







KNOWLEDGE, TRUST AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS: A SOCIAL EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVE ON RESIDENTS' SUPPORT FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Citation: Khalifa, G.S.A., Albeshri, M., Abdel-Aziz, M.E.S., Elkhwesky, Z., Nair, B.B., Almuharrami, R.S.A., Aldhaheeri, M.A.A., & Alshehhi, K.S.R. (2026). Knowledge, trust and perceived benefits: A social exchange perspective on residents' support for tourism development. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 65(2), 798–811. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.65217-1722>

Abstract: Tourism has become a cornerstone of the United Arab Emirates' national strategy for economic diversification, particularly in emerging destinations such as Al Ain, which is increasingly positioned as a cultural eco-tourism hub. Despite substantial government investments, the long-term success of tourism initiatives relies heavily on the support of residents. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study investigates how residents' knowledge of tourism development (KT) and trust in governmental decisions (TGD) shape their perceived benefits of tourism (PB) and support for tourism development (STD). A structured online survey yielded 378 valid responses from residents of Al Ain. Constructs were measured using validated Likert-scale instrument, and partial Least Squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test proposed relationships. The findings reveal that KT and TGD significantly and positively influence PB and STD, with PB playing a critical mediating role in transforming knowledge and trust into behavioral support. Notably, the direct path from KT to STD was insignificant, underscoring the importance of perceived advantages as a psychological mechanism linking awareness to support. The model explained 58.3% of the variance in PB and 69.2% in STD, indicating substantial explanatory power. Additionally, mediation analysis revealed that both TGD and PB act as significant mediators, illuminating the pathways through which knowledge and trust shape community backing for tourism advancement. Theoretical contributions of the study lie in extending SET to incorporate cognitive (Knowledge) and institutional (trust) antecedents, offering a more nuanced understanding of resident response to tourism development. Particularly, the findings underline the need for policymakers to prioritize transparent communication, resident education, and participatory decision making to enhance community endorsement of tourism initiatives. Tailored awareness campaigns that emphasize both economic and non-economic benefits can foster stronger alignment between residents and tourism growth objectives.

Keywords: tourism development, Social Exchange Theory, community engagement, residents' support, public trust, perceived benefits, UAE

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has solidified itself as a strategic cornerstone in the UAE's efforts to diversify away from oil dependency. According to (WTTC), the sector's contribution to national GDP rose from AED220billion in 2023- equivalent to 11.7% of GDP- to AED 257.3 billion in 2024, representing 13% of the economy and making a 3.2% increase year on year (Gulf Today, 2024, WAM, 2025). Al Ain, recently named the Gulf Capital of Tourism in 2025, is an increasingly important asset in the UAE's tourism expansion, with widespread acclaim for its cultural heritage, ecological diversity, and adventure tourism products (Khalifa, Alkheyi, et al., 2025; Al Rousan et al., 2024).

As tourism initiatives grow under frameworks like the UAE Tourism Strategy 2031 and the National Tourism Charter, community engagement locally becomes critical for the sustained success of any venture (WAM, 2025). Community support is linked to tourist growth; hence locals' perspectives on tourism growth must be studied (Ionescu & Popescu, 2024). Since local participation is crucial to tourism development, scholars, policymakers, and service providers can learn how residents view tourism impacts to better develop tourism in a community (Mehran et al., 2014). Considering local knowledge helps governments promote tourism in their communities. The growth of the tourism business depends on strong societal support for the industry (Alamineh et al., 2023).

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Residents' trust and support for governmental tourism development are dependent upon the extent to which their perceptions are properly taken into account (Kanwal et al., 2020). Public trust in government is defined as the conviction held by citizens that some aspect of the governmental system will lead to what is desired even in the absence of constant oversight (Miller & Listhaug, 1990). Trust is necessary for successful administration because it enables a government to retain its effective legitimacy and authority in making decisions (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Alharthi et al., 2019; Alkathiri et al., 2019). Although there is an increasing interest in developing tourism in emerging destinations, there is a dearth of thorough insights in literature regarding the impact of knowledge on the trust that underpins the planning and execution of tourist initiatives in tourism destinations. Thus, there is an urgent need for research that tackles these issues and offers insightful information to scholars, residents, policy officials, and tourist promoters.

This study aims to determine how residents' understanding of tourist development influences their trust in government decisions in the context of tourism, and how this, in turn, shapes residents' perceptions and support for tourism development in the UAE. The UAE exemplifies a distinctive environment for tourists' advancement, marked by swift expansion and significant governmental investment. Nevertheless, research on this context is scarce (Antwi-Boateng & Al Jaber, 2022). The literature on tourism impact predominantly focuses on residents' perceptions regarding the social, cultural, environmental, and economic effects of tourism (Almeida-García et al., 2016; Gursoy et al., 2010; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). However, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the interactions among these factors and their collective influence on residents' attitudes towards tourism development initiatives (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). Moreover, prior studies frequently examine residents' knowledge or trust independently, neglecting the interplay between these elements and their combined impact on support for tourism growth (Choi & Murray, 2010; Hossain et al., 2019).

Considering the UAE's swift tourism expansion, propelled by initiatives like the 'Projects of the 50,' the significance of residents' sentiments is becoming paramount. The national policy priorities the enhancement of tourism capacities and the augmentation of community involvement in tourist initiatives to cultivate a cohesive national identity (Zaidan, 2016).

A significant research issue, however, is the ambiguity surrounding the role of perceived tourist benefits by locals and their support for tourism growth. In this regard, Andereck & Nyaupane (2011) highlighted that while the importance of perceived benefits on citizens' support is recognized, their mediation role in the interaction between knowledge and trust remains little understood. Hence, the need for a comprehensive approach arises to comprehend the intricate relationships among the residents' awareness of tourism development, trust in decisions, perceived benefits of tourism, and their support of tourism development. For example, certain tourism reports issued for Dubai show that there is a tendency now for longer stay durations and inclusiveness in many demographics of tourists; thus, supporting that local community engagement and perceived advantages can actually drive visitor satisfaction and bolster support towards sustainable tourism programs (Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism [DET], 2023). The current work enhances the tourism literature through its specific focus in the UAE context on how residents' knowledge, trust in government measures, and perceived benefits of tourism work together to shape support for tourism growth.

