

THE BENEFIT OF GEO-BRANDING IN A RURAL GEOTOURISM DESTINATION: ISFAHAN, IRAN

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Abstract: Rural centres are among the most important of those which have affected world tourism trends. The increase in short-term trips has made these territories one of the main tourism destinations. In today's competitive world, a targeted effort is necessary to brand all products and services to compete for tourist attraction. It is noteworthy that, until this time (2016) 120 villages have been considered as rural destinations for the target of tourism markets in Iran, and therefore, it can be said that the existence of a particular brand is an encouraging and effective factor to attract tourists to rural areas. The Delphi technique is used to determine the benefits of making and managing a tourism brand for desert villages which are geotourism destinations in Isfahan, Iran. Analysis of the data summarized thirteen benefits of geo-branding for rural areas.

Key words: desert village, geotourism, Iran, tourism brand

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Introduction

Destination branding (DB) is considered as one of the most important and effective strategies in the marketing area for tourism destinations. It is a selection of reliable factors to recognize a destination through image-reconstruction and image building (Cai, 2002; Curtis, 2001; Hall, 2002). Furthermore, the main idea behind building DB is to establish an emotional (Morgan & Rego, 2009) and rational link with tourists through unique identity. It is highly regarded due to its impact on improving the mental image of tourists and making a competitive differentiation. Despite the importance of branding in the realm of marketing for destinations, not enough attention has been given to the area. A lack of a mental image of appropriate destinations for many parts of the country has led to the fact that many people travel only to certain cities within the borders of Iran. Among

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the areas with great potential in tourism marketing – especially geotourism– are villages located in desert areas, although they have not yet been successful as they should in attracting tourists. Making a brand is an important factor in introducing these areas. Desert villages are among the purest and most admired of natural and geological but unknown heritage in Iran, and they have a great potential for desert tourism and geotourism development in the country. Due to their own geomorphology and geology attractions, these regions can easily be introduced as geotourism destinations. Geotourism is part of the new niche tourism which has recently become of interest in many countries (Hose, 2003; Dowling & Newsome, 2005). Geotourism, which strives to identify and preserve earth heritage such as geological and geomorphological phenomena, can be not only a positive factor for tourist attractions and economic development, but can also play an important role in sustainable, rural development in destinations. In today's competitive world, identifying and introducing desert villages as geotourism destinations requires worldwide marketing. Obviously, tourist destination branding is one of the most important aspects of destination marketing. Making and managing a brand can significantly influence the improvement of tourists' mental image and competitive differentiation of a destination compared to other similar destinations.

This survey is specifically concerned with the benefits of making and managing a geotourism brand in the desert villages of Isfahan, Iran. Data were collected through a literature review and the responses from a questionnaire for experts. The paper is organized as follows: in the following section a literature review is presented which includes the importance of brand making and managing in geotourism destinations. The methodology, analysis of results, and a conclusion are presented in subsequent sections.

Literature review

Nowadays, a brand is an influential factor in the conception of tourists when choosing a destination. Thus, a robust and solid brand can distinguish a product, service or a destination from its rivals (Lim & O'Cass, 2001). Investigating the role of branding in destination marketing is of the utmost importance. The issue became more important when the decision-makers of the tourism industry found that many destinations had become of interest due to the early mental images created in individuals and so many theories were suggested for building a destination brand. The most extensive efforts were made by Hankinson (2004) who was the first person to lead the theoretical framework of product-based branding to tourism destination branding. Regarding this, Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) stated that a destination brand can play a coordinating role among tourism stakeholders through the creation of a common image (Cai, 2002). Here it must be said that the higher the number of stakeholders who use the brand, the greater the destination awareness and tourist attraction will be, although quality control (QC) is also needed, since taking advantage of unregistered products and services or businesses may damage the mental image of brand. As a result, the role of brand manager is to establish an evaluation committee to authorize the use of the brand and provide reports on quality control products and services (Aaker, 1997). According to the American Marketing Association, the brand can be defined as a multi-dimensional combination of functional, emotional, strategic and communication elements with which a unique network of connections is made in the minds of consumers (Tsiotsou & Goldsmith, 2012).

Among brands, rural and cooperative brands are an excellent way to promote the local economy. Nowadays, brands in rural destinations play an important role in the development of the green economy and sustainable tourism. Cai (2002) proposed one of the first conceptual destination rural branding models. In the model, the brand elements mix to uniquely identify and position the destination through positive image building.

