

Review of Nation Branding Impact on Iran's Tourism Industry development

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Abstract

As a consequence of global interaction, real time news availability, consumer generated media and content, countries have become increasingly aware of their image domestically and internationally. In response to this awareness, some countries have adopted advertising and marketing practices to manage their country image. The current study aims to develop and test a theoretical model of nation branding, which integrates the concepts of the branding and nation images. It is proposed that the overall image of the country (i.e., nation brand) is a mediator between its brand assets (i.e., internal and external assets) and tourists' future behaviors (i.e., intentions to visit). The contribution of this paper is that, put the nation brand for the first time as a mediator role in this paper. The results confirmed that nation brand is influenced by two types of brand assets and is a critical mediator between brand assets and intention to visit.

Keywords: National Character, Nation Brand, Nation Brand Assets

I. Introduction

Perhaps for as long as humans have existed and learned to live together, forming tribes, villages, and now nations, they have put social processes in place to create order so as to flourish as a group. The group's ability to retain members, add new members, and trade with other groups depends on many different factors, but one of them is the image of a specific group and the way in which the group is seen by others. In contemporary terms, we call this a *nation brand* and the

brand notion has become an interesting hypothetical construct in the advertising, marketing and political literature of the past few decades.

Many countries have become increasingly aware of their image domestically and internationally. In response to this awareness, some countries have adopted advertising and marketing practices to manage their country image (Gilmore, 2002; Lodge, 2002; Martinovic, 2002; Supphellen & Nygaardsvik, 2002). Countries have either used non government professionals or borrowed marketing practices to help with initiatives that range from

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tourism (Harrison, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002), to country of origin (Kleppe, Iversen, & Stensaker, 2002).

Historically, concepts of nation brands could arguably be rooted in the study of national character, since the concept of national character can be traced back at least as far as the eighteenth century (Kra, 2002). Contemporary empirical research in national character, on the other hand, has taken place largely within the domain of personality psychology. With the tendency towards inter-disciplinary work, marketing merged with personality psychology to form studies in brand personality. On the surface, with the general acceptance of a theory of brand personality, national character would appear to be the logical label for the study of a nation's brand. However, empirical research of national character tends to liken country attributes to human personality traits. Yet a nation brand, consisting of its land, government, economics, culture, international alliances and more, is certainly more complex than human personality.

It is widely acknowledged that tourism destinations must be included in the consumers' evoked set, from which an ultimate decision is made (Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004; Dana & McCleary, 1995; Leisen, 2001; Tasci & Kozak, 2006). However, consumers are generally offered various destination choices that provide similar features such as quality accommodations, beautiful scenic view, and/or friendly people. Therefore, it is not enough for a destination to be included in the evoked set; instead the destination needs to be unique and differential to be selected as a final decision. From this perspective, the concept of nation branding is critical for a destination to be identified and differentiated from alternatives in the minds of the target market. Although not explicitly examined in the context of branding, destination image should be regarded as a pre-existing concept corresponding to nation branding (Pike, 2009). In fact, the core of nation branding is to build a positive country image that identifies and differentiates the country by selecting a consistent brand element mix (Cai, 2002). The image of a destination can be described as "perceptions about the place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory" (Cai, 2002, p. 723).

Current perceptions of Iran among many global audiences have been shaped by a combination of factors that have lead to the State being viewed solely through a conflict prism. The question is then begged of whether or not action can be taken to fundamentally change these perceptions. The emergence of the field of *nation branding* has produced research, lessons and insights into how nations can effectively utilize resources to shape audience perceptions in accordance with state interests and goals.

Iran is a country that is rich in diversity of cultural and historic terms, representing a recorded human history that stretches back some 10,000 years. Iran's tangible cultural assets include 10 ancient locations recognized by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as World heritage. In addition, this country has a rich natural diversity, including desert, mountains and coasts across climate zones from temperate to sub-tropical. In spite of being in list of top ten countries that have most amount of natural and cultural tourist attractions, interval amount of tourists that visit this country are very low (114th in world). One of the main reason for that is, lack of knowledge about Iran or in some cases, not very good reputation of Iran that make this country remove of tourists evoke set. In response to this, improving Iran's public reputation (international image) is critical.

This study firstly has attempted to identify and prioritize the nation branding most effective components and Secondly, tried to examine the effect of Iran's international image (nation brand) on tourists intention to visit Iran.

