

**Stakeholder voices in coastal and marine tourism:
unpacking the drivers and barriers to sustainable
engagement**

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Stakeholder Voices in Coastal and Marine Tourism: Unpacking the Drivers and Barriers to Sustainable Engagement

Abstract

Coastal and marine areas are among the most popular tourist destinations, playing a vital role in sustaining the livelihoods of local communities. Despite coastal and marine tourism literature often highlighting local community support driven by economic benefits, growing concerns about environmental degradation and cultural pollution remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, this paper adopts Social Exchange Theory and Social Network Theory to explore the drivers and barriers to sustainable stakeholder engagement in promoting coastal and marine tourism. Data were collected in 2024 through 17 semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion involving purposively sampled participants, including local community members, tourists, and representatives from government agencies in Iran. Thematic analysis revealed four key antecedents to sustainable stakeholder engagement: economic-infrastructural, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance-institutional. Among these, the environmental dimension emerged more as barriers than driving forces, whereas the other dimensions displayed a more balanced dynamic, functioning as both drivers and barriers. This paper contributes to the coastal and marine tourism literature by offering a nuanced perspective on the mechanisms of cooperation and resource exchange between local communities and key stakeholders, emphasizing their role in promoting coastal and marine tourism development.

Keywords: Sustainability, Stakeholder Engagement, Coastal and Marine Tourism, Drivers, Barriers

Introduction

As one of the world's most influential industries, tourism plays a vital role in shaping the economic and cultural landscapes of many nations (Nugroho and Numata, 2022). Within its diverse segments, coastal and marine tourism constitutes one of the most significant and rapidly growing sectors within the global tourism industry (Duan et al., 2022). According to OECD projections through 2030, coastal and marine tourism is anticipated to hold the largest share (26%) of the global ocean economy, involving approximately 8.6 million employment opportunities (Hynes et al., 2024). Beyond its economic significance, coastal and marine tourism also serves as a platform for intercultural exchange and has emerged as a key pillar of sustainable development in both developed and developing countries (Dimitrovski et al., 2021; Duan et al., 2022). Its impact is particularly evident in the sustainable growth and uplifting of the development standards of the local communities, which are driven by a range of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental complexities (Kallmuenzer et al., 2022; Mejjad et al., 2022; Sebastian and Rajagopalan; 2009). On the positive side, coastal and marine tourism can generate significant socio-economic benefits, including creating employment opportunities for local communities (Mejjad et al., 2022) and reinforcing social security through improved livelihoods and economic stability (Ramli et al., 2024). However, coastal and marine tourism can also pose risks, such as threats to biodiversity, environmental degradation, and cultural pollution (Ramli et al., 2024). For instance, the increasing use of glass-bottom boats in coastal and marine areas has contributed to coral reef degradation due to overuse and fuel pollution, ultimately endangering these fragile ecosystems. Moreover, high visitor concentrations on beaches, combined with unregulated coastal development—such as removing mangrove forests and seagrass meadows—can accelerate coastal erosion and lead to commodifying local culture for commercial purposes (Mola et al., 2012; Papathanassis, 2023). These observations underscore that the interaction between coastal and marine tourism and local communities does not always yield uniformly positive outcomes. Instead, it can present significant challenges to environmental sustainability and cultural preservation (Arabadzhyan et al., 2021; Daskin et al., 2020).

However, prior literature on coastal and marine tourism often places disproportionate emphasis on positive outcomes, frequently overlooking potential challenges and negative impacts in light of economic development gains (Arabadzhyan et al., 2021; Mejjad et al., 2022). For example, Wilks (2023) reported that coastal and marine tourism can significantly enhance

psychological and social empowerment in local communities by creating employment opportunities, improved infrastructure, and strengthening local economies. Mejjad et al. (2022) assessed local community perceptions across four dimensions—economic, environmental, social, and cultural—and emphasized that well-managed coastal and marine tourism can support sustainable livelihoods while also revitalizing ecosystems, local markets, and communities. Further, Ardhita and Ferdiansyah (2025) investigated sustainable development strategies in coastal areas, proposing initiatives to strengthen community participation, promote equitable employment, build social capital among local communities, and raise environmental awareness among tourists.

As outlined above, extant literature has primarily focused on local communities' support for coastal and marine tourism due to perceived economic benefits (Arabadzhyan et al., 2021; Mejjad et al., 2022), offering limited insight into cultural degradation and the growing challenges associated with climate change impact. In reality, not all local communities view coastal and marine tourism development positively. While it may generate economic benefits, some communities express concern over increased social vulnerability and cultural disorientation—particularly in areas where rapid tourism growth and environmental degradation disrupt traditional ways of life and cultural values (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2022; Lazzari et al., 2021). In such contexts, the limited scholarly focus on the negative impacts of coastal and marine tourism—such as rising sea levels, coastal flooding and erosion, ecosystem imbalances, and cultural vulnerability—fails to reflect local priorities (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2022; Mejjad et al., 2022). Analyzing and incorporating community perspectives that emphasize these adverse effects is crucial when making tourism-related decisions. Otherwise, the lack of meaningful engagement may hinder local communities from actively participating in and supporting coastal and marine tourism development (Pekerşen and Kaplan, 2023; Handoko et al., 2023). This highlights the urgent need for more holistic and context-specific research that examines both the barriers and drivers of coastal and marine tourism while incorporating the voices of local communities and addressing the sociocultural and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

