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A Sociological Analysis of the Role of the Tourism Industry in the Economic and Social Development of Mashhad

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to develop a sociological explanation of how the tourism industry contributes to the economic and social development of Mashhad. This applied qualitative study was conducted using grounded theory based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. The study population consisted of tourism activists, managers, experts, and specialists working in tourism, hotel management, travel services, and cultural heritage in Mashhad. Fifteen participants were selected through purposive sampling, and recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interview data were managed and analyzed using MAXQDA software through open, axial, and selective coding. The constant comparative method was applied throughout the analysis. Trustworthiness was established based on Lincoln and Guba's criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The grounded analysis identified the role of the tourism industry in the economic and social development of Mashhad as the central phenomenon. Historical and cultural capacity, geographical and urban location, and diversity of tourism attractions emerged as causal conditions. Infrastructure, urban position, and concentration of activities constituted contextual conditions, while economic and political crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and international relations functioned as intervening conditions. The principal strategies included investment, social empowerment, tourism diversification, and place marketing. These strategies were associated with the major consequences of balanced development, employment creation, spatial justice, reduced unemployment, and economic prosperity. The findings indicated that tourism development operates through an interconnected sociological process in which cultural resources, urban structures, institutional conditions, stakeholder participation, and external pressures jointly determine developmental outcomes. Tourism can function as a major mechanism of economic and social development in Mashhad when its religious and cultural capacities are supported by adequate infrastructure, integrated governance, diversified tourism products, local participation, strategic investment, and equitable spatial planning.

Keywords: Tourism Industry; Economic Development; Social Development; Grounded Theory; Pilgrimage Tourism; Urban Tourism; Mashhad

Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most influential service-sector activities in contemporary urban economies, not only because of its capacity to generate income and employment, but also because of its broader implications for social interaction, spatial development, infrastructure, cultural exchange, entrepreneurship, governance, and regional competitiveness. In major destination cities, tourism increasingly functions as a multidimensional development mechanism that connects economic production with social transformation and urban restructuring. Its influence extends beyond hotels, transportation, restaurants, and travel agencies to a wide range of complementary sectors, including retail, cultural

industries, health services, recreation, digital services, construction, and local entrepreneurship. Accordingly, the developmental significance of tourism should be understood within a broader sociological framework in which economic outcomes are interdependent with institutional arrangements, local participation, social equity, cultural identity, and the spatial distribution of opportunities. Recent studies have similarly emphasized that tourism-led development is shaped by the interaction of destination resources, infrastructure, governance capacity, investment, and broader economic conditions rather than by tourist arrivals alone [1-3].

The relationship between tourism and development is especially important in cities whose economic and social structures are strongly influenced by continuous flows of visitors. Tourism can stimulate local economies through direct tourist expenditure and through indirect and induced effects across interconnected sectors. Investment in accommodation, transportation, recreational services, public facilities, and destination infrastructure can create employment, encourage entrepreneurship, increase local revenues, and strengthen the competitiveness of service industries. Infrastructure investment is particularly significant because accessibility, transportation capacity, urban amenities, and the quality of public services affect both destination attractiveness and the ability of local economies to convert tourism demand into sustained economic benefits [3]. At the same time, the effects of tourism are not automatically positive or equally distributed. Tourism growth may also intensify spatial concentration, congestion, environmental pressure, land-value changes, inequality, commercialization of culture, and dependence on volatile visitor markets. Sustainable tourism development therefore requires institutional coordination and policies capable of balancing economic expansion with environmental protection, social inclusion, and long-term resilience [4, 5].

From a sociological perspective, tourism is particularly significant because it reshapes relationships among residents, visitors, businesses, public institutions, and urban spaces. Tourism produces repeated encounters among groups with different cultural backgrounds, lifestyles, expectations, and economic capacities. Such interactions may strengthen cultural exchange, social learning, collective identity, and community participation, while simultaneously creating tensions related to commodification, unequal access to urban resources, crowding, or changes in local patterns of everyday life. The distribution of tourism revenues and opportunities also has important implications for social justice. When tourism-related employment, investment, and infrastructure are concentrated in particular areas or among limited groups, the benefits of tourism may reinforce existing inequalities. Conversely, when local residents participate in tourism entrepreneurship, decision making, cultural production, and service provision, tourism may contribute to social empowerment and more inclusive forms of urban development. This broader understanding is consistent with contemporary approaches that connect tourism development with governance, local capacities, destination resources, and regional socioeconomic structures [1, 2].

These issues acquire particular importance in Mashhad, one of Iran's largest metropolitan areas and one of the most prominent religious tourism destinations in the Islamic world. The city possesses a unique tourism structure because pilgrimage constitutes the principal source of visitor movement, while commercial, recreational, cultural, historical, medical, and other forms of tourism operate alongside it. The religious and symbolic position of Mashhad has generated a long-established tourism economy centered on accommodation, passenger transport, retail activity, food services, travel agencies, religious services, and other visitor-oriented businesses. Earlier analyses of tourism economics in Mashhad demonstrated the considerable role of tourism in the economic functioning of the metropolis and highlighted the importance of examining tourism not merely as a temporary visitor activity but as an integral component of the urban economy [6]. The principles of

tourism management likewise underscore the necessity of understanding destinations as integrated systems in which tourism resources, service provision, management, demand, and local development interact continuously [7].

Mashhad's tourism system is distinguished by both its scale and its diversity. Religious tourism remains the dominant component, but the city's capacity to attract visitors is increasingly connected with complementary forms of tourism and broader destination experiences. The development of halal and religious tourism illustrates the importance of cultural and religious identity in shaping Mashhad's attractiveness and differentiating it from competing destinations [8]. At the same time, the sustainability of pilgrimage tourism requires attention to governance quality, ethical practices, legal frameworks, and regulatory mechanisms. Comparative research on pilgrimage tourism has emphasized that effective governance and ethical-regulatory frameworks are necessary to ensure that tourism development remains socially responsible and sustainable, particularly in destinations characterized by large visitor flows and complex stakeholder relationships [9]. Thus, Mashhad's religious identity provides a powerful tourism advantage, but translating that advantage into balanced economic and social development depends on management capacity and institutional effectiveness.

The development of Mashhad as a tourism destination is also closely related to the quality and resilience of its tourism businesses. Hotels, accommodation establishments, transportation services, commercial enterprises, and travel agencies form a substantial part of the city's tourism value chain. Research on four- and five-star hotels in Mashhad has shown that strengthening brand survival and competitiveness is closely connected with the broader development of the tourism industry, indicating that destination development depends in part on the capacity of tourism firms to create value, maintain service quality, and adapt to changing market conditions [10]. Similarly, research focusing on innovative business models in Mashhad's tourism industry has highlighted the importance of value creation at the destination level, suggesting that tourism enterprises must move beyond conventional service delivery and develop models that create differentiated value for visitors and stakeholders [11]. These findings indicate that the contribution of tourism to urban development is partly mediated by the performance, innovation, and adaptability of businesses operating within the destination ecosystem.

Strategic planning is another essential component of tourism-led development in Mashhad. The city's tourism service businesses operate under conditions of market competition, economic instability, changing tourist expectations, infrastructural limitations, and institutional complexity. Strategic assessment of service-sector development in Mashhad has emphasized the importance of identifying internal and external capacities, threats, and competitive conditions when formulating tourism policies [12]. Tourism development is therefore not simply a consequence of existing attractions but depends on the ability of public and private actors to recognize opportunities, manage constraints, and coordinate resources. This requirement becomes more pronounced when the tourism economy is exposed to external shocks. Research on the future of sports tourism in Mashhad, for example, has shown the usefulness of scenario planning for anticipating alternative futures and improving preparedness under conditions of uncertainty [13]. Such approaches are particularly relevant to destinations in which tourism constitutes a significant source of business activity and employment.

