Iranian Tourism Infrastructures and Services: Toward a Destination Brand

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ABSTRACT

Destination branding has nowadays become one of the most challenging and attractive discussions in place marketing of tourism issues. Considering the plethora of advantages of branding concepts and activities for countries around the globe and high potentials of Islamic Republic of Iran as a tourism destination, in this paper authors have tried to study the current situation of tourism infrastructures and services by applying the existing brand models and localized ones in order to define any potential gaps between the current situation and the desired one. The methodology of research was descriptive- survey and in terms of objectivity it falls within the scope of implicational researches since by its accomplishing; some necessary changes may take place in Iranian tourism industry. To achieve the objectives of this research, 102 members of Iranian DMO(Destination Marketing and Management Organization)consisting of managers and experts reliable regarding the respected subject formed the sample of the study. Data was collected through a researchers-administered questionnaire. Its reliability was calculated by taking a pre-test and Cronbach's alpha assessment. The alpha value was above acceptable minimum value (0.70). The collected data was then an alysed by using means comparing method. Findings implicated that Iran's infrastructures and tourism services that are prerequisite for tourism brand are not reflecting brand values and attributes(including brand personality, brand positioning and brand reality). Results showed a significant difference with the perceived mean. Based on findings, in the end, managerial and marketing recommendations were presented.

INTRODUCTION

Aaker [2] defined brand as identifying the commodities or services belonging to a seller or a group of sellers and, the differentiation between these and the competitors' commodities or services. Similarly, Ritchie & Ritchie [42] considered destination brand as a name, symbol, logo, word mark or any graphic design which not only defines destination, but also differentiates it; in addition, it promises the experience of a memorable travel-which is exclusively resulting from the destination features- to the tourist. Besides, it consolidates and enriches the cheerful memories of destination experience. Destination brand refers to the context and conditions of a place [16] making it attractive and remarkable for visiting, and as stated by Baker [4], it is of ten labelled as tourism brand as well. Most cities and places are more inclined to tourism brand or destination brand rather than overarching place brand, since it is more expressive and acts more organized in establishing a relationship to the place characteristics [4]. Destination branding means creating a visage or a reputation which attracts the investors and tourists to that destination [37]. Destination branding creates a vision of the destination in the tourist’s mind and is the main leverage affecting tourist’s consideration sets and criteria in making decisions [26]. Therefore, a mechanism for attracting more tourists is developing a well-established brand for the destination. There have not been much academic studies on destination brand [22] and [15] and this concept has not been widely applied in tourism area [8]. In this study, therefore, the researchers review the current situation of tourism brand in Iranian setting being reinforced by the existing infrastructures and services.

Conceptual Framework of the Study:

a. Destination Brand:

Tourism branding of a destination gives some information to the visitor, before beginning the journey, in order to recognize and identify the destination, differentiates it from its competitors and form his/her
expectations of the forthcoming travel [38]. Even perceptions gained after travel can be influenced by destination brand [42]. Clarke [12] points out six advantages of tourism branding:

- Helping to decrease the destination choice sets while making decision;
- Helping to reduce the intangibility effect (since familiarity with physical features of destination brand and its symbolic concept compensates for the intangibility effect);
- Creating stability and consistency among destination outlets through time, making sure that tourists’ expectations of the destination will be met;
- Being a valuable mechanism for reducing performance risk, social risk, psychological risk, and economic risk;
- Facilitating clear segmentation of market;
- Helping to integrate and coordinate tourism producers and workgroups to move toward the same outcome while introducing the destination.

Countries around the world have similar reasons for branding. Among the most important reasons are destination positioning and differentiating it for persuading the tourist to spend more, and elevating the standard of living of residents. According to Park & Petrick [40], increasing the economic well-being of the residents by developing tourism, managing destination image and attracting tourists is attained by building a desirable image. Country brand is a very influential factor in tourists’ process of purchase decision while choosing the destination [8]. Reaching such a goal is only possible by applying branding concepts and trying to create a positive image in the minds of present and future tourists, so that they may choose a certain destination among numerous competitors for their journey [21].

As the tourism brand is assumed to be the dependent variable of this study, it is defined by the existing literature to form the conceptual framework as follows:

1. **Personality of a destination brand**; which itself is composed of different components [27, 28] such as perceptible elements like restaurants, hotels, sports/recreational activities and facilities, museums and etc., that incorporate tourism activities and businesses; non-perceptible elements such as visitors’ characteristics, type and quality of services provided, and staff attitude of service sections are also important parts of destination brand which arise the need for social acceptance, self-esteem and self-assertion. Generally combination of the attributes of a brand personality describe the real feeling of experiencing the place, such as serenity, excitement, joy, etc., general atmosphere of a place will form the personality of the destination in the visitor’s mind [43,5,39,6,25,13,1,19].

