

Community Resilience as a Foundation for Sustainable Tourism: Evidence from Al Ula, Saudi Arabia

By

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Abstract

This study explores the role of community resilience in shaping the development of sustainable tourism in Al Ula, Saudi Arabia. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the research examines residents' perceptions of the impact of tourism, in terms of governance, cultural identity, and community adaptation. The findings reveal that while tourism is widely perceived to provide significant economic benefits, particularly regarding employment, there is concern over rising living costs and limited community participation in decision-making. Strong correlations were observed between participatory governance, cultural pride, and community support, underscoring the importance of inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to resilience building. Qualitative insights further highlight residents' calls for enhanced involvement, and the protection of cultural heritage. The study contributes to understanding how governance, cultural identity, and socio-economic impacts intersect in fostering community resilience within the context of rapid tourism development and offers practical recommendations to support more inclusive and sustainable tourism strategies in Al Ula.

Keywords: Community Resilience, Sustainable Tourism, Heritage Tourism, Vision 2030.

مرونة المجتمع كأساس للسياحة المستدامة: دراسة حالة محافظة العلا، المملكة العربية السعودية

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المستخلص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة دور مرونة المجتمع في تشكيل تنمية السياحة المستدامة في محافظة العلا، المملكة العربية السعودية. وبالاعتماد على البيانات الكمية والنوعية، يتناول هذا البحث تصورات السكان لتأثير السياحة، من حيث الحوكمة والهوية الثقافية والتكيف المجتمعي. كشفت النتائج أنه في حين يُنظر إلى السياحة على نطاق واسع على أنها توفر فوائد اقتصادية كبيرة، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالتوظيف، إلا أن هناك قلقاً بشأن ارتفاع تكاليف المعيشة ومحدودية مشاركة المجتمع في صنع القرار. وقد لوحظت في هذه النتائج ارتباطات قوية بين الحوكمة التشاركية والفخر الثقافي ودعم المجتمع، مما يؤكد أهمية اتباع مناهج شاملة ومراعية للثقافات لبناء المرونة. كما تُسلط الرؤى النوعية الضوء على دعوات السكان لتعزيز المشاركة وحماية التراث الثقافي. تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهم كيفية تقاطع الحوكمة والهوية الثقافية والآثار الاجتماعية والاقتصادية في تعزيز مرونة المجتمع في سياق التنمية السياحية المضطربة، وتقدم توصيات عملية لدعم استراتيجيات سياحية أكثر شمولاً واستدامة في العلا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مرونة المجتمع، السياحة المستدامة، السياحة التراثية، رؤية ٢٠٣٠.

1. Introduction

The concept of resilience has become central to discussions around sustainable development, particularly in the context of tourism planning in environmentally and socially vulnerable destinations. As global tourism confronts increasingly complex challenges—from climate change and pandemics to economic shocks and cultural degradation—the capacity of communities to adapt, transform, and sustain themselves has emerged as a defining factor in their long-term viability (Espiner et al., 2017; Holladay, 2018). In light of this, resilience has been reframed not only as a response but as a strategic asset that underpins sustainability, especially in heritage-rich regions undergoing rapid tourism development.

Within this evolving discourse, community resilience—encompassing economic adaptability, social cohesion, and environmental stewardship—has gained prominence as both a theoretical lens and a practical goal in tourism studies (Manner-Baldeon et al., 2024; Ragmoun, 2022). The integration of resilience frameworks into tourism planning has proved to be especially relevant in Global South contexts, where top-down development models often overlook local agency and long-term social impacts (Martínez Rodríguez & Nieto Moreno, 2023).

In destinations that promote heritage, where identity, place attachment, and collective memory are integral to community life, resilience takes on additional significance as a mechanism for protecting not only infrastructure but also cultural continuity and the ongoing ability of the local community to retain their autonomy (Fabbricatti et al., 2020; Pavlova, 2024).

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda has positioned tourism as a pillar of economic diversification with Al Ula emerging as a flagship destination. Situated in the northwestern region of Saudi Arabia, Al Ula has been identified as a UNESCO World Heritage site, rich in archaeological and cultural heritage. As such, spearheaded by the Royal Commission for Al Ula (RCU), the region is undergoing rapid transformation into a global cultural and eco-tourism hub. While significant investments have been made in infrastructure, conservation, and global partnerships, questions remain about the extent to which local communities are integrated into planning processes, empowered through tourism development, and resilient in the face of change.

This article seeks to explore these questions by focusing on the role community resilience might play in shaping sustainable tourism in Al Ula. Drawing on global case studies and conceptual frameworks from the literature on tourism resilience, it investigates how local capacities, governance structures, and heritage assets can be mobilized to support inclusive and adaptive tourism development. In doing so, the study aims to contribute both to the wider discussion on sustainable tourism and community resilience, and more particularly to emerging research on the way these frameworks can inform tourism development strategies within the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

The article specifically addresses the following research questions:

1. How is community resilience conceptualized and operationalized within sustainable tourism frameworks?
2. What lessons can be drawn from international resilient tourism models that apply to the Al Ula context?

3. To what extent does current tourism development in Al Ula reflect the principles of community resilience?

2. Literature Review

The integration of community resilience within sustainable tourism planning has become a central concern for scholars examining long-term development in heritage-rich and environmentally vulnerable regions. In the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Al Ula stands out as a strategic tourism destination undergoing rapid transformation. The literature reviewed in this study provides a comprehensive foundation for evaluating the extent to which tourism development in Al Ula currently reflects or can support community resilience across social, economic, and environmental domains.