The current study focuses on developing and testing a theoretical model of nation branding, as well as exploring the potential of Iran as a preferred nation brand. Specifically, the study tries to fill the gap in the literature. This study aims to incorporate the existing concepts of branding with nation image studies. This study identifies the conceptual similarities between the components of destination image and nation brand assets in the marketing literature, and suggests two types of brand assets (i.e., internal and external assets) in destination branding. For this purpose, an empirical test was conducted in Tehran (capital of Iran), in which successful nation branding is necessary to overcome its lack of clear image.

II. Literature review

2.1 Brand personality

Up until the work of Aaker (1997), the term “brand personality” has been used loosely in the literature to describe such qualities as brand equity, brand value, and brand image. Though brand personality can contribute to brand equity and brand value, a brand personality is most similar to brand image. The AMA defines brand equity as “the value of a brand” (AMA, 2007) suggesting that brand equity contributes to the net worth of the enterprise. From a consumer perspective, brand equity is based on consumer attitudes about positive brand attributes and favorable consequences of brand use”.

According to the American Marketing Association, a brand image is defined as “The perception of a brand in the minds of persons. The brand image is a mirror reflection (though perhaps inaccurate) of the brand personality or product being. And It is what people believe about a brand (thoughts, feelings, expectations).

Just as personality psychology looks for individual differences in people, brand personality itself can – and often is – used as a basis for differentiation among brands (Siguaw, Mattila, & Austin, 1999). Furthermore, like personality psychology, brand personality exhibits enduring qualities across time and varying associations (Wee, 2004). Presumably the customer base for the brand welcomes and reflects that brand personality as well.

2.2 National character

Evidence shows that usage of the term national character goes back as far as 1920 (McDougall, 1920). As an area of study, social scientists during that time referred to this research as culture and personality theories (LeVine, 2001). The interaction between culture and personality was seen as inextricable, because “...human personality is both a continually producing factor and continually produced result of social evolution...”(Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927, p. 1831). In the early part of the twentieth century, the concept of national character was embraced largely by social psychology (Cattell, 1949; McDougall, 1920) and anthropology (Benedict, 1946; Gorer, 1948). Today, though the term national character has made its way into mainstream usage (Udell, 2006) and also into other areas such as public policy (Ridge & Levesque, 2002) , much of the research comes out of psychology, more

specifically, personality psychology. Using personality traits as the basis for describing national character, researchers have compared Western and Eastern differences (Sun, 2002), linked national character to economic behavior (Yang & Lester, 1995, 1997).

2.3 Nation brands

Although there is some contentiousness over treating a country as a brand (Klein, 2002; Olins, 2002), evidence shows that employing business branding strategies can significantly enhance a country's brand image. The enhancement of a country's image benefits many countries outside their borders for product exports (e.g., country of origin); (Kleppe, Iversen, & Stensaker, 2002) and on their own soil attracting tourists from other countries (Harrison, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002).

The process of branding a country has been likened to branding a business. Although it is dangerous to take the analogies too far, branding businesses and nations do have a lot in common (Olins, 2002, p. 247). The assumption is that both may use similar techniques whether they are implemented by the marketing and advertising staff of a company or by those persons responsible for communicating news of country governance, commerce and image. In both situations, the belief is that people can be influenced in similar ways.

A healthy brand can benefit a country in several ways. Two of those ways addressed in the literature are in country of origin work and tourism.

Tourism, or as it is increasingly being referred to as destination branding (Caldwell & Freire, 2004), in many countries also benefits greatly from a healthy nation brand. For instance, New Zealand has successfully billed its brand as "100% Pure," featuring the diversity of the country as an attractive tourist destination (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002).

Part of the problem with the term nation brand as it is currently treated in the literature is that the concept has not been clearly defined with a unified approach for analysis. A country's image is described as resulting "from its geography, history, proclamations, art and music, famous citizens and other features" (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Nation brands not only provide extrinsic clues in product evaluations, but they are products themselves.

In an ever-emerging world economy, globalization is no longer a buzz concept but a direct path to developing a financially healthy nation. Anholt (2002) notes that some academic papers act as microscopes and some act as telescopes. Right now, the issue of nation branding is in its infancy and needs to be addressed with powerful telescopes in experienced hands.

