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RESEARCH LETTER



Place branding and moderating role of social media

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how social networks impact place branding of a tourism destination and encourage prospect tourists to visit that place. By adapting an existing model, a survey conducted in a sample of 135 users of 2 social networks of telegram and Instagram who travelled at least once to Gilan Province in north of Iran. This analytical study empirically tests the hypotheses for SEM, using PLS 3 and R. The assessment of the outer model and the inner model was conducted. The importance-performance map analysis matrix indicates that the place image had the highest importance, but the lowest performance. When social media enters as a moderator, the significance of its effect is not sufficient to impact the results. It can be interpreted that merely sharing photos and videos from the beauty of Gilan province or its food is not sufficient to create a distinguished image in the minds of prospect visitors; but it must be used as a supplementary of activities from the administration of the province to promote the place image and attractions for tourists. Also it is suggested that social media can be used to promote pro-environmental behaviours in tourists.

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KEYWORDS

Social media; place branding; destination branding; tourism industry; hospitality industry; Gilan

1. Introduction

As a leading global industry, tourism generates a considerable wealth for destinations (Mason, 2015; Roudi, Arasli, & Akadiri, 2018) and contributes to employment (Fang, Ye, & Law, 2016). It shared 10% of the world's GDP in 2015 and 1 in 11 jobs worldwide (UNWTO 2016, cited in Zuo & Huang, 2018). For countries like Iran, in addition to such advantages, there are some extra reasons for intensifying the attention to tourism, such as the imposition of new sanctions (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2018). Iranian government is willing to invest on tourism industry, based on natural attractions and cultural heritages on local places inside the country as a competitive advantage as well as price competitiveness (Seyfi & Hall, 2019). While a well-developed tourism market context is necessary within the country (Estiri, Amiri, Khajeheian, & Rayej, 2018; Shabani & Hassan, 2018), Iranian tourism suffers from the negative imagery in the world (Khodadadi, 2016), e-marketing activities in social media help Iranian tourism to increase its competitiveness (Nasihatkon, Kheiri, & Miralbell, 2016) and also to fix such a negative imagery. Social media promote the tendency of Iranians and foreign tourists to travel inside the country and to visit different places (Ghaderi, Hatamifar, & Henderson, 2018b; Mousazadeh, Éva, & Akbarzadeh, 2018); for example, Wise and Farzin (2018) showed that user-generated content in the facebook page of 'See you in Iran' has positively affected the willingness to visit Iran. This also affects positively on eco-tourism (Gohary, Pourazizi, Madani, & Chan, 2018) and environment-friendly tourism (Mousazadeh et al., 2018). However,

there is a theoretical gap between the existing knowledge of tourism promotional activities in Iran (Ghaderi, Abooli, & Henderson, 2018a) and the inter-relationship of place image, place association, place reputation and tourism experience.

1.1. Problem statement

According to the above-mentioned impact of social media on Iranian tourism, poor use of social media in e-marketing of tourism in Iran (Nasihatkon et al., 2016), and the importance of place branding in the selection of destination place (Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, Foroudi, & Nguyen, 2016), this study aims at filling the theoretical gap by providing a model to understand the effect of social media on place branding. It is expected that this model will help different stakeholders such as policy-makers, practitioners and academics to use social media in the development of tourism and improvement of the negative imagery of the country. To reach this aim, adapting an existing model of place branding and testing it in Iranian communities of users in social networks has been selected as the research strategy. Since the Gilan province enjoys from natural beautifulness, delicious foods, famous for hospitality and well-placed geographical location, this research addresses how social media platforms can have an effect on destination branding of this province.

2. Theoretical model

Theoretical model of this research has been taken from Foroudi et al. (2016), with a change in the position of social media, to keep it updated with the recent findings from the role of social media on place branding. In this theoretical model, place branding is an independent variable that has effects on place image. Place image impacts place reputation directly, while place association and tourism experience play the role of mediator variables (Figure 1).

