

An application of European Performance Satisfaction Index towards rural tourism: The case of western Iran



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ABSTRACT

Iran is endowed with numerous historic and cultural attractions spanning more than 7000 years of continuous civilization, affording it much tourism potential. However, the country currently ranks 70th worldwide in tourists' arrivals and 77th in revenues generated by tourism. Though tourism potential does not always lead to its development, an assessment of resident attitudes towards tourism as an economic development strategy is a needed precursor to an integrated management approach so that once the impediments are lifted, the industry can develop in an appropriate and sustainable way. To achieve this end, this study operationalized the European Performance Satisfaction Index to assess resident attitudes and commitment towards tourism in Oraman County in Iran's Kurdistan province. Yielded from the survey data was a causal chain of factors influencing commitment towards tourism among those known in the community to have experience in current tourism offerings and upon whom future tourism development would likely depend.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is an economic phenomenon that has economic, social, cultural, personal, and ethical impacts on the communities that host it (Crossley, Jamieson, & Brayley, 2012; Othman & Rosli, 2011; Rathore, 2012). Tourism ranks second behind the oil industry in export revenue-generating potential (Haldar, 2007; Othman & Rosli, 2011). The tourism industry affords significant economic development opportunities for rural areas with natural, historic and cultural attractions, and a people willing to host visitors. Given that 75% of the world's poor reside in rural areas, tourism is one of the most frequently employed economic development strategies in these areas (Holland, Burian, & Dixey, 2003; Peters, Frehse, & Buhalis, 2009). The underlying belief in rural tourism initiatives is that the tourism sector could act as a catalyst to propel economic growth by providing additional income to farmers and economic diversity within the community, thereby reversing the depopulation of rural areas caused by migration to urban centers in search of employment opportunities (Apostolakis & Clark, 2011; Cloesen, 2006; Drăgulănescu & Druțu, 2012).

Tourism can be a challenging industry due to its volatile nature and susceptibility to a wide range of influences (Shakya, 2011). If tourism develops without any specific plan or strategy to navigate these challenges, environmental and societal problems can intervene to the point where the negative effects of tourism on the host community will exceed its benefits (Sheykhi, 2009). Community participation is

expected to improve both local resource management, as well as distribution of the economic benefits of tourism (Key & Pillai, 2006). Once a community becomes a tourist destination, the lives of residents in that community become affected by tourism activities (Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013). The active support of local residents will have an influence on the success of tourism development (Hritz & Ross, 2010; Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, & Jones, 2013). In this regard, Murphy (1985) asserted that tourism is a resource industry, dependent not only on the natural and cultural resources, but also on public goodwill. This goodwill of residents towards tourists is an essential piece of a visitor's experience, for if the residents are unwelcoming or antagonistic to visitors, no amount of amenities will compensate for such hostility (Hritz & Ross, 2010). Therefore, the level of residents' commitment to tourism development is important to ascertain prior to any consideration of regional tourism planning. On the other hand, it also can be assumed that increases in residents' commitment to tourism will give support to strategies for attracting more tourism to the destination. Thereby, if the level of residents' commitment to tourism development is high, the potential conflicts between residents and tourism establishments should be mitigated through open dialog and cooperation focused on common objectives (Chen, 2000; Crotts, 2014).

Geographically, the Islamic Republic of Iran encompasses an area of 1.6 million km², with a population of more than 70 million people and a wide range of climatic conditions. With more than 7000 years of continuous civilization, Iran is endowed with numerous historical and cultural attractions. It is the oldest civilization to remain in existence containing numerous cultural heritage sites that document this heritage. Religious tourism or pilgrimage in the country is centuries old and is the basis for

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several rural tourism economies. Hence, Iran is positioned as one of the top ten countries with the highest potential for attracting international tourists, even though it currently ranks 70th in international tourist arrivals and 77th in revenues generated by tourism (UNWTO, 2009).

However, the mere existence of tourism potential in Iran does not automatically lead to the development of the industry there. Visa restrictions, international trade sanctions, the lack of infrastructure, and regional conflicts all create significant barriers to international travel. What is much needed is an integrated management approach towards development of tourism once the barriers to such development can be reduced or eliminated. Even though tourism planning began in the country in 1858, the prioritization of other plans associated with oil and other resource industries has taken precedence (Iran Tourism Development Corporation, 2006). Recently, Iran has adopted progressive policies in order to encourage tourism development. However, the development of this potentially valuable industry – particularly in rural communities – requires an understanding of residents' attitudes and commitment to such an economic development strategy.

The purpose of this study was to explore residents' commitment to tourism development, which is believed by many Iranians to have significant potential. Based on the European Performance Satisfaction Index (EPSI) model, a survey was developed and administered in order to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence and mediate residents' commitment to developing their community's tourism economy.

