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Impact of Community Participation on Sustainable Development in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh: Mediating Effect of Marine Tourism Development

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Abstract

While marine tourism is crucial to coastal economies, community engagement is highly essential for its long-term viability. Achieving a balance between ecological conservation and economic expansion in marine tourism destinations demands a greater understanding of how local participation influences sustainable development. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the impact of community participation on sustainable development in the context of a popular marine tourism destination, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, explicitly focusing on the mediating position of marine tourism development. Adopting a quantitative research approach, 400 local communities were surveyed. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyse the relationships between "community participation," "marine tourism development," and "sustainable development outcomes." The findings reveal that higher levels of local engagement significantly contribute to sustainable development outcomes, with marine tourism serving as a crucial mediator. By empowering local communities, policymakers can enhance the efficacy of marine tourism as an instrument for sustainable development in Cox's Bazar and similar coastal regions.

Keywords: Community participation, sustainable development, marine tourism, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

Community engagement in sustainable development initiatives has attracted considerable attention and has been adopted as a technique for achieving long-term natural and socio-economic objectives by various government and non-government organisations (Sutresna et al., 2019; Hamzah et al., 2020). Participation from local communities enhances a sense of ownership by ensuring that development interventions are aligned with the needs and aspirations of those directly affected (Thetsane, 2019). Sustainable development involves considering the needs of the current generation without compromising future generations' capacity to address their issues (Barbosa et al., 2014). It requires a holistic approach to development planning and implementation because it encompasses ecological, social, and economic aspects (Rahman et al., 2022).

Similar to other development interventions, community engagement has been emphasised as a prerequisite to meaningful tourism development. Studies to date have explored different facets of community participation in tourism across varying contexts (see Avi et al., 2020; Kabir & Avi, 2023; Ma et al., 2024). However, what is missing is a rigorous analysis of community participation induced by marine tourism development, and it affects the sustainable development of the respective destinations (Cong & Chi, 2021; Hern´andez et al., 2023). Hence, this study aims to assess the impact of community engagement on sustainable development by examining the mediating role of marine tourism development in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Cox's Bazar is well-known for its spectacular natural beauty, particularly for its recognition as the world’s longest unbroken sandy beach (Avi et al., 2021; Bhuiyan et al., 2020). Marine tourism development plays a significant role in Cox's Bazar’s development, attracting many visitors seeking to explore its coastal beauty (Bhuiyan et al., 2020). Sustainable development in Cox's Bazar is of utmost importance due to climate change vulnerability,

disasters, and the fragile marine ecosystem, which hosts a diverse range of flora and fauna. Unsustainable tourism exerts significant environmental pressure, leading to pollution, habitat degradation, and resource depletion (Islam & Shamsuddoha, 2018). Hence, exploring the effect of marine tourism development on community engagement and sustainable development in the study context becomes essential to understand the dynamics and outcomes of these interactions (Bhuiyan et al., 2020).

This study intends to investigate the different facets in this regard. The key objective is to assess the impact of local community participation on sustainable development in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, through the mediation of marine tourism development. While pursuing that, the study intends to explore the correlation between "community participation" and "marine tourism development", "marine tourism development" and "sustainable development", and explain how "marine tourism development" mediates the relationship between "community participation and sustainable development". The findings are believed to offer meaningful insights to policymakers and local administrators in marine tourism destinations while contributing to the extant literature on "community participation in tourism and sustainable development".

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community participation in tourism

Local communities have long been highlighted as the 'nucleus' of tourism development (Simmons, 1994) and excluding them from tourism may be counter-productive to sustainable tourism (Hoque, 2020). Any country's tourism industry benefits from community participation directly and indirectly (Amin et al., 2020; Eyisi et al., 2021; Thetsane, 2019). Alongside the active engagement in tourism ventures, they may offer valuable insights into destination characteristics such as cultural, ecological, and historical resources

(Amin et al., 2020; Hamzah et al., 2020). Such engaging interactions between hosts and tourists are essential for fostering tourism development. It provides visitors with an opportunity to learn more about local communities and engage in cultural exchange (Eyisi et al., 2021; Tosun, 1999). Furthermore, locals' engagement contributes to the preservation of ecological resources through promoting sustainable practices. Contributions to projects such as path maintenance, waste management, wildlife conservation, and habitat restoration can help sustain the area's natural resources (Kasim et al., 2021). Community participation can also contribute to the development of marine tourism, as discussed below.

