



Designing a Behavioral Model of Sports Tourists

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Abstract

The present study aims to design a behavioral model of sports tourists using a qualitative, interpretive-exploratory approach. The research population included experts in sports tourism, managers, specialists, travel agencies, the sports tourism committee of the Public Sports Federation, and academics with relevant expertise. A sample of 20 individuals was selected through purposeful sampling until theoretical saturation was reached. Data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with these experts. The data were coded and analyzed using the classic Grounded Theory approach by Glaser (1998) to develop the model. The coding sheets were analyzed for face and content validity and confirmed by four experts in sports management and the research team. Reliability was determined using Scott's Pi inter-coder agreement, which yielded a high score of 0.89. Based on the findings, the

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behavioral model of sports tourists in Iran was categorized into six theoretical dimensions: psychological needs-based activism, infrastructure and environmental impacts, governance structure and competitive advantage, media and information ecosystem, destination image and quality of experience, and the formation of future intentions and feedback. The findings suggest that this model can serve as a native and conceptual framework for planning and policy-making in Iran's sports tourism sector. It can help enhance revenue and increase the number of sports tourists, thereby contributing to the comprehensive development of this industry in the country.

Introduction

Tourism has various types, and one of its important and significant sectors, which serves as a motivating factor for tourists and has the potential to become a cross-sectoral element in the tourism industry, is sports, referred to as sports tourism (Arichi et al., 2025). Today, many countries and tourist regions face intense competition to attract tourists, and for this reason, the attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of tourists, as a core component of the tourism industry, have gained attention for their role in repeat visits and participation, as well as achieving sustainable success for a destination (Jeong, 2023). It is clear that if managers aim to optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing activities, they need to understand how consumers make decisions to purchase or use tourism products. Therefore, understanding consumer behavior is essential for success in sports tourism marketing (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). For this reason, numerous studies have been conducted in recent years to understand the behavioral patterns of sports tourists. These behavioral patterns can assist decision-makers and market players in predicting and controlling consumer behavior. Additionally, the scientific analysis of consumer behavior aids in effective tourism planning and marketing (Ebrahimizadeh and Yari, 2011). Consumer behavior in tourism varies from country to country, and it is necessary to recognize it considering the many determining factors that influence tourism supply and demand (Miragaya and Ferreira, 2016). Meanwhile, Iran, despite having diverse natural, cultural potentials and various tourist attractions, has not been able to take effective steps towards attracting domestic and foreign tourists as expected, and it seems that one of the significant reasons for this is the lack of research and scientific studies in this area. Therefore, the present study aims to design a comprehensive model of the behavioral patterns of sports tourists. Accordingly, the main research question is: What is the behavioral model of sports tourists? What are the influencing factors, stimuli, attitudes, expectations, and behavioral performances of sports tourists?

Methods

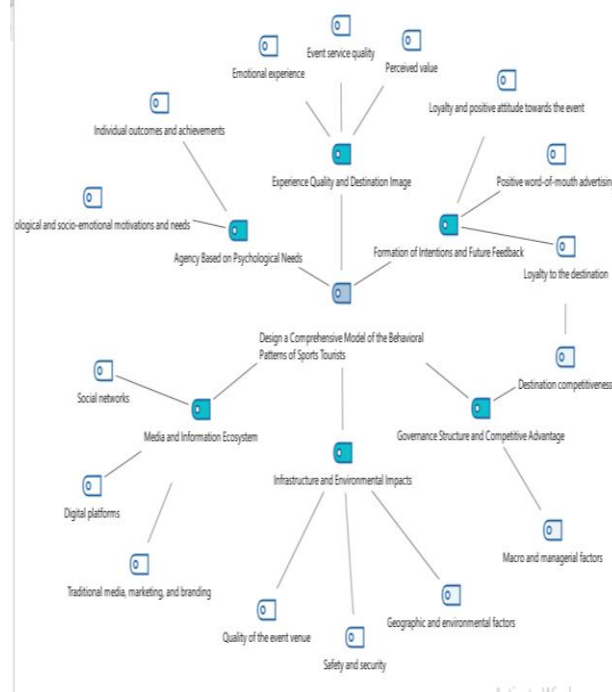
This research is philosophical and interpretive in nature and exploratory in its essence, utilizing qualitative research methods and grounded theory with a classical or Glaserian approach (1998) to theorize about the phenomenon under study. Given the research objective, the statistical population of the study includes all experts in sports tourism, university faculty members (with

