



Tourists' Perceived Authenticity Regarding the Definition of Cultural Destinations in Iran

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Abstract

Nowadays, the generated and shared content on tourist perceptions in social media is considered a fresh and far-reaching way to introduce the concept of the destination image. Destination decision-makers attempt to use this content to provide a deep understanding of tourism supply and demand. Marketers have to be particular about it when defining a proper destination image. In this regard, many researchers have emphasized the importance of using social media to tap into tourists' perceptions of destination because it not only helps to deepen the administrators' understanding of the demands of this type of tourism and to propose new approaches to determine the customers' preferences in destination marketing but also directs new products and services to satisfy the tourists to a greater extent. Depending on the type of tourism, the contexts and criteria for this kind of virtual investigation are different. For example, in cultural destinations, tourists' perceptions of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and services and products offered in virtual contexts are regarded as a tool to assess the tourists' perceptions of that destination. The present study assumes that a holistic approach toward the analysis of tourist perception in the virtual sphere could be a well-qualified alternative to determine tourists' wants in cultural destinations. Content analysis, which is a practical method in analyzing visual and textual data and

therefore is quite pertinent to the analysis of tourist perceptions, was adopted as the data analysis instrument in this study. To collect the data, two frequently-visited and widely-used websites with easy access to tourists' comments, namely *TripAdvisor* and *Flickr*, were selected so that tourists' experiences and perceptions could be gathered more authentically and conveniently. The findings demonstrated that the analysis of perceived authenticity of cultural destinations in Iran could provide the content required to create a destination image for purposeful marketing in Iran. Perceived Authenticity was categorized into three main themes: emotional, sensational, and rational.

Keywords: Authenticity, Cultural Destination, Destination Image, Marketing, Tourism

Introduction

Understanding the process of choosing a tourist destination is of substantial importance for governments and tourism organizations in today's competitive arena across the globe. The reason is that destination should distinguish itself from other contenders desirably and appropriately and should positively place itself in customers' minds. One of the key contributors to this placement process is the perception of local authenticities and creating a distinct and attractive image of the destination (Kozak, 2001, p.20). Since the advent of the Internet, which has led to profound changes in disseminating tourist perceptions of tourism destinations (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Mariani, 2014; Parra-Meron˜o, Beltra'n-Bueno & Padilla-Piernas, 2017), written and visual electronic resources have had a huge impact on obtaining primary information to extract perceived authenticity of destinations and consequently on creating proper destination images. A key element in the process of destination placement is the creation and administration of a distinct and different image of the destination; thus, special attention should be paid to the fact that successful marketing would not be capable of attracting customers to the competitive advantages of a destination unless it can provide an appealing destination image (Kuzak, 2002, p.21).

In the past, the transmission of experiences took place solely through a spoken or written account of events and occurrences known as *verbal advertisements* or *word of mouth* (Grewal, Comer & Mehta, 2001; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Westbrook, 1987). Since the Internet-based

communicative system represents customers' perceptions after using the products and services (Bone, 1995), it gradually entered the field of tourism and turned into one of the fundamental mechanisms to the study of customer preferences (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Richins, 1983).

With the advancement and enhancement of the role of the virtual sphere, this system evolved and adapted to the *Electronic Word of Mouth* (eWoM), which is not limited to the comments from family and friends and encompasses other users' attitudes and perceptions. This one-to-one communication is based on online comments, rankings, and recommendations made by people worldwide. This evolution occurred not only in the mode of communication (from analog to digital) but also in the number of people who have access to the data (from limited individuals to countless users) (Gutiérrez, Parra, & González, 2014). Furthermore, in the new format, long-term permanence is sustained; that is, users can constantly refer to other users' comments (Meliaín-González, Bulchand-Gidumal, & González López-Valcarcel, 2013). Hence, destination marketers should observe the content generated in virtual platforms to determine the destination images and improve or enhance them to increase the competitiveness of the destination image.

Moreover, since customers think that the information shared by other users is authentic, non-profit-making, and not under the control or influence of the companies (Gutiérrez et al., 2014), they find those data more valid and relevant compared to the information provided by other sources or by official websites presenting the product (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Meliaín-González et al., 2013; Parra-Merono et al., 2017). This new approach legitimized the product users' experiences and made their experiences a worthwhile tool to identify tourists' intersensory destination images in marketing research.

