City brand love: destination attractiveness and memorable tourism city experiences

Davood Ghorbanzadeh

Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on the literature on brand–consumer relations in an attempt to apply the concept of brand love to a city tourism destination, this paper aims to explore the antecedents and consequences of city brand love.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on quantitative research and cluster sampling, study data was collected from 330 international tourists who visited six Iran cities. The research model is tested using partial least square structural equation modeling.

Findings – According to the results, city brand attractiveness, city brand identification and memorable city brand experience are the antecedents of city brand love. Moreover, the city brand attractiveness, both directly and indirectly through memorable experiences and identification with the city brand, is one of the antecedents of city brand love. Finally, the results suggest that word of mouth and revisit intention are major behavioral outcomes of city brand love.

Originality/value – By providing a validated conceptual model that traces the antecedents and consequences of city brand love, this study attempts to answer prior calls for examination from the viewpoint of city tourism scholars.

Keywords City brand love, City brand attractiveness, City brand identification, City brand memorable experience

Paper type Research paper

City brand love: atractivo del destino y experiencias turísticas memorables en la ciudad

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Amor de marca de ciudad: atractivo del destino y experiencias turísticas memorables en la ciudad

Resumen

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: A partir de una investigación cuantitativa y muestreo por conglomerados, los datos del estudio se recogieron de 330 turistas internacionales que visitaron seis ciudades iraníes. El modelo conceptual se analizó mediante un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales de mínimos cuadrados parciales (PLS).

Objetivo: Basándose en la literatura sobre las relaciones entre marca y consumidor para aplicar el concepto de amor de marca a una ciudad como destino turístico, la presente investigación analiza los antecedentes y las consecuencias del amor de marca de ciudad.
Conclusiones: Conforme a los resultados, el atractivo de la marca ciudad, la identificación con la marca ciudad y la experiencia memorable con la marca ciudad son los antecedentes del amor a la marca ciudad. Adicionalmente, el atractivo de la marca ciudad, tanto directa como indirectamente a través de las experiencias memorables y la identificación con la marca ciudad, es uno de los antecedentes del amor por la marca ciudad. Finalmente, los resultados sugieren que la comunicación boca-óido y la intención de volver a visitar la ciudad son los principales resultados comportamentales del amor de marca de ciudad.

Originalidad/valor: Al proporcionar un modelo conceptual validado que analiza los antecedentes y las consecuencias del amor de marca de ciudad, este estudio trata de responder a las llamadas para su estudio desde la óptica del turismo urbano.

Palabras clave: Amor de marca de ciudad, Atractivo de la marca ciudad, Identificación con la marca, Experiencia memorable con la marca ciudad

Tipo de papel: Trabajo de investigación

1. Introduction

City branding has emerged as an academic subject and a fundamental task for urban managers, planners and marketers (Casais and Poço, 2021; Piehler et al., 2021). City branding is a subfield of place branding, which focuses on marketing and branding cities to existing and potential residents as a place to live and to tourists as a place to visit (Pasquinelli et al., 2022). It is argued that the characteristics of city branding are similar to that of branding for products or services (Bouchon and Rauscher, 2019). The name of a city can engender associations and perceptions in an individual’s mind in a similar way to that of product or service brands (Casais and Poço, 2021). Therefore, it is of particular importance to explore the emotional relationships between the city–tourist, which can be borrowed from the consumer (tourist)–brand (city) literature (Seyyedamiri et al., 2022).

Brand love is defined as emotional and passionate feelings for a brand that might lead to commitment and loyalty (Roy et al., 2013). It represents the affective feelings of satisfied customers (Gumparthi and Patra, 2020). Individuals can form deep relationships with objects that they love. These can include a wide variety of things including family, friends, lovers and places (Ahuvia et al., 2014). Aro et al. (2018) and Swanson (2017) propose the concept of destination brand love which is defined as the brand love shown by tourists and visitors toward a tourist destination. In their research, they identify some commonalities with brand love literature such as that destination brand love can lead to greater destination loyalty (i.e. likelihood of returning to that destination), greater insensitivity to price changes, greater willingness to invest, greater resistance to negative information about the destination, engage in positive word of mouth (WOM) to promote the destination and feeling of separation distress (Amaro et al., 2020).

Empirical studies in the field of city branding (Ardyan and Susanti, 2018; Yu and Kim, 2020) have exhibited that emotional connections with the city brand embrace behavioral consequences for tourists. Therefore, understanding the antecedents and consequences of love for city brands as tourist destinations is essential for urban marketers. The present study looks into the antecedents and consequences of city brand love. Previous studies have concluded that the memorable experience of the destination brand, destination brand attractiveness and city brand identification has a bearing on city brand love (Amaro et al., 2020; Manyiwa et al., 2018; Yu and Kim, 2020). Several studies on tourism have reported that destination brand love prompts WOM and revisit intention behavior (Shafiee et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Even though previous studies have explored the memorable experience of destination brands, destination brand attractiveness and destination brand identification, there is a paucity of research on the impact of these variables as antecedents of city brand love among tourists.

