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## Conceptualizing Destination-Community Hospitality: An Illustrated Framework Leveraging Persianate Culture

### Abstract

**Purpose**—Adopting a cultural lens, this study conceptualizes destination-community hospitality to capture societal hospitality at the destination as an intangible asset. Destination-community hospitality comprises a set of attitudes and traits that are organically conveyed by community members and directly experienced by tourists. The paper contributes to efforts aimed at freeing hospitality from the confines of commercial lodging and food and beverage establishments.

**Design/methodology/approach**—The study proposes an affection-attention-awareness framework by drawing on the pertinent literature and leveraging the affective-behavioral-cognitive model of attitudinal change. It focuses on the effects of cognition in conceptualizing destination-community hospitality as the core of the framework. Methodologically, the framework is illustrated with qualitative data including observational fieldwork and interviews conducted in Iran.

**Findings**—Illustration of the affection-attention-awareness framework in the context of Iran highlights how welcoming attitudes are leveraged at a destination as an ingrained community mindset even in the absence of formal initiatives or professional training. It underscores the hospitality advocacy role of local-community members irrespective of public-sector policy and capacity deficiencies.

**Originality/value**—Research on community-wide hospitality at destinations, as a major cultural asset in the context of strategic hospitality management, remains underdeveloped. With illustrative evidence, the findings elevate the critical role of community members as innate advocates of hospitality in developing destinations. The proposed framework of destination-community hospitality provides a new perspective and impetus for investigating hospitality beyond commercial domains.

**Practical implications**—Destinations that strive to attract tourists should tap into the significant wealth of intuitive hospitality within communities as an intangible resource. The ingenuity should be preserved to sustainably enhance the overall tourist experiences. The framework can serve as a guide to strategically facilitate destination-community hospitality.

**Keywords:** *destination-community hospitality; hospitality advocate; cultural image; strategic hospitality management; policy deficiency*

## Introduction

Most tourists are strangers upon their arrival at a destination. While they may not necessarily share the same levels of desire for local social interaction during their trips, they are likely to appreciate the hospitality of local community as a major appeal. Local hospitality practices convey impressions of warmth and generosity toward tourists and impact their experiences. Local hospitality, including sincerity and friendliness of host community members, could instigate highly amicable interactions (Stepchenkova *et al.*, 2019). These would be remembered by tourists as an important part of their destination experiences (Köchling, 2021). The strength of such effects depends on the extent and quality of interactions. Furthermore, the sincerity aspect associated with the host image has a positive influence on intentions to revisit (Ekinici *et al.*, 2007). Building on a synthesis of the relevant literature and qualitative data, the current study aims at advancing the concept of *destination-community hospitality* based on the affective-behavioral-cognitive model to capture societal hospitality at the destination as an intangible asset.

Hospitality should be viewed as an intangible tourist attraction that can be leveraged for destination management. Several studies have suggested that tangible tourist attractions may not be appreciated as much as the intangible ones—which are more likely to be reflected in (e)word-of-mouth communication (Aydin, 2020). It has been further argued that the image associated with the core travel experiences at a destination is likely to constitute its most important image dimension (Choi and Cai, 2016). In this vein, local hospitality can directly impact how the destination is perceived, especially if it becomes a core travel experience. As suggested by Prebensen *et al.* (2013), demonstration of arousal and interest is an indication of the value tourists attach to their travel experiences. The latter two observations about travel experience are of particular significance for destinations that suffer from negative stereotypes, for example, those affected by their respective countries' negative images (Campo and Alvarez,

2019). Travel experiences shared by actual tourists are arguably more important for the fortunes of such destinations given their impact on the decisions made by potential tourists (Torres, 2023). While the mainstream media may continue to influence the image of such destinations, negative stereotypes are increasingly challenged by user-generated content on the Internet (Adam, 2021).

The public sector can certainly play important roles in mitigating such shortcomings as well as enhancing destination management and competitiveness (Colmekcioglu *et al.*, 2022; Del Gesso *et al.*, 2022; Elkhwesky *et al.*, 2022; Ritchie and Jiang, 2021). A recent study highlights such roles played by municipal governments in promoting welcoming attitudes offered by the cities to their guests (Del Gesso *et al.*, 2022). Resident engagement can further help to compensate for market and government failings (Dolezal and Novelli, 2022). The present study adopts a cultural lens to show how welcoming attitudes can be highly consequential for strategic hospitality management at the destination as an ingrained community mindset even in the absence of any efficient public-sector initiative or professional hospitality training. This means that destinations should laud and tap into their hitherto largely unrecognized community wealth of intuitive hospitality for their genuine advocacy.

Hospitality serves to convey the hospitable characteristics of people in general. *Destination-community hospitality* is thus conceptualized in the current study to capture societal hospitality at the destination as an intangible asset. The concept is further developed into a framework by employing the affective-behavioral-cognitive model of attitudinal change (Rosenberg and Hovland, 1960), which lends itself to a more people-centered image of the destination (Davari and Jang, 2021). The concept and framework call for organically tapping into the cultural assets associated with community-wide hospitality.

The framework is then illustrated for a destination to demonstrate the concept by employing a qualitative approach with observational and interview data. Iran is chosen as the

destination. The country has seldom been depicted positively in the mainstream media (Khaksari *et al.*, 2014) following its 1979 Revolution, notwithstanding the government's reluctance or lack of institutional capacity to adequately leverage its wide range of tangible assets. Yet, a significant cleavage between the mainstream international image of Iran as a country dominated by religious ideology (Khaksari *et al.*, 2014) and the reality on the ground almost always surprises its first-time visitors (Akhoondnejad, 2015). The nation, historically known as Persia, further enjoys a host of hospitable cultural attributes like friendliness, willingness to help, and affection for guests, which have impressed visitors since the early days of international travel (Akhoondnejad, 2015; Butler *et al.*, 2012). These attributes, often referred to as Persian hospitality, are informed by a genuine and enduring part of the national culture (Beeman, 1976) and can uniquely facilitate tolerant and affectionate interactions. The illustrative framework can facilitate the shaping of a positive perception of any country, region, or locality with hospitable cultural attributes, which like Iran is not recognized favorably as a tourist destination due to geopolitical circumstances, public-sector shortcomings, or other reasons.

