Creating an International Place Brand through Recreational Sports (Case Study: Kish Island)

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Article Info

Abstract

Background: The purpose of this research was to analyze the factors influencing the creation of an international place brand through recreational sports (the case of Kish Island).

Martials and Methods: The research method is qualitative (Grounded Theory of Glaser type). The statistical population included all managers and experts active in the field of recreational sports. A sufficient number of statistical samples were selected based on theoretical saturation in a purposeful and accessible manner (16 people). Research tools included systematic library study and semi-structured interview. Using content validity and kappa coefficient, the validity of the tool was evaluated. The method of coding and conceptual framing was used to analyze the findings.

Results: The presented analytical framework included three main parts of environmental factors, processes and consequences of creating an international place brand through recreational sports. Environmental factors included branding opportunities and location branding obstacles. The processes of creating the international brand of Kish Island included the infrastructure required for branding, providing new services, management factors, and the consequences of international branding of the place included entrepreneurship, improvement of social conditions, economic development and attachment to the place.

Conclusion: According to the results of the research, it can be said that the relevant authorities should understand the value of the dimensions identified in this research in order to create an international brand in touristic destinations (especially Kish Island) and implement related programs in this. Places to upgrade. Finally, from the researchers' point of view, it can be said that the present study is of great importance for Iranian managers and is a fundamental step for the development of recreational sports in creating the international brand of touristic places.

Keywords: Sports marketing, Sports tourism, Branding, Sports services, Beach sports

1. Introduction

Today, branding has emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing businesses, organizations, professions, and other entities (1). In the tourism industry, attention to branding has also recently become prominent. It can be argued that a crucial factor in tourists' decision-making process is destination branding (2). In fact, destination branding enables tourists to gather information, identify and establish the identity of a destination, and become familiar with it before traveling [Rajabi, 2016 #138]. Moreover, destination branding distinguishes a brand from its competitors and shapes tourists' expectations for their upcoming trips. Destination branding refers to the name, symbol, logo, phrase, or other graphic forms that identify and differentiate a destination, promising a memorable journey with unique and enjoyable experiences (3). Additionally, destination branding serves as a means to reinforce and strengthen joyful memories of the destination (4). According to Hassan, Hamid (5) model, destination branding can be categorized into three dimensions: historical, cultural, and natural. Successful examples from the tourism industry worldwide have shown that a complex structure of culture, history, and nature can create a unique characteristic in destination branding, facilitating tourism development and marketing efforts.

Tourism and branding are recognized as two key elements in the economic and cultural development of societies (Piras & Pedes, 2025).

Tourism, as a global industry, not only provides a source of income for countries and various regions but also serves as an opportunity for cultural exchange and increasing people's awareness of other cultures and lifestyles. In this regard, place branding, especially in tourist destinations, acts as a powerful tool for attracting tourists and strengthening the cultural identity of that location. Place branding, by showcasing the unique features of an area such as its history, culture, natural attractions, and existing infrastructure, can elevate its position in the global tourism market. This process helps introduce and promote the values and opportunities available in a tourist destination and contributes to the sustainable development of this industry in the long term (Moliterni, Zulauf & Wagner, 2025).

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing economic sectors. Nowadays, tourism is recognized as a significant force in international change and development (6) and is seen as a solution for struggling economies, being the world's largest industry in terms of employment and domestic production and the fastest-growing industry in terms of economic growth (7). Higham and Hinch (8) emphasized that the success of the global tourism industry depends entirely on the capabilities of tourist destinations to some extent, where they must be unique and distinctive in competition with other destinations. Yates (9), as the planner of the Sports Tourism Association of Canada, in the model of planning and practical design for the

development of sports tourism at the congress of this association in 2006, identified, estimated, and developed the capabilities and capacities of sports tourism as one of the four stages of the development of sports tourism in Canada, claiming that this model is comprehensive and global and can be used in any region provided that the budget is available. In today's world, countries select their distinguishing characteristics and position themselves based on a unique identity grounded in tangible and intangible factors. These characteristics can be related to national identity intertwined with a sense of place.

Local identity influences strategic communication policies and enables a nation to create a sense of place and foster a strong emotional connection among individuals who share that place. This is where the significant role of networks in implementing and coordinating efforts in communicating this matter at national and international levels, as well as in private and governmental sectors, becomes apparent. The implementation of innovative technologies and well-designed advertising campaigns targeting specific psychosocial groups with cognitive population characteristics can lead to destination branding [Shahhosseini, 2023 #137]. This is a continuous process involving individuals associated with such communication practices, residents, internal and external stakeholders, collaboration between governmental and private sectors, and visitors, regardless of historical background.

Attention needs to be paid, especially towards creating brand identities while considering economic, social, and geopolitical issues [Shahhosseini, 2023 #137]. Political situation, environmental factors, international political environment, and the economic and political situation of a country are significant, determining the policies employed for the promotion and advancement of a region. Economic, political, social, and psychological parameters assist in presenting the identity of a place because these places need to distinguish themselves from others and demonstrate their unique and distinctive characteristics (10).

