

CULTURAL TOURISM AND LOCAL COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT: A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

Dr. Sajitha P K

*Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Sir Syed College, Kannur University, Taliparamba, Kannur, Kerala, India,
E-mail: sjayakrish@gmail.com, Orcid Id: 0000-0002-2543-3297*

ABSTRACT

Cultural tourism has the possibility of leading to sustainable community development through tourism involvement, benefit-sharing, and conservation. The downside of cultural tourism at rural sites with heritage is that the sites may be affected by environmental issues, poor infrastructure, and a lack of involvement in tourism activities. This study examined the relationship between cultural tourism and local community empowerment in the Mankele community surrounding Sudwala Caves in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. A mixed-methods design was used. Secondary data, consisting of structured questionnaire responses, poll questions, open-ended responses, and focus group discussion transcripts, were analyzed. Quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding. The findings were then integrated through a harmonized mixed-methods analysis. Environmental sustainability emerged as the dominant theme, followed by infrastructure and social services, economic empowerment, skills development, governance support, cultural heritage preservation, and community participation. Respondents recognized tourism as a potential source of employment, income generation, cultural enterprise, and skills development. However, the findings also showed concerns regarding limited inclusion, uneven benefits, weak institutional support, environmental management, and infrastructure constraints. In fact, cultural tourism has the potential to empower local communities through processes like inclusive governance, environmental conservation, capacity building, and livelihood development. Improved coordination among the actors involved in tourism, that is, tourism operators, local government, and the local community, will be necessary for this purpose.

KEYWORDS; *cultural tourism, community empowerment, sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, mixed methods*

INTRODUCTION

Heritage, identity and local community experiences are all aspects of the cultural tourism industry that have made it an important part of global tourism development. Cultural resources like traditions, heritage sites, indigenous practices and local lifestyles are increasingly relied upon by tourism destinations to draw visitors and give destinations a competitive edge (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020). Local communities are also now more critical in the tourism development processes because of the rising demand for authentic tourism. Thus, the concept of cultural tourism is strongly linked to economic development, cultural conservation and participation of the community. Cultural tourism is an advantageous form of tourism for rural areas, as it can broaden their base and provide jobs in communities where there are not many economic opportunities. Businesses in the tourism sector, like accommodation, local crafts, cultural performances, and food services, can often be a source of local livelihoods and income generation (Wijijayanti et al., 2020). The development of tourism can also contribute to overall rural development, such as providing infrastructure and boosting economic activity within the rural communities.

Tourism development can also give rise to social and environmental issues in host communities, however. In the absence of tourism planning and decision-making processes involving communities, there may be pressures on natural resources, environmental degradation and unequal benefit distribution due to tourism activities. Studies on tourism impact have thus highlighted the importance of tourism being sustainable both economically and environmentally, while also ensuring the welfare of the community (Jalloh, 2021). There is a growing attention on environmental sustainability in the context of tourism destinations where the conservation of biodiversity, access to water and land management have a direct impact on tourism and local livelihoods. In fact, community empowerment has become one of the principles of sustainable tourism development, given that sustainable tourism development would directly impact local communities and policies. Empowerment can mean economic participation, involvement in decision-making, social inclusion and access to development opportunities. Communities are now a central part of sustainable tourism frameworks with a focus on community engagement in the governance and planning of tourism (Scheyvens & van der Watt, 2021). In destinations where tourism can impact the community's livelihoods and shared environmental resources, participatory governance becomes crucial (Romão, 2025).

The issue of tourism development and environmental sustainability is still one of the key concerns in tourism research. Tourism activities have a direct impact on natural resources, including environmental degradation, biodiversity and pressure on community resources. Thus, the sustainable tourism strategies promote environmental protection and community-based resource management in tourist destinations (Baloch et al., 2023). Such concerns are particularly relevant in the rural areas where residents rely on environmental opportunities for their livelihoods and tourism. The preservation of cultural heritage is also significant in the development of cultural tourism. Heritage resources are also important to local identity, cultural continuity, and being tourism attractions. The development of tourism can help with the conservation of the heritage through raising awareness and economic considerations for the preservation activities. Meanwhile, there are still issues of cultural commodification and loss of traditional practices in the tourism destinations

(Ruhanen & Whitford, 2021). In the field of heritage preservation, there is a growing trend of using technological and conservation measures to promote sustainable tourism development (Mendoza et al., 2023).

