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**Local Community Involvement in Sustainability Tourism Development in
Malaysia: A conceptual model**

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate how to involve local community to achieve sustainability in tourism development. Through a conceptual approach, it proposes a comprehensive model for supporting sustainable tourism development in Malaysia. This model emphasizes local community' perceptions of place identity, political trust sustainability awareness, economic benefit, and local community involvement to support sustainability in Malaysia. The study evaluates community views on tourism development, considering both positive and negative impacts, and assesses their support for sustainable tourism development based on their attitudes. Furthermore, the study employs stakeholder theory to underpin four research propositions.

Keywords: place Identity; political trust; sustainability awareness; economic benefit

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1.0 Introduction

The significance of sustainable tourism has garnered increasing recognition within the tourism industry. In Malaysia, the prioritization of sustainable tourism has been notable since the Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001–2005) and remains a pivotal consideration (Peeters, Çakmak, & Guiver, 2024). The overarching objectives of sustainable tourism development in the country encompass achieving sustainable growth and fostering potential income generation at the national, state, and local levels (Rasoolimanesh, Ramakrishna, Hall, Esfandiar, & Seyfi, 2023).

Although tourism can bring about numerous positive effects for local communities (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012; Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Hashemi, Mohammed, Rasoolimanesh, Kiumarsi, & Dara Singh, 2022), it also carries the potential for adverse consequences for residents (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012; Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996; Hashemi, Mohammed, Rasoolimanesh, Kiumarsi, & Dara Singh, 2022). Hence, the sustainability and prosperity of a destination's tourism industry hinge on the perceptions of local residents regarding the impacts of tourism development on their community (Hashemi et al., 2022). Notably, spanning from the Eighth Malaysia Plan to the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, there has been a significant emphasis on environmental considerations in tourism development. The government's efforts to promote sustainable tourism primarily focus on conserving and safeguarding destinations, as

evidenced by the presence of national ecotourism policies. Consequently, this highlights that tourism development in Malaysia primarily emphasizes environmental aspects, particularly in ecotourism destinations (Bagheri, Tuan Lonik, Jaafar, Adam, Asma Wan Talaat, & Wolf, 2022).

Notably, spanning from the Eighth Malaysia Plan to the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, there has been a significant emphasis on environmental considerations in tourism development. The government's efforts to promote sustainable tourism primarily focus on conserving and safeguarding destinations, as evidenced by the presence of national ecotourism policies. Consequently, this highlights that tourism development in Malaysia primarily emphasizes environmental aspects, particularly in ecotourism destinations (Bagheri, Tuan Lonik, Jaafar, Adam, Asma Wan Talaat, & Wolf, 2022). In recent years, government initiatives have encouraged sustainable practices such as responsible waste management, the protection of biodiversity, and the promotion of eco-friendly tourism activities. These measures align with the country's commitment to global sustainability goals, including the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Looking forward, the continued success of Malaysia's sustainable tourism industry depends on a holistic approach that integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Strengthening policies, increasing community engagement, and fostering collaboration between stakeholders will be key in ensuring that Malaysia remains a leading sustainable tourism destination. By leveraging innovative practices, promoting responsible travel behavior, and enforcing strict environmental regulations, Malaysia can maintain its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage while reaping the economic benefits of tourism.

2.0 Literature Review

Research on local community involvement in sustainable tourism development highlights the crucial role that communities play in shaping and benefiting from tourism activities while ensuring the long-term preservation of cultural, environmental, and economic resources (Bagheri et al., 2022). In developing nations, residents' perceptions of tourism development and their willingness to participate in and support such initiatives often differ significantly from those in developed nations (Jaafar et al., 2015; Sharpley, 2014). As Sharpley (2014) noted, a favorable perception of tourism's positive impacts encourages communities to support tourism development and actively engage in related activities.

