Branding of Sports Tourism Destination in Mashhad City

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Abstract

Purpose: Today, there are sizable chunk of cities in the world, trying to introduce themselves as destination brands in various areas. Given that, this study aimed to explain the effective factors on destination branding in the field of sports tourism in Mashhad.

Method: This study was of applied research, from the view point of purpose, and also, in terms of its nature, it was in the field of exploratory research, furthermore, in terms of data collection, it was of a descriptive-survey type. Also, due to the use of Q methodology, it was a type of mixed research (quantitative-qualitative). The statistical population included marketing and branding specialists, sports tourism experts, sports management professors and people active in the field of tourism who had complete knowledge of Mashhad. For this purpose, theoretical saturation was achieved after in-depth and semi-structured interviewing 16 experts selected purposefully and finally 26 people completed the Q questionnaire.

Results: The data obtained from sorting the Q statements were entered into SPSS software version 26 and analyzed through varimax rotation (exploratory factor analysis). The findings revealed six different mental models. The priority of these models were infrastructural factors, inner city situation, cultural activities, commercial creativities, urban essence, and transportation, respectively.

Conclusion: The results of this research emphasize the strengthening of indicators such as suitable access to the Internet, managerial decisions, cultural diversity, the existence of suitable places and markets, the potential of the region and the smoothness of traffic and roads in order to make the destination as a brand in Mashhad's sports tourism.

Keywords: Branding, Commercial Creativity, Infrastructure, Sports Tourism, Mashhad

Introduction

It is widely declared that tourism destinations should seek to stimulate consumers, who are the ultimate decision-makers of the trip (Dana and McClearly, 1995, Leisen, 2001; Kaiet al., 2004; Tasci and Kozak, 2006). However, in general, different options for the destination are offered to customers, which have similar

features, such as quality accommodation, beautiful and spectacular views. Therefore, it is not enough that a destination acts only to excite the individual. Instead, the destination must be unique and different to be chosen as a final decision. From this point of view, the concept of destination branding can be critical to determine the destination and distinguish from the options available in the person's mind (Qu et al., 2011). Although it is not explicitly examined in brand area, destination image should be considered as a concept that already corresponds to destination branding (Park, 2013). In fact, the core issue of the brand is to create a positive image of destination which defines and differentiates the destination by choosing a combination that is compatible with the brand elements.

Destination branding can be defined as a way to communicate the destination's unique identity through differentiating the destination from competitors (Morrison and Anderson, 2002). Destination brands have two important functions including identification and distinction. Identification means explaining to consumers the source of the product. (Florek, 2005). For example, a place includes tangible features such as historic sites or beaches as well as intangible features such as culture, customs, and history. Due to the complex nature of being a brand, identity generalization is inevitable (Fan, 2006). In general, tourism destinations emphasize points such as high-quality accommodation, restaurants or well-designed public spaces (Baker, 2007). It's even more important to recognize what brand relationships are advantageous over competitors (ie, what are the points of difference and distinction).

Differences in points of distinctions help consumers to evaluate the brand positively and connect with the brand (Keller, 2008). Indeed, the key point in branding is that consumers understand the differences between brands within a product group (eg, location and destination) because it is difficult to replace distinctive and unique brands with others (Ko et al., 2011). Over the years, destination branding research has paid special attention to the role of the brand in relation to tourism destination brand consumption (Chang et al., 2020). Such studies have shown that the sports events industry is one of the largest industries that act as a catalyst for business opportunities where destinations can enjoy the benefits of tourism. However, the globalization of sports and mass media have intensified the marketing pressures on tourism destinations to not only promote their brands through sports, but also to promote the competition among destinations in the domestic and international area (Weed & Bull, 2009; Gibson & Lamont, 2006).

To cope with the advanced competition caused by globalization, destinations increasingly need a destination branding approach in their domain, where they adopt specific tactics to gain a competitive advantage over others. Such tactics are generally associated with using sport tourism leverage, through which stakeholders recognize events as opportunities to achieve desirable long-term results (Chalip, 2002).