Research hypotheses have been extracted from this model and are as follows:

- H1: Place branding is positively related to place image;
- H1a: The relationship between place branding and place image is moderated by social media;
- H2: Place image is positively related to place reputation;
- H2a: The relationship between place image and place reputation is moderated by social media;
- H3: Place image is positively related to place association;
- H4: Place association is positively related to place reputation;
- H5: Place image is positively related to tourism experience;
- H6: Tourism experience is positively related to place reputation;
- H7: The relationship between place image and place reputation is mediated by place association;
- H7a: The relationship between place image and place association is moderated by social media;
- H8: The relationship between place image and place reputation is mediated by tourism experience;
- H8a: The relationship between place image and tourism experience is moderated by social media;

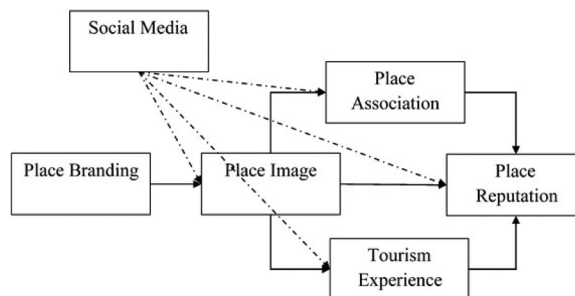


Figure 1. Theoretical model (adapted from Foroudi et al., 2016).

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Sample

The statistical population of this study includes users of two social media, Instagram and Telegram, inside Iran, with a criterion of at least once travelled to Gilan province. To determine the representative sample size, SPSS Sample power 3.0 was employed. The maximum number of predictor variables in the multiple regression model is 4; thus with a confidence level of 0.95, the power of increment 85% and the R -squared 0.10, the minimum acceptable sample size was 126. To be more confident, more questionnaires were distributed and 135 filled and verified returned questionnaires used as sample of this study.

3.2. Measures, reliability and validity

A researcher-made questionnaire constructed from the two sections of demographic information of respondents, and the research-related questions, including 24 questions with five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). To measure each variable, four questions were developed. Reflectiveness of measurement models was also confirmed by CTA analysis (p -value > .05) (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Gudergan, 2018, p. 88). To assess measurement models, Smart-PLS version 3 gets used (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). AVE values are higher than 0.5 (Ebrahimi, Ahmadi, Gholampour, & Alipour, 2019; Hulland, 1999; Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015) shows the convergent validity of measurement models (Table 1).

As AVE values are lower than 0.5, convergent validity was tested referring to the outer loadings. It shows values higher than 0.4 that implies on convergent validity of measurement models (Arbatani, Kawamorita, Ghanbary, & Ebrahimi, 2019; Ebrahimi, Shirsavar, Forootani, Roohbakhsh, & Ebrahimi, 2018a; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006) (Table 1). Table 3 shows discriminant validity at the level of factors. It has been tested according to Fornell and Larcker (1981). To test discriminant validity in the level of indicators, cross-loadings have been used, by plspm package of R (Sanchez, 2013). Figure 2 implies on discriminant validity in the level of indicators. Also the reliability of questionnaire has been calculated by composite reliability (CR) (Table 1). Some researchers identify values higher than 0.7 as favourable for CR (Ebrahimi & Mirbargkar, 2017; Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014). As all values for all factors are higher than 0.7, the reliability of the means of data collection is acceptable.

Variance inflation factor (VIF) used to investigate multicollinearity. In reference to VIF, the values lower than 3.5 are considered as favourite (Ebrahimi, Shafiee, Gholampour, & Yousefi, 2018b; Ebrahimi & Mirbargkar, 2017; Hair et al., 2014) (Tables 2 and 3).

4. Results

Male respondents are 49.2% and 50.8% are female. Most of the respondents that use social media of Telegram or Instagram are youth. Table 4 illustrates the characteristics of respondents.

Entropy statistic norms show $EN = 0.55$ in FIMIX test (Ebrahimi et al., 2018b; Khajeheian & Ebrahimi, 2020) that is positive (Ramaswami, Rao, Van Der Bliek, Kelly, & Krishnan, 1993), and therefore, the homogeneity of population confirmed and results were confirmed with more confidence.

Conceptual model has been tested by SEM technique (Appendix). Related indices to structural equation modelling tested. The most important indices are R^2 and R^2 adjusted (Table 5). Also to evaluate the predictability of model, the Stone-Geisser (Q^2) indices were used, including Construct Cross-validated Redundancy (CC-Red) and Construct Cross-validated Communality (CC-Com), which propose that closer to 1 is more favourable (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974). Also SRMR has been used to test the overall model-fit. In this case, the values lower than 0.08 are considered as favourable (Hair et al., 2014). In the estimated model of this research, SRMR has been reported as

Table 1. Statistics of construct items.

