



## **The Role of Religious Tourism and Empirical Marketing in the Development of Entrepreneurial Sports Opportunities in Mashhad**

**Ahmad Mahmoudi<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohammad Hosein Ghorbani<sup>2</sup>, Bahador Azizi<sup>3</sup>,  
Saman Mehri<sup>4</sup>, Hosein Bahador<sup>5</sup>**

\*<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.  
*ah.mahmoudi@ut.ac.ir*

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. in Sport Management, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran  
*H\_ghorbani91@yahoo.com*

<sup>3</sup> Ph.D. Student in Sports Management, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran  
*Bahador.MU@gmail.com*

<sup>4</sup> Master Degree of Sport Management, Faculty of Physical Education & Sport Sciences, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.  
*Saman.mehri94@gmail.com*

<sup>5</sup> Ph.D. Student in Sport Management, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran  
*hoseinbahadoor@yahoo.com*

Received: 2021-10-21

Accepted: 2021-12-4

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the role of religious tourism and experimental marketing in developing entrepreneurial sports opportunities in Mashhad. As the first step, the study's statistical population consisted of all tourists in Mashhad who have been there for at least one week for religious tourism and have also visited this city's recreational and sports centers. Moreover, three standard questionnaires were used to collect data and to analyze the data, the Skewness and Elongation tests were used to determine the data distribution, one-sample t-test to compare the mean of variables with the hypothetical standard, Kendall W test to prioritize the components from the sample view

and modeling equations were used; on top of that, all analysis was performed using SPSS software version 23 and SmartPLS version 3. The results showed that the average score of religious tourism, experimental marketing, and entrepreneurial sports opportunities and their components are relatively good. Hence, their average score was more than three. Results also showed that religious tourism and empirical marketing positively and significantly affect developing entrepreneurial sports opportunities in Mashhad. Finally, the structural equation model of the relations of the three main variables of this research and their components had a suitable fitting.

**Keywords:** Experimental Marketing, Entrepreneurial Opportunities, Religious Tourism, Religious-Sports Approach

## Introduction

Today, it is true that spiritual tourism is different from ordinary tourism, but spirituality can be seen in the heart of any journey. What can be accepted is that tourists intend to improve themselves during this trip, and from this point of view, a degree of spirituality can be sought in any type of tourism. According to this issue, in spiritual tourism, through entrepreneurship and innovation, we can focus on developing businesses that can provide some spirituality to tourists in different dimensions according to their needs (Marjani & Pourjam, 2016). Spiritual tourism can create job opportunities for all countries with different cultures and religions (Haq & Medhekar, 2015).

The economic development trend of developed countries reflects the fact that underdeveloped countries have ignored the importance of entrepreneurship in economic development. Entrepreneurship can be a suitable tool for adapting organizations and businesses to the region's environmental needs and urban space. Because tourism has a complex, multidimensional, and changing environment, entrepreneurship in tourism businesses seems essential for the survival of organizations and tourism development (Marjani & Pourjam, 2016). Entrepreneurship in spiritual tourism and adapting to changes in the economy can create the ground for building spiritual businesses. Changes in culture, economics, and community attitudes underlie the development of spiritual entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurs can market spiritual values such as personal growth and other profound values (Fonneland, 2012).

Entrepreneurs need to understand modern tourists and provide them with the right experiences according to their needs and expectations of spirituality

(Marjani & Pourjam, 2016). Some researches have shown that some activities are considered subsets of spiritual and religious tourism, such as visiting mosques and holy places, socializing with local people and talking to people familiar with the field of tourist attraction, spiritual experience of attending special ceremonies, visiting Islamic tombs, participating in shrine ceremonies and educational workshops, and attendance at cultural-religious events. In addition, the main motivations of tourists to participate in spiritual tours are learning history and culture, searching for the real face of Iran and its culture, and enjoying new experiences (Bahadori, Farsani, & Shafiei, 2019).

Islamic marketing is a critical issue because it must be carefully examined and know for whom, where and when it should be done (Wilson, 2012). Hence, tour guides are actively involved in developing religious tourism and contribute to this issue by making tourists' experiences enjoyable. Their approach, understanding, and empathy with tourists can be influential in providing unique experiences. Spiritual tourism is not just about mystical or religious experiences, but spiritual tourism guides can help tourists make a deeper assessment of their lives (Parsons, Houge Mackenzie, & Filep, 2019).

Suitable tourism requires proper empirical marketing, and it is essential to carefully consider who the tourists are, precisely what they are looking for, and what is valuable to them. Then, the unique experiences promised to tourists must be met (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019). Religion and pilgrimage have been significant issues for persons from the beginning, and also now they are the most effective tools for inclusive and sustainable development in society (Griffin & Raj, 2018). Consideration of factors such as the experience of visitors to holy places, place management, and the potential impact of religious tourism on economic and cultural development has become very important (Kim, Kim, & King, 2020).

Marketing style, residents' attitudes, and service quality can affect visitors' mental experiences (Huang & Pearce, 2019). Some research has shown that empirical marketing has a positive and significant effect on tourist satisfaction and loyalty, so there is a need for a non-traditional marketing strategy for many religious tourism places (Sobari, Usman, & Prasetia, 2019). On the other hand, the development of religious tourism requires activities that contribute to individuals' personal and spiritual growth. Sports and sports businesses are the things that can help personal development, improve mental, health and other items such as economic development, but researchers have ignored it. Woodward (2003), in his research, states that considering the

necessities of religious tourism can be a great help to the local economy of a community. Provided we pay attention to an anthropological point of view. Each person has a particular motivation to engage in spiritual activities and respond to people's favorite experiences, which shows the importance of paying attention to empirical marketing. It can be said that the economic impact of religious tourism is even greater than other parts of the market because tourists would make purchases for their friends and family and even like to buy souvenirs for their own (Heidari, Yazdani, Saghafi, & Jalilvand, 2018).

According to some research, international tourists are interested in religious tourism activities and attractions in Iran. Spiritual tours have the suitable potential for development, provided that their possibilities are used well. However, a country like Iran is in a favorable situation on the one hand due to high cultural diversity, especially in religious and cultural rituals, and on the other hand due to the existence of attractive and different natural resources and four seasons climate (Dalkir & Beaulieu, 2017). Many tourism organizations play an essential role in profitability and GDP growth during a recession and contribute to other sectors, such as sports. However, there is a lack of research in experimental marketing (Li & Petrick, 2008; Buhalis, 2000).

