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Effect of Hijackings on Sustainable Tourism in Lamu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Lamu County is an important cultural and historical tourism destination in Kenya, but persistent terrorism-related security threats, particularly hijackings, continue to undermine the performance and sustainability of its tourism sector. Such incidents may reduce tourist confidence and arrivals, constrain business profitability, increase operational costs, and disrupt the livelihoods of communities dependent on tourism. This study examined the effect of hijackings on sustainable tourism in Lamu County, Kenya, guided by Social Conflict Theory. A descriptive research design was adopted. The study targeted 240 tourism-related stakeholders and sampled 72 respondents, including local business owners, tour operators, government officials, community-based organizations, and Beach Management Unit members. Data was collected using semi-structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The findings showed that hijackings had a statistically significant negative effect on sustainable tourism ($\beta = -0.267$, $p = 0.012$). The study concludes that hijackings constitute a significant threat to the sustainability and resilience of Lamu's tourism sector. It recommends strengthened collaboration among government, security agencies, tourism stakeholders, and local communities, alongside improved crisis preparedness, coordinated communication, and public awareness programmes to mitigate security risks, restore tourist confidence, protect livelihoods, and promote sustainable tourism development in Lamu County.

Keywords: *Hijackings, Sustainable Tourism, terrorism, Lamu County*

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1. Introduction

Globally, the tourism industry is highly sensitive to security threats, particularly terrorism, which can significantly disrupt travel patterns, undermine investor confidence, and result in substantial economic losses. In response, governments and tourism stakeholders have increasingly adopted comprehensive strategies to mitigate terrorism's effects on tourism. These include security enhancements, crisis management frameworks, and public-private partnerships to strengthen preparedness and response capabilities (UNWTO, 2022; Buhalis & Leung, 2020). Additionally, resilience-building initiatives such as crisis communication training and recovery planning have proven effective in enabling destinations to rebound from such disruptions (Faulkner & Russell, 2020). Sustainable tourism practices that emphasize environmental stewardship and community involvement not only enhance destination appeal

but also contribute to long-term stability and resilience against external threats, including terrorism (Hall & Higham, 2019).

In Africa, the threat of terrorism has had profound implications for tourism development across various regions. Countries such as Nigeria, Mali, and Kenya have experienced targeted attacks on popular tourist destinations and natural reserves, leading to significant declines in tourist arrivals and threatening the livelihoods of communities dependent on tourism revenue (UNWTO, 2019; WTO, 2021). While some nations, such as Egypt and Tunisia have made notable progress in enhancing security and crisis response mechanisms following attacks, others, particularly in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, continue to struggle with persistent insecurity and political instability, hindering efforts to establish and sustain robust tourism sectors (Hall & Timothy, 2018; Mbaiwa, 2020). The varying levels of resilience across the continent underscore the need for context-specific approaches to managing tourism amid terrorism.

Kenya, one of Africa's leading tourism destinations, has faced several terrorism-related incidents over the past two decades, including high-profile attacks that have affected tourist confidence and the broader perception of safety in the country. Nevertheless, the sector has shown considerable resilience. According to Benur and Bramwell (2021), diversifying tourism products and shifting focus beyond traditional wildlife safaris to cultural, eco, and adventure tourism has been instrumental in reducing the country's reliance on specific geographic locations and spreading risk. These efforts, supported by government and private-sector actors, have helped maintain flows of international and domestic tourists even amid insecurity.

Lamu County, located along Kenya's northern coastline, has been particularly affected by terrorism, especially due to its proximity to the Somalia border and its perceived vulnerability to extremist activity. Incidents targeting both local populations and tourist infrastructure have significantly reduced tourist arrivals, led to disinvestment, and disrupted community livelihoods (Khaemba & Ndonye, 2019). These developments have heightened socio-economic challenges in a region already grappling with high poverty rates and limited economic opportunities.

1.1 Problem Statement

Lamu County has experienced recurrent insecurity associated with Al-Shabaab activities, including hijackings, kidnappings, ambushes, and bombings. Hijackings are particularly concerning because they can disrupt the movement of tourists, tourism workers and transport operators, while creating fear and negative perceptions of Lamu as a tourist destination. These disruptions may lead to tourist cancellations, reduced visitor confidence, higher security costs, and losses for tourism-related businesses. Despite government interventions such as increased security operations, community policing and domestic tourism promotion, tourism in Lamu remains vulnerable to insecurity. Efforts to diversify tourism through cultural heritage and ecotourism have also been undertaken, but the extent to which hijackings specifically affect sustainable tourism in Lamu County remains insufficiently established. Existing studies have largely examined terrorism and insecurity broadly, with limited attention to hijacking as a distinct security threat and its specific implications for tourism sustainability. This gap calls for an empirical assessment of how hijackings affect tourism activities, tourism-related livelihoods, and the sustainability of Lamu County's tourism sector.

