

Strategic Management in Tourism for Silk Road Cultural Heritage in Iran

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Abstract | In recent decades, the Silk Road known as one of the world's most valuable international tourism destinations, which is a bridge between great civilizations in the East and West. This study focuses on the Silk Road in Iran as a case study and tries to identify tourism strategies for promoting Silk Road tourism in Iran. The data was gathered through an interview form. A qualitative method (content analysis) through MAXQDA software was used to analyse the data. The results illustrate that product development, conglomerate diversification, concentric diversification, joint venture, and market penetration are five strategies that can promote Silk Road tourism in Iran. Further investigation revealed seven operational solutions for product development and conglomerate diversification, divided into four categories. In addition, concentric diversification and joint venture strategies include ten and five operational solutions respectively. Lastly, the market penetration strategy is classified into six categories.

Keywords | Iran, Silk Road, strategic management, tourism

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1. Introduction

The Silk Road was a major trade route between China and Europe between the third century B.C. and the fifteenth century A.D., and it included the Land Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road (Fallon, 2015). According to Simpfendorfer, the Silk Road is “one of the World’s most powerful brands, perhaps even bigger than Disney or Coca-Cola” (UNWTO, 2018, p. 7). Winter (2016) noted that it created one belt, one road, and one heritage. It is noteworthy that Xi’an (China) is the start of one of UNESCO’s world heritage "Silk Roads" routes, and also that Iran is one of the oldest countries on it. In 2016 the world assembly of the cities of Silk Road as an international cultural, economic, and tourism centre was established in Iran under the supervision of UN-HABITAT Agency in the caravanserai of Sa’d al-Saltaneh (Qazvin) to cooperate between cities and countries located on the World Silk Road. Obviously, this event can create opportunities for Silk Road tourism in Iran.

The question is, which strategic management can help to promote Silk Road tourism in Iran? The main originality of this research includes tourism strategic management for Silk Road to extend the literature. Moreover, introducing Iran’s Silk Road and its cultural heritage as a tourism destination is the next contribution of the present research. Lastly, this research is an initial attempt to bring this idea to reality.

2. Theoretical framework

Lane and Lewcock (1996) highlighted Silk Road tourism as a strategy for the revival of heritage in Uzbekistan. However, Uzbekistan need to develop its foreign inbound tourism through developing its transport infrastructure (Karimov et al., 2023).

Wood (2002) believed that not only does it in-

clude cultural and natural heritage, but it also encompasses long-forgotten empires and history. Recently, global attention has been focused on Silk Road tourism. The idea of the Silk Road Tourism project was designed at the UNWTO assembly that took place in Indonesia in 1993 (Redi, 2017). The tourism program aims to increase and improve sustainable tourism development along the Silk Road belt; maximize the benefits of tourism development for local communities along the route; to stimulate investment and conservation of natural and cultural heritage sites and attractions of the Silk Road (Redi, 2017). Regarding this, The Silk Road Action Plan (2016/2017) strived to promote tourism in the area. The Action Plan aims to foster collaboration between stakeholders (World Tourism Organization; UN Agencies; SR Task Force; SR Member States) to stimulate investment and reduce poverty along the Silk Road, as well as safeguard its cultural and environmental resources. It is worth mentioning that 35 Member States participating in the UNWTO Silk Road Programme include: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, China, Croatia, DPR Korea, Rep. Korea, Egypt, Georgia, Greece, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Montenegro, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey (Çalışkan et al., 2019), Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan (UNWTO, 2022). It is noteworthy that positive results of the UNWTO Silk Road Programme (2010/2017) have been classified into 4 categories: 1) 34 countries participated in the program; 2) strong public-private partnerships were established; 3) the awareness of Silk Road as a travel brand increased; 4) tourism diversification, joint research, joint capacity building, tourism intelligence, etc. accrued (UNWTO, 2018).

Furthermore, TripAdvisor, Wikivoyage, Wikitravel, etc. as the most famous travel search engine pay particular attention to Silk Road. According to the TripAdvisor customer server in Febru-

ary 2017, the ten top countries that travelers associated with Silk Road were Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey (Çalışkan et al., 2019), China, Indonesia, Egypt, Croatia, Japan and Russia (UNWTO Silk Road Programme, 2017).

