

Chapter 10

A TEXTUAL AND VISUAL-BASED EXPOSITION OF IRAN AS A DESTINATION

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Abstract: Iran, home to 22 World Heritage Sites in 2017, is blessed with an abundance of breathtaking scenery and a multitude of historic environments for tourists to enjoy. This exploratory chapter investigates tourists' perceptions about the nature of heritage tourism in Iran, using the five most important cultural attractions as a starting point. A total of 25 photos and 60 reviews constitute the sample. The data were content-analyzed using a deductive and inductive procedure. The results show the relevance of sensory perceptions as a way of creating a bond with cultural heritage that should be considered in the future when defining a brand for Iran as a destination. **Keywords:** Iran; destination image; content analysis; visual data; textual data

INTRODUCTION

More than simply visiting historic sites, heritage tourism is a personal encounter with traditions, history, and culture. It is based upon the concept that each community has a story to tell. This is a rapidly growing niche market that is directed towards experiencing the local customs, traditions, arts, history, sites, and culture that authentically represent a particular place. Historical and archaeological resources include museums, landmarks, state and federal historic sites, historic corridors, county courthouses, train depots, lighthouses, bridges, monuments, and properties or districts listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Iran is characterized by a unique scenery and a multitude of historic environments for tourists to enjoy. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2018), 22 world heritage sites were recorded in 2017. Twenty-one of the listed world heritage sites belong to the cultural category and one of them is related to natural heritage.

Grounded on the importance of cultural heritage tourism in Iran, the idea is to extract tourists' meanings and perceptions about Iranian heritage, with the starting point of five main cultural attractions in this country, according to TripAdvisor. The reason for using TripAdvisor as a source of information here is that it provides easy access to tourists' opinions and perceptions, through their posted reviews and photos. This really shows their experience in Iran in a "freer" and "more authentic" way, and consequently their opinions and thoughts. In addition, content generated by tourists who comment and share information via social media is arguably a great challenge for destination branding nowadays. This is a tremendous source of information that should not be neglected; on the contrary, it should be reinforced by marketers when defining a suitable destination image (DI).

The discussion in this chapter is based on the research question "What type of meanings and perceptions, which might be involved in the image formation of Iran as a heritage destination by tourists, could help develop a tourism brand for this country in the future?" This study is grounded on the assumption that a more integrated approach to data production and analysis might be a suitable option. Since visual data analysis has become a noteworthy approach in qualitative research in recent years, this chapter advocates that a visual approach can add value to textual data and analysis while considering the goals of the research.

For this purpose, a review of the literature on heritage tourism, destination image, and visual image was undertaken in order to better understand the main theoretical topics of the study. A methodology section explains the integrated approach to data production and analysis, in this case a content analysis of textual and pictorial information. A discussion of the results and their implications is also proposed.

HERITAGE TOURIST AND DESTINATION IMAGE

The discussion begins with a literature review of three topics: the meaning of heritage tourism, destination image, and visual image. Tourism, the world's largest industry, is essential to a community's economic vitality, sustainability, and profitability (Poria et al., 2001). The historic and cultural resources associated with people, events, or aspects of a community's past give that community its sense of identity and help tell its story. These resources are the most tangible and intangible reflections of a community's heritage.

Exactly what is heritage tourism? More than simply visiting historic sites, it is a personal encounter with traditions, history, and culture. Heritage tourism is based upon the concept that each community has a story to tell. This is a rapidly growing niche market that is directed towards experiencing the local customs, traditions, arts, history, sites, and culture that authentically represent a particular place. To the heritage tourist, this culture must be unique and it must be authentic. The heritage tourist wants to visit historic houses, museums, courthouses, battlefields, gardens, and lighthouses, along with revitalized historic waterfronts, downtown districts, and residential neighborhoods.

Historical and archaeological resources include museums, landmarks, state and federal historic sites, historic corridors, county courthouses, train depots, lighthouses, bridges, barns, battlefield parks, cemeteries, fountains, sculptures, monuments, and properties or districts listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Cultural resources include written records and documents, oral histories, traditional music and dance, theaters, galleries, ethnic restaurants, artists, craftspeople, folklorists, singers, storytellers, festivals, fairs, community practices, traditions or folkways, and land uses such as agriculture or mining. Natural resources include local, state, and national parks; gardens and recreation areas; scenic vistas and byways; unique or rural landscapes; wilderness areas and wildlife habitats; and rivers, canals, lakes, gorges, beaches, and marshes.

