Nader ZALI[*], Issa EBRAHIMZADEH[**], Masoud ZAMANI-POOR[***], Amin ARGHASH[***]

CITY BRANDING
EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL
CAPABILITIES OF ISFAHAN CITY

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalisation is increasing with shifting in resources, capital, and people around the world and intensification in competition among cities for investment, business, tourists, and different events is considerable (Zhang and Zhao, 2009, pp. 245, 252). Globalisation intends to help the developing cities to compete more easily with early established cities which are in a more stable situation (Pfefferkorn, 2005, p. 11). In such circumstances, city managers are looking for marketing for their cities to stay ahead in development path and also to promote the competitiveness level of the cities. The beginning of marketing for cities dates back to the 19th century. Marketing and expansion of the tourism services sector has intensified in cities, along with increasingly looking for marketing for their own locations. Today, due to the importance of the role of marketing in cities, conscious use of marketing methods by public organisations not only is known as a secondary tool in solving the planning problems, but also it is considered as a rule and principle in place management (Kavaratzis, 2004, p. 59).

To prove their individuality in achieving various economic, political, social or psychological purposes, cities have long sought to separate from each other (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005, p. 1). Along this historical route and increasing

[*] Nader ZALI, University of Guilan, Faculty of Arts and Architectures, Department of Urban Planning, P.O. Box 1841, Rasht, Iran, e-mail: Nzali@Guilan.ac.ir
[**] Issa EBRAHIMZADEH, University Sistan and Baluchestan, Faculty of Geography and Environmental Planning, Department of Geography and Urban Planning, P.O. Box 98155-987, Zahedan, Iran, e-mail: iebrahimzadeh@gmail.com
[***] Masoud ZAMANI-POOR, [***] Amin ARGHASH, University of Guilan, Faculty of Arts and Architectures, P.O. Box 1841, Rasht, Iran, e-mails: m.zamanipor@gmail.com; amin_arghash@yahoo.com

competitiveness of cities it is expected to see city branding role as action resulting from a consensus among the public and the officials about the identity of the city and also as a strategic instrument for spreading competitive advantages of cities used by many of them around the world to enhance competitiveness (Zhang and Zhao, 2009, pp. 245, 252), and also as a suitable tool for city marketing.

Generally speaking, to make a correct decision and to schedule correctly, city managers need a comprehensive knowledge to influence the city. To create healthy communities and understand the costs and benefits of different patterns of development, managers need to have sufficient knowledge, i.e. they have to know the current image of the city, then to design the image as they wish and to define actions for city improvement. Studying of image and identity of the city is a crucial part of recognition in the process of urban planning strategy (Gholipoor *et al.*, 2010, p. 38).

In Iran, while some cities have a good image, some others have a negative or weak picture in the minds of people inside or outside the city (Gholipoor *et al.*, 2010). Isfahan city, known as *half of the world* (Nesf-e Jahan) by tourists (Pope, 2007: 207), has a special position that makes authorities call it the capital of Islamic culture and civilization of Iran (Isfahan Governorate, 2009). Regarding this naming by city officials as the main objective of the present study, that is the analysis of cultural capabilities of Isfahan city as the symbols of Islamic-Iranian culture and civilisation in line with city branding, and also taking into account the fact that city branding is the result of consensus among the public and the officials, the study tries to answer four main proposed questions through bidirectional examination. On the one hand, the study focuses on a centralized top-down look from the transnational, national, regional, and local level and on the other hand it takes a bottom-up view from the people's perspective (foreigners, domestic visitors and residents). The questions are (1) to what extent transnational and national documents confirm the practical use of cultural identity in Iran, especially in Isfahan? (2) to what extent regional and local documents confirm the capability of cultural identity of Isfahan? (3) from the viewpoint of people (foreigners, domestic visitors and residents), to what extent cultural factors compared to other elements like policy and economy are the most important factors and to what degree people's subjective image is based on the cultural assets of the city? (4) from the people's point of view, which one of the cultural elements that make the identity of the city can be perceived better?

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study tries to use hierarchical documents along with bottom-up field research and with the use of questionnaires to analyze and examine the cultural capabilities of Isfahan city as a symbol of Iranian-Islamic culture and civilisation in order to brand the city. The successive steps of the analysis are set out below.

Step 1. Identifying city branding concept and recognizing aspects through which people understand the city in order to use them in the field research.

Step 2. Seeking the cultural components which make the identity of the city and evaluating them from the viewpoint of people (foreigners, domestic visitors and residents).

Step 3. Recognizing the importance and the privileged position of the culture of Isfahan city from the authorities' viewpoint. The framework for the recognition is based on a top-down and macro to micro process, on Transnational Documents, Perspective Document as the highest Planning Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran, at the regional level on National Development Document of the province, and locally on City Perspective Document.

Step 4. Examining to what extent the cultural factor compared to other factors like policy and economy, is the most prominent element in people's view and recognizing how people perceive and experience the cultural capabilities which make the identity of the city via bottom-up field research. To do this, questionnaires were distributed among visitors (domestic and foreign) and residents. The questionnaires were distributed to three top historical and cultural places that are privileged both inside and outside the borders and have been recorded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This includes modern entertainment places as well. The places are as follows: Imam Square (Naghsh-e-Jahan) recorded in 1979, with registration number 115 (UNESCO, 2013); Chehelsotoon Garden of Persian gardens recorded in 2011, Reg 1327 (UNESCO, 2013), and Jame Mosque recorded in 2012, Reg 1379 (UNESCO, 2013). Questions were designed so that respondents had to rate them on an agreement scale, graded from 5 (the strongest agreement) to 1 (the strongest disagreement). There were also open-ended questions where respondents were able to make more comments and free suggestions. In total, 100 people participated in the surveys. Among them, 20% of respondents were Isfahan's residents, 40% were domestic visitors, and 40% were foreigners. Extracting and analyzing the data is the final step of the research.

3. REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Various studies with different purposes have been done in connection with city branding around the world. In their essay 'City Branding and the Olympic Effect: A Case Study of Beijing', Li Zhang and Simon Xiaobin Zhao (2009) sought to examine the degree of matching between the identity and core values as determined by the city authorities and the realities as perceived by visitors and residents; also, they evaluated the Olympic effects as a great impact on Beijing branding process, and presented two major conclusions. The first one was that there was a mismatch

between the identity and core values as branded by the city authority and what was perceived and experienced by visitors and residents; and the second was that great events like Olympic Games, overall, have limited publicity effect and impact on the city branding process.

Manuel Di Carlo *et al.* (2009) discuss the results of designing a cultural brand for Milan city. The main conclusions are that each part of development and branding strategies should be innovative in enhancing the positive features and dealing with the negative ones, and one of the requisite conditions for the success of a brand is participation of a wide range of beneficiaries.

In their research, Larisa Dragula and Denisa Kuatralo (2012) have targeted a cultural element called National Museum of Unity in Romanian Alba lulia city in the context of city branding. They identified positive and negative aspects as perceived by tourists and specified activities which must be done by the museum over the year compared to previous years in order to increase tourist flow. In 2005, with the use of contemporary developments in marketing theory and practice, Kavaratzis and Ashvorth show that how it is possible to correlate product branding to city branding as a powerful depicting strategy to the current city. And they are also trying to define a framework for an effective strategy for city branding. Kavaratzis and Ashvorth have also found that if they want to extend the products branding theories, it is necessary to take city branding into account as well, for city is a product which remains. It includes distinctive features like spatial scale, spatial hierarchy, inherent multiplicity etc. that differentiate city branding from product branding. They believe that if these distinctive features are recognized, it is possible to include product branding in this process and achieve a valid and effective form for place management; otherwise, it is considered an irrelevant deviation.

In a modelling study, Gholipur *et al.* (2010) evaluated the key factors effective in shaping city image towards effective city branding among Tehran citizens. The study proved that the priorities of 'Tehran Inner Image Shaping' model are: economy, trade, scope of services, the city's international status, transportation and communication infrastructure, traffic, social issues, heritage constructions preservation, the environment, architecture and city attraction, citizen self-awareness, culture, education and university. They have also offered suggestions for improving various aspects of city; for example, in the cultural field, they have suggested increasing the diversity and plurality of events, boosting cultural festivals in Tehran and providing better access to culture and cultural products for citizens.

To summarize the recent research in the field of branding, it can be concluded that for transferring the fundamental branding concepts from commercial products to city area, distinctive features of commercial products and of city should be taken into consideration.

4. CITY BRANDING AND EVALUATION VARIABLES

City branding by putting pressure on cities lacking brand increases their speed in development path (Stigel and Frimann, 2006, p. 247). Product branding and marketing are sources of inspiration for designing city branding. Branding a product is representative of a range of physical, social, psychological attributes and beliefs that are associated with that product. Branding is a conscious strategy to select some attributes of a product. It is considered as core values of a product in order to facilitate the process by which consumers confidently can recognize them. Those core values form the product's identity. Although some, like Peterson (1981), object that cities are not like products that are involved in direct transactions of markets, proponents argue that the concept of product branding can include city branding as well. One of the crucial strategies in city branding is the creation of city's identity which employs a wide range of history, demography, economy and policy (Zhang and Zhao, 2009, p. 246). City identity is not an easy but difficult comprehensible concept. At the first step, everyone thinks that they can understand and identify both identity concept and city term, whereas in a professional sense, understandings of the two are very difficult (Behzad-far, 2007, p. 38). Holloway and Hubbard assert that interaction with 'place' may take place 'through direct experience with the environment or indirectly through media representations'. However, what is important is how the information is processed and through subjective process leads to perceptions of stable images of place which are a basis for their daily interaction with their environment. Such subjective plans allow people to navigate through complex realities, for 'our surrounding is usually more complicated than our feeling about it'. In fact, branding is engaged with those mental images. 'Place brand management' is an attempt to influence and improve the mental plan that is considered as an optimal path for the current needs and future demands of a place (Kavaratzis, 2008, p. 10).

In general, place identity is affected by physical functions and by experienced emotional aspects of the environment. Place dependency is associated with a strong understanding of the relationship between individual and specific location. This relates to the quality of current location and quality of other alternative places that is comparable with the current place (Ujang, 2012, p. 158). Branding process helps a city to define its identity in order to draw attention and to be distinct from other cities and helps the city to promote and publicize itself better (Dragolea and Cotîrlea, 2012, p. 681).

