

## Original Article

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## A study on the role of economic structures on the dynamics of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz

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### Abstract

This study investigates the role of economic drivers in shaping the dynamics of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz, a heritage-based urban space that, despite its rich cultural and economic assets, faces persistent challenges related to investment mechanisms, institutional support, and financial infrastructure. Adopting a quantitative research design grounded in a positivist paradigm, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to economic actors, creative entrepreneurs, managers, and tourists operating within the bazaar. The reliability and construct validity of the measurement model were confirmed, and causal relationships among variables were examined using structural equation modeling. The findings indicated that local investment, sustainable employment, and creative entrepreneurship constitute the most influential economic drivers strengthening the bazaar's economic structure, while the creative tourism economy plays a critical mediating role in translating these drivers into tourism dynamism. Moreover, the dynamics of creative tourism in the Tabriz Bazaar are primarily shaped by social and economic outcomes, alongside tourist satisfaction, underscoring the importance of social interactions and community participation. Overall, the results highlighted the necessity of an integrated development approach that combines targeted investment, institutional support, and creative economic activities. Such a framework provides a context-sensitive foundation for policy-making and strategic interventions to foster sustainable creative tourism in historic bazaars.

### Keywords

Creative tourism  
Creative economy  
Economic drivers  
Historic urban markets  
Structural equation modeling  
Tabriz historic bazaar

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, urban development paradigms have increasingly shifted away from models grounded in mass production, heavy industry, and consumption-oriented tourism toward mobilizing cultural, creative, and social assets as sources of sustainable competitive advantage (UNCTAD, 2022). Within this context, creative tourism has emerged as a novel approach that, by emphasizing experience orientation, the active participation of tourists and local communities, and value creation rooted in cultural skills and knowledge, enables a redefinition of tourism's role in the urban economy (Richards, 2022). The significance of this approach is particularly evident in historic cities, where conventional tourism models, centered on passive consumption and the commodification of culture, are increasingly incapable of addressing the complex demands of contemporary urban environments.

In response to this challenge, the scholarly literature has sought to conceptualize the nexus between tourism, creativity, and urban development. Empirical studies indicate that creative tourism can contribute to urban economic diversification, enhanced resilience, and strengthened place identity by fostering creative industries, local entrepreneurship, and community participation (Duxbury & Richards, 2023; Zhang & Cameron, 2020). However, recent research underscores that such outcomes cannot be achieved solely through cultural initiatives. Evidence suggests that, in the absence of sustainable economic mechanisms, institutional support, and adequate financial infrastructure, many creative tourism projects remain episodic and symbolic, failing to generate structural transformation within the urban economy (Smith & Diekmann, 2023; Zhang & Wang, 2024).

Accordingly, a significant research gap can be identified in the existing literature. Although a substantial body of research has examined the cultural, identity-based, and participatory dimensions of creative tourism, systematic analyses of its economic and institutional drivers, particularly within living historic spaces, remain limited (Dias et al., 2023; Liu & Ko, 2024; Carvalho & Reis, 2024; Zou et al., 2025). Much of the scholarship has either remained at a conceptual level or has addressed the interrelationships among local investment, creative entrepreneurship, financial infrastructure, and urban governance in isolation. Yet, the development of creative tourism is inherently complex and networked, shaped by the simultaneous interaction of these interdependent factors (Zhang &

Wang, 2024).

Within the domestic literature, despite a growing body of research on creative tourism, the dominant focus has been on describing general capacities and challenges. Critical analyses of economic mechanisms, investment risk, stakeholder conflicts of interest, and deficiencies in urban governance have received comparatively limited attention (Khorami et al., 2025; Parvin et al., 2025). This predominantly descriptive orientation has resulted in a lack of robust analytical frameworks in the domestic literature to inform policymaking and developmental intervention, thereby perpetuating the gap between research and practice.

In this regard, the historical bazaar of Tabriz, one of the largest covered bazaars in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, constitutes a prominent example of an urban space endowed with substantial cultural and economic capacities for the development of creative tourism. The diversity of traditional activities, artisanal value chains, distinctive architectural fabric, and the bazaar's regional significance collectively render it a potential platform for producing participatory and creative experiences. Nevertheless, these capacities have not been effectively integrated into the creative economy and tourism sector. The absence of digital infrastructure, weak institutional support, stakeholder fragmentation, investment uncertainty, and the lack of integrated policymaking have hindered the realization of these potentials (Moazezi Mehr-e-Tehran, 2025). This condition reflects a structural disjunction between cultural capital and economic mechanisms, ultimately undermining the bazaar's economic resilience.

From this perspective, the historical bazaar of Tabriz faces a developmental paradox: the coexistence of significant cultural-economic potential with the inability of existing economic and institutional structures to leverage these assets effectively. A substantial part of this inefficiency appears to stem from the absence of a structural analysis of the economic drivers underpinning creative tourism. Existing policies have largely concentrated on physical interventions or event-based initiatives, with limited attention to the interconnections among local investment, creative entrepreneurship, financial infrastructure, and urban governance.

Thus, the present study aims to analyze the role of economic drivers in shaping the dynamics of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz. It addresses the following questions: Which economic components

exert the greatest influence on the development of creative tourism in this context? How do local investment, creative entrepreneurship, and institutional support affect the formation and sustainability of this approach? And what are the principal structural barriers to the advancement of creative tourism? The ultimate objective is to propose an analytical framework to inform policymaking and developmental intervention in historic bazaars.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Creative tourism has been advanced in contemporary scholarship as a critical response to the limitations of mass tourism and purely experience-oriented models. Early theorists in this field, most notably Richards and Raymond (2000), conceptualized creative tourism as grounded in tourists' active participation, learning processes, and the co-creation of experiences with host communities. Despite its foundational role in reshaping the tourism paradigm, this approach has been subject to substantial critique, particularly for its excessive emphasis on the experiential dimension while overlooking the economic, institutional, and structural mechanisms that enable the continuity and reproduction of such experiences. This limitation becomes especially pronounced in living historic spaces, such as bazaars, where creative tourism constitutes not merely a cultural phenomenon but an integral component of everyday economic activity and local livelihoods.

In response to this shortcoming, the creative economy literature has sought to elucidate the economic underpinnings of creative tourism. The creative economy framework, as articulated by UNCTAD (2022), underscores the role of intangible assets, innovation, entrepreneurship, and creative industries in generating economic value. However, a key critique of this perspective is that, in many studies, the creative economy is framed as an abstract growth strategy, with insufficient attention to specific institutional, spatial, and social contexts. Consequently, when detached from local contexts and governance structures, it may lead to excessive commodification of heritage and the erosion of cultural authenticity.