Travel trends for the Silk Road in 2017 illustrated that 61% explored ancient cities; 58% visited UNESCO World Heritage Sites on the route; 44% were interested in trying local gastronomy; 39% attended local festivals and events and 39% visited art galleries and museums (UNWTO Silk Road Programme, 2017).

Concerning Silk Road tourism, some research has been carried out, especially in countries that are located on it, as follows:

Grabowski and Geng (2000) investigated the satisfaction of European tourists regarding the service quality of Silk Road tours beginning at the city of Xi'an and ending at the city of Urumqi (China) at the same time 20 tour guides were asked how satisfied they thought their clients were; the results illustrated the need for more differentiated consumer research so that products can be tailored to specific segments. The results also indicated that tour guides' training should be improved to include elements of service quality assurance and customer orientation. Moreover, Werner (2003) argued that Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan face challenges in promoting tourism on the Silk Road such as procedures for obtaining a tourist visa, tax policies that affect tourists and tour operators, the need for tourism promotion, and the licensing of tour operators. Shadpour (2008) introduced the potentials of Semnan Province, Iran, such as Ahovan caravanserai, Safavid caravanserai of Lasjerd; Qasr-e Bahram Caravanserai; Deh-Namak Caravanserai; Miandasht Caravanserai and Mayamey Caravanserai for promoting Silk Road tourism. In addition, Falah Tabar (2008) revealed that the revival and restoration of the Silk Road in Semnan Province can be a strategy for attracting tourists. Bahrami (2016) also investigated the attitude of domestic tourists towards Silk Road tourism development

in the case study of the provinces of Semnan and Shahrood (Iran) using a quantitative method. The results illustrated that domestic tourists are interested in promoting Silk Road tourism. The tourists also believed that the prosperity of tourism in this region can be attributed to economic development, employment, and income generation. In addition, Nastaran and Rezaei Shahabi (2009) illustrated that East Azerbaijan (Iran) has many tourist areas and its position on the route between the European countries and the Silk Road as well as its neighbouring independent countries have created a high potential for improving tourism there.

Suocheng et al. (2015) argued that to develop the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), cities located on the belt should create a flexible visa system for foreign tourists and strive to build a Silk Road international tourism union to improve regional cooperation mechanisms.

Moreover, Parvinder (2016) identified the benefits of tourism development on the Silk Road of India as follows: flourishing tourism across borders – the north-eastern and the eastern states of India could connect with the Chinese and Tibetan regions to promote cultural tourism and border tourism; 2) developing a sourcing point – Silk Road tourism will become a sourcing point for less developed destinations, especially for remote areas via the involvement of the communities; 3) third market accessibility – collaborations and partnerships in Silk Road tourism development may help India access other markets like China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan by extending an international/national tourism network along it. Ngwetjana and SIFOLO (2023) also believe that local involvement is a pillar of sustainable tourism.

Shehzad et al., (2019) argued that ICT plays a vital role in the development of the Silk Road in China. Furthermore, Çalışkan et al., (2019) noted that Silk Road tourism through ancient international trade re-creation provided an opportunity for tourism development.

Mamirkulova et al., (2020) in a case study of

Kazakhstan illustrated that both direct and indirect effects of the New Silk Road Initiative on tourism infrastructure revealed significant and positive influence on residents' quality of life, and introduced this niche tourism as a strategy for sustainable tourism development.

Raimkulov et al., (2021) investigated the American tourists' experiences who visited Silk Road tourism in Uzbekistan through quantitative research. The results indicated that the tourists are satisfied with cultural attractiveness, natural attractiveness, the local people and superstructure, infrastructure, and price attractiveness in Silk Road tourism of Uzbekistan.

Winter (2021) believed that the Silk Road heritage and tourism industry has expanded far beyond the remote regions of Central Asia and created an opportunity for academic research, and international policy for peace, harmony, trust, and dialogue.

