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Unveiling Spiritual and Cultural Narratives in Tourism: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

In a complex geopolitical context, Iran utilizes its rich spiritual and cultural heritage as a fundamental element of its tourism strategy to convey a sophisticated national identity. This research utilizes a qualitative thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, analyzing official promotional materials, academic literature, and content generated by tourists to reveal the prevailing narratives that influence Iran's destination image. The analysis identifies a complex identity systematically built upon four narrative foundations: (1) sacred pilgrimage, which includes Shia, Sufi, and Zoroastrian spiritual journeys; (2) the grandeur of ancient empires, highlighting Achaemenid glory and Silk Road resilience; (3) the artistic soul of prominent cultural cities, notably Isfahan and Shiraz; and (4) the lived experiential aspect of deep hospitality, represented by the practice of Taarof. A key finding is the intentional balancing of Iran's pre-Islamic Persian heritage with its modern Islamic identity, resulting in a unified narrative of a persistent and resilient civilization. These narratives function as critical tools of "soft power," enabling Iran to actively counter singular, often negative, international perceptions. This study presents a framework for analyzing the use of narrative in navigating a contested geopolitical landscape and identifies a critical vulnerability: the strategy's reliance on the preservation of fragile heritage assets. This research offers significant insights for scholars and practitioners, highlighting essential aspects of destination marketing and cultural diplomacy. It illustrates the complex interactions among heritage, spirituality, tourism, and geopolitics in a nation seeking to reshape its global image.

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Introduction

Worldwide, destinations are increasingly vying for attention by developing and conveying engaging narratives that influence perceptions and inspire travel. Narratives play a central role in destination branding, providing meaning frameworks for tourists (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Scholars classify tourism narratives into factual, mythical, and symbolic typologies, each shaping visitor expectations and experiences (Can et al., 2025; Mura & Sharif, 2016). Iran's situation is unique owing to its millennia of intricate history and multifaceted geopolitical challenges. Iran offers a distinctly intriguing case study for the examination of tourism narratives. This destination embodies millennia of history, the amalgamation of ancient and Islamic civilizations, and significant present geopolitical tensions, resulting in a complex and much disputed narrative landscape. Iran's tourism industry is experiencing a modest resurgence, attracting some visitors recently, a notable rise from prior years, although still falling short of its pre-pandemic zenith (Khodadadi, 2025; Sutarya et al., 2024). This expansion is mostly fueled by regional markets, especially from adjacent nations like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Turkey, to which Iran provides cultural affinity, geographical closeness, and economical travel options (Babakhani et al., 2023; Nadalipour et al., 2022).

This recovery occurs amidst significant challenges that directly affect its narrative development. International sanctions are the most consequential, having estranged Iran from global financial systems, significantly limiting foreign investment, infrastructure development, and access to tourism technology (Shahrabi Farahani & Farahani, 2025). The ongoing economic pressure is exacerbated by negative international media representations, which foster a perception of risk and instability that tourism officials strive to mitigate (Boodaghi et al., 2025; Sutarya, 2023). Additionally, the historical sites that support these stories face problems from lack of funding, poor management, and the demands of development that isn't sustainable, leading to an unstable base for the tourism industry (Jabbari et al., 2023; Shahrabi Farahani & Farahani, 2025).

This context renders tourism promotion in Iran a fundamentally political endeavor aimed at constructing a counter-narrative. The official narrative, as expressed on platforms such as visitiran.ir, serves not only as an informational repository of attractions but also as a strategic communication effort aimed at contesting and reshaping the prevailing, frequently adverse, geopolitical discourse (Fakhimi et al., 2024). The meticulous equilibrium of categories like "Religious Tourism" and "Historical Tourism" is a strategic endeavor to convey a complex and attractive identity. A thematic analysis of Iran's tourism narratives constitutes a deconstruction of a state-level soft power strategy, wherein the selection of emphasis and framing represents a political decision intended to sway a global audience (Abdrakhmanova et al., 2023; Kato & Prozano, 2017).

Our research makes two contributions. Initially, it transcends broad descriptions of tourist attractions to methodically analyze and thematically classify the particular narratives that constitute Iran's tourism allure. This study seeks to systematically identify and analyze the prevailing spiritual and cultural narratives within Iran's tourism discourse, investigating how these narratives are constructed, balanced, and strategically utilized as instruments of soft power to influence international perceptions of Iran. Therefore, the research specifically examines a main question and three sub-questions:

Main question: How do various sources collaboratively shape Iran's spiritual and cultural tourism narratives?

Sub-questions:

1. How are sacred pilgrimage narratives constructed in official vs. tourist-generated content?
2. In what ways do pre-Islamic and imperial narratives appear across sources?

What implications do these narratives have for Iran's destination branding and soft power?

