

# Merchants' Perception Towards Tourism Development Under COVID-19 Pandemic in Iran: Investigating the Impact of Social Hospitality and Hospitable Behaviour

SEDIGHEH MOGHAVVEMI \* [Sedigheh@um.edu.my]

ALI HASSANI \*\* [hassani@usc.ac.ir]

**Abstract** | This study expanded the Social Exchange Theory (SET) to elucidate factors motivating merchants in tourist destinations to operate their businesses despite the high risk of exposure to COVID-19. SET allows for a more comprehensive understanding of economic theory, especially when investigating human attitudes and behaviours during crises, and this study intends to measure the costs and benefits of serving tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of merchants' hospitable behaviour, and the perception of personal benefits towards attitude and tourism development. Questionnaires were collected from 670 merchants from five tourist hotspots in five major Iranian cities and later analyzed using structural equation modelling (Amos). The results confirmed that personal benefits significantly affect merchants' support for tourism development. The economic crisis and poor business conditions during the pandemic forced business owners to accept tourists despite the high risk. Social hospitality, socio-cultural benefits, and tourism's contribution to the community impact merchants' attitudes towards tourism development. This study expanded the SET model and used it to elucidate how local merchants react to tourists and support tourism development despite the risk of exposure to COVID-19. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is among the first to measure individual (social hospitality, personal benefit), social (social cost and benefit, negative interference in tourism), cultural (cultural cost and benefit), and economic (tourism contribution to the community) aspects of tourism development among merchants during the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis. Policymakers, tourism organizations, and local communities can collaborate to promote tourism recovery and sustainable development. Strategies should focus on training merchants to provide excellent tourist experiences, improving infrastructure and services, emphasizing economic benefits for merchants, and managing potential negative impacts.

**Keywords** | Social hospitality, hospitable behaviour, personal benefit, tourism development, merchants' support

\* University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

\*\* University of Science and Culture, Tehran, Iran

## 1. Introduction

A comprehensive examination of existing literature reveals that researchers have long been investigating the development of tourism and its various implications, including its consequences, benefits, costs, communal support (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011; Vinerean et al., 2021; Moghavvemi et al., 2021), host attitudes, and perceptions towards tourism (Andereck et al., 2005; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010; Joo et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021), residents' satisfaction (Wang et al., 2014), resident's financial ability (Moghavvemi et al., 2024), and positive tourism behaviors (Nghiem-Phu and Pham, 2022; Blackie et al., 2023). These studies employ several theoretical frameworks: Integrated Threat Theory, Social Exchange Theory (Odinga, 2023), Identity Theory, Social Representation Theory, Integrative Theory of Cross-cultural Adaptation, Emotional Solidarity, and Social Distance Theory. However, new frameworks such as institutional theory and bottom-up spillover theory are beginning to emerge. Among these frameworks, Social Exchange Theory (SET) has predominantly been used to explain residents' attitudes, focusing on the social behavior exhibited in the interaction between two parties, where cost-benefit analysis is employed to assess risks and benefits. In 2019, Hadinejad, Moyle, Scott, Kralj, and Nunkoo reviewed the literature on residents' attitudes towards tourism and argued that the SET is still relevant for exploring residents' attitudes towards tourism. This is supported by Ahmad et al. (2023), which argued that there is a need to focus on exploring lesser-explored exchange rules in psychological transactions. SET (Ap, 1992) was used to determine the socio-cultural and economic costs and benefits of tourism development, and the results confirmed that residents would only support tourism development if the socio-cultural benefits outweigh its related costs. The SET highlighted the individual perception of the personal benefits of tourism development while not directly measu-

ring it. Although tourism development impacts the entire community, the perception of personal benefit would be more critical for business owners or those benefiting from tourism development directly or indirectly. This will result in differing opinions and perceptions towards tourism development, as different parties will perceive it differently.

Researchers are beginning to acknowledge the importance of different factors not investigated previously, such as hospitality (Lashley, 2011; Blain and Lashley, 2014) and personal benefits (Lee et al., 2010; Kang and Lee, 2018). Some researchers highlighted the importance of investigating the social hospitality provided by the destination (Chau and Yan, 2021) and indicated that despite the industrial practice of promoting destinations as hospitable and the popularity of some places as hospitable destinations, few studies investigated the self-proclaimed hospitality of these destinations. Culture and hospitality vary from culture to nation, generally meaning that the tourism aspects of one country will not necessarily apply to another.

Moreover, there is a lack of data about certain situations requiring in-depth study, which is especially poignant if researchers are trying to speculate about (perceived to be) closed countries where data is not readily available, or the destination has not been extensively researched. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many countries to limit tourism activities (Almeida et al., 2024; Cantú et al., 2024), however, evidence shows that despite the high percentage of COVID-19 cases in Iran, the tourism sector remained operational and active. There is limited research on tourism development in Iran and why Iranian merchants were willing to accept tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moghavvemi et al., 2023). The lack of information about tourism development during the COVID-19 pandemic and merchants' perceptions of tourism development motivated this study. This study investigates merchants' attitudes and perceptions towards tourism development during

the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on merchants assuming that personal and economic benefits will impact their perception of tourism development, and personal benefits are the main driver for their support. The Revised SET provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors impacting merchants' acceptance of tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study's objective is to quantify the personal benefit, social hospitality, tourism contribution to the community, social costs and benefits of tourism development, negative interference, and its effects on merchants' attitudes toward supporting tourism development during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. The results are expected to paint a better picture of the actual situation in Iran in the shadow of the pandemic and merchants' perspectives in the tourist destination towards tourism development.

