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DEVELOPING SPORTS TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN EMERGING COUNTRIES: THE CASE OF ZREBAR LAKE IN IRAN

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Abstract

Introduction. Sports tourism is considered an effective strategy for developing local economies, creating jobs, and developing local infrastructure. Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify key factors contributing to the development of sports tourism in emerging countries. To accomplish this goal, we studied Zrebar Lake in western Iran. ***Material and Methods.*** Administrative documents were reviewed and experts were interviewed to identify the critical factors affecting the development of sports tourism. Afterwards, interpretive structural modeling was used to determine the relationships between these factors. ***Results.*** TThe findings of our study indicate six factors, i.e. infrastructure, management, economic factors, competitive advantage, environmental and cultural factors. Using MICMAC analysis, we determined their role in developing sports tourism. ***Conclusions.*** The current efforts of tourism authorities to develop sports tourism in emerging destinations should be directed at the effective management of the factors identified by our study. This article is the first attempt to shed light on important factors that need to be considered when developing sports tourism in emerging countries.

Key words: sports tourism, sports tourism development, interpretive structural modeling, Zrebar Lake

Introduction

The tourism industry in the 21st century is known as the sunrise industry. Nowadays, tourism is considered as a strategic industry that has a lot of profit and can lead to poverty alleviation, wealth creation, prosperity and satisfaction of people [1]. Until the corona crisis, the share of the tourism industry in the GDP of the world economy was 10.5%, and one out of every four new jobs in the world was related to tourism. However, with the emergence of this global crisis in 2020, this share decreased to 3.5% and led to the loss of about 50 million jobs [2, 3]. Therefore, the high capacity of the tourism industry to generate income and employment has made it one of the main sectors of the global economy [4, 5].

Meanwhile, sports tourism is the most developed part of this industry, which constitutes a significant part of the entire tourism industry. Sports tourism cannot be easily defined, but it can be mentioned as a social, economic and cultural phenomenon that results from the unique interaction of activity, people, and place [2]. It is currently the fastest growing section of the travel business, producing billions of dollars each year. According to Research and Markets [6], the global sports tourism market size was valued at $323,420.0 million in 2020, and is projected to reach $1,803,704.0 million by 2030, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 16.1% from 2021 to 2030. As a result, sport-related tourism offers excellent opportunities for emerging tourism destinations to grow [7].

This is despite the fact that nature-based tourism constitutes a major percentage of these tourist activities. For many years, natural resources (climate, seashores, coastal stretches, special plants and animals, rivers, lakes, forests, mountains, caves, landscapes, hidden sights) and attractions of a region are the main grounds for the development and progress of activities. Therefore, sports tourism is one of the important industries that revitalize communities with a wide range of natural resources [8]. Unfortunately, this fact of uncontrolled growth in tourism destinations creates unpredictable risks for the economy, society and environment of these areas [9]. Therefore, paying attention to sustainable tourism can be an effective management tool to preserve natural resources in this region [10].

In this regard, many researchers have examined the positive and negative aspects of sports tourism. The positive impacts of sports tourism include increased job creation, improved quality of life, and the cultivation of sports culture [11], whereas the negative effects include disruption to public transportation, road closures [12], an increase in crime rates [13], and environmental degradation [14].

In addition, previous studies on sports tourism development have focused on the perception of residents [12, 15, 16, 17, 18]. Others examined the salient role of place image and knowledge about tourism for gaining support from local residents [19, 20] and local authorities for sports tourism development [15].

A noteworthy point in the abovementioned studies is the lack of studies in the formation trends in the development of sports tourism. Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify key factors contributing to the development of sports tourism in emerging countries. To accomplish this goal, we studied Zrebar Lake in western Iran. The present study answers two research questions based on the interpretive structural modeling (ISM) approach. Question 1: what are the formation levels of sports tourism development in Zrebar Lake in Kurdistan? We addressed this question using interpretive structural modeling. Question 2: what are the effective variables (independent and relational) and the affected variables (dependent and autonomous) in shaping the development of sports tourism in Zrebar Lake in Kurdistan? We addressed this question using the MICMAC diagram.

