

# An Organizational Ecology Approach to the Tourism Industry: A Generalist–Specialist Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the tourism industry through an organizational ecology approach by identifying the characteristics, environmental conditions, competitive dynamics, and strategic implications of generalist and specialist orientations among four- and five-star hotels in Tehran, Iran. This qualitative study was conducted among managers of four- and five-star hotels in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their managerial experience, familiarity with hotel operations, and knowledge of competitive and environmental conditions in the tourism industry. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 hotel managers, and recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interviews addressed service diversity, target markets, competitive positioning, resource dependence, environmental uncertainty, organizational flexibility, specialization, and adaptation strategies. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using the constant comparative method. Coding and analysis were conducted iteratively through continuous comparison within and across interviews, development of conceptual categories, examination of contrasting cases, and refinement of relationships among niche breadth, organizational strategy, and environmental conditions. The analysis indicated that generalist and specialist orientations represented two distinct but dynamic ecological responses to market and environmental conditions. Generalist hotels were inferred to possess greater resilience under heterogeneous and unstable demand because diversified customer groups and service portfolios reduced dependence on individual market segments. However, this advantage was accompanied by greater managerial complexity and resource coordination requirements. Specialist hotels demonstrated stronger differentiation, clearer organizational identity, focused resource allocation, and closer alignment with specific customer needs, but their narrower niche increased vulnerability to segment-specific disruptions. The findings further indicated that the relative effectiveness of either orientation depended on environmental uncertainty, competitive intensity, resource availability, technological capability, stakeholder relationships, and destination characteristics. The generalist–specialist distinction provides a useful organizational ecology framework for understanding strategic positioning in the hotel industry, suggesting that organizational success depends less on adopting a universally superior strategy than on achieving an appropriate fit between niche breadth and environmental conditions.

**Keywords:** Organizational Ecology; Tourism Industry; Generalists; Specialists; Hotel Management; Niche Strategy; Environmental Fit; Tehran

## Introduction

Tourism is increasingly understood not merely as an economic activity but as a complex organizational field embedded in ecological, social, technological, institutional, and spatial environments. The expansion of tourism markets, the diversification of tourist preferences, intensifying competition among service providers, growing sustainability expectations, and the increasing vulnerability of destinations to environmental and economic



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disturbances have collectively altered the conditions under which tourism organizations operate. In this context, the survival and development of tourism enterprises depend not only on their internal capabilities but also on their capacity to occupy an appropriate organizational niche, obtain scarce resources, respond to environmental pressures, and establish a sustainable relationship with the wider ecosystem in which they are embedded. Contemporary tourism research increasingly emphasizes this interconnectedness by examining ecological security, sustainability, stakeholder relations, spatial suitability, and resilience as fundamental determinants of tourism development (1-3). These developments provide a strong conceptual basis for applying an organizational ecology approach to the tourism industry, particularly when examining the strategic distinction between generalist organizations that serve broad markets and specialist organizations that concentrate on relatively narrow market niches.

Organizational ecology offers a distinctive perspective for explaining organizational diversity, competition, adaptation, survival, and mortality. Rather than viewing organizational outcomes solely as the result of managerial choice, the ecological approach emphasizes the interaction between organizational forms and the environmental conditions surrounding them. Organizations are understood as populations competing for limited resources, legitimacy, customers, labor, technology, institutional support, and strategic positions. Within such populations, environmental selection processes favor organizational forms that are relatively well matched to prevailing conditions, while organizations that fail to achieve an appropriate fit may experience declining performance or exit. This perspective is particularly relevant to tourism because tourism enterprises are highly dependent on changes in demand, destination attractiveness, accessibility, economic conditions, environmental quality, public policy, cultural trends, and technological developments. Tourism organizations must therefore continuously negotiate the tension between maintaining a stable identity and responding to external changes. Studies of tourism ecological security and destination sustainability similarly show that tourism systems evolve through the combined influence of environmental resources, development intensity, economic activity, and governance arrangements, highlighting the importance of examining tourism organizations as components of broader ecological systems (1, 2, 4).

One of the central distinctions in organizational ecology is between generalist and specialist organizations. Generalists typically occupy broad niches, serve diverse customer groups, and provide a relatively wide range of products or services. Their wider niche breadth can offer resilience when environmental conditions fluctuate because dependence on any single segment or resource is comparatively limited. In contrast, specialist organizations concentrate their resources and capabilities within narrower market niches and often develop greater expertise, identity clarity, and service differentiation in those domains. Specialists may perform particularly well under stable or segmented conditions in which customers value distinctive expertise, whereas generalists may possess an advantage in heterogeneous or unpredictable environments. Tourism provides an especially appropriate setting for analyzing this distinction because hotels, tour operators, attractions, ecotourism enterprises, medical tourism organizations, and destination-based firms can differ substantially in their target customers, breadth of services, resource dependence, and market positioning. For example, the development of children's and youth tourism demonstrates how tourism products may be designed around highly specific demographic segments and their particular social and recreational needs (5), while research on medical tourism illustrates the organizational challenges associated with integrating multiple service providers and developing coordinated packages for a specialized visitor market (6). Such differences can be interpreted ecologically as alternative strategies for occupying and defending organizational niches.

The distinction between generalization and specialization also becomes increasingly important as tourism markets fragment into multiple forms, including ecotourism, medical tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, community-based tourism, marine tourism, sport tourism, and other experience-oriented segments. Tourism organizations can respond to such fragmentation either by broadening their portfolio and attempting to attract multiple categories of customers or by concentrating on selected segments and developing specialized competencies. The integration of agriculture and tourism, for instance, demonstrates how tourism organizations and destinations may broaden their functional scope through cross-sectoral integration and diversified rural experiences (7). Conversely, specialized forms of tourism may derive competitive strength from local ecological assets, particular community capabilities, or destination-specific resources. Research on community-based ecotourism emphasizes the value of aligning tourism activities with local resources, technology, and sustainable community development (8), while studies of marine ecotourism indicate that effective management may require highly context-specific coordination among economic, ecological, and stakeholder interests (9). These patterns suggest that niche breadth is not merely a marketing decision but reflects a broader organizational response to resource conditions and environmental opportunities.

From an ecological perspective, the availability, quality, and spatial distribution of environmental resources constrain the range of viable organizational strategies. Tourism development is often dependent on landscapes, natural attractions, infrastructure, accessibility, institutional capacity, and the environmental carrying capacity of destinations. Accordingly, ecological suitability can determine which forms of tourism can emerge and which organizational niches can be sustained. Research on ecotourism suitability has shown that spatial patterns of development are shaped by multiple obstacle and driving factors, indicating that tourism opportunities are unevenly distributed and that organizational strategies need to correspond to local ecological conditions (3). In Iran, assessment of protected areas has similarly demonstrated the importance of land potential and landscape ecology for ecotourism development, indicating that tourism planning must be compatible with ecological capacity and conservation requirements (10). More recent approaches integrating geographic information systems, remotely sensed data, and normative criteria have further emphasized that sustainable ecotourism development requires careful identification of ecological threats and spatial constraints (11). Within organizational ecology, these findings imply that environmental carrying capacity and resource distribution can shape organizational niche selection and influence whether broad or specialized strategies are more sustainable.

