



Development of Alternative Tourism in the Province of Ouezzane, Morocco: Proposal for a Structural Equation Model

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Abstract: This paper asks whether alternative tourism can, in practice, move the needle on sustainable local development in the province of Ouezzane, Morocco. Set against the familiar limits of mass tourism, approaches grounded in sustainability, authenticity, and respect for host communities seem—under the right conditions—to offer a more balanced path. Building on an in-depth review of the literature, we set out a conceptual model and indicate how it would be examined through structural equation modelling (SEM). The model assembles the principal drivers—and their plausible interrelations—that are likely to shape the emergence of alternative tourism in a region with substantial yet under-used natural and cultural assets. Core constructs include community empowerment, perceived economic benefits, participatory governance, sustainable infrastructure, perceived environmental preservation, socio-cultural enhancement, and multi-stakeholder coordination; together they are posited to contribute to sustainable tourism development. The analysis underlines the salience of a territorial lens, coordinated action among stakeholders, local capacity building, and the promotion of cultural specificities. Although theoretical at this stage, the model offers a coherent framework for understanding the dynamics at work and for informing strategy design in Ouezzane, while acknowledging that empirical testing will be necessary to validate the proposed relationships.

Keywords: Alternative tourism; Local development; Community empowerment; Sustainable tourism; Participatory governance.

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1 Introduction

Tourism remains a major, fast-moving sector of the world economy, yet the environmental and social costs of mass tourism are increasingly hard to ignore. Against this backdrop, alternative tourism—centred on sustainability, authenticity, and respect for local communities—has gained traction as a plausible response rather than a simple niche. This article explores the potential of such tourism to support sustainable local development in the province of Ouezzane, Morocco. Building on a detailed review of the literature, we put forward a conceptual model and consider its assessment via structural equation modelling (SEM) to identify the key factors, and probable interconnections, that may drive forms of alternative tourism that genuinely benefit the territory. Situated in the foothills of the Rif Mountains, Ouezzane combines rich natural landscapes with distinctive cultural heritage that remains only partially mobilised for development. Carefully managed alternative tourism—attentive to environmental limits and local traditions—could, in principle, diversify the local economy and contribute to poverty reduction. Our objective is to sketch, from existing scholarship, a theoretically well-grounded model capable of clarifying the underlying mechanisms and guiding strategy choices for sustainable tourism in the region. We also recognise possible tensions: sustainability claims can mask displacement effects, and fragmented

governance may blunt community benefits—points the model seeks to bring into view. The article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on alternative tourism and local development, consider the specific potential of Ouezzane, draw lessons from experiences across the Maghreb and the Mediterranean, and outline key challenges and feasible responses. Second, we set out the methodological orientation, justify the use of SEM, define the variables, and formulate the hypotheses. Third, we present the proposed model derived from the literature and stated hypotheses. Fourth, we discuss the main implications and the expected theoretical and practical contributions. We conclude by summarising the central insights, noting the limits of this preliminary work, and outlining future research—most notably the empirical validation of the model and refinement of the constructs in situ. What distinguishes this study is its exploratory stance and the elaboration of an original theoretical model anchored in a close reading of prior work. The intention is to offer a solid, usable framework for grasping the determinants of alternative tourism in Ouezzane, setting the stage for subsequent empirical investigations aimed at a more precise understanding and a judicious development of the sector in the province.

2 Literature Review: Alternative Tourism and Local Development in the Province of Ouezzane

This review maps the main theoretical and empirical threads on alternative tourism and its contribution to local development, taking Ouezzane as the anchor case. The discussion unfolds in five parts: the conceptual bases linking alternative tourism to place-based development; an overview of Ouezzane's tourism assets; the trajectory of alternative tourism in Morocco; lessons that may travel from the Maghreb and the wider Mediterranean; and, finally, the challenges—and plausible strategies—for a more sustainable pathway in Ouezzane.

