

Analysis of obstacles to the economic development of sports tourism in Iran

Abstract

Purpose: The present research aimed to analyze of obstacles to the economic development of sports tourism in Iran.

Methods: The qualitative methodology based on grounded theory was used in this study. The participants included experts in sports management majors as well as tourism experts. Theoretical sampling was performed, and 17 people were selected until theoretical saturation. The interview measurement tool was semi-structured, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation. A peer review was carried out for the validation process. Data reliability was verified by monitoring the decision path of researchers and giving all raw and analyzed data, codes, categories, study process, primary objective, and questions to the academics to be investigated precisely. Qualitative data were analyzed in open, axial, and selective coding stages.

Results: Based on the results of the three-stage coding of the model of barriers to economic development of Iranian sports tourism, categories were identified in the form of 26 categories and 182 conceptual codes and were placed in the six dimensions of the paradigm model as follows: causal conditions (7 categories), pivotal phenomenon (4 categories), contextual factors (4 categories), intervening factors (5 categories), and consequences (6 categories).

Conclusion: The findings inevitably insisted on appointing a trustee in this area and synergistic interactions among different units of the tourism industry and sports tourism.

Keywords: obstacles, economic development, sports tourism, grounded theory

Introduction

A decrease in traditional economic activities, such as agriculture, mining, etc., over the past three decades on the one hand and the limited activities of entrepreneurs on the other, have highlighted the importance of exploring and adopting modern approaches to enhance economic bases and diversify productive activities [Eusebio et al., 2018]. One of the solutions to this issue is tourism, which has a high capacity for attracting both domestic and foreign capital. Tourism is a new approach that can play a key role in empowering local communities, developing human resources, diversifying the economy, promoting economic growth, providing occupational opportunities, and enhancing living standards through social services [Seir et al., 2018]. Indeed, tourism is a global phenomenon that exhibits a combination of economic, social, and cultural affairs [Ali Akbari et al., 2018].

To enhance and develop the tourism industry, one effective strategy is to identify its various sectors and prioritize the most critical ones. One significant sector with the potential to create cross-sectoral opportunities within tourism is sports, commonly known as sports tourism. [Moharram Zadeh and Qiami-Rad, ۲۰۰۸].

Sports tourism is one of the attractive areas of the tourism industry in Iran that can be well developed due to Iran's climate, culture, etc., which can be recognized as a huge income-generating resource. Sports tourism, is one of the most public forms of tourism that can be perceived as an opportunity to help economic growth. Therefore, today, sports tourism is considered one of the most profitable, healthy, and environmentally friendly industries for each country's economy and has been recognized as a tool for sustainable economic growth [Moharamzadeh and Iman Zadeh, 2019 & Pashayi et al., 2019]. Sing and Dash (2016) also emphasized the significant potential of sports tourism to generate income. Further, statistics and growth trends presented by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) show the critical impacts of this industry on the world economy over time, suggesting its essential role in the economy of different

countries [Heetae, 2019]. New tourism theories show that sport-based tourist attractions provide higher economic, social, and political benefits compared to cultural attractions [Parvini et al., 2017]. Raso & Cherubini. (2023) analyzed 64 studies on the economic impact of sports tourism in a systematic review. The review shows how both large and small sporting events can drive regional development by attracting tourists, creating jobs, and boosting local businesses. However, the review emphasizes that strategic planning and management are essential to maximize benefits and minimize negative impacts.

In this regard Nikana and Tichava (2018) conducted a study to investigate sports tourism as a local economic development enhancer for emerging destinations. The data indicate that sports tourism significantly helps develop the local economy and plays an essential role in regional enhancement. Five factors were identified via the factor analysis, including economic impacts, effects of local economic development, socio-environmental effects, trust and participation of government and society, and regional development impacts.

