

THE EVALUATION OF TOURISM DESTINATION BRAND EQUITY FROM THE FEMALE TOURIST'S PERSPECTIVES (STUDY OF 16 CITIES IN IRAN)

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Abstract: Despite the surge in interest in research on tourism destinations, little attention has been paid to investigating and comparing destination brand equity that implies conceptualizing how tourists evaluate a destination brand is complex. This study examined empirical information to compare and identify the status of destination brand assets of 16 Iranian cities. In recent years feminist tourism is largely neglected in Iran, accordingly the present study aims at evaluating the status of the tourism destination brand equity from the female tourists' perspective in several cities in Gilan province, northern Iran. The statistical population of the study consists of the total number of female tourists visiting different cities in Gilan province. However, regarding the large statistical population, the sample size was determined using random sampling and 380 female tourists were chosen from the population. Since women tend to be more precise and accurate than men in visual fields and accordingly in evaluating a destination, we decided to use a female population in this study. Data were collected by questionnaires measuring variables such as awareness, mental image, perceived quality and loyalty. The data analysis were conducted using SPSS through cluster analysis and logistic regression tests. The results indicate that the status of the tourism destination brand equity in this region is promising; besides, the image of brand was the most influential and the dimension of loyalty was the least influential in promoting the tourism destination brand equity in this region.

Key words: Tourism Destination, Tourists, Brand Equity, Gilan Province's Cities, Iran

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry as a young and unique section of industry has dominated a significant part of the economic and non-economic activities in the developed and developing countries. The industry has many benefits for communities, including job creation, deployment of economic capital and to promoting political legitimacy (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013; Nunkoo, 2015; Hesam et al., 2016; Saarinen, 2006). Creating and strengthening brand for tourism destinations is of great importance in the long-term success of tourism (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998; Caldwell & Freire, 2004). Therefore, one of the main goals of managers and destination marketing experts is to increase their revenues and other benefits of this growing global industry through destinations branding (Gretzel et al., 2006). Keller (2003) states using brands to differentiate products is a strong competitive marketing strategy, and Buhalis (2000) believes that utilizing brand in service industries such as tourism has more efficiency in comparison with manufacturing industries. Probably the increasing attention to branding services, including tourism, during the recent decades is an evidence of this trend. According to Gursoy & McCleary (2004), the decisions of tourists is highly influenced by the destination brands. In fact, these brands are providing information identifying the destination and differentiating them from other competitors, as well as forming tourists' expectations from the upcoming travel (Murphy et al., 2007). As a result, tourism destination branding is one of the key aspects of destinations brand management and include many advantages (Kozma, 2010). However, note that many marketing researchers such as Kotler & Gertner (2002) believe that the principles of product branding are not directly applicable to services branding. Konecnik & Gartner (2007) has posed this question that, can the concept of tangible goods and products brand be utilized for tourism destinations? Gursoy & McCleary (2004), argue despite some similarities between the two mentioned concepts, they are evidently distinct. Subsequently, there is no generally accepted framework for evaluating the tourism destination brands, due to their specific complexities (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). However, the concept of brand equity of tourism destinations contains most of the significant variables in tourism destinations branding.

The tourism industry in every region and country is witnessing high competitive growth (Blanke & Chiesa, 2013), due to this global competition, tourism destinations are seeking a global branding strategy to create strong brands (Kotler & Gertner, 2002), and to overtake competitors and generate differentiation for themselves (Buhalis, 2000). Any product or service requires a purposeful efforts in branding to attract customers and to survive in the competitive market. Destination branding is also pursuing to integrate all the attributes that are associated with a place (i.e. its art, agriculture, sports culture, food, investments etc.), under one concept which represents a unique identity for that place and distinguish it from other competitors (Campelo et al., 2014; Morgan & Pritchard, 2004; Blain et al., 2005). More significantly, branding requires a vision (Miličević et al., 2017) and a mission (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998) regarding the destination and its future success. Nowadays, customers are surrounded not only by numerous brands but also by various methods of marketing in introducing new brands. In basic marketing, the term Brand is widely referred to any type of product or service. Tourism destination can be also considered as a kind of product or brand with tangible and intangible attributes (Pike, 2005; Pike et al., 2010). Despite the novelty of destination branding concept, many tourism destination around the world are trying to acquire the necessary strategies for branding their places, similar to manufacturing units, in order to obtain a unique identity among their competitors (Hosany et al., 2006; Hankinson, 2005). The Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) are currently facing a constant struggle for attracting tourists and becoming an irreplaceable destination (Pike & Page, 2014); for this purpose, a favorable and

