Testing Perceived Image of Iran among Foreign Tourists: Case Study of Isfahan

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Abstract: This research aims to examine the perceived image of Iran among foreign tourists. Research variables include infrastructure factors, cultural factors, environmental and natural factors, political factors, tourism facilities and factors, and economic factors. Descriptive-survey method was used to test hypotheses and answer to questions of research. Statistical population includes all foreign tourists who visit Isfahan. Statistical population size is 384. This research conducted in Isfahan. Researcher-constructed questionnaire was used to collect data. T-statistic test was used in this research. SPSS software was used in order to analyze collected data and to test research hypotheses. Findings show that research variables including cultural factors, environmental and natural factors, political factors, and economic factors are in good status.

Keywords: foreign tourists image, infrastructure factors, cultural factors, environmental and natural factors.

Introduction

Tourism industry is among world important industries with rapid growth in the development of world economy which directly and indirectly can affect other economic and cultural activities by making the highest added value(Stabler,1998). Making income and new job opportunities, promoting people life level, selling services, activity in tourism infrastructure, handicrafts, developing and improving infrastructure equipment of road axes, and transportation systems are considered as important economic effects of this rapid growth, such that many call tourism as world's first industry(Beerli, A. & Martin,2004). Countries can make income by preparing and making specific facilities and resources through different ways like agriculture, industry, and production(Buck E., . Paradise Remade,1993). Many countries are not in good position due to climate conditions, industrial and agriculture richness, and so on; however, all countries can make income through tourism(Cooper,1995). Many of developed countries and even developing countries have increased their national income through tourism. Tourism flow is an important tool in acquiring and introducing domestic productions and products to foreigners and as a result, develop and extend markets and making income (Saei, Naiji, and Rezaei, 2013). Economists call tourism invisible export. International studies and researches show that tourism is one of the most effective catalysts for activating and keeping small and medium businesses and has the ability to provide entrepreneurs with new opportunities for part-time and whole-time jobs which can achieve capital production return more rapidly than building industry and other industries with less negative effect on environment(Ebrahimi,2004). Today, tourism is converting to one of the main organs of world commercial economy and many of the planners and policymakers of development call tourism main pillar of sustainable development. This caused different countries try to use different solutions in developing tourism with regard to their natural, cultural, and historical capabilities and can attract investment flow and in addition, to provide employment and income can experience economic diversity with taking foreign exchange earnings and prepare ground for distributing national income and development of different sectors in international dimension by developing and extending tourism (Farzamnia, 2012). With regard to above discussion, current research examines perceived image of Iran as a tourist destination among foreign tourists. Current research is a case study among foreign tourists who visit Isfahan.

Research literature

In current research, tourism industry is considered as the biggest and most diverse industry in the world. Many countries consider this dynamic industry as the main source of income, employment, private sector growth, and infrastructure development, especially in developing countries wherein other forms of economy like production and extraction are not economic or don't have an important role in trade and commerce, much attention is paid to develop tourism industry(Ebrahimi,2004). For example, in adjacent countries there are real instances of tourism industry success. Turkey, for instance, is one of countries which is weaker than us in terms of underground and natural resources; however, it could promote its economic status in region with regard to tourism industry(Papeli Yazdi,2011). In current research, we try to examine perceived image of Iran as a tourist destination among foreign tourists. In other words, what is perception of foreign tourists about Iran's tourism (Madhoushi & Naserpour, 2012). Today, role of tourism industry as a tool for regional development is undeniable. In spite of broad income of this industry for many countries, our country has a little share. Our country can be a good tourist destination for attracting tourists with regard to climate conditions, monuments, and cultural diversity. This kind of historical-cultural tourism is exposed less at competitive threats, because products offered in it
remain unique and are not repeatable. Estimates of International Tourism Organization show that about 37% of travels belong to cultural tourism and this section will have 15% growth, annually (Richard, 1996). In another research, it was shown that 70% of American tourists are tourists of cultural heritages. Also, two thirds of tourists travel to England search for cultural heritages as part of their travel. About half of Americans who traveled locally in 1996 were in search of cultural aspects like visiting museums, art galleries, and other cultural items (Crain, 1998).