2.1 Conceptual Context of Alternative Tourism and Local Development

2.1.1. Definition and Principles of Alternative Tourism

Often presented as the foil to mass tourism, alternative tourism promotes forms of travel that respect environments, safeguard local cultures, and treat host communities as partners rather than scenery. The guiding logic is sustainability—with ethics and responsibility not tacked on at the end, but woven through practice. As Honey (2008) argues, this field tends to privilege “small-scale” configurations that favour authentic encounters and deeper immersion in place. The ambition, put simply, is to shrink the ecological footprint of tourism while amplifying its socio-economic gains for residents. In that spirit, three interdependent pillars are repeatedly invoked: social equity, to ensure a fair distribution of benefits; economic viability, to sustain activities that genuinely feed the local economy; and ecosystem conservation, to protect natural resources and biodiversity for future generations (Praptiwi et al., 2021). Alternative tourism is not monolithic. Ecotourism, for instance, centres on the discovery—and careful stewardship—of natural areas, encouraging the observation of flora and fauna and raising awareness of ecosystem fragility. Solidarity tourism leans on fair-exchange principles and direct collaboration with host communities; it values cultural immersion, knowledge sharing, and contributions to concrete local projects. Rural tourism, for its part, highlights both tangible and intangible rural heritage—traditional crafts, culinary practices, seasonal agricultural know-how, and community rituals. While the emphases differ, these strands converge on a common stance: local people should sit at the heart of the development process, not as peripheral service providers but as decision-makers and guarantors of authenticity and longevity (Widhianthini, 2017). That said, some caution is warranted. “Small-scale” does not automatically mean low impact; popularity can strain fragile sites, and the pursuit of “authenticity” may slide into commodification. Benefit-sharing can also falter when governance is weak or external actors capture key rents. These caveats do not negate the promise of alternative tourism; they simply suggest that design and implementation—who participates, who decides, who gains—matter as much as labels.

2.1.2. Local Development and Territorial Approach

Local development is commonly understood as an endogenous, participatory process through which a territory mobilises its resources—human, natural, cultural, institutional—to improve residents' living conditions. It stands in contrast to exogenous models imported wholesale from outside, which often miss local realities and priorities. In this view, the territory is not just a map location but a social construct, produced by dense interactions among actors, institutions, and material and immaterial assets (Pecqueur and Zimmermann, 2004). Applied to alternative tourism, a territorial approach is not optional; it is the hinge. It invites close attention to the specific endowments and constraints of each place, involves local actors in co-designing projects, and aligns tourism dynamics with ongoing social and economic rhythms. Such an approach also fosters networks—linking farmers, artisans, guides, accommodation providers, cultural associations, and public bodies—so that skills are pooled and sectoral silos

soften. The result—when the pieces align—is a more integrated development path in which agriculture, crafts, and tourism tend to reinforce rather than crowd out one another. Still, territorialisation is no miracle cure. A shiny “territory brand” can, if governance is not inclusive, paper over uneven power relations; and without basic coordination, neighbouring communes may duplicate the same offers or compete over the very assets that are most fragile. Acknowledging these frictions early is likely to help design workable safeguards—participatory planning, transparent benefit-sharing, inter-communal agreements, even simple rules on carrying capacity—that make alternative tourism more apt to translate into lasting, local gains.

2.2 The Potential of Alternative Tourism for Local Development: The Exemplary Case of Ouezzane

2.2.1. Natural and Cultural Assets of Ouezzane

Set in the foothills of the western Rif in north-western Morocco, the province of Ouezzane offers a useful lens for thinking about alternative tourism in a rural, mountainous context. The landscape’s sharp ridgelines and green valley’s shelter extensive cork-oak stands and notable biodiversity; thermal springs with reputed therapeutic properties add another layer of appeal. Taken together with wide scenic vistas, these features appear well suited to low-impact activities—guided hikes on way-marked trails, birdwatching in seasonal corridors, nature interpretation that pairs landscape reading with local knowledge. In practice, visitors might combine a morning walk with a visit to a small cooperative (olive oil, textiles) where production methods are explained and sales are modest, not extractive (Praptiwi et al., 2021). Cultural assets are no less distinctive. Long regarded as a centre of Sufi practice, Ouezzane is home to numerous zaouias and annual moussems that draw pilgrims from across the country. Local crafts—fine woodwork, leatherwork, and weaving—testify to intergenerational know-how preserved in workshops and cooperatives. The urban fabric—whitewashed houses punctuated by red tiles—gives the city a coherent visual identity and a quietly “lived-in” aesthetic (Widhianthini, 2017). That said, heritage is delicate: sacred spaces can be overexposed, and artisanal practices risk commodification if demand outpaces community control. Framing visitors conduct and privileging community-led curation may help sustain authenticity while sharing benefits.

2.2.2. Development Challenges and Opportunities for Alternative Tourism

Despite these clear assets, Ouezzane still sits off the main tourist map, overshadowed by imperial cities and coastal resorts. As IDRISSE (2023) argues, the province could serve as a laboratory for balanced territorial development aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Properly designed, sustainable alternative tourism may contribute to poverty reduction through decent, durable employment—guiding, small-scale lodging and food services, and craft valorisation—while anchoring income locally (Praptiwi et al., 2021). Environmentally minded products could, in parallel, support forest conservation, prudent water use, and biodiversity protection (SDG), provided monitoring and community enforcement are in place (Widhianthini, 2017). Constraints, however, are non-trivial. Limited accessibility—an uneven road network and sparse public transport—raises costs and narrows market reach. Lodging stock remains thin and not always aligned with alternative tourism preferences (homestays, rural gîtes, eco-lodges), which dampens length of stay and spending. Coordination gaps among local authorities, associations, cooperatives, artisans, and guides further complicate coherent destination building (IDRISSE, 2023). Without stronger collaboration, there is a risk of fragmented offers, enclave operations, or rent capture by external intermediaries. These hurdles also suggest where to act. Incremental connectivity upgrades, support for quality standards and small-host capacity, and clear benefit-sharing rules could unlock momentum. Equally, light-touch visitor management around sacred sites and forests would safeguard carrying capacity. With such guardrails, Ouezzane’s alternative tourism potential is likely to translate into tangible, place-based development rather than a short-lived niche.

