DIPLOMA THESIS

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Influencing factors on the competitiveness of tourism products in Iran tourist cities, with a specific case study on Rasht

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1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a dynamic and multifaceted industry that is pivotal in nations' economic and cultural development. In recent years, Iran has emerged as a developing tourism destination, with its rich historical heritage, diverse landscapes, and vibrant culture attracting visitors from around the world. A fundamental catalyst propelling the expansion of the tourism sector is the magnetic appeal of cities, each endowed with a distinctive array of tourism products tailored to a diverse spectrum of interests and preferences.

Among these cities, Rasht, the capital of Gilan Province in northern Iran, stands out as a promising destination. Rasht's natural beauty, historic sites, culinary traditions, and welcoming atmosphere make it a distinctive hub for tourism activities. However, the competitiveness of tourism products within Rasht is shaped by many factors that demand a comprehensive examination.

This thesis delves into the influencing factors that contribute to or hinder the competitiveness of tourism products in Iranian tourist cities, with Rasht serving as a specific survey.

First, to assess the competitive factors of tourism products, a research model was employed. Subsequently, a questionnaire was constructed based on this model. Furthermore, the competitiveness index of nations, as determined by the], was measured and reported. The findings of this assessment have been utilized in this thesis, focusing on the context of Iran for comparative analysis.

The purpose of this comparison is to elucidate the competitive standing of tourism products in the city of Rasht. It aims to discern whether the competitiveness in Rasht surpasses, equals, or falls below the national average.

Second, the tourism industry is recognized as one of the drivers of economic growth, employment, and cultural exchange in Iran. Therefore, an enhanced understanding of the factors shaping tourism product competitiveness can help local authorities, businesses, and stakeholders make informed decisions to boost the industry's contribution to the national economy.

In addition, this research aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers and city planners on developing and promoting tourism products effectively. By identifying both

strengths and weaknesses, it will be possible to formulate tailored strategies that enhance the competitiveness of Iranian touristic cities, fostering their sustainable development.

The ensuing chapters of this thesis will delve more extensively into these subjects, offering a thorough exploration. Ultimately, this work will serve as a valuable reference for individuals keen on understanding tourism's sustained progression and evolution in Iranian cities, using Rasht as an illustrative case study.

Research objectives:

1. To analyze the current state of tourism in Rasht, Iran.

2. To identify the main factors that influence competitiveness tourism from a literature review

3. To measure and compare competitiveness factors of tourism in Rasht with the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 (TTCI2019) of Iran.

Research Hypotheses:

The statistical hypothesis formulated to achieve the third objective of the research is as follows:

H: The total index of competitiveness in the tourist products of Rasht, derived from questionnaire data, is greater than, equal to, or less than the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 (TTCI2019) score for Iran.

In addition, the statistical assumptions pertaining to the competitiveness factors are delineated in Section 3.5.1.

Keywords: Tourism Product, Competitiveness, Sustainability

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Destination Competitiveness

2.1.1 Competitiveness in the General Literature

In modern conditions of increasing globalization and internationalization of the world economy, the problem of international competition is becoming a priority. The growth of the country's international competitiveness is an outcome of the heightened global competitive landscape. Globalization is characterized by expanding cooperation, strengthening integration, and increasing competition directly related to globalization (CHAYNIKOV A.A., 2022).

Country competitiveness delineates the condition of the national economy and potential avenues for its advancement. Within the framework of the globalized world economy and unrestricted capital movement, the enhancement of country, industry, and product competitiveness collectively emerges from the incorporation of contemporary technologies, innovations, and progressive concepts. This confluence works synergistically to establish optimal socio-economic conditions (Loshkutova, 2009).

The modern economic dictionary considers a country's competitiveness as the ability of the state's economy to participate in world trade, maintain and increase specific segments in world markets, and produce products that meet global requirements. PAUL R. KRUGMAN (2012) states that competitiveness depends on the nation's economic and technological manufacturing capacity, the quality of manufactured goods, the size of production costs, the development of infrastructure, and the presence of absolute and relative advantages of a particular country.

In the late 1970s, researchers and industry experts began emphasizing the concept of competitiveness in the race to achieve economic growth in an accelerating and increasingly complex business world (KRUGMAN, 2012). However, it was not until the 1990s that Michael Porter published his book, The Competitive Advantage of Nations, which spread the term worldwide (PORTER, 1990). Economic unions, international organizations, and think tanks such as the EU, OECD, VEF, and The International Institute for Management Development, have begun publishing competitiveness reports comparing the economic

performance of countries that further increased interest in competitiveness (GARDINER B., MARTIN R., TYLER P., 2004).

As Krugman also notes, the leaders of the leading countries did not doubt that the key to achieving socio-economic prosperity was competitiveness. Competitiveness, as commonly understood, is the ability associated with prosperity or "sustained superior performance" (WISENTHIGE K., GUOPING C., 2016).

The World Economic Forum, in its endeavor to assess countries through the Global Competitiveness Index, defines competitiveness as "the set of institutions, policies, and factors that determine a country's level of productivity" (Global Competitiveness Report Special Edition, 2020). As a result, the universality of the term competitiveness has led to its ambiguity, and as a result, today there is no consensus on what the term means and how it can be measured. Moreover, the meaning of this term has not been formally revised since Porter first introduced it in the 1990s. In addition, according to (FAGERBERG J., KNELL M., SRHOLEC M., 2020), the state of construction of the conceptual theory of competitiveness has not been analyzed. Meanwhile, the process of its construction includes the formation of steps of abstraction from sensations concepts. It constructs the development of theoretical provisions to fully formalize the theory for explaining and predicting the world around us.

The fundamental definition of the term competitiveness is Porter's interpretation of this concept (PORTER, 1990). In describing the competitive advantage of countries, he noted that the only meaningful concept of competitiveness at the national level is productivity. A country's fundamental goal is to provide a high standard of living for its citizens. Productivity is the main factor determining the population's standard of living in the long term, and it is also a critical factor in the formation of national income per capita. Porter (1990) argued that a country's standard of living depends on the ability of its businesses to achieve high levels of productivity and systematically improve them. Businesses must develop the necessary capabilities to compete in more complex industry segments where productivity tends to be high. Thus, the main target factor of competitiveness at the state level is the population's high and growing standard of living. He argued that the primary goal of competitiveness could be achieved by increasing the productivity of domestic businesses. Porter identified the primary context as competition between high-productivity, complex industry segments.

A country with a highly productive industry has a high level of income, which supports the high quality of public services, which, in turn, significantly improves the standard of living of its citizens (PORTER, 1990). Therefore, increasing the productivity of domestic industries contributes to achieving the main goal - competitiveness. At the same time, this is the goal of the entire state (the totality of socio-economic systems and civil institutions) and business.

Since regions, towns, and countries display different income and employment characteristics, one can continue to distinguish microeconomic (based on the competitiveness of products) and macroeconomic approaches (based on productivity). Consequently, this broader and more complex notion of competitiveness becomes more specific:

– Companies and sectors are competitive if their products and services are marketable internationally and capable of realizing high income (added value) without reducing the number of their employees, i.e., if they do not have to cut their workforce because they introduce new technologies or increase their productivity.

– Regions, towns, and countries exhibit competitiveness when their economies are open, per capita income experiences consistent growth, and a high employment rate is sustained. This implies that substantial portions of the population can anticipate benefits from the generated income (Edmonds, 2000, "Regional Competitiveness & the Role of the Knowledge Economy," House of Commons Library, Research paper 00/73, 56 pp.).

Increased productivity leads to higher wages for workers, higher living standards, and higher quality of government services. Thus, the relationship presented in Figure 1 seems quite apparent. At the same time, the more innovative and technologically self-sufficient an economy is, the more innovative and technological resources that benefit productivity are available to all participants in socio-economic processes. From this point of view, it is also natural that the state should create the conditions for accumulating the necessary funds and systems that create a favorable, innovative context for civil institutions and the population within the country. That is why it is highly illogical to study the manifestation of levels of competitiveness in isolation from each other (CHAYNIKOV A.A., 2022).
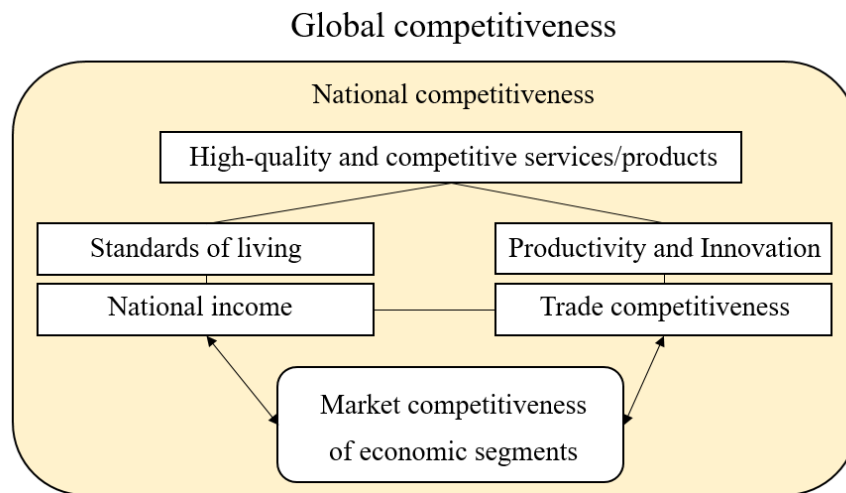
Global competitiveness

Figure 1:   The relationship between levels of competitiveness through its factors
(Source: CHAYNIKOV A.A., 2022)

The objectives of regional development programming and the diverse characteristics and factors influencing competitiveness can be categorized into three distinct levels. (Figure 2):

– Primary classifications of regional competitiveness, represented by ex-post indicators, encompass essential metrics such as income, labor productivity, and employment.

– Developmental (programming) factors influencing regional competitiveness, characterized as ex-ante factors, pertain to elements directly influencing fundamental categories. These factors can be leveraged to enhance regional competitiveness through institutional interventions during short-term programming periods.

– Determinants of regional competitiveness success, encompassing social and environmental conditions, serve as explanatory factors that indirectly influence basic categories and development factors. These determinants evolve over prolonged periods, extending beyond the purview of economic policymaking due to their enduring significance.

The "pyramid model" of regional competitiveness results when characteristics influencing competitiveness are graphically represented. This model comprises a hierarchical structure with the components of long-term success situated at the base. The middle layer incorporates development (programming) factors, while the primary categories included in the standard definition of competitiveness are positioned one level higher. At the pinnacle of the pyramid rests the standard of living and welfare of the region's population, constituting the ultimate objective (LENGYEL I., 2004), "The pyramid model: enhancing regional competitiveness in Hungary," Acta Oeconomica, Vol. 54 (3), pp. 323–342).
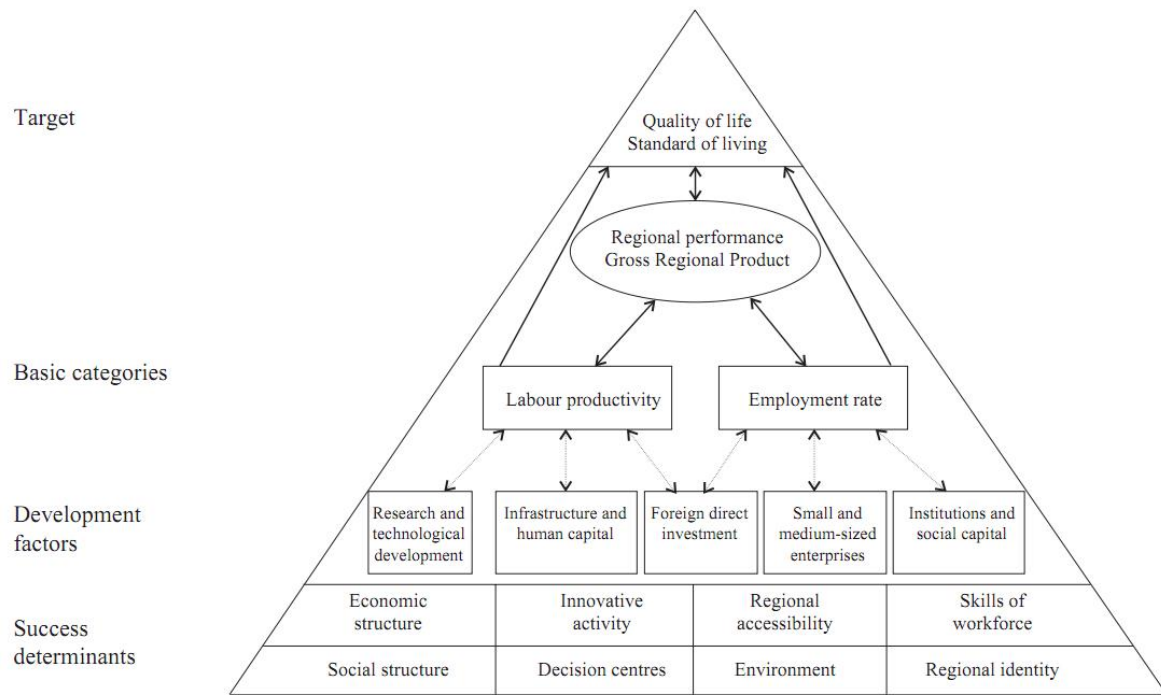
Figure 2:   The pyramid model of regional competitiveness (Source: LENGYEL I. (2004). The pyramid model: enhancing regional competitiveness in Hungary. Acta Oeconomica, Vol. 54 (3) pp. 323–342)

The spread of international competition due to rapid globalization and its impact on domestic industries has made competitiveness necessary (WISENTHIGE K., GUOPING C., 2016). Brady et al. defined globalization as "the intensification of international economic exchange and the label of the modern era of international economic integration" (BRADY, D., BECKFIELD, J. AND SEELEIB-KAISER, M. 'Economic globalization and the welfare state in affluent democracies, 1975-2001', American Sociological Review, Vol. 70, No. 6 2019, pp. 921). Definitions of competitiveness conceptualized the background factor as intensifying global competition and focused on the "intensification of economic exchange" that further intensified global competition through trade. However, these definitions seem to miss the "economic integration" that occurs under globalization (BRADY D., BECKFIELD J., SEELEIB-KAISER M., 2019). Porter extended these definitions by introducing the perspective of trade specialization in the new global competition. He argued that globalization is not just about how many goods a country can export to other countries but a new paradigm shift in economic activity where a country assimilates into the global economy.

According to existing research, the main focus for overall competitiveness is to improve people's quality of life through factors like income, jobs, and fair income

distribution. Achieving this competitiveness involves increasing productivity at the local level throughout the entire economic system. The global context also matters, as how well knowledge and resources are used can impact the competitiveness of countries and companies in different industries.

2.1.2   Competitiveness in the Tourism Industry

The tourism industry is one of the paramount and swiftly advancing economic sectors. It not only caters to the populace's demand for recreation and entertainment but also positively influences the development of cities and regions, contributing significantly to the overall prosperity of their citizens. At the same time, in this sector, there is a high increase in competition associated with an increase in the quality of tourism services, the development of innovations in the field of transport and communications, and the emergence of new marketing technologies in the field of tourism. Thus, ensuring the competitiveness of tourist destinations becomes one of the main directions of regional policy, especially in regions and countries dependent on tourism (THE TRAVEL & TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS REPORT, 2019).

Researchers have proposed different definitions of destination competitiveness from various approaches. RITCHIE J. R. B. CROUCH G. I. (1999) examined the definition regarding the economic prosperity of destination residents, which is consistent with the view raised by the World Economic Forum (PORTER M., 2001). This approach is specifically applicable to international-level destinations. It is considered reasonable to examine destination competitiveness with a focus on economic prosperity since the nations (destinations) compete in the international tourism market to foster the economic well-being of residents, as well as the opportunity to promote the country as a place to live, trade with, invest in, do business with, play sport against, etc. (DWYER L., KIM C. W., 2009).