Marine tourism development

Marine tourism refers to tourist activities conducted in water bodies such as oceans, seas, and other bodies of water (Orams & Lück, 2014). However, these activities include scuba diving, boat tours, cruises, snorkelling, sailing trips, yachting, fishing, and so on (Avi et al, 2021). With appropriate approaches and considerations, marine tourism development is possible. The marine tourism sector of any country can grow if the proper infrastructure and facilities are built (Ciacci et al., 2021); safety rules and guidelines are put in place for tourists while they are doing marine tourism activities (Wilks, 2021); marine ecosystems are protected, and sustainable practices are used (Islam & Shamsuddoha, 2018); the local communities are involved in planning and developing marine tourism initiatives (Rahman et al., 2022); and marketing, promotion, research, and monitoring are given top priority (Tien et al., 2021). Wang and Zhang (2019) added that marine tourism resources can be developed through the sustainable development of the marine economy. Hence, there is a link between marine tourism development and sustainable development, as it can be attributed to the three aspects of sustainable development addressed in the following section.

Sustainable development

The sustainable development concept "fulfils the needs of the present generation without compromising the future generation's necessities" (Lee & Jan, 2019). It stresses the balanced integration of ecological conservation, economic progress, and social well-being in development interventions, including tourism (Barbosa et al., 2014; Rahman et al., 2022). Ecological sustainability refers to protecting and preserving environmental resources through ecosystem conservation, the protection of endangered species, biodiversity preservation, the implementation of sustainable water management practices, and encouraging responsible behaviour among tourists and local communities (Mondino & Beery, 2019). Economic sustainability prioritises long-term economic growth by efficiently utilising resources and minimising negative impacts (Hsu, 2019). This aspect encompasses economic diversification, responsible resource management, support for local businesses, promotion of green technologies, and minimisation of adverse environmental effects (Choi et al., 2021). Social sustainability includes several elements, such as empowering local communities in decision-making systems (Rahman et al., 2022). This cultural exchange benefits both tourists and host communities (Zaei & Zaei, 2013), promoting social services, infrastructure development, and access to healthcare, education, and recreational facilities that ultimately ensure the quality of life (Luck et al., 2010), encouraging tourism activities that respect local customs and traditions (Ahebwa et al., 2016), minimising negative social impacts, and fostering mutual (host-guest) respect and understanding (Stankova & Vassenska, 2015).

Various bodies have highlighted tourism as a sustainable development tool in different contexts, where the importance of local participation has been acknowledged (Hern´andez et al., 2023; Roem, 2023). Nonetheless, the evidence demonstrates contested outcomes to date, particularly regarding benefits for local communities arising from such development, as such benefits

are essential to accept and support a development intervention and subsequently participate in it (see Hoque et al., 2022). Importantly, marine tourism development induced community participation and how it affects sustainable development initiatives at a destination scale demands a better understanding. Hence, this paper aims to investigate such a relationship in a marine tourism destination setting- Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Theoretical underpinning

The essence of Alternative Development (AD) (Pieterse, 1998) is embraced in this study, which assumes that marine tourism development could lead to sustainable development by fostering community participation. While theories such as Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and Social Exchange Theory (SET) offer valuable understandings, e.g., CBT focuses on project-level execution (Asker et al., 2010). SET stresses perceived costs and benefits (Ap, 1992), whereas AD theory provides an inclusive framework that situates tourism within the broader social, political, and ecological contexts (Ziai, 2017; Bebbington, 2000). The AD concept postulates that development moves beyond economic aspects and adopts a holistic approach, prioritising community participation, e.g., community governance (Koop, 2014). This makes AD ideally suited to critically analyse how tourism development in coastal zones can be aligned with local demands and regenerative implementations (Bebbington, 2000; Koop, 2014). Therefore, AD provides a guiding theory and a transformative instrument for evaluating whether tourism promotes sustainable and inclusive development in coastal regions (Ziai, 2017). The notion of sustainable development largely aligns with the principles of AD approaches (Gudynas, 2016), which encourage the adoption of innovative tools and experiments to pursue development (Berkhout et al., 2010).