Economic instability can substantially affect tourism demand, investment, and business continuity. Studies examining the influence of economic sanctions on tourism growth in Mashhad have indicated that macroeconomic and political conditions can directly shape the capacity of the tourism sector to expand and maintain competitiveness [14]. Fluctuations in prices, household purchasing power, investment conditions, and international mobility may reduce tourist expenditure or increase the operating costs of tourism enterprises. These vulnerabilities became even more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic,

when restrictions on mobility demonstrated the dependence of tourism-related employment and services on continuous visitor flows. Although such crises may be temporary, they reveal structural weaknesses and reinforce the importance of resilience, economic diversification, and adaptable governance within tourism-dependent urban economies. In this context, a sociological analysis must account not only for tourism's benefits but also for the conditions that shape the vulnerability and unevenness of those benefits.

A further dimension of Mashhad's tourism development concerns the growing importance of smart tourism and digital transformation. Contemporary tourists increasingly rely on digital information, online platforms, mobile services, destination applications, social media, and electronic transactions when selecting and experiencing destinations. Feasibility research concerning smart tourism in Mashhad has emphasized that successful transition toward a smart destination requires adequate technological, organizational, and infrastructural foundations [15]. More recent research has further identified managerial and institutional challenges associated with the development of smart tourism destination management in Mashhad, demonstrating that digitalization is not solely a technological issue but also a matter of governance, organizational coordination, human resources, and strategic capacity [16]. International evidence similarly suggests that digital governance can promote tourism development by improving the utilization of tourism resources and strengthening destination competitiveness, although the extent of these effects depends on broader economic conditions [2]. Digital transformation therefore represents both an opportunity and a governance challenge for Mashhad's tourism system.

Digital communication has particular relevance to specialized tourism markets such as medical tourism. Mashhad possesses significant medical and health-service capacities, and the development of health tourism can diversify the city's tourism economy beyond pilgrimage. Research conducted among medical tourists in Mashhad has shown that digital marketing can improve tourists' awareness and influence the visibility of health-related tourism services [17]. Other studies have examined the structure and competitiveness of Mashhad's medical tourism sector and have highlighted the importance of institutional conditions, service quality, supporting industries, destination competitiveness, and strategic management [18]. Marketing-related factors also play a central role in attracting and retaining medical tourists, and research in Mashhad has identified and prioritized important service-marketing dimensions associated with this sector [19]. Branding is equally important; the evaluation of health-tourism branding indicators in Mashhad has demonstrated that coherent destination identity and brand management are necessary for strengthening the city's position within competitive health-tourism markets [20].

Health tourism also illustrates how tourism development depends on networks of institutions rather than isolated enterprises. Research on the development of medical tourism in hospital settings has shown that organizational, service, infrastructural, marketing, and managerial factors collectively determine the capacity of destinations to develop competitive health-tourism services [21]. Within Mashhad specifically, word-of-mouth communication has also been identified as an important mechanism in the development of health tourism because visitors' experiences and interpersonal recommendations can influence destination reputation, trust, and future demand [22]. These studies collectively demonstrate that diversification into specialized tourism markets may increase the economic value of tourism, but such diversification requires service quality, institutional coordination, marketing competence, reputation management, and appropriate infrastructure. From a sociological standpoint, diversification also broadens the range of actors participating in the tourism economy and changes the types of interactions taking place between visitors and local service providers.

The economic and social effects of tourism are also strongly shaped by stakeholder relationships. Religious tourism in Mashhad involves a wide range of actors, including municipal organizations, cultural and religious institutions, accommodation providers, transportation authorities, private businesses, local residents, and visitors. Stakeholder prioritization studies in the context of Mashhad's religious tourism have shown that tourism development requires recognition of different levels of influence, interest, and responsibility among participating groups [23]. The effectiveness of tourism policy consequently depends on the ability to coordinate these stakeholders and align their often-divergent objectives. Integrated governance is particularly important where tourism development affects land use, infrastructure, local livelihoods, cultural heritage, and neighborhood conditions simultaneously. Without such coordination, tourism expansion may produce fragmented investment and uneven development despite high levels of visitor demand.

Urban planning is therefore inseparable from tourism policy in Mashhad. Large-scale tourism flows create significant demand for accommodation, transportation infrastructure, commercial activity, pedestrian spaces, and urban services, particularly in areas surrounding major pilgrimage sites. However, urban development projects can also threaten historically or culturally valuable places when economic and infrastructural pressures are not balanced with heritage protection. Research on urban development plans in Mashhad has documented the potential destruction or degradation of valuable places within the pilgrimage-tourism city, highlighting the tension between modernization, tourism expansion, and preservation of culturally significant urban environments [24]. This tension has direct sociological implications because heritage sites are not merely physical assets; they embody collective memory, local identity, symbolic meaning, and residents' relationships with urban space. Tourism development that disregards these dimensions may produce economic gains while simultaneously weakening the cultural foundations that make the destination distinctive.

The concept of sustainable tourism provides an important framework for addressing such contradictions. Sustainable development requires that tourism-generated economic benefits be accompanied by responsible resource use, environmental protection, cultural preservation, and long-term community benefit. International evidence from ecotourism suggests that tourism can generate economic development while creating incentives for environmental conservation when appropriate institutional and economic mechanisms are in place [4]. Similarly, research on sustainable agritourism through circular-economy principles demonstrates that tourism businesses can integrate economic value creation with resource efficiency and sustainable local development [5]. Although the tourism profile of Mashhad differs from ecotourism and agritourism destinations, these studies reinforce a broader principle: the developmental value of tourism should be evaluated through its capacity to create durable social, economic, environmental, and spatial benefits rather than through short-term increases in visitor numbers.

Regional development research likewise indicates that tourism can function as a catalyst for broader territorial transformation when tourism resources are systematically linked with local capabilities and development strategies [1]. This perspective is particularly relevant to Mashhad because its tourism sector has the potential to influence not only the central pilgrimage zone but also peripheral districts, neighboring areas, transport corridors, recreational spaces, and complementary service sectors. The distribution of tourism infrastructure and investment therefore has implications for spatial justice. If tourist expenditure and infrastructure development remain concentrated within a limited number of districts, tourism may intensify existing inequalities. If, by contrast, tourism planning diversifies attractions and directs investment toward less-

developed areas, it may contribute to more balanced urban development, improved public services, and expanded local employment opportunities.

The emerging international literature further emphasizes that tourism development is closely linked with destination infrastructure, digital governance, resource utilization, and the overall competitiveness of local economies [2, 3]. These relationships are especially relevant in Mashhad, where a high volume of visitors creates both developmental opportunities and substantial demands on transportation, accommodation, public services, environmental resources, and urban management. The central analytical challenge is therefore not simply to determine whether tourism contributes to economic growth, but to explain through which social and institutional mechanisms its benefits are produced, how they are distributed among groups and spaces, and under what conditions tourism may generate undesirable consequences. Such questions require attention to the lived experiences and interpretations of those directly involved in the tourism system.

Despite the considerable body of research on specific dimensions of tourism in Mashhad—including religious tourism, hotel competitiveness, health tourism, digital marketing, smart tourism, sports tourism, tourism services, stakeholder management, urban planning, and economic constraints—much of the existing literature has examined these dimensions separately [10, 13, 16, 20]. Consequently, there remains a need for an integrated sociological explanation capable of linking the city's tourism capacities with contextual conditions, external pressures, stakeholder strategies, and economic and social consequences. Such an approach is particularly important because the developmental role of tourism emerges from relationships among structures and actors rather than from isolated variables. Understanding these relationships can provide a more comprehensive basis for policy making, integrated tourism governance, local empowerment, investment planning, diversification, and spatially balanced development.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to sociologically analyze and develop an empirically grounded explanation of the role of the tourism industry in the economic and social development of Mashhad.

Methodology

This study was applied in terms of its purpose and qualitative in terms of its methodological orientation. Given the multidimensional nature of tourism and its complex relationships with the economic and social development of Mashhad, the study was conducted using grounded theory based on the systematic approach developed by Strauss and Corbin. The selection of grounded theory was particularly appropriate because the study sought to move beyond a purely descriptive account of tourism activities and develop an empirically grounded sociological explanation of how the tourism industry contributes to economic and social development within the specific context of Mashhad. The methodological choice was based on several considerations, including the complexity and context-dependent nature of tourism in the city, the limited availability of sufficiently comprehensive indigenous models explaining the sociological dimensions of tourism-led development, the importance of incorporating the experiences and interpretations of actors directly involved in the tourism sector, and the exploratory nature of the research questions. Accordingly, the study emphasized the meanings, experiences, interactions, institutional arrangements, and social processes through which tourism influences employment, economic activity, service provision, urban development, social relations, cultural interactions, and the broader developmental trajectory of Mashhad.

