

WHEN RESIDENTS BECOME CONSUMERS OF PLACE: SOCIAL EXCHANGE PERCEPTIONS AND THE ACCEPTABILITY OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN A HERITAGE DESTINATION

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism destinations depend on the voluntary acceptance of host communities. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study conceptualises host-community residents as active consumers of place — agents who evaluate tourism against the heritage, ecological and community values that define their lived environment — and examines how those evaluations shape the acceptability of sustainable tourism. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was administered to 410 residents across nine taluks of Chikkamagaluru district, a biodiversity-rich coffee-estate heritage destination in the Western Ghats of Karnataka, India. Structural equation modelling (SEM) using AMOS tested an integrated seven-construct model. All five hypothesised antecedents significantly and positively influenced sustainable tourism perception: social and cultural heritage emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.623$, $p < .001$), followed by environmental sustainability ($\beta = 0.611$), community attachment ($\beta = 0.538$), resource utilisation ($\beta = 0.457$) and environmental attitude ($\beta = 0.358$). Perceived sustainable tourism strongly predicted local economic gain ($\beta = 0.639$, $p < .001$). Community attachment partially mediated the environmental attitude–sustainable tourism relationship (indirect = 0.197, 95% CI [0.135, 0.262]). Perceptions were uniform across gender, livelihood activity and residential tenure, indicating community-wide evaluative consensus. These findings reframe host communities as evaluative consumers of their own destination and carry implications for heritage-sensitive, community-oriented tourism governance in biodiversity-hotspot destinations.

Keywords: *Sustainable tourism; social exchange theory; resident perceptions; community attachment; heritage destination; Western Ghats*

Introduction

The sustainability of a tourism destination is determined by the communities that inhabit it — by whether they perceive tourism as beneficial, regard it as compatible with their values and livelihoods, and extend voluntary acceptance to its continued development. This insight, central to Social Exchange Theory (SET), has generated four decades of empirical research (Ap; Gursoy, Jurowski, and Uysal; Nunkoo, Smith, and Ramkissoon). Yet residents are too

often framed as passive recipients of tourism's effects rather than as active evaluating agents whose judgements ultimately govern destination outcomes.

This paper argues for a more deliberate reframing: host-community residents are consumers of place. Just as market consumers evaluate products against their needs, values and prior experience, residents of a tourism destination evaluate the transformation of their lived environment against the heritage, ecology and community they inhabit, arriving at a judgement of acceptability. This consumer-of-place framing draws on SET's core premise — that exchange relationships are sustained when perceived benefits outweigh costs — but repositions the resident as an active evaluator who brings cultural identity, environmental values and community belonging to the appraisal (Besculides, Lee, and McCormick; Um and Crompton; Williams and Vaske). The empirical setting is Chikkamagaluru district in the Western Ghats of Karnataka, India.

The Western Ghats are among the world's principal biodiversity hotspots (Myers, Mittermeier, Mittermeier, da Fonseca, and Kent). Residents here simultaneously cultivate coffee estates that tourists visit, operate the homestays in which visitors stay, and are custodians of pilgrimage sites and forest landscapes that define the destination's appeal. Unregulated tourism in comparable Western Ghats destinations has been shown to erode traditional livelihoods, encroach upon forests and displace community control (Varghese and Natori; Gadgil). Chikkamagaluru represents an instructive test site at an earlier point on this trajectory, where governance decisions are still being formed.

Figure 8 presents the integrated conceptual model underpinning this study. The study addresses four questions: which antecedents most strongly shape residents' sustainable tourism perception; whether community attachment mediates environmental attitude's influence; whether sustainability perception drives economic gain; and whether perceptions differ across socio-demographic groups. These questions are addressed through an integrated structural-equation model estimated on primary data from 410 residents.