People often focus on issues like climate, environment, transportation and traffic, living standards and costs, sports and leisure facilities, social order and cultural life of the city to view and think about city in practical terms. Anholt (2007) comes up with six analytically distinct aspects through which a city is understood and the brand of city can be evaluated. These aspects as the city brand-

ing hexagonal indexes include Presence (familiarity and contribution to global culture), place (physical aspects), potential (economy and educational opportunities), Pulse, community and people (cultural alignment) and Prerequisite (living standards and infrastructure) which cover both tangible and intangible dimensions of economic and social developments (Anholt, 2007, p. 59). Table 1 has given the branding indexes of city in summary.

Table 1. The aspects of people's perception of the city

Aspect	Meaning
Presence	The city's international status and standing; the city's global contribution
place	The city's appearance and physical attributes, such as cleanliness of environment
potential	The city's opportunities for future development
Pulse	The city's vibrancy and exciting ways of life with lots of interesting activities for residents and visitors
people	The city's friendliness, openness, cultural diversification and safety
Prerequisite	The city's basic infrastructure and public amenities

Source: Anholt (2007), pp. 59, 60.

Identity and traditional values of a city cannot be ignored like a neutral statement, but as a claim, they should be evaluated with different benefits to be cleared that they are justifiable or not. Creation of identity for a city is a crucial part in branding discussion (Zhang and Zhao, 2009, p. 246). Hence, in regard to the research orientation that is analysis and examining of capabilities of Isfahan cultural identity, cultural identity and its other components will be evaluated.

5. CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ITS COMPONENTS

Undoubtedly, culture is the most important and richest source of identity. Individuals and groups always adopt an identity with recourse to cultural components and elements. Because these components and elements have a remarkable ability to meet people's need as they want to be distinct from or integrate into mass of people. In other words, culture creates either differences or integration. When we talk about culture we are referring to the ways in which humans, individually or collectively, in relationship with others make their life meaningful. In traditional societies, power and high performance of boundaries create an exclusive space for specific cultures. Such cultures could therefore benefit from immunity based on the use of such proprietary to find an absolute position. Since there was no culture competitor and cultural alterations were very few, humans' need for absolute and stable resources was met appropriately. But globalisation process not

only destroyed exclusive position and immunity of cultures, but also reduced their ability for drawing traditional identity. In a world without borders, various cultural components and elements inevitably clash with each other so they get together (Behzadfar, 2007, pp. 32, 33). Maintaining meaning and identity of city elements is very important, because it reinforces identity, community feelings, and sense of place (Ujang, 2012, p. 157).

Recognizing the identity of a city should be based on constitutive components of the character of that place. The constitutive components of the character of a city are; natural, artifact and human components, of which each has its own attributes and variables. Some variables are as follows (Behzad-far, 2007, pp. 54–56):

– natural components: mountains, rivers, material, hills, plains etc.;
– artifact components: individual buildings, roads, neighbourhoods, squares, curbs etc.;
– human components: culture, language, religion, customs, education etc.

Combination of the mentioned components forms cultural characteristics (cultural identity) of a city. Given that the variety of cultural components is immense to be used in evaluating a city, it is better to view them in macro-scale (Zhang and Zhao, 2009, p. 250).

1. Indigenous liberal arts and crafts.
2. Heritage constructions.
3. Lifestyle, customs and traditions.

6. INTRODUCING ISFAHAN CITY

Socio-political developments which gradually took place after the Mongol invasion in Iran caused continuous transformations in architecture and urbanism of Iran. During this period, actions that began in the time of Shah Tahmasb and culminated in the time of Shah Abbas should be considered as a turning point (Forotan, 2009, p. 95). These developments led to the creation of buildings and lasting premises in the town which have remained in minds since a long time ago and encompass an important part of the cultural heritage of the town. This is the reason why travellers know the town as 'half of the world' (Pope, 2007, p. 207). Isfahan city has a pleasant weather, prominent areas like Naghsh-e-Jahan square, memorable monuments like Ali-Ghapoo and Menar-Jonban, and unique and unbeatable mosques like Sheykh-Lotfollah and Shah-Abbas Mosque. There you can see appropriate links between nature and architecture such as Khajoo and See-o-Se Pol (thirty three) bridges. And natural river of Zayand-e-rud completes all of these features (Heidarzadeh and Saeedi, 2011, p. 12).

Having three places recorded by UNESCO, Isfahan has a unique position among historic cities in Iran and around the world. The places are: Imam Square (Naghsh-e-Jahan) recorded in 1979, with registration number 115 (UNESCO, 2013), Chehelsotoon, Garden of Persian gardens, recorded in 2011, REG 1327 (UNESCO, 2013), and Jame Mosque recorded in 2012, REG 1379 (UNESCO, 2013). Some of the outstanding places of historic, cultural and tourism interest of Isfahan city are listed in table 2.

Table 2. Some of the heritage constructions and tourist places of Isfahan city

Hotels	Commercial centres	Recreation	Historic sites and museums
Abbasi Hotel boasts a combination of modern architecture and architecture of Abbasid period Kowsar Hotel Hotel Julfa	City Centre Shops and complexes around Chahar bagh (four gardens)	Zayandeh river coastal parks Birds Garden Flowers Garden Amusement Park Falls Beach Park of Nazhvan	Imam square Collection Jame mosque Chehelsotoon garden Hasht behesht garden Chahar bagh axis Monarjonban Bridges Julfa neighborhood churches

Source: Honarfar (1997).

