



Original scientific paper

# Shaping Tourism Strategies through Local Perceptions: A Case Study of Muharraq

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## ABSTRACT

*Bahrain, a longstanding tourist destination in the Gulf region, has seen its economy benefit significantly from tourism. However, the improper development of tourism has led to negative impacts on urban tourism in historic areas, risking the loss of authenticity. This study aims to explore factors influencing the development of tourism strategies in Muharraq city, focusing on residents' perceptions. A qualitative approach was used, including a comprehensive literature review, interviews with residents to capture their views on tourism-related issues, and a self-administered questionnaire with key officials and stakeholders. The study identifies critical factors affecting tourism development and offers recommendations for enhancing cultural tourism in Muharraq. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers to create sustainable strategies that balance economic growth with cultural preservation, ensuring that Muharraq remains a culturally vibrant city while promoting sustainable urban tourism. This research contributes to the broader field of urban tourism studies by highlighting the importance of local perceptions and participatory approaches in shaping effective tourism policies. By addressing key elements that influence tourism development, the study supports the creation of strategies that safeguard heritage while fostering sustainable growth in one of Bahrain's most culturally significant cities.*

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### Highlights:

- Proposing a strategic plan to improve the tourism industry as a strong supporter of the country's economy
- Understanding local's perception of tourism-related issues contributes to identifying important aspects that impact the growth of cultural tourism in Muharraq City.
- A fishbone diagram is a useful analysis tool to highlight the crucial factors towards successful and sustainable cultural tourism in the city.
- The significance of public participation in tourism development is discussed in this research.
- Policymakers can use the findings of the study to build a strong basis for the success of strategic planning to make Muharraq city a destination for cultural tourism.

### Contribution to the field statement:

According to this study, Bahrain's economic status might be enhanced by strategically boosting the tourism industry. It seeks to determine, via the perspectives of its citizens, the variables that might influence Muharraq City's tourism development initiatives. In one of Bahrain's most culturally vibrant cities, this research adds to the body of knowledge on urban tourist studies by addressing important elements that would assist policymakers in developing sustainable cultural tourism.

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## 1. Introduction

The global tourism industry attracts hundreds of millions of domestic and international travelers each year, making it a significant contributor to local economies worldwide (UNWTO, 2023b). According to the World Tourism Barometer, the global economy is projected to grow by 2.9% in 2024, highlighting tourism's potential role in this expansion (UNWTO, 2023a). However, while tourism development can positively impact local economies, it can also bring about various negative consequences for communities, particularly in historic urban areas (Vidal Rua, 2020). The perceptions of host communities regarding the impacts of tourism are critical to understanding these effects and to fostering sustainable tourism strategies.

Recent studies have extensively examined how host communities perceive the impacts of tourism development on their well-being and community life (Ko & Stewart, 2002). These studies have identified both positive and negative community perceptions of tourism. For instance, some research suggests that unfavorable perceptions are often linked to specific aspects of community life, such as public services and opportunities for civic engagement (Ko & Stewart, 2002). Conversely, other studies indicate that many residents believe tourism can improve their community's quality of life. Understanding these perceptions is essential for developing initiatives that foster local support for sustainable tourism development and reduce potential conflicts between visitors and residents (Lee, Li, & Kim, 2007).

Local perceptions of tourism can vary significantly, influenced by factors such as the extent of tourism development, the interaction between locals and visitors, and changes within the tourism sector itself. Allen et al. (1988) emphasized that the perceived impacts of tourism on community life are closely related to the scale of tourism development. Hence, understanding how local communities perceive tourism is crucial for planning and implementing sustainable tourism strategies that align with community expectations and needs.

Bahrain is a compelling case study for examining these dynamics, given its unique blend of archaeological heritage spanning 5,000 years and contemporary Arab culture. The nation draws tourists from neighboring Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and beyond, thanks to its rich historical legacy, which includes artifacts dating back over 9,000 years. Despite its limited physical and human resources, Bahrain's tourism sector is experiencing rapid growth, supported by the National Action Charter and Vision 2030, which emphasize economic diversification away from oil dependency (Sadiq Husain et al., 2022). The strategic importance of the tourism industry as a driver of economic growth was underscored in Bahrain's Vision 2030 (Oxford Business Group, 2022).

The economic impact of tourism in Bahrain is significant. For example, a 2022 survey by the Bahrain Tourist and Exhibitions Authority and the Information and e-Government Authority reported that revenues from inbound tourism increased by 175%, reaching approximately BHD 1.5 billion (MOFNE, 2022). Moreover, research indicates a correlation between tourism and economic growth in Bahrain, with findings suggesting a causal relationship between the two (Fuad, 2015; Kreishan, 2015). To maximize the potential of heritage tourism, numerous conservation and preservation projects have been launched, leveraging these as attractions for tourists (El-Ghonaimy & Al-Haddad, 2019).

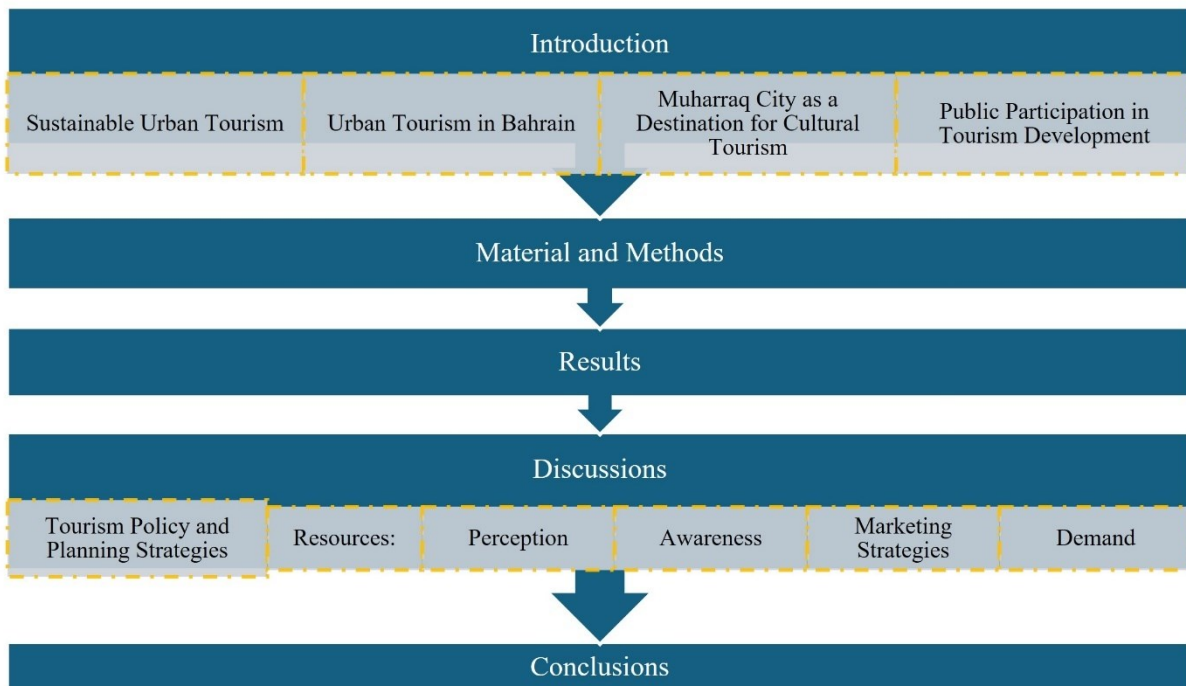
While substantial research exists on local perceptions of tourism in underdeveloped countries, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning historic towns in more developed destinations, such as Bahrain. This study aims to address this gap by examining local perceptions of tourism in Muharraq, a historic city in Bahrain. It seeks to understand how residents' views on tourism-related issues, shaped by their demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, impact the development of effective tourism strategies for these areas.

