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Feasibility Study of Tourism Entrepreneurship Development in Rural Areas of Darreh-Shahr County: Application of SWOT-AHP Model

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to conduct a feasibility study on tourism entrepreneurship development in rural areas of Darreh-Shahr County, with the goal of providing appropriate strategies for its enhancement. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods in a sequential exploratory design. Through purposeful and network sampling, 15 key informants from the fields of entrepreneurship and tourism were selected for in-depth interviews, continuing until data saturation was achieved. Qualitative data were subjected to SWOT analysis, while quantitative data underwent analysis using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP). The findings indicated that a combination of conservative and aggressive strategies is essential for the development of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr County. The AHP analysis highlighted the importance of aggressive strategies, such as "organizing exhibitions and establishing local markets for rural and nomadic products." Additionally, it emphasized the need for conservative approaches, including "providing long-term, low-interest loans for the development of essential infrastructural facilities supporting rural entrepreneurial tourism" and "attracting local investors to establish recreational facilities like parks." In conclusion, this study underscores the necessity of employing a diverse range of strategies to foster the growth of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr County.

Keywords:

Rural businesses; rural tourism; strategic analysis; tourism entrepreneurship

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INTRODUCTION

While various strategies for rural development have been proposed, global experiences and current conditions have illuminated the necessity for a new approach to rural development (Rezaei et al., 2016). One of the primary strategies identified for rural development is tourism entrepreneurship. This is attributed to the fact that the tourism industry, through the generation of new employment opportunities and foreign exchange profits, plays a pivotal role in driving economic advancement for countries (Kala and Maikhuri, 2011). Moreover, it contributes to augmenting national incomes (Estelaji and Khoshniyat Bayati, 2012). Indeed, the tourism sector stands out as a revenue-generating strategy, bestowing substantial added value (Rezvani, 2019), and it has been heralded as a pathway to development (Reinhold, 2000). By fostering sustainable rural development across economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions, the tourism industry not only enhances employment prospects but also elevates living standards. Furthermore, it serves to counteract rural migration and mitigate the proliferation of suburbanization in urban areas. Tourism entrepreneurship introduces a diverse array of income streams for rural households, effectively addressing financial pressures. Its expansion holds the potential to engender a wide spectrum of economic activities and job opportunities within rural regions. Tourism entrepreneurship within target villages designated for tourism is a strategy aimed at empowerment and capacity building, designed to bridge the gap between urban and rural areas. Its purpose is to foster economic, social, environmental, and institutional parity, serving as a pivotal instrument for achieving sustainable development. This approach, in turn, facilitates job generation, curtails unemployment, and mitigates migration from rural to urban locales. It also facilitates the transition of surplus rural labor from the

agricultural and livestock sectors to the service sector (Bobochiaris, 2013). Consequently, the expansion of tourism entrepreneurship encourages individuals to engage in productive activities and attain economic prosperity. This, in effect, diminishes poverty, ultimately leading to the amplification of social services and a surge in investment within rural regions (Christos et al., 2014).

As a result, through the creation of new demand, tourism endeavors to generate job opportunities, augment household incomes, facilitate cross-cultural interactions, raise awareness, catalyze structural transformations, and establish the requisite infrastructure for diverse activities (Lordkipanidze et al., 2005). Within this context, it can be asserted that tourism entrepreneurship holds immense significance, operating at both macro and micro levels. On a macro scale, it functions as a global and transnational magnet for attracting tourists, while on a micro scale, it takes the form of a regional and national developmental strategy (Jamshidi and Khatounabadi, 2013).

Regrettably, despite Iran's status as one of the world's most captivating countries in terms of cultural, artistic, and environmental attractions – boasting a multitude of diverse and appealing villages – it has encountered challenges in effectively drawing tourists to rural areas (Rezaei et al., 2016). This assertion is substantiated by the scarcity of employment opportunities, accompanied by rising unemployment and poverty, which constitute central issues for these villages (Heilig and Gerhard, 2002). A significant contributing factor is the lack of an entrepreneurial mindset and the unfamiliarity of villagers with the latent potentials within rural locales. This imbalance has led to a growing divide between rural and urban development, steadily exacerbating over time. Consequently, villagers become discontented with their living and economic circumstances

within these areas (Rezaei et al., 2016).

In this context, a study by Akbari Samani et al. (2020) concluded that successful development of tourism entrepreneurship in rural regions hinges upon the collaboration of two key groups: investors (for funding and marketing) and the government (for education and awareness campaigns) within villages that possess the potential for tourism entrepreneurship. Additionally, the findings of a study by Hosseininia and Aliabadi (2021) revealed a set of factors influencing the tourism entrepreneurship ecosystem in rural parts of Iran. These factors encompass supportive socio-cultural elements, political-governance systems, market dynamics, financial-economic considerations, networking and communication, human capital, and natural and infrastructural capacities, respectively.