This is particularly relevant for countries like Iran, which is geographically well-positioned and rich in coastal and marine resources, offering significant potential for economic development through community-based tourism initiatives (Zarghmi, 2024). Without adequate scholarly attention, unplanned expanding coastal and marine tourism could lead to substantial ecological,

social, and economic disruptions, ultimately undermining the significant economic benefits it aims to deliver (Mayaka et al., 2018; Nugroho and Numata, 2022). For instance, in Iran, the lack of comprehensive management strategies for coastal areas has resulted in overexploitation of natural resources, leading to habitat degradation and loss of biodiversity (Pira et al., 2025; Matoufi and Tajeddini, 2015; Zarghmi, 2024). Moreover, the absence of effective governance structures that actively incorporate the voices of local communities engaged in coastal and marine tourism has hindered sustainable development efforts, leading to tensions between community interests and government policies (Wu, 2021; Salarvand et al., 2025).

To address this void in prior literature, this paper integrates Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Social Network Theory (SNT) to examine the perceived barriers and drivers of coastal and marine tourism development in Iran, as understood by local communities and stakeholders. SET is employed to explore how social interactions evolve, offering insight into cooperation, reciprocity, and the development of positive perceptions among residents who engage with tourists (Pekerşen and Kaplan, 2023; Han et al., 2023; Park et al., 2017). However, SET alone does not fully capture the complex, multi-stakeholder dynamics required for sustainable coastal and marine tourism development, particularly about local businesses, travel agencies, hotels, and government institutions. To overcome this limitation, SNT is incorporated to illuminate the concept of benefit exchange—understood as the sharing of resources, information, and support within networks (Chang et al., 2021). SNT emphasizes the role of social networks in enhancing adaptability and resilience within social-ecological systems, especially in managing shared resources (Hu and Chen, 2024). Its focus on mutual benefit allows for a deeper analysis of how diverse stakeholders can collaborate effectively (Chang et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2023). By combining SET and SNT, this paper offers a more holistic understanding of the interrelationships among residents, tourists, and institutional actors involved in coastal and marine tourism.

Building on this foundation and guided by the theoretical frameworks of SET and SNT, this paper aims to achieve the following research objectives:

1. To identify planned changes introduced through the advancement of coastal and marine tourism in Iran, as perceived by local communities and stakeholders
2. To examine the driving forces that shape relationships between local communities and other stakeholders involved in coastal and marine tourism development in Iran.

3. To explore the restraining forces that hinder the development of coastal and marine tourism, based on stakeholder and community perspectives.

The findings contribute to advancing the development and sustainability of coastal and marine tourism from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Theoretically, by applying the principles of SET and SNT, this paper offers a nuanced perspective on the cooperation and resource exchange mechanisms between local communities and key stakeholders, highlighting their role in advancing coastal and marine tourism development. This integrated approach strengthens the sustainability of stakeholder relationships within coastal and marine tourism ecosystems by incorporating the perspectives and experiences of local communities. Practically, this paper highlights how coastal and marine tourism areas can be positioned as destinations for sustainable economic development by effectively addressing their potential negative impacts. The findings offer valuable insights for contributing to national GDP growth and narrowing the liquidity gap by framing coastal and marine tourism as a viable, long-term revenue-generating sector.

The remainder of the paper begins with a critical review of the study's theoretical background, followed by an outline of the methodological approach. The findings are then presented, leading to the conclusion, which discusses key theoretical and practical implications. Finally, the study's limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Literature Review

Community-based Sustainable Tourism Development

Tourism, recognized as a vital economic and social sector in the modern economy (Alcalá-Ordóñez and Segarra, 2025; Ramli et al, 2024), plays a crucial role in fostering cultural interchange (Dimitrovski et al., 2021), driving economic growth (Hynes et al., 2024; Pafi et al, 2020), and creating employment opportunities (Costa et al, 2023; Wilks, 2023). Within this context, community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged as an innovative approach that emphasizes the active participation of local communities in tourism activities by providing various services (Stoddart et al., 2020). CBT is grounded in the belief that local communities should be active agents in the tourism sector rather than merely passive recipients of its benefits (Costa et al., 2023; Krittayaruangroj et al., 2023). It is essential to distinguish CBT from rural tourism, as they fundamentally differ in their objectives and implementation. While rural tourism often focuses on showcasing rural lifestyles to visitors, CBT is rooted in the belief that local communities should

serve as active participants in the tourism sector rather than passive recipients of its benefits (Vargas-Sanchez et al., 2011; Krittayaruangroj et al., 2023). CBT emphasizes collaboration among all stakeholders and prioritizes the sustained welfare of communities within the framework of sustainable tourism development. For instance, Blapp and Mitras (2020) characterize CBT in their study of Bali as a respectful partnership with local communities, integrating economic, cultural, environmental, and social dimensions to promote a deeper appreciation of both heritage and the natural environment.

