

Original Research Paper

Investigating the Dimensions of Branding Tourism Destinations (Case Study: Simorgh Brand)

Azadeh Azimi^{1*}, Mahla Rezaei²

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism Services Management, Faculty of Tourism,
University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

2. Ph.D. Student, Department of Tourism Services Management, Faculty of Tourism, University of Tehran,
Tehran, Iran.

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Abstract | Branding refers to the development of a name, sign, symbol, or a combination of these elements that identify a specific product and distinguish it from competitors. Today, tourism destinations utilize branding as a fundamental strategy to achieve their goals. Given the intense competition among countries and regions to attract tourists, creating a place brand is one of the key marketing strategies in this context. In fact, destination branding is considered a practical method for attracting more tourists. The Simorgh brand has been introduced as the tourism brand of Iran. This article aims to examine the dimensions of the Simorgh brand from the perspective of tourism professionals in Iran. For this purpose, the dimensions of branding have been compared with the characteristics of the Simorgh brand. This research employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both library research and field study methods to collect data. Additionally, the fundamental correlation technique was used to analyze the dimensions of the Simorgh brand. The research findings indicate that brand satisfaction holds the highest value, while brand awareness ranks the lowest. This suggests that, overall, tourism industry professionals in Iran have a high level of satisfaction with the Simorgh brand. Each dimension is examined and analyzed in detail, followed by recommendations for the further development of the brand.

Keywords | Brand, Branding, Tourism Destinations, Branding Dimensions, Simorgh.

Introduction and Problem Statement | Brands are one of the most powerful forces shaping consumers' lives. They act as communication partners, fostering a sense of belonging and helping consumers construct, express, and affirm their desired identities (Park & Chang, 2022). In the context of tourism, destination branding involves creating an image that influences consumers' decisions to choose one destination over another (Giannopoulos et al., 2021). Destinations are viewed as brands and used as competitive positioning tools to appeal to customer preferences, persuading them to choose a destination even if they have not previously experienced it (Pappu et al., 2007).

One of the main challenges in creating a distinctive brand is understanding the essence of a place's identity and recognizing the key characteristics that define its personality. These factors are closely tied to the culture and its core values (Marzano & Scott, 2009). Since brand meanings are socially constructed and culturally dependent, comprehending the elements that define a sense of place not only helps determine what should be depicted but also how it should be represented. These meanings influence the fulfillment of expectations from tourism experiences and play a crucial role in the sustainability of a brand's appeal (Campelo et al., 2013). Consequently, tourism branding is a powerful tool for establishing a lasting and long-term connection in the minds

* Corresponding Author: 09125307194, azimi87@ut.ac.ir

of tourists, and countries strive to attract visitors by creating a strong and appealing brand. Various dimensions are involved in building such a brand.

Iran is recognized as one of the developing countries with favorable climatic conditions and rich cultural heritage. Despite its vast tourism potential, little effort has been made in recent years to effectively promote its tourism assets. Unfortunately, designing a suitable brand for Iran and introducing it to the international community has not received sufficient attention. However, in February 2019, the Simorgh tourism brand was selected as Iran's national brand. This brand was developed based on field studies conducted by local scholars and interviews with international tourists who had visited Iran.

Given the importance of branding in tourism destinations, and the attention this issue has received in advanced countries with developed tourism sectors, this research aims to examine the dimensions of the Simorgh brand and compare them with the standard dimensions of destination branding. Accordingly, the research seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the key dimensions of branding in tourism destinations?
2. To what extent are these dimensions reflected in the Simorgh national brand?

Research Background

Overall, the body of research on place branding has not been very extensive over the years. Pritchard and Morgan (1995) conducted the first significant study on place branding. From 1995 to 2015, the

development of destination branding research progressed slowly. However, a noticeable increase in studies on this topic has been observed from 2016 to 2022 (Fig. 1).

