

Residents' Attitudes toward International Tourism: A Case of Iran

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Abstract

The main objective of this research was to investigate Iranian attitudes toward the impact of foreign tourism on the economic, social/cultural, environmental, and the country's religion. The results of the survey questionnaire to 836 Iranians in major tourism cities revealed that, in general, Iranians view foreign tourism as having a positive influence economically, social/culturally, and environmentally. On the impact of foreign tourism on the country's religion, residents were mostly neutral, indicating ambivalence whether the impact would be positive or negative. Implications of the findings for the country's economic development strategies are discussed.

Keywords: international tourism, Iran, tourism impact, economic development

1. Introduction

According to data from the World Travel and Tourism Council, the direct contribution of tourism to world GDP and employment in 2012 was US\$ 2.1 trillion and 101 million jobs (WTTC, 2013). Including both direct and indirect impacts, tourism's total contribution to world GDP in 2012 was estimated to be US\$ 6.6 trillion and employment of 260 million people. These benefits, however, have not been equally shared by regions and countries. While Europe hosts more than 50% of the global tourism arrivals and 45% of tourism receipts, the Middle East and North Africa regions, on the other hand, each host about 5% of the global tourism arrivals and 4% of tourism receipts (UNWTO, 2012).

Similar performance differences exist among countries within the region. For example despite the wealth of tourism attractions in Iran, tourism industry performance has been extremely weak compared to nearby countries such as UAE (Figures 1 and 2). Iran's global share of international tourism receipts and arrivals was a mere two tenths of one percent (0.2%) in 2008 (UNWTO, 2011). There are, indeed, many factors such as the political situation or inadequate infrastructure that impacts tourism performance within a country (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). But, one factor that has received special attention in the tourism literature is the attitudes of local residents toward foreign tourists (Bahae & Saremi, 2013; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011).

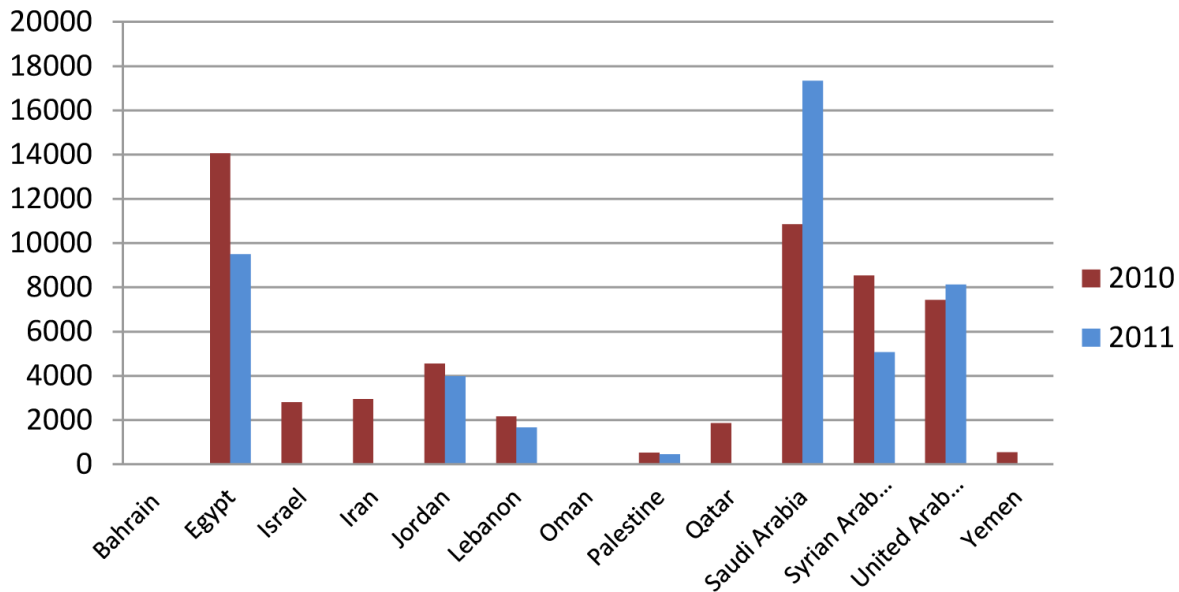


Figure 1. International tourism arrivals for Middle East countries (000's), (UNWTO)¹

