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## Evaluation of Effective Factors on Creating Social Bond in Religious Tourists Using the Services of Recreational-Sports Complexes in Mashhad

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### Article Info Abstract

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The study aims to evaluate the effective factors on creating a social bond in religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes in Mashhad. The research method was quantitative with a structural equation model approach. The statistical population of the study was religious tourists who used the services of recreational-sports complexes in Mashhad. A total of 388 tourists were selected as the sample by convenience sampling. The measurement tool was a modified Adamczyk 25-item questionnaire based on expert opinions, which has four subscales (intimacy, security, passion, and commitment). The face and content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by experts while the construct validity was confirmed using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Reliability was also obtained by more than 0.7 using Cronbach's alpha. To analyze the data, descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used. Finally, the results revealed that the components of secure and intimate bonding are the most essential elements of creating a social bond in religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes in Mashhad, respectively. Consequently, this study emphasizes strengthening indicators such as infrastructure development, equipment, and facilities to reduce risks, using new marketing methods, protecting the tourist information, attention to the opinions, interests, and values of religious tourists, creating an intimate and social atmosphere, creating a secure and reassurance environment, etc. to create a social bond in religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, the tourism industry as the largest and most diverse industry has become an important source of income globally and is considered as one of the factors affecting cultural exchanges between countries (Camilleri, 2018). Tourism as a dynamic and systematic act leads to the transformation, reconstruction, and dynamism of tourists (Cave & Dredge, 2020). Considerable numbers of developed and developing countries consider this dynamic industry as their main source of income, employment, private sector growth, and infrastructure development (Camilleri, 2018).

Today, sport is also one of the great and critical industries globally, which accompanied by tourism have created one of the most amazing modern service industries called "Sports Tourism" industry. (Cho, Joo, & Chi, 2019). Gibson defines the phenomenon of sports tourism as leisure-based travel in which people temporarily leave their place of residence to play or watch physical activities or to see the attractions related to these activities (Rostamkolae & Poursoltani, 2019). On the other hand, religious tourism is a type of tourism that has a kind of socio-cultural potential to change the motivational states of a person who needs cultural and religious issues in the spiritual presence (Moaven, Movahed, & Tabiee, 2017). Therefore, the arrival of international sports-religious tourists in the country not only causes regional development and encourages investment in all parts of the country, but the sector income is also an indispensable financial source for the development of tourism sectors (Fernández, Azevedo, Martín, & Martín, 2020). Therefore, trying to study and recognize the social ties of religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes and pay attention to the quality of services is one of the most important points that the international community has given priority in the present era. Social ties are beyond distances and can be useful in any field (Beheshti, Saatchian, & Marefati, 2016).

Social bonding increases the individual's connection with the values and rules of society so that the individual internalizes customary values and norms and then strengthens the internal adaptive characteristics of the individual. Thus this can contribute to the sociability of individuals and promote social participation. (Mahmoudi, Ghorbani, Dabir, & Sharifi, 2020). In this regard, establishing strong social ties between tourists and service organizations are among the most important activities in the field of business. As Joseph and Unnikrishnan (2016) state, a company's ability to attract and retain customers is not only related to the product it offers but certainly depends on the way it provides services to customers. They provided levels of relationship including Financial, Social and Structured ties. These factors are effective in increasing relationships and retaining customers. This means by studying the social links of customers and increasing the quality of services, act in a way that customers themselves become a media to promote their business (Joseph & Unnikrishnan, 2016). Therefore, social links and structured links will help the service providers in creating reputation and business development in

competitive markets and will play an effective role in attracting and retaining tourists. In this regard, countless definitions of social bonding have been made so far.

Turnbull & Wilson (1989) have stated that social bonds mean positive interpersonal relationships between customers and service providers. Wilson also defined social bonds in terms of the degree of friendship and mutual desire (Lipsey & Wilson, 1995). Hawke & Heffernan (2013) stated that love creates personal attachments between people and then defined interpersonal friendship as an emotional bond.

