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Proposing a Model for Religious Tourism Development: Evidence from Iran

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This study proposes a model for religious tourism as one of the most promising types of tourism worldwide, by focusing on the conditions of Iran as a potentially popular destination for religious tourism. The study relies on a mixed (qualitative and quantitative) method. The qualitative phase identifies the model dimensions and strategies. To do this, practitioners and experts were interviewed and the data collected were investigated through the thematic analysis method. This process revealed four main dimensions and 18 subsidiary strategies. In the quantitative phase, the dimensions and strategies identified were arranged in a questionnaire and through the survey method, were prioritised by experts in the Iranian tourism industry. The data analysis results, based on intuitionistic fuzzy AHP, revealed that the most important dimensions in religious tourism, as assessed by experts and practitioners in the Iranian tourism industry, were: 'marketing strategies', 'HR training and development', 'reinforcing executive management structures', and 'implementing information technology.' Finally, following a comparison of the results with those of another studies in this field, some executive and research-related suggestions are proposed.

Key Words: religious tourism, thematic analysis, intuitionistic fuzzy AHP, Iran

Introduction

One of the extensively growing tourism types in today's world is religious tourism (some times called *spiritual tourism*) (Chantziantoniou & Dionysopoulou, 2017), which is undertaken by over 300 million tourists each year (Durán-Sánchez *et al.*, 2018). This type of tourism has developed into an 18-billion US-dollar industry (Kartal *et al.*, 2015), representing one of the major contributors to economic development (Muriuki *et al.*, 2016). Meanwhile, religious tourism is regarded as

one of the most effective tools for comprehensive and sustainable development in societies hosting religious places (Griffin & Raj, 2017). Given this significance, many programmes and policies have been formulated to utilise religious tourism as a strategic and effective instrument contributing to economic development in destinations with a potential for religious tourism (Alodadi & Benhin, 2015).

Hosting thousands of religious places and monuments (Rahmani *et al.*, 2013), Iran is a country in which diverse

religions are practiced (Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Islam) and which enjoys great potential for tourism (Fatima *et al.*, 2016) in terms of its cultural-religious status (Mahmoodi *et al.*, 2015). The history of religious tourism in the country dates back to the travels of ancient Persians to the Temple of Anahita (Momeni *et al.*, 2008). According to authentic historical documents, the tombs of about 33 prophets are located in Iran, including those of Daniel, Habakkuk, Qedarites, and Samuel. Furthermore, the shrine of the eighth Holy Imam of Shia believers is in Mashhad (Aghajani & Farhadifard, 2015).

Iran also hosts popular places of worship belonging to various religions, including such places as Chak-Chak (Zoroastrians' shrine in Yazd) (Mousavi *et al.*, 2013), Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2020), the prophet Samuel's tomb in Saveh, and Judaic sacred sites (e.g. Tomb of Esther and Mordechai); meanwhile, hundreds of religious rites and rituals take place in Iran, making the country a strong destination for attracting religious tourists (Aghajani & Farhadifard, 2015).

Yet, a review of the studies conducted in this field suggests that the few works addressing religious tourism in Iran simply explore Islamic tourism without investigating the full potential of this mode of tourism in the country (Aghajani & Farhadifard, 2015; Hataminezhad *et al.*, 2016; Alipour *et al.*, 2017; Mousavi *et al.*, 2014; Taghvaei *et al.*, 2010; Zargham Borujeni & Towhid Lu, 2012). More specifically, such studies do not propose any models to develop religious tourism in Iran. Therefore, to further expand religious tourism in the country, a novel and practical model must be constructed (Hataminezhad *et al.*, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to propose a model for developing religious tourism in Iran; the study underscores the fact that one of the major stages of tourism development in a destination / region depends on well-structured plans, models and strategies (Hadiani *et al.*, 2012), although such facets themselves would require sufficient and theoretically sound research (Amiri Aghdaie *et al.*, 2016). In fact, successful and sustainable tourism activities, along with (non)economic profits arising from processes in this area, require innovative

plans, models and strategies (Sigalat-Signes *et al.*, 2019), as well as a precise and scientific outline, that could help to retain current market shares and absorb even more shares in this large market (Ziyaei, 2004). Iran can be regarded as a destination with high potential for religious tourism. Proposing an effective model represents one of the most essential and primary steps in the process of managing and developing this type of tourism.