It is noteworthy that countries located on the Silk Road attempt to promote tourism in this area through initiatives, for example Uzbekistan organized a Silk Road literary festival, the 27th Tashkent International Tourism Fair "Tourism on the Silk Road and fashion show" (TITF, 2022). A systematic literature review method (Petticrew and Roberts, 2008) was used to recognize the operational solutions for promoting Silk Road tourism (Table 1). The results indicated that the majority of the recent studies have emphasised on the field of introduction of locations, heritage sites and cities located on the ancient Silk Road (Mamirkulova et al., 2020; Nastaran and Rezaei Shahabi, 2009; Tabar, 2008) and the benefits of tourism development on the Silk Road (Winter, 2021; Mamirkulova et al., 2020, Parvinder, 2016) and tourist demands and satisfaction in this regard (Raimkulov et al., 2021; Bahrami, 2016; Grabowski and Geng, 2000; UNWTO Silk Road Programme, 2017) and there is a limited academic works in the field of the investigation of the strategic management in tourism for Silk Road.

It is worth mentioning that, we use David

(2007) strategic typology for classification of strategies in this research. According to David (2007) classification the strategies categorized into 12 actions: joint venture, forward integration, backward integration, horizontal integration, market penetration, market development, product development, related diversification, unrelated diversification, retrenchment, divestiture and liquidation.

A systematic literature review method illustrated that the majority of the researches (The Silk Road Action Plan, 2016/2017; Çalışkan et al., 2019; UNWTO, 2018; Parvinder, 2016) emphasis on the joint venture strategy (collaboration) for promoting Silk Road Tourism. Furthermore, some researchers believe that market penetration strategy (Shehzad et al., 2019; Parvinder, 2016) plays a vital role in Silk Road Tourism development. In addition, some researches (TITF, 2022; Grabowski and Geng, 2000) highlighted concentric diversification/related diversification strategy for Silk Road tourism. Product development is another strategy which Suocheng et al., 2015 indicated in their researches for promoting Silk Road tourism (Figure 1 and Table 1). This paper raises the issue of whether there are more strategies for promoting Silk Road tourism?

This study is an initial attempt to investigate this issue in the case study of Iran. Silk Road Tourism is a current consideration in Iran. Moreover, up to this time, no significant work has been undertaken in the field of strategic management and Silk Road tourism. Besides, none of the above-mentioned approaches takes into consideration the identification of strategic management for Silk Road tourism and the results of this study not only can expand the literature reviews and fill this gap but also can diversify tourism in Iran. Furthermore, Silk Road Tourism can be a sustainable strategy for the preservation of the tangible and intangible heritage of the Silk Road in Iran.

Table 1 | A systematic literature review of the operational solutions for promoting Silk Road tourism. (Open codes)

Operational solutions for promoting Silk Road tourism (Identified codes)	Researchers
Collaboration between stakeholders	The Silk Road Action Plan, 2016/2017; Çalışkan et al., 2019; UNWTO, 2018; Parvinder, 2016
Training tour guides	Grabowski and Geng (2000)
Facilitating procedures for obtaining a tourist visa for tourists who are interested in silk road heritage visiting	Werner (2003); Suocheng et al. (2015)
Policies making for the tax affect tourists and tour operators in Silk Road tourism	Werner (2003)
Local Involvement	Parvinder (2016)
Organizing festivals such as Silk Road literary festivals, fairs, events, conferences, etc.	TITF(2022)
Using ICT	Shehzad et al., (2019)

Source: Smart Community Ecosystem

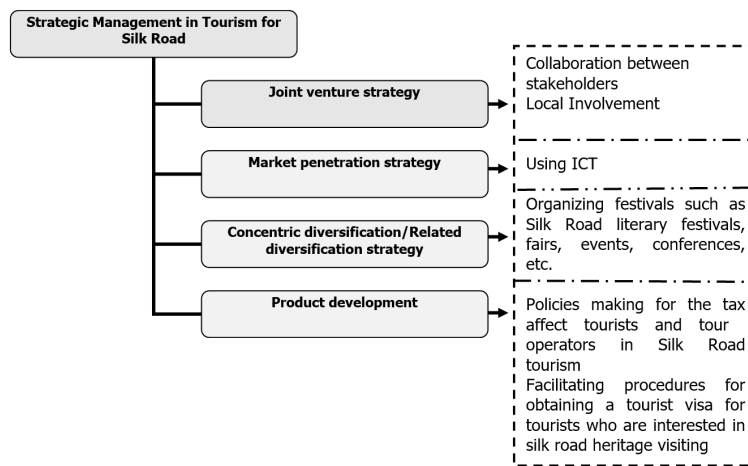


Figure 1 | Strategies for promoting Silk Road tourism (obtained from literature review studies)
Source: Own construction