Therefore, in this study, researchers seek to answer the question of religious tourism and experimental marketing's role in developing entrepreneurial sports opportunities in Iran?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Religious tourism**

Tourism is a field in which one can experience spirituality and religiosity, and of course, tourists are also looking for specific meanings and concepts (Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohli, & Manuel-Navarrete, 2014; Kujawa, 2017). Spiritual tourism has various forms with many purposes and intentions; one of them is religious tourism. One of the essential elements of spiritual tourism is general health, i.e., activities such as yoga, meditation, hydrotherapy, concentration exercises, etc., help improve public health. These can be parts of different spiritual journeys that have been shaped by other businesses (Marjani, & Pourjam, 2016). Going to another place to get away from

everyday life and experience excellent spiritual feelings can determine personal success in the future (Gibson & Connell, 2003).

Hence, spirituality is considered one of the significant forces and reasons for travel since conscious tourists seek spiritual satisfaction and recovery of their mentality (Fathi, Maleki, Koksal, Yuzbaşıoğlu, & Ahmadi, 2019).

Spiritual tourism is not just a journey with religious motives and is not limited to pilgrimage and visiting sacred places. For spiritual tourism activities, there are many places in the world, and many of them are cultural and even include places and natural landscapes. Spiritual tourism, like many other issues in the world, needs to be developed, and the existence of spiritual companies and entrepreneurial opportunities that contribute to spiritual tourism is necessary not only for spiritual tourism but also for the survival of jobs in the contemporary world (Marjani, & Pourjam, 2016).

Religious tourism can also be defined as visiting holy places to participate in or attend religious ceremonies and pilgrimages in the form of visits or activities to research religious documents (Heidari et al., 2018). A spiritual tourist refers to those not necessarily for pilgrimage but can also visit non-religious and recreational places. According to industry forecasts, religious tourism is supposed to become an essential element of international travel and tourism (Griffin & Raj, 2018) and play an important role in communities' economic and cultural development (UNWTO, 2017).

### **Empirical marketing**

Empirical marketing includes all interactions that the audience has with the brands. These interactions create an experience. The stronger, more effective, and more lasting this experience is, the better competitive advantage and the more valuable and profitable the business (Jalali, Nadalipour, & Fathi, 2020).

In other words, empirical marketing helps tourists communicate with goods and services through five parts: sensory, emotional, cognitive, physical, and identity. On top of that, empirical marketing brings intelligent decisions to make conscious purchases of goods or services, ultimately leading to customer satisfaction. It should be noted here that all services and goods provided in the process of offering to tourists and visitors are considered a means of creating a desirable and satisfactory time and experience (Jalali et al., 2020).

Empirical marketing includes other things, such as Experience Economy<sup>1</sup>. Experience economy plays a role in the participation of tourists in personal and unique experiences and seeking to provide different and memorable experiences for each person. The ability to deliver unique and personal experiences will create a lasting competitive advantage for companies and businesses in the future. It is sometimes observed that there is a clear gap between the demand of tourists and what they are experiencing at the destination. This gap is due to the lack of knowledge about tourists and understanding their expectations to achieve a balanced experience (Marjani, & Pourjam, 2016).

Managers and authorities involved in tourism should increase the tourists' demand and interest for spiritual tourism, religious and non-religious travel, and provide challenging, intellectual, transcendent, and meaningful experiences in this direction (Cheer, Belhassen, & Kujawa, 2017).

Today, marketers and manufacturing and service companies face many challenges, diverse and new in terms of customer and consumer satisfaction. In recent years, merely having advanced facilities and technologies, skills and work experiences, and social interactions does not guarantee the success of organizations and firms. On the other hand, today, consumers face a multitude of similar products in terms of appearance, quality, and service, which has made it difficult for customers to choose. Today, customers are looking for a distinct choice with emotions. New concepts such as empirical marketing and empirical values are presented to firms and marketers (Routledge, Arndt, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2008).

Empirical marketing is a relatively new and expanding orientation that contrasts with traditional marketing. While conventional marketing frameworks view the customer as a sensible decision-maker, focused on the functional features and benefits of the products, empirical marketing sees them as rational people focused on achieving the desired experiences. Experimental marketing can be applied to different businesses in different industries. Williams (2006) has argued that the products of the tourism industry are always practical. In addition to products and services, people gain experience by staying in a hotel, eating in a restaurant, or visiting different

---

1. The term "**Experience Economy**" was first used in a 1998 article by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore describing the next economy following the agrarian economy, the industrial economy, and the most recent service economy.



places. When someone visits a site and buys a product or service, they consider their consumption experiences in the decision-making process for future choices, such as choosing a tourist destination (Williams, 2006).

### **Entrepreneurial sports opportunities**

Today, the world is experiencing rapid economic changes due to globalization, fast technological advancement, and the ICT revolution. Although these have increased wealth globally, they have also led to the disappearance of the concept of time and place, cultural pluralism, different lifestyles, and pervasive consumerism. These cases have been transferred to various types of tourism, including spiritual tourism. In modern tourism, entrepreneurship and providing innovative experiences for tourists through entrepreneurial activities, innovation in services, and products can be helpful tools in this field (Marjani & Pourjam, 2016).

Spirituality is a new concept, but it is not a recent phenomenon, and it can help different professions that deal with various aspects of spirituality (Haq & Medhekar, 2015). Innovation in tourism is an important issue that has received less attention in business and academic research. Here are three elements for innovation in tourism products and services that can be considered: people, places, and events (Haq & Medhekar, 2015).

As mentioned, sports and businesses can be effective and influential in the development of spiritual tourism. Entrepreneurship affects many aspects of the sports industry, especially in the areas related to leisure and tourism. In addition, sport is a worldwide hobby and one of the largest revenue generators worldwide (Ratten, 2018).

There are three perspectives on entrepreneurship: based on innovation, business formation, and opportunity recognition. The innovation-based approach emphasizes the role of change and novelty as part of entrepreneurship. The second view is a business formation, which looks at entrepreneurship as a focus on creating businesses. Creating a new business is an entrepreneurial approach that takes place with unique innovations in mind.

