



2528-9705

Örgütsel Davranış Araştırmaları Dergisi

Journal Of Organizational Behavior Research

Cilt / Vol.: 8, Sayı / Is.: S, Yıl/Year: 2023, Kod/ID: 23S0-921



Validation of Mashhad Destination Brand Identity Model

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ABSTRACT

The destination brand identity is a strategic perspective to determine how the destination brand is chiefly perceived by tourists. Consequently, the current study has been compiled to identify the destination brand identity model in Mashhad. Survey research strategy and research method are quantitative. The statistical population of the study is all citizens of Mashhad, which according to the 2016 census, was 3,062,242. The statistical sample was obtained by stratified random sampling method proportional to the volume. 384 people were selected via the Morgan table. The research tool includes a researcher-made questionnaire that includes 39 questions or items. To analyze the data of this research, PLS structural equation software has been used. Findings of the research in the destination brand identity model of Mashhad include 2 categories of destination brand identity (hard criteria) and destination brand identity (soft criteria) with 5 components. The data showed that the model has the necessary validity.

Keywords: Brand identity, Destination brand identity, Mashhad city

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a significant socio-economic phenomenon in the twentieth century. The industry, which began with the activities of a small group of people at the beginning of this century, progressively became a pervasive phenomenon after World War II and prominently after 1970. Nowadays, tourism is known as an influential force in international change and a solution to save destitute economies, because it is the largest industry in the world in terms of employment and domestic production and the fastest industry in terms of economic growth (Veysi et al., 2017). Tourism is a growing economic sector that takes various forms depending on the type of place and region of tourism. Each region, place, or destination has its characteristics and different strategies should be used based on its strengths (Duman et al., 2018). Over the past decade, many tourism destinations have emerged and investment in tourism-related activities

has increased (Kani et al., 2017). Destination branding, as a field of research, has been considered in response to increased competition to attract tourists and capital and to help cities, regions, and countries in marketing and branding strategies (Zenker et al., 2017). Creating a destination brand as a strategic tool to create a competitive advantage of a destination has become a common practice to promote history, quality of place, lifestyle, and culture and increase the opportunity, power, or influence of the city in a competitive environment (Zhang and Xiaobin Zhao, 2019). The destination brand is increasingly considered as an important asset in the development of the city as well as an effective tool to differentiate, improve the position and increase the influence and prestige of the city (De Oliveira et al., 2017). Likewise, experts and marketing managers of tourism destinations try to increase their share of revenues and other benefits of this expanding global industry by creating a brand for destinations and strengthening it (Ghaffari et al., 2014, 846). Destination branding can be one of the most important factors in its success. Cities formerly known as all-purpose cities have now concluded that they must consciously and adequately adapt to their characteristics and capabilities on the one hand, and the needs and requirements of the future world on the other. Conscious branding will give destinations a new identity in the future. In the newly internationalized environment, destinations make multiple attempts to describe their distinctive features. In addition to traditional economic factors and urban infrastructure, “soft” factors such as quality of life, urban aesthetics, and local development policies are considered local development criteria. In the recent framework, the role of policy-making, location marketing, and branding has become increasingly important around the world (Okazaki, 2018).

Consequently, policymakers need to pay attention to the role of destination branding as a strategic development tool, to clarify the identity, positioning the city in the perception of the non-resident target group, and at the same time increase the sense of belonging among the city residents. The difficult strategy of destination branding is to create an identity for the city that has developed from a range of conceptual variables such as history, anthropology, economics, politics, and rules. A city often has specific identifiable ideas or intrinsic values perceived by its inhabitants (Vosoughi et al., 2020). Therefore, creating a strong brand for the destination means creating and developing a meaningful and valuable identity that leads to the success of the destination, tourists' desire to revisit, prefer it and recommend it to others, and ultimately increase visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Chiang and Yang, 2018). Destination brand identity has a great effect on shaping the destination brand, identifying tourist perceptions about different destinations, and creating a unique brand for the destination (Kiani Feyzabadi, 2016, 168). The destination identity represents the distinction between the tangible and intangible characteristics of one place and another. Consequently, considering the role of the brand in the tourism market, drawing the identity of the destination is very important and is the factor of differentiation of one place with other places. The identity of the destination brand is formed over a long period, with geographical features, cultural level, architecture, local customs and traditions, and lifestyle. So, it can be said that the identity of a destination brand is a historical phenomenon and has changed or evolved (Vosoughi et al., 2020, 147). In addition, what gives the destination brand its identity depends on the perceptions that tourists have of their surroundings (Caneen, 2014). The identity of the destination brand can be considered as the personality of the destination and a promise that is being fulfilled to be able to increase tourist loyalty and tourist