Meanwhile, Osooli and Valinezhad (2021) concluded, through their research, that an aggressive strategy proves most effective in cultivating rural tourism within Lorestan province. The implementation of this strategy entails several proposed measures: inclusion of Khorramabad city's villages in the roster of targeted tourism destinations, leveraging existing assets like historical monuments, local cuisine, hunting grounds, mineral deposits, and medicinal plant resources; formulation of tourism package programs for visitors; efforts to engage educated rural individuals in advancing rural tourism; establishment of startup enterprises focusing on markets for handicrafts, livestock, agricultural produce, and botanical goods from villages; and strategic planning for the execution of natural and cultural tourism initiatives.

Furthermore, in a separate study, Nazari et al. (2020) deduced that accessibility to entrepreneurship training centers, coupled with risk-taking training, the presence of a dedicated training team, instruction on business establishment and investment initiation, as well as availability of resources in entrepreneurship training centers, can

collectively contribute to the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, in an investigation by Korani (2020), the key strength propelling tourism development in the Rijab region of Kermanshah province was identified as its stunning, lush, and distinctive landscape, featuring gardens, springs, and waterfalls. Conversely, the primary weaknesses encompassed insufficient sanitary and lodging facilities, alongside inadequate welfare amenities. Additionally, a noteworthy opportunity lay in the presence of a fish hatchery. On the flip side, the most prominent threat was the substantial distance separating this region from the country's prominent tourist destinations. Consequently, the prioritized approach for the development of rural tourism in the Rijab region favored a defensive model.

The results of a study performed by Rostami and Ehsanifar (2018) showed that the factors of rural tourism development can be classified into two categories: "support groups" and "climate opportunities and suitable contexts". In this sense, "continuous and periodic monitoring of accommodations and hotels by veterinary and health organizations" in the field of climate opportunities and suitable contexts and "the positive attitude of people in accepting rural tourists" in the field of support groups can be regarded as the most important factors in entrepreneurship development in the field of tourism. Furthermore, Torkashvand (2018) has concluded that tourism entrepreneurship in the tourism village of Abbas Barzegar (Bavanat) has been able to connect with other economic sectors and activate a positive atmosphere for the rural economy. However, Farahani et al (2017), in another study, concluded that the main factor in the development of tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas, other than economic, social and organizational factors, is the environmental (natural-ecological) factor. Moreover, Hesaam et al. (2016) in a study entitled as "Assessment of tourism entrepreneurship development in rural areas (case study: villages of

Larijn) showed that the index of access to physical infrastructure, social arena and self-confidence had a high utility in the studied areas. But, the indexes of access to education, consulting and experience, skills and knowledge, capital, innovation and creativity, foresight, production, and sales and marketing of products are not in good condition. Meanwhile, [Rezaei et al. \(2016\)](#) found out that the main obstacles to the development of tourism entrepreneurship in Marvdasht are: political-governmental, infrastructural, promotional, cultural, natural and educational barriers. In addition, [Darvishi et al. \(2014\)](#) in a study concluded that aggressive strategy (maximum-maximum); including, 1. Spatial-physical training and organizing the villagers and rural areas, 2. Creating an appropriate mechanism for public and private sector investment, 3. Tourism services and employment-generating activities, 4. Contextualizing new functions to be accepted in the village, and 5. Promoting and developing the tourism culture and creating solidarity between the local community and tourists, can be regarded as a suitable strategy to achieve tourism development in Gaikan village.

Conversely, [Cotoi et al. \(2011\)](#) concluded that safeguarding entrepreneurship, protecting intellectual property, and ensuring access to adequate credit and capital stand as the most effective strategies for entrepreneurship development. [Egbe et al. \(2013\)](#) considered fostering professional skills among individuals and providing support to be the paramount approach for entrepreneurship development. Additionally, [Firoozi et al. \(2013\)](#) indicated that less than ten percent of villagers possess familiarity with entrepreneurial skills. Moreover, the findings underscored the significance of two factors, namely the level of familiarity with entrepreneurship and the establishment of entrepreneurial infrastructure, in propelling entrepreneurship development in Kharistan village. [Ghanbari et al. \(2016\)](#) determined that the subsequent

sub-criteria hold substantial weight in rural tourism entrepreneurship development: “proximity of the region to the country’s transportation routes” as a strength, “lack of an entrepreneurial culture among residents” and “official neglect” as weaknesses, “diverse income generation avenues” as opportunities, and “deterioration of historical sites” and “alteration of land use and rural landscapes” as threats. The predominant classification strategy identified for entrepreneurship development in rural tourism was the “maintenance” strategy.