Literature review

Religious tourism

Historically speaking, religions have shown strong ties with tourism (Heydari Chianeha *et al.*, 2018), while gaining spiritual experiences has been one of the main motivations behind traveling and tourism (Sharply & Deborah, 2010). The association of religion and tourism has led to the formation of a new form of tourism called *religious tourism*, which refers to journeys that people make to satisfy their spiritual or religious needs (Rot *et al.*, 2014). Of course, this type of tourism is based on one of the oldest and most prosperous modes of tourism worldwide (Maneenetr & Tran, 2014). Although traveling with religious motivations is a long-lasting practice, scholars see it as a new phenomenon evolving out of *pilgrimage* (Timothy *et al.*, 2008). As such, demand for religious tourism is regarded as an aspect of social development, which is a necessity in modern life (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

Religious tourism provides a type of tourism in which participants are religiously motivated (either in religion exclusively or any other elements associated with it) and are willing to visit or become engaged in spiritual activities in religious / sacred places (e.g. churches, mosques, tombs, monuments of saints' descendants) (Meyer, 2004). Visitors could also participate in religious festivals, performances, and similar events (Shinde, 2018). Religious tourism is also viewed as a method for acquiring religious knowledge and spiritual awareness (Indrawati *et al.*, 2016). Some see religious tourism as a new type of cultural tourism that could respond to new and emerging needs or could provide a tool for striking a balance between physical health and mental / spiritual well-being.

It can also serve as a channel for fostering empathy / sympathy among cultures and for developing reliable and sustainable relations across different communities (Fabio *et al.*, 2016). Generally speaking, religious tourism could refer to all voluntary travels for a limited period of time with religious motivations (Tkaczynski & Arli, 2018), with the purpose of visiting sacred places, participating in religious ceremonies, making a pilgrimage, or performing specific religious duties. Of course, people may engage in such travels without religious motivations, only to visit or learn about attractive religious sites / places (Kartal *et al.*, 2015).

Studies concerned with religious tourism started in the 1950s, conceptualising this phenomenon through various approaches; scholars have pursued economic, anthropological, sociological, geographical, ecological, and other purposes to study and investigate religious tourism (Alvarado-Sizzo *et al.*, 2017). Some have considered this type of tourism as a distinct variation, and describe it as involving journeys made by believers in religion (called *pilgrims*) with religious motivations (Indrawati *et al.*, 2016). In this approach, a tourist is a person who merely tries to make use of or be inspired by the places s/he visits (Indrawati *et al.*, 2016). Some others, however, view religious tourism as a sub-type of cultural tourism practiced for non-religious purposes. Other scholars regard religious tourism as a phenomenon composed of both religious and non-religious motivations (Chadha & Onkar, 2016). In such approaches, religious places are regarded as tourism places or destinations that serve multiple purposes; for instance, beyond religious tourism, they can serve tourists interested in history, culture, art and architecture (Durán-Sánchez *et al.*, 2018).

The findings of studies conducted worldwide also demonstrate the high potential of this type of tourism for generating revenue and introducing social / economic developments in destinations; governments and the private sector activists, too, find religious tourism interesting, while various plans have been codified and implemented in various countries to further develop this mode of tourism (Kartal *et al.*, 2015). Meanwhile, some scholars contend that in expanding religious tourism, a distinction must be made between tourists and pilgrims. The reason for this is that although people from both of these groups visit the same places and use the same

infrastructure and facilities (Jackowski & Smith, 1992), they have different motivations, attitudes and behaviours, leave different impacts on hosting communities / locales, and could inspire the formation of different markets (Naumov, 2011).

On this account, some have focused on these differences between attitudes, needs, interests and behaviors of tourists, dividing religious markets into two major parts: the first part could be called *pilgrimage tourism*, in which people normally follow religious interests, goals and attitudes in their travels, tend to stay in religious sites during their travels, and do not pay much attention to other tourism services and attractions. The second part could be called *religious tourism*, in which tourists / individuals are motivated by knowledge-based interests in their visits to religious places / sites. They seek to gain knowledge and experience, use various resources to expand their information, have attention to other tourism services / attractions, and buy other products / services (Jackowski & Smith, 1992).