In sports, there are new businesses based on new ideas. There are also changes in technology and social expectations, which means the formation of sports businesses requires risk. The new sports business may be adapted from existing sports or may involve the creation of a separate entity. The third view is opportunity-based, which emphasizes the search process. Once approved, it is vital to commercialize entrepreneurial opportunities for sport. Most sports'

ideas need time to be exploited, time is important to them, and they need to be manipulated quickly. The time lag between the recognition of sports entrepreneurship and its development in the market leads to failure. For this reason, it is essential to address it at crucial times and influential events (Ratten, 2018).

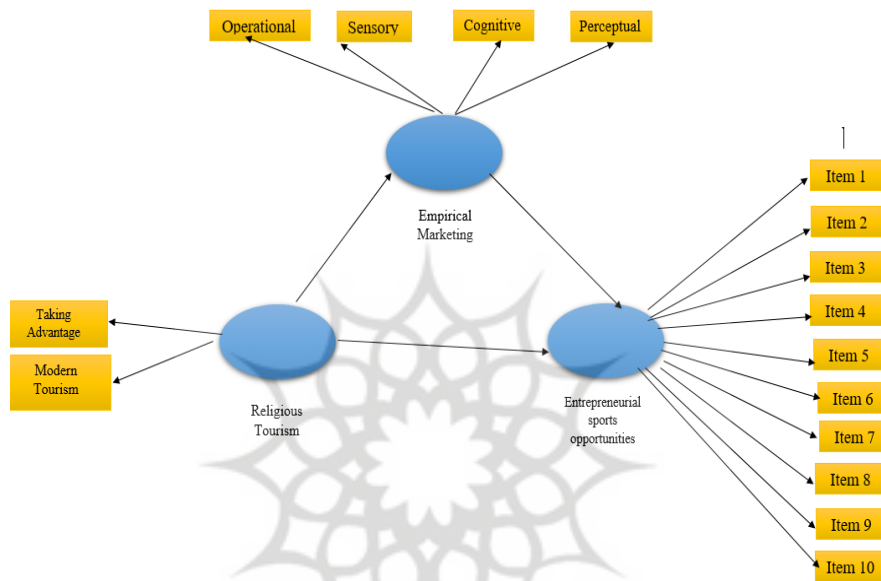


Figure 1. Conceptual model of research

### Methodology

The method of the present study is practical in terms of purpose, and this is in the category of descriptive-correlational research. The data have been collected through questionnaires. The statistical population of the study consisted of all tourists in Mashhad who have been there for at least one week for religious tourism and during this period have also visited the recreational and sports centers \_ Azadi karting, Aftab beach park, land of Mojhayeh Khoroshan, land of Mojhayeh Abi, Soran riding complex\_ in this city. Due to the lack of access to the exact number of tourists and the community's infinity, the study's statistical sample was calculated based on the Cochran indefinite volume formula. Based on the information obtained, the sample size was estimated at 234 persons. The random cluster sampling method was used to select the sample. Due to the extent of recreational and sports centers in



Mashhad, Azadi karting complexes, Aftab beach park, land of roaring waves, land of blue waves, and Soran riding complex were determined to conduct research. Finally, tourists who were present in these centers and met the necessary conditions were randomly selected. Finally, 234 questionnaires were distributed among tourists in these recreational sports centers. After separating the distorted and incomplete questionnaires (20 questionnaires), 214 questionnaires were used for statistical analysis, and the research results were prepared and adjusted based on this number.

Data were collected using three standard questionnaires. The first questionnaire was Experimental Marketing (Rezaee, Hamidi, Sajjadi, & Honari, 2015) which includes four components: Perceptual experience of religious-sports travel (items 1 to 5), Cognitive experience of religious-sports travel (items 6 to 10), Sensory experience of religious-sports travel (items 11 to 18) and a practical experience of religious-sports travel (items 19 to 22). The second was a researcher-made religious tourism questionnaire, which includes two components: using religious perspective towards sports to encourage travel (items 1 to 7) and modern tourism with a religious-sports approach (items 8 to 13). This questionnaire was designed by studying the theoretical foundations and then taking samples from several related backgrounds. Finally, the Sports Entrepreneurship Opportunities Questionnaire (Puhakka, 2010) was used, including ten items.

It should be noted that all questionnaires were designed and adjusted based on the 5-point Likert scale. To confirm the content validity of the research tool, the opinions of ten professors and experts in the field of marketing and tourism were used. After reviewing the views, the necessary changes were applied. Also, Cronbach's alpha test was used to confirm the reliability of the instrument. The reliability of the questionnaires for empirical marketing, religious tourism, and entrepreneurial sports opportunities were 0.88, 0.79, and 0.91, respectively.

To analyze the data, it can be said that Skewness and Elongation tests were used to determine the data distribution, a one-sample t-test to compare the mean of variables with the hypothetical standard, Kendall W test to prioritize the components from the sample view and modeling equations were used.

All analyses were performed using SPSS software version 23 and SmartPLS version 3.

## Findings

First, the demographic characteristics of the sample are presented.

**Table1. demographic characteristics of the sample**

Variable	Domain	frequency	Frequency Percentage
age	18-30 years old	53	24.77
	31-40 years old	48	22.46
	41-50 years old	68	31.77
	Over 51	45	21
	Total	214	100
Gender	male	134	62.61
	Female	80	37.39
	Total	214	100
Marital status	single	93	43.46
	married	121	56.54
	Total	214	100
education	Under high school diploma & Diploma	14	6.54
	Associate Degree	7	3.28
	Bachelor	63	29.43
	Master Degree	78	36.44
	Ph.D.	52	24.30
	Total	214	100
occupation	Student	6	2.80
	Employee	28	13.09
	Manager	36	16.83
	Military	61	28.50
	Freelance	74	34.58
	Part-time	9	4.20
	Total	214	100

As the results of Table 1 show, regarding the age status of the studied sample, the highest frequency with 31.7% is related to the option of 41-50 years (68 people), and the lowest frequency with 21%, is associated with the possibility of over 51 (45 people). Regarding gender, the highest frequency with 62.6%, is related to men (134 people), and the lowest frequency with 37.3%, is connected to women (80 people).

Regarding marital status, the highest frequency with 56.5% belongs to married people (121 people), and the lowest frequency with 43.4% is related to single people (93 people).

Regarding the level of education of these people, the highest frequency with 36.4%, belongs to the master's degree (78 people), and the lowest frequency with 3.2% is related to the associate degree (7 people).

Finally, regarding people's jobs, the highest frequency with 34.5%, is related to freelancers (74 people), and the lowest frequency with 2.8% is connected to students (6 people).

