

How Empowering Local Communities Influences Sustainable Tourism Development: The Mediating Role of Community Participation

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ABSTRACT

Community empowerment has gained a lot of importance over the last decade because it has a positive influence on the achievement of sustainable tourism. This research will discuss the mediation effect of community participation (CP) on relationship between government empowering policies and sustainable tourism development (STD). Particularly, the study suggests CP as a major mediator between the aspects of empowerment of local communities (ELC) and enhanced sustainability performance in tourism destinations. A sample of 384 stakeholders, comprising local residents, tourism entrepreneurs and the policymakers in Jordan, was used to obtain data which were analyzed through structural equation modelling (SEM). It has been shown that ELC has a positive and direct prediction of CP as well as STD. The results also indicate that CP has a significant positive impact on the results of sustainable tourism. On top of these, CP was also discovered to play an important role in mediating the relationship between community empowerment and STD. Based on the idea of the stakeholder theory and sustainable development theory (SDT), the case study indicates that ELC is extremely vital and contributes to the active engagement promotion to contribute to the environmental sustainability, socio-cultural conservation, and economic gains in the tourist destinations. The implications of the findings to the policy makers and tourism planners in Jordan is that inclusive policies should be designed to enhance CP and STD in the long term.

Keywords: Community Empowerment, Sustainable Tourism Development, Community Participation, Stakeholder Theory, Tourism Policy, Jordan Tourism Industry

JEL Classifications: Z32, Q56, D71

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the global tourism industry over the last decade has been a radical change as the models of mass tourism have been changed to more accommodative and sustainable development paradigms. It has been occasioned by the rising environmental and socio-cultural forces, as well as the necessity to

achieve fair distribution of economic benefits among destination stakeholders (Ghosh et al., 2025; Mohd Yusof et al., 2025). In this changing environment, empowerment of local communities (ELC) is becoming an urgent policy and developmental agenda, especially in developing and emerging economies like Jordan, with tourism being a very important sector of economic development and cultural conservation (Wang et al., 2021; Lijun

and Ahmed, 2024). Even though the significance of community-offered approaches is acknowledged, most tourism destinations have been facing the challenge of inadequate local participation in the decision-making process, resulting in the unsustainability of practices and socio-economic inequalities (Jameel et al., 2025; Sulaiman et al., 2024). ELC is the idea of increasing the capacity, power, and the role of residents in tourism planning and development processes and helps people to impact the decision-making process that influences their livelihoods and environments (Hu et al., 2022). This construct is premised on the stakeholder theory that focuses on the involvement of various stakeholders in the decision-making processes of organizations and policies to realize sustainable outcomes (Freeman, 1984). Empowered communities in the tourism context have high chances of helping to ensure that the area sustains sustainable projects, as well as maintain the cultural heritage and help in long-term destination resilience (Yousaf and Javed, 2025). This choice of variable is thus explained by the fact that it plays a central role in getting the governance structures to overlap with the grassroots-based engagement, and thus it is one of the keystones of the modern discourse in tourism policy. To add to this, CP is imagined as the individual participation of locals in the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of tourism (Tong et al., 2024). It is an important tool of empowerment becoming translated into concrete development effects.

Using the participatory development theory, the more the higher the level of participation, the greater the transparency, accountability and shared ownership, which increases the effectiveness of tourism initiatives (Reed, 2008). The use of CP as a mediating variable is both justified in theory and practise because it is proposed in earlier works that empowerment is not an adequate factor, unless it is operationalized by using meaningful processes of participation (Lijun and Ahmed, 2024). In this way, it becomes a channel connecting the empowerment activities with the sustainable tourism results. Dependent variable, STD, refers to the coordinated approach to environmental protection, socio-cultural preservation and economic viability as a part and parcel of tourism systems (Gautam and Bhalla, 2024). The construct is based on the SDT, which theorizes the necessity of the development that should satisfy the current needs without affecting the future generations. The fact that it remains included is especially important in the context of the growing global focus on the indicators of sustainability and the logic of responsible tourism. In other tourist destinations, such as Jordan, where other heritage sites such as Petra and Wadi Rum are ranked globally, sustainable tourism is not only economically important but a strategic need to ensure the protection of natural and cultural resources (Xiaoning et al., 2025). The economic importance and the prevailing market conditions in the tourism sector in Jordan are solid reasons why the sector should be chosen. Jordan is a key tourist destination, and tourism shows about 12.14% contribution to GDP and is also the foremost source of FX and workforce of the country (Ghosh et al., 2025; Sulaiman et al., 2024). The industry has proved itself strong and bounced back in recent years after the worldwide disruption, as more and more people come to the country, and the government contributes to the sustainable and community-based tourism development (Hu et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, there are still issues that require attention, such as the distribution of benefits unequally, environmental damage, and insufficient interest of the community in the tourism governance (Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025; Wang et al., 2021). These factors enable Jordan to be a convenient empirical platform to consider the interaction amid empowerment, participation, and sustainability. Although the literature on sustainable tourism is increasing, there are still a number of critical research gaps. Numerous researches have investigated CP and sustainability outcomes separately but the mediating relationships between them have received a little emphasis (Xiaoning et al., 2025; Sharma and Bhat, 2023). Although empowerment has been a highly discussed topic, less has been known about its direct and indirect implications on STD, especially in the environment of the developing countries (Hu et al., 2022; Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025). The available literature takes a somewhat qualitative or theoretical perspective and does not have strong empirical support through modern methods of research like SEM (Yousaf and Javed, 2025; Lijun and Ahmed, 2024). No local studies in the Middle East, and more so in Jordan, have given context-specific research, and socio-political and cultural factors play a vital role in tourism development (Ghosh et al., 2025; Sulaiman et al., 2024). Moreover, in past researchers have failed to employ stakeholder theory, as well as sustainable development theory adequately, to describe how empowerment can be converted into outcomes of sustainability (Lijun and Ahmed, 2024; Tong et al., 2024). These shortcomings point to the necessity of a holistic, theory-based, and empirically-grounded study.

