Towards Credible City Branding Practices: How Do Iran's Largest Cities Face Ecological Modernization?

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Abstract: City branding is not only increasingly practiced in cities in established economies, but also among municipal governments in countries, until quite recently, rather closed off from the outside world. One country with a strong drive to engage in urban (re)development in the post-oil era through enhancing its 'ecological modernization' is Iran. Megacities in Iran have all begun to venture into making profiles of what they think they are or would like to be. However, some of the adopted city branding strategies lack sophistication. In this article, the authors examine what indicators can be used for evaluating the credibility of city brands and apply these to Iran's 15 megacities. After offering brief descriptions of the generic features of each of these cities, they map their use of city brand identities and popular city labels related to ecological modernization and analyze the credibility of their city branding practices. Based on their findings, the authors distinguish five types of cities and explain what makes some types more credible in their use of brands than others. Generally speaking, compared to cities in other nations, Iranian cities pay special attention to historical, natural, cultural, and religious aspects.

Keywords: city branding; ecological modernization; brand credibility; Iran; megacities

1. Introduction

As noted at various places in the academic literature, city branding practices have grown in importance among ambitious municipal governments in recent decades [1–4]. They are used as a tool to enhance a city's image in the competitive global arena to lure investors, corporations, a talented workforce, visitors, and residents into the city. In many cases, using labels, such as *sustainable*, *low carbon*, *eco*, *resilient*, *knowledge*, *digital*, or *smart* before 'city' aim to convey a particular impression among key stakeholders and enhances attractiveness [5,6]. Nonetheless, empirical evidence suggests that the malleability of a city's brand in the eyes of stakeholders, clients, and observers is limited: it depends on subjective perceptions, consists of multiple aspects that may not always point in the same direction, and is associated with ideas lingering on from the past that are difficult to erase [7]. Much of the literature deals primarily with city branding strategies, practices, and experiences collected in cities located in wealthy and developed nations, but knowledge of how this works in non-Western countries is less widespread, especially in those where opening up to market influence and global capitalism is a recent phenomenon. Nonetheless, there is a burgeoning literature and growing number of case studies on this topic [8–10]. Awareness is growing that international and national positioning, profiling, and imagineering of places is apparently also awakening in countries thus far relatively secluded from international influence. One of them is Iran.

Since the rise to power of President Rohani and the signing of the international treaty on nuclear power, economic sanctions have been lifted, curiosity for development 'out there' has increased, and cities are getting increasingly connected to global trends of which the need for credible self-branding is an important one [11]. Iran is considered as being of strategic geopolitical importance due to its historical incorporation in the Silk Road, the presence of vast natural resources, the presence of a relatively highly-educated population, and the availability of comparatively advanced physical infrastructures [12]. While the above suggests a very large fount of future economic opportunities, mounting environmental problems, in fact, cause a major headache. Implementing the construction of smart urban infrastructures and transforming outdated industrial structures have become developmental imperatives. As a consequence, urban master plans for Iranian cities frequently express attempts made by local governments to develop their urban environments into livable and pleasant places for their citizens, as well as promising locations for high-quality capital investments. Such efforts can be seen as dealing with the challenges of 'ecological modernization' [10,13–15]: generating higher economic value-added with reduced resource consumption and/or reduced emission of harmful substances. Often, a transition from manufacturing industries to services is involved, and/or the upgrading of production processes by making them higher in quality and lower in resource intensity. In the urban context, it is usually associated with the promotion of sustainable or smart cities.

The aim of this article is two-fold. It is first to distill from the academic literature on city branding key insights allowing us to establish a set of criteria to assess the credibility of city branding practices as developed by municipalities. This will allow us to have a critical look at the practices of any given municipality. In Section 2, therefore, we will examine what the state-of-the-art literature on city branding tells us about the criteria for credible city branding practices.

The second aim is to map and evaluate the city branding practices as engaged in by Iranian municipalities and obtain a valid impression of how they present themselves to the outside world, in terms of general positioning (city brand identities), as well as in the specific debate on sustainable and/or smart city development (use of city labels). We will lean on earlier work where city branding in the face of ecological modernization was analyzed for German and Dutch cities [16] and Chinese cities [9,10]. Section 3 will present the methodology as used in this contribution and explain how data was collected in Iran's 15 cities with over 500,000 inhabitants, nationally known as its 'megacities'. Section 4 will briefly introduce the main features of these 15 cities to the extent that these are relevant for assessing the credibility of their city branding choices. Section 5 presents our findings for the cities and a general assessment of the credibility of these choices is given. Specific attention is paid to the question of how issues of ecological modernization are addressed. Section 6 will conclude with an overview of the main takeaways from this article and some hints for future research.

2. The Credibility of City Brands: Theory

This section will examine the existing literature on branding credibility and place branding with as a specific aim to identify factors contributing to the credibility of city brands.

The literature on product branding in the private sector has generated a number of insights on brand credibility with potential use for city branding. Ohanian argues that branding is tantamount to successful communication. It is essentially the manipulation of messages in such a way that these are received positively. Enhancing the credibility of both source and message can be helpful in reaching this goal [17]. Erdem et al. identify three elements which contribute to communicated messages being received in a positive manner and, thus, provide a higher likelihood of being accepted: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness [18]. Trustworthiness is a quality related to the reliability of the source of the information on the brand, expertise refers to the specific knowledge and skills of this source, and attractiveness involves the 'personality' features of this source. Unfortunately, the literature on credibility of product branding has more to say about the credibility of the messenger than about

the credibility of the message or brand itself. Since, in our study, 15 municipal governments are the messenger in all cases, this can barely be considered a distinguishing factor.

As context for the credibility of city brands, their integration within the broader provincial and national (country) context of which cities are a part matter a great deal [19]. In this sense, facilitating the national development of an overarching branding strategy or policy and inserting the city brand in it may eventually benefit both levels. A report commissioned by Heritage Counts (2016) demonstrates that, in the United Kingdom, cultural heritage is emphasized at both the national and local levels in place branding practices and that this combined approach promotes their credibility in terms of felt authenticity and distinctiveness [20]. Credible brands use a unique voice to tell the story about promotional promises, the current situation, and the past heritage of the city. However relevant as a general insight, all cities under study here are located in the same nation; a reason why we do not include this factor in our analysis either.