The research problem was elucidated by examining previous studies that investigated various aspects of destination branding. Some of these studies explored and identified factors influencing the branding of Mashhad as a sports destination (11), presented a model for place branding focusing on large recreational, sports, and tourism projects (12), examined the special value of Iran's sports tourism destination brand and its influencing factors from the perspective of sports tourists (13), explored the effects of destination branding on the development of sports tourism with the mediating role of economic infrastructures in southern provinces of Iran (14), examined the role of experiential values in sports tourism destination branding (15), explored the role of destination familiarity in branding Iran as a sports tourism destination (16), and focused on participatory city branding through sports and recreational physical

activities based on community (17). Additionally, Chen (18) studied the interaction between coastal economic regions and the construction of ecological sports tourism, showing that coastal sports tourism projects rely on integrated planning of both marine and terrestrial areas.

This study, titled is essential because place branding, especially in the fields of tourism and recreational sports, has gained significant importance in today's world. Given the intense competition between various tourist destinations, creating a unique brand for each place can play a crucial role in attracting tourists and boosting the local economy. While many studies have focused on place branding in commercial, cultural, or historical contexts, the use of recreational sports as a tool for place branding has received less attention. This study helps fill the gaps in the existing literature by exploring how recreational sports can be used as an important tool in building international place brands, specifically in Kish Island, a popular tourist destination.

Place Identity Theory plays a significant role in the process of place branding. This theory is based on concepts from social identity and social psychology, focusing on the relationship between individuals and places. Place identity is defined as the set of characteristics, symbols, and experiences that distinguish a place from others. In the branding process, place identity plays a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions of a place. Specifically, in tourist destinations like Kish Island, creating a unique place identity can help attract more tourists. In this context, recreational sports serve as an important tool to enhance the place identity. For example, sports like swimming, water skiing, or diving can give Kish Island a distinctive identity and set it apart from other tourist destinations. These activities not only create unforgettable experiences for tourists but also help them build a deeper connection with the place and feel a greater sense of belonging. Therefore, using recreational sports for place branding on Kish Island can be highly effective, particularly in strengthening its identity. Overall, this process can help elevate the island's position internationally, leading to the growth of the tourism industry and economic prosperity (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Stakeholder Theory is another key theory in place branding, particularly in areas like management and branding strategies. According to this theory, the place branding process should consider the needs and expectations of all the various stakeholders involved. These stakeholders may include local residents, government officials, investors, businesses, and even tourists. On Kish Island, each of these groups plays a significant role in shaping and strengthening the place brand. For example, local residents can create a positive experience for visitors by providing quality services and hospitality, while local authorities can contribute to attracting more tourists through proper planning and supportive policies for the tourism

industry. In this context, recreational sports can serve as a key factor in fostering interaction among these different stakeholders. In addition to attracting tourists, recreational sports can create new opportunities for investors and local businesses. Therefore, applying Stakeholder Theory to the place branding process of Kish Island is of particular importance, as it helps identify the needs of various stakeholder groups and incorporate them into branding strategies. As a result, utilizing this theory can significantly enhance the brand of Kish Island on an international level (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

In addition to providing new models for using recreational sports in place branding, this research also contributes to the development of quantitative research in this field. While most place branding studies, particularly in Iran, have been conducted qualitatively, this study offers a more precise assessment of the impact of recreational sports on place branding through quantitative methods. The case study of Kish Island, with its unique features as a tourist destination, can provide valuable insights for other global destinations on how to leverage recreational sports in place branding. Furthermore, the study identifies the benefits and challenges of creating an international brand through recreational sports, which can help improve place branding strategies worldwide.

The conclusion drawn from the review of past research on the establishment of international place branding through recreational sports indicates that there has been limited quantitative research in this area. Hence, the present research was conducted to advance previous research and address the research gap in international place branding. Although some tourist destinations, albeit not primarily sports-related, have undertaken initiatives in this regard, unfortunately, our country lacks a reputable and well-known brand at a macro level for branding tourist-friendly destinations. On the other hand, nowadays, sports and tourism have become significant economic activities in the developed and developing world, garnering increasing attention as a domestic market and being identified as a factor in the economic and social revitalization of urban and rural communities. Considering that a society moving towards development requires spaces for leisure and rejuvenation, tourism and travel through sports are the best forms of recreation for this purpose. Tourist destinations should be organized and structured in a way that attracts sports tourists while also contributing to the creation of international destination brands. Additionally, one of the crucial factors that should be considered in studies and development planning of any concept or system is regional potential. The regional potential of Kish Island regarding the establishment of an international brand has not yet been comprehensively and systematically studied.

Given that this island is considered one of the most important tourist destinations in Iran and has unique characteristics that make it an ideal location for studying the process of place

branding, Kish Island, with its advanced tourism infrastructure, beautiful beaches, and diverse recreational and sports facilities, has high potential to become an international brand. Additionally, due to its geographical location and unique economic and social conditions, Kish Island offers special attractions for both domestic and foreign tourists. Therefore, examining how recreational sports can be used to create an international brand for this island can serve as a suitable model for other tourist destinations around the world.

