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Identifying Iran's Image Dimensions as a Tourist Destination using Content Analysis

The present study tried to identify the dimensions of Iran's image as a tourism destination. The researcher developed an on-line questionnaire and by sharing it with the different members of social networks, received their opinions about Iran. The responses given by the participants were analyzed with Nvivo software and the image of Iran as a tourist destination was identified in terms of 8 dimensions: Rules and regulations, Infrastructures, Perceived Risks, Natural environment, Culture and history, Country's general atmosphere, Value for money and Uniqueness of the destination.

Keywords: Destination Image, Qualitative Technique, Content Analysis, Tourism, Iran's image

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Introduction

There is a growing number of tourist destinations among which travelers can choose (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Destination marketers spend a considerable amount of money, time, and energy to create a favorable image of their destination. For this reason, destination marketers should have a good and comprehensive understanding of images travelers hold about their own destination and the competing ones (San Martin & Del Bosque, 2008). Developing a positive image of the destination in the target markets is necessary to create a competitive advantage (Gartner, 1993).

Destination image is an important concept employed in investigating tourists' decision about destinations, with much contribution to our understanding of tourist behavior (Elliot, Papadopoulos, Kim, 2011). It is known that the evaluation and analysis of destination image have been the focus of much attention in the related academic literature, with a significant contribution to a better understanding of tourist behavior (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Positive images of destinations can help the potential tourists to choose among competing destinations, thereby making the destination an element of potential travelers' "aware" and "evoked" sets. Consequently, it can be inferred that the success or failure of any tourism destination is largely akin to the images held by the potential travelers. The effective management of those images by the destination should also be taken into account (Crouch, 2011; Sirgy & Su 2000).

There have been studies focusing on the relationship between destination image and tourists' preference or visiting intention (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). It can be understood from such studies that those destinations with strong and positive images are more likely to be considered and chosen by the potential tourists. Therefore, every decision choice model should consider image as an important element (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003).

It is necessary to explore the images that tourists develop for a tourist destination before travelling, in order to identify its strengths and weaknesses (Chen & Uysal, 2002), and

improve it efficiently (Leisen, 2001), thereby ensuring its competitive strength (San Martin & Del Bosque, 2008).

Literature Review

Destination Image

“Destination image” (DI) is a widely-used term, but it has not been well conceptualized. It has been pointed out that while the concept is widely used in the empirical context, it suffers from a lack of a good definition and a solid conceptual structure (Chen et al., 2014). Researchers have proposed a number of definitions, comprising various components and dimensions, which aim to capture the dynamic and complex nature of DI (Gallarza et al., 2002). There has been a tendency to consider the image as the reasoned and usually emotional interpretation of the consumer. This is as a consequence of two closely interrelated components: (1) the perceptive/ cognitive evaluations, which represent the individual’s own knowledge and beliefs about the object and (2) affective appraisals, which show the individual’s feelings towards the object (Kwon & Vogt, 2010).

Examination of methodologies used to measure destination image showed that most researchers conceptualized destination image in terms of some lists of attributes, not holistic impressions, with a few exceptions (e.g., Reilly, 1990; Um & Crompton, 1990). It has been shown that destination image could be considered in terms of both an attribute based component and a holistic component; also some images were found to be based on directly observable or measurable (functional) characteristics (e.g., sceneries, attractions, and accommodation facilities), while others could originate from more abstract, intangible (psychological) characteristics (e.g., such as friendliness, safety, and atmosphere (Murphy, 2000). So it has been recommended to conceptualize image as having components of three continua: attribute/holistic, functional/psychological, and common/unique (Tasci et al., 2007).

Table 1 shows the dimensions of destination image as offered by different researchers for different destinations. As tourists hold different images for different destinations and the dimensions of DI may be different for other destinations, this study tried to find the dimension of Iran's image. Given the unique position of Iran in terms of politics, international relations, economy, culture, civilization, etc., the use of variables employed in other studies to investigate the dimensions of Iran's image may not be good enough. Therefore, the present research tried to focus particularly on Iran's image, rather than only using the classifications available in the literature.

