

Examining the Impact of Modern Social Media on Sports Tourism Marketing in Ardabil Province

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Abstract: Tourism is one of the key economic sectors that has been recognized as a clean industry, contributing significantly to national economic growth by increasing foreign exchange earnings, boosting employment, and generating income. This study is a mixed-methods research (quantitative and qualitative) and is categorized as a survey-based and grounded theory study in terms of methodology. The qualitative phase involved a sample of 15 experts, including university professors in sports management and tourism specialists, who were interviewed. The study followed three fundamental stages of coding. In the quantitative phase, the target population consisted of sports tourists in Ardabil Province, who responded to a 24-item questionnaire using a Likert scale. Given the indefinite size of the statistical population, it was considered unlimited, and based on Cochran's formula for an unlimited population, the sample size was determined to be 384 participants. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, and ultimately, 380 valid questionnaires were collected using a simple random sampling method. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and Lisrel software, employing structural equation modeling tests. The results of the research questions indicate that all five examined factors demonstrated that the consequences of introducing sports tourism marketing include (tourism marketing through media, the impact of sports tourism development in the region, tourist attraction and retention, tourism economy, and cultural tourism). The causal factors influencing sports tourism marketing (sports managers' and specialists' policies, cultural-sports tourism potentials, and regional transformations) play a crucial role in the development of sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province, with an emphasis on modern social media.

Keywords: Sports Tourism, Social Media, Ardabil Province

1. Introduction

The development of tourism activities is largely dependent on diverse natural, cultural, and historical attractions. Leading countries in the tourism sector have successfully responded to global tourism demands by leveraging their natural landscapes, such as lakes, sunny beaches, and snow-capped mountains, as well as their historical heritage, artificial attractions, and well-structured organizational frameworks that facilitate large-scale investments, allowing them to maximize the benefits of tourism [1].

In the contemporary era, tourism is considered one of the most influential factors in fostering international relations. However, its development requires specific resources such as climate, historical and cultural sites, natural

attractions, traditions, infrastructure, and facilities. Recognizing this, many countries have started to invest in the necessary infrastructure to expand tourism [2, 3]. On one hand, the rapid population growth and urbanization, and on the other, the significant advancements in transportation networks, technology, and other aspects of modern life, have intensified the demand for travel and tourism [4-6].

Today, the tourism industry has become highly competitive among cities, to the extent that even destinations with abundant attractions strive to create additional unique features to attract visitors [1, 7]. This is particularly important during seasons when tourism numbers decline due to political, economic, natural, or social factors. One of the critical elements in tourists' decision-making processes is the length of stay at a destination, which holds significant importance for tourism destinations [3]. The duration of a tourist's stay is also a key determinant of tourism's economic impact on a region. This metric allows for the evaluation of tourism's influence on the wealth of the host country, which varies depending on the time spent by tourists at the destination [8, 9].

Additionally, studies have identified the length of stay as a highly influential factor due to its positive correlation with tourism revenue. The longer the stay, the more opportunities tourists have to engage in various activities [10]. Sports tourism is an industry that emerges from the combination of tourism and sports. In other words, sports activities are a significant part of the tourist experience, and tourism itself is often linked to different types of sports. Various factors influence the development of tourism, and different sources categorize these factors in multiple ways [11].

Sports tourism has various definitions and classifications, with different scholars offering distinct perspectives on the concept. One of the most widely accepted definitions is provided by Gibson, who defines sports tourism as leisure-based travel, where individuals temporarily leave their residence to engage in or spectate sports activities [12].

Social media platforms provide individuals with the opportunity to freely express their opinions during sports events and actively engage with other digital citizens (netizens) [13].

In today's world, social media has seen exponential growth and has become an inseparable part of human life. People use social media for various purposes, including shopping, entertainment, banking, and communication. Due to its extensive usage, marketers have recognized social media as a vital tool for advertising, leading many companies to replace traditional advertising methods with social media marketing. Organizations invest significant time, resources, and money in social media advertising, constantly striving to design campaigns that effectively stimulate consumer motivation to make purchases [14]. Television, radio, and digital networks remain some of the most effective means of communication between businesses and consumers, facilitating product promotion and customer engagement [15].

Unfortunately, Iran has taken a relatively passive approach in hosting international sports events. Even when the country has successfully hosted global competitions, it has merely focused on the logistical aspects of hosting rather than leveraging these events to boost the sports tourism industry. A national commitment to sports tourism marketing is essential. Before any major sporting event, a dedicated marketing committee must be formed, and influential media outlets in target countries and cities must be identified. Given the exchange rate dynamics, sports tourism presents an excellent opportunity for attracting international visitors to Iran. However, marketing efforts should not end with tourist attraction; they must commence before the product is even designed and continue beyond the sale.

