

The Nexus of Rural Ecotourism Entrepreneurship and Social Factors: Where Is the Missing Link of its Development?

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Abstract

This research has been conducted with the aim of investigating the effect of social factors on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship in Dezful tourism villages. This research is a descriptive-correlation type that was conducted using a survey method. Residents of tourism villages of Dezful constitute the statistical population of this research, based on the Cochran formula and the use of stratified random sampling, 381 households were selected as the research sample. The main tool of this research is a researcher-made questionnaire whose validity and reliability were tested and confirmed. In order to analyze data and test research hypotheses, structural equation modeling with partial least squares approach and PLS Smart software have been used. The findings showed that networking in the village, social participation, education and information, social capital and tourism capacities explain a total of 62.5% of the changes related to the rural ecotourism entrepreneurship. From this research, it can be concluded that social factors are always effective in the growth or retardation of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship according to their collective and cultural potential, and along with economic, historical, cultural and political factors, they can help the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Ecotourism, Rural tourism, Social factors.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, one of the basic problems of the country was the backwardness of villages and the migration of villagers to urban areas, the main factor of which is economic issues, especially the lack of employment (Rostami et al., 2022). Rural areas are increasingly affected by the loss of economic opportunities and significant population decline, which has a negative impact on local economies (Cunha et al., 2020). Therefore, it is very important to pay attention to rural entrepreneurship with an attitude to the problems in these areas (Betancourt et al., 2021; Izadi and Ghanbari, 2021). Entrepreneurship is considered a new solution in development theories for empowerment and capacity building in rural areas in order to achieve rural development (Shamanian et al., 2022). In this view, unlike other approaches that base rural development on the entry of human and financial capital from outside the village, it emphasizes the motivation of local and indigenous entrepreneurial talents (Izadi and Ghanbari, 2021). Therefore, entrepreneurial villagers combine new ideas and existing capacities and create a new or improved economic activity that generates a continuous flow of income and wealth for them, and in this way, deprived areas move towards development with greater speed (Nongbri and Devananda Singh, 2022). In the villages, there are different capacities for starting entrepreneurial activities, and by identifying them, you can plan for job creation (Imani and Azimi, 2021). Ecotourism entrepreneurship is one of the emerging topics conceptualized as innovative practices that have both economic and social benefits (Lucas et al., 2019).

Ecotourism entrepreneurship usually leads to new investment, job creation and income, but it can also help to increase the appreciation of the value of unique endogenous resources such as local products. The resulting economic and social dynamics bring new functions to old resources, revitalize small communities through local and extra-local networks, strengthen local business, and increase the social capital essential to the survival of rural communities (McGehee et al., 2015). Ecotourism entrepreneurship is proposed as a strategy for sustainable rural development by creating job opportunities based on the sustainable use of local resources and emphasizing the internal development of the village (Fhlatharta et al., 2017). The concept of ecotourism entrepreneurship focuses more on the environmental aspects following economic activities, and the social aspect has received less attention from researchers. But tourism activities are not just economic and technical measures and have wide socio-cultural consequences that can question even the benefits of those measures. Ecotourism entrepreneurship has been researched from the perspective of different sciences such as management, geography and economics, and it is necessary that a sociological attitude towards the topic of tourism is also made and finally, social solutions to strengthen tourism considered by philosophers and planners are obtained.

The current research area is the Dezful city in Khuzestan province, in terms of being located in the northernmost point of the province and close to the mountains, as well as the passage of the Dez river through the heart of this city, it is one of the greenest and most beautiful sightseeing spots in Khuzestan, and its ancient aspect also adds to its beauty (Frouhani & Salehi, 2018). Most of the villages located in this city have great ecological and historical-cultural potential to attract tourists (Boojarian & Moameni, 2015). In recent years, the high cost of production and low income from the sale of agricultural products, low productivity, and climate change events such as floods, droughts, and dust have caused irreparable damage to agricultural and horticultural products. As a result, many small-scale farmers have become unemployed, and owner farmers have started to work in the tourism sector by changing the use of their agricultural land and turning it into villa gardens (Mohammad Sharifi et al., 2020). However, the entry of tourists to these tourist places, which are often built in villages, is accompanied by behavior that violates the norms and contrary to moral and legal standards and clothes that are contrary to custom, which has led to the protest of the villagers of the region due to the conflict and confrontation with the local culture and moral values. The arrival of tourists has been accompanied by behavior that violates the norms and contrary to moral and legal standards and clothes that are contrary to custom, which has led to the protest of the villagers of the region due to the conflict and confrontation with the local culture and moral values. In general, the villa gardens of Dezful on the one hand have created jobs and increased income for the villagers and attracted more tourists in this city, and on the other hand, due to the lack of a responsible approach in the matter of tourism, it has created problems in the fields of agriculture, social and culture, heritage and environment. In fact, tourism entrepreneurship in Dezful city, due to the lack of a responsible and conscious approach to ecotourism in policy-making and planning, has left huge damages in the cultural, environmental and historical fields, and in the long run, it will cause significant and acute social consequences; therefore, considering the role of rural tourism entrepreneurship in creating income and employment for the people of the city and the need to pay attention to the ecological capacities of the tourism environment, research on social factors affecting the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship is a fruitful thing.

