



# Tourists' perceived destination image and behavioral intentions towards a sanctioned destination: Comparing visitors and non-visitors

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on a qualitative study, this study aims to provide an improved understanding of how tourists perceive a sanctioned destination's image and how sanction-induced crises influence tourists' behavioral intentions. To do so, this study employed semi-structured interviews with 30 individuals each with and without prior experience visiting Iran. The findings revealed that sanctions influence affective and cognitive images and enhance tourist risk perceptions, including financial, satisfaction, terrorism and war, political, crime, security, and functional/performance risks. Furthermore, a positive post-trip evaluation was found to play a significant role in further behavioral intention, thereby enhancing destination image. Overall, this study enriches the literature on tourism and crises by focusing on visitors' and non-visitors' perceptions of a sanctioned destination and their subsequent behavioral intents. The theoretical and practical implications of the study are provided in the conclusion.

## 1. Introduction

Major powers have long used sanctions as foreign policy instruments to address significant foreign policy crises (Peksen, 2019). Although primarily utilized by international actors, such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in response to threats to international peace and security or to preserve or restore peace (Lorenz, 2019), this widely used geopolitical tool of statecraft has significant implications for tourism destinations. Previous studies suggest that tourist destinations are highly vulnerable to geopolitical crises (Farmaki, Antoniou, & Christou, 2019; Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016), and sanction-induced crises have a significant effect on tourists' intention to visit a destination subject to sanctions (Khodadadi, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2019a). Nonetheless, despite the burgeoning literature on the effects of various crises—terrorist attacks, financial crises, political instability, and biosecurity threats, etc.—on perceived destination image and tourist risk perception (Hall, 2010; Li, Blake, & Cooper, 2010; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Wright & Sharpley, 2016), knowledge concerning sanctioned destinations is limited (Seyfi, Hall and Vo-Thanh, 2020).

The use of sanctions as a foreign policy tool has attracted substantial research in political science, economics, and public policy. However, to date, sanctions have mainly been seen as economically-focused

geopolitical instruments while their multi-scaled sociocultural components have generally been ignored (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016; Seyfi & Hall, 2020a). Indeed, research on the political geography of sanctions has not emphasized tourism as a significant topic (Hall, 2010). This exploratory study responds to the call of previous researchers (Khodadadi, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2019a; Seyfi & Hall, 2020a, 2020b) to investigate the impact of sanctions on destination image and perceived risk. While previous studies have analyzed the impact of sanctions on destinations (Farahani & Shabani, 2013; Khodadadi, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Morakabati, 2011; Seyfi & Hall, 2020a), less attention has been paid to tourists' perceptions of sanctions. To address the above-mentioned gaps, this study investigated how a sanction-led crisis has influenced Western tourists' perceptions of Iran's image as an emerging tourist destination.

Iran, which has been under the longest-standing sanctions regime since the 1970s, provides an interesting case for understanding such interrelationships. By focusing on two distinct groups of visitors (those who have already visited Iran) and non-visitors (those who may visit Iran in the future), researchers can segregate the relative influence of different image sources and representations.

According to Ryan and Cave (2005), destination image is a complex and multifaceted concept, and quantitative studies cannot capture all

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aspects of tourists' perceptions. A qualitative approach could thus allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding and provide a more holistic insight into the subject under investigation (Chen, 2018). Furthermore, the extant literature on destination image has mostly been quantitative in nature, while there is a relatively notable absence of qualitative research examining this significant and established area of research. Therefore, this study adopted a qualitative approach.

In addition, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to examine visitors and non-visitors' perceptions of travelling to a sanctioned destination. A comparison of the two different image contributes a more balanced approach to the extant literature, which mainly focuses on visitors. Furthermore, little is documented about tourists' (especially Western tourists, as one of the main tourism-generating markets) views of sanctioned destinations, which are arguably not major destinations in the global tourism market. This research is also timely, given the re-imposition of sanctions against Iran by the United States following a brief period where they were lifted (2015–2018) in response to Iran's nuclear programme as well as the current discussion over its continuation.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: First, recent studies focused on non-visitors and visitors' assessments of a destination's image and the perceived risks and sanctions are reviewed. In the methodology section, we describe the qualitative approaches adopted to collect and analyze the data. This is followed by a discussion of the findings. Finally, in the conclusion, we discuss the implications and limitations of our results.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Destination image for visitors and non-visitors

Although the notion of image has been largely explored by tourism scholars, they have yet to reach a consensus on a specific definition for "destination image" (Chen, 2018); instead, many frequently admit that image represents an individual's perception of the different attributes of a place, such as cultural, physical, and social aspects of a country, while simultaneously comprising one's own feelings about the destination through image components (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Crompton, 1979; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991).