2. **Position of a destination brand**; it is representative of the brand position with respect to competitive grounds [29,4] which means that it shows the differences and similarities between the destination and its competitors-similarities like a certain landmark [22], e.g. mosque in multiple destinations, and differences meaning a specific feature which may have a mosque in a specific destination. In fact where the destination brand stands comparing to its counterparts [6,13,23,44,30].

3. **Promise of a destination brand**; it means fulfilling the promises and commitments of the brand to satisfy the potential tourists [20]. Brand personality and all that is associated to it should be real and have solid backing. Innovative branding requires appropriate marketing and wise investment in facilities and services. Without investment in and development of services and unique features, the brand will not come true, consequently the loyalty to the brand and repetition of purchase would not be attained [22,23,44,11,16,41].

Considering the above-mentioned factors, a question rises that what are the basic needs and elements which contribute the most to a successful, well developed tourism brand? The existing literature implies that the crucial grounds to develop a destination accurately based on its brand lie in two main developments: infrastructures and services (See Table 2 in appendix).

b. **Infrastructures**: 

*Infrastructure* which are mostly composed of access services such as transportation within the destination and to the destination or public and sanitary services [32,24,22] such as parking, restrooms, rooms for babies and sweeping the streets, quality of roads, airports and ports, telecommunications, commercial infrastructure, and extent of building development [6,7] paths, train stations, pedestrians and ext. Dinnie are vital to form the real feeling of a destination brand [46,22]; general atmosphere of destination in which the main services are offered, is usually created and the required services and facilities should be provided to make the brand more attractive [43,39,25,1]. Establishing effective relationships between these different aspects is the ultimate objective of the destination brand [22] and as Kotler, Haider, and Rein [33], argued for place marketing four strategic elements exist: image, attractions, infrastructure, and people. The different features and requirements of each should be studied and considered at the time of destination branding for maintaining tourists satisfaction [1,7]. The resources for products and services developed for tourism come from both the private and public sector with some offerings such as convention centres and other infrastructure being developed either directly by public monies or through joint ventures between public and private funding [9].
c. Tourism Services:

The tourism system is formed around a core which includes an accumulation of structures, goods, services and other resources that contribute directly to tourism [34]. Cooper et al. [14] determine destinations as the focus of facilities and services designed to meet the needs of the tourists. The attractiveness of destination is also enhanced by its ability to provide efficient and effective services [45]. Buhalis [10] cites that destinations are an amalgam of tourism products and services, which are consumed under the brand name of the destination. Tourism services include services which are in the centre of brand experience, such as restaurants and hotels, attractions, bars and clubs, tourist centers, networks of tourist information excursions at the destination and etc. [6,7,17] which all require proper services and appropriate behaviour of the staff in order to enhance the tourism brand [22,16,19].

Based on the title and objectives of the research, the following two questions are posed:
1- Do tourism services of Iran reinforce the tourism brand?
2- Do tourism infrastructures of Iran reinforce the tourism brand?

The theoretical model of the study is exhibited below in the figure 1:

![Theoretical framework](image)

**Fig. 1:** Theoretical framework.

The research variables as shown in the theoretical model above are divided into two general categories. The first category includes independent variables which are determined based on two main elements of the model i.e. infrastructure, tourism services and dependent variable including personality, position, and promise. Each one of the independent and dependant variables have components and subcomponents which are briefly exhibited in Table 1 (See appendix). Totally, independent variables have 8 subcomponents. The relationship between each one of the 8 subcomponents of independent variables and each one of the dependant variables has been identified separately. How independent variables influence dependant variables is assessed based on the answers of statistical sample.

**Method:**

The methodology of research was descriptive-survey and in terms of objectivity it falls within the scope of implicational researches since by its accomplishing; some necessary changes may take place in Iranian tourism industry. From among 130 experts of the ICHTO (DMO of Iran), by referring to the organizational chart, the opinions of 102 experts was collected regarding the questions that whether or not, in current situation of the country, independent variables reinforce the dependant variables, by using 5-point Likert scale (1- totally disagree and 5- totally agree). The reliability of the self-administered questionnaire was calculated by taking a pre-test and Cronbach's alpha assessment. The alpha value was above acceptable minimum value (0.70) as shown in Table 3. The questionnaire was consisted of demographic data including age, gender, work experience in tourism area and education, and it was revealed that 53% of the participants were female and 47% were male (which shows the approximate relative balance of the sample). More than 80% of the participants had above 5 years work experience in this area and the work experience of about 40% of them was above 10 years. This fact proves the reliability and validity of the answers. 71% of the respondents had undergraduate degrees and below, 27% had graduate degrees and about 2% had doctorate degrees. In addition, about 80% of the participants were below 45 years old. Considering the size and status of the sample, the T-test was used in order to find the answers for the research questions. As a contract in statistics, “3” is the mean and due to the valuables having a normal distribution (as per one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results shown in Table 3), this test was applied to investigate the research questions.