D'Hauteserre (2015) asserts that competitiveness manifests as "the destination's adeptness in upholding its market standing and share, with a continuous endeavor for enhancement over time." Similarly, Hassan (2000) articulates competitiveness as "the destination's capacity to innovate and integrate value-added products that fortify its resources while strategically maintaining market position vis-à-vis competitors." Furthermore, Dwyer, Forsyth, and Rao (2000) expound that "tourism competitiveness is a comprehensive concept enveloping price differentials, intertwined with currency exchange dynamics, the efficiency levels of diverse facets of the tourist industry, and qualitative factors influencing the allure

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or repulsion of a destination" (Dwyer, 2009). Expanding on this, Dwyer and Kim (2003) posit that destination competitiveness epitomizes "the proficiency of a destination in providing goods and services that outperform counterparts on facets of the tourism experience deemed pivotal by discerning tourists" (Dwyer, Kim, 2009).

According to several studies (DIMANCHE F. (2005); RITCHIE J. R. B., CROUCH G. I. (2009); VANHOVE N. (2002)), the tourism industry in a region can be recognized as competitive only when it has, on the one hand, tourist destinations that are attractive to tourists, and on the other hand, it can provide high-quality products (services) comparable in quality to the products or services of another tourism industry. Destinations of the same market segment. Other studies indicate (MANGION M.-L., DURBARRY R., SINCLAIR M. T. (2005)) that the competitiveness of tourism destinations cannot be separated from creating high-added value products and their integration into the tourism market. In addition, the development of a tourist destination must be sustainable not only economically but also from the point of view of social policy, politics, ecology, culture, etc. A long-term focus on improving the quality of the industry product, which helps improve the image of the tourist destination or country, is also essential generally.

The competitiveness of the tourism sector covers many factors, including:

− natural (geographical location, climate, landscape, etc.);

− artificial environment (tourism infrastructure, transport infrastructure, hotels and restaurants, entertainment industry);

− general globalization of markets, etc.

With the growth of the tourism market and the development of new tourism concepts (holiday, environmental, congress, tourism for people with disabilities, etc.), the relevance and significance of such research is only growing. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to identify competitiveness factors in the tourism industry and consider ways to assess them based on a systematic approach and the CM (Competitivity Monitor) method, adapted to analyze the modern needs of the tourism market.

In the general literature, many definitions of competitiveness have been put forward, but no universally agreed-upon definition (PORTER M., 1999). As a result, numerous factors are linked to destination competitiveness. These factors can encompass objective metrics like the number of visitors, market share, tourist spending, employment,

and the value the tourism industry adds. They can also include subjective aspects such as cultural richness, heritage quality, and tourism experience.

Figure 3 shows a tourist destination's competitiveness and sustainable development model created by DWYER L. KIM C. W. (2009).

This model describes the most critical factors for ensuring the competitiveness of a tourist destination:

− Main/additional factors of the attractiveness of a tourist destination - include natural (primary) and artificially created (additional) resources of the tourism industry (for example, parks, campsites, beaches, theaters, museums, landscapes, etc.);

− Management of a tourist destination aims to enhance the appeal of primary tourist assets and foster the formation and growth of supplementary tourist assets. Competent management serves as a means to establish higher standards of quality, efficiency, and adaptability, meeting the demands of contemporary customers in the tourism industry;

− tourist market and population quality of life – including demand conditions (type of market, seasonality, brand awareness, consumer preferences, etc.), regional and (or) national quality of life.
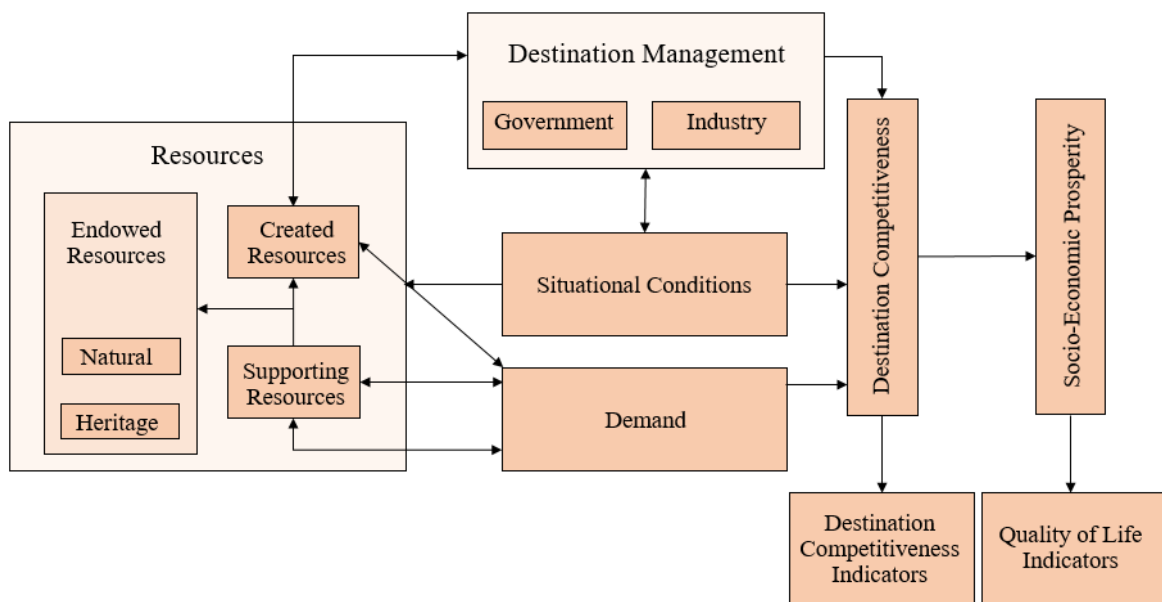

Figure 3:   The Dwyer & Kim's Integrated Model of Destination Competitiveness
(Source: DWYER L., KIM C. W., 2009)

Henceforth, destination competitiveness is delineated as "the adeptness of a destination to conceive and furnish value-added products and deliver a quality experience

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deemed significant by tourists, all the while ensuring the sustainability of its resources and securing a market position relative to competitors" (Dwyer, Kim, 2009; Hassan, 2000).

2.2.   Tourism Product: Concept, Structure, Service Provision

Tourism is characterized by the convergence of an origin and destination in its most elemental form. This fundamental aspect is elucidated through the production and consumption of tourism goods and services (Gunn, 1994). The origin is perceived as the demand side of tourism, while the destination signifies the supply side. Additionally, various links exist between the origin (tourists) and destination, encompassing aspects such as transportation, information accessibility, and marketing components to facilitate purchasing decisions.

Studies have shown that a tourism destination comprises various products and experiential opportunities that come together to create the overall experience for visitors. This complete visitor experience matters for destination competitiveness, and it poses a complex challenge for researchers in the field of tourism to describe (DWYER, 2004) fully.

Within the comprehensive tourism system, the destination functions as a distinct product comprising diverse segments: tourism resources (natural attractions, cultural and historical sites, etc.), infrastructure, accommodation, food services, facilities, activities, and more. The tourism experience, encompassing aspects such as sightseeing, activities, entertainment, hotel stays, food consumption, and interactions with staff and residents, collectively shapes the perception of the destination and significantly influences its competitiveness.

The World Tourism Organization (2019) expands the boundaries of the concept of tourist resources, highlighting the following groups:

- natural resources;
- energy wealth;
- human factor (demographic and cultural aspects);
- institutional, political, legal, and administrative aspects;
- social aspects, features of the social structure, level, and traditions in the field of education,
- health care and recreation;

– various goods and services, transport, communications, infrastructure for recreation and entertainment;

– economic and financial activities.

The understanding and structuring of the tourism product are actively discussed by prominent scientists and have several serious differences from domestic practice. Thus, JEFFRIES D. (2001) identifies six elements of the tourism product: a vehicle used to travel to the destination, a vehicle used on site, the form of housing provision, duration of rest, travel route, and mobility indicators.

A tourism product refers to any service that meets the needs of travelers during their journey and requires payment. In practice, we often categorize these services into core and supplementary offerings. However, in terms of what they offer consumers, there are no significant distinctions between them. For example, guided tours included in a comprehensive package are considered core services. Still, if a tourist buys them separately at their travel destination, they are classified as supplementary services.

Thus, the difference between essential and additional services lies in their relationship to the package or set of tourist services initially purchased by the tourist.

The main tourist product in practical activities is a comprehensive service - a standard set of services sold to tourists in one "package."

2.2.1 Factors Influencing tourism

The tourism sector has been constantly evolving and expanding in the last decades. As a result, it has become an essential part of the economies of many countries, creating many jobs and contributing substantially to the states' gross domestic product. The significance of tourism is, therefore, doubtless. Developing this industry would bring a series of positive externalities, leading to a virtuous circle in which more visitors contribute to the economic development of a region, and a more advanced economy is expected to bring a higher number of tourists through different indirect channels. Thus, it is essential to find out what factors can influence the level of tourism.

1. Cultural attractions: The historical sites, museums, traditional architecture, and cultural events can impact the competitiveness of Rasht's tourism products.

These attractions can attract both domestic and international tourists interested in experiencing Iranian culture.

2. Natural attractions: Rasht's forests, mountains, and rivers.

The availability of outdoor activities like hiking, camping, and wildlife can attract nature lovers.

3. Gastronomic tourism: A prevalent form of travel revolves around exploring food-related experiences. This includes visiting food producers, attending food festivals, dining at renowned restaurants, and discovering unique culinary destinations. The essence of gastronomic tourism lies in tasting specific types of food, observing the production processes, and enjoying dishes prepared by celebrated chefs, contributing to its widespread popularity in contemporary travel trends. That is a notable achievement for Rasht being included in UNESCO's Creative Cities Network for gastronomy highlights the city's dedication to the art and practice of choosing, cooking, and enjoying good food. This recognition can bring attention to Rasht's culinary traditions and contribute to the promotion of its unique gastronomic culture on an international scale.

4. Infrastructure: The quality and accessibility of transportation networks, accommodation options (hotels, guesthouses, etc.), and tourist facilities (restaurants, shopping centers, etc.) can influence the competitiveness of Rasht as a tourist destination.

5. Safety and security: When choosing a destination, safety and security are essential for tourists. A safe environment, low crime rates, and effective emergency services can positively impact the competitiveness of tourism products.

6. Hospitality and service quality: The friendliness, professionalism, and language skills of the local population, as well as the quality of customer service provided by tourism-related businesses, can influence the competitiveness of Rasht as a tourist destination.

7. Marketing and promotion: Effective marketing strategies and promotional campaigns highlighting Rasht's unique attractions and experiences can attract more tourists and enhance its competitiveness in the tourism market.

8. Government support and policies: Supportive government policies, investment in tourism infrastructure, and developing cultural heritage can contribute to the competitiveness of Rasht's tourism products.

9. Accessibility: Good connectivity through air, road, and rail networks, as well as the availability of direct flights or transportation options from major cities or international airports, can make Rasht more accessible to tourists.

10. Pricing: Competitive pricing of accommodation, attractions, and services compared to other destinations can make Rasht more attractive to tourists, especially budget-conscious travelers.

11. Sustainability: Minimizing environmental impacts, preserving cultural heritage, and supporting local communities can enhance the competitiveness of Rasht's tourism products for those responsible travelers in the environment.

It is clear that the growth factors of tourism are dynamic and tend to change at a very high rate from region to region because of massive disparity among the landscapes, people, traditions, and climates.

2.3. Tourism in Iran

2.3.1 Overview of the Tourism Industry

Over the past few years, Iran has attracted the attention of politicians, scholars, researchers, the media, and ordinary people interested in events in the Middle East, Iran, and around it.

Iran's strategic geographical position holds significance as it shares borders with the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz to the south, critical passageways for substantial oil exports. The nation boasts noteworthy reserves of gas and oil. Within its borders reside diverse ethnic groups, including Persians, Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Baluchis, Talysh, and Arabs, coexisting harmoniously. Historically, up until 1979, tourism, particularly on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea, thrived. However, there has been a noticeable shift, and presently, religious, cultural, and ethnographic tourism is experiencing growth in the region.

So far, Iran has registered 25 cultural sites and two natural sites in the UNESCO World Heritage. Iran has registered 16 cultural subjects in the UNESCO Intangible Heritage and four cities in the UNESCO Creative Cities Collection. This is just a part of Iran's tourism potential in different regions due to this country's rich history and culture. Iran has a variety of tourist areas throughout its geography.

Iran (Persia) is a rich country in Culture, History, and Natural heritage, home to one of the world's oldest civilizations, and known as the Four Seasons' Country.

In addition to sites inscribed on the World Heritage list, member states can maintain a list of tentative sites they may consider for nomination. The World Heritage List of

nominations is only accepted if the site was previously listed on the tentative list. As of August 2023, Iran has 56 properties on UNESCO's tentative list.

Tourism in Iran has steadily grown as more travelers discover the country's rich history, diverse landscapes, and warm hospitality. Iran offers a unique blend of ancient civilizations, stunning architecture, breathtaking natural beauty, and a vibrant culture that attracts visitors worldwide.

Based on the infrastructure and attractions provided, Iran can be divided into eight central regions (see Figure 4):

- History and culture.
- Forest and green plains.
- Religion.
- Entertainment.
- Spring nature.
- Spa.
- Expedition.
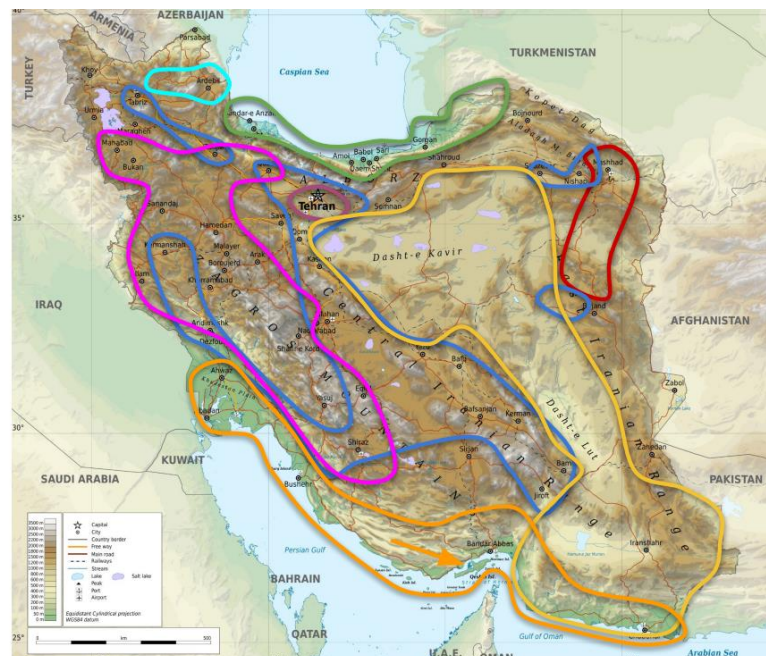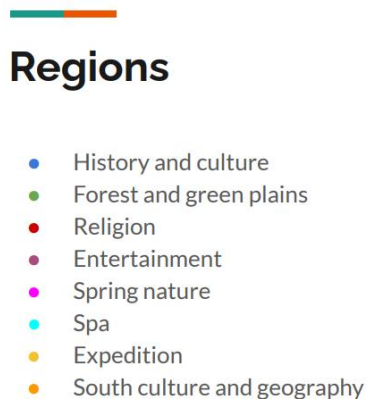- South culture and geography.

Figure 4: Main Touristic Regions of Iran (Source: Own Development)

Many "horror stories" regarding Iran are idle speculation or the result of deliberate disinformation. Traveling around the country is relatively safe. Iranians are very hospitable

and friendly people. Iran is very original; the country has many unique natural, historical and architectural monuments.

