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'You wouldn't want to go there': what drives the stigmatization of a destination?

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ABSTRACT

In a highly competitive market, managing the quality of destination image is a major concern for tourism marketers and policymakers. Negative connotations attached to a destination can potentially produce forms of stigma and lead to the stigmatization of a destination. Research on stigmas attached to tourists or tourism practitioners has gained growing scholarly attention; however, empirical knowledge on the stigmas associated with a place (spatial stigma) and the underlying factors driving the stigmatization of a destination is yet to be developed in tourism literature. To fill this gap and grounded in a multidisciplinary literature on the stigma-place nexus, this study explores the stigmatization of Iran through an analysis of in-depth interviews with the representatives of country's key tourism informants. The findings of the qualitative study demonstrated how Iran's destination identity is contested. Six reinforcing forms of stigmas were identified: political, religion, security, hygiene, performance and regional stigmas. The study concludes that destination stigma is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that manifests in different ways depending on where it is generated, encountered and experienced. In adopting a more contextual approach the study offers several new perspectives on stigma production, negotiation and resistance in tourism destinations.

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stigmatization; place
identity; risk perception;
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Introduction

Countries constantly struggle and compete to attract more tourists in the highly competitive global tourism market. Tourists' decisions to visit a particular destination are influenced by their perception of a positive destination image (Currie, 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Severt & Hahm, 2020). However, negative images are also clearly important (Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2021; Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2022). Different stigmas associated with a destination may 'produce a spoiled place identity' (Bush et al., 2001) which might contribute to the 'deterioration of a destination image' and subsequently affect tourist arrivals (Avraham, 2015, 2016; He et al., 2022). As Condevaux et al. (2016) noted, successful tourism development highly relies on how the stigmas connected with a destination are counteracted, reversed and replaced with positive values.

There is a growing body of research that indicates that those who live in economically, socially and politically marginalized places 'may be marked by a stigma of place, referred to as spatial stigma, which influences their sense of self, their daily experiences, and their relations with outsiders' (Graham et al., 2016, p. 1). This

is extremely significant for senses of personal wellbeing (Thomas, 2016), but may have wider implications. For example, Besbris et al. (2018) concluded that residency in a poor community of colour has a negative effect on sellers' ability to attract customers in a classified marketplace. Yet how might stigmatization of place have implications for the decision-making and perceptions of those who perceive such a place from outside, including with respect to tourism?

The association of stigma with a community or a place is well acknowledged in the geographical and urban studies literature. For instance, Bush et al. (2001) characterized stigmatized places as arising from public perceptions which elicits high perceptions of risk. Stigma has also been discussed in tourism at the level of individuals or markets in relation to the stigma attached to obese tourists (e.g. Small & Harris, 2012), tourists with disabilities (e.g. Randle & Dolnicar, 2019), Arab/Muslim tourists (e.g. Moufakkir, 2015, 2020), spatial stigma attached to tourists with fatal illness (e.g. He et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020), occupational stigma in the hospitality industry (e.g. Kusluvan et al., 2022), and tour guides (Li et al., 2020, 2021). The

current literature has primarily focused on stigmas attached to tourists and public stigma (i.e. residents and tourism practitioners). Nonetheless, there is a notable absence of empirical research in tourism on the stigmas attached to a place and the underlying factors influencing the stigmatization of an emerging destination. This study responds to calls for more scholarly and context-based studies on spatial stigma (Graham et al., 2016; Parkhill et al., 2014; Paton et al., 2017; Wacquant et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2020) by investigating the drivers underpinning the stigmatization of a destination. Such research is significant because of the implications it may have for travel decision-making and word-of-mouth, as well as, potentially, investment and business location decisions.

This study focuses on Iran which is arguably an emerging tourism destination suffering from a negative imaginary in major tourism-generating markets (Khodadadi & O'Donnell, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Media and political portrayal of Iran as a 'pariah state' along with political tensions with the West as a result of the country's nuclear programme, political instability and conflicts in the wider Middle East have all contributed to Iran's negative image in many tourist-generating markets, which hides the country's rich cultural and natural heritage and history of tourism (Khodadadi, 2016; Morakabati, 2011; Motahar et al., 2021; Seyfi & Hall, 2018). This study is also timely in light of significant media coverage of the protests and uprising in Iran led by young women fighting for their human rights, freedom and democracy (Begum, 2022). Through the series of interviews with representatives of country's key tourism informants, this study attempts to identify key stigmas attached to the stigmatization of Iran as a tourism destination in the relatively overlooked Middle East region (Isaac et al., 2015). The findings of this study are expected to contribute to a new understanding of the elements that shape destination stigma, which is crucial for the development of successful tourist marketing and management strategies.