In order to brand themselves, countries need an integrated communication policy or framework that coordinates how the countries portray themselves (Brymer, 2003). This portrayal needs to be consistent, intrusive and memorable in order to distinguish that nation from others. There are those who strongly support the notion of nation branding, not just internally, but also beyond a country's borders (Lindstrom, 2006). A strong nation brand is not just good for tourism and business, but it creates a whole "ecosystem of branding" for a country (Lindstrom, 2006).

2.4 Nation brand assets

The image of a place is an important asset (Ryan & Gu, 2008). Ryan and Gu (2008) emphasize that the image itself is the beginning point of tourist's expectation, which is eventually a determinant of tourist behaviors. In the tourism literature, it is widely acknowledged that overall image of a nation is influenced by internal and external assets (Dinnie, 2007, 29).

Unfortunately, the majority of image studies treated destination image as a cognitive and affective evaluation. Only few studies employed nation brand components in understanding the overall image of a destination (Othavong, 2007).

A fundamental concept in understanding how to effectively engage audiences is 'brand equity,' which simply refers to the value of a brand. Determining a brand's value will significantly help in determining specific strategies and tactics to use for segmented target audiences. Dinnie states that there are two approaches to viewing brand equity: the consumer perspective and the financial perspective. The *consumer perspective* holds that "brand equity may be evaluated in terms of consumer awareness of the brand in question, consumer judgments regarding brand quality, uniqueness, prestige and so on (Dinnie, 2007, p. 62). The *financial perspective* "involves attempts of various kinds to attach a financial value to specific brands (Dinnie, 2007, p. 62). The stakeholder theory of brand equity suggests that "brand value is co-created through interaction with multiple strategic stakeholders, and therefore, it would be erroneous to focus only on the customer when assessing brand equity (Dinnie, 2007, p. 63). Dinnie points out, there is no universal consensus on accounting methods and procedures for the financial evaluation of brands (Shore, 2010, p. 28). Thus, Dinnie's suggestion for nations to conduct research in order to gain insight into specific dimensions of their nation brand equity (NBEQ), (Shore, 2010, p. 28) seems to suggest that strategists should determine which variables of brand equity are most important and relevant to continually measure, respective to specific national goals and interests.

As rich repositories of cultural meanings, possessing deep emotional and experiential qualities, nation-brands should be well-placed to develop such emotional attachments to their brands (Dinnie, 2007, p. 64). Thus, a deep understanding of audience values, beliefs and emotions is required when designing and implementing effective nation brand campaigns (Wang, 2008, p. 12). Dinnie spends considerable effort into identifying "major sources of NBEQ that potentially form the basis for developing strategic nation-branding campaigns (Dinnie, 2007, p. 67). These sources are presented in the form of an asset-based model in which the internal and external assets comprising NBEQ are conceptualized in terms of innate, nurtured, vicarious and disseminated assets. He defines NBEQ as "the tangible and intangible, internal and external assets (or liabilities) of the nation" and states that these assets and liabilities represent the sources for NBEQ (Shore, 2010, p. 29).

Dinnie explains that innate assets are "enduring elements of national identity, those aspects of the essence of the nation that can be viewed as assets in attempts to build nation brand equity. Such assets include a nation's iconography, landscape and culture... and these provide a powerful and authentic means of differentiation for the nation-brand. Moving on from innate assets, nurtured assets derive from conscious contemporary efforts to create a healthy environment for nation-brand equity development. Dinnie argues that if domestic populations and

stakeholders are not aware of the images and reputations that are being projected of their own country, they cannot expect to 'live the brand.' The result can be a gap between reality and the projected image, which will create dissonance when external audiences discover that the nation's projected image is not rooted in reality (Dinnie, 2007, p. 70). While innate and nurtured assets are *internal* to a country, vicarious and disseminated assets are *external* to a country. Vicarious assets are experienced second-hand, rather than through direct personal contact (Dinnie, 2007, p. 71). Culture, specifically pop culture, can be both an innate, internal asset and vicarious, external asset due to its exposure to audiences outside of the country. Music and film, for example, are mediums through which powerful images of national identity can be expressed. Moving on from vicarious assets, disseminated assets are "tangible projections of the nation-brand existing beyond the nation's homeland and throughout the wider world." Examples include branded exports, the use of official and unofficial brand ambassadors, and a country's Diaspora community.

