise is essential not only for mapping ICH, but also for embedding it in tourism strategies in a way that supports, rather than distorts, local cultural life (Throsby, 2009; Smith & Waterton, 2009; UNESCO, 2019).

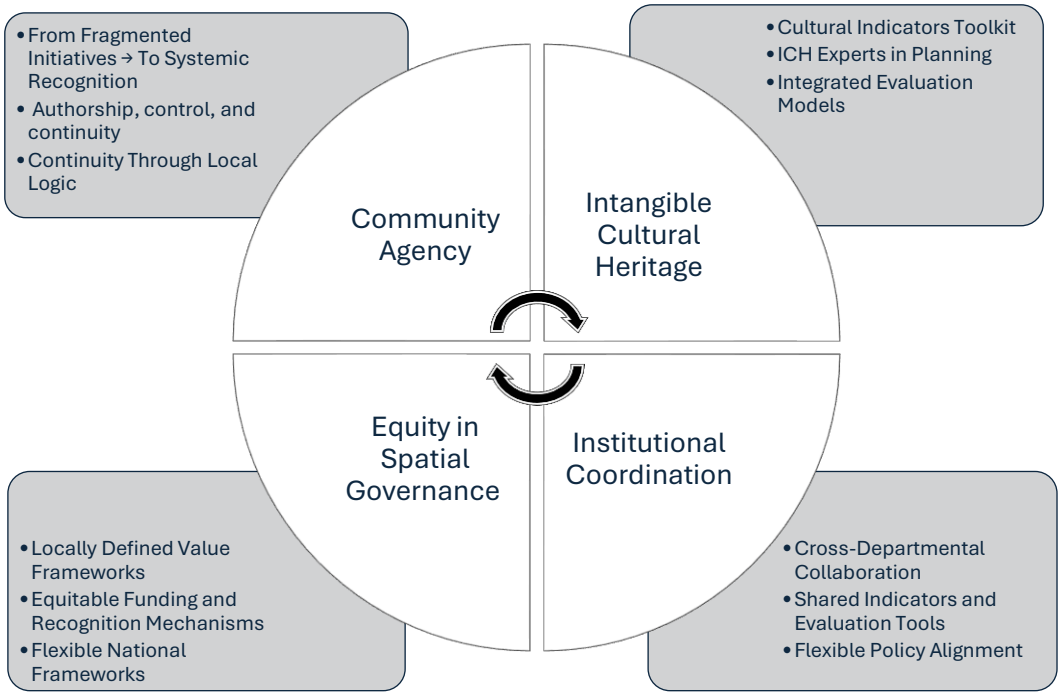
Equity in Spatial Governance

Spatial inequality has become one of the key themes in this study. Existing strategies prioritise already recognised tourism destinations, while culturally rich but less visible regions receive limited policy attention. The Renaissance of Heritage framework offers to address this imbalance by encouraging planning processes that are responsive to local cultural contexts. Rather than forcing regions to conform to national tourism templates, the model supports decentralised governance, whereby counties can set goals that reflect their specific context, such as preserving local traditions, seasonal practices or intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge (Farsari ,2021). This approach promotes equitable recognition without standardisation, ensuring that diverse regions participate in cultural tourism policy on their own terms. This shift helps ensure that all regions, not only established tourism hubs, are included in policy development, supporting a more balanced and context-sensitive participation in Ireland's cultural tourism planning (OECD, The Culture Fix: Creative People, Places and Industries, 2022).

Institutional Coordination Over Structural Expansion

The model does not call for institutional expansion but advocates for a shared framework through which existing tourism and heritage plans can be reviewed and better aligned. By applying common cultural sustainability indicators, such as levels of community participation, support for intangible heritage, and continuity of local practices, local authorities can harmonise their heritage and tourism policies while preserving regional specificity. This may reduce duplication and facilitate collaboration between heritage and tourism offices.

At the same time, the framework calls for a shift in the rhetoric used in tourism policy. Current strategies often describe culture as a product, resource, or economic asset. While this language supports market-orientated logic, it risks undermining deeper cultural meanings and community values. Reframing this language to emphasise care, continuity, and shared authorship can help decision-makers better recognise culture as a lived, evolving practice. This shift is not only symbolic it can shape what is funded, prioritised, and protected. Clearer, community-rooted language allows policies to reflect the real value of culture beyond visitor numbers or branding goals (Belfiore, 2022).



While the Renaissance of Heritage model remains conceptual at this stage, it offers a critical reorientation of how cultural sustainability is framed within Irish tourism policy. Rather than a prescriptive framework, it serves as an initial intervention—opening a space for future applied research, empirical testing, and collaborative development to transform these principles into operational strategies.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This work represents an effort to systematise the challenges of integrating cultural sustainability into Irish tourism policy. At its core is a critical interpretation of current institutional practices, the identification of fragmentation between cultural and tourism

policy, and the proposal of the Renaissance of Heritage model as a conceptual alternative.

The model emphases four interrelated principles: community as a subject of governance, institutional recognition of intangible heritage, territorial equity, and coordination of existing structures. These principles are not considered as independent elements, but as parts of a holistic system — a form of ‘cultural DNA’ in which each strand has a vital role in sustaining and renewing cultural practices. This metaphor emphasises that cultural sustainability is not a static category, but a living, self-renewing system.

However, this approach remains at the conceptual stage. Its implementation in policy requires further empirical research, especially at the local level. In particular, the following questions remain open:

- What specific institutional mechanisms can ensure the real integration of communities into strategic planning?
- What indicators and assessment tools are best suited to measure the continuity and viability of cultural practices?
- How can we avoid the risk that a community empowered to make decisions will begin to reproduce market logic and commercialise culture for the sake of tourism?
- To what extent are tourists willing to be participants in more ethically oriented forms of cultural interaction rather than consumers?

In addition, there may be barriers to the introduction of new thinking: regulatory inertia, limited resources, the dominance of economic priorities in tourism, and a lack of cross-sectoral trust between cultural and tourism institutions.

Thus, Renaissance of Heritage is not a final model, but a point of entry into a new way of thinking about tourism policy, focused not on serving demand, but on supporting meaning, identity, and a sustainable cultural future. Further theoretical research, comparative studies, and the development of operational tools are needed to make this model practical and adaptable to different contexts.

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