

## EXAMINING EXTERNAL PRESSURES ON INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DESTINATION IN MYANMAR: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

Sustainable tourism in Myanmar faces mounting challenges from political instability, economic volatility, social pressures, and technological limitations. While these PEST factors shape tourism outcomes, limited research has explored how institutional capacity mediates their impact in fragile national contexts. This study examines the interplay between external pressures and institutional responses to understand pathways toward sustainable tourism development in Myanmar. A qualitative research design was employed, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 stakeholders across Myanmar's tourism sector, including policymakers, operators, and community leaders. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis to identify patterns related to PEST factors, institutional capacity, and sustainability outcomes. Findings reveal that political and economic instability are the most critical barriers to tourism development, compounded by labor migration, cultural neglect, and weak technological infrastructure. Despite these challenges, institutional capacity expressed through community engagement, workforce training, and adaptive strategies emerged as a key mediator in mitigating external pressures. Discussion/Implications: The study contributes theoretical insights by demonstrating the mediating role of institutional capacity in volatile environments and provides practical recommendations for strengthening governance frameworks, fostering public-private partnerships, and enhancing technological investment. These implications are relevant for policymakers and practitioners seeking to build resilience and advance sustainable tourism not only in Myanmar but also in similarly fragile contexts.

**Keywords:** Institutional Capacity, Myanmar, PEST Analysis, Resilience, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism.



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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a dynamic and multifaceted industry that is highly sensitive to external macro-environmental conditions. Political, economic, social, and technological (PEST) factors shape tourism opportunities, but they also impose significant disruptions that threaten growth and sustainability (Aguilar, 1967; Causevic & Lynch, 2013; Zhang et al., 2022). These challenges are especially pronounced in developing economies and fragile political environments, where limited resources and instability undermine sectoral resilience (Meyer, 2018; Alam et al., 2022; Ajadi & Ayanlowo, 2025; Charlize et al., 2025).

In Myanmar, the tourism industry has faced compounded pressures, including persistent political instability, economic fluctuations, inadequate technological infrastructure, and widespread migration of skilled labor (Michalon et al., 2019; Oo & Zan, 2020; Zreik, 2024; Asmaningrum et al., 2025). These factors have restricted the sector's competitiveness in the global tourism market and eroded confidence among both investors and tourists (Ayoub, 2020; Boughton et al., 2023; Kuščer et al., 2024; Alkilany et al., 2025). Similar concerns have been noted across Southeast Asia, where weak financial systems and political volatility hinder sustainable tourism growth (Nguyen et al., 2020; Goh et al., 2022; Diaz et al., 2025).

At the same time, the role of institutional capacity the ability of organizations to adapt, coordinate, and implement effective responses emerges as a critical determinant of resilience and long-term sustainability (Orr et al., 2019; Elshaer, 2024; Demon & Santos, 2025). Strengthening institutional capacity through policy reforms, stakeholder collaboration, and capacity-building initiatives provides a potential pathway for mitigating external shocks (Okafor et al., 2021; Friday et al., 2022; Atmojo et al., 2024; Fetmirwati et al., 2025; Islami et al., 2025). Evidence from community-based tourism in Myanmar and other fragile destinations shows that grassroots engagement can enhance resilience and promote inclusive development (Walsh & Zin, 2019; Bozdaglar, 2023; Syngellakis et al., 2023; Hagad et al., 2025).

Although prior studies have examined individual PEST dimensions and their influence on tourism, the literature offers limited insight into the mediating role of institutional capacity in contexts of fragility (Đurkin & Frleta, 2021; Bhuiyan et al., 2023; Hafiz et al., 2025). Moreover, little research has addressed how these external pressures collectively shape sustainable tourism in Myanmar, where political and economic volatility create particularly acute challenges (Clifton et al., 2018; Yuniarti, 2024). This knowledge gap restricts the ability of policymakers and stakeholders to design evidence-based strategies for resilience (UNCTAD, 2025; World Bank, 2025).

To address this gap, the present study investigates how PEST factors influence institutional capacity in Myanmar's tourism sector and explores how institutions mediate these external pressures to foster sustainable tourism outcomes. The study adopts a qualitative thematic analysis of stakeholder perspectives, contributing both theoretical and practical insights into resilience-building in fragile tourism contexts. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Political, Economic, Social, and Technological (PEST) factors influence the tourism industry in Myanmar?
2. How do institutions within the tourism sector mediate these external influences through capacity-building efforts and adaptive strategies?
3. How do external pressures, in combination with institutional responses, affect the development of sustainable tourism destinations in Myanmar?

