
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring National Identity (Re)production: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Iran's Representation on its Official Tourism Website

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ABSTRACT

Given the significance of tourism in national identity construction and promotion in current era along with Iran's need for such an international image promotion, the present study investigated the linguistic texts on the discourse of the Iranian official tourism website to achieve two objectives. Firstly, considering the convoluted interplay among discourse, tourism, and national identity, it investigates how Iranians, in terms of their identity, are represented in the linguistic texts of the discourse used on the Iranian official tourism website. Secondly, it identifies how the discourse either maintains, challenges, or transforms the existing stereotyped perceptions of its identity, embracing its Western represented portrayal in Western media. The current study adopted critical discourse analysis as its framework and used Fairclough's three-dimensional model as its approach to CDA. The findings of the study demonstrated that Iranians' authentic and genuine identity, by which they wish to be seen, contests the Western mainstream perceptions of Iranian national identity. Therefore, there is a tendency to transform the prevailing Western stereotypical perceptions of their identity from the producers of the analyzed discourse.

KEYWORDS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Iranian National Identity; Media Discourse; Official Tourism Website; Tourism Discourse

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1. Introduction

Tourism, in the present era, is considered one of the largest and fastest industries worldwide (Bunghez, 2016). Financially, tourism contributes to the world's gross national income as much as ten percent (Fatemi et al., 2012). It also financially contributed as much as twenty-five percent to new job creations globally pre-pandemic (Buhalis et al., 2023). However, in the case of some countries, economic benefits per se are not the sole driving reason to pursue tourism, and the primacy of non-economic advantages of tourism is attended to as equal as its economic profits. These advantages are mostly pertinent to a nation's identity, resulting in its international recognition as a unique community. In other words, tourism serves to represent a community by constructing and/or promoting a distinct national identity. Thereby, it enhances both national and international awareness of the respective nation in terms of collective pride (Lindblom et al., 2022). This awareness enhancement is alluded to as national identity, the construction, maintenance, and representation of which are increasingly requisite due to the 'crisis of identity' currently impacting people (Hall, 1992, p. 274).

In the case of Iran, identity related advantages come to the foreground considering Iran's international appearance, which is negatively disseminated by Western media (Jahedi & Abdullah, 2012). This manipulation may appear to be further biased when Western countries are seen as a unified entity, while unfriendly countries with discrepant ideologies are placed on the opposing side of the fence in terms of 'us' vs. 'them' (Van Dijk, 2016). Predominantly, Iran has always been portrayed in the Western media as 'them' and 'outsiders', who are hazardous, to justify their opposition towards Iran (Friedman & Ghorbankarimi, 2022). In this

regard, media power also emerges as a threat in manipulating Iran's image, potentially leading to further distortion of its identity. Thus, Iran's image increasingly requires (re)construction and (re)production in that identity is 'something fragile' (Wetherell, 2008) that needs to be protected and preserved as it 'could be lost' (McLaren, 2004).

This issue was augmented once President George W. Bush stated about 'for us or against us' as his overall foreign policy to be applied in America's political foreign relations with other countries (Mastanduno, 2005). In compliance with that, as Iran had not acted in favor of America, it was pictured as one of the 'axis of evil' countries by George W. Bush which resulted in Iran's further misrepresentation as anti-Western and anti-American ever since (Alisobhani, 2022). Such ideological confrontation became even more serious when President Donald Trump exited the Iran nuclear agreement, also known as JCPOA.

Considering the potency of Western media in influencing both particularized and communal awareness through the structured distribution of knowledge (Valkenburg et al., 2016). and in imposing what and how to think on readers/viewers (Bakaki & Bernauer, 2016), coupled with their persuasion potentials to control 'minds of readers or viewers' (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 10), it is apparent that they have easily influenced Westerners' perceptions of Iran (Salim, 2010). This influence has led to conspicuous misrepresentations of Iranian national identity by the Western media, as they tend to prioritize political standpoints over Iran's rich history and civilization.

As a result, Iran is attempting to represent a 'true' national identity, displaying Iran's rich history, culture, and religion, to enhance its peaceful relations with the international community and present a positive nonviolent appearance (Khodadadi, 2016) for which tourism profoundly contributes to the establishment and enhancement of peoples' social and cultural understanding within the international community (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2021). To this end, the discourse of tourism should be considered the core of communication occurring between Iranians and potential tourists, as it is the power of discourse that allures and persuades potential tourists to leave their homelands and visit a foreign land (Dann, 1996). Thus, this study aims to analyze how the discourse on the Iranian official tourism website has been utilized through critical discourse analysis, employing Fairclough's dialectical relational approach, to uncover the national identity attributed to Iranians and persuade outsiders to recognize and visit Iran.

1.1 Research Objectives

The present study seeks the following objectives, which are:

To investigate how Iranians, in terms of their identity, are represented in the linguistic texts of the discourse used on the official Iranian tourism website.

To identify how the discourse is either maintaining the status quo as to its identity or transforming it.

2. Literature Review

2.1 National Identity

Building a nation as 'a named human community occupying a homeland and having common myths and a shared history, a common public culture, a single economy and common rights, and duties for all members' (Smith & Brent, 2001, p. 13) is seen as the onset of national identity construction. Aligned with nation, national identity is defined as 'the sense of belonging and faithfulness...' to such commonalities in a 'national society' embodied in terms of '...common symbols and elements' (Gharibyan, 2012, p. 6952) through which image of a nation in the international community is uniquely represented.

The process of national identity construction is the process of 'othering' (McManus, 2020), in that, it constructs a world divided into 'us' and 'them' or 'in-group' and 'out-group' (Jenkins, 2008). In other words, it delineates 'who you are' and 'where you belong to' through making a contrast with other people and places (Rose, 1995, p. 116).