Moving on to the literature on city branding (but without explicit attention paid to credibility issues), at face value, place branding shows resemblance to city marketing, a term much en vogue in the 1980 and 1990s. However, on closer inspection it appears that marketing essentially refers to a heightened sense awareness of what target groups or stakeholders wish, while branding has a strong aspect of loyalty and overarching policy strategy to it [21]. In contradistinction, however, Lucarelli argues that place branding was driven by a more generic need in public policy where public authorities needed to profile themselves more strongly and, from there, place brands evolved into broader multi-dimensional socio-political constructs generated through multi-level interaction among a variety of different actors: this essentially makes city branding a co-development process of cities with various relevant stakeholders [22]. Having these stakeholders on board is crucial for its translation into effective policy strategy and implementation. Vanolo has defined city branding as a complete set of activities aimed at establishing and maintaining a positive city image and conveying this information to different target groups via materials and events at various scales [3], all of this to gain competitive advantage over other cities. In other words, while city marketing can, for instance, support Isfahan in knowing more about its various stakeholders in and around the city and act on this knowledge, city branding can help it in letting these stakeholders grow aware of Isfahan's positive highlights that may be translated into a long-term commitment to engage in, and collaborate with it. Dinnie, emphasizing other aspects in his definition, sees a city brand as a unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements, which provides the city with culturally-grounded differentiation and relevance for its target audiences [2]. This implies that a chosen brand should be clearly distinct from others and, thus, the opposite of 'a great place to live and work' [21], while also able to attract a variety of audiences. Most authors in the field are in agreement that place branding, of which city branding is a specific subspecies, is more complex in nature than product branding, because cities are truly multi-dimensional entities evoking a great variety of impressions and associations depending on the people among whom, and circumstances under which, they are evoked [23]. One general message addressed at different groups of stakeholders with potentially conflicting interests and expectations can lead to trouble, making it necessary to convey partially different (but not contradictory) messages to those various target groups [24–26]. In that sense, city branding has more in common with the corporate branding that large companies and holdings with many different product lines engage in [27]. Tourists and visitors seek the availability of exciting cultural centers and entertainment parks in a city, while wealthy residents, real estate companies, and project developers prefer quiet green neighborhoods and high-quality public facilities, such as schools and hospitals. They may, in fact, even be repelled by busy and noisy streets filled with hotels and exciting day-trippers. This demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between various target groups and stakeholders and addressing these in different ways; at their turn, they hopefully communicate the brand message in the same way with their own partners, a sign that they support it and act in accordance with it.

An additional aspect appearing in the literature on city branding relevant to urban transformation is the aspect of dealing with the tension between a city's current social, economic, and geographic

features, and its profile (its existing brand) and self-image based on high-brow future ambitions (its desired brand). Generally speaking, one can say that cities have (i) a historically-based cultural, social, and economic inheritance or legacy which colors them; (ii) a present social and economic profile with a specific composition of the population and collection of dominant industries; and (iii) a set of policy ambitions, goals, and chosen policy measures aimed to realize these hopes for the future. If the present situation and future ambitions deviate from each other too strongly without stakeholders able to grasp how this gap can be closed, credibility of a brand severely suffers from this (perceived) inconsistency [3,7,10,28]. On the other hand, if the realization of future ambitions can be seen as a continuation and enhancement of an evolving developmental path spiced up with a peculiar historical and cultural background the brand will appear both attractive and credible. It is all about the potential to connect past, present, and future in one logical narrative. Therefore, local governments that are able to align their historical and current profile with future wishes, follow up with necessary implementation steps, and manage to convince relevant stakeholders to echo their brand in ways consistent with their own are likely to bridge the gap between the existing and desired brand and have a higher chance to realize their long-term goals for urban transition.

Based on the above reading of the literature, we list six factors that contribute to the credibility of city brands that can be taken on board for the rest of the analysis. These are the potential to:

- Generate feelings of loyalty;
- Facilitate the development of an overarching strategy or policy;
- Evoke positive feelings;
- Demonstrate uniqueness or distinctness;
- Allow for different yet non-contradictory messages to various stakeholders; and
- Logically connect past heritage, current profile, and future ambitions.

3. The Credibility of City Brands: Method

This section will explain how data was collected and processed and, following, what procedures the credibility factors utilized to come to an assessment of the branding practices of the 15 cities under study.

We have examined the city branding practices among the fifteen most prominent cities in Iran, known as its 15 'megacities', each having more than 500,000 inhabitants. The question remains what city branding practices consist of and how they can be measured. Kavaratzis and Ashworth have identified three elements in city brands: brand identity, brand position, and brand image [4]. Mayes argues that identities derive 'from the intrinsic features and history of a given place and a shared (personalized) relationship to these elements' [29]. Govers and Go believe that 'place identities are constructed through historical, political, religious, and cultural discourses; through local knowledge, and influenced by power struggles' [30]. In short, given that a city brand identity constitutes the essential actual or imagined core of a city's self-perception, it should definitely be examined here as an aspect that municipal governments deal with in their positioning and self-promotion activities. A brand position, on the other hand, is that part of value proposition communicated to a target group that demonstrates competitive advantages in particular fields [4]. In this sense, a city's brand position is related to a specific economic market, niche, or policy area for which its specific plans and visions express both the status quo and expectations for future development based on future ambitions. We will also take this aspect into account in this study since it addresses the desired infrastructural development and industrial transformation of a city in the face of ecological modernization [6,9,10,16]. Finally, a brand image refers to how the brand is perceived by the outside world. In other words, identity is 'how we see ourselves', whereas image represents its mirror image and can be described as 'how others see us'. Since the focus of this article is on how local government practice city branding and not on how citizens, residents, and visitors perceive these cities, we mapped the city brand identities and city brand positions for each city, but not the city images. Our goal was to produce a table with

the city brand identities and positions for each of the 15 cities and then assess the credibility for each cell in the table.