In the light of these gaps, the main reason of the current study is to analyse the effects of ELC on STD mediated by CP. More precisely, the research aim to (1) determine the direct impact of community empowerment on STD, (2) determine the effect of community empowerment on CP, (3) test the impact of participation on the sustainability outcomes, and (4) test the mediating effect of CP in this relationship. This research has many relevant implications on different levels. Theoretically it combines both the stakeholder theory and the SDT in offering a holistic approach in explaining the dynamics of tourism sustainability. It is an empirical study that has a quantitative method of confirming sophisticated relationships between important variables in the context of a developing country. In practice, the findings have practical implications on policymakers and tourism planners in crafting participative and inclusive policies. The research is not confined to the scholarly discussion but is focused on practical issues on tourism administration and sustainability. It is particularly unique in the sense that it incorporates the aspects of empowerment, participation, and sustainability into one integrative model, which provides a subtle insight into the processes of tourism development. Finally, the urgency to facilitate fair, inclusive, and sustainable tourism systems to the advantage of local communities, as well as the general economies, drives the study.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The current research is based on the Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and SDT (WCED, 1987), which in combination can help to have a strong conceptual framework of how ELC can influence

STD through CP. These theories find their application in the tourism sphere especially, as there are multiple players involved, such as the local residents, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and tourists who interact and shape the results of the destination together (Sharma and Bhat, 2023; Wang et al., 2021). The Stakeholder Theory is based on the idea that organizations and policies are most successful when understanding the interests of all the concerned stakeholders are realized, harmonized, and incorporated into the decision-making among stakeholders (Jameel et al., 2025). Stakeholders in tourism are not only limited to businesses, but also the local communities whose involvement is highly required in sustainable development (Tong et al., 2024). Community empowerment allows stakeholders to exercise agency in tourism planning and governance and the distribution of resources, thus balancing the interests of the local communities with the sustainability objectives of the whole tourism industry (Gautam and Bhalla, 2024; Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025). This view has been well supported by prior research, which demonstrated that the engagement of stakeholders improves policy acceptance, compliance, and competitiveness of destinations in addition to the benefits (Mohd Yusof et al., 2025). As an example, in Jordan, the active involvement of the local community in the eco-tourism and management of heritage sites has been associated with the enhanced environmental protection and socio-economic positive outcomes (Sulaiman et al., 2024).

The theory of sustainable development offers a supplementary perspective on the subject, concentrating on the incorporation of environmental, social and economic goals into development (WCED, 1987). Sustainable development in the tourism situation assures that the existing tourism expansion does not undermine ecological integrity or cultural heritage of the destinations and, at the same time, provides fair economic prospects (Xiaoning et al., 2025; Jameel et al., 2025). STD as a dependent variable is thus motivated by its policy-relevant, industry-relevant, and community-relevant outcomes particularly in a resource sensitive destination such as Petra and Wadi Rum in Jordan. Empowerment, participation, and sustainable results have been found to interact positively as previous research indicated that sustainability-oriented practices in the local communities work better when they are empowered and engaged (Yousaf and Javed, 2025; Mohd Yusof et al., 2025). These theories have been selected in particular due to the fact that Stakeholder Theory elaborates on the process of empowerment and engagement, whereas SDT includes the establishment of normative objectives to which the processes in question should be oriented (Sulaiman et al., 2024; Xiaoning et al., 2025). Their combination generates an effective theoretical justification concerning the necessity to test the mediating role of community involvement since empowerment is not necessarily followed by sustainability except in cases where residents are actively involved in the tourism-related decision-making process and initiatives (Jameel et al., 2025). This pathway has been supported in the literature, whereby participatory governance acts as a mediator to the relationship between community empowerment and positive ecological, socio-cultural, and economic effects (Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025; Yousaf and Javed, 2025).