This study is crucial as knowledge and trust are fundamental in modern society and are essential for social, political, and community connections (Freitag & Bühlmann, 2009). Consequently, the following research objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the relationship between residents' knowledge of tourism development and their support for tourism initiatives.
2. To examine how trust in government decisions influences residents' support for tourism development.
3. To identify the role of perceived benefits of tourism in mediating the relationship between residents' knowledge, trust in government decisions, and support for tourism development.
4. To provide recommendations for policymakers on enhancing community support for tourism development.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Context of the Study

The UAE, established in 1971 on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula, has seven emirates: Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah. Due to its strategic location, the UAE has always functioned as a key hub for transportation and commerce between the East and West (Hammad et al., 2019).

The UAE government considered tourism development a driver of its economic diversification plans due to rapid population expansion and the fact that oil is a finite resource whose price fluctuates globally. Tourism employed 7% of the UAE's workforce in 2015 and supported 330,000 employees (UAE Tourism Report-Q1 2018, 2018). UAE Emirates has become a major tourism destination, attracting millions of tourists from around the world (Gulf News Business, 2018). The 2024 Statista Report predicted 17.3 million foreign visitor arrivals in the UAE between 2024 and 2029, a 63.32 percent increase. After nine consecutive increases, arrivals are expected to peak at 44.66 million in 2029, as shown in Figure 1.

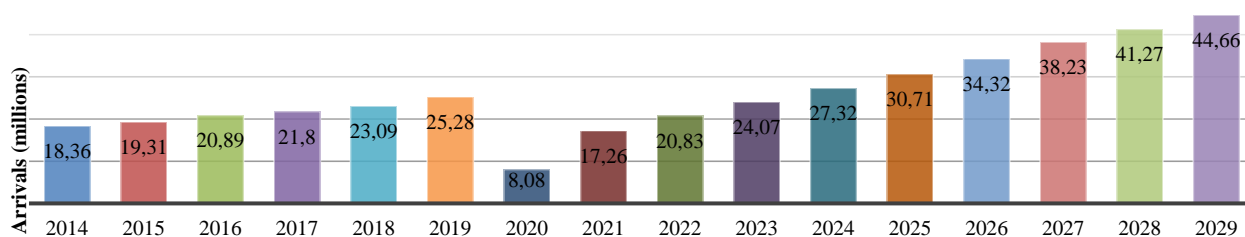


Figure 1. Number of international tourist arrivals in the United Arab Emirates from 2014 to 2029 (in millions) (Source: Statista, 2024)

According to Michael et al. (2019), the everyday lives of locals in any destination are greatly impacted by tourism, and their support is essential for the development of tourism (Gursoy et al., 2010). As the primary non-oil economic sector in the UAE, tourism is predicted to continue to increase in importance and play a crucial part in the country's economic growth (John, 2018). Due to its high position in terms of tourism-related income, spending, GDP contribution, employment, and investment (Michael et al., 2019; WTTC, 2018), the UAE is the most competitive country in the Middle East (TTCI, 2017). Nonetheless, a significant concern is the inactivity of residents in the tourism sector, indicating little opportunity for their comprehensive involvement in the industry's advancement.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

SET may be traced back to the fields of sociology and social psychology, with early work by Blau (1964) and later development by Emerson (1976). The origins of SET can be traced back to the domains of sociology and social psychology. Tourism development further makes people collect their attitudes with the SET as the principal theory used to explain the attitudes of locals toward tourism. It has "implicitly or explicitly" become the driving force behind most studies. According to Nunkoo et al. (2013, p. 6), SET's attractiveness stems from its awareness of the heterogeneous composition of a host community. This means that various segments would have different attitudes—whether favorable or otherwise—considering what they perceive to be the benefits and costs of the tourism undertaking.

Literally, SET has been applied in previous studies to assess how residents develop opinions concerning the establishment of invasive tourism in their locality. A series of studies such as Gursoy et al. (2016), alongside Stylidis & Terzidou (2014), proved that evaluations by residents on what costs and benefits accrue from such developments form the basis of one's attitude orientation. The factors highlighted include residential bonding to the neighborhood, eco-centric values (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006), place image, attitudes toward mega-events (Stylidis, 2016), and public trust (Gursoy et al., 2016). Studies have also cited varied predictors with respect to their influence on perceiving impact while supporting what such studies are about. Ap (1992) made SET popular in the tourist impact sector as a theoretical framework explaining why locals react the way they do to tourism growth. SET is responsible for the popularity of SET by indicating that individuals evaluate a transaction under the lenses of possible costs and benefits it can bring and that such behavior responses are governed by their overall evaluation of the transaction being evaluated. According to Ouyang et al. (2017), most studies which have taken SET to be the prime theoretical framework have most probably assumed that the judgments locals make are rational concerning their actions.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Residents' knowledge of tourism development, trust in governmental decisions, perceived benefits of tourism, and support for tourism development

Residents' knowledge of tourism growth includes their awareness and understanding of tourism policies, initiatives, and effects. Informed residents tend to possess more favourable attitudes towards tourism, as knowledge can shape perceptions (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). The term "knowledge" describes how well locals understand issues pertaining to tourism development and the function of local government in the field. Studies show that citizens' support for tourism-related activities frequently increases when they are informed about the benefits and strategies associated with tourism (Tuzunkan & Arslanturk, 202). While scholars of politics have studied the relationship between citizens' trust and their knowledge of how the government (or particular services) functions and have shown that there is a positive relationship between these two concepts (e.g. Li, 2004), tourism researchers have not kept up with these significant studies. This is a significant omission because several academics have shown that local populations frequently lack sufficient understanding of how the tourism industry operates, which makes good governance more difficult (e.g. Moscardo, 2011). Communities' lack of understanding could result in negative bias in their perceptions of local government, undermining trust. It is reasonable, theoretically, to deduce from the previous discussion that the two aspects of political trust are influenced by the residents' awareness of tourism development. Therefore, subsequent hypotheses are put forth:

H1: Residents' knowledge of tourism development positively influences their trust in governmental decisions.