## **Literature review**

The sociocultural and sociopsychological aspects of tourism are informed by the extent and variety of relations experienced between tourists and hosts (Cohen, 1979). Hospitality is reflective of good relations between guests and hosts in which the latter act with good intentions to please the former (Louis, 2013). It is condensed into those moments or experiences of significant human interaction (Lehto *et al.*, 2020). Much of the literature on hospitality has embraced a relatively narrow focus. Research has been largely directed to studying commercial hospitality operations in relative disregard of the broader notions of hospitableness (Pereira-Moliner and Molina-Azorín, 2023). Of note is that many advanced societies have experienced reduced levels of obligation to fulfill the individual and community requirements of hospitableness (Blain and Lashley, 2014), which has further helped limit the practice of hospitality to commercial settings.

### ***Limits of commercial hospitality***

The literature on hotel management and similar commercial activities has surely allowed researchers to make important contributions to the knowledge of hospitality (see review by Sharma *et al.*, 2023). A strong association is underscored between visitor satisfaction and hospitality as manifested in the behavior of the tourism workforce (Torres, 2023). The welcoming attitude of staff is a major construct of studies focusing on the quality of services at hotels, which is assessed by the level of respect and courtesy, friendliness and sense of caring, and willingness to help and support, among other attributes (Radojevic *et al.*, 2019).

Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) suggest five factors associated with the hospitality experience in luxury hotels, including “personalization,” “warm welcome,” “special relationship,” “straight from the heart,” and “comfort.” Business travelers have fewer hospitality expectations compared to those who travel for leisure purposes, while those with

higher incomes have more expectations. Pijlis *et al.* (2017) distinguish *experiencing hospitality* from *hospitality experience*, applying the former not only to the hospitality industry but to the service industry as a whole. Adopting a broader perspective to develop a scale for measuring the hospitality experience at any kind of service organization, the aforementioned study highlights the experiences of “inviting,” “care,” and “comfort.” Of note is that the focus on formal service provision by direct service providers is retained in most studies even when alluding to a wider tourism context.

Technological advancements add new dimensions to commercial hospitality (Chi *et al.*, 2020; Morosan and Bowen, 2022), notwithstanding the need to define a strategic approach to work with the machine, not against the machine (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). Chi *et al.* (2020) maintain that human involvement is necessary for performing tasks that require intuitive and empathetic intelligence and suggest that automation in the hospitality industry takes place mostly at the mechanical and analytical levels. Yet, especially against the background of the COVID-19 outbreak, many studies demonstrate that hotel guests may prefer to interact with machines over humans (Huang and Wang, 2022). At the same time, with the mainstreaming of contactless service technologies in place of human interaction between staff and guests in hotels and restaurants, tourists are likely to seek the experience of human hospitality in other settings to maintain a balance between technology and human interaction (Davari *et al.*, 2022).

### ***Hospitality beyond direct service providers***

Destination experiences are arguably enhanced when tourists encounter various forms of hospitableness with more members of the host community. The cultural sustainability pillar of tourism relies on a very broad range of hospitable interactions as major gateways for social and cultural exchanges (Davari and Jang, 2023)—which are inadequately treated in tourism

sustainability scholarship (Molina-Collado *et al.*, 2022). Recognizing this, some articles have striven to gradually advance the concept of hospitality beyond the activities of lodging and food and beverage establishments that expect immediate monetary profits from their guests. Written by a relatively small number of scholars (e.g., Lashley *et al.*, 2007; Lynch *et al.*, 2011; Radojevic *et al.*, 2019), they are mainly conceptual rather than empirical. Some of the reasons for this include the intangibility of the concept and the diversity of expectations of both tourists and residents of the host community, as well as sampling limitations and methodological challenges.

There exist a few attempts at developing scales for measuring hospitableness. Blain and Lashley (2014) measure the strength of genuine hospitableness in individuals in a hotel setting and suggest three dimensions for hospitableness—desire to put guests before yourself, desire to make guests happy, and desire to make guests feel special. Tasci and Semrad's (2016) scale to measure hospitableness in different consumption contexts underscores three sets of traits: heart-warming, heart-assuring, and heart-soothing traits in order of importance. Taheri *et al.* (2018) demonstrate that sincere social interactions and sincere emotional responses constitute the two major dimensions of host sincerity.

As a set of traits possessed by individuals, groups, or communities in general (Telfer, 2013), hospitableness and (sense of) hospitality are treated interchangeably in the literature. This is fine, but the importance of the concept should not be reduced to the exchanges between tourists and direct service providers as hosts. According to Lashley *et al.* (2007), hospitality is reflective of societal norms, values, beliefs, and ideologies rooted in culture. In this sense, hospitality is offered for its own sake, without immediate or direct concern for remuneration or reciprocity. Lynch *et al.* (2011) suggest that hospitality is constructed by both the traits that engage it and the cultures and societies that give meaning to it. Through this lens, cultural traits arguably play a substantial role. A human being is molded by her culture and habits of behavior



to some extent. Hofstede (2011) defines culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others. Behavioral habits, including hospitality, certainly vary across individuals based on their backgrounds and preferences, but they are collectively influenced by culture (Cohen, 1979). Although culture is not without significant ambiguity as a concept, it has nevertheless been highlighted as a main determinant of perceptions concerning tourist-host relations. Despite their mobility and fluidity, cultures remain distinct, with differences and similarities, and thus considering their effects on tourism behavior is an important endeavor (MacCannell, 1973).