If we examine the development of destination branding topics over time, we can identify several key areas of focus. From 1995 to 2010, research primarily concentrated on tourist behavior, brand image, destination branding, and tourism development, as illustrated in Fig. 2 During the period from 2011 to 2016, studies expanded to include themes such as tourism destinations, co-creation, city branding, destination branding, and national identity. Finally, from 2017 to 2022, research on destination branding further evolved to encompass topics like destination loyalty, co-creation, communication, sustainability, place branding, satisfaction, and cultural identity.

Najafipour and Pourfaraj (2014), in their article titled Ranking of Factors Affecting Tourism Brand Identity of Kerman City, ranked the factors influencing the tourism brand identity of Kerman City. Through content analysis of semi-structured interviews with experts from four sectors - academic departments, government organizations, private sector managers, and managers of non-governmental organizations in the field of cultural heritage and tourism - 70 basic themes (indicators), 12 organizing themes (components), and 7 comprehensive themes (dimensions) were identified. In the quantitative section, the findings from the qualitative section were validated, and the identified factors were ranked based on the opinions of tourists, the primary

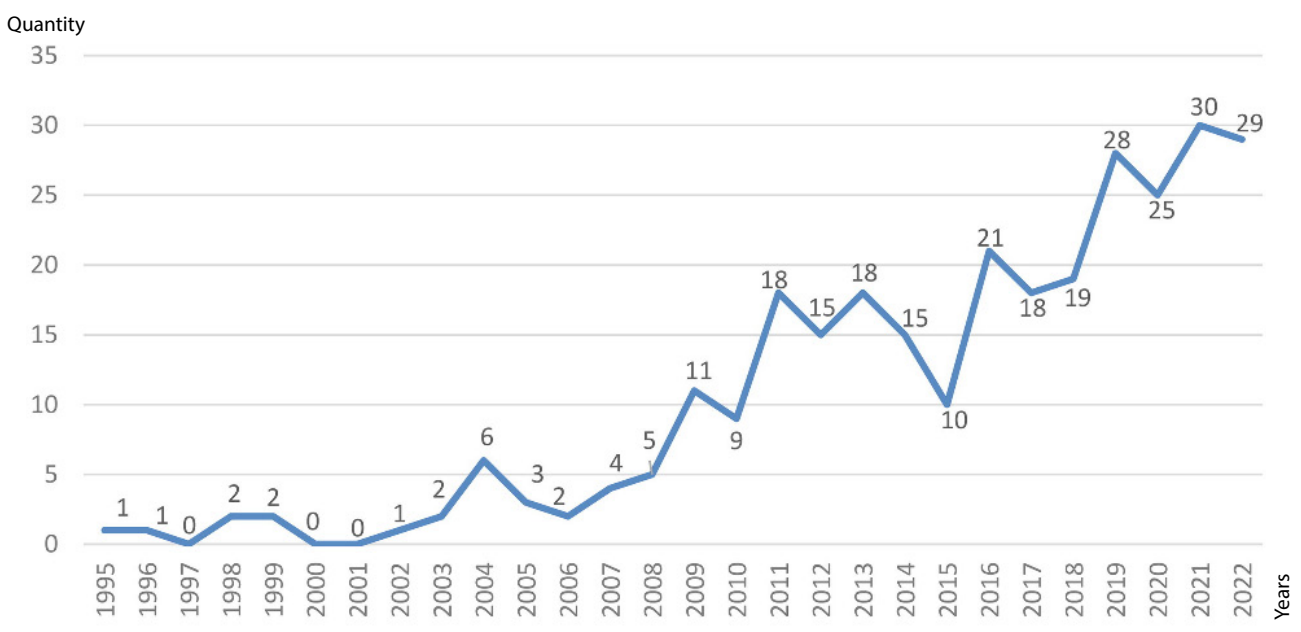


Fig. 1. Trend of studies on place branding from 1995 to 2022. Source: Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024.