This research is significant because it addresses the unique vulnerabilities of Myanmar's tourism sector ranging from weak governance and economic constraints to technological limitations and labor migration. By analyzing the interplay between external pressures and institutional responses, the study provides actionable recommendations for strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing community engagement, and promoting sustainable practices. Beyond Myanmar, the findings contribute to global debates on tourism resilience, offering transferable insights for other tourism-dependent economies facing similar challenges (Serio et al., 2024; Flórez et al., 2025; Galli et al., 2025; Jackson, M. M., & Alfaki, 2025; Klinaku et al., 2025).

Building on this foundation, it is important to situate the study within existing scholarship. Prior research has widely applied the PEST framework to understand how political, economic, social, and technological conditions shape tourism opportunities and constraints. A review of this literature provides

the theoretical basis for examining how these external pressures interact with institutional capacity in fragile contexts such as Myanmar.

### **The PEST Framework and Its Application in Tourism**

Tourism is strongly influenced by external macro-environmental factors that arise from the political, economic, social, and technological context (Đurkin & Frleta, 2019; Lytvyn, 2022; Linh et al., 2025). One of the most widely applied approaches for analyzing these external influences is the PEST framework, first introduced by Aguilar (1967). The framework enables researchers and policymakers to assess how such external drivers shape tourism planning and development (Causevic & Lynch, 2013; Alam et al., 2022; Mor, 2025). Its application is especially relevant in developing and politically fragile contexts, where external shocks often determine sectoral resilience and competitiveness (Rafdinal, 2021; Zreik, 2024). In Myanmar, these factors affect not only tourist arrivals but also institutional responses and the capacity to achieve sustainable tourism outcomes (Ayoub, 2020; Boughton et al., 2023; Le & Aye, 2025).

#### **Political Factors**

A stable political environment is essential for tourism growth. When peace and security prevail, tourists perceive destinations as safe, and tourism organizations can plan for the future (Akbar et al., 2019; Meyer, 2018). Conversely, instability disrupts arrivals, investment, and governance structures. Myanmar's political crisis illustrates this challenge, where conflict and weak state capacity have undermined long-term development prospects (Yuniarti, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2025; Nisa et al., 2025). Zhao et al. (2025) argue that when public institutions lack coordination, the entire tourism system becomes fragile. Comparative cases reinforce this concern: in Colombia, political conflicts weakened local governance and jeopardized community tourism projects (Shenk, 2022; Flórez et al., 2025; Rahajo & Kumyat, 2025), while in South Africa, instability in governance directly constrained tourism growth (Meyer, 2018). These examples demonstrate that institutional mediation in fragile environments is conditional on political stability and legitimacy (Detotto et al., 2021).

#### **Economic Factors**

Economic conditions also play a decisive role in shaping tourism development. High inflation, currency depreciation, and reduced foreign investment discourage both entrepreneurs and tourists (Kuščer et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2020). In Myanmar, the political crisis has amplified economic instability, leaving many tourism projects underfunded (Clifton et al., 2018; Boughton et al., 2023). Zhao et al. (2025) emphasize that a supportive business environment is a prerequisite for effective institutional interventions. Goh et al. (2022) also note that fluctuations in currency exchange rates significantly reduce the number of international tourists, while Gupta et al. (2021) and Khan et al. (2020) highlight the importance of attracting foreign direct investment for sustaining tourism infrastructure. Recent studies confirm that institutions can partially offset economic instability through localized initiatives such as community-based tourism (Hizmi & Junaid, 2023), though these remain constrained by weak fiscal and financial governance.

#### **Social Factors**

Tourism sustainability also depends on the involvement and acceptance of local communities. If local stakeholders feel excluded or distrustful of institutions, sustainable tourism development is difficult to achieve (Setokoe & Ramukumba, 2020; Bozdaglar, 2023; Saindah, 2025). Myanmar's efforts to expand community-based tourism (CBT) illustrate both potential and limitations. Walsh and Zin (2019) showed that CBT in rural Myanmar contributed to cultural preservation but suffered from weak governance and low community trust. Broader research echoes this concern: Sarr et al. (2020) and Đurkin & Frleta (2021) found that emotional and social factors such as confusion, fear, and uncertainty reduce community participation in tourism. Sarr et al. (2020) and Đurkin & Frleta, (2021) similarly argue that community trust and empowerment are central to sustainable tourism. Strengthening institutional–community partnerships is therefore essential for building resilience and ensuring equitable benefits from tourism initiatives (Syngellakis et al., 2023).