2.3.2 Statistics

According to the World Tourism Organization statistics bureau, Iran's foreign tourist arrivals 2022 rose 315 percent from a year earlier. Data showed that around 4.1 million tourists came to the country in 2022, while Iran attracted 990,000 tourists in 2021.

In 2022, the increase in foreign tourist arrivals experienced a growth rate three times higher than the global average in this sector. However, Iran's share in attracting foreign tourists remains relatively small despite this upward trend, accounting for only 0.4% of all foreign tourist trips in the same year, as outlined in the report.

The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) was analyzed to assess the overall situation. Since the latest published report –TTCI 2021 – covers only 117 countries, excluding Iran, the report of 2019 was analyzed.

Encompassing 140 economies, the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 gauges the array of factors and policies instrumental in fostering the sustainable development of the travel and tourism sector. This, in turn, plays a pivotal role in contributing to a country's overall development and competitiveness.

Among the presented 140 economies, Iran ranked 89 with a 3.5 out of 7 score. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that its rank has gone up since the previous report of 2017, showing Iran as the 93rd economy with a total score of 3.4. Iran also ranks 8th in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This is due to the significant improvement in information and communications technology (ICT) readiness (Figure 5). It encompasses preparing the organization's ICT (i.e., the IT infrastructure, operations, and applications), plus the associated processes and people, against unforeseeable events that could change the risk environment and impact ICT and business continuity.

Figure 5 presents 14 main features that were estimated in the Report. As can be seen, almost all of them belonging to Iran fall below the average. The ones that overcome the group average are price competitiveness, natural and cultural resources, and business travel.

Figure 5: Iran's ICT Readiness as the most improved one among 140 economies'
(Source: The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report, 2019)

Regarding price competitiveness, Iran maintains its leading position among the presented countries (Figure 6). Prices have become more competitive regionally, enhancing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region's substantial advantage compared to the global average. As a significant global producer of fossil fuels, MENA boasts some of the world's lowest fuel prices, often supported by government subsidies. Furthermore, several regional economies, notably Iran, Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia, offer visitors enhanced purchasing power due to lower exchange rates. Notably, recent years have seen improvements in regional price competitiveness driven primarily by reductions in ticket taxes, airport charges, and decreased hotel prices.

	Global Rank	ENABLING ENVIRONMENT					T&T POLICY & ENABLING CONDITIONS				INFRASTRUCTURE			NATURAL & CULT. RESOURCES	
		Business Environment	Safety & Security	Health & Hygiene	Human Resources & Labor Market	ICT Readiness	Prioritization of T&T	Int'l Openness	Price Compt'ness.	Environ. Sustainability	Air Transport Infrastructure	Ground & Port Infrastructure	Tourist Service Infrastructure	Natural Resources	Cultural Res. & Business Travel
United Arab Emirates	33	5.6	6.3	5.4	5.1	6.4	4.7	3.0	5.5	4.5	5.7	4.5	5.6	2.4	2.2
Qatar	51	5.6	6.3	5.3	5.1	5.6	4.4	3.5	5.9	4.4	4.5	4.7	5.0	1.8	1.4
Israel	57	5.1	5.5	6.0	5.3	5.9	5.0	2.5	3.8	4.3	3.6	4.4	5.4	2.3	1.7
Oman	58	5.3	6.5	5.3	4.6	5.3	4.7	2.8	5.7	4.4	3.4	4.4	4.1	2.3	2.0
Bahrain	64	5.4	5.9	5.2	4.9	5.8	4.5	2.9	5.8	4.1	3.5	5.2	4.6	1.6	1.2
Saudi Arabia	69	5.2	6.0	5.7	4.6	5.2	4.6	1.6	5.9	4.0	4.1	3.5	5.1	1.9	1.9
Jordan	84	4.6	5.7	5.4	4.0	4.8	5.1	3.3	5.3	4.3	2.7	2.9	3.8	2.2	1.3
Iran, Islamic Rep.	89	3.9	5.4	5.0	4.1	4.5	3.7	2.4	6.7	3.9	2.5	3.1	2.8	2.4	2.8
Kuwait	96	4.7	5.8	5.6	4.3	5.5	3.6	1.9	5.6	4.0	2.6	3.3	3.9	1.8	1.1
Lebanon	100	4.0	4.8	5.6	3.9	4.1	5.0	2.5	5.5	4.1	2.5	2.8	4.0	2.0	1.4
Yemen	140	3.5	3.2	4.1	3.0	2.4	2.1	1.3	6.0	3.4	1.2	2.0	1.9	1.8	1.3
Middle East Aveage		**4.8**	**5.6**	**5.3**	**4.5**	**5.1**	**4.3**	**2.5**	**5.6**	**4.1**	**3.3**	**3.7**	**4.2**	**2.1**	**1.7**
Egypt	65	4.4	4.8	5.0	4.3	4.3	5.2	2.2	6.5	4.7	3.3	3.4	3.2	3.0	3.3
Morocco	66	4.9	6.0	4.6	4.1	4.6	5.2	3.1	5.6	4.5	3.2	3.5	3.9	3.1	2.2
Tunisia	85	4.4	5.2	5.2	4.1	4.4	5.0	2.6	6.1	4.4	2.5	2.8	4.1	2.6	1.4
Algeria	116	3.9	5.6	5.2	4.1	4.2	3.1	1.5	6.2	3.5	2.2	2.8	1.8	2.1	2.0
North Africa Average		**4.4**	**5.4**	**5.0**	**4.2**	**4.4**	**4.6**	**2.3**	**6.1**	**4.3**	**2.8**	**3.1**	**3.3**	**2.7**	**2.2**
MENA AVERAGE		**4.7**	**5.5**	**5.2**	**4.4**	**4.9**	**4.4**	**2.5**	**5.7**	**4.2**	**3.2**	**3.6**	**4.0**	**2.2**	**1.8**

Figure 6: The Middle East and North Africa TTCI 2019 Scores (Source: The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report, 2019)

In recent years, the country's scores in the last two areas have experienced a decline, necessitating intensified efforts to enhance habitat protection and preserve heritage sites, as indicated by The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, 2019. Additionally, relatively low digital demand for natural, cultural, and entertainment experiences suggests potential gaps in marketing strategies and traveler perceptions. The persistent safety and security concerns are a plausible explanation for this disparity. Eleven Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries rank within the bottom 40 for terrorism incidents, with two among the ten worst globally.

Moreover, Iran grapples with geopolitical tensions, instability, and conflict. Security concerns contribute to Iran being the most restrictive concerning international openness. Consequently, travelers often encounter barriers when visiting the region, while the aviation and overall Travel and tourism (T&T) sectors face constraints due to limiting bilateral air service and regional trade agreements.

In 2019, Iran became the third fastest-growing tourism destination globally, experiencing an impressive yearly growth rate of 27.9 percent. This remarkable growth can be attributed to various incentives, including visa waivers, a 90-day visa-on-arrival policy, standard residence services, alluring tourism routes and packages, and cost-effective and secure tours. These factors and adherence to the latest international tourism standards contributed to a remarkable 53% increase in inbound tourism in 2019, securing Iran's position as the top-ranking country globally.

Furthermore, Iran's tourism sector stands out for its highly competitive prices (see Figure 7), positioning it as a new phenomenon in the global tourism landscape, garnering attention from numerous nations.
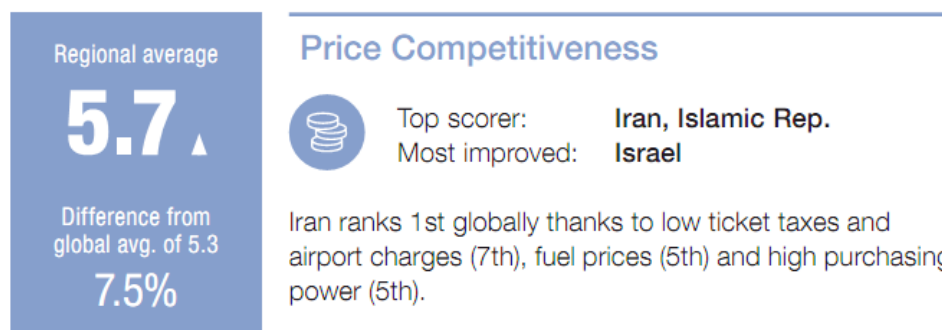

Price Competitiveness

| Regional average | Top scorer: | Iran, Islamic Rep. |
| **5.7** ▲ | Most improved: | Israel |

Iran ranks 1st globally thanks to low ticket taxes and airport charges (7th), fuel prices (5th) and high purchasing power (5th).

Difference from global avg. of 5.3
7.5%

Figure 7:   Iran as the Top Scorer in Price Competitiveness among 140 economies'

(Source: The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report, 2019)

Although COVID-19 restrictions resulted in a decline after 2019, by 2022, with the gradual relaxation of measures, tourism in Iran rebounded to levels reminiscent of the pre-2017 period.

Figure 8 presents international tourist arrivals to Iran in 2011-2022, and Figure 9 shows international tourist arrivals to Iran in 2022 by month. Notably, the peak was reached in July, with Iran welcoming over 550,000 tourists (13% of the year's arrivals). However, the gap is not huge, proving the popularity of inbound tourism throughout the year.
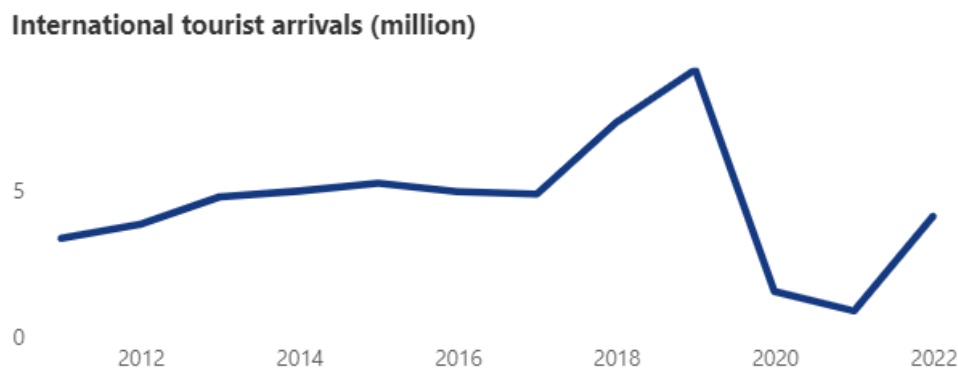
International tourist arrivals (million)

Figure 8: International Tourist Arrivals to Iran in 2011-2022 (Source: UNWTO Tourism Dashboard, 2023)

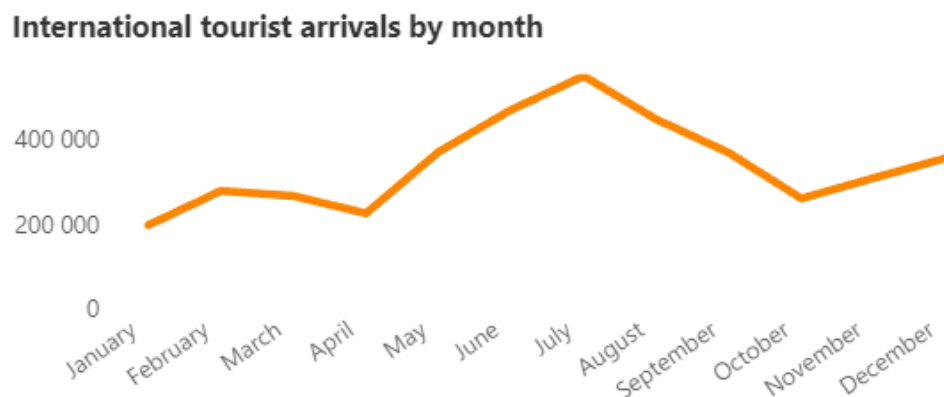**International tourist arrivals by month**

Figure 9: International Tourist Arrivals to Iran in 2022 by Months (Source: UNWTO Tourism Dashboard, 2023)

According to the latest statistics of the WORLD TRAVEL AND TOURISM COUNCIL, the share of the tourism industry in the total economy of Iran in 2022 also increased by 39.2 percent and reached 4.6 percent of the total economy of Iran.

With the boom in tourism, the job creation rate of this industry in Iran increased by 11.2% in 2022, and the number of people working in this industry increased to 1.44 million. In the same way, the share of the tourism industry in total employment in Iran reached 6.1%

in 2022. Statistics show that foreign tourists spent 6.2 billion dollars in Iran in 2022, a 73.5% increase compared to the previous year (UNWTO, 2023).

Based on the Travel And The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (2015), a SWOT analysis of the tourism industry in Iran was implemented (Figure 10).

Strengths	Opportunities
– Price Competitiveness; – Diverse and unspoiled natural settings with a range of geographical landscapes; – Suitable geographical and strategic location; – Suitable geographical and strategic location; – Potential capacity of the zone for investment and tourism planning	– Increase in human resources; – Growing ICT readiness; – Developing air transport infrastructure and ground and port infrastructure; – Growing attention to natural resources.
Weaknesses	**Threats**
– Undeveloped business environment; – Lack of safety and security; – Weak labor market; – Low attention to the travel and tourism industry; – Slowly developing tourist service infrastructure. – Unsuitable environmental and organizational infrastructures; – Weakness of promotional activities, public relations and marketing regarding the tourism attractions in the zone; – Lack of the most minor welfare facilities in tourism sites.	– Little foreign investment in the tourism sector of the zone; – Lack of suitable strategic and operational programs to attract foreign tourists to Iran; – Development of tourism in neighboring countries; – Political instability.

Figure 10: SWOT analysis of the tourism industry in Iran (Source: TRAVEL AND THE TRAVEL & TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS REPORT, 2015)

Endowed with myriad natural beauties, a rich history and culture spanning through time, and many tourist sites, including 27 inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, Iran earnestly strives to secure a more substantial share in the global tourism industry.

2.3.3   Rasht as a Tourist Destination

Situated in northern Iran, approximately 25 km from the Caspian Sea coast, Rasht is one of the country's foremost tourist destinations, celebrated for its natural and historical attractions. Positioned 327 kilometers from Tehran, Rasht is a megacity and is the focal point of the Gilan province in northern Iran. It is the largest and most densely populated city among the three provinces bordering the Caspian Sea: Gilan, Mazandaran, and Golestan.

Climate

Gilan is one of the greenest provinces in Iran, and much of its popularity is due to its unique climate. The weather in Rasht is temperate and semi-Mediterranean, with warm and hot summers and wet and cold winters. It has the highest rainfall in Iran and is known as the City of Rain.

Rasht was also called the city of Silver Rain due to the rainfall rate. The lowest rainfall occurs in the summer, especially in August, September, and November.

Continuous rains in Rasht and Gilan have forced residents to use appropriate roof coverings. The most suitable covering for their roofs was the use of ceramics.

The minimum temperature in Rasht city is 11°C and the maximum is 20°C.

Culture

Although Gilan is one of the smallest provinces in Iran, it is a province with ethnic and dialect diversity. Various ethnic groups in Rasht and other areas of Gilan coexist peacefully and form a common rich culture.

The people of Rasht observe various rituals in their daily activities, which gives the city a reputation as a city of high culture among various ethnic groups in Iran.

Rasht is pivotal in Iran's historical narrative, serving as the gateway to Russia and Europe and consequently being influenced by Western architecture. This city boasts the distinction of hosting Iran's inaugural public library and is the first Iranian city where girls were allowed to attend school.

Iran declared January 2 as Rasht Day to commemorate the historical heritage of Rasht.

Language

The residents of Rasht primarily communicate in Gileki, a Caspian language belonging to the northwestern Iranian language branch. However, Persian is the official national language in the region.

Traditional food

Aside from its nature, this Iran City is well-known for its food. It is so famous that UNESCO registered it as a creative city of gastronomy.