This understanding is derived from general branding literature (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Keller et al., 1998; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002) and emphasizes the role of image building. Furthermore, Cai (2002), in an article titled “Cooperative branding for rural destinations” illustrated that conceptualization and modelling of cooperative branding will help advance the field of destination marketing and bring about efficient use of rural tourism resources and effective marketing practices; the above mentioned study was conducted in Old West Country, a marketing consortium consisting of seven rural counties in the state of New Mexico, USA. He found that both the region and its member communities benefited from cooperative branding in projecting a consistent cognitive image based on shared destination attributes. In addition, Embacher (2013) urged that building and managing a rural tourism brand brings benefits by supporting business chains, creating trust in unknown products and services, giving security, facilitating decision-making, allowing identification and self-presentation, creating familiarity and positive prejudices, minimizing the risk for disappointment, standing for values, giving orientation, standing for controlled quality and creating repeat business.

It is noteworthy that the private sector or family businesses only undertake innovation such as creating new products or organizing new tourism activity when an organization promises them it will be profitable. Branding (certification) of local products will support the local producer. Local producers and customers will benefit from branding advantages which are higher quality, environmentally friendly and so on (Farsani et al., 2012).

It is obvious that geoparks and geotourism destinations which emphasise sustainability activities should not maximize the negative impacts on the ecosystem. Therefore, they should take advantage of a local, national or international certification brand or Eco-labels for their products, services and activities. Eco-labels are an excellent way to enhance credibility for green marketing claims. Eco-labels on one hand help a quality product stand out in the market, and also allow customers to recognize and choose products with a low negative impact on the environment (earth-friendly products); on the other hand, they can guarantee and support entrepreneurs, small and medium-size businesses, products and services. The awards, guidelines, labels and formal certificates of environmental quality related to the tourism industry developed a greater importance in the 90s. This aims to distinguish companies or institutions that contribute in some way towards sustainable development in tourism (Lima & Careto, 2007).

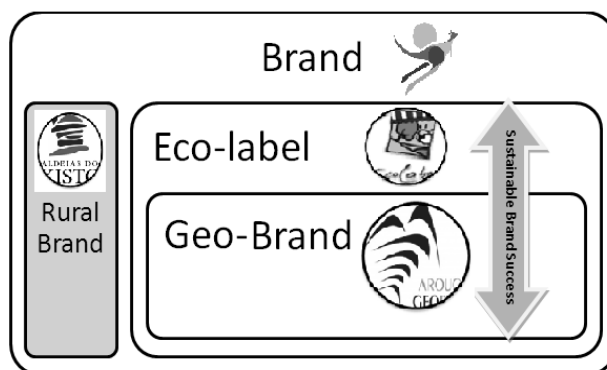


Figure 1. Sustainable Brand Success in Rural Tourism Destinations

In the last two decades with the emergence of geotourism and geoparks as a sustainable form of tourism in protected and rural areas, a new concept of “Geo-brand” – an earth-friendly brand creating an image that identifies geological or geomorphological

heritage of a territory – entered tourism marketing. Lastly it can be concluded that Eco-labels and Geo-brands undoubtedly helped fuel sustainable brand success in rural tourism destinations (Figure 1). Regarding creating Geo-brands, the Global Geopark Network (GGN) provides opportunities and possibilities, through a common logo, for small firms which are the members of the geopark network to boost their creativity and initiatives (Zouros & Mckeever, 2009). At the local level in some rural and protected areas located in geoparks territories or geotourism destinations (such as: Vulkaneifel Geopark (Germany); Arouca Geopark, Azores Geopark and Naturtejo Geopark (Portugal); twenty-seven schist villages (Portugal); Cabo de Gata-Nijar Natural Park (Spain); Nature park TERRA.vita European Geopark (Germany); Parco Naturale Adamello Brenta (Italy); Eisenwurzen European Geopark (Austria)) tourism markets take advantage of the geo-brand or other Eco-labels and certifications (e.g. in festivals, local products, events, publications etc.). Moreover, some local producers use the geo-brand for promoting their rural products and activities (Figure 2) (Farsani et al., 2013a; Agência Desenvolvimento Turístico, 2008).



Figure 2. Geo-brands in rural geotourism destinations (Portugal) a: the geo-brand is a symbol of houses built from schist stone b: the geo-brand is a symbol of an outstanding fossil locality of the Darriwilian (Middle Ordovician) age, where giant trilobites and trilobite clusters (from several to thousands of specimens) occur in large slabs of shale in Arouca Geopark territory (Source: Arouca Geopark website; Agência Desenvolvimento Turístico, 2008)

However, the rural tourism brand is a new concept in Iranian tourism marketing and up to this time, no significant work has been undertaken in this field and none of the above-mentioned approaches takes into consideration the benefit of a rural geotourism brand in a case study in Iran. The importance of this research is to investigate the benefits of making and managing a geotourism brand in the desert villages of Isfahan, Iran as rural geotourism destinations. Rural geotourism is nature-based tourism which takes place in the countryside and which includes unique geological and geomorphological landscapes. In these villages, geo-heritage and geo-landscapes fit in with the rural population’s lifestyle and culture (Farsani et al., 2013b).

