Is Tourism a Boon or a Bane?

Exploring the Nexus of Tourism Impacts, Livelihood, and Migration:

A Case Study of the Himalayan Region of Upper Mustang, Nepal

by

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ABSTRACT

Prior to COVID-19, tourism was one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries. Consequently, extensive scholarly research has been conducted on various aspects of tourism. However, the majority of this research has primarily focused on the experiences of tourists, leaving the impacts and dynamics on host destinations, especially in developing countries, relatively understudied. This dissertation examines the dynamics of tourism in Upper Mustang, Nepal. Using a confluence of mixed methods, the three research papers in this dissertation address the gaps in existing literature and provide insights into the complex dynamics of tourism in the region. These studies investigate the effects of COVID-19 on global migratory networks and trans-local kinship relationships, examine the impacts of tourism and power relationships, and analyze the factors that influence tourism-based livelihood diversification. The first paper analyzes migration, mobility, and precarity within the trans-local Himalayan community, particularly in light of the COVID-19's disruptions. The second paper explores Upper Mustang residents' perspectives on tourism impacts and considers power relationships. The third paper investigates the factors influencing households' decisions to adopt or avoid tourism-based livelihood diversification in Upper Mustang. The findings highlight the dependence of Mustangs' well-being on global migratory networks and trans-local kinship relations. Perceived tourism impacts varied based on geographical location, which defined the presence of tourists. The study reveals an uneven distribution of tourism benefits among the local population, stemming from historical social structures that pre-date tourism. Furthermore, it identifies factors that positively or negatively influence households' choices to diversify their livelihoods into tourism. The research underscores the

disruptive nature of migration on the trend of livelihood diversification. Overall, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of tourism complexities and effects in the context of Upper Mustang, which are relevant to tourism impacts experienced globally. By addressing multiple dimensions, including migration, power relationship, and livelihood decisions, it sheds light on the intricate dynamics of tourism for the region and connects local tourism to global processes of migration and livelihood change. The research emphasizes the need for a balanced exploration of host destination perspectives and expands knowledge on the impacts of tourism.

DEDICATION

To everyone who got laughed at for their audacity to pursue something unique, venturing beyond the usual boundaries, embracing unconventional journeys, while never losing sight of the prize. This is for you.

To my motherland Upper Mustang and all the Lowa, the people of Lo.

To Chandra Bahadur Gurung, my GURU BUWA, who instilled the value of education in me at an early age. We now have our own example in Dhaulagiri Boarding School.

To my grandfather, the Late Pema Wongdue and my family.

To myself. This is not the ultimate goal, but a reminder, an epiphany, a step closer to what lies ahead: a taller, mightier, formidable mountain.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1997, the Upper Mustang region, nested in the Tibetan Plateau experienced an unprecedented and exceptionally severe snowstorm. The snowstorm had devastating consequences throughout the region including my family. The snowstorm tragically claimed the lives of almost 200 yaks that belonged to my father and grandfather. This incident marked a turning point in our family's way of life and a poignant moment where we lost a part of our culture. As an indigenous person, born and raised in the remote Himalayan region of Nepal, my firm conviction has been that we have been subjected to profound injustice, whereby my community, despite being among the least responsible for climate change, disproportionately bears the brunt of its most severe consequences. In my PhD application I had stated, *"I want to examine how climate change is affecting the human dimensions of natural resource management and livelihoods in the Himalayan district of Mustang in Nepal."* During my pilot research, it became evident that residents prioritized their immediate survival, considering the tangible threat climate change posed to their traditional livelihoods. Compounded by worsening impacts of political and economic factors, people from mountain communities are pushed to adopt alternative livelihood strategies, such as tourism, which may have been perceived initially to be less susceptible to the impacts of climate change and more stable overall as a livelihood option. In the context of mountain tourism destinations, diversification of livelihood strategies, specifically toward tourism, is an adaptive response to the challenges posed by climate change. Therefore, through an in-depth study

of tourism dynamics in Upper Mustang, I am also studying the intricate dimensions of climate change.

Since the onset of the 21st century, the tourism industry has undergone a remarkable surge in growth. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2018), tourism continues to be one of the fastest growing industries in the world. For developing countries like Nepal, the tourism industry can be viewed as an engine of economic advancement and a pathway for improving livelihoods, even more so when other economic sectors on aggregate are producing marginal results. Prior to 1950, Nepal was completely isolated from the international community, relying heavily on agriculture as its main source of income. It was, however, the successful ascent of Mountain Everest in 1953 by Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary that caught international attention (Shreshta and Shrestha, 2012). Ever since this time, the Nepalese government initiated a process of engagement with the global sphere through the promotion of tourism, particularly mountain tourism. Mountain tourism capitalizes on being home to eight of the ten world's tallest mountains and its unique culture (Gurung and DeCoursey, 2000; Upadhaya et al., 2022). Today, tourism has proven to be the important part of the economy. In the year 2019, tourism contributed to 7.9% of Nepal's GDP amounting to Rs. 240.7 billion (equivalent to 206,000,000 USD) in revenue and created 1.05 million jobs. Consequently, over the past few decades, this unprecedented expansion of tourism, both globally and specifically in Nepal, has resulted in myriad of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental consequences-both advantageous and

detrimental. It has also stimulated extensive scholarly inquiry into numerous aspects of t the tourism phenomenon (Mathieson and Walls, 1982; Baggio, 2008).

Scholarly research on tourism in the context of Nepal has predominantly centered on a few concentrated urban areas like Pokhara, Ghandruk, and Kathmandu, as well as popular rural destinations such as the Sagarmatha (Everest) region, Annapurna region, and Chitwan National Park (Nyaupane and Timothy; 2022; Gurung and DeCoursey, 2000). Upper Mustang, despite being a highly sought-after mountain destination in Nepal, has received limited research attention in the field of tourism (Shackley, 1994, 1995, 1996; Banskota and Sharma, 1998; Gurung and DeCoursey, 2000; Nepal, 2000, Heredge, 2003). Moreover, existing studies on tourism in Upper Mustang are simplified, primarily revolving around memoirs, and limited to a focus on the negative impacts of tourism on the rich and unique culture (Gurung and Burnsilver, 2023) or management of natural resources (Banskota and Sharma). Furthermore, these studies are outdated, as many having been conducted two decades ago. Household level data on tourism in this region is non-existent. As a geo-politically sensitive border region with long and tumultuous history, unique cultural and natural features, only opened to tourism in 1992, and subject to major infrastructural and socio-cultural changes, Upper Mustang presents an excellent opportunity to investigate and analyze tourism dynamics and its implications for policy recommendations.

A goal of this research is to contribute to the reframing of tourism studies by drawing from complexity theory and the commons literature to understand decision

making within the tourism system of Upper Mustang. The focus of this research was on how the livelihood and management decisions of stakeholders in a tourism hosting country, under different vulnerability contexts, can contribute to transitioning and reframing tourism studies within broader interdisciplinary scholarship – one which considers tourism to be a set of choices open to people among various livelihood and management options linked to other social, cultural and environmental outcomes.

Since the inception of tourism studies, a majority of research has disproportionately focused on the positive economic benefits of the industry while overlooking the widespread negative economic, social, and environmental impacts (Mathieson and Wall 1982). In the contemporary tourism literature, while there have been some studies on host destinations, those are often limited to the perception (Jurowski et al., 1997; Lankford and Howard 1994; Liu and Var 1986; McGehee and Andereck 2004; Perdue et al., 1990; and Wang and Pfister 2008) and attitudes of hosting residents (Sirakaya et al., 2002; Nepal, 2008; Sharpley, 2014, and Garcia et al., 2015) often in the context of developed countries (Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2012 and Goffi et al., 2019). Tourism scholars have rarely focused on decision-making processes. Even then the focus has been on consumer decisions (Mottair and Quinn, 2003; Nuraeni et al., 2015; and Zhou et al., 2015) rather than on the decisions of various stakeholders at host destinations, i.e., whether to engage and how to engage in tourism.

Tourism Perception

Since the inception of tourism studies, an emphasis on the economic benefits of tourism has overshadowed widespread negative economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts (Mathieson and Wall, 1982). When these negative effects are studied, they tend to focus on negative environmental and economic impacts while occasionally addressing the social dimensions and associated external costs (Hall, 1999). A critical evaluation of existing tourism literature by Nash et al., (1981) revealed a lack of sociocultural complexity across all levels. Nash et al., further pointed out the need for methodological and theoretical sophistication in the tourism literature, noting that this literature lacked substantial theory of its own (Dann, Nash, and Pearce, 1988). To really understand the challenges associated with tourism, it is important to understand the perception of local people about the impacts of tourism on the economy, environment, and the culture. The release of the Brundtland report (1987) marked a significant milestone in the development of sustainability concepts prompting a shift in tourism research. Consequently, the focus of tourism research expanded beyond the simplistic notion of "more tourism is better" to encompass a broader range of subjects (Inskeep, 1991; Hall, 2011; Bramwell and Lane, 1993, 2011). Local communities' inclusion and participation as tourism stakeholders were identified as crucial for attaining short-term success (Murphy and Price, 2005, p. 174) and for maintaining long term success (Byrd, 2007). Although both host destinations and consumers (i.e., tourists) experience the impacts of tourism, the literature continues to focus predominantly on the perception of consumers. Consequently, there has been a relative lack of research and theoretical

development regarding the perspectives of stakeholders in host destinations. Despite the significance of bottom-up stakeholder perspectives, their exploration and analysis remain relatively limited in the existing tourism literature (Saito and Ruhanen, 2017). One important step to redressing a lack of inclusion of residents' voices in sustainable tourism is to understand and assess residents' baseline perceptions of specific impacts of tourism. Furthermore, even when the focus is on the perceived impacts of tourism (Lo et al., 2014; Ap, 1992; Jurowski et al., 1997), many of these studies occur in developed country contexts (Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2012; Wang and Pfister, 2008; Goffi et al., 2019). Harrill (2004) highlights that most tourism research to date has been conducted in North America and Europe, and that interest in this research area should stimulate efforts to explore resident perceptions and attitudes in other locales (Harrill, 2004, p. 2).

Political Ecology and Tourism Inequalities

The tourism literature has seen dramatic recent growth linking tourism to a wide range of issues and calls for a more equitable examination and evaluation of tourism impacts (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Baggio, 2008; Hunter, 2002; Briassouless, 2002). The crucial issues of justice and fairness have often been overlooked in the realm of sustainable development in general, and specifically in tourism scholarships (Knowles, 2019; Jamal and Camargo, 2014). Scholars focusing on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have raised concerns about inequalities and injustices related to environmental degradation, depletion of resources, violations of human rights, cultural and social impacts, and economic gains (Britton, 1982). However, Jamal and

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Higham (2012) argue that although justice and rights are prevalent issues across various tourism contexts, they are often implicit or inadequately theorized. Drawing from political ecology perspective research conducted in Fiji, Britton (1982) sheds light on the growing inequalities observed within the tourism economy, along with the uneven distribution of power and economic benefits at the local level. Through their case study in Quintana Roo, Mexico, Jamal and Camargo (2014) illustrate a range of justice issues experienced by local Mayan residents. Stonich (1998) and Nepal and Saarinen (2016) further contribute to this discourse by highlighting disparities in the distribution of costs and benefits, the loss of access to and use of local resources, and the disproportionate allocation of scarce water resources to tourists, leading to water shortages for disadvantaged local populations. As the issue of justice and fairness is common and prevalent in tourism, I use political approach to understand and contextualize those issue in the context of tourism through the examination of power relationship across all actors in Upper Mustang.

Tourism and Livelihood Diversification

As households in rural areas, particularly in developing countries, face challenges and struggles to rely solely on subsistence livelihoods because increasing stress on natural resources, depopulation and/or scarcity of local labor through outmigration, changing economic goals, and the increasing reliance of communities on service industries, diversification of livelihoods has been a response (Palmer and Chuamuangphan, 2017). While tourism is not a panacea, it has proven to be practical and

a viable choice for alternative livelihoods, particularly in rural tourist destinations in the context of developing countries (Huang et al., 2022; Su et al., 2019; Mbaiwa, 2011). Increasing livelihood diversification in tourist destinations has sparked academic interest. As such, there is strong evidence from different regions and countries that explore the livelihood diversification decisions and emphasizes the role of tourism in livelihood diversification and consequently improving living standards (Huang et al., 2022). The existing literature in this space, however, has predominantly focused on the fundamental decisions and decision-making processes of tourism consumers (i.e., tourists). Therefore, the livelihood diversification decision-making processes of households in tourism destinations are poorly understood. In addition, the current focus has been relatively broad, primarily examining diversification as a shift from farming to non-farm strategies, which limits the specific exploration of livelihood diversification within the tourism sector itself. (Avila-Foucat and Rodríguez-Robayo, 2018; Asfaw et al., 2017; Eshetu, 2014).

Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) Framework and Tourism

Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA), based on the available resources within specific rural households, emphasizes the significance of dynamic livelihood capitals (human, social, financial, physical, and natural) in shaping livelihood decision-making strategies (Ding et al., 2018; DFID, 1999). While recent literature on livelihood diversification using SLA has largely focused on farm and non-farm activities, as well as natural resource management, agriculture land use decisions, mining, wage labor, and livestock production (e.g., Bires and Raj, 2020; Burbano and Meredith, 2021; Stone and

Nyaupane, 2016; Torell et al., 2017), there has been limited application of SLA in the context of livelihood diversification and tourism research, with a few exceptions (Su et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Kimbu et al., 2022; Letsoalo, 2019; Wang et al., 2016; Tao and Wall, 2009). Kunjuraman (2022: 2) further highlights the scarcity of SLA application in tourism research in developing countries, resulting in a gap in the relevant literature. Tao and Wall (2009) argue that SLA provides a comprehensive approach to examining the impact of tourism on sustainable livelihoods, with "capitals" or "assets" being the central focus, and the interactions between different livelihood assets being crucial in providing deeper insights into livelihood diversification (Fang et al., 2014; Zenteno et al., 2013). Overall, SLA serves as a valuable analytical framework that enables a thorough exploration of the complexities of people's lives and their livelihood choices, by assessing the role played by different livelihood capitals in the context of vulnerabilities.

Transnationalism, Translocality, and Migration

The literature on migration is built on early scholarship pertaining to transnationalism and translocality (Appadurai 1996; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1995; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Vertovec 2003; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999) that recognized the need to "broaden and deepen because migrants are often embedded in multi-layered multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind" (Basch, Glick Schiller, Szanton Blanc 1995). Working against methodological nationalism which takes the nation-state as a given in social analysis, I align my thinking with Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of "simultaneity, or living lives that incorporate daily activities,

routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally…"
This way of conceptualizing migration exceeds economic frames of analysis and subverts
narratives of national development and crisis management, and advances "beyond the
static, reified and essentialized concept of community and into the study of migrants and
non-migrants within a social field of differential power" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller
2002:324). Moving beyond static typologies of migrant identities, modernization
theories, and historical-structuralist thought that focuses less on the agency of migrants
and more so on the global market and capitalist development, I view migration as a
process "whereby migrants operate in social fields that transgress geographic, political,
and cultural borders" (Brettel 2008:120). Rather than privilege nation states as units of
analysis, I build on theories of translocality to refer to diasporic Mustangi communities
"whose identities travel across nation states and are reconstituted in localities that
transcend national territorial boundaries making these spaces translocal rather than
transnational" (Banerjee 2011:334).

Contributions of this Research to Tourism Research

This dissertation holistically examines the dynamics of tourism within the context
of Upper Mustang, considering the rapid socio-cultural, economic, political, and
environmental changes in recent years as a result of various external disturbances at
multiple levels. Specifically, I delve into the nature of migration, mobility, and precarity
within a global translocal Himalayan community, navigating the unprecedented economic
and social disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and its implication on
tourism. The dissertation also explores the perspectives of the residents of Upper

Mustang on the key dimensions of tourism impact, while also considering power relationships between different actors and what impacts on tourism outcomes. Furthermore, I investigate the underlying factors that shape household decisions regarding the adoption or avoidance of livelihood diversification through tourism-based strategies in the Upper Mustang region. By addressing these multifaceted aspects, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding tourism and its effects in this context.

The three papers within this dissertation share a broad connection, as they explore the interrelationship between tourism impacts, livelihood diversification, and migration in the region of Upper Mustang, Nepal. The complex and dynamic nature of these phenomena is evident, as they mutually influence and interact with one another. Notably, this research took place amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a unique opportunity to investigate the interplay between an dramatic drop in tourism, livelihood diversification decisions, and migration in the context of external drivers in real-time.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2 focuses on the nature of migration, mobility, and precarity among a global translocal Himalayan community in the context of unprecedented levels of economic and social upheaval being experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic. I build on theories of transnationalism and translocality to position migration as a cyclical process whereby the wellbeing of people in Upper Mustang, Nepal and NYC, the USA

rests on the reliability of global migratory networks and translocal kinship relations — a basis for security and belonging that COVID-19 has challenged and reconfigured. An ethnographic focus on one translocal Upper Mustangi family frames the discussion of how COVID-19 has overturned previously held ideas around migration to NYC and uncovered new forms of precarity. I examined the ways in which individuals, families, and community networks living within and between Upper Mustang and NYC are making sense of this COVID moment, in light of the assumptions about migration, mobility, and socioeconomic security on which their decisions to migrate to NYC have rested.

Findings suggest that the COVID moment has overturned the idea that migrating to the US, to a certain extent, will ensure financial stability for Mustangis living in both Upper Mustang and NYC, and has posed serious challenges to the assumptions, undergirding migration, that there is a "system" in the US that will protect them. Situating this article within the theoretical framework of transnationalism and belonging, rooted in migration, this paper shows how people who move between Nepal and NYC enact cyclical migratory pathways, complicating what it means to be "home" or "abroad" as they maintain close social and economic relationships with their ancestral homelands. This paper also shows that despite spatially dispersed kinship arrangements, the collective sentiment of a shared identity and responsibility to community remains strong. It is precisely within and through these dense kinship relations — relations which "give meaning to people's lives in accordance with, or even despite, their physical and political

abilities to move - that the importance of these networks are revealed, even as they are challenged and reconfigured in the face of COVID.

Chapter 3 examines the core facets of tourism impact as perceived by the residents of Upper Mustang, while also incorporating consideration of power relationships. It is being revised for publication as a co-authored research paper in the journal of *Tourism Planning and Development*. I use political ecology as a conceptual framework to examine the distributive (in)justices and outcomes of economic, environmental, and socio-cultural changes associated with tourism in the context of a rural region in a non-western developing country context. I theorize the synthesis of power perspectives in political ecology by focusing on a combination of power perspectives that is composed of two interrelated dichotomies: structure versus agency. The aim of this paper is to address two research questions in this regard: 1) How do people from Upper Mustang perceive that tourism is affecting their economy, environment, and culture, and what are key sociodemographic, economic, and geographic factors underlying these perceptions? And 2) Are the benefits and costs associated with tourism evenly experienced by individual households or settlements in Upper Mustang?

Results show that the perceived impacts of tourism varied and were primarily dictated by geographical location based on the presence of tourists or lack thereof. Findings also suggest that tourism benefits are unevenly experienced by the locals of Upper Mustang and the uneven distribution of tourism benefits can be attributed to power relations emerging from historically established social structures that predate tourism

itself. From a theoretical standpoint, this research emphasizes the indispensable role of equity and fairness within the realm of tourism. Discussion of findings highlights the intricate relationship between tourism impacts, and the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects requires examinations of power and interrelationships among stakeholders.

Chapter 4 examines the underlying factors that influence the decisions of the households that enable or disable livelihood diversification by adopting tourism-based livelihood strategies in Upper Mustang. Over the past century the viability of households, especially in the context of developing countries, relying on subsistence lifestyle has become a growing source of uncertainty, posing a serious concern. Tourism, even though not a panacea, has been shown to provide viable alternative livelihood options in some rural areas especially in developing countries. Households in tourist destinations are rapidly diversifying their livelihood to tourism-based livelihood strategies. As such, tourism as an agent of livelihood diversification has intrigued academia, and there is strong evidence from different regions and countries that emphasizes the role of tourism as a livelihood option. Using the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) framework, and a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, this paper examines the factors that enable certain households in Upper Mustang to diversify as well as the factors that influenced other households to refrain from diversification.

The quantitative findings reveal that factors such as gender and village location have a significant and positive influence on diversification into tourism, while the upper

middle income had significant but negative influence on household decisions to diversify their livelihoods. Approximately 69% of households in Upper Mustang have moved beyond traditional activities and diversified their livelihoods, participating in remittance-based or tourism-related activities. Based on qualitative results, four key themes were identified as enabling factors that positively influenced households to engage in tourism diversification: the perception of tourism as a viable income source, remittances, the location of the village relative to trekking routes, and the social prestige associated with tourism. Conversely, three themes were identified as barriers that deterred households from diversifying into tourism: migration, village location, and the contact system. Findings highlight that a combination of rapid socio-cultural and economic changes, along with the vulnerability of tourism to external factors, have disrupted previous assumptions about the momentum and sustainability of livelihood diversification through tourism in Upper Mustang. As a result, households in the region face the challenge of making livelihood decisions amidst significant uncertainties.

Research Positionality

Being a first-generation student, an immigrant, and a member of an indigenous mountain community from the Himalayan region of Nepal, my unique positionality has contributed to my journey as a PhD student. These intersecting identities shaped my perspective and influenced the way I approached my research. Additionally, conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic further impacted my research journey, presenting both challenges and opportunities for adapting my methodologies and engaging with participants

"at a distance". Being born and raised in Upper Mustang, my experience and interactions with residents were distinct in comparison to outsiders. As Upper Mustang is a close-knit community, I came across some participants who were either distant relatives or acquaintances of my family members. I acknowledge that my pre-established connections within the community made the recruitment process more favorable for me. However, being a native of Upper Mustang and a non-Bista, there is a possibility of subconscious bias on my part or the respondents to certain topics based on assumptions I was raised with. In general, this positionality allowed me to bring forth a nuanced understanding of issues related to migration, indigenous communities, and the dynamics of tourism in my birthplace, Upper Mustang. I strive to leverage my experiences and perspectives to contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive knowledge production around tourism and its impacts for the people of Upper Mustang.

Dissertation Organization

This dissertation contains five distinct chapters. In this introductory chapter, I provided subject framing to the topics addressed within this dissertation, the research objectives, and brief accounts of the three data chapters. Chapters two, three, and four are each independent research articles investigating a distinct aspect of the broader tourism problem space. Chapter two consists of work recently published in the journal *Development and Change* and is reproduced here with co-author permission (Appendix A). Chapter three is currently under revision and accepted for publication in the journal *Tourism, Planning and Development* and is also reproduced in this dissertation with co-

author permission (Appendix A). Chapter four is targeted for eventual peer-reviewed publication in a tourism journal. As the main body of this dissertation is in the form of three independent research articles, each data chapter is a self-contained investigation, inclusive of literature review, methods, results presentation, and bibliography. A final cumulative discussion is presented in the final chapter covering main themes and findings of this work, as well as broader impacts and potential future directions and developments. A compiled reference section containing a full bibliography of the complete dissertation document can be found starting on page 179.

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CHAPTER 2

UNSETTLING THE AMERICAN DREAM: MOBILITY, MIGRATION, AND

PRECARITY AMONG TRANS-LOCAL HIMALAYAN COMMUNITIES DURING

COVID-19

ABSTRACT

New York City (NYC) garnered significant national and international attention when it emerged as the coronavirus epicenter in the US, in spring 2020. As has been widely documented, this crisis has disproportionately impacted minority, immigrant, and marginalized communities. Among those affected were people from Mustang, Nepal, a Himalayan region bordering Tibet. This community is often rendered invisible within larger Asian immigrant populations, but their presence in the US has transformed their trans-local worlds, between Nepal and NYC. Seasonal mobility and life-stage wage labor to cosmopolitan Asia has been common in Mustang for decades. More permanent moves to NYC began in the 1990's. These migrations were based on assumptions about attaining financial stability in the US in ways deemed unattainable in Nepal. An ethnographic focus on one trans-local Mustangi family frames the discussion of how COVID-19 has overturned previously held ideas around migration to NYC and uncovered new forms of precarity. I build on theories of transnationalism and trans-locality to position migration as a cyclical process whereby the wellbeing of Mustangis' in Nepal and NYC rests on the reliability of global migratory networks and trans-local kinship relations — a basis for security and belonging that COVID-19 has challenged and reconfigured.

INTRODUCTION

At the intersection of 74th street and Roosevelt Avenue, in the heart of Jackson Heights, Queens, is a T-Mobile store. This small kiosk, tucked in between a popular *momo* (dumpling) joint and a store selling South Asian style wedding attire, is a trans-local community hub. It serves as a meeting spot for people from Mustang, Nepal, who have made their way to, and are making their way in, New York City (NYC). The store is a place to engage in community gossip, purchase SIM cards for those recently arrived, participate in community-led loan transactions (*dhukuti*), or simply stash belongings, knowing they will be safe while doing errands or grabbing a quick Nepali meal. It is a running joke within the Mustang-American community that this T-Mobile store is the community's "Google." It is a literal and lived search engine: a central reference point, a space where knowledge is generated and shared among the few thousand people from Mustang who live in NYC, but who also, by virtue of kinship connections, economic obligation, and related senses of belonging and identity, also live trans-local lives, between New York and the vastly different high-altitude mountain environment which is their ancestral homeland.

According to the official website of New York state, Queens is the most ethnically diverse borough in NYC and also the most diverse urban area in the world. Queens is not just the capital of linguistic diversity, but also an unparalleled testament to the possibilities of coexistence among those whose differences are profound (Solnit and Jelly-Schapiro, 2016: 194). The exceptional internationalism and intersectionality of Queens has made it a hub for immigrants. Immigrants from all over the world and from

all walks of life have found sanctuary in Queens among people who share their language,

food, and culture (Stewart et al., 2019). Mustangis and thousands of other international

(im)migrants making their way to NYC share more than just the space: the ultimate

pursuit of the 'American Dream.' Hence, the Mustangi experience in NYC is both unique

and more universal.

Mustangis migrate to the US for many reasons, but perhaps the single-most

overriding explanation is encompassed by a frequently used Mustangi saying that, in

America, "*system chha*" and in Nepal, *"system chhaina".*[1] This English-Nepali hybrid

expression — which means, essentially, that a socioeconomic safety net (*system*) exists

(*chha*) in the US but does not exist (*chhaina*) in Nepal — is a way of talking about how

America is a less precarious place than Nepal. It is notable that the languages in play in

this code-switching phrase does not include the variant of Tibetan spoken in Mustang but

is, instead, built from the dominant languages of nation-states: English and Nepali. In

contrast to Nepal, the US is envisioned as a place of reliable and high-quality healthcare,

transportation, educational facilities, higher income opportunities, and basic

infrastructure like roads, electricity, and drinking water. This "system" refers to state-led

social systems, as opposed to locally rooted community systems of care and assistance.

This distinction, in turn, allows for a deeper analysis of how people's accessibility and

inaccessibility to a proposed "system" alters perceptions and experiences of migration.

An exploration of "system *chha/chhaina,*" especially in the context of a pandemic, also

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[1] We do not provide a linguistic analysis of the Nepali to-be verb "chha/chhaina." Rather, we use these
terms as an analytical entry point to explore how the Mustang community perceives migration to the US in
comparison to opportunities in Nepal.

points to the fallacies and shortcomings of relying on national systems and creates space for community-based trans-local caretaking practices between Nepal and the US. As this paper will show, for Mustangis, like many other immigrants, this sense that the US has something fundamental that their home country does not is at once an aspirational narrative, a lived experience, and a precarious reality.

