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Empirical investigation of tourists' perceived psychic distance of Iran as a tourism destination

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Abstract

The aim of the current study was to investigate the perceived psychic distance of potential tourists in relation to Iran as a tourism destination. The concept of psychic distance refers to perceived similarities/ differences between specific destination and tourist's home country. The members of couch-surfing virtual community participated in this study. The statistical data were collected by convenience sampling method. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by identifying the dimensions of perceived psychic distance in relation to Iran. The results of exploratory and confirmatory analysis indicated that these dimensions include infrastructure, culture and legal distance. Furthermore, the result of one sample t- test revealed that international tourists perceive high psychic distance in relation to Iran as a tourism destination. In addition, the result of one-way variance analysis showed that tourists from ten of the world's regions perceived different levels of psychic distance in relation to Iran. Tourists from the Middle East region perceived less psychic distance compared to other regions. These findings have several managerial implications. First, development of Iranian tourism industry requires planning to reduce perceived psychic distance in terms of infrastructure, culture and legal aspects. Second, based on the lower psychic distance which is perceived by tourists from the Middle East, the Iranian tourism policy-makers can consider the region as a more accessible target market.

Keywords

Construal level theory, Destination marketing management, Iran, Psychic distance, Tourist perception.

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Introduction

While evaluating a destination, tourists may perceive differences or similarities between the destination and their home countries. Abooali and Mohamed (2012) noted that psychologically, tourists might perceive a destination far from or close to themselves. Tourists who perceive more similarities between the tourism destination and their home countries, construe the destination closer to their home. Those who perceive less psychic distance, feel more comfortable in visiting that place (White & White, 2007). In contrast, when there are more differences between the tourism destination and tourist's home country, the more the perceived psychological distance and the less likely they will travel to that destination (Kozak *et al.*, 2007).

Understanding the psychic distance concept is critical to understanding tourists' decision making because prior researches have suggested that it systematically influences both perceptions of the decision process and evaluations of the destination alternatives. Recognizing some characteristics of the destination and its social environments according to which tourists can perceive similarities or differences with their home countries is especially important. Measuring tourists' perceived psychic distance has important implications for managing the characteristics of tourism destination and targeting the tourists' markets. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to identify the dimensions of perceived psychic distance from Iran. In addition, the study aimed to determine the potential perceived high/ low psychic distance of tourists in relation to Iran. Do potential tourists from different world regions perceive similar amount of psychic distance with regard to Iran as a tourism destination? Which of them have lower perceived psychic distance with regard to Iran? The results of the study are important because it shows the dimensions based on which, Iran, as a tourism destination is perceived differently from tourists' home countries. The results of the study could be applied to identify marketing strategies in order to reduce tourists' perceived psychic distance and to induce fundamental changes for tourism development in the destination country.

Literature Review

Construal level theory

People generate experiences directly from things that are present in their current time and place. Hence, it is not possible to garner experience from events of past and future from other places where they are not present. Our choices and decisions are influenced by memories of present events, plans, predictions and alternatives kept in mind (Todorv *et al.*, 2007). So, how does an individual plan for future events? How does he/she make decision about other places and realities that are spatially far from him/her? Construal level theory shows that people can make decisions about things that they have not experienced by shaping abstract inferences about those phenomena, which are far in temporal, spatial and social terms. Something can be predicted about the future and reactions of people far from us. Predictions, memories and thoughts are mental constructs and are separate from direct experiences of people (Trope & Liberman, 2003). They help us represent distance of those phenomena psychologically. Indeed psychic distance is a mental experience that can be close or far from reality in terms of time and place (Trope & Liberman, 2010). From a psychological viewpoint, psychic distance is an egocentric concept. The reference point of this concept is self, here and the present time and there might be a distance between a stimulus or phenomenon and this reference point.

