

Strategies for the Development of Sports Tourism under Sanctions

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ABSTRACT:

Today, sports tourism, as one of the most dynamic and profitable sub-sectors of the tourism industry, plays a key role in economic growth, job creation, and the enhancement of national branding of destinations. However, realizing this potential in developing countries facing international sanctions is accompanied by serious structural and perceptual challenges. Sanctions, through mechanisms such as deterioration of destination image, reduced tourists' perceived security, disruptions to financial transactions, and limitations on international transportation, significantly affect inbound tourist flows. The present study was conducted to identify strategies for developing sports tourism in Iran under sanctions, adopting a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis. Data were collected from two main sources: a systematic review of scientific literature and national upstream documents, and the insights of 14 academic and executive experts through a specialized panel. Data analysis, following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke and integrating a deductive-inductive approach, led to the identification of 12 major strategic domains, including managerial strategies, media and cyberspace strategies, political strategies, economic strategies, strategies based on natural capacities, technological strategies, strategies based on indigenous and geopolitical advantages, private sector participation, educational strategies, national brand enhancement, regional cooperation, and infrastructure development. A common feature of these strategies is the emphasis on endogenous capacities, reduction of vulnerability to external pressures, and a strategic shift from high-risk global markets toward regional and neighboring markets based on cultural and civilizational commonalities. The findings indicate that, despite creating undeniable challenges, sanctions can act as a catalyst for strategic reconsideration, reprioritization, and the discovery of neglected domestic capacities. From a theoretical perspective, this study provides a conceptual framework at the intersection of sports tourism literature, destination marketing, and the political economy of sanctions; from a practical perspective, it offers a roadmap for policymakers, sports managers, and stakeholders in Iran's tourism industry.

Keywords: *Sports tourism, International sanctions, Development strategies, Sports diplomacy, Destination marketing, Iran*

INTRODUCTION:

The tourism industry in the twenty-first century is recognized as a sunrise industry. Today, tourism is considered a strategic industry that generates substantial profit and can lead to poverty alleviation, wealth creation, public welfare, and satisfaction (Boroujerdi, Mansouri, & Asadi, 2023). In today's globalized world, tourism has become one of the main drivers of global economic growth (R. Li & Ling, 2025). Job creation, wealth distribution, and the development of local culture are among the well-recognized economic benefits of tourism at the global level (Rangkuti, Setyawati, Hartono, & Hidayah, 2024). One sector of tourism with the potential to increase tourist visits and positively impact economic revenue is sports tourism (Surahman et al., 2025), which is growing as an economic driver. Industry stakeholders are seeking to capitalize on this opportunity due to its contribution to regional development (Fauzi, Saputra,

Ma'mun, Nuryadi, & Handayani, 2025). Sports tourism is the most developed segment of this industry and accounts for a significant share of the overall tourism sector. It cannot be easily defined, but it may be described as a social, economic, and cultural phenomenon arising from the unique interaction of activity, people, and place (Boroujerdi et al., 2023). According to the World Tourism Organization, sports tourism is travel undertaken by individuals to participate in or observe sporting activities. This category encompasses a wide range of activities, from conventional sporting competitions such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, and other major international sporting events, to active participatory sports such as marathon running, cycling, skiing, and diving (Chen & Pu, 2025). As an important bridge connecting the sports and tourism industries, it enriches the concept of tourism while opening new horizons for the development of the sports industry (R. Li & Ling,

2025). As a key sector of the tourism industry, sports tourism has significant economic impacts on host communities, including employment generation, increased local income, and infrastructure development. By attracting tourists and hosting small and large events, this sector can create direct and indirect employment opportunities and increase local businesses' revenues (Raso & Cherubini, 2023).