To achieve these objectives, the study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of local residents regarding the impact of tourism on their city?
2. How can residents' perceptions and insights influence the development of sustainable urban tourism strategies in Muharraq?

By answering these questions, the research will provide valuable insights into the role of local perceptions in shaping tourism development strategies that balance economic growth with cultural preservation, thereby contributing to the broader field of urban tourism studies.

Figure 1 explains the main lines structuring the research.



**Figure 1.** The Research Structure.

### 1.1. Sustainable Urban Tourism

As per UNWTO (2023a), urban tourism is known as "a type of tourism activity which takes place in an urban space with its inherent attributes characterized by non-agricultural based economy such as administration, manufacturing, trade and services and by being nodal points of transport. Urban/city destinations offer a broad and heterogeneous range of cultural, architectural, technological, social and natural experiences and products for leisure and business". Since cities serve multiple purposes, there might be a wide range of reasons why visitors choose to visit them. Its multifunctionality allows for the simultaneous of multiple experiences, which complicates the link between (urbanity, mobility, sustainability, and tourism) (Aall & Koens, 2019). Many advantages come from urban tourism for urban communities: more local goods and services are produced, population growth and living standards are raised, arguments are made for building or upgrading basic infrastructure (roads, waterworks, parks, power plants, and electricity), the environment is improved, and the reputation that is needed to attract businesses is formed (Moulay, 2019). When the needs and desires of residents and visitors collide, cities face differing demands for services and amenities (LUU et al., 2021). Even if cities are more resilient and active than rural locations, increasing numbers of tourists may disrupt the harmony between various user groups and lower cities' living standards (Nia & Suleiman, 2017). These "tourist difficulties" are simultaneously connected to more significant societal problems and city stakeholders. Engaging all critical stakeholders in governance is especially difficult because many parties are engaged (Rahbarianyazd, 2017). One may even argue that the problems with sustainable urban tourism are so significant that they cannot be resolved within the confines of the existing (*political, social, and economic structures*), necessitating a drastic change or revolution (Seyfi et al., 2019).

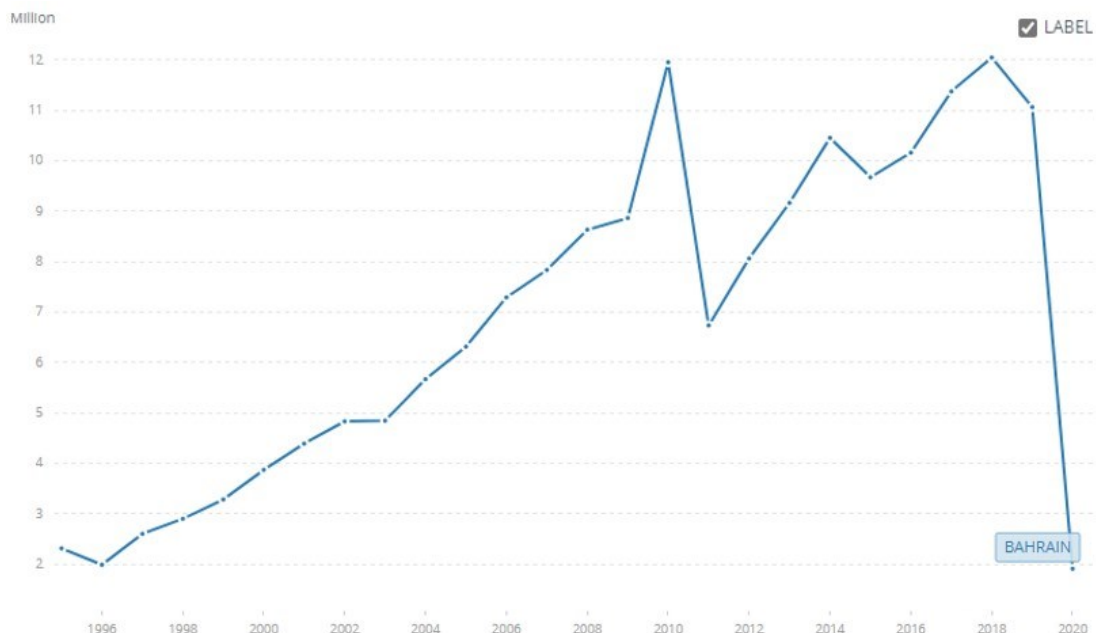
A significant contribution to the New Urban Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals—among which Goal 11 is to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable"—can come from urban tourism. A city's ability to grow and offer its citizens and visitors enhanced and improved living circumstances is fundamentally linked to its tourism industry

(UNWTO, 2020). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) first presented its viewpoints on the topic in 1993, marking the beginning of the conversation on sustainable tourism. Prior changes in the industry that resulted in social, economic, and ecological issues, prompted the inclusion of sustainable development on the agenda for tourist policy. Accordingly, the type of tourism that promotes actions that further the cause of universal and generational justice might be referred to as sustainable urban tourism (Aall and Koens, 2019).

