



<http://doi.org/10.22133/ijtcs.2025.553787.1247>

## A Religious Tourism Model to Promote Tourism Development in the City of Kerman

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### Article Info

#### Received:

2025-10-24

#### Accepted:

2025-12-14

#### Keywords:

Religious tourism  
Kerman  
Tourism  
Grounded Theory

### Abstract

The aim of this research was to design a religious tourism model in Kerman City. The research strategy was Grounded Theory. The statistical population included 14 experts and officials in the tourism sector who were selected using purposive sampling. Theoretical saturation was achieved at interview 12, after which subsequent interviews yielded no additional open codes. The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview. The findings showed that the causal factors include the existence of Kerman's high attractions and potential in the field of religious tourism, the location of various religious and spiritual places in and around the city of Kerman, the image of Kerman as a religious city with a rich cultural history, the strategic location of the province as a domestic and international transit route. The contextual factors include the city's tourism infrastructure and the area surrounding religious places, planning and development, opportunity recognition, participation and encouragement of the private sector, changing managers' attitudes, developing an economic perspective on tourism, a holistic and strategic perspective on tourism, and urban branding in the field of religious tourism. The intervening factors included, weakness in tourism infrastructure, Kerman's remoteness from other tourism destinations, attention to tourists' behavior, some officials and citizens' unfamiliarity with the concept of religious tourism, lack of focus on sustainable tourism, institutional and managerial challenges, lack of attention to religious tourism target groups are considered as obstacles to development in this area.

### How to Cite:

Dehyadegari, S., & Pourjoupari, Z. (2026). A Religious Tourism Model to Promote Tourism Development in the City of Kerman. *International Journal of Tourism, Culture and Spirituality*, 9(1), 119-139.

## Introduction

Tourism, as one of the most important and growing industries in the world, plays a significant role in economic development, job creation, cultural exchange, and increasing national income. In recent decades, this industry has become one of the main foundations for wealth formation and improving the livelihoods of societies, and has been able to attract the attention of policymakers and researchers as one of the key drivers of social and economic development (Zou et al., 2022; Sigala et al., 2025; Crouch, 2001). In many countries, the tourism sector is an important source for attracting investment, providing foreign exchange, reducing the balance of payments deficit, and solving the problem of unemployment. Among the different types of tourism, religious tourism has a special importance. Religious tourism refers to travel to holy places, shrines, and places that are valuable to followers of different religions and sects in terms of belief and spirituality (Ohlan & Ohlan, 2024). In addition to religious aspects, this type of tourism also has cultural, social and economic dimensions and, as one of the most important sub-branches of cultural tourism, has taken a significant share of the global tourism market. Estimates show that about 330 million people visit religious sites around the world annually, which indicates the enormous potential of this field in economic development and promotion of cultural interactions (Zarkada & Kashif, 2025). In Iran, the existence of numerous religious sites and diverse religious and cultural rituals has provided a suitable basis for the development of religious tourism (Mirhoseini et al., 2025). In the meantime, the city of Kerman, as one of the most important religious and historical destinations in the country, has great potential (Amirpour Saeed & Amirpour Saeed, 2023). The existence of shrines such as Prince Hossein Jopar, Imamzadeh Mohammad Kerman, Imamzadeh Ali Sirjan, and mosques such as Jame Mosque, Malek Mosque, Ganjali Khan Mosque, Sahib-e-Zaman Mosque, as well as the tomb of Hajj Qasem Soleimani, has made this city one of the potential poles of religious tourism in Iran (Anjomrouz et al., (2022). Despite these capacities, it seems that Kerman province has not yet been able to exploit these potentials in a desirable way. The lack of appropriate tourism infrastructure, weakness in religious tourism planning and marketing, and inconsistency between related institutions are among the factors that have hindered the development of this sector. In addition, the special geographical and transit location of Kerman province, which acts as a connecting link between the east and west of the country, has caused a large number of travelers to pass through this route, but a significant part of them pass through the region without staying or visiting religious and historical sites (Shafaei et al., 2015). This indicates the existence of a gap between the province's religious tourism potential and actual performance in attracting and retaining tourists. Accordingly, this research presents a model for the development of religious tourism in Kerman city and identifies factors affecting sustainable development and management. This situation indicates a significant gap between

the actual capacities and the actual performance of the province in attracting and retaining tourists. A review of the literature shows that although several studies have pointed out the importance of religious tourism, few studies have specifically analyzed the factors affecting the development of religious tourism in Kerman or presented an efficient and local model for its sustainable management. In fact, the lack of a coherent and scientific model that can explain the key components, obstacles, opportunities, and strategies for the development of religious tourism in Kerman is the main gap in the research literature in this field. Such a model can identify the factors affecting the development of this area, as well as provide a path for scientific planning, infrastructure improvement, targeted marketing, sustainable exploitation of existing capacities, and increasing the role of religious tourism in the economy and culture of the province. Accordingly, the present study was conducted with the aim of designing a model for the development of religious tourism in Kerman city and tries to fill the gap in the theoretical and managerial literature in this area by identifying the effective components and explaining an efficient framework.