Furthermore, this theoretical framework is compatible with the studies that focus on the significance of the local knowledge and collective action in sustainable tourism (Lijun and Ahmed, 2024). Stakeholder Theory gives the structural perspective of the people that should be empowered, and SDT dictates the results expected, establishing a sound rationale of the proposed model in this research. The research in the same context, such as in the Middle East emerging economies, has strongly indicated the idea that community empowerment and participation processes play a central role in the sustainability of tourism and hence, gives theoretical and practical support to the current model of research (Tong et al., 2024). Overall, both Stakeholder Theory and SDT are very powerful and solid theories with consistent, empirical ground to analyse the impact that ELC has on STD, mediated by CP. Such a framework does not only inform the choice of the variables but also creates a sound theoretical support of the proposed mediating relationships, which maintains that the study is conceptually sound and practically applicable to the Jordan tourism industry.

2.1. Empowering local Communities and Sustainable Tourism Development

ELC is a well-known factor that contributes to STD, and especially in the destination where the socio-cultural and environmental resources are prominent as a tourism competitive advantage (Gautam and Bhalla, 2024). Empowerment is a promotion of capacity, authority, and decision-making power among residents to have an impact on the policies, resource distribution, and development strategies that have a direct impact on the residents (Sulaiman et al., 2024). Empowerment of the local stakeholders increase their chances of engaging in practices that strike a balance between economic growth and environmental conservation and preservation of culture, which are important aspects of sustainable tourism (Mohd Yusof et al., 2025). The relationship between the community empowerment and tourism sustainability is positive and is supported by empirical evidence. An example is a study in Jordan and other Middle Eastern settings that found that the destinations in which the community plays a active role in the planning and management have a higher level of environmental conservation, equitable economic gain and social cohesion (Jameel et al., 2025; Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025). On the same note, Yousaf and Javed (2025) underlines that empowerment is the means of local ownership of tourism resources that lessen its exploitation and promote responsible practices. The stakeholder theory also emphasizes that sustainable performance can be more attainable once all the corresponding actors, such as the residents of the local area, are actively involved in the decision-making process (Lijun and Ahmed, 2024). Community empowerment is especially essential in the Jordanian tourism sector, as it is one of the main contributors to GDP and employment and faces such challenges as the unequal distribution of benefits, environmental degradation, and commodification of cultures (Tong et al., 2024). Therefore, it is theorized that the increased ELC positively anticipate the attainment of STD goals and offer theoretical and practical support to policy interventions in the direction to inclusive and robust tourism development.

H₁: ELC positively predicts STD.

2.2. Empowering Local Communities and Community Participation

ELC is strongly recognized as a precondition to substantial involvement in the process of planning and development of tourism (Ghosh et al., 2025). Empowerment also increases the ability, power, and faith of the residents to participate in decision making, thus making the previously inactive stakeholders active (Sulaiman et al., 2024). The theoretical insights, and especially the stakeholder theory, underscore that sustainable performances are realized when all the stakeholders, such as the local communities, have the right and the capacity to shape the tourism governance (Xiaoning et al., 2025). In this regard, empowerment is not just an administrative or policy-related organ, but rather something motivating, enabling, which stimulates communities to engage in the activities associated with the environmental protection, cultural and heritage management, and economic planning (Jameel et al., 2025). Experiments conducted in developing nations and Jordan are not an exception as the studies indicate that communities become much more engaged in tourism-related activities once assigned decision-making power, resources, and a role in policy discussions (Lijun and Ahmed, 2024; Sharma and Bhat, 2023). Indicatively, a study of community-based tourism projects in Jordan has shown that the empowerment activities, including training programmes, consultative forums, and co-management schemes, had a direct positive impact on how the residents participated in tourism planning, environmental monitoring, and service delivery (Gautam and Bhalla, 2024). Moreover, the concept of participation is a scheme where empowerment creates sustainable advantages, the link between what the policy intends to do and actual developmental results (Wang et al., 2021). Since participation is extremely important in operationalizing the concept of empowerment and the realization of the sustainable tourism goals, it is theorized that ELC positively related to the increase of the degree of CP. The connection highlights the need to incorporate empowerment approaches into tourism governance systems in order to promote inclusive, participatory, and sustainable development in Jordan and other developing economies (Jameel et al., 2025).

H₂: ELC positively predicts CP.

