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Feasibility Model for Implementing a Sport Tourism Destination Management System Based on Strategic Foresight in Northwestern Iran

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ABSTRACT

Sport tourism has become a strategically important field for regional development, particularly in destinations that combine natural assets, sport facilities, cultural attractions, and cross-border market potential. However, sport tourism destinations often remain fragmented when public agencies, tourism businesses, sport organizations, and technology providers operate without an integrated destination management system. Objective: This study aimed to develop and test a feasibility model for implementing a sport tourism destination management system in Northwestern Iran using a strategic foresight perspective. The study used an applied descriptive-correlational field design. The statistical population consisted of managers and experts from sport and youth departments, cultural heritage and tourism organizations, active travel-service offices, and university faculty members in sport management across Northwestern Iran. A Delphi procedure was used to refine indicators, and 153 completed questionnaires were analyzed. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS and SmartPLS with partial least squares structural equation modeling. The Delphi procedure produced consensus after two rounds. In the structural model, all four feasibility dimensions had positive and significant effects on the implementation of the sport tourism destination management system: managerial factors ($\beta = 0.84$, $t = 33.58$, $p < 0.001$), economic factors ($\beta = 0.83$, $t = 29.17$, $p < 0.001$), technological factors ($\beta = 0.83$, $t = 27.26$, $p < 0.001$), and environmental factors ($\beta = 0.72$, $t = 10.11$, $p < 0.001$). The results indicate that managerial coordination is the primary driver of implementation, followed closely by economic and technological readiness. Successful implementation requires integrated governance, investment planning, digital infrastructure, environmental and stakeholder coordination, legal support, human-resource development, and public-private cooperation. The proposed model offers a practical framework for improving sport tourism competitiveness and sustainable destination development in Northwestern Iran.

Keywords: sport tourism; destination management system; strategic foresight; feasibility study; SmartPLS; Northwestern Iran

Introduction

Tourism has become one of the major drivers of regional development, employment, cultural exchange, destination branding, and service-sector growth, while also creating possible social and environmental costs that require coordinated management (Archer et al., 2005; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). Sport tourism represents one of the most dynamic branches of this industry because it combines travel motivation with sport participation, sport spectating, event attendance, outdoor recreation, and visits to sport-related attractions. The field has expanded from a narrow focus on sport events to a broader destination-development agenda that includes infrastructure, branding, stakeholder coordination, digital services, environmental management, and visitor experience (Getz, 2008; Gibson, 1998; Higham, 2005).

Sport tourism is particularly relevant for regions that have diverse natural landscapes and seasonal recreation opportunities. Northwestern Iran has mountainous areas, winter-sport potential, lakes, cultural heritage assets, rural tourism opportunities, and urban destinations that can support different forms of sport tourism. Yet the ability of such destinations to compete depends not only on the existence of attractions but also on whether destination resources are coordinated through an integrated management system. Tourism development without coordination may create fragmented marketing, weak service quality, duplicated investment, poor stakeholder alignment, and limited long-term sustainability (Morrison, 2019; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Destination management systems and destination management organizations are intended to coordinate the many components that shape a destination: attractions, accommodation, access, information systems, marketing, pricing, visitor services, public regulation, and private-sector participation. In the digital era, destination management also requires data systems, online communication, e-tourism services, and real-time information for visitors and managers. Buhalis and Law (2008) showed that information technology transformed tourism management by changing how destinations communicate, distribute products, and interact with tourists (Buhalis & Law, 2008). More recent work on smart tourism similarly emphasizes digital infrastructure, data integration, and technology-enabled visitor experiences (Gretzel et al., 2015).

Sport tourism destination management is also linked to economic and social development. Sport-related travel can increase hotel occupancy, stimulate local spending, create employment, improve destination image, and encourage repeat visitation (Daniels, 2007; Hritz & Cecil, 2019). At the same time, sport tourism can generate pressure on infrastructure, the environment, local culture, and public resources if growth is not planned. Therefore, destinations need feasibility models that identify the managerial, economic, technological, and environmental conditions required for implementation before launching large-scale systems or investment programs.