Intangible cultural heritage is also considered as heritage tourism (Esfehani & Albrecht, 2018). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines intangible cultural heritage as:

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history, and provides them with the sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2003)

As Timothy and Boyd indicate, heritage tourism “typically falls under the purview of cultural tourism (and vice versa), is one of the most notable and widespread types of tourism and is among the very oldest forms of travel” (2006, p. 1) and simply means “the present-day use of the past” (Ashworth, 2003; Graham, Ashworth, & Tunbridge, 2000). Despite the variety of views, this definition includes both tangible and intangible heritage. Taking this aspect into consideration places heritage as one of the important sections of tourism in many parts of the world. It is one of the most significant types in terms of tourists and attractions (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). Nowadays, scholars put their efforts into a deeper understanding of both the supply and demand sides. On the former side, heritage tourism is widely looked to as a tool for community economic development (Chhabra et al., 2003). However, information technology sheds light on understanding the demand side by offering new methods.

Researchers have also tried to investigate more about the relation between components of heritage as the core of the tourism industry and other concepts; from planning (Dredge, 2004), managing (Garrod & Fyall, 2000), and policymaking to sustainability of heritage tourism (Du Cros, 2001). In terms of sustainability, Du Cros (2001) suggests a model to assist in planning for sustainable cultural heritage tourism. A matrix is proposed indicating the relationship between the continuums of robustness and market appeal. Frost (2006) examines the direction of historic films as an intangible attraction with concepts (and issues) of authenticity, destination image, and the development of heritage tourism. Timothy and Ron (2013)

investigate relationships between heritage cuisines and tourism by using concepts related to identity, image-building, authenticity, and tourism-induced change.

Considering the literature for the subject of this chapter, it seems that among the concepts, authenticity is the most relevant. What distinguishes a community from others are those stories which make a community unique and special. Wang believes “Authenticity is relevant to some kinds of tourism such as ethnic, history or culture tourism, which involve the representation of the Other or of the past” (Wang, 1999, p. 350). Perceived authenticity as a measure of product quality and as a determinant of tourist satisfaction is significant in heritage tourism (Chhabra et al., 2003) and it can be further classified into objective, constructive, and existential authenticity (Wang, 1999). The role of authenticity as a contemporary marketing tool in motivation and the image of the attraction are proven to be pivotal.

Regarding another related topic, destination image, an exploratory approach of image is needed since it is a concept that results from multiple contributions from several disciplines with different insights (Rodrigues, Correia, & Kozak, 2011). One of the main issues deals with the understanding that “image” is a multifaceted construct whose nature is inextricably linked to other fields of knowledge. Some refer to image as an “elastic referentiality” accumulated over multiple centuries with multiple and conflicting meanings (Stern, Zinkhan, & Jaju, 2001). Others even propose “eiconics” as a new discipline, explaining that the “theory of image does provide a basis for the integration of a great deal of intellectual work which previously has seemed rather unrelated” (Boulding, 1956, p. 160). Costa (1992) goes even further, arguing that image, as a form of communication, is considered as “global science.” Boulding (1956) advocated that image totally influences human behavior. After this assertion, marketers started to be concerned with consumers’ images of products, services, and companies themselves.

It is important to assert how multidisciplinary seems to be rooted in the destination image (DI) construct (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Rodrigues et al., 2011). A review of the literature (Rodrigues, Correia, & Kozak, 2012) reveals that although a substantial number of studies have been conducted over the last four decades, several scholars still recognize a lack of conceptual framework around this construct (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 1993; Gartner, 1993). In fact, there is still no consensus on how to define it as a result of its ambiguity. As Pearce points out, “image is one of those terms that will not go away, a term with vague and shifting meanings” (Pearce, 1988, p. 162).