Of course, scholars believe that developing religious tourism must consider both of these streams of tourism, although their differences or distinctions must be taken into account in religious tourism development plans (Naumov, 2011). Some state that today changes in pilgrims' attitudes and behaviours have reduced their differences from other tourists and suggest that this has made it possible to consolidate and develop a market including pilgrims and tourists; such changes include pilgrims and religious tourists' increased interest in other products, services and attractions, and their increased tendency to pay more for extra costs (Karta *et al.*, 2015)

Research Method

This study was an exploratory mixed (qualitative and quantitative) method project that followed applied purposes. The population included experts and practitioners in the Iranian tourism industry. In the qualitative phases of the study, 30 individuals were selected, based on the snowball sampling method. Primarily, experts and practitioners with at least 10 years of work experience in tourism and at least a Bachelor's Degree were identified, and then they were contacted within a three-month period for the researchers to

conduct the interviews with them. Through the structured interviews, which took between 60 and 90 minutes, the participants were asked to analyse the current status of Iranian religious tourism while sharing strategies to help develop this type of tourism in Iran.

To keep track of the participants’ opinions and capture all of the data exchanged in the interviews, the interactions were voice-recorded with the consent of the participants; after each interview was conducted, all of the data were meticulously analysed. The interview process was continued until saturation was reached. Following that, to construct the religious tourism development model, the data were scrutinised through thematic analysis. In the second phase, the dimensions and strategies falling under each dimension were identified and were arranged in the form of a questionnaire. Eight experts in the field of tourism were selected through purposive sampling method and they shared their opinions based on pairwise comparisons of the items in the questionnaire. In the quantitative phase, to prioritise the dimensions and strategies, the data collected were analysed through intuitionistic fuzzy AHP.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis represents one of the most frequently used methods for analysing qualitative data; it involves the process of analysing highly diverse and scattering data and converting them into rich and substantial data (Braun & Clarke, 2012); the process ultimately helps to identify internal patterns in the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Intuitionistic fuzzy set

In fuzzy set theory, proposed by Zadeh (1965), the membership degree of numbers $\mu_A(x)$ is set in the interval [0, 1], whereas their non-membership degree is only set through the membership degree of $1 - \mu_A(x)$ (Khadivar *et al.*, 2016). Although fuzzy set theory works well in the case of controlling uncertainties arising from ambiguity or partial association with another set, the theory cannot model all modes of uncertainty in real-life situations, especially those involving insufficient information. In many circumstances (like

deciding the importance of strategies for religious tourism development) where decision-makers cannot normally express their preferences due to ambiguities in information or decision-making conditions, it would be necessary to rely on multi-criteria decision-making in an intuitionistic fuzzy environment.

Atanassov (1986) introduced an extension of intuitionistic fuzzy sets that could reveal another dimension of the membership function. Intuitionistic fuzzy sets are represented by three notions: membership degree, non-membership degree, and uncertainty degree. Such sets provide a functional tool for describing ambiguous / imprecise information and for dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity in the decision-making process (Wu & Zhang, 2010). This study drew on intuitionistic fuzzy AHP to prioritise the strategies for religious tourism development; the steps in this method, according to Wu and colleagues (2013), are as follows:

Step 1: Create a hierarchical structure for the problem

Step 2: Create a pairwise comparison matrix based on the interval-valued intuitionistic fuzzy numbers reported by the decision-makers (see Table 1), and establish an interval-valued intuitionistic fuzzy preference relation

(IVIFPR) as $\tilde{R} = (\tilde{r}_{ij})_{n \times n}$.

Degree of preference in pairwise comparisons	Interval-valued intuitionistic fuzzy
Equal priority	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]
The average value	[0.29, 0.41], [0.12, 0.58]
Rather preferred	[0.1, 0.43], [0.03, 0.57]
The average value	[0.03, 0.47], [0.03, 0.53]
Strong preference	[0.13, 0.53], [0.07, 0.47]
The average value	[0.32, 0.62], [0.08, 0.38]
Very high priority	[0.52, 0.72], [0.08, 0.28]
The average value	[0.72, 0.85], [0.05, 0.15]
Quite strong priority	[1, 1], [0, 0]

(Abdullah and Najib, 2014)

Step 3: Aggregate the experts' opinions through equation (4), in which k is each expert and q_k is the weight of each expert. In the present study, the weights of the experts were all considered to be equal to 0.125.

$$r_{ij} = \left(\left[1 - \prod_{k=1}^h (1 - \mu_{ijk}^-)^{q_k}, 1 - \prod_{k=1}^h (1 - \mu_{ijk}^+)^{q_k} \right], \left[\prod_{k=1}^h v_{ijk}^-^{q_k}, \prod_{k=1}^h v_{ijk}^+^{q_k} \right] \right) \quad (4)$$

$j = C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$

Step 4: Calculate the score judgment matrix $\tilde{S} = (\tilde{S}_{ij})_{n \times n}$ and the interval multiplicative matrix $\tilde{A} = (\tilde{a}_{ij})_{n \times n}$,

where $\tilde{a}_{ij} = 10^{\tilde{s}_{ij}}$.

