



ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Designing a Tourism Management Model for the Cultural Heritage and
Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to design a tourism management model for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province. The present study is an applied-developmental study in terms of its purpose and is a cross-sectional survey study in terms of the method and time period of data collection. The statistical population of the present study was managers of different levels of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province. The qualitative part of the sampling method was based on non-probability sampling methods. In the quantitative phase of the research, a random stratified sampling method was used to validate the proposed research model. Given the exploratory, a semi-structured interview was used to collect the opinions and views of the experts of the National Iranian Oil Company regarding the identification of the indicators, components and dimensions of the research model. The qualitative method of grounded data analysis was used in ATLAS TI software. 6 main categories, 26 central categories and 160 primary codes were identified. Causal conditions include data management, information technology, employee status, tourist status and organizational structure. Contextual conditions include geographical location, tourism infrastructure, cultural heritage status, government conditions, and social culture. Intervening conditions include data analysis process, international conditions, management support, economic conditions, and advertising and marketing. Strategies include data-driven decision-making, improved financing, customer relationship management, tourism branding and cross-sectoral partnerships, organizational training and learning, and modeling from successful areas. Outcomes include revenue generation and profitability, sustainable regional development, tourist satisfaction, and improved tourism image. ©authors

Introduction

Tourism management, as one of the fundamental pillars of sustainable development, plays a decisive role in planning, organizing, and optimally utilizing the tourism capacities of each region (Tajdini et al., 2026). This management field, by integrating economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, tries to increase the economic benefits of tourism while preventing its negative consequences such as the destruction of natural resources, social inequalities, and the weakening of cultural identity (Dogru et al., 2025). In fact, tourism management is not limited to attracting tourists, but is a systematic process for guiding tourism flows in line with the long-term interests of the host community. In the current situation, the rapid growth of the tourism industry and the increasing diversity of tourist demand have doubled the need for scientific and integrated management approaches (Liu-Lastres, 2022).

Lack of strategic planning, weak coordination among responsible institutions, and lack of coherent policies in destination management are among the challenges that can lead to unsustainable use of tourism resources and reduced satisfaction of tourists and local communities (Ionescu et al., 2022). Therefore, tourism management should be based on accurate data, stakeholder participation, and continuous performance evaluation in order to effectively respond to environmental changes and market needs (Zenker et al., 2020). Given the increasing importance of tourism in regional and national development, it is essential to pay attention to tourism management as a fundamental research and implementation issue (Arici et al., 2023). Efficient tourism management can pave the way for a balanced distribution of economic benefits, create sustainable employment, improve service quality, and strengthen the destination image at the national and international levels (Zhuang et al., 2024). Therefore, addressing the challenges and requirements of tourism management is of particular importance not only for improving the performance of this industry, but also for achieving sustainable and balanced development in host communities (Shafiee et al., 2023).

As one of the important provinces of Iran in terms of history, culture, and nature, Khuzestan province has unparalleled tourism potential that can play an important role in the economic, social, and cultural development of the region (Mousavi Alizadeh et al., 2025). With three UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including Sousse, Chogha Zanbil, and the historical water structures of Shushtar, as well as natural attractions such as wetlands, rivers, coastal areas of the Persian Gulf, and monuments of the Sacred Defense, this province has a wide variety of tourist attractions that attract millions of visitors annually. Official and field statistics show that during the Nowruz holidays in recent years, visits to Khuzestan's tourist attractions have reached impressive figures; For example, between March 2024 and April 2024, nearly 9.435 million visits to these attractions were recorded, indicating the huge reception of tourists from the province's various capacities. Also, during the same period, more than 1.403 million person-nights were recorded in the formal and informal sectors, indicating the desired length of stay of tourists in the region (Hosseini Siahgoli et al., 2025).

These figures indicate the high tourism potential of Khuzestan province, but along with these attractions, there are also serious challenges in managing and exploiting these capacities. A sudden increase in the number of visitors during peak tourism seasons such as Nowruz without adequate planning for accommodation, service, and transportation infrastructure can lead to double pressure on natural and cultural resources. For example, reports indicate that more than 86 percent of tourists are accommodated in informal or emergency accommodations, which indicates a lack or mismatch of formal infrastructure with the volume of demand (Rahimi et al., 2024).

On the other hand, other statistics also show that the province has been able to record impressive records in attracting tourists in different years, especially during holidays (Rahimi et al., 2022). According to published reports, in April 2024, more than 8 million 358 thousand overnight stays and about 30 million visits to the province's tourist attractions were recorded,

which indicates a huge leap in Khuzestan tourism compared to previous years. These statistics show that Khuzestan province has been able to seriously improve its position as one of the main domestic tourism destinations in recent years (Jafari et al., 2025). In addition to domestic tourism, the arrival of foreign tourists, although still lower compared to destinations in other countries, is also on the rise (Khajoui et al., 2025). For example, according to statistics, more than 6,000 foreign tourists have visited Khuzestan province since the beginning of the year until July 17, 2018, mainly from neighboring countries such as Iraq, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. This shows that Khuzestan also has the potential to attract cross-border tourists, especially given its geographical location near the border of Arab countries and its cultural and historical potential shared with the history of the region. However, the capacity to attract foreign tourists in Khuzestan province has not yet been fully realized and requires targeted policies, international advertising, and improved service to foreign travelers (Shawkati et al., 2025).

Along with opportunities, there are also significant threats and challenges that, if tourism management cannot properly identify and resolve, the rapid growth of tourism can lead to negative impacts. These challenges include weak formal accommodation and service infrastructure, lack of effective monitoring and evaluation systems, expert human resource management, and lack of coordination between relevant executive agencies. For example, with millions of visits recorded, the lack of effective strategies for managing tourist traffic, monitoring service quality, and preserving natural and cultural resources can lead to problems such as environmental pollution, pressure on attractions, and tourist dissatisfaction (Kuhbar et al., 2024).

