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**SPORT TOURISM AS NEW NICHE MARKET SEGMENT AND BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES**

Kalandarov Jalol Abdujalilovich

Email: jrstudyhouse@gmail.com

**Abstract**

The project aimed to create a paradigm for business by promoting sports tourism as a niche market in Uzbekistan, focusing on rural sports and local games. The study was carried out utilizing a mixed-methods approach, with qualitative and quantitative stages. The qualitative phase relied on grounded theory, and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The data was evaluated in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding. A model was built based on the resulting codes. The study found that six factors influence sustainable sports tourism development based on local sport: marketing, money and support, religious and social participation, infrastructure, and management and planning. In the quantitative phase, the model was validated using partial least squares structural equation modeling. This phase's statistics population comprised organizational staff working in tourism and sport, as well as organized coaches, referees, and athletes participating in rural sports in Uzbekistan.

**Keywords.** Sports tourism, rural sports, local games, niche market, tourism sector, market segment.

**Introduction**

Sports tourism combines two powerful industries: sports and tourism. Sports tourism has evolved into a global socioeconomic phenomenon. The International Olympic Committee and the World Tourism Organization have inked cooperation agreements to enhance coordination and synergy between tourism and sports activities, highlighting the industry's significance. Sports tourism has a high revenue potential, and in some countries, foreign exchange profits from this industry are a substantial source of money that helps to develop the economy. Growth data issued by the World Tourism Organization illustrate the industry's significant impact on the global economy as well as its importance in many national economies. While sports tourism has unquestionable economic benefits, it can also have a negative impact that grows in proportion to the size of sporting events and activities. Sports tourism initiatives often prioritize economic goals over environmental concerns, such as protecting the region's natural ecosystems and addressing potential negative impacts. Previous research has also shown that the social, cultural, and psychological effects of modern sports tourism outweigh the economic impact. This means that, if not properly planned and controlled, the growth of sports tourism can result in a variety of social and cultural issues. Indeed, it is commonly understood that any tourism plan that does not consider the destination's environmental, social, cultural, and historical context will fail [1]. As a result, in recent years, managers and specialists in the tourist sector worldwide have been considering a

new branch of sports tourism known as sustainable sports tourism, which is centered on rural sports and local games. This style of tourism seeks to leverage each area's natural, cultural, and historical assets as tourist attractions. Sports tourism could be a feasible alternative to the unsustainable tourist strategies that now exist in many areas. The host community's compatibility infrastructure and human and cultural assets contribute to economic, social, and environmental sustainability because they are connected to nature, use natural tools and facilities without the need for special equipment and locations, and reduce the seasonal effects of common tourism. Sports tourism, a two-dimensional economic and social activity, is at the junction of the tourism and sports industries. Sports tourism is tourism that is organized by people to see or participate in various sporting activities. It is a sport-focused tourism industry. Sports tourism encompasses travel for professional and recreational sports events, as well as non-sports activities such as physical exercise. Sports tourism encompasses a range of services offered while traveling to certain areas to participate in sports. The goal of the journey can be professional (professional teams and players) or recreational (trail runners at small outdoor sporting events). Sport tourism, which prioritizes a spatial context, benefits local economic development, socio-cultural exchange, and relationships among stakeholders. Sports tourism has diverse potential, which can impact visitor valuation depending on local factors. Sports tourism is made up of several distinct and interconnected parts. Next, the authors established four criteria to define sports tourism, all of which are closely related [2,3,4].

### Literature View

Sports tourism is highly useful since it not only entertains tourists and generates cash for the host community, but also promotes physical fitness and health among the people. sporting tourism involves traveling away from home for non-commercial purposes to see or participate in sporting events. Sports tourism is classified into three types: active, event, and nostalgic tourism. Sport tourism can have a significant impact on local and regional economies, social structures, and physical landscapes, with both short-term and long-term environmental consequences. Sports tourism is often viewed as a source of economic growth, however, it's important to recognize the negative effects of unregulated tourism growth. The tourism business can have a variety of negative economic effects on a community. These negative consequences include increased living costs, inflated prices of goods and services during the tourist season, an increase in the income disparity, an increase in land prices, land-use change, overexploitation of natural resources, and an increase in the tendency of people to work in the service industry. Tourism often entails social interactions, either temporary or ongoing, between residents and tourists that have specific effects and repercussions. Sports tourism can enhance ethnic heritage, social identity, spirit, and national pride, fostering a sense of citizenship, promoting local culture, and preserving cultural traditions. Sports tourism can have negative social and cultural consequences, including neglecting more profitable opportunities, disrupting community balance, destroying local identity and