Community involvement in tourism is essential for fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among residents. When local people are engaged in decision-making and benefit directly from tourism activities, they are more likely to protect and promote their cultural heritage and natural environment (Sharpley, 2014). Sustainable tourism initiatives that prioritize local participation can lead to job creation, infrastructure development, and the preservation of traditional practices, all of which contribute to long-term social and economic sustainability. However, barriers such as lack of awareness, insufficient financial resources, and limited access to decision-making processes can hinder meaningful community engagement in tourism development. Addressing these challenges requires targeted policies, education programs, and capacity-building initiatives to empower local communities (Bagheri et al., 2022). Ensuring the sustainability of tourism presents a considerable challenge, as it requires balancing high-quality tourism experiences with the protection of natural and cultural environments. Sustainable tourism is founded on core values that integrate economic, social, and cultural objectives (Sharpley, 2014). The effective development of sustainable tourism necessitates the active involvement of local communities, supported by strong political leadership that fosters broad participation and consensus. Moreover, sustainable tourism is an ongoing process that requires continuous monitoring and the implementation of preventive or corrective measures. This approach ensures that tourism remains economically viable without depleting essential resources, particularly the physical environment and the cultural identity of local communities (Hashemi et al., 2022). In addition to community involvement, political and institutional support play a crucial role in the successful implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives. Governments and policymakers must establish clear guidelines and regulations to ensure that tourism development aligns with sustainability principles. Financial incentives, grants, and subsidies can also be instrumental in encouraging local businesses and entrepreneurs to adopt eco-friendly practices. Moreover, public-private partnerships can help bridge the gap between economic development and environmental conservation, ensuring that tourism-related activities generate long-term benefits for all stakeholders.

The present study aims to explore several key hypotheses related to sustainable tourism development (STD) and community involvement. First, it seeks to measure and assess the role of place identity in shaping local communities' perceptions of the economic benefits of engaging in STD. Second, the study aims to evaluate the level of political trust among community members and its influence on their perception of economic benefits within STD. Third, it examines the relationship between sustainability awareness and the perceived economic benefits of STD among local communities. Finally, the study investigates the connection between economic benefits and community involvement in STD, highlighting the crucial link between financial incentives and active participation in sustainable tourism initiatives. Furthermore, understanding the dynamics between economic benefits and sustainability awareness can provide valuable insights into how local communities perceive their role in tourism development. While financial incentives are important motivators, long-term sustainability requires fostering a deep-rooted appreciation for environmental conservation and cultural preservation. Education and awareness campaigns can play a significant role in this process, helping communities understand the long-term benefits of responsible tourism practices. By integrating sustainability education into local schools and community programs, future generations can be better equipped to take an active role in sustainable tourism initiatives. By addressing these research objectives, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into the factors influencing local community engagement in sustainable tourism development. A deeper understanding of these dynamics can help policymakers and tourism stakeholders develop strategies that encourage greater community participation, ensuring that sustainable tourism remains a mutually beneficial and long-lasting endeavor. In the long run, a well-balanced approach that integrates economic growth, environmental protection, and cultural preservation will be key to achieving sustainable tourism development in Malaysia and beyond.

3.0 Stakeholder Theory

The concept of stakeholder participation has its roots in the fields of business management and public administration literature. It wasn't until 1984, when Freeman published "Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach," that stakeholder participation became widely recognized in management literature. In this influential work, Freeman (1984) defined a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can influence or is influenced by the organization's goals" (p. 46). The adoption of Stakeholder Theory remains relatively new and largely limited within the realm of tourism (Attanasio, Preghenella, De Toni, & Battistella, 2022; Wu, Hashemi, Yao, Kiumarsi, Liu, & Tang, 2023). Attanasio et al. (2022) investigated the involvement of residents as stakeholders in sustainable development, exploring the intricate connections between resident perceptions, community participation, and sustainable tourism development. Furthermore, Stakeholder Theory suggests that to achieve the criteria for successful development, stakeholders' interests and perspectives must be taken into account (Peeters, Çakmak, & Guiver, 2024). Therefore, the application of Stakeholder Theory in this study will enable the evaluation of stakeholders' attitudes and behavioral intentions towards supporting sustainability management in Malaysia.