2.1 Resilience and Sustainability: Distinct but Interconnected Concepts

Recent research distinguishes between sustainability as a normative goal and resilience as a dynamic process. Sustainability is often associated with long-term stability and conservation, whereas resilience emphasizes adaptability, transformation, and the capacity to absorb shocks. This distinction is critical in the tourism sector, which can be particularly susceptible to various forms of disruption within the environmental, social, and economic realms. Holladay (2018) builds on the distinction by merging the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) with Holling's Adaptive Cycle to offer a more realistic model of the dynamics behind tourism that emphasizes phases of growth, collapse, and renewal, supporting the argument put forward by Espiner et al. (2017) that resilience should be seen as a prerequisite for sustainability, particularly in peripheral or high-risk destinations. Mihalič (2024),

through bibliometric and co-citation analysis, confirms the continued dominance of the sustainable tourism paradigm but warns of its fragmentation under the influence of rival and quasi-paradigms such as smart tourism and metaverse tourism. For Al Ula, these insights suggest that sustainability strategies must incorporate resilience in order to be adaptive and context-sensitive and thus remain effective over time.

2.2 Community Resilience and Resident Well-Being

Community resilience is commonly conceptualized as the capacity of a community to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and adapt to disruptions while maintaining its core functions and identity (Norris et al., 2008). Cutter et al. (2008) further emphasize that resilience involves both absorptive capacities and adaptive learning processes that enable long-term transformation. In tourism contexts, resilience entails not only withstanding external shocks but also navigating endogenous challenges such as cultural change, governance deficits, and socio-economic inequalities. Several studies underscore that community resilience is a fundamental determinant of sustainable tourism outcomes. Manner-Baldeon et al. (2024), in their study of San Cristóbal Island, demonstrate that communities with high levels of economic diversity, social trust, and environmental awareness report significantly higher resident satisfaction. In Al Ula, where local communities are experiencing rapid change due to external tourism investment, such findings stress the need to enhance local capacities to ensure opportunities across all social and age strata and active engagement with processes of change and with issues such as environmental stewardship.

Lin, et al. (2018) provide a complementary case from post-disaster Japan, illustrating how community-led educational tourism facilitated social cohesion, knowledge transmission, and ecological regeneration. Although Al Ula is not a post-disaster setting, the model of “bouncing forward” through community empowerment and educational tourism is transferable. Similarly, Ragmoun (2022) shows that internal organizational capacities are key to resilience and sustainable tourism in the Saudi context. Her research highlights the importance of investing in human capital, institutional agility, and adaptive leadership—principles highly relevant for Al Ula’s tourism institutions.

2.3 Heritage and Cultural Tourism as a Resilience Asset

Al Ula’s rich archaeological and cultural assets place it in a particular beneficial position regarding frameworks that conceptualize heritage as a source of resilience. Fabbricatti, et al. (2020) propose the model of Heritage Community Resilience (HCR), where cultural practices, civic rituals, and place-based festivals become tools for social learning, innovation, and governance. Their work in Alta Irpinia, Italy, illustrates how community engagement with cultural heritage fosters both emotional connection and adaptive capacity.

Pavlova (2024), in her discussion of the RESILIAGE project, emphasizes the value of “active memory,” where cultural traditions and shared narratives are used to educate and prepare communities for future risks. In the Al Ula context, traditional ecological knowledge, oral histories, and local identities could be integrated into tourism offerings not merely for commodification but as mechanisms for long-term resilience and identity preservation.

The comparative study of Athens and Rome by Ahachmi et al. (2024) demonstrates how cultural tourism, when embedded in resilient urban planning frameworks, contributes to economic diversification, environmental restoration, and inclusive governance. Al Ula could adopt similar practices by aligning heritage-led tourism with ecological corridors, cultural access for marginalized groups, and decentralized planning mechanisms.

2.4 Governance, Community Agency, and Institutional Resilience

Governance structures play a pivotal role in shaping resilience outcomes. Adger (2000) conceptualizes resilience not only as an ecological or social notion but as a political one—deeply tied to equity, representation, and justice. He emphasizes the need for decentralized governance and recognition of local knowledge systems. These themes are echoed by Martínez Rodríguez and Nieto Moreno (2023), who found that in Acapulco, despite the presence of resilience-focused policy frameworks, the lack of strategic coordination and community involvement hindered implementation. Timothy (2007) argues that empowering local communities and ensuring meaningful stakeholder participation are essential components of sustainable tourism governance, as affirmed by Nunkoo and So (2015) who likewise maintain that residents' support for tourism is strongly influenced by perceived fairness in governance, trust in local institutions, and opportunities for participation in decision-making. A comparable situation was observed in Al Ula, where tourism-led development has advanced rapidly, but meaningful community participation in governance processes remains limited (Alrashidi, 2024). For Al Ula, this highlights the importance of embedding participatory planning, feedback mechanisms,

and transparent governance into the tourism strategy spearheaded by the RCU.

Janusz et al., (2017) offer methodological insight through their use of photo-elicitation interviews in Bruges, which revealed the emotional and spatial effects of tourism on residents. Their work illustrates how resident perceptions, often overlooked in formal planning, are crucial to understanding tourism's social impacts. Applying such tools in Al Ula could yield valuable insights into how local people experience and interpret the rapid transformation of their cultural landscape.