2.3. Community Participation and Sustainable Tourism Development

CP is also accepted as a pivotal tool in terms of reaching sustainable tourism outcomes because it allows the involvement of the local population in the planning, management, and conservation efforts (Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025). Involvement enables communities to impact on the choices made about the use of resources, heritage conservation, and social-economic advantages, in such a manner that tourism growth is in line with the local demands and the capacities. The SDT has shown that a long-term sustainability strategy necessitates economic, environmental, and socio-cultural goals to be balanced, and such balance can be achieved only in those cases when the local stakeholders are actively involved in the decision-making and implementation process (Sulaiman et al., 2024). Research in Jordan and other Middle Eastern nations has demonstrated that the greater the levels of community involvement in the decision-making and implementation process, the more the culture conservation, the

equitable income distribution, and sustainability levels (Mohd Yusof et al., 2025). In the same vein, Xiaoning et al., (2025) reiterates that participatory mechanisms enable the community to co-manage tourism projects so as to create a sense of ownership, accountability and compliance to sustainable practises. In other studies, it is emphasized that the involvement of residents in decision making will make them feel a sense of responsibility towards the preservation of the environment, the development of heritage sites, as well as the creation of socially inclusive tourism (Sharma and Bhat, 2023; Jameel et al., 2025). Stakeholder theory also contributes to the theoretical rationale because it states that the effectiveness and sustainability outcomes of policy become more efficient and effective in case all interested actors are incorporated in the decision-making processes (Mohd Yusof et al., 2025). In the real-life, community involvement is the link between empowerment efforts and actual sustainability outcomes, such that resources, training, and authority are transformed into value (Yousaf and Javed, 2025). In line with this it is postulated that CP positively predict STD as an indication of both empirical evidence and theory. The connexion highlights the significance of supporting participatory models within the tourism industry of Jordan to realize socially equitable, environmentally responsible, and economically viable results (Tong et al., 2024).

H₃: CP positively predicts STD.

2.4. Mediating Role of Community Participation

Although ELC offers the structural, financial and policy assistance needed to facilitate development of tourism, it has been known to make an impact by actively participating in decision making and planning. CP is the key process where empowerment becomes the key to the results of sustainable tourism (Lijun and Ahmed, 2024). The stakeholder theory notes that the presence and involvement of all of the interested parties such as local citizens, entrepreneurs, and policymakers contribute to the increased legitimacy and efficacy of tourism projects, providing the channels to enable empowerment to yield the results (Hu et al., 2022). Empowerment can be only symbolic without meaningful participation, which not produce any environmental, socio-cultural or economic advantages (Wang et al., 2021). The sustainable development theory also contributes to this mediation view as it points out that long term sustainability depends on integrated activities of stakeholders, in which participation allows local communities to co-manage resources, impose conservation behaviors, and shape decision making in order to harmonies with the environmental, social, and economic goals (Jameel et al., 2025). According to Sharma and Bhat, (2023), capacity-building efforts, consultative forums, and co-management efforts, as empowerment initiatives, have improved CP, who have ensured better sustainable tourism results. On the same note, Wang et al. (2021) and Mohd Yusof et al., (2025) stress that participatory models can ensure that such positive outcomes of empowerment as greater authority and availability of resources are adequately translated into responsible and sustainable tourism practices. In addition, this mediating relationship fills a significant gap in the tourism literature as past studies tended to study empowerment and sustainability results separately and did not focus on how empowering can affect sustainability (Sulaiman et al., 2024). This study combines theoretical contributions of the stakeholder theory and SDT with empirical data by placing CP in the middle of them,

which have an organized and practical set of guidelines that can inform policymakers and practitioners (Jameel et al., 2025).

H₄: CP mediates the relationship between ELC and STD.

These hypotheses are visually illustrated in Figure 1.

3. METHODS

In this study, the cross sectional survey design was employed which used the quantitative methods of investigation of the relationships among the variables.

3.1. Research Subjects and Methods

The study population included 14,625 tourism stakeholders, who consist of local residents, tourism entrepreneurs and policymakers, operating in different tourism sectors in Jordan between the 2025 and 2026 period. A disproportionate cluster sampling was utilized to select the study sample. It was decided that at least 376 participants would reflect the population with reference to a 95% confidence level (Ghosh et al., 2025). The researchers went to the selected tourism communities and organizations that were part of the study sample to collect data and administered questionnaires to the stakeholders who volunteered to participate in the research. In that regard, a total of 398 stakeholders were used to collect data. Nonetheless, data of nine respondents were identified to be extreme values and were then eliminated out of the original data before the analysis phase. Thus, 389 complete data sets were used during the analysis phase of the research. This is the number (n = 389) that was considered to be adequate to reflect the population of study. Out of the 389 stakeholders utilized in the research, 62.5% (n = 243) were local inhabitants and 37.5% (n = 146) were tourism entrepreneurs and tourism policymakers, 29.1% (n = 113) worked in the field of heritage and cultural tourism, and 70.9% (n = 276) worked in the field of eco-tourism and adventure tourism. With respect to the experience of the participants in the tourism industry, 20.1 (n = 78) years had experience of 4 years, 39.6 (n = 154) years had experience of 5-12 years and 40.3 (n = 157) years had an experience of 13 and above years. As concerns the level of education of the participants, 78.9% (n = 307) had a degree of bachelors level, and 21.1% (n = 82) had a degree of graduate level.