Literature Review

A narrative is a structured account of events conveying meaning and identity (Labov & Waletzky, 1997; Mura & Sharif, 2016). Labov and Waletzky (1997)'s foundational work established that narratives consist of structural elements, including orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda, which collectively create meaning from temporal sequences of events. Tourism narratives encompass multiple typologies, including factual accounts, historical documentation, mythical narratives, and symbolic interpretations (Cohen, 1979; MacCannell, 2013). The contemporary tourism ecosystem is increasingly recognized not merely as a compilation of locations and services, but as an economy of narratives where storytelling becomes a strategic tool for destination branding and visitor engagement (Mossberg, 2008; Woodside et al., 2007). Destinations vie by developing and conveying engaging narratives that influence perception, inspire travel, and impart significance for visitors (Foroozanfar et al., 2025b; Traskevich & Fontanari, 2023). Studies define spiritual tourism as travel motivated by existential and well-being pursuits (Esmaeili Mahyari et al., 2025; Norman, 2012; Shahrabi Farahani & Ramezanloo, 2023), with core dimensions of meaning-seeking, self-transformation, and reflective practices. Spiritual narratives are accounts that examine individual or communal encounters with the sacred, frequently encompassing aspects of faith, transformation, and goal (Najafipour et al., 2014; Zhiri & Thomas, 2023). In the realm of tourism, the term refers to travel driven by a quest for spiritual involvement, contemplation, or affiliation with religious customs (Abdrakhmanova et al., 2023). This type of tourism, commonly referred to as spiritual tourism, includes a diverse range of activities, from organized pilgrimages to sacred locations to more personal quests for self-discovery and well-being (Norman, 2012). It is a subjective and individual pursuit for significance

and improvement, separate from yet frequently intersecting with officially endorsed religious tourism (Kato & Prozano, 2017).

Religious tourism, one of the earliest forms of travel, has remained a fundamental aspect of religious traditions throughout history (Abdrakhmanova et al., 2023). This includes travels driven by religious objectives and has developed into a significant segment of the global tourism sector (Esmaeili Mahyari et al., 2025). The increasing significance of sacred sites, especially since the late 20th century, has led to a rise in tourist interest in religious destinations (Abdrakhmanova et al., 2023). The World Tourism Organization (WTO) estimates that 313 million individuals visit religious sites each year (Bassano et al., 2019), underscoring their significant contribution to both domestic and international tourism (Najafipour et al., 2019; Soliman et al., 2024). This type of tourism promotes economic growth and development in destinations while enhancing cultural, political, religious, and social ties between tourists and host communities (Mura & Sharif, 2016). Religious tourism, though frequently conflated with other forms of travel, is fundamentally rooted in distinct beliefs and practices, leading to changes in perspectives on life and divine connections (Can et al., 2025). Spiritual tourism represents a pursuit of meaning, identity, or well-being, independent of religious institutions or doctrines. Spirituality, defined as the pursuit of life's meaning, goes beyond organized religion and encompasses wider existential aspects (Norman, 2012; Shahrabi Farahani & Farahani, 2025).

Abdrakhmanova et al. (2023) emphasized the varied emotional aspects of religious and spiritual tourism. A study conducted on visitors to the Ascension Cathedral in Almaty, Kazakhstan, indicated that visiting religious sites fosters a significant sense of inner peace and happiness among tourists, regardless of their religious affiliations. Even ineffective tourists stated feeling blessed during their visits, presenting a strengthened sense of inner satisfaction and a reduction of physical and psychological difficulties. This study points to emotional well-being and inner fulfillment as key motivators for tourists' involvement with religious destinations. Tourists commonly experience feelings of happiness, comfort, peace, enrichment, and individual growth, irrespective of their religious beliefs. The spiritual tourism industry has experienced significant growth, marked by a notable rise in travelers pursuing spiritual well-being and life purpose, diverging from contemporary demands (Abdrakhmanova et al., 2023; Shahrabi Farahani & Ramezanloo, 2023).

Cultural narratives serve as foundational stories that characterize a culture, influencing members' perceptions of the world, interpersonal interactions, and self-identity (Sandhya et al., 2024). Transmitted across generations through myths, legends, historical records, and social norms, these narratives offer a framework for comprehending a society's values, customs, and historical experiences (Can et al., 2025). Engaging with these narratives is crucial for tourists seeking multicultural comprehension and a more actual travel experience (Boodaghi et al., 2025; Foroozanfar et al., 2024).

The relationship between spirituality and cultural involvement is apparent in diverse manifestations of tourism. The examination of Takht-e Foulad Cemetery in Isfahan, Iran, underscores its function as a "cultural tourism theme park" that encompasses literature, poetry, music, philosophy, mysticism, and the arts. This site serves not only as a cemetery but also as a significant repository of spiritual and cultural heritage, evident in its architecture, artwork, and the legacies of notable individuals interred there. The research indicates that a spiritual approach to tourism may enhance visitor experiences beyond traditional historical and cultural narratives, facilitating holistic development and improving both material and spiritual heritage (Shahrabi Farahani & Farahani, 2025).