In fact, despite its tourist attractions (historical, religious, and natural), the Islamic Republic of Iran hasn't developed effective policies to receive its share of the tourism market, resulting in the continuation of socio-economic obstacles that could be resolved by tourism development. On the other hand, based on the UNESCO criteria, Iran is among the top ten countries globally regarding tourist attractions. Also, based on the fourth development program in Iran, it has been predicted that Iran will be the host of 20 million tourists annually by the end of 2024 [Farahani et al., 2017]. Due to political sanctions against Iran, inflation, unfavorable economic conditions, and other factors that have led to a decrease in investment in the field of sports tourism, such statistics were not achieved by the end of 2024. However, despite all the conditions, perhaps paying attention to the sports industry, sports events, and attractions could have accounted for an important part of the tourism attraction statistics. Of course, it must be said that over the past decades, the development of sports

tourism in Iran, due to strategic political and economic conditions, has not achieved any particular success despite occasional efforts in this area. For example, Eslami (۲۰۱۳) studied the current status of sports tourism in Iran and stated that sports tourism development is far below the desired level. Non-development is rooted in political and social contexts dominating the macro-management of a country, rather than being dependent on a specific party, group, and individual [Heidari and Razzaghi, 2019]. In this regard, in another study, Pashayi et al. (2020) verified the mediating role of organizational factors in the effect of social, economic, and environmental factors on sports tourism development. Amini et al. (1398) identified the driving and inhibitory factors in the sports tourism development in the government's functional area. They investigated three categories, including tourism dimensions, sports tourism, and barriers to sports tourists' entry to Iran. In the case of sports tourism barriers, the elements were categorized into four parts, namely management, infrastructure, culture-politics, and communication-advertisement.

Iran's untapped potential in sports tourism is somewhat paradoxical – rich in natural and cultural assets, yet constrained by a set of challenges. Zolghadr et al. (2022) have cited the following reasons: structural and managerial challenges (fragmented governance, lack of coordination between tourism and sports authorities, weak strategic planning, lack of a unified national vision for sports tourism, limited private sector participation due to high government ownership and control), economic and investment issues (high costs and low incentives for investors in sports tourism).

Ali Doost et al. (2023) also examined the barriers to the development of sports tourism in Iran and stated barriers such as political and legal barriers, visa and travel restrictions, mandatory hijab laws and cultural restrictions, marketing and advertising gaps, and infrastructure and service deficiencies.

Political and legal barriers, such as international sanctions, have limited foreign investment and tourist arrivals. Visa and travel restrictions, coupled with negative images from global media, deter many potential visitors. Mandatory hijab laws and cultural restrictions affect the attractiveness of some international tourists. Marketing and advertising gaps, such as inadequate global marketing and branding of Iran's sports tourism offerings, lack of digital presence and influencer participation in international tourism markets, in addition to infrastructure and service deficiencies such as poor international transport connections and limited domestic connectivity, are raised as obstacles to the principled introduction and promotion of sports tourism in Iran.

In addition to the barriers mentioned in the two previous studies, Keshtidar et al. (2021) have pointed out insufficient facilities for hosting large-scale sporting events or accommodating active tourists and low quality of services in the hospitality and tourist support sectors.

. After examining the barriers to the economic development of sports tourism in Iran, Olfati (2012) stated that although Iran is gifted with tourism resources and services, there are many problems in the way of tourism development, such as political issues, poor advertising attempts and approaches, unsuitable marketing techniques, lack of recreational centers and appropriate malls, restricting laws and regulations on the entry of tourists, shortage of tourism variety, and huge investment needed to activate this industry that might seem non-profitable.

Despite Iran's rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, and growing interest in recreational activities, the sport tourism industry remains underdeveloped compared to its economic potential. While numerous opportunities exist for leveraging sports to attract domestic and international tourists, economic growth within this sector is hindered by several persistent barriers. These obstacles—ranging from inadequate infrastructure and limited governmental support to poor marketing strategies and regulatory constraints—have prevented sport tourism from

becoming a viable contributor to Iran's broader economic development. This article aims to analyze the multifaceted challenges slowing progress in Iran's sport tourism economy. By identifying key structural, financial, and policy-related impediments, the study seeks to provide strategic insights that could inform stakeholders, policymakers, and entrepreneurs on how to unlock the economic potential of this promising industry.

Materials and Methods

The present study is qualitative and conducted using grounded theory. The study used a qualitative design based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory framework to examine the underlying barriers to economic development in Iran's sport tourism industry. Grounded theory is particularly well-suited for extracting theory from data and exploring complex social processes in emerging research fields. Participants were selected using theoretical sampling to ensure rich and relevant insights. The sample consisted of 17 experts, including sport tourism researchers, government managers in the field of sport and tourism, and individuals active in the private sector in the field of sport tourism. Selection criteria focused on professional involvement and direct experience with economic and structural issues in the tourism and sports industry. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting 45–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in person or online, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Supplementary data were obtained through document analysis (e.g., tourism development reports, government policy summaries in the field of tourism, and related articles). Interview analysis was conducted following the coding procedures of Strauss and Corbin. The coding method in Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory consists of three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. These stages help in analyzing qualitative data and developing theory based on the data.