4.0 Hypothesis Development

4.1 Place Identity and Economic Benefits

McCool and Martin (1994) defined "Place identity" refers to the unique characteristics, meanings, and emotions that individuals or communities associate with a particular location. It encompasses the sense of belonging, attachment, and pride people feel towards their environment. Place identity is often shaped by various factors such as cultural heritage, historical significance, natural features, and social interactions.

The relationship between place identity and economic benefits is significant. A strong and positive place identity can attract visitors, investors, and residents, thereby stimulating economic activity and contributing to local development. Conversely, neglecting or mismanaging place identity may lead to economic stagnation, loss of competitive advantage, and decline in quality of life (Hashemi, Mohammed, Rasoolimanesh, Kiumarsi, & Dara Singh, 2022).

Gannon et al. (2020) discovered a positive direct impact of place identity on residents' support for tourism development. In a study by Man Cheng, So, and Nang Fong (2022), it was found that residents who perceived positive impacts were more likely to support tourism development. Additionally, for residents with high-level place identity, perceived benefits significantly contributed to fostering support for tourism development. Previous research underscores the crucial role of community attachment in shaping residents' views on tourism development, as indicated by status consistency rules (Hashemi et al, 2022).

As a result, the positive impact of community attachment on perceived benefits and support for tourism development is further clarified and justified by the principles of group gain and status consistency rules in Sustainable Tourism (ST). These principles underpin the following hypothesis.

H1: There is a direct and significant relationship between place identity and the economic benefit to support STD in Malaysia.

4.2 Political Trust and Economic Benefits

Political trust pertains to the expectation of residents that governmental decisions align with their interests and that the government is held responsible for these decisions (Bramwell, 2014). Significantly, residents must trust the government before lending support to any policy or development project (Bronfman, Vazquez, & Dorantes, 2009). As a result, political trust can contribute to democratic stability and provide a foundation for sustainable development (Liu, 2023). Tichaawa, Dayour, & and Nunkoo (2023) argue that stimulating economic growth to generate employment among residents is likely to result in increased trust in government institutions. Conversely, if residents perceive that government institutions are unable to foster economic growth, this may lead to a lack of trust. In addition, Han, Ramkissoon, You, & Kim (2023) posit that residents are inclined to trust the government more when they derive benefits from tourism. Conversely, if residents do not experience such benefits, there is a higher likelihood of distrust. This skepticism arises when the development's costs outweigh the benefits for the community, aligning with the principles of social exchange theory.

When residents exhibit high levels of interpersonal trust, they tend to place trust in the decisions and behaviors of others who perceive tourism development as yielding more benefits than costs. Consequently, they are inclined to support the viewpoints and actions of these individuals (Han et al., 2023). Despite assertions that research on stakeholders' perceived trust and benefits concerning sustainable tourism development is extensively studied (McGehee & Andereck, 2004), none of these studies have explored its correlation with the concept of political trust and perceived benefits in Malaysia. This phenomenon, as per Webster (1990), denotes political trust utilized to exploit the resources of developing countries. Therefore, based on this theoretical discourse, the following proposition is posited:

H2: There is a direct and significant relationship between political trust and economic benefit to support STD in Malaysia.

4.3 Sustainability Awareness and Economic Benefits

To promote community economic benefit, scholars in the literature emphasize the importance of awareness of communities' understanding of sustainable tourism initiatives (Alahmari, Issa, Issa, & Nau, 2019). Based on Darvishmotevali and Altinay (2022), sustainability awareness among local communities can indeed have a significant impact on the demand for sustainable tourism experiences. When people become more conscious of environmental issues and the importance of preserving natural resources, they often seek out travel options that align with their values. Moreover, Communities that prioritize sustainability may advocate for eco-friendly practices in tourism, such as supporting businesses that use renewable energy, minimize waste, and promote conservation efforts. This, in turn, can encourage tourism operators to adopt more sustainable practices to meet the growing demand for responsible travel experiences (van Langen, Vassillo, Ghisellini, Restaino,

Passaro, & Ulgiati, 2021). Furthermore, local communities may also play a role in educating visitors about the importance of preserving the environment and respecting local cultures, fostering a deeper appreciation for sustainable tourism practices (Rustam, Wang, & Zameer, 2020). Empowering communities to participate in tourism planning, development, and management processes can lead to social cohesion, cultural preservation, and economic empowerment. When residents are involved in decision-making and benefit-sharing, tourism development can generate economic opportunities, create jobs, and support local livelihoods, thereby fostering sustainable socio-economic development (van Langen et al, 2021). Therefore, the following hypothesis proposes:

H3: There is a direct and significant relationship between sustainability awareness and the economic benefit to support STD in Malaysia.