powerful brand is a strong marketing weapon (Morgan et al., 2003), since from tourists' perspectives, a destination with more favorable image and identity may have higher priority comparing to another destination even with outstanding landscapes (Ilieş & Ilieş, 2015; Mao, 2008). One of the shortcomings of tourism products is their intangibility which affects the integration of the tourism service providers' attempts and markets' stability during different periods, however, tourism destination branding can be a method to decrease the negative influences of this feature (Baker & Cameron, 2008; Weiermair, 2004). In recent years feminist tourism and tourism destinations in Iran are largely neglected and most of the tourist attractions have remained unknown. Besides, the notion of tourism destination is not well-perceived in Iran and in the other word, this concept is still very young and immature in Iran. For that reason, evaluating and identifying the brand equity and influencing factors on its growth from female tourists' perceptions can be very efficient and effective in the branding process and long term marketing for the destinations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand equity and customer-based approach

Brand equity in customer-centric approach is focused on customers' knowledge about the brand. This knowledge is reflected in their awareness, mental image and brand's associations (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991). Therefore, brand's power originates from customers' knowledge and opinions which stems from their experiences or the marketing programs related to that brand (Keller, 1993; Lassar et al., 1995). Generally, brand equity is measured from customers' perspectives based on the two behavioral and perceptual aspects (Keller et al., 2011; Keller, 1993). Keller (1993, 2011) was one of the pioneers in theorizing and conceptualizing the brand equity from customers' perspectives with focus on perceptual aspects. Keller assumed that the brand equity is based on knowledge and its comparison with similar products; moreover, Keller conceptualized the brand knowledge based on the two aspects of awareness and image. Aaker (1991) presented a model based on the two concepts of behavior and perception in order to conceptualize the brand equity. He defined five components for evaluating the brand equity from customers' perspective: brand awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations and other proprietary brand assets such as patents, trademarks etc. The advantage of Aaker's model is combining the two behavioral and perceptual aspects in one scale for measuring the brand equity. Although customers' perspectives are the prerequisites for the behavioral aspect of brand equity, the evidences indicate that perspective is not an indicator, strong enough for evaluating market behavior, thus, utilizing a scale including both perceptual and behavioral aspects can promote the assessment in this regard (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010; Keller et al., 2011; Feldwick, 1996). Cobb-Walgreen et al., (1995) explain that brand equity from marketing point of view is customer-based brand equity. The complementary research of Yoo, et al., (2000) completed these aspects and finalized them into the four aspects of brand associations, awareness, loyalty and perceived quality, yet in 2003, Keller added the mental image as another influential factor in brand equity. Boo et al., (2009) with regards to the results obtained by Yoo et al., (2000) considered the outputs of the brand equity as consumers' preferences to buy a certain product among its counterparts.

Brand Awareness

Tourism destination marketing aims to maximize awareness about specific destinations through creating a unique brand (Dinnie, 2004; Jago et al., 2003; Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Aaker (1991) believes that brand awareness can be used as a strong lever for a potential buyer to recall and identify a brand in a specific category of products. He has defined several levels for brand awareness, from brand recall to leading brand. The leading brand refers to the conditions that a brand turns into the only name that comes to mind for a specific type of product.

Brand Image

Brand images are defined as perceptions about the brands, reflected by brand's associations into the consumer's mind (Aaker, 1991; Graeff, 1997). The brand image is not necessarily objective or real. For example customer's image about the quality of a restaurant's food can be based on the quality of the provided services not only the taste of the food. In fact, the perceptions about the reality are more effective on the image than the reality itself (Biel, 1992; Woodward, 2000). Mental perceptions can be subjective too, which is more common in the field of services, since people can base their perceptions on the experiences which are not tangible and standardized in nature (Martinez & De Chernatony, 2004; Keller, 1993). For instance, customers' perceptions about a park can be only based on their experiences; if they went to the park on a gray rainy day or a very crowded period, they might not have a very positive image about that park.