## 2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is widely used to understand residents' perceptions of tourism development and its impact on local communities (Cortez & Johnston, 2020). It has proven more suitable than economic theory in studying COVID-19 economic effects on vendors (Tilaki et al., 2021). SET focuses on various forms of social, economic, and cultural exchanges, where individuals engage in actions based on the costs and benefits of the community (Cortez & Johnston, 2020). As a double-edged sword, tourism brings both positive and negative aspects to host communities and their members (Wang & Pfister, 2008; Musa et al., 2015). The impact is more significant for tourism workers (Abdrakhmanova & Moghavvemi, 2022).

Researchers have revised and expanded SET to explain residents' perceptions of tourism development (Table 1). Meeker (1971) revised SET ba-

sed on reciprocity theory, emphasizing exchanges between groups with six rules: reciprocity, rationality, altruism, group gain, status consistency, and competition. Martín, de Los Salmones Sánchez, and Herrero (2018) integrated SET and the triple bottom line to assess tourism benefits and costs. This influenced residents' support for tourism development. Scholars like Woo, Kim, and Uysal (2015) advocate for incorporating non-economic factors such as life satisfaction, community pride, and quality of life. Overall, this theory provides a suitable foundation for studying the costs and benefits of individual behaviors, particularly in relation to tourism development.

A review of the previous research shows that the factors that influence residents to support tourism development fall into two categories: economic rationality and non-economic rationality. Economic rationality emphasizes the calculation of material benefits, while non-economic rationality focuses on emotional aspects (e.g., emotions, affection, and beliefs) of residents' attitudes toward supporting tourism development (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011; Woosnam et al., 2018; Kang and Lee, 2018; Wanga et al., 2020; Jimenez-Medina et al., 2021; Lindberg et al., 2021). However, normal behavior is a combination of both, and residents in the local community are either rational or emotional, and they form attitudes based on economic and non-economic rationalities. Therefore, the theories measuring both aspects are more successful and produce better results. Therefore, this research revised and added four new variables to create a research model measuring both aspects: social hospitality, tourism contribution to the community, negative interference, and personal benefit to the SET, to investigate economic and non-economic rationalities to explain merchants' attitudes towards tourism development. This model was developed based on the assumption that economic benefits will have more value for merchants, mainly when the country is under the economic pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure

1). The following section details each factor and related hypothesis.

### 2.1. Support towards Tourism Development

Residents' level of support or opposition for tourism development depends on their perception of whether the exchange of resources between residents and tourists is fair (Litvin et al., 2020). Residents would generally be more supportive of tourism development if they benefited from it (Muresan et al., 2016; Tjitunga, Bama, & Makuzva, 2023; Ngwetjana & Sifolo, 2023; Gore, Borde, & Desai, 2023; Bhuiyan & Darda, 2023). According to Mohammadi et al. (2010), local residents in Kermanshah, Iran, are positively inclined towards tourism, as it creates jobs, increases local revenue and recreational facilities, incentivizes heritage restoration, and generates more investment and spending in the area. They believe that tourism development can improve the economic conditions in the region. Zamani-Farahani et al. (2008) indicated that locals who receive their income from tourism activities would be more welcoming towards tourism development and hesitant to disapprove of any negative outcomes. The abovementioned studies confirmed that the economic and cultural impact of tourism, such as job creation, increased employment opportunities, and living standards, and the restoration of destination sites and cultural activities, are some of the main factors that encourage residents to support tourism development. Comprehensively, it has been affirmed that economic, socio-cultural, and infrastructure benefits are significantly correlated and therefore directly related to the residents' support of tourism development (Muresan et al., 2016; Mgabhi & Ezeudji, 2023; Karimov, Jeong, Sobirov, & Choi, 2023). However, when residents are forced to bear increased costs while not reaping its benefits, they would be negatively predisposed towards developing the tourism industry (Guo et al., 2014; (Muresan et

al., 2016). Negative impacts, such as wildlife destruction, crowding, vandalism, and noise pollution, will negatively affect residents, who will oppose tourism development (Chen & Chen, 2010).

### 2.2. Social Hospitality

The literature review produced a few studies involving social hospitality provided by destinations despite the industrial practice of promoting destinations as hospitable (Chau & Yan, 2021). In the conventional view, hospitality is viewed as human behavior, focusing on the interaction, exchange, or relationship in the host-guest encounter. Andrews (2011) suggested that the destination can be appraised according to a criterion of hospitality centered on making the guest feel welcome. Some tourism research emphasized the residents' welcoming nature, assistance, and protection for travelers, and creating a sense of home for visitors as hospitable behavior (Lashley, 1995; Brotherton, 1999; Brotherton and Wood, 2007). Other research investigated it from the visitors' perspective (Tasci and Semrad, 2016) and indicated that visitors appreciate residents' helpful, welcoming, and friendly behavior at the destination. In the social sciences, the concept of hospitality goes beyond commercial services and encompasses social interaction and relationships (Lynch, Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011). Others examined the concept of hospitality to describe the commercial activities for receiving guests among the accommodation, food, and beverage sectors (Blain & Lashley, 2014). Chau and Yan (2021) highlighted politeness, helpfulness, and respect as the three highest ratings in the context of hotel and restaurant services. Some studies highlighted the non-human aspect of hospitality and suggested that it includes the physical services environment, such as facilities, friendly, welcoming, aesthetics, and safe places (Brotherton, 2017; Pijls, Groen, Galetzka, & Pruyn, 2017). The physical aspects

of hospitality can be measured via factors such as cleanliness, comfort, safety, and security (Brother-ton & Wood, 2007; Pijls et al., 2017).