Table 1: Destination image dimensions in the literature

Author	Year	Destination image dimensions
Beerli & Martin	2004	Natural Resources ,General Infrastructure ,Tourist Infrastructure, Tourist Leisure and Recreation, Culture History and Art ,Political and Economic Factors, Natural Environment ,Social Environment ,Atmosphere of the Place
Rezende-Parker, Morrison, Ismail	2003	Natural attractions/interest ,Safety and comfort, Cultural comparisons ,Facilities and information, Vacation atmosphere/exoticness, Economic and social conditions, Transportation , Adventure/learning
San Martín , Del Bosque	2008	Atmosphere, Cultural environment, Affective Image, Natural Environment, Infrastructures/ Socioeconomic environment
Nicola, Skinner	2010	Beautiful, Forest, Wildlife, Fun, Walks, Activities, Peaceful, Specific attractions, Pretty, Scenery, Family, Historical, Welcome, Adventure, Special,
King, Chen, Funk	2012	Travel Basics, Events, Environment, Attractions
Chen, Lin, Petrick	2012	Overall service quality ,Food quality ,Accommodation quality ,General infrastructure ,Tourism facilities ,Local transportation Cleanliness ,Cultural attractions ,Historical attractions ,Beautiful scenery
Gomez, Molina, Esteban	2012	Nature ,Cultures, Infrastructures ,socio-economic, environment, Atmosphere, Social conditions

Measurement of destination image

In order to measure the DI, two approaches have been introduced, structured and unstructured. Most studies used a structured methodology. In this methodology, the research asks questions in a prescribed form and order with DI attributes being pre-identified. There is no variation in the questions between participants. For this reason, Likert-type or semantic differential scales are used. Then, respondents rate the destination in relation to each of the attributes and accordingly, an 'image profile' is derived from these ratings (Stepchenkova & Li, 2014).

One limitation of the structured method is that respondents are forced to rate the destination according to predetermined salient attributes. It is possible that these attributes do not conform to the attributes that respondents have of the destination and they do not reflect the characteristics of the particular destination (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000).

An unstructured methodology happens to be a central technique for collecting information in case of exploratory or research formative studies. In this methodology, questionnaires contain broad/holistic questions. Respondents describe or explain their perceptions and feelings about the destination freely. In this way free answers can generate detailed data and enable in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. In order to analysis the data, categorization techniques such as content analysis are employed. Unstructured methodologies help the researcher find specific attributes of the destination that respondents hold in their mind (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009).

Methodology

To identify the dimensions of Iran's image, this study employed the technique of content analysis. To do this, an open-ended questionnaire was designed based on a review and evaluation of the literature and the theoretical frameworks presented for the destination image. This study was conducted during autumn 2014. Respondents had never visited Iran and were recruited online through social networks including Couch Surfing and Linkedin. The electronic version of the questionnaire was designed in Google drive and then its link was promoted in the aforementioned social networks. With regard to the size of the sample in qualitative research, Patton (2002) holds that there is no rule specifying the size of the sample in this kind of research and sampling is gradual, until reaching information saturation. Accordingly, the sample in this study consisted of 74 people. The respondents were selected through a convenience sampling method. Attempts were made to create the maximum diversity in the sample by putting the link of the questionnaire on platforms attracting people

with different characteristics, thereby eliminating the possibility of overlap. For the analysis of textual data, the qualitative technique of content analysis by Nvivo (10) software was employed. Qualitative content analysis is a technique through which the researchers extract meaning from the text. The unit of content analysis is the smallest part of the text in which events and things are investigated. So, this unit is determined at a particular level for each research. Signs, words, sentences, the whole texts and even the person can be the units of analysis. Units are coded in each study, that is, units are characterized in terms of one or more codes. In this study, the sentence was chosen as the unit of analysis and accordingly, codes and categories were induced from the raw data. The qualitative data were analyzed in terms of sentences and the researcher read the sentences several times to get their meanings and code them under emerging categories. Then, based on the relations between the categories, they were put under a general category and finally, they were subsumed under the main theme. Ultimately, according to the general meanings of categories, the researcher characterized the dimensions of Iran's image as a tourist destination. To improve the reliability, an external rater was also employed to analyze the data and see whether there was the same understanding of meanings and categories. Also, to increase the validity, sampling with the maximum diversity was done. To ensure the accuracy of data, the findings were returned to the respondents after analysis to be verified and member checked by them. Also, to ensure the accuracy of codes, there was an interview with one of the experts in the field.