Fig. 1. Imam square Collection Fig. 2. Jame mosque Fig. 3. Chehelsotoon garden

Source: authors

7. UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL ASSETS OF ISFAHAN CITY AND PROVINCE ON THE BASIS OF HIERARCHICAL TRANSNATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL DOCUMENTS

Transnational level: Today, cities are tied to their specific titles. For example, at the international level, St. Petersburg city, the cultural capital of Russia (Sexton and Events Team, 2011), has been chosen by the EU as the cultural capital of Europe; this common title was also granted to the cities of Marseille and Košice in Slovakia in 2013 (Palmer *et al.*, 2011). Isfahan as a popular city in the cultural arena has an active presence in Iran and the world as well. In 2006 it was chosen by Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) as the capital of the Islamic World – a title that is annually granted to a city in Islamic countries (Altwaijiri, 2006).

National level: In the twenty-year development strategy – a document which is considered a long-term plan of the Islamic regime – particular attention has been given to cultural heritage and tourism. On the basis of Paragraph 1 of this document, country development should be in line with cultural, geographical, and historical requirements. Dominant spirit of the objectives of the twenty-year strategic development plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on culture and its identity components; in the first of the eight paragraphs of this document, emphasis is on culture and its components, particularly the popular culture of the society. Among the cultural and historical concepts of this country, cultural heritage is given priority. Therefore, without preservation, restoration, and maintaining of the cultural heritage, tourism development is impossible. Paragraph 6 of the twenty-year development plan considers another ideal aim that is achieving the first place in the economy in Southwest Asia. This will not be achieved without an emphasis on rapid and continuous growth of the economy, relative increase of *per capita* income, and increase in employment and participation rate. In this regard, one cannot ignore the role of tourism industry development that has a high potential in creating rapid economic growth and causes further participation through constructive and effective interaction with the world (Paragraph 8 of the document) (Zali, 2009, pp. 120, 121). Isfahan Province due to its specific historical, geographical, cultural, artistic, and religious position has provided various contexts for development and establishment of the Islamic-Iranian culture.

Regional level: In various parts and multiple sections of the National Development Document of Isfahan Province as a regional document, there is an emphasis on the necessity of using capabilities and capacities of Isfahan city. The following are some of the most important items of the document that point to the topic of culture and tourism (Isfahan Government, 2011).

In the section on Development Capabilities of the province, which is the most important section, city culture refers to:

Paragraph 5: having different historical, natural, and man-made tourism attractions with national and international value as a tourism hub in the region.

Paragraph 6: having cultural value of historical written heritage, valuable works of art, architecture and urbanism, artists and cultural thinkers affecting the interactions at the country and the world level and unique status of Isfahan city in art and cultural interactions of the world.

Paragraph 8: having social components accelerating economic relations and social relations (lasting religious background, strong informal financial systems, professional ethic, and corporations with rich experience, informal self-law-abiding social institutions, scientific and technical capacities).

Paragraph 17: having strong potential in handicraft.

In long-term goals of the province development, as can be seen below, tourism industry promotion is directly targeted as the main goal of development.

Paragraph 6: promoting cultural, scientific, and artistic functions of the province in international interactions.

Paragraph 8: enhancing and equipping tourism industry at the level of international standards and making the province a tourism hub of the country.

Paragraph 18: promoting and preserving cultural values and identity features and ensuring suitable forms of spending leisure time for different groups of society.

Local level: Since the strategic development plan is a source and a reference for all plans, the relevant local level document for Isfahan depicts, as shown below, the status of this city in 1404 (Isfahan Municipality, 2010, p. 68).

8. ISFAHAN STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN (1404)

8.1. Isfahan, Capital of Culture and Civilization of Islamic Iran

An Islamic city, pure, mosque-centred, the cradle of elites and scientists, inspiring, and symbol of Islamic modern civilization.

People-centred city with a single management, based on knowledge and wisdom, value-oriented and with the approach of social justice.

An innovative city with people who are faithful, joyful, and responsible and are treated as an example in citizenship culture.

A beautiful, thriving, green, safe, healthy, and smart city.

An advanced city with Islamic-Iran architecture, balanced, and compatible with cultural and historical identity.

An advanced city with a dynamic economy and productive livelihood, based on production of knowledge, technology, and tourism along with comfort;

A perfect city with a superior position in the world because of its culture, art, and tourism and the best city to live in Iran.

This document begins with the title of 'Isfahan, Capital of Culture and Civilisation of Islamic Iran'. It indicates that the officials assigned to Isfahan a high position in the cultural dimension. In fact, the officials in their plans are looking for the architecture of Isfahan to get the city to its peak (the capital of culture and civilisation of Islamic Iran).

The noteworthy point that the document referred to is that Isfahan has potential to reach to the top of the world's culture, art and tourism. Since city branding is a strategic instrument for dissemination of cities' competitive advantages (Zhang and Zhao, 2009, p. 245), thus in case of an agreement between the officials and the public on imagined picture (the capital of culture and civilisation of Islamic Iran) for Isfahan city, city branding can be an appropriate strategy in achieving this great aim. Analysis of hierarchical documents, in which Isfahan city is named as the cultural capital of the Islamic World by ISESCO, an international organisation, and the capital of culture and civilisation of Islamic Iran, shows that there is special effort to take advantage of cultural capabilities of the country, particularly of Isfahan city because of its rich cultural heritage, from transnational to local level (figure 4).
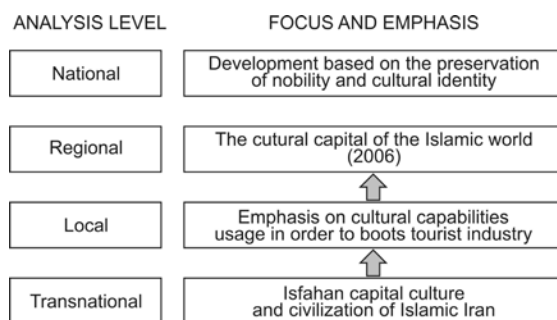

