

Research Paper: Sports Tourism Marketing and Sustainable Rural Development (Case Study: Rural Areas of Iran)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Although sports tourism helps the livelihood and well-being of tourist areas by providing economic opportunities, irresponsible tourism development can have many negative consequences for tourism purposes. Little attention has been paid to the sustainability of the sport, and it is necessary to be aware of the effects of this sector on sustainable development. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development.

Methods: The research method is qualitative content analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 prominent sports management professors until reaching the Theoretical saturation. The constant comparison method was used for data analysis during open and axial coding stages.

Results: Findings showed the main factors that hinder the improvement of sports tourism in Iran include political, legal, human resources, social-cultural, health, informational, and communication factors in the Sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development of Iran.

Conclusion: Based on the obtained results, the sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development in Iran also need to use sports capacities which include the environmental capacities of sports, sports entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurs. Applying the strategies of policy-making, management, planning, and marketing in infrastructures about religious and social participation and financial and support considerations can lead to the emergence of sustainable consequences for the livelihood of local communities.

1. Introduction

I

n today's changing world, technology is evolving rapidly. To keep up with such a

high-speed process, it is necessary to continuously identify today's technologies and developments (Hayduk, 2020). One of the most fundamental factors in the development of technology is to pay attention to knowledge, innovation, and technological ideas (Kwon et al., 2019).

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A country's economy, especially in developing countries such as Iran, flourishes by moving toward new technologies and changing the composition of products and services in startup activities (Shams & Moradi, 2020). New businesses, referred to by various titles such as startups, have created a great revolution in the world of entrepreneurship in less than a decade (Bocken et al., 2020). On the other hand, sports, as the sixth income-generating industry in developed countries, has attracted the attention of many idea owners, sports entrepreneurs, and innovative accelerator centers (Hattink & Wichers, 2021).

On the other hand, today, challenges such as increasing urbanization, changes in consumption patterns, and increasing the use of new technologies have created a new paradigm of life, which is full of opportunities and new business models (Berg et al., 2020). Sports science, as an interdisciplinary field that deals with issues such as health, well-being, behaviors, lifestyle, etc., constantly faces technological changes, social developments, new needs of customers, changes in quality of life standards, etc. (Hattink & Groen, 2021). Today, sports has been proposed as a developing industry in the world, where the increase in entrepreneurial processes has created wealth, value, and new job opportunities (Wallis et al., 2020). Therefore, looking at new sports businesses and startups is particularly important. Sports startups are agile models for starting new businesses and are an important stimulus for creating employment and increasing the country's GDP (Ratten, 2020). In Iran, based on ICT Startups Empowerment and Facilitation Center (IEFC) and Facilitation Center, startups such as sports clubs, non-attendance sports, pain detection devices for sports injuries, Hamafker Sports, T Sports, etc., have been launched. Still, it has not made successful progress quantitatively and qualitatively in Iran. In this type of startup, innovative processes and the use of new technologies, and research achievements are among the most important requirements. According to McDowell et al. (2018), innovation is an important key factor for gaining a competitive advantage in startup businesses (McDowell et al., 2018).

In line with their activities and creating value for society and profit for organizational stakeholders, sports tourism is forced to identify new opportunities (Block, 2017). Chalipe (2018) believes that sports tourism is an entrepreneurial process, and the entrepreneurial approach in sports tourism can provide a mechanism to endure economic crises (Ghaffari, 2016). Chalipe (2018) believes that sports tourism is an entrepreneurial process, and the entrepreneurial approach in sports tourism can provide a mechanism to endure economic crises (Ghaffari, 2016).

Entrepreneurship can provide the fields of economic prosperity and change and lifestyle for all sections of society by discovering and expanding job opportunities related to sports (Ramezanpour Nargesi, 2017). The three important approaches to entrepreneurship are wealth creation, technology development, and job creation. Nowadays, spending free time with attention to sports is expanding, and this trend can be useful in creating new sports jobs. Sports play an important role in production and employment (Zarrabi, 2015).

The tourism industry is very important worldwide, especially in developing countries, which do not have other economic resources such as production or extraction of natural resources. According to the statistics published in different countries, about 20 to 30 percent of tourists say sports as the main reason for their trip, and more than half of the vacation trips are trips whose purpose are sports (Shahrabi, 2019).

On the other hand, according to the statistics of the World Tourism Organization, 43% of the world's jobs are related to the tourism industry. For example, from 1997 to 2015, sports tourism caused an annual increase of 13% in the gross national product caused by economic activities. Due to holding great sports competitions, annual unemployment has decreased by 19% (Elyasi et al., 2016). A study by Provistel Hider (2018), aimed to develop sports tourism with a mountain biking approach in Austria, found that sports tourism's functions with a mountain biking approach lead to physical and psychological effects. Maybe this problem lead to the development of the sports tourism industry in this region if the culture is improved. Si & Haibo (2018) also stated that the capabilities of the Internet and virtual spaces could effectively expand sports tourism and make countries benefit from its social and economic benefits. Sani et al. (2018) also stated that sports and tourism are rapidly growing and expanding, and sports tourism combined with tourism and sports is recognized as a powerful and growing economy.