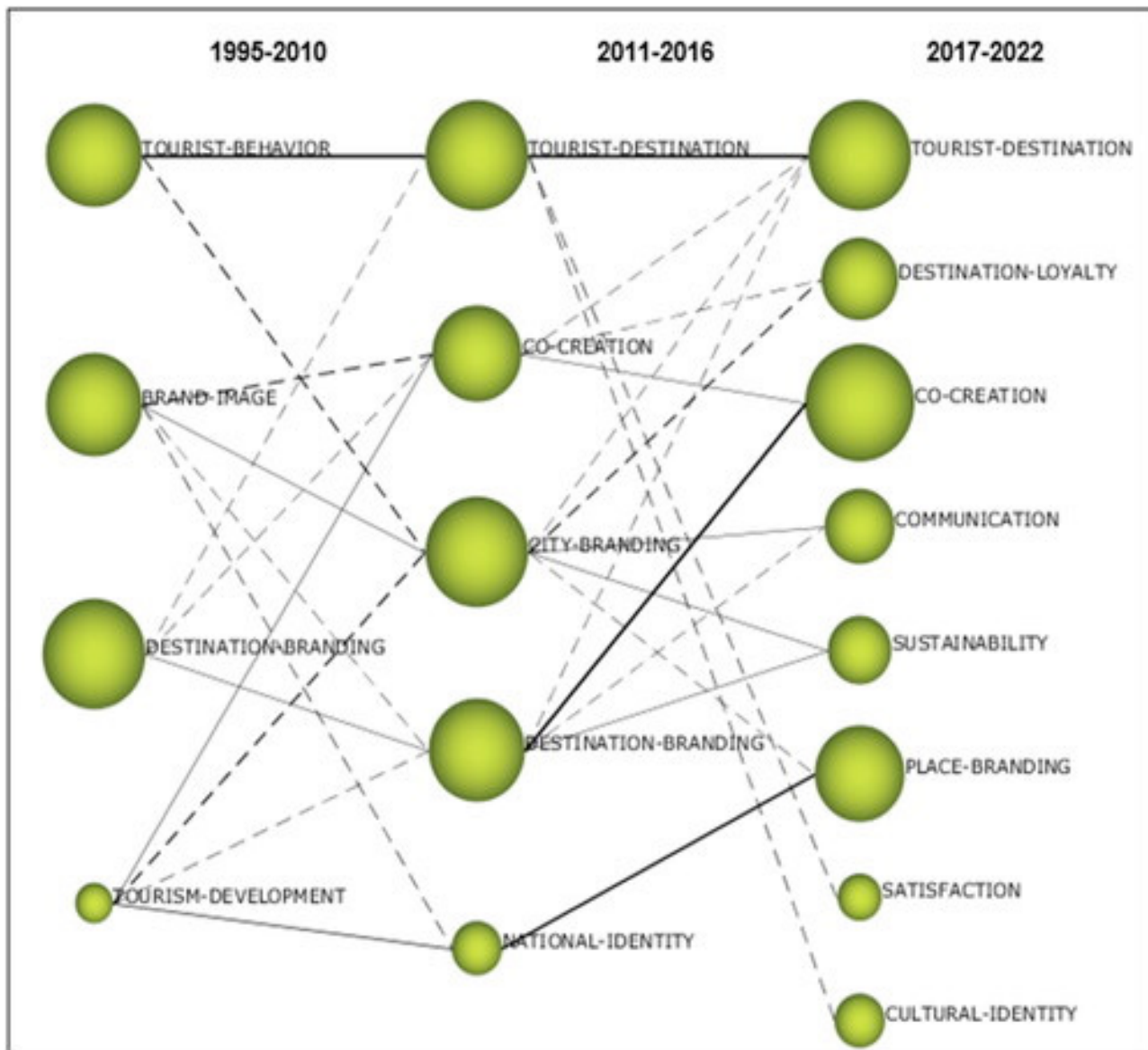


Fig. 2. Map of the longitudinal evolution of place branding themes. Source: Authors.

audience for Kerman City’s tourism brand identity. The results showed that the dimensions of “urban and physical management” and “economic” had the highest ranks, with average scores of 22.5 and 65.4, respectively. On the other hand, the dimensions of “psychological” and “marketing” had the lowest ranks, with average scores of 2.43 and 3.24, respectively.