One of the most popular methods of measuring social bonds is the Adamczyk model, which uses the theory of attachment styles of Balbi et al. (1992) and the Sternberg love triangle approach (1986) (Sternberg, 1986). This model consists of four dimensions including 1. Secure bond \_People with high self-esteem degree, able to create and maintain intimacy with others\_ 2. Intimacy bond \_ means love, friendship, understanding, and caring for others \_ 3. Bond commitment \_Sense of unity and attachment to a particular person\_ 4. Passionate Bond \_a strong desire for a specific goal (Adamczyk, 2013). In this regard, the studies of Casado-Díaz et al. (2017) show the power of international social bonding of tourists in maintaining security.

Albayrak et al. (2018) concluded that the experience of religious tourism is a multifaceted structure that includes interaction, belonging, spiritual, and emotional communication. Çelik (2019) stated that social bonds have positively changed the social distance of tourists to local people.

Fathi et al. (2019) showed in their studies that supporting web-based tourism businesses and social networks by provincial headquarters, banks, and entrepreneurial capitals play an important role in strategic tourism planning with an emphasis on spirituality. Also, they revealed that educational programs to justify diversity in society and its benefits had the highest priority.

The results of Krolikowska et al.'s study (2020) also confirmed two social links (security and intimacy) in tourists. Also, the study of Sestino et al. (2021) indicated that religious tourism destinations can meet the spiritual needs of tourists as well as play an important role in establishing ties with the local population. Moreover, their attachment in terms of sense of belonging, intimacy, and emotional bonding can be considered as a vehicle to promote sustainable local development.

Among those studies conducted in Iran, the most important and relevant researches include the following:

Beheshti et al. (2016) concluded that there is a significant relationship between "secure attachment bonding" and "Sternberg theory intimacy bonding" with satisfaction. Alem et al.'s (2016) study reveals that there is a significant relationship between the criterion variables such as commitment, attachment, belief, and social participation and the predictive variable of ritual theater and also the attachment component has a high impact on social bonding with ritual theater.

The results of Maleki et al. (2019) showed that the beautiful city scenario shows a situation where foreign sanctions are reduced and the development of the city will be based on competitive advantage or religious tourism, which shows the best future. Fathi et al. (2020) in their research concluded that tourism policies along with cultural and natural resources are the most effective indicators to increase the competitiveness of the tourism industry in Qom province. Also, Mahmoudi et al. (2020) concluded that creating appropriate security conditions has an important role in promoting the social bond of winter sports tourists. The research backgrounds show that despite the importance of social ties in Iran, no research with a special emphasis on religious-sports tourists has been so far conducted in the case of Iran. Also, sociological research and social bonding in sports and religious tourism in this field have been very limited. As a result, it seems that there is a research gap in this area, and researching to analyze the precedents of creating a social bond in religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes is of key importance.

Today, the issues of social bonds, quality of services, and tourist satisfaction are recognized as the strategic levers and key axes in the competition scene. A company's ability to attract and retain tourists is not just about the products it offers, but it certainly depends on the way it provides services to people. Creating social bonds helps service providers build a reputation and business development in competitive markets. To this end, every service organization to evaluate and improve the quality of its services in the first stage should identify the needs and expectations of its tourists and try to establish a strong relationship between tourists and their service providers (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). In this way, the service organization can identify the expectations and the type of bonds of its tourists to the organization, and also take firm steps in improving the level of services provided and gaining satisfaction from tourists.

Accordingly, it is important to study the factors affecting the establishment of social bonds among tourists who visit the sports complexes of Mashhad in addition to performing pilgrimage rituals. Also, utilizing the dimensions of social bonds, such as intimacy, security for individuals, and paying attention to enthusiastic environments can create a mutual commitment as well as a ground for the loyalty of religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes.

Therefore, the research question is whether religious tourists visiting sport and recreational-sports complexes pay attention to social bonds with the elements of the environment in explaining their behavior? Which feature of an environment will have a distinct role in the presence of people?