Major powers have long used sanctions as an instrument of foreign policy to address critical foreign policy crises (Gorji, Garcia, & Mercadé-Melé, 2023). Sanctions have become a key foreign policy tool, often favored for providing peaceful means of conflict resolution rather than military force. They are being employed with increasing frequency, and their scope has expanded beyond trade restrictions to include other penalties, such as financial, travel, arms sales, and military assistance restrictions (Khalid, Okafor, & Burzynska, 2024). Tourism sanctions are coercive geopolitical actions by a state aimed at restricting its residents' international travel to specific destinations to extract political concessions from the target country. Unlike conventional border controls such as visa regulations and entry restrictions, tourism sanctions tend to operate in the opposite manner, namely by prohibiting citizens from traveling to a particular region or country (Chung, Paik, & Kim, 2025). Tourism destinations are highly vulnerable to geopolitical crises, and sanctions-related crises have a significant impact on tourists' decisions to visit sanctioned destinations (Chung et al., 2025; Gorji et al., 2023). Being portrayed as a dangerous, unstable, and internationally isolated destination can send negative signals to potential visitors. Consequently, sanctions can create a negative image of a destination, reduce perceived safety and security for visitors, or reinforce existing generalizations, stereotypes, and negative perceptions, regardless of whether they reflect the actual situation (Khalid et al., 2024). The primary objective of sanctions is to restrict the target country's economic activity by disrupting existing international economic relations. Disruption in these international economic relations within the target country affects tourism flows (Khalid et al., 2024). Sanctions may impose travel bans on specific individuals, groups, or all nationals of the target country. In the case of sanctions imposed on Iran, these measures have caused significant damage to the tourism industry, particularly when sanctioning countries introduced stricter visa regulations for travel to Iran (Khalid et al., 2024). Following the agreement reached between Iran and the P5+1 group (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, Russia, and Germany) regarding Iran's nuclear program, sanctions against Iran were lifted on January 16, 2016. As a result, Iran ranked among the world's fastest-growing tourism destinations for two years. However, following the United States' withdrawal from the agreement in May 2018 and the reimposition of sanctions, Iran's thriving tourism industry was significantly damaged. After the return of sanctions, foreign investors almost completely withdrew from Iran due to the risk of being placed on

the U.S. sanctions blacklist and the fear of losing access to the U.S. market. Additionally, some European airlines suspended flights to Iran. Iran's image as a tourist destination has been undermined by the reimposition of more than 1,500 sanctions (Gorji et al., 2023). At a time when the tourism industry is recognized as one of the most important levers of economic growth and sustainable development, sports tourism has attained a special position among tourism sub-sectors due to its high capacity for value creation, direct and indirect employment generation, and strengthening of the destination's national brand. This type of tourism not only generates sustainable revenue streams through the organization of major international events and participatory activities, but also becomes an effective tool for comprehensive development by strengthening cultural identity and improving the quality of life in host communities. However, realizing this potential in developing countries, particularly those subject to international sanctions, faces serious challenges. Unilateral and multilateral sanctions, beyond their direct effects on financial and trade flows, severely distort the destination's image, tourists' perceived sense of security, and, consequently, inbound tourism flows. Iran's experience following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 demonstrated that the reimposition of sanctions can rapidly halt significant growth in inbound tourism and effectively reduce foreign investment in sports tourism infrastructure to near zero. This situation has underscored the need to formulate resilient, endogenous strategies for the development of sports tourism.

Accordingly, the main research question of the present study is: under the constraints imposed by international sanctions, which strategies can ensure the sustainable development of sports tourism in Iran?

Literature Review:

In recent decades, sports tourism has attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers as one of the most dynamic sub-sectors of the tourism industry. Numerous studies indicate that sports tourism, through the synergy between sporting activities, natural and cultural attractions, and tourism infrastructure, plays a key role in economic growth, regional development, and the enhancement of destination image (Boroujerdi et al., 2023; Rangkuti et al., 2024). In this regard, research has emphasized the importance of hosting sporting events, developing participatory sports, and leveraging natural and cultural resources as key drivers of sports tourism development (Fauzi et al., 2025; Surahman et al., 2025). A significant portion of the existing literature has focused on the development of sports tourism under normal and stable conditions. For example, Li and Ling (2025) demonstrated that the sustainable development of sports tourism can directly contribute to economic growth and increased employment in urban destinations. Similarly, Chen and Pu (2025) examined China's sports tourism economy and emphasized the roles of macro-level policymaking, government investment, and private-sector participation

in shaping a competitive sports tourism ecosystem. While these studies provide valuable frameworks for sports tourism development, they have largely been conducted in contexts free from geopolitical tensions and international constraints. In contrast, the literature addressing the impact of sanctions and geopolitical crises on tourism has primarily focused on general tourism. Research shows that economic and political sanctions, by weakening destination image, reducing perceived safety, imposing transportation restrictions, and disrupting financial transactions, lead to a significant decline in tourist flows (Khalid et al., 2024). Gorji et al. (2023), in an empirical study, demonstrated that a negative mental image resulting from sanctions can adversely affect revisit intentions and destination recommendations, even among tourists who have previously traveled to the sanctioned destination. Furthermore, Chung et al. (2025), through a comparative analysis of tourism sanctions, identified sanctions as a targeted instrument of foreign policy whose effects extend beyond the economy to influence social perceptions and tourist behavior.

