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Impact of Participative Leadership on Tourist Engagement and Behavioral Intention in Asir, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper investigates the direct and indirect effects of participative leadership on tourist engagement and behavioural intention in the nature-based tourism destinations in Asir, Saudi Arabia. A quantitative study was employed utilising a cross-sectional study design using structural equation modelling. This study gathered four hundred valid samples from tourists in Asir between December 2024 and February 2025. Results reveal that participative leadership favourably promotes tourist engagement; hence, it affects behavioural intention substantially. The mediation of the relationship between participative leadership and behavioural intention revealed by tourist engagement underlined the need for participative leadership in improving eco-tourism experiences and outcomes. The findings offer a fresh perspective on the function of leadership in sustainable tourism development.

Keywords: Participative leadership, tourist engagement, behavioural intention, nature-based, Asir

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Introduction

Various nations largely rely on tourism to boost their economy, and growing nature-based or eco-tourism has significantly impacted the tourism industry (Fang, 2020; Shang et al., 2023). Unlike mass tourism (conventional, standard and on a large scales), alternative nature-based tourism involves travel to natural destinations. According to Marson (2011) alternative tourism is more heterogeneous, Reisinger (2013) lists alternative tourism, including: 'nature-based, adventure, rural or agritourism, sustainable, heritage, religious, wellness and spa, educational or volunteer tourism'. Particularly, nature-based tourism has become the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry (Winter et al., 2019). Several studies have investigated nature-based tourism including adventure tourism (Weber, 2001), wellness and spa tourism (Brymer & Lacaze, 2013; Stará & Peterson, 2017), educational tourism (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017), religious tourism (Kim et al., 2020), agritourism (Rauniyar et al., 2021), sustainable tourism (Chiwawa & Wissink, 2023), heritage tourism (Jia et al., 2023), scientific tourism (Bellato & Pollock, 2023). Therefore, regardless of what tourism offers, nature-based tourism provides a well-structured method that promotes both personal and environmental wellness (Ankre & Wall-Reinius, 2024; Brymer & Lacaze, 2013). Among the different ecotourism sites around the globe, Saudi Arabia's Asir region is one of the remarkable examples. Visitors to Asir get unique opportunities to observe how sustainability, environment, culture, and way of life interact. Asir's old mountain villages are shining examples of self-sufficient, sustainable communities in action (UNESCO, 2015). Communities in Asir use different microclimates of the area to maximise natural resources for its lifestyles and implement passive farming methods to produce amazing per acre agricultural output (Singh & Islam, 2013). Located in the Southwestern Saudi Arabia, two main geographies define the Asir region: the Tihama, a hot, humid coastal plain fronting the Red Sea, and the rocky Sarat mountains rising to more than 3000 meters. Sarat's high altitude in the mountains guarantees a consistent annual rainfall supply. This makes the surroundings ideal for agricultural growth (Ahmad, 2023; Jaber & Marzuki; 2018). However, as the demand for eco-tourism has surged and contrary to any notion of decline, tourists are now eager to explore the stunning landscapes of mountains and forests alike (CREST, 2019). According to Liburd et al. (2022), such a change in understanding is especially important at a time when global tourism is progressing towards sustainable development. Nevertheless, Xu et al. (2022) stressed that ecotourism is becoming ever more prevalent, and in this context, we believe that both Asir's regions need support not just in facilities but also from tourists. The region is unique in that it is accessible and affordable to a diverse demographic. Although eco-tourism is enduring, leadership in tourism is also important in guiding the sector towards sustainability. Especially noteworthy is Participative Leadership (PL), which supports inclusive decision-making techniques to sustain the environment (Kahai et al., 1997). This leadership style, as explained by Gil-Cordero et al. (2023) and Lam et al. (2015) entails all the stakeholders including residents and visitors in co-creation of sustainable practices. Unlike conventional, top-down management styles, PL encourages a cooperative environment that enables people to actively take part in generating tourism experiences (Gil-Cordero et al., 2023; Thabet et al., 2023). For destinations like Asir, where tourism is deeply intertwined with natural heritage, the adoption of PL can directly influence the success of eco-tourism initiatives and the experiences of tourists.