The specific challenges that Kish faces in international branding include intense competition with other tourist destinations in the region and worldwide, a lack of global recognition for the Kish brand, and advertising limitations at the international level. Although Kish has many attractions for tourists, it has yet to establish a strong and globally recognized brand. Using recreational sports could be an effective solution to overcome these challenges, as these sports can provide unique and appealing experiences for tourists and help introduce the Kish brand internationally. Therefore, studying how to leverage recreational sports in the branding process of this island can help identify existing challenges and propose strategies to improve its branding.

The stakeholders involved in the process of creating Kish Island's international brand through recreational sports include groups and individuals who are directly or indirectly impacted by or play a role in this process. These stakeholders include domestic and international tourists as the primary users of the recreational experience, tourism officials and managers in Kish, investors and entrepreneurs active in various tourism sectors, the local community benefiting from economic and social growth, sports centers and organizers of recreational events, travel agencies and tour operators, the government and national policymakers providing legal and infrastructural support, and both domestic and international media involved in promoting and advertising the Kish brand. Coordination and collaboration among these stakeholders can significantly influence the success of the branding process and create shared benefits for all parties involved.

Describing the status and delineating the ecosystem of recreational sports on Kish Island serves as the initial step towards a comprehensive and holistic approach to its development. In addition to these sources, various capabilities and opportunities that can lead to the development and branding of Kish Island through recreational sports need to be identified and examined. Therefore, it can be said that if recreational sports infrastructures can be developed in coastal areas of Kish Island to provide a good experience for customers, we may witness their increased presence in these areas. Therefore, providing positive and memorable experiences for tourists in the competitive market of recreational sports on Kish Island is essential. Based on this, the aim of

the present research is to answer the following question:

What are the dimensions and indicators of establishing an international brand on Kish Island through recreational sports?

2. Methods and Materials

The methodology of this qualitative research was Grounded Theory (Glaser). Initially, primary questions were extracted through a review of the existing literature. These questions were slightly modified for contextualization. Subsequently, the research instrument (semi-structured interview questions and open-ended questions) was developed. Four questions for use in semi-structured interviews were extracted through a review of previous literature. Necessary modifications to the questions were made by the researchers. The questions used in the semi-structured interviews mostly revolved around the dimensions of destination branding, especially on Kish Island, such as urban infrastructures and environmental potentials for recreational sports. Other questions focused on whether Kish Island has the potential to create job opportunities and develop recreational sports. The statistical population of this research includes individuals who are somehow related to the topic of place branding and recreational sports in Kish Island or similar tourist destinations. These individuals include domestic tourists who have experience with recreational sports in Kish, managers and officials of tourist destinations, investors and entrepreneurs active

in the fields of tourism and sports, experts and researchers in the areas of tourism and branding, as well as managers and stakeholders in the recreational sports industry.

The criteria for participation in this research include individuals who are somehow involved with the topic of place branding and recreational sports on Kish Island or similar tourist destinations. These individuals include domestic tourists with experience in recreational sports in Kish (at least 4 years of experience), managers and officials of tourist destinations (at least 4 years of experience), investors and entrepreneurs active in the tourism and sports sectors (at least 4 years of experience), experts and researchers in the fields of tourism and branding (at least 4 years of experience), as well as managers and professionals in the recreational sports industry (at least 4 years of experience). These individuals must have the necessary experience or knowledge in place branding and recreational sports and be willing to participate in the research and provide relevant information related to the research topic.

In this research, various criteria (individuals specialized in sports marketing, branding, and recreational sports management) were determined for selecting participants. Therefore, purposive sampling was used to obtain rich information by selecting participants. The research team examined the backgrounds of managers and active members. Then, contact was made with these individuals, and subsequently, interviews were conducted with

these experts and specialists until theoretical saturation was achieved (16 participants).

To enhance the credibility of the research, various methods have been used. In this study, participants with sufficient experience and knowledge in the field of place branding and recreational sports in Kish Island and similar tourist destinations were selected to improve the accuracy and validity of the data. In the second phase, interviews were conducted with individuals who have direct experience in these areas to gather more accurate and reliable information. Additionally, methods such as peer review and repeated feedback from researchers and experts were utilized to validate and refine the findings. To ensure the dependability of the research, all stages of the study have been carefully documented, and the processes and methods have been transparently explained. The use of credible data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews, long-term observations, and repeated data analysis ensures that the results are consistently and reliably obtained. If this study were to be replicated under similar conditions with similar methods, there is a high probability of achieving similar and stable results. The demographic information of the participants is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Research Participants

Education	Club Experience	Job Title	Age	Interviewees
MSc	9	Sports and Recreational Facilities Management	39	P1
MSc	5	Sports and Recreational Facilities Expert	47	P2
MSc	8	Sports and Recreational Facilities Expert	56	P3
MSc	7	Sports and Recreational Facilities Management	53	P4
Ph.D	9	Sports Marketing Professor	43	P5
Ph.D	11	Sports Marketing Professor	49	P6
MSc	13	Sports and Recreational Facilities Management	45	P7
MSc	9	Sports and Recreational Facilities Expert	47	P8
MSc	7	Sports and Recreational Facilities Expert	39	P9
MSc	10	Sports and Recreational Facilities Expert	43	P10
MSc	6	Sports Marketing Professor	51	P11
MSc	7	Sports and Recreational Facilities Management	48	P12
MSc	14	Sports and Recreational Facilities Management	46	P13
MSc	8	Sports and Recreational Facilities Expert	41	P14
Ph.D	9	Sports Marketing Professor	45	P15
Ph.D	6	Sports Marketing Professor	43	P16