Literature review

Destination image

The term 'image' is conceptualized to describe a person's sets of beliefs or perceptions of a product, service, or place and its attributes (Kotler et al., 1993). In tourism studies, the concept of destination image is generally defined as a tourist's overall perception of the destination, including their emotions, prejudices and imagined landscape (Crompton, 1979; Tasci et al., 2022). It is generally recognized in the tourism literature

that there are three main components of a destination image: (1) cognitive component (the knowledge, belief or perception of an individual towards a destination), (2) the emotional/affective component (the feelings and emotions of an individual towards a destination) and (3) the conative component (the desire to travel to a particular destination based on one's future situation) (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Tasci et al., 2007). Tourists' cognitive perception and affective appraisal of a destination can both influence their choice in the future (Karl et al., 2020). Tourists' behavioural intentions and decision-making are greatly influenced by the image of a destination (Karl et al., 2020). Beerli and Martin (2004) noted that destination image is formed based on the needs, motivations, prior knowledge and experience of tourists. Research indicated a number of factors influencing destination image, including previous tourist opinions, the media, word of mouth and real-life experiences in the destination (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Media and social media advertisements, as well as opinions of previous tourists, usually influence first-time tourists' opinions of a destination (called as 'induced image') (Hao et al., 2019). The 'induced image' of a destination may not fully reflect its 'organic image', which includes its history, local culture and traditions (Tasci et al., 2007). Although advertising, marketing, and media campaigns rely heavily on images, they are unable to fully convey the reality of a destination (Hao et al., 2019). The management of the induced image of a destination based on existing facts is therefore crucial for attracting tourists (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Prior literature has documented that destination image is a significant factor in determining the competitiveness among destinations for attracting tourists (Cronch, 2011). Negative labels attached to a place can create a negative destination image (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2021, 2022). Therefore, the infamy of a destination potentially affects all the aspects of attracting tourist to a geographical area (Hao et al., 2019).

Conceptualizing destination stigmatization

Stigma has been widely researched in the social sciences (Moufakkir, 2020) and is usually framed in terms of labelling and social isolation (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). In Goffman's (1963) seminal work, stigma was first defined as: 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance' (Goffman, 1963, p. 9). While Goffman focused on stigma relating to personal attributes, more recent studies suggest that stigmas are not only attached to individuals or social groups (Pachankis et al., 2018) but also with space and

place (Gregory et al., 1996; Parkhill et al., 2014; Shields, 1991). Shields (1991) views stigma as a reflection of the meanings produced about places. As the meanings of a place may undergo change and metamorphosis in response to changes in the social and cultural circumstances of its environment, Shields (1991) concluded that spatialization and space-related meanings are produced in the environment, and although they may be temporary and relative such meanings can have a considerable impact while they exist.

Several studies examining stigma suggest that the stigmas attached to a place are mainly created due to social and cultural expressions of place and are often externally applied (Andersen, 2002; Wang et al., 2020), but, if pervasive, may become internalized by a place community over time (Graham et al., 2016; Thomas, 2016). Although unfavourable labels might have socio-cultural and political dimensions (Paton et al., 2017), they can also contribute to the geographical stigmatization of a place. From a tourism perspective, stigmas are perceptions regarding a destination which can influence tourist' judgments about a particular destination (Chaulagain et al., 2019; Severt & Hahm, 2020). Therefore, despite its strong tourism potential, a destination may be seen as an isolated or undesirable place by travellers (Currie, 2020) since the externally applied negative labels that surround a region or place may have a significant impact on its position as a tourism destination (Currie, 2020; Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2022).