The US is not the first or only place to which those from Mustang have migrated. For centuries, Himalayan communities from Mustang, Nepal, have engaged in an array of livelihood strategies to survive and thrive in their high-altitude villages (Craig, 2020; Murton, 2017; Ramble, 2008). Agriculture, animal husbandry, and trans-Himalayan trade (primarily grain, salt and wool) defined patterns of subsistence in and through mountain environments (Van Spengen, 1995: 23). In the 20th century, these strategies came to include engagement with seasonal forms of commodity trade and life-stage wage labor abroad, primarily in South and South-East Asian cities. However, over the past two decades, these dynamics of mobility, economic strategy, educational aspiration, and attendant social change have come to include more permanent forms of migration, principally to NYC (Craig, 2020 and Craig, 2002). While Mustangis comprise a small percentage of new immigrants in NYC, the impacts of depopulation back in Mustang are stark and have come to define the lives of young and old, alike (Childs et al., 2014).

These aspirations of mobility and patterns of migration hinge on several assumptions, all of which circulate around the idea that the value of hard work and the US dollar would make the many sacrifices worth it. These assumptions are as follows:

first, that the United States presents a more stable "system" – economically, politically, and socially – than Nepal ever could; second, that remittances as well as the circulation of people and capital between Nepal and NYC will enable better futures, particularly at a time of rapid socio-environmental change in the Himalaya; and, third, that economic investments in Mustang itself can be profitable, given its unique cultural and environmental allure as a tourist destination. Trans-local lives have been built on these premises — "American Dream" propositions that rest on lived experiences rooted in Mustang.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged each of these assumptions. In the spring of 2020, Himalayan and culturally Tibetan New Yorkers, including those from Mustang, found themselves at the epicenter of this pandemic (Correal and Jacobs, 2020). For many, access to health care and social service benefits such as unemployment has been limited; the "system" has been challenging to navigate for sociocultural and linguistic reasons. Many Mustangi-New Yorkers are essential or otherwise vulnerable workers: in service industries such as restaurants and grocery stores, as health care workers and childcare providers, in construction, and in the gig economy, including as drivers for Uber. The physical and economic impact of the pandemic on these livelihood strategies have disrupted remittances, which, in turn, have made life for families back in Nepal more challenging, as they also experience lockdown and associated economic uncertainty as well as even more limited access to health care. As we have learned, this pandemic is disproportionately impacting minority, immigrant, and marginalized communities within the United States and around the world. In this sense, Mustangi experiences are not

exceptional (Borjas, G, 2020 and Lieberman-Cribbin et al., 2020). Yet the ways in which individuals, families, and community networks living within and between Mustang and NYC are making sense of this COVID moment, in light of the assumptions about migration, mobility, and socioeconomic security on which their decisions to migrate to NYC have rested, provide insights into important questions about migration in and beyond the COVID moment.

This article asks: How have the challenges of a global pandemic upended ideas about what this migration affords? It is argued that the current COVID moment has overturned the idea that migrating to the US will ensure financial stability for Mustangis living in both Nepal and NYC, and has posed serious challenges to the assumptions, undergirding migration, that there is a "system" in the US that will protect them. The relevancy of "system *chha/chhaina*" to the Mustangi communities in Nepal and NYC has become even more apparent this past year. In what follows, I explore this concept of "system *chha/chhaina*" to argue that although the US is seen by Mustangis as a place where a social welfare system does exist in ways absent in Nepal, the pandemic and concurrent social unrest has simultaneously exposed major faults in the system and reinforced the importance of trans-local networks of care and community. Though focused on one relatively small community and the unique ways they have carved their lives between the Nepal and NYC, this article contributes empirically and conceptually to broad scholarly understandings of transnationalism and trans-local lives (Appadurai, 1995 and Basch et al., 1994), with respect to its impacts on cultural and socioeconomic wellbeing and immigrant precarity (Butler, 2004; De León, 2015; Paret and Gleeson,

2016), as well as dynamics of identity and belonging (Craig 2020 and Shneiderman 2015).

LOCATING THE COVID-19 MOMENT: RESEARCH METHODS

On 7th March 2020, as many in the Mustang community of NYC were preparing to celebrate a birthday and wedding with a gathering of over five-hundred people, Governor Andrew Cuomo declared a State of Emergency. The city began locking down, imposing strict social-distancing measures, and enforcing the temporary closure of many businesses. During this time, Nepal began to see an uptick in COVID-19 cases, with the Government of Nepal announcing a nation-wide lockdown on March 24th. As Mustangis in both Nepal and NYC grappled with the devastating effects of lockdown and consequently the loss of employment and remittances, Queens became "the epicenter of the epicenter" (Behbahani, 2020). To be certain, the immense loss those from Mustang have faced as a result of the pandemic is not unique, with global case numbers rising and concurrent social mobilization around systemic racism also shaking the nation and the world. In both cases, however, Mustangis are among populations disproportionately affected by both the pandemic and forms of structural inequality (Gurung et al., 2020).

One cannot overstate the outsized risk of COVID-19 infection for 9new immigrants and other marginalized communities; the pandemic has laid bare the relationship between structural inequality and health outcomes (Ross, 2020). Beyond risks to personal health prompted by the virus, immigrants face higher levels of precarity as a result of linguistic barriers, job insecurity, unequal access to healthcare, and legal

uncertainty around visa and citizenship status (Shrestha, 2019). Mustangi households coped with ill family members and the loss of income. Even so, many continued to work through the pandemic, either because their jobs were deemed essential or out of financial necessity. As these realities unfolded in NYC, family members back in Mustang were struck by the fact that they could no longer rely on remittances nor turn to tourism as Nepal shut its national borders. While NYC's Mustang community have been adapting to these ongoing challenges, they also are coming to terms with the precarious nature of their lives as a diasporic community in the US and questioning the assumption that attaining the "American Dream" equals a level of stability, security, and protection that would otherwise be unattainable in Nepal.

The data for this article is based on ethnographic research including participant observation, surveys, and semi-structured interviews collected over time as a result of each author's academic engagements in Mustang, Nepal, and within Mustang communities of NYC. I have chosen to collaborate on this piece, leveraging my diverse positionalities and this unique global moment. I aim to unpack the three assumptions mentioned above, around which migration between Nepal and NYC have been built, examining how each has either unraveled or been fundamentally changed as a result of the COVID-19. I position the following assumptions within their historical and social context and describe the ways each has been overturned by the sociopolitical upheaval of the past year.

I delve ethnographically into each assumption by focusing on the story of one family from Mustang, whose members (names are actual) now reside in and between Mustang, Kathmandu, and NYC. This is the family of AUTHOR 1. AUTHOR 1's parents, Kunga Dhakpa and his wife Tamding Wangmo, both 70 years old, are from Mustang. After Tamding fell ill seventeen years ago, they moved to the neighborhood of Boudha, in Kathmandu, where a growing population of people from Nepal's northern Himalayan regions reside. Kunga has since split his time between Mustang, caring for the agricultural fields in the spring and summer, and Kathmandu, caring for Tamding and enjoying the warmer winters in the Kathmandu valley. Kunga and Tamding raised six children (Kunga, Tsering, Wangmo, Lhakpa, Chimi, and AUTHOR 1) who all migrated to the US between 2004 and 2010 and currently live in NYC.

This family's experiences of transnational migration, socioeconomic change, caretaking across international borders, and challenges associated with the division of labor among Himalayan communities, is at once distinctive and contain elements that are familiar components of other immigrant stories, including but not limited to the Mustang community. Unlike many other trans-local Mustangi households wherein at least one member of the younger generation remains in Nepal, *all* of the children in this family are in NYC, while their elderly parents reside full-time in Nepal. This family includes siblings who span two demographic generations and represent a wide (and still quite uncommon) spectrum of educational trajectories as well as diverse labor strategies: an aspiring scholar, a private school teacher and US college graduate, an Uber driver, a babysitter, and one sibling who is retired. In other ways, though, the case study of this

family echoes the lives of the majority of Mustangis — in their reasons for migrating, their social and financial commitments to family and community on two continents, and the ways they maintain these connections. It is also a story of sacrifice, precarity, and hope that is shared by many other immigrant communities across time and space, and in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SITUATING MUSTANG: TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND TRANS-LOCAL LIVES

In order to understand what makes Mustang's migration narrative at once unique and universal, including in the face of COVID-19, I situate this place and its people in terms of its geography, history, and patterns of mobility. Located high in Nepal's Himalaya (see figure. 1), Mustang District is home to approximately 14,000 people, most of whom speak a local variety of Tibetan, are practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, and who have relied for centuries on agriculture, animal husbandry, and regional trade to survive and thrive in this high-altitude environment. Prior to the creation of the nation-state of Nepal in 1769, the region had been home to a local succession of rulers, dating to the 14th century, chief among them being the King (N. *raja,* T. *gyalpo*) of Lo, the northernmost region of the district which today borders the Tibet Autonomous Region, China. After the mid-18th century, Mustang was annexed into what remained for centuries the world's only Hindu kingdom, became for a time a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, and has been, since 2008, the secular federal democratic republic of Nepal. The 25th in this lineage of Mustang rulers, King Jigme Dorje Palbar Bista, was stripped of his national recognition as a local *raja* in 2008, after Nepal's larger

political transition, although he and his family retain strong local cultural, political, and socioeconomic authority in the region. Bista died in 2016, at the age of 86, having ushered his people through massive changes throughout the 20th and 21st century, from the Chinese annexation of Tibet and the presence of Tibetan resistance fighters in Mustang from 1960-71, through major national political transitions and a ten-year civil war (Cowan, 2016, McGranahan, 2010; Pettigrew, 2010).

Dating back to its early founding and connections to the western Tibetan kingdoms of Gungthang, and up until the present day, Mustang has been a major corridor of trans-Himalayan trade. Lower Mustang has been part of the popular Annapurna trekking circuit since the late 1970s; the upper reaches of Mustang was considered to be a "forbidden kingdom" and was only opened to foreigners in 1992. Officials attribute the restriction of foreigners in Upper Mustang until this time to the safety of international visitors after the closure of the border given geopolitical sensitivities. However, present day Mustang is anything but isolated. Over the past two decades, the region has experienced rapid development of roadways (Murton, 2017; Murton, 2019, Murton and Lord, 2020), electricity, and the building of new guest houses, hotels, and restaurants to facilitate the influx of tourism, an industry which has become a primary mode of income generation. Over roughly the same time period, seasonal migration for petty trade or wage labor to other Asian countries, primarily India, has continued, and education- and economic-based migration to the US and Europe has increased.

Centuries of trade relations with neighboring Tibet and India means mobility is not new to the culturally Tibetan people living along the trans-Himalayan borderlands (Bauer, 2004 and Ratanapruck, 2007). However, these contemporary configurations of migration have radically reformulated what it means to belong to high mountain Nepal. The migration of many people from Mustang to the United States, with the majority of migrants residing in NYC began in the mid-1990s (Craig, 2020, 2011, 2004, and 2002). This initial wave of migrants assumed they would stay temporarily, as they had done in the 1980s and early 1990s in places such as Japan and Korea, earning money to repay debts and create savings for families back in Nepal, as well as to generate cash for school fees, building materials for new homes in the village or in urban centers of Kathmandu or Pokhara, investments in guest houses, seasonal trading supplies, and new forms of transportation in Mustang. This migratory route to the US increased in popularity throughout the late 1990s and early 2000's; simultaneously, state and local development initiatives sought to build roads linking Mustang to urban areas of Nepal, India, and China, and economic opportunities as well as new questions about Mustang's environmental and economic future, have surfaced. Today, it is estimated that over two thousand Mustangis of the approximately 8-9,000 people from culturally Tibetan regions of this district now live in NYC, forming a substantially large part of Mustang's diaspora (Craig, 2020: 6).

Many push-pull factors have contributed to this reality. Rural mountain communities in developing nations like Nepal have very low adaptive capacity and hence suffer disproportionately from the consequences of climate change (Gurung, 2017).

Emerging from the educational and economic constraints of village life, the environmental impacts of climate change felt in Himalayan communities such as Mustang, and the political instability of Nepal, migration has come to be seen as a "normative step in the life course and a defining feature of...society" (Childs and Choedup, 2018: 4). Migration to NYC and other international locations is firmly rooted in the assumption that this mobility will result in a more secure, even prosperous, lifestyle for households in Nepal and abroad. The emphasis on working hard and earning in foreign currency is a pervasive notion in Mustang and one that has led to the district experiencing one of the highest rates of depopulation in Nepal (Childs et al., 2014). The diversification of household labor by sending one or more individuals abroad is a decision that weighs heavily on the minds of parents who wish to give their children better educational and employment opportunities. For Mustangi youth, migration is seen as a necessary step to attain financial security and a higher social status—a coveted rite of passage and a family obligation, both. What began as a small number of individuals (mostly young and middle-aged men) in NYC has morphed into the resettlement of entire families, with younger generations now starting families of their own in the US.

Still, Mustang remains at once a local and a global place: a region of interconnection and interdependence, across vast physical and experiential distances. It is argued that Mustang is a paragon of trans-local (Appadurai, 1995; Banerjee, 2011) global community—one that productively challenges scholarly understandings of immigrant precarity and the emplacement of identity and belonging. Moving beyond the concept of place as rooted in locality or a territorially-based community (Massey 1991), I situate this

article within theories of transnationalism and belonging, rooted in studies of migration that recognize the large web of relations, experiences, and understandings that contribute to a "global sense of place" (ibid). Diverging from concepts like migrant assimilation and reassimilation, this story of one Mustang family shows how people who move between Nepal and NYC enact cyclical migratory pathways, complicating what it means to be "home" or "abroad" as they maintain close social and economic relationships with their ancestral homelands. Migration itself is a phenomenon that occurs at the intersection between those who move and those who stay behind. Transnational flows of people, goods, cash and ideas are an essential part of the cultural, social, economic and political life of all from Mustang today, regardless of where they live. Furthermore, disruptions of such flows in moments of upheaval and unpredictability, such as a global pandemic, have consequences that reverberate across local and national borders, and uncover the precarity of those who rely on mobility, theirs and/or others, to support themselves and their families.

This work builds on early scholarship on transnationalism and trans-locality (Appadurai, 1995; Basch et al., 1994; Portes et al., 1999; Vertovec, 2003) that recognize "migrants are often embedded in multi-layered multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind" (Basch et al., 1994: 1003). However, Mustang's historical position as an important site of economic activity but a locus of political, geographical, and cultural marginalization in Nepal demands that this work against methodological nationalism which takes the nation-state as a given in social analysis. Moving beyond static typologies of migrant identities, modernization theories,

and historical-structuralist thought (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002), I view migration as a process "whereby migrants operate in social fields that transgress geographic, political, and cultural borders" (Brettel and Hollifield eds., 2008: 120). I build on theories of trans-locality to refer to diasporic Mustang communities "whose identities travel across nation states and are reconstituted in localities that transcend national territorial boundaries making these spaces trans-local rather than transnational" (Banerjee, 2011: 334; also see Etzold, 2017). Focusing on locality within studies of migration and mobility allows for an understanding of belonging and identity that is predicated on the ever-changing sociopolitical contexts through which migrants move. This sense of trans-locality remains strong even after migrants put down roots in new locations, such has been the case for those from Mustang in NYC.

As a concrete example of these dynamics, I offer this: In December 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic still raging, community members from upper Mustang (Lo) purchased a building for nearly US $3.8 million in Queens, with the goal of transforming it into a community center. It took a subset of the Mustang community (approximately 800 individuals) nearly a decade to raise the cash with which they bought this property outright — funds raised primarily through rotating credit systems (*dhukuti)*, loans from community members and donations. Although infrastructural renovations are needed and income streams will need to be identified to repay loans associated with this work, the purchase of this property is a remarkable achievement, signifying not only a move towards establishing themselves firmly in NYC, as other immigrant communities have done, but also creating a space to forge enduring trans-local connections by providing

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services such as language and culture classes, elder care, and spaces for religious worship. The building serves as a symbol of strength as the Mustangi community in NYC continues to grow. The realization of this long-term goal is also an indication of the community's intention to retain their sense of place, both within and to Mustang's cultural heritage, and in NYC. In this way, I view the constantly changing networks and connections that expand notions of place as territorially or spatially fixed to encompass what Massey (1991) refers to as an "extroverted sense of place" that integrates the global and the trans-local.

In the context of a trans-local community like those from Mustang, migration is a process through which belonging and affective identity are transformed and reaffirmed (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Pfaff and Toffin eds., 2011; Shneiderman, 2015). I argue that the examples from Mustang help us to understand migration as a fundamentally *cyclical* process. The Mustang example shows how people who move away also remain an integral part of household and village-level politics, socioeconomic systems, and ecological change back in their ancestral communities. Craig refers to this cyclical and differentiated movement of Mustangis through time and space as the "*khora* of migration" (Craig and Gurung, 2018 and Craig, 2020). As a concept emerging from Himalayan and Tibetan communities, it is an "English gloss for the interrelated and culturally salient processes of circumambulation (as around a sacred site) and the Tibetan Buddhist concept of cyclic existence…" This concept of *khora* "illustrates patterns of mobility, processes or world-making, and the dialectical relationship between loss and wonder around which diasporic experiences turn" (Craig, 2020: 8). The framework of

khora in relation to migration "is rooted in relatedness, in kinship" (Craig, 2020: 8); it is

in and through kinship networks as well as social institutions such as *dhukuti*,

community-based social welfare organizations (*kyidug*), and other forms of obligation to

each other and to place that not only enable people from Mustang to migrate but that

sustain these trans-local connections, regardless of where one is physically located. These

community-based systems of care and financial assistance were not only integral to how

those from Mustang in NYC are making it through the pandemic, but also to how they've

been able to envision a future in the form of the community building in Queens. Such

trans-local systems remain an enduring part of how and why Mustangis have viewed

migration to NYC as a way for those both in America *and* in Nepal to thrive.

MIGRATION ASSUMPTIONS AND STATES OF PRECARITY

In moments of crisis (Bates-Eamer, 2019; Butler, 2004; Casas-Cortés, 2014;

Chacko and Price, 2020; Paret and Gleeson, 2016; Stewart, 2012), kinship becomes even

more important as community members rely on one another to navigate challenges and

uncertainties. The financial and social costs of the pandemic have called into question

many of the assumptions around which Mustangis have built trans-local livelihood

strategies. Ways of living and possible futures that once felt secure have been called into

question as people turn to each other and to community-based support networks to

survive. I use the term "precarity" in this context to highlight the indeterminate,

restrictive, and fragmented circumstances trans-local communities navigate over time,

across scale, and in different places. Levels of precarity among immigrant communities

are influenced by micro and macro dynamics, "by fluctuating national regulations and

policies, the vicissitudes of labor markets, changes in nuances of popular discourse on migration and migrants as well as personal and social characteristics" (Chacko and Price, 2020: 14). I view precarity not only in terms of economic insecurity but as an embodied experience of vulnerability marked by conditions that violate one's sense of agency and wellbeing (Butler, 2004; Chu 2010; De León, 2015; Paret and Gleeson, 2016).

In what follows, I position this article as both a sense-making process of the current moment and an ethnographically rooted analysis of how COVID-19 is being experienced in NYC and, secondarily, in Nepal. I examine how this moment is overturning many previously held notions about migration. I endeavor to imagine how COVID-19 will have long term impacts on the socio-economic wellbeing of communities such as those from Mustang who have come to rely heavily on labor migration and remittances, and I consider how trans-local lives have been profoundly altered by increased levels of precarity and vulnerability.

Assumption 1: In America, Unlike Nepal, The "System" Is Reliable

Mustangi people often remark that one of the fundamental elements that divides life in Nepal from life in America is that, in the US, "system *chha.*" Despite elements of hardship—structural inequalities, cultural expectations, stresses on family ties, financial burdens, linguistic barriers—Mustangis who have migrated, on the whole, have done well for themselves. However, after the outbreak of COVID-19, the "system" they'd envisioned existed in NYC was exposed for its underlying vulnerabilities, forcing Mustangis to confront systemic inequality in America that they had previously

downplayed or overlooked for many years. The following vignette, emergent from AUTHOR 1's family experiences, illustrates the overturning of this assumption.

It is no coincidence that all of Kunga and Tamding's children ended up in the US. They assumed that America offered their children a chance for a better education and economic advancement. Kunga and Tamding's own lack of education, and awareness that village life offered limited opportunities, played a central role in their decision to encourage their children to migrate. Their reasoning is founded on a certain privileging of the "American Dream" narrative but in ways that also assumed Nepal, and Mustang, would still be the primary locus of belonging and identity, even after migration. Wealth and opportunity sought in NYC would eventually circle back and help to "develop" Mustang. Over time, this propensity to migrate has created a social stigma now attached to younger generations who do not leave—they are presumed to be "stuck" in Nepal—or those who make conscious decisions to return to Nepal. This stigma has grown stronger over the past decade, creating a pressurized environment that assumes one should attempt to migrate to the US upon completing high school or even before.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken confidence in this attitude towards migration as a "life stage" rite of passage as well as an economic strategy. When Queens became the US epicenter of COVID-19, Mustangis in Nepal began to worry about family members in NYC. The sense of economic security that Mustangis in NYC had felt was halted: this security depended on NYC being its usual bustling global hub. When the city came to a standstill, and when the "system"—particularly health and human services—

was overwhelmed, many Mustangis felt their fundamental vulnerability for the first time. In some instances, people were called back to work in "essential" jobs like healthcare and service industries, but they chose not to go for fear of exposing their relatives to the virus, particularly since most live in crowded multi-generational households (Venugopal, 2020). Unemployment skyrocketed. People got sick and several from the community died. While they were able to rely on their own long standing networks of community care, rotating credit systems, and culturally Tibetan Buddhist practices to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic — often to very positive effect — they also felt abandoned, disillusioned, and confused by the lack of clarity and support coming from state and local government, and disbelief at the level of unpreparedness and consequential death and sickness that occurred, in such unevenly distributed ways across the city.

Prior to the COVID-19, Mustangis rarely acknowledged their vulnerability in the US—the presumed "land of opportunity." Now, these narratives of stability and security have shifted. Many Mustangi women work as babysitters, caretakers, or house cleaners while men tend to work in hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, or for driving services like Uber. Within the family in question, four siblings and their spouses are all involved in such industries, while the two most educated siblings have "white collar" employment— as a schoolteacher and a graduate student. Amidst NYC lockdown, three of the four sisters were called to work because their employers labor from home. The sibling who is a babysitter was most concerned about returning to work because she recognized the unequal terrain of risk. The fact that the most educated among this family had the

"luxury" of working from home drew stark comparisons and created tension within a family that was, still, working hard to take care of one another.

Prior to the pandemic, Mustangi people were not fully aware of state or federal unemployment benefits as they had not needed such assistance; they knew it existed in the abstract, as part of the "system" that those with proper immigration documents could access, but this remained theoretical knowledge. The majority of the Mustangi community in NYC have trouble reading, writing, and speaking in English proficiently, with many of them never having used a computer. Now this capacity to navigate "the system"—not in the abstract but in specific terms—became a crucial element of their daily lives, leaving many anxious, helpless, and insecure. Many did not have email addresses or the language skills necessary to apply for assistance. In this family, the most educated siblings navigated unemployment bureaucracies and applications for other federal benefits for the rest of the family —and for many other people in the Mustang NYC community. Although the stimulus payments and unemployment benefits from the government brought some relief, Mustangis still had to pay their bills and feed their families, both in the US and Nepal, on much reduced income.

These experiences of "system" breakdown in America stood in stark contrast to the experiences that many Mustangis have had in other countries, at other moments of migration. For example, Wangmo and Kunga first migrated to work in Japan before coming to the US. They had never questioned this decision, until now. They noticed that Japan has garnered significant praise for their handling of COVID-19, whereas the US

has been widely criticized for its politicization of the epidemic and the ensuing lack of effectiveness in curbing the virus. "If we stayed in Japan," Kunga said in May 2020, "we would never have to fear for our lives. About 100,000 people have died in the US. How is the US the number one country?" Since he voiced this sentiment, the death toll has well surpassed half a million Americans. As the realities of the US' failed attempts to contain COVID's spread became apparent, worries over children's education, future employment opportunities, and healthcare access has become a central point of concern.

The vulnerabilities Mustangis and other immigrant communities face as a result of the pandemic reveal "how precarity stretches to embrace multiplicity, to go beyond the limits of workspace, and to rethink labor, citizenship, and care practices" (Casas-Cortés, 2014: 47). COVID-19 has amplified the precarious nature of trans-local lives—the contingent employment and social risks[2] immigrant communities endure as they are forced to question their financial safety nets and dismantle the assumption that migration leads to economic security. The pandemic has also revealed to immigrant parents that "working hard" is not enough to provide a better life for their children. Rather, it has heightened the social, linguistic, and technical divides between generations and within families.

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[2] Although the primary driver for migration is economic, educational opportunities for younger generations is also cited as a rationale (Childs and Choedup, 2018). COVID has also challenged these assumptions, with stark consequences for parents in NYC who are at once unequipped to, and yet responsible for, aiding their children in the adjustment to distance learning.

The case of Kunga and Tamding's family reveals how broader political and economic shifts reconfigure relationships between individuals and communities across localities, and in doing so, reinforce many of the same insecurities that underpin migration decisions. This vignette also supports Sassen's (1998) claim that migrations "do not just happen; they are produced. And migrations do not involve just any possible combination of countries; they are patterned" (56). The "*system chha*" narrative moved from an abstract concept to a lived, challenging, and concrete in the wake of the pandemic. Now, Mustangis are learning to navigate through the US system by gaining basic tangible skills and knowledge that has the potential to allow them to tap into the very system they cite as a primary reason to migrate to NYC — but that they had never really relied upon. As Mustangis have discovered during the pandemic, however, this system is also complex, convoluted, sometimes even inaccessible, and far from perfect, even as it can afford them new elements of stability beyond what is maintained through trans-local community networks. Mustangi communities in Nepal and abroad, as well as other immigrant communities, are left to question the conditions upon which their trans-local lives are built, and to consider the possibility that living in the US is not a prerequisite for stability.

Assumption 2: Remittances Are Reliable and Make Life Better For Those In Nepal

The importance of migration and mobility among the communities of Mustang dates back centuries, with opportunities in tourism and international labor migration as contemporary iterations of old patterns. The introduction of a cash economy, and a decreasing reliance on traditional forms of livelihoods, means that the majority of

Mustang's households now depend on the influx of money from tourism and remittances — as is the case for many others in Nepal (Baniya et al., 2020 and Sijapati and Limbu, 2012). New economic alliances and responsibilities in relation to remittances emerge alongside changing social structures in Mustang and within Mustang's diasporic communities that transform kinship networks, local forms of governance, and community wellbeing. Moreover, the reliance on the remittance economy as a fundamental part of Mustangi livelihoods is rooted in the possibilities that trans-local mobility offers. I return to another aspect of the lives in this one Mustangi family to reveal the complicated decision-making processes around migration, and the ways in which many families now face even greater financial vulnerabilities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kunga and Tamding live a comfortable life in their Kathmandu home, but not everyone can afford to live in Nepal's capital where the cost of living is high and has increased exponentially in recent years. Just two decades ago, few Mustangi owned houses in Kathmandu. Since that time, a growing number have purchased houses in Kathmandu, with funds earned abroad. As the number of Mustangi migrants to NYC increased, the number of houses owned by those in Kathmandu also increased. Before Mustangis migrated to NYC, few could even afford the luxury of seasonal migration to southern Nepal or parts of northern India to escape Mustang's brutally cold winters. Today, Mustangi elders, like Kunga and Tamding, whose children are abroad, either live in Pokhara and Kathmandu or split their time between Mustang and urban Nepal.