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in Iran in the desert villages of Isfahan province (in the east of the province). Isfahan (covering an area of 107,029 km² between 30°42’ and 34°30’ N latitude and 49°36’ and 55°32’ E longitudes) is located on the main north–south and east–west routes crossing Iran, and it is Iran’s number one tourist destination

for a good reason. Isfahan province is situated between the massive central Zagros mountain range and the grand desert. Isfahan has a great desert in the east including some desert tourism villages which have recently become known as geotourism destinations (e.g. the villages of Mesr and Farahzad, Garmeh (Figure 3), Ghoortan, etc.). The empirical part of this study was conducted from June to September 2014.

A Delphi technique as a systematic and interactive forecasting method is used to investigate the benefits of making and managing a geotourism brand in the desert villages of Isfahan province, Iran. This technique relied on a panel of fifteen experts. In order to achieve this goal, the major research questions were formulated as follows:

Q1: What are the benefits of a geotourism brand in desert villages?

The fifteen experts answered the questionnaires in three rounds. In the first step an open-ended question was designed for face-to-face meetings and the interviews and the data for this study were collected through a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling method is a non-probability sampling technique that is used by researchers to identify potential subjects in studies where subjects are hard to locate. Sample sizes in a qualitative method may be too small to support claims of having achieved either informational redundancy or theoretical saturation (Sandelowski, 1995). The qualitative research method (axial coding) is used for analysing the data. In the second step, according to the experts' opinion which was given in the first questionnaire and literature reviews, the second questionnaire (closed-ended) was designed. Responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree for key characteristics of benefits of a rural geotourism brand. The questionnaire was sent to the same experts as those who filled in the forms. In this regards, a hypothesis was designed as follows:

H₀: The parameter is not desirable ($M \leq 3$)

H₁: The parameter is desirable ($M > 3$)

In the third step, the one-sample t-test method was used to achieve the more desirable parameter, and lastly, the authors removed the non-desirable parameter and summarized the results and sent them to the experts. This process was repeated until a consensus emerged.

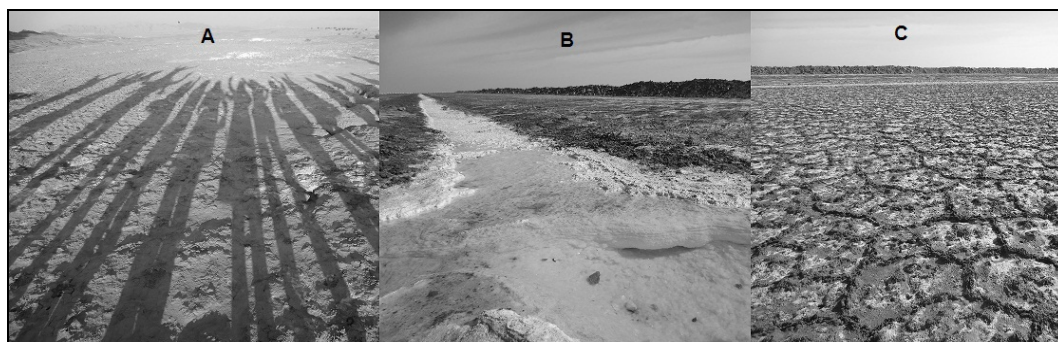


Figure 3. Geo-attractions of Garmeh Village A) Desert land, B) Salt Lake, C) Salt Polygons)

RESULTS

As mentioned before, a total of fifteen experts were interviewed. Respondents indicated their opinions and ideas about the benefits of making and managing a desert rural geotourism brand. Analysis of the data through a qualitative method (axial coding) without software identifies marketing, economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits of a geotourism brand in desert villages (Table 1).

Table 1. Determining the Variables According to Qualitative Method (axial coding) Analysis

Coding	Group		The benefits of a geotourism brand in desert villages
A	Marketing	A1	An appropriate brand is considered as a marketing tool
		A2	A tool for popularization (it is kept in people's memories)
		A3	Raises the curiosity of tourists to discover the desert
		A4	Attracts the attention of tourists to desert areas
		A5	An important factor to introduce the geological and geomorphological features and attractions of the desert area
		A6	Brings more competitiveness
B	Economic	B1	Local Economic Development
		B2	Creates opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment
		B3	Attracts investors to desert villages
		B4	Attracts investors to desert public-private partnerships
C	Socio-cultural	C1	Local involvement
		C2	Regional identity and value creation
		C3	Standardization of tourism services and infrastructure
		C4	Local product standardization
D	Environmental	D1	Sustainable desert tourism
		D2	Protection of desert ecosystem

According to the results obtained from the qualitative research (Table 1) and literature reviews, we summarized the benefits of a geotourism brand in desert villages of Isfahan (Table 2).