2. Literature review

Tourist villages are “well-established rural settlements, preserving ethno folkloric values and traditions and with a rich historical past, which, outside from their own political-administrative, social, economic and cultural functions, fulfill, seasonally or throughout the year also the hosting and catering function for tourists who are spending an a stay of indefinite leisure stay or visiting these villages in itinerant tourism programs, with or without meals” being of several types depending on the predominant resources (Ciolac et al., 2022).

Tourist villages possess unique collections of natural and cultural resources that may represent valuable business opportunities (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). The tourism of these types of villages can be an example of rural entrepreneurship and implicitly the entrepreneurship of rural ecotourism (He et al., 2021). Ecotourism is a type of responsible nature tourism in which tourists travel to visit uninhabited or untouched natural areas, and recently it has gained a suitable and growing market (Mobasheri et al., 2022).

Ecotourism entrepreneurship is the process of discovering and creating new economic opportunities by taking advantage of ecotourism capacities and taking into account the needs of tourists, with the optimal use of internal and external environmental stimuli, to achieve added value by providing new and improved products and services to the tourism market. It is done in a creative and innovative manner by maintaining the values of the social and environmental environment (Sojasi Ghidari et al., 2014). In fact, the link between tourism and entrepreneurship makes a lot of sense, because the combination of both phenomena provides an opportunity for meaningful action that goes beyond what corporate social responsibility has been able to provide (Jiménez et al., 200). Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship can be the answer to some problems of villages and at the same time the source of innovation, the solution and the reason for changing the rural environment (Adamowicz & Zwolińska-Ligaj, 2020) and is a way to stimulate the increase in productivity and economic competitiveness and ensure the development of the local community (Bouichou et al., 2021). Rural tourism businesses, however, are usually small in size and influenced by rural contexts (i.e. distance from large markets, skilled labor and dispersed business networks), can make a valuable contribution to the entrepreneurial dynamics of own lands; because they depend on the natural and social environment around them to maintain their business (Popescu et al., 2022). Ecotourism entrepreneurship is directly related to responding to the environment in a creative and innovative way (Martini et al., 2020). One of the important factors affecting the development of ecotourism entrepreneurship is social factors; because a person who creates new ideas has social backgrounds, such as family characteristics, community customs, the level of participation and cooperation, friends, relatives, and neighbors who can help him achieve success (Méndez-Picazo et al., 2021). For this reason, Gao and Qin (2022) emphasize the social characteristics that are effective in the formation of entrepreneurial behavior and express it as follows: existing roles in society, life experiences, family background, level of education and awareness, social class, Bureaucratic organizations. Tourism entrepreneurship can grow and develop in a region when the features of the host community, including attitudes and perceptions of the host community towards tourism are developed, and this point should be considered as an important factor in knowing the strategy and priorities of tourism entrepreneurship (Jamal and Vakil Alroaia, 2021). In general, it seems

that there is a direct relationship between the characteristics of local communities towards tourism and its development, so that the local communities who consider tourists a danger to their environment oppose its development, but communities that consider tourism as a factor in the direction of growth and development and preservation of their environment welcome tourism (Nasiri & Zare, 2020). Research has shown that neglect and lack of planning regarding social factors affecting tourism entrepreneurship causes inappropriate reactions from local communities (Madanaguli et al., 2021). The ecosystem perspective recognizes that the social context plays an essential role in enabling, stimulating and constraining entrepreneurship, but does not ignore the role of an entrepreneur (Cavolla et al., 2018). Entrepreneurs of small tourism businesses in rural contexts, although heterogeneous, have high socio-economic and cultural status with lifestyle motivations (Mottiar et al., 2018).