Fig. 4. The results of upstream plans and documents analysis

Source: authors' elaboration

By changing the direction of analyzes from down to up, the study plans to evaluate the matching degree of respondents' mental picture of Isfahan city with what the authorities and international institutions stated in high-level documents, and to analyze cultural capabilities of Iafahan from the viewpoint of respondents in the context of city branding and other related issues.

9. BASIC RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The results of the questionnaire survey primarily reveal the perceived high cultural status of Isfahan city compared to the other factors such as politics and economy, and allow identification of cultural elements which make the identity of the Isfahan city from the respondents' view (foreigners, domestic visitors and residents) via indexes (presence, place, potential, pulse, people and prerequisite) by which a city can be perceived when it is going to be branded. Those elements include handicrafts and indigenous liberal arts, heritage constructions, lifestyle, customs and traditions.

Questions were designed in such a way that respondents had to rate them through an agreement scale, graded from 5 (the strongest agreement) to 1 (the strongest disagreement). There were also open-ended questions where respondents were able to make more comments and free suggestions. In total, 100 people participated in the surveys. Among them, 20% were Isfahan's residents, 40% were domestic visitors, and 40% were foreigners.

Since in every planning the first step is recognizing of the environment and society of the target, the present study has pointed to the environment in the chapter titled 'Introducing Isfahan City'. Therefore, in the first step of the field research the researcher attempted to recognize and identify the target society (foreign visitors, domestic visitors and residents), thus the mean age was studied primarily. Overall, the average age of the target group was 37/5 with a standard deviation (SD) 13/5, i.e. 70% of the group were in 24–51 age range; in other words, as regards age groups, there are mainly young and middle-aged people. More than 50% of the respondents, 80% of foreigners and 70% of domestic visitors, as separately shown in figure 5, have university education (bachelor degree or higher degree). According to figure 6, most of the respondents are employees or those who have public occupations. Figure 7 shows that more than 60% of foreign visitors have high or very high income. On the whole, over 80% of all respondents have medium to high income.

The survey mentioned above reveals the characteristics of the respondents, especially foreign and domestic visitors. What is found is that the majority of visitors are young and middle-aged people with medium to high income and jobs that have regular holidays or free jobs.

Figures 8 and 9 show that nearly 80% of Iranian visitors travelled to Isfahan with their family. This more or less indicates that tourism capabilities of Isfahan can meet the needs of visitors who travel to the city with their family. According to figure 9, about 65% of foreign visitors have travelled to the city with friends. A noteworthy point is that the role of tours faded into significance when compared with those family travels, because only 14% of visitors have travelled by tours. Generally, it can be said that tourism capabilities of Isfahan that are marketable for foreign customers are more suitable for those who travel in groups and are educated.
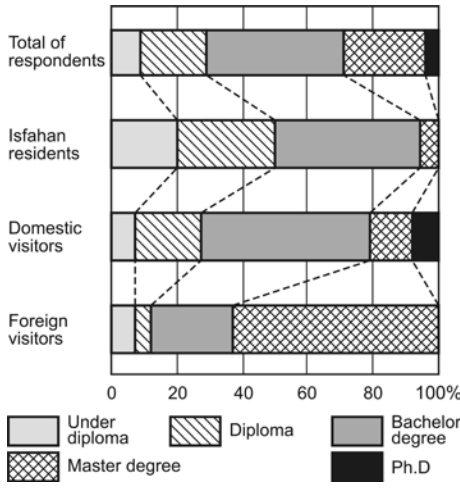
Fig. 5. Education level of respondents

Source: authors' elaboration

Fig. 6. Type of respondents' occupation
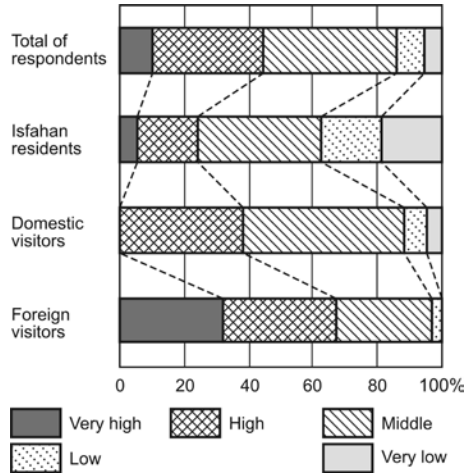
Source: authors' elaboration

Fig. 7. Respondents' income levels
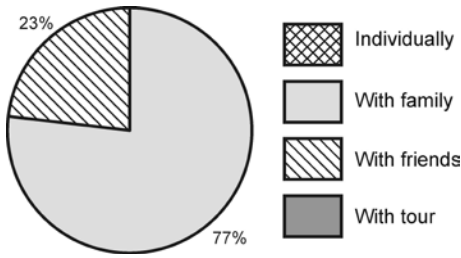
Source: authors' elaboration

