Research Article

A Study on the Potential Natural Heritage Values for the Sustainable Tourism Practices in Al Hamra and Misafat Al-Abriyeen—Visitor's Perception

Dr. Chandra Sekhara Reddy Kamireddy[1], Dr. Krishna Murthy Meesaala[2], Dr. Mouza Mohamed Al- Hadhrami[3], & Dr. Mohamed Riyazhkhan[4]

[1, 2 &4] Faculties, Department of Business Studies, College of Economics and Business Administration, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Sultanate of Oman,

[3]Assistant Professor, College of Economics and Political Sciences-Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman,

First Author,& Corresponding Author Email: chandrasekhra.reddy@utas.edu.om

Second & Corresponding Author, Email: krishna.murthy@utas.edu.om

Third Author, Email: m.hadhrami@squ.edu.om

Fourth, Author, Email: mohamed.riyazhkhan@utas.edu.om

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This research explores visitors' perceptions of the potential values of natural heritage for sustainable tourism in Al Hamra and Misfat Al-Abriyeen, Oman. These sites combine cultural and natural resources, which are recognized as fundamental to identity and continuity (UNESCO, 2005). Cultural legacy involves tangible artifacts and intangible attributes passed down, preserved, and protected across generations (Kurin R., 2003; Bolin A., 2019). The defense of both cultural and natural heritage is essential for fostering cultural diversity and endorsing sustainable development, permitting connections to history and gratefulness for human and natural diversity. In 2023, Oman's tourism sector enhanced as one of the top 20 destinations, considering its assurance of high-quality visitor techniques and aligning with growth trends in other Gulf countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia (World Tourism Organisation, UNWTO 2020). This research directs on the sustainable development of Misfat Al Abriyeen and Al Hamra by advancing local residents to develop economic, social, and cultural consequences. The idea includes developing trekking involvements that influence exceptional regional features, therefore inspiring diverse business opportunities and attracting international tourists (Flores, R. P., et al., 2019). This research paper would help find probable areas for increasing natural heritage and tourism, strengthening the national economy, improving per capita income, creating jobs, improving living standards, elevating rural development, and lifting local self-efficacy (Rehman, A. 2020). The outcomes are expected to offer insights into how sustainable tourism can provide to comprehensive community empowerment and economic progress in Oman. **Keywords:** Cultural Heritage, Economic development & sustainability, Socio-historical, Tourism,

INTRODUCTION

Governments worldwide have identified the dual advantage of empowering local communities and improving tourism to promote sustainable economic growth. Rich cultural heritage and diverse landscapes are significant in the Sultanate of Oman. By empowering local communities across all governorates, the government can guarantee that revenue assistance is evenly distributed, thus promoting societal well-being. Safeguarding and adapting local heritage sites into tourist destinations conserves these essential cultural landmarks and releases new avenues for economic development through improved tourism. Oman's tourism sector has evidenced a stable rise in arrivals, underscoring the nation's accomplishment in attracting visitors and diversifying its economy. The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) described that in 2022 the tourism sector made a direct added value of RO 1.1 billion, marking a significant 33 percent hike from RO 804.9 million in 2021. This accounts for 2.4 percent of Oman's GDP (Jomar Mendoza, 2023), highlighting the growing importance of tourism in the national economy. This enhancement in tourism has not only improved the GDP but has also created substantial job opportunities, fostering more comprehensive economic development. A perfect example of local empowerment and cultural protection can be identified in the village of Misfat Al Abriyeen. Known for its fabulous vistas and the picturesque mountain road leading to it, this village indicates Oman's rich history through its charming old houses and traditional lifestyles. Misfah Hotel in Misfat Al Abriyeen endures as evidence of heritage preservation, with its heritage-style exterior and traditionally adorned rooms that highlight local craftsmanship and olden traditions (Al Hashimi, A. (2024).

