

Article

# Adoption of Entrepreneurial Behaviours in Sports Tourism in Developing Countries

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**Abstract** The aim of this study is to identify the adoption of entrepreneurial behaviours in sports tourism in developing countries. This research is a qualitative study. The systematic method of Strauss and Corbin has been used to analyse the data. Based on the results of in-depth interviews with stakeholders ( $n = 25$ ), 75 indicators of sports tourism entrepreneurship were identified. Our research findings show that the necessary institutional arrangements in regulatory/legal/administrative dimensions (rule of law, government policies), normative/cultural (social norms, values, and beliefs), cognitive/educational (promotion of elite knowledge, promotion of social knowledge) and guidance measures/supporter (public sector support, private sector support, complementary attraction and information technology) have potential to improve the rate of entrepreneurial behaviours by increasing the ability and willingness of entrepreneurs to take advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities in the field of sports tourism. Our findings suggest that co-actors need to engage in a multi-stakeholder engagement approach to promote the tourism sports industry in developing countries. The existence of a legal, normative, supportive and educational environment may influence the ability and desire of market participants to identify and embrace entrepreneurial opportunities in the sports tourism sector.

**Keywords** entrepreneurship; sports tourism; legal factors; educational factors; cultural factors; supportive factors

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## 1. Introduction

With the development of technology, information technology and transportation, the tourism industry has been one of the strongest and largest industries [1] pre the global health pandemic COVID-19. Many developing countries remain heavily dependent on tourism for their livelihoods [2]. Economists often label the tourism industry as the invisible economy [3]. According to the forecasts of the World Tourism Organization pre COVID-19, tourist numbers were expected to increase to 1.6 billion in 2020 and 1.8 billion in 2030 [4]. The World Tourism Council predicted that in 2027 the tourism industry will be expected to support more than 380 million jobs globally and may be ahead of other global sectors of the economy including communications, business and economic services, manufacturing, retail and distribution [5]. Dubreuil [6] provided a classification of jobs in tourism: (1) jobs not attributed to tourism demand, (2) jobs attributed to tourism demand, (3) jobs in other industries except tourism, which are attributed to the demand for tourism, and (4) all the jobs that can be attributed to tourism demand. Various types of tourism are highly regarded by employers and entrepreneurs including historical, cultural, medical and sports tourism among others. The sports tourism industry remains significant [7] with important impacts on the society and economy providing individuals with an opportunity for entrepreneurial activities [8]. Tourism has become the largest industry in the world due to its positive social, cultural and economic effects, especially income generation and impact on

## Highlights of Science

economic growth; for many countries, tourism remains an important source of business, income, employment and foreign exchange [9].

Sports and tourism are inextricably linked, countries have become more inclined to earn more money through innovation in both sectors [10]. Sports tourism has the potential to contribute to economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment among residents [8]. Economists in developing countries are increasingly focusing on sports tourism as a productive industry for job creation and entrepreneurship.

We use Iran as the context of our study to investigate the potential to further promote the sports tourism industry, contributing to locals' livelihoods and aligning with sustainable development goals. Iran, with its natural and cultural attractions, as well as its diverse climate and four seasons, has great potential for tourism. Its sports tourism industry is emerging; however, due to the dependence of the Iranian economy on income generated from oil, entrepreneurship opportunities in sports have been neglected [11].

The individual-opportunity nexus framework [12] in entrepreneurship suggests that entrepreneurship is essentially the result of a link between individuals (entrepreneurs and organizations) and the environment and opportunity. Opportunity refers to a set of conditions that make entrepreneurial ideas for new products or services desirable and feasible [13]. This set of environmental factors affects the cost, time, and type of entrepreneurial activity; if the set of conditions does not exist in a desirable way, entrepreneurial activities will be done at a higher cost and time, and the type of activities may be from productive to unproductive, formal to informal; innovative to imitation and opportunity-oriented [14]. One of the important environmental factors that affect entrepreneurial processes is "institutional factors". Institutions are human-defined frameworks that guide their behaviours [15].

Studies show that from 1967 to 1989, the willingness of tourists to participate in sports has grown by 1300 percent, and there is much evidence in this regard. A 1996 survey of the number of tourists in Australia and New Zealand found that more than 3% of the total number of sports and leisure visitors spent between \$ 234 million and \$ 430 million in Australia. Also, major sporting events can influence the expansion of future tourism markets by attracting visitors to a city or country they have not visited before. Some countries have also been very successful in developing and making a profit from sports tourism. In America, revenue from tourism events is estimated at \$ 27 billion a year, and more than 75 million American adults (two-fifths of the population) said they had attended a sporting event while traveling, either as a spectator or as a participant [16]. So, we can say that the sports tourism industry is an entrepreneurial and employment-generating one, and overall, one of the most effective ways to overcome the problem of unemployment is to develop sports entrepreneurial activities for locals. The importance of sports tourism, in addition to economic well-being, is to create jobs by providing its services which mostly require direct manpower. Previous research has provided little insight into the field. Our study adopts a new and innovative approach to entrepreneurship in the sports tourism industry, paying special attention to the environment, opportunities and institutional factors. Certainly, entrepreneurs in the field of sports tourism in different countries, especially in Iran (with a different institutional background), need to accurately identify these factors in order to bring their creative thoughts and ideas closer to practice and start a new business. Our research seeks to identify the adoption of entrepreneurial behaviours in sports tourism in developing countries with a qualitative and exploratory approach.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Sport Tourism