The literature suggests that DI has emerged as an exciting new opportunity for further study since it “exerts a crucial effect on consumer choices” (Correia & Kozak, 2010, p. 200). Moreover, objective outcomes (Rodrigues, Correia, Kozak, & Tuohino, 2015) reveal, one, based on a DI-research trend (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010), the scope of its studies has become wider and non-traditional entities are included as new types of tourism and, two, inconsistency between DI conceptualization and operationalization is among the most cited problems in DI research (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Tasci & Holecek, 2007). Due to the inconsistencies in measuring DI, a qualitative approach and method was undertaken and reinforced in the 1990s (Jenkins, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008). In the meantime, researchers started acting skeptical about the validity of attribute lists; by the mid-1990s alternative methods of DI assessment based on qualitative techniques started to be proposed (Dann, 1996; Reilly, 1990; Ryan & Cave, 2005). Finally, information processing theory gave rise to imagery processing theory (MacInnis & Price, 1987), where visual methods to assess DI started to be applied (Mackay & Fesenmaier, 1997).

The use of the visual element in qualitative research materialized in the so-called “visual movement” (Heisley, 2001), with the roots of its application in the field of visual anthropology. Researchers today have a set of data at their disposal. Visual support, such as paintings, photographs, films, drawings, and diagrams, among others, have allowed the introduction of new interpretive elements that enrich the analysis and understanding of its object of study. Image informs, elucidates, documents, and adds value and meaning to the phenomenon itself (Rodrigues, 2017; Rodrigues & Costa, 2018). Banks (2007) points out two main reasons for the adoption of visual data analysis in qualitative research: in contemporary society, images are omnipresent, and exactly from this premise, all visual representation must potentially be considered in all scientific studies of society. That is, image is everywhere and cannot be “apart” from research projects that focus on the study and understanding of the world lived in. A study of images or visual data may reveal new insights and perspectives that are not accessible through the use of other data.

However, according to Heisley (2001), and in response to his question “Why do researchers resist the adoption of the visual element?”, several reasons surfaced: that the visual element is still considered less “serious” by academia; that visual understanding is accessible to all, allowing multiple interpretations for those observing (this loss of control can be

uncomfortable and threatening to the researcher); that researchers are not yet familiar with the use of “video” as a data source; that many are still influenced and biased by the idea that words are more “intellectualized” than images; that there seems to be no “peer review” yet to legitimize its adoption; and that this is a very hard and demanding work.

In general terms, it is possible to identify two main dimensions in the adoption of visual elements (Rodrigues, 2017; Rodrigues & Costa, 2018). The first refers to the creation of images (visual data) such as videos, photographs, or drawings by the researcher to document or analyze aspects of social life and social interaction. The investigator makes notes of what he/she observes, and analyzes using visual elements. The second concerns the collection and study of images produced and/or “consumed/observed” by the research subjects. In this case, the project is more “visual” and there is a greater social and personal connection of the subject being studied with these same images.

In terms of the use of qualitative data, textual and pictorial data started to be used in DI studies mainly in the 2000s, based on the imagery processing theory (MacInnis & Price, 1987), a new paradigm applied to consumer behavior. Feighey highlights the potentially important contributions of visual-based research in tourism studies when he states that “the considerable theoretical and methodological space between researcher-found images and researcher-created images potentially offers tourism scholars opportunities to establish alternative approaches to vision and visuality in tourism” (Feighey, 2003, p. 77).

Jabosen (2007), by specifying the application of photo-based research approaches in tourism, reinforces this research strategy. Visual stimuli such as travel photography have been used as a methodological approach (Dadgostar & Isotalo, 1992; Greaves & Skinner, 2010; Mackay & Fesenmaier, 1997). In fact, the focus on the use of imagery processing theory as a way of assessing DI was brought in by Echtner and Ritchie (1991). A milestone in including the visual element in assessing DI was MacKay and Fesenmaier’s work (1997). Since then, pictorial materials (in addition to textual data) have been analyzed via several techniques, such as content analysis (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Govers & Go, 2005; Hsu & Song, 2013; Kozak, 2006; MacKay & Couldwell, 2004; Oliveira & Panyik, 2015).

The most common approach to evaluating images has been content analysis, traditionally grounded on motifs and themes (Albers & James, 1988; Govers & Go, 2005). Two formal methodologies are commonly employed in the study of visual images: content and semiotic analysis. The former has been widely used in media studies for decades, particularly in photographic media (Bell, 2001). In the contexts of tourism photography, content analysis provides an empirical foundation for contrasting and

comparing appearances within large data-sets (Marsh, 1984 cited on Albers & James, 1988). The data-set must be composed of the overall content and composition of pictorial elements (Albers & James, 1988; Govers & Go, 2005; Markwell, 1997).