4.4 Perceive Benefits and Community's Willingness to STD

Understanding and managing stakeholders' perceptions of benefits is an ongoing and dynamic endeavor (Hashemi et al., 2022). Effective communication, proactive engagement, and a commitment to highlighting the tangible benefits of sustainability are essential. When stakeholders acknowledge the advantages of sustainability, they tend to adopt positive attitudes and actively support sustainability initiatives (Szromek et al., 2023). Regarding water resources management, Ahmed et al. (2020) argue that stakeholders such as government agencies, environmental organizations, local communities, businesses, and individuals may perceive various benefits when they actively support and engage in sustainable water management practices. These perceived benefits can be influential in motivating their participation. Additionally, according to the study of Ding, Wang, Nie, and Wu (2023), perceived benefits related to environmental concern influence stakeholders' attitudes toward wastewater management. The assertion made by Jeelani, Shah, Dar, and Rashid (2023) highlights the importance of organizations and institutions understanding the perceived benefits that stakeholders anticipate from their involvement. This understanding can facilitate support and collaboration, which is crucial for the success of sustainability initiatives.

Moreover, stakeholders often have specific goals or expectations related to their participation or support. In the context of sustainability and the environment, stakeholders may perceive benefits such as reduced environmental impact, cost savings, or enhanced corporate social responsibility (Szromek et al., 2023). These perceived benefits are key drivers of stakeholder engagement in sustainability initiatives. By aligning sustainability efforts with stakeholders' perceived benefits and goals, organizations can increase stakeholder participation and support for sustainability initiatives. This approach not only fosters collaboration but also enhances the effectiveness and impact of sustainability initiatives in addressing environmental challenges. Consequently, the following hypothesis was formulated.

4.5 Local Community's Participate in STD

Resident perceptions of the positive and negative effects of tourism development play a crucial role in their engagement in tourism activities, including those that affect the sustainability of tourism development (Nicholas et al., 2009). Moreover, the level of support for tourism development within local communities is determined by residents' perceptions of both the positive and negative impacts of tourism (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). Positive perceptions of the effects of tourism on the community tend to foster support for tourism development, whereas negative perceptions often lead residents to withdraw their support for tourism development (Sharpley, 2014). The attitudes of stakeholders play a critical role in endorsing sustainability initiatives, significantly influencing the success and effectiveness of such efforts (Kim & Hall, 2021).

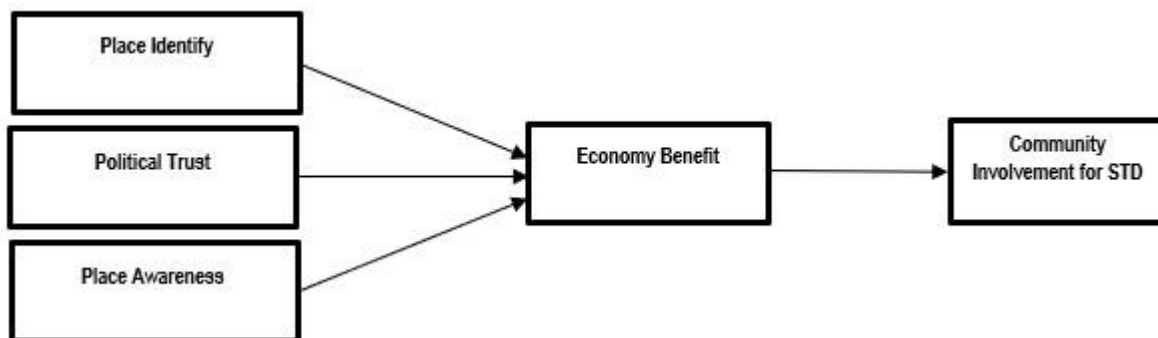


Fig. 1: Proposed Conceptual for STD model.