In the context of Iran, the number of studies specifically addressing the consequences of sanctions on the tourism industry is limited, and most have focused on inbound tourism or destination image. The findings of these studies indicate that the return of sanctions after 2018 led to the withdrawal of foreign investors, a reduction in international flights, and a sharp decline in tourist arrivals (Gorji et al., 2023). However, a systematic examination of sports tourism development under such conditions, particularly from the perspective of indigenous and resilient strategies, has received far less attention. On the other hand, a limited number of studies have addressed sports tourism development using qualitative and theoretical approaches. Gharib Zadeh et al. (2023), using a grounded theory approach, proposed a model for sports tourism development; however, sanctions and geopolitical constraints did not play a central role in their proposed model. This research gap indicates that despite the growing importance of sports tourism for the economies of developing countries, existing conceptual frameworks are not fully capable of explaining the dynamics of this industry under sanction conditions.

Overall, the literature review shows that although valuable research has been conducted in the fields of sports tourism and the impact of sanctions on tourism, a study that specifically and integratively addresses strategies for developing sports tourism in the context of international sanctions—particularly using a qualitative, indigenous approach—remains lacking. This research gap highlights the need for exploratory and theoretical studies that explain the interaction among structural, perceptual, and strategic factors under sanction conditions and provide a practical framework for policy and decision-making.

problem of the study, which is the identification and formulation of strategies for the development of sports tourism in Iran under international sanctions, thematic analysis was selected as the main method of data analysis. Thematic analysis, as one of the most widely used qualitative analysis methods, is employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns and underlying themes within data. Due to its high flexibility in dealing with diverse data sources (including documents, interviews, and scientific texts), it was considered highly suitable for this exploratory study, which requires the discovery of a conceptual framework from dispersed sources. The study used a combination of deductive (based on existing theoretical literature and conceptual frameworks) and inductive (based on content analysis of documents and expert opinions) approaches.

Data Sources and Data Collection Process:

The research data were collected from two main sources:

1. **Systematic literature review and upstream documents:** In the first stage, through a systematic review, reputable domestic and international scientific articles on sports tourism, the impact of sanctions on tourism, sports diplomacy, and strategic tourism management were reviewed and analyzed. In addition, relevant upstream and policy documents, including national development plans, strategic documents of the Ministry of Sports and Youth and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, as well as official reports published by international organizations related to sanctions and tourism, were examined. This stage led to the identification of an initial list of potential themes and strategies, which formed the basis of the study's deductive approach.
2. **Expert panel and semi-structured questionnaire:** In the second stage, to validate, refine, and complement the identified strategies, the views of 14 experts in sports management, tourism, economics, and public policy were gathered. The selection criteria for experts included academic, research, or executive experience related to the research topic. The experts were asked to evaluate and prioritize the proposed strategies based on specific criteria (including effectiveness under sanctions, feasibility, alignment with internal capacities, and sustainability) and, if necessary, propose new strategies. This process enabled the inductive refinement of themes and ensured their alignment with the country's local and practical realities.

METHODS:

The present study is applied-developmental in purpose and qualitative in approach. Considering the main

Thematic Analysis Process:

Data analysis was conducted based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework and with the use of qualitative analysis software:

1. Familiarization with the data: At this stage, all articles, documents, policy texts, and expert feedback notes were carefully studied and repeatedly reviewed to gain a deep, comprehensive understanding of the data.
2. Generating initial codes: After full familiarization with the data, all texts were systematically analyzed, and key concepts and phrases related to sports tourism development and strategies for coping with sanctions were extracted and converted into initial meaningful codes.
3. Searching for themes: In this stage, the initial codes were compared based on semantic similarity, conceptual overlap, and thematic relationships, and were grouped into initial and potential themes. A preliminary hierarchical structure of basic, organizing, and global themes was formed.
4. Reviewing themes: The identified themes were reviewed and refined at three levels: (a) reviewing codes within each theme to ensure internal coherence; (b) reviewing themes in relation to the entire dataset to ensure accurate and comprehensive representation; and (c) matching themes with expert feedback and evaluations to ensure external validity. At this stage, some themes were merged, others removed, and others redefined.
5. Defining and naming themes: After stabilizing the final thematic structure, precise definitions and comprehensive, meaningful names were assigned to each organizing and global theme. This process led to the formation of 12 macro-strategic domains (global themes) and multiple operational subcategories (organizing themes).
6. Producing the final report: The findings of the thematic analysis were compiled into a coherent, analytical narrative and presented in the results section of the study. Each theme was explained with reference to primary data, documentary evidence, and expert confirmation.

Validity and Reliability of the Research:

To ensure the accuracy, validity, and reliability of the findings, several strategies were employed. Data source triangulation, using scientific articles, policy documents, and expert opinions simultaneously, helped reduce single-source bias. Member checking was applied by presenting the final findings to the panel members and obtaining their confirmation, which served as one of the most important validation tools in qualitative research. In addition, to establish a clear audit trail, all stages of the research—including the

literature search, code extraction, theme development, and applied revisions—were thoroughly documented. Finally, the inter-coder agreement index for a portion of the data was calculated, and a high agreement level of over 80% indicated acceptable reliability of the coding and analysis process.

Research Findings:

Given the main research question regarding the identification of sustainable development strategies for sports tourism in Iran under the constraints of international sanctions, a systematic analysis of qualitative data obtained from expert interviews and the review of upstream documents led to the identification of a set of endogenous, resilient, and multidimensional strategies. These strategies are categorized into twelve macro domains, each of which includes specific operational actions. The common feature of all these strategies is the emphasis on indigenous capacities, the reduction of vulnerability stemming from external pressures, and the prioritization of regional and neighboring markets over global markets influenced by sanctions. The findings indicate that although sanctions have created serious challenges for Iran's sports tourism in financial, transportation, image-related, and infrastructural dimensions, they have simultaneously provided an opportunity to redefine priorities, focus on self-reliance, and maximize the utilization of neglected domestic and regional capacities. The identified strategies, on one hand, aim to neutralize or reduce the adverse effects of sanctions through mechanisms such as bypassing financial barriers, using local currencies, and developing domestic supply chains. On the other hand, by relying on public diplomacy, narrative-based digital marketing, and strengthening regional cooperation, they seek to reconstruct the destination image and attract specific segments of sports tourists who are less sensitive to perceived political risks. In the following, the details of each strategy and its subcategories are presented.



Figure 1: Strategies for the Development of Sports Tourism under Sanctions

Table 1: Main Strategies and Subcategories

Strategy Category	Sub-strategies
Managerial Strategies	Development of a national strategic document for sports tourism Reform of institutional structure and establishment of a special working group in the government cabinet Delegation of authority to high-potential provinces
Media and Cyber Space Strategies	Production of multilingual content and a dedicated international platform Broadcasting professional documentaries on adventure attractions Use of global influencers and familiarization tours International campaign to counter Iranophobia
Political Strategies	Soft public diplomacy through sports ambassadors Depoliticization of sport and active membership in federations Facilitation of visa issuance (airport electronic visa) Redefinition of sports diplomacy with neighboring countries and sisterhood agreements
Economic Strategies	Establishment of a sports tourism startup support fund Specialized sports insurance policies Resistance economy and strengthening domestic supply chains Facilitation of financial transfers using local currencies Investment incentive packages (land, camps)