Food is essential for the people pf Guilan and is one of the most significant aspects of their lives. Also, its importance can be seen in the province's diversity of dishes, especially in Rasht, the center of Guilan province. Besides, the reason for the formation of these varied and colorful foods can be due to the climate of this region, which gave diverse vegetation and animal diversity, and this diversity has had an impact on the formation of the people's food culture.

The existence of plants, poultry and various marine animals opens the door to creating diverse cuisines. Besides, a variety of delicious flavors such as pomegranate sauce, garlic, and olive oil should not be ignored since they are constant ingredients of Gilaki foods and specify the originality of the foods of this area. Garlic, eggplant and tomatoes are one of the most nutritious ingredients for making foods. Moreover, Gilan rice, famous worldwide, is often used instead of bread for meals.

The city offers more than 200 recipes. Gilan cuisines are mostly garlic-stoke and vegetable-rich. Rasht foods are very diverse and visitors will have a gourmet meal, with any taste, in the world of delicious desserts. The most well-known foods in Rasht are Mirza Qasemi, Torsh-e Tareh, Anar-Bij, Sir-Qelyeh, Baqali-Qatoq, kal Kabab, Aloo Mosamma, and sour Kebab.

As a Creative City of Gastronomy, Rasht envisions several key initiatives:

- Establishing the Local Food Museum to preserve and promote local food products and recipes, including the indigenous food culture of Guilan.

- Supporting research and development (R&D) in gastronomy and nutrition through collaboration with academia and research centers.

- Empowering women, vulnerable groups, and individuals in culture, social affairs, and economy by providing enhanced training and employment opportunities.

- Fostering collaboration with other Creative Cities of Gastronomy through the exchange of knowledge and experiences, as well as undertaking joint initiatives.

Sights of Rasht

Rasht has many monuments due to its long history. Unlike many small Iranian cities, Rasht has a great nightlife and visitors will see many people hanging out in large squares at night.

Rasht is famous for its city hall in a square called "City Hall Square," built around 1900. It is Rasht's most identifiable landmark due to its colonial style, topped by an iconic mini-dome and a distinctive whitewashed tower. It looks great in daylight. This historical square dates back to the Pahlavi dynasty and is one of the most famous places in Iran from the past to the present day. Visitors can see historical places like the Telegraph Museum, the Old Hotel, the Clock Tower and other buildings. The presence of markets and shops in this square has made it one of the destinations for walking and entertainment.

"Rasht Bazaar" is one of the attractions of the Rasht district. The variety of products, their quality and freshness are among the most important reasons for the popularity of this bazaar among people and tourists for the largest open bazaar in the country.

The "Tomb of Mirza Kuchak Khan," known as Sardar-i-Jangal, is located south of Rasht. This simple and, at the same time, beautiful monument is highly respected by everyone who visits the area.

"Gilan Rural Heritage Museum" is located 18 km south of Rasht. The open-air museum, dedicated to rural and tribal life, is the first in Iran and remains a unique museum of this type in Iran and beyond in the Middle East and Central Asia.

"Lake and village Sakalaksar dam" is located 15 kilometers south of Rasht behind the embankment dam in the village of Sakalaksar. Sakalaksar Village is a picturesque area where tourists can see the villagers working hard in the rice fields.

The "Qadir House" in Rasht is one of the historical buildings of the province, dating back to the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods.

The National Library, Iran's first public library, is another place in Rasht that attracts visitors.

"Saravan Nature Park" is one of the oldest forest fields of Gilan, which, due to its variety of plant species, is rarely found throughout the country and even around the world. At the entrance to the Saravan forest park, there is a small pond that is incredibly beautiful. This pond has a wooden platform and swan-shaped boats for walking on the water.

Eynak Lagoon (glasses lagoon) is located in the West of Rasht and is considered the second-largest pond in the Gilan province. This pond is called Einak (glasses), as seen in aerial photographs.

2.4. Sustainable Tourism

2.4.1 Theoretical Aspects of Sustainable Tourism

The World Tourism Organization's definition of sustainable tourism is comprehensive and emphasizes a holistic approach. It highlights the need for tourism to consider its immediate impacts and long-term consequences on economic, social, and environmental dimensions. By balancing the needs of tourists, industry, the environment, and local communities, sustainable tourism aims to create a harmonious and lasting impact that benefits all stakeholders. The cited source, the UNWTO EU Guidebook on Sustainable Tourism for Development (2013), likely provides further insights into practical guidelines for implementing sustainable tourism practices.

Moreover, the World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme affirm that sustainable tourism "refers to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability" (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005: 11-12. Making Tourism More Sustainable – A Guide for Policy Makers). This definition underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that considers the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and socio-cultural factors in ensuring the enduring sustainability of tourism. Sustainable tourism should also maintain high tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience, raising awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

The twelve main goals for sustainable tourism laid out in 2005 by the World Tourism Organization and the United Nations Environment Program are as follows:

1. Economic Viability: To ensure the viability and competitiveness of tourism destinations and enterprises so that they can continue to deliver benefits in the long term.

2. Local Prosperity: To maximize the contribution of tourism to the economic prosperity of the host destination, including the proportion of visitor spending retained locally.

3. Employment Quality: To strengthen the number and quality of local jobs created and supported by tourism, including the level of pay, conditions of service and availability to all without discrimination by gender, race, disability, or other ways.

4. Social Equity: To seek a widespread and fair distribution of economic and social benefits from tourism throughout the recipient community, including improving opportunities, income, and social services.

5. Visitor Fulfillment: To provide a safe, satisfying and fulfilling experience for visitors, available to all without discrimination by gender, race, disability, or other ways.

6. Local Control: To engage and empower local communities in planning and decision-making about tourism management and future development in their area in consultation with other stakeholders.

7. Community Wellbeing: To maintain and strengthen the quality of life in local communities, including social structures and access to resources, amenities, and life support systems, avoiding any form of social degradation or exploitation

8. Cultural Richness: To respect and enhance the historic heritage, authentic culture, traditions, and distinctiveness of host communities

9. Physical Integrity: To maintain and enhance the quality of landscapes, both urban and rural, and avoid the physical and visual degradation of the environment

10. Biological Diversity: To support the conservation of natural areas, habitats, and wildlife and minimize damage to them

11. Resource Efficiency: To minimize the use of scarce and non-renewable resources in the development and operation of tourism facilities and services

12. Environmental Purity: To minimize the pollution of air, water, and land and the generation of waste by tourism enterprises and visitors. [Making Tourism More Sustainable - A Guide for Policy Makers, UNEP and UNWTO, 2005, p.11-12 http://www.unep.fr/shared/publications/pdf/DTIx0592xPA-TourismPolicyEN.pdf]

The role of sustainability in tourism finds its place in The Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI) (World Economic Forum – The Travel & Tourism Development Index – Insight Report, 2021). It is a direct evolution of the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI), published biennially for the past 17 years. The TTDI

benchmarks and measures the set of factors and policies that enable the sustainable and resilient development of the Travel and Tourism (T&T) sector, which in turn contributes to the development of a country. The transition from TTCI to TTDI reflects the index's increased coverage of travel and tourism (T&T) development concepts, including the expanding role of sustainability and resilience in T&T growth (World Economic Forum – The Travel & Tourism Development Index – Insight Report, 2021). The Tourism & Travel Competitiveness Index is a strategic benchmarking tool for various stakeholders, including businesses, governments, international organizations, and others involved in developing the Travel and Tourism (T&T) sector. This index facilitates cross-country comparison, enabling the benchmarking of countries' progress in the key drivers of T&T development. In doing so, it offers valuable insights that inform policies and investment decisions, both for T&T businesses individually and for the sector as a whole.

The structured design of the index, encompassing five subindexes, 17 pillars, and 112 individual indicators distributed among these pillars (as depicted in Figure 11), offers a comprehensive framework for evaluating the Travel and tourism sector. This intricate structure serves to identify the strengths and areas for improvement in each country, aiding in the development of sustainable and resilient growth strategies. Moreover, the index is a pivotal platform for multistakeholder dialogue, fostering discussions that formulate effective policies and actions at various levels—local, national, regional, and global.

Figure 11: Travel & Tourism Development Index framework (Source: World Economic Forum – The Travel & Tourism Development Index – Insight Report, 2021)

2.4.2 Sustainable Tourism in Iran

Sustainable development is frequently viewed as a long-term approach to balancing the requirements of the present with those of the coming generations. In order to improve the long-term prosperity and riches of the current generation and to prevent actions that might harm the prospects of future generations, sustainable development is a sort of development strategy (TOSUN C., 2001). The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2021 describes the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a set of 17 interconnected global goals that serve as a road map for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. In order to accomplish the stated objectives, the world is urged by the 2030 Agenda to take courageous and revolutionary actions (HALL C. M., 2019).

Appropriate tourism development and tourism management in Iran is to contribute to almost all 17 goals of SDGs. Goal 11 of the 2030 Agenda strongly emphasizes "Sustainable Cities and Communities," with Target 11.4 being "to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage." Cultural heritage is also mentioned more subtly in other goals like Goal 4 on "Education," Goal 8 on "Work and Economic Growth," and Goal 12 on "Consumption and Production" (LABADI S., GILIBERTO F., ROSETTI I., SHETABI L., YILDIRIM E., 2021). In order to achieve the objectives of sustainable development, heritage can be a crucial resource that promotes identity, memory, and a feeling of place (LABADI S., GILIBERTO F., ROSETTI I., SHETABI L., YILDIRIM E., 2021; AREMU, 2014). Heritage boosts regional attractiveness, social welfare, and social cohesion, as well as the long-term advantages of tourism. Heritage tourism may present the potential for sustainable economic development and enhance community quality of life due to the uniqueness of the cultural, historical, architectural, and archaeological treasures found at heritage sites (OLYA, ALIPOUR, and GAVILYAN 2018). According to KHODADADI, PEZESHKI, and O'Donnell (2021), heritage tourism requires a sustainable approach to management and planning, and community support is essential for the establishment of sustainable tourist development strategies at heritage sites (OLYA, H. G., ALIPOUR H., GAVILYAN Y., 2018). Participating society in sustainable development initiatives increases the likelihood that the Sustainable Development Goals will be met and reduces the difficulties associated with protecting cultural heritage as a precious but fragile resource for current and future generations.

Iran is a unique tourist destination with diverse natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. The country attracts tourists with its architecture, historical monuments, culinary

traditions, and the hospitality of its people. However, to achieve sustainable tourism development, attention must be paid to several important aspects.

Three main sustainability dimensions and their implementation in Iran are described in Table 1.

Table 1: The Situation surrounding Sustainable Tourism in Iran

	Sustainability	Situation	Challenge
1	Economic	The government also actively supports programs aimed at developing rural tourism communities. The Rural Tourism project encourages infrastructure development, creating rural hotels and providing tourism training to residents. As a result, the number of tourists visiting rural areas has increased by 15% over the past two years, bringing additional income to rural communities.	− Poor quality of life: a more expansive definition of human well-being beyond economic welfare should be proposed. − The lack of direction and economic strategies in the ecotourism industry. − The shortcomings and failure of infrastructure services such as the roads. − The non-compliance of economic and environmental integration: Economic decisions should be chosen according to their environmental impacts.
2	Social	Iran also actively supports programs to preserve cultural heritage and respect local traditions. An example is the creation of "Cultural Villages," which are living museums and tourist attractions. They help preserve unique cultural aspects and create opportunities for local people to participate in the tourism industry. This helps to strengthen sociocultural ties and develop regional communities.	− Need for commitment between eras: At the show, choices about future eras' natural effects must be made. − Social equity: All individuals have the right to have the environment in which they develop and flourish. − Need of inclusion: Educate ought to be rebuilt to form all sounds within the decision-making handle. − Need for security in a few forsake ranges in Iran. − The need for legitimate administration within the eco-tourist locales.

			– Need of ease in getting visas to enter the nation. – Need for Lodgings and resort centers within the eco-tourist districts.
3	Environmental	Iran has government programs aimed at protecting natural resources and the environment. An example of such a program is Green Iran, which aims to increase green space and reduce energy consumption. As part of this program, environmentally friendly hotels are built, and green landscaping is done in tourist areas. As a result, the number of trees in Iran has increased by 14% since 2016, leading to improved air quality and enriched nature.	– Lack of comprehensive strategic programs – Lack of skill and human resources in eco-tourism major – Weakness and lack of social security, especially in some remote areas – Lack of attention to eco-tourism attractions and lack of responsibility for the environment. – Unsuitable transportation system to visit specific areas.

(Source: ISMAEL REZAEINEJAD, The role of Eco-tourism in sustainable development: case study eco-tourism challenges in Iran, 2021)

In the last few years, Iran has increased the number of measures to promote sustainable tourism, recognizing the importance of balancing tourism development with environmental, cultural, and socio-economic considerations. Some measures and initiatives Iran has implemented to ensure sustainable tourism are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Assuring Sustainable Tourism in Iran

	Measure	Example
1	Development of Eco-Tourism	Golestan National Park, located in northern Iran, is a prime example of an eco-tourism destination. Visitors can explore diverse ecosystems, observe wildlife, and enjoy hiking and camping while adhering to responsible tourism practices.
2	Preservation of Cultural Heritage	Iran has UNESCO World Heritage Sites like Persepolis and Isfahan's historical city center, where meticulous preservation efforts are undertaken to protect these cultural treasures.
3	Community Involvement	The village of Abyaneh, known for its traditional red mud-brick houses, involves residents in tourism activities by offering homestays, guided tours, and the sale of handmade crafts.

4	Tourism Infrastructure	Iran has developed modern hotels and improved transportation infrastructure, including expanding airports and highways to enhance tourist accessibility.
5	Environmental Protection	In ecologically sensitive areas like the Dasht-e Kavir desert, regulations are in place to minimize the environmental impact of activities like desert tours and protect fragile ecosystems.
6	Promotion of Sustainable Practices	Tour operators in Iran promote sustainable practices such as limiting plastic usage, conserving water, and educating tourists about preserving natural environments.
7	Cultural Exchange Programs	Iran's "Rural Heritage" program offers tourists the opportunity to engage with rural communities, participate in local traditions, and gain insight into the daily lives of Iranians in rural areas.
8	Tourism Education and Training	Iran's tourism industry offers training programs for guides, encouraging them to provide culturally sensitive and environmentally responsible experiences for tourists.
9	Regulation and Monitoring	Environmental impact assessments are required for tourism projects in sensitive areas. Authorities monitor compliance with regulations to minimize adverse effects on nature.
10	Promotion of Responsible Travel	Tourism campaigns emphasize respecting dress codes, customs, and traditions and educate visitors on etiquette when visiting religious sites.
11	International Collaboration	Iran collaborates with international organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to share knowledge and best practices for sustainable tourism development.

(Source: ISMAEL REZAEINEJAD, The role of Eco-tourism in sustainable development: case study eco-tourism challenges in Iran, 2021)

Due to government programs and investments, sustainable tourism development in Iran is becoming increasingly visible and successful. It is essential to continue efforts in this direction by investing in infrastructure, marketing, and education. This will allow Iran to strengthen its position on the world tourism scene, enrich its cultural and economic structure, and preserve its natural wealth. In conclusion, Iran is an example of a country where sustainable tourism development is becoming a reality through the joint efforts of the government and local communities. These programs demonstrate how tourism can be a tool for developing and conserving nature and cultural heritage and increasing the income of local people.

3 MATERIAL AND METHOD

3.1.   Research Approach

Different researchers may assign different meanings for the team research approach in science. In some publications, the research approach may imply general data collection and analysis methods and differences between qualitative and quantitative methods.