Practically, when local communities are actively involved in planning and decision-making processes, the outcomes often extend beyond economic gains: misunderstandings between hosts and tourists are reduced (Lee et al., 2022; Raymond & Hall, 2008), collaboration is strengthened (Quaranta et al., 2016; Blapp and Mitras, 2020), and resources, knowledge, and power are more equitably shared (Costa et al., 2020; Reggers et al., 2019). This participatory framework helps prevent the centralization of power and ensures that development initiatives align with local priorities (Vignieri, 2019). Consequently, CBT has demonstrated the potential to generate social, environmental, and economic benefits (Zielinski et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2023; Vignieri, 2019; Zapata & Hall, 2012). For instance, Zapata and Hall (2012) elucidated that CBT has the potential to yield considerable advantages, including enhanced employment prospects, economic stability, and social cohesion for local populations, contingent upon its integration and support alongside other economic initiatives. Similarly, Mehvar et al. (2018) investigated economic development within the coastal regions of Indonesia aimed at generating revenue, fostering local investments, and improving infrastructure, revealing that varied social development can expedite the advancement process.

As CBT continues to grow alongside rising visitor numbers, local communities experience both the benefits and challenges of tourism development (Zielinski et al., 2022; Pafi et al., 2020; Raymond and Hall, 2008). Coastal and marine tourism is no exception. With its potential to generate local income (Dimitrovski et al., 2021; Phelan et al., 2020), create employment opportunities (Mason and Cheyne, 2000), improve infrastructure (Mehvar et al., 2018; Costa et al., 2023), and strengthen cultural and social ties (Unhasuta et al., 2021; Hunter and Shaw, 2007), it can serve as a powerful catalyst for economic development (Nocca, 2017; Cortés-Macías, 2021). Accordingly, the active engagement of local communities in coastal and marine tourism can

enhance living standards and foster alternative livelihoods (Park et al., 2017; Vargas-Sánchez and Porras-Bueno, 2011). However, recognising the associated negative consequences, including environmental degradation and cultural commodification, is critical. Therefore, particular attention must be paid to the environmental and sociocultural impacts of tourism development, as these risks can undermine both ecological resilience and community well-being (Davenport & Davenport, 2006; Costa et al., 2020).

From the perspective of SET, local communities are more likely to support coastal and marine tourism development when they perceive the benefits to outweigh the costs. Conversely, communities tend to oppose or withdraw support for such initiatives when they anticipate losses. Given the potential of coastal and marine tourism to serve as a key economic driver, it is essential to understand the factors that facilitate or hinder sustainable stakeholder engagement. SET offers a valuable theoretical framework for conceptualizing the complex, multi-stakeholder interactions involved in coastal and marine tourism development, as it highlights the cost-benefit evaluations local communities undertake when determining whether to support tourism growth.

Social Exchange Theory and Coastal and Marine Tourism

SET, widely recognized as one of the most robust and commonly applied theoretical frameworks, offers valuable insights into understanding communities' perceptions and attitudes toward tourism (Nugroho and Numata, 2022; Alrwajfah et al., 2021). The theory posits that individuals assess exchanges by weighing the perceived benefits against the associated costs (Long and Kayat, 2011; Park et al., 2017). In the context of coastal and marine tourism, the application of SET has proven effective in generating meaningful insights, as it provides a structured theoretical lens through which to examine how local communities perceive and react to coastal and marine tourism development (Ribeiro et al., 2017; Vargas-Sánchez and Porras-Bueno, 2011).

According to SET, a lack of local community participation in tourism development can erode social and economic values (Strzelecka et al., 2017; Shani and Pizam, 2011). In contrast, residents who actively engage with tourists often develop more positive perceptions of tourism's impacts on their daily lives, which can improve their social and economic well-being (Daskin et al., 2020). Empirical studies on community empowerment reveal a range of diverse and, at times, conflicting findings regarding the relationship between resident participation and their perceptions of tourism impacts (Jani, 2018; Li and Wan, 2013; Cavus and Tanrisevdi, 2003). While some

research provides positive evidence supporting this connection (Mayaka et al., 2018; Choi and Murray, 2010), other studies suggest that there may be no significant correlation between the level of resident engagement and their view of the effects of tourism (Maruyama et al., 2018). This inconsistency highlights a pressing need for further investigation to better understand the contextual differences at play and to explore the role of local communities in creating value more thoroughly (Nunkoo and Gursoy 2012; Shani and Pizam, 2011).

This issue is particularly critical in developing regions, where varying infrastructure and social structures can significantly influence outcomes (Chang et al., 2021). For example, Sihombing et al. (2024) highlighted that although coastal and marine tourism contributes significantly to economic development in Bali, it also presents considerable threats to coastal ecosystems, necessitating careful management and the adoption of sustainable practices to mitigate adverse impacts. Conversely, in China, limited community participation—driven by economic constraints and the influence of manipulative gatekeepers—resulted in inequitable benefit-sharing, further discouraging local community involvement in coastal and marine tourism (Tien et al., 2021; Ji and Ding, 2024). These contrasting examples underscore the importance of context-specific strategies in promoting effective community participation in tourism development.

Understanding the dynamics of community participation in coastal and marine tourism development requires a nuanced approach that considers local socio-economic conditions, governance structures, and the community's capacity for meaningful engagement. Such an approach is critical for promoting sustainable tourism practices supporting local livelihoods and environmental conservation. Given these complexities, relying solely on SET may be insufficient to fully capture the intricate social dynamics and the central role of local communities (Jani, 2018). Instead, a more comprehensive theoretical framework, merging SET with SNT, can better illuminate the multifaceted impacts of coastal and marine tourism. This perspective enables the identification of strengths and weaknesses in current interactions and provides deeper insight into how evolving relationships may influence community outcomes over time.