Strategies Based on Natural Capacities	Specialized rehabilitation and recovery camps using mineral hot springs Standardization of climbing and caving routes Design of multi-dimensional tours (skiing and swimming in one province)
Technological Strategies	Digitalization of services and an integrated reservation system Digital marketing using virtual/augmented reality Data-driven governance and big data analysis of tourists
Strategies Based on Indigenous and Geopolitical Advantages	Revival of the solidarity games of the Indian Ocean littoral countries International registration of competitions in ancient Iranian sports
Private Sector Participation Strategies	Delegation of management of public sports facilities to international companies Creation of sports tourism industrial clusters in selected provinces
Educational Strategies	Launch of a postgraduate program in sports tourism management Professional hosting courses for local communities
National Brand Development Strategies	Design of an integrated destination brand (unified visual and conceptual identity) Participation of sports teams with tourism-related uniforms and slogans
Regional Cooperation Strategies	Annual cultural-sport event jointly held with 12 countries of the Nowruz region.
Infrastructure Development Strategies	Construction of international-standard sports and recreational villages Development of direct flight networks from neighboring cities to Iran's sports tourism destinations

1. Managerial Strategies

• Development of a strategic document for sports tourism

Preparation of a comprehensive national plan with the participation of all key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Sports and Youth, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A clear definition of roles and responsibilities for each public and private institution to avoid duplication and to determine the main governing authority of this sector.

• Institutional restructuring

Establishment of a “Special Sports Tourism Working Group” within the Cabinet to accelerate macro-level decision-making and facilitate inter-sectoral coordination.

Delegation of authority to high-potential provinces (such as Mazandaran, Kish, Isfahan, and Hormozgan) to enable more agile management and decision-making grounded in local strengths.

2. Media and Cyber Space Strategies

• Multilingual media content production

Launch of a dedicated international platform for Iranian sports tourism in multiple world languages to continuously showcase attractions, events, and provide practical information such as visas and accommodation. Production and broadcasting of professional documentaries on Iran's adventure attractions, such as desert trekking, diving in the Persian Gulf, and skiing in the Alborz mountain resorts, through reputable international networks.

• Utilization of influencer capacity

Design and implementation of familiarization tours to invite prominent global travel and adventure

influencers to provide first-hand and credible narratives of Iran's safety and attractiveness as a destination.

• Narrative building and countering Iranophobia

Launching an international social media campaign to present the real image of Iran through sports and adventure perspectives.

Encouraging foreign tourists to generate user-generated content and share their travel experiences in Iran is the most credible form of promotion.

3. Political Strategies

• Focus on soft public diplomacy

Utilizing prominent Iranian athletes as “tourism ambassadors” to exert a strong cultural influence on the global stage.

• Depoliticization of sport

Active and effective membership in international sports federations and events, and playing a constructive role in separating Iran's sports image from political tensions to secure more hosting opportunities.

• Facilitation of visa issuance for foreign tourists

Full implementation of the “airport electronic visa” for citizens of more than 60 target countries to remove the major administrative barrier to tourist entry.

• Redefinition of international sports relations

Prioritizing “sports diplomacy” with neighboring countries and Nowruz-region states, and leveraging cultural commonalities to design joint events.

Signing sports sisterhood agreements between Iranian provinces and foreign regions to develop sustainable relations at provincial and local levels.

4. Economic Strategies

• Facilities and governmental support

Establishment of a sports tourism startup support fund to attract innovative and creative ideas.

Design of specialized sports insurance policies to cover risks for both domestic and international tourists during sports activities.

- **Resilient economy approach**

Focusing on the development and strengthening of the domestic supply chain for high-quality sports equipment to neutralize the impact of sanctions on imports.

- **Use of local currencies for financial transactions**

Activation of special tourism accounts using regional currencies for tourists from target countries such as Iraq, Russia, and the Gulf states to facilitate financial transfers.

- **Investment incentive packages**

Provision of land designated for sports-tourism use under easy and affordable conditions for the private sector to construct desert camps, ski resorts, and coastal accommodations.

5. Strategies Based on Natural Capacities

- **Sports health tourism**

Establishment of specialized “rehabilitation and recovery” camps utilizing the country’s mineral hot spring resources and integrating modern physiotherapy with traditional medicine and nature-based therapies.

- **Sports geotourism and adventure nature tourism**

Organizing and standardizing international climbing and caving routes for hosting global competitions and attracting professional tourists.

Designing and offering “multi-dimensional tours” that exploit Iran’s unique geographical diversity, such as skiing in the morning and swimming in the sea in the afternoon within a single province.

6. Technological Strategies

- **Digitalization of sports tourism services**

Development of a comprehensive online system for booking all required services, including equipment, coaches, guides, and sports accommodations, with full price transparency.