Studies show that few studies have been done regarding the impact of social factors on tourism entrepreneurship. Haji Ali Akbari et al. (2022) in a research reported the role of social factors such as participation, education and social interactions in the development of ecotourism in Zanzan. Rostami et al. (2022) in the analysis of entrepreneurship development capacities in rural areas showed that the lack of social components such as entrepreneurship network, participation of women and girls, skill training and familiarity with tourism capacity is one of the obstacles to the development of ecotourism entrepreneurship. Izadi and Ghanbari (2021) in investigating the role of factors affecting entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector in line with the development of rural areas, have emphasized social factors with the dimensions of social participation and education. Qalipour et al. (2021) reported social factors with the components of education, unity and empathy, customs and traditions as background conditions in the development of ecotourism entrepreneurship in tourism target villages. Jajarmizadeh et al. (2021) presented a model for the development of rural tourism entrepreneurship in Fars province using the metacombination method, in which social factors with the components of social capital and human capital are at the highest level. Omidpour et al. (2020) introduced the socio-cultural factor with the components of participation, individual and group relations, skilled manpower, training and counseling centers as effective structural factors on the development of entrepreneurship in rural areas of Delfan. Cunha et al. (2020) investigated the management motivations and practices of rural tourism entrepreneurs and showed that entrepreneurs are motivated by various factors in which social lifestyle motivation plays a major role. Richard (2020) has conducted a research entitled the factors affecting rural entrepreneurship, and based on the findings, these factors include: economic, social and educational factors. López et al. (2019) investigated rural entrepreneurship development strategies in the northern plateau of Spain and showed that the most appropriate entrepreneurship development strategy is the cooperative development strategy of rural entrepreneurship, which depicts the participation of civil society

by adapting the "working with people" model. Aggarwal (2018) stated the most important influencing factors for the development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in rural India: training in the field of developing the entrepreneurial skills of rural people, financing the entrepreneurial efforts of rural people in the form of small and rural companies, and strengthening the network between potential entrepreneurs and peers with their experience. Various researches have shown that several social factors can play a vital role in the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship, and the correct guidance of those factors will lead to the improvement and development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship. In the following, in order to develop the conceptual model of the research, the social factors affecting the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship are mentioned.

Networking: In the field of entrepreneurship, the importance of networking and strategic alliances has always been emphasized, and it is known as one of the most essential factors for business success (Udimal et al., 2021). Networking is a socio-economic activity in which entrepreneurs meet, share information and seek potential business partners in order to identify, create or act on entrepreneurial opportunities and build business relationships (Abu Rumman et al., 2021). Networking leads to discovering new opportunities for cooperation with other businesses or the possibility of entering a new market, establishing long-term and purposeful business relationships with potential customers, and makes the business name visible, receiving advice and learning from the people present in the communication network enables the exchange of information about challenges, experiences and social support (Jiang et al., 2018). Based on this, the first hypothesis of the research is:

Networking is effective on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship.

Social participation: the problems caused by the traditional patterns of tourism development through global experiences have led the realization of sustainable tourism development towards the community-oriented tourism development model (Lo & Janta, 2020). The tourism industry uses the local community as a resource and sells it like a product and ultimately affects the lives of every member of the community (Wani et al., 2022). According to the theory of social exchange, for a society to participate in tourism activities, it must benefit from it. Therefore, local residents must decide whether the benefits of tourism outweigh the costs, taking into account economic, social, cultural and environmental concerns. Conversely, if local residents perceive that tourism development is likely to cost them heavily, they are unlikely to support further tourism development (Rumiani et al., 2017). Yilma et al. (2016) stated that in the southern highlands of Ethiopia, the unsustainable activities of ecotourism in the absence of a cooperative platform

have become a factor in destroying the environment and threatening biodiversity. Based on this, the second hypothesis of the research is:

Social participation is effective on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship.

