



Sustainable Community-Based Tourism in the Digital Era: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract:

This study examines how community-based tourism (CBT) is reshaped under digital platformisation, focusing on tensions between sustainability and platform-mediated tourism systems. Using an interpretivist qualitative case study in a rural CBT destination in Vietnam (December 2025–June 2026), the research draws on 32 semi-structured interviews, observation, and digital artefact analysis. Findings show that digital visibility has become the main mechanism of market access, displacing resource-based advantages. Governance is increasingly hybrid, with authority shared among local actors, intermediaries, and platform infrastructures. Value creation remains local but is partially leaked through commissions and algorithmic mediation. Uneven digital capability produces internal stratification. Sustainability emerges as a negotiated, unstable condition shaped by platform dependence and adaptive responses.

Keywords: Community-based tourism; digital platforms; sustainability; platformisation; governance

1. Introduction

Community-based tourism (CBT) is frequently positioned as a way to anchor tourism development in local livelihoods rather than external capital. In principle, it gives communities some control over tourism activity and a share in the resulting benefits. In practice, that control is uneven. Some places manage to keep decision-making relatively local, but many others end up depending on outside intermediaries, seasonal demand, or platform-driven visibility that sits outside their influence. The gap between the idea of CBT and how it operates on the ground has become harder to ignore.

At the same time, tourism has been pulled into a wider digital shift. Booking, promotion, and even perception of destinations are increasingly shaped through platforms and algorithmic systems. What is visible online tends to attract demand, while what is not tends to disappear from circulation. This changes how tourism value is formed. It is no longer only about physical assets or local experience design, but also about how destinations are positioned within digital environments that they do not fully control (Gretzel et al., 2015; Buhalis & Leung, 2018). For CBT operators, this creates a mixed reality. Digital tools make it possible for small destinations to reach wider markets without traditional intermediaries, and social media can amplify visibility quickly. But access is not equal. Outcomes depend on platform logic, digital skills, and often unpredictable exposure through algorithms. In many cases, communities participate in systems they cannot shape, especially where visibility and booking flows are governed externally (Xiang et al., 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

These shifts also complicate sustainability. Digitalisation does improve coordination in some cases. In others, it simply shifts where control sits. In a few interviews, what stood out was not efficiency gains but a growing sense that “nothing really moves unless it appears online first. Its effects are therefore uneven and context-dependent rather than consistently positive or negative (Gössling, 2021). CBT sits directly within these tensions. Its emphasis on local participation and long-term sustainability does not always align with platform-driven tourism markets, where control over visibility and demand is partly external. Sustainability, in this sense, becomes something negotiated rather than guaranteed, shaped by how communities adapt to shifting digital conditions (Tolkach & King, 2020).

What remains less clear is how these changes are experienced at community level. Much of the existing literature explains digital transformation in structural or technological terms, but less is known about how local actors actually interpret and deal with it in everyday practice. This study addresses that gap by examining sustainable CBT in the digital era, focusing on how opportunities and challenges emerge simultaneously through digital transformation. What this study argues is not simply that CBT is being digitalised. Platform systems appear to function as an emerging coordination layer within CBT operations, not by replacing community governance directly, but by subtly restructuring the conditions under which decisions about visibility, access, and demand become possible. This layer does not replace community governance directly, but quietly reorganises how decisions become possible in the first place. The implication is that CBT is no longer externally influenced by digital platforms; it is internally structured through them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community-based tourism and sustainability tensions

CBT is commonly framed as a development approach that links tourism activities with local livelihoods and participation, under the assumption that greater community involvement naturally leads to more equitable benefit distribution and stronger control over resources. However, empirical reality rarely reflects this assumption in a stable way, as CBT outcomes tend to vary significantly depending on market access, governance capacity, and the extent of external mediation.

In many cases, communities retain partial involvement in day-to-day tourism operations, yet strategic control gradually shifts towards external intermediaries or market-driven systems that shape demand and visitor flows. This creates a structural gap between normative expectations of empowerment and the operational constraints observed in practice, where participation does not necessarily translate into decision-making authority.

Tolkach and King (2020) highlight that CBT sustainability depends on the alignment between community agency, institutional support, and governance structures, but this alignment is inherently unstable and tends to shift under external pressures. As a result, sustainability in CBT should be understood less as a fixed condition and more as an ongoing negotiation shaped by changing power relations and market dependencies.

