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## **The role of emotional intelligence of service providers in the travel process: With an emphasis on sustainable tourism and human spiritual needs (Case study: Tour service providers in Iran)**

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### **Article Info**

### **Abstract**

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The present study tries to analyze the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in the trip process (before, during, and after) with a different view of sustainable tourism (from the perspective of tourist satisfaction) and emphasis on the human spiritual needs, to pave the way for further access tourist satisfaction and implementation of sustainable tourism. This is an applied exploratory research and has been done by content analysis and system thinking (to draw a conceptual model qualitatively and validated by experts). Data was collected through in-depth interviews with experts in sustainable tourism and spirituality. Experts were recruited through purposeful snowball sampling until data saturation and theoretical saturation. based on the findings, service providers' emotional intelligence plays an important role in improving the travel process by (A) helping the tourist in choosing the right travel package (before the trip), (B) creating a sense of calm, cheerfulness, and happiness in the tourist through responding to his spiritual needs (during the trip) and (C) impact positively in the mental evaluations and future decisions of tourist (after the trip). Based on systemic thinking, the results showed that paying attention to the tourists' spiritual needs through the employees' emotional intelligence is effective in achieving more sustainable tourism, so according to research findings and the widespread role of emotional intelligence in the travel process, training of service providers in the use of emotional intelligence is recommended to activists and planners in this industry.

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## Introduction

With emerging the adverse effects of tourism over time, a purely economic approach to tourism gave way to a sustainable approach; and emphasis was placed on controlling negative effects and developing positive effects for all current and future tourism stakeholders (Bello & Kamanga, 2020) so that today this issue is widely welcomed by governments (Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2020). Despite the importance of this issue and the passage of decades since the introduction of and the efforts of sustainable tourism, still (as it should be) countries have not been successful in achieving sustainable tourism (Sharpley, 2020; Ziaabadi et al., 2016).

Sustainability has different stakeholders and it is not possible to achieve sustainable tourism without considering all of them (Tan et al, 2018). However most studies in this field have focused only on the host community; while meeting the tourists' needs and satisfying them is one of the requirements for the success of tourism and the realization of sustainable tourism (Roxas, Rivera & Gutierrez, 2020; Streimikiene et al., 2021; Morovati Sharifabadi, Azizi & Jamshidi, 2016), In one hand, the realization of sustainable tourism is impossible without the stakeholders' satisfaction (the tourist is one of these stakeholders), and on the other hand, tourist satisfaction by influencing loyalty and positive quotes, is a key factor in marketing and the sustainable tourism economy.

According to existing definitions, when a person's expectations are met, her/his satisfaction is achieved (Toghraee, Shafiei & Doosti-Irani, 2020). But what are these expectations? Where do they come from? How can they be answered correctly? Does just building a luxury hotel, good transportation, and providing the right infrastructure cover them? Researchers have given several answers to these questions (Tayebnia, 2020; Mehdizadeh & Amiri, 2019; Ahmadi, khairollahi & cheraghi, 2017; Afkhami, Alizade & Arouji, 2017; Morovati Sharifabadi et al., 2016; Panahi et al., 2015).

In addition to physical needs, man also has many spiritual needs. Today, attention to these needs has become so prominent that the present age is referred to as the new age of spirituality (Maleki et al., 2019). So tourism considering the dimension of spirituality includes a wide range of motivations and values (Fathi et al., 2019a). Today's tourist travels to achieve spiritual satisfaction and recovery of her/his mentality (Fathi et al., 2019b). These needs cannot be met by physical infrastructure alone. In this regard, the use of decent manpower, which is one of the elements of tourism competitiveness is important (Fathi, Maleki & Yaqoobi, 2021).

while what we see most today are the tedious journeys that not only failed to meet the tourist's spiritual needs but also increased her/his physical fatigue; So that after returning from the trip, there is a need to rest to rejuvenate. In other words, most of today's trips do not satisfy tourists as they should.

the distinguishing feature of the present study is the attention to the tourist's spiritual needs and the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in responding to them.

There are studies such as Apte & Khandagle (2016), Narimani, Habibi & Rajabi (2011), and Kapur & Rawat, (2016), that consider satisfaction as one of the components of quality of life, and confirmed the effect of emotional intelligence on quality of life (and consequently on satisfaction). Research shows that emotional intelligence means an accurate knowledge of oneself and others' feelings and emotions, the message that these emotions have in interpersonal relationships, and the correct management of oneself and others' feelings and emotions in a way that leads to problem-solving (Anastasiadis, 2020; Prentice, 2020; Ugoani, 2020). Therefore, it seems that emotional intelligence is effective in recognizing the tourists' spiritual needs and responding to them and consequently obtaining their satisfaction and the realization of sustainable tourism.