Educational and awareness: despite the fact that the human spirit for entrepreneurship is formed in childhood, but at the same time, it is possible to create a creative spirit and work mission in people with a correct educational program (Wei et al., 2019). In this regard, for innovation and creativity in the rural environment, one should not be satisfied only with the intellectual and mental capacity and mental talent of people, but special attention should be paid to the effect of education and training (Movahedi et al., 2014). Entrepreneurship training can be considered as a starting point in improving and motivating people's tendencies (Serdyukov, 2017). In addition, in the field of ecotourism entrepreneurship development, the category of information plays an important role. Destinations that provide accurate and timely information to tourists through appropriate and scientific marketing and advertising have a greater chance of being selected as a tourist destination (Berhanu and Raj, 2020). Because before buying travel services, customers prefer to collect information on this matter (Xue & Zhang, 2020). Based on this, the third hypothesis of the research is:

Education and information are effective on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship.

Social capital: Social capital is defined as a sociological phenomenon and it is considered as a set of existing norms in social systems that increase the level of cooperation of society members and decrease costs (Alvani et al., 2011). Social capital is of special importance for the collective management of common resources at the local level. Therefore, social capital has the ability to improve cooperation between community members and coordination in the development process of ecotourism (Widiartanto, 2022). In a research, Bayatani (2021) emphasized the role of social capital in the development of ecotourism, and Kiani Salmi et al. (2021) while confirming the connection between the improvement of social capital and the development of tourism, point out the necessity of planning for the foundation of people's trust in social institutions in order to strengthen social capital. Based on this, the fourth hypothesis of the research is:

Social capital is effective on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship.

Tourism capacities: people do ecotourism to take advantage of natural attractions, rest and relaxation. The more the number of ecotourism attractions in the region, the more the demand for visitors. Ecotourism emphasizes natural and local attractions (Zhu & Sun, 2022). Managers of tourist destinations have realized that they should add new, exciting, pristine and unrivaled attractions to the tourism

assets of their destinations so that the number of applicants to visit those destinations will increase according to the demands and goals of tourism (Connell et al., 2015). Festivals and events can be a powerful tool to attract tourists during low boom seasons and create an image of the region and its awareness in the minds of tourists (Getz and Stephen, 2016). Based on this, the fifth hypothesis of the research is:

Tourism capacities are effective on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship.

The emergence and development of rural entrepreneurship is a phenomenon dependent on social, economic and individual variables, which are often considered as supporting conditions for the development of rural businesses. Among the mentioned factors, social issues and conditions can be defined as a factor for the development of tourism and can be affected by the conditions and development of tourism in societies as a dependent element. The interpretation and explanation of tourism as an effective or impressionable variable depends on the paradigm and framework that is chosen in a research. Figure (1) shows the conceptual model of the research.

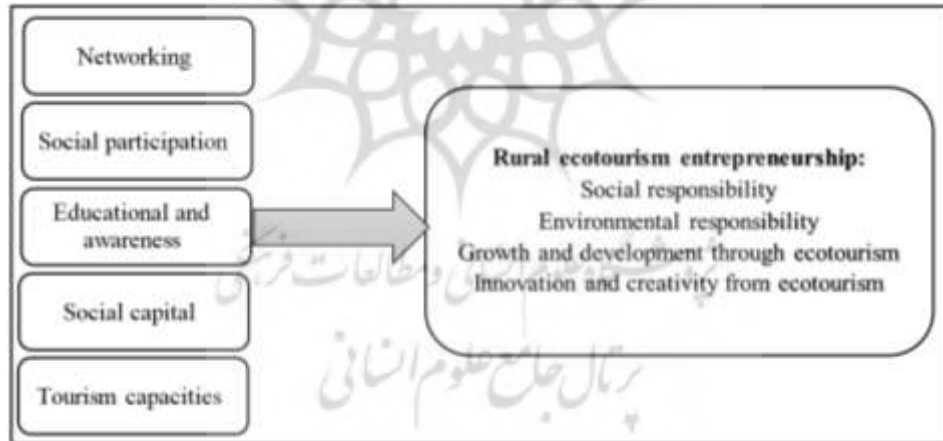


Figure 1. The conceptual model

3. Research Method

The current research has been conducted with the aim of explaining the role of social factors on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship in Dezfoul tourism villages. This research is an applied research in the classification of research based on the purpose, and in terms of the research method, it is a

descriptive-correlation type, which was carried out in the form of a survey. The statistical population includes residents of tourist villages in Dezful. Based on this, the number of statistical population were 10616 households. To determine the sample size, Cochran's correlation was used and the sample size was estimated to be 381 households, which were selected using stratified random sampling method. Table (1) shows the number of selected samples in each village.