## Methodology

The present study is applied research and in terms of data collection method is correlational research based on structural equation modeling. The statistical population of the study was all religious tourists who used the services of sports-recreational complexes in Mashhad. Due to the infinite research population ( $N > 100,000$ ), based on Cochran's sample size formula for infinite population, 428 tourists were selected as the sample by convenience sampling.

The questionnaires were physically distributed among religious tourists who used the services of the studied recreational-sports complexes in the period from May to September 2019.

Finally, after eliminating the pointless cases, data analysis was performed on 388 questionnaires.

In this study, the Adamczyk Social Bonding Questionnaire (2013) included 25 items and 4 dimensions (intimacy, security, passion, and commitment) with a five-point Likert scale (very low = 1 to very high = 5) was used. To prepare the questionnaire, the English text was first translated to Persian. The experts then reviewed and approved the Persian translation along with the original text. The face and content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by 10 professors and the construct validity was confirmed using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Also, the internal reliability coefficient value (Cronbach's alpha) for the questionnaire was 0.81, which indicates the acceptable reliability of the questionnaires.

In this study, descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze the data. Finally, to organize, summarize, classify raw scores from descriptive statistics, and to estimate parameters and predict from inferential statistics, SPSS and AMOS software was used.

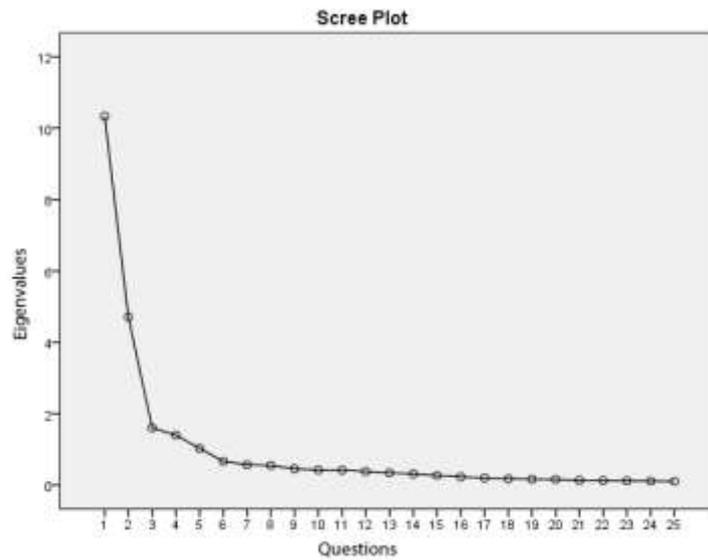
## Findings

To perform the confirmatory factor analysis, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test was used to determine the adequacy of the sample size.

According to Table 1, the results of this test were 0.942, which shows that the sample size is suitable for factor analysis. Also, the results of the Bartlett test were calculated to be 9836/320, which shows there is a suitable correlation between the items.

**Table 1. Sampling Adequacy Test Results**

Variable	Value	
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin index to fit the sample size	0.942	
Bartlett test to show correct factor separation	Chi-squared	9836.320
	Freedom Degree	300
	Significance Level	0.001



**Figure 1. Scree plot for extracted factors**

A Scree plot was used to perform the factor analysis method. Figure 1 shows the changes in eigenvalues about the factors. This diagram is used to determine the optimal number of components and identify four factors, the value of which is greater than the specific value of one.

In this study, four factors can be extracted as important factors that have the greatest role in explaining the variance of data.

