

Identification and Explanation of Effective Factors in Sustainable Sports Tourism Development in Ardabil Province (with an Emphasis on Marketing Approach)

Received: 2024-08-04

Accepted: 2025-06-29

Vol. 7, No.1.2026, 86-103

Rahim Zare¹
 Armaghan Rezaei²
 Ahmad Mahmoudi^{3*} 
 Mohammad Ghasemi

¹ Associate Professor of Tourism Management Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

² Master of Entrepreneurship, University of Kashan, Kashan, Iran

³ Assistant Professor of Sport Management University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

⁴ Ph.D. Student of Sport Management, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

***Correspondence:**

Ahmad Mahmoudi, Assistant Professor of Sport Management University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

Email: ah.mahmoudi@ut.ac.ir

ORCID: [0000-0001-7579-2274](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7579-2274)

DOI:

[10.22098/rsmm.2025.14612.1323](https://doi.org/10.22098/rsmm.2025.14612.1323)

Abstract

Purpose: Sports tourism is one of the most significant forms of tourism implemented in various countries. Among the primary objectives of nations is the sustainable development of sports tourism in regions that offer this type of tourism. To achieve this goal, it is essential to effectively identify and analyze the influential factors in this area. The main objective of the present study is to identify the factors affecting the sustainable development of sports tourism in Ardabil Province, with an emphasis on a marketing approach.

Method: This research employs a mixed method with a Concurrent Nested approach to investigate the subject. Initially, using a qualitative systematic review method, the necessary information and data were collected to extract the "thematic axes" for semi-structured interviews based on previous research in this field. Then, in the second phase, using the thematic analysis method, the influential factors were identified.

The database for resource extraction includes: ScienceDirect, Emerald, MDPI, Taylor & Francis, Proquest, Research Gate, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

Results: According to the findings of the study, out of 115 relevant studies, 16 validated studies or those meeting the criteria were examined, and 100 relevant indices were extracted. In the second phase of the research, 72 fundamental themes, 24 comprehensive organizer themes, and 6 comprehensive participant themes were identified, which are considered influential factors in the sustainable development of sports tourism in Ardabil Province.

Conclusion: The results of the current research indicate that the influential factors in the sustainable development of sports tourism lead to residents and businesses in the regions offering sports tourism services benefiting from unique economic advantages while fostering innovation and competitive advantage in sports tourism destinations.

Keywords: Ardabil Province, Marketing, Mixed Study, Sustainable Sports Tourism, and Tourism.

Copyright

©2026 by the authors. Published by the University of Mohaghegh Ardabili. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



Introduction

Today, since the beginning of the 21st century, the tourism industry has become one of the most profitable industries in the world, and there is fierce competition among many countries to attract tourists (Valizadeh & Seyed Amery, 2020; Naghizadeh-Baghi et al., 2023). Intense competition between countries and destinations in the tourism industry has led to a focus on certain events that are considered the main concern of tourism destinations and their marketing organizations (Chuang et al, 2018; Chen et al, 2010). This intense competition has caused these countries and destinations to dedicate time and resources to creating tourist satisfaction as well as destination loyalty (Ribeiro et al, 2018).

According to the prediction of the World Tourism Organization (WTO), in 2030, the number of tourists entering emerging destinations is expected to double between 2010 and 2030 (Pratt & Tolkach, 2018). Business, sports, and tourism are topics that can be integrated so that the mixed result is so profitable that all countries, regions, cities, travel agencies, and sports can gain countless advantages (Lamont, 2014). That is why economists focus on sports tourism because they believe that sports tourism is a productive industry to create employment and entrepreneurship. The development of sports tourism activities leads to more employment, and this can be highly useful for developing countries that have a young population and job seekers (Gibson et al, 2012). Most researchers suggest that hosting sports events provides a series of enjoyable and memorable experiences for tourists, especially sports fans (Wong & Tang, 2016). Sports events are known as hedonic services providing many tangible and intangible benefits to host countries or destinations (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). Today, sports and tourism are known as two growing industries that due to their unique nature, can facilitate the way for the development of a wide range of tangible and

intangible resources for countries. The attractiveness of these two industries becomes more meaningful when both are placed next to each other as complements (Jaberi et al, 2018). Many governments consider sports tourism as one of the most critical driving forces for tourism success and strive to host sports events (Jeong et al, 2019). Notably, it has been reported that sports events of various scales can attract many domestic tourists and improve the destination image almost as much as large sports events (Wong & Tang, 2016). For this reason, local communities which are unable to host large-scale sports events should consider small-scale repetitive sports events as a cost-effective means of attracting tourists (Jeong et al, 2019).

Sports tourism has been focused on by many researchers for many years, as it is generally recognized that it provides an effective means to sustainably increase the growth of tourism destinations (Gibson, 1998; Jeong et al, 2019). Gibson, who provided a comprehensive analysis of sports tourism, defines sports tourism as "leisure-based travel" that takes people temporarily outside their home environment to participate in physical activities, watch physical activities, or respect the attractions associated with physical activity (Gibson, 1998).

In recent years, several researchers have also become increasingly interested in studying "active sports tourism" as a means of attracting and satisfying tourists (Hodeck & Hovemann, 2016). Active sports tourism means that people travel to or participate in sports events such as windsurfing, canoeing, golf, hiking, skiing, marathon, cycling, or triathlon (Jeong et al, 2020). In addition, according to the study by Kaplanidou and Vogt, active sports tourism brings up tourists emotional experiences such as excitement, relaxation, pleasure, self-actualization, and pride, and participation in a sports event is considered an achievement and "a lot of fun" (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010).

Hence, both academics and industrial managers

must understand the role of sports tourism in the formation of tourists' emotions. The tourism industry in developing countries enjoys a very high capacity for growth and development, meanwhile, it has not grown and developed as much as it should be. In other words, this emerging industry is particularly important for developing countries like Iran, which has faced problems such as rampant unemployment, limited foreign exchange reserves, and a single-product economy based on oil and oil products. This concern is one of the basic issues raised in this area. On the other hand, Iran, with its natural capacities and tourist and cultural attractions, as well as a diverse and four-season climate, as a country capable of providing favorable conditions for those interested in foreign travel, can be considered an important pole of the sports tourism industry in a general sense.