The study setting was the metropolitan city of Mashhad, the capital of Razavi Khorasan Province in northeastern Iran. Mashhad is situated on the Mashhad Plain between the Kopet-Dag and Binalud mountain ranges and covers an urban area of more than 29,000 hectares. The city has historically provided favorable conditions for human settlement because of its geographical position and access to the water resources of the Kashafrud Plain. Mashhad represents one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in the Islamic world and possesses a distinctive religious, cultural, economic, and administrative position within Iran. The presence of the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza has established pilgrimage and tourism as major functional components of the city's urban economy and social organization. The city annually receives more than 20 million pilgrims and tourists, creating extensive demand for accommodation, transportation, retail, food services, travel services, cultural facilities, recreational activities, and other tourism-related economic sectors. In addition to its religious identity, Mashhad functions as an important commercial, administrative, and cultural center in eastern Iran, making it an appropriate setting for investigating the relationship between tourism and urban socioeconomic development.

The spatial and functional characteristics of Mashhad were also considered when defining the research setting. The city is administratively divided into 13 municipal districts and has experienced substantial demographic and physical expansion over recent decades. Its population increased from approximately 176,000 inhabitants in 1940 to more than 3.3 million in 2016, illustrating the considerable scale of its urban growth and the increasing pressure placed on infrastructure, services, housing, transportation, and urban resources. Land-use patterns further demonstrate the complexity of the city's socioeconomic structure. Residential land constitutes approximately 26.2% of the urban area, while the road and transportation network accounts for approximately 24.7%. Other areas are allocated to commercial, educational, higher-education, health-care, religious, cultural-historical, recreational, industrial, accommodation, transportation, agricultural, and public-service functions. Tourism-related activities are therefore embedded within a diverse metropolitan system rather than being geographically or economically isolated from the broader functioning of the city.

From a functional perspective, Mashhad has a prominent pilgrimage-tourism role. The concentration of visitors around the Holy Shrine has stimulated the development of extensive accommodation facilities, transportation services, travel agencies, commercial establishments, hospitality enterprises, and recreational and cultural services. Several prominent urban landmarks and transportation nodes also contribute to the tourism structure of the city, including the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza, the passenger terminal, Mashhad International Airport, the railway station, Malekabad Garden, Koohsangi Park, Vakilabad Park, and Shohada Square, as well as historically and culturally significant sites such as the Khajeh Rabi Mausoleum. These elements simultaneously function as tourist attractions, mobility nodes, urban landmarks, and components of the city's spatial identity. Consequently, the selection of Mashhad as the study area enabled the researchers to examine tourism within a setting where pilgrimage, commerce, mobility, hospitality, urban infrastructure, cultural heritage, and social interaction are closely interconnected.

The study population comprised individuals possessing direct professional experience, managerial responsibility, specialist knowledge, or academic expertise related to tourism and its associated sectors in Mashhad. Participants included tourism activists, managers, specialists, and knowledgeable professionals working in areas such as tourism administration, hotel and accommodation services, travel and tourism services, and cultural heritage. A total of 15 participants were ultimately included in the study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those interviewed possessed sufficient experience and knowledge to provide information-rich accounts concerning the economic and social consequences of

tourism development in Mashhad. Sampling and data collection were conducted concurrently in accordance with grounded theory principles. Participant recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that subsequent interviews no longer generated substantively new concepts, properties, dimensions, or relationships capable of contributing meaningfully to the emerging analytical framework. Selection was therefore guided by conceptual relevance and the ability of participants to clarify, expand, compare, or refine emerging categories rather than by statistical representativeness.

The primary instrument for data collection was the in-depth semi-structured interview. This method was selected because it enabled participants to describe their professional experiences, observations, interpretations, and evaluations of the role of tourism in Mashhad while simultaneously allowing the researchers to explore emerging concepts in greater depth. The semi-structured format provided sufficient consistency across interviews while retaining the flexibility required for grounded theory research. The interview framework focused broadly on participants' perceptions of the economic and social functions of tourism, mechanisms through which tourism affects urban development, employment and business creation, investment and service-sector expansion, social and cultural interactions, changes in residents' livelihoods, institutional and infrastructural conditions, opportunities generated by pilgrimage tourism, and barriers that may restrict the developmental contribution of the tourism industry. Rather than restricting participants to predetermined response categories, the interviews encouraged detailed narratives and explanations of processes, relationships, contextual conditions, and consequences.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, allowing the researchers to establish direct interaction with participants and obtain detailed accounts of their experiences. During each interview, probing questions were used whenever clarification, elaboration, or concrete examples were required. As data collection progressed, the interview process became increasingly responsive to the emerging analysis. Concepts identified in earlier interviews informed subsequent questioning, enabling the researchers to examine similarities and differences among participants' accounts and to explore the properties and dimensions of developing categories. Particular attention was given to participants' explanations of how Mashhad's position as a major pilgrimage destination generates economic opportunities through accommodation, transportation, retail, travel services, cultural activities, food services, and related industries, as well as how these processes influence social interaction, urban identity, access to services, quality of life, cultural exchange, and relationships among residents, visitors, private-sector actors, and public institutions.

The study also incorporated contextual information concerning the physical and functional structure of Mashhad to support interpretation of the interview data. The spatial distribution of residential, commercial, accommodation, transportation, religious, recreational, educational, industrial, and public-service land uses was considered as contextual evidence for understanding how tourism is integrated into the wider urban system. Particular attention was paid to the role of the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza and the network of major transportation and tourism-related facilities, including the airport, railway station, passenger terminal, parks, historical sites, accommodation facilities, and commercial-service areas. This contextual consideration helped situate participants' narratives within the actual spatial and institutional environment of Mashhad and facilitated interpretation of the relationships between tourism activities and broader processes of economic and social development.

To enhance methodological rigor and the quality of the qualitative evidence, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged

engagement with the data, purposive selection of knowledgeable participants, iterative interviewing, continuous comparison of emerging concepts, and examination of participants' perspectives until theoretical saturation was achieved. Transferability was addressed through detailed description of the research setting, the socioeconomic and tourism characteristics of Mashhad, the participant group, and the methodological procedures, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to comparable tourism destinations and urban contexts. Dependability was supported by maintaining a systematic analytical procedure and documenting the progression from interview data to codes, categories, and the final conceptual structure. Confirmability was strengthened by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts and maintaining a traceable relationship between the raw qualitative material and the categories developed during analysis. Collectively, these procedures were intended to reduce arbitrary interpretation and strengthen the transparency and methodological defensibility of the findings.

The qualitative data were analyzed using MAXQDA software in accordance with the systematic grounded theory procedures of Strauss and Corbin. Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively rather than as separate sequential stages. Following each interview, the material was prepared for analysis and examined to identify meaningful concepts related to the role of tourism in the economic and social development of Mashhad. The constant comparative method was applied throughout the analytical process, whereby incidents, statements, codes, concepts, and emerging categories were continuously compared with one another. This approach allowed conceptual similarities and differences to be identified and enabled categories to be progressively refined as additional data became available. MAXQDA was used to organize the interview material, manage codes and categories, retrieve related segments of data, compare participants' accounts, and maintain a transparent record of the analytical process.

Analysis was undertaken through open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, interview transcripts were examined closely and meaning units relevant to the research phenomenon were identified and assigned conceptual codes. The purpose of this stage was to remain sufficiently open to the participants' perspectives and avoid imposing a predetermined theoretical framework on the data. Similar codes were subsequently compared, merged where conceptually appropriate, and organized into preliminary concepts and categories. Particular attention was directed toward statements concerning employment creation, income generation, entrepreneurship, investment, expansion of hospitality and service industries, commercialization, infrastructure, urban services, social interaction, cultural exchange, residents' participation, institutional coordination, inequalities, environmental and spatial pressures, and other perceived consequences of tourism development.