2.5 Environmental Vulnerability and Spatial Risk Management

Environmental vulnerability is particularly salient in Al Ula's desert ecosystem. The study by Buchari et al. (2024) on Bandung Regency, Indonesian demonstrates how spatial planning, environmental classification, and multi-stakeholder collaboration can guide tourism development away from high-risk zones. This method is directly applicable to Al Ula, where fragile ecosystems, water scarcity, and conservation priorities must be integrated into tourism zoning and investment decisions.

Chowdhury et al. (2023) provide further strategic insight through their use of fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), which identifies combinations of resilience strategies most effective in sustaining tourism supply chains during crises. Their findings stress the importance of synergistic approaches—combining business model adaptation, hygiene standards, digital infrastructure, and coordination with public authorities. For Al Ula, this implies that resilience cannot be achieved through isolated interventions but requires a coherent portfolio of policies and practices that operate across multiple domains.

2.6 Tourism Resilience and Sustainability in Saudi Arabia

Recent research in the Saudi context further highlights the complex relationship between tourism growth, economic development, and environmental sustainability in Saudi Arabia (Alqahtani, 2025), emphasizing too the need for locally grounded resilience strategies to navigate the sector's rapid transformation under Vision 2030 (Ragmoun, 2022). Other local studies underscore the importance of community participation and cultural sustainability in shaping resilient tourism pathways. For example, Al Gassim (2021) documents how heritage villages in Saudi Arabia have engaged residents in sustainable tourism initiatives. Similarly, Hassan et al. (2020) highlight the role of social responsibility in fostering community resilience within the Saudi tourism and hospitality sector. These insights align with calls to preserve cultural identity while promoting sustainable tourism across Saudi destinations (Sampieri & Bagader, 2024) and to enhance public understanding of sustainability principles within local communities (Yousif & Zatar, 2025).

2.7 Conclusion

The literature reviewed reveals a growing consensus on the necessity of integrating community resilience into sustainable tourism development, especially in heritage-rich, environmentally vulnerable areas. Across diverse contexts, resilience is framed as a dynamic, multifaceted process that enables communities to adapt to and shape the changes brought by tourism.

In light of the literature discussed, this study thus employs the following definition of community resilience to frame the empirical investigation: community resilience is the capacity of the local community to adapt to tourism-related changes, maintain social cohesion, preserve cultural

identity, and foster inclusive governance, while enhancing its ability to absorb economic, social, and environmental pressures (Norris et al., 2008; Cutter et al., 2008; Pavlova, 2024). This multidimensional concept encompasses economic adaptability, social networks and trust, participatory governance, and cultural continuity.

However, the literature review also indicates that many resilience frameworks remain conceptual and underutilized in actual planning processes, and while the existing scholarship offers a rich foundation for understanding resilience within tourism, there is limited empirical research exploring how local communities in these contexts actually perceive tourism-led development and participate in shaping its outcomes. Notable, there a very few studies that apply resilience frameworks to the case of heritage destinations in the Middle East, despite their growing global significance as tourist sites.

Therefore, by empirically examining Al Ula as a case where cultural heritage, tourism development and community dynamics intersect, and in integrating mixed-methods data with global resilience models, this study contributes to both academic literature and practical policy by illuminating how community resilience can be understood, measured, enhanced, and applied in rapidly transforming heritage destinations. In so doing, this study aims to offer insights that are both contextually specific and theoretically informed.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative empirical approach, supported by qualitative insights drawn from open-ended survey questions, to examine the role of community resilience in shaping sustainable tourism development in Al Ula, Saudi Arabia. This approach aligns with

Creswell's (2014) view that integrating both structured and open-ended data can enrich understanding of participant perspectives and trends within a specific context.

3.1 Research Design

The research employs a mixed-method survey-based design, in which quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire incorporating Likert-scale items, complemented by open-ended questions to capture residents' personal views and experiences. This approach allows both statistical analysis of general trends and thematic exploration of key issues raised by participants. It reflects Bryman's (2016) argument that combining quantitative and qualitative elements enhances the validity and depth of social research. Theoretical frameworks from the tourism and resilience literature (Espiner et al., 2017; Fabbri et al., 2020; Pavlova, 2024) provided conceptual guidance for the design of the questionnaire and interpretation of results.

3.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through a structured survey administered to residents of Al- Ula between April 1, 2025–June 1, 2025.

Sampling Approach: A **purposive sampling strategy** was used to target adult residents with diverse demographic backgrounds, including age, gender, occupation, and level of tourism engagement. To enhance reach, **snowball sampling** was also employed, with participants encouraged to share the survey link through social and community networks. Surveys were distributed **online** using Google Forms.

The final sample consisted of **198 valid responses**, providing a broad cross-section of the local population. Participants were required to be over 18 years old and to have lived in Al Ula for at least one year. While not fully random, the sampling approach ensured a meaningful range of perspectives and enabled the inclusion of marginalized voices often underrepresented in formal planning processes.