Sports tourism plays an important and effective role in achieving tourism goals in any society and has been a major part of the success of communities [17]. Sports tourism, as a special type of tourism, may provide tourists with extraordinary experiences [18]. Gibson, Kaplanidou & Kang [17] in an article examining the sports tourism event in six events over 18 months, argued that the presence of spectators in the venue leads to the financial well-being of individuals with job creation and the injection of money into the society. Hinch and Ito [19] announced that sports tourism and exploiting its potential is one of the important goals in Japan, e.g., the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Hodeck, Eckert-Lindhammer and dos Santos [20] showed that sports tourism played an important role in the success and achievement of the goals of the Rio 2016 Olympics. According to the World Tourism Organization and tourism forecasts pre COVID-19 health pandemic, the number of tourists entering emerging

destinations is expected to double between 2010 and 2030 [4]. According to the World Tourism Organization, Iran ranks tenth in ancient and historical attractions and fifth in the world in terms of natural attractions. Based on experts' opinions, the tourism industry has not had the development it deserves [21].

### 2.2. *Entrepreneurship in Sport Tourism*

Pre COVID-19 health pandemic, forecasts show that tourism and travel will grow by 5% worldwide by 2020. It is interesting to note that these predictions for sports tourism by the end of 2020 show a figure of 10%. The Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization and the President of the International Olympic Committee stressed in a joint message that tourism and sports are two driving forces for stability in economic growth, job creation and income growth [22]. When sports spectators and foreign tourists buy goods and services in the host country, the income from foreign exchange is injected into the domestic economy, which makes the domestic business more profitable, increases the tax rate and creates new job opportunities [23]. Ball [24] examining the importance of entrepreneurship in leisure, sports and tourism, stated that entrepreneurship is a key factor in the prosperity of businesses related to these three areas. Entrepreneurship in sports tourism can be the production of a product or the provision of new services including sports business start-ups [25]. Entrepreneurship in the sports tourism industry has the potential to promote business, employment opportunities, and mental and physical health. What distinguishes entrepreneurial activities from near-field research is the focus on the process of business emergence or new socio-economic activity [13,25], with sustainable economic, social, environmental outcomes [8,26]. Entrepreneurship is a great tool for promoting economic growth and job creation in societies [27], especially in the sports tourism industry as a highly competitive one with opportunities to promote sustainable development, e.g., catering, sightseeing, transportation, shopping, adventure and other aspects [28,29]. Since the 1990s, most entrepreneurial attention has been focused on the environment [30]. Shane and Venkataraman [12] proposed the individual-opportunity nexus framework, suggesting that entrepreneurship is a combination of opportunity as a set of conditions which makes entrepreneurial behaviours desirable and possible and the agent as an individual or a company that engages in entrepreneurial behaviours. Our study suggests that each of the two factors of individual and opportunity or environment alone cannot form an entrepreneurial output and as "individuals" and "environment", "opportunity" also plays an important role in creating and improving the quality of the entrepreneurial activity. The environment and the set of conditions help an entrepreneur realize his or her idea of embracing entrepreneurial opportunities [14]. One of these environmental factors is "institutions", playing a significant role in the desirability and feasibility of entrepreneurial behaviours and ideas [31,32].

### 2.3. *Institutional Factors*

Institutions are the rules of the game in a society, or more formally, the rules and principles that shape the interaction of people in societies shaping their behaviours within an institutional framework. Organizations need to consider the effects of other factors such as rules and regulations and the culture of societies on their managerial choices and activities [31,33]. Institutions can determine the culture of a society, through formal factors such as political and economic laws, treaties, or informal factors such as behaviours, attitudes, values, and behavioural norms. Scott [34] also places institutions in three legal, normative, and cognitive categories. The legal dimension of the environment relates to regulations, policies, rules, and laws that affect the entrepreneurial behaviours of individuals and the pace of entrepreneurship development; better laws lead to a reduction of entry barriers and more business opportunities. The normative dimension of the environment includes social norms, values, and beliefs related to the entrepreneurial behaviours of individuals in society. The cognitive dimension of the environment includes the cognitive frameworks and social knowledge that individuals share in society, through which they select and interpret information [34–36]. Stenholm, Acs and Wuebker [35] added another dimension called the environmental guide dimension to Scott's [34] three normative, legal, and cognitive dimensions. The guide dimension of a set of fertile conditions and industries includes access to customers and suppliers and proximity to top universities, which affects the type of opportunities used in a system and provides the necessary ground for productive, innovative and