Moreover, the Al Hajar Mountains and the ancient town of Al Hamra provide additional examples of how tourism can be intertwined with cultural preservation. The traditional mud-brick homes and the sprawling date palm plantations not only draw tourists but also preserve the historical essence of the region. Following the falaj, or traditional irrigation channels, visitors experience the ingenious ancient water management system that sustains the lush plantations, offering a blend of educational and aesthetic experiences (Velikaya, O. 2022). In conclusion, Oman's strategy of integrating local empowerment with tourism development serves as a model for sustainable economic and cultural preservation. By focusing on these areas, the country enriches its societal well-being and strengthens its financial base, proving that cultural heritage and modern tourism can coexist and flourish together.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Misfat Al Abriyeen, a heritage village in Oman, plays a pivotal role in Oman's Vision 2040, which aims to harness tourism and heritage-led initiatives to foster a sustainable future. While the village has been recognized for its innovative eco-tourism strategies, including cluster photovoltaics and heritage accommodation options like Guesthouse B & B, it faces considerable challenges that could impede its development into a model for sustainable rural tourism. Although its economic and cultural potential, Misfat Al Abriyeen competes with infrastructural and environmental difficulties and challenges typical of rural heritage spots.

Those comprise issues related to the maintenance and restoration of ancient buildings, sustainable management of natural resources, and integration of modern amenities with no compromising cultural integrity. The local association, Al Misfat Al Ahlia, engage stimulating the local economy by creating job opportunities and supporting local businesses with the help of tourism-led activities. Likewise, there is a crucial need to address the village's infrastructural deficits, enhance its tourism facilities, and improve waste management systems to support increased tourist activities. Moreover, residents and stakeholders lack awareness about the potential benefits of sustainable tourism, which hinders collective efforts towards achieving the strategic goals aligned with national and international sustainable development frameworks. This research aims to explore these issues in-depth to propose actionable strategies that can aid Misfat Al Abriyeen in overcoming these barriers, thereby optimizing its contribution to the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of Oman's sustainable development aspirations.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Quality improvement is one of the significant strategies many tourists use to increase their competitiveness in international tourist markets (Alberto A. et al. 2010). Countries' cultures, landscapes, geographical appearances, and historical events are vital and powerful movements for sustainable development in the tourism sector. It means natural and rustic, focusing on creating a friendly relationship between the environment and economic growth. As per the research work of (Zhao X., 2024) discussed, this study builds an expert-driven evaluation methodology to evaluate the sustainable tourist development of China's intangible cultural heritage associated with play. According to (Hakim et al. 2021), the presence and variety of cultural and natural heritage sites are essential for significant tourist attractions because they positively impact cities and residents' well-being. Culture is a complex structure that mirrors the social environment, human thought, and behavior. Local culture, which is the standard way to distinguish one culture from another, is the culmination of the traits and spirit of the local population after long-term development within a particular geographical area (Liang Jingyi, Chan Chung-Shing 2017). Timothy, D. J. 2014 highlighted that one of the world's most significant and pervasive tourism resources is cultural heritage, and heritage tourism is currently one of the most prominent types of travel. Many places seek to tourism-driven socio-economic development in the built environment or other types of heritage. Although landscapes are significant tourist resources (Liberato et al., 2020), they also significantly impact travelers' actions and decision-making (Doxiadis and Liveri, 2012).

Pellegrino, F. (2021) argued that landscape is an integral part of the quality of life for people everywhere and an essential element of individual and social well-being. According to Liberato et al. (2020), "Landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them." As perceived and embodied, symbolic, and metaphorical, landscapes can be seen as venues for various activities, performances, or events (Edensor, T. 2001; Canwell, D., & Sutherland, J. (2003). Landscapes can be considered significant resources for tourism (Liberato et al., 2020), but they also significantly influence tourists, their activities, and decision-making processes (Doxiadis and Liveri, 2013). Engaging in various tourist practices – sightseeing, shopping, going on tours, visiting attractions and events, and running in the cities – is a way for tourists to engage with their surroundings and, therefore, co-create the tourist landscape.