Survey Instrument Design: The survey was based on validated tools from the tourism and resilience literature. Key items were adapted from existing resilience indicators (Fabbricatti et al., 2020; Pavlova, 2024), tourism impact perception scales (Mihalič, 2024; Manner-Baldeon et al., 2024), and governance participation measures (Nunkoo & So, 2015; Timothy, 2007). The questionnaire design was also shaped by previous research conducted by the author (Alrashidi, 2024), which examined residents' perceptions of tourism's impact on the quality of urban life in Al Ula. The findings of that study highlighted the need to explore these issues more deeply through a resilience-focused lens, with particular attention to community adaptability, governance, and cultural sustainability in the context of rapid tourism development. The questionnaire included the following:

- 15 Likert-scale items (5-point scale) covering economic, social, cultural, aspects as well as governance-related aspects and adaptability.
- 7 demographic items (e.g., sex, age, gender, occupation etc.)
- 3 open-ended questions focused on community change, perceived challenges, and suggestions for improving tourism governance and resilience.

In this study, community resilience was operationalized through survey items capturing key dimensions identified in the literature: adaptability to tourism-driven change (e.g., “Our community adapts well to changes brought by tourism”), social cohesion and mutual support (e.g., “The community in Al Ula supports each other in difficult times”), trust in local governance (e.g., “I trust that local institutions in Al Ula work in the community’s best interest”), and cultural pride and continuity (e.g., “I feel proud when presenting our culture to tourists”). The instrument was reviewed by two academic experts in tourism and community development to ensure face validity and was pilot-tested with 10 local residents. Minor revisions were made based on feedback regarding clarity and cultural relevance.

3.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative survey data were analysed using **descriptive and inferential statistical techniques**. Data were first cleaned and screened for completeness in **SPSS**. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were calculated to summarize residents’ perceptions of tourism’s economic, social, cultural, and governance impacts.

To explore relationships among key variables related to community resilience, **Pearson’s correlation analysis** was conducted. This approach allowed for the identification of significant associations between variables such as participatory governance, cultural pride, and perceptions of social cohesion—dimensions already recognized as fundamental to community resilience (Adger, 2000; Pavlova, 2024).

The open-ended qualitative responses were analysed using an **inductive thematic analysis** approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Responses were first read in full to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture recurring patterns and significant themes related to perceived economic impacts, cultural identity, governance concerns, and community resilience strategies. These codes were iteratively refined into broader thematic categories. While the qualitative component was designed to complement rather than undergird the study, it provided important perspective and local nuance to the quantitative findings.

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results enhanced the **validity** and **credibility** of the findings (Creswell, 2014), helping to surface both broad patterns and individual voices within the Al Ula community.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. The research underwent ethical review by the relevant institution.

4. Case Context: AL Ula, Saudi Arabia

AL Ula, located in the northwestern region of Saudi Arabia within the Medina Province, is a city of significant historical and cultural importance. Covering an area of approximately 22,561km², it encompasses natural desert landscapes with a lush oasis valley, sandstone mountains, and ancient cultural heritage sites dating back thousands of years (RCU, 2024). The area is internationally recognized for its archaeological significance, including the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hegra (Mada'in Salih), as well as for its long-standing tribal communities (UNESCO, 2024). In recent years, Al Ula has undergone substantial transformation driven by state-led initiatives

aiming to position it as a global destination for heritage, nature, and luxury tourism.

The RCU, established in 2017, is the central body responsible for the strategic planning and development of the region, with emphasis on conservation, cultural revitalization, economic diversification, and sustainability. The AL Ula Sustainability Charter, for example, promotes green building, waste reduction, and ecological conservation, and the Journey Through Time Masterplan outlines a 15-year vision for turning AL Ula into a living museum integrating heritage, art, and landscape (RCU, 2024).

Despite these forward-looking plans, several concerns have been raised around the social dimension of development—particularly regarding the degree of community participation, preservation of local identity, and distribution of tourism benefits. Like the cases of Acapulco (Martínez Rodríguez & Nieto Moreno, 2023) and the Galápagos Islands (Manner-Baldeen et al., 2024) referenced in the literature review, Al Ula potentially illustrates a tension between top-down tourism strategies and the need for grassroots resilience. Recent research in Al Ula indicates that while tourism has enhanced infrastructure and created job opportunities, many residents have also reported concerns about rising costs of living, limited involvement in tourism decision-making, and threats to cultural authenticity (Alrashidi, 2024). While infrastructure and international visibility have improved, the mechanisms for empowering local communities—through skills development, governance participation, and cultural ownership—remain less documented.

Al Ula is also an ecologically sensitive destination. The region's desert ecosystem is highly susceptible to water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and

degradation from overuse, especially as tourism volumes increase. As shown in the Bandung and Lembang Fault studies (Buchari et al., 2024; 2023), in facing environmental vulnerabilities, spatial risk mapping and ecologically informed planning are critical to avoid long-term environmental damage. AL Ula's efforts in ecosystem restoration and protected area designations are promising but must be aligned with resilience-based frameworks that include local environmental knowledge and adaptive land-use management.

Culturally, as already noted in the literature review, Al Ula's transformation offers opportunities to apply heritage-led resilience models such as Heritage Community Resilience (HCR) (Fabbri et al., 2020) and the RESILIAGE framework (Pavlova, 2024), which advocate for engaging communities in the co-creation of heritage narratives and tourism experiences. Integrating such models could help mitigate the risks of cultural commodification and instead encourage resilience through maintaining cultural continuity alongside embracing innovation.



Figure 1: Geographical overview of AL Ula, highlighting its location within Saudi Arabia (Thesublimeblog, 2022).