Decision to choose destination by tourist sometimes becomes conditional with regard to their perception of tourist destination image. Effect of tourist destination image has been considered in most of tourism decision-making models (Danaifar, H. Alvani, 2011). It is believed that tourism destinations which stronger positive images are chosen more. Of course, perhaps potential customer's perception of a tourist destination is very different from reality. What leads to choice of a customer is his/her perception of destination. Generally, market perception or perception of each one of potential customers is based on good or bad advertisement, experiences, knowledge, and awareness. Task of industrial managers of tourist destination is to study about perceived image of that tourist destination in different sections of market and take actions to make and maintain desirable market perception of that tourism destination, if necessary (Reza Qoli Zadeh, 2013). There is a broad consensus on effect of perceived image of a tourist destination on decision to travel to that destination. Tourist perception of a tourist destination image is defined as his/her perception or understanding of that place (Crompton, 1997). Some of other researchers see perceived image as a mental image of tourism destination. So, it is relational to suppose that perceived image affects tourist decision-making. Perceived image is a mental understanding from a reality which has obtained by tourist and affects his/her attitude and emotional or affective aspects. Having a precise definition of perceived image is very difficult, since its term has been used in different fields of psychology, behavioral sciences, marketing, and sociology. In psychology, perceived image refers to outward or visible image, while in behavioral discussions includes more aspects, like effects made, awareness, emotions, values, and believes about a special issue (Mercer, 1971). However, in marketing, image refers to characteristics which affect consumer behavior. Common definition of a tourist destination image in tourism texts was proposed by Crompton (1979). He defines perceived image of a tourist destination as follow: perceived image is a set of believes, opinions, and ideas which person has about a destination. This definition is at personal level but is generalizable to group level. It is very important to marketers to detect aspects of perceived image which are common in a market section. This allows dividing market to provide strategies suitable for each market section (Laws & Cooper, 1998). Lawson and Bad boy's definition of perceived image refers to both personal and group aspects. From their view, perceived image is argument of object knowledge, understandings, pre-judgements, perception, and emotional thoughts which a person or group has about a tourist destination (Beerli & Thomas, 2004). Perceived image may be an unreal or mental image of tourist destination but this mental image of tourist affects his/her choice (Mercer, 1971). Results of various research reveal that tourists' behavior sometimes becomes conditional by their perception of tourist destination image and effect of this is observable from beginning in stage of choosing travel destination. Therefore, reasons for choosing destination are not only justifiable by objective factors of environment (Johnson & Thomas, 1995). Thus, it is supposed that tourist destination or places which have strong positive image are chosen and/or attract more attention in decision-making process. Atlenoud & Armstrong (1996), Johnson & Thomas (1992), and Ritchi (1991) researches have referred to this issue. Perceived image has major effect on perceived quality of a tourism destination. Because it shapes what can be expected from a tourist destination before visiting a place. Each person perception of a tourist destination is special to him/her and consists of his/her memories, understandings, and perception of that place. Stabler divides factors affect shaping tourist perception of a tourism place image to supply and demand factors (Stabler, 1988). Affective factors of demand side include motivation, psychological characteristics, experiences and cultural-social characteristics of tourist; however, factors of supply side include destination reputation, marketing programs, and news and reports published about it. In Beerli and Martin's model, affective factors in shaping a tourist destination image has been classified to two classes: information resources and personal characteristics of tourist (Beerli et al, 2004). Information resources are considered as motivator or shaper factors of destination image. They are factors that affect shaping perceptions and assessments of tourist. Information resources means all different resources available to tourist including information obtained from visiting place (Reza Qoli Zadeh, 2013). Information resources can be divided to first and secondary information. First hand resources are resources which obtain from direct visiting of destination experience. Secondary or second hand resources include four resources; overt and covert encouraging, independent, and organic which obtain before visiting tourist destination and affect image. Overt encouraging resources are common advertisements of media and offer more by institutions related to tourism in destination or tour providers (Ranjbarian, B, 2012). However, reports from destination and/or articles presented are in covert encouraging resources class which can advertise unofficial and hide from destination. Free or independent resources include disseminating news, documents, films, television programs, and so on from different media. Organic resources are persons like friends and relatives of tourist and information obtained from tourism destinations which are based on knowledge or experience of person. This class of information is collected gradually through life (Beerli et al, 2004). Personal or internal factors also affect shaping image. Thus, perceived image is like a planned understanding of tourist destination and is shaped with regard to needs, motivations, previous knowledge, preferences, and other characteristics of tourist. Hunt (1975) states that perceived image sometimes is affected by distance from destination. Because persons more likely visit places near them and get information about it through magazines, friends, and relatives. He concludes that persons have stronger and more real perception of a tourist destination near to them (Hunt, 1975). Step by step theory of perceived image states that perceived image of a non-
tourist is very different from perceived image of a tourist who visited a tourist destination (Gunn, 1972). Of course, this claim has been confirmed by various researches, such as Chon (1992). Generally, traveled people have more real, sophisticated, and differentiated perception than others. However, Narayana (1976) found that perceived image of a tourist destination can change with time, especially if tourist disturbs his/her mind by visiting other similar places. Perhaps, great number of tourism organizations advertise about a tourism place but if some aspects are emphasized which are different or in contrast it will have few influence. Laws (1991) stated that how Hawaii islands as volcanic or orchids’ islands can be a visiting place for tourists. Many of responsible persons in tourism affairs make decisions about products mix and target markets combination. This requires providing conditions that can meet changing needs and tastes of tourists and affect tourists’ decisions (Laws & Cooper, 1998). Strategic methods are increasingly entering to tourism planning and when considering decision to choose product and market, are very effective. Strategic planning of tourism market provides an effective framework to study and examine all aspects of subject. This process of choosing target makes a general idea for investors in tourism and makes it targeted. Manner of strategic planning leads to close cooperation between public and commercial units and provides mean for innovation and creativity for these organizations. Adapting this manner requires precise determination of duties and responsibilities (Laws & Cooper, 1998). With regard to importance of foreign tourists' perception who visit Iran and its role and influence on developing tourism and increasing travel of tourists to Iran, this research is conducted to examine perceived image of Iran as a tourist destination among foreign tourists as a case study in Isfahan.