It is important to consider both internal and external components of nation image to build a comprehensive nation branding model. Pike (2009) further supports the notion that brand assets in nation branding should include internal and external asset components. Thus, this study suggests that the nation brand of a particular destination is influenced by the internal and external assets stored in the consumers' minds.

Although it is argued that internal and external asset components are hierarchically correlated to form a nation image (Cai, 2002, Gartner, 1993, Woodside & Lysonski, 1989), it is still possible that each internal and external nation brand asset component would have unique contributions to the overall brand formation. That is, each asset would have a different level of impact on the overall brand formation because brand assets are not considered equally weighted in terms of performance to consumers (Keller, 2008, p. 59). The separate treatment of internal and external components is necessary to examine their unique effects on consumers' attitude structure and future behaviors (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Russel, 1980; Russel & Pratt, 1980; Russel & Snodgrass, 1987; Russel, Ward, & Pratt, 1981). Consequently, this study proposes that positive internal and external asset components as separate and independent brand assets would be positively related to the overall brand of a nation (i.e., brand image). Thus, hypothesis 1 and 2 are established as:

H1: Internal assets will positively affect the visitor's overall image of a nation (Nation brand).

H2: External assets will positively affect the visitor's overall image of a nation (Nation brand).

2.5 Tourists behaviors

It has been supported that the overall image of the destination is influential not only on the destination selection process but also on tourist behaviors in general (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988; Bigné, Sánchez & Sánchez, 2001; Cooper et al., 1993; Mansfeld, 1992). The intentions to visit or revisit the destination and to spread a positive word-of-mouth have been the most important behavioral consequences in destination image and post-consumption behavior studies.

Due to the intangible nature of a service product, a consumer's purchase decision usually involves higher levels of perceived risk than purchasing manufactured products. Positive attitude is an excellent source to reduce perceived risk for its clarification and feedback opportunities (Murray, 1991). In addition, it is considered an

important information source influencing consumer's choice of destination (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Oppermann, 2000; Weaver & Lawton, 2002; Yvette & Turner, 2002). It is argued that a person with a perceived positive image is more likely to recommend the destination (Bigné et al., 2001). Thus, it is expected that a visitor with positive overall image, as a total impression of internal and external as set of nation, would be more likely to visit the destination and recommend it to others. That is, overall image would mediate the relationships between nation brand image and tourist behavior in destination selection. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H3: Visitor's perception of overall image (nation brand) toward a destination will mediate the relationships between two nation brand assets (internal and external assets) and the visitor's intention to visit the destination. Fig. 1 showed represents the conceptual framework of building Nation brand.

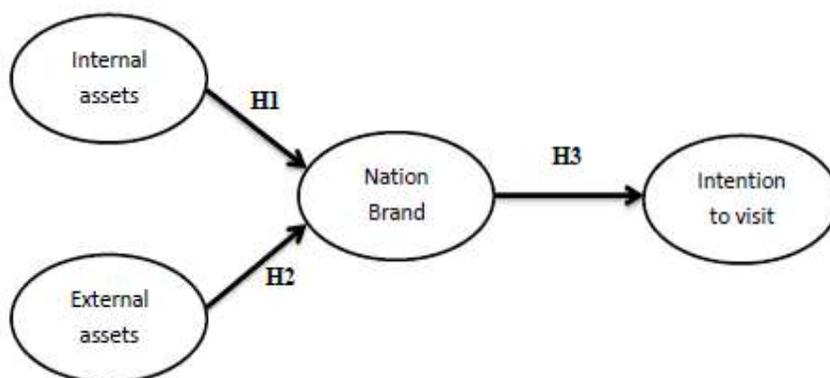


Fig 1: A model of nation branding with hypothesized paths

III. Methodology

3.1 Sampling

The target population of this study was foreign visitors, who stopped at 10 most visited tourist attractions of Tehran as most visited city of Iran (including museums, palaces and theme parks) during a twelve-week period in March and May 2019. A confidence interval approach was used to determine the sample size, suggested by Burns and Bush (1995).

With 50% of the estimated variability in the population (Burns & Bush, 1995), the sample size was set at 386 at the 95% confidence level. Assuming a response rate can decrease, a total of 450 people were approached to participate in the survey.

