

The Analysis of Tourism Destinations Branding: A Case Study of Lorestan Province in Iran

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to study and explain the concepts of tourism destinations branding of required data through field survey in the form of factors affecting the tourism destinations branding in Lorestan province, Iran. To control the quality of data, Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) consisting of ten questions was used to assess the accuracy, validity and importance of qualitative studies with emphasis on objectives, methodology, research design, sampling and collection methods, and researcher-participant relationship. The questionnaire covered 13 important indicators including service quality, destination image, advertising, nature and natural attractions, destination nature, security, destination perception, culture and traditions, transportation and access facilities, management, value and credibility of destinations, tourism facilities, and place reputation.

Keywords: branding, tourism, Lorestan province, Iran

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, tourism development has shifted from a centrally planned economy to more sustainable development. Sustainable development is the ideal point of the tourism industry in the 21st century (Zargham Borujeni and Nikbin, p. 139). Decades ago, researchers looked at tourism as a larger system rather than a simple process of economic exchange between businesses and consumers. Planners and economists have established tourism supply (business and community resources) and demand (tourism market) on both sides, including transportation and marketing communications. Travel and tourism have become a global industry and one of the fastest growing industries in the world. If not the fastest growing industry in the world, tourism can be an important source of creating jobs for non-metro communities, especially for those who are economically underdeveloped while others are becoming invisible regions (Hughes, 1995). According to those working in tourism industry, the world will witness a tourism revolution at the beginning of the third millennium. The current development of the tourism market and the growing investment in the marketing of this industry has led to the increasing importance of branding cities and countries (G mez, M., 2015). Therefore, many marketing professionals are trying to brand or re-brand cities to create a community that people want to live or visit. Two important issues in the process of branding the cities are converging. First, urban brands are a means of disseminating identity; and second, urban brands are a tool for the world to increase competitiveness. If these two issues are combined, they can open up vistas of sustainable development (Hughes, 1995). To achieve sustainable development using tourism destinations branding - the most important goal of which is to cause socioeconomic development in the destination areas, comprehensive studies should be carried out regarding the factors in the process of successful branding management of these goals. The existence of different resources and beautiful destinations for tourism is only a small part of success in the industry. The introduction and fame through branding is a major contribution to the prosperity and development of tourism, and in fact, tourism development is affected by showing well and being seen. On the other hand, a good reputation, which is a reflection of public perceptions, indicates the extent to which the relevant

authorities are acting in a desirable and logical manner in this regard. Investing in branding for tourism purposes leads to huge profits in marketing, human resources, and finance in the field of global competition; it also provides beneficial results in terms of politics, economy, culture, and society (Tabatabai-Nasab and Mahavarpour, 2017, p. 72).

Lorestan is a province of western Iran in the Zagros Mountains. It covers about 28,294 km² and accounts for 1.8 percent of Iran's area. It is situated north of Khomein and Arak of Markazi province and Malayer and Nahavand of Hamedan, south of Khuzestan, east of Friden and Golpayegan of Isfahan province, and west of Kermanshah and Ilam provinces. This province features spectacular geological regions such as Kashkan and Simareh rivers and parts of Zagros Mountains. The region has very beautiful passages and charming mountain views. Oak trees and different seasons are common in the region. These natural conditions are not common in most parts of the country, and even worldwide. This condition has connected the eastern residents of Iranian plateau to western countries over the ancient times. During the pre-Islamic era and the development of Islam, trading and cultural communication among people and nations was through this area. Also, post-Islamic era witnessed the significant role of this region in establishing the connection between Iran and other nations. Western part of Iran had a significant role in development of trading among Mesopotamian nations. Lorestan's climate has made it an important and strategic province. Many researchers believe that no academic studies have been conducted on the destinations branding and that the concept has not been widely used. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the effective factors in tourism destinations branding in Lorestan province, Iran.

