

Factors Affecting Brand Equity Of Tourism Destination Image In Zhejiang

Province: Consumer Trust As A Moderator

Jin Fengyuan¹, Albattat Ahmad², Azman Norhidayah³

^{1,2}Graduate School of Management, Post Graduate Centre, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, 40100, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

³Faculty of business management and professional studies Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, 40100, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

This study explores the intricate interplay of brand equity in relation to Zhejiang's status as a tourism destination. The technique used takes into account several criteria, including the influence of numerous elements such as the perception of cuisine, the perception of the location, the quality of lodging services, the convenience of transportation, the overall brand experience, the trust of tourists, and the value of the brand. The research seeks to get a comprehensive knowledge of the links between these aspects and their combined influence on brand equity via investigation. this research offers a comprehensive exploration of brand equity in the context of Zhejiang as a tourist destination. It employs a robust methodology, considers multiple influential factors, and investigates moderating and mediating variables. The findings provide practical guidance for tourism stakeholders, ultimately contributing to the advancement of tourism management and destination branding practices.

Keywords: Brand experience, Tourist trust, Brand equity

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Introduction

The tourism sector is a vibrant and rapidly expanding industry that has evolved to become an integral part of the global economy. Advances in technology and communication have fueled this growth, facilitating the movement of an ever-increasing number of travelers to a wide array of destinations. Today, tourism is no longer a luxury afforded by the few but a widespread phenomenon, deeply embedded in the fabric of societies worldwide. This industry's surge has had profound effects on the economic fabric of

regions, turning tourism into a critical engine for socio-economic development and a vital income source for millions (UNWTO, 2019).

The competitiveness of the tourism industry is anchored in the experiences it offers, with destinations vying to create distinctive and memorable experiences that set them apart (Lee, Seong & Qu, 2020). These experiences are not just about sightseeing or leisure activities but encompass the holistic impression a place leaves on its visitors, which in turn, shapes its brand equity. Brand equity, a

key concept in marketing, represents the value a product or service gains from its brand perception, influenced by consumer awareness and associations (Zinkhan & Smith, 1992). In the field of tourism, this idea refers to the attractiveness and appeal of a location. Understanding the elements that influence the brand value of a destination is essential for both academic research and industrial application.

It is essential to address this deficiency for stakeholders such as politicians, marketers, and local businesses, since they rely on these insights to develop policies that effectively attract and please visitors. Insufficient comprehension may result in poor marketing endeavors, improper distribution of resources, and finally, an incapacity to fully exploit the tourist industry's potential in Zhejiang. It also poses risks of diminished tourist satisfaction, which is vital for repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth promotion.

In light of this, the present study aims to explore several research objectives that align with the gaps identified in existing literature. By examining the impact of food image on Zhejiang's destination brand equity (RO1), determining the influence of destination image (RO2), analyzing the role of accommodation service quality (RO3), and examining the effect of ease of transport (RO4), this research endeavors to construct a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to brand equity. Furthermore, it seeks to investigate the moderating role of tourist trust (RO5) and the mediating role of brand experience (RO6) within these relationships.

Through this research, the study intends to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of destination branding and contribute to the broader domain of tourism studies. The multifaceted nature of this inquiry not only benefits the local stakeholders in Zhejiang's tourism sector but also adds to the

academic literature, offering a comprehensive model that links key determinants of destination brand equity through the lenses of brand experience and consumer trust. It is with these objectives in mind that the study proceeds, aiming to unravel the intricate fabric that weaves together the elements of destination branding and its implications on the prosperity of Zhejiang province as a prominent tourism destination.

2 Literature review

2.1 Theoretical Background

The burgeoning field of tourism research has yielded numerous theoretical frameworks to unravel the intricate web of factors that shape tourist behaviors and preferences. Among these, Destination Image Theory, Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Model, Food Image Theory, Trust Theory, and Brand Experience Theory stand prominent in understanding and improving the various dimensions of tourist experiences, notably within the context of Zhejiang province's tourism brand equity.