The interview protocol began with questions that asked participants to elaborate on their experiences as experts, managers, or active board members in recreational sports in the context of creating an international brand for the venue. In the next section, participants were asked to explain the environmental capability of Kish Island to create an international brand in the realm of recreational sports. Additionally, participants were asked to discuss the barriers to establishing an international brand on Kish Island. In another section of the questions, participants were asked to explain the capability of recreational sports clubs to develop and grow job opportunities (entrepreneurship) and sports facilities (development of camps and sports complexes) for creating an international brand. During each interview, notes were taken, and

follow-up questions were asked based on responses to the questions in the interview guide for clarity or further explanation if needed. After the interviews were completed, the recorded audio was transcribed verbatim by the researcher using a transcription service. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, an inductive coding approach was used. Additionally, a grounded theory approach by Glazer was employed to identify, organize, and present patterns in this data set. In this study, data analysis and coding were conducted using the three-step method of open, selective, and theoretical coding. Various approaches are used to enhance validity in qualitative research. In this study, several review sessions were conducted to ensure confirmability and reliability. Finally, to ensure integrity, the research team remained committed to the confidentiality of the secondary data set.

3. Results

Based on the analysis of the research findings, the factors influencing the creation of an international brand for the venue through recreational sports (case study of Kish Island) were framed. The details related to the framework perspectives and the dimensions and components are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Framework and Coding of Identified Components along with their Frequency in Sources and Interviews.

Frequency	Key points	Dimensions	perspectives
5	Decision-making under community leadership	Activation of citizen participation	Opportunities for place branding
2	Creating a comprehensive community in the field of recreational sports participation		
3	Public governance performance in fostering community participation in recreational sports		
6	Optimizing available resources for the development of sports infrastructure	Expansion of sports infrastructure on the island	
4	Ease of access to recreational sports facilities		
8	Value-driven communications	Stimulation and creation of brand value	
4	Creating a creative brand name through word-of-mouth advertising		
3	Hierarchical power	Maintaining traditional approach	Barriers to place branding
3	Robust financial procurement mechanism		
5	Conventional and commercial perspective based on events		
8	Focus on foreign trade and tourists	Preserving multiple stakeholders	
6	Potential mismatch in stakeholders' perception of the city's image		
7	Limited access to strategy and resources	Weak awareness of recreational sports	
2	Inadequate media coverage		
4	Favorable climate of the location	Natural environment potentials	Infrastructures
6	Presence of diverse ecological species		
7	Display of natural features of the sea and Kish Island coastline		
6	Existence of 5-star hotels	Urban infrastructures	
5	Presence of an international airport		
4	Variety of culinary and restaurant options		
6	Presence of diverse shopping centers		
2	Development of modern urban infrastructure		
4	Desirable transportation system		
5	Availability of suitable communication infrastructure (internet)		
3	Ease of convenient access to the location		
7	Presence of adequate medical centers		
4	Existence of security, especially social security		

6	Providing up-to-date and differentiated services	Related to tourism	Offering new sports services
3	Utilizing sports as a tool for tourism		
2	Creating a positive and unique experience		
4	An opportunity to showcase Kish's capabilities		
2	An opportunity to showcase Kish's distinctive features		
3	Highlighting the unique aspects of the location		
5	Presenting a culture similar to Muslim countries to attract tourists		
4	Offering visa-free conditions on Kish		
5	Engagement of the private sector in tourism		
5	Sports infrastructure with international standards	Related to events	
3	Standard sports equipment		
4	Appropriate media coverage during events		
4	Utilization of various marketing tools		
5	Broadcasting rights for games		
6	Attracting international sponsors		
5	Hosting competitions on a specific calendar for the venue		
3	Media content production (film, clips)	Media	managerial
6	Word-of-mouth advertising		
5	Attracting international capital through advertising		
4	International communications		
2	Utilization of international networks (TripAdvisor, Travel)		
5	Endorsement by celebrities, athletes, and coaches		
3	Location advertising by celebrities, athletes, and coaches		
6	Long-term approach	Goal setting	
4	Step-by-step approach		
5	Review and presentation of the location's background		
7	Specific program and budget		
5	Professional management team		
2	Optimization and pattern recognition		
7	Strategic thinking		
5	Invitation of prominent and influential teams		
4	Invitation of federations		
6	Creation of innovative sports technologies		
9	Creation of competitive advantage for the venue and showcasing it		
4	Presentation of cohesive identity and personality traits		
6	Establishment and development of the location's image in consumers' minds		
2	Empowerment of residents and businesses on Kish Island	Entrepreneurship and job creation	Consequences
7	Indigenous and local employment generation		
3	Attraction of private and government credit and capital		
5	Increase in presence and visibility	Improving social conditions	
6	Enhancement of security perception on Kish Island		
6	Attraction of diverse social and cultural strata		
8	Elevation of the level and quality of social interactions		
2	Sense of belonging to Kish Island	Attachment to place	
2	Tourist satisfaction and repeat visits		
7	Continuation of sports interactions with Kish Island		
5	Creation of job and economic opportunities	Economic development	
3	Creation of income-generating and currency-generating opportunities		
3	Attraction of sports investors to the island		
6	Attraction of foreign tourists and foreign currency inflow		
4	Financial support from investors and the government in the construction phases of recreational projects		