Different societies demonstrate different levels of hospitable obligation (Blain & Lashley, 2014), depending on openness to visitors and the extent to which care for guests is exercised. Iranian hospitality is a long-standing tradition rooted in pre-Islamic Iran that remained in practice after the introduction of Islam to the region (Spuler, 2014), attributing a spiritual aspect to it. Generally, in Iranian culture, guests are warmly welcomed and are called “the friend of God” (Habib-e-Khuda) (Ghaderi et al., 2020, P. 3). Iranians describe hospitality as a national virtue and an abiding expression of identity. Hekmat (2018) indicated that any guest in an Iranian home experience is welcome and respected and considers it a spiritual experience (hospitality tradition). Therefore, they will do as much as they possibly can to keep the guest happy and satisfied. However, these traditions are often subject to change (Razak et al., 2020). Kunwar (2017) explained the two features of the host-guest interaction, like reciprocity and transaction, and argued that hospitality becomes transactional when the behavior is mainly concerned with an economic exchange for a profit. The abovementioned literature shows that hospitality is one of the essential factors impacting individual perceptions and behaviors. Although few studies investigated Iranian hospitality, there is a lack of research on the residents’ hospitality, while the personal benefit of a particular behavior is also involved; in the case of this research, merchants’ perceptions towards tourism development, this study assumed that merchants would show strong hospitable behavior towards tourists, and the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H1: Social hospitality has a significant positive effect on merchants’ attitudes towards tourism development.*

### 2.3. Social benefit

The social impact of tourism was acknowledged before the COVID-19 pandemic by several studies, with negative over-tourism reported as an extreme case (UNWTO 2019; Jimenez-Medina et al. 2021). However, the situation is changing with the current pandemic, even though there is still a lack of research about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the community. Based on the previous research, when referring to the social impact of tourism, Mathieson and Wall (1982, p. 137) define it as changes in the residents’ quality of life in the destination. Tourism development has stabilized individuals’ lives, enhanced societal harmony, furnished residents with excellent recreational opportunities, and provided them with the opportunity to form and build relationships with the community in their respective hometowns (Lin and Lu, 2015). According to this evidence, this research hypothesizes that the social benefits of tourism developments will induce a positive perception of tourism development.

*H2: The perception of social benefits has a significant positive effect on merchants’ attitudes towards tourism development.*

### 2.4 Negative interference

Negative interference refers to the detrimental intervention that the tourism industry experiences, which negatively affects residents. Sometimes, residents feel uncomfortable because tourists tend to get too close (Urry, 2002). This can create an uncomfortable situation for both parties, resulting in increased discontentment. Residents could even experience unfamiliarity in a familiar setting, leading to emotional and psychological disturbance and making them wary of tourism (Fairley & Tyler, 2009).

Moreover, environmental impacts, such as air

pollution, water pollution, fertilizer leakage, spilling of road oil, wildlife destruction, interruption of wildlife, and disruption of natural habitat, could well disrupt the daily lives of locals (Andereck et al., 2005). The locals might resent being forced to deal with the aftermath of tourism. Easterling (2005) pointed out that some young couples residing in tourist islands reported being forced to leave home due to the significant increase in the cost of living.

*H3: The perception of negative interference has a significant negative effect on merchants' attitudes towards tourism development.*

## 2.5. Social cost

The social cost of tourism refers to a situation where the changes taking place negatively affect a community. Tourism development can create negative social impacts on the residents' daily habits, daily routines, beliefs, values, and social lives (Andereck et al., 2005). The effect of tourism differs from one community to another; for example, residents in Pattaya, Thailand, believe that tourism is the cause of negative social impacts such as prostitution and drug abuse, culminating in STDs/STIs, increased divorce rates, and corruption (Khizindar, 2012). Guo et al. (2014) outlined that tourism development could eliminate local traditions, encourage addictions, and decrease academic motivations among the local children. It was pointed out that "community-focused" residents are concerned and sensitive to the social impacts derived from tourism development because they experienced increased criminal activities in their respective communities (Sinclair-Maragh et al., 2015). When locals believe that tourism negatively affects their livelihoods, they perceive it negatively and might not be enthused about tourism development.

*H4: The perception of social costs has a significant negative effect on merchants' attitudes towards tourism development.*

## 2.6. Contribution of Tourism to the Community

Tourism development is an essential instrument for national economic enhancement (Lin and Lu, 2015), and its impacts strongly influence residents' attitudes towards tourism development. Previous research has indicated that tourism development can precipitate better employment opportunities, enhance infrastructure, increase investment opportunities (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011), and improve public development and the local economy (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). The tourism industry could also result in the acquisition of better recreational facilities (Muresan et al., 2016) while elevating the fabric of the community and cultural values, leading to increased self-esteem (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008) as well as improved quality of life among less privileged locals (Wang et al., 2014; Guo et al., 2014). Muresan et al. (2016) found that tourism development positively influences road traffic and public service development. It can be surmised that the more the locals benefit from tourism, the higher the chances they will perceive it positively (Muresan et al., 2016).