To bridge this gap, the theory of sustainable economic development in tourism provides an intermediary framework that emphasizes the balance among economic growth, heritage conservation, and social equity (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). This perspective highlights sustainable employment, community participation, and equitable distribution of economic

benefits as prerequisites for tourism sustainability. Nevertheless, the sustainable development approach also faces limitations in explaining performance disparities among comparable historic destinations, as it is often limited to macro-level policy considerations, ignoring micro-level economic mechanisms.

At this juncture, urban economic frameworks and the heritage–economy–tourism convergence offer complementary insights. According to Scott (2012), historic urban spaces, such as bazaars, function as multi-level systems in which economic activities, social networks, and cultural values operate simultaneously and interactively. Similarly, Ashworth and Tunbridge (2000) conceptualize heritage not as a constraint but as a productive asset that can generate and reproduce value when effectively integrated with economic and tourism activities. These perspectives enable a more nuanced analysis of the roles of local investment, financial infrastructure, and institutional interaction in shaping the dynamics of creative tourism.

Building on this synthesis, the present study constructs its theoretical framework by purposefully recombining these strands. Within this framework, creative tourism is understood not as the outcome of a single determinant but as the product of a networked interaction among core economic drivers, including sustainable employment, creative entrepreneurship, local investment, and financial infrastructure. In the absence of supporting drivers, both internal and external, such as local governance, supporting policies, and institutional coordination, these core drivers are unlikely to translate into substantive developmental outcomes.

In the proposed conceptual model, these interactions contribute to the formation of a creative economy and the convergence of heritage, economy, and tourism, which function as intermediate systemic outcomes. These outcomes, in turn, create the conditions for sustainable tourism development, defined not merely by increased tourism demand but by strengthened local livelihoods, active heritage conservation, and the long-term viability of the historic bazaar. Ultimately, this networked process culminates in the realization of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz, wherein the bazaar operates as a dynamic socio-economic and cultural ecosystem.

Thus, the theoretical framework of the present study extends beyond a descriptive model and constitutes a critical analytical construct. Drawing on established theoretical foundations, it explicates the interrelationships among economic, institutional, and

cultural factors within the historical bazaar contexts, directly aligned with the study’s objective of identifying

the key economic drivers influencing the dynamics of creative tourism.

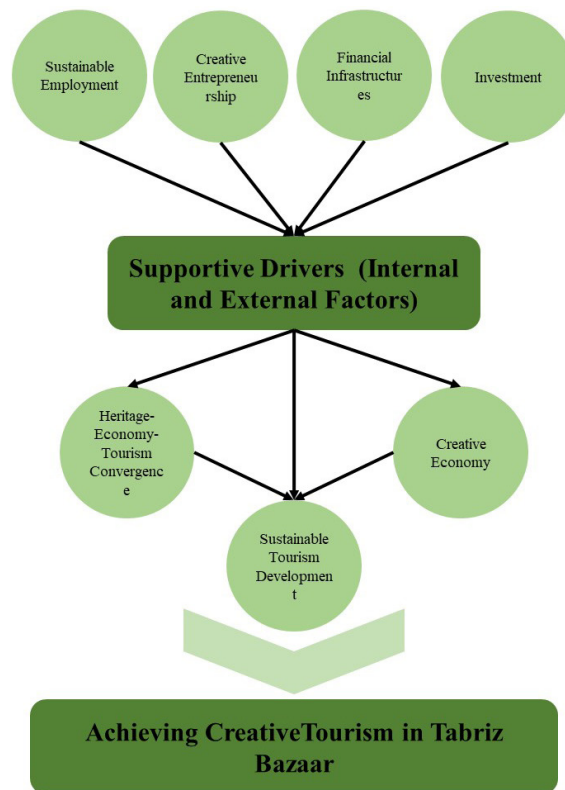


Figure 1. Theoretical model of economic drivers influencing creative tourism

### 2.1. The concept of historic bazaars in Iran: from economic core to urban civilization symbol

Historic bazaars in Iran cannot be defined merely as economic spaces; rather, they constitute “a tangible symbol of urban civilization and a manifestation of the inseparable nexus between economy, culture, and society in the Iranian context” (Soltanzadeh, 2016: 45). The etymology of the term bazaar itself reflects this broader conceptualization. The word appeared in Middle Persian as *vāzār* and in Old Persian as *ābākāri* (composed of *ābā*, meaning gathering place, and *kāri*, meaning movement or circulation), indicating its historically intertwined, coequal social and commercial functions (Behzadfar, 2019: 32).

From the perspective of urban functionality, historic bazaars served as the backbone and vital artery of Iranian cities. They were not only the principal corridors of communication and commodity exchange but also the primary channels for the circulation of information, news, and social interaction (Soltanzadeh, 2007: 28). Due to this communicative centrality, in various historical periods, the bazaar evolved into a focal point of social and political transformation, with

“the economic power of merchants functioning as an effective lever of influence over the structure of political authority” (Jamshidiha et al., 2015).

The constitutive elements of historic bazaars – such as *rasteh* (linear commercial passages), *timcheh* (domed trading halls), *sara* (courtyard caravanserais), *qeyserieh* (specialized luxury trade sections), and *chaharsuq* (intersections) – are not merely responses to physical or spatial requirements; rather, they embody a coherent guild-based and socio-economic system (Pirnia, 2012: 116). The integration of institutions such as mosque, *hussainiyya*, and school within or adjacent to the bazaar reflects the profound interconnection between religious institutions and economy in the Iranian–Islamic city. This spatial proximity is not a neutral arrangement; it reinforces the merchants’ “symbolic capital”, including trustworthiness, integrity, and reputational credibility, through participation in religious and communal practices (ibid: 29). Such characteristics distinguish Iranian bazaars from purely commercial marketplaces in other civilizations.

In the contemporary era, although the emergence of modern shopping centers and malls has undermined

the exclusive economic role of historic bazaars, their unparalleled status as repositories of collective memory and markers of urban identity has become increasingly evident (Moazezi Mehr-e-Tehran, 2025). The principal challenge today is not the museification or static preservation of these spaces, but rather “the revitalization of their active role within the economic and social cycles of the contemporary city.” This revitalization necessitates mobilizing new potentials, such as creative tourism, which can generate renewed economic value by leveraging the bazaar’s historically embedded social and cultural capital (Parvin et al., 2025).

In particular, the historical bazaar of Tabriz, one of the largest and oldest covered bazaars in the world and inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, represents a paradigmatic example of a living socio-economic and cultural ecosystem. The continuity of economic activity alongside the preservation of traditional spatial and institutional structures renders this bazaar a “natural laboratory” for testing innovative development models such as creative tourism (Khorami et al., 2025). Thus, its analysis extends beyond a retrospective examination of the past; it offers a prospective model for integrating heritage and innovation within the framework of sustainable urban development.