3. Case Study (Silk Road Heritage in Iran)

The Silk Road connected such powerful ancient empires as Rome, Parthia, Kushan, and China. International trade was crucial for Sassanid Persians, therefore, the Silk Road in Iran underwent a great boom in Sasanian Empire (224–651). Based on the eastern-western axis, arrived in Iran in Khorasan and included the cities of Tous, Neyshabur, Sabzevar, Shahrud, Damghan, Semnan to the ancient Rey, and from Rey to Qazvin. From Qazvin the Silk Road divided into two branches: 1) from Qazvin, one way to the northwest was towards Sarab, Tabriz, Marand, and then Khoy, and the other way; 2) westward towards Hamedan, Kermanshah, leaving the country (Figure 1). This is

the main way that has been confirmed based on important historical sources and global references such as UNESCO. Furthermore, other sub-routes that connect Iran with the world through the Persian Gulf are very numerous, the most important of which is the way that started from ancient Rey to Isfahan, Shiraz, and Bushehr, and then left the country via the sea route (Seifi, 2016).

It is noteworthy that five focal points located on the main Silk Road in Iran, confirmed by UNESCO are Neyshabur, Tehran (Rey), Hamadan, Qazvin, and Tabriz. All of these cities were the capital of Iran in different periods.

In addition, Bistotun, Sheikh Safi al-din Khānegāh and Shrine Ensemble in Ardabil, Takht-e Soleyman, The Persian Garden, Persian Qa-

nat, Tabriz Historic Bazaar Complex are UNESCO World Heritage sites located on or near the Silk Road in Iran.

Moreover, the tourists who visit the main Silk Road in Iran can enjoy UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage of Iran such as Naghali; Iranian Performative Story-telling, Bakhshi Music of Khorasan, and the National program to safeguard the traditional art of calligraphy in Iran.

It is worth mentioning that, there is some unique agricultural landscape near the Iran Silk Road which inscribed in Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) such as the Qanat-based Saffron Farming System in Gonabad and Grape Production System in Jowzan Valley, Iran. It can be said that this potential can attract tourists who are interested in agritourism to Iran Silk Road (GIAHS, 2022).

The Silk Road in Iran is involved in literature. Tabriz, Tehran, Tos, and Neyshabur are literary destinations in Iran. Known travellers and travelo-

gues such as Marco Polo, Nasir Khusraw (Persian poet, philosopher, Isma'ili scholar, traveller, and one of the greatest writers in Persian literature), and Saadi Shirazi have highlighted the Iranian Silk Road.

The Silk Road in Iran is also a dark tourism destination because of the Mongol invasion of Persia in 1219. Neyshabur, Rey, etc. are examples of dark tourist cities on the Silk Road of Iran.

Lastly, we believe that observation, literature review, and history allow us to conclude that the Silk Road in Iran can be an amazing destination for tourists who are interested in cultural tourism, tourism and history, agritourism, literary tourism, music tourism, and dark tourism.

Last but not the least reason demonstrated that Iran has great potential for promoting Silk Road tourism is that sericulture and the traditional production of silk for weaving are inscribed as intangible cultural heritage of Iran in UNESCO (UNESCO, 2022).



Figure 2 | The main Silk Road in Iran, confirmed by UNESCO, and the geographical location of the case study
Source: Own construction

4. Methods

As mentioned before, this research was conducted in the case study of the Silk Road in Iran.