## Literature Review

### *Tourism*

Tourism is a phenomenon of temporary movement or travel carried out by several people belonging to different countries. Tourism may be within a domestic area or from one country to another foreign country. Tourism has become an essential business sector in many developing countries in recent years through the development of related jobs, improving the living standards of local people and supporting the growth of other industries. Tourism provides many benefits to both tourist destinations and receiving centers (Preko et al., 2023; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). This industry is one of the vital industries that helps to increase government and private sector revenues and helps the tourism industry to find many job opportunities in various fields such as hotels, car rental offices, restaurants, souvenir shops, gas stations and other fields. Developing countries are trying to improve and diversify their tourism products to attract international tourists. Therefore, tourism becomes very important for such countries and an increasing number of studies focus on tourism development (Hasan, 2024; Khan et al., 2020). Tourism has many characteristics that distinguish it from other activities. There are also differences in time zones for tourism activities. Several factors affect the behavior of tourists. The money factor is also very important, which may affect the length or shortness of the tourism period. The tourist is considered as a fundamental factor in increasing the level of general income of the country because he is considered as a consumer of the host country. Travel is often for relaxation, entertainment, which is called the satisfaction of psychological needs. Tourism is also vital in strengthening relations, friendship, and understanding between people of different countries and cultures (Torabi et al., 2022; Soliman, 2021).

In the meantime, Iran, with its millennia-old civilization, rich cultural heritage, and impressive natural and religious diversity, has great potential for tourism development. One of the prominent provinces in this regard is Kerman province, which has a unique place on the country's tourism map with its vast area, historical background, and special geographical location. In addition to having prominent historical and cultural monuments such as the Shahzad Mahan Garden and the Shahdad Cloaks, Kerman has numerous religious attractions such as the Shahzad Hossein Jopar, Imamzadeh Mohammad Kerman, Imamzadeh Ali Sirjan, Jame Mosque, Malek Mosque, Ganjali Khan Mosque, Sahib-ol-Zaman Mosque, and the tomb of Martyr Hajj Qasem Soleimani, all of which can be attractive destinations for domestic and foreign religious tourists (Rezaie et al., 2025).

### ***Tourist***

The concept of “tourist” in tourism literature is one of the most fundamental terms, the precise definition of which plays an important role in policy formulation, destination planning and statistical analysis (Cronjé & du Plessis, 2020). According to international definitions, a tourist is any person who enters the territory of a contracting state without any distinction based on race, sex, language, religion or nationality; provided that this destination is not his previous place of residence. A tourist’s stay in this country must last at least 24 hours and is usually defined as more than six months but within a twelve-month period (Jovicic, 2019; Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Dilek, & Dilek, 2018). Also, the purpose of the tourist’s entry must be legitimate and other than permanent migration; In other words, a tourist does not enter a country with the intention of permanent residence or employment, but has motives such as recreation, pilgrimage, business, education, treatment, participation in events or visiting friends and acquaintances. This definition shows that every tourist is a traveler, but not every traveler is necessarily a tourist; because groups such as immigrants, border residents, international transport drivers, diplomats or people who are present at the destination for less than 24 hours are not included in the tourist classification Ketter, (2021) and Seeler et al. (2021). In completing this definition, the United Nations Statistical Commission also introduced the term “visitor” in 1953. According to this definition, a visitor is a non-resident who intends to reside in a country outside his or her place of residence for a maximum of one year, without having a professional activity or formal employment in that country. This group can include tourists as well as day travelers. This classification helps to clarify the conceptual boundaries between tourists, travelers, and other human movement groups and to analyze statistical data more accurately (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2020; Jebbouri et al., 2022). In addition, recent tourism studies emphasize that the definition of a tourist is not only a temporal or geographical definition; it also includes a set of behavioral, motivational, and economic characteristics. Tourists create cultural, economic, and social interactions with their temporary presence in a destination, and therefore their

accurate identification is essential for destination planning, resource management, tourism marketing, and macro-decision making (Carvalho et al., 2023).