Most researchers conceptualize perceived destination image as a tourist's overall perception or a comprehensive set the emotions, prejudices, imaginations, and impressions that a person has of a destination (Tasci, Uslu, Styliadis, & Woosnam, 2022; Almeida-García, Domigunéz-Azcue, Mercadé-Melé, & Pérez-Tapia (2020); Agapito, Oom do Valle, & da Costa Mendes, 2013). Echtner and Ritchie (1993) claim that an image must represent a psychological component (e.g., security and safety, the staff's hospitality and feelings) and a functional element (e.g., weather and type of accommodation). Wang and Hsu (2010) argued that tourists' image of a destination includes five dimensions: level of service quality (i.e., knowledge, staff abilities and skills, and reliable and consistent service), tourism resources (i.e., cultural activities and rich heritage), destination environment (i.e., clean, tidy, pleasant, with enjoyable weather), and other supporting factors (i.e., transportation convenience).

Scholars have also introduced different dimensions of destination image: cognitive, affective, and conative (Crompton, 1979; Embacher & Buttle, 1989; Gartner, 1994; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The cognitive component refers to the knowledge or thoughts tourists have towards a place, while the affective component reflects their feelings and emotions towards a destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Gartner, 1994). Finally, the conative dimension of destination image is represented by the action of visitor (Kuhzady & Ghasemi, 2019; Siyamiyan Gorji, Almeida-García, & Mercadé Melé, 2022). Positive word of mouth (WOM), recommending the destination to relatives or others, and a desire to return comprise this action step (Gartner, 1994; Kim, Holland, & Han, 2013).

Although the concept of image has been studied extensively, little

research has focused on a comparative analysis between prospective and actual visitors (Bianchi & Milberg, 2017; Davari & Jang, 2021). Some authors have also highlighted the scarcity of literature regarding the images that individuals hold of destinations they have never actually visited (Proyungorj, 2021; Styliadis & Cherifi, 2018). Indeed, destination image studies are inconclusive as to whether non-tourists' perceptions of a destination differ from actual tourists and in what dimensions or features different tourist groups perceive a destination differently (Awaritefe, 2004). Few studies have examined emerging destinations, especially in the Middle East, to compare the perceptions or demands of tourists and non-tourists. Scholars use several terms to describe images held by those who have a low perception of a specific vacation destination. For instance, the concept of "secondary image" has mostly been adopted; however, it typically refers to a constructed image taken prior to a scheduled trip to the target place (Lopes, 2011). Davari and Jang (2021) propose the "people-centered image" notion to refer to the images in the minds of non-visitors that were projected by the natives of that country. Some studies used the term "prospective visitors" to describe the images of travelers who indicated an interest in visiting a holiday location but have not yet travelled there (Davari & Jang, 2021). Maghrifani, Liu, & Sneddon (2022) also define "potential tourists" as those people who have not visited the destination but are likely to travel there at some point in the future. They also argue that given that tourists' self-concept may change as a result of their travel experiences, it may be the case that visitors and non-visitors differ in terms of visitor image congruity. In our study, we adopted Pike's (Pike, 2008, p. 206) definition of "non-visitors" as "those who would like to visit but have not yet been able to for various reasons, as well as those who have chosen not to visit Iran." Pre- and post-visit images have also been examined in the existing research to address individual perceptions towards a given destination (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2020). Wang and Davidson (2010) evaluated the pre- and post-trip image differences between visitors and non-visitors to Zanzibar Island, with the latter having a more positive image than the former. Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye (2011) investigated the pre- and post-trip student variations in attitudes towards target destinations for short-term stays. According to these findings, positive pre-trip perception declines as the actual travel experience progresses.

Cherifi, Smith, Maitland, and Stevenson (2014) argued that the general attributes of destination images can be used to assess non-visitors' images of destinations. Accordingly, Yilmaz and Yilmaz (2020) categorized the backgrounds of destination images for non-visitors. They suggest that non-visitors' destination images can be shaped by two different types of background: 1) a pre-trip destination background, which comprises information sources, brand and identity, and travel constraints; and 2) a pre-trip personal background, which includes tourists' profiles, motivations, place identity, familiarity, empathy, beliefs, perceived risk, and cultural values. Davari and Jang (2021) argued that long-term relations with people from another country and hospitality experiences have a significant role in shaping potential tourists' image of the country. Bianchi and Milberg (2017) found that destination brand awareness, brand image, and destination value are the main drivers that attract non-visitors to visit a long-haul holiday destination. Prior research has also demonstrated that non-visitors have fewer favorable images of a holiday destination than do visitors. (Awaritefe, 2004; Hughes & Allen, 2008; Phillips & Jang, 2010). In addition, post-visit experiences enhance the image of a place in tourists' minds compared with the pre-trip stage, particularly in terms of attributes such as the social environment, attractions, weather, infrastructure, and people (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Non-visitors obviously have less knowledge about the destinations than visitors (Hughes & Allen, 2008), and because both groups use different sources of information to acquire knowledge about the destination, their images are formulated in different ways (Frochot, Entina, & M., 2009). Overall, research indicates that potential tourists' perceptions of destinations are less reliable and are formed by a variety of sources and factors, including media, WOM, and one's imagination (Prayag, 2009).