Destination Image Theory, as expounded by Gartner (1993) and Echtner & Ritchie (1993), underscores the influence of perceived destination image on tourist choices and satisfaction. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) expanded on this by differentiating the cognitive and emotive components of destination image, an area further developed by subsequent studies, such as those by Beerli & Martín (2004), Prayag & Ryan (2012), and Chen & Tsai (2007), which linked destination image to value perception, loyalty, and brand equity. Li et al. (2018) further emphasized the digital management of destination image, asserting the weight of online reviews in its formation.

The SERVQUAL Model, pioneered by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), provides a lens for assessing perceived service quality across five

dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. This model has been widely applied in tourism to enhance service delivery, as evidenced by Park & Jeong (2019) in their examination of service quality in hill resorts. In the case of Zhejiang province, employing SERVQUAL could pinpoint gaps in lodging services, thus aiding in elevating the overall tourist experience and brand equity.

The Food Image Theory articulates the dual cognitive and affective dimensions of food image and its impact on destination perception, as noted by Quan & Wang (2004). Kim, Eves, & Scarles (2009) expanded on this by exploring the emotional responses linked to food. Li et al. (2015) demonstrated the substantial influence of food imagery on tourist behavior and destination perception, particularly within Taiwan's night markets. This theory provides a valuable framework for assessing how Zhejiang province's culinary offerings contribute to its destination image and brand equity.

In the realm of Trust Theory, Del Chiappa, Andreu, & Gallarza (2018) explicated the pivotal role of trust in reducing perceived risk and enhancing positive tourist behaviors. McAllister (1995) differentiated between cognitive and affective trust, which influence consumer behavior and decision-making. Yoo et al. (2009) and Han et al. (2021) highlighted trust's impact on online booking intentions and the authenticity of local cuisine experiences, respectively. Trust emerges as a critical factor in the tourist experience in Zhejiang province, influencing the relationship between various service dimensions and the destination's brand equity.

Lastly, Brand Experience Theory, as introduced by Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello (2009), provides a multidimensional perspective on consumer-brand interactions, encompassing sensory, emotive,

intellectual, and behavioral aspects. These dimensions collectively shape consumer satisfaction and loyalty, as demonstrated by Zarantonello & Schmitt (2010). This theory underscores the importance of a holistic brand encounter in the tourism sector, impacting tourist satisfaction and future choices.

Synthesizing these theoretical perspectives illuminates the complexity of shaping a positive tourist experience and destination brand equity. For Zhejiang province, integrating these frameworks can guide strategic marketing efforts and service enhancements. Understanding the nuanced influences of destination image, service quality, food perception, trust, and brand experience is paramount for regional stakeholders aiming to fortify Zhejiang's position in the competitive tourism market. As the literature suggests, a synergy between these theoretical constructs and practical application is essential for enhancing tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and ultimately, the sustainable growth of tourism branding.

2.2 Tourist Trust as a Moderator

2.2.1 Tourist Trust and Food Image

Tourist trust plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between food image and brand experience. The concept of food image refers to the mental representations and perceptions that individuals hold about a destination's culinary offerings. A positive food image contributes to an enhanced brand experience, as it aligns with tourists' expectations and desires for memorable gastronomic experiences. However, the strength of this association is amplified when there is a high degree of trust among tourists.

According to Boon and Holmes (1991), trust is a psychological state marked by a positive and

confident expectation of someone else's intentions in situations that include possible hazards. Trust, in the context of tourism, refers to the way travelers perceive the reliability and ethical behavior of a location and its services (Wang & Emurian, 2005). Tourists with a strong degree of trust in a place are more inclined to see its culinary offers positively, leading to an improved brand experience.

This connection may be comprehended via the lens of social exchange theory (SET), which asserts that social relationships are founded on reciprocal exchange and obligation (Emerson, 1976). Within the tourism industry, visitors want to maximize the benefits they get from their trip, such as engaging with brands in a deep and meaningful way, while avoiding the costs and any hazards involved with their travel. The food picture symbolizes a perceived benefit, while trust acts as a tool to mitigate perceived dangers in this transaction.

