A nation brand model based on the brand constructs and underlying factors: a case study of Iran

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article **Article History:** Received 05 March 2023 Revised 11 July 2023 Accepted 03 September 2023 Published Online 12 June 2024 **Keywords:** *Nation branding,* *Nation brand meaning,* *Nation brand recognition,* *Nation brand identity,* *Nation brand image.*	The current research deals with the design of the national brand model based on the basic brand constructs. The main goal of the current research is to identify the constructs of nation branding and its underlying factors at the level of creating awareness of Iran's national brand. In this research, the most important constructs of the nation brand, as well as the underlying factors of each construct, were identified, which can be of special help in formulating nation brand development strategies. This research is applied based on purpose and descriptive survey. The statistical population of this study is the letsgoiran foreign tourism corporation. A sample of 360 people was analyzed. According to the results of the partial least squares technique, the most important construct affecting nation branding is brand meaning and brand recognition. In addition, the most effective underlying factor for creating a national brand is the credibility of the national brand and its overall image in the minds of the audience, especially foreign tourists who choose Iran as their destination.

Introduction

In the era of globalization, countries that have engaged in branding at the national level and have used this as a tool to improve the position of their national brand at the international level have achieved important benefits such as attracting foreign investments, promoting exports, and attracting tourists (Kotsi et al., 2018). Since the country of Iran is a single-product economy and dependent on oil, attracting foreign investments can play an important role in the economic prosperity of this country. Considering Iran's huge historical and natural resources, one of the suitable platforms for the development of Iran's non-oil economy is the tourism industry. The tourism industry is considered one of the most important economic sectors in many countries, and now extensive actions have been taken to develop this industry in many countries. According to the reports of the World Trade Organization, the market size of the global tourism sector in 2022 grew by almost 41% compared to the previous year, which is predicted to increase to nearly 2.29 trillion dollars in 2023 (Statista, 2022).

Iran is considered one of the top 10 countries in the world in terms of tourist attractions, but the income from tourism for the country is very small, and the political situation of Iran in the last decade in the world, especially in the Middle East, can be considered as one of the key reasons. Since tourism with the least investment earns the most returns for countries, the need to expand the study in the field of the tourism industry and introduce Iran's brand as an influential role in this industry is felt more than ever. Obviously, with Iran's lack of activity and the progress of other countries in the world and especially Iran's neighbors in the tourism industry, many opportunities for foreign investment and foreign exchange will be lost, which will cause irreparable damage to Iran's economy and its role in the international scene. The increase in global competition among nations, whether for investment and trade or tourism, seems to have caused the expansion of nation branding. Nation branding is related to the public image of a country in the international arena, which covers all political, economic, and cultural dimensions. A nation brand is defined as the total image of a nation in the minds of international stakeholders, which may include some of the following elements: people, place, culture, language, history, food, fashion, famous figures (celebrities), global brands, etc. (Dubinsky, 2022; Fan, 2010).

The important thing is that a national brand reflects the main identity of that country in the eyes of tourists. The review of research related to nation branding literature reveals that past studies have examined the concept of nation branding from the angle of one of the effective constructs in the formation of the nation brand. Some studies have examined nation branding from the perspective of brand identity (Hao et al., 2021; Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016; Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2016; Sun and Paswan, 2016; Hakala et al., 2013; Kerrigan et al., 2012; Heslop et al., 2010), others have studied this concept from the perspective of brand image (Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2016; Yousaf and Li, 2015; Hakala et al., 2013; Rojas-Mandez, 2013; Kerrigan et al., 2012; Sun and Paswan, 2011; Heslop et al., 2010; Kang and Yang, 2010; Lu and Davis, 2006; Paswan et al., 2003), and some studies have emphasized the importance of brand recognition in the formation of the nation brand (Nath et al., 2013). Also, no study was found that investigated the underlying factors of the constructs affecting the national brand. Based on this, the first contribution of the current research is that it examines the effective constructs in the formation of the nation brand with a comprehensive approach and has introduced the underlying factors of each construct separately. Therefore, this study is one of the first research that dealsdeals with identifying the most effective causal path of the underlying factors and constructs of nation brand formation simultaneously.

Since the concept of the national brand is dependent on the environment, the results of the studies in this field cannot be easily generalized. The results of the studies in the field of the nation brand concept in Iran show that these studies have generally examined the nation branding process at the level of macro-environmental factors: economy, government, people, etc. (Jamkhanah et al., 2019; Mahdiye & Nedaeifard, 2019; Faiz et al., 2019) and also no research was found that studied the concept of Iran's nation brand from the perspective of branding process and constructs which is the focus area of the present research. The branding process is conceptualized at different levels of brand perception; these levels include the level of awareness, association, trust, and loyalty (Aaker, 2009). Based on the stages of reaching maturity, the branding process is carried out based on these levels. Since the studies conducted in the field of Iran's nation branding are very limited and the level of nation brand awareness at the international level needs more attention, the current research focuses on

the study of Iran's nation branding process at the level of creating awareness as its second contribution. Four variables of brand meaning, brand recognition, brand identity, and brand image play the most important role in creating awareness of the nation's brand (Knott, 3013; Keller, 2013), which is the basis of the modeling of the current research. Therefore, the main problem of the current research is to identify the constructs of nation branding and their underlying factors at the level of creating awareness in Iran.

Theoretical framework
Nation brand
Researchers differ on how to define a nation brand and which components make up a nation brand (Hao et al., 2021; Papadopoulos et al., 2016; Fan, 2006). There is no consensus on the definition of a national brand. The complexity of the concept and its error with other concepts, such as destination brand, place brand, and country brand, has led to the lack of a common definition for the meaning of nation branding. The terms "nation" and "country" are often used interchangeably in the literature, although they are different (Hao et al., 2021; Fan, 2006). Table 1 lists some definitions of national national brands in the literature.