## 2.2. Sanctions-induced destination image, perceived risk, and behavioral intention

Sönmez et al. (Sönmez & Allen, 1994, p.22) define tourism crisis as:

Any occurrence that can threaten the normal operation and conduct of tourism-related businesses; it damages a tourist destination's overall reputation for safety, attractiveness and comfort by negatively affecting visitors' perceptions of that destination; and, in turn, it causes a downturn in the local travel and tourism economy and interrupts the continuity of business operations for the local travel and tourism industry by the reduction in tourist arrivals and expenditure.

From this perspective, sanctions alone can be regarded as a crisis for the tourism industry of a target country in terms of the challenges, difficulties, and problems faced by visitors and businesses (Khodadadi, 2018).

Sanctions have four different types of negative impacts on the target country's tourism industry: macroeconomic, direct, indirect, and induced impacts (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018). The direct economic effects of sanctions hit the supply and demand sides of the tourism-related sectors. On the other hand, the indirect economic impacts refer to the effect of the sanctions on tourism-supporting industries. As a result, sanctions may have both distributional and revenue effects on the target countries. Furthermore, the ensuing impacts of sanctions exacerbate problems when it comes to determining the image of a destination, particularly in the tourist-generating market (Khodadadi, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Sanctions create a negative image of a destination and demand for tourism falls (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2019a, 2019b).

Tourism crises and destination image have been the subject of numerous studies (Huang & Medeiros, 2021; Jiang, Ritchie, & Benckendorff, 2019), mostly focusing on countries such as North Korea, Russia, China, Turkey, and Japan (Li, Wen, & Ying, 2018; Sharpley, 2005) or investigating diverse geographical areas such as Asia, South-east Asia, Europe, and North America (Papatheodorou, Rosselló, & Xiao, 2010). These studies have shown how different types of crises negatively affect tourism flow by increasing the psychological risks to tourists, altering travelers' perceptions of the destination's attractiveness, and damaging a destination's image (Li et al., 2010).

Studies that have adopted risk theory to explain travel behavior during a crisis, in this case imposing sanctions, have identified safety-related concerns as key predictors of travel avoidance (Alvarez and Campo, 2014; Avraham and Ketter, 2017; Chew & Jahari, 2014). Tourists often prefer to visit low-risk destinations (Li et al., 2018). Sanctions depict a destination with a high level of risk and threat, thus leading potential tourists to avoid or delay their visit (Khodadadi, 2018; Seyfi & Hall, 2019a, 2019b). Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) proposed an interpretation of destination-specific risks based on their evidence, echoing Sönmez (1998) argument that both actual and perceived risks should be addressed in risk research. However, they overlook the fact that visitors perceive risk differently depending on the situation and destination (Horiachko, 2021). Thus, although these studies provide valuable insights, they only partially illustrate why individuals do not plan to visit a destination (Farmaki et al., 2019). Moreover, while safety is admittedly a key factor for tourists, it does always affect potential tourists' willingness to visit a destination (Yang & Nair, 2014). Despite these dangers, some tourists, particularly repeat visitors, return to their favorite sites. Although the explored background of behavioral intention based on the literature review has identified the major variables in visit intention—attachment, perceived value, the destination's distinctive nature, satisfaction, destination image, previous travel experience, and perceived risk—the relationship between crisis events and behavioral intention among visitors and non-visitors has been relatively overlooked (Rastegar, Seyfi, & Rasoolimanesh, 2021; Rasoolimanesh, Seyfi, Rastegar, & Hall, 2021; Hosseini, Cortes Macias, & Almeida Garcia, 2021).

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Study context: Tourism and sanctions in Iran

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 prompted a series of diplomatic conflicts between Iran and Western countries, particularly the USA. Not long after, the first sanctions were issued by the US after Iranian students occupied the American embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, taking more than 60 American diplomats hostage and sparking a 15-month international crisis (Esfandiary & Fitzpatrick, 2011).

In addition to the increase in tension over Iran's nuclear programme in 2010, unprecedented sanctions were instituted by the United States (Ghaderi, Soltani, Henderson, & Zareei, 2018). While there are a number of North African and Middle Eastern countries that have been targets of economic sanctions, Iran is particularly well known for being subject to some of the toughest and longest-lasting embargo regimes in the modern world (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011). These long-term sanctions have crippled the Iranian economy and made life more difficult for Iranians (Moret, 2014).

Due to an agreement signed by Iran and the P5 + 1 (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, Russia, and Germany) regarding its nuclear programme, i.e., the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" (JCPOA), sanctions against Iran were lifted on January 16, 2016. Consequently, for two years Iran was ranked among the world's fastest-growing tourist destinations (Khodadadi, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Siyamiyan Gorji, Almeida-García, & Mercadé Melé, 2021). On May 8, 2018, US President Donald Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the JCPOA, despite the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) having confirmed that Iran had complied with its terms ten times (IAEA, 2017). Consequently, Trump reinstated intensified sanctions in 2018 and expanded them in 2019 and 2020 under the "maximum pressure campaign" (Drezner, 2019).