Previous research has explored the relationship between tourism development, community involvement and cultural protection in various tourism settings. Tourism can help to sustain economic development and the conservation of culture, and at the same time cause environmental and social pressures for the host communities (Zunaidi et al., 2022). Studies have further highlighted the importance of cultural tourism in supporting identity preservation and economic stability within local communities (Reddy & Sailesh, 2024). In the context of South Africa, tourism research has also started to focus on the socio-cultural aspects of tourism development in historically and culturally significant communities (Dakile et al., 2025). McKercher (2020) also finds that the cultural tourism markets are continuously changing as destinations are more and more embedding the culture and heritage in the tourism experiences.

While there is existing research on tourism development and community involvement, there is a lack of research that combines cultural tourism, environmental sustainability and community empowerment in rural communities around heritage sites like Sudwala Caves. Previous research has tended to focus on the economic impact of tourism or on cultural preservation alone, and has not considered the interrelated experiences of local communities, such as those associated with governance, infrastructure, participation and environmental sustainability. There has also been some limited work that has used a mixed-method approach to consider the combined impact of these dimensions on local empowerment in rural South African tourism destinations.

This research focuses on the correlation between cultural tourism and local community empowerment in the community of Mankele that surrounds the Sudwala Caves in the Province of Mpumalanga in South Africa. The study also examines perceptions by communities in relation to tourism development, environmental sustainability, cultural heritage conservation, support for governance, tourism infrastructure, and engagement in tourism activities.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research design was mixed methods in order to investigate cultural tourism and local community empowerment in the Mankele community that surrounds Sudwala Caves in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Both quantitative and qualitative tools were utilized to understand trends within the community and the participant experiences in terms of tourism, environmental sustainability and empowerment. Convergent mixed methods were used in which quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately and combined for interpretation.

2.2 Data Source

Secondary data was used, which was sourced from a community-based tourism dataset that was developed within the Mankele community near Sudwala Caves in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. The data contained structured questionnaire responses, poll questions and focus group discussion (FGD) transcripts on tourism, environmental conservation, cultural heritage, governance and community participation (Ogola & Nkechinyere Ijoma, 2025).

2.3 Study Area

The study was conducted in the Mankele community, which is situated close to the Sudwala Caves in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. The area is related to tourism activities related to cultural heritage and environmental resources. Residents of the community have a number of opportunities as well as challenges related to tourism development, such as employment, engaging in tourism activities, and environmental management.

2.4 Data Collection Instruments

The quantitative part was composed of structured questionnaires and poll questions that were given to the members of the community. They gathered data on demographic characteristics, perceptions of tourism, environmental conservation and preservation of cultural heritage. Qualitative data included focus group discussion transcripts and the results of the open-ended questionnaire. These are participant experiences captured in the context of tourism development, infrastructure, governance support, environmental sustainability and community empowerment.

2.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyse quantitative data. Demographic information and community perceptions were described using frequencies, percentages, summary statistics and comparative analyses. Thematic analysis was used to interpret and analyse the qualitative data. Cleaning, coding and categorising of the answers to the open-ended questionnaires and the focus group discussion transcripts resulted in the identification of themes, including environment, empowerment, governance, infrastructure and social services, cultural heritage, skills and community participation. Quantitative and qualitative results were then merged using a harmonised mixed-methods analysis to discern dominant themes in the datasets.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents gives an overview of the composition of the respondents as per their gender and educational qualifications. It is crucial to understand the demographic characteristics of the participants, as it may affect the perceptions they have of the tourism development, environmental conservation and community empowerment initiatives. Table 1 indicates that the respondents were mostly female respondents (56.82%) and male respondents (43.18%). This suggests that women were more active in the community discussion and in giving responses to the survey questions. From the education point of view, the majority were secondary education (68.18%), primary education (15.91%) and tertiary education (13.64%). The results indicate that the majority of the respondents had secondary

education, followed by primary and tertiary education.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	25	56.82
Gender	Male	19	43.18
Education Level	Secondary	30	68.18
Education Level	Primary	7	15.91
Education Level	Tertiary	6	13.64