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### Technological Factors

In the modern era, tourism is increasingly dependent on digital tools such as online booking platforms, digital marketing, and mobile applications (Yang & Zhang, 2022; Kumar et al., 2023). However, Myanmar continues to face significant technological challenges, including limited internet access, frequent power outages, and outdated ICT infrastructure (Michalon et al., 2019; Oo & Zan, 2020). These deficiencies constrain data collection, visitor management, and destination promotion. Similar challenges have been reported in India's northeastern states, where weak digital infrastructure undermined ecotourism potential (Barman et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the growing adoption of digital payments and booking systems indicates gradual progress (Pahlevansharif et al., 2019; Prados-Castillo et al., 2023). As Serio et al. (2024) and Galli et al. (2025) note, investment in ICT infrastructure and the alignment of digital transformation with environmental and social sustainability objectives are increasingly becoming decisive factors in global tourism competitiveness.

### Institutional Capacity in Tourism

Institutional capacity refers to the ability of government agencies and related organizations to plan, make decisions, and solve problems effectively (Kassu, 2014; Detotto et al., 2021). In developing countries, institutional performance is often constrained by limited resources, poor training, and weak inter-agency cooperation (Gupta et al., 2021; Friday et al., 2022). In Myanmar, tourism-related institutions such as regional tourism committees frequently operate in isolation without adequate coordination or support mechanisms (Walsh & Zin, 2019). Toh et al. (2024) emphasized that despite the presence of multiple tourism actors, collaboration remains fragmented, creating confusion and slowing sectoral progress.

Comparative studies highlight similar patterns elsewhere. For example, institutional fragmentation in Timor-Leste has weakened ecotourism development, underscoring the importance of strengthening inter-institutional collaboration (Rideng et al., 2024). Research in Thailand also demonstrated that community-based tourism (CBT) adaptation during crises depended heavily on institutional facilitation and capacity-building (Syngellakis et al., 2023). Where public-private partnerships are weak, sustainable tourism systems are difficult to sustain (Hu et al., 2021). Bhuiyan et al. (2023) further explain that coordinated partnerships between public agencies and the private sector are essential for building resilience in fragile environments. In Myanmar, however, political instability, low public trust, and limited funding continue to restrict institutional performance and undermine collaborative tourism development (Clifton et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2025).

### Sustainable Tourism Destination

The concept of sustainability in tourism is rooted in the Brundtland Report, which emphasized meeting present needs without compromising future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Hizmi & Junaid, 2023). Sustainable tourism requires balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social equity, a balance that is particularly pressing in fragile destinations such as Myanmar. While the country is rich in culture and natural resources, political and economic instability has limited the sector's ability to implement sustainability-oriented strategies (Michalon et al., 2019; Alam et al., 2022).

Community engagement is widely recognized as essential for achieving sustainable tourism outcomes. Studies confirm that when local stakeholders are actively involved in tourism planning, benefits are distributed more equitably across economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Wijaya et al., 2021; Ismatillaevna et al., 2023). Myanmar's gradual shift toward CBT models aligns with responsible tourism and social equity principles (Toh et al., 2024). These initiatives foster local ownership, cultural preservation, and resilience in times of crisis. Evidence from Cambodia and Laos similarly demonstrates that community empowerment is central to tourism sustainability in Southeast Asia (Sarr et al., 2020; Syngellakis et al., 2023).

At the same time, ecotourism and cultural tourism in Myanmar must address threats to biodiversity, water resources, and pollution (Kumar & Sheryazdanova, 2021; Kumar et al., 2023). Strategies for sustainable tourism development should therefore optimize economic opportunities while minimizing environmental risks (Serio et al., 2024; Galli et al., 2025). Scholars have also emphasized the importance of institutionalizing sustainability within tourism planning to ensure that short-term gains do not undermine long-term resilience (Rideng et al., 2024; Flórez et al., 2025). Recent bibliometric studies

indicate that sustainability-driven approaches in tourism are increasingly being recognized as a central research agenda, especially in contexts of crisis (Sampaio et al., 2022).

In Myanmar, achieving sustainable tourism requires a holistic approach that integrates community engagement, institutional strengthening, environmental stewardship, and economic growth. Such a balance will allow the sector to grow while safeguarding cultural heritage and natural resources for future generations.

