

# Exploring Relationships between Destination Brand Equity, Satisfaction, and Destination Loyalty: A Case Study of Mongolia

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## ABSTRACT

*There has been growing interest among researchers in knowing the concept of the customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model which is widely applied in marketing research. In this study, the researchers made an attempt to apply the concept of customer-based brand equity as a tourism destination (CBBETD) by incorporating various antecedents of destination brand equity that leads to tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. A conceptual relationship model is proposed and examined by using Mongolia as a tourism destination. The study concluded that tourists' awareness of a tourism destination which influences a positive perception of the image can lead to the expectation and actual experience of perceived service quality. Moreover, tourists want to become satisfied with the perceived tourism quality, and subsequently with aspects that influence loyalty.*

**Keywords:** *Destination brand equity, Tourist satisfaction, Destination loyalty, Mongolia*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nowadays destination image studies are popular in the field of tourism development because the image of the destination is influenced by the tourist's decision making process and choice (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999a; Beerli & Martin, 2004a). Besides these studies, academicians have considered destination branding studies under the central core concept of image formation (Cai, 2002; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

Competition among tourism industry branding has become an important element of tourism management. Since the 1990s there has been a growing interest in the concept of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) for firms (Aaker, 1991). Based on the CBBE model of firms, Konecnik and Gartner (2007) have investigated the different dimensions of customer-based brand equity for a tourism destination (CBBETD). Their measurement of the customer's perspective of a destination brand consists of the tourist's awareness of the destination in their mind, the image and perceived quality as well as their attitude of loyalty to the investigated destination.

In the marketing literature, operationalizations of CBBE can be separated into two groups: consumer perceptual equity (brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality) and consumer behavioral equity (brand loyalty) (Kim & Kim, 2005). The study of Kim and Kim (2005) which measured the relationship between the brand equity of hospitality industries concluded that the measure of brand loyalty comes from the importance of customer satisfaction. Moreover, perceptual brand equity such as brand awareness is a necessary condition for the creation of a brand image and leads to brand perceived quality which is inferred attributes (Esch, Langner, Schmitt & Geus, 2006; Keller, 1993).

Within the tourism literature, academicians and scholars have considered the relationships between the tourist's perceptual variables (such as destination image, perceived service quality) and the tourist's behavioral variables (such as tourist satisfaction, tourist loyalty) of the tourism destination (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Castro, Armario & Ruiz, 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007).

However, there have been very few studies on CBBETD to distinguish between the perceptual and behavioral perspectives of destination brand equity. Hence, the objectives of this study are to identify CBBE for the promising international tourist market in Mongolia as a tourist destination and specifically, to explore the effect of CBBETD on tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. It also examines the effect of tourists' satisfaction on their loyalty.

Mongolia is the world's second-largest landlocked country, which is located between two large neighbors the Russian Federation and China. At the beginning of the 21st century, Mongolia remains one of the few countries to retain its ancient culture and traditions and the nomadic lifestyle, which plays an important role in creating a general perception of Mongolia among tourists (Juulchin, 2007). The tourist attractions and activities in Mongolia are

related to the natural environment, historic features and cultural heritage. Since Mongolia's transformation to improve the market economy in 1990, the tourism sector has evolved into a critical part of the country's development. It has been a major factor in Mongolia's union with the world trend of globalization. After 1990, the number of leisure tourist arrivals has grown owing to an increase in tourists predominantly from Japan, China, Korea, France, UK, Germany, USA, and the Russian Federation. Their number is steadily increasing every year and the government actively supports tourism (Ministry of Roads, 2007). The disadvantages of Mongolia's tourism opportunities are largely its unfavorable climate, which allows only one full tourist season comprising the summer months.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS**

In this study we define the destination brand equity as perceptual equity (destination awareness, destination image, perceived quality), and treat the destination loyalty (behavioral equity) as one of the consequences of perceptual equity. The fact of destination loyalty significantly depends on tourist satisfaction. Therefore tourist satisfaction is also one of the consequences of perceptual equity.

