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Factors Influencing Tourism Space Commodification in the Mahmoudabad County, Northern Iran

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Abstract

This study examined the impacts of land-use changes as well as factors that influence tourism space commodification in Mahmoudabad County, Northern Iran. Satellite images were used to identify agricultural land-use changes while empirical data were collected from 379 local people who were randomly sampled with their views, gathered via a reliable, structured questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics as well as the practical application of the Irridex, Tourism Area Life Cycle, and Weizenegger theoretical models. The satellite images showed massive land-use changes in agricultural lands to tourism facilities. Internal factors such as economic, environmental, and socio-cultural factors as well as external factors such as the influence of the political economy in the areas of the banking system, tax system, and government policies were noted to exacerbate tourism space commodification in the Mahmoudabad County, Northern Iran. To mitigate the increasing tourism space commodification in the study area, policymakers in government, as well as all concerned stakeholders in the tourism sector, must factor the local people into all tourism-related decision-making processes while adopting proactive ways such as tactfully using the tax system, policies forimproving agricultural production, and clear-cut tourism directives that prioritize cultural and environmental consciousness.

Keywords

Environmental factors, Political economy, Socio-cultural factors, Space commodification, Tourism, Mahmoudabad County

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Introduction

The tourism sector has been one of the fastest-growing industries globally and directly contributed 2.9 trillion US dollars to GDP in 2019 (Lock, 2020). Tourism creates one out of every eleven jobs and accounts for a 10 percent share of all global GDP (UNWTO, 2015). The growth of international tourism that flows to developing economies is expected to be increased up to 4.4 percent annually (World Bank, 2016). Tourism's phenomenal growth continues to attract the attention of national as well as local governments since they see this sector as an avenue through which to meet their aims of enhancing public funds and creating stronger fiscal systems (Cárdenas-García, Sánchez-Rivero, & Pulido-Fernández, 2015). More physical investments, such as highways, airports, and convention centers, as well as investment incentives, such as land allocation and tax returns, have appeared in government master plans to facilitate tourism development in recent years (Okumus et al., 2012). Thus, the tourism space is commodified (Prodnik, 2012) or continuously produced and reproduced to maximize economic profits. In this process, the socio-cultural and ecological dimensions of space are often neglected. Central governments and lobbyists of rentier groups commonly tend to overemphasize tourism's potential economic benefits while underestimating the environmental and socio-cultural impacts (Cetin et al., 2017). Indeed, controls relating to agricultural land-use changes, forests degradation, the increased number of second homes, the increase in property prices, local inflation, and socio-cultural dualism are imposed only when these are understood as the crisis that has emerged in tourism spaces (Ghazoul, & Chazdon, 2017; Gallent, & Tewdwr-Jones, 2018; Roberts, Hall, & Morag, 2017; Shalaby, & Tateishi, 2007). This situation means it is extremely difficult to implement solutions for the spacecommodification process in many destinations, especially in developing countries. Mouhamadou (2018) noted a similar condition in his study at the Saly small coast in Senegal, that tourism is at its stagnation phase, and thus recommended the re-qualification of the typology of the tourism space in the region. Both internal and external factors affect the commodification of the tourism space. The internal factors of the space commodification process in the capitalist system are related to the essence and internal mechanism of the capitalist mode of production. These include the quantification and abstraction of time and space, the commodification of social relations, the commercialization of the natural environment resources, the capitalist ontology, and epistemology in relation to space, and the requirements of capital spatial flows (Harvey, 2016; Martineau, 2012; Marx, 1973). The external factors of space commodification are affected by state policies, banking, and tax systems. This process methodologically can vary from region to region and from country to country (Harvey, 2012). Political economy conditions as an external factor can prevent the space commodification process or conversely intensify it (Smith, 2008). Furthermore, the tourism space in an unequal political economy can be a means of

production and a commodity (Harvey, 2010). The unlimited capital growth cycle and capital accumulation, the lack of state constraints in non-productive sectors, and the inefficiencies and weaknesses of the banking and tax system will ultimately lead to dramatic changes in tourism spaces (Adom, 2019; Bianchi, 2018; Piketty, 2014, 2015; Thanvisitthpon, 2015). These factors will be dominated in tourism destinations where states donot apply spatial limitations and restrictions regardingthe capital cycle in tourism spaces. Local spaces are a connected part of the locals' identity and existence and belong to them. With the commodification of space, locals feel like they are living in "nowhere" and many issues are expected to emerge in the future and the long term.

The villages of Mahmoudabad have many attractions for tourists due to its appropriate climatic characteristics, vegetation, the variety of animal life, flora species, adequate water and soil resources, special cultural characteristics, and beautiful landscapes, such as seas, mountains, and jungles. There is growing frustration with local inhabitants concerning tourism's negative effects on local resources. Uncoordinated tourism growth leads to several adverse impacts that reduce the quality of life. These effects include increased population, inflation, air and water pollution, congestion, crime, cultural conflicts, and social change (Mihalič, 2000). The growth and expansion of tourism and spatial ramifications have been striking in the rural areas of Mahmoudabad and have beena cause of concern for the locals, especially in recent years. Thus, this study sought to investigate the tourism commodification of space in the region. Previous studies have highlighted one or two factors that affect tourism space commodification either positively or negatively. This study investigated all the potential internal and external factors that affect the tourism space commodification in Mahmoudabad County in Iran. This is the first study that attempts to study the tourism space commodification in the study area by considering the extent to which the various internal and external factors affect the tourism space commodification in the Mahmoudabad County in Iran. The research questions that were pivotal inthe study were:

1. What are the land-use changes in Mahmoudabad County, Iran, and their impacts on tourism space commodification?

2. What are the internal and external factors that affect tourism space commodification in Mahmoudabad County in Iran?

The Concept of Tourism Development

Everything unlimited is therefore meaningless (Hegel, 2015). Human spatiality is a limitation for creating a meaningful place to live. We don't just exist in space, but we exist spatially and our existence is spatial. In other words, our existence depends

on our spatiality. wWhen we are talking about humans, indeed, we are talking about human spatiality as well (Malpas, 2000; 2007; 2008). Space provides the best opportunity to form a sustainable and deep social relationship over time (Norberg-Schulz, 1971; Relph, 1976). The temporality and sociality of human beings depend on space. Spaces and places find their meaning with human social activities during concrete times, activities, accidents, and events, and human beings conversely find their meaning by place and space (Heidegger, 2001). However, in the capitalist mode of production, space is continuously produced and reproduced to gain more profits in the market.In other words, such spaces are produced through abstract amounts of time, such as a week, a month, or a year and they are not only caused by social relations but also by the social relations that have already been abstracted. This process can lead to disruption from history, culture, linearization of human nature, individual mechanical relationships, feelings of absurdity, emptiness, individual and social alienation, and many social, psychological, and cultural issues (Karakaya, 2014; Lefebvre, 1991; Yilmaz-Saygin, 2006). This mere economic rationality is the starting point of space commodification (Peck, 2005). The nature and requirements of the unlimited capital growth cycle and the ontology and epistemology of the capitalist mode of production in relation to space ultimately lead to the commodification of place and space (Wilson, 2013). In the capitalist ontology, space is reduced to constructions or places to attract the overflow of metropolitan populations (Sabatini, 2003). Moreover, the lack of historical culture and collective memories in commoditized places followed by the priority of financial issues and economic justifications have been caused by the issues of identity and epistemological dualism (Fitchett, 1997). The reduction of the space as a hollow container (Newtonian space) can neglect the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions of space (Devine, 2017; Harvey, 1982, 1990; Lefebvre, 2004; McDowell, 2018). Devine (2017) contends that rising social ills are a result of the degradation of local cultures and social relationships fuelled by tourists.

