

EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE BRAND EQUITY FORMATION IN TOURIST DESTINATIONS THROUGH FACTOR ANALYSIS

Khairul Anwar Bin Adani, Tini Maizura Mohtar

Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy

Universiti Malaysia Sabah

88400 Kota Kinabalu Sabah

ABSTRACT

***Corresponding author's email:**
tmaizura@ums.edu.my

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Recent research highlights the potential of destination branding as a marketing tool, yet few studies have applied the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) approach to assess destination brand equity, particularly in combining various dimensions. This study addresses this gap by empirically evaluating Sabah's brand equity through a consumer survey targeting Japanese tourists. It examines the causal relationships among nine brand equity dimensions: brand awareness, brand uniqueness, perceived brand quality, perceived brand value, brand image, perceived destination risk, perceived brand reputation, brand satisfaction, and brand loyalty. Data were collected from 100 tourists at Kota Kinabalu International Airport using questionnaire to refine the factor structure and assess concurrent validity. The analysis included exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, confirming the dimensionality of the constructs and integrating "perceived destination risk" into the existing framework to address security concerns and general risks associated with the destination. This research contributes to understanding Japanese tourists' sentiments toward Sabah as a tourism destination. The findings may offer strategies for policymakers to enhance Sabah's brand performance. Reliability assessments indicated acceptable to good reliability across most constructs, with improvements observed after item revisions. This study fills a gap in empirical research on destination marketing and brand equity, focusing on a specific target market.

INTRODUCTION

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) serve as essential network managers that foster collaboration among various stakeholders to enhance destination competitiveness. The distinction between destination management and marketing is important, as the former encompasses a broader range of responsibilities, including strategic planning and operational oversight, while the latter primarily focuses on promoting the destination's image and offerings.

Despite the significant contribution of Japanese tourists to Sabah's tourism spending, their visitor numbers are notably low compared to other markets, such as South Korea. This discrepancy indicates an urgent need to explore deeper into the factors influencing brand equity and the perceived risks associated with traveling to Sabah. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective marketing strategies that can attract more visitors from Japan.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

From a practical perspective, Japanese tourists have contributed significantly to spending patterns while traveling in Sabah. Statistics from the Sabah Tourism Board show that Japan ranked among the top three highest-spending markets in 2019. However, despite the high spending potential, the number of Japanese tourist arrivals remains low, comprising only 1.8% of the total market share in 2019. In contrast, South Korean tourist arrivals were substantially higher. Travel decisions are often influenced by factors such as geographical distance, tourist motivation, and perceived risk. Although South Korea and Japan are located at similar distances from Sabah, the significant disparity in tourist arrivals points to deeper issues—particularly in destination branding, perceived risk, and overall image.

Thus, the problem centres on understanding why Japanese tourists, despite their high spending patterns, have relatively low visitation rates to Sabah, and how destination brand equity and perceived risk influence their travel intentions.

Current research reveals several notable gaps in the understanding of Sabah's destination brand equity. Firstly, there is a lack of studies that specifically focus on the Japanese tourist market, despite its potential for growth. Secondly, the role of perceived destination risk—particularly its influence on tourists' intention to revisit—remains underexplored. Additionally, existing brand equity models rarely incorporate perceived risk as a core component, limiting their effectiveness in capturing the full range of factors that shape tourist behaviour. Addressing these gaps can offer valuable insights for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and tourism marketers, enabling them to develop more targeted and resilient branding strategies.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- a) This study aims to investigate the causal relationships between the dimensions of destination brand equity and the sentiments of Japanese tourists in selecting Sabah as a travel destination
- b) To examine the significant effect of perceived destination risk on the revisit intention of Japanese tourists to Sabah.
- c) To examine the significant effect of perceived destination risk on Sabah's brand image as a tourism destination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination Brand

A controversy has emerged in marketing disciplines over the applicability of the brand theory (Anholt, 2002; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Olin, 2002; and Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). Besides that, Gartner & Ruzzier (2011;

Foley & Fahy (2004); Konecnik & Gartner (2007); and Pritchard & Morgan (2017) also stated that tourism scholars made similar concerns concerning the relevance and applicability of brand theory to tourism destinations.