A significant number of tourism researchers have focused on this concept in recent decades because it plays a central role in tourists' decision-making and can create many opportunities. In the sports tourism area, some studies have focused on large-scale sporting events such as the summer or winter Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, and the World Championships (Jin et al, 2013). However, few recent studies have focused on small-scale repetitive sports events. According to Wong and Tang, small-scale sports events can also attract tourists and media coverage (Wong & Tang, 2016). Iran is a mysterious land with four seasons, in addition, all of its districts enjoy a sizable chunk of potential. In many of its districts, it can be seen that despite the ever-increasing development of sports and the existence of significant tourism capacities, the issue of sports tourism has not been properly addressed by sports and tourism managers. The enhancement of scientific research and the theoretical foundations of sports and tourism can gradually provide the necessary basis for the development of these two income-generating industries. Especially sports tourism

in Iran's provinces, which is a growing market and has significant potential to become an attractive market. Ardabil province is one of the northwestern provinces of Iran, which has ten counties enjoying various climates. It mainly welcomes tourists in sports fields such as skiing, rock climbing, mountaineering, river tracing, water sports, hiking sports camping, etc. Its pleasant and special weather in different seasons of the year has turned this province into an exciting destination that attracts many sports tourists from different cities of Iran and has the potential to become an international destination for sports tourists. It is true that this province, like many other provinces, has a high capacity to attract tourists - especially sports tourism - but due to the mentioned reasons, this issue is not recognized as "sustainable" and even in some areas and seasons of a year, this type of tourism is not well received.

Therefore, this research is the first research study that seeks to identify the effective factors in the development of sustainable sports tourism in Ardabil, which aims to identify the key and effective factors of this type of tourism and be fruitful concerning sustainable development that it is done by emphasizing the marketing approach. The need to pay serious attention to travel and tourism as a new phenomenon in the machine lifestyle of the 21st century is undeniable because of the advancement of technology the mechanization of societies and the spread of new inventions and discoveries that make people dependent on cities have made people face many challenges (Butler, 2000). Today tourism has become an attractive industry that plays an important role in the economic development of many countries (Allameh et al, 2015).

Tourism can soon be considered the number one industry in the world due to its positive social, cultural, and economic effects. So that many countries are trying to exploit this industry by creating appropriate infrastructure and meeting the tourists' demands (Mazloomi Soveini & Gaspar, 2022). For most countries,

tourism is an important source of business, income, employment, and foreign exchange (Giao et al, 2021). Tourism can be defined as an important aspect of economic development (Chin et al, 2020). Following successful countries in the tourism industry, other countries have also tried to develop this sector but it should be noted that achieving a comparative advantage in this area requires the creating of suitable infrastructure, meeting tourists' needs, and creating favorable tourism facilities (Reihani & Khatibzadeh, 2021).

Sports have become one of the most common motivational factors for tourists globally, and countries have more willing to earn more money through new methods and innovations in the industry. Sports and tourism are inextricably linked. Most countries in the world that have natural and cultural heritage utilize sports tourism as a strategic tool for escalating employment and economic development (Heydari et al, 2021).

Sports tourism is considered more than an industry as a socio-economic phenomenon in the world, and many countries and cities of the world understand the many benefits and effects of this industry through investment and utilize it as an important source for growing their economy (Van der Zee, 2010; Emery, 2010). Tourism and sports are the world's largest industries, which by combining them has created one of the most amazing modern service industries called the sports tourism industry (Veal, 2011). Sports tourism is one of the types of tourism that plays an important and effective role in achieving tourism goals in every society and has been a major part of the success of societies in the field of tourism in recent years. Sports tourism, as a special type of tourism, presents tourists with wonderful experiences (Perić et al, 2019).

Sports is one of the critical activities during tourism and tourism is associated with different types of sports. Watanabe et al. (2018) also stated that sports tourism is one of the key types of tourism that causes the growth of tourism in

countries (Watanabe et al., 2018). A great body of studies has been done to promote sport globally. Sports can be developed or promoted through various activities such as sports tourism etc. The sports tourism industry is used to develop and promote sports (Arulmozhi & Vinayamoorthi, 2019). The arrival of tourists is also influenced by important sports events, and holding sports events provides useful tourism opportunities (Valizadeh & Seyed Amery, 2020). According to a survey of tourists, the nature tourism and sports tourism industry is a multi-billion-dollar industry. The value of the sports tourism industry in 2017 was reported to be about 7 billion dollars (Arulmozhi & Vinayamoorthi, 2019).

Sports tourism is a type of tourism that temporarily moves people from their daily lives to participate in or watch a sports event or respect a sports heritage (Malchrowicz-Mosko & Munsters, 2018). The term sports tourism was coined to create a better understanding of sport as a motivation for tourism (Hritz & Ross, 2010; Weed, 2006). According to the statistics of the World Tourism Organization, 43% of the jobs in the world are related to the tourism industry. For example, during the years 1997 to 2005, sports tourism led to an annual increase of 13% in the gross national product as a result of economic activities (Safdel et al, 2014). According to Gibson's study, sports tourism can be described as leisure-based travel that takes people away from their daily lives temporarily to participate in or watch a sporting event or respect a sporting heritage (Gibson, 1998).

Researchers believe that sports tourism can be described in terms of three main behaviors including participating, watching, and visiting (Mazloomi Soveini & Gaspar, 2022). Based on this perspective, there is a clear consensus among sports tourism researchers that sports tourism is divided into three categories including event sports tourism, active sports tourism, and nostalgia sports tourism (Gibson, 1998). Event sports tourism depicts tourists actively or passively at a sporting event as

spectators whose main purpose of travel is to cheer on their country and their favorite star players or to spend time with family members, friends, and social groups (Kwon, 2014). In this regard, many countries and districts are increasingly considering major sporting events such as the Olympic Games and World Championships as a core component of their destination marketing strategy (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011).