### 3. Literature review

Recent international research indicates that creative tourism, centered on tourists’ experiential engagement and active participation, extends beyond conventional tourism models and has demonstrably enhanced the economic and cultural value of destinations. Interactions between tourists and artisans or creative workshops, such as those documented in Lucknow, India, have been identified as decisive factors in attracting visitors (Islam & Sedu Khan, 2025). These findings suggest that the success of creative tourism in such contexts is attributable not merely to the presence of cultural assets, but to the effective mobilization of local capacities, facilitation of stakeholder interaction, and the creation of economic incentives for local entrepreneurs. They further indicate that, in the absence of supportive networks and linkages between local investment and creative opportunities, the latent potential of creative tourism remains unrealized.

Studies on entrepreneurship within creative communities likewise demonstrate that the purposeful use of cultural and historical assets to generate

distinctive experiences directly enhances destination attractiveness (Carvalho & Reis, 2024). A critical review of this literature reveals that successful creative entrepreneurship depends on two fundamental factors: first, institutional support and targeted investment; and second, entrepreneurs’ capacity to transform cultural resources into marketable products and experiential offerings to tourists. The absence of either factor may constrain the economic and cultural impacts of creative tourism. Within the domestic literature, research has similarly emphasized the importance of the creative economy, local investment, and entrepreneurship, highlighting their decisive role in the development of creative tourism (Khorami et al., 2025). However, due to methodological limitations and the lack of network-based analytical models, many domestic studies have not fully captured the complex interactions among these factors.

The transition from cultural tourism to creative tourism is also constrained in the absence of coherent policy support and flexible institutional frameworks (Liu & Ko, 2024). These studies demonstrate that fragmented policymaking, weak financial infrastructure, and inadequate governance mechanisms hinder the realization of creative tourism’s potential capacities. Domestic research likewise underscores the importance of systemic reform, efficient management, and privatization as complementary drivers of creative tourism development (Nikraftar & Kaveh, 2025). These findings suggest that even where investment and entrepreneurial capabilities exist, the absence of institutional support and effective governance may impose significant constraints, which is also observable in the historical bazaar of Tabriz.

Concerning competitive advantage and cultural branding, empirical evidence indicates that leveraging comparative advantages and constructing creative brands can enhance the destination’s status while fostering innovation and employment in the creative economy (Alvaro Dias et al., 2024; Zhang & Cameron, 2020). A critical assessment of these studies suggests that cultural branding exerts a meaningful impact only when accompanied by targeted investment, adequate infrastructure, and supportive policies. In the domestic context, research on the Tabriz Bazaar has highlighted the synergy between cultural heritage and creative tourism, demonstrating that limited exploitation of cultural assets, without a supportive and managerial framework, cannot ensure the sustainable development of creative tourism (Parvin et al., 2025).

Barriers and constraints in the development of creative tourism in historic marketplaces have also received scholarly attention. Studies identify the absence of creative management, insufficient financial infrastructure, and inadequate innovative services as principal impediments (Moazezi Mehr-e-Tehran, 2025; Taghvaei et al., 2022). These findings indicate that the mere existence of cultural and historical assets is insufficient; rather, the success of creative tourism requires integration among investment, institutional support, financial infrastructure, and service innovation. In other words, latent capacities cannot translate into tangible outcomes without synergy among these interrelated factors.

A comparative review of domestic and international scholarship reveals that, at the global level, tourist engagement with creative industries and the strategic use of cultural assets constitute primary drivers of success. In contrast, in Iran, structural constraints, insufficient institutional support, and limited financial infrastructure impede the realization of these capacities. The principal gap in the domestic literature lies in its predominant focus on identifying individual factors and barriers in isolation, rather than examining

their networked and interactive dynamics within a specific historical context. Conversely, while international studies tend to be model-driven and comprehensive, they often overlook the distinctive cultural, economic, and institutional conditions of Iran, as well as the particular characteristics of historic bazaars, such as the Tabriz Bazaar.

Accordingly, the present study, with a specific focus on the historical bazaar of Tabriz and through a critical analysis of economic, cultural, and managerial drivers, seeks to address this gap in the domestic literature. By drawing upon international experiences while grounding the analysis in local conditions, it proposes a comprehensive analytical framework that elucidates the interaction among local investment, creative entrepreneurship, financial infrastructure, and institutional support in the development of creative tourism. This approach not only overcomes the methodological limitations of prior studies but also provides a foundation for designing context-sensitive policies and developmental interventions aligned with the endogenous capacities and cultural specificities of the historical bazaar of Tabriz.

**Table 1. Literature review**

Author	Research topic	key findings	Relevance to the current study
Islam & Sedu Khan (2025)	Creative tourism in Lucknow, India	Tourists' interaction with artisans and creative workshops as a key attraction factor	Aligned with the current study's focus on the role of local entrepreneurship
Carvalho & Reis (2024)	Creative communities entrepreneurship	Utilizing cultural assets to create unique experiences	Confirming the necessity of local investment and creativity
Liu & Ko (2024)	Transition from cultural tourism to creative tourism	The role of national policies and market changes in this transition	Related to the policy-making and government support dimension in the current study
Alvaro Dias et al. (2024)	Competitive models for creative destinations	Utilizing comparative advantage and cultural branding	Reinforcing the idea of branding Tabriz Bazaar as a creative destination
Zhang & Cameron (2020)	The impact of the creative economy on destination development	Employment growth and innovation in tourism services	Aligned with the investigation of sustainable employment in the current study
Khorami et al. (2025)	Factors affecting the development of creative tourism	Creative economy as the most important factor (Eigenvalue = 8.357); key role of local investment and entrepreneurship	Aligned with the current study's focus on economic drivers, particularly investment and entrepreneurship
Nikraftar & Kaveh (2025)	Priorities for creative tourism development	Improving systems and privatization; the importance of efficient management	Complementing the current study's approach by focusing on policies and government support
Parvin et al. (2025)	The role of intangible heritage in the creative tourism of Tabriz Bazaar	Synergy between heritage and tourism; promoting cultural conservation	Providing the ground for the current study's connection to the cultural dimension of Tabriz Bazaar

Author	Research topic	key findings	Relevance to the current study
Moazezi Mehr-e-Tehran (2025)	Barriers to the development of creative tourism in historical bazaars	Lack of creative management; absence of financial infrastructure	Overlaps with the current study's focus on financial and managerial infrastructures
Taghvaei et al. (2022)	Elucidating strategies for the development of creative tourism in tourism services	Lack of creative services as a barrier to tourist attraction	Highlighting the importance of service innovation, which is considered in the current study.