2.2. Digital transformation and the reconfiguration of tourism systems

Digital transformation in tourism has fundamentally altered how destinations are accessed, evaluated, and consumed, moving beyond incremental technological improvement towards a structural reorganisation of tourism systems. Platform infrastructures, in particular, play a central role in shaping visibility and demand distribution, meaning that what becomes visible online increasingly determines what becomes economically viable.

Gretzel et al. (2015) and Buhalis and Leung (2018) conceptualise tourism as a connected ecosystem of actors and technologies, yet this ecosystem is far from balanced in practice. Platform systems do not merely connect stakeholders; they actively filter and prioritise them through ranking mechanisms, algorithmic visibility, and engagement-based logic.

Evidence from rural tourism contexts (Zhang & Zhang, 2022) shows that access to markets is increasingly mediated by platform exposure, which is unevenly distributed and often unpredictable from the perspective of local actors. Some CBT operators experience rapid increases in demand once visibility thresholds are reached, while others remain structurally marginalised despite comparable service quality.

Xiang et al. (2021) describe digital transformation as adaptive rather than linear, but in CBT settings this adaptation is partial and asymmetrical, as local actors adjust their behaviour to platform requirements without having control over the underlying systems that generate visibility and demand.

2.3. Smart tourism ecosystems and data-driven governance

The smart tourism ecosystem perspective provides a useful framework for understanding how digital infrastructures reshape tourism governance through continuous interaction between data, stakeholders, and institutional environments. In this view, data becomes a key coordination mechanism that enables responsiveness and real-time decision-making.

However, this data-driven logic is not evenly distributed across actors. While Del Vecchio et al. (2021) suggest that big data enhances managerial capacity in tourism systems, the ability to interpret and act on such data remains concentrated in platform operators or intermediaries, creating structural asymmetries in knowledge access and decision-making capacity.

In CBT contexts, this asymmetry becomes particularly significant because visibility is no longer simply informational but directly tied to market access. Emerging technologies, including immersive digital environments discussed by Buhalis et al. (2023), further intensify this shift by relocating tourism experience into digitally mediated spaces, thereby weakening the exclusive role of physical place in value creation.

2.4. Digital engagement, platforms, and shifting power relations

Tourist engagement has increasingly shifted towards platform-mediated environments where social media, review systems, and algorithmic feeds determine visibility and influence demand formation. Sigala (2018) argues that engagement is co-produced through digital interaction, rather than being fully controlled by destination managers, highlighting the decentralisation of influence in contemporary tourism systems.

In practice, however, this decentralisation is uneven. Visibility outcomes fluctuate significantly across destinations, and these fluctuations are not always explainable through service quality or managerial effort alone. Some destinations gain sudden exposure through platform dynamics, while others remain largely invisible despite active participation in digital spaces.

Li et al. (2019) emphasise that rural tourism development is shaped by uneven access to digital infrastructure and capability, but an additional layer emerges in platform-dependent CBT contexts, where algorithmic mediation itself becomes a key determinant of inequality. Over time, platforms begin to function as indirect governance systems that shape not only visibility but also the perceived value and relevance of destinations.

2.5. Sustainability implications in digitally mediated CBT systems

The relationship between digitalisation and sustainability in tourism remains inherently ambivalent, as digital systems simultaneously generate efficiency gains and new forms of inequality. Gössling (2021) notes that these effects are not mutually exclusive but coexist within the same system, producing uneven outcomes across different contexts.

In CBT settings, this ambivalence becomes particularly visible. Digital platforms expand market access and improve communication efficiency, yet they also embed communities within external infrastructures that govern visibility, demand flows, and transactional processes. As a result, sustainability cannot be understood solely in economic or environmental terms but must also account for control over information flows and decision-making structures.

Rather than representing a stable equilibrium, sustainability in digitally mediated CBT systems appears as a continuously shifting condition shaped by the interaction between local adaptive strategies and externally imposed platform logics.

2.6. Research gap and analytical positioning

Despite extensive literature on both CBT and digital tourism, these two strands remain insufficiently integrated at the level of lived, empirical experience. CBT research continues to emphasise participation and governance structures, while digital tourism studies focus primarily on platform systems and technological transformation.

