

"Role Of Sustainable Practices In Promoting Environmentally Responsible Tourism: A Mediation Analysis"

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Abstract

This study explores the connection between tourism involvement and sustainable practices toward eco-tourism, aiming to understand how these practices influence the adoption of sustainable tourism development within Rajasthan's tourism sector. A comprehensive analytical framework is constructed and tested using primary data gathered from eco-tourists, local residents, and key stakeholders in the tourism industry. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is applied to test the proposed hypotheses and examine the relationships among core variables. The findings indicate that sustainable practices have a direct and significant effect on sustainable tourism development. However, tourism involvement does not mediate the link between sustainable practices and sustainable tourism outcomes, suggesting that the implementation of sustainable practices independently drives positive sustainability impacts. By concentrating on the distinctive eco-tourism environment of Rajasthan, the study offers meaningful insights into sustainability mechanisms within tourism. The findings highlight the need for tourism operators and policymakers to enhance eco-tourism awareness and education initiatives, thereby fostering environmentally responsible behavior and greater engagement. Furthermore, tourism managers are encouraged to embed sustainable practices—such as conserving natural resources and preserving cultural heritage—into their operational models and promotional efforts.

Keywords: Sustainable Practices, Tourism Involvement, Sustainable Tourism Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays a significant role in promoting the sustainable development of a region, delivering numerous advantages while creating diverse economic, social, environmental, and cultural effects, both favorable and adverse (Chen & Chen, 2010; Ernoul, 2009). Local communities' active participation and support are essential for achieving success in sustainable tourism development (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Sardianou et al., 2015). In Rajasthan, these principles are embedded in policies such as the Rajasthan Eco-Tourism Policy, which seeks to align tourism activities with sustainability goals. Community-driven initiatives, including rural tourism and heritage conservation projects, further illustrate the state's commitment to sustainable tourism development (Citaristi, 2022).

Despite these efforts, Rajasthan faces numerous challenges in achieving its sustainable tourism objectives. Rapid urbanization, over-tourism in popular cities like Jaipur, Udaipur, and Jodhpur, and inadequate infrastructure strain the state's natural and cultural resources (Islam et al., 2020). Existing studies on Rajasthan's tourism sector primarily focus on its economic contributions and the environmental challenges associated with over-tourism, such as water scarcity, inadequate waste management, and overstressed infrastructure (Chouhan, 2022; Khangarot & Sahu, 2019; Khatri & Sharma, 2024). However, there is a significant gap in understanding eco-tourists' behavioral and psychological dimensions, particularly the role of individual and collective attitudes toward sustainability in shaping tourism practices (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016). This study aims to fill this gap by examining the role of tourism involvement in promoting eco-tourism and sustainable development. This research aims to

analyse the relationship between tourism attitudes toward eco-tourism and determine how these attitudes influence sustainable practices within Rajasthan's tourism sector. This study emphasizes the importance of involving all stakeholders in Rajasthan's tourism ecosystem, including government bodies, private sector operators, local communities, and tourists. An inclusive approach is critical to ensure equitable distribution of tourism benefits and minimize its negative impacts. By examining the relationship between tourism involvement, eco-tourism attitudes, and sustainable practices, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing sustainable tourism development in Rajasthan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of the Construct

Sustainable Practices

Sustainable tourism practices involve adopting environmentally friendly methods, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering local economic development while ensuring minimal adverse impacts. These practices include energy conservation, waste management, the use of renewable resources, and community engagement. Adetola, & Adediran highlighted (2014) collaboration among various stakeholders as a cornerstone for implementing sustainable practices effectively. Mihalic (2016) introduced the green destination framework, emphasizing the role of policy and infrastructure in promoting sustainability. The UNWTO, 2005 defines sustainable practices as addressing the needs of visitors, host communities, and the environment while ensuring future viability.

Sustainable practices refer to actions that promote long-term benefits for the environment, economy, and society while minimizing negative impacts. In tourism, these practices ensure the industry meets current stakeholders' needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their needs. Sustainable practices can be categorized into economic, social, environmental, and ethical dimensions, each contributing to the overarching goal of sustainability.