To summarize, visitor trust has a role in improving the favorable connection between the perception of food quality and the whole brand experience. A strong degree of trust among visitors enhances the probability of a good perception of food, eventually leading to a more pleasant overall brand experience.

2.2.2 Tourist Trust and Destination Image

The relationship between destination image and brand experience is also influenced by tourist trust. Destination image encompasses tourists' beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions about a specific location (Crompton, 1979). A favorable destination image significantly impacts tourists' decision-making processes and their overall experiences in a destination. However, the bond between tourists and the destination is strengthened when there is a high level of trust established.

Rousseau et al. (1998) define trust as the willingness

to be vulnerable due to optimistic beliefs about the intentions or actions of another individual. In tourism, trust influences the connection formed between tourists and a destination, as well as the associated brand. When tourists have confidence in the destination's ability to fulfill its projected image and commitments, they are more likely to have favorable encounters consistent with the destination's brand.

Tourist trust, as a moderating factor, enhances the positive impact of a favorable destination image on brand experience. Visitors who trust a destination are more receptive to the experiences offered by that location, resulting in a more positive perception of the destination image and ultimately boosting the entire brand experience.

2.2.3 Tourist Trust and Service Quality of Accommodation

The quality of accommodation services is a critical factor influencing the relationship between service quality and brand experience. High-quality lodging services significantly shape the overall tourism experience, affecting factors such as visitor satisfaction, trust, and behavioral intentions (Hu et al., 2009). Tourists who trust the consistent excellence of lodging services in a specific location are more likely to have an enhanced overall brand experience.

According to Kim et al. (2018), confidence in the quality of accommodation services has a favorable impact on perceived value, contentment, and emotional connections with the brand experience. Consequently, this might result in positive behavioral intentions, such as spreading positive recommendations and developing strong loyalty towards the brand.

The trust of tourists has a moderating role in the connection between the quality of lodging services and the brand experience. A high degree of trust

enhances the beneficial influence of service quality on the entire brand experience. Tourists who trust the quality of hotel services are more likely to have positive experiences that match the destination's brand image, leading to an improved brand experience.

2.2.4 Tourist Trust and Ease of Transport

The impact of transportation ease on the brand experience inside a tourism site is substantial, and the trust of tourists plays a vital part in influencing this connection. The level of transportation convenience directly impacts tourist pleasure, comfort, and their overall opinion of a place (Wang et al., 2019). Trust in the effectiveness and dependability of the transportation system improves favorable brand experiences, resulting in recurring visits and recommendations via word-of-mouth.

The correlation between the ease of transportation and the perception of a brand is influenced by the degree of trust that tourists have, where a strong level of trust enhances the favorable effect of easy transportation on the perception of the brand. When tourists trust the transportation infrastructure of a location, they are more likely to have enhanced brand experiences characterized by happiness and positive emotions. These positive experiences, in turn, contribute to the development of brand equity and the perception of the destination as valuable and emotionally compelling.

2.3 Brand Experience as a Mediator

2.3.1 Brand Experience and Food Image

Brand experience plays a pivotal mediating role in the relationship between food image and brand equity. A positive food image contributes to an enhanced overall brand experience, aligning with tourists' expectations for memorable gastronomic

experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Consequently, this has a direct influence on the value and perception of the destination brand.

Brand experience, as defined by Brakus et al. (2009), includes the sensory impressions, emotional responses, cognitive processes, and behavioral reactions that are triggered by stimuli related to a brand. Positive interactions with a brand significantly contribute to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and brand equity (Iglesias et al., 2011).

Within the context of food image and brand equity, brand experience acts as a mediator. A favorable food image contributes to an enhanced brand experience, which, in turn, positively impacts brand equity. This suggests that improving the perception of food can be a strategic approach to augment the overall brand experience and, ultimately, destination brand equity.

