

Article

Community Support and Socioeconomic Impacts of Cultural Tourism Development in Western Kenya

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Abstract: Cultural tourism has emerged as a vital alternative in rural areas, particularly in Kenya. However, its socioeconomic impacts on local communities are not fully understood. This paper examines how community attitudes and involvement assist the growth of sustainable tourism in Bungoma County, rural Western Kenya. Using a sample of 320 respondents and partial least square-structured equation modeling (PLS-SEM), this study examined key socioeconomic indicators, including employment opportunities, income generation, and community engagement. The economic and cultural importance of tourism for rural development is demonstrated by these metrics. Our results show that support from tourism is strongly influenced by favorable community perception. This study recommends tailored socioeconomic strategies, such as promoting cultural entrepreneurship, enhancing local infrastructure, and fostering collaborative efforts between stakeholders, to diversify rural economies. The novel approach of this research provides critical insights into community-based tourism and presents significant results, contributing to the broader literature on rural socioeconomic development.

Keywords: community-based tourism; community's perception; sustainable tourism development; tourism support; Kenya



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1. Introduction

Tourism is a rapidly growing industry that contributes to economic growth and social well-being worldwide [1]. It is among the most vibrant sectors, generating USD 8.8 trillion and accounting for 10.4% of global GDP in 2018 alone [2] and ranked the second-fastest-growing sector after the manufacturing sector. The industry has experienced rapid growth, with a 3.9% increase in 2018 compared to the 3.2% worldwide gross economic growth [2]. Tourism also contributes 10% of the global employment share, creating one in every five new job opportunities in the recent decade [1–3]. Additionally, tourism brings in adequate foreign exchange, creates entrepreneurial opportunities, and encourages infrastructural development. For instance, with its colorful culture, scenic landscape, beaches, and abundant wildlife, Kenya has established itself as a sought-after leader in African tourism destinations [4–6]. Tourism plays a crucial role in Kenya's economic growth, contributing approximately 10% of the total gross domestic product (GDP) and 9% of the national employment share [7–9].

Tourism's cultural, social, environmental, political, and economic impacts are pathways through which tourism impacts individual behaviors, value systems, collective lifestyles, family relationships, cultural celebrations, moral behavior, and destination communities' organizational structure [10]. Studying a community's perceived tourism impact

is crucial for sustainable tourism development and enabling the implementation of ideal policy measures [11–16].

The linkage between tourism and a community's socioeconomic development has been debated, but the astute utilization of tourism can contribute to a community's social well-being [17–19]. Community-based tourism enterprises (CBTEs) can be self-sustaining and realize the prosperity of community development through innovation and collaborative partnerships [20,21]. Community-based tourism (CBT) context analysis is being increasingly recognized as an effective approach to understanding the socioeconomic impacts of community-based tourism [20,22,23]. For instance, refs. [24,25] envisioned that the rise of alternative CBT forms is highly inclined toward local development needs and supporters of CBT as a doable notion in the lack of improved application models.

This study focuses on residents living near World Heritage Sites (WHS) in Bungoma County by sourcing information from residing residents. Thus, the World Heritage Sites marked by the Kenyan government in Bungoma County serve as the unit of analysis of their perceptions of tourism development [26–28]. It compares negative and positive perceptions' direct and indirect impacts on the involvement of the community and support of the growth of sustainable tourism development and investigates the mediating role of community participation on the link between the community's perception and support of community-based sustainable tourism development in tourist site destinations in rural settings [1,13,27,29–36]. This research makes a substantial contribution to the existing body of knowledge by investigating stakeholder views and social exchange theories, data collection methods, theoretical frameworks, data analysis methods, ethical considerations, and policy recommendations [37–39].

The existing literature on tourism in Kenya primarily focuses on broader national- or regional-level impacts, with limited attention given to the local, community-level effects of cultural tourism, especially in rural settings. While studies have acknowledged the general benefits of tourism for socioeconomic development, there is a gap in understanding how these benefits materialize in rural communities, where cultural tourism is often positioned as an alternative livelihood. For instance, previous research has highlighted the importance of tourism in creating employment, generating income, and fostering cultural preservation, but the specific dynamics in rural settings remain underexplored [13,33]. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the perceptions of rural communities regarding the socioeconomic impact of cultural tourism and exploring how these perceptions influence community involvement and backing for the growth of sustainable tourism.

