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**EMBEDDING SUSTAINABILITY IN CULTURAL EVENTS: INSIGHTS FROM
THE PENANG GEORGE TOWN FESTIVAL**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how environmental, social, and economic sustainability initiatives influence participant satisfaction and experience at the Penang George Town Festival (PGTF), a leading cultural heritage event in Malaysia. Guided by Sustainable Development Theory and the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, the research adopts a quantitative, participant-centered approach to evaluate how attendees perceive and respond to sustainability efforts. Using structured surveys, data were collected from 150 participants and analysed through descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and Pearson correlation analysis. The findings reveal that all three sustainability dimensions significantly affect participant satisfaction, with social sustainability notably cultural inclusivity and community engagement emerging as the strongest predictor ($r = 0.68$, $p < .001$). Environmental ($r = 0.61$) and economic ($r = 0.54$) sustainability also show meaningful positive impacts. These results affirm that sustainability practices are not only operational imperatives but also critical experiential drivers in cultural events. The study contributes to the limited empirical evidence from Southeast Asian contexts and highlights the need for holistic, multidimensional sustainability strategies in festival planning. The insights derived are particularly valuable for festival organizers, destination managers, cultural policy-makers, and local community stakeholders seeking to enhance event quality, promote inclusive development, and strengthen tourism resilience.

Keywords: Sustainable event management, sustainable development, cultural festivals, Sustainable Development Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural festivals serve as critical platforms for promoting heritage, economic activity, and social unity within communities. In the context of urban tourism, they also play an increasingly important role in shaping the city's global image and attractiveness (Mair & Weber, 2019). The Penang George Town Festival (PGTF), an annual event initiated to commemorate George Town's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, exemplifies this trend by merging artistic expression with community engagement. As the festival continues to expand in scale and international appeal, it faces increasing pressure to embed sustainability across its operational and experiential dimensions.

Despite growing interest in sustainable event management, critical gaps persist in understanding how sustainability initiatives influence participant satisfaction and experience particularly within non-Western cultural contexts (Getz & Page, 2020). While existing literature has predominantly explored the logistical and environmental aspects of sustainability, limited attention has been given to participants' subjective perceptions, especially in Southeast Asia where heritage-based festivals such as the Penang George Town Festival (PGTF) are deeply embedded in local identity and cultural narratives. Moreover, prior research tends to focus on large-scale sporting or music events, resulting in both theoretical and empirical gaps within the cultural festival segment. There remains an overemphasis on environmental sustainability, often at the expense of exploring how social and economic initiatives shape participants' sense of value, engagement, and loyalty (Lianopoulos et al., 2024).

In practice, festivals like PGTF continue to face challenges in meaningfully integrating sustainability into their design and delivery. Notably, the visibility of economic sustainability efforts and the measurement of social inclusivity often remain limited or ambiguous. In response to these issues, this study aims to: (i) examine the influence of environmental, social, and economic sustainability initiatives on participant satisfaction and experience, and (ii) determine which dimension exerts the most significant impact on enhancing the overall festival experience. This study examines the extent to which environmental, social, and economic sustainability initiatives influence participant satisfaction and experience at the Penang George Town Festival (PGTF). By adopting a participant-centric lens, the study diverges from the predominantly organizer-focused and operational literature, offering novel insights into how sustainability is perceived and valued by attendees. The findings aim to assist event organizers, policymakers, and tourism strategists on the strategic importance of embedding holistic sustainability practices to enhance festival experiences and foster long-term stakeholder engagement.

Sustainable event management has emerged as a critical subfield within tourism and hospitality studies, emphasizing the integration of environmental stewardship, social inclusivity, and economic resilience into event planning and delivery (Laing & Frost, 2017). Drawing upon the triple bottom line (TBL) framework, event sustainability is conceptualized through three interdependent dimensions: environmental, social, and economic. Environmental sustainability seeks to mitigate ecological impacts through practices such as responsible waste management, energy efficiency, carbon offsetting, and renewable resource use (Mair & Smith, 2022). Prior studies have emphasized the effectiveness of eco-certifications and green logistics in shaping perceptions of environmental responsibility. Mair and Laing (2012) demonstrated that visible green practices such as recycling facilities and energy-efficient infrastructure positively influence festivalgoers' evaluation of an event's environmental commitment. Nonetheless, the existing literature is heavily skewed toward large-scale Western contexts, with limited

empirical attention given to heritage-based festivals in Asia, where cultural and contextual nuances may yield different sustainability perceptions and outcomes (Elkington, 1997; Mair & Weber, 2019).