2.3 The Evolution of Tourism in Morocco: Between the Legacy of Mass Tourism and the Emergence of Sustainable Models

2.3.1. The dominant model of mass tourism and its limitations

For several decades, Morocco’s tourism pathway has been shaped by a quantitative logic—more beds, larger complexes, charter flows—anchored in a few high-visibility hubs (Agadir, Marrakech, the Mediterranean rim). The macro gains are well known rising arrivals, foreign-exchange earnings, and employment. Few would contest that broad narrative. Yet the territorial concentration of flows has carried non-trivial costs: intensive water use in already stressed basins, pressure on fragile coastal and peri-urban ecosystems, mounting waste streams, and

landscape artificialisation. Social effects are mixed, too. While jobs multiplied, many remained seasonal or precarious; spatial inequalities widened between destinations under the “spotlight” and inland provinces; and certain cultural expressions were packaged for consumption in ways that may slip toward folklorisation. None of this denies the mobility and income mass tourism has offered to many households. It does suggest that scale delivered numbers, not necessarily balance—particularly once ecological thresholds and community voice are weighed.

2.3.2. Towards Diversification of Tourism and the Emergence of Sustainable Tourism

Over roughly the last fifteen years, policy discourse and practice in Morocco have increasingly acknowledged these limits and pivoted—gradually—toward diversification and sustainability. Public initiatives have encouraged products beyond the beach-and-city binary and foregrounded forms of tourism more attentive to environments and host communities. In this setting, the Green Morocco Plan (2008)—although aimed at agricultural transformation—has indirectly supported rural tourism by fostering value addition in the countryside, promoting local products, and strengthening producer organisations. The spillovers matter: as rural economies diversify, hospitality, guiding, and small-scale catering can emerge on firmer local roots. For Ouezzane, where family farming and smallholdings underpin livelihoods, the agriculture–tourism nexus appears particularly promising. Short supply chains that link producers to visitors (farm-gate sales of olives, honey, or goat cheese), hands-on workshops that transmit agricultural savoir-faire (e.g., olive pressing, beekeeping), and modest agritourism formats that invite participation in seasonal tasks can anchor spending locally, reduce leakage, and lengthen stays. These pathways fit a lower-impact model—if framed by clear social and environmental safeguards. That “if” is not cosmetic: without reliable access, basic quality standards for homestays and rural lodgings, and coordination among communes, cooperatives, guides, and public authorities, diversification risks fragmenting into isolated projects. Conversely, with incremental connectivity improvements, targeted capacity-building for hosts, and shared rules for benefit-sharing and resource stewardship, sustainable tourism is likely to move from aspiration to practice—enhancing Ouezzane’s autonomy while keeping its ecological and cultural commons intact.

2.4 Lessons from experiences in the Maghreb and the Mediterranean

Examining how other Maghreb and Mediterranean territories have navigated rural development, heritage stewardship, and resource constraints offers practical cues for Ouezzane. The cases below—different in ecology and governance but comparable in their reliance on place-based assets—highlight strategies that appear to work, the trade-offs they entail, and the conditions under which they are likely to endure.

2.4.1. Tataouine (Tunisia): Rural Tourism and Community Inclusion as Levers for Development

In south-eastern Tunisia, Tataouine has leveraged striking desert panoramas, troglodytic **ksour**, and a rich Amazigh/Berber legacy to build a distinct rural tourism offer (Moalla & Amami, 2019). A notable thread has been the adaptive reuse of **ksour** as small-scale accommodation and cultural venues, paired with craft valorisation. As Moalla and Amami (2019) show, place-based products and artisanal know-how—supported by geographic indications and short marketing circuits—help differentiate the destination and keep value local, which may slow rural out-migration by adding secondary income streams. Governance practices matter here: a World Bank (2016) perspective stresses that participatory decision-making in rural projects improves the fairness of benefit distribution and, by extension, community buy-in. Still, success is fragile. Revenues can cluster around a few sites or intermediaries; cultural expressions, if staged primarily for visitors, risk sliding into folklorisation. Grewal (2018) therefore argues for “slow tourism” logics—longer stays, moderated flows, and deeper, context-sensitive encounters—to protect traditions and landscapes. In effect, Tataouine suggests that heritage rehabilitation and community inclusion can reinforce each other, but only when pacing, access rules, and local control are taken seriously.