## 1.2. Urban Tourism in Bahrain

With a total area of 771 square kilometres, Bahrain is composed of 51 islands. Blessed with a multitude of unique geographical features, the region boasts an astounding quantity of natural springs. Traditional customs and historical landmarks coexist with contemporary advancements and cosmopolitan life, and the nation presents an intriguing fusion of Eastern and Western cultures as tall structures compete for space with traditional buildings. With over 1850 persons per square kilometre, Bahrain's population—estimated at 1.42 million in 2017—is extremely densely inhabited. Foreigners from various nations and backgrounds make up 54% of Bahrain's population (Bahrain National Portal, 2024). Historical and traditional places in Bahrain serve as reminders of the country's rich past and robust cultural identity.

In Bahrain, the industry most impacted by the pandemic was tourism. Before the pandemic, Bahrain welcomed one million tourists on average each month, and the Bahrain Economic Board (EDB) reports that between 2015 and 2019, total inbound tourism spending grew at a compound annual growth rate of 9.9%. 12 million tourists visited Bahrain in 2018, and 11.1 million did so in 2019 (Figure 2). International arrivals fell to 1.9 million in 2020, an 83 percent decrease as a result of closed borders. This steep decline in foreign arrivals was accompanied by a corresponding decline in incoming tourism spending. According to the Oxford Business Group (2022) on tourism in Bahrain, total inbound tourism expenditure reached BD1.6 billion in 2019, however, this fell to BD692.5 million in 2020.



**Figure 2.** Arrivals tourists to Bahrain. Source: World Bank ([www. data.worldbank.org](http://www.data.worldbank.org))

Bahrain's Minister of Industry, Commerce, and Tourists, Zayed bin Rashid Al Zayani, unveiled the country's new 2022–2026 tourism plan in 2021. As indicated by the Minister, the plan's primary goals are to promote Bahrain as a major international tourism destination and to enhance the industry's GDP contribution. Among other initiatives, the goal is to establish cultural tourism as a primary draw for travellers to accomplish this (The Daily Tribune, 2021). The most recent figures for the period of January to June 2023 were released by the Bahrain Tourism and Exhibition Authority (BTEA) in



2023, and they showed impressive growth in the country's tourism industry. The most recent BTEA data shows that during the first half of 2023, Bahrain received an incredible 5.9 million tourists, a phenomenal 51 percent rise over the same period the previous year, when the Kingdom received 3.9 million visitors. This notable increase in visitors highlights Bahrain's increasing appeal as a top travel destination.

Bahrain is a desirable destination for both business and pleasure travel because of its geographical location, easy access, and wide array of services that suit a variety of tourists' tastes. According to M. Toorani, Director of Marketing & Promotion at BETA, the increase in tourists made Bahrain a top travel destination. She emphasized the goal of creating experiences that highlight Bahrain's rich past and culture (The Daily Tribune, 2021).

### **1.3. Muharraq City as a Destination for Cultural Tourism**

Muharraq has been taken as this paper's case study due to its significant past and present impact on identity, comprising numerous historical elements in the Kingdom such as historical fortresses and magnificent traditional buildings, and is endowed with cultural importance. Muharraq was initiated by Al Khalifa in 1810, and its economy was initially organized around a tribal, feudal system (El-Ghonaimy, 2020). In the past ten years, the city has witnessed a very active process of reviving its heritage, regenerating economic areas, implementing comprehensive infrastructure, and safeguarding communities. Muharraq, the third-largest city of Bahrain is located in the southwest part of the northern island (Figure 3). Muharraq is 1.5 miles away from the main island and linked to Manama city, the capital, by a causeway (Figure 4). In 2020, around 263,373 people were living in Muharraq ([www.ceicdata.com](http://www.ceicdata.com)). The city has maintained its historic charm despite numerous alterations over the years. The compact and organic urban fabric, which has developed over time, connects the various areas of the city and is in line with the prevailing natural and cultural conditions (Shubbar & Boussaa, 2022). Muharraq has gained recognition for its cultural contributions, exemplified by the numerous restored traditional Bahraini homes scattered throughout its winding streets and alleys (Figure 4). The Sheikh Isa bin Ali House, the Bin Matar House, the Abdullah al Zayed House, and other traditional homes that highlight various facets of Bahrain's rich legacy are among the remnants of these ancient homes that were once held by local pearl traders (BACA, n.d.). As the principal hub for the once-significant pearl-diving business in Bahrain, its harbour served as it expanded into a commercial hub. It met a complex web of interrelated cultural, social, religious, economic, and physical needs by utilizing local resources which created a link between the built environment and culture. Like all other Arab cities, Muharraq's urbanization was influenced by customary tribal laws, which is why it has many of the physical traits of Islamic Arab cities. Considered one of the finest examples of traditional Gulf urbanization, the city's distinctive organic form and architecture are evident in its network of homes, mosques, and trading facilities (Alraouf, 2014).



Figure 3. Al Muharraq city location in the map of Bahrain. Source: www.ontheworldmap.com