Acknowledging that marine tourism development can be considered a sustainable development tool, theory indicates that development effort depends on the tool, and community engagement is crucial to achieving development by

utilising and implementing it (Pieterse, 1998; Eyisi et al., 2021). Earlier studies (such as Sutresna et al., 2019; Bhuiyan et al., 2020; Dimitrovski et al., 2021) have demonstrated that various perspectives on development can enhance our understanding of how community engagement and tourism growth influence different aspects of sustainable development, including social, environmental, and economic sustainability. In addition, Rahman et al. (2022) noted that community participation in ecotourism impacts sustainable development. Similarly, Bhuiyan et al. (2020) also argued that ecotourism and marine tourism have enormous potential to enhance sustainable development. Therefore, this study examines whether community participation and marine tourism development contribute to sustainable development in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Hypotheses development

Hypothesis 1: Community Participation and Marine Tourism Development

Previous studies have shown that local engagement, particularly in the planning and implementation stages, is crucial for successful marine tourism development (Elliott et al., 2001; Eshliki & Kaboudi, 2012; Rahman et al., 2022; Singgalen et al., 2019). Prabhakaran et al. (2016) identified the local community's contribution to mitigating marine waste in reducing the climate change impacts on tourism destinations. Besides, Warouw et al. (2018) argued that local participation contributes to sustainable marine tourism development by promoting sustainable practices. In addition, AD theory articulates endogenous development by enhancing local ownership, capacity, and awareness in the creation of tourism pathways (Bebbington, 2000; Koop, 2014). In alignment with this, Kasim et al. (2021) supported the notion that the community role is crucial for marine resource protection. Hence, the hypothesis can be proposed that:

H1. "Community participation has a positive impact on marine tourism development."

Hypothesis 2: Marine Tourism Development and Sustainable Development

Many authors argue that the development of marine resources is a driving force for sustainable development in coastal areas (Wang & Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2020; Noronha et al., 2002; Tien et al., 2021). Earlier literature found that the marine tourism development can contribute to generating employment opportunities for the local communities (Avi et al., 2021; Klein et al., 2004), creates opportunities for new businesses (González-Morales et al., 2021), and establishes or improves infrastructural facilities, such as ports, marinas, piers, visitor centres, and recreational amenities, and diversification of the local and national economies (Kovačić et al., 2016; Lousada & Castanho, 2022). On the other side, Mafruhah et al. (2020) argued that environmental sustainability through creating marine conservation awareness, developing sustainable infrastructure, and monitoring efforts to assess the marine ecosystems' health, can be possible through marine tourism development. Apart from these, Rahman et al. (2022), Leposa (2020), González-Morales et al. (2021) mentioned that the marine resources development has a positive influence on social sustainability, which improves the overall socioeconomic well-being of the local communities. These conform with the AD's core principles of endogenous growth when guided by justice, participation, and sustainability, significantly contributing to inclusive development in coastal regions (Pieterse, 1998; Bebbington, 2000; Koop, 2014; Ziai, 2017). Hence, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H2. "Marine tourism development has a positive impact on sustainable development."

H2a. Marine tourism development has a positive impact on economic sustainability.

H2b. Marine tourism development has a positive impact on environmental sustainability.

H2c. Marine tourism development positively impacts social sustainability.