Since the existence of required facilities is the first step in attracting and maintaining tourists in the sense of re-demanding, understanding the region's situation in terms of these factors provides the basis to learn about the tourism situation of the region and its pathology and development in order to satisfy the expectations and needs of tourists and create their satisfaction and loyalty towards the destination. Tourists' expectations are formed based on previous travel experiences, advertisements and encouragements. Consequencly, the quality of services, the quality of facilities, and the received and perceived values will have a direct impact on the quality of travel, tourism experience and their level of demand in the future (Oisal, 2003).

If you gain desirable experience in using a brand, it can lead to positive results such as

trust, satisfaction, emotional reactions of customers, which ultimately leads to a deep commitment to the brand. Researchers stated trust is created when it has a lot to do with intimacy, or when tourists claim that their satisfaction is high, which will lead to loyalty. This issue is one of the most important movements for loyalty and commitment in marketing (Sahin et al., 2011). In addition, when customers commit to a brand, firstly, their loyalty increases, and secondly, they will like it more and introduce it to their friends (Bergvist and Bach Larson, 2010).

Today, the brand is defined the tourist's perception and mental image of the destination, proper service, the identity card, and identity of the tourist destination. Being a brand is important because branding plays a big role in increasing the trust and loyalty of customers to a tourist destination. That's why one of the main issues of attracting tourists is branding. A tourist place should be able to introduce itself to the world with a feature so that it can attract tourists and people determine their destination according to that feature (Manshi and Babanjad, 2014). To develop this industry in a country, the necessary infrastructure must be provided. In recent decades, the role of branding and tourism has attracted the attention of researchers and different people. In today's competitive market, identification and branding of a destination to make it unique and distinctive among competitors has become more necessary and critical. If tourism destinations want to succeed in branding, they should be formed based on their potentials, so that the destinations cannot be easily replaced by another's. Hence, the new and changing environment of tourism today needs continuous research to invent and introduce advanced competitive strategies which are compatible with changes in demand. The role of brands and branding becomes necessary again and it should be addressed more in tourism destinations.

Tourism is one of the things in the world today due to its positive effects on the society, culture and economy of countries, and it has attracted the attention of many countries. In the future, this industry will become the first and most profitable industry in the world and will have a very high impact on economic growth. In such a way that many countries have created suitable fields and infrastructures for the use of this industry. For many of these countries, tourism has made a major contribution to business activities, income generation, job creation and foreign exchanges (Alipour et al., 2015).

Because the existence of required facilities is the first step in attracting and maintaining tourists in the sense of re-demanding them, therefore, knowing the situation of the region in terms of the existence of a level of these factors, provides the basis for getting to know the state of tourism in the region and its pathology and development. Brings to meet the expectations and needs of tourists, to create their satisfaction and loyalty towards the destination. Tourists' expectations from the region are formed based on previous travel experiences, advertisements and encouragement from others. As a result, the quality of services, the quality of facilities and the received and perceived values will have a direct impact on the quality of travel, tourism experience and their level of demand in the future (Oisal, 2003). If there is a good experience in using a brand, it can lead to positive results such as trust, more satisfaction, improving the emotional reactions of customers, which ultimately leads to a deep commitment to the said brand. The researchers stated in their results that trust is created when it has a lot to do with intimacy, or to put it better, if tourists repeat their demand that their satisfaction with the destination is high, which will lead to loyalty; This issue is one of the most important movements for loyalty and commitment in marketing (Sahin et al., 2011). In addition, when customers commit to a brand, firstly, their loyalty increases, and secondly,

they like it more and introduce it to their friends (Bergvist and Bach Larson, 2010).

Mashhad, as one of the largest cities in Iran, possesses many potentials and sports tourism attractions, and on the other hand, holy Mashhad attracts many tourists due to the hosting the enlightened court of Imam Reza which can help maintaining and continuing the travel of tourists. The development of the sports tourism industry can become an important factor in the growth and development of this city, but achieving these benefits will be possible when it is placed in the context of proper planning and foresight (Nazari Tarshizi et al., 2019).

Branding the destination can be considered as one of the goals that can help the development of sports tourism in Mashhad, therefore, the question of the current research is what are the factors affecting the destination branding in sports tourism and what mental patterns can be identified to do so?