Social Network Theory and Coastal and Marine Tourism

SNT offers a valuable theoretical framework for examining evolving relationships and patterns of cooperation within social structures composed of actors, dyadic ties, and broader networks of interaction (Stoddart et al., 2020). It defines social structures using three core elements: nodes

(actors), ties (relationships), and the overall network. Nodes represent individuals or organizations, while ties reflect interactions such as social connections or resource exchanges, collectively shaping actor relationships (Dinh et al., 2024). Networks are commonly analyzed using two key characteristics: density, referring to the number of connections between nodes, and centrality, indicating the concentration of power or resources (Ahuja et al., 2012). Although dense networks often enhance trust and facilitate information flow (Timur and Getz, 2008), Brett (2003) argues that decentralized structures can also effectively disseminate information by reducing redundancy and overlapping relationships. Thus, the choice of network type should align with the intended function, objectives, and contextual characteristics.

Social network analysis has gained increasing prominence in academic research, particularly within tourism management, as the tourism industry inherently relies on the active involvement and cooperation of diverse stakeholder communities (Chiu et al., 2006; Saunders, 2013). Key actors in this context typically include tourists, local communities, government agencies, and private sector representatives. The relationships among these actors—defined by the nature, strength, and frequency of their interactions—form complex networks that influence tourism outcomes. These linkages are critical in shaping decision-making processes, resource allocation, and trust-building among stakeholders. As such, SNT has emerged as a robust theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of stakeholder engagement and collaboration in tourism development, particularly in identifying patterns of influence, conflict, and cooperation (Chang et al., 2021).

Although the perceptions of local communities regarding the development of coastal and marine tourism have not been fully explored and remain underrepresented in prior literature (Arabadzhyan et al., 2021; Mejjad et al., 2022), understanding the interplay between evolving social networks and external influences—and their effects on community development—is vital. This study aims to bridge this gap by integrating the broad theoretical framework of SET with the micro-level analytical insights provided by SNT to examine the drivers and barriers to sustainable stakeholder engagement in realizing the full potential of coastal and marine tourism.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm (Lim, 2024) to explore the role of local communities in the sustainable development of coastal and marine tourism, as well as their

interactions with key stakeholders. Grounded in an interpretivist philosophy, this research adopts an inductive approach, guided by the well-established frameworks of SET and SNT, to explore perceptual relationships and inform the design of interview protocols (Luo and Ren, 2020; Hanafiah et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2020, Kallmuenzer et al., 2019). Thematic analysis was selected as the primary analytical method, aligning with the study's qualitative nature and its focus on uncovering themes that reflect participants' lived experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Tajeddini et al., 2017). This reflexive approach emphasizes the researcher's active role in interpreting data, enabling the identification of barriers, enablers, and mechanisms influencing sustainable development from the perspectives of local communities and stakeholders (Eivazinezhad et al., 2022). While the study does not aim to develop new theories, it systematically interprets qualitative data within the context of existing theoretical constructs (Abbasi et al., 2015; Gamage and Tajeddini, 2022). Grounded theory was deemed unsuitable for this study, as it relies on the emergence of theory from data, whereas this research is guided by predefined theoretical frameworks (e.g., SET and SNT) and does not aim to develop new theories.

Sampling and Data Collection

A mono-method qualitative approach was employed, with data collected cross-sectionally between September and November 2024. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three key stakeholder groups: local inhabitants, domestic tourists, and policymakers in Iran. Iran was chosen as the research setting due to its unique geographical features—namely its northern and southern coastlines—and the urgent need to harness its coastal and marine tourism potential in response to the country's current socio-economic challenges, particularly economic instability (Salarvand et al., 2025; Zarghmi, 2024).

Sampling began with purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling, resulting in 17 interviews conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved. The respondent profile is presented in Table 1. Further, a focus group comprising six members (one policymaker, two tourists, two locals, and one researcher) was convened to validate the findings, confirming that no new themes emerged. Data analysis followed Hanafiah et al.'s (2021) thematic analysis framework involving transcription, coding, and theme development. Participants were categorized into three primary groups: (a) Local residents directly involved in providing coastal-marine tourism services or with prior experience in such roles, (b) Governmental policymakers responsible for formulating policies

related to coastal and marine tourism and (c) Tourists who had visited coastal and marine tourist destinations in the region at least once within the preceding six months.

Data Collection Process

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to share their insights openly and candidly. The interviews were conducted in Farsi to ensure linguistic accessibility. The interview process was divided into two main sections: (1) participants' demographic characteristics and (2) their perspectives on engaging in coastal and marine tourism, with a focus on perceived benefits and barriers, particularly about the complex multi-stakeholder interactions involving government entities, local communities, and tourists.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, with participants briefed on the research objectives before commencement. All interviews were recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and verified by participants to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were subsequently analyzed using MAXQDA software for advanced content analysis.

Data Analysis

Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, the process unfolded as illustrated in Figure 1, providing a clear and systematic overview of the analytical steps. The analysis began with audio-recorded interviews, which were fully transcribed. The researchers immersed themselves in the raw data by rereading transcripts, cross-referencing, and taking notes, ensuring personal biases did not influence the process. Data were organized into codes, each representing the meaning of a text segment and grouped into similar phrases. The coding process was systematically completed in four stages (see Figure 1), enabling structured analysis and detailed interpretation. Researchers independently analyzed transcripts and finalized coding through joint meetings and comparisons to ensure accuracy. Detailed notes and collaborative discussions enhanced validity and minimized bias.

