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Sustainable Ecotourism Practices and Destination Choice: Perspectives from Tourists

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Abstract

This study examined sustainable ecotourism practices and their influence on tourists' destination choice. It assessed the effects of environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation on tourists' destination choice. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, and primary data were collected from 391 tourists using a structured questionnaire. Analysis involved descriptive statistics and multiple regression to test the study's hypotheses. Results showed that community engagement had the strongest positive effect on destination choice, followed by environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation. Based on these findings, the study recommended adopting eco-friendly practices such as wildlife preservation, habitat protection, sustainable infrastructure, water conservation, zero-waste tourism, and green transportation. To enhance community engagement, stakeholders should implement co-managed tourism projects, hire local tour guides and staff, promote local businesses, support community development initiatives, and offer authentic homestay programmes that immerse visitors in local culture. These measures will position tourist destinations as unique, eco-friendly ones, appealing to tourists seeking meaningful, culturally enriching, and socially responsible travel experiences.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, ecotourism, destination choice, environmental conservation, authentic experiences

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Introduction

Destination choice is crucial for the economic sustainability of tourist locations, as it influences tourist flow, revenue generation, and the viability of the local tourism industry (González & Cabañero, 2018). A highly preferred destination attracts a steady, diverse visitor stream, ensuring continuous economic activity. This enhances market visibility, driving demand that benefits hotels, restaurants, transport providers, and local artisans (Kim & Lee, 2019). Additionally, it positions the destination as an investment hub, fostering infrastructure development and innovative tourism offerings. Moreover, being a top choice enables destinations to command premium pricing for accommodations, experiences, and packages, boosting profitability and reinvestment potential (Chen & Chen, 2017). However, in contemporary times, marked by growing awareness of climate change and the pressing need for environmental sustainability, tourists are increasingly prioritizing destinations that demonstrate a strong commitment to eco-friendly practices (Cheng & Zhan, 2020). This shift reflects a broader trend toward responsible travel, where environmentally conscious travelers actively seek out locations that minimize their ecological footprint while promoting sustainable development. As such, destinations that are perceived as leaders in green initiatives—such as conserving natural resources, reducing carbon emissions, supporting biodiversity, and engaging in sustainable waste management—tend to resonate more with this evolving demographic (Nguyen & Tran, 2021). Moreover, eco-conscious tourists often evaluate destinations based on their adherence to sustainable tourism certifications, the availability of green accommodations, and the promotion of low-impact recreational activities, such as hiking, cycling, or wildlife observation (Dangi & Jamal, 2017). Against this backdrop, tourist destinations around the world are integrating sustainable ecotourism practices into their operations to project their commitment to environmental sustainability and attract environmentally conscious tourists (López-Sánchez & de los Ángeles González, 2018). In this sense, sustainable ecotourism entails the adoption of practices that balance environmental conservation, community well-being, and visitor satisfaction (Al-Qudah & Malkawi, 2019). It involves activities (such as preserving biodiversity, reducing waste and energy consumption, and encouraging the use of renewable resources) designed to minimize the ecological impact of tourism while fostering a deep appreciation for natural and cultural heritage (Al-Khanbashi & Zubair, 2022). This practice of sustainable ecotourism is rapidly gaining traction in the Middle East because the region is increasingly recognizing the dual necessity of diversifying its economy and addressing environmental challenges (Al-Zubi & Othman, 2021). Many Middle Eastern countries (including Oman), traditionally reliant on oil revenues, are embracing sustainable tourism as a means to create alternative economic opportunities while preserving their unique natural and cultural resources. The region's diverse landscapes, ranging from Oman's pristine coastlines and deserts to Jordan's historical sites and protected reserves, provide significant potential for eco-tourism activities that align with global sustainability trends (Shammas, 2021).

Similarly, governments and stakeholders are investing in eco-friendly infrastructure, such as solar-powered resorts, green transportation systems, and waste management solutions, to appeal to environmentally conscious travelers (Aideed, 2021). Additionally, there is a growing emphasis on conserving fragile ecosystems, such as the Arabian Desert and the coral reefs of the Red Sea, through initiatives that promote responsible tourism and environmental education. Community-based ecotourism projects are also gaining momentum, empowering local populations by creating jobs and fostering cultural exchange (González & Cabañero, 2018). Given the incremental adoption of these sustainable ecotourism practices in this region, it is