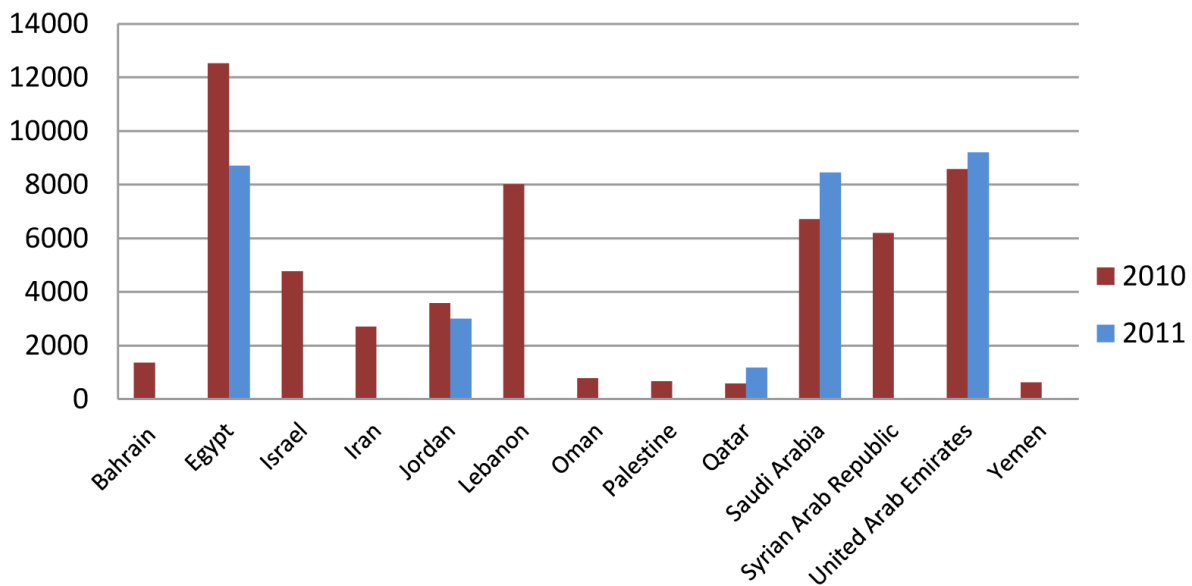


Figure 2. International tourism receipts for Middle East countries (\$US millions)¹

Despite the extensive studies on people's attitudes toward international tourism, there is a dearth of research in the context of the Middle East, especially Iran. Only a handful of studies have looked at Iranian attitudes toward tourism, but these studies are all small in scale as they were conducted in a particular city or at one tourism destination. In light of the paucity of research within the Iranian context, the present study explores Iranians' attitudes toward tourism in multiple locations in the country. Iran provides an interesting case for such research because on one hand, the country has a wealth of historical, cultural, and natural tourism resources, and on the other, it may appear to be a

¹ At the time of this research, 2011 data were not available for all countries.

hostile political environment for some tourists. In addition, the tourism industry seems to be a plausible alternative growth strategy for the country in light of the country's heavy reliance on gas and oil and the crippling economic sanctions imposed by the West on those industries.