Sports tourism is defined as "a leisure-based trip that takes people beyond living outside their homes to participate in and watch sports activities as well as visit sports attractions" (Gibson, 2006). Sports tourism can be understood as a unique interaction of activity, people and place. Sports and tourism activities have been working together since ancient times. There is no doubt that sports tourism is one of the most important industries which is characterized by increasing profits, without experiencing almost any shocks and consequences caused by the global economic crisis (Jakovlev et al, 2017). Sports tourism aims to observe or participate in various planned sports events. This type of tourism focuses on sports. In all the countries of the world, people have a great interest and passion for continuing it and intend to pursue it as a professional job. Most of them are interested in sports from childhood. They start training and by reaching the stage of adolescence, they have enough skills in sports. When people find a strong interest in a particular sport, they intend to turn it into a profession. In this way they engage in professional training and participate in sports competitions.

These sports enthusiasts, or more precisely, these athletes, usually travel a considerable distance to attend the game scenes and to participate in the traditional pre-game and post-game celebrations. The most notable example is the "bamboo" parties where their families and friends cook, eat, drink and socialize with their fellow fans near the stadium and around the university. For many college football fans, this traditional style has continued through generations, and the memories of attending play a significant role in their decision to travel for sporting events. Similarly, there is a positive relationship between memories and behavior of sports fans (Tsai and Wang, 2017).

One of the fastest industries in the world can be called sports. This phenomenon plays a role in creating sports tourism by sports events globally such as the Olympic Games, super championships and so on. It can be classified into three categories including sports tourism, active sports tourism and nostalgia sports tourism (Ross, 2001). Event sports tourism refers to major sporting events such as the Olympic Games, the Super Bowl and the FIFA World Cup. Active sports tourism means traveling to participate in sports-related activities like golf, hiking, tennis, cycling, diving and so on. Nostalgic sports tourism draws travelers to visit famous sports halls and sites. This type of sports travel makes visitors have unique experiences. Examples include the Women's College Basketball Hall of Fame in Knoxville, the Stadium in Beijing, China, and the Historic Center in Charlotte (Ross, 2001). Sports tourism, as a special type of tourism, provides extremely active (referring to active participation as a competitor) or passive (referring to passive participation as a spectator) experiences for tourists. Regardless of the type of engagement (active or passive),

sports tourism is all about the interaction of activities, people and places with respect to these socio-spatial dimensions. Sports tourism experience is a subjective interpretation of organizational, infrastructural, environmental and other characteristics in the field of sports tourism (Yoshida et al, 2017).

Regarding branding in sports tourism, various researches have been conducted inside and outside of Iran, some of the most important and most recent of which are described below. Rabbani et al. (2018) investigated the strategic planning of urban branding in tourism industry and showed that the creation, improvement and development of urban brand programs using the strategic planning model of urban branding will strengthen the city's position, economic and social development of the city and attract tourists. Shariatnejad et al. (2016) in a research entitled Explaining the components of urban branding with an emphasis on the tourism industry (case study: Khoramabad city) concluded that the consequences of branding in Khoramabad city include increasing the attention of the government and the private sector to investment in Khoramabad city, Increasing people's motivation to travel to this city, and spreading the distinct identity of Khorramabad city through introducing it to all stakeholders and then encouraging them to choose this city as a tourist destination. In an overseas study, Matiza et al (2020) in a research concluded that there is an inseparable relationship between South African place branding and tourism. Success in contemporary tourism marketing is significantly related to immigration policy. Avraham (2018) in a research investigated the marketing and branding strategies of the nation to deal with tourism crises and stereotypes of the destination and showed that using three types of source strategies (personal testimony, blaming the media), message (spreading a narrow image, using famous people) and audiences (emphasis on similar values, cultural symbols and geography) can combat national stereotypes. Hemmonsbey et al (2018) in a research entitled concluded that in their research, they concluded that it is possible to clearly show the positive effects of important events for a developing destination, in accordance with economic-social development and brand exposure. In addition, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of strategic partnerships for effective brand development.

Today, the brand is defined by the tourist's perception and mental image of the destination, proper service and, in a way, the identity card, function and identity of the tourist destination. Being a brand is important because branding plays a big role in increasing the trust and loyalty of customers to a tourist destination. For this reason, one of the main issues of attracting tourists is branding. A tourist place should be able to introduce itself to the world with a feature so that it can attract tourists and people determine their destination according to that feature (Manshi and Babanjad, 2014). In order to develop this industry in a country, infrastructures must be It is necessary to provide in order to attract tourists.