To compile this table, we collected the following data:

1. The city brand identity as shown in their most recent Urban Master Plan (UMP);
2. The city brand identity as found on their municipal government website;
3. The dominant use of city labels as found in their UMPs reflecting their brand position;
4. The dominant use of city labels on their internet websites reflecting their brand position; and
5. A city's adoption of and inclusion in national sustainable urban development programs, such as on environmental protection or smart city development, but also the protection of cultural heritage and the preservation of Iranian-Islamic identity or the identity of city and countryside characteristics. These target 'ecological modernization' in Iran by promoting aspects of social, economic, and/or environmental sustainability. This reflects their efforts to flesh out the above brand position in terms of policy actions.

We assumed it to be more reliable to establish city brand identity on the basis of two indicators (1 and 2) and city brand position on three indicators (3, 4, and 5). While the brand identities were composed of essential self-descriptions and phrases these cities give of themselves in the UMPs and on their websites, the city labels in Table 5 had to be gathered in a more pre-structured manner. Inspired by earlier work where 10–12 key city labels were distinguished in the academic literature [6], in the Randstad and Rhine-Ruhr areas [16], and in a variety of Chinese regions [9,10], we also found a number of recurrent city labels typical of the Iranian context. The labels were eventually used were manufacturing city, service city, knowledge city (including education city), creative city, resilient city, smart city, digital city (including E-City, ICT-city, and virtual city), innovation city, liveable city (including green city, garden city, juicy city, and smooth city), tourism city (including health city, natural eco city, religious city, and beautiful city), and sustainable city. We simply made counts of the appearance of each of these city labels in the UMPs and on official municipal websites and presented these counts in our table. However, since the format, density, and size of UMPs and websites differed across cities, the numbers given in them cannot be easily be compared across cities. We decided to group similar variants under one label. As with the brand identities we gathered them from the cities' UMPs and websites, but we also analyzed which cities had successfully applied for, and had been accepted, in one of the national sustainable urbanization programs. This enables them to use the label or reputation associated with that particular high-brow program and is, thus, a valid third indicator of dominant use of city brand positions.

The original goal of our study had been to systematically apply the six criteria for credible city branding to the scores of the 15 cities as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Criteria for credible city branding.

Credibility Aspect/City	Generating Feelings of Loyalty	Facilitating Overarching Strategy	Evoking Positive Feelings	Demonstrating Uniqueness	Allowing Different, Non-Contradictory Messages	Logically Connecting Past, Present and Future
City A						
City B						
…						
…						
Etc.						

However, when making the first tentative efforts to apply these credibility factors to the various data on the Iranian cities, it transpired that not all of them were amenable to measurement and/or unambiguous outcomes. This was specifically the case with 'generating feelings of loyalty' and 'evoking positive feelings' and mostly strongly with issues of religion, which would typically lead to bipolar outcomes (strongly positive or negative feelings about Iranian-Islamic identity). In our credibility assessment we restricted our analysis to the other four factors and applied these to the city

branding practices of each city (an overall impression of the findings on brand identity and use of city labels) with three possible scores: high, medium, and low.

4. The Main Features of Iran's Megacities in Brief

Before analyzing and interpreting the branding practices in Iran's 15 megacities with over 500,000 inhabitants, it is important to have a general impression of their dominant demographic, economic, social, and cultural features. These features color the position from which cities brand themselves and determine the developmental options they have. The megacities are, in descending order of population numbers: Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Karaj, Tabriz, Shiraz, Ahwaz, Qom, Kermanshah, Uremia, Rasht, Zahedan, Kerman, Arak, and Hamedan (see Figure 1 and Table 2). Figure 1 demonstrates the topographic position of the cities, Table 2 presents their population numbers and territorial size, while Table 3 at the end of the section summarizes all other relevant geographic data of the cities.
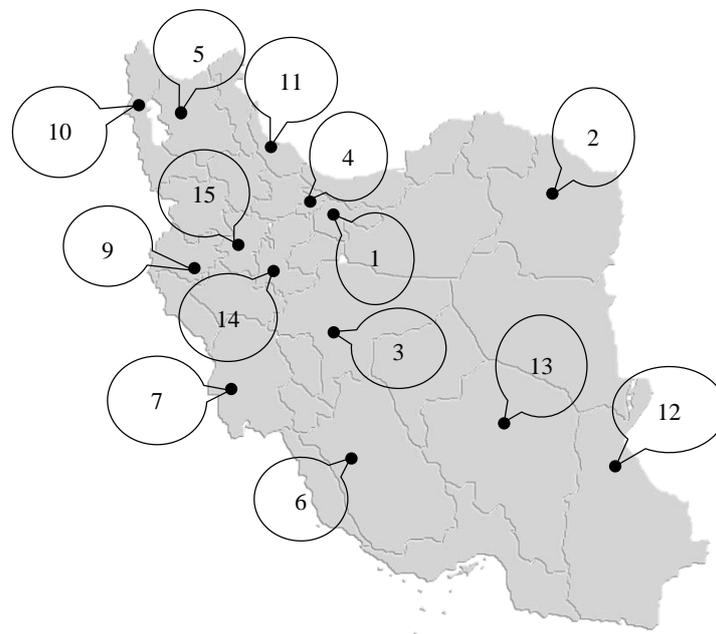

Figure 1. Fifteen Iranian megacities.

Table 2. Population and space of Iran's megacities.

	City	Population (2011)	Space (km^2)
1	Tehran	8,154,051	750
2	Mashhad	2,749,374	300
3	Isfahan	1,756,126	235
4	Karaj	1,614,626	165
5	Tabriz	1,494,988	190
6	Shiraz	1,460,665	225
7	Ahwaz	1,112,021	140
8	Qom	1,074,036	95
9	Kermanshah	851,405	90
10	Urmia	667,499	90
11	Rasht	639,951	60
12	Zahedan	560,725	75
13	Kerman	534,441	85
14	Arak	526,182	60
15	Hamedan	525,794	70

Tehran has been the nation's capital for more than 200 years and currently counts approximately 8 million regular inhabitants and an additional floating population of 4 million. It has 16.2% of Iran's entire population. In addition to being its political capital, Tehran is also an important administrative, economic, and cultural metropolis. Three dominant industries in Tehran province in terms of investment amount are food and beverages, rubber and plastics, and manufactured metal products [31]. Tehran is the focal point of Iran's transportation network and the area where more than 40% of the nation's economic activities take place. Tehran is a melting pot of ethnic groups, languages, and numerous Persian dialects and accents. Having a wide range of high-ranked universities, innovative businesses, and startups in comparison with others, their use of the term "knowledge-based" is not far-fetched.