1.1 Iran and International Tourism

Iran is an ancient country that has diverse cultures and a rich heritage, representing a recorded human history that goes back 10,000 years (O’Gorman, McLellan, & Baum, 2007). Iran’s location at the intersection of major Asian, Middle Eastern and European countries and trade routes has shaped its diverse cultures and history. Iran’s tourism assets belong to different periods of Persian² history: including from pre-Islamic era of Zoroastrianism (3000 BC), Achaemenian (559 BC) and the Sassanian (224 AD) empires to post-Islamic dynasties of Samanid (864 AD), Ghaznavid (977 AD), and Safavid (1501 AD). The invasions of Alexander of Greece (330 BC), Arabs with their new Islamic religion (651 AD), and the Mongols (1256 AD) have all been instrumental in shaping Iranian culture and heritage. There are thousands of historical sites and monuments scattered across the country as potential tourism attractions, and while more than 12,000 of them are officially registered (Mashai, 2005), there are many archeological areas which have not yet been explored or recorded (O’Gorman *et al.*, 2007).



Figure 3. Map of Iran

² We use terms Persia and Iran interchangeably.

In addition to its rich historical and cultural assets, Iran is endowed with magnificent physical, natural, and ecological diversity (Figure 3). The three mountain ranges in Iran, the volcanic, fertile Sabalan range in the northwest, the Jurassic-era Zagros in the west, and the Alborz range in the north (including the highest mountain in Iran at 18,600ft), the two great deserts, Dashte Lut and Dashte Kavir, plus rivers, lakes, caves, and forests shape the natural environment of Iran’s tourism industry. Diversity of the natural environment and climatic seasons in Iran affords tourists the ability to enjoy winter sports and water sports in the same months. As O’Gorman *et al.* (2007) observed, Iran’s natural characteristics along with its archaeology, cultural heritage, and traditions are an ideal and important tourism destination for foreign tourists.

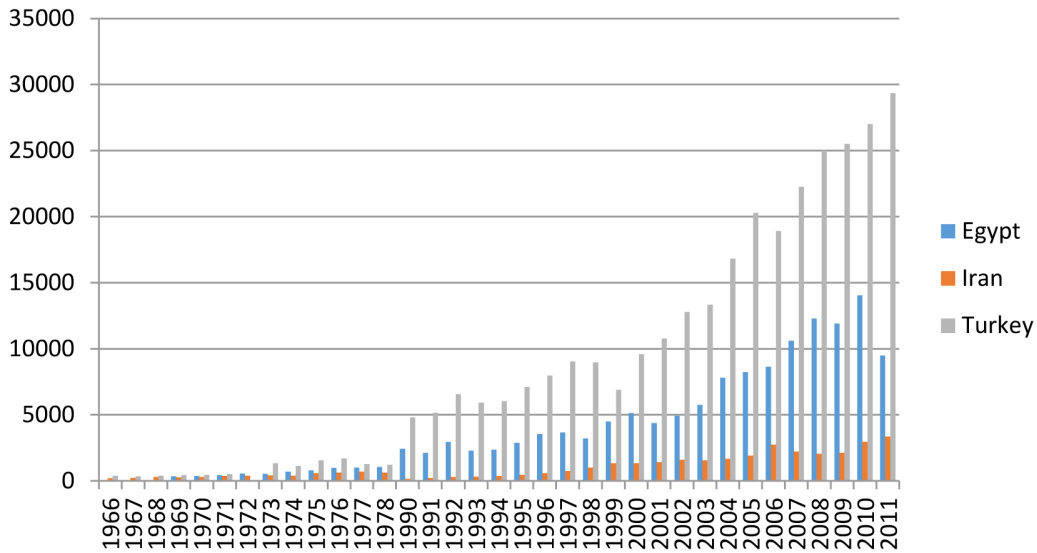


Figure 4. International tourism arrivals (000's)