In summary, hospitality is meant to reflect the hospitable traits of people in general. Many societies around the world, especially the more traditional ones in developing countries, are likely to enjoy an indigenous form of hospitality that can be expressed both to other members of the community and to strangers. These cultural traits can potentially facilitate communication and understanding between people from different backgrounds. A destination's culture with significant hospitality traits can enhance its place distinctiveness (Davari and Jang, 2023). People of a certain destination may be more committed to hospitality for the pleasure it gives them personally or collectively, even if they do not necessarily perceive it as a commitment (Blain and Lashley, 2014). When hospitality is embedded in the culture of a host community and is ingrained in the mindset of its members, it collectively affects various interactions with tourists. It can thus be referred to as community hospitality.

### **Toward destination-community hospitality**

Experiencing hospitality in regular tourism establishments is critical to creating an appealing travel experience (Davari *et al.*, 2022; Pijlis *et al.*, 2017; Sharma *et al.*, 2023; Torres, 2023). Furthermore, how tourists are treated in tourism-related settings such as airports or other transportation facilities may influence their view of the sort of hospitality they are likely to encounter throughout their visit to a destination. Yet, local hospitality practices, particularly as viewed through a cultural lens, could further portray sentiments of sincerity and goodwill by the residents of the host community toward tourists during informal transactions in local markets, when walking on the streets, or while standing in line for any reason (Lehto *et al.*, 2020; Lynch *et al.*, 2011). On a different note, as border scholarship in tourism concentrates on legal concerns between neighboring countries (Park *et al.*, 2022; Sofield, 2007), it often ignores the importance of the welcoming treatment of tourists. This is a major gap in the literature on international travel because the genuine travel experience starts when someone steps into a country and crosses the border. All the above points to the need for a better hospitality notion that captures the various aspects of societal hospitality at the destination, which is coined in this study as *destination-community hospitality*.

Indeed, there is little academic research on community hospitality toward shaping the destination perception, barring references made to the hospitality of faith communities (Lashley *et al.*, 2007). Concerning the latter, Murray and Johnsen (2011) employ “community hospitality” when referring to faith communities taking care of the homeless. Beyond this, Davari and Jang’s (2021) study uses the term “people-centered image” to refer to the image projected by the natives of developing destinations while living outside their countries of origin. Leveraging the cases of India and Mexico, it underscores the significant impact of experienced hospitality on non-visitors to the extent that a low level of trust would no longer

make a difference in their visit intentions. Sensing hospitality during a trip in interactions with different members of the host community is expected to play a crucial role in enhancing tourists' travel experiences. Cai *et al.* (2021) have attempted to articulate the characteristics of traditional Chinese hospitality through a Western lens as social value and beyond commercial contexts.

In the present study, destination-community hospitality is defined as the hospitality organically conveyed by community members and experienced by tourists in the sociocultural settings of a destination. Shared by most people in a community, it is associated with their general friendliness, benevolence, and inclination to treat strangers sincerely, with little expectation of personal gain. A destination community can be local, regional, or national. Its members' hospitality may manifest itself in various circumstances but not necessarily under formal settings. Destination-community hospitality could be experienced in regular tourism establishments (e.g., hotels or restaurants), during any informal interaction (e.g., while riding public transportation, retail shopping or greeting people on the street), or in tourism-related settings (e.g., borders or airports).

Although some previous studies have implicitly treated the above hospitality traits, the term “destination-community hospitality,” reflected in the attitude of the members of the host community, is advanced explicitly in this paper. It encompasses every aspect of the actual travel experience, beginning with how tourists are greeted at borders. Emotional impressions made across broader contexts are more memorable for tourists (Torres, 2023) and are more likely to be included in the (e)word-of-mouth (Aydin, 2020). Friendly communication accompanied by welcoming gestures and facial expressions play significant roles in conveying positive messages (Martha and Santoso, 2019)—which comprise some of the basic elements of destination-community hospitality.

### ***Capturing attitudinal change***

As originally defined by Allport (1935), attitude refers to mental and emotional states that characterizes an individual. It reflects either positive or negative evaluations of an object, person, or phenomenon by the individual and impacts the way she behaves. While its cognitive (mental) aspects are attributed to beliefs, its affective (emotional) aspects are ascribed to motivations (Allport *et al.*, 1954; Eagly and Chaiken, 2007; Hovland *et al.*, 1957). This component has been further developed by social psychologists. In many studies, a single numerical index has been used to reflect the position of an attitude object on an evaluative continuum. However, implementing an evaluative continuum would be insufficient to fully capture all relevant properties of an attitude (Fabrigar *et al.*, 2005).

Notwithstanding the existence of different perspectives on attitude, its three main components have been highlighted in review papers in an array of contexts—including Dohle *et al.* (2018) on eating behavior, ElHaffar *et al.* (2020) on green consumption, and Martha and Santoso (2019) on pedagogy. Most definitions of attitude situate it within the individual's mind (Eagly and Chaiken, 2007). This underscores the importance of concepts and issues associated with the mindset of people holding attitudes, especially those embedded in their culture. Rosenberg (1960) conceptualizes attitude “as featuring consistency among feelings, beliefs, and overt actions (p. 15)”, the latter being guided by situational restrictions. Changes in attitudes—a combination of beliefs, emotions, and behaviors—can result from social influence (Wood, 2000).