Table 1. Nation branding definition

Authors	Definition
Kleber, D. M. S., & Juusola, K. (2021).	A nation brand is the mental image of a country that is formed in the minds of national and international audiences. On the other hand, nation branding refers to activities aimed at image management strategies through which a country's image is actively managed, monitored, and evaluated to build and maintain a country's reputation among international target audiences.
Wu et al. (2017)	Nation brand is all perceptions about a nation in the minds of its international stakeholders.
Dinnie (2016)	Nation brand is the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences.
Fetscherin (2010)	A national brand belongs to the public domain; it is complex and includes multiple levels, components, and disciplines. It entails the collective involvement of the many stakeholders it must appeal to. It concerns a country's whole image, covering political, economic, social, environmental, historical and cultural aspects.
Fan (2006)	Nation branding concerns applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image. Nation branding counts several sources as its "parents," including country of origin, destination branding in tourism, as well as public diplomacy, and national identity.
Anholt (2005)	The nation brand is the sum of people's perceptions of a country across the six areas of national competence: cultural, political, commercial, human assets, investment potential, and tourist appeal.

When applying the concept of brand to nations instead of products, there is a moral obligation to do so honestly and respectfully and to recognize appropriate constraints on treating nations as a brand. A national brand should originate from the country's culture and not just in the form of a superficial logo or advertising campaign (Dinnie, 2016). Aaker (2009) introduces different perception brand perception levels including awareness, association, trust, and loyalty (Aaker, 2009). The international studies conducted on Iran's national brand are very limited. Therefore, to create brand perception at the international level, the present study focuses on the stage of creating awareness between Aaker's different levels of brand perception. The four most important variables in creating national brand awareness are brand meaning, brand recognition, brand identity, and brand image (Knott, 2013; Keller, 2013). The role of these constructs and their underlying factors in creating a national brand is explained as follows.

The impact of brand meaning and its underlying factor on a nation brand
Brand meaning is the mental link between names, images, and associations in memory (Keller 2013). Brand meaning evolves from brand knowledge. The objective nature of what a brand represents is the basis of brand value and competitive advantage (Elizabeth & Elliot, 2016). Brand meaning refers to the customers' dominant perceptions of the brand (Berry, 2000). The concept or impression immediately comes to their minds regarding the brand (Berry & Seltman, 2007) and shapes their feeling (Aaker, 1991).

Understanding brand meaning is significant because it not only creates the brand image in users' minds and fulfills their quest for brand value but also helps manage brand-related strategies (Ray et

al., 2021; Narvanen & Goulding, 2016; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Several studies have stated that brand meaning is effective in forming brand value (Ray et al., 2021; Su & Tong, 2015). In the field of nation marketing, the meaning of the nation brand and the notion created in the audience's mind can increase awareness, prominence, and place position (Florek & Insch, 2011; Higham & Hinch, 2009; Chalip & Costa, 2005). So, brand meaning is one of the most fundamental factors in brand building (Keller 2013).

One of the underlying factors of brand meaning is the presented brand. The presented Brand is the brand message (the name, logo and visual presentation) that a nation conceptualizes and promotes (Berry, 2000). It is one of the vehicles to disseminate the desired branding message along with advertising (Garcia et al., 2011; Berry & Seltman, 2007). At the same time, the way the brand is presented to reach its intended meaning is one of the significant challenges that brands face. The main challenge is to create a unique meaning that can provide a kind of emotional relationship in audiences' minds (Holt, 2004). Therefore, how the brand is presented is the biggest challenge facing nations. The brand's meaning is adequately explained to the audiences when a meaningful and unique relationship forms between a brand and an interpreter that audiences create in their mind. Researchers have found that a presented brand creates a sense of awareness in various contexts that shape the brand's meaning (Ray et al., 2021; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015; So and King, 2010). Accordingly, the effect of brand meaning and its underlying factor on national brand will be examined through the below hypotheses.

H1: Brand meaning has a positive and significant effect on the nation's brand
H1-1: Presented brand has a positive and significant effect on brand meaning

The impact of brand recognition and its underlying factors on national brand
Brand recognition is the ability to recognize and recall a brand (Garcia et al., 2012; Berry & Seltman, 2007; Berry, 2000; Aaker, 1991), reflected in the salience of the brand in the customer's mind (Garcia et al., 2011; Aaker, 1991). Brand recognition is the main element of a brand's effect on tourism (Garcia et al., 2012; Oh, 2000). It can be defined as a tool that emphasizes defining and generating the familiarity of a target audience towards a particular brand (Foroudi, 2019; Foroudi et al., 2014, 2016).

Knowing the brand is an indispensable part of its value to the audience (Oh, 2000). There are many studies that promote the brand's development as a direct result of brand recognition (Foroudi, 2019; García et al., 2012). Knott et al. (2013) identified brand recognition as one of the key opportunities for the branding of a nation. Brand recognition is an instrument whereby nations use to impact a target audience's attitude by creating association and belief towards a particular nation (Foroudi, 2019).

Two underlying factors of brand exposure and publicity make up brand recognition. According to cognitive capacity theory, objects with prominent characteristics capture attention in a bottom-up manner (Song et al., 2020; Ruz and Lupiáñez, 2002), implying that product placement with prominent features may capture a higher level of audience attention (Song et al., 2020). Marketing theory dictates that exposure and experience influence the information that consumers gain about brands, thereby influencing consumers' feelings about brands (Baumann et al, 2015). As a result, the audience is exposed to the brand; its experience can have an effect later on in the amount of emotion it relates to and remind it of the direct impact (Baumann et al., 2015; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Brand exposure is the actions taken by a nation to ensure its brand is seen, noticed, and recognized by audiences. Brand exposure can be of great influence on the recognition of a national brand and the chain of events that occur after exposure to the brand; it can lead to the target audience being reminded.