Yixiong (2018) also believe that with the development of communities, the efficiency of tourism resources can become the main force for economic development. In the meantime, the development of sports tourism has a unique and leading role. Marko et al. (2018), Kamilla et al. (2018), Chun-Chu et al. (2018), Hungenberg et al. (2022), Darmawan et al. (2022), and Shi & Yang (2022) have also emphasized the importance of expanding sports tourism on the development of cultural and social capacities and economic prosperity in their report of research findings.

The most important and relevant researches in the field of startup businesses are as follows: The research findings of [Zia & Toti Far Tehranpur \(2019\)](#) confirmed the positive and significant relationship between innovative tendency, electronic readiness, and the performance of startup sports businesses. In this context, new sports businesses should pay attention to networking and open innovation in joint research and marketing of their products and services. In addition, one of the important and productive factors of knowledge and innovation is the human capital of the faculties of the country's physical education and sports sciences. [Rahimi et al. \(2020\)](#) also pointed out that academic activists in the field of sports are one of the main sources of creating a competitive advantage through academic entrepreneurship. In another study, [Rahimi & Khabiri \(2020\)](#) concluded that sports entrepreneurs need multifaceted attitudes and behaviors. Above all, they should market their products and services innovative, pioneering, and stubbornly and provide the necessary incentives for establishing an innovative culture and creative promotion of resources in sports startups. To fill this research gap, [Rahimi et al. \(2020\)](#) showed that market knowledge based on the commercialization of sports science research is a potential source for creating value and competitive advantage in startup companies. It ultimately develops such companies and helps improve the state of technology-based entrepreneurship of these companies and creates employment in the sports field.

Bahmanpour and Taheri Hossein Abadi (2018) also reported in their research that in modern sports tourism plans, only economic goals are prioritized, environmental considerations and protection of the region's natural ecosystem, and attention to ecological power have been forgotten. According to Higham and Hinch (2018), less attention has been paid to sustainability in sports, and one should be aware of the effects of this sector on sustainable development. Accordingly, traditional sports and indigenous and local games have been suggested as a new face of sports tourism as a tool for sustainable tourism development ([Ghafouri et al., 2021](#)). [Fallah et al. \(2018\)](#) also consider native and local sports and games as factors influencing the development of sustainable sports tourism. Native and local sports and games can contribute to the stability of the host communities' economic, social, and environmental pillars due to the connection with nature and the use of natural tools and facilities and minimizing the seasonal effects of common tourism ([Harjo & Susanti, 2018](#)). But unfortunately, in the country of Iran, no systematic effort has been made to introduce and apply the unique capacities of native and local sports in the development of sports

tourism ([Ghafouri, 2014](#)). Also, the results of various research show that rural areas are now increasingly considered places for entertainment, recreational and welfare activities, secondary houses, and alternatives to urban residential areas ([Sasu & Epuran, 2016](#)). The existence of natural potentials and beautiful views in rural areas are considered natural places in today's world where people seek refuge to escape the pressures of urbanization ([Zargham & Haji Mohammad Amini, 2010](#)). Rural tourism is one of the areas of rural development that provides opportunities and facilities, especially for rural employment and income. It plays an effective role in revitalizing and renovating rural areas ([Ghadiri Masoom, 2011](#)) and is considered the most important part of the activity of rural areas.

With its exceptional nature, Iran's vast land includes beautiful and unique beaches, mountains, lakes, forests, and deserts, placing Iran in fifth place in terms of natural attractions in the world. Also, Iran is one of the top ten countries in the world regarding tourist attractions. Considering other human, cultural, sports, etc. capabilities and capacities, it can be called a country capable of developing the sports tourism industry. Natural attractions related to mountain climbing and nature tourism, beach, water, and summer sports, desert tourism and desert hiking, and attractions related to hunting and fishing are the most important in developing sports tourism in Iran. Meanwhile, villages have favorable and special conditions according to their cultural, social, economic structure, geographical, and natural environment. Hot and dry areas cover a large part of our country. Iran's desert areas are places with high potential and virgin and secret nature for sports tourism, which with proper planning and management, can bring significant income to the people living in these areas. The hardworking people of Kush brought the desert out of the isolation of Hakim. Also, because nowadays, visiting farms, gardens, groves, springs, and cultural and tourist sights of rural settlements are of interest to the guest community and tourists, planning for their optimal use in the direction of rural tourism development is unavoidable. According to the fourth development plan of Iran, the number of tourists should reach equal to 20 million people per year by the end of 2024 (Vision document, 1404). Considering the cultural, religious, and value restrictions, this country holds events related to tourism as well as sports tourism. It seems that the topic of recreational sports tourism has more favorable and suitable conditions for development, and this point should be taken into consideration in the development plans of sports tourism. The role-playing of this tourism development with an innovative approach provides a platform for sustain-