Sports, as a multi-dimensional tool that has many effects, has proven its place and role in many cases. Such as economy, health, social relations and healthy leisure, prevention of social delinquencies and deviance and many other applications (Pitz and Statler, 2007). Through the development of sports, sports activities have become a tool for the development of societies and peace in different cultures. Different aspects of human life have changed with sports; So that sports has even widely penetrated into societies such as family, school, institutions and public and private sectors, and has become one of the most important social phenomena of the present century by penetrating the heart of mass and public media. Especially as long as these activities are organized regularly and in the form of sports competitions and events. Therefore, sports tourists have significant

effects on the host communities and cause the comprehensive development of the host city (Getz and Page, 2016). Because the destinations choose people to travel and stay for a special experience and according to the understanding that can be understood from a certain characteristic, it is possible to create a brand identity for them through marketing communication methods; Therefore, when tourists choose between a branded destination and its competitors, due to the higher position of the brand in the mind of the customer, they prefer the well-known option or the brand. Today, tourists are face to face to choose their desired destination based on a wide range of destinations that offer almost similar comfort and entertainment facilities, so it is no longer enough for tourists to know and experience a city, province or country. to be chosen as a travel destination, but they should create a wonderful image of themselves so that tourists go to this city or destination despite the high competition (Bolurian and Qalipour, 20

According to the stated content, the importance and necessity is also understood, and since Mashhad has wide capacities in the development of sports tourism, including well-equipped stadiums, natural and artificial running tracks, mountaineering and nature tourism places, water sports. Also, adventurous sports such as high jump, paragliding, etc. can help to brand Mashhad as a hub for sports tourism. Therefore, the main question of the current research is what factors are there in branding the destination in the field of sports tourism in Mashhad?

Materials and Methods

This research is applied research from the view point of purpose. This study is in the field of exploratory research. Also, this research is a descriptive survey in terms of data gathering. Also, due to the use of Q methodology, it was a type of mixed research (quantitative-qualitative). According to the opinion of sports tourism experts and sports managements, as well as considering the purpose of the research, the statistical population includes marketing and branding specialists, sports tourism specialists, sports management professors and people active in the field of tourism, who have a complete knowledge of the city of Mashhad. In this study, due to the exploratory nature of the research, sampling was done in two separate parts. In order to identify the factors that were conducted through interviews with experts, it was done in a purposeful sampling method and 16 interviews were conducted to identify the factors of destination branding in sports tourism.

Regarding the quantitative part at which Q questionnaire was available based on the sampling method, it should be mentioned that Q analysis can be done between 20 and 40 people (Gholamian et al, 2021), so it is not like other quantitative research which is determined by Cochran's formulas or Morgan's table.

Q-methodology is a systematic study about the mentality and perspective of the studied people. In this methodology, an effort is made to identify and rank the different views of people around the subject under investigation. For this reason, this method is sometimes called Q-sort. Q methodology is a technique that enables the researcher to firstly identify and classify individual perceptions and opinions and secondly to categorize groups of people based on their perceptions. In fact, with the help and use of this methodology, the researcher will be able to finally reveal the mentality of people and their thinking patterns regarding different subjects by using the steps defined in it.

That's why, firstly, it takes time to fill out the Q questionnaire, and the people who complete this questionnaire must have enough expertise and free time to fill in the questionnaire. Secondly, in the Varimax rotation, the KMO test determines the adequacy of the sampling volume, which is confirmed by the same number of statistics in the case of the Q questionnaire. Given that, finally, 26 people

completed the Q questionnaire.

The data collection method was the library method (to collect the discourse space) and then semi-structured in-depth interviews. At first, an interview was conducted to identify the factors influencing destination branding in tourism in Mashhad.

Then, the design of cue cards and chart was done in order to sort the cue samples, and using the cue method, the mental patterns of the experts were identified. Finally, the mental patterns were prioritized.

Then, the data obtained from sorting the Q statements were entered into SPSS software version 26 and analyzed through varimax rotation (exploratory factor analysis).

Results

In Table 1, the information of interviewees and those who completed the Q questionnaire were stated.