Social sustainability refers to the promotion of equity, inclusivity, cultural preservation, and community empowerment (Crespi-Vallbona & Noguer-Juncà, 2024). Cultural events like the Penang George Town Festival (PGTF) are uniquely positioned to foster social sustainability by featuring local artists, promoting traditional performances, and facilitating intercultural dialogue. According to Antón et al. (2022), visitor satisfaction in cultural festivals is strongly linked to social engagement and authenticity. However, challenges persist as Bossey (2020) and Walters (2019) point out, many events continue to struggle with issues of accessibility and inclusivity, particularly concerning marginalized communities. Evaluating how PGTF addresses these challenges is therefore essential for assessing its social sustainability outcomes. Economic sustainability encompasses practices that ensure long-term financial viability, support for local vendors, and equitable economic benefit distribution (UNWTO, 2022). Research indicates that festivals providing economic opportunities for local entrepreneurs enhance perceived value and encourage repeat visitation (Dresler & Jackson, 2024). Nevertheless, economic impacts are often assessed at the macro level, overlooking participant-level perceptions of affordability, value-for-money, and fairness (Nam et al., 2024).

Participant satisfaction is a multidimensional construct shaped by cognitive evaluations, emotional responses, and behavioral intentions (Chi & Chi, 2020). Christou (2018) argues that elements such as cultural immersion, authenticity, and the overall atmosphere significantly contribute to experiential value. However, many existing models fail to consider sustainability practices as key determinants of satisfaction. This oversight is increasingly problematic, as modern festivalgoers expect events to embody social responsibility and environmental consciousness, a trend well-documented in sustainable tourism and event research (Laing & Frost, 2010).

Sustainable Development Theory

The Sustainable Development Theory (WCED, 1987) underpins this study by advocating a holistic approach to human development that balances current needs without compromising future generations. In the event context, it emphasizes aligning environmental conservation with social welfare and economic prosperity (Mair & Weber, 2019). Events that succeed in implementing this balance are more likely to achieve long-term viability and stakeholder satisfaction. Drawing from Sustainable Development Theory (WCED, 1987), this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Environmental sustainability initiatives positively influence participant satisfaction and experience at PGTF.

H2: Social sustainability initiatives positively influence participant satisfaction and experience at PGTF.

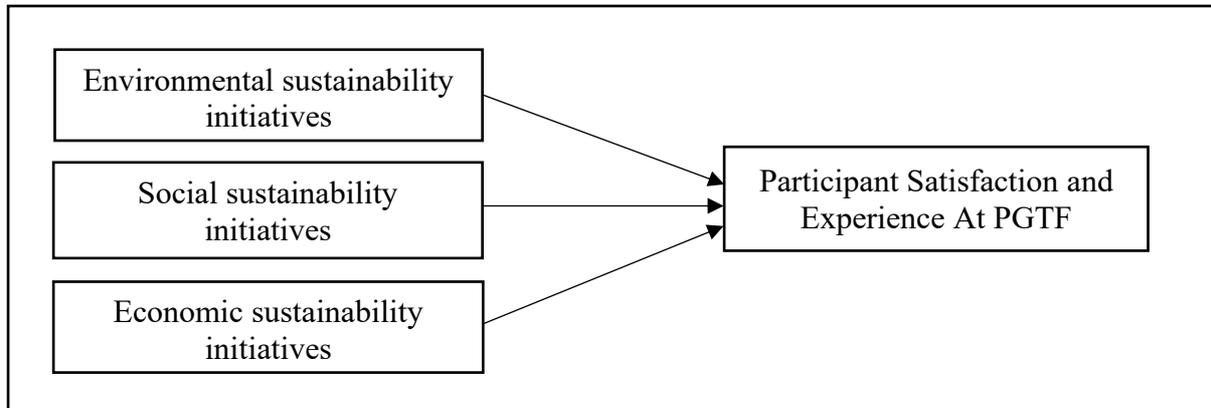
H3: Economic sustainability initiatives positively influence participant satisfaction and experience at PGTF.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model positions environmental, social, and economic sustainability initiatives as independent variables, while participant satisfaction and experience function as the dependent variable. The framework reflects the integrative influence of sustainability on the event's perceived value.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework illustrating the influence of sustainability initiatives on participant satisfaction and experience at PGTF



Source. Authors

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 guiding this study is grounded in the Sustainable Development Theory (WCED, 1987) and the triple bottom line model (Elkington, 1997), which conceptualizes sustainability through three interrelated dimensions: environmental, social, and economic. These dimensions serve as independent variables environmental sustainability initiatives, social sustainability initiatives, and economic sustainability initiatives that are hypothesized to influence the dependent variable, participant satisfaction and experience. Environmental sustainability initiatives refer to the strategies implemented by festival organizers to minimize ecological harm and promote environmental stewardship. Examples include waste reduction, energy conservation, utilization of renewable resources, and encouraging low-emission transportation methods. These initiatives are increasingly valued by festivalgoers, particularly those with pro-environmental attitudes, as they contribute to a cleaner event atmosphere and reflect responsible event governance (Jones & Walton, 2022).