This study investigates the influence of PL on Tourist Engagement (TE) and Behavioral Intention (BI) in Asir, Saudi Arabia. The concept of TE is repeatedly tied to eco-tourism (Sharma & Sarmah, 2021). According to Rather et al. (2023), TE refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement of tourists in their tourism experiences and a tourist's proactive

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interaction with an event or a location (Loureiro, 2014; Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019). As a key for positive tourism outcomes, TE influences tourists' decisions to participate in sustainable activities, their level of satisfaction, and their overall loyalty to a destination (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; Sharma & Sarmah, 2021). According to Buckley (2020) and He et al. (2023), TE has been confirmed to result in positive tourism outcomes. Nevertheless, tourists who are actively engaged in eco-tourism activities are more likely to experience stronger emotional connections with the destination (Hunt & Harbor, 2019). TE was found to lead to increased satisfaction and a greater sense of responsibility toward sustainability efforts (Massingham et al., 2019; Paul & Roy, 2023). Meanwhile, the likelihood of tourists returning a place or recommending it to others, often known as BI, defines its sustainability and competitiveness most of all. In part, Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) influences BI by aspects such as destination image, perceived value, and satisfaction (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Lam & Hsu, 2006). Earlier investigations by Erul et al. (2020) and Sparks (2007) showed that positive BI encourages return visits and boosts Word-Of-Mouth (WOM), therefore improving the reputation of a place and helping to support tourism development. Thus, in marketplaces of competitive tourism, constant success depends on motivating BI. In recent years, sustainable tourism has become a global subject as eco-tourism destinations strive to find a balance between protecting the environment, supporting local communities, and growth in their economies. In this sense, PL positions itself as an important factor for sustainability, influencing how people act and how industries operate. Furthermore, an effective leadership style establishes plans that can help the environment and encourages the industries, tourists, and the communities to be responsible as well as helps improve the way people think and act. However, the effect of PL on the outcomes of sustainable tourism remains uncertain. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the role of PL in shaping TE and BI. In PL leaders provide more emotionally receptive and cognitive feedback by creating a participative, environmentally friendly environment (Lili & Rafiq, 2024). Thus, the relevance of this study is heightened in light of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which seeks to diversify the economy with tourism as a main pillar. As a result, Asir in Saudi Arabia is being pushed as a sustainable tourism destination that blends local cultural experiences with environmental preservation into one aspect of this aim, which makes it a perfect setting for researching the effect of PL on tourism's outcomes.

Literature review

Participative leadership (PL)

Kahai et al. (1997) defined PL as a leadership style where leaders actively encourage staff members to take part in collective decision-making, seek advice from subordinates before making decisions, and grant them practical decision-making authority. Much of the existing research on PL focuses on organisational studies (e.g., Chen & Tjosvold, 2006; Wang et al., 2022) and highlights its impact on cross-cultural management. Other research, such as Li et al. (2018) investigated PL on task performance and organizational citizenship behaviour toward organisations. However, in the context of tourism and hospitality, different studies have examined PL's influence on improving employee performance quality in the hotel industry, such as that by Ukil et al. (2025). Lili & Rafiq (2024) investigated its role in promoting hotel employees' pro-environmental behaviour through green participative leadership. Moreover, Elsetouhi et al. (2023) examined its impact on employee innovative behaviour through employee voice in tourism SMEs. PL also extends to engaging various stakeholders in hospitality and tourism. For example, research by Gil-Cordero et al. (2023) demonstrated that PL supports environmental preservation programs by fostering sustainability through the active participation of local populations and tourists. On the other hand, Dionne et al. (2010) emphasized that PL values all members' contributions, serving as a catalyst for creating robust orientation and differentiated information-sharing systems. Additionally, Huang et al. (2010) reasoned that PL thrives on encouragement and support for information and idea sharing, as well as inclusive decision-making processes. Overall, PL's qualities are suggested to enhance both natural resource preservation and tourist satisfaction. Gil-Cordero and associates highlight its potential for addressing sustainability challenges in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Tourist engagement (TE)