**Table 2. Fit Goodness Indices of Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model of the First Degree of the Revised Version of the Social Bonds Questionnaire**

Fit Indicators		Indicator values	Acceptable values	Comment
Chi-squared	X <sup>2</sup>	178.02	-	-
Freedom Degree	FD	148	-	-
Chi-square to freedom degree	X <sup>2</sup> /FD	1.20	1-3	<b>Optimal</b>
root-mean-square error	RMSEA	0.042	X<0.1	<b>Optimal</b>
Comparative fit index	CFI	0.96	X>0.9	<b>Optimal</b>
Normal Fit Index	NFI	0.96	X>0.9	<b>Optimal</b>
Non-Normed Fit Index	NNFI	0.95	X>0.9	<b>Optimal</b>
Indicators of Financial Integration	IFI	0.96	X>0.9	<b>Optimal</b>
Adjusted Goodness of fit index	AGFI	0.90	X>0.9	<b>Optimal</b>

According to Table 2, the ratio of chi-square to the degree of freedom is 1.20. Considering that this is the most important fitting statistic and is very sensitive to the sample size if the criterion of this statistic is between 1 and 3, it shows the desired situation. One of the most important indicators is the goodness of the root fit of the mean squares of the estimation error. The criterion, in this case, should be less than 0.05, which is called excellent fit, and values of 0.05 to 0.10 indicate a moderate fit. In Table 2, this statistic is equal to 0.042 and is acceptable or optimal. Then, to investigate the standard model obtained from the first-order confirmatory factor analysis, Figure 2 has been presented.

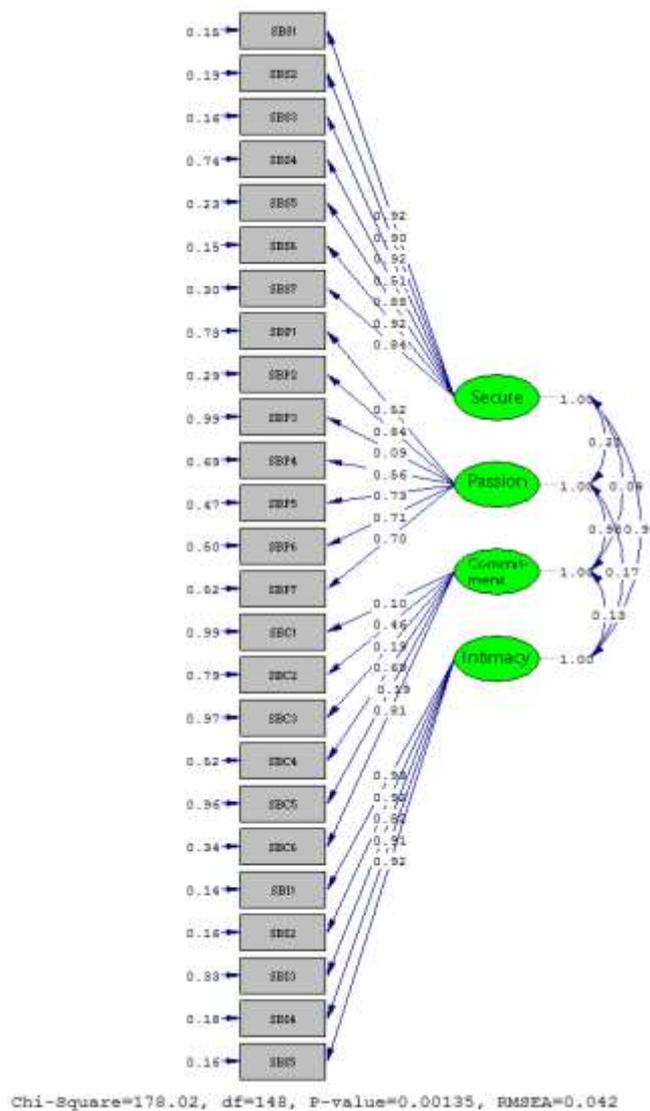


Figure 2. First-order factor analysis model of the revised version of the Social Bonding Questionnaire

The results show that all questions in terms of having factor loads higher than 0.05 were classified into four components (7 questions for secure bonding, 7 questions for Passion Bonding, 6 questions for Commitment Bond, and 5 questions for Intimate Bonding) and the relationships of all items to their factor are meaningful. Then, the fit indices of the measurement model are shown in Table 3. Also, the second-order factor analysis model of the revised version of the Social Bonding Questionnaire is shown in Figure 3.