During axial coding, the categories generated through open coding were systematically related to one another. Consistent with the Strauss and Corbin paradigm, the analysis examined the relationships among causal conditions, the central phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies or actions, and consequences. This stage was intended to clarify not only what effects tourism produces but also the circumstances under which these effects occur and the mechanisms through which tourism contributes to or constrains socioeconomic development. The researchers therefore examined how Mashhad's religious importance, volume of pilgrimage travel, urban infrastructure, institutional arrangements, investment conditions, tourism services, stakeholder participation, and broader socioeconomic environment interact to shape the developmental outcomes of the tourism industry. Relationships between economic dimensions and social dimensions were also explored in order to avoid treating them as independent processes.

Selective coding constituted the final analytical stage and involved integrating the principal categories around a central explanatory phenomenon capable of representing the sociological role of the tourism industry in Mashhad's economic and social development. At this stage, relationships among the major categories were reviewed, conceptually refined, and integrated into a coherent grounded explanation. Categories that lacked sufficient conceptual development were revisited through constant comparison with the interview material, while overlapping concepts were consolidated to improve analytical clarity. Theoretical saturation was regarded as achieved when additional interviews and repeated examination of the data no longer produced new categories or meaningful modifications to the relationships among existing categories. The final analytical structure therefore emerged inductively from the experiences and interpretations of the 15 participants while remaining sensitive to the distinctive pilgrimage-based, economic, cultural, spatial, and institutional characteristics of Mashhad. This systematic process provided the foundation for presenting the study's findings and subsequently explaining how the tourism industry operates as a multidimensional mechanism of economic and social development within the city.

Findings and Results

The participants comprised 15 individuals with direct professional, managerial, executive, or specialized experience in the tourism economy of Mashhad. The sample represented the principal institutional and occupational domains associated with the city's tourism system, including tourism management and administration, hotel and accommodation services, travel agencies and passenger services, cultural heritage, and tourism-related service activities. The inclusion of participants from different organizational and professional positions provided variation in perspectives regarding the economic, social, institutional, infrastructural, and cultural consequences of tourism development. All participants had practical familiarity with the conditions of tourism in Mashhad and were able to describe the opportunities and constraints associated with the city's distinctive position as a major pilgrimage destination. Sampling continued alongside data analysis until theoretical saturation was achieved at the fifteenth interview. The diversity of professional perspectives was particularly important because tourism in Mashhad does not operate as an isolated economic activity; rather, it constitutes an interconnected urban system involving accommodation, retail, transportation, cultural services, religious pilgrimage, municipal management, investment, employment, and interactions between residents and visitors. The interviews therefore provided a multidimensional empirical basis for identifying the categories incorporated into the final grounded theory model.

Table 1

Open, Axial, and Selective Coding Structure of the Sociological Role of Tourism in the Economic and Social Development of Mashhad

Selective category	Axial category	Main subcategories	Representative open codes
Causal conditions	Cultural and historical capacity	Religious-pilgrimage identity; historical-cultural attractions; symbolic status of Mashhad	Presence of the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza; religious reputation of the city; pilgrimage motivation; historical continuity of travel to Mashhad; cultural attractions; religious ceremonies; symbolic capital of the city
Causal conditions	Geographical and urban location	Regional accessibility; metropolitan position; connection with eastern Iran	Strategic location in northeastern Iran; regional service center; accessibility from neighboring provinces; proximity to transport corridors; metropolitan concentration of services
Causal conditions	Tourism infrastructure	Accommodation, transportation, hospitality, and service capacities	Hotels and guesthouses; travel agencies; airport; railway station; passenger terminal; urban transport; restaurants; retail services; recreational facilities
Causal conditions	Diversity of tourism attractions	Religious, recreational, historical, commercial, and cultural attractions	Pilgrimage tourism; urban recreation; shopping; parks; historical sites; cultural events; family tourism; combined pilgrimage-leisure travel
Central phenomenon	Role of the tourism industry in the economic and social development of Mashhad	Tourism as a multidimensional urban development mechanism	Expansion of urban economy; employment creation; service-sector growth; social interaction; cultural exchange; urban transformation; improvement of service capacity

Contextual conditions	Infrastructure	Capacity and quality of physical and service infrastructure	Transportation capacity; accommodation supply; urban services; public facilities; accessibility; infrastructure maintenance; tourism information systems
Contextual conditions	Urban position	Metropolitan centrality and concentration of population and services	Large urban population; regional administrative role; commercial centrality; concentration of institutions; high visitor flows
Contextual conditions	Spatial concentration of activities	Concentration around the shrine and major tourism corridors	Centralization of tourism businesses; pressure on central districts; uneven spatial distribution; congestion; concentration of accommodation and retail services
Intervening conditions	Economic crises	Inflation, reduced purchasing power, investment uncertainty, rising operating costs	Increasing travel costs; declining tourist expenditure; instability of business revenues; higher accommodation and transportation costs; investment risk
Intervening conditions	Political conditions	Domestic and international political environment	Policy instability; international perceptions; administrative restrictions; changing travel conditions; regulatory uncertainty
Intervening conditions	COVID-19 pandemic	Disruption of mobility and tourism-related businesses	Travel restrictions; closure or reduced activity of tourism enterprises; loss of employment; reduced hotel occupancy; vulnerability of tourism-dependent livelihoods
Intervening conditions	International relations	Cross-border travel, foreign tourists, and regional connectivity	International visitor flows; visa and mobility conditions; relations with neighboring countries; foreign tourism markets; destination image
Strategies	Investment	Expansion and modernization of tourism-related economic capacities	Private investment; hotel development; redevelopment of tourism zones; investment incentives; infrastructure financing; support for small tourism businesses
Strategies	Social empowerment	Strengthening local participation and community benefits	Local entrepreneurship; resident participation; skills development; employment of local residents; community-based tourism; strengthening social capital
Strategies	Diversification	Expansion beyond pilgrimage-centered tourism	Cultural tourism; recreational tourism; medical tourism; shopping tourism; event tourism; historical tourism; longer visitor stays
Strategies	Place marketing	Strengthening destination image and coordinated promotion	City branding; digital marketing; promotion of attractions; integrated tourism information; national and international advertising
Strategies	Integrated planning	Coordination among tourism-related institutions	Interorganizational cooperation; municipal coordination; tourism governance; coherent policy making; public-private partnership
Consequences	Balanced development	More equitable spatial and sectoral distribution of tourism benefits	Development of peripheral districts; decentralization of tourism services; balanced investment; distribution of economic opportunities
Consequences	Employment	Direct, indirect, and induced job creation	Hotel employment; transportation jobs; retail employment; guides; food services; travel-agency employment; informal and seasonal work
Consequences	Spatial justice	Improved distribution of infrastructure and services	Better access to facilities; distribution of tourism investment; neighborhood improvement; reduced central concentration; improved public spaces
Consequences	Reduced unemployment	Expansion of livelihood and entrepreneurial opportunities	Youth employment; self-employment; small businesses; household income generation; tourism-related entrepreneurship
Consequences	Economic prosperity	Increased income, investment, business activity, and urban revenues	Increased tourist expenditure; business turnover; municipal revenues; service-sector expansion; investment circulation; local market growth
Consequences	Social and cultural development	Interaction, cultural exchange, social participation, and urban vitality	Host-guest interaction; cultural awareness; social dynamism; community participation; strengthening of urban identity

As shown in Table 1, the coding process demonstrated that the sociological role of tourism in Mashhad was formed through an interconnected set of economic, social, cultural, spatial, and institutional mechanisms. The causal conditions reflected the structural advantages that make tourism an important component of Mashhad's development, particularly its religious and historical identity, strategic urban position, extensive tourism infrastructure, and diversity of visitor attractions. These conditions created the initial capacity for large-scale visitor flows and for the development of a broad tourism-related service economy. The central phenomenon emerging from the interviews was the role of the tourism industry as a multidimensional mechanism of economic and social development rather than merely a source of visitor expenditure. Participants described tourism as a process capable of affecting employment, entrepreneurship, service-sector growth, investment, urban infrastructure, cultural interaction, and the distribution of opportunities within the city. However, the actual developmental outcomes depended strongly on contextual conditions such as the quality of infrastructure, Mashhad's metropolitan position, and the spatial concentration of tourism activities, as well as intervening conditions including economic crises, political circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic, and international relations. The participants' accounts further indicated that investment, social empowerment, diversification of the tourism product, destination marketing, and

integrated institutional planning represented the principal strategies required to transform tourism capacity into sustainable development. When these strategies were implemented effectively, tourism was perceived as contributing to balanced development, employment creation, spatial justice, lower unemployment, economic prosperity, and broader social and cultural development.