### ***Religious tourism***

Religions play an important role in shaping and guiding human behavior, culture and customs. For example, it is clear that differences in lifestyles and daily habits, including the type of eating and drinking, are often based on religious beliefs. Religious beliefs influence human behavior in two ways: on the one hand, they limit or guide the behavior of individuals based on a set of specific taboos and requirements (Khan, 2024; Drăguleasa et al., 2024). On the other hand, religions play a fundamental role in shaping the norms, customs, and culture of societies, and in this way indirectly affect human behavior. In the context of continuous global political developments, religion has continued to maintain an important position as a social movement and has penetrated the fabric of cultures and traditions with its complex structures and functions. Although there is still no consensus on a precise and comprehensive definition of the concept of religion, religion can be defined as a system of identifiable beliefs and practices that acknowledge the existence of a “superhuman” force that allows humans to face and transcend life’s problems (Gupta & Gahalot, 2024). There are also different views on the concept of “religious tourism”. Religious tourism can be defined as visiting places where visitors have the opportunity to experience religious events or places or their works and products such as art, culture, traditions, and architecture (Mzobe & Nyikana, 2024). Considering tourism as a unique and multidimensional socio-cultural phenomenon, as well as paying attention to the specific cultural and social conditions of Iran, there is a fundamental need to design a local model that, while paying attention to the global components of tourism, is also appropriate to the local characteristics of the country. This type of tourism follows numerous historical monuments and mostly follows their cultural and social aspects. It is proposed because people with different cultures and specific customs come together in one place and perform their religious rituals together (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2020; Rashid, 2018; Choe, 2025).

### ***The city under study***

Kerman Province has an area of 383,562 square kilometers and a population of 6,276,431 (according to the 2018 census). The provincial capital is Kerman City (with a population of 737,334). Kerman Province is located in southeastern Iran and occupies about 33% of the country's territory. Geographically, the province is located between 77 and 67 minutes and 16-degree north latitude and 62 and 71 degrees to 63 and 73-degree east longitude from the Greenwich Meridian. The province is the second largest province in the country in terms of area. It borders Yazd and South Khorasan provinces to the north, Hormozgan province to the south, Sistan and Baluchestan province to the east, and Fars province to the west. The province has 35 counties, 42 districts, 341 rural districts, and 73 cities. Kerman

Province is located at the intersection of the Zagros Mountains and the central and semi-desert regions in the southeast of the Great Central Desert of Iran, which is approximately 323 kilometers long. The width of this desert separates Kerman from Sistan and Baluchestan. Kerman province, as one of the country's large and historical provinces, has unparalleled potential in the field of religious tourism. Kerman has numerous holy sites such as Shah Nematollah Vali in Mahan, Imamzadeh Hussein bin Musa al-Kazim in Tabas (Yazd province, but on the way to Kerman), and other religious sites that can be designed and introduced in the form of religious tourism routes (Afshar, 2019).

### **Research Background**

Seifollahi and Azizi (2025) studied the presentation of a model for the development of religious tourism in Ardabil province. Based on the findings, the causal factors for the development of religious tourism in Ardabil province are: attracting investors and structural factors; intervening conditions are: culture, characteristics of religious tourists, creating space and equipping welfare facilities; the governing context is: geographical location of Ardabil province, unique Ashura culture and easy accessibility of historical and religious elements, the strategies of this research are: religious tourism marketing and technological factors and finally, the outcomes of this research include: strengthening social cohesion, sustainable tourism development, economic improvement and environmental impacts. Yekta et al. (2025) studied the effect of dimensions of religious tourism experience on the mental health of tourists (case study: Afghan religious tourists in Iran). The results of this study showed that all dimensions of religious tourism experience (sensory, behavioral, cognitive, co-creation, and original) have a positive and significant effect on the mental health of Afghan religious tourists. Co-creation experiences (0.227) and original experiences (0.199) had the greatest effect on the mental health of Afghan religious tourists. Finally, suggestions were made such as using new technologies to improve the pilgrim experience and holding interactive ceremonies and programs for pilgrims. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of paying attention to the environmental factors of social networks in increasing tourists' behavioral intentions to visit the city of Karbala and developing religious tourism in this city. Dehyadegari et al. (2022) studied the factors affecting tourists' intention to visit tourist attractions in Kerman province with an emphasis on electronic advertising. The results showed that electronic advertising has an effect on electronic word-of-mouth marketing with a standard coefficient of 0.73 and a value of  $t$ , 10.276, and on destination image with a coefficient of 0.26 and a value of  $t$ , 4.626. Also, the destination image has an effect on the attitude towards it with a coefficient of 0.93 and a value of  $t$ , 13.341. Finally, the results show the effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth marketing with a coefficient of 0.16 and a value of  $t$ , 3.752, and the attitude towards the destination with a coefficient of 0.81 and a value of  $t$ , 11.978 on the intention to visit.