Mashhad (meaning "place of martyrdom" in Arabic) is the capital of the central Khurasan province and the greatest religious metropolis in the country. It is home to about 8% of Iran's population. It is the site of the very large Imam Reza (the Shia imam murdered by Arabian Nights caliph Haroun al-Rashid) shrine that draws more than 20 million Shia pilgrims a year. The city's population numbers around 3 million in recent years and 55% of Iran's hotels are located in Mashhad. Mashhad is also the city of saffron. For this reason, agricultural and service sectors have an even greater share in its added economic value than manufacturing and mining. The three dominant industries in the central Khurasan province are; food and beverage, metal products and textile [31].

Isfahan is Iran's third most populous city and the capital of Isfahan province. It has historically been among the most important urban centers on the Iranian plateau and counts a large number of historical monuments: bridges, caravanserais, minarets, and mosques, attracting a major share of the tourists in Iran. Petroleum products and nuclear fuels, fabricated metal products, and textile production are three dominant industries in Isfahan province [31].

Located near Tehran, Karaj is one of the primary destinations for immigrants. Many believe that if Karaj did not exist, Tehran would have no room to breathe with all its immigrants, air pollution, and lack of green space. Karaj, due to massive immigration, is a microcosm of all cultures and ethnicities in Iran and has become one of Iran's economic and cultural pillars. Located near Tehran, it has accommodated many industrial towns around the city causing considerable environmental problems. The opening of Tehran-Karaj metro has added to the flourishing of Karaj. Food, equipment, and machine manufacturing and chemical products constitute the industrial core of Alborz province in which Karaj is located.

Tabriz city, one of the ancient Turkic cities has the world's largest historical indoor bazar and is known as a UNESCO world heritage site, of which hand-woven carpets are a key element. Ministers of tourism in Islamic countries selected Tabriz as the capital of Islamic tourism in 2018. Petroleum products and nuclear fuels, food and beverage products, and chemical products are the three dominant industries in East Azerbaijan province [31].

Shiraz; the capital of Fars province, has been the city of poetry and Persian literature, philosophy, and ethics for a long time. Until the Islamic revolution, Iran had a tradition of wine-making which stretched back centuries. It centered on the ancient city of Shiraz. Different people have lived in the Fars province, such as the Aryans, the Samis, and the Turks, who worked together to form the Iranian culture [32]. Shiraz is also the birthplace and resting place of the great Persian poets Hafez and Saadi. The most interesting buildings in Shiraz are located in the old part of the town. The largest share of value added in Fars province is related to agriculture; cultivation, and horticulture. With regard to industry, the three sectors with the highest value-added are food, the production of petroleum, and chemical products [31].

Ahwaz is one of the key strategic metropolises of the country in that it contributes enormously to the nation's GDP (gross domestic product) with its oil production and refineries. Since much of its wealth is donated to the national coffers, while it is left with severe environmental problems itself, it has seen a large number of protests in recent years. It is said that "Ahwazies get only pollution, disease, and death from the oil trade" [33]. According to a recent air quality survey by the World

Health Organization, Ahwaz is one of the world's most polluted cities with the highest count of small airborne particles out of 1100 urban areas around the world. As can be expected, the largest share of its the value added comes from petroleum products and chemical products [31].

Iran's second pilgrimage center after Mashhad, Qom (Ghom), is home to the magnificent Massoumeh shrine and shrines for various other Shiite scholars; students come from around the world to study in its madrassas and browse in its famous religious bookshops. Receiving the pilgrims (providing accommodation, services, and facilities) and being the center of religious learning have, along with its proximity to Tehran, led to substantial population growth [34].

Since Kermanshah is located in the middle of the Zagros Mountains, and between two cold and warm regions, it enjoys a moderate climate [32]. Much of the industrial activity of the province is concentrated in its capital city. An early modern industrial enterprise, established in 1962, is the Bisotun sugar-refining factory. The most notable enterprise of all is Kermanshah's oil refinery, which was completed in 1971. There are also several operative factories of medium size that manufacture textiles for local consumption. Other industries include food processing, electrical and mechanical appliances, and cement and construction materials, as well as mining of marble and limestone throughout the province [12].

Urmia, another ancient Turkic city and the capital of West Azarbaijan province is located on vast green plains and surrounded by vineyards and apple orchards. Recently, Urmia's greatest challenge has been to preserve Lake Urmia. Lake Urmia was twice as large as Luxembourg and the largest salt-water lake in the Middle East. Since then it has shrunk substantially, and it was sliced in half in 2008, with consequences uncertain to this day, by a 15-km causeway designed to shorten the travel time between the cities of Urmia and Tabriz [35]. The agricultural sector adds the largest share of economic value-added in West Azarbaijan province. Food production and non-metallic minerals manufacturing are the dominant industries in this province.

Rasht is located by the Caspian Sea where it was one of the cities along the Silk Road route. It joined the world's creative cities network under UNESCO as a creative city for gastronomy. Rasht and Hamedan are among the provincial centers of the country considered as great agricultural centers of the country. Surrounded by the fertile delta of the Sefīd-Rūd River, both the city and its gastronomy benefit from a rich variety of natural resources, especially various species of fish and in-season products. Above all, gastronomy in Rasht is synonymous with the protection and promotion of cultural heritage [36]. Thus, the highest value-added in industry is from food.

