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**A FRAMEWORK OF PLACE BRANDING, PLACE IMAGE, AND PLACE  
REPUTATION: ANTECEDENTS AND MODERATORS**

**PANTEA FOROUDI**

The Business School, Middlesex University London, United Kingdom, UK  
P.foroudi@mdx.ac.uk\* corresponding author.

**SURAKSHA GUPTA**

Kent Business School, University of Kent, Kent, United Kingdom,  
S.Gupta@kent.ac.uk

**PHILIP KITCHEN**

ESC Rennes School of Business, Rennes, France  
Philip.kitchen@esc-rennes.com

**MOHAMMAD M. FOROUDI**

Brunel Business School, Brunel University, United Kingdom,  
Mohammad@foroudi.com

**BANG NGUYEN**

East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, China,  
Bang.london@gmail.com

# **A FRAMEWORK OF PLACE BRANDING, PLACE IMAGE, AND PLACE REPUTATION: ANTECEDENTS AND MODERATORS**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper develops a framework that links the concepts of place branding, place image, and place reputation. Focusing on the antecedents and outcomes of place branding in the context of an emerging country, namely Iran, the model further examines critical moderation variables.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative approach was undertaken, comprising face-to-face in-depth interviews with fifteen respondents, involved in communicating about their country for various purposes such as encouraging tourism, promoting exports, and attracting investments. Based on analysis of the qualitative data, a comprehensive framework for place branding was formulated.

**Findings** – Findings indicate that the key indicators of identifying a place brand come under two headings, namely *national culture* (country's name, country's brand, country attributes, social changes, geography and environment, people, culture (history, language, etc.), and *infrastructure* (security, economic condition, technological advancement, tourism development goals, place marketing and promotional strategy), which influences on the favorability of place branding. In addition, five main moderators of the outcomes of place branding were identified, namely, political perception, social media and news, place awareness, place association, and tourism experience.

**Practical implications** – Effective place branding could help a country attract tourists, visitors, traders, and investors. Place branding should be considered a constructive tool that can be successfully applied to managing a country's image.

**Originality/value** – Place branding has received little attention in the context of emerging markets. This is the first known study undertaken with a view to understand and develop a place branding model that links with place image and place reputation in an emerging country. The study identifies twelve antecedents of place branding and five important moderators. Findings will help policy makers, country brand managers, and communication professionals more generally who deal with a country's image and reputation and those involved in improving the tourism industry in Iran.

**Keywords** – Place branding, place image, place reputation, emerging market, tourist industry

## **Introduction**

Academic research on place branding has grown considerably as researchers have witnessed that places, including nations, compete intensely for tourists, foreign direct investments, and exports (Balakrishnan et al., 2009; Che-Ha et al., 2016). Many countries around the world are seeking to enhance their image, with the aim to increase tourism, inward investment, exports, and business activities (Kotler et al., 1999; Papadopoulos, 2004; Van Ham, 2001). In the global tourism industry, competition for tourists has increased the need for a better country positioning and many countries are now turning to place branding to develop a unique and distinctive identity in the minds of key stakeholders (Middleton and Clarke, 2012; Kumar, 2015).

However, few studies have to date developed a comprehensive research model of place branding that considers its antecedents and consequences, linking place branding to place image and place reputation (e.g., Bose et al., 2016; Wagner and Peters, 2009). Further, research devoted to understanding place branding's influence in the tourism industry, especially in the context of an emerging country, is sparse (Dinnie et al., 2010; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009). Little is known about the coordination of place branding among managers, directors of travel and tourism organizations, and tour and travel agencies from an inter-organizational perspective (Tasci and Kozak, 2006).

To address the above gaps in the literature, the study develops a tourism place branding framework that arises from the views and perceptions of policy and decision-makers in tourism organizations. The objective is to examine how place branding can improve an indigenous tourist industry. Three research questions are addressed: What are the indicators of place branding?

What are the main outcomes of place branding? And how does place branding influence the tourism industry?

The chosen study context is Iran. Iran has a population of more than 75 million people and offers cultural splendors and a diverse and beautiful landscape, yet as a destination it has not yet been fully recognized and has a low number of tourists. Iran is a comparatively under-researched country relative to place branding. For example, although Iran has a prosperous historical and cultural background as well as diverse environment and climate, it has not taken a part in the globalization process (Moghaddam et al., 2013) and therefore offers great potential to follow the development of its tourism industry from a place branding perspective. Examining place branding activities in Iran thus highlights the challenges confronting indigenous managers in an emerging country. To be competitive in the global environment, Iran needs to create branding strategies that allow them to serve different market segments; hence the study has implications for policy makers and communication professionals more generally who deal with the image and reputation and those involved in improving the tourism industry in Iran.

This paper is structured as follows. We delineate the theoretical background and differentiate between place, nation, country, and destination branding. Then we explain our research method, which utilizes a qualitative research design. The findings offer novel insights to the place branding literature in a little understood context. Based on the theory and qualitative data analysis, we design a place branding model for the specific study context. We conclude by discussing the theoretical significance of place branding and its implications for decision makers seeking to attract tourists and also highlight avenues for further research.

## **Theoretical background**

*Place branding.* A growing number of researchers emphasize the importance of place branding in marketing. The marketing and branding of countries, cities, regions, and places are positioned firmly on contemporary policy agendas (Boisen et al., 2011), particularly in the field of destination and tourism marketing (Kaplan et al., 2010). Kaplan et al. (2010) indicated that the place branding concept as a systematic investigation could offer benefits to other stakeholders outside the tourism industry, including policy makers and communication professionals. Place branding is primarily focused on attractions and location image that might attract events, tourists, investors, visitors (e.g., students or professionals), trade, and the category of people termed ‘influencers’ (Anholt, 2010). In tourism marketing, place branding tends to focus on cities (Zenker, 2009), which are competing for tourists, markets, opportunities and attention (Boisen et al., 2011). A key purpose of place branding is to attract foreign nationals as tourists by marketing or promoting a place (Anholt, 2010) which is primarily focus on the promotion of tourist destinations, and is a valuable tool to attract tourists (Balakrishnan, 2009).