Fig. 8. Type of foreign visitors' travels
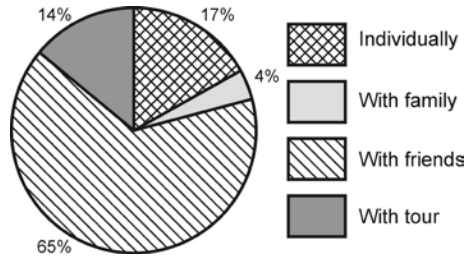
Source: authors' elaboration

Fig. 9. Type of domestic visitors' travels
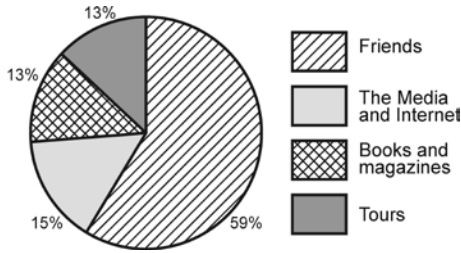
Source: authors' elaboration

Fig. 10. Ways of collecting information about Isfahan city by domestic visitors
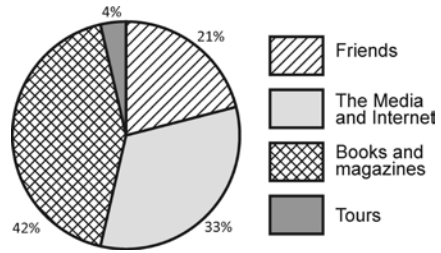
Source: authors' elaboration

Fig. 11. Ways of collecting information about Isfahan city by foreign visitors

Source: authors' elaboration

With regard to ways of receiving information by foreigners or domestic visitors, the results show that nearly 60% of domestic visitors received information from their friends or relatives (figure 10). This shows the level of public awareness of Iranian society about the city's marketable capabilities and high level of satisfaction of domestic visitors who travelled to Isfahan before. The study also showed that 70% of foreign visitors have received their information about Isfahan city from mass media, Internet, books, and international magazines (figure 11).

This proves the importance of the international status of Isfahan, which is reflected in different foreign media, international books and magazines. It motivates foreign travellers to visit Isfahan. Another interesting point indicated in figure 11 is that tours have the least role in this area.

As shown in figure 12, more than 90% of domestic and foreign visitors announced that the reason for their presence in Isfahan is tourism. This proves the high capacity of the city. Figure 13 highlights the degree of visitors' willingness to visit the city again. This shows that Isfahan was able to meet the requirements in terms of cultural and tourism capabilities – it was successful in facing up to the brand claimed by the authorities.
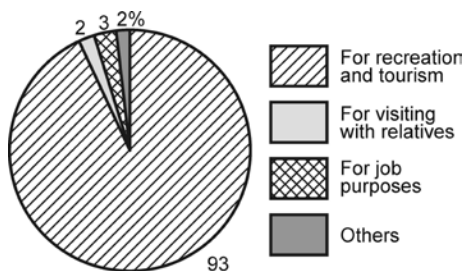
Fig. 12. Reason for the presence of foreign
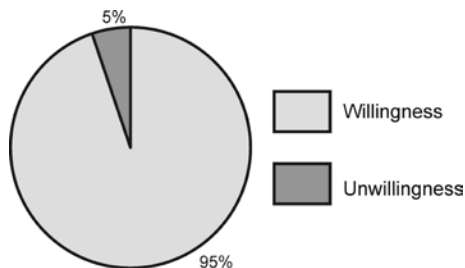and domestic visitors

Source: authors' elaboration

Fig. 13. Degree of visitors' willingness to visit
Isfahan again

Source: authors' elaboration

The cultural status of Isfahan will be analyzed from the respondents' view in the remaining part of this study. Table 3 confirms a high and prominent position, in respondents' opinion, of the cultural status of Isfahan city compared with two other dimensions, i.e. policy and economy, at the national or transnational level.

Table 3. Cultural status of Isfahan in regard to respondents' mental image

Isfahan position and status from the viewpoint of respondents	Cultural	Economic	Political	Dimensions
	4.2	3.9	3.8	average

Source: authors' elaboration.

The next step in the analysis is evaluation of the components which make the identity of the city in order to find out how each of the components was perceived. The employed indexes, as mentioned in theoretical principles, include presence, place, potential, pulse, people, and prerequisite (Anholt, 2007, pp. 59, 60). As table 4 shows, the components of the city's buildings and monuments with 3/8 of average has a better position than the other two dimensions, handicrafts and indigenous liberal arts and lifestyle, in presence component. These two components imply international status and position of the city. This proves that people and visitors have better perceptions of heritage constructions in comparison with handicraft art and lifestyle.

The results related to the 'place index' show that handicrafts, local arts, historical buildings and monument components from the viewpoint of respondents have been rated at almost the same level (4 and up), while lifestyle, customs and traditions in this index received poorer ratings. It can be concluded that physical characteristics of this index are weaker in comparison with handicraft, arts and historical buildings. Evaluation of components through 'potential index' showed that components of historical monuments received higher score than two other components. In other words, based on people's view, these components have

Table 4. Evaluation of cultural components of Isfahan in line with city branding

Suitable dimension for branding Isfahan city	Cultural aspects of Isfahan suitable for branding	Evaluation measures						
		presence	place	potential	vibrancy (pulse)	people	prere-quisite	average
Culture	Indigenous liberal arts and handi-crafts	3.1	4	3.4	3.3	3.3	3.8	3.5
	Heritage construc-tions	3.8	4.2	3.8	3.9	3.6	3.8	3.8
	Lifestyle and cu-stoms and traditions	2.9	3.2	3.5	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Average	3.6	3.8	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.5

Source: authors' elaboration.

a much better chance of developing than other cultural components that create identity. This feature of historical buildings and monument components is also true in the case of two other indexes – vibrancy and socialisation. It indicates that this component is more exciting, more interesting and more varied for people, and has higher transparency as well.

