



Identifying and Prioritizing the Consequences of Digital Marketing in Sports Tourism Using Interpretive Structural Modeling

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ABSTRACT

With the expansion of digital technologies, digital marketing has become a vital tool in attracting sports tourists. This research was conducted in 2024 with the aim of identifying and prioritizing the consequences of digital marketing in sports tourism using the interpretive structural modeling method. The present study was applied and carried out with a mixed approach (qualitative-quantitative) and using the interpretive structural modeling (ISM) method. In the qualitative stage, thematic analysis was used using library studies and semi-structured interviews with 13 experts in sports tourism, marketing, and researchers in these two fields. In the quantitative stage, 15 experts were selected purposively and data were collected through a researcher-made questionnaire. In the qualitative section, 55 basic themes and 10 organizing themes were identified, which were centered around the overarching theme of "Consequences of Digital Marketing in Sports Tourism." The results of the quantitative section showed that these outcomes were categorized into four levels, with the main foundations at the first level. Infrastructure development, as the most influential level, directly affected the third level criteria (tourism economic development, tourist behavioral and attitudinal development, and tourism destination awareness). By presenting an Interpretive Structural Model (ISM), this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the outcomes of digital marketing in sports tourism, which can assist managers and policymakers in areas such as marketing strategies, resource allocation, and competitive policymaking. To date, the development of a hierarchical and leveled model of digital marketing outcomes in sports tourism using the ISM method has received limited attention in this field.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, tourism is recognized as one of the fundamental pillars of economic development. Many policymakers view tourism as a key driver of economic growth, as this industry, often described as a form of invisible export, contributes to increased tax revenues, expanded exports, and the overall strengthening of national economies (Gorzin et al., 2023). In recent decades, the tourism industry has experienced rapid and remarkable growth, accounting for a substantial share of nations' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Alidoust Ghahfarrokhi et al., 2023). Consequently, given the growing importance of tourism and intense global competition, tourist destinations continuously strive to expand their market share and attract more visitors (Ghaffari & Mamramezani, 2019). Among the various tourism segments, sports tourism has emerged as a dynamic subsector. Sport and tourism share common objectives, including encouraging participation in enjoyable activities and providing opportunities for individuals to escape the pressures of daily life (Karegar et al., 2024). However, competition in this field has intensified to the point that achieving distinction and uniqueness has become a major challenge. Addressing this requires creativity and specialized knowledge in digital marketing (Mariani et al., 2019). Experiences from several countries demonstrate that leveraging social media platforms and investing in digital marketing have played a crucial role in tourism development (John et al., 2020). The practical implementation of digital marketing is indispensable for the tourism industry in Iran. Despite having considerable tourism potential—especially compared to other countries in the region—Iran has yet to capitalize on a significant portion of these opportunities. One of the main reasons for this shortfall is the weakness in executing marketing strategies, particularly digital marketing. Many of Iran's tourist attractions have not been effectively promoted on social media in multiple languages. At the same time, digital marketing has created unprecedented opportunities to showcase tourism potential and can drive a

substantial transformation in the development of this industry. However, Iran has not yet fully leveraged this tool, whereas many countries in the region have successfully attracted a significant number of tourists through digital marketing. Therefore, Iran could also take effective steps to advance its tourism industry by harnessing digital marketing strategies. According to Interdependence Theory, interactions among sports tourism stakeholders—such as athletes, spectators, organizers, and digital platforms—are crucial; yet, these interactions are enabled by digital capabilities.

With the advancement of information technology, the increasing online engagement of users, and the rising global internet penetration, digital marketing has garnered significant attention as a critical area of expertise for business practitioners (Rezaei soufi et al., 2021). The term digital marketing was first introduced in the 1990s (Kannan, 2017). Technological advancements have facilitated numerous activities, including marketing (Sembiring et al., 2022). As a subset of direct marketing and a component of integrated marketing communications, digital marketing has experienced the fastest growth among marketing approaches (Mariani & Baggio, 2022). The tourism industry has gradually embraced this tool, offering part of its services through digital marketing (Mariani et al., 2019). By leveraging modern technologies and digital channels, it has significantly contributed to raising public awareness, promoting sports activities, and accelerating economic growth (Pashaie et al., 2025). Digital marketing also enables customers to access information anytime and anywhere (Yasmin et al., 2015). Among the objectives of digital marketing are identifying its critical elements and leveraging strategic solutions at both organizational and operational levels to enhance the effectiveness of business activities in the digital commerce domain (Hoseyni et al., 2022). Utilizing this tool offers numerous benefits, including greater market presence, cost reduction, service personalization, unrestricted access, and

improved communication for companies. Furthermore, understanding the potential impact of the internet on core business aspects can improve marketing programs and support the development of sustainable strategies (Nuseir, 2016). Digital communications also enable feedback, interaction, and responses, providing key customer insights that can be used to fine-tune communication strategies. Additionally, two of the primary advantages of digital marketing are increased brand loyalty and the facilitation of online sales (Çizmeci & Ercan, 2015).

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) categorize digital marketing into the following tools: search engine marketing (SEM), search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, email marketing, affiliate marketing, social media marketing, and online display advertising. They emphasize that a successful digital strategy should integrate these tools in a cohesive manner.