Applying the results of the present study can be crucial in both theoretical and practical parts. From the theoretical aspect, identifying effective variables (independent and linked) and

affected variables (autonomous and dependent) is helpful. Thus, since no specialized research has been done in sports tourism so far, this study can be the beginning of research in Iran, and it can also contribute to this field's literature and theoretical foundations. Moreover, in terms of the practical aspect, this study can be helpful for sports institutions, policymakers, and planners of sports tourism. It enables them to identify the key and effective variables in the formation process of sports tourism in this region of Iran so that they can take desirable and rapid measures to solve problems and develop the identified indicators.

At the end of this study, by identifying the key factors in the formation of sports tourism in Iran based on interpretive structural modeling, we intend to help the institutions in charge of sports. Using the results of this study, they can eliminate deprivation in this region in Iran, satisfy the natives, and gain the public trust for non-discriminatory and equal development of the highly potent areas in Iran.

Developing Sports Tourism

As two critical motivational factors in choosing a destination to spend vacations, tourism and sports are among the crucial aspects of contemporary society [21]. Therefore, sport, like other attracting factors, is one of the attractions of tourism, and the events that include sports are considered a type of attraction [22]. Economic factors related to sports events are one of the reasons that motivate the authorities of different cities to hold sports competitions.

Attracting sports tourists based on sporting events strengthens sustainable tourism and local development economically and socially because participants spend significant figures, part of which at least benefits local people. Moreover, the collaboration between different stakeholders can be crucial to implementing a long-term profitable regional strategy for sporting and tourism events [23]. Small sports tourism events offer many opportunities for local cities and host communities. Thus, many countries and municipalities within these countries want to take advantage of local and global sports tourism opportunities for gaining economic benefits [24]. Because a small-scale sports event that is compatible with the community infrastructure and human and cultural capital of a region can be a more suitable form of sustainable tourism development [25].

It is clear that the development of sports tourism has attracted a lot of attention by improving the host community's social welfare and life quality and has many environmental, socio-economic, and cultural benefits for local residents [15]. However, the development in each industry requires different infrastructures, and according to Razavi et al. [22], the development of sports tourism will be possible when all the infrastructural factors and facilities that are effective in sports tourism are taken into consideration. Also, to develop sports tourism infrastructure, appropriate solutions should be implemented, e.g., facilitating the optimal use of information and communication technology, active participation of employees in all stages from attracting tourists to providing services, creating standard sports facilities and equipment, and strengthening the transportation system, As a result, it is necessary to consider the factors that influence the development of sports tourism in each region simultaneously and long-term.

Considering the deep impact that the coronavirus had on the sports tourism sector, Parnell et al. [26] was to provide gifts and prizes to encourage sports tourists (such as free distribution of event tickets) for the development of sports tourism in the post-corona era. Therefore, in such a situation, officials and trustees of sports tourism in the industry and university should also fight to change the nature and structure of tourism. Because doing such work is very important for its survival [27].

And finally, border areas with outstanding capacities and potentials, as gateways for entrance and connecting the national space with international spaces, are of great importance for developments of this type. Kurdistan's Bashmaq border is a national capital and a suitable opportunity to attract foreign tourists. It is the gateway through which a large amount of currency enters Iran that can tremendously grow if we plan and seize the opportunity and use the existing potentials in the field of sports tourism.

Sports Tourism Research

Sports tourism research has focused on both the demand and the supply side. Moreover, sports tourism can be divided into mega sports events, regional sports events and physical activities. A recent review of the sports tourism literature has concluded that although there is a diversity of topics in the study of mega sports events in relation to countries and cities, there is a scarcity of research on regional sports tourism [28].

From the demand side, research has focused on tourism motivations, satisfaction, factors affecting sports tourism, destination choice, and visitation frequency. Miranda and Andueza [29] found that the factors of natural attractions, water sports and walking are more important in attracting sports tourists. In their research, Sandelin and Fiechtner [30] concluded that one of the important factors in attracting sports tourists is having luxurious places, especially for young tourists, in the desired location. It also showed that taking care of health and physical wellbeing is the focus of sports tourism consumers.