Strategic foresight provides a useful orientation for this problem because sport tourism destinations operate in uncertain environments. Visitor behavior, technology, environmental risks, economic conditions, and competitive destinations change over time. A foresight perspective encourages managers to think beyond short-term visitor numbers and to assess future readiness, governance capacity, digital transformation, investment conditions, and sustainability risks. This is consistent with destination competitiveness frameworks that treat competitive advantage as a result of resource endowment, destination management, supporting factors, policy, planning, and situational conditions (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Previous studies have examined sport tourism impacts, destination image, sport event value, small-business perceptions, e-tourism systems, and tourism-community relations (Chen & Funk, 2010; Harrison-Hill & Chalip, 2005; Moscardo et al., 2017). However, fewer studies have developed an empirically tested feasibility model for implementing a sport tourism

destination management system in a specific regional context. This gap is important in Northwestern Iran, where sport tourism potential exists but coordinated destination governance, economic feasibility, digital readiness, and environmental integration remain critical challenges.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to provide a feasibility model for implementing a sport tourism destination management system based on strategic foresight in Northwestern Iran. The study examined the effect of environmental, economic, managerial, and technological factors on system implementation using Delphi-based indicator validation and partial least squares structural equation modeling.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Sport Tourism and Destination Management

Sport tourism refers to travel that is motivated by participation in, observation of, or association with sport activities and sport-related places, and its development is linked to destination image, visitor experience, sustainability, and regional competitiveness (Chen & Funk, 2010; Croes et al., 2021; Jiménez-García et al., 2020). It includes active sport tourism, event sport tourism, nostalgia sport tourism, and recreation-based travel. The sport tourism experience depends on both sport-specific resources and broader destination attributes such as access, accommodation, hospitality, safety, service quality, cultural attractions, and environmental quality (Gibson, 1998; Higham, 2005).

Destination management is the coordinated management of the components that constitute a destination and is increasingly recognized as an institutional task rather than a purely promotional activity (Unwto, 2019). A destination cannot be understood as a single product produced by one organization. It is a network of public institutions, private firms, community actors, transport providers, sport organizations, accommodation providers, event organizers, technology platforms, and visitors. Effective management therefore requires horizontal and vertical coordination among stakeholders (Morrison, 2019; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

A sport tourism destination management system can be understood as an integrated governance and information system that supports planning, marketing, visitor management, coordination among stakeholders, and sustainable development of sport tourism resources. In technologically advanced destinations, such systems also include databases, customer information, online booking, digital marketing, service coordination, and communication tools that connect visitors with destination suppliers (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel et al., 2015).

Strategic Foresight and Feasibility Dimensions

Strategic foresight is relevant because destination managers must anticipate future opportunities and risks rather than react only to current demand. In the sport tourism context, foresight requires attention to demographic change, visitor expectations, environmental risks, technology adoption, public-private partnership, investment capacity, and regional competitiveness. The feasibility of a destination management system therefore depends on multiple dimensions rather than a single technical solution.

Managerial factors refer to governance capacity, human-resource capability, strategic planning, crisis management, inter-organizational coordination, legal requirements, and the ability to align public and private actors. Economic factors refer to investment readiness, affordability, service pricing, market demand, revenue generation, private-sector participation, and

the capacity to provide services for different visitor segments. Technological factors include digital infrastructure, internet access, online marketing, information systems, communication platforms, and digital services for visitors and managers. Environmental factors include destination attractiveness, natural and cultural resources, stakeholder relations, resident culture, competition among service providers, and sustainability conditions.