Theoretical Foundations

Tourism is one of the important factors in the economy dynamism and sustainable development of any country. Studies on the history of travels in past centuries confirm that human beings have traveled for various motives such as business, education, religious aims, adventure, and political reasons (Sadr Momtaz and Agha Rahimi, 2010, p. 517). The rapid growth of tourism in the world and its benefits has attracted the attention of governments and planners and has led to the formation of new policies in this area. The developed countries of the world have realized the importance of tourism before other countries and have planned for its development. Tourism can become the most important economic resource in many developing countries that do not have much economic resources. That is why most developing countries have started various programs in the field of tourism development. Tourism may have many positive and negative effects; its positive effects include job creation, increasing investment opportunities, improving the quality of life, cultural growth, strengthening local values and traditions, developing infrastructure, protecting historical and ecological sites, and developing planning skills. However, if not managed and controlled well, it can have many negative effects, including pollution, threats to local culture, damage to the environment, spread of diseases, traffic, and consumerism (Esmailzadeh et al., 2011, p. 120). The word "tourism" first appeared in 1811 in the *Sporting* magazine. Since the 1970s, studies on the tourism industry in its modern sense have gained a special place among other academic sciences, and today tourism is one of the most promising activities, which is referred to as the development gateway. Tourism was one of the most developed industries in the second half of the twentieth century and it was often used as a key to economic growth, both in developed and developing countries (Zarabi and Parikhani, 2010, p. 38). Regarding the importance of the tourism industry, in addition to cultural, social, and political factors, natural environment factors also play an important role in tourism development and tourist attraction (Ranjbar et al., 2010, p. 80). Tourism is one of the most important activities of contemporary life, which makes dramatic changes in the appearance of the earth; it also changes the political, economic, and cultural situation, character, and way of life in human beings. According to the definition of the World Tourism Organization, the prerequisite for sustainable tourism development is the integration and coordination of economic and environmental, as well as social and cultural goals. This ensures the long-term benefits for the host community, guest tourists, and the protection of natural resources and cultural heritage (Karami Dehkordi and Kalantari, 2011, p. 2). However, Gosling et al. (2005) expressed that tourism is generally a highly consuming industry with a significant share of the operating destination in less desirable eco-productivity values than the global average (Kahn and Hongbing, 2011). Mollis (1998), Genius and Anwar (2000), and Ritchie and Geo

(1987) concluded that important events and festivals are now widely seeking tourists' reconsideration of marketing strategies of different nationalities (Stokes, 2006). Choi et al. (1999) and Snapner et al. (2003) believe that shopping is one of the most pervasive leisure activities by tourists (Yuksel, 2007, p. 58). Abdollahzadeh & Taghipour (2015), studied Identify and Priorize Suitable Area for Ecotourism Development using Multi-criteria Analysis for Development of the Tourism Market in Iran (Nathanz City). Nathanz city having regard to natural attraction, desert, Karkas mountain, geo sites, protected areas have great potential to develop eco-tourism. The development of tourism in the city requires recognition of the potential and actual potential of the region. The aim of this study is to identify attractions of Nathanz city to develop new markets by using geographic information system. TOPSIS model were prioritized according to the marketing indicators. Mirzaie et al. (2015), studied The Relationship Between Social Bearing Capacities with Conflict as a Result, in the Perception of the Visiting Historical Sites. Sustainable tourism needs to prevent the destruction and degradation of social, cultural and ecological systems in the host society. It is obvious that tourism development and social characteristics is changing. But this, and severity of these changes depend on the size and number of tourism activities. Alamdar khoodaki et al. (2019, p. 72), studied Effect of integrated marketing communication on brand value with the role of agency's reputation. Habibi et al. (2020) examined the relationship between social responsibility and the brand of companies listed on the Tehran Stock Exchange. The results of this study show that there is no significant relationship between the disclosure of corporate social responsibility and market share and there is a significant relationship between disclosure of corporate social responsibility and net profit margin. Taghipour & Ahmadi Sarchoghahi (2015), studied Evaluation of Tourist Attractions in Borujerd County with Emphasis on Development of New Markets by Using Topsis Model. This research aims to identify tourist attractions in Borujerd County in order to develop new tourism markets in Lorestan province of Iran. For that purpose and with the use of GIS, parameters such as slope, aspect, elevation, precipitation, land use, topography, and landform geology are separately studied and digital maps for each feature are created. These activities have been analyzed using TOPSIS multi-criteria decision model and based on marketing factors.

Tourism is defined as voluntarily spending one's leisure time outside of their place of residence for enjoyment; it is a multi-purpose activity that takes place outside the tourist's environment and does not last more than a year and is intended for recreation, business, or other activities (World Tourism Organization, 1997). Studies on the effects and consequences of tourism date back to the 1960s, when the emphasis was on economic growth as an indicator of national development, and was measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment rates, as well as the multiplication factor. In the 1970s, the effects of tourism on social and cultural issues expanded, and then, with the formation and emergence of some problems such as the environmental consequences of tourism, they became the main concern of tourism researchers in the 1980s. Thus, the movement changed from analyzing the effects of economic growth to social and ecological effects. In the 1990s, this change of approach was integrated with the analysis of the previous effects of tourism and the type of tourism was also considered so that the movement from mass tourism was changed to sustainable tourism in the forms of ecotourism, heritage tourism, and community-based tourism (Rezvani et al., 2011).