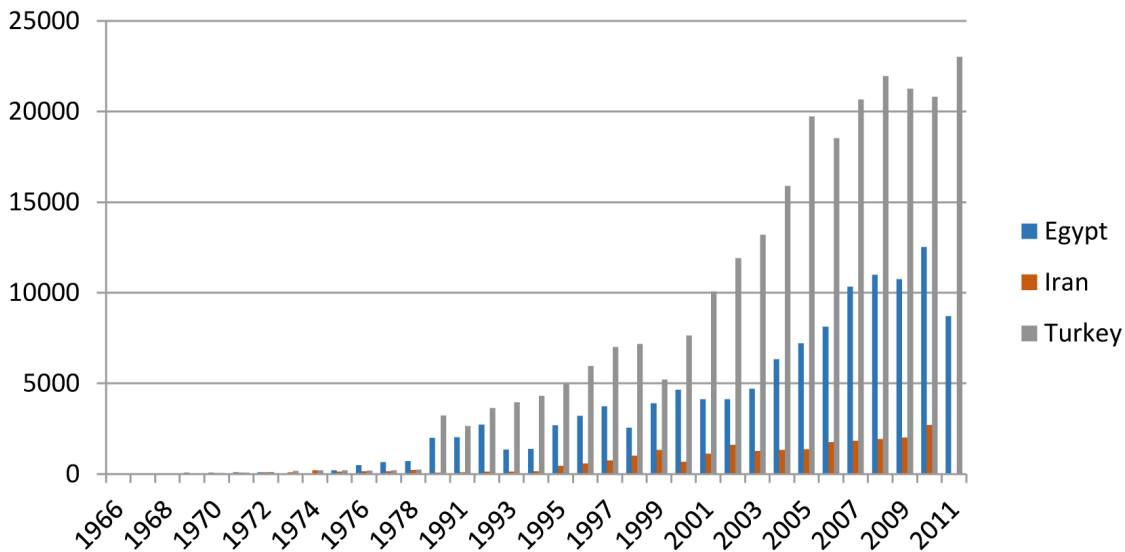


Figure 5. International tourism receipts (\$US million)

However, despite this wealth of tourism resources, Iran has a very small fraction of this global industry, especially when compared with similar countries in the region. The Iranian Revolution in

1979, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and the ongoing tensions between Iran and the West (Bahae & Pisani, 2009) have severely impacted its international tourism industry. Based on the most recent available data (UNWTO, 2012), Iran's global share of tourism receipts and arrivals was negligible (0.2%). Even within the region, Iran's tourism industry significantly underperforms compared to comparative countries of Turkey and Egypt (Figures 4 and 5).

In recent years, because of international economic sanctions and their impacts on Iran's oil and gas industry, Iranian government officials have begun to recognize the importance of the tourism sector segment for economic development. As such, with more emphasis on this industry, there has been a slight growth in both the number of tourist arrivals as well as international tourism receipts. But, Iran has a long way to go before realizing the full potential of this industry. Since the local people's attitudes toward foreign tourists is among the most important factors that would either hinder or enhance tourism, it is critical as the first step to understand whether or not Iranians are hostile or welcoming towards foreign tourists. This study builds on a limited research in this area and provides a more comprehensive survey of Iranian attitudes toward foreign tourism to date. For the remainder of this paper, we first provide a brief review of literature on attitudes toward tourism impacts in general and then for the Iran's context in particular. Then, we discuss our research methodology, provide a discussion of findings, and conclude with implications of the study.

2. Attitudes toward International Tourism

Local residents' attitudes toward tourism have been shown to have a direct relationship with tourism development (Mason, 2004; Nicholas, Thapa, & Ko, 2009; Oviedo-Garcia, Castellanos-Verdugo, & Martin-Ruiz, 2008). That is, positive attitudes of local populations toward tourism appear to lead to more opportunities for successful tourism development in those communities. Conversely, negative attitudes seem to hinder tourism growth. The attitudes of local residents toward tourism are shaped, in part, by the economic, social/cultural, and environmental impacts that tourism would have on destination communities. The following is a brief overview of the existing literature in these areas.

2.1 Economic, Social/Cultural, and Environmental Impacts of Tourism

Among the three areas of tourism impacts, the economic consequences of tourism on local communities have received the most attention in the literature (Mason, 2004). Most studies in this area have reported positive residents' attitude towards tourism. People believe that tourism contributes to the economic development of the community by creating employment (Ashe, 2005; Tosun, 2002), helping small businesses (Davis, Allen, & Cosenza, 1988), and bringing capital investment opportunities to the community (Upchurch & Teivane, 2000; Settina & Richmond, 1978). For many countries, especially developing ones, the economic impact of tourism is significant not only for the local economies but also for national economic growth (Sharpley, 2009).