The tourism industry has witnessed dramatic growth in many parts of the world,even though there is a growing understanding that it often causes adverse environmental and social impacts on destinations (Su & Swanson, 2017). Too often, the emphasis continues to be on expanding visitor volume rather than adding value for its stakeholders. Even in Iceland, which is an advanced country that embraces many concepts of green living, there has been a dramatic growth of visitor arrivals in recent years (Cetin et al, 2017). In 2016, there were a reported 1.7 million international tourists although the country's total population was only 330,000 (BBC, 2017). Thus, the industry's ability and motivation to attain sustainability principles are questionable. Tourism makes heavy use of free-shared resources such as nature and the sustainable management of these resources costs money. In fact, in the absence of financial support, it is hard to achieve sustainability (Hughes, 1995). According to Burns and Holden (1995), both tourists and the industry that serves them should

bear the costs to maintain the environment. The authors argued that just like foreign companies being charged for extracting oil, foreign tourists should also be charged for the benefits they derive from the use of common goods and public services at a destination (Cetin et al, 2017).

Several tourism scholars have studied the interactions between tourists and the local people (Adom, 2019; Boniface, Cooper, & Cooper, 2016; Freire, 2009; Hviding & Bayliss-Smith, 2018; Nam, Kim,& Hwang, 2016). However, a majority of studies examined their relationships from the residents' perspective (Eusébio, Vieira, &Lima, 2018; Mason, 2015; Rivera, Croes, &Lee 2016). Despite the great relevance of these studies, there is still the need to fill the research gap on how to prevent destination tourism space commodification in the often unequal political economies of developing countries. Mapping up strategies to avert the unbridled tourism space commodification should be a moral right for all stakeholders in the tourism industry (Prince, 2017).

Tourism Commodification of Space

The socio-cultural, economic, and environmental costs brought by the exponential growth of tourism have elevated the debate on tourism space commodification, especially in coastal areas (Cavallaro, Galati, & Nocera, 2017). Tourism space commodification is understood as the extreme use of natural resources in such a way that threatens the well-being of both the current generation and future generations (Sedighi, 2016). The economic aspect of tourism space commodification conversely refers to an overemphasizing in relation to increasing investment, income, and jobs created in a short time in destination areas (Mowforth & Munt, 2015; Roudi, Arasli, & Akadiri, 2018)There is a decline in total welfare functions such as tourist property and real estate demands that cause land values and house prices to go up, increase rent, reduce local youth purchase power, increase local product prices, increase living costs, and increase building material costs (Diedrich & Aswani, 2016;Isik, Dogru, & Turk, 2018). The resources that tourists use are the most common resources, which are also consumed by the locals. The tragedy of the commons, according to Hardin (1968), is that these resources will inevitably be destroyed, because no one is assigned to monitor and control their usages, such as culture, scenery, and air, even though they are used by many in a manner that exceeds their limits to regenerate and be restored. It can be argued that if tourism is to merit beinglabelledaspart of the hospitality industry, it must look beyond its customers and carefully consider the environmental, social, and cultural impacts it is creating on the host community at large. There is a saturation level for tourism in any given locality or region. If that level exceeds the costs of tourism, it begins to outweigh the benefits (Young, 1973). For example, Doxey (1975) explains how irritated locals can become if their tolerance levels are exceeded. After a certain level of tourism activity, the locals start to compete with tourists for

resources, such as space, water, parking, litter, sewage, transportation, visiting and shopping lines, or even for a favorite spot to view the scenery (Young, 1973). In his popular Doxey Index (Figure 1), he posits that local people are enthusiastic about tourism development in their region (level of euphoria). However, when the tourism industry expands and becomes an all-profit making venture, apathy towards tourists by the residents' sets in (Level of Apathy). Thus, it reaches a saturation point where local people are incensed at tourists for compromising their environment, culture, etc. due to the expansions of tourism facilities (Level of Irritation). This is aggravated to the point where animosity toward tourists reaches the level of antagonism where, for instance, tourists are blamed for the high taxes, etc. This situation is worse when the destination landmass is not large enough to cater for the expansions of tourism facilities (Szromek et al., 2020). One way that destinations seek to combat the socio-cultural and environmental costs arising from tourism development is through the imposition of direct local corrective taxes. This includes empty properties tax, capital gains taxes on the real estate tax, lodging tax, car rental tax, entrance fees, and visa fees, or indirect local corrective taxes, such as sales tax and VAT (Cetin et al., 2017). In many destinations, tourists already pay some general direct and indirect taxes, such as sales tax/VAT, and the tourism industry contributes to the government fiscal budget through income tax. General sales taxes collected from tourism represent more than 10 percent of tax receipts for most developing countries. For example, Cetin (2014) found that 35 percent of tourist spending in Turkey goes to the central government in the form of tax revenues. This figure is even more striking for smaller tourist economies, such as Hawaii (Shareef & McAleer, 2005). This correlates with Weizenegger's model that suggested the imposition of high taxes to tourism operators if limits of tourism traffic exceed the region's capacity (Weizenegger, 2006). Another strategy is suggested in the Szromek et al. (2020) study of the attitudes of tourist destination residents toward the effect of overtourism in Krakow in Poland. Their findings showed that the introduction of limits on tourist numbers could avert the negative effects of tourism (overtourism). These approaches when implemented in tourism destinations would lead to sustainable tourism Butler illustrates in the first three stages of his popular Tourism Area Life Cycle of Evolution (TALC), which are levels of exploration, involvement, and development (Butler, 1980). In these three phases, sustainable tourism is judged by the development and maintenance of a tourism destination in efficient ways such that though it might be profitable, it does not result in land-use changes and erosion of the rich cultural and place identities of the local communities (Adom, 2019; Szromek et al., 2020).