Zahedan is the capital of Baluchistan province in Iran. It is a border city connecting Iran with Pakistan. It is one of the largest regions in Iran, but it is less developed than much of the rest. Research carried out in this province and its cities indicate that on all four economic, environmental, social, and health aspects, Baluchistan ranks almost at the bottom of all Iranian provinces [37].

Kerman is an ancient city located on the edge of the Lut Desert in the central-south of Iran and the capital city of Kerman province. It has been famous for cumin and opium. Kerman and Zahedan are on the trade route opening Iran and Europe to the opium trade from Afghanistan. A large share of the GDP in agriculture in Kerman province is based on pistachios. Metal and steel manufacturing are the dominant manufacturing industries in Kerman.

As a major industrial city, Arak hosts several industrial factories inside and within a few kilometers outside of the city. As an industrial city in a developing country Arak is subject to serious pollution. This city, only 200 years old, officially became a megacity in 2014. The main agricultural products of the city are grain, barley, and fruits, including grape, apple, walnut, and almond. Arak also exports hand-knotted carpets which are generally referred to as Sarouk rugs. After Khuzestan (in which Ahwaz is located) and Tehran, Markazi province (with Arak in it) has the highest GDP per capita among Iranian megacities. Petroleum products, chemical products, and non-metallic minerals are the dominant industries [32].

Hamedan is a very historical city, since it was the capital of the empire of the Medes until they forged a union with the Persians. It also served as the summer capital of the Achaemenid Empire [33].

Its modern version in Iran's mountainous region was designed by Karl Ferisch, a German engineer, as a city concentric in shape. Hamedan is famous for pottery and ceramics and it has an influential group of environmental advocates who use the power of the media to preserve the environment and the ancient city texture. Food production and the manufacturing of non-metallic minerals add the lion's share to its industrial value-added [32].

Table 3. Key economic data of Iranian megacities (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2017).

Province	Capital City	GDP			Value Added (%)		
		Value (Billion Rial)	Share (%)	Per Capita	Agriculture	Industry and Mining	Services
	Iran	6225.66	100	82.8	100	100	100
Tehran	Tehran	1436.432	23.1	117.9	3.9	11.8	36.4
Central Khurasan	Mashhad	331.292	5.3	55.3	6.7	3.3	6.9
Isfahan	Isfahan	416.864	6.7	85.4	4.1	7.9	6.0
Alborz	Karaj	157.793	3.5	65.4	1.7	1.5	3.6
East Azerbaijan	Tabriz	207.139	3.3	55.6	4.6	3.2	3.2
Fars	Shiraz	262.028	4.2	57	8.7	3.0	4.5
Khuzestan	Ahvaz	836.240	13.4	184.5	6.8	25.0	4.3
Qom	Qom	59.520	1.0	51.7	0.8	0.8	1.1
Kermanshah	Kermanshah	106.086	1.7	54.5	2.4	1.2	2.1
West Azerbaijan	Urmia	125.717	2.0	40.8	4.6	1.0	2.5
Gilan	Rasht	126.891	2.0	51.1	3.0	1.3	2.6
Sistan	Zahedan	75.230	1.2	29.7	2.6	0.5	1.6
Kerman	Kerman	164.053	2.6	55.8	7.1	2.3	2.2
Markazi	Arak	125.424	2.0	88.7	2.2	2.3	1.7
Hamedan	Hamedan	88.882	1.4	50.6	3.5	0.8	1.7

5. City Branding Practices in Iran's Fifteen Megacities

Table 4 presents the city brand identities of all 15 megacities as expressed in their Urban Master Plans and as found on their official local government websites. It is important to realize that there is no common format in either UMP or local websites, so each city presents itself to the outside world in a different way. While some cities incorporate strategic visions others, such as Kermanshah and Zahedan, mainly display action plans. Finally, for unknown reasons, the website of Mashhad City has been unavailable for a long time.

Table 4. City brand identities in (UMP)s and on websites.