Although it has been demonstrated that residents' comprehension of tourism development influences their opinions of the benefits and drawbacks associated with it (Moscardo, 2011), research has not yet been able to fully explain this relationship. It was discovered by Nunkoo (2015) that those who had a low knowledge of tourism reported higher expenses associated with tourism and had fewer hopeful views towards the growth of tourism. In contrast to the findings of this study, Andereck et al. (2005) found that citizens who were informed about the expansion of tourism perceived benefits that were more significant from the industry. Despite this, the researchers were unable to establish a correlation that was statistically significant between the amount of information and the costs connected with the development of tourism. It was discovered by Latkova & Vogt (2012) that the level of information that citizens had regarding tourism did not have any impact on their opinions of the effects that tourism development had. The existence of these inconsistencies demonstrates the requirement for further inquiry. These discrepancies indicate the necessity for additional investigation. Therefore, the subsequent hypotheses are posited:

H2: Residents' knowledge of tourism development positively influences the perceived benefits of tourism.

The level of knowledge that the local community possesses regarding tourism development is a significant factor in determining the level of support that locals have for tourist development and management (Nicholas et al., 2009). In contrast, the identification of negative consequences leads to a withdrawal of support, which in turn has an impact on the

development's potential to be sustainable (Latkova & Vogt, 2012). Residents' knowledge helps to promote community support for the expansion of tourism business. According to Nunkoo & Ramkissoon (2011), as long as the locals of a tourism region are aware that the benefits of development outweigh the expenditures connected with it, they will be willing to support it (Jurowski et al., 1997). According to Nunkoo & Ramkissoon (2011), citizens are less inclined to support tourist development if they receive insufficient information regarding the consequences of such development. In order to shed light on these discussions, the following hypotheses have been suggested:

H3: Residents' knowledge of tourism development positively influences their support for tourism development.

H3a: Residents' trust in governmental decisions in the context of tourism mediates the relationship between knowledge of tourism development and the residents' support for tourism development.

Residents' trust in Governmental Decisions, Perceived Benefits of Tourism, and Support for Tourism Development

Based on Blau's 1964 Social Exchange Theory, trust can be understood as a relational structure (Frederiksen, 2019). According to Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005), the establishment and maintenance of social contacts between two partners involves the establishment of trust among the many stakeholders, such as the people and the government.

The trust that residents have in the government's capacity to manage tourism development in an ethical and efficient manner is directly related to the level of trust that they have in this government's decisions. One of the most important factors in determining public support for tourist efforts is trust in the decisions made by the government. According to research conducted by Tichaawa et al. (2023), there is a correlation between growing public trust in the government and enhanced public perception and support of tourism initiatives. The residents' impression of tourism is dependent on their awareness of the function of governmental institutions in the tourism sector as well as their perception of the tourism industry (Albu & Irimia, 2025). Moscardo (2011) provided evidence that residents' perceptions of the costs and advantages associated with tourism are influenced by their level of faith in the decisions made by the government about tourist responsibilities. Bulatovic et al. (2025), for instance, acknowledged that citizens who have a higher level of trust in the acts of the government report larger advantages. Nunkoo (2015), on the other hand, shown that those who have a lower level of trust exhibited a greater level of anxiety over the costs that are linked with the actions. In light of this, the following hypotheses are developed:

H4: Residents' trust in governmental decisions in the context of tourism positively influences their perceived benefits of tourism.

H4a: Residents' trust in governmental decisions in the context of tourism mediates the relationship between knowledge of tourism development and the residents' perceived benefits of tourism.

Trust is one of the key elements included in the destination governance models (Khalifa, Elshaer, et al., 2025; Hossain et al., 2025). It is important for forming relationships between citizens and governmental institutions, and it is necessary for collaborative decision-making and activities involved in the management of tourist development. These include cultural interchange and improvements in quality of life as non-economic benefits; while the economic gains are financing by the government, employment opportunities, and improvements to infrastructures. These benefits also have a significant influence on the level of community support provided for tourism programs. Residents' desire to actively promote tourism is demonstrated by their support for the expansion of tourism. Neuts et al. (2021) explain that this support is influenced by the understanding of residents about tourism, trust in government institutions, and perceived benefits. Understanding these factors that give support can assist policymakers in developing community-centric tourist policies. Mwongoso et al. (2023) mention that the economic and non-economic benefits of tourism are assessed by community members. Trust in governments affects people's support for measures taken by the government across a huge number of studies. For example, Nunkoo et al. (2012) find that the degree of trust citizens hold towards any tourist organisations has a positive influence on the level at which they support tourism development. Other studies also find that trust in government correlates with political support for government policies (Gabriel & Trudinger, 2011). The following hypothesis is therefore postulated:

H5: Residents' trust in governmental decisions in the context of tourism positively influences their support for tourism development.

Perceived Benefits of Tourism and Support for Tourism Development

Early study by Oviedo-Garcia et al. (2008) indicate that individuals who experience larger economic gains from tourism are more likely to regard it as economically advantageous, express a stronger support for tourism, and demonstrate a lesser sensitivity to the cultural and environmental benefits that tourist provides. Research by Gursoy et al. (2002) suggests that there is a clear association between the level of support that residents have for tourism development and their perceptions of the benefits that tourist businesses provide. This implies that when residents have positive perceptions, their approval of tourism development is likely to increase (Herman & Nedelcu, 2023). Similarly, Afthanorhan et al. (2017) opined that there is a positive relationship between perceptions of tourist impacts and benefits provided by tourism development, and support for further development of tourism. Social exchange theory contends that the level of support or opposition to tourism development by local people depends on their perception or assessment of the benefits and costs incurred from the tourism development, whether those benefits and costs entail losses or gains (Gursoy et al., 2002). Social exchange theory postulates that residents satisfied with the exchanges made with tourism are likely to endorse either newly developed or established forms of tourism. According to Nicholas et al. (2009), several empirical studies have concluded that the perception of the benefits of tourism development by local citizens is positively correlated with their willingness to support the expansion of such tourism. The hypotheses supported by this argument are:

H6: Perceived benefits of tourism development are more likely to support tourism development.

H6a: Perceived benefits of tourism development mediates the relationship between knowledge of tourism development and the residents' support for tourism development.

H6b: Perceived benefits of tourism development mediates the relationship between residents' trust in governmental decisions in the context of tourism and the residents' support for tourism development.

In Figure 2, the conceptual model of the study is displayed.