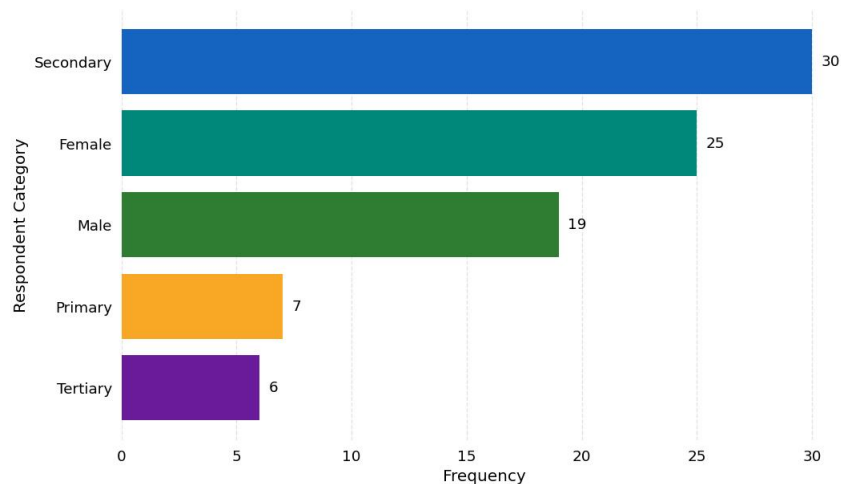


Figure 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic trends presented in Figure 1 further support the predominance of secondary education respondents and show that there is significant female representation in the study. Thus, the demographic profile shows high female participation, and respondents are mainly secondary educated.

3.2 Distribution of Community Themes Across Questionnaire Sections

There were significant differences in the emergence of themes between the various parts of the qualitative questionnaire. Environment and sustainability, economic empowerment, community support through governance, preservation of cultural heritage, community engagement, and skills development emerged as the key issues that determined community experiences and perceptions. As can be seen in Figure 2, the concept of environmental sustainability was well captured in alien plants and biodiversity, accidental fires and perceptions of living conditions. Economic empowerment had a strong presence in the tourism and perceptions of living conditions segments, reflecting the strong linkages in the community's mind between tourism development and job creation and livelihood opportunities.

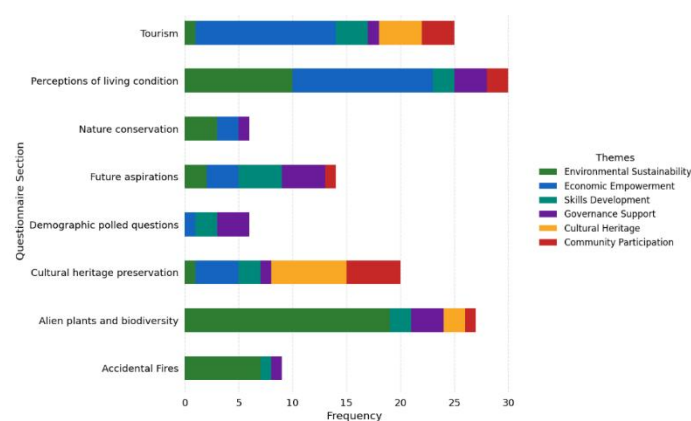


Figure 2. Theme Distribution Across Questionnaire Sections

The cultural heritage preservation section had strong responses that were connected with traditional identity, heritage preservation and the involvement of the community. Likewise, future aspirations answers captured the significance of governance support and capacity building for sustainable empowerment. The results for each of the sections of the questionnaire thus indicated various aspects of tourism, environmental management and community development.

3.3 Integrated Mixed-Methods Themes

The Results were integrated from the questionnaire and focus group discussion, giving a holistic view of the key issues related to cultural tourism and community empowerment. The harmonized mixed-methods analysis involved merging both qualitative data sets and determining the most prevalent community concerns and priorities. As shown in Table 2,

environmental sustainability emerged as the dominant theme with a combined frequency of 101 occurrences (30.61%). This was followed by infrastructure and social services (18.18%) and economic empowerment (18.18%). Skills development and training was 10.30%, and governance and institutional support was 10.00% of the integrated themes.

Table 2. Final Integrated Mixed-Methods Themes

Theme	Questionnaire Frequency	FGD Frequency	Combined Frequency	Combined Percentage
Environmental Sustainability	43	58	101	30.61
Infrastructure and Social Services	28	32	60	18.18
Economic Empowerment	36	24	60	18.18
Skills Development and Training	16	18	34	10.30
Governance and Institutional Support	17	16	33	10.00
Cultural Heritage Preservation	13	9	22	6.67
Community Participation and Inclusion	12	8	20	6.06

The integrated analysis showed that the themes that appeared most often across the datasets were environmental sustainability, infrastructure, social services and economic empowerment. Environmental sustainability mentioned the conservation of biodiversity, alien plant management, accidental fires, and access to water, while economic empowerment referred to jobs and living conditions related to tourism-related activities. The themes of cultural heritage preservation and community participation were less common, but were still evident throughout the questionnaire and focus group responses.