Despite the doubt over the transferability of the brand concept to a tourism location, several questions regarding this subject remain to be addressed (Boo et al., 2009; Pike et al., 2010; Saraniemi & Ahonen, 2008; Pecot & de Barnier, 2015; and Samuel Adeyinka-Ojo, 2020).

Conceptual Framework for Destination Brand Equity

Konecnik & Gartner (2007) and Boo et al. (2009) question the integrity of transferring theories and concepts from branding tangible goods to branding intangible goods such as tourism destinations. This is due to the complexity of the decision-making process in tourism compared with the decision-making process of tangible goods (Cai, 2002). Attempts have been made to build conceptual frameworks for destination branding, which are still in their infancy but are increasing, primarily by modifying existing frameworks (Keller, 1993) CBBE model in both tourism (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Lee & Back,

2008; Pike et al., 2010 and Im et al., 2012) and hospitality (Kim & Kim, 2004; Prasad & Dev, 2000; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

The destination brand model proposed by Konecnik & Gartner (2007) focused on the interrelationships between these four brand dimensions, comprising three image components (cognitive, affective, and conative) and the cumulative worth of brand dimensions to establish consumer-based brand equity for a destination. The study results altered when the brand value was included in the study of Konecnik & Gartner (2007).

The value dimension was shown to be more critical to loyalty than the image dimension. For this research, researcher's adapted the approach of Ghaffari et al., (2017) where it defines the eight brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand uniqueness, perceived brand quality, perceived brand value, brand image, perceived brand reputation, brand satisfaction, and brand loyalty) Although Aaker (1996) and Keller (1998) proposed a ten-item customer-based brand equity scale, but the measurement of customer-based brand equity scale for tourism destination can be different from other products (Ghaffari et al., 2017).

Operationalizing Consumer-Based Destination Brand Equity

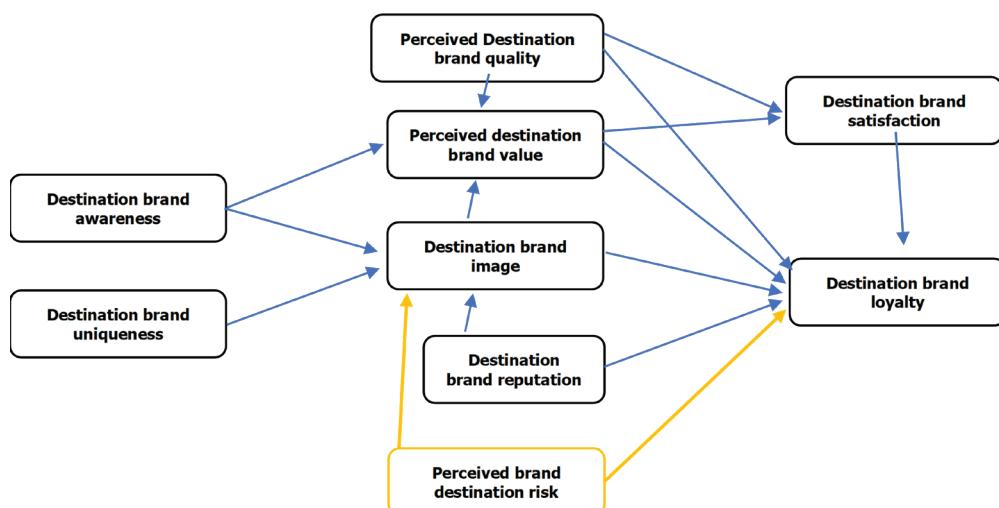


Figure 1: Proposed Destination Brand Equity Model

Adapted and Modified from (Ghaffari et al., 2017)

Destination Brand Awareness

According to Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993), brand awareness is crucial in shaping the overall brand equity. Brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in consumers' minds. Aaker (1996) described numerous stages of brand awareness, ranging from ordinary brand recognition to domination, which refers to the circumstance in which the brand concerned is the only brand recalled by a customer. Brand equity requires awareness since it is the first stage in developing and increasing brand value (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011). How travellers form their awareness of a destination will determine the specific feelings (affective associations) link to the destination (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989).