*H5: The perception of tourism contribution to the community has a significant positive effect on merchants' attitudes towards tourism development.*

## 2.7. Personal Benefits

Economic rationality and material benefits are important aspects of individual behaviors (Jimenez-Medina et al., 2021; Lindberg et al., 2021), particularly residents' support for tourism

development. Researchers such as Perdue et al. (1995) tested the impact of personal benefit in the tourism context and pointed out that residents personally benefiting from gambling positively view their quality of life in Colorado and support gambling. Another study conducted by Kang and Lee (2018) showed that residents' perceptions of cannabis tourism influenced by personal benefit impacted their perceptions of tourism development. In a similar vein, personal benefit is a strong and significant determinant of residents' support for marijuana tourism (Kang & Lee, 2018). The studies mentioned above outline the significant effect of personal or direct economic benefits on residents' support for tourism development (see Figure 1). In line with these works, it is hypothesized that merchants' benefits have a significant positive impact on their support for tourism development.

*H6: The perception of personal benefits has a significant positive effect on merchants' support for tourism development.*

## 2.8 Attitude towards Tourism Development

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) defined attitude as representing an individual's general feeling of favorableness or unavoidableness towards a specific object. It is of utmost importance to consider residents' attitudes, as they are a crucial factor in realizing sustainable tourism (Hasani et al., 2016; Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Abdrakhmanova et al., 2023) due to their status as the main stakeholders in supporting tourism (Chen, 2015). Residents' attitude towards tourism development relies on their recognition and impression of its expected benefits and costs (Sirakaya et al., 2002). Iranians view tourists and tourism development positively due to its positive influence on economic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors (Bahaei et al., 2014). Aref's (2010) study involving Shirazi locals repor-

ted that they view tourism positively in the context of their areas. This is likely because, unlike other places, the negative impacts of tourism, such as drugs and prostitution, are nonexistent in Shiraz despite the presence of tourists (Zamani-Farahani et al., 2008). Bahaei et al. (2014) studied residents in four tourist sites in Iran (Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz, and Yazd) in terms of the socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and religious effects of tourism. Their research argued that Iranians view tourism and tourism development positively. It is therefore hypothesized that:

*H7: Merchants' positive attitude has a significant positive effect on merchants' support towards tourism development.*

## 3. Methodology

Before outlining the method, the section below provides brief vignettes of Iran.

### 3.1. Iran

With a population of 81,162,788 (2017) and spanning over more than 1.6 million km<sup>2</sup>, Iran is one of the oldest significant civilizations on Earth, dating as far back as 5000 BC. Iran boasts numerous archaeological sites (Zendehdel, 2001), with 21 historical sites listed as World Heritage, with over 56 more under assessment for similar status. However, thousands of historical sites and monuments are yet to be discovered (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ir>). Iran ranks 10th in civilization, historical monuments, cultural attractions, climatic diversities, and ecosystem richness among WTO member countries (UNESCO reports). Iran's magnificent physical, natural, and ecological diversity encompasses mountains, deserts (Dashte Kavir

and Dashte Lut), and many caves, forests, lakes, and rivers (Bahaee et al., 2014). In addition, the different regions and cities in Iran retain their respective historical attractions and trademarks. These characteristics render Iran ideal for tourism, but ongoing tensions between Iran and the West and its political orientation negatively affected its image, resulting in a low inflow of western tourists. Allahdadi (2011) pointed out that tourism in Iran reported negative growth rates since the number of locals traveling abroad exceeds that of tourists entering the country. However, the Iranian government views tourism as one of the critical sectors that can help boost the economy in the context of the nation's national economic and social development plans.

**Esfahān** is a major city in the west of Iran, roughly 340 km south of the capital city of Tehrān. Its tree-lined boulevards, Persian gardens, and important Islamic buildings give it its reputation as a living museum of traditional culture. (<https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/isfahan>).

**Shiraz**, celebrated as the heartland of Persian culture for more than 2000 years, is an opulent oasis of greenery and culture in an otherwise barren landscape; it is the town of roses, of nightingales, of love, and, at one time, of wine. But above all, Shiraz is the town of poetry, of Saadi and Hafez. The crafts of Shiraz consist of inlaid mosaic work of triangular design; silverware; pile carpet weaving; and weaving of kilim, called Gilim and Jajim in the villages and among the tribes. ([http://eurasia.travel/iran/places/central\\_iran/shiraz/](http://eurasia.travel/iran/places/central_iran/shiraz/))

**Tehrān**, the capital city of Iran, is located in north-central Iran at the foot of the Elburz mountain range. Since its establishment as the capital city more than 200 years ago, Tehran has grown from a small city to a major metropolis with an area of 707 square kilometers and 12

million inhabitants (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Tehran>).

**Yazd** is an important centre of Persian architecture. Yazd's heritage as a center of Zoroastrianism is also important. There is a Tower of Silence on the outskirts, and the city itself has a Fire Temple, which holds a fire that has been kept alight continuously since 470 AD. Yazd also remains a centre of Islamic art and learning. Central to both the existence and the success of the city is its irrigation system, the qanāt, which drains water from the mountains and into the city through pipes that run for many miles underground ([http://eurasia.travel/iran/places/central\\_iran/yazd/](http://eurasia.travel/iran/places/central_iran/yazd/))

**Tabriz**, Persian Tauris, is the fourth largest city of Iran and the capital of the East Āz-ārbāyjān province, lying about 4,485 feet (1,367 meters) above sea level in the extreme northwestern part of the country. Tabriz has several notable ancient buildings. The Blue Mosque, or Masjed-e Kabūd (1465–66), has long been renowned for the splendor of its blue tile decoration. The citadel, or Ark, which was built before 1322 on the site of a collapsed mosque, is remarkable for its simplicity, its size, and the excellent condition of its brickwork.