What remains underexplored is how digital infrastructures operate within community-level decision-making processes, particularly how local actors interpret and respond to visibility, dependency, and constraint in everyday practice. Existing studies often treat platforms as external forces acting upon tourism systems, without fully capturing their embedded role within local governance structures.

This study addresses this gap by conceptualising CBT as a socio-technical system in which digital infrastructures are not external additions but internal components shaping governance, value creation, and sustainability dynamics. The analytical focus therefore shifts from describing digital transformation to examining how it is experienced, negotiated, and unevenly realised within community-based tourism systems.

3. Case and Methodology

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in a rural community-based tourism (CBT) destination in Vietnam from December 2025 to June 2026. The period captures a recent phase in which tourism continues to stabilise post-pandemic while becoming increasingly dependent on digital platforms for visibility, coordination, and market access. Digitalisation is treated as an embedded process shaping everyday tourism practices rather than an external shock. The case is a loosely organised CBT setting where tourism is integrated into household livelihoods rather than operating as a formal industry. Local residents engage in hosting, guiding, and selling products, while coordination remains partly informal. Over time, digital platforms have become central in shaping demand, pricing, and visibility, producing a hybrid governance structure combining community coordination with platform-mediated control.

A total of 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including 18 local tourism participants, 6 community or cooperative representatives, and 8 intermediary actors such as homestay coordinators and online promoters. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in CBT activities, including hosting, coordination, and digital mediation roles, ensuring representation across both operational and intermediary functions. Data collection followed three phases: contextual mapping (Dec 2025–Feb 2026), intensive fieldwork (Mar–May 2026), and follow-up clarification (Jun 2026). Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by recurring patterns in the final interviews without emergence of substantially new codes (approximately after the 27th interview).

This design enabled tracking of seasonal variation and shifts in platform-driven demand. Interviews were conducted in flexible settings such as households, tourism sites, and community spaces. Observation focused on digital tool use in practice, including booking coordination via messaging apps, social media promotion, and pricing adjustments influenced by online demand signals.

Digital artefacts including social media posts, online reviews, and platform listings were also analysed to examine how visibility is constructed within platform ecosystems beyond local control. The analysis did not move in a straight coding sequence. Themes appeared, were revised, sometimes collapsed into each other when the field data contradicted earlier interpretations. Data were initially coded inductively, generating first-order codes such as “visibility dependence”, “platform ranking influence”, and “intermediary mediation”, which were later grouped into higher-order themes including platform visibility, governance reconfiguration, and value distribution dynamics. Reflexive thematic analysis was used, although in practice it was closer to iterative sense-making than formal coding stages. Coding was initially inductive, focusing on platform dependency, visibility asymmetry, and governance shifts, then interpreted through a socio-technical lens informed by smart tourism ecosystem and platformisation literature (Gretzel et al., 2015; Xiang et al., 2021).

The study adopts an interpretivist case study approach, aiming for analytical rather than statistical generalisation, and explains how CBT sustainability is reshaped through interactions between community actors, institutions, and digital infrastructures.

4. Results & Analysis

4.1. Platform visibility as the primary access mechanism

Field evidence indicates a clear reordering in how community-based tourism (CBT) accesses tourism markets, where visibility within digital platforms increasingly functions as the primary entry condition rather than a secondary promotional layer. Traditional factors such as physical resources, landscape quality, or even service differentiation remain relevant, but they no longer operate as sufficient conditions for attracting demand in the absence of digital visibility.

What emerges in practice is a filtering mechanism embedded within platform infrastructures. Listings on online travel agencies, algorithmic ranking systems, and engagement-driven exposure on social media collectively determine whether a CBT operator becomes visible to potential tourists. This visibility is not evenly distributed and does not follow a transparent logic from the perspective of local actors, which makes market entry partially detached from service quality itself.

Several interview accounts suggest that tourism demand often begins not from evaluation of quality but from prior exposure within platform systems: *“If we are not on Facebook or Booking, we basically do not get any customers”*

(H1, homestay owner, March 2026); “Tourists now search through apps first; they no longer ask directly” (H4, household operator); “Those who post frequently get customers; those who don’t get buried in the system” (H6, household operator). Field observation indicates that households offering comparable services receive highly uneven booking volumes depending on their platform visibility, ranking position, and posting frequency on OTA systems. In this sense, visibility operates as a precondition for selection rather than a consequence of it. Some households experience rapid increases in bookings once their online presence reaches a certain threshold of algorithmic circulation, while others remain largely absent from search results despite offering comparable services.