Temporal distance includes a phenomenon or stimulus that has distance with the individual temporally. Spatial distance is a distance that a phenomenon or stimulus has with the individual in terms of place; and social distance is the distance that the stimulus has with itself or the individual or indeed it is an event that has occurred in the presence of others. This theory helps explain how an individual perceives a phenomenon or stimulus which is close to or far from him or her (Trope & Liberman, 2011).

According to Liberman *et al.* (2011), there are two construal levels, which are the high and low construal levels. The low construal level is objective and contains an implicit representation of the partial and

secondary characteristics of an event. High construal level is subjective and is the schematic and total representation obtained from exploitation of the whole represented topic. Construal levels and distance affect each other mutually. When individuals conceive an event or a thing at a high construal level, it should be in a farther temporal, spatial and social distance considering other events. Hence, a farther distance is generated for that event in mind in temporal, spatial and relational terms (Weber & Chapman, 2005).

In fact, people perceive a similar stimulus which is closer to their status when that stimulus is construed at a low level. When a consumer is able to suppose a stimulus or phenomenon with all details objectively along with representation of its details, he/she is at the low construal level and has a low psychic distance with that phenomenon. Vice versa, when the consumer perceives a phenomenon schematically and holistically, he/she is at a high construal level and feels a higher psychic distance with that phenomenon (Liviatan *et al.*, 2006).

According to the construal level theory, when an individual has adequate, accessible and reliable information about a phenomenon, he/she will use low construal level to construe the phenomenon and evaluate it objectively. Thus, he/she will have a lower psychic distance with the phenomenon. In contrast, when the individual does not have adequate, accessible and reliable information about a phenomenon, he/she will be at a high construal level, performs general illustration and evaluates the phenomenon totally and abstractly (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Application of psychic distance in international marketing

Before discussing about psychic distance in tourism context, prior studies in international business environment was reviewed, and then it was discussed with regard to the tourists' perception. Nowadays, many countries believe that concentration on their domestic markets is not enough and try to target foreign markets to obtain more sales or to compensate domestic sales reduction (Harzing, 2004). To this end, a firm should choose among foreign markets. Choosing an appropriate

market is one of the vital decisions for a firm and has long-term consequences in the process of its business globalization (Malhurta *et al.*, 2009). In this regard, managers are affected by their perceptions about difficulties of entering a foreign market. There is a construct based on the concept of similarity/difference in international marketing literature, in order to explain the existing cultural differences among the domestic market and potential foreign markets and it is referred to as psychic distance (Eliss, 2007).

The Uppsala model in the globalization process of firms indicates that managers prefer to choose markets, which have psychic closeness to their domestic market. In other words, that has low psychic distance. Despite the high theoretical and practical value of the term psychic distance, attempts for conceptualization and operationalization of this construct have not been so accurate. The term psychic distance was first utilized by Bkerman (1956) and then by Johnson *et al.* (1977). Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul (1975) defined this term as factors, which prevent the flow of information between a firm and its markets. For instance, difference in language, culture, education level, and industrial development level are the factors that led to psychic distance in international business. Based on literature review, no clear definition about psychic distance has been presented. However, Suasa and Bradly (2006) defined psychic distance as the perceived difference by managers between their home and host countries. A manager who wants to enter a foreign market will perceive a lower psychic distance if he/she perceives more similarity between his/her country and target countries (Legaz & Suasa, 2010). There have been many attempts for operationalization of this concept in the scope of international marketing and developing a reliable measurement tool to evaluate perceptions of managers about perceived psychic distance. Literature review shows that this operationalization has been done at three different categories.

The first category is related to the study of Fletcher and Bohn (1988) and Sethi *et al.* (2003). They used Kogut and Singh's (1988) model which is based on Hofstede’s (1980) cultural difference dimensions to measure psychic distance.

The second category used national level indicators based on publicly available data (Brewer, 2007). Dowand and Larimo (2009) criticized this approach for not considering the differences amongst individuals and the level of their prejudices. Prime *et al.* (2009,) also noted that "a major problem is that measurement development procedures do not take into account the perceptual nature of the phenomenon".

