



Identification and Prioritization of Factors Influencing the Development of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Coastal Sports Tourism

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Abstract

The present article aimed at identifying and prioritizing the factors influencing the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in coastal sports tourism on Kish Island. This applied research adopted a descriptive–analytical approach to data collection. The statistical population comprised fifteen experts in sports management, executive managers, and entrepreneurs active in coastal sports tourism, selected through purposive sampling. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts, and a thematic analysis approach based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework was employed to identify the key factors affecting SME development. In the second phase, the identified factors were ranked and prioritized using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) and Saaty’s (1980)

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pairwise comparison matrix. The findings revealed five main factors and seventeen subcategories. The economic and financial dimension ranked first, followed by multi-level governance and cross-sectoral synergy, marketing and value chain, risk, safety and resilience, and finally, environmental aspects. As the first specialized study focusing on the development of SMEs in coastal sports tourism, this research proposes a strategic framework for creating a dynamic environment that fosters employment generation and entrepreneurial growth. Senior managers and policymakers on Kish Island can enhance the development and sustainability of such enterprises by emphasizing foreign investment attraction, legal transparency, financial incentives, cross-sectoral collaboration, risk management, resilience, and environmental considerations.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

In recent decades, tourism has been recognized as a key driver of economic growth and sustainable development globally, contributing significantly to employment generation, income creation, and the enhancement of local communities' quality of life (Liu et al., 2025). Sports tourism, particularly due to the synergy between athletic experiences and tourism opportunities, has experienced rapid and impactful growth. Beyond attracting tourists and enhancing destination image, it serves as a critical catalyst for sustainable economic development and the creation of innovative businesses (Intiyar et al., 2023; Guo, 2024; Gharibpour et al., 2024). A prominent segment within this field is coastal sports tourism, which integrates sporting and recreational activities in coastal environments. By leveraging natural resources, accommodation and recreational services, sports education and equipment, and event organization, it provides a valuable platform for the development of local enterprises (Orams, 1999). Coastal areas, as some of the most attractive natural destinations, draw millions of tourists annually and play a fundamental role in the economic prosperity of coastal communities and small islands (Houston, 2018; Northrop et al., 2020). Activities such as surfing, diving, boating, and beach volleyball not only stimulate demand for tourism services but also contribute to the diversification of local businesses and the generation of sustainable income (Guo & Chen, 2024; Pereira et al., 2022). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), due to their high flexibility, play a crucial role in enhancing destination competitiveness, alleviating poverty, and creating sustainable employment (Andris & Kasgen, 2022; Page et al., 2017). Despite the importance of this sector, research gaps remain in identifying and prioritizing the factors influencing the development of such enterprises, particularly in coastal regions (Gholami et al., 2023). Rapid changes in the tourism industry, increased international competition, and economic instabilities resulting from crises such as the pandemic have intensified the need to reconsider strategies and business models (Lopez Diaz et al., 2022; Hong, 2014; Nafayap et al., 2024). Kish Island, with its strategic geographical location, coral beaches, and diverse sporting and recreational facilities, offers

unique opportunities for the development of coastal sports tourism and the establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Methods and Material

This study employed an integrative approach, combining thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006) with the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP). In the first phase, 15 purposively selected experts—including sports management and tourism specialists, executive managers of relevant organizations, and entrepreneurs active in coastal sports tourism—participated in semi-structured interviews conducted between April and June 2025. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and all data were fully transcribed and prepared for analysis. Sampling was purposive, with participants selected based on relevant academic qualifications, a minimum of six years of professional experience, and direct involvement in coastal sports tourism, to ensure the credibility and validity of the data. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework (2006): familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme search, review, definition and naming of themes, and final analysis and interpretation. This process resulted in the identification and classification of five main categories and 17 subcategories as the key factors influencing the development of SMEs in coastal sports tourism. In the second phase, the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) was employed to evaluate the criteria and determine their relative importance. A three-level hierarchical model, comprising goals, criteria, and subcriteria, was developed. Data were collected through pairwise comparison matrices (Saaty, 1980) using a structured questionnaire, which was administered in July 2025 to 13 of the 15 experts from the first phase. The analysis was conducted using Expert Choice 11 software, yielding the weighting and ranking of the identified factors. To assess the reliability of the results, consistency indices (CI), consistency ratios (CR), and random consistency indices (RCL) were utilized.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in coastal sports tourism is based on five main factors and 17 associated components. The primary factors include economic and financial aspects, multi-level governance and cross-sectoral synergy, marketing and value chain, risk, safety and resilience, and environmental considerations. Correspondingly, results from the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) analysis revealed that economic and financial factors were identified as the highest priority, exerting a significant influence on the development of SMEs in coastal sports tourism. Specifically, attracting foreign and inter-regional investment in the sports tourism sector, with an overall weight of 20.1%, ranked first. This was followed by the formulation of supportive credit policies and facilities for local entrepreneurs, with a total weight of 18%, in second place, and the provision of financial and credit incentives for small sports enterprises, with a weight of 16.7%, in third place. Accordingly, attracting foreign investment, developing supportive policies, and providing