Interrelations of different attitudinal elements are of significance. Affect is an emotional aspect of an attitude (Allport *et al.*, 1954; Rosenberg and Hovland, 1960; Zajonc, 1984). Affect cannot exist independently of cognition given that cognition is, by definition, a prerequisite for emotions (Lazarus, 1982), regardless of the evidence (Zajonc, 1984). Almost no meaningful idea, behavior, or experience occurs in the absence of affect (Ulrich, 1983). Feeling,

experience, behavior, and cognition are all components of affect in contemporary social psychology theories (Ortony *et al.*, 2022). The well-known affective-behavioral-cognitive (ABC) model of attitudinal change (Rosenberg and Hovland, 1960) captures this interrelation as it depicts the interplay among the three components, which is of significance for the destination-community hospitality framework.

### ***A framework for destination-community hospitality***

#### *Affective destination-community hospitality*

Travel experiences are largely influenced by emotional connections to destinations (Prebensen *et al.*, 2013). The positive feelings potentially aroused in international tourists relate to the affective component of the model of attitudinal change. Friendliness and sincerity as everyday affection shown to tourists in a destination evoke positive emotions and are reflective of the hospitality-related traits of service providers (Blain and Lashley, 2014), the host sincerity of locals (Taheri *et al.*, 2018), the different tourism consumption contexts (Tasci and Semrad, 2016), or hospitable traits possessed by individuals, groups, or communities in general (Telfer, 2013). These attributes thus inform the affective construct of destination-community hospitality in the framework.

#### *Behavioral destination-community hospitality*

The behavioral component of the model is addressed by how members of the host community, whether in direct or indirect contact with tourists, behave during social interactions. Hospitality is expressed through actions. Travel experiences shared on social media and travel blogs reveal that a large number of tourists have been touched by the pleasant and respectful ways they have been treated and taken care of in destinations they have visited (Stepchenkova *et al.*, 2019).

The tendency of tourists to recommend a destination with friendly locals to others by highlighting the difference between their expectations and actual experiences is a sign of behavioral loyalty (Prebensen *et al.*, 2013; Torres, 2023). These observations can be captured by the concept of attention as the behavioral construct of destination-community hospitality in the framework.

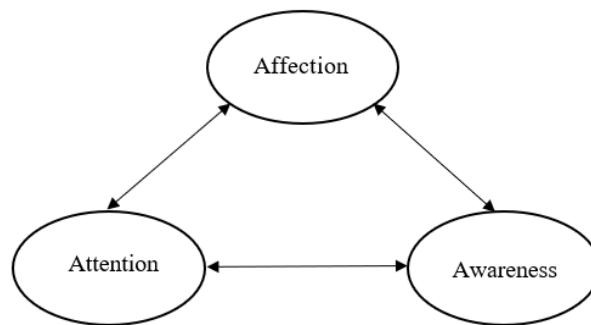
### *Cognitive destination-community hospitality*

The environmental values, beliefs, and meanings along with the knowledge that members of a community associate with their roles as hosts can arguably make them feel significant as contributors to society. Individuals subconsciously tend to associate themselves with their respective communities and incorporate cognitions about their environment into their self-definitions, in line with the cultural traits they have inherited or come to possess (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). This component, in terms of an awareness about the importance of hospitality as a major cultural asset, has not been cultivated directly for destination management. Hospitality is not a commodity in any culture and should rightly remain so. At the same time, individuals could be encouraged to enhance their awareness of the significant roles they can play as hospitality advocates (Davari and Jang, 2021). Such awareness and advocacy could change attitudes toward a destination and help transform its image. As underscored by Stokburger-Sauer (2011), the social integration of outside individuals into the culture of communities is a major means of brand advocacy.

To capture the different components of attitude, considering their interrelations are essential to reflect the societal hospitality at the destination as an intangible cultural asset. Figure 1 sums up the above discussions on destination-community hospitality. Addressing the components of the model of attitudinal change, the figure shows how it is operationalized in an affection-attention-awareness (AAA) framework: how members of the host community

tentatively feel about tourists - the affective component, how they treat them - the behavioral component, and how aware and mindful they are about their cultural traits and their roles as advocates - the cognitive component. The three A's must be considered dynamically in the conceptual framework. Destination-community hospitality is at its height in the collective presence of all three constructs. It can be colloquially interpreted as members of the host community consciously cultivating and leveraging the hospitable facets of their native culture whenever applicable.

**Figure 1**  
The AAA framework of destination-community hospitably



### **Illustration of AAA framework**

An emotionally laden concept such as destination-community hospitality can be felt readily but may not be described easily in a rigorous manner. Making use of context is appropriate in analyzing such a concept (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1974) as well as a good means to address its complexity (Creswell and Poth, 2016) and situational restrictions (Rosenberg, 1960). Covering multiple details across various aspects of the subject, which increases reliability, and leveraging context-dependent knowledge and experience can help to highlight cultural dynamics associated with destination-community hospitality.

### ***Methodology***

Iran is used for the context in light of two considerations. On one hand, the country has been labeled and depicted as a hostile and pro-terrorist place in the contemporary media scene (Campo and Alvarez, 2019). On the other hand, Persian hospitality has been recognized by foreigners since the early days of international travel (Butler *et al.*, 2012). Shared at various community levels in Iran, Persian hospitality comprises an enduring set of social norms and personal values that guide human interactions.