As a result of the US pulling out of the agreement in May 2018 and the re-imposition of sanctions, Iran's booming tourism industry suffered significantly. Following the return of sanctions, foreign investors almost entirely pulled out of Iran owing to the risk of being blacklisted according to US sanctions, the fear of losing access to the US market, and because some European airlines suspended flights to Iran. Iran's image as a tourist country has again been tarnished by the over 1500 sanctions that have been reimposed (Seyfi & Hall, 2020a, 2020b), and potential tourists consider Iran a risky destination. The mobility of tourists visiting Iran is also affected by the re-imposition of sanctions (Khodadadi, 2018). Travel advisories have been reissued by European countries to citizens who wish to visit Iran, and major online travel companies have suspended operations in the country. Although Iran is a fairly affordable tourist destination (due to the decrease in the currency rate, Iran continues to have a competitive advantage in attracting international tourists), only a small number of international tourists visit the country. Foreign tourists, especially Europeans, have a negative perception of Iran, and as a result of sanctions, most potential tourists regard Iran as a dangerous and risky destination (Akhoondnejad, 2015; Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2022).

### 3.2. Research design

Owing to the exploratory nature of this study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were deemed suitable for data collection. The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on a literature review and previous studies (e.g., Chen, 2018; Li et al., 2018; Proyrungorj, 2021; Styliadis & Cherifi, 2018) and was adapted to the study context. A pilot study was also conducted with three visitors and three non-visitors to ensure the efficacy of the interview questions in eliciting sufficient data to fulfil the study aims (Jennings, 2011). By doing so, new questions were added and ambiguous questions were revised. An interview protocol, involving the interview procedure, central questions and subsequent follow-up probes was adopted (see Appendix 1. for details).

Four broad themes pertinent to the research objectives were prioritized: (1) How do you perceive Iran's destination image as a sanctioned destination? (2) How do you personally perceive the effects of sanctions on your decision to visit Iran as a holiday destination? (3) Do you feel it is dangerous to travel to a sanctioned destination? (4) How have sanctions affected your intention to visit Iran and to recommend it as a tourist destination? Respondents were also asked follow-up questions to discuss more about the factors influencing their perceptions and to allow researchers to probe for deeper details. Examples included "What reasons and factors make you have such perceptions?", "Could you please explain to me in detail your experiences regarding these perceptions?", "Could you please tell me about your reasons for having such perceptions?", "How would you describe your emotions, feelings, or moods about Iran as a place to visit or a tourist destination subjected to sanctions?", and "Do you have a plan to visit/revisit Iran in the near future? Why or why not?". The last section captured the socio-demographic details of the sample (age, gender, level of education, marital status, and occupation).

The interviews continued until data saturation was achieved after 60 interviews, with the last interviews not yielding any new information. All interviews were conducted in English by the lead author. Content analysis via the NVivo software guided by the content analysis technique of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), open coding, and latent content analysis was applied in two separate stages.

### 3.3. Sampling, data collection, and analysis

Ideally, exploring the perceptions of visitors and non-visitors requires the use of tourists of the same nationality to ensure identical cultural backgrounds (Seddighi, Nuttall, & Theocharous, 2001; Wang & Davidson, 2010). Hence, the sample of visitors and non-visitors included Spanish, Italian, and German tourists who were among the top inbound markets to Iran. Different steps were taken to obtain a purposive sample of visitors and non-visitors suitable for this study. First, we contacted several main travel agencies in Iran that operate group tours for foreign tourists. In the case that they agreed to participate in the study we requested the visitors' contact details to follow up with interviews. In this stage, we encountered challenges in successfully completing the samples since there was no guarantee that visitors would agree to participate in the interview. Finally, 30 tourists agreed to be interviewed. To recruit non-visitor interviewees, we asked visitors after each interview if any of their friends and acquaintances who had not visited Iran would be interested in being interviewed. These individuals were then contacted, and those who accepted and were available were interviewed. Using snowball sampling, more participants were recruited by asking the first round of interviewees to recommend people who might be interested in participating in the study. This sampling technique was chosen as the most suitable for obtaining a sample of non-visitors suitable for this investigation. The criteria for non-visitors' sampling included (i) a citizen of one of the defined countries who had never visited Iran, (ii) able to speak English, and (iii) 18 years old and over (for ethical reasons). The respondents' profiles are listed in Table 1 (see Appendix 2). Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 min and was recorded with the interviewees' consent. All interviews were conducted using the Skype and Zoom platforms. The use of new Internet technologies as a research tool has been recognized and is more conducive to difficult-to-reach and geographically dispersed communities (Hanna, 2012).

## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1. Sanctions and perceived destination image

In most cases, the study participants noted that sanctions and related crises negatively affected their perceptions of Iran as a travel destination. The data analysis showed that sanctions have negative impacts on

five attributes of tourists' perceived destination image: social environment, atmosphere, political and economic factors, general infrastructure, and tourist infrastructure. Some non-visitor interviewees believed that Iranians might not be as friendly towards Western visitors compared to other tourists due to the intensive negative influence of sanctions on ordinary people that has increased anti-Western sentiments. Indeed, because the sanctions were imposed by Western governments, they were concerned about people's attitudes towards Western tourists; therefore, they felt they would not be welcomed or might be ignored by the local people. While other respondents showed a more moderate attitude towards Iran's government, they still felt that it would hamper their tourism experience in Iran. According to Awaritefe (2004), the images affecting potential visitors' intention to visit a place are more influenced by images of the friendliness of the local people and safety and health issues rather than by destination facilities and other physical characteristics.

In contrast to non-visitors, almost all visitors reported feeling that local people, Iranian tour guides, and other employees in the tourism sector were friendly towards Western tourists. Respondents stated that they had never received such warm hospitality before, and Iranians had gone beyond a pure host–guest relationship:

*...The hospitality for me was wonderful. When I needed a hand, they helped me in the best way... to be honest before I arrived in Iran, I didn't think that the local people would have a good attitude towards Western tourists (Interview # 3).*

This was echoed by another respondent:

*I was really fascinated by Iranian hospitality. People had a good attitude towards foreign tourists. They were eager to speak with tourists or help them. However, I had thought that maybe local people would feel some rejection towards Western tourists (Interview #1).*

In addition, a majority of non-visitors spoke negatively about the general infrastructure and tourist infrastructure in Iran. Indeed, for many participants, the perceived sanction effects translated into poor services, undeveloped roads and airports, and insufficient private and public transport facilities. One of the non-visitors explained that:

*Iran is under pressure because of the sanctions, so I guess the quality of the roads, buses, and in general public services is not good. I think we will see poor infrastructures (Interview # 34).*

In contrast, visitors' perceptions of the general and tourist infrastructure in Iran were fairly positive. Visitors were impressed by the level of infrastructure, such as local transportation, subway systems, roads, shopping centers, hotels, and restaurants. Local transport services were highly praised for their orderliness. In the opinion of most interviewees, Iran generally has satisfactory subway systems, good accommodations, modern shopping centers, and developed infrastructures. For instance, one respondent commented:

*I saw locally developing infrastructure. Most big cities had good urban infrastructures. In Tehran, modern buildings, big shopping malls, subways, and bus transport systems were excellent and Isfahan was so beautiful and green... the accommodation was clean, comfortable, and modern, with dimensions more like those commonly found in European establishments (Interview # 9).*

These findings confirm that tourists' images can change significantly and positively after visiting a destination. Since sanctions are imposed on pariah states in the international system, this issue in itself will expose the destinations to negative intense judgments and attitudes from potential tourists, regardless of the reality of the imposed sanctions. The comments below from Respondents 33 and 40 provide examples:

*Iran is a dictatorship. If it wasn't, they [the world powers] would not impose sanctions on Iran, where I have heard tourists do not have their individual freedom (Interview # 33).*

*I think their government is repressive and individual freedoms are not being allowed. I mean there would be a lack of freedom, so I guess I would meet a controlled society (Interview # 40).*

In contrast to non-visitors, visitors believed that Iran was much more secular and not as radical as other Middle Eastern countries. For instance, one respondent commented:

*... although Iran is like a Muslim country, it is not as strict as other Muslim countries that I've been to (Interview # 19).*

Surprisingly, two non-visitors argued that sanctions would affect the public atmosphere in tourist areas. They stated that since sanctions also impact lower-class people, there is a major presence of homeless individuals at tourist sites, creating representational clashes. One respondent noted:

*I think as a result of sanctions, Iran's homeless population has been growing in recent years. Therefore, at tourist sites, I will probably see poor people who ask us to help them. I do not like this kind of social atmosphere. (Interview # 43).*

Based on stigmatization theory, [Seo, Choi, and Shin \(2021\)](#) argue that there is a negative effect of the phenomenon of homelessness on tourists' experiences of a destination. Consistent with the findings of [Beerli and Martin \(2004\)](#), Iran's perceived destination image is influenced by cognitive attributes, especially political and economic factors, the social environment, and general infrastructure. This study's findings corroborate [Khodadadi and O'Donnell \(2017\)](#) and [Morakabati \(2011\)](#) contention that the image of some destinations, such as Iran, is not tourism specific and tightly tied to political propaganda and the country's relationship with other nations. The Iran case also shows the influence of sanctions on visitors and non-visitors' views of the destination's image and risk is bolstered by the political discourse around the grounds for sanctions by the governments imposing them ([Fuchs & Reichel, 2011](#)). It can be argued that political reasons, such as sanctions, can be considered to be equally or more dangerous than other physical threats (such as weather) and social hazards (e.g., hostile local people) in destinations.