A rapidly expanding and closely related segment is wellness tourism, which is driven by the pursuit of health and well-being. This type of tourism seeks to enhance physical, mental, emotional, occupational, intellectual, and spiritual well-being (Najafipour et al., 2025). Research on the Baghestan Recreation and Tourism Village demonstrates that wellness tourism significantly contributes to spiritual health. Positive emotions, personal motivations, and outcomes such as stress reduction, empathy, and self-reliance collectively enhance spiritual health (Shahrabi Farahani & Ramezanloo, 2023). This supports the notion that self-knowledge and inner peace serve as essential mediating variables for tourists pursuing wellness experiences, resulting in a deep connection with nature, others, and a higher power. Wellness is defined as a multidimensional, dynamic, and mindful process that results from the harmonious interaction of body, mind, soul, and environment, facilitating a healthy lifestyle (Can et al., 2025; Shahrabi Farahani & Ramezanloo, 2023).

Despite extensive research on destination branding and religious tourism, few studies systematically compare spiritual and cultural narrative typologies across official and tourist sources, creating a critical gap in soft-power scholarship. Recent research on Middle Eastern tourism narratives emphasizes the political use of cultural stories, which may oversimplify complex identities or align with state agendas (Esmaeili Mahyari et al., 2025). The integration of these essential perspectives enhances the analysis of Iran's tourism discourse. The literature indicates that narrative construction in politically sensitive contexts should be analyzed for both its content and its intended audience, as well as the power dynamics it embodies. This study addresses a gap in the literature by systematically analyzing the interplay between spiritual and cultural narratives within the Iranian context, despite the increasing research on destination branding and soft power. The examination of religious and spiritual tourism reveals the ambiguous and dynamic relationship between these concepts, emphasizing the necessity to comprehend the varied experiences of tourists and pilgrims, which include subjective perceptions, emotions, and interactions with destinations (Esmaeili Mahyari et al., 2025; Sandhya et al., 2024).

Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative approach focused on thematic analysis to examine and interpret the spiritual and cultural narratives that form Iran's tourism product. This qualitative approach enables a comprehensive interpretive understanding of complex social phenomena, including the construction of national identity and destination image. This methodology facilitates a critical examination of the complex, multifaceted, and frequently debated meanings inherent in tourism discourse, in contrast to quantitative methods that aim to measure and generalize. This approach is chosen to advance the study's objective of transcending a mere catalog of tourist sites, instead examining the narratives associated with them and their role as strategic instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power.

We used Atlas ti software for text coding. This analysis utilized a diverse corpus of textual and visual materials to provide a comprehensive and triangulated perspective. All materials were collected between January and June 2024. The dataset depicted in Figure 1 included:

- Official promotional materials: A systematic analysis was conducted on the website of Iran's Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts (MCTH), visitiran.ir, serving as the primary source of the state-sanctioned narrative aimed at international audiences.
- Academic literature: We searched Scopus and Web of Science using 'Iran tourism' and 'narrative' keywords, applied language and journal-type filters, and followed PRISMA protocol for screening. So, peer-reviewed academic papers on Iranian tourism, cultural heritage, destination branding, and identity politics were reviewed to establish a foundation for the analysis in existing research.
- Tourist-generated content: An analysis was conducted on TripAdvisor reviews and English-language travel blogs from international tourists visiting Iran between 2020-2024. Travel blogs were sourced from platforms including Lonely Planet Thorn Tree, Travel Blog Directory, and individual blogger websites. TripAdvisor reviews were systematically selected from top-rated Iranian tourist destinations including Imam Reza Shrine (Mashhad), Persepolis (Shiraz), Naqsh-e Jahan Square (Isfahan), and Yazd Fire Temple. From each source, we extracted complete narrative segments related to spiritual and cultural experiences.

The data analysis utilized a six-step framework for thematic analysis, as illustrated in Figure 2, developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method is recognized for its rigor in qualitative research (Clarke & Braun, 2021; Foroozanfar et al., 2025a). The process was methodical and repetitive