Importantly, this process is not locally governed. Ranking mechanisms, recommendation systems, review accumulation, and engagement signals are controlled by platform logics that sit outside the CBT system. Local actors respond to these logics through incremental adjustments—modifying content style, increasing posting frequency, or managing online responses—rather than shaping the underlying rules of visibility itself.

This produces an uneven internal geography of opportunity within the same destination. A small number of actors accumulate sustained visibility and associated economic benefits, while others remain structurally marginalised in terms of exposure. The differentiation observed here is not simply a reflection of service quality or investment capacity, but of differential positioning within algorithmically mediated systems of attention.

Table 1. Visibility as a structuring mechanism in CBT digital access

Dimension	Operational mechanism	Observed outcome in CBT
Market entry	Platform listing, ranking, algorithmic exposure	Access becomes visibility-dependent rather than resource-dependent
Demand formation	Reviews, engagement signals, recommendation systems	Tourist flows fluctuate independently of service quality
Local agency	Content production and posting behaviour	Reactive adaptation rather than rule-setting capacity
Distributional effect	Uneven algorithmic amplification	Concentration of demand in a limited number of actors

Overall, visibility operates less as a communication channel and more as a structural condition that determines whether CBT actors are included in or excluded from tourism demand flows. In the context of sustainable community-based tourism in the digital era, this mechanism simultaneously expands market access while embedding dependency on external platform infrastructures that regulate how such access is produced.

4.2. Hybrid governance and shifting control over tourism operations

The empirical material indicates that community-based tourism no longer operates through a purely community-centred governance structure. What emerges instead is a hybrid configuration in which authority over tourism operations is distributed across local households, intermediary actors, and digital platforms. This arrangement is not formally designed but has gradually taken shape through increasing reliance on platform-based booking systems, algorithmic visibility, and externally mediated visitor flows.

Control is therefore not removed but redistributed across layers of the system: “We still set the price ourselves, but we must follow online prices; otherwise we receive no bookings” (H3, homestay owner); “When bookings come through the platform, we no longer have full control over allocation” (INT2, intermediary actor). Local actors remain responsible for service delivery, yet their influence over upstream and downstream processes becomes more limited over time. Booking allocation is often shaped by platform ranking systems or intermediary mediation, while pricing decisions, although still formally set at local level, are repeatedly adjusted in response to online competition, seasonal fluctuations, and differences in listing visibility. Operational authority is thus fragmented across multiple nodes of the tourism value chain rather than concentrated within the community.

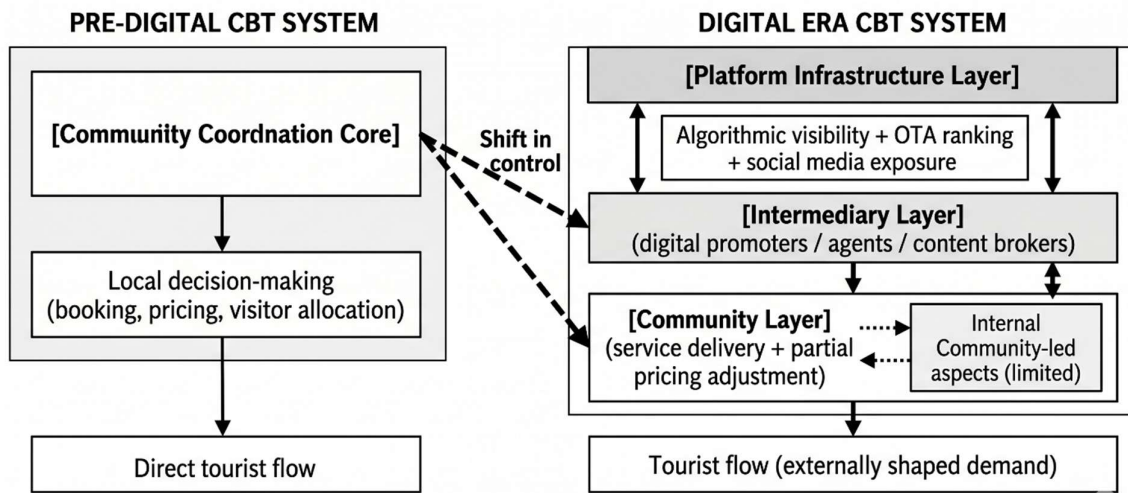
A more substantive shift lies in the gradual externalisation of functions that were previously embedded in community coordination. Visitor allocation, demand sequencing, and market positioning are increasingly influenced by platform