Table 1. Demography

Code	Position	Resume	Interview	Count	Questionnaire Q	Count
I 1	Marketing and branding expert	Over 5 years	·	4	✓	8
I 2	Sports tourism expert	Over 5 years	·	2	✓	10
I 3	Sports management professor	Over 10 years	·	3	✓	3
I 4	Tourism activists	Over 5 years	·	3	✓	5

Next, in table 2, the information of interviewing and the examining of the theoretical foundations to identify the factors affecting the branding of the destination in Mashhad city were stated. There is no exact and definite criterion for the number of Q statements, but in various researche, these propositions have been between 20 and 60 different numbers (Gholamian et al, 2021). Among the 42 propositions obtained from the interviews and theoretical foundations, 12 propositions were removed and merged due to similarity or repetition, and finally 30 propositions were finally confirmed.

Table 2. Factors affecting Destination Branding in Sports Tourism

Code	Q factors	Source	
		Interview	**Theoretical Foundations**
1	Suitable internet access	*	*
2	Smooth rood traffic leading to Mashhad	*	
3	The potential of the region as the economic hub of the country's tourism	*	

4	parks, tourist facilities and various barbecues in the city	*	
5	Suitable accommodation and services in Mashhad	*	*
6	Cultural diversity of Mashhad	*	
7	Ease of entry of domestic and foreign tourists to Mashhad	*	*
8	suitable places and markets for business	*	*
9	Industrialization of sports and tourism in Mashhad	*	
10	local games	*	
11	Local business boom	*	
12	Meeting the expectations of tourists		*
13	Proximity to the main population and urban centers to attract investors	*	
14	Festivals and cultural events	*	
15	Susceptibility of the region for investment		
16	well-equipped football stadiums of Mashhad	*	
17	Adequacy of road network and public transportation		*
18	Management decisions and determination for the development of sports tourism		
19	Development of uses for the development of sports tourism in the country		*
20	Relationship-oriented and sociability of Mashhad city		
21	road protection and repairment and intra-city transportation network	*	
22	Hosting international sports events in Mashhad	*	
23	Desired hospitality of residents	*	*
24	Adequate social centers in the field of tourism	*	
25	The effectiveness of religious places on the branding of Mashhad city		*
26	Self-employment opportunities in the field of tourism and sports in Mashhad		
27	Effectiveness of advertising campaigns in introducing Mashhad city as a tourism hub	*	

28	Low unemployment rate of Mashhad		
29	Desired social security	*	*
30	Favorable investment conditions in sports tourism in Mashhad		*

Through the Q factor analysis, different mental patterns of experts were identified and the research questions were answered. To determine the optimal number of components, the Pebble chart was used. This chart shows the changes of special values in connection with the factors. According to experts, a total of 6 factors were identified higher than one.

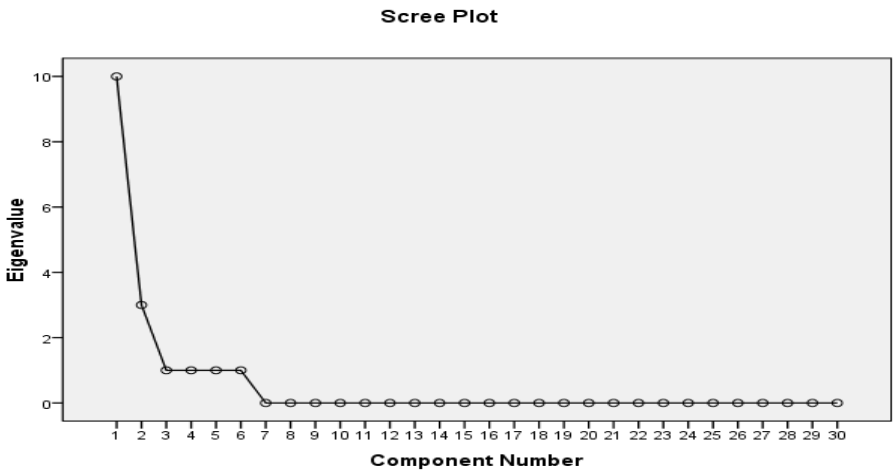

figure 1. Pebble chart

Like exploratory factor analysis, two steps must be done in Q methodology. First, factors and effective factors in branding the destination were extracted, then the rotation of the factors is carried out so that they can be interpreted. To perform Q factor analysis, interactive rotation of factors (Varimax rotation) was used. The amount of variance of each mental pattern and its specific value are shown in Table 3 &4.