Wacquant et al. (2014) argued that political and government authorities and cultural experts produce and impose spatial stigmas on destinations, often unknowingly. Drawing on the term 'territorial stigmatization', the authors stated that 'territorial stigmatization is not a static condition or a neutral process, but a consequential and injurious form of action through collective representation fastened on place' (2014, p. 1270). Focusing on Arab/Muslim women visiting relatives in the West, Moufakkir (2020) argued that owing to stigmas and labels regarding immigrants and perpetuated stereotypes, these groups of travellers are considered disadvantaged tourists from a destination perspective. In a similar vein, Neal (2018) examined stigma and identity among sex tourists in terms of broader public perceptions of sex workers as 'dirty workers'. He noted that even though sex work and services provided by sex workers might be classed as 'dirty work' and stigmatized by some, many sex tourists do not identify it as dirty job and downplay their role in it. According to Khodadadi (2016), tourism suppliers in Iran face two main challenges with regard to tourism development in the country: (1) a negative image of Iran in the major tourism-generating markets and (2)

insufficient resources to tackle this negative discourse. A study by He et al. (2022) demonstrated that tourists' perceptions of spatial stigma positively influence their feelings of shame, anger and animosity, which in turn negatively impacted their environmentally responsible behaviours. By focusing on the social stigma faced by immigrants, Alsaleh and Moufakkir (2019) argued that owing to the unfavourable view of the destination community, female Arab Muslim tourists suffer negative psychological effects such as shame, injustice, insecurity, confusion, ambivalence and anxiety. Wang et al. (2020) investigated wellness tourism and its spatial stigma in Bama Yoa, China, where residents of the city, which is a wellness-tourism destination for cancer patients and others with chronic diseases, try to differentiate themselves from wellness tourists. Inappropriate behaviours, negative feelings and broken promises by tourists were identified as the primary reasons for this spatial stigma, leading residents to live and work in environments distant from tourist visits and presence (Wang et al., 2020).

Drawing on Shields (1991) theoretical concepts, it can be concluded that tourists accept or reject tourist destinations via meaning construction and social spatialization. Negative labelling may thus limit the appeal of destinations to tourists and contribute to the development of 'rejected' destinations (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Seyfi & Hall, 2018). Isolation and rejection of a destination appear to be manifested in two forms: geographical isolation and tourism market isolation which both contribute to the creation of destination stigmas. Nonetheless, there is a paucity of empirical research how an emerging tourism destination is stigmatized and the underlying factors driving destination stigmatization. This points to the key gap that this study aims to fill.

Research method

This study was guided by an interpretive approach and drew from research traditions that emphasize the role socio-cultural framings and constructions play in the realization of risk, place and stigma (e.g. Parkhill et al., 2014) to gain a greater understanding of the factors underpinning the stigmatization of Iran as an emerging tourism destination in the Middle East region. As such, a qualitative methodology is therefore deemed suitable to capture meanings and framings that can explain stigma and its relation to place (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative interviews were undertaken with representatives of tourism informants in Iran to reflect a range of stakeholder perspectives regarding the factors underpinning the stigmatization of Iran. Key informant interviews

Table 1. Profile of the study interviewees.

Code	Gender	Education	Industry experience (years)	Sector
1	Male	BA	10	Tour guide association
2	Female	PhD	13	Tour guide
3	Male	MA	18	Public sector (government official)
4	Female	MA	22	Public sector (government official)
5	Male	Vocational degree	20	Hotel manager
6	Male	MA	10	Travel agency
7	Female	High school	21	Public sector (government official)
8	Male	BA	18	Hotel manager
9	Male	BA	11	Tour operator
10	Female	MA	9	Hotel association
11	Male	Vocational degree	34	Travel agency
12	Female	MA	13	Public sector (government official)
13	Male	BA	17	Tour guide association
14	Female	BA	11	Tour guide
15	Male	MA	19	Public sector (government official)
16	Female	MA	22	Tour operator
17	Female	BA	34	Tour guide
18	Male	MA	16	Travel agency
19	Male	MA	13	Public sector (government official)
20	Female	High school	25	Public sector (government official)
21	Male	PhD	8	Academia
22	Male	MA	14	Public sector (government official)
23	Male	Vocational degree	27	Tour guide
24	Female	BA	18	Academia
25	Male	MA	16	Travel agency
26	Male	MA	14	Public sector (government official)
27	Female	High school	18	Hotel association
28	Male	BA	11	Public sector (government official)
29	Female	MA	20	Tour operator
30	Male	MA	19	Public sector (government official)
31	Male	BA	12	Travel agency association
32	Male	MA	19	Public sector (government official)
33	Male	MA	8	Hotel manager
34	Female	PhD	13	Academia
35	Female	BA	16	Public sector (government official)
36	Male	MA	19	Academia
37	Male	MA	18	Travel agency association
38	Male	PhD	5	Public sector (government official)
39	Male	BA	15	Hotel manager