The next step was to select the interval of the samples (nth) by using a SRS. The interval of the sample (nth) was determined by dividing the previous total visitor number of the ten tourist attractions by the number of attendance at each of them. Every nth visitor who stopped at the ten tourist attractions was approached to participate

in the survey. A random starting number for each day was created. A set of questionnaires along with an instruction letter was distributed to ten tourist attractions according to a proportionate subsample size for each attractions.

3.2 Instrument

The survey questionnaire consisted of three major sections. The first section included questions relating to the individual travel behavior of respondents and the information source used prior to planning a trip to Iran. The travel behavior items included the number of times they visited Iran, purpose for the trip, length of stay, familiarity with Iran and their desire to visit Iran again.

The second section was developed to assess the internal, external assets and perceptions of overall image toward Iran as a travel destination. To generate a complete list of the respondent's perceptions associated with internal assets, a method used by Outhavong (2007) and Dinnie (2009) was adapted. During the review of the literature on nation brand measurement, all the attributes used in the previous studies were recorded and grouped by the researcher into a "master list" of attributes. In addition, two focus group sessions were held with twelve participants each developing multi-item scales capturing various aspects of Iran's image as a travel destination. For additional input, various travel literature and promotional brochures on Iran's tourism were also reviewed. The last step was to have a panel of expert judges, who are academics and practitioners in the areas of tourism, marketing, and consumer behavior, examine the complete list of attributes to eliminate redundancies and to add any missing attributes.

Finally, 20 items relating to internal assets were selected. These attributes divided in two major group that developed by Dinnie (2007) included: Innate (cultural heritage, environment) and Nurtured (education and healthcare, wealth and power). External assets of destination was measured by the same method used in internal assets using nation brand scales developed by Othavong and Dinnie. (2007).

16 items relating to external assets were selected. These attributes divided in two major group that developed by Dinnie (2007) included: Vicarious (human rights, peaceful) and Disseminated (advertisements, foreign affairs). Respondents were asked to rate Iran as a travel destination on each of 20 attributes on a 5-point Likert scale (1=*not at all descriptive*, 5=*extremely descriptive*).

Additional two questions were included to determine the respondent's intention to revisit Iran and the respondent's intention to recommend Iran as a favorable destination to others with a 5point Likert-type scale (1=most unlikely; 5=most likely). The final section was devoted to collecting demographic information about the respondents.

A pilot test was performed to assess how well the survey instrument captured the constructs it was supposed to measure, and to test the internal consistency and reliability of questionnaire items.

The results of the reliability tests for each dimension showed that Cronbach's alpha was 0.73, indicating above the minimum value of 0.70, which is considered acceptable as a good indication of reliability (Hair et al., 1998). Based on the results of the pilot test and Feedback from tourist's experts, the final version was modified considering questionnaire design, wording, and measurement scale.

3.3 Data Analysis

Principal component analyses were used to determine the underlying dimensions of Iran assets. Confirmatory factor analysis and SEM were utilized to test the conceptual model of Nation branding. The data was processed with the statistical package SPSS 18.0 and LISREL 8.7.

IV. Results

The result of Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2=111.747$, $Sig=0.000$), indicating that nonzero correlation existed. The overall value of MSA was 0.735, which was well above the recommended threshold of sampling adequacy at the minimum of 0.50 (Hair et al., 1998). These two tests suggested that the data was suitable for an exploratory factor analysis. A principal component analysis with orthogonal (VARIMAX) rotations was assessed to identify underlying dimensions of internal and external assets.

Table1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.813
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	111.747
	Df	28
	Sig.	.000

Based on the eigenvalue greater than one, scree-plot criteria, and the percentage of variance criterion, four factors were chosen which captured 60.77% of the total variance. Among the 12 attributes, four items had communalities less than 0.50 and factor loading less than .40. When there are variables that do not load on any factor or whose communalities are deemed too low, each can be evaluated for possible deletion (Hair et al., 1998). The dropping of these variables with low communalities and low factor loadings increases the total variance explained approximately 10% (from 58.2% to 68.6%). The results of the principle component analysis with orthogonal (VARIMAX) rotations are shown in Table 2 and 3. The scree-plot indicated that four factors may be appropriate.