Transparency and Rigor

Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined four criteria for qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was ensured by accurate data interpretation, diverse participant selection, and data saturation. Confirmability was achieved through transparent documentation and external audits. Dependability was reinforced by oversight from

methodological experts. These measures ensured the study's validity, reliability, and trustworthiness, providing a solid foundation for interpreting and applying findings. The study involved participants from three groups—tourists, government representatives, and local community members—using the Focus Group methodology to promote synergy and consensus on key components and indicators (Liamputtong, 2011). Six individuals, selected based on their expertise and familiarity from interview sessions, participated, including codes C7, C1, P4, T4, T3, and one researcher. Facilitated by a researcher, the 90-minute session encouraged open dialogue on drivers and barriers affecting local community development in coastal and marine tourism. The meeting concluded with a concise synthesis of these findings, ensuring comprehensiveness and inclusiveness.

Findings

Grounded in the broader theoretical framework of SET and SNT and informed by conceptual overlaps, the data-driven barriers and drivers were organized into four overarching themes: economic-infrastructure, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance-institutional, as presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Theme 1: Economic-infrastructure

From an economic standpoint, critically assessing the role of local community engagement is essential to advancing and sustaining coastal and marine tourism. Insights from the interviews revealed that individuals led most construction projects in the region from outside the local communities. This external dominance resulted in several challenges, including unjustified price escalations, unregulated development, and weakening the regional socio-economic fabric. The following excerpts from interviewees further illustrate these dynamics.

"With the growth of tourists to the sea shores and the use of tourist activities such as boating, the prices of this type of service have faced a double or more growth, which has made it difficult for local communities to use these facilities" (C7)

"Generally, hotels and agencies are partnered with external companies to supply food and other services for tourists and do not allow local people to engage with tourist services" (C6)

Drawing on the theoretical framework of SET, which emphasizes the evaluation of perceived benefits and costs in exchange relationships, local communities often cultivate an atmosphere of

distrust and perceive themselves as marginalized from the economic network. This perception is primarily attributed to a lack of understanding of the economic dynamics and insufficient active participation from local communities in tourist activities. Consequently, feelings of exclusion and frustration may lead some community members to respond in ways that inadvertently undermine other stakeholders, reflecting their frustration and sense of exclusion.

"With the growth of coastal tourism, this has caused each of the local communities to fill their surplus land with a variety of local products, each of which earns income in some way (local pastured eggs, local honey, Yogurt and local buttermilk and other items)" (C6)

SNT underscores the vital connections between local communities and tourists, fostering an environment where both groups strive to establish effective and innovative communication channels. These sustained interactions are intended to generate reciprocal benefits through long-term and stable tourist engagement. As a result, local communities not only create employment opportunities and protect the ecosystem but also gain opportunities to preserve cultural heritage and promote meaningful cultural exchange. In doing so, they contribute to enhanced tourist satisfaction and support broader governmental development efforts.

However, negative interactions involving certain intermediaries often undermine this mutually beneficial relationship, resulting in the unequal distribution of benefits and costs across economic sectors. The nature of stakeholder relationships and the extent of their involvement directly influence the success of coastal and marine tourism initiatives. When key stakeholders are excluded—often due to power imbalances or coercive dynamics—this disrupts the equilibrium, potentially leading to social tensions, including conflict or unrest within local communities.

Theme 2: Socio-cultural

As emphasized in the SET, limited involvement of local communities in the advancement of coastal and marine tourism is linked to a heightened risk of undermining the existing socio-cultural fabric. This perceived marginalization can lead to increased tensions and potential conflicts with tourists. Interview findings revealed that, in several cases, local community members expressed their frustration through actions such as obstructing tourist access routes or engaging in confrontational behavior, including instances of harassment. However, such expressions of vulnerability and resistance from local communities can discourage coastal and marine tourism. In response, many tourism providers have adopted innovative strategies—such as offering diverse

livelihood opportunities for both genders—to mitigate local opposition and foster community inclusion.

"Many long-running family businesses in coastal and marine tourism are now hiring more women, which helps even things out between men and women when it comes to work. It's also a smart move to ease pushback from local communities, especially when people feel their culture is being overwhelmed by tourism" (P3)

Guided by rigorous analysis and grounded in SET principles, the advancement of coastal and marine tourism has contributed to a diversification of the local occupational structure. It has positively shifted societal perceptions regarding women's roles in the labor market. Notably, in arts and crafts that support tourism experiences, these changes have fostered significant growth, providing added value to the tourism sector and enhancing social cohesion within local communities. On the other hand, amidst deepening economic challenges and rising inflation in Iran, many households have resorted to leasing their homes during peak holiday seasons as a coping mechanism. One interviewee specifically highlighted this trend during the data collection process.

"Because many rural coastal areas are economically struggling, most families rent their homes during the holidays and send their relatives to stay with others. This way, they can make a decent amount of money" (C5)

This situation has the potential to undermine the familial structures and disturb the tranquility of households, which may be a significantly contribute to the rising divorce rates within these regions. Conversely, according to the SNT, the governing framework of the nation, along with the issues associated with Sharia law and the mandates concerning the observance of hijab, reveals inherent contradictions among the government, tourists, and local communities.