**Findings:**

Test result summary in Table 4 shows that mean score for none of the dependant variables is above 3. This means that the expert respondents believe, in current situation, none of the dependant variables (infrastructures and tourism services) reinforce Iran’s tourism brand. Below comes the result of data analysis regarding research questions:

1- The role of Infrastructures in supporting the Destination Brand
The main question posed in this regard is whether tourism infrastructures of Iran reinforce the tourism brand? The findings resulting from the data shows that the answer to this question is negative. It can be argued that the tourism brand infrastructures including 1. Transportation services, 2. Access within the country and to the country, 3. Sanitary services, 4. Providing service for and organizing outdoor spaces (parks, entertainment centers, etc.) and 5. The quality of facilities and services provided for the visitors, do not provide an appropriate opportunity for achievement of brand services and currently, have not been successful in exposition of Iran’s brand personality, brand positioning and meeting visitors’ expectations.

2. The role of Tourism Services in supporting the Destination Brand

The question related to services is that whether tourism services, reinforce the Iran’s main tourism brand? The answer to this question is negative due to the research findings. This means tourism services (including 1- hotels and lodging facilities, 2- attractions and recreational-leisure activities and 3- retailing services) in current situation of Iran, do not result in supporting Iran’s tourism brand; in other words, currently, tourism services have not succeeded in exposition of Iran’s brand personality, demonstrating superiority over competitive destinations, meeting tourists’ expectations and maintaining promised commitments.

Discussion and Conclusions:

The ultimate objective of the present study was identifying the current situation of Iran’s tourism infrastructures and tourism services in order to decide whether these elements support tourism brand. According to the experts’ opinions on current situation of Iran’s tourism facilities and services; and as it was assumed by the authors, serious lack of well-developed infrastructures and well-organized tourism services was found in the Iranian tourism industry. Whilst the infrastructures and services are not reflecting any values to be attained from traveling to the destination and nor can be definitive of destination brand personality, position and promise, there will be a huge gap between the current situation and the desirable one. The findings show that there has not been sufficient investment in improving infrastructures, facilities and services required by the brand. As it is emphasized by Hankinson [22] brand positioning and commitment should be deeply rooted in present realities and perceptible and non-perceptible features of the brand, otherwise they will be inefficient. It should be mentioned that developing a successful brand requires time and finances. The reason why none of the related service based aspects are able to reinforce Iran’s brand could be due to ignoring investment and development. Whatever it is, the tourism brand is dependent on a created space and a series of services, and without providing a set of relevant facilities the tourism brand would not exist in reality. Suggestions to Iranian DMO in order to improve the current situation are as follows:

- To expand tourism infrastructures and services based on the brand target market requirements and brand personality strategic planning should be provided.
- To decide on how to reflect the brand values and attributes well, in services and infrastructures; which also prefers the destination to its competitors, groups of experts in different relevant areas must be established.
- To gather enough budgets for investment on and development the infrastructures public and private capital must be absorbed.
- To bring quality and provide visitors satisfaction a customer-based approach in tourism establishments must be applied.

To conclude; destination branding based on true and real assets, facilities and provided services is the master key to tourism development, and the fundamental factor of tourist attraction to the destinations which will lead to tourists satisfaction and repetition of the visit. DMOs and the others in charge must take strategic steps toward a destination brand which starts by providing vital facilities.
REFERENCES


Appendix

Table 1: Research variables and their subcomponents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Subcomponent related to each variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Tourism services</td>
<td>➢ Retailing services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Hotels and accommodation, services related to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Recreational- leisure services and events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Tourism infrastructures</td>
<td>➢ Domestic access services (domestic and public transportation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Foreign access services (international transportation, access routes to the country)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Sanitary services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ How to service and organize outdoor spaces (parks, outdoor entertainment centres, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ The quality of facilities and services provided for the visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependant variable</td>
<td>➢ Brand personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Brand positioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Brand promise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: authors, retrieved from literature)