Method of the study

This research is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-analytical in terms of data type. The method of collecting the data is field and library. Part of the data was obtained through a library study that includes theoretical content and research literature and models in branding and part of the findings was completed using a questionnaire. The tool used in this research was taking notes from available sources, books, and documents and a questionnaire completed by experts of the sample community.

Scope of the study

Lorestan province is one of the western provinces of Iran. The province covers an area of 29,308 km² and its population is estimated at more than 1,760,000 people. Unemployment rate in Lorestan is 20.2%, which is the highest unemployment rate in Iran. This province is the thirteenth province in the country in terms of population and is one of the most populous provinces in Iran. Khorramabad is the capital of the

province. According to 2006 statistics, Khorramabad is the twentieth largest city in the country. Lorestan is a mountainous land and except for a few limited plains, it is covered by the Zagros Mountains. Oshtrankoooh is the highest mountain (4,150 meters) of the province located between Dorud, Azna, and Aligudarz counties and its lowest point is located in the southernmost part of the province and is about 500 meters above sea level. According to archaeological findings, this area is one of the first ancient human settlements. Lorestan Mafragh (bronze) has a great archaeological reputation. Lorestan is the only province in Iran that is regarded as one of the four main parts of National Museum of Iran due to its extraordinary historical importance. These four main parts are prehistoric, historical and Lorestan, Islamic era, seal and coin. Lorestan province is the third most water-rich province in the country and has 12% of the country's water resources.

Findings of the study

In order to study the issue, first, the factors affecting tourism branding in Lorestan province were studied and then these factors were distributed in the form of a questionnaire among 30 experts in the tourism sector, the results of which are as follows:

✓ *The quality of service*

According to the respondents, among the items, services such as internet, access to markets, and the availability of electronic shopping had the highest average.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of service quality

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Services such as internet, access to markets, and the availability of electronic shopping	30	2	5	3.93	0.79
Existence of health centers and medical services	30	2	5	3.7	0.99
Quality of food and restaurants, cleaning, etc.	30	2	5	3.37	0.96
Quality of services	30	2.67	4.67	3.67	0.61

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Image destination*

According to the respondents, among the items, the attitude towards the places and attractions of the destination had the highest average in the dimension of the destination image.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the destination image

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Attitude towards the peace and comfort of the destination	30	2	5	3.3	0.79
Attitude towards destination places and attractions	30	2	5	3.5	0.86
Destination image	30	2	4.5	3.4	0.67

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Advertisement*

According to the respondents, among the items, getting acquainted with the characteristics of the tourism destination had the highest average in the dimension of advertising.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of advertising

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Get acquainted with the characteristics of destination tourism	30	2	5	3.37	0.93
Appropriate and correct ads	30	2	5	3.3	0.79
Advertising	30	2	5	3.33	0.69

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Nature and natural attractions*

According to the respondents, among the items, the natural features of the place such as forest, sea, etc. had the highest average in the dimension of nature and natural attractions.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of nature and natural attractions

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Natural features of the place such as forest, sea, etc.	30	2	5	3.27	0.74
Prominent natural features such as vegetation type, wildlife, etc.	30	1	5	3.2	0.89
A feature not common and not found elsewhere	30	1	5	3.03	0.96
Nature and natural attractions	30	1.33	4.67	3.17	0.64

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *The nature of the destination*

According to the respondents, among the items, the aim of travel such as religious, educational, sports, etc. had the highest average in the dimension of the nature of the destination.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the nature of the destination

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Type of travel such as religious, educational, sports and ...	30	1	5	3.57	0.94
Existence of amenities and comfort regarding the nature of travel	30	1	5	3.53	1.11
The nature of the destination	30	1	5	3.55	0.89

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *The nature of the security*

According to the respondents, among the items, the responsiveness of tourist places to visitors had the highest average in the dimension of security.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of security dimension

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Accountability of tourist sites to visitors	30	1	5	3.53	1.01
Accountability of tourist places to the authorities	30	1	5	3.47	1.07
Respect the privacy of tourists	30	1	5	3.37	0.89
Security	30	1	5	3.46	0.77

*Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Perception of destination*

According to the respondents, the items of perceived value of the destination of pilgrimage, treatment, etc., and the small difference between the attitude and the mental perception of the destination were of equal importance to the respondents.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of destination perception