Hypothesis 3: Community Participation, Marine Tourism Development and Sustainable Development

Marine tourism development can affect the correlation between "community engagement" and "sustainable development" by establishing a platform for their engagement, harnessing local knowledge, aligning community interests with sustainable goals, balancing economic benefits and environmental conservation, enhancing socio-cultural well-being and promoting sustainability (Basile et al., 2021; Pittman et al., 2019; Francolini et al., 2023). By integrating community engagement, marine tourism development can contribute to a more inclusive, responsible, and sustainable tourism industry (Masud et al., 2017; Sutawa, 2012). The AD theory also reflects tourism as a means of transformative change, as it supports endogenous growth and turns community engagement into socially equitable and ecologically responsible outcomes (Koop, 2014). Hence, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H3. "Marine tourism development mediates the relationship between community participation and sustainable development."

H3a. Marine tourism development mediates the relationship between community participation and economic sustainability.

H3b. Marine tourism development mediates the relationship between community participation and environmental sustainability.

H3c. Marine tourism development mediates the relationship between community participation and social sustainability.

Conceptual framework

This study conceptualises community engagement as impacting marine tourism development and, in turn, sustainable development. It considers community participation as an independent variable, marine tourism development as a mediator, and sustainable development as a dependent variable, adopting the AD theory. By adding a new mediator, "marine tourism development", to the link between "community participation" and "three aspects of sustainable development", this study attempted to contribute to the

broader notion of AD. Studies in this regard are scarce and thus demand further understanding across different contexts. Figure 1 shows the conceptual basis of this study.

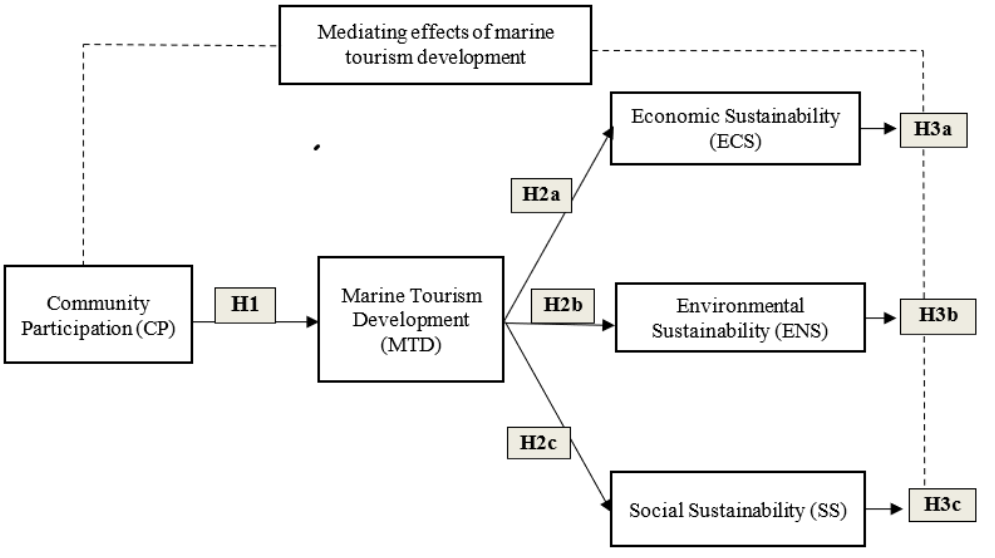

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Source: Authors' own

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedure

The quantitative research approach was adopted in this study as an appropriate way of testing relationships among variables through hypothesis development (Heslinga et al., 2012). The research area was located in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Although there are many marine tourist spots in other coastal districts in Bangladesh, Cox's Bazar was selected due to its natural appeal, unique features, accessibility, popularity of its marine tourist attractions, and suitable amenities and facilities (Bhuiyan et al., 2020).

Data were collected from local communities in the Cox's Bazar region. A two-stage sampling strategy was employed to ensure both relevance and representativeness. First, purposive sampling was used to identify a target

population based on specific inclusion criteria: (a) the respondents must be residents of the Cox's Bazar area, (b) they must be directly or indirectly engaged in marine tourism activities, and/or (c) they must possess awareness of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of marine tourism, including its contributions to local livelihoods, social well-being, and environmental conservation. Second, from this purposively defined group, participants were randomly selected to minimise selection bias and enhance the credibility of the findings. This approach allowed for a balance between methodological rigour and relevance to the research objectives.