Ecological constraints, however, are only one dimension of the environment confronting tourism organizations. Tourism enterprises also operate within networks of relationships involving suppliers, customers, public agencies, local communities, nongovernmental organizations, destination management bodies, and competing firms. The quality of these relationships can affect access to resources, legitimacy, knowledge, and market opportunities. Shared ecological values between tourism actors, for example, can strengthen buyer-supplier relationships and facilitate collaboration within tourism networks (12). Such findings are relevant to organizational ecology because survival depends not only on competition but also on relational embeddedness and access to supportive networks. Similarly, research on ecological tourism partnerships indicates that public-private collaboration can become especially important under crisis conditions, when leadership and interorganizational coordination determine the capacity of tourism systems to respond effectively to disruption (13). These relational factors may operate differently for generalist and specialist organizations. Generalists may require broader networks to support diversified service

portfolios, whereas specialists may depend more intensively on a narrower set of suppliers, customers, or institutional partners closely linked to their niche.

The increasing emphasis on sustainable tourism has further altered the selection environment faced by tourism organizations. Sustainability is no longer limited to environmental protection but increasingly includes social resilience, co-management, local participation, institutional responsibility, and the capacity to balance tourism development with long-term ecological stability. Studies of ecotourism have emphasized socio-ecological resilience, co-production, and co-management as mechanisms through which tourism development can contribute to broader sustainable development objectives (14). Likewise, community-based tourism models increasingly integrate strategic evaluation frameworks with local participation and ecological objectives in order to improve tourism management and destination sustainability (15). From an organizational ecology perspective, the institutionalization of sustainability creates new legitimacy criteria: organizations are increasingly selected not only according to price, efficiency, and service quality but also according to their environmental responsibility, stakeholder engagement, and compatibility with destination sustainability goals. This shift can create opportunities for specialists that build a distinct identity around ecological or community-oriented services, while simultaneously encouraging generalists to incorporate sustainability practices across a diversified portfolio.

Another increasingly important dimension concerns technological change and communication. Digital technologies can modify competitive boundaries, reduce information asymmetries, enable more precise market targeting, and allow organizations to reach niche customers beyond their immediate geographical environment. In community-based ecotourism, technological applications can improve visitor experiences and support more sustainable forms of resource use (8). Social media can similarly expand the visibility of specific tourism niches and facilitate collaboration among tourism enterprises, nongovernmental organizations, and policy actors, thereby strengthening the institutional environment for sustainable tourism development (16). Technological change can therefore affect the ecological balance between generalists and specialists. On the one hand, digital platforms can enable specialists to reach narrowly defined customer groups at lower cost and strengthen niche-based identities. On the other hand, large generalist organizations may use technological resources to diversify services, integrate distribution channels, analyze multiple customer segments, and increase their competitive reach. Consequently, the relative advantages of specialization and generalization are not fixed but may change as technologies reshape resource accessibility and market boundaries.

The competitive position of tourism organizations is also influenced by destination image and place-based differentiation. Tourism organizations rarely compete solely through their internal services; they simultaneously benefit from or are constrained by the symbolic, cultural, and ecological identity of the destination in which they operate. City branding, for instance, can enhance destination attractiveness by differentiating a tourism area and creating a recognizable identity for potential visitors (17). Such differentiation can influence the organizational ecology of a destination by creating new niches, modifying tourist flows, and affecting the density of organizations competing within particular segments. A destination successfully branded around nature, health, heritage, sport, or cultural experiences may provide favorable conditions for specialist organizations, whereas a highly diversified metropolitan destination may support generalist enterprises capable of serving multiple tourism segments. Thus, organizational niche strategies should be understood in connection with the broader positioning of the destination.

The concept of ecological fit is also important because tourism organizations face conflicts among competing forms of landscape use, stakeholder interests, and development priorities. Tourism development may generate

tensions between conservation, commercial activity, community interests, infrastructure expansion, and recreational use. Recent research on national parks has shown that identifying areas of conflict among ecotourism stakeholders is essential for effective landscape management and sustainable decision-making (18). Such conflicts can constrain organizational expansion and influence which tourism activities gain legitimacy or access to critical resources. Specialists dependent on a narrowly defined environmental asset may be particularly vulnerable to restrictions on resource use, whereas generalists may possess greater flexibility to shift activities across different market or service domains. At the same time, specialists may enjoy stronger legitimacy when their focused activities correspond closely to environmental protection goals or stakeholder expectations. The ecological consequences of niche breadth are therefore likely to depend on the interaction between resource dependence, institutional legitimacy, and environmental regulation.

Organizational ecology is also relevant to tourism because tourism markets are frequently exposed to crises, shocks, and periods of uncertainty. Economic downturns, political instability, environmental hazards, climate-related disturbances, disease outbreaks, changes in travel regulations, and sudden shifts in consumer behavior can rapidly modify the availability of resources and customers. The organizational forms that survive such disturbances are not necessarily those that perform best under stable conditions. Research on crisis leadership within ecological tourism partnerships demonstrates that the capacity to coordinate stakeholders and mobilize collective resources becomes especially important when tourism systems encounter disruption (13). More broadly, sustainability scholarship in tourism and related event-based sectors has emphasized the need to connect organizational management with ecological thinking and long-term system resilience (19). These observations support a central proposition of organizational ecology: the survival value of a particular organizational form is contingent on environmental conditions rather than universally determined.

The tourism industry of Tehran provides a particularly valuable context for examining these processes. As a large metropolitan destination, Tehran contains diverse visitor markets, including business travelers, domestic tourists, international visitors, medical travelers, cultural tourists, and individuals traveling for administrative, educational, commercial, and social purposes. Hotels operating in such an environment may therefore face strategic choices regarding whether to maintain broad service portfolios or concentrate on narrower and more distinctive customer segments. Iranian tourism research has already demonstrated the importance of organizational integration and coordinated service provision for specialized tourism markets such as medical tourism (6), while ecological assessments of tourism potential in Iran indicate that tourism development is closely associated with environmental capacity, landscape characteristics, and sustainability considerations (10). However, considerably less attention has been given to how hotel organizations themselves occupy different market niches and how the generalist-specialist distinction can explain their responses to competition and environmental change.