2.4.2. Ahaggar Cultural Park (Algeria): Heritage Preservation and Community Empowerment at the Heart of a Sustainable Tourism Strategy

The Ahaggar Cultural Park in Algeria’s Hoggar massif, managed by the **Office National du Parc Culturel de l’Ahaggar** (ONPCA), illustrates a conservation-first model where tourism is carefully choreographed around ecological and cultural thresholds (IUCN, 2020). With vast landscapes, endemic biodiversity, and Tuareg heritage, the park has promoted activities such as guided camel trekking, rock-art interpretation, and traditional bivouacs—offers that generate income while keeping cultural practice and environmental limits in view (APS, 2021). A distinguishing feature is the structured role granted to Tuareg communities in governance and product design, which appears to strengthen authenticity and align benefits with custodianship. Yet intergenerational dynamics pose challenges. Younger residents, drawn to urban opportunities, may find heritage-linked occupations less attractive over time. Without targeted training, entrepreneurship support, and dignified income prospects, knowledge transmission can falter. The Ahaggar experience thus points to a dual imperative: formalise community

co-management and invest in the skills pipeline so that empowerment is not merely symbolic but economically viable (IUCN, 2020; APS, 2021).

2.4.3. Shouf Biosphere Reserve (Lebanon): Integrating Ecology and Local Economic Development

Lebanon's Shouf Biosphere Reserve—nearly 50,000 hectares and central to the survival of the emblematic cedar—demonstrates how ecological restoration, ecotourism, and rural enterprise can be woven together (IUCN, 2018). Community participation has underpinned initiatives ranging from cedar reforestation and signed hiking networks to value-chain support for honey, olive oil, and medicinal herbs (CEPF, 2014). Reported economic effects are non-trivial—estimates suggest annual gains between £16.7 and £21.3 million and more than 200 direct jobs, around 40% held by women—while partnerships among local authorities, NGOs, and private actors have raised service quality and sustainability standards through eco-certifications and targeted marketing to environmentally conscious visitors (CEPF, 2014; Shouf Cedar Society, 2023). Challenges persist. Rural youth retention remains uncertain without credible training pathways in ecotourism and resource management or viable craft micro-enterprises (e.g., woodcraft, traditional soap). The Shouf case nonetheless indicates that biodiversity protection and livelihood improvement need not be at odds; when communities are decision-makers and environmental criteria are non-negotiable, conservation outcomes and local multipliers can reinforce each other (IUCN, 2018; CEPF, 2014; Shouf Cedar Society, 2023). *Takeaway for Ouezzane.* Across these experiences, three design choices recur: (i) anchor products in specific heritage and ecosystems while pacing visitation; (ii) institutionalise community roles in governance and revenue-sharing; and (iii) invest early in skills and enterprise support for youth and women. Adapting these principles to Ouezzane's social fabric and carrying capacities may not guarantee success, but it substantially improves the odds that alternative tourism delivers durable, place-based benefits.

2.5 Challenges and Strategies for Sustainable Tourism Development in Ouezzane

Building on lessons from the Maghreb and the wider Mediterranean, Ouezzane faces a familiar mix of promise and constraint. Turning potential into durable, place-based gains will likely hinge on governance arrangements that coordinate actors, steady investment in local skills, and a marketing narrative that feels specific to Ouezzane rather than copy-pasted from elsewhere.

2.5.1. Territorial Governance and Multi-stakeholder Coordination: Towards an Integrated and Participatory Approach

As Daghri and El Omari (2015) note, poor coordination among municipalities, cooperatives, associations, guides, artisans, and private operators is a recurrent brake on rural tourism in Morocco. Ouezzane is no exception. A pragmatic step would be to establish a territorially anchored “tourism cluster”—a platform where stakeholders co-produce a shared vision, sequence projects, and pool scarce resources. Drawing inspiration from participatory arrangements seen in the Ahaggar Cultural Park and the Shouf Reserve—where communities are embedded in decision-making—could help avoid zero-sum competition, clarify roles, and stabilise benefit-sharing (IUCN, 2020; APS, 2021; CEPF, 2014). Concretely, participatory management committees with transparent mandates (planning, carrying-capacity rules for sensitive sites, pricing guidelines for guides and homestays, grievance channels) would make governance both visible and accountable. This may sound procedural, but without it, even well-intended projects fragment, rents concentrate, and natural and cultural assets are over-used.

