A study on tourists’ tendency towards intangible cultural heritage as an attraction (case study: Isfahan, Iran)

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ABSTRACT

Human civilization is a set of material and immaterial achievements, none of which was produced without the
other. Intangible cultural heritage and spiritual heritage are part of the achievements of human civilizations that
give them identity. Isfahan is a city known for its tangible cultural attractions such as Islamic architecture,
handicrafts, palaces, Persian gardens, etc. However, it has much intangible cultural heritage that tourists are not
familiar with and which is not considered as a tourist attraction. This paper’s concern is to study intangible
cultural heritage of the city of Isfahan (Iran) as a new tourist attraction. Moreover, this research has three major
purposes: 1) to investigate the tendency of tourists towards intangible heritage; 2) to measure tourists’ awareness
of intangible heritage; and 3) to determine the priority of intangible heritage attractions and activities from the
domestic tourists’ perspective. On the basis of the results of this study it can be concluded that domestic tourists
are not familiar with the concept of intangible cultural heritage. However, tourists are interested in intangible
heritage attractions and activities, especially in cooking and tasting local foods, making and tasting local sweets,
traditional medicine and medicinal plants and gaining a certain level of skill in producing traditional crafts.

1. Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has been defined in UNESCO’s 2003 Convention as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage”. Accordingly, the term Intangible Cultural Heritage refers to oral traditions and expression, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003; Van Zanten, 2004). Intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from past generations to present and future generations and is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, nature and history. According to some authors (Gonzalez, 2008; Lenzerini, 2011; Robertson, 2009; Shahi & Khorshid, 2013; Smuka, 2016) ICH brings a sense of identity to communities.

In 2015, World Tourism Day highlighted the theme ‘One Billion Tourists, One Billion Opportunities’ – a theme that needs to be realised for creative new attractions, activities and experiences to emerge. This study tries to identify ICH as a new tourism product and in this regarding, there is a need to evaluate tourists’ trends as customers. Novelli (2005) highlighted place and audience studies for promoting a new tourism product in a destination and indicated the relation between the demand and the supply side. Since there is a relation between demand and supply, tourism demand should be studied to enable ICH to be identified as a tourism product. Furthermore, before bringing ICH into the market, studies should be carried out on whether tourists will welcome it, whether the tourists have enough awareness of the products and which sub-products are more attractive to them.

Hence, the primary purpose of this study is to study the ICH of Isfahan, Iran, as a tourist attraction. In addition, this paper aims to investigate the tendency and awareness of audiences (domestic tourists as the most important customers for this market) towards ICH in Isfahan.

2. Literature review

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) believed that heritage is actually a new mode of cultural production that gives a second life to dying ways of life, economies and places. Peckham (2003) noted that heritage carries two related meanings: 1) it is associated with tourism and with sites of historical interest that have been preserved for the nation; 2) it is used to describe a set of shared values and collective memories. It is
noteworthy that politics and economics are two pillars giving added value to cultural heritage (Bendix, 2009).

Since the Second World War, UNESCO has preserved and supported a series of world heritage items, starting with tangible heritage, natural heritage and most recently intangible heritage as metacultural production (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). The Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention (ICH) was adapted by the UNESCO Conference held in October 2003 (Blake, 2008) with the aim of safeguarding the representations, expressions, knowledge and techniques that communities, groups and even individuals used in their culture (UNESCO, 2003). ICH is appreciated as a source of cultural identity, creativity and diversity (Bouchenaki, 2003; Smeets, 2004). Cultural traditions, cultural identity and cultural aspirations give meaning and value to the environment (Robertson, 2009). ICH creates bridges between past, present and future (Petronela, 2016). Lenzineri (2011) argued that there is a positive relation between safeguarding ICH and human rights. Besides, the study on Robben Island (South Africa) illustrated that sites of intangible heritage heavily emphasise symbolic interpretations of meaning (Deacon, 2004). Furthermore, in recent decades, ICH has become one of the main motivations for travel, with tourists seeking to engage with new cultures and experience the variety of performing arts, handicrafts, rituals, cuisines and interpretations of nature and the universe (UNWTO, 2003). However, there are some tensions between protection and commodification of ICH as a new issue in the interdisciplinary field of heritage tourism (Su, 2018). Since the emphasis on this paper is on tourism, below we discuss the positive and negative views of tourism on ICH.