Then, using Skewness and Elongation tests, the distribution of data was investigated. In this regard, considering that all the indicators were in the range of +2 to -2, it was found that the data distribution was expected, and then parametric tests could be used.

Then, using a one Sample t-Test, the importance of each variable from the perspective of the sample was investigated.

**Table 2. analyzing one-sample t-test to determine the role of empirical marketing, religious tourism, and entrepreneurial sports opportunities and their components in the sample group with a cut point of 3.**

Variable	Significance	Statistic T	Average
Perceptual	0.001	15.759	3.54
Cognitive	0.001	14.539	3.51
Sensory	0.001	14.390	3.53
Operational	0.001	15.002	3.61
Experimental marketing	0.001	21.270	3.55
Take advantage of religion's view towards sports to encourage travel	0.001	18.660	3.63
Modern tourism with a religious-sports approach	0.001	6.408	3.25
Religious tourism	0.001	14.429	3.44
Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	0.005	2.843	3.10

To investigate the role and importance of variables and components of research in the study population, a one-sample t-test was used.

As shown in Table 2, the average score of empirical marketing, religious tourism, and entrepreneurial sports opportunities and all their components indicates a relatively good status. Their average score was more than 3. Also, considering the significance levels, all of which are less than 0.01, it can be said that there is a significant difference between the mean of these variables and the hypothetical mean.

Next, using the W. Kendall test, the components of each variable are prioritized.

**Table 3. W. Kendall Test to Prioritize Empirical Marketing Components**

Statistic	Value
chi-square	<b>2.302</b>
Degree of Freedom	<b>3</b>
significance	<b>0.15</b>

As can be seen in Table 3, because the significance level of the W. Kendall test is greater than 0.01, it can be said that there is no significant priority among the components of empirical marketing.

**Table 4. W. Kendall test to prioritize the components of religious tourism**

Statistic	Value
chi-square	<b>51.522</b>
Degree of Freedom	<b>1</b>
significance	<b>0.001</b>

As can be seen in Table 4, because the significance level of the W. Kendall test is less than 0.01, it can be said that there is a significant priority among the components of religious tourism.

**Table 5. Average ranks and priorities of religious tourism components**

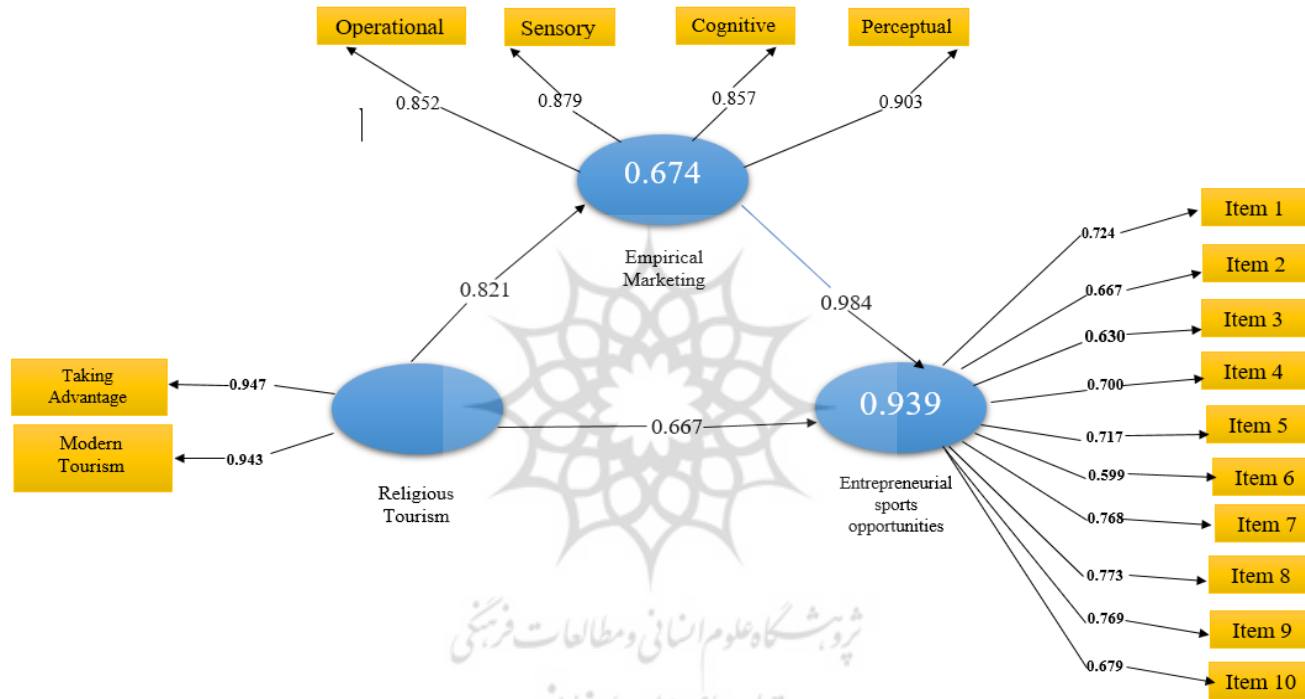
Factors	Priority	Average ratings
Take advantage of religion's view towards sports to encourage travel	First	<b>1.69</b>
Modern tourism with a religious-sports approach	<b>second</b>	<b>1.31</b>

As shown in Table 5, the most crucial priority of the components of religious tourism is related to the element of "using the view of religion in sports to encourage travel," and the element of "Modern tourism with a religious-sports approach" is in the second priority.

Finally, the relationship between the three main research variables and their components is shown using structural equation modeling.