The need for such an analysis becomes clearer when the tourism industry is viewed as an organizational population rather than merely as a collection of independent firms. Hotels compete for overlapping resources, including customers, skilled employees, distribution channels, investment, institutional legitimacy, supplier relationships, and strategic locations. At the same time, differences in service scope, target market, organizational identity, and resource dependence may generate distinct ecological positions. Some hotels may adopt a generalist orientation by serving several customer groups and offering extensive accommodation, food and beverage, event, leisure, business, and complementary services. Others may exhibit specialist tendencies by focusing more intensely on particular customer segments, service experiences, or differentiated market positions. The viability of either

strategy may depend on environmental heterogeneity, market density, competition, technological change, stakeholder relationships, and the availability of resources. Sustainability-oriented research increasingly demonstrates that tourism outcomes arise from interactions among economic, social, institutional, and ecological subsystems rather than from isolated organizational decisions (2, 14). Similarly, stakeholder-based and landscape-oriented research indicates that tourism development depends on the capacity to coordinate multiple interests while maintaining resource sustainability (9, 18).

Despite the theoretical relevance of organizational ecology, much of the existing tourism literature has focused on ecological sustainability in its environmental sense rather than organizational ecology as a theory of organizational populations, niche width, competition, selection, and survival. Existing research has generated valuable knowledge concerning tourism ecological security (1, 4), environmental and economic interactions (2), ecotourism suitability (3), ecological threats (11), stakeholder relationships (12), community-based management (15), destination branding (17), social media and institutional collaboration (16), and the sustainable management of specialized tourism environments (9). Nevertheless, these streams have rarely been integrated with the generalist-specialist framework to explain how tourism enterprises select niches and respond to competitive and environmental pressures. Addressing this gap is important both theoretically and managerially because niche breadth affects resource dependence, flexibility, differentiation, competitive overlap, and organizational vulnerability. A qualitative examination of hotel managers' experiences can therefore reveal how generalist and specialist orientations are understood and enacted in practice and under what environmental circumstances each orientation is perceived as advantageous.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to explore the tourism industry through an organizational ecology approach by identifying and interpreting the characteristics, environmental conditions, competitive dynamics, and strategic implications of generalist and specialist orientations among four- and five-star hotels in Tehran, Iran.

## Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design based on the organizational ecology perspective to explore the characteristics, strategic orientations, and adaptive patterns of generalist and specialist organizations in the tourism industry. Given the exploratory nature of the research question and the need to obtain an in-depth understanding of organizational strategies, environmental adaptation, competitive positioning, resource utilization, and niche-related behaviors within the hotel sector, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate. The study population consisted of senior and middle-level managers working in four- and five-star hotels in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with emphasis on individuals who had sufficient managerial experience and direct knowledge of hotel operations, competitive conditions, customer markets, service diversification, specialization strategies, and organizational responses to environmental changes in the tourism industry. A total of 15 hotel managers participated in the study. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that subsequent interviews no longer generated substantially new concepts, properties, or dimensions relevant to the distinction between generalist and specialist organizational strategies. The participants represented four- and five-star hotels operating in Tehran and held managerial positions that enabled them to provide informed accounts of organizational decision-making and strategic adaptation. Eligibility for participation required current managerial employment in a four- or five-star hotel in Tehran, practical experience in hotel management and tourism-related activities, familiarity with the competitive and environmental conditions of the

hospitality industry, and willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. Individuals who lacked sufficient managerial experience or were unable to provide detailed information concerning organizational strategies and environmental adaptation were not included. Prior to each interview, the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to the participants, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality of personal and organizational information was assured.

Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the organizational ecology of hotels and the strategic distinction between generalist and specialist orientations. An interview guide was developed in accordance with the conceptual foundations of organizational ecology and the objectives of the study. The questions focused on the range and diversity of services offered by hotels, the breadth or specificity of target markets, organizational dependence on particular customer segments, resource allocation, competitive strategies, responses to environmental uncertainty, adaptation to changes in tourism demand, organizational flexibility, specialization in particular services or market niches, advantages and disadvantages of diversified service provision, and the conditions under which hotels adopted generalist or specialist strategies. Participants were also encouraged to explain how environmental factors such as fluctuations in tourism demand, economic conditions, technological developments, changes in customer preferences, competition among hotels, and institutional conditions affected organizational survival and strategic positioning. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews while also using probing questions to clarify participants' responses and explore emerging concepts in greater depth. Interviews were conducted individually with the 15 managers in an environment that ensured privacy and minimized interruptions. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also recorded during and immediately after the interviews to document contextual information, key observations, and preliminary analytical insights. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, allowing concepts identified in earlier interviews to inform subsequent interviews and enabling the researcher to examine emerging similarities, differences, and relationships more systematically. The interview process continued until theoretical saturation was reached and additional interviews produced no meaningful new conceptual categories.

The interview data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, through which data collection, coding, comparison, and conceptual development proceeded iteratively. Immediately after transcription, each interview was read several times to obtain an overall understanding of the participant's account and to identify meaningful units related to organizational characteristics, environmental conditions, competitive behavior, resource utilization, market scope, specialization, diversification, adaptation, and organizational survival. Initial codes were assigned to relevant statements and segments of the transcripts, and these codes were continuously compared both within individual interviews and across interviews. Similar codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories, while differences and contradictory cases were retained and examined to identify variations in organizational responses and strategic orientations. Particular attention was given to characteristics distinguishing generalist hotels, which tended to operate across relatively broad market segments and provide diverse services, from specialist hotels, which concentrated resources and capabilities on narrower customer groups, services, or market niches. Throughout the analytical process, newly identified codes were compared with previously developed codes and categories in order to refine category boundaries, identify their properties and dimensions, and clarify relationships among organizational strategy, environmental conditions, competitive pressures, and survival mechanisms.

Constant comparison was also used to examine differences between four- and five-star hotels and to determine whether particular environmental circumstances favored generalist or specialist organizational forms. Analytical memos were prepared throughout the coding process to document conceptual interpretations, emerging relationships, and decisions concerning the integration or differentiation of categories. Coding and analysis continued until the categories were sufficiently developed and additional data did not substantially alter their conceptual characteristics. To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, attention was given to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and consistency of interpretation through repeated examination of the transcripts, continuous comparison of codes with the original interview data, review of deviant or contrasting cases, and maintenance of a systematic analytical record from initial coding to the development of the final conceptual structure.