2.5.2. Training and Local Capacity Building: Investing in Human Capital

Alternative tourism stands or falls on everyday competencies—welcoming guests, interpreting heritage, managing small lodgings, and doing so sustainably. Evidence from Tunisia shows persistent gaps in language proficiency, service management, and knowledge of local heritage (Dribek, 2012). The implication for Ouezzane is straightforward: design a targeted training pathway that matches real tasks, not abstract job titles. Morocco's Ministry of Tourism and Handicrafts has already advanced an integrated vocational training track in hospitality, project management, and languages; adapting this to Ouezzane's rural profile would be a sensible starting point (Ministry of Tourism, Handicrafts and Social and Solidarity Economy, 2023). The OFPPT's guide and hotel-management modules could serve as templates for short certificates—weekend intensives for hosts, field-based interpretation clinics for guides, and micro-enterprise coaching for cooperatives (OFPPT, 2023). Partnerships with universities and responsible-tourism NGOs would add technical depth (e.g., visitor-flow monitoring, heritage conservation basics). Peer exchanges with places that faced similar hurdles—Djerba, or ecotourism initiatives in Algeria and Lebanon—could accelerate learning by showing what “good” looks like in practice (Dribek, 2012; IUCN, 2018; CEPF, 2014). The goal is not training for its own sake but qualifying and certifying local actors so that quality rises, community confidence grows, and visitors notice.

2.5.3. Territorial Marketing and Promotion of Cultural Specificities: Building a Unique Tourist Identity

Competing on generic imagery is a losing game. Ouezzane's edge lies in what only Ouezzane can offer: spiritual heritage (moussems and **zaouias**), a living craft tradition, and a landscape tailored to slow, nature-based discovery. Positioning should lean into these specifics. Curated event calendars around religious and cultural festivals can anchor seasonality; culinary storytelling that highlights olive-oil know-how and everyday regional dishes can make "local" tangible; and themed hiking circuits (forests, water sources, craft villages) can help visitors link sites into coherent experiences (Plan Bleu, 2011). The Shouf Biosphere Reserve reminds us that credibility matters: a clear sustainability message, visible eco-standards for accommodation, and partnerships that include municipalities, NGOs, and private actors signal that the destination is serious (CEPF, 2014; Shouf Cedar Society, 2023). Digital tools should amplify, not replace, this substance—simple, multilingual content; geo-tagged trail maps; short videos produced with cooperatives; and social media that showcases hosts, not just vistas. A small caveat: culinary and ritual references need careful curation with local custodians to avoid mislabeling or folklorisation; authenticity is an asset, but only if communities retain editorial control (El Mejjad et al., 2024). *In short*, Ouezzane's pathway seems to rest on three mutually reinforcing moves: (i) organise who does what—and who benefits—through participatory territorial governance (Daghri and El Omari, 2015); (ii) professionalise the offer via targeted, certifying training that matches on-the-ground tasks (Dribek, 2012; Ministry of Tourism, Handicrafts and Social and Solidarity Economy, 2023; OFPPT, 2023); and (iii) tell a place-true story through marketing that elevates Ouezzane's spiritual, culinary, and natural signatures while keeping sustainability commitments visible (Plan Bleu, 2011; CEPF, 2014; Shouf Cedar Society, 2023). None of this guarantee's success, but together these steps markedly increase the odds that alternative tourism becomes a stable engine of local development rather than a passing trend.

3 Methodology

This section presents the methodological approach used to articulate a conceptual model for the development of alternative tourism in the province of Ouezzane. We motivate the choice of structural equation modelling (SEM) and set out the model's structural variables as inferred from the literature review.

3.1 Methodological Framework and Justification for the Use of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

Our objective is to sketch a theoretically grounded framework that clarifies the determinants of alternative tourism in Ouezzane and the ways these determinants interact. To do so, we proceeded in two steps. First, an extensive review of scholarship on alternative tourism and local development—augmented by lessons from comparable Maghreb/Mediterranean territories—helped us delimit key constructs, surface candidate relationships, and flag potential tensions (e.g., benefit capture, carrying capacity). Second, we formalise these insights in a structural equation model. SEM is appropriate here for at least three reasons. *First*, it can represent complex networks of relations among multiple constructs—some directly observed, many latent—without losing sight of the whole (Kline, 2016). *Second*, it explicitly models measurement error, which is not a luxury when working with abstract notions such as "perceived environmental preservation" or "socio-cultural enhancement" (Hair et al., 2019). *Third*, it allows the simultaneous testing of a system of hypotheses, yielding a more integrated view than piecemeal regressions. Given the theory-driven spirit of the exercise, a covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) approach appears suitable for future empirical validation; that said, if early samples are modest or distributions deviate markedly from normality, a variance-based approach (PLS-SEM) may be preferred at the pilot stage. Measurement models will distinguish reflective constructs—where indicators are manifestations of an underlying disposition—from formative composites—where indicators *compose* the construct (Hair et al., 2019). In this exploratory phase, we stop short of estimation: the model is specified and justified, not yet tested. Subsequent work will address instrument design, data collection in Ouezzane, and empirical validation.