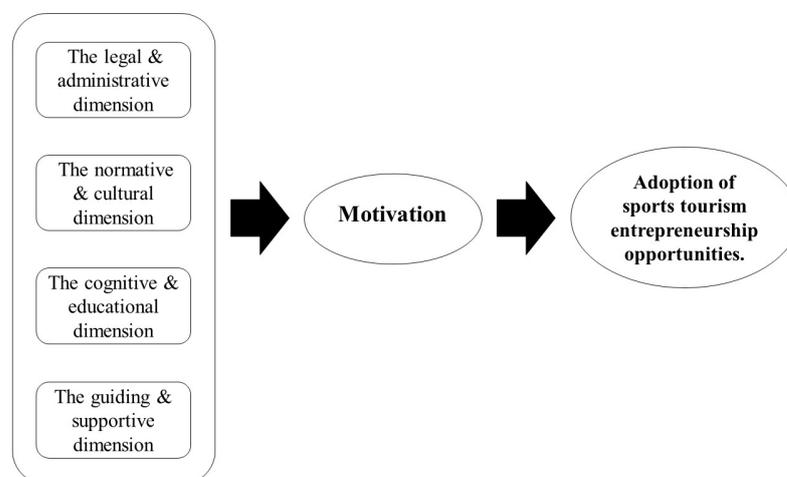
high-growth entrepreneurship [35]. Countries with better institutions and countries with more entrepreneurial and commercial businesses are more likely to grow economically [37–39].

### 3. Hypotheses and Theoretical Framework of Research

Sport is one of the most common motivating factors for tourists. Today, the authorities and sports planners of developing countries try to specialize and localize the disciplines, so that some countries, according to the talents and potentials in their country, establish sports centres focusing on one or more specific sports, such as the country, Korea, which organizes special competitions in martial arts, especially taekwondo, earning a lot of income every year in this way. Or, countries that are suitable for winter sports in terms of climate, such as skiing, hockey, have been able to provide a major part of their per capita national income through the establishment of infrastructure to launch sports tourism activities, like Switzerland and Austria. The fact is that sports tourism is not only because of sporting events, but also important axes in the sustainable development of tourism that must be considered. The cultural, social, economic and, even natural characteristics of a country can be effective in the development or non-development of tourism in a region. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the potentials of each region and to make policies based on the most important and richest axes. Sports tourism in Iran is also a fledgling industry. Due to the lack of suitable sports facilities, it still does not have a good position and its development requires the construction of standard stadiums and sports halls and other necessary infrastructure, yet at the same time, there is attraction. The unique natural and historical sites as well as the 4-season climate that exists in Iran at any time, has provided a good potential for the development of sports tourism in Iran, which requires the identification of entrepreneurial opportunities. Research literature and theoretical foundations show that sports tourism may require the existence of institutions that increase the ability and willingness of individuals (entrepreneurs) to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Undoubtedly, sports tourism requires market institutions to reduce the cost and time of entrepreneurial behaviours. Drawing on past literature on the institutional environment in four dimensions, namely, regulatory, legal & administrative, normative & cultural, cognitive & educational [34] and guiding & supporting [35], we propose the following as the adoption of entrepreneurial behaviours in sports tourism in developing countries:

1. The regulatory, legal & administrative dimension influences motivation and in turn adoption of sports tourism entrepreneurship opportunities.
2. The normative & cultural dimension influences motivation and in turn adoption of sports tourism entrepreneurship opportunities.
3. The cognitive & educational dimension influences motivation and in turn adoption of sports tourism entrepreneurship opportunities.
4. The guiding & supportive dimension influences motivation and in turn adoption of sports tourism entrepreneurship opportunities.

The theoretical framework of the research is presented in [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 1.** Initial research framework [34,35].

#### 4. Materials and Methods

Our research approach is qualitative. The method of data foundation theory is usually implemented in three ways: systematic, new and adaptive. In this research, a systematic method attributed to Strauss and Corbin [40] has been used to analyze the data. Thematic and spatial domain of identifying institutional factors affecting the adoption of entrepreneurial opportunities in sports tourism in Iran was from December 1, 2019 to June 15, 2020. The statistical population of the present study includes all managers and officials in the Ministry of Sports and Youth of the Islamic Republic of Iran, managers and officials of sports departments of Iran's provinces, managers and officials of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization of Iran, professors and experts in sports management, PhD students in sports management, managers and officials of the Federation of Public Sports, managers and officials of leisure and tourism agencies, and entrepreneurs and business owners in the field of sports tourism, of which 25 people were considered using snowball and purposive sampling. The information of participants in the research can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of the participants (interview).