In summary, AL Ula embodies many of the opportunities and challenges discussed in the resilience-tourism literature. As a location relatively recently embarking on the journey of intentional development as a heritage and nature destination within an ecologically fragile environment and complex community dynamics, Al Ula is a compelling case for examining how sustainable tourism can be grounded in principles of community resilience.

5. Findings

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the findings of this study reflect a balance of optimism and concern on the part of residents regarding the impacts of tourism and the resilience of their community. Quantitative results indicate that economic benefits are widely recognized. The majority of respondents agreed that tourism has improved employment opportunities ($M = 4.45$, 89.4% positive responses) and brought broader economic benefits to the

region ($M = 4.28$). However, there is also a strong perception that the cost of living has increased significantly ($M = 3.96$, 76.8% positive responses), particularly affecting housing and essential goods.

Perceptions of community resilience are more nuanced. While a majority of respondents agreed that the community adapts well to changes brought by tourism ($M = 3.74$), views on sustained social cohesion were more neutral ($M = 3.40$). Trust in local institutions and perceptions of participatory governance were also mixed, with moderate agreement that decision-makers involve residents in tourism-related decisions ($M = 3.41$). Cultural pride remains a strong and positive dimension, with residents expressing pride in presenting their culture to tourists ($M = 4.38$). Correlation analysis highlighted important relationships. Participatory governance was strongly associated with cultural engagement ($r = 0.89$), while employment improvements were linked with community support ($r = 0.57$) and cultural pride ($r = 0.56$). These findings suggest that both governance quality and economic inclusion are important for fostering community resilience. Qualitative insights enriched the quantitative findings by highlighting residents' voices. Participants expressed both appreciation for economic opportunities and concerns about rising living costs, views elaborated in more detail below. Many called for greater local participation in governance and decision-making and stressed the importance of preserving cultural identity amidst change. These qualitative themes reinforce the need for inclusive and participatory approaches to sustainable tourism development in Al Ula.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Questionnaire Items

Item	Mean	Std Dev	% Positive	% Negative	Valid N
Tourism has brought economic benefits to Al Ula	3.48	1.27	62.1	24.7	198
Tourism has improved employment opportunities in Al Ula	4.45	0.86	89.4	3.0	198
Tourism has increased the cost of living in Al Ula	3.96	1.11	76.8	10.1	198
I feel positive about Al Ula becoming a major tourist destination	3.74	0.98	62.6	9.6	198
I have been directly affected (positively or negatively) by tourism	3.4	1.0	56.1	17.7	198
Our community adapts well to changes brought by tourism	3.6	1.06	64.1	16.2	198
Social cohesion in Al Ula remains strong despite changes caused by tourism development	2.84	1.23	37.9	42.9	198
There are enough training or development programmes for locals	3.41	1.1	55.1	20.7	198
The community in Al Ula supports each other in difficult times	3.05	1.12	36.4	27.3	198
I trust that local institutions in Al Ula work in the community's best interest	3.66	1.05	65.7	12.6	198
Local heritage and culture are taken into account in tourism project planning	2.39	1.27	23.7	55.6	198
Residents' opinions are considered when making tourism-related decisions	2.46	1.24	22.7	51.5	198
Decision-makers in Al Ula involve residents in the process of making tourism-	4.3	0.86	88.4	3.5	198

related decisions					
I feel proud when					
presenting our culture to	3.33	1.09	45.5	18.7	198
tourists					