- **Digital marketing**

Use of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies to provide virtual experiences of activities such as diving in Kish or skiing in Dizin, aiming to enhance the effectiveness of pre-travel marketing.

- **Data-driven sports tourism governance**

Analysis of big data from international tourists to identify preferences, behavioral patterns, and travel seasons to target marketing based on nationality and interests precisely.

7. Strategies Based on Indigenous and Geopolitical Advantages

Revival of the “Solidarity Games of Indian Ocean Countries” and use of Iran’s strategic location to become a regional hub for hosting international events. Definition and global registration of an exclusive event titled “International Traditional Iranian Sports Competitions,” including disciplines such as polo, Zurkhaneh sports, and traditional wrestling, to attract heritage-sport tourists.

8. Private Sector Participation Strategies

Delegation of management of public sports facilities to reputable international tourism companies to improve service and hospitality standards in sports complexes. Establishment of “sports tourism industrial clusters” in selected provinces to create synergy among local businesses, transportation, accommodation, and sports attractions.

9. Educational Strategies

Launching a postgraduate academic program in “Sports Tourism Management” to train specialized human resources proficient in foreign languages and international marketing.

Organizing “professional hosting” training courses for local communities and stakeholders to enhance cultural sensitivity and improve interaction with foreign tourists.

10. National Brand Development Strategies

Designing an integrated “destination brand” to present sports-oriented Iran globally with a unified visual and conceptual identity across all marketing activities.

Participation of Iranian sports teams in international competitions with tourism-related uniforms and slogans to increase global visibility of Iran’s tourism brand.

11. Regional Cooperation Strategies

Holding an annual cultural-sport event jointly with the 12 countries participating in the UNESCO-listed Nowruz dossier, focusing on Nowruz, the spring of solidarity, and sports.

12. Infrastructure Development Strategies

Designing and constructing “sports-recreational villages” with international standards, including sports arenas, halls, hotels, restaurants, and shopping centers to function as comprehensive tourism destinations.

Development of direct flight networks and expansion of air routes from neighboring high-population cities to Iranian sports and tourism destinations are critical prerequisites for sustainable development and regional competitiveness.

Discussion and Conclusion:

The present study was conducted to identify and formulate strategies for developing sports tourism in Iran amid international sanctions. The analysis of findings revealed that the development of this sector under sanction conditions requires a shift from conventional strategies toward a multidimensional, resilient, and endogenous approach. In this regard, twelve macro-strategic domains were identified, collectively providing an integrated framework for policymaking and action under geopolitical restrictions. The findings are interpreted in light of existing literature, and their theoretical and practical implications are discussed below.

The findings of this study are both consistent with and, in some respects, novel and complementary to the existing literature. First, at the level of managerial strategies, the emphasis on strategic planning and institutional reform aligns with Chen and Pu (2025), who highlighted the role of macro-level policymaking and inter-sectoral coordination in shaping a competitive sports tourism ecosystem. However, in the Iranian sanctions context, these strategies acquire new

dimensions: the necessity of decentralization and the establishment of a special governmental working group address the inefficiency of centralized systems under crisis conditions. This aspect has been less emphasized in prior studies. This finding suggests that institutional agility is a prerequisite for implementing other strategies under sanctions.

Second, the identified media and cyberspace strategies directly address the issues of destination image and Iranophobia, which are recognized in the literature as among the most damaging consequences of sanctions (Khalid et al., 2024; Gorji et al., 2023). The use of narrative-based campaigns, global influencers, and user-generated content reflects a shift from traditional promotion to digital marketing grounded in authenticity and lived experience. This finding is consistent with Chung et al. (2025), who emphasized the impact of sanctions on tourists' social perceptions, and demonstrates that countering negative imagery does not necessarily require formal diplomatic tools but can also be effectively pursued through new media and non-state actors.

Third, the identified political strategies, particularly the depoliticization of sport, the redefinition of international sports relations, and the emphasis on soft public diplomacy, represent one of the most important findings of this study and form a key point of differentiation from previous research. While earlier studies have mainly focused on the negative impacts of sanctions on tourism (Khalid et al., 2024), the present findings indicate that sport can serve as a tool to circumvent political barriers and maintain informal international interactions. The emphasis on prioritizing sports diplomacy with neighboring countries and Nowruz-region states also reflects a strategic shift from high-risk global markets to lower-risk regional markets strengthened by shared cultural and civilizational ties. This finding is consistent with the concept of the "geopolitical redefinition of destination" and can be generalized as a macro-strategy under sanction conditions.