Ardabil Province, with its high tourism potential, welcomes a significant number of domestic and international tourists each year. In this context, the role of social media is particularly crucial, as it can enhance tourism

development, increase tourist retention, and ultimately contribute to sustainable tourism, which is a core component of sustainable development.

Given these considerations, this study aims to address the following question: What impact do modern social media have on sports tourism in Ardabil Province?

2. Methodology

Overall, the research design of this study is mixed-methods, given the nature of the subject. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach because the researcher needs to utilize both quantitative and qualitative methods to answer the research questions. This research seeks both discovery (through qualitative research) and validation (through quantitative research), making the exploratory mixed-methods design the most suitable choice. This design begins with a qualitative phase, making it an optimal method for investigating a phenomenon. In an exploratory design, the study initiates with qualitative research to examine a phenomenon, followed by a quantitative phase designed based on the qualitative findings.

After obtaining the necessary approvals and explaining the research objectives, the researcher secured written informed consent from all participants before conducting a pre-test. To examine the impact of modern social media on sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professors in sports management and tourism experts. Therefore, the statistical population in the qualitative phase consisted of sports management professors and tourism experts. Purposive sampling was used in this phase, with a sample size of 15 participants, or until theoretical saturation was achieved. These experts were interviewed to collect qualitative data.

In the quantitative phase, the statistical population comprised tourists, who were considered an unlimited population. Based on Morgan's table, the sample size for an unlimited population was determined to be 384 individuals. The simple random sampling method was used.

For data collection in the quantitative phase, a researcher-developed questionnaire was utilized. The questionnaire focused on the impact of modern social media on sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province, consisting of 24 items measured on a Likert scale.

Data analysis in the qualitative phase was conducted using three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the quantitative phase, research questions were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with SPSS and Lisrel software.

3. Findings and Results

In axial coding, interview transcripts were re-examined along with open codes, and the relationships between concepts were analyzed. As a result, eight subcategories (sub-themes) emerged:

1. Tourism marketing through media
2. Impact of sports tourism development in the region
3. Tourist attraction and retention
4. Cultural tourism
5. Tourism economy
6. Regional transformations
7. Policies of managers and sports specialists

8. Cultural-sports tourism potentials.

Table 1. Categories Formed in the Initial Axial Coding Stage

Category (Theme)	Subcategory (Domain)	Concept
Consequences of Introducing Sports Tourism Marketing in Ardabil Province through Modern Social Media	Tourism marketing through media	- Rapid promotion of tourism - Lack of control over personal information - Crossing geographical boundaries - Formation of online communities
	Impact of sports tourism development in the region	- Economic efficiency - Job creation and unemployment reduction - Development of tourism motivations - Foreign exchange earnings - Cultural exchange
	Tourist attraction and retention	- Quality of infrastructure - Quality of health and medical services - Quality of hospitality and accommodation services - Environmental hygiene
	Tourism economy	- Dynamic economic growth - Income and wealth distribution - Personal and social profitability - Job creation - Regional economic efficiency
Causal Factors Influencing Sports Tourism Marketing in Ardabil Province through Modern Social Media	Cultural tourism	- Cultural interaction - Exchange of cultures and traditions
	Policies of managers and sports specialists	- Profit exchange management - Financial resource management - Attraction of domestic and foreign investors - Creating a competitive environment to attract investors - Utilizing specialized human resources - Accepting innovative ideas
	Cultural-sports tourism potentials	- Tourist attraction - Investor attraction - Cultural, economic, and social development in the region
	Regional transformations	- Job creation - Income growth - Road quality improvement - Increased investment in the region - Active participation of women in economic and social activities - Development of sports facilities and equipment - Expansion of sports venues

These emerging categories were continuously revised, with conceptually similar codes being grouped together. The categories were compared, merged when necessary, or further divided into one or more subcategories. The identified categories in the initial stages of analysis shaped the researcher’s understanding, influencing the design of subsequent questions and interviews. Through further interviews and data analysis, the researcher developed a deeper insight into the experiences of the participants.

Based on the analysis of interview codes and the research problem, the following primary categories were identified:

1. Development of sports tourism marketing: Economic prosperity, investor attraction, cultural exchange, job creation, increase in gross domestic product (GDP), foreign exchange generation.
2. Modern social media: Messaging platforms, microblogs (Twitter), social networking sites (Facebook), web-based technologies, mobile applications.