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pertinent to investigate their contributions to enhancing tourists' choice of destinations. To this end, this study sought to determine the effectiveness of specific practices (such as environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural heritage preservation and sustainability orientation) in enhancing tourists' destination choice. This is critical because these practices are being implemented in the tourism sector through a range of initiatives designed to enhance sustainability while promoting the country's natural and cultural assets. In destinations like Salalah, environmental conservation efforts include the establishment of protected areas, such as the Salalah Protected Reserve, aimed at preserving biodiversity and preventing overexploitation of natural resources (Shammas, 2021). Community engagement is prioritized through the involvement of local populations in tourism-related activities, such as guiding, handicraft production, and hospitality services, ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed equitably (Aideed, 2021). Cultural heritage preservation is promoted through the restoration and conservation of historical sites like the Al-Baleed Archaeological Park, and efforts to showcase Omani traditions through festivals and exhibitions (Al-Hashim, 2015). Moreover, sustainability orientation is integrated by educating tourists about Oman's eco-friendly practices, such as waste reduction, water conservation, and renewable energy initiatives in accommodations and transport systems (Alkathiri & Soliman, 2022). This study was therefore conducted to achieve the following objectives: 1) to determine the effect of environmental conservation on tourists' destination choice, 2) to examine the effect of community engagement on tourists' destination choice, 3) to ascertain the effect of cultural heritage preservation on tourists' destination choice and 4) to assess the effect of sustainability orientation on tourists' destination choice.

Literature review and hypotheses

Sustainable ecotourism

Sustainable ecotourism is a responsible travel approach that combines ecological conservation with cultural sensitivity, aiming to minimize negative environmental impacts while maximizing positive contributions to local communities and ecosystems (Gössling et al., 2021). It emphasizes the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, promoting awareness and respect for biodiversity and local traditions. Unlike conventional tourism, which often prioritizes economic gain over environmental sustainability, sustainable ecotourism seeks to balance the needs of tourists, the environment, and host communities (Li et al., 2022). The concept emerged as a response to the growing recognition of tourism's adverse effects, such as habitat destruction, pollution, and cultural erosion. In the late 20th century, global awareness of environmental degradation and the rise of sustainability discourse in international development led to the incorporation of eco-friendly practices into tourism (Sharma & Hassan, 2020; James et al., 2024). Organizations such as the United Nations and the International Ecotourism Society played critical roles in formalizing and promoting sustainable ecotourism as an ethical and economically viable alternative. The growth of sustainable ecotourism has been driven by several key factors, including increased environmental awareness among travelers, governmental and non-governmental advocacy for sustainable development, and the economic potential of ecotourism for rural and underserved communities (Ateljevic, 2020).

Tourist destination choice

Tourist destination choice refers to the process by which travelers decide where to visit based on a combination of personal preferences, external influences, and destination attributes (Chen & Rahman, 2018). This decision-making process encompasses an evaluation of factors such as cultural appeal, accessibility, affordability, safety, and the uniqueness of experiences offered. The significance of this choice extends beyond individual travelers, shaping the dynamics of global tourism and contributing to the socio-economic landscapes of destinations (Li et al., 2019). Tourists' decisions often reflect broader trends in consumer behaviour, influenced by marketing efforts, online reviews, social media, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Destinations that align with the desires and expectations of tourists stand to attract greater footfall, which in turn can drive regional development and global recognition (Prayag & Ryan, 2019). The economic performance of destinations is intricately tied to the choices made by tourists (Stylidis & Cherifi, 2018; Ndlovu, 2023). This is because tourism generates significant revenue through direct expenditures on accommodations, dining, transportation, and recreational activities, alongside indirect benefits to local businesses and service providers. By attracting tourists, destinations create jobs, stimulate investment, and foster economic diversification (Wang & Hsu, 2019). However, destination choice is shaped by several key factors, including the perceived quality of services, the appeal of natural or cultural attractions, and effective destination branding (Zhang et al., 2018). Environmental sustainability, political stability, and health and safety conditions also play critical roles in ensuring a destination remains attractive to potential visitors (Su et al., 2018).

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in the value-belief-norm (VBN) theory propounded by Stern et al. (1999). It is a framework that explains environmental behaviour as stemming from personal norms, which are influenced by values, beliefs, and perceptions of responsibility. The main premise of the VBN theory is that pro-environmental behaviour is driven by a causal chain that begins with deeply held personal values, progresses through beliefs about environmental conditions and their consequences, and culminates in the activation of personal norms that guide behaviour (Chen, 2015). The theory posits that individuals who internalize environmental values and believe their actions can influence ecological outcomes are more likely to develop moral obligations, or personal norms, that compel them to engage in behaviours that support sustainability (Chunhua et al., 2023).