## 4. Research methodology

### 4.1. Research design

The present study was structured in accordance with the research “onion” framework proposed by Saunders et al. (2019), encompassing philosophical stance, methodological approach, strategy, and research design. At the first layer, the research philosophy was grounded in social positivism, as the primary objective was to examine causal and influential relationships between economic structures and the dynamics of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz, necessitating measurable quantitative data collection and statistical analysis. At the second layer, the study adopted a quantitative, analytical approach, enabling hypothesis testing and the modeling of interrelationships among variables. The third layer concerned the research strategy. A survey-based case study strategy was employed, as data were collected from a real-world context – the historical bazaar of Tabriz, to analyze the interactive effects of economic drivers on the dynamics of creative tourism. At the fourth layer, the research was classified as descriptive–analytical and applied. In addition to identifying and explaining relationships among key variables, the study aimed to generate an analytical framework to inform policymaking and developmental interventions within the historical bazaar of Tabriz. Data were collected during the spring and summer of 2025 (1404 in the Iranian calendar), an appropriate period to measure performance and behavioral realities, given the level of economic and tourism activity in the market.

### 4.2. Research data

The statistical population of the study comprised four principal stakeholder groups directly involved in creative tourism within the historical bazaar of Tabriz:

1. Economic actors and merchants operating within the bazaar;
2. Entrepreneurs and practitioners in the creative industries sector;
3. Local managers and decision-makers associated with the bazaar; and
4. Tourists present in the marketplace.

These groups were selected based on the stakeholder-oriented approach in urban tourism studies, which emphasized the necessity of simultaneously understanding the perspectives of producers, regulators, and consumers of tourism experiences. The sample size was determined using Cochran’s formula for large populations. Assuming an extensive but indeterminate population ( $N > 10,000$ ), a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and maximum variance ( $p = q = 0.5$ ), the initial estimated sample size was 384 respondents. To enhance statistical power, 385 valid questionnaires were ultimately analyzed. This sample size was sufficient for multivariate analyses, considering the requirements of structural equation modeling and the adequate ratio of sample size to model parameters (Kline, 2016). A random sampling method was employed; the statistical population was first classified into four stakeholder categories, and then respondents were selected across all four groups.

**Table 2. Descriptive characteristics of participants**

Stakeholder groups	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Bazaar merchants	152	39.5
Visitors	194	50.4
Local managers (District Municipality and Tourism Organization)	18	4.7
Entrepreneurs (handicrafts and tourism)	21	5.4

The primary data collection instrument employed in this study was a structured questionnaire, comprising three main sections. The first section captured the demographic characteristics of respondents; the second section addressed economic indicators, including local investment, sustainable employment, and creative entrepreneurship; and the third section measured performance indicators of creative tourism, such as tourist experience, interaction with creative industries, and social participation. All questionnaire

items were designed using a five-point Likert scale, enabling respondents to indicate the intensity of their agreement or disagreement with each statement. The constructs and measurement items were developed based on an extensive review of established international and domestic scholarship (e.g., Carvalho & Reis, 2024; Liu & Ko, 2024; Khorami et al., 2025; Nikraftar & Kaveh, 2025) to ensure the instrument's content validity.

**Table 3. Assessing the validity and reliability of data**

Variable	Component	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Operational definition of the component	Indicators
Economic drivers (independent variable)	Investment	0.841	The extent of financial resource allocation to economic and creative tourism activities in the Tabriz Bazaar	Volume of investments made, percentage of budget allocated to creative tourism, and level of support for creative businesses
	Financial infrastructure	0.735	The ability of the financial system to support investments and creative activities	Access to small and medium-sized loans, the existence of support funds, and access to insurance and financial services
	creative entrepreneurship	0.798	The level of innovation and creativity in establishing businesses related to tourism and cultural industries	Number of startups, diversity of creative products, degree of innovation in provided services
	sustainable employment	0.812	The capacity to create continuous job opportunities related to creative tourism	Number of employees in creative industries, job retention rate, and ratio of employment to the active population
Creative tourism economy (mediating variable)	Creative economy	0.762	The impact of economic activities based on innovation and creative industries on the tourist experience	Income share of creative industries, number of innovative products and services, and level of tourist participation in creative activities
	Heritage-economy-tourism synergy	0.715	Synergy among cultural heritage conservation, economic activities, and tourism	Number of joint cultural-economic projects, level of local community participation, and visitation rate of heritage related to creative activities
Tourism dynamics (dependent variable)	Economic impact	0.791	The bazaar's ability to create sustainable economic value from creative tourism activities	Increase in local income, share of creative tourism in local GDP, diversification of income sources, and creation of sustainable employment
	Social impact	0.865	The impact of tourism on improving the quality of life and social interaction of the host community	Local community participation in activities, increased satisfaction of employees and residents, reduction of social inequality, strengthening of local social networks
	Cultural impact	0.710	The bazaar's ability to protect and promote cultural heritage and local identity	Number of cultural heritage programs related to creative tourism, preservation of traditions and handicrafts, tourist interaction with local culture, hosting of cultural events

Variable	Component	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Operational definition of the component	Indicators
Tourism dynamics (dependent variable)	environmental impact	0.782	The impact of tourism activities on the natural environment and the physical structure of the bazaar	Compliance with environmental standards, waste and natural resource management, reduction of negative tourism impacts, and improvement of public space quality and historical architecture
	Tourist satisfaction	0.809	Tourists' positive and memorable experience of creative activities	Level of tourist satisfaction, likelihood of revisit, recommendation to others, and evaluation of participatory experience and experience authenticity
	Innovation in service delivery	0.745	The ability to provide innovative tourism services aligned with sustainable development	Number of creative and innovative services, diversity of offered experiences, alignment with sustainability principles, tourist participation in experience co-creation

The conceptual model of the study comprised economic drivers (independent variable), the creative tourism economy (mediating variable), and tourism dynamics (dependent variable), which were identified as the principal determinants of creative tourism development in the historical bazaar of Tabriz. The variables included investment, financial infrastructure, creative entrepreneurship, sustainable employment, creative economy, heritage–economy–tourism collaboration, economic impact, social impact, cultural impact, environmental impact, tourist satisfaction, and service innovation. These variables and their corresponding indicators were derived from prior studies and subsequently contextualized to reflect the specific characteristics of the Tabriz Bazaar, so that causal relationships and their interdependencies could be examined using structural equation modeling (SEM).

During the data analysis phase, preprocessing tests were first conducted, including checking for missing data, normality of distribution, and detection of outliers. Construct validity was evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS software. Model fit was assessed based on multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including CFI, GFI, NFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. As reported in Table 4, all fit indices

fell within acceptable thresholds, indicating the adequacy of the measurement model and a strong alignment between the theoretical structure and the observed data. The CMIN/DF ratio was 2.18, which is below the recommended threshold of 3, indicating an optimal fit. Additionally, the values of GFI, CFI, NFI, and TLI all exceeded 0.90, demonstrating satisfactory model fit. The RMSEA and SRMR values were 0.026 and 0.039, respectively, both within the desirable range (below 0.05), suggesting minimal approximation error. All factor loadings were statistically significant and exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating strong correlations between observed indicators and their corresponding constructs. Collectively, the results confirmed that the proposed model effectively explains the relationships among the variables. Furthermore, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated for all constructs. CR values exceeded 0.70 and AVE values surpassed 0.50, confirming satisfactory convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, and the results indicated that the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its correlations with other constructs, thereby demonstrating conceptual distinction of the constructs.