Regarding the consequences of destination brand equity, satisfaction and loyalty have frequently been identified in previous destination studies. Specifically, we can find the following sequences: image → satisfaction → loyalty (recommend or revisit), quality (service, perceived, and trip) → satisfaction → loyalty (Bigne et al., 2001; Castro et al., 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007). However these studies did not consider measuring destination awareness. Destination awareness is one of the key perceptual indicators of tourist behavior (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Therefore it can be included in destination brand equity as perceptual equity in this study.

### **Interrelationships between the Attributes of Destination Brand Equity**

The concept of destination awareness has mostly been investigated under the topic of the tourism decision process (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) as defined as an image of the destination existing in the minds of potential tourists (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). The study of Milman and Pizam (1995) combined the concept of destination image with the awareness dimension.

In tourism literature, the relationship between destination awareness and perceived quality has not been much investigated and has not received attention with regard to destinations. In marketing literature, Keller (1993) points out that the consumer's awareness and associations lead to perceived quality of

brand. Similarly, Yoo and Donthu's (2001) proposed model suggested that brand awareness and associations precede perceived quality of customer-based brand equity.

There has been a great body of studies focusing on the significant relationship between destination image and perceived quality (Bigne et al., 2001; Castro et al., 2007). Chen and Tsai (2007), in their study found that the destination image perceived by tourists and the experience related to trip quality (the comparison between expectation and actual experience) was positive. Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Destination awareness positively influences tourists' destination image
- H2: Destination awareness positively influences tourists' destination perceived quality
- H3: Destination image positively influences tourists' destination perceived quality

### **Relationships between Destination Brand Equity and Tourist Satisfaction**

Many studies have discussed the destination image and tourist satisfaction. But there is a relationship between customer satisfaction and image that has not received much attention from researchers (Bigne et al., 2001; Castro et al., 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007). This is because they are typically analyzed with other constructs, such as perceived value, perceived quality, and customer loyalty.

Some analysts treat perceived quality as a relatively stable perception of the service which influences customers experience of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with specific instances of the service over time (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993). Even though perceived quality is understood to be antecedent to satisfaction, there can be diminishing satisfaction returns from an increase in the level of service quality (Hellier, Geursen, Carr & Rickard, 2003). Bigne et al. (2001) in their empirical study indicated that perceived quality has positive influences on satisfaction. The following hypotheses were framed based on the logic of the above discussion:

- H4: Destination image positively influences tourists' satisfaction
- H5: Destination perceived quality positively influences tourists' satisfaction

### **Relationships between Destination Brand Equity and Destination Loyalty**

The influence of image is not only limited to the stage of selecting the destination, but also affects the behavior of tourists in general (Chang & Shin, 2004). Similarly, destination image has a positive effect on behavior variables as well as on the evaluation variables (Bigne et al., 2001). The literature review has shown

that there is a positive relationship between perceived quality and intentions after the purchase (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996). Further Castro et al. (2007) and Chen and Tsai (2007) empirically examined the relationships between perceived service quality (trip quality), and future behavioral intentions (intention to recommend and intention to revisit) in their respective studies. The following hypotheses are:

H6: Destination image positively influences tourists' loyalty

H7: Destination perceived quality positively influences tourists' loyalty

### **Relationships between Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty**

Previous research findings demonstrated that there is a significant relationship among tourist satisfaction, intention to return, and positive word of mouth communication (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000) and destination loyalty (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H8: Tourists' satisfaction positively influences their loyalty

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Definition of Research Constructs and Questionnaire Design**

The conceptual model has five constructs which are defined as follows:

*Destination awareness* is defined as an image of the destination existing in the minds of potential tourists and it also introduces the concept of tourism destination familiarity. The questionnaire has five items that are included to measure destination awareness adopted from previous studies (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Milman & Pizam, 1995). *Destination image* is the individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about an object or destination. The image is measured by 16 items used by Baloglu and McCleary (1999a) and Konecnik (2006). *Destination perceived quality* is a comparison between the perceptions of the performance and the consumer's expectation of the service. The perceived quality of the tourist destination is measured by eight items adopted from Baker and Crompton (2000) and Konecnik and Gartner (2007). *Tourist satisfaction* refers to the emotional state of tourists after the visiting experience. *Destination loyalty* is defined as their intention to revisit the destination and recommend it to others. Tourist satisfaction is measured by a single item adopted by Bigne et al. (2001) and Chen and Tsai (2007) and the destination loyalty (likelihood of revisiting and willingness to recommend) is adopted from Oppermann (2000).