These vignettes serve to demonstrate the historical characteristics of each city in this study and how each destination has a unique set of concerns.

### 3.2. Data collection

Questionnaires were distributed to 1,000 retailers, travel agents, hotels, business owners, and vendors in five tourist destinations in the tourist zone in Iran, namely Esfahan, Shiraz, Tehran, Yazd, and Tabriz, based on purposive sampling. These five cities are significant tourist destinations and received domestic tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic, although there is no data on how many visitors visited these cities. The questionnaire was translated into Persian and back into En-



glish, per Brislin (1980), and three researchers in different cities personally distributed hard copies of the questionnaires among domestic tourists. Data collection continued for three months. 670 questionnaires were completed and submitted (almost equal number from each city), translating to a response rate of 67%. 70% of the respondents were men, and 30% were women. They were on average 45 years old, with the majority (60%) married and educated (50%), 36% owning businesses, and 60% working in shops.

### 3.3. Measurement

Previously validated scales (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011; Ajzen, 1991; Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Woosnam, 2012; Chau & Yen, 2021; Telfer, 2011; Pijls et al., 2017; Kang & Lee, 2018; Teye et al., 2002; Sirakaya et al., 2002) were used but modified to fit this research context involving merchants of tourist destinations in Iran. Table 2 lists the measurement items, which are supporting tourism development and social benefit and cost of tourism, adopted from Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011); attitude was adopted from Ajzen (1991) and Moghavvemi et al. (2017); tourism contributions to the community were adopted from Woosnam (2012); social hospitality was adopted from Chau and Yen (2021), Telfer (2011), Pijls et al. (2017); personal benefit was adopted from Kang and Lee (2018); negative interference was adopted from Teye et al. (2002) and Sirakaya et al. (2002). A seven-point Likert scale (ranging from (1) for strongly disagree to (7) for strongly agree) asked merchants to rate their perspective on the negative or positive effects of tourism development in the area. In addition to the primary constructs, the demographics of the respondents, like age, gender, marital status, and education, were measured. The validity of the questionnaire was tested with five academic experts and five practitioners, then revised with minor changes.

## 4. Data Analysis and Results

The data were checked for missing data, outliers, normality, and multicollinearity, and the results confirmed that the data was normal and fit the model. The reliability of the constructs was checked using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), and the results showed the reliability of the variables to exceed 0.7 (see Table 1). After cleaning the data and the descriptive test in SPSS, structural equation modeling (Amos) was used to examine the research's framework. This study employed measurements validated in previous studies. It employed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm the items and explain how measured variables represent constructs involved in a theoretical model, as recommended by Hair et al. (2006). The CFA was tested, and the results showed a good fit with the collected data (see Table 3).

The convergent and discriminant validities of the scales were assessed via composite reliability and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (see Table 2). The composite reliabilities of all the constructs exceeded 0.800, while the AVE for all constructs was greater than 0.50. These tests confirmed the convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2006). Furthermore, to evaluate the discriminant validity, we compared the square root of each construct AVE to its correlations with other variables. The results showed that the construct correlations were all below the square root of AVE for that construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2006). Thus, the results of both tests confirmed the discriminants' validity (see Table 2).

The relationship between the independent and dependent variables was examined using a structural model. The proposed structural model was tested for an overall model fit, and the results indicated that most of the fit indices exceeded the recommended values (see Table 3). Therefore, the overall fit indices indicated an acceptable fit of the data to the model.

**Table 1** | List of items, descriptive statistics, Cronbach Alpha, Composite Reliability, and AVE

Constructs Items	Mean	S. D	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Standardized Regression Weight	Composite Reliability	AVE
<b>Support towards Tourism Development:</b>			0.891		0.879	0.753
ST	3.82	1.04		0.753		
ST1	3.92	0.98		0.693		
ST2	3.52	1.03		0.801		
ST3	3.77	1.06		0.813		
ST4	3.86	1.05		0.789		
ST5						
<b>Attitude: A</b>			0.913		0.908	0.814
A1	3.91	0.99		0.809		
A2	3.89	0.96		0.869		
A3	3.90	0.97		0.853		
A4	3.96	0.93		0.836		
A5	3.53	1.02		0.706		
<b>Tourism Contributions to Community:</b>			0.878		0.882	0.743
TCC	3.46	1.00		0.695		
TCC1	3.27	0.99		0.745		
TCC2	3.48	1.02		0.782		
TCC3	3.42	0.99		0.822		
TCC4	3.50	0.90		0.639		
TCC5						
<b>Negative Interference Tourism: NIT</b>			0.901		0.855	0.768
NIT1	2.43	0.788		0.780		
NIT2	2.58	0.861		0.818		
NIT3	2.52	0.856		0.881		
NIT4	2.12	0.850		0.595		
<b>Social Benefit of Tourism: SBT</b>			0.834		0.823	0.735
SBT1	3.39	1.00		0.783		
SBT2	3.65	1.03		0.751		
SBT3	3.35	1.02		0.772		
SBT4	3.37	1.04		0.681		
SBT5	3.31	1.01		0.690		
<b>Social Cost of Tourism: SCT</b>			0.909		0.838	0.712
SCT1	3.11	0.98		0.649		
SCT2	2.68	0.92		0.668		
SCT3	2.62	0.89		0.750		
SCT4	2.80	0.96		0.754		
SCT5	2.71	0.86		0.541		
<b>Personal Benefits: PB</b>			0.868		0.838	0.796
PB1	3.80	1.01		0.828		
PB2	3.78	1.01		0.792		
PB3	3.55	0.99		0.769		
<b>Social Hospitality: SH</b>			0.787		0.871	0.724
SH1	3.55	0.99		0.818		
SH2	3.51	0.95		0.815		
SH3	3.44	0.97		0.803		
SH4	3.43	0.95		0.616		
SH5	3.55	0.94		0.534		
SH6	3.56	0.94		0.760		