*Nation branding.* Research by Kaplan et al. (2010) and Kavaratzis (2005) shows that place branding can include nation, country and destination branding. The main premise of *nation branding* is that “the reputations of countries (by extension, of cities and regions too) behave rather like the brand images of companies and products, and they are critical to the progress, prosperity, and good management of those places” (Anholt, 2013, p.6). Nation branding has been defined as “the strategic self-presentation of a country with the aim of creating reputational capital through economic, political and social interest promotion at home and abroad” (Szondi, 2008, p.5). The domain of nation branding extends beyond a consumer focus on tourism

promotion (Dinnie et al., 2010; Pike, 2005) to include extra functions such as investment attraction (Arregle et al., 2009; Capik, 2007; Cho et al., 2009; Lee and Rugman, 2009), export promotion (Tesfom et al., 2004) and public diplomacy, which is the dialogue with foreign publics designed to inform and influence (Cowan and Cull, 2008; Fullerton et al., 2009). Furthermore, “nation branding uses the tools of branding to alter or change the behavior, attitudes, identity or image of a nation in a positive way” (Gudjonsson, 2005, p.285) and should be managed in such a way as to appeal to tourists, add value to products produced in the country, attract foreign investment, and attract talented incomers or residents (Stock, 2009).

*Country branding.* Utilized by marketers to strengthen identity, country branding is a strategic tool for a country's competitiveness (Akotia, 2005; Che-Ha et al., 2016). Kotler and Gertner (2002) likened a country to a company and indicated that countries should develop a unique brand image to empower investment and tourism attraction capabilities. According to Szondi (2007), country branding promotes economic, commercial and political interests at home and abroad. Furthermore, country brands provide intangible services to a particular country, such as improved reputation; thus, country branding requires a more holistic and creative approach. The more specific aims of country branding are to create or advance the ‘country-of-origin’ effect, promote exports (outward direction) or attract investors or a skilled workforce (inward direction). Country branding and destination branding use visual and verbal elements such as logos, visuals, and slogans. These need to be distinctive (Tasci, 2011).

*Destination branding* concerns a geographic competitive region, which works to generate value for visitors and presents an important challenge for place marketers (Morgan et al., 2004;

Wagner and Peters, 2009). A destination is defined as a place that attracts tourists or visitors for a temporary stay. The majority of place branding research exists in the realm of destination branding, which is primarily tourism-oriented (Kaplan et al., 2010; Walmsley and Young, 1998). Destination branding is an offshoot of place branding (Anholt, 2005; Blichfeldt, 2005; Kavaratzis, 2005) that mainly revolves around leisure tourism (Hankinson, 2005). According to Cai (2002) and Wagner and Peters (2009), destination branding concerns selecting a consistent element mix to identify and differentiate one's country through destination image building.

Eroglu and Machleit (1989) point out that the country's image is wrapped up in extrinsic cues, including value or brand name, which are part of a product's image. The process of effectively communicating a country's image incorporates its products, tourism, internal investments, the way it behaves nationally and is viewed internationally, how it represents its culture, its management of its own natural resources and environment and even the behavior of its citizens. These all come together to create a certain overall image in the media and the minds of prospective visitors (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). Consequently, if the overall image is managed effectively, and with appropriate level of publicity, there will be a substantial impact (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2007). For instance, a negative country image can have a detrimental effect on tourism and indeed upon an indigenous tourism industry (Haugland et al., 2011).

Place branding links to brand association, which is "anything linked in memory to a brand" (Aaker, 1991, p.109). For example, Bilkey and Nes (1982) noted that consumers are likely to perceive products from a country which they think is underdeveloped to be riskier, and of lower quality, than products made in more developed countries (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2014).



Place association can be related to place attachment, which is defined as ‘the emotional connection that people create with specific place, where they feel safe and comfortable (Florek, 2011). Developing place attachment and understanding its precursors (Cardinale et al., 2016) is an important outcome for any place branding activity. The study highlights that despite the rising interest in place branding via, nation, country and destination branding, little is known about the relationship between place branding and its outcomes in terms of brand association(s), namely brand image and brand reputation. Furthermore, the marketing literature offers no systematic study on the effect of place branding on tourism promotion from internal stakeholder perspectives (among managers, directors of travel and tourism organizations, tour and travel agencies). To address these gaps, this research explores the main elements of place branding and its main outcomes from an internal stakeholder perspective, and further develops a framework that links place branding with the brand image and reputation of tourist destinations.

## **Method**

A qualitative approach was employed to investigate the multiplicity of perspectives related to place branding. Given the under-explored research themes, the qualitative research design consisted primarily of participant observation to gain a close familiarity with the respondents, and interviews were conducted over three months in Iran and UK. In-depth face-to-face interviews took place with fifteen key organizational managers who were selected because of their status as knowledgeable respondents and drawn from organizations engaged in place branding and place image activities. The interviews encouraged interviewees to elaborate their own interpretations, belief, attitudes and feelings (Aaker et al., 2001) about the country, and its tourism potentialities.

The researchers contacted the director of Tourism industry in Iran and initially, twenty-six managers who were mainly tour and travel agency directors were introduced to the researchers. However, five managers were travelling outside the country, two managers were not interested in the research, one was absent due to illness, and three managers were unavailable due to their work. Thus, only fifteen agreed to be interviewed. One of the respondents was the director of the tourism industry, seven respondents were country directors of Iranian travel and tourism organizations, and seven participants were travel agency company managers in Iran.