Ahmad et al. [31] concluded that five factors affect the participation of tourists and the development of sports tourism in Malaysia: popularity and entertainment of the event, cost-effectiveness (costs and expenses), facilities and infrastructure, social effects, and environmental impact. Chang et al. [15] also noted that knowing the extent of information, awareness, and knowledge of local people about tourism has a positive impact on the local community and increases the support level of the local community for sports tourism. The development of sports tourism takes place with regard to many economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects, including paying attention to people's livelihood, preserving cultural heritage, and preventing the entry of various types of waste into the lake. Huachen and Tingluo [33] recommend creating an official website to develop sports tourism, designing multiple software related to sports tourism, and using different sales methods in the context of an online marketing platform. In a meta-analytical study, Keshtidar et al. [34] identified six factors that determine the development of sports tourism in Iran, namely tourism and natural attractions, advertising and marketing, infrastructure and facilities features, event-related elements, socio-cultural factors, and managerial aspects. Sarlab et al. [35] pointed out that socio-cultural and environmental factors related to natural attractions, sports, and infrastructure have a significant effect on predicting the development of sports tourism in East Azerbaijan province. Also, Stojanović and Šerić [36] mentioned that since ancient times, sports and health have been a very important driving force when it comes to visiting a particular destination. So, in the future, it is expected to have a significant growth of nature tourism combined with sporting activities, health-recreational tourism, golf tourism, wellness tourism, as well as activities such as fitness, mountain hiking, mountain biking, hiking and biking, etc. As a result, this issue will increase the development of tourism.

Material and Methods

This study aims to examine the most critical factors in developing sports tourism in emerging economies. Using thematic analysis elements, the study first identified the causes of sports tourism development. Then, the data were analyzed through Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and the Cross-Impact Matrix Multiplication Applied to Classification (MICMAC) methodologies.

Data Collection

We adopted a purposive/judgmental approach to sampling. Participants were selected based on their expertise in sports tourism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 experts. These people were experts from the Department of Sports and Youth, sports delegations, environmental experts, coaches as well as athletes and tourism agents in Kurdistan province, of whom six had a master's degree, five had a bachelor's degree and four had a doctorate. The results showed that the mean age of the study participants was 36.6 years. In terms of the background or expertise, 4 people had experience of less than 10 years and 11 people had experience of more than 10 years in the field of sports tourism, and they were also familiar with Zrebar Lake. Also, in terms of gender, 3 individuals were female and 12 were male. According to studies by Ramesh et al. [37], the number of participants in ISM studies is usually between 14 and 20.

Ethical Report

Ethical issues that were observed in this study are as follows: obtaining informed consent from participants to take part in the study, recording all interviews with the permission of participants and providing explanations about the objectives of the study and the reason for recording the interview session, keeping the interview file in a safe place, fidelity in transferring interview texts from recording to recording, and observing the principle of confidentiality of information, respecting the opinion of the participants even when requesting to leave the investigation. The time and place of the interviews were determined by the agreement of the participants.

Interpretive structural modeling (ISM)

This method was developed by Warfield in 1974 as a method of interpretive structure. In this method, the relationships between components and their leveling are presented, which are used to illustrate, create, and understand a hierarchical structure of a complex system to analyze and solve decision-making problems. Interpretive structural modeling is a structural approach; therefore, the overall structure is derived from a complex set of variables based on relationships.

We followed well-established guidelines for conducting ISM [38, 39], and each step is related to the previous one and cannot be deleted. The ISM technique consists of seven well-defined steps.

Step 1: Identifying the Factors.
Step 2: Structural Matrix of the Variables' Internal Relations.
Step 3: Initial Reachability Matrix.
Step 4: Structural Self-Interaction Matrix.
Step 5: Level partitioning.
Step 6: Plotting the model.
Step 7: The MICMAC approach.