In recent years, the internet has grown in importance as a search tool for worldwide tourism experiences (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Choi et al., 2007; Pabel & Prideaux, 2016). According to Xiang and Gretzel:

The so-called social media Websites, representing various forms of consumer-generated content (CGC) such as blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks, collaborative tagging, and media files shared on sites like YouTube and Flickr, have gained substantial popularity in online travelers' use of the Internet. (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010, p. 179)

The second generation of web-based services is characterized by having consumer-generated content, allowing tourists to share information (Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008). In fact, internet in general and social media in particular have raised questions about marketing, distribution channels, improving business management, and efficient marketing research in the tourism industry (Akehurst, 2009; Liu, 2005).

Accordingly, there is a worldwide recognition of the potential use of social media for marketing purposes, and it is important to highlight that tourism is an experiential industry that is unequivocally visual (Garrod, 2009). With the rise of the internet, social media, and visual contents, a new form of image has appeared, one that focuses on visual analysis of photos as a means to communicate the experience at the destination. Therefore, experiential images in photographs can be defined as the experiential component based on the tourist's personal experience of visiting a destination; it is how the tourist reacts to what is around him. This is an idea based on Vaughan and Edwards' (1999) work concerning the experiential dimension of destination image. This can be applied to visual elements such as photographs, since they are of particular relevance as unique representations of tourists' perceptions, values, and experiences at a specific location.

Study Methodology

The territory of Iran hosts one of the most diverse and rich compilations of cultural heritage found in contemporary societies today. The Iranian

Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and Tourism Organization's registry for immovable national heritage now includes 27,500 properties of significant cultural heritage around the country. Nevertheless, new discoveries of heritage, ranging from prehistoric (such as rock art) and ancient, to the medieval and Islamic period are being constantly made or recognized. Consequently, research, documentation, and conservation activity needs are ever increasing.

Iran is blessed with an abundance of breathtaking scenery and a multitude of historic environments for tourists to enjoy. According to UNESCO (2018), 22 world heritage sites were recorded in 2017. Of these, 2 belong to the cultural category and one to natural heritage. These sites include Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran (2008), Bam and its Cultural Landscape (2004), Bisotun (2006), Cultural Landscape of Maymand (2015), Golestan Palace (2013), Gonbad-e Qabus (2012), Historic City of Yazd (2017), Masjed-e Jamé of Isfahan (2012), Meidan Emam, Esfahan (1979), Pasargadae (2004), Persepolis (1979), Shahr-i Sokhta (2014), Sheikh Safi al-din Khanegah and Shrine Ensemble in Ardabil (2010), Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System (2009), Soltaniyeh (2005), Susa (2015), Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex (2010), Takht-e Soleyman (2003), Tchogha Zanbil (1979), The Persian Garden (2011), and The Persian Qanat (2016). Furthermore, Iran has 56 possible heritage sites on UNESCO's "Tentative List." (UNESCO, 2018).

Regarding the methodology of the study reported in this chapter, the general objective is to explore tourists' meanings, perceptions, and feelings of Iran as a heritage destination through their comments and photos. It is assumed that these perceptions are grounded on the destination's heritage, as well as its myths and legends, which might differentiate the destination in a way that is meaningful to tourists. In order to help define a marketing strategy for Iran as a destination in the near future, the goal is also to investigate tourists' ideas and perceptions about the nature of heritage tourism in Iran. The general objective is reflected in the research question "What type of meanings and perceptions are involved by tourists in the image formation of Iran as a heritage destination (textual and pictorial analysis) can help in developing a brand in the future?"

The method of content analysis was based on procedures of other photo-based studies, specifically on Tuohino and Pitkanen's work (2004). TripAdvisor is a social media part of Expedia Inc. and operates a variety of consumer-facing, user-generated content websites. It is based on the idea that tourists trust other tourists' trips, ideas, perceptions, and opinions when planning their trips. The primary function is the collection and

dissemination of user-generated content – reviews, ratings, photos and videos – in a highly specific domain, namely travel (O’Conner, 2008). Tourist consumers can go on the site and consult quantitative and qualitative feedback, textual and pictorial (mainly photos and videos), all posted by other tourists. TripAdvisor was used for this exploratory study, mainly the “Top Things to Do” category for Iran (<https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g293998-Activities-Iran.html>).