Sample Characteristics

The demographic profile of respondents in study is provided in Table 2. The gender distribution of the respondents was 63.51 per cent male and 33.78 per cent female. Most of the respondents were highly educated, 40.54 per cent attended college and bachelors 'degree and 29.72 per cent attended graduate school. The highest percentage of respondents were from Europe (17.56%).

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	47	63.51
	Female	25	33.78
	Missing	2	2.70
	Total	74	100
Education	Less than high school degree	4	5.40
	High school degree	14	18.91
	College and Bachelor's degree	30	40.54
	Graduate degree	22	29.72
	Missing	4	5.40
	Total	74	100
	Total	74	100
Origin	Africa	6	8.10
	America	9	12.16
	Europe	13	17.56
	East Asia and Pacific	11	14.86
	South Asia	2	2.70
	Middle-east	1	1.35
	Missing	32	43.24
	Total	74	100%

Findings

After analyzing the sentences offered by the respondents, the dimensions of Iran's image were classified into eight categories. In the following, categories and sub-categories of Iran's image are shown (Table 3) and then explained in detail.

Table 3: Iran Image Dimensions

Theme	Category	Sub-Category	Codes
Destination image dimensions	Rules and regulations	Religious rules	the ban on the use of alcoholic drinks, the ban on homosexuality, strict religious laws.
		Social norms	Special covering for women, covering the hair by women, inequality between men and women in their covering, strictness in women's covering, not laughing in public, wide capital punishment, differences between Iran and other source countries in their norms, differences in codes of ethics, the ban on photography
		Regulation of acquiring Iranian visa	difficulty in getting visa, hard and fast rules in providing visa, not allowing the entrance of some travelers
	Infrastructure	Banking Facilities	lack of credit cards, inability to use ATM systems
		Tourism infrastructure	unsuitable residential places, few facilities for travelers
		General infrastructure	lack of a good transportation system, unsuitable flight services
	Perceived Risk	Health and safety	traffic, reckless driving, air pollution, cities noise pollution, dangerous, getting trapped in religious encounters, turmoil, violent behavior of nasty people toward travellers
		Personal rights and freedom	lack of enough security for women, lack of freedom of expression, lack of freedom in expressing the feelings, arrestment, harsh punishment for getting along with the members of the opposite sex, strictness in women's covering, living with different restrictive norms, lack of enough freedom in talking to travellers, detachment of locales from travelers
		Psychological	looking at travellers as spies, the possible Israel attack, secret cameras, chasing the travellers, being killed due to unfamiliarity with Islamic obligations
		Social	the bad image of Iran in travellers' minds, being blamed for travelling to Iran by friends, difficulty in communicating with locales due to their unfamiliarity with English, the possibility of not being able to communicate with the locales, difficult language and dialect,
		Financial	robbery
	Natural environment	Activities in Nature	different activities including mountain climbing, desert exploration, trying risk
		Natural Attractions	sand and gravel, beautiful mountains, unique beauty, good weather, fantastic views, unique natural attractions, unique wildlife, awesome wilderness, diverse climatic conditions
	Culture and history	Handmade attractions	different markets, interesting museums, old cities
		Rich historical and cultural attractions	rich cultural heritage, wonderful sites, numerous historical attractions, a variety of foods, healthy foods, great cuisine, different restaurants, special music, interesting customs, ancient Persian culture, positive interaction with culture, experiencing the new culture, Iranian culture
		Cultural richness	old civilization, rich culture and history, cultural difference, historical country, civilized people, people interested in culture and art
	Country's general atmosphere	Affective	relaxed, stressful, sad, closed, comfortable, peace, comfortable life, demolished buildings, biller traces, strange and weird
		Social relations	kind people, hospitable, friendly, warm-hearted, friendly and warm, civilized, excited by visiting travellers, helpful, generous, racist, economical look at travellers, proud people, unfriendly to travellers, responsible people, religious destination
		International relationship of destination and government attitudes toward tourism	government dishonesty, lack of a flexible diplomacy toward other countries, political atmosphere of travelling, lack of diplomatic channels, government's lack of interest in tourism, unfriendly relations with other countries, absence of counseling

			house and embassy of some countries due to governments' relations
		Visual Environment	demolished buildings, traces of billet, strange and weird, dirty, dusty and dry, clean, beautiful cities, great architecture
	Value for money	Value for Money	high expenses due to sanctions, high costs of tourism services, expensive country, low costs, cheap, lack of fuel, inflation, financial crisis
	Uniqueness of the destination		Experience new foods, learn a completely different culture, experience different culture, a different life style

Rules and Regulations

Based on analyzed responses, rules and regulation as a dimension of destination image has been divided into three sub- categories of religious rules, social norms and regulation of acquiring Iranian visa.