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Organizational Position</b>
1	Male	44	PhD	9	Professor of sport management
2	Male	47	MA	11	Deputy Minister of Tourism of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
3	Female	52	PhD	21	Professor of sport management
4	Male	46	BS	10	Expert of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
5	Male	43	PhD	8	Tourism entrepreneur
6	Male	49	PhD	15	Sports tourism researcher
7	Female	35	MA	6	An employee of a tourism agency
8	Female	48	PhD	13	Deputy Minister of Research, Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts
9	Male	46	BS	10	Director of tourism agency
10	Male	54	MA	25	General manager of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
11	Female	47	PhD	12	Professor of sport management
12	Male	42	MA	8	Adviser to the deputy minister of Culture of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
13	Male	49	BS	16	Sports tourism expert
14	Male	39	PhD	7	Sports tourism researcher
15	Male	46	BS	11	Sports tourism expert of the Sport for all Federation
16	Female	42	MA	8	Sports tourism entrepreneur
17	Male	55	PhD	19	Research deputy of Cultural Heritage and Tourism Research Institute
18	Male	50	PhD	23	Deputy Minister of Research, Ministry of Sport and youth
19	Female	38	PhD	6	Sport management researcher
20	Male	41	MA	9	General manager of Heritage of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization
21	Female	43	PhD	7	Professor of sport management
22	Male	51	BS	26	Tourism sports tourism expert
23	Female	44	MA	10	Sports tourism entrepreneur
24	Male	45	PhD	14	Professor of sport management
25	Male	46	MA	5	Director of sport tourism agency

Using in-depth interviews, we asked participants to comment on the institutional factors influencing the adoption of sports tourism entrepreneurship opportunities in Iran. Interviews with individuals were conducted both in-person and online through virtual networks, and participation was voluntary. Researchers first interviewed participants in person. Subsequently, due to the outbreak of the coronavirus and the observance of health protocols, researchers switched to online data collection. Interviews ranged from 35 to 70 minutes. The number of interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached (no new descriptions could be identified from transcripts). Open, axial, and selective coding were used to count the first and second level categories (axes) and their relationships. Categories were based on code refinement, deletion of duplicate codes, comparison and review of embryonic codes with codes previously obtained. In the end, for the validity of the findings, the results were presented to several interviewees in the form of tables and reports to be reviewed and corrected by participants. The findings were compared with the results of other researchers and existing theories to confirm the accuracy and validity [41]. To increase the reliability and validity of the research, the following measures were taken: all the processes of this research, from preparing the interview protocol to coding, have been documented in detail. This was to ensure that other researchers can follow the process of reaching data from the results. Reliability was increased by using several people in coding and checking the data with the participants. Internal validity was achieved showing the extent to which the results and interpretations are correct.

### 5. Results

#### Demographic Information of the Participants in the Study

The study involved 25 people from the community for interviews, of which 17 were men and 8 were female. The majority of participants in the study (60%) were over 45 years old and the rest 40% were between 26 and 44 years old. Of these, 5 had a PhD in sports management, 12 had a doctorate in a different field, 5 had a master's degree, and 3 had a Bachelor's degree. All interviewees had at least 10 years of scientific and research experience in sports tourism and sports tourism entrepreneurship.

Following the findings of the study, by using simultaneous analysis of the coding process, during and after the interviews, the institutional factors affecting the adoption of entrepreneurial opportunities for sports tourism in Iran were identified through open and axial coding. The open coding of the interviews indicated that the 84 primary indicators could influence the adoption of entrepreneurial opportunities in Iranian sports tourism, which were ultimately categorized in the final 75 indicators. During the axial coding process, the researchers used analytical tools to ask questions and make constant and theoretical comparisons between dimensions, sub-dimensions, and features that appeared in open coding to develop relationships between dimensions and sub-dimensions. The indicators were classified into 11 pivotal factors, of which 4 final dimensions emerged (see Table 2).

Our model of Iran's sports tourism entrepreneurship opportunities is drawn from Table 1.