Regarding the Iranian context, to increase tourist mobility, perceived authenticity should also be explored thoroughly, and the resulting data needed to be considered in creating a new communication format. A glance at the literature shows that authenticity may be the most relevant concept, which could be achieved by studying tourist perception. Authenticity is one of the basic characteristics that make a society unique and distinguishable from other societies. Perceived authenticity as a criterion of product quality and an essential contributing factor in customer satisfaction has attracted remarkable significance in heritage tourism (Chandralal, 2013). It has been categorized as objective, structural, and existential (Wang, 1999). Authenticity has a vital

role as a marketing device in visualizing attraction and motivation in the contemporary era.

With 26 registered sites in the National Heritage List up to 2021 (including 23 historical and heritage sites), Iran should be a name to conjure as a cultural destination in the realm of tourism. Thus, identifying tourist perception of local authenticities may tremendously assist the administrative and policy-making plans to live up to that potential.

The main assumption in the present research is that identifying tourist perceptions of cultural destinations in Iran may demonstrate the distinctiveness of Iran as a cultural destination from its similar counterparts and since tourists typically trust other people's ideas, perceptions, and comments and use that information in their travel plans, this may help decision-makers to define a proper destination image. Therefore, the leading research question of the study is as follows:

RQ: What are the perceived authenticities regarding the formation of Iran's image as a cultural destination?

Literature Review

According to the literature, the destination image is a new and exciting opportunity for future studies because it has a remarkable effect on customer choices. The most common method for assessing images has been *content analysis based on tourists' perception authenticity*, which is obtained from textual and visual data, a need for an exploratory approach. Nowadays, social media websites that encompass different kinds of content generated by customers (CGC) have gained great momentum in studying tourist experiences. Therefore, eWOM has turned into a critical element in the rankings of online agencies and has become a source of influence on consumption behavior.

Table 1. Summary of Previous Research Findings

Authors and Year of Publication	Findings
Akehurst, 2009; Liu, 2005	The Internet and social media have raised questions about marketing, distribution avenues, improvement of business management, and research on efficient marketing in the tourism industry.
Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006	Customers' interactions in different platforms have social (commitment to societies) and economic (beneficial expenses) values for them.
Bickart & Schindler, 2001	The importance of eWOM is not restricted to searching for other users' comments; instead, eWOM has turned into a critical element in the rankings of online agencies and has become a source of influence on consumption behavior.
Sparks & Browning, 2011	Negative eWOM in quantitative rankings is more frequent in the fields because customers share their dissatisfaction more often, although this effect decreases with new positive comments.
Buhalis & Law, 2008; Choi et al., 2007; Pabel & Prideaux, 2016	In recent years, the Internet has become an important searching tool for searching tourist experiences across the world.

Authors and Year of Publication	Findings
Xiang & Gretzel, 2010	Social media websites that encompass different kinds of content generated by customers (CGC) have gained great momentum in studying tourist experiences.
Migue´ns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008	The second generation of web-based services, including customers’ generated content, allows tourists to share their information.
Boulding, 1956	Image utterly affects human behavior. After these discussions, marketers attached high importance to images of products, services, and agencies themselves from the customers’ points of view.
Wang, 1999	Wang believes that <i>authenticity</i> is what is perceived from the destination in heritage tourism and is connected to various attractions such as cultural, historical, and ethnic attractions because it occurs through the representation of others or the history.
Rodrigues, Correia, & Kozak, 2011	With regard to the tourism destination image, there is a need for an exploratory approach because the image is a concept generated by multiple disciplines with a variety of different insights.
Correia & Kozak, 2010	According to the literature, the destination image is a new and exciting opportunity for future studies because it has a remarkable effect on customer choices.
Feighey, 2003	Feighey emphasizes the vital role of visual elements research in tourism and states that the conspicuous theoretical and methodological space between researcher-found images and researcher-generated images provides opportunities for tourism researchers to propose alternative approaches to tourism studies.
Banks, 2007	The study of images or visual data can provide us with new insights and perspectives that cannot otherwise be achieved.