Epistemological dualism and monetarily relationships between tourists and local people can be a key element in the commodification of the social aspect of a destination space that can also influence local people's inner relationships. In particular, a commoditized relationship between these two parties is a crucial factor for

the development of tourismspace commodification. The foregoing discussion shows the need for a study that would adopt a comprehensive approach to tourism activities in relation to space commodification. The majority of the research emphasized one aspect of space, but in this paper, we tried to consider all aspects of local space to understand how tourism activities and infrastructures in the lack of an appropriate political-economic system can lead to local tourism space commodification. One of the other limitations of existing research concerns neglecting the political economy concept and the importance of banking, tax, and insurance systems to prevent tourism space commodification or intensifying the commodification process, land-use change, and space privatization. In this paper, we investigated both internal and external factors that influence space commodification in tourism development in Mahmoudabad County in Iran. A key theme for tourism space commodification which is an external factor is the political economy of tourism space. As such, there is a clear distinction between an unbalanced and an unequal political economy and a balanced political economy, because the former situates the locals in a different spatial context from the latter. External factors such as an unlimited capital growth cycle, also determines space commodification. We conceptualize that tourism space commodification is the result of both internal and external factors in tourism spaces and the inherent relationships between the political economy and tourism activities within the spatial system in totality (Figure 2).

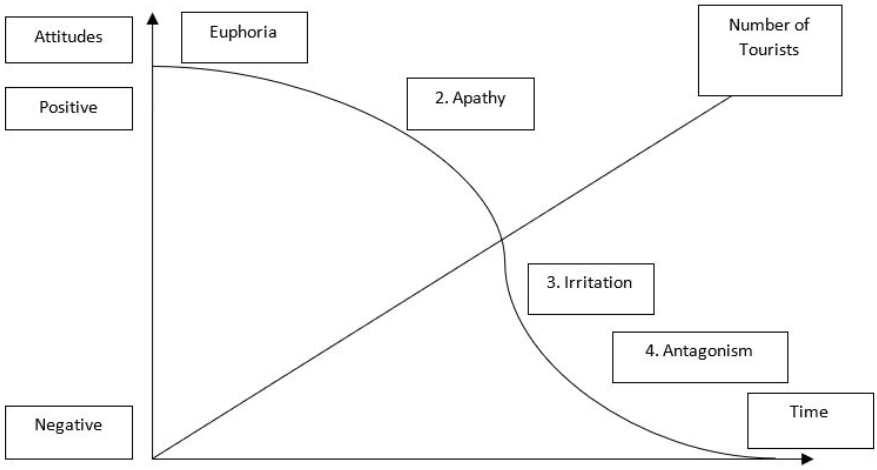

Figure 1. Irridex Model (Source: Doxey, 1975)

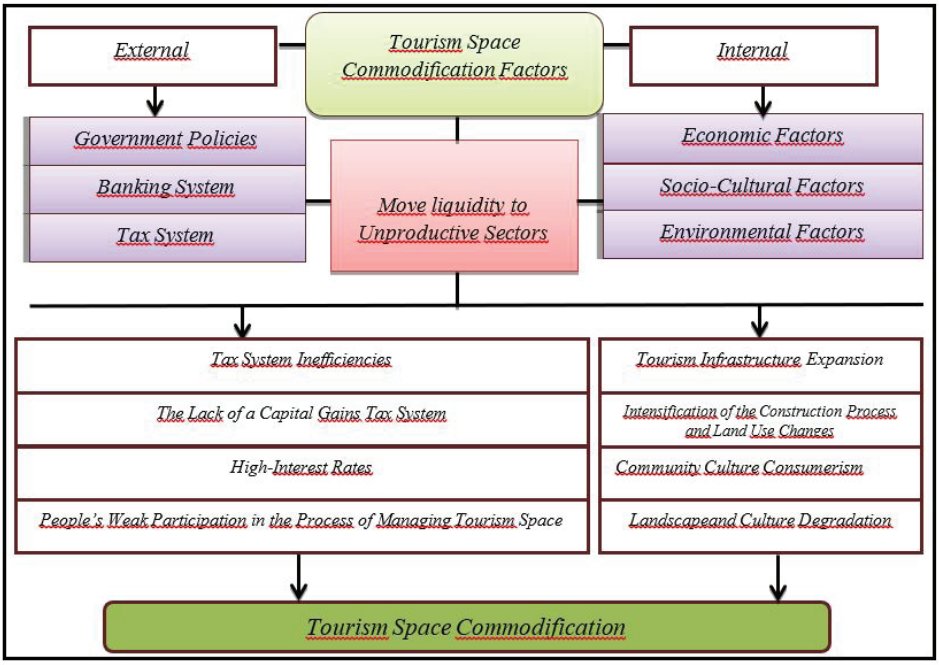

Figure 2. The Conceptual Framework of Tourism Space Commodification
(Source: Authors' Construct, 2019)

Methodology

Study Area

Mazandaran Province is one of the most densely populated provinces in Iran, and it has diverse natural resources, such as large reservoirs of oil and natural gas. The diverse nature within the province features plains, prairies, forests, and rainforests that stretch from the sandy beaches of the Caspian Sea to the rugged and snowcapped Alborzsierra, which includes Mount Damavand. It is one of the highest peaks and largest volcanos in Asia.Mazandaran is a major producer of farmed fish, and aquaculture provides an important economic addition to the traditional dominance of agriculture. The province covers an area of 23,842 km². Sari is the capital city of the province. Mazandaran is divided into 15 counties (Shahrestan in Persian). All the Shahrestans are named after their administrative center except for the Savadkooh (MASJED, 2014). The Mazandaran province is geographically divided into two parts - coastal plains and mountainous areas. The Alborz Mountain Range surrounds the coastal strip and the plains of the Caspian Sea. Due to a permanent sea breeze and the local winds of the southern and eastern coasts of the Caspian Sea, sandy hills were formed, which caused the appearance of a low natural barrier between the sea and

the plain. There are often snowfalls in the Alborz regions, which run parallel to the Caspian Sea's southern coast, and it divides the province into many isolated valleys. Mahmoudabad County is a county in the Mazandaran Province in Iran. The capital of the county is Mahmoudabad city. In the 2016 census, the county's population was 90,054 with 24,135 families (Census of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2016). The county is subdivided into two districts - the Central District and the Sorkhrud District. The county has two cities, Mahmoudabad and Sorkhrud (Figure3).