The SmartPLS algorithm, using structural equation modelling, was applied to analyse the relationships among the "independent", "mediator", and "dependent" variables. The "partial least squares (PLS)" statistical instrument was applied in two steps. At first, the "measurement model" was evaluated using "confirmatory factor analysis", and then the "structural model" was used to assess hypotheses.

Instrumentation

Survey questionnaires were originally prepared in English and later translated into Bengali so that local people could understand and respond appropriately. In total, 400 respondents were surveyed. A "five-point Likert scale" ("5 = strongly agree" to "1 = strongly disagree") was used for collecting responses from respondents. The following Table 1 presents how variables are operationalised in this study:

Table 1: Operationalisation of variables

Variables	No. of Items Utilised	Sources	Example Item
CP	05	Chamarro et al. (2023), Hsu et al. (2020), Rahman et al. (2022)	"Full participation by everyone in the community is necessary for successful marine tourism development."
MTD	05	Rahman et al. (2022), Dimitrovski et al. (2021)	"CP will ensure MTD."
ECS	06	Rahman et al. (2022), Chamarro et al. (2023)	"MTD will improve economic well-being."

ENS	07	Rahman et al. (2022), Hsu et al. (2020)	"CP will support environmental conservation and development projects by developing marine tourism sectors."
SS	05	Rahman et al. (2022), Bhuiyan et al. (2020)	"MTD will improve social well-being."

Source: Authors' own

FINDINGS

Measurement Model

This study used SmartPLS v4.1 to examine the structural model and the established hypotheses. SmartPLS is well known for PLS-SEM analysis and provides the necessary reliability and validity results before running bootstrapping for hypothesis testing (Ringle et al., 2022). Initially, the study tested the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). There were 28 items across five constructs in this study, and all items had loadings above the threshold of 0.708 for reflective indicators, as defined by several academicians (Hair et al., 2019; McNeish et al., 2023; Sarstedt et al., 2021). "Cronbach's Alpha (CA)" and "Composite Reliability (CR)" are common tools to assess internal consistency, with thresholds of 0.700-0.950 to ensure the latent variable does not compromise content validity. The results indicate a good score within the reference range, ensuring the reliability of the constructs based on the survey data. In addition, the study conducted "Average Variance Extracted (AVE)" to measure convergent validity, which exceeded the threshold of 0.500 for each latent variable (Hair et al., 2019). To assess collinearity, the study examined the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). All items of the latent variables have VIFs less than 3, indicating no collinearity issues (Marcoulides & Raykov, 2019).

The study also explored the model's discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, which is more widely accepted than the cross-loading matrix technique. Based on the HTMT analysis, all values of the comparison latent variables are below the reference value of 0.850, thereby ensuring

discriminant validity of the study (Nasidi et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2: Result of the measurement model

Latent Variables	Items (see appendix)	Loadings	VIF	CA	CR	AVE
CP	CP1	0.849	2.212	0.892	0.920	0.696
	CP2	0.794	1.810			
	CP3	0.837	2.374			
	CP4	0.862	2.373			
	CP5	0.828	2.442			
ECS	ECS1	0.745	1.673	0.856	0.893	0.581
	ECS2	0.809	1.858			
	ECS3	0.727	1.602			
	ECS4	0.752	1.749			
	ECS5	0.727	1.618			
	ECS6	0.809	2.130			
ENS	ENS1	0.831	2.636	0.914	0.931	0.659
	ENS2	0.822	2.384			
	ENS3	0.804	2.263			
	ENS4	0.792	2.163			
	ENS5	0.780	2.063			
	ENS6	0.834	2.447			
	ENS7	0.818	2.288			
MTD	MTD1	0.717	1.487	0.809	0.867	0.567
	MTD2	0.817	1.775			
	MTD3	0.726	1.493			
	MTD4	0.774	1.676			
	MTD5	0.726	1.449			
SS	SS1	0.871	2.722	0.894	0.922	0.703
	SS2	0.817	2.095			
	SS3	0.777	1.913			
	SS4	0.828	2.179			
	SS5	0.895	2.898			

Source: Authors' own

Table 3: Result of discriminant validity test (HTMT Ratio)

