

# Unveiling the Potential of Community Support for Country Tourism: A Case Study of Oman's Dhofar Region

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**Abstract:** The tourist business in Oman is thriving, thanks to the upturn in local activity; income at 3-to 5-star hotels in the Sultanate increased by 135%, while the number of guests increased by 79.1%. Because of this, the National Centre for Science Information reports that hotel occupancy in Oman surged by 39.1 percent in February 2022. In light of the new priorities for Oman's tourist industry, the post-pandemic surge in demand for domestic and local attractions, such as Khareef Salalah 2022, has taken centre stage. Community support to promote Oman tourism post-pandemic in the Dhofar region, which is the important tourist destination of Oman, has not been studied yet, despite numerous studies aimed at understanding the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 on Oman's tourism and its strategic recovery. So, it's crucial to figure out how the public gets involved and what they do on purpose in the country's tourism industry during a pandemic. The study also delves into the variables and communication's involvement in getting people to rally behind the country's post-pandemic tourism recovery efforts. In order to accomplish important goals and get to the bottom of the investigation, the qualitative research design was adopted. Participants included representatives from travel agencies, adventure trip operators, tour guides, performers, and guests of the Salalah and Dhofar hotels. The interviews were semi-structured. Community involvement and the desire to support rural tourism are two areas where this study's findings will add to the existing literature in the hospitality and tourist industries.

**Keywords:** Community Supports and Measures; Oman's Tourism Industry; Tourism Recovery Drive Post-Pandemic; Public Participation and Intentional Behaviour; Global Tourism Industry; Tourism and Hospitality Literature.

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## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak and the prolonged pandemic have significantly impacted the global tourism industry. Due to worldwide travel restrictions, domestic and international tourism has encountered unprecedented challenges [14]. The tourism industry, including the accommodation industry, public transport, conferences, conventions, public events, cruise transitions, meetings, sports events, celebrations, cafes and restaurants, festivals, seminars, or sports events, experienced substantial disruption [21]. Countries worldwide encountered an unprecedented airport scenario where national and international flights were halted [14]. The World Health Organization has developed protocols that countries have implemented to contain the widespread dissemination of the virus, leading to an economic downturn. This decline has been more severe for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries due to the significant drop in oil prices [1]. Oman's tourism industry has also been profoundly affected by the pandemic, with the sector experiencing a direct loss of half a billion Omani rials at the end of September 2020 [30].

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a significant decline in visitors to Omani hotels, with a 53.9% drop. In the first ten months of 2020, only 646,841 guests visited Omani hotels, which is 1.40 million less than the previous year. Among these

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guests, 50% were Omani nationals, while 47,643 were from Asia, 164,873 were from Europe, 34,349 from GCC and Arab countries, 18,335 were from other non-Gulf Arab countries, 17,919 from the Americas, 5,302 from Oceania, 3,391 from Africa, and 17,342 visitors from different nationalities [4]. Moreover, the revenue of 3- to 5-star hotels has dropped by 60.2%, and their occupancy rates have declined by 50.1%.

The limited operation of flights has had a catastrophic impact on associated business activities such as tour operators, travel booking agents, event management companies, restaurants, and other tourism-related services [12]. However, after the reopening of international borders, Oman’s tourism industry has strongly recovered. With the rebounding of domestic activities, Oman’s tourism industry is recovering, with revenues of 3 to 5-star Omani hotels recording an increase of 135 percent and a rise in guest numbers of 79.1 percent. As a result, the occupancy of Omani hotels increased by 39.1 per cent in February 2022 [8]. The first emphasis has been given to the substantial demand for local and domestic tourism after the pandemic to revive Oman’s tourism. Therefore, examining community attitudes and intentions to engage and promote country tourism is essential [11].

**1.1. Research Questions**

- What types of community and public support can be implemented to promote country tourism in the post-pandemic era?
- How effective are these supports in increasing tourism flow to the Dhofar region of Oman?
- How does effective communication play a role in encouraging community involvement and mitigating the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry in the Dhofar region of Oman?
- What other factors contribute to positive community involvement in promoting country tourism?