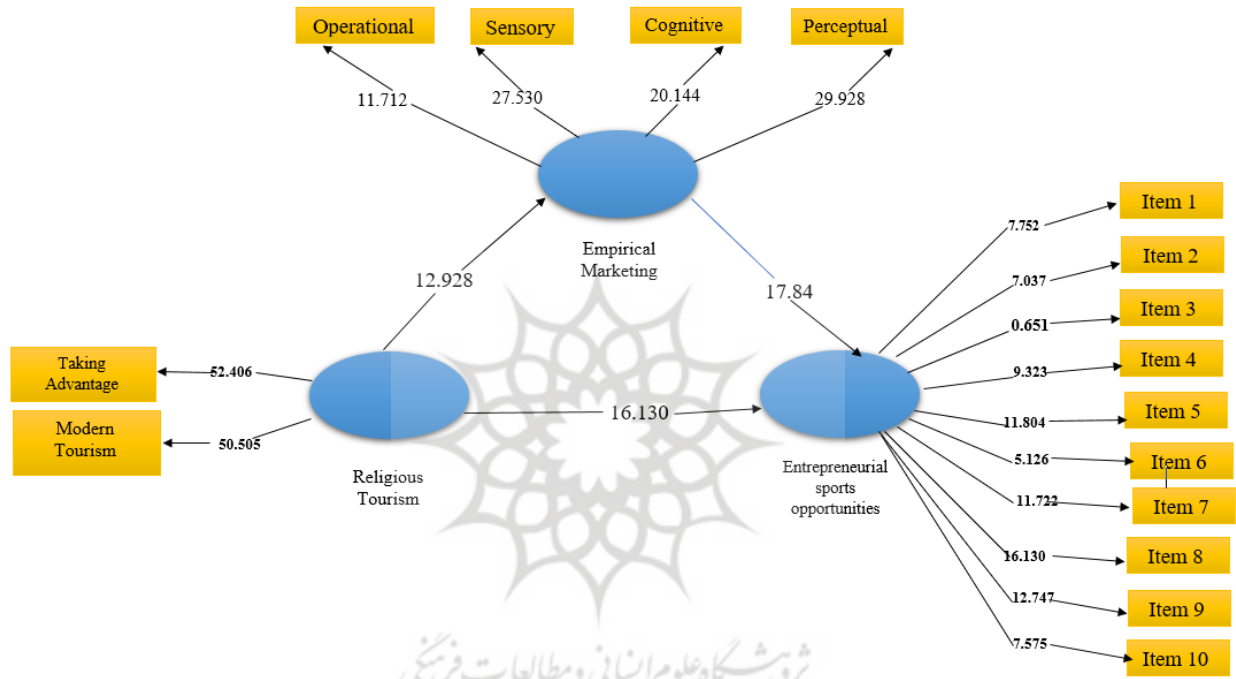
**Table 6. Regression Coefficients of Empirical Marketing Communication Model, Religious Tourism and Sports Entrepreneurial Opportunities**

Significance	The value of T	Factor load			
0.001	29.92	0.90	Empirical Marketing	←	<b>Perceptual</b>
0.001	20.14	0.85	Empirical Marketing	←	<b>Cognitive</b>
0.001	27.53	0.87	Empirical Marketing	←	<b>Sensory</b>
0.001	11.71	0.85	Empirical Marketing	←	<b>operational</b>
0.001	52.40	0.94	Religious Tourism	←	<b>Take advantage of religion's view towards sports to encourage travel</b>
0.001	50.50	0.94	Religious Tourism	←	<b>Modern tourism with a religious-sports approach</b>
0.001	7.75	0.72	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 1</b>
0.001	7.03	0.66	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 2</b>
0.001	6.65	0.63	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 3</b>
0.001	9.32	0.70	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 4</b>
0.001	11.80	0.71	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 5</b>
0.001	5.12	0.59	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 6</b>
0.001	11.72	0.76	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 7</b>
0.001	16.13	0.77	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 8</b>
0.001	12.74	0.76	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 9</b>
0.001	79.57	0.67	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Item 10</b>
0.001	12.92	0.82	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Religious Tourism</b>
0.001	16.13	0.66	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Religious Tourism</b>
0.001	17.84	0.98	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	←	<b>Empirical Marketing</b>



**Figure 2. Structural Equation Model of the Relationship between Experimental Marketing, Religious Tourism, and Standard Entrepreneurial Sports Opportunities**





**Figure 3. Structural Equation Model of the Relationship between Experimental Marketing, Religious Tourism, and Sports Entrepreneurial Opportunities in Statistical Model T**

In the following, general criteria of model quality are presented.

**Table 7. Coefficient of determination**

Variables	Modified R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>
Empirical marketing	0.70	<b>0.71</b>
Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	0.32	<b>0.33</b>

According to the results of Table 7, the value of the obtained coefficient of determination is 0.70 and 0.33, which the acceptance criteria are 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67, respectively, weak, medium, and strong.

According to the obtained coefficients of determination, it is observed that this criterion has a moderate and strong fit.

**Table 8. Effect coefficient criterion**

Variables	Religious Tourism	Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	Experimental marketing
Empirical Marketing	-	-	-
Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	-	-	<b>0.39</b>
Religious Tourism	-	0.50	<b>0.64</b>

According to the results of Table 8, the value of the effect size index is 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 according to the acceptance criteria. In other words, it indicates the size of the small, medium, and large effect of each structure on another structure (Cohen, 1988). The research results indicate that the effect size is very large.

**Table 9. Predictor fit criteria (Q<sup>2</sup>)**

Variables	Q <sup>2</sup>
Experimental marketing	<b>0/540</b>
Entrepreneurial sports opportunities	<b>0/369</b>
Religious tourism	<b>0/454</b>

(Q<sup>2</sup>) was introduced by Stone (1974) and Geisser (1975) determines the model's predictive power in endogenous structures. They believe that models with acceptable structural fit should be able to predict the model's endogenous variables. Henseler et al. (2009) set the three values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 as low, medium, and strong predictive power. According to the results of Table 11, it can be said that this criterion has a substantial value in all variables.

The GOF index is used to check the fit of the model. First, consider the standard value of the dependent variable (experimental marketing) (0.38), second, consider the coefficient of determination of the dependent variable (experimental marketing) (0.89), and third, put these values in the following formula.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{GOF} &= \sqrt{\text{Communality} \times \text{Rsquare}} \\ \text{GOF} &= \sqrt{0.38 \times 0.89} = \\ \text{GOF} &= \sqrt{0.338} \\ \text{GOF} &= 0.581 \end{aligned}$$

As a result, the value of GOF index is equal to 0.581, which according to the three values of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.41 as weak, medium and strong values for GOF, indicates an overall solid fit.

Finally, to fit the research model in PLS software version 3, new criteria have been proposed to examine the model fit.

SRMR index is the newest index used in the version the PLS3 software. According to Henseler et al. (2014), the model has a good fit when the value of this index is less than 0.1 or 0.08. according to table 10 can be said that the research model has a good fit. Other model fit indices have also been calculated.

