UNESCO's World Heritage Sites: The interplay between an international and a local brand (Gonbad-e Qābus Brick Tower, Iran)

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Abstract

While UNESCO's World Heritage Sites (WHS) are among the catalysers that can affect destination image, this has its own challenges and opportunities.Gonbad-e Qābus brick tower, in north-east Iran, is one of the most iconic existing symbols of the ancient cultural exchange between Central Asian nomads and Iran's ancient civilization. Registered as a UNESCO's WHS in 2012, this outstanding masterpiece of early Islamic brick architecture may play a pivotal role in shedding light on various dimensions of new cultural exchanges, and can potentially highlight the role of Turkman minority culture in tourism presentation of the area surrounding the WHS.

This chapter provides an empirical examination (20 interviews: 10 with tourism experts and 10 with local people) of this interplay in the context of the Gonbad-e Qābus brick tower. The discussion focuses on the influence of the heritage site designation brand upon the prior image, or 'brand', of the destination (Turkmen culture). Furthermore, the chapter considers how far both brands can be unified within the destination. Firstly, the mission of UNESCO is outlined, before discussing the role of the local community and their attitudes toward the Gonbad-e Qābus tower becoming a WHS. The chapter then turns to focus on the challenges of designating an international brand for the local community at the destination, and whether, and how, the local people might accept the newly-awarded branding of their own culture.

Keywords: Destination image, World Heritage Sites, Local community, Minority culture

Introduction

While UNESCO's World Heritage Site (WHS) designation of particular sites can be beneficial for the tourism industry at the broader destination, this can have its own challenges. The strong relationship between identities and community is discussed by Ballesteros and Ramírez (2007), who identified the main role of the symbolic community in heritage tourism development and the influence of tourism on identities. In the case that local authorities and other tourism stakeholders at the destination do not include consideration of the role of local communities in the tourism development of the sites, those communities surrounding the site may feel excluded from the management of their own heritage. As UNESCO, as an international brand, takes over representation, and to some extent presentation, of the site, the other challenge is to match the demands of tourism to local needs, while making it sustainable and viable. As a multi-faceted

industry, tourism has significant impacts, not only on the heritage sites themselves, but on the entire community and environment that surrounds the heritage site (Salazar, 2012).

Despite Iran having inscribed 24 properties (22 cultural and 2 natural sites) on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site (WHS) list, in addition to its 57 sites on the tentative list, it plays only a small role as an international tourism destination. (UNESCO, 2019). This small role is the consequence of different factors including international sanctions against the country (since 1995), lack of a formidable and ongoing long-term strategy for the tourism industry of the country, and insufficient infrastructure for tourism (Seyfi, & Hall, 2018; Shabani, & Tucker, 2018). Moreover, in the case of each designated site, there is invariably a particular, and often problematic, interplay between the international WHS 'brand' and the local 'brand(s)', or cultural identity/ies.

The objective of this chapter is to offer an empirical examination of this interplay in the context of the Gonbad-e Qābus brick tower, in north-east Iran. Registered as a UNESCO's WHS in 2012, this outstanding masterpiece of early Islamic brick architecture is one of the most iconic symbols of the ancient cultural exchange between Central Asian nomads and Iran's ancient civilization. As such, it can shed light on the different dimensions of cultural exchange, as well as potentially highlighting the Turkmen minority's culture and its role in the formation of a new tourism image and presentation of the area surrounding the WHS. The discussion in the chapter will focus on the influence of the heritage site designation brand upon the prior image, or 'brand', of the destination (Turkmen culture). Furthermore, the chapter considers how far both brands can be unified within the destination. Firstly, the mission of UNESCO will be outlined, before discussing the role of the local community and their attitudes toward the Gonbad-e Qābus tower becoming a WHS. The chapter will then focus in on the challenges of designating an international brand for the local community at the destination and how/if the local people might accept the effect of the newly-awarded brand on their own culture.