Religious rules

Many of the respondents believed that in Iran, foreign tourists are not allowed to enter mosques and they cannot learn about their religious rituals. They believe that unintentionally insulting the religious beliefs of the local people can have grave consequences. The travelers think that religious rules are very strict and can have negative consequences for them. Also, due to the ban of using alcoholic drinks, travelers consider Iran as a destination with strict laws.

- **Social norms**

The analysis of this category showed that travelers think that social interaction of people in Iran is along with a strict code of ethics. If the travelers violate it, even unintentionally or because of being ignorant about it, they likely must bear a severe punishment. The respondents also think that in Iran, the code of dressing for women is very strict such that many women travelers or some men coming with their families have serious constrains to

travel to this country. They also think that it is not possible to express their feelings in the public such that walking hand in hand with their spouses in public. Laughing, especially loud in public is banned in Iran and given that some gestures may be involuntary and can have negative implications, they are afraid of misinterpretations by people. The assumption is also that there are laws banning photography, leading to severe security measures. Overall, the travelers think that there are numerous restrictions in people's social lives.

- **The regulation of securing visa**

Many of the respondents assume that receiving an Iranian visa involves some complicated formalities as well as much bureaucracy. Also, some, especially American ones, believe that they are not allowed to enter Iran. The idea is that the diplomatic channel for travelers who intend to visit Iran is not good enough and counseling services are not provided in some countries.

Infrastructures

There are two different and contradictory views among tourists with regard to this dimension. Some regard Iran a developed country in terms of its tourist infrastructure and some others think that due to the lack of enough development in the country's infrastructure, they prefer not to travel to this destination. Also, lack of well-developed airlines is another reason for the lack of interest in travelling to Iran. Most respondents believe that in Iran, it is impossible to use international credit cards and it is impossible to withdraw cash from ATMs and, so they are likely to run short of money in this country, thereby turning this in to a big concern.

Perceived Risk

According to the responses received and definitions of different risks in the literature, risk dimension can be subdivided in to five categories: physical (health and safety) risk, psychological risk, personal rights and freedom risk, financial risk, and social risk. Physical risk has been defined as possibility of action or situation which occurs during a tour and because of which; individual's health is undermined by a danger, harm, or illness due to some conditions like law, climate, and sanitary problems (Tsaurand et al., 1997). Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) have referred to psychological risk as a condition which may not be compatible with the image an individual holds about himself. Financial risk involves stealing or losing of properties and belongings. Most foreign travelers carry valuable things during a trip and many times they are worried about robbery, loss of baggage and belongings, and possible road accidents (Noh, 2006). Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) have defined social risk as a possibility of traveling to a particular destination, where people's ideas may affect individual's beliefs.

According to the responses, potential tourists think of Iran as a crowded country with heavy traffic and much air pollution, thereby being afraid of endangering their health. They are also worried that their unawareness of some illegal activities in Iran may lead to their arrest or even the charge of spying by the Iranian government. They are also afraid of entering some religious confrontations. Some travelers regard Iran as an insecure country. They think of Iran as a country with much turmoil and chaos and due to problems with the West, they are worried of being arrested and sent to jail. They also believe that Iran is a military country with little or no freedom of expression. They think that in this country, tourists are separated from other people to guard against any interaction between them. They are also afraid of travelling with their families because of the security reasons mentioned. They also consider Iranian government policies dictatorial and their personal security is being threatened in case they travel to this country. They also regard Israel's attacks on Iran as a

serious threat discouraging them from travelling to this country. Overall, there is a negative attitude toward Iran among their friends and colleagues and they are also afraid of being mocked by their acquaintances. They also think that Iran is reputable destination in the international community and fear of robbery is one of the major concerns among tourists.

Natural environment

According to analyses conducted, the natural environment can be subdivided into two sub-categories: natural attractions and activities in nature. From the travelers' points of view, Iran is a beautiful country with many wonderful and unique natural attractions. They also think that Iran has a beautiful wildlife offering exciting experiences. Travelers assume that upon entering Iran, they will face natural sceneries and a sunny weather. They will also expect to see untouched natural attractions. From the second sub-category, only mountain climbing and walking in deserts have been mentioned.