## Findings and Results

A total of 15 managers from four- and five-star hotels in Tehran participated in the study. Of the participants, 11 (73.3%) were male and 4 (26.7%) were female. In terms of age, 4 participants (26.7%) were between 35 and 44 years, 7 (46.7%) were between 45 and 54 years, and 4 (26.7%) were aged 55 years or older. Regarding educational attainment, 2 participants (13.3%) held a bachelor's degree, 9 (60.0%) held a master's degree, and 4 (26.7%) held a doctoral degree. In terms of managerial position, 6 participants (40.0%) were general managers or hotel managers, 4 (26.7%) were deputy managers or operations managers, and 5 (33.3%) held senior managerial positions in areas such as marketing, strategic planning, accommodation services, or food and beverage management. Eight participants (53.3%) worked in five-star hotels and 7 (46.7%) worked in four-star hotels. With respect to managerial experience in the hotel and tourism industry, 3 participants (20.0%) had between 5 and 10 years of experience, 5 (33.3%) had between 11 and 15 years, 4 (26.7%) had between 16 and 20 years, and 3 (20.0%) had more than 20 years of experience. Overall, the participant profile demonstrated that the interviews captured the perspectives of relatively experienced managers with substantial familiarity with hotel operations, competitive conditions, customer segmentation, and environmental changes in Tehran's tourism market.

**Table 1. Summary of the Coding Process and Main Categories Derived from the Interviews**

| Main category                             | Subcategories                                                                                         | Representative concepts and initial codes                                                                                                                                             | Participants referring to category, n (%) |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Generalist organizational orientation     | Broad target market; service diversification; multiple revenue sources; flexible market coverage      | Serving different customer groups; combining accommodation, events, food and beverage, business services, leisure services; avoiding dependence on one segment; broad market coverage | 13 (86.7%)                                |
| Specialist organizational orientation     | Focused target market; differentiated expertise; niche identity; concentrated resource allocation     | Serving a specific customer group; designing customized services; building a specialized reputation; concentrating resources on a profitable niche                                    | 12 (80.0%)                                |
| Environmental uncertainty and adaptation  | Demand volatility; economic fluctuations; seasonal changes; regulatory change; crisis exposure        | Fluctuating occupancy; sudden demand decline; changing travel behavior; economic instability; adaptation to unexpected environmental changes                                          | 14 (93.3%)                                |
| Competition and resource dependence       | Customer competition; human resources; distribution channels; strategic location; supplier dependence | Competition for guests; skilled employees; online channels; corporate contracts; agencies; scarce resources                                                                           | 13 (86.7%)                                |
| Organizational flexibility and resilience | Adjustment of services; portfolio modification; market switching; risk distribution                   | Changing service combinations; targeting alternative markets; reducing dependence; reallocating organizational resources                                                              | 12 (80.0%)                                |

|                                             |                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                  |            |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Differentiation and organizational identity | Distinctive positioning; service expertise; customer loyalty; specialized image                    | Developing recognizable services; creating a unique market position; strengthening repeat patronage; expertise-based competition | 11 (73.3%) |
| Technology and market access                | Online platforms; digital marketing; customer databases; social media; electronic booking          | Online reservations; targeted advertising; customer segmentation; digital communication; platform-based competition              | 11 (73.3%) |
| Stakeholder and network relationships       | Travel agencies; suppliers; public institutions; corporate customers; online intermediaries        | Strategic alliances; agency relationships; supplier coordination; government interaction; organizational networks                | 10 (66.7%) |
| Sustainability and legitimacy               | Environmental responsibility; resource efficiency; social expectations; destination sustainability | Energy saving; waste reduction; responsible service provision; customer expectations; organizational legitimacy                  | 9 (60.0%)  |
| Dynamic niche positioning                   | Movement between specialization and generalization; hybrid strategy; selective diversification     | Broadening services; concentrating on profitable segments; maintaining a specialized core with complementary services            | 12 (80.0%) |

The constant comparative analysis showed that the data could be organized around ten interconnected categories describing the ecological position of hotels and their responses to the tourism environment. As presented in Table 1, environmental uncertainty and adaptation constituted the most pervasive category and were identified in the accounts of 14 participants (93.3%). Managers repeatedly emphasized that fluctuations in occupancy, economic conditions, customer behavior, travel patterns, regulations, and unexpected disruptions influenced decisions concerning the breadth of the hotel's market niche. Generalist organizational orientation and competition and resource dependence were each reflected in the accounts of 13 participants (86.7%), indicating that broad market coverage was closely connected with the need to distribute risk across different customer groups and to compete for scarce organizational resources. Specialist orientation was also strongly represented, with 12 participants (80.0%) describing situations in which greater concentration on specific customer groups or service categories provided a clearer competitive identity. Organizational flexibility and dynamic niche positioning were each identified by 12 participants (80.0%), demonstrating that participants did not generally regard hotels as permanently generalist or specialist. Instead, niche breadth was described as an adjustable strategic characteristic that could change according to environmental pressures and organizational capabilities. Differentiation and organizational identity, technology and market access, stakeholder relationships, and sustainability were somewhat less frequent but remained important dimensions of the emerging model. Collectively, the coding structure indicated that organizational ecology in the hotel industry was characterized by an interaction among niche breadth, environmental uncertainty, competition, access to resources, organizational capabilities, and the capacity to modify strategic positioning over time.

**Table 2. Characteristics and Consequences of a Generalist Orientation in Four- and Five-Star Hotels**

| Dimension       | Generalist characteristics identified in the interviews                                                                                        | Perceived advantages                                                    | Perceived challenges                                       | Participants referring to dimension, n (%) |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Market breadth  | Simultaneous targeting of business travelers, domestic tourists, families, international guests, event participants, and other customer groups | Reduced dependence on a single segment; broader occupancy opportunities | Difficulties in establishing a highly distinctive identity | 13 (86.7%)                                 |
| Service breadth | Accommodation combined with restaurants, events, meetings, leisure, business facilities, and complementary services                            | Multiple revenue streams; cross-selling; greater use of hotel capacity  | Greater managerial and operational complexity              | 12 (80.0%)                                 |

|                               |                                                                                                |                                                       |                                                                    |            |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Response to demand volatility | Ability to replace declining segments with alternative markets                                 | Higher resilience during changes in demand            | Need for continuous monitoring of several markets                  | 12 (80.0%) |
| Resource configuration        | Distribution of human, physical, financial, and marketing resources across multiple activities | Lower dependence on one organizational capability     | Greater total resource requirements and coordination costs         | 11 (73.3%) |
| Competitive strategy          | Competing across several segments rather than relying on a narrow niche                        | Wider customer acquisition opportunities              | Exposure to a larger number of competitors                         | 10 (66.7%) |
| Revenue structure             | Income generated from several services and customer categories                                 | Risk dispersion and improved financial stability      | Unequal profitability among services                               | 11 (73.3%) |
| Organizational flexibility    | Ability to shift emphasis among segments, packages, and services                               | Greater adaptive capacity during environmental change | Potential strategic inconsistency if diversification is excessive  | 12 (80.0%) |
| Brand positioning             | Broad and inclusive hotel image                                                                | Greater accessibility to heterogeneous customers      | Weaker niche-specific identity than highly specialized competitors | 9 (60.0%)  |

The findings presented in Table 2 revealed that the principal ecological advantage of the generalist orientation was breadth. Thirteen managers (86.7%) referred to broad market coverage as an important means of reducing dependence on a single customer population. Generalist hotels were described as organizations attempting to serve several markets simultaneously, including business travelers, families, domestic and international tourists, conference guests, and customers using restaurant, meeting, or event facilities without necessarily purchasing accommodation. This breadth was closely associated with service diversification. Twelve participants (80.0%) stated that offering accommodation alongside food and beverage services, conferences, ceremonies, business facilities, and complementary services allowed hotels to create several revenue channels and compensate for declining demand in one area through income from another. Generalists were therefore perceived as comparatively resilient when demand was heterogeneous or unstable.