Table 4. Model fit indices

Index	P	CMIN/DF	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	NFI	TLI	SRMR
Value	0.476	2.18	0.954	0.988	0.026	0.976	0.977	0.039

To assess construct and face validity, the questionnaire was first administered to a pilot sample of 30

respondents from the target population. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to ensure

appropriate item loadings on their respective constructs. Reliability of the instrument was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.70 indicating high reliability. Although for some constructs, such as heritage–economy–tourism collaboration, alpha values were close to the acceptable limit (0.715), given the multidimensional and emerging nature of this construct in the context of Iran's historical markets, it was considered within the acceptable range and consistent with common criteria in exploratory-explanatory research. To control for common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was performed. The first factor accounted for less than 35% of the total variance, indicating that

the risk of bias arising from a single data source is within acceptable limits. Additionally, statistical assumptions, including normality of data distribution, absence of outliers, and multicollinearity, were examined and confirmed. Analytical procedures encompassed Pearson correlation, multivariate regression, and structural equation modeling (SEM) using SPSS 28 and AMOS 26. SEM was chosen due to its capability to simultaneously analyze both direct and indirect relationships among latent and observed variables, as well as its compatibility with complex conceptual models commonly employed in urban tourism studies.

**Table 5. Assessment of data normality**

Test	Statistic	df	ppp-value
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.038	384	0.184
Shapiro-Wilk	0.847	384	0.469

Next, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the preliminary relationships between economic variables and creative tourism performance. This step ensured that the variables were suitable for inclusion in the SEM model and for subsequent multivariate regression analysis. For structural analysis, SEM was employed to investigate both direct and indirect effects of the drivers and to determine the pathways of influence, due to its ability to handle relatively small sample sizes and non-normal data and its suitability for analyzing complex multivariate relationships (Hair et al., 2022). In addition, multivariate regression tests were conducted to assess the impact of economic variables on various creative tourism indicators. At the same time, t-tests and ANOVA were used to examine group differences among different stakeholder categories. All statistical analyses were performed using AMOS 26 for SEM and SPSS 28 for correlation and regression analyses. AMOS 26 was selected for its advanced capabilities in path analysis and evaluation of model validity and reliability. Also, SPSS 28 provided robust tools for classical statistical testing and descriptive analysis. Furthermore, the SEM results were evaluated using fit indices, coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), and structural fit measures to ensure that the conceptual model adequately explains the relationships between economic drivers and creative tourism performance in the historical bazaar of Tabriz.

#### 4.3. Study area

The historical bazaar of Tabriz, as one of the world's oldest and largest covered bazaars, functions not only as an active economic hub but also as a cultural and social center, playing a significant role in the urban life of Tabriz over the centuries. Spanning over 27 hectares and comprising 20 commercial streets (rasteh), 35 caravanserais and courtyards (sara), 25 domed trading halls (timcheh), 11 alleys, 12 schools, 30 mosques, and more than 5,500 commercial units, it represents a prominent example of traditional Iranian bazaar architecture and spatial organization (Khamachi, 2007).

The strategic location of Tabriz along the historical Silk Road transformed this bazaar into one of the most important centers of international trade in past eras, a significance it continues to hold today within the context of tourism and urban economy (Khamachi, 2007: 193).

The Tabriz Bazaar is not merely a venue for commerce but also a living stage for local cultural experiences. Cultural events are an inseparable part of its identity. A notable example is the Muharram mourning rituals, particularly at the Mozaffarieh Timcheh, which becomes the focal point of ceremonies from the 8th to the 12th of Muharram. During this period, commercial activities are paused, and the bazaar transforms into a space for religious gatherings, charitable offerings, and hospitality for mourners. This collective experience,

while spiritually significant, also serves as a unique cultural tourism attraction for both domestic and international visitors (Omran & Esmaili Sangari, 2008).

In terms of world heritage, the Tabriz Bazaar is inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and East Azerbaijan Province boasts 13 global handicraft excellence awards and 278 national awards, highlighting its prominent role in Iran's artistic and traditional production (UNESCO, 2006; www.irna.ir). These achievements serve both as a foundation for cultural and creative tourism branding and as an opportunity for the development of handicraft export markets.

Regarding tourism infrastructure, Tabriz offers 15 hotels (including 4 five-star and 5 four-star hotels), 34 guesthouses, and approximately 600 registered restaurants and traditional eateries, providing substantial capacity for accommodating visitors (East

Azerbaijan Tourism Organization, 2025). Combined with the bazaar's unique architectural structure and its integration with surrounding public spaces such as the Grand Mosque and Ali Qapu, these facilities create a favorable environment for sustainable, experience-based tourism development (East Azerbaijan Tourism Organization, 2025).

The historical bazaar of Tabriz exemplifies a living integration of economy, culture, and society, where commercial activities, religious rituals, artistic production, and social interactions are intertwined. This creates a unique platform for creative tourism, offering visitors a multidimensional experience of shopping, immersing in local lifestyles, observing traditional arts, and participating in cultural events. With coordinated management and planning, this potential can significantly enhance Tabriz's position on the global tourism map (Haghparsat & Esmaili, 2018).

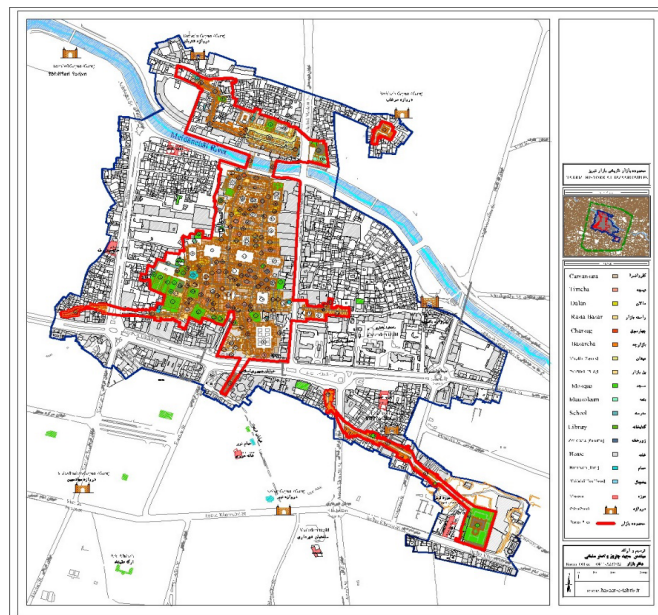


Figure 1. Historical bazaar of Tabriz (Cultural Heritage of East Azerbaijan and Tabriz Municipality District 8, 2005)

## 5. Research findings

The findings of this study are interpreted based on a triangulation of results from structural equation modeling (SEM; Table 5), correlation analysis (Table 6), and multivariate linear regression (Table 7), allowing for a statistically coherent and contextually grounded explanation of how economic drivers influence the dynamics of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz.