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Perceived value of pilgrimage, treatment, etc.	30	1	4	3.1	0.92
Less difference between the mental nature and the mental perception of the destination	30	1	5	3.1	0.89
Destination perception	30	1	4.5	3.1	0.7

*Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Culture and traditions*

According to the respondents, among the items, the existence of a variety of manifestations of local customs and traditions, including food, celebrations, etc. had the highest average in the dimension of culture and traditions.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics of the dimension of culture and traditions

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Variety of manifestations of local customs and traditions, including food, celebrations, etc.	30	1	5	3.17	0.87
Hospitality	30	1	5	3.03	0.89
Culture and traditions	30	1	4.5	3.1	0.69

*Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Transportation and access facilities*

According to the respondents, among the items, the security of transportation locations such as domestic airlines, railways, buses, etc. had the highest average in terms of transportation facilities and access.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics on transportation and access facilities

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	S. D
All kinds of transportation systems at origin and destination	30	1	4	3.27	0.74
Security of vehicles such as airlines, domestic, railways, buses, etc.	30	3	5	3.93	0.58
Reasonable cost of existing transportation systems	30	1	5	3.63	1.07
Transportation and access facilities	30	3	4.33	3.61	0.47

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

According to the respondents, among the items, the management of destination tourism services has the highest average in the dimension of management.

Table 10. Descriptive statistics of the dimension of management

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Management of destination tourism services	29	2	5	3.69	1
Proper planning and scheduling	30	2	5	3.57	0.94
Management	30	2.5	5	3.63	0.75

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Value and validity of destinations*

According to the respondents, among the items, the existence of background and accuracy of services provided on site had the highest average in the dimension of value and validity of the destination.

Table 11. Descriptive statistics on the value and validity of destinations

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Historical and value aspects of the place	30	2	5	3.2	0.93
Existence of background and accuracy of services provided on site	30	2	5	3.37	1.03
Thematic indicators appropriate to travel destinations such as the existence of places, historical, caravanserais, etc.	30	2	4	3.1	0.76
Value and credibility of destinations	30	2	4.67	3.22	0.59

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Tourism facilities*

According to the respondents, among the items, removing business-related obstacles and problems in the destination had the highest average in the dimension of tourism facilities.

Table 12. Descriptive statistics of tourism facilities

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Providing facilities and services for tourists	30	2	5	3.23	0.77
Eliminate obstacles and problems of business owners related to tourism in the destination	30	2	5	3.43	0.86
Creating various financial and credit incentives, including prizes and ...	30	2	4	3.4	0.72
Tourism facilities	30	2.67	4	3.36	0.45

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Place reputation*

According to the respondents, among the items, the removal of barriers and problems of business-related businesses in the destination has the highest average in the dimension of tourism facilities.

Table 13. Descriptive statistics of the dimension of location reputation

Item	No.	Min.	Max.	Avg.	SD
Unique beauty of the place	30	1	5	3.63	1.066
Reputation and location facilities	30	2	5	3.23	0.774
Place reputation	30	2.00	5.00	3.4333	0.62606

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

✓ *Introducing dimensions*

In the table below, the indicators are introduced in the order of appearance in the text:

Table 14: Introduction of index symbols

Item	Symbol
Quality of services	M1
Destination image	M2
Advertising	M3
Nature and natural attractions	M4
The nature of the destination	M5
Security	M6
Destination perception	M7
Culture and traditions	M8
Transportation and access facilities	M9
Management	M10
Value and credibility of destinations	M11
Tourism facilities	M12
Place reputation	M13

* Source: Author Extraction, 2019

Conclusion

The results of descriptive statistics showed that the management dimension with an average of 3.63 and services quality with an average of 3.66 had the highest score. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to examine the normal distribution of data. The results of this test showed that the data did not have a normal distribution. Friedman test was used to compare the mean scores. The results showed that the management and quality of services in this test also took the first place. Pearson correlation and regression tests were used to investigate the relationship between dimensions and dependent variables. The results showed that there is a significant relationship between the independent variables of services quality, advertising, nature of destination, security, culture and traditions, transportation and access facilities, management, and affiliation of tourism branding. Also, no significant relationship was observed between the independent variables of destination image, nature and natural attractions, destination perception, value and credibility of destinations, tourism facilities, and tourism branding dependent. Therefore, these variables were removed for regression testing. Regression test showed that the security dimension had the highest coefficient for the impact on its dependent variable. The results showed that the tourism facilities dimension should be removed in order to increase reliability and credibility.

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