Authors and Year of Publication	Findings
Albers & James, 1988; Govers & Go, 2005	The most common method in the assessment of images has been <i>content analysis</i> based on motifs and themes.
Beerli & Martin, 2004	There are two most popular official approaches to the study of images: <i>content analysis</i> and <i>semiotic analysis</i> . Content analysis has been used in media studies for many years, especially in visual media.
Rodrigues, 2017; Rodrigues & Costa, 2018	In general, two major dimensions could be recognized in the appreciation of visual elements. The first dimension is the creation of images (visual data) such as videos, photos, or drawings generated by the researcher to document or analyze aspects of social life and social communication. The researcher takes notes from their observations and uses them to analyze the visual elements. The second dimension is the collection and the study of the generated or used/observed images by research subjects. In this case, the project is more <i>visual</i> , and there is a personal and social relationship between the images and the subjects under study.
Ranjbarian, Ghaffari, & Taslimi Baboli, 2019	The brand's mental image is classified into three emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. The sociocultural, economic, sanitary, and political perceived risk has meaningful effects on the desire to revisit the destination with a mediating role of the destination's behavioral, cognitive, and emotional image.
Hamidizadeh, Ghareche, Hadizadeh, & Salimipour, 2017	Word of mouth has a noticeable influence on tourists' mental image (cognitive, psychological, emotional, and individual) and consequently on their intention to travel.
Taghipourian, Yazdani, & Aghaifar, 2019	Destination image impacts the desire to revisit and the desire to recommend the destination to others.

Conceptual framework

Since services such as tourism cannot be tested before use, the mental images of these services are of paramount importance. Tourism destination image is formed as a result of the accumulation of a body of tourist perceptions and interpretations about a tourism destination. Perhaps that is the reason why some authors acknowledge that destination image plays a prominent role in tourists' decision to travel to a destination and desire to revisit that (Amrollahi & Nazari, 2015, p.229). Destination image as a crucial marketing concept in the tourism industry has attracted much scholarly attention. Findings from research relating to destination image help marketers recognize the strengths and drawbacks of destination and create insights into providing better products and extending the products (Chen & Tsai, 2007, p.1171). The mental image is influenced by the accumulation of perceptions of tourists who have previously traveled to a destination and shared these perceptions with others. As a criterion of product quality and a contributing factor in customer satisfaction, perceived authenticity is an essential concept in heritage tourism (Chandralal, 2013). Various interpretations of authenticity for understanding tourist experiences have been put forth in tourism studies (Brown, 2013, p.177; Mura, 2015, p.228). Authenticity is not confined to physical objects; instead, it refers to artifacts, routine lifestyle, and recreational, religious, or cultural activities. Authenticity is a multidimensional structure that considers the concept of value as an exchange between two variables of quality and price is too simplistic (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). For instance, Korean (2004, p.209) considers brand, cost, and risk to constitute elements of restaurant business perception. Also, Burton (2011) found that satisfaction from recreational services was a function of affective and cognitive assessments, with the difference that affective assessments were more predominant. Leisure-time activities like tourism need to pay attention to tourists' imaginations, affections, and emotions to explain the tourist shopping behavior. A great deal of tourism products have symbolic meanings beyond their tangible characteristics, such as quality and price, and affective benefits can influence customer decision (Ranjbarian et al., 2019, p.212). This influence comes from various communication channels, one of which is the word of mouth, Interactions, comments, or unofficial perceptions of customers exchanged with friends or relatives in using certain products or services (Grewal, Comer, & Mehta, 2001; Litvin et al., 2008; Westbrook, 1987).

Research Method and Sampling:

Since the objectives of this study are applied in nature, *thematic analysis* was adopted. This method is well-established in qualitative research and is a technique to understand, analyze, and report the existing patterns within qualitative data in such a way that it turns scattered and varying data into rich and detailed data (Brown, 2006 as cited in Abedi, Taslimi, Faghihi, & Sheikhzadeh, 2011).