#### 4.2. Sanctions and perceived risk

Interviews with visitors and non-visitors revealed how sanctions and related crises have impacted perceptions of Iran as a tourist destination. Interviewees also commented on the Iranian nuclear programme, which has been the source of many embargoes and the main reason for a number of tensions between Iran and the West, thus adding to the perceived risks of visiting the country in different aspects. However, non-visitor respondents expressed more negatively about Iran and perceived a high risk of visiting the country. We found that sanctions enhanced six types of perceived risk: financial, satisfaction, terrorism and war, political, crime, security, and functional/performance.

Furthermore, since Iran's nuclear programme has become an international issue, the mass media, mainly in Western countries, has continuously portrayed Iran as an unsafe destination for tourist activities ([Khodadadi & O'Donnell, 2017](#)). Our analysis of the interviews showed that non-visitors thought there was significant political risk in going to Iran based on what they had heard or read in the news. One interview participant remarked:

*The news displays negative images of Iran; we always read bad news about this country. When it comes to travelling to a new country such as Iran, I am sometimes confused whether the image projected by media reflects the reality (Interview # 44).*

As scholars have stated, news broadcasts play a major role in the

perceived risk of a destination ([Kapuściński & Richards, 2016](#); [Khodadadi & O'Donnell, 2017](#)). Information about political instability, tensions, conflicts, and other threats to a destination also affects tourists' risk perceptions ([Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014](#); [Kapuściński & Richards, 2016](#)). Potential tourists tend to avoid unsafe and dangerous places while peace, tranquility, and safety are prerequisites for attracting them ([Hasan, Ismail, & Islam, 2017](#); [Sönmez, 1998](#); [Sönmez and Graefe, 1998a](#)). In other words, the choice to visit a destination is based on the evaluation of its image, where risk is a significant component that has a direct impact. A visitor provided more details:

*At first, I was so afraid. My friends had told me, "Don't go to there. Iran has a lot of political conflict with Western nations," and I answered, "Okay, I can try." So, before travelling to Iran, I was worried about everything. But when I went there, I found a country that was different from what the news, media, or people had said (Interview # 22).*

We also realized that some interviewees felt that as European tourists, they would not be warmly welcomed owing to what they perceived as the Iranian government's hostile attitude towards some Western citizens. They also identified strongly with the Western governments' discourse on Iran. In fact, respondents believed that if they travelled to Iran, they would be viewed as interlopers or, in the worst case, spies. For many interviewees, this translated into a broad sense of uncertainty and worry about Iran. One recent incident in which an Austrian travel blogger was imprisoned confirmed this feeling:

*I heard that Iran arrested a European tourist and put him in jail... That is really an injustice to him... I feel that after the current sanctions, Iran's government might be monitoring and controlling visitors' behavior and activities more... so I guess no one likes to visit a country where there is a risk of getting arrested (Interview # 14).*

Iranian-Western tensions have escalated further due to the sanctions imposed against Iran. Consequently, some interviewees expressed that they began to consider the risks linked to the current situation and how it might affect their safety when travelling to and within Iran. Indeed, most respondents were concerned about security and safety, mainly because they anticipated facing a high level of hostility and animosity towards foreigners, particularly Westerners in Iran. As [Rastegar et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Hua, Li, and Zhang \(2020\)](#) explain, safety risks are strong predictors that are more likely to deter tourists from travelling to regions deemed risky. In our study, one of the participants, who had vague images of Iranian attributes, provided us with more details about his concerns in the following comment:

*I just get a general not very nice feeling about Iran. Not as safe, I guess. I think that in Iran there is a high crime rate. Because sanctions destroyed people's jobs... I don't know if it's just word of mouth, but you hear things about hazards and threats in such a destination. I just don't feel like I would be as safe going there (Interview 42).*

Although non-visitors frequently reported the lack of safety in Iran as a tourist destination, visitors viewed Iran as a safe destination. This confirms how tourists' perception of risks could be altered after visiting a country and its people, thereby positively enhancing their perceived image ([Chen, 2018](#)). One example of a respondents' opinion is as follows:

*... Iran was very safe. Much safer than a tourist expected. Even safer than that some European countries. My image of Iran was worse, like a lot of people, especially Europeans. There was nothing to be scared of (Interview # 27).*

In addition, both visitors and non-visitors perceived functional/performance risk, which occurs when it is assumed that the quality of services would not meet tourists' expectations ([Çetinsöz & Ege, 2013](#); [Baker, 2014](#); [Casidy & Wymer, 2016](#)). Following this line of thought, interviewees frequently mentioned the ban and restrictions on international payments as one of the significant effects of sanctions on tourists'

experiences. In fact, Iran does not have direct access to international payment networks such as MasterCard and Visa, which causes tourists difficulty. An interviewee commented as follows:

*As a result of the sanctions, we were unable to transfer money or use our debit card... (Interview # 18).*

A non-visitor also wondered how he would be able to book a hotel in Iran and pay the fees with his cards. He remarked that:

*Imagine I want to visit Iran, but I can't book any accommodation, I can't buy a bus ticket. I can't reserve any domestic flight! Is that acceptable? (Interview # 55).*