It is common to see congregations of elderly Mustangis circumambulating the holy Buddhist stupas of Boudhanath and Swayambhu in Kathmandu each morning and evening. Like many of their friends, Kunga and Tamding subscribe to this daily ritual of prayer, taking advantage of their old age and freedom from the responsibilities of village life. Most of the time, they consider themselves fortunate to have all of their children in the US. Even though their children are not physically present, they have hired local caretakers. In addition, the children send money for personal expenses and allowance for pilgrimage trips, to raise money for the restoration of monasteries (Craig, 2004), help villages affected by natural disasters, aid in the construction of new community spaces and schools, and provide other emergency financial support.[3] For example, in 2003, Tamding was diagnosed with early-stage pancreatic cancer. She was airlifted by helicopter and taken to a private hospital in Kathmandu for treatment where she was told by doctors that she would not live more than six months. Seventeen years later, Tamding still lives a fairly healthy life. She attributes her second chance at life to America —to the remittances from NYC that made her expensive medical treatment in Nepal possible.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become exceedingly difficult to send money back to Nepal (Akram, 2020). This is due to loss of employment among those in NYC as well as a sense that they need to save to economically survive the pandemic, but it is also a logistical concern. Remittances are most often sent in the physical hands of Mustangis who are traveling to Nepal as opposed to formal bank

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[3] As recently as March 2020, the Mustang community in NYC raised money for anticipated COVID-related relief back in Mustang.

transfers that tend to be costly and unreliable, at least on the Nepal side. There has never been a shortage of people to send money or goods back home: people circle through. But the pandemic changed all that.

During a WeChat group call in mid-March with Kunga and Tamding, the children were discussing if they should send money and, if so, how. With the worldwide travel restrictions, no one was traveling to Nepal. Instead, people have resorted to money transferring agencies, but with the majority of businesses closed, this is not reliable (Gill, 2020). Lhakpa, one of the only family members to remain employed during the pandemic, was able to send money via bank transfer to Nepal in March 2020. However, Kunga and Tamding were not able to receive the money until June when the Government of Nepal started easing lockdown. In times like these, the burdens of trans-local kinship networks become stark.

This vignette shows how precarity exists in spaces of both production and reproduction (Gidwani and Ramanmuthy, 2018), in both "receiving" sites of migration and the "home" regions of migrants. Trans-local livelihood strategies rely on "invisible economies of care" (Shah and Lerche, 2020) whereby migrants abroad are responsible to their kin back home who, in turn, provide a safety net by maintaining the household, looking after children, and tending to the agricultural fields and livestock. COVID-19 has shown how trans-local kinship networks in and between Mustang and NYC, and the economies of care that sustain them, are stretched thin. Previously held configurations of trans-local care practices are temporarily disrupted and have been undermined for the

foreseeable future as new economic and social vulnerabilities expose the fragmented and risky nature of migration. The story of Kunga and Tamding's family reaffirms how "precarity is experienced at the intimate scale of the human body but also it is influenced by policies determined by the nation-state or supra-national entities" (Chacko and Price, 2020: 3). Practices of caring for elderly members of the family, like Tamding's cancer treatment, or funding infrastructure projects, like the building schools in Mustang, intersect with national policies and labor markets that dictate the availability of foreign employment and economic transfers. As the effects of COVID-19 continue to disproportionately affect immigrant and other marginalized communities, the production and reproduction of trans-local livelihoods and the kin relations at their core become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Assumption 3: Reinvesting In Mustang Tourism Is Profitable

As I have shown, remittances serve as an important mechanism of survival for trans-local Mustangi families and remain a vital part of development and economic growth for those who remain in Nepal. Likewise, the advent of a robust tourism industry in Mustang in the early 1990's created new opportunities, with many households constructing guest houses and restaurants to cater to the growing number of tourists. The number of hotels and other tourism-oriented businesses in Mustang have increased steadily[4] over the past few decades. Before 2000, the large settlement of Lo Monthang had only two hotels; by 2019, that number had risen above thirty. Although the entirety

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[4] The exception to this being heightened periods of political tension during Nepal's decade-long Maoist conflict (1996-2006) and the 2015 earthquakes which devastated Nepal's infrastructure and claimed over 9,000 lives curtailed tourism during these years.

of this tourism-sector development is not solely due to remittances, according to

AUTHOR 1's survey data from 2019, well over half of tourism-related businesses are

created and sustained with remittances. The following vignette examines the shift from

agriculture and animal husbandry to tourism as a perceivably less risky and more

lucrative economic investment, inclusive of the complex familial negotiations that factor

into decisions over the household division of labor between Nepal and NYC.

Before Kunga and Tamding's children migrated to the US, they subsisted on

farming, animal husbandry and trade, as did most families in Mustang. During the

farming season, Kunga and Tamding worked arduous days in the fields, and in winter

Kunga used to travel to Mustang's northern border to Tibet (China) to trade livestock

(mostly sheep and yak) for lumber, furniture, furs, and other goods. Kunga is one of those

Loba men who Murton (2019: 3) refers to who frequently travelled between Tibet and

Mustang for petty trade. Although Kunga still engages in such trade in a limited manner,

the border is geopolitically sensitive and such economic activity has become unreliable.

Beginning in the 1960s, this trans-Himalayan border region became increasingly

militarized after China's occupation of Tibet, making it more difficult to sustain previous

patterns of transhumance and economic exchange. This was exacerbated in the 1960s and

'70s by the presence of Tibetan resistance soldiers in Mustang, and again in the winter of

1999-2000, when the Karmapa, a high-profile figure in Tibetan Buddhism, fled Tibet into

exile in India by traveling through Mustang (for details see Cowan, 2016 and

McGranahan, 2010). After Tamding was diagnosed with cancer and moved to

Kathmandu, it became impossible for Kunga to continue working the land and caring for

the village house alone. Despite his childrens' constant requests to retire, Kunga, like many elderly Mustangis, did not have other plausible forms of earning income except through tourism.

In the summer of 2013, Kunga expressed his desire to open a hotel. "Everyone is building a hotel," he explained. "My cousins are building hotels; they seem to be doing very well. We have a good plot of land for building a hotel as we do not farm there anymore." Owning a hotel has become an attractive idea in part because it is seen as a sign of prestige, progress, and wealth. It is rare to encounter a family who owns a hotel in Mustang who does not have at least one family member abroad. Before COVID-19, investments in tourism-related businesses were considered low risk, in that they did not require an extensive educational background or a hefty amount of startup capital; some cash as well as land, such as a fallow field, was sufficient. Using remittances to invest in the tourism industry has been deemed safe, and something that is attractive to older and younger generations alike. Particularly for younger migrants, many of whom did not grow up in Mustang, they see tourism as a profession they can invest in now and could delve into if they returned.

In the wake of the pandemic, tourism has suffered the steepest drop since the 1960s when Nepal first began opening its borders to foreign tourists (Prasain, 2020). The pandemic and associated lockdown has restricted international travel and prevented the movement of people within Nepal during peak tourist seasons. COVID-19 has exposed how uncertain the tourism industry is in a much more convincing way than the Nepal

earthquakes of 2015 (Le Billon et al., 2020 and Shneiderman et al., 2020) when tourism

bounced back hastily. The pandemic has made Mustangi communities come to terms

with tourism's precarity, linked as it is to a reliance on remittances, on the one hand, and

cyclical migratory flows as well as the capacity for foreign and domestic travel, on the

other. This vignette also draws attention to the simultaneity of trans-local communities

(Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004) in a way that highlights the important roles of both

migrants and non-migrants; investments abroad fund projects in Nepal, which in turn,

help to ensure migrant families maintain a safety net back home (Shah and Lerche, 2020).

Investing in tourism-oriented businesses is likely to decrease while navigating the twin

crises of a pandemic and its economic fallout. As future opportunities in the tourism

industry in Nepal diminish concurrently with earning opportunities for those abroad, the

assumption that trans-local migration offers a pathway to a more secure future back in

Nepal, particularly through tourism, is marked by insecurity and unpredictability.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have elaborated on the nature of migration, mobility, and precarity

among a global trans-local Himalayan community in the context of unprecedented levels

of financial and social upheaval being experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic.

These stories illuminate the ways this crisis has inordinately affected the lives of

marginalized immigrant communities of color in places like NYC—people whose jobs

are often considered "essential" and those whose families elsewhere depend on the

continued investment of remittances for their survival. For many Mustangis, these

burdens have caused them to reevaluate the assumptions on which their decisions to

migrate rested. From the presumption that America would always offer better and more stable economic opportunities than Nepal, to the notion that the US presents a reliable social safety net—a "system"—that is unavailable in Nepal has been called into question as a result of the global health crisis. As tourism has come to a standstill in Nepal, the aspirational idea that youth in NYC can return to Nepal after accumulating enough capital now hangs in the balance as they struggle to support their families in the US, let alone send money back to Nepal.

The focus on trans-local migration and precarity in the context of COVID-19 highlights the undue pressure immigrant communities, like those from Mustang, endure in moments of crisis. The case of Kunga and Tamding's family from Mustang is just one intimate example of precarity in the context of a trans-local community whose lives are built around a shared sense of belonging and economies of long-distance care. Previously existing and enduring forms of community-based loan systems (*dhukuti)* and welfare organizations (*kyidug)* emerged as even more vital forms given the ways the pandemic overburdened national healthcare and financial systems. Although precarity is not a fixed status, with migrant communities facing varying levels of such insecurity through space and over time, COVID-19 has provided a unique moment to unpack what it means to belong to a transnational kinship network at a time of immense physical risk as well as economic and social unrest. The examples from Mustang uniquely illustrate how one small immigrant community has successfully integrated their own systems of trans-local care while also tapping into systems in the US to sustain lives before, and during, the pandemic.

Future generations of Mustangis will, nonetheless, need to face the cultural, political, and economic repercussions of rapid depopulation from their ancestral homeland, and confront how the flows of people, goods, and ideas have altered life in Mustang. Moreover, those living in NYC will continue to navigate shifting cultural and political contexts while renegotiating what it means to be Mustang-New Yorkers, as what constitutes "system *chha/chhaina*" changes across time and generations. The ethnographic narratives presented in this article, coupled with a theoretical engagement with trans-locality, belonging, and precarity in the context of migration, shows that despite spatially-dispersed kinship arrangements, the collective sentiment of a shared identity and responsibility to community remain strong. It is precisely within and through these dense kinship relations — relations which "give meaning to people's lives in accordance with, or even in spite of, their physical and political abilities to move" (Craig, 2020: 14) — that the importance of these networks are revealed, even as they are challenged and reconfigured in the face of COVID. What remains to be seen is how the forced physical stilling of these trans-local lives may, yet again, reconfigure assumptions about what it means to stay, to leave, or to return home.

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CHAPTER 3

AN UN(EVEN) PLAYING FIELD? A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF TOURISM

IMPACTS IN UPPER MUSTANG, NEPAL

ABSTRACT

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries; as the pandemic wanes, tourism industry growth is anticipated. Globally, households in regions with high levels of tourism are rapidly diversifying their livelihoods to tourism-based ones. While scholarly research on Sustainable Tourism Development has expanded, local perceptions of tourism impacts, in the context of developing countries, are comparatively understudied. Additionally, the role of power relations in tourism dynamics have been implicit or poorly theorized. As a geo-politically sensitive border region, only opened to foreign visitors in 1992, Upper Mustang, Nepal, is an ideal region to explore these dynamics. Using political ecology approach, this paper examines the core facets of tourism impact as perceived by locals, while also incorporating consideration of power relationships that may differentiate positive and negative tourism experiences and perceptions in a non-western developing country context. Results show that the perceived impacts of tourism were mostly dictated by geographical location based on the presence of tourists or lack thereof. Findings also suggest that the uneven distribution of tourism benefits can be attributed to power relations emerging from historically established social structures that predate tourism itself.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is defined as, "a social, cultural and economic phenomenon, which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes" (UNWTO, 2018). Prior to COVID-19, tourism was one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries. The unprecedented expansion of sustainable tourism development (STD) has given rise to a multitude of economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts - both positive and negative - and has stimulated scholarly research on many aspects of tourism phenomena (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Hall, 2011). While the impacts of tourism are felt by both host destinations and consumers (i.e., tourists), a focus on consumers' experiences dominates the literature. Perceptions of stakeholders in host destinations are comparatively understudied and undertheorized. Additionally, tourism scholarship has been criticized as linear, reductionist, and mechanistic (Farrell and Twining-Ward, 2004; Baggio and Sainaghi, 2011). For example, a majority of tourism research has disproportionately focused on positive economic benefits of the industry, while overlooking widespread negative economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts and tradeoffs (Ruhanen, et al., 2015; Bramwell and Lane, 2012; Faulkner and Russell, 1997). There is a need to reframe tourism studies to include these complexities.

This paper uses a political ecology approach to examine and understand the local perceptions of economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts of tourism within the Upper Mustang region of northern Nepal. Upper Mustang is a politically sensitive border area with unique cultural and natural features, and a long tumultuous history. The

opening of the region to foreign tourism in 1992, and recent major infrastructural changes (including but not limited to the creation of a motorable road) means the region is dealing with tourism impacts and dynamics on host communities in real time. Political ecology as a conceptual framework disaggregates local stakeholders' differing perspectives on tourism by examining factors that differentiate social actors who benefit from those who do not. This lens can be instrumental in understanding the basis for local perceptions about tourism: first, by examining the distribution of tourism benefits, associated causes, and consequences; and second, by highlighting the disproportionate precarity of the tourism experience within the area and across its inhabitants.

The primary research questions this paper seeks to answer are: 1) How do people from Upper Mustang perceive that tourism is affecting their economy, environment, and culture, and what are key sociodemographic, economic, and geographic factors underlying these perceptions? And, 2) Are the benefits and costs associated with tourism evenly experienced by individual households or settlements in Upper Mustang? This paper examines the distributive (in)justices and outcomes of the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural changes associated with tourism in Upper Mustang.

SUSTAINABILITY AND PERCEIVED TOURISM IMPACTS

The concept of sustainability gained momentum in the early 90s with the release of the Brundtland report (1987), which proved to be a turning point for tourism planning and research. As the premise of sustainable tourism gained popularity, tourism research extended beyond the analysis of linear "more tourism is better" assumptions to a wide

array of topics, primarily sustainable tourism development and planning processes at regional and national levels (Inskeep, 1991; Hall, 2011; Bramwell and Lane, 1993, 2012). Many factors were found to contribute to sustainable tourism outcomes, but critical among these was stakeholder involvement in the process (Byrd, 2007). Local communities' inclusion and involvement as tourism stakeholders were identified as crucial for achieving sustainable outcomes in the short term (Murphy and Price, 2005, p. 174), and for maintaining long-term success. However, the role of bottom-up stakeholder perspectives has not been studied extensively (Saito and Ruhanen, 2017).

Previous research implies that the perception of residents towards the impacts of tourism are instrumental in future policy consideration, marketing, and operation of tourism programs (Ap, 1992). However, research focused on attitudes currently dominates the literature. There is a theoretical link between perception and attitude, i.e. if perceptions of tourism are positive, then attitudes towards tourism industry encounters will also be positive (Brida et al., 2011). Pickens (2005, p. 44) offers a concise definition of attitudes as, "... a mindset or a tendency to act in a particular way due to both an individual's experience and temperament." In contrast, perception is the process by which organisms interpret and organize sensation to produce a meaningful experience of the world (Lindsay and Norman, 2013, p. 52). Thus, attitudes emerge from perceptions, and are a direct precursor to action or behavior. Most attitude studies rely on Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Andereck et al. 2005; Gursoy and Rutherford 2004), the Irridex model (Doxey, 1975), or Butler's Tourism Life Cycle model (1980). However, Stylids et al., (2014) citing Gursoy and Rutherford (2004) criticized earlier attitude studies for

being descriptive, while not offering a rationale for *why* residents' perceptions of tourism are as they are. One important step to redressing a lack of inclusion of residents' voices in sustainable tourism is to understand and assess residents' baseline perceptions of specific impacts of tourism.

The second gap in tourism studies is that even when the focus is on the perceived impacts of tourism (Lo et al., 2014; Ap, 1992; Jurowski et al., 1997) these studies occur in developed countries (Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2012; Wang and Pfister, 2008; Goffi et al., 2019). Harrill (2004) highlights that most tourism research to date has been conducted in North America and Europe, and that interest in this research area should stimulate efforts to explore resident perceptions and attitudes in other locales (Harrill, 2004, p. 2).

Finally, since the discipline's early years, tourism scholars have disproportionately focused on understanding economic impacts (Comerio, 2019; Liu, et al., 1987). This focus persists (Song et al., 2018; Walpole and Goodwin, 2000; Liu et al 1987), but tourism scholars are expanding to encompass other dimensions that define perceptions and attitudes about tourism. Despite this expansion of focus, however, three pillars in tourism scholarship on impacts remain dominant: economic, environmental, and socio-cultural (e.g., Jurowski and Gursoy, 2004; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2012; Vargas-Sánchez et al., 2009). These themes are so pervasive across tourism literature that scholars even refer to the set as the "triple bottom line approach" (Stylidis et al 2014; Andersson and Lundberg, 2013; Prayag et al., 2013). This paper examines these core facets of tourism impact as perceived by local residents, but also incorporates

consideration of socio-cultural power relationships that may differentiate positive and negative tourism perceptions and contribute to uneven economic benefits from engaging in the tourism industry in a non-western developing country context.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND TOURISM

In the case of Upper Mustang, an emerging issue around tourism is fairness and equity with respect to the "triple bottom line." As an interdisciplinary field, political ecology offers an approach for understanding the complexities of meanings, uses, and management of natural resources including conflicts, power relations, and inequality (Nepal and Saarinen, 2016). In *Ownership and Political Ecology* anthropologist Eric Wolf (1972) demonstrated the connective linkages between local ecosystems and the parameters of economic change (p. 201) and framed the need to combine inquiries around local ecological contexts with knowledge of social and political history (p. 205). This approach crystallized as political ecology and now reflects an increasingly diverse field extending beyond academic research to issues of power and control over natural resources, environmental justice, conservation politics, indigenous rights, and climate vulnerability. Put simply, political ecology recognizes that environmental change and social-ecological problems are the product of political processes (Robbins, 2011).

The sustainable tourism development (STD) literature has seen dramatic recent growth linking tourism to a wide range of issues and calling for a more equitable examination and evaluation of tourism impacts (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Baggio, 2008; Hunter, 2002; Briassouless, 2002). As scholars across disciplines raise critical

questions in regard to the ability of tourism to advance the economic, ecological, and social well-being of rural communities, political ecology has powerful potential to unpack the social relations and power structures often associated with tourism in the developing world. The approach is a means to assess historical patterns of inequalities (Nepal and Saarinen, 2016; Peluso, 1992), understand how tourism contributes to contemporary patterns of resource (in)access, and consider the agency of various impacted stakeholders (Saito and Ruhanen, 2017).

The emerging issues of justice and fairness have been overlooked in sustainable development generally, and more specifically in STD (Knowles, 2019; Jamal and Camargo, 2014). STD scholars have challenged inequalities and injustices linked to environmental degradation, resource depletion, human rights violations (Hills and Lundgren, 1977), cultural and social ramifications (Mowforth and Munt, 2015), and commercial gains (Britton, 1982). However, Jamal and Higham (2012) argue that while the issues of justice and rights are common across tourism contexts, they typically remain implicit or poorly theorized. Based on work in Fiji, Britton (1982) highlights the increasing inequalities evident in the tourism economy (ibid, p. 332) and uneven distribution of power and economic benefits at local levels (p. 333). The work of Jamal and Camargo (2014) via a case study of Quintana Roo, Mexico illustrated a range of justice issues experienced by local Mayan residents. Additional work by Stonich (1998) and Nepal and Saarinen (2016) reveal inequalities in the distribution of costs and benefits, loss of access and use of local commons, and disproportionate allocation of scarce water resources to tourists, while disadvantaged local populations experience

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water shortages. These critiques are relevant to the context of lived experience with tourism in Upper Mustang.

THE ROLE OF POWER

Unequal access to resources implies inequitable power relationships. I define power as, "the ability to achieve a desired objective" in this paper (Nepal and Saarinen, 2016, p. 83). Svarstad et al (2018) argues that synthesis across power perspectives would strengthen theorizing about power in political ecology scholarship. Actor-oriented power perspective is where power exercised by actors is connected to agency, but agency is constrained as well as enabled by various structures (see Engelstad, 2003; Dowding, 2008; Dahl, 1957). Neo-Marxist power perspective is where human agency, socially conditioned, is produced and reproduced by historically established social structures (see Isaac, 1987, p. 81; Wisner, 2015, p. 56). I focus here on a combination of actor-oriented and neo-Marxist power perspectives for Upper Mustang. According to the theory of power elite put forth by Mills (1981), "elite" refers to top ranked people of society who exert "power" by imposing their will upon others. Upper Mustang is a highly stratified society with a socio-cultural hierarchy conditioned by historical patterns. In this article I use "elite" to refer to individual(s) who are higher in Mustang's social rank based on caste, economic strength, and level of political influence. I explore if tourism benefits are widely and/or evenly distributed, why particular patterns emerge, and the characteristics of beneficiaries.

RESEARCH SITE AND HISTORY

Upper Mustang encompasses the northern regions of Mustang District, situated in the high trans-Himalayan region on Nepal's northern border with the Tibet Autonomous Region, China (See Figure 1). Upper Mustang includes 27 villages in total divided into two rural-municipalities (Lomanthang Rural Municipality and Lo-Gekar Damodarkunda Rural Municipality). According to the Nepal 2011 population census, the population of Mustang District as a whole was 13,452 people with 3,322 calling Lo/Upper Mustang home. At times popularly referred to as a "Lost Kingdom of Nepal" and "Forbidden Kingdom of Lo", Upper Mustang has a rich recorded history that dates back to the 7th century. The geo-positionality of Upper Mustang along an important historical trade route made it a major corridor for trans-Himalayan trade as well as an area with constant border conflicts. Subsequently, Upper Mustang was a breeding ground for the continual rise of new regional powers and the center of numerous wars and invasions. Ramble and Vinding (1987, p. 9) highlight the tumultuous history of Upper Mustang, stating, "neighboring powers have through the past millennium controlled the area: Tibet from the 7th to the 9th century; Gungthang from the 13th through the 14 centuries; Jumla in the 16th century; Ladakh in the 17th century; Jumla in the 18th century; and Gorkha from the end of the 18th century." These tensions continue into the modern era. Upper Mustang shares a border with Tibet. After China occupied Tibet in the late 1950s, the region became increasingly militarized. Instability was further exacerbated when Mustang subsequently became a refuge to many Tibetan resistance soldiers (McGranahan, 2010).

In 1789 King Prithivi Narayan Shah conquered numerous small kingdoms including Mustang, to form the nation that is contemporary Nepal. Even after Mustang was conquered, the local king of Mustang maintained close ties with the Shah kings until 28 May, 2008, when the monarchy was officially abolished in Nepal. Despite the promulgation of 1961 Act to abolish petty kings and principalities, the King of Lo retained the title "Raja" was given limited authority, traditional rights, and even the rank of colonel and an equivalent salary that enabled and perpetuated elite-centric rules, rights, and norms (Chalaune, 2009, p. 119). The King of Lo is highly revered and still possesses the stature of Lord Buddha.

In 2008, the government of Nepal transitioned to a secular federal democratic republic. Even as Nepal navigates through a larger political transition, the former King of Lo and his family retain strong local cultural, political, and socioeconomic authority in Upper Mustang. Upper Mustang may seem culturally homogeneous based on language, religion, and physical appearance. However, differentiation based on wealth, power, and social caste makes the region highly heterogeneous. Upper Mustang is socially stratified, and the caste naming system based on historic family origins is still intact and respected. This system differentiates elite families by the surname "Bista*"*, those descended from the king, as distinct from the rest of the population, which includes various classes of *samanya* (referred to as "ordinary" or "commoners") and those considered of lower status by virtue of their occupation and/or family lineage (e.g., musicians, blacksmiths).

In the context of tourism, these social distinctions culminate in a primary organizing frame called the "contact system." This refers to pre-existing referral relationships between trekking agencies and guides who are based in bigger cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara, but work locally, and hotel owners of Upper Mustang. It is imperative to note that foreign tourists are required to be accompanied by a licensed guide to travel to Upper Mustang. Tourists first connect with agencies and guides even before they step in Upper Mustang, who then direct visitors only to specific hotels along the trekking routes with whom they have prior agreements (i.e., contacts).
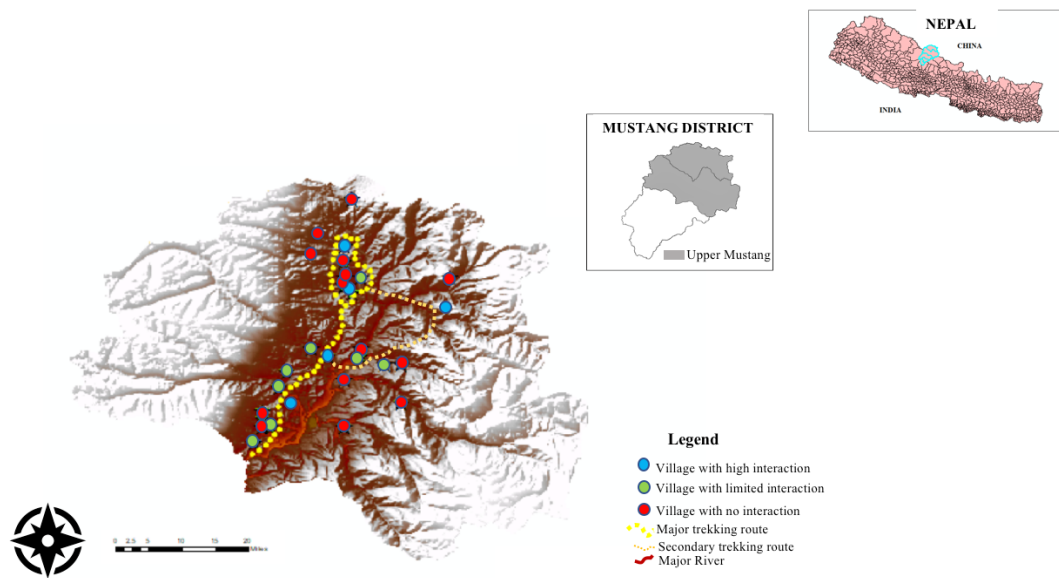
Figure 1. Map of Upper Mustang Nepal with the trekking route and villages. (Secondary trekking route lead to specific natural features and exclusive to specialized tourists upon request).

TOURISM IN UPPER MUSTANG

Before tourism, Upper Mustang livelihoods revolved around three occupations: agriculture (primarily wheat, barley, mustard), animal husbandry (yaks, sheep, horses,

cows, and goats), and trans-Himalayan trade primarily of salt, grain, and furniture (Childs et al., 2014). Due to its remoteness and isolation from the central Nepalese government, the region is at a disadvantage geographically. Gentle and Maraseni (2012) suggest that the people of Upper Mustang are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change due to a combination of limited livelihood options and harsh environmental conditions. Gurung (2017) suggests that with the combination of climatic, economic, and political factors, people from mountain communities in developing nations like Nepal are pushed to adopt livelihood options - like tourism - that are deemed less vulnerable to climate change.

Upper Mustang was only opened to foreigners in 1992, leading in part to its allure and the tag "The Forbidden Kingdom of Lo." Since this opening, Upper Mustang has become a popular tourist destination (Gurung et al., 2021). Foreign tourism has risen steadily over the past 20 years (Figure 2), with the exception of the 2015 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly this exotic branding enticed foreigners into the region, even as the area remained a hot spot of geopolitical tensions. For example, after multiple Tibetans attempted to flee China occupied Tibet via Upper Mustang, the region came under heavy military scrutiny. One high profile example occurred in the winter of 1999-2000, when the Karmapa, a very high-profile figure in Tibetan Buddhism, fled Tibet by traveling through Upper Mustang to India (Cowan, 2016).