To frame scattered information, a qualitative approach was applied (Malterud *et al.*, 2016; Pratt *et al.*, 2020). Multiple types of evidence and data sources were examined to gain a full understanding of the context (Creswell and Poth, 2016, p. 95). These were supplemented by observational fieldwork to get a better knowledge of the research context (Levy-Paluck, 2010). Two of the authors were involved in two types of observational fieldwork, echoing Bozeman and Youtie's (2018) synergy-building approach in research teamwork: (1) ethnographic observations (Levon, 2013) of almost two decades by one of the authors during his scholarly life; and (2) non-participant observations (Denzin, 2010) while having



conversations with residents and tourists during several trips by another coauthor. The field trips were made in the Spring and Summer of 2019, Summer of 2020, and Summer 2021.

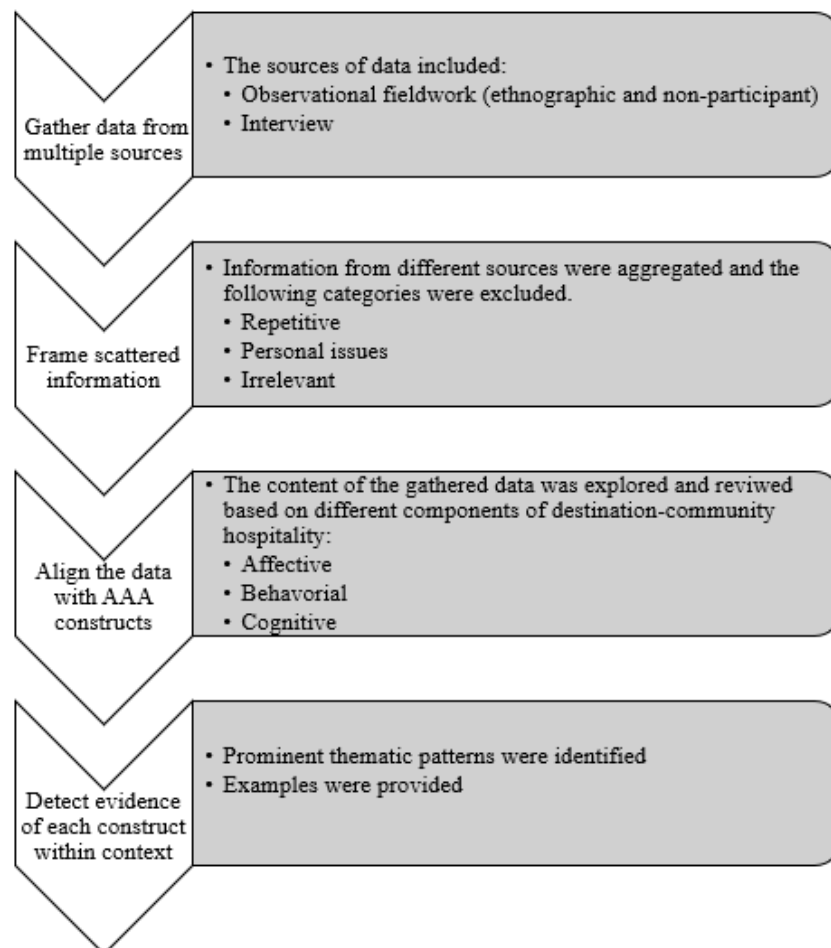
Furthermore, to overcome the deficiencies of observational studies as cautioned in Zelditch (1962), three rounds of open-ended interviews were conducted with two Iranian tourism business owners each. The interviewees had spent their professional lives in Iran's tourism sector and had extensive knowledge of various elements of Iran's tourism, allowing the in-depth interviews to have a high information power (Malterud *et al.*, 2016). Less bias is expected from qualitative data gathered through the private sector actors (Reingold, 1999)—which is of importance in this context. The interviewees' businesses are significant in Iran's inbound tourism. The two entities accounted for around one-quarter of Iran's inbound tourism and the two individuals had abundant information to share. Such expert contribution enabled the development of a trustworthy process (Bedford *et al.*, 2006) and a higher level of content validity (Almanasreh *et al.*, 2019).

Consistent with ethnographic investigations, an additional comfort zone, with no time constraint, was provided that allowed them to give more information (Winchester and Green, 2019). In this vein, general themes were mentioned in the meetings and the interviewees guided the conversations. The interviewees shared their insights about the viewpoints of different stakeholders, mainly residents and international tourists. The themes included, although not limited to, the popular tourist attractions, ups and downs of travel experiences for the majority of international travelers, perceptions about religious limitations (like hijab for women), and dining experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the approach and limit subjective interpretations, the general themes were discussed in several rounds with each individual (Pratt *et al.*, 2020).

Based on the data collected, the next subsection describes Iran's diverse cultural heritages, with humanitarian beliefs and hospitality as their major components, to then

highlight destination-community hospitality as an untapped cultural asset. The AAA framework is subsequently illustrated by investigating some emerging and promising activities in the destination country. Evidence from the literature on Iran’s tourism context is used to enrich the illustration. According to Tranfield *et al.*’s (2003) study on evidence-informed research, “making sense of what the collection of studies are saying,” enhances qualitative arguments (p. 207). Figure 2 summarizes the steps taken for the illustration.

**Figure 2**  
Steps taken for illustration of AAA framework



### ***Destination-community hospitality in the Persianate culture***

Against the backdrop of ongoing conflicts between the Iranian and some Western governments as well as the recent political turmoil in the country, it is not common for the international media to portray Iran as a potentially major tourist destination. Nor can one discern sufficient enthusiasm on the part of the current Iranian government to promote the country as a tourism brand. Yet, Iran's long history has endowed it with rich cultural heritages that have been influenced by a multitude of sources. The country remains diverse in climatic, cultural, and (sub-) ethnic terms. Furthermore, its Persianate culture is shared not only by its inhabitants but also by many others in neighboring countries. Iran has a high standing in the rankings of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It has 24 properties inscribed on the World Heritage List, including 22 Cultural Heritage Sites and two Natural Heritage Sites. Furthermore, the country offers 14 intangible cultural assets included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List, three of which are shared by other Persianate societies (UNESCO, 2023).