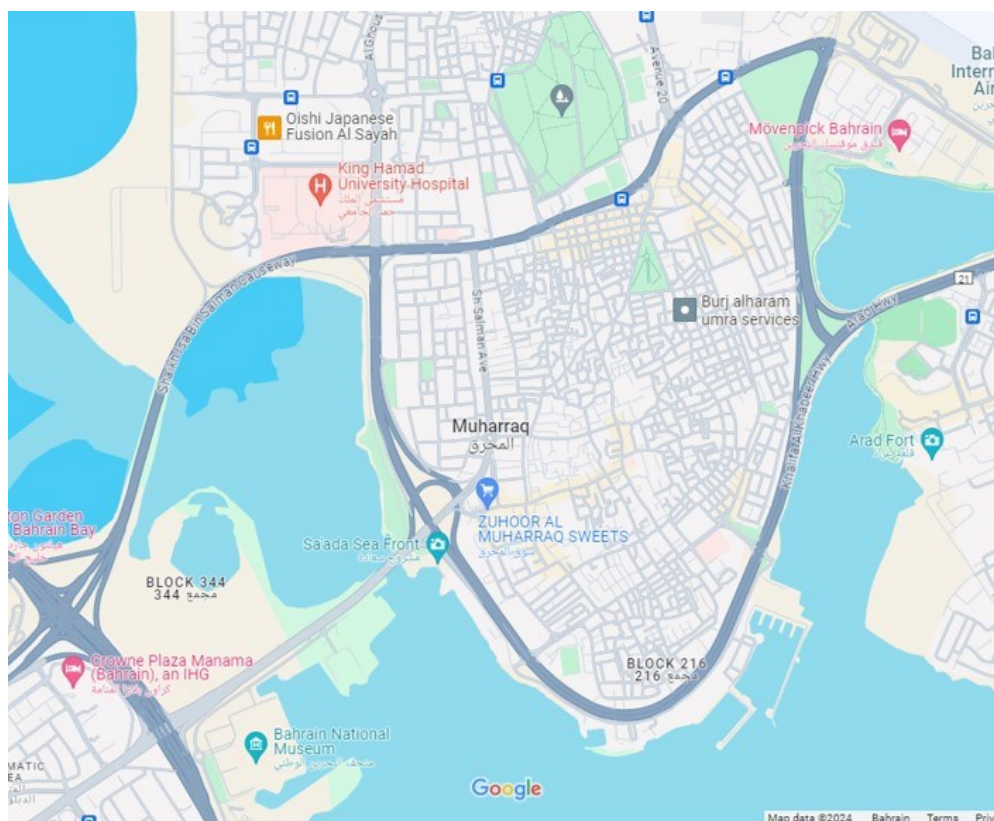


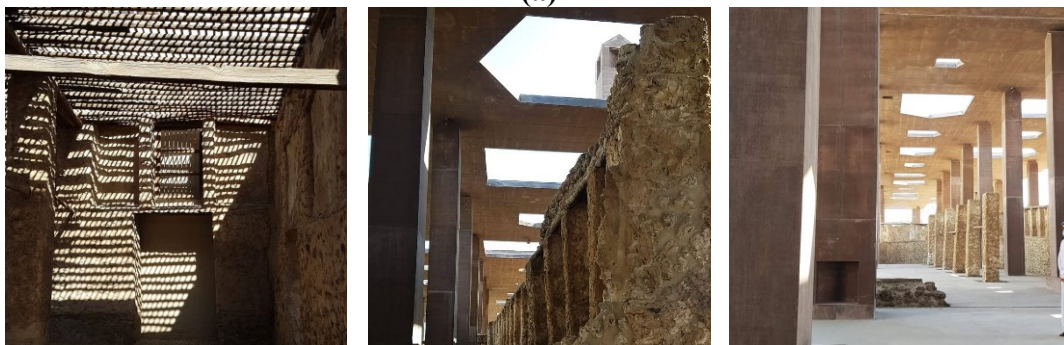
Figure 4. Map of Muharraq City, Bahrain. Source: www.google.com/maps

Nonetheless, the government moved to preserve and modernize the region's architectural legacy. A UN World Heritage site, the Pearling Path includes historic homes with their distinctive character (Figure 5a & 5b). His Majesty King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa gave the orders to revive Isa Al Kabeer Palace and develop Muharraq in a way that maintains and protects its historical and cultural identity. An essential part of the country's character is its cultural heritage, developed, protected, and promoted

by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA). The Authority aims to solidify culture's position as a social and economic advancement pillar and enhance Bahrain's standing as a nation that respects all cultures abroad. (BACA) as a government authority is working with all relevant official entities to highlight the historical and cultural significance of the city's rich tangible and intangible urban and cultural heritage through various urban renewal initiatives, like the Pearling Path project, that was implemented throughout the city of Muharraq (Sadiq Husain et al., 2022). The project is a representation of Muharraq's pearling era, which was recognized for many centuries as the most prominent pearling civilization and industry in the world ([www.pearlingpath.bh](http://www.pearlingpath.bh)). The project's goals are to provide community and cultural venues, enhance the town's environment, and draw local Bahraini families back to the area in order to balance the town's demographics. It also aims to highlight the town's heritage with the pearling business. The Pearling Path was successfully added to the UNESCO World Human Heritage List as part of the authority's efforts to promote the city's cultural and tourism status, and it is still working on cultural sites that highlight the city's historical relevance (BACA, n.d.).



(a)



(b)

**Figure 5.** (a) Traditional Buildings, and Al Qaisarya Souq in AL Muharraq. (b) The Pearl Path Project, AL Muharraq.

#### 1.4. Public Participation in Tourism Development

According to Geddes et al. (2019), participatory design is predicated on five essential ideas. “Politics” in the sense that those who are impacted by a decision should have a chance to influence it; “people” in the sense that they are subject matter experts and can have a significant influence on design; “context” in the sense of circumstances; “methods” in the sense that they are a way for users to have an impact; and “product” in the sense of the ultimate objective of participatory design. Three major

themes with differing approaches can be used to organize participatory planning throughout the literature:

- a. Reasons for choosing to participate in participatory design.
- b. Potential levels of engagement; and
- c. kinds of participants in terms of networks and scale.

Geddes et al. (2019) believe that the Design Participation development should shift its attention from asking "why people should engage" to asking "how" to apply the concept of participation. The impacts of tourism, which explain changes or repercussions on tourist development, have received more attention as tourism grows globally. Understanding locals' perspectives on tourism's consequences can help policymakers and other tourism sector players create more sustainable tourism policies and foster support from residents (Long & Kayat, 2011). The success of the tourism sector depends on the cooperation of locals, who must be amicable and welcoming to visitors and refrain from opposing tourism-related initiatives in their neighbourhoods. In the same way that they concentrate on drawing visitors, tourism planners should also take the time to comprehend locals' worries and perspectives regarding the effects of tourism. Numerous studies have looked into how locals perceive tourism's effects on their communities in recent years. At the positive end of the spectrum, Hammad et al. (2017) contend in their study about tourism in Abu Dhabi that the growth of tourism enhances the standard of living for locals, fosters cultural interactions with visitors, upgrades infrastructure, expands leisure options, fortifies cultural identity, and provides communities with economic advantages and job opportunities. Conversely, adverse consequences encompass low-wage tourism jobs, particularly in service sectors such as cleaning, security, and hospitality, which devalue locals in comparison to other employment prospects; loss of local resource access; development of tourism-related coping mechanisms; avoidance of tourist destinations that contradict local customs; and problems with crowding and security (Hammad et al., 2017).