Results

Determinants of development of sports tourism

Structural Self-Interaction Matrix

Table 1. Main determinants of development of sports tourism in Zrebar Lake of Iran

Category	Subcategory
(A) Infrastructure related factors	communication channels; development of private and public accommodation centers; holding competitions; advertising; quality of service provided; increasing the security of the lake; sports facilities and equipment
(B) Economic factors	sponsors; scientific marketing; dedicated budgets
(C) Environmental factors	taking advantage of natural potentials; urban branding
(D) Competitive advantage	variety of sports uses; service welfare; information technology
(E) Management factors	manpower; connections; long-term planning; effective rules and regulations; attention to the wishes and in-terests of tourists
(F) Cultural factors	local awareness; proper patterning; indigenous-sports festivals

The Structural Self Interaction Matrix is shown in Table 2 below.

Initial Reachability Matrix (RM)

Table 2. Structural Self-Interaction Matrix

Variable	A	B	C	D	E	F
(A) Infrastructure related factors		X	V	V	X	V
(B) Economic factors			V	X	X	V
(C) Environmental factors				V	A	V
(D) Competitive advantage					A	O
(E) Management factors						V
(F) Cultural factors						

The achievability matrix is prepared using the structural self-interaction matrix, i.e., using the zero and one placement rule; the SSIM matrix is converted to a zero-and-one matrix in the form of Table 3.

Final Reachability Matrix

Table 3. Initial Reachability Matrix (RM)

Variable	A	B	C	D	E	F
(A) Infrastructure related factors	1	1	1	1	1	1
(B) Economic factors	1	1	1	1	1	1
(C) Environmental factors	0	0	1	1	0	1
(D) Competitive advantage	0	1	0	1	0	0
(E) Management factors	1	1	1	1	1	1
(F) Cultural factors	0	0	0	0	0	1

The final reachability matrix is obtained by considering the transferability relationship, meaning that the initial reachability matrix is adapted. Thus, to obtain the matrix (using Euler's theory), we first add the initial matrix to the unit matrix and then bring the resulting matrix to the power of n. The empowerment operation must be performed based on the Bolin rule. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

Level Partitioning

Table 4. Final Reachability Matrix

Variable	A	B	C	D	E	F	Influence
(A) Infrastructure related factors	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
(B) Economic factors	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
(C) Environmental factors	0	1'	1	1	0	1	4
(D) Competitive advantage	1'	1	1'	1	1'	1'	6
(E) Management factors	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
(F) Cultural factors	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Dependence	4	5	5	5	4	6	

At this stage, after obtaining the final reachability matrix, two available sets and an initial set (prerequisite) are defined to determine the level of criteria. The first line where the shared area of the two sets is equal to the available set will take precedence as the first level. After determining the level, remove the criterion or criteria whose level is specified from the table and repeat this until the levels of all the remaining variables are determined. The ISM network structure is then plotted based on the specified levels and the final matrix. Therefore, all criteria are leveled according to their penetration power and degree of dependence. Table 5 presents this process.

Interpretive Structural Model

In this step, based on the variables' levels and the final achievability matrix, an initial model is drawn, and by removing the transferability in the initial model, the final model is obtained. According to Figure 1, cultural factors were at the lowest level, i.e., level 1. The variables of environmental factors, economic factors, and competitive advantage were at level 2. The variables of managerial factors and infrastructure were at the highest level, i.e., level 3.

Influence and dependence degree of "MICMAC graph plotting"

At this stage, the variables are classified into four groups. The first group consists of autonomous variables (Quadrant 1) with low penetration power and dependence. The second group includes dependent variables (Quadrant 2), which have low penetration power and high dependence. The third group is composed of Linkage variables (Quadrant 3) with high penetration power and high dependence. Consequently, the fourth group consists of independent variables (Quadrant 4) with high penetration power and low dependence. According to Figure 1, infrastructure factors, managerial factors, economic factors, competitive advantage, and environmental factors were located in the Linkage cluster (Quadrant 3), and cultural variables were juxtaposed in the dependent cluster (Quadrant 2).