Perceived Destination Brand Quality

Destination brand quality is a significant component of brand equity in the travel and hospitality industries (Boo et al., 2009; Pike, 2010; Pike et al., 2010; Myagmarsuren & Chen, 2011; Yuwo et al., 2013; Tran et al., 2017). Perceived quality is a vital attribute of brand equity because it creates value for consumers by differentiating the brand from competitors and giving consumers a reason to buy (Allameh et al., 2015). According to Konecnik and Gartner (2007), The perceptions of visitors toward a place in terms of its capacity to meet their travel-related expectations and needs are referred to as destination-perceived quality. Similarly, Pike et al. (2010) consider destination-perceived quality to be visitors' views on the quality of a destination's infrastructure, hospitality services, and facilities, such as accommodations.

Destination Brand Image

Destination brand image consists of the various associations and connections stored in consumers' minds about the brand, necessitating that consumer accurately recall and reconstruct the brand from their memory (Chi et al., 2020). Research on quantifying

destination image has seen notable success over time. The significance of this area was initially highlighted by Hunt (1975). Gallarza, Saura & Garcia, (1989) offered a thorough definition, portraying destination image as a complex, multifaceted, and an evolving concept.

Destination Brand Loyalty

There are two methods to define brand loyalty, attitudinal and behavioural (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). By embracing consumer preferences and dispositions toward brands, brand loyalty focuses on customers' repurchase intentions and commitment to a specific brand from an attitudinal standpoint (Atilgan et al., 2005; Pitt et al., 2007; Bennett, Kennedy & Coote, 2007). On the other hand, behavioural loyalty is defined as a consumer's repeated purchase of a brand as reflected in purchase choices. Pappu, Cooksey & Quester (2005) argue that this restricted concept of loyalty captures no explanation of customer choices (Javalgi & Moberg, 1997). When analysed, destination loyalty has been proven to influence visitor behaviour throughout the destination selection process (Chon, 1992; Um & Crompton, 1990; Um & Crompton, 1990; and Woodside & Lysonski, 1989).

Destination Brand Satisfaction

Satisfaction is the psychological and emotional result of individual experiences, regardless of whether it correlates to initial expectations (Baker & Crompton, 2000). Additionally, satisfaction refers to emotional reactions, emphasising the emotional component (Iglesias et al., 2011). Meanwhile brand relationship quality describes how satisfied customers are with a brand over time (Lin, 2015). The management of tourism destinations should pay particular attention to perceived quality since it significantly impacts satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Clemens et al., 2011; Lai and Chen, 2011). Quality has been shown to have a positive effect on behavioural intentions (Petrick, 2004). Notably, enhanced service

quality significantly influences tourists' revisit intentions (Petrick et al., 2001).

Destination Brand Uniqueness

The degree to which consumers perceive a brand to be different from its rivals is referred to as brand uniqueness. Similarly, Kim et al. (2009) identified this idea as a key component of brand equity. Indeed, tourists' perceptions of a place's brand uniqueness is one of the factors that improves their opinion of that destination and distinguishes it from rival destinations. Furthermore, travellers' impressions of a destination's brand uniqueness are a component that increases their assessment of that destination and distinguishes it from other places (Cai, 2002).

The survival of a tourism destination and its positioning globally depend on its capacity to develop unique marketing strategies (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004). Ideally, a special tourism asset should serve as a catalyst for achieving lifetime value, relationship development (service quality experiences), emotional connection, and familiarity, eventually resulting in repeat business (Prentice, 2004). According to Wiedman (2014), most destinations today boast luxurious resorts and world-class attractions, claiming a distinct competitive advantage (Nagorski, 2020).

Perceived Destination Brand Value

The utility generated from a brand's projected performance is the customer-perceived quality value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Lassar et al. (1995) and Eid & El-Gohary (2015) suggest that perceived value is the result of marketing efforts. That perceived value refers to evaluating received outcomes concerning economic expenses (Ghaffari et al., 2017). One of the key business objectives is to improve consumer perceived value, which should result in useful outcomes such as customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ghaffari et al., 2017). Nam et al. (2011) indicate that consumer perceived value is essential in distinguishing a

brand from competitors. Tsai (2005) identifies perceived value as one of the key components of brand equity that affects customers' intentions to purchase a brand in the future. Similarly, Ponte et al., (2015) suggest that customers who see more value in a brand's products and services are more likely to plan to repurchase it and recommend it to others.