Few studies have been done in this regard, so the present study tries to examine the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in different stages of travel by emphasizing tourists' spiritual needs to find a way to increase tourist satisfaction and more successful implementation of sustainable tourism. In this regard, this study has focused on tourism tour service providers, who are closely related to other supply sectors due to the presentation of a complete tourism package. It allows researchers to more comprehensively examine the role of service providers' emotional intelligence throughout the tourism supply chain. This research was considered in Iran. This country with numerous tourist attractions and rich culture in religious-spiritual teachings (although spirituality is not summed up in religion) has a good opportunity to develop sustainable tourism focusing on spiritual needs. If this can be achieved, it brings the economic benefits of sustainable tourism development as well as providing tourists vitality and happiness.

Therefore, this study addresses the following questions:

(A) emphasizing the spiritual needs of human beings, what is the role of tourism service providers' emotional intelligence in the travel process (before, during, and after the trip)?

(B) How does it help to implement sustainable tourism?

## **Research literature**

Tourism as demand arises from a set of material and spiritual needs that one strives to meet. Material needs refer to needs such as the need to experience new attractions such as new food, new place, different amenities, the experience of nature, different climates, etc. Intangible or spiritual factors (spirituality) in tourism are also defined as achieving excellence (mental and physical), reaching meaning (education and training, reasoning and exploration), and achieving mutual understanding (supernatural, natural,

social, and interpersonal) (Shafia & Sabaghpour Azarian, 2017). One of the reasons that people travel is to meet spiritual needs, gain peace, freshness, vitality, etc.

Tourism as an industry goes through a process of satisfying the tourists' needs. In this process, the tourists' needs are received as input. The desired response to them (processing) results in the feeling of calm, happiness, vitality, and lightening to the tourist (output).

Emotions may be tied to an object or experience, so that not only provides physiological responses but also leads to subjective assessments and may survive long after an experience and encourage one to do things that reinforce or weaken those emotions (Palomba, 2018). Emotions are mental beliefs whose experience, expression, and management are driven by cultural values (Pathak & Muralidharan, 2020). Therefore, to succeed in this process and respond to the tourist's needs, the ability to recognize, be aware, understand and regulate the feelings of oneself and others, so that one can manage one's interactions with others in a desirable way is essential, which Goleman refers to it as emotional intelligence (Anastasiadis, 2020).

Researchers believe that emotional intelligence has a new perspective on human capabilities. These capabilities include the ability to (A) understand individual-personality differences, (B) maintain motivation, resilience to adversity, control over impulses, empathy with others, hope, (C) cope successfully with others, (D) manage one's emotions, and (E) analyze and respond to others to do the necessary things. (Naderi & Akbari, 2017). Emotional intelligence means the ability to recognize individual differences and personality traits, capacity, understand the feelings of others in face and speech, tone of voice, etc., recognize and manage their emotions, and the ability to convey and express emotions in different cultures (MacCann et al., 2020). According to Salovey and Mayer, emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, understand, and receive the feelings of oneself and others, and to manage and use them to guide thoughts and behavior (Prentice, 2020). Salovey and Mayer considered four dimensions of emotional intelligence: 1) the ability to perceive expressed emotions: This dimension of emotional intelligence focuses on understanding the natural emotions expressed by humans. This perception refers to attention to emotional messages, when they appear in facial expressions, tone of voice, or cultural-artistic products. For example, a person who recognizes a fleeting fear in a person's face has a greater ability to perceive emotions than a person who does not recognize this fear. 2) The ability to use emotions to facilitate thinking: This dimension can be interpreted as the use of emotions to focus on important events (in a way that simplifies the decision-making process) or the use of emotions to facilitate the problem-solving process and advance goals. 3) The ability to understand emotions and their meaning: the ability to understand complex emotions (for example, two emotions in one face mode) and the ability to recognize the change from one emotion to another, the ability to recognize the cause of emotions and understand the relationship between them. 4) The ability to manage

emotions: This dimension refers to the ability to manage emotions and feelings in a particular situation. The ability to regulate emotions in oneself and others, moderate emotions, and move from negative emotions to positive emotions are in this dimension (Ugoani, 2020).

### **Experimental background**

Researchers believe that emotional intelligence in businesses involving social components and interpersonal interactions can have a competitive advantage (or a combination of benefits for customers and employees) (Prentice, 2020). Several Persian kinds of research were conducted on both concepts of business intelligence and cultural intelligence as well as emotional intelligence in tourism. (Nazari Salari, Khadivar & Abdolvand, 2016; Akbarianronizi & Ramezanzadeh Lasbooyee, 2015; Karoubi, Amiri & Mahmoodzadeh, 2016)