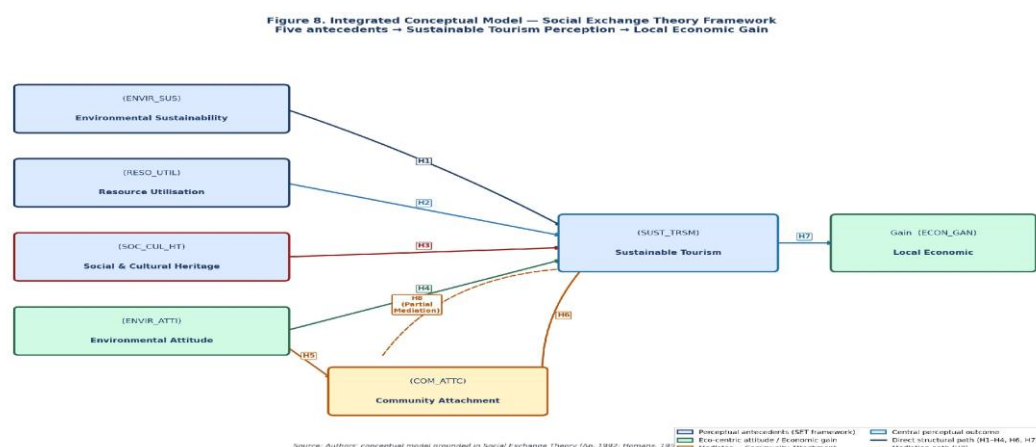


Figure 8. Integrated Conceptual Model — Social Exchange Theory Framework. Source: Authors, based on Ap (1992); Homans (1958); Emerson (1976).

Literature Review

Social Exchange Theory and the Resident-as-Consumer Framing

Social Exchange Theory (SET) holds that social actors weigh rewards against costs and extend engagement when the balance is favourable (Homans; Blau; Emerson). Applied to tourism by Ap, the theory frames residents as rational actors who support tourism when perceived net benefit outweighs costs. The consumer-of-place framing advanced here enriches this logic: residents bring to their appraisal not only an economic calculus but cultural identity, ecological values and community belonging as consumption values. Heritage is a consumption value because it represents the symbolic and cultural wealth of place; environmental quality because it sustains the experiential character of the destination; community belonging because it defines the social identity within which the evaluation occurs. Recent scholarship has enriched SET by incorporating identity (Nunkoo and Gursoy), power and trust (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, "Power"), and community factors (Crespi-Vallbona, Noguer-Junca, and Perez-Guilarte) alongside the material exchange logic.

Sustainable Tourism as a Perceptual Outcome and Study Hypotheses

Sustainable tourism is conceptualised as the degree to which residents regard tourism in their region as balanced, durable and acceptable (Choi and Sirakaya; Lankford and Howard; Lee). This follows Saarinen's argument that the limits of acceptable tourism are socially negotiated rather than objectively given. Five exchange-related antecedents shape this evaluation. Environmental sustainability captures whether tourism conserves natural resources and minimises ecological harm — a consistently documented antecedent in nature-based destinations (Gursoy, Jurowski, and Uysal; Han, Ramkissoon, You, and Kim). Resource utilisation reflects whether tourism uses the destination's natural and cultural resources responsibly and equitably, encompassing both ecological stewardship and distributive justice (Saarinen; Sharpley). Social and cultural heritage captures tourism's perceived role in preserving local traditions and identity a consistently positive antecedent in heritage-embedded settings (Besculides, Lee, and McCormick; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, "Developing").

Environmental attitude is a stable, eco-centric dispositional construct causally prior to the evaluation of tourism itself (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, and Jones). Community attachment — the emotional bond with the community — is among the most consistently documented predictors of support for sustainable tourism and mediates other antecedents' influence (Lee; Styliadis; Gannon, Rasoolimanesh, and Taheri; Williams and Vaske). Local economic gain is the downstream consequence of perceived sustainable tourism, closing the exchange loop (Perdue, Long, and Allen; Kim, Uysal, and Sirgy; Pang, Hao, Xiao, and Bao). Eight hypotheses (H1–H8) are derived from these theoretical relationships, as summarised in the methodology section.

Methodology

A positivist, deductive, quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill; Bryman; Creswell and Creswell). A structured questionnaire with 34 Likert-scale items measured seven constructs, adapted from established, validated scales: environmental sustainability and resource utilisation items from Choi and Sirakaya and Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, and Vogt; environmental attitude from Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, and Jones; community attachment from Williams and Vaske, McCool and Martin, and Um and Crompton; social and cultural heritage from Besculides, Lee, and McCormick and Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, and Vogt; sustainable tourism from Choi and Sirakaya, Ap and Crompton, and Lankford and Howard; and local economic gain from Perdue, Long, and Allen and Kim, Uysal, and Sirgy. Expert review established content validity (Churchill); pilot testing (N = 100) confirmed Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$ across all scales (Nunnally and Bernstein). Stratified random sampling across nine taluks of Chikkamagaluru district yielded 410 valid responses, exceeding the Rao soft minimum of 384 at 95% confidence and 5% margin of error, satisfying Kline's N: q rule for SEM, and meeting Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson's recommended minimum of 200–300 for stable estimation.