In the context of this study, the relevance of the VBN theory is that it provides a framework for understanding how individuals' values and environmental beliefs influence their decisions and behaviours, such as their choice of travel destinations. The VBN theory, propounded by Stern et al. (1999), posits that values (such as altruism or biospheric values) shape environmental beliefs,

which in turn activate personal norms that guide pro-environmental behaviour. Based on this, it can be implied that tourists' destination choices may be influenced by their sense of moral obligation toward environmental conservation, community engagement, and cultural heritage preservation, aligning with their broader sustainability-oriented values and beliefs. As such, this theory is particularly relevant to the study objectives because it links sustainability orientations with actionable outcomes, such as selecting destinations that align with ecological and cultural preservation. Hence, the VBN theory helps explain why tourists might prefer a destination if they perceive it as embodying sustainable ecotourism practices, including environmental conservation, community involvement, and cultural heritage preservation.

Environmental conservation and tourist destination choice

Environmental conservation as a dimension of sustainable ecotourism focuses on minimizing the ecological footprint of tourism activities while preserving and restoring natural habitats (Fathi & Khamis, 2019). It is gaining traction in the tourism sector due to growing global awareness of environmental degradation and the urgent need to combat climate change (Moyo & Tshandama, 2021; Agboola & Adedeji, 2020). As environmental conservation gains traction, its implementation at tourist destinations involves measures such as limiting visitor numbers, adopting renewable energy solutions, enforcing waste management protocols, and creating awareness among tourists about eco-friendly practices (Kante & Thiam, 2023). Also, conservation programmes often engage local communities, leveraging their traditional knowledge and encouraging participation in eco-friendly tourism enterprises, which supports socioeconomic development. This emphasis on sustainability influences destination choice as environmentally conscious tourists prefer locations that demonstrate a commitment to preserving natural and cultural heritage (Al-Hashim, 2015). Such destinations not only attract responsible travelers but also build their reputation as sustainable hubs, ensuring long-term viability and competitiveness in the global tourism market (Cheng & Zhan, 2020). The foregoing viewpoint implies that environmental conservation as a key dimension of sustainable ecotourism has the potential to influence tourists' choices towards destinations. This viewpoint is backed by the study of Hamed & Al-Rashidi (2022), which revealed that environmental conservation had a significant positive effect on tourist loyalty in Oman's coastal regions. The viewpoint is also backed by the study of Fathi & Khamis (2019), which revealed that environmental conservation had a significant positive effect on tourist loyalty in Dubai. Hence, the following alternative hypothesis was put forward in this study:

H_1: Environmental conservation has a significant effect on tourists' destination choice.

Community engagement and tourist destination choice

Community engagement in sustainable ecotourism has emerged as a key dimension due to its ability to foster positive relationships between local populations and tourism operations, thereby ensuring the long-term preservation of natural resources and cultural heritage (Nguyen & Tran, 2021). By involving local residents in decision-making processes, tourism businesses can promote environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and the equitable distribution of economic benefits (Dangi & Jamal, 2017). Also, in recent times, the implementation of community engagement in tourist destinations is often seen through collaborations between government bodies, local businesses, and indigenous communities (López-Sánchez & de los Ángeles González, 2018). By empowering local communities to actively participate in the tourism value chain, destinations can offer more authentic experiences that resonate with environmentally conscious travelers (Al-Qudah & Malkawi, 2019). This approach significantly influences tourist destination choice, as more travelers are prioritizing destinations that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability and cultural sensitivity (Al-Khanbashi & Zubair, 2022). The foregoing viewpoint implies that community engagement as a key dimension of sustainable ecotourism has the potential to influence tourists' choices towards destinations. This viewpoint is backed by the study of Lin & Chang (2018), which revealed that community engagement had a significant positive effect on tourist loyalty towards Taiwan's national parks. The viewpoint is also backed by the study of Zaki & Ibrahim (2020), which revealed that community engagement had a significant positive effect on tourist patronage in Egypt's eco-destinations. Hence, the following alternative hypothesis was put forward in this study:

H_2: Community engagement has a significant effect on tourists' destination choice.