able rural development in rural areas. , the development of various types of tourism products that guarantee the achievement of the resort destination with long-term social, economic, and ecological stability should be considered in sports tourism of Iran's villages. Since rural sports and native and local games are significant areas in Iran, It is possible to develop and promote this new field of sports tourism in the country's villages by combining natural and cultural attractions as the main factors affecting the presence of tourists. Therefore, according to the importance of the topic and reviewing the literature, this research is looking for an answer to these questions: what are the problems, and obstacles to the growth and development of innovative marketing in sports tourism, especially in rural areas.

2. Literature Review

Tourism is a broad economic, cultural, social, and political activity. The extent of this activity is such that its development is impossible without integrated and collective participation. In the field of tourism development, Iran has remarkable latent abilities. Due to the importance of tourism in scientific planning in the world economy and cultural, social, and environmental fields, it is necessary to pay attention to this sector (Ghanbari et al., 2013). Tourism industry is not only a way to have fun and escape from everyday life, by using strategic planning and respecting the principles of sustainable development in tourism, the economy of countries can be developed (Sharifi Tehrani & Yousefi, 2013). For this reason, today, tourism has become one of the largest and most profitable industries in the world economy (UN-WTO, 2017).

In today's world, especially in the markets, many transformations are observed along with the expansion of competition in various fields. Benefiting from marketing knowledge is necessary for all companies and organizations seeking a conscious and purposeful presence in the market without surrendering to change (Rusta et al., 2012). It can be said that marketing has different branches, one of which is innovative marketing. Innovative marketing is the interface between entrepreneurship and marketing and reflects entrepreneurial behavior in the marketing methods of a company, by which innovation can be used in market activities. Innovative marketing plays a very important role in achieving a sustainable competitive advantage by providing concepts, tools, and infrastructures to bridge the gap between innovation and the market situation (Hills & Hultman, 2011). Innovative marketing is a concept that seeks to describe marketing processes and identify opportunities in a fluctuating envi-

ronment for small businesses that have limited resources (Manasra et al, 2013) and by taking advantage of a wide view and a creative approach to focus on innovation, risk management and optimal use of resources, it is also used to describe a wide range of activities and reactions in small and medium businesses (Kurgun, 2011). Bechere et al. (2012) quoting Gruber (2004) believe that innovative marketing is the main reason for success in all new companies and is considered an important strategy for the future of businesses, which includes paying attention to the activities of people in the company is integrating customer information, competitor intelligence, product knowledge and providing superior value to customers (Jones & Rowley, 2011). Morris et al. (2002) also proposed seven dimensions for innovative marketing: being proactive, risk-taking, innovation, opportunism, creating value from the tendency of companies to entrepreneurship, leveraging resources, and customers from the tendency of companies to marketing.

In this regard, it should be acknowledged that there is a difference between traditional and innovative marketing. Based on the scientific views of marketing, innovative marketing is considered a complement to traditional marketing. In addition, these two concepts are similar in terms of creating value for business sustainability, but there are also differences in the characteristics of each one (Sarma et al, 2013). Kurgun et al. (2011) believe that although innovative marketing is generally an evolved and developed concept of traditional marketing, there are significant differences between these two concepts. Davis et al. (1991) see the difference between these two approaches in the form of a spectrum where traditional marketing with risk avoidance and control-oriented features is on one side of the spectrum and innovative marketing with a high degree of entrepreneurship is on the other side of the spectrum.

The state of Iran's economic variables such as gross national product, per capita income, gross investment, etc. in the last three decades shows the heavy dependence of Iran's economy on oil revenues, to diversify the sources of economic growth and foreign exchange earnings, as well as create new job opportunities are very important in the country of developing other industries (Zamani, 2014). Sports tourism industry is expanding all over the world and as a lucrative industry, it has a very high economic importance due growing trend of people towards sports and the need to consume sports goods and services (Qayami Rad, 2015). This increasing trend in the unemployment of university graduates is not excluded, but warning for the relevant authorities. Therefore, in Iran's economy, employment is among the main con-

cerns of economic policy makers (Hosseinpour, 2019). Other countries have almost been able to take advantage of its positive effects by paying more attention to entrepreneurship, in this regard, Fadda et al. (2020), González-Serrano et al. (2020), Zhang et al. (2020) and Pellegrini et al. (2020) have named sports tourism as one of the important solutions for the economic development of advanced countries.