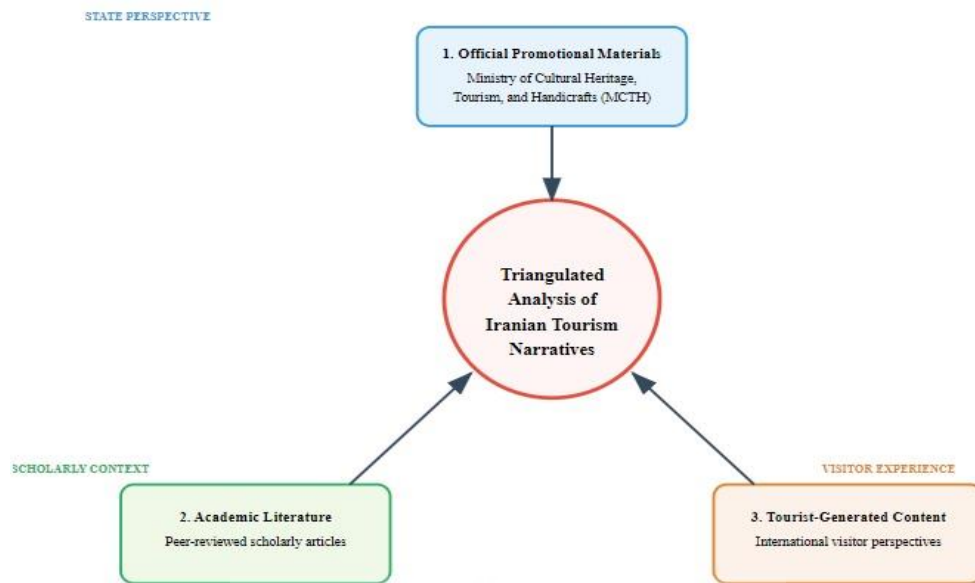


Figure 1. Sources of data and data collection

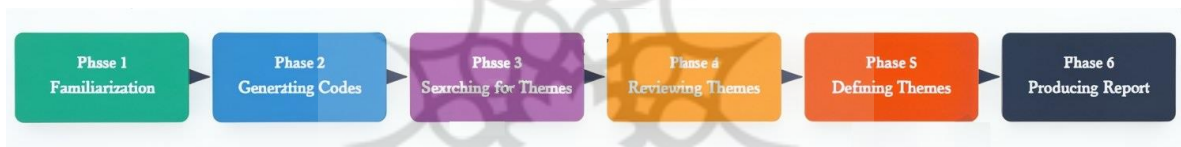


Figure 2. The six-phase of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

1. Familiarization with the data: All collected materials underwent multiple readings to ensure thorough immersion in the content. The initial phase entailed documenting preliminary ideas and possible patterns.
2. Generating initial codes: The textual data underwent systematic coding. This process entailed identifying key features of the data pertinent to the research question and assigning a concise label (a code) to each feature.
3. Searching for themes: The diverse codes were aggregated into possible overarching themes. This step entailed the analysis of relationships among codes and their grouping into overarching patterns of meaning.
4. Reviewing themes: The potential themes were subsequently reviewed and refined. This process entailed verifying the themes against the coded extracts and the complete dataset to confirm their coherence, distinctiveness, and accurate representation of the data. Themes were consolidated, eliminated, and subdivided into sub-themes.

5. Defining and naming themes: Following the development of a satisfactory thematic map, each theme was assigned a precise definition and designation. This phase entailed delineating the narrative conveyed by each theme and its connection to the overarching research question.
6. Producing the report: The final step involved integrating the analyzed themes into a coherent and persuasive report. This involved the selection of relevant data extracts, such as quotes from promotional materials or travel blogs, to exemplify the themes and to articulate the analytical narrative outlined in the Findings and Discussion sections of this paper.

To improve reliability and validity, coding was independently verified by several researchers according to Gioia et al. (2013), and triangulation was accomplished through the comparison of official and tourist-generated sources. Ethical considerations were upheld by utilizing solely publicly accessible content and anonymizing personal identifiers in tourist reviews. The sampling strategy for tourist-generated content emphasized diversity in nationality, travel purpose, and platform (e.g., blogs, TripAdvisor) to guarantee a representative cross-section of visitor experiences.

Findings

The investigation of Iran's tourism discourse identifies four primary narrative clusters that are consistently conveyed to and encountered by tourists. Themes serve as fundamental components of the nation's destination identity, each reflecting unique historical eras, cultural practices, and spiritual traditions that contribute to Iran's intricate narrative. The thematic analysis is presented in Table 1. This narrative landscape is analyzed through its main themes, which are subdivided into specific sub-theme narrative strands, elucidating the distinct stories that contribute to the overall destination image. The themes, sub-themes or narrative strand, key sites, and practices are organized in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of Spiritual and Cultural Narratives in Iranian Tourism

Main Theme	Sub-theme or Narrative Strand	Core Narrative Elements	Key Sites & Practices
Sacred Pilgrimage	Shia Ziyarat	Devotion, Community, Miracles, Shia Identity, Architectural Splendor	Imam Reza Shrine (Mashhad), Fatima Masumeh Shrine (Qom), Shah Cheragh (Shiraz)
	Sufi Mysticism	Inner Journey, Divine Love, Poetry, Esoteric Knowledge, Pantheism	Tombs of Hafez & Sa'adi (Shiraz), Sheikh Safi al-Din Khanegah (Ardabil)
	Ritual Architecture Narrative	Sacred Geometry, Light and Mirror Work (<i>Aina-Kari</i>), Processions, Storytelling through Design	Muharram rituals, Architectural details of mosques and shrines
Ancient Roots	The Eternal Flame & Purity	Continuity, Purity, Ancient Wisdom, Enduring Faith	Yazd Fire Temple (Eternal Flame)