UNESCO, The mission of a big brand

Every year, the cultural committees of UNESCO in Paris publish the lists of World Heritage Site (WHS) properties and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) elements, in which the exceptional universal value of each site is stated. Inscription is a reminder that all the people of the world are not only the owners but are also responsible for these places or intangible elements. Moreover, the World Heritage lists reinforce the identification, preservation and transmission towards future generations of these valuable places and monuments from the perspective of history and art (Saipradist and Staiff, 2008). While the main purpose of these recognitions by UNESCO is to preserve and conserve those sites, on the other hand, inscription often leads to a significant increase in tourist numbers (Breakey, 2012). Indeed, the notion of heritage sites having a cultural tourism purpose is integral to UNESCO's production of what Di Giovine (2009) calls the global heritage-scape, in that it plays a major role in harnessing 'the global flows of international travellers to interact with the authentic monuments *in situ*' (Di Giovine, 2009, p. 42).

Further to this point, Meskell (2014, p. 237) has argued that the 1972 World Heritage Convention 'is not so much about protection anymore, but instead about branding, marketing, and promoting new nominations in an increasingly acquisitive heritage economy'. According to Su and Wall (2011), this trend causes a paradoxical condition; while the basic objective of UNESCO is to promote the protection and preservation of sites, some destinations are prioritizing tourist development, especially in new destinations or those little known. This sudden increase in the number of visitors can put in danger the survival of the WHS (Abuamoud, Libbin,Green, & Alrousan, 2014; Breakey, 2012; Landorf, 2009).WHS designation plays a "labelling" (Yang,Lin, & Han, 2010) or "branding" (Timothy, 2011) role for the destinations and can be a significant

motivator for those tourists who seek heritage experiences (Caust, & Vecco, 2017; Poria, Reichel, & Cohen, 2013; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). In this regard, culture becomes one of the most tempting motivators and heritage is seen as one of the most significant and fastest growing aspects of tourism (Poria et al., 2003; Correia, Kozak, & Ferradeira, 2013).

The three conventions passed by the UNESCO in order to protect man-made treasures that exist in the world, are as follows;
1- Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972)
2- Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)
3- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression (2005) (UNESCO, 2003).

As Article 2 of the UNESCO's Convention regarding the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) explains, "Safeguarding' means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage." (UNESCO, 2003). The question then arises as to whether there is a desire locally to 'revitalize' the heritage and make it 'viable'. Accordingly, this could be interpreted as a way of making a site or culture come alive, while trying to maintain its unique characteristics. However, the World Heritage list has been criticized for having a particular, Eurocentric, bias on 'monumentality' (Alivizatou, 2012). While there are attempts to accommodate cultural diversity, Labadi (2013), for example, notes that the World Heritage list continues in its mode of 'privileging specific aesthetic and art historical points of view' (Labadi, 2013, p. 61).

Moreover, Rau (2014) highlights the potential negative impact of increased tourism and discusses the inherent contradiction in the position of UNESCO when they are aware of the dangers of increased promotion of a site, despite the damage that occurs. While it is mentioned in the Budapest Declaration (UNESCO, 2002) that the UNESCO assignment is to promote "an appropriate equitable balance between conservation, sustainability and development" in UNESCO sites, on the other hand, UNESCO's objective is to preserve the cultural and natural (tangible and intangible) heritage for the future generations. This threat can be considered when the new visitor flows may seriously affect and damage the environmental and cultural integrity of these destinations as the carrying capacity of the site is seriously reduced. These impacts could be traced in overcrowding of sites, changes in use and appearance of buildings, commercialization of local culture, the issue of management and conservation, compromised and corrupted cultural values and the "tourismification" of the sites (Jimura, 2019; Nicholas et al., 2009; Daniel, 1996).

The role of local community

The strong relationship between heritage, identity and community is discussed by Ballesteros and Ramírez (2007), as they identified the main role of the symbolic community in heritage tourism development and the influence of tourism on identities. In this regard, Simpson (2008), indicates the effect of community involvement and how it can be beneficial at all stages of tourism development. When WHS status is awarded to a site, to a certain degree, representation, control and planning of the site are invariably removed from the local community, so that the locale becomes appropriated by national and international interests which may exclude the community from the conversation. In this regard, the major challenge could be how to match the demands of tourism to local needs, while making it sustainable and viable. As a multi-faceted industry, tourism has significant impacts, not only on the heritage sites themselves, but on the entire community and

environment that surrounds the heritage site. These factors bring the threat of uncontrolled expansion of UNESCO cultural heritage sites to attention (Salazar, 2012).