3.4 Comparison Between Questionnaire and Focus Group Themes

A comparative overview of the themes in the questionnaire and focus group discussion is provided in Table 3. As seen in the table, the most dominant theme in both sets of data was environmental sustainability, with 26.06% of the questionnaire themes and 35.15% of the focus group discussion themes. Social services and economic empowerment, infrastructure were also significant proportions for both methods.

Table 3. Questionnaire and FGD Theme Comparison

Theme	Questionnaire Frequency	Questionnaire Percentage	FGD Frequency	FGD Percentage	Combined Frequency	Combined Percentage
Environmental Sustainability	43	26.06	58	35.15	101	30.61
Infrastructure and Social Services	28	16.97	32	19.39	60	18.18
Economic Empowerment	36	21.82	24	14.55	60	18.18
Skills Development and Training	16	9.70	18	10.91	34	10.30
Governance and Institutional Support	17	10.30	16	9.70	33	10.00
Cultural Heritage Preservation	13	7.88	9	5.45	22	6.67
Community Participation and Inclusion	12	7.27	8	4.85	20	6.06

Data obtained from the questionnaire and focus group discussions indicate there is a high level of convergence between the two sets of data. Results show that there were common themes that appeared in both methods, further lending credibility and reliability to the mixed-methods. Environmental sustainability was the most common theme both in the

questionnaire results and the focus group discussions (see Figure 3); however, it was more prevalent in the focus group discussions. There was also relatively even coverage within the two datasets for infrastructure and social services. Economic empowerment, on the other hand, was more prevalent in the questionnaires than in the focus group discussions.\

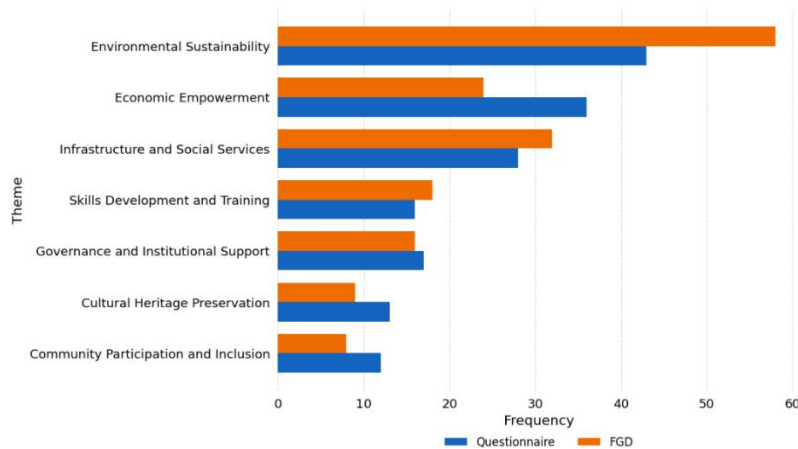


Figure 3. Questionnaire and FGD Theme Comparison

The focus group discussions yielded more information on the issues of environmental constraints, governance issues and infrastructure constraints; and the questionnaires yielded more information on economic empowerment and livelihoods. The comparison shows that there were common themes from the questionnaire responses and the focus group discussions. The findings were integrated, and the most prevalent themes of cultural tourism and local community experiences were found to be environmental sustainability, economic empowerment, infrastructure and social services, and governance support.

4. Discussion

The results indicate cultural tourism is closely related to environmental sustainability, economic empowerment, infrastructure, governance and community participation in the Mankele community. The most prevailing theme in the mixed methods was environmental sustainability, showing that residents' perceptions of the development of tourism are linked to the state of their environment. The importance of alien plants, access to water, fire management and biodiversity indicates that tourism cannot be divorced from environmental management in the study area. Economic empowerment was also found to be a key finding. Respondents related tourism to employment, livelihood opportunities, and potential income generation activities, including cultural activities, crafts, food services, and local involvement in tourism-related activities. What the results indicate is that while the residents are aware of the benefits of tourism, they also believe that the current benefits are unequal and inadequate. The availability of infrastructure and social services was also a key consideration. Many roads, clinics, schools, water, electricity and transport have been mentioned and show that community empowerment does not only involve tourist jobs. Residents feel there is a link between meaningful tourism development and a better life. Governance and institutional support were also prominent, reflecting the importance of co-operation between different groups of tourism operators, government institutions and leadership in the community for empowerment.