	Cosmological Order & Ritual	Ancient Rites, Connection to Nature, Elements (Earth, Fire, Water, Air)	Towers of Silence (<i>Dakhma</i>), Funerary rituals
	Miraculous Refuge & Royal Lineage	Divine Protection, Survival, Link to Pre-Islamic Kingship	Chak Chak Pilgrimage Site
Imperial Grandeur	Achaemenid Glory	Power, Multicultural Empire, Civilizational Peak, Tragic Fall	Persepolis, Pasargadae, Naqsh-e Rostam
	Silk Road Resilience	Commerce, Cultural Crossroads, Destruction, and Rebirth	Bam Cultural Landscape (Arg-e Bam)
	Engineering Ingenuity	Adaptation, Sustainability, Hidden Networks, Mastery over Nature	<i>Qanat</i> Systems, Ice Houses (<i>Yakhchāl</i>), Windcatchers (<i>Badgir</i>)
Artistic Soul and Lived Culture	Safavid Perfection	"Half the World", Artistic Zenith, Urban Harmony	Naqsh-e Jahan Square (Isfahan), Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Chehel Sotoun Palace
	The Poetic Heart	Literature, Romance, Gardens as Paradise, Serenity	Eram Garden (Shiraz), Tombs of Poets, Narenjestan-e Qavam
	The Sensory Bazaar & Craftsmanship	Artisanal Tradition, Living History, Commerce as Culture, Sensory Immersion	Historic Bazaars of Isfahan, Tabriz, and Shiraz; Handicraft workshops
	The Performance of Hospitality	Generosity, Respect, Social Ritual, Humanness	The practice of <i>Taarof</i> in daily interactions

Result

The Narrative of Sacred Pilgrimage: Journeys of Faith and Devotion

The narrative of sacred pilgrimage constitutes a fundamental aspect of Iranian tourism, evident in three interconnected dimensions: the collective practice of Shia Ziyarat, the more esoteric journey of Sufi mysticism, and the employment of ritual and architecture as significant storytelling mechanisms.

- *Shia Ziyarat: Central Pillar of Communal Shia Pilgrimage.* This narrative serves as a significant catalyst for tourism in Iran and its surrounding areas, focusing on pilgrimage (ziyarat) to the shrines of Shia Imams and their relatives. Mashhad and Qom serve as the epicenters. The Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad is recognized as the primary pilgrimage destination for Shia Muslims in Iran, drawing millions of visitors each year. The Fatima Masumeh Shrine in Qom positions the city as a significant center for religious scholarship on a global scale. The narrative presented reflects profound commitment, shared identity, and spiritual comfort. This narrative is strongly supported by tourist experiences documented in our analysis. For instance, one international visitor to the Imam Reza Shrine noted: "The atmosphere here is unlike anywhere else... you can feel the devotion of thousands of pilgrims around you". Similarly, academic literature emphasizes that "Shia pilgrimage sites serve as focal points for collective identity formation and spiritual renewal" (Esmaeili Mahyari et al., 2025). TripAdvisor reviews consistently highlight themes of

spiritual transformation, with visitors frequently using terms such as "blessed," "peaceful," and "life-changing" when describing their experiences at these sacred sites.

- **Sufi mysticism:** The esoteric path of the soul. The Sufi narrative presents a personalized spiritual journey that is closely linked with Persian poetry and philosophy. The tombs of poets such as Hafez and Sa'adi in Shiraz serve as sites of spiritual pilgrimage, attracting visitors in search of inspiration. This narrative, associated with renowned mystics such as Rumi, aims to engage a global audience in the pursuit of spiritual insight.
- **Ritual & Architecture as Narrative:** Stories in light and action. This narrative strand emphasizes the communication of faith through non-verbal methods, extending beyond the sites themselves. The architecture of the major shrines serves as a fundamental substance for this purpose. The mirror work, known as Aina-Kari, which lends the Shah Cheragh shrine its designation as "King of Light," is intended to reflect the divine and establish an ethereal environment for pilgrims. This represents a purposeful application of design to convey a narrative of an idealized existence. Public rituals, particularly during Muharram, serve as significant narrative performances. The ceremonies and reenactments of historical events commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, reinforcing a collective Shia identity and historical narrative among participants.

The Narrative of Ancient Roots: Zoroastrianism and Pre-Islamic Identity

The narrative of endurance and ancient wisdom is intricately linked to Iran's pre-Islamic Zoroastrian heritage, particularly in Yazd. This narrative is conveyed through three distinct stories.

- **The Eternal Flame & Purity:** A narrative of continuity. The Yazd Fire Temple (Atashkadeh) is pivotal to this narrative, containing a sacred flame that is claimed to have been continuously burning for more than 1,500 years. The narrative exemplifies continuous integrity and purity, with the flame representing the perpetual presence of Ahura Mazda. The history of the flame, concealed and relocated for centuries to safeguard it from invaders, introduces a significant dimension of resilience and devotion. The enduring appeal of Zoroastrian heritage sites is evident in visitor testimonials. One travel blogger observed: "Standing before the eternal flame in Yazd, I felt connected to 3,000 years of continuous worship". Academic research confirms that "Zoroastrian sites offer tourists a tangible link to pre-Islamic Iranian identity, satisfying contemporary quests for authentic cultural experiences" (Boodaghi et al., 2025).
- **Cosmological Order & Ritual:** A narrative of ancient worldviews. The Towers of Silence (Dakhma), situated on the periphery of the city, suggest a more mysterious history. This narrative describes distinctive Zoroastrian funerary practices in which corpses are left exposed to the elements to prevent contamination of the sacred elements of earth and fire. For tourists, these sites

exhibit striking beauty that encourages reflection on a fundamentally different perspective concerning life, death, and humanity's role within nature.