With a brief look at the statistics and events presented by the World Tourism Organization, which is growing, we find that this industry has had a significant impact on the world economy; This shows the importance and extent of tourism in countries (Shams & Moradi, 2020). Tourism includes a set of trips that are carried out in order to participate in special ceremonies, and the absence of a tourist from his permanent place of residence during this trip is temporary and transitory. Obviously, those who make regular business trips between their workplace and their home are not included in this definition. In recent decades, sports tourism is considered a new form of tourism, so tourism and sports are interdependent and complementary. The link between tourism and sports has created a new type of tourism that has created a new and comprehensive structure to fill leisure time and recreation along with the spiritual and physical vitality of humans (Ademi & Panahi, 2015). Today, sports is among the most important industries in the world and among the most common motivating factors for tourists. The idea of sports as a tourist attraction is not a new topic, but the sport's attractions theoretical foundations have recently been noticed. Sports, like other attractive factors, is among the tourist attractions, with the difference that it is a unique attraction. Sports can attract many tourists. Therefore, events that include sports are considered a kind of attraction and act as a factor that attracts tourism to the destination city or country (Mandalizadeh, 2017).

Higham and Hinch (2006) defined sports tourism as traveling for non-commercial reasons to observe or participate in sports activities that are far from the place of residence. Gibson (1998) suggests three types of sports tourism: active sports tourism, event sports tourism, and nostalgic sports tourism. The development of sports tourism in any form has consequences for residents. So, destination communities are in a position to benefit from the sustainability of tourism development or pay its costs (Moyle et al, 2020). Therefore, tourism sustainability analysis of particular importance (Jiménez-García et al, 2020).

Sustainable sports tourism is a type of sports tourism that meets the needs of current sports tourists as well as host communities, and at the same time, provides opportunities for the expansion of sports tourism and uses resources in a way that preserves cultural values at the same time, ecological processes, and life support systems to respond to economic, social, institutional, and technological needs (Carneiro et al., 2016). So that benefits obtained from it are preserved not only for the current generation but also for the future generations.

Since the late 1980s, the development of tourism has moved from economic development to sustainability (Tiago et al., 2020) and the traditional tourism paradigm has changed due to the consequences of that unbridled tourism and has been replaced by the new paradigm of sustainable tourism (Huili et al., 2018).

Therefore, in the last few years, a new field of sports tourism has emerged under the name of traditional sports tourism intending to organize small-scale sports events using the capabilities of natural attractions and cultural and historical attractions that have roots in traditional and native sports of communities. It has attracted the attention of managers and specialists in the tourism industry (Hernández et al., 2016). Indigenous rural sports tourism is a suitable alternative to today's unsustainable tourism models (Gibson et al., 2012); since it is compatible with the infrastructure and human and cultural capital of the host community, it is a type of sustainable sports tourism (Higham, 1999).

Karimi et al. (2020) designed a model for the development of adventurous sports tourism based on the foundation data theory. Based on the findings, the needs and challenges in this research include social and cultural factors, employment based on entrepreneurship, emotion management, communication, and infrastructure management; Obstacles including administrative and managerial obstacles, facilities and equipment, personal, financial and economic, security, infrastructure, information; The platforms include laws and regulations, cultural and informational, academic, and specialized human resources; The solutions include safety management, training, and culture building, venue and event management, and quality and innovation management; Economic, social and cultural effects were identified.

Zargham Broojeni and Sedaghat (2018) in their research examined the sustainable development of tourism in the country's five-year economic, social, and cultural development plans by applying the foundation data theory. According to the obtained model, the main category

ries are Causal categories (environmental concerns, and Iran's geopolitical situation), central category (sustainable development of tourism), background categories (participation, and harmony of tourism stakeholders, tourism education, and research), intervening categories (sense of tourism place, management tourism finance, safety, and security in tourism, new technological methods of tourism, and good governance of tourism), strategic categories (tourism planning, and policy, tourism marketing, tourism green management, tourism sustainable transportation management, and tourism control, and supervision) and category Consequences (cultural richness of host communities, protection of tourism resources, and welfare, and quality of life).

Xie (2019) in examining the obstacles and solutions to the development, and industrialization of Chinese folk sports tourism, using the content analysis method, showed that the lack of innovative planning, limited investment channels, and relatively blind investment decisions hinder the development, and industrialization of tourism. Chinese folk sports and increasing cooperation between the government, companies, and the market, enriching the quality of sports products, improving the quality of services, expanding the tourism industry chain, expanding folk culture, optimizing the structure of the sports tourism industry, and branding folk sports have been emphasized. Gkoumas et al. (2019) presented a sustainable tourism evaluation model in the Mediterranean region; The results show that culture, politics, and economy are the main factors influencing the development of sustainable tourism in the region.

Boonsiritomachai & Phonthanukitithaworn (2019) researched to investigate the role of community participation and their support for the development of sustainable tourism for sports events in Thailand and showed that community participation and their support have a positive and direct effect on the three dimensions of tourism sustainability (economic, social, cultural, and environmental). Swart et al. (2018) in their study qualitatively examined the stakeholders' point of view on the factors affecting the development of sports tourism in Gabon in the Africa Cup of Nations and show that for the development of a sustainable sports tourism industry, poor infrastructure such as accommodation facilities, service facilities, and Welfare, transportation, and travel agencies, high cost of tourism, lack of advertising about sports events in the media, lack of financial sponsors for sports events, lack of financial support in government organizations should be taken into consideration.