Table 2

Causal, Contextual, and Intervening Conditions Shaping Tourism-Led Development in Mashhad

Paradigm component	Main category	Analytical interpretation	Developmental implication
Causal conditions	Cultural and historical capacity	Mashhad's pilgrimage identity produces a stable and recurrent motive for travel and distinguishes the city from ordinary leisure destinations	Sustains demand for accommodation, transportation, retail, food, cultural, and religious services
Causal conditions	Geographical and urban location	The city's regional position and metropolitan functions increase its accessibility and service centrality	Extends tourism effects beyond the tourism sector to commerce, transportation, and regional services
Causal conditions	Tourism infrastructure	Existing accommodation and transportation facilities provide the material basis for receiving large visitor populations	Increases capacity for tourism expenditure, employment, and private investment
Causal conditions	Diversity of tourism attractions	Combining pilgrimage with recreation, shopping, heritage, and cultural activities broadens the visitor experience	Increases length of stay and expands the distribution of expenditure among economic sectors
Contextual conditions	Infrastructure quality	Developmental benefits depend on the adequacy of transport, accommodation, public space, sanitation, information, and urban services	Weak infrastructure can transform tourism growth into congestion and service pressure rather than development
Contextual conditions	Urban position	Mashhad's large population and administrative-commercial importance generate both market capacity and pressure on resources	Tourism interacts strongly with the broader metropolitan economy and urban governance system
Contextual conditions	Concentration of activities	Tourism services are highly concentrated in specific central areas, especially around major pilgrimage zones	Creates agglomeration advantages but may intensify congestion, inequality, and spatial imbalance
Intervening conditions	Economic crises	Inflation, changing household purchasing power, and rising business costs affect both tourists and service providers	Reduces expenditure capacity, increases investment risk, and threatens tourism-sector employment
Intervening conditions	Political conditions	Political stability, regulation, and policy consistency influence destination confidence and investment	Stable governance facilitates planning, whereas uncertainty restricts long-term tourism development
Intervening conditions	COVID-19 pandemic	Travel restrictions demonstrated the vulnerability of a city with substantial dependence on visitor flows	Highlighted the need for economic diversification, resilience planning, and support for tourism businesses
Intervening conditions	International relations	Regional and international relations influence foreign visitor mobility and destination image	Improvement in external relations can expand international tourism and diversify demand

Table 2 indicates that tourism development in Mashhad cannot be understood through visitor numbers alone because the transformation of tourism into economic and social development is conditional upon a wider structural environment. At the causal level, participants consistently situated Mashhad's religious and historical capacity at the foundation of its tourism system. The Holy Shrine of Imam Reza provides a recurrent and culturally embedded motivation for travel, while other historical, recreational, commercial, and urban attractions enable visitors to combine pilgrimage with broader tourism activities. The city's metropolitan position and extensive transportation and accommodation infrastructure reinforce this advantage by enabling Mashhad to accommodate large-scale flows of visitors. Nevertheless, the participants distinguished these underlying capacities from the contextual conditions that determine whether tourism produces sustainable benefits. In particular, the quality and geographical distribution of infrastructure were considered critical because inadequate transport systems, excessive spatial concentration, insufficient public services, and unequal investment can generate congestion, environmental pressure, and uneven access to tourism benefits. Economic and political conditions were identified as major intervening forces because tourism consumption and private-sector investment are highly sensitive to inflation, purchasing power, policy instability, and perceptions of economic risk. The COVID-19 pandemic represented the clearest example of the vulnerability associated with dependence on mobility and demonstrated how rapidly employment, hotel occupancy, passenger services, and small tourism businesses could be disrupted. International relations similarly influenced access to foreign tourism markets and the international image of Mashhad. Accordingly, the participants conceptualized tourism

development as the result of an interaction between strong destination assets and a changing socioeconomic and institutional environment.

Table 3

Strategic Actions for Strengthening the Economic and Social Contribution of Tourism in Mashhad

Strategic category	Components	Mechanism of action	Expected contribution
Investment and economic support	Private investment, infrastructure financing, incentives, modernization of accommodation facilities, support for tourism enterprises	Expands productive capacity and improves the quality and diversity of tourism services	Employment creation, increased tourist expenditure, business expansion, improved competitiveness
Social empowerment	Local participation, vocational training, community entrepreneurship, support for small enterprises, participation of residents in planning	Increases residents' capacity to participate in and benefit from the tourism economy	Inclusive employment, stronger social capital, community acceptance, wider distribution of tourism income
Diversification of tourism products	Cultural tourism, recreational tourism, medical tourism, historical tourism, shopping tourism, events, family-oriented activities	Reduces dependence on a single tourism motivation and encourages visitors to engage in additional activities	Longer stays, higher expenditure, seasonal stability, expansion of tourism markets
Destination marketing and branding	Integrated city branding, digital promotion, tourism information, promotion of attractions beyond the shrine	Improves destination visibility and provides tourists with information about a wider range of urban experiences	Increased demand, broader visitor markets, improved destination image, spatial dispersion of tourist flows
Integrated urban and tourism planning	Coordination among municipality, tourism organizations, cultural institutions, transport authorities, private sector, and local communities	Reduces fragmented decision making and aligns infrastructure, economic, cultural, and social policies	Efficient resource use, coherent governance, reduced institutional conflict, sustainable tourism development
Spatial redistribution of tourism activities	Development of attractions and services outside highly concentrated central zones	Directs investment and visitor movement toward less-developed parts of the city	Reduced congestion, improved spatial justice, more balanced neighborhood development
Improvement of service quality	Professional training, service standards, information systems, digital services, visitor management	Strengthens visitor satisfaction and increases the efficiency of tourism businesses	Repeat visitation, higher competitiveness, stronger economic returns, improved urban reputation
Resilience and crisis management	Business support mechanisms, diversified tourism markets, adaptive planning, crisis protocols	Reduces vulnerability to pandemics, economic shocks, and disruptions in travel demand	Employment protection, business continuity, faster recovery, greater stability of tourism revenues

The strategies presented in Table 3 demonstrate that participants did not regard the expansion of visitor numbers as an adequate tourism-development policy by itself. Instead, they emphasized the conversion of tourism demand into durable economic and social capacities. Investment emerged as a fundamental strategy because the city's existing tourism demand requires continuous improvement in accommodation, transportation, public services, attractions, and business infrastructure. However, participants also stressed that capital investment must be accompanied by social empowerment. Without opportunities for residents, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and local communities to participate in the tourism economy, increased tourism activity may produce economic concentration rather than inclusive development. Diversification was therefore identified as another central strategy. Although pilgrimage remains Mashhad's dominant tourism function, participants considered the development of recreational, cultural, medical, historical, shopping, and event-based tourism necessary for extending visitor stays, increasing expenditure, reducing seasonality, and connecting tourism with a larger number of local economic activities. Destination marketing was likewise viewed as a mechanism for repositioning Mashhad from a destination associated primarily with pilgrimage toward a multidimensional urban destination. Integrated planning constituted the institutional foundation linking these strategies, because the tourism system involves the municipality, heritage and tourism authorities, transportation agencies, private enterprises, cultural institutions, accommodation providers, and local communities. Participants suggested that fragmented decision making reduces the efficiency of tourism development and intensifies spatial inequalities. Consequently, spatial redistribution, improvement of service quality, and crisis-resilient tourism planning were viewed as complementary strategies for producing a more sustainable, inclusive, and economically productive tourism system.