The concept of "engagement" was first introduced in business research as "personal engagement," with a focus on employee engagement (Kahn, 1990). In the context of tourism, Kumar & Pansari (2016) defined TE as the attitude, behaviour and level of connectedness between the tourists and the attraction itself. However, involvement, a related construct, reflects the psychological motivation state in which a tourist perceives a destination as relevant and engaging. It often serves as a precursor to engagement (Kim et al., 2017; Su et al., 2020). Engagement itself stands for a long-term intention to support a valued relationship, which in the tourism context manifests as repeated visits and favourable recommendations (So et al., 2021). Notably, activities focused on conservation contribute significantly to TE. For example, engagement results in outcomes such as higher levels of satisfaction, site loyalty, and ecologically responsible behaviour (Lee, 2011; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Like Customer Engagement (CE), TE can be seen as a unidimensional (e.g., Taheri et al., 2014) or multidimensional (Huang & Choi, 2019; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; So et al., 2014). According to Rasoolimanesh (2019), tourists who are engaged with a tourism destination have passionate and enthusiastic feelings about the destination. Therefore, enthusiasm items such as "I am heavily into this tourism site," "I am passionate about this tourism site," and "I am enthusiastic about this tourism site," which measure this aspect of tourist engagement, are being adopted in the current study. Several studies have highlighted the importance of TE as a key determinant of successful ecotourism. For instance, Massingham (2019) found that tourists engaged in eco-tourism projects, such as animal protection initiatives, demonstrated greater support for conservation policies, reported higher satisfaction levels, and were more likely to revisit or recommend the destination. Similarly, Kumar et al. (2024) and Singh & Chauhan (2025) reasoned that tourists' awareness of their personal responsibility to preserve natural resources

significantly influences TE at ecotourism destinations. Pro-environmental behaviours also play a critical role in fostering TE. According to Piao & Managi (2022), tourists who engage in sustainability and conservation initiatives are more inclined to donate to environmental projects and feel emotionally connected to the sites of these projects. Furthermore, immersive experiences that connect tourists to local ecology can enhance their engagement. Research by Palmer & Chuamuangphan (2018) and Pineda et al. (2023) suggests that involving communities in these experiences not only fosters participation in sustainability efforts but also enhances overall pleasure among participants.

Behavioral intention (BI)

Understanding consumer loyalty, particularly in the tourism industry depends on the importance of BI. Oliver (1997) described consumer loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a preferred product or service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviours" (p. 392). Early confirmatory analysis by Vallerand et al. (1992) found that BI determines the behaviour. In the context of tourism, BI is sometimes assessed by indicators such as the desire to visit a destination, the possibility of returning to the same destination, or the inclination to suggest the place to others. Furthermore, Chen & Gursoy (2001) noted that in tourism studies, repeat visitation has become a major indicator of destination loyalty; this conclusion is consistent with other studies (e.g., Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Prayag, 2009). However, under similar conditions or incentives, the idea of revisit intention pertains to the likelihood that a tourist will return to a place in the future (Assaker et al., 2011; Sukthankar, 2024). Revisit intention as a post-visit behaviour indicates the comprehensive evaluation of a tourist's experience (Zhang et al., 2018). According to Wu et al. (2018) and Zhang et al. (2018), authentic and interesting interactions define positive experiences that have been shown to boost intentions to revisit. Furthermore, an earlier study by Chang et al. (2014) shows that tourists who discover their experiences are fulfilling and meaningful show potent intention to revisit the destination. Moreover, positive tourism experiences help to create intentions to return and are crucial for the continuous development of tourist destinations and in building a destination reputation (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019). Therefore, a destination's reputation regarding its recommend-ability and appeal for future visits is judged by repeat visitation.