The focus on economic empowerment is consistent with the findings that culture and cultural heritage can contribute to local livelihoods and creative economic activities, especially for marginalised communities and women (Surti et al., 2024). The finding is also aligned with the tourism literature in the communities, which sees tourism as a means of poverty reduction, employment creation and decent work if local people are involved in tourism value chains (Jackson, 2025). This is in line with studies that have suggested that sustainable environmental management is crucial for the continuity of tourism development and the tourism destinations' resilience (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2019). The same is true of sustainable tourism studies, which have emphasized the importance of stakeholders' roles in safeguarding environmental resources and managing the impacts of tourism in the tourism communities of the tourism destinations (Irawan et al., 2022). The environmental results are also related to green tourism literature, which reveals that tourism sustainability is linked to the responsible behaviour of tourists, awareness and development of the conservation of the environment (Ibnou-Laaroussi et al., 2020). In Mankele, environmental sustainability was depicted as a community development issue, as residents rely on land, water, vegetation and biodiversity for their day-to-day livelihoods.

The gendered and community empowerment aspects of the findings are backed by the research on cultural tourism and women empowerment that participation in cultural production can enhance their income, identity and social recognition (Su et al., 2023). The findings of the study also resonate with the evidence that the sustainable development of tourism in the local community requires empowering the community, especially when it strives to be more involved in planning, decision-making, and benefit sharing (Risfandini et al., 2023). The theme of cultural heritage preservation shows that, in general, cultural tourism development and traditional villages are closely related to the discussion of how traditional villages and local communities are important in preserving local wisdom (Suardana et al., 2022). Findings regarding governance also align with research that indicates that inclusive tourism governance and benefits at the community level

require local participation and coordination among various stakeholders (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2021).

The results are relevant in planning cultural tourism in the Mankele community. Ignite the tourism industry with the job creation, skills development, small enterprise creation, and give locals opportunities to be involved in the cultural tourism industry. Community members need to be identified as labour providers as well as contributors to cultural interpretation, heritage presentation and destination development. The results also indicate that environmental management needs to be incorporated in tourism planning. The management of alien plants, fire management, water issues, and biodiversity conservation would help to improve the sustainability of tourism and community welfare. There is a need to establish practical conservation and training programs between local institutions and the tourism industry through a local participation process involving the residents. Governance issues are not left behind. Improvement is required in participation mechanisms so that residents can be involved in decisions concerning tourism. Trust could be increased, and more inclusive empowerment outcomes could be achieved by community forums, local tourism committees, and clear benefit-sharing models.

There are some caveats to be mentioned. The study was carried out based on secondary data, and thus, the original data collection process was not controlled. The quantitative was descriptive, and the qualitative results were as they appeared in the available transcripts and in the information provided in the questionnaires. In future, it would be beneficial to use a larger household survey, involve tourism operators and government officials, and to compare the Mankele community with other communities in South Africa that have heritage tourism. A longitudinal study might also explore if there are changes over time in the participation in tourism, the environmental management and empowerment outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between environmental sustainability, economic empowerment, infrastructure, governance and community participation influences cultural tourism in the Mankele community. Findings from the mixed methods reveal that residents appreciate the value of tourism, but also feel that they are underrepresented in the benefits and decision-making processes of tourism. The greatest concern was environmental sustainability, which suggests that the development of tourism around the Sudwala Caves requires good management of natural resources, biodiversity, water access, alien plants and fire risks. Economic empowerment and infrastructure were also key parts of community experiences. Tourism was seen as a possible way of getting jobs, income, culture and skills, but it is still limited with weak local participation and limited institutional support. Cultural heritage preservation and community inclusion were less common, but were equally significant to ensure that tourism is a meaningful reflection of local identity and provides positive impacts on community well-being. As a planned and inclusive cultural tourism, when linked to environmental protection, skills development and equitable livelihood, there is clear potential for community empowerment. The results indicate that, in order to implement more sustainable and community-based tourism results, there is a need for more collaboration among tourism operators, local institutions and residents.

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