Based on the conceptual framework, the present study includes three sections: environmental factors of branding, processes, and consequences of international branding. Environmental factors

include branding opportunities and obstacles. The processes of creating international branding for Kish Island include necessary infrastructures for branding, offering innovative services, and managerial factors. The consequences of international branding for the place include entrepreneurship, improvement of social conditions, economic development, and attachment to the place, each of which has its own subsets. The branding opportunities section includes three dimensions: activating citizen participation, expanding sports infrastructures on the island, and stimulating and creating brand value. In the barriers section, dimensions such as maintaining traditional approaches, preserving multiple stakeholders, and weak awareness of recreational sports are included. Additionally, the infrastructure dimension consists of three aspects: natural environmental potentials, urban infrastructures, and cultural and social factors. Furthermore, the offering innovative services dimension includes two aspects related to tourism and events. The managerial factors dimension also includes two aspects: media and brand goal-setting. Finally, the consequences of creating international branding through recreational sports include entrepreneurship, improvement of social conditions, economic development, and attachment to the place. The analysis of these dimensions has a systematic nature, and the interaction between variables and outcomes is depicted in the following figure.
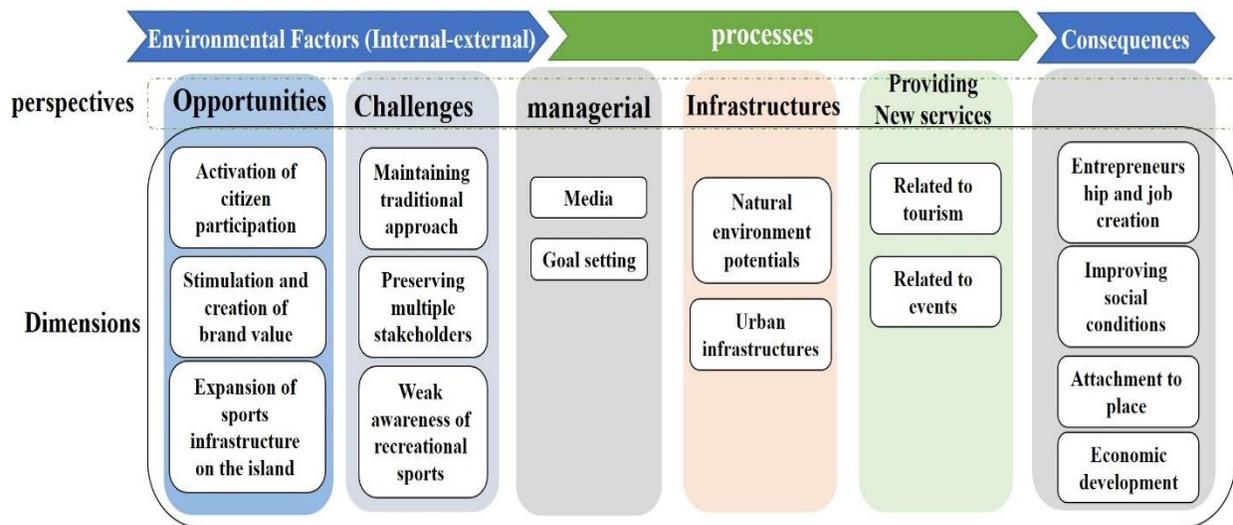

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Factors Influencing the Creation of International Branding Through Recreational Sports

4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to identify the conceptual framework for creating international branding of a place through recreational sports (the case of Kish Island). One of the significant innovations of this study is the relatively

comprehensive examination of all dimensions and processes involved in international place branding. In this research, the identification and explanation of a scientific framework based on qualitative data were pursued. Accordingly, the components resulting from qualitative surveys are structured into three sections: environmental factors of branding, processes, and consequences of international branding. Environmental factors include branding opportunities and obstacles. The processes of creating international branding for Kish Island include necessary infrastructures for branding, offering innovative services, and managerial factors, while the consequences of international place branding include entrepreneurship, improvement of social conditions, economic development, and attachment to the place.