Table 1. The number of selected samples in each village

District	Name of the village	Number of households	Number of samples	District	Name of the village	Number of households	Number of samples
Sardasht	Abolhasan	37	2	Choghamish	Ghaleh Sardar	95	3
	Tut Olia	197	7		Kohnak	430	15
	Gavmir	299	7		Beladieh	235	8
	Boneh Kololi	796	29		Shingor Olia	260	9
	Mahur Bernji	244	9		Seyed Noor	431	15
	Sabzab	141	5		Boneh Hajat	350	13
Central	Shamsababd	705	25	Shahin	Leives	35	2
	Anjirak	1073	39		Noorabad	14	1
	Ahmadabad	1600	57		Bisheh Bozan	66	2
	Ghaleno	274	10		Pamanar	48	2
	ben Jaafar	1317	47		Mazeh Paryab	49	2
	Jateh	340	12		Dareh Abnieh	51	2
	Senjar	957	34		Kharmizan	48	2
	Banebal	325	12		Koolsira	55	2
	Zavieh	224	8		Total	10616	381

The main tool of data collection was the researcher-made questionnaire, which was compiled according to the research objectives, after studying the literature and the background of the research and interviewing the experts. To operationalize each of the research variables, based on the used questionnaire, a number of items were considered. Questionnaire items were designed in the form of a five-point Likert scale (very low=1, low=2, moderate=3, high=4, very high=5) and were provided to the respondents to express their opinion about that item. In order to test the proposed model and explain the relationships between the variables in the desired model and present the final model, structural equation modeling with partial least squares approach and PLS Smart software were used. Based on data analysis algorithm in PLS method, measurement models, structural model and general model were fitted respectively. To check the fit of measurement models, three criteria of reliability, convergent validity and divergent validity were examined. To fit the structural model, the significance coefficients of t-values, R² criterion, and Q² criterion were used, and GOF criterion was used to fit the overall model.

4. Results

To check the reliability of the measurement models, the criteria of factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were calculated as follows. Since in the initial measurement model, some items had factor loadings less than 0.3 and t-values less than 1.96, therefore, by removing the mentioned questions, factor loadings were recalculated and it was found that the factor loading of other items is higher than 0.3, which measure the hidden variables well with a high correlation level, and this relationship is also significant. Table (2) shows the specifications of the items in the measurement models.

Table 2. Specifications of items in measurement models

Code	Item	factor loadings	t-value
REE	Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship		
Cr	Innovations and creativity formed in the field of ecotourism		
Cr1	Providing environmentally friendly tourism products	0.839	46.300
Cr2	Providing environmentally friendly tourism services	0.865	58.581
Cr3	Innovation and initiative in applying environmentally friendly inputs and technologies in business	0.799	32.511
Gr	Growth and development through ecotourism at the local and regional level		
Gr1	Development of new tourism markets at the national and international level and action based on the needs of the customers of these markets	0.763	34.580
Gr2	Improving the level and quality of life of the local community	0.800	34.595
Gr3	Increasing employment, creating new job opportunities	0.847	50.883
Gr4	Reducing migration and stabilizing the population of villages or returning migrants to the village	0.851	47.183
Gr5	Earning income and economic well-being for rural households in the region	0.694	25.099
Er	Environmental responsibility		
Er1	Preservation of the habitat and biodiversity of native flora and fauna of the region	0.752	31.066
Er2	Reducing pollution of basic natural resources (water, soil, air) and reducing waste in tourism activities	0.820	49.720
Er3	Preservation of natural resources and attractions and protection of the environment with proper exploitation	0.746	25.633
Er4	Saving energy and using renewable energies	0.831	53.493
Er5	Learning and acquiring knowledge and attitude and environmental responsibility in the local community	0.778	35.345
Er6	Designing and building facilities compatible with the nature and culture of the region with the least possible damage to the native ecosystem	0.714	37.072
Sr	social responsibility		
Sr1	Preservation and promotion of cultural heritage	0.774	25.899
Sr2	Improving social justice and enjoying the benefits of tourism for the local community	0.856	57.175
Sr3	Adherence to the norms and customs of the local community	0.843	50.068
Net	Networking in the village		
Net1	Using the experiences of local entrepreneurs	0.769	35.249
Net2	Establishment of non-governmental organizations supporting rural entrepreneurship	0.616	18.498
Net3	The attention and support of village councils and Islamic councils to rural entrepreneurs	0.710	26.057
Net4	Connecting with other entrepreneurs and creating an entrepreneurial network	0.644	15.987