publications, articles, and specialized fields of study in tourism in sports), executive managers in the tourism sector, experts in tourism and cultural heritage, active tourism institutions and agencies, and members of the sports tourism committee of the General Sports Federation. Ultimately, 20 of them were selected as the research sample through purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was reached. According to the views of grounded theory proponents, Glaser and Strauss (1998), theoretical sampling continued until the categories reached theoretical sufficiency, where the newly collected data did not differ from the previously collected data and were similar (Glaser and Strauss, 1998). The data collection method in this research involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with research experts, which were coded and analyzed based on grounded theory and the classical approach, ultimately leading to the design of a contextual model based on Glaser's classical approach (1998). Subsequently, based on the grounded theory method, the findings from the interviews were analyzed and finalized according to open, selective, and theoretical coding. Additionally, all coding sheets in the interview section were analyzed using formal and content validity methods. For this purpose, the coding sheets were approved by four experts in sports management as well as the research team. In this research, the criterion for confirmability was achieved through precision in sample selection and the integration of data collection methods, namely semi-structured interviews and note-taking. In the reliability section, the method of coder agreement with a Kappa of 0.89, which has high reliability, was used (Krippendorff, 2004). It is worth mentioning that the reliability of the data was considered through systematic grounded theory methods in the collection, recording, analysis, and interpretation of data (Glaser and Strauss, 1998).

Results

The results indicated that the comprehensive model of the behavioral patterns of sports tourists in Iran was categorized into six theoretical categories and 16 selected action categories based on psychological needs (motivations and psychological-social needs, as well as individual outcomes and achievements), infrastructure and environmental impacts (geographical and environmental factors, safety and security, and the quality of the event venue), governance structure and competitive advantage (macro and managerial factors and destination competitiveness), media and information ecosystem (traditional media, marketing and branding, digital platforms, and social networks), quality of experience and destination image (event service quality, perceived value, and emotional experience), and the formation of intentions and future feedback (loyalty and positive attitudes towards the event, loyalty to the destination, and positive word-of-mouth advertising); and were categorized into 169 open codes. Figure 1 presents the comprehensive model of the behavioral patterns of sports tourists.

Figure 1. Comprehensive model of sports tourist behavior patterns



Conclusion

The present research was conducted with the aim of designing a comprehensive model for the development of sports tourism. The findings indicated that the success of a sports tourism destination relies on the complex and coordinated interaction of six key areas of action based on psychological needs, which serve as a factor for fulfilling the higher needs of sports tourists; infrastructure and environmental impacts, which are essential physical and perceptual foundations; governance structure and competitive advantage, which act as strategic pillars and coordinators; media and information ecosystem, which serves as the communication artery and community builder; quality of experience and destination image, which are the beating heart and creators of emotional value; and finally, the formation of intentions and future feedback, which represent the ultimate outcome and reflection of the integrated performance of the destination. This model reveals that the modern sports tourist perceives the destination as an "integrated ecosystem," where the sporting event is merely one component of a broader experience. Today, emotional, environmental, technological, and social factors have gained equal importance to traditional factors (such as safety and service quality). This transformation is a result of the emergence of new paradigms such as "responsible tourism," "experience economy," and "digital culture," which have changed the criteria for tourist selection and satisfaction. Accordingly, and based on the designed model, the following practical recommendations

are offered for stakeholders. First, the development of a national strategy document for sports tourism through the establishment of an inter-organizational working group consisting of all stakeholders and defining national standards for "sports tourism destinations" in areas such as infrastructure, services, and environmental sustainability will help create a coordinated and integrated framework. Next, the establishment of a unified digital platform that facilitates ticket booking, accommodation, and transportation while providing information, along with the integration of tourism data and the use of artificial intelligence to analyze tourist behavior, will strengthen the informational artery of the destination. Simultaneously, the enhancement of smart and sustainable infrastructure, through investment in integrated transportation (such as free buses on event days) and the implementation of "green infrastructure" projects (such as advanced waste management systems in stadiums and the use of renewable energy), provides the necessary physical environment for a comfortable and responsible experience. On the other hand, investing in the training of human resources and the local community, by designing specialized training courses for guides, security personnel, and service providers focused on "hospitality" and "sustainability," as well as involving the local community in hosting and benefiting from economic gains, will enhance the quality of interactions and the cultural richness of the tourist experience. To transform the event into a memorable experience, it is essential to design combined packages that integrate the sporting event with visits to cultural and natural attractions and to create "experience-oriented zones" around the stadiums (including food festivals, handicraft exhibitions, and interactive programs). In the field of communications, implementing a data-driven marketing strategy using sports figures to build the destination brand and developing digital campaigns centered on "storytelling" and "creating excitement" before the event will significantly help attract and engage the target audience. Finally, maintaining and managing a long-term relationship with tourists through the establishment of a loyalty system for returning visitors (offering discounts and benefits for repeat visits) and launching a monitoring and feedback system to identify and resolve issues during their stay will ensure their loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion. The coordinated implementation of these proposals will not only lead to sustainable attraction of sports tourists but will also transform the destination into a sustainable, memorable, and leading "global brand" in the sports tourism industry.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, Sport, Tourists, Tourism.