Bahari et al. (2020) examined the effect of emotional intelligence on the organizational commitment of employees in the hotel industry and concluded that emotional intelligence and its dimensions have a significant positive effect on the organizational commitment of employees. Karoubi et al. (2018) examined the effect of emotional intelligence on the job performance of employees in the hotel industry and concluded that emotional intelligence and its dimensions have a significant positive effect on job performance. Naderi & Akbari (2017) examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and the quality of life of tourism students and concluded that emotional intelligence in times of failure and adversity (due to failure to achieve the goal) creates hope and motivation in the person (a sign of health), and has a direct and indirect positive effect on the quality of life. Karroubi, Hadinejad & Taghavian Noghan (2016) studied the relationship between cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence of tour guides in Tehran and concluded that improving the cultural intelligence of tour guides increases their emotional intelligence and those who benefit from cultural and emotional intelligence can help to improve the relationship between tourists and the host community. Zahedi & Zandi (2015) also studied the effect of emotional intelligence on organizational citizenship behavior in the hotel industry and concluded that there is a significant positive relationship between the components of emotional intelligence and the organizational citizenship behavior of hotel staff.

There are several Latin researchers in this area. Prentice, Dominique Lopes & Wang (2020) examined the effect of emotional and artificial intelligence on employee retention and performance, focusing on service employees in the hotel industry, and concluded that emotional intelligence has an important effect on employee retention and performance. Also, employees with a high level of emotional intelligence can manage customer encounters and create a positive customer service experience, which affects their evaluation of employee service performance and their satisfaction with employees and the hotel. Prentice (2020) also studied the emotional intelligence of tourism service providers in a review

study and emphasized that emotional intelligence affects improving the tourist experience. Lee, Kim & Jeon (2013) also examined the effect of emotional intelligence of South Korean flight attendants on service improvement and organizational loyalty and concluded that organizational loyalty plays a mediating role between emotional intelligence and service improvement.

Some studies have examined the emotional intelligence of the seller in the field of business and banking, and their findings have confirmed the effect of the seller's emotional intelligence on her/his performance (Asgari et al., 2020), the effect of the seller's emotional intelligence on customer loyalty (Asgari et al., 2020; Mohammadzade et al., 2018; Nader Javaherian, 2016; Shoeib & Salavati, 2018), the effect of the seller's emotional intelligence on sales (Mohammadzade et al., 2018) and the effect of seller's emotional intelligence on customer satisfaction (Shoeib & Salavati, 2018; Najafizadeh, Najafizadeh & Fayazi, 2016).

According to these studies, the present study differs from previous research in several cases: Firstly, it is exclusively about tourism and services, not customer and product; Secondly, the role of emotional intelligence in the whole travel process is investigated and not only about satisfaction and loyalty which are related to after the travel experience. Third, it seeks to find the relationship between the emotional intelligence of service providers and the realization of sustainable tourism.

## **Methodology**

This is an exploratory applied study because it seeks to understand the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in the process of travel and the realization of sustainable tourism, and the results can be applied to planners, managers, and related business owners.

The in-depth interview was used to answer the research questions. Experts were recruited through purposeful snowball sampling until data saturation and theoretical saturation. Inclusion criteria were expert who has full knowledge and mastery of the concepts of sustainable tourism, emotional intelligence, satisfaction, human spiritual needs, and basic concepts of tourism, as well as at least 3 years of teaching experience or activity in the field of tourism.

The first interview with a university professor in the field of tourism began and then continued with other experts (until data saturation and theoretical saturation were reached). From September 2020 to January 2021, 12 interviewees including 3 females and 9 males were interviewed. They were four university experts in the field of tourism, four experts in the field of communication, and four service providers of tourism tours in Iran.

To conduct each interview, the purpose and subject of the research were first discussed and an appointment was arranged. Then face-to-face and sometimes online interviews were conducted. Each interview started with the general question "To achieve sustainable tourism, and according to the

tourist's spiritual needs, what role do you think the emotional intelligence of tourism service providers plays in the travel process (before, during, and after the trip). Then, as necessary, more detailed probing questions were asked. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes. At the end of the interview, the researchers reviewed the summary of the material and tried to ensure the accuracy of their perceptions of the raised points with the approval of the other party.

The content analysis technique was used for data analysis. The key points were coded by carefully reviewing the collected data. Finally, during a round-trip process and continuous comparison, the codes were categorized, and the sub-categories and main categories were determined based on the relevant concepts.

Lincoln and Guba's criteria were used to ensure validity and reliability. Lincoln and Guba introduced the concept of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) instead of the concepts of validity and reliability (Nowell et al., 2017). «Credibility» means internal validity and refers to the reasonableness and significance of the findings. To achieve this goal, methods of presenting the results and text of the interview to the interviewee, and matching the findings with what she/he said, as well as long-term observation, and field participation is used. «Transferability» is an alternative to the external narrative, and means providing enough information to the reader to judge the application of findings in other contexts. For this purpose, it is necessary to provide sufficient explanations so that readers can judge the generalizability of the results. «Dependability» replaces credibility, means enabling review by other researchers, and is achieved by documenting research data, methods, and results. «Confirmability» is an alternative to objectivity, meaning re-examination to prove the quality of findings, and is usually done by methods such as multilateralism and self-critical reflection analysis (Parvizi babadi, 2018). Therefore, in the present study, to ensure the trustworthiness of the results, parallel coding by the authors, re-examinations, and final confirmation of the findings by experts were used. Attempts were also made to provide a detailed explanation of the research method, in addition, the results were documented (by giving some quotations and how they were coded) and the findings were explained and interpreted.

