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Sport Tourism as a Future-Oriented Public Health Strategy: Developing a Sustainable Development Model for Qeshm Island

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ABSTRACT

This study developed a sustainable development model for sport tourism in Qeshm Island by framing sport tourism as a future-oriented public health strategy that can generate economic benefits while supporting active lifestyles and environmental stewardship. A sequential exploratory mixed-methods design was employed. In the qualitative phase, 23 semi-structured interviews with experts in sport management, tourism, business, and environmental management were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in 50 indicators organized into 10 components and five dimensions: natural and environmental resources, infrastructure and services, economic factors, socio-cultural factors, and management and governance. In the quantitative phase, 560 stakeholders of sport tourism development in Qeshm were surveyed using a researcher-made questionnaire with confirmed validity and reliability. Descriptive findings showed that, except for natural and environmental resources (M = 3.10), other dimensions were below the desired midpoint: infrastructure and services (M = 2.15), economic factors (M = 2.05), socio-cultural factors (M = 2.43), and management and governance (M = 1.78). Structural equation modeling indicated that all five dimensions significantly and positively predicted sustainable sport tourism development, with the strongest effects for management and governance (β = 0.35) and infrastructure and services (β = 0.30). Model fit indices supported acceptable fit. The model provides an operational roadmap for policy and planning to convert Qeshm's natural potential into sustainable, health-supportive sport tourism outcomes.

Keywords: sport tourism; sustainable development; governance; infrastructure; strategy.

Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most dynamic and fast-growing sectors of the global economy, with a distinctive capacity to generate income, create employment, and stimulate investment in transport, hospitality, and public infrastructure. Contemporary evidence in tourism economics continues to show that tourism can contribute to economic growth through multiple channels—visitor spending, foreign-exchange earnings, job creation, productivity effects, and induced infrastructure investment—although the magnitude and direction of impacts can vary across contexts and policy regimes (Li et al., 2018; Shahzad et al., 2017). Alongside these economic opportunities, destinations increasingly face the governance dilemma of "growth versus stewardship": benefits may be unevenly distributed, local cultures may be

commodified, and natural assets can be degraded when tourism expansion proceeds without accountable planning and ecological safeguards (Buckley, 2012; Butler, 1999).

Within this broad industry, sport tourism has emerged as a specialized and increasingly popular form of travel that combines participation in, or spectating of, physical activities with leisure. Foundational work characterizes sport tourism as encompassing at least three overlapping domains: active sport tourism (travel to participate), event sport tourism (travel to watch), and nostalgia-related sport tourism (travel motivated by sport heritage and places) (Gibson, 1998). Subsequent syntheses emphasize that sport tourism is not a single product but a portfolio of markets, motivations, and settings that range from small-scale community events to mega-events and from low-impact nature-based activity to capital-intensive facility-based sport (Weed, 2009). This diversity makes sport tourism attractive for destination development, but it also means that policy design must be sensitive to local carrying capacity, institutional capability, and the distribution of benefits and burdens among stakeholder groups.

From a development perspective, sport tourism is often promoted because it can attract visitors with relatively high willingness to pay and generate "flow-on" demand across accommodation, food services, transport, retail, and local experiences. Empirical studies of sport event and active recreation tourism show that spending patterns are shaped by origin, trip characteristics, event attributes, and the mix of activities available at the destination (Downward et al., 2009; Salgado-Barandela et al., 2018). At the destination level, research also indicates that integrating sustainability practices into sport-tourism offerings—across economic, socio-cultural, environmental, policy, and technological dimensions—can strengthen long-term competitiveness rather than merely short-run volume growth (Carneiro et al., 2016). Yet these potential gains are not automatic: sport tourism can intensify land-use conflicts, seasonal congestion, and infrastructure burdens, especially where development is framed narrowly as event hosting rather than as a managed value chain that benefits residents and protects ecological capital.

A sustainable development lens is therefore central to contemporary tourism and sport-tourism policy. The triple-bottom-line view—economic viability, socio-cultural wellbeing, and environmental integrity—has been widely used to translate sustainable development into operational priorities for destination organizations and public agencies (Stoddard et al., 2012). Conceptual and critical reviews warn that sustainability in tourism is frequently asserted more than achieved; progress tends to depend on regulatory capacity, credible monitoring, and governance arrangements that can reconcile competing interests over space, investment, and resource use (Bramwell, 2011; Buckley, 2012). In practice, tourism development is inherently political: public agencies, private investors, sport organizations, municipalities, and community groups negotiate over infrastructure budgets, land and coastal access, and the narrative of what the destination "should become." Evidence on institutional collaboration shows that fragmentation across organizations can undermine coherence in tourism planning, whereas effective coordination can improve legitimacy, implementation, and benefit sharing (Adu-Ampong, 2017).