Cultural heritage preservation and tourist destination choice

Cultural heritage preservation as a dimension of sustainable ecotourism is gaining increasing importance due to growing awareness of the need to protect cultural identities while promoting tourism (Rajesh & Saji, 2018; Chen & Zhang, 2022). The growing recognition of cultural tourism, particularly in the context of indigenous and local cultures, contributes to its traction as it supports both environmental conservation and community development (Nguyen & Lee, 2021). The implementation of cultural heritage preservation in tourist destinations involves a variety of strategies, such as the establishment of heritage sites, the promotion of local arts and crafts, and the integration of cultural programmes that engage both tourists and local communities (Zhang & Wang, 2020). In terms of tourist destination choice, the preservation of cultural heritage can significantly influence decisions, as modern travelers increasingly seek destinations where they can experience not only natural beauty but also rich, authentic cultural experiences (Lin & Chang, 2018). Tourists are drawn to locations that offer a combination of eco-friendly practices and cultural sustainability, which enhances their overall travel experience and provides them with a sense of contributing to the protection of the local culture (Zaki & Ibrahim, 2020). The foregoing viewpoint implies that cultural heritage preservation as a key dimension of sustainable ecotourism has the potential to influence tourists' choices towards destinations. This viewpoint is backed by the study of Zhang & Wang (2020), which revealed that cultural heritage

preservation had a significant positive impact on tourist patronage in Southeast Asia. The viewpoint is also backed by the study of Alzaheb & Al-Zubi (2021), which revealed that cultural heritage preservation had a strong positive effect on tourist loyalty in Jordan's nature reserves. Hence, the following alternative hypothesis was put forward in this study:

H_3: Cultural heritage preservation has a significant effect on tourists' destination choice.

Sustainability orientation and tourist destination choice

Sustainability orientation refers to the process of educating and enlightening tourists on the sustainability initiatives and practices of a destination (Chiu & Chen, 2020). This orientation fosters an understanding of the delicate balance between tourism and environmental conservation, ultimately guiding visitors toward more sustainable actions, such as minimizing waste, conserving energy, and respecting local communities and wildlife. This focus on sustainability orientation is gaining traction in the tourism sector due to increasing awareness of environmental degradation and the growing demand for responsible travel experiences (Figueroa & Díaz, 2019). Implementing sustainability orientation involves incorporating eco-friendly policies, providing information on conservation efforts, and engaging tourists through various platforms such as guided tours, educational materials, and digital media (Kallmuenzer & Peters, 2022). By emphasizing the environmental and social value of their practices, destinations can influence tourists' decision-making processes, with many choosing to visit places that demonstrate a strong commitment to sustainability (Liu & Liao, 2018). This, in turn, enhances the attractiveness of eco-tourism destinations, as travelers are increasingly seeking destinations that align with their values and contribute positively to the planet (Tavitiyaman & Zhang, 2023). The foregoing viewpoint implies that sustainability orientation as a key dimension of sustainable ecotourism has the potential to influence tourists' choices towards destinations. This viewpoint is backed by the study of Singh and Singh (2019), which revealed that sustainability orientation had a significant positive impact on tourist loyalty at eco-tourist destinations in India. The viewpoint is also backed by the study of Nguyen & Lee (2021), which revealed that sustainability orientation significantly predicted tourist loyalty in Vietnam. Hence, the following alternative hypothesis was put forward in this study:

H_4: Sustainability orientation has a significant effect on tourists' destination choice.

Empirical review and conceptual model

Sustainable ecotourism has gained significant attention as a strategy for promoting environmental conservation while ensuring long-term tourist engagement. Various studies have examined the impact of sustainable practices such as environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation on tourist loyalty and patronage across different regions. The Table below presents a summary of key research studies in this field, highlighting their objectives, methodologies, findings, conclusions, and limitations.