In this regard, this paper aims to identify strategic management and operational solutions for promoting Silk Road tourism in Iran. Qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004; Forman and Damschroder, 2007) was used, and the data were gathered through the snowball sampling method. Semi-structured interview forms, text and academic articles were data collection tools for this research.

CVR formula and Lawshe table (Wilson et al., 2012) were used to determine the content validity of the interview form. In the CVR formula, N_e is the number of experts indicating "essential" and N is the total number of elites.

$$CVR = (N_e - N/2)/(N/2) \text{ formula (1)}$$

Content validity ratio (1) demonstrated an excellent validity of the interview form.

Between September 2022 and November 2022, interviews were conducted with experts in the tourism, marketing, entrepreneurship, and heritage fields to explore their ideas descriptively. We used face-to-face interviews and online interview techniques. Open and axial coding was used to analyse the data. After each interview, the data were coded and the data reached saturation point in interview number 29 and no additional new code is identified. Then, the qualitative content analysis searches concepts, terms, and relationships between these concepts to reveal hidden patterns in the interviews (Momeni Rad, 2013), and the axial coding is done. It is noteworthy that the axial coding was done based on the strategies defined in the book by David (2007). David (2007) classification the strategies categorized into 12 actions such as joint venture, forward integration, backward integration, horizontal integration, market penetration, market development, product development, related diversification, unrelated diversification, re-

trenchment, divestiture and liquidation.

Lastly, a simple percent agreement was applied by two coders to determine reliability, and they reached an agreement on an average of 90%.

5. Results

As mentioned above, a total of 29 interview forms were coded for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated to ascertain the characteristics of the sample. Among the survey participants, 34.5% (10) were female, and 65.5% (19) were male. The majority of respondents were between 35 and 55 years of age (65% (19 persons)); 14% (4 persons) were more than 55 years and 21% (6 persons) were lower than 35 years of age.

Among the interviewees, ten persons were experts in the field of tourism, four in the field of marketing, five in entrepreneurship, and ten in the area of heritage and culture.

The results of open and axial coding proposed five strategies for promoting Silk Road tourism in Iran such as product development, conglomerate diversification, concentric diversification, joint venture, and market penetration (Table 2). Product development is the first strategy recommended by experts. Product development seeks to increase sales by improving present products or services or developing new ones. This strategy is categorised into seven operational solutions as follows: restoration and changing caravanserai into hotels and resettlements, development of passport services, communication and visa services for the Silk Road tourism of Iran, creating a Silk Road secretariat and executive human resources, organizing seminars, meetings and conferences regarding Silk Road heritage, organizing educational workshops and programs for the empowerment of local communities of Silk Road area, organizing workshops for training tour guides for the Silk Road and or-

ganizing events and start-ups to design Silk Road tourism related to businesses and SMEs.

Moreover, conglomerate diversification which emphasises adding new, unrelated products or services is suggested as the second strategy. Offering a package to the visitors of the Silk Road of Iran trip on the Silk Road by the Trans-Iranian Railway which is inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, creating health & wellness houses in caravanserais and offering Iranian traditional medicine and herbal medicine to tourists, holding the literary festival on the Silk Road and organizing bike tours and a marathon race on the Silk Road and are identified as operational solutions for conglomerate diversification strategy.

Furthermore, for concentric diversification strategy which has an emphasis on adding new but related products or services ten operational solutions were recognised such as: organizing cultural events and festivals with a Silk Road theme, organizing the traditional art festivals of Iran Silk Road, organizing photo gallery exhibition of Silk Road attractions, offering experience tour of workhouses in Isfahan, Kashan and Yazd which silk textiles, termeh, brocade, etc. are weaving traditionally to silk road travellers, reviving historical transportation on the Silk Road such as carriages, horse riding, camel riding, etc., holding Silk Road travelogues' festival (Marco Polo, Nasir Khusraw and Saadi Shirazi etc.), organizing historical tours regarding of Iran and Byzantine Empire wars on changing the route of trade roads in the Sassanid Empire (224 to 651 AD), organizing architectural tours for introducing the architectural style of historical buildings on the Silk Road, organizing dark tours on Iran Silk Road with emphasis on Mongol invasion of Persia because of the murder of 450 Mongolian merchants in the city of Otrar and visiting silkworm breeding farms in Iran.