According to the results, 12.6% of respondents were women, while 87.4% were men. The age distribution of participants showed that 2.9% were under 20 years old (lowest frequency), while 27.4% belonged to the 20–29 age group (highest frequency). Regarding educational background, 2.9% of respondents had a high school diploma (lowest frequency), while 63.4% held a bachelor's degree (highest frequency). In terms of occupation, 5.0% of respondents were teachers (lowest frequency), whereas 23.2% were employees (highest frequency).

After conducting exploratory factor analysis, the factor analysis model for confirmatory factor analysis of the questions related to the consequences of sports tourism marketing was examined. The LISREL output model was presented in the form of standardized estimates and significance values. This model includes all consequences of sports tourism marketing. The numbers on the arrows represent the factor loadings of the variables, indicating the

magnitude of each. The model fit indices, as shown in Figure 1, suggest that the measurement model for the consequences of sports tourism marketing is appropriate, with an RMSEA value of 0.083. Given that this value is less than 0.1, it indicates a reasonable approximation of the model's mean squared error. Additionally, the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio is less than 3, further confirming the model's adequacy. The fit indices (GFI, AGFI, and NFI) are 0.93, 0.96, and 0.93, respectively, supporting the model's overall goodness of fit.

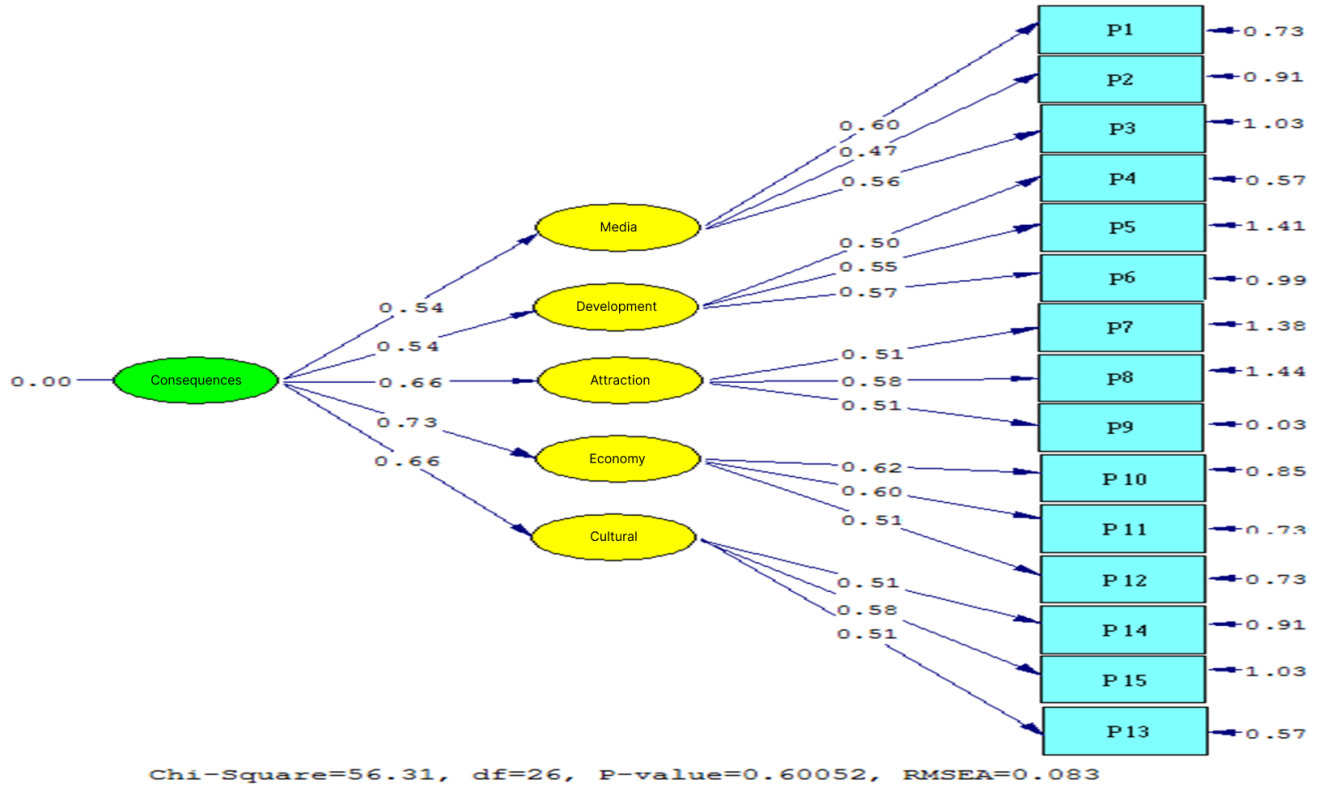


Figure 1. Structural Equation Model of the Consequences of Sports Tourism Marketing