Table 1. Summary of key research studies

Authors/Year	Research Objective	Methodology	Findings	Conclusion	Limitations
Chen & Zhang (2022)	Assess the impact of sustainable ecotourism practices on tourist loyalty in China	Survey of 321 tourists, factor analysis, regression	Environmental conservation & community engagement significantly enhance tourist loyalty	Sustainable ecotourism practices drive tourist loyalty	Does not address sustainable ecotourism's role in destination choice in Oman
Singh & Singh (2019)	Investigate impact of sustainable ecotourism on tourist loyalty in India	Survey of 250 tourists, SEM	Environmental conservation & cultural heritage preservation significantly impact loyalty	Integrating environmental & cultural sustainability enhances loyalty	Does not explain role in Oman's destination choice
Nguyen & Lee (2021)	Examine sustainable ecotourism's role in tourist loyalty in Vietnam	Survey of 400 tourists, correlation & regression analysis	Environmental conservation & community engagement are key predictors of tourist loyalty	Environmental sustainability commitment strongly influences loyalty	Does not explore role in Oman's destination choice
Zhang & Wang (2020)	Study impact of sustainable ecotourism on tourist patronage in Southeast Asia	Survey of 500 tourists, EFA, SEM	Environmental conservation, community engagement, and cultural heritage preservation impact patronage	Sustainable practices shape tourist patronage behavior	Does not address role in Oman's destination choice
Lin & Chang (2018)	Investigate ecotourism's influence on tourist loyalty in Taiwan	Survey of 350 visitors, multiple regression & path analysis	Environmental conservation & sustainability orientation are key predictors of loyalty	Sustainable practices foster long-term tourist loyalty	Does not address Oman's destination choice
Alzaheb & Al-Zubi (2021)	Explore sustainable ecotourism & tourist loyalty in Jordan	Survey of 381 tourists, factor & regression analysis	Environmental conservation & community engagement strongly impact loyalty	Sustainable practices boost tourist loyalty	Does not explain role in Oman's destination choice
Zaki & Ibrahim (2020)	Examine sustainable ecotourism's effect on tourist patronage in Egypt	Survey of 428 tourists, SEM	All four variables (environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural preservation, sustainability orientation) significantly impact patronage	Sustainable ecotourism practices influence tourist patronage	Does not explore Oman's destination choice
Hamed & Al-Rashidi (2022)	Study ecotourism sustainability & tourist loyalty in Oman's coastal regions	Survey of 582 tourists, SEM, regression analysis	Environmental conservation & community engagement are top predictors of loyalty	Sustainable practices boost loyalty in Oman's ecotourism sector	Does not explain role in Oman's destination choice
Fathi & Khamis (2019)	Investigate sustainable ecotourism's impact on tourist loyalty in Dubai	Survey of 312 tourists, factor & regression analysis	Environmental conservation, community involvement, cultural preservation, & eco-friendly infrastructure impact loyalty	Integrating sustainable practices enhances satisfaction & loyalty	Does not explore role in Oman's destination choice
Moyo & Tshandama (2021)	Analyze influence of sustainable ecotourism on tourist patronage in South Africa	Survey of 406 tourists, EFA, ANOVA tests	Wildlife conservation, waste management, educational programs & sustainable infrastructure positively impact patronage	Sustainable practices enhance attractiveness of national parks	Does not address role in Oman's destination choice
Agboola & Adedeji (2020)	Examine sustainable ecotourism & tourist loyalty in Nigeria's Omo Forest Reserve	Survey of 295 tourists, correlation analysis, SEM	Environmental education, community empowerment, biodiversity conservation & responsible tourism impact loyalty	Practices foster loyalty & conservation	Does not explore role in Oman's destination choice
Kante & Thiam (2023)	Study effect of sustainable ecotourism on tourist patronage in Senegal	Survey of 278 tourists, focus groups, chi-square & path analysis	Community engagement, environmental conservation, cultural heritage protection & policies impact patronage	Sustainable practices ensure long-term tourism sustainability	Does not explain role in Oman's destination choice

Based on a thorough review of empirical studies, this study developed a conceptual model (see FIG. 1) to visually portray the proposed relationship between the independent (sustainable ecotourism) and dependent variables (destination choice). The model shows that the independent variable comprises four sub-variables: environmental conservation, community engagement,

cultural heritage preservation and sustainability orientation. The dependent variable also comprised five parameters: destination appeal, tourist preference, visitation frequency and regular visit. These variables and parameters were adapted from extant relevant studies for testing in the present study in order to determine the causality between sustainable ecotourism and tourists' destination choice.