Cultural tourism in rural areas can diversify local economies and improve livelihoods [40]. However, without a clear understanding of its socioeconomic impact, policymakers and tourism stakeholders may struggle to develop effective strategies for sustainable tourism development. As noted in recent studies, tourism can contribute to local economic growth by promoting cultural heritage and offering new livelihood opportunities [27,36]. This study provides empirical evidence from a rural Kenyan context and highlights their support and engagement with tourism activities. Focusing on community perceptions and participation, this research provides valuable insights into how cultural tourism can be leveraged to promote sustainable development in marginalized rural areas. Additionally, the study findings are poised to deliver robust policy direction to government stakeholders and the private sector in harnessing the untapped socioeconomic benefits of community-based tourism development in a culturally rich region such as Western Kenya.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines the perceived socioeconomic impact of community-based tourism development in rural setting regions [13,33,34]. Tourism development directly impacts communities through frequent interaction with tourists, entrepreneurs, and government stakeholders, affecting community values, behavioral lifestyle, and quality of life. Positive impacts include job creation, income, and empowerment programs, while negative impacts include increased costs of living and property prices and less access to

essential commodities [27,36,41,42]. Socially, tourism enhances entertainment and recreational facilities, promotes cultural identity, and preserves customs and culture. However, negative impacts include traffic congestion, overcrowding, increased criminal activities, environmental pollution, community displacement, and cultural erosion [1,30,43,44]. Rural tourism, which involves nature-based activities, agriculture, sightseeing, and angling, can boost a community's economic status by creating jobs, widening income sources, and promoting cultural identity. However, it can also lead to increased income disparity, poverty exacerbation, and imbalanced spatial development [45–51].

Community support and engagement in sustainable community-based tourism development are crucial for achieving sustainable development goals [13,27,51]. Community support refers to the behavioral intentions of residents towards supporting tourism development in their locality, influencing cost-level visitors' willingness and satisfaction [52–58]. Local communities play a vital role in reviving, protecting, and sustaining tourist heritage sites, contributing to their socioeconomic gains, quality of life, and effective collaboration [54]. Community participation is essential for successful tourism planning [54,59–64]. The theory of community support and participation (SET) suggests that when a community perceives positive benefits from sustainable tourism development, it will participate in interactions and exchanges with tourists, supporting the development [52,65–74].

However, studies have found contradictory findings concerning negative social perceptions, such as environmental impacts. Rural-based communities are more interested in community-based tourism development through cultural dancing, sightseeing, art and crafting, and gaining economic benefits from participating in sustainable tourism activities [72,75–82]. Overall, community perception plays a significant role in determining community participation and support in sustainable tourism development [65,66,82–84]. Other studies [84–86] have observed that residents' perceptions of community participation influence their support for cultural-based tourism development. Similarly, ref. [87] observed that engaging the local community in decision-making and management fosters their positive perception of community-based/cultural tourism development. On the other hand, refs. [83,88–90] concluded that a positive perception of the socioeconomic impacts of cultural tourism enhances the community's participation in sustainable community-based tourism development.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area

This study was conducted in Bungoma County, Kenya, a former Western Province. The county is known for agriculture, with farmers producing various crops. With a population of 1,670,570 (about twice the population of Delaware) and a density of 760 people per kilometer squared, Bungoma County is home to different ethnic tribes, including the Bukusu, Sabaot, and Teso people. The county also hosts numerous historical and heritage tourist sites, including Mount Elgon National Park, Mwibale Wa Mwanja, and Nabuyole Falls, and cultural activities like sightseeing, dance, and artistic painting. The region boasts domestic and international tourism activities [91]. The majority of domestic and international arriving tourists enjoy the good scenery, mountains, rivers, and cultural activities such as bullfighting, cockfighting, mountaineering, zip-lining, and painting [92]. Figure 1 below captures the map of Bungoma County in Western Kenya.