retention rate (Bahari et al., 2016). In other words, the identity of the destination brand is the embodiment of all elements and activities of the destination brand. Strong branding enables the destination brand identity to be embodied and evolved in the minds and hearts of tourists. So, branding and destination brand identity can be considered as the most important factors in the business future of a destination brand (Asadi et al., 2015). Nevertheless, while the focus of tourism research for decades has been on some branding concepts such as the destination image, the destination brand identity has received less attention from researchers because it is a completely new concept in the field of tourism. Positioning destinations based on functional characteristics make them less recognizable and distinctive, but the use of additional attributes and suggesting the destination brand identity may be effective in differentiating tourist destinations and encouraging tourists (Taghizadeh Jourshari et al., 2020, 220). Despite this emphasis on destination brand identity, there are still few studies aimed at understanding its impact and importance in destination branding. Increasing competition in tourism markets has led destination managers to use the principles of branding to create a unique identity for their destination and tourism services and improve their position in international markets. In Iran, despite more than 1300 cities and considering that the urban population in our country is about seventy percent and is above the global average (fifty percent), it is necessary to use new approaches to urban management in urban management such as creating and managing identity. Implementing destination identity and creating the destination brand identity, first requires a model to design and determine the brand identity, and in the next step are brand marketing and advertising strategies that create the task in the mind of the target market by creating a brand experience, as well as marketing communications (usually through the media). Consistent with the need for this research, it can be mentioned that so far none of the marketing activities to promote Iran and create a favorable image of it as a tourist destination, has been able to create a coherent and meaningful identity for Iran. Consequently, before entering the topic of brand equity, it is necessary to do research and take steps to create a brand identity. The case of this study is the city of Mashhad, which has the tourism center of the province at the provincial, national and regional scales. Mashhad is one of the important tourism cities of Iran, a valuable and unique asset in terms of historical antiquity. With valuable cultural and religious monuments in the national and international territory, which has excellent conditions, is one of the major tourism centers in Iran and the world. Historical and religious context and the existence of the holy shrine of the eighth Shiite Imam can attract many tourists. Appropriate and scientific planning in the tourism industry of this city can turn it into one of the most important tourism centers and this city has a unique identity as a tourist destination. In this regard, the need to develop a destination brand identity model for the city of Mashhad to respond as quickly and efficiently is considered a process necessity of urban management.

As mentioned, in the literature on brand identity, both domestically and globally, numerous studies have been conducted, but the design of the destination brand identity model has not been done. For example, Wäckerlin et al. (2020) specified that there are structural differences between the destination image network and the destination brand identity. Taecharungroj (2019) also showed that the destination brand identity framework includes destination physics, destination activities, and destination personality. According to Dyankov et al. (2018), the soft power of the destination, the destination image, and the destination brand image affect the identity of the tourism destination brand. Asadi et al. (2015) also stated that branding for



purposes is one of the ways to create a competitive advantage in the tourism market. Identity and image are the most important parts of the destination brand. The destination identity represents the distinction between the tangible and intangible characteristics of one place and another. Consequently, regarding the role of the brand in the tourism market, drawing the identity of the destination is very significant. According to Brahui and Zovidavianpour (2014), security, confidence, and ease of entry of tourists by air, seaways, etc., have the greatest impact on branding as a tourist destination.

Lastly, based on what was said, the current study was compiled with the question of “How is the validation of the destination brand identity model (Mashhad)”?