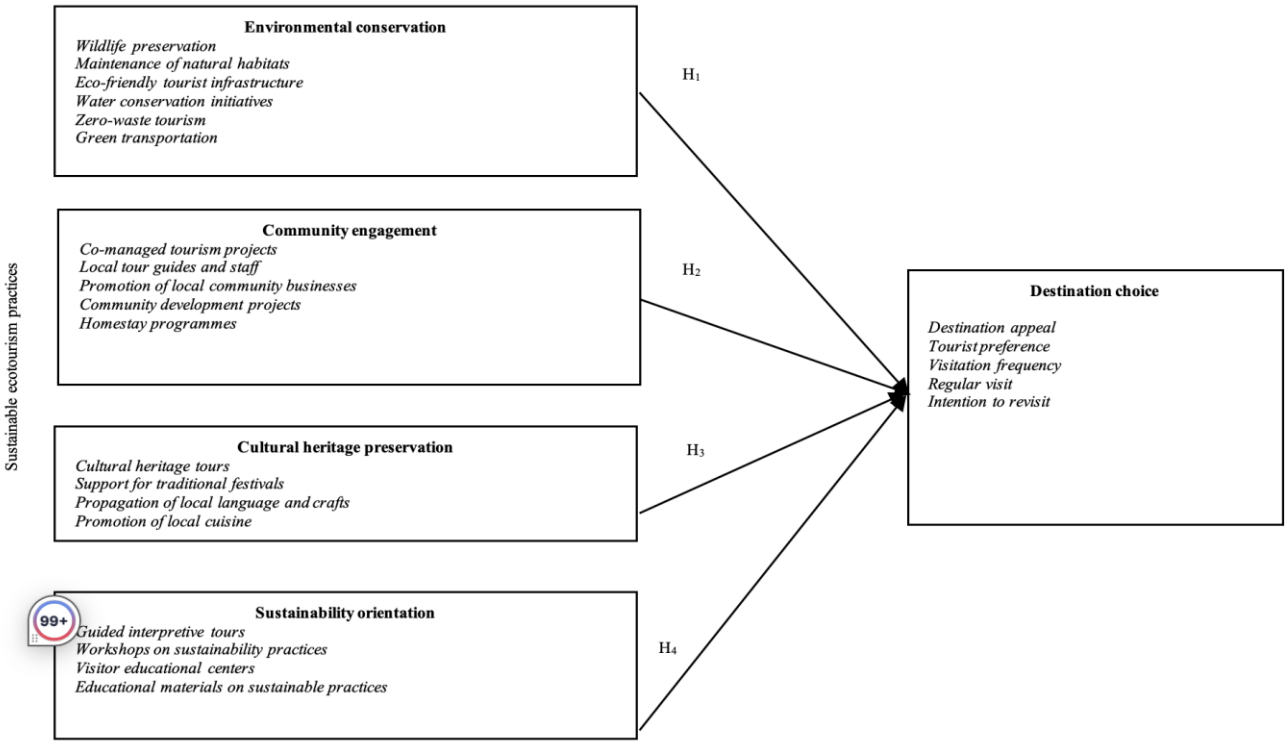

Figure. 1: Conceptual model of the study
Source: Parameters of independent variable adapted from Chen & Zhang (2022); Singh & Singh (2019); Nguyen & Lee (2021); Alzaheb & Al-Zubi (2021). Parameters of dependent variable adapted from Lin & Chang (2018)

Research method

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to collect primary data at a single point in time, effectively capturing variables, relationships, and patterns within a specific context. This approach ensured efficient data collection and analysis, enabling the assessment of current trends and correlations without prolonged observation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target population included 413,122 tourists who visited Salalah, Oman in July 2024 (Muscat Daily, 2024). Using the Taro Yamane formula, a sample size of 400 tourists was determined. After determining the sample size, systematic random sampling was used for respondent selection. The population of 413,122 tourists was divided by the sample size of 400 to obtain a sampling interval ($k = 413{,}122/400 \approx 1033$). A random starting point between 1 and 1033 was selected using a random number generator, and every 1033rd tourist was chosen until 400 respondents were reached. This method ensured equal and predictable inclusion, yielding a representative and unbiased sample. Primary data was collected via a structured questionnaire administered electronically through Google Forms, assisted by a three-member research team. Questionnaire parameters were adapted from relevant studies to ensure validity, reliability, and alignment with research objectives. Reliability was further confirmed using Cronbach's alpha on a pilot survey of 30 tourists in Muscat. All scales generated alpha coefficients of at least 0.7 (see Table 1), affirming the instrument's reliability for data collection. After the questionnaire survey, the data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the study's hypotheses were tested using multiple linear regression in SPSS.