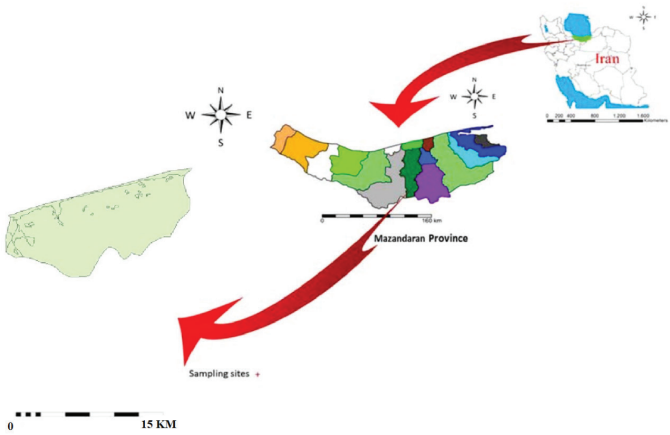

Figure 3. Study Area in Mazandaran Province, Northern Iran

Recently, many tourists have visited Mahmoudabad County. More than 10 million local and international tourists came to Mazandaran province in just 13 days of Iranian national days in 2019 (Executive Secretary of Mazandaran Travel Services Staff, 2020). This is about four times the Mazandaran province population. This may be as a result of the strategic and central location of the Mahmoudabad County, as well as the low rates of rent, land, and housing in the region.[1]

Several traditional events attract tourists to the region. For instance, in mid-summer, the Tirgan festival, as well as the Varf Chal traditional ceremony, are commemorated, where traditional food is served and traditional rituals associated with water, such as the tying of rainbow-colored bands on the wrists, recitations, etc. are performed (Iran Tourism and Touring Organization, 2020). There are more than 800 historical and cultural sites with several interesting natural landscapes such as mountains, caves, and water bodies as well as religious monuments (Mirzaei, 2013). Meanwhile, there is no kind of tax system in this area, and this problem makes Mahmoudabad a haven for second homes and speculative activities. Also, the region is affected by Iran's banking system has the highest interest rates in Asia. Productive sectors, especially

1 Iranian Rial officially is the lowest currency in the world

farmers, are suppressed by Iran's banking system for two reasons. First, the large of money created inIran's banks has led to superfluous liquidity. The second is the high inflation there, which has reduced the people's purchasing power and increased the cost of living. Finally, farmers will be inclined to sell their land and get the money they need in this situation (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Land-Use Changes and Coastal Privatization in the Study Area
(Source: Photographed by the Authors)

Materials and Methods

The research method applied in this study was descriptive-analytical in analyzing the economic and social variables affecting land-use changes and how these factors affect tourism space commodification. This research method was appropriate because of the study's aim of describing the causal relationship (Loeb et al., 2017) between the internal and external factors affecting tourism space commodification in the study area while analyzing them closely to shed light on how the variables contribute to tourism development in Mahmoudabad County, Iran. The people that were selected and theirrationale were completely random to give an equal chance to all Mahmoudabad citizens (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Fraenkel et al., 2012). For the appropriate and fair distribution of the 405 respondents, the population of each settlement was first identified. Second, each settlement's share of the total population was calculated. A quantitative questionnaire was designed to garner the data for the study. The questionnaire was initially checked by an experienced researcher in tourism studies, after which it was pilot tested on a small section of the sample before the final administration for the full-scale study. This was to enhance the validity of the data collection instrument. Though 405 copies of the questionnaire were administered, 379 copies were finally received and used for the analysis of the data. SPSS software was employed in analyzing the data from the questionnaire administered based on a 5-point Likert scale.

Also, to assist in describing the land-use changes in Mahmoudabad County, Iran from 1978-2015, and their impacts on tourism space commodification, satellite images from Landsat 8, 7, TM, and MSS were used. Finally, ENVI software and a supervised classification method of maximum likelihood were used to provide the classification map (GIS) for each use. Geometric corrections and geo-referencing of the images were conductedusing vector maps of the aerial photos. Re-sampling was conducted using the nearest neighbor interpolation method. Radiometric correction of the images was performed on the images to reconstruct the phenomena and to enhance thequality of the images as well as to remove the unfavorable effects of light and the atmosphere. Evaluation of the histogram of the spectral bands was based on different features, such as color, tone, texture, shape, and size of the image. Then, using different algorithms of image processing, the classes were separated from each other in different steps using a support vector machine or the supervised classification method. Finally, five classes of lands that included residential and industrial lands, agriculture lands, arid and desert lands, playa, saline soils, and mountainous areas were recognized. An informed consent form was given and/or explained to participants that explained the voluntary nature of the study and their right to quit as a participant as and when they wanted. It explained the rationale of the study and the confidentiality of their personal information and views expressed in the study (Bailey, 1996).

Results and Discussion

To investigate the effective factors that influence the tourism space commodification process, the descriptive characteristics of the respondents were examined. Second, the role of internal factors, such as economic, socio-cultural, and environmental aspects of tourism, and external factors, such as state policies, banking, and the tax system were determined using descriptive means and standard deviation tests.

Descriptive Profile of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents indicated that 95 percent were male with the remaining 5 percent beingfemale. Also, 36.9 percent of the respondents had less than a high school diploma, 45.8 percent obtained an associate's degree, 14 percent had a bachelor's degree, and 3.3 percent had a graduate degree. In terms of employment, about 90 percent of the respondents work as farmers in rice cultivation, and the remaining 10 percent were shopkeepers, housewives, taxi drivers, and teachers. The mean age of the respondents was approximately46 years old.

Table 1
Descriptive Profile of Respondents

Variable	n	Percentage
Gender		
Male	350	95
Female	19	5
Monthly household income		
US$801 and over	30	8
US$701-US$800	55	15
US$601-US$700	70	19
US$501-US$600	74	20
US$401-US$500	77	21
US$301-US$400	59	16
Under US$300	4	1
Maritalstatus		
Single	12	3.2
Married	357	96.8
Education level		
Less than a High school diploma	136	36.9
Associate's degree	169	45.8
Bachelor's degree	52	14
Graduate degree	12	3.3
Mean age = 46.6years old		

Land-Use Changes in the Study Area

Based on the satellite data from Landsat 8, 7, TM, and MSS at Mahmoudabad County, we noticed that the forestlands decreased from 38 percent in 1978 to 3 percent in 2015, and the residential land-use increased from 6 percent to 18 percent

(Figure 5). The findings revealed that the process of Mahmoudabad land-use changes began in recent years, and the big changes occurred after1988 (Figure 6). This implies that gradually, the tourism space in Mahmoudabad County is being commoditized. Similar to the findings of Mouhamadou (2018) who noted that the massive land-use changes in the Saly small coast in Senegal hadresulted in the stagnation of tourism, the same can be said of the state of tourism in the Mahmoudabad County. Our land-use changes align with other land-use change studies in the different provinces in Iran. For instance, Alizadeh Fardet al. (2013) analyzed Mazandaran land-use changes using the Land Change Modeler from 1998 to 2011. The results showed a rich array of changes in the forests, residential land, and agricultural land. The forests have decreased by 33,487 hectares, and the residential and agricultural lands have increased by 21,367 hectares and 13,155 hectares, respectively. With Northern Iran, the general patterns of land-use changes are scattered with an emphasis on Western Mazandaran (Gholamali Fard et al., 2012). In Northern Iran, tourism construction, such as second home tourism, has increased and the natural environment has decreased. Between the period from 1984 to 2010, the number of residential spots (25.46 percent) and roads (15.63 percent) also increased with a sharp decrease in forest area (33.53 percent) and water resources surfaces (23.93 percent) have been observed (Mirzayi et al., 2013). Mehrabi et al. (2013) showed that the most important factor in the Mazandaran agriculture land-use change was the people's economic problems, such as low-incomes and the lack of banking financial access.