3.2. Measures

Ethical approval to undertake the study was given by the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the Jordan University (Decision No. 2026-4/3.21, dated 12 February 2025) before the actual data collection took place. To ensure that the data-gathering stage was done effectively, the ELC Scale, the CP Scale and the STD Scale were used in the research.

3.2.1. Local communities empowerment scale

ELC Scale was modified to the Jordanian environment by (Xiaoning et al., 2025). There are 18 Likert-type items, the answers to which lie between 1 (Never) and 5 (Always). The scale is made up of three dimensions such as support, decision-making authority and resource accessibility that are broken down into 10 items of the support dimension, and four items of the decision-making authority dimension and resource accessibility dimension. The

increased scores that were received through the scale show that there is increased empowerment of local communities. The internal consistency coefficients of Cronbach alpha were determined to be 0.75-0.83 during Cronbach alpha scale adaptation study (Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025). The reliability coefficients of the Jordanian adaptation of the scale were also recalculated in the present study and were found to be 0.95, 0.87, 0.88, and 0.94 respectively, indicating the support dimension, decision-making authority dimension, resource accessibility dimension, and the entire scale.

3.2.2. Community participation scale

Hu et al. (2022) created the CP Scale and consisted of 16 Likert-type statements depending on responses in a scale between 1 (Strongly disagree) and 5 (Strongly agree). The scale consists of four dimensions which are decision-making participation, environmental participation, socio-cultural participation and economic participation. The original internal consistency coefficients of Cronbach alpha of the four dimensions and the scale as a whole were found to be in the range of 0.77-0.88 (Mohd Yusof et al., 2025). An increased score on the scale indicates that there is an increase in the level of participation of the local communities in tourism activities. The current study recalculated reliability coefficients which showed to be 0.80 with decision-making participation, 0.84 with environmental participation, 0.69 with socio-cultural participation, and 0.81 with economic participation, and 0.90 with the total overall score of the scale.

3.2.3. Sustainable tourism development scale

The STD Scale was initially created by Lijun and Ahmed (2024) and then translated into a Jordanian one by (Tong et al., 2024). The scale comprises of ten Likert-type questions organized in three dimensions such as environmental sustainability, socio-cultural sustainability, and economic sustainability. The items of the scale are answered in a scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The scores that are higher on the scale represent higher levels of STD in destinations. Jameel et al. (2025) established the internal consistency coefficients of the alpha of the three scale dimensions, and scale of the test as ranging between 0.76 and 0.86. The reliability coefficients in the present research were recalculated and identified to ensure that the values are 0.77, 0.79 and 0.81 under environmental, socio-cultural and economic sustainability, respectively, and 0.85 under the total score of the scale.

3.3. Control Variables

The characteristics of gender and the professional experience of individual respondents in the tourism industry were the control variables of the current study as they were believed to possibly influence CP and STD. Past research regarding community participation indicated that male stakeholders had exhibited greater degrees of engagement in the decision-making process Xiaoning et al. (2025), whilst other researchers found no significant differences in respect of gender (Hu et al., 2022). Speaking of the professional experience, the research has shown that more experienced stakeholders are more likely to be involved in tourism governance (Sharma and Bhat, 2023). Considering the literature at hand, we selected gender (1 = female, 2 = male) and professional experience as a control variable in the present study because both of them may potentially influence participation and sustainable tourism results.

3.4. Analytic Techniques

In the analysis of the collected data, we used the descriptive statistics (standard deviation and arithmetic mean), correlation analysis and SEM. It has been said that correlation coefficients have indicated an insignificant relationship when r is below 0.12, weak relationship when 0.12-0.42, moderate relationship when 0.42-0.72, a strong relationship when 0.72-0.92 and a very strong relationship when r is >0.92 . The hypotheses presented in the present study were tested by using the IBM version 24 statistical software, namely AMOS. As a method of conducting SEM, we found it better to do it in two stages. The first step was the establishment of a measurement model that incorporates all the variables of the study followed by its testing. Second, the development of a structural model was done to examine the effects between latent variables and explore mediation. By using such a model, we were able to estimate both the direct effect between each of the constructs of ELC, CP and STD as well as the indirect effects of ELC on STD. The assumption of multivariate analysis was analyzed with respect to the dataset before making analyses. In this context, we analyzed the data on outliers, multicollinearity and normality problems. One hundred and nine outliers were also removed out of the dataset and 389 valid scale forms were to be analyzed. Regarding normality, the values of the coefficients of kurtosis and skewness of the latent variables of study were within the range of -1.1 $+1.2$, meaning that the data was normally distributed (Mohd Yusof et al., 2025). We considered tolerance values and variance inflation factors (VIFs) to test the problem of multicollinearity in which a VIF of more than 10 and a tolerance value of <0.10 means that there is a multicollinearity problem (Kline, 2026). In the present research, the value of tolerance was 0.79 and that of VIF was 1.27, and this showed that there was no problem of multicollinearity in the data. The goodness of the fit indices used to determine the acceptability of the structural model based on the analyses were the goodness of fit χ^2/df , GFI, RMSEA, CFI and SRMR. A χ^2/df below 3.5 and a RMSEA of 0.09 or below are considered to be indicative of a good fit in the literature (Hoe, 2008; Kahn, 2006), whereas Hair et al. (2010) reported that a good fit will yield CFI and GFI values above 0.92. Besides, the literature suggests that a relatively good fit between a structural model and its data should be accompanied by the SRMR value of 0.09 or lower (Xiaoning et al., 2025).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Variable Correlations

