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## QUALITY PERCEPTIONS OF IRANIAN TOURISTS' VISITING PROVINCE OF VAN / TURKEY

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### Abstract

As an amalgam element of tourist experiences and preferences the concept of destination quality has gained a great attention in the past. Quality has considerable impacts on the destination competitiveness and as the result on the satisfaction and revisit intentions of the visitors. It has a persistent impact rather than a tentative impact on the destinations' tourist flow patterns. This research reviews the literature and highlights wholly or partly the quality of destination as a tourism product which is offered to tourists and creates regular demand. Quality is a crucial concept that can provide insights on the way they are viewed and perceived by the tourists ultimately as customers visiting and using artificial and auxiliary service produced in the destination. This paper aims to explore the tourist perceptions related to Van City of Turkey as most popular destination visited by Iranian tourists. The study uses primary data collected from the visitors through the questionnaire form which structured as an empirically in Likert form from the scales in literature. Each item constituted to measure the quality perceptions of tourists related to evaluation of natural, cultural and other potential attractions of Van as tourism products. Items which gain the highest and the least score as the perceptions of the tourists are explained at the result of the analysis.

**Keywords:** Destination quality, Iranian tourist perceptions, Tourism product, Van city, Turkey.

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism, with its economic, social and cultural effects, demonstrates a balancing characteristic not only in the development of the countries but also in the development of the counties or the less developed areas by balancing the disparities between different places. Currently, tourism is one of the most important economic, social and cultural development tools, due to its impact on balance of payments, to be source of employment and income generator, etc. for the economy. And today all around the World, many places emerged as an ordinary tourist visited area at the beginning soon to become a popular tourist destination

The term destination is referred to "the place to arrive" in the most general sense (Cabael, 2011, p.5). Destination is a tourist resort, a village, a city, a region, country, a few group of countries or even a continent has been considered as tourist destination (Öter and Özdoğan, 2005, p. 129. Destinations are regarded as geographical areas, such as a country, an island or a town (Hall, 2000; Davidson & Maitland, 1997; cited in Buhalis, 2000, p. 97). According to the Tinsley and Lynch (2001) the tourist destination is a system which is containing a number of components such as attractions, accommodation, transport, and other services and infrastructure (p.372). Destinations are amalgams of tourism products, offering an integrated experience to the visitors (Buhalis, 2000, p. 97). Ultimately a destination can be regarded as an urban, city, town or a village or any geographical area which has current resources to attract the tourist and capability and ability to cater for the needs of visitors. The destinations are described as the geographical areas where tourists go to cater for their needs and the places where the needs of

the tourists met (İçöz, 2001, p.8). According to Hosany et al. (2006), the destination is a region with a small geographical area that is smaller than the country and larger than the city and having important attractions such as a transportation network, potential for development and sufficient geographical area for the development of superstructure for tourist facilities (cited in Bostan, 2013: 719).

Van province, established on Iran border of Turkey can be considered as a considerable tourism destination not only from the point of view of Iranian tourists but also from the Japanese and European tourists more than two decade ago since it has significant historical and natural attractions. Van province, constitutes more than half of the distance at the border of Turkey with Iran, approximately 300 kilometers of the 560 km border is the border of Turkey with Iran and it is neighbor province to Iran which has about 85 million habitants. Van province, with its position is not only binding Iran to Turkey and it takes a role on connecting Central Asia to Turkey and to Europe. Besides; it is close to several broader geographical zones and additionally it shares cultural similarities with them. Van city is an important destination for Iranian tourists. In this sense, the fact that countries have good relations with the neighboring countries has a significant benefit in terms of tourism economy and other aspects. The geographical and cultural proximity, the availability of shopping opportunities, the multiplicity of shopping stores such as shopping malls, the availability of quality products in Turkey, and the rich tourist potential are the other factors that increase the attractiveness of Van for Iranian visitors (Çetin, 2017a, p.45).