Factors and indicators	Outer loadings	Model type
Place branding (AVE = 0.401, CR = 0.73, SD = 0.47, M = 3.83)		
PB1: Travel to Gilan has a social sense, like its history	0.533	Reflective
PB2: People of Gilan are full of hospitality, like their games	0.595	
PB3: Gilan is pleasant and entertaining, like its food	0.740	
PB4: Gilan's nature and road are full of beauty, like its rain	0.647	Reflective
Place image (AVE = 0.436, CR = 0.75, SD = 0.53, M = 3.67)		
PI1: Gilan has entertaining group-games	0.600	
PI2: Gilan has delicious local food	0.687	
PI3: Gilan has lovely people	0.534	Reflective
PI4: Gilan has a beautiful nature	0.792	
Place association (AVE = 0.471, CR = 0.78, SD = 0.51, M = 3.79)		
PA1: Football teams of Malavan/Sepidrood		
PA2: Massoleh	0.631	Reflective
PA3: Mirza Koochak-khan (Historical legend)	0.740	
PA4: Fabulous jungles	0.585	
Tourism experience (AVE = 0.473, CR = 0.77, SD = 0.50, M = 3.76)	0.772	
TE1: Previous experiences of Gilan, encouraged me to travel again	0.771	Reflective
TE2: I get interested to travel to Gilan by friends' recommendation and advices	0.401	
TE3: Taste of foods and souvenirs interested me to travel again	0.881	
TE4: Knowing some people from Gilan made me interested to travel to Gilan.	0.602	
Place reputation (AVE = 0.43, CR = 0.75, SD = 0.45, M = 3.83)		Reflective
PR1: Gilan is a beautiful place	0.615	
PR2: Gilan is a hospital place	0.720	
PR3: Gilan is a must-see place	0.635	
PR4: Gilan is a place that is worth to travel	0.652	
Social media (AVE = 0.48, CR = 0.78, SD = 0.54, M = 3.74)		
SM1: The photos of Gilan in Telegram/Instagram made me interested to travel	0.813	
SM2: The memories that people of Gilan shared in Telegram/Instagram made me interested to travel	0.548	
SM3: Attractiveness of tours to Gilan shared in Telegram/Instagram made me interested to travel	0.735	
SM4: Comments in Telegram/Instagram posts encouraged me to travel to Gilan	0.648	

Note: CR: composite reliability; AVE: average of variance extracted; SD: Standard deviation; M: Mean.

**Figure 2.** Cross-loadings for indicators.

Table 2. Multicollinearity with VIF.

Factors	Place association	Place branding	Place image	Place reputation	Social media	Tourism experience
Place association				2.111		
Place branding			1.355			
Place image	1.200			1.563		1.219
Place reputation						
Social media	1.393		1.323	2.174		1.291
Tourism experience				1.435		

Note: VIF: Variance inflation factor.

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Factors	Place association	Place branding	Place image	Place reputation	Social media	Tourism experience
Place association	0.686					
Place branding	0.473	0.633				
Place image	0.534	0.589	0.660			
Place reputation	0.412	0.610	0.556	0.657		
Social media	0.615	0.494	0.407	0.325	0.693	
Tourism experience	0.367	0.529	0.349	0.416	0.501	0.688

Note: Data in this table are square roots of AVE (see the numbers in oblique line).

Table 4. Demographics features.

Features	Levels	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Gender	Male	65	49.2	1.51	0.50
	Female	67	50.8		
Age	Under 30 years	49	37.1	1.98	0.95
	30–40 years	49	37.1		
	41–50 years	22	16.7		
	51 years or more	12	9.1		

Table 5. Evaluation of structural model indices.

Variable	R^2	R^2 adjusted	CC-Red	CC-Com
Place association	52.8%	51.7%	0.211	0.157
Place branding				
Place image	43.8%	42.4%	0.139	0.102
Place reputation	50.7%	48.8%	0.163	0.086
Social media				
Tourism experience	40.5%	39.1%	0.140	0.185

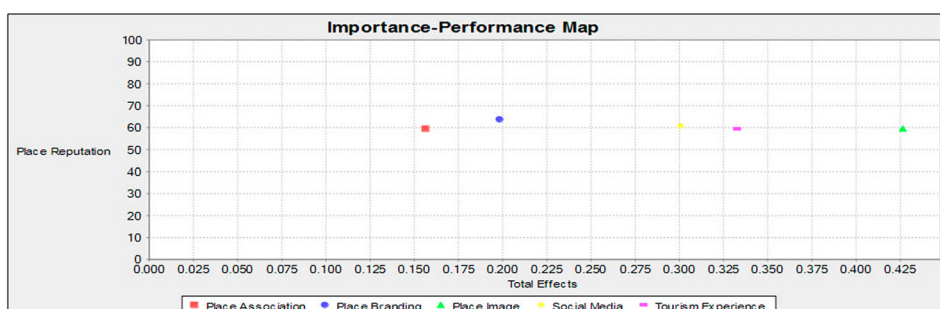
0.141, which means a medium coordination between empirical model and theoretical model. Meanwhile, NFI results in values between 0 and 1 are positive. It confirms fitness of model (Bentler & Bonett, 1980).