1.2 Research Objective

To determine the effect of hijackings on sustainable tourism in Lamu County, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

Karl Marx established Social Conflict Theory in the 19th century, which focuses on tensions that arise when different groups compete for limited resources, often because of power and wealth disparities. The theory assumes that social conflicts emerge when marginalized communities feel excluded from the benefits of resources or opportunities. In the context of terrorism and tourism, these social tensions can manifest in violent actions, such as terrorism, kidnappings, and hijackings, as a means for these groups to express their frustrations. This theory applies to this study by showing how inequalities in tourism-dependent regions like Lamu can create security threats that harm the tourism industry. By promoting inclusive tourism policies and ensuring local communities benefit from tourism, the study will explore how addressing these social disparities can reduce the risk of terrorism and violence, fostering a more secure and stable environment for tourism (Mason & Cheyne, 2020).

2.2 Empirical Review

Mensah (2016) examined sustainable tourism in Cape Coast and Elmina, Ghana, highlighting a disconnect between policy and practice. Using Stakeholder Theory and a mixed-methods approach, he found that while plans promote sustainability, implementation lacks community involvement, funding, and oversight. The study concluded that meaningful stakeholder engagement and local capacity-building are essential for sustainable tourism to succeed in developing countries.

Mbuthia, Kieti and Ipara (2024) examine sustainable tourism development in Lamu County, highlighting the importance of traditional culture and local heritage. Through ethnographic research and stakeholder consultations, they identify cultural sustainability as a critical but often overlooked pillar. Drawing on the Cultural Sustainability Model, Wanjiku shows that integrating local heritage into tourism offerings strengthens both community pride and the visitor experience, ultimately building more resilient tourism systems.

This study builds on this body of knowledge by examining how security threats in Lamu County promote or undermine sustainable tourism. Unlike broader studies that assess sustainable tourism from national or theoretical perspectives, this research will explore how local stakeholders perceive, adapt to, and influence sustainable tourism practices amid insecurity. It will provide insights into locally grounded strategies that promote resilience across the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of tourism development.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design to explore how terrorism affects sustainable tourism in Lamu County. The descriptive design was chosen because it provides a detailed, accurate account of the current situation and captures both the challenges and opportunities terrorism poses for the tourism industry. This approach allows an in-depth exploration of the socio-economic and environmental factors affecting tourism sustainability, offering a clear understanding of how terrorism and tourism practices interact in the region. The study included 240 respondents from these stakeholder groups. The researcher used 30% of the total target population. This follows Mugenda (2003), who noted that a sample of 10% to 30% is sufficient for a study.

From the target population, the study will select a sample of 72 respondents, including 30 local business owners, 15 tour operators, 10 government officials, 8 CBOs, and 9 members of the Beach Management Unit. This sample size represents 30% of the total target population, which

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Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) consider sufficient, as anything above 10% is deemed adequate for research purposes. The study collected data through field surveys using semi-structured questionnaires. The study analyzed quantitative data using descriptive statistics and qualitative data using qualitative analysis. The analysis addressed each research question and provided a detailed exploration of the relationship between terrorism and sustainable tourism in Lamu County.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Results on Hijackings and Tourism Performance

This section presents the descriptive results on hijackings and tourism performance. The researcher sought to establish respondents' perceptions of how hijacking activities affect tourism performance in Lamu County. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Hijackings and Tourism Performance

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev
Hijackings reduce tourist arrivals	0	5.1	12.8	46.2	35.9	4.13	0.77
Fear of hijackings affects sustainability	0	7.7	10.3	43.6	38.4	4.12	0.81
Hijackings reduce profitability	0	5.1	12.8	46.2	35.9	4.11	0.79
Hijackings reduce tourist confidence	0	7.7	10.3	43.6	38.4	4.12	0.81
Hijackings increase operational costs	0	7.7	12.8	41.0	38.5	4.06	0.81
Hijackings affect local livelihoods	0	5.1	10.3	46.2	38.4	4.14	0.78

Table 1 indicates that respondents largely agreed that hijacking activities have a considerable adverse effect on sustainable tourism in Lamu County. The highest mean score was for the statement that hijacking activities negatively affect the local population's living standards (mean = 4.14), followed by reduced tourism arrivals (mean = 4.13). Respondents also agreed that hijackings reduce tourists' confidence in visiting Lamu County (mean = 4.12) and threaten the sustainability of tourism development (mean = 4.12). Similarly, respondents indicated that hijacking activities decrease the profitability of tourism enterprises (mean = 4.11) and increase their operational costs (mean = 4.06). These findings suggest that hijacking's effects extend beyond tourist perceptions and directly affect tourism businesses and communities that depend on tourism-related activities for their livelihoods. The relatively low standard deviations further indicate considerable consistency in respondents' perceptions of hijacking's effects on sustainable tourism.