### Gaps in Literature

Although substantial research exists on the PEST framework and its application in tourism, and while there are studies on institutional capacity and sustainable tourism, very limited scholarship explores the interaction among PEST factors, institutional capacities, and sustainable tourism in a regional context (Đurkin & Frleta, 2021; Rideng et al., 2024). Few have examined how institutions mediate external pressures such as political turmoil, economic crises, or technological barriers in achieving long-term sustainability within the tourism sector (Causevic & Lynch, 2013; Sampaio et al., 2022). In fragile contexts, institutional roles often remain underdeveloped, leading to gaps in resilience and adaptive capacity (Flórez et al., 2025).

In Myanmar, these challenges are even more acute given the country's fragile political condition, economic volatility, and poorly developed technological infrastructure (Boughton et al., 2023; Yuniarti, 2024). Despite increased attention to national and regional analyses of sustainable tourism, the literature provides little insight into how institutions adapt to, or contribute under, sustained external pressures through capacity-building initiatives. Addressing this knowledge gap is critical, as institutional capacity determines whether external shocks translate into collapse or resilience. This study therefore contributes by presenting a thematic analysis of PEST factors influencing institutional capacity in Myanmar's tourism sector and examining how institutions develop resilient and sustainable tourism. It also offers theoretical implications for understanding how tensions between institutional fields and policy space shape tourism development, while providing policymakers and tourism institutions with actionable insights specific to fragile contexts.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study (Figure 1) demonstrates the dynamic relationship between external drivers, institutional capacity, and sustainable tourism destinations. Political, Economic, Social, and Technological (PEST) factors function as external forces that exert pressures on tourism organizations, introducing challenges such as political instability, economic fluctuations, labor migration, and technological limitations (Kassu, 2014; Friday et al., 2022). These pressures influence Institutional Capacity, which acts as a mediator by enabling organizations to absorb shocks and adapt through capacity-building initiatives, workforce development, and operational improvements. Strong institutional capacity supports risk anticipation, community outreach, and stability, fostering resilience against external pressures.

This mediation ultimately shapes the development of Sustainable Tourism Destinations, which prioritize environmental, economic, and social benefits for host communities. The framework sequentially links external PEST forces to institutional behaviors and tourism outcomes, emphasizing resilience and proactive engagement as critical to achieving long-term sustainability. By grounding the framework in existing governance and institutional theories while adapting it to Myanmar's fragile context, this study underscores the importance of balancing external stimuli with institutional capacity-building to thrive in volatile environments. Figure 1 illustrates this conceptual framework, showing how PEST factors influence institutional capacity, which in turn mediates the development of sustainable tourism destinations.

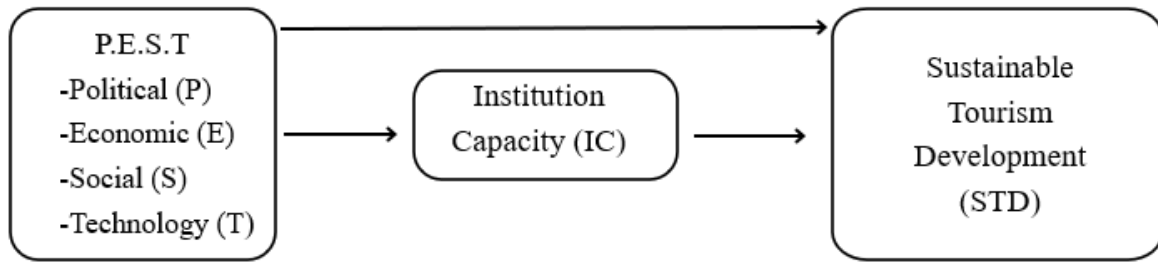


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study (Developed by the Author)

**RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the interplay between Political, Economic, Social, and Technological (PEST) factors, institutional capacity, and sustainable tourism development in Myanmar. Qualitative methods were chosen because they enable an in-depth understanding of stakeholder perceptions and institutional responses in fragile contexts where quantitative data are often limited or unreliable. A thematic analysis approach was applied to capture patterns within stakeholder narratives and to build a nuanced interpretation of how institutional capacity mediates external pressures.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 20 participants from Myanmar’s tourism sector, including policymakers, tour operators, licensed guides, regulators, business leaders, consultants, professors, and NGO specialists. Inclusion criteria required that participants (i) had at least three years of direct engagement in tourism-related roles in Myanmar, (ii) were actively involved in policy, regulation, operations, or tourism workforce training, and (iii) consented to a 30-60-minute interview. Exclusion criteria applied to individuals with less than one year of sector involvement, those based outside Myanmar, or roles unrelated to tourism decision-making. This approach ensured a diverse sample capturing both strategic and operational perspectives, and data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged. The sample size of 20 was deemed sufficient because data saturation the point at which no new themes emerge was achieved, consistent with established qualitative research standards (Francis et al., 2010).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between September 2024 and October 2024. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes and was either face-to-face or via online platforms (e.g., Zoom) depending on participant availability. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions structured around three thematic areas: (1) the influence of PEST factors, (2) institutional responses and capacity-building, and (3) pathways to sustainable tourism. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