Step 5: Create the priority vector of the interval multiplicative matrix $\tilde{A} = (\tilde{a}_{ij})_{n \times n}$

$$\tilde{w}_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^n \tilde{a}_{ij}}{\sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^n \tilde{a}_{ij}} = \left[\frac{\sum_{j=1}^n \tilde{a}_{ij}^-}{\sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^n \tilde{a}_{ij}^-}, \frac{\sum_{j=1}^n \tilde{a}_{ij}^+}{\sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^n \tilde{a}_{ij}^+} \right]$$

Findings

As the data analysis results revealed, based on the principles and guidelines of thematic analysis, the religious tourism development model in Iran involved

Table 2. The Research Model

Dimensions (Main Themes)	Symbol	Strategies (sub-themes)
Marketing strategies (A)	A1	Diversifying religious tourism products (concentric diversification) For instance, through designing a calendar for religious events related to different faiths and holding such events
	A2	Diversifying religious tourism products by integrating various types (conglomerate diversification)
	A3	Detecting target markets for religious tourism and conducting marketing activities to influence the market (market development)
	A4	Conducting marketing activities to increase religious tourism marketing share (market penetration)
	A5	Using the capacities of cultural events and religious rituals of different faiths to advertise Iran as a destination which hosts religious events (e.g. Arba'een Pilgrimage long walks for Shia believers, Chack-Chack rituals in Yazd for Zoroastrians)
	A6	Collaborating with competing destinations (for instance, through mutual local advertising in countries engaged in religious tourism such as Turkey, Malaysia etc.)
	A7	Establishing tourism attraction agencies in target markets
Reinforcing executive management structures (B)	B1	Establishing a policy-making council for religious tourism with the participation of all practitioners
	B2	Enhancing the infrastructure of religious tourism (e.g. accommodations in the vicinity of places of worship)
	B3	Facilitating the conditions for absorbing capital to develop the infrastructures
	B4	Making it possible for the private sector to participate in planning and implementing activities related to this sector
Applying information technology (C)	C1	Maximizing Iranian religious tourism practitioners' participation in Iranian websites and social media
	C2	Employing international media and networks to introduce the capacities of Iran (e.g. Al Kawthar and Sahar)
	C3	Designing and developing web-based virtual religious tours in target markets with a focus on tourism to attract potential visitors
HR Training and developing (D)	D1	Designing and implementing specialised management development plans
	D2	Training specialised religious tour guides
	D3	Designing and implementing domestic / international tourist interaction training courses for staff in religious places
	D4	Designing and implementing training courses for tour guides and agency managers

Table 3. Pairwise comparison matrices for the model dimensions based on the experts' opinions

Expert 1					Expert 2					Expert 3					Expert 4				
	A	B	C	D		A	B	C	D		A	B	C	D		A	B	C	D
A	1	3	4	2	A	1	4	5	3	A	1	3	3	2	A	1	7	5	3
B	1/3	1	2	1/2	B	1/4	1	2	1/2	B	1/3	1	1	1/2	B	1/7	1	1/3	1/4
C	1/4	1/2	1	1/2	C	1/5	1/2	1	1/3	C	1/3	2	1	1/2	C	1/5	3	1	1/4
D	1/2	2	2	1	D	1/3	2	3	1	D	1/2	2	2	1	D	1/3	4	2	1

Expert 5					Expert 6					Expert 7					Expert 8				
	A	B	C	D		A	B	C	D		A	B	C	D		A	B	C	D
A	1	5	7	2	A	1	4	7	2	A	1	8	6	3	A	1	5	7	3
B	1/5	1	3	1/4	B	1/4	1	5	1/3	B	1/8	1	1/3	1/5	B	1/5	1	3	1/3
C	1/7	1/3	1	1/6	C	1/7	1/5	1	1/6	C	1/6	3	1	1/4	C	1/7	1/3	1	1/5
D	1/2	4	6	1	D	1/2	3	6	1	D	1/3	5	4	1	D	1/3	3	5	1

four dimensions (main themes) and 18 strategies (sub-themes); these elements, which shape the research model, are listed in Table 2.