Since no research has been done in the field of sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development, and considering the existing research gap, it is necessary to investigate the influencing factors with scientific and systematic research, using the point of view of experts and specialists. The sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development should be discussed and the appropriate solutions and strategies to achieve sustainable sports tourism should be developed.

3. Methodology

This study is a type of qualitative research. The purpose of this research is to investigate the sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development. This work was done by conducting qualitative research of the Glazer type, whose method is exploratory. This research, through literature review and exploratory interview, was analyzed to identify the obstacles to the progress of innovative marketing using content analysis (coding of analysis unit, categories, and registration unit). To conduct interviews, the research participants were prominent professors in the field of sports management. These people were purposefully selected for interviews on the subject of the research (25 interviews with 25 people, and continued until theoretical saturation). The snowball method was used for sampling. According to the views of Johnson (1997) and Patton (2002) of three methods of pluralism, including pluralism in the method (retesting the work method), pluralism in the researcher (reliability test between identifiers), and participatory pluralism (using new interviewees to test the reliability of the model), have been used to confirm the validity of the research (Johnson, 1997; Patton, 2002). The interview agreement and data analysis were used in full for three new interviewees. To calculate the open validity percentage of the research test between the new interviewees, the identified identifiers of the two tests were compared. In each of the research sections (main research and validation research), identifiers that are similar in two-time intervals are identified as "agreement" and non-similar identifiers are identified as "disagreement".

Table 1 shows that the total number of codes in the two phases of the research is 87, the number of agreements between codes is 41, and the number of disagreements is 5. Using formula 1, the validity percentage of the pluralism method in the interviewee is 94.2%. Considering the fact that this reliability rate is more than 60%, the interviewees have good credibility and the method of selecting the interviewees is also confirmed.

Table 1. Reliability calculation of research test (pluralism in the interview)

| The total number of identifiers (codes) | Number of agreements | Number of disagreements | Retest reliability (percentage) |
|---|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 87 | 41 | 5 | 2/94 |

**Table 2.** Calculation of retest reliability (pluralism in the method)

| Row | Total number of codes | Number of agreements | Number of disagreements | Retest reliability (percentage) |
|-------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | 46 | 21 | 4 | 3/91 |
| 2 | 52 | 24 | 4 | 3/92 |
| 3 | 38 | 18 | 2 | 7/94 |
| Total | 136 | 63 | 10 | 6/92 |



According to [Table 2](#), the total number of codes in two-time intervals of 15 days is equal to 136, the number of agreement codes between codes in these two times is equal to 63, and the number of non-agreements in these two-time intervals is equal to 10. The open reliability of the interview test in the method of pluralism by using the mentioned formula is 92.6%, which is much higher than 60%, and the reliability of coding is confirmed.

Also, for the method of pluralism in the researcher, to calculate the reliability of the interview with the intra-subject agreement method of two coders, one of the sports management doctoral students was asked to participate in the research as a coder. The necessary training and methods for coding were presented to him, and then 3 interviews were coded by both the researcher and the person in question, and the percentage of agreement between the coders is shown in the [Table 3](#).

According to [Table 3](#), the total number of codes registered by the researcher and colleagues is 165, the number of agreements between codes is 68, and the number of disagreements is 29. Using the mentioned formula, the reliability between the coders for the interviews of this research is equal to 82.4%. Considering that it is above 60%, the reliability of the coding is confirmed.

Three stages of open, central, and selective coding were used using MaxQD Pro version software.

4. Findings

First step: open coding

In the present study, data was collected from interviews. The questions were asked to the interviewees in a general and open manner. After each interview, the researcher proceeded to analyze and open coding. At first, primary codes were identified, and then, while removing similar codes, conceptual codes were identified, and finally, after examining and classifying conceptual codes, categories were identified. In total, 41 concepts, and 7 categories were identified. The following table shows a part of one of the interviews and its relationship with the concepts obtained from the research.

Second step: Axial coding

In this stage, the codes identified in the previous stage along with their categories were placed in the form of seven core codes of security, health, social-cultural, human resources, political and legal, information and communication, and economic ([Table 5](#)).