Environmental and resource dynamics further underscore why sustainability must be embedded from the start. Cross-national evidence links tourism development to broader energy and emissions pathways, suggesting that growth-oriented tourism strategies can create environmental trade-offs unless aligned with clean energy transitions and resource management (Khan et al., 2020). These concerns are amplified for island destinations, where ecological resilience can be limited and development pressures concentrate along coasts. Recent island-focused sustainability research highlights the need to assess tourism development through multidimensional lenses that include ecological resilience, accessibility, and accommodation capacity—dimensions that jointly shape both visitor experience and ecosystem-based management (Chi & Liu, 2023). For islands, ignoring capacity limits risks degrading the very natural and landscape assets that constitute the destination's comparative advantage.

Public health policy is likewise shifting toward "upstream" determinants of health—active mobility, access to safe recreation spaces, social participation, and community wellbeing. A large multi-city study demonstrates that built-environment features such as walkability, public-transport access, and park availability are associated with higher levels of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, implying that planning decisions can materially influence population health (Sallis et

al., 2016). Complementary evidence suggests that activity embedded in everyday movement—walking and cycling as "active travel"—can confer health benefits over time, even though effect sizes vary by context and study design (Saunders et al., 2013). These insights create a policy rationale for integrating health objectives into tourism planning: destinations can be designed not only for visitors, but also as everyday activity landscapes for residents.

Sport tourism can be interpreted as a future-oriented public health strategy when it is designed to normalize physical activity through attractive experiences, expand safe recreation infrastructure for residents as well as visitors, and strengthen social connectedness through events and shared activities. However, these benefits depend on social sustainability and governance. Research on tourists' perceptions indicates that attitudes toward tourism are shaped by the quality of host–guest relations and the affective bonds that develop through interaction (Joo et al., 2019). From the residents' side, empirical models integrating emotional solidarity and social exchange logic show that support for sport tourism development is influenced by perceived community contributions and the nature of resident–tourist relationships (Giango et al., 2022). Residents' multi-dimensional perceptions of sport tourism impacts—covering socio-cultural, environmental, and governance aspects—also shape the social legitimacy of future development (González-García et al., 2022). Moreover, measurement work on perceived social impacts of sport tourism events demonstrates that communities evaluate both benefits (e.g., pride, development, economic gains) and costs (e.g., congestion, security risks), reinforcing the need for balanced planning and transparent impact management (Kim et al., 2015). Destination communication is also part of governance: brand messages and place narratives can shape expectations and experiences, which in turn influence satisfaction, revisitation, and word-of-mouth—key mechanisms for sustainable demand rather than one-off visitation (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2020).

Qeshm Island provides a compelling context for integrating these perspectives. As a major island destination in the Persian Gulf, Qeshm combines distinctive coastal environments and geoheritage landscapes with culturally specific traditions and livelihoods. Geotourism scholarship has highlighted Qeshm as a setting where geopark-oriented development can support socio-cultural sustainability, local identity, and community participation when tourism products are designed around heritage protection and local benefit (Torabi Farsani et al., 2012). Empirical work on Qeshm's geotourism development further indicates that residents' attitudes and perceived benefits (notably employment) are central to the acceptability and durability of tourism strategies (Shahhoseini et al., 2017). Complementary destination assessment research has identified multiple ecotourism potentials and emphasized that converting these assets into sustainable outcomes requires planning that is attentive to both opportunities and constraints (Ranjbaran & Zamanzadeh, 2023). At the same time, broader evidence on geopark-based development suggests that geopark branding and community-oriented geotourism can stimulate local economic activity when aligned with participation and appropriate management (Lee & Jayakumar, 2021).

Despite these opportunities, a persistent gap remains in many destinations: sport tourism is promoted as a generic engine of growth without an explicit, context-specific model that integrates sustainability constraints, public health co-benefits, and governance realities. For Qeshm, the need is not merely to list attractions, but to (a) identify and prioritize sport-tourism potentials, (b) clarify the sustainable economic value chain and the institutional roles needed to deliver it, and (c) translate sustainability principles into operational indicators that can guide investment, regulation, and monitoring over time. Accordingly, this study positions sport tourism as a future-oriented public health strategy and develops a sustainable development model tailored to Qeshm Island. By grounding model development in destination assets and stakeholder realities, the research aims to provide a practical roadmap for policymakers, investors, and local communities—supporting sustainable livelihoods, protecting natural and cultural capital, strengthening institutional coordination, and leveraging sport and recreation as pathways to healthier, more resilient communities.