Research methodology
This research is applied and descriptive-survey. To collect data about research literature and background, library study was done. Researcher-constructed questionnaire was used to collect information. Statistical population includes all foreign tourists of Isfahan. Because statistical population size was considered infinite, with regard to infinite statistical population, sample size selected 384 based on Morgan's table. Sampling method is based on availability. Questionnaires were distributed among statistical population and after they were completed and collected, obtained data were analyzed by SPSS software and T-statistic test for testing research hypotheses and answering research questions. Model used in current research was adopted from model used by Martin et al (2014).

![Figure 1. Conceptual model of research (Martin et al, 2004).](image)

Research hypotheses
Main hypothesis
Perceived image of Iran among foreign tourists is in good status.
Secondary hypotheses
Foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan infrastructure factors is in good status.
Foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan cultural factors is in good status.
Foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan tourism facilities and factors is in good status.
Foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan environmental and natural factors is in good status.
Foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan political factors is in good status.
Foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan economic factors is in good status.
Research findings
In this section, we test hypotheses and answer questions of research by t-test.

Testing first hypothesis: foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan cultural factors is in good status.

Table 4.1. One sample t-test was used to test first hypothesis and findings are shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Difference of mean</th>
<th>Upper and down limits of 95% confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural factors</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>3.754</td>
<td>12.102</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.253</td>
<td>1.219 - 1.257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1. Findings of one sample t-test for Testing effect of foreign tourists' perception on quality of Isfahan cultural factors.

According to table, since calculated T (12.102) is more than table T (1.96) and calculated significance level is less than 0.05 and because calculated mean (3.753) is more than standard mean (3), we conclude that foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan cultural factors is in good status.

Testing second hypothesis: foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan tourism facilities and factors is in good status.

Table 4.2. One sample t-test was used to test second hypothesis and findings are shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Difference of mean</th>
<th>Upper and down limits of 95% confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilities factors</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>2.341</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.2411</td>
<td>0.2011 - 0.2811</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2. Findings of one sample t-test for Testing effect of foreign tourists' perception on quality of Isfahan tourism facilities and factors.

According to table, with regard to that calculated T (-1.8) is less than table T (1.96) and that calculated significance level is more than 0.05, we conclude that foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan cultural factors is not in good status.

Testing third hypothesis: foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan infrastructure factors is in good status.

Table 4.3. One sample t-test was used to test third hypothesis and findings are shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Difference of mean</th>
<th>Upper and down limits of 95% confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure factors</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>2.415</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
<td>0.0321</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.3159</td>
<td>0.2742 - 0.3578</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3. Findings of one sample t-test for Testing effect of foreign tourists' perception on quality of Isfahan infrastructure factors.

According to table, with regard to that calculated T (-1.3) is less than table T (1.96) and that calculated significance level is more than 0.05, we conclude that foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan infrastructure factors is not in good status.

Testing fourth hypothesis: foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan’s environmental and natural factors is in good status.

Table 4.4. One sample t-test was used to test fourth hypothesis and findings are shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Difference of mean</th>
<th>Upper and down limits of 95% confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental factors</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>3.736</td>
<td>14.825</td>
<td>0.3737</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.2326</td>
<td>1.1988 - 1.2738</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4. Findings of one sample t-test for Testing effect of foreign tourists' perception on quality of Isfahan environmental and natural factors.
According to table, with regard to that calculated T (14.825) is more than table T (1.96) and that calculated significance level is less than 0.05 and because calculated mean (3.736) is more than standard mean (3), we conclude that foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan environmental and natural factors is in good status.

Testing fifth hypothesis: foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan’s political factors is in good status.