Publicity refers to mentioning a brand in the media. This helps brands build awareness and attract potential audiences. According to Hu and colleagues (2011), any visibility of a brand via blogging is a valuable addition to the audience's memory of that brand. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of the brand name positively influences the recipient's perceptions, which may enhance one's recognition of the brand (Schivinsky & Dabrowski, 2014; Berry, 2000). For a brand to succeed in a society, where information about different offerings far exceeds what audiences can handle, a brand must occupy a distinctive place in people's minds. This is accomplished by simple and focused messages emphasizing strong, favorable, and unique brand associations that clearly distinguish a brand from its competition (Aaker, 1996). Since the 1970s, many leading scholars have advocated different versions

of the mind-share model (Keller, 1998; Aaker, 1996; Ries and Trout, 1981). What is certain is that nations that have been exposed more widely, both online and offline, have always been more targeted. Based on the above, the effect of brand recognition and its underlying factors on a national brand will be examined below hypotheses.

> **H2:** Brand recognition has a positive and significant effect on the nation brand
> **H2-1:** Brand exposure has a positive and significant effect on brand recognition
> **H2-2:** Publicity has a positive and significant effect on brand recognition

The impact of brand identity and its underlying factors on nation brand
Identity concerns how a person defines themself and the tension embedded in how that person connects to the social groups in the environment (Ashforth et al., 2008; Schau & Gilly, 2003). The nation identity is a type of psychological bond that is generally irrational. This psychological connection brings together compatriots in a country called a "sense of belonging". This sense of belonging is created due to the close bond between each individual and the collective self, that is, the nation (Fan, 2010).

A nation's brand identity includes elements such as language, literature, food, sports, architecture, history, political regime, famous personalities, and tourism experiences that are portrayed to the target audience (Ahmed, 2020). In today's world, which has gained a global nature, countries need to promote their distinctive features and create a position for themselves that can present a unique identity based on tangible but intangible elements. These distinctive features form the nation identity (Kavoura, 2014). Nation unique identity is important in shaping a nation's brand. Countries show their identity to the world through advertising, and it promotes tourism for the country. Countries, regardless of their history, need to continuously attract the attention of audiences in other countries based on their national identity, especially for nation branding (Kavoura, 2014). So, brand identity is a major component of the nation's brand development (Knott, 2013).

The five elements that makeup brand identity are authenticity, culture, people, narrative stories, and the location of tourism destinations (Ashforth et al., 2008; Schau & Gilly, 2003). These five elements are the mainstay of the nation's brand identity (Shao et al., 2015). Prior studies have shown the significance of supporting culture, people, and narrative stories in shaping national brand identity (Hao, et al., 2021; Rodner and Kerrigan, 2018). South Korea is a good example of how industrial and cultural policy popularized its nation brand (Huang, 2011). The importance of art and culture in establishing and communicating national identity is mentioned in many studies (Hao et al., 2021; Rodner & Kerrigan, 2018; Huang, 2011). Accordingly, the effect of brand identity and its underlying factors on a national brand will be examined below hypotheses.

> **H3:** Brand identity has a positive and significant effect on the nation's brand
> **H3-1:** Brand authenticity has a positive and significant effect on brand identity
> **H3-2:** Culture has a positive and significant effect on brand identity
> **H3-3:** People have a positive and significant effect on brand identity
> **H3-4:** Stories have a positive and significant effect on brand identity
> **H3-5:** Place has a positive and significant effect on brand identity

The impact of brand image and its underlying factors on nation's brand
A brand is more than just the designed or created aspects; it includes the perceptions and images in the stakeholder's mind (Knott et al., 2015). The nation's brand image includes those things that the people of a country want the world to recognize as the most distinctive, important, and lasting aspects of their country. The nation's brand image is created based on the perception of people outside the country. These perceptions are rooted in stereotypes, media coverage, and people's personal experiences (Andersson, 2022).

Countries always have a national brand, whether they actively manage it or not. Because every country has an image in the international audience's mind, this image may be strong or weak, clear or ambiguous. There are four main reasons for managing a nation's brand image: attracting tourists, foreign direct investment, skilled labor/talented residents, and added value to produced products (Andersson, 2022; Stock, 2009). Active brand image management effectively grows and improves the

country's reputation among target audiences at the international level, leading to the formation of a nation brand (Fan, 2010). So, one of the key themes of nation branding prevalent in the literature is nation brand image (Hao et al., 2021; Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016; Herrero-Crespo et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2016; Hakala et al., 2013; Kerrigan et al., 2012; Sun and Paswan, 2011; Heslop et al., 2010).

In a more vivid approach, there are five determinants for the nation's brand image: infrastructure and socio-economic environment, natural and cultural resources, pleasant atmosphere, social setting environment, and overall image. These five factors have been subtly analyzed in the research conducted by Garcia (2012) and studied in separate research such as Rodriguez (2008), Martin (2004), Baloglu (1999), and Ritchie (1991). Based on the above, the effect of brand image and its underlying factors on a national brand will be examined below hypotheses.