Sustainable Economic Practices:

Sustainable economic practices in tourism involve strategies that maximize economic benefits for local communities, promote equitable income distribution, and ensure financial viability without exploiting resources. Amerta (2017) emphasized the importance of balancing economic growth with resource conservation, cautioning against over-dependence on tourism revenues. Aniqoh et al. (2022) highlighted the role of community-based tourism in enhancing local economic empowerment and reducing leakages. Batool et al. (2024) argued that sustainable economic practices should focus on long-term profitability and be aligned with social and environmental goals.

Sustainable Social Practices:

These practices aim to preserve cultural heritage, enhance community participation, and promote equitable access to tourism benefits. Amerta (2017) argued that sustainable social practices involve actively empowering local communities, particularly marginalized groups, to participate in tourism. Moscardo (2008) highlighted the importance of education and capacity building in fostering social sustainability. Additionally, sustainable social practices help maintain cultural authenticity while adapting to the needs of modern tourism.

Sustainable Environmental Practices:

Environmental practices in tourism aim to minimize ecological impacts, conserve biodiversity, and promote resource efficiency. Dodds & Butler (2009) proposed a sustainable tourism framework emphasizing carrying capacity and resource conservation. Blanton et al. (2024) discussed practical measures such as energy efficiency, water conservation, and waste management as critical components of sustainable tourism. Environmental certification programs, such as those discussed by Batool et al. (2024) encourage businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices and appeal to environmentally conscious travelers.

Sustainable Ethical Practices:

Ethical tourism practices include promoting fair treatment of workers, respecting human rights, and ensuring responsible marketing. Chan & Baum (2007) emphasized the importance of ethical codes in guiding tourism behavior and decision-making. Cheng et al., (2021) discussed how ethical tourism practices uphold justice, equity, and inclusiveness, benefiting host communities and tourists. These

practices address issues like preventing exploitation and ensuring fair trade in tourism-related goods and services.

Tourism Involvement

Aniqoh et al. (2022) identified three dimensions of tourism involvement—attraction, self-expression, and centrality—each playing a critical role in shaping individuals' relationships with tourism. Gursoy et al. (2010) found that when communities are actively involved in tourism initiatives, they develop more favorable perceptions of tourism's benefits, leading to more substantial support for the industry.

Sustainable Tourism Development

Dodds and Butler (2009) stressed the significance of effective governance and accountability in implementing sustainable tourism strategies. Sustainable tourism development focuses on strategies harmonizing environmental, socio-cultural, and economic objectives to deliver enduring benefits. It emphasizes meeting the needs of all stakeholders while preserving resources for future generations. The core principles of sustainable tourism include: (1) preserving environmental quality, (2) ensuring benefits for both local communities and tourists, (3) fostering strong connections between tourism and the environment, (4) promoting harmony among local populations and their surroundings, (5) adapting to the carrying capacity of destinations by creating flexible conditions, and (6) encouraging collaboration among all stakeholders to achieve the shared goal of sustainable development (Amerta, 2017).