Therefore, as a contemporary approach in the development of tourism-targeted villages, tourism entrepreneurship offers a solution to the economic struggles faced by villagers. Its capacity to generate employment opportunities and generate income positions it as a viable remedy through temporary and productive employment avenues, especially for women and unemployed individuals. Despite the crucial role of tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas, there exists a dearth of comprehensive studies in this field, particularly within Iran and employing a qualitative approach. As a result, due to the current circumstances, there is a shortage of well-defined strategies for the advancement of this particular type of entrepreneurship. Simultaneously, despite its considerable tourism potential encompassing crafts, agriculture, livestock, and natural assets, the city of Darshahr grapples with elevated unemployment rates. Consequently, this prompted the undertaking of the present feasibility study that employs SWOT analysis to initially delineate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with rural tourism entrepreneurship development. Subsequently, through the construction of a SWOT matrix, the study aimed to offer pertinent and pragmatic strategies for enhancing rural tourism entrepreneurship. Ultimately, using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), the study prioritized the most critical strategies for the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county.

METHODOLOGY

In terms of the research paradigm, the current study employs an exploratory-sequential mixed (qualitative-quantitative) approach. The study population comprises all key informants in the realm of entrepreneurship and rural tourism within Darh-shahr county (Ilam province). For sampling, purposive selection was utilized, followed by the application of the snowball sampling technique. After conducting 15 interviews, each lasting between 45 to 55 minutes on average, data saturation was achieved. To analyze the collected data, directed content analysis was employed. This method aids in establishing the initial coding framework and interrelations between codes, indicative of a deductive categorization approach (Mayring, 2005). Considering our goal of identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in tourism entrepreneurship development within rural areas through the SWOT technique, directed content analysis proved suitable.

Within qualitative research, concepts like credibility, confirmability, and transferability are utilized to encapsulate diverse facets of trustworthiness (Iman and Noshadi, 2012). In the current study, the credibility of results was bolstered through various means: member controls, diverse researchers engaged in data collection and analysis, and self-assessment by the researcher.

To ensure the confirmability of the findings, all recorded notes, documents, and interviews were scrutinized by the researcher and then shared with other researchers to validate the correspondence between the raw data and the derived outcomes. To assess the transferability of the findings, the researcher meticulously detailed the research conditions.

Data analysis involved the utilization of the SWOT technique for the qualitative aspect, and the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) for the quantitative component. Within the qualitative framework, the SWOT analysis delineated both internal factors (strengths

and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) influencing the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural regions of Darreh-Shahr. Following the formulation of the SWOT matrix and the identification of tourism entrepreneurship development strategies for the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county, a paired comparison questionnaire was developed. Respondents were tasked with assigning importance and priority to strategies based on internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) on a 9-point scale. In the subsequent stage, SPSS25 software was employed to calculate the geometric mean of these strategies in relation to each other. Expert Choice11 software was then utilized to assign weights and establish priorities. After inputting the geometric mean scores of rural tourism entrepreneurship development strategies in Darreh-Shahr county into the Expert Choice software, the weighted average for each strategy was computed. Ultimately, the weighted average scores were employed to prioritize the strategies for tourism entrepreneurship development in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county, thereby facilitating the selection of the most optimal strategies.

RESULTS

Through the analysis of the content derived from interviews, a total of 45 concepts (codes) were identified, comprising seven strengths, 19 weaknesses, 10 opportunities, and nine threats. Broadly speaking, this analysis yielded 26 codes (concepts) categorized as internal factors (strengths and weaknesses), and 19 codes (concepts) as external factors (opportunities and threats). To assess the internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) concerning the development of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county, the focus was on prioritizing these aspects (as presented in Table 1). This prioritization was achieved through the application of calculated

coefficients, which were established based on insights from rural entrepreneurship and tourism experts. Subsequently, a spider web chart was constructed to visually elucidate the foremost priorities among the internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) (Figure 1).

Based on the findings presented in Table 1 and depicted in Spider Web Chart 1, it is evident that certain factors hold considerable significance for the development of tourism

entrepreneurship in the rural regions of Darreh-Shahr County. These factors include the presence of numerous ancient, historical, and natural landmarks within the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr County, the prevailing hospitality and warm reception extended by the local populace to tourists, the coexistence of diverse nomadic communities and tribes with distinct traditions and customs in the region, the historical, cultural, and religious value associated with the area, as well as the

Table 1
Summary of Internal Environment Assessment Results (Strengths and Weaknesses)