The two-step SEM approach (Anderson and Gerbing) was followed in AMOS with maximum-likelihood estimation. Mediation (H8) was tested through bootstrapped indirect effects with 2,000 samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (Preacher and Hayes; Baron and Kenny). Group comparisons used independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA with Cohen's d and eta-squared (Cohen; Lakens; Field). Common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff).

Results

Respondent Profile

The achieved sample comprised 410 valid responses from residents across nine taluks. Of these, 95.0% were local residents and 5.0% were migrants. Gender: 75.0% male (n = 308) and 25.0% female (n = 102). Age: 26.0% below 30 years, 38.0% aged 31–45 years and 36.0% above 45 years. Education: 15.0% primary/middle, 33.0% high school/PUC, 43.0% graduate and 9.0% postgraduate. Duration of residential stay at the tourist destination: 41.0% for 10–15 years, 24.0% for 16–20 years and 35.0% above 20 years. Primary occupation in tourism-linked activities was reported by 148 respondents (36.0%), distributed across hotel/homestay/restaurant (30.4%), taxi/auto (25.0%), handicraft and art selling (25.0%) and tourist guiding (19.6%).

Figure 1 presents the demographic profile.

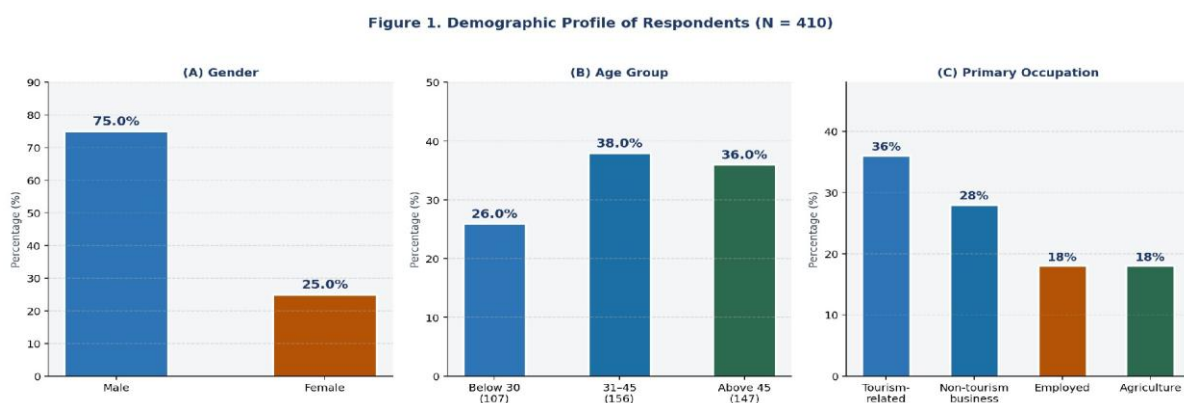


Figure 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 410). Note: Panel A = Gender; Panel B = Age Group; Panel C = Primary Occupation. Source: Primary survey data.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 410)

Category	Sub-Category	N	%
Gender	Male	308	75.0
	Female	102	25.0
Age	Below 30 years	107	26.0
	31–45 years	156	38.0
	Above 45 years	147	36.0
Education	Primary/Middle	62	15.0
	High School/PUC	135	33.0
	Graduate	176	43.0
	Postgraduate	37	9.0
Residential Status	Local Resident	390	95.0
	Migrant	20	5.0

Duration of Stay	10–15 years	168	41.0
	16–20 years	98	24.0
	Above 20 years	144	35.0
Tourism Occupation	Tourism-related	148	36.0
	Non-tourism business	114	28.0
	Employed	74	18.0
	Agriculture	74	18.0

Note. Source: Primary survey data (N = 410).

Measurement Model Results

Exploratory factor analysis on the pilot dataset (N = 100) confirmed the hypothesised seven-dimensional structure with all items loading adequately on their intended factors. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the full sample demonstrated excellent measurement model fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.073$, GFI = 0.949, AGFI = 0.937, RMSEA = 0.013, CFI = 0.968, IFI = 0.968, NFI = 0.945, RFI = 0.930.