Other studies have referred to perceptions of decision-maker managers for operationalization of psychic distance among countries and have evaluated the distance with the destination country, in terms of cultural business. According to the critics presented, managers' perceptions to evaluate psychic distance have been better than the secondary information of countries. Psychic distance in a recent study by Sousa and Legaz (2011) has been regarded as a two-dimensional construct of the characteristics of people and their countries. The first dimension referred to the modernism aspects of a country while the second dimension refers to the degree of interaction or separation among the people.

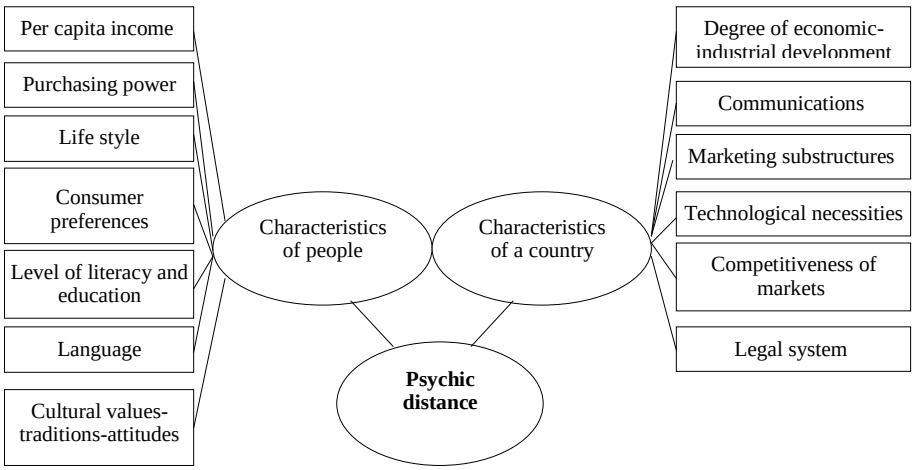

Fig. 1. Psychic distance model in international marketing (Sousa & Legaz, 2011)

Tourists and perceived psychic distance of destination

In international marketing, the concept of psychic distance has been

applied widely. It applies to the tourists who are investors during a trip. Their final decision obviously is a destination with less psychological distance as this reduces "Uncertainly Avoidance" factors and increases "Security and Reassurance" (Abooali & Mohamed, 2012). The literature review showed that tourist's psychic distance perception could be regarded based on the concept of proximity (Mahamed & Abooali, 2012). Therefore, lesser proximity exists between the tourist and other individuals (social environment of the destination), he or she will perceive a higher social and psychic distance with the destination. According to the index of proximity or lack of proximity, the concept of psychic distance of a tourism destination can be generalized in another form. The more proximity is perceived between tourism destination and the tourist's home country; he/she construes the destination psychologically at a lower level and feels a close psychic distance with the destination (Mahamed & Abooali, 2012).

In contrast, if there are many differences between the tourism destination and the home country and their proximity is low, a higher psychic distance with destination is perceived. For instance, although there is a high physical distance between Australia and England but their numerous similarities have led to a low psychic distance between the two countries (Mahamed & Abooali, 2012).

Generally, tourists desire to visit a destination with less psychological distance (White & White, 2007); on the other hand, cultural similarity positively influences tourist's intention to visit a country (Ng & Soutar, 2007). In spite of these facts, tourists might have varying motivations for traveling to different destinations (Jang *et al.*, 2009). Variety/ novelty seeker tourists prefer to visit novel destinations in order to feel excitement. This type of tourists likes to consume new cultural symbols, being familiar with other people with different rituals and customs. The results of Lepp and Gipson's (2003) study revealed that novelty seekers perceive lesser levels of risk associated with international tourism than those seeking familiarity. Therefore, novelty seekers may have some inclination to visit exotic places whether a perceived psychic distance exist or not.