**Table 10. Summary of model fit indices**

Indices	Estimated model
SRMR	0/079
d_ ULS	1/072
d_ G	0/301
Chi-Square	659/926
NFI	0/722

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Religion is one of the critical issues in urban planning and human history (Vukonic, 1996). Religion reflects ideas for life through the societies' values and attitudes (Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2004). These values and attitudes shape the behavior and actions of organizations and people. Religious bigotry is one of the most important cultural forces and has a crucial influence on behavior (Delener, 1994; Essoo & Dibb, 2004; Sood & Nasu, 1995; Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2012).

Considering the influence of religion on human behavior, in this study, the role of religious tourism and empirical marketing in developing entrepreneurial sports opportunities was investigated in Mashhad as one of the religious tourism centers in Iran. According to the research findings, it was found that the score of religious tourism and its components indicate a relatively favorable situation so that their average score was more than 3. It was also found that there is a significant priority among the elements of religious tourism, according to which the most important focus of the components of religious tourism is related to the component of "using the view of religion towards sports to encourage travel," and the component of "modern tourism with a religious-sports approach" is in the second priority, which is in line with the findings of Hoseinipor, Rezaie Doolatabadi, and Kazemi (2017) and Loloie, Shafia, Firoozi, and Gholami (2017). Hence, Fathi et al. (2021), in their research, state that tourism policies, cultural and natural resources are the most effective indicators to increase the competitiveness of the tourism industry.

In this regard, Hoseinipor et al. (2017), by examining the factors of traction and drift affecting the intention of religious tourism and how they have been affected, found that essential factors of traction in the intention of the religious tourists to travel to Qom comprises into, age, belief in the need for pilgrimage, being religious, motivation to increase faith, the experience of religious travel, and the motivation to forgive sins.

Loloie et al., (2017) state in their research that looking at spirituality through the lens of tourism can be considered as the strong and profound effects of individual connections with society and the environment. What can be seen in the relationship between religions and tourism is a kind of conceptual, political, and social system that provides the ground for unity and alignment of religions in the form of a travel plan. This unity and

companionship have philosophical and conceptual contexts that are the basis for the formation of spirituality and spiritual perception of travel.

According to the findings, it can be said that religious-sports tourism has special importance from the perspective of our samples. For example, some have acknowledged that religious-sports travel for a variety of reasons such as mystical approach, religious leaders' views on such travel, religious advice, the importance of recognizing sacred sites, providing financial aid, and support for religious-sports venues, strengthening one's identity through such a trip, etc. was the priority of these people. Others acknowledged that traveling to Mashhad was a particular priority for them due to achieve unique religious-sports experience, the architectural appeal of religious sites in the city, and the history of the city's holy sites.

Also, the results show that the average of empirical marketing and all its components indicate a relatively favorable condition, so their average score was reported as more than 3. Also, it was found that there is no significant priority for the components of empirical marketing, which is consistent with the findings of Rezaee et al. (2015), Panahi (2017), and Hosseinzadeh Shahri and Haddadi (2015). In this regard, Rezaee et al. (2015), by examining the psychometric parameters of the Empirical Marketing Questionnaire of sports brands, found that experimental marketing has five components: cognitive experience, sensory experience, correlation experience, perceptual experience, and functional experience. On the other hand, Panahi (2017), by examining the effect of empirical marketing on the intention to repurchase sports customers, stated that experimental marketing and its dimensions (i.e., emotional, perceptual, and communication experience) in addition to sensory experience and functional experience, have a positive effect. They make the intention to repurchase sports customers.

Also, Hosseinzadeh Shahri and Haddadi (2016), by examining the effect of experimental marketing on empirical customer value, with the role of mediating brand personality, found that the level of all three variables: experimental marketing, empirical customer value, and brand personality. they are higher than average based on customer attitudes; also, empirical marketing and brand personality have a positive effect on the customer's experiential value. Therefore, according to the findings, it is clear that empirical marketing and its components (perceptual, cognitive, sensory, and functional) are very important from tourists' perspective.

It is also clear that from the point of view of these people, there is no significant priority between the components of empirical marketing, which means that all these components affect these people almost equally, and they do not consider any of them before the other.

Furthermore, the results showed that the average of entrepreneurial sports opportunities indicated a relatively favorable condition so that the average score was more than 3, which was consistent with the findings of Mohammadkazemi et al. (2014) and Razavi Mahmoudabadi et al. (2016). In this regard, Mohammadkazemi et al. (2014), by identifying business opportunities (entrepreneurship) in the sports industry, found three main groups of these opportunities: service, creation, sales, and marketing opportunities. Among these, the "service opportunities" have the highest rank and the "create and sell" have the lowest level.

Ratten (2018) attaches great importance to the commercialization of entrepreneurial opportunities in sports. Proper utilization of sports ideas requires adequate timing and attention to trends in sports so that delays in identifying sports entrepreneurship and its development in the market can lead to the failure of sports entrepreneurship.

Also, Razavi Mahmoudabadi et al. (2016), by identifying and ranking the factors affecting entrepreneurship in sports, stated that the factors of compiling comprehensive planning in sports entrepreneurship, the existence of the Ministry of Sports and Youth in the country, and the sports television network in the country, respectively have more priority than other factors. According to the research findings, it can be said that from the point of view of the sample, entrepreneurial sports opportunities are suitable importance. In this regard, these people have confirmed that in this city there are enjoys opportunities for sports entrepreneurship, supporting managers for sports entrepreneurship opportunities, facilities and equipment to identify sports entrepreneurial opportunities, sufficient resources and facilities to create a new sports business, managers supporting new ideas helping people to start and develop sports entrepreneurship, adequate database, and group discussion to identify opportunities.

Furthermore, the research results show that the model of structural equations of research based on religious tourism and experimental marketing's role in creating entrepreneurial opportunities in sports has a favorable fit. The results show that religious tourism has a positive and significant effect on the development of entrepreneurial sports opportunities in Mashhad and these



findings are consistent with the results of Marjani & Pourjam (2016), Heidari et al. (2018), and Griffin & Raj (2018). Marjani & Pourjam, 2016 in their research, state that religious tourism can lead to the development of new businesses and create social entrepreneurship and innovation to provide spirituality to religious tourists according to their needs. For some tourists, motivations such as health, adventure, and well-being are essential, along with religion, rituals, authentication, and cultural practice (Cheer et al., 2017).