Evaluation of infrastructures is another noteworthy point that these three cultural identity components reveal. According to the people of Isfahan city, infrastructures of handicraft arts and historical works are at the same level. On all evaluations and assessments, however, historical buildings and monuments have gained the highest average through five other indexes. This means that although there are almost equally suitable infrastructures for handicraft arts and for historical monuments, historical works were perceived better by audiences (foreign visitors, domestic visitors and residents). In other words, the most manifest cultural and identity element of the city are buildings and historical monuments.

The survey indicated that three cultural and identity components of Isfahan were perceived by audiences with an acceptable score of 3 and up. But it is important to note that in each stage of the branding strategy, enhancing the strengths and addressing weaknesses in order to achieve success seems essential (De Carlo *et al*., 2009, p. 20). Improving socialisation level and enhancing the international status and position of the city (visualisation) can accelerate the movement of Is-

fahan on the course of changing to an international-cultural-tourism city because of its rich cultural potential.

Considering that great international events can provide a good chance of promoting and advertising a city's features (Zhang and Zhao, 2009, p. 253), some parts of the field research referred to the international events. For example, the study posed a question about international Film Festival for Children and Adolescents, which is held annually in the city. To what extent audiences are familiar with it and thus became familiar with the city? It was found that despite the fact that more than half of the audiences considered Isfahan as a suitable host for international events, a large proportion of them did not have any information on this subject. Interestingly, what became clear from this review is that Isfahan has lost a good chance for promoting and advertising its tourism capabilities because of inappropriate informing. It seems that by removing barriers, Isfahan can increase its speed on the course of taking advantage of its tourism capabilities based on cultural elements and hope to change into a brand based on cultural tourism.

Given that the focus of the research was aimed at analysis and evaluation of cultural capabilities of Isfahan city in line with city branding, the findings which are based on analysis of the degree of correlation between indexes for each of the cultural components (handicrafts and local arts, buildings and historical monuments, lifestyle and traditions and customs) will be evaluated and analyzed in a comparative study. The discussed data are based on tables 5, 6, 7.

In analyzing the correlation between 'visualisation index' and 'place index' it was evident that this correlation in each of three components is direct and meaningful. But, the correlation for components of handicrafts, buildings and historical works is weak while the correlation for lifestyle component is strong. In other words, improvement in physical features of cultural products and centres and exhibitions focused on lifestyle, customs and traditions of Isfahan leads to improvement in the mental picture of this specific component at national and international level.

What is derived from the correlation between two variables of 'visualisation' and 'potential' is that the correlation in each of the three components is relatively weak, direct and meaningful. Overall, it can be concluded that with increasing the use of hidden opportunities of the city in connection with cultural elements and components, we are able to improve the international image of Isfahan city.

Comparative analysis of degree of correlation between two variables of 'potential' and 'place' reveals that in all the components there is a positive and meaningful correlation between these two variables. It is particularly strong in buildings and historical works components. That is to say, improvement in physical quality of cultural components, particularly the buildings and historical works, leads to enhancement of cultural advantages of Isfahan city in line with city branding.

Table 5. Matrix of correlation degree between indexes of people's perception of the city in evaluating 'handicrafts and indigenous liberal arts' component

Variables	Presence	place	potential	Pulse	people	Prerequisite
Presence	1					
place	.271*	1				
potential	.311**	.224*	1			
Pulse	.301*	.239*	.626**	1		
people	.245*	.200	.362**	.404**	1	
Prerequisite	.142	.287**	.075	.136	.381**	1

Source: authors' elaboration.

Table 6. Matrix of correlation degree between indexes of people's perception of the city in evaluating 'heritage constructions' component

Variables	Presence	place	potential	Pulse	people	Prerequisite
Presence	1					
place	.230*	1				
potential	.255*	.360**	1			
Pulse	.133	.166	.514	1		
people	.098	.254*	.428**	.358**	1	
Prerequisite	.230*	.324**	.342**	.271*	.588**	1

Source: authors' elaboration.

Table 7. Matrix of correlation degree between indexes of people's perception of the city in evaluating 'lifestyle and customs and traditions' component

Variables	Presence	place	potential	Pulse	people	Prerequisite
Presence	1					
place	.637**	1				
potential	.213*	.231*	1			
Pulse	.290**	.394**	.718**	1		
people	.198	.299**	.315**	.386**	1	
Prerequisite	.277*	.377**	.350**	.310**	.631**	1

Source: authors' elaboration.