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and interrelations of the study variables. Based on the responses of the respondent

Table 1: Descriptive results

Variables/values	M	SD	α	1	2	3
ELC	4.02	0.68	0.95	-		
CP	3.94	0.71	0.87	0.44**	-	
STD	4.08	0.61	0.89	0.52**	0.55**	-
Skewness	-	-	-	-0.63	-0.21	-0.25
Kurtosis	-	-	-	0.73	0.10	-0.22
TI	-	-	-	0.79	0.79	-
VIF	-	-	-	1.27	1.27	-

α : Cronbach's alpha coefficient, M: Mean, SD: Standard deviation, TI: Tolerance index, VIF: Variance inflation factor. $P < 0.01$

stakeholders, it was found that ELC ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.68$) and community participation ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.71$) are highly high. STD was also of high level in the participants ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.61$). We identified moderate, significantly positive ELC and CP ($r = 0.44$, $P < 0.01$), ELC and STD ($r = 0.52$, $P < 0.01$) and CP and STD ($r = 0.55$, $P < 0.01$).

4.2. Measurement Model

The structural model was developed and tested using a measurement model to include all the latent variables before the hypotheses of the study were tested. The model values of χ^2 were determined as 105.34 with the degree of freedom 34 ($\chi^2/df = 3.10$). The rest of the fit indices were calculated as follows: $GPI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.08$, $SRMR = 0.06$ and $CFI = 0.95$. Comprehensively, these values indicated that the model fitted the data satisfactorily. Moreover, the entire set of standardized factor loadings of underlying constructs proved to be statistically important ($P < 0.001$). These loadings were between 0.48 and 0.90 of ELC between 0.51 and 0.80 of CP and between 0.60 and 0.85 of STD.

4.3. Structural Model

This was a structural model that we created with the latent variables of the study. In this model, ELC was used as the independent variable, STD was the dependent variable and CP was the mediating variable. The hypothesized model had a sufficient fit to the data which led to an $802/df = 2.88$, $RMSEA = 0.07$, $GFI = 0.93$, $SRMR = 0.05$ and $CFI = 0.94$. The structural model also found that ELC was a positive and direct predictor of STD ($\beta = 0.35$, $P = 0.001$) and CP ($\beta = 0.51$, $P = 0.001$). These findings upheld H_1 and H_2 . Moreover, CP was also a positive and direct foreteller of STD ($\beta = 0.50$, $P < 0.001$), which addressed H_3 . Concerning the mediation, H_4 was that CP mediates the association between ELC and STD. The mediation model showed that ELC had an indirect interaction with STD via CP ($\beta = 0.26$, $P = 0.001$); therefore, H_4 was accepted. Other control variables in the mediation model were also studied; gender and professional experience (years in tourism). It turned out that gender is a significant predictor of STD ($\beta = 0.11$, $P = 0.01$), implying that female stakeholders were more engaged in sustainable tourism activities as compared to their male counterparts. Professional experience as the other control variable did not come out as a significant predictor of STD ($\beta = 0.05$, $P = 0.01$) (Table 2).

5. DISCUSSION

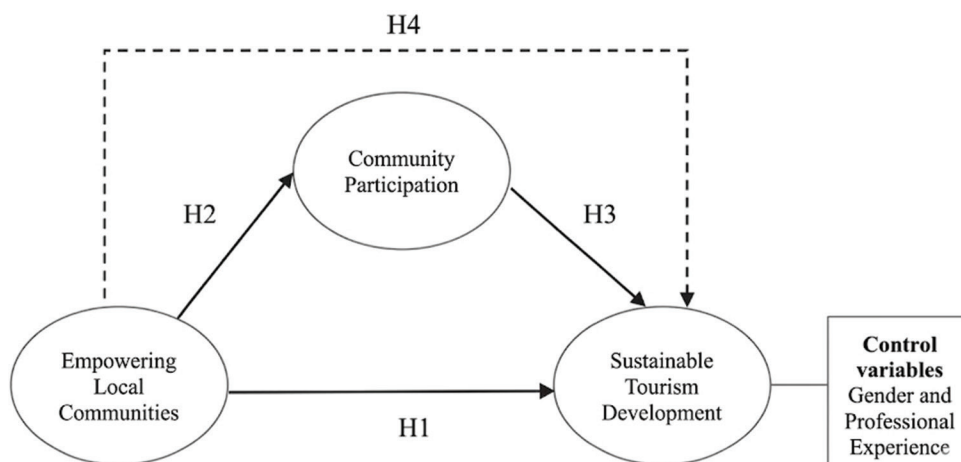
The results of this research are a good indication that ELC plays a critical role in the promotion of STD in Jordan. To begin with, the direct positive impact of ELC on STD proves the idea that the presence of structural, financial, and policy assistance to the communities increases their capacity to utilize tourism resources in a responsible way and lead to long-term sustainability (Ghosh et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with the past studies that established the empowerment interventions, including capacity-building programmes and participatory decision-making platforms, to play a central role in enhancing the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic performance in tourism destinations (Sulaiman et al., 2024). On the same note, research in the Middle East setting has also noted that empowered communities are