Table 1: Summary of questionnaire reliability results

SN	Variables	No. of items	Alpha coefficients
1	Environmental conservation	6	.719
2	Community engagement	5	.804
3	Cultural heritage preservation	4	.793
4	Sustainability orientation	4	.750
5	Destination choice	5	.841
		24	

Result

The questionnaire survey involved a total of 400 copies of the questionnaire administered to tourists. Of this, 391 copies (or 97.75 percent) were successfully retrieved, while 9 copies (or 2.25 percent) could not be retrieved from the respondents. Hence, this analysis was based on the responses of 391 respondents representing ≈ 98 percent of the intended sample.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the study's variables

	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Environmental conservation	391	3.50	3.8956	.90044	.811
Community engagement	391	2.80	3.8256	.63550	.404
Cultural heritage preservation	391	2.75	4.0454	.73294	.537
Sustainability orientation	391	3.75	3.9393	.96542	.932
Destination choice	391	3.20	3.9621	.81057	.657
Valid N (listwise)	391				

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on study variables using a 5-point Likert scale. Mean scores indicate general agreement: environmental conservation (3.90), community engagement (3.83), cultural heritage preservation (4.05), sustainability orientation (3.94), and destination choice (3.96). Standard deviation ranged from 0.6355 (community engagement) to 0.9654 (sustainability orientation), with variance confirming this pattern (0.404 and 0.932, respectively). Response ranges varied, with sustainability orientation highest (3.75) and cultural heritage preservation lowest (2.75). Overall, respondents agreed with the variables, but perceptions varied, with cultural heritage preservation rated highest and sustainability orientation showing the most variability.

Multicollinearity test

Multicollinearity arises in multiple regression when predictor variables are strongly correlated, making it difficult to assess their individual impact on the dependent variable (Osborne & Waters, 2019). This issue can undermine the model's statistical power and lead to misleading results, where a predictor expected to have a significant effect may appear irrelevant or show an opposite relationship. In this study, multicollinearity was evaluated through tolerance levels and the variance inflation factor (VIF). Following Keith's (2019) guidelines, multicollinearity is considered absent if VIF values are below 5 and tolerance levels exceed 0.1. As shown in Table 3, the VIF values are all below 5, and the tolerance levels are above 0.1, confirming that multicollinearity was not a concern in this study.

Table 3: Multicollinearity test results

	Collinearity Statistics	
Variables	Tolerance	VIF
Environmental conservation	.301	3.324
Community engagement	.340	2.943
Cultural heritage preservation	.545	1.834
Sustainability orientation	.358	2.796

Test of hypotheses

The hypotheses developed in this study were tested in the null form using multiple regression statistic. The decision rule was: the null hypothesis is rejected if the p-value is less than 0.05, and it is not rejected if the p-value is greater than or equal to 0.05.

1. H_0: Environmental conservation has a significant effect on tourists' destination choice.
2. H_0: Community engagement has a significant effect on tourists' destination choice.
3. H_0: Sustainability orientation has a significant effect on tourists' destination choice.
4. H_0: Cultural heritage preservation has a significant effect on tourists' destination choice.

Predictors: Environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural heritage preservation and sustainability orientation
Outcome: Tourists' destination choice

Table 4: Model summary of the effect of sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.911[a]	.830	.829	.33566

a. Predictors: (Constant), Environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural heritage preservation and sustainability orientation

Table 5: Analysis of variance of the effect of sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	212.750	4	53.188	472.076	.000[b]
	Residual	43.490	386	.113		
	Total	256.240	390			

a. Dependent Variable: Tourists' destination choice
b. Predictors: (Constant), Environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural heritage preservation and sustainability orientation

Table 6: Coefficients of the effect of sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.275	.111		12.484	.000
	Environmental conservation	.441	.034	.490	11.805	.000
	Community engagement	.003	.046	.502	8.065	.000
	Cultural heritage preservation	.409	.031	.370	13.030	.000
	Sustainability orientation	.217	.029	.258	7.361	.000

Tables 4, 5, and 6 present the multiple regression analysis results of the effect of sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice. The correlation coefficient (R = 0.911) in Table 4 indicates a strong positive relationship between the

predictor (sustainable ecotourism practices) and the dependent variable, tourists' destination choice. The R^2 value of 0.830 signifies that 83 percent of the variance in tourists' destination choice is explained by sustainable ecotourism practices, showing a highly predictive model. Table 5 presents the ANOVA results, where the F-statistic of 472.076 ($p < 0.001$) confirms the model's overall significance. This high F-value suggests that the combined effect of the predictors significantly influences tourists' destination choice. Table 6 further breaks down the individual predictors' contributions using standardized beta coefficients, which reveal the relative importance of each dimension. Community engagement ($\beta = 0.502$, $p < 0.001$) and environmental conservation ($\beta = 0.490$, $p < 0.001$) exert the strongest influence, with community engagement contributing the highest to the model. Cultural heritage preservation ($\beta = 0.370$, $p < 0.001$) also has a notable positive effect, while sustainability orientation ($\beta = 0.258$, $p < 0.001$) has the least but still significant influence. These findings collectively demonstrate a positive effect of all predictors on destination choice, highlighting community engagement as the most influential factor. Based on the decision criteria, all null hypotheses are rejected since the p-values for each predictor are well below the 0.05 threshold, confirming their significant effects on tourists' destination choice in Oman.

