



## A model of customer-based brand equity and its application to multiple destinations

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### ABSTRACT

Lack of research regarding destination brand measurement indicates that conceptualizing how tourists evaluate a destination brand is complex. This study examined empirical information to develop a destination brand model by employing customer-based brand equity models through a scale purification process, ensuring its reliability and validity. The proposed model and the alternative model were tested with an online survey sample of Las Vegas and Atlantic City visitors. The results provide support for the concept of customer-based brand equity and corroborate its application to the destination context. However, multi-sample invariance tests implied that destination-specific items should be considered when developing a destination brand model.

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### 1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that a brand is a powerful means of differentiation, and that differentiation is a significant competitive marketing strategy (Kapferer, 1997; Keller, 2003; Kotler, 1988; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007). The extension of the brand concept from products to service industries such as tourism offers implications for resort and travel destination management (Buhalis, 2000; d'Hautserre, 2001; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998; Williams, Gill, & Chura, 2004; Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). Destination branding is considered a vital aspect of current destination management practice, as broadening tourist opportunities and travel locations have resulted in the increased substitutability and lack of differentiation amongst some destinations (Pike, 2005).

The complex characteristics of a destination present a challenge to branding (Cai, 2002; Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Gnoth, 2002; Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000). There have been few systematic investigations of brands within tourism destinations (Hankinson,

2005; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). In some cases, destination brand research has followed a marketing approach from a retail perspective; however, these were at the conceptual level of exploration (Cai, 2002; Prebensen, 2007; Woodside et al., 2007).

In terms of destination brand management, various means to communicate the brand message effectively have been suggested (Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, & Ali, 2003; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002; Ooi, 2004). However, specific effects on destination brand management, such as the assessment of brand impact, have not been investigated. Measuring the effectiveness of brands is a crucial aspect of successful long-term destination management (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). It has been suggested that the effectiveness of destination brands can be measured from a customer perspective. Furthermore, empirical research that focuses on experienced travelers and their perception of the destination brand should be employed to measure the effects of brands on the customer (Blain et al., 2005; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998).

In spite of the growing importance of destination brands, most conceptual and empirical research has focused on destination images (Cai, 2002; Hall, 2002; Hankinson, 2004, 2005; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002; Prebensen, 2007; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Tasci et al., 2007). This approach, based on image-level conceptualization, implies that the measurement of the effectiveness of destination brands relies solely on images of the destination. It has been

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suggested that, despite the pivotal role of visual image in brand evaluations, other brand assessment dimensions should be considered (Hankinson, 2004; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Most recently, by applying customer-based brand equity to tourist destinations, Konecnik and Gartner (2007) proposed and tested four dimensions of a destination's brand (i.e., awareness, image, quality, and loyalty) and found a positive relationship among the variables. Their conclusion was that destination image is central to brand evaluation and brand equity, but that the other dimensions are also necessary to truly measure customer-based brand equity.

The purpose of this study was to apply and extend the concept of customer-based brand equity to destination brand measurement in an integrated model. This study has the following objectives: to develop a valid and reliable model of consumer-based destination brands, to empirically assess the dimensions of the destination brand construct, to test the relationship among dimensions in a destination brand construct, and to validate the model construct. The process used to establish the model was based on a multi-dimensional perspective of destination brands.

The lack of research regarding destination brand measurement may be an indication of the complexity involved in understanding how tourists evaluate a destination brand. Hence, a study measuring customer-based destination brands in an integrated construct is important for several reasons. First, the exploratory work will further define the nature of a destination's brand, which is the first step in developing a theory of the brand construct. Setting boundaries for the destination brand construct is beneficial to avoid redundancy with other constructs. Second, this study will suggest a different approach to measure destination brands and provide a valid and reliable measurement model. In addition, because there has been no accepted measurement method, it is expected that the findings will spur additional research.

## 2. Destination brand

### 2.1. Conceptualization of a brand for tourist destinations

Much of the current marketing literature indicates that the principles of product brands do not apply directly to services (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003; Knowles, 2001). Konecnik and Gartner (2007) questioned whether the product brand concept can be transferred to tourist destinations. Ooi (2004) also noted that similarities in products and services brands are accentuated, but that differences between them are often ignored by researchers. Hence, studies of destinations suggest that the universality of a brand has to be considered in terms of tourism characteristics and destination attributes (Buhalis, 2000; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; McIntyre, 1993; Ringer, 1998; Tasci et al., 2007).