The first studies regarding the relationship between local community and tourism took place during the 1970s, according to which several theorical models such as Butler's tourism area life cycle (Butler, 1980), stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and social exchange theory (Ap, 1992) among others, have been developed by different scholars. Most of the literature regarding this issue has shown that a correct understanding and assessment of tourism development in level of local communities is fundamental to foster sustainable tourism (Johnson et al, 1994; Diedrich, and García-Buades, 2009). When it comes to tourism issues, direct and indirect impacts affect not only the cultural heritage site but the entire community and environment that surrounds it, so uncontrolled expansion can be considered a threat for the short and long-term sustainability of the site and the local community (Bâc, 2012).

Local communities' attitudes towards tourism are a key component in the identification, measurement and analysis of the changes caused by tourism, so that examination of these factors will help local decision makers in terms of planning, developing and managing of the current situation based on which public could support the tourism industry (Hall & Page, 1999; Ryan & Montgomery, 1994; Pearce, 1980). Carmichael, Peppard, and Boudreau, (1996) and Andereck and Vogt (2000) considered the important role of the local community and attitudes towards tourism and consider it vital that key local stakeholders need to have the opportunity to express their opinions in the decision-making process. They are those who ultimately decide which changes brought about by tourism are acceptable and which are not. Moreover, any site which is nominated for WHS status, must have a detailed Management Plan and a strong legal framework as part of the Nomination Documents by its State Party (Shackley, 1998). In this regard, the management and conservation plan of the site must be improved throughout and after the nomination process as all WHSs need to uphold their management and conservation plan (Bianchi, 2002; Smith, 2002).

Beside the main role of the decision makers (at all levels) in terms of planning and providing the infrastructure at the destination, local people would ideally need to be encouraged and educated about the preservation of the site, as their participation is a vital part of the mission of WHSs (UNESCO, 2010). However, De Cesari (2010, p. 308) has noted that, because 'the 1972 Convention in fact authorizes not only experts but also the nation-state and its representatives as the proper subjects of World Heritage', indeed other interested parties, including local residents around the site, can not only be excluded, but can even become 'silenced in the process (ibid.).' Tucker and Carnegie (2014), for example, discuss the ways in which local cultural values are subjugated to the supposed 'universal values' encompassed in the UNESCO World Heritage listings at a Turkish WHS. Further to this, according to Labadi (2013:150), the content of World Heritage nominations often 'contains the seeds to fuel controversies, conflicts and the marginalization of whole sectors of populations'. It is therefore highly pertinent to consider the interplay between the UNESCO WHS global 'brand' and the local identity, or 'brand', otherwise exerted in and around sites in the WHS listings.

Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, as a key stakeholder of the tourism industry in the country, has brought into attention the importance of local community engagement in cultural heritage management. Nevertheless, a lack of tourism experts, community consultation and education, and ineffective strategies and policies are considerable challenges in many of Iran's destinations. For example, as Donato and Lohrasbi's 2017 study of Takht-e Soleyman WHS noted, the vital role of the local community in the development process of the site and destination was neglected, despite the great desire of engagement from the community's side. Indeed, it is widely observed that in the overall perception of local community, if the advantages of tourism development outweigh its disadvantages, the community will support and value tourism

development, whilst failing their expectations will lead to negative reactions towards the development (Gursoy et al., 2002; Haobin Ye et al., 2014; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015). This chapter examines this interplay between the local community, World Heritage designation and tourism development for the case of Gonbad-e Qābus in Iran, and will now outline the methods employed in this case study research.