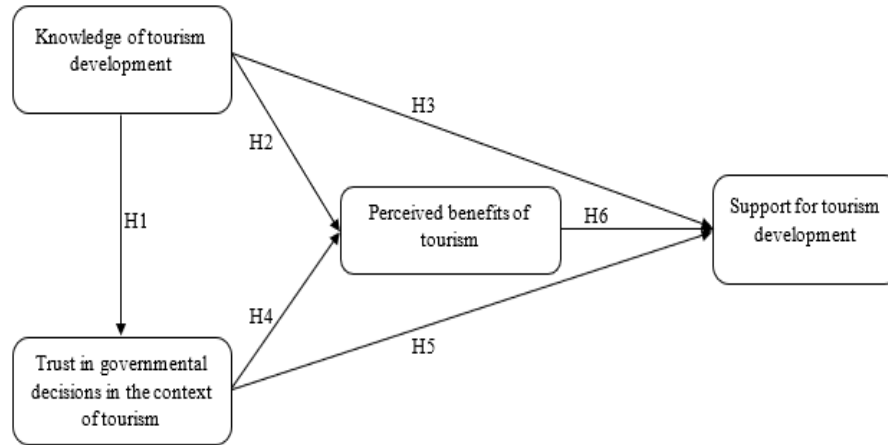


Figure 2. Conceptual structure

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Justification for Al-Ain selection

Eid & Elbanna's (2018) recent study examined Al-Ain as a travel destination; however it was unable to offer a thorough grasp of its perception. This emphasises the necessity of more research to establish Al-Ain as a unique travel brand under the Abu Dhabi umbrella. According to Longart & Iankova (2022), Al Ain is a strong option for research because of its unrealised potential, especially in the areas of branding and strategic development.

As an Abu Dhabi sub-brand, its distinctive qualities merit further investigation to strengthen its standing in the market. The local communities' perceptions on the impact of tourism have been the subject of a few studies, including Afthanorhan et al. (2017) and Alamineh et al. (2023) who highlighted them as an understudied field. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of Al-Ain's citizens' understanding of tourism development and their perception of the governmental role and benefits of tourism on their support of tourism development.

Research design

This study employed a quantitative methodological framework, utilising an online questionnaire intended for the citizens of Al Ain. Questionnaires are widely used in social research to gather primary data from large samples of people and organizations. They allow efficient, affordable, and unobtrusive data collection (MacDonald & Headlam, 2014). Specifically, questionnaires provide a convenient means to collect information from many respondents in a short time frame, which can be challenging using interviews alone (Alshenqeeti, 2014). In disciplines studying human perceptions and behaviour, like tourism research, questionnaires can enable better sampling of target populations to highlight patterns in individuals' perceptions, beliefs, intentions, attitudes, and awareness concerning a particular topic (Hair et al., 2017).

Sampling technique

The target population for this study consisted of permanent residents of Al Ain, aged 18 years and above, who had resided in the city for a minimum duration of one year. A minimum sample size of 300 respondents was determined in accordance with established guidelines for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which serves as the primary analytical technique in this research (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2010). To ensure a representative sample, stratified random sampling was employed, allowing for proportional inclusion of residents from the various districts within Al Ain (Howell et al., 2020). Within each district, streets were randomly selected using a street directory. Subsequently, households were randomly approached based on house number listings, and eligible residents were invited to participate in the study. Data collection was conducted between October and November 2024 through an online questionnaire administered and monitored by the research team.

Questionnaire development

The questionnaire was structured into three main sections, with the full layout provided in Appendix A. The primary objective of the first section was to collect demographic information from respondents, including gender, age, educational background, and duration of residency in Al Ain. The second section focused on measuring residents' perceptions across five domains related to tourism impacts. Residents' knowledge of tourism development was assessed using three items adapted from prior validated studies (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Nunkoo, 2015). Trust in governmental decisions regarding tourism was measured using four items derived from the works of Lühiste (2006) and Shi (2001). Perceived benefits of

tourism in Al Ain were evaluated using nine items informed by the frameworks of Teng (2019), Gannon et al. (2021), and Látková & Vogt (2012). Finally, support for tourism development was measured using four items adopted from Woo et al. (2015) and Látková & Vogt (2012). The original questionnaire was developed in English and subsequently translated into Arabic following the blind translation-back-translation procedure recommended by Brislin (1976). To ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence, the translation process was conducted with the assistance of a professional translator and language editor. This approach ensured the reliability and clarity of the instrument across languages.

Data analysis

The analysis of the research model was conducted using Variance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-VB) through the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach, utilizing SmartPLS 4.0 software (Ringle et al., 2015). Consistent with the guidelines proposed by Hair et al. (2017), the measurement model was first assessed to establish reliability and validity before evaluating the structural model and testing the hypothesized relationships. Following the two-step approach recommended by Hair et al. (2010), the evaluation process was divided into two distinct phases: one focused on assessing the measurement model (i.e., model fit), and the other on analyzing the structural model. The measurement model specifies how each latent construct is operationalized through its observed indicators, while the structural model represents the hypothesized relationships among the constructs, enabling simultaneous estimation of multiple paths. This method allows for greater accuracy and robustness in testing complex theoretical frameworks (Barclay et al., 1995).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sample profile

In behavioral research, Saunders & Townsend (2018) recommend a sample size ranging from 370 to 384 to achieve a 95% confidence level. Accordingly, a total of 500 questionnaires were distributed. From the responses received, 378 valid surveys were retained for analysis, providing a reliable representation of the perspectives of Al Ain residents. The demographic breakdown is presented in Table 1. The sample closely reflects the broader population of Al Ain, with a nearly equal distribution between male and female respondents, aligning with recent census data.

The 31–40 age group constituted the largest proportion of participants, followed by those aged 41–50. The majority of respondents were long-term residents, having lived in Al Ain for more than 11 years, suggesting a high level of familiarity with the city and its development. Regarding educational attainment, approximately one-third of participants reported holding a bachelor's degree, indicating a relatively well-educated respondent base.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Profile

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)	Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	59.2%	Educational Level	Secondary/Equivalent	25%
	Female	40.7%		Bachelor	63%
Age	18–30	4%		Master	9%
	31–40	31%		Others	3%
	41–50	27%	Duration of Living in Al Ain	5–6 years	5%
	51–65	25%		6–10 years	31%
	>65	12%		Over 10 years	64%