Methodology

This study was applied research in terms of purpose, aiming to identify destination potentials and develop a practical sustainable sport tourism development model for Qeshm Island. In terms of data type and logic of inquiry, the study adopted a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design, in which an initial qualitative phase was used to generate and articulate the model, followed by a quantitative phase to test and prioritize the extracted dimensions and examine their relationships with sustainable sport tourism development in Qeshm.

Phase 1: Qualitative study (model development)

The first phase employed a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon in depth and to uncover latent dimensions that are not adequately captured by existing frameworks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 23 experts and practitioners with relevant expertise in sport management, business/marketing management, tourism management, geography and tourism planning, urban planning, media/communications, environmental management, and tourism economics. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling to ensure information-rich cases, and recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved (i.e., no new concepts or categories emerged in subsequent interviews). Interviews were conducted with prior coordination regarding time and setting, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim.

A qualitative content analysis strategy was used to analyze interview data. Coding proceeded iteratively and concurrently with data collection to refine interview prompts and probe emerging themes in later interviews. The analytical procedure included open coding (labeling meaning units), axial coding (grouping codes into categories and specifying relationships), and selective coding (integrating categories into overarching themes and a coherent model). In axial coding, the study used a structured paradigm approach to organize categories in relation to causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Coding and category management were conducted in MAXQDA, complemented by manual review and iterative comparison against the transcripts to prevent omission of relevant meanings.

Trustworthiness was addressed through multiple strategies: (1) member checking (summarizing key points to participants and confirming interpretations), (2) peer review of codes and categories by research collaborators, (3) triangulation across different expert profiles and professional backgrounds, and (4) maintaining an audit trail documenting decisions in sampling, coding, and theme development. For qualitative coding reliability, a test–retest procedure was implemented by recoding selected interviews after a time interval and calculating agreement. In addition, an inter-coding agreement index was estimated using the Holsti approach to verify coding stability.

Phase 2: Quantitative study (model testing and prioritization)

In the second phase, a quantitative, descriptive–analytical approach was used to evaluate the proposed model. The target population comprised sport managers, sport tourists, and individuals knowledgeable about sustainable economic development in sport tourism. Sample size was determined using the Cochran formula, yielding a minimum required sample of 540 respondents. Because complete access to the population was impractical, participants were selected using proportionate stratified random sampling, ensuring representation across relevant subgroups.

A researcher-made questionnaire was developed directly from the qualitative findings. The instrument consisted of 50 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, organized into five main dimensions (natural/environmental resources, infrastructure and services, economic factors, socio-cultural factors, and governance/management) and ten subdimensions. Face validity was assessed through expert review and iterative item revision. Content validity was evaluated using CVR, and construct validity was examined via confirmatory factor analysis within a structural modeling framework. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha (pilot test with 30 respondents) and composite reliability. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, a Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for normality, one-sample t-tests to assess current status, and structural equation modeling

(SEM) using LISREL and/or SmartPLS to confirm the measurement and structural model and to estimate the relative contribution of model components.

Findings and Results

Qualitative findings (Phase 1: model development)

In Phase 1, 23 semi-structured interviews with domain experts (coded M1–M23) were analyzed using iterative qualitative coding (open → axial → selective) and thematic analysis. The qualitative output was a comprehensive model with 50 indicators, organized into 10 components and 5 main dimensions: Natural & environmental resources; Infrastructure & services; Economic factors; Socio-cultural factors; Management & governance (see table 1). This structure also served as the blueprint for the quantitative instrument.

Qualitatively, experts described Qeshm's development logic as a "conversion pathway": (i) natural and sport attractions create the initial pull, (ii) infrastructure and service chains convert that pull into sellable and safe sport-tourism products (accommodation, access, equipment, training), and (iii) sustainable economy and governance ensure long-term viability through local value capture, safety regulation, and environmental protection. This pathway clarifies that Qeshm's advantage is not only the existence of sport-appropriate natural settings, but the ability to operationalize them responsibly and consistently.