To ensure transparency and alignment between constructs and data collection, an instrument grid was developed Table 1.

Table 1. Instrument Grid for Data Collection

Construct/Theme	Example Interview Question	Expected Insight
Political Factors	“How has political instability or policy changes affected tourism operations in your experience?”	Impact of governance, safety, and political stability on tourism.
Economic Factors	“What economic challenges or opportunities influence your ability to sustain tourism activities?”	Resource availability, investment, inflation, and financial constraints.
Social Factors	“How do community attitudes, labor migration, or cultural preservation affect tourism sustainability?”	Local trust, social participation, skilled labor availability, and cultural heritage protection.
Technological Factors	“What role does technology play in supporting or limiting tourism in Myanmar?”	Infrastructure quality, ICT adoption, digital tools, and communication.

Construct/Theme	Example Interview Question	Expected Insight
Institutional Capacity	“In what ways do institutions help manage or adapt to these challenges?”	Capacity-building, stakeholder collaboration, resilience strategies, and adaptive governance.
Sustainable Tourism Outcomes	“What strategies do you believe could ensure tourism remains sustainable in Myanmar?”	Recommendations for policy, practice, and community-based approaches.

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. First, transcripts were repeatedly read for familiarization, noting initial impressions. Second, semantic codes were generated inductively, such as “policy volatility,” “labor migration,” and “ICT outages.” Third, codes were collated into candidate themes, including political challenges, capacity-building, and community engagement. These themes were then reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. Fifth, themes were refined, defined, and named to capture their essence, such as “Institutional Mediation” or “Community Engagement.” Finally, themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework. This structured approach allowed systematic interpretation and ensured that the findings remained closely tied to the study objectives.

To ensure transparency and alignment between constructs, data collection, and coding, an instrument grid and sample codebook were developed Table 2. This framework demonstrates how PEST factors, institutional capacity, and sustainability outcomes were operationalized and analyzed through thematic coding.

Table 2. Instrument Grid and Coding Framework

Construct/Theme (Parent Code)	Subcode	Example Interview Question	Expected Insight	Example Quote from Data
Political Factors	Policy Volatility	“How has political instability or policy changes affected tourism operations?”	Impact of governance, safety, investor confidence	“Our business plans are regularly thrown into disarray because the political situation is unpredictable.”
	Safety & Security	“How do you perceive safety conditions affecting tourism?”	Perceptions of tourist safety and international image	“Tourists are unwilling to come due to safety concerns, even domestic tourists feel insecure.”
Economic Factors	Inflation & Currency	“What economic challenges influence your ability to sustain operations?”	Effect of inflation, devaluation, affordability	“The cost of living has risen sharply, making it hard to maintain competitive pricing.”
	Investment Decline	“How has the investment climate affected tourism?”	Funding shortages and lack of investor trust	“Foreign investors hesitate to invest in tourism infrastructure because of the political climate.”
Social Factors	Labor Migration	“What impact has migration of skilled workers had?”	Talent shortages, service quality	“The best tour guides and managers have left the country, and it’s becoming harder to replace them.”
	Cultural Preservation	“How are cultural heritage and	Local engagement,	“There’s no awareness or initiative for cultural

Construct/Theme (Parent Code)	Subcode	Example Interview Question	Expected Insight	Example Quote from Data
Technological Factors	Infrastructure Limitations	community roles reflected in tourism?"	heritage protection	preservation, which is essential for sustainable tourism." "Frequent power outages and poor internet connectivity make it nearly impossible to leverage technology effectively."
		"What role does technology play in supporting tourism?"	Power supply, internet connectivity, ICT tools	"Digital payment systems and online booking platforms are beginning to gain traction."
Institutional Capacity	Innovation Potential	"Have you seen any emerging digital tools in use?"	Early adoption of payment systems, booking platforms	"Digital payment systems and online booking platforms are beginning to gain traction."
	Capacity-Building	"What role do institutions play in workforce readiness?"	Training, skill development, resilience programs	"We focus on training new staff to fill the gaps left by those who have left the industry."
Sustainable Tourism Outcomes	Community Engagement	"How do institutions involve local communities in tourism?"	Partnerships, CBT models, co-management	"By involving local communities in tourism activities, we can create a win-win situation."
		Resilience	"What strategies could ensure tourism sustainability in Myanmar?"	Institutional resilience, small-scale sustainability projects