In this study, psychic distance refers to the gap or difference that the tourist might perceive between his/her home country and the tourism destination. The unique attributes of destination, which make it different from the tourists' home country, may be a driven factor during tourists' decision-making (O'Leary & Deegan, 2003). The present study contributes to identifying the dimensions of psychic distance perceived by Iran's potential tourists. Through these dimensions, the tourism destination can be managed and helped to facilitate tourists entrance to destination country of Iran. Another purpose of the study was to determine the extent of psychic distance perceived by non-traveled tourists to Iran. Given the purposes of the study, the research question and hypotheses are proposed as follows:

Research Question: What are the dimensions of perceived psychic distance by tourists from Iran as a destination?

Hypotheses:

H_1: Potential tourists perceive psychic distance between their home countries and Iran.

H_2: There is a significant difference among perceived psychic distance of tourists from different world regions about Iran.

Methodology

The members of couch-surfing virtual community participated in this study. This virtual community has different members from all over the world. In this virtual community, members share their previous travel experiences and discuss about different places before traveling to those destinations. An electronic version of the questionnaire was prepared and then a link of the questionnaire along with the application to participate in the study was uploaded in the discussion pages of various groups of the couch-surfing virtual community. Thus, the survey data was gathered by convenience-sampling method. Six hundred and twenty (620) respondents who had visited the virtual tourism community participated in the quantitative study in July-August 2013. Demographic characteristics of the statistical sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the statistical sample

	Frequency		Frequency
Gender		**Marital status**	
Male	365	Married	229
Female	255	Single	185
Age		Divorced	16
18-25	63	Living with partner	121
25-35	163	**Education level**	
35-45	143	Less than highschool	15
45-55	150	High school	47
More than 55	102	Bachelor	169
Nationality		Graduated	390
The Middle East	55	**Travel frequency**	
European Union	72	Once in a year	131
Central America	59	Twice in a year	136
Africa	30	Three times in a year	87
Asia	92	More than three times in a year	265
North America	77		
South America	66		
Oceania	56		
Caribbean Sea	68		
Europe	45		

A self-administrated questionnaire was designed based on literature review, 19 items were included to measure the perceived psychic distance. Since, the measurement was based on perceived difference between tourists' home country and Iran, respondents were asked to compare their countries with Iran based on each item. A five point Likert type scale was used ranging from 1 (completely similar) to 5 (completely dissimilar). In order to explore and confirm the dimensions, exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were used. For this purpose, principal component analysis (PCA) using varimax rotation was applied. To ensure partial correlation of paired variables and adequacy of sampling, Bartlett’s test of Sphericity was used. Items with factor loading less than 0.5 were omitted and for those remaining items, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to measure internal consistency and reliability. Then, first-order confirmatory factor analysis of each extracted dimension was conducted to confirm validity (convergent validity) of three dimensions of perceived psychic distance. Then, second-order confirmatory factor analysis was performed for

measuring the perceived psychic distance construct. The first hypothesis was tested by means of a t-test and the second one was tested using ANOVA and LSD tests.

Data analysis

Exploratory factor analysis

An exploratory factor analysis was applied to purify the measurement indicators. The factor structure of the study model proved reliable by the Bartlet's chi-square, KMO test, and Cronbach's α (Lee *et al.*, 2007; Hwang *et al.*, 2005; Lehto *et al.*, 2004). There are three factors extracted from 19 items within " psychic distance perception" with Eigen value more than 1 (Table 2).

Table 2. Principle component Analysis of perceived psychic distance

Dimensions	Eigen values			Extraction Sums of Squared loading			Rotation Sums of Squared Loading		
	Total	Variance percentage	Cumulative	Total	Variance percentage	Cumulative	Total	Cumulative	Variance percentage
1	8,827	46,669	46,669	8.827	46,669	46,669	4,715	24,814	24,814
2	2,223	11,70	58,41	2,233	11,70	58,4	3,903	20,750	45,384
3	1,047	5,510	63,909	1,047	5,510	63,909	3,520	18,525	63,909
4	0,851	4,480	68,389						
5	0,795	4,168	72,573						
6	0,557	2,932	75,507						
7	0,555	2,921	78,428						
8	0,465	2,450	80,822						
9	0,448	2,353	83,363						
10	0,408	2,147	85,283						
11	0,384	2,011	87,405						
…	0,374	1.967	89,371						
19		1.262	100						

[KMO=0.945, Bartlett's chi-square=7159.6, P =0]

Varimax rotation was employed for principle components in order to extract factors on the same scale that exhibit significant loading on the construct (latent variable).