Table 2: Dimension of Nation Brand

Variables	Internal assets	External assets
Innate		*0.98 12.45
Nurtured		0.79 9.80
Vicarious	0.86 11.66	
Dissemination	0.75 12.32	
Sig Level	0.001	0.001

*The first number is factor weight and second number is t value

Table 3: Dimension of Sub-Criteria for Nation Brand

Variables	Innate	Nurtured	Vicarious	Dissemination
Her (Cultural heritage)	*0.95 13.08			
En (Environment)	0.82 22.94			
Edu (Education & Healthcare)		0.92 14.50		
Eco (Wealth and Economy)		0.88 12.77		

Hu (Human rights)			0.80 22.23	
Pea (Peacefulness)			0.81 22.34	
Ad (Advertisements)				0.88 17.91
Sem (Seminars & Foreign affairs)				0.72 17.56

The scale reliability for each factor was tested for internal consistency by assessing the item-to total correlation for each separate item and Cronbach’s alpha for the consistency of the entire scale. Rules of thumb suggest that the item-to-total correlations exceed .50 and lower limit for Cronbach’s alpha is .70 (Hair et al., 1998). The results of the item-to-total correlation indicated that each of the four factors exceeded the threshold of .50 ranging between 0.71 and .0.83. These four factors were later used to construct summated scales as independent variables for structural equation modeling (SEM) for hypotheses testing.

4.1 Measurement model

Through principal component analyses, the four underlying dimensions of internal and external assets were identified. All these 8 constructs were operationalized in the measurement model (Table 2&3). There is no reason to expect uncorrelated perceptions; thus the factors are allowed to correlate as well (Hair et al., 1998).

For purposes of CFA in this study, a covariance matrix was employed (Table 4). LISREL program (version 8.7) was chosen to estimate the measurement model and the construct covariances.

Table 4: Covariance matrix for CFA

	Her	En	Edu	Eco	Hu	Pea	Ad	Sem
Her	1.000	.420	2.524	3.327	.290	.362	12.319	1.445
En	3.420	31.09	0.464	.429	.333	.416	32.276	9.301
Edu	5.524	4.464	21.21	.283	.187	.409	10.257	11.296

Eco	6.327	2.429	64.283	1.000	.654	.427	76.366	0.332
Hu	1.290	1.333	0.187	0.654	13.81	.485	3.560	31.423
Pea	2.362	9.416	11.409	15.427	8.485	1.000	21.570	13.302
Ad	0.319	0.276	71.257	21.366	0.560	.570	31.00	.355
Sem	1.445	.301	.296	1.332	14.423	.302	.355	2.98

4.2 Structural model

Based on the results of CFA, the structural model was tested. The overall model fit statistics show that the model is acceptable to represent the hypothesized constructs. Table 5 shows the fitness of model. All the paths proposed in the structural model were statistically significant of the expected positive direction (Table 5). Thus, all three hypotheses failed to be rejected.

Table 5: Goodness of fit

factor	value
χ^2	P* (0.789) 89.11
RMSEA	0.013
CFI	0.98
NFI	0.97
RMR	0.008
GFI	0.96
AGFI	0.95

The data of this study show fitness characteristics and factor structure of the theoretical foundation of performance variables, and this represents a good fit of the theoretical structure is in line with the questions.

Hypothesis 1, the more positive internal assets of a destination, the more likely visitors would have the positive overall image of the nation branding, was failed to reject (standardized coefficient= 0.91; t value= 1.35 ; Sig< 0.05). Hypothesis 2 also failed to be rejected (standardized coefficient= 0.82; t value= 3.65; Sig< 0.05), supporting that the visitor's perception of Iran's nation brand is positively influenced by external assets. Hypothesis 3 tested the positive relationship between nation branding as a mediator on intention to visit. It also failed to be rejected (standardized coefficient= 0.85; t value= 3.49; Sig<0.05), suggesting that the nation branding of a destination has a positive influence on intention to visit.

The results confirmed that internal assets have the strongest effect on nation brand, followed by external assets, respectively. Hypotheses 3 tested the mediating role of nation brand on the relationships between the two nation brand's assets and tourist behaviors (i.e., intention to visit Iran). The results supported the mediating role of nation brand.

Path Diagrams play a fundamental role in structural modeling. Path diagrams are like flowcharts. They show variables interconnected with lines that are used to indicate causal flow. One can think of a path diagram as a device for showing which variables cause changes in other variables. However, path diagrams *need not* be thought of strictly in this way. They may also be given a narrower; more specific interpretation. The structural model was shown in figure2.