**1.2. The objective of The Study**

- To investigate the impact of accountability, capability building, and leader support, crucial elements in promoting community empowerment.
- To explore the significant role of communication in promoting community support and empowerment.
- To understand how community empowerment can impact the perceived benefit and perceived cost of supporting country tourism.
- Further, the study examines how community support is critical in achieving sustainable tourism development (STD).

**1.3. Research Gap**

Despite being a prominent tourist destination in Oman, research has yet to be conducted to understand how the local community can support the recovery of the tourism industry in Dhofar and what measures can be taken to promote tourism in the region after the pandemic [22]. Therefore, further research is needed to develop effective strategies for promoting tourism in Dhofar and ensuring its sustainable recovery post-COVID-19.

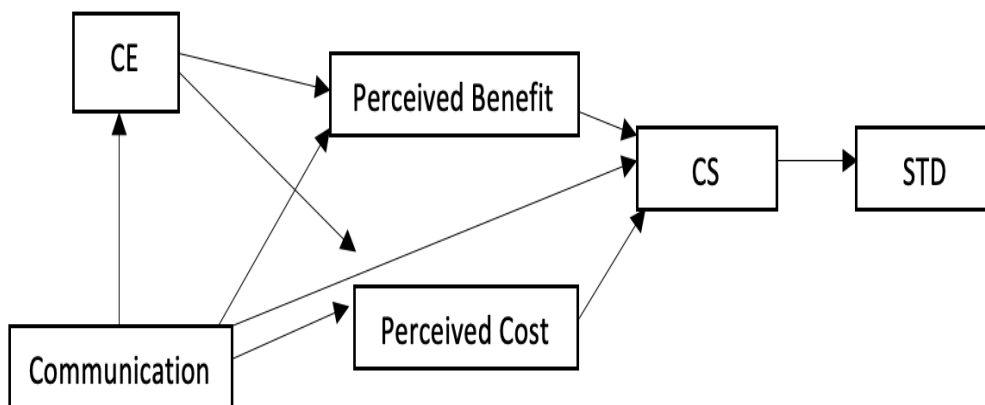
**1.4. Research Framework**

The adopted research framework is based on a study by Khalid et al. [27]. However, this framework has been further extended by including communication, which can influence community support for STDs. Communication is critical in this framework, as it disseminates information regarding tourism development and calls for public participation [10]. Communication is used to raise awareness and perception and build trust, changing attitudes towards tourism (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Construct and Items

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>References</b>
Community Empowerment	Attachment (AM), Capability Building (CB) Leader Support (LS)	Khalid et al., [27]
Communication	Channel of Communication (CC)	Rosyidi et al., [17]
Perceived Benefits Perceived Cost	Tourism rewards (TR), Quality of Life (QOL), Tourism investment, Risk Factor	Nunkoo and Ramkissoo [20]
Community Support		Khalid et al., [27]
STD		Khalid et al., [27]

According to Putri and Adinia [10], an integrated communication model for social change suggests that communication can significantly impact society individually and collectively. Thus, communication helps create plans and formulate programs essential for successful STDs. As Rosyidi et al. [17], communication is crucial in building group networks and creating a consensus for participating in country tourism. Overall, including communication and SET theory in this research framework represents a significant step towards understanding the complex factors that influence community support for STDs [23] (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Research Framework. CE- Community Empowerment; CS- Community Support; STD- Sustainable Tourism Development

## 2. Literature Review

Community empowerment is a critical aspect of community development. It involves giving community members the power to take control of decisions that positively affect their lives. Community empowerment is closely related to community support and perceived benefits [25]. This literature review explores community empowerment factors, including accountability, capability building, leader support, communication influence on perceived benefit, cost, and community support.