Shirmohammadi et al. (2022), in their article “The Effect of Tourism Festival Brand Reputation on Brand Attachment to a Tourism City”, explored the impact of a tourism festival’s brand reputation on brand attachment through the variables of brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand image, specifically in the context of rose-picking festivals in Kashan. The results of the hypothesis testing indicated that components of brand reputation - such as reliability,

familiarity, and expertise - had a positive and significant effect on the awareness, perceived quality, and brand image of Kashan.

Faramarz Pour et al. (2020) examined the role of commercial marketing in cultural tourism branding, with an emphasis on experiential marketing, in their study titled “The Role of Commercial Marketing in Cultural Tourism Branding (Case Study: Neyshabur City)”. Their findings identified six general categories - five senses, feeling, thinking, relationship, action and reaction, and emotion - along with 33 sub-indicators as the most important elements of cultural tourism branding with a focus on sensory marketing.

Jalalian (2019), in his article “Investigating Factors Affecting Brand Equity in Tourism Destinations”, analyzed the factors that impact brand equity in the

tourism destination of Marivan. This applied study used a descriptive-analytical approach, collecting data through field (survey) and library methods. The findings revealed that in addition to brand image, factors such as brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand awareness also directly influence the brand equity of Marivan.

Nassaji Kamrani et al. (2017), in their study “Explaining the Factors Affecting the Promotion of the Tourism Brand of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, identified four key factors impacting Iran’s tourism brand: the tourism industry, tourism destinations, domestic factors, and international factors. Additionally, 16 sub-factors, including economic policy, social networks, foreign tourist experiences, global sports successes, and scientific and artistic achievements, were analyzed.

Lezgi and Sayami (2017), in a study on urban branding, prioritized six key factors, including satisfaction with urban services and infrastructure, transportation services, proper access, and the international status of the city. Among these, the city’s unique characteristics and assets received the highest score, while its international status received the lowest.

Mukti and Rufia (2024), in their article “Community-Based Tourism: A Destination Branding Model for the Historic Village of Segonong”, used a phenomenological approach to examine how integrating daily community activities, environmental protection, and partnerships with sectors such as education, culture, and the Jakarta Dairy Company can enhance the economic, social, and cultural situation of the village. The study concluded that for effective community-based tourism branding, it is essential to focus on product innovation, improvement strategies, social networks, marketing communications, educational tourism, collaboration, equity, and value chain development.

In their article “Destination Brand Identity: Challenges, Opportunities, and Future Research Agenda”, Escobar-Farfán et al. (2024) employed a scientometric methodology to map scientific contributions in the field of destination branding. Their findings highlighted two groundbreaking structures in the field and identified eight key themes for future research: a) tourism destinations, b) digital communications and technologies, c) co-creation, d) place branding, e) cultural identity, f) sustainable destinations, g) dimensional aspects, and h) destination satisfaction.

Finally, Zenker et al. (2017) found in their research that positive attitudes toward place branding among

residents increased with brand complexity. However, they emphasized that place branding for residents requires more complexity than destination branding and that all sector brands must be interconnected.

De Noronha et al. (2017) published an article titled “Confused Branding? An Exploratory Study of Place Branding Practices among Place Management Professionals”. Their findings indicate that the strategic potential of place branding is negatively impacted by an emphasis on operational thinking, which hinders innovation and undermines a holistic approach to urban management. They recommend conducting quantitative research to gain a deeper understanding of place branding and urban management.

In a separate study, Liu & Chou (2016) examined tourism in Kinmen, Taiwan, and found that brand value is the top priority, followed by marketing strategies and tourism incentives.

Based on existing research in the field of branding, four categories of studies can be identified according to their focus on indicators. The first category includes studies that emphasize indicators such as place marketing, place branding, destination image, identity, culture, and urban characteristics.