Raw	Strengths	Normal coefficient
S1	Existence of many ancient, historical and natural monuments in rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county	0.051
S2	hospitality and tourist acceptance among the people of the region	0.045
S3	Existence of different nomadic communities and tribes with different traditions and customs in the region	0.043
S4	Existence of local and traditional products to offer to tourists in the region	0.040
S5	The diversity of geographical and natural environment and the existence of pristine and untouched areas in the region	0.029
S6	Historical, cultural and religious value and prestige of the region	0.041
S7	Interpersonal relationship and strong kinship ties among the people of the region	0.014
-	Sum of normal coefficients of strengths	0.263
Raw	Weaknesses	Normal coefficient
W1	Lack of information regarding the potentials and capabilities of tourism entrepreneurship in the region	0.044
W2	Lack of credits and financial support for the development of tourism entrepreneurship in Darh-shahr county	0.045
W3	Lack of man-made attractions (parks and recreational places) in Darreh-Shahr county	0.039
W4	Lack of entrepreneurial thinking style among the people of Darreh-Shahr	0.011
W5	Overlooking the use of potential local investors to develop tourism entrepreneurship in the region	0.040
W6	Inadequate health and welfare infrastructure in Darreh-Shahr county	0.035
W7	Lack of suitable markets to introduce and sell local products and handicrafts of the region	0.029
W8	Lack of appropriate services and amenities, preferably based on local products of the region	0.018
W9	Lack of cooperation among the people of the region	0.010
W10	Low quality level of services and skills of employees working in tourism centers	0.024
W11	Lack of planning and policies for the development of rural tourism entrepreneurship	0.032
W12	Weak communication and transportation routes in rural and nomadic areas of the region	0.027
W13	Lack of cooperation of various organizations related to the development of tourism entrepreneurship in the region	0.019
W14	unknown entrepreneurship capabilities in the rural areas of the region	0.022
W15	Lack or weakness of tourist guidance and counseling services in the area	0.018
W16	Neglecting and ignoring traditional and cultural ceremonies and customs in the region	0.030
W17	The negligence of the officials and the people to preserve the natural and ancient attractions of Darreh-Shahr county	0.036
W18	Lack of education of local people on how to deal with tourists and methods of attracting them	0.025
W19	Lack of specialized personnel in the fields related to entrepreneurship and rural tourism	0.030
-	Sum of normal coefficients of weaknesses	0.534

availability of indigenous and traditional products to offer to tourists.

Furthermore, drawing from the outcomes displayed in [Table 1](#) and Spider Web Chart 1, it becomes evident that specific factors stand out as noteworthy weaknesses impeding the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural zones of Darreh-Shahr County. These factors encompass the absence of financial backing and credit support for the expansion of tourism entrepreneurship within Darh-shahr County, inadequate awareness regarding the potential and capabilities of tourism entrepreneurship in the region, neglecting the utilization of local investors with promising potential for developing tourism entrepreneurship, scarcity of man-made attractions (such as parks and recreational facilities) within Darreh-Shahr County, and insufficient health and welfare infrastructure within the city. In terms of analyzing the external factors (opportunities and threats) associated with tourism entrepreneurship development in rural areas of Darreh-Shahr County, the calculated normalized coefficients, which draw from the perspectives of experts specialized in rural entrepreneurship and tourism, were utilized for prioritizing opportunities and threats (as shown in [Table 2](#)). Following this, a spider web chart was generated to provide visual clarity on the principal priorities among the external factors (opportunities and threats) (refer to [Figure 1](#)).

Drawing from the findings outlined in [Table 2](#) and visually depicted in Spider Web Chart 1, it becomes apparent that certain factors hold significant potential for fostering the development of tourism entrepreneurship within the rural sectors of Darreh-Shahr County. These factors encompass governmental financial incentives and provision of long-term loans for private sector investments, the unregulated urban sprawl and escalating environmental pollution in urban areas, the proximity to other tourist destinations (such as

Kermanshah, Lorestan, etc.), the feasibility of utilizing national and provincial credits to enhance and advance the tourism industry, and the mounting emphasis on holidays within families and various social strata across the country.

Conversely, derived from the conclusions presented in [Table 2](#) and Spider Web Chart 1, it is observable that specific factors pose substantial challenges to the growth of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural domains of Darreh-Shahr County. These factors entail the absence or restrictions on tourism service providers for rural and nomadic areas of the region, the lack of structured and coordinated tourism programs and tours in surrounding cities and provinces, visitors' negligence in safeguarding the natural and human environment, governmental policies that overlook rural tourism entrepreneurship within the region, and the ineffectual and uneven distribution of tourist influx to the area across the year.

To ascertain the strategic landscape of internal and external factors influencing tourism entrepreneurship development in the rural regions of Darreh-Shahr County, a spider web chart was employed ([Figure 2](#)). This chart serves to delineate the significance and placement of internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) as well as external factors (opportunities and threats) in the identification of suitable strategies.