"Due to the region's climatic conditions and the appeal of coastal tourism, people generally feel very comfortable about their appearance. However, this comfort has been met with significant opposition from certain individuals." (C4)

It is important to emphasize that, based on the interviews conducted with both tourists and local residents in various coastal villages, certain communities display a markedly more favorable attitude towards the advancement of tourism. For instance, insights gleaned from tourists who have

previously resided in distinct regions along the coasts of Guilan province reveal that their perceptions vary significantly based on educational attainment and age demographics. Specifically, younger populations in these villages demonstrate a greater propensity for effective communication with tourists and a heightened acceptance of discussions surrounding attire and hijab. However, these differences are also closely connected to the educational backgrounds of individuals; in other words, a higher educational level within the region correlates with a diminished enthusiasm for the expansion of coastal tourism, as residents perceive this phenomenon as a potential threat to the integrity of the natural ecosystem. Ultimately, an additional facet of the discourse pertaining to socio-cultural issues is the escalation of conflicts and tensions between local populations and tourists, a phenomenon that can be attributed to the inadequacy of essential infrastructure.

"During busy periods, a drop in water pressure in the villages has become problematic due to the full occupancy of guesthouses and hotels, resulting in many households lacking access to drinking water." (C3)

"In the second half of the year, with the arrival of beach tourists, the drop in gas pressure in villages intensifies. However, it is important to note that the number of tourists decreases during this period." (C2)

Based on the analysis, the government's insufficient efforts to improve the region's infrastructure and potential capabilities have led to conflicts. According to the principles of SNT, the breadth of communication between governmental entities and local communities has been significantly truncated, resulting in a performance that is predominantly controlling. This scenario illustrates that the government, through irregular and at times quasi-rent interventions, has disrupted the equilibrium among key stakeholders, thereby leading to an overall disturbance of balance.

Theme 3: Environmental

From an environmental perspective and in line with the principles of SET, the impacts of coastal and marine tourism development have generally been viewed negatively. Below are some examples of statements drawn from the interviews.

"There are no restrictions on vehicle access for tourists visiting the beaches, allowing cars to enter near the water. Additionally, tourists are allowed to enter the water in any type of clothing." (T4)

"One of the dirtiest areas of the village is the beachfront, where construction is often carried out through rentals and without respecting privacy. Those who build pavilions typically do so legally." (C5)

The analysis of all cases reveals that marine pollution, coupled with the absence of clear guidelines for construction practices in coastal and marine areas, has led to negative consequences across multiple dimensions. Additionally, the growth of coastal and marine tourism has contributed to the degradation of coastal landscapes and ecosystems, undermining the region's natural attractions and causing their decline. There has also been a significant increase in waste generated by construction activities, with a noticeable accumulation of debris in urban coastal areas. These lands are often assigned to non-local individuals, and construction is frequently carried out without proper authorization. Furthermore, one salient finding that emerged from the tourists' perspective during the interviews is as follows:

"I visit this beach at least once a year. Each time I arrive, I notice two things: first, that the constructions have moved closer to the shore, and second, that the development of these constructions has increased significantly, covering the entire beach." (T5)

Regarding the purview of SNT, the unilateral relationships among the actors have created an imbalance within the country's coastal and marine tourism ecosystem. Consequently, government authorities have been ineffective in managing relationships about the environmental dimension and have failed to reach a consensus on the nature and extent of communication among the involved parties. Notably, there is a lack of a dedicated mechanism for monitoring the habitation of individuals near the coastline and the issuance of unlawful permits for construction activities adjacent to the shore. These issues have hindered local communities' ability to engage in effective marine fishing practices and have posed significant challenges. Descriptive examples of these challenges are presented as follows:

"As a member of this town, I am unable to go fishing because I need a permit, which is usually not granted to people like me. Additionally, non-natives are also included in this restriction." (C7)

Theme 4: Governance-institutional

Within the context of SET and SNT, the government apparatus and governance framework have a significant impact on various environmental, economic, and socio-cultural areas. Insights from the

interviews and focus group discussions highlight that the absence of proper policies regarding waste landfilling has become a major environmental issue. The following statement from the interview reflects this concern.

"In the northern region and Guilan province, one of the concerns of government institutions over the past decade has been the protests from local communities regarding garbage collection, which has become a significant challenge for the government." (C1)

As revealed, there is a lack of a definitive governmental policy related to waste management, including aspects of waste separation, recycling, and disposal. Based on the cases documented during fieldwork, all waste generated by both local inhabitants and tourists has been systematically collected and disposed of in designated areas. However, the absence of a specific waste management mechanism has led to neglect of these materials, and with the growth of coastal-marine tourism in the coastal provinces, this situation has worsened. The consequences of this scenario have manifested as heightened grievances among local communities, primarily due to the pervasive unpleasant odors permeating the region. Additionally, the influence of government institutions, when examined through the lens of SNT, has led to a disconnect of interests and heightened tensions, while also strengthening the relationships and consensus among key stakeholders. Below are some illustrative examples drawn from the interviews in this regard:

"In my opinion, cultural heritage institutions issue permits to build in villages indiscriminately, a practice that is becoming a habitual concern and is seriously harming the villages, tourists, and local communities." (C6)

"As someone who has worked in the cultural heritage sector of the province for 11 years, I can confidently say that the government, through misguided policies, is effectively handing over the entire tourism sector to a select few. This results in certain individuals receiving special benefits, which ultimately causes long-term dissatisfaction among tourists." (P2)