cultural heritage, increasing crime, and causing conflicts between tourists and locals [4,5]. On the other hand, the planning and execution of sports tourism initiatives entails a variety of activities that can hurt the environment. While some research indicates that constructing new sports infrastructure or applying measures to improve sports venues might have a positive environmental impact, most local stakeholders believe that sports tourism initiatives have a negative environmental impact. Negative environmental implications of gatherings and activities include littering from food and drinks, increased energy usage, and air and noise pollution. Consider environmental and socio-economic sustainability while making tourism decisions, as overused places and resources can become unappealing to guests. The development of sustainable sports tourism affects both tourists and sports professionals. Because of the detrimental implications of unregulated tourism, the traditional tourist paradigm must be modified and replaced by the new paradigm of sustainable tourism.

### Methodology

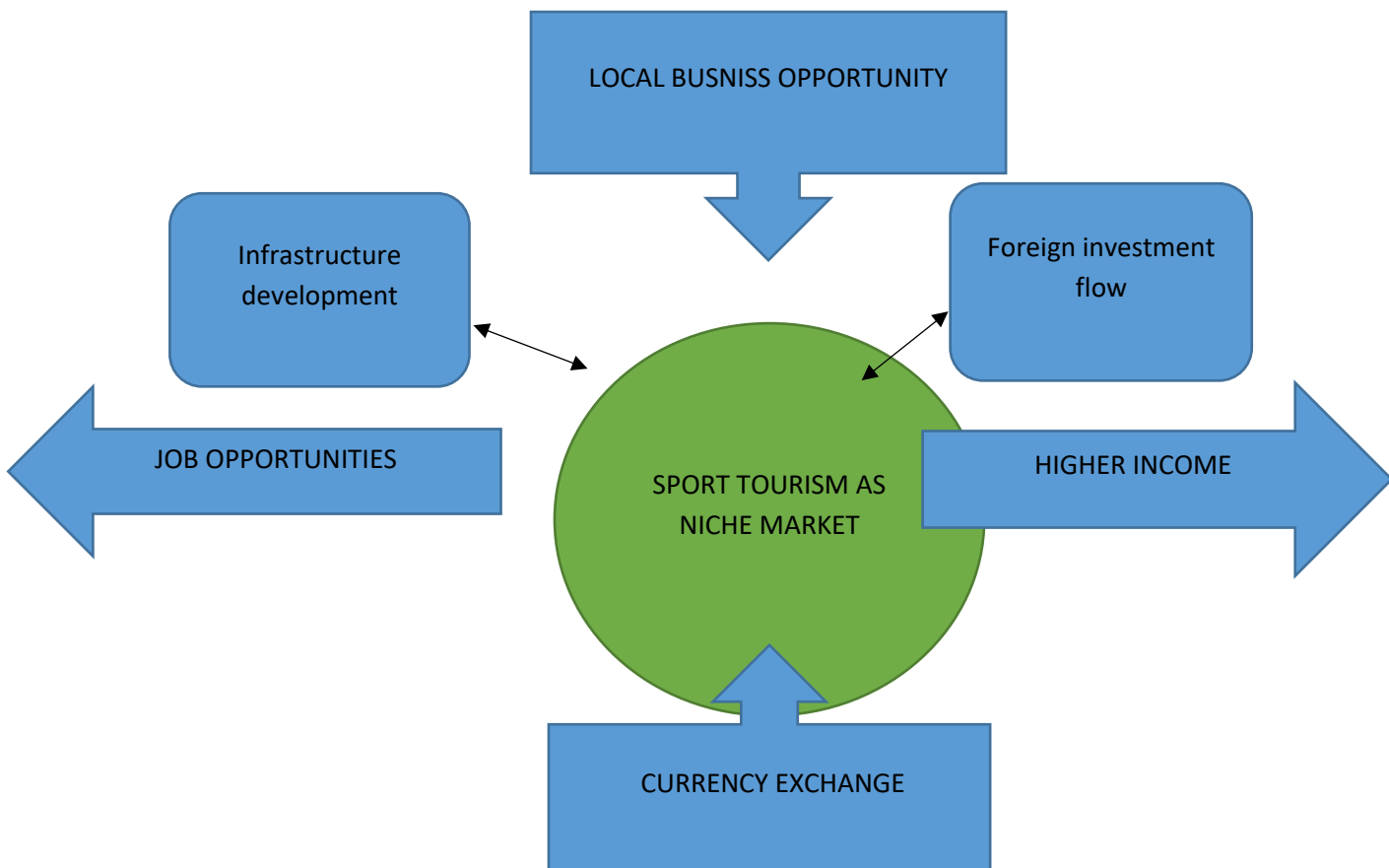
Each research differs from the others in terms of purpose, type, nature, and methodological approach. The current research has a mixed objective and is experimental in character; it seeks to investigate the function of sports tourism in promoting the culture and ethics of the host society. In this study, the focus group qualitative method was employed in the first step to extract the major components and indications. The retrieved cases are then evaluated by professionals to determine whether they are rejected or confirmed. Semi-structured interviews are used to collect information in the first phase, while questionnaires are used in the second phase. Participants in the first phase are seasoned experts in sports tourism, sports management, culture management, and sports ethics, with university degrees and executive experience. At this step, purposive sampling was used, with sample numbers selected based on theoretical saturation.