Table 3. Reliability calculation between two identifiers (coders)

| Row | Total number of codes | Number of agreements | Number of disagreements | Retest reliability (percentage) |
|-------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | 61 | 25 | 11 | 82 |
| 2 | 55 | 22 | 11 | 80 |
| 3 | 49 | 21 | 7 | 85/7 |
| Total | 165 | 68 | 29 | 82/4 |



Table 4. Part of the interview and conceptual codes obtained from the primary codes related to this part of the interview

| The text of the interview | Conceptual codes obtained from primary codes related to this part of the interview |
|--|---|
| There are many obstacles facing innovators in the field of sports tourism. One of the most important of these cases is the fear of not returning capital after investment. Innovators are worried that investment is not accompanied by profitability. villagers do not welcome this type of innovation and do not achieve their goals at all. On the other hand, among the obstacles facing them, we can mention security issues. That there is still not much Social Security in the country in some areas. Innovators who intend to work in the field of organizing sports events are worried about not being able to find the human resources they need, talented and experienced. | Fear of no return on investment Investment Profitability Welcoming the villagers Failure to achieve the goals of innovators Social security issues Social security in rural areas of the country Human resources Finding talented manpower Experienced manpower State barriers Cumbersome rules Paperwork Parallel organizations Long-term reviews social-cultural |

**Table 5.** Axial coding

| Row | Main article | concepts |
|-----|---------------------|---|
| 1 | Security | Ensuring the safety of sports tourists |
| 2 | | Providing financial security for sports tourists |
| 3 | | Negative advertisements regarding Iran's security for sports tourists |
| 4 | | The challenge of natural hazards and natural insecurities (such as floods and earthquakes) |
| 5 | Health | Lack of fresh and healthy drinking water in all regions of Iran |
| 6 | | Existence of infectious diseases such as Covid-19 |
| 7 | | Lack of equipped medical centers in all regions of Iran |
| 8 | | Weak waste disposal culture in Iran |
| 9 | | Weak culture of separating dry and wet waste |
| 10 | | The presence of garbage in nature and roads |
| 11 | social-cultural | Cultural and religious differences in the regions of Iran |
| 12 | | Cultivation regarding participation in sports tourism events by media and education |
| 13 | | Unpleasant behaviors of fans and spectators in sports events |
| 14 | | The presence of violence in athletes and fans |
| 15 | | Weak culture of society in filling free time with sports activities |
| 16 | | Weakness in entrepreneurial culture and acceptance of innovations |
| 17 | | The villagers' lack of acceptance of sports tourism innovators |
| 18 | Human resources | Lack of innovative specialists in various fields of sports tourism |
| 19 | | Lack of up-to-date knowledge of active human resources in sports tourism |
| 20 | | The weakness of educational centers (such as universities) for training innovators in the field of sports tourism |
| 21 | | The low motivation of talented innovative forces to work in sports tourism |
| 22 | Political and Legal | Existence of bureaucracy and time-consuming administrative procedures |
| 23 | | Low level of legal literacy of innovators |
| 24 | | Corruption and discrimination in the administrative system |
| 25 | | Tax problems |
| 26 | | The multiplicity of organizations and their parallel work |

Table 5. Axial coding

| Row | Main article | concepts |
|-----|-------------------------------|--|
| 27 | Information and communication | Lack of interactive network between innovators |
| 28 | | Poor communication between innovators and the government |
| 29 | | Poor information about sports tourism innovators regarding their products |
| 30 | | Weak communication between sports tourism innovators and media (virtual and traditional) |
| 31 | | Absence of a comprehensive information system regarding sports tourism innovators |
| 32 | Economic | Corruption and discrimination in the administrative system |
| 33 | | Poor recognition of innovators in sports tourism businesses |
| 34 | | Weakness in marketing sports tourism products (goods and services). |
| 35 | | Undesirable competitive market strategies |
| 36 | | Finance and budget problems available to sports tourism innovators |
| 37 | | The existence of economic obstacles facing Iran |
| 38 | | Existence of inflation and embargo |
| 39 | | Expensive equipment needed by sports tourists |
| 40 | | Fear of no return on investment |
| 41 | | Non-cooperation of banks to grant low-interest loans |



Finally, after many investigations and consultations with several sports management professors, the number of 41 concepts, and 7 categories were identified.

Third step: Selective coding

Because the purpose of the current research was only to identify obstacles, therefore determining the relationship between categories is not objectives of the present research.

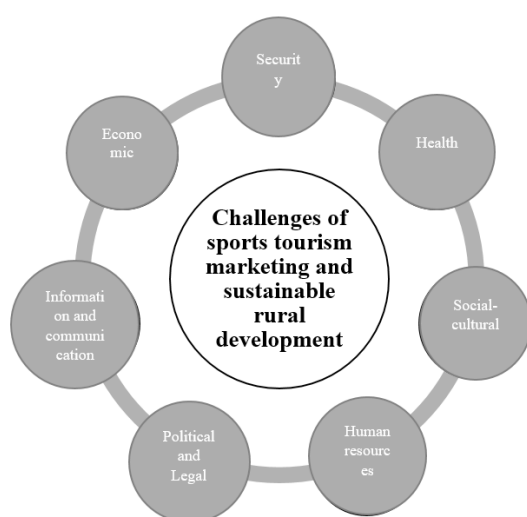


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development



5. Discussion

Sports tourism in Iran, like many tourism sectors, is neglected, although this country can hold a wide range of sports disciplines due to its size and also having different weather throughout the year and in a fixed period of the year. For example, in the winter season, you can experience skiing in the western and northwestern highlands of Iran at the same time, and you can also organize sports related to the desert in the desert areas. The best conditions for receiving tourists are located in the sea, sand, and sun, who are keen on water sports. These tourist centers are located around rural areas and it is important to pay attention to development of these areas. Considering Iran's limitations in holding international tournaments due to Sharia standards and also the lack of adequate and modern facilities, this part of sports tourism in Iran cannot be emphasized of course, these limitations can be solved with proper management and planned investment.