**Table 2.** Extraction of secondary axial codes (dimensions/components) and policy indicators/tools.

	<b>Dimensions / Components</b>	<b>Axial Factors</b>	<b>Indicators/Political Tools Sample</b>	
The effective Institutional factors on the exploitation of sports tourism entrepreneurship opportunities in Iran.		Rule of Law	Develop an effective law for the presence of intermediaries and entrepreneurs in cyberspace Develop sufficient, necessary and specific rules for sports tourism businesses Development of laws to protect entrepreneurs in this field (spiritual support for entrepreneurs) Creating a safe and legal environment for the public to enter the sports tourism industry Homogenization of the rules of the organizations related to sports tourism Establish stability and transparency of laws	
		Administrative and Legal Dimension	Policies of Government	Changing attitudes towards government policies in the field of sports business Reduce tensions and national and regional political crises and reduce sanctions Giving enough authority and freedom to business owners in this area Eliminate barriers and expedite the process of obtaining employment licenses Accelerate the implementation of sports tourism development programs Identify and organize intermediaries Increase the executive guarantee of contracts between entrepreneurs and relevant organizations Identity formation among companies and agencies active in the field of sports tourism Determining the single trustee and providing the supervisory authority to the said institution for legislation in this area Investigation of sports tourists' complaints according to the country's law Develop security policies for special sports tourism areas such as beaches The dynamic growth of the economic environment of the sports tourism industry through the serious reform and revision of banking laws and regulations, such as reducing the requirements and legal steps to provide banking facilities with appropriate bank rates to new and start-up companies
	Normative/Cultural Dimension		Social Norms	Eliminate cultural and social restrictions on the promotion of sports tourism Considering the general welfare of the society Increasing the social and cultural capacities of the sports tourism environment Increasing citizens' awareness of the benefits of sports tourism Holding annual national and international gatherings and conferences Managing cultural development and social participation through a strategy of health and culture-making in a recreational sports environment
		Values	Institutionalizing the culture of sports entertainment among different segments of society Promoting understanding of opportunities and capabilities in the sports tourism industry to create a proper attitude towards wealth and capital among stakeholders, activists and applicants Encourage top active entrepreneurs and organizations in the field of sports tourism that are most satisfied with customers Provide financial incentives and tax exemptions for top entrepreneurs Introducing the best entrepreneurs and organizations active in the field of sports tourism Promoting the spirit of hospitality culture of the people of the country	
			Beliefs	Development of social and cultural capital of sports tourism events and entrepreneurship centres through the establishment of a counselling and training service centre Promoting the culture of organizational entrepreneurship in sports tourism by creating the appropriate structure and culture of organizations Promoting economic security for risk appetite and investing in the sports tourism industry to promote a culture of risk aversion in the environment Promoting entrepreneurial intention and tendency in the sports tourism industry by supporting social and cultural norms of entrepreneurship

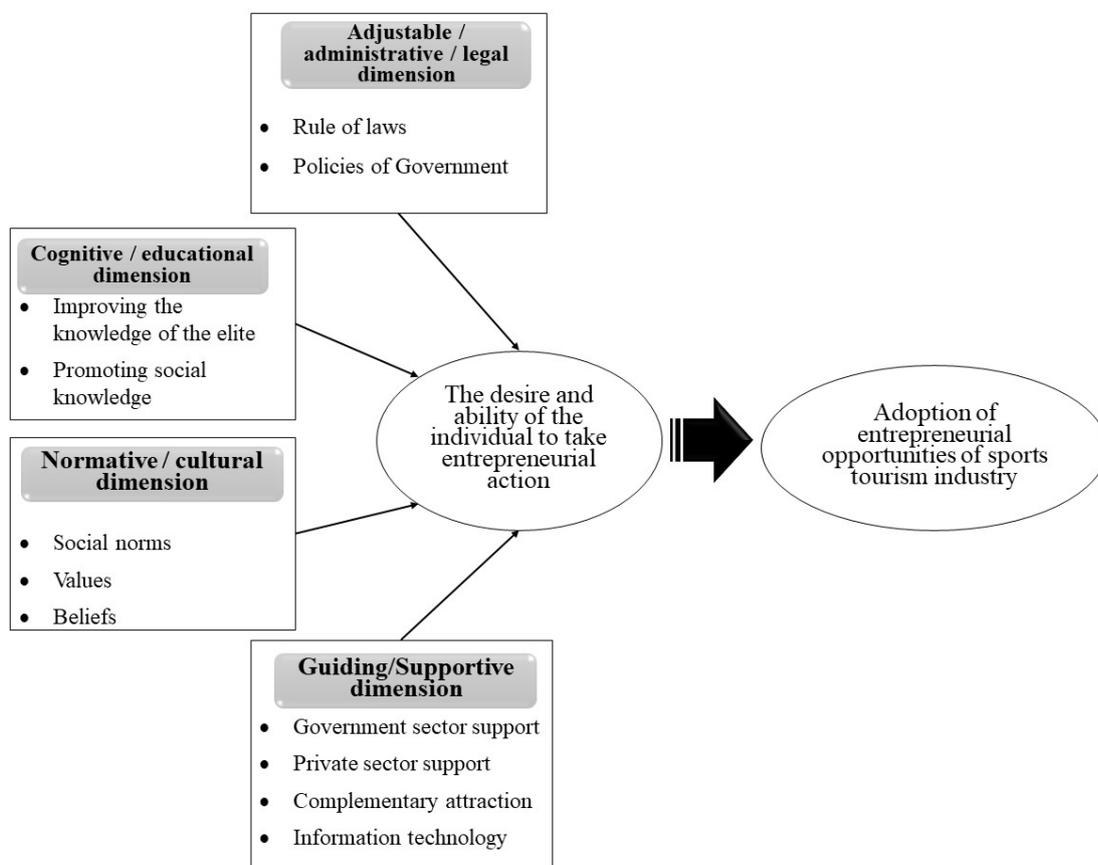
**Table 2.** (Continued)