In addition, the lack of a scientific and localized management model for Khuzestan Province has led to many tourism initiatives being implemented in isolation and without full coherence. Due to its specific historical, climatic, and cultural characteristics, Khuzestan Province cannot fully utilize tourism management models developed in other provinces or countries. This clearly highlights the need to design a specific tourism management model for Khuzestan; A model that can take into account the unique characteristics of the province and provide operational solutions for sustainable tourism development in it (Mirzaei et al., 2025). The need to develop this model is felt more in a situation where Iran has generally tried in recent years to increase the share of tourism in the national economy and develop more comprehensive programs in this field. According to national statistics, Iran's tourism industry experiences millions of domestic visits and several million international visits annually and is considered as part of the country's economic development program.

Considering the role of tourism in creating jobs, increasing foreign exchange earnings, and preserving cultural and natural heritage, designing and implementing effective tourism management models on a provincial scale can contribute significantly to achieving the country's macro goals. In general, it can be said that despite the huge capacities and impressive statistics of visits to Khuzestan's tourist attractions, there is a serious gap in the scientific modeling of provincial tourism management.

A gap that has prevented Khuzestan's tourism potential from being fully realized and many opportunities are missed due to weak planning, coordination, and monitoring. This can not only lead to a decrease in the quality of the tourist experience, but can also have long-term negative effects on the province's cultural and natural resources. Therefore, it is essential for the Khuzestan Provincial Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization to design and explain a comprehensive tourism management model.

This model should be able to cover various tourism processes, including strategic planning, infrastructure development, resource management, marketing, stakeholder participation, and performance evaluation, in an integrated manner, and respond to the current and future tourism needs of the province. Such a model can pave the way for sustainable tourism development, increase tourist and local community satisfaction, and establish Khuzestan's role as one of the most important tourism destinations in the country.

Literature Review

In examining the theoretical framework and tourism management model for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province, it should be noted that the scientific literature on tourism still faces significant theoretical gaps in the field of comprehensive and integrated theorizing; especially when the goal is to develop a local and practical model for the management of a provincial institution.

Many existing studies, although they have addressed key issues such as tourism sustainability or destination governance, often remain at the conceptual or case level, and an integrated framework that describes the cause-and-effect relationships between tourism management variables in a comprehensive model has not been developed. For example, a study that proposes a sustainable tourism governance framework in three layers including destination management, stakeholder engagement, and adaptation to pressures shows that theoretical efforts to integrate the principles of governance, participation, and sustainability into a coherent model are still ongoing and need further development.

In addition, classical destination management approaches such as the destination life cycle model, which introduces the stages of growth and evolution of a destination, have been used as a theoretical basis in many tourism management studies, but this model alone is not able to explain the complexities of destination management performance, especially in the context of stakeholder network interaction and sustainability. Also, in the literature, stakeholder theory is known as a framework for understanding the role of different actors in sustainable tourism development, but some studies show that the development of coherent and interconnected participatory models that explain the distribution of power, participation and interaction in the destination management structure is still not enough and needs to be further developed. In addition, the existing literature focuses on separate theoretical sections, such as destination marketing, tourist loyalty or sustainable governance system, without collecting these elements in an integrated theoretical framework and examining them in interaction with each other.

This is particularly important in developing a tourism management model for executive organizations such as the Provincial Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, as these models should be able to explain the role of policymaking, stakeholder participation, local capacities, environmental sustainability, and economic performance simultaneously in an analytical framework. Recent research in the field of destination management also emphasizes the need to integrate classical and modern approaches, stakeholder networking, the use of technology, and a focus on sustainability, but shows that the development of a local, structured, and consistent theoretical framework with regional cultural, social, and economic characteristics has not yet been fully completed. The initial tourism management model for the Khuzestan Provincial Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization can be designed based on four key dimensions, each of which has a complementary and interactive role in sustainable tourism development.

The first dimension is governance and institutional structure, which includes policymaking, regulations, decision-making, and coordination between government institutions, the private sector, and the local community, and forms the overall framework for tourism management.

The second dimension is stakeholder and community participation, which emphasizes the empowerment of host communities, the development of local capacities, the strengthening of social capital, and the creation of participatory decision-making processes, and promotes cohesion and cooperation among the main tourism actors.

The third dimension is the management of tourism resources and services, which includes physical and service infrastructure, service quality management, destination marketing and branding, and the protection of natural and cultural resources, and has a direct role in the tourist experience and tourist attraction.

The fourth dimension is sustainability and risk and crisis management, which ensures the continuity of the tourism system by emphasizing environmental protection, natural and human-made crisis management, and ensuring the safety and satisfaction of tourists. These dimensions, while relatively independent, are interconnected in an interactive cycle; in such a way that governance decisions affect stakeholder participation and resource management, the performance of resources and services shapes the quality of the tourist experience and the image of the destination, and sustainability and crisis management ensure that tourism has sustainable development in the long term.

As a result, the initial model should present these dimensions as an integrated framework that identifies the cause-and-effect relationships between policymaking, participation, services, and sustainability and has the potential to be localized in the cultural, social, and economic context of Khuzestan.

Therefore, in the present study, which aims to design a tourism management model for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province, it is proposed to use an integrated approach between the theories of sustainable tourism development, stakeholder theory, destination governance theory, and destination life cycle theory.

Such a framework can fill the gap in the literature and provide a solid theoretical foundation for explaining variables, relationships, and management mechanisms at the provincial level; because the combination of these theories allows for a better understanding of the conflicts and interactions between different actors, how destinations are sustainable, and how policies can be adapted to local characteristics.

