

## **Evaluation of the Phantasm and Branding of Tourism Destinations (case study: South Khorasan Province, Iran)**

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### **Abstract**

Nowadays, the tourism branding has such importance for governments that annually they spend a lot of financial resources to building the brands although their efforts don't reach to the desirable results. This study aims at evaluating the phantasm and branding of tourist destinations in the South Khorasan Province in Iran. An applied qualitative methodology was used to carry out the data foundation analysis. 100 tourists, who had visited the South Khorasan Province, were interviewed. In the interviews, the identification and assessment of tourist phantasm were determined for each county and accordingly it was suggested to establish the required infrastructure, and services according to tourists' view. The Results showed that phantasms such as "agricultural products, desert hiking, higher education, astronomy and mineral resources" had a high priority in the building of tourist branding in the study area. Therefore, decision-making and planning at macro level should define the Destination brand and at the micro level Province tourism projects should be done in accordance with these brands and priorities.

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**Keywords: Tourist Branding, South Khorasan Province, Tourist Destinations.**

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### **Introduction**

The idea of branding a destination is a relatively new one and the academic investigation of such a process is still in its infancy (Gnoth, 1998). Although the words 'brand', 'branding' and 'destination image' have already appeared in many academic studies and industry conferences, no apparent effort has been made to distinguish between destination image and destination branding. The purpose of this short commentary is to stimulate thinking on destination branding and to outline its relationship with destination image (Ekinci, 2003). Destination image is more cognitive and involves subjective knowledge of a destination (e.g. expensive, exotic, urban, cold, and developed) and therefore its evaluation may vary from one person to another. For example, some tourists may consider Turkey to be a European holiday destination while others disagree with this image. We believe that a tourist's attitude towards a destination also includes an element of strong emotional attachment (e.g. exciting, fun). So, bearing in mind that, on many occasions, the evaluation of destination image includes some element of emotional attachment, the question arises as to what extent the overall view of a destination is emotional (Morgan et al., 2002). According to Balakrishnan, the starting point in creating a strategy for positioning and establishing a brand is a vision that is achieved by composing the elements that attract visitors, that help them to decide whether to visit a destination and encourages loyalty to that destination. Its action begins in the guest's resident country, is enhanced upon the arrival and during the stay in a tourist destination, and it is also present at the time of leaving the destination at the end of the visit. Though creating an experience, a destination can boost its image, but it should be borne in mind that too many brands in a destination can lead to confusion, in the sense that where a guest decides to visit is made a more difficult decision (Aaker, 1991). Pike emphasizes positioning strategy focusing on one or a few key attributes, and proposes tourist destination positioning proposes a number of steps such as: identifying target markets and travel contexts; identifying groups of competing destinations in the target market and in a given travel context; identifying the motivations and benefits of previous visitors, as well as those who have not yet visited the destination; identifying perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the competing destinations;

identifying opportunities for differentiated positioning, selection and implementation of market position; as well as monitoring the implementation of the strategy of positioning for a certain period of time (Pike, 2008; Lončarić, 2014). Furthermore, the image of a destination is the outcome of different factors such as the recommendations and views of previous visitors, advertising campaigns like media statements in leaflets and newspapers or visible on television, and the actual day-to-day life and local culture of the destination (Echtner and Ritchie 2003, p. 38). In addition to that, potential customers have individually-formed images about a tourist destination based on their own experiences. Nevertheless, this perceived image often does not match the tourist destination's reality (Andreu et al., 2001). The observed cultural disparity of a country plays a part in the travelers' selection of a tourist destination as well as the visitor's loyalty. Therefore, destination managers need to have a general understanding of their potential guests and their individual preferences (Chen and Gursoy, 2001), since the overall development as well as continuous control of the TDI components is the responsibility of the destination's management (Howie, 2003).