		Promoting a culture of creativity and ideology in the sports tourism industry by reforming the structure and repressive culture of the country Culture building through advertising teasers Promoting organizational entrepreneurship in sports tourism centres by creating job incentives
Cognitive/Educational Dimension	Improving the Knowledge of the Elite	Increasing the number of people trained in the country to familiarize people with the benefits of sports tourism Creating the appropriate scientific and technological support for the development of sports tourism by developing the relationship between the university and the sports tourism industry Promoting knowledge and technology in the sports tourism industry with higher education in the field of entrepreneurship and sports tourism Establishment of academic disciplines in the field of sports tourism in universities across the country
	Promoting Social Knowledge	Marketing, management and entrepreneurship training for intermediary companies in the field of sports tourism Learning foreign languages, especially target languages Provide the opportunity to use the experiences of other countries in the field of entrepreneurship in sports tourism Providing a scientific environment and sports tourism technology Teaching entrepreneurial skills in the family Training and growth of risk appetite and investment in the sports tourism industry through mechanisms to reduce uncertainty in the sports tourism market environment Increasing entrepreneurial intention and orientation in the sports tourism industry through entrepreneurship education in the field of education related to sports science and tourism Promoting creativity and ideation in the sports tourism industry through training, documenting and disseminating the experiences of tourism entrepreneurs
	Government Sector Support	Provide the economic infrastructure needed for sports tourism businesses Supporting the country's banking systems for entrepreneurs in the field of sports tourism Reduce the cost of purchasing and maintaining equipment and facilities in various sectors of sports tourism Increasing government investment in sports tourism Proper use of advertising in the field of sports tourism Efforts by government agencies to introduce sports tourism attractions to tourists Enhancing sports entrepreneurship processes by using system management Promoting legal political support for the sports tourism industry by de-bureaucratizing the organization's structure, strengthening intra-sector links The attention of the trustees to the geographical and indigenous context of the development of sports tourism and the elimination of the existing weaknesses in the technical and engineering management of sports and tourism Creating intermediary institutions that facilitate information Facilities and financial assistance to entrepreneurs in the field of sports tourism Review and redesign of entrepreneurial processes in the sports tourism industry through structural and program reform
	Private Sector Support	Ability to understand opportunity and capability in the sports tourism industry through information and legal support Development of financial resources and capital in the sports tourism industry through loans, facilities and credits, formation of an independent investment fund Develop physical capital and facilities in the sports tourism industry by increasing private sector participation and investment Economic growth and employment in the sports tourism industry through the support of small and medium industries Establishment of financial facilitator intermediaries Expansion of biodiversity and environmental health through the strategy of expanding the geographical and indigenous context of the regional domain of entrepreneurship in the tourism industry
Guiding/Supportive Dimension	Complementary Attraction	Establishment of consulting institutions for starting businesses in the field of sports tourism Creating physical infrastructure (transportation, etc.)
	Information Technology	Promoting welfare services and developing sports infrastructure by strengthening the strategy of developing sports tourism entrepreneurship resources with a diverse approach Development of human resources and capital in the sports tourism industry through the creation of a stakeholder database Develop a chain of innovation in sports tourism products and services through the creation of national and regional information networks Creating information-based infrastructure Development of sports communications and exchanges through the strategy of restructuring the strategy and management of the development of sports tourism entrepreneurship with a flexible approach

## 6. Discussion

The tourism industry, especially the sports tourism industry, has several potentials for job creation including sports tourism entrepreneurship. Exploiting these opportunities in any region requires attention to the key factors [42]. According to the individual-opportunity nexus framework [12] in engagement in entrepreneurial opportunities, besides the role of the individual, context and opportunity are important in creating and improving the quality of entrepreneurial

activity [43]. The entrepreneurial environment that helps an entrepreneur realize the idea of engaging in entrepreneurial activities is important [14]. This study identified the institutional factors affecting the adoption of entrepreneurship opportunities in sports tourism in Iran. The legal, normative, supportive and educational environment may have an impact on the desire and ability of market participants to identify and take advantage of sports tourism opportunities in Iran. Findings in Table 1 show that the necessary institutional arrangements in the legal and administrative (Rule of Law, Government Policies), normative and cultural (Social Norms, Values and Beliefs), cognitive and educational (Improving the Knowledge of the Elite, Promoting Social Knowledge) and, guiding and supportive dimensions (Government Sector Support, Private Sector Support, Complementary Attraction and Information Technology) may enhance the desire and ability of entrepreneurs to take advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities in sports tourism and foster entrepreneurial behaviours. These findings coincide to a great extent with Scott's [34] and Stenholm, Acs and Wuebker's [35] frameworks which distinguished between legal, normative, cognitive, and conducive dimensions of the institutional environment (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The final research model.