Par	social participation		
Par1	The existence of trade unions and unions in different fields of business	0.675	21.324
Par2	Creation of spontaneous social groups of cooperation	0.662	17.138
Par3	Cooperation and participation of local people in tourism activities	0.758	28.037
Par4	Improving the participation of the local community, especially women and youth	0.722	22.069
Edu	Education and awareness		
Edu1	Providing marketing, financial, investment, technical consultations by governmental and non-governmental institutions	0.657	21.300
Edu2	Holding educational and promotional courses related to entrepreneurship and tourism	0.794	42.137
Edu3	Using mass media and social networks to inform about rural tourism attractions	0.739	29.716
Edu4	Educating and informing tourists about preserving the environment and culture of the region	0.744	28.293
Edu5	Educating the host community about the environmental and natural resources of the villages and interaction with tourists	0.657	16.361
Edu6	Using local knowledge of villagers	0.723	22.864
Soc	Social capital		
Soc1	The level of trust and solidarity in local communities	0.787	36.511
Soc2	Absence of bigoted and limiting opinions in local communities	0.733	28.133
Soc3	Attitude and acceptance of local people towards tourists	0.708	24.079
Soc4	Preventing conflict and tension between tourists and local people	0.699	20.477
Soc5	Improving social security at the village level	0.748	30.232
Cap	Tourism capacities		
Cap1	The existence of historical cultural works, museums and historical places and cultural heritage such as traditional arts and crafts	0.713	24.130
Cap2	Holding native and local ceremonies and festivals during the presence of tourists	0.692	26.529
Cap3	Holding an exhibition of direct supply of agricultural products and handicrafts in the village	0.700	23.311
Cap4	The existence of knowledgeable and familiar people to guide tourists and correctly introduce attractions to them	0.671	19.973

Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) measures showed a significant level of reliability and convergent validity of all the constructs of the measurement model. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all structures were more than 0.70, the combined reliability of the structures was more than 0.70, and the average variance extracted was more than 0.50. The results of reliability and convergent validity of research constructs are given in table (3).

Table 3. Convergent validity and reliability assessment of measurements

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	CR
Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship	0.94	0.95	0.52
Networking	0.74	.90	0.49
social participation	0.77	0.83	0.56
Education and awareness	0.89	0.87	0.57
Social capital	0.86	0.90	0.61
Tourism capacities	0.73	0.91	0.55

The divergent validity of the measurement model was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (1981). As illustrated in Table 4, since each variable's square root of AVE was greater than its correlation with other variables, it was concluded that each variable of the model has greater interaction with its own factors in

comparison with those of other variables; therefore, the divergent validity of the model can be confirmed.

Table 4. The matrix of divergent validity assessment of the research constructs

Row	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship	0.721					
2	Networking	0.551**	0.700				
3	social participation	0.454**	0.474**	0.678			
4	Education and awareness	0.489**	0.608**	0.481**	0.754		
5	Social capital	0.566**	0.624**	0.594**	0.643**	0.714	
6	Tourism capacities	0.471**	0.563**	0.485**	0.552**	0.610**	0.742

After examining the measurement models, the fit of the structural model of the research was studied. In fact, the structural model shows how the hidden variables are linked with each other, considering that the R^2 of the rural ecotourism entrepreneurship variable was 0.625, the appropriateness of the fit of the structural model is confirmed. The value of Q^2 for the rural ecotourism entrepreneurship variable was 0.189, which shows the strong predictive power of the model regarding the endogenous structure of the model and once again confirms the appropriate fit of the structural model of the research. To check the overall fit of the model, only one criterion called GOF was used. In this research, the value of GOF index is equal to 0.297, which shows the strong overall fit of the model. Then, by examining the t-coefficients and the standardized factor load coefficients of each path, the research hypotheses were tested. Figures (2) and (3) show the structural model of the research based on path coefficients and t-values.