### 2.1. Accountability, Capability Building, Leader Support and Community Empowerment.

Accountability, capability building, and leader support are essential factors that significantly influence community empowerment. Accountability refers to the act of being responsible for one’s actions. It involves being transparent and answerable to the community. According to Hermawan [9], accountability positively influences community empowerment by enhancing trust and confidence between community members and their leaders. Capability building involves enhancing community members’ skills, knowledge, and resources. It equips them with the necessary tools to take control of their lives. According to Tafara [3], capability building positively influences community empowerment. This enables community members to participate actively in decision-making processes. Leader support involves providing the necessary guidance and resources to community members and creating a conducive environment that enables them to thrive. According to Tafara [3], leader support positively influences community empowerment. This is because it creates a sense of belonging and encourages community members to participate actively in decision-making.

### 2.2. Communication, Perceived Benefit, Perceived Cost, and Community Support:

Communication is a crucial factor that positively influences community empowerment. Effective communication involves exchanging ideas and information between community members and their leaders. According to Tafara [3], communication positively influences community empowerment by enhancing transparency and fostering trust and confidence between community members and their leaders.

Perceived benefit and perceived cost are essential factors that significantly influence community empowerment. Perceived benefit refers to the perceived advantages that the community members stand to gain by participating in decision-making processes. On the other hand, perceived cost refers to the perceived disadvantages that community members face by participating in decision-making processes. According to Yu et al., [5] perceived benefit and perceived cost significantly influence community empowerment because they affect the willingness of the community members to participate actively in decision-making processes.

### **2.3. Communication and Community Empowerment**

Effective communication is critical to community empowerment. Communication involves exchanging ideas and information between community members and their leaders. Effective communication promotes transparency, trust, and confidence between community members and their leaders. This literature review explores the various ways in which communication positively influences community empowerment. Transparency is an essential aspect of effective communication. It involves being open and honest about information and ideas. According to Tafara [3], transparency positively influences community empowerment by enhancing trust and confidence between community members and their leaders. When community members feel that their leaders are transparent, they are more likely to participate actively in decision-making. Effective communication promotes shared knowledge between community members and their leaders. When community members have access to information and ideas, they are better equipped to participate actively in decision-making. According to Hermawan [9], shared knowledge positively influences community empowerment by equipping community members with the necessary tools to take control of their lives.

### **2.4. Perceived Benefit, Perceived Cost and Community Support**

Perceived benefit, perceived cost, and community support are essential factors to consider when examining the effectiveness of community interventions. In the literature, perceived benefit refers to the perceived positive outcomes or advantages individuals believe they will receive from participating in a particular program or intervention. On the other hand, perceived cost refers to the perceived adverse outcomes or disadvantages individuals think they will experience due to participating in a particular program or intervention. Research has shown that perceived benefit significantly predicts participation in community interventions. For example, a study by Kegler et al. [16] found that individuals who perceived more significant benefits from participating in a community-based physical activity program were likelier to participate. Nunkoo and Ramkissoo [24] also explain that the social exchange theory (SET) has been widely used to describe how the exchange of resources, patterns of rewards, and investment costs affect the level of community participation and support for sustainable tourism development. The study also highlights a strong direct link between perceived benefits and support for the tourism industry.

Similarly, Mattke et al. [28] found that individuals who perceived more significant benefits from participating in a worksite wellness program were likelier to participate. Perceived cost has also been a significant predictor of participation in community interventions. For example, a study by Kegler et al. [16] found that individuals who perceived more significant costs associated with participating in a community-based physical activity program were less likely to participate. Similarly, Mattke et al. [28] found that individuals who perceived more significant costs associated with participating in a worksite wellness program were less likely to participate. Community support is another significant factor to consider when examining the effectiveness of community interventions. Community support refers to the support individuals receive from their community, including family, friends, and colleagues, for participating in a particular program or intervention. Research has shown that community support is a significant predictor of participation in community interventions. For example, a study by Eyler et al. [2] found that individuals who received social support from their family and friends were likelier to participate in a community-based physical activity program. Thus, perceived benefit, perceived cost, and community support are all significant factors to consider when examining the effectiveness of community interventions. Individuals who perceive more significant benefits, lower costs, and more excellent community support are likelier to participate in community interventions, which can lead to positive health outcomes for individuals and communities [29].

