



What Are the Sports Tourism Factors and Potentials in Guilan Province?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: In recent years, tourism, especially sports tourism, has become a rich source of income in many countries. Therefore, identifying the factors that affect the flourishing of sports tourism in a region is the first step for the progression and development of sports tourism.

Methodology: In this study, a researcher-made questionnaire with 94% Cronbach's alpha was used to identify the factors affecting tourism growth in Guilan Province. Twelve professors of sports management confirmed the validity of the questionnaire. The statistical population consisted of 25 cultural heritage experts, 46 sports specialists, and 600 sports tourists. A census was sampling in the first (cultural heritage experts) and second (sports experts) groups. The third group consisted of sports tourists, namely all those who visited Guilan Province to participate in competitions and watch the fajar decade tournament in 2019. The sample number was considered 460 according to similar studies. The questionnaire was submitted to a group of professors and university experts, and its validity was confirmed. SmartPLS software was employed to analyze the data.

Findings: The research results showed that aquatic sport in coastal cities could lead to the prosperity of sports tourism in Guilan Province and turn this province into a hub of water sports tourism. To achieve this goal, sports, welfare, transportation infrastructure, and proper advertisements are necessary.

Originality: Many studies have been done on affective factors of sports tourism in Guilan province. These researches show that the natural attractions of Guilan province are the priority of sports tourism development in this region. This study shows that attention to water sports effectively promotes sports tourism in Guilan province. It appears that this is the first research to investigate the potentials of sports tourism in Guilan Province of Iran.

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1. Introduction

Today, the tourism industry is regarded as the largest and most diverse industry globally, which is the main source of income, job creation, private sector growth, and infrastructure development in many countries (Valizadeh & Amery, 2020). Sports tourism is also a new form of tourism emerging from the connection between tourism and sports and creating a unique and comprehensive structure to fill leisure and recreation time and promote human mental and physical vitality (Harahap & Kartika, 2020). In general, any travel for sports activities is called sports tourism, including skiing, hiking, mountaineering, cycling, hunting, swimming, boating, participating in sports competitions, watching tournaments and the like. Such excursions may be done individually or collectively. Many countries attract sports tourists by establishing well-equipped sports complexes and facilities for sports and athletes; in addition, sports sponsors and spectators who travel to the venue are considered sports tourists (Zarei & Ramkissoon, 2020). Sports tourism is the best industry to improve the economic, social and political conditions, increase employment and income and develop infrastructure. It has also become an economic complement. Many cities attempt to use the empty capacity of hotels to host sports competitions or take advantage of festivals to help the tourism and hotel industry (Herbold et al., 2020). Championship sports are also widely supported by governments to bring about economic, social and political benefits by creating sports tourism brands for the host community in addition to stimulating national pride (Zhai et al., 2021). Also, the facilities were built for international sporting events can be used for many years for the entertainment, cultural and sports requirements of tourists in their leisure time.

2. Theoretical background

Developed countries in the tourism industry have taken further steps to identify the potential of sports tourism in their country to invest in tourist attractions in each region, succeed in attracting sports tourists and create better economic opportunities for their country (Buning et al., 2016). In a study by Dixon et al. in 2021 on the legacy of sports tourism ten years after hosting the 2010 Vancouver Olympics and Paralympics, it was found that this event provided new sports tourism opportunities over this period and that many tourists became regular visitors. That is why all countries are trying to provide the conditions for holding critical sporting events and attracting tourists to allocate a large share of this economic activity to their region and country (Dickson et al., 2021). In their research, Buning et al. (2016) concluded that sports tourism enables the optimal use of natural sports attractions to invite sports tourists and gain tourism revenue (Buning et al., 2016). Happ (2020) examined the interests of the destination for the sport tourism development and concluded that as well as natural attractions, sports facilities and venues, transportation infrastructure, political framework, advertising, amenities and hotels are of importance in the attractiveness of an area as a tourist destination (Happ, 2020).