Given the numerous benefits of digital marketing and the limited effectiveness of traditional marketing methods in promoting the tourism industry, the necessity of adopting innovative marketing strategies in this sector has become increasingly evident. Nevertheless, despite its importance, research on digital marketing in the context of sports tourism remains scarce. The research gap addressed by this study stems from the absence of a structured and prioritized model for the consequences of digital marketing in the field of sports tourism. In other words, although previous studies have examined the effects of digital marketing on tourism or sports, they have not comprehensively addressed issues such as the lack of integration in identifying consequences, the absence of a systemic approach to the relationships among these consequences, and the neglect of sports tourism as a specific context. Therefore, identifying and prioritizing the consequences of digital marketing in this sector can play a significant role in the growth and development of the sports tourism industry. The theoretical foundation of this study

integrates economics, marketing, information technology, and tourism management, with a primary focus on the notion that digital marketing is not merely a supportive tool but a strategic necessity for the development of sports tourism in Iran. By addressing existing gaps in the literature—particularly regarding the prioritization of consequences and the causal relationships among them—this study contributes to the theoretical enrichment of the field. The main research question of this study is: How can the consequences of digital marketing be analyzed and interpreted in the field of sports tourism, and how are these consequences prioritized in Iran? To address this research question, the consequences of digital marketing were identified through a review of the existing literature and with the participation of sports tourists, marketers, and staff from relevant organizations. Using the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) approach, the relationships among various consequences were analyzed and prioritized. This model assists researchers and managers in the sports tourism industry in identifying and analyzing the complex interrelationships among different variables.

Research Background

A review of domestic and international studies indicates that digital marketing and sports tourism have been key areas of interest for researchers. For instance, Golmohammadi et al. (2025) demonstrated that concepts such as customer, social, industry, tourism, and brand in digital marketing topics, as well as club-related, social, and competitive concepts in sports and digital marketing studies, have been emphasized as critical themes. These concepts contribute to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of digital marketing methods in the sports industry, thereby facilitating improved performance and profitability in this sector. Bharti et al. (2024) demonstrated that companies leveraging digital marketing tools recorded a 27% higher customer retention rate

compared to firms relying on traditional marketing methods. According to Isavi (2024), key consequences of digital marketing in sports tourism include fostering tourist loyalty toward sports tourism destinations, foreign exchange generation and national economic development, and enhancing tourism brand equity. Farahani et al. (2023) classify the outcomes of digital marketing advancement into five overarching categories: informational benefits, strategic advantages, economic gains, intangible benefits, and customer-centric outcomes. The findings of Lotfi Ashtiani et al. (2023) indicate that the consequences of digital marketing in the field of medical tourism in Iran can be classified into four key components: tourist loyalty, tourist satisfaction, service quality, and social media content. Rastgoo et al. (2023) reported that the consequences of co-creating experiences in sports tourism include the enhancement of tourists' behavioral intentions, stimulation of the tourism economy, development of tourism infrastructure, improvement of host community social welfare, promotion of social capital, cultural development, and value creation. Among these, the promotion of social capital and the stimulation of the tourism economy were identified as the most influential and the most influenced components, respectively, in sports tourism. In the study conducted by Tahmasebpour et al. (2022), the consequences of digital marketing on the development of the tourism industry encompassed economic, socio-cultural, political, and environmental development. The findings of

Salahi Kojour et al. (2021) indicated that the use of digital tools provides numerous benefits for sports tourism businesses; among these benefits is supporting the development of the industry to reduce dependence on oil and diversify the economy. These studies indicate that digital marketing can serve as a powerful tool for the development of sports tourism. However, a research gap still exists regarding the identification and prioritization of its consequences in the context of sports tourism in Iran. This study aims to fill this gap in the industry. Research on designing an Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) framework for the consequences of digital marketing in sports tourism is of considerable importance, both scientifically and practically. This study not only contributes to the advancement of theoretical knowledge but also has the potential to enhance the performance of the sports tourism industry and attract a larger number of tourists. The novelty of this research lies in presenting a hierarchical, multi-level model of the consequences of digital marketing in sports tourism using the ISM method, which has received limited attention in this domain so far. First, the consequences of digital marketing in sports tourism were identified through thematic analysis. Then, recognizing that these consequences differ in their real-world priorities and are inherently interrelated, the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) approach was applied to establish their hierarchical relationships.

2. Methodology

This study was applied in nature and followed an exploratory mixed-methods design (qualitative–quantitative). In the first phase, a literature review was conducted to collect theoretical foundations, review previous studies, and prepare for the interviews. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were carried out with experts and specialists in relevant fields. The qualitative

research population consisted of experts, specialists, and practitioners in the fields of tourism, marketing, and sports management. Participants were selected based on their adequate knowledge and expertise related to the research topic. A purposeful sampling technique was employed, and sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. In addition, part of the research data was obtained from

library sources related to digital marketing in the tourism domain. After reviewing the literature and conducting the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed, coded, and categorized. Based on the insights gained from the initial interviews, further participants were selected for additional rounds of interviews. For analyzing the qualitative data, Thematic Analysis was employed. As a simple yet effective method for examining qualitative data, Thematic Analysis identifies, reviews, and reports recurring patterns within the data, transforming diverse and scattered information into rich and meaningful insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, Thematic Analysis was conducted through several stages, including data identification and filtering, code extraction, and the development of basic, organizing, and overarching themes. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the data, techniques such as participant review and evaluation by external experts were used. During participant review, three interviewees were invited to examine the final analytical report and share their feedback. Additionally, in the expert validation process, the findings were reviewed by three faculty members who were not part of the study. Following their feedback, the necessary revisions were made.