The five most important cultural attractions in Iran as a destination, according to TripAdvisor, were Persepolis, Isfahan Music Museum, Naqshe Jahan Square, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, and Imam Reza Holy Shrine. In each attraction, 5 photos and 12 reviews (most recent) constitute the exploratory sample of this study. The data sampling for texts and photos follows a “selective and purposeful strategy” (Coyne, 1997) which is “shaped by the time that researcher has available to him, by his framework, by his observations [...] after several observations the researcher will know who to sample for the purpose of the study” (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, cited in Coyne, 1997, p. 624). The goal here was to extract emotions, perceptions, and feelings related to heritage tourism through photos and texts. The reviews were later coded into categories that describe the specific meaning discussed.

TripAdvisor was considered an appropriate source of data since the aim was to generate an exploratory sample of heritage meanings of Iran through visual analysis. A total of 25 photos (pictorial data) and 60 reviews (textual data) from the sampled social media website were collected and grouped by attraction.

Methods of Textual Analysis. The textual data was first content-analyzed using webQDA (Web Qualitative Data Analysis), software which carries out qualitative data analysis individually or collaboratively, synchronously or asynchronously. In terms of the coding procedure, a direct approach was undertaken where “the researcher uses existing theory or prior research to develop the initial coding scheme prior to beginning to analyse the data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1286). In this case, the choice of the items to depict was determined beforehand (through tree nodes) as part of the study which means that the codebook relied on codes from related past studies to extract meanings based on Tuohino and Pitkanen’s work (2004).

The definitions for each category adapted to the heritage realm in this case are “emotions”: all the first and instantaneous emotions that tourists feel when experiencing heritage; “sensory perceptions”: meanings which, in one way or another, could be seen as originating sensory input, including

aesthetic evaluation (sight) and heritage experiences (multiple senses); “intellectual comprehension”: meanings originating from a psychological or an intellectual interaction with heritage, as well as coded attributes including qualities of the heritage and symbolic meanings attached to it and the psychological stimulation originating from a heritage experience; “active participation”: meanings coded as a way to actively participate with the heritage because of its ability to engage an individual in a time-space relation; and “memories”: from the different activities mentioned by the tourists which in some way were connected to a particular memory.

This study is essentially explorative and a more “deductive procedure” was undertaken since a prior formulated theoretical schema was used (Mayring, 2000). In fact, the goal was to depict sensations, emotions, and perceptions related to heritage in Iran. The qualitative step of these categorizations and analysis consists of a methodological controlled assignment of the category to a passage of text. A descriptive method that “summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often as a noun—the basic topic of a passage [...]” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 70) was adopted. The final segments for all the five cultural attractions analyzed (passage of the texts) categorized in each category were undertaken (120 segments in the “emotions” category; 87 segments in “sensory perceptions”; 52 segments in “intellectual comprehension”; 25 segments in “active participation”; and four segments in “memories”).

After this step, however, the method of coding was mixed with an “inductive procedure.” Grounded on Gibbs’ (2007) assumption that coding might add interpretation and theory to the data, particularly if the researcher is interested in generating new explanations and theory, a step-by-step formulation of inductive sub-categories was also developed out of the material (through free nodes). This procedure allowed the generation of new sub-categories specifically related to each dimension (type of emotions, type of sensory perceptions, and so on). Sub-categories were developed accordingly for all those contained on heritage meanings. Subsequently, a refinement of the meanings that tourists have about the heritage due to this more inductive analytic process was obtained.

Methods of Pictorial Analysis. The approach and method for analysis of the photos was based on content analysis, a technique of interpreting visual images that was originally developed to draw inferences from written and spoken texts. The procedure for content analysis is based on Rose’s (2016) methodology and is composed of four stages. Regarding the first stage, “finding your images,” the images chosen are indeed appropriate to the

question being asked. In this case, they are photos of Iran posted by the tourists themselves on TripAdvisor, and were used to extract meanings and perceptions that might be involved in image formation of Iran as a heritage destination. Other sources could be used, but this technique is both convenient and “authentic.”