**Table 1. Analytical summary of the research background and its relationship to the proposed model**

Study	Main Focus / Framework	Key Findings	Alignment with Kerman Model	How Kerman Model Extends / Modifies / Contradicts
Seifollahi & Azizi (2025)	Investor attraction, structural factors	Social cohesion, sustainable development, economic and environmental benefits	Partially aligned: Kerman model also emphasizes infrastructure and economic-environmental outcomes	Extends by integrating multi-sector tourism capacities and transit potential; emphasizes participatory management beyond investor attraction
Yekta et al. (2025)	Religious tourism experience	Mental health improvement, experience-based outcomes	Aligned in emphasizing tourist experience	Extends by combining experiential factors with infrastructure and strategic development; adds local stakeholder participation
Bahari & Mohammadi (2024)	Religious and civilizational capacities	Focus on leveraging Islamic heritage for tourism	Aligned in identifying cultural/religious capacities	Extends by operationalizing capacities specifically for Kerman, connecting them to practical tourism strategies and local economic development
Bagheri et al. (2021)	Driving & inhibiting factors in religious tourism	Infrastructure, socio-cultural and economic influences	Strongly aligned	Extends by providing a structured model linking infrastructure, stakeholder participation, and strategic interventions; emphasizes actionable policy recommendations
Dinparast et al. (2019)	Economic impacts of religious tourism	Rural economic development	Partially aligned	Extends by integrating both urban and regional economic outcomes, while adding strategic pathways for sustainable development
Rostami et al. (2024)	Causal conditions, interventions, outcomes	Framework for Mehran border tourism	Aligned conceptually	Extends by adapting Kerman model to border context; emphasizes participatory management, infrastructure readiness, and integrated planning for cross-border tourism

Daskin and Pala (2025) studied the role of emotional solidarity on support for religious tourism and the results showed that dimensions of emotional solidarity such as warm welcome and empathetic understanding are positively related to support for religious tourism. Zarkada and Kashif (2025)

examined the structure and content of the religious tourism destination image structure: An exploratory network study of the opinions of travelers to Mecca and Medina - Open Access. The results show that the religious tourism destination image is a three-dimensional structure - cognitive, affective and behavioral - that includes religious-specific variables, generally sacred and secular in a single and inseparable experience. (Khan, 2024). In a study, he investigated how religious tourists' attitudes towards artificial intelligence (AI) affected their self-efficacy for AI and their engagement in AI. The results of his study showed that attitudes towards AI had a significant effect on self-efficacy for AI, which in turn had a positive effect on engagement with AI. Table1 presents the analytical summary of the research background and its relationship to the proposed model.

### **Research Method**

In this study, the data analysis method is based on the grounded theory approach. In this approach, the analysis process is carried out through open, axial, and selective coding to extract the main concepts and ultimately explain the final research model. Grounded theory is a qualitative, inductive, and exploratory method that is particularly suitable for designing a model and generating theory from data. In the present study, grounded theory has been used in terms of strategy, which is an inductive method with a completely qualitative and exploratory approach. The statistical population of this study includes experts, scholars, and tourism officials. The participants in this study included 14 specialists, experts, and professors in the field of tourism because of the depth of experience, practical knowledge, and informational value of their data. To select the sample, purposive sampling method was used, which is a non-probability method. Sampling adequacy was achieved with the theoretical sampling method. Theoretical saturation was achieved at interview 12, after which subsequent interviews yielded no additional open codes. Theoretical sampling is the best method for developing a theory. In theoretical sampling, in-depth interviews proceed until the theoretical saturation is reached. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used until theoretical saturation is reached (Charmaz, 2001). The demographic characteristics of the interviewed experts are given in Table 2.

### **Research Findings**

#### **Research Quality Assessment**

To ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings of this qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four-factor validation framework including reliability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability was used. These four criteria are considered one of the most valid models for assessing the quality of data-based research and have been used in similar studies. 1- Credibility: To increase credibility, the analysis process was conducted as a continuous comparison and initial findings were sent to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the perceptions. The corrective feedback received was also

applied in revising the categories so that the interpretations were more consistent with the reality of the data. 2- Transferability: To enhance transferability, the research context and characteristics of the participants were accurately reported, and direct quotes were used for the categories to allow the reader to judge the applicability of the findings in similar situations. 3- Dependability: To enhance dependability, the stages of the research from data collection to analysis were fully documented, and the process of coding and interpreting the data was reviewed by research method experts to confirm the consistency and coherence of the research decisions. 4- Confirmability: In order to increase confirmability, all analytical notes, different versions of coding, and documents related to the formation of categories were kept to show that the results were based on data and were immune to the researcher's personal interference and bias.

### **Findings of grounded theory (qualitative part of the research)**

As mentioned earlier, interviews were conducted with 14 specialists, experts and professors in the field of tourism. The analysis of these interviews enabled the researcher to understand concepts that, when integrated with each other, led to a deeper understanding of the why and how of the "religious tourism pattern of Kerman city." All stages of open coding, selective or focused coding, theoretical (final) coding, and finally achieving the theoretical model were obtained from the interview texts conducted and documented in this study. Some interviewees mentioned more than one concept, and during coding, all concepts were recorded as much as possible. In coding the interview text, the researcher used natural or living codes that were the same as the interviewees' sentences or expressed his/her own understanding of the sentences, which are called confirmation codes, and based on the materials formed from past research, the appropriate code was assigned to it. The main question of the present study is to identify the "dimensions and components of the religious tourism development pattern of Kerman city," which was also the goal in the researcher's mind during coding. Also, the dimensions of the model and the relationships between the dimensions of the model were also in the researcher's mind and were taken into account in coding.