The specific technique used in this study is *thematic network analysis*. In this technique, the deepest layers of phenomena are extracted from the text (basic themes). Next, basic themes are classified and summarized into more abstract and distinct principles (organizing themes). In the third step, those transcendent themes are emerged into fundamental metaphors and develop into comprehensive themes that preside over the whole text (global themes) (Rabbani & Rabbani, 2014, p.19).

In this research, the two widely-used websites by tourists, namely *TripAdvisor*¹ and *Flickr*², were used to collect the preliminary data on keywords and expressions. Up to 537 comments made by foreign tourists about Iran's most important tourism destinations were collected, and recurrent expressions about each cultural tourist attraction site were written down. In fact, this investigation aimed to describe the perceived authenticity regarding Iran's cultural tourist attraction sites. Categorizations were based on controlled analysis. The extraction of concepts and themes was done according to the study's objectives, an approach which "summarizes the theme of a text into a word or a short phrase" (GO & Govers, 2020, p.129). With reference to Gibbs' (2007) postulation that codification may add interpretation and theory to the data, especially when the researcher is inclined to propose new justifications and theories, a step-by-step formulation of deductive subcategories within the data was also carried out.

In the next stage, since a part of the data was in the visual format, the visual analysis method was employed. In analyzing the images, regarding the fact that the visual sphere, social media, and visual content have created a new form of images, visual image analysis was used as an approach to transmit the destination experience. Therefore, experiential images in the pictures were

1. <https://www.tripadvisor.com/attractions-g293998-activities-Iran.html>
2. <https://www.flickr.com>

considered the experiential element based on the tourist's personal experience of the destination, which is the tourist's reaction to their environment.

The method utilized to perform image analysis was *thematic analysis*, which was primarily invented to deduce oral and written texts. Thematic analysis of images was conducted following Rose's (2016) four-stage approach. In the first stage, 'finding the images,' images corresponding to the posed research question are selected. In this study, the corresponding images were images of Iran posted by tourists on TripAdvisor and Flickr websites, which were used to collect meaning and perception about Iran as a tourism destination. Using other resources was also possible, but this technique was selected because it was more convenient and *authentic*. At this stage, a question pops up (Rose, 2016): "Which content is more relevant to your research questions?". To manage the visual data and use clustered sampling (pictures were classified into clusters in terms of the type of attraction), purposive sampling was also employed (Coyne, 1997) because the aim of the study in this respect is exploratory.

The second stage is the 'codification of images,' which is done after selecting the sample pictures. To this end, various categories and classes are defined for images. Codification is the process of defining descriptive labels for the images. In this study, a descriptive codification was used (yan, 2020). Then, motifs were listed according to the type of attraction. The content analysis was merely qualitative rather than quantitative (evaluation of frequencies) in our study. Here, our purpose was to study the motifs (objects or appearances) in each picture.

In the third stage, or the 'interpretation of results, the goal was to identify the type of listed motifs in each picture according to attraction type and to accomplish the textual analysis through this image analysis.

This technique introduced by Vaughan and Edwards (1999) in the experiential domain of tourism destinations could be used for the analysis of visual content such as pictures because they are unique representations of perceptions, values, and experiences of tourists. Hence, the Flickr website was chosen by scrutinizing various websites, evaluation classifications, and tourist popularity and references. Most frequent pictures taken by tourists from historical destinations were selected and presented in an interpretative expression. After collection, a holistic approach was used to generate and analyze the data via the content analysis technique for visual and textual data.

Research Validity and Reliability:

Most qualitative studies have used the criterion of '*trustworthiness*' rather than quantitative reliability and validity measures to refer to the evaluation of qualitative data. Trustworthiness, in simple terms, is the extent to which one can rely on the findings of a study and can trust their outcomes (Mohammadpour, 2013). This criterion consists of four different criteria. Three criteria of credibility and confirmability, analysis triangulation, which is a recent criterion in qualitative research, were drawn upon in this study.

Credibility relates to the extent that research findings are believable (Mohammadpour, 2013, p.184). Researcher's long-term involvement with the data, that is, sufficient time investment in understanding the research topic and compatibility and correlation of data, are among the factors that contribute to the credibility of the research. This criterion was considered and put on record in the present study. A precise specification of research design and limiting the research population prove this claim.