	CP	ECS	ENS	MTD	SS
CP					
ECS	0.153				
ENS	0.175	0.346			
MTD	0.165	0.368	0.764		
SS	0.191	0.258	0.101	0.380	

Source: Authors' own

Hypotheses Testing

The hypotheses of the study were evaluated using PLS-SEM analysis. The study used one-tailed bootstrapping with 5000 iterations in SmartPLS v4.1, as recommended by the scholars (Becker et al., 2023; Memon et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2019). Based on the analysis, the adjusted R-squared values for ECS, ENS, and SS are 0.100, 0.436, and 0.108, respectively, indicating that MTD explains variation in the latent dependent variables to a moderate extent.

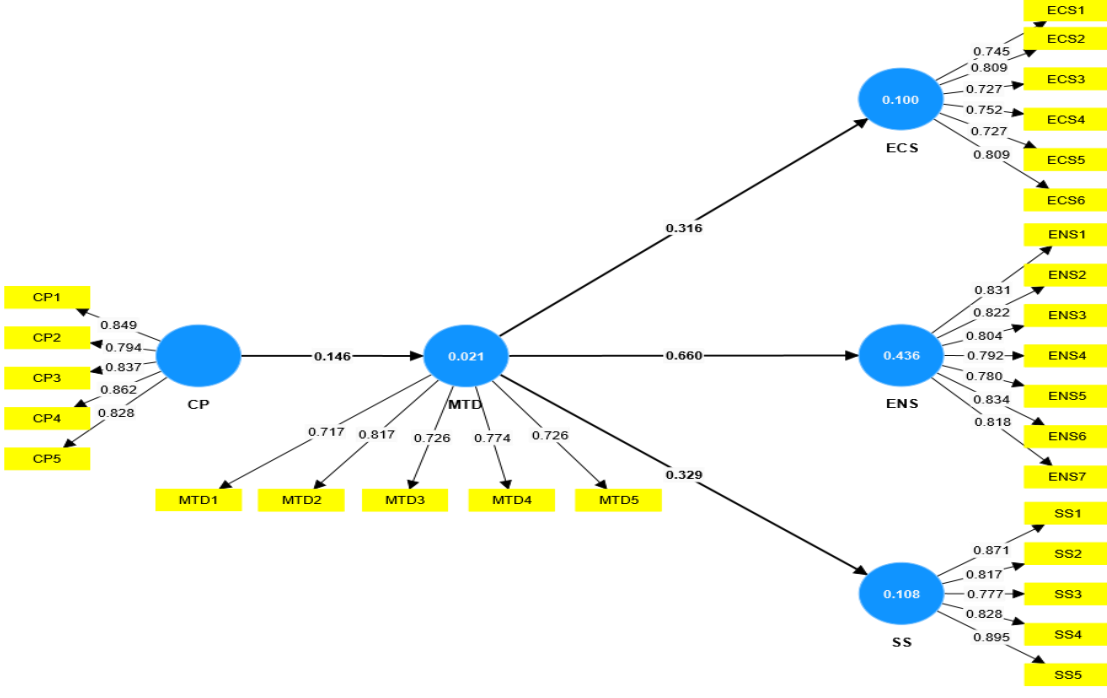

Figure 2: Diagram for the structural model
Source: Authors' own

The results indicate that CP positively influences marine tourism (β = 0.146, t = 2.522). Therefore, the first hypothesis of the study is accepted based on the survey data. The study hypothesised that MTD has a solid positive relationship with ECS, ENS, and SS. The analysis of the survey data indicates the same result (β = 0.316, t = 9.734; β = 0.660, t = 21.321; and β = 0.329, t = 7.157, respectively). Hence, all sub-hypotheses under H2 were supported. Through an in-depth analysis of previous studies, the study assumed that marine tourism development positively mediates the relationships among CP and ECS, CP and ENS, and CP and SS. The data analysis also yielded similar results. The result revealed that MTD successfully mediates the relationship between CP and ECS, with a beta value of 0.046 and a p-value of 0.010, indicating significant positive mediation. Similarly, MTD positively mediates the correlation between CP and ENS, with beta scores of 0.096 (p=0.008, t=2.418) and 0.048 (p=0.008, t=2.420), respectively. Therefore, the study concludes that all hypotheses are accepted and that all requirements are fulfilled.