infrastructures operating beyond the governance boundary of the destination. This does not remove community governance entirely, but it places it within a broader system of platform-mediated coordination in which key informational and operational inputs originate outside the local setting.

As a result, governance becomes neither fully local nor fully external, but layered and continuously adjusted in practice. Community actors retain responsibility for execution, yet the conditions under which execution takes place are increasingly shaped by external digital systems. Governance, in this sense, is contingent on platform logics that regulate visibility, transactional flows, and informational hierarchies, often in ways that are not directly observable to local participants.

A conceptual representation of this reconfiguration is illustrated below.

Figure 1. Transition from community governance to platform-mediated governance in CBT



From an analytical perspective, this structure signals a shift away from community-centred coordination towards platform-mediated governance. The key transformation is not simply technological adoption, but a reallocation of decision-making authority from locally embedded mechanisms to externally governed digital infrastructures. This reconfiguration has direct implications for how value is distributed and how sustainability is negotiated in subsequent sections.

4.3. Uneven digital capability and internal stratification

A recurring pattern in the field material is that inequality within CBT does not primarily follow spatial or geographic lines. It is instead produced internally, within the same community, and shaped by how differently actors are able to engage with digital environments. Location or physical resources matter less than the capacity to operate within platform-based systems.

This capacity is unevenly distributed. Some households have developed routines around digital engagement, such as maintaining social media pages, responding to online reviews, or adjusting visual content based on platform feedback:

Table 2. Digital capability and internal stratification in CBT households

Household group	Digital capability	Outcome
H1, H2	Active OTA + social media management	Stable tourist inflow
H3, H4	Partial reliance on intermediaries	Irregular demand
H5	Low/no digital engagement	Minimal direct bookings

“I am not skilled at posting online, so I have to rely on others” (H7, household operator); “Some days we have guests, some days we don’t know why” (H8, household operator). These practices are not always formalised, but they gradually translate into more stable visibility and more consistent tourist flows.

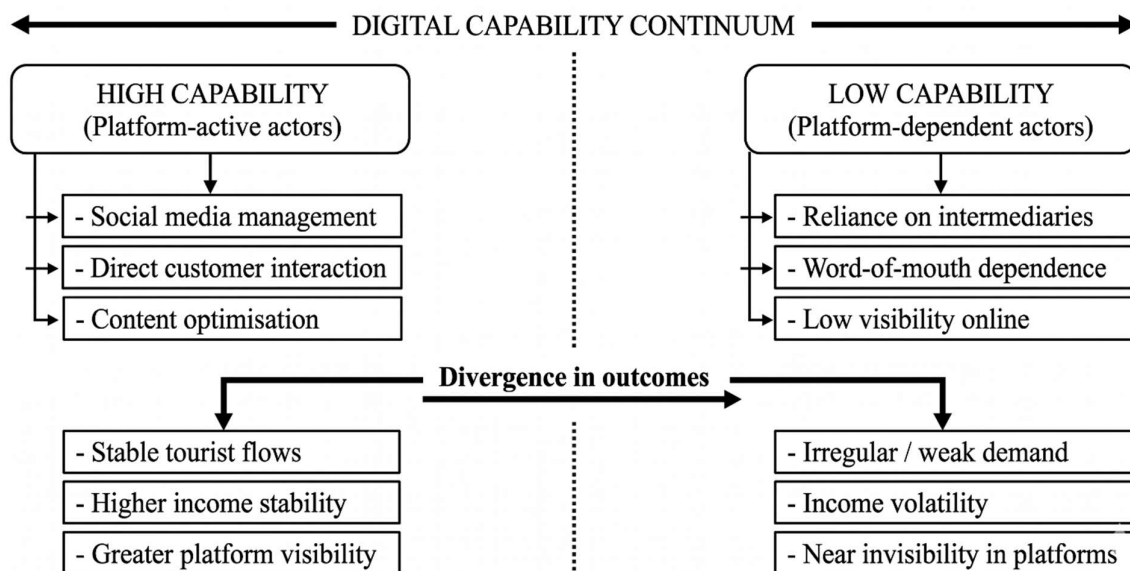
Others operate in a different condition. Their participation in tourism depends more on intermediaries or informal recommendation networks, which tend to be less predictable and more vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations. In these cases, access to visitors is not stable, and demand often arrives indirectly rather than through direct platform exposure.