Perceived quality

Perceived quality can be defined as the Customer perceptions of the general quality or superiority of a product or service than other counterparts (Zheithaml, 1988; Aaker, 1996). Perceived quality is a competitive necessity in branding (Saleem et al., 2015) and most of the companies and organizations are now utilizing the customer-driven quality as a powerful strategic tool (Keller, 1993). Kotler et al., (2014) discuss the association between product quality, service and customer satisfaction and profitability and indicate that in fact, perceived quality is not the reality of the product, but the subjective valuation of the customers about that product. Perceived quality just like the brand's image, provides value for the customer to distinct a product from others and gives a reason to buy a specific brand (Zheitaml, 1988; Kotler & Keller, 2000). However, perceived quality is a very challenging issue, since the tourists overall perception about a destination is a combination of products, services and experiences. Thus Quality has a critical role in determining the consumers' behavioral patterns. Since the tourism products are mostly services and intangible, they cannot be measured simply on quantitative grounds and usually the assessment criteria for perceived quality is the level of quality.

Brand Loyalty

Although the concept of consumers' loyalty has been widely studied in the general marketing, yet investigating the brand loyalty for destination has not been the subject of many researches. Loyalty is evidently leads to the stability of the destination (Oppermann, 2000) and leads to many advantages such as less marketing costs, more influential travel trade and frequency of word-of-mouth marketing (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Gitelson & Crompton (1984) has referred to five factors resulting in returning the tourists to a previously visited destination:

- Reduction of the risk of an unsatisfying experience;
- The chance to meet people with common interests;
- Emotional attachment;
- Opportunities to have new experiences;
- Expressing the satisfaction from their previous experiences.

Behavioral loyalty also indicates that the past experiences can influence the tourists' present and future decisions in selecting their destination. In fact, many destinations are relying on repeated visits from their customers (Operman, 2000; Pike, 2005) . Operman (2000) suggests that loyalty to a destination should be studied over time, i.e. the continuous behavioral patterns in visits need to be considered. Meanwhile, behavioral loyalty can be a logical and convenient predictor for future choices. Many researchers have proposed several evaluations on the theoretical and the empirical levels, however, according to Yoo & Donthu (2001) there is no consensus regarding the assessment method of brand equity. On the other side, some recent efforts has led to some agreements about brand equity assessment

(Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). In this study for the first time 16 Iranian cities were chosen to their brands be investigated. Also we proposed combination of indicators from some previous studies for accurately measuring the tourism destination brand equity. According to the above-mentioned literature the research model was designed (Figure 1).

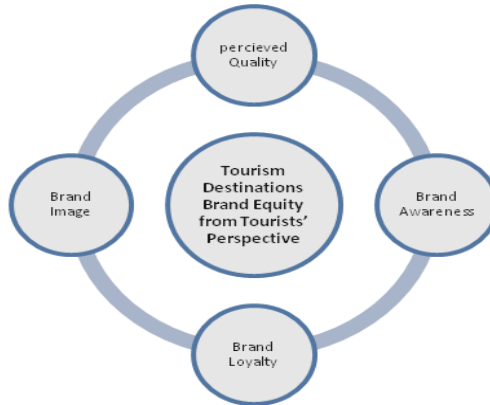


Figure 1. Research model

THE STUDY AREA

Gilan Province is one of the 31 provinces of Iran, lies along the Caspian Sea on the northern Iran with the area of 14711 Km² and located on the geographical coordinates of 37.2774°N 49.5890°E. According to the administrative divisions, this province has 16 cities.