The aim of this study is to determine how the destination quality of Van, which is an important tourist attraction for Iranian tourists, is perceived and as a result of this determination, to give decision makers in tourism within the scope of destination marketing in terms of rational and strategic marketing plan.

### **Components of Tourism Product of Van as a Tourism Destination**

Tourism product is evaluated by some authors in tourism literature as an entire product with in the context of tourism supply constituted by the attractions, accessibility and amenities of a destination (Hacıoğlu, 2016, p.41; Usta, 2016, p. 113; Kozak et al. 2017, p.71; Collier, 2006, p.22). Hacıoğlu (2016), Olalı and Timur (1988), Usta (2016) also defines tourism product by differentiating it from the tangible assets of a destination offered for the tourist experience and concentrates on the ability of a destination to cater the needs of tourists as a package made of a mixture of both tangible and intangible services given a destination (Usta, 2016:420). Additionally, events (Getz, 1989), efforts of the tourism businesses and the image of the destination are considered as the other components which comprise the tourism product (Hosany, et al. 2006; Kozak et al. 2017; Usta, 2016).

Buhalis (2000), classify tourism product components as: attractions (natural, man-made, artificial, purpose built, heritage, special events), accessibility (entire transportation system comprising of routes, terminals and vehicles), amenities (accommodation and catering facilities, retailing, other tourists service), activities (all activities available at the destination and what consumers will do during their visits), ancillary services (services used by tourists such as banks, telecommunication, post, newsagent, hospital, etc.) and available packages (pre-arranged packages by intermediaries and principals). The components of the resources offered to tourists use in a destination listed and classified as (Buhalis, 2000, p. 98; cited in Çetin, 2017, p.584); Attractions (natural, man-made, artificial, purpose built, heritage, special events) : are listed as

- Accessibility
- Amenities (accommodation and catering facilities, retailing, other tourist services)
- Available packages (pre-arranged packages by intermediaries and principals)
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## Literature Review on Destination Quality

Tourism can be characterized as a combination of processes realized by the people moving between places voluntarily and purposely originated for producing experiences (Aho, 2001, p.33). During this movement marketing activities in both origin and in the target place where will be visited becomes leading for tourism demand. Tourism marketing for a destination is the mean of systematic and coordinated activities to manage tourism personnel at local, regional, national or international level in order to meet the needs of tourist consumers in the best way and to provide the most appropriate income. Marketing for a destination is the total efforts to be done on the name of reaching the right and accurate tourist consumer. According to Rızaoğlu (2003), one of the factors affecting the decision-making process of tourist consumers depends on the characteristics of the place to be chosen to visit by the visitors (Rızaoğlu, 2003: 160). To sum up the ultimate target of marketing policy and destination marketing shaped with the objective to create a high quality level destination with its components and to reach right and accurate customer base. Product as a destination or specific service in the destination offered to the visitors can make it an appealing and attractive destination for the tourism demand. So the destination needs to offer a tourism product which will result with the visit of the tourists to the destination. The amalgam feature of the tourism product which is constituted by attractions, activities and the amenities requires the tourism product handle high level quality standards which worth to be preferred to revisit by the visitors (Çetin b, 2017, 583).

In a destination the product can be considered as either holistic (resources, services, etc. as supply) or specific approach (services). This also reminds that product in a destination can be regarded as a specific service provided by a business which a destination's resources enabled the conditions. So the evaluation of the hospitality and service quality holds difficulties (Parasuraman et al. 1988; Saleh and Ryan, 1991). So the tourist product is categorized by Middleton (1989) as specific or total level. "Specifically" the tourist product is offered as a discrete product by a single business such as a sightseeing tour or an airline seat and the other "total" level as synonymous with the entire components of tourism product is the complete experience of the tourist from the time one leaves home to the time one returns" (Middleton, 1989; cited in, Smith, 1994, 584).