Table 4*Economic, Social, and Spatial Consequences of Tourism Development in Mashhad*

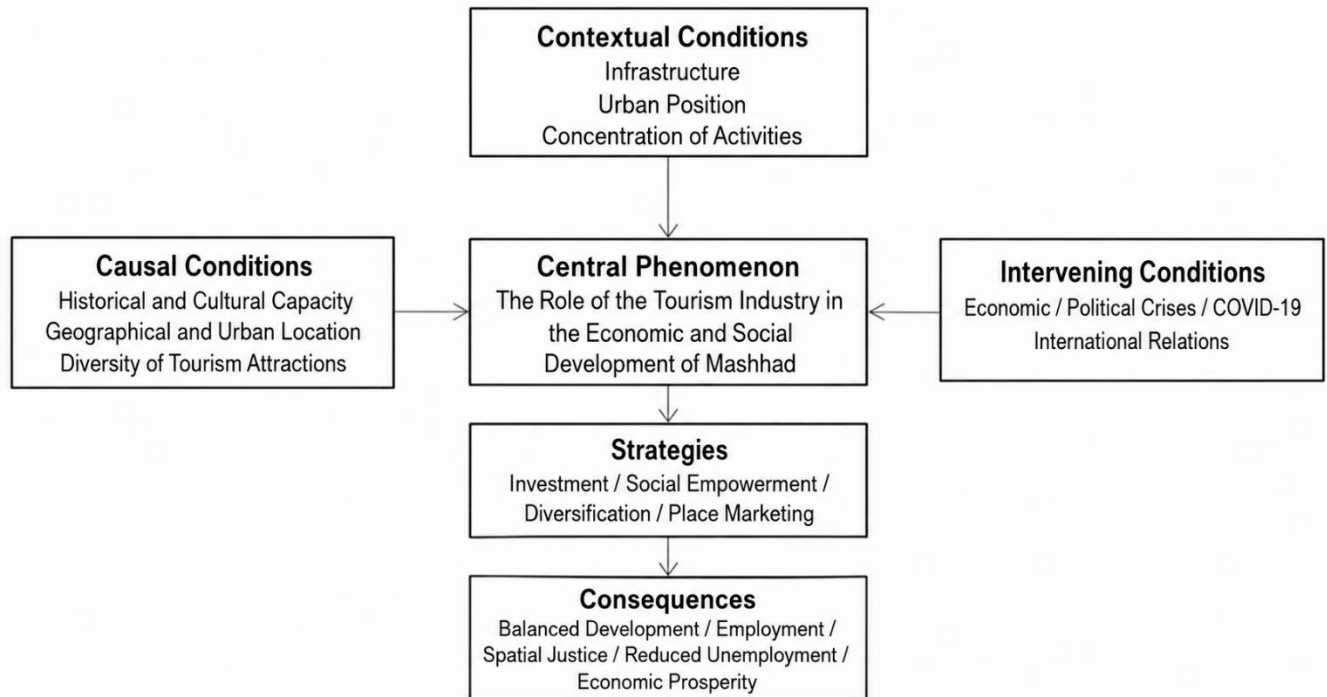
Consequence domain	Main consequence	Manifestation in the urban system	Broader sociological meaning
Economic	Employment creation	Jobs in hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, transportation, retail, tourism services, and related activities	Tourism expands both direct and indirect livelihood opportunities
Economic	Reduction of unemployment	Entry of young people, service workers, entrepreneurs, and small-business owners into tourism-related activities	Tourism can function as an employment-absorption mechanism in the metropolitan economy
Economic	Economic prosperity	Increased turnover, tourist expenditure, private investment, service demand, and urban revenues	Visitor expenditure circulates across multiple interconnected economic sectors
Economic	Entrepreneurship	Creation of small businesses, travel services, handicraft activities, food services, retail, digital tourism services, and local enterprises	Tourism lowers entry barriers for some forms of service entrepreneurship and self-employment
Social	Social interaction	Increased encounters between residents, domestic tourists, pilgrims, and international visitors	Tourism expands intercultural contact and everyday social exchange
Social	Cultural exchange	Transmission of customs, values, experiences, and representations of local identity	Tourism can strengthen cultural awareness while also creating pressures for cultural commercialization
Social	Social empowerment	Participation of residents and local actors in tourism-related initiatives	Tourism contributes to agency and social capital when benefits are participatory rather than concentrated
Social	Quality of urban life	Expansion of public services, transport, recreation, commercial facilities, and public-space improvements	Tourism infrastructure can generate shared benefits for residents when planned inclusively
Spatial	Balanced development	Distribution of tourism investment beyond dominant central zones	Tourism can stimulate development in less-advantaged urban districts
Spatial	Spatial justice	More equitable access to infrastructure, services, employment, and investment	The developmental legitimacy of tourism depends partly on how benefits and costs are geographically distributed
Spatial	Urban regeneration	Improvement of streets, public spaces, tourism corridors, commercial areas, and culturally significant locations	Tourism can contribute to physical renewal and increased attractiveness of urban environments
Institutional	Strengthening urban governance	Greater need for coordination across tourism, transportation, municipal, cultural, and economic institutions	Tourism encourages cross-sector governance but exposes weaknesses in fragmented institutional structures
Institutional	Increased resilience requirements	Need to prepare for economic shocks, health crises, and fluctuations in visitor flows	Dependence on tourism creates both economic opportunities and systemic vulnerability
Cultural	Strengthening destination identity	Greater visibility of Mashhad's religious, historical, and cultural characteristics	Tourism reinforces symbolic identity and the city's position within national and transnational networks

Table 4 shows that the consequences of tourism development extended considerably beyond direct financial gains. Economically, participants identified employment creation, reduced unemployment, greater business turnover, entrepreneurship, investment, and expansion of the service economy as the most visible effects of tourism. Because tourism demand is distributed across accommodation, food services, transportation, retail, cultural activities, and travel services, its economic influence was described as having a multiplier character. The interviews also suggested that tourism creates opportunities for small-scale and self-employed economic actors, although the extent of these benefits depends on access to capital, institutional support, and market conditions. At the social level, tourism was associated with increased interaction among residents and visitors, exposure to different lifestyles and cultural practices, and opportunities for greater participation in tourism-related economic and civic activities. Participants nevertheless emphasized that positive social outcomes are not automatic; excessive commercialization, pressure on public resources, and unequal distribution of benefits can weaken local acceptance of tourism. Spatially, tourism was considered capable of promoting urban regeneration and infrastructure development, but the strong concentration of tourism activities around central pilgrimage districts may reproduce spatial inequality if investment is not extended to other neighborhoods. For this reason, balanced development and spatial justice emerged as important consequences as well as policy objectives. The institutional consequences were similarly dual in nature. Tourism encourages coordination between numerous public and private organizations but also reveals weaknesses in fragmented planning and crisis preparedness. Overall, the findings demonstrate that tourism has the

capacity to serve as a major mechanism of metropolitan development when economic growth is accompanied by social inclusion, spatial redistribution, institutional coordination, and protection of the cultural identity of Mashhad.