H4: Brand image has a positive and significant effect on the nation brand
**H4-1:** Infrastructure and the socio-economic environment have a positive and significant effect on brand image
H4-2: Natural and cultural resources have a positive and significant effect on brand image
H4-3: Pleasant atmosphere has a positive and significant effect on brand image
H4-4: Social setting environment has a positive and significant effect on brand image
H4-5: Overall image of the location has a positive and significant effect on brand image
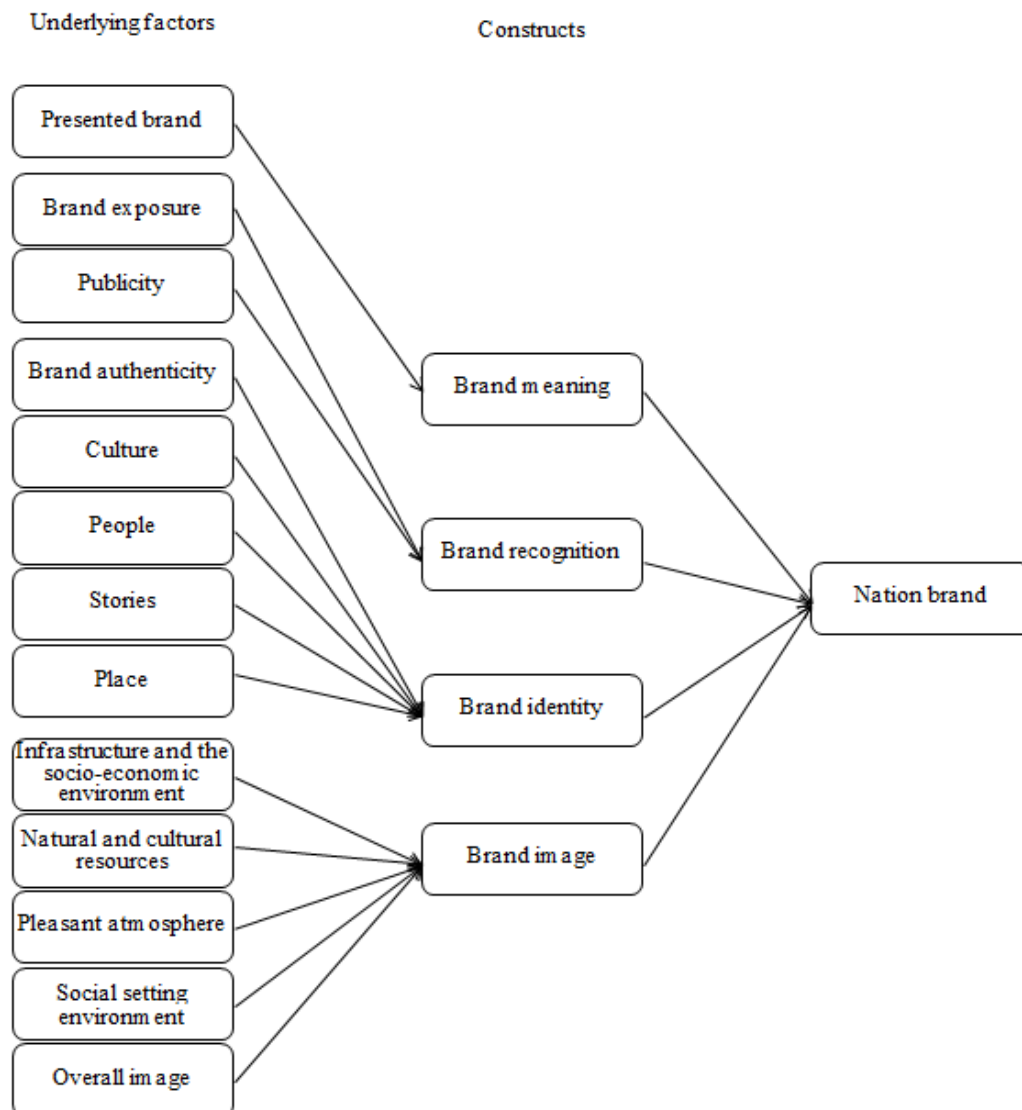
Fig. 1. conceptual model

Methodology

This study aims to identify the constructs of nation branding and their underlying factors. It is an applied and descriptive survey research. Also, regarding the hypothesis discussed in this study, it is a definite research, and from a time perspective, it is a cross-sectional study. The statistical population of this study is the "Let's Go to Iran" travel agency's foreign tourists who have traveled to Iran in recent years. Let's Go to Iran is an Iranian tour operator and travel agency located in Shiraz & Kish that has been organizing travel experiences for almost three decades. Johnson's method, in which the sample size is 10 or 20 times more than the hidden variables of the conceptual model, is used to estimate the sample size. In the present study, according to Johnson's method, considering 18 hidden variables, the estimated number of samples is between 180 and 360. Eventually, 360 people were selected as samples. The questionnaires were distributed based on the information recorded in the company's database by email and non-probability sampling method.

In this study, a researcher-made questionnaire was used to collect data, and the survey items are shown in Table 2. Content validity, structural validity, and convergent validity were used to examine the validity of the questionnaire. To assess the content validity, the questionnaire was given to some of the experts and supervisors of management and behavioral sciences, such as supervisors and counselors, and they confirmed the questions and evaluation of the hypotheses as well as the validity of the structure. In addition, the confirmatory factor analysis method was conducted to confirm the terms of the questionnaire. It should be noted that questions 16, 23, 27, 55, 56, 57, 76, 82, and two dimensions of cultural events and nature were omitted due to a factor load less than 0.7. Also, regarding divergent and convergent validity, questions were in a satisfactory range. The reliability of the questionnaire was used to calculate Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability (CR coefficient) (Table 3). The CR coefficient was more than 0.6 in all cases, indicating that the questionnaire has satisfactory reliability. To analyze the obtained data, the data normalization test (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) was first used to examine the data normalization. The average variance (AVE) was used as the third indicator for assessing convergent validity. An AVE equal to or greater than 0.5 ensures adequate convergent validity. The validity of the research data is presented in Table 2. It should be noted that all variables are in an acceptable range. Combined Reliability: The last verifier of the convergent validity is the combination reliability, which must be greater than the average extraction variance for each factor for verifiable convergence validity (CR> AVE). Finally, according to the above four tests presented in Table 3, it can be concluded that the research model has an appropriate convergent validity.