In the quantitative phase, a pairwise comparison questionnaire was developed based on the qualitative findings and the literature to evaluate the effects of digital marketing on Iran's sports tourism sector. Subsequently, the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method was applied as a multi-criteria decision-making technique to analyze the interrelationships and mutual influences among the identified factors. The ISM method is an effective tool for examining the type and direction of complex interrelationships among system elements (Singh & Kant, 2008). It simplifies complex systems through graphical and verbal representation, making them easier to understand.

Its advantages include ease of interpretation, integration of expert opinions, systematic analysis of complex systems, and the prioritization of key elements, all of which assist managers in applying the model more effectively (Chandramowli et al., 2011). The ISM approach is an expert-driven methodology that effectively analyzes the interdependencies among qualitative variables of varying importance and identifies the underlying hierarchical relationships between them (Ramazaniyan et al., 2015). In the present study, expert opinions were obtained through purposive sampling to determine the conceptual relationships among the identified indicators. Unlike purely quantitative statistical methods, ISM focuses on the depth and quality of expert knowledge and experience rather than on sample size. Accordingly, a sample of 10 to 20 experts is generally considered sufficient for studies using this approach. The selection of 15 experts in this study was justified based on the following considerations:

Disciplinary diversity: Experts were drawn from the fields of digital marketing, sports tourism management, and information technology to ensure comprehensive coverage of all relevant dimensions of the topic.

Theoretical saturation: Following the analysis of the opinions of the 15 experts, repetition of concepts and consistency in the pairwise comparison matrices indicated that the data were adequate.

To prioritize the components, a pairwise comparison questionnaire was completed by experienced professionals in tourism and researchers specializing in digital marketing, and the collected data were subsequently analyzed.

Table 1 presents a summary of the research methods based on the Research Onion model.

Table 1. Research Methodology Based on the Research Onion Model

Research Layers	Research Methods
Ontology	Critical Realism: Assumes the existence of an objective reality independent of human perception, while acknowledging the researcher's cognitive limitations
Epistemology	Interpretivist–Descriptive Approach: Focuses on gaining deep insights into phenomena through interaction with participants and the integration of qualitative and quantitative perspectives
Research Philosophy	Pragmatism: Combines qualitative and quantitative paradigms to address complex research questions effectively.
Research Approach	Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design: Qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase
Research Strategy	Qualitative: Thematic analysis using semi-structured interviews. Quantitative: Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM).
Sampling Technique	Qualitative: Purposeful sampling until theoretical saturation (experts in tourism, marketing, and sport management). Quantitative: Purposeful expert sampling (academic and industry professionals).
Data Collection	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews and literature review. Quantitative: Pairwise comparison questionnaire developed from qualitative findings.
Data Analysis	Qualitative: Thematic coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), incorporating participant validation and external expert review. Quantitative: Hierarchical relationship analysis using ISM (Singh & Kant, 2008).
Research Design	Sequential Design: Qualitative phase followed by quantitative phase.
Interview Duration	45–60 minutes

3. Findings of the Research

The qualitative phase of the study revealed that the participants included 10 men and 3 women, with an average age of 43.15 years.

In terms of educational attainment, 7 participants held doctoral degrees, 5 held master's degrees, and 1 held a bachelor's degree.

Furthermore, 6 participants had academic backgrounds in Physical Education, while the remaining 7 had specialized in non-Physical Education fields such as Sociology, Biomedical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Software Engineering, and Geography and Tourism Planning. Detailed information about the qualitative sample is presented in Table 2.

Table2. Distribution of Participants in the Qualitative Section

Interviewee	Position	Gender	Education	Field of Study	Age	Work Experience
P1	Faculty Member - Researcher in Tourism & Marketing	Male	PhD	Sports Management	56	30
P2	Faculty Member - Researcher in Tourism & Marketing	Male	PhD	Sports Management	48	18
P3	Faculty Member - Researcher in Tourism & Marketing	Female	PhD	Sociology	58	25
P4	Faculty Member - Researcher in Tourism & Marketing	Male	PhD	Sports Management	39	9
P5	Faculty Member - Researcher in Tourism and Marketing	Female	PhD	Sports Management	34	5
P6	Manager of Travel Services	Female	Bachelor's	Management	63	15
P7	Active in Tourism & Tour Leader	Male	PhD	Sports Management	31	7
P8	Vice President of the Provincial Association of Professional Tour Guides	Male	Master's	Biomedical Engineering	38	5

P9	Secretary of the Provincial Association of Professional Tour Guides	Male	Master's	Civil Engineering	34	3
P10	International Certified Tour Guide	Male	Master's	Software Engineering	33	3
P11	Board Member of the International Rafting Federation & Tour Leader	Male	Master's	Geography & Tourism Planning	48	18
P12	Manager of Air Travel & Tourism Services Company	Male	Master's	Management	49	16
P13	Active in Tourism & Tour Leader	Male	PhD	Sports Management	30	5

In the qualitative phase of the study, Thematic Analysis was applied to analyze the data. Initially, the data were collected from library sources and semi-structured interviews, followed by a systematic coding process. Subsequently, all codes were reviewed, and similar ones were grouped into basic themes. This stage aimed to identify the approach for integrating different codes to develop coherent basic themes. Next, preliminary titles were assigned to each basic theme, and their relationships with the extracted codes were examined. During this process, some themes were merged due to conceptual similarity and overlap. Finally, after several rounds of reviewing and refining the codes, the final synthesis was completed.