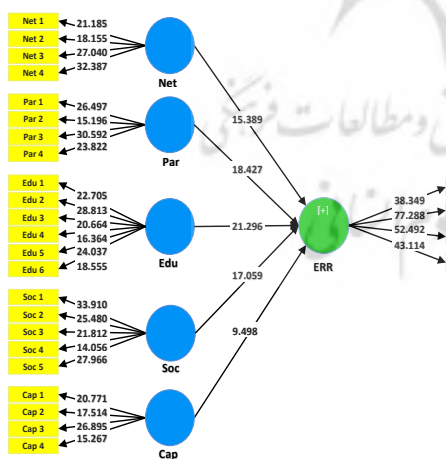


Figure 2. The research structural model based on the t values

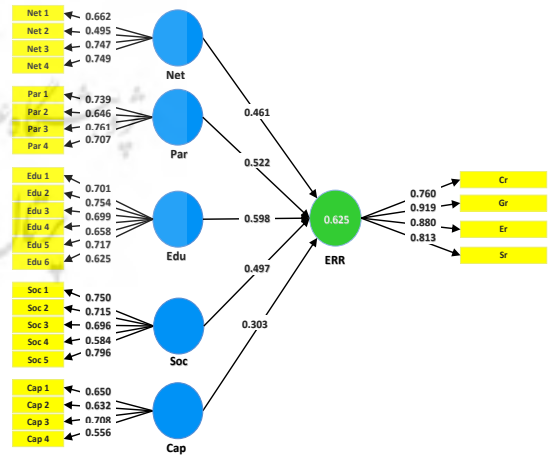


Figure 3. The research structural model based on the path coefficients

If the value of t-statistic for each of the paths is more than 1.96, that path is significant at the 95% confidence level and the related hypothesis is confirmed. As can be seen, all considered paths were found to be significant at the 95% confidence level, and thus all research hypotheses were confirmed. Table 5 represents the path and value of t-statistic for the relationship among latent variables based on the tested conceptual model.

Table 5. Path analysis of the research structural model

	Hypotheses		Path coefficient	t-value	Result
Networking	→	Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship	0.461	15.389	supported
social participation	→	Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship	0.522	18.427	supported
Education and awareness	→	Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship	0.598	21.296	supported
Social capital	→	Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship	0.497	17.059	supported
Tourism capacities	→	Rural ecotourism entrepreneurship	0.303	9.498	supported
R ² :0.625			Q ² : 0.189	GOF: 0.297	

According to the results obtained from table (5), it can be said that networking in the village, social participation, education and awareness, social capital and tourism capacities have a positive and significant effect on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship. The values related to the path coefficient in the final research model showed that networking in the village with a path coefficient of 0.461, social participation with a path coefficient of 0.522, education and awareness with a path coefficient of 0.598, social capital with a path coefficient of 0.497 and tourism capacities with a path coefficient of 0.303 have a positive and significant effect on rural ecotourism entrepreneurship and directly explains 62.5% of the changes related to the rural ecotourism entrepreneurship variable.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Ecotourism entrepreneurship is the process of entrepreneurship development based on ecotourism, which leads to the creation of new businesses in the ecotourism sector and provides the grounds for strengthening job opportunities, income, marketing, value creation, and the like for the villagers. However, since ecotourism entrepreneurship is in accordance with the implementation stage in terms of the entrepreneurial process model, therefore, for the formation and realization of ecotourism entrepreneurship, there is a need to know the driving factors and conditions, which in this research are the social factors effective on the

development of ecotourism entrepreneurship. It was studied in the tourist villages of Dezful. The findings of the research showed that networking in the village, social participation, education and awareness, social capital and tourism capacities explained a total of 62.5% of the changes related to the dependent variable of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship and the rest is related to other factors that are included in this research have not been checked. Among the factors influencing the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship, the variables of education and awareness and social participation had the greatest impact on the dependent variable. It should be noted that the host communities, as the main beneficiaries of tourism, play an important role in ecotourism entrepreneurship. The community is considered both as a scene of tourism events and as a source of local knowledge. From both points of view, it can be argued that the networks and relationships between people in a destination community and their level of social trust resources and their favorable cooperation with tourists will have a great impact on the development of ecotourism entrepreneurship. As one of the players in the tourism development process, the society should cooperate to increase the economic and social benefits of tourism. The cooperation of each of the elements of the tourism system with each other to meet the needs of tourists entering the destination, as well as cooperation with tourists to create favorable experiences for them, can develop ecotourism entrepreneurship. According to their collective and cultural potential, social factors are always effective in the growth or retardation of economic phenomena. Social factors along with economic, historical, cultural and political factors can help the development of tourism entrepreneurship. The findings of this research are in agreement with the research results of Rostami et al. (2022), Izadi and Ghanbari (2021), Gholipour et al., (2021), Jajarmizadeh et al. (2021), Omidpour et al. (2020), Cunha et al. (2020), Richard (2020), Lopez et al. (2019) and Aggarwal (2018) and they also emphasized the role of social factors in the development of tourism entrepreneurship in their research.