The present research was conducted to analyze the sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development, the results of the research indicated that 41 concepts and 7 categories are obstacles to the improvement of the sports tourism marketing innovation in rural areas of Iran. Among the identified factors, we can refer to security, health, social-cultural, human resources, political and legal, information and communication, and economic factors. Based on the results of the research, security factors are among the obstacles to improving the sports

tourism marketing in rural areas of Iran. This result is in line with the results of Lee et al. (2022), Stankova (2022), and Sun (2022). So, it can be said that development and security complement each other. Sustainable security depends on sustainable development, and sustainable development guarantees security. Today, anything that does not have a scientific definition and is not governed by logical rules has failed or stagnated. This is also true in the tourism industry and its security aspect. These discussions double the need to pay attention to the villages around the sports tourism centers and maintain the connection between the sustainability of sports tourism and the, which is the villagers as the host community in general tourism. On the other hand, when a tourist does not have a suitable place to stay, she will not return to that place. However, today security is considered the most fundamental principle in the development of tourism development strategy in the world. There is a defined relationship between tourism, stability, development, and security because the development of tourism infrastructure is largely related to other current and construction activities of a region, supporting factors, laws and regulations (security), information; The coordination of related organizations and the expansion of transportation are dependent on tourism affairs, and any occurrence of insecurity and the use of violence at different levels will cause irreparable damage to this industry.

Based on the results of the research, health factors are among the obstacles to improving the sports tourism marketing in rural areas of Iran. Health aspects of tourism areas are among the important issues that are of serious concern to tourists from different regions and can affect the choice of tourism route and tourism destination. Health aspects of tourism areas are among the important issues that are of serious concern to tourists from different regions and can affect the choice of tourism route and destination. Therefore, paying attention to a clean environment, paying attention to and maintaining pristine areas, as well as paying special attention to environmental issues can lead to attendance and re-attendance in tourism places, although these factors, in addition to the need for management measures, to Cultivation and public education is also needed, which should be given serious attention by managers and officials of tourism areas. After the corona epidemic in the country and the world, the importance of health issues has become more important and is one of the important factors that tourists pay attention to, therefore, it is very important to follow health protocols in accommodation and tourism places.

Based on the results of the research, social-cultural factor are among the obstacles to improving the sports tourism

marketing in rural areas of Iran. Cultural strategies, and cultivation can cause the development of innovation in the sports tourism industry. Cultural contexts play a decisive role in the development of human resources, and culture, including values, beliefs, and norms, can play an important role in people's tendency to innovate. The development of innovative culture can develop the platform for people to use entrepreneurial opportunities and increase the visibility of opportunism in the field of entrepreneurship and flourish the innovative talents of people. The development of innovative culture can lead to the development of innovation in the sports industry, especially among sports science experts. Also, communication strategies can cause the development of innovation in the sports tourism industry. To locate tourism, increase the accuracy of places prone to tourism development, and guide and identify the potential of tourists in the country's villages, basic maps, boards, and birth certificates should be prepared. In the village, there are many monuments and attractions, including water springs, very beautiful and unique mountains, very old water mills, etc. These attractions should be valued and not allow them to be forgotten and destroyed. Information can increase the community's awareness of tourism opportunities and their willingness to attend sports tourism places. This desire of the people in the community and increasing their presence in sports tourism places can attract the attention of entrepreneurs and provide the basis for investment and creation of new business on behalf of their.

Based on the results of the research, human resources are among the obstacles to improving the sports tourism marketing in rural areas of Iran. Undoubtedly, the most important component of sustainable growth and development is expert and committed human resources, which has been the factor of progress and excellence of societies and is considered as their most important asset. Training and guiding talents in the direction of developing knowledge and innovation can cause sustainable development and growth of businesses, especially in the sports industry; guiding sports science experts to create businesses in sports tourism areas can also be an important solution in the development to be stable in these areas. Considering the role of the sustainability of local communities livelihoods, the development of various employment packages related to the tourism industry by the planners in guiding the natives of the region to achieve the designated jobs is one of the things that can partially realize the effectiveness of the positive economic consequences of tourism.