However, in our view, the research approach is best seen as a general plan and procedure for conducting the study. Accordingly, the approach for the research can be divided into three categories:

1. Deductive approach

2. Inductive approach

3. Abductive approach

The primary distinguishing factor between deductive and inductive approaches lies in the relevance of hypotheses to the study. Exactly, that is a concise and accurate summary. The deductive approach focuses on testing the validity of existing assumptions, theories, or hypotheses, while the inductive approach is oriented toward generating new theories and forming generalizations based on observed patterns or data. Conversely, abductive research initiates with 'surprising facts' or 'puzzles,' with the research process dedicated to their explanation.

For the research at hand, the deductive approach is deemed suitable. It presents several advantages:

- The ability to elucidate causal relationships between concepts and variables.

- The potential for quantitative measurement of concepts.

- The capacity to generalize research findings to a certain extent.

In this study, the process involves formulating hypotheses at the outset. Subsequently, relevant research methods are selected and applied to test these hypotheses, aiming to substantiate or refute them (see Figure 12).
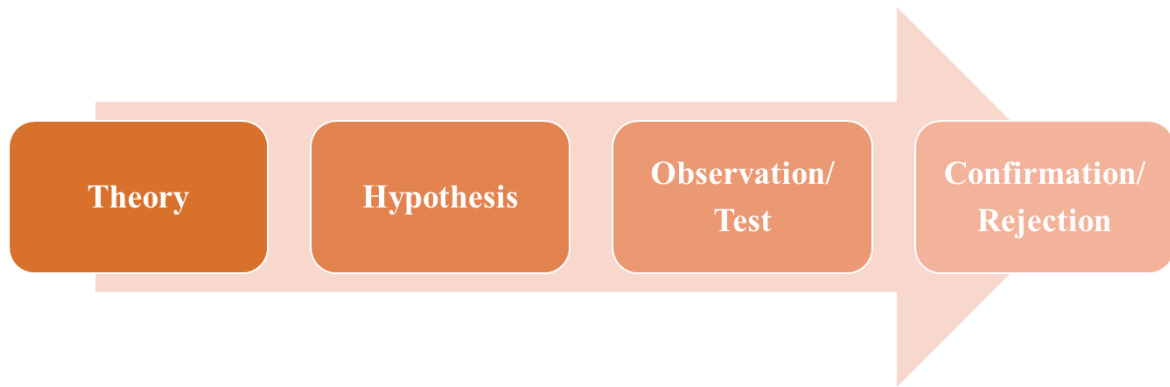
Figure 12: Stages of deductive Approah (Source: Own Development based on https://research-methodology.net/research-methodology /deductive-approach-2/)

Generally, studies using the deductive approach follow the following stages:

1. Deducing hypothesis from theory.

2. Formulating a hypothesis in operational terms and proposing relationships between two specific variables

3. Testing hypothesis with the application of relevant method(s). Quantitative methods include regression, correlation analysis, mean, mode, median, etc.

4. Examining the test's outcome, thus confirming or rejecting the theory. When analyzing the outcome of tests, it is essential to compare research findings with the literature review findings.

3.2. Research model

Various considerations have been considered in selecting competitiveness assessment factors for tourist products. Initially, a comprehensive literature review on competitiveness in tourism was conducted. Subsequently, factors amenable to collection through the survey method were chosen. Within this framework, the nature of these factors was compared with the columns and components of the TTCI 2019 study. Nevertheless, the study calculated the index by standardizing economic factors and their transformation into competitiveness-corresponding factors. Furthermore, the breadth of this study encompassed the entire country rather than focusing solely on urban destinations within each country. Ultimately, a set of factors was selected based on their highest recurrence in tourism literature, measurability in the questionnaire, and relevance to tourism in the destination of Rasht.

The assumption is made that each of the selected factors has an equal impact on the competitiveness of tourism products. In the TTCI 2019 study, researchers assumed equal impacts of columns and model components. Thus, as illustrated in Figure 13, the equal influence of competitiveness factors has been considered.
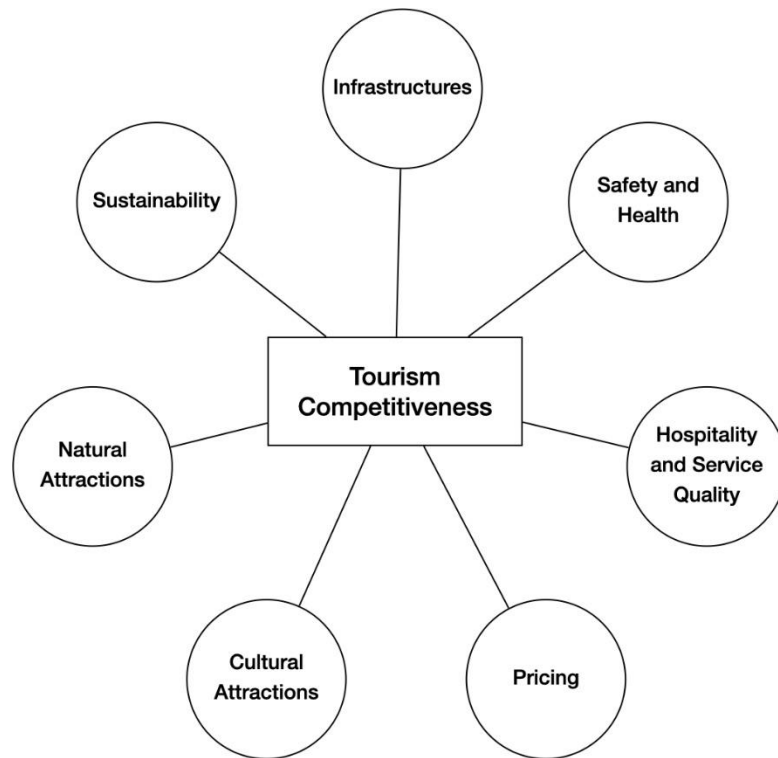

Figure 13: Tourism Competitiveness Factors (Source: Own Development based on https://www.tutorialspoint.com/tourism_management/factors_affecting.htm)

3.3.   Data Collection method

For the master's thesis, primary and secondary research types are used.

Secondary research is a valuable method that utilizes existing data collected for a different purposes. This data can be sourced from various outlets, such as books, articles, reports, and databases. In the context of the thesis, secondary research methods encompass:

1. Literature Review: A comprehensive review of existing literature on the research topic to gather information, theories, and empirical findings.

2. Content Analysis: Analyzing existing documents or media to extract relevant information or trends.

3. Data Mining: Using existing databases or datasets to extract new insights or patterns.

4. Meta-Analysis: Combining and analyzing the results of multiple primary research studies to draw broader conclusions.

Advantages of secondary research include cost-effectiveness, time efficiency, and the ability to access a wide range of data sources.

Primary research involves the collection of original data directly from sources. This data is gathered specifically for the research project and is often used to address research questions. A questionnaire is provided in Appendix 3 of this thesis. It consists of 26 questions, including:

– Multiple-Choice Questions;

– Yes/No Questions;

– Likert Scale Questions;

– Open-Ended Questions;

– Demographic Questions.

The survey is created via an online platform, Google Forms, sent through social media Facebook, and delivered individually.

3.4.   Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study uses a questionnaire to collect answers from 30 people living in Iran. The survey aims to discover their travel habits and the main reasons that may influence tourism in Rasht, Iran.

Indeed, using a Likert scale is a widely accepted and effective method in research. This scale is a valuable tool for gauging the level of agreement or disagreement with a statement and capturing the intensity of sentiment or perception on a given topic. Respondents are provided with various responses, enabling them to express their views nuancedly, thereby contributing to a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the data collected. The Likert scale's flexibility and ease of use make it a popular choice for researchers seeking to quantify attitudes and opinions in a structured and measurable way.

In the questionnaire design, a minimum of two questions have been formulated to assess each factor. Some factors, such as "Infrastructure," which inherently encompasses a more significant number of components, have been measured through four questions.

Additionally, specific questions have been designed to ascertain the accuracy of responses, posing a concept with two distinct formulations. Consequently, if respondents provide divergent answers to these questions, the reliability of the response set diminishes, leading to the exclusion of such data from the research dataset.

Furthermore, a subset of questions has been devised to inquire about the characteristics of the respondents, aiming to profile the audience demographically. This stratification is intended to ensure that the respondents collectively represent a sample indicative of tourists in Rasht. In instances where a respondent declares not having previously visited Rasht, their response set is also excluded from the research dataset. An example of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix 2.

3.5. Data processing and Analysis

Data is processed and analyzed for the thesis using Microsoft Excel and Google Forms. It has taken approximately two weeks to collect and proceed, starting on the 1st of September with the closure of Google forms on the 14th of September. Data was processed in the following weeks to test hypotheses about the main factors affecting tourism in Rasht, Iran, and was combined and estimated using Microsoft Excel.

3.5.1 One-Sample T-Test Analysis

In this section, to compare the questionnaire results with the competitiveness scores in the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 (further –TTCI2019), a one-sample t-test has been used. A one-sample t-test is a statistical hypothesis test used to determine whether the mean calculated from sample data collected from a single group differs from a designated value specified by the researcher. External value is chosen for scientific reasons, often a mean previously established in a population, a standard value of interest, or a mean concluded from other studies. In a one-sample t-test, the hypotheses are:

- Null Hypothesis (H0): "The population mean equals the specified mean value."

- Alternative Hypothesis (H1): "The population mean differs from the specified mean value."

Therefore, the Objective is to Determine if there is enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

The hypotheses for this analysis are as follows:

1. Total competitiveness

$H0_1$: The total competitiveness mean of data from the questionnaire is equal to the TTCI2019 Score.

$H1_1$: The total competitiveness mean of data from the questionnaire differs from the TTCI2019 Score.

2. Cultural attractions

$H0_2$: The cultural attractions mean of data from the questionnaire is equal to the TTCI2019 Score.

$H1_2$: The cultural attractions mean of data from the questionnaire differs from the TTCI2019 Score.

3. Natural attractions

$H0_3$: The natural attractions mean of data from the questionnaire is equal to the TTCI2019 Score.

$H1_3$: The questionnaire's natural attractions mean of data differs from the TTCI2019 Score.

4. Infrastructure

$H0_4$: The infrastructure mean of data from the questionnaire equals the TTCI2019 Score.

$H1_4$: The infrastructure mean of data from the questionnaire differs from the TTCI2019 Score.

5. Safety and security

$H0_5$: The safety and security mean of data from the questionnaire equals the TTCI2019 Score.

$H1_5$: The safety and security mean of data from the questionnaire differs from the TTCI2019 Score.

6. Hospitality and service quality

$H0_6$: The hospitality and service quality mean of data from the questionnaire is equal to the TTCI2019 Score.

$H1_6$: The hospitality and service quality mean of data from the questionnaire differs from the TTCI2019 Score.

7. Pricing

$H0_7$: The pricing mean of data from the questionnaire equals the TTCI2019 Score.

$H1_7$: The pricing mean of data from the questionnaire differs from the TTCI2019 Score.

8. Sustainability

$H0_8$: The sustainability mean of data from the questionnaire equals the TTCI2019 Score.

$H1_8$: The sustainability mean of data from the questionnaire differs from the TTCI2019 Score.

The Test has been performed by SPSS software, and the result will be demonstrated in section 4.4. SPSS is a software program for statistical analysis, data management, and visualization. It is widely utilized in various fields for data manipulation, hypothesis testing, and creating graphs and charts to understand data patterns better.

3.6.   Ethical Consideration in Research

The emphasis on ethical considerations in research is commendable, and the outlined principles align with established ethical norms. The fundamental ethical principles in this thesis are gathered from BRYMAN and BELL (2007), key Ethical Principles in Dissertations.

1. No Harm: Research participants should not be subjected to harm in any way.

2. Respect for Dignity: Prioritize respect for the dignity of research participants.

3. Informed Consent: Obtain full consent from participants before the study.

4. Privacy Protection: Ensure the protection of the privacy of research participants.

5. Confidentiality: Maintain adequate confidentiality for research data.

6. Anonymity: Ensure the anonymity of individuals and organizations.

7. Avoid Deception: Avoid any deception or exaggeration about the aims and objectives of the research.

8. Declaration of Affiliations and Funding: Declare affiliations, sources of funding, and any possible conflicts of interest.

9. Honest Communication: Communicate about the research with honesty and transparency.

10. Avoid Misleading Information: Avoid any misleading information and representation of primary data findings in a biased way.

Prioritizing these ethical considerations is essential for the research's integrity and ensuring participants' well-being and rights. It contributes to conducting respectful, fair, and responsible research, ultimately leading to findings that can positively influence societal change.

4 RESULTS AND THEIR EVALUATION

4.1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the demographic profile of the respondents who participated in our research study. Understanding the characteristics of the participants is crucial as it not only provides context for the findings but also helps draw valuable insights regarding the target population. The demographic data collected from the questionnaire responses offers a snapshot of our respondents' diverse backgrounds and attributes, shedding light on the broader representation of the study sample. This information serves as a foundational component for interpreting the subsequent results and offers a basis for identifying potential response variations across different demographic segments.

The demographic profile encompasses various variables, including age, gender, educational background, employment status, and other factors relevant to the research objectives. Each of these variables plays a pivotal role in shaping the perspectives and experiences of the participants. In the following sections, a detailed breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the participants is provided.

Figure 14 represents the distribution of participants by their gender.
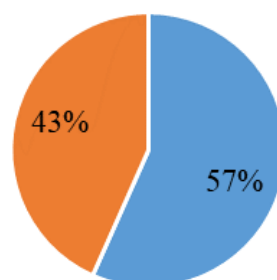

Figure 14: Gender Distribution (Source: Questionnaire Results)

Figure 14 shows that the shares of males and females participating in the survey are almost equal, though most respondents (57%) are women.

Figure 15 shows the age groups of participants.

41

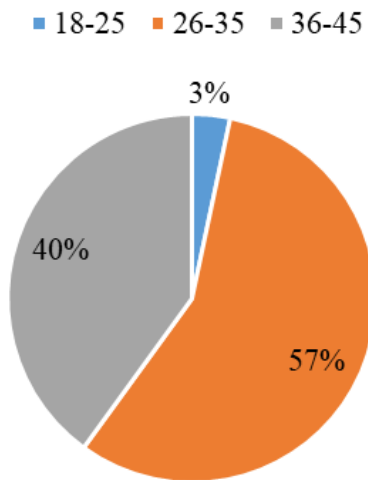Please indicate your age

■ 18-25 ■ 26-35 ■ 36-45

3%

40%

57%

Figure 15: Age Groups of the Respondents (Source: Questionnaire Results)

As shown in Figure 15, most respondents are aged 26-35 (57%), while only one person is between 18-25 (3% of the sample). 40% of all the respondents are aged between 36-45.

Figure 16 illustrates the education level of the samples.
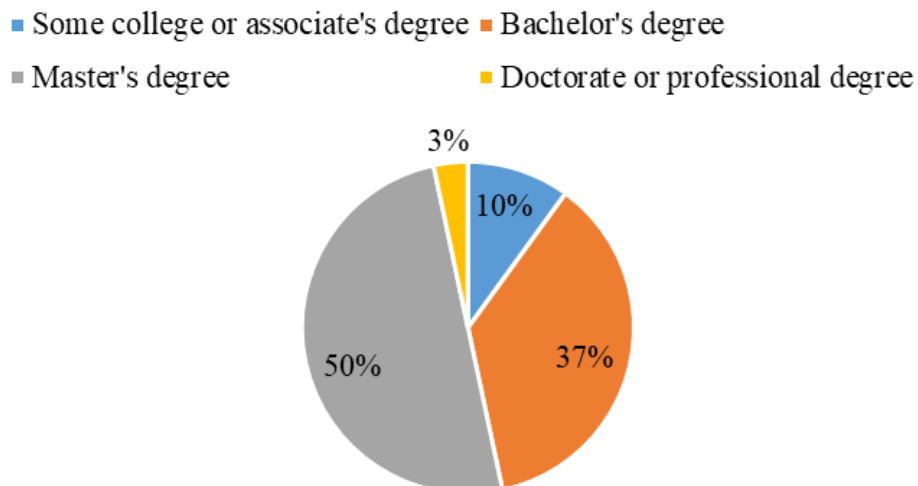
Please indicate your level of educaton

■ Some college or associate's degree ■ Bachelor's degree
■ Master's degree ■ Doctorate or professional degree

3%

10%

50%

37%

Figure 16: Distribution of the Respondents by the Level of Education (Source: Questionnaire Results)

Figure 16 shows that half of the respondents have obtained a master's degree, followed by those who completed their bachelor's degree (37%). One person has a doctoral or professional degree, while three people (10% of the sample) have an associate's degree.