3.2 Identification of Variables and Model Architecture

Drawing on the review, we retain the following latent variables (with indicative content in parentheses) and posit their likely interrelations:

Table 1. Model Variables

Variable	Definition	Theoretical justification	References
Community Empowerment	Degree of involvement and empowerment of local communities in tourism development, including access to education, training and resources.	Promotes the active participation of local populations in tourism activities, thereby improving economic benefits and strengthening the sense of ownership of development projects.	Ben Nasr (2015)
Perceived Economic Benefits	Local people's perception of the economic benefits of alternative tourism (improved income, job creation, development of related activities).	Influences the positive perception of tourism and the support of local communities for sustainable tourism initiatives. Tangible benefits encourage participation in and support for tourism projects.	Praptiwi et al. (2021)
Participatory Governance	Degree of inclusion of local communities in tourism development decision-making processes, transparency and effectiveness of governance mechanisms.	Inclusive and transparent governance strengthens the confidence of local populations, promotes sustainable resource management and contributes to a more equitable distribution of tourism benefits.	Daghri & El Omari (2015)
Sustainable Infrastructure	Availability and quality of environmentally friendly tourism infrastructure (eco-lodges, marked trails, eco-friendly transport).	Sustainable infrastructure minimises the environmental impact of tourism, improves the attractiveness of the destination for environmentally conscious tourists and contributes to the quality of life of local populations.	Abi-Said & Maroun (2015)
Perceived Environmental Preservation	Perception by local populations and visitors of the effectiveness of environmental protection measures in the context of tourism development.	A positive perception of environmental preservation reinforces the destination's image as an environmentally friendly place, attracts eco-conscious tourists and encourages sustainable behaviour.	IUCN (2018, 2020)
Socio-Cultural Enhancement	Degree of recognition, promotion and revitalisation of cultural heritage and local traditions, respect for cultural authenticity.	The enhancement of intangible and tangible cultural heritage contributes to tourist appeal, strengthens the cultural pride of local communities and promotes the development of authentic tourism that respects local values, while avoiding the risks of folklorisation.	Martínez-Ruiz et al. (2017); Honey (2008)
Sustainable Tourism Development	Contribution of tourism to the sustainable development of the region, encompassing economic, social and environmental dimensions, in accordance with the principles of sustainable tourism.	Sustainable tourism development is the ultimate goal, aiming to maximise economic and social benefits for local populations while minimising negative impacts on the environment and preserving cultural heritage for future generations.	Weaver (2006); Battaglia & Frey (2024); United Nations (2015)

Source: produced by the author

The proposed model, based on SEM, will specify the hypothetical relationships between these variables, drawing on the findings of the literature review. For example, it is conceivable to postulate that community empowerment has a positive effect on perceived economic benefits, that participatory governance positively influences perceived environmental preservation, or that sustainable infrastructure plays a mediating role between participatory governance and sustainable tourism development. The construction of the model and the precise formulation of the hypotheses will be the subject of the following section, which will provide a graphical representation of the proposed model and a detailed justification of the postulated relationships between the variables.

4 Results and Discussion

This section sets out the conceptual model advanced for alternative tourism development in Ouezzane and articulates testable hypotheses linking its core constructs. It then discusses what these links may imply for theory and for decision-makers on the ground.

4.1 Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses

The model (Figure 1) weaves together the seven explanatory constructs distilled from the literature—community empowerment, participatory governance, sustainable infrastructure, perceived environmental preservation, perceived economic benefits, socio-cultural enhancement, and multi-stakeholder coordination—and relates them to the overarching outcome, sustainable tourism development. The proposed paths, rooted in prior work, specify plausible mechanisms rather than definitive causal claims; they are intended for subsequent empirical scrutiny.