Descriptive statistics

Participants generally expressed favorable attitudes toward tourism development in Al Ain, with overall mean scores across key constructs exceeding the neutral midpoint of 3 on a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents demonstrated positive perceptions of the impacts of tourism, expressed support for tourism development, and rated government policies related to tourism positively. Participants also provided self-assessments of their knowledge of tourism development and evaluated its perceived benefits, particularly in relation to economic impacts. These included perceived contributions to revenue generation, business opportunities for local entrepreneurs, employment creation, and enhancement of infrastructure and public facilities. These aspects were consistently rated above the neutral midpoint, indicating a generally optimistic view of tourism's role in promoting socio-economic development within the community.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated with respect to convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all core constructs were above the accepted threshold, and all individual items demonstrated statistically significant factor loadings ($p < 0.01$), thereby confirming internal reliability. Detailed results, including construct means, standard deviations, factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), are presented in Table 2 (Kline, 2010). All constructs exceeded the minimum recommended thresholds for both Cronbach's alpha and CR (> 0.70), indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability (Hair et al., 2017). Furthermore, the AVE values for each construct were above the 0.50 benchmark, confirming convergent validity. In addition, all factor loadings surpassed the 0.50 threshold, establishing indicator reliability across the scale items. These findings collectively demonstrate strong convergent validity for each construct, thereby supporting their appropriateness for inclusion in the structural model analysis and affirming their suitability for addressing the study's analytical and research objectives (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation, loading, Cronbach's Alpha, CR and AVE

Note: M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted

Constructs	Item	Loading (> 0.5)	A (> 0.7)	CR (> 0.7)	AVE (> 0.5)	VIF
	KT1	0.901	0.840	0.843	0.758	2.302
	KT2	0.862				1.983
	KT3	0.848				1.837
	PB1	0.869	0.926	0.934	0.697	3.030
	PB2	0.861				2.820
	PB3	0.867				2.957
	PB4	0.835				2.503
	PB5	0.844				2.590
	PB6	0.891				3.560
	PB8	0.651				1.519
	STD1	0.838	0.827	0.826	0.662	2.132
	STD2	0.846				2.194
	STD3	0.859				2.288
	STD4	0.702				1.296
	TGD1	0.822	0.854	0.858	0.695	1.974
	TGD2	0.823				1.918
	TGD3	0.832				1.869
	TGD4	0.857				2.131

- A five-point scale, ranging from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree, respectively), is employed for measuring
- All the factor loadings of the individual items are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$)

Discriminant validity of the measurement model was assessed using three widely accepted approaches: cross-loadings, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). Cross-loading analysis was conducted to determine whether each indicator demonstrated a higher correlation with its corresponding latent construct than with other constructs. The results confirmed that all items loaded more strongly on their respective constructs than on any alternative constructs, thereby supporting the notion that the indicators effectively measure the intended latent variables. This differentiation among constructs offers clear evidence of construct distinctiveness and ensures that each construct captures a unique dimension of the phenomenon under investigation (Hair et al., 2017).

As shown in Table 3, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was also applied to further evaluate discriminant validity. According to this method, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct should be greater than the construct's correlations with all other constructs. The results met this condition, confirming that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with any other construct (Hair et al., 2017), thus reinforcing construct uniqueness (Awang, 2014). In addition, the HTMT ratio was used to assess discriminant validity by evaluating the strength of relationships between constructs. According to Henseler et al. (2015), HTMT values below 0.90 are indicative of satisfactory discriminant validity. As shown in Table 2, the majority of HTMT values fell below this threshold, confirming that the constructs are empirically distinct and demonstrate higher correlations within themselves than with other constructs. Collectively, these results validate the discriminant validity of the measurement model and confirm the distinctiveness and reliability of the constructs used in this study.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity

	Fornell-Larcker				HTMT			
	KT	PB	STD	TGD	KT	PB	STD	TGD
KT	0.871							
PB	0.614	0.835			0.693			
STD	0.519	0.784	0.814		0.623	0.894		
TGD	0.345	0.637	0.707	0.834	0.405	0.710	0.832	

Assessment of Structural Model

Hair et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of employing a bootstrapping procedure with up to 5,000 resamples when evaluating the structural model in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

Table 4. Results of the structural path analysis

H	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-value	P-values	Decision	Q2	f ²	Q ²	VIF
H1	KT -> TGD	0.345	0.042	8.195	0.000	Supported	0.119	0.135	0.081	1.000
H2	KT -> PB	0.448	0.022	20.240	0.000	Supported	0.583	0.423	0.403	1.135
H3	KT -> STD	0.087	0.045	1.934	0.053	Not-Supported	0.692	0.015	0.448	1.615
H4	TGD -> PB	0.483	0.033	14.747	0.000	Supported		0.492		1.135
H5	TGD -> STD	0.356	0.047	7.644	0.000	Supported		0.243		1.694
H6	PB -> STD	0.504	0.049	10.361	0.000	Supported		0.345		2.396

This approach facilitates the estimation of path coefficients (β), coefficient of determination (R^2), and corresponding t-values, providing robust statistical inference. In addition to these core metrics, the authors recommend reporting predictive relevance (Q^2) and effect sizes (f^2) to assess the model's explanatory and predictive power comprehensively. Furthermore, as noted by Sullivan & Feinn (2012), while p-values are useful for determining whether a statistically significant effect exists, they do not convey the magnitude or practical significance of that effect. Therefore, supplementing p-values with measures such as f^2 enhances the interpretive value of the model's outcomes, allowing for more nuanced conclusions regarding the strength and importance of relationships among variables (Figure 3, & Table 4).