Relationships between PL, TE, and BI and hypotheses development

The relationships among the proposed construct PL, TE, and BI are largely unexplored. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time this construct has been examined in the tourism and hospitality literature. Raza & Khan (2022) stressed that boundary conditions that strengthen or weaken the relationships between constructs should also be further explored. Besides, Seyfi et al. (2021) demonstrated that TE positively influences BI and found that TE directly enhances BI through revisit intention. Research supporting TE's mediation role was conducted by Teng (2021) who observed that TE significantly mediated the relationship between film tourism experiences and tourist BI. Furthermore, Kumar et al. (2022) found that TE serves as a link between engaged visitors and verified outcomes (e.g., leading to conservation behaviours, satisfaction, enhance knowledge of the environment, loyalty, and advocacy). Ahmed et al. (2021) underlined how inclusive and sustainable leadership styles help to set up TE. It looks as though that within the framework of eco-tourism sites, PL acts as a pathway to TE, which subsequently influences BI. For places like Asir, where the entire portfolio focuses on projects aimed at enhancing the surroundings and benefiting the people, this link is particularly important. According to the reviewed literature, the following hypotheses are suggested:

H1: PL has a positive impact on TE within eco-tourism destinations in Asir, Saudi Arabia.
H2: TE positively affects BI within eco-tourism destinations in Asir, Saudi Arabia.
H3**:** TE mediates the relationship of PL with BI within eco-tourism destinations in Asir, Saudi Arabia.

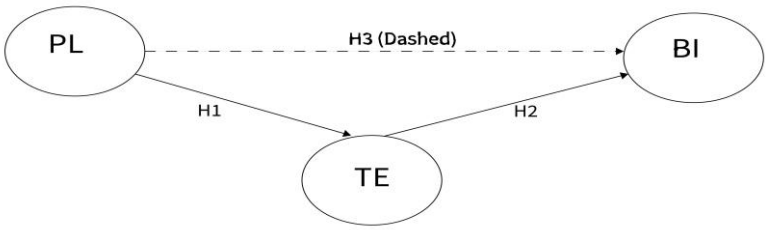

Figure 1: A conceptual model of the study participative leadership, tourist engagement and behavioral intention. Dashed H3 refers to not assessed previously.

Methodology

A structured questionnaire was designed. The target population consisted of tourists visiting eco-tourism sites in the Asir region including domestic and international tourists. Data were collected onsite from al-Soudah Park, Jebel al-Soudah, Shamsan Castle, Abha High City, Rijal Almaa Museum and other natural attractions in the region between December 2024 and February 2025. Based on the exploratory nature of the research, a purposive sampling technique was used in which tourists were approached in eco-tourism sites and encouraged to take part in the study. Data collection was continued until (n=400) completed and valid responses were obtained, which is suitable for PLS-SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2019). The inclusion criteria were

participants who visited one of the eco-tourism destinations in Asir in the past 12 months. We used carefully calibrated and validated scales in this study to measure the PL, TE, and BI constructs, guaranteeing their validity and reliability. PL was evaluated using six-item scale from the Empowering Leadership Questionnaire (Arnold & Drasgow, 2000; α =.92). TE was measured using a three-item (enthusiasm) scale (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; α =.92), while BI was assessed using a four-item scale (Loureiro, 2014; α =.95). To verify measurement scales and investigate hypotheses, data analysis was performed using *R* software and the Lavaan package. The descriptive statistics showed that the positive responses to the PL, TE, and BI constructs were varied. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) demonstrated the measurement model's validity and robustness by achieving essential thresholds. Standardised factor loadings indicated the scales' dependability and showed strong relationships between the items and the constructs. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) further demonstrated the model's ability to identify meaningful associations in the data, showing that it could account for a moderate portion of the variance for both TE and BI.