Table 1. Model (questionnaire) structure derived from qualitative phase (50 indicators)

Dimension	Components (2 per dimension)	Indicator range	No. indicators
Natural & environmental resources	Unique natural attractions	1–5	5
	Environmental sustainability	6–10	5
Infrastructure & services	Sport & recreation facilities	11–15	5
	Accommodation & transport services	16–20	5
Economic factors	Employment & sustainable income	21–25	5
	Pricing & financial models	26–30	5
Socio-cultural factors	Local community participation	31–35	5
	Safety & security	36–40	5
Management & governance	Policy & planning	41–45	5
	Marketing & tourist attraction	46–50	5

Quantitative findings (Phase 2: current status + SEM)

In Phase 2, 560 stakeholders of sport tourism development in Qeshm were surveyed using the researcher-made questionnaire developed from the qualitative model. Descriptive results revealed a clear imbalance across dimensions: Natural & environmental resources was closest to/above the midpoint, while the other dimensions were substantially below the desired level (see table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of core dimensions (n = 560)(Likert 1–5)

Dimension	Mean	SD
Natural & environmental resources	3.10	0.61
Infrastructure & services	2.15	0.78
Economic factors	2.05	0.76
Socio-cultural factors	2.43	0.80
Management & governance	1.78	0.69
Sustainable sport tourism development (overall)	2.30	0.72

A one-sample t-test (test value = 3) confirmed that the only strong-performing component was unique natural attractions (M = 4.25), whereas environmental sustainability was rated critically low (M = 1.95). All "implementation-facing" dimensions—including infrastructure, economic mechanisms, socio-cultural readiness, and especially governance were significantly below the desired midpoint (p = 0.000) (see table 3).

As shown in Figure 2, respondents rated Natural and Environmental Resources slightly above the theoretical midpoint (M = 3.10), indicating that Qeshm's strongest competitive advantage lies in its natural endowments and suitability for sport activities. In contrast, all "implementation" dimensions were evaluated below the desired level, including Infrastructure and

Services (M = 2.15), Economic Factors (M = 2.05), Socio-cultural Factors (M = 2.43), and particularly Management and Governance (M = 1.78). This pattern suggests that although Qeshm possesses substantial destination assets, the supporting ecosystem required to convert these assets into sustainable sport tourism products—such as standard facilities, reliable access and accommodation, investment mechanisms, local participation, safety systems, and coordinated governance—remains underdeveloped. The relatively low mean for the overall sustainable sport tourism development construct (M = 2.30) further confirms that, from the stakeholders' perspective, Qeshm is currently below the acceptable threshold for sustainable sport tourism performance. These descriptive results align with the one-sample t-test findings (Table 3), which show a significant strength in unique natural attractions (M = 4.25) but a critical weakness in environmental sustainability practices (M = 1.95), highlighting a risk that unmanaged growth could undermine the destination's core natural capital.