After analyzing the content and determining the role of emotional intelligence in the travel process, the "systemic thinking" method was used to determine the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in achieving sustainable tourism. In systemic thinking, the factors and components in question are examined as a single system, and attempts are made to draw a causal relationship between them qualitatively. It makes it easier to understand the complexities of relationships.

Finally, the quality model in this study was drawn using Vensim software based on the researchers' opinions and impressions from interviews. Then, it was seen and approved by the mentioned experts. The obtained pattern was first corrected by two experts and then saturated with the approval of ten other

experts (without change again). Since in the present study, the purpose of applying systems thinking was only to emphasize the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in achieving sustainable tourism, it was sufficient to draw a conceptual model (qualitative/interpretive/descriptive) and validate it by experts, so its quantitative validation, estimation, and validation with numerical values and Scenario writing was ignored. This method of applying systems thinking, which helps to understand causal relationships in systems consisting of qualitative variables, is a new approach to system dynamics that has been used in numerous humanities studies such as Roxas et al. (2020).

## Results

All interviews were transcribed and coded. For example, one part of the second interview was:

*“Sometimes a person decides to travel, but does not know where? Meanwhile, seeing a picture or hearing a certain sound can make her/him decide. For example, sometimes when a person hears the sound of the call to prayer along with the image of the shrine of Imam Reza, she/he feels homesick for the pilgrimage and determines her/his destination. Part of emotional intelligence is recognizing these spiritual needs and aligning advertising with them”*

### Extracted code for this section was:

Helping to make the right choice by considering the tourist’s spiritual needs in the advertisements, using audio and video to suit the spiritual needs of human beings.

### Part of the third interview was:

*“One of the current challenges for tourists is to ensure that health protocols are followed (given the Covid-19 pandemic). Although all tourism service providers advocate for such protocols, the important thing is to gain the tourist's trust. A service provider who uses emotional intelligence to understand the issue of trust can expose another tourist's opinion on his or her social network or site - regarding the service provider's compliance with health protocols-, and thereby gain the trust of the tourist.”*

### Extracted code was:

Obtaining tourists’ trust through displaying other tourists' comments on the site or virtual network.

### Part of the seventh interview was:

*“Usually, when a complete travel package is offered, there are restrictions for the tourist. For example, please imagine a person who is allergic to red meat. if she/he has to choose a travel package that gives her/him no freedom to choose food, will face problems. A service provider with emotional intelligence, realizing this problem, can simply diversify the food menu a little, and reduce the fear of illness (Due to the compulsion to eat improper food).”*

**Extracted code was:**

Put different options to choose from in one travel package.

After extracting the codes, in a reciprocal process, the sub-categories and main categories were identified according to Table 1.

**Table 1. The role of emotional intelligence of service providers in the travel process**

(Source: Findings of the present study)

Travel process	Main categories	Subcategories	Codes
Before the trip	Helping to choose the right travel package	Respect the freedom and authority of the tourist, by offering a suitable and diverse travel package	Put a variety of options to choose from in one travel package
			Provide various packages based on different spiritual needs
			Possibility to change some options during the trip (such as length of stay, etc.)
		Reduce the feeling of shopping risk by creating a sense of confidence in the tourist	Get the support of reference groups to recommend the brand, destination, etc. to others
			Provide the possibility of sharing the opinions of other tourists on the site
			Images of the sea and the horizon (reminder of the infinity of the human soul)
Using spiritual symbols in advertisements, provided conditions for aligning the tourist's choice with her/his spiritual needs (Presenting images, videos, music, etc. in a way that leads the audience's mind to satisfy spiritual needs)	Nostalgic images (reminiscent of memories)		
	Show local life (reminder of simplicity and tranquility)		
	Images of religious places (pay attention to the tourist's beliefs)		
During the trip	Creating a sense of peace, vitality, and happiness in the tourist by responding to her/his spiritual needs	Providing the ground for the tourist's emotional attachment to the residents	Provide the ground for interaction with local people following the tourist spirit.
			Combining travel package with creative tourism features
		Provide the basis for place dependence	Trying to conceptualize the place for the tourist
			Creating nostalgia for her/him
		To meet the tourist's spiritual needs, create the conditions to bring more memories or souvenirs with her/his (by increasing the cost)	Offer to buy handicrafts and souvenirs
			Offer to receive more services
	Educational suggestions in the field of tourist interest (e.g., handicrafts)		
	Investment proposal and ...		
After the trip	Positively influence the mental evaluations and future decisions of tourist	Trying to gain tourist satisfaction	Survey
			Respond to comments
			Follow up on requests
		Trying to make the tourists loyal	Refund part of travel expenses in case of dissatisfaction
			Offering new packages tailored to the mood and interest of the tourist
			Maintain marketing communication with the tourist
Strive for positive quotes	Display tourists' comments for other audiences		
	Encourage tourists to share their opinions and views in member groups		