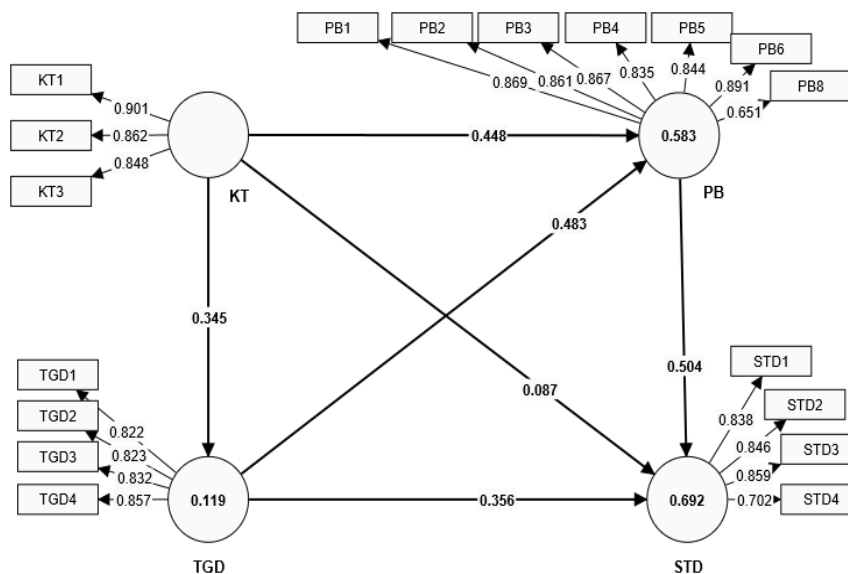


Figure 3. The research's conceptual framework

Direct Hypothesis Testing

The structural model results demonstrate positive and statistically significant relationships among the core constructs, namely Knowledge of Tourism Development (KT), Trust in Governmental Decisions regarding tourism (TGD), Perceived Benefits of tourism (PB), and Support for Tourism Development (STD), thereby confirming hypotheses H1 through H6. The effect sizes (f^2), which range from 0.015 to 0.492, indicate the proportion of variance in the dependent constructs explained by each predictor variable. Furthermore, the model's predictive relevance (Q^2) values, ranging between 0.119 and 0.692, provide evidence of strong predictive capability across the relationships assessed.

Importantly, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, which fall between 1.000 and 2.396, remain well below the commonly accepted threshold of 5.0, suggesting that multicollinearity is not a concern within the model. These outcomes collectively offer robust empirical support for the proposed theoretical framework, affirming the hypothesized relationships and enhancing the model's validity in explaining residents' support for tourism development. Table 3 presents the detailed results of the structural path analysis, including standardized beta coefficients, standard errors, t-values, p-values, hypothesis testing outcomes, effect sizes (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and VIF statistics.

The confirmation of these hypothesized paths underscores the theoretical proposition that knowledge, trust, and perceived benefits are critical determinants of community support for tourism initiatives. KT \rightarrow TGD path is statistically significant, supporting H1 with ($\beta=0.345$, $t=8.195$, $p=0.000$). The positive relationship highlights that as residents' knowledge development increases, their trust in governmental decisions strengthens. This suggests that well-informed residents are more likely to perceive government as capable and reliable in managing tourism related initiatives.

This result emphasizes the role of educational outreach and transparent communication in building trust. Additionally, KT \rightarrow PB relationship is highly significant, confirming H2 with ($\beta=0.448$, $t=20.24$, $p=0.000$). It highlights that individuals who possess greater KT are more likely to perceive positive benefits from tourism. This positive relationship reflects the strength and consistency of this association, which underscores the importance of raising public awareness about tourism's cultural, economic, and social contributions to enhance supportive attitudes. Although the KT \rightarrow STD path coefficient is positive, this association is non-significant with ($\beta=0.087$, $t=1.934$, $p=0.053$), hence, H3 is not supported. The TGD \rightarrow PB path is statistically significant, supporting H4, with ($\beta=0.483$, $t=14.747$, $p=0.000$). This result highlights that individuals who trust institutional decisions are more likely to perceive tourism as beneficial.

This finding indicates that institutional trust plays a crucial role in shaping favorable tourism perceptions, reinforcing the value of accountability and participatory governance. Furthermore, TGD \rightarrow STD relationship is supported with ($\beta=0.356$, $t=7.644$, $p=0.000$), showing that TGD significantly enhances STD. This result implies that when residents believe their government is making sound and fair tourism related decisions, they are more likely to endorse tourism policies and initiatives. Lastly, the PB \rightarrow STD path is significant and substantial in magnitude, supporting H6 with ($\beta=0.504$, $t=10.361$, $p=0.000$). PB demonstrates the strongest influence, underscoring the critical role that resident's perceptions of tangible and intangible tourism benefits play in motivating their support.

Table 5. Bootstrapping the indirect effect

H	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-value	P-values	2.5%	97.5%
H3a	KT -> TGD -> STD	0.123	0.021	5.873	0.000	0.083	0.164
H4a	KT -> TGD -> PB	0.167	0.021	7.930	0.000	0.125	0.208
H6a	KT -> PB -> STD	0.226	0.025	8.863	0.000	0.179	0.278
H6b	TGD -> PB -> STD	0.244	0.030	8.214	0.000	0.190	0.307

Testing Indirect Hypothesis (Mediation Assessment)

According to Hair et al. (2021), mediation occurs when a causal variable influences an outcome variable indirectly through a mediating variable. This relationship can be expressed as $c = c' + ab$, where c is the total effect, c' is the direct effect, and ab is the indirect effect through the mediator. Hair et al. (2021) emphasize a straightforward understanding of mediation in behavioral research. In the current study (Table 5), Trust in Governmental Decisions (TGD) emerges as a key mediating variable in the relationship between Knowledge of Tourism Development (KT) and Perceived Benefits (PB), with a statistically significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.167$, $t = 7.930$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that residents with higher knowledge about tourism are more likely to perceive its benefits positively, primarily because of increased trust in governmental actions.

This finding underscores the importance of institutional trust as a channel through which knowledge is translated into positive perceptions, reinforcing the need for transparent and participatory governance in tourism policy-making.

Additionally, PB serves as a significant mediator between KT and Support for Tourism Development (STD) ($\beta = 0.226$, $t = 8.863$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that residents with greater tourism knowledge are more likely to support tourism initiatives indirectly through their perceptions of its benefits. This highlights the critical importance of effectively communicating the socio-economic and cultural contributions of tourism to the public to strengthen support.

Furthermore, PB also mediates the relationship between TGD and STD ($\beta = 0.244$, $t = 8.214$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that institutional trust enhances support for tourism through residents' perception of its benefits. Similarly, KT indirectly influences STD through TGD ($\beta = 0.123$, $t = 5.873$, $p < 0.001$), further emphasizing that trust in government functions as a crucial mechanism by which knowledge fosters public support for tourism development. These findings collectively highlight the interconnected role of knowledge, trust, and perceived benefits in shaping residents' attitudes and behaviors, and point to the value of adopting an integrated communication and engagement strategy in tourism governance.

Multigroup analysis: Locals vs Expatriates

A multigroup analysis was conducted to assess whether structural relationships differed between local and expatriate residents. The structural measurements indicate differences in predictive relations (Figure 4). The R^2 value for STD appears to be greater for locals (0.791) than for expatriates (0.673), which suggests that KT and TGD account better for support for tourism development among the local people. On the contrary, Perceived Benefits of Tourism (PB) appears to be explaining the same for both, with R^2 values of 0.593 for locals and 0.585 for expatriates.