After identifying and labeling the basic themes, the next step was to identify the organizing themes. In this stage, basic themes that exhibited notable similarities and were centered around a shared concept were merged to form the organizing themes. Ultimately, these organizing themes were grouped under the overarching theme of “Consequences of Digital Marketing in Sports Tourism in Iran.”

Table 3 presents sample excerpts from the interviews, along with the corresponding basic and organizing themes related to the economic development of tourism. These findings reflect the consequences of digital marketing development in sports tourism in Iran.

Table 3. Sample Interview Excerpts and Basic and Organizing Themes for Economic Development in Sports Tourism

NO.	Interview Text	Basic Themes (Open Codes)	Source
1	... Utilizing online services provided by digital marketing can help introduce tourist attractions and sports disciplines. Additionally, in various regions such as deserts, seas, mountains, and any environment suitable for sports activities, these initiatives can contribute to job creation in this sector.	Job Creation	P5, Shirshamsi et al. (2023) ; Tahmasebpour et al. (2022)
2	... Sports tourism can be one of the most revenue-generating sub-sectors of tourism for the country and even has the potential for foreign currency earnings.	Foreign Currency Earnings	P12
3	... One of the outcomes of developing sports tourism through digital marketing is the reduced dependence on government budgets.	Reduced Dependence on Government Budgets	Javashi Jadid et al. (2020) ; Rastgoo et al. (2023)
4	... One of the key impacts of digital marketing in sports tourism is the increased likelihood of domestic and foreign investments due to its novelty and high profitability potential.	Increased Domestic and Foreign Investment	P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020) ; Rastgoo et al. (2023)
5	... In previous years, the tourism industry had limited opportunities for startups. However, digital	Competitiveness and Competitive Advantage	

NO.	Interview Text	Basic Themes (Open Codes)	Source
	marketing has created new possibilities, enabling individuals with skills and experience to participate in the sector's development. Consequently, competition with major brands has become feasible, and tourism profits are now more evenly distributed.		P4, P6, Rastgoo et al. (2023); Shirshamsi et al. (2023)
6	... One of the primary sources of national income is oil. However, sports tourism can generate substantial revenue and serve as an alternative economic driver.	Reduced Dependence on Oil and Diversification of Economy	Salahi Kojour et al. (2021)
7	Digital marketing minimizes intermediaries and brokers, allowing direct online transactions without the need for middlemen.	Reduced Intermediaries and Brokers	P5, P6
8	... Digital marketing is a cost-effective method for both customers and marketing agencies. Customers can achieve their goals within their budget without intermediaries, while agencies can attract more clients and adjust their strategies dynamically to maximize profits without incurring major losses.	Reduced Market Access Costs	P5, P6, P7, P9, P12, Shirshamsi et al. (2023)

At this stage, the eight extracted basic themes were integrated and conceptualized within the organizing theme of "Economic Development of Tourism" to enhance coherence and enable a more comprehensive analysis and interpretation.

Table 4 presents a summary of the basic and organizing themes under the overarching theme. (In the table, "P" refers to the interview participants.

Table 4. The Formation Process of the Overarching Theme of Digital Marketing Development Outcomes in Iran's Sports Tourism

Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Source
Economic Development of Tourism	Job Creation	P5, Shirshamsi et al. (2023); Tahmasebpour et al. (2022)
	Foreign Currency Earnings	P12
	Reduced Dependence on Government Budgets	Javashi Jadid et al. (2020); Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Increased Domestic and Foreign Investment	P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020); Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Competitiveness and Competitive Advantage	P4, P6, Rastgoo et al. (2023); Shirshamsi et al. (2023)
	Reduced Dependence on Oil and Diversification of Economy	Salahi Kojour et al. (2021)
	Reduced Intermediaries and Brokers	P5, P6
	Reduced Market Access Costs	P5, P6, P7, P9, P12, Shirshamsi et al. (2023)
Behavioral and Attitudinal Development of Tourists	Tourist Satisfaction	P1, P2, P3, P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020); Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Tourist Loyalty to Service Provider	P5, P13, Lotfi Ashtiani et al. (2023); Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Word-of-Mouth Travel Recommendation	P4, P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020); Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Repeat Visitation of Tourists	P1, P2, P4, P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020); Rastgoo et al. (2023)

Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Source
	Reputation and Popularity of the Destination or Service Provider Brand	P4
	Creation of Memorable Experiences	P4
	Identity Formation with Destinations or Events	P4
Destination Awareness	Increased Access to Destination Information	P5, P6, P7, Dashtlaali et al. (2020)
	Enhanced Knowledge and Insight of Customers and Service Providers	P4, Rahmanpour et al. (2023)
	Recognition of Tourist Attractions for Tourists	P5, Shirshamsi et al. (2023)
	Timely Information on Sports Events	Dashtlaali et al. (2020)
Infrastructure Development	Development of Transport Infrastructure	P5, Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Development of Telecommunication Infrastructure	P4, P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020) ; Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Development of Sports Facilities	P2, P5, P10, Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Expansion of Sports Accommodations (Hotels, Guesthouses, etc.)	P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020) ; Rastgoo et al. (2023)
Cultural Development	Enhanced Cultural Interactions between Different Societies	P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020) ; Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Development of Host Country's Culture	P1, P2
	Promotion of Local Traditions and Customs in Different Societies	P4, P5
	Cultural Awareness in Host Communities	P1, P4, P5
	Expansion of Digital Literacy	P3, P4, P7, P9, P12
Social Capital Development	Trust in Online Tourism Services	P5, Dashtlaali et al. (2020)
	Development of Direct Communication between Tourism Agencies and Customers	P5, P6, P7, P13
	Development of Tourist-to-Tourist Communications	P4, P5, P6
	Expansion of International Relations	P4, P7, P12
	Increased Trust among Sports Tourism Stakeholders	P5, P13, Rastgoo et al. (2023)
	Engagement and Interaction with Customers and Fans	P4
	Expansion of Collaborations	P2, P8, P9
Social Welfare Development	Enjoyment of Material Well-being	P1, P3, P5, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020)
	Development of Facilities for Tourists and Host Communities	P1, P9, P11, P12
	Improvement in Quality of Life for Host Communities	P1, P11, Javashi Jadid et al. (2020)
	Enhancement of Living Standards	P5
	Seamless Access to Services	P4, P5, P10, P12, Lotfi Ashtiani et al. (2023)
	Facilitation of Service Reception	P4, P5

Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Source
Success of Branding Initiatives	Expanded Market Access	P2, P8, P9
	Value Creation for Customers and Service Providers	P4
	Enhanced Effectiveness of Advertising Campaigns	P4
	Increased Access and Visibility	P3, P6, P7
	Expansion of Brand Content and Storytelling	P4, P7
	Attainment of Positive Image and Reputation	P5, P7
Marketing Strategy Improvement	Instant Reporting and Evaluation for Strategy Adjustment	P4
	Utilization of Customer Data Analysis to Meet Needs	P4
	Reduced Advertising Strategy Costs	P6, P9
	Effective Targeting of Consumer Groups Based on Preferences and Interests	P4
Environmental Development	Reduction of Paper and Physical Resource Consumption	P7, P9, P12
	Fast and Effective Information Dissemination	P2, P3
	Encouragement of Sustainable Behaviors	P4
	Effective Targeting	P4

At this stage, the 55 basic themes extracted in the previous phase were organized into 10 abstract concepts, referred to as organizing themes, to enhance coherence and facilitate analysis and interpretation. The ten organizing themes are as follows: Tourism Economic Development; Behavioral and Attitudinal Development of Tourists; Destination Awareness; Infrastructure Development; Cultural Development; Social Capital Development; Social Welfare Development; Success of Branding Initiatives; Marketing Strategy Improvement; and Environmental Development.

Steps of Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM)

a. Formation of the Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM):

The Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) represents the positions of the identified enablers

and is constructed based on their dimensions and pairwise comparisons. The type of relationship among the enablers is indicated using the symbols V, X, O, and A.

b. Formation of the Initial Reachability Matrix (RM):

The Initial Reachability Matrix (RM) converts the relational symbols in the SSIM into binary values (0 and 1). The rules for this conversion are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Method of Converting Conceptual Relationships into Numbers (Thakkar et al., 2006)

j to i	i to j	Conceptual Symbol
0	1	V
1	0	A

1	1	X
0	0	O

c. Formation of the Final Reachability Matrix:

The Final Reachability Matrix is developed based on the transitive relationships among the variables and addresses secondary relationships between the indicator dimensions. A secondary relationship occurs when, if dimension I leads to dimension J and dimension J leads to dimension K, then dimension I should also lead to dimension K. If this condition is not satisfied in the reachability matrix, the matrix is revised and the missing relationships are incorporated. In this process, some zero elements are converted to one, denoted as 1*. By identifying the secondary relationships and applying the necessary adjustments, the final reachability matrix is obtained.

d. Determination of Levels and Priorities of Variables:

After identifying the reachability and antecedent sets for each element and determining their intersection set, the variables are assigned to specific levels. For each element, the reachability set includes the rows in the matrix with a value of 1, while the antecedent set consists of the columns with a value of 1. The intersection set is derived from the overlap of these two sets. When an element's intersection set matches its reachability set, that element is assigned to the first priority level. By removing these elements and repeating the process for the remaining ones, the levels of all elements are determined.

e. Construction of the Interpretive Structural Model (ISM):

The ISM is constructed based on the final reachability matrix and the previously determined levels of the elements.

f. Driving and Dependence Analysis (MICMAC Method):

The row sums of the final reachability matrix indicate the driving power of each element, while the column sums represent the element's dependence. Based on these two factors, elements can be classified into four groups: autonomous, dependent, linkage, and independent. Autonomous elements exhibit weak driving power and low dependence, and are relatively isolated from other elements. Dependent elements have low driving power but high dependence. Linkage elements possess both high driving power and high dependence, such that any action on these elements causes changes in other elements. Independent elements have high driving power and low dependence, and are considered key elements, which are classified into either the independent or linkage groups. In the present study, after identifying the research factors in the qualitative phase, which consisted of 10 criteria, the analysis was conducted as follows:

- Economic Development of Tourism (C1)
- Behavioral and Attitudinal Development of Tourists (C2)
- Destination Awareness (C3)
- Infrastructure Development (C4)
- Cultural Development (C5)
- Social Capital Development (C6)
- Social Welfare Development (C7)
- Success of Branding Initiatives (C8)
- Marketing Strategy Improvement (C9)
- Environmental Development (C10)

In this study, the Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) was constructed as the first step. The symbols used in this matrix were defined in the initial phase. The matrix was developed based on experts' opinions, and the results are presented in Table 4. Subsequently, using the information in Table 6, the Initial Reachability Matrix was generated with binary values (0 and 1).