Table 1. Dimensions, components, and indicators extracted from foreign literature

Authors	Article Title	Extracted codes
Çoban & Yıldız (2019)	Developing a destination management model: Case of Cappadocia	Destination management model, sustainable development, stakeholder engagement, destination attractiveness, destination organization, community participation
Liorançaitė et al. (2025)	Heritage Management Models for Sustainable Community Tourism Development	Cultural heritage management, local community participation, sustainable tourism development, management framework, participatory policies
Tahiri & Kovaçi (2025)	Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Heritage as Drivers of Regional Development	Sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, regional development, community participation, management strategy
Aisyah(2023)	Implications of Planning and Management for the Development of Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism in Malaysia	Planning and management, sustainable tourism, organizational policies, heritage conservation
Uslu et al. (2024)	The role of authenticity, involvement and experience quality in heritage destinations	Quality of tourist experience, cultural authenticity, participation, tourist satisfaction, service management
Fayziyev (2025)	Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage Through Tourism	Heritage conservation, stakeholder participation, promotion of indigenous culture, responsible tourism
Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022	Digital Marketing Strategies for Sustainable Tourism Destination Management (Example: Shahr Noor)	Destination marketing, tourism management, competitive strategies, destination advertising
Rezaei Sorkhani et al.2022	Developing a Tourism Management Model with an Emphasis on Beach Sports	Economic-marketing criteria, infrastructure facilities, public relations and advertising, social and cultural factors, political-security factors
Asadpour Kordi et al., 2022	A Study of the Development of the Iranian Tourism Industry with an Emphasis on the Efficiency of this Industry	The path of development in infrastructure and widespread advertising at national and international levels
Amirabadi, 2022	A Study of the Framework of the Tourism Attraction Model in Iran with a Panel Data Approach	Variables of population density and geographical distance between countries, Human Development Index,

In summarizing the research background related to designing a tourism management model for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province, it can be stated that previous studies, although they have addressed various aspects of tourism management, including strategic planning, sustainable development, tourism governance, stakeholder participation, destination branding, and the role of infrastructure, have mainly had a sectoral, generalizable, and non-local approach.

A significant portion of these studies have been conducted at the national or international level and have paid less attention to the cultural, social, climatic, and institutional requirements of specific regions such as Khuzestan Province.

On the other hand, a review of the background shows that the models presented have often focused either on the economic aspects of tourism or have only addressed destination development from a market and demand perspective, and the role of executive institutions, especially the Cultural Heritage and

Tourism Organization as a central actor in policymaking, regulation, and inter-sectoral coordination, has not been considered in an integrated and systematic manner. Also, the weakness in simultaneously utilizing modern approaches to public management, such as participatory governance, data-driven decision-making, and institutional networking, can be seen as a common gap in previous studies.

Therefore, considering the unique historical, cultural, and natural capacities of Khuzestan Province and at the same time the existing structural, institutional, and managerial challenges, the necessity of designing a local, comprehensive, and practical tourism management model for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province is felt more than ever before; a model that can integrate previous theoretical and empirical findings, respond to the specific conditions of the province, and pave the way for improving management performance, promoting institutional coordination, and realizing sustainable tourism development at the provincial level.

From an educational perspective, the “Designing a Tourism Management Model for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province” serves as a practical learning framework that integrates theoretical knowledge with local realities. This model teaches students and managers how to identify the cultural, historical, and natural capacities of a province by applying systems thinking, scientific research methods, and strategic analysis, and how to organize these capacities within a coherent managerial framework. Moreover, learning how to localize tourism management theories and adapt them to the climatic, social, and cultural conditions of Khuzestan is one of the model’s most important educational outcomes.

From the perspective of professional learning, the model emphasizes the development of managerial and decision-making skills and demonstrates that successful tourism depends on intersectoral cooperation and the participation of local communities. Through this model, learners become familiar with concepts such as sustainable tourism, cultural heritage management, diversification of tourism products, and challenge management, and they learn how to transform tourism into a tool for economic development, job creation, and the strengthening of regional cultural identity.

Method

The present study was applied in terms of its purpose and qualitative in terms of its method with a grounded theory approach based on the approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998). In this study, methodological angle was observed using different data collection methods such as library study method and review of specialized sources and texts as well as semi-structured interviews. Data angle, which is controlling the compatibility of different data sources within the same method, was also considered by the researchers in this study and more than one data source was used. Its potential participants were all managers of different levels of tourism in Khuzestan province.

The sampling method was purposive and individuals were selected. This group was selected to conduct the qualitative part of the research and participated in the interview process. Purposive sampling method was used to determine the samples of this study and determine this group of experts. In this study, the main source of data was interviews, so that the initial interviews were exploratory and descriptive, and gradually after each interview, the data

from the interviews were coded interview by interview, and through the method of constant data comparison, theoretical codes emerged through re-coding. In this way, 15 interviews were coded, and concepts and sub-categories and main categories emerged. It should be noted that the densification and saturation of the axial categories was carried out based on theoretical sampling, so that by conducting interviews with the statistical population of the research, the concepts of that category were condensed and enriched. For example, with the first 6 interviews that were conducted, the category of type of change was condensed. In other categories, such as results and consequences, the data was not sufficient, so the interviews continued based on theoretical sampling until the desired category was saturated. It should be noted that theoretical sampling for the interviews was not based on the number of interviewees but on their role in condensing the categories.

The interviews reached theoretical saturation by interview 15. The duration of the interviews was between 30 and 50 minutes. Grounded theory was used to analyze the qualitative research data in ATLAS TI software. In this plan, the stages of analyzing the collected qualitative data were carried out in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The interviews were conducted based on the following questions from the selected individuals in the qualitative sample:

1. What do you think is the current status of tourism management in Khuzestan Province?
2. What role does the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of the province play in guiding and coordinating tourism activities?
3. What are the most important management challenges of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province in the field of tourism?
4. What institutional or structural barriers have reduced the effectiveness of tourism management in the province?
5. To what extent is there coordination and interaction between the Cultural Heritage Organization and other tourism-related institutions?
6. To what extent is the tourism decision-making and planning process in the organization based on data and expert studies?
7. To what extent are the province's current tourism policies and programs consistent with the local, cultural, and social conditions of Khuzestan?
8. What shortcomings do you see in the performance evaluation and monitoring system for the province's tourism programs?
9. How is the role of the private sector, local communities, and non-governmental organizations defined in the province's tourism management? What solutions do you suggest to increase stakeholder participation in the province's tourism management process?
11. In your opinion, what components and characteristics should an effective tourism management model for Khuzestan Province have?
12. What management structure or mechanism can help improve inter-sectoral coordination in the province's tourism?
13. How should the position of the provincial Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization be defined in the desired tourism management model?
14. What are the most important priorities for reforming and improving tourism management in Khuzestan province in the short and long term?
15. If you were to provide one key recommendation for designing a tourism management model for Khuzestan province, what would that recommendation be?