Method

Since this research aims to validate the destination brand identity model of Mashhad, the research method is quantitative. The statistical population in the quantitative part, including the citizens of Mashhad, which according to the census of 2016, is 3062424. Based on a stratified random method proportional to the volume and using the adequacy of the Morgan table, the sample size is 384 people. The research tool in the quantitative part includes a researcher-made questionnaire that includes 2 categories called destination brand identity (hard criteria) and destination brand identity (soft criteria), 5 components, and 39 questions or items.

Findings

To validate and analyze the research data, Holland (1999) method has been used for modeling by partial least squares method, which comprises determining the measurement model through reliability and validity, to evaluate the measurement model of the methods, the confirmation of data coordination with a given factor structure is used. Confirmatory factor analysis examines the suitability of items selected to represent variables. Since the research measurement model is reflective, the tests are selected for research are reflective. Based on studies by Hair (2010) before performing any test on reflective measurement models, a homogeneity test must be performed to make the questions of a variable unidimensional. Before structural equation modeling tests the research hypotheses, it is necessary to confirm the validity of the research measurement tool through the confirmatory factor analysis technique. In the fitted factor analysis model, the factor load of all variables in predicting the relevant items except questions 1 and 2 at the confidence level of 0.95 had a significant difference with zero and the amount of factor load is more than 0.5 and their test statistic is more than 1.96. Consequently, at this stage, the mentioned questions or items are removed and left out of the process.

Figure (1) shows the factor load of the confirmatory factor analysis model after eliminating the questions.



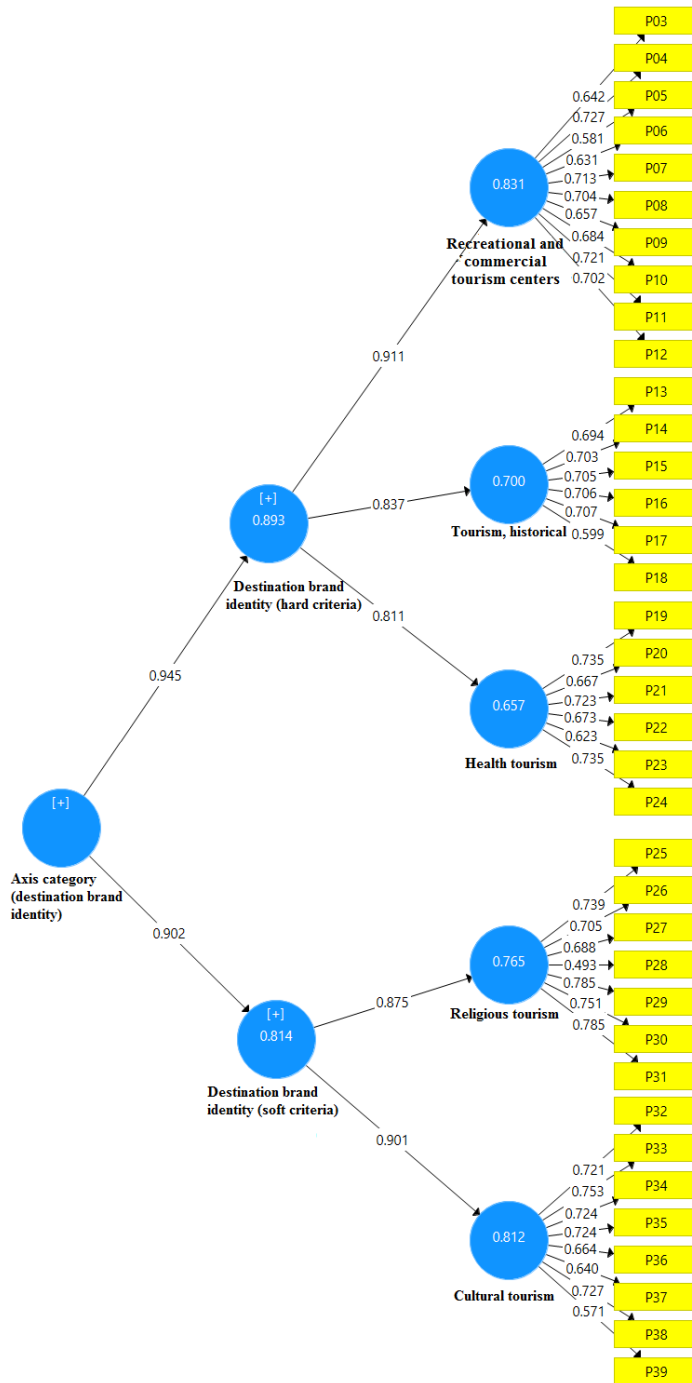


Figure 1: Factor load Confirmatory factor analysis model after removing questions