have long been viewed as an integral part of qualitative research (Lokot, 2021). Previous studies suggest that given information elicited directly from 'knowledgeable' people and because of the 'status and expertise' of the key informants (Taylor & Blake, 2015), they tend to provide 'insider' knowledge on sensitive topics (McKenna et al., 2011), and confidential insights that cannot be obtained with other methods (Lokot, 2021; Taylor & Blake, 2015). According to Lokot (2021), key informant interviews might be inadvertently seen as producing more valuable knowledge than interviews with 'ordinary people'. Given the sensitivity of the study's topic and the political climate in Iran (Seyfi et al., 2020), a purposive sampling process was chosen because it allows researchers to use their prior knowledge of the topic and location to select people who will assist them in achieving their goals and answering their research questions (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). After assessing previous stakeholder research (Hao et al., 2019; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2016) as well as the familiarity of the authors with the key tourism actors in the country, various stakeholders from

different regions of Iran were chosen and invited to participate as key informants and starting points for gathering interview data. Nevertheless, such an approach to participant selection is prone to potential ethnocentrism bias (Keith, 2019) although the authors sought to overcome this by the adoption of a different range of sampling methods. Snowball sampling was used to recruit further participants by asking the initial interviewees to recommend potential respondents. The informants were carefully selected to represent several sectors in the country's tourism and hospitality industry and to provide for a diversity of perspectives (see Table 1). After conducting 39 in-depth interviews and reaching 'theoretical saturation' where the last interviews did not yield any new insights (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the interviews were terminated.

Interviews were sought to unveil the elements that contribute to the stigmatization of Iran as a tourism destination. After initial phone calls with each participant, the first interviews were scheduled based on their availability. Given the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographical dispersion of participants,

all interviews were conducted via phone calls. At the beginning of the interviews, the topic and the study's objectives were explained to each interviewee so that they could gain enough familiarity with the topic of study. Then assurances were provided regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of the obtained data. The quotes used to illustrate the results were anonymized with a number given to each participant. In addition, with the participants' permission, interviews were recorded. In each interview, participants were first asked to provide a general description of their background in tourism and then the key study question was asked 'in your perspective, what elements contribute to the construction of negative stereotypes and stigmas about Iran as a tourist destination?' They were then asked to provide concrete examples from their own prior experiences. Interviews were conducted in Persian which was the primary language of most of the study participants. All interviews were conducted by the lead author and were then translated back into English to ensure consistency in meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The results were subsequently checked by the second researcher who is a native Persian language speaker. On average, interviews lasted 45 min.

Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological approach was utilized for data analysis since phenomenology is an appropriate tool for analysing individual experiences about a topic (Leininger & McFarland, 2002; Wirihana et al., 2018). By using this method of data analysis, researchers can identify emerging themes and their interconnectedness and help ensure the credibility and reliability of their results (Wirihana et al., 2018). The

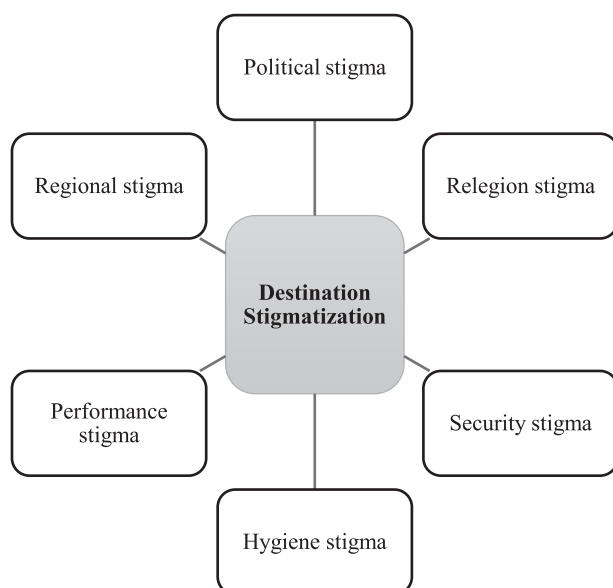


Figure 1. Key themes shaping the destination stigmatization.

initial coding was carried out by the lead author which was then checked by two other members of the team.