Elahi et al. (2021) suggest that the sports mega-events have many consequences, including employment creation, increased investment, increased prices, improved

infrastructure, increased tourism, and urban reconstruction for the host communities (Elahi et al., 2021). The different destinations have specific characteristics, attractions and capabilities of sports and tourism to develop tourism and attract tourists. Pouder et al. (2018) pointed out that the first step in developing sports tourism in an area is identifying potentials (natural and artificial). Also, the cultural heritage of the region is effective in the blossoming of sports tourism. It is essential to detect the hubs of sports tourism according to the potentials of the destination communities (Pouder et al., 2018). The climate of each region has an important impact on mapping the future of tourism development and multiple capabilities of receiving tourists in different areas during the year, paving the way for increasing tourism potentials, especially sports tourism (Karimi et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential to address the factors affecting the prosperity of sports tourism in each region. One of the critical factors that can develop the country's sports tourism industry is recognizing the factors that affect the flourishing of sports tourism in each country region (Nazari, 2021).

As Iran struggles with the unemployment problem more than ever before and because the country's economy has become increasingly dependent on petroleum, policymakers are looking for solutions to reduce the dependence on oil revenues. In the meantime, tourism can be a good alternative in this regard. The United Arab Emirates has shifted its focus from an oil- and gas-based economy for many years, and as a result, has witnessed the growth of health, sports, recreation and tourism services industries. Dubai has hosted major international sporting events, many of which are repeated annually. The phenomenon of sports tourism has received special attention as a strategy for the economic development of societies. In this regard, the sports tourism sites of Tehran Province, as one of the most important provinces with tourism attractions, have been addressed (Moradi Doliskani & Atghia, 2021). The most important success factors that make Dubai a competitive global sports destination are tourism attractiveness, proper management of events and the variety of events in this region (Swart et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the share of our country showed a downward trend due to the spread of COVID-19 in 2020. Unfortunately, this figure is tiny compared to 77/000/000 international tourists entering France simultaneously (UNWTO, 2021)¹.

To improving the Iranian sports tourism industry, we must follow the steps taken by developed countries. Furthermore, advances in any region's tourism and sports tourism industry by addressing the factors affecting the prosperity of sports tourism and providing for the development of sports tourism in that region. Meanwhile, Guilan province is considered one of the most beautiful provinces in terms of natural attractions with high capacities for developing the tourism industry. The diversity of geographical conditions of this province in terms of topography, especially the factor of altitude that divides it into coast, plains, foothills and mountains, can be explained as follows. The climate in the coastal part is alluvial, and foothills enable the attraction and retention of tourists throughout the year. Permanent rivers flow throughout the province from west to east and from north to south, the existence of coasts all over the province that all tourists can enjoy. Vegetation, forest and rangeland, and the distribution of rural,

¹ The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations

nomadic and urban settlements and other tourism capacities (Adabi et al., 2020). Despite its rich natural capital for tourism, unfortunately, there has been no infrastructural development in the tourism and sports tourism sector in Guilan. Employment as a result of tourism in this region has not managed to eradicate unemployment. Due to the high unemployment rate of young people in Guilan Province, which often leads to their migration to industrial cities, it is necessary to take action and create employment to earn income from sports tourism. To accelerate this process, it seems necessary to pay attention to the factors affecting the flourishing of sports tourism in Guilan province.

3. Methodology

The present research is applied in terms of objective or result, descriptive in terms of research goals and field concerning data collection method. The researcher-made questionnaire with Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 was used in this study. Twelve sports management professors also confirmed the validity of the questionnaire at the Guilan, Alzahra and Tehran Universities. The statistical population consisted of 25 cultural heritage experts, 46 sports specialists, and 600 sports tourists. Sampling in the first (cultural heritage experts) and the second community (sports experts) has been a complete census. According to studies and similar research, the sample size in the third community (sports tourists, namely all people visiting Guilan Province to participate and watch the competitions of the Fajr decade) was 460. After the necessary corrections, a questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale with very low=1 to very high=5 was prepared for a pilot study. Therefore, to evaluate the validity of the prepared questionnaire, it was given to the twelve professors experts. The smartPLS19 software (version 3.3.3.) has been used to analyze the data.