National identity is not only constructed within a nation but outsiders' perceptions of a nation also play an important role in construction of a national identity as it is through the negotiation of both insiders' and outsiders' perceptions of a nation's representations that a national identity is constructed and (re)produced (Sun et al., 2020). In this regard, tourism, through the reproduction of a nation's images for tourists, functions as a robust tool in constructing a national identity because these images contribute to a nation's identity (Li et al., 2019). Considering that, tourism constructs, promotes, and (re)presents national identity through construction of the outsiders' perceptions of a nation by offering them a nation's tangible and visible images as tourist attractions to distinguish it and its people from others.

2.2 Discourse in Tourism

This concept has been overshadowed by both narrow and broad perspectives depending upon the context in which 'discourse' is defined. Linguistically, it refers to 'a continuous stretch of language – spoken or written – larger than a sentence' (Crystal, 1992, p. 25). However, other scholars, such as Foucault (1980), as a social philosopher, define 'discourse' to refer to knowledge that is socially and historically constructed and simultaneously constructs the social context and structure. Similarly, the definition

adopted in the current study considers discourse as a social practice that is constituted by and constitutive of the social structure and context (Fairclough, 2013).

As Dann (1996) maintains, 'tourism is grounded in discourse' (p. 2) since it is a discourse that creates and communicates particular images of a destination to tourists (Mak, 2017; Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2019). With respect to that, discourse is utilized to represent a destination to tourists to inform them of what they are to see in terms of 'an anticipation of intense pleasures' (Urry, 1990, p. 3). Therefore, the discourse employed in the tourism context captures attention and encourages tourists to control their understanding and experience of a destination (Dann, 1996). To do so, the discourse on tourism, in terms of a specific discourse filled with extreme languages, is persuasively employed (Jaworska, 2017). Moreover, the discourse of tourism is also specific to meaning-making, as it projects socio-cultural implications. That is, the discourse on tourism represents and communicates social and cultural meanings (Pinto-Coelho & Pinto, 2018) that reflect 'certain ways of seeing reality...' (Caballero-Mengibar, 2015, p. 39).

2.3 Discourse and National Identity

Regarding discourse and national identity, Billig (1995, p. 8) claims that, 'to have a national identity is to possess ways of talking about nationhood' (as quoted in Baruh & Popescu, 2008, p. 84) as national identity is considered to be discursively constructed, maintained, and promoted. In this regard, De Cillia et al. (1999) contend that 'national identities – conceived as specific forms of social identities – are discursively, by means of language and other semiotic systems, produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed' (p. 153). Identity is regarded as a social construct that is not static; pre-existing identities are negotiated and communicated through interactions within and across communities (Swann et al., 2009).

Identity construction in the tourism context is the process of touching others through discourse due to its persuasive and sensitive nature (Yang et al., 2020). Yet, although people are impacted by the order of discourse, the audience's interpretation of the represented identity via discourse is contingent on the cultural norms and social understanding of the audience (van Leeuwen, 2005).

3. Method

The study was designed with a qualitative orientation to gain deeper insight and achieve the research objectives. With respect to the analysis, Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to CDA was adopted to be utilized in terms of description, interpretation, and explanation stages to explore the representation of Iranian national identity in the discourse employed on the Iranian official tourism website.

3.1 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Analysis

Fairclough regards discursive events to be 'instance(s) of language use' (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138), which are three-dimensional because they are considered as: 1) manifestations of spoken or written language; 2) manifestations of social practice in the production and interpretation of text; and 3) forms of social practice (Fairclough, 1995). He believes that sheer textual analysis is insufficient for analyzing discourse, and the three mentioned levels of meanings should be taken into consideration (Fairclough, 1992).

Discourse, in Fairclough's view, is constituted and constitutive (Fairclough, 2001). That is, while discourse constitutes identities, social relations, and knowledge, it is also constituted by social structures and practices. This belief also explicates the intertextuality of discourse in the sense that, whereas an existing discourse as a social practice is constituted by other existing social practices, it also constitutes a new discourse (Fairclough, 1989). Therefore, once discourse is employed in different novel ways, it leads to social change, which is dependent on the power relations of the discourse (Fairclough, 1989).

The three-dimensional model is according to the belief that a text, as a discursive event, holds three dimensions of meaning, namely textual, discursive, and social (Fairclough, 1992). Janks (1997) illuminates each of the three dimensions clearly. The textual level termed description, as the foremost inside box of the dimensions, signifies 'the object of analysis (including verbal, visual or verbal and visual texts)' (Janks, 1997, p. 26). Specifically, the present study seeks to uncover the identity of Iran and its people by delving into the values present in the text. These values are considered pivotal in the manifestation of ideology and identity, as outlined by Fairclough (1989).

The discursive level termed as interpretation, as the second inside box of the dimensions, refers to 'the processes by which the object is produced and received (writing/speaking/designing and reading/listening/viewing) by human subjects' (Janks, 1997, p. 26). Lastly, the social level termed as explanation, as the foremost outside box of the dimensions, demonstrates the social practices through 'the socio-historical conditions' regulating the interpretation and production processes (Janks, 1997, p. 26).

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

The Iranian official tourism website is considered as the setting from which the data was collected as it is the primary source of information to which tourists refer as the official site. There was a total of 82 items involved in terms of tourist attractions in the

Iranian official tourism website which were listed and numbered first and the samples were then systematically selected based on even numbers. Forty-one items, constituting fifty percent of the total, were purposefully selected from a source population deemed capable of providing representative insights into the broader population.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Description Stage

For the analysis of the linguistic texts based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, relations of words are regarded as the locus of meanings (Fairclough, 2013) and the 'focus of ideological struggle' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 115). Within this study, the meanings conveyed through linguistic texts are interpreted and discussed in relation to the representation of Iranian national identity. This analysis is structured around three thematic schemes, landscapes and territory, religion, and history and civilization. These thematic classifications are chosen for their significance in illuminating the nuanced dimensions of Iranian national identity in the discourse.