Most research has relied on these indicators. The second category concentrates on indicators related to food, politics, governance, marketing, national branding, peace, and destinations. Additional studies address management, stakeholder engagement, and urban indicators. Finally, a smaller subset of studies focuses on innovation and heritage (Fig. 3).

Theoretical Foundations

A strong and desirable brand has emerged as a powerful marketing tool, as tourists often prefer destinations with a favorable mental image over those with merely beautiful landscapes and scenery (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Beyond promoting specific products and services, major brands now invest millions of dollars and significant effort into establishing themselves as global brands (Steenkamp, 2014). Consequently, competition among brands is intensifying, with an increasing number of businesses recognizing the importance of branding (Išoraite, 2018).

The global tourism competition presents challenges for destinations, including the struggle for access to ideas, financial resources, talent, and visitors. Destinations vie for a share of revenue, talent, and visibility, which are influenced by the overall country image and the strength of the destination

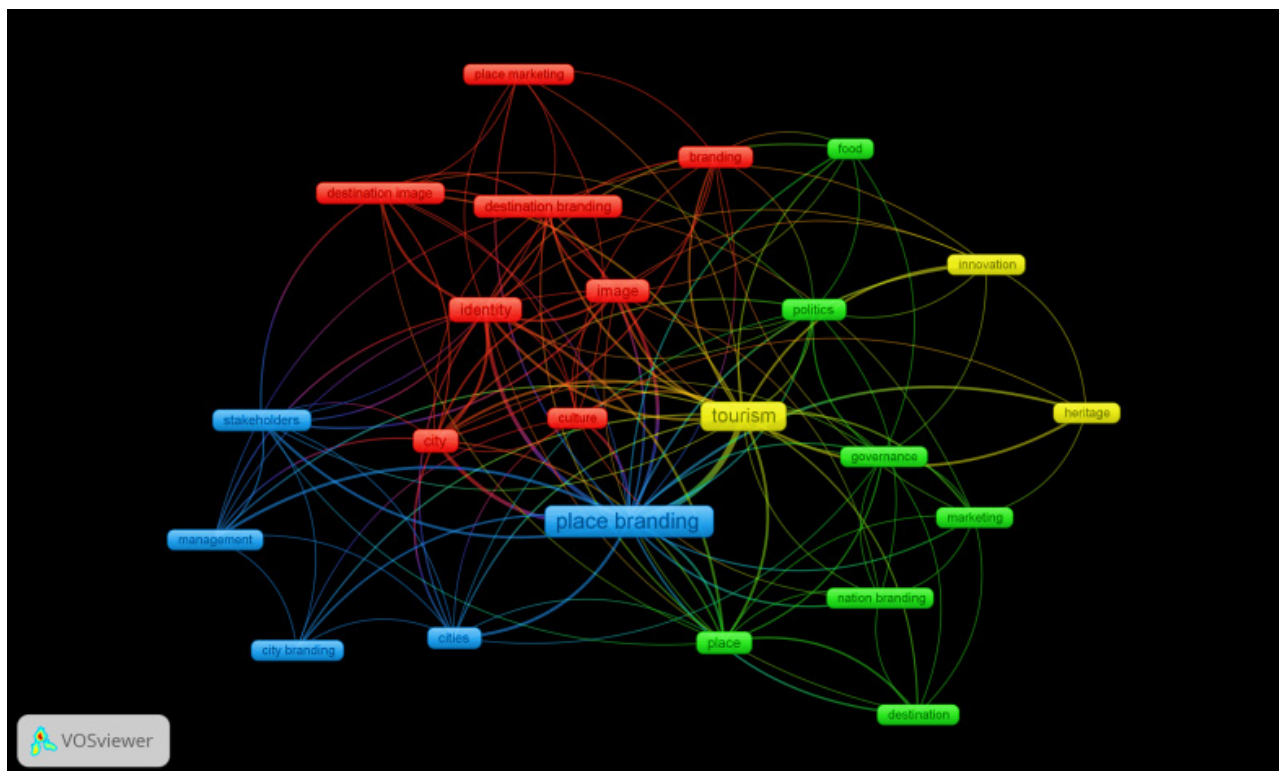


Fig 3. Communication Network of Relevant Indicators in the Field of Place Branding and Tourism. Source: Authors.