The availability of oil export earnings, entirely at the disposal of the government, has been one reason behind the muted official interest in developing Iran's tourism. This has been augmented over the past forty years by a post-revolutionary Islamist ideology that strives to protect its "culture" from foreign influences. These circumstances have gone hand in hand with some of the restrictions placed on behaviors in public, including compulsory hijab and prohibition of alcohol. The country's conflictual relations with some Western countries, where a significant number of potential tourists may originate, has been a related factor. Furthermore, due to both internal and external circumstances, perceptions of Iran, as well as its region as a whole, have been tarnished over the years. At the same time, many aspects of the Iranian culture have the potential to contribute to uniting humans and rejecting xenophobia and chauvinism. These are particularly reflected in Persian hospitality.

Yet, little concerted effort has been made toward changing this milieu through rebranding or making strategic investments in Iran's tourism-related material and human resources or institutional development. Iranian authorities have in the past shown two contradictory signs concerning tourism development policy. Taking advantage of the country's rich tourism potential is undoubtedly on the minds of those government officials who prioritize development above ideological issues. Others in the Iranian political establishment fear that increased openness to international tourism would reduce the government's sway on the society—both socio-culturally and security-wise. One of the interviewees brought up the issue in this way, “Despite its assets, Iran is far from becoming a tourism hub. A main reason is that several ineffective organizations have overlapping authorities that negatively impact tourism via visa restrictions, compulsory hijab, or keeping international travelers safe. Yet, Iran's Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts has failed to address any of these issues, while it claims to be *the lead* organization in tourism.”

Persian hospitality is not automatically reflected in the activities of those directly working in Iran's tourism industry. They are seldom as welcoming or sociable as typical Iranians whom tourists encounter on the streets. The circumstances have been exacerbated by the prevailing non-competitive economic environment which stifles the growth of professionalism. The shortcomings can be addressed, at least partially, through proper training, which can enhance hospitality traits. One of the interviewees mentioned that “Iranian travel agencies admit that their tour packages are not competitive mainly because high-quality human resources are not available. They are readily willing to hire motivated people who have received quality training.”

Competent entry-level human resources in Iran's commercial tourism establishments are scarce as a result of major shortfalls in its educational system. This is highlighted in a recent study that reveals limited practical training, weak instruction, inappropriate course contents,

and lack of motivation to aggravate the gap between higher education and industry requirements (Seyfi *et al.*, 2018). In an earlier study, most employees and managers of Tehran's hotels gave their lowest scores to quality cultural practices and business excellence (Arasli, 2012). The gap between tourism training and industry needs exists in many countries (Kravariti *et al.*, 2022). However, the issue seems to be even more acute in Iran. This is evidenced by the fact that high-standard hotels often face difficulty in filling their positions with qualified personnel. "Iranians are generally very hospitable people... In Iran, we don't have middle management which has been exposed to international standards... (Pereira, 2016)."

### ***AAA framework for Persian hospitality***

Persian hospitality is manifested in the attitudes of Iranians across all walks of life. It has withstood the challenges of modernization, four post-revolutionary decades, and recent economic, political, and social turmoils. Persian hospitality obliges Iranians to delight their guests. It encourages politeness, courtesy, civility, friendliness, and a welcoming attitude as well as willingness to help and support, modesty, and generosity. Persian hospitality is not about give-and-take transactions, and money is certainly not at its core. Rather, it is a gesture of support and goodwill.

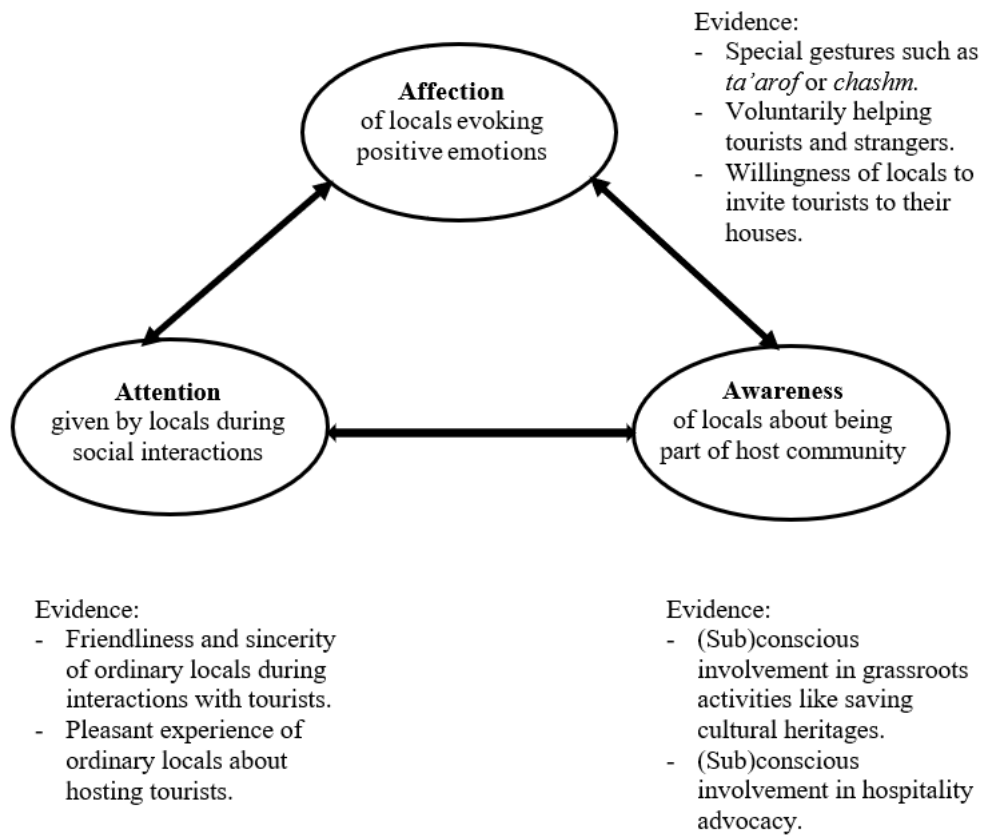
Persian hospitality has been highlighted in the writings of historians and other scholars with travel experiences in the country. According to Dutch Iranologist Willem Floor (W. Floor, personal communication, July 11, 2019), "The thing that really stands out in contact with Iranians is their effusive and seemingly unbounded hospitality ... The same behavior has been reported to me by acquaintances who only visited Iran once. In short, Iranians are, if not the most, among the most hospitable people in the world and great hosts, who will do anything to make a guest feel welcome and comfortable." Comments posted on various platforms by tourists are likely to mention the general ambiance in which the Iranian community is willing