Gonzalez (2008) investigated the relationship between existential intangible tourism and personal identity in Spain and the results indicated that intangible heritage tourism can provide a source of identity separate from local places. In addition, Ma and Wang (2008) suggested that ICH knowledge should be transformed into tourism products and in order to preserve it they urged three strategies: 1) the establishment of museums of ICH which present heritage in a static state, and preferably protect the authenticity of ICH; 2) the creation of theme parks for ICH which rebuild the authenticity of ICH and virtualize the experience space; and 3) real-life scenery stages based on people’s performing activities. It can be said that the real-life scenery stage is the best strategy for transforming ICH into a tourism product. Besides, Keitumetse and Nthoi (2009) demonstrated that in the developing world, giving a site World Heritage status is likely to encourage tourism, and the impact on the resident community’s intangible heritage must be considered and safeguarded.

George (2010) stated that the tourism industry derives significant economic benefits from local ICH. A major moral and ethical issue comes from the tourism industry’s failure to recognize the monetary value of local ICH in its tourism production and to fairly compensate the local producers and creators (communities). Timothy (2011) noted that tangible heritage and intangible heritage are both important elements of the cultural tourism offering and ICH indeed embodies much of the tourism product. Rodzi, Zaki, and Subli (2013) looked at tourism and ICH and mentioned that tourism on one hand attracts tourists and benefits the locals and on the other hand can damage ICH and transform it into a cultural good or practice. According to UNWTO (2012), tourism can be a powerful catalyst for local cultural reproduction and revitalisation, even though it may also pose a danger to those cultural aspects that communities wish to consciously protect from over-commercialisation. Smuka (2016) employed structured interviews and observation to examine the impact of the use of ICH on the development of the territory. The results illustrated that activities and events organized in the territory did not pay particular attention to ICH as a tourism product, while preservation of intangible heritage through tourism increases the awareness of the community’s national identity and promotes the economic and social development of the society in the long term.

Lastly, Sammells (2014) argued that inscribing ICH in the UNESCO list can be a strategy for conceptualizing, commodity marketing, connecting to global audiences and attracting cosmopolitan ones (such as tourists).

It is noteworthy that intangible heritage and tourism is a current consideration in Iran. The study of Shahi and Khorshid (2013) identified intangible heritage as a strategy for the development of creative tourism in Mazandaran Province, Iran; the clearest result of the research is that ICH cannot only help to create identity for the local community but also relates the past to present and future. Furthermore, the results illustrated that intangible heritage plays an important role in the dialogue between different cultures and mutual respect for cultural diversity and promotes creative tourism in the territory. Su (2018) revealed that engaging with tourism commodification can be a strategy to revive, sustain and re-create musical ICH values in Lijiang, China.

However, up to this time, no significant work has been undertaken in the field of investigation of tourists’ tendencies towards and awareness of ICH as discussed in this paper (Fig. 1). Besides, none of the above-mentioned approaches takes into consideration intangible cultural heritage in a case study of Isfahan, Iran.