In terms of direct effects, KT more strongly influences STD for locals ($\beta = 0.180$) than for expatriates ($\beta = 0.064$), meaning that perhaps imparting knowledge on tourism is more relevant to support from the local residents. However, TGD more strongly influences STD for locals ($\beta = 0.457$) than for expatriates ($\beta = 0.332$), meaning that a trust in the decisions of the government is a more precise measure of support for tourism initiatives for local stakeholders.

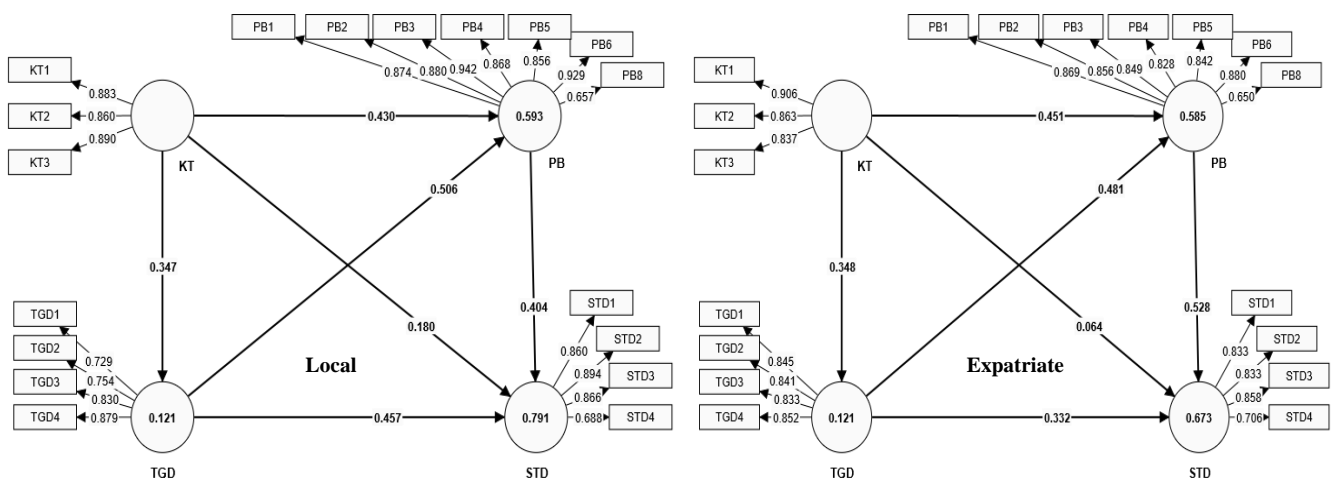


Figure 4. Local vs Expatriate Results

Finally, STD impacts PB minimally more for expatriates ($\beta = 0.528$) than it does for locals ($\beta = 0.404$), stressing that expatriate support for tourism is perceived in greater part through the benefits that arise from tourism. The findings suggest a need for targeted strategies: while engaging locals in policy processes and strengthening trust in government processes may enhance support for tourism, stimulating interest and raising awareness on tourism developments may be more influential in gathering support from expatriates. Such multilevel understanding can ensure inclusive and effective tourism planning.

DISCUSSION

This study examines the relationship among residents' knowledge of tourism development, their trust in governmental decisions, perceived benefits and their support of tourism development. Integrated within the framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET), the results provide a strong theoretical and practical insight into the elements influencing community support for tourism initiatives. This study enhances understanding of how these constructs affect citizens' attitudes by presenting empirical evidence from Al-Ain, so contributing to academic literature and the development of policies.

The findings indicate that residents' knowledge about tourist development favourably affects their trust in governmental actions, perceived benefits and support for tourism development (H1, H2, and H3 validated). These findings corroborate previous studies (e.g., Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Tuzunkan & Arslanturk, 2021), which highlighted the significance of knowledge in cultivating informed and positive attitudes towards tourism. By reducing misconceptions and possible resistance, knowledge enables locals to assess tourist initiatives with knowledge. This is in line with SET, which holds that knowledgeable stakeholders are more likely to view transactions favourably. Communities that comprehend the justification for tourism regulations are better able to weigh the advantages and disadvantages, which results in more positive opinions. Additionally, the results are consistent with research on governance, which shows that knowledge increases institutional trust (Grimmelikhuisen, 2012; Elnagar et al., 2025). On the other hand, a lack of knowledge may lead to doubt or even hostility towards tourism-related projects (Moscardo, 2011; Elkhwesky et al., 2026). Therefore, awareness-raising initiatives that clearly convey the material and immaterial advantages of tourism must be given top priority by policymakers.

A crucial factor that influenced perceived advantages and support for the growth of the tourism industry was trust (H4 and H5 supported). This bolsters the idea that trust in SET is a relational framework that promotes constructive interactions, as proposed by Blau (1964). The benefits of tourism are better perceived by locals, and they are more inclined to support tourism projects when they have trust in the decisions made by the government. This result supports previous research (Nunkoo, 2015; Tichaawa et al., 2023) that emphasised trust as a key component of community involvement in tourist planning.

The relationship between community expectations and governmental policy is strengthened by trust, which serves as a channel for communication. Residents are more likely to support tourism projects when they believe that government actions are ethical, open, and inclusive. These findings highlight how important it is for governments to interact with communities in order to make sure that decisions are not only inclusive but also seen as fair and advantageous. Building trust can be greatly helped by tactics like public accountability, transparent goal communication, and participatory decision-making.

The research validates the strong positive correlation between perceived benefits and support of tourism development (H6 supported). This relationship is fundamental to Social Exchange Theory, which posits that individuals assess exchanges according to perceived costs and benefits. The increased mean scores for perceived economic advantages—such as enhanced revenue, job possibilities, and upgraded infrastructure—highlight the essential influence of concrete benefits on citizens' support. The perceived significance of economic gains, which are frequently the most obvious advantages of tourism, is consistent with the conclusions of earlier research (Gursoy et al., 2002; Nicholas et al., 2009).

To further strengthen community support, the study also emphasises the importance of non-financial advantages like better public spaces and cross-cultural interactions. For tourism to continue to get long-term support, policymakers need make sure that its advantages are equitable and apparent throughout the community.