Based on the conceptual framework and the empirical design of the present study, four hypotheses were tested: H1: Environmental factors positively affect implementation of the sport tourism destination management system. H2: Economic factors positively affect implementation of the sport tourism destination management system. H3: Managerial factors positively affect implementation of the sport tourism destination management system. H4: Technological factors positively affect implementation of the sport tourism destination management system.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was applied in purpose and descriptive-correlational in design. Data were collected through fieldwork using a questionnaire developed from the literature and validated through a Delphi process. The model was tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). This approach was suitable because the study aimed to evaluate a predictive implementation model involving several latent feasibility dimensions and because the data showed non-normality for some variables. SEM logic was applied cautiously as a predictive model-testing procedure, with attention to measurement validity and the interpretation of latent constructs (Chin, 1998; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Kline, 2016).

PLS-SEM was selected because it is commonly used in exploratory and predictive models, particularly when the objective is theory development, prediction of a target construct, and evaluation of complex models with latent variables (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015).

Population and Sample

The statistical population included managers and experts from the General Departments of Sport and Youth, cultural heritage, tourism and handicrafts organizations, active travel-service offices in the field of tourism, and faculty members in sport management at universities in Northwestern Iran. A stratified sampling method was used to capture the perspectives of relevant institutional and professional groups. A total of 153 complete questionnaires were analyzed.

The Delphi panel consisted of 14 experts from four groups: sport management academics, management and tourism academics, researchers knowledgeable in sport tourism, and managers of tourism agencies. This panel structure was appropriate because feasibility assessment requires both academic expertise and practical knowledge of tourism and sport administration.

Table 1. Study Design and Data Sources

Component	Description
Research type	Applied, descriptive-correlational, field-based study
Main sample	153 complete questionnaires from managers, experts, tourism offices, and faculty members
Indicator validation	Two-round modified Delphi procedure with an expert panel
Measurement domains	Environmental, economic, managerial, and technological factors
Analysis software	SPSS and SmartPLS
Main analysis	PLS-SEM including measurement-model assessment and structural path analysis

Instrument Development and Delphi Procedure

The questionnaire was initially developed from the literature and expert review. The first version contained 28 items distributed across four dimensions: environmental factors, economic factors, managerial factors, and technological factors. Face and content validity were reviewed by sport management academics, doctoral students, and tourism managers. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, and values above 0.70 were considered acceptable.

The Delphi procedure was used as a structured consensus technique. In the first round, experts evaluated the relevance of items using a five-point Likert scale. Items with agreement at or above the 75th percentile were accepted; items at or below the 25th percentile were candidates for deletion; and items between these thresholds were retained for further evaluation. Experts could also provide open comments and propose additional items. In the second round, retained and newly suggested items were reconsidered. Consensus was defined as agreement of 75% or higher with less than 15% change in scores. No third round was required.

Table 2. Summary of the Delphi Process

Round	Items evaluated	Accepted	Deleted	Retained for next round	Suggested/added items	Outcome
Round 1	28	23	0	5	7	12 items entered Round 2
Round 2	12	3	9	0	0	Consensus achieved; no third round required
Final outcome	-	26 final questionnaire items	-	-	-	Final instrument approved for SEM analysis

Data Analysis

Normality was examined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Because some variables were non-normal, PLS-SEM was used to test the structural model. The final model estimated the effects of environmental, economic, managerial, and technological factors on implementation of the sport tourism destination management system.

Path coefficients (β), t-values, and significance levels were used to evaluate the hypotheses. The direction, magnitude, and significance of each path were interpreted to determine the priority of feasibility dimensions.

Research Findings

Delphi Panel and Indicator Refinement

The Delphi panel included 14 experts. In the first round, all panel members responded. Of the 28 initial items, 23 were accepted and five required further consideration. Seven suggested items were also accepted for the second round. In the second round, 13 experts responded (92.86%). Of the 12 items evaluated in the second round, three were accepted and nine were deleted. Therefore, consensus was achieved after two rounds, and no additional Delphi round was required.