Active sports tourism describes tourists who actively participate in a sports event as participants to improve mental and physical health, reduce stress, and achieve personal goals (Yang & Kang, 2001). Nostalgia sports tourism refers to tourists visiting famous sports venues such as stadiums and museums for major sports events and professional teams (Gibson, 1998). Sports tourism has been revived in the last few years because it has an important contribution to the local economy, such as improving the image of the destination and attracting tourists (Jeong et al, 2019). Heydari et al. (2023) assert that for the sports tourism industry to grow in developing countries like Iran, numerous factors must converge more closely in fostering the growth of this industry. In this regard, the presence of appropriate legal, normative, supportive, and educational frameworks affects the ability and inclination of market leaders to identify and capitalize on entrepreneurial opportunities in this emerging industry in countries. The findings of the study conducted by Nematisefat et al. (2023) underscore the necessity of enhancing indicators such as improving the quality of existing infrastructure, private sector investment, establishment of a dedicated senior tourism committee, transportation facilities, and leveraging the experiences of successful countries in the development of senior sports tourism. The findings of Nazari Torshizi et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of enhancing indicators such as adequate internet access, management decisions, cultural diversity, availability of suitable venues and markets, and

smooth traffic and roads to establish a destination as a brand in sports tourism. Sports tourism can be vital for global peace and increasing understanding and interdependence. Sports tourism can globally contribute to the creation of a new international economic system that helps to fill the wide economic gap between developed and developing countries. It can also guarantee the development of sports tourism especially economic and social progress in developing countries (Valizadeh & Seyed Amery, 2020). Various researches have been conducted in this area, the most important of which will be discussed below. In an article, Gibson et al. (2012) examine the eventual sports tourism in six events in 18 months discuss the economic variable, and finally conclude that the presence of spectators at the venue leads to the financial well-being of people and creates jobs (Gibson et al, 2012). It can also inject money into society (Darabi et al, 2020). Hinch and Ito (2018) stated that sports tourism and exploiting its potential is one of Japan's important goals in some upcoming sports events including the 2019 Japan Rugby World Cup and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (Hinch and Ito, 2018). The research of Hodeck et al. (2018) also showed that sports tourism played an important role in the success and achievement of the goals of the Rio 2016 Olympics (Hodeck et al, 2018). Deniz and Yenel (2013) in a study titled "Structural Analysis of Physical Education and Sports System in Northern Cyprus" stated that sports associations and the Ministry of Tourism should create a joint group to improve sports tourism using the country's natural resources (Hodeck et al, 2018; Deniz and Yenel, 2013). By reviewing the literature and theoretical framework, it can be seen that sports tourism, which is one of the most important types of tourism in the world, has many potential benefits that can create opportunities, employment, stability, etc. for countries. But as mentioned before, the sports tourism industry in Iran is an emerging industry and due

to the dependence of Iran's economy on oil, these resources and potentials have been used less for entrepreneurship, job creation, and economic development in the country (Darabi et al. 2020).

The new era is called the arena of competition for resources and capital. The big industrial countries that are victorious in this field have put the exploitation of resources and capital at the top of their priorities. Notably, these successful countries have started their growth cycles under the supervision of educated and skilled people. Although the foundations of sports tourism research have been established by most of the previous studies, its main gap is in identifying the effective factors specific to each destination and climate, and in this research, Ardabil province was chosen for this purpose. Thus, the innovation of the current research is filling the existing theoretical gap.

A review of past research shows that these factors have been examined in certain dimensions (such as: economic, cultural, etc.) and this research has tried to examine all the factors in relation to each other. This point distinguishes the present research from other similar researches. The innovation of the current research is both in reviewing the theoretical literature from different perspectives and in terms of methodology, the approach used in it is the Concurrent Nested Strategy approach.

Materials and Methods

According to the nature, purpose, and type of the current research, it is a mixed research using the constructed nested strategy examining the issue.

In this way, at first, using the qualitative method of systematic review, research and related research are identified and analyzed, and the thematic axes stage are identified to use later; then, the key and main components are extracted using the qualitative method of thematic analysis. In this type of approach, firstly, one of the methods that has a larger scope is carried out, and another study with a

different approach will be done at its heart. Data analysis usually involves data transformation and also synthesis is done in the data analysis stage. These methods are suitable for obtaining a broader view of a subject under investigation and for studying different groups or levels in a single study (Sajadi et al., 2012). The systematic review method is one of the qualitative methods that like meta-analysis and meta-synthesis methods, examines research and keywords related to the research topic (Gong & Jia, 2022). A systematic review is a method that is used in sports contexts such as reviewing sporting events (Thomson et al., 2020), or in relation to nature-based, adventure sports tourism (Gstaettner et al., 2018; Pickering et al., 2018; Wolf et al., 2017).

In this phase, to analyze the theoretical literature structure of various research in the field of sports tourism, a co-citation network analysis was used which is critical to identify key research themes, identify patterns in the data, and research opportunities for future studies (Kim et al, 2021). The time domain of the selected research includes the research of the last ten years, i.e. 2012 to 2022. In this regard, foreign sources were extracted from scientific databases such as ScienceDirect, Emerald, MDPI, Taylor & Francis, Proquest, Research Gate, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

Then, by collecting the required information and data, thematic axes are used to conduct semi-structured interviews in the second phase - the thematic analysis method. The thematic analysis method is one of the most important qualitative methods that examines and analyzes themes using an inductive approach (Warner, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2020).

This method uses six main steps to identify and count themes:

- Step 1: Getting to know the data;
- Step 2: Creating initial codes;
- Step 3: Searching for themes;
- Step 4: Revise themes;
- Step 5: Defining and naming themes

□ Step 6: Preparing the report (Caulfield, 2020: 2; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017: 3354). Moreover, this method comprises different approaches, one of the most widely used of which is Attride-Stirling's triple approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Hence, this approach has also been used in this research; so, the extracted themes are divided into three themes: "basic, organizing, and global" Finally, the results have been shown separately in Table 2.

Results

First phase: qualitative method of systematic review

According to the previous sections' explanations, in the first phase, this research examines all the research carried out in this

area by using the systematic review qualitative method so that, among 115 related types of research, only 16 qualified researches were examined. The relevant processes have been shown separately in Figure 1.

These Indicators belong to the development of sustainable sports tourism which have been extracted from relevant research limited to the last decade (2012-2022 AD), where the researchers used the systematic review method. The main criterion for reviewing articles is the relevance of their topics and contents to the main topic of the article.

Next, in Figure 1, the process of systematic review and extraction of relevant Indicators are shown.