Figure 1

Paradigm Model of the Sociological Role of the Tourism Industry in the Economic and Social Development of Mashhad



The final paradigm model illustrates the theoretical integration of the categories generated during open, axial, and selective coding. At the center of the model lies the core phenomenon, namely the role of the tourism industry in the economic and social development of Mashhad. The model indicates that this phenomenon originates in four principal causal conditions: the city's cultural and historical capacities, its geographical and urban position, the availability of tourism infrastructure, and the concentration and diversity of tourism attractions. Mashhad's religious identity, particularly its position as a major pilgrimage destination, establishes a persistent structural demand for tourism, while its metropolitan functions and transportation connections enable this demand to be transformed into extensive flows of people, capital, and services. The central phenomenon operates within contextual conditions consisting primarily of infrastructure, urban position, and the spatial concentration of tourism-related activities. These contextual characteristics determine the capacity of the city to receive visitors and distribute the resulting benefits. At the same time, intervening conditions—including economic crises, political circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic, and international relations—can strengthen or weaken the relationship between tourism capacity and developmental outcomes. Economic instability may reduce visitors' purchasing power and discourage investment, while political and international conditions can influence destination image, international tourist mobility, and the predictability of tourism-related business activity. The model further demonstrates that the effects of these conditions are mediated through strategic responses. Investment provides the financial and infrastructural capacity required for expansion; social empowerment increases the participation of local communities and distributes benefits more broadly; diversification reduces excessive dependence on pilgrimage as a single tourism product; destination marketing strengthens the visibility and competitiveness of Mashhad; and integrated planning coordinates the multiple institutions

involved in the tourism system. When these strategies are effectively implemented, the principal consequences include balanced development, employment creation, spatial justice, reduced unemployment, and economic prosperity. The relationships depicted in the model therefore reveal that tourism is not simply an exogenous source of revenue for Mashhad. It is a sociologically embedded urban process whose developmental effects emerge through the interaction of cultural resources, urban structure, economic conditions, institutional arrangements, social participation, and policy choices. The model consequently explains why the same high volume of tourism can generate different economic and social outcomes depending on the quality of governance, spatial distribution of investment, resilience to external shocks, participation of local communities, and capacity to diversify tourism activities beyond the dominant pilgrimage function.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to provide a sociological explanation of the role of the tourism industry in the economic and social development of Mashhad by integrating causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences within a grounded theoretical framework. The findings showed that tourism in Mashhad should not be interpreted merely as a sector that generates visitor expenditure; rather, it functions as a multidimensional urban process embedded in the city's religious identity, historical resources, metropolitan position, infrastructure, service economy, governance structure, and social relations. The central phenomenon identified in the analysis was the role of tourism as a mechanism capable of influencing employment, economic circulation, entrepreneurship, social interaction, urban services, spatial development, and cultural exchange. This interpretation is consistent with broader research emphasizing that tourism contributes to development through interconnected economic, institutional, infrastructural, and social channels rather than through a single direct pathway [1-3].

One of the major findings was that Mashhad's historical and cultural capacity, geographical and urban location, and diversity of tourism attractions constitute the primary causal conditions underlying tourism-led development. The religious importance of Mashhad, particularly its status as a major pilgrimage destination, creates a relatively continuous flow of visitors and establishes a durable foundation for the city's tourism economy. This finding is consistent with research on religious and halal tourism in Mashhad, which has emphasized the distinctive role of the city's religious identity in shaping tourism demand and destination differentiation [8]. It also aligns with earlier analyses of Mashhad's tourism economy that identified tourism as one of the structural components of the metropolitan economy rather than as an incidental activity [6]. From a sociological standpoint, this finding indicates that the city's symbolic and cultural capital is converted into economic and social opportunities through repeated flows of pilgrims and tourists, the expansion of service activities, and the formation of networks of businesses and institutions that respond to visitor needs.

The findings further indicated that tourism infrastructure constitutes a central contextual condition determining the extent to which tourism resources can be transformed into developmental outcomes. Transportation systems, accommodation facilities, urban services, information infrastructure, commercial facilities, and accessibility were all identified as essential to the functioning of the tourism system. This result is strongly supported by Zhao et al., who emphasized the role of infrastructure investment in stimulating tourism development by improving accessibility and the capacity of destinations to accommodate tourism demand [3]. The importance of infrastructure is also reflected in research on the feasibility of smart tourism in Mashhad, which showed that technological and infrastructural requirements are fundamental to the development

of a more efficient and competitive tourism destination [15]. More recent findings concerning smart tourism destination management in Mashhad similarly demonstrate that technological infrastructure must be accompanied by managerial capacity and institutional coordination [16]. Therefore, the present findings extend previous studies by showing that infrastructure should be understood not only as a physical support system but also as a sociotechnical and institutional condition shaping accessibility, service quality, investment, and the distribution of tourism benefits.

Another significant finding concerned the spatial concentration of tourism activities. Participants emphasized that the clustering of tourism services around major pilgrimage and central urban areas creates both economic advantages and developmental challenges. On the one hand, concentration facilitates access to accommodation, retail, transportation, religious services, and visitor-oriented businesses. On the other hand, it can intensify congestion, uneven investment, pressure on public services, and spatial disparities between central and peripheral districts. This finding is compatible with research demonstrating that urban development plans in Mashhad may place pressure on valuable historical and cultural spaces, particularly where modernization and tourism-related expansion are not balanced with heritage preservation [24]. It also complements the regional development perspective advanced by Rasouli et al., who emphasized that tourism can contribute to territorial development only when resources and benefits are distributed in ways that support broader regional capacities [1]. The current study therefore suggests that the developmental value of tourism in Mashhad depends not only on the magnitude of tourism activity but also on its spatial organization and the degree to which investment and services are distributed across the urban system.

The intervening conditions identified in the study included economic crises, political circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic, and international relations. These conditions were perceived as capable of either facilitating or constraining the developmental role of tourism. The effect of economic crises is particularly important because tourism demand is sensitive to household purchasing power, travel costs, inflation, business operating expenses, and investor confidence. This result is supported by Sajasi Qeidari et al., who examined the impact of economic sanctions on tourism growth in Mashhad and demonstrated that macroeconomic constraints can significantly influence the performance of the tourism sector [14]. The results also correspond with scenario-based research on the future of sports tourism in Mashhad, which emphasized uncertainty and the importance of preparedness for changing external conditions [13]. The sociological implication is that tourism-dependent livelihoods are exposed to broader political-economic structures beyond the control of individual businesses or local communities. Consequently, urban tourism policy should incorporate resilience and crisis-management mechanisms rather than assuming continuous growth in visitor flows.

The COVID-19 pandemic was identified as an especially influential intervening condition because it exposed the vulnerability of tourism-dependent businesses and employment. Although the pandemic was a temporary shock, its effects demonstrated how strongly the urban tourism economy depends on mobility and face-to-face service provision. Hotels, travel agencies, transport services, restaurants, retailers, and other tourism-related enterprises experienced considerable disruption when visitor flows declined. This finding reinforces the importance of diversification and crisis preparedness, which also emerged as strategic priorities in the present study. The broader literature on sustainable tourism similarly suggests that resilience should be integrated into development planning because excessive dependence on a single market or form of tourism can increase socioeconomic vulnerability [4, 5]. In Mashhad, where pilgrimage constitutes the dominant tourism

motivation, diversification into health, cultural, recreational, sports, shopping, and event tourism may therefore reduce the risks associated with dependence on one primary tourism segment.

Diversification emerged as one of the most important strategies identified by participants. Although pilgrimage tourism remains the core of Mashhad's destination identity, the findings indicated that long-term economic development requires the expansion of complementary tourism products. Health tourism was particularly important in this regard. Previous studies in Mashhad have demonstrated that health tourism has substantial potential but depends on effective service marketing, destination branding, digital communication, and institutional coordination [17, 19, 20]. Research using Porter's Diamond Model has similarly emphasized that the competitiveness of Mashhad's medical tourism sector is influenced by supporting industries, service conditions, organizational structures, and broader destination factors [18]. Studies of medical tourism development in hospital settings have likewise shown that organizational, infrastructural, and managerial factors must be coordinated if health tourism is to become a sustainable development pathway [21]. These findings support the present result that diversification is not merely the creation of additional attractions; it requires institutional capacity, service quality, marketing, and integrated destination management.

The findings also demonstrated that destination marketing and branding are strategic mechanisms for increasing the economic and social contribution of tourism. Participants viewed place marketing as essential for communicating Mashhad's broader tourism potential beyond its pilgrimage identity. This is consistent with research on health-tourism branding in Mashhad, which highlighted the importance of systematic branding indicators in strengthening destination competitiveness [20]. Digital marketing has also been shown to increase awareness among medical tourists, demonstrating that communication strategies can directly influence destination visibility and tourist decision making [17]. In addition, word-of-mouth communication has been identified as an influential mechanism in the development of health tourism, reinforcing the importance of visitor experience, trust, and reputation [22]. The present study therefore suggests that effective place marketing should be integrated with service quality and destination experience rather than treated as a purely promotional activity. A strong tourism image is sustainable only when it reflects actual service performance and diversified visitor opportunities.