As shown in Table 3, tourists' perceived psychic distance of Iran has three dimensions. The first factor was labeled " infrastructure distance" and included the items that were associated with communication infrastructures, level of hygiene and cleanliness, educational level, development of tourism services, tourism

infrastructures (accommodation and transportation), level of hospitality and services, and safety level and measures the tourists' perception about difference between the their home country and Iran with regard to infrastructures. The second factor is composed of six items. These items included language, tradition and rituals, lifestyle, cultural symbols, core values system and religious beliefs. The second factor was labeled "culture distance". It is notable that items of individualism and materialism levels have been excluded from culture dimension, since they had loadings factor of less than 0.5. The third factor was identified as "legal distance" and included legal system, foreign policy, citizens' behavioral freedom and tourism rules. This factor emphasized on the perceived difference between Iran and the tourists' home country in relation to legal issues.

Table 3. Rotation matrix of factor loadings (ordered) and extracted dimensions of perceived psychic distance

Items	Infrastructure dimension	Culture dimension	Legal dimension
S.63: Communications infrastructure	0.824		
S.62: Level of hygiene and cleanliness	0.797		
S.61: level of literacy and education	0.782		
S.65: development of tourism services	0.733		
S.64: tourism infrastructures(accommodation and transportation)	0.723		
S.59: Level of hospitality and services	0.724		
S.60: Safety level	0.552		
S.66: level of individualism		0.34 (omitted)	
S.67: level of materialism		0.24 (omitted)	
S.57: traditions and rituals		0.779	
S.52: language		0.627	
S.55: citizens' life style		0.777	
S.56: cultural symbols		0.765	
S.54: core values system		0.714	
S.53: religious beliefs		0.614	
S.51: legal system			0.78
S.68: foreign policies			0.69
S.50: tourism regulation			0.68
S.58: citizens' behavioral degree of freedom			0.64

Measurement models

Each of the measurement models was examined by confirmatory factor analysis (Lee *et al.*, 2007; Hwang *et al.*, 2005; Lehto *et al.*,

2004). The individual item reliability of each construct evaluates whether the measured variable toward the construct has completely standardized estimates between 0.63 and 0.87, and whether it is statistically significant; meaning that the measurement model reaches the ideal model fit (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The composite reliability (CR) of the construct is used to measure the latent variable's internal consistency. The higher the t value, the more precisely the measures can predict construct reliability. Scholars suggest that the CR value should be greater than 0.6 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Table 4 shows that all measured variables reach the significance level (t>1.96) and the CR value for all constructs are between 0.81 and 0.93. Moreover, an adequate convergent validity should contain less than 50% average variances extracted (AVE) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In other words, the AVE value should be 0.50 or above. As shown in Table 4, the AVE value for each construct is 0.86, 0.75, and 0.67.