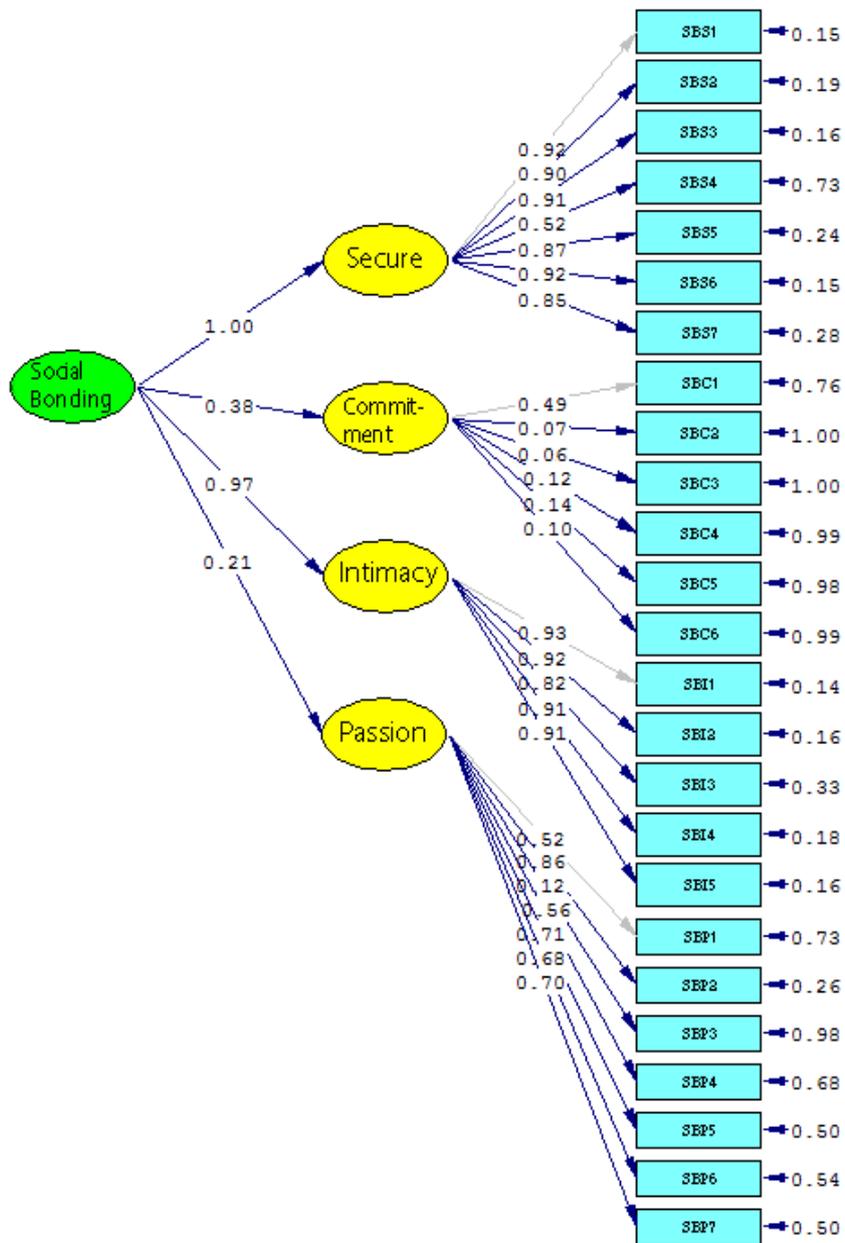
**Table 3. Fitting Indicators of the Confirmation Factor Analysis Model of the Second Degree of the Revised Version of the Social Bonding Questionnaire**

Fit Indicators		Indicator values	Acceptable values	Comments
Chi-squared	X <sup>2</sup>	177.02	-	-
Freedom Degree	DF	149	-	-
Chi-square to freedom degree	X <sup>2</sup> /DF	1.19	1-3	<b>optimal</b>
root-mean-square error	RMSEA	0.042	X<0.1	<b>optimal</b>
Comparative fit index	CFI	0.98	X>0.9	<b>optimal</b>
Normed Fit Index	NFI	0.98	X>0.9	<b>optimal</b>
Indicators of Financial Integration	IFI	0.98	X>0.9	<b>optimal</b>
Non-Normed Fit Index	NNFI	0.98	X>0.9	<b>optimal</b>
Adjusted Goodness of fit index	AGFI	0.90	X>0.9	<b>optimal</b>

Then, to examine the significance of the relationship between the observed variables (questions) and latent variables (factors), the t-index is used.