The recorded interviews were carefully transcribed and read several times to elicit key phrases that were directly related to the subject of the research. Next, the significance of each elicited sentence that demonstrated the participants' expertise was determined. The fourth step was the extraction of key learning themes from linked sentences. In the fifth step, similar concepts were compared to determine major themes associated with destination stigmas. In the sixth step, a comprehensive image of the stigma's internal relationships was created. The final stage entailed referring to participants to validate the findings. After transcribing the interviews, the phrases relevant to the study were extracted. Then, 26 factors that influenced the formation of destination stigma were identified from the participants' perspectives. Finally, considering the similarity and closeness of the factors, six key themes were elicited as the different types of destination stigma (Figure 1). These are summarized in Table 2 and are discussed in the following section. The reliability of qualitative research depends on the plausibility of the data and the consistency of the findings with 'divergent' sources of

Table 2. Key identified themes.

Key themes	Factors underpinning destination stigmatization
Political stigma	– Allegations of support for terrorism – Unilateral and multilateral international sanctions – Strained and tense relationships with neighbouring countries
Religion stigma	– The need for tourist's adherence to strict religious principles in the destination – Strictness regarding hijab for women – Islamophobia
Security stigma	– Police strictness – Possibly of being kidnapped in the destination – Possibility of terrorist attacks – Destinations' insecurity – High probability of being robbed in the destination
Hygiene stigma	– Problems with hygiene practices in the destination – Presence of numerous diseases in the destination – Disregard for hygiene practices in the destination community
Performance stigma	– Inappropriate behaviours of previous tourists from the community of origin in forging destinations – Inappropriate behaviour towards previous tourists (occurrence of some incidents for foreign tourists in the destination and providing less value for money while offering services). – High levels of gender discrimination in the destination (patriarchy and gender segregation) – Lack of a sense of freedom for tourists, unlike other destinations – Lack of prioritizing tourism as a development approach in the political system – Adopting a unilateral approach and merely considering religious tourism in foreign tourism
Regional stigma	– War and insecurity in neighbouring countries – Activities of terrorist groups in the borders surrounding the country – Insecurity in some border areas of Iran

information. Obtaining such convergence was facilitated by interviewing a range of informants with different perspectives (Yin, 2009).

Findings and discussion

Political stigma

Analysis of the key themes mentioned by the study participants indicated that political stigma is one of the key reinforcing forms of stigmatization of Iran as a destination. Perhaps unsurprisingly, nearly all the participants emphasized that multilateral and unilateral sanctions imposed on Iran have significantly affected the place identity of Iran perceived by international tourists:

Continued news related to international sanctions against Iran in different countries' media definitely affects tourists' decision for choosing Iran as a holiday destination. (Interview #6)

Some media outlets tend to attribute all the negative political events, terrorism, and insecurity in the region to Iran, which has led to the creation of negative images of Iran for tourists. (Interview #7)

Another factor contributing to the formation of political stigma for the destination and was highlighted by the participants pertains to the label of Iran's support for terrorism. One of the participants mentioned:

... although Iranians themselves are victims of terrorism, due to the ugly image of terrorism in the world, connecting Iran with terrorism or suspicions of its support for terrorism caused those who are interested visiting Iran to change their views Iran and look for alternative destinations. (Interview #11)

Because terrorism leads to insecurity and significantly affects tourism (Liu & Pratt, 2017), tourists always try to travel to safe destinations associated with peace and tranquility (Corbet et al., 2019). Tense relations with neighbouring countries also influence the formation of political stigma for the destination (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Because neighbouring countries can be sources from which tourists travel to Iran plus, may be associated Iran by virtue of perceived regional geographies. However, due to weak political ties and disagreements on various issues, media negatively produce a negative perceived image of Iran (Khodadadi, 2016; Motahar et al., 2021). This was stated by one of the study participants:

weak diplomacy has led to tense relations with neighboring countries in recent decades. As a result, tourists from neighboring countries that constitute a part of foreign tourists visiting Iran are presently less inclined to visit Iran. (Interview #2)