3. Case study

Iran is known as a cultural destination which includes tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Flatbread making and sharing culture; Novruz; Qālishūyān rituals of Maḥdād-e Ardehāl in Kāšān; Naqūlī, Iranian dramatic storytelling; traditional skills of building and sailing Iranian Lenj boats in the Persian Gulf; music of the Bakhshis of Khorasan; Pahlevani and Zoorkhanei rituals; ritual dramatic art of Ta‘ziye (http://www.aparat.com/v/2sYMX); traditional skills of carpet weaving in Fars; traditional skills of carpet weaving in Kashan; and Radīf of Iranian music are intangible cultural heritage inscribed on the representative list of the ICH of humanity, UNESCO (UNESCO, 2017). Regarding safeguarding and introducing intangible cultural heritage, the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization established a spiritual heritage virtual museum in 2013 (ICHTO, 2013). This study was conducted in the city of Isfahan, Iran. Isfahan is a city in central Iran, south of Tehran and is the capital of Isfahan Province. Isfahan Province as a cultural destination in Iran includes intangible heritage attractions such as traditional wipe-tinning of copper, the art of coppersmithing, flag parades (Alam Gardani), Qālishūyān rituals of Maḥdād-e Ardehāl and Gogolgīri (making rose-water), which are inscribed on national and in some cases UNESCO lists (ICHTO, 2013). The city was an ancient town and capital of Persia from...
1598 to 1736. In addition, the city has great potential for cultural and art tourism and it is Iran's number one tourist destination for a good reason. Isfahan has many tourist attractions – Persian gardens and important historic Islamic buildings which give it a visual appeal unmatched by any other Iranian city, and the many artisans working here underpin its reputation as a living museum of traditional culture and arts. It is noteworthy that Isfahan was announced as a creative city in the field of crafts (UCCN, 2017). Besides, Isfahan includes ICH such as traditional skills of carpet weaving, traditional skills of making handicrafts, Pahlevani and Zoorkhanei rituals (Fig. 2A), Isfahan music school, religious minorities’ music, ritual dramatic art of Ta’ziye, local and social customs, traditional games such as Chogān (Fig. 2B), gastronomy, etc., which can attract tourists to this destination and offer these new products to them.

4. Methodology

The research methodology includes quantitative research. The first phase consisted of an extensive literature review of intangible heritage and tourism. The main objective of this study is to investigate the tendency of domestic tourists towards the development of intangible heritage in Isfahan, Iran. In order to achieve this goal, two research
questions and four hypotheses were developed:

Q1 Are domestic tourists familiar with Isfahan’s intangible cultural heritage?

Q2 Are tourists interested in Isfahan’s intangible heritage attractions and activities?

H1. Tourists are familiar with Isfahan’s intangible heritage.

H2. Tourists are interested in Isfahan’s intangible heritage (attractions and activities).

H3. At least two of the variables (attractions and activities of intangible heritage from the tourists’ perspective) are significantly different from each other.

H4. Two variables of gender and awareness of intangible heritage are independent.

ICH is a current world consideration. Therefore, the study aims to discover attractions and activities of ICH that can attract tourists to the city. Thus, in the second step, according to observation, literature review and the National Heritage List, the intangible heritage activities and attractions of Isfahan were listed (Table 2).

In the next phase, a questionnaire (using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very low to very high) was designed to investigate the tendency of tourists towards ICH. Hence, data for this part of study were gathered through questionnaires (closed-ended questions). Regarding this, it was focused on tourists and the questionnaire was distributed in the city (around attractions, hotels, airports, etc.). For determining sample size, the researchers used Veal’s (2006) rules. Veal’s table (2006) illustrated that the sample size should be 384 people. Thus, 400 questionnaires were distributed and 385 questionnaires were returned to us.

5. Results

As mentioned before, a total of 400 questionnaires were distributed to domestic tourists in the city centre, historic monuments and sites, and hotels where most tourists are found. After eliminating unusable responses from the completed questionnaires, 385 responses were coded for data analysis. Cronbach’s alpha is 0.853, which presents a high level of reliability. Descriptive statistics were calculated to ascertain the characteristics of the sample and to compare means and standard deviations for each multi-item scale. Among the survey participants, 45.7% (176) were male, and 54.3% (209) were female (Fig. 3). Based on the result of the descriptive analysis (on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very low to very high) (Table 1), 65.4% of respondents were interested (high and very high on the scale) in cooking and tasting local foods and 61.6% (high and very high on the scale) in exploring and watching traditional games in the city such as polo (Chogān) in historic places.