1. Open Coding:

In this stage, the data are carefully examined and concepts, events, and observations are extracted. These concepts are then labeled as primary codes. These codes can be words or short phrases that refer to specific topics or phenomena.

2. Axial Coding:

In axial coding, the concepts and codes extracted in the previous stage are linked together and arranged into larger categories. This stage involves identifying relationships between concepts and creating a coherent structure for the data.

3. Selective Coding:

In this stage, a main concept or category is selected as the main focus of the analysis. Then, other categories and concepts are organized around this main category, and a final theory on the topic of barriers to the economic development of Iranian sports tourism is formed.

To ensure validity, validity was increased through member reviews, participants reviewed and summarized the findings.

Reliability was maintained by tracing analytical decisions in audit trails and reflective notes. Transferability was supported by providing comprehensive descriptions of the Iranian sports tourism context. Ethical approval was obtained and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

In this study, the intra-subject agreement method was used to calculate the reliability of the interviews conducted. To calculate the reliability of the interviews using the intra-subject agreement method, two coders were asked to participate in the study as research assistants; They were given training and techniques for coding the interviews. The researcher then coded two interviews with these research associates. In each interview, codes that were similar to the individual and the researcher were marked as “agreement” and codes that were not similar were marked as “disagreement.” The percentage of within-subject agreement, which is used as an indicator of the reliability of the analysis, was calculated using the following formula. The results are presented in Table 1.

Reliability percentage= (number of agreements *2/ total number of codes) * 100

Table 1. Reliability results between two coders

Coder	Total number of codes	Number of agreed codes	Number of disagreed codes	Agreement rate (%)
Coder 3	15	6	3	80.00
Coder 10	12	5	3	83.33
Coder16	18	8	2	77.77
Total	45	17	8	80.00

The intra-subject agreement percentage of the interviews conducted in this study, using the aforementioned formula, was 80%. Given that this reliability rate is more than 60% (Stemler, 2001), the coding reliability is acceptable.

Results

Some demographic characteristics of the participants, such as gender, work experience, Scope of work, and education level, are presented in frequency and percentage form in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of subjects

Variable	Position	Frequency	Frequency percent
Sex	Female	6	35%
	Mal	11	65%
Career	15-20 years	8	47%
	More than 20 years	10	53%
Degree	Master of Science	7	41%
	PhD	11	59%
Scope of work	researchers	7	47%
	managers	6	35%
	Private sector	4	18%
Total	100	17	100%

After coding according to the Strauss and Corbin method, 182 open codes were obtained, which were placed in 25 categories. Then, the categories were divided into six large clusters: causal conditions, strategies, Central phenomenon, contextual factors (internal and within the organization's control), intervening conditions (environmental and outside the organization's control), and consequences. Finally, in the selective coding

stage, the relationships between the apparent categories and the paradigmatic model of the theory emerged from the data. It should be noted that after studying the interviews and reviewing them several times, codes were extracted from the interviews, and then, considering their concepts and categories, main themes were obtained. Table 3 is an example of the interviews conducted for coding.

Table 3. An example of how-to code based on one of the conducted interviews

Interviewee: Researcher Position: University faculty Experience: 12 years of research	Detected codes
Question 1: What do you see as the main economic obstacles to the growth of sports tourism in Iran? “One of the main challenges is the lack of sustained investment from both the public and private sectors. Sports tourism requires not only sports infrastructure, but also tourism services – transportation, hospitality, and marketing, which are currently underfunded or scattered across multiple ministries. In addition, sanctions and currency instability have discouraged international tour operators and investors from entering the Iranian market. This financial uncertainty has created a ripple effect and slowed down the overall pace of development.” Question 2: How do you assess the current infrastructure supporting sports tourism in Iran? “We have several well-known stadiums and natural sites that could serve as excellent venues for sporting events, such as Lake Urmia for water sports or the Alborz Mountains for mountaineering. However, accessibility remains a serious issue.” Many potential tourism areas lack proper roads, airports, or nearby accommodation. Infrastructure is usually concentrated in a few urban centres and does not extend to destinations that attract international sports enthusiasts.” Question 3: What practical steps can help overcome current barriers? “A unified national strategy that focuses specifically on sports tourism is essential. This includes encouraging regional governments to host events, offering tax breaks to businesses that invest in related infrastructure, and using Iran’s cultural heritage to create hybrid experiences, such as combining traditional Iranian festivals with sporting events.	Economic Barriers -Lack of Investment -Impact of Sanctions - Currency Instability - Limited Private Sector Participation Infrastructural Barriers - Poor Access - Concentration in Urban Centers -Inadequate Accommodation Strategic Solutions - International Cooperation - Policy Benchmarking