Culture and history

Based on the analyses, culture and history dimension was divided in to three sub-categories: artifacts, cultural and historical attractions, and folk's rich culture. Travelers hold the belief that Iran enjoys a rich culture with a great civilization. They assume that Iran possesses valuable archaeological sites as well as historical and cultural attractions. The potential tourists also regard Iranians as people who are interested in culture. They also see the traces of the old Persian culture in Iran. They think that interesting Iranian customs cannot be found anywhere else.

Country's general atmosphere

The present researcher categorized the general atmosphere under four sub-categories: Affective, social relations, international relations and government's attitude toward tourism

and the visual environment. Atmosphere represents the quality of the surrounding environment, that is, some special qualities that create positive feelings. Given that social relations and attitudes of the tourists toward the host can have a serious influence on how the atmosphere is felt by them; this category was also subsumed under the general atmosphere. From the respondent's' view, Iranians are friendly, warm-hearted, cooperative, and hospitable. They are also very respectful to the tourists. Due to their rich culture, they are proud of themselves. For some western tourists, there is the possibility that after their entrance to Iran, they may be subject to unfriendliness of local people. According to the responses received regarding the international relations of Iran, some tourists feel that the Iranian government is not interested in having good relations with other countries, thereby not welcoming people coming from other countries too. This creates a sense of lack of trust in the destination. This is why the researcher put international relations and government's attitude under the category of general atmosphere. Also, with regard to the visual dimension, what tourists expect to see in the destination, whether they observe beautiful clean buildings or demolished dirty ones, constitutes the general atmosphere. What tourist watches forms his overall impression of the country.

Value for money

Value for money shows the desirability of shopping or a sum of money paid. Some travelers think of Iran as a country with cheap services and facilities for tourists. On the other hand, some others regard Iran as a troubled country due to economic sanctions and they think that these sanctions have had a negative effect on the prices of goods and services. People may not get very little for what they pay.

Uniqueness of the destination

The analysis of responses showed that travelers think of Iran as a country with a wide variety of foods and it is possible for them to have new food experiences. Also, people's lifestyle, they think, is unique and not seen in other countries. Therefore, travelers can experience a new life in Iran. Getting to know Iranian and Persian culture can be very special, according to some respondents.

Conclusion and implications

Given the importance of the dimensions of a traveler's image in planning and policy-making for destination authorities in charge, this study investigated the dimensions of Iran's image as a tourist destination through qualitative research. This qualitative study employed content analysis to investigate Iran's image as a tourist destination. The analyses revealed that the dimensions of Iran's image can be viewed in terms of 8 categories: rules and regulations, infrastructures, perceived risk, natural environment, culture and history, general atmosphere, value for money and uniqueness. One of the most important images of the potential travelers toward Iran was related to different religious and social norms. Most respondents regarded ethical codes and social norms as being too strict and creating a negative image of Iran. Tourism managers should focus on cultural tourists, not recreational tourists. Also, due to much propaganda by Western media against Iran and association of this country with terrorism, the security issue has turned in to a big concern for the potential travelers. Based on the study findings it is recommended that tourist managers create tourism groups in social networks in order to change tourist views by word of mouth or by making movies about Iran to increase tourist information. Furthermore, the analyses of the responses showed that most potential travelers held positive views toward Iranian culture and civilization. So destination marketing managers should consider this issue in segmentation and market targeting. In the previous classifications, the category of rules and regulations has not been considered. This

could be due to the big difference between Iran and other countries in terms of their social and normative rules as well as their codes of ethics. Also, there is the category of entertainment and night life in the previous studies (Aleger & Garau, 2010; Byon & Zhang, 2010; Kim et.al.,2009), but in the case of Iran, the respondents did not have any reference to it, probably because Iran is regarded as a cultural/ religious destination with historical, cultural attractions for people travelling to this country. So, the category of entertainment and hobbies has not be mentioned in this study, especially given some religious laws that forbid some types of entertainment in Iran, in comparison to other countries. For example, in spite of long beaches in Iran, due to covering restrictions, beach activities and sports are not a focus for the foreign travelers. The dimensions identified in this study can be of great help to policy-makers and the officials to improve the positive image of Iran among the potential travelers. Overall, the study illustrated the value of a qualitative approach in eliciting DI dimensions for emerging destinations that do not fit a generic destination model.

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