Brand Identity Indicator/City	City Brand Identity as in UMP	City Brand Identity as on Official Website
Tehran	Tehran is a world-class cultural, knowledge-based city, with authentic Persian and Islamic identity, beautiful, resilient, a benchmark for the Islamic world. Alive and prosperous, with a thriving economy based on cultural industries and higher education services. These features will make our city an 'educated city'.	Tehran, City of Hope, Partnership and Prosperity. Tehran; Smart, Innovative and Knowledge City.
Mashhad	Mashhad is a holy city with a unique religious-pilgrimage oriented identity on the national and global scale; lead in sustainable urban development at the national level with a global approach by relying on a knowledge-based economy, advanced industries and superior services, especially pilgrimage services, tourism and natural tourism.	Website unavailable
Isfahan	Isfahan Capital of Islamic Culture and Civilization; the cradle of elites, source of Inspiration and Embodiment of Islamic Civilization. A creative city with faithful, glad and knowledgeable people. A beautiful, green and smart city with Iranian Islamic architecture. Professionally run city with a dynamic economy and a high quality of life. A productive city based on science, technology and tourism. An exciting city with prominent culture, art and tourism and the best city in Iran to live in.	Isfahan, the beautiful city of God, with turquoise domes, the Islamic Cultural Capital of Iran and a creative city.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Brand Identity Indicator/City	City Brand Identity as in UMP	City Brand Identity as on Official Website
Karaj	Karaj; A Sustainable city ensuring quality of life, providing superior services, with the economic opportunities of a metropolitan capital in terms of investment and employment, with relative self-sufficiency, favorable for tourism and leisure activities. A resilient and environmentally friendly city.	Karaj; a miniature Iran. "A city with an Iranian Islamic Identity", "A Sustainable City with Public, Lively, Succulent and Prosperous Spaces", A smart and Knowledge-based City. "A Justice-Driven City where Social and Economic Inequalities have been removed", "A creative and economically robust city with strong foundations to serve Iran as a while", A "sustainable city" residence, activity and leisure are well-integrated, " A city with prosperous, innovative, hopeful and joyful citizens ". A resilient city.
Tabriz	Tabriz, a city with a strong historical and cultural background. Tabriz is one of the most prominent faces of the Islamic city and is one of the most important academic centres of the country and the largest scientific pole of Northwest Iran. Turkish language symbolizes the local identity of the city. "Tabriz City of the Firsts"; the first printing house, the first school, the first school for deaf, the first machine produced coins, the first chamber of commerce, the first municipality and the first township.	Tabriz is the fourth largest city and one of the historical capitals of Iran. "City without beggars", "Iran's safest metropolis", "World of Carpet" and the cleanest city in Iran. The Capital of Tourism among Islamic Countries in 2018.
Shiraz	Shiraz the Religious and Cultural Capital of Islamic Iran. A smooth City for traffic, green and safe. A capable city in urban management and investment attraction. A city for life, work and leisure. Shiraz is a Centre for tourism (religion, sports, nature, health, history and culture) at the national and international levels. An ICT City for services on the Persian Gulf coast. A beautiful, coherent and shiny city.	Shiraz, the city of "Raz [means mystery]". The cultural capital of Iran and the second largest literary city in the world, the third religious city in Iran.
Ahwaz	Ahwaz is a clean, safe, commercial, industrial and tourism city with high social well-being based on continues cultural, social and managerial growth in Southern Iran. A tourism city in five years time.	Ahwaz has had many births throughout history, and what has been reminiscent of this glorious millennial treasure is a rich culture and small memorials left over from the last century.
Qom	Qom is the capital for the production and publication of religious thoughts and Shiite teachings, a world-wide pilgrimage city, a pattern of Islamic modernity. Qom is one of the main poles of religious tourism.	Qom, pilot city for religious diplomacy at the international level, a large workshop for construction projects, with efficient urban transportation; A smart city. Qom is a desert that becomes green.
Kermanshah	n.a Only profiling actions mentioned	Kermanshah is a beautiful face and stout chest of Islamic Iran.
Urmia	Urmia is a cultural city, developed and citizen-oriented. One of the oldest Iranian cities on a lush flood surrounded by apple and grape gardens.	Urmia is the land of beauty; Land of Understanding and Peaceful Coexistence. The city of apple and grapes. Urmia is one of the oldest volleyball cities in Iran.
Rasht	Rasht is the most important centre for leisure and travel activities in terms of natural attractions. The industrial area in Rasht is one of the most important projects in the Caspian Sea region.	The beautiful city of Rasht is located in the most important region in the province of Gilan, no word can describe this lush and beautiful area and it should just be seen. Rasht is named the "city of silver frequent rains" due to rain and thunderstorm.
Zahedan	n.a Only profiling actions mentioned	Zahedan is the capital city of the Province of Sistan and Baluchestan and one of the youngest provincial capital cities in the country. Zahedan is connected to both Pakistan and Afghanistan via roads.
Kerman	Kerman; A city to live in with vitality and sustainable city development. The gateway to history and identity, the pole of tourism in the East and South-east for the ancient civilization of Islamic Iran. The historical civilization in Kerman is perpetuated in the academic and cultural activities.	Kerman has been usually one of the most important cities in tourism and every year has been host for many internal and external guests. It's the centre of Southeast and also its cultural economic, industrial, social and political reference point in the Southeast.
Arak	Arak, a city near the Zagros Mountains, Iran's Industrial Pole. Iran's central transportation hub.	Arak, a city on the central plateau of Iran, and its industrial capital.
Hamedan	Capital of Iranian History and Civilization.	Hamedan; an E-city and a Cradle of History. Hamadan is one of the most ancient cities in Iran and an emerald jewel in the Western region of ancient Iran, One of the six historical and cultural cities of the country.

When comparing the style many of the above cities adopt in presenting themselves with those found in previous studies on Germany, the Netherlands [16], and China [9,10], it stands out that religious, cultural, and natural features are much more prominent in cities' self-images and that the focus on history is also stronger. This does not mean that a view of future economic development is absent, but it essentially only appears among the subset of cities that already economically do better. All taken together, a division can be made into five types of Iranian megacities based on their brand identity choices:

1. Cities eager to adopt the complete package of religious, cultural, and modern technological amenities. This implies they are proud of their natural and/or cultural treasures and Islamic

significance, but they also want to share in high-tech development boosting the future economic profile of their city. This applies to Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Qom.

2. Cities adopting a modern, multi-cultural profile seeing themselves at the confluence of various migration and ethnic streams and deriving character and strength from diversity without leaning on tradition much. Karaj belongs to this category.

3. Cities with a strong industrial and manufacturing profile, based on petroleum and chemicals. Even though they may express a desire to diversify into tourism, the credibility of realizing this is limited for the moment. Ahwaz and Arak are in this industrial group.

4. Cities with abundant natural and agricultural treasures, and sometimes quite poetic ways of describing themselves, but with a comparatively low profile in industry and services. These cities are Tabriz, Urmia, Rasht, Kerman and Hamedan.

5. Cities with a weak economic profile and an essentially negative self-perception that mention only action points and features of transport accessibility in their brand identity. Their self-image seems neither strongly rooted in past heritage nor in future ambitions. Kermanshah and Zahedan are in this group.

It becomes apparent that there is a strong correlation between economic strength and professionalism in branding, with cities in groups 1 and 2 having both city brand identities that generate emotional appeal, are amenable to the development of an overarching strategy or policy, demonstrate a certain level of uniqueness and allow for different yet non-contradictory messages to various stakeholders, and connect past heritage, current profile, and future ambitions. Karaj is stronger in its multi-cultural uniqueness and leans less on the past, Tehran is special in its global ambitions, while the other cities in group 1 are strongest in connecting the past, present, and future. While cities in group 3 are strong in their industrial profile, the attractiveness of this profile as a city brand identity has obviously shrunk in the face of severe environmental deterioration. Cities in the fourth group, on the other hand, have attractive cultural identities in many ways: they demonstrate uniqueness and lean strongly on natural or cultural treasures. However, their messages are not future-oriented, allow for little economic variety, and cannot be seen as a strong starting point for an overarching policy strategy. This severely restricts their practical appeal for ecological modernization. The cities in the fifth group, finally, appear to be so fully absorbed in getting by to pay any attention to branding at all.