The advent and the rapid growth in tourism has contributed to economic, environmental, and socio-cultural changes, both positive and negative, as the divide

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between those who are connected to tourism and those without connections grows. Scholars studying Upper Mustang have attributed the negative impacts to a range of factors, including but not limited to lack of planning, ad hoc approaches, isolation from the central government, weak and duplicitous regulation, and unclear jurisdiction (Shackley, 1994,1996; Banskota and Sharma, 1998; Gurung and DeCoursey, 2000; Nepal, 2000, Heredge, 2003). While the most illustrious positive impacts have been on the economy as tourism has created opportunities for the residents of Upper Mustang to diversify their previously limited livelihood strategies, tourism's most severe negative impacts have been on the water resources. There is no water supply to individual households; locals get water from communal taps. Hotel bathrooms and toilets are putting a strain on water resources, and it is now common to see poorer locals going to the river or streams to wash dishes and do laundry.
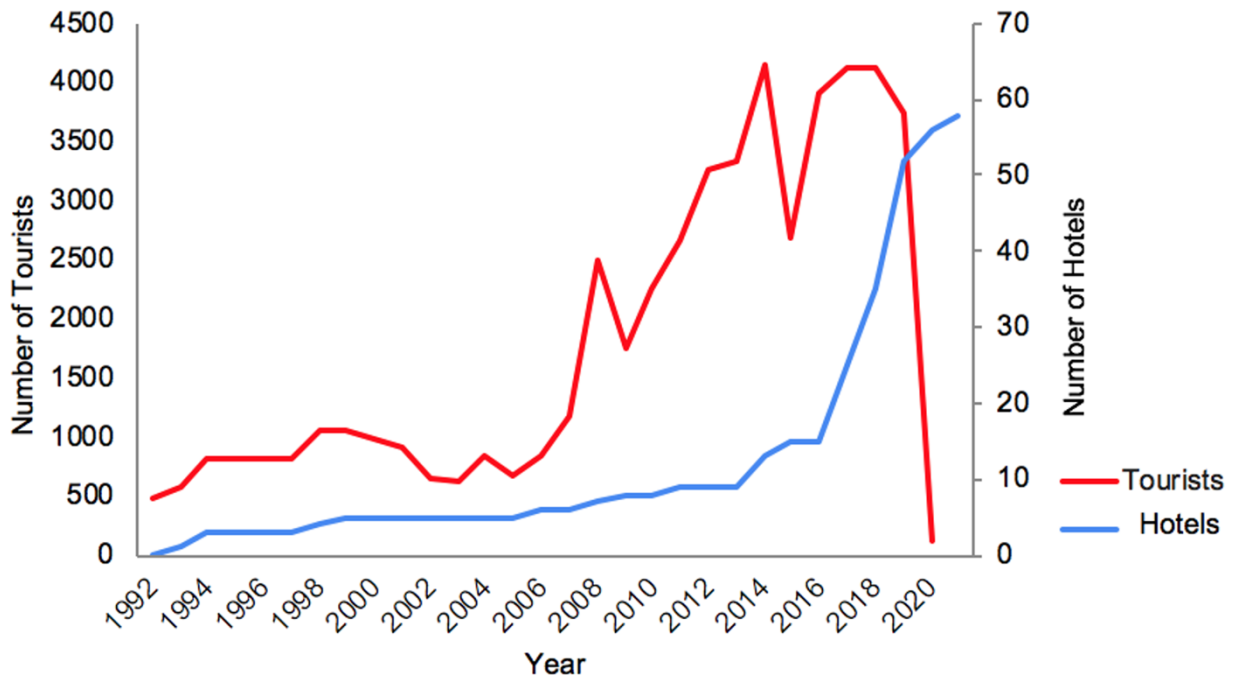
Figure 2. Numbers of Tourists Per Year and Hotels in Upper Mustang 1992-2020. (Source: ACAP and Tashi W Gurung)

METHODS

Research Design and Data Collection.

This research focused on perceptions and power relationships and so employed a mixed method approach inclusive of a survey questionnaire with open-ended follow up questions, participant observations, and a census of hotels. The first author is a native of Upper Mustang working in his own culture and environment. Therefore, all communication for the data collected, from May to Aug 2018, occurred directly between the author and the residents. Given the researcher's identity and positionality, all interactions occurred in *Lo-ke* (local Tibetan variant).

Participants (heads of households) for both questionnaire-based survey and extended discussion were recruited through a mix of purposive and respondent-driven sampling (RDS) strategies. This resulted in an inclusive sample by age, gender, and village. One hundred sixteen questionnaires were completed in 24 out of 27 Upper Mustang villages. No interviews occurred in three villages; one is a settlement with just four households and had no residents at the time of data collection, and two villages were inaccessible because of high river flow. A subset of 107 respondents expanded their answers on the questionnaire (92%) and described additional perceptions of tourism impacts. Questionnaires/interviews were conducted in private homes, public places, and places of work such as shops, tea houses, and farms. All participants consented to be a part of the study (IRB STUDY00008120). Additionally, hotels, tea shops, and tourism shops in each community were counted. For each hotel, ownership and startup year were recorded.

The questionnaire contained 15 questions, first focusing on socio-demographic characteristics, and then asking impact questions that probed the triple economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts. Socio-demographic questions included gender, age, educational level, and how people made a living. Each impact question had 4 response options using a modified Likert scale, i.e., *positive, neutral, negative*, and *I do not know*. It was a strategic decision by the first author to capture lack of knowledge about topics in a separate "I don't know" category, as some participants had expressed no knowledge of tourism impacts in prior discussions.

Previous perception studies in tourism have been criticized for being descriptive, but not offering explanation for the findings (Gursoy and Rutherford, 2004). The use of Likert scales to assess the impacts of tourism has gained popularity because of high convergent and discriminatory power (Mensah, 2012; González-García, 2018). However, Stylidis et al., (2014, p. 4) argues that when scholars rely on simple, a priori categorization of impacts, respondents are confined to stating their level of agreement with pre-coded statements. This study addressed this concern by building ample opportunities for discussion immediately after the set of base questions were asked. The first author would prompt respondents as follows, "You said environmental impacts are positive. What do you mean?", or "Could you give an example of what you mean"?

Data Manipulation.

Questionnaire-based survey data were analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences 26. Sociodemographic data was categorized by gender (male/female), age (3 categories), education level (4 levels), and type of livelihood (4 categories) (Table 1). Distinct livelihood types were named and categorized into 4 groups, two of which included tourism (1 group fully dependent on tourism related activities and another in which people were diversified into tourism and other activities). Open-ended interview data were transcribed by the first author and entered into Excel. A code book was developed to identify perceived economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts and associated themes using a keyword in context approach. Hotel data were categorized based on ownership by caste and years of operation.

The 24 survey villages were coded into three categories of interaction with tourists, based on proximity to the trekking route. Proximity is vital because it controls the amount of time tourists spend in each village, and the probability of interaction between locals and tourists. Villages were categorized as either; "no interaction" because they do not fall along the trekking route and have no tourist presence (N = 14), "limited interaction" (N=8) for those along the trekking route where tourists make pit stops only for snacks, but do not spend the night, and "high interaction" (N = 5), for communities along the trekking route where tourists spend at least one night.

Data Analysis.

A Pearson chi-square analysis first analyzed the strength and direction of underlying relationships between socio-demographic variables (gender, age, education, livelihood), village proximity categories, and perceptions of tourism (economic, environmental, and socio-cultural) impacts. Cumulative hotel ownership according to social status by village is presented and calculated for the time period 1992 to 2021. Frequencies of perceptions were calculated for economic, environmental and socio-cultural categories across village categories. Content analysis identified important keywords and frequencies illustrating positive and negative impacts (economic, environmental, and socio-cultural) of tourism. Exemplar quotes illustrate themes emerging in the qualitative data, such as distribution of benefits and costs, power, fairness, and equity.

RESULTS

Demographics.

The ratio of male to female participants was equal. The majority of participants (47.4%) were adults aged 41-60), 37.9% were young adults (age 19-40) and the remaining 14.6% were seniors (61 and above). Participants with no formal education accounted for 52.6% of the sample, those affiliated with religious studies (*monks*) accounted for 6.9%. 27.6% of respondents had less than a high school education and the most educated (high school and above) accounted for 12.9% of the sample. The majority of respondents (37.9%) were engaged solely in land-based farming/livestock as their livelihood, 33% depended on tourism to some degree - 16 % fully and 17% on tourism in combination with other strategies. About 28% were engaged in other forms of livelihood such as teacher, clerk, etc.

Table 1.

Demographic profile of survey participants from 24 villages in Upper Mustang.

Variables	Categories	n (116)	(%)
Gender	Male	58	50.0
	Female	58	50.0
Age Group	Young Adults (18-40)	44	37.9
	Adults (41-60)	55	47.4
	Senior (60 and above)	17	14.6
Education Level	Below High School	32	27.6
	High School and Above	15	12.9
	Religious Studies	8	6.9
	No Formal Education	61	52.5
Livelihood	Farming	44	37.9
	Tourism-Oriented	19	16.4
	Tourism, Farming, and Trade	20	17.2
	Other*	33	28.4
Village Proximity Categories	No Interaction (N=14)	35	30.2
	Limited Interaction (N=8)	33	28.4
	High Interaction (N=5)	48	41.4

*Teacher, painter, office clerk, monk.

Pearson chi square tests revealed a significant and positive association between proximity to the trekking route and the *economic* impacts of tourism (Table 2). The closer respondents lived to the trekking route, the more likely their perceptions of the economic impacts of tourism were positive, suggesting that trekking route proximity implies more

opportunities to interact economically with tourists. The education level of respondents was associated with the perception of socio-cultural and environmental impacts, albeit the effect was in different directions. The higher an individual's education level, the more likely they perceive tourism impacts on socio-cultural outcomes to be positive. In contrast, higher education was negatively associated with perceived environmental impacts from tourism. The attributes of gender, age and livelihood were unrelated to perceptions of economic, environmental, or socio-cultural impacts. This finding mirrors the results of previous studies where socio-demographic aspects (such as age, language, sex, marital status etc.) were not found to strongly affect perception formation (Renda et al., 2014; Madrigal, 1995; Liu and Var, 1986; Pizam, 1978).

Table 2.

Chi-square association between socio-demographic and proximity variables and tourism impacts.

Pearson's Chi-Squared (X^2) Test—Cross Tabulation

	Economic Impacts			Environmental Impacts			Cultural Impacts		
Education				Value	df	X^2	Value	df	X^2
				23.541^a	8	0.003**	25.249^a	8	0.001**
Village Category	Value	df	X^2						
	22.518^a	4	0**						

*** Significance < 0.01 level (2-tailed), df = degrees of freedom.*

Hotels And Economic Power

Once a motor road reached Mustang district in 2007-2008, the tourism industry boomed (Figure 2), and the number of hotels increased exponentially (Figure 3). Of 60 hotels, 29 hotels are in Lomanthang, the biggest village and formerly the capital of Upper Mustang where the king of Lo resides in his palace. All Bista families in Upper Mustang are from villages categorized as "high interaction." Until 2009, all of the 8 hotels present in Upper Mustang were in high-interaction villages, and all were owned by Bista families. In 2010 the first non-Bista family hotel appeared outside of a high-interaction village monopoly. Intensive building occurred from 2013 onward. In high interaction villages, non-Bista ownership grew, accounting for 62.5% of all new hotels. In the limited interaction category, all hotels (33% of hotels overall) are non-Bista owned and have been built since 2010. While hotel ownership is becoming more equal between caste groups, older hotels, which are all Bista-owned, still have significant advantages over newer hotels because of the contact system. These differences emerge below in discussions about economic benefits of tourism.
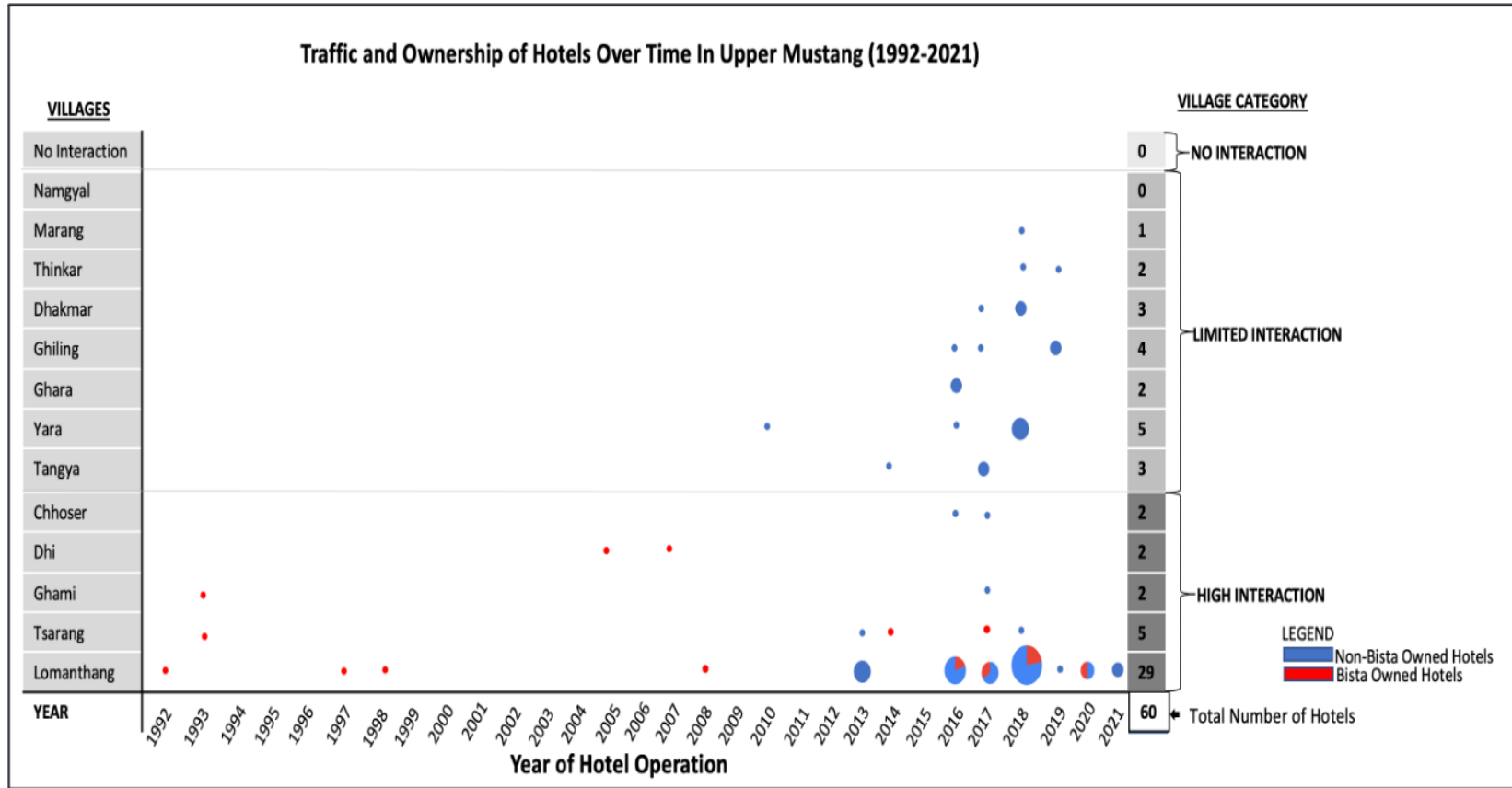
Figure 3. Hotel Construction by year and by group across villages. By year, symbols indicate the number of hotels built in different villages of Upper Mustang by Bista (red) and non-Bista (blue) families from 1992-2021. Villages grouped by level of interaction are shown on the left axis, while cumulative hotels built in villages are displayed on the right axis. The number of hotels built in one year ranged from one to nine.

Economic Impacts

When asked about their perceptions of the economic impacts of tourism, 62% of participants overall responded that their community is benefiting from tourism. Only 29% did not perceive positive economic impacts from tourism, and very few respondents were neutral on economic effects (6%) or did not know how to answer (3%). Breaking down responses according to village categories (Figure 4), the vast majority of high-interaction respondents (39% compared to 7% and 16% of limited and no interaction respondents respectively) perceived tourism effects positively. However, some high interaction respondents clarified that not everyone benefits. One stated, *"Only the bigger hotels and rich people (referring to hotels that existed before theirs that are Bista-owned) benefit most, as we only get tourists on occasions when the bigger hotels owned by richer people are at full capacity."* Some respondents from high interaction villages also saw future potential to benefit from tourism, framed as, *"I do not benefit from tourism now, but I will once I own a hotel."* In contrast, most respondents from limited interaction villages had negative perceptions (22 respondents from limited interaction) of tourism impacts on their economic well-being. As one respondent stated, *"Only the bigger villages like Lomanthang, Tsarang (both high interaction villages) get the direct, maximum benefits. We only got minimal benefits as tourists only stop for a short period of time, just for tea and snacks, you know."* Perceptions from no interaction villages were the most variable of the three village categories. One respondent stated, *"We do not even have a single tea house in our village. How can we benefit from tourism?"* However, another from the same village category differentiated individuals from community benefits, stating, *"We*

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do not benefit, but others do. They are also part of our community. At least people are benefiting, not us, but our people nonetheless."

Respondents had strong perceptions about the economic impacts of tourism, whether positive or negative. Those who perceived the economic impact of tourism as positive cited the flow of revenue, and many who did not perceive positive and direct economic impacts accruing to them still acknowledged the economic benefits of tourism overall. However, results emphasized unequal distribution of economic benefits from tourism. For example, "*There is an obvious economic benefit of tourism. Even though I personally do not benefit, I know other people are benefiting. Hotels definitely benefit from tourism, and they are part of our community. So, our community benefits, but not all [people] do.*" Alternatively, another respondent who ranked tourism economic impacts negatively saw no wider benefit, "*Only hotels [owners] are benefitting, not the community. Just because the hotels benefit does not mean the community benefits. Most people do not benefit but suffer because of the increased expense.*" This respondent was referring to higher costs of living associated with tourism. Other observations highlighted the issue of unfairness amongst hotel owners because of the contact system. One owner new to the hotel business stated,

> "*It is not fair that we do not get tourists. The tourists do not even look at our hotels. It is because of the contact system. I am new and do not have any contacts. They have contacts and they go straight to the big hotels, as the guide leads them straight there. How are we supposed to get tourists? It is very frustrating. We only*

get tourists during Tiji [a local festival in May that is a major tourist attraction]

and we are dry most of the time".

Another respondent echoed the contact system issue but framed it as *"If you can take*

advantage, then you can benefit from tourism. But you have to be able to take

advantage." Many of the negative perceptions expressed economic optimism, but also

frustration and a lack of clarity on how new businesses can succeed given the contact

system.
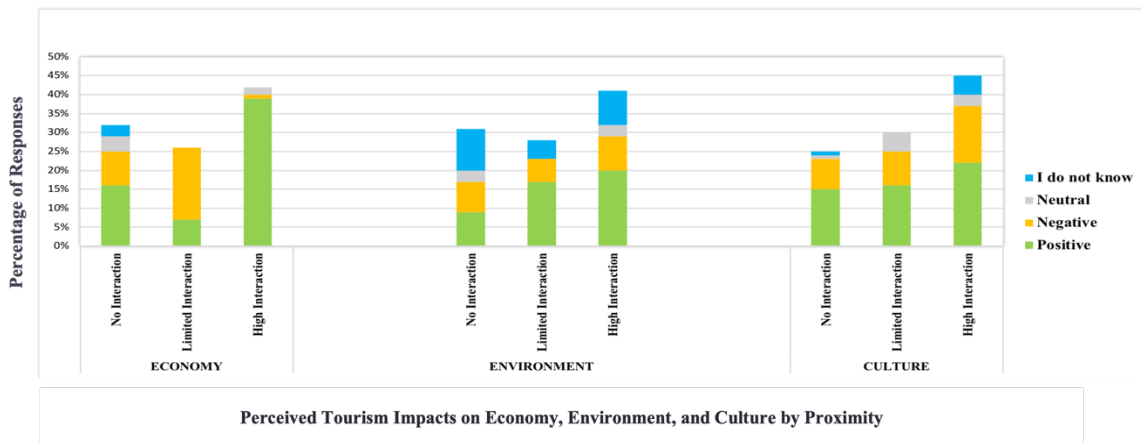
Figure 4. Percentage of survey respondents perceived impacts of tourism on the economy, environment, and culture organized by village interaction categories (Left to right within three pillar classification; no, limited and high interactions). Percentages across the three pillars for each impact sum to 100%.

Environmental Impacts

Across all respondents, 46% did not perceive their environment was being

negatively impacted by tourism in Upper Mustang, while 22.4% of participants perceived

that tourism had negative effects on their environment, and 6% were neutral. One quarter

of respondents did not know. The environmental domain had the highest proportion of "I

don't know" responses across the three domains, suggesting high levels of uncertainty about tourism and environmental outcomes. Within limited and high interaction villages, over 50% of perceptions relating to environmental impact were positive. For no interaction villages, responses were very mixed and only 8% were positive.

Within the qualitative data, 34.8% respondents expressed their sentiments about tourism in relation to the wind, e.g., "*It gets very windy whenever tourists step onto our land.*" Whether this effect was perceived as positive or negative varied by individual. Some described this wind as negative, like a bad omen, whereas others did not. The most commonly named negative environmental impact of tourism was scarcity of water resources. As one person from Lo-manthang stated, *"We have to wait for our turn in line. The hotels join their pipes to the tap and it takes a long time to fill their big tanks. It is just easier to do my chores on the stream rather than to wait."* Pollution was the second most common negative environmental issue, specifically, increasing numbers of tourists resulted in more waste. Interviewees expressed that previously there was no plastic, glass, and metal waste, but presently the majority of trash consists of these materials. However, some (12.5%) named general economic development as the primary cause of pollution, not tourism. One person stated, "*Tourists do not contribute to pollution, development associated with tourism does. Tourists are well-behaved and they pick up after themselves.*" Some respondents even claimed that tourism was the reason why their places are cleaner now. One stated "*I think our places are cleaner because we have toilets and bathrooms now.*"

Socio-Cultural Impacts

Overall, 53% of the respondents perceived no negative impacts from tourism on their culture/traditions, while 32% of respondents perceived that tourism was negatively impacting their culture. Similar to the environmental category, about 15% of respondents were unsure (either did not know (6%) or were neutral (9%)). Within the high interaction villages, 50% of respondents viewed tourism impacts positively and this increased to 52% and 60% within limited and no interaction villages respectively.

Respondents who perceived that tourism was negatively impacting their culture expressed concern about the risk posed by strangers "flocking into their land" and potentially stealing their valuables, for example smuggling of statues and rare religious texts. In addition, those with negative perceptions voiced concerns about the influence of westerners' way of life and doing things, including their modern attire, food choices, and specifically, public displays of affection. One older respondent stated that, "*We see tourists holding hands and kissing in public and our kids copy them. That is totally against our values. Shameless.*"

Respondents who perceived no negative effects from tourism on their culture linked the presence of tourists and the tourism industry with the preservation, protection, and conservation of their culture and rituals, specifically the revitalization of festivals and rituals that had vanished prior to the explosion of tourism. However, some respondents expressed both positive and negative effects, also blaming tourism for rapid socio-

cultural change overall. Others acknowledged that change is inevitable. One person stated that, *"Change is natural. Cultural change is inevitable. Tourism is not to blame for those changes. We would have changed even if we did not have any tourists."* There was a sense of cultural appreciation among certain respondents who admired tourists and tourism for giving them reason to conserve, popularize, and promote their culture globally. As one respondent stated, *"because of tourism people have changed their mindset and realized the importance of our culture,"* while another stated, *"Festivals like Yartung [celebrated to mark the end of the growing season] were already dead but alive now because of tourism."*

DISCUSSION

Tourism has been a growth industry in Nepal. Almost 34 percent of respondents in this study were engaged with some aspect of tourism. Understanding how the residents of Upper Mustang perceive tourism and its economic, environmental and socio-cultural effects on life is critical to mitigating negative outcomes and supporting positive ones. Combining household perception and hotel census data, I asked: 1) How do people from Upper Mustang perceive that tourism is affecting their environment, economy, and culture, and what are key socio-demographic, economic, and geographic factors underlying these perceptions? And, 2) Are the benefits and costs associated with tourism evenly experienced by people (households) in Upper Mustang? Prior work (Gurung et al., 2021) suggests that the tourism industry is alleviating household economic stress through diversification of livelihood options. This study found that economic perceptions of many

respondents were positive, and while tourism is also contributing to rapid socio-cultural change and stress on the environment, respondents expressed positive outcomes of tourism in these contexts as well. However, results show that the economic effects of tourism are highly unequal. Applying a political ecology lens to tourism development in Upper Mustang highlights the equity and justice elements of sustainable tourism development.

Economic

The majority of respondents communicated the economic benefits of tourism. Many respondents, however, distinguished "community" from individual benefits, or spoke about benefits as "potential," and perceptions were much more mixed in communities with low or limited interaction. For instance, respondents from "no interaction" villages commonly expressed that there is no direct economic benefit *to them*, but the villages with "limited" and "high" interaction benefited directly. It is clear that the economic benefits of tourism heavily hinge on the geographical location of the villages.

These positive perceptions are consistent with other findings that tourism development results in economic benefits and can play an important role in revitalizing and improving the living standard of local communities in host destinations (Charag and Bashir, 2020; Andereck et al., 2005; Ap, 1992). However, results also align with a counter point perspective, that economic benefits are unevenly distributed (Nyaupane et

al., 2020; Gursoy et al., 2010; Kuvan and Akan, 2005). Nyaupane et al., (2020) concluded that economic benefits are asymmetrically distributed in Annapurna region of Lower Mustang in that only few families are privy to economic benefits. The locations are not random but are based on the accessibility to important cultural sites such as the king's palace, monasteries, etc., around which the trekking routes developed. Interviews also highlighted how geography intertwines with caste to define where hotels were built, therefore providing access to tourists, a point that I return to in greater detail below.

Gursoy et al (2010, p. 390) concluded that if residents perceive one impact factor as more important than others, then perceptions around that impact factor are likely to influence perceptions for other factors. In the case of Upper Mustang, the positive economic perceptions of residents on tourism impacts were expressed more frequently than for environmental and socio-cultural impacts. Positive direct experiences or economic hopes for the future could be mitigating other negative perceptions. This skewing influence of economic experiences on environmental and socio-cultural impacts is worthy of further investigation.

Environment

Survey results indicate the perceptions of tourism impacts on the environment are equally split between positive and negative views, with a quarter of respondents undecided. The proportion of negative perceptions was similar across low to high levels of interaction, so respondents with more tourism experience were not more likely to

express negative perceptions. In Upper Mustang livelihoods are under threat as climate change-induced stresses, primarily on water resources, intensify (Carlson, 2021). Water related issues are exacerbated as water demand increases with more tourists and more facilities to serve them. Water scarcity was one negative effect mentioned frequently in Upper Mustang, followed by pollution. As Gossling (2001) reported, water use grows exponentially with increasing hotel size, so it is unsurprising that in larger villages adjacent to the trekking route, water scarcity was more of a concern (see Stonich, 1998; Cole, 2012). In response to shortages, water storage tanks are a temporary solution for those who can afford it (typically well-off hotel owners), but other locals do not have this option. For example, one unhappy resident expressed frustration with having to go to the stream to do basic household chores that require water, while hotel owners "*have multiple attached bathrooms."* Similar to the findings of Stonich (1998) in Honduras and Cole (2012) for Bali, a majority of local people, irrespective of village location, bear a disproportionate share of the suffering resulting from environmental scarcity.