brand. A successful destination is unlikely to attract global attention unless it possesses distinctiveness, effective positioning, and a robust destination image (Giannopoulos et al., 2021). The primary objective of a place brand is to foster positive associations and differentiate it from other destinations (Hanna & Rowley, 2011). Destination branding strengthens the emotional connection between visitors and the destination, thereby reducing consumer search costs and perceived risks (Giannopoulos et al., 2021). It can also be defined as a means of creating and communicating a unique identity that resonates with visitors and investors, distinct from that of competitors (Kim & Hyun, 2011).

Destination brands should convey a distinctive and appealing image that highlights the unique characteristics, identity, and culture of the location (Sinclair-Maragh, 2018). Culture plays a pivotal role in influencing consumer behavior, encompassing the values and beliefs of a society. It is a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, law, ethics, customs, and traditions (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Products and services are reflections of culture, and their cultural meanings are often conveyed through symbols. Consumers frequently purchase products for their symbolic significance rather than for their functional attributes (Chegini et al., 2016).

Numerous researchers have examined the influence of cultural values on brand awareness, concluding that these values significantly impact consumer perceptions (Sung et al., 2011).

A brand encompasses its logo and slogan, each with distinct characteristics. The brand logo is a crucial element of a brand (Septianto & Paramita, 2021). Color is a vital aspect of logo design, possessing inherent meanings that contribute to a brand's identity (Flores, 2017). Font design features, referring to the typefaces representing brand names, also play an essential role (Mead et al., 2020). The logo's shape relates to the graphic design of the brand (Foroudi et al., 2017). Company names serve as communication tools between companies and consumers (ibid.).

Tourism researchers and professionals have increasingly acknowledged the significance of tourist brand awareness and brand loyalty, both of which are sub-concepts of brand equity (Huerta-Alvarez et al., 2020). Perceived quality greatly influences perceived value and customer satisfaction (Konuk, 2021). The brand symbol constitutes a core component of its identity, which can be categorized into five elements: form, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-pattern (Kiaie et al., 2013). Brand personality plays a crucial role in the buyer-seller

interaction process, serving as an effective means to differentiate a company from its competitors on a symbolic level (Cortez & Dastidar, 2022). Brand loyalty is defined as the degree of attachment or commitment that a customer feels towards a brand (Prados-Peña & Barrio-García, 2021).

Based on the studies conducted within the reviewed background and the presented theories, the conceptual model of this research is illustrated in Fig. 4. Achieving satisfaction, loyalty, and quality is contingent upon the tourist's awareness of the destination brand, perceived quality - which reflects the influential cognitive dimensions - value rooted in rich cultural heritage, and the formed image, symbol, personality, and identity. In this context, the development of the destination brand relies on employing a symbol that is concise, comprehensive, and capable of effectively penetrating the minds of consumers.

Research Method

The present research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This study is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive survey in terms of methodology. The subjects comprise tourism industry activists, purposefully selected from managers and experts, members of the academic community specializing in tourism, hotel and agency managers, tour guides, and social and cultural activists in the tourism sector. The sampling method used is purposive sampling. In the quantitative phase of the research, 193 tourism industry activists responded to the questionnaire. Data collection was achieved through library studies and questionnaires. Given the nature of the research

topic, the triangulation method was employed to confirm reliability. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha test was utilized in the quantitative section to assess the reliability of the questionnaire items.

By reviewing available literature, the dimensions of branding for tourism destinations were identified, and after final approval, they were measured and evaluated using the conceptual model depicted in Fig. 4. In the second phase, the fundamental or focal correlation technique was applied to compare these dimensions within the Simorgh national brand and to measure the impact of branding dimensions. The analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.