The participants in Iran and UK were involved in the implementation of place branding and place image communications for tourism, export promotion, and investment attraction. The purpose was to sample a broad and rich cross-section of views among their respective organizations so as to gather in-depth and authoritative knowledge on the research topic as stated in the interview guide. The interviewees decided the venues and timing of interviews (Ritchie et al., 2003). Interviews were conducted in Farsi or English depending on interviewee choice. The average interview lasted one hour and twenty minutes and all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure reliability (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009). Due to the nature of the topic, when permission was not given to record the interview, interviews were paused and notes were taken and later written up.

An interview guide enabled the interviewers to check whether all areas of interest were covered, though respondents were permitted to freely move from subject to subject without necessarily adhering to the order of the subjects in the guide. In accordance with Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), the aim was to create a “conversation-like dialogue rather than asking questions that

impose categorical frameworks on informants' understanding and experiences" (p.492). The use of open-ended questions enhanced and increased the validity of the responses, as is appropriate for studies of an exploratory nature (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002). Prior to the interviews, questions were translated into Farsi and translated back by experts in English and Farsi. In addition, interviews in Farsi were translated into English, reviewed twice and checked for reliability of translation.

In order to produce a refined and complete synthesis and interpretation of the material collected from the qualitative data, QSR NVivo software Version 8 was used which is appropriate for data administration and analysis. The researchers found NVivo to be useful for mapping out the themes of the interviews diagrammatically and assisted researchers in viewing the whole text, enabling inter-relationships of the codes to be seen at a glance (Welsh, 2002) and thus more apropos for data storage and retrieval (Esterberg, 2002). The use of NVivo as computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software made the data analysis more reliable, easier, more accurate and more transparent (Gibbs, 2002) as well as made manipulation and analysis of the data easier. The researchers first manually coded the data and then imported the data in NVivo. Combining NVivo and manual coding increases the trustworthiness of data. Based on Lincoln and Guba (1985), this study meets the criteria of trustworthiness for qualitative study by employing multiple methods for analysis used to check internal validity and credibility, the detailed description of the research setting (external validity, transferability), cases and informants confidentiality protected, and rigorous multiple stages of coding (reliability and dependability), and word-by-word interview transcription (objectivity and confirmability) (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

## **Findings**

This study identified twelve key place branding elements under two headings, namely *national culture* (country's name, country's brand, country attributes, social changes, geography and environment, people, culture (history, language, etc.), and *infrastructure* (security, economic condition, technological advancement, tourism development goals, place marketing and promotional strategy), which are influences on the favorability of place branding. In addition, five main moderators of the favorability of place branding were acknowledged, namely, political perception, social media and news, place awareness, place association, and tourism experience. Based on the review of the related literature and qualitative analysis, the research model of place branding, place image, and place reputation is presented in Figure 1.

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### **Antecedents of Place Branding**

*Name of the country.* The name of a country provokes a set of perceptions in the minds of stakeholders and offers a competitive edge for a place. A country contains some branding power, such as a vision, a purpose, and a political direction. The name can be (i) an interpretation of history, (ii) a reminder of the people who live there (e.g., England, land of the Angles), (iii) descriptive of the physical aspect that the country first presents to the visitor or colonist, (e.g., Albania or 'the white country,' referring to its mountain peaks), (iv) or owe more to superstition, religion and the natural anxieties of explorers and colonists on lonely and dangerous voyages far from home (e.g., the Isle of Man, which derives its name from Manannan mac Lir, the Brythonic

and Gaelic equivalent of the god Poseidon (Anholt, 2010). A travel agency director referred to the origin of a country's name as the identity of the country:

*“We as Persian[s] have strong identity in the world, even our country name which has always been known as such by those who inhabit her, but for centuries in the past she was known as Persia (or Pars or even Fars) a province of modern country. This was used mainly by Europeans who took their naming conventions from the writings of the ancient Greek writers, Persis which comes from the name of Cyrus’ main clan ‘Pars’ or ‘Parsa’ which has given its name also to a province in southern part of the country, called Fars in the modern Persian Language and Pars in Middle Persian. Persis is the Hellenized form of Pars. According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, the name ‘Persian’ comes from the mythological hero, Perseus. This appears to be a folk etymology. An edict by the government in 1935 called for the country to be known as Iran, but this was rescinded just after the Second World War in 1948 when both names were used for the country. Some Persians protested this decision because it separated the country from its past.”*

*Country’s brand.* The interviewees expressed how they understood branding in relation to Iran. Around the concept of global branding, a tourism leader argued that:

*“...A powerful, distinctive, broad-based and appealing national brand is the most valuable gift which a country can give to its exporters: think what ‘Made in Japan’ does for electronics, or ‘Made in Italy’ for fashion. We are famous for saffron, handmade carpets and oil. Today, branded exports form one of the most potent ways of building and sustaining national image. Everybody knows or has heard about country’s identity and its culture, like other countries, it has its brand. Paris is famous as a romance city; is famous*

*for history, civilization, famous flying carpets and poetry. Our country's brand will strive to deliver to its tourists a sense of discovery. We recognize the importance of the human spirit and the human soul in caring for others. Iran is the architecture of the beautiful and historic country (not clear) and if that the country had more branded products it would have more tourists."*

One of the issues addressed in the questions was the relationship between Iranian products' brand and its customers. An interviewee had some positive views in this regard.

*"In your mind, how has the label 'Made in Iran' contributed to the success of products worldwide? As a marketing slogan, [it] is clearly associated with a different phase of design which links with the post-industrial phase especially in the carpet market. It stands for a generalized branding as a place of a certain kind of design, a certain kind of lifestyle; in every house you can see the Persian carpet. It is the culture. When people get married, the families will give them handmade Persian carpets as a gift. It is a marketing tool used by Iranian companies and the government to market their products. Carpets were first made by nomadic people to cover the floor in their tents and the tomb of Cyrus, who was buried at Perspolis in Shiraz."*

However, an interviewee made some negative comments. These were about people mistrusting Persian brands.