The logic and process of extracting codes from interview texts is as follows: the researcher simultaneously develops the questions in question in his mind and assigns the desired code by encountering texts that referred to a common concept. Table 3 shows the extracted open codes and their classification into subcategories and core categories, which form the main basis of the qualitative findings of this study. In Table 4, the axial codes identified, categorized and analyzed in the selected codes are presented.

**Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Interviewed Experts**

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Education	Years of activity	Occupation
1	Male	59	PhD	26	University professor, tourism expert and researcher
2	Male	55	PhD	20	Investor and executor of tourism projects in Kerman
3	Male	40	M.A.	20	Deputy of Tourism, Kerman Provincial Office of Cultural Heritage and Tourism
4	Male	47	M.A.	19	Public Relations Manager, Provincial Department of Tourism
5	Male	48	PhD	17	University professor, tourism expert and researcher
6	Male	59	PhD	27	University professor and tourism expert
7	Female	55	M.A.	30	Human Resources Manager, Kerman Provincial Department of Tourism
8	Male	55	PhD	27	CEO of a travel agency and tour operator
9	Female	29	B.A.	Tourism experience in visiting major religious sites across several countries	Foreign visitor
10	Male	45	M.A.	18	Deputy of Administration and Finance, Municipality District
11	Male	27	M.A.	Experience in visiting major religious tourism destinations within the country	Iranian visitor
12	Male	48	PhD	26	Foreign visitor
13	Female	32	M.A.	-	Management Expert and Researcher
14	Male	33	Bachelor	Tourism experience in visiting major religious sites across several countries	Foreign Visitor

### Presentation of the Final Paradigmatic Model

It should be noted that the previous steps, namely **axial and selective coding**, were conducted through an iterative process. Therefore, the stages of selective coding are not strictly separated from one another but occur interactively alongside open and axial coding.

In summary, the **data analysis procedure**, which led to the development of the theoretical model, includes causal conditions, contextual and intervening factors, strategies, and consequences that collectively explain the core phenomenon, i.e., **“Religious Tourism in Kerman City.”**

The theoretical model of **“The Religious Tourism Pattern of Kerman City”** is illustrated according to the dimensions of the **paradigmatic model** in Figure 2.

Since the interview questions for experts were designed based on this paradigmatic framework, the interviewees provided their views specifically according to the model’s components. However, through several rounds of analysis and refinement, their initial responses were adjusted. The final model is presented in Figure 1.

**Table 3. An example of open-text interviews and extraction of subcategories and core categories**

Interviewee	Interview transcript	Sub-categories	Main Category
12	Kerman served as a major stopover within the Ganjali Khan complex, where caravans continued their journey toward China. Since Kerman was located on a secondary branch of the Silk Road, caravanserais naturally developed along this route. Kerman was also a transit point for routes coming from India, Pakistan, and the southern regions.	Kerman as a logistics hub for other provinces; Kerman’s position on the ancient Spice and Silk Roads	Strategic location of Kerman and its position on domestic and international transit routes
3	One of the most important issues is the development of infrastructure and providing basic facilities for tourists to enter Kerman. Tourism attraction requires that visitors first feel safe and secure.	Shortage of hotels and accommodation; perceived insecurity due to migrants; security-oriented perception toward the province	Weaknesses in essential tourism infrastructure in Kerman
7	Through cultural interactions and the presence of tourists, Kerman is introduced in a better, more refined, and more deserving manner at regional and international levels.	Cultural learning and exchange; socio-cultural impacts of tourism; socio-cultural development; cultural and social interactions	Socio-cultural consequences of tourism
2	One of the major weaknesses in Kerman’s tourism sector is the lack of effective and creative advertising. Visitors stated their perception of Kerman was completely different because no documentaries, films, series, or standard promotional clips were produced, nor were street or highway advertisements implemented (even on the Tehran–Qom highway with 500,000 daily travelers).	Outdoor tourism advertising in other provinces; content marketing; development of cultural packages; production of films and promotional clips; national and international media exposure	Creative and comprehensive tourism advertising