Table 3. The amount of explained variance of each factor or mental pattern and its eigenvalue

Mental patterns	**Orthogonal rotation of factors**		
	Total	**Percentage of variance**	**Cumulative variance**
1. facility and infrastructure factors	10.852	36.174	36.174
2. Inner city situation	3.592	16.972	53.146
3. Cultural activists	1.561	6.204	59.350
4. Commercial creativities	1.441	4.803	64.153
5. Urban essence	1.174	3.915	68.068

Mental patterns	Orthogonal rotation of factors		
	Total	Percentage of variance	Cumulative variance
6. Transportation condition	1.044	3.481	71.549

The varimax rotation showed the experts identified 6 factors that explain and cover 71.549 percent of the total variance of these 6 mental patterns. To find out which experts have specified these 6 patterns, the rotation matrix was used. Varimax method is one of the usual methods of orthogonal rotation of factors. Towards factor's interpretability, the Varimax orthogonal rotation was used, the results of which were not reported in the article for brevity.

Based on the output of SPSS software, the values of factor loadings were compared with each other and the important factors and comments were identified. In addition, towards analyzing and interpreting factors, the criteria of the important factors have been taken into account, and finally, in Table 4, the mental patterns of experts from Q samples, participants and Q factors in each mental pattern are given in order of priority.

Table 4. Prioritizing and identifying mental patterns of experts

	Q Factors	Mental patterns
Q1	The Internet access	**Infrastructure & Facilities**
Q5	Accommodation	
Q16	Equipped football stadium	
Q19	Development of uses for the development of sports tourism in Mashhad	
Q22	Hosting international sports events	
Q18	Management decisions and determination for the development of sports tourism	**Inner city situation**
Q20	The relationship orientation basis and sociality of the city	
Q27	Existence of advertising campaigns to introduce Mashhad as a tourism hub	
Q28	Low unemployment rate in Mashhad	
Q30	Desired investment atmosphere in sports tourism in Mashhad	
Q6	Cultural diversity of Mashhad	**Cultural activities**
Q10	Unique and Local games	

Q14	Festivals and cultural events	
Q23	Residents' Hospitality	
Q24	Touristy Social Centers	
Q8	Commercial centers and Markets	**Commercial creativities**
Q9	Industrialization of sports and tourism	
Q11	Local business boom	
Q13	Proximity to the main population and urban centers to attract investors	
Q26	Self-employment opportunities in tourism and sports	
Q3	The potential of the region as the economic hub of the country's tourism	**Urban essence**
Q4	parks, tourist facilities and various barbecues in the city	
Q15	Susceptibility of the region for investment	
Q25	The effectiveness of religious places on the branding of Mashhad city	
Q29	Suitable social security	
Q2	Smooth traffic leading to Mashhad	**Transportation**
Q7	Ease of entry of domestic and foreign tourists to Mashhad	
Q17	Adequacy of road network and public transportation	
Q21	Protection and repairment of the road and intra-city transportation network	

In Figure 2, the destination branding model was drawn in sports tourism in Mashhad.

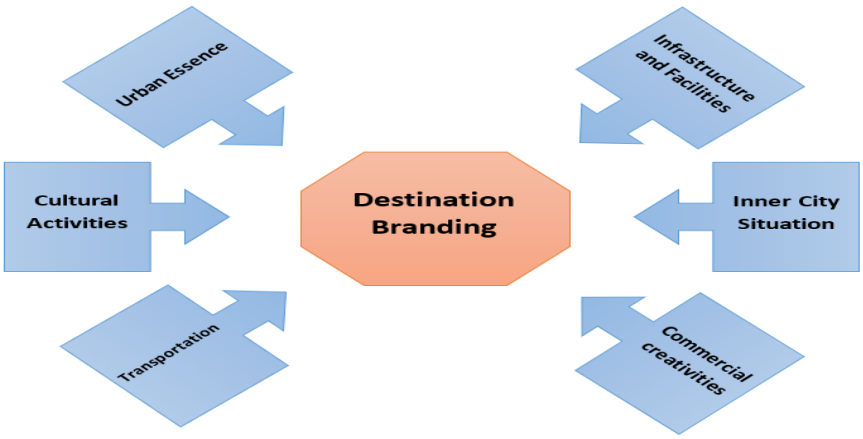

Figure 2. The final research model on destination branding in Mashhad sports tourism

Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to explain the effective factors in destination branding in the field of sports tourism in Mashhad. According to Q methodology, research findings showed that 6 mental models play a role in destination branding in the field of sports tourism in Mashhad. The first mental model was "infrastructural factors and facilities". One of the advantages of the city of Mashhad in being able to introduce itself as a sports tourism destination brand is its suitable facilities and infrastructure in various aspects; as stated, the city of Mashhad has good facilities for sports tourism, including well-equipped stadiums, natural areas for sports and well-equipped water parks, which confirms this finding. The second mental model was the "inner city situation". Mashhad, as one of the big cities of the country, has a stable and acceptable situation in terms of inner city factors, which will directly and indirectly help the branding of the destination. The third mental model was "cultural activities". Mashhad has implemented good cultural activities in the city because of the holy shrine of Imam Reza and hosting domestic and foreign religious tourists. These cultural activities can be useful in branding the destination of Mashhad. The fourth mental model was "commercial creativity". Undoubtedly, one of the important factors in the trips of tourists is to shop and visit the business places of the host city. In this regard, Mashhad city is in a favorable situation despite the fact that it has many commercial centers. "Urban nature" was the fifth mental pattern. This mental model shows that Mashhad has a special belt that has a positive effect on its tourism, and in terms of its existence, it is tourist-friendly, which makes it known as a tourism hub and a destination brand. Finally, "state of transport" was the last mental model. Communication ways inside and outside the city are one of the most important issues that are effective in tourism and urban branding, and Mashhad city has a relatively favorable situation in this mental model.

In the following, each of the mental patterns was examined and analyzed separately and compared with the backgrounds of past researches.

The first mental model: infrastructural and facilities factors

This mental model included factors such as the Internet access, accommodation, well-equipped football stadium in Mashhad, the development of uses for the development of sports tourism in Mashhad, and hosting international sports events in Mashhad. This mental model specifically shows that special attention should be paid to existing facilities and infrastructures. From the view point of these experts, these facilities and equipment in Mashhad is a good reason for this city to become a brand in the country. The result that facilities and equipment play a role in branding was mentioned in the researches of Martiza et al. (2020) and Hemonsby et al (2018).

The second mental model: inner city situation

This mental model includes factors such as managerial decisions and determination to develope sports tourism, relationship-oriented and social nature of the city, advertising campaigns to introduce Mashhad as a tourism hub, the low unemployment rate and favorable conditions for investment. This mental pattern specifically points out that Mashhad city enjoys advantages which distinguish Mashhad from other cities in the country. This distinction causes Mashhad to be branded and is one of the most important mental patterns for branding. This result _that the structure of the city and the strengths of a place has a great impact on the branding of a place_ overlaps and is consistent with the research Rabbani et al. (2018) and Tsai

et al. (2017).

The Third mental pattern: cultural activities

This mental model included factors such as the cultural diversity of Mashhad, local games, festivals and cultural events, suitable hospitality, and sufficient social centers in the field of tourism. This mental pattern specifically refers to the importance that every city has a series of cultural and social issues causing the development of the city. In this research, in particular, there were experts who considered cultural activities to be one of the most important factors affecting destination branding in the field of sports tourism in Mashhad.

The fourth mental pattern: commercial creativities

This mental model includes factors such as places and markets for business, the industrialization of sports and tourism in Mashhad, the prosperity of local trade, proximity to the urban centers to attract investors, and self-employment opportunities in the field of tourism and sports in Mashhad. This mental model points out that some cities have commercial capabilities and creativity that make them be introduced as a tourism brand because their capabilities in the field of business attract and promote tourism.

The fifth mental model: urban essence

This mental model included factors such as the potential of the region as the country's economic tourism hub, parks, tourism facilities and various barbecues in the city, the region's susceptibility to investment, the effectiveness of religious places on the branding of the city of Mashhad, and suitable social security. This mental model shows that Mashhad pesseses a special belt which has a positive effect on its tourism. This result is in line with the research findings of Perchkani et al. (2018) and Rabbani et al. (2018).