The study showed that effective communication increased the perceived benefit of participating in community programs, leading to higher levels of community support. Effective communication positively influenced the perceived cost of participation in community programs, leading to increased community support [10]. In addition to the perceived benefit and cost, communication positively influences community support. A study by Alexander et al. [13] showed that effective communication between community members and program leaders increased community support for the initiative. This was particularly true when the communication was perceived as transparent and honest. Effective communication can positively influence the perceived benefit and perceived cost of participation, which can ultimately increase community support for the initiative. To ensure the success of community programs, it is essential to prioritize effective communication between program leaders and community members.

### **2.5. Community Support and Sustainable Tourism Development**

Gursoy and Kendall [6] highlight the importance of the local community in promoting sustainable tourism development. Community support includes emotional and practical assistance provided by one's social networks, such as family, friends, and other community members. The backing of the local community is crucial for sustainable tourism development to be successful. Several factors influence community support and effectiveness in promoting sustainable tourism development, including economic benefits, environmental concerns, and social impacts.

Gursoy et al. [7] emphasize the importance of economic benefits in promoting community support for sustainable tourism development. The local community is more likely to support sustainable tourism development when it generates economic benefits for the local community. Similarly, environmental concerns are vital in promoting community support for sustainable tourism development. The local community is more likely to support sustainable tourism development when tourism activities are environmentally responsible. Social impacts refer to the effects of tourism activities on the local community. The local community is more likely to support sustainable tourism development when tourism activities have positive social impacts, such as creating employment opportunities and promoting cultural exchange.

Effective communication is also crucial in promoting community support for sustainable tourism development, as Gössling et al. [26] noted. Effective communication involves exchanging ideas and information between community members and tourism stakeholders, which can help increase understanding and support for sustainable tourism development.

The importance of community support in sustainable tourism development has been recognized worldwide, as studies conducted in various regions of the World have shown. The participation, engagement, and goodwill of locals are crucial to the success of the tourism industry. However, community support depends on perceived benefits and investment costs to tourism ventures. Positive benefits encourage residents to participate more, as it improves their financial conditions and standard of living. Therefore, responsible tourism planning focuses on host community welfare by minimizing tourism development costs and empowering them through resource identification, capacity building, and environmental education.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study applied qualitative research designs to address key objectives and attain research findings. The author found that this method was more suitable to assess the experiences and perceptions of tourism stakeholders towards participating in Oman Tourism. A semi-structured interview was designed to gather data. Fifteen In-person and telephonic interviews were conducted with various stakeholders in the Salalah, Dhofar tourism community, including representatives from hotels, travel agencies, tour guides, entertainers, and adventure facilitators.

It was observed that the culture in the north part of Oman differs from that of the south, which made some respondents reluctant to answer openly. Language was also a constraint, with some respondents preferring to answer the questions by writing themselves in Arabic. The authors used an open-ended question survey to assess respondents' subjective understanding.

Random and snowball sampling techniques were applied, and six constructs were devised: communication (Independent variable), community empowerment, perceived benefits, perceived cost, community support, and STD (Dependent variables). This pilot study was conducted to understand the community's needs and level of support for promoting Oman tourism, as the Oman government wants to achieve sustainable development by creating community consensus.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

According to the research, the interviewees' ages ranged from 25 to 55, and their responses were transcribed verbatim. A majority of 66.57% of the interviewees believe that a sense of belongingness to Oman empowers them to participate in the country's tourism [15]. The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism is working on a renewed tourism plan for the entire year, which includes initiatives like the Ubar Empty Quarters festival. Initially, the locals were not enthusiastic about the idea but later realized the benefits and became more involved [18]. The tourism officers provide information to stakeholders through telephones and social media [19].

A renowned camp organizer at Ubar, the lost city, explains that due to government initiatives, Ubar tourism has flourished. Although the locals did not initially appreciate the idea of a winter festival, they later understood the benefits, and Ubar tourism has been expanding yearly.

Tourist Guide1 mainly works with European tourists and says Oman's beautiful resources empower the country's tourism. He mentioned that he has never received any financial support from the government. However, the government supports local communities in many ways, such as loans and other financial support. In recent years, the government has developed Ubar, the Empty Quarter. A few years ago, there was only one camp, but now many camps and tourist activities are being organized in winter, apart from Khareef Salalah.