Table 4. Open codes (Central phenomenon)

Detentions	Categories	Secondary coding and conceptual codes
Central phenomenon	Managerial and executive barriers	shortage of a developmental perspective among managers, dominance of governmental sector on the tourism industry, government's support of the private sector's investment, poor performance of banks and financial institutions to fund sports tourism development, managers' emphasis on statistics instead of development, short-term view towards tourism and sports tourism, weak sports diplomacy in Iran, Inefficacy of managers (mismanagement), excessive changes in management, non-industrial approaches by managers, disregarding collective wisdom, low productivity of sports tourism resources in Iran
	Mismanagement	shortage of motivation and energy, being unaccountable and not concerned about development, inexperienced managers, lack of long-term planning, narrow-minded managers, excessive economic rents in state offices, irrelevant university majors of managers (compared to administrative positions), lack of willpower for any changes, selection of a poor team by poor managers, dogmatism by managers, non-serious management to tackle industrial problems, not delegating tasks to concerned units and subgroups, lack of teamwork in organizations, low management courage, low self-confidence among managers, managers' fear of being questioned, being immersed in bureaucracy, inability to use opportunities, shortage of managers' consultation with experts to solve sport-tourism problems.
	Structure of the government	Imbalance in major and governmental policies, sanction-induced problems, and inappropriate. The government's economic policies, economic rent in the office system, excessive politicization of some managers, inappropriate policies towards early-profitable enterprises and Inappropriate - implementation and inappropriate - supervision of plans, imbalance in the exchange rate, excessive bureaucracy in governmental organizations, government's non-support of the investment in sports tourism, absence of sport and sports tourism in government's priorities
	Barriers to the entry of sport tourists	Not having enough effective international seats to host sports events, cultural and religious beliefs of Iran, poor performance in providing services to sports tourists, vast anti-Iran propaganda, weak domestic

		and foreign advertisement, cultural inconsistency of tourists with the Iranian society, not feeling complete security, disbelief of managers in absorbing sports tourists.
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Table 4. Open codes (Causal conditions)

Detentions	Categories	Secondary coding and conceptual codes
Causal conditions	Shortage of an appropriate strategic, managerial, and planning approach	shortage of long-term plans in relevant administrative organizations, shortage of a plan for domestic and international economic collaborations, shortage of strategic plans for different parts of sports tourism, non-identified investment priorities in sports tourism, inappropriate policies in the private sector, arbitrary decisions and lack of foresight in state offices, disregarding sustainable development, excessive changes in the management, changing managers due to any shift in investors, the reluctance of managers to develop long-term plans due to excessive short-term variations in the management, appointing inexperienced individuals as main managers and changing them in the short term
	Lack of facilities and equipment	There is a limited number of modern shopping centers and recreational centers, a small number of sports museums, very few stadiums and standard sports facilities, a small number of restaurants, coffee shops, buffet, sports equipment shops, etc. in sports centers, and a lack of sports camps, few appropriate accommodations in sports centers (particularly nature sports)
	Market-related problems	Lack of knowledge about the sports tourism market, not introducing a diversity of market products in the sports tourism industry, high cost of tourists' accommodation in Iran relative to the quality of provided services, lack of sufficient knowledge about tourists' tastes to provide suitable services, improper marketing, non-compliance with international standards to provide services to tourists, shortage of liquidity and working capital, non-familiarity of business owners to funding methods and their emphasis on banking facilities