In this stage, a question is asked (Rose, 2016): “Which content is most relevant to addressing your research questions?” In order to make the pictorial data manageable, the sample strategy used in this study was stratified (the photos were arranged in subgroups that already existed in the dataset, by “type of attraction”), and blended with a selective and purposeful approach (Coyne, 1997). The goal of the study here is purely explorative. The second stage is “coding the images,” after selecting a sample of images, which allows a set of categories to be formulated for coding images. Coding is the process of attaching a set of descriptive labels to the images. In this case, a descriptive coding was adopted (Saldaña, 2009) which identified the “motifs” (objects or appearances) shown in every image using webQDA software. Sentences from the textual findings were used in pictorial descriptors, which helped enrich this analysis. Other studies were grounded on motifs and themes (Albers & James, 1988; Govers & Go, 2005; Rodrigues et al., 2015). Subsequently, the motifs were all listed by type of attraction and a list of motifs was obtained. In this case, the content analysis approach was merely qualitative rather than quantitative (measurement of frequencies). The goal here was only to explore the motifs (objects or appearances) in each photo. In the third stage, “analyzing the results,” the goal was to identify the type of motifs listed in each photo per attraction and to complement the textual analysis by means of this pictorial approach.

Study Results

The content analysis of text and pictures was conducted separately. Nevertheless, the results were complementary. The textual analysis is crucial to respond to the research question, and the results from visuals are considered to be supportive. In order to understand and refine the findings into a practical view, the study results are presented per category by the type of cultural attraction.

Emotions Category. This category resulted in 24 sub-categories of emotions (Table 1). Based on a deductive-inductive analysis approach, the category was divided into different sub-categories according to the type of

Table 1. Classification of Emotions Extracted from Content Analysis

Beauty & enchantment	Joy & happiness
Value & significance	Uniqueness
Vitality & fascinating	Pleasant
Boring & tedious	Relaxing
Wasting time	Recommendation
Inspiring & refreshing	Unexpected
Consume & dominated	Surprised & amazed
Tolerance & respect	Atmosphere
Awareness	Open & spacious
Rewarded	Socialization
Dislike	Modern
Favorite & beloved	Quiet & peaceful

cultural attraction, which consisted of various positive and sometime negative emotions that the tourists reported when visiting the site. In the sub-category of “exuberance,” tourists mentioned “the greatest of the great”; in the category of “value & significance,” tourists mentioned “cradle of humanity”; in “vitality & fascinating,” they mentioned “awesome place,” among other remarks.

Due to the ambiguity of some responses, their meanings were difficult to code into any category. The type of emotions that were repeated in every cultural attraction (five in total) were: “beauty & enchantment” and “value & significance,” which means that the tourists seem to be impressed by the beauty of heritage in Iran, but at the same time recognized its value and significance in terms of cultural and historical perspective.

Sensory Perception Category. This category resulted in 14 sub-categories (Table 2). Based on a deductive-inductive analysis approach, the category was divided into different sub-categories according to the type of cultural attraction, which consisted of various perceptions. In the sub-category of “sight,” tourists mentioned “I totally love the beautiful garden”; in the sub-category of “temperature & climate,” they mentioned “either take a break in the square it might be hot too”; in the sub-category “aesthetic,”

Table 2. Sensory Perceptions Extracted from Content Analysis

Sight	Sound
Crowded	Love & Passion
Temperature & Climate	Endless
Aesthetic	Best time
Fresh	Details
Silence & Peace	Distance & Location
Taste	Well-being

they mentioned “the square has a number of photogenic buildings,” plus other remarks.

The second most frequent category when describing the meanings of heritage was through sensory perceptions. In fact, this results in some way from paying attention to the relevance of sensory perceptions as a form of creating a bond with the heritage. As an example, “distance & location” was extracted as a sub-category worth mentioning. Regarding the Naqshe Jahan Square in Isfahan, tourists highlighted the central location of the square with direct access to other main points of interest. In addition, it is important to highlight the “best time” as another sub-category extracted from the content analysis, in this case referring to Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan. As mentioned by a tourist, “I love the picture of the mosque more in the evening when the lights came out.” This sub-category reveals that tourists perceived the most suitable time to visit a cultural attraction and that it was important to them. A final remark to one more example related to “details” as a sensory perception.