A visitor gave us more details about perceived financial risk:

*It was very unusual for us that we couldn't pay by credit card. We had to keep cash, which left us exposed to being robbed. We were worried the whole time about losing our money (Interview # 14).*

#### 4.3. Sanctions and tourists' behavioral intention

One of the aims of this study was to explore the impacts of sanctions on visitors and non-visitors' decisions to (re)visit Iran and WOM. To do so, research respondents were asked whether, if possible, they would (re)visit Iran during existing sanctions and, if so, why. Non-visitors and visitors offered different opinions. Almost all visitors conveyed a strong desire to return and stated they wanted to visit the country again. In terms of WOM, they said that they sometimes recommend a destination to their friends and family. The following statements illustrate this:

*Iran is just fantastic, and it is the best country I have ever visited. I recommended Iran to everyone as it was a great country with great food and very nice and honest people. Of course, I would like to go there again (Interview #24).*

Most participants tended to show positive feelings towards Iran as a tourist destination:

*Iran was something completely different and new to me. It was much more different than I had thought; it is a pleasant, interesting destination for tourists (Interview # 11).*

Tourist images can change significantly, not only while travelling but also after the travel experience has concluded, with impacts on further tourist behavioral intention, such as satisfaction, recommendation, and revisiting (Almeida-García et al., 2020; Akhoondnejad, 2015; Kim, McKercher, & Lee, 2009; Yilmaz, Yilmaz, İçigen, Ekin, & Utku, 2009; Kim et al., 2009).

Elderly respondents perceived the impact of sanctions differently from their younger counterparts. Indeed, senior interviewees tended to express more negative opinions and believed that they would not visit Iran because of sanctions and potential dangers. However, some younger respondents reacted positively to visiting a sanction-ridden country from a purely adventurous perspective. For instance, one adventurous visitor commented,

*I really wanted to discover the mystery of Iran. One of the main reasons for visiting Iran was to experience the real situation (not the bad Iran everyone thinks it is) and to discover a mysterious, unknown destination (Interview #23).*

Interviewees also stated that even though the reputation of Iran as a tourist destination is negatively impacted by the sanctions, being a sanctioned destination would contribute to the "secrets" of Iran and motivate them to choose this "mysterious" destination. In contrast, some non-visitors doubted whether they would choose a sanctioned destination for their holidays. Indeed, the negative destination image caused by the sanctions increased the perceived risks and led to them avoiding Iran. In addition, the current political tension between Iran and the West and safety and security concerns have exacerbated these bad feelings.

Some non-visitors felt that it was not reasonable to go to a sanctioned destination, as indicated by one respondent:

*I don't think that Iran would be a holiday destination that I would want to visit someday... I guess travelling to a sanctioned destination would be stressful (Interview # 35).*

Previous studies have emphasized that tourists perceive the risk of a lost opportunity; in other words, they miss the chance to enjoy alternative options if they buy a particular tourism package (Hu, 2011). Likewise in our study, a few of non-visitors considered that they should not completely rule out certain destinations:

*Maybe someday I'll decide to visit Iran. I think it would be a kind of exotic destination (Interview # 54).*

The present study coincides with the findings of previous research that psychological dimensions of sanctions affect potential tourists' image and travel behavior (Seyfi, 2018; Hall and Seyfi, 2021; Khodadadi, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Farahani & Shabani, 2013). While the sanctions imposed against Iran have largely contributed to non-visitors' negative image of Iran as a holiday destination, such a political tool does not necessarily encourage them to avoid choosing Iran. According to prior research, as tourists familiarity with a destination increases, their level of risk perception decreases (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b). Zhan, Zeng, Morrison, Liang, and Coca-Stefaniak (2022) noted that the past experience of visiting a destination also improves the sense of safety. In other words, tourists who have visited a destination in the past tend to not avoid it in the future. These findings support our results, which showed that visitors tend to revisit even sanctioned destinations.

Interestingly, the findings of this study also demonstrate that some non-visitors see Iran as an even more interesting and "mysterious" place, and the ongoing tensions between Iran and the West have actually motivated their willingness to visit the country. While the sanctions against Iran have been widely covered in the media, tourists still want to see the "true" Iran in person instead of what is portrayed by the mass media. Moreover, the perception of risk depends on the degree of novelty sought (Correia, Kozak, & Ferradeira, 2013). Hence, since some of our respondents claimed that their interest in Iran was based on unraveling the mysteries of an unfamiliar destination, it can be concluded that their wish to visit Iran stems from their desire for a novel experience in which they perceive a low level of risk. This is in line with the findings of Maghrifani, Liu, & Sneddon (2022), who found that novelty-seeking motivations influence non-visitors' travel intention.