2.2 Hypotheses development

Sustainable Practices and Sustainable Tourism Development

Modern tourism development increasingly emphasizes sustainability, focusing on preserving cultural heritage and protecting the natural environment. Many destinations are actively working to reduce tourism's socio-cultural and environmental challenges (Liu, 2003). Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) seeks to balance the needs of current tourists and host communities while ensuring that future generations can also benefit from these resources (Streimikiene et al., 2021). As defined by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainable tourism aims to minimize environmental, social, and cultural harm while enhancing economic benefits and preserving cultural values. Central to this approach are sustainable practices that prioritize environmental stewardship, respect for local cultures, and economic fairness (Iaquinto, 2015). These efforts help mitigate tourism's negative impacts and build a foundation for long-term resilience and viability of destinations (Kwarteng et al., 2016). Environmental sustainability measures, such as reducing carbon emissions, preserving biodiversity, and utilizing renewable energy, are essential for improving the ecological well-being of tourist destinations (Babu et al., 2018). Studies indicate that sustainably managed protected areas attract eco-friendly travelers, promoting tourism growth without exhausting natural resources (Kornilaki & Font, 2019). Likewise, initiatives to safeguard cultural heritage, including the protection of indigenous traditions and historical sites, enhance the tourism experience while preserving local identities (Prakash et al., 2023). Engaging local communities in tourism planning and decision-making fosters inclusivity and instills a sense of ownership, strengthening ties to sustainable tourism practices (Budeanu et al., 2016). Economically, sustainable approaches are vital in ensuring fair distribution of tourism benefits (Islam et al., 2020). Integrating local businesses and workforce into the tourism sector helps create jobs, support local entrepreneurship, and boost regional economic stability (Iaquinto, 2015). Furthermore, research suggests that the increasing preference of tourists for environmentally and socially responsible destinations gives sustainability-focused locations a competitive advantage, resulting in higher profitability and sustained growth (Barbieri et al., 2020). Implementing sustainable tourism practices is not without its challenges. Financial limitations, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), often obstruct the adoption of eco-friendly technologies and SP (Mazhenova et al., 2016). Additionally, inadequate regulatory enforcement and the need to raise awareness among tourists about sustainability present notable obstacles (Islam et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, the growing global demand for sustainable tourism offers significant opportunities (Font et al., 2017). Achieving Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) requires using resources to remain within their regenerative capacity. Sustainable practices (SP) are crucial in advancing STD by promoting environmental protection, cultural heritage preservation, and economic growth (Linnes et al., 2022). Incorporating sustainability into tourism strategies enhances destinations' attractiveness and overall quality while ensuring tourism supports broader sustainable development goals.

(Laitamaki et al., 2016). Islam et al. (2020) explored key factors influencing SMEs' adoption of sustainability practices in the tourism accommodation sector and their effects on competitive advantage. Their research highlights that collaboration among tourism firms, innovation, robust technological support, sustainable practices by intermediaries, and committed leadership are critical drivers of adopting sustainable practices. In contrast, government policies and local attitudes toward sustainability had minimal impact. Recent studies (Babu et al., 2018; Budeanu et al., 2016; Font et al., 2017; Islam et al., 2020; Kwarteng et al., 2016; Mazhenova et al., 2016; Prakash et al., 2023) emphasize that sustainable practices across economic, environmental, social, and ethical dimensions are essential prerequisites for STD. Research further indicates that all facets of sustainable practices significantly influence STD (Kornilaki & Font, 2019; Liu, 2003; Nave et al., 2021; Streimikiene et al., 2021). Based on these findings, as illustrated in Fig. 1, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H₁: Sustainable practices significantly influence sustainable tourism development.

Mediating the impact of tourism involvement between sustainable practices and sustainable tourism development

Tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and influential sectors globally, contributing significantly to economic growth, cultural exchange, and environmental awareness (Birendra et al., 2021). Within this paradigm, sustainable practices, such as resource conservation, waste management, and community engagement, are crucial for long-term tourism development (Loehr et al., 2021). Scholars such as Showkat and Nagina (2024) argue that sustainable practices are the foundation for addressing sustainability's environmental, social, and economic dimensions in tourism. For instance, implementing eco-friendly infrastructure, such as renewable energy systems and water recycling facilities, has been shown to reduce the ecological impact of tourism while enhancing resource efficiency (Pan et al., 2024). Moreover, initiatives to preserve cultural heritage and empower local communities have demonstrated positive outcomes in fostering social cohesion and economic inclusivity (Bathla et al., 2024).