Result

Reliability analysis

The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. All constructs showed high internal consistency, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	CR	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha
PL	0.91	0.77	0.89
TE	0.92	0.78	0.90
BI	0.94	0.80	0.92

These Cronbach's Alpha values exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, showing good internal consistency for each construct (Hair et al., 2019).

Path analysis results

The path analysis results in Table 2 show the relationships among the constructs in the model. The findings show that all proposed hypotheses were empirically supported. H1 shows that PL has a positive effect on TE (β = 0.72, p< 0.001). H2 show that TE directly influences BI (β = 0.68, p< 0.001), and H3 PL indirectly influences BI by mediating TE (β = 0.49, p< 0.001).

Table 2: SEM Results - Path coefficients

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	p-Value	Result
H1: PL → TE	0.72	0.09	< 0.001	Supported
H2: TE → BI	0.68	0.08	< 0.001	Supported
H3: PL → BI (Indirect)	0.49	0.07	< 0.001	Supported

The *p*-values of < 0.001 showing that the results are statistically significant and supporting the hypotheses assessed.

Mediation analysis

The indirect impact of PL on BI was investigated further using a bootstrapping method using TE. Table 3 shows the mediation effect was confirmed by the 5000 bootstrapping since the 95% confidence interval for the indirect impact excluded zero (CI = 0.34, 0.61).

Table 3: Mediation analysis - Bootstrapping results

Path	Direct Effect (β)	Indirect Effect (β)	95% Confidence Interval
PL → TE → BI	0.72	0.49	[0.34, 0.61]

The bootstrapping results show that TE fully mediates the relationship between PL and BI, confirming the significance of the indirect pathway.

Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio

This work computed discriminant validity with the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio. Given all HTMT values were below 0.85, the model's constructs PL, TE, and BI have excellent discriminant validity. Table 4 shows the results of HTMT.

Table 4: HTMT ratio

Construct	PL	TE	BI
PL	1.00	0.71	0.65
TE	0.71	1.00	0.75
BI	0.65	0.75	1.00

Values of the HTMT ratio display construct discriminant validity. Every result show construct differentiation and discriminant validity below 1.00.

Discussion

This study examined the link between PL, TE, and BI in the framework of eco-tourism in Asir, Saudi Arabia. The results follow the research on sustainable tourism and PL since they show important consequences on how leadership approaches, when focused on sustainability, deliver great value. In this study, PL was found to have a significant direct impact on TE (β = 0.72, p = 0.001). The results also point to previous studies showing that leadership emphasising environmental sustainability promotes higher emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2021; Lili & Rafiq, 2024; Ullah Khan et al., 2023;

Zheng et al., 2023). As PL is characterised by inclusivity and active participation of tourists in environmental projects, Lili & Rafiq (2024) and Ullah Khan et al. (2023) stated that PL creates common goals between tourists and the destination, signifying that implementing such practices in tourism can strengthen environmental awareness and pro-environmental behaviours. The findings of our study support these results, emphasising their significance since tourism is seen as a tool for preservation, protection, and promotion of local culture, resulting in participatory leadership that translates leadership strategies. Our research outcomes further highlight the qualities of PL's potential for addressing sustainability challenges in the tourism and hospitality sectors, which are consistent with a previous study by Gil-Cordero et al. (2023), which detailed that PL's qualities enhance both natural resource preservation and tourist satisfaction. Furthermore, our study shows that TE mediates the association between PL and BI ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$), verifying that engaged tourists enjoy positive results of their visits. This finding emphasises the critical importance of participation in turning leadership ideas into actual tourist outcomes; thus, tourists feel emotionally and cognitively involved. This is consistent with previous research findings of del Bosque & San Martín (2008), Shang et al. (2023) and Sheldon (2020), that indicate tourists will have richer and more meaningful experiences of tourism destinations, which include intentions to recommend and revisit. Therefore, the role of TE mediation within the construct of this study showed that engagement is not merely a side effect of tourism; rather, it is a major ingredient that makes or breaks whether tourists feel their visit is meaningful and memorable. This finding supports Chen et al. (2023) and Suliyanto et al. (2025) research that suggests active empathy for sustainability challenges while staying in eco-tourism locations resulted in an increased emotional attachment to the area, therefore improving the whole experience, including their BI. This would imply having more interactive and participatory experiences, like nature walks with a guide, eco-friendly seminars, or cooperative conservation projects, can make the tourists feel the connection with the environmental element of the tourism experience.