A statistical description of the characteristics of the field participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics

Interviewee	Job Title	Education Level	Age	Gender	Experience (Year)
1	Manager	Master's Degree	42	Male	8
2	Manager	Master's Degree	48	Male	10
3	Deputy Manager	Master's Degree	39	Female	5
4	Manager	Master's Degree	51	Male	15

5	Manager	PhD	49	Male	9
6	Manager	PhD	48	Female	11
7	Expert	Master's Degree	37	Male	7
8	Manager	Master's Degree	49	Female	10
9	Deputy Manager	Master's Degree	46	Male	6
10	Expert	Master's Degree	47	Male	9
11	Manager	PhD	52	Male	13
12	Manager	Master's Degree	46	Male	12
13	Expert	Master's Degree	39	Female	8
14	Expert	Master's Degree	47	Male	14
15	Manager	Master's Degree	44	Gender	9

Findings

In this section, data are analyzed in an open, axial, and selective coding manner to emerge a fully evidence-based theory through a systematic and gradual process. Grounded theory allows researchers to simultaneously collect, analyze, and interpret data, and to continuously create feedback between data and theory. One of the important features of grounded theory is that the research process is flexible and the researcher continuously interacts between new data and initial analyses. This method allows researchers to develop realistic and reliable theories based on real data. In this technique, theoretical sampling methods are used to collect data in a wide and deep manner and help complete the theory. Also, validation techniques such as continuous comparison and examination of differences and similarities in the data are used to strengthen the accuracy and validity of the theory. For open coding, all interviews were entered into Atlasti software. Necessary checks were made and the desired codes were extracted. The labeling of the codes was done based on the interviews and the researcher tried to adhere to the individuals' insights towards the respondents as much as possible in order to avoid any possible and unwanted bias as much as possible. Throughout the coding process, the researcher adhered to the theoretical sensitivity that is the principle of grounded theory research and did this to enrich the research as much as possible. Table 3 shows an example of the coding of the interviews conducted.

Table 3. Reference to some interviews and relevant coding

Interview	Primary category
Collecting basic information from tourists. For example, you want to know who comes to Khuzestan, what areas they visit, what services they want, how much time they spend and what their opinions are. This information can be collected in the form of questions, forms, feedback or even through digital systems. The goal is to know what can help improve tourism services.	Collecting basic information from tourists
Keep the collected data in a suitable and secure place. Like a digital library that organizes all the information about tourists, services, visits, etc. well. This helps us to find the data easily, not lose it and be able to use it. Without this step, the information may be lost or we may not be able to use it well.	Maintaining data in appropriate databases
This step is like a transformation process. For example, from the millions of data we have collected, we need to understand what patterns there are. For example, we can understand which months have the most tourists, which areas are the most popular, or which services are the most popular. This useful information helps us to make better decisions and provide better services to tourists.	Extracting useful information from data
Always keep the data up to date and correct errors. For example, if a tourist has entered his information incorrectly or a new tourist area has opened, we must update these changes in the data in a timely manner. This helps us to always use accurate and reliable information and make better decisions.	Keeping data up-to-date and accurate
Data must be shared well and quickly between different departments of the organization such as management, technical, service and sales. For example, if a tourist services department has collected information about tourists, other departments must be able to access that data to make better decisions. Without this connection, information may be lost or duplicated	Transferring data between departments of the organization
Important data must be secure. For example, if a system is stolen or someone accesses the information without permission, there may be a problem. So we must use methods such as encryption, backup and access control to protect the data from any kind of risk such as theft, mistakes or technical accidents.	Protecting data from accidents and unauthorized access
The organization must have the right hardware and technical systems that can store, process and transfer the data well. For example, a powerful server to store data, a fast network to transfer information and systems that can manage the data easily. Without these systems, working with data becomes very difficult.	Existence of appropriate technical systems
We must use good and appropriate programs to manage data. Such as software that can organize data well, prepare useful reports and help us use the data better. Without these software, working with data becomes very time-consuming and difficult.	Use of data management software

Interview	Primary category
Data systems must be connected to the Internet so that they can easily communicate with each other and access information. For example, if one department is in Ahvaz and another department is in Islamabad, they must be able to easily share information. Without the Internet, this task becomes very difficult.	Access to the Internet for data systems
All systems in the organization, such as sales, service, management, and technical systems, must be well connected. For example, if a tourism services department records information, the other departments must be able to access that information. This connection helps us work as a single team and share information well.	Connection between internal systems of the organization
The organization's technology systems must be protected from unauthorized attacks such as data theft, viruses, or hacking. For example, we must use security software, data encryption, and access filtering to prevent important information from the organization, such as tourist or sales information, from being lost or stolen.	Protecting technology systems from cyber attacks
The organization should have a team of technical experts who maintain the systems well, troubleshoot problems, and make necessary updates. For example, if a sales system or data storage system has a problem, there should be someone who can find and fix the problem in a timely manner. Without this team, the systems can suffer serious problems.	Existence of a technical team to maintain systems
The organization's employees should be able to work well with systems and data. For example, they should know how to collect data, how to search for information, and how to create useful reports. These skills help the organization to use data better and make better decisions.	Employee skills in working with data

Also, the theoretical foundations and related codes are examined and extracted:

Table 4. Codes extracted from theoretical foundations

Expert	Extracted codes	Expert opinion
Pearce (2005)	Attracting target tourists, analyzing tourist behavior, reviewing satisfaction and feedback	Pearce says that to attract tourists, we need to understand their motivations and needs. In Khuzestan, we must analyze tourist behavior and feedback and design services that are exactly in line with tourist demands.
Urry(1990)	Using social networks, branding, the province's image, attracting tourists, producing content	Urry believes that tourists look at destinations with a "special eye" and this eye is influenced by the media. Therefore, for Khuzestan, media and social networks should be used to create a new and attractive image of the province.
Butler(1980)	Increasing the number of tourists, developing infrastructure, increasing tours, destination management, predicting tourist flows	Butler says that destinations have a life cycle; growth, maturity, and saturation. For Khuzestan, we must plan to improve infrastructure and service quality along the way and prevent saturation and decline in tourists.
Cooper(2012)	Destination management, cooperation between sectors, service quality, customer relationship management, policymaking	Cooper emphasizes destination management; meaning that all sectors must act in harmony. In Khuzestan, it is also necessary for the government, private sector, local community, and heritage organization to work together to provide standard and integrated services.
Hall(2008)	Sustainable tourism, preserving natural resources, developing sustainable infrastructure, economic and social impacts	Hall says that tourism development must be sustainable; meaning that it both contributes to the economy and preserves the environment and culture. In Khuzestan, sustainable infrastructure must be built and natural and cultural resources must be protected.
Sharpley(2009)	Tourism impacts, local employment, developing local businesses, supporting local crafts and culture	Sharpley believes that tourism has social and economic impacts. Therefore, in Khuzestan, tourism must be managed in a way that creates local employment and strengthens local culture and handicrafts.
Weaver(2011)	Sustainable development, public participation, data management, destination planning	Weaver says that for sustainable development, local people must participate in decision-making and planning must be based on data and evidence. In Khuzestan, public participation and tourist data must be used for decision-making.
Cohen(1979)	Cultural interaction, cultural experiences, respecting local culture, educating tourists	Cohen says that tourism must be in harmony with local culture and that tourists must experience a real cultural experience. For Khuzestan, unique cultural experiences must be created and local culture must be respected.

Based on the dimensions of the Strauss and Corbin (1998) data model, the classification of identification codes is specified in Tables 5 to 9.

Table 5. Coding of qualitative data (causal conditions)

Table 5: Coding of quantitative data (causal conditions)		
Primary category	Core Category	Selected Category
Collecting primary information from tourists	Data Management	Causal Conditions
Maintaining data in appropriate databases		
Extracting useful information from data		
Keeping data up-to-date and accurate		
Transferring data between departments of the organization		
Protecting data against accidents and unauthorized access	Information Technology	
Existence of appropriate technical systems		
Use of data management software		
Access to the Internet for data systems		
Connection between internal systems of the organization		

Primary category	Core Category	Selected Category
Protecting technology systems from cyber attacks	Employee Status	
Existence of a technical team to maintain systems		
Employee skills in working with data		
Understanding organizational justice		
Relationship of responsibilities with academic qualifications		
Employee motivation to participate and pursue the organization's goal		
Cooperation between employees		
Status of job satisfaction		
Statistics of tourists entering the region	Tourist Status	
Region or country of origin of tourists		
Duration of tourists' stay		
Survey of tourists		
How tourists behave and interact with the environment	Organizational Structure	
How the organization's departments are divided		
Level of entry into decision-making in the organization		
How departments communicate		
Main policies of the organization in data management		
Active participation Sections in processes		
Technical structure of data management systems		

Table 6. Open coding of qualitative data (strategic conditions)

Primary Category	Focus Category	Selected Category
Using tourist input data for decision-making	Data-Driven Decision	Strategies
Analyzing the number and time of tourist visits		
Changing policies based on new data		
Using data to evaluate the performance of sectors		
Predicting tourist flows using data		
Preparing data-driven reports for managers	Improving Financing	
Attracting capital from the private and foreign sectors		
Planning to increase income from cultural heritage services		
Creating tourism businesses in the region		
Receiving financial assistance from the government and related institutions		
Increasing the annual budget for tourism activities	Customer Relationship Management	
Creating financial resources independent of the sale of tourism services		
Responding to tourists' questions immediately		
Providing timely and quality services		
Creating 24/7 online customer relationship management		
Collecting tourist feedback	Tourism Branding	
Surveying the level of tourist satisfaction with services		
Creating long-term relationships with visiting tourists		
Using feedback to improve services		
Designing the tourism identity of Khuzestan Province		
Publishing attractive content on social networks	Cross-Sector Partnerships	
Using cultural heritage in branding		
Creating slogans or Khuzestan tourism collections		
Cooperating with the media to Brand promotion		
Holding cultural-tourism events to attract attention		
Collaboration with tourism businesses	Organizational Training and Learning	
Collaboration with universities for research and development		
Public participation in tourism activities		
Collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and other institutions		
Collaboration with cultural and environmental organizations		
Creating tourism networks between departments	Replicating Successful Regions	
Training managers in tourism and data management		
Training employees in tourism skills		
Creating ongoing training courses		
Sharing knowledge between different departments of the organization		
Evaluating employee skills		
Creating a culture of learning and continuous updating		
Study of tourism successes in other regions		
Emulating successful management models		
Using experiences from other regions		
Adapting successful models to Khuzestan conditions		
Creating an information network with successful regions		
Evaluating adaptability		

Table 7. Open coding of qualitative data (Consequences)

Primary Category	Core Category	Selected Category
Increasing income from cultural heritage services	Revenue and Profitability	Consequences
Attracting capital from the private sector for development		
Increasing higher-income tourism tours		
Increasing the number of incoming tourists		
Increasing service prices due to improved quality		
Creating cultural and commercial side activities related to tourism		
Increasing local businesses	Sustainable Regional Development	
Preserving natural resources in tourist areas		
Reducing pollution from tourism activities		
Creating job opportunities for local people		
Supporting agriculture and local culture in tourism		
Developing sustainable infrastructure		
Supporting handicrafts		
Supporting local foods		
People's participation in the tourism development process	Tourist Satisfaction	
Providing better and timely services		
Intimate and comfortable communication with tourists		
Respecting tourists' rights and security		
Providing sufficient information about heritage and services		
Creating unique cultural experiences		
Responding to feedback and improving services	Improving Tourism Image	
Increasing the province's attractiveness to tourists		
Improving the display of Khuzestan's culture and heritage		
Increasing the province's global ranking in tourism		
Improving the province's image in domestic and foreign media		
Increasing visits to world heritage sites		
Creating a unique tourism identity For Khuzestan		