2.3.2 Brand Experience and Destination Image

Brand experience also serves as a mediator in the relationship between destination image and brand equity. A favorable destination image leads to an enhanced brand experience, as tourists have positive expectations and experiences that align with their perceptions of the destination (Chen & Tsai, 2007). This positive brand experience contributes to brand equity through various dimensions, including brand awareness, favorable brand associations, and customer loyalty (Pike et al., 2010).

Brand experience mediates the relationship between destination image and brand equity, emphasizing the importance of both cultivating a favorable image and facilitating memorable experiences within a destination. Destinations that prioritize creating positive brand experiences alongside a positive image are more likely to enhance their brand equity.

2.3.3 Brand Experience and Service Quality of Accommodation

Brand experience plays a critical mediating role in the relationship between the service quality of accommodation and brand equity. High-quality lodging services contribute to a favorable brand experience, characterized by positive sensory and emotional reactions, cognitive engagement, and positive behaviors (Sthapit & Björk, 2017). This brand experience, in turn, influences brand equity through heightened brand awareness, associations, and loyalty (Hosany et al., 2015).

The mediating function of brand experience underscores the importance of delivering superior services in lodging establishments to generate memorable experiences for tourists, ultimately enhancing destination brand equity.

2.3.4 Brand Experience and Ease of Transport

Transportation convenience within a destination also interacts with brand experience as a mediator. Convenient transportation enhances the overall brand experience by facilitating positive emotions, cognitive engagement, and positive behaviors (Dickinger & Lalicic, 2018). These aspects, in turn, contribute to brand equity through increased brand awareness, favorable brand associations, and customer loyalty (Buhalis, 2000).

2.4 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a visual or written product that explains the proposed relationships between the factors that are to be explored in the study. For this research, the framework would revolve around the independent variables (food image, destination image, service quality of accommodation, and ease of transport), the moderating variable (tourist trust), the mediating variable (brand experience), and the dependent variable (brand equity).

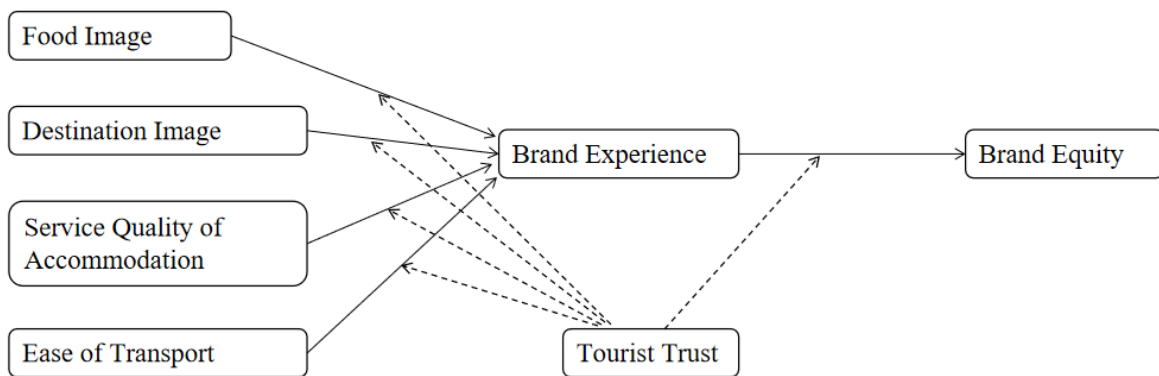


Figure 2.1 Conceptual framework

2.5 Generalization of the main statements

The literature provides a comprehensive understanding of how brand experience acts as a critical mediator between various aspects of the tourist offering and brand equity. The review highlights the importance of creating favorable brand experiences through the enhancement of food image,

destination image, accommodation service quality, and ease of transport. Each factor independently and collectively influences brand equity, with the relationship being nuanced by the level of tourist trust.