A complex yet complimentary relationship is shown by the combined examination of these constructs. Knowledge increases citizens' trust in the government, which increases their appreciation of the benefits and support for the growth of the tourism industry. Its crucial role in managing the connection between locals and tourism planners is highlighted by the fact that trust is both a result of knowledge and a motivator for assistance. Additionally, the perceived advantages of tourism serve as a last driving force, converting knowledge and trust into concrete assistance for development projects.

The multigroup analysis between local and expatriate residents offered further insight into how these relationships differ across demographic segments. The structural model explained more variance in support for tourism among locals than expatriates. Knowledge and trust had a stronger influence between locals, highlighting that civic education and trust building efforts may yields greater returns within local people. Conversely, perceived benefits played a slightly more important role among expatriates indicating that visible and personal benefits are more influential for expatriates' residents. These results point to the necessity of targeted engagement strategies (Hong et al., 2023; Khalifa et al., 2022), emphasizing participatory governance and transparency for locals and benefit focused communication for expatriates.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study emphasizes the essential roles of knowledge, trust, and perceived benefits in influencing citizens' support for the development of tourism. Integrating these components within a SET framework offers an extensive understanding of community attitudes towards tourism. Policymakers and planners need to utilize these insights to formulate inclusive, transparent, and equitable tourist policies that correspond with community expectations, promoting sustainable tourism growth in Al-Ain and beyond.

Theoretical Implications

This study significantly advances Social Exchange Theory (SET) by broadening its use within tourism development. It highlights the interrelation of knowledge, trust, and perceived advantages in influencing citizens' support for tourist projects, providing a deeper understanding of the factors that affect community attitudes. The results not only corroborate the fundamental premise of SET—that individuals assess transactions based on perceived costs and benefits—but also offer

new insights into the mediating function of trust and the subsequent impacts of knowledge. A crucial theoretical contribution is the acknowledgement of the crucial role that knowledge plays in influencing locals' perceptions of tourism. This study shows that knowledge is a fundamental factor that affects trust and benefit perceptions, although prior research has mostly concentrated on direct cost-benefit analyses. By incorporating knowledge into the framework, the study fills a significant vacuum in the literature on SET by emphasising how knowledge and comprehension of tourism policies and efforts influence the process of social exchange. This result supports the notion that knowledgeable people are better able to assess interactions favourably since they can identify the possible long-term advantages of tourism growth.

Furthermore, it implies that information is a necessary component that enhances the perceived justice and transparency of governmental acts in addition to being a precondition for trust. By expanding the range of antecedents that influence trade dynamics and highlighting the significance of cognitive elements like awareness and comprehension in promoting constructive social interactions, this theoretical realisation enhances SET.

The study emphasises that perceived benefits serve as the key outcome of the exchange process, directly affecting citizens' support for tourism development. This research demonstrates that, whereas SET generally focuses on the equilibrium between costs and benefits, positive perceptions of benefits can enhance community support, resulting in a cascade effect where trust and knowledge foster more favorable attitudes. The theoretical contribution consists in showing that perceived benefits encompass social and cultural aspects like better public facilities, infrastructure, and chances for cross-cultural interaction in addition to economic ones. This study enhances the application of SET in complex, multifaceted circumstances such as tourist development by expanding the range of advantages covered in the analysis.

Practical Implications

The findings underline the need for politicians and tourist planners to build trust and community awareness to gain tourism support. Awareness campaigns must prioritise clear, accessible, and transparent tourism policy information, benefits, and long-term repercussions. By dispelling myths, stressing tourist development, and explaining how tourism activities relate to economic, cultural, and social goals, such efforts can educate communities. Community involvement in decision-making fosters ownership, transparency, and trust in government. Community consultations, workshops, and public forums can help policymakers build trust in tourist initiatives by hearing locals' concerns and addressing them.

Additionally, tourist planners must focus on benefit distribution to boost community support. Tourist initiatives must benefit all community sections, both economically and non-economically. Tourism may become more important to citizens by creating jobs, supporting local businesses, and funding community development. To ensure community inclusivity in tourism development, non-economic benefits like cultural preservation and infrastructure improvements must be promoted.

Furthermore, tourism success depends on community-focused strategies. Tourism policy must carefully match citizens' expectations, values, and aspirations to resonate with locals. Authorities may establish tourism policies that win community support and promote long-term sustainability and cohesiveness by understanding and incorporating community cultural, social, and economic needs (Kundan et al., 2022). Tourism development can be described as collaborative efforts that strengthen the community and increase its welfare, creating a lasting link between tourism and the local population.

Finally, tourism policies must be aligned with local values, expectations, and aspirations. This requires a nuanced understanding of cultural, social, and economic fabric of the community. Strategies that resonate with local identity and collective goals are more likely to secure widespread support and foster a sense of shared purpose. Ultimately, this study advocates for community centric tourism planning, wherein development is not imposed but co-created with the residents it intend to serve. By positioning tourism as a collaborative and mutually beneficial endeavor, policymakers can strengthen the bond between residents and tourism development, ensuring sustainable outcomes and enhanced community welfare.

Limitations and Future Research

It is essential to acknowledge the fact that this study is context-specific, despite the fact that it offers vital insights. The findings are based on data from Al-Ain, and it is possible that their applicability to other places is restricted.

In order to validate and expand upon the findings, it is recommended that future study investigates similar associations in a variety of cultural and geographical contexts.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies have the potential to offer a more in-depth comprehension of the ways in which these concepts develop over the course of time and in response to shifting socio-economic contexts.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.S.A.K., M.A., and M.E.A.A.; methodology, G.S.A.K., Z.E., and B.N.; software, G.S.A.K. and M.A.; validation, G.S.A.K., R.S.A.A., M.A.A.A., and K.S.R.A.; formal analysis, G.S.A.K., Z.E., and B.N.; investigation, G.S.A.K., M.A., M.E.A.A., and Z.E.; data curation, G.S.A.K., R.S.A.A., M.A.A.A., and K.S.R.A.; writing – original draft preparation, G.S.A.K. and M.A.; writing – review and editing, G.S.A.K., M.E.A.A., Z.E., B.N., R.S.A.A., M.A.A.A., and K.S.R.A.; visualization, G.S.A.K., M.A., and R.S.A.A.; supervision, G.S.A.K. and M.E.A.A.; project administration, G.S.A.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study may be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgements: The research undertaken was made possible by the equal scientific involvement of all the authors concerned.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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