4.1.1 Landscapes and Territory

Places and landscapes of Iran, as one of the ten topmost countries regarding potential natural resources (Fatemi et al., 2012), definitely have some features to be represented. The phrase 'the presence of a variety' [1] appears to be an introduction and a salient descriptor for the phrase 'fauna and wildlife'. Considering the delineations of synonymy referring to where words 'are mutually substitutable with little effect on meaning' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 116) on the one hand and of hyponymy signifying the situation 'where the meaning of one word is included within the meaning of another word' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 116), the words of 'fauna and wildlife' are utilized as both synonyms and hyponyms. Furthermore, the significance of this wildlife diversity is underscored by the term 'protected areas' [2], emphasizing the value of safeguarding such diversity.

The significance of the protected areas is accentuated on by the direct employment of the phrase 'the most attractive areas in the world' on the one hand and indirectly through the utilization of the two official organizations' names on the other hand [2 & 3]. The names of these two organizations, namely 'The Department of the Environment' and 'UNESCO', are utilized to augment authenticity and enhance credibility of such places both nationally and internationally [3]. On the other hand, such official names are drawn upon to legitimize and support the author's claim that such areas are 'one of the most...' in both 'Iran' and 'world' [2]. Likewise, they are also utilized to bring admissibility to the subsequent claim, which is being 'one of the Biosphere Reserves' [3].

Moreover, in sentence [4], Golestan Park is given two important values, namely 'the first' and 'national'. These two words carry significant meaning, as they convey positive and persuasive messages to both recipients and creators. Used with a high degree of certainty, they serve to amplify the importance of the park in question. In this regard, the word 'first' reflects originality while 'national' indicates true representation of a nation [4]. With respect to that, this park is regarded as the original and true representation of the wildlife in Iran.

However, sentence [5] attributes the park's renown to its adept use of subordination structures, aligning with impactful words like 'verdant' and 'virgin' to underscore its natural value. The acknowledgment of its diversity is evident in the phrase 'different species of flora and fauna', while the statement 'it is famous in Iran and the world' distinctly emphasizes its esteemed position in both local and global contexts.

In the context of lakes and waters, antonymy, defined as 'meaning incompatibility—the meaning of one word is incompatible with the meaning of another' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 116), is prevalent. Antonymous pairs such as 'day' vs. 'night', 'hot' vs. 'cold', 'summer' vs. 'winter', 'ancient' vs. 'currently', and 'dried up' vs. 'rich' [6 to 9] are employed to convey the richness and diversity of the landscape.

Yet, antonymy is not restricted to vocabulary since sentence structure can also depict this feature. Such contradictory structure is employed in the sentence [6] utilizing subordination and the conjunction 'whereas' to emphasize the contradiction related to the waters. Coupled with that, the phrase 'only in the winter' is a description that represents a seasonal lake due to the restriction that the word 'only' brings about in the context [6].

For the sentence [10], the target people have been directly determined as 'nature lovers' and the Anzali wetland is indeed introduced to gain such people's attention. The words, utilized to introduce the mentioned wetland, endeavor to exhibit various aspects of this wetland to impress viewers with the synonyms 'beautiful' and 'spectacular', which tourists endeavor to discover [10 & 14]. To underscore the wetland's significance as a natural treasure, its connection with diverse bird species is clarified through the phrases 'one of the best' habitat and 'appropriate surroundings' for birds. This assures bird enthusiasts that a variety of avian species frequent the wetland. Visiting this wetland becomes an opportunity to witness two marvels with one experience [15].

Furthermore, the synonymous words of 'rivers', 'streams', and 'water' and the utilization of 'gulf', 'island', and 'peninsula' as hyponyms are to indicate the profusion of water which signifies vitality, refreshment, and rejuvenation (Rahmat et al., 2023) [2 & 6 to 17] which are typical tourists' preferences in finding their destinations. Besides, usage of 'apart from' and 'also' imply evasion

of restrictions for the referred place [12 & 13]. The Caspian Sea is regarded to be universally unique as 'world's largest' lake. The application of 'land-locked body of water' is to further describe why the Caspian 'Sea' is regarded as a lake [17].

Caves are represented as sophisticated ancient phenomena in contrast to what the term 'old' connotes which usually refers to simplicity, plainness, and primitiveness. Similarly, ancient people, who are usually known as 'primitive', are conversely introduced as diligent and talented people. In this regard, impassibility represented by the phrase 'long and narrow passages' on the one hand and the phrase 'primitive implements' on the other hand display their intelligence and perseverance [20 & 21]. In the meantime, their sophistications are also represented through the statistics given in the sentences concerning the cave's construction [23 & 24]. Moreover, to scrutinize implications of the word 'overlooking', it conceptualizes the implicit superiority of the cave, representing the proud past, over the village, referring to the present, while both refer to civilization [18].

For the second cave, through the antonymous utilization of 'Cenozoic period' vs. 'recently discovered', two concepts are constructed in terms of scarcity and novelty which are the two most sought-after features in tourism contexts [25 & 26]. The stunning beauty of this cave is demonstrated in terms of the hyponymy of 'reflection' and 'light', as well as 'prism' and 'crystals' on the one hand and of the two synonymously used phrases, namely 'one of the most beautiful' and 'outstanding caves of the world' [28]. Yet, the scarcity of the mentioned cave is regarded by drawing upon the other synonymous words, such as 'rare' and 'exceptional' [29]. Lastly, the harmonious combination of 'the beautiful' and 'the decorative' is meant to lure the public, guiding them on the stunning appearance of the caves. These caves were naturally beautiful but were artistically created and decorated for more aesthetic value decoding the artistic appreciation of inhabitants which has persisted since a time when art was yet to be formalized, indicating an inherent inclination towards artistic preferences even in the absence of a defined concept of art [27].