Ayeni A A Dorcas (2012) discussed it with a focus on the physical elements, particularly landscaping. This study makes the case for the growth of Nigeria's tourism sector. Investigating whether landscaping is necessary for Nigerian tourist attractions is, thus, the study's primary goal. An analysis of the literature on landscaping and an investigation of its significance for tourism growth were conducted to accomplish this. According to Nohl (2011), enhancing a landscape's aesthetics will significantly impact its sustainable development; as a result, sustainability is a comprehensive concept for the management and development of nature and resources. Their research (Spencer, A. J., et al. 2023) presents a comparative analysis of sustainable tourism development in the Anglophone Caribbean from 1962 to the 2020s. The purpose of this article is to present a comparative analysis of sustainable tourism development in the Anglophone Caribbean from 1962 to the 2020s. The sustainability of the tourism sector is intimately related to its growth. There is no time to waste finding a solution balancing sustainable development with economic prosperity. Three distinct aspects of sustainability must be balanced for long-term success: environmental, sociocultural, and financial sustainability (Pellegrino, F. 2021). Jasper Hessel Heslinga, J. H., et al. (2015) discussed exploring the possible benefits of tourism for landscapes and the role that tourism may play in fostering social-ecological resilience in the Dutch Wadden. According to the authors, the perspective on social-ecological systems is a helpful strategy that might be applied to enhance the governance of multifunctional socio-ecological systems in coastal regions. There have been missed opportunities to combine tourism with scenery. The authors believe that there may be synergies between tourism and environmental protection, and that these should be found.

Thomas Doxiadis and Dionysia Liveri (2013) this study aim to demonstrate the strong branding relationship between tourism and the environment and the beneficial effects that excellent design can

have on both. First, the association between the landscape and the brand of a tourist location is developed. Then, using real-world examples, the positive and negative relationships between a tourist destination's brand and its landscapes are investigated. Lastly, case studies of government-commissioned or globally acclaimed projects showcase best practices in three primary study and planning stages. In the context of a dynamic, networked world and a globalizing economy, tourism destinations have the task of being flexible. Hartman, S. In his research work to improve comprehension and conceptualization of flexible tourism destinations, he outlines the concept of "fitness landscapes," a metaphor employed in complexity theories to illustrate the evolution paths of adaptive systems. Per their work by Linda Osti and Lucia Cicero (2018), this paper aims to identify tourists' perceptions of positive and negative landscape features. Its objective is to classify rural tourists into homogenous groups according to their sensitivity towards specific landscape characteristics. Ricart, S. (2019) discussed in his work identifying the tourism potential of natural and cultural heritage in historical irrigation canals by promoting social learning and providing digital tools to locals and visitors. In his paper, Wendy Chepkemei Rop (2020) aims to predict how tourism affects conservation by looking at two everyday tourism activities: rock climbing and hiking. It suggests that while there is a chance that tourism will have detrimental effects, it can also positively alter essential ecosystems, such as the one in Hell's Gate National Park. Wengel Y (2020) examines two minor trends impacting Nepal's adventure tourism market. Despite being a well-liked location for adventure tourism for almost fifty years, Nepal had a restricted selection of adventure tourism activities until recently.