4. Results

The Smart PLS (2) structural equation design software has been used to assess the fit of the research model. The result of this study is presented in the software output graph and Figure 1-4. Evaluation of structural model: The estimation method in PLS is non-parametric. Therefore, the indicators obtained in PLS all show the quality of fit. The critical indicators are the validity and reliability indices of the model and estimation of the independence of indicators and the square of correlation, which can be seen in Table 2. As can be seen in the Table, Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which must be >0.6 , is acceptable in all three of our variables. In addition, the **AVE** coefficient or the mean extracted variance, which must be >0.5 , confirms the validity of the model. On the other hand, the **VIF** coefficient, which is used for the independence of indices, also shows that the indicators forming the structure are no longer too aligned with each other. Finally, the **R²** coefficient, 0 for the exogenous variable, is acceptable for endogenous variables. Concerning the findings, the research hypotheses were confirmed. In contrast, no positive relationship was observed between non-water tourism priorities and the tourism boom in the province ($t=0.14$).

Table 1. The indicators reported in the designed model.

R ²	Indicator Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Mean of extracted variance AVE	Alignment between indicators VIF
0.53	0.23	0.52	0.67	Natural tourism attractions of the province
0	0.18	0.84	0.90	Factors of tourism industry development in the province
0	0.38	0.65	0.85	Tourism facilities of the province
0.41	0.14	0.56	0.74	Water tourism priorities
0.48	0.29	0.62	0.83	Non-water tourism priorities

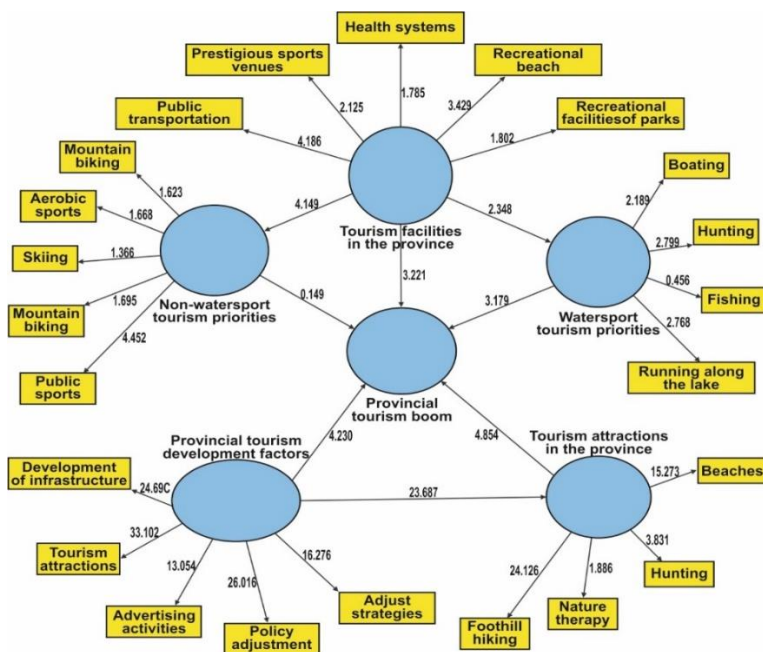


Figure 1. Fitted research model.

Table 2. T- and P-value of the conceptual research model.

Path	Path coefficient	The test statistic (t)	P-value	Result
Confirmed	0.01	4.85	0.672	Tourist attractions with the prosperity of tourism in the province
Confirmed	0.001	4.23	0.414	Factors of tourism industry development with the prosperity of tourism in the province
Confirmed	0.05	3.22	0.573	Tourism facilities with the prosperity of tourism in the province
Confirmed	0.001	3.17	0.482	Water tourism priorities with the prosperity of tourism in the province
Rejected	-	0.14	-0.149	Non-water tourism priorities with the prosperity of tourism in the province
Confirmed	0.001	23.68	0.874	Factors of tourism industry development with the tourist attractions of the province
Confirmed	0.05	2.34	0.257	Tourism facilities of the province with water tourism priorities
Confirmed	0.001	4.19	0.657	Tourism facilities of the province with non-water tourism priorities