Socio-cultural

Generally, perceptions of socio-cultural impacts were mixed across village categories. Many respondents expressed tradeoffs associated with tourists' presence as a result of western influence on their lifestyle. Some respondents mentioned the risk of theft associated with tourism, as centuries old statues, antiques, and valuable religious texts have been stolen in the past (Steve Chao, *Al Jazeera*, 2018). However, many respondents perceived tourism impacts on culture as positive, in the sense that the

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presence of tourists acts to revitalize cultural activities and support cultural preservation. Some respondents credited tourism for introducing them to new ideas, new ways of doing things, and even new food. Anecdotal and observational evidence suggests the impacts of tourism vary by generation, as respondents perceived that younger generations are more prone to westerners' influences, while older generations are unaffected by the same phenomena.

Power and Tourism "Success"

The findings clearly highlight inequality in how the cost and benefits of tourism impacts are experienced by the people of Upper Mustang. Geography, caste and economic status interact to define where tourists spend their time - and therefore how the economic power of tourism is wielded - and who benefits. In the context of tourism, the application of political ecology is useful in conceptualizing how social relations and power structures are produced and reproduced (Douglas, 2014, p. 9). Cheong and Miller (2000) argued that power is everywhere in society (p. 372) and everywhere in tourism (p. 378), leading to a high potential for negative distributional outcomes. Ruhagen (2017, p. 189) recognized power as a key influence in stakeholder involvement, which is indeed a core element of sustainable tourism development.

In Upper Mustang, until 2010 (early) tourism was dominated by Bista family ownership of hotels - particularly in high interaction villages where historic sites were located, and trekking routes developed. Economic power is shifting however, as a

majority of hotels built since 2010 are non-Bista owned (Figure 3). Yet, results show that tourism benefits remain unequal. Many respondents described how the benefits of tourism remain limited to only 'rich' people; some stated that only people with hotels benefited, whereas others stated that benefits are limited to people from bigger villages along the tourist route. Some locals expressed that they do not have the ability to take advantage of tourism even if they decide to engage in tourism-oriented livelihoods. Those who already own hotels describe how they have potential to benefit once the number of tourists increases. The hotel owners, however, feel the disproportionate distribution of economic benefit will persist, resulting in inequality because they believe they will only get tourists when the big hotels of "rich" people run out of rooms. As one hotel owner stated, "*We only get tourists during major festivals where the bigger hotels run out of rooms. That happens just a couple of times a year*."

Results also highlight the contact system as a critical factor underlying unequal distribution of economic benefits. The contact system itself is an emblem of an historical intersection of actor-oriented and structural power perspectives. From an actor-oriented perspective (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2018), non-Bista families do have increased agency to build and potentially share tourism benefits. However, according to Dowding (2008), even though power is connected to agency, the role of structure in constraining the agency of actors cannot be overlooked. In neo-Marxist power perspectives, existing structures, produced historically, can enable or constrain human agency in ways that tend to reproduce structure (Svarstad et al., 2018, p. 354).

To a large extent, the contemporary inequalities expressed by the contact system exhibit both agency and structural dynamics. Non-Bista have increasing agency to break into the hotel business. But culturally conditioned, and established social structures based upon a caste system make it exceedingly difficult for non-Bista to attract tourists. Then interacting with geography in Upper Mustang, the contact system disproportionately benefits those individuals and families, who historically have had more socio-economic power and influence. This reality is also reflected in how or why local respondents do not openly discuss the ways that historical patterns dictate contemporary successes and power structures. For example, failures among non-Bista hotel owners are typically linked to individual shortsightedness or lack of a "business sense," and do not recognize the role that structural inequalities have in shaping economic possibilities in Upper Mustang.

Local elite families of higher socioeconomic status have political connections, cultural authority, and greater tourism infrastructure and capacity. The higher a local individual's socio-economic status is, and the older their tourism businesses are, the stronger their contact network will be. Although the Bista families account for less than three percent of the total population of Upper Mustang, their influence remains disproportionate to their numbers in terms of social, economic, and political capital. The result of the 2017 local election is a stark example of continuing Bista influence. After the restructuring of the state, Nepal's local-level elections were held in May 2017. In Upper Mustang, across two rural-municipalities, all the victorious individuals were Bista

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(2 Mayors, 1 Deputy Mayor, 1 Ward-Chairperson, and the province-wide parliamentary representative). These underlying dynamics of social inequality are only tacitly acknowledged, if voiced at all, sometimes for fear of gossip or reprisal. Therefore, these contact networks remain a source of significant inequality. They are at once an emblem of social capital and inequity, leading to a consolidation of elite power in the region. Despite radically transformed larger political, these social dynamics continue to drive inequality in tourism as it develops.

As Upper Mustang has embraced tourism, inequality based on the cost and benefits associated with tourism seem to be increasing as well. The results show that these effects hinge on geographic location and historically established social structure. People living along or close to the trekking route are privy to greater economic benefits from tourism and the agency of non-elite locals remains limited by history and socio-political dynamics.

CONCLUSION

The cost and benefits of tourism are unevenly experienced by the locals of Upper Mustang. The contact system emerging from historical patterns, social structure based on a localized caste system, and socially conditioned ideas about power and agency differentiate social actors who benefit from those who do not. This, in turn, also has a place-based element to it, both in terms of which villages are the most powerful and largest - and therefore major tourist destinations - and those more marginalized in the

past, and in the present. In this way location correlates with historical elite status and political power, despite gains by non-Bista in hotel ownership and democratizing and secularizing trends at a national level. Power expressed through these historical patterns and established social structures creates and perpetuates an uneven topography for tourism. Time and again tourism has been criticized for rendering playing fields uneven by creating opportunities based on class: creating exclusive enclaves for the rich, while limiting the poor and marginalized (Scheyvens and Biddulph, 2018; Jamal and Camargo, 2014; Gibson, 2009). The findings of this study validate these criticisms and emphasize that tourism research cannot afford to discount the emerging issues of justice and fairness within local communities.

Despite differing perceptions about the impacts of tourism, there is still a strong expression of intent, desire, and investment to engage in tourism activities. People in Upper Mustang are hopeful and believe in the potential of tourism. The tourism landscape collapsed dramatically with the advent of COVID-19. The industry remains in limbo even as this paper is being written, and it is critical to evaluate the consequences of the pandemic in Upper Mustang.

In conclusion, understanding the relationships between sustainable development, and the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts of tourism requires examinations of power and interrelationships among stakeholders. Key stakeholders here include the residents and local hotel owners emphasizing that communities are

heterogeneous in terms of benefits and costs. Theoretically, this study emphasizes equity and justice components of tourism that are integral to sustainability. The layperson version of this research will be disseminated to the residents and decision makers in communities of Upper Mustang. Ultimately the goal of this research is to contribute to policy decisions in Upper Mustang that increase the positive impacts of tourism and reduce its negative effects. For that, further empirical research is required to understand and manage tourism that is collaborative and engages substantively with the residents. Gaining this understanding is even more pressing now that the fragility of the tourism system has been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in Upper Mustang, an area rapidly diversifying and adopting tourism as a livelihood.

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CHAPTER 4

TO BE OR NOT TO BE HOTEL OWNER? A CASE STUDY OF TOURISM

LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION IN UPPER MUSTANG, NEPAL.

ABSTRACT

Livelihood diversification involving tourism is increasing amongst households in popular tourist destinations in tandem with global growth in the tourism industry. This research identifies and examines the factors that influence livelihood decisions to move into tourism in the Himalayan region of Upper Mustang, Nepal. A temporal census of hotels (see Chapter 3), and a combination of social, political, and economic factors operating at local, regional, and national scales shape the overall decision landscape and affect household-level decisions to participate in tourism. The study employs the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) framework and specifically explores the role played by different livelihood capitals in this process. A mixed methods approach inclusive of a survey questionnaire with open-ended follow-up questions and participant observations is the basis for binomial logistic regression analysis. Qualitative data then provides a mechanism to understand additional social, economic and political contexts surrounding decisions about tourism. Findings illustrate that gender, income, and proximity of the village to trekking routes were significant in decisions to diversify livelihoods through tourism. Furthermore, the future of tourism in Upper Mustang and the well-being of its residents are jeopardized by the combined effects of limited livelihood options, the volatile nature of tourism, and the global network of migration,

leaving the people of Upper Mustang facing a difficult choice regarding their engagement in tourism-related livelihood strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Before COVID-19, tourism was one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries in terms of foreign exchange, income generation, and employment creation. As COVID-19 subsides, the tourism sector is rebounding to pre-pandemic levels, highlighting the profound influence of the broader socio-economic and political factors on household decision-making. According to the United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism provided 289 million jobs and accounted for 6.1% of global GDP in 2021 (UNWTO, 2022). As COVID-19 subsides, the tourism sector is rebounding to pre-pandemic levels, highlighting the profound influence of the broader socio-economic and political factors on household decision-making. The unprecedented expansion of tourism has created a plethora of opportunities, and proven to be a viable livelihood option for households and businesses world-wide. Tourism as an economic development option and provider of foreign exchange dollars has been particularly attractive to planners in developing countries. For rural people within developing countries with limited livelihood options, isolated geographies, low access to financial capital, increasing stress on natural resources, and emerging negative impacts of climate change on traditional subsistence livelihoods, tourism is especially appealing (Palmer and Chuamuangphan, 2017). Households in popular tourist destinations have become increasingly dependent on tourism, and research on many aspects of the tourism

phenomena has followed (Xu et al., 2022; Makwindi & Ndlovu, 2021; Mathieson & Wall, 1982). In recent decades, communities across the Nepal Himalayas, including Upper Mustang, have adopted a more diversified approach to their traditional livelihood strategies by integrating tourism alongside their existing livelihood activities (Amburgey et al., 2023; Gurung et al., 2023).

The tourism literature has heavily focused on the fundamental decisions and decision-making processes of tourism consumers (i.e., tourists). However, the livelihood diversification decision-making processes of households in tourism destinations are comparatively poorly understood (Paudel et al., 2017; Kunjuraman, 2022). Even though livelihood diversification has garnered increasing attention from policymakers and researchers alike, the literature has predominantly focused on the dichotomy of farm to non-farm activities as livelihood strategies, without delving into the specific characteristics of non-farm livelihood options. This includes wage engagement in service industries, migration, and tourism. As well, while households are the locus of decisions to add tourism as an activity, broader social, economic and political conditions also set the stage for why tourism may or may not be a viable, safe or stable livelihood option.

TOURISM AS LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION

Before globalization and industrialization, communities across the globe centered subsistence predominantly on farming, livestock husbandry, trade and fluid combinations thereof. In the past century the singular dependency on subsistence livelihoods has

decreased, especially in the context of rural areas in developing countries (Johnson and

Hutton, 2014). There are a wide range of factors that contribute to these changes to

subsistence: including stress on natural resources, depopulation and/or scarcity of local

labor through outmigration, changing economic goals, and the increasing reliance of

communities on service industries (Bires & Raj, 2020; Asfaw et al., 2017; Bunce et al.,

2010; BurnSilver, 2009; Paavola, 2008; Dearden & Downie, 2018). Research suggests

that the process of livelihood diversification can range from adding new complementary

activities to existing subsistence patterns, to movement into entirely new non-land-based

strategies over time (Huang et al., 2022; Su et al, 2020 Su et al., 2019; Ashley and

Carney, 1999; Mbaiwa, 2011; Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011).

Ellis defined livelihood diversification as, "*the process by which rural families

construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in their struggle

for survival and in order to improve their standard of living"* (1998:4). The problematic

language around subsistence as an implied "struggle for survival" aside, livelihood

diversification has been a growing interest amongst scholars. However, the focus has

generally been on diversification as a sectoral shift from farm to non-farm livelihood

strategies (Avila-Foucat & Rodríguez-Robayo, 2018; Asfaw et al., 2017; Alobo Loison,

2015; Eshetu, 2014). Tourism is a livelihood strategy in itself, but most importantly it

also has the potential to influence other sectors of livelihood strategies that existed long

before the advent of tourism and are more traditional to an area, namely: agriculture,

pastoralism, hunting and gathering, etc. particularly in the rural context. In this context

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tourism is regarded as a complementary pathway for livelihood diversification (Bires & Raj, 2020; Lasso & Dahles, 2018; Kimbu et al., 2019; Sowman, 2011; Torell et al., 2017).

Tourism contributes to economic growth at multiple levels, through income generation for local and national governments, and employment opportunities. Tourism has, unequivocally, been an important economic development option particularly in the rural areas of developing countries. Tourism, even though not a panacea, has provided viable alternative livelihood options in some rural areas, especially in developing countries (Huang et al., 2022; Su et al., 2019; Ashley and Carney, 1999; Mbaiwa, 2011; Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011) and has played an important role in enhancing living standards (Huang et al., 2022). In the context of Upper Mustang, the effects of tourism has alleviated household economic stress through diversification of livelihood options, but also contributed to rapid socio-cultural change, stress to the environment, and vehemently threatens the rich and unique, but fragile culture (Gurung & BurnSilver, 2023 *in review*, Amburgey et al., 2023; Gurung et al., 2021; Banskota & Sharma, 1998; Shackley, 1996). Rapid growth in tourism has resulted in negative socio-cultural changes, environmental consequences, and institutional ramifications, which are overlooked, or blinded by the appeal of an "instant" cash economy, and new levels of economic inequities and injustice are emerging (Gurung & BurnSilver, *2023 in review*).

Multiple case studies provide compelling and robust evidence supporting the role of tourism in diversifying livelihood portfolios within rural communities, while

coexisting with traditional livelihood strategies (Suntikul & Dorji, 2016; Wu & Pearce, 2014; Leu, 2019; Tao and Wall, 2009; Su, et al., 2016; Kheiri & Nasihatkon, 2016). Other work economic inequities associated with tourism. Another significant gap is understanding the rationale behind people's livelihood choices and subsequently livelihood decisions. Scholars have argued that the factors influencing individual/household livelihood decisions are the key determinants of livelihood improvement (Huang et al., 2022; Mogaka et al., 2014).

SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD FRAMEWORK

The Sustainable Livelihood Approach (henceforth referred to as SLA) developed by the British Department for International Development (DFID) has been widely applied to understand how rural households make livelihood decisions (Figure. 1). Based on the resources available to rural households in specific contexts, SLA emphasizes the role of dynamic livelihood capitals that facilitate livelihood choices (Ding et al., 2018; DFID, 1999). Here, "capitals" are more than just resources utilized in building livelihoods; they are assets that empower individuals or households to define and determine the quality of life they attain (Bebbington, 1999; Ellis and Freeman, 2004; Ellis, 2000). The framework for livelihoods differentiates five asset types: physical capital (also referred to as produced capital, economic capital or infrastructure capital); natural capital (including land, trees, fish stocks, etc); human capital (encompassing people, education, and health); financial capital (encompassing income, savings and credit); and social capital (combining kinship networks and associations) (Figure. 1).

Examining the decision making and livelihood choices of individuals and households in rural areas using SLA has the potential to enhance the understanding of livelihood diversification as a decision-making process, and subsequently provide important insights to how new activities may improve living standards. Particularly in the context of livelihood diversification into tourism, the SLA framework is useful because it has been used to examine people's livelihood responses to exogenous shocks such as conflict and climate shocks (Su et al., 2022; Kimbu et al., 2019; Ellis, 2000), while also incorporating inter-temporal social relationships that facilitate diversification (Avila-Foucat and Rodríguez-Robayo, 2018; Tao and Wall, 2009; Ellis, 2000a, 2000b, 1998).
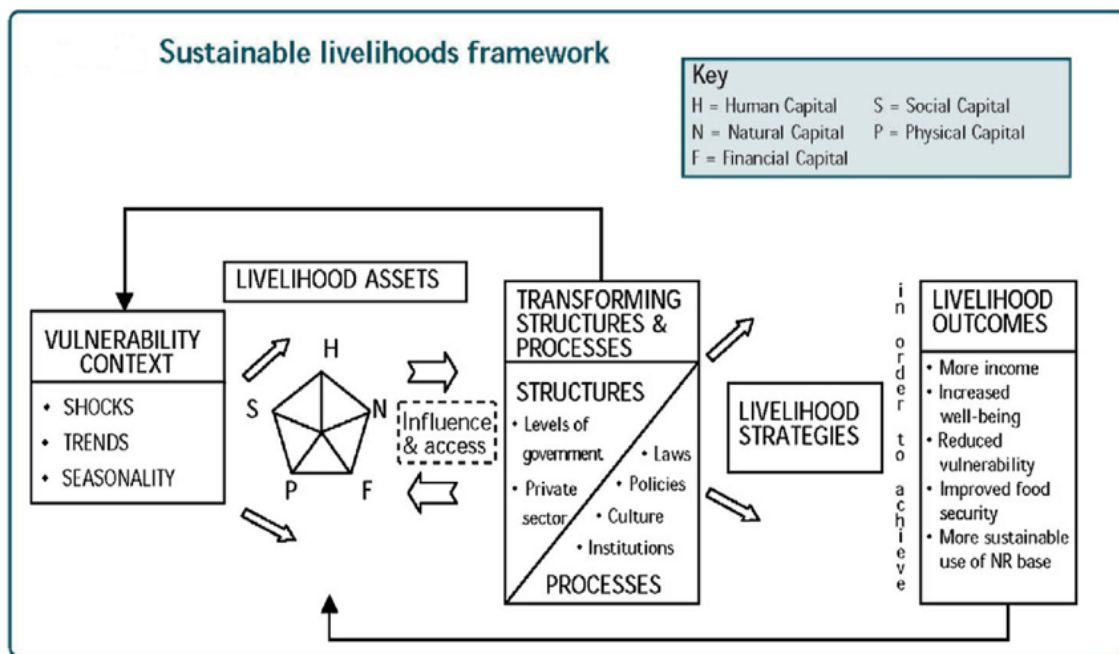
Figure 1. Sustainable Livelihood Framework developed by the British Department for International Development (DFID, 1999).

Tao and Wall (2009) advocated specifically for the utilization of SLA as a comprehensive approach to understanding the impacts of tourism on sustainable livelihoods. Existing literature employing SLA framework at the intersection of tourism and livelihood diversification includes the impact of tourism components on livelihood diversification outcomes in Ethiopia (Bires and Raj, 2020), the impact of seasonality on livelihood diversification in rural tourism destinations in Guangxi, China (Su et al., 2022), the exploration of links between tourism and other livelihood strategies among the aboriginal community in Taiwan (Tao and Wall, 2009), the outcomes of community-based ecotourism in Sabah, Malaysia (Kunjuraman, 2022). The research conducted by Avila-Foucat and Rodriguez-Robayo (2018) which investigates the factors that influence livelihood diversification into wildlife tourism among coastal communities in Oaxaca, Mexico, closely resembles this study. However, their approach relies solely on quantitative data. Kunjuraman (2022: 2) argued that the application of SLA in tourism research in the context of developing countries remains rare.

Even when SLA has been employed, criticism has arisen regarding its inadequate consideration of power dynamics, use of a limited diversity of indicators beyond the standard demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education, and insufficient attention to nontraditional household capitals in the context of livelihood diversification. Furthermore, there has been no combined quantitative-qualitative investigation that specifically examines household factors that lead to diversification into tourism (Bires &

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Raj, 2020; Avila-Foucat & Rodríguez-Robayo, 2018). This research attempts to address these existing gaps.

In this study, SLA is used as a framework to examine the presence of different capital factors that predict household livelihood diversification into tourism in a rural region of Nepal. Upper Mustangi households were making decisions in a context of dealing with multiple exogenous shocks prior and during to the study period, including COVID-19, political changes, an earthquake and infrastructure development (see following section). We first use quantitative indicators to examine the influence of various types of livelihoods capital – human capital (e.g., gender, age, household size), financial capital (e.g. credit access, savings, income), social capital (e.g. caste, migration, remittance), and physical capital (e.g. geographical location, access to motor road and hotels) on a household's livelihood diversification into tourism in Upper Mustang, a rural Himalayan region of Nepal. Qualitative data then provides a mechanism to understand additional social, economic and political contexts surrounding decisions about tourism.

UPPER MUSTANG

Upper Mustang is situated in Nepal's northern border with Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China which was previously Tibet (Figure. 2). Upper Mustang exists in the Himalayan rain shadow, on the Tibetan Plateau and the elevation ranges from 2,800 meters to 6,500 meters. The Upper Mustang region has 27 villages in total divided into two rural-municipalities: Lo-Manthang Rural Municipality and Lo-Gekar Damodarkunda

Rural Municipality (Figure. 2). The total population of Mustang district, according to the census of 2022 is 13,452. The literacy rate of Upper Mustang is listed at 33%, which is well below the national average of 54.1%. There are few formal financial institutions in Upper Mustang. However, *Dhikuti,* a localized rotating credit system, has traditionally provided financial assistance to residents of Upper Mustang well before banks were introduced. *Dhikuti* embodies social capital and involves individuals from families and communities coming together in a tightly-knit social network to distribute equal sums of money at regular intervals. Before the inception of the tourism industry, the people of Upper Mustang depended on three core occupations: agriculture, mobile animal husbandry, and trans-Himalayan trade (Childs, Craig, Beall, & Basnyat, 2014). Limited livelihood options, lack of infrastructure, unfavorable geographical location, and isolation from the central government, has resulted in Upper Mustang status as an impoverished region.

Despite the abolition of petty kings and principalities in 1961, the King of Upper Mustang retained the title "*Raja*" and was given limited authority, traditional rights, and even the rank of colonel (Chalaune, 2009:119). In 2008, the Nepal monarchy was abolished, and the government transitioned to a secular federal democratic republic. While Nepal continues to navigate through a larger political transition, the former king of Lo and his family still retain strong local cultural, political, and socioeconomic authority in Upper Mustang. At present, the King of Lo is still recognized by the people of Lo and plays a significant role culturally and traditionally. Individuals and families who are

descendants of the king are considered part of the elite and are distinguished from the rest of the population by bearing the surname "Bista".
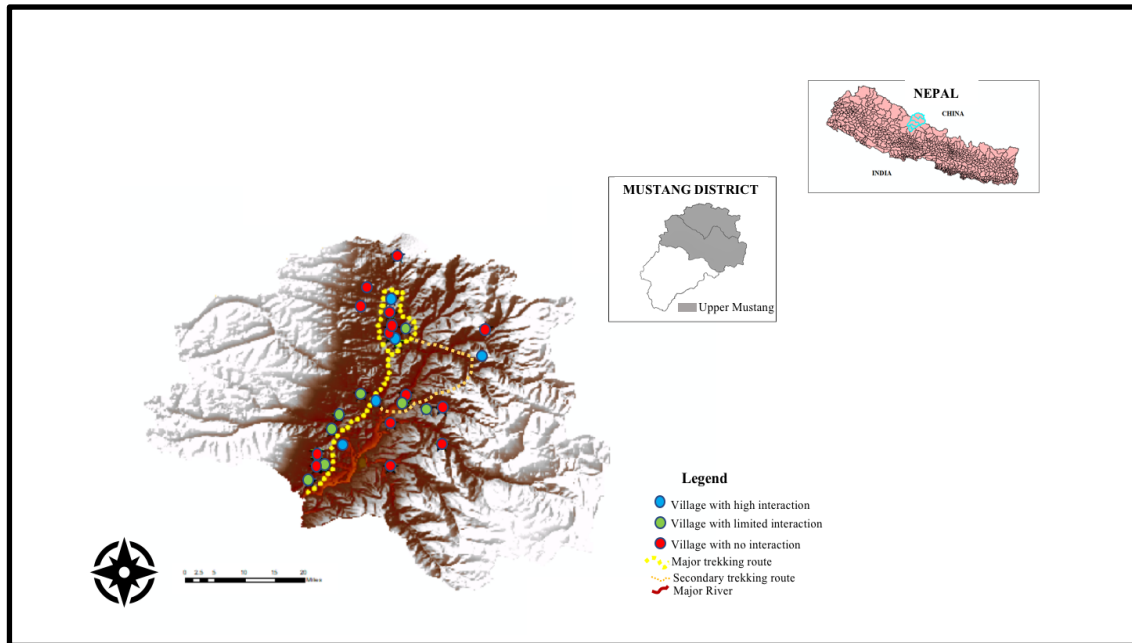
Figure 2. Map of Upper Mustang Nepal with the trekking route and villages. (Secondary trekking routes lead to specific natural features and are exclusive to specialized tourists upon request).

TOURISM CONTEXT IN UPPER MUSTANG

Because of its status as "The Forbidden Kingdom, " and the draw of Lo-Manthang, the historical capital as "The Ancient Walled City," Upper Mustang has been a very popular destination for foreigners (Figure. 2). The beautiful, rugged landscape that offers majestic and eye-catching views of glorious mountains like Dhaulagiri and Annapurna, unspoiled temples, monasteries, and shrines of Upper Mustang, along with the ancient sky caves where monks practiced meditation many centuries ago, remain

captivating features of this kingdom. Vibrant festivals and lamas dressed in striking red robes are contemporary features that draw travelers from far away. This land not only upholds the everyday principles of Buddhist ethics, but also safeguards an extraordinary legacy of Tibetan religious artwork (NTC report, 2012). It is crucial to highlight that foreign tourists visiting Upper Mustang must be accompanied by an authorized guide as per the regulations set by the Nepalese government. This rule is in place to ensure the safety of travelers and promote local and regional job creation. Tourist guides play a vital role as intermediaries between tourists and hotel owners. Before entering Upper Mustang, tourists initiate contact with agencies and guides who then exclusively guide them to specific hotels along the trekking routes based on pre-arranged agreements.

Tourism in Upper Mustang began in 1992 due to a combination of economic, political and historical factors (Figure. 3). This figure illustrates how tourism takes place within broader social, political, economic and disaster contexts, and is highly susceptible to exogenous shocks such as political instability, earthquakes (2015) and a global pandemic. Here, we provide a concise summary of how a range of external drivers, at various levels of jurisdiction - local to federal - have impacted tourist numbers and tourism infrastructure (e.g., hotels) in Upper Mustang, consequently outlining the context for decisions by Upper Mustang residents to pursue diversification into tourism.

The antecedents of tourism in Nepal can be traced back to the early 1950's after the fall of the imperial Rana regime in 1951. This led to the opening of Nepal's borders to

foreigners. It was, however, the successful ascent of Mountain Everest in 1953 by

Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary that caught international attention (Shreshta and

Shrestha, 2012). Subsequently, in 1958 the first tourism board was formed (Nepal, 2010).

Since then, the number of foreign visitors increased steadily throughout the following

decades as mountain tourism gained popularity. However, until March 1992, the region

of Upper Mustang, Nepal remained officially closed to the outside world.

Several geopolitical reasons explain prior closure of the region to foreigners.

Upper Mustang has historical and geographical links with the Tibetan Autonomous

Region, and when China invaded Tibet in 1959 more than 100,000 Tibetans fled the

country to seek refuge in the neighboring countries of Nepal and India. Along with

regular refugees, members of the Tibetan Resistance Army chose to relocate to Upper

Mustang. Politically being a part of Nepal, but close to Tibet, Upper Mustang became a

base of operations for guerilla operations against the People's Liberation Army and,

eventually, a place where these insurgents settled, with support from the USA CIA

(McGranahan, 2010; Knaus, 1999). The government of Nepal also faced political

pressure from China to take action on the Tibetan guerrilla camp operating from Upper

Mustang. Finally, in 1974, the Nepal government sent military troops to urge them to

surrender and engage in a war if resistance was encountered. That was the end for the

Tibetan Resistance in Upper Mustang, however, some survivors still remain as refugees

in two refugee settlements in the district. Some attribute the restriction of foreigners in

Upper Mustang to geo-political factors. Others attribute it to efforts to conserve the

fragile culture and ecosystems that could be under threat if it was opened to the outside world.