Intellectual Comprehension Category. Most perceptions about heritage were related to the importance of a tour guide during the visit. The relevance of existing information related to the cultural attraction being visited is of utmost importance, which corroborates the need for this element during a tourist visit. This category had 10 sub-categories (Table 3).

Based on a deductive-inductive analysis approach, the category of intellectual comprehension was divided into different sub-categories according to the type of cultural attraction, which consisted of various perceptions. In the sub-category of “tour guide & information,” tourists mentioned “I

Table 3. Intellectual Comprehension Extracted from Content Analysis

Tour Guide & Information	Interaction with local people
Heritage value	Storytelling
Organized tour	Entertainment
Heritage conservation	Professionalism
Location & Distance	Level of management

totally recommend that you get a guide if you go”; in the sub-category of “heritage value,” they wrote “it is one of the oldest Iran monuments belongs to the Achamanids Era”; in the sub-category “organized tour,” tourists noted “good touring agency because you really need the explanation.”

These are examples of meanings originating from a psychological or an intellectual interaction with heritage. The coded attributes include qualities of the heritage, but, most of all, organizational features and various elements that add value to heritage, which originate from a heritage experience (such as “storytelling,” “entertainment,” or “level of management”). For instance, the relevance of stories when tourists are interacting with heritage was mentioned by a tourist, “there are so many stories worth hearing about behind each instrument,” which could be reinforced in terms of heritage experience; or the need for entertainment while tourists are perceiving heritage more intellectually during their visit. It seems contradictory, but can actually be seen as complementary.

Active Participation and Memories. This category includes ways to actively participate with the heritage because of its ability to engage an individual in a time-space relation. It includes four sub-categories (Table 4): one, the need to explore the attraction more deeply; two, the importance of the surrounding landscape for tourists that add value to the visit; three, the necessity of enjoyment and finding entertainment while visiting the attraction; and, four, the existence of stories that create strong content to help a heritage become more attractive. In engagement with heritage, the process of creating memories is crucial. The sub-categories of memories mentioned by the tourists (three in total) were: one, linked to the importance of reviewing photos after the trip; two, connected to childhood

Table 4. Active Participation and Memories Extracted from Content Analysis

Explore	Reviewing pictures
Surrounding landscape	Childhood memories
Fun making	Memories
Storytelling & Content	

and youth; and, three, their awareness that it is the moment when they are experiencing the attractions, which creates good memories from the trip.

Based on a deductive-inductive analysis approach, the two previous categories were divided into different sub-categories according to the type of cultural attraction. In the sub-category of “explore,” tourists commented “expect to spend a good hour and a half exploring different places”; in the sub-category of “surrounding landscape,” they advised “don’t forget to climb up the adjacent hill to get a breathtaking view”; in the sub-category “reviewing pictures,” they mentioned “reviewing our pictures after the trip.”

Pictorial results were similar to those of the text content analysis, with coherence between them. This means that visual stimuli corroborate the findings from textual analysis. The applied visual method obtained 34 motifs organized by types of attraction listed in [Table 5](#).

In terms of visual stimuli related to heritage, a primary idea emerges. The description of photos considered meaningful and perceptions directly associated with the functional and cognitive perspective of heritage. However, not only were attributes directly related with the heritage extracted, but also attributes linked with the attraction’s surroundings and with the affective and psychological perspective of heritage. For instance, regarding Persepolis in Shiraz, attributes such as “ancient columns,” “astonishingly slender columns,” “monumental gateway to the city of Persepolis,” or “sky, sun & clouds.” Concerning Naqshe Jahan Square in Isfahan, attributes such as “huge square,” “delightful gift bazaars with local handcraft,” and “water and fountains in the middle of the square” should be highlighted. Regarding the Isfahan Music Museum, it is important to highlight attributes such as “the guide explaining the instruments,” “diversity of Persian traditional instruments,” or “live music performance in the museum.” Regarding Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, attributes worthy of mention include “this mosque is in [a] big and nice square,” “incredible art