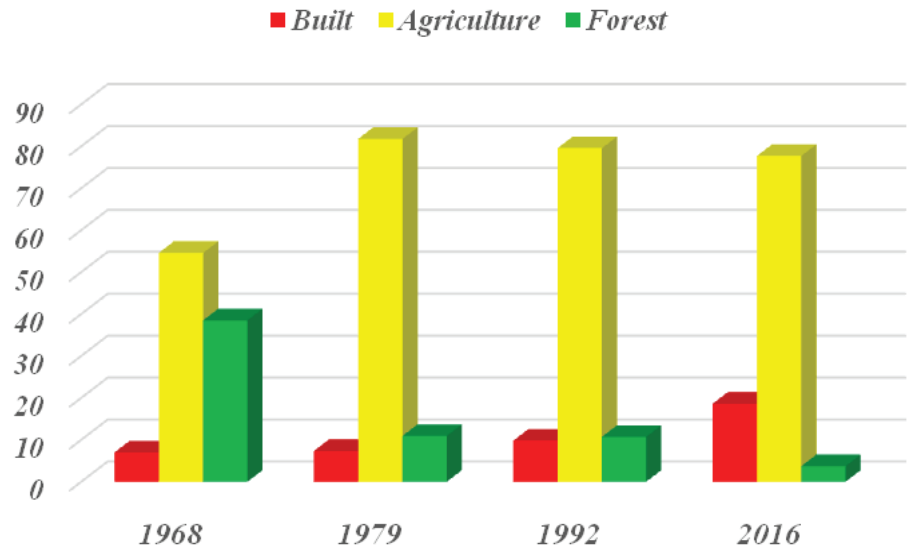

Figure 5. Percentage of land Use Changes in Mahmoudabad County from 1968 to 2016

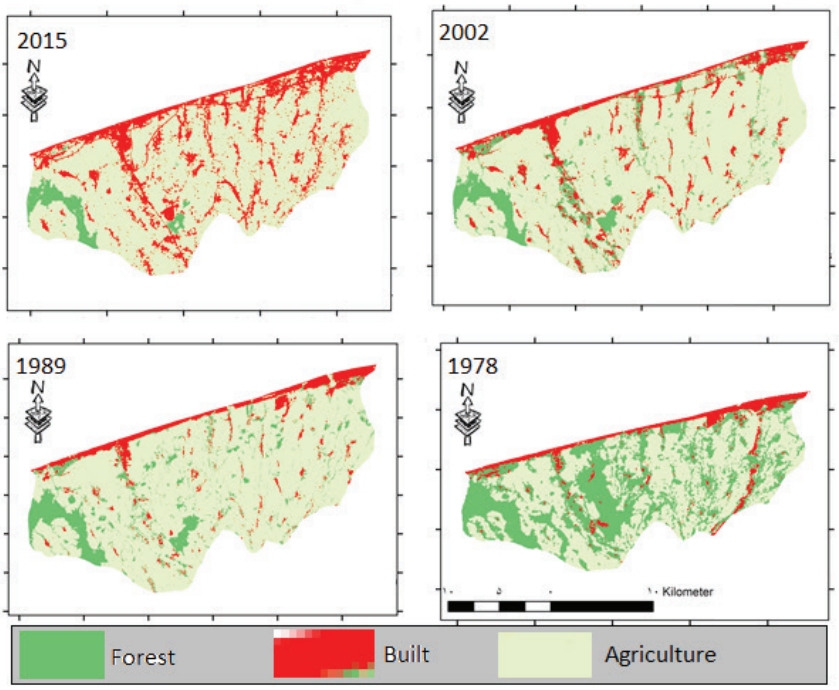

Figure 6. Land Use Changes in Study Area from 1978 to 2015

The governance system in Mahmoudabad County must create constraints and limitations to control the capital accumulation and the space commodification process at tourist destinations. One of the measures that can prevent tourism space commodification is the limitation of agricultural land-use changes, forest degradation, air, water, soil, and architectural pollution. Indeed, state policies, the banking system, and the tax system should direct the liquidity to the productive sectors and strengthen the manufacturing sector. We concur with the view of Sklenicka et al. (2014) that farmers should not be inclined to implement extreme land changes.This is because these extreme land changes often result inmany socioeconomic and environmental-ecological challenges in space over a long period. Based on Weizenegger's theoretical model (Weizenegger, 2006), we assert that the Iranian government must introduce limits to the tourist traffic such that high taxes are imposed on tourism industries in the Mahmoudabad County and other tourist destinations in Iran. This will minimize the high level of the commodification of the tourism space that has been the main driver for the unprecedented land-use changes in Iran. This suggestion is not misplaced because the findings of Szromek et al. (2020) at the Krakow region in Poland called for a similar introduction of strategies in controlling the high tourist traffic in the region. These firm measures must be taken by the governance system in the Mahmoudabad County and the Republic of Iran to mitigate the aggravated

land-use changes to prevent the loss of individual and social identity (Light, 2016) as well as local values and norms (Adom, 2019; Hsu & Huang, 2016). It would also aid to reduce significantly, the high crime rate (Seaton, Graham, & Dann, 2018), local inflation (Tribe, 2015), extreme agricultural land-use changes (Mirzai et al., 2013), and the elimination of plant coverings, the extinction of animals (Astaneh, Rezvani, & Sedighi, 2016) while increasing the security protocols in the country (Ghaderi, Saboori, & Khoshkam, 2017).

Internal and External Factors Influencing Tourism Space Commodification in the Mahmoudabad County, Iran

In this section, we present the findings on the factors that affect tourism activities in space commodification in Mahmoudabad County, Iran.The descriptive mean test and the SD's were used to evaluate the impact of each internal and external factor affecting the space commodification process, and the results are included in Table 2.

Table 2
Internal and External Factors Influencing the Mazandaran Space Commodification

Factors	Index	N	Mean	SD
Internal Factors (Tourism)	Economic	369	4.195	0.559
	Social-Cultural	369	3.976	0.462
	Environmental	369	4.374	0.511
External Factors (Political Economy)	Government Policies	369	4.520	0.479
	Tax System	369	3.960	0.496
	Banking System	369	4.350	0.521

Internal Factors Influencing the Mazandaran Space Commodification

Economic Factors

The economic dimension of tourism activities in Northern Iranhave had positive impacts, such as increased public revenue ($\bar{x}$=4.25, SD=1.264), increased investment ($\bar{x}$=3.90, SD=1.216), raising income ($\bar{x}$=3.89, SD=1.264), an improved employment status ($\bar{x}$=3.72, SD=1.224), and increased production rates ($\bar{x}$=3.67, SD=1.276), but the negative impacts of tourism must also be considered. From the respondents' point of view, tourism activities in Northern Iran have serious challenges, such as land values and house prices rising ($\bar{x}$=4.73, SD=0.921), rising rents ($\bar{x}$=4.64, SD=0.895), reduced youth purchasing power ($\bar{x}$=4.56, SD=1.096), an increase in local product prices ($\bar{x}$=4.15, SD=1.147), rising living costs ($\bar{x}$=4.04, SD=1.218), and building material costs increasing ($\bar{x}$=4.04, SD=1.111). All of which can push tourism spaces into the path of commodification.