At the same time, participants did not consider diversification to be costless. Eleven managers (73.3%) emphasized that maintaining a broad organizational niche required substantial physical, financial, and human resources. A hotel serving several customer populations needed personnel with different capabilities, multiple types of facilities, more complex marketing activities, and the ability to coordinate numerous service processes. Twelve participants (80.0%) nevertheless viewed this broader resource configuration as a source of adaptive flexibility because resources could be reallocated when one segment became less attractive. The generalist strategy was consequently characterized by a trade-off between resilience and complexity. Its principal strength was the distribution of environmental risk, whereas its principal weakness was the managerial burden created by operating simultaneously across diverse markets.

The analysis also showed that generalist hotels faced distinctive competitive pressures. Ten participants (66.7%) explained that a broad market scope increased the number of organizations with which the hotel competed because competitors could include both other large hotels and specialized establishments operating within individual service categories. Generalist hotels therefore benefited from market breadth but could also encounter stronger competitive overlap. Participants further indicated that extensive diversification could weaken organizational identity when customers could not easily associate the hotel with a distinctive service or market position. Nine managers (60.0%) explicitly referred to this tension between inclusiveness and differentiation. Thus, the generalist ecological strategy

appeared most advantageous where environmental variability was high and sufficient organizational resources existed to support broad market coverage without excessive loss of efficiency or identity.

**Table 3. Characteristics and Consequences of a Specialist Orientation in Four- and Five-Star Hotels**

| Dimension                   | Specialist characteristics identified in the interviews                                                  | Perceived advantages                                                | Perceived challenges                                           | Participants referring to dimension, n (%) |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Target-market concentration | Focus on one or a limited number of clearly defined customer segments                                    | Deeper understanding of customer needs; stronger market positioning | High dependence on demand within the selected segment          | 12 (80.0%)                                 |
| Service specialization      | Customized and differentiated services designed around niche expectations                                | Higher perceived expertise and service distinctiveness              | Lower capacity to serve unrelated customer groups              | 11 (73.3%)                                 |
| Resource concentration      | Allocation of personnel, marketing expenditure, facilities, and managerial attention to a selected niche | Greater efficiency and expertise in the focal domain                | Vulnerability when niche-specific resources lose value         | 10 (66.7%)                                 |
| Organizational identity     | Clear and recognizable market image                                                                      | Stronger differentiation and brand clarity                          | Difficulty repositioning rapidly outside the established niche | 11 (73.3%)                                 |
| Customer relationships      | Greater emphasis on repeat customers, personalization, and niche-specific loyalty                        | Stronger customer attachment and potential repeat patronage         | Smaller potential customer population                          | 10 (66.7%)                                 |
| Competitive overlap         | Reduced direct competition with broadly positioned hotels when the niche is distinctive                  | Ability to avoid some forms of mass-market competition              | Intense rivalry if several organizations enter the same niche  | 9 (60.0%)                                  |
| Environmental sensitivity   | Strong dependence on conditions affecting the focal segment                                              | Potentially high performance when niche demand is stable            | High vulnerability to segment-specific disruption              | 12 (80.0%)                                 |
| Expertise accumulation      | Repeated experience in a limited service or market domain                                                | Development of specialized knowledge and routines                   | Risk of competency rigidity and limited transferability        | 10 (66.7%)                                 |

As shown in Table 3, specialization was primarily associated with focus, differentiation, and the concentration of organizational resources. Twelve participants (80.0%) described a specialist orientation as one in which the hotel concentrated on one or a limited number of customer groups rather than attempting to serve the entire available market. Participants explained that specialization could involve focusing on business guests, medical travelers, international tourists, long-stay customers, particular corporate markets, luxury-oriented guests, or other identifiable groups for whom differentiated service packages could be developed. The main advantage of such concentration was an increased ability to understand the expectations of the focal market and to design organizational processes around those expectations. Eleven managers (73.3%) indicated that specialist hotels could develop more recognizable expertise and a clearer market image because resources were concentrated rather than dispersed across unrelated activities.

A second important advantage of specialization concerned organizational identity. Eleven participants (73.3%) emphasized that a hotel known for a particular type of experience or customer segment could develop stronger differentiation than a hotel attempting to appeal equally to all groups. Specialized service routines, employee skills, communication practices, physical facilities, and marketing strategies could reinforce this identity. Ten managers (66.7%) also associated specialization with stronger relationships with repeat customers because detailed knowledge of the focal segment enabled greater personalization. This was particularly important where customers valued reliability, expertise, or customized service rather than standardized accommodation alone. Resource concentration was therefore seen as creating both operational and reputational advantages.

However, the principal disadvantage of specialization was environmental dependence. Twelve participants (80.0%) emphasized that specialist hotels were especially vulnerable when the demand conditions supporting their niche deteriorated. A hotel strongly dependent on a specific market could experience substantial reductions in occupancy and revenue if political, economic, regulatory, technological, or behavioral changes affected that group. Specialists had fewer immediately available substitute markets and could require substantial organizational changes to reposition themselves. Participants therefore distinguished between efficiency within a stable niche and resilience under environmental instability. A narrow niche could generate superior differentiation when demand was sufficiently stable, but it could also magnify exposure to shocks. The constant comparison of managers' accounts indicated that specialization was most favorable where the target market was identifiable, sufficiently large, relatively stable, and associated with needs that could be served through distinctive capabilities that competing hotels could not easily imitate.