After conducting exploratory factor analysis, the factor analysis model for confirmatory factor analysis of the questions related to causal factors influencing sports tourism marketing was examined. The LISREL output model was presented in the form of standardized estimates and significance values. This model includes all causal factors affecting sports tourism marketing. The numbers on the arrows represent the factor loadings of the variables, indicating the magnitude of each. The model fit indices, as shown in Figure 2, suggest that the measurement model for causal factors influencing sports tourism marketing is appropriate, with an RMSEA value of 0.083. Given that this value is less than 0.1, it indicates a reasonable approximation of the model's mean squared error. Additionally, the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio is less than 3, confirming the model's suitability. The fit indices (GFI, AGFI, and NFI) are 0.94, 0.98, and 0.94, respectively, supporting the model's overall goodness of fit.

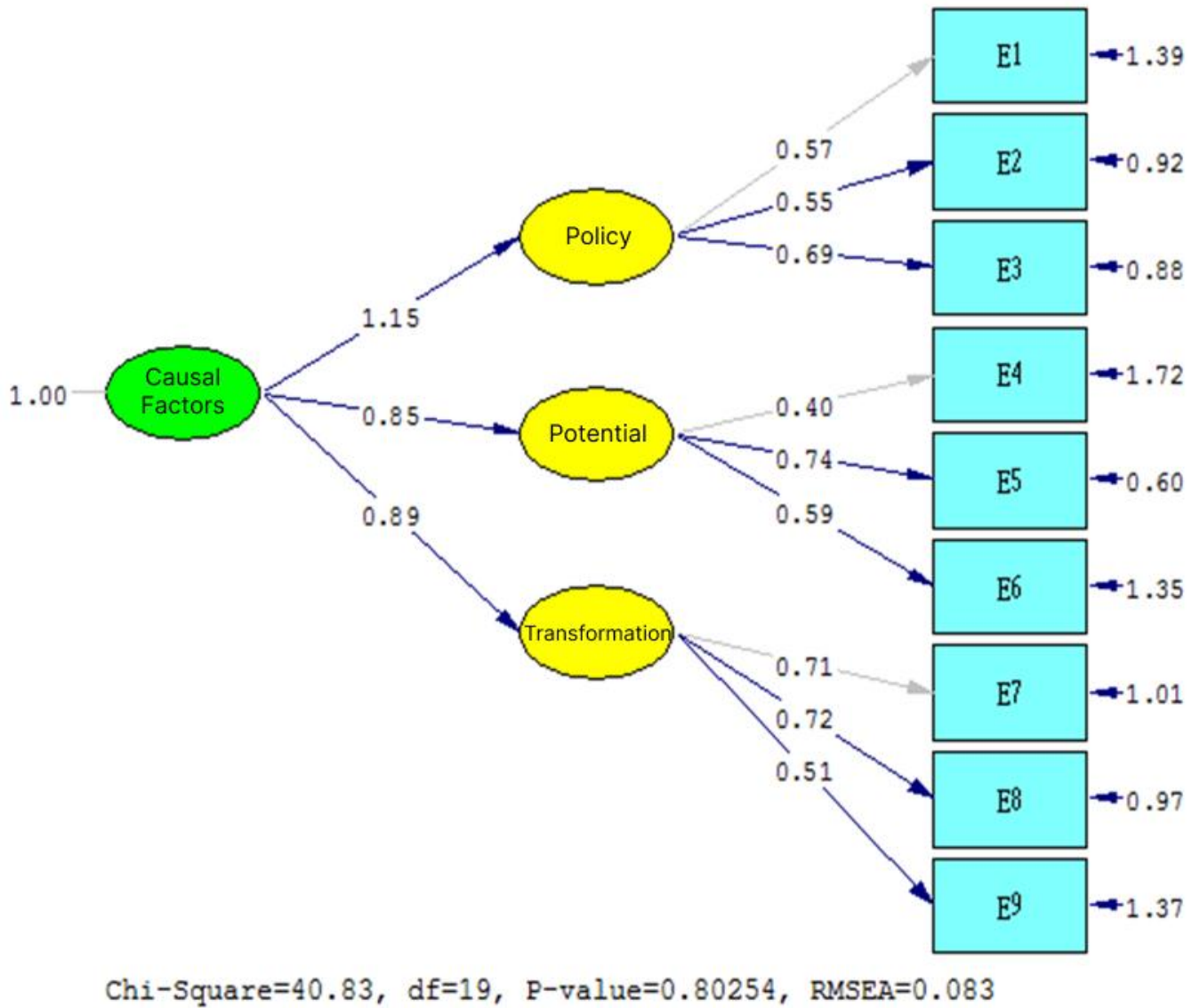


Figure 2. Structural Equation Model of the Causal Factors Influencing Sports Tourism Marketing

To address this question, the reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of the factors related to the sports tourism marketing model were estimated. The reliability results, based on the correlation of items with the total score, item reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the extracted constructs based on the final model, are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Analysis of Reliability and Convergent Validity of the Factors in the Sports Tourism Marketing Model

Category	Subcategory	Items	Item Reliability	Correlation of Item with Total Score	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	CR
Consequences of Introducing Sports Tourism Marketing in Ardabil Province through Modern Social Media	Tourism Marketing through Media	Question 1	0.70	0.52	0.83	0.54	0.94
		Question 2	0.71	0.59			

		Question 3	0.76	0.51			
	Impact of Sports Tourism Development in the Region	Question 4	0.71	0.58			
		Question 5	0.79	0.58			
		Question 6	0.73	0.50			
	Tourist Attraction and Retention	Question 7	0.71	0.50			
		Question 8	0.72	0.54			
		Question 9	0.77	0.50			
	Tourism Economy	Question 10	0.70	0.54			
		Question 11	0.70	0.52			
		Question 12	0.72	0.51			
	Cultural Tourism	Question 13	0.76	0.66			
		Question 14	0.78	0.52			
		Question 15	0.72	0.50			
Causal Factors Influencing Sports Tourism Marketing in Ardabil Province through Modern Social Media	Policies of Managers and Sports Specialists	Question 1	0.76	0.66	0.72	0.57	0.92
		Question 2	0.79	0.57			
		Question 3	0.77	0.53			
	Cultural-Sports Tourism Potentials	Question 4	0.76	0.66			
		Question 5	0.74	0.57			
		Question 6	0.75	0.51			
	Regional Transformations	Question 7	0.76	0.52			
		Question 8	0.72	0.58			