*"When you think of clothes, for me the brand itself is less important than its quality. Some of our brands have very good quality and can be more expensive than foreign brands. The foreign brands are sometimes cheaper to buy because of taxes and cheap imports. Most of*

*the high quality brands have changed their brand names and have exported to other countries. For example, in Dubai, you can see exactly the same product with a different brand name, which people would buy, purely because they are prepared to buy abroad and pay much more, and feel good about it. As a result, Persian products have a good market in Saudi Arabic, the Emirates and also Turkish and Russian states.”*

One of the interviewees made another negative comment, stating that Iran did not have a specific brand, and that high levels of poverty together with the difference between the country's past culture, history, and modern status quo leads to a negative perception of the country.

*Country attributes.* Iran currently has both advantages and disadvantages in relation to tourism. The following statements from the Director of the Tourism identified the main competitive strengths of the country's image.

*“... as a tourist destination it is rich, ancient, and has a unique tangible and intangible Persian cultural heritage and history, in particular, and its location on the ancient Silk Road which passed through the northern part of the country. Our ancient civilization as exemplified by its many important archaeological, ancient monuments, town and city assets. We have a diverse natural landscapes, fauna and flora incorporating two sea coasts, three major mountain ranges, two major deserts, and major plateau area to the west, and diverse climates including arid dry desert climates, cool temperate climate, humid Mediterranean climates, and cold alpine climates. In addition, our strategic geopolitical location in relation to Asia, the Middle East, and Europe; the grandeur of the*

*Zagros and Alborz mountain ranges, and vastness of its two main deserts and availability of adequate utility services.”*

While the tourism sector possesses several strong points, it is also beset with a number of internal weaknesses that limit its ability to harness the full potential of its tourism resources. The following statements show the main competitive weaknesses, which were identified by tourism managers in the UK:

*“Feedback from our visitor and research shows that the “limited use of sustainable development and management practices including interpretation of cultural and natural site values at important cultural and natural sites resulting in the de-vaporization of important natural and cultural assets; there is no up-to-date inventory and evaluation of resources and their associated tourist access, facilities, and services. There are fixed plants and equipment such as transportation equipment, hotels, resorts, and other facilities are generally aged, need to be retired, require major refurbishment, and in the case of some accommodation buildings, in need of complete re-development, basic transportation infrastructure is utilitarian and whilst adequate, is aged, unsuited to modern tourist traffic, and cannot cope with any significant expansion, service standards provided by the existing manpower is generally a weak reflection of a lack of customer focus and concern, poor recruitment policies, as well as limited, weak and inappropriate manpower training, cultural values and norms that restrict the type of tourism that we can attract; current policies and regulations such as the civil aviation policy, the labor law, the guilds law, and the investment law, the inability to properly privatize tourism facilities and services,*



*coupled with a climate that is generally suspicious of private sector activities and the view that the public sector knows best continues to discourage industry development.”*

Based on the interview analysis, the main competitive threats facing the country were found to be: continuing to discourage ‘real’ private sector participation in the industry; failing to implement, monitor, and maintain sustainable tourism development and management principles and practices in relation to the impact of tourism on the natural, socio-cultural, and economic environment. Failing to properly address the critical tourism management and institutional issues, the impact of natural disasters such as earthquakes, flooding, and drought; political turbulence and conflicts within the country, and between it and its neighboring countries; and regional conflicts. While it is not possible to exert any control over some of these threats, contingency plans need to be put in place to deal with such eventualities as far as possible.

*Social changes.* In relation to the changes in the social economic developments, an interviewee stated that:

*“The government is committed to the development of the tourism sector in order to harness its potential towards socio- economic development as well as environment and socio-cultural sustainability. To support the development of tourism, the government has a tourism program as part of its five year planning process; and maintains a national tourism office within the Ministry of Cultural Guidance, whose primary functions are to implement the five-year tourism plan. Overall, it possesses many of the basic competitive strengths necessary to develop a strong and sound tourism and these strengths give the*

*capacity to compete with neighboring destinations in the region such as Turkey and Greece.”*

Hence, increased competitive opportunities exists for Iran as an international tourist destination are identified by interviewees as:

*“...taking advantage of the traditional strength as a trading nation to develop a strong and vibrant private tourism industry sector; using web based information dissemination and e-commerce developments to enable destinations and destination based suppliers to reach and market direct to the travel trade and consumers at low cost; taking advantage of the development of more efficient and lower cost tourist facilities and services and management systems; and developing Tehran as the main international airport hub in the region by taking advantage of the consolidation of the transportation sectors-particularly the airline sub-sector.”*

*Geography and environment.* A country's cultural heritage (McKercher and Cros, 2002) is not just limited to historical sites and monuments inherited by the nation from civilizations dating back to 2,500 years ago. Based on the interviewees' comments, cultural heritage and tourism organizations should give preference to introducing cultural values more than the historical monuments. The country directors of travel and tourism noted that revenues from tourism should be spent on the maintenance of the cultural heritage sites. In addition, he pointed out that the excavation and identification of new cultural heritage sites and registering them with UNESCO are costly and the expenses should come from the proceeds of the tourist industry.

Historical sites can have an influence on place branding (Rein and Shields, 2007). From the participants' comments, it is apparent that an historical site can create its own brand and create a well-established location for tourists, which is distinctive. The tourist brand has a distinctive dimension and approach; a dimension that focuses on the targeted audiences (tourists in question) and attempts to understand the type of demand for a certain destination or geographical location, in this case, specific to the country. A participant states that:

*“...you can see from tourist attractions data that the country is rich in cultural and natural tourism resources, many of which are unique to the world. The country's primary tangible cultural tourism assets include the ancient city of Perspolis, Naghsh - Rustam, and Choga Zambil which are listed as part of the UNESCO World Heritage. Also, Silk Road runs across the country, as do other great caravan routes to the South... also possesses a rich intangible living culture that is exemplified in its cities, towns, village, and rural areas. The diverse ethnic communities and villages of Iran support a rich array of intangible cultural tourism assets such as their art, craft, costumes, music, cuisine, costumes, and traditions.”*

The interviewees also revealed how they perceived the country as a brand through its historical sites. A respondent made the following positive comments.