Fathi et al. (2019) state in their research that the development of acceptable scenarios in spiritual tourism helps its actors and stakeholders to create appropriate programs for different situations and also helps the development of tourism.

Religious tourism can create job and entrepreneurial opportunities for all countries according to different religions and regional cultures and rituals (Haq & Medhekar, 2015). Heidari et al., 2018 in their research state that the economic impacts related to religious tourism are more significant than other market segments because for many pilgrims and other spiritual travelers, the purchase of religious and sacred souvenirs is essential. Sports such as swimming are recommended in Islam, and religious tourists are usually willing to use one or more sports venues alongside religious facilities to improve their health.

The results showed that empirical marketing has a positive and significant effect on the development of entrepreneurial sports opportunities in Mashhad. These findings are in line with the results of Huang & Pearce (2019) and Sobari et al. (2019). It is said that people in religious areas are not adequately trained in entrepreneurship and innovation and cannot use the existing capabilities (Huang & Pearce, 2019).

Marketing efforts with an approach to affecting visitors' experiences in the sensory, emotional, cognitive, practical, and identity aspects cause a strong feeling and reaction about the perception of facts in the visitor. Thus, visual effects, olfactory quality, calm, considering the comfort climate of visitors in terms of temperature, especially indoors, are all very important (Jalali et al., 2020).

However, there is a need for a suitable strategy for empirical marketing that can create a positive experience for religious tourists. Current marketing methods still use traditional marketing strategies that are not compatible with today's modern world (Sobari et al., 2019).

For this reason, to properly use empirical marketing, it is necessary to have a suitable information system for tourists visiting religious places and paying attention to their changing needs. For example, the building facade and decor of sports venues and spaces and being fit with religious sites is a critical issue. Creating a sense of commitment, respect, and spirituality, and the unique design of products and providing services with respect and intelligence can affect the success of sports businesses.

Religious tourism needs to choose the right marketing strategies to influence the development of entrepreneurial sports opportunities properly. Having the correct technologies, smart databases, and providing different sports experiences compared to other places and regions can effectively develop entrepreneurial sports opportunities.

According to the results, it is suggested that the necessary training be given to the residents of religious areas to use and take advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities in sports. So they can use the existing capabilities. Marketing and advertising tools should align with religious culture and customs; Of course, this does not mean that marketing tools should be traditional.

Also, according to the results, it is suggested that managers and tourism marketers of Mashhad achieve a proper assessment of the interest and tendency of religious tourists in this city and introduce entrepreneurial sports opportunities by examining the real potential. Moreover, specialized webinars and seminars should be held for interested people, and the necessary information and training should be provided for people. On top of that, despite the activities of various institutions related to religious tourism, it can be said that this area has a trustee, so long-term policies and strategies are needed to guide the implementation of religious activities (Maleki, Khasehi Varnamkhasti, Fathi, & Saffarinia, 2019).

Integrated policy-making accompanied by coordinated management concerning religious tourism leads to a better atmosphere of taking advantage of the existing potential. In addition, the removal of barriers to business and tourism in a province will be facilitated through coordinated actions by the tax, municipal, industrial, mining and trade organizations.

In this study, the effects of religious tourism and empirical marketing on the development of entrepreneurial sports opportunities were discussed in general. In the next step, it is suggested to examine the existing challenges facing religious tourism to enhance entrepreneurial sports opportunities and

access their impact on visitors' experiences, especially their spiritual experiences, and provide appropriate solutions in this regard.

One of the limitations of the present research was the time limitation because the participants in the study were interviewed in a certain time and it brought the possibility to answer the questions under the influence of negative or positive events.

As the acknowledgment, the present study owes to the cooperation of university professors and tourists in Mashhad who helped to complete the questionnaires. Hence researchers appreciate this intimate collaboration.

## References

- Bahadori, S. R., Farsani, N. T., & Shafiei, Z. (2019). Tourists' views on Islamic spiritual tours (case study: Yazd, Iran). *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 10(1), 323-335.
- Bandyopadhyay, R., & Nair, B. B. (2019). Marketing Kerala in India as God's Own Country! for tourists' spiritual transformation, rejuvenation and well-being. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 14, 100369.
- Buhalis, D. (2000). Marketing the competitive destination of the future, *Tourism Management*, 21(1), 97-116.
- Buzinde, C., Kalavar, J. M., Kohli, N., & Manuel-Navarrete, D. (2014). Emic understandings of Kumbh Mela pilgrimage experiences. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 49, 1-18
- Cheer, J. M., Belhassen, Y., & Kujawa, J. (2017). The search for spirituality in tourism: Toward a conceptual framework for spiritual tourism. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 24, 252-256.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences*, Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dalkir, K. and Beaulieu, M. (2017) *Knowledge Management in Theory and Practice*, MIT press. Cambridge, MA, London.
- Delener, N. (1994). Religious contrasts in consumer decision behavior patterns, their dimension and marketing implication. *European Journal of Marketing*, 28(5), 33-36.
- Essoo, N., & Dibb, S. (2004). Religious influences on shopping behavior: an exploratory study. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 20(78), 683-712.
- Fam, K. S., Waller, D. S., & Erdogan, B. Z. (2004). The influence of religion on attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products. *European Journal of Marketing*, 38(5/6), 537-555.
- Fathi, M., Maleki, M., Koksai, C., Yuzbaşıoğlu, N., Ahmadi, V. (2019). Future Study of Spiritual Tourism based on Cross Impact Matrix and Soft Systems