The T-score on the relationship between the questions and the related subscales indicates that the T-value in all questions was higher than three. This means that the questions in each component can predict the factors.

Careful examination of the parameter estimation values of each factor question shows that question 6 (with a factor load of 0.92 and a T value of 34.99) is the most important predictor variable in the secure bonding factor, question 9 (with a factor load of 0.86 and a T value of 10.98) is the most important predictor variable in passionate bonding factor, question 15 (with a factor loading of 0.49 and a T value of 6.10) is the most important predictor variable in commitment bonding factor, and finally, question 21 (with a factor loading of 0.93 and a T value of 34.94) is the most important predictor variables in the intimate bonding factor.



Chi-Square=177.02, df=149, P-value=0.00135, RMSEA=0.042

Figure 3. Second-order factor analysis model of the revised version of the Social Bonding Questionnaire

**Table 4. T-index and factor loads of the second-order model items of the revised version of the Social Bonding Questionnaire**

Variables	Row	T-index	Items	T-index	Factor loads
Secure Bonding	1	34.98	I have a comfortable relationship with the service providers in this water entertainment complex.	34.98	0.92
	2	32.78	I have a special attachment to using this water entertainment complex.	32.78	0.90
	3	34.10	The water entertainment complex atmosphere enjoys a reassuring environment.	34.10	0.91
	4	12.30	I feel safe in this water entertainment complex.	12.30	0.52
	5	29.52	The water entertainment complex protects the customer information well.	29.52	0.87
	6	34.99	If necessary, service providers solve the customer's problems.	34.99	0.92
	7	27.50	I deliver my information to the service providers of this complex if needed.	27.50	0.85
Passionate Bonding	8	5.83	I need to be in constant contact with this water entertainment complex.	5.83	0.52
	9	10.98	I enjoy using the water entertainment complex services.	10.98	0.86
	10	3.37	I am highly enthusiastic and interested in using the water entertainment complex services.	3.37	0.12
	11	6.84	I have always admired the service providers of this water entertainment complex.	6.84	0.56
	12	10.12	My connection with this water entertainment complex goes beyond my presence there.	10.12	0.71
	13	9.90	The service providers of this complex care about the customers' interests in their programs.	9.90	0.68
	14	10.07	The services provided in this complex are more than customers' expectations.	10.07	0.70
Commitment Bonding	15	6.10	Keeping in touch with this complex is extremely important to me.	6.10	0.49
	16	4.19	I would like to have a long-term relationship with this water entertainment complex in the future.	4.19	0.07
	17	3.33	At any time, I find myself committed to using the services of this water entertainment complex.	3.33	0.06
	18	4.09	I always like to use this water entertainment complex.	4.09	0.12
	19	4.47	Even if countless water entertainment complexes and facilities are available, I would like to use the services of this water entertainment complex.	4.47	0.14
Intimate Bonding	20	3.47	I will grab every opportunity to attend the water entertainment complex.	3.47	0.10
	21	34.94	I feel that my interests and values have a lot in common with the water entertainment complex atmosphere.	34.94	0.93
	22	34.91	The service providers of this water entertainment complex pay attention to my opinions.	34.91	0.92
	23	25.49	Comments and suggestions from customers are considered in this complex.	25.49	0.82
	24	33.43	Service providers have a mutual understanding of customer needs and desires.	33.43	0.91
	25	34.45	I enjoy the intimate atmosphere and social character in this water entertainment complex.	34.45	0.91