	Problems of the banking system	Problems with the banking system, government's economic problems, granting facilities to individuals based on favoritism and regulations, lack of committed banking experts to assess plans accurately, security problems by banks, tough conditions for security, dishonored cheques, outstanding debts, etc., granting more facilities to the unproductive sector of the economy, too high bank interest rates, absence of precise and transparent indices of receiving bank facilities, inappropriately dealing with industry investors
	Impossibility to conduct a feasibility study on projects before implementation	Not performing a detailed feasibility study before investment, issuing infrastructure construction permits merely on an applicant's request, not studying the target market, absence of expert consultants in banks to evaluate projects, scattered and unrelated investments, abandoning many tourism and sports tourism projects halfway, blind imitation to select the type of investment in the industry, not having a business plan in sports tourism businesses, using unreal data and many copied business plans.
	Hardware barriers	limited sports tourism infrastructure, lack of sports camps, unfavorable environmental investment, barriers to the hospitality industry, high cost of updating sports equipment and facilities due to rapid technological advancement, uncertain financial resources in the process of implementation and development of all types of attractive sports, a limited number of specialized human resources in the process of implementation and development of all types of highly attractive sports, not identifying the diversity of sports tourism in Iran, a major weakness in the domestic and international transportation system, poor road system and connecting routes
	Software barriers	Limited number of tourists entering Iran, a strict business environment in the tourism industry, low purchasing power of tourists entering Iran, poor domestic and international marketing in the field of sports tourism, inappropriate marketing to absorb tourists of high purchasing power, low-quality services provided by domestic tour leaders, poor attention of agencies and tour leaders towards sport tourists, a small number of sports events, seasonal nature of sports tourism activities, inappropriate utilization of free-trade zones, dramatically poor performance to provide services to sport tourists

Table 4. Open codes (Strategies)

Detentions	Categories	Secondary coding and conceptual codes
Strategies	Organizational	-Developing investment in the private sector -Interaction of various government departments and organizations for the development of sports tourism -Interaction between the public and private sectors to plan sports tourism development
	Management	-Developing IT systems in the field of sports tourism -Appointment of a single trustee for sports tourism - Proper advertising and marketing in sport tourism -Appointing a unit trustee for sports tourism -Using successful management models for sports tourism development in leading countries -Involving all government managers at different levels of management in policy-making for the economic development of sports tourism -Stable structuring of sports tourism organizations in the organizational chart of the Tourism Department -Change, orientation, and trans-organizational and international interaction and knowledge enhancement of sports tourism sector managers
	Supportive and Legal	-Developing protective laws and regulations, developing financial throat guidelines, and facilitating, -Establishment of laws and regulations for granting loans and facilities to the productive sectors of sports tourism -Identifying and assessing the needs of services and products in the sports tourism sector and prioritizing solutions to challenges based on resource capacity -Increasing the quality and quantity of sports tourism services by facilitating and encouraging the entry of academic experts using relevant processes in the community.
	Structural	-Production, publishing, and publishing books, magazines, and materials related to sports tourism -Developing IT systems in the field of sports tourism -Training specialized human resources -Creating a sports tourism database -Developing media activities for sports tourism -Education of specialized human resources -Compilation of Iran's Sports Tourism Atlas
	Professional	-Reviving native and traditional sports across the country -Proper advertising and marketing -Hosting major sporting events is a way to develop the economic benefits of sports tourism. -Identifying and optimally utilizing natural infrastructure to host adventure events

Table 4. Open codes (intervening conditions)

Detentions	Categories	Secondary coding and conceptual codes
Intervening conditions	Society's mindset	The poor economic mindset among people, the culture of cooperation and collaboration, and not having the spirit of claiming rights, poor organizational culture
	Contradictions between the views of various state organizations	Too much bureaucracy in the way of investors, contradiction among the objectives of different organizations, the inability of state authorities to make the managers of different units reach a consensus, a lack of total agreement between the views of managers
	Environmental barriers	Inactivity of international companies, economic sanctions on Iran by the United Nations Security Council, economic sanctions on Iran by the European Union, economic sanctions on Iran by the United States, lack of extensive diplomatic relations with countries, Iran's absence in global competition, economic inequalities, the Covid-19 outbreak, additional Covid-19 pressure on Iran's economy, inactivity and shortage of dynamism in Iran's per capita production, instability of Iran's position in the modern global geopolitical system, political issues and propaganda against Iran, lack of international seats in international sports organizations, lack of foreign investment, military threats against Iran
	Legislation-related barriers	Restrictive laws and regulations, inappropriate economic policies towards tourism and sports tourism, weakness of banks and financial institutions to fund the development of sports tourism, numerous problems of privatization, centralism in the country's political system, improper production structure for economic growth, complex legal environment in the tourism industry and sports tourism, investors' encounter with too much bureaucracy disappointing them
	Lawlessness and a personalized way of dealing with the law	Violating the tax exemption law by the taxation office, incorrect interpretations of the law, inaccurate implementation of the law, and removal of barriers to production and business, personalized way of applying laws in different offices, lobbying in the decision-making process, prejudice-based decision making, and not reporting law violations by offices