Consequently, allegations of support for terrorism, sanctions and strained relationships with neighbouring countries produce political stigmas for the destination of Iran which are believed to be the main reason leading to the decline in the number of international tourists visiting Iran (Khodadadi, 2016; Morakabati, 2011; Seyfi & Hall, 2018; Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2022). In their study focusing on Iran, Siyamiyan Gorji et al. (2022) examined the impacts of sanctions on destination image, perceived risk and tourists' behavioural intention. According to the authors, sanctions have a significant influence on tourists' affective and cognitive images, as well as their perceptions of risk, including financial, satisfaction, political, crime, security and functional/performance risks. Since, from a visitor's perspective, political stigma results in a poor political image of the country at an international level, Iran suffers from a negative place identity (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2021, 2022). Such stigmas can destroy the international prestige of a destination (Severt & Hahm, 2020).

Religious stigma

Religious stigma is another type of stigma that was identified regarding the destination of Iran. There is an excessive emphasis on foreign tourists' adherence to religious principles or particular interpretations of religion in this type of stigma. To this end, these were noted by the participants:

... considering the advertisements made in global media, most people in the Western countries see Iran as a country with severe Islamic laws. (Interview #22)

... most of non-Muslim visitors consider conforming to Islamic principles in a destination to be difficult and confusing ... they avoid visiting countries with stringent Islamic rules and restrictions. (Interview #17)

This echoes another participant:

due to the strictness of wearing hijab, most women do not travel to a country like Iran ... even some female travelers worry that if they do not wear the full hijab in Iran, they would be imprisoned. (Interview #31)

Media advertisements portray Iran as abnormal and violent toward women who do not fully wear hijab. (Interview #11)

These findings indicate that religious stigma associated with a destination could significantly contribute to the decline in international tourist willingness to visit Iran (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Religion stigma is indicative of a religiously harsh, fundamentalist and strict image for tourists (Koch & Vora, 2020) which hinders tourism enjoyment (Jafari & Scott, 2014). Kunst et al. (2012) noted that most travellers choose countries where

they are not required to respect strict religious rules. This finds support in previous studies. For instance, Moufakkir (2020) argues that most women see the strictness of the hijab as an uncomfortable form of gender discrimination which significantly affect their travel decision-making. Choma et al. (2016) also stated that severe religious requirements for visitors are seen by many as an insult. In their study on the interactions between Islamic theocracy and tourism, Seyfi and Hall (2019) also argued that institutions in theocratic systems of governance exert significant influence on tourist flows and tourism destinations at different scales. This can range from policy formulation and implementation to the policing of behaviour that can affect tourists' perceptions of such countries so significantly. In the Iranian case, such perceptions have only been reinforced by recent protests in the country regarding the regime's attitudes towards women and individual rights (de Hoog & Morresi, 2022).

Security stigma

Security stigma was noted as another factor leading to the stigmatization of Iran. Prior research highlighted that tourism development and selecting a travel destination are always highly correlated with security (Poku & Boakye, 2019). One of the respondents commented:

... negative adverts in foreign media portraying Iran as a dangerous and unsafe country discourage many people from visiting the country. The inability of Iranian media to counter negative advertising on insecurity has lowered the likelihood of tourists selecting Iran as a holiday destination. (Interview #21)

This echoes other interviewees' comments:

... despite Iran's high levels of security comparing to the other countries in the region, advertisements have led many tourists to believe that theft and kidnapping are prevalent in Iran such negative stereotypes have led many tourists to believe that Iran is an unsafe destination and that traveling there is extremely dangerous. (Interview #13)

... Tourists' perception of Iran has been distorted by the poor security in the neighboring countries. (Interview #14)

As the above findings illustrated, negative portrayal of media and perceived insecurity could reinforce the stigmatization of a destination, alleviating concerns regarding security and ensuring foreign tourists' safety should be of paramount importance by the destination marketing organizations (Condevaux et al., 2016; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Condevaux et al. (2016) suggested 'reversing stigmas' and stated that effective tourism

development is greatly dependent on how stigmas associated with a destination are reversed and replaced with positive values. Therefore, ensuring foreign tourists' safety is crucial for the development of tourism in any destination.