Research Gap and Objectives of the Study

While comprehensive research on the potential values of natural heritage for sustainable tourism in Al Hamra and Misfat Al-Abriyeen leaves several gaps for further exploration, one significant gap is the lack of comparative analysis with other regions in Oman or the broader Middle East, which could reveal unique elements or commonalities that influence sustainable tourism development. Furthermore, the outcomes of cross-sectional design limit the understanding of the long-term impacts of visitor perceptions and subsequent tourism activities on natural and cultural assets. There is a clear need for longitudinal studies to assess tourism practices' sustainability and long-term effects on heritage sites. Another gap is the insufficient analysis of the roles and perspectives of various stakeholders, including government bodies, NGOs, and business owners, which could provide deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities for promoting sustainable tourism. Furthermore, the study's qualitative approach to potential economic benefits lacks a quantitative assessment of the financial impact, particularly concerning how increased tourism affects local pricing, employment, and overall economic stability in Al Hamra and Misfat Al-Abriyeen. Lastly, the research does not thoroughly explore potential conflicts or synergies between preserving cultural heritage and maximizing economic benefits from tourism, suggesting a need for studies focused on balancing these aspects. Addressing these gaps could enhance academic understanding and guide policymakers and tourism developers in leveraging natural and cultural resources for sustainable growth. The objectives of the study are to identify potential NH values contributing to sustainable tourism in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen, to examine the perception of residents and tourists on potential NH values in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen and to evaluate the Sociocultural, Historical, Landscape, and Sustainability Factors Affecting Tourism in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen.

Research Methodology

The research employed an exploratory approach to examine tourists' perspectives of the potential values of natural heritage at Al Hamra and Misfat Al-Abriyeen for sustainable tourism. This methodology was selected to provide insights into tourists' attitudes and views that remain inadequately examined or comprehended. The study used quantitative and qualitative methods to enhance comprehension of the subject matter. Primary data were obtained from Al Hamra and Misfat Al-Abriyeen tourists through a standardized questionnaire and personal interviews. This method facilitated the acquisition of direct information concerning travelers' experiences and perspectives.

Secondary data were obtained from current research and publications about natural heritage tourism, sustainable tourism practices, and prior studies on tourist impressions at the selected sites. These data facilitated the construction of a theoretical framework and bolstered the survey of primary data. The research utilized convenience sampling due to participants' actual availability in the designated tourist sites. This non-probability sampling strategy was chosen to enable efficient and rapid data collection, which was crucial due to the study's exploratory character and the research environment's geographical limitations. The study's target subjects were visitors visiting Al Hamra and Misfat Al-Abriyeen—a total of 237 participants engaged in the study. The sample size was sufficient to acquire meaningful insights and conclusions for this exploratory analysis. A structured questionnaire was prepared to obtain quantitative data.

The evaluation had closed-ended and open-ended questions to collect broad information regarding tourists' perceptions of natural heritage and its necessity for sustainable tourism. The questionnaire was structured to be concise and optimize response rates and was accompanied via Google Forms. In addition to the questionnaire data, personal interviews were performed with a subset of participants. The interviews were administered with deep qualitative perceptions into personal perceptions and comprehensive remarks concerning the natural heritage values at the Misfat Al Abriyeen. The questionnaires were addressed electronically through Google Forms to visitors who visited the places during the referred period. The detailed investigation involved conducting face-to-face interviews with select tourists, chosen for their readiness to be comprised, and suggesting detailed observations. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were inspected with statistical software to discriminate response patterns and correlations. Descriptive statistics, comprising frequencies and percentages, were used to review the data. Qualitative data from personal interviews were subjected to thematic investigation to distinguish prevalent themes and insights on the perception of natural heritage values. Sequential Equation Modelling was used in the study, and the research arranged with ethical norms, ensuring that all respondents knew the study's objective and their rights.

The objective of the study is to identify potential NH values contributing to sustainable tourism in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN BY AGE AND GENDER

Age Group	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
18-24 years	10%	8%	18%
25-40 years	35%	25%	60%
41-60 years	10%	9%	19%
Above 60 years	2%	1%	3%
Total	**57%**	**43%**	**100%**

Source: Questionnaire

TABLE 2: PARTICIPANT ROLES

Role	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Tourists	150	63%
Residents	87	37%
Total	**237**	**100%**

Source: Questionnaire

Tables 1 and 2 present an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents, including age distribution, gender breakdown, and their roles as tourists or residents. Most participants were tourists (75%) and fell within the age group of 25-40 years, with a balanced representation of both genders.