Table 4. Open codes (Contextual factors)

Detentions	Categories	Secondary coding and conceptual codes
Contextual factors	Problems related to the current laws	Cumbersome rules, burdensome licensing, complex bureaucracy, difficulty in granting facilities, non-transparent and incomprehensive laws, instability of laws and regulations, abundant problems in the private sector with the taxation and finance office and insurance office, the centrality of laws instead of being regional, uncertain programs and laws, lawlessness, and a personalized way of dealing with law
	Shortage of skilled workforce	A limited number of challengers in the management body, immigration of experts and adroit workforce, insufficient number of committed experts, Filling of some managerial positions by favoritism, Non-allocation of budget for managers' ongoing training, lack of expert technicians in the body of sports tourism industry, appointing inexperienced individuals, absence of an experienced group of consultants, poor qualification and expertise of business owners in the sports tourism industry, low managerial, technical, and legal knowledge of business owners in the sports tourism industry, not defining a perspective for businesses in the sports tourism industry due to the shortage of experts and qualified managers in the management body
	Legislation-related barriers	Restrictive laws and regulations, inappropriate economic policies towards tourism and sports tourism, weakness of banks and financial institutions to fund the development of sports tourism, numerous problems of privatization, centralism in the country's political system, improper production structure for economic growth, complex legal environment in the tourism industry and sports tourism, investors' encounter with too much bureaucracy disappointing them
	Lawlessness and a personalized way of dealing with the law	Violating the tax exemption law by the taxation office, incorrect interpretations of the law, inaccurate implementation of the law, and removal of barriers to production and business, personalized way of applying laws in different offices, lobbying in the decision-making process, prejudice-based decision making, and not reporting law violations by offices

Table 4. Consequences

Detentions	Categories	Consequences
Consequences	Developmental consequences	Comprehensive development of sports tourism Strategic planning to develop sports tourism in the country Establishment and development of specialized camps for various sports Employing specialized human resources in the field of sports tourism Development of virtual sports tourism Developing a great connection between the university and industry in the field of tourism Development of infrastructure and superstructures required for the development of sports tourism Development planning based on land use planning in the field of sports tourism
	Organizational consequences	Entry of the private sector into the sports tourism industry Increasing interaction and coordination between government organizations involved in the field of sports tourism. Increasing interaction between the government and private sectors to implement strategic and executive plans.
	Management consequences	Creating a suitable structure in tourism and sports tourism for production and development Empowering managers in the field of sports tourism Creating an independent structure for sports tourism in government institutions
	Social consequences	Creating content about sports tourism and increasing public awareness Increasing awareness of communities hosting sporting events in the field of sports and tourism Creating a positive attitude towards sports in communities hosting sporting events Improving the social well-being of communities hosting sporting events
	Cultural consequences	Introducing natural, cultural, and historical attractions Promoting and strengthening local and national culture Introducing attractive local and traditional, regional, and national games Recording historical and natural monuments of Iran in the field of sports tourism
	Economic consequences	Increasing the economic growth of the country Reducing the outflow of domestic tourists Increasing the number of domestic sports tourists Increasing investment and financing instruments for sports tourism, and increasing the number of sports tourists Reduction of currency outflow Increasing foreign exchange Job creation and reduction of the unemployment rate

As shown in Table 4, after reviewing and reviewing the interviews several times, the categories were identified in the form of 26 categories and 182 conceptual codes. And they were placed in the six dimensions of the paradigm model as follows: causal conditions (7 categories), central phenomenon (4 categories), background factors (4 categories), intervening factors (5 categories), and consequences (6 categories).(Figure 1)