In a destination physical resources such as natural resources or facilities such as waterfall, wildlife, climate, weather, historical attractions as sites and the condition of the infrastructure are also accepted as the physical plant. Hotels, restaurants, parks, transportation facilities, population, local culture, residents' attitudes and events are evaluated entirely as the ancillary with the service offered in a destination. So the quality of tourism in a destination is assessed based on the impacts of those resources' and their design on the tourist experience. Services offered in a destination also diversified based on the form of the tourism product components. Since the nature of the service is intangible makes difficult to measure the quality and it is may have different mean to each visitor. On this account, management of service provision takes critical role on the evaluation of entire quality of the destination in addition to the how unique and significant the components of tourism products are. As Saleh and Ryan (1991) emphasize that the successful provision of a service began with the ability of management that assesses the client's expectations correctly (Saleh and Ryan, 1991, 326).

Stevens, (1992) underscores quality and branding value was as important factors that can make visiting a place more attractive in the competitive environment of tourism market. Thus according to Stevens (1992, p. 44) the remaining competitive in the tourism market are the perceptions of tourists of the better destination quality comparing the other destinations and attractive prices (Stevens, 1992, p. 44). Quality and value are accepted as the critical objectives for revitalizing tourism industries for some destination marketing organizations (Murphy et. al 2000). Addition to the quality, destination image is also the other critical element for evaluation of the destination and it has magic impact on return of tourists to destination. Imagery has been defined by psychologists as a distinct way of processing and storing multisensory information in working memory (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 39).

Destination image is generally defined in the literature as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions a person has of a destination (Crompton, 1979; Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). Lawson and Baud Bovy

(1977) defines destination image as “the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place” (p.10). Dichter (1985, pp.4e5) further suggested that “image is not only the individual traits or qualities but also the total impression an entity makes on the minds of others” (cited in Stylidis et al. 2017, p.185). Tourism, as a fantasy industry, largely relies on the projection of favorable destination images to entice people to visit a destination (Pan, 2011; cited in Terzidou et al. 2018, 306). The importance of the tourist destination’s image is since it affects the individual’s subjective perception and consequent behavior and destination choice (Chon 1990, 1992; Echtner and Ritchie 1991; Stabler 1988; Telisman-Kosuta 1989; cited in:Gallarza, et al. 2002, p.56). Chen and Tsai (2007) found that destination image is the most important effect on tourists’ intention to revisit and willingness to recommend the destination to the others.

Of course the number of attractions, the quality of the tourism services, existence of infra and superstructures and hospitality and security may be the principal factors which influence on tourists preference to visit a destination. Overall evaluation of those factors may be collected sum in overall image of a tourist destination. Image influences tourists’ demand for a destination (Rızaoğlu, 2003, p. 160). The image of the tourist destination has an influence on recommendation to others (Sevim vd., 2013, p. 116). A positive destination image increases recommendation, the occupancy rates and enables an efficient marketing with the less level of marketing costs (İnan, vd., 2011, 494).

Destination image, commonly defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993), is considered critical for the success of any tourist destination as it is known to influence tourists’ destination selection process, on-site experience, and their future behavior. According to Choi *et al.* (1999), destination image is people’s belief, idea or impression about a place (Mohamad et al. 2012). Tourism authorities, therefore, need to develop and maintain a positive destination image to improve the competitiveness of a place and increase visitors’ loyalty (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011; Stylidis, Shani, & Belhassen, 2017; cited in Terzidou et al. 2018, p.308). Destination image could be considered in terms of both an attribute-based component and a holistic component. In addition, some images of destinations could be based upon directly observable or measurable characteristics while others could be based on more abstract, intangible (friendliness, safety, and atmosphere). Therefore, the notion of functional and psychological characteristics, as suggested by Martineau (1958), could be applied to destination images (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, 42).