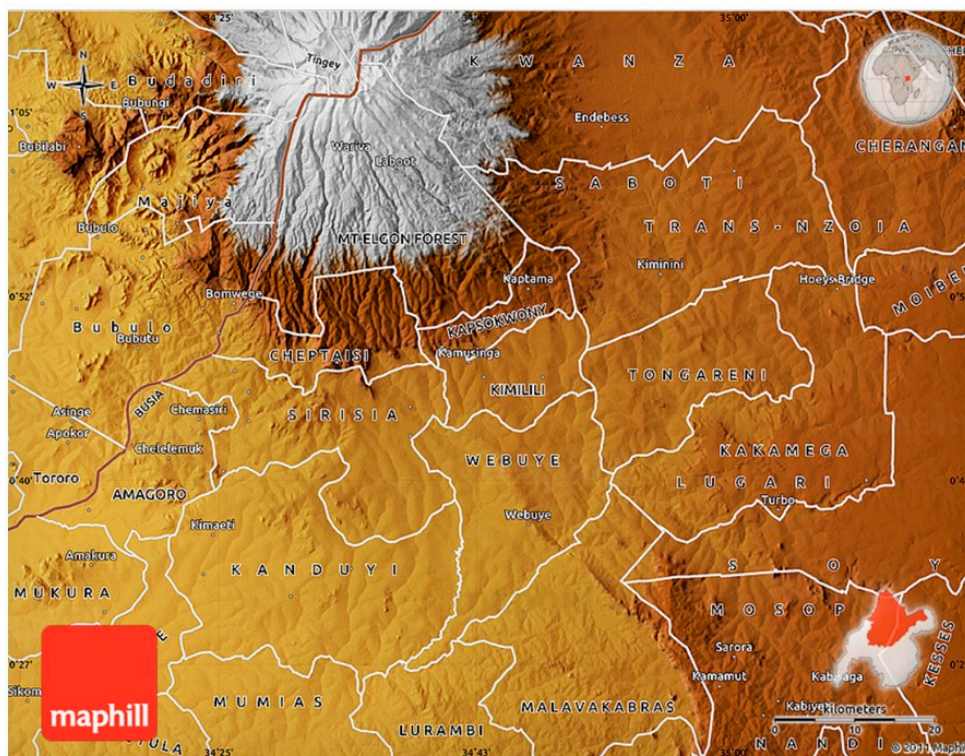


Figure 1. Bungoma County map. Source: Maphill, 2013/<http://www.maphill.com/kenya/western/bungoma/maps/physical-map/> (accessed on 29 October 2024).

3.2. Data Collection Tool, Sampling, and Procedure

A questionnaire was employed as part of this study's quantitative methodology to measure negative socioeconomic perceptions, positive perceptions, community engagement, and support for community-based sustainable tourism development [13,59,65,83,93–96]. The questionnaire was administered to rural-based community members engaged in tourism activities. A systematic sampling technique was used to select households for the study, with a specific sample size for rural-based households. Demographic information was collected from the selected households, ensuring a representative sample from rural areas. The researchers successfully collected 320 respondents, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of socioeconomic perceptions and participation in sustainable tourism development [77,97,98]. A systematic demographic sampling method was applied explicitly as it is suitable for controlling autocorrelation between construct variables [99]. We selected this method for several key reasons. Firstly, the systematic approach minimized the risk of data manipulation, thanks to our comprehensive and robust data collection tool. Additionally, it proved to be cost-effective, enabling us to efficiently cover a broader scope. Furthermore, systematic sampling was chosen for its high application efficiency and its ability to reduce the likelihood of the sample's bias significantly. Before data collection, we explained the topic and asked for consent from each participant, and we gave them a copy of the consent form to keep and consult.

3.3. Data Analysis

This investigation utilized the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) multivariate statistical method aided by Smart PLS 3.0 and SPSS version 22.0 software to estimate the model linking community perception and participation to support for community-based sustainable tourism development. PLS-SEM has been regarded in the literature as efficient in estimating path models entailing several latent variables and supporting multigroup and indirect analyses [13,100,101]. It is also robust in exploring relationships, does not require strict assumptions, and maximizes the explanatory power

of selected exogenous variables [102]. Moreover, PLS-SEM supports the determination of nexuses between constructs and associated variable indicators by specifying structural paths between various variable constructs [102,103].