Case study and methods

Based on previous studies regarding the effects of UNESCO site designation on a destination, the authors undertook an empirical survey in order to evaluate the interplay between an international brand and a local brand, in improving the image and fostering the tourism industry of a destination. The study was conducted in May 2019 (Gonbad, Iran) and was administered in a 'semi-structured interview' format in person by one of the authors (Shabani). Convenience sampling was used whereby any apparent residents (13) of Gonbad and Tourism experts (12) who had minimum 10 years of working experience at ICHTO (Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization) of Golestan province branch, were approached and asked if they were willing to take part in a short interview. Of 25 respondents asked, 20 were interviewed overall. Out of 10 experts who were interviewed, 5 of them were managers at ICHTO and the other 5 were ICHTO employees (archaeologists and heritage conservation specialists). Also, 5 of the residents were souvenir shop owners around the UNESCO site and the other 5 were residents of Gonbad who were visiting the site. The residents' interviews lasted approximately fifteen minutes each and the experts' interviews lasted twenty-five minutes each, on average.

Overall, the interviewees were open to express their ideas and were keen to help the improvement of tourism industry of the region by taking part in the research. The interviews were conducted in Persian with the interviewees asked a series of questions on subjects including: the negative and positive points of Gonbad-e Qābus before and after WHS designation, the strengths, weaknesses and potential of the tourism industry of Gonbad, and their views about the impact of WHS designation on the culture, economy and overall image of the city as a destination. Interviewees were also asked about their ideas for increasing the level of awareness about the attractions of the city both nationally and internationally, and also their suggestions about improving the tourism industry of the city. The respondents' answers to the interview questions were later translated to English and analysed for identifiable patterns with regards to what was considered 'meaningful' in relation to the subject of the role of the local brand (Turkmen culture) in comparison to an international one (UNESCO). While the study was limited in size and scope, it nonetheless yielded insightful information. These findings are organised around the role of the UNESCO brand as an international brand and, comparing this to the role of the local brand, we discuss their implications for the destination.

The tallest brick tower in the world

Turkmen Sahra (which means Plain of Turkmens), is a region in Iran's Golestan Province southeast of the Caspian Sea and, bordering Turkmenistan, is where the majority of Turkmen ethnic peoples of Iran reside. Iranian Turkmen Ethnicity has for a long time represented a group of semi-nomadic tribes who are Sunni Muslim and have retained a fairly traditional way of life (Minorsky, 1953).

Gonbad-e Qabus is a city of Golestan province with a land area of 21 km^2 and a population of 151,910 in the north east of Iran (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2016; Gonbad Municipality, 2018). The history of the region (Hyrcania in Greek or Varkâna in Old Persian Language) dates back to 600 BC, but the city itself (reconstructed in 1934 by the order of Reza Shah, the first king of Pahlavi dynasty) takes its name from Qābus Ibn Voshmgir (Ziyarid ruler and literati, 10th - 11th Century), and is located near the ruins of the ancient city of Gorgan (also called Jorjan, the capital of the Ziyarid dynasty), which was destroyed during the Mongols' invasion in the 14th and 15th centuries (Governor of Golestan Informing Base, 2015). Gonbad-e Qābus brick tower is a 53m high tomb which was built in 1006 AD for Qābus Ibn Voshmgir and was registered as a UNESCO WHS in 2012. This tower is one of the most iconic symbols of the ancient cultural exchange between Central Asian nomads and Iran's ancient civilization and is considered as an outstanding masterpiece of early Islamic brick architecture (UNESCO, 2012). It is believed that, Gonbad-e Qābus brick tower is the only remaining evidence of the ancient city of Gorgan and is an outstanding and technologically innovative example of Islamic architecture that influenced sacred building in Iran, Anatolia and Central Asia. The structural design (ten-pointed star) of this master piece is based on a geometric formula which achieved great height in load-bearing brickwork and makes this hollow cylindrical tower visible from great distances in the surrounding lowlands from all directions. Not only has its conical roofed form become a prototype for tomb towers and other commemorative towers in the region, but also it became an outstanding example of a commemorative tower whose design illustrates the exceptional development of mathematics and science in the Muslim world at the turn of the first millennium AD (UNESCO, 2012).