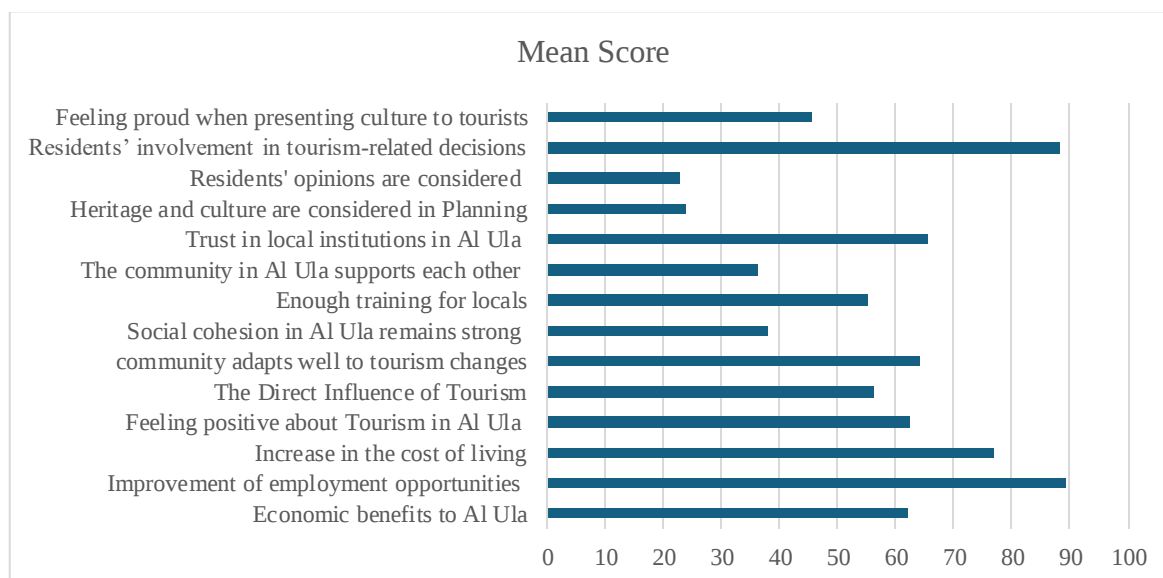


Figure 1: Mean Score of the Questionnaire Items

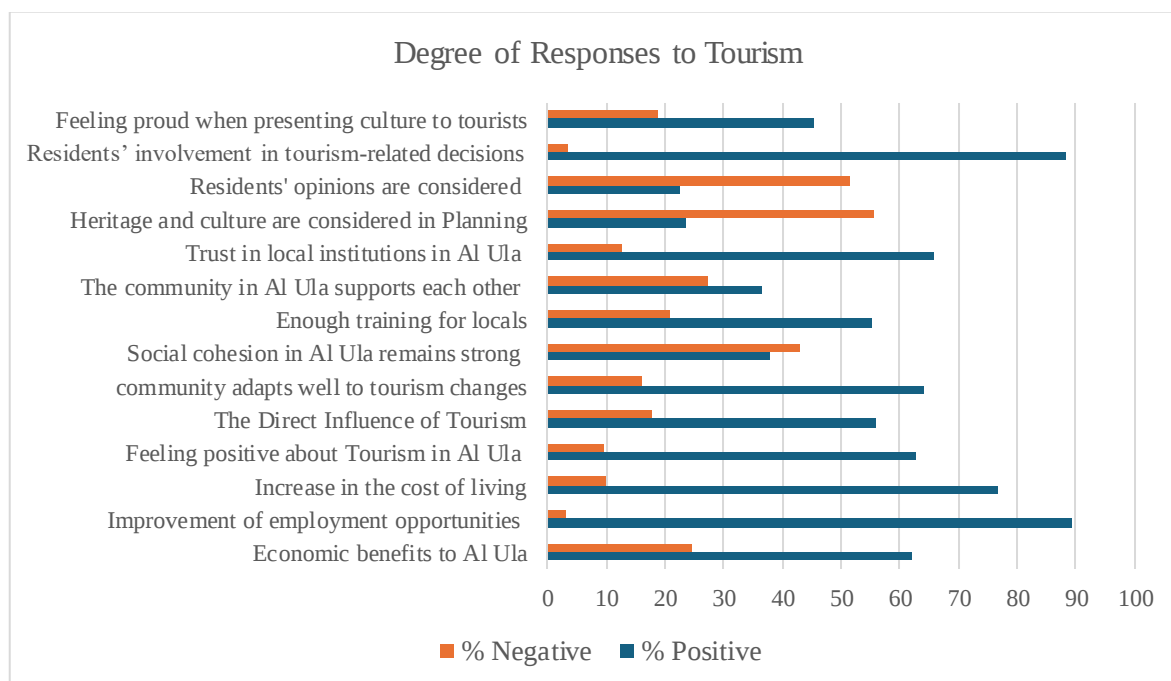


Figure 2: Percentage of Positive and Negative Responses to Tourism

The results highlight important dynamics in how residents of Al Ula experience and respond to tourism-driven change. It is also worth noting that the apparent divergence between the high positive ratings for 'decision-makers involve residents' and the lower ratings for 'residents' opinions are considered' likely reflects a gap between the existence of formal participation mechanisms and residents' perceptions of their actual influence on decision-making—a dynamic commonly observed in tourism governance research (Martínez Rodríguez & Nieto Moreno, 2023; Bramwell & Lane, 2011). These findings are discussed further in the next section in relation to existing literature and implications for sustainable tourism development in Al Ula.

5.2 Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis revealed several significant relationships among the study variables. Notably, participatory governance was strongly associated with cultural engagement. The item 'Decision-makers in Al Ula involve residents in the process of making tourism-related decisions' was highly correlated with 'I feel proud when presenting our culture to tourists' ($r = 0.89$), and with 'Participation in tourism-related activities' ($r = 0.61$).

Employment opportunities were positively correlated with perceptions of community support ('The community in Al Ula supports each other in difficult times', $r = 0.57$) and cultural pride ($r = 0.56$), suggesting that economic benefits may reinforce social resilience. Additionally, trust in local institutions and perceptions of cultural inclusion in tourism planning were positively linked with social cohesion indicators, supporting the theoretical argument that governance quality contributes to community resilience.

Table 2: Top Significant Correlations between Questionnaire Items

Variable 1	Variable 2	Correlation (r)
Decision-makers involve residents	I feel proud when presenting our culture	0.89 → exceptionally strong
Residents' opinions considered	Participation in tourism-related activities	0.61 → strong
Tourism has improved employment	Community supports each other in difficult times	0.57
Community supports each other in difficult times	I feel proud when presenting our culture	0.56
Tourism has improved employment	I feel proud when presenting our culture	0.56

5.3. Qualitative Insights

To complement the quantitative findings, responses to the open-ended questions provided additional depth and nuance to residents' perceptions of tourism development and community resilience in Al Ula. A light thematic analysis of the responses identified four key themes: perceived economic benefits, concerns about rising costs of living, fears of cultural change and marginalization, and calls for strengthening community resilience. Selected quotations from residents are included to illustrate these perspectives:

Perceived Economic Benefits and Opportunities

Many respondents expressed appreciation for the economic opportunities generated by tourism, particularly in terms of employment and business activity. One participant noted, "*Tourism has provided job opportunities and boosted the local economy.*" Another added, "*It opened new doors for us as locals to be part of something bigger.*" These views align with the positive quantitative ratings regarding economic benefits and employment.