On the other hand, confirmability refers to the '*qualitative objectivity*' of research reports in such a way that the researcher has to show that their findings are practically and truly based on the data (Mohammadpour, 2013, p.186). In this study, with respect to the developmental trend from tourist comments to basic, organizing, and global themes, the analysis of results and the research findings were based on conceptual and lexical requirements of research data.

Moreover, analysis triangulation involves using more than one researcher (i.e., analysis) to scrutinize and review the research findings (Mohammadpour, 2013, p.192). In the current study, more than one researcher was involved in the principles and procedures of the research. Besides, the research was conducted under the direct supervision of a supervisor professor as the study leader.

Findings of the Study

The present study was exploratory. The underlying assumption was that perceptions about Iranian cultural heritage could demonstrate the distinctiveness of Iran as a cultural destination from similar destinations. Since tourists trust other people's accounts, experiences, ideas, perceptions, and comments and use those impressions in their travel plans, this endeavor may help decision-makers define proper destination images from Iran.

Following a codification procedure with a deductive approach, categories were combined to identify the types of destination perceptions, and tourists' perceptions of cultural destination were extracted. Global themes of cultural attractions were classified as emotional, sensational, and rational. The definition of each category in the field of heritage is as follows:

'Emotional perception': tourists' emotions during their heritage experience.

'Sensational perception': meanings are drawn from primary sensory input such as aesthetic evaluation (vision) and heritage experiences (multiple senses).

'Rational perception': meanings are taken out of psychological or rational interactions with heritage.

In the realm of cultural heritage, identifying perceived authenticity from tourists' viewpoints and using them to establish the destination is of crucial importance. For example, the recurrence of the civilizational and historical glory of Persepolis indicates that this characteristic has to be highlighted in the marketing and advertisement of this site, both in visual and textual configurations of the destination brand. Likewise, the Historic City of Yazd has to be introduced by its exquisite historical scenery.

Table 2. Perceived Authenticities of Destination

Basic Theme	Historical Site	Number	Organizing Theme	Global Theme
Poor guidance, lack of road signs, and lack of professional guide	Persepolis 6 Atashgah 5	11	Legibility of route signs	Rational
High Prices: Separate tickets for different sections of Persepolis, In the sites where some sections are closed, the entrance price is not worth it, Obligatory payment for open space sites, More expensive tickets for tourists Economical Prices: Low-budget tickets in Palaces and Negarestan Garden, Economical prices in Vank Cathedral and museums	Persepolis 3 Golestan Palace 3 Negarestan Garden 2 Shah Mosque 1 Atashgah 5 Ali Qapu 11 Chehel Sotoun 3 Vank Cathedral 1	30	Price	
Knowledgeable, well-informed, conscientious, punctual, fluent in the language, responsible beyond duty	Persepolis 10 National Museum of Iran 2 Isfahan Music Museum 3 Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque 2 The Achaemenid Museum 5 Golestan Palace 1	23	Satisfaction with the tour leader	
Atashgah: difficult to access Negarestan Garden: easy access National Museum of Iran: close to subway	Atashgah (difficult) 4 National Museum of Iran 2 (reasonable distance from the subway) Negarestan Garden 3	9	Accessibility	

<p>Persepolis: vast information about Iranian lifestyle in ancient times, especially Achaemenians Music Room in Ali Qapu: quite interesting information about music and Iranian musical systems (Dastgah) Yazd Water Museum: good education about elaborate equipment used to extract groundwater and traditional underground aqueducts called 'Qanats.' National Museum of Iran: becoming familiar with the ancient Iranian art and culture Yazd Silence Tower: Zarathustra's manifestations, familiarity with Zoroastrianism Borujerdi House: getting acquainted with Iranian hospitality Amir Chakhmaq: Nakhil-gardani tradition and other religious rituals Kermanshah Bazaar: gaining knowledge about medicinal plants</p>	<p>The Achaemenid Museum 19 Music Room in Ali Qapu 13 Music Museum 12 Yazd Water Museum 21 Amir Chakhmaq 3 Kermanshah Arcade Bazaar 3 Fin Garden 3 National Museum of Iran 4 Armenian Museum (Vank) 5 Yazd Silence Tower 1 Borujerdi House 7 Kermanshah Bazaar (Kurdish Culture) 1</p>	<p>93</p>	<p>Learning</p>	
<p>Golestan Palace: uninteresting with obsolete furniture Yazd Water Museum: insufficient information Niavaran Palace Complex: not glorious National Museum of Iran: dull and boring</p>	<p>Golestan Palace 1 National Museum of Iran 1 Yazd Water Museum 5 Achaemenid Museum 3 Niavaran Palace Complex 2</p>	<p>12</p>	<p>Satisfaction with the attraction</p>	