**Table 5. T-index and factor loads of the second-order model of the revised version of the Social Bonding Questionnaire**

<b>Components</b>	<b>T-index</b>	<b>Factor Loads</b>
Secure Bonding	26.18	<b>1.00</b>
Commitment Bonding	9.51	<b>0.38</b>
Intimate Bonding	24.46	<b>0.97</b>
Passionate Bonding	3.93	<b>0.21</b>

Finally, according to Table 5, in general, the results of the second-order factor analysis of the social bonding questionnaire reveal that secure bonding (with a factor load of 1 and a T value of 26.18) and intimacy (with a factor of 0.97 and a T value of 24.46) are respectively the most important components of creating a social bond in religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes in Mashhad.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The present study, which was conducted to analyze the antecedents of social bonding in religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes in Mashhad, is one of the most important efforts that was made by providing a multifaceted approach towards programs and proposals for business development.

Managers' awareness of the social ties of religious-sports tourists, as well as the allocation of resources to them, helps to build reputation and business development in competitive markets, as the clients act as media to promote such a business.

Based on the results, it was observed that secure bonding is the most important component of social bonding in religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes in Mashhad. This result is consistent with the results of Casado-Díaz et al. (2017), Krolikowska et al. (2020), Beheshti et al. (2015), and Mahmoudi et al. (2015). Beheshti et al. (2016) concluded there is a significant relationship between "secure attachment bonding" and "Sternberg theory intimacy bonding" with satisfaction. Likewise, Casado-Díaz et al.'s study (2017) reveals the strength of tourists' international social bond in maintaining security. Krolikowska et al.'s study (2020) also confirmed two social bonding (security and intimacy) in tourists. On top of that, Mahmoudi et al. (2020) concluded that creating appropriate security conditions plays an important character in promoting the social bond of winter sports tourists.

Secure bonding strengthens positive and constructive relations between human beings and leads to increasing the sense of belonging and social interactions and the spirit of cooperation and collaboration

(Bazrafkan & Gachkoob, 2011). In other words, secure bonding in sports tourism places creates a sense of trust and confidence and increases the participation of religious tourists using the services of recreational sports complexes. For this purpose, secure bonding is necessary for the social bonding of religious tourists using the services of recreational sports complexes.

It is important for religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes that the existing laws in the field of sports tourism in Iran are in line with international standards and there would be an organization to monitor the implementation of laws and defend the rights of tourists. That's why the officials of tourism sports centers must provide conditions by international standards for religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes and be responsible for it. Moreover, they should also provide appropriate information in this regard so that religious tourists can participate in sports venues with the awareness and ease of having their rights protected because, in an environment where one feels threatened, one is less interested in interacting and cooperating with others. But when the tourists are in good condition and are sure of the standard safety of facilities and equipment and permits related to health laws, they seek social connection and intimacy with ease and comfort. In this regard, based on the research results, the component of intimacy after a secure bonding is also the most critical component of creating a social bond in religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes in Mashhad. These results are consistent with the study results of Beheshti et al. (2015), Alem et al. (2015), Albayrak et al. (2018), Çelik (2019), and Sestino et al. (2021). The results of Alem et al.'s (2016) study show that there is a significant relationship between the criterion variables such as commitment, attachment, belief, and social participation, and the predictive variable of ritual theater and the attachment component has a high impact on social connection with ritual theater. Likewise, Albayrak et al. (2018) concluded that the experience of religious tourism is a multifaceted structure that includes interaction, belonging, and spiritual and emotional bonding. Çelik (2019) also stated that social ties have positively changed the social distance of tourists to local people. Also, Sestino et al. (2021) revealed that religious tourism destinations can meet the spiritual needs of tourists as well as play a key role in establishing ties with the local population.