Table 6. Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM)

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10
C1		V	O	V	A	V	O	X	V	O
C2			V	O	X	V	O	O	X	O
C3				O	X	A	O	V	V	O
C4					V	V	X	O	V	X
C5						X	X	X	V	V
C6							X	V	V	O
C7								V	V	A
C8									V	O
C9										O
C10										

Next, the transitive relationships were identified, and the Final Reachability Matrix was subsequently obtained, as presented in Table 7. All

values marked as 1 in this table were originally zeros in the Initial Reachability Matrix.*

Table 7. Final Reachability Matrix

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	Driving Power
C1	1*	1	1*	1	1*	1	1*	1	1	1*	10
C2	1*	1*	1	0	1	1	1*	1*	1	1*	9
C3	1*	1*	1*	0	1	1*	1*	1	1	1*	9
C4	1*	1*	1*	1*	1	1	1	1*	1	1	10
C5	1	1	1	1*	1*	1	1	1	1	1	10
C6	1*	1*	1	1*	1	1*	1	1	1	1*	10
C7	1*	1*	1*	1	1	1	1*	1	1	1*	10
C8	1	1*	1*	1*	1	1*	1*	1*	1	1*	10
C9	0	1	1*	0	1*	1*	0	0	1*	0	5
C10	0	0	0	1	1*	1*	1	1*	1*	1*	7
Degree of Dependency	8	9	9	7	10	10	9	9	10	9	

Then, based on the Final Reachability Matrix and following the procedures described in Step 4, the reachability and antecedent sets were derived, and the criteria were assigned to their respective levels. The results of this process are presented in Table 8.

After determining the final values of the indicators and based on the Final Reachability Matrix, the Interpretive Structural Model (ISM) was constructed. The final model is presented in Figure 1.

Table 8. Determining the Levels of Indicators

	Reachability Set	Antecedent Set	Intersection Set	Level
C1	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-	3
C2	C1-C2-C3-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-	C1-C2-C3-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-	3
C3	C1-C2-C3-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-	C1-C2-C3-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-	3
C4	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C10	C1-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C10	4

	Reachability Set	Antecedent Set	Intersection Set	Level
C5	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	1
C6	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	1
C7	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C10	2
C8	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C10	2
C9	C2-C3-C5-C6-C9-	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C2-C3-C5-C6-C9-	1
C10	C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C9-C10	C1-C2-C3-C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C10	C4-C5-C6-C7-C8-C10	2

The research model comprises four levels. The fourth level, which includes the criterion Infrastructure Development (C4), is the most influential and directly affects the third-level criteria: Economic Development of Tourism (C1), Behavioral and Attitudinal Development of Tourists

(C2), and Destination Awareness (C3). This hierarchical influence proceeds from bottom to top, such that the three criteria at the first level—Cultural Development (C5), Social Capital Development (C6), and Marketing Strategy Improvement (C9)—are the most affected.