Table 8. Coding of qualitative data (Contextual conditions)

Primary category	Core Category	Selected Category
Location of the region to the country's borders	Geographical Location	Contextual Conditions
Ease of access to important tourist cities		
Located on national or international tourist routes		
Proximity to historical areas		
Geographical and climatic conditions		
Existence of main and secondary roads to the area	Tourism Infrastructure	
Existence of hotels, inns and other accommodations		
Status of terminals and airports		
Existence of appropriate means of transportation in the area		
Access to health and public hygiene services		
Level of security in tourist areas		
Existence of cultural services and tourist guidance		
Access to the Internet in tourist areas	Cultural Heritage Status	
Number of national and world heritage sites in the area		
Level of protection and maintenance of heritage sites		
Attractiveness of heritage sites to tourists		
Holding cultural events around heritage sites		
Educating the community and tourists about heritage sites	Government Conditions	
Updating and reconstructing old heritage sites		
Government's macro policies in the field of tourism		
Amount of budget allocated to tourism		
Existence of appropriate laws for tourists		
Cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism and other institutions		
Development projects in tourist areas		
Government support for the Cultural Heritage Organization	Socioculture	
Level of community acceptance of tourists		
Existence of a culture of hosting and accompanying tourists		
Level of community awareness of cultural heritage		
Public participation in tourism activities		
Local beliefs affecting tourism		
How people interact with tourists in the region		

Table 9. Open coding of qualitative data (intervening conditions)

Primary category	Core Category	Selected Category
Dividing data based on origin, purpose,	Data Analysis Process	Intervening Conditions
Identifying tourist behavior patterns		
Preparing useful reports for decision-making		
Updating the model based on new data		
Checking the accuracy and validity of collected data		

The country's relations with tourism countries	International Conditions	
International policies in the field of tourism		
The impact of sanctions on tourist arrivals		
International agreements with bordering countries		
The impact of religious conditions on tourist arrivals		
The impact of political changes on tourism		
The impact of wars on tourist flows	Management Support	
Approval of management policies by managers		
Allocation of financial and human resources		
Participatory management of managers with employees		
Ideological support for data-driven management		
Cooperation of senior managers in projects		
Evaluating the performance of managers in implementing the model	Economic Conditions	
The impact of exchange rates on tourism costs		
The impact of inflation on the price of tourism services		
The amount of investment in the field of tourism		
How to price accommodation, guidance and other services		
Financial policies affecting government tourism		
Income level Society and purchasing power	Advertising and Marketing	
Status of marketing strategy to attract tourists		
Use of social networks		
Status of cooperation with domestic and foreign media		
Status of attracting target tourists		
Creating attractive and cultural content		
Surveying tourists' feedback on advertising		

After completing the analysis and measurement of various data, the final research model is presented as follows:

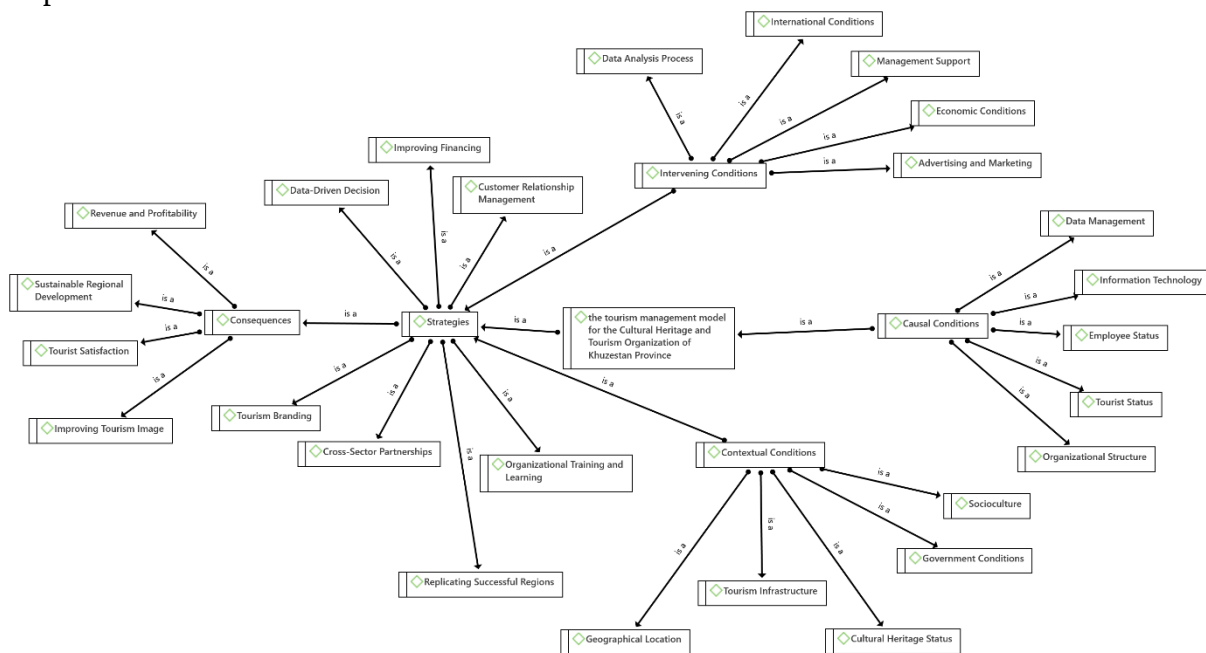


Figure 1. Graphical output of the software for the tourism management model for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province (ATLAS.TI software output)

Four quantitative criteria were used to examine the validity, transferability, confirmability, and reliability: Holstey coefficient, Scott's p-coefficient, Cohen's kappa index, and Krappendorff's alpha. The correlation of experts' views by calculating the Holstey coefficient or "percentage of observed agreement" was 0.870, which is a significant value. Considering the shortcomings of the Holstey method, the p-Scott index was also calculated, which was 0.912. The fourth index for estimating the validity of qualitative research is Cohen's kappa index. Cohen's kappa index was 0.809 in this study. Finally, Krappendorff's alpha was used, and its value was estimated to be 0.833 in this study.