Structural equation modeling results indicated that the relationships among the key constructs were

highly explanatory and stable. Standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ) ranged from 0.71 to 0.86, critical ratios (C.R.) exceeded 11, and all path coefficients were significant at  $p < 0.001$ , demonstrating a strong fit for the conceptual model. Furthermore, bootstrap analysis with 5,000 iterations and BCa confidence intervals confirmed the stability of all path coefficients, with minimal bias (Bias  $< 0.002$ ), reinforcing the validity of causal inferences.

Within the economic drivers construct, "Investment" ( $\beta = 0.82$ ) and "Sustainable employment" ( $\beta = 0.81$ )

had the highest factor loadings. This reflects the economic nature of the Tabriz Bazaar, which relies heavily on ongoing commercial, production, and service activities. Unlike emerging tourism spaces, the bazaar functions as a living historical economic system, where investment impacts are meaningful only when they stabilize both traditional and creative employment. The role of “Creative entrepreneurship” ( $\beta = 0.79$ ) indicates that innovation within local occupations, such as handicrafts, tourism experience design, and cultural services, complements economic investment. In contrast, “Financial infrastructure” ( $\beta = 0.74$ ), although significant, had a lower weight, suggesting that formal financial instruments in the Tabriz Bazaar function more as facilitators rather than primary drivers.

In the creative tourism economy construct, “Creative economy” ( $\beta = 0.76$ ) and “Heritage–economy–tourism collaboration” ( $\beta = 0.72$ ) significantly explained the construct. This finding indicates that in Tabriz, creative tourism emerges when innovative economic activities are integrated with the market’s tangible and functional heritage. Collaboration among economic

actors, heritage custodians, and tourism stakeholders provides the mechanism to transform the historic bazaar into a dynamic economic–cultural experience. Within the tourism dynamics construct, “Social impact” ( $\beta = 0.86$ ) had the highest value, highlighting that the dynamism of tourism in the Tabriz Bazaar depends more on social interactions, merchant participation, and engagement between tourists and the local community than on income generation or infrastructure alone. The bazaar is perceived as vibrant when tourists experience themselves as part of the daily life flow of the bazaar. “Tourist satisfaction” ( $\beta = 0.81$ ) and “Economic impact” ( $\beta = 0.79$ ) also strengthen the dynamism, while “Cultural impact” ( $\beta = 0.71$ ) and “Environmental impact” ( $\beta = 0.78$ ) primarily support long-term sustainability and quality of the tourist experience rather than immediate dynamism. Overall, these findings demonstrate that the interplay of investment, sustainable employment, creative entrepreneurship, and collaborative mechanisms underpins the emergence of creative tourism, while social and economic interactions drive the active dynamism of the historical bazaar of Tabriz.

**Table 6. Results of structural equation modeling**

Latent construct	Observed indicator	Standardized $\beta$ / $\beta$	S.E.	C.R.	Bootstrap mean	95%bca ci lower	95%BCa CI upper	P-value	Bias (%)	Bias (mean $-\beta - \beta$ )
Economic drivers	Investment	0.82	0.05	16.4	0.82	0.72	0.9	0.000	0.12	0.0010
	Financial infrastructure	0.74	0.06	12.3	0.742	0.63	0.83	0.000	0.15	0.002
	Creative entrepreneurship	0.79	0.05	15.8	0.790	0.70	0.87	0.000	0.10	0.000
	Sustainable employment	0.81	0.05	16.2	0.810	0.71	0.88	0.000	0.08	0.000
Creative tourism economy	Creative economy	0.76	0.05	15.2	0.761	0.67	0.85	0.000	0.13	0.001
	Heritage-economy-tourism Collaboration	0.72	0.06	12.0	0.720	0.61	0.81	0.000	0.18	0.000
Tourism dynamics	Economic impact	0.79	0.05	15.8	0.790	0.70	0.87	0.000	0.12	0.000
	Social impact	0.86	0.04	19.0	0.861	0.78	0.92	0.000	0.10	0.001
	Cultural impact	0.71	0.06	11.8	0.711	0.60	0.81	0.000	0.20	0.001
	Environmental impact	0.78	0.05	15.6	0.780	0.68	0.86	0.000	0.15	0.000
	Tourist satisfaction	0.81	0.05	16.2	0.810	0.72	0.88	0.000	0.10	0.000
	Innovation in service delivery	0.75	0.06	13.0	0.751	0.64	0.83	0.000	0.14	0.001