Within the administrative and legal dimension of the institutional factors, the role of government is sometimes perceived as more prominent than other factors [2,44–46]. For instance, having a legal structure for sports tourism makes it easier for entrepreneurs to start a business. Our results align with Rodrick, Subramanian and Trebbi [47] study on the role of government in business performance. Our findings however contradict Kaynak and Kuan's [48] study in the Philippines, arguing that the institutional environment has a limited impact on the performance of tourism businesses. A possible reason for this discrepancy is the different research contexts (Iran and Philippines) and other intervening factors, including entrepreneurial culture and government structure.

Further, there are unstructured businesses in the field of sports tourism that operate without the necessary permits. These constitute a major barrier to having structured sports jobs in this area. Also, connecting with other co-actors, e.g., tourism organizations, the Ministry of Sports

and Youth and obtaining the necessary licenses to set up and develop sports tourism entrepreneurship is often not easy for sports entrepreneurs who may have a brilliant project proposal but often may not see it to fruition. Very often, these barriers prevent the individual from implementing his/her entrepreneurship initiative. As claimed by Stenholm, Acs and Wuebker [35], regulatory interventions and policy choices significantly affect the rate of entrepreneurial activity but does not affect the type of entrepreneurial activity in a country. Government policies in this regard should not be neglected. The Ministry of Sports, Youth and Tourism and banking institutions need to provide further support to promote the sports tourism industry. Providing incentives and attractive banking interest rates, and developing security policies in tourism settings can contribute to the promotion of sports tourism in Iran. Security is also very significant, as entrepreneurs must ensure the security of sports tourists. In particular, foreign tourists are interested in travelling to a place where they feel safe [17–19].

Findings show that the normative and cultural dimension of sports tourism entrepreneurship is another important institutional factor contributing to economic growth and development. Scholars argue cultural tourism is one of the important branches of tourism that has a close relationship with other areas of tourism [49–52]. In Nelson's [53] study, culture is considered as a momentous factor in promoting sustainable tourism with the use of bicycles for intercity tourism, which was necessary to create a cycling culture among the people. Increasing awareness among students about entrepreneurship in sports tourism may encourage them to be future entrepreneurs or/and help the spread of sports tourism in society. Municipalities, universities and other non-governmental organizations through the strategy of health and culture building in sports recreation, holding annual national and international conferences, increasing citizens' awareness of the benefits of sports tourism, improving the social and cultural capacities of sports tourism environment and most importantly, taking into account the level of public welfare in society may assist in creating a culture of sports tourism which has potential to contribute to the economy. Another consequential point about the norm is to pay attention to the prevailing values and individual values. Different segments of society need to put exercise and physical and recreational activities as one of the important components of health in the family's economic portfolio [46,54,55] and consider the cost of sports activities as an investment in their children's future.

In the context of our study, promoting sports tourism in Iran may motivate entrepreneurs to join the industry. Entrepreneurs who are influential in the growth of the industry should not be overlooked. Government agencies need to further appreciate the role of tourists as an important stakeholder in the industry [56]. Workshops and seminars can be organized showcasing examples of entrepreneurial success. Promoting the culture of organizational entrepreneurship in sports tourism with a focus on economic security for risk appetite, promoting entrepreneurial behaviours with the support of social and cultural norms of entrepreneurship and promoting the culture of creativity and ideation in the sports tourism industry need to be considered.

Cognitive and educational factors are another substantial institutional dimension affecting engagement in entrepreneurial opportunities in sports tourism in Iran. The growth of any industry requires full knowledge and training of people [57–59]. Raisi, Baggio, Barratt-Pugh and Willson [60] expressed the transfer of inter-organizational knowledge to tourism as an important factor in the development of the tourism industry. Sports tourism requires educating the present generations about sustainability [61,62]. Universities could consider sports tourism entrepreneurship to be integrated into their curriculum. The entrepreneurial marketing strategy was confirmed to have a significant positive effect on business performance [63] and promoting social knowledge by teaching marketing and entrepreneurship techniques to individuals and intermediaries in the field of sports tourism can contribute to develop sports tourism in Iran. Furthermore, teaching foreign languages to applicants for more effective communication with international tourists, having the cooperation of science and technology parks to further develop this field and supporting new ideas and using the potential of the media, including television, as well as broadcasting documentaries on sports tourism businesses and interviewing entrepreneurs from around the world can contribute too.