With social/cultural impact of tourism, most studies report a positive attitude of local residents toward global tourism (Besculides, Lee, & McCormick, 2002; Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Harrison, 1992; Settina & Richmond, 1978). For example, Besculides *et al.* (2002) reported that tourism benefits the community to "learn about, share, and preserve their culture" (p. 314). Sharpley (1994) reported that tourism increases social interactions and contributes to the preservation of historic and religious buildings. Akis, Peristianis, and Warner (1996) also showed positive attitudes toward social/cultural impact of tourism because tourism would increase interactions between the locals and the tourists and improves the local services and facilities. Other studies have shown that tourism promotes local arts (McKean, 1978), increases pride and cultural identity (Esman, 1984), and improves the quality of life and the image of the community (Settina & Richmond, 1978; Clements,

Schultz, & Lime, 1993; Weikert & Kertstetter, 1996). But there are also studies that have reported a negative view of local residents on the social/cultural impact of tourism. For example, as reported by Kousis (1989), tourism has negative impacts on family and social values. It has also been reported that tourism contributes to the commercialization of local culture and arts (Burns & Holden, 1995; Cohen, 1988), lowers their quality (Boynton, 1986), increases crime (Aref, 2010; Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Gursoy, Jurovski, & Uysal, 2002; Pizam, Reichel, & Stein, 1982) and may create social conflicts in the local communities (Tosun, 2002).

With respect to the environmental impact of tourism, both positive and negative attitudes have been reported. For example, it's been shown that tourism developments such as golf courses, ski resorts, and marinas have destroyed forests, fish sanctuaries, and marshlands (Hillery, Nancarrow, Griffin, & Syme, 2001). Often such developments degrade the very site which attracted the tourists in the first place. Such concern over the negative environmental impacts of tourism has been reinforced by the growing voice of the environmental movement in recent years (Lowe & Rudig, 1986). As a result, the sustainability of the natural and physical environment, and in a more significant and broader sense, balancing the economic, social/cultural, and environmental impacts of tourism on destination communities has emerged as a desirable goal of many tourism development plans. Interestingly, however, research shows that the positive economic impact of tourism on residents' attitudes trumps environmental concerns (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Kuvan & Akan, 2005.)

2.2 Attitudes of Iranians toward International Tourism

The research on Iranians' attitudes towards tourism impacts is very limited and scant. The few studies that have investigated Iranian attitudes toward tourism are all small in scale and scope and have focused on a particular city or an attraction site within a city (Aref, 2010; Mohammadi, Khalifah, & Hosseini, 2010; Rastegar, 2009; Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2008). Nevertheless, the findings of this limited research point to an overall positive attitude of Iranians in those local communities toward tourism. Aref's (2010) study of residents' attitudes in the city of Shiraz revealed that Iranians generally have a positive attitude toward the economic, social/cultural and environmental impacts of tourism on their local community. For instance, the key factors that participants in the survey identified for the positive economic impact of tourism included "benefits to local people and small business", "employment opportunity", and "increase the standard of living." (p. 258) With regard to social/cultural and environmental impacts of tourism, respondents believed that tourism "encourages a variety of cultural activities", provides "opportunity to put their culture on display", and that international tourism "provided incentive for the restoration of" destination sites (p. 258). Similar results were reported by Mohammadi *et al.* (2010) in their research in the city of Kermanshah, a popular heritage attraction region in western Iran. From the economic view, respondents showed positive attitudes toward tourism for reasons such as it "leads to more investment and spending" and "job opportunities" (p. 223), while it may also lead to increase in prices. The authors also reported that the residents' favorable attitude toward global tourism was mostly due to its positive social impact on the community. In particular, residents were eager to meet tourists and had pride to show their ancient heritage (Mohammadi *et al.*, 2010).