*“Our country is one of the ten most important countries in the world for its archaeological sites and ruins... is home to important Shiite religious shrines and religions attraction is not related just to Muslims. There is a church which was built 33 AD in Oromieh, this church is one of the oldest in the world. We even have around 40 graves of Jewish Imams (Would Imams be correct here?) here such as Prophet Daniel which is located near the*

*Karoon River, south of the country. There are a lot of old a Zoroastrians temple, where people revere fire and have a special ceremony in Aid Norooz, which is still is part of the old culture, celebrating New Year.”*

Broadly speaking, Iran is a relatively diverse country, not least in topography and climate. The country is surrounded by beautiful sites of ancient architecture, ideal mountains and historical monuments. The country has a number of specific features including gigantic landscapes. Furthermore, Iran’s image, the enchantment of a visit to the country is the feeling of contact with a ‘different’, but incomprehensible world, accessible, unusual and diverse. The country’s distinctness allows tourists to experience the diversity that makes it stand out from the crowd of many other tourist destinations.

*People.* Iran has friendly and welcoming inhabitants, architectural arts, and well-respected customs. The experience can be unique, and this includes lack of alcohol due to religious beliefs. Some tourists regard this prohibition as a downside to the country. However, other factors compensate for the prohibition of alcohol and the requirement of full body coverage. Non-Iranian interviewees made the following positive comments.

*“... the more popular concepts in today’s brand is its history and its culture. I think the landscape in terms of culture, lifestyles, personal aspirations, daily routines, shopping habits will have an impact on the nation’s branding and advertising. Moreover, the country is love, pure love; from my experience, they are the most hospitable and friendliest people. I think it is the country’s brand. Foreigners have false impression about Iran due to the negative publicity through foreign media.”*

Another participant believed that:

*“The tourist who comes to our country is not purely a visitor, in the sense of a consumer, he is after monuments and the people and the history. Our country is an historic country and most of the foreigners come to our country for two missions; first, they are tourists or researchers about ancient Persia and others come for investment. I believe most of them are happy when they leave or stay. The most of the foreign tourists are visiting for its pilgrimage, touring cultural heritage sites and sightseeing. Our country has attracted tourists for thousands of years. It also has had a rich inheritance of traditional intellectuality... whilst the majority of European tourists tend to visit the historical cities and Isfahan, Yazd, Shiraz, Arabs are mostly attracted to places of pilgrimage such as Mashhad and Qum. We as the tourism organization trying to introduce the country as one of the main tourism attractions and we know it takes a while. Recently we have many tourists from Germany which has a positive impact on our country.”*

*Culture of the country.* Culture is an experience identified from the interviews as an important element, which influences place branding (Hanna and Rowley, 2008). Examination of the relationship between culture of country and place branding has recognized by authors that permeate differentiation and, evaluating the presence of neighbouring images prevailing on the ‘place’ brand (Hanna and Rowley, 2008; Hankinson, 2005). Culture of a country offers a potentially large tourist attraction (Florek, 2005). Heritage solutions and historical and cultural tourist sites can be recognizable if the marketing strategies are adopted thus:

*“...the tourism value of their current heritage, urban regeneration, funding, branding and marketing strategies must be recognized and used as a tool/brand to promote the sector.”*

A respondent discussed the culture as follows:

*“I personally like the word Persia than Iran and I think is one of the world’s oldest and richest civilizations in the world. The first signs of civilization were in Archaeological terms, were where various ethnic groups with similar cultures lived on the Iranian Plateau. Unfortunately, there are only a few literary remains or examples left by the Ancient Persians. Most of these consist of royal inscriptions which were discovered from the rule of King Darius I and then from the regency of his son Xerxes.”*

The interviews explored how the participant perceived the country as an ancient culture. The interviewee made the following positive comments. They said that there are literary remains of the Ancient Persians to be found, dated to the rule of King Darius. An interviewee stated that:

*“...what you see today as Iran is only a small piece of what was once a big and powerful empire. The old Persia civilization dates back to more than 2500 years ago and human rights are founded on the basis of Cyrus’ ideas. Hospitality, family ties and high regard for traditions can be some of the noticeable characteristics of the nation in general in the culture. “*

However, they also made some negative comments:

*The major problem for the country is cultural bias, social inequity, and financial problems that have led to serious psychological, social, and economic problems of the people.*

*Political and economic corruption here is a significant problem. Its impact and disadvantages are felt by ordinary Iranians in many areas including political rights, civil administration procedures, taxation, health services and education.”*

*A country’s language.* The use of a specific language provides a universal reference point and is the most significant factor of the place brand (Anholt, 2004). The power of language brings about widespread social change. A nation generally refers to a large group of people of the same race and language (Fan, 2006). Language of the country or tone of voice can be referred to as a ‘basic element’ of identity, which differentiates a brand and reach out audiences with a message about its diversity (Anholt, 2004). One interviewee, who was a travel agency manager, stressed the importance of language:

*“Persian lyrical poetry is a favorite of many of our visitors and they believe when they hear people talk, it give them a way of expressing of their love. It is very interesting to know, we have many visitors who come to the country to learn Farsi and they know the history of our language and country better than us.”*

*Infrastructure within the country.* The importance of infrastructure on place image has acknowledged by previous scholars (Daspit and Zavattaro, 2014; Ulldemolins, 2014). The interviewees had a negative perception and saw the existing transportation infrastructure and services as outdated, are not suited to the needs of a modern tourist industry have limited capacity and cannot cope with any significant expansion. Expressing views on transportation services and infrastructure, one respondent noted that that the country has seven main airline carriers, which operated regional routes, European routes, and Asia routes. At present, the road hierarchy is divided into expressways, highways, first class main roads, and second-class main

roads, sandy or gravel main paved roads and other roads. They also had other negative perceptions. The railway network of the country does not cover all parts of the country.