Miraculous Refuge & Royal Lineage: A narrative of survival. The pilgrimage site of Chak Chak concludes this triptych with a narrative of miraculous protection. According to legend, Nikbanou, the daughter of the final pre-Islamic Sassanian king, was concealed from invading forces in a mountain cave, where water has continuously dripped, establishing a connection to Iran's pre-Islamic royalty and divine intervention.

The Narrative of Imperial Grandeur and Civilizational Legacy

This narrative cluster conveys an impression of strength, intelligence, and enduring significance throughout history.

- *Achaemenid Glory: The narrative of civilization.* Persepolis epitomizes this myth as the ceremonial capital of the inaugural Persian Empire. The outstanding reliefs on the Apadana staircase convey a narrative of a refined and diversified empire founded on unity and tolerance. For contemporary Iranians, it serves as a significant source of national pride. The narrative of imperial grandeur resonates powerfully with international visitors, as evidenced in their testimonials. A German tourist wrote: "Persepolis made me understand why Iran was once the center of the civilized world". This sentiment aligns with scholarly observations that "ancient Persian sites serve as powerful symbols of civilizational achievement, countering contemporary negative stereotypes" (Boodaghi et al., 2025).
- *Silk Road Resilience: The narrative of perseverance.* The cultural landscape of Bam reflects a narrative of commercial and cultural exchange along the historic Silk Road. Additionally, this contemporary narrative reflects a story of significant devastation due to the 2003 earthquake and the ensuing reconstruction efforts, serving as a compelling illustration of national resilience and renewal.
- *Engineering Ingenuity: A narrative on the mastery of natural phenomena.* A notable sub-narrative within the theme of imperial grandeur is the narrative of Persian engineering. The ancient qanat underground water management systems exemplify cultural traditions and sustainable adaptation to desert environments, as acknowledged by UNESCO. The narrative of ingenuity encompasses various structures, including the towering badgirs (windcatchers) of Yazd and ancient ice houses (yakhchāl), which exemplify an advanced comprehension of thermodynamics. Their collective efforts illustrate a civilization that not only endured a challenging environment but also excelled through advancements in science and engineering.

The Narrative of Artistic Soul and Lived Culture

This narrative cluster highlights the aesthetic refinement and human warmth of Iranian culture.

- *Safavid Perfection. The Perfection of the Safavid Dynasty.* Isfahan and Shiraz serve as dual centers of artistic and poetic expression. The narrative of Isfahan is encapsulated in the proverb "Esfahān nesf-e-jahān" (Isfahan is half the world), reflecting the urban and architectural excellence of the Safavid era. Isfahan and Shiraz represent dual aspects of Iran's cultural identity, each characterized by a unique narrative. The narrative of Isfahan is encapsulated in the renowned Persian proverb "Esfahān nesf-e-jahān" (Isfahan is half the world). This narrative examines the urban and architectural excellence of the Safavid era, focusing on the harmonious design of Naqsh-e Jahan Square, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The narrative develops through the remarkable aesthetics of its azure-tiled mosques, exemplified by Sheikh Lotfollah; its refined palaces like Chehel Sotoun (Palace of Forty Columns); and its notable bridges, Si-o-se-pol and Khaju, which serve as both crossings and social gathering sites. Isfahan exemplifies an aesthetic peak, characterized as a comprehensive artistic endeavor. The artistic excellence of Isfahan consistently overwhelms visitors, as captured in their authentic responses. An American tourist reflected: "Walking through Naqsh-e Jahan Square, I finally understood why they say Isfahan is half the world". Academic literature supports this narrative impact, noting that "Safavid architectural achievements create immediate emotional connections with visitors, transcending cultural boundaries" (Shahrabi Farahani & Farahani, 2025).
- *The Poetic Heart: The narrative of Literature, Romance, Gardens as Paradise, Serenity.* Shiraz is positioned as the "city of poets, literature, and flowers" in its narrative, which is more personal and romantic. The tranquil ambiance of its numerous gardens, particularly the UNESCO-listed Eram Garden, which exemplifies the Persian vision of paradise on earth, tells its tale. The profound cultural respect for its indigenous poets, Hafez and Sa'adi, lies at the heart of this narrative. Their tombs are living monuments to Iran's creative heart since they are not solemn memorials but rather thriving hubs of cultural activity where both Iranians and visitors congregate, particularly at night, to read poetry and take in the literary ambiance.
- *The Sensory Bazaar & Craftsmanship: A narrative of living history.* The historic bazaar presents a narrative distinct from the high art of mosques and palaces. This narrative illustrates the interplay between historical experience and sensory engagement, highlighting the interdependence of commerce and culture. The bazaars of Isfahan, Tabriz, and Shiraz convey their narratives through the aromas of spices, the clanging of coppersmiths' hammers, and the visual appeal of vibrant textiles. This narrative highlights artisanal tradition, demonstrating centuries-old craftsmanship in various forms, including Persian carpets and intricate metalwork, transmitted across generations.