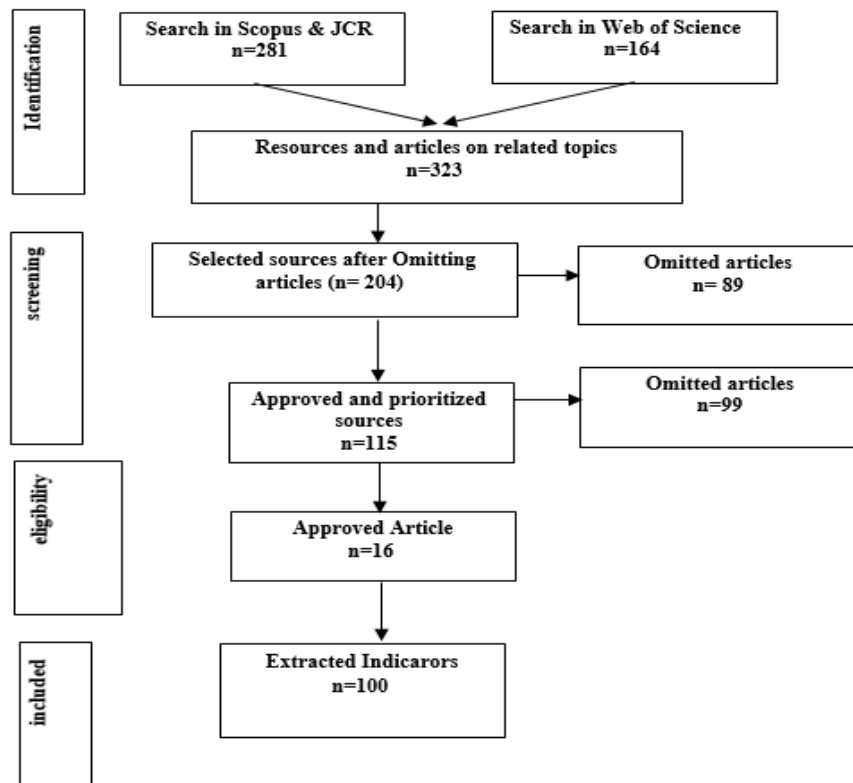


Figure 1. The Systematic Review Process and Indicators Extraction

Next, Table 1 shows the Indicators extracted from related research using the systematic

review method.

Table 1. Indicators Extracted from Related Research, Using the Systematic Review Method

Source	Indicators	Database
Tsekouropoulos et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on the local community, • promoting sustainable development, • managing sports events, • providing sports services to participants and 	Research Gate, MDPI

Source	Indicators	Database
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the local community, the local community needs and maintaining existing resources, increasing social cohesion and citizens' pride, Overall promotion of the image of a tourist destination. 	
Liu et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influential networks in sports tourism, economic growth, economic development and economic impact, increasing tax revenue, job opportunities in tourism destinations, developing sports tourism, increasing capital and productivity, Satisfaction and well-being of the local community. 	ScienceDirect
Mazloomi Soveini & Gaspar (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> positive social, cultural, and economic effects; creating appropriate infrastructure; meeting the requirements of tourists; Meeting the needs of tourists and creating tourism facilities; Intention to revisit tourist destinations; tangible and intangible resources for countries; the growing development of sports; significant tourism capacities; Development of sports tourism in different places. 	Ensani.ir
Bichler & Pikkemaat (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the strategic location of destinations in sports tourism, developing tourist destinations in winter sports, the main factors in attracting tourists, the potential of innovations, a better understanding of the expectations, needs, and goals of sports tourists, Attracting new customers, multilateral cooperation. 	ScienceDirect
Jeong et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small-scale sports events, tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty, marketing strategies, Maintaining loyal customers, favorable opinions and experiences of visiting a destination, social media, building destination loyalty, Media coverage. 	MDPI
Gholipour et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The relationship between major sports events and tourist attractions, strategic management and planning, development of local and regional areas, economic and political factors determining sports tourism, Policy consequences. 	ScienceDirect
Cho et al. (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group participation, paying attention to the main attractions, developing loyalty in sports tourists, Direct and indirect experiences. 	ScienceDirect, Research Gate
Kim et al. (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning for sports events, more support for the local community, increasing sports tourism capacities, developing sports tourism services, emerging opportunities for sports tourism, Facilitating opportunities for tourism 	Research Gate, MDPI

Source	Indicators	Database
Koc (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> destinations. events, tourism, and sports industries; Tourism and sports activities, recreational activities related to sports, understanding the attitude of tourists, Safety and security of tourists. 	ResearchGate, Taylor & Francis
Kim et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sports tourism events, residents' perceived social impacts, opportunities for economic growth, increase the income and employment opportunities for the local community, the process of planning and developing sports events, improving the well-being of the local community, Developing supportive attitudes. 	ScienceDirect, Research Gate
Huang et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizations responsible for sports tourism events, voluntary participation of organizations and tourists, society and economy based on altruism, the attitude of sports tourists, community participation, customer, communication, employee relations, green management, environmental sustainability, power of sports attractions 	Research Gate, MDPI
Alleghany & Granary (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key success factors in sports tourism, supporting sports tourism, organizations supporting sports tourism, capacity building, development of touristic sports 	Science Direct, Research Gate
Hua & Chiu (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Event-based sports tourism, sports tourism attractions, availability of opportunities for participation, structural constraints, sports leisure activities, growth of the sports tourism industry 	Science Direct, Research Gate
Hua et al (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in sports tourism activities, sports tourism consumer group, improving the quality of life, social-cultural activities (sports festivals), transportation availability, service location, Access to public facilities. 	Science Direct, Research Gate
Gibson et al (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of sports tourism initiatives, Welcoming of major sports tourism events, opportunities for sports tourism and economic development, development of sports infrastructure, Attention to sports events based on public participation. 	ScienceDirect, Research Gate, Taylor & Francis
Shipway (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sports tourism development, growth and scientific participation in sports tourism, development of sports tourism enhancement space elements, Changing dynamics of sports tourism. 	ResearchGate

As can be seen in the above table, the Indicators extracted from the systematic review method are similar to each other to a large

extent so that, it indicates the convergence and alignment of thematic and conceptual research. Given the last stage of the systematic review

method, things like "the needs of local community and preservation of existing resources, development of sports tourism, meeting the needs of tourists and developing tourism facilities; development of tourist destinations in sports, strategic management, and planning, sports tourism events, attraction power sports, sports tourism attractions, development of sports infrastructure, changing dynamics of sports tourism" were included in the form of thematic axes in the interview protocol and will be used in the second phase of the research - thematic analysis method.

The second phase: the qualitative method of thematic analysis

Now, the themes mentioned above are placed in the form of an interview framework and the relevant themes are extracted using semi-structured interviews. At this time, semi-structured interviews are conducted with relevant experts, and then, in the next step, they enter the six-step process of thematic analysis. The participants of this phase of the research are scientific and executive experts in the field of sports management, sports tourism, sports events, and management of organizations in charge of sports and tourism in Ardabil province, who are interviewed and examined under different conditions and characteristics. These experts were selected using the purposeful sampling method, which was limited to 12 interviews according to the rule of theoretical saturation.

To extract the main themes, in the first stage,

due to the Coronavirus pandemic, interviews were conducted online, and the collected materials were accurately recorded and then typed.