4.1.2 Religion

In Iran's case, mosques not only represent Islamic ideology but also depict Iran's history and civilization owing to their multifarious functions. They are adorned with artistic architectures which are represented in terms of hyponyms of 'inlaid brick-work', 'plaster moldings', 'engravings', and 'tile works' [30 to 34]. Similarly, the mathematical configurations encompassing the structural embellishments of the mosques manifest through the hyponyms of 'polygonal', 'octagonal', and 'geometric decorations' [33 & 34]. This framework fosters the discernment that mosques serve as repositories for Iranian Islamic artistic achievements. It indicates a strong link between the people of Iran and their religious convictions. Moreover, this suggests that the intricate adornments and architectural improvements gracing mosques serve as poignant manifestations of deep respect and homage to their firmly held religious beliefs and ideology. Simultaneously, it establishes a direct correlation between religion and art, contributing to the formation of an Iranian spiritual ambiance (Askarizad et al., 2022; Mahdavejad et al., 2011). This atmosphere, characterized by artistic engagement, diverges from fundamentalism, as artists' sensibilities are inherently distanced from harshness.

Moreover, throughout history, mosques were not merely perceived as 'places for worship' in the conventional sense [35 & 36]. On the contrary, they served as educational institutions where students engaged in both scientific and theological studies. Additionally, mosques held historical significance as centers for information and cultural exchange, judicial forums, as well as communal spaces for festivities and social interactions (Raesian & Badreh, 2013), illustrating the pragmatic integration of religion into the social fabric of Iranians' lives. Therefore, mosques have been multi-dimensionally considered as the social, scientific, and theological hubs on which scholarship and prosperity of the people have been depended.

As mentioned earlier, mosques are portrayed as the canvas through which the highest artistic values and achievements find expression. In this context, a diverse spectrum of contributors, including political dignitaries like Shahs (kings) and ministers, as well as members of the public, including merchants and artists, played pivotal roles in the establishment of these mosques [37 to 39]. Examining these four representative groups within Iranian society, it is widely inferred that the Iranian people, across various strata, have demonstrated a profound reverence for their religion intertwined with a rich commitment to the arts.

Eventually, it can be perceived that mosque has been a sign of civilization, knowledge, and art which is in opposition to the present perception of mosque, as a symbol of fundamentalism. That is, mosques are in this discourse ideologically contested and novel ideological attributions are contributed to mosques. More to the point, as rewording refers to the situation in which an 'oppositional' wording happens or, as Fairclough (1989) asserts, where 'an existing, dominant, and naturalized, wording is being systematically replaced by another one in conscious opposition to it' (p. 113), rewording is surely occurring regarding mosques and their representations.

On the other hand, the conception of 'mosque' vs. 'theatre' is conventionally presupposed because of the Muslim extremists who inculcate such a perception that theatre is to some extent discordant with Islamic ideology [41]. However, this perception of Islam is not compatible with the Iranian Islamic ideology because of their art-loving nature which is displayed by the phrase 'passion plays' [41].

What is more, the employment of 'and' between the words of 'mosque' and 'theatre' in the texts on the one hand and the construction of mosques and theaters beside each other in the actual setting on the other hand are two representations of Iranian Islamic ideology that depict Iranians as those who can manage their arts and religion go hand in hand without manipulating one another. Therefore, as theater, emblematic of modernity, intertwines with religion, emblematic of tradition, it is evident that Iranians make no sacrifice of either their religious heritage or their embrace of modernity.

Likewise, the association of 'bazaar' and 'mosque' together as the representation of this world and the representation of the hereafter respectively is another hint which is worthwhile to consider [43]. Yet again, it represents the sound Islamic ideology of the Iranians who are neither extremely towards this world to forget the hereafter nor towards the hereafter through which the world and its encompassments, such as family and society, are to be forgotten. Therefore, Iranians are regarded to be art-lovers while they are religious on the one hand and modern progressive thinkers while they keep their traditions on the other.

The engagement of women in crafting these artistic mosques and squares, alongside their male counterparts, is symbolized by the term 'wife', resonating with profound implications related to family and womanhood [40]. This challenges prevailing stereotypes that confine women to limited social roles dictated by Islamic fundamentalism. The term underscores the integral role of a wife, portraying her not only as a supportive partner to her husband but also as a companion actively involved in both familial and societal matters.

4.1.3 History and Civilization

Cities and villages are also displayed as signs of Iran's civilization, culture, and history. In this respect, Persepolis' significance is accounted for by means of the first statement about the monument which is described as 'one of the first to be registered in UNESCO World Heritage List' [44 & 45]. This statement includes two important words. First, it is 'UNESCO', as mentioned afore, which generates the value of the world heritage to all of its registered monuments and the other is the word 'first' implying its importance and superiority over other monuments [44].

Besides, the word 'example' bears the meaning of 'one out of many' to allude to the huge history of Iran [45]. In this context, 'example' is utilized not to represent specification, but it is conversely employed for the purpose of generalization [45]. That is, through exploitation of the massive magnitude of Persepolis, audiences are to be convinced that this is just one manifestation of Iran's civilization and history. Hence, it imparts this understanding that if one of them demonstrates such grandeur, how huge the whole history of Iran is.