Definitions of tourism destination brands (Blain et al., 2005; Cai, 2002; Gyimothy, n.d.; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003) draw their inspiration from marketing, as the concept may be extended to both tangible and intangible elements (Aaker, 1991; Clifton, 2003; Murphy, 1998; Ward, Light, & Goldstein, 1999). In other words, tourists perceive a destination as a product. They evaluate the attributes of the destination through both cognitive and affective processes (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Research has emphasized a unique combination of functional, symbolic, and experiential elements of a brand to create a unique destination identity (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Laws, 1995; Williams et al., 2004). Also, the role of a destination brand in the customer's destination decision-making process has been highlighted (Jago et al., 2003; Morgan et al., 2002; Ooi, 2004).

Academic interest in destination brands has emerged only recently (Blain et al., 2005; Gnoth, 1998; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Williams et al., 2004). There is limited availability of destination brand literature regarding the elements that comprise a brand, as well as recommended measurement methods (Kaplanidou & Vogt,

2003; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998), and components of destination brands (Blain et al., 2005; Deslandes, 2003; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003; Pike, 2004). Most research has focused on case studies at the conceptual or exploratory level (Cai, 2002; d'Hauteserre, 2001; Ooi, 2004; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Williams et al., 2004).

The examination of a destination's brand is challenging, as the literature lacks a commonly accepted framework (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Interestingly, in the field of tourism, destination image has been employed to understand destination brands (Cai, 2002; Edwards, Fernandes, Fox, & Vaughan, 2000; Hall, Robertson, & Shaw, 2001; Hankinson, 2004, 2005; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002; Prebensen, 2007; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Tasci et al., 2007). Ooi (2004) indicated that most destination brand studies concentrate on how brand images and messages are formulated and presented. In marketing, a brand is also generally recognized as an extension of its image (Keller, 2003).

However, Hem and Iversen (2004) noted that "image formation is not branding, albeit the former constitutes the core of the latter. Image building is one step closer, but there still remains a critical missing link: the brand identity. To advance destination image studies to the level of branding, the link needs to be established" (p. 86). Kaplanidou and Vogt (2003) also indicated that a brand can further build upon other destination components after establishing an image that differentiates a destination from its competitors. They suggested that destination brands could be envisioned by identifying other dimensions in the construct.

### 2.2. Customer-based brand equity

The emergence of brand equity has raised the importance of marketing strategies and provided focus for managers and researchers (Keller, 2003). Brand equity is a core concept concerning brand management and it is viewed from different perspectives (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003; Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995; Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998; Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Simon & Sullivan, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). There is considerable debate regarding the definition of brand equity and its measurement (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). However, brand equity is accepted as the overall utility that customers place in a brand compared to its competitors (de Chernatony & McDonald, 2003; Vazquez, Belen del Rio, & Iglesias, 2002).

Keller (2003) described brand equity as "a multidimensional concept and complex enough that many different types of measures are required. Multiple measures increase the diagnostic power of marketing research" (p. 477). He noted that, from a marketing perspective, brand equity is referred to as consumer-based brand equity. Recently, the concept of brand equity has been employed to measure how consumers assess a brand overall (Ford, 2005). In particular, the measurement of customer-based brand equity is considered an important but challenging aspect of branding (Pappu et al., 2005). Although there have been no consistent measurement techniques, several researchers have explored brand equity measurement based on customers' perspectives (Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Washburn & Plank, 2002; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000).

Recent studies have highlighted the need to refine and measure the consumer-based brand equity construct (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). De Chernatony and McDonald (2003) indicated that an instrument to measure brand equity from a customer perspective has been lacking despite the increasing importance of the brand equity concept. Similarly, there is a need for a destination brand measure (Blain et al., 2005; Deslandes, 2003; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003; Ooi, 2004; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998).

The concept of customer-based brand equity and its measurement have emerged in tourism and hospitality settings (Kim & Kim, 2005; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Lee & Back, 2008; Prasad & Dev, 2000). Destinations are far more multi-dimensional than consumer goods and other types of services (Pike, 2005). Low and Lamb

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