TABLE 3: MEAN RATINGS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR NH VALUES (OBJECTIVE 1)

NH Value	Mean Rating	Standard Deviation (SD)
Mesmerized Nature	4.5	0.7
Terrace Farms	4.3	0.8
Cultural Diversity	4.7	0.5
Cool Falaj Water System	4.4	0.6
Architectural Diversity	4.6	0.5
Cliff-edge Camping Spots	4.1	0.9
Stargazing with Low Light Pollution	4.8	0.4
Traditional Mud Houses	4.5	0.6
Cross-country Adventure Opportunities	4.2	0.8

Source: Questionnaire

Interpretation:

Mean Ratings of all natural heritage values received a mean rating above 4.0, indicating strong positive responses from the participants regarding their contribution to sustainable tourism. Standard Deviations (SD) values range from 0.4 to 0.9, reflecting varying levels of agreement. Natural heritage, comprised of Stargazing with Low Light Pollution and Cultural Diversity, shows low SD values and denotes consistent consensus among responders. On the contrary, Cliff-edge Camping Spots exhibit a relatively elevated standard deviation, representing more significant heterogeneity in participant perceptions. This table offers a quantitative overview of the perceived significance of each NH value in fostering sustainable tourism within the region. The survey results for identifying potential natural heritage (NH) values that support sustainable tourism in Al Hamra, and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen reveal several key attractions supporting sustainable tourism activities.

Tourists emphasized the area's mesmerizing natural beauty, rugged landscapes, and majestic Hajjar Mountains as a core feature, with 80% strongly agreeing on its value. Terrace farms, traditional mud houses, and diverse cultural elements were also highly acknowledged, with cultural diversity rated 4.7/5, implying its importance in enriching the destination's appeal. The unique Falaj water system, which provides calm and perpetual running water and low light pollution and enables stargazing opportunities, was rated positively as a distinctive feature that adds significant value to the tourist experience. Furthermore, adventure opportunities such as cliff-edge camping spots and cross-country exploration contribute to the region's attractiveness for eco-tourists. The blend of natural beauty, cultural richness, traditional agricultural practices, and adventure offerings generally make Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen model for facilitating sustainable tourism, elevating visitor experiences while preserving local heritage, and community-led endeavors.

Another objective is to assess the perception of visitors and locals on potential NH values in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen.
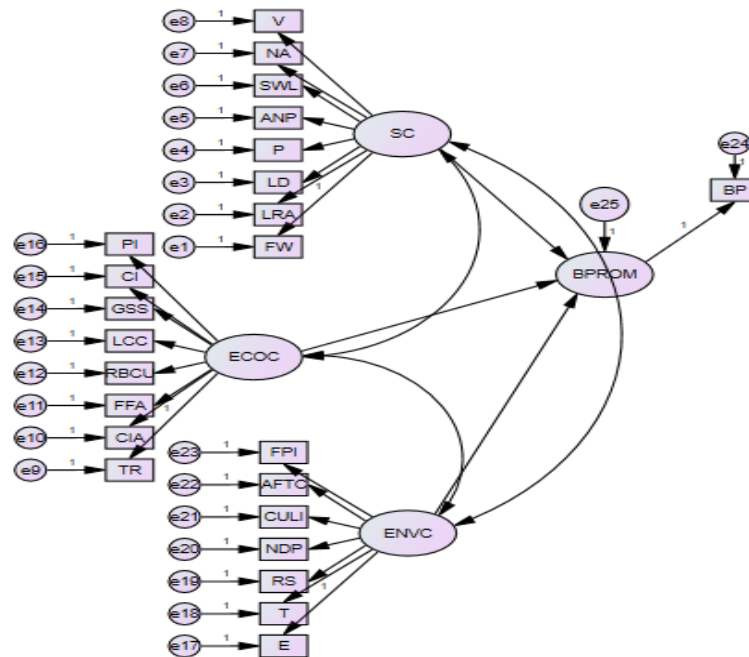

FIGURE 1: STRUCTURED MODEL OF OBJECTIVE 2

Figure 1 illustrates that the framework fits well with the data, as denoted by all critical indices meeting or exceeding suggested thresholds. It productively recorded the relationships among the variables, assuring a reliable and valid summary of the factors affecting tourism in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen.