The impact of TE on BI showed a strong favourable effect ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). Our finding supports Rasoolimanesh et al.'s (2019) viewpoint, that claimed engagement acts as a pillar of general satisfaction and favourable tourism outcomes. Engaged tourists tend to develop passionate and enthusiastic feelings about the destination. Moreover, our results revealed that engaged tourists demonstrated higher degrees of pleasure and were more willing to provide recommendations that align with the findings of Abror et al. (2020). In this study, BI was operationalised as loyalty, likelihood to recommend, and the intention to revisit the destination. We found that TE significantly influences the involvement at eco-tourism sites, leading to a strong attachment to the place. This attachment transfers into loyalty and recurring visits in the future. These findings are consistent with Quynh et al. (2021) who discovered that emotionally committed tourists are more eager to recommend and revisit their destination. By connecting PL to notable results in BI with TE acting as the mediator, this study adds to already existing knowledge. Indeed, much of the present literature covers leadership, like in the works of Ahmed et al. (2021) and Lili & Rafiq (2024) or TE, as shown in studies of Gupta et al. (2023), Kumar et al. (2024), and Seyfi et al. (2021) separately. Our study improves the theoretical framework of TE and BI through investigating a direct connection to leadership practices. Such connection highlights in what way leadership influences sustainable tourism outcomes and the active relationship between leadership and tourists' behaviour. Therefore, in addition to filling existing literature gaps, these findings create opportunities for further research into such relationships in different ecological and cultural settings. Finally, as the objective of the current study is to look at how tourists in eco-tourism destinations respond to PL, particularly in Asir's eco-tourism sites, the study offers managers and policymakers in the tourism industry insightful practical outcomes. These environmentally oriented PL strategies help eco-tourism sites improve the tourist experience and encourage participation in sustainability, therefore helping to preserve resources and cultural sites. This fits the worldwide trend toward sustainable tourism, which supports the economic benefits of tourism while following the ideas of environmental stewardship and preservation of cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This paper investigates, in the framework of eco-tourism in Asir, Saudi Arabia, the relationships among PL, TE, and BI. Important results show that PL is quite important in promoting TE, therefore affecting loyalty, the likelihood of recommending the place, and the revisit intention. The results show the possibility of sustainable leadership strategies to improve visitor experiences, hence increasing their relevance and fulfilment. Clearly important in this relationship is TE, therefore enhancing the positive effects of PL on BI. The results of the research have broader applicability for eco-tourism sites outside of Asir. Giving the growing awareness of environmental sustainability among tourists, locations that embrace inclusive and eco-friendly leadership strategies can expect an increase in visitor satisfaction as well as committed supporters and advocates who will uphold their vision for the future for years to come. Although this body of literature includes PL, TE, and BI, more study is needed to close current gaps. Showing the limitations of this study, which can be overcome in next studies even if it produces pertinent results. Mostly, the cross-sectional method limits the detection of causal links across time. Longitudinal research might shed light on how PL and TE affect BI results over a longer period. Second, the study drew on self-reported data, which can be prone to social desirability or memory recall bias. By including qualitative samples gathered by observations or interviews to supplement the quantitative data, a mixed-methods approach could improve next investigations. Eventually, even if this study was conducted in Asir, more research is needed to evaluate how broadly relevant these results are to other eco-tourism places, particularly in various cultural or geographical settings, therefore improving the general relevance of the conclusions obtained.

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