Perceived Destination Brand Reputation

Reputation is the collective opinion of outsiders on the key traits of organizations (Fombrun and Rindova, 2000). Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) specifically suggest the same definition as the key traits of a brand. Brands must have a good reputation in order to be profitable and successful (Herbig and Milewicz, 1995). According to Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009), academics and industry professionals agree that brand reputation is growing more significantly. Cretu et al. (2007) suggest that brand reputation is more significant, particularly in service marketing. Hence, the reputation of the seller has a substantial impact on how consumers choose their purchases. Companies and brands with a favourable reputation are more likely to draw in consumers, and if a company consistently fails to live up to its stated aims or marketing signals, it will gradually lose its positive image and gain a bad one (Milewicz and Herbig, 1994).

Perceived Brand Destination Risk

Despite its importance, the concept of perceived risk in the context of tourism only gained significant attention in the literature in the early 2011, where researchers (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; and Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992) pioneering study on the concept of risk perception in tourism. According to Fuchs & Reichel (2011), the theory of perceived risk has been covered in consumer behaviour literature for more than four decades. The theory assumes that consumers perceive risk in their purchasing behaviour and usually act to reduce it (Mitchell & Mitchell, 1999). Mitchell & Mitchell (1999) said that the theory of perceived

risk had undergone a process of development and developed a research legacy in consumer behaviour research. (Mitchell & Mitchell, 1999) also stated that perceived risk continues to be studied by practitioners and academicians, and it has been applied in various fields. He also mentioned that marketing scholars have yet to develop a widely accepted theoretical or practical definition.

METHODOLOGY

A research paradigm helps to outline and justify the researcher philosophical choices in relation to the chosen research method (Saunders et al., 2019). The philosophy of this study is positivism, and uses the CBBE model from Ghaffari et al., (2017) to test the hypothesis. The approach used was deduction. To fulfil the research aims of investigating the relationship of brand equity multidimensional elements with Sabah total branding equity, quantitative research technique was adopted.

The instrument used was a set of questionnaires administered online, using a google form to reach all the respondents from Japan. This study used a mono method. The questionnaire was adapted from Ghaffari et al. (2017) for this study. The time horizon for this study was cross-sectional to explain the respondent's response at a particular time.

Research Design

This research used causal relationship of destination brand equity dimensions, specifically for Sabah as a tourism destination and Japan as the target market. This study used the quantitative method, using a survey questionnaire adapted from Ghafari et al. (2015) and Kyle and Woosnam (2015). This study used a quantitative research approach to test the objective theories by examining the causal relationship among variables. These variables consist of 53 instruments that were later analysed using statistical procedures.

Data Collection Method

A random sampling technique was used for the data collection. The questionnaire was distributed using QR code that was directed to the Google form. additionally, the researcher printed physical copies of the questionnaire as a backup in case of internet connection issues. The nonprobability sampling design was used in this study. Nonprobability sampling indicates that no probabilities are attached to the sample subject chosen by the population (Sekaran, 2003). This shows that the findings cannot be reliably extrapolated to the general population.

Research Instrument

Research is based on an online questionnaire consisting of Part 1 (related to demographic information and history visits) and Part 2 (related to constructs and to be answered using a 5-point Likert scale). The questionnaire is a written set of questions that have been formulated for the respondent to record their answer, usually in an alternative that is quite clear (Sekaran, 2013). For this study, the researcher used the five categories of Likert-type scale statements; (5=Strongly Agree 4=Agree, 3= Uncertain, 2=Disagree, and 1=Strongly Disagree). A five-point Likert-type scale was used to improve response rate and quality while lowering respondents' frustration (Babakus & Mangold, 1985). Besides that, Babakus & Mangold, (1985) also stated that a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' was used since studies advised that it would minimise respondents' annoyance levels while also increasing response rate and quality. With a Five-point scale, it is pretty simple for the interviewer to read out the complete list of scale descriptors ('1 equals strongly disagree, two equals disagree ...') (Dawes, 2017). The survey was translated into Japanese language to make it easier for Japanese individuals to complete. The researcher utilised the back-translation approach, the most common methodology used to evaluate the accuracy

of translation in survey research, to confirm the credibility of the questionnaire questions translated into the Japanese language. The questionnaire is confidential, and they are given an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study to encourage them to complete the questionnaire.