South Khorasan Province, the study area of this research, has a high historical background—more than 719 historical, cultural and natural heritage sites have been registered in the national monuments list. Also, there are several registered world heritage sites in this province, further evidence of the civilized culture in this region. The study area, despite its capabilities and potential in the field of tourism, has not yet reached its full development level. Therefore, the applied policies were ineffective, or perhaps so ambitious that achievement of the objectives was not possible within the conditions of the province. In order to evaluate this, the aims of this paper can be listed as below:

- ❖ Providing a regional branding model;
- ❖ Prioritizing the affecting factors on the brand;
- ❖ Evaluation of the mental images for branding of South Khorasan province;
- ❖ Determining the type of services that providers should provide for tourists in the Province.

Aimless development of images is caused by different sources such as studying, traveling, buying products and getting acquainted with

people. Many researchers claim that a positive image of the country not only affects economic factors such as attracting tourists, selling national products and production, foreign direct investment, and migration of expert forces and personnel to the country, but also causes reinforcement and simplification of people's knowledge and improves cultural changes. Reynolds describes the formation of the image as follows "Expansion of the mental structure based on the emotional flood of information". In the case of the image of a place, this information flood can have different sources. An image is the outcome of different, diverse, and often conflicting messages while are sent from one place, and this image is formed individually in the mind of each message recipient (Kavaratzis, 2009: 27). The images have a specific power. The image of a landscape leads to a feeling equivalent to the direct experience of that place. The images are not always neutral (impartial) or without stimulant power (Ryan, 2008: 16). The important point is that we can describe the images as tools to promotion of cultures, reflection and improvement of special common concepts, beliefs, and value systems (Richards and Wilson, 2004: 1933).

Every image has three main components including cognitive, emotional, and general. In fact, the cognitive component of the image is an introduction to its emotional component. In addition, the combination of these two factors creates a general image of an object that can be positive or negative. McCleurry and Stern and Kirk Owr practically demonstrated that the emotional and cognitive components of the image have a positive effect on the overall image, and the first factor also affects the overall image through the second factor (Beerli, 2004: 658). Information resources and variables of social and demographic psychology are considered significant in all models of the spatial image (Ryan, 2008: 144). There is a cognitive knowledge, in the core of this interactive system, about the unique and common characteristics of the place and the emotional response to these characteristics. By interaction between the knowledge of common and unique characteristics and the emotions towards them, a general picture is created and used by decision makers. Lynch states that individuals have a relatively detailed and coherent subjective image of their region that has been created in the interaction between the place and the individual itself and that is significant for labor and emotional well-

being. The image of a place is unique in each person's view and depends on past experiences and presentations of that particular place. There are two types of images including external image: the way in which the general public or other communities out of the place realize it, and the interior image: the way in which its inhabitants see their place in the community or in their neighborhood. These two images affect each other. If a society has a negative image of a community, the community itself will have a low level of self-image (Rahmani et al., 2013: 25). Schultz defines the sense of place as a general phenomenon with the structural, spatial, and atmospheric values which human receives it through perception, orientation, and identification (Partovi, 2008: 122). One can take Schultz's theories that: in fact, in his opinion a clear mental image that leads to the identity of a person is achieved by having meaningful places. For him, the path and boundary (realm) (which is somewhat similar to Lynch's path and knot) are the agents of the recognition of the environment and he considers the use of memorable signs and symbols effective in the perception and understanding of human from the place. These signs can be familiar or memorable signs for people. Generally, emotion and understanding of a space means a place. He also considers participation and group activities in the form of being with others, as the factors which give the place a high quality. Generally, these spatial factors can find the necessary conditions for communicating with human and reviving (Habibi, 2008).

In 1988, Gan described seven stages of the formation of an image that show the relationship between mind and message of the image, presented in the structure of a model with the following information: 1. A subjective image relating to travel experiences, 2. Correction of images by realizing information, 3. The decision of traveling, 4. The destination and goal of traveling, 5. Partners or partners in destination, 6. Returning home, and 7. Correction of images based on the travel experiences. This study seeks to look at the purpose of the brand in the concept of tourism, but it affects other topics such as politics, international relations, and product marketing. We know that today tourism is one of the largest economic activities of the countries and plays a significant role in their economy. In this regard, in 2004 Morgan, Richard and Pride agreed that selecting a holiday destination represents the way of life for today's customers, and the places they are

choosing to spend their time on vacation is hard and should be a place which has the ability to hold celebrations, attract their emotions and conversations (Morgan, 2004:18). Based on the viewpoint of the World Tourism Organization in the 21st century, we can see the enhancement of tourism goals along with diversity and faddism. Tourism goals will lead to the arrival of brand names in relation with new emotions.