As shown in Table 1, the role of emotional intelligence of providers in tourism services is classified into three times before, during, and after the trip, which is described below:

**The role of service providers' emotional intelligence before the trip:** Offering a suitable and varied travel package is a respect for the freedom and authority of the tourist. In this regard, it is necessary to design various packages according to the spiritual needs of human beings, and an option for changing and selecting some options of the selected package.

Also, one of the spiritual needs of the tourist is to trust the service providers or the destination and the selected package. This trust is gained through their approval by reference groups and other tourists or their experience. In this regard, service providers can address this issue by attracting the support of reference groups and showing the other tourists' opinions.

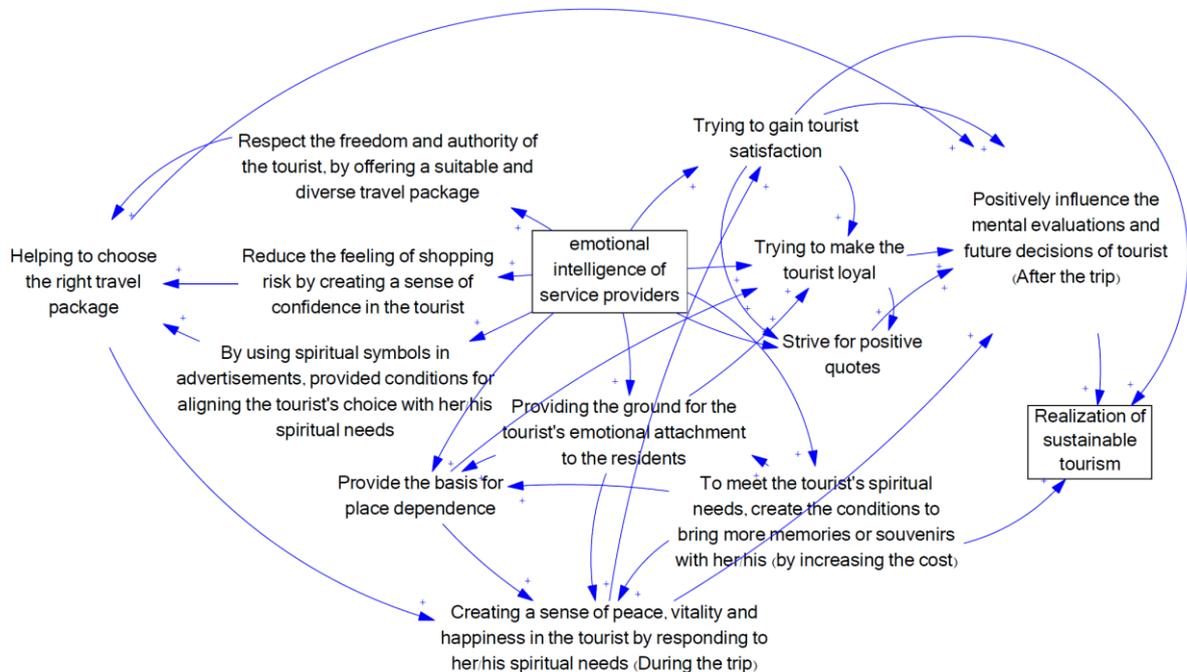
Experts believe that texts, images, videos, and music containing emotional, psychological, and intangible symbols in destination advertisements or tourism services, as well as providing the right image, can help the tourist to make the right choice according to personal mood. People travel based on their mental image of destination. The image of the destination before the trip can be taken from the tourist's knowledge and attitude, previous experience, advice from friends and acquaintances, advertisements, etc. Therefore, it is necessary to advertise dimensions of the destination image that focuses on satisfying the individual's spiritual needs and lead the tourist's imagination in this direction. The more the images correspond to the spiritual and spiritual needs of human beings, the more the motivation to travel become (Ali & Howaidee, 2012). Also, it is necessary to match the images before and after the trip for obtaining tourist satisfaction and desirable branding. In other words, the presented images must reflect the reality, since tourist dissatisfaction, negative quotes, and the lost opportunity to enjoy the benefits of tourist loyalty, also create an unfavorable image for potential tourists.