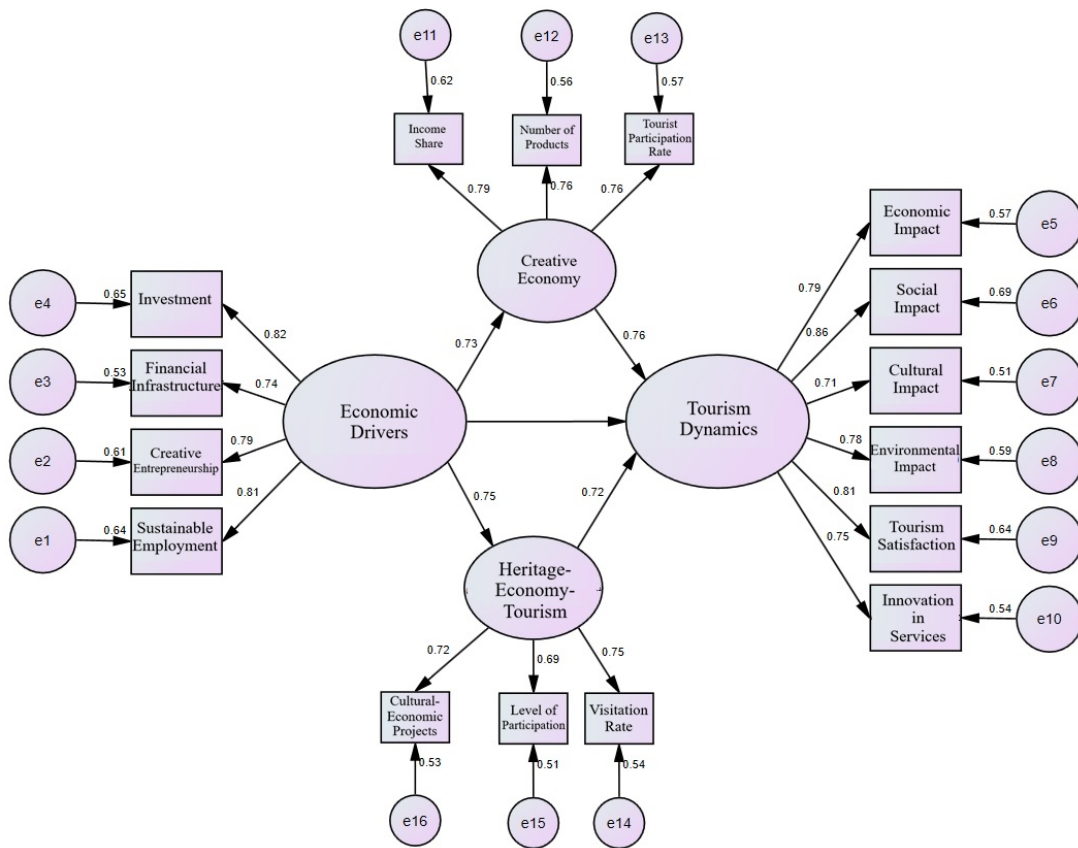


Figure 2. Results of structural equation modeling (SEM) in Amos software

The correlation analysis revealed that all components of the economic drivers construct were positively and significantly correlated with both the creative tourism economy and tourism dynamics ( $r$  ranging from 0.60 to 0.82,  $p < 0.001$ ). The strongest correlations were observed between “Investment” and “Economic drivers” ( $r = 0.82$ ) and between “Creative entrepreneurship” and “Tourism dynamics” ( $r = 0.72$ ). In the context of the Tabriz Bazaar, this correlation pattern indicates that increased investment and entrepreneurial activities are simultaneously

associated with enhanced creative tourism performance. However, the variation in correlation strength suggests that not all factors contribute equally. For instance, the moderate correlation of financial infrastructure with tourism dynamics ( $r = 0.66$ ) implies that access to financial resources is necessary but not sufficient to stimulate tourism activity on its own. These results highlight the importance of the spatial and socio-cultural context of the Tabriz Bazaar, where social and cultural functions are as critical as economic functions.

Table 7. Results of the correlation test between economic drivers and research variables

Indicators	Statistic	Economic drivers	Creative tourism economy	Tourism dynamics
Investment	Correlation coefficient	0.82	0.65	0.70
	P-value	0.000	0.000	0.000
Financial infrastructure	Correlation coefficient	0.74	0.60	0.66
	P-value	0.000	0.000	0.000
Creative entrepreneurship	Correlation coefficient	0.79	0.67	0.72
	P-value	0.000	0.000	0.00
Sustainable employment	Correlation Coefficient	0.81	0.63	0.71
	P-value	0.000	0.000	0.000

The multivariate linear regression analysis demonstrated that the examined indicators possess high explanatory power, with adjusted R<sup>2</sup> values ranging from 0.54 to 0.70 across most models. This indicates that the independent variables account for a substantial portion of the variance in the dependent variables. High t- and F-statistics, along with the absence of multicollinearity (Tolerance > 0.39, VIF < 2.5), further confirm the statistical validity of the results.

Within the investment dimension, “volume of executed investments” ( $\beta = 0.81$ ) had the greatest effect, highlighting that in the Tabriz Bazaar, direct and visible investment impacts the economic and tourism dynamics more than budget allocations or indirect support policies. Furthermore, high coefficients in

creative entrepreneurship and sustainable employment ( $\beta$  up to 0.81) indicate that innovation is effective only when it leads to actual employment within the historical bazaar spaces.

High coefficients for social impact, economic impact, and tourist satisfaction demonstrate that the tourism experience in the Tabriz Bazaar is inherently multidimensional. In other words, increased revenue alone, without tourist satisfaction or social participation, does not generate sustainable dynamism. The relatively balanced coefficients for cultural and environmental impacts suggest that heritage preservation and environmental quality are necessary conditions for sustaining tourism, but they do not serve as primary drivers of short-term dynamism.

**Table 8. Results of the linear regression test**

Latent construct	Observed indicator	Adjusted R2	$\beta$	t-value	F-value	Tolerance	VIF	p-value
Investment	Volume of investments made	0.67	0.81	15.8	250.4	0.42	2.38	0.000
	Percentage of the budget allocated to creative tourism	0.65	0.79	15.00	225.3	0.46	2.22	0.000
	Level of support for creative businesses	0.62	0.76	14.2	202.7	0.47	2.15	0.000
financial infrastructure	Access to small and medium-sized loans	0.55	0.74	12.3	151.3	0.56	1.79	0.000
	Existence of support funds	0.53	0.71	11.8	139.2	0.51	1.96	0.000
	Access to insurance and financial services	0.51	0.69	11.21	125.4	0.55	1.85	0.000
Creative entrepreneurship	Number of startups	0.62	0.79	15.8	249.6	0.49	2.04	0.000
	Diversity of creative products	0.60	0.77	14.8	230.0	0.44	2.27	0.000
	Level of innovation in services provided	0.58	0.75	14.0	215.0	0.47	2.13	0.000
Sustainable Employment	Number of employees in creative industries	0.64	0.81	16.2	261.4	0.43	2.33	0.000
	Job retention rate	0.62	0.79	15.5	245.0	0.48	2.08	0.000
	Employment-to-active population ratio	0.60	0.770	14.7	228.0	0.46	2.17	0.000
Economic Impact	Increase in local income	0.68	0.82	16.5	272.6	0.49	2.04	0.000
	Share of creative tourism in local GDP	0.66	0.80	15.51	247.4	0.46	2.17	0.000
	Diversity of income sources	0.64	0.78	15.0	235.4	0.41	2.44	0.000
	Creation of sustainable employment	0.62	0.76	14.51	223.3	0.44	2.27	0.000