Besides, the research model should offer similar estimates in other samples of the same community according to the indicators measuring the variables. Therefore, in the modified reflective measurement model, different tests are done for the reliability of the model. Cronbach's alpha test shows the internal correlation of one-variable questions outside the model and the composite reliability coefficient shows the internal correlation of one-variable questions inside the model. According to Fornell and Larcker (1986), Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite



reliability should be above 0.7, which the results of Table (1) show that this coefficient has been observed.

Table 1. Reliability results obtained for the objective category research model

Row	Research components	Cronbach's alpha	Combined reliability
1	Recreational and commercial tourism centers	0.868	0.894
2	Destination brand identity (soft criteria)	0.885	0.904
3	Destination brand identity (hard criteria)	0.908	0.920
4	Historical tourism	0.780	0.842
5	Health tourism	0.784	0.848
6	Cultural tourism	0.844	0.880
7	Religious tourism	0.835	0.877

Hensler (2009), citing studies by Fornell and Larcker, stated that in addition to the questions of each variable, the variables themselves must also diverge from each other (i.e., lack of colinearity or critical correlation). Consequently, in Table (2), the correlation between the latent variables is the square root of AVE instead of the number 1 on the main axis. The square root of the AVE of each variable must be greater than the correlation of that variable with other variables. Table (2) shows the results of the Fornell and Larcker tests.

Table 2. Fornell and Larcker test

	Recreational and commercial	Destination brand identity	Destination brand identity	Historical tourism	Health tourism	Cultural tourism	Religious tourism
Recreational and commercial tourism centers	0.678						
Destination brand identity (soft criteria)	0.591	0.623					
Destination brand identity (Hard criteria)	0.911	0.712	0.889				
Historical tourism	0.637	0.640	0.837	0.687			
Health tourism	0.586	0.626	0.811	0.585	0.694		
Cultural tourism	0.540	0.901	0.674	0.616	0.613	0.693	
Religious tourism	0.504	0.875	0.584	0.515	0.491	0.578	0.913

In addition, to fit and validate the destination brand identity model, it is necessary to ensure the convergent and divergent validity or the same aspects of their differential validity that the correlation between the two of them in pairs is less than 0.9. Based on that, the non-overlap between the dimensions of the research variables in the form of differential validity is also confirmed, as a result of which the construct validity of the model is confirmed. In convergent validity, the measurement indices of each variable must converge with each other. This test was proposed by Hensler et al. (2009) for convergent validity and it was stated that in each variable AVE should be greater than 0.5. Table (3) shows the test results of the average variance extracted.

Table 3. Results of average variance extracted test

Row	Research components	Average variance extracted test
1	Recreational and commercial tourism centers	0.559
2	Destination brand identity (soft criteria)	0.588
3	Destination brand identity (hard criteria)	0.547
4	Historical tourism	0.572
5	Health tourism	0.582
6	Cultural tourism	0.580
7	Religious tourism	0.508

The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) test, which has been officially added to PLS by Ringel et al. since 2012, should be less than 0.08, which in this study is 0.0683, so the fit of the model is confirmed based on this model. Likewise, for the goodness of fit (GoF) index, which measures all the predictions of the measurement model and the structural model, it is calculated with 0.01, 0.26, and 0.36 (Tenenhaus, 2005), which in this study, the number 0.580 was obtained, which indicates that the size of this index is strong.