In the second stage, the primary codes were created, which went to the third stage, i.e. searching for themes, to categorize them. In this step, 159 raw codes were identified and each of them introduced a "concept" as a code.

In the fourth stage, themes are reviewed. This phase begins when we create a set of themes, and review them. This stage, itself, includes two rounds 1. Reviewing themes and 2. Refining themes. The first round includes a review of coded summaries. In the second round, the validity of the themes of the data set is considered.

Then, in the next stage (stage five), the themes are named, so that each of them has a unique name related to itself.

Then, in the last stage [stage six], the final analysis is carried out where each of the extracted themes is shown in their original formats.

Hence, the extracted themes, after going through these six stages using Atride-Sterling's triple approach (2001) were categorized in the form of basic, organizing, and global themes. In Table 2, global and organizing themes are listed separately.

It should be mentioned that to avoid repetition of the content in the article, the basic themes were omitted, and only global and organizing themes were stated.

Table 2. Global and Organizing Themes

	Global theme	Organizing theme
1	Effective Participation and interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Comprehensive participation of the province's departments; ● managing and coordinating the trustee organizations; ● Interactive and collaborative decision-making and policy-making of effective departments.
2	Development and expansion of structural and infrastructural facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improving the capacity of tourist destinations; ● Balancing the tourist-destination flow; ● providing facilities; ● improvement and developing basic and advanced infrastructure; ● Improving and promoting transportation and communication ways.
3	Marketing and Development of tourist destinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the attractiveness of sports tourism destinations; ● Identify the capacities and capabilities of tourist destinations in the province;

Global theme		Organizing theme
4	The quality of providing sports tourism services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing and implementing strategies for touristic destinations Process, price, and quality of products and services provided; satisfaction of sports tourists; creating tourism demand; providing distinctive and cost-effective (competitive) products and services; Providing and improving sports tourism support services
5	Modern and green technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of new and distinctive media and communication technologies; using peaceful and eco-friendly technologies; Increasing communication tools and advanced technologies in touristic destinations; Creating smart sports tourism destinations.
6	Software and behavioral approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Culturalization of tourism acceptance in host communities; training and empowering the human resources of the host communities; safety and security of tourists; Legal Supporting

As it can be seen, among the 72 basic themes, 24 organizing themes and 6 global themes were extracted, which are considered effective factors developing sustainable sports tourism in Ardabil. In the following, these items are explained.

Given the variety of demands of sports tourists as important factors in attracting tourists and developing the needs of this type of tourism, the development of this sector requires a full understanding of these needs and their provision by the destination. By investing in infrastructure as well as predicting efficient plans following the expectations of tourists, the demands of tourists in the sports tourism market can be met. Sports tourism is characterized by the movement of individuals or groups to participate in a sporting event. Sports events can be classified as important events that are effective in creating sustainable tourism destinations. The success of a sports event depends, to a large extent, on the interaction and cooperation of tourism actors, the local community, and the organizers of the sports event, notably, this was one of the most important themes obtained from the expert interviews. Also, the interaction of trustee organizations and institutions can bring more vital benefits to the local community by promoting sustainable development.

According to experts, organizing events

includes preparation, implementation, analysis, and evaluation taking into account all the factors that can affect the event. In particular, managing sports events includes aspects such as planning, implementing the selected actions, and controlling their effectiveness aiming to provide sports activities to the participants and the local community.

Supporting the local community and all stakeholders is an important factor in the success of managing and organizing sports events.

Factors such as facilities, accommodation, weather, access to the destination, the image of the destination, and its promotion are also other success factors.

New and eco-friendly technologies are one of the most recent approaches to sports tourism in the current era.

Many touristic destinations try to provide such services in addition to creating a competitive advantage over other destinations and also being effective in protecting the environment.

The quality of providing sports tourism services is also one of the key topics in this field.

In many tourist destinations, sustainable development is associated with the realization of a sporting event taking into account the needs of the local community and the conservation of existing resources. Furthermore, through sporting events, social

cohesion and citizen pride reflecting the multidimensional impact of a sporting event on the entire community are enhanced. Moreover, the general improvement of a destination's image can be associated with a sports event in the long term and leads to an increase in the active participation of citizens. These are the main manifestations of software and behavioral approaches in this field. In fact, sports tourism now leaves the environment at the center of a

Discussion

Sustainable sports tourism has been one of the important topics in recent decades, which has been studied from different aspects. In particular, several research efforts have already been made in this field, but they have not stated anything precisely related to this topic. In general, it could be said that different factors in

sporting event, so its protection and its ecological footprint are more important factors than short-term economic benefits. As a result, the multi-dimensional impact of a sporting event on a destination shapes the residents' attitudes and behavior at the same time.

In general, these themes are effective factors in the development of sustainable sports tourism in Ardabil.

sports tourism have different effects on sustainable tourism destinations. A sustainable sports tourism destination makes the destinations rely on themselves to a large extent and creates opportunities in the host society. In figure 2, the theme network is drawn.