This study employed a survey instrument including all constructs of the proposed model to examine the hypotheses of interest. The questionnaire was designed based on previously published literature. As English is an international language common among international tourists, translation was unnecessary.

All attributes were evaluated using a Five-point Likert scale asking respondents to indicate their degree of agreement on a scale ranging from “strongly disagree (= 1)” to “strongly agree (= 5)”. The last section of questionnaire was related to the socio-demographic information of the tourists to identify their characteristics.

### **Sampling Design and Data Collection**

The target population was international tourists who visited Mongolia in summer who were at least 18 years of age or older. The survey was conducted randomly in the departure lounge at Genghis Khan International Airport over an eight week period from August 20 to October 15 in 2007. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed and 128 usable questionnaires were received, resulting in a response rate of 64%.

The respondent profile revealed that the respondents who visited Mongolia were predominantly males (58.6%). Almost half of the respondents were in the age category of between 25 and 44 (50.8%) years. The majority of the respondents were highly educated with at least an undergraduate degree (62.5%). Regarding the occupations of respondents, 20.3% were employed, and 14.1% were students. More than one third of tourists (34.4%) had incomes of more than \$5,000 and the majority of the respondents visited Mongolia (35.2%) for the purpose of pleasure. Just over one fourth of tourists (26.6%) received information from friends or relatives, and 15.6% from the internet. Regarding the type of travel arrangements, 48.4% of respondents visited on a package tour, and 51.6% came by independent travel. Mostly, the international tourists came from the USA (15.6%), Japan (11.7%), and the United Kingdom (11.7%).

### **Data Analysis**

To purify the measurement scales and identify their dimensionality, principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was applied to condense the collected data into certain factors. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the entire measurement model specifying the hypotheses' relationships to the observed indicators of the latent constructs. Based on the convergent validity of CFA results Structural Equation Model (SEM) analysis was used to find out the relationships between constructs and the overall fit of the research model.

## **EMPIRICAL RESULTS**

### **Exploratory Factor Analysis**

In the beginning analysis exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed individually for each construct's dimensions of the proposed model. To group variables of destination awareness, exploratory factor analysis was applied with eigenvalue set to 1.0 and varimax rotation. With the criterion of a factor loading greater than 0.6 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998), two variables were deleted from the further analysis. A single factor with the remaining three variables was extracted. 52.8% of the total variance was explained and Cronbach's alpha (0.533) shows the reliable factor analysis in Table 1.

Table 1: Factor analysis of destination awareness

<b>Factor/item</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>	<b>Eigenvalue</b>	<b>Variance Explained</b>	<b>Cronbach's <math>\alpha</math></b>
To be aware of Mongolia	0.79	1.585	52.8	0.53
Easy to imagine Mongolia	0.72			
To remember the Mongolian flag	0.67			

Initially, there were 16 items in the questionnaire of destination image and after factor analysis seven items were deleted because of a lower factor loading for further analysis. The three image factors were identified in the ideal solution. The first factor concerns "atmosphere" (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ). The second factor is named "prestige" (3 items,  $\alpha = 0.62$ ). The third factor extracted is "nature" (2 items,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ) with the total explaining 63.9% of the variance. The factors loading of the extracted variables were above 0.6 as suggested by Hair et al. (1998). The result of the factor analysis for destination image is shown in Table 2.

Following the same procedure, three factors that were derived as having the perceived quality most portrayed by the tourists relating to the travel destination are shown in Table 3. It was found that all the variables had significantly high loading scores (above 0.60) and the factors were labeled based on the statements concerning each element. The first factor relates to "facility" (3 items,  $\alpha = 0.62$ ). The second factor is related to "service" (3 items,  $\alpha = 0.65$ ). The last factor extracted was associated with "place" (2 items,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ) with the total explaining 65.53% of the variance.