In accordance with Spider Web Chart 2, it becomes apparent that weaknesses take precedence, followed by strengths and opportunities, in the formulation of strategies for the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural domains of Darreh-Shahr county. Consequently, a significant focus has been directed towards these aspects to develop pertinent strategies for the region's tourism entrepreneurship growth. To this effect, a SWOT matrix—a synthesis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—was established to identify suitable strategies for the

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Table 2

Summary of the External Environment Assessment Results (Opportunities and Threats)

Raw	Opportunities	Normal Coefficient
O1	Existence of low-interest facilities for the development of rural tourism entrepreneurship	0.015
O2	The possibility to use national and provincial credits to promote and improve the tourism industry	0.018
O3	Proximity to other tourist areas (such as Kermanshah, Lorestan, etc.)	0.019
O4	Government financial incentives and long-term loans for private sector investment	0.015
O5	Existence of strong urban-rural and nomadic ties in the country	0.013
O6	Increasing the importance of holidays among families and different social classes of the country	0.018
O7	Interest in traveling and spending time in nature and rural places in Iranian society	0.016
O8	Willingness to travel to villages and nomadic areas to meet relatives, acquaintances and friends	0.014
O9	The uncontrolled expansion of cities and the intensification of environmental pollution in the urban area	0.021
O10	Increased desire to use nature for relaxation and rest	0.017
-	The sum of the normal coefficients of opportunities	0.218
Raw	Threats	Normal Coefficient
T1	Lack of allocation of significant tourism budgets to Darreh-Shahr county	0.010
T2	Regular and coherent tourism programs and tours in the surrounding cities and provinces	0.024
T3	Government policies overlooking the rural tourism entrepreneurship in the region	0.019
T4	The disappearance of indigenous cultures and socio-cultural problems due to the presence of tourists	0.012
T5	Irresponsibility of visitors in protecting the natural and human environment	0.022
T6	Lack or limitations of tourism service providers to visit rural and nomadic areas of the region	0.024
T7	Extensive land-use change of agricultural lands and gardens to residential and industrial use in the region	0.013
T8	Destruction of historical sites, natural environment and animal and plant life in the region	0.014
T9	Improper and irregular distribution of tourist arrivals to the region throughout the year	0.017
-	Sum of normal coefficients of threats	0.155

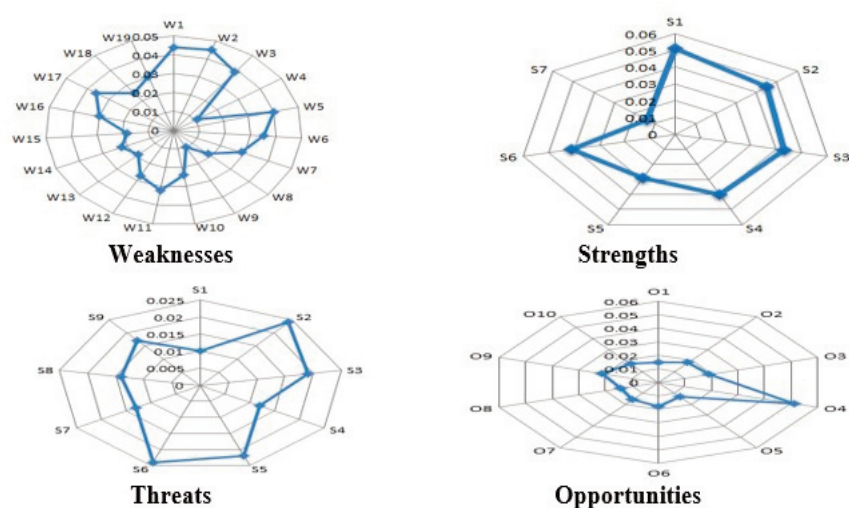


Figure 1. Spider Web Chart of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of Rural Tourism Entrepreneurship

enhancement of tourism entrepreneurship in Darreh-Shahr county's rural sectors.

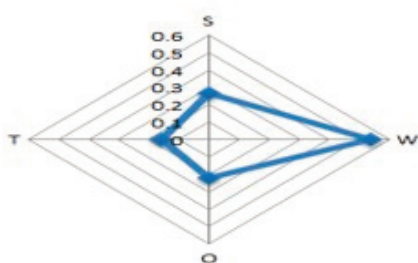


Figure 2. Strategic Space Analysis of Internal and External Factors

This matrix gives rise to four distinct types of strategies:

Aggressive strategies (SO): Utilizing strengths to exploit external opportunities. **Conservative strategies (WO):** Mitigating internal weaknesses or harnessing overlooked strengths to capitalize on opportunities. **Competitive strategies (ST):** Leveraging internal strengths to mitigate external threats. **Defensive strategies (WT):** Addressing internal weaknesses to avert external threats. Subsequently, building upon the aforementioned considerations, the foremost strategies essential for the progression of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural zones of Darreh-Shahr county are elucidated, categorized by internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) (as outlined in Table 3).