Research Measurement

Table 1 Research Measurement (Part 1), table 2: Research Measurement (Part 2). Part 1 consists of 5 questions related to Demographic Information (gender, marital status, average household, education, age and occupation.

Table 1 Research Measurement (Part 1)

Indicators	No. of Item
PART 1	
Demographic	
DEMO 1 Age	5
DEMO 2 Gender	Ghafari et al, (2017)
DEMO 3 Marital Status	
DEMO 4 Education	
DEMO 5 Employment	

Part 2 consists of measurements for the research's constructs: (Destination brand awareness, destination brand uniqueness, perceived destination brand quality, perceived destination brand value, destination brand image, perceived destination brand risk, destination brand reputation, destination brand satisfaction, and destination brand loyalty). The question was adapted from Ghafari et al. (2017) and Kyle M Woosnam et al. (2015). The variables and indicators for assessing tourism in Sabah cover various aspects of the destination. Destination brand image emphasizes historic charms, cultural events, outdoor activities, and relaxation options. Destination brand awareness evaluates how easily travellers can recall Sabah's unique features when considering cultural and historical trips. The

perceived destination quality focuses on cleanliness, hygiene, notable hotels, and infrastructure. Destination brand satisfaction measures how travellers' experiences align with their expectations. Perceived destination brand value assesses the cost-effectiveness and reasonable pricing of experiences. Perceived destination brand uniqueness highlights Sabah's distinct architecture and customs that set it apart from other locations. The destination brand reputation examines trustworthiness and recognition of Sabah as a reliable tourism spot. Destination brand loyalty gauges travellers' feelings of attachment to Sabah compared to other destinations. Lastly, the perceived risk destination addresses concerns regarding safety and crime, which can impact travellers' decisions.

Table 2: Research Measurement (Part 2)

Variables & Indicators	No. of Item / Reference
PART 2	
Destination brand image	
BI1 The destination offers historic charms.	7
BI2 The destination offers a number of cultural events.	Ghafari et al., (2017)
BI3 The destination has good museums.	
BI4 Sabah has cultural diversity as a tourism destination.	
BI5 Sabah provides many outdoor activities for tourists.	
BI6 Sabah is a good destination for relaxation.	
BI7 Sabah is a destination with amazing cultures and customs.	

Method for Data Analysis

The Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM) was used for data analysis in this research, consisting of measurement model analysis and structural model analysis. The Measurement Model analysis was required to confirm the construct validity, which can be defined as how measured items reflect the latent theoretical construct, they were designed to measure (Ramayah, Cheah, Chuah, Ting & Memon 2016). There were four primary assessments as part of The Measurement Model, namely Internal Consistency (Cronbach Alpha and Composite Reliability), Indicator Reliability, Convergent Validity (Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Conceptual Framework

The framework consists of 9 brand equity dimensions: brand awareness, brand uniqueness, perceived brand quality, perceived brand value, brand image, perceived brand reputation, perceived destination risk, brand satisfaction, and brand loyalty. The framework was adapted and modified from a previous study conducted by Ghaffari et al. (2017). Earlier research by Ghaffari et al. (2017) explored the specific dimensions of destination brand equity and their causal relationships to develop a tourism destination brand equity model. A preliminary study was conducted to identify the dimensions of tourism destination brand equity, and the main study was conducted to test the proposed model among the tourists who visited the tourist's destination. In this study, the researcher updated the framework by adding one more domain from (Kyle M Woosnam et al., 2015) to understand destination risk better. Woosnam's research examines how safe visitors feel and their emotional connection to local people. The researcher selected the Perceive Safety Scale from Woosnam's study because it matches the goal of evaluating overall safety risk at the destination, this scale directly addresses travellers' concerns about safety, which is a critical factor in destination choice.