## 5. Conclusions and implications

This study set out to investigate visitors and non-visitors' perceptions of a crisis for a tourism destination in the context of sanctions. We also attempted to determine the risk perception and destination image perception of these two groups and to interpret the major images encoded as the mental configuration of factors that influence visitors and non-visitors in their destination selection process. The empirical findings advance our understanding of the impacts of sanctions on destination image, perceived risk, and behavioral intention. The results of this study also indicate that sanctions can damage non-visitors' image of the targeted country in all three components: cognitive, affective, and conative. The findings provide a holistic account of the effects of sanctions on tourists' perceptions of sanctioned destinations and how they affect their behavioral intention. Given the increased use of sanctions as a peacetime measure to deal with an international crisis, our findings emphasize sanctions as an important area to gain a deeper understanding of tourists' perceptions and the perceived risk of a crisis.

The analysis of our interviews also revealed noticeable differences between the two groups regarding their perceptions of visiting a sanctioned destination. This attribute is also visually represented using NVivo 12 in Fig. 1, which illustrates a word cloud image that reflects interviewees' responses. Word clouds are graphical representations of



Fig. 1. World Cloud of non-visitors (left) and visitors' (right) perceptions towards Iran.

the word frequencies depicted in different sizes. According to this information, larger and bolder words are more important (Kuhzady and Ghasemi, 2019). As can be seen, from the perspective of the majority of non-visitors, Iran was perceived to be a highly risky destination as well as a less hospitable country to Western tourists while sanctions are in place. Indeed, anti-Western sentiments, negative news, bilateral conflict, terrorism, and personal safety issues are reasons a destination might not be chosen. This damaged destination image, in turn, negatively affects non-visitors' behavioral intention. In contrast, visitors held positive images of Iran and tended to describe Iran as having hospitable and warm or welcoming people.

In addition, compared with their senior counterparts, younger respondents stated that Iran is a worthy and safe destination for tourists despite the sanctions. This finding also supports some previous studies indicating that perceived risk depends on the tourist profile, such as gender, nationality, age, travel experience, personality, knowledge, risk tolerance, and risk-related competencies (Yi, Yuan, & Yoo, 2020; Casidy & Wymer, 2016; Sharifpour, Walters, & Ritchie, 2014; Baker, 2014). Some studies have addressed the effect of perceived travel risk on the formation of destination image. Prior research has revealed that perceived socio-psychological and financial risks influence both cognitive and affective destination images (Chew & Jahari, 2014). In addition, perceived images can impact future travel behavior (Ahmad, Jamaludin, Zuraimi, & Valeri, 2021).

Despite the growing body of research on sanctions and tourism, the understanding of the impact of sanctions on destination reputation and how the latter influences the risk perception of tourists is not well understood. This study responds to the call of previous researchers for further inquiry into the psychological effects of sanctions on destinations. By doing so, this study extended the prior stream of research on destination image and investigated the images by comparing non-visitors and visitors. Such a comparison between these two groups of visitors has not been investigated to the same degree as the other impacts of sanctions on tourism destinations.

The findings of this study have several marketing and managerial implications for understanding the image of sanctioned destinations and tourists' perceived risk. As the results indicated that non-visitor's image of Iran was mostly negative, Iran's national tourism administration should rethink and revise its marketing strategies to improve the country's image. Indeed, in the minds of potential tourists, Iran was perceived as an unsafe destination for Westerners. Therefore, promotional campaigns might work best if they project safety and security issues in Iran. To achieve this goal, the tourism promotion of sanctioned

destinations, such as Iran, should be designed to be more informative rather than persuasive. According to Awaritefe (2004), informative promotions have a greater impact on non-visitors. The function of informative promotion is to provide potential tourists with information about a destination for their consideration while making their decisions. Accordingly, both groups of tourists would possess different perceptions of the destination and require distinct promotional messages.

In addition, creative campaigns are needed to convey Iran's real image through different sources. To increase potential tourists' awareness of Iran and its actual characteristics, Iran's destination management organization (DMO) should increase its marketing activities, particularly on social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Non-visitors can more easily construct destination images based on information sources (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). Since the persistence of an image is a key characteristic, implying that changing an existing image is likely to be difficult (Avraham & Ketter, 2016), sanctioned countries such as Iran should shape their image in a way that decreases perceived risk and highlights their positive features.

While this paper has shed some light on the impacts of sanctions on destination image and risk perception towards a sanctioned destination among visitors and non-visitors, it has some limitations. The current study was limited to investigating the behavioral intentions of Western tourists in Iran. A sample size of 60 (30 visitors and non-visitors, respectively) may not represent the total number of tourists in Iran. The generalizability of this study is limited due to the limited sample and exploratory nature. Further research needs to examine the links between sanctions and destination image more closely using a cross-cultural perspective to assess the psychological impacts of sanctions on Eastern and Western visitors. Indeed, travelers from diverse cultural backgrounds may assess and interpret destinations differently. Future studies could also use mixed methods to assess risk perception and destination image before, during, and after travelling to sanctioned destinations.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Abolfazl Siyamiyan Gorji:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Fernando Almeida Garcia:** Supervision, Resources, Resources, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Pere Mercadé-Melé:** Supervision, Resources, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2022.101062>.

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