TABLE 4. FIT INDICES FOR OBJECTIVE 2

Indices	Value	Suggested value
χ^2/df	1.498	<5.00 (Hair et al., 1998)
p-value	0.346	>0.05(Hair et al., 1998)
GFI	0.985	> 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)
AGFI	0.928	> 0.90 (Hair et al. 2006)
NFI	0.967	> 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)
CFI	1.000	> 0.90 (Daire et al., 2008)
RMSEA	0.016	<0.08(Hair et al. 2006)

Source: Questionnaire

The model demonstrates an exceptional fit with the data recognized by all critical indices meeting or exceeding the suggested thresholds. Especially, the chi-square, GFI, AGFI, NFI, CFI, and RMSEA values together refer to the model's precise interpretation of the collected data. This effective fit indicates that the model successfully records the relationships along with the variables, confirming that the results extracted pertaining to the components affecting tourism in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen are reliable and valid.

The third objective is to explore the determinants, namely, Sociocultural, Historical, Landscape, and Sustainability aspects influencing Tourism in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen
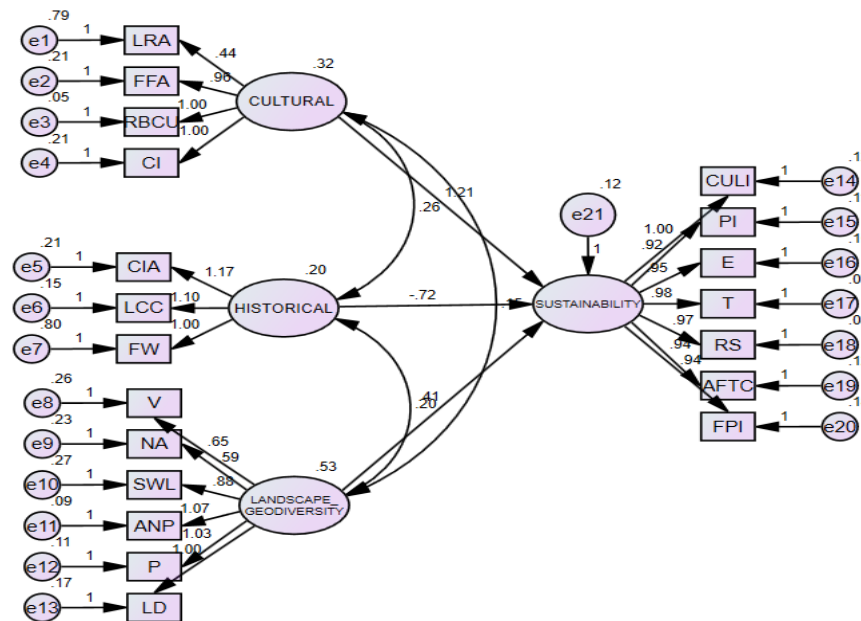

FIGURE 2: STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL FOR OBJECTIVE 3

TABLE 5: MODEL FIT SUMMARY OF STRUCTURAL EQUATION

Indices	Value	Suggested value
χ^2/df	2.456	<5.00 (Hair et al., 1998)
p-value	0.034	>0.05(Hair et al., 1998)
GFI	0.991	> 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)
AGFI	0.938	> 0.90 (Hair et al. 2006)
NFI	0.973	> 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999)
CFI	0.945	> 0.90 (Daire et al., 2008)
RMSEA	0.055	<0.08(Hair et al. 2006)

Source: Primary Data

The Model Fit summarise the Structural Equation (Model 2) furnish several recommendations that measure how well the model fits the collected data based on unique accepted standards. Chi-Square (χ^2/df) value is 2.456, which is lesser than the recommended threshold of <5.00 (Hair et al., 1998), which depicts a good model fit. The p-value is 0.034, which is moderately below >0.05 criteria; while the fit is generally satisfactory, there may be some areas for development in the model. Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) is the value of 0.991 beyond the recommended denoting value of >0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999), which refers a robust model fit.

Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) possess a value of 0.938, it is more than 0.90 (Hair et al., 2006), indicating an excellent model adjustment. Normed Fit Index (NFI) has the value of 0.973 is more than 0.90 (Hu and Bentler, 1999), which signifies that the model performs well in explaining the data. Comparative Fit Index (CFI) constitute the value is 0.945, above 0.90 (Daire et al., 2008), revealing a good fit. Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) include the value is 0.055, which is lesser than the threshold of <0.08 (Hair et al., 2006), showing a well-fitting model. All signifies within or very close to the suggested values, indicating that the model offers a good representation of the relationships in the data. The fit assessment established that the model efficiently explains the design noticed in the survey responses, with minor room for improvement.

DISCUSSION

The study analyzed capable natural heritage (NH) values offering sustainable tourism in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen, concentrating on cultural, historical, landscape, and sustainability elements. The results align well with earlier research studies highlighting the role of natural and cultural heritage in enticing tourists and advocating sustainable tourism. Past studies, such as those by Timothy, D. J. (2014) and Hakim, L. et al. (2021), have underlined the importance of cultural heritage and diversity in boosting the tourism appeal of destinations. This study enhances those outcomes by showing that cultural diversity, traditional architecture, and local practices in Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen are crucial elements of their tourism potential. However, Liberato et al. (2020) explored how landscapes influence travellers' actions and decisions. This idea is reflected in this study's conclusion about the attraction of Al Hamra's and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen's natural scenic beauty, namely, the Hajjar Mountains, terraced farms, and falaj water systems. The landscape attribute enhances the aesthetic experience and serves as a distinguishing selling point for these regions, consistent with the argument of Ayeni A. A. Dorcas (2012), who characterized that natural elements, remarkably well-preserved landscapes, are crucial in developing tourism in rural areas.

The comparison of this research with that of Spencer, A. J. (2023), who outlined sustainable tourism in the Caribbean, also proves similarities in how sustainability goals are being accomplished in diverse contexts. Both studies emphasized the significance of balancing environmental, sociocultural, and economic sustainability to ensure tourism destinations' long-term success. In Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen, the community-led endeavors, conservation of cultural assets, and low environmental impact tasks like stargazing provide to achieve this balance, much like the strategies outlined by Spencer et al. for the Caribbean. Nevertheless, in some regions where tourism growth has often led to cultural dilution, this research identified that Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen have productively preserved their cultural identity while embracing tourism. The outcomes match the work of Rogelio Policarpio Flores et al. (2019), who claimed to leverage cultural assets to establish income opportunities and enhance local tourism offerings. The highlight on maintaining traditional events, such as farming on terraced slopes and the operation of heritage-style inns, has allowed these areas to establish tourism without sacrificing cultural authenticity, a challenge found in earlier studies as essential for sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

The study summarises that Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen embrace substantial potential for sustainable tourism due to their rich cultural heritage, historic assets, and varied natural landscapes. These regions suggest a unique combination of natural beauty, cultural experiences, and community-led initiatives, constructing them ideal destinations for eco-tourists and culture seekers. This is consistent with the findings from earlier studies that have emphasized the importance of cultural and natural heritage in promoting tourism. The contrast also designates that, like other positive, sustainable tourism destinations, these areas have accomplished moderate tourism growth with cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. In the future, strategic actions should include collaboration among stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and government bodies, to safeguard cultural and natural assets while promoting social and economic development. The findings

highlight the significance of maintaining cultural diversity, traditional architecture, and natural aesthetics as core aspects of the tourism offering, which aligns with previous research. By preserving these key characteristics, Al Hamra and Misfah Al-Arbiyeen can confirm sustainable tourism growth, contributing positively to local communities and visitor experiences.

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