Based on the results of the research, political and legal factors are among the obstacles to improving the sports tourism marketing in rural areas of Iran. Law and legislation are important factors in attracting or repelling entrepreneurs, complex and ambiguous laws and the large number of legislative authorities and successive changes in laws can cause confusion for entrepreneurs and also make their drawing of the future ambiguous and keep them away from the innovation process and unfortunately enter undesirable areas such as brokering. Increasing organizational cooperation and improving the level of coordination can reduce the legal obstacles faced by entrepreneurs and the time required to obtain licenses, and provide grounds for encouraging entrepreneurs to move in the direction of the law and comply with standards; Reduce law evasion and therefore, paying attention to reducing cumbersome laws and providing facilitating laws and incentives in the development of innovative marketing can provide the basis for improving the business environment.

Based on the results of the research, informational and communication factors are among the obstacles to improving the sports tourism marketing in rural areas of Iran. Tourists need valid information about the desired destination to choose a tourism destination. They get the information they need in different ways; including mass media, such as television, radio, satellite, Internet, tourism booklets and magazines, international tourism organizations, tourism agencies in foreign countries, as well as tourists who have visited tourist destinations and have had the real experience of traveling to these destinations. However, the unprecedented growth of the tourism industry in the past few years and competition at the global level, the quality of information available in the social media of the destination with facing new challenges and destinations are looking for more effective information strategies. The need for an effective and efficient information strategy is among the basic challenges that arise as a result of this dynamic and evolving situation. To promote success in the target market, the destination must distinguish itself from its competitors favorably and appropriately and find a position in the minds of its customers. The key element of the positioning process is managing perception and creating an attractive and distinctive image of the destination; In this context, the development of information and communication factors in the field of new information and communication technologies and special attention to virtual space can be important and worthy of attention.

Based on the results of the research, economic factors are among the obstacles to improving the sports tourism

marketing in rural areas of Iran. This result is consistent with the results of Xu et al. (2022), Zhang et al. (2022), and Bhattarai et al. (2022). It can be said that economic factors are factors that determine the business environment and willingness to innovate. If a favorable and stable economic environment is created, more capable and talented people will be attracted to innovative opportunities, and in fluctuating conditions, peace and concentration will be lost and no one will have the motivation to work and start a new business.

However, in general, improving sports tourism marketing and sustainable rural development requires the use of capacities within sports, these capacities include environmental capacities surrounding sports, people entering the field of sports innovation, and the ruling environment of entrepreneurs. Several researchers have investigated the dimensions of innovative capacities in various ways, in the content of these researches, several dimensions can be seen, these dimensions include the existence of sports tourism and entrepreneurship capacities, the capacity of holding sports events, the capacity of women's participation in the field of sports entrepreneurship, etc. These capacities have covered sports tourism according to its extent, based on which, with this introduction and interpretation, this research seeks to examine the existing capacities in the sports tourism industry and sustainable rural development, in the next step, to examine the existing conditions for using the capacities available in this industry are sports. The results of this research help the managers of the field of sports and tourism in the direction of designing and adopting strategies for the development of sustainable sports tourism by identifying the obstacles to improvement in the rural areas of Iran. According to the results of the current research, the following suggestions are presented:

It is suggested to revive the culture of the host community and introduce it to the tourists through local people next to the tourist sites and the establishment of anthropology booths, handicrafts, and foods of the local people to familiarize the tourists with the local culture. It is also recommended to determine the climate comfort calendar of Maqsd for 12 months of the year and plan to create and expand tourism according to this calendar.

Quantitative and qualitative improvement of tourism service infrastructures and allocation of facilities appropriate to the needs of tourists to villages and provision of special facilities to infrastructure development projects in tourism destinations.

Determining government support policies (loans, facilities, subsidy policies, partnership bonds) and eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy in the country's administrative environment is suggested for the entry of private sector investors to develop sports tourism.

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Decision-making and implementation of tourism programs by holding meetings with the presence of elected representatives of the people and polling residents and the formation and strengthening of associations and non-governmental institutions active in the field of tourism to attract people's participation in the process of preparation, implementation, and exploitation of construction, social and economic plans and projects in the field of tourism.

It is recommended that sports tourism services comply with Shari'a standards and remove religious and religious obstacles to the entry of foreign tourists, such as not forcing tourists to implement religious and Shari'a standards.

Interaction with national and international scientific and knowledge-based authorities is suggested to standardize and make the processes of rural sports and native games scientific. It is also recommended that rural sports and native games be registered jointly with countries that have a cultural background in this field or join countries that have registered some rural sports and native games.

sports managers countrys can inform the tourists about the place and time of the festivals by forming a specialized committee of traditional sports festivals and compiling a cultural calendar to determine the time and place of each native-local festival through tourism agencies; Also, considering the role of politics, it is recommended to develop a strategic document for sports tourism at three local, regional and national levels in the country. In this case, it is inevitable to plan short-term, medium-term, and long-term programs according to the executive power of the country and draw a time policy to guide the program based on the resources, facilities, objectives, and goals that will be determined.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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