A study by Rastegar (2009) on residents' attitude toward tourism in the city of Yazd, an ancient heritage city in central Iran, showed a positive attitude toward tourism mainly because of its economic impacts and the positive changes it would bring to residents of Yazd. Rastegar also reported that older residents displayed negative attitudes toward the social/cultural impacts of tourism. Two studies by Zamani-Farahani and Musa (2008, p. 810; 2013) conducted in two popular tourism destinations in Iran, the Sar'in and Masooleh, reported positive residents' attitudes toward

the economic and social/cultural impact of tourism on local communities. Moreover, the authors examined the level of religiosity among the respondents and found that respondents identifying with a strong Islamic faith viewed the “social/cultural impact of tourism positively”. Zamani-Farahani and Musa reported that tourism not only helped the development of local infrastructures and improved the image of the destinations, but also improved the local quality of life and cultural activities (Zamani-farahani & Musa, 2012). Despite the results of these limited, but encouraging studies that show an overall positive attitude toward tourism in Iran, there is a need for more comprehensive research in this area (Bahae & Saremi, 2013). The present study has taken on this challenge and conducted research in multiple geographical locations and tourism attraction sites to discern Iranians’ attitudes toward economic, social/cultural, environmental, and religious impacts of tourism.

3. Methodology

We conducted a survey of 836 Iranians in four major tourism cities in Iran, including Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Yazd. As social science research is extremely challenging within the Iranian context due to government restrictions and oversight, we collected our data from a convenience sample of adults present in bazaars, travel agencies, tourist zones, hotels, and places of business frequented by tourists. The sample was acquired through a snowball sampling technique directed by the first author of this study.

The survey instrument, adapted from Gursoy and colleagues, contained three sections: demographic data, opinion questions related to tourism and tourists; and a final open-ended question focusing on the costs and benefits of tourism (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Gursoy *et al.*, 2002). Demographic data included respondent age, education, occupation, gender, etc. Respondents answered 22 closed-ended questions on the economic, social/cultural, environmental, and the religious impacts of tourism in addition to their attitudes toward tourists from different countries/regions. The wording of a sample question was “Tourism is likely to create more jobs for your community” or “Tourism is likely to change our traditional culture” with answers recorded on a 5-point Likert scale from ‘very positive’ to ‘very negative’. Also, Respondents indicated their attitudes toward different tourist groups on a 5-point Likert scale from ‘most preferred’ to ‘least preferred.’ Finally, an open ended question dealing with the costs and benefits of tourism was included. The survey was first developed in English and translated into Farsi by three Iranian expatriates following Brislin (1980) and minor translation issues were resolved.³

4. Results

In this section we report upon the descriptive statistics of the sample, present findings of the study, and provide a discussion of our results. The descriptive statistics of the sample respondents appears in Table 1. Overall, the sample is generally middle-aged, well-educated, married, urban, professional, middle class, with some foreign exposure through international travel. Despite the convenience nature of the sample, we believe it is a relatively accurate representation of the Iranian context especially in the major tourism cities. The questionnaires were distributed in tourism sites, bazaars, travel terminals, educational institutions, religious sites and other places in different cities where ordinary people commute and represent a cross section of Iranian people.

³ For a copy of the survey contact the first author.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of sample respondents (n=836)

Variable	Value
Age (%)	
18 to 25	29.2
26 to 35	46.4
36 to 50	21.4
51 and older	3.0
Education (%)	
High School	15.7
4-year University Degree	62.4
Graduate/Doctoral Degree	21.9
Civil Status	
Single	41.6
Married	58.4
Average Household Size in Persons (std. dev.)	3.60 (1.5)
City Residence (%)	
Teheran	26.0
Esfahan	64.5
Shiraz/Yadz/Other	9.5
Occupation (%)	
Medicine/Engineering	9.8
Teacher	12.0
Entrepreneur	20.6
Student	23.9
Housewife	7.5
Government Worker/Retired/Unemployed	26.2
Gender	
Male	52.3
Female	47.7
Average Annual Household Income in \$US	8,558.25
Foreign Travel (%)	
None	38.3
Visited 1 Country	19.4
Visited 2 or More Countries	42.3

The results of our survey questions dealing with respondents' attitudes on the effect of tourism impacts on the country's economy; culture; natural resources; and religion are presented in Table 2. With respect to the tourism's impact on the economy, an overwhelming majority (95.7%) of respondents indicated that tourism has a positive or very positive impact on the nation's economy.