Based on the analysis, the government, as a key player in enhancing local community well-being, has inadvertently diminished their role through ineffective policies, resulting in its disconnection from the coastal and marine tourism ecosystem. In this environment, key stakeholders, including various agencies, have exploited the system to their benefit, often manipulating regulations and, in some instances, engaging in corrupt practices with policymakers. Such changes have allowed

for the identification of the contributions of other participants to maximize benefits while minimizing challenges. On a positive note, the expansion and advancement of coastal and marine tourism have the potential to serve as a platform for significant events due to the value-generating relationship with local communities. The following are illustrative examples drawn from the analysis

"Every weekend, approximately 500 to 600 cars from Tehran and other cities arrive at the beach in one of the villages of Hasanroud Anzali. A round-trip fee of about 20,000 tomans is charged for each car." (T3)

"One notable aspect of the growth of coastal tourism is its potential to significantly generate income and assist the government through the construction, development, and prosperity of hotels and other related sectors." (C1)

Based on the interview excerpts and considering factors such as the government's significant budget deficit, the need to control liquidity expansion and inflation at the community level, and the necessity to generate revenue, the income potential from coastal and marine tourism can be economically beneficial and provide vital support to government entities. Additionally, the ongoing relationship between tourists and government authorities can be strengthened and sustained through the collaboration of local communities. "For clarity, Appendix 1 provides a table summarizing the key themes and the most frequently cited codes across the four main dimensions identified in the analysis.

Conclusion and Implications

Although the literature on coastal and marine tourism often emphasizes local community support driven by perceived economic benefits, environmental degradation and cultural disruption concerns remain insufficiently explored (Arabadzhyan et al., 2021; Mejjad et al., 2022). To address this gap, this study adopts SET and SNT to investigate the drivers and barriers to sustainable stakeholder engagement in promoting coastal and marine tourism. Drawing on data from 17 semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion with purposively selected participants—including local community members, tourists, and government agency representatives in Iran—the findings identify four key antecedents to sustainable stakeholder engagement: economic-infrastructural, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance-institutional

Concerning the economic-infrastructure domain, drivers include enhancing family business brands, establishing income-generating opportunities for local communities, improving residents' welfare, and increasing incentives for private sector investment and rural development initiatives. Conversely, barriers include excessive inflation in housing and rental prices, inequitable income distribution among key stakeholders within the coastal tourism network, deteriorated infrastructure such as roads, the seasonal nature of coastal tourism, rising costs for ancillary services like surfing and boating, and the diminished role of local communities in the value chain, which is essential for attracting tourists. The findings largely align with prior researchers, such as Dinh et al. (2024), who recognized significant enablers linked to the advancement of family brands and correlated obstructive factors with the reduced involvement of local communities in value creation for stakeholders. Hanafiah et al. (2021) also documented poverty alleviation within local communities as a critical indicator in fostering tourism in Malaysia.

Within the socio-cultural dimension, key driving factors include increased female participation at the community level, enhanced regional knowledge among locals, intellectual growth through intercultural interactions, and improved educational attainment. In contrast, barriers include conflicts between tourists and residents, overcrowding that disrupts village life, limited English language proficiency, and noise-related disturbances affecting local tranquillity. Additional concerns involve cultural erosion due to differing values and attire, lifestyle shifts linked to higher divorce and separation rates, and even fatal incidents among coastal populations. These findings align with Daskin et al. (2020), who highlighted the dual impact of cultural development and rising social conflict in the context of coastal and marine tourism. Moreover, quantitative insights from interviews suggest that women exhibit more significant support for coastal and marine tourism than men, largely due to employment opportunities—contrasting with studies by Lee et al. (2022) and Despres (2023), which found men more favorable toward tourism development.

Within the environmental dimension, key drivers include the rich diversity of plant ecosystems along the coastline. However, several impediments were identified, such as noise pollution, beach and marine contamination, degradation of natural landscapes, destruction of coastal ecosystems, the spread of waste, unregulated land use changes due to construction, and the

accumulation of construction debris in urban coastal areas. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Ferreira da Silva (2022) and Duan et al. (2022), which also emphasized significant environmental concerns associated with coastal tourism development.

Within the governance-institutional dimension, key facilitators include increased revenue from toll-free roads, tax income resulting from infrastructure diversification, and greater government investment in coastal and marine tourism. On the other hand, significant constraints involve the erosion of public order, the absence of a cohesive framework for permit issuance, and growing tensions among key stakeholders in coastal tourism development. Supporting these insights, Daskin et al. (2020) argue that the advancement and sustainability of coastal and marine tourism can contribute meaningfully to government tax revenues while strengthening governance structures.

More specifically, the environmental dimension emerged predominantly as a barrier rather than a driving force among the identified dimensions. In contrast, the other dimensions demonstrated a more balanced dynamic, serving as both drivers and barriers.

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to theory in two vital ways. First, the findings extend existing coastal and marine tourism literature, which has primarily focused on local communities' support and perceived benefits of tourism development, by demonstrating that, in practice, several barriers prevent some community members from holding such positive perceptions. Theoretically, by applying the principles of SET and SNT, this paper offers a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of cooperation and resource exchange between local communities and key stakeholders involved in coastal and marine tourism development. It reveals how perceived costs and benefits, as framed by SET, shape local community involvement or resistance toward coastal and marine tourism development. At the same time, SNT uncovers the relational structures and communication flows that influence stakeholder engagement. Together, these frameworks deepen the understanding of how trust, reciprocity, and network connectivity impact the sustainability and inclusiveness of coastal and marine tourism. By doing so, this study challenges the criticism of SET as merely an economic framework, emphasizing that social exchange processes are deeply embedded within and shaped by the dynamics of coastal and marine tourism ecosystems.