The information regarding the occupation of the respondents was also collected and presented in Figure 17.
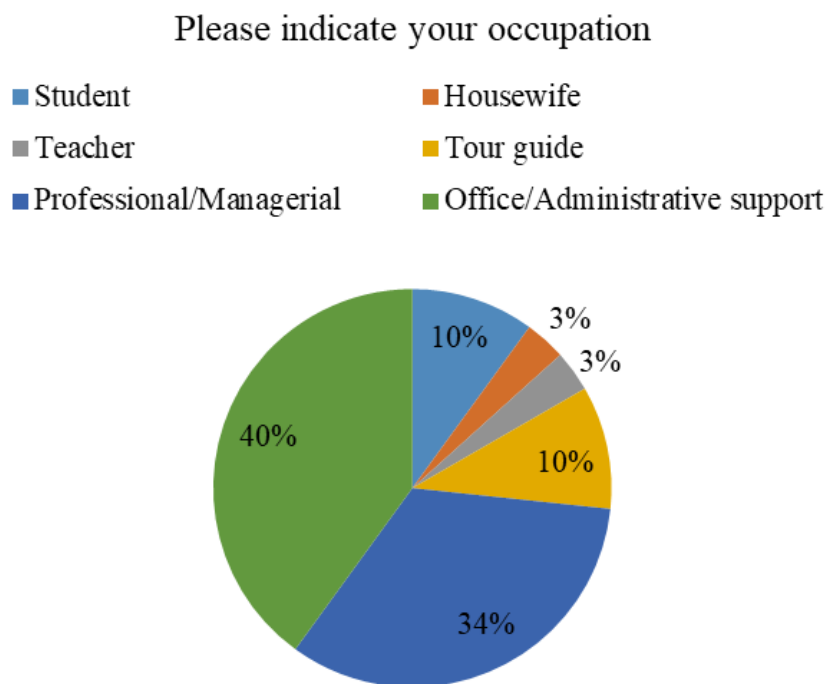
Please indicate your occupation

- Student
- Housewife
- Teacher
- Tour guide
- Professional/Managerial
- Office/Administrative support

Figure 17: Occupation of the Respondents (Source: Questionnaire Results)

As observed, most of the participants are employed in Office/Administrative support roles, comprising 40% of the sample. Following this group are individuals in Professional/Managerial positions, accounting for 34%. The remaining respondents include three students and three tour guides (10% each), alongside one teacher and one housewife, representing 3% of the total sample.

Figure 18 represents the distribution of the respondents by their income.

Figure 18 shows that 33% of all the respondents have less than $5,000 annually. The survey results show that the most common income is between $5,000 and $10,000 annually (37% of the respondents). 17% of the respondents earn from $10,000 to $20,000 each year, and 3% of the participants obtain $20,000-30,000. According to the data, 10% of the respondents earn more than $30,000 annually.

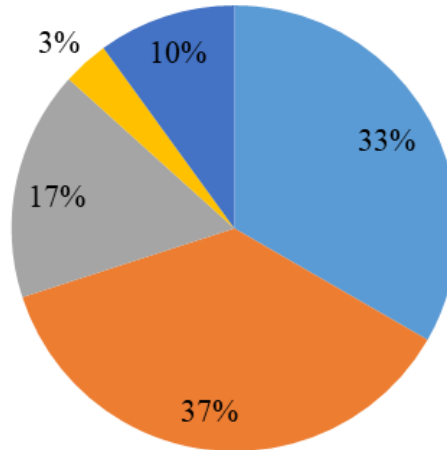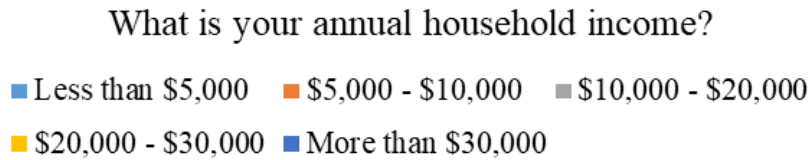## What is your annual household income?

■ Less than $5,000 ■ $5,000 - $10,000 ■ $10,000 - $20,000
■ $20,000 - $30,000 ■ More than $30,000

Figure 18: Distribution of the Respondents by the Annual Income (Source: Questionnaire Results)

4.2. Travel Habits of Respondents

This section investigates the travel behavior displayed by the respondents who participated in the research study. The data gathered from the questionnaire responses allows us to gain valuable insights into our respondents' diverse travel patterns, choices, and preferences. Understanding travel habits is a critical foundation for our subsequent analysis, enabling us to draw significant conclusions and implications for the broader travel and tourism sector.

Figure 19 shows the distribution of the answers to the question," How many members are usually included in your travel group?"

As seen in Figure 19, most respondents (56%) prefer to travel within a group of 2-4 people. At the same time, some people usually travel in larger groups: 17% of the respondents opted for a group of 5-7 members, and the other 17% tend to choose even larger groups – more than seven members. Only 10% of the respondents would travel alone.

How many members are usually included in your travel group?

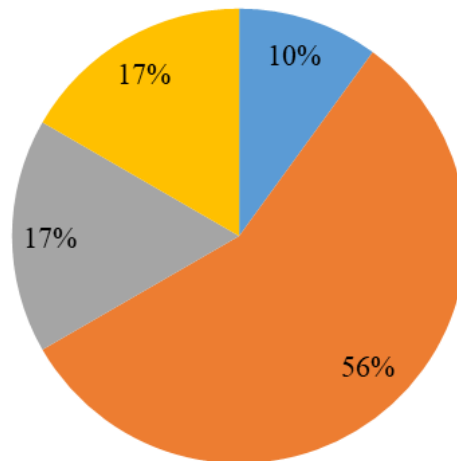■ Just myself ■ 2-4 members ■ 5-7 members ■ More than 7 members

Figure 19: Distribution of Travel Group Sizes (Source: Questionnaire Results)

Figure 20 demonstrates the distribution of respondents' spending habits while traveling.

How much are you willing to spend on travel and tourism activities per day per person?

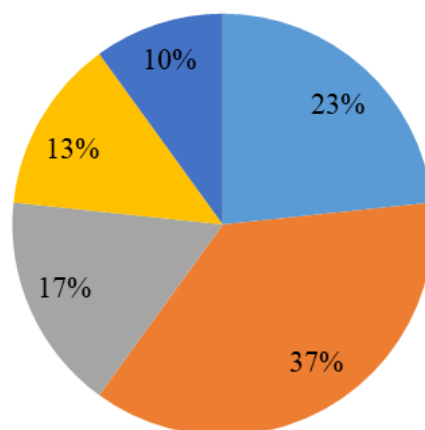■ Less than $20 ■ $20- $30 ■ $30 - $50 ■ $50 - $100 ■ More than $100

Figure 20: Respondents' Spending Habits while Traveling (Source: Questionnaire Results)

The graph in Figure 20 shows how much people would like to spend on travel and tourism per day per person. The results show that the most common budget for travel and tourism per person per day is between $20-30, which 37% of the respondents prefer. This group is followed by the people willing to spend less than $20 per day (23% of the respondents). At the same time, 17% of the participants would spend between $30-50 each day for tourism activities. 13% of the respondents normally would spend $50-100 daily. Only a small number of people spend more than $100 on travel and tourism activities per day per person (10%).

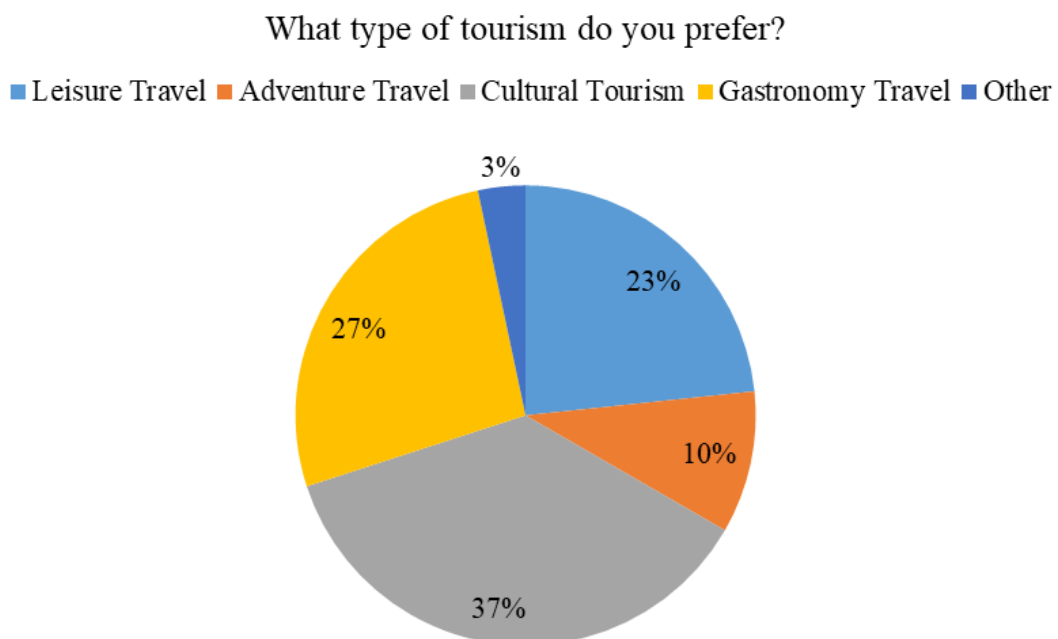Figure 21 shows what type of tourism Iranian respondents prefer.

Figure 21: Distribution of Answers regarding Tourism Type (Source: Questionnaire Results)

It can be noted that most of the respondents prefer cultural tourism (37%). The next biggest group belongs to gastronomy tourism (27% – 8 respondents), which is unsurprising due to their well-known passion for food. Iranian people deeply love food and gastronomy due to the rich tapestry of their culinary traditions, which are intertwined with the country's ancient history and diverse cultural influences. The abundance of ingredients from different regions and an array of aromatic spices and herbs allows for creating complex and flavorful dishes steeped in tradition and closely guarded family recipes. Food is a source of nourishment, a medium for preserving and sharing their cultural heritage, and a way to

express hospitality and respect for guests. The cultural importance of food in Iranian society, coupled with its presence in celebrations and rituals, fosters a profound appreciation for the art of gastronomy, making it an integral part of their identity and daily life.

According to the answers, almost a quarter of people also like leisure travel (23%). Only 10% of all the respondents seek adventure traveling, and 3% of people usually have other travel purposes (medical tourism, business tourism, educational tourism, etc.).

4.3.   Tourism in Rasht

In this section, the respondents were asked questions about Rasht to understand their experience and perception.

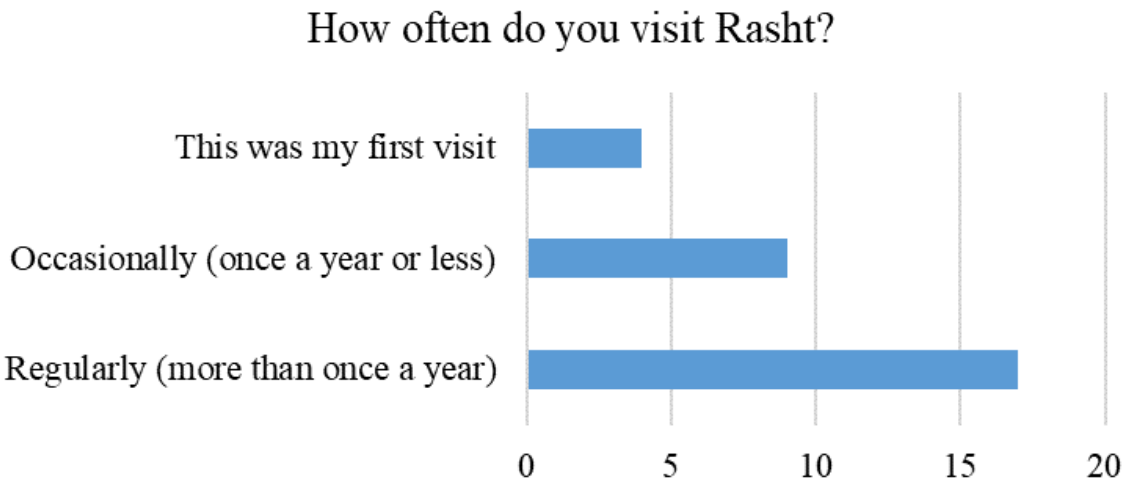Figure 22 shows how often the respondents visit Rasht.

Figure 22: Frequency of the Respondents' Trips to Rasht (Source: Questionnaire Results)

Observing the results provided, it can be seen that most of the respondents (17 people) tend to visit Rasht regularly (more than once a year). Iranians are drawn to Rasht for its captivating natural beauty and culinary excellence. Rasht offers picturesque landscapes, a pleasant climate, and a reputation as the "City of Food" in Iran. Its diverse regional cuisine, rooted in the local traditions of Gilan, makes it a culinary haven, enticing food enthusiasts from across the country. The warm hospitality of the locals adds to its allure as a destination for a memorable cultural and culinary experience.

Nine people declared that they visit Rasht occasionally (once a year or less), and four respondents had visited Rasht only once during the interview.

A 10-point Likert scale was applied for questions 10-13 (see Appendix 3) in order to analyze people's opinions about several factors that may influence the level of tourism in

Rasht (where one represents "not important" or disagree or bad and 10 represents "extremely important"). The results are analyzed using the preference level scale in Table 3 and presented in Table 4.

Table 3: Preference Level Scale

Scale	Preference Level	Rating
8.5-10	Completely agree	5
6.5-8.5	Agree	4
4.5-6.5	Neutral	3
2.5-4.5	Disagree	2
1-2.5	Completely disagree	1

Source: Own Development

Table 4: Rating of Tourism Factors in Rasht

Statement	$\overline{x}$	Standard Deviation	Preference Level
The pricing of tourism products and services in Rasht is reasonable and offers good value for money	7.57	2.18	Agree
There is a wide range of accommodation options available, like rental villas/ecotourism residences/AIRB&B in Rasht, except hotels	6.77	2.43	Agree
Rasht offers a variety of hotel options	2.97	1.52	Disagree
Rasht offers a variety of dining and entertainment options	9.00	1.34	Completely agree
Total	6.58	1.87	Agree

Source: Questionnaire Results

Table 4 demonstrates that the average level of the development of tourism factors in Rasht is 6.58, which proves the preference level "Agree" overall. The standard deviation is relatively low, showing the model's adequacy.

At the same time, one cannot say that all the factors are developed equally. In detail, the pricing of tourism products and services in Rasht is reasonable and offers good value for money, with a mean of 7.57.

It is also fair to note that a wide range of accommodation options are available, like rental villas/ecotourism residences/Airbnb in Rasht, except hotels.

Oppositely, there are few hotels in the area ($\bar{x}$ = 2.97). Tourism tends to be limited or restricted when there are only a few hotels in the area, as accommodation availability often plays a pivotal role in travelers' decision-making processes, and a lack of options may deter potential visitors.

Lastly, the results show that Rasht offers various dining and entertainment options. A wide variety of dining and entertainment options is crucial to attracting tourists because it enhances their overall travel experience, offering diverse experiences that cater to different tastes and preferences.