Discussion

The test of hypothesis one revealed that environmental conservation significantly influenced tourists' destination choice. This aligns with Hamed & Al-Rashidi (2022), who found a positive effect of environmental conservation on tourist loyalty in Oman's coastal regions, and Fathi & Khamis (2019), who reported similar findings in Dubai. This highlights environmental conservation as a key determinant of destination choice, emphasizing its role in enhancing a destination's appeal and competitiveness in the global tourism market. Also, hypothesis two showed that community engagement significantly influenced tourists' destination choice. This supports Lin & Chang (2018), who found a positive effect of community engagement on tourist loyalty in Taiwan's national parks, and Zaki & Ibrahim (2020), who observed a similar impact on tourist patronage in Egypt's eco-destinations. The finding underscores the role of local community participation in tourism-related activities, cultural offerings, and hospitality, enhancing a destination's attractiveness to visitors. Hypothesis three confirmed that cultural heritage promotion had a significant positive effect on tourists' destination choice. This is consistent with Zhang & Wang (2020), who found cultural heritage preservation positively influenced tourist patronage in Southeast Asia, and Alzaheb & Al-Zubi (2021), who reported a strong effect on tourist loyalty in Jordan's nature reserves. This highlights cultural heritage as a key driver of tourism appeal, reinforcing the importance of preserving local traditions, historical landmarks, and cultural experiences. Finally, hypothesis four revealed that sustainability orientation significantly influenced tourists' destination choice. This aligns with Singh & Singh (2019), who found a positive impact of sustainability orientation on tourist loyalty in India's eco-tourist destinations, and Nguyen & Lee (2021), who reported similar findings in Vietnam. This underscores sustainability education and awareness as pivotal factors in attracting environmentally conscious tourists to destinations.

Conclusion and practical implications

This study was carried out to investigate the effect of sustainable ecotourism practices on tourists' destination choice. It was conducted against the backdrop of the growing prevalence of ecotourism, which is proposed as a sustainable tourism practice with the potential to enhance tourist attractions. The study specifically sought to determine the roles of environmental conservation, community engagement, cultural heritage preservation and sustainability orientation in influencing tourists' destination choice. Through a structured questionnaire survey, primary data were obtained from tourists and analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The study found that community engagement had the highest significant positive effect on tourists' destination choice, followed by environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation and sustainability orientation. These findings underscore that stakeholders in the tourism sector must prioritize community engagement, environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainability orientation as critical factors in enhancing the appeal of destinations as sustainable ecotourism hotspots. This could be actualized through actions such as the adoption of eco-friendly practices in destinations, including wildlife preservation, habitat protection, sustainable infrastructure, water conservation, zero-waste tourism, and green transportation. This will position such destinations as top eco-tourism hotspots, attracting more environmentally conscious tourists. There is also the need for sustainable community engagements to be implemented in destinations through co-managed tourism projects, employing local tour guides and staff, promoting local businesses, supporting community development initiatives, and offering authentic homestay programmes that immerse visitors in local cultures. These initiatives will enhance a destination's appeal as a unique, culturally enriching, and socially responsible destination, attracting tourists who value meaningful and authentic travel experiences. Furthermore, it is critical for tourism practitioners to implement cultural heritage preservation through guided heritage tours, support for traditional festivals, promotion of local crafts and languages, and showcasing authentic local cuisine. This will enhance a destination's appeal as a unique cultural destination, attracting tourists seeking authentic and immersive experiences. In addition, tourism policymakers and practitioners will need to implement sustainability orientation through guided interpretive tours, workshops on sustainability practices, visitor educational centres, and educational materials to engage tourists in their eco-friendly initiatives even before arrival. This will enhance tourists' destination choice by fostering a deeper understanding of established commitments to sustainability, attracting those who prioritize environmentally responsible travel experiences to destinations.

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