One condition of using PLS-SEM is that variables and their associated constructs should be measured using the scale level measured, and the sample size should be at least 100; hence, our sample is adequately placed within the required threshold, in line with previous studies [13,104]. This is because the “ten times” rule of thumb, augmented by bootstrapping, helps in accommodating sample sizes within 100-sample thresholds, which can be obtained by converting to a minimum adequate sample size [13,72].

Due to the inconclusiveness and differences in the literature presented in section two, this study hypothesized the following:

H1. *The community's positive socioeconomic perceptions impact community-based participation in the development of sustainable tourism in rural regions.*

H2. *The community's negative socioeconomic perceptions impact community-based participation in the development of sustainable tourism in rural regions.*

H3. *Community participation impacts support for the community-based development of sustainable tourism in rural regions.*

H4. *The community's positive socioeconomic perceptions impact the support for the community-based development of sustainable tourism in rural regions.*

H5. *The community's negative socioeconomic perceptions impact the support for the community-based development of sustainable tourism in rural regions.*

This study was guided by the following hypothesized path model shown in Figure 2, adopted from recent studies [13,83,100,101].

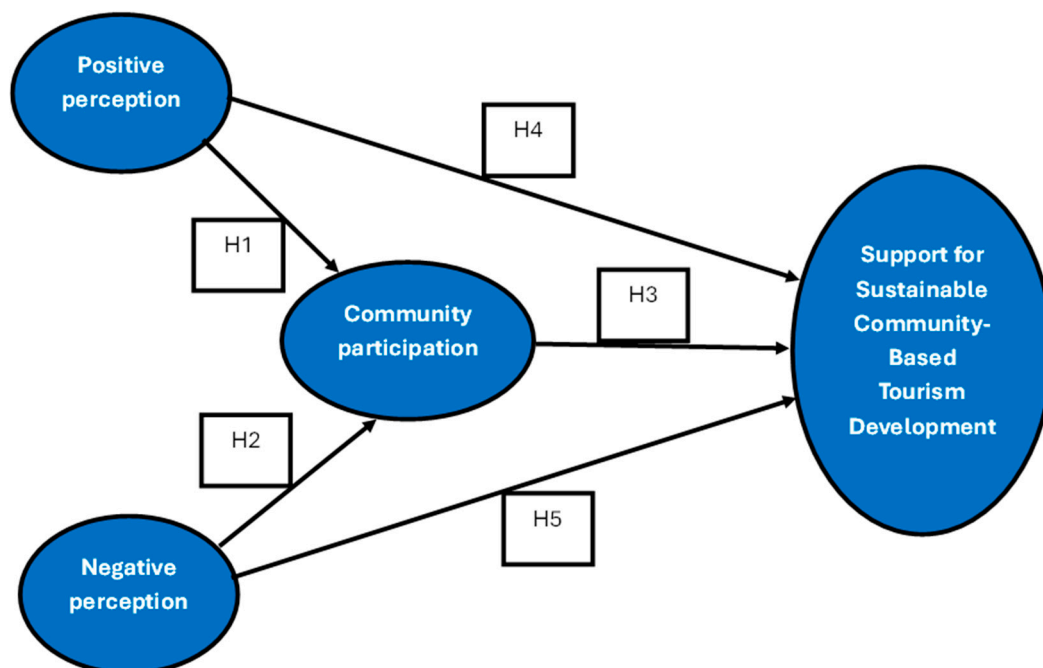


Figure 2. Hypothesized structural path model of community participation and support for sustainable community-based tourism development.

4. Results

This section covers this study's analysis and discussion of key findings. Specifically, this section is divided into two main parts: descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics entailed summarizing the collected data in frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics regarding the profiles of the respondents. Accordingly, the results show that the majority (50.5%) were female, of whom 9.4% were married. Also, the majority (62.3%) had tertiary education. The findings also showed that the majority (53.3%) were aged between 18 and 25. The average monthly income was KES 669.7. Additionally, only 16% of respondents indulged in community-based sustainable tourism development.