Additionally, the respondents were asked to rate several factors that may influence the level of tourism in Rasht. Quantitative results (where 1 – the lowest score and 4 – the highest score) are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: The Level of Main Tourism Factors Development in Rasht

Question	$\bar{x}$	Level of Development
How would you rate the quality of transportation networks (roads, airports, etc.) inside Rasht?	2,03	medium
How diverse are the cultural attractions (e.g., historical sites, museums, festivals) in Rasht?	2,97	medium
How well-preserved are the cultural attractions (e.g., historical sites, museums, festivals) in Rasht?	1,90	low
How easy is it to reach Rasht through various modes of transportation (e.g., air, road, rail)?	3,03	high
How safe do you feel when visiting Rasht?	3,23	high
How would you rate the overall hospitality and service quality provided by businesses in Rasht?	3,17	high
How would you rate the overall hospitality and service quality provided by accommodation facilities (ecotourism accommodation, guesthouses, etc.) in Rasht?	2,93	medium
Do you consider the pricing of tourism products and services in Rasht to be...	2,10	medium
Do you consider the marketing of tourism products in Rasht to be...	1.63	low

Source: Questionnaire Results

The table shows that half of the mentioned factors, such as transportation networks, diversity of cultural attractions, hospitality, service quality provided by accommodation facilities, and pricing in Rasht, are developed/maintained on a medium level.

Some factors (accessibility, safety and security, level of hospitality, and service quality provided by businesses in Rasht) are considered highly developed as the respondents granted them better scores. Maintaining high levels of accessibility, safety, and security, as well as hospitality and service quality, is essential for the sustained success of a tourism destination, as these factors directly influence tourists' satisfaction and their likelihood to return and recommend the destination to others, ultimately driving the region's economic growth and reputation in the global tourism industry.

However, in the respondents' opinion, cultural attractions (e.g., historical sites, museums, festivals) in Rasht are not well-preserved. Cultural attractions in Rasht are not well-preserved primarily due to factors such as insufficient funding, inadequate maintenance, and lack of awareness.

Moreover, according to the respondents' answers, the marketing of tourism products in Rasht is insufficient, which means that the destination struggles to attract visitors, resulting in lower tourist numbers, decreased revenue, and underutilized potential.

Figure 23 shows the evaluation of sources from where the respondents first heard about Rasht as a tourism destination.
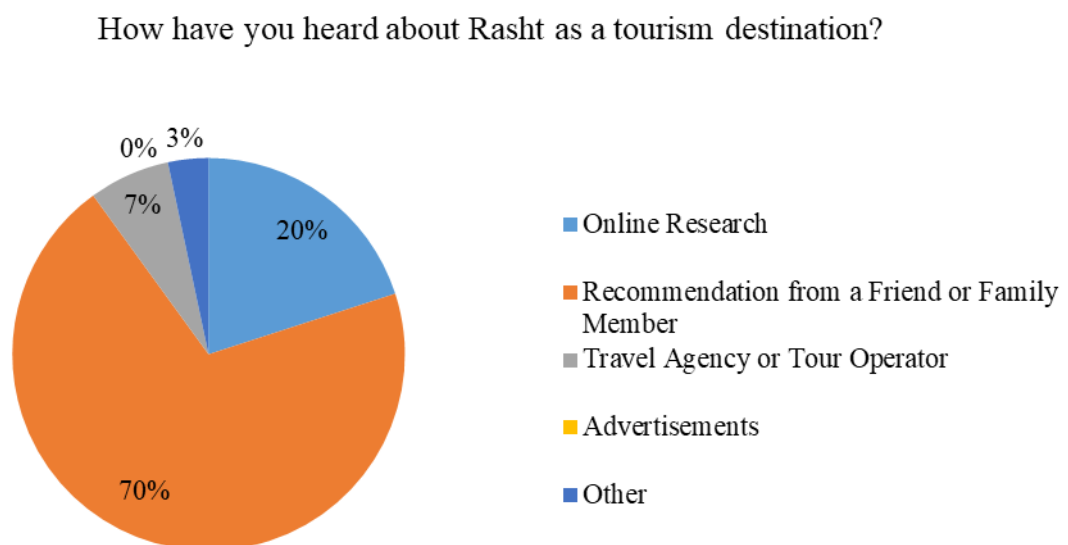
How have you heard about Rasht as a tourism destination?

Figure 23: Sources from where the Respondents first heard about Rasht as a Tourism Destination (Source: Questionnaire Results)

As shown in Figure 23, most of the respondents (70%) heard about Rasht as a tourism destination from their friends and family. 20% of them discovered Rasht via online research, while 7% were advised to choose Rasht by a tour operator. However, according to the results, none of them had learned about Rasht from any advertisement. It points out once again that the marketing of tourism products in Rasht is weak and needs to be reorganized.

The respondents were also asked to what extent, in their opinion, the Iranian government supports tourism development in Rasht. Results are presented in Figure 24.
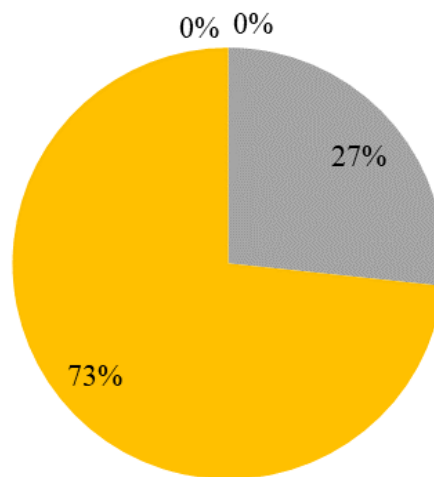

Figure 24: Governmental Support of Tourism in Rasht, Respondents' View (Source: Questionnaire Results)

Unfortunately, most of the respondents (73%) believe that the government provides minimum support for the tourism development in Rasht. It is possible that the Iranian government does not prioritize tourism development in Rasht due to resource allocation, budget allocation, infrastructure priorities, and other strategic goals.

Figure 25 shows the distribution of the answers to whether the respondents have seen tourism in Rasht follow sustainable and responsible practices.

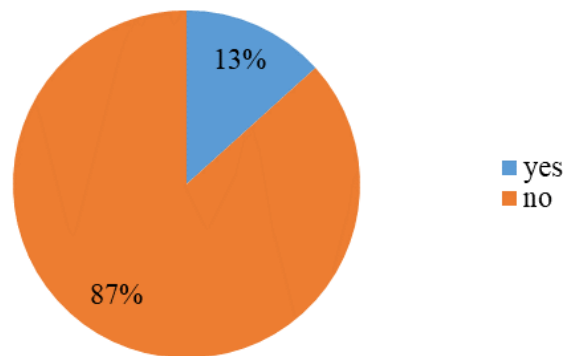Have you seen tourism in Rasht follows sustainable and responsible practices?

Figure 25: Distribution of Answers to the Question of whether there are Sustainable and Responsible Practices in the Tourism Industry of Rasht (Source: Questionnaire Results)

Despite the overwhelming importance that respondents place on sustainability in tourism, it is evident that the current landscape in Rasht lacks comprehensive sustainable practices. While travelers express a strong desire for responsible and environmentally conscious tourism, the absence of these practices in Rasht's tourism offerings highlights a critical area for improvement. This disconnection between traveler expectations and the existing tourism practices underscores the untapped potential for Rasht to align itself with the evolving priorities of modern tourists. By integrating sustainable and responsible approaches into its tourism industry, Rasht can meet the growing demand for eco-friendly and culturally respectful travel experiences and ensure the long-term vitality of its unique attractions and communities.

As the final question, the respondents were asked if they would recommend Rasht as a tourism destination to others. As a result, all of the respondents gave positive answers. This resounding approval not only underscores the city's potential to thrive as a tourism destination but also signals an encouraging prospect for the growth and further development of the tourism industry in Rasht.

The respondents were also asked to rate a set of factors that may influence their desire to visit Rasht in order to define the most important of them. Quantitative results (where 1 – is the lowest score and 5 – is the highest score) are presented in Table 6.

Based on the information presented in Table 6, the key factors were identified:

– Cultural attractions.

– Natural attractions.

– Pricing.

– Sustainability.

Table 6: Average Score of Factors Influencing Tourism in Rasht

Factor	$\overline{x}$	Ranking
Cultural attractions	**4.80**	**1**
Natural attractions	**4.68**	**2**
Infrastructure	4.42	5
Safety and Security	4.12	7
Hospitality and service quality	4.27	6
Pricing	**4.62**	**3**
Sustainability	**4.53**	**4**

Source: Questionnaire Results

The analysis indicates several key factors significantly influence individuals' desire to visit Rasht. The diverse cultural attractions, including its rich heritage and traditions, and the allure of natural attractions encompassing lush landscapes and the Caspian Sea are pivotal in attracting potential tourists. Furthermore, Rasht's renowned gastronomy, with its unique and savory local dishes, serves as an irresistible draw, emphasizing the importance of culinary experiences in travel decisions. As a practical consideration, pricing also factors into the equation, as affordability and competitive pricing can make Rasht an even more appealing destination. Understanding the interplay between these factors can guide tourism development efforts and marketing strategies to maximize Rasht's appeal to a broader audience of travelers.

The unanimous emphasis on sustainability and responsible tourism underscores a growing awareness among travelers about the broader impact of their journeys. It reflects an increasing desire among tourists to engage in travel experiences that enrich their lives and contribute positively to the environment and local communities. As travelers seek to connect with the cultural, natural, and culinary assets of Rasht, it becomes increasingly apparent that a commitment to sustainability and responsible tourism is seen as essential in preserving the city's unique charms for generations to come. This alignment of traveler priorities with sustainable and responsible tourism principles is a notable theme that underlines the importance of addressing these aspects in Rasht's tourism development and promotion.

4.4.   One-Sample T-Test Analysis with Competitiveness Factors

In this section, the T.Test results have been demonstrated.

To compare questionnaire results with competitiveness scores in the TTCI2019 report, the values have been standardized within the range of 1 to 5. Initially, the competitiveness scores in the organization's report were distributed from 1 to 7. To establish uniformity and enhance comparability, these original scores have been transformed to a standardized scale ranging from 1 to 5, as depicted in Table 7. Also, the total competitiveness value is calculated by an equal average of all seven factors.

Table 7: Adjusted Competitiveness Scores

Competitiveness Factor	Score	Standardized Score
Cultural attractions	2.8	**2.20**
Natural attractions	2.4	**1.93**
Infrastructure	3.1	**2.40**
Safety and Security	5.4	**3.93**
Hospitality and service quality	2.8	**2.20**
Pricing	6.7	**4.80**
Sustainability	3.9	**2.93**
Total Competitiveness	3.8	**1.67**

Source: Own Development based on TTCI2019 data

In this context, when the *Sig. (two-tailed)* the value computed is below 0.05, it leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H0) and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis (H1). Conversely, if this value exceeds 0.05, it results in the acceptance of the null hypothesis (H0) and the rejection of the alternative hypothesis (H1).

Figure 26 illustrates rejecting null hypothesis H0 related to Total Competitiveness and accepting the alternative hypothesis H1. This implies that the average score for Total Competitiveness, as derived from the questionnaire, significantly differs from the score presented in TTCI 2019.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Competitiveness_total	30	3.80	.29	.05

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 1.67					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Competitiveness_total	40.85	29	.000	2.13	2.03	2.24

Figure 26:   SPSS Analysis Results for Total Competitiveness (Source: Own Development based on TTCI2019 data and Questionnaire Results)

In the following tables, the results for each factor of competitiveness are demonstrated.

Figure 27 illustrates rejecting null hypothesis H0 related to cultural attractions and accepting the alternative hypothesis H1. This implies that the average score for Cultural attractions, as derived from the questionnaire, significantly differs from the score presented in TTCI 2019.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Cultural attractions	30	3.97	.72	.13

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2.2					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Cultural attractions	13.47	29	.000	1.77	1.50	2.03

Figure 27: SPSS Analysis Results for the Factor "Cultural Attractions" (Source: Own Development based on TTCI2019 data and Questionnaire Results)

Figure 28 shows that hypothesis H0 regarding natural attractions is rejected, and hypothesis H1 is accepted. This means that the average for natural attractions obtained from the questionnaire significantly differs from the score listed in TTCI 2019.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Natural attractions	30	4.67	.55	.10

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 1.93					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Natural attractions	27.42	29	.000	2.74	2.53	2.94

Figure 28:   SPSS Analysis Results for the Factor "Natural Attractions" (Source: Own Development based on TTCI2019 data and Questionnaire Results)

Figure 29 demonstrates the rejection of null hypothesis H0 about Infrastructure and the acceptance of hypothesis H1. This indicates a noteworthy difference between the average Infrastructure score acquired from the questionnaire and the score documented in TTCI 2019.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Infrastructure	30	3.33	.63	.12

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2.4					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Infrastructure	8.09	29	.000	.93	.70	1.17

Figure 29: SPSS Analysis Results for the Factor "Infrastructure" (Source: Own Development based on TTCI2019 data and Questionnaire Results)

In Figure 30, we can observe the rejection of null hypothesis H0 concerning Safety and security, with the acceptance of hypothesis H1. This signifies a notable dissimilarity between the average Safety and security score acquired from the questionnaire and the score reported in TTCI 2019.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Safety and security	30	4.23	.68	.12

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 3.93					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Safety and security	2.45	29	.021	.30	.05	.56

Figure 30: SPSS Analysis Results for the Factor "Safety and Security" (Source: Own Development based on TTCI2019 data and Questionnaire Results)

Figure 31 shows that hypothesis H0 regarding Hospitality and service quality is rejected, and hypothesis H1 is accepted. This means that the average Natural attractions obtained from the questionnaire significantly differ from the score listed in TTCI2019.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Hospitality and service quality	30	4.01	.42	.08

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2.2					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Hospitality and service quality	23.44	29	.000	1.81	1.65	1.97

Figure 31: SPSS Analysis Results for the Factor "Hospitality and Service Quality"

(Source: Own Development based on TTCI2019 data and Questionnaire Results)

Figure 32 presents the rejection of null hypothesis H0 of Pricing and the acceptance of hypothesis H1. This points to a notable divergence between the average Pricing score derived from the questionnaire and the score documented in the TTCI2019 report.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Pricing	30	3.10	.66	.12

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 4.8					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Pricing	-14.07	29	.000	-1.70	-1.95	-1.45

Figure 32:   SPSS Analysis Results for the Factor "Pricing" (Source: Own Development

based on TTCI2019 data and Questionnaire Results)

Figure 33 shows that null hypothesis H0 regarding Sustainability is rejected, and hypothesis H1 is accepted. This means that the average Sustainability obtained from the questionnaire significantly differs from the score listed in TTCI2019.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Sustainability	30	3.30	.65	.12

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 2.93					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Sustainability	3.11	29	.004	.37	.13	.61

Figure 33: SPSS Analysis Results for the Factor "Sustainability " (Source: Own

Development based on TTCI2019 data and Questionnaire Results)

In this thesis, we set out to examine seven hypotheses that aimed to compare the mean scores obtained from our survey with the Competitiveness scores presented in the TTCI2019 report, focusing on factors such as Cultural attractions, Natural attractions, Infrastructure, Safety and security, Hospitality and service quality, Pricing, and Sustainability. Utilizing SPSS software for our analysis, we have discovered a significant difference between our survey's mean scores and those presented in TTCI 2019. As a result, we could not accept any of the seven hypotheses for all the factors under investigation.

Several factors may contribute to this disparity. First, the TTCI2019 report is based on data up to 2019, whereas we are operating in 2023. This temporal gap means the report may not reflect the dynamic changes in Iran's tourism landscape in recent years, especially in light of the significant disruptions caused by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the report covers the entirety of Iran, while our survey specifically targeted Rasht, providing a more localized and up-to-date perspective on this specific region. Additionally, it is essential to note that the TTCI2019 report is based on a considerably larger statistical sample, while our survey was limited to 30 respondents. Finally, compared to many other cities in Iran, Rasht boasts distinctive features that contribute to its appeal as a tourism destination, including its unique culture, natural beauty, and vibrant hospitality industry.