financial incentives can accelerate the sustainable growth of these enterprises (Francis et al., 2017; Guaye et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2022). Subsequently, dimensions related to multi-level governance, particularly the enhancement of collaboration among government agencies, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations, ranked fourth with an overall weight of 10.4%. This finding highlights the importance of inter-institutional cooperation as a key prerequisite for the development of SMEs in coastal sports tourism (Pereira et al., 2022). Another important component of this integrated framework is the alignment of regional planning with national tourism development policies, which ranked sixth with a total weight of 0.044. The findings further emphasized that marketing and the value chain—especially culture-based branding with an overall weight of 0.072—occupied the fifth position among factors influencing the development of SMEs in coastal sports tourism. This cultural approach, by highlighting the unique characteristics of each region, significantly enhances the ability to attract and engage tourists (Noti et al., 2024). In addition, the use of digital platforms for targeted marketing and networking among complementary businesses within the sports tourism value chain, with weights of 0.039 and 0.023 respectively, represents other influential factors in this domain. Furthermore, risk, safety, and resilience were identified as the fourth critical factor in strengthening the performance and sustainability of SMEs. Within this framework, the development of safe infrastructure and green technology, with a total weight of 0.043, ranked seventh. Finally, the findings of the present study indicated that environmental aspects constitute the fifth key factor in the development of SMEs in coastal sports tourism. Within this framework, several essential subcomponents were identified, including beach carrying capacity management (overall weight = 0.022), monitoring the ecological impacts of sports tourism in sensitive coastal areas (0.008), and the design and implementation of environmental guidelines for sports operators (0.005). Overall, the results demonstrate that the combination of these five factors provides a strategic framework for the sustainable development of SMEs in coastal sports tourism, offering guidance to managers, policymakers, and entrepreneurs in leveraging economic opportunities while mitigating risks.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in coastal sports tourism on Kish Island requires a simultaneous focus on five key dimensions. First, the economic dimension serves as the primary driver of development, facilitating growth through attracting foreign investment, enhancing infrastructure, improving service quality, and leveraging innovative technologies within a transparent legal framework and through financial incentives. Second, multi-level governance and cross-sectoral synergy, by strengthening coordination among government agencies, the private sector, and local communities, integrating regional programs with national policies, and effectively utilizing tourism data, provide a platform for strategic and efficient decision-making. Third, marketing and

the value chain, through destination branding based on the cultural and environmental attributes of Kish, the use of digital marketing, and networking among SMEs, enhance competitiveness, improve the tourist experience, and expand market reach. Fourth, risk, safety, and resilience management, through investment in safe and low-carbon infrastructure, the establishment of standardized safety and health protocols, and the enhancement of preparedness against natural, technological, and social crises, ensures business continuity and reduces economic vulnerability. Fifth, environmental aspects, through the management of beach carrying capacity, controlling tourist density, and promoting sustainable practices, not only contribute to the protection of sensitive coastal environments but also reinforce the long-term competitive advantage of enterprises. Overall, adopting an integrated approach based on these five dimensions can ensure sustainable development, enhance resilience, and achieve a lasting competitive advantage for sports tourism enterprises, particularly SMEs, on Kish Island.

Keywords: analytic hierarchy process (AHP), coastal sports tourism, Kish Island, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), value chain