**The role of service providers' emotional intelligence during the trip:** According to experts, a friendly conversation or a good feeling while traveling often leads to a tendency to stay longer, emotional dependence on service providers or the local community, interest in the place, or even higher costs and purchases. For example, when service providers can perceive and recognize the taste and excitement of tourists seeing a traditional place (the first dimension of emotional intelligence: the ability to perceive expressed emotions), it quickly comes to mind what tourists are interested in (third dimension: the ability to understand the meaning of emotions and the cause of emotion), and they can talk to them more about it (fourth dimension: the ability to manage emotions), give them more training (second dimension: the ability to use emotions to facilitate thinking), or even offer to visit local handicraft markets, to respond correctly to the positive feelings of the tourists and to satisfy them, and to help them take souvenirs and happy memories with them. In addition, it can boost the sale of local handicrafts (second dimension). Now, this can be true of the local food, the natural environment of the

destination, the calm atmosphere, the simplicity of the lifestyle, the avoidance of the hustle and bustle of urban life, and so on.

**The role of service providers' emotional intelligence after travel:** A good memory of the trip, a feeling of calm, and cheerfulness after the trip will naturally lead to satisfaction, loyalty, and a positive quote. In other words, the service providers' emotional intelligence affects tourists' satisfaction, loyalty, and positive quotes by recognizing and satisfying tourists' spiritual needs before and during the trip. Also, maintaining contact with the tourist after the trip can give more information about her/his perception of the travel experience, her/his mental judgments, and other spiritual needs. This connection, which can be established in web-based environments and social networks, facilitates further understanding of the needs and provides the appropriate and diverse definition of tourism packages for tourist re-choices. Offering new packages at this stage can increase tourist loyalty. Also, following their opinions and wishes and displaying them on the relevant site or page can make the tourist more satisfied, to the extent that he/she is encouraged to recommend a specific destination or brand to other tourists, friends, and colleagues.

Figure 1 attempts to present the interpretive model of the research based on the sub-main and main categories (listed in Table 1) through system thinking.



**Figure 1. Interpretive (qualitative) model of the role of service providers' emotional intelligence in the process of travel and the realization of sustainable tourism (Source: Research Findings)**

In the model (figure 1), the causal relationships of the main and sub-categories are tried to be depicted interpretively (according to the opinion of researchers and expert approval). It should be noted that Figure 1 provides only a conceptual (interpretive/qualitative) model of causal relationships, and as mentioned earlier in the research methodology section, considering that in the present study, the purpose of applying systems thinking was only to emphasize the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in achieving sustainable tourism with qualitative validation by experts, was avoided from quantitative validation of the model.

As shown in Figure 1, some subcategories affect not only the main category but also other subcategories. For example, trying to satisfy a tourist brings loyalty and a positive quote. Also, emotional dependence has a positive effect on place dependence, because remembering a destination as part of place dependence can be the result of a friendly conversation with the residents.

In addition, the main categories before and during the trip, helping to choose the right travel package and creating a sense of calm, vitality, etc. have a positive effect on post-trip evaluations. the person who chooses a package that suits his/her spirits and needs, enjoys the experience more, so helping to choose the right package also creates a sense of calm and vitality during the trip.

Recognizing emotions and focusing on them provides the basis for a friendly and memorable conversation because, with the correct knowledge of these emotions, it is possible to determine the direction of the conversation and bring the audience (tourist) with them. What brings a tourist back to a place with a variety of choices is a memorable memory and experience; a good feeling or even a sincere conversation, along with the simplicity and purity of the indigenous people which can be manifested through place dependence and emotional dependence on residents, can take the tourist away from the confusion of imagination and everyday life. In other words, the tourist's loyalty depends on creating a unique memory for her/him. On the other hand, what makes a person feel good is often narrated over and over again as a memorable experience for friends and acquaintances (positive quotes). All of this leads to a better evaluation of travel, and ultimately the realization of more sustainable tourism. Satisfaction, loyalty, and positive quotes leading to a better evaluation of the trip are a competitive advantage for the destination. It can increase sales and attracts more tourists and contributes to the economic dimension of sustainable tourism. On the other hand, tourist satisfaction as a tourism beneficiary is one of the requirements of sustainable tourism.

Figure 1 also depicts the indirect effect of the emotional intelligence of service providers on the realization of sustainable tourism, through a mediator of increasing tourist spending. Increasing the tourist's spending through buying handicrafts and local products or investing in the destination, etc.

helps to increase the incomes of the local community, which contributes to the local community economy and is a basic principle in sustainable tourism.

As a result, it can be said that emotional intelligence has a general and systemic effect, although it was presented in table 1 separately for before, during, and after the trip.