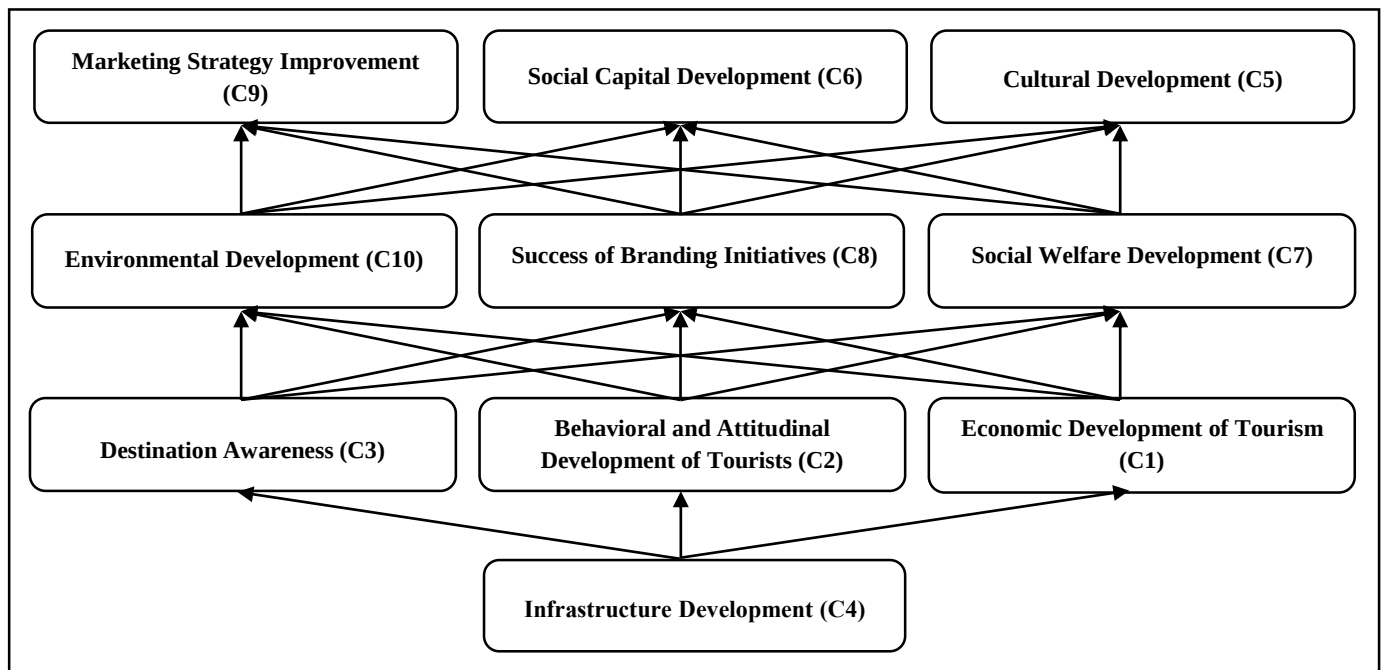


Figure 1. Hierarchical Model of Indicators

Driving and Dependence Analysis (MICMAC)

Based on the driving power and dependence of each criterion (Table 4), the indicators were categorized using the MICMAC analysis method (Figure 2). Marketing Strategy Improvement (C9) belongs to the dependent group, exhibiting strong dependence but weak driving power, meaning it is

highly influenced by other elements while exerting little

influence on the system. The remaining criteria fall within the linkage area, indicating that they are both highly influential and highly dependent; in other words, even small changes in these variables

can lead to substantial changes throughout the system.

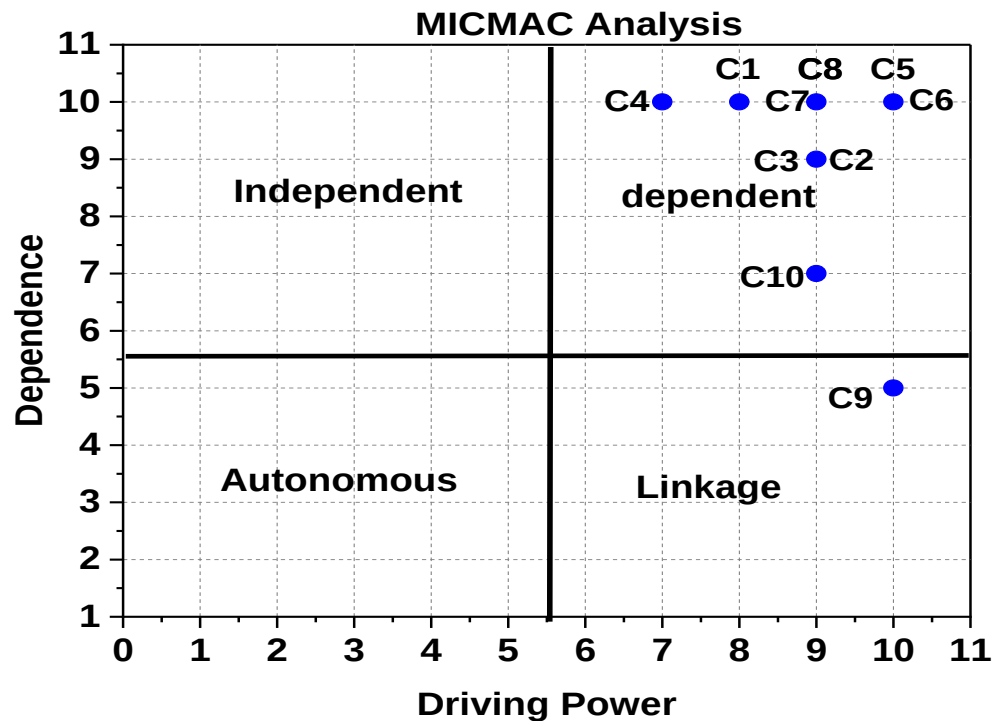


Figure 2. Diagram of Influence and Dependency Power

4. Discussion and conclusion

Despite the comprehensive identification and prioritization of the consequences of digital marketing in sports tourism, this study highlights the integrative and transformative role of digital marketing as a unifying link connecting all the identified components. Digital marketing is not merely a supportive tool but a dynamic system that creates synergy among the economic, cultural, social, and environmental dimensions, thereby providing a coherent framework for the sustainable development of sports tourism. The primary objective of this study was to identify and prioritize the consequences of digital marketing in sports tourism using the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method. In the qualitative phase of the research, ten factors were identified as the consequences of digital marketing in the tourism sector, namely: Economic Development of

Tourism, Behavioral and Attitudinal Development of Tourists, Destination Awareness, Infrastructure Development, Cultural Development, Social Capital Development, Social Welfare Development, Success of Branding Initiatives, Marketing Strategy Improvement, and Environmental Development. Consistencies with previous studies were observed in these findings. For instance, [Golmohammadi et al. \(2025\)](#) examined social and branding concepts as key topics in digital marketing. From their perspective, these concepts not only contribute to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of digital marketing practices in the sports industry but also enhance performance and profitability in this field. In this regard, their findings align with the components of success in branding initiatives and the economic development of tourism identified in the present