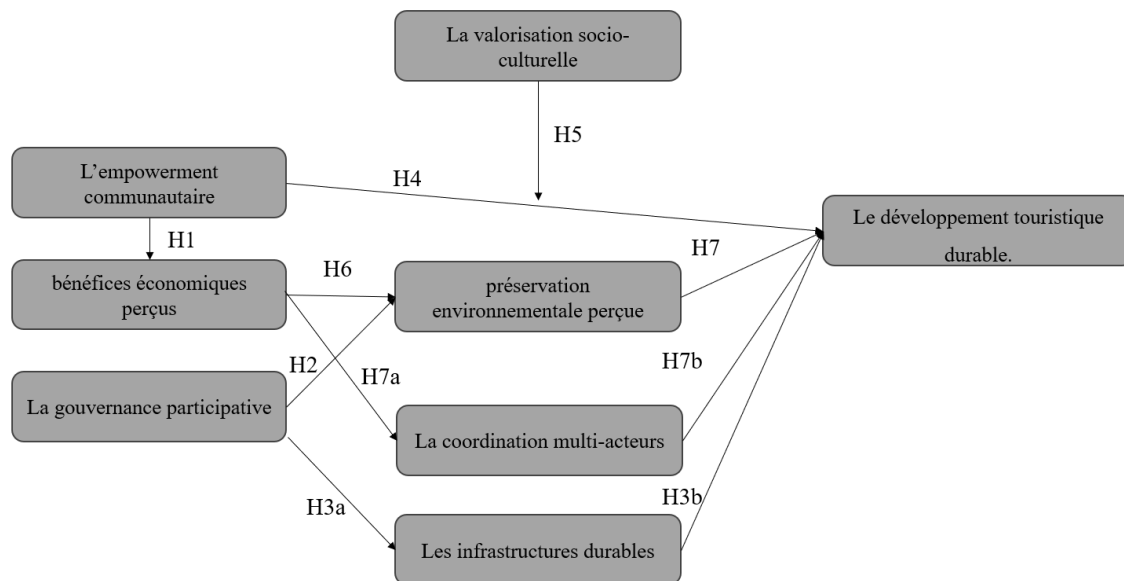


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Alternative Tourism Development in Ouezzane

Source: Produced by the author

Research Hypotheses

H1. Community empowerment → Perceived economic benefits (positive).

Strengthening local capabilities—through training, organisation, and voice—appears to increase communities’ ability to capture tourism-related income and stabilise livelihoods (Ben Nasr, 2015).

H2. Participatory governance → Perceived environmental preservation (positive).

When communities meaningfully share in resource governance, environmentally prudent norms and co-monitoring tend to diffuse more readily, reinforcing stewardship.

H3. Sustainable infrastructure mediates the link between participatory governance and sustainable tourism development.

H3a. Participatory governance → Sustainable infrastructure (positive).

Deliberation with residents helps prioritise “right-sized” infrastructure and align investments with sustainability principles (Abi-Said & Maroun, 2015).

H3b. Sustainable infrastructure → Sustainable tourism development (positive).

Eco-compatible facilities (e.g., waste, water, trail systems, small lodgings) can reduce biophysical pressures while enhancing destination appeal (Abi-Said & Maroun, 2015).

H4. Community empowerment → Sustainable tourism development (positive).

More autonomous communities are better positioned to manage visitor flows, curate offerings, and arbitrate trade-offs, which likely improves sustainability outcomes (Honey, 2008).

H5. Socio-cultural enhancement mediates the effect of community empowerment on sustainable tourism development.

Where empowerment nurtures cultural pride and respectful presentation of traditions, sustainability gains may be amplified via stronger local curation and visitor learning (Martínez-Ruiz et al., 2017).

H6. Perceived economic benefits → (indirect) Perceived environmental preservation via eco-responsible investment.

If conservation is seen to “pay,” actors are more inclined to adopt and fund eco-practices—closing a virtuous loop between income and stewardship (Dehoorne et al., 2012; GIZ, 2023).

H7. Multi-stakeholder coordination moderates the link between perceived economic benefits and sustainable tourism development.

H7a. Perceived economic benefits → multi-stakeholder coordination (positive).

Shared economic prospects can catalyse collaboration and reduce zero-sum behaviour (Berriane, 2009).

H7b. multi-stakeholder coordination → Sustainable tourism development (positive).

Coordination helps avoid duplication, pool scarce resources, and sequence projects—conditions that typically raise the sustainability ceiling (Berriane, 2009).

H8. Perceived environmental preservation → Sustainable tourism development (positive).

A credible environmental stance tends to attract sustainability-minded visitors and supports low-impact models (Weaver, 2006; Battaglia & Frey, 2024).