He added that Oman's Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has effectively managed communication with tourism stakeholders. The ease of scheduling phone appointments has promoted open dialogue on various topics. Additionally, the Ministry emphasizes the importance of utilizing a communication channel to attract tourists and educate local communities about the benefits of tourism, thereby alleviating concerns regarding cost and risk. The interview response indicates that Oman's Ministry

of Heritage and Tourism has emphasized effective communication as it is vital in encouraging community involvement and mitigating the pandemic's impact on the tourism industry in the Dhofar region of Oman. Involving the local community in decision-making and addressing their concerns builds trust and encourages support for tourism initiatives.

According to Tourist Guide<sup>2</sup>, social media has proven to be a valuable communication channel for attracting tourists to Oman. Tourists often research destinations on the internet and social media before making travel plans, so showcasing Oman's natural beauty, friendly people, and safety is crucial. Oman is widely considered one of the safest countries in the World.

The 360-degree shift in tourism activities has benefited local communities, and now they have started seeing tourism as a viable secondary source of income. The government has intentionally included local communities in the growth of the tourism industry. Oman's natural resources present numerous opportunities for tourism activities such as Scuba diving, fishing, mountaineering, paragliding, camping, and more. By promoting the benefits of tourism, the Ministry can encourage more communities to engage in tourism, supporting locals by purchasing food, traditional goods, and cultural artefacts. It is worth noting that tourists often buy such items from locals. The interview response indicated that post-pandemic tourism practices focused more on promoting local culture and heritage through festivals, events, and cultural activities. The community supported this drive, which helped attract more visitors and generate their interest in the region. Oman Government's revived plan focused more on investment in infrastructure development to make it easier and more convenient for tourists.

Tourist Guide<sup>3</sup>, also known as the "Salalah Guru," has stated that it is essential to understand the Oman tourism industry's challenges. He expressed his support for the Ministry's efforts to promote tourism in the country, particularly in attracting young people to the industry. The respondent emphasized that love for the country often motivates individuals to participate in the tourism industry, and the growing support of local communities is a positive sign for the industry's future. However, he also highlighted the need for improvement in transportation infrastructure. During the Khareef season, the issue of traffic congestion is a significant concern for both locals and tourists, and it can hinder the overall visitor experience. He suggested that policymakers focus on innovative strategies to manage traffic, such as promoting alternative transportation modes or encouraging visitors to use public transportation. This can enhance the visitor experience and contribute to the sustainable development of Oman's tourism industry.

Compared to Khareef 2022 and Khareef 2023, community support has improved. According to a survey, 80.95% of interviewees have stated that people's participation has increased due to the Oman government's tourism initiatives. While 14.28% of interviewees noted that community participation has improved to some extent, they also pointed out that there is still a long way to go. More involvement from Omani youth is needed. In the survey, 90.48% of interviewees stated that directly benefiting the local community would encourage investment in small and medium enterprises. The media communication network must communicate more effectively with the local community and create awareness to promote country tourism and encourage public participation. Youth involvement can also create consensus and build greater community cohesion.

The interview results indicate that a notable proportion of Salalah's tourism stakeholders (28.57%) exhibit a strong sense of social responsibility towards their country and community. These individuals are dedicated to ensuring their involvement in the tourism industry benefits themselves and the broader society. On the other hand, 38% of respondents engaged in country tourism activities because they enjoyed the tourism profession. The Omani government has implemented several initiatives to promote tourism in the country, including developing tourism infrastructure, promoting Oman's tourism image globally, and providing various leisure activities. The Khareef 2022 festival is a new initiative that places greater emphasis on providing visitors with a diverse range of activities. Most interviewees (85%) appreciated the government's effort and leadership in implementing these initiatives. However, a significant portion of stakeholders (42%) felt that more must be done to ensure that a more comprehensive population can benefit from these efforts and independently engage in country tourism activities. They believe that the government should improve accessibility to resources and opportunities for the less privileged and marginalized members of society.