In other words, according to Figure 1, it can be said that the emotional intelligence of service providers, by recognizing the tourists' spiritual needs and responding to them three times before, during, and after the trip, has a direct and indirect impact on tourist satisfaction and improve the tourism economy, and consequently the realization of sustainable tourism.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The tourism industry was created to plan to meet human needs through travel and tourism. Therefore, one of the requirements for earning a stable income in this industry is to respond correctly to the tourist's needs and satisfy her/him. Thus, it can be said that lack of sufficient knowledge about the tourists' spiritual needs and consequently lack of planning for the correct response, can be one reason for tourist dissatisfaction and consequently failure to implement sustainable tourism. many studies have dealt with material travel needs and stimuli, and in this study, only the intangible (spiritual) needs of the tourist have been emphasized. Spiritual stimuli refer to immaterial, intangible, and subjective factors that have a particular focus on evoking emotions and responding to one's spiritual needs. Man has an infinite and free spirit, but material life, with its time and space limitations, labor laws and regulations, etc., deprives him of inherent freedom; As a result, man always is searching for freedom, peace, and alignment with his transcendent soul. On the other hand, tourism, with the relative freedom and leisure that creates for a person, to some extent, provides her/him the opportunity for self-knowledge and satisfaction of psychological needs.

When service providers know their own and others' feelings better, their social skills increase, and have better interaction between them and tourists, and ultimately provide a more desirable trip and lasting evaluation of the trip for tourists. Therefore, the present study, by emphasizing the importance of satisfying the tourists' spiritual needs in their satisfaction and subsequent realization of sustainable tourism, has analyzed the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in the travel process and the realization of sustainable tourism.

The results of this study showed that the emotional intelligence of service providers before, during, and after the trip is important. Its details are as follows:

**Before the trip:** The emotional intelligence of the service providers helps the tourist to choose the right travel package (as follows):

- A. creating diversity in tourism packages respect the tourist's free choice. This freedom can be achieved by the variety of packages or their contents or the possibility of changing the conditions of a tourism package. Free choice reduces the fear of being forced to accept unfavorable conditions. Service providers can recognize these fears and plan to prevent them through emotional intelligence.
- B. Gaining tourist trust: it is possible to reduce the tourist's sense of risk and gain her/his confidence by encouraging reference groups to recommend a brand or destination, and by displaying tourists' opinions on the relevant website or page. In other words, service providers, using their emotional intelligence, can identify the potential risks that the tourist faces, and by changing the situation, gain their confidence in their choice.
- C. Trying to align the tourist's choice with her/his spiritual needs: In this regard, the application of symbols in advertising can be very effective. Service providers can use their emotional intelligence to identify the tourist's spiritual needs, including the need for freedom, peace, reminiscence, simplicity, etc. they can use images, audio, etc. that are reminiscent of the above in advertising their services. Exposing these symbols helps the tourist to align her/his choice of destination and type of travel with her/his spiritual needs just as hearing the call to prayer can motivate a person to visit a religious place and gain peace of mind. Symbols have the property of taking human thoughts with them and leading the person to a particular choice.

Regarding the role of emotional intelligence of service providers before the trip, no relevant research was found whose results are comparable to the present study.

**During the trip:** Travel service providers can use their emotional intelligence to better respond to the tourist's spiritual needs, thereby creating a sense of peace, joy, and happiness in the tourist. This can also be done in the following ways:

- A. Providing the ground for emotional dependence with residents: Understanding the tourist's moods and interests and using emotional intelligence will help lead the tourist to interact more with the locals, thereby paving the way for his/her emotional attachment to the locals. For example, for a tourist who is interested in handicrafts, it is possible to visit the relevant workshops, or even the tourist participates in the production of the product as a show and as an attraction.
- B. providing the ground for place dependence: The feeling of belonging to a place is usually achieved after one or more unique experiences in the place, or job dependence, investment, education, etc. in that place. In such a way that the place finds a special meaning for the person. In this regard, even a good memory of the trip, with a dear friend, and the

recollection of memories, is enough for dependence. As a result, using emotional intelligence to identify the tourist's spiritual needs and interests, and responding to them correctly, can help create a sense of place dependence.

- C. To meet the spiritual needs of the tourist, create conditions to bring more memories, or souvenirs with her/him by increasing the amount of spending: Offer to buy souvenirs that the tourist is interested in, offer to visit local markets, offer to invest in the production of products that the tourist is interested in, or teach what the tourist is interested in, in addition to the destination's economic prosperity, makes the tourist feel good.

In this regard, Lee et al. (2013) addressed employees' emotional intelligence on service improvement, as well as Prentice et al. (2020) and Karoubi et al. (2018), considered employees' emotional intelligence to be effective on employees' performance. Karroubi et al. (2016) also confirmed the effect of tour guides' emotional intelligence on improving the relationship between the host community and tourists, which is consistent with the results of the present study.