All indicator loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and ranged from 0.735 to 0.880, demonstrating strong indicator reliability. Figure 2 presents the complete factor loading heatmap for all 34 indicators across all seven constructs. Figure 7 presents the AVE, $\sqrt{AVE}$ and composite reliability values. Figure 4 compares observed fit indices against recommended thresholds for both the measurement and structural models.



Figure 2. CFA Standardised Factor Loadings (λ) — All 34 Indicators across 7 Constructs. Note: All loadings significant at $p < .001$. Darker shading indicates higher loading value.

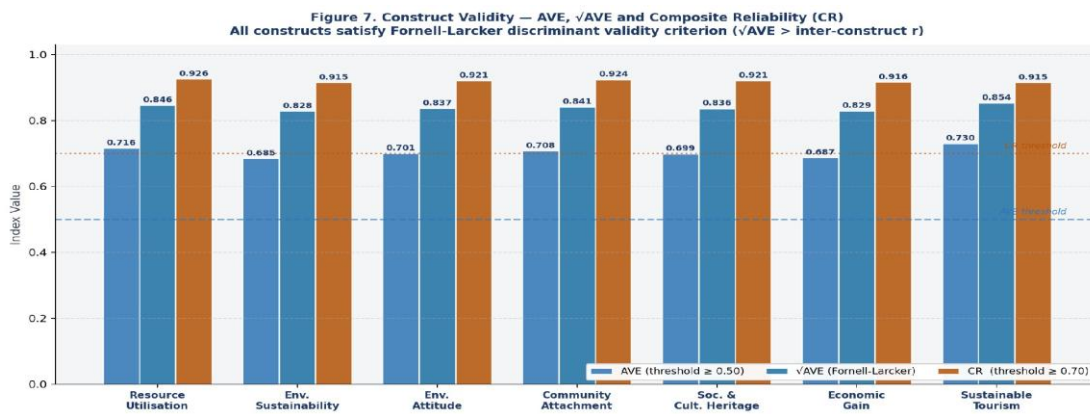


Figure 7. Construct Reliability (CR). Note: All constructs satisfy Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity criterion ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}} > \text{inter-construct } r$).

Figure 4. Goodness-of-Fit Indices: CFA Measurement Model vs. Structural Model

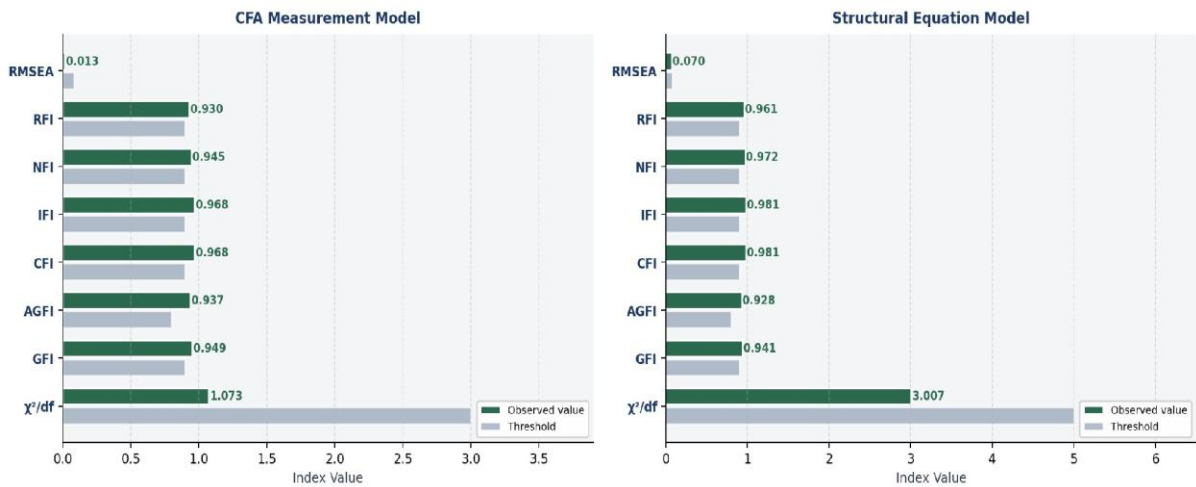


Figure 4. Goodness-of-Fit Indices: CFA Measurement Model (left) and Structural Model (right). Note: Green bars = threshold met. All indices within acceptable ranges.