2. Research framework

The EPSI model has been applied to a number of economic sectors, but not tourism. It is based on the assumption that all organizations must listen to customers in order to achieve long-term sustainable economic success. Long-term success of a corporation is closely tied to its ability to adapt to changing customer needs and preferences, and the EPSI is designed to compare and provide a benchmark of support for such a solution based on a set of elaborate criteria that influence customer support. Though the EPSI has never been applied to tourism,

let alone resident attitudes, the authors contend that it provides a useful framework from which to assess a rural tourism development's potential, from the perspective of its key community stakeholders. The underlying premise of adapting the EPSI model towards resident attitudes rests on the high interdependence of tourism satisfaction and resident support and commitment to tourism development (Wang, Zhen, Zhang, & Wu, 2013). Such support is a multidimensional construct (Gallarza & Saura, 2006) which this adaptation of the European Performance Satisfaction Index (EPSI) attempts to assess. The EPSI model is shown in Fig. 1.

Given that the EPSI model has not previously been applied to resident attitudes towards tourism development, a search of the literature was required to operationalize the model's key factors. Access to library databases in tourism is limited in Iran, so the items drawn from the literature are by no means exhaustive for the ways each factor has been operationalized. However, the effort produced the needed survey that reasonably operationalized each factor in an efficient and parsimonious way. Moreover, it provided a basis for testing a causal chain of associations, leading to the following hypotheses:

- H1.** The more favorable the image of tourism, the higher the perceived value of tourism among residents.
- H2.** The more favorable the image of tourism, the higher the residents' overall satisfaction with existing tourism development.
- H3.** The higher the perception of tourism quality, the higher the perceived value among residents.
- H4.** The higher the perception of tourism quality, the higher residents' overall satisfaction with existing tourism development.
- H5.** The higher the expectation of residents towards tourism, the higher the perceived value.
- H6.** The higher the perceived value, the higher the overall satisfaction with existing tourism development.

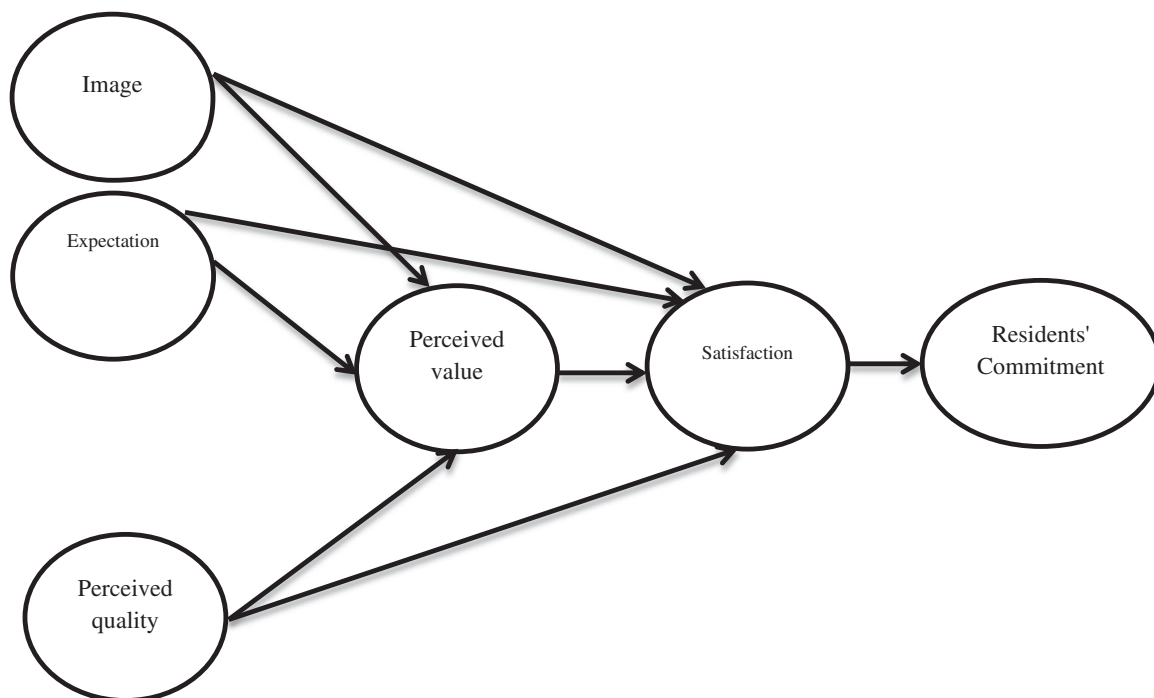


Fig. 1. EPSI model (modified).
Source: European Benchmark, EPSI Rating, 2011.

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