Based on the findings presented in Table 3, it is evident that four distinct strategic categories have been proposed for fostering tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county. These categories encompass three aggressive strategies (SO), three conservative strategies (WO), two competitive strategies (ST), and two defensive strategies (WT).

While the primary objective of this study is to devise effective strategies for enhancing tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county, practical constraints such as financial limitations, time

restrictions, and internal and external environmental factors rendered the implementation of all proposed strategies infeasible. Consequently, to prioritize and select the optimal approach, the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) was employed. The outcomes pertaining to the assessment of the relative significance of each identified strategy for the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county are graphically depicted in Figure 3. Furthermore, a succinct overview of the prioritization results, as determined through weighted averaging, is provided in Table 4. Significantly, the observed incompatibility rate within this study was 0.07, markedly below the standard threshold of 0.1. This outcome underscores the coherence of judgments within the paired comparison matrix, affirming the alignment and consistency of results.

Based on the findings presented in Figure 3 and Table 4, it is evident that the following strategies hold significant importance for the development of rural tourism entrepreneurship in Darreh-Shahr county, as per the assessment of experts in the field of entrepreneurship and tourism. These strategies include holding traditional exhibitions, markets, and bazaars to showcase goods and services produced by villagers and nomads (average weight of 0.248), providing low-interest, long-term loans to enhance necessary infrastructure for rural tourism development (average weight of 0.218), and fostering collaboration with local investors to establish man-made attractions like parks and recreational spaces in the county (average weight of 0.181).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the research findings, numerous strengths have been identified for the development of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county. These strengths include the presence of a multitude of ancient, historical, and natural monuments, a strong culture of hospitality

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Table 3

SWOT Matrix to Determine Tourism Entrepreneurship Development Strategies

	Weaknesses	Strengths
	W1. Lack of information regarding the potentials and capabilities of tourism entrepreneurship in the region	S1. Existence of many ancient, historical and natural monuments in rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county
	W2. Lack of credits and financial support for the development of tourism entrepreneurship in Darh-shahr county	S2. hospitality and tourist acceptance among the people of the region
	W3. Lack of man-made attractions (parks and recreational places) in Darreh-Shahr county	S3. Existence of different nomadic communities and tribes with different traditions and customs in the region
	W4. Lack of entrepreneurial thinking style among the people of Darreh-Shahr	S4. Existence of local and traditional products to offer to tourists in the region
	W5. Overlooking the use of potential local investors to develop tourism entrepreneurship in the region	S5. The diversity of geographical and natural environment and the existence of pristine and untouched areas in the region
Opportunities	Conservative strategies (WO)	Aggressive strategy (SO)
O1. Existence of low-interest facilities for the development of rural tourism entrepreneurship	WO1. Granting low-interest and long-term loans to improve the infrastructure required for the development of rural tourism entrepreneurship in the county of Darreh-Shahr WO2. Designing and compiling websites, brochures and advertising teasers in order to attract domestic and foreign tourists in Darreh-Shahr county WO3. Attracting the cooperation of local investors in order to develop man-made attractions (parks and recreational places) in Darreh-Shahr county	SO1. Granting low-interest and long-term loans for the restoration and conservation of ancient, historical and natural monuments of Darreh-Shahr county SO2. Holding traditional exhibitions, markets and bazaars in order to provide goods and services produced by villagers and nomads in the county of Darreh-Shahr SO3. Educating and training local people, villagers and nomads of Darreh-Shahr county in order to attract tourists and develop rural tourism entrepreneurship
O2. The possibility to use national and provincial credits to promote and improve the tourism industry		
O3. Proximity to other tourist areas (such as Kermanshah, Lorestan, etc.)		
O4. Government financial incentives and long-term loans for private sector investment		
O5. Existence of strong urban-rural and nomadic ties in the country		
Threats	Defensive strategies (WT)	Competitive strategies (ST)
T1. Lack of allocation of significant tourism budgets to Darreh-Shahr county	WT1. Encouraging local and private investors to launch regular and cohesive tours and tourism services in Darreh-Shahr WT2. Constructing indoor recreational places (water parks, amusement parks, shopping malls, etc.) in order to attract tourists to Darreh-Shahr county throughout the year	ST1. Establishing travel agencies in order to provide services to domestic and foreign tourists to visit the ancient, historical and natural monuments of Darreh-Shahr county ST2. Providing suitable charter services by travel agencies in cold seasons and non-holidays in order to attract tourists all year round in the county of Darreh-Shahr
T2. Regular and coherent tourism programs and tours in the surrounding cities and provinces		
T3. Government policies overlooking the rural tourism entrepreneurship in the region		
T4. The disappearance of indigenous cultures and socio-cultural problems due to the presence of tourists		
T5. Irresponsibility of visitors in protecting the natural and human environment		