Composite reliability values exceeded 0.90 for all constructs and AVE ranged from 0.685 to 0.730, satisfying convergent validity thresholds (Fornell and Larcker). All HTMT ratios were below 0.85, confirming discriminant validity (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt). Table 2 provides the complete measurement quality summary.

Table 2

CFA Measurement Quality — Composite Reliability, Cronbach's Alpha, AVE and $\sqrt{AVE}$

Construct	Loading Range	CR	Cronbach's α	AVE	$\sqrt{AVE}$
Resource Utilisation	0.814–0.871	0.926	0.927	0.716	0.846
Environmental Sustainability	0.735–0.880	0.915	0.916	0.685	0.828
Environmental Attitude	0.811–0.856	0.921	0.921	0.701	0.837
Community Attachment	0.805–0.869	0.924	0.924	0.708	0.841
Social & Cultural Heritage	0.814–0.871	0.921	0.921	0.699	0.836
Local Economic Gain	0.792–0.874	0.916	0.916	0.687	0.829
Sustainable Tourism	0.795–0.879	0.915	0.915	0.730	0.854

Note. CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; $\sqrt{AVE}$ = Square Root of AVE. All loadings significant at $p < .001$. Source: AMOS CFA output (full-fledged study, $N = 410$).

Structural Model Results — Hypotheses H1 to H7

Following validation of the measurement model, the structural model was estimated. Overall structural model fit was acceptable: $\chi^2/df = 3.007$, GFI = 0.941, AGFI = 0.928, RMSEA = 0.070, NFI = 0.972, CFI = 0.981, IFI = 0.981, RFI = 0.961, PCFI = 0.708, PNFI = 0.702. All seven hypothesised direct paths were significant and positive. Figure 5 presents the full structural equation model diagram with all standardised path coefficients. Figure 3 presents the ranked path coefficients as a horizontal bar chart for visual comparison. Social and cultural heritage was the strongest predictor of sustainable tourism perception ($\beta = 0.623$, C.R. = 11.539, $p < .001$), followed by environmental sustainability ($\beta = 0.611$), community attachment ($\beta = 0.538$), resource utilisation ($\beta = 0.457$) and environmental attitude ($\beta = 0.358$). Sustainable tourism perception exerted the strongest outcome-side effect on local economic gain ($\beta = 0.639$, C.R. = 12.034, $p < .001$). All eight hypotheses and their decisions are summarised in Table 3.

Figure 5. Structural Equation Model with Standardised Path Coefficients (β)