To weight and prioritise the dimensions and strategies, intuitionistic fuzzy AHP was employed. Table 3 shows the decision-matrix of each expert.

The numbers representing linguistic statements (Table 3) were converted into intuitionistic fuzzy numbers (based

on Table 1); the procedure for Expert 1 is presented in Table 4. The same procedure was conducted for all of the experts.

After the linguistic statements were converted into intuitionistic fuzzy numbers for each expert, their opinions were merged, based on **Equation 4** (Table 5). It must be noted that the compatibility index for all of the experts' pairwise comparisons tables was less than 0.1, which showed the compatibility of the decision matrices.

Table 4. Converting the linguistic statements into intuitionistic fuzzy numbers for Expert 1

Dimensions	Marketing strategies	Reinforcing executive management structures	Applying information technology	HR Training and developing
Marketing strategies	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]	[0.1, 0.43], [0.03, 0.57]	[0.03, 0.47], [0.03, 0.53]	[0.29, 0.41], [0.12, 0.58]
Reinforcing executive management structures	[0.03, 0.57], [0.1, 0.43]	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]	[0.29, 0.41], [0.12, 0.58]	[0.12, 0.58], [0.29, 0.41]
Applying information technology	[0.03, 0.53], [0.03, 0.47]	[0.12, 0.58], [0.29, 0.41]	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]	[0.12, 0.58], [0.29, 0.41]
HR training and development	[0.12, 0.58], [0.29, 0.41]	[0.29, 0.41], [0.12, 0.58]	[0.29, 0.41], [0.12, 0.58]	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]

Table 5. Aggregating the experts' opinions

Dimensions	Marketing strategies	Reinforcing executive management structures	Applying information technology	HR training and development
Marketing strategies	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]	[0.27, 0.59], [0.04, 0.41]	[0.31, 0.61], [0.06, 0.39]	[0.20, 0.42], [0.06, 0.57]
Reinforcing executive management structures	[0.05, 0.46], [0.12, 0.54]	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]	[0.18, 0.48], [0.08, 0.52]	[0.07, 0.55], [0.11, 0.44]
Applying information technology	[0.07, 0.42], [0.2, 0.58]	[0.11, 0.51], [0.10, 0.49]	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]	[0.08, 0.52], [0.18, 0.48]
HR training and development	[0.08, 0.58], [0.17, 0.42]	[0.16, 0.45], [0.06, 0.55]	[0.23, 0.50], [0.07, 0.50]	[0.38, 0.42], [0.22, 0.58]

Table 6. Calculating the interval multiplicative matrix for the dimensions of religious tourism

Dimensions	Marketing strategies	Reinforcing executive management structures	Applying information technology	HR training and development
Marketing strategies	[0.631, 1.585]	[0.725, 3.486]	[0.834, 3.528]	[0.422, 2.291]
Reinforcing executive management structures	[0.324, 2.176]	[0.631, 1.585]	[0.454, 2.478]	[0.423, 2.746]
Applying information technology	[0.304, 1.663]	[0.422, 2.559]	[0.631, 1.585]	[0.399, 2.178]
HR training and development	[0.453, 2.539]	[0.412, 2.457]	[0.533, 2.652]	[0.631, 1.585]

Table 7. Calculating the possibly degree matrix and the weights of religious tourism dimensions

Dimensions	Marketing strategies	Reinforcing executive management structures	Applying information technology	HR training and development	Score of dimension	Final weight	Rank
Marketing strategies	0.500	0.555	0.586	0.547	0.797	0.266	1
Reinforcing executive management structures	0.445	0.500	0.531	0.492	0.742	0.247	3
Applying information technology	0.414	0.469	0.500	0.460	0.711	0.237	4
HR training and development	0.453	0.508	0.540	0.500	0.750	0.250	2

After the score judgment matrix was computed, the interval multiplicative matrix was calculated via **Equation 5**, the results of which are reported in Table 6 for religious tourism.