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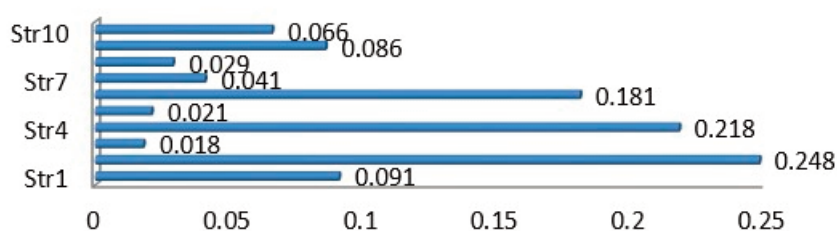


Figure 3. Relative Importance of Strategies for Tourism Entrepreneurship Development

Table 4

Prioritization of Tourism Entrepreneurship Development Strategies

Strategies	Weighted average	Priority
Providing low-interest, long-term loans for the restoration and conservation of ancient, historical, and natural monuments in Darreh-Shahr county.	0.091	4
Organizing traditional exhibitions, markets, and bazaars to showcase and offer goods and services crafted by villagers and nomads in the county of Darreh-Shahr.	0.248	1
Educating and training local residents, villagers, and nomads in Darreh-Shahr county to attract tourists and foster entrepreneurship in rural tourism.	0.018	10
Providing low-interest, long-term loans to enhance the necessary infrastructure for the advancement of rural tourism entrepreneurship in the county of Darreh-Shahr.	0.218	2
Creating and designing websites, brochures, and promotional teasers to attract both domestic and international tourists to Darreh-Shahr county.	0.021	9
Engaging the collaboration of local investors to enhance man-made attractions such as parks and recreational areas in Darreh-Shahr county.	0.181	3
Setting up travel agencies to offer services to domestic and international tourists, enabling them to explore the ancient, historical, and natural landmarks of Darreh-Shahr county.	0.041	7
Offering appropriate charter services through travel agencies during colder seasons and non-holiday periods to attract tourists year-round in the county of Darreh-Shahr.	0.029	8
Motivating local and private investors to initiate consistent and integrated tours and tourism services in Darreh-Shahr.	0.086	5
Building indoor recreational facilities such as water parks, amusement parks, and shopping malls to draw tourists to Darreh-Shahr county year-round.	0.066	6

and tourist receptiveness among the local population, diverse nomadic communities with distinct traditions and customs, the historical, cultural, and religious significance and prestige of the region, as well as the availability of local and traditional products for tourists. These factors underscore the importance of Darreh-Shahr county's rich heritage, historical and natural landmarks,

handicrafts, and socio-cultural elements in driving rural tourism entrepreneurship. These findings resonate with the conclusions drawn in prior studies (Lordkipanidze, 2002; Pourjafar et al., 2012; Karimi, 2015), which also highlighted the significance of antiquities and socio-cultural attributes as strengths in rural tourism development. Indeed, beyond its natural and historical

attractions, the indigenous culture and local traditions stand out as pivotal attractions that annually draw a multitude of tourists to this specific area.

Furthermore, the study's outcomes revealed several prominent weaknesses in the development of tourism entrepreneurship in Darreh-Shahr county's rural areas. These weaknesses encompass the lack of access to credits and financial backing for tourism entrepreneurship advancement, limited awareness concerning the region's tourism potential and capabilities, underutilization of local investors for fostering tourism entrepreneurship, the absence of man-made attractions like parks and recreational facilities within Darreh-Shahr county, and insufficient health and welfare infrastructure.

In essence, the most critical weaknesses in the realm of tourism entrepreneurship development in Darreh-Shahr county are associated with educational and promotional aspects, investment support, and infrastructure provisions. It is imperative that various officials involved in tourism entrepreneurship development in rural areas prioritize these factors. Despite the plethora of attractions in the area, inadequate amenities and infrastructure can dissuade tourists from visiting or prolonging their stay. In certain instances, the lack of pertinent information prevents tourists from being aware of the diverse attractions present in Darreh-Shahr county, thus acting as a substantial barrier to the region's tourism entrepreneurship advancement.

Consequently, addressing this matter warrants the attention of authorities. These findings align with the conclusions drawn in previous studies (Markley, 2002; Chambers & Shaw, 2004; Rezaei et al., 2016; Rokneddin Eftekhari et al., 2018) where in factors such as financial support, infrastructure, and educational promotion have been identified as weaknesses impeding the progress of rural tourism entrepreneurship development.