**Table 4. Classification of Axial Codes within Selective Codes**

<b>Model Components</b>	<b>Axial Categories</b>
<b>Causal Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High potential and attractiveness of Kerman in religious tourism</li> <li>- Existence of various religious and spiritual sites in and around the city of Kerman</li> <li>- The image of Kerman as a religious city and the deep connection between its religious-cultural identity and spiritual heritage</li> <li>- Strategic location of Kerman and its position along domestic and international transit routes</li> </ul>
<b>Intervening Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weakness in various tourism infrastructures of Kerman and its religious sites</li> <li>- Remoteness of Kerman compared to other tourism destinations</li> <li>- Considering tourists' behavior and experiences</li> <li>- Lack of awareness among people and authorities about religious and other forms of tourism</li> <li>- Emphasis on sustainable tourism</li> <li>- Institutional and managerial weaknesses and challenges</li> <li>- Attention to target groups in religious tourism</li> </ul>
<b>Contextual Factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tourism infrastructure of the city and environment of religious and pilgrimage sites</li> <li>- Planned and purposeful tourism development</li> <li>- Opportunity recognition in tourism</li> <li>- Participation and encouragement of the private sector and community-based religious tourism</li> <li>- Changing attitudes and prioritizing the tourism industry in Kerman</li> <li>- Developing an economic perspective toward tourism</li> <li>- Holistic and strategic approach to tourism</li> <li>- Branding Kerman in tourism and religious tourism</li> </ul>
<b>Core Phenomenon</b>	Proposing a religious tourism model to promote tourism development in the city of Kerman
<b>Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Completing and defining tourism chains at micro and macro levels</li> <li>- Diversifying and developing investment methods in religious tourism</li> <li>- Pragmatism and institutional reforms in favor of Kerman's tourism industry</li> <li>- Conducting research and studies in the field of religious tourism</li> <li>- Defining various tourism and religious tourism events in Kerman</li> <li>- Creative and comprehensive advertising</li> </ul>
<b>Consequences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic consequences</li> <li>- Cultural and social consequences</li> <li>- Satisfaction and loyalty of Kerman's visitors and tourists</li> </ul>

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The present study was conducted with the aim of designing a religious tourism model for Kerman city. Considering data analysis and extraction of concepts through theoretical framework and field findings, a model was designed that systematically and scientifically explains various dimensions that affect the development of religious tourism in Kerman. Based on the research findings, causal conditions such as Kerman's high attraction and potential in religious tourism and other tourism sectors, the location of various religious and spiritual places in the center and surroundings of Kerman city, the mental image

of Kerman as a religious city, and the deep connection between the city's religious and cultural identity and its spiritual heritage, the geographical and strategic location of the province on domestic and international transit routes have provided important opportunities for the development of religious and spiritual tourism. The results of this part of the study are in line with the research of Rostami et al. (2024), Bagheri et al., (2021), Seifollahi and Azizi (2025). At the same time, the research showed that a set of interfering conditions, such as the weakness of Kerman's tourism infrastructure and the environment of its religious sites, Kerman's remoteness compared to other destinations for people and officials to gather with religious tourism and other forms of tourism, attention to sustainable tourism, institutional and management weaknesses and problems, and attention to target groups in religious tourism are serious obstacles to the realization of these capacities. These factors, while reducing the effectiveness of development programs, have caused existing advantages not to be fully realized. The results of this part of the research are in line with the research of Rostami et al. (2024), Bagheri et al. (2021), Seifollahi and Azizi (2025). On the other hand, contextual factors such as the city's tourism infrastructure and the environment of religious and pilgrimage sites, targeted tourism planning and development, opportunism in tourism, participation and encouragement of the private sector and popularization of religious tourism, changing attitudes and promoting the priority of the tourism industry in Kerman, developing an economic perspective on tourism, a holistic and strategic perspective on tourism, branding Kerman in tourism and religious tourism are among the elements that play a leading role in strengthening this pattern. The results of this part of the research are in line with the findings of the research of Rostami et al. (2024), Bagheri et al. (2021), Seifollahi and Azizi (2025) are in line. Social participation and creating a sense of belonging to the tourism industry will be the basis for the sustainability and longevity of development measures in the field of religious tourism. The central phenomenon of the research is the design of a religious tourism development model centered on the city of Kerman. Analyses show that these categories have a high capacity for defining new tourism routes in the country. The strategies designed in the proposed model include such things as completing and defining tourism service chains at the micro and macro levels, pragmatism and carrying out institutional reforms in favor of the Kerman tourism industry, implementing research projects and studies in the field of religious tourism, designing various tourism and religious tourism events, diversifying investment models, and utilizing creative and inclusive advertising. Implementing these strategies will require managerial will, organizational convergence, and utilizing new technological and media capacities. The results of this part of the research are in line with the studies of Rostami et al. (2024), Bagheri et al. (2021), Seifollahi and Azizi (2025). Finally, the results show that implementing this model can have important consequences. Economic consequences will include creating employment, increasing local incomes, developing related industries, and boosting the tourism economy in the region. Cultural and

social consequences, such as increasing cultural interactions, promoting tourist loyalty, and establishing Kerman's position as an important tourism destination, are other results of this model. The increase in tourist satisfaction and the growth of repeated visits also indicate the practical efficiency of this model in the local conditions of Kerman. The results of this part of the research are in line with the studies of Rostami et al. (2024), Bagheri et al. (2021), Seifollahi and Azizi (2025). In summary, this research has presented a localized, strategic and scientific model for the development of religious tourism in Kerman city, which, while paying attention to cultural and value components, has the ability to be generalized to other religious destinations in the country.