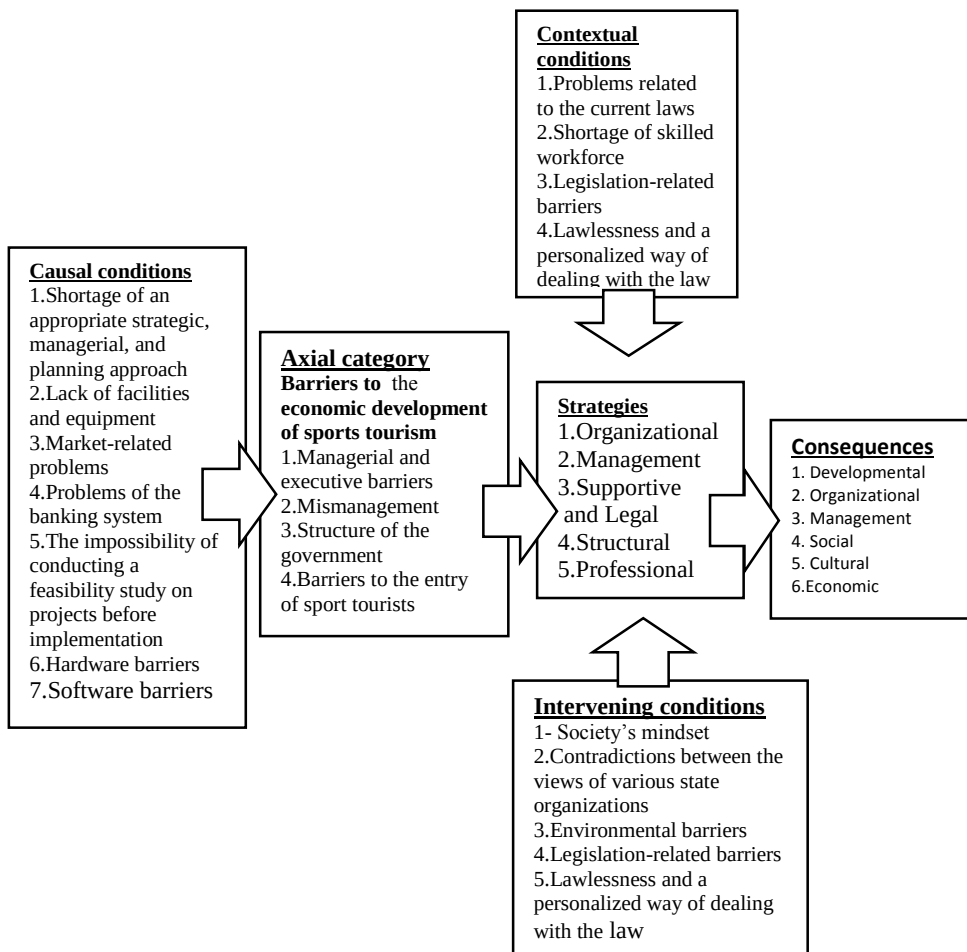


Figure 1. The paradigmatic model obtained from the present research

Six environmental conditions, as well as contextual characteristics, affect the strategies of the sports tourism industry. Minor and major strategies have been recognized as approaches to resolving the economic development barriers to sports tourism. No organization can reach its set goals without proper strategies. The effects of causal factors on the main phenomenon led to the adoption of the strategies proposed in the model. Furthermore, strategies are affected by environmental conditions and contextual characteristics, yielding organizational and meta-organizational consequences.

Discussion

Development refers to the enhancement of a community's economic, political, cultural, and social capabilities and capacities. The development of a country depends on factors such as economic growth, health indices, life expectancy, and citizens' satisfaction. Development is a quantitative and almost economic concept on the one hand and a qualitative, social, and prevailing concept on the other hand. Suppose tourism, as a clean industry including invisible exports, is nicely managed. In that case, it can be the most productive industry with the highest foreign exchange that can play a crucial role in the enhancement of people's lives, economic growth, and development of societies [Bayat, 2013]. This research proposed a paradigmatic model for the barriers to the economic development of sports tourism in Iran.

Managerial and executive barriers, Mismanagement, Structure of the government, and Barriers to the entry of sport tourists were identified as the main and pivotal factors in the analysis of the barriers to the economic development of sports tourism in Iran.

The aspects of Shortage of an appropriate strategic, managerial, and planning approach, Lack of facilities and equipment, Market-related problems, Problems of the banking system, the impossibility of conducting a feasibility study on projects before implementation, Hardware barriers

and Software barriers, play a role as causal factors in analyzing the barriers to the economic development of sports tourism in Iran.

Organizational, Management, Supportive and Legal, Structural, and Professional strategies are actions to realize the model of obstacles to the economic development of Iranian sports tourism.

The internal environment, as background conditions in the research model, includes: Problems related to the current laws, Shortage of skilled workforce, Legislation-related barriers, Lawlessness, and a personalized way of dealing with the law. They provide a specific context for the strategies presented.

The external environment, as an intervening condition in the research model, included Society's mindset, Contradictions between the views of various state organizations, Environmental barriers, Legislation-related barriers, Lawlessness, and a personalized way of dealing with the law. In order to formulate the presented strategies, it was considered.