Findings and Discussion

To analyze the relationships between the research variables, the focal correlation analysis method was utilized. The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) table is presented as Table 1.

In Table 1, the Wilks' Lambda statistic value is 0.13, indicating that 13 percent of the variability in the dependent variables is not explained by the independent variables. This suggests that the Wilks' Lambda test was significant, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis, which posits that there is no relationship between the two sets of independent and dependent variables.

As shown in Table 2, three foci have been identified, with the first focus providing the most explanation of the model, exhibiting a correlation of 0.920 between the two sets of conceptual models. The square of the focal correlation coefficient, known as the focal root, is equal to 0.8464. This indicates that the primary variables related to the focal variable of branding dimensions predict and explain 84 percent of the

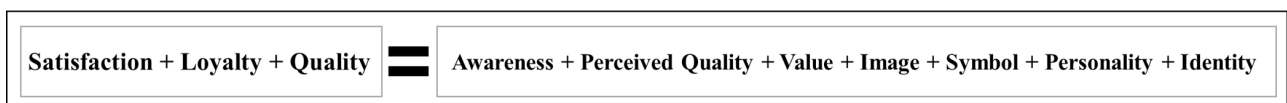


Fig. 4. Conceptual Research Model. Source: Authors.

Table 1. Multivariate Analysis of Variance Criteria. Source: Authors.

Test name	Value	F-Statistic	Degrees of Freedom	Error	Significance
Pillar's trace	0.56	16.02	21	1458	0
Hotelling's trace	1.00	23.23	21	1448	0
Wilks' lambda	0.13	22.22	21	471.470	0

Table 2. Canonical Correlations and Eigenvalues. Source: Authors.

Center	Correlation	Eigenvalue	Wilks statistic	F-test	Significance level
1	0.920	5.537	0.139	22.222	0
2	0.306	0.103	0.907	1.383	0.172
3	0	0	1.000	0	1.000

variance in the main variables related to quality, satisfaction, and brand loyalty.

The second and third foci explain approximately 9.3 percent and 0 percent of the variance in the model, respectively, with focal roots of 0.093 and 0. This is significantly lower than that of the first focus, and based on the level of significance, their correlations are not considered valid. Given the status of focal correlation in the three functions, the focal relationship based on the first function will be selected and discussed below.

The findings indicate that the squared focal loads, ranked from highest to lowest, include: brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, brand identity, brand symbol, perceived quality, brand image, brand equity, and brand awareness. The complete results are detailed in Table 3. The conceptual model of the research is illustrated in Fig. 4.

Based on the square of focal loads, brand satisfaction emerges as the highest value, while brand awareness registers the lowest. This indicates that experts and stakeholders in the Iranian tourism industry express a high level of satisfaction with the Simorgh brand. Their significant opinions regarding loyalty to the Simorgh brand suggest it is both popular and desirable.

Regarding brand personality, experts view the Simorgh brand symbol as trustworthy, attractive, unique, and likable as an Iranian tourism brand. Concerning brand identity, they believe that the Simorgh brand effectively conveys the authentic and national identity of Iran, showcasing the country's cultural heritage. They find the Simorgh brand symbol suitable for the Iranian tourism industry and appreciate the logo's coloring and design. According to their feedback, the color range used in the Simorgh logo is very appealing, and the design is both special and aesthetically pleasing. They also consider the font type used in the Simorgh brand design to be

appropriate, and they find the brand slogan to be engaging and well-related.

However, experts express concerns regarding the perceived quality dimension, stating that the Simorgh brand lacks continuity and stability in quality representation for Iran. They feel it does not encompass all traditional and cultural perspectives of the country and does not adequately reflect Iran's historical and cultural tourism or its globally recognized sites.