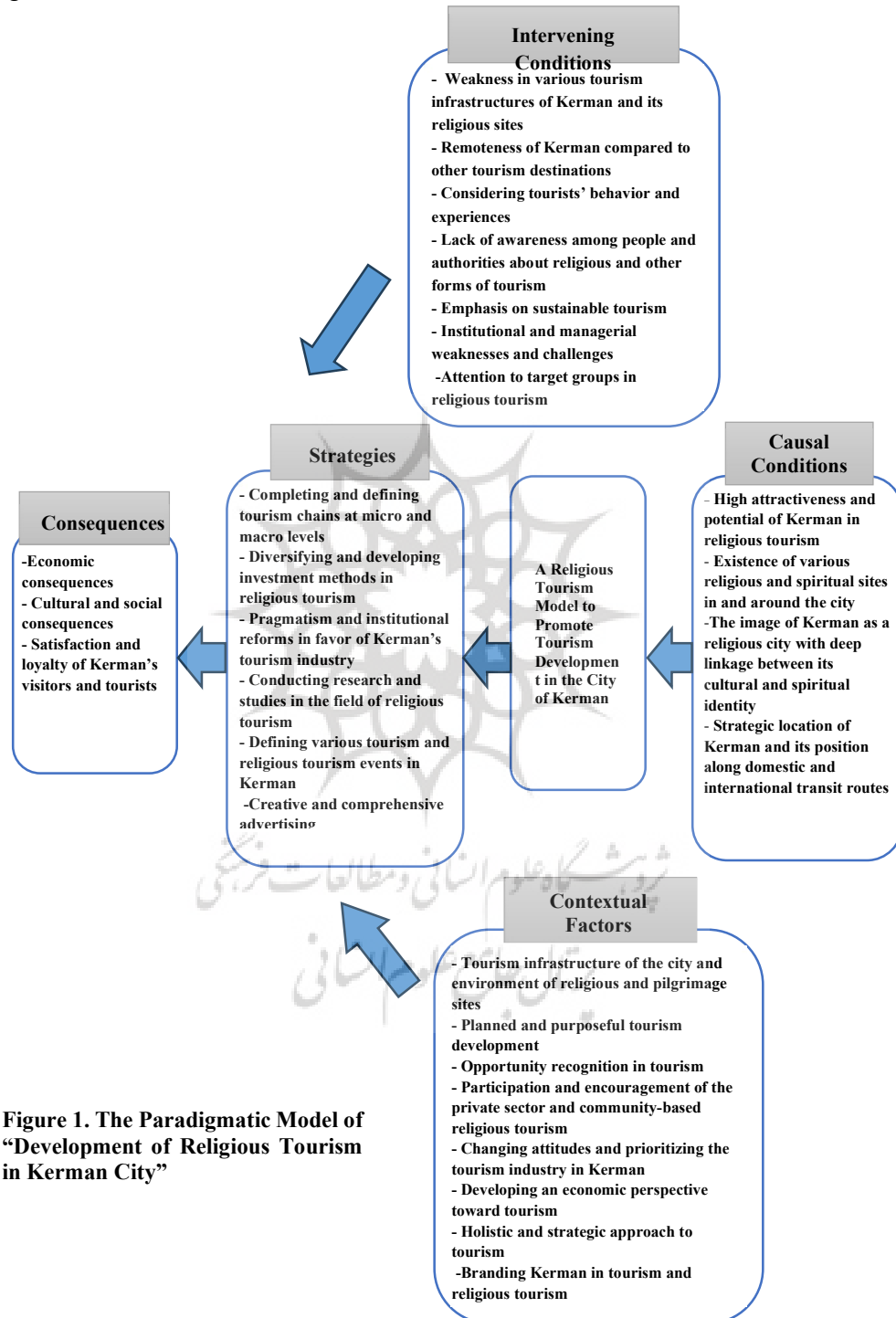
### **Practical Suggestions**

Given the findings of the present study and the fact that Kerman province has rich capacities in the field of religious and cultural tourism, it is suggested that the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, in cooperation with the Kerman Governorate, municipalities and other relevant institutions, should draft a comprehensive document for the development of religious tourism in Kerman province. This document can provide a coherent framework for planning, investing and marketing religious tourism by identifying and classifying the religious, pilgrimage, cultural and historical attractions in the province. In this regard, designing and implementing diverse pilgrimage and cultural routes that are a combination of holy places, martyrs' monuments, the remains of prominent scholars and cultural centers can play an effective role in integrating religious tourism activities in the province. In addition, it is suggested that, with the aim of improving the mental image and brand of the destination, the brand identity of Kerman's religious tourism should be designed based on components such as spirituality, the culture of sacrifice and resistance, historical authenticity, hospitality, and the spiritual heritage of the people of this region.