Concerns about Rising Costs of Living

At the same time, several residents voiced concerns about the negative side effects of tourism-driven growth, particularly the rising cost of living. One respondent observed, *"The prices of housing, food, and services have increased significantly."* Another commented, *"Many families are struggling to keep up with the cost of basic needs."* This theme reinforces the quantitative finding that a large proportion of respondents perceived increases in the cost of living.

Fears of Cultural Change and Marginalization

A number of participants expressed apprehension about the potential loss of cultural identity and limited involvement of local residents in tourism governance. One resident stated, *"Our culture should not be reduced to entertainment for tourists,"* while another remarked that *"decisions are made without truly involving us. Locals feel sidelined."* These concerns mirror the mixed quantitative ratings regarding governance and participation.

Calls for Strengthening Community Resilience

Finally, many residents highlighted the importance of building resilience by enhancing local capacities and ensuring fair opportunities. Suggestions included offering more training programmes, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering meaningful community participation. One participant urged, *"We need to be empowered and trained to take an active role in tourism, not just watch it happen."* Another wrote, *"Protecting our traditions while adapting to change is vital for the future."*

What emerged most strongly from the qualitative data that was not so apparent from the quantitative results was the sense of tourism

happening to residents rather than them being able to actively either encourage or discourage this. Comments such as culture becoming tourist entertainment or “watching it happen” convey this, as does to some extent the expressed struggle to “keep up” economically. The qualitative insights reflect the complexity of community resilience amidst the evolving development of tourism, where recognised economic benefits are matched by levels of concern over being “sidelined” as local residents. The qualitative results particularly underscore a strong community desire for greater agency and more inclusive approaches that protect local identity while enabling adaptation to change. These issues are explored further in the following discussion, in relation to broader literature on sustainable tourism and resilience.

5.4. Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study align with and extend insights from both the global literature on sustainable tourism and resilience, and the emerging body of research within the Saudi Arabian context. At the global level, the strong perceived economic benefits of tourism in Al Ula are consistent with patterns observed in other rapidly transforming destinations. Similar positive perceptions of employment and income opportunities were reported in Acapulco (Martínez Rodríguez & Nieto Moreno, 2023) and the Galápagos Islands (Manner-Baldeon et al., 2024), where tourism acts as a key driver of local livelihoods. These findings reinforce the argument that economic inclusion is a foundational dimension of community resilience (Norris et al., 2008; Fabbricatti et al., 2020).

At the same time, this study highlights that economic gains are accompanied by important social tensions—particularly regarding rising

living costs, a finding strongly reflected in prior research on Al Ula by Alosaimi (2022) and consistent with broader observations of social inequities in tourism development globally (Pavlova, 2024). Such dynamics underscore the need to balance economic growth with principles of social equity and community well-being (Adger, 2000).

The mixed perceptions of governance and community participation observed in this study also resonate with global findings. Research in both Mexican (Martínez Rodríguez & Nieto Moreno, 2023) and European contexts (Pavlova, 2024; Mihalič, 2024) shows that limited community involvement undermines institutional trust and weakens resilience. The present findings reinforce this view: although some residents expressed satisfaction with aspects of governance, quantitative and qualitative data indicate an overall perceived lack of meaningful inclusion in tourism-related decision-making. This supports arguments that participatory governance is essential to building adaptive capacity and collective agency (Timothy, 2007; Nunkoo & So, 2015).

Importantly, the study also connects with recent research on sustainable tourism and resilience within Saudi Arabia. Studies such as Al Gassim (2021) and Hassan et al. (2020) have emphasized the importance of community participation and social responsibility in fostering more resilient and inclusive tourism outcomes in Saudi heritage and hospitality sectors. Similarly, Ragmoun (2022) underscored the role of institutional agility, adaptive leadership, and capacity-building—principles strongly echoed in this study's qualitative findings regarding the need for empowerment and skills development in Al Ula. Furthermore, Sampieri and Bagader (2024) and Yousif and Zatar (2025) have stressed the importance of cultural sustainability and public awareness of sustainability principles in Saudi tourism strategies. These insights

resonate with the present study's findings that cultural pride and governance participation are critical resilience assets in Al Ula.

Finally, the persistence of strong cultural pride among Al Ula residents—despite concerns about cultural commodification—reflects the complex role of cultural identity as both a resilience asset and a site of contestation (Pavlova, 2024; Fabbri et al., 2020). The observed correlations between cultural pride, governance participation, and community support further underscore that cultural identity is not merely a static heritage to be preserved, but an active, dynamic force that can strengthen resilience when local communities are empowered to shape their own cultural narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These findings also complement recent work in Al Ula (Alrashidi, 2024), which highlights the centrality of cultural authenticity and local agency in sustainable tourism development.

Overall, this study contributes to both global and Saudi scholarship by empirically demonstrating how the interplay of governance, economic inclusion, and cultural identity influences community resilience in a rapidly evolving heritage-based tourism context. In doing so, it offers practical insights for advancing the goals of Vision 2030, while also addressing the broader theoretical need for more empirical applications of resilience frameworks in Middle Eastern tourism research.