The magnificence of Persepolis is highlighted through the employment of hyponymy of two extreme intensifier and quantifier words in terms of 'very' and 'many', accompanied with synonymous words of 'remarkable' and 'considerable' to contribute to the 'the greatest empire', Persia [45, 47, & 50]. Furthermore, Persepolis is represented to be a happy place due to the utilization of the words 'celebration' and 'ceremonies' associated with freedom and richness depicted by the words 'wealth' and 'autonomy' [50 & 51]. Yet, the autonomy was not just for Persians, but they were indeed freedom fighters to relieve other nations from oppressions of their oppressors. This is reflected in the first charter of human rights composed by Cyrus the Great, a Persian king (Irannejad, 2023).

On the other hand, interchangeable employment of 'Iran' and 'Persia' is to directly construct connection between these two names, and it imparts that the characteristics already described belong to Iran as much as they belong to Persia, as the old name of Iran [44 to 51]. Therefore, it is inferred that the interchangeable use of names aims to emphasize that the distinction between these two names arises solely from the passage of time, yet the essence of the nation remains as historically significant as it was in the past. Also, usage of the name 'Persia' is due to the fact that compared to the name 'Iran', 'Persia' holds more historical values, and it represents Iranians as more civilized, sophisticated, and enlightened.

The linguistic texts also describe the historical village of Masuleh. Through the usage of words, such as 'forest', 'valley', 'mount', 'river', and 'waterfall' in the form of hyponymy, 'nature' of the mentioned village is depicted [52 & 53]. Concurrently, its beauty is synonymously regarded as 'unique' and 'exquisite' [54 & 55]. Furthermore, women's sensational contribution to beauty of the village is also heightened [55].

Kalpurkan is another village exhibited through the synonymous words of 'multifarious' and 'various' versus of 'unique' and 'particularity' [57 & 58]. The singularity of this village is for its nature and character while its variety is for its pottery handicrafts. The word 'perpetuate' portrays the constant pursuit of pottery from the past until present although the current situation is somehow in contradiction of its ancient time, which is represented in terms of 'now' versus 'old' and 'ancient', since pottery is near to extinction [56, 67, & 58].

Besides, the association of 'potters', 'women', 'economy', 'contribute', and 'family' as well as 'ever' leads to the construction of significant perceptions regarding the women's role in this village in a small-scale and in Iran in a large-scale [59]. Primarily, women are described as the 'artists' who construct such artistic potters. Subsequently, women are acknowledged as 'contributors' to the

economy, signifying their role in providing financial support to the family. Simultaneously, their contribution extends beyond the monetary realm, encompassing their active involvement in familial affairs. Thus, by considering the perspectives presented in [40, 55, & 59], the portrayal of women's roles undergoes reinterpretation and scrutiny. They are depicted not only as active participants in social life akin to men but also as enduring contributors, underscored by the term 'ever'.

Regarding the palaces and gardens of Iran, synonymy and hyponymy are predominantly used to represent such mentioned beauties of Iran. Utilization of the synonymous words of 'huge' and 'one of the largest in the world' on the one hand and the employment of 'majestic', 'the most interesting', 'beautiful', 'unique', and 'elegant' on the other hand construct hyponymy together to reflect value and beauty while they also bring about overwording manifesting the uniqueness of the beauty in Iran [61, 63, & 66].

However, this beauty is not natural, but it is manmade. It specifies Iranians' inclination towards art, beauty, and serenity. They are represented as those who combine arts and science in their artistic structures which is exposed in the acoustic effect of the 'sound room' [65]. In this regard, the kings contributed the most because they provided affluence for such kinds of construction. This contribution is apparent by the reiteration of the synonymous words, such as 'sovereign', 'monarch', 'king(s)', and 'Shah(s)' in the statements [64 & 66] in terms of hyponym and overwording. Apart from that, high literacy is attributed to the artists who provided such architectural arts through the usage of 'nastaliq script' as it connotes high knowledge mastery due to the association of the literate elites with this script [62]. Furthermore, hospitality of Iranians is also reflected by enumerating various amusements of guests in Iran.

The representation of religion in Iran emanates through the concurrent use of the terms 'many religious sites' and 'popular' [67 & 68]. Presence of numerous religious sites across the country underscores the profound significance that Iranians attribute to religion, notably Islam as the national faith. Simultaneously, the widespread popularity of these religious sites serves as an additional manifestation of the deep-rooted religiosity and spirituality among the Iranian populace.

The expression 'remain so to this day' constitutes another manifestation of religion in Iran [68]. This phrase not only echoes the idea of continuity, signifying a steadfast adherence to religious practices as they were in the past, but also implies a subtle reference to modernity through the mention of 'this day'. This implicit reference suggests a nuanced juxtaposition between tradition and modernity within the context of religion, reflecting the dynamic nature of Iranians' religious identity. Concomitantly, they indicate this signification that despite modernity and secularism attenuating religion, the people of Iran have preserved their religion and beliefs through equilibrating between modernity and religion, showcasing a consistent continuity of moderate Islamic ideology.

Furthermore, religion is represented as ideology for Iranians on which their polity is constructed. The sentence [69], including the word 'enemies', clearly defines Iran and Ottoman's enmity due to their differences in Islamic stances, among other historical and geopolitical issues. On this matter, it is represented that enemies are those who are religiously against these people. More to the point, the phrases of 'a place of worship' in the sentence [70] as well as 'lavishly restored', 'dome in gold', 'many fine embellishments', and 'highly detailed tile work' [71] represent the religious respect and appreciation of Iranians towards their religious leaders, figures, and places.

Regarding grammar, more so than other items absolute employment of the declarative sentence mode coupled with positivity draws attention. Since questions and imperatives hold more persuasive power (Fairclough, 2013), usage of declaratives as the only sentence mode denotes that the discourse used in this official website is to function as an information-giving source rather than a persuasive one because of its official status. Meanwhile, it is believed that persuasion in this discourse occurs through its persuasive vocabulary rather than its grammar.