Table 4. Construct validity and reliability of the measurement models

Items and dimensions	Factor loading	t-value	P-value	AVE	CR
Infrastructure dimension (α=0.895)	-	-	-		0.81
S.63: Communications infrastructure	0.85	16.1	0.0		
S.62: Level of hygiene and cleanliness	0.83	15.3	0.0		
S.61: Level of literacy and education	0.74	14.5	0.0		
S.65: Development of tourism services	0.75	14.1	0.0		
S.64:Tourism infrastructures(accommodation and transportation)	0.76	14.2	0.0	0.86	
S.59: Level of hospitality and services	0.77	14.7	0.0		
S.60: safety level	0.64	18.1	0.0		
Culture dimension (α=0.903)	-	-	-		0.90
S.57: Traditions and rituals	0.8	18.2	0.0		
S.52: Language	0.69	12.3	0.0		
S.55: Citizens' life style	0.81	13.2	0.0		
S.56: Cultural symbols	0.80	14.5	0.0	0.75	
S.54: core values system	0.79	16.5	0.0		
S.53: Religious beliefs	0.75	16.5	0.0		
Legal dimension (α=0.816)	-	-	-		0.93
S.51: Legal system	0.75	15.7	0.0		
S.68: Foreign policies	0.7	15.8	0.0		
S.50: Tourism rules	0.63	17.6	0.0	0.67	
S.58:Citizens' behavioral degree of freedom	0.87	17.5	0.0		

As it was mentioned in exploratory factor analysis of perceived psychic distance variables, three dimensions were identified for tourists' perceived psychic distance construct. These dimensions include infrastructure, culture and legal dimensions. In order to analyze how these three exploratory dimensions can measure overall perceived psychic distance at a higher abstraction level, second-order factor model was used to measure perceived psychic distance of the destination. Factor loading value of each dimension and the analysis related to three-dimensionality of psychic distance construct are illustrated as follows:

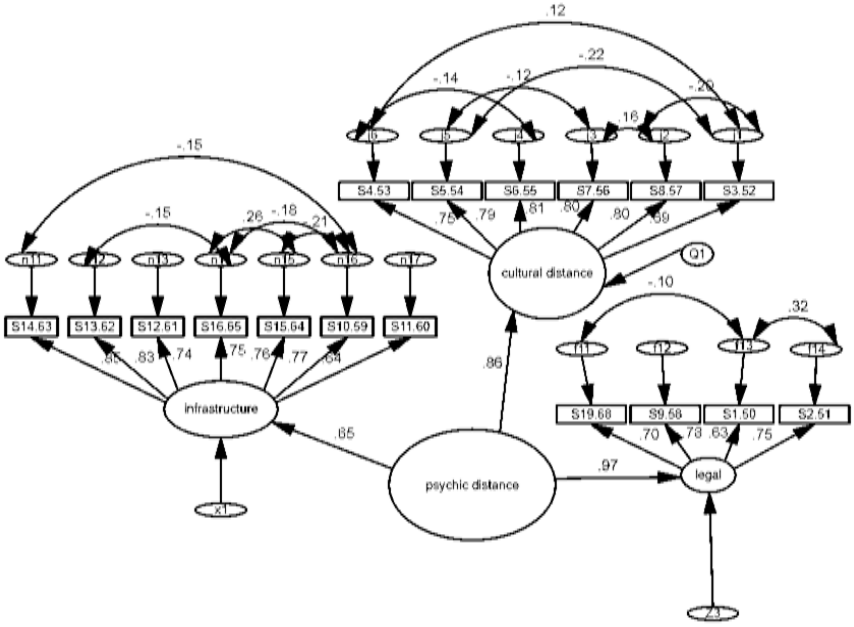

Fig. 2. Modified second-order factor model of perceived psychic distance

Table 5. Goodness indexes of second-order factor analysis model of perceived psychic distance.

Second-order three factor model of perceived psychic distance	Normed Chi-Square	p- value	RMSEA	P-close	RMR	CFI	RFI	NFI	GFI	TLi, Rohel
Confirmatory factor model of psychic distance	3.2	0.0	0.059	0.001	0.046	0.954	0.919	0.939	0.928	0.939