5.5. Implications for Practice

The findings of this study offer several important implications for tourism planners, policymakers, and community leaders seeking to foster more resilient and sustainable tourism development in Al Ula. As the destination continues to evolve into a major international tourism hub under Vision 2030, ensuring that tourism growth aligns with principles of

community resilience and cultural sustainability will be critical to achieving long-term success.

First, while the strong positive perceptions of economic benefits and employment opportunities indicate that current tourism strategies have generated tangible value for residents, this success must be balanced with careful management of tourism's broader socio-economic impacts. In particular, the rising cost of living—especially in housing and essential services—emerged as a clear concern. Without proactive measures to promote affordability and social equity, tourism growth risks exacerbating vulnerabilities among less advantaged community members. Planners should consider mechanisms such as affordable housing initiatives, price monitoring systems, and targeted support for vulnerable groups to mitigate these risks.

Second, the study highlights the central role of governance quality and community participation in shaping resilience outcomes. The strong correlations observed between participatory governance and cultural pride suggest that empowering residents to actively contribute to tourism planning fosters a more resilient and cohesive community. The Royal Commission for Al Ula (RCU) and other planning bodies should prioritize enhancing participatory mechanisms—such as transparent public consultations, regular feedback channels, and community representation in governance structures—to strengthen trust and adaptive capacity. In this, it is essential that participation is not only procedural but also perceived by residents as giving real agency addressing the current gap between formal engagement opportunities and residents' perceptions of their influence on tourism decision-making.

Third, the resilience of Al Ula's cultural identity emerged as a clear asset for sustainable tourism. Residents expressed strong pride in their cultural heritage and a desire to see it protected and authentically represented. Efforts to involve local communities in the co-creation of cultural programmes, interpretation, and visitor engagement should be expanded. This aligns with global best practices in heritage tourism and with Vision 2030's emphasis on preserving Saudi cultural identity.

Finally, the community's own voices, as captured through the qualitative data, call for enhanced capacity building and empowerment. Providing targeted training in tourism-related skills and small business development can further enhance community resilience and ensure that tourism benefits are broadly shared. Partnerships between the RCU, local educational institutions, and private sector actors could help deliver such programmes at scale.

In sum, embedding resilience principles—social equity, participatory governance, cultural sustainability, and capacity building—into Al Ula's tourism strategy offers a clear pathway for achieving both local well-being and international competitiveness. The lessons from this case also hold relevance for other heritage-based tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

5.6. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

As with all research, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, which in turn suggest avenues for future research. First, in terms of limitations, it is important to note that the findings are based on self-reported perceptions collected through a structured questionnaire and open-ended survey questions. While this approach provides valuable insights into residents' views, it also reflects the inherent

subjectivity of such data. Additionally, while the sample size was sufficient for the purposes of this study, it may not fully represent all demographic segments of the Al Ula community. Future research should aim to ensure representation across different groups, including younger and older residents, different tribal and social backgrounds, and varying levels of economic engagement with tourism.

Second, the study's quantitative focus was complemented by a light thematic analysis of qualitative responses, rather than a full qualitative research design. While the qualitative insights enriched the findings, future studies could conduct more in-depth qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups, to explore residents' experiences of tourism governance, cultural change, and resilience strategies in greater detail. This would provide richer contextual insights and further amplify community voices.

The third point to note is that the data were collected at a single point in time. As tourism development in Al Ula is evolving rapidly, perceptions and community dynamics are likely to change. A longitudinal approach would be valuable to track how community resilience develops, and perceptions continue to evolve in response to ongoing changes. Such an approach could help capture dynamic changes in community adaptation, participation, and well-being over a more significant period of time.

Lastly, while this study focused on descriptive analysis and correlations, future research could explore more advanced quantitative modeling (such as factor analysis or structural equation modeling) to further refine the understanding of community resilience dimensions and their relationships with tourism impacts. Finally, comparative studies examining other tourism destinations in Saudi Arabia or similar heritage-

rich contexts globally could provide useful benchmarks and help identify transferable lessons for sustainable and community-centered tourism development.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to advancing the understanding of how community resilience and sustainable tourism development interact in the unique and rapidly evolving context of Al Ula, Saudi Arabia. By employing a mixed-methods approach grounded in both global resilience frameworks and local perceptions, the research highlights how governance quality, economic inclusion, and cultural identity operate as interrelated pillars of community resilience in heritage tourism settings.

The findings demonstrate that while residents largely recognize the economic benefits of tourism—particularly in terms of employment and local opportunity—significant concerns persist regarding rising living costs, limited transparency in governance, and threats to cultural authenticity. Notably, the strong correlation observed between participatory governance and cultural pride underscores the importance of inclusive decision-making in building social cohesion and adaptive capacity.

The voices of the community, reflected in both the statistical trends and qualitative narratives, emphasize the urgent need for tourism strategies that empower local residents, foster cultural continuity, and ensure that the social and economic gains of development are equitably distributed. In particular, ensuring that community participation is both meaningful and perceived as such by residents will be critical for strengthening trust and enhancing the legitimacy of tourism governance.

In sum, sustained attention to local agency, cultural stewardship, and governance innovation will be critical for ensuring that Al Ula's tourism development enhances—not erodes—community resilience and that in line with the aspirations of Vision 2030, Al Ula can offer not only a model of economic diversification, but also an exemplar of how resilience-based approaches can foster more inclusive and sustainable pathways in heritage tourism more widely.

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