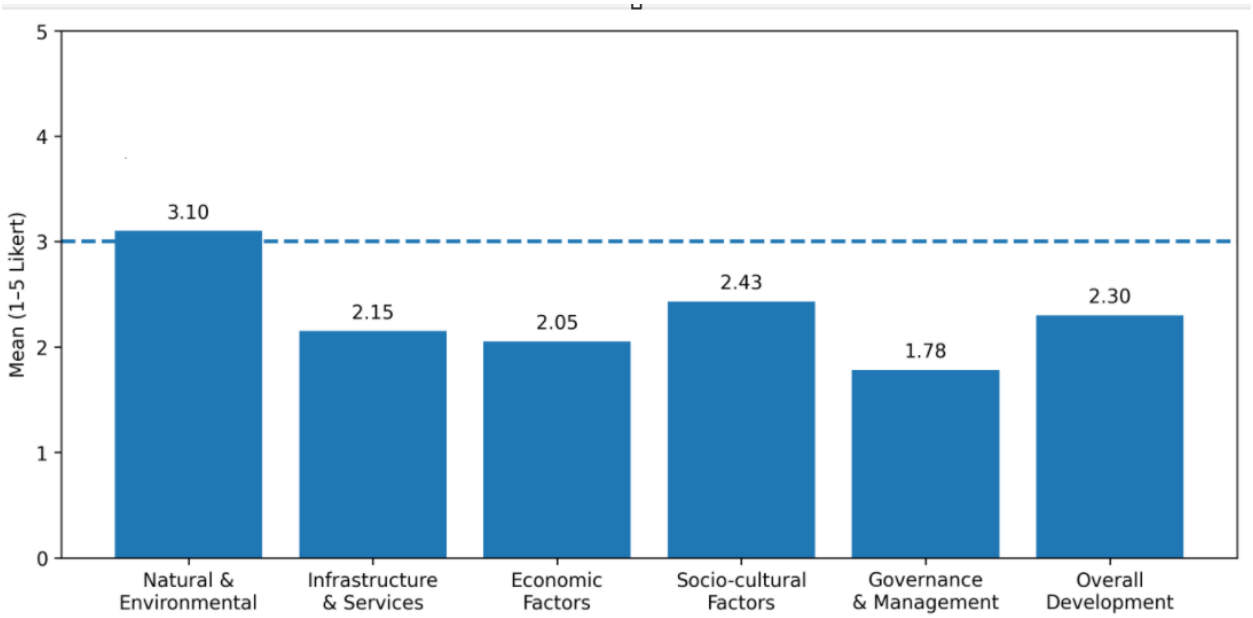

Figure 1. Mean scores of the five model dimensions and overall sustainable sport tourism development in Qeshm Island (n = 560).

Note. Scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale (1–5). The dashed line represents the theoretical midpoint (3); values below 3 indicate an implementation gap relative to the desired level.

Table 3. One-sample t-test (test value = 3)(df = 559)

Dimension / component	Mean	SD	t	p	Status
Unique natural attractions	4.25	0.68	48.92	0.000	Above desired
Environmental sustainability	1.95	0.82	-33.61	0.000	Below desired
Infrastructure & services (overall)	2.15	0.78	-23.98	0.000	Below desired
Economic factors (overall)	2.05	0.76	-27.43	0.000	Below desired
Socio-cultural factors (overall)	2.43	0.80	-15.93	0.000	Below desired
Management & governance (overall)	1.78	0.69	-38.55	0.000	Below desired

Measurement model quality

Reliability and convergent validity were satisfactory across all constructs. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.86 to 0.91, CR from 0.89 to 0.93, and AVE from 0.61 to 0.68, supporting internal consistency and convergent validity.

Structural model (SEM): relative influence of the five dimensions

As shown in table 4, SEM results indicated that all five dimensions had positive and significant effects on sustainable sport tourism development. The strongest effect belonged to management & governance (β = 0.35), followed by infrastructure & services (β = 0.30). Economic factors (β = 0.25) and socio-cultural factors (β = 0.23) also played meaningful roles, while natural & environmental resources (β = 0.18) had the smallest direct effect suggesting it functions more as a foundational asset whose value depends on governance and infrastructure. The model demonstrated strong predictive and

explanatory power for the endogenous outcome: $R^2 = 0.58$ and $Q^2 = 0.45$. Model fit indices also indicated acceptable-to-good fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.85$; GFI = 0.92; AGFI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.048; CFI = 0.95; GOF = 0.64.

Table 4. SEM summary (path coefficients + model performance)

Element	Result
Significant paths (β, ordered)	Governance 0.35; Infrastructure 0.30; Economic 0.25; Socio-cultural 0.23; Natural 0.18
Explanatory power	R^2 (development) = 0.58
Predictive relevance	Q^2 (development) = 0.45

As shown in Figure 2, the structural equation modeling (SEM) results identify the relative strength of each dimension in predicting sustainable sport tourism development in Qeshm. The largest standardized effect belongs to Management and Governance (β = 0.35), indicating that improvements in strategic planning, institutional coordination, regulation, monitoring, and destination marketing are the most influential levers for advancing sustainable sport tourism outcomes. The second strongest predictor is Infrastructure and Services (β = 0.30), highlighting that investments in sport and recreation facilities, access, accommodation, transport, equipment provision, and related service quality substantially contribute to development when aligned with sustainability goals.