Table 4: Path analysis result

	Paths	Beta	Standard deviation	t statistics	p values	Confidence Intervals Bias Corrected	
						5.00%	95.00%
H1	CP -> MTD	0.146	0.058	2.522	0.006	0.064	0.228
H2a	MTD -> ECS	0.316	0.032	9.734	0.000	0.254	0.362
H2b	MTD -> ENS	0.660	0.031	21.321	0.000	0.604	0.708
H2c	MTD -> SS	0.329	0.046	7.157	0.000	0.252	0.404
H3a	CP -> MTD -> ECS	0.046	0.020	2.313	0.010	0.018	0.075
H3b	CP -> MTD -> ENS	0.096	0.040	2.418	0.008	0.041	0.155
H3c	CP -> MTD -> SS	0.048	0.020	2.420	0.008	0.022	0.076

Source: Authors' own

DISCUSSION

The study was conducted to analyse the relationship between CP and MTD, which, in turn, affects ECS, ENS, and SS. In addition, the study intended to identify the mediating effect of MTD between CP with ECS, ENS, and SS. The findings provide valuable insights into the relationships between MTD and sustainability dimensions, such as ecological, economic, and social perspectives. The recognition and endorsement of all proposals emphasise the crucial position of marine tourism and community engagement in promoting sustainable growth. These findings extend global conversations on participatory progress by underscoring that, when shaped by community representatives, marine tourism can guide inclusive and holistic sustainability that aligns with the AD principles (Pieterse, 1998; Bebbington, 2000).

The association linking CP and MTD emphasises the crucial role of engaging local communities in the strategic planning and implementation of diversified marine tourism initiatives. This correlation indicates that if local communities are actively engaged, there is a higher probability of achieving tourism development. The results align with other studies that emphasise the advantages of including the community in promoting sustainable tourism (Chami, 2018; Khalid et al., 2019; Ngoc et al., 2021). Alongside this, their active engagement ensures that progress aligns with the specific requirements of local communities, cultural beliefs, and ecological factors, thereby improving the overall efficiency and approval of tourism initiatives. This also aligns with participatory models in which community proprietorship has enhanced long-term sustainability outcomes (Sutawa, 2012; Masud et al., 2017). In the case of Cox's Bazar, the complex socio-economic structure of the community, which includes both host communities and Rohingya refugees, makes inclusive planning even more urgent. That is why the strong CP–MTD relationship is particularly important in this context.

The study also revealed that MTD has a considerable influence on ECS, ENS, and SS. This is a significant finding, as it shows that well-controlled marine tourism can be a catalyst for inclusive sustainability. In terms of economics, MTD has high potential to generate alternative sources of income and spur local economies, particularly in coastal regions (Nitivattananon & Srinonil, 2019). Responsible tourism activities can promote mutual eco-friendly behaviour, thereby enhancing the environmental sustainability of the attractions by raising awareness of the consequences of preserving marine habitats (Dimitrovski et al., 2021). Therefore, these findings align with the global literature and enrich it by illustrating how MTD serves as a mediating tool linking community engagement to sustainability. This reflects the AD framework's emphasis on endogenous development, in which tourism is not the end but the means to empowering local transformation (Koop, 2014; Ziai, 2017).

The MTD can play a strong mediating role in the relationships among CP, ECS, ENS, and SS. The influence of the community can be enhanced through proper tourism development policies in coastal areas. It is essential to ensure a well-organised MTD policy to achieve sustainable tourism infrastructure and practices with local support. The insights from Cox's Bazar may also apply to other coastal tourism areas, especially in the Global South, where marine ecosystems face significant challenges, and local people are increasingly underserved. However, effective utilisation rests on comparable levels of stakeholder engagement, local governance capacity and socio-political stability. Therefore, policymakers should ensure an inclusive, participatory tourism development plan to enhance the tourism sector's sustainability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY PRACTISE

The study underscores that involving local communities in tourism planning can enhance the sustainability and acceptance of tourism initiatives by ensuring alignment with community needs and values. Additionally, CP has

bolstered conservation efforts, which are essential for safeguarding sensitive marine ecosystems. Importantly, evidence (e.g., Avi et al., 2021; Selvaduray et al., 2023) also suggests that MTD can significantly benefit local economies when local communities actively manage tourism, thereby emphasising the economic outcomes of CP.