The use of this coding framework enhanced the rigor of analysis by ensuring consistency across transcripts and transparency in theme development. Combined with triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling, this approach strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings.

To enhance the trustworthiness of findings, the study adopted multiple strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through triangulation by comparing insights across stakeholder groups (e.g., policymakers vs. private operators) and by conducting peer debriefing with a second researcher who reviewed coding and thematic structures. Reflexivity was maintained through a reflexive journal that documented assumptions and analytic decisions, minimizing researcher bias. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, memos, and theme development, allowing for transparency and reproducibility. In addition, brief summary findings were shared with selected participants for verification, which provided an additional layer of validation.

All participants provided informed consent and were assured confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Given Myanmar's sensitive political environment, special care was taken to avoid coercion, leading questions, or identification of participants that could place them at risk.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings, derived through thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews, illuminate how external macro-environmental pressures (PEST) interact with institutional capacity to shape sustainable

tourism development in Myanmar. Results are organized by the three research questions (RQs) and integrated with interpretation and implications.

A total of 20 participants were interviewed, representing both public and private stakeholders in Myanmar’s tourism sector. The sample included policymakers, regulators, professors, tour operators, general managers, consultants, licensed guides, NGO specialists, and sales executives. This diversity ensured perspectives from both strategic decision-makers and operational staff. Interview durations ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, conducted either face-to-face (17 participants) or online (3 participants). Table 3 summarizes the participant characteristics.

Table 3. Participant roles, interview durations, and insights contributed to the thematic analysis of external pressures and institutional capacity in Myanmar's tourism sector. (Author’s own compliance)

Position	Number of Participants	Interview Duration	Key Insights Provided
General Manager/Hoteliers	3	45 minutes each	Operational challenges and managerial strategies.
Director/Tour Operators	5	30–45 minutes	Tourism planning, market dynamics, and external pressures.
Licensed Guides	2	30 minutes each	On-ground interactions with tourists and operational constraints.
Professors (Government Colleges)	2	30–45 minutes	Academic perspectives and policy-oriented views on sustainable tourism.
NGO Tourism HR Specialists	2	45 minutes each	Workforce destination and labor market challenges.
Sales Executive	1	45 minutes	Customer engagement and marketing-related challenges.
Consultants	2	45 minutes each	External evaluations of institutional strategies and market positioning.
Principal (Private Sector)	1	45 minutes	Private sector’s role in sustainable tourism and institutional collaboration.
Public Sector Regulators	2	30–60 minutes	Policy implementation, governance challenges, and institutional frameworks.

*RQ1: How do Political, Economic, Social, and Technological (PEST) factors influence the tourism industry in Myanmar?*

**Political Factors (Policy Volatility, Safety & Security)**

Political instability emerged as the most significant barrier. The coup, civil unrest, and frequent policy changes disrupted operations and eroded both tourist and investor confidence: *“Tourists are unwilling to come due to safety concerns, and even domestic tourists feel insecure traveling within the country.”* These findings align with Zhao et al. (2025), who showed that political uncertainty in Myanmar undermined the effectiveness of tourism institutions. Comparative evidence from other fragile destinations confirms that political turbulence causes long-term reputational damage and reduces tourism competitiveness (Causevic & Lynch, 2013; Yuniarti, 2024). Similarly, Flórez et al. (2025) highlighted how institutional fragility in conflict-affected Colombia weakened ecotourism sustainability. Rebuild governance credibility, reduce ad-hoc policy shocks, and grant tourism bodies sufficient autonomy to maintain continuity during crises.