Table 2: Results for standardized effects, standard errors, and confidence intervals

Pathways	β	SE	95% bootstrap CI lower	95% bootstrap CI upper	P-value
Standardized direct effects					
ELC→STD	0.351	0.039	0.220	0.482	***
ELC→CP	0.507	0.043	0.362	0.625	***
CP→STD	0.498	0.069	0.341	0.623	***
Gender→STD	0.112	0.037	0.031	0.201	0.006
Experience→STD	0.048	0.003	-0.050	0.135	0.372
Standardized indirect effects					
ELC→STD	0.253	0.042	0.176	0.341	***
Standardized total effects					
ELC→STD	0.604	0.053	0.471	0.710	***

R²=0.564

Figure 1: Conceptual model



more likely to own tourism projects and become more involved in the management of resources (Tong et al., 2024; Jameel et al., 2025). This paper also discovered that ELC is a good predictor of CP. This observation reaffirms the concept that empowerment processes give the residents the power, resources, and incentive to engage closely in governance of tourism (Wang et al., 2021). The communities that can feel empowered are more likely to take part in the environmental protection, preservation, and the process of decision making, which aligns with the theoretical approaches of the stakeholder theory to inclusive governance as the way to achieve effective policy outcomes (Gautam and Bhalla, 2024; Sulaiman et al., 2024). On the other hand, it is postulated in some works of tourism literature that even empowerment might not be sufficient when participatory structures are poor or tokenistic (Yousaf and Javed, 2025; Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025). Yet, as we find, in the Jordanian setting, active participation is, in fact, associated with empowerment efforts, which is a gap bridged by the previous research. The HR was observed to positively affect STD meaning that the involvement of local stakeholders in the planning and management as important contributors to the realization of sustainability goals. This observation supports the study of Jameel et al. (2025) who claimed that participation methods are more effective in increasing accountability and ownership of the local population, which will ultimately result in a better resilient and efficient outcome. It also concurs with the reports of Mohd Yusof et al. (2025) and Sulaiman et al. (2024) who stressed the importance of social participation in conversion of empowerment into tangible sustainability outcomes. The scale of the effect, which is presented

in this research, indicates that participatory mechanisms can serve as the key driver in the alignment of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental objectives within the tourism sector. Weaker effects of participation on the outcomes of sustainability have been found in some conflicting studies, especially in areas with weak governance capacity (Ghosh et al., 2025; Sharma and Bhat, 2023). The discrepancies can be described by the differences in local governance systems, cultural values, and the degree of involvement in the past in Jordan. Notably, mediation analysis showed that CP has the full mediation effect of the relationship between ELC and STD. This observation underscores the fact that empowerment initiatives by themselves cannot solely result in sustainability; rather they have an impact that is indirect through the direct participation of the local stakeholders. This finding is consistent with the conclusion of Gautam and Bhalla (2024) and Sulaiman et al. (2024) who pointed out the mediating effect of involvement in translation of empowerment into responsible tourism activities.

It also fills the gaps of previous studies that mostly explored empowerment and sustainability separately without determining the mechanism behind it (Yousaf and Javed, 2025; Lijun and Ahmed, 2024). On the control variables, gender was significant to predict STD implying that, female stakeholders are more engaged in sustainable tourism activities compared to their male counterparts. The observation is corroborated by the existing literature that observes gender variations in environmental stewardship and participatory behaviour when introducing

tourism (Tong et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2022). On the other hand, the role of professional experience was not found as an important predictor, which means that experience does not always mean more participation or sustainability results, which is in line with the inconclusive evidence of past studies (Mohd Yusof et al., 2025; Jameel et al., 2025). In general, the research paper offers a logical interpretation of the interaction and relationship between empowerment and participation and its impact on STD. The results illustrate the pivotal role of CP as a process through which structural empowerment is associated with actual sustainability deliverables. The findings by incorporating the theoretical insights of the stakeholder theory and SDT add to a more comprehensive view of the mechanisms by which the local communities able to positively impact tourism development.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