During the interview, the participants developed insightful ideas on enhancing tourism in the Dhofar region. One of the most compelling suggestions was to focus on developing the Darbat and Saat areas. These areas have breathtaking natural landscapes and cultural sites that have the potential to attract a large number of tourists. However, to ensure that these areas remain sustainable, a system needs to be in place to manage traffic and minimize the impact of tourism on the environment. Furthermore, it was suggested that Oman should promote its tourism industry beyond just the Khareef season. The region's unique winter season could be marketed to showcase its serene beauty and distinct offerings.

Additionally, Oman's rich art and crafts heritage could be showcased through exhibitions and fairs, providing a platform for local small and medium enterprises to showcase their products and benefit directly. Media communication networks need to be more active and enhanced in promoting Oman's natural and cultural offerings and encouraging public participation. This will

help raise awareness about the country's tourism potential among the youth, create a consensus among society's people, and ensure that Oman's tourism industry is sustainable and beneficial for all stakeholders.

Community support from all sections has driven the tourism sector's growth. To increase long-term investment, youth and women must participate equally in promoting tourism. Different communication channels are significant in raising awareness regarding the benefits of tourism. The target audience can effectively convey the message by using multiple communication channels. This can be achieved through various means, such as social media campaigns, community events, and educational programs. Furthermore, funding opportunities, robust tourism infrastructure, and skills development programs can contribute to communities' positive involvement in promoting tourism.

The interview responses indicate several factors influencing positive community involvement in promoting country tourism. Ensuring direct benefits and communicating this to the local community generates more interest in participating in tourism practices. This can include providing employment opportunities, supporting local businesses and other economic benefits, and preserving local heritage and culture. Additionally, involving the community in the planning and decision-making can help build support and encourage ownership of tourism initiatives. Finally, effective communication and transparency can help build trust and promote community involvement.

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the research findings, there are several practical implications for the tourism industry in Oman. Firstly, the government's efforts to promote tourism have increased community participation. However, there is still room for improvement, particularly in engaging the youth in the tourism industry. To achieve this, the government should focus on creating awareness among the youth, highlighting the benefits of tourism, and providing more opportunities for them to engage in the industry.

Secondly, the government should continue emphasizing a range of communication channels to attract tourists and educate local communities about the benefits of tourism. Social media platforms have proven to be valuable communication tools, and the government should focus on using these channels effectively to promote Oman's natural beauty, friendly people, and safety. A multi-communication channel strategy must be incorporated to reach a comprehensive community and encourage them to participate in country tourism.

Thirdly, the government should improve transportation infrastructure to manage traffic congestion during the Khareef season for Dhofar's region. Innovative strategies such as promoting alternative transportation modes or encouraging visitors to use public transportation should be explored to enhance the overall visitor experience.

Finally, community support and social responsibility should be emphasized in the tourism industry in Oman. The government should focus on improving access to resources and opportunities for the less privileged and marginalized members of society to ensure that a broader population can benefit from tourism development initiatives. Women need to be promoted to participate actively in different tourism initiatives. This will increase new investment opportunities, help create a consensus in society, and ensure that Oman's tourism industry is sustainable and beneficial for all stakeholders.

### **5.1. Future Direction**

Based on the current research, future studies can be conducted on various aspects of tourism to enhance its benefits and promote sustainable tourism practices. One area of focus is tourism awareness campaigns, which highlight tourism's economic, social, and environmental benefits. Such campaigns attract more visitors and increase opportunities for youth participation in tourism-related activities. Another potential area of exploration could be innovative transportation solutions that can enhance the overall visitor experience. This can include exploring alternative transportation modes, such as electric vehicles or bike-sharing programs, that can reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainable tourism practices.

Moreover, future studies can also focus on how government tourism initiatives can benefit the less privileged and marginalized members of society. This can be achieved by improving accessibility of resources and opportunities, such as education and training programs, and promoting women's involvement in tourism activities. By doing so, tourism can become a more inclusive and sustainable industry that benefits all members of society.

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