Note: Average Variance Extracted (AVE); S.D: Standard Deviations

**Table 2** | Correlation and Square root of average variance extracted

Constructs	SB	NI	SC	TC	At	ST	PB	HB
Social Benefit	<b>0.857</b>							
Negative Interference	-0.119**	<b>0.876</b>						
Social Cost	0.012	0.584**	<b>0.843</b>					
Tourism Contribution	0.384**	-0.071**	-0.055**	<b>0.861</b>				
Attitude	0.319**	-0.373**	-0.324**	0.384**	<b>0.902</b>			
Support Tourism Development	0.350**	-0.385**	-0.353**	0.409**	0.705**	<b>0.902</b>		
Personal Benefit	0.194**	-0.131**	-0.098	0.380**	0.493**	0.420**	<b>0.892</b>	
Hospitable Behaviour	0.198**	-0.197**	-0.196**	0.341**	0.456**	0.418**	0.565**	<b>0.850</b>

Note: Value on diagonal is the square root of AVE, \*\*p&lt; .01.

Table 3 | Fit Indices for Measurement and Structural Model

Quality-of-fit indices	Measurement model	Structural model
CMIN	1951.806	1818.09
$\chi^2/df$	2.750	2.243
TLI	0.900	0.918
CFI	0.911	0.927
IFI	0.912	0.927
RMSEA	0.051	0.051

Note: Value on diagonal is the square root of AVE, \*\* $p < .01$ .

The relationship between the independent and dependent variables was tested to test the relationship between personal benefit and attitude, which was not significant. In the second model, the relationship between personal benefit and sup-

port for tourism development was tested, which was positive and significant, confirming that personal benefit directly impacts merchants' support for tourism development.

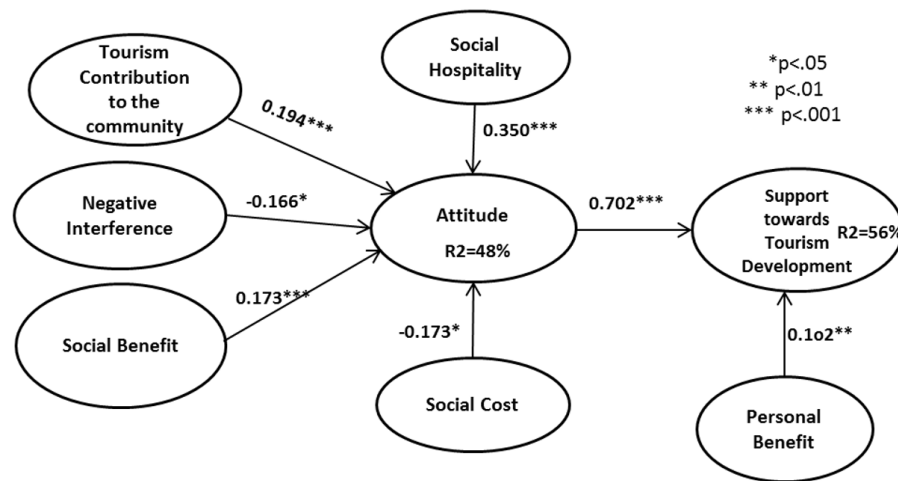


Figure 1 | Results of Model

Testing the relationship among independent and dependent variables showed that social hospitality ( $\beta = 0.350$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ), social benefit ( $\beta = 0.173$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ), and tourism contribution to the community ( $\beta = 0.194$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ) are significant and positive predictors of merchants' attitudes towards tourism development, while negative interference ( $\beta = -0.166$ ;  $P = 0.033$ ) and social cost ( $\beta = -0.173$ ;  $P = 0.028$ ) are significant and negative predictors of merchants' attitudes. Social hospitality is the strongest factor that impacts merchants' attitudes. Attitude ( $\beta = 0.702$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ) and personal benefits ( $\beta = 0.102$ ;  $P = 0.01$ ) are significant predictors of merchants' sup-

port for tourism development. These factors can explain 48% of the variance in merchants' attitudes towards tourism development and attitudes towards personal benefit, predicting 56% of the variance in support for tourism development.

## 5. Discussion

This study examines merchants' perceptions of tourism development in Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic. By testing the revised SET model, valuable insights were gained regarding the fac-

tors influencing tourism development during pandemics and economic crises. The findings contribute to understanding merchants' perceptions in three key ways. Firstly, the revised SET model demonstrates the reliability and validity of measures related to personal benefit, tourism's contribution to the community, negative tourist interference, and social hospitality among merchants. Secondly, during the economic crisis, merchants prioritized personal benefit and economic impact over social costs, as revealed through evaluations of different models. Finally, perceived tourism benefits, contribution to the community, social hospitality, and personal benefit significantly affect merchants' attitudes and support for tourism development. The results also establish a positive relationship between cultural benefits and merchants' attitudes toward tourism development. Iran's rich cultural heritage and diverse population make it an attractive tourist destination, with merchants offering local products and promoting local traditions. Despite temporary closures, social pressure led to the reopening of famous religious and historical sites, benefiting businesses in those areas. These findings align with previous studies highlighting residents' positive perceptions of tourism development, as it provides cultural benefits and promotes their city and customs.