### Result

To ensure theoretical saturation and sampling, five experts were interviewed and asked if the coding results matched their experience. A positive response was received. Theoretical sampling was also done. The theory was declared saturated when new data samples matched the old code.

Validating the model and outcomes was necessary after examining interview data through three coding steps. This was done using data triangulation. Three types of triangulations are used: source triangulation (using many sources from different groups and at different times), investigator triangulation (reviewing findings by multiple researchers), and methodological triangulation (using various methods such as observation, interviews, documents, and questionnaires). Experts in sustainable sports tourism were consulted to validate the factors derived from interviews and refine them accordingly [6,7,8,9,10]. Figure 1 illustrates the model constructed based on research

literature and qualitative phase data. Based on the established model, the study hypotheses can be phrased as follows:



**Figure – 1. Conceptual model of sports tourism effects as niche market<sup>1</sup>**

Hypothesis 1: The sport tourism has a positive and significant effect on the creation of job opportunities.

Hypothesis 2: The sport tourism significant effect on the development of local tourism businesses.

H3: The sport tourism has a positive and significant effect on higher income through tourism services.

H4: The sport tourism has a positive and significant effect on foreign currency flows.

### Discussion and conclusion

According to the literature research, no specific models exist to estimate the extent of the development of sports tourism as a niche industry. Previous models looked at the growth of sustainable tourism in general terms. They either ignore the sustainability part of the paradigm or are vague and do not promote the approach. Alternatively, the

<sup>1</sup> Author work

proposed model is not complete and does not incorporate the variable idea of sustainable sports tourist growth. As a result, the current study was done to establish a model of sustainable sports tourism development based on RSLG. The most significant aspect of sports tourism as a niche was identified as “economic sustainability”. This component focuses on the local economy’s diversification, controlled economic growth, equitable distribution of economic advantages, reasonable income, price stability, and equal job possibilities. Another critical aspect of sustainable sports tourist growth is environmental sustainability. Because promoting RSLG does not necessitate the construction of extra infrastructure or facilities, this sort of sports tourism may be more beneficial in protecting natural resources and the environment. Sports tourism development has a socio-cultural dimension that has received less attention than its economic and environmental repercussions. Tourism's socio-cultural effects are frequently too gradual to be seen in a short period, but they are usually long-lasting and permanent. Furthermore, studies have shown that the willingness and participation of local people are critical to the development of the tourism business. Experience has shown that achieving a sustainable tourism business requires the cooperation, support, and engagement of local populations. Community participation and support play an important role in the creation of sustainable athletic events. Significant impact on the development of RSLG. Another aspect influencing RSLG tourism is management and planning. Tourism growth without a clear plan and strategy can lead to environmental and social issues that outweigh its benefits over time. Therefore, tourism should be promoted and managed in a controlled, integrated, and sustainable manner based on logical planning. The current study had some limitations that should be addressed in future investigations. This study focuses on sustainable sports tourism development using RSLG in Mazandaran. As a result, comparable research can be undertaken in various locations of the world with RSLG to generalize the findings. Furthermore, this study only examined three aspects of sustainable tourism: the environmental, sociocultural, and economic components. Future research should broaden the scope to include other aspects of sustainable sports tourism, such as technological, institutional, and Physical dimensions.

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