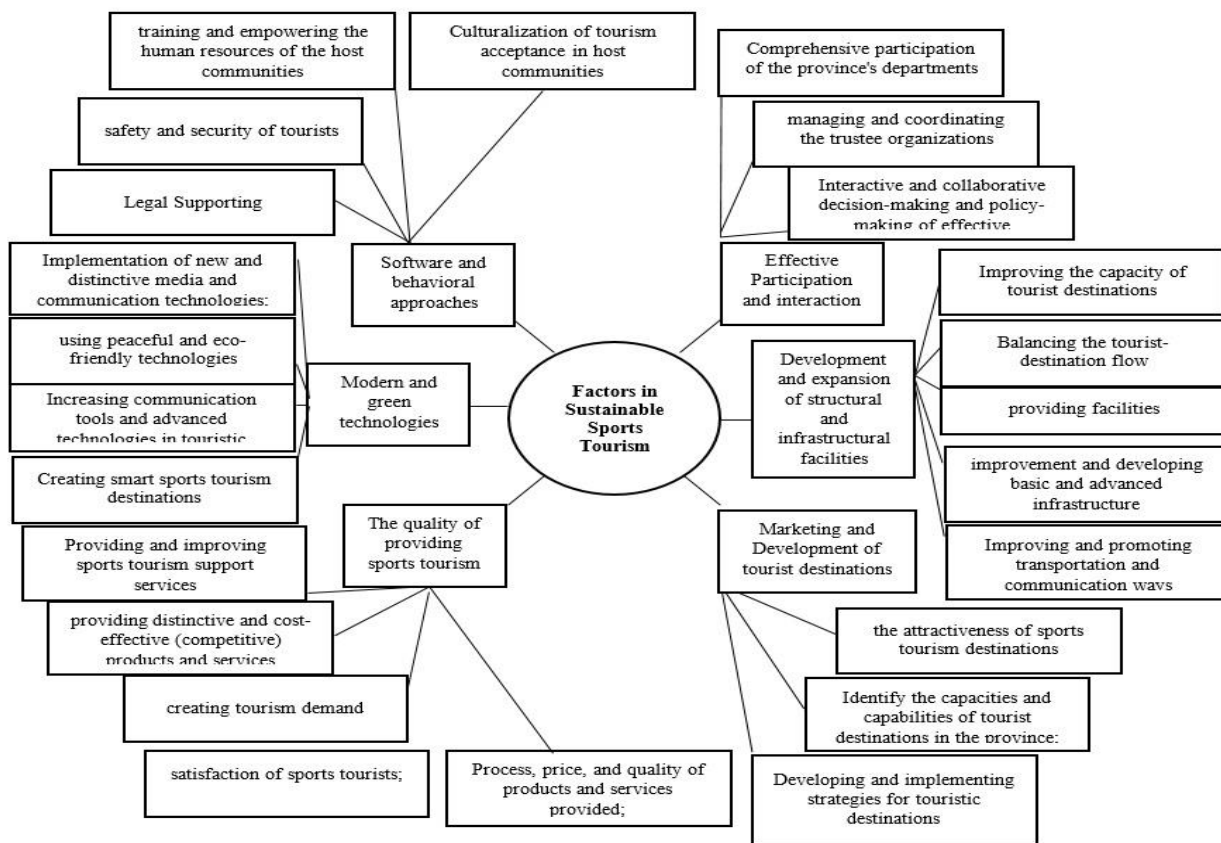


Figure 2. The Theme Network

Ardabil province, along with its unique and special climate, has the potential to use sports tourism activities while preserving and reviving tourist attractions, to help the livelihood of local people who are kind of tourist

destinations. It could be possible to create a comprehensive and strategic management plan for destinations through the creation of a sustainable development plan and management of sports tourism activities. Sustainable sports

tourism can develop local innovation and sustainable development in Ardabil and help to meet the needs of different generations without jeopardizing the future in this changing and dynamic environment which is constantly evolving. From the viewpoint of tourism, sustainable development is the basis of tourism product and service development, which is created with special emphasis on the local community and natural environment management. From this point of view, sustainable sports tourism can be considered a type of tourism related to the quality of residents' lives and visitors' experiences.

Given the themes extracted, it can be seen that utilizing modern and green technologies (eco-friendly) regardless of each sector, can be fruitful for the sustainable development of sports tourism. This issue requires planning and formulation of strategies that are created at different levels.

Sports tourism requires efforts and organized planning, meanwhile, the lack of targeted planning leads to problems and difficulties. That's why the institutions and organizations in charge must coordinate with other effective departments to make decisions that will improve the tourist-destination relationship. In addition, the development of sustainable sports tourism is inextricably linked to community participation and gives special importance to determining the attitudes and behavior of residents.

Under the global theme of "soft and behavioral approaches", tourism as a form of development is often associated with improving the living standards of the residents of a community by focusing on the community development model or basing its success on the participation of the community as a whole in any action. In this

regard, issues like "cultivating the acceptance of tourism in the host communities; training and empowering the human resources of the host communities; safety and security of tourists; and legal supporting" are of great importance to gain satisfaction and build trust for local communities in decision-making. In this context, sustainable development is associated with continuous social changes and in many cases leads to the creation of new and alternative models of tourism development.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify effective factors in the development of sustainable sports tourism in Ardabil province. The sustainable development of tourism in Ardabil province can be supported and developed by referring to the themes extracted in this research, and this category is also the key to solving tourism problems in this province. Also, it is necessary for all the custodian institutions to cooperate in this field.

To achieve this critical goal, tourism organizations must be involved in processes in which the community plays an active role in planning the future of the destination as well as taking the necessary steps to ensure that residents and businesses gain benefit from tourism. Also, don't forget the important role of marketing. Therefore, sports tourism development and planning strategies should seek initiatives and create advantages in this area. In fact, marketing in this field makes it possible to introduce sports tourism and the potentials of this province, and take measures to create a competitive advantage and other neglected dimensions. For this reason, it is necessary to pay special attention to the marketing approach in this field.

References

- [1] Allameh, S. M., Pool, J. K., Jaberi, A., Salehzadeh, R., & Asadi, H. (2015). Factors influencing sport tourists' revisit intentions: The role and effect of

destination image, perceived quality, perceived value, and satisfaction. Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics.

- [2] Arulmozhi SJ, Vinayamoorthi G.

- (2019). Marketing Sport Tourism In India. Advance and Innovative Research. 2019 Apr; 6 (2): 23.
- [3] Assaker, G.; Vinzi, V.E.; O'Connor, P. (2011). Examining the effect of novelty seeking, satisfaction, and destination image on tourists' return pattern: A two factor, non-linear latent growth model. Tour. Manag. 2011, 32, 890–901.
- [4] Attride-Stirling, J. (2001), "Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research", Qualitative Research, Vol. 1, No. 3, Pp. 385-405.
- [5] Bichler, B & Pikkemaat, B. (2021). Winter sports tourism to urban destinations: Identifying potential and comparing motivational differences across skier groups. Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism. Volume 36, December 2021, 100420.
- [6] Braun V. & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? Qual. Res. Psychol. (2020), pp. 1-25, 10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238
- [7] Butler, RW. (2000). Ecotourism-has it achieved maturity or has the bubble burst. Keynote address. Pacific Rim Tourism. 2000.
- [8] Caulfield, Jack. (2020). How to do thematic analysis. Published on September 6, 2019 by. Revised on August 14, 2020. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/thematic-analysis/>
- [9] Chen, C.F.; Chen, F.S. (2010). Experience quality, perceived value, satisfaction and behavioral intentions for heritage tourists. Tour. Manag. 2010, 31, 29–35.
- [10] Chin, Y.-S., Mohamad, A. A., Lo, M.-C., Ibrahim, W. H. W., & Ha, S.-T. (2020). Antecedents of destination image in natural protected area: The moderating role of perceived value. Geo Journal of Tourism and Geosites, 32 (4), 1222-1228.
- [11] Cho, H; Joo, H & Chi, Ch. (2019). Examining nostalgia in sport tourism: The case of US college football fans. Tourism Management Perspectives. journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tmp
- [12] Chuang, L.M.; Chen, P.C.; Chen, Y.Y. (2018). The determinant factors of travelers' choices for pro-environment behavioral intention-integration theory of planned behavior, unified theory of acceptance, and use of technology 2 and sustainability values. Sustainability. 2018, 10, 1869.
- [13] Darabi, M., et al., (2020). Scenario Planning of the Future of Sports Tourism Industry in Mashhad. Annals of Applied Sport Science, 2020, 8(4).
- [14] Deniz, S. and F. Yenel. (2013). The Structural Analysis of Physical Education and Sports System in The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2013. 89: p. 772-780.
- [15] Emery, P., (2010). Past, present, future major sport event management practice: The practitioner perspective. Sport management review, 2010. 13(2): p. 158-170.
- [16] Fourie, J.; Santana-Gallego, M. The impact of mega-sport events on tourist arrivals. Tour. Manag. 2011, 32, 1364–1370.
- [17] Gholipour, H; Arjomandi, A; Marsiglio, S & Foroughi, B. (2020). Is outstanding performance in sports events a driver of tourism? Journal of Destination Marketing & Management. Volume 18, December 2020, 100507.
- [18] Giao, H. N. K., Vuong, B. N., Phuong, N. N. D., & Dat, N. T. (2021). A model of factors affecting domestic tourist satisfaction on eco-tourism service quality in the Mekong Delta,