This result indicates that the final instrument was based not only on the literature but also on expert consensus. The Delphi process was particularly important because destination management systems involve local, administrative, economic, technological, and environmental conditions that may not be fully captured by generic tourism models.

Normality Assessment

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that environmental and technological factors had normal distributions, whereas economic and managerial factors did not. This supported the use of PLS-SEM, which is appropriate for prediction-oriented modeling and can be applied when multivariate normality assumptions are not fully met.

Table 3. Kolmogorov-Smirnov Normality Test

Variable	Z	p-value	Result
Environmental factors	0.84	0.48	Normal
Economic factors	1.98	0.02	Non-normal
Managerial factors	2.21	0.01	Non-normal
Technological factors	1.19	0.12	Normal

Structural Model Results

The structural model showed that all four dimensions had positive and significant effects on implementation of the sport tourism destination management system. As shown in Table 4, the strongest effect belonged to managerial factors (β = 0.84), followed by economic factors (β = 0.83), technological factors (β = 0.83), and environmental factors (β = 0.72). All paths were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Structural Path Results for the Final Model (DMS = destination management system)

Hypothesis / Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
Environmental factors -> DMS implementation	0.72	10.11	< 0.001	Supported
Economic factors -> DMS implementation	0.83	29.17	< 0.001	Supported
Managerial factors -> DMS implementation	0.84	33.58	< 0.001	Supported
Technological factors -> DMS implementation	0.83	27.26	< 0.001	Supported

Figure 1 presents the final structural model in simplified form. The figure should be interpreted as a predictive SEM model rather than a causal proof. It shows that sport tourism destination management system implementation in Northwestern Iran depends most strongly on managerial readiness, followed closely by economic and technological readiness, with environmental factors also contributing significantly.

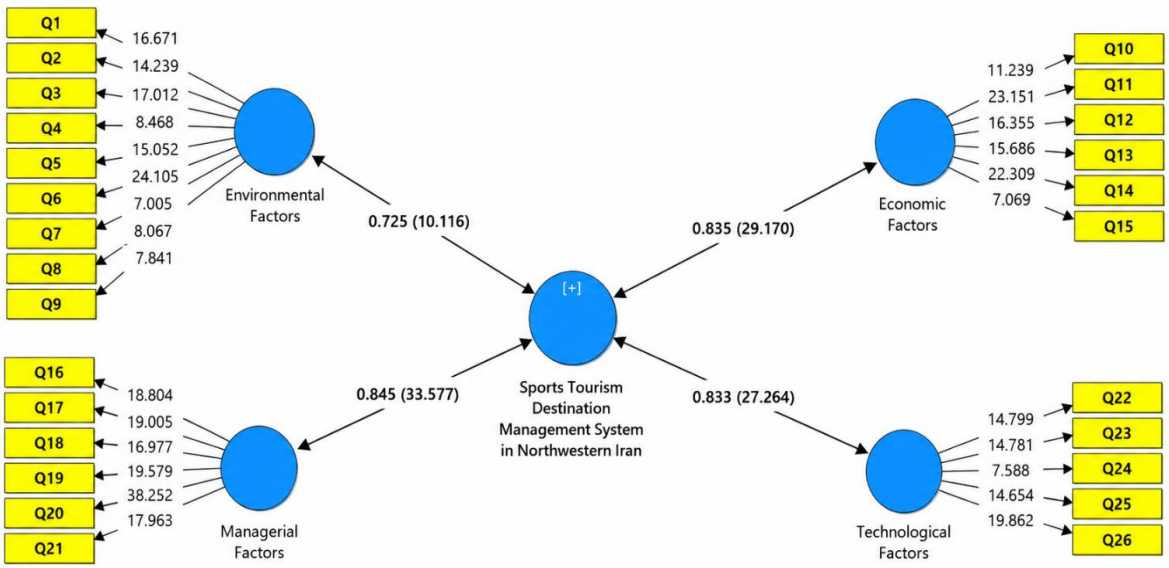

Figure 1. Final structural model of sport tourism destination management system implementation