Table 1. Profile characteristics of respondents.

Characteristics	Frequency/Mean	Percentage
Gender		
Male	53	49.5
Female	54	50.5
Marital status		
Divorced	17	15.9
Married	10	9.4
Separated	6	5.6
Single	65	60.8
Widowed	9	8.4
Education level		
No education	1	0.9
Primary	8	7.6
Secondary	31	29.3
Tertiary	66	62.3
Age bracket		
18–25 years	56	53.3
26–35 years	24	22.9
36–45 years	14	13.3
46–55 years	9	8.6
56+ years	2	1.9
Average income (KES)	669.7	
Participation in CB tourism		
Yes	17	16.0
No	89	84.0

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics regarding the profiles of the respondents. Accordingly, the results point out that the majority (50.5%) were female, out of whom 9.4% were married. Also, the majority (62.3%) had tertiary education. The findings also showed that the majority (53.3%) were aged between 18 and 25. The higher average monthly income was Kshs 669.7. Additionally, only 16% of respondents indulge in community-based sustainable tourism development.

Table 2 outlines the descriptive statistics of this study's variable, which is the community's support for community-based sustainable tourism development. The mean values indicate that most people support community-based tourism in rural areas, including those involved in tourism ventures. Rural residents have more positive perceptions than negative ones, indicating their agreement with community-based sustainable tourism de-

velopment [65,105,106]. The results also suggest that rural residents agree to participate in community-based sustainable tourism development.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of model variables.

Construct/Battery Item	Mean ¹	Std div
Sup1: supporting tourism will be an essential part of the community	3.48	1.21
Sup2: authorities should support and promote CBT development	3.30	1.28
Sup3: I believe CBT development should be actively encouraged	3.50	1.30
Sup4: long-term planning by authorities can mitigate the adverse effects of tourism on the local environment.	3.06	1.45
Np1: locals will suffer from high expenses	2.09	1.30
Np2: there will be a high crime rate	2.32	1.39
Np3: tourism will increase the cost of living	2.21	1.38
Np4: tourism in nearby towns will increase congestion, noise, etc.	2.49	1.40
Pp1: our standard of living would increase considerably because of sustainable CBT development	3.02	1.41
Pp2: tourism would attract more investment to my community	2.73	1.34
Pp3: tourism would create more jobs for my community	2.82	1.32
Pp4: tourism would create local entrepreneurship such as home crafts, bnbs, agribusiness, etc.	3.29	1.39
Cp1: the county government considers all community's opinions regarding conservation projects in Bungoma county	3.41	1.34
Cp2: the county government seeks our opinions regarding the planning and development of tourism in Bungoma county	3.64	1.34
Cp3: the county government involves the community in sustainable tourism development decision-making	3.73	1.31
Cp4: the county government engages the community in managing tourist sites in Bungoma County	3.61	1.33

¹ Five-point Likert scale, with 1 measuring extremely negative (strongly disagree) and 5 measuring extremely positive (strongly agree).

4.2. Hypothesis Testing Using PLS-SEM Model Measurement Assessment

PLS was used to evaluate the causal relationship between the variable constructs and their indicators. Before assessing causal relationships, it was crucial to examine the reliability and validity of the model's measurement [103,107,108]. The coefficient of determination (R²) was used to evaluate the validity of the structural model, showing the quality of the model. Based on the analysis, 11.6% of changes in the rural community's support for sustainable tourism development was explained by its perceptions and so was 32.8% of variations in the rural community's participation in sustainable community-based tourism development (Figure 3).

Secondly, discriminant validity was conducted, which refers to the degree to which it differed significantly from the rest of the model's constructs. In this study, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio was recently utilized to determine the discriminant validity [109,110]. Specifically, this study considered 0.85 as the HTMT criterion (i.e., HTMT0.85) threshold for ascertaining the discriminant validity instead of the conventional Fornell–Larcker criterion [13,109]. As indicated in Table 3, group-specific model estimation discriminant validity was ascertained since all results of the HTMT0.85 criteria were below the critical value of 0.85 [13].