Hygiene stigma

Analysis of key themes showed that perceived hygiene practices lead to the formation of a hygiene stigma for Iran. Hygiene is a significant factor in selecting a destination by tourists (Bhati et al., 2021). As Abubakar et al. (2017) reported, travellers' intentions directly depend on their level of trust in a destination's reliability and quality assurance.

The interviewees commented that:

... stereotypes about Iran's poor cleanliness contribute to the growing reluctance of tourists to visit the country. (Interview #7)

... a high prevalence of certain illnesses in a particular place may deter travelers from visiting that country ... This was shown by the high death rate of COVID-19 in Iran, which was widely publicized by the media. (Interview #16)

Moreover, the weak efforts in containing the COVID-19 pandemic in the country and the high number of infections and death also contributed to the negative perception of Iran as a travel destination (Seyfi et al., 2020). Studies have shown that tourists avoid travelling to destinations that may endanger their health (He et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). There are also worries over tourism insurance, pricing and the quality of health services provided to visitors (Moreno-González et al., 2020). Therefore, destinations should try to offer the necessary assurances regarding hygiene practices by adhering to hygienic protocols and promoting general hygiene in society.

Performance stigma

Performance stigma was also identified as one of the drivers underpinning stigmatized destinations. One of the study interviewees believed that:

... in some instances, the inappropriate behavior of Iranian tourists in other countries can affect the negative attitude toward the destination of Iran. (Interview #29)

The inappropriate and uncustomary behaviour of tourists from a country in other destinations might contribute to the stigmatization of that country as a destination. This echoed the study participants' views:

... bad prior experiences and tourists' discontent with the way they are treated at the destination, the quality

of available services, and a lack of competence in entertaining tourists all contribute to the destination's unfavorable image. (Interview #37)

... Men's sexual stares toward female visitors are a cause of irritation in several destinations such as Iran. (Interview #30)

... a lack of amenities, freedom, or entertainments may also make tourists feel less welcome in a destination ... over-emphasis on religious tourism and ignoring other forms of tourism can easily isolate a country from the global tourism market. (Interview #4)

The findings corroborate other research. For instance, Wilson and Little (2008) and Brown and Osman (2017) also found that perceived or actual harassment of women tourists can create a stigma for the destination. Prior studies suggested that tourists are in pursuit of destinations where no discrimination exists towards them or local women and where they feel free safe and free from harassment (Brown and Small, 2017; Hall et al., 2023). This highlights that a positive destination image is a meaningful combination of suitable structures and actions. This implies that potential tourism attractions in a destination like Iran do not necessarily lead to a successful positive image (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Avraham, 2015, 2016; Avraham & Ketter, 2008). Furthermore, as the findings highlighted, stigmas attached to a destination can also stem from internal forces and factors or political orientations regarding the development of tourism in the destination. This echoes the findings of Seyfi and Hall (2020) who noted that Iran's tourism development is strongly influenced by domestic political agendas leading to divergent perspectives among key actors regarding tourism development trends and outcomes.

Regional stigma

Regional stigma was also identified as one of the main factors leading to the stigmatization of Iran as a tourism destination. Regional stigma can refer associated with a specific national or regional space, such as the Middle East. Iran's position in the politically unstable Middle East region impacts the safety of the country as a tourism destination (Morakabati, 2011; Seyfi & Hall, 2018). The following were noted by the interviewees:

... because of turmoil in neighboring countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, most tourists assume that Iran is also insecure and visiting there is risky. This is particularly important for tourists who intend to travel to Iran with their cars or bicycles. Since most of them prefer to enter or exit the country through its eastern or western land borders safely and conveniently. (Interview #14)

The activities of terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Middle East region have led to the negative perception of the whole region as a travel destination and Iran is not immune from such perceptions. (Interview #19)

As the findings highlighted, the Middle East region as whole has been grappling with insecurity in recent decades and, sometimes perhaps even unconsciously, such conditions are generalized to nearly all countries in the region (Isaac et al., 2015; Seyfi & Hall, 2019). These issues demonstrate that a country's geographical and geopolitical position may result in the establishment of a spatial stigma associated with that destination (Isaac et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2020). Indeed, territorial stigmatization at a national destination scale is connected to how the meaning of space is influenced by media interpretations of political and socio-economic conditions (Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Such stigmatization may even be encouraged by other governments as part of the geo-political dimensions of international relations, diplomacy and competitiveness. Iran's relationship with neighbouring countries therefore plays an important role in enhancing its destination image and increasing tourists' willingness to visit the country (Morakabati, 2011).