Furthermore, it is perceived that the process type of 'attribution', as descriptions, more than other process types is used. In terms of expressive modality, with exception of the twice usage of 'approximately', the rest of the sentences are produced with high expressive modality because of the utilization of simple present tense as a 'terminal point' which represents 'a categorical commitment of the producer to the truth of the proposition' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 129). Sentences are predominantly produced in active voice with clear agency.

4.2 Interpretation

While Iran has faced image manipulation and even destruction, tourism emerges as a powerful tool to convey the country's authentic identity to the world. The government as a pivotal force, expressing a strong commitment to the tourism industry, aims to maximize its potential (Pezeshki et al., 2023). The Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization of Iran (MCTH), as an official governmental institution, possesses the requisite qualifications, recognition, and accountability to effectively represent the nation to a global audience.

The contents are narrated by the producer(s) through the descriptions attributed to Iran's tourist attractions in terms of the written texts. They are fixed and thus not as dynamic as dialogue or even monologue. The discourse is well-elaborated in describing Iran's attractions although they appear in plain simple English. Each tourist attraction has its own separated explanation which is provided in its specific domain on the website.

The subject positions, in this context, are occupied by the producers, who are the officials in MCTH, while potential tourists serve as both the audience and interpreters. In this regard, there is no change of position. Therefore, the producers of the discourse only allow manifestation of their values and not the interpreters' in order to reflect 'certain ways of seeing reality ...' (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998, p. 6), which they approve. The relation chosen between producers and interpreters is exactly like tour guides and visitors respectively, excluding interruptions and interactions.

Media discourse is one-sided discourse with consideration of an ideal potential audience with which the actual audience is negotiated to understand the intended meanings of the producers (Fairclough, 1989). However, it should also be mentioned that the producers need to have an acceptable understanding of the current knowledge of the audience about the intended discourse while they have in mind the desirable and ideal knowledge, they expect the audience to acquire through their discourse. Therefore, it is almost certain that there are some shared common understandings between producers and interpreters although they have differences of understanding (Fairclough, 1989).

The common understanding in this regard can be specified in terms of the influence of the Western media on the audience. The producers hold the knowledge about the negative influences of the Western media on the potential audience regarding the identity of Iran and its people as they are mostly living outside the sphere of the Iranian media. Thus, they encounter the discourse with some ambiguities and internalized negative stances towards Iran emanated from the mentioned media impression.

On the other hand, interpreters are individuals driven by curiosity about Iran, actively searching for official sources to gain insights into the country. They discover the website and engage with its discourse. This group may include potential tourists contemplating a visit to Iran or individuals whose curiosity has been piqued by media coverage and who are eager to discover the authentic Iran and its people.

In the meantime, interpreters from different institutions of society hold different perspectives on ideologies and power relations (Fairclough, 2013). Fairclough accentuates such differences by maintaining that 'one consequence of this is that situations may be differently interpreted if different social orders are being drawn upon as interpretative procedures by different participants' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 151). Not only do such differences occur cross-culturally but also can happen within a culture because of 'different ideological positions' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 151).

Yet, in this case, although the audience may be from different parts of the world, they communicate with one another through tourist attractions and touristic mediums, which are universally perceived (Dann, 1996). As all interpreters approach the discourse with 'some context in mind' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 151), majority of them, being the audience, anticipate encountering beauty and elegance across various facets of Iran when visiting the official tourism website. To some extent, they are confident that the knowledge conveyed through the website's discourse will be both pleasant and joyous.

Apart from that, Fairclough (2001) accentuates the significance of presuppositions in this stage since 'presuppositions are not properties of texts, and they are an aspect of text producers' interpretations of intertextual context' (p.127). In other words, producers and interpreters communicate with each other through some existing intertextual knowledge in the form of presuppositions. Albeit presuppositions are to some extent already hinted, there are some formal textual features which refer to presuppositions. 'One of the ...' is one of those features showing that there are further and this not the only case. Moreover, 'the most attractive areas in the world' is one of such presuppositions through the usage of 'the, most, attractive, and the world' since definite article 'the' and 'modifiers' are presupposition cues manifesting magnetism (Fairclough, 1989).

Likewise, 'the world's largest lake' is another example in which superlative adjective is used showing the ultimate largeness. In another case, there is another phrase 'famous in Iran and the world' and 'the best known archeological monument' having almost the same features of presupposition alluding to fame. 'A beautiful view', 'beautiful decorative stones', 'beautiful paintings', and 'a spectacular view' are similarly considered since they are all presupposed with their adjectives indicating beauty although definition of beauty may vary among people.

4.3 Explanation

Examining discourse requires considering the context for meaning construction, as the order of discourse is influenced by power relations in social contexts (Fairclough, 2013). The discourse was produced amidst accusations from the U.S. asserting Iran's threat to international peace, a historical analysis unveils a stark contrast. Iran, in its modern history spanning two centuries, has refrained from initiating wars, showcasing a commitment to peace. This historical context sets the stage for a nuanced examination of the disparities between perceived threats and actual historical actions (Tabatabai & Samuel, 2017). Labeling Iran and its people has

led to a distortion of their true identity, orchestrated by both Democrat and Republican administrations, bolstered by the influence of Western media. Their perceptions of Iran and its people, shaped by political leaders and authorities, have been promoted without genuine consideration for the perspectives of Iranians.