The strategies presented in the research model will have the following consequences: Developmental, Organizational, Management, Social, Cultural, and Economic consequences.

In the research of Amini et al. (2020), Farazian et al. (2019), Khanzadeh (2014), Zolghadr et al. (2022), Yorg et al. (2017), Nikana and Tichava (2018), Pashaei et al. (2020), Raso et al. (2023), Ali Doost et al. (2021), and Kashmidar et al. (2021), which were conducted in different ways and in different societies, all have identified management problems and barriers to investment and income generation as the main obstacles to the economic development of tourism and sports tourism.

It is worth noting that barriers to tourism development have not changed over the past 10 years in Iran, but rather, expanded sanctions, political pressures against Iran, and increasing domestic and foreign problems have highly hampered the development of tourism and sports tourism on a larger scale in different managerial layers. This has caused the development of

tourism (as an important economic stimulus for developing countries such as Iran) and sports tourism (as a type of tourism proportional and compatible with the culture and social conditions of Iran) to be removed from the development program priorities and receive minimal attention. Even the development of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization into a separate Ministry has not helped resolve the barriers to tourism development in Iran.

These barriers to the development of tourism and sports tourism in Iran have weakened this industry, whereas developed countries are seeking extensive and full growth of tourism and sports tourism to make a further profit and make the most of economic opportunities. Marmo et al. (2015) stated that due to the historical over-reliance of emerging economies on handicraft industries, such as mining and agriculture, the dynamic expansion of globalization has forced economies to move towards various activities, e.g., the development of service sectors such as sports tourism. In addition to numerous commercial and economic consequences associated with sports tourism and event hosting, other long-lasting benefits can be used for the long-term sustainable development of local economic communities. For instance, sports tourism often leads to the rapid development of public infrastructures and the creation of recreational and sports facilities, which can absorb investment in the accommodation and hospitality industries in local areas (Ann George et al., 2017). Bohaula (2017) also postulated that in many economies, sports tourism is recognized to have a key role in general growth, particularly in economic and social development opportunities such as employment and job creation for locals. However, the effectiveness of sports tourism as a tool for economic and social enhancement in developing nations depends on adequate facility capacity, a lack of appropriate infrastructure for disabled accessibility, and knowledgeable and experienced managers.

Furthermore, sports mega events such as the Olympic games and their mega infrastructure projects and the number of people involved in decision-making to host such events have shown a divergence of opinion

between the local communities and the governments. There is no doubt that sports can bring together people worldwide; yet, local small events can introduce a huge potential for low infrastructure and required equipment and opportunities for more traditional sports activities. Communities, in under-developed and developing countries, need to recognize and make use of the potential of local sports as a resource and competitive advantage in their destination development, their local identity, and enhancement of their communities' image (Herbold, Thees & Phillip, 2020).

Conclusion

Iran's tourism development status is unfavorable due to a lack of profitability, insufficient government support, personalized and restrictive measures by some responsible and irresponsible authorities, and a shortage of necessary facilities for the private sectors (such as long-term loans with low interest rates) (Amin Khaki, ۲۰۱۰).

Allocating suitable lands at government prices, removal of unnecessary and cumbersome administrative formalities for the development of sports facilities, hotels, and welfare centers, and ensuring the security of investment in the tourism industry by the government to motivate the private sector will develop sports tourism infrastructure in Iran. If the strategies presented in the model are implemented, it is expected that Iran will take advantage of the benefits of sports tourism, such as creating an appropriate framework for production and development in tourism and sports tourism, comprehensive development of sports tourism, strategic planning to develop sports tourism in the country, effective entry of the private sector into the sports tourism industry, spatial planning in the field of sports tourism, establishment and development of specialized camps for various sports, increasing national and local income generation, employing specialized human resources in the field of sports tourism, increasing the number of domestic sports tourists, increasing investment and financing instruments for sports tourism, development of executive protocols for

travel and sports tourism. The development of virtual sports tourism is yet another way to fight against political propaganda against Iran, reduce their native effects on Iran's reputation in the world, and compensate for the lack of pro-regime media for international advertising to introduce the positive image of Iran. Nonetheless, according to the research findings and the barriers to Iran's macro-management, this important objective can be achieved provided that a trustee is selected for the sports tourism development unit and strategic and specialized management and planning are implemented.

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