to give without a specific expectation—which will arguably be reflected in the “affection” and “attention” constructs. In particular, *ta’arof* is a unique etiquette among Iranians that is eye-capturing. It comprises a series of complementary social behaviors. Not easily translated into other languages, *ta’arof* is the art of behaving properly in Iran and is observed in various contexts—taxi drivers at first refusing to take their fare; hosts insisting on guests eating more food; or locals inviting foreigners to their homes to welcome them. The behavior is not elitist and has endured despite various types of economic and political hardship experienced by Iranian society over the past few decades.

Another interesting gesture that captures the attention of tourists is saying *chashm* (meaning eye in Persian) by Iranians while sometimes pointing to or almost covering the eye(s). It is a polite way of saying “OK” or “I will do so.” The word *chashm* is also used in other contexts that convey courtesy. For example, *qadamat ru-ye chashm*, which literally means “you can step on my eye,” is a very polite way of saying “you are welcome in my place anytime.”

In terms of the awareness in the framework, Persian hospitality is valued by Iranians and mentioned in rhetorical terms by the officials without formulating any specific policy to promote awareness about it. Iran’s non-governmental actors have however taken some steps toward raising awareness. In particular, there are signs of grassroots initiatives in the form of ecotourism (Alaadini and Fathi, 2015) or cultural heritage activism (Mozaffari and Jones, 2022) that indirectly promote Persian hospitality. Yet, there is significant room for individual Iranians to enhance their awareness of the important roles they can play as Persian hospitality advocates. Illustrating AAA for Iran can be colloquially interpreted as Iranians consciously cultivating and leveraging their inherited Persian hospitality traits. Figure 3 offers an empirical interpretation of each of the AAA constructs for the Persian hospitality context, operationalizing each by using evidence from the context.

**Figure 3**  
Empirical mirror of AAA framework for Persian hospitality



The three constructs of the AAA framework are articulated in the analysis of cyber-media activities and electronic word of mouth in Iran to demonstrate the role of community-based Persian hospitality at Iranian destinations. Table I associates each construct of the AAA framework depicted in Figure 3 with specific cybermedia evidence. Rooted in the Iranian culture, the “affection” construct is informed by the way Iranians directly express their feelings about hosting foreigners on social media. Similarly, sharing electronic word of mouth by foreigners about the way Iranians in different communities treat them relates to the “attention” construct. However, as suggested above, there is a need to focus on the awareness.

The government is reluctant to address the gap between pre-travel perceptions and the reality of the Iranian society, due to its ideological stance as well as its limited capacity for action. More accurate information on the Iranian society and its cultural heritages is obviously

available from history books or documentaries. Moreover, the Internet is increasingly becoming one of the most important means of accessing and sharing information about tourist destinations. Despite Internet censorship in the country, millions of Iranians easily bypass the restrictions by using readily available VPNs. Routine Internet use (including significant social media participation) in Iran is not limited to young techies or those who travel internationally. It is ubiquitous among all walks of life—homemakers, micro-business owners, drivers for ride-hailing companies, etc.

Tourist-to-tourist interactions on social media significantly impact the behaviors of those involved, whether negatively (Adam, 2021) or positively (Köchling, 2021). User-generated content, along with posted pictures and video clips, is increasingly affecting the creation of tourist destination images in developing countries (Adam, 2021). Additionally, there is evidence that online content enhances the pre-travel experiences of potential tourists (Köchling, 2021). As such, a relatively large number of platforms provide potentially more accurate information about traveling to Iran, in particular by sharing real impressions of ordinary travelers who have been to Iran. However, much more “awareness” about the advocacy role of individual Iranians in cyber-media activities is required to successfully leverage Persian hospitality. They should consciously cultivate and leverage their embedded destination-community hospitality for the benefit of their country’s image.