The guiding and supportive factors are another dominant institutional dimension [45] that has a much greater impact on the entrepreneurial engagement in sports tourism. Government sector support and private sector support are of particular importance here. Having the necessary infrastructure is key to show the potential of sports tourism. Kanwal, Rasheed, Pitafi, Pitafi and Ren [64] argue that people's understanding of road infrastructure and transportation is directly related to community support for tourism leading to community satisfaction [65]. The private

sector can provide financial support to attract more investors. As claimed by Stenholm, Acs and Wuebker [35], the availability of venture capital strengthens the type of entrepreneurial activity, that is, entrepreneurs' attitude toward innovation, internationalization and growth ambitions. However, it is important for the government and private sector to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, which will yield collective benefits [29,66].

Sports tourists who travel to participate in or assist with sports events may need hotels, parking, shopping markets, cultural souvenirs to mention a few. This will require good tourism planning and development [8,67,68]. Finally, access to the latest technology such as sport gadgets and virtual networks can be a notable factor in promoting tourism products to other potential tourists around the world that asks for serious investment in technology [69].

## 7. Conclusions

Our study concludes that many factors are important for promoting the sports tourism industry in developing countries. Governments are the first key to success by supporting local entrepreneurs, providing the necessary financial resources, and creating the necessary infrastructure for sports tourism: including transportation and education. The private sector can contribute to the industry by investing in and promoting businesses. The local people are an important stakeholder too. As families teach entrepreneurship to their children and support their children's creative ideas, they can grow and prosper as entrepreneurs. Parents can contribute to broader societal goals by raising creative and entrepreneurial children in the economic, social, and cultural dimensions. In other words, all these factors participate in establishing environments that are supportive to increasing the success for businesses or, as Acs, Estrin, Mickiewicz and Szerb [57] and Audretsch, Cunningham, Kuratko, Lehmann, and Menter [70] argue, an "entrepreneurial ecosystem".

In general, this study provides new insights into the institutional factors influencing entrepreneurial opportunities in the field of sports tourism. Additionally, this study indirectly found that Scott [34] and Stenholm, Acs and Wuebker [35] frameworks fit well in the context of sports tourism entrepreneurship in a developing country. Their multidimensional measures of the entrepreneurial environment seem capable to encompass all major challenges of sports tourism entrepreneurship.

This study has multifold implications. First, it identifies key factors that affect the adoption of entrepreneurial behaviours in sports tourism thus bridging the gap between the entrepreneurship and sports tourism literature. This study extends existing theoretical frameworks by introducing a number of new indicators within legal and administrative, normative and cultural, cognitive and educational, and guiding and supportive institutional arrangements. While these indicators should be tested in future research, no doubt that they are beneficial for fostering entrepreneurial behaviours in Iran and other similar countries. Regarding practical implications, this study might expand the horizons of sports tourism entrepreneurs and help them when identifying favourable business opportunities. Even more important, this study and its findings should inform the policymakers that a customized approach on improving the innovative capacity of sports tourism entrepreneurs is of extreme importance. In this regard, this study can be used as a guide for policymakers who should make decisions and shape a stimulating business environment for sports tourism in Iran and other similar countries.

## 8. Research Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of the present study was that its implementation coincided with the outbreak of coronavirus that due to the special safety conditions against this virus, access to the subjects was much more difficult than normal. This implies that the interviewing session times had to be reviewed accommodating the COVID-19 context. The emerging industry of the sports tourism in Iran has made it a little difficult to find researchers who are experts in this field. Second, this study was exploratory in nature and the applied methodology might be replicated in other country settings for more conclusive findings. Similarly, a comparative study in different institutional contexts will be an interesting avenue for future research. Researchers interested in the sports tourism industry are also encouraged to identify other hidden dimensions of the industry and offer further solutions to overcome the barriers to business growth in this field. Finally, future quantitative research can build on our exploratory study to measure entrepreneurial behaviour opportunities for sports tourism.

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## Author Contributions

Conceptualization: all authors; Data curation: R.H., M.K. and H.R.; Formal analysis: R.H. and M.E; Funding acquisition: H.R; Investigation: R.H. and H.R; Methodology: R.H. and E.A; Project administration: M.K. and H.R; Resources: R.H. and E.A; Software: E.A; Supervision: M.K. and H.R; Validation: H.R. and M.E; Visualization: R.H., M.K. and H.R; Roles/Writing—original draft: R.H., H.R. and M.E; Writing—review & editing: H.R. and M.E.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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