Discussion

This study aimed to provide a model for developing sports tourism in emerging countries and destinations based on the study of Zrebar Lake in Kurdistan, Iran. As the findings of the study indicated, from the experts' point of view, six main categories and 22 subcategories were considered to develop sports tourism in Zrebar Lake. These categories include infrastructure related factors (e.g., communication channels, private and public accommodation centers, holding competitions, advertising, security, quality of the provided services, sports facilities and equipment), managerial factors (e.g., specialized human force, connections, long-term planning, as well as effective rules and regulations), environmental factors (e.g., making use of natural potentials, creating a sports brand), economic factors (e.g., sponsors, scientific marketing, and allocation of dedicated funds), and competitive advantages (e.g., diversity of sports applications, welfare and service uses, information technology) that were included in the Linkage cluster (Quarter 3). The results of this part of the research were consistent with previous research findings (Tab. 1). However, what is important in the present study is the two factors of advertising and marketing, as well as sports events, which are mentioned in most of these articles as the main factors. In the current study, we have named them as sub-categories of structural components. Another difference is the placement of competitive advantage as the main category, which in most studies is referred to as a subcomponent. Another important difference of this paper was the design of a model based on interpretive structural modeling, because this method categorizes the formation process based on important variables. Finally, what is clear is that all these components are interconnected like links in a chain, and to develop sports tourism, it is necessary to pay attention to all of them along each other.

Table 5. The first repetition of the reachability matrix's level segmentation

Variable	Reachability set	Antecedent set	Intersection set	Level
(A) Infrastructure related factors	1-2-3-4-5-6	1-2-4-5	1-2-4-5	3
(B) Economic factors	1-2-3-4-5-6	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	2
(C) Environmental factors	2-3-4-6	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	2
(D) Competitive advantage	1-2-3-4-5-6	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	2
(E) Management factors	1-2-3-4-5-6	1-2-4-5	1-2-4-5	3
(F) Cultural factors	6	1-2-3-4-5-6	6	1