Social sustainability initiatives encompass efforts to support cultural diversity, strengthen community engagement, and promote inclusivity. These practices may involve showcasing local artists, preserving intangible heritage, ensuring equitable access to event spaces, and fostering diverse representation in programming (Crespi-Vallbona & Noguera-Juncà, 2024). Social sustainability has been widely linked to participants' emotional attachment and sense of belonging, ultimately enhancing their overall event experience (Kim & Kim, 2019).

Economic sustainability initiatives refer to strategic financial practices that not only ensure the long-term viability of an event but also stimulate inclusive local economic growth. These efforts include equitable revenue distribution among stakeholders, affordable and transparent ticket pricing, preferential access for local vendors and micro-enterprises, and the formation of strategic partnerships with community-based businesses. By integrating local entrepreneurs into the event supply chain such as through food stalls, crafts, and transport services festivals can generate multiplier effects that benefit the broader community. Furthermore, clear communication of these economic efforts increases participant awareness and enhances perceptions of fairness and value. Events perceived as economically inclusive and socially responsible are more likely to foster repeat attendance, community goodwill, and positive word-of-mouth (UNWTO, 2022).

The dependent variable, participant satisfaction and experience, encompasses attendees' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the event. This includes perceptions of value-for-money, enjoyment, cultural enrichment, and meaningful social interactions (Chi & Chi, 2020; Le et al., 2024). Prior research suggests that sustainability practices, when effectively communicated and executed, can significantly enhance the perceived quality of festival experiences (Lianopoulos et al., 2024; Mair & Smith, 2022). By examining these relationships, the framework provides a comprehensive lens to understand how sustainability initiatives beyond their operational benefits serve as key contributors to participant satisfaction and the overall success of cultural events.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a positivist research philosophy and a quantitative cross-sectional design to empirically examine the relationships between sustainability initiatives and participant satisfaction and experience at the Penang George Town Festival (PGTF). Positivism was appropriate as it emphasizes objectivity, empirical measurement, and hypothesis testing through statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research adopted a deductive approach, where hypotheses based on the literature were tested through quantitative data. The study was conducted during the 2024 PGTF event, offering a real-time evaluation of participants' responses to sustainability practices observed during the festival.

Sampling and Research Site

The research was conducted at PGTF, an annual cultural festival held in George Town, Penang, Malaysia. A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants who had attended at least one event session and were exposed to visible sustainability initiatives. This approach ensured that respondents had sufficient context to provide informed feedback on the variables under study. The target sample size was determined using G*Power for correlation analysis with medium effect size (0.3), $\alpha = 0.05$, and power = 0.80, yielding a minimum sample size of 84. However, to enhance generalizability and mitigate response bias, the sample was expanded to 150 valid responses. The sampling included local residents, domestic tourists, and international visitors, aged 18 years and above.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire, hosted on Google Forms and distributed through PGTF's official social media platforms, email lists, and QR code posters at event venues. The instrument consisted of five sections; (i) Demographic profile Age, gender, education, place of residence, (ii) Environmental Sustainability Initiatives Waste management, energy efficiency, use of renewable resources, (iii) Social Sustainability Initiatives Support for local artists, heritage preservation, inclusivity, (iv) Economic Sustainability Initiatives Vendor support, fair pricing, equitable benefit distribution, (v) Participant Satisfaction and Experience Items capturing enjoyment, perceived value, cultural immersion, and inclusivity. All sustainability and satisfaction items were measured using 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Items were adapted from previous validated studies (Antón et al., 2022; Cheng & Cheng, 2023) to ensure content validity and contextual relevance.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The survey was conducted over a two-week period during the festival in July 2024. Participants were briefed on the study purpose and informed consent was obtained before survey participation. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses were guaranteed, and ethical clearance was granted by the university research ethics committee. The data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 28). Analysis procedures included; (i) Descriptive statistics: To profile respondent characteristics and summarize item means and standard deviations, (ii) Reliability analysis: Using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency of each construct ($\alpha \geq 0.70$ considered acceptable) and (iii) Pearson correlation analysis to test hypothesized relationships between sustainability initiatives and participant satisfaction and experience. A quantitative, survey-based approach was selected for its ability to quantify perceptions and identify statistically significant relationships among variables. This method enables generalizable insights, especially important in emerging domains like sustainable event experiences. While qualitative methods could offer deeper narrative insights, they were not aligned with the deductive and hypothesis-testing goals of this study. This robust methodological framework ensures that findings are grounded in empirical data while aligning with best practices in sustainable event research.