<p>Persepolis and Chehel Sotoun: architecture masterpiece Golestan Palace: beauty and genius of architecture Tughrul Tower: breathtaking architecture and its peculiar solar clock Shah Mosque in Isfahan: the climax of Iranian architecture Historic City of Yazd: outstanding and spectacular</p>	<p>Persepolis 7 Ali Qapu 11 Chehel Sotoun 12 National Museum of Iran 34 Golestan Palace 33 Tughrul Tower 8 Vank Cathedral 3 Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque 21 Abbasi Great Mosque 50 Khaju Bridge 13 Amir Chakhmaq Complex 8 The Achaemenid Museum 8 Historic City of Yazd 17 Yazd Great Mosque 8 Sultan Amir Ahmad Bathhouse 6 Tekyeh Moaven al-molk 18 Silence Tower 7</p>	258	Glory of Architecture	Sensational
<p>Ali Qapu: a historically glorious place Chehel Sotoun: uniqueness of historical symbols and signs Jame'a Mosque of Isfahan: historical and religious glory Achaemenid Museum: a place to learn the history Jame'a Mosque of Yazd: an outstanding indication of history Tekyeh Moaven al-molk: a sense of involvement in history and religion</p>	<p>Persepolis 19 Ali Qapu 5 Chehel Sotoun 5 Atashgah 6 National Museum of Iran 12 Tughrul Tower 6 Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque 6 Shah Mosque 2 Jame'a Mosque of Isfahan 12 Yazd Silence Tower 8 Achaemenid Museum 4 Jame'a Mosque of Yazd 3 Tekyeh Moaven al-molk 7 Taq-e Bostan 6</p>	101	The glory of Iranian- Islamic history	

<p>Persepolis: beauty and glory of impeccable engravings; the beauty of Iranian cities Amir Chakhmaq Complex: the best place for night photography Historic City of Yazd: the beauty of this place and beautiful photography of the arched roofs Bisotun: Integration of history and art, impeccable engravings with minimum equipment Ali Qapu: the shining jewel of Isfahan's beauty Fin Garden, Chehel Sotoun Garden, Negarestan Garden: the most beautiful gardens ever Sultan Amir Ahmad Bathhouse: decoration and composition of elements Borujerdi House: radiating and vivacious colors, legendary decoration and innovation Yazd Silence Tower: the beauty of the sky Isfahan Shah Mosque: amazing tile work Naghsh-e-Jahan Square, Historic City of Yazd, and Kermanshah Arcade Bazaar: beautiful shops</p>	<p>Persepolis 30 Ali Qapu 10 Tughrul Tower 2 Abbasi Great Mosque 12 Yazd Silence Tower 10 Amir Chakhmaq Complex 19 Historic City of Yazd 25 Fin Garden 16 Kermanshah Arcade Bazaar 3 Taq-e Bostan 2 Atashgah 8 Khaju Bridge 11 Sultan Amir Ahmad Bathhouse dome roof 14 Chehel Sotoun 11 Negarestan Garden 8 Borujerdi House 9 Beautiful ancient shops 30 Niavaran Palace Complex 3</p>	<p>221</p>	<p>Beauty</p>	
<p>Vank Cathedral: extraordinary paintings of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary on the walls Chehel Sotoun: the delicacy of mural artworks Tekyeh Moaven al-molk: the tile work is like a history picture book Negarestan Garden: the delicacy of wall paintings Taq-e Bostan: embossed wall art is like a beautiful animation</p>	<p>Chehel Sotoun 17 National Museum of Iran 3 Niavaran Palace Complex 1 Negarestan Garden 2 Vank Cathedral 8 Tekyeh Moaven al-molk 6 Persepolis 2 Taq-e Bostan 1 Shah Mosque 10 Fin Garden 8 Sultan Amir Ahmad Bathhouse 5 Golestan Palace 14 Tekyeh Moaven al-molk 5</p>	<p>82</p>	<p>The glory of Iranian Art</p>	