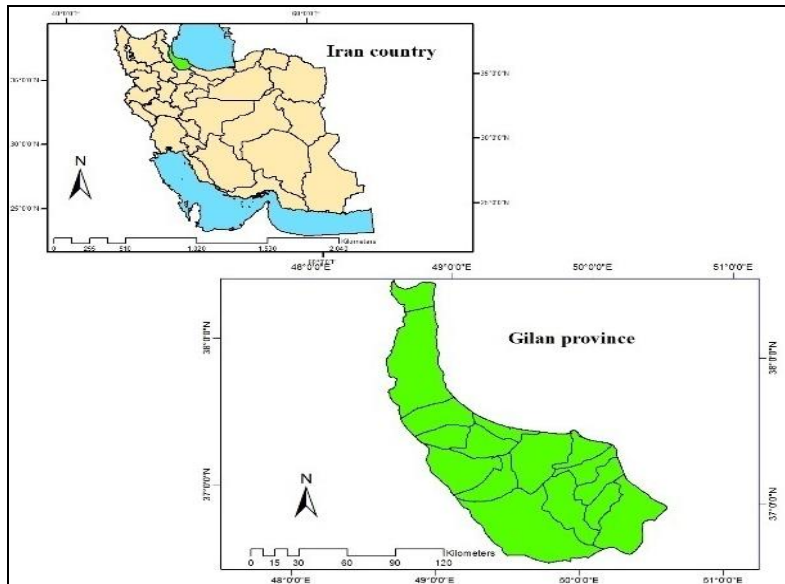


Figure 2. Map of the study area

METHODOLOGY

The present study follows a descriptive –analytical research method which has been conducted through a survey method. The study consists of two documentary and quantitative section. In the documentary section, the literature review was gathered via

library researches, while the quantitative section contained the field surveys which were conducted by means of questionnaires as scale for collecting data. The statistical population of this study contains the female tourists visiting the cities in Gilan province. Since women tend to be more precise and accurate than men in visual fields and accordingly in evaluating a destination, we decided to use a female population in this study. Due to the unknown exact number of the statistical population, the following formula is used to determine the number of research sample. The number of 380 tourists were chosen from the study population.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 P(1-P)}{d^2}$$

Based on the formula (Kotrlik et al., 2001):

N= Sample size

Z = The value of standard variable unit, which is 1.96 in the 95% confidence interval

P = The value of the attribute available in the population. If not available, it can be considered 0.5. In this case, variance reaches its maximum value.

q = The percentage of people who do not have the attribute (q = 1-P)

d = Acceptable error

Table 1. Indicators of tourism destinations ranking based on the tourists' perspectives (source: Sean Hyun & Kim, 2011; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993; Aaker 1991, Arnett et al., 2003; Yoo & Donthu 2001; Keller, 2003; Boo, Busser et al., 2009)

| Dimensions | Indicators |
|-------------------|---|
| Brand Image | Nature and exceptional landscape; quiet and calm environment; relaxing places; desirable weather; lakes, mountains and beaches; historical monuments; cultural attractions; hospitable locals; local foods; unique handicrafts; shopping facilities; adventurous places; generally attractive. |
| Perceived Quality | Clean air; high quality accommodation centers; high quality transportation infrastructures; road infrastructure quality; physical security; reasonable prices; high quality services; hygienic environment; Appropriate information; easy access; special attention to tourists; persistence (sustainable) quality. |
| Brand Awareness | Discriminatory power in comparison with other tourist destinations; imaging some attributes, hearing about the destination; logo or symbol of the tourism destination. |
| Brand Loyalty | Favorite tourist destination; more advantages compared to similar destinations; intend to visit in the future; recommending to others. |

DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

The descriptive findings are indicating the brand equity status of the tourism destinations in the studies area. The city of Lahijan has the highest rate in the brand image dimension and the city of Amlash has the lowest rate. Highest rate for the brand quality dimension is attributed to the Bandar-e Anzali, while Talesh has the lowest rate. Langarud town has the highest rate in the awareness dimension and the lowest rate is ascribed to the town of Siahkal. And finally, for the town of Fuman has the highest rate of loyalty and Rudbar the lowest rate. Regarding the brand equity of the studied tourism destinations and by utilizing the cluster analyzes, the results indicated that 12.8% of the participants believed the brand equity of the studied tourism destinations are weak, while 60.9% rated their brand equity as great and the remaining 26.3% considered it average. To continue the analysis of the results, different dimensions of the brand equity of tourism destinations were compared with each other within three clusters through discriminant analysis. The results revealed that the brand image dimension has the highest value in the weak cluster as well as the average cluster, while in the great cluster, brand awareness has the highest rate and after that there is the brand image.