In an international context, Iran is connected to Europe via a railway between Tehran-Tabriz-Istanbul, Pakistan via Zahedan, and central Asian countries. One of the non-Iranian correspondents made recommendations to improve the image of existing tourist areas and plan the development of the emerging areas. They stated that future improvement programs should focus upon better signage, between area road tourist facilities and services, visitor information and interpretation, improved natural and cultural site management and restoration, and upgrading of the quality of human resources. At the same time, emphasis should be given to formulation plans for the sustainable development of the emerging areas, and those potential areas that could contribute to product and market diversification in the medium term.

*Security.* Based on Terrorism index (2007) and Gallup's World affairs survey (2008) US citizens perceive Iran as Al-Qaeda stronghold. An interviewee mentioned that the effects are relevant for Iran suffering from sustained crises, therefore, many tourists perceived negatively about Iran. He recommended designing a new tourism websites and found optimizing the existing ones essential:

*“Our customers typically feel the need to access a great deal of information about the destination, drawing on their family/friends/colleagues, travel agents, tour operators' brochures and websites, travel features and general media coverage on the selected destination and, of course, destination websites and collateral material. This material is 'processed' by individuals in the light of their own knowledge, travel experience and*



*prejudices. A potential 'short list' of destinations may then be drawn up and related to the offerings in the market place, the prospective traveler's budget and many other issues. All these factors are taken into consideration in reaching the travel destination decision. The destination assessments may be reviewed and revised at the time of each prospective holiday or may be long-term dream holiday destinations. Countries fall on a continuum: at one end are countries which come and go out of fashion; while at the other are long standing inspirational destinations."*

According to an agency Director in UK, the visitors worry about security and the political situation. Thus, more efforts should be done in these respects to improve the image of Iran.

*Economic condition.* With the thawing of relations between the country and the rest of the world, Iran seems to be poised for a huge economic leap forward. In order to exploit this opportunity to the full all sectors of the Iranian economy must become fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses in the world markets in which they may potentially be involved. An important part of this new self-awareness must be how the country is perceived as a brand in different parts of the world. A participant made the following recommendations:

*"The companies have to be market driven; they have to be responsive to the investors and to its shareholders. We are actively looking at global expansion, which is why it's important for us to have a global architecture in place. We need to have a broader reach, a more global distribution network, and a more balanced portfolio."*

*Technological advancement.* In relation to tourist facilities and services, it was found that non-Iranian interviewees saw the future of tourism markets as dependent on two factors: (i) the ability of tourism countries to deliver ‘a high quality product’ and (ii) the changing tastes, needs, wants and demands of the international traveler. The use of well-developed niche-based marketing strategies, technology of products and business processes can lead to improved total market growth. In terms of the country’s technological advancements for tourism purposes, a participant noted that:

*“From our survey, the existing service infrastructure base (telecommunications, power, portable water, health-care, security, and waste management systems) is suitable for all tourists in the better-established destinations and less suitable for the long-haul markets in other less well-established destinations.”*

On the whole, there was agreement that the country should do more to advance its technology.

*Place marketing and promotional strategy.* Regarding the ‘Iran Tourism and Touring Organization’ (ITTO), the current country marketing program can be divided into two broad programs. The first is related to improving the enabling structure for tourist growth to take place. The second program is related to domestic and international promotion activities (ITTO, 2014). A participant stated the following with regard to tourism and the importance of place marketing and promotion strategy:

*“Using our country as a brand to attract customers is completely different when it comes to travelers and tours around the world. There are brand campaigns on the web, which assist with the tourist aspect of marketing by using the recommended brands. To*

*a small fraction, tourism branding may not necessarily be associated with the decline in foreign tourists as other factors may as well affect the tourism of the country. Factors other than the brand also play an enormous role in tourism, such being the neighboring countries, which may be involved in a war or have some kind of terrorist involvement or association. Clearly, these factors adversely influence the tourism branding of a country and it is predictable; this can potentially fluctuate the sustainable tourism.”*

To enable the development of tourism, the present marketing program focuses on developing the marketing capabilities of strengthening the security and quality of the road, rail, and air transportation services for tourists including creating public awareness about tourism in affected communities, raising the standards of existing travel services and terminal facilities especially outside of the main cities. ITTO works to improve access, sanitation, presentation, interpretation, appearance, and overall management of the cultural tourist attractions, developing an effective tourism information system including a computerized information data base, improving visa issuing, airport, airline, immigration, customs, and health services. Apart from increasing the limit on the value of goods that tourists can bring in or take out and better informing tourists about the purchase and export of antique items, they also work on improving the existing foreign exchange and banking services to better meet the needs of tourists (ITTO, 2014).

*Tourism development goals, objectives and targets.* According to the findings, the overall goal for the development of the tourism industry is to introduce the country’s culture to the world in order to promote a dialogue of civilizations, take full advantage of the country’s strategic

geopolitical position, promote economic development especially among disadvantaged groups, contribute to the sustainable development of the natural and socio-cultural environment, and contribute to national unity. In this context, the long-term tourism development objectives, based on the general guidelines identified above are developing the tourism sector to (i) increase and maintain awareness and knowledge of country's heritage in domestic and international markets; (ii) enhance the country's international relations and its image abroad; and (iii) foster regional development and cooperation.