<p>Chehel Sotoun: Gaz and Poolaki with cardamom tea Negarestan Garden: Delicious Iranian comestibles Kermanshah Arcade Bazaar: the scent of medicinal plants and spices, as well as cookies Isfahan Music Museum: enjoy the coffee Iran is like a big kitchen</p>	<p>Chehel Sotoun 7 Golestan Palace 10 Negarestan Garden 8 Isfahan Music Museum 3 Kermanshah Arcade Bazaar 7 Amir Chakhmaq 1 Borujerdi House 1</p>	37	Delicious Comestibles	
<p>Persepolis: a mysterious place Tughrul Tower: a sense of enigma Yazd Silence Tower: a sense of fear of the unknown Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque: a sense of mystery</p>	<p>Persepolis 2 Tughrul Tower 1 Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque 1 Yazd Silence Tower 5</p>	9	Mysteriousness	
<p>Persepolis: traveling to the past life of Iranian people Atashgah: a sense of connectedness to the people who built it Ali Qapu Palace Porch: traveling back to the Safavid era Vank Cathedral: affinity with the Armenians who have been tyrannized and abused throughout history</p>	<p>Persepolis 3 Ali Qapu 5 Golestan Palace 4 Negarestan Garden 1 Vank Cathedral 3 Atashgah 1</p>	17	The feeling of Travel Through History	Emotional
<p>Khaju Bridge and Amir Chakhmaq Complex: speaking with people Historic City of Yazd: amicable interaction with people</p>	<p>Khaju Bridge 8 Historic City of Yazd 9 Amir Chakhmaq Complex 3</p>	20	A Place to Communicate with People	

<p>Isfahan Music Museum: the thrill of live music, learning to play, and cooperating in performances Khaju Bridge: the joy of dancing and singing</p>	<p>Isfahan Music Museum ^ Khaju Bridge 4</p>	<p>12</p>	<p>The Joy of Song and Music</p>
<p>Atashgah: the atmosphere of the mountain and the fire temple, a spiritual connection to the invisible world Yazd Silence Tower: weird and mysterious vibes Taq-e Bostan: pleasant and uplifting environment of the garden and its surrounding lake Khaju Bridge: the relaxing and tranquilizing peace of Iranian gardens Tekyeh Moaven al-molk: mental tension Sultan Amir Ahmad Bathhouse: eye-catching setting Borujerdi House: a love story</p>	<p>Atashgah 5 Tughrul Tower 1 Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque 3 Yazd Silence Tower 7 Borujerdi House 6 Tekyeh Moaven al-molk 4 Taq-e Bostan 6 Chehel Sotoun 1 Negarestan Garden 1 Jame'a Mosque of Isfahan 1 Khaju Bridge 5 Fin Garden 1</p>	<p>49</p>	<p>Impression of the Environment</p>
<p>Vank Cathedral: astonishment of such a place in an Islamic country Yazd Silence Tower: fear and amazement of the philosophy behind its architecture</p>	<p>Vank Cathedral 7 Yazd Silence Tower 6</p>	<p>14</p>	<p>Bewilderment</p>