4.2 Discussion of Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The proposed model contributes on three fronts. First, it treats sustainable tourism development as intrinsically multi-dimensional, knitting together economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance strands rather than isolating a single axis—a tendency much prior work falls into. By staging these dimensions within one system of relations, the framework invites questions about trade-offs and complementarities that single-equation treatments may miss. Second, it places community empowerment and participatory governance upstream, not as background conditions but as drivers that are likely to shape what follows—who benefits, how resources are stewarded, and whether the offer is curated or merely consumed (cf. Honey, 2008). Third, it opens the “black box” through two mediating channels—sustainable infrastructure and socio-cultural enhancement—which may explain how empowerment and governance translate into outcomes perceived as sustainable, rather than assuming a direct, linear effect. Conceptually, the framing allows for friction. Empowerment without coordination can fragment offers; governance without credible infrastructure risks “paper sustainability.” Likewise, socio-cultural enhancement may slide into folklorisation if custodians lack editorial control. Acknowledging multi-stakeholder coordination as a moderator speaks to this: even when perceived economic benefits are strong, weak platforms for collaboration can blunt sustainability gains. Endogeneity remains a live concern—places that already preserve environments might attract better governance rather than the reverse—so the model is explicit about subsequent empirical checks. For managers in Ouezzane, several cues follow. Prioritise capacity building that is close to tasks (host certification, heritage interpretation, micro-enterprise coaching), as this is likely to lift perceived benefits and stewardship at once. Make governance visible through participatory committees with clear mandates—carrying-capacity rules for sensitive forests and zaouias, benefit-sharing protocols, accessible grievance channels. Invest in the “small systems” that matter daily—waste and water management, last-mile access, trail signage—since right-sized infrastructure is where environmental intent becomes practice. Curate cultural content with custodians to strengthen pride and reduce misrepresentation; pair this with simple indicators (e.g., share of local sourcing, seasonality of jobs, visitor compliance with site codes) to track whether H1–H8 are plausibly materialising. Finally, use a territorial platform (cluster) to pace product launches and align promotion with carrying capacity, so marketing does not outrun management.

4.3 Limitations and Future Prospects

This study is intentionally conceptual; its claims rest on accumulated literature rather than field data from Ouezzane. External validity is thus provisional, and several risks remain: omitted variables (e.g., market access, digital visibility, safety perceptions), context-specific governance dynamics, and the usual measurement hurdles tied to latent constructs (common-method variance, wording effects). The direction of some paths may also be bidirectional, which argues for designs that can handle endogeneity. Future work should proceed in three steps. (i) Operationalisation. Develop and pre-test a measurement instrument tailored to Ouezzane, adapting established scales for reflective constructs and carefully specifying formative blocks (Kline, 2016; Hair et al., 2019). (ii) Data and estimation. Collect multi-informant data (residents, cooperatives/artisans, guides/operators, visitors, local authorities) to reduce single-source bias; pilot PLS-SEM if early samples are modest, then confirm with CB-SEM as data allow. Consider multi-group tests (e.g., commune, gender, youth) and hierarchical modelling if projects cluster by locality. (iii) Design enrichment. Pair surveys with qualitative work—focus groups with custodians of moussems, ethnographic observation on trails—and, where feasible, add a longitudinal or panel component to observe change rather than one-off snapshots. Once estimated, the model can be trimmed or extended (e.g., adding market-linkage or digital-readiness constructs) and translated into actionable guidance: sequencing of infrastructure, governance routines, and marketing tactics calibrated to carrying capacity. Comparative analyses with other Moroccan provinces or Mediterranean cases would help separate what is general from what is Ouezzane-specific, sharpening both theory and practice.

5 Conclusion

This study proposes an original theoretical model for alternative tourism in the province of Ouezzane, grounded in a close reading of the literature and informed by structural equation modeling. The findings suggest—without claiming certainty—that community empowerment, participatory governance, sustainable infrastructure, environmental stewardship, socio-cultural valorisation, and multi-stakeholder coordination operate together rather than in isolation. In practice, this likely means that local cooperatives having a real say in decisions, basic services that actually work year-round, and concrete conservation measures (e.g., trail maintenance, waste sorting, water usage control) move the needle only when they are aligned and jointly monitored. The model thus underscores the web of interdependencies among these levers and cautions that the success of alternative tourism in Ouezzane hinges on an integrated approach rather than a checklist of actions. That said, this is an opening move, not a closing statement. The framework remains theoretical and requires empirical testing. The next step is to operationalise each construct with field-sensitive indicators—such as residents' effective decision power, the share of tourism revenue retained locally, the reliability of off-grid energy or water systems, the condition of natural sites, or the vitality of craft and ritual practices—and to design measurement instruments that can capture both direction and intensity of effects. Collecting data in situ (ideally with a mixed-methods and, where possible, longitudinal design) will allow us to examine the stability of the hypothesised paths, probe potential trade-offs (for instance, between visitor flows and heritage conservation), and adjust the model when results contradict expectations. This empirical work should culminate in actionable recommendations tailored to Ouezzane's specific realities—its mountainous terrain, dispersed settlements, and distinctive cultural heritage—rather than generic prescriptions. If validated and refined, the model opens promising avenues for a form of tourism that generates local income without eroding ecological or cultural assets, and that, over time, improves everyday living conditions. Lessons from this exploratory effort may also be transferable—cautiously—to other regions facing similar constraints, contributing to the broader conversation on sustainable tourism and nudging practice toward approaches that are more responsible, inclusive, and fair.

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