According to a recent analysis, the most popular paradigm for looking at local viewpoints on tourism is the social exchange theory (Hadinejad et al., 2019). The aim of social exchange theory (SET) is to comprehend the resource exchange between people and groups in an interaction environment. According to the theory, the probability of an individual having a positive evaluation of a trade is higher when they believe the exchange holds benefits. One community feature that affects resident sentiments, according to Algassim et al. (2022) is the ability to control how tourism resources are used or how development is directed.

## 2. Material and Methods

This research utilizes a case study approach, focusing on Muharraq City, to explore the relationship between Bahraini residents' support for the expansion of the tourism industry and their perceptions of its negative consequences. The study aims to investigate urban tourism perceptions in historic areas and to understand how residents of Muharraq City perceive tourism-related issues, including how socioeconomic and demographic factors shape these perspectives. A qualitative research methodology was selected to provide comprehensive, descriptive data that would generate insights and perceptions regarding urban tourism (Hassan, 2024). Furthermore, this approach helps contextualize quantitative data, enhancing the understanding of public perceptions and offering explanations for quantitative findings.

The research methodology was structured into two main stages:

**Stage One:** A comprehensive literature review was conducted, focusing on the concept of sustainable urban tourism, the characteristics of urban tourism in Bahrain, and the specific appeal of Muharraq City as a cultural tourism destination. This stage also explored the role of citizen engagement in tourism development, drawing on insights and information from previous studies to establish a foundational knowledge base.

**Stage Two:** A survey was conducted using a qualitative methodology targeting a sample of Bahraini permanent residents over the age of 18, residing either in Muharraq or other Bahraini cities. The survey instrument consisted of three sections: the first section collected demographic data, including age, gender, and place of residence; the second section asked participants to rate their agreement or



disagreement with fourteen statements regarding urban tourism; and the third section solicited participants’ recommendations for improving tourism planning in Muharraq. The survey was distributed online in both Arabic and English, and participants were encouraged to share the survey link with their acquaintances. Due to time constraints, the survey was conducted over one week, resulting in 83 responses from a diverse range of participants in terms of age, gender, education level, and background. Further details are provided in Table 3.

Additionally, open-ended interviews were conducted with Muharraq residents to document their opinions and analyze local perspectives on tourism-related issues in this historical heritage city. These one-to-one interviews aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, attitudes, and views. Depending on availability, interviews were conducted via video conference or in person, using open-ended questions to encourage in-depth responses.

To complement the questionnaire, several stakeholders and industry professionals were interviewed to gain insights into the tourism sector in Bahrain. These semi-structured interviews included ten open-ended questions focused on opinions about Muharraq City and its cultural tourism potential (Table 2). Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. The purpose of the questionnaire and interviews was clearly communicated, and no personal information was collected from participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

**Table 2:** Experts Interview – Open-ended Questions on Cultural Tourism in Muharraq and the Authorities' Role in the Development of Tourism in Bahrain.

No.	Questions	Categories
1	Please give us insight into the status of tourism in Bahrain and what is targeted in the new tourism plan for the Kingdom of Bahrain.	Perception
2	What types of Tourism in Bahrain are more successful? Cultural, sports, medical, ecological, leisure,..etc?	
3	Why tourism is important for Bahrain?	
4	Do you think Bahrain's cultural tourism can be successful compared to the other types?	Demand
5	What are the stakeholders that need to collaborate to make Muharraq a successful cultural tourism destination?	Resources
6	Has any survey been conducted considering the social impact of tourism in Bahrain? (i.e. is tourism encouraging social interaction between residents and visitors? Is the satisfaction of the residents taken into account?	Awareness
7	What are the challenges that might face cultural tourism in Bahrain?	
8	In case of resistance from the residents towards tourist attractions in their area, what could be the solution to reach public satisfaction? Can public participation in the planning process and taking their concerns into consideration work?	Planning Strategies
9	From your experience, what are the recommendations to be considered in targeting Muharraq as a cultural tourism destination without causing any negative impact of overcrowding in the area (cultural differences, congestions in traffic, disturbance to quiet neighbourhoods, safety and security,..etc)	
10	What is the role of the BCCI Committee in making this type of tourism a successful one?	

Three parts make up the survey: the first recorded demographics, which were evaluated as follows: age (three age groups: 18–29, 30-49, and 50 and above), gender (male and female), and city of residence (Muharraq, or other cities).

The second component comprised 14 statements that assessed citizens' opinions of the four domains of tourist impacts on a scale from strongly disagree to highly agree. The characteristics were drawn from past research on locals' impressions of the cultural, social, economic, and environmental effects

of tourism carried out in areas with comparable cultural and environmental features, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Algassim et al., 2022; Hammad et al., 2017). In the third section, there were measures of public support for tourism growth. The participants were given a checklist with seven recommendations that they believed would enhance cultural tourism in the city and benefit the community. The participants were free to contribute suggestions beyond those that were provided.

### 3. Results

Following the collection of information from the questionnaires and interviews, the demographics of the respondents were examined. Figures 6a, 6b and 6c display the respondents' age, gender, and place of residence. Most respondents were female (78.3%), and 21.7% were male. The majority of the respondents were in the younger age group of 18-29 (38.6%), 30-49 (37.3%), and the older age group above 50 years old were the least (24.1%). 51.8% of respondents live in Muharraq city while the rest were from different cities in Bahrain. The diverse demographics of the respondents demonstrated an increased interest in the research issue, particularly among the younger respondents who expressed concerns about the direction of their community development.