Second, this integrated theoretical approach connects individual motivations with broader structural relationships, offering a more comprehensive model for understanding local community involvement in coastal and marine tourism. By examining both the personal and systemic factors that shape engagement, it highlights the intricate dynamics between local communities, government entities, and tourists. This approach deepens our understanding of local community participation and provides a holistic framework for analyzing tourism development in community-based and environmentally sensitive contexts. It considers the economic-infrastructural, socio-cultural, environmental, and governance-institutional dimensions, ensuring a more balanced and sustainable approach to tourism development that respects both local needs and cultural and ecological integrity.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study offer practical guidance for stakeholders aiming to foster sustainable coastal and marine tourism. Given the growing influx of visitors, it is recommended that the government establish a dedicated committee comprising local council members and community representatives. This body would oversee construction activities, rental agreements, and related concerns, while maintaining regular communication with a designated ministry team to ensure coordination and accountability in cases of non-compliance. Further, municipalities should consider partnering with innovative startups and environmental firms to address mounting waste management challenges—which have strained relationships between local communities, government bodies, and tourists. Such collaborations can improve waste collection practices and enhance community satisfaction.

Regarding environmental conservation, the ongoing degradation of coastal and botanical ecosystems due to tourism development necessitates protective measures. Local legislation is advised to introduce protective barriers in high-traffic coastal areas, which are developed in close consultation with local communities. These measures should be regularly monitored and institutionalized to ensure long-term environmental integrity.

From a socioeconomic standpoint, policymakers can develop targeted strategies to increase the active participation of local communities in coastal and marine tourism, both in the short and long term, thereby empowering them. This could include offering low-interest loans, providing skills training, launching awareness campaigns, and ensuring community involvement in

managing and planning coastal and marine tourism resources to maximize local benefits. In parallel, tourism industry professionals can draw on the study findings to refine their business practices and further support sustainable tourism development. Promoting locally produced goods and services can create economic opportunities for communities. Additionally, designing inclusive tourism packages that engage less-educated and middle-income residents can amplify the positive socioeconomic impacts of coastal and marine tourism.

Moreover, fostering diversity and structure within the local workforce can catalyze job creation in rural areas. Prioritizing economic development that aligns with environmental sustainability can strengthen ties between local communities and tourism enterprises, thereby supporting tourism growth. By promoting sustainable practices—such as locally sourced, eco-friendly products—communities can generate added value and establish consistent income streams. In the long run, this approach can potentially deliver mutual benefits for all stakeholders involved in coastal and marine tourism.

Limitations and Further Research

Like any research, this study acknowledges several limitations, offering valuable opportunities for future research. One of the constraints of the current study pertains to its geographical emphasis on the northern territories of Iran. Given the intrinsic disparities in cultural, social, economic, and even climatic circumstances between the northern and southern regions of Iran, the extrapolation of the findings to alternative areas warrants caution. In the territories of the north, the engagement of local communities in coastal and marine tourism ventures is notably more pronounced and organized, whereas in the southern regions, particularly in provinces such as Hormozgan and Bushehr, the distinct social milieu, indigenous lifestyles, and local interactions shape the dynamics between communities and stakeholders differently. Consequently, it is recommended that forthcoming research also analyze the interactions between local communities and various actors in regions characterized by differing cultural, social, and economic frameworks, thereby facilitating the development of a more holistic and comparable model across these areas.

Another limitation of the study arises from its concentration on domestic tourists, a consequence of the specific circumstances engendered by sanctions and restrictions on the influx of international tourists during the research period. The presence of foreign tourists can potentially introduce varied perceptions, behaviors, and requirements into the tourism interaction milieu.

Thus, future research should revisit and augment the proposed framework by incorporating their viewpoints in light of the anticipated lifting of sanctions and the potential increase in foreign tourist numbers. Such a strategy could enhance the comprehensiveness and efficacy of the findings in sustainable coastal and marine tourism development.

Considering the characteristics of coastal and marine tourism and the socio-cultural and normative constructs of the community, elements such as hijab and traditional Islamic attire are integral to Iran's Islamic culture and should be recognized as both constraining factors and institutional markers. In this context, it is recommended that scholars approach this inquiry through a cross-cultural lens within developing nations, employing a comparative analytical framework. Furthermore, given the constraints imposed by attire regulations and occupational limitations for women in Iran, along with women's comparatively more favorable disposition towards the advancement of family enterprises and coastal and marine tourism, it is advised that researchers conduct cross-cultural comparative studies in other Islamic nations, such as Malaysia, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, to explore this matter further.

Finally, while this paper has examined the complex relationships among key stakeholders in coastal and marine ecosystems—namely local communities, governmental entities, and tourists—from a sustainability standpoint, the focus has primarily been on the dynamics that either facilitate or hinder collaboration between local communities and other stakeholders. Moving forward, it is suggested that future research, within the framework of SNT, investigate the resilience of tourist networks at coastal destinations and evaluate the essential contributions of each stakeholder to realize the full potential of coastal and marine tourism.

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