Besides the tower, the city has other attractions, such as:

- Historical: The Great wall of Gorgan; the longest brick wall of the world (c. 200 km) which was built from 420s AD to 530s AD by Sasanid Empire (Sauer et al, 2013; UNESCO, 2017).
- Natural: Plain and wetlands (Alma Gol, Aji Gol and Ala Gol)
- Cultural: Turkmens' Culture and customs
- Sportive: Horse riding competitions (this city is the capital of horse riding in Iran)
- Religious: Shrine of Imam Yahya bin Zaid.

All these recognitions imply that, at present, the city is among one of the most attractive tourism destinations in Iran and is the best representative of Turkmen culture (which is considered as the local brand for this destination). Hosting the majority of Turkmen ethnicity, this region is popular for the art and handicrafts of Turkmen. Apart from the history of Gonbad, the Turkmen ethnicity (comprising more than 60% of the population of the city) and its culture, whose carpets and horses are known globally, are among the most important attractions in this region. Turkmen clothing, which is quite different from the country's usual dress, is also another attraction of this region;

people (both male and female) wear their own traditional clothes in public (Governor of Golestan Informing Base, 2015).

Local opinions in relation to WHS designation

For nearly all the residents interviewed (living in Gonbad for more than 20 years and hence remembering their several visits of the sites before and after the designation), the Brick Tower was considered among the top three attractions that the city is known for, followed by the Turkmen ethnicity and handicrafts. According to the residents, prior to Gonbad-e Qābus designation as a WHS site, it used to be an open space and a cultural centre bringing people together, although there was not much information or signage available for tourists. Tourism officials also stated that the site was one of the main areas of gathering for celebrations, festivals and routine get-togethers. For example, one expert said: The cultural centre of the site was the best place for the younger generation to spend their free time". Another respondent said: "It used to be an open site that people could visit and enjoy anytime, no matter day or night".

At the same time, respondents in both groups pointed out, in relation to the negative aspects of the site before designation, that there was previously a lack of an appropriate conservation programme for the site, as well as an unattractive and unsecure surrounding area, and a lack of standardised informing system for tourists such as available guides or informative signs. As one expert said: "The site wasn't introduced well and no one even in the region knew about it, no protection and conservation program were considered for it". Another resident said that: "Nobody could control the safety and conservation of the site and the tower itself had suffered considerable damage".

Following the WHS listing, it is being managed more systematically and people now need to buy tickets for entrance and the fund is used for maintenance and conservation purposes. The majority of the tourism officials interviewed believe this to be a positive development, due to additional funds for research and maintenance purposes and the opportunity for enhanced image and subsequent increased tourist visitation: "A special protection team is now considered to do the studies and protecting the site, repairing the damaged part of the tower". However, in the case of the residents, nearly all them did not notice any significant difference, saying that "Nothing important happened, just periodic conservation plans". Another said: "Just some informative signs in the site can be seen, but nothing major happened".

On the other hand, residents were still pessimistic about the impacts of the WHS and stated the negative points about this designation, that the site has not benefited as expected with other UNESCO sites in other countries. Furthermore, residents believe that there have not been any major changes following its listing. Lack of attention to the site, limited efforts in advertising this WHS nationally and internationally, as well as lack of facilities are perceived to be the main weaknesses of the site from the residents' perspective. For example, one person said: "I visited some of the UNESCO sites in other countries and their sites are not comparable with ours as the level of information and services for tourists are far better elsewhere". Both groups highlighted what they saw as a lack of tourism experts at a managerial level, as well as weak city planning and infrastructure, limited accommodations (there are only two hotels in the city), and absence of tour

guides. It was pointed out, for example, that: "The infrastructure is not ready for the tourists as there is no information and no suitable accommodation provided for tourists. Also, there is no expert at managerial level for tourism". There appears to be lack of expertise on the tourism front with the majority of experts in the ICHTO having degrees and experience in archaeology and conservation, rather than tourism. Accordingly, the lack of a clear marketing strategy in order to make the site better known outside the region is considered a major issue: "The UNESCO site is still unknown for the local people and also for the high rank decision makers of the region and there are still no informative plans for them".