Priority of Feasibility Factors

The priority order of the feasibility factors was managerial, economic, technological, and environmental. Managerial factors had the highest path coefficient, indicating that governance, human-resource selection, legal requirements, strategic planning, crisis management, and inter-organizational coordination are the primary prerequisites for implementation. Economic and technological factors were nearly equal in strength, suggesting that financial feasibility and digital infrastructure must be developed together. Environmental factors had a smaller but still significant effect, showing the importance of destination attractiveness, resident culture, stakeholder cooperation, and competitive service conditions.

Table 5. Priority Ranking of Feasibility Dimensions

Rank	Dimension	β	Interpretation
1	Managerial factors	0.84	Primary driver of implementation; reflects governance and coordination capacity
2	Economic factors	0.83	Essential for investment, pricing, market readiness, and service affordability
3	Technological factors	0.83	Essential for digital services, information access, marketing, and system integration
4	Environmental factors	0.72	Important for destination attractiveness, stakeholder relations, and sustainability

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide a feasibility model for implementing a sport tourism destination management system based on strategic foresight in Northwestern Iran. The results showed that managerial, economic, technological, and environmental factors all had significant positive effects on system implementation. This finding supports the view that destination management cannot be reduced to marketing or infrastructure alone; it requires coordinated governance, investment capacity, technology, and stakeholder integration (Morrison, 2019; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

The strongest effect was observed for managerial factors. This result is theoretically consistent with destination competitiveness models, which emphasize destination management, policy, planning, and organizational coordination as critical elements of competitiveness (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). In practical terms, Northwestern Iran requires managerial structures that can coordinate sport agencies, tourism departments, cultural heritage organizations,

municipalities, travel-service providers, private investors, and local communities. Without such coordination, even destinations with strong natural or sport resources may fail to deliver coherent visitor experiences.

The strong managerial coefficient also reflects the institutional nature of sport tourism. Sport tourism products often depend on multi-actor collaboration: venues, transport, accommodation, event organizers, guides, safety services, digital platforms, and public authorities. Previous work has emphasized that collaboration between sport and destination actors is necessary for creating synergy between sport resources and destination branding (Harrison-Hill & Chalip, 2005). The present findings extend this argument by showing that managerial feasibility is the highest-priority condition in a regional implementation model.

Economic factors also had a strong effect. Sport tourism can generate local economic benefits through visitor spending, hotel occupancy, services, events, and related employment (Daniels, 2007; Hritz & Cecil, 2019). However, the feasibility of a destination management system depends on whether investment, pricing, service affordability, and revenue models are realistic. The findings suggest that destinations in Northwestern Iran must design services for visitors with different income levels while also creating sufficient profitability for suppliers and investors. This balance is central to sustainable destination development because excessive visitor costs can reduce demand, whereas weak profitability can reduce private-sector participation.

Technological factors were nearly as influential as economic factors. This result is consistent with e-tourism research showing that information technology has transformed destination marketing, distribution, information access, and visitor decision-making (Buhalis & Law, 2008). A sport tourism destination management system requires digital databases, online information, reservation capacity, communication platforms, digital marketing, crisis communication, and visitor-support tools. Smart tourism research further suggests that digital infrastructure can improve the quality, personalization, and coordination of tourism experiences (Gretzel et al., 2015). Therefore, technology should not be treated as an optional promotional tool; it is part of the management infrastructure of modern destinations.

Environmental factors were also significant, although their effect was smaller than that of the other dimensions. This does not mean that environmental factors are unimportant. Rather, it indicates that destination attractiveness, resident culture, competition among service providers, and stakeholder relations require managerial and technological systems to be converted into implementation capacity. Sport tourism destinations may possess mountains, lakes, forests, winter-sport settings, or cultural attractions, but these resources become competitive only when they are managed, marketed, protected, and integrated into visitor services.