Table 3
Economic Factors Influencing the Mazandaran Space Commodification

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	Land value and house prices rising	4.73	0.921
2	Rising rent	4.64	0.895
3	Reducing youth purchase power	4.56	1.096
4	Increase public revenue	4.25	1.264
5	Increase in local product prices	4.15	1.147
6	Rising living costs	4.04	1.218
7	Building material costs increase	4.04	1.111
8	Increase Local Products Sale	4.01	1.053
9	Increases investment	3.90	1.216
10	Raising Income	3.89	1.264
11	Improve employment status	3.72	1.224
12	Increase production Rates	3.67	1.276

Socio-cultural Factors

According to the data in Table 2, tourism socio-cultural factors are considered as the third internal factor that affects the commercialization of the Mahmoudabad tourism space. 14 items were used to evaluate this index, and the results are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing the Mazandaran Space Commodification

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	Sense of community privatization	4.36	1.175
2	Increase and improve infrastructure, facilities, and services	4.27	1.082
3	The prevalence of luxury goods and extreme consumerism	4.14	1.072
4	Increasing satisfaction with public facilities and services	4.04	1.086
5	Sense of less security	3.86	1.115
6	The reluctance of tourists to converge and interact with indigenous residents	3.81	1.258
7	Sense of less self-identity among youth	3.80	1.239
8	Tourists do not respect local traditions, beliefs, and customs	3.67	1.212
9	Dissatisfaction with cultural and social changes due to tourist arrivals	3.59	1.201
10	Increase resident-tourist conflicts	3.59	1.340
11	Negative impacts on youth behaviors	3.59	1.135
12	The feeling of being less quiet	3.42	1.168

From the perspective of the locals, the sense of community privatization ($\bar{x}$=4.36, SD=1.17) created from tourist commoditizing activities can play a key role indeveloping the epistemological dualism between the locals and the tourists and consequently strengthen the tourist space commodification process.Accordingtothe data in Table4, although tourism has improved the infrastructure, facilities, and services ($\bar{x}$=4.27, SD=1.082), it has the prevalence of luxury goods and extreme consumerism ($\bar{x}$=4.14, SD=1.072), a sense of less security ($\bar{x}$=3.86, SD=1.115), a reluctance of tourists to converge and interact with indigenous residents ($\bar{x}$=3.81, SD=1.258), and a sense of less self-identity among the youth ($\bar{x}$=3.80, SD=1.239). Also, the tourists do not respect the local traditions, beliefs, and customs ($\bar{x}$=3.67,

SD=1.212), there is a dissatisfaction with cultural and social changes due to tourist arrivals ($\bar{x}$=3.59, SD=1.201), an increase in resident-tourist conflicts ($\bar{x}$=3.59, SD=1.340), negative impacts on youth behaviors ($\bar{x}$=3.59, SD=1.135) and a feeling of being less quiet ($\bar{x}$=3.42, SD=1.168) can eventually aggravate the process of tourist space commodification.

Environmental Factors

Mahmoudabad has many tourism villages, rustic scenery, and it hosts numerous Tehranian people in all four seasons of the year, including autumn. Nice weather, beautiful nature, customs and traditions, handicrafts as well as local games and dialects are among the main attractions of the county. Thatched houses, flagstone sidewalks, and the jujube trees create charming scenery in the villages of Mahmoudabad in the autumn. In recent years, the demand for land and housing has increasedannually due to the arrival of a large number of tourists. From the respondents' point of view, tourism activities have had a great impact on the destruction of forests ($\bar{x}$=4.74, SD=1.027) and the exacerbation of land-use changes ($\bar{x}$=4.70, SD=1.030). Also, due to the economic pressures, farmers are trying to meet their needs by implementing land-use changes, such as plotting and selling agricultural lands. This trend has led to a decrease in the amount of agricultural land ($\bar{x}$=4.66, SD=1.069) and has reduced the agricultural land area ($\bar{x}$=4.61, SD=0.914). Construction increases ($\bar{x}$=4.56, SD=0.997) in rural areas have led to the architectural dualism between the local and tourists houses ($\bar{x}$=4.58, SD=1.029), an increase in architectural pollution ($\bar{x}$=3.56, SD=1.172), destruction ofbeautiful rural areas ($\bar{x}$=4.43, SD=1.127), rural settlements expansion ($\bar{x}$=4.25, SD=1.123),reducedsanitation in the coastal areas ($\bar{x}$=3.90, SD=1.430), increasing waste and rubbish ($\bar{x}$=4.70, SD=1.030),an increase in the number of coastal settlements ($\bar{x}$=4.70, SD=1.030), an increase in noise pollution ($\bar{x}$=4.74, SD=1.027), an increase in air pollution ($\bar{x}$=4.74, SD=1.027), and an increase in water and soil resources pollution ($\bar{x}$=3.76, SD=1.316).

Table 5
Environmental Factors Influencing the Mazandaran Space Commodification

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	Destruction of forests	4.74	1.027
2	Exacerbation of land use changes	4.70	1.030
3	The decrease in the amount of agricultural land	4.66	1.069
4	Rural house renovation	4.65	0.833
5	Reduction of agricultural land area	4.61	0.914
6	Privatization of coastal areas	4.58	0.941
7	Architectural dualism between locals' and tourists' houses	4.58	1.029
8	Increase in construction	4.56	0.997
9	Increase in the number of coastal settlements	4.53	0.972
10	Destruction of beautiful rural areas	4.43	1.127
11	Rural settlements Expansion	4.25	1.123

12	Increase in waste and rubbish	4.10	1.380
13	Noise pollution Increase	3.90	1.291
14	Reduction in sanitation in the coastal area	3.90	1.430
15	Increase in water and soil resources pollution	3.76	1.316
16	Increase in air pollution	3.58	1.215
17	Increase in architectural pollution	3.56	1.172

The findings on the internal factors influencing tourism activities in the study area in terms of the economy have revealed that tourism has led to an increase in production rates, the sale of local products, investment, income, employment status, public revenue, rural house renovation, infrastructure, facilities, and services. However, these economic benefits of tourism in the region, if not properly managed, will just be in the short term as Su and Swanson (2017) as well as Cetin et al. (2017) theorized. If the economic drivers of tourism are prioritized with a compromise on the other internal factors such as the environmental and socio-cultural costs, labeled now as 'overtourism', then in thelong term, the tourism activities in the region would lead to very disastrous impacts as noted by Szromek et al. (2020). It would lead to unsustainable tourism as posited by Butler (1980) in the TALC model where he illustrated that the failure to balance tourism activities may eventually lead to stagnation and an eventual decline. The findings from the study have shown that environmental factors in the tourism activities in the Mazandaran province have been ignored, leading to an exacerbation of land-use changes which have resulted in less security, the prevalence of luxury goods, and extreme consumerism, a sense of community privatization, a sense of less self-identity among youth, the destruction of forests, the reduction of sanitation in the coastal areas, noise pollution, water, and soil resources pollution, air pollution, architectural pollution, increased waste and rubbish, and epistemological dualism (host-tourist), negative consequences well documented in the tourism literature (Eusébio, Vieira, & Lima, 2018; Rivera, Croes, & Lee 2016; Mason, 2015; Hughes, 1995).