Table 2. The Questioner Index

No.	Study variable	Number of index	References
1	Nation brand	9	Nicola E. Stokburger-Sauer (2011)
2	Presented brand	3	Juan et al., (2011)
3	Brand meaning	4	Juan et al., (2011)
4	Brand recognition	3	Song et al., (2019)
5	Brand exposure	3	Baumann et al., (2014)
6	Publicity	2	Alexa et al., (2014)
7	Brand identity	3	Kornum et al., (2017)
8	Authenticity	13	Eggers et al., (2013)
9	Narrative stories	4	Hjelmgren (2016)
10	People	8	(Kirkman et al., 2006; Tung & Verbeke, 2010)
11	Culture	12	(Kirkman et al., 2006; Tung & Verbeke, 2010)
12	Place	8	(Kirkman et al., 2006; Tung & Verbeke, 2010)
13	Infrastructure and socioeconomic environment	6	García et al., (2011)
14	Natural and cultural resources	4	
15	Pleasant atmosphere	2	
16	Social environment	2	
17	Overall image	2	
18	Brand image	3	Baumann et al., (2014)

Table 3. Cronbach's alpha coefficient and the combined reliability of the variables

Study variable	Crohnbach's alpha	Combined Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Nation brand	0/908	0/924	0/575
Brand meaning	0/812	0/889	0/727
Brand recognition	0/758	0/861	0/673
Brand identity	0/701	0/829	0/619
Brand image	0/778	0/871	0/692
Presented brand	0/772	0/867	0/685
Brand exposure	0/726	0/843	0/642
Publicity	0/735	0/883	0/735
Authenticity	0/755	0/860	0/755
Culture	0/865	0/898	0/597
Narrative stories	0/751	0/889	0/800
People	0/786	0/875	0/700
Place	0/792	0/878	0/706
Infrastructure and socioeconomic environment	0/810	0/868	0/567
Natural and cultural resources	0/749	0/856	0/665
Pleasant atmosphere	0/736	0/883	0/791
Social setting environment	0/802	0/910	0/835
Overall image	0/718	0/876	0/780

Analysis and results

Regarding the demographic characteristics of the sample, the age, a fourth of respondents (92) are between 45 and 54 years old, and people between the ages of 25 and 34 account for 20% (74). Regarding marital status, 73% were married 19% were single, and 8% chose others. Regarding the education level, most subjects have a bachelor's degree and a small minority 1% elementary degree (3 students). Also, regarding the status of employment, a significant majority (129 people), accounting for 36%, are employed, and only 2% are students (7 people). For the duration of stay, 43% had a 2 to 7-day length of stay. Finally, regarding the country of origin, a large number (88) Europe, and a minority, 9%, were from the Middle East (32%).

The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the significance level for all variables was less than 0.05, which means rejecting hypothesis zero and confirming the abnormal distribution of data.

Using the external model of the PLS method, the questionnaires were first measured. An external model of equivalence is confirmatory factor analysis. To examine the model, the external model has been used to measure the relationships of hidden variables with their evaluation items. Until the constant is fixed, the observer variables are well-measured by the hidden variables, and relationships can not be tested. The standard coefficient of questions is 16 (534/0), 23 (487/0), 27 (279/0), 55 (672/0), 56 (611/0), 57 (624/0), 76 (600/0), 82 (595/0) and two dimensions of cultural events (343/0) and nature (599/0) were eliminated due to factor load less than 0.7% of the model. Thus, the model of structural equations was formed as follows.

The bootstrapping value (t statistic) in all cases is greater than the critical value of 1.96, which indicates that the correlation between the visible variables and the hidden variables is self-significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that each major variable has been properly measured. A general criterion for fitting goodness is proposed by Tenenhaus et al. (2005), GOF Index. This index takes into account both the measurement and structural models and is used as a benchmark for predicting the overall performance of the model (Azar et al., 2012). The Fit Fitness Index (GoF) was calculated using the following formula.

$$GOF = \sqrt{communality \times \overline{\overline{R^2}}} = \sqrt{0.695 \times 0.404} = .530$$

The average subscription is the equivalent of the AVE of each of the variables, and the mean value of the AVE variables is estimated at 695 and is included in the model. Also, the mean R2 of all intrinsic variables was calculated to be 0/404. Structural modeling specialists by the PLS method have a GOF index of less than 0.1, a moderate average of 0.3 to 0.25 and a magnitude of more than 0.36. Taking into account these criteria, the fit index of the sample model is considered to be 0/530, except for large sizes. According to these findings, it can be concluded that the tested model in the sample is a

very suitable fitting. Q2 (CV red): This criterion determines the predictive power of a model for an endogenous structure, and is between 0 and 1, which is closer to one than one. This indicator shows how well the independent variables of a given dependent variable have been able to predict well. If Q2 = 0.02, the predictive power is weak; if Q2 = 0.15, it is moderate predictive power; and if Q2 = 0.35, then it is considered strong power prediction (Manuel et al., 2009). In Table 5, the variance is explained, and the coefficients Q2 and R2 are reported for the sample criterion variable. The results of testing the study hypotheses are as presented in Table 4.