In examining the opportunities for international place branding, respondents were essentially answering the question of what factors in the environment could help create the international brand of Kish Island through recreational sports. From the perspective of participants in this research, opportunities for place branding through recreational sports include three dimensions: citizen participation activation, expansion of sports infrastructure on the island, and brand value creation. In the citizen participation activation section, interviewees believed that through participatory community decision-making, creating a comprehensive community, and public governance performance, steps could be taken towards

creating an international brand for Kish Island. In this regard, it can be said that understanding the numerous stakeholders of a city, from governments to entrepreneurial groups, investors, export agencies, visitors, and citizens, and their often conflicting interests in recent paradigm shifts in international place branding trends, is of particular importance (19). Therefore, recent studies have called for a participatory approach and collaborative branding to address this multifaceted characteristic (20-22). Among the stakeholders, citizens emerge as prominent active members of the community who bring distinct perceptions and special connections to the city into the branding process and avoid emphasis on external groups (23). Citizens and local communities can be more influential than other stakeholders as they experience, live, and to some extent embody the place brand every day. While citizens have largely been excluded from previous city branding practices, recent participatory branding approaches encourage their involvement in such processes and advise them to claim ownership of their city brands to rectify the discrepancy between the city as experienced and the city as marketed (24). Because if citizens cannot recognize or agree with the predetermined identity resulting from a construction project to image a city or city marketed as a product, the entire city branding process is suspect (17). When citizens play significant roles as "consumers," "ambassadors," and residents in city branding and want to

express their opinions about the city (23), a participatory process to ensure place quality and citizen well-being using the city's authenticity is necessary (19, 24); Therefore, to achieve international branding of Kish Island, the participation of a comprehensive group of stakeholders must be supported (25, 26); Consequently, examining the place identity of city residents and how to create a recognition system around it is crucial. Ultimately, it can be said that for the creation of city brands, a city branding process must consider "interaction and fluidity" leading to stakeholder participation (27). Practical goals and strategies such as understanding reality, identifying key stakeholders, and prioritizing actions should first be discussed within the city to "integrate the specific features of the place and promote participatory place branding" (28). However, the results of this study indicate that Kish Island branding activities still rely on a relatively traditional top-down city marketing approach that focuses on external stakeholders.

In another section, the participants in the present study identified the expansion of sports infrastructure on the island as one of the influential factors in creating the international brand of Kish Island through recreational sports. Respondents were aware that the investments and resources required for promoting recreational sports are vastly different from those needed for hosting major sports events. Encouraging recreational sports increases access to sports participation within the city and enhances people's quality of life by deploying various community-based sports programs and increasing facilities. The possibility that recreational sports can contribute to branding Kish Island through the expansion of sports infrastructure simplifies the process of international branding from the perspective of participating individuals in the research, focusing on two main issues: (a) optimizing existing resources and (b) providing access for participation in recreational sports. Explaining these findings, it can be said that in the process of identifying and promoting distinctive features, achieving strategic branding requires maximizing conditions for participating in recreational sports. For Kish Island, a combination of green spaces in outdoor areas and active citizens utilizing natural assets can be mentioned as a source of differentiation. From the perspective of sports infrastructure, emphasis on active lifestyles in outdoor spaces through participation in recreational sports is more cost-effective and less complicated than hosting major events.

In another section, interviewees believed that stimulating and creating brand value, including effective factors in creating the international brand of Kish Island through recreational sports. In this regard, it can be said that participating individuals stated that through value-based communications and creative brand creation through word-of-mouth advertising, efforts can be made to create an international brand for Kish Island. Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska (20)

introduce the concept of the value-oriented approach and argue that the perspective of place branding should shift from a competition-oriented view for economic outcomes to a demand-oriented approach for community-based development. Traditional place branding primarily operates within the framework of top-down communications and hierarchical decision-making structures, with primary goals largely shaped by external audiences such as tourists and potential investors. This research demonstrates that place branding must establish and implement widely recognized public values by the community, considering who the primary audience of place branding is. In particular, it emphasized that place branding strategies based on public value can serve as drivers for changing how people meet their needs in society.

In another section, interviewees believed that the obstacles to international place branding through recreational sports include dimensions of preserving traditional approaches, maintaining multiple stakeholders, and weak awareness of recreational sports. In the traditional approach preservation section, participating individuals expressed that various factors such as hierarchical power, rigid financial procurement mechanisms, and commercial and clichéd event-based perspectives could disrupt the creation of an international place brand through sports. This finding indicates the acceptance of the traditional decision-making model regarding the use of sports in Kish Island's branding activities. Such decision-making processes revolve around

elite groups (29), which encounter bottom-up place branding reflecting the experiences and needs of residents.

In another section, participating individuals stated that preserving multiple stakeholders could disrupt the creation of an international brand for Kish Island. They noted that these obstacles could include a focus on foreign trade and tourists, and potential misalignment of the city's image among stakeholders. This issue is highlighted by respondents who prioritize foreign stakeholders over residents. Alongside activities related to sports, this prioritization is expressed as a desire to promote beyond the region and indicates on the global stage that the city has the capacity to compete in hosting "Level 2" sports events (30). Bias towards these stakeholders stems from economic development goals to attract tourists and businesses, aligning with an event-centric mindset. Therefore, it does not seem that residents of the island are considered stakeholders. Hence, preserving multiple stakeholders may likely disrupt the creation of an international brand for Kish Island through recreational sports. This was indicated by respondents who described how the city's image varies among different stakeholder groups. For Kish Island, the city has never been able to clearly articulate its place brand; the city's previous efforts in brand development focused on advanced technology, and if cities lose sight of how their inhabitants perceive their home, motivation to create and manage a place brand weakens (24). The gap between the image