The sixth mental model: transportation

This mental model includes factors such as the smoothness of traffic and roads leading to Mashhad, the ease of entry of domestic and foreign tourists to Mashhad, the adequacy of the road network and public transportation, and the protection and repairment of the road and intra-city transportation network. Transportation and traffic is also a very strong deterrent factor in many touristic cities globally. Many urban brands have realized the importance of smooth traffic and easy transportation in their city to become a brand. That's why this mental model also refers to the same importance, and it was also mentioned in the research of Mousavi et al. (2016).

In the following, using Q factor analysis, identified mental patterns were prioritized. The findings showed that the mental model of facilities and infrastructure factors is the most important priority. Undoubtedly, when it comes to the destination brand, the first issue that appears in the audience's mind is what sports or tourism facilities and capabilities the destination city has. For instance, the country of Qatar has been introduced as a clear example of a sports tourism brand in the world. So, it seems reasonable that this pattern is in the first place of importance. In Mashhad, the facilities such as a modern and well-equipped stadium, hosting international events and suitable accommodation, have made it a good destination brand in sports tourism area.

The second priority goes to inner city situation. One of the reasons was the importance of the state of Mashhad, which people are satisfied with. The fact that the economic conditions of the people are good, the unemployment rate is low, and there are suitable advertising campaigns for the city of Mashhad is an important factor in the recognition and branding of the city of Mashhad in the field of tourism (indirect role in sports tourism), but this effect is so important which goes to the second most important in the branding of sports tourism.

The third priority was belonged to cultural activities. Perhaps at first glance, this model should not be among the top priorities, but with a closer look, you will realize it is in its right place, because the activities mentioned under the title of culture are issues that tourists always face. For example, people's behavior towards tourists, native and local games, etc. cause a destination brand to be recognized in the field of sports tourism. Therefore, the city of Mashhad can be identified and introduced as a destination brand at the national level (not only internationally).

The fourth priority goes to commercial creativities. Commercial creativity specifically points to the fact that sports and the sports tourism industry in Mashhad can provide a suitable market for investors. Although the effect of this factor is important in branding a city, many successes haven't been achieved in this way.

The fifth place belongs to the urban essence. Although this mental model has been placed in the fifth priority, it is argued that its importance can be high because it has a serious indirect effect on the branding of the destination in the field of sports tourism, for example, social security and the religious places have an indirect role in the branding of the field of sports tourism. Therefore, even though this pattern is in the last priorities, it does not indicate it's less important. Finally, the last place goes to the transportation. Since the tourism traffic of Mashhad has been established due to the hosting of many religious ceremonies, it will have a great impact on the development of sports tourism in Mashhad. Maybe that's why it was ranked last in importance.

Conclusion

In a general conclusion, it should be mentioned that these mental patterns do not have the same factor load and priority, but they cannot be given weight and graded for sure because this research is based on experts' opinion and has not been distributed among a wider volume, so this prioritization cannot be definitely rejected or confirm. Therefore, the following practical suggestions can help branding the destination of Mashhad:

1- According to the first mental model (infrastructural factors and facilities), it is suggested that in order to brand Mashhad city, at first, the existing facilities of Mashhad city should be used as much as possible to host various sports events, including domestic and international ones, and secondly, to develop the facilities and payment equipment to be known more and more as a famous sports urban brand.

2- According to the third mental model (cultural activities), it is suggested that festivals such as local, regional, provincial or national competitions be held in Mashhad every year, and the good culture of the people of Karbala, Mashhad as a driving factor.

3- According to the fourth mental model (commercial creativity), it is suggested that Mashhad city can attract authorized representatives of famous sports brands such as Nike, Adidas, New Balance, Puma, Under Armor, etc. in Mashhad city. Since many religious tourists travel to Mashhad city every year, the presence of reputable sports stores will play a big role in branding Mashhad city in the field of religious tourism.

4- According to the fifth mental model (urban nature), it is suggested to make the most of Mashhad city's existing capacities, such as parks and tourism facilities, and Mashhad city's aptitude for sports investment. For this purpose, the necessary infrastructure must be provided for the presence of investors in the city of Mashhad.

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