To test H1 and H2, direct effects were considered. Based on Table 6, results of test H1 ($H1: \beta = 0.465, t = 5.466, p = .000$) and H2 ($H2: \beta = 0.301, t = 2.562, p = .010$) showed that in the confidence level of 95%, values are $p < .05$ and both hypotheses are confirmed. Similarly, H3 ($H3: \beta = 0.319, t = 3.777, p = .000$), H5 ($H5: \beta = 0.227, t = 2.501, p = .012$) and H6 ($H6: \beta = 0.333, t = 2.923, p = .000$) were confirmed, while H4 was rejected ($H4: \beta = 0.156, t = 1.240, p = .003$).

The mediating effect of place association and tourism experience was tested by H7 and H8. In both hypotheses, first the total effect of place image on place reputation was tested, which shows a significant effect ($\beta = 0.426, t = 4.059, p = .000$) then the significance of indirect effect was tested. For H7, the indirect effect of place image on place reputation ($\beta = 0.049, t = 0.294, p = .769$) is not significant, thus it does not support the mediating effect for this hypothesis. Similarly, H8 tested and the indirect effect of place image on place reputation ($\beta = 0.076, t = 2.094, p = .037$) is significant, thus partial

Table 6. Results of research hypotheses.

Hypotheses	β	SD	<i>t</i> -statistics	<i>p</i> -value	Decision	Mediation	Moderation
H1	0.465	0.085	**5.466	.000	Supported		
H1a	0.247	0.255	0.968	.333	Not supported		No
H2	0.301	0.118	**2.562	.010	Supported		
H2a	−0.367	0.309	1.185	.236	Not supported		No
H3	0.319	0.084	**3.777	.000	Supported		
H4	0.156	0.126	1.240	.215	Not supported		
H5	0.227	0.091	*2.501	.012	Supported		
H6	0.333	0.114	**2.923	.003	Supported		
H7	0.049	0.170	0.294	.769	Not supported	No	
H7a	0.053	0.140	0.378	.706	Not supported		No
H8	0.076	0.036	2.094	.037	Supported	Yes	
H8a	−0.318	0.337	0.943	.346	Not supported		No

p* < .05.*p* < .01.**Figure 3.** IPMA matrix histogram of research variables setting place reputation as purpose.

mediating effect was confirmed. To test H1a, H2a, H7a and H8a, due to the moderating effect of social media, product indicator method (in Smart-PLS 3) has been used. In H1a, this effect is not significant (H1a: $\beta = 0.247$, $t = 0.968$, $p = .333$), thus social media is not moderator of place branding on place image, and the hypothesis is rejected. H2a, H7a and H8a are tested in a similar way. Table 6 shows how these hypotheses were rejected.

The importance-performance map analysis (IPMA matrix) (Hair et al., 2018) is shown in Figure 3 and it indicates that place image had the highest importance, but the lowest performance.

This analysis was performed with a focus on research questions (Figure 4), and in this concern it showed that questions PI2 and PI4 that are related to place image, including 'Gilan has a beautiful nature' and 'Gilan has delicious local food' have more favourite situations and are more important.

5. Discussion

Social media have changed the way people communicate in different aspects of their lives, such as health (Khajeheian, Colabi, Ahmad Kharman Shah, Bt Wan Mohamed Radzi, & Jenatabadi, 2018) or work (Khajeheian, 2018) and accordingly, how they decide about their travels (Jenkin, 2010). People use social media to acquire information to plan their travels and also they share their experiences by social media options such as sharing, commenting and recommending of places and activities to do (Usui, Wei, & Funck, 2018). This research presents a model for investigation of variables that are contributed in destination branding. The effect of place branding on place image (H1: $\beta = 0.465$, $t = 5.466$, $p = .000$) shows the higher path coefficient. Questions associated with place branding show that a calm travel and beautifulness of Gilan have been the most important elements for respondents. IPMA matrix