Discussion and Conclusion

In line with the obtained results and explaining the hard criteria of destination brand identity, it can be alleged that one of the elements through which different cities try to create brand identity are urban symbols that recreational and commercial centers are of this kind (Pourzarandi, 2016). In other words, one of the most effective things in attracting tourists and creating a brand image and identity from a destination is the existence of high-quality and recreational and commercial tourism centers in the destination that tourists can use easily and simply. These centers can include artifacts visible in recreational centers such as parks and indoor amusement parks, which tourists, in addition to visiting the destination, remember as a symbol and a lasting image of the destination brand that symbolizes it. It is also very important to have an excellent infrastructure to build a strong brand identity for a destination. For instance, the condition of electricity, water, internet, road, public transportation quality in resorts has a great effect on attracting tourists and can be effective in building a strong brand identity. On the other hand, tourist services providers' locations such as airports and restaurants must be in good condition and of very high quality to attract tourists back to the destination and be able to be recorded in the mind of the tourist. Besides in a destination, there should be facilities such as places for sports activities and shopping facilities. Because a tourist in addition to visiting recreational and pilgrimage places also seeks to have suitable shopping and shopping centers and it is one of the parts of a trip to a destination that a manager of a tourist destination can



benefit from these items and build a strong brand identity for the destination. In addition to these festivals, handicraft exhibitions can also be a symbol of that destination, and in these festivals and exhibitions, the customs, culture, and traditions of the people of that destination are displayed, and the tourist is introduced to the identity and authenticity of the area and it will have a great share in creating a lasting and beautiful image of the destination. Furthermore, in a tourist destination such as Mashhad, the existence of theme parks such as water and roaring waves as the first water parks in the country has a great impact on attracting tourists and remembering the destination, and tourists in addition to pilgrimage and use of other places and facilities also use amusement parks. Also, the city of Mashhad, with its pleasant and lush countryside such as Torqabeh and Shandiz, and the existence of restaurants, recreational spaces and centers, and high-quality restaurants, has a positive experience in the discussion of food tourism and has great importance and reputation as a tourist destination. They are part of the brand identity of the destination of Mashhad. The city of Mashhad with a beautiful and clean urban space and the existence of large commercial complexes in the city and providing a variety of facilities to tourists at every level and budget is known as a valuable tourist destination in Iran, which shows the strong brand identity for this city. As mentioned by Ahmadi Asli and Abdolhosseini (2017), considering the importance that people attach to visiting the attractive environment, planners and officials should pay special to this issue and expand the creation of suitable facilities for families and improve the health of such spaces to increase the welfare of society to help more in creating the desired image and identity of the destination.

Historical tourism is extensively related to cultural heritage or cultural resources. These sources usually include museums, historical tombs, and landscapes (Teymouri et al., 2014). Historical places, due to showing the identity of cities, have a great value to attract tourists and the city of Mashhad as a tourist destination has many historical opportunities that attract tourists to this city. Serving local food, souvenirs, and handicrafts to attract more tourists to the destination has a great effect and is effective in building the identity of the destination brand. Similarly, Mashhad city with its historical physical attractions and ancient houses left from ancient times, the existence of tombs of famous personalities such as Ferdowsi, and Shajarian has a great impact on the formation of the brand identity of Mashhad. The current findings are consistent with the findings of research on historical tourism. Hejazi and Khazaei Musk (2016) in their study entitled “Investigating the capacity of historical monuments in tourism development, a case study of the Safavid complex in Farahabad, Sari”, stated that the creation of related museums, holding special ceremonies such as celebrations and competitions and producing radio and television programs in this historical site is effective in identifying and increasing the amount of tourist attraction. Also, Khamsehnejad and Alimoradi (2015) in “analyzing the role and effects of historical attractions in the development of urban tourism Case study: Qazvin historical monuments” stated that better knowledge of historical attractions is a step to increase tourists to these areas. This fact requires long-term planning through advertising, construction of tourism facilities, and creation of appropriate and standard roads ... in such historical contexts that are consistent with the findings of this research.