RESULTS

This section presents the analysis of survey data collected from 150 PGTF attendees. The results are structured to include demographic profiling, reliability testing of constructs, descriptive analysis of sustainability practices, and correlation analysis to assess relationships among variables.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Of the 150 valid responses, 53% identified as female and 47% as male. The majority of respondents (62%) were aged between 18 and 35 years, indicating a predominantly young and adult participant group. Approximately 71% of participants held at least a bachelor's degree, and 48% were domestic tourists, while 38% were Penang locals and 14% were international visitors.

Reliability Analysis

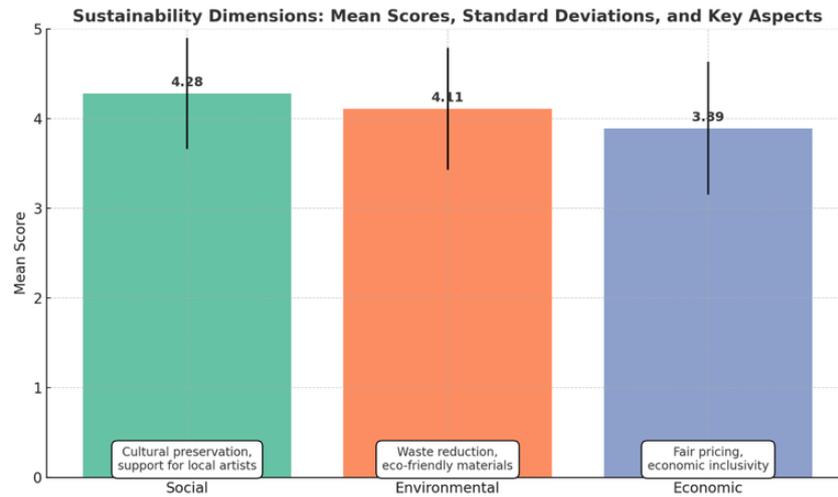
Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the internal consistency of each construct. All constructs demonstrated high reliability, with alpha values exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.70, thereby indicating strong internal consistency and measurement stability. Specifically, environmental sustainability initiatives recorded an alpha value of 0.84, social sustainability initiatives 0.88, economic sustainability initiatives 0.81, and participant satisfaction and experience 0.86. These results affirm that the measurement scales employed in this study were both reliable and appropriate for subsequent statistical analysis.

Descriptive Statistics of Sustainability Constructs

Figure 2 revealed that respondents rated social sustainability initiatives the highest ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.62$), particularly in terms of cultural preservation and support for local artists.

Figure 2

Descriptive Statistics of Sustainability Constructs



Source. Authors.

Environmental sustainability initiatives followed ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.68$), with waste reduction and the use of eco-friendly materials being most recognized. Economic sustainability scored lowest among the three constructs ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.74$), with respondents expressing lower agreement on fair pricing and economic inclusivity. These results suggest that participants are more attuned to and appreciative of social and environmental efforts than economic strategies, which may be less visible or less directly communicated during the event.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationships between the three sustainability dimensions and participant satisfaction and experience. The results indicate that all independent variables were significantly and positively correlated with the dependent variable at the $p < .001$ level. Specifically, environmental sustainability initiatives demonstrated a moderate positive correlation with participant satisfaction ($r = 0.61$), followed by social sustainability initiatives, which exhibited the strongest correlation ($r = 0.68$). Economic sustainability initiatives also showed a significant, albeit comparatively lower, correlation ($r = 0.54$). These findings provide empirical support for the proposed hypotheses (H1–H3) and underscore the critical role of social sustainability in shaping participants' event experiences. The results are consistent with prior research highlighting the importance of cultural engagement and inclusive programming in fostering emotional and experiential value among festivalgoers (Antón et al., 2022).