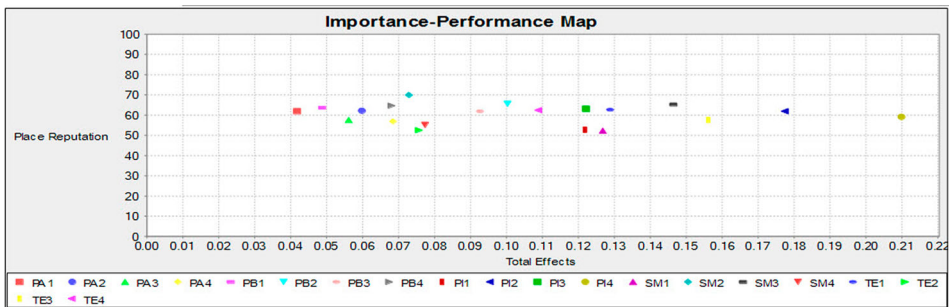


Figure 4. IPMA matrix histogram of research questions setting place reputation as purpose.

results show that place image is the most important variable of the model because this variable has the highest degree of importance for respondents, while the current performance is low. IPMA matrix shows that two most favourable items of place image, 'Gilan has a beautiful nature' and 'Gilan has delicious local food', are performed low too. For example, the city of Rasht has been globally registered by UNESCO as a creative city in food, but the potentials of this fame have never been extracted. The results show that Gilan tourism suffers from low performance in the use of its potentials to attract visitors.

It can be said that unless one, all hypotheses that imply on direct effect are confirmed, but when social media as mediating variable enters, its significance is not sufficient to impact on the results. It can be interpreted that merely sharing of photos and videos from beautifulness of Gilan province or its food is not sufficient to create a distinguished image in the minds of prospect visitors.

5.1. Limitation

The first limitation of this research is to be cross-sectional, means data collected in one specific period of time. Considering the nature of tourism and hospitality industry, longitudinal research will provide more generable results.

Also, this study focused on tourism destinations, and it might not be generalizable to all other types of place branding. In addition, geographical limitation of the sample to the tourists inside Iran, with specific cultural characteristics and media usage, might not be generalizable to other nationals.

Another limitation of this research is collecting data from users of Instagram and telegram and excluding other popular social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc. that are filtered in Iran. For this reason, the results of this study do not present the main portfolio of social media that is universally used worldwide. In the absence of Facebook and Twitter and other universally popular social media, generalizability of the conclusion must be considered carefully.

5.2. Managerial implications

Findings of this paper stress on importance of using social media to encourage prospect tourists to visit a specific place by brand destinations. For this reason, and in the absence of professional social media management by municipalities and tourist agents, it is recommended to the administration of the Gilan province to wisely use social media for sharing the interesting characteristics. Also to save natural beauty of the province, encouraging of pro-environmental behaviours is needed, which can be managed by the use of social media to transfer environmental messages that create positive behaviours in the visitors and to save the place image of Gilan.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix

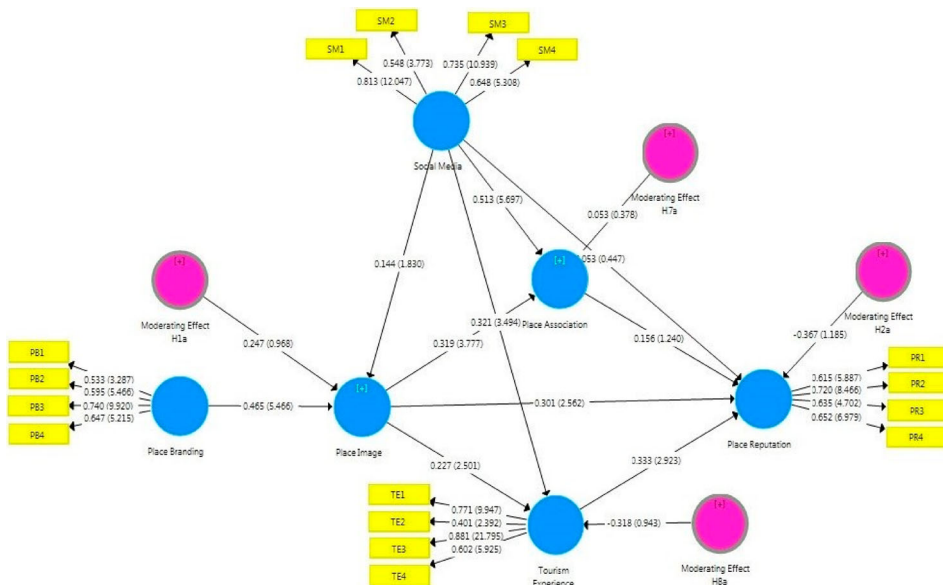


Figure A1. Output of SmartPLS3 for path coefficient and t-statistics model.