The results also have implications for strategic foresight. The feasibility model suggests that sport tourism development should be planned as a future-oriented system. Managers should assess future demand, digital transformation, environmental risks, crisis readiness, investment needs, and public-private cooperation before implementation. This foresight approach is particularly important in Northwestern Iran because the region's sport tourism potential is geographically diverse and institutionally complex.

Overall, the study contributes to sport tourism management by presenting an empirically tested model that integrates feasibility assessment with strategic foresight. The model identifies a clear order of priorities and shows that managerial capacity is the foundation of implementation. At the same time, the model warns against a one-dimensional approach.

Economic investment without digital infrastructure, technology without governance, or environmental resources without stakeholder coordination are unlikely to produce a sustainable destination management system.

Practical Implications

Based on the results, destination managers should first establish a coordinated governance structure for sport tourism in Northwestern Iran. This structure should include public agencies, private businesses, sport organizations, tourism offices, municipalities, local communities, and technology providers. Second, regional authorities should develop investment packages that support both high-income and budget-conscious sport tourists. Third, digital platforms should be created to provide integrated information, booking, destination marketing, communication, and crisis-notification services. Fourth, environmental and cultural resources should be managed through sustainability guidelines and resident participation. Table 6 summarizes the applied implications of the model.

Table 6. Applied Recommendations for Implementation

Finding	Recommended action	Expected implementation benefit
Managerial factors are the strongest driver	Create an inter-organizational sport tourism destination management council	Improves coordination, legal support, crisis management, and strategic planning
Economic factors are highly influential	Develop investment incentives, differentiated service packages, and affordability strategies	Improves market feasibility and private-sector participation
Technological factors are essential	Build an integrated digital destination platform with information, booking, marketing, and communication tools	Improves visitor experience, data access, and destination promotion
Environmental factors remain significant	Protect natural assets, train residents, coordinate service suppliers, and promote sustainable practices	Improves destination attractiveness and long-term sustainability

Conclusion

This study developed and tested a feasibility model for implementing a sport tourism destination management system based on strategic foresight in Northwestern Iran. The findings showed that managerial, economic, technological, and environmental factors all positively and significantly affect implementation. Managerial factors had the strongest effect, indicating that governance, human-resource capability, legal requirements, crisis readiness, strategic planning, and stakeholder coordination are the foundation of successful implementation.

Economic and technological factors were also strong predictors. These findings show that financial feasibility and digital readiness must be developed simultaneously. Environmental factors also played a significant role by highlighting the importance of destination resources, service competition, resident culture, and sustainability. The model therefore provides a practical framework for regional sport tourism planning and can help policymakers, sport organizations, tourism authorities, and private investors identify the conditions needed for successful implementation.

The study is limited by its regional scope, cross-sectional design, and reliance on questionnaire-based expert and stakeholder data. Future research should test the model in other regions, compare different types of sport tourism destinations, use longitudinal designs, and examine how digital destination management systems influence actual visitor behavior, satisfaction, and repeat visitation.

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Authors' Contributions

Lida Farzollahzadeh: conceptualization, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, and writing – original draft. Mehrdad Moharramzadeh: supervision, methodology, validation, and writing – review and editing. Masoud Imanzadeh: statistical analysis, methodology, and writing – review and editing. Nasrin Azizian Kohan: conceptual guidance, project administration, validation, and writing – review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

AI use statement

Generative artificial intelligence tools were used only for English language refinement, editorial structuring, and formatting support. All scientific content, methodological decisions, statistical interpretation, and final approval remain the responsibility of the authors.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the aims and procedures of the study, participation was voluntary, and responses were treated confidentially. The study used an anonymous, non-interventional expert and stakeholder questionnaire. No clinical procedure or vulnerable population was involved. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and participation was voluntary.

Transparency of Data

Reasonable requests for research materials should be directed to the corresponding author, subject to university policies and participant confidentiality.

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