5. Managerial implications

According to the t coefficient (4.85), there is a significant relationship between tourist attractions, beaches, fishing and hunting, nature therapy, and rangeland climbing with the prosperity of sports tourism in the province. This means that the natural tourist attractions of Guilan Province could lead to the boom of sports tourism in this province. The results of [Maleki et al. \(2020\)](#) research also show that the nature of Guilan province has been evaluated to be capable of sports tourism ([Maleki et al., 2020](#)). [Chaigasem and Leruksa \(2020\)](#), in their study entitled "Sports Tourism Guidelines in Thailand", have pointed to the impact of natural tourist attractions such as mountains, sea, and climate on the prosperity of sports tourism ([Chaigasem & Leruksa, 2020](#)). Guilan province, with eight coastal cities, has a high potential for beach sports and hosting these sports. [Carvache-Franco et al. \(2019\)](#), in their research, evaluated the demand of foreign tourists in a beach destination and claimed that in addition to attraction, ecotourism, beach and sea, water and beach sports are among the most important motivations for tourists to enter coastal cities ([Carvache-Franco et al., 2019](#)).

Guilan, which has more than ten hot springs, is considered rich in terms of nature therapy. According to the statistics provided by the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage of Guilan, each hot spring can receive 10,000 tourists a year, creating jobs for 40 people directly and indirectly. However, an average of 500 people uses these springs annually, most of whom are residents. Surveys show that the absence of infrastructure facilities, lack of a special trustee, and people's ignorance of the existence of hot springs are among the reasons for neglecting the hot springs of Guilan ([Namamian & Rahmati, 2021](#)). According to the t coefficient (4.23), there is a significant relationship between paying attention to the development factors of the tourism industry (improvement of infrastructure, advertising activities, policy adjustment, regulation of strategies) with the flourishing of tourism in this province. [Khodabakhshzade et al. \(2020\)](#), in a study modelling indicator for the development of sports tourism, introduced economic, political, communication, infrastructure and managerial indicators as criteria and indices to assess the prosperity and development of sports tourism.

Therefore, consideration of the required infrastructure for the development of sports tourism is of importance ([Khodabakhshzade et al., 2020](#)). [Zohrevandian et al. \(2018\)](#) in 2018, ranked the factors affecting the flourishing of sports tourism in the country and concluded that the political and legal support of the government is of utmost importance in the thriving of sports tourism ([Zohrevandian et al., 2018](#)). [Moharramzadeh and Imanzadeh \(2019\)](#), in a study on strategies for the development of adventure sports tourism in Ardabil Province, declared political and legal factors, information and ads, infrastructure, economic, managerial, security and safety, cultural and social factors as influential actors in the prosperity of tourism in that region ([Moharramzadeh & Imanzadeh, 2019](#)).

Creating the perception of security from various angles leads to sports growth in general and soccer in Iran and even globally ([Nazarian Madavani et al., 2021](#)). The importance of advertising to promote sports tourism destinations is obvious because a large part of our worldview is rooted in preconceived media messages ([Jiang et al.,](#)

2020). Zeytoonli, in his research (2020), presented a model of the effects of tourism advertising and identified ads, especially word of mouth, as one of the essential factors influencing the flourishing of sports tourism and recognized hosting of sports events as one of the main tools in attracting sports tourists (Zeytoonli, 2020). According to investigations stating that media advertising and increasing competition sensitivity through mass media are among the most important factors affecting the presence of people in competitions, media advertising and blogs can indeed effectively boost sports tourism (Lubis et al., 2020). Iranpur Mobarake et al. (2019), also studied the role of mass media in the development of sports tourism in Isfahan province and recognized the significance of audio-visual media compared to other media (Iranpur Mobarake et al., 2019) in the development of sports tourism.