In step 5, following **Equation 6**, the possibility degree matrix was created, and then **Equation 7** was used to find the score for each dimension. Finally, through dividing the score of each dimension by the total scores observed, the final weight of each dimension was derived (see Table 7 for the results). As can be seen, such dimensions as ‘marketing strategies’, ‘HR training and development’,

‘reinforcing executive management structures’, and ‘applying information technology’, were the most important factors in religious tourism development in Iran.

Similarly, the weights of the strategies related to each dimension was calculated. Tables 8-11 show the prioritisation results of the strategies falling under each dimension (viz. marketing strategies, HR training and development, reinforcing executive management structures, and applying information technology). The results are further elaborated on below.

Table 8. Calculating the possibly degree matrix and the weights of “marketing strategies”

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	Score	Final weight	Rank
A1	0.500	0.472	0.508	0.481	0.511	0.385	0.457	0.830	0.138	5
A2	0.528	0.500	0.535	0.508	0.538	0.413	0.485	0.858	0.143	3
A3	0.492	0.465	0.500	0.473	0.503	0.377	0.449	0.823	0.137	6
A4	0.519	0.492	0.527	0.500	0.530	0.404	0.476	0.850	0.142	4
A5	0.489	0.462	0.497	0.470	0.500	0.374	0.446	0.820	0.137	7
A6	0.615	0.587	0.623	0.596	0.626	0.500	0.572	0.946	0.158	1
A7	0.543	0.515	0.551	0.524	0.554	0.428	0.500	0.874	0.146	2

Table 9. Calculating the possibly degree matrix and the weights of “reinforcing executive management structures”

	B1	B2	B3	B4	Score	Final weight	Rank
B1	0.500	0.531	0.548	0.618	0.799	0.266	1
B2	0.469	0.500	0.518	0.587	0.769	0.256	2
B3	0.452	0.482	0.500	0.569	0.751	0.250	3
B4	0.382	0.413	0.431	0.500	0.681	0.227	4

Table 10. Calculating the possibly degree matrix and the weights of “applying information technology”

	C1	C2	C3	Score	Final weight	Rank
C1	0.500	0.509	0.514	0.675	0.337	1
C2	0.491	0.500	0.505	0.665	0.333	2
C3	0.486	0.495	0.500	0.660	0.330	3

Table 11. Calculating the possibly degree matrix and the weights of “HR training and development”

	D1	D2	D3	D4	Score	Final weight	Rank
D1	0.500	0.464	0.422	0.439	0.706	0.235	4
D2	0.536	0.500	0.457	0.474	0.742	0.247	3
D3	0.578	0.543	0.500	0.518	0.785	0.262	1
D4	0.561	0.526	0.482	0.500	0.767	0.256	2

Discussion

This study proposed a model for religious tourism development by focusing on the current conditions in Iran; the study was motivated by the importance of religious tourism as an effective facet for introducing and representing religion, culture and history (Chantziantoniou & Dionysopoulou, 2017), and as a central factor contributing to economic development in destinations (Muriuki *et al.*, 2016). The study underscored the importance of constructing models that could guide tourism activities (Sigalat-Signes *et al.*, 2019). The results revealed the following dimensions involved in the Iranian religious tourism development: marketing strategies, reinforcing executive management structures, applying information technology, HR training and development. These elements are explicated below.

Marketing Strategies

Given the fierce competition in today’s world in terms of gaining and maintaining market share in the tourism industry, it is crucial to employ effective marketing techniques, tools, and strategies as key success factors

(Kozak & Buhalis, 2019) as emphasised in tourism studies dealing with the industry (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2008; Sharma & Hazarika, 2017; Srinivasan, 2014).

Marketing and employing its techniques / tools for industrial tourism development in Iran represent important factors because tourism is inherently affected by foreign / domestic economic, social and political interactions and international relations among states; these factors seem to have been more effective in Iran following the Islamic Revolution (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Political conflict with some countries, poor advertising and management practices (Raad, 2019), and sanctions and propaganda campaigns against Iran have created a negative and unfavourable image of the country in some target markets; such factors also seriously undermine the success and industrial tourism development in Iran (Bijami & Ahmad, 2019). As such, using marketing techniques could prove to be an effective step in passing through the challenges and barriers to reach a level of growth and development that is compatible with the potentials of religious tourism in Iran. The strategies of ‘marketing’ are further explained below.