Sports tourism sites are considered as social capital to strengthen integration as well as create a platform for social functions and lead to the facilitation of relationships and the refinement of social construction. Intimacy is part of the needs of religious-sports tourists, which along with a mental look can create different and sometimes heterogeneous effects on people. The more people are present in public spaces and participate in its activities, the greater the factors such as attachment and intimacy of individuals and the promotion of individual identity (Alem et al., 2016). In this regard, sports venues are always considered places with the ability to create high intimacy among tourists. Sports venues create a sense of belonging, intimacy, and attachment because of the possibility of a social relationship

and shared experience between individuals. The bonding of intimacy with sports venues arises from activities and interactions between human-place and human-human. Also, it deals with the interaction of the feelings, knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors of religious tourists with sports venues. Therefore, today, the focus on intimate bonding as an executive mechanism has become a business tool to generate revenue. In other words, when there is a high level of intimacy in sports venues, religious-sports tourists feel comfortable with the environment and service providers, and this convenience leads to a better interaction with the complex staff and other tourists. Actually, in intimate bonding, the tourist feels a special intimate and social atmosphere in sports venues. In this regard, sports venues authorities, especially water sports parks, can provide conditions for tourists to feel a high commonality between their interests and values with the complex, and lead to a better bond of intimacy.

Therefore, the officials of recreational-sports complexes, especially aquatic parks, are suggested to provide conditions for tourists to feel a high commonality between their interests and values with the complex, and ultimately this can lead to a better bond of intimacy. After the intimacy component, the commitment component has a great impact on creating a social bond in the target society. These results are consistent with the findings of Alem et al. (2016) and Albayrak et al. (2018). The study results of Alem et al. (2016) show that there is a significant relationship between the criterion variables such as commitment, attachment, belief, and social participation and the predictive variable of ritual theater; also, the attachment component has a high impact on the social connection of individuals with ritual theater. Customer retention is a process in which management tries to increase customer commitment to the organization by using factors such as training, providing appropriate facilities and services, etc. (Alsankour & Zardoshtian, 2020).

Emotional commitment refers to an individual's emotional dependence on sports tourism complexes. Committed customers show the superiority of a sports complex over other complexes because a committed customer is the most important resource of an organization. Today, in advanced organizations, the importance of committed customers is so great that the effectiveness of all methods and strategies is attributed to committed customers. In this regard, the desire to provide qualified and desired services to customers plays an important role in creating commitment in sports customers because, today, improving the quality of services in the service industry is a key strategy for sustainability and profitability of organizations (Mahmoudi et al., 2015). Therefore, addressing customers' problems, security, needs, and demands are among the measures that should be at the top of the duties and priorities of sports tourism managers in line with customer commitment. In this regard, it is recommended to the officials of recreational-sports tourism complexes to always be aware of their customer's expectations and to design their functional and technical services in a way that exceeds the customers' expectations level. This strategy should also cover the followings: respecting the privacy of

tourists ensuring customer safety, responding to complaints, paying attention to the health of tourists, providing a calm environment, Protecting the rights of tourists, creating a favorable social atmosphere, and ensuring of the existence of amenities including adequate parking and easy access, etc.

According to the results of the present study, managers of cultural heritage and tourism, sports and youth, and decision-makers are advised to plan in the development of infrastructure, equipment, and facilities to reduce risks, create dependence on sports venues with different and new marketing methods, create a safe environment, protect the information of tourists, pay attention to the opinions, suggestions, interests, and values of tourists( especially religious tourists), solve the problems of tourists if necessary, create an intimate and social atmosphere, etc.

The limitations of the present study are the statistical population limited to users of services of sports tourism complexes in Mashhad, Ignorance of cultural, social, and economic conditions of participants, Lack of trust among some participants and staff of sports complexes.

Therefore, other researchers interested in this field are suggested to study the variables of the present research in the recreational-sports complexes of religious cities of the country nationally to increase the validity and richness of this research. Those interested in this field can also do comparative studies in leading countries. Other cases suggested to researchers include Explaining the confidence-building tools of recreational-sports complexes, Examining cultural, social, and economic barriers in the behavior of religious tourists using the services of recreational-sports complexes, and Investigating the deterrents and motivators of religious tourists in using sports services.

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