Table 2. Attitudes on tourism impact on the economy, environment, culture, religion

Attitude	Percent Responding
What is your opinion on the impact of tourism on the country's economy?	
Very Positive	58.3
Positive	37.4
Neutral	2.8
Negative	0.7
Very Negative	0.8
What is your opinion on the impact of tourism on the country's natural environment?	
Very Positive	26.7
Positive	47.3
Neutral	16.7
Negative	9.1
Very Negative	0.2
What is your opinion on the impact of tourism on the country's culture?	
Very Positive	23.9
Positive	46.7
Neutral	19.7
Negative	9.0
Very Negative	0.7
What is your opinion on the impact of tourism on the country's religion?	
Very Positive	12.4
Positive	28.2
Neutral	46.8
Negative	10.8
Very Negative	1.8

Respondents opined similarly with regard to tourism's impact on the natural environment and national culture. In each circumstance, more than seven in ten respondents believed that tourism had a positive or very positive impact. For both socio/cultural and environmental impacts of tourism, less than 10% of the respondents recorded negative or very negative impacts. Two

demographic variables differentiated the opinion for the natural environment: age and civil status. In particular, the 26 to 35 age group believed in a smaller positive impact of tourism on the natural environment (66.0% versus 73.9% overall) and were slightly more negative in their view of tourism's impact upon the natural environment (11.1% versus 9.3% overall).

Table 3. Statistical insights into tourism impact upon the economy, environment, culture, religion (n=836)

Variable	Statistical Differences~			
	Economy	Environment	Culture	Religion
Age*	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Civil Status*	No	Yes	No	No
City Residence*	Yes	No	No	Yes
Occupation*	No	No	Yes	Yes
Gender*	No	No	Yes	Yes
Foreign Travel*	No	No	Yes	No

~Each category reduced to very positive/positive=1; neutral – 2; negative/very negative = 3.

^ comparison of means (ANOVA).

*Cross-tabulations, significance at the $.10 \leq$ level.

These differences notwithstanding illustrate a substantive positive view of tourism on the natural environment. This finding indicates that the youth and the educated class of society are more sensitive toward the environment perhaps because of their exposure through education or online media about the green movement and environmental issues (Bahaee, Perez-Batres, Pisani, Miller, & Saremi, 2014).

The role of one demographic variable on tourism's impact on culture was very interesting. Respondents who had visited (e.g., travelled) to more countries abroad held a more positive view of tourism's impact upon the local Persian culture (74.4% versus 64.4%). This result seems logical because people who have more experiences abroad and have seen how other countries successfully showcase their culture and how they have benefited from tourism, showed a more favorable attitude toward the tourism impact on their culture than those who lack such experiences.

The view of tourism's impact upon religion recorded the most significant differences. Men viewed tourism's impact upon the country's religion (i.e., Islam) in a more positive light and in a less negative view than women. Half of the respondents from Tehran saw a positive connection between tourism and religion whereas just about one-third of respondents (36.7%) from Esfahan believe the connection between tourism and religion was positive. These findings could be due to the fact that men are a more dominant player in Iranian society and as a result have more interactions and exposure to tourists and tourism activities, hence recognize its importance and expressed a more positive view. Furthermore, Tehran, the capital, is the most diverse, open and liberal city in Iran and, thus, respondents from that city showed a more positive impact of tourism on religion as compared to Esfahan which is, from a religious point of view, a more conservative and a homogeneous city. It should be noted, however, that while a smaller percentage of respondents (40%) believed tourism has 'positive' or 'very positive' impact on religion, only 12% reported 'negative' or 'very negative' impact. Surprisingly, and perhaps understandably, close to a half of the respondents indicated a neutral opinion. This finding shows Iranian awareness of the importance of the tourism industry because of its positive economic, social/cultural and

environmental impacts and at the same time shows their ambivalence about its influence on the country's religion.