The joint venture strategy is indicated as the fifth strategy for promoting tourism on the Silk Road of Iran. Setting up cooperation agreements on tourism and trade with countries located on

the Silk Road, sisterhood agreements between the cities located on the Silk Road (at present there is a sisterhood agreement between Baghdad and Mashhad; Neyshabur and Khoy), establishing cultural houses, forums and NGOs regarding tourism and the Silk Road and Creating a national tourism cluster for cities located on the Silk Road of Iran are operational solutions mentioned for the joint venture strategy.

The last but not the least strategy recommended by elites is market penetration. Market penetration is categorised into six sub-themes such as making and managing a brand for the Silk Road tourism of Iran promoting the export and supply of carpets and handicrafts, local products, tour packages, etc., participating in international tourism fairs and exhibitions to introduce Silk Road attractions through the leaflet, photo, film, etc., inviting influencers to cities located on Silk Road of Iran, content production techniques in Silk Road tourism in Iran to stimulate visiting, inviting directors and filmmakers to select the Silk Road of Iran as a film location and introducing the Silk Road of Iran in social media. MAXQDA was used to visualize a tree map of strategies (Figure 3).

Table 3 | Strategies for promoting tourism on the Silk Road of Iran

Strategy	Operational solutions	Interview	Source
Product development	Restoration and changing caravanserai into hotels and resettlements	✓	
	Development of passport services, communication, and visa services for the Silk Road tourism of Iran	✓	
	Creating a Silk Road secretariat and executive human resources	✓	
	Organizing seminars, meetings, and conferences regarding Silk Road heritage	✓	
	Organizing educational workshops and programs for the empowerment of local communities of the Silk Road area	✓	
	Organizing workshops for training tour guides for the Silk Road	✓	
Conglomerate diversification or/ Unrelated Diversification	Organizing events and start-ups to design Silk Road tourism related to businesses and SMEs	✓	Grabowski and Geng (2000)
	Offering a package to the visitors of the Silk Road of Iran to trip on the Silk Road by the Trans-Iranian Railway which inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site	✓	
	Creating health & wellness houses in caravanserai and offering Iranian traditional medicine and herbal medicine to tourists	✓	
	Holding a literary festival on the Silk Road	✓	(TIIF, 2022)
	Organizing bike tours and a marathon race on the Silk Road	✓	
	Organizing cultural events and festivals with a Silk Road theme	✓	
	Organizing the traditional art festivals of Iran Silk Road	✓	
	Organizing photo gallery exhibition of Silk Road attractions	✓	
	Offering experience tour of workhouses in Isfahan, Kashan, and Yazd where silk textiles, termeh, brocade, etc. are weaved traditionally to silk road travelers.	✓	Finastlian et al., 2019
	Reviving historical transportation on the Silk Road such as carriages, horse riding, camel riding, etc.	✓	
Concentric diversification or/ Related Diversification	Holding Silk Road travelogues festival (Marco Polo, Nasir Khusraw and Saadi Shirazi, etc.)	✓	
	Organizing historical tours regarding of Iran and Byzantine Empire wars on changing the route of trade roads in the Sassanid Empire (224 to 651 AD)	✓	Eimanpor and Kohsari (2012)
	Organizing architectural tours for introducing the architectural style of historical buildings on the Silk Road	✓	
	Organizing dark tours on Iran's Silk Road with emphasis on the Mongol invasion of Persia because of the murder of 450 Mongolian merchants in the city of Otrar	✓	
	Visiting silkworm breeding farms in Iran	✓	
	Setting up cooperation agreements on tourism and trade with countries located on the Silk Road	✓	
	Sisterhood agreement between the cities located on Silk Road (at present there are sisterhood agreements between Baghdad and Mashhad; Neyshabur and Khoy)	✓	
	Establishing cultural houses, forums, and NGOs regarding tourism and the Silk Road	✓	
	Creating a national tourism cluster for cities located on the Silk Road of Iran	✓	
	Local Involvement	✓	Parvinder (2016)
Market Penetration	Making and managing a brand for the Silk Road tourism of Iran to promoting the export and supply of carpets and handicrafts, local products, tour packages, etc.	✓	
	Participating in international tourism fairs and exhibitions to introduce Silk Road attractions through leaflets, photos, films, brochures, etc.	✓	
	Inviting influencers to cities located on the Silk Road of Iran	✓	
	Content production techniques in Silk Road tourism in Iran to Stimulate visiting	✓	
	Inviting directors and filmmakers to select the Silk Road of Iran as a film location	✓	
Introducing the Silk Road of Iran in social media	✓		