Despite the fact that the branding of tourism destinations has been developing a lot in recent years and has been one of the new areas of research (Morgan and Pritchard, 2002), some part of the discussion topic has been subtitled with the alternative label of the study of mental imagery of the tourist destination and has been the subject of research for more than 30 years. The goal of marketing of the tourism destination is to increase awareness related to tourism destination by creating a unique brand. The main hypothesis associated with branding of a place is that when a place is named, there are several dependent concepts in the minds of individuals that these dependencies can be manipulated. Such a manipulation leads to a better branding for one place. As a result, branding focuses on creating a brand management system based on the identity and specific features of a unique place (Efe Sevin, 2014: 49). The positive image predicted by the authorities of the destination can cause positive changes in the perceptions of tourists; however, in many cases tourists see everything different from what the destination image represents (Nidoo et al, 2012: 3). Destinations having identifiable images (UNESCO World Heritage Site) have a high possibility to be selected by tourists and have positive images (Martins, 2015:5).

#### **Study Area**

South Khorasan Province is located on the eastern borders of Iran. This area is one of three provinces that were created after the division of Khorasan in 2004. Initially, the newly created "South Khorasan" included only Birjand County and some new counties adjacent to that county (i.e. Nehbandan, Darmian and Sarbisheh), but in subsequent years, all northern and western cities and territories of the old Quhistan (such as Qaen, Ferdows and Tabas) have been annexed into South Khorasan (Wikipedia, 2017).

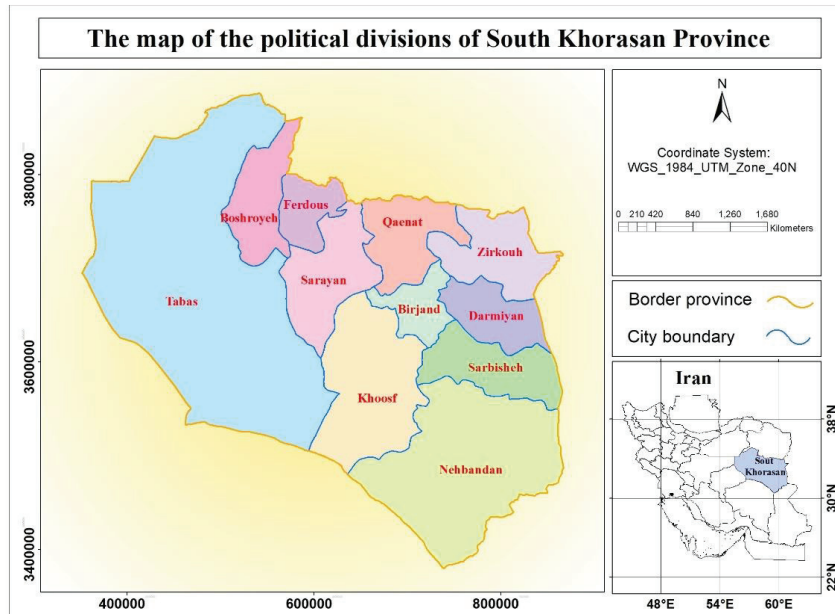


Fig. 1. A view of the study area. Source: Fallahzadeh et al., 2017

Birjand is the central city of South Khorasan Province and the study area is limited by borders to the north with Khorasan Razavi, to the east with Afghanistan, to the west with Yazd province, Isfahan and Semnan, and to the south with the provinces of Kerman and Sistan and Baluchestan.