Second order model fit

For the adequacy of the second order model, the measurement model indices of constructs were examined with confirmatory factor analysis. The chi square value of the measurement model is significant ($e^{2}_{(140)}$ = 448.6, P< 0.01), which means the theoretical model and the empirical data do not fit each other significantly (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). However, from results of EFA and CFA, it is revealed that the measurement model moderately fits the data. Instead of the a^2 value, if the value of NCI (Normed Chi-Square Index; n^2/df) is between 2 and 5, the measurement model would be acceptable too (Marsh & Hocevar, 1985). The NCI value of this theoretical model was 3.2, which suggests a reasonable fit of the measurement model with the data. Other indices also achieved the standard value, including RMSEA (= 0.059) is higher than 0.08, CFI (= 0.954), NFI (= 0.939), GFI (= 0.928), TLI (= 0.939) were above 0.90 and RMR (= 0.046) was below 0.05. To sum up, the adequacy of the measurement model is good. Considering goodness of second-order confirmatory factor analysis, it can be concluded that perceived psychic distance of Iran is a three-dimensional construct that contains infrastructure, culture and legal dimensions. In other words, tourists perceived Iran differently from their country of origin in terms of these dimensions.

One sample t- test and Analysis of variance

As stated in hypothesis one, potential tourists perceive psychic distance between their home countries and Iran. In order to test this hypothesis, the mean value of each perceived psychic distance dimension was calculated for each questionnaire. Then it was tested by means of one sample t-test with cutoff point equal to 3. There were statistically significant differences with average at the P<0.05 level for the infrastructure (t= 4.04, P=0), cultural (t=4.45, P=0) and legal (t=4.45, P=0) dimension. Therefore, tourists generally perceive Iran different from their home country in infrastructure, culture and legal terms. As stated in the second hypothesis, the tourists' perceived psychic distance of Iran differs significantly by their regions. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to

explore the impact of regions on the overall perceived psychic distance. Results of ANOVA test show that F= 11.11 and P=0. Hence, there is a significant difference among the ten regions under study, in terms of perceived psychic distance of Iran. To put it differently, people in the different regions perceive Iran differently. In order to understand people of which regions perceive a lower psychic distance than other regions, the LSD test was used. Post hoc comparisons using the LSD test indicated that tourists from the Middle East perceive a lower psychic distance than other regions (Table 6).

Table 6. Results of LSD test to compare tourists from Middle East with other regions with respect to their perceived psychic distance

Region	Regions	Difference in mean distance of psychic distance in the Middle East with other regions	Standard error	Sig
The Middle East	Africa	-0.53	0.16	0.001
	Asia	-0.41	0.13	0.003
	Central America	-0.65	0.23	0.006
	Europe	-0.815	0.15	0.0
	European Union	-0.092	0.129	0.0
	North America	-0.088	0.133	0.0
	Oceania	-1.02	0.171	0.0
	South America	-0.088	0.171	0.0
	Caribbean	-0.764	0.189	0.0

Considering the significant values which is presented in the third column of Table 6, the differences of perceived psychic distance is significant ($P \leq 0.05$). Other results of Post hoc comparisons reveal that Africans perceive a lower psychic distance of Iran compared to people from Europea and Oceania. Asians perceive a lower psychic distance of Iran than Europeans and people of North America, Oceania and South America but they perceive a higher psychic distance than tourists from the Middle East.

Discussion

The primary aim of the current study was to extract and validate the construct of psychic distance. The results of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis revealed that overall perceived psychic distance construct has three dimensions which are infrastructure, culture and legal dimensions. On the other hand, based on legal, cultural and infrastructural factors, potential tourists may perceive some destinations different from their own country. This finding is consistent with the results of Abooali and Mohamed's (2012) study; which revealed that psychic distance in tourism context should be measured using the items which are related to the tourism nature.

The result of the first hypothes is shows that the perceived psychic distance of Iran is more than the average. Therefore, potential tourists perceived high psychic distance in relation to Iran as a tourism destination. It means that potential tourists perceived Iran different from their own country, in terms of infrastructure, cultural and legal dimensions.

In this study, infrastructure distance referred to perceived infrastructure differences between tourist's home country and Iran. In addition, cultural distance include perceived cultural differences. Culture dimension showed that the perceived difference in language, traditions and rituals, lifestyle and core values system as well as religious beliefs has resulted in the perceived difference by tourists between their home country and Iran. Similarly, literature review indicated that tourists' perception with regard to some factors such as level of safety (Echtner & Ritchie,1991), level of hygiene and cleanliness (Pike *et al.*, 2010), quality of infrastructure (Lee, 2009), cultural similarities (Ng & Souter, 2007) influence their intention to visit.