Health is a fundamental right of all human beings. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines health tourism as the use of services that improve or enhance a person's health and well-being through the use of mineral water, climate or medical interventions, in a place outside the



residence of the person and lasts more than 24 hours (Panahi, 2018). Mashhad is a health tourism destination with beautiful tourism centers, a clean environment, natural resources (hot springs around Mashhad), nature and mountains, air conditioning has a great reputation and is one of the most important factors in building the brand identity of the city. Likewise, the existence of desirable, up-to-date, and advanced medical services compared to other regions and destinations and having the highest level of health standards is known as one of the important destinations in health tourism. Regarding the existence of health tourism in Mashhad such as therapeutic spas, mineral springs and four seasons nature, powerful surgeons in Mashhad can be considered as one of the favorite destinations in the region, which creates a strong brand identity for this city. Besides, the results of the research are consistent with the results of the study of Hosseinpour et al. (2015) which, under the title of “the relationship between medical tourism capabilities and tourist attraction”, states that there is a significant relationship between medical tourism capabilities and tourist attraction and the variables of the country and hydrotherapy places in predicting the attraction of medical and therapeutic tourism. Shirkhodai et al. (2016) in their research entitled “The study of the effect of destination image on satisfaction and behavioral goals in health tourism”, show that creating a good image of the destination leads to the satisfaction of health tourists, followed by positive behavioral goals that increase future visits and recommending the destination to others. According to Shojaei et al. (2014), Mashhad has been able to be somewhat successful in attracting health tourists. Consequently, the results attained in this study in the health tourism sector are consistent with the resulting research.

According to the results and explaining the soft criteria of the destination brand identity, it can be assumed that religious tourism is one of the most common forms of tourism around the world. Religious attractions, shrines, and holy places attract a large number of tourists every year (Amiri Aghdaei, 2016). The city of Mashhad is one of the important centers of Islamic tourism and pilgrimage in the Islamic world. The shrine of Imam Reza (AS) and the spiritual atmosphere around the shrine, is the main center of Islamic tourism in Iran and annually receives tens of thousands of domestic and foreign pilgrims and tourists and is one of the main factors in building brand identity. It is the city of Mashhad. Religious tourists visit this religious place, realizing that their spiritual values and meanings and emotional values are respected in this destination and are respected by those in charge. Observance of the traditional and religious values of tourists and the value and respect for tourists also cause them to record the destination as a religious destination in mind. Likewise, due to the holy existence of Imam Reza (AS) court and the Islamic religious environment around it with a traditional and Islamic style, it leaves a great impact on the minds and souls of tourists and this is the main reason for tourists to travel to Mashhad. Astan Quds Razavi, which is in charge of this court, by adhering to the slogans, promises, and assurances it gives to tourists, can succeed in attracting tourists and cause the building of a strong identity of this city as a tourism destination brand. In line with the importance of religious tourism in the destination brand identity model, the results of this study are consistent with the results of Ayati et al. (2016) entitled “The study of the impact of urban physical factors on the development of religious tourism”. Factors affecting the development of religious tourism included favorable landscape, accessibility, support services, and facilities and confinement, the feeling of peace, sense of security, place identity, and visual pleasure, which is consistent with the results of this study in some parts. Likewise Hosseinpour et al. (2016) in their study entitled “the study of traction factors affecting the intention of religious tourism and how they affect



(Qom city)” indicated that the intention of religious tourism, are the tourist believes in the need to visit the region, being religious, motivation to increase faith, the experience of religious travel, existence of the facilities of nightlife, the development of health services, the popularity of the region, and the development of transportation. These factors are similar to the mentioned research.