Table 1

Descriptive analysis of the tendency of respondents towards intangible heritage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency (Scale)</th>
<th>Skewness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1: Are you familiar with Isfahan’s intangible heritage?</td>
<td>42 (Very low)</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2: Are you interested in getting to know and listening to the Isfahan music school?</td>
<td>19 (Low)</td>
<td>0.211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3: Are you interested in visiting musical instrument workshops and gaining knowledge about their production?</td>
<td>16 (Medium)</td>
<td>0.292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4: Are you interested in visiting the ritual dramatic art of Ta’zieyey (a kind of Condolence Theatre inspired by historical and religious events and a kind of Passion Play on the tragic fate of Hassan and Hussein who are the grandsons of the prophet Mohammad)?</td>
<td>40 (High)</td>
<td>0.185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5: Are you interested in participating in or watching live Pahlevani and Zoorkhanei rituals (a traditional sport)?</td>
<td>22 (Very high)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6: Are you interested in traditional skills of carpet weaving?</td>
<td>5 (Missing data)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7: Are you interested in visiting handicraft workshops and gaining skills in traditional crafts?</td>
<td>10 (1; 0.3%)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 8: Are you interested in learning about Isfahan’s forgotten handicrafts and gaining a certain level of skill in their production?</td>
<td>22 (4.7%)</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 9: Are you interested in listening to Iranian oral storytelling?</td>
<td>30 (5.7%)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 10: Are you interested in cooking and tasting local foods?</td>
<td>49 (7.5%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 11: Are you interested in learning about epic Isfahan narratives?</td>
<td>49 (10.6%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 12: Are you interested in exploring and watching traditional games in the city such as horse polo (Chogān) in historic places?</td>
<td>16 (10.4%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 13: Are you interested in participating in sacred music of religious minorities and learning about it (e.g. Christians)?</td>
<td>10 (5.7%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 14: Are you interested in learning about the habits and social customs such as rites and ceremonies related to transition processes in the city (e.g. birth, marriage, death, etc.)?</td>
<td>18 (6.5%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 15: Are you interested in making and tasting local sweets of the city such as Gaz, etc.?</td>
<td>25 (4.7%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 16: Are you interested in listening to live Isfahan folk music?</td>
<td>25 (6.5%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 17: Are you interested in understanding proverbs and oral traditions?</td>
<td>12 (3.1%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 18: Are you interested in learning about traditional medicine and medicinal plants?</td>
<td>7 (5.5%)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the result of the descriptive analysis (on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very low to very high) (Table 1), 65.4% of respondents were interested (high and very high on the scale) in cooking and tasting local foods and 61.6% (high and very high on the scale) in exploring and watching traditional games in the city such as polo (Chogān) in historic places.
The results (sig = 0.002 which is < 0.05); indicated that two differences between the variables (attractions and activities) are significant. The null hypothesis was rejected (Table 2). However, an analysis of the data with a Binomial Test (Observed Prop < 0.6 and Sig < 0.05) illustrated that, among the intangible heritage activities and attractions, respondents have a high interest in visiting musical instrument workshops and acquiring knowledge about their production; visiting workshops and gaining skills about traditional arts and handicrafts; cooking and tasting local foods; making and tasting local sweets; participating in sacred music of religious minorities; learning about habits and social customs and learning about traditional medicine and medicinal plants. Therefore, the results also illustrated that, based on domestic tourists’ perspectives, the above-mentioned attractions and activities are the most suitable for offering in package tours.

Furthermore, a Friedman test was used to analyse the third hypothesis:

**H0.** There are no differences between the variables (attractions and activities of intangible heritage) from the tourists’ perspective.

**H3.** At least 2 of the variables (attractions and activities of ICH from the tourists’ perspective) are significantly different from each other.

It is noteworthy that a Friedman test was used to analyse the attractions and activities in which tourists were interested. Analysis of the data (Table 3) illustrated that the null hypothesis is rejected and it can be concluded that there are differences between variables. Among the variables, cooking and tasting local foods; making and tasting local sweets; learning about traditional medicine and medicinal plants and visiting workshops and getting to know traditional skills of making arts and handicrafts are those which have the highest scores respectively. It is worth mentioning that the authorities, SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and investors should pay particular attention to the intangible culture heritage which is a priority for tourists in planning and package tours.