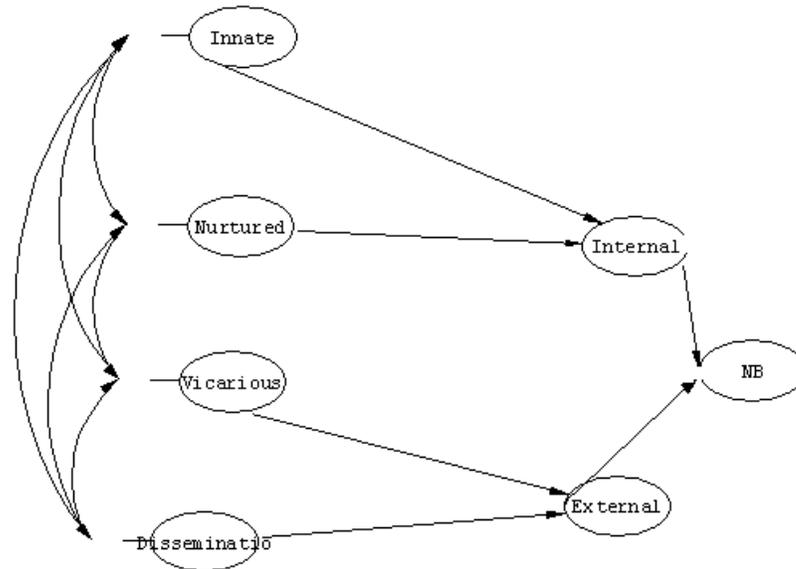


Fig 2: Path Diagram model

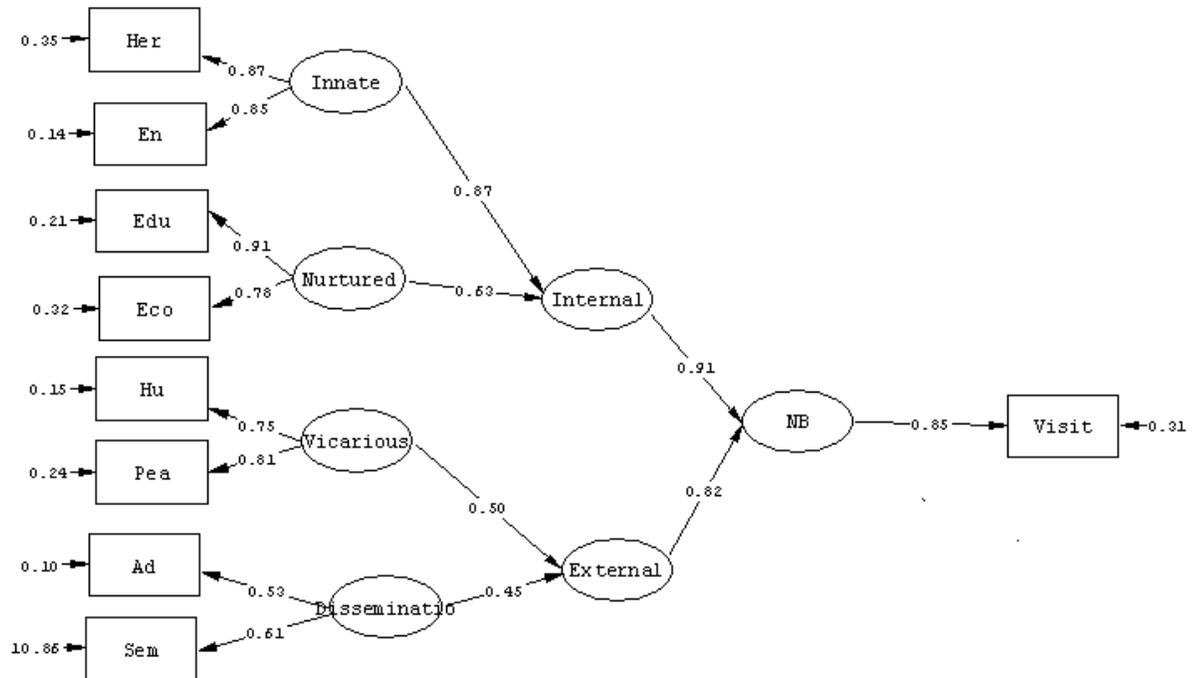


Fig 3: Nation branding model results

V. Conclusions

This study aimed to test a theoretical model of nation branding. It was proposed that destination image (i.e., brand image) is a multi-dimensional construct, influenced by the internal and external assets, and four constructs that collectively affect tourist behaviors (Intention to visit).