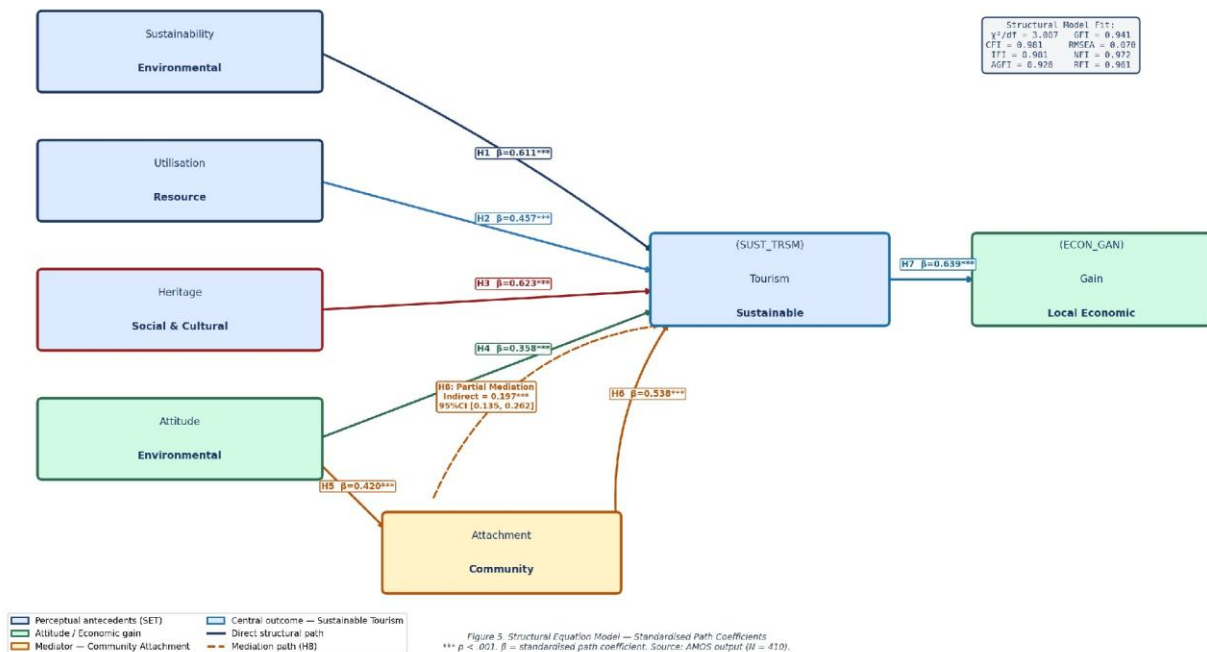


Figure 5. Structural Equation Model — Standardised Path Coefficients (β). Note: $\chi^2/df=3.007$, GFI=0.941, AGFI=0.928, CFI=0.981, RMSEA=0.070. *** $p < .001$. Source: AMOS output ($N = 410$).

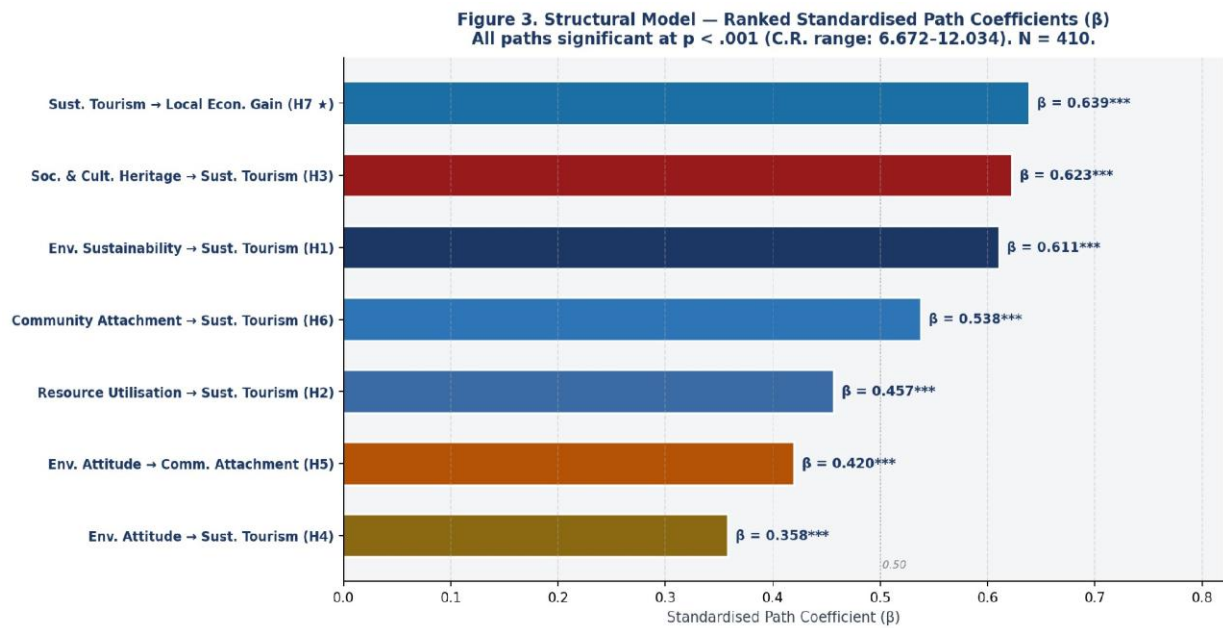


Figure 3. Ranked Standardised Path Coefficients (β) — All Hypothesised Paths. Note: All paths significant at $p < .001$. N = 410.