Table 2. The Benefits a Geotourism Brand as an Eco-label in Desert Villages of Isfahan, Iran

Coding		The benefits of making and managing a geotourism brand in desert villages	Mean	
A	Marketing	A1	Promotes network activity	3.7333
		A2	Attracts the attention of tourists to desert areas	3.9333
		A3	An important factor to introduce the geological and geomorphological features and attractions of the desert area	3.4667
		A4	Brings more competitiveness	3.4667
B	Economic	B1	Local economic development	3.8000
		B2	Creates opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment	3.8000
		B3	Attracts investors to desert villages	3.9333
		B4	Attracts investors to desert public-private partnerships (small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs))	4.4000
C	Socio-cultural	C1	Local involvement	3.8667
		C2	Regional identity and value creation and providing cultural exchange	4.2000
		C3	Standardization of tourism services, infrastructures and local products	3.9333
		C4	Reverse rural-urban migration	3.0667
D	Environmental	D1	Sustainable desert tourism	4.000
		D2	Protection of desert ecosystem	3.8667

In the next step, based on the result of the descriptive analysis (on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and analysis of the data with a one-sample t-test (Table 3), it can be said that promoting network activity, attracting

tourists to desert areas, introducing the geological and geomorphological features and attractions of the desert area and bringing more competitiveness to the area are marketing benefits; and developing local economy, creating opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment, attracting investors to desert villages and attracting investors to desert public-private partnerships (small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)) are categorized as economic benefits of making and managing a geotourism brand in desert villages. In addition, experts illustrated good agreement on three socio-cultural benefits: local involvement, regional identity and value creation and providing cultural exchange, standardization of tourism services, infrastructure and local products. It is noteworthy that reverse rural-urban migration is removed from the sub-divisions. Moreover, promoting sustainable desert tourism and protection of desert ecosystems are classified as environmental benefits of a geotourism brand. Finally, the results of the one-sample t-test were sent to the experts again and a good agreement was generally found among them on variables: A1, A2, A3, A4; B1,B2,B3,B4; C1,C2,C3 and D1, D2.

Table 3. The Result of One-Sample T-Test for Selecting the Variables

variable	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
A1	4.036	14	.001	0.73333	0.3436	1.1230
A2	3.500	14	.004	0.93333	0.3614	1.5053
A3	1.974	14	0.068	0.46667	-0.0403	0.9736
A4	2.432	14	0.029	0.46667	0.0551	0.8783
B1	4.000	14	.001	0.8000	0.3710	1.2290
B2	4.000	14	.001	0.8000	0.3710	1.2290
B3	4.090	14	.001	0.9333	0.4439	1.4227
B4	3.552	14	.003	1.06667	0.4227	1.7107
C1	4.026	14	.001	0.86667	0.4049	1.3284
C2	6.874	14	.000	1.20000	0.8256	1.5744
C3	5.137	14	.000	0.93333	0.5436	1.3230
C4	0.269	14	0.792	0.06667	0.5989	-0.4656
D1	3.623	14	0.003	1.00000	0.4080	1.5920
D2	2.582	14	0.022	0.73333	0.1243	1.3424

Conclusion

Desert villages are one of the purest and most wonderful but unknown natural attractions in Iran and have a great potential for tourism attraction and development in the country. Among the provinces in Iran, Isfahan has great potential for promoting desert tourism. These regions, due to their specific geomorphology and geology, are well introduced as geotourism destinations. In today's competitive world, identifying and introducing these regions as geotourism destinations requires worldwide marketing. Nowadays in a competitive market, tourism destination branding is one of the most important aspects of destination marketing which can have a significant influence on improving the mental image of tourists and creating competitive differentiations in a destination compared to other similar destinations. Recent studies have illustrated that a rural tourism brand and Eco-labels play an important role in the development of the local economy and sustainable tourism.

This study is an initial attempt to investigate the benefit of making and managing a geo-brand as an Eco-label in desert village of Isfahan, Iran. The results provide some support for the expectations that building a geo-brand brings important benefits for rural areas. The result of the Delphi technique clearly shows that making and managing a geo-

brand brings thirteen benefits to desert villages such as promoting network activity, attracting tourists to desert areas, introducing the geological and geomorphological features and attractions of the desert area, bringing more competitiveness to the area, developing the local economy, creating opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment, attracting investors to desert villages and attracting investors to desert public-private partnerships (small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), local involvement, regional identity and value creation and providing cultural exchange, standardization of tourism services, infrastructure and local products, promoting sustainable desert tourism and protection of desert ecosystems.

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