### **Social hospitality and merchants' attitudes towards tourism development**

The results support the relationship between social hospitality and merchants' attitudes towards tourism development (H1 supported). Iranians are famous for their welcoming behavior towards others and their respectful behavior towards guests, which they regard as part of their religious and cultural ritual. When a guest enters their house, or a customer enters their shop, they are obliged to provide a comfortable and safe place for their guest and help when needed. This study confirmed that merchants exhibit hospitable beha-

avior towards their customers, impacting their attitude to support tourism development, consistent with previous studies emphasizing helpfulness and respect (Chau & Yan, 2021) as essential factors in hotels and restaurants and friendly, welcoming, and safe places as non-human aspects of hospitality (Brotherton, 2017; Pijls, Groen, Galetzka, & Pruyn, 2017). This study also confirms the significant effect of social hospitality as one of the decisive factors impacting merchants' attitudes toward supporting tourism development.

### **Social benefits and merchants' attitudes**

The results confirmed a significant and positive relationship between social benefits and merchants' attitudes towards tourism development (H2 supported). Hotels, restaurants, and shops improve the quality of services to motivate tourists to visit, which impacts the local quality of life. The quality of public transportation increased, and the government paid more attention to the cleanliness of public and recreation areas. Tourists tend to gravitate towards recreation and entertainment in rural areas, parks, or places outside cities. This benefits the locals by improving the quality of services offered by hotels, restaurants, and shops, per Khan et al. (1990). As far as tourism development is concerned, it can be assumed that there are positive impacts on the lives of residents in Iran living in a specific destination, which encourages them to view tourism positively. This is consistent with previous research arguments pointing out that there is a possibility that tourism development can minimize social inequalities, create jobs for women, and elevate living standards (Cihar and Stankova, 2006; Park et al., 2019).

### **Negative interference and merchants' attitudes towards tourism development**

The results also indicate a negative and non-significant relationship between negative interfe-

rence and merchants' attitudes towards tourism development (H3 supported). The more residents in Iran experience negative interference, the more they will negatively view tourism development. However, the result is not significant because the number of foreign tourists is not high, and locals did not experience any negative effects due to their presence. Furthermore, local tourists travel during peak seasons, such as New Year and school holidays, and residents do not view them negatively due to the positive influence of local tourists, such as increased incomes and businesses. However, specific cases have residents reacting negatively to local tourists, especially during summer holidays, when they negatively impact the local environment, such as setting up spontaneous bonfires. In addition, the constant flow of tourists during peak seasons could result in damaged infrastructure, urban expansion, and environmental degradation (Madan & Rawat, 2000).

#### **Social costs and merchants' attitudes toward tourism development**

This research confirmed a negative relationship between social costs and merchants' attitudes toward tourism development (H4 supported). If merchants experience negative social effects, their perception of tourism becomes negative. Unlike other countries, Iran's strict social controls and restrictions limit negative tourism impacts. For instance, countries like Malaysia and Turkey permit gambling activities, negatively affecting residents. In Iran, traffic congestion and overcrowding occur during holidays, particularly in tourist areas. However, travel was limited during the pandemic, and some cities experienced more outdoor activities than within city limits. The negative relationship between social costs and residents' attitudes towards tourism development is supported by Sirakaya et al. (2002), both of whom posited that there is a negative relationship between the perception of negative social impacts and residents'

perceptions and support for tourism development.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of foreign tourists was few. Generally, tourists in Iran are also compelled to adhere to the Islamic dress code in Iran, consume Halal products, and do not have access to alcohol, which means that the negative effects of tourism reported in other countries are not as prevalent in Iran. Previous research indicated that tourism development could negatively affect traditional and family values (Tosun, 2002), and there is always the possibility for residents to be influenced and start adopting tourists' norms and values (Khizindar, 2012).

#### **Tourism's contribution to the community and merchants' attitudes towards tourism development**

The results confirmed a significant and strong positive relationship between tourism's contribution to the community and merchants' attitudes towards tourism development (H5 supported). When the tourism industry benefits the locals, they have strong and positive attitudes towards tourism development. In an Iranian context, many new malls have been built, especially in cities with more local and foreign tourists, which provides business opportunities and income for locals. These benefits leave a positive impression on Iranians, and they tend to view tourism and its development positively. Assante et al. (2012) posited that the flow of tourists and tourism development would elevate residents' quality of life via public services, which benefits both tourists and locals.

#### **Personal benefits on merchants' support for tourism development**

This research confirmed the significant and positive effect of personal benefits on merchants' support for tourism development (H6 supported). Financial benefit was one of the main factors impacting most merchants in tourists' destinations to

open their businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic and pressured the government to end the lockdown after a few weeks. Most tourist sites, hotels, restaurants, local airlines, shopping malls, and travel agents operated during the pandemic and provided products and services despite the high risk of coronavirus infection. Tourists were travelling to various tourist destinations, particularly during festivals and holidays. Since the economic condition was not good, merchants supported tourism development and welcomed tourists to improve business revenue and overcome economic challenges. This result is consistent with Kang et al. (2008) and Kang and Lee (2018), highlighting the impact of personal benefit on residents' support for tourism development.