### Material and Methods

The methodology used was based on a descriptive-analytical approach. To better understand the subject, a qualitative research method was used in the frame of an inductive approach. Accordingly, grounded strategy (data theory foundation), based on a deductive approach, was used to design the model in this research. The data theory foundation has two Glaser and Strauss approaches. In the present study, Strauss and Corbin's method has been used as it is a systematic method for data analysis. The method of data collection in this study was a profound semi-structured interview with experts (see Table 1). The statistical population consists of two groups: the first group - this group includes the experts; and the second group. Also, in order to assess the satisfaction of tourists regarding tourism services and to assess the level of satisfaction of the image tourists have from South Khorasan province, a number of questionnaires were completed by people who

had visited this province at least once. For sampling, a targeted sampling design and a snowball technique was used. The first group was selected for the interview, and then the subsequent group was introduced to the interview by the first group, and the sampling continued in the same manner, until no new thoughts or data were created—so-called research to theoretical saturation, which is sufficient for research such as this. Finally, questions were completed in the form of a questionnaire by the sample members and then analyzed using SPSS statistical analysis software.

**Table 1. Number of samples**

First group	Experts include: A number of faculty members from the Department of Geography and Management, Cultural Heritage Clients throughout the country.	30 people
Second group	A number of students that residing in the different provinces of country (these people have not traveled to South Khorasan province so far)	35 People
	A number of students that residing in the different provinces of country (These people have traveled to South Khorasan province at least once)	35 People
Total	-	100

Source: Research findings, 2017

## Discussion

Due to the nature of the applied method, the data interpretation in this study was carried out by coding the sentences obtained from the interviews. Encoding uses an indicator as a token operational through which the data is molded and conceptualized and then re-connected in new ways. Encoding is the interpretation of the main process of constructing and implementing the data theory. In this research, three methods of coding were used: open, axial, and selective coding. In this section, we will examine the results in detail.

**Open coding:** This phase of the fundamental data theory method is carried out immediately after the first interview. In other words, after each interview, the researcher begins to find concepts and to select the appropriate tags for them and combine the involved concepts (Table 2).

**Table 2. The classification derived from open coding**

---	concept	Titles
1	Social component	Unity, unemployment, number of proponents, social security, rate of stealing and social violence, addiction, relaxation, attraction, hospitality.
2	University and education	Variety of educational centers, facilities and educational infrastructure for students, research centers, teaching quality, applied research.
3	Trading	Business practices, applying new business practices, job diversification, successful investments, new businesses, special economic zone, border customs, general price levels
4	Investment opportunities	Private investment, participatory investment, rich mineral resources, special potential in relation to new energy, tourism and ecotourism.
5	Agricultural and livestock products	Saffron, barberry, jujube, herbs, pistachios, pomegranate, dates, natural honey.
		Dairy and livestock products, camels, ostriches, etc.
		Historic buildings, mosques, warehouses, caravansaries, historic buildings, castles, markets.



6	Tourism	Kayaking, climbing, wetlands, hot springs, pristine nature, protected areas, astronomy, tourism, conferences and more.
		Handicrafts such as weaving cloth, Jajim weaving, carpet weaving, carpet weaving, carpet weaving, food tourism.
7	Tourism and service infrastructures	Rail, air, road, cross-country transport Restaurant, hotel, hospitality, dining, chain stores, camps and residential centers, parks and green spaces, medical emergencies, relief and etc.
8	Military and law enforcement	Army barracks, police force, revolutionary guards.
9	Domain Services	Public administration, hospitals and medical services, government agencies.

Source: Research findings, 2017

Bringing all the themes of the images examined in Table (2) outlines the highest and lowest percentages of the province's images in the minds of tourists (Table 3).

**Table 3 Image topics and effects percentage from the tourists' perspective**

--	Image topic	%	--	Image topic	%
1	Higher education	13	8	Military	14
2	Historical tourism	7	9	Services	5
3	Religious tourism	5	10	Crops	20
4	Nature tourism	11	11	Mineral resources	4
5	Food tourism	2	12	Astronomy	3
6	Tourism conferences	0	13	Music	0
7	Handicrafts	5	14	Desert climbing and climbing (as a special potential)	11
<b>Total</b>		100%			

Source: Research findings, 2017

According to the responses provided by tourists (people who have visited South Khorasan Province at least once), the topics of "agricultural products, military, higher education, climbing and deserting, and nature tourism" are the most abundant in their mental images. Now, in order to clarify the topic, it is best to look at the views of the experts by comparing the images provided. Table (4) shows the subject of images and the percentage effect of each topic.