- Methodology. *International journal of Tourism, Culture & Spirituality*, 3(2), 19-41.
- Fathi, M., Mohammadasab, M., Maleki, M., & Yaqoobi, S. (2021). Providing a Model for the Competitiveness of Religious Tourism Using DEMATEL and Structural Equation Modeling. *Commercial Surveys*, 18(105), 57-70.
- Fonneland, T. (2012). Spiritual entrepreneurship in a northern landscape: Spirituality, Tourism and Politics. *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 48(2), 155–178.
- Geisser, S. (1975). The predictive sample reuse method with applications. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 70(350), 320-328.
- Gibson, C., & Connell, J. (2003). “Bongo fury”: Tourism, music and cultural economy at Byron Bay, Australia. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 94(2), 164–187.
- Griffin, K., & Raj, R. (2018). The importance of religious tourism and pilgrimage: Reflecting on definitions, motives and data. *The international journal of religious tourism and pilgrimage*, 5(3), 2-9.
- Haq, F., & Medhekar, A. (2015). Spiritual Tourism between India and Pakistan: Business Opportunities and Threats. *World journal of social sciences*, 5(2), 190-200.
- Heidari, A., Yazdani, H. R., Saghafi, F., & Jalilvand, M. R. (2018). The perspective of religious and spiritual tourism research: a systematic mapping study. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 9(4), 747-798.
- Henseler, J., Ringle, C.M., Sinkovics, R. R. (2009). The use of partial least squares path modeling in international marketing, *Advances in international Marketing*, 20, 277-320.
- Henseler, J., Dijkstra, T. K., Sarstedt, M., Ringle, C. M., Diamantopoulos, A., Straub, D. W., Ketchen, D. J., Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., & Calantone, R. J. (2014). Common beliefs and reality about PLS: Comments on Rönkkö and Evermann (2013). *Organizational research methods*, 17(2), 182-209.
- Hoseini, S., Rezaie Doolatabadi, H., & Kazemi, A. (2017). Exploration of Pull and Push Factors Which Influence of Travel Intention of Religious Tourism and Their Affect Method (Qom city). *Tourism Management Studies*, 11(36), 109-124.
- Hosseinzadeh Shahri, M., & Haddadi, S. (2017). The Effects of Experiential Marketing on Customer Experiential Value through Brand Personality. *Quarterly Journal of Brand Management*, 3(4), 41-64.
- Huang, K., & Pearce, P. (2019). Visitors' perceptions of religious tourism destinations. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 14, 100371.
- Jalali, M., Nadalipour, Z., Fathi, M. (2020). The Impact of Experimental Marketing on the Behavioral Intentions of Visitors to Tourism Attractions (Case Study:

- Persian Gulf's Martyrs Lake Resort). *Journal of Tourism and Development*, 9(1), 66-89
- Kim, B., Kim, S., & King, B. (2020). Religious tourism studies: evolution, progress, and future prospects. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 45(2), 185-203.
- Kujawa, J. (2017). Spiritual tourism as a quest. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 24, 193-200.
- Li, X., Petrick, J. F. (2008). Tourism marketing in an era of paradigm shift, *Journal of Travel Research*, 46(3), 235-248.
- Loloie, K., Shafia, S., Firoozi, G., & Gholami, F. Z. (2017). Religious Tourism, Spiritual Tourism or Tourism and Spirituality: A Study of Similarities and Differences through Content Analysis. *10th International Conference on Economics and Management*, Rasht. (in persian)
- Maleki, M., Khasehi Varnamkhasti, V., Fathi, M., & Saffarinia, M. (2019). Future Studies of Religious Tourism of Qom Province based on Scenario Planning Approach. *Journal of Tourism and Development*, 8(3), 184-205. (in persian).
- Marjani, T., & Pourjam, A. (2016). Entrepreneurship as a Tool for Presenting Authentic Experiences through Spiritual Tourism Development. *International Journal of Tourism and Spirituality*, 1(1), 100-115.
- Mohamadkazemi, R., Zaffarian, R., Khodayari, A., Javadinia, M. (2014). Identifying Entrepreneurial Business Opportunities in Sports Industry with an IT Approach. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Development*, 7(1), 95-112.
- Panahi, F. (2017). *Investigating the effect of experimental marketing on the intention to repurchase sports customers*. Master Thesis, Mohaghegh Ardabili University. (in persian).
- Parsons, H., Houge Mackenzie, S., & Filep, S. (2019). Facilitating self-development: how tour guides broker spiritual tourist experiences. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 44(2), 141-152.
- Puhakka, V. (2010). Versatile and flexible use of intellectual capital in entrepreneurial opportunity discovery. *Journal of Management Research*, 2(1), 1-26.
- Ratten, V. (2018). *Sport entrepreneurship: Developing and sustaining an entrepreneurial sports culture*. Springer.
- Razavi Mahmoudabadi, M. J., Ghahreman Tabrizi, S., Zarei Mahmoudabadi, M. (2016). Identifying and ranking the factors affecting entrepreneurship in sports with a coherent approach of multi-criteria analysis and Copeland, *Journal of Sport Management and Motor Behavior*, 12(23), 113-130. (in persian).
- Rezaee, M., Hamidi, M., Sajjadi, N., Honari, H. (2015). An investigation of the psychometric properties of the experiential marketing questionnaire among sport brands. *Contemporary Studies On Sport Management*, 5(9), 23-33.

- Routledge, C., Arndt, J., Sedikides, C., & Wildschut, T. (2008). A blast from the past: The terror management function of nostalgia. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44*(1), 132-140.
- Sobari, N., Usman, H., & Prasetia, P. (2019). The Influence Experiential Marketing and Customer Value to Loyalty Moslem Tourists. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Strategic and Global Studies, ICSGS 0218*, October 24-26, 2018, Central Jakarta, Indonesia.
- Sood, J., & Nasu, Y. (1995). Religiosity and nationality, an exploratory study of their effect on consumer behavior in Japan and the United States. *Journal of Business Research, 34*(1), 1-9.
- Stone, M. (1974). Cross validatory choice and assessment of statistical predictions, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, 36*(2), 111-133.
- UNWTO. (2017). International congress on religious tourism and pilgrimage. Retrieved from <http://europe.unwto.org/event/international-congress-religious-tourism-and-pilgrimage>
- Vukonic, B. (1996). *Tourism and religion*. New York: Pergamon.
- Williams, A. (2006). Tourism and hospitality marketing: fantasy, feeling and fun. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 18*(6), 482-495.
- Wilson, A. J. (2012). The new wave of transformational Islamic marketing: reflections and definitions. *Journal of Islamic marketing, 3*(1), 5-11.
- Woodward, S. C. (2003). Faith and tourism: accommodating visitor and worshipper in the historic city. *6th US/ICOMOS International Symposium, Managing Conflict and Conservation in Historic Cities*, 24-27 April 2003, Annapolis, Maryland, available at: [www.icomos.org/usicomos/Symposium/SYMP03/Woodward.htm](http://www.icomos.org/usicomos/Symposium/SYMP03/Woodward.htm)
- Zamani-Farahani, H., & Musa, G. (2012). The relationship between Islamic religiosity and residents' perceptions of socio-cultural impacts of tourism in Iran: Case studies of Sare'in and Masooleh. *Tourism Management, 33*, 802-814.