Source: Obtained from qualitative analysis, strategic typology adapted from David's (2007) classification

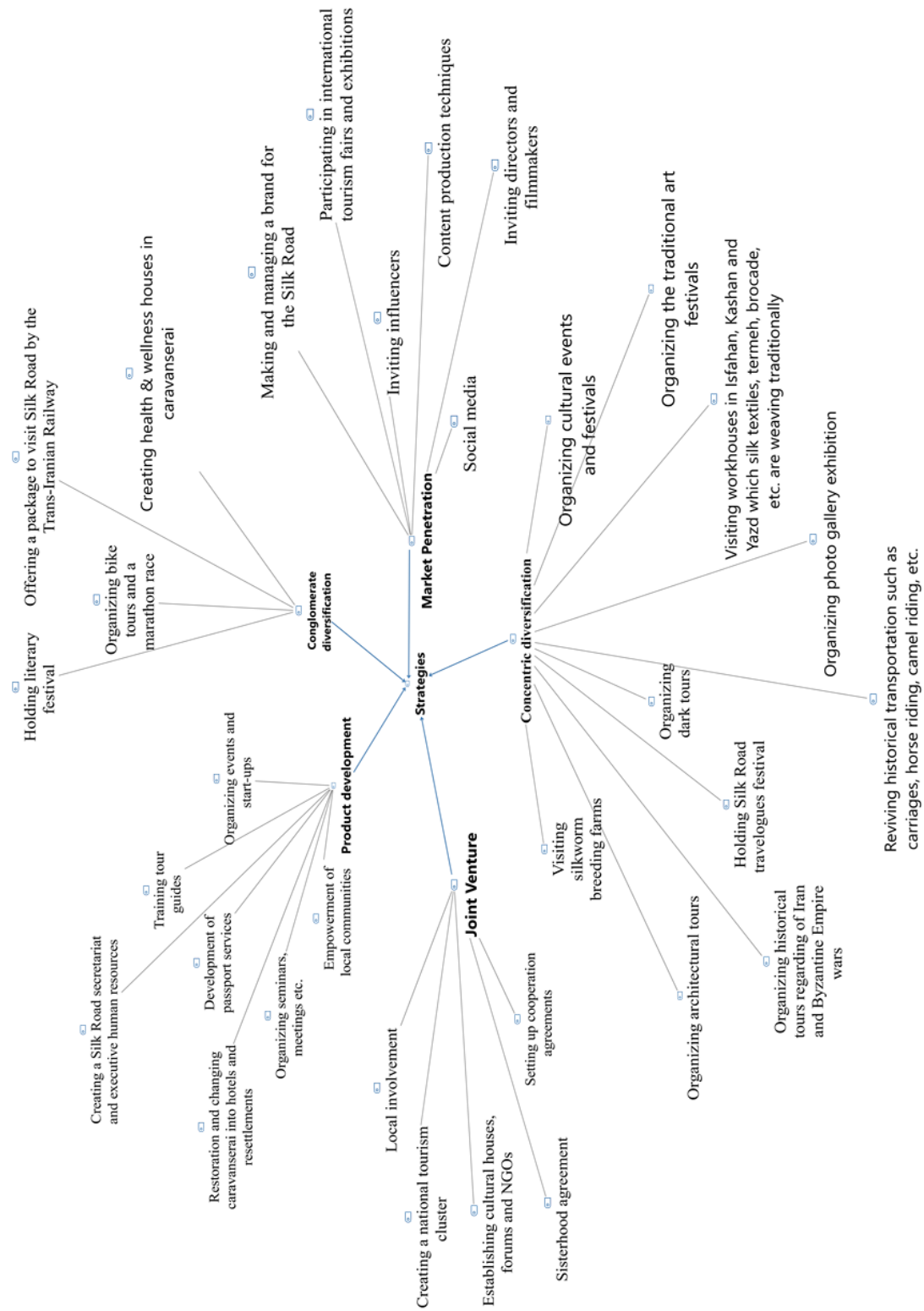


Figure 3 | MAXQDA's code map of suitable strategies and operational solutions for promoting tourism in the Silk Road of Iran