Upon cessation of hostilities, Upper Mustang was officially opened to the outside world in March 1992 (Figure. 3). Tourism numbers only marginally increased at the beginning. In 1996 a Maoist insurgency began a civil war in Nepal, which lasted to 2006, and ultimately led to the death of more than 13,000 people (Lawoti, 2009). Although Mustang itself remained one of the least impacted districts from the war, political instability meant there was a decrease of tourist arrivals in Nepal and by extension to Upper Mustang. Even from 1999-2000 there was a slight decrease in the number of tourists due to the region being under heavy military scrutiny after high profile Tibetans attempted to flee China occupied Tibet via Upper Mustang (for details see Cowan, 2016 and McGranahan, 2010). The closure of the border, a heavy military presence, and geo-political sensitivities in turn upended trans-Himalayan trade, which was historically an important livelihood option for the people of Upper Mustang.

The outlook for tourism transformed dramatically in the year 2008 (Figure 3) due to a combination of infrastructure development and political factors, including the introduction of local and regional motor roads, a national peace treaty between the government of Nepal and Maoists, and the abolition of the monarchy in Nepal and in Upper Mustang. A slight decline in tourist numbers in Upper Mustang in 2010 can be linked to the youth-led protest held a month before the tourist season, where they

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threatened to bar tourist entry as a means to hold the Nepalese government accountable

for not fulfilling their commitment to allocate 60 percent of tourism revenue for local

development. Two major events illustrate the unstable nature of tourism as a livelihood

strategy post 2008: the 2015 earthquakes that caused major infrastructural damage and

claimed nearly 9,000 lives in Nepal, and the declaration of a global pandemic on March

11, 2020, by World Health Organization. Both decimated international tourism arrivals in

Nepal and Upper Mustang.

Figure 3 also overlays tourism numbers and hotel construction since 2008 in Upper

Mustang (Gurung & BurnSilver, *in review*). The number of hotels surged starting in

2013, reflecting earlier decisions to construct hotels, then 2-5 years of construction time

due to the harsh winter conditions that only allow for work during a few months each

year. The intersection of outside political and economic events with tourism arrivals and

then hotel openings highlight the dynamic context over time in which local households

make livelihood decisions to diversify into tourism.
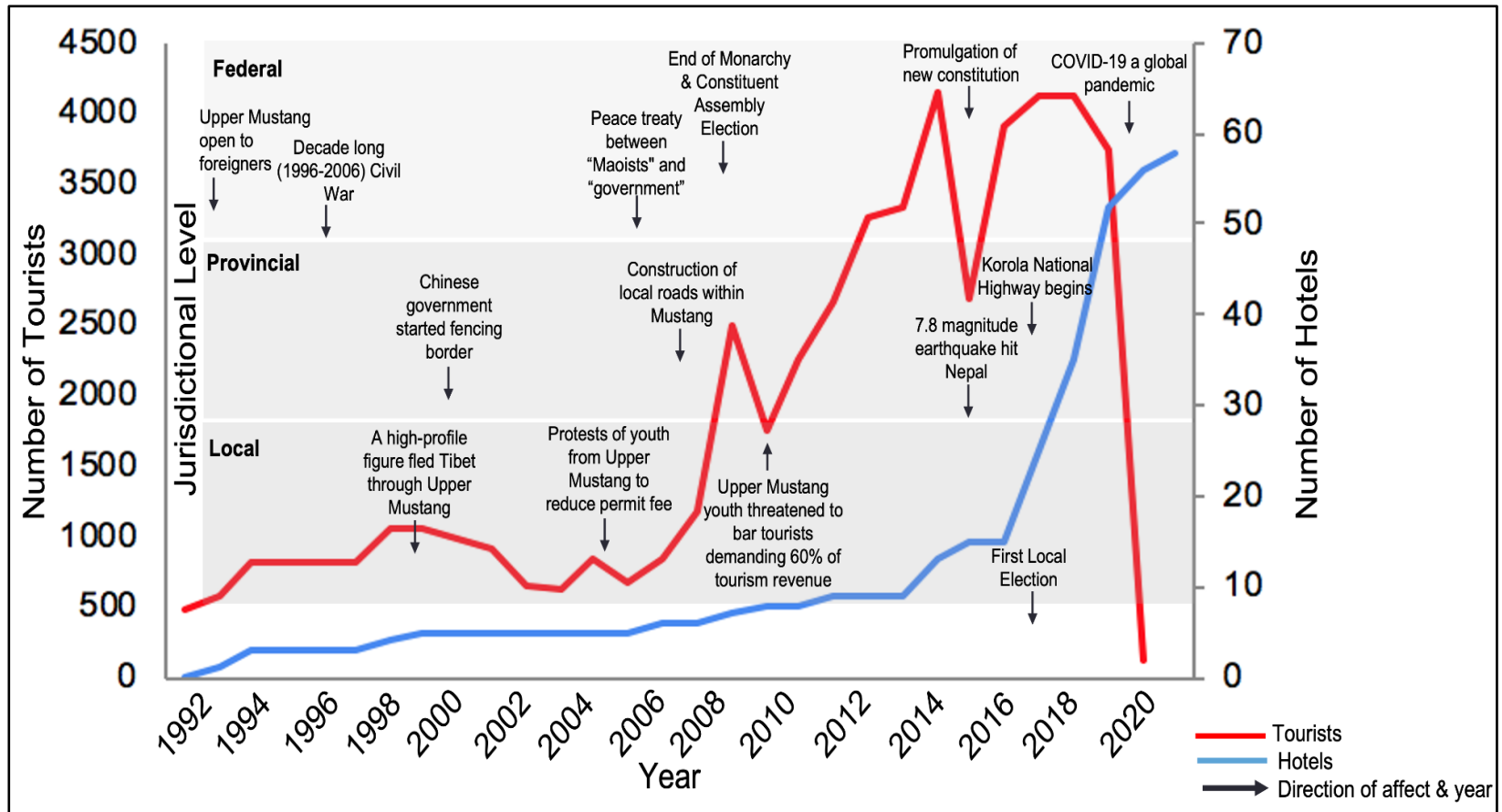
Figure 3. The number of tourists visiting per year and the number of hotels built per year in Upper Mustang from 1992 to 2020 are accompanied by a timeline of key events relevant to tourism at three levels: local, provincial, and federal. Source: Derived from Gurung and BurnSilver (2023, in review).

Research Questions

Using a confluence of mixed methods approach, this study employs SLA to examine the presence of various livelihood capitals and their role in livelihood diversification decisions. This research addresses the following two research questions:

1) What are the key household capitals that predict household decisions to diversify livelihood into tourism in the Himalayan region of Upper Mustang, Nepal?

2) What other factors emerge from qualitative interviews and influence decisions to diversify livelihoods into tourism?

METHODS

Research Design and Data Collection

This study employed a mixed method approach inclusive of a survey questionnaire with open-ended follow up questions, and participant observation. The survey instrument included socio-demographic and economic characteristics including age, gender, education, income, and migration affords of local households of Upper Mustang and evaluation of each capital source.

The researchers acknowledge that a purely quantitative or qualitative approach can limit the interpretation and understanding whereas the integration of both can complement each other and thus, provide a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of decision making. Past studies that generated data in tourism research and academic research in general have faced criticism for not offering a rationale behind responses provided in the survey, which therefore limit the

understanding of the dynamics and context. In addition, studies using only survey data have been subject to scrutiny for being descriptive without explanation (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). The use of Likert scales, most prominent in survey techniques, has gained popularity because of high convergent and discriminatory power (Mensah, 2012; González-García, 2018). However, some scholars such as Stylidis et al., (2014, p. 4) argue that relying on predetermined categorization confines participants' response by allowing them only to state their level of expression with pre-coded statements, thereby limiting the depth of understanding. To overcome this challenge, this study provided ample opportunities for discussion immediately after a set of base questions were asked. Open ended prompts provided qualitative data allowing participants to provide a more detailed, nuanced, and comprehensive explanation of their survey responses. The qualitative data are used to provide context for the quantitative analyses and results.

The first author is a native of Upper Mustang working in his own culture and environment. All communication for data collected, from July to November 2021, occurred directly between the author, a local research assistant, and the residents of Upper Mustang. The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges that led the first author to depend on the assistance of a local research assistant for data collection in the research field. The research assistant played a crucial role collecting data directly, working closely with the first author for guidance and supervision. Given the research team's identity and positionality, all interactions occurred in *Lo-ke,* a Tibetan dialect.

Participants (heads of households or representative of the head of household in their absence) for both questionnaire-based survey and follow-up interview were recruited through a mix of purposive and respondent-driven sampling (RDS) strategies. This resulted in an inclusive sample by age, gender, livelihoods, and village. One hundred thirty-three combination questionnaires/interviews were completed across all 27 villages of Upper Mustang. Questionnaires/interviews took place in private homes, public places, and places of work such as shops, tea houses, and farms. Given that data collection took place during a global pandemic (COVID-19), the research team adhered to all safety protocols (e.g., masks and spacing) and took all necessary precautions to ensure the safety of the participants and local people. All participants consented to be a part of the study (IRB STUDY00008120).

Data Manipulation

All the variables included in the analysis are categorical in nature. Socio-demographic data was categorized by gender (male/female), age (3 categories), education level (4 levels), and type of livelihood (4 categories) (Table 1). The categorization of socio-demographic variables was guided and influenced by the patterns observed in national reports and data sets. All the independent variables were proxies for different forms of capitals: age, gender, marital status, education (proxy attributes for human capital), income level (proxy for financial capital), village location based on proximity (proxy for physical capital), and the presence or migration of family members abroad (proxy for social and financial capital). For this study, remittances are regarded as a

representation of both social capital and financial capital. Social ties in this sense means access to financial help through remittances.

The 27 survey villages were coded into three categories of interaction with tourists, based on proximity to primary and secondary trekking routes. Proximity is vital because it defines the amount of time tourists spend in each village, and the probability of interaction between locals and tourists (Figure. 2). Villages were categorized as either; "no interaction" because they do not fall along trekking routes and have no tourist presence (N = 14), "limited interaction" (N=8) for those along trekking routes where tourists make pit stops only for snacks, but do not spend the night, and "high interaction" (N = 5), for communities along the trekking route where tourists spend at least one night. Furthermore, the independent variables encompassed a variety of dimensions, each representing distinct forms of capital defined in SLA. Gender, age, education, and livelihood strategy were indicative of human capital, while the village and the proximity to the trekking route represented physical capital. Financial capital was captured through income, and the number of family members abroad and time since migration were a measure of social capital.

Additionally, distinct livelihood types were named and categorized into 7 groups, four of which included tourism (1 group fully dependent on tourism related activities and another in which people engaged in other activities but had diversified into tourism). Open-ended interview data were transcribed by the first author and entered into Excel

and used to develop a code book to identify associated themes using a keyword in context approach.

Data Analyses

Questionnaire-based survey data obtained was analyzed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences 26. Binary Logistic Regression is used to identify the factors predicting tourism diversification with the dependent variable as binomial, i.e., either livelihood diversified or not into tourism. A binomial logistic regression is a good fit for this data because the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable is not linear, and the model does not require normality of distribution (Hyeoun-Ae, 2013; Pituch & Stevens, 2016; Makwindi & Ndlovu, 2022). Whether the household has diversified their livelihood into tourism or not is coded 1 = Diversified, 0 = Not Diversified, where the "did not diversify" group is the reference (baseline category) and the "diversified" group is the target category.

Table 1.

Demographic profile of survey participants.

Variables	Categories	Count (n=133)	(%)
Gender	Male	77	57.9
	Female	56	42.1
Age Group	Young Adults (18-40)	72	54.2
	Adults (41-60)	49	36.8
	Senior (60 and above)	12	9
Education Level	No Formal Education	52	39.1
	Religious Studies	8	6
	Primary Education	21	15.8
	Secondary Education	16	12
	High School Education	30	22.6
	Bachelors	6	4.5
Income Category	Did not disclose	28	21.1
	No Income	10	7.5
	Low Income	41	30.8
	Lower Middle Income	33	24.8
	Upper Middle	17	12.8
	High	4	3
Livelihood	Traditional (farm, livestock, trade)	41	30.8
	Tourism	13	10
	Wage	2	1.5

	Traditional + Remittance	41	30.8
	Traditional + Tourism	18	14
	Remittance + Tourism	10	7
	Traditional + Remittance + Tourism	8	6
Village Proximity Categories	No Interaction (N=14)	32	24.1
	Limited Interaction (N=8)	49	36.8
	High Interaction (N=5)	52	39.1
Family Members Abroad	None	55	41.4
	One	51	38.3
	Two	17	12.8
	Three or more	10	7.5
Time Since Migration of Family Members	No Members Abroad	55	41.3
	In the past 5 years	59	44.4
	In the past 10 years	16	12
	In the past 15 years	3	2.3

The qualitative data collected in this research was analyzed using NVivo, a text analysis software designed for managing and analyzing qualitative data. The code book developed in Excel focused on drawing out themes drawn from the data using a grounded theory approach (Creswell & Creswell 2017). The qualitative data was then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in participants' responses. This process involved generating codes and subsequently deriving themes. Exemplar quotes were selected and provide illustrative examples of themes across the qualitative data and

are broadly representative of wider sentiments and perceptions captured during interviews.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The total number of participants was 133 from 27 villages in Upper Mustang. The sample was broadly representative across age and gender groups. The number of male and female participants was 57.9% and 42.1% respectively (Table 1). The majority of participants (54.2%) were young adults (aged 19-40). Adults aged 41-60 made up 36.8% of the sample, while the remaining 9% were seniors aged 61 and above. A majority of the participants (39.1%) had no formal education while 6% were educated non-formally through religious studies. Participants with the most education (bachelors and above) accounted for only 4.5% of respondents while 22.6% had a high school education. About 28% of participants had less than a high school education (12% completed a secondary education and 15.8% had completed their primary education).

The distribution of villages by geographic proximity to trekking routes was 36.8% from villages with high interactions with tourism, 39.1% from villages with limited interactions and 24.1% from villages with no significant tourism interactions. When asked about their annual income, a notable proportion (21.1%) of the participants hesitated to respond, citing reasons such as they are uncomfortable with the question, or they do not know. While 7.5% of the participants stated that they did not have any

income, 30.8% of the participants reported having a low annual income. Additionally, 24.8% fell into the lower-middle income category, and 12.8% identified themselves as having an upper-middle income. Only a small percentage (3%) of participants stated they had a high income. Almost 60% of sample respondents (58.6%), had at least one family member living and working abroad. Of the participants who had family members abroad, 42.9% said they received remittances and 24.8% said they did not, and 32.3% declined to answer. Among the participants, 38.3% had a single family member living and working abroad, 12.8% had a minimum of two family members abroad, and 7.5% had more than three family members overseas. Lastly, in terms of migration timeline, 44.4% of the family members had migrated within the last five years, 12% within the last 10 years, and 2.3% within the last 15 years.

Patterns of Diversification into Tourism

Seven livelihood strategies were identified in Upper Mustang, Nepal (Figure. 4). Tourism diversification, combined with some other form of livelihood such as farming, and remittance, was found to be the most common type of local diversification in Upper Mustang. Out of all participants, 36.8% (n = 49) engaged in tourism to varying degrees, including the combination of traditional livelihoods and tourism (14%), a combination of remittance and tourism (7%), and a combination of traditional livelihoods, remittance, and tourism (6%). Notably, 10% (n = 8) of the respondents relied exclusively on tourism activities, specifically within the hotel sector.

Conversely, 30.8% (n = 41) of participants were exclusively engaged in traditional livelihood activities, e.g., land-based farming (22%), livestock (6%), and trade (1.5%), and farming, livestock, and trade (1.5%). Livestock included goats, sheep, horses, and cows. Additionally, another 30.8% (n = 41) of participants pursued traditional forms of livelihood while also receiving remittances from family members residing abroad. A mere 1.5% of the participants (n = 2) were involved only in wage-based activities, specifically as a teacher and a clerk.

At present, results indicate that ~ 69% of households in Upper Mustang have diversified beyond traditional activities and engage in a combination of remittance or/and tourism-based endeavors (Figure. 4). This pattern of livelihood diversification emerged in the context of Upper Mustang is an indication of people responding to emerging conditions and making new kinds of livelihood choices.
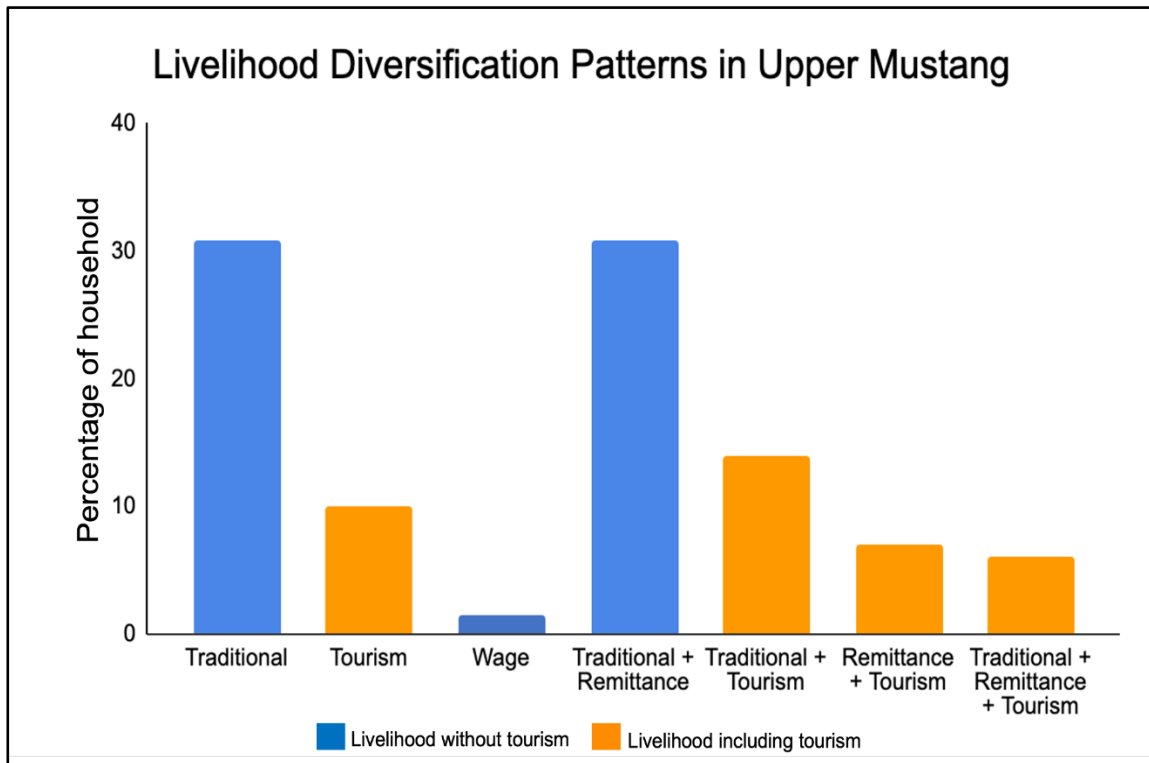
Figure 4. Livelihood diversification patterns in Upper Mustang after the advent of tourism in 1992.

Regression Results –Household Level Decisions to Engage in Tourism

      I turn next to the question of what household-level factors predict the decision to engage with tourism.

      The dependent variable in the model focuses on whether a household has pursued livelihood diversification into tourism, with a code of 1 representing the "Diversified" category and a code of 0 representing the "Not Diversified" category. The "Not Diversified" group acts as the reference or baseline category, while the "Diversified" group serves as the target category. The Binomial logistic regression model explained 72% (Nagelkerke R^2) or 53.0% (Cox & Snell R^2) of the variation in diversification intention (Table 3). The accuracy for predicting households that pursued diversification

was 80.4%, while for those who did not diversify, it was 90.2%. Overall, the accuracy rate was 86.5%, indicating strong classification performance. The Binomial logistic regression explains the variables that could influence the household level decision to diversify into tourism or not (Table 2). Within each variable, the first category is designated as the reference category and is denoted with an asterisk (*). Among the foundational demographic variables (age, gender and education), which are proxy attributes for human capital, only the gender of the household head had a significant positive impact on diversification into tourism (Table 2): households led by females exhibited a 1.46 times greater likelihood of diversifying into tourism compared to households led by males.

Results also revealed that the geographical location of a village – a proxy for physical capital - had a strong and positive influence on the diversification of livelihoods towards tourism (Table 2) for villages characterized by high levels of interaction but had no impact on the decision for low and medium interaction villages. In these high-interaction villages, households were 1.59 times more likely to engage in livelihood activities that include tourism compared to households situated in villages with limited or no interactions.

Results for the impact of income level - a proxy for financial capital - as a predictor of household diversification to tourism were mixed, and somewhat surprising. Only one of the income categories was significant in the model, and counter to

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expectations, this impact was negative. Households with an upper middle income were 3.5 times less likely to diversify into tourism compared to the referent category of households with low income (Table 2). The influence of having a family member(s) residing abroad (a proxy indicator for social and financial capital) also had a negative coefficient in the model, meaning that households with members abroad were less likely to diversify into tourism. However, these results were not statistically significant when compared to the reference category (Table 2). While not significant, the number of family members residing abroad was inversely related to the likelihood of engaging in tourism-related diversification. The timeframe variables of when family members migrated abroad (a proxy for social capital), did not have a significant impact on the intention to engage in tourism-related livelihood diversification. Nonetheless, an observable pattern based on time since migration is present. The duration of migration was inversely related to the likelihood of the household diversifying their livelihood into tourism (Table 2). In other words, earlier migration indicates potentially other forms of income diversification or the lack of need to diversify into tourism.

Table 2.

Binomial Logistic Regress Summary and Significance.

Predictor Variables		Coefficient	S.E.	Wald's X^2	*p*-value	95% C.I. Lower	Upper
Gender	*Male	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Female	1.458	.537	7.360	.007*	.081	.667
Marital Status	*Married	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Not Married	-.862	.734	1.381	.240	.100	1.778
Age Group	*Young Adult	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Adult	.317	.689	.212	.654	.356	5.305
	Senior	2.242	1.360	2.715	0.99	.654	135.35
Education Level	*No Education	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Religious Studies	1.378	.1.519	.504	.478	.384	5.624
	Primary	3.157	1.697	3.459	.063	.844	654.11
	Secondary	.159	.918	.030	.863	.194	7.085
	High School	.712	.940	.574	.449	.323	12.864
	Bachelors and Above	.085	1.122	.006	.940	.121	9.824
Village Category	*No Interaction	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Limited Interaction	.717	.597	1.443	.230	.636	6.591
	Most Interaction	1.592	.769	4.281	.039*	.045	.919
Income Category	*No Income	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Low Income	-1.783	1.144	2.428	.119	.018	1.584
	Lower Middle	.916	1.118	.671	.413	.279	22.354
	Upper Middle	-3.544	1.521	5.430	.020*	.001	.569
	High Income	1.217	1.212	1.008	.315	.314	36.340
Family Members Abroad	*None	-	-	-	-	-	-
	One	-1.282	.898	2.036	.154	.048	1.614
	Two	-2.728	4.038	.456	.499	.000	178.98
	Three or more	-3.409	1.837	3.444	.063	.001	1.211
When did they migrate?	*None	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Past 5 years	-.271	.947	.082	.775	.119	4.878
	Past 10 years	-.644	2.329	.076	.782	.020	

Past 15 years	-1.165	1.461	.636	.425	.331	183.05
						13.331

Table 3. ***Model Summary***

Case Classification Accuracy	Cox and Snell R - Square	Nagelkerke R - Square
86.5%	0.72	0.53

Qualitative Results

When participants were asked to expand on the factors that contributed to their decision to diversify their livelihood strategies into tourism, a few important themes emerged (Figure. 5). Factors were predominantly either *facilitative* or *preventative*. Four prominent themes emerged as facilitative factors that positively influenced households to diversify into tourism: perception of tourism as a source of income, remittance, village location, and social prestige. In contrast, three themes were preventative factors that hindered households from diversifying into tourism: migration, village location, and the contact system. Village location was both facilitative and preventative depending upon the specific context and the households' locations. Each of these themes are addressed in the following section along with exemplar quotations that illustrate how participants described these factors.

Green Themes are *Facilitative.*
Orange Themes are *Preventative.*

Figure 5. Themes identified by Respondents in describing their decisions to diversify or not into tourism, visualized by coded theme. *Facilitative* factors mentioned (green, total n=821), and *preventative* factors (orange, total n=551 mentions) are presented. Individual theme counts are shown within each theme in chart segments. Examples of all seven themes were identified across all 133 respondents, with 108 respondents making multiple references to themes while discussing tourism.

Facilitative Factors

Perception of Tourism as a Source of Income

The most common theme that respondents mentioned as motivating their decision to engage in tourism was the *perception* or a "hope" that tourism would be a profitable income source. This theme was prevalent across all participants regardless of village locations, or their livelihood choices. Its dominance exemplifies the universal perception that tourism can provide an opportunity to generate additional income. Upper Mustang residents have limited livelihood options, but the advent of tourism in the region has

given residents a conceptual framework for imagining potential opportunity. As one respondent who is an owner of a six-bedroom hotel explained: "*Now what should I say? Definitely [tourism can be] an additional source of income. I mean there is not much going on here. We have limited opportunities. What else can you do to make more money?*" For many households, this perception has borne out in reality: tourism has allowed them to generate an extra source of income. And, now more than 30 years ago when tourism first began, relying on traditional forms of livelihood (farming and livestock) has been a growing concern, as numerous challenges with maintaining these existing livelihood strategies exist. For example, one respondent who just started a small hotel explained:

> *I have livestock but it's getting harder. [There are] a lot of [animal] diseases. So, it's difficult to take care of livestock and it has become a very risky and costly form of livelihood. Also, farming is difficult. So, I thought tourism is the most feasible way to add an extra source of income.*

However, these quotes also illustrate a potential tension between few opportunities to diversify and the perception that tourism "could" offer a better source of income. Engagement in tourism could represent perceived potential benefits rather than *actual* income. This observation could explain why income was not significant or positively related to the decision to diversify into tourism in the binomial regression analysis.

Remittances

Over half of the respondents reported having at least one family member living and working abroad. Almost 29% of all facilitative responses pertained to remittances, but these were predominantly expressed by households that had already diversified into tourism and had family members abroad. However, some participants who had neither diversified into tourism nor have family members abroad did acknowledge that remittances can shape household decisions to diversify livelihoods towards tourism. Other households in Upper Mustang described using remittances to invest in the tourism sector. Among the households that have diversified into tourism, a primary impetus behind livelihood diversification was linked to having family members living and working abroad.

While a negative relationship between having family abroad and tourism engagement was suggested in the regression findings (though the result was not significant), remittances were commonly identified as a factor that initially facilitated households participating in tourism, and then maintained livelihood diversification related to tourism. For example, a respondent who built a hotel seven years ago explained: "*I had some savings, but that was not enough to build a hotel. My younger brother, after he went to America, sent money. With my savings and the money my brother sent, we were able to build a hotel.*" Some respondents were quick to clarify that they did not always request financial assistance from their family members abroad, rather they did so only when faced with significant expenses that they were unable to finance on

their own, such as renovation or expansion of a hotel. One respondent stated, *"Only when we were building this (pointing to the hotel) we asked my son to send money. We did not ask for money after that. We did not need to. Don't think we are always begging for money."* Responses suggest that irrespective of whether the household has diversified its income sources or not, having a family member(s) working abroad and remitting money creates a sense of security and serves as a way to leverage growth, renovation, and expansion of opportunities and safety net. This feeling of assurance is a significant aspect for many households when contemplating livelihood diversification, and it provides an additional source of stability - and prospects for growth - for tourism endeavors.