Education and awareness is the most important factor affecting the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship. The prerequisite for effective decision-making for rural ecotourism entrepreneurship is comprehensive awareness of all stakeholders. Education in the field of entrepreneurship and environment is the most fundamental method in the development of ecotourism entrepreneurship, the purpose of which is to find the most appropriate and best system and method of raising awareness level at the community. According to Mubasheri et al. (2022), three groups of people should be trained; people of indigenous communities who are permanently present, tourists who are temporary guests of natural and pristine areas under protection and the employees active in this sector. These trainings can increase their sensitivity to accidents and comprehensive quantitative and qualitative changes in the environment. Raising people's awareness should lead to an increase in their concern and finally their activism. Social participation was

recognized as the second most effective factor on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship. Ecotourism emphasizes social relations, improving the effectiveness of local participation and social bonding to protect the environment. In the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship, "participation of all stakeholders" is a strategic factor. Because the participation of local communities as the main factor of giving them character and identity, causes the distribution of power and saves costs and resources and turns people's potential into reality (Ebrahimi & Yaqoubi, 2022). The next factor was identified as social capital. According to Aghandeh & Karoubi (2020), in the context of tourism, the social capital of the host community includes all the resources and communication skills of the local residents, which are used to gain the benefits of tourism. Because the interests of local people are discussed along with environmental protection in ecotourism, social capital is of special importance for the collective management of common resources at the local level. Therefore, social capital has the ability to improve cooperation between community members and coordination in the process of ecotourism development. Networking also plays an important role in streamlining and facilitating local network structures as a factor of sector cohesion and finally, it leads to the improvement of tourism performance and enables inter-organizational networks and stakeholders to use the total of existing relationships to improve access to information resources and other resources as a competitive advantage. Safai Konjin et al. (2021) state that the lower the density, homogeneity and concentration of the network, the higher the efficiency of the network. Also, open networks are usually more efficient. Chow and Chan (2018) showed that a culturally diverse network increases the probability of obtaining new ideas from network communication. On the other hand, in order to improve the field of entrepreneurship development in the villages, it is necessary to improve the capacities. Because, according to Ebrahimi et al. (2021) the development of entrepreneurship in rural areas is based on local resources and creating an environment that encourages entrepreneurship requires a special structure. The existence of these factors and maintaining the provision of special capacities is the basis for the growth, prosperity and development of rural areas. Finally, achieving the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship in Dezful will be more smooth when at the same time the innovation of tourism entrepreneurship is used in accordance with the atmosphere that governs the studied area and is more compatible with these conditions; Tourism entrepreneurship provides platforms for growth and development and improvement of quality of life for the host community, and tourism income outputs improve the quality of life and development of the region. Finally, tourism activities and businesses in harmony with the social context and cultural structure of the host society, in addition to protecting the cultural heritage and improving their sense of self-confidence, lead to the acceptance and acceptability of these activities in the host society and as a result, it will bring their active participation in the development process.

The findings of the present research can provide practical and scientific guidelines for the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship in Iran to managers and policy makers. In fact, on the one hand, due to the lack of research conducted in this field, as well as the lack of precise and coherent policies and programs related to the development of ecotourism in Iran, and on the other hand, the importance of identifying the influencing factors on the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship, managers and policymakers as the main custodians of planning and development of this industry can use the results as guidance in planning the development of rural ecotourism entrepreneurship in the country.

The suggestions based on the results of this research are:

- By holding local festivals, local games, the promotion of handicrafts and local products, it is possible to create an environment that encourages entrepreneurship while improving tourism capacities.
- Holding educational and consulting courses in the field of ecotourism entrepreneurship provides the villagers with familiarity with these businesses and increases their awareness about the needs of tourists.
- Attracting people's participation in the construction and development activities of the villages, which ultimately led to the development of the infrastructure and facilities of the village, and the formation of rural tourism cooperatives with the membership of residents and their participation in tourism activities is another solution for the development of ecotourism entrepreneurship.
- Building the capacity of host communities to accept tourism realities is one of the basic principles of hospitality. Capacity building should be done in the host society so that they look at tourists not as foreigners and consumers of goods, but as permanent customers and promoters of culture. If there is a favorable level of social relations to interact with tourists, the possibility of developing ecotourism entrepreneurship also increases.

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