Tourism spaces can be understood as learning environments because they provide direct, experiential interaction between visitors and cultural heritage. Museums, historical sites,

cultural events, and heritage landscapes allow tourists to engage with history, traditions, and local identities beyond formal educational settings. Through interpretation panels, guided tours, storytelling, exhibitions, and interactive activities, visitors can develop a deeper understanding of the historical, cultural, and social significance of a destination. In this sense, tourism spaces function as informal learning environments where knowledge is constructed through observation, participation, and emotional connection with the place and its heritage.

The proposed tourism management model improves the quality of visitors' learning experiences by emphasizing educational planning within tourism development. By integrating interpretive programs, trained guides, informative signage, digital media, and culturally rich events, tourism managers can transform heritage sites into structured learning environments. Such an approach not only enhances visitors' understanding and engagement but also creates added value for destinations by promoting meaningful and memorable experiences. As a result, tourists do not simply observe cultural heritage; they actively learn from it, which strengthens cultural appreciation, supports heritage preservation, and increases the overall quality of the tourism experience.

Emerging technologies can play a transformative role in enhancing the learning experience of tourists within cultural heritage spaces by turning static environments into interactive and engaging ones. For example, smart instructional guides and augmented reality (AR) applications allow tourists to visualize hidden historical layers, lost architectures, or cultural simulations in three dimensions, making history come alive before their eyes. Additionally, educational apps and interactive maps in museums and historical sites provide visitors with the opportunity to choose personalized learning paths and access categorized, interactive information based on their interests. These technologies shift learning from a passive to an active, multisensory, and memorable experience that aligns with the expectations of modern tourists.

In the proposed tourism management model, such technologies are positioned as critical infrastructures within "visitor experience management" and "tourism product development" components. By implementing these technological tools, destination managers can create added value—not only increasing visitor satisfaction, but also supporting the preservation and more effective presentation of cultural heritage. These innovations serve as a bridge between specialized heritage knowledge and public understanding, making historical information easier to comprehend and more attractive to wider audiences. Ultimately, including such technologies in the model reflects a modern management approach in which technology is used not only for marketing, but as a medium for facilitating knowledge transfer and improving the educational quality of the tourism sector.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data, 160 initial codes were identified in 26 core categories and 6 optional categories. The categories of data management, information technology, staff status, tourist status, and organizational structure were identified as causal conditions. Jafari et al. (2025) also showed that the status of tourists in terms of needs, expectations, satisfaction, and behavioral patterns affects the design of tourism services and policies as a causal factor, and ignoring this component can lead to a decrease in the attractiveness of the destination and a decline in the competitiveness of the province. Geographical location, tourism infrastructure, cultural heritage status, government conditions, and social culture were identified as background conditions. Khajoo et al. (2025) also showed that the geographical location of Khuzestan province has high potential for tourism development due to its border with neighboring countries, access to open waters, climatic diversity, and the existence of important rivers. However, specific climatic conditions, such as extreme heat in parts of the year, can be considered as a contextual constraint in tourism planning and increase the need for scheduling and diversifying tourism products. In addition, tourism

infrastructures, including transportation, accommodation, welfare services, and access to attractions, provide a practical basis for the implementation of tourism policies, and weakness or inequality in the distribution of these infrastructures challenges the efficiency of tourism management. Hosseini Siahgoli et al. (2025) also concluded that social culture, as one of the most important contextual conditions, affects the attitude of the local community towards tourism, the level of public participation, and the way in which hosts and tourists interact. Social acceptance of tourism, preserving cultural values, and strengthening social capital can pave the way for sustainable tourism development in the province. In general, these five categories, as background conditions, form the overall context of tourism management in the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province, and paying attention to them is essential for formulating realistic and effective policies. The data analysis process, international conditions, management support, economic conditions, and advertising and marketing were identified as intervening conditions. Rahimi et al. (2024) also showed that advertising and marketing, as a vital intervening condition, plays an important role in introducing the tourism capacities of Khuzestan Province, shaping the destination image, and attracting tourists. Weakness in marketing strategies, lack of use of modern advertising tools, and inconsistency of messages can reduce the effect of other positive factors. In general, these five categories, as intervening conditions, have a moderating and reinforcing role in the tourism management system of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province, and targeted attention to them can significantly increase the effectiveness of the presented tourism management model. The identified strategies include: data-driven decision-making, improved financing, customer relationship management, tourism branding and cross-sectoral partnerships, organizational training and learning, and modeling from successful areas. Rahimi et al. (2024) showed that tourism branding, as a key strategy, plays an important role in shaping a positive mental image of Khuzestan Province as a distinctive tourism destination and can be effective in increasing the competitiveness of the province at the national and international levels. Also, cross-sectoral partnerships, emphasizing cooperation and coordination between government institutions, the private sector, local communities, and non-governmental organizations, provide a platform for realizing participatory governance in tourism. Organizational training and learning, and modeling from successful areas as empowering strategies, create the basis for promoting human capital, transferring successful experiences, and continuously improving organizational performance. Overall, these strategies provide a coherent framework for guiding tourism management in the Khuzestan Provincial Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization and can be a practical basis for effective policy and decision-making in this area. The identified outcomes include revenue generation and profitability, sustainable regional development, tourist satisfaction, and improved tourism image. Shokati-Amaghani et al. (2025) also showed that increasing tourist satisfaction levels can lead to repeat travel, positive word-of-mouth advertising, and enhanced loyalty to the destination. Improving the tourism image of Khuzestan Province, as a strategic outcome, plays an important role in enhancing the competitive position of the province at the national and international levels. A positive destination image can increase the trust of tourists, investors, and other stakeholders and pave the way for sustainable tourism development in the long term. Overall, these four outcomes show that effective tourism management not only improves the performance of the Khuzestan Provincial Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, but also plays an important role in the comprehensive and sustainable development of the province.