Analysis of intensity of correlation between indexes of dynamism (pulse) and presence, dynamism and place, and dynamism and potential makes it clear that there is a direct and meaningful correlation in each of the three variables of handicrafts component whereas in components of buildings and historical works there is no meaningful correlation between dynamism and presence, and dynamism and physical variables. And in relation to components of lifestyle, customs and traditions there is a direct and meaningful correlation among the mentioned indexes. A more detailed examination of the intensity of correlation among the above mentioned indexes shows that there is a strong and direct correlation between dynamism and potential indexes. The fact is that the more diversity and attractiveness

in cultural components (handicrafts and indigenous liberal arts, heritage constructions, lifestyle and customs and traditions) suitable with the target's taste (foreigners, domestic visitors and Isfahan citizens), the better the prospects for using the cultural assets of the city in order to brand it. This leads to attracting investment and generating income which is the result of any sort of branding.

Direction of the relation of the society variable with variables of presence, place, potential and dynamism is direct in each of the three analyzed cultural components. Except for buildings and historical works, lifestyle, customs and traditions there is a meaningless connection between variables of 'people' and 'visualisation'. In other words, if correlation, transparency and cultural diversity increase in three areas, i.e. handicrafts and indigenous liberal arts, buildings and historical works, lifestyle and customs and traditions, it can be expected, firstly, that Isfahan will be able to promote its national and international status and make its cultural capabilities play a prominent role in handicrafts and indigenous liberal arts at global level, and secondly, it will be possible to improve the physical quality and use of cultural advantages and to enhance the attractiveness of each of the three analyzed cultural components.

The direction of the relation of the prerequisite variable with variables of presence, place, potential, and dynamism and people is direct in each of the three analyzed cultural components. Except that in handicrafts and local art components there is a meaningless correlation between infrastructure variable with visualization, potential and dynamism variables. Comparison of the above correlation among each of the three components indicates that there is a fairly strong correlation between two indexes of 'infrastructure' and 'people' within components of buildings and historical works, and lifestyle, customs, and traditions. With increasing the level of basic infrastructure and public services, particularly in the contexts of heritage constructions, and lifestyle, customs and traditions, city correlation, transparency, and safety will be greatly increased as well.

10. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the study was analysis and evaluation of cultural capabilities of Isfahan city as a symbol of Iranian-Islamic culture and civilisation in order to brand the city. Taking into account the fact that city branding is the result of consensus among the public and the officials, the study attempted to fulfil three aims through bidirectional examination. From one direction, the study focused on a centralized top-down look from the transnational, national, regional, and local level while the other direction was a bottom-up look from the people's view (foreigners, domestic visitors and residents). To achieve these aims, the study first sought to find

out, by reviewing documents, the identity as envisaged by the authorities, and the identity as perceived by the public through Anholt's criteria (2007), which are related to aspects through which a city is perceived (visualisation, place, potential, dynamism, people, and infrastructure), and also to evaluate the matching degree of the two approaches compared to each other. Second, it sought to identify the most prominent feature of Isfahan's cultural identity as the most important competitive advantage of the city in order to brand the city. Third, within cultural components (handicraft and local arts, buildings and historical monuments, lifestyle and customs and traditions), it sought to examine and evaluate the correlation among indexes (visualisation, place, potential, dynamism, people and infrastructure) through which people understand a city.

In general, the naming of Isfahan as the cultural capital of the Islamic World by ISESCO, the focus of Iran Perspective Document on development based on Iranian-Islamic culture and identity, and the basing of development strategy on employing cultural and tourism capabilities of the province and city of Isfahan, which is mentioned in National Development Document of the province, indicates that Isfahan has a top global position in art, culture and tourism, and it is expected that Isfahan will become the capital of Islamic culture and civilisation of Iran. With this title it will be the sole contender among Iranian cities. And based on the above mentioned reasons, it is concluded that there is special effort to take advantage of cultural capabilities of the country, particularly of Isfahan city because of its rich cultural heritage, from transnational level to local level. Another conclusion that can be reached by reviewing documents is that the competitive identity envisaged by the authorities for Isfahan city is an identity based on Iranian-Islamic culture and civilisation. Field research also has revealed various facts and interesting lessons. One lesson is that the people in Isfahan (foreigners, domestic visitors and residents) mostly are young or middle-aged, educated, with medium to high income. Therefore, the authorities have to take into account the preferences of the people when they supply the cultural capabilities of Isfahan to their customers (foreign visitors and domestic ones), to ensure continuing and increasing inflow of tourists.

Since city branding is a public action and is the result of a consensus among the officials and the public about city's identity, the study revealed that there is an agreement between the authorities and the public of Isfahan (foreigners, domestic visitors, and residents) on the city's main and competitive identity. Both the authorities and the audiences have emphasized the role of cultural identity of Isfahan based on Islamic historical works and civilisation from the past. Thus, it seems that Isfahan has taken a major step on the branding path towards becoming a symbol of Iranian-Islamic culture and civilisation.

Another important result is that among three major cultural components (handicraft and indigenous liberal arts, heritage constructions, lifestyle and customs and

traditions) that are affected by physical functions and intrinsic aspects of culture, buildings and historical works were perceived best by the respondents, in other words the most prominent feature of cultural identity of Isfahan are its heritage constructions. This shows that the greatest advantage of Isfahan to be used in competition with other cities in Iran and around the world is its heritage constructions. Meanwhile city branding can be treated as a useful tool for promoting this significant advantage.

A final conclusion is that in most cases of evaluation, respondents paid more attention to physical characteristics than to intrinsic and inward characteristics. The same was found by Zhang and Zhao's (2009) research which they conducted in Beijing city.

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