However, despite past tensions, in 2013-2015 and 2021, Iran and America acknowledged the necessity of viewing each other as reliable powers. This mutual recognition led to treaty negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, deemed peaceful by Iran but suspected of having military intent by Western powers. During a particular timeframe, Barack Obama, a Democrat, and Hasan Rouhani, a moderate figure in Iranian politics, coincided in leadership positions. Obama, known for his emphasis on diplomacy and peaceful approaches, created an environment conducive to negotiations. Similarly, Rouhani, as a leader, contributed to a favorable atmosphere in Iran's international relations. Consequently, both nations initiated negotiations, beginning with a phone call and resulting in a subsequent treaty. However, Donald Trump as the president of the United States withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal and stimulated distrust (Sayahi, 2022). Yet again, after the US 2020 presidential election and the election of President Biden, Iran and the US have started their negotiations to resume the execution of the mentioned deal which, as of now, has not resulted in any agreement.

Generally, the discourse serves a dual purpose in its application. Firstly, it seeks to showcase the hidden beauties and diversities of Iran, portraying a side seldom exposed to the world. This narrative constructs a pleasant atmosphere that deliberately veers away from violence, threats, and concerns. The intention is to (re)shape Iran's national identity, challenging the current image with which it is often associated. Secondly, the discourse strategically (re)constructs Iran's mild and moderate Islamic ideology. This deliberate effort is aimed at challenging the prevailing Western mainstream understanding of Iran's national identity, signifying a clear contestation to redefine the country's narrative and transform the existing status quo in this regard.

5. Conclusion

The Western mainstream portrayal of Iran as an 'axis of evil' country, initially introduced by George W. Bush, faces explicit contestation within the Iranian official website discourse. This pushback is rooted in their dissatisfaction with the prevailing image. In this endeavor, the website's discourse portrays Iran as a nation whose exceptional beauty, sophistication, and rich civilization has been intentionally overlooked. The effort is dedicated to projecting these characteristics, spanning landscape, history, civilization, and religion, as the genuine image and identity of Iran. By utilizing linguistic features such as synonymy, hyponymy, and antonymy, among others, the discourse endeavors to accentuate the extraordinary pleasantness of its nature and environment, aiming to (re)shape the perception of the country as inherently peaceful.

The juxtaposition of three significant concepts in people's lives, 'mosque' representing religion and tradition, 'theater' symbolizing progression and modernity, and 'bazaar' embodying society and commerce, reflects a balanced and moderate Islamic ideology, distancing itself from intolerance. Likewise, the portrayal of women's active roles in both family and society authentically reflects Iranian ideology, contrasting sharply with the passivity and subordination traditionally ascribed to women in the context of Islamic fundamentalism, where their roles are often depicted in comparison to men.

All in all, the discourse reproduces Iranians' perception of Islam as moderate Islamic ideology which is away from 'fundamentalism' and 'extremism' by which Iran is projected in the Western media 'because of its 'Islamic character'' (Jahedi & Abdullah, 2012, p. 60). They projected a demeanor of a harmonious and moderate Islamic ideology, shaping their identity through embellished arts and tourist attractions. This intentional portrayal deliberately omitted any touristic focus on military aspects or perceived threatening powers, aiming to reshape and counter the prevailing stereotype of extremism associated with their image. Thus, the discourse of the website is resisting in accepting the Iran's identity constructed, produced, and promoted by the Western media. In the meantime, it is struggling to transform the status quo about Iran's image and identity to reproduce and then promote an acceptable representation of its identity.

This study is confined to analyzing the discourse present on the Iranian official tourism website while there are non-official websites available. This analysis focuses solely on linguistic texts within the mentioned website. It is important to note that visual texts and website genres are not subjects of the current study. These limitations should be acknowledged, potentially paving the way for future studies to explore these aspects further.

6. Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

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Appendix A: The Linguistic Text

- [1] Some areas in Mazandaran Province, due to the presence of a variety of fauna and wildlife have come to be known as protected areas.
- [2] These are in the Gulf of Gorgan, Ashooradeh Island and Miankaleh peninsula, and extent to approximately 7,000 hectares and are known to be among the most attractive areas in the world.
- [3] The Department of the Environment as a wildlife refuge protects it and UNESCO has registered it as one of the Biosphere Reserves.
- [4] The Golestan National Park is the first Iranian National Park.
- [5] Because of its natural value such as the existence of verdant and virgin forests and different species of flora and fauna, it is famous in Iran and the world.
- [6] The Salt Lake contains water only in the winter months, whereas in summer a crust of salt attracts attention.
- [7] This region experiences an extremely dry climate and the difference between day and night temperatures range till approximately 70° C.
- [8] It is a section of an ancient lake, currently dried up and rich in mineral sedimentation due to gradual evaporation.
- [9] It is hot and dry in the summer and cold and dry in the winter.
- [10] The Anzali wetland and its islands have a beautiful view which attracts nature lovers.
- [11] Rivers, streams and water from irrigation drains into this wetland.