Village Location

Both quantitative and qualitative results aligned in pointing out that village proximity to the trekking route positively affects households' decisions to diversify their livelihoods into tourism. Thirteen of 27 villages in Upper Mustang are situated along the primary and secondary trekking routes and/or the motor road. But, there are varying degrees of popularity even among the favorable tourism destinations and some destinations are more sought out by the tourists than others. Residents of villages that have at least some degree of interaction with tourists view building hotels as a potential strategy to diversify their livelihood. This theme was most commonly identified by residents of villages with high or limited interactions. Regardless of their livelihood choices, participants unanimously expressed that the location of a village is a factor that positively influences one's decision to diversify into tourism. This sentiment was

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expressed as follows by one hotel owner from a limited interaction village that had no hotels at all 10 years ago: *"First, in our place, they didn't really have hotels. They just had a camping site. Tourists started looking for tea houses and place to sleep, so we decided there is that opportunity….to build a hotel."*

Results also suggest that households who previously relied on traditional livelihood practices began to consider alternatives due to a combination of factors, including growing demand for lodging from the tourists in higher traffic areas and challenges associated with sustaining and profiting from agriculture and livestock-based livelihoods. One hotel owner stated:

> *Everything is expensive now. Farming and animal rearing is not enough. It did not take much to decide [to build a hotel.]. There is no complicated process involved. No. We saw tourists and there were no places for them to stay. That's how we decided that we may provide accommodation for them and make a business out of it. Frankly, it was an easy decision. [It] did not take a lot of thinking."*

In addition to presenting an opportunity to diversify, the scarcity of lodging options for tourists was also perceived as a moral and religious obligation to extend hospitality by some locals. As one hotel owner said, *"There is a saying in our religion that guests are the avatar of gods. By opening a hotel, we are providing service to the tourists that are looking for accommodation and helping ourselves. Everyone is happy."*

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Some households also seemed to be positively influenced by the success of their neighbors who had capitalized on the advantage of the location and already diversified. One respondent from a village with only three households was the last one to open a hotel and said, *"Our village falls right along the trekking route. We see people stopping here for lunch. Nilgiri [the name of another hotel] is overwhelmed with customers during lunch time. So, it was a good opportunity for us."* While some residents were influenced by their neighbors' flourishing hotel business, others were swayed by advice from people from all walks of life, encouraging them to take advantage of the location for their own benefit. For example, a resident of a limited interaction village noted: *"It was one of the teachers in our local school. His name is Master Raju. He thought we should open a hotel because there were no other hotels in this village. And we thought it's a pretty good investment."*

Residents are cognizant of the fact that not all villages are equally favored by tourists. Some residents recognized and acknowledged their privileged location and felt a sense of obligation to leverage their advantageous position. Put simplest by one participant:

> *I think it was the location. There are other villages that don't fall on the route. They don't have that opportunity. But our village falls right on the route. So, we built this hotel to make more money to capitalize on the location.*

Another respondent who is a hotel owner in Lo-manthang, the capital of Upper Mustang, echoed the sentiment of the majority of respondents and said:

First of all, I always thought making a hotel would be a good idea in Lo-

manthang. This is the center of Upper Mustang. We are a very popular tourist

destination in Nepal and all over the world. Second, we have land that is perfect

for a hotel because it's not too far and it's big enough to construct a decent size

hotel.

Social Prestige

The concept of social prestige, which serves as an indicator of social capital, was identified as a key factor both as a motivator for households to pursue livelihood diversification and as an outcome resulting from their successful diversification efforts. Social prestige played a crucial role in influencing the decisions surrounding livelihood diversification. Who is considered successful? In Upper Mustang, the perception of what or who is successful has changed over time. The attributes that were once a barometer of success are not necessarily relevant in the current context. Residents described these changes in economic and social status. As one participant said: *"In our community these days, things have changed. People have become money minded. Now we don't look at how many farms you have or how many yaks, sheep, or horses you have. Whoever has more money is considered successful."* Another participant provided a detailed explanation that directly connected social prestige to tourism:

People are abandoning farming and have given up raising livestock. Today, in

our place, we measure success by who has hotels, how big the hotel is, the

standard of the hotel and how many rooms there are. Most importantly how many

rooms have attached bathrooms. Haha.

In Upper Mustang, respondents connected economic success, prestige, and social status. These themes were prevalent across participants of all backgrounds. However, participants who explicitly acknowledged the prospect of gaining social prestige as a motivation for diversifying into tourism were primarily the participants who have not diversified into tourism, i.e., those who do not own a hotel. Over the past decade, building a hotel has become not only a vehicle for income diversification but also a common practice as a way of displaying wealth. Hotel ownership has become a symbol of success (Figure 2). Although the majority of the hotel owners across Upper Mustang hesitated to acknowledge, explicitly, that their motive was to attain social status, a few of them made this connection overtly. One hotel owner said: *"I am not as educated as you are [referring to the first author who conducted the interview], but I did manage to build a hotel. That is a proud thing for our lineage."* Another hotel owner stated, "...*at least I can walk with my head high now that I own a hotel.*" Unlike the hotel owners, residents who did not own hotels were forthcoming in directly expressing that some individuals own hotels to make a name for themselves and climb up the social hierarchy, more so than benefit economically - at least as a primary motivating factor. For instance, one person explained:

> *...there are so many hotels in Lo-manthang and Tsarang. Not all the hotels are*
>
> *for-profit. Some people build hotels so they can earn name, recognition, and most*

importantly reputation. I guess you can do whatever you want if you have

money."

Another local expanded on this concept stating: *"Owning a hotel earns you a special place in our society. I do not think there would be as many hotels if owning hotels did not come with an honor."*

In the case of Upper Mustang, it was observed that an individual and, by extension, the household, does not necessarily have to be genuinely successful as a tourism entrepreneur to earn prestige. Oftentimes, *appearing* successful is more important than being economically successful, as it increases social capital. Respondents described how this can be achieved, for example by spending exorbitant amounts of money for interior decoration of a hotel, advertising luxurious amenities, placing misinformation on social media, and even boasting about earned income, even if untrue. For instance, one individual very enthusiastically said: *"I heard "Mr. Y" spent over $800,000 (USD) for their new hotel. I heard him saying their hotel is the most expensive in the entire region of Upper Mustang."* Another respondent added: *"He publicly said that he would open the most unique hotel in Upper Mustang. He did. But he is not even in the village most of the time. I do not see many tourists visiting that hotel, but his nephew keeps saying they are always busy."* Put simplest by one respondent: *"Who cares if the hotel is not earning money. More important than money, they are earning a name."* Therefore, there is evidence suggesting that social capital, as perceived by the residents, can potentially hold a higher value than financial capital.

Preventative Factors

Migration

Qualitative results strongly suggest that in Upper Mustang, the decision of households to *not* diversify into tourism is primarily influenced by migration - or, rather, the desire to migrate abroad. In the regression analysis, while not statistically significant, results indicated that household's inclination towards diversification declined as the number of family members abroad increased as well as their time since migration. Qualitative findings further support and expand upon these results, demonstrating a negative relationship between migration and livelihood diversification overall and diversification into tourism specifically. Irrespective of their chosen livelihood, all participants agreed that the migration of people from Upper Mustang to USA and France plays a significant role in deterring them from exploring tourism as a means of diversifying their livelihood activities.

As of 2021, the number of Upper Mustangis living in New York and France have increased exponentially. One concerned elderly resident said, *"Our village will be empty, it's just as good as empty now. There are old people and children and a few young people left. All people will die, and others will go abroad."* This phenomenon is also reflected in the demographic characteristics of the participants involved in this research: 59 percent of the households (n = 78) had at least one family member abroad. The total number of individuals from these households summed to 119, with 69 in the USA, 39 in France, and

the remaining 11 in other countries (United Kingdom=3, Switzerland = 2, India = 2, and one each in Japan, Canada, Germany, and Cyprus).

This observation suggests that the fundamental motivation for households of Upper Mustang to migrate and to diversify in ways that involve tourism is inherently the same: a better life for themselves and their family members by generating additional income and ensuring financial security. For instance, one resident explained: "*Do the math. I heard you can make at least $3000 USD in the USA [per month]. It doesn't matter what you are doing here. Does not matter how successful your business is. You're not making that much money in Upper Mustang.*" In addition to lucrative financial opportunities, some respondents also ascribe the desire to migrate to the allure of the New York City or Paris lifestyle, which is unattainable in Upper Mustang, with or without tourism. This is particularly evident with regards to the younger generation. As one resident said:

> *It's not even just the money. People are just attracted to that fancy lifestyle. I see pictures of our people on Facebook, good roads, buildings as if they touch the sky, so clean that even people look beautiful. I am not young anymore, but those pictures make me want to go to America.*

In certain households that had already diversified into tourism, the head of the household had migrated abroad, leaving the responsibilities of operating a hotel to other family members. This phenomenon could potentially have implications for gender roles, which could provide an explanation for the regression results showing that households led by

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females had a higher likelihood of engaging in tourism-related diversification. For instance, one female hotel owner stated, *"My husband left for France a few years ago. Now, I have to do all the work in the hotel. Sometimes people ask for receipts, and I find it very embarrassing to say I don't know how to write."*

Some hotel owners expressed that their ultimate goal is to go abroad, even if they might be involved in tourism, or contemplate that life. There are instances where livelihood diversification involving tourism is a mere strategy, akin to an interim step, until they amass enough financial resources or find another way to go abroad. According to one respondent, *"I am just waiting for my papers to be processed, then I will go to America. But do not tell other villagers. I don't want to jinx [the process]."* While another respondent said, *"It is expensive to go abroad and then you have to find a way. I have some money saved from this hotel. Once I have enough money and if my luck favors me, I will go to America."* There were also times when residents displayed a profound sense of urgency and desire to migrate abroad regardless of the consequences. For instance, one young unmarried interviewee said, *"I will marry a blind person as long as they are from America. I am just kidding (chuckles)."*

Village Location

Although the geographical location of the village did have a positive and significant influence on livelihood diversification towards tourism in villages with high and limited levels of interactions, this pattern did not hold true for villages with no

interactions. The qualitative findings here support the regression results and indicate that households in villages without interactions are less inclined to engage in diversification involving tourism. This theme was strongly communicated by residents of low interaction villages, and it was additionally emphasized by some residents from villages with high and limited interactions as a contributing factor for not diversifying into tourism. Up until November of 2021, when the data collection concluded, there was not a single hotel in the 14 no interaction villages. Unlike the other villages in the region, tourism has not provided any viable livelihood opportunities there. This quote from a resident illustrates the perspectives of farmers from these villages: *"We have nothing to do with tourism. Tourists don't step foot in our village. We do not gain anything from tourism."* Consequently, households in these villages have limited livelihood options, leaving them no choice but to rely on traditional livelihood strategies. As one farmer explained: *"We are very isolated. So, it's a small village. What do you expect? There is not much you can do. We don't have anything here. We are left with no choice but to depend on farms and livestock."*

Despite the proximity to the trekking route and/or motor road and favorable tourist destinations, some households do not consider tourism as providing viable livelihood options. This was expressed by individuals in villages characterized by limited interactions, aligning with the regression results that indicated households from this category are less inclined to pursue livelihood diversification involving tourism compared to villages with high interactions. One resident stated: *"We already have two hotels in*

this village. Adding another hotel is not wise since we do not get many tourists." Certain residents were hesitant to consider constructing hotels as a profitable strategy, as they perceived a limited number of tourists wouldn't justify the presence of additional hotels. A few residents also mentioned that opening a hotel may cause unnecessary tension with other hotel owners as a result of unhealthy competition. Contrary to the popular opinion, some residents mentioned the motor road as a reason not to open a hotel. With the newly constructed motor road, tourists spend significantly less money in one destination, as they can reach multiple destinations in a shorter span of time without having to stay overnight. As one resident aptly explained:

> *Before we had the motor road, tourists had to spend at least one night because it takes one full day of walking to get to the next destination. So, they had to stop here. Now they go in jeeps so they don't really spend much time here. The best they do is eat snacks and drink black tea. So, I think the motor road is to blame. Because of the motor road, they go straight to Lo-manthang. They can get there a lot faster.*

Contact System

A final preventative theme that emerged was the contact system. Upper Mustang is socially stratified. As expanded on in Chapter 2, the caste-based naming system is deeply rooted in Upper Mustang history and remains intact. The naming system differentiates elite families, who descended from the king and bear the surname "Bista", from the rest of the population. The contact system extends its effects to structure pre-

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existing referral relationships between trekking agencies in cities and Bista hotel owners in Upper Mustang. Respondents described how the contact system is a reason to not diversify into tourism. This was particularly true among the residents of villages with limited and high interactions. Both hotel owners and non-hotel owners mentioned this these in interviews. In contrast, residents of low villages rarely mentioned the contact system, likely due to these villages containing no Bista family descendants.

Respondents described how, on the one hand, the contact system has enabled the Bista families to attract more tourists; on the other hand, it has made it exceedingly difficult for non-Bista owned hotels to entice tourists to their hotels. For instance, one new hotel owner said, "*Tourists do not even look at our hotels because of the contact system. I am new and don't have any contacts. They have contacts and they go straight to the big hotels, as the guide leads them straight there.*"

While some residents have learned about the uneven economic benefits of tourism because of the contact system after diversifying, others have recognized this pattern and cited it as a reason for not diversifying. As one individual said, *"Why would I open a hotel? I do not have any contacts."* Another echoed this sentiment and said, *"The first thing you need to build a hotel is not money, not phops (mud rammed locally made bricks), not timbers. It is contacts. Some people don't understand that and regret later."* The contact system has not only created an uneven playing field in the context of tourism, but also has limited the agency of non-Bista households to diversify to a livelihood

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strategy involving tourism. One resident explained, "*As long as there are W, X, Y, Z [name dropping hotels which are all Bista-owned], other hotels have no chance. They have years' worth of contacts.*" These families also have generations of social capital and prestige behind them.

DISCUSSION

This study conducted in the Himalayan region of Upper Mustang used the framework of household capitals to examine household decisions to diversify their livelihoods into tourism and then examined qualitative statements about tourism to deepen understanding of factors that prevent or facilitate tourism decisions. Scoones (1998) suggested that decisions within contexts of vulnerability can be understood through the lens of natural, human, financial, physical, and social capitals. Following the SL framework, I identified site-specific proxies that correspond to different forms of livelihood capital. Regression findings revealed that gender (human capital), income (financial capital), and village location (physical capital) were significant in tourism decision making. Qualitative results further elucidated factors that either contributed to or acted to prevent respondents from diversifying into tourism and highlighted some of the mechanisms by which these factors affected decision-making. Notably, migration - emerged as a pivotal factor that both mediated and disrupted the patterns of livelihood diversification into tourism. Migration was conceptualized as a proxy variable for both social and human capital in this work, although results highlighted that migration connects to financial capital as well. Tourism can subsidize migration itself, or migration

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can subsidize tourism activities of those still in Upper Mustang. Both qualitative and quantitative results combined, paint a picture of tourism as a livelihood strategy that has been and remains highly uncertain. This uncertainty emerges from regional, national and international political, health and disaster contexts. The combined effects for Upper Mustangi is that tourism is undergoing a paradigmatic shift from a hopeful diversification opportunity to an option secondary to migration away from Upper Mustang.

The first set of analyses presented straightforward results on diversification patterns and binomial logistic regression to identify predictors in tourism diversification decisions. Tourism was a part of a livelihood strategies for 36.8 percent of households, but importantly an additional 30.8 percent of households were dependent on remittances in some form. Tourism is important as a livelihood pattern, but not all-encompassing.

The regression analysis revealed several key findings regarding the factors impacting diversification into tourism, which are aligned with findings from other studies. The gender of the household head was found to have a significant positive effect on engaging in tourism-related activities. This finding is supported by studies conducted by Ogra and Badola (2014) and Tucker and Boonabaana (2012) highlighted how tourism contributes to empowering women by enhancing their livelihood assets in meaningful and distinct ways. Additionally, the geographical location was found to have a positive and significant impact, confirming the findings from qualitative research. Both quantitative and qualitative results aligned in pointing out that village proximity to the

trekking route positively affects households' decisions to diversify their livelihoods into tourism. This finding aligns with previous by in Paudel et al (2017) in Nepal, and Wang et al., 2016; Oumer et al., 2013 for other regions. Income level as proxy for financial capital, was a significant negative predictor for only upper middle income households diversification to tourism. This unexpected outcome could potentially be explained by the insights derived from the interview data. The qualitative data revealed that the primary motivation for respondents' decision to engage in tourism was the *perception* or a "hope" that tourism would be a profitable income source. This result is consistent with the findings of Leu (2019), Ajayi et al. (2016) and Buchanan et al. (2016), who show that households in rural areas actively pursue tourism entrepreneurship with a hope to secure an additional source of income and even escape poverty and this action can take place either independently or in conjunction with other forms of capital.

Livelihood Capitals and Livelihood Diversification into Tourism:

The work of DFID (1999a) and Ellis (2000) highlight that different forms of livelihood capitals are interconnected. Households of Upper Mustang often pull from and combine different human, social, financial, physical and natural capitals to make decisions about how to diversify their livelihood strategies and ensure survival. The results of this paper also emphasize that beyond the three variables of gender, income and village proximity, other factors associated with tourism facilitate of prevent households from engaging in tourism.

Extensive research on the critical role of financial capital in livelihood diversification has explored factors like access to credit, income, market access, and savings as important determinants (Kunjuraman, 2022; Ansoms & McKay, 2012; Barbieri & Mahoney, 2009; DeJanvry & Sadoulet, 2011; Ellis, 2000; Mushongah & Scoones, 2012). Similarly previous research acknowledges the significance of social networks as a valuable form of social capital (Bennett et al., 2012; Tolkach & King, 2015). Specifically, studies have highlighted the significance of internal and external institutional support (Kunjuraman et al., 2022, (Nath et al., 2020) in livelihood diversification. External networks such as those between locals, NGOs, private sectors, government officials, and environmental conservation agencies were not found to be important in Upper Mustang. The limited dependence on these external sources might be attributed to the region's low literacy rate, lack of awareness about available resources, and the reliance on remittances and the *dhukuti* system, as noted by Amburgey et al. (2023) for Mustang. Findings revealed that residents mostly relied on the internal and localized social networks shaped by caste-based naming systems, which is unique to Upper Mustang and transnational kinship networks.

The findings of this study align with these results, but also emphasize the tight interconnectedness of financial and social capital as mechanisms that contribute to diversification decisions of households.

Results indicate that the primary sources of finance in Upper Mustang include remittances, household savings, selling livestock, and the use of *Dhukuti*, a community-based rotating credit system. This system, rooted in a communal practice of storing food grains to assist those in need, has historically provided financial support to residents even before the existence of formal financial institutions, prior to tourism and migration. Many households, regardless of whether they have family member(s) abroad or not, were able to diversify into tourism. Importantly, qualitative results strongly emphasized that remittances facilitated diversification into tourism. Households that own hotels and have family members abroad rely on translocal remittances for significant financial support, such as building, renovating, and expanding their hotels. Financial and social capital are linked by tight social relationships that can yield financial help. Similar local and translocal rotating credit systems have been observed in various communities worldwide, such as rural Nigeria (Kurtz, 1973), where women use it to meet their family financial needs, and diasporic South Korean (Light et al., 1990) households in Los Angeles and small business owners in post-World War II Japan (Dekle & Hamada, 2000) who use it to finance ventures and small-sized firms, respectively.

Social capital also varied between households based on their caste and translocal kinship networks. For instance, the contact system positively affected the diversification decisions of Bista households, but had a negative impact on non-Bista households. Households with a strong contact system – predominantly Bista - are more likely to engage in livelihood diversification related to tourism as they derive significant benefits

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from such social structure. Additionally, the social network has a positive or negative influence on livelihood diversification decisions is also contingent on whether the household has family member(s) abroad. Remittances - as an expression of both financial and social capital - are identified as an important mechanism for economic security and sustaining translocal families in Upper Mustang. Remittances remain a vital factor enabling households to diversify their livelihoods and withstand the challenges associated with tourism. As of 2019, more than half of tourism-related businesses in Upper Mustang are created and sustained with continued investment of remittances (Gurung et al., 2021:18). The nurturing and strengthening of translocal kinship networks, facilitated by remittances, have enhanced households' agency in diversifying their livelihoods.

Tourist Guides and Human Capitals

Education has been identified by several studies, notably Rahut et al. (2018), Rahut et al. (2014), and Khatun and Roy (2012), as a form of human capital that plays an important role in promoting livelihood diversification. These studies have also shown that the absence of education serves as a constraint, impeding livelihood diversification in comparable regions such as the rural areas of Bhutan, Nepal, and West Bengal. In contrast, Avila-Foucat and Rodriguez-Robayo (2018) found that education did not positively influence livelihood diversification involving tourism in rural Mexico. Avila-Foucat and Rodriguez-Robayo described the level of education as homogeneous, but limited to primary school, as a possible explanation for education as not relevant to diversification. The results of this study also found that education and associated literacy

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skills were not important determinants of livelihood diversification decisions. In the case of Upper Mustang, more than half of the participants (61%) either had no formal education or a primary-level education, a pattern of education that is also uniform at the level of primary school.

One unique factor surrounding the role of education in tourism in Upper Mustang, is the unique role of tourist guides as direct contributors to cooking, writing, language, and networking activities with tourists. Their role may compensate for less robust education and specialized skills of local Mustangi. The role played by tourist guides has allowed the hotel owners of Upper Mustang to engage in livelihood activities involving tourism without necessarily requiring a high levels of education or linguistic and culinary skills.

The roles of tourist guides, including trekking guides, have been a subject of scholarly discourse (Cohen, 1982; Dearden & Harron, 1994; Haig & McIntyre, 2002; Randall & Rollins, 2009; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2016). These literatures discuss the various roles tourist guides play that are primarily categorized as either leadership or intermediary. In the context of Upper Mustang, the role of the tourist guides extends beyond what is discussed in the literature. In addition to being knowledgeable about the destination and physically fit to trek, a licensed tourist guide is expected to possess other requisite skills such as proficiency in languages spoken by both tourists and local people, culinary, reading, and writing. Saying 'tourist guides are the caretakers of the tourists'

would not be an understatement, as tourists guides perform a wide range of duties including cooking, laundering, and serving meals. It is common to witness tourists guides in the kitchen of local hotels preparing and serving meals to their clients.

Capitals are Interconnected

In this study, integrating qualitative and quantitative results illustrates how one capital interacts with others, in both facilitative and preventative directions. For instance, in Upper Mustang, households relied on *dhukuti*, savings (*financial capital*) and remittance (*financial capital*) sent by family members abroad (*social capital*) to build hotels (*physical capital*) and owning hotels (*physical capital*) is a sign of prestige which adds to *social capital*. In contrast, non-Bista households that do not have an established contact system (*social capital*) and live in the villages that are not in the proximity to the established route (physical capital) are less likely to engaged in livelihood diversification that involve tourism and pursue other forms of livelihood diversification strategies such as migration. This way of examining livelihood capitals allows scholars employing SLA to have a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms by which types of livelihood assets both facilitate and prevent certain livelihood diversification decisions. Furthermore, the SLA framework typically does not encompass factors like the contact system and translocal kinship networks, which emerged as influential in household decision-making within the Upper Mustang context. This approach holds considerable theoretical and practical consequences for residents residing in tourism destinations in other global tourism areas.

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Migration: A Notable Disruptive Force to Livelihood

Migration is not new to the people of trans-Himalayan region, as they have long relied on long distance trade relations with neighboring Tibet and India (Gurunt et al., 2021; Bauer, 2004; Ratanapruck, 2007). The contemporary configurations of migration have, however, radically altered many aspects of the lives of the people of Upper Mustang (for details see Gurung et al., 2021). In the early 1990s and 2000s, the first wave of Upper Mustangis migrated to countries like the USA, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan with the expectation of staying temporarily until they earned enough money to repay debt and save enough to return and live a comfortable life in Nepal (Craig, 2020). By 2022, the migration paradigm had changed. There were more than a thousand Upper Mustang residents residing in New York City and slightly less than a thousand in Paris, comprising a significant proportion of Mustang's diaspora in just two global cities and a significant number of Nepali workers are employed abroad in Malaysia and Middle Eastern countries.

The rate of international labor-based migration in Nepal is rapidly increasing. Between 2019/20 and 2021/22, over 1.1 million labor approvals were granted by the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security (MoLESS, 2022). In 2020/21, a total of 203,934 Nepali migrants returned home, which rose to 470,978 in 2021/22. Notably, residents of Upper Mustang exhibit distinctive migration patterns compared to other Nepali migrants, often choosing destinations such as the United States and France due to

higher income levels and more favorable immigration policies. These countries provide opportunities for permanent residency or citizenship, allowing Upper Mustangi residents to bring their families along. Consequently, it has become common for Upper Mustangi youth residing in the USA or France to visit Nepal for marriage and subsequently return abroad with their spouses.

The reasons for this paradigmatic shift in migration are highlighted in Figure 3. Since 1992, tourism has been vulnerable to a series of external disturbances such as political unrest, natural calamities, and global pandemics. Most effects at regional and national levels were negative. A few were positive, i.e., road building and construction of schools and health posts. However, despite the growth in tourist numbers and the expansion of hotels, particularly in the time period from 2012 to 2019, tourism numbers vacillated wildly after 2020, and this sets the decision context for local households – whether to diversify into tourism, or not. Migration to countries like the USA and France, offers a stable system - economically, politically, and socially, and conditions which are increasingly perceived as unattainable in Nepal. Therefore, the most-sought after and desired form of livelihood strategy have been to migrate abroad.

This was not always the case, not at least to this extent. Results from interviews suggest that there were times when livelihoods involving tourism were desired and remittances were crucial in livelihood diversification decisions in Upper Mustang for many households. Gurung et al., (2021) estimated that well over half of tourism-related

businesses were created and sustained because of remittances. However, the rapid

paradigm shift in the socio-cultural context against the backdrop of permanent migration

is altering the livelihood diversification patterns. Amburgey et al., (2023) identifies

several factors that expedited this process, writing that households relying on livelihood

strategies involving tourism in Upper Mustang were impacted the most during COVID-

19, as the country shut borders for foreigners. In interviews some hotel owners expressed

their earlier intentions were not to migrate abroad, but they have reconsidered their

intention since COVID-19. Put simplest by one elderly local, *"These days money talks.*

People follow money. They will do what brings them more money. Now you tell me where

is more money, in tourism or in America? I think the answer is pretty simple. Our place

will be empty in the next few years."

The socio-cultural context in Upper Mustang has also experienced a rapid and

significant transformation influenced by external drivers, resulting in permanent

migration that continues to affect the livelihood decisions of the people in Upper

Mustang. Globally, similar trends can be observed as a result of rapid industrial growth

and urbanization. For example, in China, the rapid migration of labor to urban areas has

led to the abandonment of farmlands and villages (Xu et al., 2019 and Yangang, 2014).

Similarly, in the American West, the remarkable growth of tourism and recreation has

caused significant changes in land use and migration patterns, resulting in a departure

from traditional livelihoods and triggering substantial socio-cultural and economic

transformations (Ooi et al., 2015 and Winkler et al., 2007).