The Performance of Iranian hospitality (Taarof): The performance of a living narrative. The lived experience of Taarof, a distinctive Iranian custom of hospitality, represents a significant narrative. This represents a multifaceted cultural framework of politeness, respect, and generosity that regulates social interactions. This phenomenon is frequently characterized as a "dance of politeness," encompassing a ritual of iterative offers and refusals. A host will persistently present food or a gift, while the guest is anticipated to graciously refuse multiple times before ultimately accepting, demonstrating humility. Taarof is fundamentally based on a cultural inclination to demonstrate respect and prioritize the guest over oneself. The cultural script of politeness and generosity is complex. Tourist blogs contain numerous accounts detailing experiences of exceptional hospitality. This personal narrative of warmth and human connection effectively counters negative political portrayals of Iran. The hospitality narrative finds its strongest expression in visitor accounts of interpersonal encounters. A British traveler noted: "The kindness of Iranian people completely changed my preconceptions about this country". Research confirms that "authentic hospitality experiences serve as powerful counter-narratives to political tensions, creating lasting positive impressions" (Sandhya et al., 2024).

Conclusion and Discussion

This study identifies four primary narrative clusters that constitute the foundation of Iran's destination identity by analyzing a diverse array of sources, including official government promotions and tourist-generated content. Secondly, by situating these narratives within the realm of geopolitics and "soft power," the study offers a critical examination of how cultural storytelling serves as a strategic instrument to mitigate adverse international perceptions and convey a more nuanced national identity. This study provides a crucial framework for scholars and professionals to comprehend the complex relationship between heritage, politics, and tourism in a disputed locale.

This study clarifies that the narratives regarding Iranian tourism are not simply descriptive; rather, they serve as actively constructed instruments of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Through thematic analysis of official materials, academic literature, and content generated by tourists, four interconnected narrative clusters were identified: Sacred Pilgrimage, Ancient Roots, Imperial Grandeur, and Artistic Soul. These narratives collectively depict Iran as a nation characterized by a rich civilization, spiritual depth, artistic beauty, and notable hospitality, an image that both acknowledges and surpasses its geopolitical challenges. Figure 3 highlights the narrative clusters, key sites or practices, and representative quote or theme.

This study concludes that Iran's tourism landscape is characterized by a complex interplay of spiritual and cultural narratives. The narratives presented correspond with the essential experiential dimensions of spiritual tourism identified in previous research, serving as integral elements of Iran's

national identity and its strategic communication on a global scale. The success of this projection depends on effectively managing internal identity politics and addressing the substantial external pressures that jeopardize the heritage foundational to these narratives. The findings indicate that Iran presents a complex and multi-faceted image that strategically integrates its spiritual, historical, and cultural resources. This analysis will contextualize these findings within the wider academic discourse on spiritual and religious tourism, comparing them with recent studies to examine the implications of this narrative strategy.



Figure 3. Summary of narrative clusters, key sites and representative theme

The mental and psychological outcomes identified in this study's narratives closely correspond with empirical research on pilgrim experiences, both in Iran and worldwide. The theme of Sacred Pilgrimage, which evokes feelings of peace, spiritual connection, and devotion, aligns closely with the findings of Esmaeili Mahyari et al. (2025) at the Razavi Holy Shrine. The experience of attaining inner peace and happiness transcends cultural and religious boundaries, as evidenced by the study conducted by Abdrakhmanova et al. (2023) on visitors to the Ascension Cathedral in Kazakhstan. Their finding that non-adherent tourists reported feeling "blessed" supports the assertion that narratives surrounding Iranian sites, whether religious or historical, are intended to evoke a universally recognized sense of awe and spiritual fulfillment. Furthermore, this study posits that Iran's tourism offerings encompass a wider spiritual and cultural dimension beyond formal religion. The narrative of the Artistic Soul and Lived Culture, wherein visitors engage in quiet contemplation in gardens or at the tombs of poets, parallels the "Consciousness" theme identified by Esmaeili Mahyari et al. (2025), which encompasses experiences of self-reflection and detachment from routine life. This indicates that Iranian tourism effectively offers

environments that align with Norman (2012) classifications of "Spiritual Tourism as Retreat" and "Spiritual Tourism as Quest," addressing contemporary pursuits for meaning beyond traditional religious frameworks.