		Question 9	0.75	0.51			

The results from the above tables indicate that the correlation coefficients of the items with the total questionnaire score exceed 0.3, and the item reliability is greater than 0.5, demonstrating that the questions possess sufficient accuracy in measuring the factors within the sports tourism marketing model. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha reliability was reported as greater than 0.6, and the composite reliability (CR) exceeded 0.7, indicating that all five factors were accurately designed to determine the components of the sports tourism marketing model.

Furthermore, the results confirm that for each construct, $CR > AVE$ and $AVE > 0.5$, verifying the convergent validity of the components.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The development of the tourism industry in industrialized countries leads to diversified revenue streams and reduces economic imbalances. In developing countries, tourism provides an opportunity for exports, foreign exchange earnings, and job creation. Furthermore, the benefits of the tourism industry are not limited to economic gains; rather, they extend to cultural aspects, such as introducing domestic culture to other countries. The structural characteristics of tourism in each location are influenced, on the one hand, by the significance, reputation, nature, diversity of roles, and religious, cultural, recreational, and commercial functions of its attractions. On the other hand, they are shaped by the social, cultural (including belief systems), and economic characteristics of both the local residents and tourists [16]. Given the importance of sports tourism development in urban economies and its dependence on economic and social factors, as well as travel characteristics and destination attributes, it is essential to identify these factors and examine the impact of modern social media on sports tourism development. This will enable policymakers in Ardabil Province's tourism sector to design effective programs aimed at increasing sports tourism and boosting the tourism economy of the province. This study examines the role of modern social media in sports tourism across all seasons in Ardabil Province.

The results indicate that all research questions were categorized into five factors, with factor loadings exceeding 0.30. This finding suggests that all identified factors can be considered as components of the sports tourism marketing model of Ardabil Province, emphasizing modern social media. Furthermore, all measurement models were evaluated based on predefined criteria and were deemed appropriate, demonstrating an acceptable model fit. Therefore, based on the results of the measurement models, it can be concluded that all research instruments exhibit adequate and acceptable fit. These findings align with previous research [17-29].