Fourth, the identified economic strategies clearly reflect the requirements of a resistance economy within the tourism industry. The emphasis on developing a domestic supply chain for sports equipment, using local currencies in transactions, and providing investment incentive packages is all designed to reduce vulnerability caused by disconnection from the international financial system. These findings are consistent with Iran's post-JCPOA experience, highlighted by Gorji et al. (2023), indicating that the reconstruction of sports tourism without economic self-reliance and diversification of financial mechanisms would be fragile and unsustainable. The innovative aspect of this section is the proposal to activate tourism accounts in regional currencies, which can serve as a model for other sanctioned countries as well.

Fifth, the technological strategies, particularly data-driven governance and the use of virtual reality, add a new dimension to the literature on sports tourism under sanctions. While previous studies have mainly focused

on traditional marketing or diplomacy, this study's findings show that digital technologies can serve as key tools for marketing, service delivery, and destination management by bypassing the physical and media restrictions imposed by sanctions. Big data analytics for identifying travel patterns and tourist preferences enables more precise targeting of marketing activities and optimal allocation of limited resources, which becomes critically important under sanction conditions. Sixth, the strategies based on indigenous and geopolitical advantages, including the revival of regional games and the definition of ancient Iranian sports competitions, demonstrate a deep understanding of Iran's competitive differentiation in sports tourism. These findings align with those of Fouzia et al. (2025) and Sorman et al. (2025), who emphasized the importance of sporting events and cultural-natural resources. However, in the sanction context, the focus shifts from large-scale global events toward local, regional, and heritage-based events. This shift not only reduces the political and logistical risks of hosting international mega-events but also strengthens national identity and cultural cohesion.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that international sanctions. However, they create undeniable challenges for Iran's sports tourism, but can paradoxically act as a catalyst for strategic rethinking, reprioritization, and the discovery of neglected capacities. The strategic model identified in this research, on the one hand, seeks to neutralize or reduce the adverse effects of sanctions through economic, financial, and logistical mechanisms, and on the other hand, through the use of public diplomacy, modern technologies, and indigenous advantages, aims to construct a new and differentiated image of Iran as a safe, authentic, and attractive destination for regional and cross-border sports tourists.

From a theoretical perspective, this study provides a new conceptual framework for analysis and policymaking in complex geopolitical contexts by integrating the literature on sports tourism, destination marketing, and the political economy of sanctions. This framework can serve as a basis for future research in other sanctioned countries or regions experiencing similar geopolitical crises. Moreover, the emphasis on regional and culture-based strategies addresses the theoretical gap identified in the literature review: the lack of models that consider sanctions as a structural factor in sports tourism development.

From a practical perspective, the results of this study can serve as a roadmap for policymakers, sports managers, and stakeholders in Iran's tourism industry. It is recommended that, in the first step, a special sports tourism working group be established within the government, and a national strategic document be developed with the participation of all stakeholders. In the second step, priority should be given to short-term, low-cost strategies such as launching a multilingual digital platform, activating sports diplomacy with neighboring countries, and organizing regional events, to generate quick wins and build momentum for long-

term infrastructure projects. Ultimately, the success of these strategies depends on political will, inter-sectoral coordination, and active participation of the private sector and local communities.

This study, like any research, has limitations. The qualitative nature of the study and reliance on the perspectives of domestic experts, while enhancing analytical depth and contextual relevance, limits the generalizability of the findings in quantitative terms. In addition, the dynamic nature of the geopolitical environment and the continuous changes in the scope and intensity of sanctions require ongoing updates to these strategies. For future research, it is recommended to conduct quantitative studies to prioritize and weight the identified strategies, comparative analyses of other sanctioned countries' experiences in sports tourism development, and studies on the perceptions and preferences of actual and potential sports tourists from target regional markets. Furthermore, designing and implementing pilot projects based on these strategies in one of the high-potential provinces and evaluating their effectiveness could be an important step toward translating this conceptual framework into operational, measurable outcomes.

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