What is notable is that this divergence cannot be fully explained through differences in service quality. In several instances, tourism products offered by different households are broadly comparable in form and content. Yet their outcomes differ significantly, mainly due to how they are positioned within digital circulation systems. This suggests that value capture is increasingly shaped by informational visibility rather than material differentiation.

Over time, these differences accumulate and produce a form of internal stratification that is not immediately visible through conventional CBT frameworks. The community does not appear divided from the outside, but internally it functions as a layered structure in which digital capability becomes a key point of differentiation in access to tourism flows.

This shifts the nature of inequality. It is no longer primarily a matter of uneven development between destinations, but something that emerges within a single CBT system itself. The distribution of opportunity becomes tied to how actors are incorporated into platform-mediated circulation, which is neither uniform nor fully predictable.

Figure 2. Digital capability and stratification within CBT



In this sense, digital transformation does not simply expand participation in CBT. It reorganises participation along uneven capability lines, producing differentiated positions within what is formally described as a shared community-based system.

4.4. Platform-driven value distribution and leakage

The empirical material suggests that the CBT value chain is no longer fully contained within a locally bounded system of production and exchange. Instead, it is increasingly shaped through platform infrastructures that influence how value is generated, distributed, and eventually captured. In many cases, a noticeable share of tourism revenue does not remain within the destination, but is gradually diverted through commission fees, intermediary arrangements, and platform-based transaction costs.

This movement of value is not always immediately recognised by local actors: *"Every time a booking comes through the app, a commission is deducted, leaving us with much less"* (H2, homestay owner); *"The final price we receive is lower than the direct selling price"* (H5, household operator); *"Intermediaries also take a share, so what remains for us is only a small portion"* (INT1, intermediary actor). It tends to accumulate quietly across different stages of digital mediation. Booking platforms take commissions at the point of transaction, intermediaries retain margins through coordination roles, and visibility mechanisms embedded in platform algorithms influence which actors actually receive demand. These layers do not operate in isolation, and their combined effect is a form of value redistribution that is difficult to trace from the perspective of individual households.

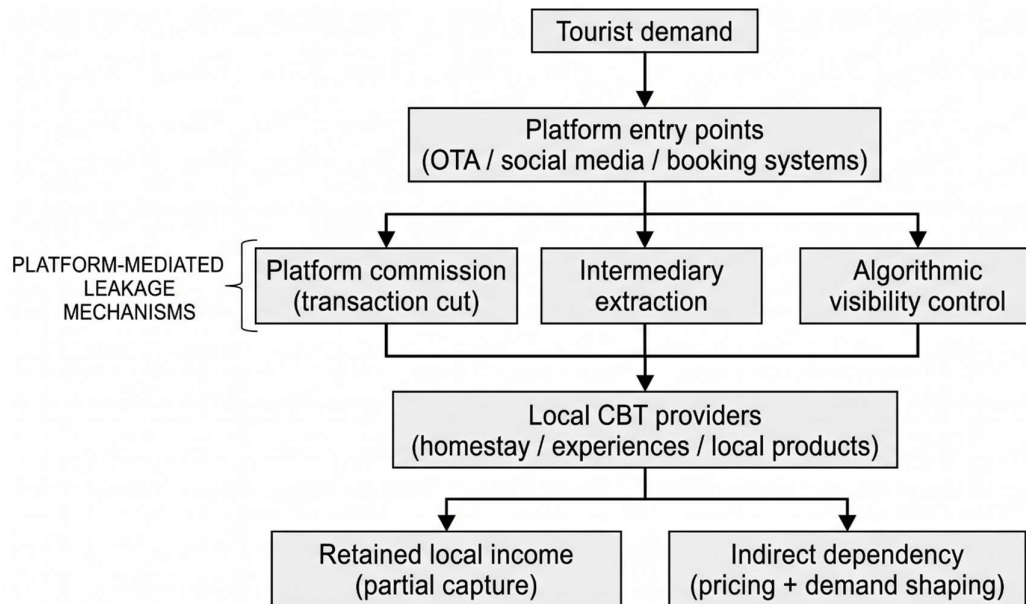
At the same time, CBT actors do not lose control over all economic activities. A portion of value is still generated and retained through direct services such as homestay accommodation, guided experiences, and local product sales. However, even these activities are not entirely independent from platform dynamics, as pricing expectations and visitor volumes increasingly reflect patterns formed through online exposure and comparison.