**Table I**  
Examples of AAA constructs within cyber-media activities

Affection	Attention	Awareness
Pleasant experience; host sincerity	<i>Ta'arof</i> ; helping/inviting strangers	Grassroots initiatives/hospitality advocacy
<p>Main message of an independently-produced documentary (Rees, 2019):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>I have to say, I did have doubts about it...I could not have been more wrong.</i></li> <li><i>Fantastically welcoming, so kind and so friendly.</i></li> </ul>	<p>AI-generated popular mentions from TripAdvisor's Iran Forum (2022):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Iranian people are generous.</i></li> <li><i>When Iranians invite tourists to their houses, they don't expect anything particular in return.</i></li> </ul>	<p>Sharing thoughtful apologies and sympathetic comments on international travelers' posts—for example, comments after the British singer, Joss Stone, was deported in 2019 for not having visa:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>We wish to make it up to you someday.</i></li> <li><i>I wish the politics and art never be mixed.</i></li> </ul>
<p>AI-generated popular mentions from TripAdvisor's Iran Forum (2022):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Sociability and hospitality of Iranians</i></li> <li><i>Showing appreciation in details</i></li> <li><i>Hospitality compensating for the limitations</i></li> </ul>	<p>Anthony Bourdain's Part Unknown episode on Iran aired in 2014 on CNN—conversation with an Iranian family:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>You should experience Persian cuisine inside peoples' houses not in restaurants.</i></li> <li><i>Iran, not what I expected.</i></li> </ul>	<p>Eye-capturing number of responses to the international travelers' comments who have left the country without knowing them—frequent responses to YouTube posts of travelogues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(From diaspora:) <i>I'm happy you love my home country.</i></li> <li>(In response to how welcoming Iranians were:) <i>People are kind everywhere. Politics divides us.</i></li> </ul>

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This study has highlighted the importance of hospitality in a host community as a cultural asset that attracts tourists. It has adopted a cultural lens to conceptualize destination-community hospitality as organically conveyed by community members and experienced by tourists. When hospitality is embedded in the culture of a destination community, it can act as a significant base for destination management. The study has underscored individual and collective roles played by community members as hospitality advocates and implicit tourism marketers.

The contribution of this study is thus two-fold. By advancing the concept of destination-community hospitality, it has contributed to efforts aimed at freeing hospitality from the confines of commercial lodging and food and beverage establishments. It has developed a framework for the concept based on the model of attitudinal change and demonstrated it in a destination. The illustration showed how some strategic approaches can be teased out to shape a positive hospitality-based cultural image for a tourist destination, which is not favorably recognized due to geopolitical circumstances, public-sector planning shortcomings, or other reasons.

## ***Theoretical implications***

Despite its potential, hospitality of the locals has been under-treated in the literature and under-tapped in practice (Pereira-Moliner and Molina-Azorín, 2023). Yet, this form of cultural asset organically exists, especially at the more traditional destinations that may otherwise face a multitude of destination management challenges, including being negatively stereotyped in the media. In such destinations facing a limited number of inbound tourists, natives can play important roles by becoming conscious of their advocacy potentials, hence the significance of community participation. Such awareness may be mainstreamed to unleash destination-community hospitality across most interactions. It can further help unveil tourism's

stabilizing effect in reducing tension within and between countries and leading to peace (Jafari, 1989). Destination-community hospitality can also act as a valuable tourism asset in the current period of reduced socialization opportunities, particularly aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis (Colmekcioglu *et al.*, 2022).

The study has developed the concept into a framework for destination management based on the model of attitudinal change. The affective, behavioral, and cognitive components of the original model have been recast in the study as an affection-attention-awareness (AAA) framework. The framework promotes that host community members should convey a sense of hospitality by both subconsciously and consciously appreciating tourists. Collectively, their hospitality can then constitute a hospitality-based cultural image for a tourist destination. The affective component in the original model is reiterated as relating to the friendliness of community members in terms of their persistent affection shown to tourists, which arouses positive feelings in both. The behavioral component in the original model has been modified as attention associated with the way local communities treat and take care of tourists. The cognitive component has been reflected as awareness in the framework.

### ***Practical implications***

Iran has been associated with negative stereotypes in the contemporary media scene. Yet, as a destination of latent cultural heritages, its cultural assets also include humanitarian beliefs manifested in Persian hospitality. The “enjoyment of culture, history, and nature” and “expansion of new horizons and perspectives” are readily offered by Iran to potential tourists (Alaadini and Davari, 2018). However, the survival of Persian hospitality is endangered due to a host of factors, including globalization and societal transformations on one hand and inadequate leadership and policy as well as economic pressures on the other. This study has probed some promising examples that underscore the role some Iranians are already playing as

Persian hospitality advocates. Such activities can be used as early guides for the incorporation of destination-community hospitality across the country's various tourism milieus.

The AAA framework shows how destination-community hospitality can be leveraged for destination management even in the absence of any formal hospitality training. It can shape a positive perception of any country, region, or locality with hospitable cultural attributes, even if it is not recognized favorably as a tourist destination due to geopolitical circumstances or its public-sector planning shortcomings. Destination management organizations need to understand how the three constructs of the framework operate for their specific destinations. Once the endowments associated with each construct are identified, they can develop appropriate strategies to address the shortcomings. Furthermore, echoing Kwok's (2022) study about bridging industry and academic knowledge, commercial hospitality entities may directly benefit from higher levels of destination-community hospitality when the overall experiences of their guests are made positive. The community's significant wealth of intuitive hospitality acts to enhance the overall tourist experience.

### ***Limitations and future research***

The awareness construct of the AAA framework is rather challenging in the Iranian context since expectations from the government's tourism policy and practice must remain modest. The country has not been successful in leveraging this unique kind of hospitality. Nor has Persian hospitality been adequately taken up in international fora or tourism academic research. Studies focusing on Iran's tourism industry touch upon Persian hospitality only in a cursory manner (Beeman, 1976; Koutlaki, 2002).

Prospective studies should be directed to investigating various constructs of destination-community hospitality as a balanced and objective reflection of tourist destinations. Furthermore, as the constructs of the AAA framework are suggested to

dynamically relate to each other in this study, their exact interrelations should be quantitatively investigated in different destinations in future studies. Finally, research should be directed to identifying policies that encourage and tap into destination-community hospitality.

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