This study evaluated the relationships between latent variables and constructed items using consistency reliability and convergence validity strategies (Table 4). Three key strategies were the composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and Cronbach alpha (CA). The loading factor for indicators should be greater than 0.7 for reliability [102]. The PLS path model's CR was higher than 0.7, indicating high reliability. Convergent and divergent validity were also evaluated, with AVE values greater than 0.5 for rural households. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics regarding the profiles of the respondents. Accordingly, the results show that the majority (50.5%) were female, of whom 9.4% were married. Also, the majority (62.3%) had tertiary education. The findings also showed that

the majority (53.3%) were aged between 18 and 25. The average monthly income was KES 669.7. Additionally, only 16% of respondents indulged in community-based sustainable tourism development. All indicators were reliable for subsequent analyses [13,93,109].

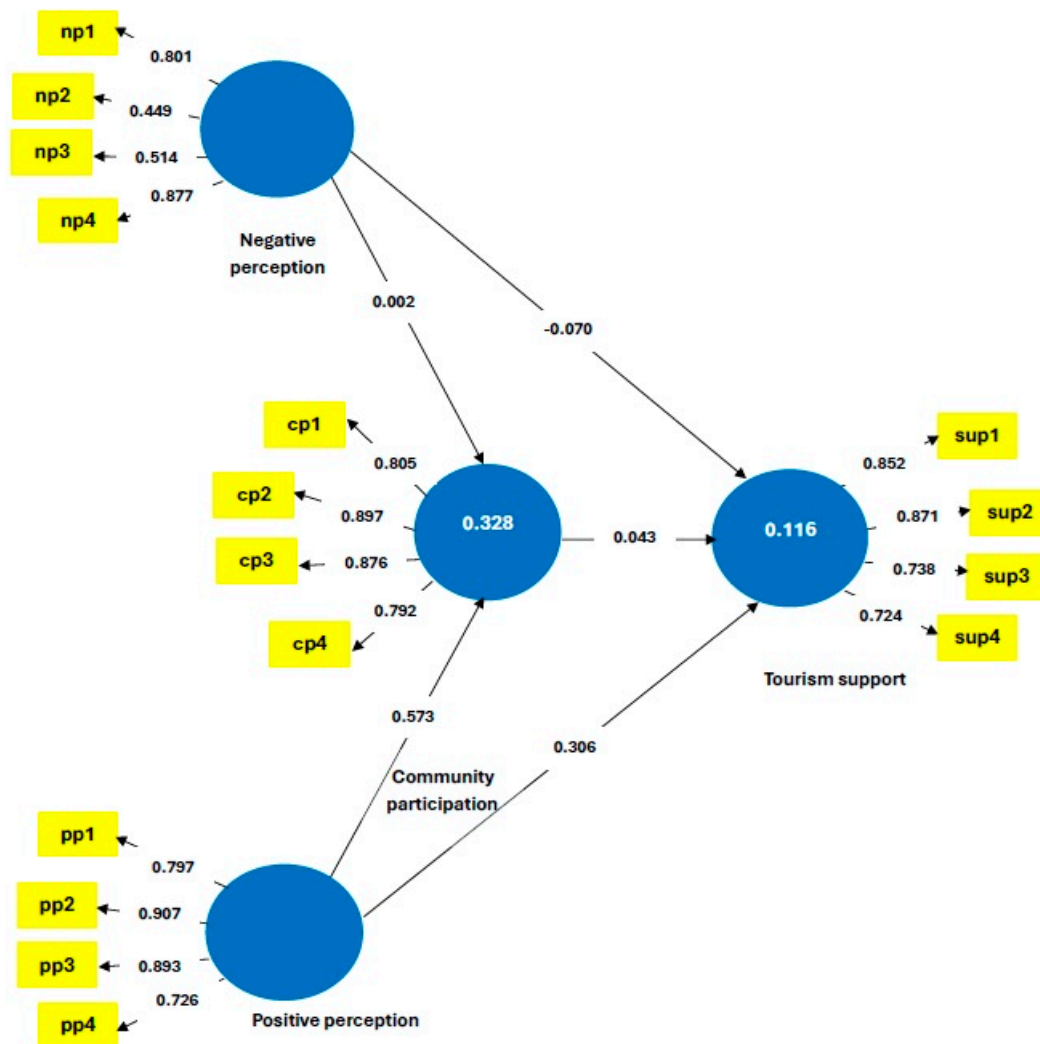


Figure 3. Model depicting path analysis and interactive relationships of variables in rural households.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (HTMT0.85 criterion).