Table 3

Structural Model Results — Standardised Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Decisions

Hy po th esi s	Structural Path	β	S.E.	C.R.	p-value	Decision
H1	Env. Sustainability → Sust. Tourism	0.611	0.050	11.552	< .001	Supported
H2	Resource Utilisation → Sust. Tourism	0.457	0.055	8.595	< .001	Supported
H3	Soc. & Cult. Heritage → Sust. Tourism	0.623	0.050	11.539	< .001	Supported
H4	Env. Attitude → Sust. Tourism	0.358	0.050	6.672	< .001	Supported
H5	Env. Attitude → Comm. Attachment	0.420	0.052	7.978	< .001	Supported
H6	Comm. Attachment → Sust. Tourism	0.538	0.051	10.109	< .001	Supported
H7	Sust. Tourism → Local Econ. Gain	0.639	0.059	12.034	< .001	Supported

Note. β = standardised path coefficient; S.E. = standard error; C.R. = critical ratio. Strongest direct predictor of Sustainable Tourism: Social & Cultural Heritage (H3). Strongest outcome path: H7. Source: AMOS structural model output (N = 410).

Mediation Analysis — Hypothesis H8

Bootstrapped mediation analysis was conducted to test the mediating role of community attachment in the environmental attitude–sustainable tourism relationship. Figure 6 presents the full mediation model with all path values. The indirect effect of environmental attitude on sustainable tourism via community attachment was significant (indirect = 0.197, 95% CI [0.135, 0.262], $p = .001$; the confidence interval excludes zero). The direct effect of environmental attitude on sustainable tourism remained significant after inclusion of the mediator ($c' = 0.164$, $p = .004$). The co-existence of significant indirect and direct effects confirms partial rather than full mediation, supporting H8 (Preacher and Hayes; Baron and Kenny). Table 4 presents the complete mediation decomposition.

Figure 6. Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis – Community Attachment (H8)

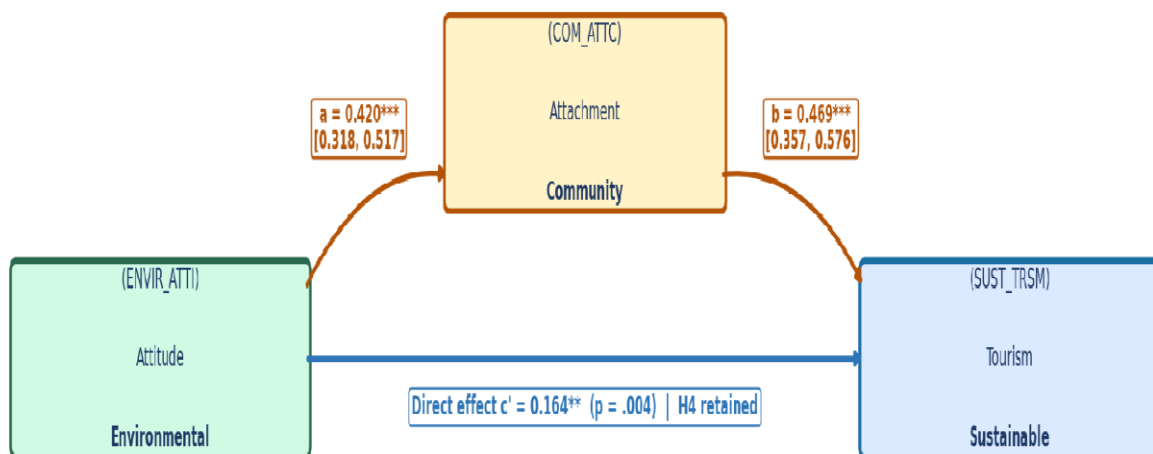


Figure 6. Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis — Community Attachment as Partial Mediator (H8). Note: Bootstrap samples = 2,000; 95% bias-corrected CI. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$. Source: AMOS ($N = 410$).

Table 4*Bootstrapped Mediation Results — Community Attachment as Partial Mediator (H8)*

Effect	Estimate	Boot SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	p-value	Decision
a path: Env. Attitude → Comm. Attachment	0.420	0.050	0.318	0.517	.001	Significant
b path: Comm. Attachment → Sust. Tourism	0.469	0.056	0.357	0.576	.001	Significant
Indirect effect (a × b)	0.197	0.033	0.135	0.262	.001	Significant
Direct effect (c')	0.164	0.057	0.055	0.279	.004	Significant
Total effect	0.361	0.052	0.260	0.465	.001	Significant

Note. Bootstrap samples = 2,000; 95% bias-corrected CI. CI excludes zero confirming significant indirect effect. Partial mediation: both indirect and direct effects significant. H8 supported. Source: AMOS bootstrapped mediation output (N = 410).