The findings align with Pizam and Mansfeld (2020), who note that security incidents can create fear and uncertainty, leading potential tourists to avoid destinations perceived as unsafe and reducing tourism demand. Similarly, Galtung (2021) argues that maritime security incidents in East Africa can undermine international tourists' willingness to visit affected destinations. These observations also align with Risk Perception Theory, which suggests that individuals assess perceived risks when making travel decisions, and concerns about personal safety can influence destination choice. In Lamu County, Kihara (2023) reports that hijacking-related insecurity has reduced tourism activities and destabilized tourism-dependent businesses.

Mwangi (2022) similarly associates insecurity with disruptions in tourism-related economic activities. Taken together, the descriptive findings indicate that hijacking may affect sustainable tourism through interconnected effects on tourist arrivals, business profitability, operating costs, community livelihoods, and visitor confidence, thereby demonstrating the need for security measures that support the continuity and resilience of tourism activities in Lamu County.

4.2 Descriptive Results on Sustainable Tourism

This section presents descriptive results on sustainable tourism in Lamu County. Table 2 summarizes respondents' responses to the sustainable tourism indicators using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Table 2: Sustainable Tourism

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev
Sustainable practices are widely adopted	5.1	20.5	28.2	30.8	15.4	3.42	0.88
Communities benefit economically	2.6	15.4	30.8	33.3	17.9	3.51	0.84
Stakeholders support conservation	2.6	12.8	28.2	35.9	20.5	3.60	0.81
Tourism contributes to growth	2.6	10.3	25.6	38.5	23.1	3.67	0.79
Policies support sustainability	5.1	17.9	30.8	28.2	17.9	3.38	0.90

As shown in Table 2, respondents generally perceived sustainable tourism practices in Lamu County as moderate. Respondents perceived sustainable tourism practices as moderately implemented in the tourism industry (Mean = 3.42), while community members experienced moderate economic benefits from tourism activities (Mean = 3.51). Respondents also agreed that tourism contributes to the county's economic growth (Mean = 3.67) and indicated moderate stakeholder support for environmental conservation activities (Mean = 3.60). These findings suggest that tourism supports the county's economic and environmental objectives, although sustainability practices have not been implemented consistently at a high level.

However, respondents reported weaker perceptions of how well tourism policies promote sustainability (Mean = 3.38). This may indicate gaps in policy implementation and coordination among tourism stakeholders. The standard deviations also show moderate variation in responses, suggesting respondents had different experiences and perceptions of sustainable tourism outcomes in the county. The findings align with Kihara (2023), who found that although tourism contributes significantly to economic growth and community livelihoods in Lamu County, sustainability practices remain inconsistently implemented. The findings therefore point to the need for stronger tourism policy implementation and greater stakeholder coordination to enhance tourism's long-term sustainability in Lamu County.

4.3 Regression Analysis

This section presents the regression analysis examining the effect of hijackings on sustainable tourism in Lamu County. The analysis sought to determine whether hijacking activities significantly influence sustainable tourism and to establish the direction and magnitude of the relationship. Table 3 presents the results.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients

Variable	B	Sig.
Hijackings	-0.267	0.012

Sustainable Tourism = -0.267 Hijackings

The study found that hijackings had a negative and statistically significant effect on sustainable tourism in Lamu County (β = -0.267, p = 0.012). This finding supports the descriptive results, which showed that respondents associated hijackings with reduced tourism arrivals, lower tourist confidence, increased operational costs, and reduced profitability of tourism enterprises. This finding aligns with Kihara (2023), who reported that insecurity, including hijacking, contributed to reduced tourism activities and instability among tourism-dependent businesses in Lamu County. Similarly, Mwangi (2022) observed that insecurity disrupts tourism-related economic activities and negatively affects tourism-dependent communities. The findings therefore show that the effects of hijackings extend beyond immediate security concerns, undermining the economic and social sustainability of tourism in Lamu County.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that hijackings significantly harm sustainable tourism in Lamu County, as shown by the regression results. Hijackings reduce tourist arrivals and confidence, lower tourism profitability, increase operational costs, and negatively affect the livelihoods of communities dependent on tourism. Although tourism continues to contribute to local economic growth and conservation, persistent insecurity undermines the sector's sustainability and resilience.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends strengthening collaboration among government agencies, security agencies, tourism stakeholders, and local communities to implement effective risk-management measures. The measures should include enhanced crisis preparedness, coordinated communication strategies, and public awareness programmes to improve response to security threats and maintain tourist confidence. Such coordinated efforts would help minimize the adverse effects of hijackings and other terrorism-related incidents on tourism activities and contribute to the long-term sustainability and resilience of the tourism sector in Lamu County.

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