Table 5 presents the dominant city labels of all 15 megacities as expressed in their Urban Master Plans and as they are found on their official local government websites. In the final column, it also demonstrates into which national city programs each of them has been incorporated. Again, the website of Mashhad City proved unavailable.

In line with our findings in Table 4, we see that the economically more powerful cities also tend to adopt higher numbers and a greater variety of city labels; they are also included in more city programs, helping them boost their urban structure and profile. Tehran, for instance, is included in all of them, and so is Shiraz. It is also intriguing that exactly all cities identified before in group 1 are included in the national smart city program, and that just Urmia from the fourth group has been added. Moreover, all cities in the first group with strong traditions in Islamic architecture (Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Qom) also boost their tourist profile through the use of the city label 'tourism city'. Karaj (group 2) is not a smart city and also does not promote itself as such, but it has firmly placed its focus on sustainability, livability, and knowledge. Among the industrial cities (Ahwaz and Arak) choices of city labels and adoption in national programs is comparatively weak, but to the extent that these exist, they reveal a wish for increases in tourism, livability, and sustainability. Among the cities with weaker economic profiles, but potentially rich in natural and cultural treasures (fourth group), and generally weak economic structures (fifth group), Hamedan stands as being by far the most ambitious by using such terms as *sustainable*, *tourism*, *digital*, *smart*, *livable*, and *resilient*. Urmia is intriguing by focusing entirely on *smart*. Zahedan is significant at the very other extreme by not mentioning any term at all. Most others are in between these outcomes. More generally, however, consistency in the choices made in the various columns are a sign of commitments and focus rather than name-dropping. In that

sense, Tehran, Isfahan, Karaj, Urmia, and Hamedan seem to stand mostly firmly behind the branding and policy choices made and, in that sense, the credibility of their use of labels and adoption of national city programs can be expected to be highest. Incorporation of their branding approach in an overarching policy strategy, therefore, seems most likely, making its transformative capacity towards ecological modernization highest. In most other cases, the use of labels appears more as a haphazard use of popular urban denominations than as actual reflected adoption and systematic application of city labels. A table offering a systematic assessment of the four credibility factors applied to the city brand identities and use of city labels is presented in Table 6. The findings are in line with the general impressions obtained in Tables 4 and 5 on city brand identities and the use of city labels, and can be used by individual cities to evaluate and monitor 'how well' they do in their city branding practices and what is open to improvement. We should add here that the factors with emotional appeal (generating loyalty and conveying positive feelings) were omitted from the analysis due to a lack of measurability (see Section 3).

Table 5. Use of city labels in UMPs and on websites, and the adoption in national programs.

City Brand Position/City	Dominant City Labels as in UMP	Dominant City Label as on Website	Visible Engagement in National City Programs
Tehran	Knowledge (8) [1] Global (7) Smart (4) Creative (3) Innovation (1)	Smart (7) Knowledge (3) Innovation (2)	Knowledge-based development Smart city program Preservation of Iranian-Islamic identity Identity of the city (global metropolis)
Mashhad	Livable (6) Global (6) Tourism (5) Sustainable (4) Knowledge (3) Digital (1)	Website unavailable	Identity of the city (global metropolis) Smart city program
Isfahan	Tourism (6) Livable (5) Smart (4) Creative (1)	Tourism (3) Creative (1)	Iranian Islamic Culture Preservation of Iranian-Islamic identity Smart city program
Karaj	Sustainable (5) Resilient (3) Livable (2) Tourism (1) Digital (1) Manufacturing (1)	Sustainable (3) Smart (1) Knowledge (1) Resilient (1)	Sustainable development
Tabriz	Knowledge (1)	Tourism (15)	Knowledge-based development
Shiraz	Liveable (72) Tourism (34) Digital (15)	Smart (14) Digital (6)	Preservation of Iranian-Islamic identity Smart city program Sustainable development The identity of the city
Ahwaz	Tourism (1)	n.a	Identity of the city
Qom	Tourism (2)	Smart (3) Tourism (1) Digital (1)	Smart city program
Kermanshah	n.a	Livable (3)	n.a
Urmia	n.a	Smart (6)	Smart city program
Rasht	n.a.	Creative (2) Sustainable (1)	Sustainable development
Zahedan	n.a	n.a	n.a
Kerman	Sustainable (3)	n.a	n.a
Arak	Sustainable (2) Manufacturing (1)	Livable (1)	Sustainable development
Hamedan	Sustainable (2) Tourism (2) Livable (1)	Sustainable (3) Digital (2) Smart (2) Livable (1) Resilient (1)	Sustainable development

[1] Frequency count.

Table 6. Evaluating city brand credibility of Iranian megacities.

Credibility Aspect/City	Facilitating Overarching Strategy	Demonstrating Uniqueness	Allowing Different, Non-Contradictory Messages	Logically Connecting Past, Present, and Future
Tehran	high	high	high	high
Mashhad	medium	high	High	high
Isfahan	high	high	High	high
Karaj	high	high	High	medium
Tabriz	high	medium	Medium	high
Shiraz	high	high	High	high
Ahvaz	low	low	Medium	medium
Qom	high	medium	Medium	medium
Kermanshah	low	low	Medium	medium
Urmia	medium	medium	Medium	medium
Rasht	medium	high	Medium	medium
Zahedan	low	low	Low	low
Kerman	high	low	Medium	medium
Arak	medium	high	Medium	medium
Hamedan	medium	low	High	high

When applying the four credibility factors in a systematic way we consider scoring each factor as below:

- facilitate the development of an overarching strategy or policy; **high** if alignment with a national program appears in both brand identity and position; **medium** if it aligns with one of them; and **low** if seen in neither;
- demonstrate uniqueness or distinctness; **high** if the unique highlight appears in both brand identity and position; **medium** if it appears in only one of them; and **low** if seen in neither;
- allow for different yet non-contradictory messages to various stakeholders; **high** if their profile covers all environmental, economic (technological and industrial), and cultural aspects; **medium** if they cover one or two aspects; and **low** if none is mentioned; and
- logically connect past heritage, current profile, and future ambitions; **high** if their brand shows promotional promises and current situation as well as past heritage; **medium** if two of them are seen; and **low** if only one or even none is mentioned.