Each item reflects common fears associated with travel, such as crime and personal safety, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how these perceptions can influence decisions. Overall, this scale effectively encompasses various dimensions of perceived risk, making it a comprehensive tool for understanding how safety concerns impact tourists' decisions regarding travel to Sabah because it is not only focusing on one factor. The southern part of Sabah's West Coast is generally at a lower risk for human-related crises, such as kidnapping and invasion, due to its geographical location. However, despite this sense of safety, it's important not to overlook the potential for natural disasters like storms, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Preparing for these events is essential, even when the area feels calm and secure. In this study, the researcher used the conceptual frameworks of Ghaffari et al. (2017) and Woosnam et al. (2015) in the context of Sabah as a tourism destination for Japanese tourists. This study serves as the preliminary investigation into the adapted framework to ensure its suitability for use within this context.

FINDINGS

The study was conducted at Kota Kinabalu International Airport from July to December 2022, involving 100 respondents. A questionnaire comprising 53 items, sourced from (Ghaffari et al., 2017) and (Woosnam et al., 2015), was utilized. The researcher evaluated the revised items with 100 Japanese tourists and assessed the validity and reliability of each construct's scales. Consequently, the number of items was reduced from 53 to 42. The researcher analysed the constructs and items from the second pilot test to determine if the scale correlated as anticipated. For reliability assessment, Cronbach's alpha was employed, utilizing the criteria where values below 0.60 are considered poor, those in the 0.70 range are deemed acceptable, and those exceeding 0.80 are considered good (Sekaran, 2003). Overall, the reliability assessment of the constructs in the study indicates a mixed picture. While some constructs like destination brand awareness,

brand loyalty, brand reputation, destination brand satisfaction, and perceived destination quality demonstrate good reliability, others such as brand image, perceived destination brand uniqueness, and perceived destination brand value show lower reliability. However, considering composite reliability measures and average variance extracted, which provide a more comprehensive view, several constructs still exhibit acceptable to good reliability.

Table 3 reveals the result before the removal of the items where the Cronbach's Alpha, was 0.691 and below the threshold for brand image and 0.551 below the perceived destination brand value threshold. Researcher revised the item adapted from Ghaffari et al. (2017) and Woosnam et al. (2015). The second test result was 0.736 and 0.759, with all constructs above 0.70 (Refer to Table 4).

Table 3: Result of Reliability Test (Before adjustment)

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Reliability Result
Brand Image	0.736	0.854	0.667	Acceptable
Destination Brand Awareness	0.838	0.893	0.679	Good
Destination Brand Loyalty	0.765	0.865	0.682	Acceptable
Destination Brand Reputation	0.815	0.875	0.65	Good
Destination Brand Satisfaction	0.829	0.885	0.617	Good
Perceived Destination Brand Uniqueness	0.837	0.901	0.754	Good
Perceived Destination Brand Value	0.759	0.867	0.693	Acceptable
Perceived Destination Quality	0.874	0.895	0.555	Good
Perceived Risk Destination	0.878	0.908	0.666	Good

Source: Derived by the Author.

Table 4: Result of Reliability Test (After Adjustment)

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Reliability Result
Destination Brand Image	0.691	0.79	0.366	Poor
Destination Brand Awareness	0.838	0.891	0.674	Good
Destination Brand Loyalty	0.765	0.865	0.682	Good
Destination Brand Reputation	0.815	0.872	0.645	Acceptable
Destination Brand Satisfaction	0.878	0.91	0.6	Good
Perceived Destination Brand Uniqueness	0.707	0.808	0.485	Acceptable
Perceived Destination Brand Value	0.551	0.688	0.435	Poor
Perceived Destination Brand Quality	0.874	0.897	0.56	Good
Perceived Brand Destination Risk	0.894	0.9	0.606	Good

Source: Derived by the Author.

CONCLUSION

The study aims to develop the framework to create a reliable measurement of destination branding constructs. The initial results indicated mixed reliability across various constructs, with some such as destination brand awareness, loyalty, and satisfaction demonstrated good reliability, while others,

like brand image and perceived brand value, fell below acceptable thresholds. After revisions based on feedback and analysis, the results showed improvements, with all constructs achieving acceptable to good reliability levels. This indicated that the adjustments made to the questionnaire were effective in enhancing clarity and relevance, as well as the overall validity of the constructs.

The use of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted further underscores the robustness of the revised framework. The findings indicate that while some constructs may require ongoing refinement, the overall reliability was now sufficient for the main study. This enhances confidence in the framework's applicability in assessing consumer perceptions of destination branding, ultimately supporting effective marketing strategies for tourism destinations.

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