The paths coefficients influencing nation brand are depicted in the Table 5.
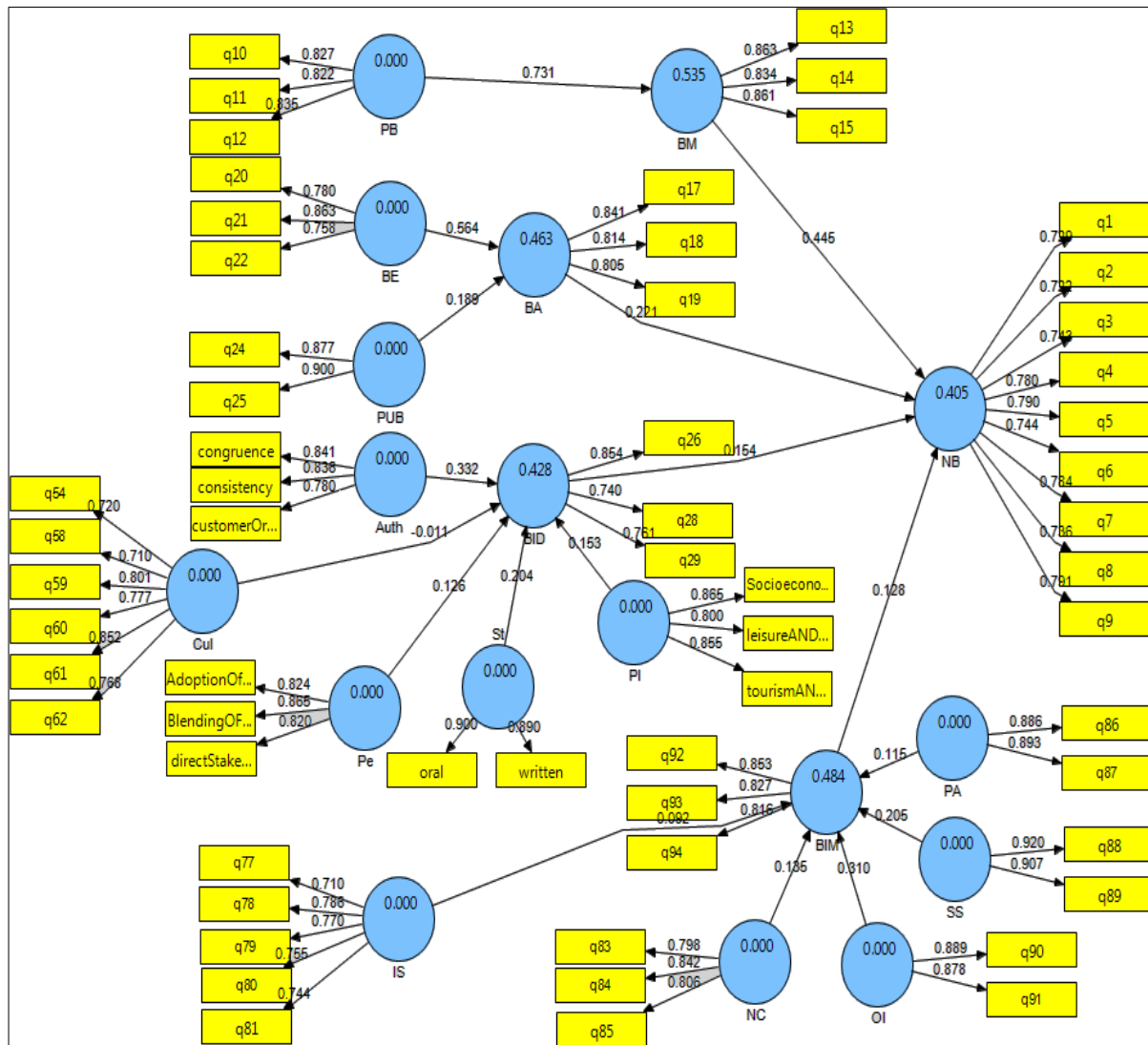
Fig. 2. Structural equation modelling of study with coefficients factor load after eliminating questions with low factor load (presented brand (PB), brand exposure (BE), brand publicity (PUB), authenticity (AUTH), narrative stories (ST), people (PE), place (PL), infrastructure and socioeconomic environment (IS), natural and cultural resources (NC), pleasant atmosphere (PA), social setting environment (SS), overall image (OI), Brand meaning (BM), brand recognition (BR), brand identity (BID), and brand image (BIM), nation brand (NB))
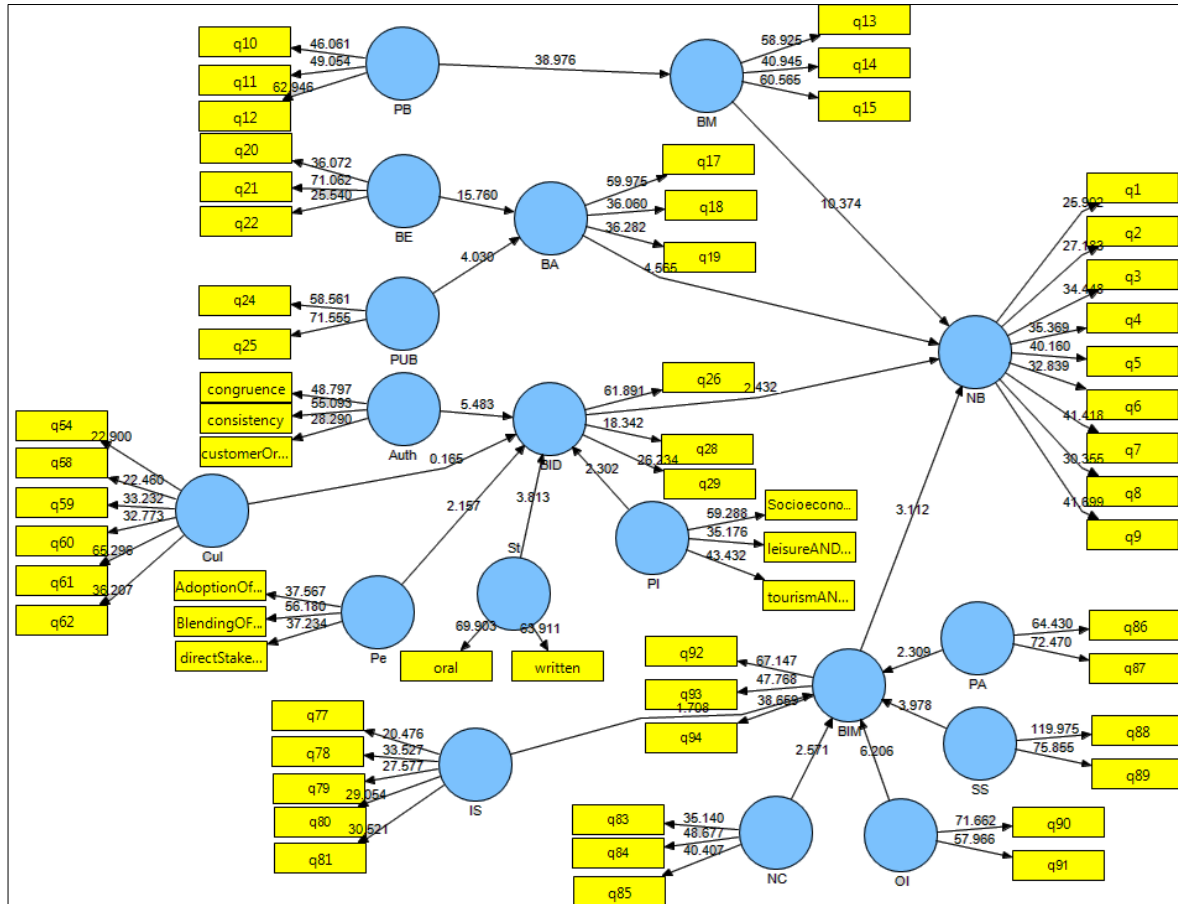
Fig. 3. Structural model of research with T-values