Investment was another major strategy identified in the grounded model. Participants emphasized that tourism-related infrastructure, hotels, transportation, public spaces, digital services, and complementary attractions require sustained public and private investment. This result is supported by research on innovative business models in Mashhad's tourism sector, which emphasizes value creation as a key element of destination competitiveness and business sustainability [11]. Research on hotel brand survival in Mashhad similarly indicates that the continued development of the tourism industry depends on the competitiveness and adaptability of tourism enterprises [10]. Strategic planning research on tourism service businesses in Mashhad has also highlighted the importance of recognizing investment opportunities and environmental threats when developing the sector [12]. Together, these studies support the present finding that investment must be targeted strategically rather than simply expanded quantitatively. Investment decisions should improve service quality, diversify attractions, distribute economic opportunities spatially, and enhance the resilience of tourism businesses.

A particularly important sociological finding was the role of social empowerment. Participants stressed that tourism development should not be evaluated solely through aggregate economic indicators but also through the degree to which local residents are able to participate in and benefit from tourism activity. Social empowerment includes local

entrepreneurship, skills development, participation in planning, access to employment, and opportunities for small businesses. This result is compatible with the stakeholder-oriented perspective presented in research on religious tourism in Mashhad, which has shown that tourism development involves multiple actors with different levels of influence and interest [23]. It is also aligned with general tourism management approaches emphasizing the role of local communities and institutional coordination in sustainable destination development [7]. The present findings indicate that without mechanisms for local participation, tourism may generate economic growth without producing inclusive social development. Conversely, when residents participate in decision making and economic activity, tourism can strengthen social capital and improve the legitimacy of development policies.

Integrated planning also emerged as a central strategy. Participants described tourism governance in Mashhad as requiring cooperation among municipal authorities, tourism organizations, cultural and religious institutions, private businesses, transport agencies, health-service providers, accommodation enterprises, and local communities. This result is consistent with Seddiqi's emphasis on governance, ethical education, laws, and regulations in the sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism [9]. It also corresponds with the challenges identified in smart tourism destination management, where fragmented governance and inadequate coordination can weaken the implementation of technological and managerial innovations [16]. The findings therefore demonstrate that tourism development is fundamentally a governance issue. Because tourism affects land use, public services, heritage, transportation, employment, investment, and social relations simultaneously, fragmented decision making can undermine the capacity of tourism to produce balanced outcomes.

The principal consequences identified in the study included employment creation, reduced unemployment, economic prosperity, balanced development, and spatial justice. Participants viewed employment as one of the most immediate benefits of tourism because visitor demand supports a wide range of occupations across accommodation, transportation, retail, food services, travel agencies, cultural services, and related sectors. This is consistent with earlier economic analyses of tourism in Mashhad that highlighted the sector's role in the metropolitan economy [6]. The findings also correspond with studies emphasizing that investment, infrastructure, and tourism resources can stimulate broader economic development [1, 3]. However, the present study adds an important sociological dimension by showing that employment outcomes must be considered alongside the quality, stability, and spatial distribution of jobs. Tourism employment may contribute to social development when it offers sustainable livelihoods and access for local residents, but it may have weaker developmental effects when employment is seasonal, insecure, or highly concentrated.

Economic prosperity was likewise interpreted as a multidimensional outcome. Participants associated tourism with increased local spending, business turnover, entrepreneurship, investment, and the circulation of money across multiple sectors. The findings therefore support the idea of a tourism multiplier effect, whereby visitor expenditure extends beyond tourism-specific businesses and influences other components of the urban economy. This is broadly consistent with research highlighting the economic role of tourism in Mashhad [6] and with more recent international studies showing that tourism development can be strengthened through infrastructure investment, digital governance, and effective utilization of destination resources [2, 3]. Nevertheless, the current findings indicate that economic prosperity becomes socially meaningful only when it is translated into wider employment opportunities, improved services, local entrepreneurship, and equitable urban investment.

Spatial justice and balanced development were among the most conceptually important consequences identified in the study. Participants emphasized that tourism should contribute to the improvement of different parts of Mashhad rather than reinforcing the concentration of investment in established central tourism zones. This perspective is consistent with regional development approaches that view tourism as a potential mechanism for distributing economic opportunities across territories [1]. It is also supported indirectly by research demonstrating the tensions between tourism-oriented urban development and the preservation of valuable urban places in Mashhad [24]. The findings therefore suggest that tourism policy should incorporate an explicit spatial dimension. The distribution of accommodation facilities, recreational attractions, transport infrastructure, public spaces, and commercial opportunities can shape who benefits from tourism and which neighborhoods experience developmental improvement.

The findings also revealed a broader relationship between tourism and social-cultural development. Tourism increases interactions among residents, domestic visitors, pilgrims, and international tourists and can therefore create opportunities for cultural exchange, social learning, and greater urban vitality. At the same time, unmanaged tourism growth may generate pressures on local identity and everyday life. Sustainable development consequently requires the preservation of cultural meaning alongside commercialization. This observation is compatible with work on religious tourism and governance, which emphasizes the need to balance tourism development with ethical and cultural considerations [8, 9]. It also corresponds with sustainable tourism research showing that development outcomes are more durable when economic activity is integrated with environmental and community considerations [4, 5]. Overall, the present study supports a sociological interpretation of tourism as a field in which economic development, cultural identity, governance, social participation, and spatial organization are continuously negotiated.

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative design and purposive selection of 15 participants were appropriate for grounded theory development but do not permit statistical generalization to all tourism stakeholders or residents of Mashhad. The findings reflect the experiences and interpretations of knowledgeable actors from tourism-related sectors, and other groups, such as ordinary residents, informal workers, pilgrims, foreign tourists, small neighborhood businesses, and vulnerable communities, may hold different perspectives. Second, the study was conducted within the specific institutional, cultural, and economic context of Mashhad, which has a distinctive pilgrimage-based tourism structure; therefore, the resulting model may require adaptation before being applied to destinations with substantially different tourism profiles. Third, the study relied primarily on interview data and did not integrate longitudinal economic indicators, spatial data, tourist surveys, or direct observational evidence. Finally, tourism development is highly sensitive to rapidly changing economic, political, technological, and geopolitical conditions, meaning that some relationships identified in the model may evolve over time.

Future research should test and extend the proposed model using both qualitative and quantitative designs. Quantitative studies could operationalize the major categories identified in this research and examine the strength of relationships among causal conditions, contextual conditions, strategies, and developmental consequences using structural equation modeling or multilevel analysis. Comparative studies across Iranian pilgrimage cities and other religious tourism destinations could determine which elements of the model are context-specific and which are transferable. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for investigating how tourism employment, business development, spatial inequality, and resident attitudes change over time and in response to economic or political shocks. Future studies should also include broader

stakeholder groups, especially residents of peripheral districts, informal workers, women entrepreneurs, young people, tourists, and small-business owners. Spatial analysis using GIS could examine whether tourism investment and infrastructure are distributed equitably across Mashhad, while mixed-method studies could combine economic indicators with qualitative accounts to produce a more comprehensive assessment of tourism-led development.

From a practical perspective, tourism policymakers in Mashhad should adopt an integrated development strategy that simultaneously addresses infrastructure, economic diversification, local participation, spatial equity, destination marketing, and crisis resilience. Investment should be directed not only toward the central pilgrimage zone but also toward peripheral areas capable of supporting cultural, recreational, medical, sports, and neighborhood-based tourism. Municipal and tourism authorities should strengthen coordination with private businesses, transport organizations, cultural institutions, health-service providers, and local communities in order to reduce fragmented decision making. Skills development and entrepreneurship programs should be expanded so that local residents can participate more effectively in the tourism economy, particularly through small and medium-sized enterprises. Greater attention should also be given to digital tourism services, destination information systems, service-quality standards, and evidence-based branding. Finally, tourism development plans should incorporate mechanisms for monitoring employment quality, local economic benefits, spatial distribution of investment, pressure on public services, and cultural impacts so that economic growth is accompanied by social inclusion and balanced urban development.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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