**Economic Factors (Inflation & Currency, Investment Decline)**

Macroeconomic volatility compounded political instability. Inflation, currency depreciation, and declining foreign investment undermined sector competitiveness and innovation: *“The cost of living has risen sharply, and this makes it difficult for us to maintain competitive pricing in the market.”* These findings are consistent with Bhuiyan et al. (2023), who showed that macroeconomic instability reduces tourism growth in developing economies. Myanmar’s situation mirrors broader Southeast Asian patterns where weak financial systems exacerbate business vulnerability (Nguyen et al., 2020). Exchange-rate

volatility also directly reduces international arrivals and investment inflows (Goh et al., 2022). Introduce targeted fiscal support, improve access to financing, and strengthen public–private partnerships to stabilize firms and encourage long-term investment.

### **Social Factors (Labor Migration, Cultural Preservation)**

Labor migration and weak cultural preservation were pressing challenges. The loss of skilled workers reduced service quality, while cultural heritage protection received limited institutional attention: *“The best tour guides and managers have left the country, and it’s becoming harder to replace them with skilled staff.”* These findings support research showing that community trust and social capital are central to sustaining tourism initiatives (Sarr et al., 2020; Durkin & Frleta, 2021). Evidence from Myanmar’s river dolphin tourism project also demonstrates that weak institutional support limits long-term sustainability (Walsh & Zin, 2019). Strengthen workforce training and cultural preservation initiatives, while engaging communities as active partners in tourism planning and delivery.

### **Technological Factors (Infrastructure Limitations, Innovation Potential)**

Poor ICT infrastructure, limited internet penetration, and frequent power outages hindered modernization. Respondents nevertheless recognized gradual adoption of digital payment systems and booking platforms: *“Digital payment systems and online booking platforms are beginning to gain traction, but the infrastructure needs significant improvement.”* These findings are consistent with studies on Myanmar and comparable regions, where technological limitations restrict competitiveness (Oo & Zan, 2020; Yang & Zhang, 2022). Barman et al. (2024) showed similar barriers in India’s northeast, where infrastructure gaps slowed ecotourism despite innovation. The risks of failing to integrate digital transformation for long-term destination competitiveness are also emphasized by Kumar et al. (2023) and Serio et al. (2024). Upgrade national ICT infrastructure, promote digital adoption across tourism enterprises, and provide training to close the digital skills gap.

*RQ2: How do institutions mediate these external influences through capacity-building and adaptive strategies?*

### **Political Mediation (Capacity-Building)**

Institutions attempted policy advocacy and workforce readiness programs, yet political interference restricted their effectiveness: *“The institutions themselves are constrained by political influence, limiting their ability to lead effectively.”* These findings support Detotto et al. (2021), who emphasized that institutional effectiveness in fragile states depends heavily on political legitimacy and stability. Establish protected operational mandates and crisis-coordination mechanisms that allow institutions to sustain core functions even during political upheaval.

### **Economic Mediation (Community Engagement, CBT Partnerships)**

Community-based tourism (CBT) projects were promoted as adaptive strategies to strengthen local livelihoods: *“By involving local communities in tourism activities, we can create a win-win situation, even during tough economic times.”* These finding echoes recommendations that grassroots initiatives can help sustain tourism during financial crises (Hizmi & Junaid, 2023). However, persistent constraints lack of financial support and limited cross-sector collaboration restrict outcomes, consistent with Gupta et al. (2021) and Friday et al. (2022). Scale CBT through clear benefit-sharing frameworks, blended finance models, and stronger coordination between government, private operators, and communities.

### **Social Mediation (Capacity-Building; Cultural Preservation)**

Institutions provided in-house training and community engagement programs to counter labor shortages and promote cultural preservation: *“We focus on training new staff to fill the gaps left by those who have left the industry.”* These findings align with regional evidence showing that empowerment of communities helps preserve authenticity and improve participation (Setokoe & Ramukumba, 2020; Sarr et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of such initiatives in Myanmar remains undermined by wider political and economic volatility (Walsh & Zin, 2019). Combine workforce skilling with community trust-building and ensure sustainable financing for heritage protection initiatives.

### Technological Mediation (Innovation Potential)

Institutions attempted hybrid manual-digital systems despite systemic limitations: *“Digital technology is essential for future growth, but we need institutional support to make it accessible and functional.”* This demonstrates adaptive capacity but highlights the structural digital divide. The need for institutions to support digital transformation is consistent with findings from Myanmar (Oo & Zan, 2020; Yang & Zhang, 2022), bibliometric reviews (Kumar et al., 2023), and recent policy-driven cases in Italy (Serio et al., 2024). Facilitate access to digital tools through shared platforms, establish interoperability standards, and expand training on digital practices in tourism enterprises.