**Table 4. Image topics and effects percentage from the students and faculty member's perspective**

--	Image topic	%	--	Image topic	%
1	Higher education	14	8	Military	11
2	Historical tourism	5	9	Services	4
3	Religious tourism	3	10	Crops	17
4	Nature tourism	9	11	Mineral resources	6
5	Food tourism	0	12	Astronomy	10
6	Tourism conferences	5	13	Music	0
7	Handicrafts	3	14	Desert climbing (as a special potential)	13
<b>Total</b>		100%			

Source: Research findings, 2017

According to Table (4), the responses provided by the experts indicate that the topics of "agricultural products, higher education, military, desert and climbing, astronomy", respectively, are the most frequent in

the mental images of this group. Also, by comparing the two tables, the change of priorities and the percentage of impact can be seen. In the images of the experts responses, the mental image of higher education and academic services received in Table (3) was ranked as the first priority and the military image (police barracks and army) is second. The mental image of desert and climbing remains in its predecessor, but the theme of nature tourism has given its place to astronomy.

**Table 5. Percentage priority objectives based on the subjects of the images according to the respondents' comments**

--	Birj and	Ta bas	Qae nat	Zir koh	Dar mian	Sari an	Nehba ndan	Ferd ows	kho sof	Boshro oyeh	Sarbis heh
Higher educati on	24.8	--	10	--	--	4	--	5	--	--	--
Histori cal tourism	7.3	9	7.2	5	34.1	--	--	3	21.4	10.1	3
Religio us tourism	3	23. 3	3	15.2	--	--	--	--	19.1	14	13
Natural tourism	4	17	4	3.4	9	2	6	4	4	5.6	19.4
Food tourism	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Confer ence tourism	13.8	--	19.3	--	--	11.7	--	--	--	--	--
Handic rafts tourism	2	2	14.3	7	29.9	4	--	28.7	4.3	2	16.3
Militar y services	16.1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Agricul tural	9.4	8.3	11.1	5.3	12.3	5.4	5	4.8	3.7	4.1	5.2
Minera l	11.6	5	29.1	3.86	19.6	--	18.4	32.4	45.5	21.6	5
Astron omy	2	26. 4	2	--	5.1	13.1	22.1	2	--	--	38.1
Music	--	2	--	4.7	--	46.8	10.3	--	--	11.4	--
Desert climbin g	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Desert climbin g	6	7	--	20.8	--	25.1	47.2	--	--	31.2	--
Total	100										

Source: Research findings, 2017

## Discussion and conclusion

Accordingly, the proposed brands for each city are as follows:

Assigned images of mental images from the respondents in Birjand: "higher education (24.8%), military (16.1%) and tourism for conferences, especially academic conferences (13.8%)"; Tabas city: "mineral resources (26.4%), religious tourism (23.3%) and nature tourism (17%)", the city of Qa'enat: respectively, "agricultural products such as saffron, barberry, etc. (29.1%), tourism conferences, especially the Red Gold conference (19.3%), and handicrafts (14.3%); Zirkouh: "agricultural products especially barberry (6.38%), desert climbing and climbing (20.8%) and religious tourism (15.2%)"; Darmian city: "historical tourism, in particular Fort Forge (34.1%), handicrafts especially carpet weaving (29.9%) and agricultural products (19.6%)"; Saraian city: astronomy (46.8%), desert climbing and climbing (25.1%), and conference tourism, especially astronomy (11.7%), "; Nehbandan city: "desert climbing and climbing (47.2%), agricultural products (18.4%) and mineral resources (22.1%)"; Ferdows city: "Agricultural products especially pomegranates (32.4%), handicrafts (28.7%) and mineral resources (22.1%)"; Khosf city: "Agricultural products, in particular, the nargis flower (45.5%), historical tourism (21.4%) and religious tourism (19.1%)"; Boshrooyehcity: "desert climbing and climbing (31.2%), agricultural products (21.6%) and religious tourism (14.0%); and Sarbishhe city: "mineral resources (38.1%), nature tourism (19.4%) and handicrafts (16.3%)".