Despite the acknowledged importance of SP, their direct impact on STD is not always linear or guaranteed (Khan et al., 2021; Aall, 2014; Baloch et al., 2023). Several studies highlight the challenges of translating sustainability principles into actionable outcomes, such as the lack of stakeholder awareness, resistance to change, and limited resources for implementing sustainability measures (Dodds & Butler, 2009). This is where tourism involvement emerges as a critical variable, influencing the extent to which sustainable practices lead to sustainable tourism development (Elshaer et al., 2021). The degree to which sustainable practices lead to sustainable outcomes is often influenced by the active involvement of stakeholders, including tourists, local communities, and businesses. By fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among stakeholders, tourism involvement enhances the adoption and effectiveness of sustainable practices (Camilleri, 2016). For instance, local community participation enhances the implementation of eco-friendly initiatives and ensures that tourism development aligns with the region's socio-cultural and environmental context (Li & Hunter, 2015). Similarly, the active engagement of tourists in sustainable behaviors—such as choosing eco-certified accommodations or supporting local businesses—amplifies the impact of sustainability measures. Furthermore, tourism involvement acts as a bridge, translating sustainable practices into tangible outcomes like environmental preservation, cultural heritage protection, and economic benefits for local populations (Dodds & Butler, 2009; Wray, 2013). Research also indicates that when stakeholders perceive their involvement in tourism activities as meaningful and beneficial, they are more likely to endorse and perpetuate sustainable tourism practices, thus solidifying the pathway to sustainable tourism development. This mediating role underscores the necessity of inclusive policies and participatory frameworks to achieve holistic and sustainable outcomes in the tourism sector (Simpson, 2001). Several empirical studies provide evidence for the mediating role of TI in the relationship between SP and STD (Baloch et al., 2023). For instance, a study by Blanton et al. (2024) on ecotourism destinations in Southeast Asia found that the involvement of local communities significantly enhanced the effectiveness of sustainable practices in achieving environmental conservation and socio-economic benefits. The study revealed that communities with higher levels of tourism involvement were likelier to adopt and support sustainable practices, leading to improved biodiversity protection, waste management, and income generation outcomes. Similarly, research by Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) on the role of stakeholder participation in sustainable tourism planning highlights the importance of inclusive and

participatory approaches. Their findings indicate that stakeholder involvement fosters trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility, which are critical for successfully implementing sustainable practices. Research further indicates that tourism involvement significantly mediates the relationship between SP and STD (Aprilia et al., 2024; Dündar & Karacaer, 2023; Khalid et al., 2019; Li, 2022; Pan et al., 2024). Based on these findings, as illustrated in Fig. 1, the following hypotheses can be proposed: **H₂**: Tourism involvement significantly mediated the relationship between sustainable practices and sustainable tourism development

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sampling and Procedure of Data Collection

The study focuses on eco-tourists, local residents, and key stakeholders engaged in tourism development at eco-tourism destinations. This includes visitors to eco-tourism sites, individuals living in nearby communities, and those involved in managing or operating tourism services. A mixed sampling approach is adopted, combining stratified random sampling and purposive sampling methods. Stratified random sampling is used to divide the sample into distinct categories—tourists, residents, and tourism stakeholders—to ensure balanced representation. Meanwhile, purposive sampling is applied specifically to stakeholders and authorities to select individuals with direct roles in eco-tourism activities and decision-making processes. The total sample size is at least 230 respondents, distributed as follows: 120 tourists, 70 local residents, and 40 tourism stakeholders or operators. Data was collected using a standardized questionnaire in two major cities of Rajasthan—Mount Abu and Jaisalmer—representing the north-western region of India. The structured questionnaire was developed to gather information on respondents' demographics, their views on sustainable tourism practices, and their extent of participation in tourism-related activities.

3.2 Measure

The substance of the questionnaire was modified to fit the requirements of the investigation from past research. These factors include SP, TI, and STD. Four aspects of the EO include SEP, SSP, SENP, and SETP. There are five items in each of the dimensions. Sustainable economic, social, environmental, and ethical practice scale adopted by (Font et al., 2016). A nine-item measure developed by (Suhartanto et al., 2018; Lee, 2013) for tourism involvement was considered to be taken initially. Environmental sustainability scales were adopted from (Lee et al., 2013), and the socio-cultural sustainability scale was adopted from (Nicholas et al., 2009).

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 23 was conducted to test the construct's validity, reliability, and discriminant validity. Three latent variables, including SP, TI, and STD, are considered in this CFA model.

4.2 Structural Model

The hypotheses were evaluated using AMOS 23, SEM. Both direct and indirect impacts were tested. STD is the outcome variable in this SEM model, with higher-order SP as the independent variable and TI as the mediator. Table 4's results are shown here, and the model estimation indicated that the evidence fit the framework well. The current research looked at path estimates and their statistical significance in evaluating hypothesized assumptions. The direct effects (H1) were tested in the first stage. The path estimate reported that SP had a significant influence on STD (SP \rightarrow STD, $\beta = 0.675$, $p = 0.000$). Thus, the study found support for H₁.