**Table 4. Environmental Conditions Determining the Relative Suitability of Generalist, Specialist, and Hybrid Strategies**

| Environmental or organizational condition        | Orientation favored by the interview findings | Explanation derived from participants' accounts                                                           | Participants referring to condition, n (%) |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| High demand uncertainty                          | Generalist                                    | Diversification reduces dependence on a single customer population and distributes risk                   | 14 (93.3%)                                 |
| High customer heterogeneity                      | Generalist                                    | Multiple segments create opportunities for broad service portfolios                                       | 13 (86.7%)                                 |
| Stable and identifiable niche demand             | Specialist                                    | Predictable niche demand supports focused investment and expertise                                        | 12 (80.0%)                                 |
| Strong need for differentiation                  | Specialist                                    | Concentration facilitates a clear organizational identity and distinctive service proposition             | 11 (73.3%)                                 |
| Abundant organizational resources                | Generalist                                    | Broader resources enable simultaneous operation across multiple services and customer groups              | 10 (66.7%)                                 |
| Limited but highly specialized resources         | Specialist                                    | Concentration allows scarce expertise to be directed toward the most valuable segment                     | 10 (66.7%)                                 |
| High environmental turbulence or crisis exposure | Generalist or hybrid                          | Multiple markets and selective diversification improve resilience                                         | 13 (86.7%)                                 |
| Strong technological capability                  | Both, depending on strategy                   | Technology enables specialists to reach narrow markets and generalists to manage multiple segments        | 11 (73.3%)                                 |
| Strong stakeholder networks                      | Both, depending on network structure          | Broad networks support generalists, while intensive niche-specific relationships support specialists      | 10 (66.7%)                                 |
| Intense mass-market competition                  | Specialist                                    | Differentiation can reduce direct competitive overlap                                                     | 10 (66.7%)                                 |
| Rapidly changing customer preferences            | Generalist or hybrid                          | Flexibility and complementary services enable faster adjustment                                           | 12 (80.0%)                                 |
| Need to balance differentiation and resilience   | Hybrid                                        | Specialized core services combined with selective diversification reduce the weaknesses of either extreme | 12 (80.0%)                                 |

Table 4 summarizes the conditional relationships identified through the constant comparative analysis and represents the central interpretive finding of the study. The interviews demonstrated that neither generalization nor specialization constituted an inherently superior organizational form. Instead, the ecological suitability of each orientation depended on the characteristics of the environment and the organization. Environmental uncertainty was the most widely identified condition, mentioned by 14 participants (93.3%). Under high uncertainty, managers generally favored broader or hybrid strategies because dependence on a single customer group was considered risky. Similarly, 13 participants (86.7%) associated heterogeneous demand with the advantages of generalization,

since a diverse visitor population created opportunities for hotels capable of simultaneously serving multiple segments.

In contrast, 12 managers (80.0%) indicated that specialist strategies were more advantageous when demand within a particular niche was stable and identifiable. Under such conditions, concentration of resources was considered more efficient than maintaining multiple services for unrelated customer groups. Eleven participants (73.3%) further indicated that specialization was advantageous where differentiation was strategically important. Thus, a narrow niche could protect the organization from direct competition if specialized competencies, customer relationships, or reputation created barriers to imitation. The relative availability of organizational resources also influenced niche strategy. Hotels possessing extensive human, financial, technological, and physical resources were regarded as better positioned to sustain generalist strategies, while firms possessing a limited set of highly specialized resources could obtain greater value by concentrating them within a specific niche.

A particularly important finding concerned hybrid positioning. Twelve participants (80.0%) suggested, either explicitly or through comparisons of organizational practices, that the most viable strategy in many circumstances was neither extreme generalization nor extreme specialization. Instead, hotels could establish a clearly differentiated core market while retaining selected complementary services and secondary customer groups. Such an arrangement enabled the organization to preserve a recognizable identity while maintaining sufficient breadth to respond to fluctuations in its principal market. Hybridization was particularly relevant under conditions of environmental turbulence, rapid changes in customer preferences, and technological development. Thirteen participants (86.7%) considered some degree of diversification beneficial under crisis-prone or highly unstable circumstances, while 12 (80.0%) emphasized the need to adjust service portfolios when customer preferences changed.

Technology was also found to alter the traditional relationship between niche breadth and market access. Eleven participants (73.3%) indicated that digital marketing, online booking platforms, customer databases, and social media could support both ecological orientations. For specialist hotels, technology expanded access to narrowly defined customer populations and made niche marketing economically feasible. For generalist hotels, it enabled simultaneous segmentation of multiple customer groups and facilitated differentiated pricing, communication, and service packaging. Stakeholder networks functioned in a similar manner. Ten managers (66.7%) reported that generalists benefited from broad networks of agencies, suppliers, corporate customers, and intermediaries, whereas specialists benefited from more intensive relationships with actors directly connected to their focal niche.

Taken together, the four stages of analysis produced an integrated picture of the organizational ecology of upscale hotels in Tehran. The findings indicated that hotels competed within an environment characterized by limited resources, changing customer populations, technological change, stakeholder interdependence, and recurrent uncertainty. The distinction between generalists and specialists primarily concerned the breadth of the organizational niche and the manner in which hotels distributed their resources across that niche. Generalist organizations reduced segment-specific dependence by maintaining multiple markets and services, whereas specialists concentrated resources to obtain expertise and differentiation within narrower domains. These orientations generated different ecological advantages and vulnerabilities rather than representing superior and inferior strategic forms. The results further indicated that hotels could modify their niche breadth over time, particularly when environmental change altered the value of existing resources or customer populations.

The constant comparative process ultimately suggested a dynamic relationship among environmental conditions, niche breadth, organizational capabilities, and survival potential. When uncertainty and customer heterogeneity increased, broader niche strategies became comparatively attractive because they distributed risk. When markets became more predictable and differentiated, specialized strategies gained value because focused resources could produce greater expertise and a stronger organizational identity. Where environmental conditions combined instability with strong pressures for differentiation, hybrid strategies appeared particularly relevant. Accordingly, the qualitative findings support an ecological interpretation in which hotel strategy is not simply a matter of managerial preference but an ongoing process of matching organizational niche characteristics with the structure of the environment. The central empirical pattern emerging from the interviews was therefore one of contingent ecological fit: organizational resilience and competitive positioning depended on the extent to which the breadth of the hotel's niche, configuration of its resources, and strategic identity corresponded with the prevailing conditions of the tourism environment.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the tourism industry through an organizational ecology perspective, with particular emphasis on the distinction between generalist and specialist strategies among four- and five-star hotels in Tehran. Analysis of the interviews with 15 hotel managers indicated that the strategic orientation of hotels could be understood along a continuum ranging from broad generalist strategies to relatively focused specialist strategies. The findings showed that generalist hotels were characterized by a broad customer base, diversification of services, reliance on multiple revenue streams, greater flexibility in responding to demand fluctuations, and an organizational tendency to reduce dependence on a particular market segment. In contrast, specialist hotels were distinguished by a narrower target market, concentration of resources on particular customer groups or service categories, greater emphasis on differentiation and expertise, stronger identity within a specific niche, and more intensive dependence on a limited set of resources or customers. The findings further demonstrated that neither orientation was universally superior. Rather, the relative effectiveness of generalization and specialization depended on environmental conditions, competition, customer heterogeneity, resource accessibility, technological capacity, institutional conditions, and the degree of uncertainty in the tourism market.