- Vietnam.
- [19] Gibson, H.J. Sport tourism: A critical analysis of research. Sport Manag. Rev. 1998, 1, 45–76.
- [20] Gibson, H.J., K. Kaplanidou, and S.J. Kang, Small-scale event sport tourism: A case study in sustainable tourism. Sport management review, 2012. 15(2): p. 160-170.
- [21] Gong, Z & Jia, Z. (2022). A Systematic Review of hospitality and tourism management students' career intentions. Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education. Volume 31, November 2022, 100381
- [22] Gstaettner, A. M., Lee, D., & Rodger, K. (2018). The concept of risk in nature-based tourism and recreation – a systematic literature review. Current Issues in Tourism, 21 (15): 1784–1809. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1244174>
- [23] Heydari, R; Keshtidar, M; Ramkissoon, H; Esfahani, M & Asadollahi. (2021). Emerging industry: Identifying the Effective Institutional Factors on the Exploitation of Entrepreneurial Opportunities of Sports Tourism Industry in developing countries. Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY license.
- [24] Heydari, R., Mahmoudi, A., Azizi, B., Pirjamadi, S., & Mehri, S. (2023). Modeling the Institutional Factors Affecting the Utilization of Entrepreneurial Capacities (EC) in Sports Tourism in Iran. Research in Sport Management and Marketing, (), -. doi: 10.22098/rsmm.2023.12758.1226
- [25] Hinch, T. and E. Ito. (2018). Sustainable sport tourism in Japan. Tourism Planning & Development, 2018. 15 (1): 96-101.
- [26] Hodeck, A., D. Eckert-Lindhammer, and L.C.F. dos Santos. (2018). Expectation and perceived experience of Rio 2016: The perspective of Latin American Stakeholders. in 9th International Sport Business Symposium. 2018.
- [27] Hodeck, A.; Hovemann, G. (2016). Motivation of active sport tourists in a German highland destination—a cross-seasonal comparison. J. Sport Tour. 2016, 20, 335–348.
- [28] Hritz N & Ross C. (2010). The perceived impacts of sport tourism: An urban host community perspective. Journal of Sport Management. 24 (2): 119-38.
- [29] Hua, K & Chiu, L. (2013). Multiculturalism: Issues of Malaysian Female Sport Tourists' In Event-based Sport Tourism. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences. Volume 91, 10 October 2013, Pages 270-287.
- [30] Hua, K; Ibrahim, I & Chiu, L. (2013). Sport Tourism: Physically-disabled Sport Tourists' Orientation. Social and Behavioral Sciences. Volume 91, 10 October 2013, Pages 257-269.
- [31] Huang, F.-H., Ye, Y.-J., & Kao, C.-H. (2015). Developing a novel Intuitionistic Fuzzy Importance–performance Analysis for evaluating corporate social responsibility in sport tourism event. Expert Systems with Applications, 42(19), 6530–6538. doi:10.1016/j.eswa.2015.04.008
- [32] Jaberi, A., Khazaei Pool, J., & Asadi, H. (2018). The Effect of Perceived Quality of Sport Tourism Destinations on Satisfaction and Intention to Revisit. Journal of Sport Management, 10(1), 17-32.
- [33] Jang, S.S.; Feng, R. (2007). Temporal destination revisit intention: The effects of novelty seeking and satisfaction. Tour. Manag. 2007, 28, 580–590.

- [34] Jeong Y, Kim S-K, Yu J-G. (2019). Determinants of Behavioral Intentions in the Context of Sport Tourism with the Aim of Sustaining Sporting Destinations. Sustainability. 2019; 11 (11): 3073. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11113073>.
- [35] Jeong Y, Kim S-K, Yu J-G. (2020). Sustaining Sporting Destinations through Improving Tourists' Mental and Physical Health in the Tourism Environment: The Case of Korea. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2020; 17(1):122. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17010122>.
- [36] Jeong, Y.; Kim, S. (2019). Exploring a suitable model of destination image: The case of a small-scale recurring sporting event. Asia Pac. J. Mark. Logist. 2019, 31, 1287–1307.
- [37] Jin, N.; Lee, H.; Lee, S. Event quality, perceived value, destination image, and behavioral intention of sports events: The case of the IAAF World Championship, Daegu, 2011. Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res. 2013, 18, 849–864.
- [38] Kim, W., Jun, H. M., Walker, M., & Drane, D. (2015). Evaluating the perceived social impacts of hosting large-scale sport tourism events: Scale development and validation. Tourism Management, 48, 21–32. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2014.10.015.
- [39] Kim, C., & Kaplanidou, K. (2019). The effect of sport involvement on support for mega sport events: Why does it matter. Sustainability, 11(20), 5687.
- [40] Kim, Y.R.; Liu, A. & Williams, A.M. (2021). Competitiveness in the visitor economy: A systematic literature review. Tourism Economics (2021).
- [41] Koc, E. (2016). Risk and safety management in the leisure, events, tourism and sports industries. Tourism Management, 54, 296–297. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2015.12.006 10.1016/j.tourman.2015.12.006.
- [42] Kwon, W.; Min, S.; Park, S.I. Causal chains of spectator motives and service factors leading to subjective well-being: Evidence from the World Championships Athletics. Korea Soc. Wellness 2014, 9, 1–15.
- [43] Lamont, M., Authentication in sports tourism. Annals of Tourism Research, 2014. 45: p. 1-17.
- [44] Liu, A; Kim Y & Song, H. (2022). Toward an accurate assessment of tourism economic impact: A systematic literature review. Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights. 3 (2): November 2022, 100054.
- [45] Maguire, Moira & Delahunt, Brid. (2017). Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step: Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars. AISHE-J. 9 (3): 3351- 33514.
- [46] Malchrowicz-Mosko, E & Munsters, W. (2018). Sport tourism: a growth market considered from a cultural perspective. Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology, 18 (4): 25–38.
- [47] Mazloomi Soveini, F. M., & Gaspar, P. (2022). The Effect of Destination Image on Satisfaction and Revisiting Intention of Desert Sport Tourists. Journal of New Studies in Sport Management, 3(2), 486-493.
- [48] Naghizadeh-Baghi, A., Javid, M., Heidari, M., & Goodarzi, S. (2023). Designing A System Dynamics Pattern of Marketing in Sport Tourism Destinations; A Qualitative Research. Research in Sport Management and Marketing, 4(3), 1-16.
- [49] Nazari Torshizi, A., Hemmat Yar, Z., Gholamian, J., Mahmoudi, A., & Pirjamadi, S. (2023). Branding of