Lastly, chi-square tests were used to test the fourth hypothesis:

**H4.** Two variables of gender and awareness of ICH are independent.

Some intangible cultural heritage in the destination are associated with gender; Pahlevani and Zoorkhaneh rituals which are allocated to men constitute good examples in this regard. Hence, investigating the relationship between gender and awareness of ICH can be useful for tourism planning and preparing package tours.

The results (sig = 0.002 which is < 0.05); indicated that two
variables (gender and awareness of intangible heritage) are associated and men (high and very high on the scale (64%)) have more awareness regarding intangible heritage than women (high and very high on the scale (53%)) (Table 4).

### 6. Conclusion

Engaging tourism with ICH includes opportunities and challenges. Tourism may be a commodity for culture. However, in recent decades, the tourism sector has paid particular attention to ICH, which not only promotes local community identity (Gonzalez, 2008; Lenzerini, 2011; Robertson, 2009; Shahi & Khorshid, 2013; Smuka, 2016) but also gives meaning and value to touristic sites and attractions (Robertson, 2009). Furthermore, ICH can be a tool for interpretation in tourism (Deacon, 2004) and can attract tourists to destinations.

The aim of the present paper was to identify Isfahan as a destination that has great potential for ICH and can attract new customers. As mentioned before, Isfahan is a city known for its tangible cultural attractions such as Islamic architecture, handicrafts, palaces, Persian gardens, etc. However, it has much intangible cultural heritage that tourists are not familiar with and is not considered as a tourism attraction.

Obviously, the emergence of a new product (ICH in this research) in the market needs the study of demand, because there is a relation between the demand and the supply. Therefore, this study strived to investigate the tendency of tourists towards ICH in Isfahan. Moreover, this is an initial attempt to measure tourists' awareness of this concept.

On the basis of the results of this research, it can be concluded that men have more awareness regarding intangible heritage than women. However, altogether, the result indicated that the domestic tourists are not familiar with the concept of ICH and results supported this expectation that intangible heritage is a current consideration in Iran and needs educational activities and storytelling regarding ICH, especially for women. Further analysis illustrated that domestic tourists are interested in ICH in Isfahan, especially cooking and tasting local foods; making and tasting local sweets; learning about traditional medicine and medicinal plants and visiting handicraft workshops and gaining traditional skill in making arts and handicrafts. As mentioned before, Isfahan city is a live museum of handicrafts and was announced as a creative city in the field of crafts. Therefore, according to the high level of interest of tourists in visiting handicraft workshops, we also suggest that organizing art tours and visiting handicraft workshops can develop as a business in the city. Moreover, the results illustrated that tourists have a high level of interest in making local sweets and cooking local foods. Hence, organizing culinary tours and visiting workshops of sweets such as Gaz, an Iranian nougat, can be a strategy for promoting visitors the opportunity to develop their creative potential through active participation in courses and learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Musical instrument workshop</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.3411</td>
<td>1.04258</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional art and handicraft workshops</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.4948</td>
<td>1.03716</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking and tasting local foods</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.8438</td>
<td>1.16590</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred music of religious minorities</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.4323</td>
<td>1.01714</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making and tasting local sweets</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.7839</td>
<td>1.06580</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local customs</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.4245</td>
<td>1.08372</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional medicine and medicinal plants</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>3.5156</td>
<td>1.14018</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4

The result of chi-square tests for the investigation of association of gender and the awareness of intangible heritage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender * Awareness of intangible heritage Crosstabulation</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>very low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected Count</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected Count</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected Count</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chi-Square Tests</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>16.443</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>16.670</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear-by-Linear Association</td>
<td>2.737</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 19.20.
experiences and acquire knowledge and skills.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcsc.2018.11.001.

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