Table 4. Path coefficients and their comparison in the sample

Path	N=360		
	T value	Path coefficient	Approve/Reject
Brand meaning=> Nation Brand	10.374	0.445	Approve
Brand recognition=> Nation Brand	4.565	0.221	Approve
Brand identity=> Nation Brand	2.432	0.154	Approve
Brand image=> Nation Brand	3.112	0.128	Approve
Presented brand=> Brand meaning	38.976	0.731	Approve
Brand exposure=> Brand recognition	15.760	0.564	Approve
publicity=> Brand recognition	4.030	0.189	Approve
authenticity=> Brand identity	5.483	0.332	Approve
culture=> Brand identity	0.165	-0.011	Reject
Narrative stories=> Brand identity	3.813	0.204	Approve
people=> Brand identity	2.157	0.126	Approve
Place=> Brand identity	2.302	0.153	Approve
Infrastructure and socioeconomic environment=> Brand image	1.708	0.092	Reject
natural and cultural resources=> Brand image	2.571	0.135	Approve
pleasant atmosphere=> Brand image	2.309	0.115	Approve
social setting environment=> Brand image	3.978	0.204	Approve
Overall image => Brand image	6.206	0.310	Approve

Table 5. The paths coefficients influencing nation brand

Path Number	Path Coefficient on nation branding	Path				
1	0.225	Presented Brand	0.731 →	Brand Meaning	0.445 →	Nation Brand
2	0.124	Brand Exposure	0.564 →	Brand Awareness	0.221 →	Nation Brand
3	0.041	Publicity	0.189 →	Brand Awareness	0.221 →	Nation Brand
4	0.051	Authenticity	0.332 →	Brand Identity	0.154 →	Nation Brand
5	-0.001	Culture	-0.011 →	Brand Identity	0.154 →	Nation Brand
6	0.019	People	0.126 →	Brand Identity	0.154 →	Nation Brand
7	0.031	Story	0.204 →	Brand Identity	0.154 →	Nation Brand
8	0.023	Place	0.189 →	Brand Identity	0.154 →	Nation Brand
9	0.011	Infrastructure	0.092 →	Brand Image	0.128 →	Nation Brand
10	0.017	Natural and Cultural Resources	0.135 →	Brand Image	0.128 →	Nation Brand
11	0.026	Social Settings Environment	0.204 →	Brand Image	0.128 →	Nation Bran
12	0.039	Overall Image	0.310 →	Brand Image	0.128 →	Nation Brand
13	0.017	Pleasant Atmosphere	0.115 →	Brand Image	0.128 →	Nation Brand

Therefore, it can be deduced that the most influential path is the path below with the highest coefficient, 0.225.

Presented Brand → Brand Meaning → Nation Brand
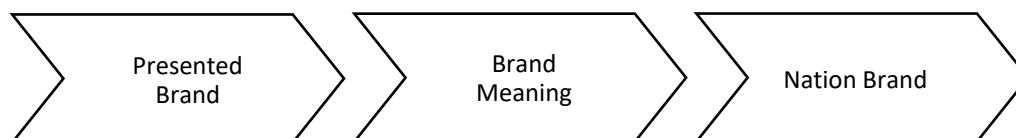
Fig. 4. The most influential path

According to Table 6, four variables of brand meaning, brand recognition, brand identity and brand image account for a total of 40.5% of the nation's brand. The amount of variance explained by predictor variables indicates the predictability of criterion variables. The Q2 index is positive for the criterion variable (nation brand) and 0/575, which indicates that the predictor variables can significantly predict the criterion variables and the predictive power of the model is robust for the intrinsic research structures. Other variables are similarly interpreted.