**After the trip:** The emotional intelligence of service providers has a positive effect on the tourist's mental evaluations and future decisions, which can be achieved in the following ways:

- A. Efforts to obtain tourist satisfaction: Surveys of a tourist's perception of how to travel, and trying to understand the views, respond to comments, and satisfy the tourist, can affect his/her overall satisfaction with the trip, and reduce the impact of travel possible inconveniences. The use of emotional intelligence facilitates the understanding of tourists' potential dissatisfaction with travel, so it is possible to discover the possible causes by providing conditions and implementing compensation strategies. This finding is in line with the results of Najafizadeh et al. (2016); Prentice et al. (2020), and Shoeib & Salavati (2018), because they concluded that employees' emotional intelligence has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.
- B. Trying to make the tourist loyal: After hearing the tourist's views, future packages can be designed to better suit the tourists' demands. she/he can be offered to buy new packages by maintaining marketing connections with her/him. This result is in line with the results of Shoeib & Salavati (2018); Nader Javaherian (2016) and Asgari et al. (2020) who concluded that employees' emotional intelligence has a positive role in customer loyalty.
- C. Trying to get feedback and positive quotes from tourists (recommendations): Encouraging the tourist to share his/her opinion and analysis of the trip with friends and acquaintances, on the website or social networks page, helps effectively in positive verbal recommendations. In this regard, no relevant research was found with comparable results. However, Prentice et al. (2020) and Prentice (2020) concluded that the emotional

intelligence of service providers has a positive role in the mental evaluations and experience of the tourist. Mohammadzade et al. (2018) also confirmed the role of employees' emotional intelligence on sales.

The interpretive model of the research also emphasized the direct and indirect effects on tourist satisfaction. For example, by helping to select the appropriate travel package and creating a sense of peace, cheerfulness, and happiness in the tourist. In this regard, Jalali, Nadalipour & Fathi (2020) also acknowledged that helping to make smart decisions in purchasing services, ultimately leads to customer satisfaction. Apte & Khandagle (2016), Narimani et al. (2011), and Kapur & Rawat, (2016) also confirmed the effect of emotional intelligence on satisfaction as one of the components of quality of life.

The research model showed that tourist satisfaction has a direct and indirect effect through mental evaluation and future decisions of the tourist on the realization of sustainable tourism. In this regard, several studies such as Roxas et al. (2020), Streimikiene et al. (2021), and Morovati Sharifabadi et al. (2016), emphasized the importance of tourist satisfaction in achieving sustainable tourism. In addition, the research model emphasizes the indirect effect of emotional intelligence of service providers through meeting the tourist's spiritual needs, creating the conditions to bring more memories or souvenirs with her/his (by increasing the cost) affecting the realization of sustainable tourism. with increased tourists' purchases and spending, the local community will benefit more from the economic benefits of tourism. improving the economy of the local community is one of the pillars of sustainable tourism (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020; Roxas et al., 2020).

Therefore, in a general conclusion, it can be said that the results of the present study emphasize the important role of the emotional intelligence of service providers in the travel process, on the one hand, it makes tourists more satisfied, and on the other hand, it is a competitive advantage for business owners. it makes the sales process easier through tourist loyalty and positive quotes; and consequently, creates economic benefits for the local community, and all this contributes to the further realization of sustainable tourism. As a result, it can be said that recognizing the tourists' spiritual needs through the emotional intelligence of service providers, is effective in achieving sustainable tourism. according to the interpretive model of the research, increasing the tourist's cost and the satisfaction and positive mental evaluations after the trip has a positive effect on the realization of sustainable tourism.

In this regard, no study was found to investigate the relationship between the emotional intelligence of service providers and the realization of sustainable tourism, Therefore, it can be said that the results of the present study are a new approach in the field of sustainable tourism, and can be a basis for future research. Also, according to the research results, staff training on the use of emotional intelligence is recommended for planners and business owners related to tourism.

### **Practical suggestions**

According to the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in the travel process, the following practical suggestions are recommended to service providers to achieve the satisfaction of the tourist (by meeting her/his spiritual needs) and ultimately to achieve sustainable tourism:

- Creating diversity in tourism packages or their contents, as well as providing the possibility of changing the conditions of a tourism package.
- encouraging reference groups to recommend a brand or destination, and displaying tourists' opinions on the relevant website or page.
- Presenting images, videos, music, etc. containing spiritual symbols in ads, in a way that leads the audience's mind to satisfy spiritual needs.
- Providing the ground for more tourist interaction with the local community.
- Trying to make the destination memorable for the tourist.
- Offer suggestions to tourists such as buying souvenirs that the tourist is interested in, visiting local markets, investing in the production of products that the tourist is interested in, or teaching what the tourist is interested in.
- After the trip, Surveys of a tourist's perception of how to travel, and trying to understand the views, respond to comments, and satisfy the tourist.
- After hearing the views of tourists, future packages can be prepared to better suit the demands of tourists, and by maintaining marketing connections with them, they can be offered to buy new packages.
- Encouraging the tourist to share his / her opinion and analysis of the trip with friends and acquaintances, on the website or social network pages.

### **Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Finally, it should be noted that although the present study was able to provide an analysis of the role of emotional intelligence of service providers in the tourism process, a breakdown of its impact on different types of tourism (including health tourism, nature tourism, etc.), or compare It did not present its effect on male and female tourists or domestic and foreign tourists, which is one of the limitations of the research. Therefore, reviewing the mentioned cases and comparing the results for future research is recommended.

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