Also, the initial euphoria (enthusiasm for the tourism development) on the part of the local people has now developed into the levels of apathy, irritation, and antagonism as noted in the Irridex model (Doxey, 1975). This situation was found to be a result of negative socio-cultural factors such as the tourists' lack of respect for local culture, values, and traditional beliefs, community privatization and consumerism, and the other equally crucial variables cited in Table 4. These same negative socio-cultural variables that affect tourism space commodification have been mentioned in the comprehensive list of socio-cultural impacts by Pizam and Milman (1986) and Burdge (1994). In both studies, the authors indicated that if tourists, referred to as 'second homeowners' are not involved in community life, demonstrable by their disrespect of the traditional value system, local habits, and traditions as well as their unconsciousness of the cultural environment of the tourist destination, this exacerbates tourism space commodification.

Similar findings of the impacts of socio-cultural factors have been noted in the studies of Ratz (2000) among the residents in the Balaton Lake in Hungary as well as Soper (2007) in Mauritania. Ratz noted that changes in the community structure and characteristics such as an increase in inflation caused by community privatization and consumerism as well as the loss of cultural identity fuelled by tourists' inconsiderate attitudes toward the place identities of their tourist destinations increases tourism space commodification. The same situation exists in the Mazandaran province where socio-cultural and environmental insensitivity on the part of tourists has increased in resident-tourist conflicts ($\bar{x}$=3.59, SD=1.340). To cavert the likely ignorance of the socio-cultural and environmental factors by tourists in the Mazandaran province, we suggest that tourists must be instructed in the accepted cultural and environmental ethics when they arrive in the Mazandaran province (Ratz, 2000).

External Factors Influencing the Mazandaran Space Commodification

The Banking System

Officially, Iranian banks paid 200,000 billion Toman in interest (4,761,904,762 USD) in 2016. However, the total profit of all non-governmental companies in the same year was about 100,000 billion Toman. This amount of interest paid was equivalent to the wage of 11 million workers during the same year, which was equivalent to 14 percent of Iran's GDP, and it was more than the sum of the industry and agriculture sectors share of the gross domestic product (GDP). It was equal to 19 percent of Iran's liquidity (CBI report, 2017). From 2001 to 2010, the number of official banks in Iran tripled. During the same period, the number of branches of the existing banks increased by 8 times. This process occurred when the agriculture sector, factories, and manufacturing companies faced fundamental monetary challenges (Shakeri, 2016). As Table 6 shows, the share of the agriculture sector loans paid on the Iran banking system decreased from 19 percent in 1993 to 7.7 percent in 2016.

Table 6
Share of Various Economic Sectors in the Total Balance of Credit Facilities in Iran

No.	Economic sectors	1993 (year)	2005	2016
1	Agriculture	19	14.3	7.7
2	Industry and Mining	36	27	28.2
3	Building and housing	30	23.1	9.1
4	Commerce and services	7	34.2	54.9
5	Export	8	1.4	0.1
6	Sum	100	100	100

About 70 percent of respondents (N=260) emphasized that the banks' insufficient support to producers and farmers ($\bar{x}$=4.10, SD=0.987), high facilities' interest rates ($\bar{x}$=4.56, SD=0.823), and high deposits interest rates ($\bar{x}$=4.40, SD=1.045) would

be influencing factors on the intensification of the tourism space commodification process. According to the World Bank Report, Iran had the highest interest rate among Asian countries in 2018 with at least 20 percent,but Iran's GDP from June 2015 to June 2016 and the years that followed were negative.

Table 7
Banking affecting Items of Mazandaran Space Commodification

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	The weakness of banks' support to producers and farmers	4.10	0.987
2	High facilities interest rates	4.56	0.823
3	High deposits interest rates	4.40	1.045

Tax System

States can use the tax system for direct liquidity to the manufacturing sectors and strengthen this sector. States with tax hurdles impede the massive amount of liquidity towards non-productive sectors. They seek to support productive sectors with tax breaks and incentives. However, tax is considered as a source of income in Iran. Table 8 shows that according to the respondents' point of view, the tax system in Northern Iran not only failed to support the production sectors (especially agriculture), but it also advocates speculation and rentier groups' activities.

Table 8
Tax System affecting Items of Mazandaran Space Commodification

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	The lack of empty properties tax	4.20	1.110
2	The lack of Luxury car tax	4.15	1.215
3	The lack of luxury house tax	4.04	1.120
4	The lack of capital gains taxes on real estate	3.87	1.080
5	The lack of Land Value tax	3.65	1.242

About 17.7 percent of respondents selected very low, 41.9 percent selected high, and 42.4 percent selected very high regarding believing that the lack of second home tourism tax (x=4.22, SD=1.12) couldbe intensifying tourism space commodification in the study area. Also, 5 percent selected moderate, 37.4 percent selected high, and 53.4 percent selected very high regarding the lack of a luxury house tax (x=4.04, SD=1.12) leading to extreme tourism construction and agricultural land-use changes. In the study area, the state does not receive any tax on properties and real estate. In other words, the capital gains tax mechanism does not exist in Northern Iran yet. From Table 8, the lack of capital gains taxes on real estate (x=3.87, SD=1.08), andthe lack of land value tax (x=3.65, SD=1.24) show that these items are important to encourage tourism activities to space commodification.

Government Policies

One of the most important factors in tourism space commodification in the study area has been excluding people from decision-making and the decision-making process. 25.4 percent of respondents responded very high, 52.2 percent responded high, and 17.1 percent modestly believing that the exclusion of locals from the decision-making process (x=4.71, SD=1.203) can lead to tourism space commodification. The other items are shown in Table 9.