In explaining this issue, it can be stated that the consequences of introducing sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province through modern social media—including tourism marketing through media, the impact of sports tourism development in the region, tourist attraction and retention, tourism economy, and cultural tourism—play a significant role in sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province with an emphasis on modern social media. These factors should be given special attention. Tourism activities encompass various economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions, serving as sources of transformation and change in developing countries. The changes brought about by tourism activities are significant and undeniable, and mass communication tools, as the carriers of messages and information, play a crucial role in these transformations. With advanced technology, these tools influence all political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions across the world [19, 20].

Host communities of sports events benefit economically, attracting investors. Studies on economic impact focus on determining the profitability of such events based on required investments, generated economic activities, and job creation. The economic impact of a sports event refers to the overall influence of the event on the economic system of a geographical region, arising from sports activities. The key indicators of sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province through modern social media should focus on rapid tourism promotion, lack of personal information control, transcending geographical boundaries, formation of online communities, economic efficiency, job creation and unemployment reduction, cultural exchange, infrastructure quality indicators, healthcare service quality, environmental hygiene, dynamic economic growth, personal and social profitability, employment generation, and regional economic efficiency.

After conducting exploratory factor analysis, a factor analysis model was used for confirmatory factor analysis of the research questions related to the causal factors influencing sports tourism marketing. The LISREL output

model was generated in the form of standardized estimates and significance values. All measurement models were evaluated based on predefined criteria and deemed appropriate, indicating an acceptable model fit. Therefore, based on the results of the measurement models, it can be concluded that all research instruments exhibit adequate and acceptable fit. This model includes all causal factors affecting sports tourism marketing.

In explaining this issue, it can be stated that the causal factors influencing sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province through modern social media—including policies of managers and sports specialists, cultural-sports tourism potentials, and regional transformations—are highly significant. Tourism activities encompass various economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions, serving as sources of transformation and change in developing countries. The changes brought about by tourism activities are significant and undeniable, and mass communication tools, as the carriers of messages and information, play a crucial role in these transformations. With advanced technology, these tools influence all political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions across the world [17-19].

Host communities of sports events benefit economically, attracting investors. Studies on economic impact focus on determining the profitability of such events based on required investments, generated economic activities, and job creation. The economic impact of a sports event refers to the overall influence of the event on the economic system of a geographical region. Key indicators should focus on profit exchange management, financial resource management, attraction of domestic and foreign investors, creation of a competitive environment for investment, utilization of specialized human resources, acceptance of innovative ideas, tourist attraction, cultural-economic-social development of the region, job creation, income growth, road quality improvement, continuous participation of women in economic and social activities, development of sports facilities and equipment, and expansion of sports venues.

Based on the results obtained, the following recommendations and key points are provided to develop a sports tourism marketing model for Ardabil Province with an emphasis on modern social media:

According to the results of the first research question regarding the consequences of introducing sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province through modern social media, it was found that rapid tourism promotion, lack of personal information control, transcending geographical boundaries, formation of online communities, economic efficiency, job creation and unemployment reduction, cultural exchange, infrastructure quality indicators, healthcare service quality, environmental hygiene, dynamic economic growth, personal and social profitability, employment generation, and regional economic efficiency should be prioritized. It is recommended that tourism and sports tourism policymakers in Ardabil Province collaborate with experts from various disciplines to make informed decisions based on these indicators.

Regarding efficiency and quality, it is necessary to enhance the quality of equipment and facilities in sports tourism regions of Ardabil Province and to develop integrated sports tourism marketing strategies that meet the expectations and needs of relevant tourists, ultimately leading to higher satisfaction. To achieve these objectives, attention should be given to stadium environments, staff attitudes, the credibility and reputation of the destination, its social perception among sports tourists, pricing strategies, accessibility, convenience, and motivation enhancement. This has been supported in previous research as well.

According to the results of the second research question regarding the causal factors influencing sports tourism marketing in Ardabil Province, it was found that profit exchange management, financial resource management, attraction of domestic and foreign investors, creation of a competitive environment for investment, utilization of specialized human resources, acceptance of innovative ideas, tourist attraction, cultural-economic-social

development of the region, job creation, income growth, road quality improvement, continuous participation of women in economic and social activities, development of sports facilities and equipment, and expansion of sports venues should be given special attention.

It is recommended that tourism management prioritize the improvement of service delivery at sports and recreational sites by utilizing existing capabilities in each province and providing the necessary infrastructure to enhance sports tourism development and growth.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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