Conclusion

This research, with the aim of designing and explaining the tourism management model for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province, has been able to achieve a coherent, indigenous, and empirical evidence-based framework by utilizing a mixed

approach and combining qualitative data-driven methods with quantitative confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. The results of the qualitative phase showed that tourism management in Khuzestan Province is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon that is simultaneously influenced by causal, contextual, and intervening factors, and only by adopting a systematic and integrated approach can we hope to improve its performance. Accurate identification of these conditions has provided a deeper understanding of the province's tourism management realities and has created a scientific basis for designing strategies and policies appropriate to the specific characteristics of Khuzestan.

At the level of causal conditions, categories such as data management, information technology, employee status, tourist status, and organizational structure were identified as the main drivers of tourism management. These findings indicate that weak information systems, lack of technological infrastructure, human resource challenges, and inflexible organizational structures are among the most important obstacles to tourism management in Khuzestan Province. On the other hand, strengthening these factors can provide the basis for more informed decision-making, better response to tourists' needs, and increased efficiency of the provincial Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization. These results are meaningfully consistent with the actual conditions of Khuzestan Province, which faces a high diversity of attractions and at the same time, managerial and structural constraints.

On the other hand, contextual conditions including geographical location, tourism infrastructure, cultural heritage status, government conditions, and social culture were identified as the platforms that shape tourism management. Khuzestan Province, with its special geopolitical location, climatic diversity, natural resources, and rich cultural heritage, has high potential for tourism development; However, weak infrastructure, challenges in protecting cultural heritage, instability of government policies, and some cultural and social constraints make it difficult to effectively implement tourism programs. The results of the study show that without serious attention to these background conditions and their gradual improvement, even efficient strategies cannot lead to desired outcomes.

Meanwhile, intervening conditions, including the data analysis process, international conditions, management support, economic conditions, and advertising and marketing, play a moderating and facilitating role in achieving tourism management goals. Especially in Khuzestan province, which is heavily influenced by macroeconomic and international conditions, these factors can strengthen or weaken the path of tourism development. The results showed that management support, relative economic stability, and the use of modern marketing tools can reduce the negative effects of some structural and environmental constraints and pave the way for the successful implementation of tourism management strategies. Based on these conditions, tourism management strategies including data-driven decision-making, improved financing, customer relationship management, tourism branding, cross-sectoral partnerships, organizational training and learning, and modeling from successful areas were formulated as strategic responses to the identified challenges and opportunities. These strategies, emphasizing the indigenous realities of Khuzestan Province, attempt to reduce the gap between the potential capacities and actual performance of the province's tourism. Adopting these strategies can move the provincial Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization from traditional and reactive approaches to intelligent, participatory, and forward-looking management.

The outcomes of tourism management, including revenue generation and profitability, sustainable regional development, tourist satisfaction, and improving the province's tourism image, were identified as the final outcomes of the model. These outcomes indicate that effective tourism management in Khuzestan Province is not limited to economic benefits alone, but can also lead to improving the quality of life of local communities, preserving cultural and natural heritage, and strengthening the province's position in the national and international tourism system. Quantitative testing of the model through confirmatory factor

analysis and structural equation modeling also showed that the proposed model has good fit and statistical validity, and the relationships between the constructs have been significantly confirmed, which strengthens the generalizability and applicability of the model in the real context of Khuzestan Province.

The final conclusion of this study shows that the designed tourism management model provides a comprehensive, local, and evidence-based framework for the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Khuzestan Province. This model can be used as a scientific basis for policymaking, strategic planning, and management decision-making, and if implemented gradually and coherently, it will pave the way for sustainable tourism development, increasing stakeholder satisfaction, and improving the image of Khuzestan Province's tourism at the national and transnational levels. Similarly, incorporating insights from location-based learning highlights how geographical context, spatial interaction, and place-based narratives shape visitors' understanding and emotional connection to heritage. Cultural learning environment studies also reinforce the idea that heritage sites provide multidimensional learning opportunities influenced by culture, identity, and collective memory. Integrating these strands of literature will not only enrich the theoretical foundation of the discussion section but also align the article more closely with the journal's academic domain, demonstrating how the proposed model contributes to both tourism management and contemporary learning theories. In the following, based on the proposed strategies, practical and executive suggestions are presented:

Data-driven decision-making

The first practical suggestion in line with data-driven decision-making is to create an integrated tourism data management system for Khuzestan Province. This system can include a comprehensive database of tourist statistics, attractions, infrastructure, tourist satisfaction levels, and the performance of tourism units. Integrating data at the organizational level provides the basis for evidence-based decision-making and prevents reliance solely on individual experience or cross-sectional decisions.

Improving financing

It is recommended to create attractive tourism investment packages commensurate with the capacities of Khuzestan Province. Introducing investment opportunities in areas such as cultural tourism, nature tourism, river tourism, and industrial tourism, along with financial and legal incentives, can increase the motivation of domestic and foreign investors.

Customer relationship management (tourist)

It is recommended to design mechanisms for receiving feedback from tourists in a continuous and structured manner. The use of digital surveys, tourism applications and online response systems allows the organization to identify the real experience of tourists and correct the weak points of services.

Tourism branding

The use of modern media and digital tools is recommended to promote the province's brand. Targeted presence on social networks, specialized tourism websites, virtual tours and international advertising campaigns can create a positive and dynamic image of the Khuzestan destination and attract potential tourists. The production of high-quality and story-oriented visual and video content strengthens the emotional connection of tourists with the province.

Inter-sectoral partnership

It is recommended to hold joint meetings and workshops for the exchange of information and coordinated planning among tourism stakeholders. These workshops can include planning cultural events, developing infrastructure, joint marketing and defining joint tourism packages. Creating an atmosphere of interaction and continuous dialogue increases trust and cooperation between institutions.

Organizational learning and training

Institutionalizing organizational learning through the sharing of experiences and tacit knowledge of employees is essential. Holding experience transfer sessions, internal

workshops, and documenting successful and unsuccessful experiences helps to promote collective learning in the organization.

Modeling from successful areas

Conducting comparative studies and field visits by managers and experts to successful areas can facilitate the transfer of practical knowledge. This action will familiarize decision-makers with practical and realistic solutions for tourism development.

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