What emerges is not a fully detached value system, but something more uneven. Value continues to be created locally, yet its capture is distributed across different actors and institutional layers in ways that are not evenly visible. In some cases, earnings remain relatively stable; in others, the same level of activity produces lower returns due to external deductions and visibility-driven demand shifts.

This produces what can be described as a “leaky” value structure, although the leakage is not uniform or linear. It varies depending on how deeply each actor is embedded within platform-mediated circulation. Some households experience higher retention because they are more directly visible online, while others lose value through multiple intermediaries before transactions are completed.

From an analytical perspective, this suggests that sustainability in CBT cannot be assessed only through the presence of local economic activity. It also depends on how value moves across the system, how much is retained locally, and how much is redistributed through external digital infrastructures that structure access to demand.

Figure 3. Platform-mediated value leakage in CBT systems



Taken together, value creation in digitally mediated CBT is neither fully local nor fully external. It operates within a distributed system where platforms function simultaneously as access points and extraction layers, producing an uneven balance between local production and local retention.

4.5. Sustainability as a negotiated and unstable condition

The findings suggest that sustainability in community-based tourism (CBT) does not stabilise into a fixed or internally consistent outcome. It appears instead as something that is continuously negotiated in practice, shaped by ongoing interaction between platform-driven market conditions and how local actors respond to them in real time. Rather than functioning as a clearly defined policy endpoint, sustainability behaves more like a shifting arrangement that is repeatedly adjusted under changing digital pressures.

Digitalisation introduces effects that do not move in a single direction. In some situations, it expands market reach and improves visibility for CBT operators, particularly through platform exposure and more efficient coordination channels. In other situations, it creates stronger dependence on external systems, especially where algorithmic visibility and platform mediation become the primary channels through which demand is generated. These two tendencies do not cancel each other out. They operate in parallel, sometimes reinforcing each other, sometimes pulling in different directions.

What appears more clearly in the field material is that sustainability is not managed through stable planning frameworks. Instead, it is shaped through ongoing adjustments made by local actors as conditions shift. Changes in booking flows, visibility patterns, and online engagement are responded to as they occur, rather than anticipated in advance. In several cases, this leads to short-term adaptations that solve immediate pressures but do not necessarily create longer-term stability: “*Tourism today depends on tourists; when they come online, we follow*” (H3, homestay owner); “*Without online demand, we basically stop operating*” (H6, household operator). To make this pattern clearer, the empirical material can be summarised as follows:

Table 3. Sustainability dynamics in digitally mediated CBT systems

Dimension	Enabling effects of digitalisation	Constraining effects of digitalisation	Resulting sustainability condition
Market access	Expanded reach beyond local geography	Dependence on platform exposure	Uneven and externally conditioned access
Governance capacity	Improved coordination via digital tools	Reduced control over demand flows	Fragmented decision autonomy
Economic stability	Short-term increase in visitor inflows	Algorithmic demand volatility	Income instability and fluctuation
Local agency	Opportunity for digital participation	Requirement to conform to platform logic	Reactive rather than strategic agency
System outcome	Efficiency gains in communication	Structural dependence on intermediaries	Non-equilibrium sustainability state

Across these patterns, sustainability does not appear as a balanced state between economic, social, and environmental dimensions. It is better understood as something that shifts depending on how platform systems structure visibility and how local actors adapt within those constraints. In some moments, CBT actors experience expansion of opportunity; in others, the same systems generate new forms of dependency that are difficult to anticipate or fully control. Sustainability in this sense is not achieved once and then maintained. It is continuously reshaped through the interaction between external platform infrastructures and locally situated responses, often in ways that remain unstable over time.