Furthermore, the synergistic effect of these variables

through the lens of brand experience suggests a need for integrated marketing strategies that promote not only the tangible aspects of the tourism product but also the emotional and cognitive engagement of tourists.

In essence, brand equity in the tourism sector is a multifaceted construct that demands a strategic approach in which experience sits at the heart of the tourist offering. Future research could empirically test the proposed conceptual framework to validate the relationships and the moderating effect of tourist trust on these relationships. As the tourism market evolves, so too must the understanding of how each interaction a tourist has with the destination contributes to the overall perception of the brand and, ultimately, the destination's success in a global market.

3 Discussion

The research design and sample methodologies described earlier provide a strong basis for performing a meticulous and dependable study on the interaction between visitor trust, brand experience, and destination brand equity within the tourism sector of Zhejiang Province. In this discourse, we will explore the ramifications and importance of these decisions, while also tackling possible obstacles and factors to be taken into account for future investigations.

The selection of a quantitative research design is very appropriate for achieving the study's aims. The study seeks to use statistical analysis to provide empirical data and unbiased insights into the connections among different components. This strategy is in line with the need to comprehensively comprehend the intricate associations between visitor confidence, brand encounter, and destination brand value in a

methodical and data-oriented way. Utilizing SPSS for initial analysis and employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with SmartPLS for more sophisticated analysis is a reliable methodology. SPSS will help in generating descriptive statistics and initial insights, while SEM allows for the examination of complex relationships among multiple variables simultaneously. This choice of methods reflects the sophistication of the research model and ensures a thorough investigation of the proposed hypotheses.

The distinction between the theoretical population and study population is crucial, given the impracticality of studying the entire population of tourists visiting Zhejiang. By focusing on specific subsets of tourists based on their interactions with different aspects of the destination (e.g., food, accommodation, transport), the study can achieve a more targeted and meaningful analysis. Despite the thoughtful research design, there are challenges to be aware of. Achieving a high response rate, especially in an online survey, can be difficult. Researchers must implement strategies to encourage participation, such as offering incentives or ensuring the survey is user-friendly. Additionally, while this study focuses on the province of Zhejiang, there may be regional variations within the province that impact tourists' perceptions. Future research could explore these regional differences for a more granular understanding of destination branding within Zhejiang. In conclusion, the research design, sampling procedures, and data analysis methods chosen for this study are well-considered and aligned with the research objectives. By employing a quantitative approach, the study aims to shed light on the intricate relationships between tourist trust, brand experience, and destination brand equity in Zhejiang's tourism industry. While challenges exist, this research is poised to make valuable contributions to the field of

destination marketing and management, helping destinations like Zhejiang enhance their appeal and competitiveness in the global tourism landscape.

4. Conclusion

This study provides a unique viewpoint in the tourist industry by investigating the complex connections between brand value and variables such as cuisine perception, location perception, quality of lodging services, and transportation convenience. This study examines how tourist trust influences brand equity, with a focus on the mediating function of brand experience. By doing so, it enhances our knowledge of the factors that shape and maintain brand equity. This scholarly contribution enhances the existing body of knowledge in the field of tourist studies and establishes a solid groundwork for future study and the development of theories. The study's results have practical ramifications for stakeholders in the tourist sector, such as tourism agencies and local businesses. This study aims to uncover the primary independent factors that impact brand equity. The findings will then be used to design strategies that may enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of destinations such as Zhejiang. These insights may guide choices about infrastructure expansion, enhancing service quality, devising marketing strategies, and other areas. Tourism experts can enhance the whole tourist experience and boost visitor happiness and loyalty by placing emphasis on variables like culinary image and service quality.

This study may provide valuable information for policymakers engaged in the growth and administration of the tourist sector. Gaining insight into the elements that contribute to brand equity facilitates well-informed decision-making about investments in infrastructure, setting of service standards, formulation of marketing and promotional

plans, and other policy issues. This study may be used as a significant tool for formulating policies that foster sustainable and competitive tourist destinations.

5. Reference

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