Constructs	Cp	Np	Pp	Sup
Np	0.093			
Pp	0.654	0.134		
Sup	0.245	0.087	0.374	

Table 5 shows that negative perceptions of community engagement and tourism support did not significantly impact community-based participation in sustainable tourism development in the setting of rural regions. The coefficient estimates for these perceptions were -0.069 . This suggests that negative perceptions did not significantly influence community involvement and support for sustainable tourism development in these areas.

Table 4. Assessment of measurement model.

Construct/Battery Item	Loading	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Support for community-based tourism		0.876	0.639	0.815
Sup1	0.845			
Sup2	0.872			
Sup3	0.739			
Sup4	0.731			
Negative perception		0.773	0.477	0.839
Np1	0.806			
Np2	0.466			
Np3	0.515			
Np4	0.882			
Positive perception		0.901	0.696	0.852
Pp1	0.798			
Pp2	0.907			
Pp3	0.893			
Pp4	0.726			
Community participation		0.908	0.713	0.865
Cp1	0.794			
Cp2	0.898			
Cp3	0.877			
Cp4	0.803			

Table 5. Causal relationships based on hypotheses set.

Hypothesized Causal Relationship	Path Coefficient	<i>p</i> -Value
Negative Perception → Community Participation	0.003	0.975 > 0.05
Negative Perception → Tourism Support	−0.069	0.654 > 0.05
Positive Perception → Community Participation	0.571	0.000 < 0.05
Positive Perception → Tourism Support	0.330	0.002 < 0.05
Community Participation → Tourism Support	0.043	0.757 > 0.05

However, the results show that positive perceptions of community participation and support for sustainable tourism development were significantly influenced by socioeconomic factors. Rural residents showed a higher positive perception of community participation. The findings also support the hypothesis that positive socioeconomic perceptions enhancing community involvement is essential for the advancement of sustainable tourism development. This study found that socioeconomic factors did not significantly influence community participation in community-based sustainable tourism development, suggesting that community participation increases support for sustainable tourism development in the setting of rural areas.

5. Discussion

This study revealed that rural residents in Western Kenya generally support community-based sustainable tourism development. Rural residents showed higher levels of participation in sustainable tourism initiatives, indicating a greater willingness to engage in such activities. Positive perceptions of sustainable tourism significantly impacted garnering support from rural residents. The study also revealed demographic variations in the residents, such as age and income differences, which could have influenced their perceptions and levels of participation in sustainable tourism. The study found that the size of the impact of the community's positive perceptions on its support for community-based sustainable tourism development among residents was more significant than the size of the impact of positive perceptions on support for community-based sustainable tourism development [27,29,30]. The study also observed a significant distinction between the impact of negative perception on the community's support for sustainable community-based tourism development in rural tourism destinations [13,31]. The study suggests that communities in Western Kenya depend on tourism development synonymously with economic inducement, demonstrating a favorable attitude towards participation in and the endorsement of community-oriented sustainable tourism development [13,96,111].

The findings of this study are largely consistent with the existing literature regarding the positive socioeconomic impacts of community-based tourism development in rural areas [13,33], but there were some notable contradictions. For example, many studies have reported widespread community support for tourism development based on perceived economic benefits [29]. However, our findings received mixed perceptions among the respondents, particularly concerning the adverse socioeconomic effects. The results showed that some participants expressed concerns about increased crime rates, higher cost of living, and traffic congestion, findings that contradict the predominantly positive narratives often presented in the tourism literature [36,41].