In analyzing the image of the Simorgh brand, experts believe it fails to create a favorable image of Iran and does not effectively communicate the depth and richness of its history. Furthermore, in terms of specific brand value, experts assert that the Simorgh brand lacks national significance within the Iranian tourism industry and cannot be regarded as the national identity of Iranian tourism. They also feel that the brand has not successfully illustrated the peace-loving nature and traditions of the Iranian people.

Finally, concerning brand awareness, experts indicate a lack of sufficient information about the Simorgh brand. They believe that encountering the Simorgh brand does not immediately evoke a memory of Iran in the minds of the audience.

Conclusion

Before presenting the results of this research, it is important to highlight that the key variables affecting the brand in this study include brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, brand identity, brand symbol, perceived quality, brand image, brand equity, and brand awareness. These variables are consistent with findings from many international studies. The concept of brand, within the framework of the presented theories, reflects a pattern established in global literature on this subject. However, an essential point, particularly in understanding branding

Table 3. The square of the focal load of branding elements. Source: Authors.

Variables	Standardized focal coefficients	Focal loadings	Squared focal loadings	Amount of variance explained
Brand identity	-0.375	-0.934	0.872356	87.2356
Brand personality	-0.182	-0.942	0.887364	88.7364
Brand symbol	-0.395	-0.933	0.870489	87.0489
Brand image	0.012	-0.814	0.662596	66.2596
Brand value	-0.065	-0.809	0.654481	65.4481
Perceived quality	-0.026	-0.834	0.695556	69.5556
Brand awareness	-0.106	-0.432	0.186624	18.6624
Brand loyalty	-0.022	-0.952	0.906304	90.6304
Brand satisfaction	-0.055	-0.961	0.923521	92.3521

processes in the postmodern era, is the emphasis on personalization, diversity, and contextual differences in the induction and recognition of brand concepts, which are largely influenced by social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors.

Since the 1990s, brand equity has become a prominent topic in tourism marketing management, especially gaining traction after 2015. In this context, brand value plays a critical role in developing tourism destination markets, regulating the characteristics of tourism products, promoting tourist loyalty, and increasing the revenue of the tourism industry.

Despite its unique climatic conditions and significant tourism potential, Iran has yet to effectively promote these advantages. The issue of designing a suitable brand for Iran and introducing it to the international community has not received the attention it deserves. In February 2019, the Simorgh tourism brand was selected as a national brand for the country, based on field studies conducted by domestic scholars and interviews with foreign tourists who had visited Iran. Although the Simorgh brand has been introduced as the tourism brand of Iran, it seems that this vital aspect of tourism destination branding has not been sufficiently prioritized by Iranian tourism officials and policymakers. There is currently a lack of systematic and comprehensive studies or programs in this field.

The research findings indicate that brand satisfaction ranks highest while brand awareness ranks lowest, suggesting that Iranian tourism industry stakeholders express high satisfaction with the Simorgh brand.

From a psychological perspective, a brand can be understood as an embodiment of values that convey a message about a destination. Without these values, the destination image may become a collection of vague impressions. The value of a tourism brand can evoke enthusiasm and a desire to engage with that brand. Therefore, it is crucial for a brand to present its value across multiple dimensions, particularly in tourism.

The results of this study emphasize the importance of brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, brand identity, brand symbol, perceived quality, brand image, brand equity, and brand awareness. It is impossible to assert a brand's success without ensuring tourist satisfaction; simultaneously, satisfaction cannot be envisioned as the central axis of a destination without a compelling mental image derived from the brand.

As a final recommendation, Iranian tourism authorities should focus on enhancing the dimensions of perceived quality, brand image, brand equity, and brand awareness. Experts and stakeholders have noted that the Simorgh brand currently lacks proper quality; therefore, qualitative improvements are essential. Additionally, it is crucial to modify the brand so that it creates a favorable image in the minds of the audience and accurately represents the cultural richness of Iran. Implementing effective brand management strategies and communication efforts will help raise awareness of the Simorgh brand and the country of Iran, as research indicates that there is currently insufficient knowledge and information about this brand among the public.

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