Furthermore, based on the interviewees' perception, the specific policy objectives should deliver the overall goal for the tourism sector by focusing on (i) marketing activities on yield optimization, creating strong market awareness, maximizing market interest and purchase of country's products, and adopting a diverse distribution system; (ii) implementing tourism planning and development policies that provide a sound basis for the sustainable development of the tourism sector over the long term; (iii) improving cross-border facilitation in the area of visa issuing, immigration and customs, and transportation services; (iv) developing qualified tourism human resources with the capacity to deliver quality service based on customer expectation; and (v) ensuring that the impacts of tourism on the socio-cultural, economic, and natural environment are managed and sustainable.

### **Moderators influencing place branding, place image, and place reputation**

*Political perceptions.* In order to take advantage of the country's geopolitical position, interviewees in London recommended six policy objectives that influence place branding: (i) Improve planning and monitoring capabilities, (ii) Improve road safety, (iii) Seek investment in 3

to 5 star hotels, and the case of foreign airlines, seek to lower taxes by moving them to a lower tax classification. (iv) Make foreign investment in tourism more secure and safer and therefore more attractive. (v) Revise the existing accommodation classification system and promoting quality. (vi) Import the required equipment, and (vii) Issue certification for travel agencies working in ecotourism, and establish an ecotourism training center in cooperation with concerned environment organizations.

*Media.* Participants noted that there are two ways to get to know a country - one is through the media and the other is through visiting it. Findings suggested that media moderates the 'place branding-image' relationship. Unfortunately Iran has had a bad press with a certain image, as noted by a participant:

*“... a tranquil destination which is home to agreeable people ... the problem is in Government officials failing to promote the tourist image of the country to the world ... Branding the country could help the people who live abroad to return to their country. This could create a center of attention for investors to the country. The successful brand would bring happiness for their people.”*

The guiding principle of destination marketing should guide the tourism influence optimization and the maximization of benefits for the region (Buhalis, 2000). Whether or not an event took place as it was reported in the media in the prospective tourist's home country, the destination in question must both be aware of how such events are being reported and be prepared to take remedial action to reassure the market place. Despite the continued growth of travel and tourism

among consumers from developed economies, only a small minority has previously visited Iran. An interviewee criticized the management of the tourism using the media:

*“Media, noting that the aim of advertising tourism is to propagate cultural values, and placing advertisements on Western broadcasting networks, will not be effective. Also it is proposed to advertise the country by inviting foreign journalists to see our cultural heritage sites and said that they would write stories about tourism here in their respective media which will be effective in encouraging foreign tourists to visit the country.”*

*Place awareness.* The domestic and international tourist marketplace needs to be highly competitive by emphasizing on place awareness and identify the opportunities a place has to offer. Therefore, to be successful, the country’s marketing and promotion strategies should address three specific objectives which were recognized by the interviewees: (i) the creation, in the major tourist generating markets, of the perception of the country as a destination offering a diverse range of natural and cultural/heritage resources that will appeal to, and attract, a range of tourist types and market segments; and providing a setting for tourist activities that is welcoming, relaxing and free of any threat to personal safety; (ii) the differentiation of the country in terms of its tourist attractions, facilities and services from competing country destinations in the Middle East and South Asia; (iii) the demonstration of the central government's commitment to improvement and expansion of its tourism infrastructure and human resources through a development policy based on quality and sustainability.

*Place association.* In discussing image and reputation, the study found significance placed on the role of place associations among participants. The following comments illustrate this assessment:

*“We as a team believe that our country brand within the world is the identity of our country and our products such as saffron. I think, the more recognized and well-known the brand can be the higher the perception of the corresponding company? can be expected. It should also be noted that branding takes a different approach and dimension in tourism. Also brand is the best tool to enhance marketing. In a similar vein, our brand identity plays a crucial and determining role in tourism, in the way it puts a demand on the target audience who are foreigners and creates an image in their minds that eventually affects their final decision while choosing our country as their destination. Such a demand gives rise to the role of significant factors such as the geography and region of the location, its climate, cost, accommodation and catering potential as well as the consideration of prospective travelers’ financial capability.”*

*Tourism experience.* It is important to understand from the respondents’ point of view, how they believe tourism experiences helps the image and reputation of the country’s tourism. An interviewee made these following positive points.

*“Travel to the country offers the best value travel in the world and what we want to give our guests is comfort, we believe luxury is a memory. If you look at the hospitality business in here, we have five and four star hotels, which are doing well. Our customers don’t need more. Because they don’t come to the country just for a luxury holiday; they also come to discover and visit our history, so most tourists prefer to stay at Abbasi Hotel in Isfahan to have an experience to savor. It was built thousands of years ago where it once served as a caravanserai to sheltered merchants and their animals as they crossed the deserts of Persia. This hotel is the top of the marketplace. We don’t have any competitors in the*

*world because of what people want from their travels. If they want a sea side destination they choose South of France or Spain. The tourist attractions of Iran are many and varied. The historical monuments are the most important, but the varied climate conditions are good for skiing for almost six months of the year and for swimming all the year round. We believe that we know exactly who our customers are – those who are interested in history, agriculture, or investors. The tourists and investors in tourism should respect our culture and traditions. The tourism industry should focus on the cultural values rather than the historical monuments in the country.”*

## **Discussion**

This study focuses on the relationship between place branding and its antecedents and main outcomes. The creation of favorable place branding is very costly and challenging for a country and decision-makers make every effort to create one that is favorable and reliably communicates countries identity to the globe. The findings of this study are of the utmost importance to decision-makers; they play a significant role in the development of an organization through branding the place, illuminating the antecedents of place branding, as well as identifying the moderating elements that influence on the relationships between place branding, place image, and place reputation. Three main contributions are offered:

### **Theoretical contributions**

First, the study has developed a research framework of the antecedents and consequences of place branding in an emerging market that consists of twelve key elements. Further, by linking place branding to place image and place reputation five important moderators have been



identified, adding new insights into the place branding concept. The framework presents an integrated conceptualization that positions place branding at the center of the company's efforts to build a favorable countries' image and countries' reputation. By engaging in place branding activities (the twelve elements), countries can communicate more favorably to internal and external stakeholders regarding important characteristics of the countries' place branding.