In conclusion, the differences between our survey results and the TTCI2019 report emphasize the need for ongoing, localized research that considers the evolving dynamics of the tourism industry, particularly at the regional level. Despite the challenges posed by the limited sample size, our study provides valuable insights into the specific context of Rasht and underscores the significance of localized data for comprehensive and up-to-date analyses of tourism competitiveness.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

Rasht, located in the northern province of Gilan, Iran, emerges as an intriguing subject for academic scrutiny in tourism. This city presents a multifaceted tourism destination characterized by its unique geographical positioning between the Caspian Sea and the Alborz Mountains. The region boasts an array of natural attractions, including lush forests, meandering rivers, and coastal landscapes, thus offering a rich canvas for eco-tourism and outdoor enthusiasts. Rasht's historical significance is underscored by ancient sites and well-preserved architectural landmarks, providing ample opportunities for cultural exploration. Moreover, it is renowned for its culinary traditions, celebrated as the "City of Rain," and offering a diverse range of Gilaki cuisine, thus appealing to gastronomic tourists. In the academic context, Rasht represents a compelling case study for understanding the interplay of nature, culture, and gastronomy in shaping a tourism destination's appeal and competitiveness.

According to the survey completed, it has been discovered that Rasht is a lovely place for tourism. It attracts its visitors with natural landscapes, historical attractions, and culinary delights and makes people come there repeatedly. The pricing of tourism products and services in Rasht is reasonable and offers good value for money. A wide range of accommodation options, like rental villas/ecotourism residences/AIRB&B in Rasht., are available. In addition, the city offers a variety of dining and entertainment options.

However, the tourism industry in Rasht is undeveloped.

For example, there is a small number of hotels in the area. Tourism tends to be limited when there are only a few hotels in the area, as accommodation availability often plays a pivotal role in travelers' decision-making processes, and a lack of options deters potential visitors.

According to the insights gathered from respondents, it appears that the cultural attractions in Rasht, including historical sites, museums, and festivals, suffer from inadequate preservation efforts. The consensus among respondents is that these cultural assets have not been adequately maintained, primarily due to financial constraints, insufficient funding, and a lack of public awareness regarding their significance.

Furthermore, according to respondents' feedback, marketing tourism products in Rasht appears ineffective. This insufficiency in marketing suggests that the destination encounters challenges in attracting visitors, leading to diminished tourist numbers, reduced revenue, and the underrealization of its tourism potential. The survey results indicate that most respondents learned about Rasht as a tourism destination through personal recommendations from friends and family. A smaller portion discovered Rasht through online research, while tour operators influenced others. Interestingly, none of the respondents mentioned learning about Rasht through any advertisement. This underscores the prevailing weakness in marketing tourism products in Rasht, highlighting the need to reevaluate and reorganize marketing efforts.

Additionally, several questions were brought about to find critical factors that may influence tourism in Rasht. Based on the respondents' answers, it was concluded that the main factors that impact tourism in Rasht are Cultural attractions, Natural attractions, Gastronomy, Pricing, and Sustainability.

Rasht's tourism potential is intricately woven into its rich cultural heritage, natural beauty, and delectable cuisine. Complemented by competitive pricing, the synergy between these elements is critical to attracting diverse tourists. Recognizing and harnessing this interplay between cultural, natural, and culinary attractions can guide strategic efforts to enhance Rasht's appeal and broaden its visitor base, contributing to its growth as a captivating tourism destination.

At the same time, while respondents emphasize the importance of sustainability in tourism, the absence of such practices in Rasht's current tourism landscape underscores the pressing need for local authorities and stakeholders to prioritize and implement sustainable initiatives. Aligning Rasht's tourism industry with the values and expectations of eco-conscious travelers presents a significant opportunity to meet demand and ensure the preservation of the city's cultural and environmental assets in the face of evolving tourism trends.

This thesis aims to test one hypothesis that consists of seven statistical analyses, which compare the mean scores from the survey with the Competitiveness scores presented in the World Economic Forum (Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019) for Total competitiveness score and factors like Cultural attractions, Natural attractions, Infrastructure, Safety and security, Hospitality and service quality, Pricing, and Sustainability, using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The analysis

revealed a significant difference between our survey results and the 2019 report's scores, leading to the rejection of all eight statistical hypotheses. In all measured factors of competitiveness in tourism products, the city of Rasht exhibits a higher index value than the figures reported in the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI) for the year 2019. This divergence can be attributed to several key factors. Firstly, the TTCI2019 report's data only extends up to 2019, not accounting for changes in Iran's tourism landscape, including the effects of events like the COVID-19 pandemic, by 2023. Secondly, our survey was specific to Rasht, offering a more localized and current perspective, while the report covers the entire country. Moreover, the report relies on a more extensive statistical sample than the study. Lastly, Rasht's unique features, such as its rich culture and natural beauty, may contribute to its distinct tourism appeal compared to other cities in Iran. In summary, the findings underscore the value of localized, up-to-date research for a comprehensive understanding of regional tourism competitiveness despite the limitations posed by the smaller sample size in the study.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the survey implemented, several recommendations can be prescribed in order to develop the tourism industry in Rasht:

1. Enhance Cultural Attractions

Preservation Given the significance of cultural attractions in Rasht's appeal, allocating sufficient resources for their preservation is crucial. Government funding, public-private partnerships, and community involvement can ensure that historical sites, museums, and festivals are well-maintained and continue to draw tourists.

2. Strengthen Marketing Efforts

Rasht should invest in comprehensive marketing strategies to address the identified weaknesses in marketing. This should encompass various channels, including online promotion, social media campaigns, and partnerships with travel agencies. Effective marketing can raise awareness and attract a more extensive audience of potential visitors.

3. Culinary Tourism Promotion

Capitalize on Rasht's unique gastronomic traditions by promoting culinary tourism. This can involve creating food festivals, culinary tours, and partnerships with local

restaurants. Highlighting the city as a culinary destination can significantly influence travel decisions and attract food enthusiasts.

4. Pricing Strategy Optimization

Consider pricing strategies that strike a balance between affordability and value. Competitive pricing, inclusive packages, and discounts for various demographics can make Rasht more appealing to a broad spectrum of travelers, enhancing its competitiveness in the tourism market.

5. Community Engagement

Involve the local community in the tourism development process. Encourage their active participation in preserving cultural assets, sharing their unique insights into the city, and offering authentic cultural experiences for visitors. Engaging the community can enrich the tourism product and make tourists feel more connected to the local culture.

6. Promote Sustainable Tourism Practices

Encourage the implementation of sustainable tourism practices in Rasht. This can include supporting eco-friendly accommodations, responsible wildlife viewing, conservation efforts, and promoting local culture and traditions while minimizing negative environmental impacts. Collaboration with local authorities, communities, and businesses to develop and enforce sustainable tourism guidelines is essential to preserve Rasht's natural and cultural resources long-term.

These recommendations aim to leverage Rasht's existing strengths while addressing identified weaknesses, ultimately enhancing its competitiveness as a tourism destination.

SUMMARY

This thesis delves into the intricacies of tourism competitiveness in Iran's touristic cities, focusing on Rasht as a specific case study. The goal of the research is to identify the main influencing factors on the competitiveness of tourism products in Iran's tourist cities, with a specific case study on Rasht, and to give recommendations for further development of the tourism industry in the city.

Rasht, the capital of Gilan Province, is characterized by its lush natural landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and renowned gastronomy, making it a multifaceted tourism destination. However, the research highlights some critical issues. First, cultural attractions in Rasht are not well-preserved, mainly due to financial constraints and a lack of awareness. Second, marketing efforts for the city are insufficient, leading to challenges in attracting tourists and realizing its full potential.

The study aimed to discern the key factors influencing tourism in Rasht, and through a comprehensive analysis of respondent feedback, four pivotal determinants were identified. The survey results emphasize the pivotal roles of cultural, natural, and culinary attractions in driving tourism, alongside competitive pricing and sustainable tourism practices. Cultural attractions, marked by the city's rich heritage and traditions, play a significant role in Rasht's appeal, providing historical and cultural enrichment to tourists. The allure of natural attractions, exemplified by the lush landscapes and proximity to the Caspian Sea, draws visitors seeking serene, picturesque settings. Additionally, Rasht's renowned gastronomy, boasting an array of unique and savory local dishes, is a compelling magnet for culinary enthusiasts. Finally, as a practical consideration, pricing is integral, with affordability and competitive pricing contributing to the city's appeal. These factors collectively underscore the diverse appeal of Rasht as a tourism destination, shedding light on the interplay of culture, nature, gastronomy, and affordability that underpin its attractiveness to travelers.

On the other hand, cultural attractions, including historical sites and festivals, face preservation challenges due to financial constraints and insufficient funding, highlighting a need for concerted efforts to safeguard these assets. Additionally, the survey indicates ineffective marketing, with most visitors learning about Rasht through personal recommendations rather than formal advertising. The synergy between cultural, natural, and

culinary elements is crucial for Rasht's tourism potential, as reflected in competitive pricing. However, the absence of sustainable practices poses a significant challenge, necessitating urgent initiatives from local authorities to align with eco-conscious traveler expectations.

The thesis employs statistical analyses to test a hypothesis, comparing survey mean scores with the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index 2019 (TTCI2019). Using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the analysis reveals a significant discrepancy between Rasht's survey results and the 2019 TTCI scores, leading to the rejection of all the statistical hypotheses. Notably, Rasht consistently exhibits a higher index value in all competitiveness factors compared to the national average reported in the TTCI2019.

This divergence is attributed to factors such as the TTCI2019 report's limited data scope, extending only to 2019 without considering changes in Iran's tourism landscape up to 2023, including the impact of events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the thesis's localized and current perspective focused specifically on Rasht, while the TTCI2019 report covers the entire country, contributing to the observed differences in competitiveness indices.

The recommendations include enhancing cultural preservation, strengthening marketing strategies, promoting culinary tourism, optimizing pricing strategies, engaging the local community in tourism development, and promoting sustainable tourism practices. By addressing these key factors, Rasht can bolster its competitiveness, attract diverse tourists, and achieve sustainable growth.

In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of localized, up-to-date research for a comprehensive understanding of regional tourism competitiveness. The thesis serves as a call to action, urging efforts to develop Rasht's tourism industry by addressing challenges, enhancing preservation, refining marketing strategies, and embracing sustainability practices.

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STATEMENT ON CONSULTATION PRACTICES

As a supervisor of Shahrzad Pourjafargholi (NEPTUN ID: FFWBRI), I here declare that the master's thesis has been reviewed by me, the student was informed about the requirements of literary sources management and its legal and ethical rules.

I **recommend** the master's thesis to be defended in a final exam.

The document contains state secrets or professional secrets: yes   **no**

Place and date: Gyöngyös, 01 November, 2023

_____
Internal supervisor

DECLARATION

on authenticity and public assess of mater's thesis

Student's name:	Shahrzad Pourjafargholi
Student's Neptun ID:	FFWBRI
Title of the document:	Influencing factors on the competitiveness of tourism products in Iran Touristic Cities, with a specific case study on Rasht
Year of publication:	2023
Department:	Tourism Management

I declare that the submitted master's thesis is my own, original individual creation. Any parts taken from an another author's work are clearly marked, and listed in the table of contents.

If the statements above are not true, I acknowledge that the Final examination board excludes me from participation in the final exam, and I am only allowed to take final exam if I submit another master's thesis.

Viewing and printing my submitted work in a PDF format is permitted. However, the modification of my submitted work shall not be permitted.

I acknowledge that the rules on Intellectual Property Management of Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences shall apply to my work as an intellectual property.

I acknowledge that the electric version of my work is uploaded to the repository system of the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Place and date: Gyöngyös, 2023/11/01

………………………………………………

Student's signature

Appendix 3: Questionnaire of the Case Study

1. Gender:

  a) Male

  b) Female

2. Age:

  a) 18-25

  b) 26-35

  c) 36-45

  d) 46-55

  e) 56 and above

3. What is your highest level of education completed?

  a) High school or below

  b) Some college or associate's degree

  c) Bachelor's degree

  d) Master's degree

  e) Doctorate or professional degree

4. What is your current occupation?

  a) Professional/Managerial

  b) Office/Administrative support

  c) Housewife

  d) Student

  e) Retired

  f) Other (please specify)

5. What is your annual household income?

  a) Less than $5,000

  b) $5,000 - $10,000

  c) $10,000 - $20,000

  d) $20,000 - $30,000

  e) More than $30,000

6. How many members are usually included in your travel group?

 a) Just myself

 b) 2-4 members

 c) 5-7 members

 d) More than seven members

7. How much are you willing to spend on travel and tourism activities per day per person?

 a) Less than $20

 b) $20- $30

 c) $30 - $50

 d) $50 - $100

 e) More than $100

8. What type of tourism do you prefer?

 a) Leisure Travel

 b) Adventure Travel

 c) Cultural Tourism

 d) Gastronomy Travel

 e) Other

9. How often do you visit Rasht?

 a) Regularly (more than once a year)

 b) Occasionally (once a year or less)

 c) This was my first visit

Please rate the following factors on a scale from 1 to 10, where one represents "not important" or disagree or wrong, and 10 represents "extremely important."

10. The pricing of tourism products and services in Rasht is reasonable and offers good value for money.

11. There is a wide range of accommodation options like rental villas, ecotourism residences, and Airbnb in Rasht, except hotels.

12. Rasht offers a variety of hotel options

13. Rasht offers a variety of dining and entertainment options.

14. How would you rate the quality of transportation networks (roads, airports, etc.) inside Rasht?

   a) Excellent

   b) Good

   c) Average

   d) Poor

15. How diverse are the cultural attractions (e.g., historical sites, museums, festivals) in Rasht?

   a) Excellent

   b) Good

   c) Average

   d) Poor

16. How well-preserved and diverse are the cultural attractions (e.g., historical sites, museums, festivals) in Rasht?

   a) Excellent

   b) Good

   c) Average

   d) Poor

17. How easy is it to reach Rasht through various modes of transportation (e.g., air, road, rail)?

   a) very easy

   b) easy

   c) Average

   d) Difficult

18. Safety and security:

- How safe do you feel when visiting Rasht?

   a) Very safe

   b) Safe

   c) Neutral

   d) Unsafe

18. How would you rate the overall hospitality and service quality provided by businesses in Rasht?

 a) Excellent

 b) Good

 c) Average

 d) Poor

19. How would you rate the overall hospitality and service quality provided by accommodation facilities (ecotourism accommodation, guesthouses, etc.) in Rasht?

 a) Excellent

 b) Good

 c) Average

 d) Poor

20. Do you consider the pricing of tourism products and services in Rasht to be:

 a) Affordable

 b) Reasonable

 c) Neutral

 d) Expensive

21. Do you consider the marketing of tourism products and services in Rasht to be:

 a) Excellent

 b) Good

 c) Average

 d) Poor

22. How have you heard about Rasht as a tourism destination?

 a) Online Research

 b) Recommendation from a Friend or Family Member

 c) Travel Agency or Tour Operator

 d) Advertisements

 e) Other

23. To what extent do you believe the government supports tourism development in Rasht?

 a) Strongly supports

b) Supports

c) Neutral

d) Does not support

24. Please rate the following factors on a scale from 1 to 5, where one represents "not important" and five represents "significant":

- Cultural attractions
- Natural attractions
- Gastronomy
- Infrastructure
- Safety and Security
- Hospitality and service quality
- Accessibility
- Pricing
- Sustainability

25. Have you seen tourism in Rasht follows sustainable and responsible practices?

- yes
- no

26. Would you recommend Rasht as a tourism destination to others?

Thank you for your involvement!