Summary of Key Findings

The findings yield several noteworthy insights into how sustainability dimensions shape participant satisfaction in the context of cultural festivals. Among the three dimensions examined, social sustainability emerged as the most influential, receiving the highest ratings from participants and demonstrating the strongest statistical association with overall satisfaction. This underscores the pivotal role of inclusive practices, cultural authenticity, and meaningful community engagement in elevating the festival experience. Environmental sustainability also exerted a significant impact, particularly through visible initiatives such as recycling infrastructure and energy-efficient operations, which reinforced perceptions of environmental accountability. In contrast, economic sustainability, while still exhibiting a significant positive correlation, demonstrated comparatively weaker influence. This may reflect limitations in the visibility or perceived relevance of economic equity measures, suggesting a need for more transparent communication and participant-facing economic benefits. Taken together, the results reinforce the conceptual premise that multidimensional sustainability strategies especially those rooted in social engagement are essential for enhancing participant satisfaction and should be systematically integrated into the planning and execution of cultural events.

DISCUSSION

The results support all three hypotheses, affirming that sustainability initiatives positively affect participant satisfaction and experience. These findings directly address the research gaps identified in previous literature, particularly the lack of empirical evidence on how sustainability dimensions are perceived by participants in Asian cultural festivals (Getz & Page, 2020; Lianopoulos et al., 2024). Social sustainability emerged as the most influential factor, emphasizing the importance of inclusive programming, cultural authenticity, and community engagement in enhancing perceived festival value (Antón et al., 2022; Christou, 2020). This aligns with calls from scholars to re-center festivals as platforms for cultural expression and local empowerment.

Environmental initiatives, such as recycling stations, energy-efficient systems, and visible eco-labelling, also contributed positively to participants' experience. These results are consistent with Mair and Laing (2012), who found that environmentally conscious practices significantly enhance attendees' perceptions of event responsibility and organizational integrity. As global environmental awareness grows, festivalgoers increasingly expect visible ecological commitments that align with their personal values (Cheng & Cheng, 2023). Economic sustainability, while significantly correlated with satisfaction, had a comparatively moderate impact. This may be due to the lower visibility of economic initiatives during the festival or the limited direct benefit perceived by attendees. Prior studies have similarly found that unless clearly communicated or experienced directly, economic efforts such as local vendor inclusion and fair pricing are less likely to shape satisfaction outcomes (Nam et al., 2024; UNWTO, 2022).

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse by reinforcing the applicability of the Sustainable Development Theory in festival contexts. It highlights that successful implementation of sustainability must consider not only operational efficiency but also participant perceptions and values. PGTF's efforts in integrating sustainability across environmental, social, and economic domains demonstrate a viable model for event organizers in heritage-rich, tourism-driven cities. Importantly, these findings align

strongly with the principles of Sustainable Development Theory (WCED, 1987), which advocates for a balanced approach to development that addresses present needs without compromising future generations. The demonstrated positive impact of environmental, social, and economic initiatives on participant satisfaction confirms that festivals embracing this balance can generate more meaningful and rewarding experiences for attendees. Similarly, the results empirically support the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework (Elkington, 1997), which conceptualizes sustainability as the integration of people (social equity), planet (environmental responsibility), and profit (economic viability).

By showing that each sustainability pillar significantly correlates with participant satisfaction, the study validates the TBL model's relevance in the event context. Social sustainability, which yielded the strongest correlation, underscores how inclusive, culturally engaging programming enhances emotional and relational experiences key components of satisfaction. Environmental and economic practices also contribute to a sense of ethical engagement and perceived fairness, reinforcing that holistic sustainability fosters both immediate gratification and long-term participant loyalty. The positive influence of sustainability initiatives on participant satisfaction supports the core premise of Sustainable Development Theory that inclusive and equitable development can enhance human well-being. Similarly, the Triple Bottom Line model is reinforced by the observed significance of environmental, social, and economic dimensions, validating its applicability in cultural event settings.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that sustainability initiatives across environmental, social, and economic dimensions are critical to enhancing participant satisfaction and experience in the context of cultural festivals. The findings underscore the dominant influence of social sustainability, particularly in promoting inclusivity, cultural authenticity, and meaningful community participation. Environmental practices also played a substantial role, aligning with the growing global emphasis on green event planning. Economic sustainability, while significant, requires better visibility and integration into the participant experience to achieve stronger engagement.

These insights respond to previously underexplored areas in the literature, particularly in Southeast Asian settings where cultural heritage and tourism intersect. The application of Sustainable Development Theory in this context reinforces the need for multidimensional sustainability planning that prioritizes both community and environmental stewardship. As such, festival organizers, event designers, and cultural policy stakeholders are encouraged to adopt holistic sustainability frameworks that align with participant expectations while also supporting long-term destination resilience.

Future research may explore longitudinal impacts of sustainability branding on festival loyalty, qualitative narratives of visitor experiences, or comparative studies across multiple heritage cities. In practice, the findings advocate for structured sustainability policies, greater stakeholder collaboration, and investment in culturally responsive programming that reflects and uplifts local identities.

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