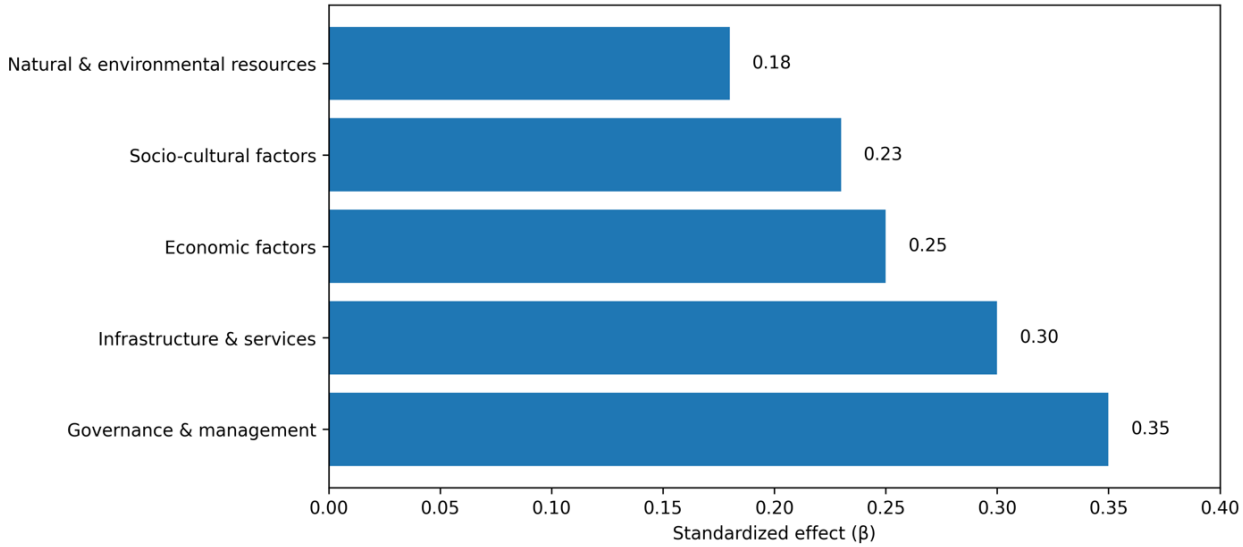

Figure 2. Standardized structural equation modeling (SEM) path coefficients (β) predicting sustainable sport tourism development in Qeshm Island.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings highlight a "resource-rich, system-poor" development pattern for Qeshm: natural and environmental resources were rated slightly above the midpoint, whereas governance/management, infrastructure, and economic mechanisms were rated substantially below the desired level. This configuration is consistent with sustainability scholarship arguing that destination success depends not only on attractive resources, but on the governance capacity to manage growth, distribute benefits, and protect ecological and socio-cultural capital (Bramwell, 2011; Buckley, 2012; Butler, 1999). In sport tourism specifically, the literature emphasizes that sustainability requires integrated planning across economic, socio-cultural, and environmental domains rather than event-led or fragmented development (Carneiro et al., 2016; Weed, 2009). A central contribution of this study is that the structural model identifies management and governance as the strongest predictor of sustainable sport tourism development (β = 0.35), followed by infrastructure and services (β = 0.30). This ranking reinforces evidence that institutional coordination and collaborative planning are decisive for implementation, especially where multiple agencies and interests intersect (Adu-Ampong, 2017; Bramwell, 2011). Practically, it suggests that Qeshm's development strategy should prioritize establishing a coherent policy framework, reducing administrative fragmentation, strengthening monitoring, and aligning marketing with sustainability commitments—before or alongside large-scale capital investment.

The very low mean score for environmental sustainability is a critical warning. Research shows that tourism growth can generate environmental trade-offs (e.g., energy use and emissions) if sustainability is not embedded into planning and operations (Khan et al., 2020). This is particularly salient for island contexts, where ecological resilience and carrying capacity constraints can be binding; recent island sustainability studies recommend multidimensional assessment and active management of ecological and infrastructure pressures (Chi & Liu, 2023). For Qeshm—also positioned within geopark and geotourism narratives—prior work indicates that local acceptance and benefit sharing are essential for long-term viability (Shahhoseini et al., 2017; Torabi Farsani et al., 2012), and that geopark-related development can generate local economic gains when linked to participation and appropriate management (Lee & Jayakumar, 2021).

Interpreting sport tourism as a future-oriented public health strategy is also supported by the results. Public health evidence links built-environment conditions (walkability, access to parks, and transport options) to higher physical activity (Sallis et al., 2016), and shows benefits of integrating active travel into daily life (Saunders et al., 2013). Therefore, investments in safe sport/recreation infrastructure and low-carbon mobility systems can deliver dual outcomes: visitor experience quality and resident health co-benefits. However, legitimacy depends on community perceptions and resident–tourist relations; studies demonstrate that support is shaped by perceived local benefits, emotional solidarity, and perceived impacts (Giango et al., 2022; Joo et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2015). In this light, strengthening governance, local participation, and transparent impact management is not only operationally necessary but socially strategic for sustaining support and trust.

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Declaration

No generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the data collection, data analysis, or interpretation of findings. AI-assisted language editing tools were used solely for improving clarity and grammar of the manuscript, without influencing the scientific content, analytical decisions, or conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and originality of the work.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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