Additionally, the insignificant relationship between community participation and support for sustainable tourism development in rural areas contradicts previous studies that emphasize the critical role of community engagement in fostering sustainable tourism development [13,59]. This may be attributed to socioeconomic differences within the community or differing levels of awareness about tourism's benefits, which calls for further investigation. This contradiction underscores the complexity of local tourism development, indicating that a uniform approach may be impractical in rural Kenya.

This study emphasizes the necessity of focused policy interventions considering the socioeconomic benefits and drawbacks of cultural tourism's development. While economic growth and community participation are important drivers of sustainable tourism development, the negative perceptions of crime and the increased cost of living suggest that local authorities and policymakers must implement measures to mitigate adverse effects. Specific strategies could include improving security, ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are equitably distributed, and addressing community concerns related to infrastructure and living standards. Additionally, integrating cultural entrepreneurship and fostering local business initiatives, such as handicrafts and cultural performances, could offer practical solutions to mitigate negative perceptions while enhancing a community's economic resilience.

This study should be expanded upon in future research by investigating qualitative aspects such as tourist satisfaction, cultural impacts, and community identity shifts. These non-economic dimensions of tourism are vital for a more holistic understanding of cultural tourism's impact on the setting of rural areas. A deeper understanding of the long-term impacts of tourism on rural communities, particularly about social dynamics and environmental sustainability, may also be possible through longitudinal studies.

This study's findings significantly enhance the current understanding of community-based tourism in rural regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where few empirical studies have focused on local community perceptions and participation. Theoretically, this research enhances our understanding of the social exchange theory (SET) by demonstrating how positive and negative perceptions can influence both community participation and support for sustainable development [82]. It also contributes to the ongoing debate about the role of socioeconomic perception, such as the fear of crime or rising living costs, which can dampen community engagement.

From a methodological perspective, the use of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was a novel approach in this context, offering a robust analysis of the relationship between latent variables such as community perception, participation, and tourism support. This methodological framework can be applied to other tourism development studies in different rural contexts, especially those with complex socioeconomic dynamics. Additionally, this approach can be used in future research to explore non-linear relationships between community perceptions and other qualitative aspects of tourism, such as environmental impacts or social cohesion.

6. Conclusions

This study offers valuable insights into the socioeconomic impacts of cultural tourism in rural Kenya, particularly focusing on community perception and participation in supporting community-based sustainable tourism development in Western Kenya. It compared the

perceptions, participation, and support of rural communities in Bungoma County, known for various tourism sites, ethnicities, and sociocultural activities [13,37]. The study made a robust comparative contribution to the literature from a developing world perspective, highlighting the significance of community perceptions in decision-making processes in conservation and cautious tourism development [11,13,27,52]. The findings highlight the need for local leaders to enhance their perceptions of the positive effects of community-based sustainable tourism development. However, this study found an insignificant effect of community involvement on support for community-based sustainable tourism development in rural areas, highlighting the pivotal role of residents' perceptions. Future studies should consider different types of community perceptions, participation, and support for tourism development across broader rural destination contexts. [13,112].

While positive perceptions related to income generation and job creation promote community support for tourism, negative perceptions, such as increased crime and higher living costs, pose significant challenges to sustainable tourism development in rural settings. Policymakers must consider these mixed perceptions by designing inclusive, community-centered strategies that promote equitable economic growth while minimizing negative externalities.

This will make community-based tourism development attractive and more rewarding to rural communities engaged in sustainable development tourism development in Kenya.

Although this study offers robust insights into the budding literature focusing on the socioeconomic impact of community-based tourism development, it acknowledges few pitfalls or limitations that act as avenues for future studies. For instance, the study relied on self-reported information on engagement, perception, and support for sustainable community-based tourism development. Also, the study focused only on one section of counties in Western Kenya; hence, the findings may not apply to the entire country. Nevertheless, future research should address qualitative dimensions of cultural tourism, including tourist satisfaction, cultural preservation, and social cohesion, from a larger unit of analysis perspective. Investigating these aspects would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of tourism on rural communities in Kenya. In addition, longitudinal studies that track the long-term effects of tourism on rural areas would be beneficial in identifying sustainable strategies for future sustainable tourism development.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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