One of the central findings was that generalist hotels perceived diversification as a mechanism for increasing resilience to environmental uncertainty. Managers adopting a generalist orientation emphasized the importance of serving several categories of guests, including business travelers, domestic tourists, international visitors, families, event participants, and customers seeking food, leisure, conference, or complementary services. From an organizational ecology perspective, such diversification expands niche breadth and decreases dependence on a single environmental resource. This pattern is particularly relevant in tourism environments characterized by instability and fluctuations in demand. Previous studies have similarly demonstrated that tourism systems are affected by multiple and interacting economic, ecological, spatial, and institutional forces, making adaptive capacity a central requirement for sustainability (1, 2). Research on the dynamic evolution of tourism ecological security has likewise shown that tourism environments undergo continuous changes driven by economic, environmental, and developmental conditions (4). The current findings extend this reasoning to the organizational level by suggesting that hotels with broader service and customer portfolios may be better positioned to absorb environmental disturbances when demand declines in one segment but remains stable or increases in another.

The interviews also revealed that the generalist strategy involved greater organizational flexibility but simultaneously generated significant managerial complexity. Managers noted that serving heterogeneous customer groups required a broader range of competencies, larger and more differentiated human resources, more extensive physical facilities, and coordination across multiple service domains. Thus, while niche breadth could decrease exposure to segment-specific risk, it could also increase operating costs and organizational complexity. This finding is consistent with the broader tourism literature emphasizing the interconnected nature of tourism systems and the need to coordinate diverse activities and resources. The integration of agriculture and tourism, for example, demonstrates how diversification can create new development opportunities but also requires effective coordination across different economic activities (7). Similarly, integrated service provision in medical tourism depends on the coordination of multiple specialized actors and services, illustrating the managerial demands associated with offering broader and interconnected packages (6). Therefore, the ecological advantage of generalism should not be interpreted merely as diversification; rather, it depends on whether the organization possesses the managerial and resource capacity required to sustain a broad niche efficiently.

A second major finding concerned the competitive advantages associated with specialist strategies. Managers describing specialist orientations emphasized the importance of developing distinctive expertise, targeting clearly defined customer groups, and designing services around the expectations of those groups. Specialist hotels were perceived as being capable of creating deeper relationships with their customers, establishing clearer organizational identities, and differentiating themselves more effectively in highly competitive markets. This result corresponds with the increasing segmentation of the tourism industry into specific forms such as medical tourism, ecotourism, youth tourism, marine tourism, and community-based tourism. Studies of children's and youth tourism demonstrate that specialized tourism segments involve distinctive expectations and service requirements (5), while research on medical tourism highlights the importance of specialized and integrated service structures designed around the needs of a particular traveler population (6). Specialist strategies can therefore provide an ecological advantage when a tourism organization can identify a sufficiently stable niche and develop competencies that are difficult for broader competitors to reproduce.

The findings nevertheless showed that specialization also increased vulnerability when the selected niche was affected by environmental change. Managers recognized that dependence on a narrow group of customers or a specific tourism activity could expose specialist hotels to substantial risk during economic downturns, changes in travel behavior, regulatory restrictions, or disruptions affecting the relevant market segment. This reflects a central proposition of organizational ecology: specialization can generate high efficiency within a defined niche but may reduce resilience when the environment changes beyond the conditions to which the organization has become adapted. This interpretation is supported by studies examining tourism ecological security and environmental threats, which demonstrate that tourism development can be highly sensitive to changes in environmental conditions and resource availability (3, 11). The broader relationship among tourism, economic development, and environmental conditions is also complex and dynamic, suggesting that organizational strategies must be responsive to multiple external pressures (2). In this regard, specialization represents a strategic trade-off between niche-specific efficiency and environmental vulnerability.

Another important finding was that the suitability of generalist or specialist strategies varied according to the characteristics of the surrounding environment. Managers indicated that generalist strategies were more useful when customer demand was heterogeneous, tourism patterns were unstable, or the hotel faced considerable

uncertainty concerning future demand. Specialist strategies were viewed as more effective when customer needs were clearly differentiated and when a stable market niche could support sustained demand. This result closely reflects the logic of ecological fit. Organizational ecology assumes that the value of an organizational form is contingent on environmental conditions rather than inherently determined. Tourism research provides parallel evidence at the destination level. Ecotourism suitability studies have shown that environmental opportunities and constraints differ substantially across locations and that tourism development should correspond to local conditions (3). In Iran, assessments of land potential and landscape ecology similarly indicate that different areas possess different capacities for tourism development (10). The current findings suggest that the same principle operates at the organizational level: niche strategies should correspond to the structure and stability of the market environment in which the hotel operates.

The findings further demonstrated that organizational survival was influenced not only by market demand but also by the ability of hotels to secure relationships with important stakeholders. Managers highlighted interactions with travel agencies, suppliers, public institutions, online booking platforms, corporate customers, local organizations, and other tourism actors as important components of organizational survival. These relationships provided access to customers, information, resources, and legitimacy. This result is consistent with evidence showing that shared ecological values can strengthen buyer-supplier relationships in tourism contexts (12). It is also consistent with research emphasizing the importance of public-private partnerships and coordinated leadership in ecological tourism, especially under crisis conditions (13). From an organizational ecology perspective, interorganizational relationships can reduce environmental uncertainty by providing more reliable resource channels and increasing organizational embeddedness. Specialist hotels may depend heavily on a limited number of strategic relationships within their niche, whereas generalists may require a wider network of relationships to sustain their diversified operations.

The role of sustainability also emerged as an important dimension of the organizational environment. Managers recognized that changing customer expectations, environmental awareness, regulatory pressures, and destination-level sustainability considerations increasingly influenced hotel strategy. This suggests that ecological selection in the tourism industry is not based exclusively on economic efficiency. Organizations are increasingly expected to demonstrate social and environmental responsibility and to align their operations with wider sustainability priorities. This interpretation is supported by studies emphasizing socio-ecological resilience, co-management, and co-production in sustainable ecotourism (14), as well as research integrating community-based tourism and strategic management approaches in marine ecotourism (15). The growing connection between tourism management and ecological sustainability has also been emphasized in broader discussions of sport ecology and sustainable event management (19). For hotels, this means that ecological fit increasingly incorporates legitimacy derived from responsible environmental and social practices. Both specialists and generalists may therefore need to adapt their strategies to sustainability expectations, although specialist organizations may have greater opportunities to build strong identities around specific sustainable tourism values.