Collaborating with competing destinations: This strategy has been introduced in some of the literature (MC Shea, 2010; Paskaleva-Shapira, 2007). To accomplish this, national, regional and local relations and cooperation need to be established (de Araujo & Bramwell, 2002) to help expand tourism destinations, while serving as key success factors in tourism development (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019);

Establishing tourist attraction agencies in target markets: Establishing such agencies in target markets could be an essential move in developing religious tourism. Such a move could help to introduce destinations, while raising awareness of, and attracting more tourists. This procedure could be accomplished by increasing innovations in products, formulating innovative marketing strategies, and facilitating the conditions for achieving competitive advantage (Weidenfeld, 2013). By enhancing the brand and positioning of the tourism destinations, it should be possible to increase the number of visitors (Zenker & Björn, 2015). Through optimisation, tourism organisations could facilitate learning conditions, reach new design techniques, and implement marketing programmes, while staying ahead of their competitors (Kozak, 2004). Such measures increase target tourists' awareness and knowledge of destinations (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019);

Diversifying religious tourism products by integrating various types (conglomerate diversification): Others studies highlight product diversification as a factor for increasing competitiveness and sustainability in tourism destinations (Benur & Bramwell, 2015), synergy between tourism products (Farmaki, 2012), and an effective strategy for increasing the number of tourists and encouraging them to re-visit destinations (Moraru, 2011);

Conducting marketing activities to increase religious tourism marketing share (market penetration): The significance of this strategy as a tourism development solution has also been pointed out in various studies in the literature (Aziri & Nedelea, 2013; Miranda Lopez *et al.*, 2013);

Diversifying religious tourism products (concentric diversification): This strategy is accomplished by devising a calendar reporting religious events of different faiths and by holding religious ceremonies for each event. Studies dealing with religious tourism also suggest that holding cultural-religious ceremonies, in the form of religious festivals and carnivals, could help develop this type of tourism (Rahmani *et al.*, 2013);

Identifying target markets and conducting marketing activities to influence the market (market development): The importance of this strategy is expressed studies in the literature, as it is considered to be an innovative solution for marketing (Gardiner & Scott, 2018);

Using the capacities of cultural events and religious rituals of different faiths to advertise Iran as a destination hosting religious events (e.g. Arba'een Pilgrimage long walks for Shia believers, Chack-Chack rituals in Yazd for Zoroastrians): This factor has been introduced as one of the major elements in religious tourism (Vukonic, 1996), and could contribute to the development of new and considerable (or better said *complementary*) products through cultural-religious events (Graham & Murray, 1997).

HR training and development

HR training and development represents one of the key success factors in tourism, and its importance has been underscored in the literature (Baum, 2007; Baum, 2016; Nzonzo & Chipfuva, 2013). The reason for this is that inspiring and developing positive attitudes, appropriate conduct, and other staff competencies in this sector could be achieved only through implementing precisely designed training programmes (Baum & Kokkranikal, 2003). Below, each of the strategies related to 'HR training and development' is explained in order of priority.

Designing and implementing domestic / international training courses on how to interact with tourists for staff in religious places: In religious tourism, which tries to attract a wide spectrum of people with different religious and cultural motivations (Chadha & Onkar, 2016; Durán-Sánchez *et al.*,

2018), human resource behaviours and interactions, are particularly important. Human resources, by establishing effective relationships with customers / guests and by providing appropriate services to them, have an essential function in shaping memorable experiences, increasing tourists' satisfaction and pleasure, fostering faithfulness to destinations and tendency to re-visit, and re-energising the business cycle. Meanwhile there are 'brand ambassadors' who constitute a durable value for their respective destinations (Zhang *et al.*, 2014: 45);

Training specialised religious tour guides: Many studies emphasise the importance of training and developing tour guides as a strategy for tourism development (Io & Hallo, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2002; Weiler & Ham, 2002);

Designing and implementing training courses for tour guides and agency managers: The significance of tour guides' and agency managers' roles in tourism development (Romero *et al.*, 2019; Sigala, 2008), as well as training courses for such agents, is a topical issue in sustainable tourism development and other studies too (Budeanu, 2005; Tepelus, 2005);

Designing and implementing specialised management development plans: Formulating and implementing specialised management development plans in the tourism industry represents a crucial issue in developing leaders with the required competencies and in ensuring the continuity of effective performance (Conger, 2010).