Group comparisons by gender (independent-samples t-tests), type of tourism-related livelihood activity (one-way ANOVA) and duration of residential stay (one-way ANOVA) revealed no statistically or practically significant differences across any construct (all $p > .05$; Cohen's $d < 0.15$; $\eta^2 < 0.02$), confirming community-wide perceptual consensus (Cohen; Lakens; Field).

Discussion

Cultural Heritage as the Dominant Consumption Value

The primacy of social and cultural heritage ($\beta = 0.623$, C.R. = 11.539) is the most theoretically significant result. In the consumer-of-place framing, cultural heritage is the most salient consumption value at stake in Chikkamagaluru residents' evaluation of tourism. The district's identity is constructed through coffee-estate culture, pilgrimage traditions, forest ecology and folk heritage. Where tourism preserves this identity, residents form a strongly favourable evaluation of its sustainability. This extends Besculides, Lee, and McCormick's cultural-benefit literature and challenges the assumption — common in SET-based research — that environmental or economic antecedents necessarily dominate, demonstrating instead that in heritage-embedded agrarian communities the cultural pathway can be primary.

Environmental Antecedents and the Two-Channel Mediation Mechanism

Environmental sustainability ($\beta = 0.611$) and resource utilisation ($\beta = 0.457$) confirm ecological stewardship as central to acceptance in nature-based destinations (Gursoy, Jurowski, and Uysal; Han, Ramkissoon, You, and Kim). In the consumer-of-place framing, environmental quality is simultaneously a hedonic consumption value — the scenic and ecological character residents inhabit — and a utilitarian one — the agricultural resource base that sustains livelihoods. Community attachment ($\beta = 0.538$ direct; indirect = 0.197 as mediator) demonstrates a dual-channel mechanism: environmental attitude operates on sustainable tourism acceptance through a direct cognitive-appraisal channel and an affective amplification channel through community belonging. Residents who hold eco-centric values invest greater symbolic significance in their community, and heightened attachment in turn drives a more favourable sustainability evaluation. This two-channel pattern, not previously documented for an Indian Western Ghats destination, advances mechanism-level understanding of SET beyond single-pathway accounts (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, "Developing"; Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock, and Ramayah).

Economic Gain, Group Uniformity and Governance Hierarchy

The strong path from perceived sustainable tourism to local economic gain ($\beta = 0.639$, C.R. = 12.034) confirms that the consumer-of-place evaluation is the gateway through which economic benefit is accessed. Residents who perceive tourism as sustainable expect and experience its economic opportunities; those who do not, do not. The absence of significant demographic differences across gender, livelihood activity and residential tenure indicates a shared, community-level evaluation consistent with Nunkoo, Smith, and Ramkissoon's finding that community-dependent destinations exhibit collective rather than segmented perceptual processes. The ranked path coefficients provide a direct governance hierarchy: cultural heritage protection ($\beta = 0.623$) is the highest-leverage instrument, followed by environmental stewardship ($\beta = 0.611$), community participation ($\beta = 0.538$), resource co-management ($\beta = 0.457$) and environmental awareness ($\beta = 0.358$).

Conclusion

This study has framed host-community residents as consumers of place and empirically tested this framing on 410 residents of Chikkamagaluru district. Social and cultural heritage is the dominant driver of sustainable tourism acceptance ($\beta = 0.623$), followed by environmental sustainability and community attachment. Community attachment partially mediates the environmental attitude–sustainable tourism relationship, confirming a two-channel mechanism through which ecological values reach sustainability acceptance both directly and via community belonging. Perceived sustainable tourism strongly drives local economic gain ($\beta = 0.639$), closing the social-exchange loop. Perceptions are uniform across socio-demographic groups, indicating a community-wide evaluative consensus that supports community-wide governance instruments.

Theoretically, the study extends SET by specifying cultural heritage as a dominant consumption value within the resident's exchange calculus and community attachment as an

affective amplification mechanism. Practically, it provides destination planners with a ranked governance hierarchy — heritage protection, environmental stewardship, community participation, resource co-management — where each intervention simultaneously strengthens sustainability perception and economic benefit realisation. Limitations include the cross-sectional design, confinement to one district and single-source survey data. Longitudinal, comparative multi-destination and mixed-methods extensions constitute the natural research agenda.

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