Moreover, there is a significant correlation between tourism facilities (health and recreational facilities, parks, prestigious sports complexes, public transportation) with the blossoming of sports tourism in this province according to t coefficient (3.22), and the more facilities, the greater the prosperity of tourism in the region. Mandić et al. in their 2018 research, examined the interrelationship between tourism infrastructure and recreational facilities with tourism development and concluded that welfare and recreational facilities, as well as transportation, are the main priorities for tourism prosperity in an area and that the private sector can help the public sector in this regard (Mandić et al., 2018). In their research, Adeola and Evans 2020 discussed the role of infrastructure and tourism development in Africa. They stated that in the studies conducted from 1996 to 2016, with the reinforcement of infrastructure and leisure facilities, the number of tourists also increased and played a significant role in tourism development in Africa. A large share of this tourism development is related to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, which has played an essential role in improving the country's infrastructure (Adeola & Evans, 2020). Their 2020 research entitled "Satisfaction in sports" claimed that if spectators were satisfied with the facilities provided at an event, such as the transportation system, availability and parking, they would attend the event again (Santini et al., 2021).

There was a significant relationship between water tourism priorities and the tourism boom in the province ($t=3.17$). This shows the considerable impact of coastal and water tourism attractions on the tourism boom of the region. In general, the results show that interests related to mountaineering and nature tourism with a load factor of 79%, those related to beach and summer water sports with a factor load of 87%, as well as fishing and hunting attractions with a load factor of 75% are the most important for the development of sports tourism in the country. Therefore, considering the role of water and beach sports in the development of sports tourism, the existence of beaches, wetlands and rivers in Guilan province is an important factor for the prosperity of sports tourism in this region. On the other hand, there was no positive relationship between non-water tourism priorities and the tourism boom in Guilan province ($t=0.14$). Such attractions are more or less present in other provinces and do not play a distinctive role in tourism in Guilan Province. For the prosperity of sports tourism in Guilan Province, it is better to focus on beaches and water sports attractions.

Wei and Zhao in 2020 also investigated the marketing of water sports tourism resources in China's coastal cities and concluded that coastal cities are the backbone of the tourism industry with their unique advantages and special local conditions compared to other cities. They are valuable sources of sports tourism. The share of sports tourism in these areas is increasing year after year, indicating the important position of beaches in the economic development of these areas (Wei & Zhao, 2020). Also, a significant relationship was observed between the factors of tourism industry development with tourist attractions of the province ($t=23.68$). It reveals that the more attention is paid to the factors of tourism development in the province, the more tourist attractions of the province are raised in the country and enjoy high capabilities for attracting tourists. Another significant relationship in the model can be the positive correlation between tourism facilities with water and non-water tourism priorities. Creating appropriate welfare and health facilities in different areas of the province can certainly convert each area to a recreation and tourism site. The conceptual model's general goodness of fit (GOF) with a 0.28 coefficient indicates a good and significant fit of the proposed model.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study shows that the existing tourist attractions of Guilan province play a significant role in the tourism boom of this region. Studies concluded that the natural attractions of Guilan province are the priority of sports tourism development in this region. Also, water sports, hill climbing and nature tourism, mountaineering, caving, forest walks, spas and nature therapy, hunting and fishing and winter sports have the highest importance in the sports tourism, respectively (Hematinejad et al., 2015).

Because eight counties in Guilan Province are located adjacent to the sea, tourist attractions related to beaches and water sports are highly effective in promoting sports tourism in this province. Meanwhile, the per capita sports spending and infrastructure related to sports tourism in these cities are moderate and weak except in Anzali County (Ramezannezhad & Eftekhari, 2019). Therefore, given the critical role of water sports tourism activities for the prosperity of sports tourism in Guilan Province. It is essential to pay more attention to this dimension of sports tourism in the region so that this province can benefit from the revenues of sports tourism capacities in coasts and water sports. Studies show no significant relationship between non-water sports tourism activities and the development of sports tourism in Guilan province. It can be attributed to the fact that this region is not separable from the other areas and reveals the importance of beach sports and providing infrastructure and welfare facilities in this sector more than ever. In a study conducted by Hasibi and Shojaei (2020), results showed that the climate conditions for sports tourism in Rudsar city were assessed. And it was concluded that June, July, August and September are the best months to attract sports tourists primarily due to the attractiveness of beaches and water recreation in hot months of the year, which is proof of the importance of beaches in the development of sports tourism in this province.