Table 4.5. One sample t-test was used to test fifth hypothesis and findings are shown in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Difference of mean</th>
<th>Upper and down limits of 95% confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political factors</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>3.707</td>
<td>15.112</td>
<td>0.5243</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.207</td>
<td>1.154 - 1.259</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5. Findings of one sample t-test for Testing effect of foreign tourists' perception on quality of Isfahan political factors.

According to table, with regard to that calculated T (15.112) is more than table T (1.96) and that calculated significance level is less than 0.05 and because calculated mean (3.707) is more than standard mean (3), we conclude that foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan political factors is in good status.

Testing sixth hypothesis: foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan’s economic factors is in good status.

Table 4.6. One sample t-test was used to test sixth hypothesis and findings are shown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Difference of mean</th>
<th>Upper and down limits of 95% confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic factors</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>3.688</td>
<td>13.106</td>
<td>0.4009</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.1888</td>
<td>1.1486 - 1.2290</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6. Findings of one sample t-test for Testing effect of foreign tourists' perception on quality of Isfahan economic factors.

According to table, with regard to that calculated T (13.106) is more than table T (1.96) and that calculated significance level is less than 0.05 and because calculated mean (3.688) is more than standard mean (3), we conclude that foreign tourists' perception of quality of Isfahan economic factors is in good status.

Testing main hypothesis: perceived image of Iran among foreign tourists is in good status.

Table 4.7. One sample t-test was used to test main hypothesis and findings are shown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Difference of mean</th>
<th>Upper and down limits of 95% confidence level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived factors</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>3.749</td>
<td>13.242</td>
<td>0.3342</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.2491</td>
<td>1.2156 - 1.2827</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.7. Results of one sample t-test for testing effect of perceived image of Iran among foreign tourists.

According to table, with regard to that calculated T (13.242) is more than table T (1.96) and that calculated significance level is less than 0.05 and because calculated mean (3.749) is more than standard mean (3), we conclude that perceived image of Iran among foreign tourists is in good status.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Having correct awareness of tourists' interests and their attitude toward tourism destinations facilities and possibilities is the necessity to control or manage perceived image of a tourism destination. A positive attitude and/or perceive a good image determines a good status of tourist destination in mind of a market section. It means that this tourist destination is different from similar ones. If managers and responsible persons of tourism industry don't provide tourists with required information through appropriate communication channels, they can't control perceived image of destination from market. Lack of enough information about attractive places of a tourist destination hinders planning by tourists and
choosing appropriate strategy to control perceived image of destination by managers. In addition, small businesses are made in each tourist destination which their performance directly affects tourism industry sometimes contradiction of public and private organizations goals which have activity in tourism industry and lack of professional knowledge hinders advancement of tourism industry in destination. Lack of coordination and control of commercial activities in tourism industry hinders adapting strategic method which makes a special identity for tourism destination. Thus, such tourist destination will not have a certain and efficient message which reveal values of that tourist destination for related market. Small organizations don't have the ability to advertise and promote their tourist region. Generally, organizations which are member of International Trade Organization have this ability. International airways and hotels which are in international markets are examples of this case. Because hotels and airways offer the most services in this field and have relationship with different markets, have the most effectiveness power. With regard to this discussion, we present some recommendations to improve tourism status in mentioned regions.

Holding cultural exhibitions to promote positive perception of tourists of Iran culture.

Presenting and introducing handicrafts and cultural products special to Iran, use tourists as cultural messengers which in turn promotes tourism.

Offer high quality services to tourists to grant their future travels.

Try to provide good and appropriate services.

Government should try to do good investments in country infrastructure to promote tourism, like developing roads, airways, rails, services related to habitations such as hotels.

Government should pass acts to promote private sector partnership in investing in tourism infrastructure.

Government should try to provide basis for growth by good policy-making in terms of facilitation in visa, target markets, developing rural tourism, instructing human force, and so on, supporting private sector, investing in habitation and infrastructure and security, and also monitoring performance of organs acting in private and public sectors.

Try to introduce good and attractive environmental factors in Iran to tourists.

Preparing an atlas of natural places which have capability to attract foreign tourists and providing it for tourists.

Try to maintain political consistency so that tourists fell security and political consistency.

With regard to high power of money of most tourists, it is recommended that offer good and appropriate services with regard to amount of money received from them.

Determine target stores which are suitable in terms of quality, quantity, and price and recommend them to tourists.

Try to keep costs rates for tourists constant and without change.

Government should take good actions to improve and promote quality of cultural factors.

Do private and public investments to improve ad promote quality of tourism factors and facilities.

Government should act to improve and promote quality of infrastructure factors and promote quality of environmental and natural factors.

Government should take good policies to improve and promote quality of political and economic factors.

References