*RQ3: How do external pressures, in combination with institutional responses, affect the development of sustainable tourism destinations in Myanmar?*

Findings reveal that political instability and economic fragility remain the most critical barriers to sustainability. While institutional strategies such as CBT, workforce training, and incremental digital adoption provide partial resilience, they cannot fully overcome systemic instability. As one participant summarized: *“By involving local communities and focusing on small-scale sustainable projects, we can maintain some level of progress despite the broader instability.”*

These results support the perspective of institutional capacity as a conditional mediator. Institutions can buffer external shocks through adaptive strategies but cannot achieve systemic resilience without stable governance and financial systems (Kassu, 2014; Friday et al., 2022; Flórez et al., 2025). Align institutional capacity-building with national governance reforms and macroeconomic stabilization to ensure long-term sustainable tourism development.

The findings of this study highlight several key actions required to strengthen Myanmar’s tourism sector under conditions of fragility. **Governance Reform:** Political interference must be reduced, and institutional autonomy strengthened to enable tourism bodies to function effectively and build public trust. **Economic Support:** Stabilizing the sector requires targeted fiscal relief, investment incentives, and stronger public-private partnerships that improve financial resilience and attract sustainable capital. **Community Engagement:** Expanding community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives and strengthening cultural preservation efforts can restore public confidence and ensure that local communities benefit directly from tourism activities. **Digital Infrastructure:** Investment in ICT upgrades, digital platforms, and workforce training is essential to modernize tourism operations and close the digital divide. **Integrated Policy Framework:** Effective collaboration across government agencies, private sector actors, and NGOs is necessary to build a more resilient and sustainable tourism ecosystem.

This study was limited to a qualitative dataset of 20 participants, which, while sufficient for saturation, restricts generalizability. Future research should employ mixed-methods designs, combining thematic analysis with quantitative modeling (e.g., PLS-SEM) to test causal pathways between PEST factors, institutional capacity, and sustainable tourism outcomes. Comparative studies across other fragile states in Southeast Asia would also deepen understanding of institutional mediation under external pressures. This study demonstrates that Myanmar’s tourism sector is shaped by political instability, economic fragility, social challenges, and technological deficits, with institutional capacity mediating these pressures. While institutions play a critical buffering role through training, CBT, and adaptive strategies, their effectiveness is limited by systemic instability. Theoretically, the research contributes by positioning institutional capacity as a conditional mediator in fragile contexts. Practically, it offers actionable recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to enhance resilience, sustainability, and long-term competitiveness in Myanmar’s tourism industry.

### CONCLUSION

This study examined how political, economic, social, and technological (PEST) factors affect Myanmar’s tourism sector and how institutional capacity mediates these pressures to support sustainable tourism development. The findings identified political instability and economic fragility as the most critical barriers, while labor migration, weak cultural preservation, and technological deficits further limited the sector’s resilience and competitiveness. By addressing the research questions, the study demonstrated three key points. First (RQ1), PEST factors directly and collectively constrain the tourism industry, with political and economic instability exerting the strongest effects. Second (RQ2), institutions respond to these challenges through capacity-building programs, community-based tourism initiatives, and gradual adoption of digital tools, though these efforts remain partial and resource-constrained. Third (RQ3), the combination of external pressures and limited institutional mediation produces a fragile and

conditional trajectory toward sustainability, where progress is heavily dependent on broader political and economic stability. Theoretically, the study contributes by advancing the concept of institutional capacity as a conditional mediator: institutions can buffer external shocks, but their effectiveness is contingent upon governance legitimacy, financial stability, and supportive policy environments. This perspective extends institutional theory in fragile contexts by showing that mediation is necessary but insufficient, highlighting how institutions in volatile environments may sustain limited resilience without achieving long-term transformation. In sum, Myanmar's tourism sector faces intertwined political, economic, social, and technological disruptions that weaken its sustainability prospects. Institutions play an essential but limited role in mediating these pressures, demonstrating both their importance and their constraints. This research enriches theoretical understanding of institutional mediation in tourism and provides broader insights into the limits of resilience-building in politically and economically fragile environments, while offering a foundation for future comparative studies across other fragile states.

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### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Thet Lwin Toh contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, and formal analysis of the study, as well as preparing the original draft of the manuscript. Amiya Bhaumik provided validation, supervision, and critical review and editing of the manuscript. Midhun Chakkaravarthy contributed to the review and editing of the paper. Arkar Htet was responsible for the investigation and also contributed to the review and editing of the manuscript.

### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

### USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the generation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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