Table 6. The variance of R2 and the coefficient Q2 of the groups

Criterion variable	Analyzed sample	
	Variance R^2	Q^2
Nation brand	0/405	0/575
Brand meaning	0/535	0/727
Brand recognition	0/463	0/673
Brand identity	0/428	0/619
Brand image	0/484	0/692

Discussion

In the present study, the nation branding model is designed at the brand awareness level based on the four constructs of brand meaning, brand recognition, brand identity and brand image and their underlying factors. The statistical analysis results show that the brand meaning had the greatest impact on the nation brand in Iran. This result emphasizes the importance of creating a common sense of communication. It reveals the importance of tourists' learning and effective communication processes. Planners in the field of tourism at the national level should work on how to communicate and design messages in such a way that all messages are clear and contain the same sense of meaning. Among the underlying factors affecting the constructs of the nation brand, the presented brand and the brand exposure have had the greatest impact. The presented brand is effective in terms of brand meaning, and the brand exposure is effective in terms of brand recognition. Regarding the presented brand concept, planners should enhance the emotional benefits of the brand through its pleasantness and attractiveness, and in the field of brand exposure, they should plan for various types of effective advertising regarding nation branding.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study has been to establish a relationship between underlying factors and constructs of the nation brand at the level of brand awareness for the first time, as it seems no study examines these relationships. Our study's findings contribute to the literature on branding, especially national brands, by proposing a conceptual framework after an extensive literature review. This research explains the mechanism by which underlying factors are linked to national brands. The findings indicate that the effect of underlying factors on a national brand is mediated by brand meaning, brand recognition, brand identity, and brand image. These findings offer several potential implications for managers, which are discussed below.

This study investigates whether the way the brand is presented is effective on the nation's brand meaning, which affects the nation's brand formation. This finding aligns with the research results of Ray et al. (2021), Elizabeth and Elliot (2016), Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015), and So and King (2010). Therefore, it is suggested to use various national marketing activities such as advertising, social media, content marketing, and public relations to strengthen Iran's national brand. Factors influencing a solid brand presence include a clear brand message, consistent visual branding, designing a positive experience for tourists, and effective communication strategies. Also, it is recommended to work in two fields: 1) the values that the nation brand transmits using publicity slogans and 2) the nation's real image. It would be advisable to perform these actions creatively to identify and define the tourist nation's personality. Collaboration between entrepreneurs and local people is vital for transmitting these values to visitors.

The results show that brand exposure has a positive and significant effect on brand recognition, this finding is in line with the research results of Song et al. (2020), Foroudi (2019), Baumann et al. (2015), Schivinsky and Dabrowski (2014), García et al. (2012) and, Berry (2000). Therefore, to strengthen the nation brand recognition in audiences' minds, it is suggested to use content marketing,

which is one of the most important strategies to strengthen brand exposure. Valuable posts should be designed, compiled, and presented on related websites using creative methods to increase Iran's national brand exposure. Also, creating an unexpected connection with the audience is of primary importance. A simple way to do this is to tell a story about Iran's nation brand. Using storytelling can be useful for new segments and underserved audiences. Creative live events can also to effectively increase Iran's national brand exposure because these events have inherent excitement and stimulate curiosity. Also, encouraging satisfied tourists to present and publish their opinions to the audience is another method that can increase brand exposure. Creating nation brand loyalty associations can also be useful in this area.

Our results have shown that brand identity has a significant direct effect on nation brand. This finding is in line with the research results of Kavoura (2014) and Knott (2013). Our findings show that the national brand signs, such as name and logo, are influential in the growth of the Iran brand. Also, advertising significantly impacts improving Iran's identity and improves nation brand. Considering underlying factors (authenticity, culture, people, narrative stories, and place) shows that authenticity has the greatest indirect effect on Iran brand through brand identity. Authenticity is related to the fact that the tourist's personal values match the Iranian values. Also, Iran always lives up to its values and adheres to its promises to tourists. Therefore, to promote Iran's nation brand through authenticity it is suggested to build a competitive identity. Iran can create its competitive identity by using value co-creation approaches as a new management tool for nation branding. Value co-creation approach is about focusing on brand and viewing its values from multiple perspectives. This approach involves multiple stakeholders (such as citizens, tourists, policymakers, and any relevant organizations) in the building of unique value proposition.

Also, this study identifies that brand image has a significant direct impact on nation brand. This finding is similar to the results of Andersson (2022) and Hao et al. (2021). It means that if tourists are interested in Iran's brand and thinking about Iran reminds them of pleasant memories, it promotes Iran's national brand. Studying the underlying factors (infrastructure and socio-economic environment, natural and cultural resources, pleasant atmosphere, social setting environment, and overall image) shows that overall image has the greatest indirect effect on Iran's brand through brand image. The overall image is related to the fact that tourists' image of Iran is good and even better than other similar tourist destinations. The overall image of a country is not a static phenomenon; it has a long-term nature, and it is difficult to change. So, to promote the nation's brand, Iran's image can be improved using brand associations such as a word or concept that comes to mind quickly. Iran's brand associations could be emotive slogans just like what India, Spain, and Malaysia use: 'Incredible India', 'Smile, you're in Spain', 'Malaysia, truly Asia'. This is a powerful way to promote Iran's image and develop tourism.

Limitations and future research suggestions

The limitations of this study offer opportunities for future research. First, the findings of this study is limited to the behavior of the sample used and may not be generalizable to other tourism organizations. So, future studies can carry out this research in other tourism organizations and conduct a comparative approach with the research results. Studies also can use the research model among domestic and foreign tourists of tourism organizations as a comparative approach. Second, the results are based on a multi-month study of foreign tourists and it is not far-fetched to change the results based on time and place. So, future studies can focus on longer time periods and different places with a more comprehensive approach. Third, this study is a cross-sectional study in terms of time, it is not possible to reach a causal conclusion with high certainty and future studies can consider the research model with a casual methodology.

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