study. Similarly, [Isavi \(2024\)](#), in a study exploring the role of digital marketing in enhancing tourist loyalty, generating foreign currency earnings, and strengthening tourism brands, emphasized outcomes that are consistent with the findings of this research concerning economic development and branding success. Furthermore, [Farahani et al. \(2023\)](#) highlighted the strategic, economic, intangible, and customer-oriented advantages of digital marketing, which correspond with the components identified in this study, particularly in terms of economic development and marketing strategy improvement. Likewise, [Rastgoo et al. \(2023\)](#) discussed the improvement of tourists' behavioral and attitudinal tendencies, the promotion of the tourism economy, infrastructure development, the enhancement of social welfare, and the advancement of social capital and cultural development—all of which are in line with several findings of the present study. On the other hand, [Tahmasebpour et al. \(2022\)](#) identified the outcomes of digital marketing in terms of economic, cultural–social, political, and environmental development, which are consistent with parts of the findings of the present study, particularly in the areas of cultural and environmental development. Similarly, [Salahi Kojour et al. \(2021\)](#) emphasized the importance of economic components in digital marketing, which also corresponds with the results of this study in this regard. Considering these consistencies, it can be concluded that digital marketing, as a powerful tool, plays a significant role in advancing various dimensions of tourism, including its economic, cultural, social, and environmental aspects. These findings reinforce the importance of digital marketing in the tourism sector and highlight the need for greater attention to its strategic application.

Given the key role of digital marketing in promoting the economic, cultural, and environmental development of tourism, it is recommended that relevant organizations design and implement innovative digital marketing strategies—such as local influencer campaigns or

the use of data analytics on social media—to enhance engagement and visibility. Furthermore, it is suggested that training programs be developed for tourism industry professionals to improve their understanding of digital marketing techniques and the effective use of modern tools for better performance and profitability. The results of the quantitative analysis categorized the key indicators of digital marketing outcomes in sports tourism into four hierarchical levels (Figure 1). The first-level indicators—including Cultural Development (C5), Social Capital Development (C6), and Marketing Strategy Improvement (C9)—were identified as the most dependent components. These indicators play a vital role in the overall success of the industry; without them, the other indicators cannot function effectively. The findings indicate that focusing on relevant aspects can lead to the overall improvement of digital marketing strategies and enhance competitiveness within the sports tourism industry. From this perspective, these results align with the social component identified by [Golmohammadi et al. \(2025\)](#). Additionally, [Farahani et al. \(2023\)](#) emphasized the strategic benefits component, which corresponds with the improvement of marketing strategies highlighted in the current research. [Tahmasebpour et al. \(2022\)](#) also highlighted socio-cultural components, which are consistent with the present study's findings. Based on these insights, it is suggested that organizations operating in the field of sports tourism should place particular emphasis on cultural and social development as well as the updating of their marketing strategies.

According to the results of Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM), the fourth-level indicator, Infrastructure Development (C4), was identified as the most influential component. This indicator is positioned at the lowest level of the ISM model (Figure 1) because it possesses the highest driving power and the lowest dependence. This position highlights the key role and significant influence of the role of Infrastructure Development (C4) in sports tourism, making it the cornerstone of

the model. Accordingly, this factor serves as the starting point for system performance, and focusing on it provides the necessary foundation for activating higher-level factors. It directly impacts the third-level criteria, namely Economic Development of Tourism (C1), Behavioral and Attitudinal Development of Tourists (C2), and Destination Awareness (C3). These findings indicate that Infrastructure Development acts not only as a key factor but also as a fundamental prerequisite for the effective functioning of other higher-level components. Therefore, focusing on Infrastructure Development can be considered a strategic starting point for enhancing sports tourism. These results are consistent with the study by [Rastgoo et al. \(2023\)](#), which emphasized the importance of infrastructure in tourism development. The role of Infrastructure Development in Sports Tourism is crucial, as it provides the technical foundation necessary for the implementation of digital marketing strategies. However, the present study, by presenting an Interpretive Structural Model (ISM), examines this role more precisely and within a systematic framework. These findings are particularly relevant for policymakers and planners in sports tourism, as they underscore the need for initial investment in infrastructure as a prerequisite for the development of other dimensions of sports tourism. Future research can explore the interactions of this factor with other model components to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the sports tourism system.

Based on Figure 2, Marketing Strategy Improvement (C9) is classified as a dependent criterion. This indicator exhibits high dependence and low driving power, indicating that it is strongly influenced by the system but exerts minimal impact on it. In other words, Marketing Strategy Improvement is more affected by changes in other variables than it influences the system itself. The remaining criteria are positioned in the linkage area, where variables possess both high dependence and high driving power. In this zone, the influence and susceptibility of these indicators are substantial, and

even minor changes can lead to fundamental transformations throughout the entire system. These findings can assist managers and decision-makers in enhancing the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies by focusing on key variables and steering the system toward optimization. In this regard, [Farahani et al. \(2023\)](#) highlighted the strategic benefits of digital marketing, which are consistent with the Marketing Strategy Improvement component identified in the present study.

To further develop and expand knowledge on the outcomes of Digital Marketing in Sports Tourism, it is recommended that future research focus on the following:

- Conduct empirical studies to validate the model on a larger scale.

- Analyze social networks to gain a more precise understanding of tourist interactions.

- Conduct regional comparative studies, such as comparing Iran with other countries, which can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this field.

This study faced several limitations. The most significant were the scarcity of relevant literature and the lack of collaboration with experts. Additionally, the limited number of interviewees constrained the results to a specific sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, reliance on expert perspectives may have introduced personal biases. Other limitations include time constraints, the influence of seasonal factors on sports tourism, and the geographical focus solely on Iran.

5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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