Simultaneously, the experts indicated that the WHS listing has caused disruption to the building development in the surrounding areas, with limited support and resolution from relevant government bodies. There is also awareness that WHS designation has caused the tightening of regulations for residents' properties around the site: "As the site is under the control of UNESCO regulations, it has affected the neighbouring areas as the people who are living near the site are very dissatisfied because of UNESCO regulations that caused many strict limitations for constructing or renovating of their properties around it".

While the tourism experts accepted some of the neglect about the planning, as well as the issue regarding providing information and services for tourists, they also appeared to lay some of the blame for the issues regarding the site upon the fact that the local community do not consider this site as their own heritage and they have no sense of attachment to this monument as one official explained: "As the Turkmen ethnicity who is the majority of the population here, don't really believe in this site as a part of their culture and they don't have any sense of belonging to this monument". Another expert similarly commented: "The people of the city do not consider the monument as a heritage for themselves and have no sense of belonging and they feel they have no control for managing the monument of their town as it is now under the control of UNESCO, somehow this made them disappointed".

On the other hand, both residents and experts stated that even the small number of visitors drawn by the WHS listing of the tower has affected the way that people are receiving the tourists and that this socialising with outsiders is having a positive effect on the community's culture. As one respondent stated: "It had a great impact as there are many tourists visiting this city and people feel somehow proud that others are interested in their culture, and this will make them more open". Another similarly remarked: "It made people to have more confidence and look at their own culture as a gift that others may want to know about it".
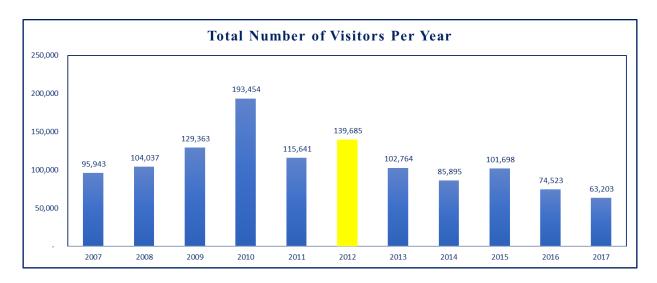
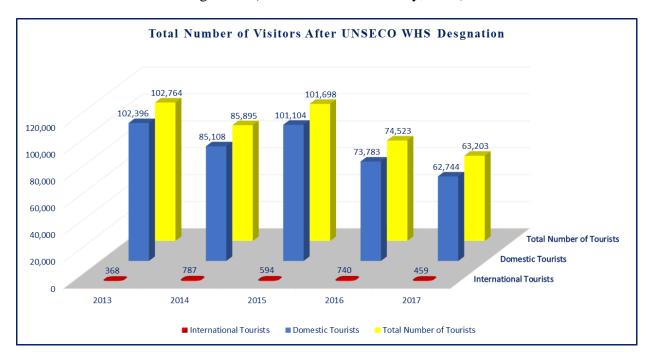Figure 1.a (National Tourists Survey, 2018).

Figure 1.b (National Tourists Survey, 2018).

Despite the increase in visitor numbers after the WHS designation, it was considered to have only a limited effect on the local economy. As such, it had not made a tangible difference in the local community's daily life. Both interviewed groups said that they had expected more benefit from WHS designation. A common response was that: "Maybe a little but not too much, increase in the number of tourists brought some financial benefits to the local people but not that much as it was expected".

In addition, both groups were lack of tourism experts at managerial level, weak city planning and infrastructure, limited accommodations (there are only two hotels in the city), and absence of tour guides. Example responses to the question about the main weaknesses of tourism industry in Gonbad include: "lack of planning for the tourism industry of the city and also the negligence of the main decision maker of the province." "Infrastructures are not ready for the tourists as there

are no information and no suitable accommodation is provided for tourists. Also, there is no expert at managerial level for tourism".