Furthermore, the present study shows that Guilan Province needs to develop factors affecting tourism, including welfare facilities (hotels, transportation, communications,

health and advertising) for the prosperity of sports tourism. And no matter how much a tourist destination has sports tourism attractions, it needs infrastructure, service and advertising incentives to attract tourists and provide the best possible sports tourism services to become a new destination for sports tourists (Danylyshyn et al., 2020). Therefore, by directing government policies toward the development of sports tourism and have more investment, effective advertising, attracting investors from inside and outside the province, managers can move toward the boom in sports tourism to solve many of the economic and immigration problems of this province. The research is conducted to identify the capacities of coastal cities of this province in various water sports to apply the results in a more specialized way for the prosperity of sports tourism in the coastal towns of Guilan province.

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شناسایی عوامل مؤثر بر رونق گردشگری ورزشی استان گیلان

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کلیدواژه

جاذبه‌های ورزشی
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نوع مقاله

پژوهشی اصیل

چکیده

هدف: هدف از انجام این تحقیق شناسایی عوامل مؤثر بر رونق گردشگری استان گیلان بود. در سال‌های اخیر گردشگری و به‌ویژه گردشگری ورزشی به یک منبع درآمد سرشار در بسیاری از کشورها تبدیل شده است. از این‌رو، شناسایی عوامل مؤثر بر رونق گردشگری ورزشی یک منطقه اولین گام جهت پیشرفت و توسعه گردشگری ورزشی به شمار می‌آید.

روش: روایی پرسشنامه توسط ۱۲ نفر از اساتید مدیریت ورزشی مورد تأیید قرار گرفت. جامعه آماری متشکل از ۳ گروه: ۲۵ نفر کارشناسان میراث فرهنگی، ۴۶ نفر کارشناسان ورزشی و ۶۰۰ نفر گردشگران ورزشی بودند. نمونه‌ها در جامعه اول شامل کارشناسان میراث فرهنگی و جامعه دوم شامل کارشناسان ورزشی به‌صورت کل شمار انجام شد. نمونه‌ها در جامعه سوم شامل گردشگران ورزشی ۴۶۰ نفر در نظر گرفته شد. برای بررسی روایی محتوا از روش روایی صوری استفاده شد که نسخه اولیه پرسشنامه در اختیار جمعی از اساتید و خبرگان دانشگاهی قرار گرفت و روایی آن تأیید شد و پایایی آن در یک مطالعه اولیه با ضریب آلفای کرونباخ معادل ۰/۹۴ بدست آمد. جهت تحلیل داده‌ها از نرم‌افزار Smart PLS استفاده شده است.

یافته‌ها: نتایج حاصل از پژوهش نشان داد ورزش‌های آبی در شهرهای ساحلی می‌تواند موجب رونق گردشگری ورزشی در این استان شود و استان گیلان را به قطب گردشگری ورزشی آبی تبدیل نماید که برای رسیدن به این هدف نیازمند به زیرساخت‌های ورزشی، رفاهی، حمل‌ونقل و نیز تبلیغات مناسب می‌باشد.

اصالت و ابتکار مقاله: مطالعات زیادی در مورد عوامل مؤثر بر گردشگری ورزشی در ایران انجام شده است. نتایج این تحقیقات نشان می‌دهد جاذبه‌های طبیعی استان گیلان اولویت توسعه گردشگری ورزشی در این منطقه است. همچنین، نتایج این مطالعه نشان می‌دهد توجه به ورزش‌های آبی به‌طور مؤثری گردشگری ورزشی را در استان گیلان ارتقا می‌بخشد.

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