Participant's Gender

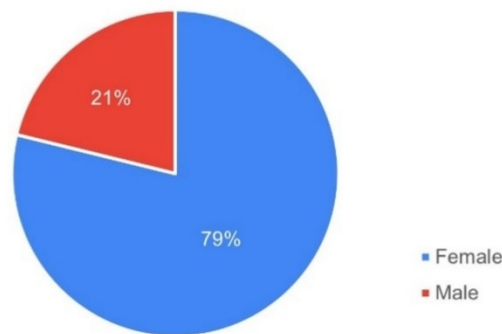
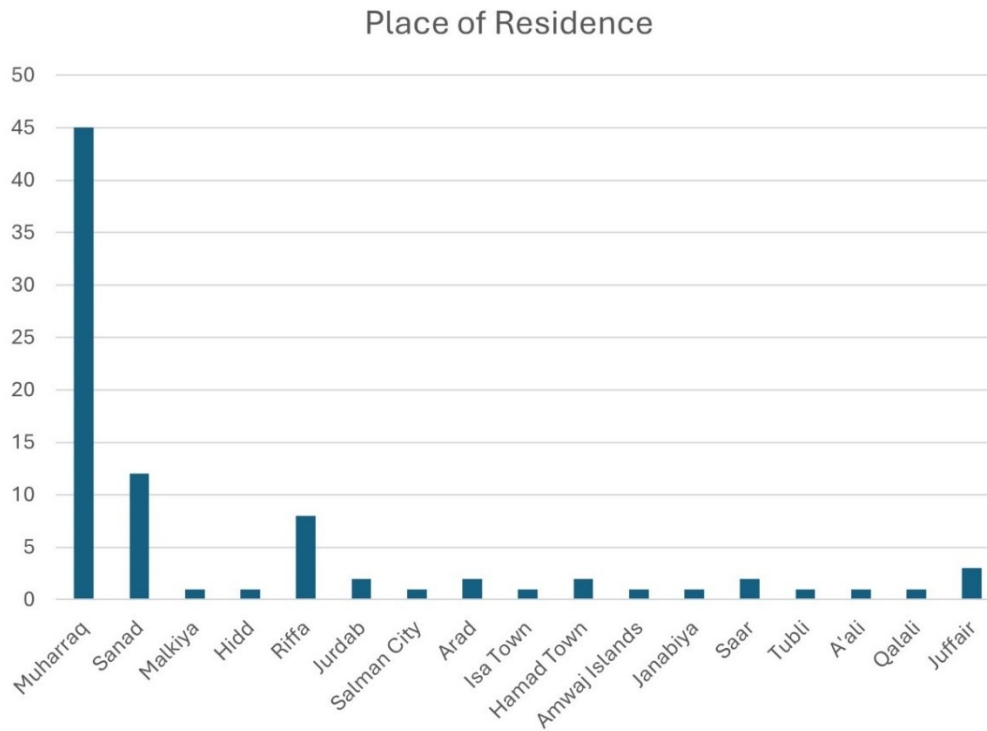


Figure 6a. Results of Participants' Gender.



Figure 6b. Results of Participants' Age Group.



**Figure 6c.** Results of Participants' Place of Residence.

Statements measuring locals' impressions of the four dimensions of tourist impacts—cultural, economic, environmental, and social—were included in the second section of the questionnaire. The vast majority of respondents firmly concur that locals' perspectives are essential when it comes to Muharraq's tourism strategy. 57 of the respondents strongly agree that tourism can lead to protecting the historic buildings in the city. Table 3 displays the statements and the respondents' opinions that measure the residents' contribution to the future of tourism development in Muharraq.

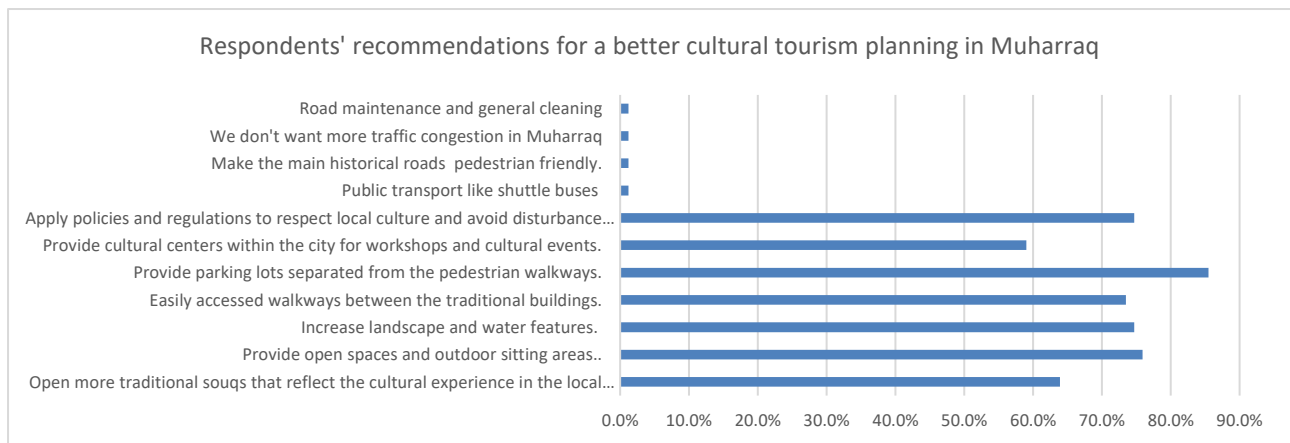
**Table 3:** Respondents' Opinions on given Statements related to the Cultural Tourism in Muharraq City.

No.	Statement	Respondents' Opinions			
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Muharraq City can be an attractive cultural tourism destination.	57	24	1	0
2	I support Muharraq's continued development of cultural tourism.	52	27	3	0
3	The Bahrain Tourism & Exhibition Authority should consider residents' opinions and concerns in the planning of tourism in Muharraq.	61	18	3	0
4	Cultural Tourism supports the local business environment in Muharraq	46	32	4	0
5	Tourism increases real estate property prices in the area.	42	33	7	0
6	Tourism increases pride in cultural identity and preserves it.	56	22	4	0
7	Tourism increases parking problems due to overcrowding.	49	28	5	0



8	Interest in protecting the region's historic buildings rises as a result of tourism.	57	21	4	0
9	Tourists cause inconvenience to residents and disturb the tranquillity of the residential area in Muharraq.	15	38	26	3
10	Misbehaviour of tourists creates problems and dissatisfaction among residents due to cultural differences.	18	38	27	2
11	Tourism improves police service and security in the area.	24	41	15	2
12	Tourism causes pollution due to increasing traffic.	14	35	31	2
13	Tourism improves the appearance of Muharraq by improving services in the area.	43	33	6	0
14	Tourism can cause damage to cultural/historical venues.	9	20	45	8

Figure 7 illustrates the questionnaire's third portion. The vast majority of participants (85.5%) strongly concur that, in order to improve the area, the parking lots and pedestrian pathways should be kept apart. Conversely, 79.5 percent support the inclusion of outdoor seating areas and open spaces in the neighbourhood. Other approaches to boosting tourism in the city were suggested by a few individuals. In addition to improving the city's infrastructure and services, some recommendations called for increasing the number of family-friendly events.