As it can be seen, in two heads of the assessment spectrum the cities of Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz reflect top scores, and Zahedan has the lowest rank.

6. Conclusions

Like cities in other nations and regions around the world, Iranian cities have also increasingly engaged in city branding practices that are potentially conducive to industrial transformation and ecological modernization. The nuclear deal opening their economy to stronger international influence has made them more amenable to trends in global competition. Especially since it has become obvious that oil and gas, as non-renewable natural resources, have a limited future timespan and generate considerable ecological damage as a result of their exploration and exploitation, some of Iran's megacities have begun to engage in city branding practices. Adopting city brand identities and using various attractive city labels play crucial roles in their attraction of alternative investors, corporations, and other stakeholders that can contribute to the ecological modernization they aspire to. The question is, however, to what extent their branding choices can be assessed as being credible. In order to evaluate this, we identified six factors for credible city branding practices from the academic literature on the topic. These were found to be the potential to (i) generate feelings of loyalty; (ii) facilitate the development of an overarching strategy or policy; (iii) evoke positive feelings; (iv) demonstrate uniqueness or distinctness; (v) allow for different, yet non-contradictory, messages to various stakeholders; and (vi) to logically connect past heritage, current profile, and future ambitions. Four of these factors (ii, iv, v, and vi) proved fit for application to the branding practices in Iran's 15 megacities and led to an assessment table offering an impression of how well each city did on which factor.

This study has shown that compared to how city branding is deployed in the face of ecological modernization, Iranian large cities pay ample attention to aspects of past heritage and to cultural and religious identity, and (to a certain extent) natural beauty. It is obvious that all Iranian cities boasting religious shrines and monuments cherish these cultural aspects in their identity. Religion is undoubtedly the root aspect of their identity in Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Qom and seen as an important basis for tourism and pilgrimage. Science and technology also appear as relevant among Iranian megacities, but only among the economically-leading cities. The wish to transition from manufacturing to services is not nearly as prominent as in Europe [16] and China [9,10].

Among all fifteen cities under study (all with over 500,000 inhabitants), we developed a classification of five types: (i) cities eager to adopt the complete package of religious, cultural, and modern technological amenities (Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz and Qom); (ii) cities adopting a modern, multi-cultural profile, and deriving character and strength from diversity without leaning on tradition (Karaj); (iii) cities with a strong industrial and manufacturing profile, based on petroleum and chemicals; (iv) cities with abundant natural and agricultural treasures, and sometimes quite poetic ways of describing themselves, but with a comparatively weak profile in industry and services (Tabriz, Urmia, Rasht, Kerman, and Hamedan); and (v) cities with a weak economic profile and an essentially negative self-perception that mention only action points and features of transport accessibility in their brand identity (Kermanshah and Zahedan). It appears that representatives in the first and second group tend to be sophisticated users of city branding practices and they meet most of the criteria for credible city branding. The picture is far more mixed among the cities in the third, fourth, and fifth groups. Industrial cities in the third group are heavily reliant on manufacturing and mining and suffer an essentially vulnerable image as a consequence of environmental contamination, but their struggle to diversify their economy is a tough one and the city branding choices do not (yet) show much potential and insight on how to realize this diversification. Suffering from an equally negative self-perception are the representatives of the fifth group. In their public documents and diplomacy, few indications can be observed as to how they would like to redefine their brand identity nor which city labels they adopt. If anything, city branding, as such, does not seem to be on their radar screen. A theoretically and methodologically intriguing intermediate group is constituted by the cities of the fourth group: these present far more positive and optimistic brand identities, generating stronger emotional impact and demonstrating uniqueness, but the potential of these identities to serve as a basis for an overarching policy or redevelopment strategy, and to diversify their economy and communicate this variety to various stakeholders, has remained weak. On those latter counts, there is still a great deal of ground to be gained for these cities. With regard to the use of city labels and the incorporation of those cities in national city programs, the overall picture is much the same, but slightly more diffuse. Again, the economically-advanced cities use many labels, adopt many national programs, and display a certain logic in which labels they do and do not embrace. The underprivileged cities evoke the opposite impression. Among the cities in the fourth group, two (Urmia and Hamedan) stand out as being more forward-looking than the others and their capacity to transform themselves over time, therefore, appears concomitantly greater than that of the others. Their drive to become smart and knowledge-oriented is remarkably high. Finally, it is also significant that Ahwaz and Arak, from the third group, do not mention oil or manufacturing at any point, nor do they express any desire to be service-oriented, high-tech, ICT-driven, or smart. Put another way, they are not proud of what they are, but they also give no obvious indication of what they would like to become instead. The picture sketched above is confirmed in Table 6, where the four measurable factors influencing the credibility of city branding practices are systematically applied to all cities and from which individual cities can take clues as to which aspects in their branding may be improved.

The findings in this paper add a few significant insights to the existing academic literature on the topic. They add knowledge on how cities in a nation that has recently opened up to global competition and where religious considerations play a vital role in information trends of economic development and urbanization, refract the drive towards ecological modernization. Some trends,

such as the emphasis on sustainability and livability, tend to be generally shared, while others, such as knowledge-orientation, smartness, and digitality, have been adopted among the more developed cities. Still other trends, such as a growing orientation towards services and advanced manufacturing, are missing out almost entirely, while yet others are more prominent (tourism-oriented, religious, and natural) than elsewhere. An important limitation in our study is that the two more subjective and/or emotional factors determining credibility were not included for lack of measurability. Future research may well introduce viable ways of including these factors in methodologically-sound ways and build connections with images of the city as held by outsiders. Follow-up research could also indicate how these features appear in other countries in the Middle East. Qatar, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi, all three prominent in city branding, are known to make quite sophisticated use of branding to promote their ecological modernization. Research mapping branding strategies in the Gulf States is ongoing and will deepen our insight in city branding for ecological modernization in countries strongly reliant on the petroleum industry, but entering the post-oil era.

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