Other noteworthy findings of our research were in the areas of tourism impact on crime and traffic where the results did not support previous literature. In particular, the notion that tourism increases the crime rate (Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Gursoy *et al.*, 2002; Pizam *et al.*, 1982) was not supported. Similarly, local residents living close to tourism sites did not believe tourism caused inconveniences and traffic jams.

5. Discussion

The main objective of this research was to explore Iranian's attitudes and perceptions toward the impact of foreign tourism on the country's economy, society/culture, environment, and the country's religion. Two major conclusions can be made from the results. First, the findings strongly confirm that Iranians in general have a positive attitude toward the economic, cultural, and environmental impacts of tourism. Second, and more pertinent to the context of Iran, the findings show that people do not believe that tourism would have a negative impact on their religion. Indeed, the positive views were more pronounced for the economic, social/cultural and environmental impact of foreign tourism than its impact on the religion. For tourism's impact on religion, respondents were mostly neutral indicating, perhaps, their ambivalence and uncertainty about the nature of such an impact. It is important to note that despite this high level of uncertainty about tourism's impact on the country's religion, more than three times as many respondents believed that tourism would have positive/very positive impact on the religion as those who indicated negative/very negative impact. Even though Iran is officially an Islamic state, these findings point to the fact that many Iranians tend to be more open and tolerant than what is presented by foreign media and is perceived of them, particularly in the West.

These findings indicate that Iranians are generally open to foreign tourism because of its various benefits and yet are aware of some potential negative consequences such as those impacting the natural environment. The results also show that Iranians are proud and secure of their cultural identity noting that tourism will not diminish the culture and may actually strengthen it through increased interactions with others and showcasing it to the world.

The findings also present significant policy implications for the government with regard to a more sustainable economic development model. Currently, the Iranian government is relying on the oil/gas industry for a substantial portion of its foreign currency needs. Events in recent years have shown that this industry does not provide sufficient job opportunities for the growing population of young Iranians and it is a highly volatile industry, not to mention that the industry is not sustainable in the long run. Tourism on the other hand, is a sustainable industry with potential to create jobs in many communities across Iran. Iran is endowed with significant historical, cultural, and natural resources which makes it a world class tourism destination. This is an opportunity for the Iranian government to promote tourism, especially international tourism as the country seems to be ready for tourists but lags behind others in the region to fully capitalizing on the benefits of this industry. Such a shift in economic development strategy of the country, indeed, necessitates serious investment in the tourism industry from infrastructure development in transportation, communication, and accommodations to training of competent human resources throughout the tourism ecosystem.

Given the untapped potential of this industry in Iran, private investors, including foreign investors, should be willing and enthusiastic for partnering in this process. Furthermore, there should be a sustained effort to improve the image of Iran in the eyes of international community. Most tourists need to perceive a destination to be safe in order to visit, and investors prefer a safe

environment to invest. While these are serious challenges for policy makers in Iran, the election of the new reformist president in Iran in 2013 and his conciliatory tone toward the West is a step in the right direction.

Our study has a few limitations. For example, the sample, while we believe it represents a cross-section of the general population in major cities, did not include people from small communities and villages whom might have different views toward foreign tourists. It was also a convenience sample due to the political situation in Iran. Future research would need to cover a broader demographic group and representation from all across Iran. Furthermore, researchers should investigate the attitudes of foreign tourists who have visited Iran and learn about their experiences at every phase of the tourism industry value chain activities. Also, of particular interest should be the study of balance that the Iranian government needs to create between tourism demands and expectations on one hand, and the religious compliance and environmental sustainability on the other.

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