- Sports Tourism Destination in Mashhad City. Research in Sport Management and Marketing, 5(1), 57-72. doi: 10.22098/rsmm.2023.12949.1229
- [50] Nemati Sefat, S., Azim Khani, A., Ghasemi, .. & Hematyar, Z. (2023). Identifying factors in the development of elderly sports tourism in Iran. Tourism and Leisure, 8(16), 119-137. doi: 10.22133/tlj.2024.418166.1120
- [51] Perić, M., V. Vitezić, and J.Đ. Badurina, Business models for active outdoor sport event tourism experiences. Tourism Management Perspectives, 2019. 32: p. 100561.
- [52] Pickering, C., Rossi, S. D., Hernando, A., & Barros, A. (2018). Current knowledge and future research directions for the monitoring and management of visitors in recreational and protected areas. Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, 21, 10–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2017.11.002>.
- [53] Postma A. (2013). When the tourists flew in': critical encounters in the development of tourism.(PhD). Groningen University, Groningen. 2013.
- [54] Pouder, R. W., Clark, J. D., & Fenich, G. G. (2018). An exploratory study of how destination marketing organizations pursue the sports tourism market. Journal of Destination Marketing & Management, 9, 184–193. doi:10.1016/j.jdmm.2018.01.005
- [55] Pratt, S. and D. Tolkach. (2018). The politics of tourism statistics. International Journal of Tourism Research, 2018. 20 (3): 299-307.
- [56] Reihani, E., & Khatibzadeh, M. (2021). Marketing Mix in Sport Tourism Context. Journal of New Studies in Sport Management, 2(3), 247-255.
- [57] Ribeiro, M.A.; Woosnam, K.M.; Pinto, P.; Silva, J.A. (2018). Tourists' destination loyalty through emotional solidarity with residents: An integrative moderated mediation model. J. Travel Res. 2018, 57, 279–295.
- [58] Safdel, H; Yektayar, M; Mohammadi, S & Molazem, T. (2014). Effective Factors on Sports Tourism: Emphasizing Development in Sports Natural Attractions. Annals of Applied Sport Science, 2 (4): 67-74.
- [59] Sajjadi, Musa; Rasouli, Maryam; Abbaszadeh, Abbas; Alavi Majd, Hamid. (2012). Mixed research methods: typology. Journal of Disability Studies, 3(2): 66-54.
- [60] Shipway. R. (2012). Sport tourism development. Book Review. Annals of Tourism Research. 39 (3): 1729-1730.
- [61] Soveini, F. M & Gaspar, P. (2022). The Effect of Destination Image on Satisfaction and Revisiting Intention of Desert Sport Tourists. Journal of New Studies in Sport Management, 3(2), 2022; 486-493.
- [62] Taleghani. Gh & Ghafary, A. (2014). Providing a Management Model for the Development of Sports Tourism. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences. 120 (19): 289-298.
- [63] Thomson, A., Kennelly, M., & Toohey, K. (2020). A systematic quantitative literature review of empirical research on large-scale sport events' social legacies. Leisure Studies, 39 (6): 859–876. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2020.1800804>.
- [64] Tsekouropoulos, G.; Gkouna, O.; Theocharis, D.; Gounas, A. (2022). Innovative Sustainable Tourism Development and Entrepreneurship through Sports Events. Sustainability. 2022, 14, 4379. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14084379>.

- [65] Valizadeh, V & Seyed Amery, M.H (2020). Identification and analysis of factors affecting the development of sports tourism in maku free trade and industrial zone with an effectual approach. J Adv Pharm Edu Res,10 (4): 104-113.
- [66] Van der Zee, E., (2010). Image improvement as a tangible legacy of Hallmark Events; the case of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. 2011.
- [67] Veal, A., Planning for leisure, sport, tourism and the arts: goals and rationales. World Leisure Journal, 2011. 53 (2): 119-148.
- [68] Warner, N; Gleeson, Ch; Fahey, P; Horgan, R & Groarke, A. (2022). Experiences of living with Lynch Syndrome: A reflexive thematic analysis. European Journal of Oncology Nursing. Volume 58, June 2022, 102117.
- [69] Watanabe, Y., et al., (2018). Attracting international spectators to a sport event held in Asia. International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 2018.
- [70] Weed M. (2006). Sport Tourism and the Development of Sport Events UK: www.idrottsforum.org; 2006 [cited 2014]. Available from: <http://idrottsforum.org/articles/weed/weed061213.pdf>
- [71] Wolf, I. D., Ainsworth, G. B., & Crowley, J. (2017). Transformative travel as a sustainable market niche for protected areas: A new development, marketing and conservation model. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 25 (11): 1650–1673. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2017.1302454>
- [72] Wong, I.A.; Tang, S.L. Linking travel motivation and loyalty in sporting events: The mediating roles of event involvement and experience, and the moderating role of spectator type. J. Travel Tour. Mark. 2016, 33, 63–84.
- [73] Yang, G.; Kang, J.H. (2001). The effect of sports event participating determinants on satisfaction and behavior intention. J. Sport Leisure Stud. 2001, 43, 473–483.