Table 2: Factor analysis of destination image

Factor/item	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained	Cronbach's $\alpha$
<i>F1: Atmosphere</i>		2.299	25.5	0.76
Relaxing atmosphere	0.81			
Exciting atmosphere	0.76			
Pleasant weather	0.76			
Good facilities for recreational activities	0.67			
<i>F2: Prestige</i>		1.784	45.4	0.62
Good shopping facilities	0.81			
Modern health resorts	0.77			
Lovely towns and cities	0.62			
<i>F3: Nature</i>		1.668	63.9	0.76
Beautiful nature	0.90			
Beautiful mountains and lakes	0.85			

Table 3: Factor analysis of perceived quality

Factor/item	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained	Cronbach's $\alpha$
<i>F1: Facility</i>		1.774	22.18	0.62
Great price value of tourism service	0.84			
High quality tourism facilities	0.74			
Employees' attitude is good	0.60			
<i>F2: Service</i>		1.743	43.96	0.65
High quality accommodation services	0.81			
Good quality local transport services	0.73			
Good quality food services	0.66			
<i>F3: Place</i>		1.726	65.53	0.76
Attractive historical and cultural attractions	0.90			
Attractive activities and events	0.87			

### Measurement Model

Based on the result of exploratory factor analysis explained in the previous section, a CFA was used to validate the items and factors structures with covariance matrix to test the convergent validity of the constructs used in subsequent analysis. The analysis was carried out separately through examining the item reliability, construct reliability, and average variance. As seen in Table

4, the result of analysis led to eliminating the factor named “nature” which is the third factor of image, owing to its low factor loading (-0.045) and t-value (-0.23). After this factor was removed, t-values for all the standardized factor loadings of the items were found to be significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, construct reliability estimates ranging from 0.80 to 0.89 exceeded the critical value of 0.7 recommended by Hair et al. (1998). The average variances extracted for all the constructs fell between 0.60 and 0.78, and were greater than the value of 0.5 suggested by Hair et al. (1998).

Table 4: Convergent validity (N = 128)

Constructs	Items	Item Reliability				Construct reliability	Average variance extracted
		Factor loadings	Standard error	Standardized factor loading	t-value		
Destination awareness	AW5	1.00		0.56		0.81	0.60
	AW4	0.72	0.229	0.61	3.146***		
	AW2	0.53	0.158	0.41	2.991***		
Destination image	IMF1	1.00		0.52		0.88	0.78
	IMF2	0.75	0.247	0.41	3.037***		
Perceived quality	PQF2	1.00		0.62		0.89	0.74
	PQF1	0.95	0.192	0.59	4.946***		
	PQF3	0.56	0.199	0.30	2.832***		
Destination loyalty	LO1	1.00		0.82		0.80	0.67
	LO2	0.59	0.219	0.42	2.694***		

A structural equation model (SEM) was employed to test the overall fit of the model and the relationship of all the variables in the entire model. Based on the CFA test, this section employed the initial model with 23 items, which in the beginning had 32 items, from five constructs namely: destination awareness, destination image, perceived quality, satisfaction and loyalty. Factors of “atmosphere”, and “prestige” served as the measurement variables of destination image. Also, factors of “facility”, “service” and “place” were used as the measurement variables of perceived quality of services. Additionally, destination awareness, satisfaction and loyalty were measured by three, one, and two items as mentioned previously.

Within the overall model, the estimates of the structural coefficients provide the basis for testing the proposed hypotheses. As shown in Figure 1, destination awareness has a significant positive effect on tourist destination image ( $\gamma = 0.90$ ,  $t\text{-value} = 3.14$ ,  $p < 0.01$  respectively); thus supporting H1. But destination awareness does not have a significantly positive influence on tourist perceived quality, hence not supporting H2. The destination image of the tourists

has a significant influence on the perceived quality of the tourists ( $\gamma = 1.25$ ,  $t$ -value = 1.25,  $p < 0.01$ ) accepting H3. As expected, the relationship between destination image and satisfaction (H4) is not supported. The perceived quality, as hypothesized, has a significantly positive effect on tourist satisfaction ( $\gamma = 2.60$ ,  $t$ -value = 2.03,  $p < 0.01$ ), thus, H5 is accepted. In addition, both destination image and perceived quality have no significant direct effect on destination loyalty, hence, H6 and H7, are rejected respectively. Finally, satisfaction has a significantly positive effect on tourist loyalty ( $\gamma = 0.82$ ,  $t$ -value = 4.53,  $p < 0.01$ ) supporting H8.