The paper has a number of valuable theoretical contributions due to the incorporation of the Stakeholder Theory and SDT into a sustainable tourism context in Jordan. First, the research proves that ELC is a direct boost to STD, which makes empirical evidence of the stakeholder theory that insider involvement and empowerment of all the pertinent actors result in improved outcomes and decision-making. The research contributes to the body of knowledge by establishing CP as a mediating factor that transforms empowerment into real life sustainability results putting the importance of active involvement in the process of closing the gap between structural empowerment and practical effects. This is a major gap in the previous literature whereby the impact of empowerment and sustainability had been typically studied separately, especially in the setting of Middle Eastern tourism (Xiaoning et al., 2025). Moreover, the results reinforce the relevance of the concept of sustainable development in tourism, showing that the dimensions of the economy, social and environmental aspects are interpolated through community-focused policies (Purnomo and Purwandari, 2025). This study offers a systematic framework that can be transferred to other developing economies through empirical validation of these theoretical frameworks in the Jordanian setting since it creates a better insight into how community empowerment and participation play a collective role in achieving sustainable tourism results. Lastly, the work is a contribution to the field of stakeholder theory because of the addition of the aspect of gender to the study, which demonstrates that the female stakeholders are the most active in the practices of sustainability, shedding light on the heterogeneity of stakeholders and the effect it has on the final outcomes of tourism development.

5.2. Practical Implications

The implications of the findings of this research to practical use are that, they can be useful to the policymakers, tourism managers and communities in Jordan and other tourism destinations. The first one is that ELC has a strong positive impact on STD, which means that the policy of tourism must focus on the structural and participatory practices of empowerment, i.e. on the training programmes, access to the decision-making processes, and distribution of financial resources to local projects. These findings can be used by the policymakers to develop more accommodative tourism governance frameworks that can actively involve the communities in

environmental management, cultural conservations, and economic planning in a manner that ensures long-term sustainability. Second, the mediating effect of CP focuses on the fact that empowerment does not suffice, but the stakeholders should also be given practical avenues to participate in tourism planning and implementation. This means that to the tourism operators and the managers there is the development of community advisory boards, co-management structures and participatory workshops to improve on the social legitimacy as well as the efficiency of the project. Third, the observation that the stakeholders of the female gender exhibit greater engagement implies the implementation of specific programmes to engage women even more in tourism activities, which may reinforce the local social unity and equality. Lastly, monitoring the empowerment strategies as well as the level of participation can be more effective in accomplishing STD to make resources and policy determination translate into tangible environmental, socio-cultural and economic returns. These practical recommendations serve as a blueprint on how the community-based approaches can be incorporated in the national or regional tourism development policies.

6. CONCLUSION

In the present study, there is strong evidence that ELC plays a key role in the attainment of STD whereby CP is a very crucial mediating process. The study shows the relevance of incorporating the stakeholder views into the planning and management of tourism by showing the direct and indirect routes through which the empowerment can lead to sustainability results. The results show that the policies and programmes aimed at enhancing local autonomy, distributing resources, and decision-making can successfully turn into environmental, socio-cultural, and economic benefits in accordance with the postulates of the SDT. Further, the paper highlights the importance of the Stakeholder Theory by demonstrating that proactive involvement of various local stakeholders especially women contributes to the effectiveness and inclusiveness of tourism development policies. This empirical validation of this model within the Jordanian tourism environment presents a theoretical and practical contribution to the study as it provides a model of sustainable tourism that can be used by policy-makers, tourism managers, and communities to initiate sustainable tourism projects together. Notably, the research paper also throws light into the processes of interaction between empowerment and participation that can be applied practically to the design of participatory governance structures and resource distribution models. In sum, the study proves that the sustainable tourism achievements cannot be only attributed to the top-down policy but the organization and empowerment of the community and participation, thus closing the gap between theory and practice in tourism sustainability. Such results offer a strong basis of upcoming researches and policy innovations in the community-based tourism development across the globe.

This study has a number of limitations that should be mentioned despite its strengths. To start with, the cross-sectional survey design not allow to make causal conclusions; longitudinal research is required to investigate how empowerment and participation change with time and what effect they produce on sustainable

tourism. Second, the research was conducted in Jordan only and this could reduce the external validity of the results to other nations/cultures that could have different systems of governance, socio-economic and tourism. This model needs to be replicated in the other Middle Eastern countries or developing countries to prove its strength in future studies. Third, the research was based on self-reporting data, which could introduce the social desirability effect or overreporting of the participation and sustainability rates. The use of triangulation techniques, e.g. interviews, field observations or secondary data might increase validity. Fourth, the gender and professional experience were considered as control variables in the study, yet some other variables, including education, income, or cultural attitudes, might also have an impact on the participation and sustainability outcomes and should be examined in the future. Also, although community participation was studied as a mediator, other possible mediators that could offer a better understanding of the issue to be answered about the connection between empowerment and sustainable tourism were considered, including social capital, trust or local governance capacity. Finally, the role of digital tools and smart tourism solutions in providing better community engagement and empowerment may be the topic of future research, responding to the challenges of the new era of tourism management.

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