### **The purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is to figure out the perceptions regarding the quality of the destination of Iranian tourists visiting Van as a popular tourist destination for them. Van, as having a border to Iran, continuously visited by many Iranian tourists during the year for several years. And the components of tourism product are tending to adopt itself to the development in tourism. The study aims to highlight the quality level of the components of tourism product in the minds of Iranian tourists’ perceptions and to provide opportunities to destination marketers to review revise and increase the quality level of the tourism products which offers advantage in tourism marketing of the destination.

### **The Methodology Of The Study**

The study is an empirical study which was structured based on the primary information collected from the tourists visiting Van. The scope of the study covers the tourists those actually visiting Van city. The information gathered from the 200 tourists visiting Van during the year 2017 and 2018 via the questionnaire form as five levels Likert scale which compromised from the studies done by Qu, et al. 2011; Ünlüönen, 2011 regards to the destination quality and the other papers in literature. SPSS statistical program were used for the evaluation of the data collected.

### **Findings**

Demographical variables seen Table 1 are explained below.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Iranian Tourists Visiting Van**

<b>Gender</b>			<b>Marital Status</b>		
	F	%		F	%
Female	97	49,0	Married	119	63,3
Male	101	51,0	Single	67	35,6
			Other	2	1,1
<b>Total</b>	198	100	<b>Total</b>	188	100
<b>Age</b>			<b>Education</b>		
18-25	35	17,8	Secondary School	39	20,3
26-35	88	44,7			
36-45	38	19,3	University	84	43,5
46-55	28	14,2	Master	57	29,5
56 and over	8	4,1	PhD.	13	6,7
<b>Total</b>	197	100	<b>Total</b>	190	100
<b>Occupation</b>			<b>Income (Monthly) (US \$)</b>		
Public Servant	34	18,0	500	45	27,1
Private Industry	73	38,6	501-1000	53	31,9
Own Job	17	9,0	1001-1500	22	13,3
Retired	13	6,9	1501-2000	14	8,4
Student	23	12,2	2001-2750	16	9,6
Jobless	29	15,3	2751 and more	16	9,6
<b>Total</b>	189	100	<b>Total</b>	162	100

198 of total 200 of Iranian tourists' 49.0 % are women and 51.0 % are men. According to marital status, 63.3% of the respondents are married and 35.6 % is single. According to the tourist visitors' ages; 18-25 years is 17.8%, ages between 26-35, is 44,7 %, ages between 36-45 is 19,3 % and ages between 46-55 is 14,2 %, and 56 years and older ones comprise just 4,1 % of total. In terms of education level, 43.5 % of Iranian tourists were university graduates, 29.5 % has master degree and the ones who have secondary school degree constitute the second least portion after the ones having PhD. degree 6,7%. With this result, it can be easily said that the large portion of the tourists visiting Van have graduate, and post graduate degree. In terms of occupational groups, it is seen that most of the participants are working at private industry. Retired visitors and students are in less number. In terms of the monthly income those who won \$ 500 comprises 27,1 %, the earners between \$ 501 and 1000 comprise 31,9 % and those group is the largest group. Almost 40 % of the visitors have more than 1000 US Dollar of income per month.

**Table 2:** Destination Quality and Image Perceptions of Iranian Tourists Visiting Van

Items of Quality	n	mean	Std.dev.
1. Modern place	173	3,08	1,12
2. Clean environment	177	3,52	1,02
3. Clean/unspoiled environment	164	3,38	1,00
4. Relaxing and comfortable environment	169	3,52	1,02
5. Safe and secure place	170	3,41	1,10
6. Good quality level of infrastructure and services	164	3,70	1,10
7. Wide selection of restaurants/cuisine	174	3,50	1,10
8. Diversified and delicious local cuisine	173	3,87	1,00
9. Tasted unique local Van breakfast	165	3,50	1,28
10. High quality hotels	161	3,47	1,12
11. Availability of many options for accommodation	154	3,52	1,14
12. Availability of many shopping opportunities and find what I look for	164	3,80	1,00
13. High quality and many number of shopping malls	170	4,00	0,88
14. High quality health institutions	165	3,42	0,90
15. Offers quality and good service to tourists	164	3,50	1,01
<b>Items of Image</b>			
16. Reasonable prices for food and beverage	168	3,65	1,02
17. Expensive place	175	2,60	1,12
18. Reasonable prices for attractions and events	169	3,50	0,92
19. Cheap shopping	159	3,70	1,05
20. Reasonable tour prices	161	3,44	1,02