Overall, the results showed that nation branding exerts a mediating role between the two components as the brand assets and the behavioral intentions. Strong and distinctive nation brand should not only be a goal of branding practices in capturing consumers' minds but also as a mediator to influence consumer behaviors, directly related to the success of the tourist destinations. Therefore, in the competitive tourism market, tourist destinations must establish a positive and strong brand image, derived from the internal and external assets associations, to increase tendency of tourists to revisit a destination and to attract new tourists to the destination.

The contribution of this paper is that, put the nation brand for the first time as a mediator role in this paper. As discussed, nation brand could have great effect on visiting the country.

The results confirm the current argument that the image of a nation directly influences intentions to visit the destination (Alcaniz et al., 2005; Bigné et al., 2001).

As Cai (2002) claimed, destination image cannot expand to destination branding without the consideration of brand identity. This study argued that brand identity needs to be created and/or

enhanced based on a clear understanding of the destination image that consumers have formed. Based on the results, the current study claims that internal and external assets of destination must be identified to understand the brand image of a destination for its significant effects on overall image. Moreover, the perceived image (i.e., brand image or overall image of a destination) should be assessed with the projected image (i.e., brand identity) by the destination. The assessment offers information to build the desired image that is consistent with the brand identity of the destination (Cai, 2002). If the perceived image is not consistent with brand identity, the source(s) of the problem must be identified and corrected (Kotler & Gertner, 2004). Promoting brand identity without fixing the current problems would cause negative word of-

mouth communications due to the discrepancy between the expectations and the actual performance. Positioning strategy must be implemented to create the desired brand image in the minds of the target market. In addition, tourism destinations should monitor the destination image regularly to examine if the projected image is well adopted by tourists. This is because consistency of core identity is critical for the success of long-term oriented nation branding practices.

VI. Limitation and recommendations for future study

One limitation of this study is that the data collection was conducted in the spring. A traveler's characteristics and images of Iran as a travel destination may vary by season (e.g., summer, winter, etc.). For example, a traveler who has visited Iran in the spring season may vary from a different image and perception toward Iran as a travel destination as opposed to that who has traveled in the winter. Thus, the findings of this study are limited to images of Iran for spring pleasure travelers. To overcome this limitation, a survey can be conducted in different seasons.

Second, the population of this study was limited to visitors who stopped at the selected ten most visited attractions Tehran. Although these ten attractions were selected based on the total number of visitors, the results may be only applicable for the travelers from these attractions in Tehran. It may not be generalizable for those who did not stop by any of the attractions during their trip to Iran. The results of this study may have excluded additional nation brand assets that might have helped better explain tourist destination choice behavior. For example, socio-psychological travel motivations of an individual were suggested by numerous tourism scholars as a crucial construct to form tourism destination images. Future research should investigate additional destination and nation brand assets that may influence overall image and tourist behaviors.

Fourth, the number of questions measuring certain constructs in the model is constrained by the practical need to develop a parsimonious questionnaire. The findings are limited to the selected items measuring the related constructs. We suggest that future research utilize more items to measure designated constructs.

In analyzing the practices of nation branding, studies should focus on the types of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic) that are being produced and exchanged within the local and global fields of nation branding. In this task, the work of Pierre Bourdieu can be particularly relevant, as it offers a theory of the “political economy of practices and symbolic power that includes a theory of symbolic interests, a theory of capital, and a theory of symbolic violence and symbolic capital” (Othavong, 2007).

A deep understanding of audience values, beliefs and emotions associated with Brand Iran should be reached before designing and implementing nation brand campaigns. Additionally, strategists should maintain a pulse of these “emotional forces” in order to keep the branding initiative based on up to date research.

No matter how large a budget is allocated towards the Brand Iran initiative, how attainable goals and objectives may seem, and how much value seems to generate for the world, brand engagement will not generate genuine, long-term success for the State unless issues relating to the Brand Iran identity are sufficiently addressed.

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