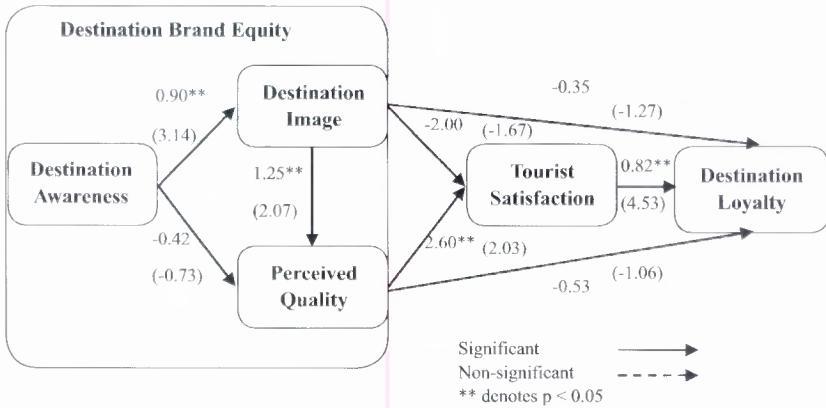


Figure 1: The Estimated Structural Model

The fit indices of the model are summarized in Table 5. The overall model indicates that the  $\chi$  value of 58.734 with 37 degrees of freedom is statistically significant at the 0.01 significance level. Furthermore, Goodness-of-Fit (GFI) value is 0.92, and Adjusted Goodness of Fit (AGFI) is 0.86. Apart from that the RMSEA value is 0.06 which is above the criteria that has been recommended (Hair et al., 1998). Thus, the proposed model fits well enough.

Table 5: Goodness-of-Fit Indices of Model (N = 128)

	Criteria	Indicators
<b><math>\chi^2</math>-test</b>		
$\chi^2$	$p > 0.05$	58.734
$\chi^2/d.f$	$< 3$	1.587
<b>Fit indices</b>		
GFI	$\geq 0.9$	0.92
AGFI	$\geq 0.9$	0.86
<b>Alternative indices</b>		
RMSEA	$\leq 0.08$	0.06

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study points out the importance of destination brand equity held by international tourists through satisfaction and destination loyalty. Through examining the destination brand equity of Mongolia as tourism destination the study identified the strengths and weaknesses of this destination based on the perspectives of tourists currently visiting the destination.

With regard to the first objective, our findings confirmed our prediction that destination awareness affects destination image (H1) and that image aspect is a direct determinant of tourists' perceived quality (H3) of the tourism destination. These findings are in line with previous destination studies (Bigne et al., 2001; Castro et al., 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Milman & Pizam, 1995). In contrast, the destination awareness dimension has no significant influence on perceived quality (H2). In this case, we can conclude that a tourist's awareness of a tourism destination which influences positive perceptions of the image can lead to the expectation and actual experience of destination perceived service quality.

The second objective is concerned with the relationships between destination brand equity and evaluation factors such as satisfaction and behavioral factors such as loyalty. Destination image, in particular, exercises a strong direct influence on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. However, contrary to our predictions, destination image does not affect tourist satisfaction (H4) and destination loyalty (H6) directly. Destination marketers should create or improve the image of a destination's perceived quality by visitors, to make it important to the success of destination tourism development. The influence of perceived quality on satisfaction (H5) with Mongolia is supported. The analysis shows that an increase in perceived quality leads to customer's overall satisfaction. But the result of perceived quality was not directly influenced by loyalty (H7) at all. We can conclude that first tourists want to become satisfied with tourism services quality, and subsequently with aspects that influence loyalty.

With regard to the third objective, the results indicate that there is a relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. The study results support the idea broadly suggested and verified in tourism that satisfaction is a key antecedent of destination loyalty. Thus, destination managers should consider the role tourist satisfaction played in developing destination loyalty. It is intuitively assumed that if tourists are satisfied with their travel experiences, they are more willing to revisit a destination as well as spread positive word-of-mouth (WOM). On the other hand, creating and managing appropriate destination branding strategies should increase tourists' destination awareness, attract to their image and quality perceptions, or influence their satisfaction and loyalty dimensions.

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