the city alone seeks to project to attract outsiders and the local sense of place residents discern through their life experiences leads to brand alienation. The image perceived by internal stakeholders, including the local community and residents, is one of a family-centric, open, green, and safe space, rather than an "advanced technology hub." Such top-down focus on external stakeholders prevents any consideration of creating an international brand for Kish Island as a means for internal stakeholders to participate in creating a shared city brand. Finally, interviewees believed that weak awareness of recreational sports could be a barrier to creating an international brand for Kish Island. Therefore, they stated that limited access to strategies and resources, coupled with insufficient media coverage, could disrupt the creation of an international brand for Kish Island through recreational sports. Based on this finding, it seems that recreational sports are less utilized in city branding strategies. Given that sports encompass all forms of physical activity, recreational sports receive relatively less attention from city representatives compared to elite sports and competitive sports, although they are deeply embedded in residents' daily lives. Even if respondents are aware of the popularity and importance of recreational sports, they expressed doubts about how it can play a practical role in any city branding process. The issues they raised mostly revolved around not finding a common ground for intervention in brand development or emphasizing the features

of activities in social centers rather than municipal jurisdiction. Although no single entity is responsible for developing the brand of Kish Island, the discussion about building and enhancing the city's image is largely conducted by city representatives as part of public policy. When their target audience includes internal stakeholders, recreational sports can serve as a tool to help reflect residents' experiences and opinions about the city and be incorporated into the consultation process. However, external-focused representatives refrain from considering internal stakeholders. As recreational sports target residents, their real value is not perceived. The challenge that keeps recreational sports from their place in urban branding due to weak awareness of recreational sports' position in urban branding can be addressed through two main issues: (a) limited access to strategies and resources and (b) insufficient media coverage and organization.

Additionally, infrastructure was composed of two dimensions: natural environment potentials and urban infrastructure. From a scientific perspective, participating individuals in this study believed that possibly developing environmental (natural and urban) infrastructures could enhance the attractiveness of sports tourism and satisfy tourists, consequently attracting tourists to these destinations for the development of recreational sports; evidence suggests that developing environmental infrastructures (natural and urban) could potentially be an effective tool in

introducing the attractiveness of sports tourism and recreational sports in that area; thus, managers and active employees in recreational sports should take steps towards developing sports tourism attractions and creating an international brand by creating innovative urban infrastructures in transportation, establishing campsites and places for developing recreational sports in the aquatic and natural environments of Kish Island.

Furthermore, after the presentation of innovative services, two dimensions related to tourism and event-related were formed. Whether sports services in the market can compete with each other is not necessarily dependent on the provision of related services, but rather on facilities, innovation, consumption patterns, etc. The extracted codes from the interviews were classified under two major categories: "Tourism-related" and "Event-related." In the section on presenting innovative services related to tourism, interviewees believed that if officials provide up-to-date and differentiated services, use sports as a tool for tourism, create a positive and different experience, an opportunity to showcase Kish's distinct capabilities from other places, and provide visa-free conditions for Kish Island, it can take steps towards creating an international brand. Similarly, in the event-related section, interviewees believed that through the creation of sports infrastructures compliant with international standards, use of standard sports equipment, proper media coverage during events, attracting international

sponsors, and holding competitions on a specific calendar for Kish Island, it is possible to create an international brand for Kish Island.

The management factors also included two dimensions: media and goal-setting. This finding suggests that various factors may be involved in city branding that may reflect the nature of political and public policy (31). This finding discusses the decentralization of hierarchical authority over the brand and city features as public and managerial governance. Given the multifaceted nature of the city and the involvement of multiple stakeholders, it is not possible to control and assign responsibility for a city brand to a specific group. Coping with widespread participation and creative decision-making under public management responsibilities is effective (21, 26). A good brand strategy should be able to create interaction among internal and external stakeholders and audiences. When this creates a sense of belonging and a common purpose, and motivates internal stakeholders, the uniqueness of a city that cannot be replicated elsewhere is demonstrated and implemented (32). This uniqueness of the city can be shaped in the minds of tourists under the shadow of effective management and use of sports media, thereby contributing to the creation of an international brand in the location.

Consequently, the consequences of establishing an international brand for a place through recreational sports include entrepreneurship and job creation, improvement of social conditions,

economic development, and attachment to the location. In this section, interviewees believed that if the approaches to creating a place brand are appropriately implemented, entrepreneurship growth can be witnessed in Kish Island. In this regard, experts stated that the consequences of establishing an international brand may include local and indigenous employment generation and attracting private and governmental credibility and capital. Scientific evidence suggests that recreational sports contribute to employment growth more rapidly than other subsets of sports (33). Although there are various challenges in the field of entrepreneurship related to recreational sports, such as industry standardization, socio-economic fluctuations, seasonal concerns (33), and epidemics like COVID-19; however, with proper management and development of existing infrastructures, it is possible to attract more people to Kish Island and utilize recreational sports infrastructures, thereby contributing to the development of tourist destinations (34, 35). Furthermore, with the development of urban and environmental infrastructures, it is possible to improve the quality of life for residents, enhance tourist experiences, preserve cultural and historical values, natural landscapes, and job opportunities, consequently creating an international brand associated with recreational sports (36). Another outcome of establishing an international brand on Kish Island through recreational sports is the improvement of the social conditions of the local community.