Table 2: The correspondence between branding models and applied variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different types of branding literature variables and models</th>
<th>Correspondent extracted variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand architecture (Cleverdon &amp; Fabricius, 2006)</td>
<td>Brand positioning, personality (perceptible and non-perceptible features)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand constitutive elements (ETC, 2010)</td>
<td>Brand positioning, promise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country branding (Fiorek, 2005, Morgan et al., 2002, 2003)</td>
<td>Brand personality, position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed look model (Urry, 1990)</td>
<td>Brand personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism destinations branding model (Saarinen, 1997, Fliachenko, 2005, Ooi, 2001)</td>
<td>Brand personality, infrastructures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism destination image formation (Baloglu &amp; McCleary, 1999)</td>
<td>Brand personality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brand building matrix (Nworah, 2005, p.3, Olins, 2002, p.244) Brand personality, promise
Brand pyramid model (Cleverdon&Fabricius, 2006, p. 9, Kaplanidou, &Vogt, 2003, p.3) Brand personality, promise
Tourist characteristics and the perceived image (Beerli& Martin, 2004) Brand personality, positioning
Hexagonal country branding model (Anholt, 2005) Brand personality, infrastructures
5Phase brand building model (Heath, 2004) Brand positioning, promise
Special value of destination brand from customer perspective model (Konecnik& Gartner, 2007) Brand personality, position
Destination identity components model (Ahonen et al., 2007) Brand personality
The decision making process of destination choice sets model (Butler, McCartney&Bennet, 2008) Brand personality, promise
Kim et al. special value model (Kim et al., 2009) Brand positioning, personality
2D destination and brand image model (Saraniemi, 2009) Brand positioning, promise
The relationship between destination image in supply and demand section model (Saraniemi, 2009) Brand personality
Brand assets pattern model (ETC/UNWTO, 2010) Brand personality
Brand cycle model (ETC/UNWTO, 2010) Brand personality, promise
Qu et al. model (Qu et al., 2011) Brand personality, promise
Gareza, et al. model (Gareza, Gomez & Molina, 2012) Brand personality, infrastructure

(Source: authors, retrieved from literature)

<p>| Table 3: Cronbach's alpha coefficients of variables and their subcomponents. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parts of questionnaire</th>
<th>Cronbach's alpha</th>
<th>Research variables</th>
<th>Cronbach's alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 1 (brand personality)</td>
<td>0.907</td>
<td>Tourism services</td>
<td>0.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 2 (brand positioning)</td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td>Tourism services</td>
<td>0.772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3 (brand promise)</td>
<td>0.891</td>
<td>Tourism services</td>
<td>0.865</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 4: One-sample kolmogorov-smirnov test (dependant variable: brand personality, position and reality). |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Statistic z and significant coefficients | Tourism services | Brand infrastructure |
| kolmogorov-smirnov z statistic for brand personality | 0.732 | 0.894 |
| Significant coefficients for brand personality | 0.223 | 0.141 |
| kolmogorov-smirnov z statistic for brand position | 0.830 | 1.124 |
| Significant coefficients for brand position | 0.212 | 0.092 |
| kolmogorov-smirnov z statistic for brand promise | 0.836 | 1.276 |
| Significant coefficients for brand promise | 0.202 | 0.077 |

<p>| Table 4: Results for one-sample t-test. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Dependant variables</th>
<th>mean scores</th>
<th>mean standard deviation</th>
<th>Number of samples</th>
<th>Statistic t</th>
<th>Lower limit</th>
<th>Upper limit</th>
<th>Test result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Tourism Services</td>
<td>Brand personality</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>.06301</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>-16.49</td>
<td>-1.16</td>
<td>-0.91</td>
<td>Tourism services do not result in reinforcing brand personality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand position</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>.06105</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>-17.30</td>
<td>-1.17</td>
<td>-0.93</td>
<td>Tourism services do not lead to Iran’s superiority over competitive destinations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand promise</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>.0655</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>-18.05</td>
<td>-1.31</td>
<td>-1.05</td>
<td>Tourism services do not result in maintaining brand commitment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Tourism Infrastructures</td>
<td>Brand personality</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>.06314</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>-20.4</td>
<td>-1.41</td>
<td>-1.16</td>
<td>Brand infrastructures do not result in reinforcing brand personality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand position</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>.06259</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>-19.90</td>
<td>-1.37</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>Brand infrastructures do not lead to Iran’s superiority over competitive destinations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand promise</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>.054482</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>-25.25</td>
<td>-1.48</td>
<td>-1.26</td>
<td>Brand infrastructures do not result in maintaining brand commitment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: authors)