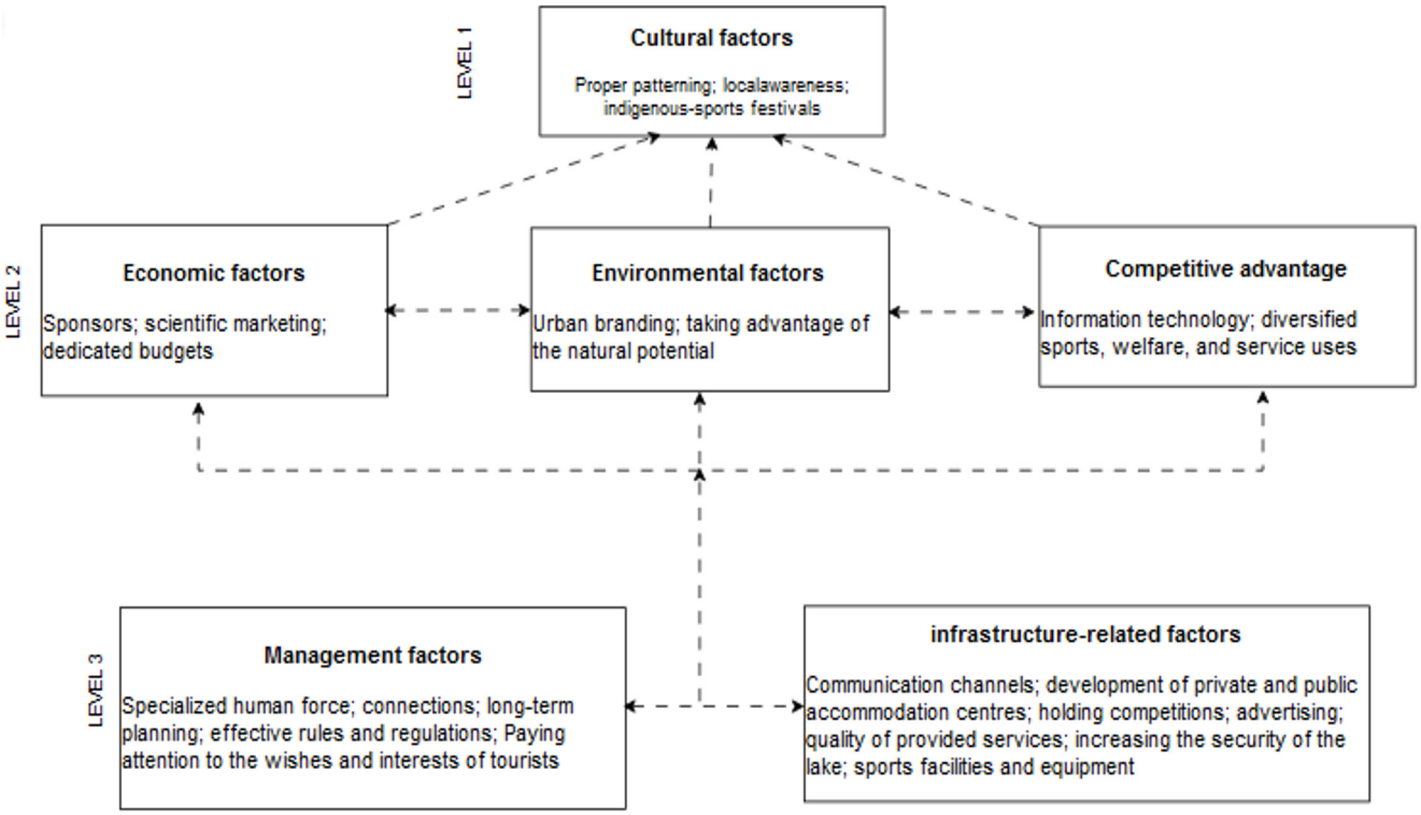


Figure 1. The interpretive structural model of sports tourism development of Zrebar Lake

It is clear that the variables that fall into one of the two Linkage (Quarter 3) and independent (Quarter 4) groups have high penetration power, and they are called key or effective variables. Therefore, the main factors that lead to the development of tourism in this region are located in this part. This shows that by resolving and improving these indicators, Zrebar Lake can be a place for the development of sports tourism. As a result, those in charge of this matter must take immediate action to resolve and enhance these indicators. It is obvious that infrastructures and facilities, if available, will attract more tourists and generate revenue for the industry. These are the factors that intend to provide and develop services to tourists, travelers, or guests. Given that the development of tourism in the general sense and sports tourism in particular occurs as a result of the advent and sojourn of tourists in tourist areas and using services and facilities, it is essential to pay attention to the role of infrastructure. According to Deery and Jago [40], sports tourism's main problem in most countries is the separation and divided management of the two areas of tourism and sports. Accordingly, based on the results of this study, one of the necessary strategies that have been used today in most countries of the world is a capable management structure in the development and expansion of sports tourism. On the other hand, Evans et al. [41] prioritized technologies to develop sports tourism. This is what we call a competitive advantage. Ultimately, what is clear is the effective link between economic growth and global tourism growth that can encourage investment in other areas of tourism as well. In fact, if the conditions are created in such a way that domestic tourism flourishes, and on the other hand, facilities are designed for domestic investors, there will be an incentive for foreign investors to enter our economy. Such investments will finally lead to the development of economic standards and bring about greater economic stability and security in the country. Consequently, attempting to eliminate shortcomings to develop sports tourism in Zrebar Lake requires public determination in all relevant areas.

On the other hand, we also identified the variables of the dependent group (Quarter 2) with low penetration power and high dependence, and the autonomous group (Quarter 1) with low penetration power and dependence as effective variables. Therefore, according to Figure 2, cultural factors, including holding indigenous-sports festivals, appropriate modeling, awareness of the local community, paying attention to the wishes and interests of tourists, are in the dependent cluster (Quarter 2). The results of this finding are consistent with some of the findings of Sarlab et al. [35], Dayour and Atanga [42], Amalu [43], Pongponrat [44] and Perić [45]. Therefore, we can assert that dependent variables have high performance or dependence but low penetration power or importance. Identifying this variable in this quarter indicates that the current efforts of the responsible organizations to develop tourism in Zrebar Lake should be focused on obviating the effective variables because any effort to improve the city's culture without eliminating key or effective factors is unnecessary and redundant. Generally, all of the abovementioned ideas act as one system in which each component is complementary to the other one. This shows that a single factor alone cannot develop sports tourism. However, the main categories of research, including infrastructure factors, managerial factors, economic factors, competitive advantage, and environmental factors also indicate this cycle, which necessitates the relevant organizations to pay special and immediate attention to improve Zrebar Lake's condition.