Table 1 shows the result of the structural model

Path	Coeffieicent	Std. Error	P Value	Hypothesis
SP \rightarrow STD	0.675	0.16	***	Supported
SP \rightarrow TI	0.186	0.179	0.298	
TI \rightarrow STD	0.171	0.077	0.026	

4.3 Mediation Analysis

The mediation effect was then investigated (Table 2). SP shows no mediation indirect effect between SP and STD (SP \rightsquigarrow TI \rightsquigarrow STD: (H_4) = 95% Boot- LLCI = 0.032; Boot- ULCI = 0.019). However, TI has no mediation effect on the relationship between SP and STD (direct effect = 0.675, indirect effect = 0.032)

Table 2 Mediation Effect

Hypothesis	Estimate	Bootstrap 95% CIs		P value	Result
		Lower	Upper		
SP \rightsquigarrow TI \rightsquigarrow STD	0.032	0.019	0.167	0.21	No Mediation

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

5.1 Direct Impact of Sustainable Practices on Sustainable Tourism Development

However, SP also significantly affects STD (SP \rightarrow STD, β = 0.675, p = 0.000). The results are consistent with the findings of earlier literature (Aprilia et al., 2024; Dündar & Karacaer, 2023). Sustainable practices are crucial for advancing sustainable tourism development, contributing to environmental conservation, economic stability, and social well-being. By reducing tourism's environmental footprint, these practices safeguard natural ecosystems and biodiversity, ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourist destinations. Economically, they provide stable opportunities for local communities, fostering inclusive growth and reducing reliance on exploitative methods. Socially, sustainable tourism promotes cultural preservation, respects local traditions, and empowers communities to reap the benefits of tourism. Additionally, it caters to the preferences of environmentally conscious travellers, boosting satisfaction and loyalty while encouraging investments in eco-friendly infrastructure and policies. Sustainable practices support balanced growth, benefit all stakeholders, and protect the planet for future generations.

5.2 Indirect Impact through Tourism Involvement

TI does not mediate SP's impact on STD (SP et al.: (H_4) = 95% Boot- LLCI = 0.019; Boot- ULCI = 0.167). This suggests that factors other than tourism involvement are more influential in fostering sustainability within the tourism industry. Policymakers and tourism operators should focus on promoting sustainable practices directly, such as adopting eco-friendly policies and educating tourists and stakeholders, instead of focusing solely on boosting tourism involvement. This highlights the importance of a comprehensive strategy for sustainable tourism development that goes beyond merely increasing engagement and tackles the fundamental drivers of sustainability.

5.3 Theoretical Implication

The findings suggest that sustainable practices play a significant role in driving sustainable tourism development (STD). This has important theoretical implications, as it highlights the key role of individual and collective attitudes in shaping sustainable outcomes in tourism. The study suggests that sustainable tourism development is influenced by the direct implementation of eco-friendly practices and the underlying attitudes toward eco-tourism. This finding challenges traditional models focusing solely on environmental or economic factors, emphasizing the need to incorporate psychological and behavioral elements into sustainable tourism theories. It also calls for further refinement of existing frameworks to account for the mediating effects of attitudes in influencing tourism sustainability. The study highlights the significance of cultivating eco-tourism attitudes among consumers and communities to establish a conducive environment for sustainable tourism practices, providing a more comprehensive perspective on sustainable tourism development.

5.4 Managerial Implications

Tourism operators and policymakers should promote eco-tourism awareness and education to encourage more sustainable behavior and participation in environmentally responsible activities. Managers should integrate sustainable practices, such as resource conservation and cultural preservation, into their tourism offerings and marketing strategies. Furthermore, understanding eco-tourism benefits can help align consumer expectations with sustainable development goals. Since eco-tourism attitudes mediate the relationship with sustainable practices, managers can implement targeted campaigns to influence tourist perceptions and behaviors, ensuring long-term sustainability in the tourism industry.

5.5 Study Limitations and the Potential for Future Research

The reliance on self-reported data from tourists and stakeholders may introduce biases, potentially affecting the reliability of the results. Future research could investigate additional elements such as policy frameworks, community-driven tourism initiatives, or technological advancements contributing to sustainable tourism.

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