Table 9
Government Policies affecting Items of Mazandaran Space Commodification

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1	Exclusion of Locals from the decision-making process	4.71	1.203
2	Inflation and economic pressures	4.70	0.980
3	Lack of adequate income and increased living costs	4.79	0.990
4	High risk for Farming activities	4.74	0.840
5	Agricultural activity Low income	4.70	1.029
6	Market volatility	4.65	0.997
7	Insufficient government support to agricultural development	4.61	0.987
8	High labor costs	4.58	0.979
9	High inputs cost (fertilizer, seed, etc.)	4.58	1.567
10	Brokers and Speculative operations	4.56	1.321
11	The lack of government control over land and housing prices	4.51	1.302
12	The weakness of government monitoring over land-use changes	4.51	1.691

The public inflation in Iran was 234 percent from 2005 to 2013, while inflation in the housing sector was 511 percent. Also, the general price index for goods and services increased eight times, while the housing and land sectors increased eighteen times and twenty-seven times respectively from 2003 to 2013 (Iran Majlis Research Center report, 2018). In Iran, the state determines agricultural product prices (rice, wheat, etc.) lower than the inflation rate and suppresses it. As a result, land prices increase faster than agricultural product prices (Table 10). As table 10 shows, in the case study area, the rice price per kilogram has 16.6 Multi-fold growth while agricultural land has 50 Multi-fold growth. In this situation, farmers prefer to sell their agricultural land and land-use change rather than face the production process problems and tolerate economic pressures.

Table 10
Comparison of Inflation in Rice and Land Value

Year	2006	2020	Multi-fold growth
Rice (kilogram/rial)	1200	20000	16.6
Agricultural land (each square meter/rial)	80000	4000000	50

Source: Iran Central Bank Website, 2020.

The study's findings on the external factors influencing the commodification of the tourism space in the Mazandaran province (the banking system, tax system, and some government policies), are linked with the governance system or the political economy of the country, similar to the findings in previous studies (Harvey, 2016; Harvey, 2010; Bianchi, 2018; Piketty, 2014, 2015; Thanvisitthpon, 2015). These external variables are exacerbating the tourism space in the entire country. For example, the findings revealed that the banking system in Iran transfers liquidity to the real estate market, home tourism constructions, and commercial activities, especially in Northern Iran. Farmers who sell their agricultural land and transfer their money and capital to the banks gain much more profits there than in the productive sectors. In the study area, farmers (agricultural land area mean = 1 hectare) prefer to sell their agricultural lands and deposit their money in the bank and gain guaranteed interest without any risk, but productive sectors must pay taxes, insurance, labor expenses, water expenses, electricity expenses, gas expenses, telephone expenses, investment risk, marketing, transportation, and sale risks. The tax system can reduce the speed of the tourism space commodification process or even de-commoditized it with empty property taxes, luxury car taxes, luxury house taxes, capital gains taxes on real estate, and land value taxes, or it can conversely intensify it through neglecting the tax system potential. Revenue generated from tourism taxes constitutes an important financial resource for local governments and tourism authorities to both ensure tourism sustainability and enhance the quality of tourist experiences. State policies with an emphasis on taxation should maximize the speculative activities risk, especially in tourism spaces. This agrees with the ideals in the Doxey Index (Doxey, 1975) and the modified TALC model by Weizenegger (2006). These popular models for tourism studies have posited the imposition of high taxes as a means of minimizing the accelerated rate of tourism space commodification, especially when tourism activities are exceeding their limits. This would slow the fast pace of land-use changes such as the massive conversion of agricultural lands into developmental projects for tourism activities in the study area. The government must put up strategies to boost agricultural production while increasing the prices for agricultural produce. This would assist the farmers not to sell their agricultural lands for developmental projects that would eventually lead to the commodification of those spaces for tourism developmental activities. Also, government policies must factor the inclusion of local people in the decision-making process at all levels of governance. Government strategies and policies must consider the locals as the owners of the local space and allow them to participate in spatial decision-making and the decision-making process. Local space is like a home for the locals, and everyone has the right to partake in the decisions regarding tourism in their home regions (Norberg-Schulz, 1971; Relph, 1976; Heidegger, 2001).When the local people are not considered in the decision-making process, they feel that their culture is been taken away from them and commodified without any benefits to them,

as also noted by Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos (2004) in the Garifuna Community of Roatan, Honduras. Soper (2007: 96) observes in a culture-heritage tourism study in Mauritius that residents must never be viewed as passive actors in tourism development but just as important as or more important than tourists. The truth is that sustainable tourism cannot be achieved if residents' support in the decision-making processes in tourism development is not solicited (Ratz, 2000). The adoption of a bottom-up approach is a key ingredient in winning the support of the people toward the implementation processes of government policies, especially those related to the halting of the commodification of the tourism spaces in the country. This approach of governance that factors local people in all decision making processes is helpful in tourism management with shreds of evidence in Ghana, Jordan, Thailand, and Honduras (Adom et al., 2020; Adom, 2019; Jamhawi & Hajahjah, 2017; Kubickova & Campbell, 2020).

Conclusion

This study has examined the impacts of land-use changes as well as factors that influence tourism space commodification in Mahmoudabad County, Northern Iran. The findings of the study have shown the extensive land-use changes of the agricultural lands of the residents which are fuelled by farmers' desire to sell their lands because of the relatively low-income generation from the agricultural production in the country. These lands are often transformed into the construction of tourism facilities that exacerbate the tourism space commodification in the region. Both the internal and external factors that contribute to the tourism space commodification investigated also point to the truism that if the negative impacts associated with them are not curtailed through strategic government policies, the general tourism development in the area will likely stagnate in the long term. For instance, the findings of the study have shown that there is a compromise on the environmental and socio-cultural factors in tourism development in the area with an overemphasis on the economic values of the tourism business. Policymakers in government must formulate green and culturally sensitive policies in the area of tourism such that huge taxes are imposed on tourism industries whenever set limits in terms of tourism traffic are exceeded and eco-friendly as well as culturally conscious practices are not meticulously observed by tourists, who are their clients. Tourism operators must always ensure that they instruct tourists who visit their tourist destination centers in the region to be conscious of the natural and cultural environments to improve the tourist-host relationships, an essential ingredient for sustainable tourism (Ratz, 2000; Butler, 1980), which is currently lacking in the Mazandaran province. Also, the government must ensure that economic policies are favorable for traditional businesses, especially in agriculture, so that farmers will not sell their lands to tourism developers to aggravate tourism space commodification. Interest rates for loans meant for agricultural production and

local factories and manufacturing industries must be low to enable local operators, especially those in the private sector to earn appreciable income. There is an urgent need for the government and tourism operators to actively involve the local people in the decision-making processes to offer them a voice in their decisions relating to tourism (Adom, 2019; Adom & Boamah, 2020). Granted, tourism activities can have both positive and negative ramifications (Ghazoul, & Chazdon, 2017; Gallent, & Tewdwr-Jones, 2018; Roberts, Hall, & Morag, 2017; Shalaby, & Tateishi, 2007). Yet, if sound and practical policies and strategies are not formulated, implemented, and enforced, the negative effects of tourism would have very dire and lasting consequences on the general development of the region. Corrective actions must be taken by the government and tourism operators to reducethe negative impacts of tourism while increasing the positive impacts to ensure a fair, balanced, and sustainable tourism operation (Mouhamadou, 2018) that prioritizes the voice of residents in tourism-related decision-making processes, the culture, and natural environments and favors local or traditional enterprises, especially in agricultural production in the Mahmoudabad County in Northern Iran.

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