Second, the current study extends existing knowledge by examining managers' evaluations of the effect of place branding on managers within a tourism setting (Florek, 2005; Gertner, 2011). The incorporation of insights from a multi-disciplinary group of respondents on place branding is a key contribution of the current study. According to Dinnie et al. (2010) place/country image has mainly been researched from a *consumer* perspective, however, there is limited study about the domain of place/nation branding extends beyond a consumer and managers' focus on tourism industry. The current study traces from the diverse group of participants on the relationship between the construct of a place branding, the factors that influence the favorability of place branding (its antecedents), and its consequences. It adds empirical evidence to address the research gaps and responds to previous calls for investigations from the perspective of marketers.

Third, using the inter-organizational perspective in a place branding context is novel in this study. That is, the results of this study clarified the influences of place's branding on tourism industry with reference to Iran. This study theorizes and provides a shared mindset in the existing body of knowledge. It also provides a preliminary attempt to develop a comprehensive understanding of favorable place branding and its relation to place image, place reputation, place association and tourism experience. Gaps in the literature on the place branding concerned the lack of

explanatory models, of conceptualizations offering a common terminology and of structural managerial approaches. This study presents a model by which to manage the place branding in order to enhance its image among key audiences, here in the context of Iran, a country which previously had little attention in the place branding literature. Furthermore, this study recognizes the new factors influencing the place branding not previously identified. Hence, the framework proposed for evaluating and assessing the place branding is a novel aspect of this research.

### **Implications for managerial practice**

The findings of the research offer managerial contributions for decision-makers and managers who wish to develop a favorable place branding and understand its effect on a favorable place image and favorable place reputation. First, this study's findings suggest that, to achieve a competitive advantage, decision-makers should have a clear understanding of what constitutes a favorable place branding. The framework developed in this study shows that a favorable place branding is influenced by twelve main factors. All these dimensions signify the country's vision, a purpose and a political direction, and they illustrate that who lives in the country has a direct influence on tourists' perception (Anholt, 2010). In addition, the model shows that when incorporating place branding, place image and place reputation conjointly, marketers need to pay attention to five moderation elements that influence on the stakeholders' decision making. For the tourism industry, discovering which specific components of place branding stakeholders find most essential can assist in developing improved marketing programs.

Second, this research contributes to the guidelines for enhancing the national unity of the country from a tourism point of view. Such a plan would require pursuing the three specific policy

objectives: (i) Review possible upgrade and expansion of the existing transportation and infrastructure system from a tourism point of view in order to facilitate greater appreciation by the people of their heritage through domestic travel; (ii) Attract investment for the development of facilities for youth, and (iii) Provide land for the development of tourist facilities.

Third, based on the interview findings, the study recommends the following measures to improve infrastructure to improve the image of the country: (i) Identify and plan the required international air access structure, and negotiate the inclusion of the new international airports as points that can be served by international carriers. (ii) Plan and commence the upgrading of the domestic airport network of each region, and develop feeder airports and helicopter landing facilities to connect to remote areas, and provide emergency services. (iii) Upgrade and improve the main trunk road access, road safety and related facilities to the regions from the country's international borders, as well as from the main population centers of the country, and plan the development of the roadside facilities and the intra-regional branch road network leading to main attractions. (iv) Develop new rail links that better serve travel to and within the regions. (v) Upgrade the existing seaports within a region by expanding existing passenger terminal facilities and the general environs of the port areas around these, and (vi) undertake studies to determine the potential demand for sea passenger services from other international ports and developing new ones if necessary.

## **Conclusion**

The study develops a model of the antecedents and outcomes of place branding, identifying the main influences to the tourism industry. Given the increased attention on the place branding, the

lack of systematic and empirical research on the place branding and its relationships to its main consequence is alarming. Using the qualitative approach, the present study has provided a framework and a corresponding analysis of the country's competitive strengths and weakness as a tourist destination, the opportunities that exist for the expansion of its tourism sector, and the treats that it may face is a virtual step in developing appropriate goals, policy objective and strategies for the development of tourism. This research provides rich data on the relationship between place branding, place image, and place reputation. It is the first research to focus on place branding among country directors of travel and tourism, as well as travel agency companies' managers in Iran and UK.

The study has also a number of implications for practice. For organizations whose goal is to succeed in foreign markets, the interviewees recommend a series of activities to make place branding more explicit, facilitate learning, and help reestablish coherence between place branding and its antecedents. Our study illustrates the significance for managers and policy makers to distinguish the ways they invoke place branding in adapting to foreign markets. Also, policy makers and country brand managers should understand what consumers perceive about the country image and then plan suitable country branding strategies or public policies to employ the country's resources.

### **Limitations and directions for future studies**

The study is not without its limitations. This research was carried out in a single setting, which was limited to the Iran context. In a different country the findings might not be the same. The research design could be another limitation of this study. This research conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants among country directors of travel and tourism, as well

as travel agency company managers who were involved in the implementation of place branding communications for tourism, export promotion, and investment attraction to explore the respondents' experiences, feeling, beliefs and understanding about the concept of the study. Therefore, the qualitative questions were aligned to the study and have probably limited the opportunities for generalization; further study here is also recommended.

In addition to the research design, the qualitative study was restricted to the country policy makers and managers. However, tourists and managers' mindsets are not alike. The research did not consider tourists' perception. The results might have been different if the study had included both managers and tourists. Hence, care should be taken when interpreting these findings. Future research should include the validation of the findings of this study, especially in other cultural settings. A replicated study is needed in order to gain greater generalizability and validity for the relationships. Furthermore, the developed model could be investigated in future research using other research approaches and confirmatory statistical techniques.

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**Figure 1: A Framework of Place Branding, Place Image, and Place Reputation**