Practical suggestions. According to the obtained results, the following suggestions are presented in each of the dimensions for improving and promoting sports tourism in Zrebar Lake.

Environmental dimension: (1) Combining sports and natural tourism and increasing sports activities by using natural potentials such as the construction of boating sites and docks, construction of triple sports tracks, design of cycling routes and tracks around the lake, construction of paragliding sites, athletic sites, etc. (2) Promotion, growth and development of visual features of the urban environment and design and implementation of sports tourism brand (Zrebar, sailing pole). Infrastructure related factors: (1) Suitable location for the construction of airport runways and railways, expansion of modern means of transportation and improvement and safety of routes. (2) Holding periodic and regular domestic competitions and international tournaments as well as broadcasting and covering news and media events. (3) Increasing the scope of advertising (media and social networks) at home and abroad. (4) Strengthening various aspects of security (social, personal, psychological, etc.); tourism and security are intertwined concepts that should be considered in tourism development programs. (5) Providing facilities and equipment for sports (water, air and land), creating places, halls and equipped sports fields. (6) Improving and developing the quality of services and health and welfare facilities provided in the city, lake and even intercity centers. Management dimension: (1) Attract, nurture and employ specialized and educated human resources. (2) Provide a comprehensive, coordinated, scientific and operational plan. (3) Cooperation and sincere coordination of institutions, organs and organizations in charge of sports tourism. (4) Establish and amend effective laws and regulations for the presence of foreign tourists and protect their rights. Economic dimension: (1) providing conditions to increase the attraction of investors both domestically and internationally. (2) Increasing the per capita requirements of the sports tourism sector in Zrebar Lake. (3) Identifying the appropriate model and developing a sports tourism marketing program in domestic and international dimensions in Zrebar Lake. Cultural dimension: (1) Revival of regional traditions, rituals and customs in the form of festivals and integrated cultural-sports exhibitions. (2) Raising the level of public awareness of the people of the region about the benefits of sports tourism and recognizing the culture of their originality and giving them participation for development. (3) Gaining experience from similar successful application models and holding seminars and training sessions focused on the development of sports tourism. (4) Raising awareness and paying attention to the values, motivations and needs of incoming tourists. Competitive Advantage: (1) Creating information websites to introduce sports tourist attractions of Zrebar Lake (2) Creating hardware and network infrastructure. (3) Creating exciting, new and up-to-date water sports entertainment and attractions in the world. (4) Creating training camps for a variety of disciplines. (5) Creating sports and recreational camps. (6) Establishment and operation of a water park. (7) Creating and launching sailing tours and other sports.

A significant obstacle in conducting this study was the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, due to the limitations of Covid-19, we reduced the time of the interviews to a minimum. Also, the local people's lack of familiarity with the advantages of sports tourism and knowing its threat to natural resources was one of the limitations of this research. Considering the identification of the effective and affected variables in the formation of sports tourism development in Zrebar Lake, we suggest that researchers use structural equation modeling (SEM) to study this model and examine the effects of each independent variable on dependent variables. Moreover, we recommend that the gender variable be used as a Linkage variable to explore the opinions of male and female tourists. Finally, considering the diverse climatic conditions and natural potential in different parts of Iran, we suggest other researchers study the formation process of sports tourism development regarding the climate and culture of specific regions. That way, scholars can come to a sound conclusion for the formation process of tourism development in Iran based on various regions' climates.

Conclusions

This study has contributed to the literature in this field by creating clear links between the components of sports tourism development. The findings of this study pointed out that first, in order to develop and improve sports tourism in Zrebar Lake in Kurdistan, it is necessary to examine the effective variables presented in Figure 2 immediately; second, the development of sports tourism in this region has positive effects on the local economy, currency exchange, and job creation for the natives of the region. Third, the findings provide the responsible organizations, departments, and trustees with executive decisions for eliminating deprivation, urban development, and, of course, the introduction and protection of this international wetland. Finally, in addition to publicly providing a hierarchy for the implementation of executive decisions in the field of tourism in Iran regarding the indigenous environment of Iran, the findings of this study implicitly recall that the development and expansion of sports tourism in this area needs codified planning appropriate to the extracted variables.

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