6. Conclusion

The Silk Road is a world heritage that remains from past trade and business activities and in some countries has turned into a forgotten heritage. It is noteworthy that the Silk Road transferred culture, civilization, and new goods and products from the Eastern to the Western regions. Therefore, it can be said that this road includes a huge tangible and intangible heritage that needs to preserve and revive. Some authors (Lane and Lewcock, 1996, Werner, 2003; Bahrami, 2016; Parvinder, 2016) also believed that tourism can be a strategy for local economic prosperity and revival of heritage on the Silk Road.

In recent decades, UNWTO has paid particular attention to this heritage and the countries located on it. This attention motivated the authors to begin research in Iran as a part of the World Silk Road.

Silk was the main product people traded through this ancient route and Iran was a country that produce and trade the Silk. Iranian art, culture, and literature were engaged with the Silk.

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies and operational solutions for Silk Road tourism in Iran. Content analysis was used in this regard. The results of the qualitative method through MAXQDA determined five strategies (product development, conglomerate diversification, concentric diversification, joint venture, and market penetration) for promoting tourism on the Silk Road of Iran. Our results also suggested conglomerate diversification or/ unrelated diversification strategy for promoting Silk Road tourism, which none of the literature review refers to that strategy. In addition, the results recommended offering a package to the visitors of the Silk Road of Iran to trip on the Silk Road by the Trans-Iranian Railway which inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site; creating health & wellness houses in caravanserai and offering Iranian traditional medicine and herbal medicine to tourists; holding a

literary festival on the Silk Road and organizing bike tours and a marathon race on the Silk Road as operational solutions for conglomerate diversification strategy.

The data indicated that the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism of Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, and local authorities should pay particular attention to restoration and changing caravanserai into hotels and resettlements, development of passport services, communication and visa services for the Silk Road tourism of Iran, creating a Silk Road secretariat and executive human resources, organizing seminars, meetings and conferences regarding Silk Road heritage, organizing educational workshops and programs for the empowerment of local communities of the Silk Road area, organizing workshops for training tour guides for the Silk Road and organizing events and start-ups to design Silk Road tourism related to businesses and SMEs.

In addition, Werner (2003) highlighted policies making for the tax that affect tourists and tour operators in Silk Road tourism, and the results of this research confirmed it and the development of passport services, communication, and visa services for the Silk Road tourism of Iran mentioned as a product development strategy.

The clearest result of the investigation is that joint venture can be a strategy for promoting Silk Road tourism in Iran, and our results support the findings of the Silk Road Action Plan (2016/2017), Parvinder (2016), Çalışkan et al. (2019) and UNWTO (2018).

Furthermore, organizing workshops for training tour guides for the Silk Road addressed as a product development strategy for promoting Silk Road tourism in Iran and our result reinforced the findings of Grabowski and Geng (2000).

We believe that the results of the content analysis allow us to conclude that diversification, especially conglomerate diversification and concentric diversification, can be axial strategies for promoting Silk Road tourism in Iran and tour opera-

tors and tourism planners should pay attention to them.

Moreover, market penetration is suggested as the key strategy to attract domestic and international tourists to the Silk Road of Iran.

It is noteworthy that feasibility, potential challenges, and implementation mechanisms of the strategies mentioned in the present study should be considered in the future research. Lastly, for future research on this work, we also provide the following suggestion:

- An investigation of visitors' tendencies and motivations towards visiting the Silk Road in Iran.
- Identifying the key drivers for the prosperity of Silk Road tourism in Iran

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