Table 5: Policy and Practical Implications for Sustainable Marine Tourism in Cox's Bazar

Policy focus	Actionable insight	Expected impact	Supporting reference(s)
Inclusive Planning	Formally include local communities in tourism planning committees.	Improved alignment with local needs and ownership.	Avi et al. (2021); Selvaduray et al. (2023).
Capacity Building	Implement skill-development programs for locals (such as eco-tour guiding, small business).	Strengthened local capacity for tourism management.	Trave et al. (2017); UNDP (2018)
Benefit-Sharing	Allocate a portion of tourism revenue for community development funds.	Fair distribution and improved services.	Bhuiyan et al. (2020); Selvaduray et al. (2023).
SDG Integration	Align marine tourism policies with SDG 14 (Life Below Water).	Sustainability of marine resources and livelihoods.	United Nations General Assembly, (2015); UNDP, (2018).
Local Monitoring	Establish community-based monitoring of tourism's ecological and social impacts.	Increased transparency and environmental protection.	Eyisi et al. (2021); Rahman et al. (2022).

Source: Authors' own

For policymakers, the findings emphasise the necessity of framework development (see Trave et al., 2017) that incorporates capacity-building programs to enable communities to engage effectively in tourism management. This can be achieved by providing training for stakeholders, financial literacy,

coastal ecosystem preservation, and tourism concern management, carried out in collaboration among the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, local universities, and NGOs. This approach also aligns with the “United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”, particularly Goal 14, which advocates for the “sustainable use of marine resources” (United Nations General Assembly 2015). Similarly, international organisations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) recognise that community-centred tourism development can improve livelihoods and long-term environmental stewardship (UNDP, 2018), providing a basis for policies that balance tourism growth with community welfare in coastal regions such as Cox's Bazar. However, incorporating these practices into the national tourism policy framework, such as the Bangladesh Tourism Master Plan, can institutionalise inclusive coastal tourism as a long-term development strategy.

CONCLUSION

This present study aimed to explore the influence of CP on sustainable development in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, focusing on the mediating role of MTD. The findings indicate that active CP is crucial for promoting sustainable development, as it fosters local ownership and aligns tourism activities with community needs. When developed with community input, marine tourism serves as a crucial mediator between economic growth and environmental conservation, providing economic and social outcomes to that particular region. These findings confirm that incorporating community voice into tourism decision-making significantly enhances the effectiveness of sustainable tourism initiatives in coastal destinations like Cox's Bazar.

This study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating specific pathways through which marine tourism mediates the relationship between CP and sustainable outcomes, extending earlier studies such as Baloch et al. (2023) and Esichaikul & Chansawang (2022). Additionally, the proposed framework

(Figure 1) offers a model adaptable to other coastal areas facing similar issues, providing a basis for further comparative research. The findings also have significant policy implications, suggesting that capacity-building initiatives should be prioritised to empower local communities to manage tourism, ensure equitable benefit-sharing, and enhance conservation efforts. Moreover, the study insights can also assist in developing MTD models aligned with SDG 14. However, this study has some limitations. The cross-sectional design constrains causal interpretation, and the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias. Besides, the context-specific focus on Cox's Bazar limits generalizability. However, the framework may apply to similar coastal settings upon validation. Future studies could explore CP in diverse settings and use mixed-method approaches. Moreover, future research should explore how different forms of CP influence specific sustainable development goals, for instance, social equity, ecological conservation, and cultural preservation. Such inquiries could provide deeper insights into the balance between tourism development and community well-being in coastal settings.

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