**Table 6. Infrastructures and proposed services for deployment in the tourist destinations of South Khorasan province from respondents' viewpoint**

City	Infrastructures and proposed services
<b>Sarbishheh</b>	Holding craft exhibitions, creating camps and promenades, creating welfare services including restaurants, hotels and hospitality, creating mineral resource processing industries (considering cost-effectiveness and environmental impacts), extensive advertising, brand design and use in designing urban furniture, encouraging private sector participation and investment.
<b>Tabas</b>	Creation of a camp and promenade, creating amenities, including restaurants, hotels and guesthouses etc., creating mineral resource processing industries (considering economic and environmental impacts), extensive advertising, brand design and use in urban furniture design, private sector encouragement for partnership and investment.
<b>Birjand</b>	Creating free educational centers, supporting entrepreneurship and student companies, designing brand symbols and using it in urban furniture design, encouraging the private sector to participate and investing, creating a camp and promenade, creating welfare services including restaurants, hotels and guesthouses etc., the establishment of processing and packaging industries, the introduction of historical attractions of the city, extensive advertising, holding university conferences to benefit from their outputs, as well as identifying and introducing the potential of the province.

<b>Qaenat</b>	Emphasis on the Red Gold Conference and academic conferences, the establishment of free educational centers, supporting entrepreneurship and knowledge based companies, designing brand symbols and their use in urban furniture design, encouraging private sector participation and investment, creating a camp and promenade, Creation of welfare services including restaurant, hotel and guest houses, etc., manufacturing of packaging and processing industries.
<b>Zirkoh</b>	The emphasis on holding desertification conferences, massive propaganda, and the introduction of natural, religious and other attractions, the creation of a camp and promenade, the establishment of welfare services, including restaurant, hotel and hospitality, manufacturing of packaging and processing industries, extensive advertising and designing the brand symbol and its use in urban furniture design.
<b>Bashroie</b>	The emphasis on holding desertification conferences, massive propaganda, and the introduction of natural, religious and other attractions, the creation of a camp and promenade, the establishment of welfare services, including restaurant, hotel and hospitality, manufacturing of packaging and processing industries, extensive advertising and designing the brand symbol and its use in urban furniture design.
<b>Saraian</b>	The emphasis on holding desertification conferences, establishing infrastructure for observing stars and astronomical activities, creating a camp and promenade, creating welfare services including restaurants, hotels and guesthouses, etc., massive advertising and design of the brand symbol and its use in urban furniture design.
<b>Khosof</b>	Exports of nargis flowers, as well as the production of agricultural products, extensive advertising and design of the brand symbol and its use in the design of urban furniture, the establishment of a camp and promenade, the establishment of welfare services, including restaurant, etc., the introduction of natural attractions, religious, etc.
<b>Nehbandan</b>	The emphasis on holding desertification conferences, Extensive publicity and introduction of natural, religious and ... attractions, creation of a camp and promenade, establishment of welfare services, including restaurant, hotel and hospitality ..., manufacturing of packaging and processing industries, extensive advertising and design of the brand symbol and Use it in urban furniture design
<b>Ferdows</b>	Establishing industries for packing and processing agricultural products, especially pomegranates, holding handicraft exhibitions, creating camps and promenades, creating welfare services including restaurants, hotels and guesthouses ..., extensive advertising, brand design and use in Urban furniture design, private sector encouragement for partnership and investment.
<b>Darmian</b>	Extensive publicity and introduction of the city's historical attractions, in particular Castle Forge, the creation of packaging and processing industries for agriculture, in particular barberry, holding handicraft exhibitions and carpet weaving, creating camps and promenades, creating amenities including restaurants, hotels and guesthouses. And ... designing the brand symbol and its use in urban furniture design, encouraging the private sector to participate and invest.