Similarly, cultural tourism is a type of tourism that is related to the culture of a country or region. Cultural tourism is “people going to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence to gather new information and experiences to meet cultural needs.” These cultural needs can be the understanding of one's cultural identity by observing the culture of others (Rabiee et al., 2014). This tourism is different and very unique from other types of tourism in various ways because during the trip, the person is always shown the lives of other people and their customs (Akbulut and Yerli, 2018). Culture and anthropology are effective factors in cultural tourism. Cultural tourists travel to that region to get to know the culture and people of a region and the language and identity of its general and specific traditions so that they can know the originality and identity of that destination. Besides, brand culture as a system of values and subcultures in a tourism destination is an effective factor in building the identity of the destination brand. The standpoint of cultural tourism is one of the effective factors in improving the cultural tourism of the destination. The city of Mashhad with its myths and stories of Ferdowsi and also the use of symbolism in attracting tourists to the destination is successful and is one of the factors attracting tourists that is effective in building the brand identity of the city of Mashhad. The hospitality of the people of the region and the good treatment of tourism and pilgrimage business activists and the good treatment of the services of the second layer of tourism (taxi, etc.), which is part of the culture of a region. It causes the crucified image of the destination to remain in the mind of the tourist and the originality and identity of the destination brand be created. Similarly, the results of this study on cultural tourism are consistent with the results of Artigas et al. (2015) entitled *Tourist Satisfaction: The Role of Tourism Destination Hospitality*. They examined the relationship between cognitive perceptions on the experience of individuals, the social performance of the destination, and the advantage of symbolic concepts and emotional evaluation, which are predictors of tourist destination development. The results show the effect of hospitality and culture of the people of the region on the satisfaction of tourism and cultural tourism. The results of cultural tourism in this study are similar to the results of Rabiee et al. (2014) that in a study of factors affecting the development of cultural tourism in Kermanshah, factors such as cultural, political, economic, advertising, infrastructure, management, and educational factors on the development of cultural tourism have been considered effective. The results of this study in terms of attitude are similar to the results of Zare Ashkazari et al. (2015) who in a study on the factors affecting the development of cultural tourism with the approach of attracting foreign tourists in Central Iran Case study: Yazd stated that cultural tourism is one of the important factors in developing tourism capacity and attracting tourists to the destination. Lastly, based on the research results, recommendations are provided to improve the brand identity of Mashhad destination:

- ✓ In line with promoting religious tourism, given that the main feature of the destination city is a pilgrimage destination, it is suggested that other aspects be developed such as markets, summer resorts, water recreation, and cultural activities such as Ferdowsi and



recreation such as water parks. For instance, shopping malls are connected to the shrine and the tourist can experience pilgrimage, shopping, recreation, transportation, and rest in a suitable cycle and chain and not be as an island.

- ✓ Since the main strategy for the development of welfare services and infrastructure is pilgrimage and traffic around the shrine, to strengthen religious tourism in the city of Mashhad, it is recommended that a chain-link be formed between the pilgrimage and other sectors of tourism, then the management of various programs and events on this issue.
- ✓ Likewise, for the development of cultural and historical tourism activities, due to the existence of many historical and cultural attractions in the region, it is recommended that by holding conferences and seminars, local festivals, and shopping discounts to attract tourists, reinforce these dimensions.
- ✓ Besides, to develop and improve the social, urban, cultural, economic, and institutional infrastructure to develop the tourism capacity of Mashhad, it is recommended that basic issues such as water supply, high-capacity streets for passenger cars, and public parking be developed.
- ✓ It is recommended to pay more attention to providing suitable accommodation, good roads, air, sea and land terminals, creating service facilities, welfare, hospitality, health, transportation and proper treatment of tourists through training, control and monitoring and all the services provided to pilgrims and tourists to strengthen tourism in the cultural dimension. One can also use the training of a tour guide in cultural tourism.
- ✓ It is proposed to strengthen religious tourism through political, cultural, and social advertising in the field of recognizing customs and traditions, pilgrimage culture, honoring pilgrims and tourists. One must inform the community about the benefits of religious tourism by providing cultural and interactive education to the guests in dealing with the local culture and residents of the pilgrim city of Mashhad.
- ✓ It is suggested that the country's officials, especially the Broadcasting Corporation, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and the Tourism Organization should create a culture of accepting foreign tourists in the community and provide the necessary social grounds for the reception of religious tourists.
- ✓ It is suggested to compile catalogs introducing antiquities and tourism and recreation areas of Mashhad for tourists to get better acquainted with other tourism facilities in Mashhad.
- ✓ By introducing the areas and tourism routes of the Mashhad region through maps and brochures and providing them free of charge for offices and tourists, through the site of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization or sending to offices paved the way for the development of cultural tourism.

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