Reinforcing executive management structures

The third dimension of religious tourism development in Iran is concerned with strategies to strengthen managerial and executive structures. These are elaborated below.

Establishing a policy-making council for religious tourism with the participation of all practitioners: Research has shown that developing the tourism industry and utilising its potential demands establishing an inclusive management system that, besides considering the existing challenges and problems, is sufficiently capable of optimising the tourism value through the implementation of plans via multiple stakeholders (Ismail *et al.*, 2014);

Enhancing the religious tourism infrastructure (e.g. accommodations in the vicinity of places of worship): The role of accommodation in religious tourism development is underscored in many studies (Ismagilova *et al.*, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2012);

Facilitating the conditions for absorbing capital to develop the infrastructures: Sound infrastructure dramatically contributes to tourism development (Caballero-Danell & Mugomba, 2007) as highlighted in studies; this strategy is seen as a major factor in developing tourism (Istar, 2016; Mahmoudifar *et al.*, 2016);

Making it possible for the private sector to participate in planning and implementing activities related to this sector: As far as this strategy is concerned, the findings are in line with those of Taghvaei *et al.* (2010) and Dehshiri (2014).

Applying information technology

With an increase in competition in tourism, new technologies are extensively used to meet the demands and achieve the satisfaction of tourists; information technologies are particularly important as they enhance the information communicated to tourists (Nicula & Elena, 2014). The strategies related to this dimension are explained below in order of priority.

Maximizing practitioners' participation in religious tourism on websites and social media: Investigations suggest that using tourism websites was among the most relevant ways of developing tourism and turning it into a smart activity (Cui *et al.*, 2015);

Employing media and international networks to introduce the capacities of Iran (e.g. Al Kawthar & Sahar): Such media includes the production of televised programmes on an international scale, especially for Moslem audiences, and can serve as a powerful tool for introducing Iran and its religious tourism capacity;

Designing and developing web-based virtual tours in target markets with a focus on religious tourism to attract potential tourists: One of the ways technology

could contribute to tourism is designing and offering web-based tours or virtual tourism, which involves a journey through digitalised worlds while using audio, textual, and video data representing physical realities. The significance and effectiveness of this strategy have been highlighted in other studies (Ravderad & Hajmohammadi, 2010)

Conclusion

The review of literature concerned with religious tourism development revealed a colourful spectrum of studies and diverse approaches to this topic such as changing and adapting cities for religious tourism (Chadha & Onkar, 2016), new trends (Fabio *et al.*, 2016), religious tourism and metropolitan development (Foruzan, 2014), cultural-religious tourism development (Heydari Chianeh *et al.*, 2018), religious tourism management (Shinde, 2018), factors affecting the religious tourism market (Suleiman & Mohamed, 2011), as well as studies dealing with actual destinations including Mexico (Alvarado-Sizzo *et al.*, 2017), Greece (Chantziantoniou & Dionysopoulou, 2017), Iran (Heydari Chianeh *et al.*, 2018), Turkey (Kartal *et al.*, 2015), Thailand (Maneenetr & Tran, 2014), Croatia (Rot *et al.*, 2014), and India (Shinde, 2018). However, no strategy-based study was found to have proposed a comprehensive model for religious tourism development, which distinguishes the present study from those in the literature. Another distinct feature of this study is its reliance on the opinions of experts and practitioners in the industry under investigation. In this study an attempt was made to explore the potential of religious tourism development by taking into account all religions in Iran; this was a factor ignored in most other studies conducted in the country.

The findings of this research could serve as a practical guideline for managers and policy-makers of the tourism industry - the agents that deal with planning and development in tourism (Ismail *et al.*, 2014). The model proposed in this study could serve as a planning map in religious tourism that could inspire inter-cultural and religious interactions among nations, while fostering a sense of empathy, mutual understanding, and international peace. It could also introduce Iran as a country in which people respect and appreciate culture and diversity.

Given such potential, managers are advised to consider the findings of the study while planning religious tourism development. The reason for this recommendation is that having a model and identifying practical methods could be key success factors in this process (Ismail *et al.*, 2014). In this study, to identify the model elements and prioritise the dimensions and strategies for religious tourism development, the opinions of practitioners in this sector of the industry were explored. Future investigations could rely on tourists' or other stakeholders' views to identify and prioritise the elements involved in the model, comparing their findings with those of the present research.

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