Table 2. Ranking the brand equity of tourism destinations in under study area

| City | | Mean | Std. Deviation | City | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------|-----------|--------|----------------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| Astara | image | 3.2000 | .23332 | Siahkal | image | 3.2346 |
| | quality | 2.8750 | .18829 | | quality | 2.7292 |
| | awareness | 3.9250 | .31519 | | awareness | 1.8250 |
| | Loyalty | 3.7875 | .43130 | | Loyalty | 2.4125 |
| Astaneh Ashrafieh | image | 2.9769 | .25828 | Shaft | image | 3.3346 |
| | quality | 2.7167 | .23632 | | quality | 2.8833 |
| | awareness | 2.5375 | .55769 | | awareness | 3.1125 |
| | Loyalty | 2.5500 | .36814 | | Loyalty | 2.8750 |
| Amlash | image | 2.7846 | .37569 | Sowme'eh Sara | image | 3.4192 |
| | quality | 2.4417 | .20069 | | quality | 2.6250 |
| | awareness | 2.0750 | .56254 | | awareness | 2.0250 |
| | Loyalty | 2.3625 | .43282 | | Loyalty | 2.7125 |
| Bandar-e Anzali | image | 2.8692 | .23158 | Fuman | image | 3.9346 |
| | quality | 3.6167 | .25989 | | quality | 3.2042 |
| | awareness | 4.3250 | .35448 | | awareness | 4.2750 |
| | Loyalty | 3.6500 | .46169 | | Loyalty | 3.9375 |
| Talesh | image | 3.3538 | .39885 | Lahijan | image | 3.9077 |
| | quality | 2.3333 | .27172 | | quality | 3.2500 |
| | awareness | 2.7125 | .56937 | | awareness | 4.3875 |
| | Loyalty | 2.4250 | .39819 | | Loyalty | 3.6375 |
| Rudbar | image | 3.2077 | .20746 | Langrud | image | 3.5385 |
| | quality | 2.6125 | .24073 | | quality | 2.9333 |
| | awareness | 2.9125 | .61385 | | awareness | 4.4375 |
| | Loyalty | 2.2500 | .47295 | | Loyalty | 3.3875 |
| Rudsar | image | 3.0346 | .25141 | Masal | image | 3.0423 |
| | quality | 2.7542 | .19585 | | quality | 2.5958 |
| | awareness | 3.7000 | .42612 | | awareness | 1.9500 |
| | Loyalty | 3.7750 | .33344 | | Loyalty | 2.3375 |
| Rasht | image | 3.8462 | .28674 | Total | image | 3.3404 |
| | quality | 3.1792 | .33144 | | quality | 2.8417 |
| | awareness | 3.9375 | .31283 | | awareness | 3.1445 |
| | Loyalty | 2.9000 | .46876 | | Loyalty | 2.9875 |
| Rezvan Shahr | image | 3.7615 | .16346 | | | |
| | quality | 2.7167 | .22031 | | | |
| | awareness | 2.1750 | .45955 | | | |
| | Loyalty | 2.8000 | .39403 | | | |

Table 3. Brand Equity of the Studied Tourism Destinations

| Brand equity clusters | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------------|
| weak | 49 | 12.8 |
| great | 100 | 26.3 |
| average | 232 | 60.9 |
| Total | 380 | 100.0 |

Based on the logistic regression model, the Omnibus Test is used for evaluating the whole model. This test explains the effectiveness and the explanatory power of the model. Therefore, the results showed that the model is acceptable based on the K-score and the significant level (Table 5). We determined discriminant value of the model and its significance through Wilks' lambda assessment. The proximity of Wilks' lambda value

to 1 and its significance level indicated the suitability of the discriminant analysis method to divide the cities into three clusters of great, average and weak from brand equity of the tourism destinations point of view. The coefficients of the classification functions indicated that all of the cities classified in the weak cluster had the least influence related to the awareness dimension and the most influence related to the quality dimension, therefore, one can conclude the status of the brand awareness is not satisfactory for all of the cities in the studied area. The Wilks' lambda statistic was used to investigate the significant level of different cities regarding various dimensions of brand equity of tourism destinations. The results revealed significant differences in the statistics and we can propose a function for dividing cities with regards to the considered dimensions. The Standardized Canonical discriminant Function Coefficients and Matrix coefficients specify that the dimensions of awareness, quality and loyalty have the major roles in differentiating the studied cities, respectively.