Interestingly, the official statistics suggest a steady year-on-year decline since listing (see figure 1.a), but this may be attributed to the recent sanctions and difficulty in traveling to the country. Despite this, both experts and residents suggest that there has been an increase in awareness towards the city and the site both nationally and internationally since WHS designation: "Our culture and customs are now known nationally, and it had a great positive effect on other people's mind as we are Sunni and proved we are as hospitable as other ethnicities. Also, this caused many people even in Iran to know more about the site as they didn't hear about it before". Another said that: "The brand of the UNESCO has brought the name of the city to peoples' attention and I think this may provide more information about our city. Also, now the city and the Turkmen culture are more known among Iranians". Similarly: "For sure now chosen as the UNESCO site introduced the city globally and brought the name of the city to the attention of the tourism market. So, everyone wants to know more about this unique monument and also the Turkmen ethnicity".

In order to better understand people's emotion about the city, the respondents were asked to describe the city as if it were a human being. It is interesting to note that the majority of interviewees (both residents and experts) used negative words such as: an old man, an ill/sick man, and depressed, although a few people described it as young, smart, and talented. This may be due to the fact that Gonbad, as a small city, is mainly comprised of minorities who have not received enough attention or financial incentives/investments over the past few decades, despite its great potential for development. Nevertheless, most people and experts believe that in the case of solving the tourism issues and providing the conditions for investment, the city has a great potential to become a major tourist destination due to its Turkmen cultural traditions and handicrafts, historical (e.g. the brick tower, the great wall of Gorgan and the ancient Gorgan city), natural (the wetlands around the city), religious (e.g. Yahya bin Zaid shrine) and sport attractions (e.g. the most important horse riding competition in Iran). Respondents said, for example, that: "This city has great potential to compete with famous cities in Iran but it needs to have tourism experts at the managerial level to understand the problems and issues of the city. Also, the government should provide the budget not only to the big cities but also for small cities like Gonbad".It was also believed that: "if the city improves all will benefit and also the opposite will happen if no one pays attention to it".

Conclusion

To summarize, it is clear from looking at both groups' responses that, as long as the local people are not well informed or involved in the tourism development and policies, or when they are not supportive or 'engaged' with the international World Heritage brand, that tensions will persist between the different brand levels. As Turkmens are among the minorities in Iran, both in terms of ethnicity and religion, they are sensitive about their own culture, and do not have strong identification the World Heritage Site. Furthermore, lack of tourism experts at the managerial level, absence of comprehensive plans and marketing strategies, weak infrastructures and not allocating enough budget nor investment, has discouraged the local community and made them believe that the WHS is nothing more than just a brand, despite the great potential of their city.

Iran, with its over 2500-year history has a great potential in becoming one of the region's main tourist destination. While the ancient culture and heritage has provided a great brand and image which could be appealing to many international heritage lovers, WHS designation has brought both positive and negative impacts upon local communities in Gonbad. It has brought the city further exposure both nationally and internationally, but on the other hand, the lack of educational and informative programs has weakened the attachment and spirit of local communities towards this WHS. Moreover, the local community feel they have not been involved in developing the WHS site of their city, so this has caused them to feel ignored and disappointed.

Based on the result of our study, both groups (residents and the tourism experts) have considered the local brand and image of their culture and city to have far more potential than the UNESCO brand. Furthermore, the officials have not been successful in capitalizing on the UNESCO brand to create a unique image of the city as a top destination in Iran. Accordingly, as for destination image, which is the most salient part of a destination brand, Turkmen culture and customs appear to be among the most important components of destination image for the region. Unfortunately, this issue is not only for Gonbad but can be seen in many other WHSs in Iran. The majority of these sites have failed to reap the benefits of WHS listing due to lack of a clear marketing strategy and a master plan as well as limited information and expert guide availability in these sites.

Based on our study, there are three main factors which have failed to influence and encourage the local community in Gonbad since its WHS listing. The first factor is the poor scale and pace of tourism development since WHS designation; this can be seen as a result of different issues such as: the lack of tourism expertise at the managerial level, absence of comprehensive urban planning and marketing strategies and weak infrastructures. The second factor is negligence of the tourism decision makers in educating and informing the local community and preparing them to take an active role in developing the tourism of their city and benefiting from an international brand. The third factor is the great patriotic sense of being a Turkmen and strong beliefs in their own customs and culture that prevented them from accepting anything which is not part of their own culture, including the international brand of UNESCO.

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