Re-filling empty villages in China and revitalizing rural places in the American agricultural heartland is a challenge, but it is one that has been retooled as an opportunity for rural places to bring back through tourism. For example, US western towns have been transformed by tourism, playing on the significant economic, social and environmental quality of life. But the challenges persist due to the inherent volatile nature of tourism, leading to continuous uncertainties surrounding the industry's future and its long-term sustainability along with the associated possibilities. In the case of Upper Mustang, migrants abroad with new skills could come back to Upper Mustang and continue to build on unique cultural history of place.

But in the meantime, limited availability of livelihood options, the instability and unpredictability of tourism, and the translocal global network of migration have combined to cause a significant outflow of people, which has led migration to be a disruptive force raising serious concerns about the future of tourism and, more importantly, the well-being of those who choose to stay in Upper Mustang.

CONCLUSION

This study employed the SLA framework to explore and examine the different factors that influence livelihood diversification decisions into tourism in the context of Upper Mustang, Nepal. The binomial logistic regression results revealed that the factors that negatively and positively influence the household livelihood diversification into

tourism in Upper Mustang were gender, income, village location and family members abroad, provisionally. After the analysis of the qualitative data, it emerged that the relationship between the capitals was not always directly facilitative or preventative. Decisions are complex, and dynamic in that household conditions and broader conditions for tourism are constantly evolving. It is important to consider the local factors and their interplay with regional and provincial factors. For future work, it would be useful to better understand other local, regional and national level contexts in which household decisions are affected. These factors should be assessed in conjunction with other household level capitals, considering the broader network of interdependent social, cultural, political, historical, and economic conditions.

In conclusion, this work contributes to the existing body of literature on livelihood diversification involving tourism, but also to the broader literature on the nexus of livelihood, migration, and tourism. More specifically, this research makes a significant contribution to the current literature that employs SLA to explore and examine the relationship between household capitals and livelihood diversification under different vulnerability contexts. This means better understanding the external (regional, national, international) drivers that define livelihood vulnerability.

One example is a scarcity of studies that analyze and understand the SLA in relation to migration pressures and possibilities concerning livelihood decisions and diversification. While this study focuses on the specific context of Upper Mustang,

Nepal, the issues identified are not confined solely to this region. Similar challenges are being observed in other locations globally undergoing comparable socio-cultural and economic transformations, such as ski towns in the Western USA and rural agricultural villages in China. The relevance of these findings extends beyond the boundaries of Upper Mustang. The results of this study have led to ongoing discussions with local tourism operators in Upper Mustang, and will be shared with stakeholders through various channels, including reports, and community gatherings, with the understanding that this work will not only help the residents of Upper Mustang make better and informed livelihood decisions, but also aid decision-makers in effectively managing tourism. The research provides vital information for shaping tourism policies, specifically regarding diversifying livelihoods through tourism, emphasizing the need to address income disparities. The findings offer valuable insights to policy makers and tourism managers in Upper Mustang to enhance livelihood strategies and guide future research and policies integrating tourism with traditional economies.

In the case of Upper Mustang, tourism has played an important role in alleviating economic stress by providing viable livelihood diversification opportunities. However, the paradigm shift caused by rapid socio-cultural and economic changes, coupled with the susceptibility of tourism to external drivers, has overturned previously held assumptions about the momentum and sustainability of a livelihood diversification strategy involving tourism. Given the high vulnerability of tourism to external disruptions, households in Upper Mustang make livelihood decisions under a great deal

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of uncertainty. The future of tourism in Upper Mustang, as well as the well-being of the residents who choose to stay in the region, has been undermined not by a single factor, but by the collective impact of limited livelihood options, the unstable and uncertain nature of tourism, and the translocal global network of migration, leaving the people in Upper Mustang in a very tough position when making the decision – do we build that hotel? This simple question, however, engages ultimately with much bigger questions of cultural history, future economic sustainability in rural Nepal, and identity for Upper Mustangi.

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the field of tourism system, the traditional research approach has been linear, reductionist, and mechanistic with an assumption that the interactions and behavior of variables can be monitored, and the outcomes can be predicted with simplified models (Baggio and Sainaghi, 2011). Many researchers therefore failed to provide a complete understanding of the structural and dynamic characteristics of tourism dynamics (Baggio and Sainaghi, 2011). Several scholars have advocated for a reframing of the field of tourism studies. (Gell-Mann, 1994; Faulkner and Russell, 1997; Lansing, 2003; Farrell and Twinning-Ward, 2004; Baggio, 2008; and Baggio and Sainaghi, 2011). These scholars argue that the conventional research paradigms employed in this domain are subject to criticism due to their linear, reductionist, and mechanistic approach towards the study of tourism. Scholars have argued that there is a need for transition of tourism studies toward more adaptive, interdisciplinary, and comprehensive and highlights that tourism researchers need to keep abreast of discourses occurring in related fields (Jørgensen, 2017; McCool and Bosak 2016; Farrell and Twinning-Ward, 2004).

In response to the appeals made by numerous scholars, I attempt to contribute to the reframing of tourism studies by enhancing the examination of tourism through a lens that incorporates interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches. This involves exploring the potential application of pertinent insights and methodologies from other fields of study like political ecology and migration to enrich the understanding of tourism

decision making. I acknowledge that tourism decisions are complex, nonlinear, integrative, unpredictable, and constantly evolving. In addition, I incorporate a historical perspective to examine tourism in relation to the prevailing yet interconnected social, cultural, political, and economic conditions in which people experience and make decisions about tourism. Tourism in Upper Mustang, Nepal presents a near perfect case to study and to investigate tourism decisions and effects while theoretically and empirically addressing the aforementioned gaps in the tourism literature. This research creatively and originally integrates theoretical frameworks from different disciplines and contributes to the broader tourism literature at the nexus of political ecology, migration and livelihood decisions.

The timing of this research coincided with a momentous political transition in Nepal, concurrent with a socio-cultural paradigm shift in Upper Mustang surrounding migration, and the backdrop of a global pandemic COVID-19. Therefore, this research is noteworthy opportunity to examine the dynamics of tourism under different institutional regimes and challenging circumstances. This study has considerable potential for immediate and practical relevance in terms of informing institutional arrangements, policies, and managerial strategies, particularly pertaining to the effective management of tourism at the grassroots and regional levels. These insights are not only applicable to the Upper Mustang region but also extend to other Himalayan regions in Nepal, neighboring countries in the Himalayas and many places globally wrestling with decisions about tourism and livelihood sustainability.

Summary of Major Chapter Contributions

  Chapter 2 of this study centered around the application of transnationalism and translocality theories, aiming to position migration as a cyclic process wherein the well-being of individuals from Upper Mustang in Nepal and NYC in the USA depends on the reliability of global migratory networks and translocal kinship relations. These networks serve as a foundation for security and a sense of belonging, which have been both challenged and reshaped by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The article delved into the characteristics of migration, mobility, and precariousness within a translocal Himalayan community on a global scale, particularly in the context of the unprecedented financial and social disruptions caused by the pandemic. The findings indicate that as tourism activities came to a halt in Nepal, the aspirational notion that youth in NYC could return to Nepal after amassing sufficient resources now hangs in the balance, as they struggle to support their families in the US, let alone send money back to Nepal. Moreover, this research shed light on the additional burdens faced by immigrant communities, such as those originating from Upper Mustang, during moments of crisis. Furthermore, it revealed that despite the dispersion of kinship arrangements across different locations, there remains a strong collective sentiment of shared identity and responsibility towards the community. It is precisely within these close-knit kinship relations, which provide individuals with a sense of purpose and meaning regardless of their physical and political mobility constraints that the significance of these networks

becomes evident, even as they face challenges and undergo transformations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation employed a political ecology approach to examine and understand the local perspectives regarding the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural effects of tourism in the Upper Mustang region of northern Nepal, while considering the incorporation of power relationships and how that contributes to differentiated experiences and perceptions of tourism within a non-western developing country context.

The findings revealed that perceptions of tourism impacts varied among the locals, with the perceived effects predominantly dictated by geographical location and the presence or absence of tourists. In addition, I found that the costs and benefits of tourism were unevenly experienced by the residents of Upper Mustang. This disparity can be attributed to the contact system stemming from historical patterns, the social structure rooted in a localized caste system, and socially conditioned notions of power and agency. These factors differentiate social actors who benefit from tourism from those who do not. Furthermore, there is a place-based element at play, as certain villages hold greater power and size, making them major tourist destinations, while others remain marginalized historically and presently. This correlation between location and historical elite status and political power persists, despite the emergence of non-Bista ownership of hotels and national-level trends towards democratization and secularization. The exertion of power

through established historical patterns and social structures contributes to an uneven landscape for tourism. Despite the differing perceptions of tourism impacts and benefits, there remains a strong inclination, desire, and investment among the people of Upper Mustang to engage in tourism activities. They remain hopeful and believe in the potential of tourism. In conclusion, I emphasize the importance of examining the interplay between tourism development and the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts of tourism through an examination of power dynamics and interrelationships among various stakeholders.

Chapter 4 used the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) framework to explore and analyze the factors influencing decision-making related to tourism-based livelihood diversification in the context of Upper Mustang, Nepal. The results of the binomial logistic regression indicated that gender of the head of the household, income, and the village location based on the proximity to the established trekking route are significant predictors of household decisions to diversify their livelihoods into tourism, but not all in positive directions. The addition of qualitative results substantially expanded on the interactions between household level assets and other factors, highlighting both facilitative and preventative relationships. Results indicated that perceiving tourism to be a viable (hopeful) income source, receiving remittances, favorable village locations, and the social prestige associated with tourism contribute to households' decision to diversify livelihood into tourism. Conversely, barriers including migration, village location, and the contact system deter households from engaging in

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livelihood diversification involving tourism. Around 69% of households in Upper Mustang have transitioned from traditional activities and engaged in diversified livelihoods, particularly in remittance-based and/or tourism-related endeavors. Respondents clearly demonstrated how financial (income and remittances) and social capital (family networks or family abroad) acted as mechanisms to both support tourism at home for some, or push others away from diversifying into tourism.

The addition of historical data on tourism and a broader set of political, economic and cultural events also highlights the real instability of tourism in Upper Mustang since 1992. Tourism is clearly vulnerable to external disruptions. Breaking "external" here down into events that occur at regional/provincial, federal and international levels also highlighted how the influx of tourists is influenced by significant socio-political events shaped by decisions made at different levels. In turn, Upper Mustangi experience the effects of these decisions and events locally, i.e. are tourists present or not? In the context of Upper Mustang, tourism has provided viable opportunities for livelihood diversification, but the rapid socio-cultural and economic changes, coupled with the vulnerability of tourism, have challenged assumptions about the sustainability of tourism-based livelihood strategies. Qualitative results in combination with migration data suggests that changing migration patterns may be leading to a paradigmatic shift away from short term migration followed by a return and investment into tourism, toward migration without return.

Throughout the three papers in this dissertation, the interconnections between tourism impacts, livelihood diversification, and migration were examined in the specific context of Upper Mustang. An important finding was that the tourism impacts and economic benefits in Upper Mustang were not evenly distributed among its residents. As well, the vulnerability context created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the concurrent flood in July 2021 significantly affected the livelihoods of the resident of Upper Mustang. A unique aspect of the research was the framing of exposures as multi-level, which provided insight into the local positionality of households. Households must respond – and adapt - to these broader economic, political and disaster contexts using different livelihood capitals. The study highlighted the initial role of migration remittances as an asset for local families, but also highlighted how it became a source of real regional vulnerability, particularly in the face of COVID-19 and natural disasters. The face of Upper Mustang is changing dramatically based on migration.

Migration rates among the people of Upper Mustang have reached unprecedented levels, leading to a transformative shift in the socio-cultural context and raising concerns about the future of both livelihood patterns and the region itself. The limited availability of livelihood options, the unstable nature of tourism, and the translocal global migratory network have collectively driven out-migration, creating a disruptive force with serious implications for the future of tourism and the well-being of those who remain in Upper Mustang.

This study has real world implications and significantly contributes to tourism scholarship from the perspective of local communities, i.e., tourism producers. Different versions of the findings of this study will be shared with stakeholders at different levels through various channels, including but not limited to, presentations, reports, and community gatherings, with the hope that this work will not only help the residents of Upper Mustang make better informed livelihood decisions, but also aid decision-makers in effectively managing tourism. Several years of visits to Upper Mustangi communities and a 2021 fellowship with the National Planning Commission of Nepal have facilitated valuable connections.

The layperson version of a report based on my second paper is already disseminated to local governmental representatives and to the National Planning Commission of Nepal. The report lays out results about the impacts of COVID-19 and natural disaster to the residents of Upper Mustang and recommendations were based on the need for policies on disaster risk mitigation and COVID recovery. Additional research reports, including layperson versions, along with policy recommendations based on remaining papers will be disseminated to governmental representatives at the local, provincial, and federal levels. The research findings on tourism impacts, unequal distribution of benefits, and livelihood diversification could have a substantial impact on shaping tourism policies. The study provides vital information for practical guidance in policymaking to promote sustainable tourism development and effective budget

allocation. These results hold potential value for tourism managers in Upper Mustang and could assist them in identifying avenues to improve livelihood strategies and inform future research and policies that integrate tourism development with traditional economies. This research took place at a time when the entire country of Nepal was navigating through major political transformation from 2017 to 2021. As well, the second half of this research was carried out amidst a global pandemic, when tourism had been brought to a literal stand still. This makes discussions about tourism futures in Nepal particularly relevant for real-time practical, institutional, policy, and managerial impacts. These impacts will be valuable not only for effective tourism management in Upper Mustang but also for other Himalayan regions in Nepal, neighboring countries in Asia that are facing similar and globally in regions wrestling with tradeoffs associated with tourism inequities and impacts.

Limitations Amid COVID-19

The dissertation data collection took place during the global pandemic COVID-19 and therefore, was carried out under challenging circumstances. The top priority was ensuring the safety of local participants, communities and the research team. This required shortening the duration of fieldwork, wearing masks and many other accommodations. This consideration and other obstacles proved to be challenging in participant recruitment and ultimately led to smaller sample sizes.

Chapter 2 was an opportunistic and flexible response to the exploding COVID-19 situation. In Chapter 3, participants were recruited from 24 out of the 27 villages in Upper Mustang. Data collection could not be conducted in three villages - one of these villages consisted of only four households with no residents at the time of data collection, and the other two villages were inaccessible due to high river flow.

The lack of inter-rater reliability testing in the analysis of qualitative data is acknowledged, which may introduce biases due to the author's affiliation with Upper Mustang. When considering the quantitative data, it is recognized that incorporating additional pertinent details, such as comprehensive demographic information about family members, would have been advantageous. This implies that the survey questionnaire could have been more inclusive in gathering a broader spectrum of information.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a global halt to everything including plans for this dissertation. A primary constraint of this dissertation arose from the postponement of data collection. Initially formulated questions became less relevant, but others emerged as critically important.

Future Directions

This study was conducted both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the data analyzed in this dissertation does not fully capture the effects of

COVID-19 on tourism dynamics, including impacts on livelihood diversification. As a result, the author is highly interested in investigating the repercussions of COVID-19 on various facets of tourism as a potential avenue for future research.

This dissertation primarily centered on studying the perceptions and decisions around tourism at household level. However, Chapter 4 begins to emphasize the equal importance of multi-level decision making around tourism, specifically the economic and infrastructure decisions that set the stage for tourism to occur. To effectively understand and manage tourism in a collaborative manner that involves meaningful engagement with Upper Mustangi residents, further empirical research is necessary. The need for understanding has become even more critical in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed vulnerabilities of the tourism system in Upper Mustang. A future research direction would involve examining the tourism system as a whole, encompassing all stakeholders, including decision-makers at local, regional and national levels. Exploring the robustness of the tourism system might be achieved here by conceptualizing tourism resources as common pool resources (CPRs) and applying Ostrom's Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework and design principles (DPs). This analysis has the potential to offer insights that are instrumental in understanding the structures and outcomes of institutions within a specific context and as well as their influence on human behavior, interactions, and tourism decision-making. Such an investigation would greatly interest the author and contribute significantly to the existing tourism literature.

This dissertation emphasizes significant increase in out-migration rates in recent years, which has led to Upper Mustang becoming one of the regions in Nepal with the highest depopulation rates. The flow of migrants, particularly to the USA and France, has become highly pervasive, shaping a new culture centered around migration. This widespread trend has instilled concerns among people remaining in Upper Mustang regarding the potential emptiness of Upper Mustang in the near future. A longitudinal study exploring the nexus of tourism, livelihood, climate change, and migration and understanding their implications for the future of Upper Mustang would be of immense interest and make a substantial contribution to the existing literature.

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APPENDIX A

CO-AUTHOR APPROVAL STATEMENT

Chapter 2 of this dissertation, "*Unsettling the American Dream: Mobility, Migration, and Precarity Among Translocal Himalayan Communities During COVID-19*" has been published in the journal <u>Development and Change</u>. [Gurung, T. W., Author 2 and Author 3 (2021). Unsettling the American Dream: Mobility, Migration and Precarity among Trans-local Himalayan Communities during COVID-19. *Development and Change*, *52*(6), 1277-1300.] I am the first author. Both co-authors of this paper have been involved in the writing process and providing feedback. The co-authors have given final approval for this paper to be included in this dissertation.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation, "*An Un(Even) Playing field? A Political Ecology of Tourism Impacts in Upper Mustang, Nepal*" is currently under the review process at the journal <u>Tourism, Planning and Development</u>. My adviser, Dr. Shauna BurnSilver, is the co-author of this work and has granted permission for this article to be included as a chapter in this dissertation.

APPENDIX B

IRB HUMAN SUBJECTS PERMISSION

APPROVAL: MODIFICATION

Shauna BurnSilver
CLAS-SS: Human Evolution and Social Change, School of (SHESC)
480/965-5992
Shauna.Burnsilver@asu.edu

Dear Shauna BurnSilver:

On 6/4/2020 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Modification / Update
Title:	Is Tourism: Boon or Bane? An Institutional Analysis of Tourism System as Commons in the Himalayan Region of Upper Mustang, Nepal.
Investigator:	Shauna BurnSilver
IRB ID:	STUDY00008120
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Gurung_IRB_Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol; • Gurung_Tashi_ConsentForm, Category: Consent Form; • Gurung_Tashi_ConsentForm_Survey.pdf, Category: Consent Form; • Gurung_Tashi_In-depth-IQ, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Gurung_Tashi_Semi-StructuredIQ, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Gurung_Tashi_Survey_Questions, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);

The IRB approved the modification.

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APPENDIX C

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Tourism-Based Livelihood Diversification Decisions in Upper Mustang, Nepal

_____

Consent Form

_____

Please read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study. Tashi Gurung, a PhD student at the School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University (ASU) is leading this research under the direction of professor Shauna BurnSilver.

Background Information
This objective of this research is to understand the status-quo of tourism industry, and the primary focus is on the decision-making processes of locals in engaging (or not) in a tourism-based livelihood and also the role of institutional arrangement in sustainable tourism system and protection of cultural infrastructure in Upper Mustang, and examine tradeoffs associated with tourism.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview. The interview will last between an hour to ½ an hour. We will ask you to discuss a set of questions surrounding tourism in Upper Mustang, with a focus on your experience and perceptions of it. You do not need to respond to every question. We may also take photographs of you, some of which may be used, with your consent, for presentation materials like PowerPoint or poster. The interview discussion will be audio recorded to ensure that transcripts of the session are accurate. After sessions are transcribed, recordings will be destroyed.
You must be 18 or older to participate.

What are the risks involved in this study?
The risks associated in this study are minimal at the best, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
You will receive monetary compensation for your time. In addition, the study may benefit the local community with a prospect of impact in local, regional, and national level.
Do I have to participate?
No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time. If you decide to participate, you are free to refuse to answer any questions that

may make you feel uncomfortable. You can withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?
This study is confidential. We will keep the records of this study private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only members of the research team who have an approved report demonstrating successful completion of training in Social and Behavioral Research Investigations on file with the Arizona State University will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in the interview, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only members of the research team who have an approved report demonstrating successful completion of training in Social and Behavioral Research Investigations on file with the Arizona State University will have access to the original recordings. Recordings will be destroyed once they are transcribed.

To ensure accuracy, interview sessions will be transcribed by researchers. Prior to transcription, we will replace participants' names with numbers to protect identities. Following transcription, we will 'clean' the file, removing names used in conversation.

In any reports we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or your organization, unless you state your preference that we do so by signing at the bottom of the form. Because we have learned that some individuals prefer to have their statements attributed to themselves, we have made provision for that option.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Tashi Gurung (tgurung@asu.edu) or Dr. Shauna BurnSilver (Shauna.Burnsilver@asu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been laced at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.
Please let us know if you wish to be part of the study.
By signing below you are agreeing to have your name used

Name:_____

Signature:_____ Date:_____

By signing below you are agreeing to be photographed and have the photographs presented in publication/presentation.

Name:_____

Signature:_____ Date:_____

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for sparing your valuable time to partake in this survey. This survey has five parts.

INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Name:

Sex:

Marital Status:

Age:
- Young Adults (18 = 40 years)
- Adults (41 - 60 years)
- Senior (61 and above

Which village are you from?

_____

Education: (How far did you go in school?)
- N/A
- Attended Primary School (number of years_____)
- Attended Secondary School (number of years _____)
- Attended High School (number of years _____)
- +2 (number of years attended_____)
- Bachelors and above
- Religious

How many family members are in your household?

_____

Who makes the major household livelihood decisions?

_____

Do you have any family members residing outside your village?
- Yes
- No

If yes, how many family members are outside your village?
- _____ within Nepal
- _____ abroad _____

      Probe: When did your family member migrate/move?

      _____

      What was the main reason for migration? (Please explain)

      _____

What are the activities within your household you depend on to make a living? (AKA what is your primary source of income?)
- Farming
- Livestock
- Tourism
- Farming/Livestock
- Farming/Livestock/Others and Tourism
- Others _____

The following questions are only for those who have transitioned/diversified their livelihood strategies to tourism-based livelihood.

When did you transition/diversify your livelihood strategy to include tourism?
_____

What did you do before that for a living?
_____

Why did you transition/diversify your livelihood to a tourism-based livelihood? (Explain)
_____

How did you find the capital investment? (probe: ask if it was dikuti/remittance/loan?)
_____

How did the decision to transition/diversify your livelihood strategy to tourism-based livelihood occur? (Please explain the process: Probe: Who made the decision? What were the steps you followed to add tourism or transition to tourism to your livelihood)?
_____

ALL respondents from here…

Think of your total income as 10 fingers. How would you divide the fingers across your different livelihood activities? How many fingers would you say you get from tourism?
_____

In your mind, what is the definition of someone who is successful?
(Probe: How has that changed over time?)
_____

Think about your total income again. What is the range of your household's annual income?
- Low Income (Below 1.02 Lakh NRP)
- Lower Middle Income (1.036 - 4.045 Lakh NRP)
- Upper Middle Income (4.046 - 12.535 Lakh NRP)

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● High Income (12.535 and above Lakh NRP)
Are you satisfied with your current income?
      a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
Is your current income enough to take good care of your family?
      a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
Is it expensive to live in Upper Mustang? Is the cost of living in Upper Mustang reasonable?
      a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain)

_____

Do you receive remittance from any family members/relatives?
  ● Yes
  ● No
    (Probe: What do you use the remittance money for?)

_____

These next questions are all about ECONOMIC FACTORS associated with Tourism
Does tourism have a positive impact on your household?
      a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Probe: How? Why?)

_____

Does tourism have a positive impact on your community's economy?
      a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain. Ask the impact of tourism on country's economy)

_____

How would you describe the relationship between hotel owners and other locals in your community?

_____
      a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain)

Has tourism decreased the outmigration of locals abroad for employment?
      a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain)

_____

Who benefits from tourism economically in Upper Mustang?
(Please explain. Probe: Ask if some benefit more than others.)

_____

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

The next set of questions ask about specific aspects of the local environment:

What kinds of environmental problems have you observed in your community?
When did these problems emerge?

Are you satisfied with the water infrastructure/supply in your community?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know

Are you satisfied with the waste management in your community?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know

Does everyone have to deal with environmental problems equally?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain. Probe: Who are most vulnerable to the consequences of environmental problems)

_____

Tourism and the environment:
Does tourism contribute to pollution, specifically waste or water in your community?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain. Probe: what are other environmental problems associated with tourism?)
_____
Do environmental problems affect your decision-making regarding decisions you make about your livelihood?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain. Probe: How?)

_____

Do environmental conditions impact tourism?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
        (If so, how?)

_____

Does tourism impact environmental conditions in your community?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain. Probe: ask how it is impacting and why)

_____

Introduce: There has been a lot of infrastructure development in Upper Mustang recently, primarily roads, bridges, welcome signs and hospitals...).

Do you think there has been a good balance between environmental conservation and development (infrastructures: roads, buildings etc)?

    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know

(Please explain. Probe: ask if the balance is important)

_____

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

Does the cultural heritage of Upper Mustang attract tourists?

    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know

What aspects of cultural heritage do you think attracts tourists?

_____

Probe: Why?

_____

How does tourism impact your cultural values and traditions?

_____

In your community do you think there a good balance between cultural conservation and development (infrastructure: roads, buildings etc)?

       a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know

(Please explain. Probe: are they mutually exclusive? Does development mean cultural deterioration?)

_____

What do you think about the future of tourism in Upper Mustang?

_____

Given what you've just said….What would that mean for you?

[Probe: Does the impact of tourism on culture affect your decision making regarding livelihood strategies?

_____

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

As you know, the state was restructured to a federal democratic republic.

Has the introduction of the new local government system strengthened the local governance system?

       a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know

How?

_____

Does the local government (gaupalika) play a role in managing tourism?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know

What kinds of things does your village government do to manage tourism?

_____

Do you engage with these activities?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know

Who takes part in decision making processes when it comes to tourism policy? (Probe: ask about budget allocation)

_____

Has tourism affected your daily routine?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
      How?
(Probe: Are there any new skills you learned because of tourism?)

Probes: Are the old norms disappearing as the tourism industry grows?
Are new norms emerging as tourism grows? Examples: Changing gender roles, new ways of cooking?
Please explain.

_____

This is the last section of the survey and these next questions are about Tourism policies in UM

Are you aware that Upper Mustang is a restricted area for tourism?
    a) Yes   b) No   c) I don't know

Are you aware that tourists have to pay a permit fee of 500 USD? (Explain 3 rules…)
    a) Yes   b) No   c) I don't know

Do you think that 500 USD is a fair amount?
    a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
(Please explain. Probe: ask for the reason why?)

_____

Once the revenue is collected, what happens to it?

_____

What do you think should be done with the permit revenue and why?

Do these tourism policies impact your decision to transition/diversify your livelihood strategy to a tourism-based livelihood? *[Be thinking about previous answer here]*
   a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
   (Please explain. Probe: how and why? Do any particular policies weigh more than others?)

_____

What are the positive and negative effects of tourism? (Please list a few)

You've told me x, x and y, y about Tourism....
So what are the three most important benefits of Tourism?
What are the three most critical costs of tourism?

Benefits of tourism	Costs of tourism
1)_____	1) _____
2) _____	2) _____
3) _____	3)_____

COVID-19 and UNCERTAINTY

Has COVID-19 impacted you/ your household in any way?
           a) Yes   b) Neutral   c) No   d) I don't know
Please explain. Probe: Positive? Negative? How?

_____

How has COVID-19 impacted tourism in Upper Mustang?
(Probe: What does this mean for the future of tourism in Upper Mustang?)

_____

Did you get any kind of assistance from the government during COVID-19?
   ● Yes
   ● No
      Please explain.

_____

What kind of assistance from the government would be helpful during a global pandemic? (why?)

_____

Do you want to share anything that we missed? Or do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your time.