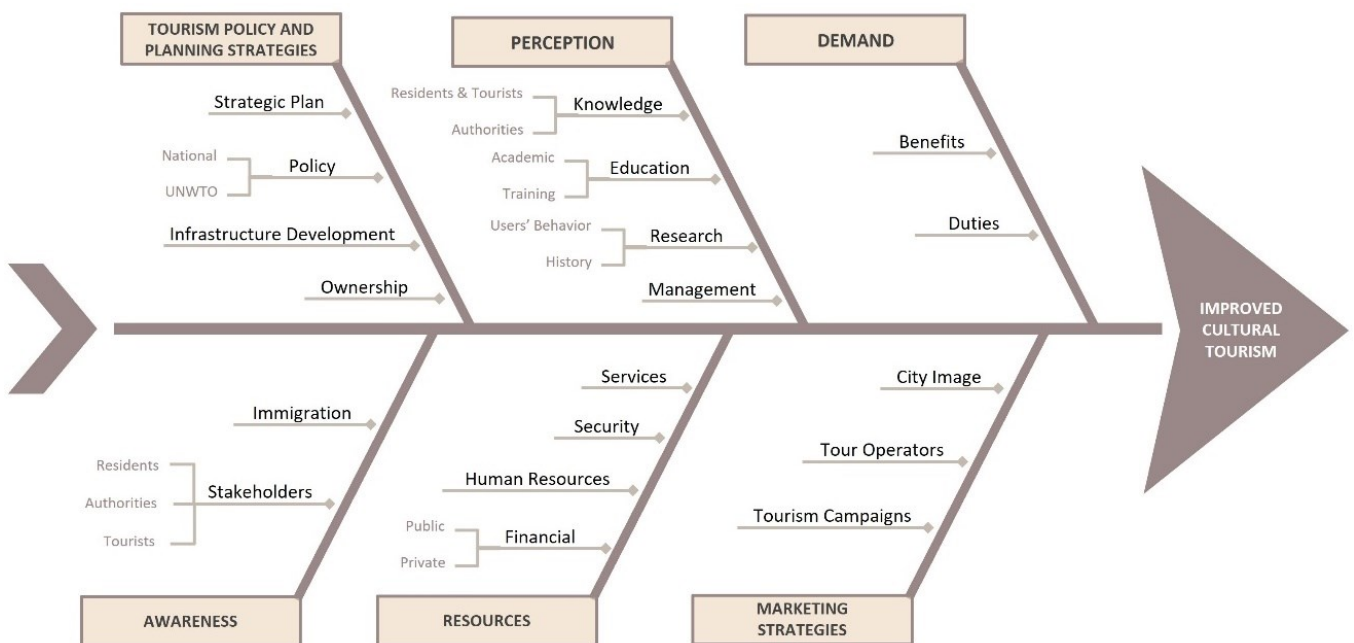
**Figure 7.** Results of Participants’ Recommendations for Better Cultural Tourism Planning in Muharraq City.

The experts' interviews added another depth to the perception of tourism in the city and gave professional guidance towards proper planning for the tourism future without creating any conflicts with the residents and the environment. Two well-experienced individuals in the tourism sector were interviewed individually and asked open-ended questions that would clarify the policies and the authorities’ strategies in the planning of tourism in the city. The interviews were transcribed, and themes were derived from the interviewees’ responses that can influence tourism planning strategies in the area. Mr. J. A., the head of the Tourism and Hospitality Committee at BCCI, believes that taking into consideration the residents’ concerns and recommendations is one of the key elements for the success of tourism development. Mr J. A. stated that the biggest challenge that faces cultural tourism in Muharraq is the rehabilitation of the historic and traditional areas due to being a sensitive procedure and extra care to be taken in the

conservation process to maintain the historic assets in the best way possible. Mr. J. A. and Mr. H. H., owners and CEOs of multiple hospitality projects in Bahrain, agree that enhanced communication between government agencies like Tamkeen, BTEA, and BCCI is necessary to create a more robust and healthy tourism development plan for Bahrain. This is vital to ensure the sustainability of cultural tourism in the nation.

#### 4. Discussions

The overall qualitative research demonstrates a positive correlation between locals' favourable assessments of tourism's benefits and their support for its growth. The replies from stakeholders and locals to the questionnaires and interviews show several factors that may influence how cultural tourism is planned for sustainability. The findings emphasized challenges that could impede the development of sustainable cultural tourism in Muharraq City if they are not successfully addressed. To determine the origins of these difficulties, a fishbone diagram (Figure 8) is utilized to highlight these six aspects that were obtained from the data. Each factor is explained in the following section in relation to previous research findings.



**Figure 8.** Fishbone diagram of factors affecting the development of cultural tourism in Muharraq City.

#### 4.1 Tourism Policy and Planning Strategies

According to the data analysis, the main obstacle to tourism development was the lack of cooperation among stakeholders, which resulted in differing opinions about how to promote the business (Seyfi et al., 2019). These involve several aspects to consider which include well-studied strategic planning for cultural tourism, Policy, Infrastructure development, and standards to follow. The owners and the government's lack of collaboration may result in a disrespect for customs and standards, which can pose a number of challenges to the sustainable growth of tourism in these locations. According to Kapera (2018) research, a number of stakeholders must work together, exhibit effective management, and have the backing of the local government in order for sustainable development concepts to be successfully implemented. Representatives from the tourism sector expressed concerns during the interviews on the maintenance of assets other than the area's tourist attractions. They emphasized the need for a policy to be formed about this issue to maintain consistency in the development of the city's infrastructure.



MacKenzie & Gannon (2019) assert that a prerequisite for long-term growth is the merging of the government and private sectors.

#### 4.2 Resources

This component covers every obstacle pertaining to resources, finances, and site conditions—these being the primary concerns of the locals. The majority of the respondents agree that a successful tourism strategy is to improve the services in the area. Wayfinding, basic amenities, paths, sewage and trash collection systems, and other weak infrastructure services are included in the code of services. One of the most crucial components of tourism growth is the provision of infrastructure and facilities (Seyfi et al., 2019). Activities in the city related to tourism may be impacted by the organizations' personnel and financial resources. The region's historical sites may not be sufficiently preserved if there is insufficient financing and a lack of skilled workers to maintain and restore the area's numerous historical landmarks and features. In addition, concerns about safety and security in Muharraq City's tourist zones were expressed in the majority of the comments. The way that safety is managed and how tourists behave both have a significant impact on these aspects (Hall et al., 2012). Visitor safety is an important matter that warrants special attention, as Woo et al. (2015) point out. This is especially true for locations deep within residential neighbourhoods, narrow walkways and pathways designated for pedestrian use.