The study's findings highlight various key

opportunities for the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county. These opportunities encompass government incentives and the provision of long-term loans to stimulate private sector investment, the ongoing urban expansion and subsequent rise in environmental pollution within urban areas, the strategic proximity to other popular tourist destinations (such as Kermanshah and Lorestan), the potential utilization of national and provincial funding for the enhancement of rural tourism entrepreneurship, and the growing significance of holidays among families and diverse social strata within the country. Indeed, the outcomes underscore that the government's supportive policies are oriented towards fostering entrepreneurship and self-employment in rural regions. Respondents viewed these fiscal and supportive policies as favorable opportunities to bolster tourism entrepreneurship development in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county. Furthermore, the congestion and pollution prevalent in cities have driven urban residents to seek refuge in rural areas during holidays or even post-retirement for residence, thereby generating ample prospects for the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship in these rural domains. These findings resonate with a study conducted by Rokneddin Eftekhari et al. (2018), which identified the presence of effective banking networks, access to low-interest loans, ample credits, and subsidies as pivotal opportunities for rural entrepreneurship development.

The study's findings elucidate several significant threats to the development of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county. These threats encompass the lack of structured and consistent tourism programs and tours within neighboring cities and provinces, the scarcity or limitations of tourism service providers catering to rural and nomadic regions, visitors' negligence in safeguarding

the natural and human environment, governmental policies that overlook rural tourism entrepreneurship, and the uneven and irregular distribution of tourist influx to the region across the year. In essence, the outcomes of this section underscore that, according to the participants in the study, tourism travel agencies in other cities and provinces have been more successful in attracting tourists. This phenomenon, in turn, constrains the growth of tourism entrepreneurship activities in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county. Furthermore, the disregard shown by some tourists towards the preservation of the natural and cultural surroundings has generated reluctance among the local populace to engage in rural tourism entrepreneurship initiatives. Lastly, it's important to note that the absence of specific policies tailored for the development of tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas, coupled with a dearth of man-made attractions leading to tourists' inability to visit the county year-round, emerges as a primary threat to the tourism entrepreneurship sector's advancement. These findings are congruent with the conclusions drawn in the following studies (Zarafshani et al., 2013; Ebrahimi Koohbone and Izad, 2014; Rezaei et al., 2016). In alignment with these studies, the results indicate that factors like alterations in local business environments, the emergence of societal abnormalities, and the degradation of cultural and environmental aspects in rural areas can be identified as prominent threats to the growth of tourism entrepreneurship in these regions.

The results of the Analytic Hierarchy Process have revealed that the following strategies hold particular significance for the development of tourism entrepreneurship in the rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county: holding traditional exhibitions, markets, and bazaars to showcase products and services by villagers and nomads; offering low-interest, long-term loans to enhance the necessary infrastructure for rural tourism

entrepreneurship; and fostering collaboration with local investors to establish man-made attractions like parks and recreational spaces in Darreh-Shahr county. These strategies closely align with the aggressive and conservative strategies highlighted in the SWOT matrix. This alignment underscores the pivotal role of the identified opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses in propelling the advancement of tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county. These results were also obtained when mapping out the strategic landscape of internal and external factors impacting the development of tourism entrepreneurship in the county's rural domains. Notably, weaknesses, strengths, and opportunities emerged as the primary determinants in shaping the strategies for the progress of tourism entrepreneurship in rural areas of Darreh-Shahr county. This finding resonates with the conclusions drawn in the following studies (Darvishi et al., 2014; Cotoi et al., 2011), wherein strategies targeting the collaboration of public and private investments and emphasizing indigenous products and services were recommended.

In general, based on the findings of this study, the following practical recommendations are proposed to facilitate the process of tourism entrepreneurship development in Darreh-Shahr:

- Organize traditional exhibitions, markets, and bazaars to showcase products and services created by villagers and nomads in Darreh-Shahr county.
- Provide education and training for local residents, villagers, and nomads to attract tourists and foster the growth of rural tourism entrepreneurship.
- Foster collaboration with local investors to establish man-made attractions such as parks and recreational areas in Darreh-Shahr county.
- Establish travel agencies to offer services to both domestic and foreign tourists, enabling them to explore the ancient,

historical, and natural landmarks of Darreh-Shahr county.

- Construct indoor recreational facilities such as water parks, amusement parks, and shopping malls to attract tourists to Darreh-Shahr county year-round.
- Organize start-up events to identify and support ideas and opportunities for launching tourism-related businesses in Darreh-Shahr.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

N. shiri and S. Seymohamadi contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

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