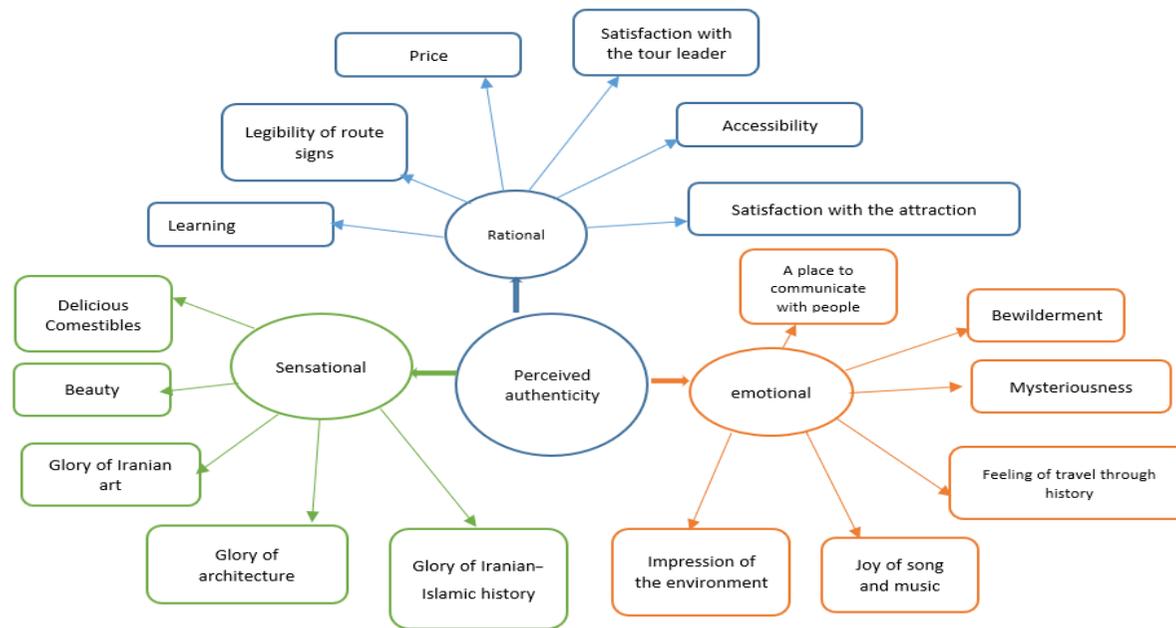


Figure 1. Thematic network of perceived authenticity in Iran cultural destinations

On the other hand, the analysis of global themes revealed that sensational perceptions were the most frequent type of perception. Therefore, in the portrayal of destinations, the keywords used to describe sensational perceptions have to be maneuvered more often in the visual and textual content generated to promote cultural destinations.

Since the narratives reported for each attraction are the first and foremost souvenirs that a tourist brings back home, those narratives can be used in social media (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TripAdvisor, etc.) as a beneficial means to promote destinations. The described charm and elegance in narratives can be utilized to stimulate visual appeal for the brand. Even the findings of this study could be applied to a single attraction.

Destination planners should enhance the positive points and overcome the drawbacks concerning rational perceptions. Overall, this research set out to investigate the perceptions of cultural destinations to identify the destination image and use it in destination branding in Iran.

Conclusion

Each tourism destination is an entity that is quite distinct from other destinations in terms of the unique circumstances of tourism and its particular characteristics. Before visiting a destination, tourists develop a mental image corresponding to their expectations based on previous experiences, word of mouth marketing, news reports, advertisements, and shared beliefs. In other words, they shape a mental image of the destination according to their logical and emotional interpretations. In this regard, marketing and branding techniques are strategies that build up on a positive destination image as an approach to make distinction and placement in customers' minds to make distinction and placement in the competitive environment.

Hence, this study attempted to employ thematic analysis of tourists' perceptions to leap forward in recognition of cultural destinations in Iran. A combination of visual and textual analysis was used to generate beneficial and significant information in branding Iran as a tourism destination.

Like any other piece of research, the current study might be limited in some respects. Since the thematic analysis was exploratory, the analysis was somewhat based on subjective judgments. Even though 537 texts and 102 pictures were analyzed, the findings may likely have not encompassed all the tourist perceptions of Iranian heritage comprehensively. In some cases, tour leaders' ideas served to persuade and attract tourists for a tour but, for the sake

of commitment to empiricism, only the foreign tourists' ideas were taken into account. Sometimes, these parts were very repetitive and had a similar textual structure. Moreover, sample pictures and analyses do not represent all the tourists visiting Iran, although this is never the researcher's claim in qualitative research. In this study, the aim was mere to explore the meanings and perceptions for future studies. The unique feature of this article was to obtain the perceived authenticity of tourists based on eWOMs for Iranian cultural destinations by using the content analysis technique to explore meanings that might be involved in the image formation of Iran as a heritage destination that could help develop a brand in the future.

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