Interviewees believed that if the platforms and capacities for establishing an international brand are well utilized, and necessary infrastructures are in place, improvements in social conditions such as increased customer presence, enhanced security perception on Kish Island, attracting diverse social and cultural demographics, and elevating the level and quality of social interactions can be observed. This finding emphasizes the results of Park's (2022) studies (17). With this finding in mind, it can be said that particularly, establishing an international brand for a place through recreational sports values social approaches for expanding internal impacts, reflecting the needs and desires of residents and communities instead of economic approaches to gain external relative advantages. Therefore, establishing an international brand for a place through recreational sports can be interpreted as a gateway to connect citizens to intangible public assets (social factors) called city brands and efforts to create common and joint management of these assets over time.

In another section of the research, it was evident that attachment to a place and a sense of belonging are consequences of establishing an international brand for Kish Island through recreational sports. In this regard, interviewees believed that if conditions for establishing an international brand for Kish Island exist, we can witness a sense of belonging to Kish Island, tourist satisfaction, and the repeated presence and continuity of sports interactions with Kish Island. This finding is supported by previous

studies. For instance, Hudak (28) states that city branding involves a complex mutual relationship between personal experience, living environment, social participation, and emotional attachment to place-related issues. Ultimately, economic development was the final consequence of establishing an international brand on Kish Island through recreational sports. Sports marketing experts believed that if all branding obstacles are removed and the branding potentials of Kish Island through recreational activities are utilized, we can witness the development of economic and job opportunities, income generation, attracting sports investors to the island, attracting foreign tourists, and the influx of foreign currency and financial support from investors and the government in the construction phases of recreational projects on Kish Island. Additionally, the findings of Salimi, Keshtidar (12) and Djaballah, Hautbois (37) confirm this finding. In this regard, it can be said that any consultation on city branding should involve various stakeholders and combine economic development with an understanding of the social, environmental, and relational factors that affect the quality of life and satisfaction with the city's image.

5. Suggestions

based on the framework derived from the research findings, it is suggested to categorize the dimensions and processes in the actions of sports management systems and consider the relationship between variables in practice. Moreover, management of tourist destinations in the field of providing sports services should not confine specific actions to some processes and consider all research processes, and for this purpose, the process outlined in this study should be the focus of decision-making. Additionally, considering the outlined dimensions, managers are recommended to employ necessary plans for the growth and prosperity of sports service businesses through recreational sports.

6. Conclusions

In general, from a sports management perspective, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of creating an international brand for Kish Island. Therefore, to improve recreational sports in tourist destinations (Kish Island), officials must improve environmental and urban infrastructures. Moreover, for tourist destinations to create an international brand for Kish Island, necessary measures to attract tourists must be taken to create jobs and local economic development. Additionally, other tourist destinations can use the findings of this study for branding their own destinations. It can also be said that this finding emphasizes the importance of environmental and urban infrastructures in the development of recreational sports. Therefore, relevant officials should understand the value of identified dimensions in this research and enhance related

plans in these places. Finally, from researchers' perspective, it can be said that the present study is of great importance to Iranian managers and is a fundamental step in developing recreational sports in creating international brands for tourist destinations.

Based on the opportunities identified in this study, Kish Island and other tourist destinations in Iran should prioritize leveraging their unique features, such as beautiful beaches, cultural diversity, and natural attractions. Targeted international advertising, the use of digital media, and collaborations with international tour operators can create significant opportunities for place branding. Given the challenges facing the branding of recreational and sports destinations like Kish Island, it is essential to identify and address the existing advertising and legal barriers at the international level. Iranian islands and tourist destinations must take steps to establish global recognition of their brands by developing suitable infrastructure for international visitors and enhancing the overall tourist experience. Considering the importance of management highlighted in the study findings, improving and updating high-level management policies for effective branding is crucial. Establishing an efficient and transparent management system focused on attracting foreign investment can contribute to the growth of Kish's brand as well as other tourist destinations. In light of these considerations, Kish Island and other tourist destinations in Iran must concentrate on international branding and

effectively utilize the available opportunities to become renowned and popular tourist destinations on a global scale.

Like any research, this study also faced certain limitations. First: The small sample size (16 participants) may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives. Therefore, future studies can address this limitation by increasing the number of participants and including diverse stakeholder groups (such as international tourists, locals, and investors) to encompass a broader range of views. Second: The focus of the study on Kish Island alone may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Consequently, conducting similar studies in other tourist destinations in Iran (such as Mashhad, Isfahan, or Qeshm) or comparative research between Kish and similar international destinations can strengthen the findings. Third: Sole reliance on qualitative data may present challenges in providing numerical support for the findings. Hence, future research could integrate official statistics and quantitative data (such as the number of tourists, tourism revenue, and hotel occupancy rates) alongside qualitative methods to enhance the validity and robustness of the results.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Acknowledgment

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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