Table 5. List of Motifs/Objects Extracted from Visual Content Analysis

<p>Persepolis Ancient columns People in the middle of the heritage Heritage pavement Sky, sun & clouds Columns within the landscape Monumental gateway to the city of Persepolis People in the middle of the site Astonishingly slender columns Remains of archaeological ruins Lengthy cohorts of sculpted warriors and guards</p>	<p>Isfahan Music Museum The guide explaining the instruments Musicians giving a concert in the museum Diversity of Persian traditional instruments An outside cafe and restaurant Live music performance in the museum</p>
<p>Naqshe Jahan Square Sky, Sun & Clouds A huge square Water mirror in the middle of the square Delightful gift bazaars with local handcraft The square is surrounded by notable buildings Overall architectural atmosphere The panoramic views of this square are beautiful The square has photogenic buildings on the perimeter Water and fountains in the middle of the square Staying on in the evening also provides good lighting opportunities</p>	<p>Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque Facade of the mosque with the Iranian style This mosque is in (a) big and nice square Very beautiful dome and ambient for visiting A unique site of Iranian art Incredible art and architecture piece One of the best Islamic architectures</p>
	<p>Imam Reza Holy Shrine Really crowded in evening and night Huge square in the evening People praying in a peaceful atmosphere</p>

and architecture piece,” and “one of the best Islamic architectures.” Finally, the Imam Reza Holy Shrine in Mashad was described with attributes such as “huge square in the evening” and “really crowded in evening and night.”

This result enhances the need to explore an affective dimension more in tourism promotion campaigns related to cultural heritage. The pictures of the attractions should not only highlight the cultural attraction itself (facades, squares, architecture), but also the feelings and sensations that the tourists might have while visiting those places.

CONCLUSION

The general objective of this study was to explore meanings and perceptions that might be involved in the image formation of Iran as a heritage destination that could help develop a brand in the future. A combined textual and pictorial analysis was applied in order to produce useful and important information for the process of creating a brand for Iran as a destination. In terms of heritage, it will be interesting to explore the main attributes of each cultural attraction and try to promote them more accurately, based on the unique selling proposition of Iran.

For instance, regarding the Naqshe Jahan Square, the openness of the square and its authenticity as a special place for the locals to socialize might be key attributes to enhance in terms of promotion; or the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, where the interior of the mosque and the square where it is located are highlighted by the tourists; or another example, such as the Isfahan Music Museum, where the guides of the museum, the concert inside the museum, and all the entertainment are truly key attributes to highlight in the future; and Imam Reza Holy Shrine, considered by the tourists to be one of the best attraction places for tourists who enjoy religious sites, with a peaceful atmosphere.

In fact, this chapter highlights the relevance of sensory perceptions as a way of creating a bond with cultural heritage. This should be explored in the process of defining an image and a brand for Iran as a tourism destination. In fact, it seems to be an interesting idea for marketing purposes to reinforce the link between heritage in Iran and its effect on tourists' senses.

An approach to experiential marketing (Schmitt, 2000) should be engaged since Iran is a "must" in terms of human senses (colors, sight, etc.). For instance, it is highly recommended that Iran should use the tourists' storytelling as a way to promote its cultural attractions. First-person stories are what tourists bring from their travel experiences. Therefore, this should be considered as a potential tool for the promotion of Iran as a destination by the national tourism organization. In addition, promotional campaigns, mainly through the use of social media (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, among others), should engage in a more sensory approach about the destination, highlighting not only functional attributes of Iran (cultural heritage), but also an experiential perspective based on the feelings, meanings, and sensations of tourists when visiting Iran.

There are some inherent limitations to this study. Content analysis is exploratory and is based on subjective judgments to some extent. Despite the fact that 288 segments were coded in this study, the findings do not

fully represent the meanings of tourists about heritage in Iran. At some points, these segments were too repetitive, containing a very similar text structure. Additionally, these samples of reviews and photos are not fully representative of all the tourists visiting heritage in Iran, though that was not the goal when using a qualitative approach. The purpose here was mainly to explore meanings and perceptions for future studies.

Finally, several additional directions are suggested for future research. First, future lines of investigation should be directed towards a reliable and valid scale of image measurement. It will be interesting to apply other qualitative techniques (such as grounded theory), based on a more interpretative paradigm, in order to thoroughly understand the nature of this new destination. In addition, a market positioning effort and a brand advantage should now be the priority for Iran, as well as engaging cooperative destination marketing through a unifying brand management (Laws, Scott & Parfitt, 2002). It is recommended that the multiple stakeholders involved in the tourism development process should adopt a short-term convergence strategy, in order to enhance all the projects and initiatives and promote co-branding for Iran as a cultural heritage destination.