- [12] Apart from the economical and environmental aspect, it plays an important role in Gilan's social, geographical, political and cultural atmosphere.
- [13] It is also of importance in connection with several scientific backgrounds such as zoology, biology and environmental studies.
- [14] The wetland displays a spectacular view.
- [15] This wetland is one of the best and appropriate surroundings for various waterfowls.
- [16] Hundreds of species of migrant birds choose to settle in this area for breeding.
- [17] The Caspian Sea is the world's largest land-locked body of water or lake.
- [18] Niasar cave dates back to approximately 2000 years ago and nestles in the limestone hills overlooking the Niyasar Village of Kashan.
- [19] This cave has been dug out with the help of primitive implements.
- [20] The same comprises of long and narrow passages, several chambers and wells.
- [21] It is well worth mentioning that appropriate gear is required to gain access to this vicinity.
- [22] The Niyasar Cave is in three floors, and has a number of wells.
- [23] The underground tunnels or passages are less than one square meter in area, and in some locations measure 100 x 70 sq. cm.
- [24] Vertically 45 wells are connected to each other at an average depth of 118 m.
- [25] Chal Nakhjir is a rare geological phenomenon which was recently discovered in 1989.
- [26] This cave belongs to the Cenozoic period. (Second cave)
- [27] It has beautiful decorative stones.
- [28] The reflection of light through prism of crystals and calcite stones, beside variable hangings from ceiling and spongy crystalic covering of the walls and flooring, create an exotic sight and ranks this cave to one of the most beautiful and outstanding caves of the world in attracting tourists.
- [29] This cave is a rare and exceptional site for tourists is worth seeing.
- [30] The principle factors regarding the artistic effects revealed in Gonbad Soltanieh are the inlaid brick-work, plaster moldings, engravings and tile works.
- [31] All these together create harmony that is worth appreciation and artistic value.
- [32] This historical site is of great value where planning and architectural feats are concerned. (Masjed Jamee Zanjan)
- [33] The whole Ivan decorated with polygonal azure tiles. (Menar Jonban)
- [34] There are various octagonal and other geometric decorations worked in plaster moldings. (Na'in mosque)
- [35] The Jame' Mosque and school of Zanjan is situated in the old part of the city.
- [36] Facing towards south are rise chambers used as residential quarters for the theology students.
- [37] The Khajeh Nezam-ol-Molk Dome, (minister during the reign of Malek Shah Saljuqi) was constructed in the years 465-485 AH. (Isfahan Mosque)
- [38] The forty pillars in the western sector of this dome were added to the mosque during the reign of Shah Abbas I.
- [39] Two minarets of this porch were additions made during the rule of Hassan Bek Turkoman and 'Abu Nasr Hassan Abadar was responsible for repairs in this mosque.
- [40] Amir Chakhmaq Shami and his wife, Seti Fatimeh built this square, in the 9th century AH. (Amir Chakhmaq Mosque)

- [41] Hadji Qanbar Bazaar on the east side of the square was one of the buildings constructed by Nezameddin Hadj Qanbar Jahanshahi.
- [42] The famous Mir Chakhmaq Mosque and theater for passion plays are located on the north of the square.
- [43] Each row or alley of the bazaar was allocated to a certain guild, besides which each segment comprised of a mosque, bath and arcade. (Qazvin bazaar)
- [44] It was one of the first Iranian sites to be registered in UNESCO World Heritage List.
- [45] The Persepolis compound, known to Iranians as Takht-e Jamshid, is a very remarkable example of ancient monuments of Iran. (Persepolis)
- [46] Persepolis (Persian: Takht-e Jamshīd) is perhaps the best-known archaeological monument of Persia (Iran).
- [47] Here in the twinkling of an eye we can leave the modern world behind and find ourselves in about 500 BC at the capital of the greatest empire the world had known to that time: the Persian Empire.
- [48] This place has been regarded as a sacred site from prehistoric times.
- [49] At its height the Persian Empire stretched from Greece and Libya in the west to the Indus River in present-day Pakistan in the east.
- [50] The many nations under the empire's rule enjoyed considerable autonomy in return for supplying the empire's wealth.
- [51] The Persian kings used Persepolis primarily as a residence and for ceremonies such as the celebration of Norūz.
- [52] Masūleh River is the river passing through Māsūleh with a water fall 200m away from the city.
- [53] The city is also surrounded by forest from valley to mount.
- [54] The most exquisite feature of Māsūleh is its architecture.
- [55] Masūleh women adorn the windows with flowerpots and this gives a unique beauty to the village.
- [56] Iranian pottery is as old as this country's history. (Kalpurkan)
- [57] Alas, after developing in multifarious manners in various centers across Iran, this art now appears on the verge of extinction despite its unique character.
- [58] Perhaps the most striking particularity of the pottery of Kalpurkan concerns its manufacturing technique, which perpetuates ancient methods and models.
- [59] The potters of Kalpurkan have ever been women, who thus contribute to the economy of the family.
- [60] The decoration appears used consist entirely of abstract symbols and mental images transmitted from generation to generation, which sometimes religious beliefs or features of her environment.
- [61] Still sometimes known as Naghsh-e-Jahan Square, this huge, open square is one of the largest in the world (500m by 160m), and a majestic example of town planning Built in 1612, many of the most interesting sights in Isfahan are clustered around the square, and it's a place you just keep coming back to again and again. (Naghsh-e-Jahan Square)
- [62] Here, there are beautiful paintings and an inscription worked with plaster in the 'nastaliq' script.
- [63] Its unique archaic architecture is related to the Safavid era.
- [64] The monarch would receive special envoys in this palace and hold his audience here.
- [65] Plasterwork of the 'sound room' was modeled such that the acoustic affect produced natural and pleasant sounds.
- [66] The sovereign and his guests would be spectators to polo, illuminations, fireworks and the dramatics that took place in the Nagsh-e-Jahan Square from the halls of this elegant palace.
- [67] The most important of the many religious sites in Qom is the Shrine of Hazrat-e Masumeh (AS), a mausoleum dedicated to Fatimah Masumeh, sister of Imam Reza (AS).

[68] The shrine which was erected in her memory soon became a popular site of pilgrimage and remains so to this day.

[69] Shah Abbas I (r. 1587-1629) wished to discourage his subjects from making pilgrimages to sites outside of his kingdom such as Najaf and Karbala, which were then in the hands of his enemies the Ottoman Turks.

[70] He thus began a large scale reconstruction of the Hazrat-e Masumeh and emphasized its importance as a place of worship.

[71] King Fat'ali Shah (r. 1797-1834) had the shrine lavishly restored, covering the main dome in gold and adding many fine embellishments including highly detailed tile work.