Technology was another factor that appeared to modify the ecological relationship between specialization and generalization. Managers explained that digital platforms, online reservations, customer databases, social media, and electronic communication had changed how hotels identified, reached, and retained customers. Digital technologies can lower some of the traditional barriers associated with specialization because highly focused organizations can reach geographically dispersed customers who share particular interests. At the same time,

technological capabilities allow generalist hotels to manage multiple market segments more effectively through data-based segmentation and differentiated communication. Similar findings have been reported in community-based ecotourism, where technology has been used to support sustainability and improve visitor experiences (8). Research has also shown that social media and collaboration with nongovernmental organizations can strengthen sustainable tourism policies and extend communication among tourism stakeholders (16). The present findings therefore indicate that technological change can modify niche boundaries, making some specialist strategies economically viable while simultaneously strengthening the coordination capacity of generalist organizations.

Destination image and market positioning also influenced hotels' niche strategies. Managers reported that the competitive position of an individual hotel was connected to the broader image and characteristics of Tehran as a destination. Hotels did not operate independently of the city's business, cultural, medical, administrative, and tourism functions. Rather, these characteristics affected the composition of potential demand and the niches available to accommodation providers. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of city branding for attracting visitors and creating distinctive tourism identities (17). From an ecological viewpoint, destination branding can influence organizational populations by creating or strengthening particular market niches. When a destination becomes associated with a particular tourism activity, specialist organizations may gain access to a more clearly defined customer population. Conversely, destinations with multiple functions and highly heterogeneous visitor profiles may generate more favorable conditions for generalist hotels.

The interviews also suggested that conflict and competition over limited resources were essential components of the hotels' ecological environment. Managers described competition for qualified employees, desirable locations, corporate contracts, distribution channels, customers, and access to influential tourism networks. This finding reflects organizational ecology's emphasis on resource competition and population density. Related tourism research has shown that competition among stakeholders for landscape resources and tourism uses can generate significant conflicts requiring deliberate management (18). Marine ecotourism research likewise demonstrates that tourism sustainability depends on balancing economic interests, stakeholder relationships, and resource constraints (9). Although hotels in Tehran operate in a different context, the underlying principle is comparable: organizational survival depends on access to scarce resources, and niche differentiation can reduce direct competition where firms develop sufficiently distinct market positions.

A further implication of the findings is that successful organizations may not remain permanently generalist or specialist. Several managerial accounts suggested that niche breadth can change over time as hotels respond to market pressures, develop new capabilities, or face changes in available resources. A generalist hotel may progressively specialize in a profitable customer segment, while a specialist hotel experiencing declining demand may broaden its services and target markets. Such movement demonstrates that the generalist-specialist distinction should be understood as a strategic continuum rather than an inflexible classification. Tourism environments are dynamic, and organizational strategies may evolve in response to environmental selection pressures. This interpretation aligns with research demonstrating temporal changes in tourism ecological security and the influence of changing driving factors over time (1, 4). It is also compatible with sustainability-oriented tourism research emphasizing resilience and adaptive management rather than fixed development models (14).

The findings therefore contribute to tourism research by transferring the concept of ecology from its dominant environmental interpretation toward an organizational population perspective. Much of the existing tourism literature uses the term ecology to discuss ecosystem conservation, ecological security, land suitability, sustainable

development, or destination carrying capacity. These areas remain important, as demonstrated by research on ecological tourism suitability (3), landscape potential in protected areas (10), environmental threats to sustainable ecotourism (11), and tourism-environment interactions (2). The present study complements this literature by demonstrating that tourism organizations themselves can be examined ecologically in terms of niche breadth, resource dependence, competition, environmental fit, stakeholder relationships, and survival strategies. The findings indicate that the generalist-specialist framework offers a useful mechanism for understanding why hotels confronted with similar external conditions may adopt substantially different strategic configurations.

Overall, the results suggest that organizational effectiveness in the tourism industry is not determined simply by the breadth or narrowness of a hotel's market strategy. Generalists gain advantages from diversification, risk distribution, and flexibility, but they face higher coordination requirements and the potential dilution of distinctive identity. Specialists gain advantages from expertise, differentiation, focused resource allocation, and stronger niche identity, but they are more vulnerable to segment-specific disruptions and resource dependence. These competing advantages imply that strategic success depends on correspondence between niche breadth and environmental characteristics. In an industry increasingly shaped by sustainability pressures, digital transformation, stakeholder interdependence, destination positioning, and ecological constraints, hotels need to continuously evaluate whether their current organizational form remains appropriate for the environment in which they operate.

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research was based on a qualitative sample of 15 managers from four- and five-star hotels in Tehran, and the findings therefore reflect managerial experiences within a specific metropolitan and organizational context. The perspectives of managers from lower-category hotels, boutique accommodation facilities, hostels, ecotourism lodges, travel agencies, tour operators, and other tourism organizations were not included. Second, the study relied on self-reported interview data, and participants' accounts may have been influenced by individual perceptions, managerial roles, organizational interests, or selective recall. Third, because the research was cross-sectional, it captured organizational strategies at a particular period rather than directly observing how hotels moved between generalist and specialist positions over time. Finally, the qualitative design was intended to generate contextual and conceptual understanding rather than statistically generalizable estimates, and the identified patterns should therefore be interpreted as analytical rather than population-level generalizations.

Future studies should test the generalist-specialist framework across a broader range of tourism organizations and geographical settings. Quantitative research could develop and validate measurement scales for niche breadth, specialization, resource dependence, environmental uncertainty, organizational flexibility, and survival performance and could subsequently examine the relationships among these variables using larger samples. Comparative studies could investigate whether the ecological advantages of generalization and specialization differ across luxury hotels, budget hotels, boutique hotels, medical tourism facilities, ecotourism accommodations, travel agencies, and digital tourism platforms. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for examining how organizations alter their niche breadth in response to environmental shocks, technological change, market saturation, or changes in tourist preferences. Future studies could also incorporate customer, employee, supplier, and policymaker perspectives and examine whether hybrid strategies combining selected forms of specialization with service diversification generate stronger organizational resilience than purely generalist or specialist models.

Hotel managers should treat the choice between generalist and specialist strategies as a question of environmental fit rather than assuming that diversification or specialization is inherently preferable. Hotels operating

in highly uncertain environments should regularly assess whether excessive dependence on a narrow customer segment creates unacceptable risk and should consider selective diversification when necessary. Conversely, hotels facing intense competition in broadly defined markets may benefit from developing stronger specialization around clearly identifiable customer groups, service experiences, or organizational capabilities. Managers should systematically monitor customer composition, revenue concentration, competitor density, technological change, stakeholder relationships, and resource dependence to determine whether their current niche remains sustainable. Strategic planning should also allow movement along the generalist-specialist continuum rather than locking the organization into a fixed identity. In practice, the strongest position may involve maintaining a clearly differentiated core capability while developing sufficient complementary services and market flexibility to withstand environmental fluctuations.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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