Existing literature recognizes that stakeholders with positive attitudes toward sustainability are more inclined to support and actively participate in sustainability initiatives (Chen, 2015; Wei, Liu, Skibniewski & Balali, 2016; Dimitrovski, Lemmetyinen, Nieminen, & Pohjola, 2021; Jeelani, Shah, Dar, & Rashid, 2023; Haldar, Kujawa-Roeleveld, Schoenmakers, Datta, Rijnaarts, & Vos, 2021). Stakeholders who prioritize sustainability and environmental conservation are more likely to hold favorable attitudes. These values often stem from a desire to safeguard the environment, minimize ecological footprints, and advocate for ethical and responsible practices (Jeelani et al., 2023). Several studies have suggested that people's attitudes towards and perceptions of water resources are reflected in government water resources management programs, as people's intentions are essential components for political will and action (Burstein, 2010; Stoutenborough & Vedlitz, 2014; Eck, Wagner, Chapagain, & Joshi, 2019; Ahmed et al., 2020). Therefore, when people's perceptions and attitudes are mirrored in relevant water management programs, there tends to be a positive relationship between their perceptions, attitudes, and their willingness to engage in water resources management. Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model for this study.

4.0 Conclusions and Discussion

Sustainable tourism development becomes paramount in such scenarios to harmonize tourism growth with environmental preservation. It tackles critical environmental and sustainability issues, particularly within destinations experiencing rapid development. The findings of the study may furnish valuable insights for policymakers, businesses, local communities, and researchers conducting studies in Malaysia and similar locales. Fostering sustainable tourism through community trust and place identity is often facilitated by increasing awareness. This strategy capitalizes on local expertise and understanding as fundamental resources for community advancement, positioning the community as central to decision-making processes aimed at improving quality of life across diverse social and environmental dimensions. Despite Malaysia not being inherently focused on tourism (Hatipoglu, 2015), it possesses crucial elements for sustainable tourism development, particularly community engagement and empowerment. Despite limited studies indicating Malaysia's potential for effective tourism governance (Elfithri, Mokhtar, & Abdullah, 2021; Chan, Selvadurai, & Aziz, 2020; Yusof, Kamarudin, Patwary, & Mohamed, 2021), their findings endorse the notion that a locally managed Malaysia, on a smaller scale, embodies essential elements of sustainable tourism planning and development. Therefore, recommendations are proposed to harness Malaysia's potential for promoting local community participation, thereby bolstering their awareness, ultimately leading to more impactful implementation of sustainable tourism initiatives. Therefore, future research endeavors may explore the dimensions of community trust within the context of Malaysia as a potential tourism destination. Furthermore, there is a need for studies to investigate the structure of community trust and awareness, along with its underlying causes and outcomes, as this remains inadequately understood.

Finally, it is imperative to explore Malaysia's role in enhancing the empowerment of local communities in tourism development, considering both developed and developing countries, as well as diverse regions worldwide. Although tourism is just one component of the wider STD concept, the process of strengthening local identity and promoting and engaging with local resources developed the components and attractions of substantial tourism. This enrichment encompasses various attractions, notably cultural, environmental, and gastronomic, as exemplified by Malaysia. Upholding local culture and authentic elements has been a focal point in delivering high-quality tourism experiences, as emphasized in the discourse on slow tourism. The local community has strongly supported Malaysia's assets, taking ownership of the township, managing their living environment, and highlighting the town's strengths. Their proactive engagement in organizing local events, implementing the community garden project, and promoting the area has enabled the development of tourism activities that appeal to the market. With residents taking the lead in guiding tourism efforts, both locals and tourists have benefited, with visitors gaining deeper insights into Malaysia through tours led by locals. Local communities must collaborate and effectively oversee established tourism initiatives to maintain Malaysia's certification through regular evaluations. As a result, the sustainability of tourism in Malaysia is expected to endure, given its alignment with sustainable practices.

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