Destination entirely covers large or small area. However many elements are available depending upon the richness of the supply of the destination. And so, the tourism product resources and the level of the development of the tourism industry shapes the offers in the destination with its offerings enabled by the sub industries actively taking place. This increases the facets of the evaluation of the destination. To sum up increased number of items are evaluated and valued by the tourist from the point of quality. Quality is one of the key factor of the consumers' purchasing process (Çetin, 2016). As seen from the Table 2 the means of tourist respondents explains that shopping facilities and their availability, quality and the prices were perceived in positive manner. Van has been found "high quality and having many number of shopping malls " the average score of this is"4". The second item which has given the highest score is that "diversified and delicious local cuisine" and it shows that Iranian tourists enjoy the meals offered in the restaurants. The item in the third rank is regarding to the shopping facilities; "availability of many shopping opportunities and find what I look for". General observation regarding to tourists who come from Iran to Van is that it is for shopping. For this reason this score prove that 164 of total respondents agree about the shopping facilities and they find what they look for. They marked least score for the item "modern place" then for the environment.

Destination image is one of the important concepts in tourism marketing literature. However, it is becoming an issue of the subjective interpretation of tourists as Mohamad et al (2012) highlighted in their studies since it can be interpreted subjectively by tourists depending on their travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit, educational level and past experience. Chi and Qu (2008) approved that destination image contributes to identifying tourist behaviour and plays a significant role in decision-making process. Destination image is an evaluation of destination in different ways, situations or conditions, which specifically focus on the purchasing services and perceptions of tourists. Thereby, tourists perceive Van as a destination which has reasonable prices. And Iranian tourists visits Van, even for short breaks. Motives for escape, quality and reasonable prices creates an image for the Iranian tourists.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that it is a desired situation to have repeated visitors to a specific destination. It is important to capture the feelings and thoughts of visitors since the significant relationships between foreign tourists' evaluations a destination from the point of quality / image and their future behavioral intention. This study was conducted with the purpose of identifying the perceptions of destination quality of the Iranian tourists visiting Van. The results of this study show that destination marketers must take particular consideration of the quality factor as this will affect tourists' behavioral intention.

According to the findings a brief and basic outlook of Iranian visitors in Van province of Turkey can be displayed. First of all, most of visitors prefer Van city because of its location and short distance. Majority of visitors arrive to Van city with land transport mainly by using bus and private vehicle transportation. This is understandable since they minimize their transport costs by doing so knowing the low prices of oil in their own country. Another aspect of Iranian visits to Van city is their independent characteristic. Few organize their visits by intermediaries. This result is significant for Turkey, a destination popular for package tours. Border countries have special characteristics in terms of visitor profile and the profile of these visitors provide favorable clues for Turkish tourism policies. Repeat visitors are of significant amount, which is a positive sign for the future of tourism industry in Eastern Anatolia Region of Turkey. When responses given for quality and image statements are analyzed, it is possible to conclude that the perceptions of Iranian visitors regarding Van as a tourism destination are quite positive. Most of the scale items are weighed over 3.00 and 3.50 on the 1-5 interval scale. Iranian visitors are especially satisfied from shopping opportunities in Turkey. Finally, this research questioned a limited part of Iranian visits to Van city. Studies with higher number of participants can produce better and more precise analysis for this emerging market in Turkish tourism.

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