The finding of this study revealed that the strategic use of these narratives serves as a calculated application of "soft power". Iranian officials have clearly outlined this strategy, positioning tourism as a vital instrument for addressing negative stereotypes and participating in cultural diplomacy. Each narrative cluster serves a distinct function: Sacred Pilgrimage reinforces regional connections; Ancient Roots and Imperial Grandeur convey an impression of a significant, ancient civilization to a global audience; and the Artistic Soul and Lived Hospitality render the nation more relatable to Western audiences. The practice of Taarof serves as a significant instrument of soft power, fostering personal connections that effectively counter impersonal geopolitical narratives. The effectiveness of these narrative, in particular, depends on the critical role of the host community in shaping the spiritual experience, as identified by Shahrabi Farahani and Farahani (2025). The strong stories that attract tourists to Iran are based on real cultural heritage, which is very delicate. The places that tell these stories often suffer from lack of funding, poor management, and damage from the environment. This problem is made worse by international sanctions that restrict access to global help, technology, and money for conservation, leading to a harmful cycle that puts soft power at risk.

Our analysis reveals a sophisticated strategy whereby Iran's tourism narratives achieve a delicate balance between pre-Islamic heritage and contemporary Islamic identity, addressing the challenge of presenting a cohesive national identity that encompasses both ancient roots and modern religious values. Each narrative cluster contributes uniquely to this balancing as follows.

1. Sacred Pilgrimage incorporates Zoroastrian fire symbolism (eternal flames, light-work) within Islamic shrines, creating continuity rather than replacement.
2. Ancient Roots presents Zoroastrian sites as "cultural heritage" that provides a historical foundation for contemporary Islamic spirituality without challenging religious supremacy.
3. Imperial Grandeur connects pre-Islamic achievements (Persepolis multiculturalism) to the Islamic golden ages, demonstrating civilizational continuity.
4. Artistic Soul showcases Safavid architecture as a synthesis where Islamic principles enhanced Persian traditions, particularly in Isfahan's design.

Limitations implications, and Recommendations for Future Studies

Limitation

This study furnishes a thematic analysis of Iran's main tourism narratives; nonetheless, its limitations highlight significant opportunities for future research. This qualitative study analyzes existing English-

language texts, yielding interpretive findings. Its scope is primarily centered on the narrative designed for an international Anglophone audience. The emphasis on English-language and international visitor perspectives constrains this study, thereby excluding domestic tourist narratives. Subsequent studies ought to integrate domestic narratives alongside quantitative validation of thematic results. The analysis omits direct interviews with tourists or policymakers, which could yield more profound, first-hand insights into narrative creation and reception.

Implications

Building on this study, the following implications are proposed:

- Tour operators should focus on developing and promoting "narrative itineraries" that thematically connect various sites, rather than marketing them individually. Findings suggest potential tour concepts such as a "Persian Ingenuity" tour that connects Isfahan's engineering marvels, including its bridges, with the ancient qanat systems, or a "Journey through the Persian Soul" itinerary that links the poetry of Shiraz with the Sufi mysticism of Ardabil and the spiritual tranquility of Yazd.
- Marketing campaigns should prioritize emotional and spiritual outcomes of visits over physical assets. Based on the findings from this and related studies, messaging should focus on themes such as "Find your inner peace," "Connect with millennia of history," and "Experience the warmth of legendary hospitality," as these serve as more compelling motivators than mere site descriptions.
- Promotional materials and guide training should proactively elucidate complex cultural practices, such as Taarof, to prevent misunderstandings and foster cultural appreciation. Presenting it as a "performance of respect" or an "art of hospitality" can transform a potentially confusing interaction into a memorable and positive cultural lesson while also proactively addressing cultural nuances.
- Investing in integrated heritage management is essential due to the fragility of heritage assets. An integrated policy approach is necessary, viewing preservation as a strategic investment in the nation's soft power resources. Investment in integrated heritage management is advisable. Funding for sites such as Persepolis and Bam should be regarded not as an expense but as vital maintenance of the foundational infrastructure of Iran's global cultural narrative.

Future Research agenda

This study, as noted in the limitations section, focused on English-language and international visitor viewpoints, so restricting its scope and omitting domestic tourist narratives. Future studies should incorporate domestic narratives. Additionally, the following future research directions are recommended for scholars:

- While this study delineated the anticipated narratives, subsequent research ought to investigate their reception. Qualitative interview research could investigate how various tourist populations (e.g., secular Western, regional religious, domestic) notice the interaction between pre-Islamic and Islamic narratives.
- The spiritual experiences recounted by pilgrims are frequently deep. Longitudinal studies tracking visitors post-return are essential to evaluate the enduring transforming effects of a trip to Iran.
- The "host community" is an essential, albeit underexplored, element of the spiritual tourism experience. Comprehensive ethnographic research is essential to comprehend the viewpoints of Iranians residing and employed at these locations.

This study focused on narratives in English. A crucial next step is to compare tourist materials created in Persian, Arabic, Russian, and Chinese to understand how Iran tailors its spiritual and cultural stories for its main local and regional markets. This research would clarify the country's strategic branding efforts aimed at specific audiences.

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