Latent construct	Observed indicator	Adjusted R2	$\beta$	t-value	F-value	Tolerance	VIF	p-value
Social Impact	Local community participation in activities	0.70	0.84	17.0	289.9	0.39	2.50	0.000
	Increased satisfaction of employees and locals	0.68	0.81	16.0	257.5	0.42	2.38	0.000
	Reduction of social inequality	0.66	0.79	15.5	244.8	0.45	2.22	0.000
	Strengthening local social networks	0.64	0.77	15.0	239.2	0.47	2.13	0.000
Cultural Impact	Number of related cultural heritage programs	0.60	0.75	14.2	206.2	0.54	1.85	0.000
	Preservation of traditions and handicrafts	0.58	0.73	13.8	199.7	0.56	1.79	0.000
	Interaction of tourists with local culture	0.56	0.71	13.2	183.5	0.50	2.00	0.000
	Holding cultural events	0.54	0.70	12.8	175.5	0.52	1.92	0.000
Environmental Impact	Compliance with environmental standards	0.62	0.78	15.0	230.4	0.55	1.75	0.000
	Waste and natural resource management	0.60	0.76	14.5	220.0	0.53	1.87	0.000
	Reduction of the negative impacts of tourism	0.58	0.74	14.3	210.9	0.46	2.17	0.000
	Improvement of public spaces and the quality of historical architecture	0.56	0.72	13.5	200.2	0.52	1.92	0.000
Tourist Satisfaction	Level of tourist satisfaction	0.64	0.80	15.5	250.5	0.53	1.89	0.000
	Likelihood of return visit	0.62	0.78	15.2	248.3	0.48	2.08	0.000
	Recommendation to others	0.60	0.76	14.5	233.5	0.49	2.04	0.000
	Evaluation of participatory and authentic experience	0.58	0.74	14.7	221.8	0.52	1.92	0.000
Innovation in service delivery	Number of creative and innovative services	0.60	0.75	14.5	225.0	0.55	1.82	0.000
	Diversity of experiences offered	0.58	0.73	14.9	215.2	0.46	2.17	0.000
	Compliance with sustainability principles	0.56	0.71	13.5	205.3	0.50	2.00	0.000
	Tourist participation in experience creation	0.54	0.70	13.5	195.6	0.51	1.96	0.000

Overall, the findings indicate that the dynamism of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz emerges from the synergistic interplay of targeted investment, creative entrepreneurship, sustainable employment, and social interactions. As a historical-economic space, the Tabriz Bazaar exhibits limited responsiveness to purely financial or physical interventions, with maximal dynamism occurring when economic policies are oriented toward enhancing social and creative tourism experiences. These results underscore the necessity of a context-

sensitive approach in planning tourism for historic bazaars, with an integrated view of the economic, cultural, and local community dimensions.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the dynamism of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz is not the result of the isolated effect of economic variables but rather emerges from the structural interplay among local investment, creative

entrepreneurship, sustainable employment, and institutional mechanisms. The high weights of investment and sustainable employment in the structural equation model suggest that, in this historical bazaar, the development of creative tourism depends less on formal infrastructure or macro-level financial policies and more on the continuity of rooted economic activities and the livelihood stability of local actors. Analytically, this is significant because, unlike many planned tourism destinations where government investment and financial infrastructure serve as the main drivers, the Tabriz Bazaar, as a historical economic system, responds selectively to external interventions, absorbing only those investments that align with its functional and social logic.

This finding aligns with international studies emphasizing the role of investment and entrepreneurship in creative tourism (Richards, 2011; OECD, 2014) but also shows a meaningful distinction. In contexts such as Lucknow, India, tourist interactions with creative industries are largely organized within structured development projects (Islam & Sedu Khan, 2025), whereas in the Tabriz Bazaar, such interactions primarily occur within the routine economic and social activities. This difference can be attributed to the “lived” nature of Tabriz Bazaar, where tourism is intertwined with trade, production, and ongoing social relations, rather than functioning as an independent activity. From this perspective, the study supports institutional and place-based economic perspectives, emphasizing the role of informal institutions, trust, and social networks in the economic performance of spaces (North, 1990; Scott, 2008).

The significant role of creative entrepreneurship in explaining economic drivers and the creative tourism economy suggests that innovation is effective in Tabriz Bazaar only when it complements traditional and heritage-based activities rather than opposing them. This aligns with Carvalho & Reis (2024), who argue that creative entrepreneurship can generate economic and cultural value only if cultural assets are successfully transformed into consumable tourism experiences. However, findings from Tabriz indicate that this transformation requires flexible institutional support, as micro-entrepreneurs face financial, legal, and managerial constraints. This implicitly critiques optimistic approaches that present creative entrepreneurship as an automatic solution for tourism development without attention to the institutional and structural context.

One of the most notable findings is the very high weight of social impact in explaining tourism dynamism. In the historical bazaar of Tabriz, tourism dynamism depends more on the quality of social interactions, active participation of merchants, and integration of tourists into the daily life of the bazaar than on purely economic indicators. This aligns with community-based tourism approaches (Murphy, 1985; Tosun, 2006) but goes further, highlighting that in active historical spaces, the local community is not merely a stakeholder but an integral part of the tourism experience. The lower weight of cultural impact relative to social impact suggests that cultural heritage in the Tabriz Bazaar is a “taken-for-granted” asset, meaning that it does not generate tourism dynamism on its own unless reproduced through social interaction and lived experience. This finding resonates with studies warning against the museumification of historical spaces (Zukin, 2010).

Causally, the results indicate that economic drivers influence tourism dynamism through the intermediary of the creative tourism economy. Investments and employment alone do not generate tourism dynamism; they are effective only when organized as creative, experience-oriented activities based on collaboration among heritage, economy, and tourism. This finding aligns with theoretical frameworks on creative tourism and the cultural value chain, which emphasize the role of experience, narrative, and participation (UNESCO, 2013), while also highlighting the importance of institutional and spatial context, often overlooked in international studies.

From a theoretical perspective, this research demonstrates that analyzing the dynamism of creative tourism in historical markets requires a framework beyond linear tourism development models, considering economic, social, and institutional dimensions simultaneously. By confirming the mediating role of the creative tourism economy and highlighting the social impact, the study adds conceptual depth to the literature on creative tourism in heritage spaces. Methodologically, the combination of structural equation modeling with Bootstrap, correlation analysis, and linear regression allows differentiation between simple correlations and causal relationships, enhancing the reliability of the results—a feature rarely observed in domestic studies.

Practically, the findings suggest that policy-making for creative tourism in Tabriz Bazaar should move beyond purely physical or promotional interventions and focus

on targeted micro-investments, institutional support for local entrepreneurs, strengthening market social networks, and designing participatory tourism experiences. For urban managers and heritage custodians, the study shows that preserving the bazaar without attention to its economic and social dynamism cannot lead to sustainable tourism development. For future researchers, the results emphasize the importance of contextualized and network-based analyses in studying creative tourism.

However, the study has limitations. Sampling was convenience-based due to the fieldwork nature and dispersion of the bazaar actors, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Data were cross-sectional, restricting temporal analysis of market dynamics. Additionally, some institutional and political variables were included indirectly due to measurement difficulties. Future research could employ longitudinal data, complementary qualitative methods, and purposive sampling to deepen and retest the identified relationships.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the development of creative tourism in the historical bazaar of Tabriz is possible only when development policies and interventions are based on the synergy among local investment, creative entrepreneurship, sustainable employment, and social participation. The Tabriz Bazaar is not merely a tourism space but a dynamic socio-economic system, and any strategy for developing creative tourism must recognize this reality as its starting point.

### Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no actual or potential conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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