#### 4.3 Perception

The conclusions are heavily influenced by the opinions of numerous stakeholders. The main causes of this problem are a lack of research and a poorly designed knowledge management system. The tourism authorities' ignorance of cultural tourism and the challenges it might face, and the growth of urban tourism may be severely hindered (Kapera, 2018). Cooper (2018) believes that the management of knowledge has not been applied extensively in the tourism field, defining it as "*a sequential process of recording, creating, sharing, and leveraging from organizational knowledge*". The academic and professional training can greatly enhance the knowledge to be received in the tourism sector, as noted by one of the interviewed experts in the field. A further important obstacle to sustainable development is found to be the dearth of research on the architecture, history, and behaviour of visitors and locals at these sites. By providing locals with a stronger historical and cultural grounding, can increase their understanding of the key concerns surrounding the heritage assets' worth (Vargas, 2018).

#### 4.4 Awareness

The data analysis revealed that authorities, migrants, stakeholders, and residents acknowledge Muharraq City's potential spiritual worth, its importance as a destination for cultural tourism, and the significance of developing sustainable management strategies for these cultural heritage assets. However, Muharraq City has a migratory population, which has a significant impact on how different populations engage with the city's historical sites (El-Kholei et al., 2019). Immigrants generally lack knowledge of the local culture and history, particularly those who were economically and socially disadvantaged when they immigrated. They don't seem motivated to find out this kind of information either. This ignorance opens the door to disregarding and even harming the destination's cultural legacy. Dutt et al. (2018) found a direct link between the degree of social attachment to tourism expansion and the length of time that individuals spend in a community. Nonetheless, the government authorities began to take steps to preserve and restore the region's architectural legacy in an attempt to spread awareness of the legacy's worth. The Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) wants to strengthen culture's role as a cornerstone of social and economic development and strengthen Bahrain's reputation as a country that values different cultures around the world. By raising awareness of this, industries like the arts, cultural tourism, and businesses associated with culture may have a significant impact on the economy by generating a lot of jobs and high-income streams, in addition to aiding in the recycling of local wealth. To achieve this goal, the collaboration between (BACA) and other pertinent official entities should be maintained closely and efficiently as part of the planning strategy for cultural tourism.



#### 4.5 Marketing Strategies

According to the research findings, effective marketing strategies are one of the recommendations received. They are found to be critical to the development of cultural tourism (Hughes & Carlsen, 2010). To attract tourists, it is essential to create a picture of the location that mobilizes both cognitive and affective components. Travelers' knowledge and opinions about a place are tied to its cognitive dimension, while their sentiments toward the location are related to its affective dimension (Pezeshki et al., 2019). Inadequate operations by tour operators combined with poor marketing and promotional strategies might lead to a negative image of Muharraq City as a destination for cultural tourism.

#### 4.6 Demand

The results show that the perceptions of negative effects on the environment and economy have an impact on locals' support for the growth of the tourism industry. The results indicate that Bahrainis are worried about the harm that tourism does to the environment. As per the recommendations received by the participants in the study, policies promoting tourism should promote eco-friendly travel and incorporate sustainable practices. A person's attitude toward a certain component of their environment is defined as "an enduring organization of motivational, emotional, perceptual, and cognitive processes" (Mothersbaugh et al., 2020). Understanding locals' demands and concerns can help policymakers and other tourism sector players create more sustainable tourism policies and foster support from residents (Long & Kayat, 2011). Perceptions, both good and bad, influence the growth of tourism. An analysis conducted recently by Hadinejad et al. (2019) revealed that empowered locals are more inclined to take advantage of tourism's potential economic, psychological, social, or political benefits as well as to engage in it. This also supports the notion that social cohesiveness can assist locals in creating unique identities and products, as well as in establishing themselves in the market (Parga Dans & Alonso González, 2019). The research successfully identified the factors that are found to be crucial in the strategic planning towards developing sustainable and efficient cultural tourism in Muharraq city.

#### 5. Conclusions

This study explored the development of tourism strategies in Muharraq, focusing on local residents' perceptions and their impact on shaping sustainable urban tourism policies. The findings emphasize the importance of incorporating local insights into tourism planning to ensure that economic growth does not compromise cultural preservation. Bahrain's recent strategic focus on diversifying its economic resources includes a robust plan to enhance the tourism sector as a significant economic contributor. Heritage tourism, identified by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) as a key area, aims to attract both domestic and international tourists, thus strengthening the tourism industry and delivering social and economic benefits. To align with national goals for sustainable tourism, it is crucial to incorporate residents' perspectives into strategic planning, ensuring a balance between economic development and cultural preservation.

In line with BACA's vision of fostering a supportive tourism environment, this research centred on improving cultural tourism in Muharraq by integrating local residents' views. The study highlighted that valuing community input helps shield Bahraini communities from potential social, cultural, environmental, and financial harm. The data gathered revealed several key factors influencing the growth of cultural tourism in Muharraq City, including policy and planning strategies, area resources, decision-makers, users' perceptions, residents' awareness, marketing strategies, and demand. The use of a fishbone diagram effectively identified these crucial aspects, illustrating their importance in strategic planning for sustainable urban tourism in historic areas.

The findings underscore the need to enhance infrastructure for both residents and tourists while preserving the social fabric and economic vitality of cultural sites. The study emphasizes the utility of using tools like the fishbone diagram in future research, given its effectiveness in analyzing the factors affecting perceptions of urban tourism in historic areas like Muharraq City. Moreover, this research discusses the importance of public participation in tourism development. The qualitative analysis provides comprehensive insights into perceptions of urban tourism, demonstrating a positive correlation



between residents' support for tourism growth and their perception of its impact on their community. Expert interviews further clarified key issues affecting the development of cultural tourism and identified challenges that must be addressed to ensure sustainability.

The study's limitations stem from the small sample size due to time constraints, making it exploratory in nature. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, future research should include a larger and more diverse group of participants and additional interviews with other officials to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies and regulations required for sustainable cultural tourism. This expanded scope could help mitigate the influence of individual opinions and provide more comprehensive guidance for fostering public participation in tourism development.

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The Author(s) declares(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

### **Data availability statement**

The research data is available within the article or its supplementary materials.

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