Source: Research findings, 2017

Understanding the potential of the province and understanding the shortcomings of regional branding can help create a positive image in the minds of tourists, which has created a competitive advantage for this vast province in the past and has been successful in regional competitiveness.

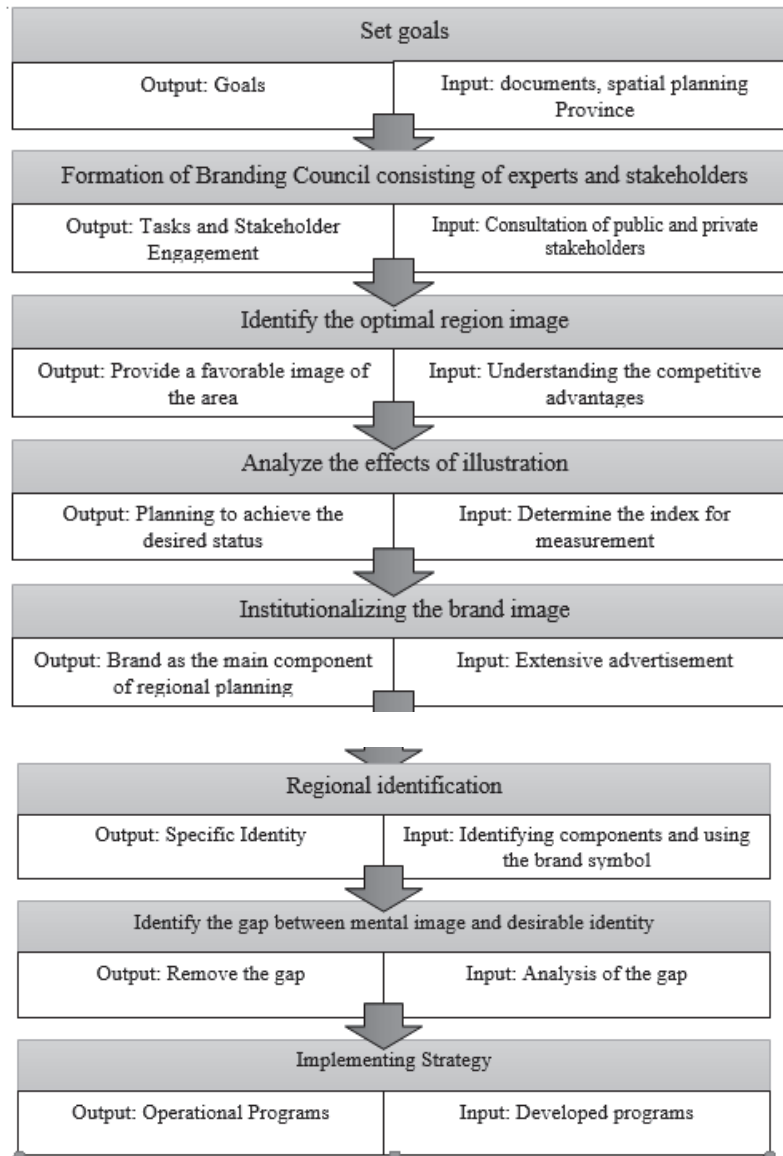


Fig. 2. Regional Brand Image Imaging.

Source: Research findings, 2017

The research adjusted the research instrument to the theoretical model for its application with the tourists who had visited South Khorasan, Iran. In the present study, mental images related to South Khorasan province have been determined and evaluated by experts and students.

Among the images presented by the respondents were "Agriculture, Desert tourism, Higher Education, Astronomy and Mineral Resources" respectively.

Tourists' awareness of the province has had a positive impact on their mental image of the quality of services they receive at the destination. For future research, we suggest destination branding factors to be evaluated through an alignment with other constructs, in order to prove the construct validity in the proposed measurement theory.

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