As stated earlier, legal difference is another dimension of psychological distance. Perceived psychic distance in legal terms is the result of difference in tourism rules, different approaches in foreign policy as tourism facilitator, difference in the legal system and perceived difference regarding citizens' behavioral freedom. Similarly,

Abooali and Mohamed's (2012) study showed that legal regulation influenced on tourists' destination evaluation. In addition, Henderson (2008) noted that international tourists are concerned about Islamic traditions, rules and legal system. International tourists perceive the Islamic destination negatively due to strict Islamic codes of behavior and restrictive religious norms (Mansfield & Winckler, 2008). The findings in terms of legal distance confirm the results of prior studies and reveal that international tourists perceives less legal similarities between their home country and Iran, as a tourism destination.

Based on the construal level framework (Liberman & Trope, 2009), one of the reasons due to which tourists perceive a high psychic distance in relation to Iran is that potential tourists have learned about Iran only through the information provided by foreign media and do not have objective information. When they perceive Iran's destination schematically and holistically, they are at a high construal level and feel a higher psychic distance with regard to Iran. The reason of this phenomenon is due to lack of Iran's destination marketing planning.

The results of the second hypothesis showed, tourists from Middle East perceived a lower psychic distance than the other nine regions. On the other hand, tourists from the Middle East have perceived more similarity between their home country and Iran. This can be due to similarities in religions, geographical closeness, similarities of rules, which are based on their religion, cultural similarities and having a more objective knowledge from Iran.

Conclusion

This study measured the perceptions of potential tourists with regard to Iran as a destination and its findings have several managerial implications. In order to develop the Iranian tourism industry, Iran's tourism policy makers must reduce the perceived gap by investing in tourism infrastructures. In other words, development of tourism infrastructures can lead to decreased perceived psychic distance. According to the perceived cultural distance, those cultural items that were considered as deterrent factors by tourists, should be eliminated. For instance, difference in language that is a cultural and

communicative factor among the tourists and Iran's local people can be reduced by developing tourist information centers, tourism guides and promulgation of an international language in Iran. In addition, potential tourists will perceive low cultural distance, if they have access to more objective and accurate information about Iran's cultural condition. This can be done through preparing proper information packages and presenting them through destination advertising.

Potential tourists perceive Iran different from their own country with regard to legal aspects. The perceived legal distance can be reduced through renewal of foreign policy approach, to project a moderate image of the country in the global community and to comply with international rules for establishing a peaceful foreign relations which shows Iran’s intention to have effective interaction in foreign relations with other countries.

The perceived similarity between Iran and Middle East countries shows that tourism policy-makers can consider the Middle East and its people as more accessible target markets. The results of the current study show that tourism industry development in Iran and entrance of international tourists requires planning to reduce perceived psychic distance in infrastructure, culture and legal terms. In addition, this requires fundamental change of attributes of the country's tourism destination, as well as presenting more objective information about the domestic environment to the global community.

The current research has some limitations, as a result of the data collection method which was done over the Internet. While this method is gaining popularity, it has some limitations associated with technology, sample composition and sampling method bias. For instance, the differences in response rates (11% from Eu, 12% from North America, 8% from Middle East and ...) may have been due to technology usage rate and potential tourists may be excluded as they lack internet access or choose not to be a member of the couch surfing virtual community. These issues may limit the scope of the obtained results.

Since the current study focused on potential tourists' perception, the survey data was gathered using electronic questionnaire and

convenience sampling method, which were conducted in a virtual community.

In conclusion, future researchers should consider objective psychic distance (not perceived psychic distance) and investigate perceptions of traveled tourists with regard to socio-cultural conditions of Iran's destination. In addition, it is suggested to future researchers to study tourists' psychic distance by phenomenology or grounded theory methods.

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