Conclusions and implications

Drawing on in-depth interviews with representatives of key tourism informants in Iran, this study aimed to explore the factors that have led to the stigmatization of the country as an emerging tourism destination in the Middle East region. The findings of this study demonstrated six key factors underpinning the stigmatization of Iran which include political, religion, security, hygiene, performance and regional stigmas. Some of these stigmas are internal and originate from poor performance or improper national policies at the destination. In contrast, external destination stigmas may be attributable to rival actions, media portrayal of the country in certain markets. The findings of the study illustrated that some of the stigmas attached to the tourism destination of Iran are an outcome of Iran's political rivalries in the region and the world. In the formation of stigmas political opponents of the current ruling elite are also influential. Such that regional and global rival countries are active in creating political and security stigmas for the destination because of the political imposition of sanctions and their diplomatic actions. These may be reinforced by religious and ideological stigmas which shape the tendency and outcome of the tourism development in the country.

This study makes three main contributions to the literature. *First*, it is the first study that has empirically

explored destination stigmatization which has not been examined in the prior studies. Prior scholarship has primarily focused on tourists and those work in the industry, while scant attention was paid to place stigmatization and its resulting effects on destination attractiveness. Therefore, the overt connection of stigma to place is novel in the context of the current tourism literature. *Second*, this research identified new stigmas connotated to a place (e.g. performance, hygiene, religion) that have not been studied in the general literature on spatial stigma and in the tourism literature in particular. This research has therefore complemented the extant literature by exploring multi-dimensional stigmas connotated to a destination. *Third*, the current study investigated the destination stigmatization in the context of a relatively overlooked country in the Middle East region which has recently been an emerging tourism destination. Although Iran and much of the countries in the Middle East region suffer from political stigma in some Western markets, the findings of this study offer novel insights into the overt connection between place and political stigmatization in the tourism literature.

This research offers some practical implications. As the findings highlight, each stigma associated with Iran strongly influence the country's destination reputation and attractiveness in the global tourism market. Therefore, tourism policy-makers and more particularly the DMO in Iran should adopt clear and consistent marketing and promotion strategies to reverse such stigmas and enhance the perceived image of the country as an emerging tourism destination. Overcoming or reversing the repercussions caused by stigmas attached to a destination is a long process that requires a long-term plan and is more than just a model or slogan change (Avraham, 2015, 2016; Avraham & Ketner, 2008). Policy-makers and other stakeholders should consider that an increase in the number of stigmas associated with Iran, and how they reinforce each other, might make it more difficult to alter the country's image in the long term in certain markets given the highly competitive tourism environment in the post-pandemic era. Furthermore, tourism development can be improved through the examination of stigmas connotated to a destination. Tourism in a destination can continue to develop if potential stigmas about the destination are periodically assessed and appropriate strategies are adopted for confronting them. In order to restore and enhance the global status of destinations such as Iran and other similar destinations, it is important to identify negative labels and stigmas surrounding them. In addition, the findings of this study could be used by policymakers and DMOs in other countries (especially those with

similar situation) for enhancing the quality of the destination image by identifying and managing destination stigmas on the global tourism market.

Limitations and future research

Despite the contributions of this study to the stream of literature on destination stigmatization, the study has certain limitations which offers several avenues for further research. First, this research focused solely on the perspectives of tourism key informants in Iran. It could be worthwhile to compare this with the perceptions of tourists. Future research could explore how and why tourists stigmatize the same destination differently than informants and locals. Secondly, Further research is recommended to identify commonalities and differences between stigmatized destinations. Thirdly, the interrelationships between sanctions and other international diplomatic and geopolitical strategies and stigma could also be usefully investigated from political studies and public policy lens. Finally, in community health studies stigmas that have been attached to places have been noted as being internalized within communities, given concerns for destination resilience and community wellbeing. It is therefore important to examine whether destination stigmas also become internalized by members of communities and the tourism industry, and to what long-term effect.

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