#### **Attitudes and support for tourism development**

Our results revealed a significant positive relationship between merchants' attitudes and support for tourism development (H7 supported). Social Exchange Theory (SET) states that residents engage in tourism-related activities when the benefits outweigh the costs (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). Therefore, merchants in Iran perceive tangible benefits positively. Iranians generally have a favorable attitude towards local and foreign tourists, considering them a source of income and a means of connecting with the world. The presence of foreign tourists is seen as an indicator of political improvement, enhanced communication, and a promising future for locals. Bahaee et al. (2014) further confirmed Iranians' positive predisposition towards tourism development, attributing it to its positive impact on economic progress. They do not anticipate negative effects on local religious beliefs from tourism development.

The results of this research would be valuable and beneficial to policymakers, as they would be able to realize the overall perspective of merchants towards tourism development and its economic ef-

fects. The government should utilize the experience of other countries relying on tourism revenue and what type of action they took during the economic crisis to help businesses. After the pandemic, they should create the opportunity for foreign investment and facilitate the activity of the private sector, which will create many direct and indirect jobs in the country, particularly for those badly affected by the pandemic. Many sectors are directly or indirectly connected to the tourism industry, such as transportation, communication, accommodations, food and shopping, services, recreation, and entertainment. The opportunities to invest in the tourism sector will improve the country's economic condition and increase tourist arrivals.

#### **5.1. Managerial implications**

Based on this study, there are several managerial implications for the tourism industry. Policymakers, tourism organizations, and local communities in Iran can work toward the recovery and sustainable development of the tourism industry. The findings suggest that promoting and preserving Iran's unique cultural heritage can positively impact merchants' attitudes toward tourism development. Efforts should be made to showcase and promote the diverse cultural aspects of different regions of Iran to attract both domestic and foreign tourists.

Encouraging and training merchants to provide friendly, welcoming, and safe tourist experiences can help create a positive perception of tourism and support its development. They should train staff to provide exceptional customer service, facilitate cultural exchanges between locals and tourists, and support initiatives that promote social cohesion and inclusiveness.

Improving the quality of services and infrastructure, particularly in public transportation and recreational facilities, can enhance tourism's social benefits. This, in turn, can positively impact lo-

cal quality of life and residents' attitudes towards tourism development. Investments in these areas should be prioritized to create a positive environment for tourists and residents.

Highlighting the economic benefits and job opportunities created by the tourism industry can generate support from local merchants. Emphasizing the positive impact on the community, such as establishing diversified businesses, improved public services, and enhanced living standards, can foster a favorable attitude towards tourism development. Efforts should be made to minimize overcrowding, traffic congestion, and damage to infrastructure and the environment during peak tourist seasons. Local regulations and community involvement can help manage these issues effectively. Creating favorable business growth and revenue generation conditions can incentivize merchants to actively support tourism development.

Considering the impact of social and cultural factors on merchants' attitudes, managers should prioritize understanding local social and cultural dynamics to tailor their offerings and marketing strategies. This can involve incorporating traditional customs and practices into tourist experiences, as well as fostering cultural exchanges.

## 5.2. Limitations and future research

Despite realizing the research objectives, this work faced a few limitations. First, data were collected from five big cities (tourist zones) in Iran, precipitating sampling bias, as the data is skewed towards those areas. Second, the pandemic conditions and health risks did not allow collecting data from smaller cities badly affected by COVID-19, and not many tourists went there. Third, this study collected data only from merchants since the pandemic impacted their businesses badly and welcomed tourists in their area. In future research, it would be better to measure and classify groups

based on their distinctive characteristics instead of their places of origin, which would improve generalizability.

## 6. Conclusions

This study revised and examined the social, cultural, and economic aspects of the SET model in Iran to better understand how local merchants react towards tourism development during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show the significant impact of social, cultural, and economic factors on merchants' attitudes toward and support for tourism development and show that merchants support tourism development despite the high health risk of COVID-19. Furthermore, it shows the individual priority in different conditions and the cost-benefit analysis of each decision.

Many businesses in tourism destinations rely on tourism, and many jobs are affected directly or indirectly. Bad economic conditions forced business owners to re-open their shops, supporting tourism development mainly due to economic and business benefits. Understanding merchants' perceptions of tourism development could allow the government to develop strategies to mitigate the negative effects and maximize its corresponding benefits.

The cultural impact, social impact, negative interference, social hospitality, personal benefits, and tourism contribution to the community influence local attitudes and impact their support for tourism development. This research confirmed that cultural benefit, social benefit, tourism contribution to the community, and social hospitality are significantly related to the merchants' attitude towards tourism development. Indeed, cultural, social, and negative interference had negative relationships with local attitudes towards tourism development; this conclusion mirrors the results of similar research from other countries. The results contradict the current perception of Iranian attitudes toward tourism development.

This study's research model was tested in an environment with local merchants in Iran due to its unique status as an Islamic country and its limited number of foreign tourists during COVID-19. The Iranian government could use the results of this study to develop appropriate approaches to mitigate the adverse effects of the tourism industry. The government also needs to improve the country's image so that foreign tourists will be more inclined to visit Iran after the pandemic. Currently, the government provides many incentives for investors, such as tax-free status for five years for accommodation providers. However, many of these benefits are not advertised due to limited media exposure. Policymakers and the government need to make the outside world aware of this and encourage foreign investment in the Iranian tourism industry to attract and heal the industry.

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