Table 4. Comparing the dimensions of destination brand equity

| Cluster | | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---------|-----------|--------|----------------|
| Weak | Image | 2.9869 | .33215 |
| | Quality | 2.4980 | .24685 |
| | Awareness | 1.7561 | .43835 |
| | Loyalty | 2.1585 | .37398 |
| Great | Image | 3.6053 | .44595 |
| | Quality | 3.2560 | .31148 |
| | Awareness | 4.3393 | .31681 |
| | Loyalty | 3.7202 | .41509 |
| Average | Image | 3.3006 | .39488 |
| | Quality | 2.7355 | .29615 |
| | Awareness | 2.9218 | .79462 |
| | Loyalty | 2.8462 | .56021 |
| Total | Image | 3.3404 | .44263 |
| | Quality | 2.8417 | .39178 |
| | Awareness | 3.1445 | 1.04316 |
| | Loyalty | 2.9875 | .70366 |

Table 5. Evaluating the logistic regression model

| Significance | Degree of freedom | chi-square | Results of the final step |
|--------------|-------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| 0.0000 | 3 | 36.587 | Block |
| 0.0000 | 3 | 36.587 | Model |

Table 6. Evaluating the total discriminant function model

| Discriminant function test | Wilks' lambda | Chi-square | Degree of freedom | Significance |
|----------------------------|---------------|------------|-------------------|--------------|
| First function | 0.967 | 28.398 | 3 | 0.0000 |

Table 7. Fisher's linear discriminant functions

| Dimension | Category | | |
|------------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Weak | Great | Average |
| Brand | 23.662 | 29.972 | 26.625 |
| Quality | 30.722 | 37.888 | 32.735 |
| Awareness | .955 | 5.629 | 3.165 |
| Loyalty | 9.631 | 14.482 | 11.807 |
| (Constant) | -86.041 | -155.961 | -111.237 |

Table 8. The difference in effectiveness of tourism destinations brand equity

| Variables | Matrix coefficients | Standardized coefficients | chi-square | Wilks' Lambda | Significance |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Brand Image | 0/663 | 0/591 | /833 41.58 | 0/971 | 0/000 |
| Quality | 0/496 | 0/436 | | | |
| Awareness | 0/621 | 0/514 | | | |
| Loyalty | 0/458 | 0/348 | | | |

Based on the analytical results, the logistics regression model can be expressed by following formula (Source: Kudryashov, 2015):

$$\text{Ln} \left(\frac{n}{1-n} \right) = a + B_1 X_1 + B_2 X_2 + \dots + B_K X_K$$

where n indicates the number of respondents

β_i are the regression coefficients

x_i are the explanatory variables

$$\text{Ln} \left(\frac{n}{1-n} \right) = 1/647(\text{constant}) + 0/591 X_1 + 436 X_2 + 0/514 X_3 + 0/348$$

Since the obtained results is positive, the status of the studied cities, as predicted by the model, can be considered as appropriate. Thus, according to this equation, the dimension of brand image is the most influential and the dimension of loyalty is the least influential, regarding the tourism destination brand equity in the considered region.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays a strong and powerful brand equity is a crucial factor in influencing the tourists' perceptions about a destination (Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998; Buhalis, 2000; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). In fact, successful brand management is the result of great comprehension and managing the brand equity which could lead to creation of influential features for leading the decision making process of potential visitors and tourists (Sasmita & Mohd Suki, 2015; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Blain et al., 2005). Having broad knowledge and up to date information about brand status among tourists is a key factor in brand management (Caldwell & Freire, 2004; Keller et al., 2011). The present study aimed in evaluating the brand equity of 16 cities in Iran from tourists' perspectives. The results indicated that Lahijan City has the highest mean of brand image dimension and the town of Amlash has the lowest rate. The city of Bandar-Anzali owned the highest rate in the quality and Talesh had the lowest quality rate. Highest rate of brand awareness was attributed to the city of Langarud and the lowest rate to the city of Siahkal. Brand loyalty had the highest rate in the city Fuman and lowest rate in the city Rudbar. Since the tourism customers are not able to test their choices physically, they have to make their mind based on the perceived image of the destination. Therefore, activities providers and tourism agencies can utilize this attribute as a marketing instrument in various ways such as brochures, posters and media advertisement to engrave a valuable image in the audiences' minds and encourage the potential tourists to pack their luggage and embark their visit.

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