4.6. Pre-emptive visibility structuring of community-based tourism systems

Across the empirical material, what becomes visible is not a set of separate changes in CBT operations, but a repeated pattern that connects visibility, control, and distribution within the same system. These patterns do not point to isolated issues. They accumulate into a broader structural condition in which community-based tourism is increasingly organised through platform infrastructures that sit partly outside local governance.

This condition does not replace CBT as an organisational form. Most activities remain locally grounded in terms of labour and service delivery. What changes is the way decisions become possible in the first place. Visibility, access to demand, and even pricing signals are increasingly shaped before local actors actively intervene. In some cases, this is only partially recognised at community level; in others, it is already treated as a normal operating condition.

The relationship between expansion and control is where the main tension appears. Market reach expands through digital visibility, yet the mechanisms that generate that visibility are not locally governed. Access to tourists becomes wider, but it is distributed in ways that are uneven and difficult to anticipate. Sustainability continues to be discussed and pursued at community level, but its actual realisation is increasingly shaped through external platform logics rather than internal planning.

These tensions are not temporary distortions. They appear consistently across the data and tend to stabilise rather than resolve. For this reason, they can be understood as structural rather than transitional.

This overall pattern can be summarised as a platform-dependent CBT structure, where three tensions repeatedly appear in different forms:

- a) *Market expansion does not correspond to control over market mechanisms*
- b) *Increased access does not reduce internal inequality*
- c) *Sustainability as discourse does not align with sustainability as practice*

These are not contradictions that emerge occasionally. They reflect how the system now operates under platform conditions, where visibility and access are organised through external infrastructures that are not fully visible to local actors. The synthesis of these dynamics is presented below:

Table 4. Platform-dependent CBT structure: paradoxical configuration

Dimension	Positive trajectory enabled by digitalisation	Countervailing effect	structural	System-level outcome
Market dynamics	Expanded visibility and demand reach	External control of exposure mechanisms		Dependent market access
Governance	Faster coordination and communication	Reduced autonomy over key decisions		Hybrid but externally shaped governance
Equity	New entry opportunities for actors	Uneven digital capability and visibility		Persistent internal stratification
Sustainability	Increased efficiency and awareness	Platform dependence and volatility		Negotiated, unstable sustainability

Overall, the evidence suggests that CBT in the digital era is not destabilised or replaced by platformisation. Instead, it is reconstituted through it. The system continues to function, but under a logic in which platform infrastructures act as both enablers of opportunity and structuring constraints on autonomy and sustainability. The paradox identified here is therefore not a contradiction to be resolved, but a stable operating condition. CBT does not break under digital pressure. Instead, it reorganises around it, producing a system where dependency and opportunity are structurally co-produced.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how community-based tourism (CBT) is being reshaped under conditions of digital platformisation, with particular attention to the tension between sustainability ambitions and platform-mediated tourism systems. The evidence suggests that CBT is no longer operating within a primarily locally governed framework, but within a hybrid configuration where visibility, access, and value distribution are increasingly structured through external digital infrastructures.

A central finding is the redefinition of access. Market entry is no longer primarily determined by physical resources or destination attributes, but by platform visibility. This shift repositions CBT actors within systems of algorithmic circulation that are only partially observable and largely beyond local control. As a result, participation in tourism markets becomes conditional on exposure within platform logics rather than intrinsic service capacity alone.

The study also shows that governance and value capture are progressively decoupled from local coordination structures. While communities remain responsible for service provision, key mechanisms of demand generation and allocation are shaped externally. This produces uneven internal outcomes, including stratification based on digital capability and fragmented value retention across the tourism chain.

Sustainability, in this context, does not emerge as a stable endpoint. It is instead continuously negotiated under conditions of platform dependence, where adaptation often replaces long-term strategic control. The empirical findings

therefore challenge conventional CBT assumptions that link sustainability primarily to local participation and governance autonomy.

Overall, the study contributes an interpretive account of CBT as a platform-dependent system in which opportunity and constraint are co-produced. Rather than displacing community-based tourism, digital infrastructures reconfigure its internal logic, generating a persistent tension between expanded market reach and reduced local control. This reconfiguration also suggests that sustainability frameworks in CBT require reconsideration under conditions where governance and visibility are structurally decoupled.

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