Municipalities and local service agencies should also take steps to improve and equip the environmental infrastructure around religious sites; including improving the quality of access, organizing public spaces, lighting, constructing service and welfare centers, parking, safe walking paths, and strengthening the public transportation system. Such measures will not only improve the visitor experience but will also increase the length of stay and satisfaction of tourists.

From a cultural perspective, organizations and institutions active in religious and cultural fields such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization, the Foundation for the Preservation of Works and the Propagation of Sacred Defense Values, the Arts Center, and the General Directorate of Culture and Islamic Guidance can play a role in improving the level of recognition, awareness, and experience of tourists by developing and implementing various cultural-educational programs such as narrative-based

tours, thematic exhibitions and documentaries, pilgrimage guide applications, and publishing multilingual booklets.



**Figure 1. The Paradigmatic Model of "Development of Religious Tourism in Kerman City"**

In the economic dimension, the establishment of handicraft and local cultural product markets in the vicinity of pilgrimage sites can help promote the local economy and create sustainable employment while introducing local culture and art. Also, the General Directorate of Transportation and Highways of the province needs to provide the necessary conditions to facilitate the movement of domestic and foreign tourists by improving and making communication routes smarter, installing multilingual information boards, and organizing a special transportation fleet for pilgrims. Finally, utilizing the capacity of national and international media in advertising and promoting religious and cultural events in Kerman province will play a significant role in increasing public awareness and attracting religious tourists from other parts of the country and the world. The coordinated and planned implementation of these measures can, while strengthening the cultural and religious identity of the province, pave the way for the sustainable development of religious tourism, the economic prosperity of local areas, and the promotion of Kerman's position as one of the leading destinations for spiritual tourism in Iran. Table 5 presents the recommendation-to-finding matrix that clarifies how each practical suggestion is derived from specific research findings.

### **Researcher Reflexivity Statement**

The researchers have a professional and academic background in tourism management and urban studies, which may influence data interpretation. Initial assumptions included a positive perspective on government–private sector collaboration and the cultural and religious potential of Kerman city. To minimize researcher bias and ensure data-driven analysis, strategies such as member checking, systematic coding (open, axial, and selective), audit trail documentation, and continuous consultation with the supervisor and expert colleagues were employed. These measures ensured that findings accurately reflect participants' perspectives and the realities of religious tourism development in Kerman.

### **Research Limitations**

This study had limitations that should be considered in interpreting the results. Data collection was conducted over a specific time period, and changes in tourism policies, infrastructure, or community attitudes at other times may have caused differences in the results. There was limited access to information and some documents, statistics, and reports from urban or religious tourism management that could have provided additional information for model analysis.

### **Author Contribution**

Dr. Saeid Dehyadegari, as the lead author, conceptualized the study, designed the qualitative methodology, supervised all stages of the research, jointly conducted the interviews with the co-author,

performed the primary coding of the data, validated the analytical process, and approved the final manuscript.

Ms. Zahra Pourjoupari participated in conducting the interviews, contributed to data coding and thematic analysis, prepared the literature review, and assisted in drafting and revising the manuscript.

**Table 5. Recommendation-to-Finding Matrix**

<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>Practical Recommendations</b>
Limited development of religious tourism infrastructure	Improve and expand service and facility infrastructure along major pilgrimage routes.
Lack of integrated and attractive pilgrimage travel packages	Design comprehensive and thematic pilgrimage packages tailored to visitor expectations.
Inadequate transportation systems for religious visitors	Enhance public and private transportation services and provide reliable mobility solutions.
Weak promotion and branding of religious tourism destinations	Strengthen destination branding and increase digital and international marketing campaigns.
Insufficient coordination among tourism stakeholders	Establish structured inter-organizational collaboration frameworks among tourism authorities, religious organizations, municipalities, and private sectors.
Limited use of technology in managing pilgrimage flows	Integrate smart tourism tools such as mobile apps, e-guides, digital maps, and real-time crowd-management systems.
Visitors' dissatisfaction with accommodation quality	Upgrade accommodation facilities, encourage investment in religious tourism lodging, and set quality standards.
Lack of trained and specialized human resources in religious tourism	Provide professional training programs in cultural interpretation, visitor management, and hospitality tailored to religious tourism.
Insufficient safety, security, and crowd-management measures	Implement modern safety protocols, improve emergency response systems, and enhance crowd-control mechanisms during peak pilgrimage periods.
Weak cultural interpretation and lack of storytelling in religious sites	Develop professional interpretive content, multilingual signage, and guided-tour programs to enrich visitor experience.
Limited participation of local communities in religious tourism activities	Increase community engagement, empower local stakeholders, and support small businesses to contribute to tourism value creation.
Inadequate support policies and unclear regulatory frameworks	Develop comprehensive policy guidelines, provide financial incentives, and clarify governance roles in managing religious tourism.

### Acknowledgement

The authors sincerely thank all interview participants for their valuable time and insights. The authors also appreciate the academic support provided by the university during the implementation of this qualitative study.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript

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