To bridge the existing gap in city brand love and respond to the request for further research on the effect of brand love on other consumer categories (Batra et al., 2012; White et al., 2020), this
study adopts a structural model to investigate several antecedents and consequences of city brand love that have been largely overlooked in the literature. First, this study responds to the call to expand the literature on consumer–brand relationships in other consumption categories through the examination of the concept of brand love in the context of tourism and urban branding. Second, it reinforces the previous evidence regarding the positive nexus between brand identification and brand love from the standpoint of city branding. The result of this study supports the social identity theory that explains the positive effects of city brand identification on city brand love. Third, researchers have increasingly been examining place branding from the tourists’ perspective (Sadeque et al., 2022; Shafiee et al., 2021) and to understand the place consumers’ (i.e. tourists’) perception of “place products” (Warnaby, 2009). This study addresses this research gap by developing and testing a model that identifies the antecedents of city brand love by considering the tourists’ perspectives. Given the intense competition between tourist cities in attracting tourists, research on the underlying drivers of the tourist city brand love and their impact on desirable behavioral outcomes can help gain a competitive advantage. Therefore, the main contribution of this research is to expand the knowledge about urban tourism branding by providing a valid conceptual model that investigates the above relationships in the field of branding of tourism destination cities.

2. Literature review: city brand love and memorable city brand experiences

Brand love includes “passion for the brand, attachment to the brand, positive evaluation of the brand, positive emotions in response to the brand, and declarations of love to brand” (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). Research shows that people can also love places, as depicted in one of the most successful marketing campaigns of all time, “I love New York.” Many studies have reported that love is a feeling displayed by people toward places, including cities (Strandberg and Styvén, 2019; Swanson, 2015) or resorts and tourist destinations (Amaro et al., 2020; Aro et al., 2018). These feelings signal love for a place and its values (Swanson, 2015). People may not explicitly express their love for a destination, but they exhibit emotions – such as exuberance when they arrive at the destination – which gives a clue about the love felt for that destination (Aro et al., 2018; Swanson, 2015).

In tourism, destination branding is very dynamic and constantly evolving, during the various interaction of the members of the destination ecosystem (Buhalis and Park, 2021). Love of the city begins after the tourists experience visiting the sights in the city. A friendly, clean and qualified city with adequate facilities possibly make someone loves the city. Someone who loves a city usually considers traveling to the city in the future, and it will improve tourists’ arrival (Ardyan and Susanti, 2018). The study focuses on city brand love and defines it as an emotional bond that is able to bring the desire to love a city.

City brand attractiveness has become an integral part of city branding strategies. The literature has discussed the parameters of the city brand attractiveness as a tourist destination (Giannopoulos et al., 2021). Kim et al. (2012) studied destination attractiveness, positing that it is shaped by the natural conditions of the destination, its accessibility and the attitude of local people. Communication features such as transportation as well as organizational and environmental services were among other factors studied by Gelbman and Timothy (2011). According to De Noni et al. (2014), nine factors contribute to the attractiveness of a city, including the level of safety, tourism supply, the quality of culture, the scale of internationalization, environmental quality, the quality of social services, the quality of health care, the quality of educational structures and the quality of job opportunities. Snieska and Zykiene (2015) argue that environmental quality, physical infrastructure, demographic features, unemployment rate, business sector, educational infrastructure, community and social and health services are attractive cities’ main characteristics. In this study, the city brand attractiveness is defined as tourists’ perception of the resources owned by the city and the city’s ability to manage and use the resources and obtain excellency from other cities (Snieska and Zykiene, 2015).
A brand experience refers to the sum of all interactions that a customer has with a particular brand (Andreini et al., 2019). This can include everything from the quality of the products or services offered, to the way that customer service is provided, to the design and messaging of the brand’s advertising and marketing materials. A brand experience can be positive, negative or neutral, depending on how well the brand delivers on its promises and meets the expectations of its customers (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). A memorable brand experience is one that stands out in the customer’s mind and creates a lasting impression. It goes beyond meeting expectations and instead exceeds them in a way that is unexpected, delightful or otherwise remarkable (Bueno et al., 2019; Chevtchouk et al., 2021). A memorable brand experience might be created through a particularly creative or innovative marketing campaign, a personalized interaction with a brand representative or a unique and memorable product or service offering. The goal of creating a memorable brand experience is to leave a lasting impression on the customer that will make them more likely to remember the brand and recommend it to others (Teng and Chen, 2023). While every brand experience contributes to the overall perception of a brand, a memorable brand experience is one that goes above and beyond to create a positive, lasting impression on the customer. It is an experience that is so remarkable that the customer is more likely to remember it and associate it with the brand in the future. Based on the definition of Hwang and Lee (2018), memorable experience in this study is defined as the perceptions and responses of tourists to a variety of events experienced in a city (related to tourist sites, facilities and public services in the city) that will not be forgotten for a long period.

Theoretically, the concept of city brand identification is borrowed from the social identity theory (SIT) presented by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Brands are used as symbols to express a person’s identity and lifestyle (Stets and Serpe, 2013). Like brands, destinations also have a specific identity (Buhalis and Park, 2021). In the tourism industry, identification is creating a meaningful connection between tourists and a place, based on which a tourist defines himself or herself in terms of that feeling (Zenker et al., 2017). A place’s culture, history, symbols, people and lifestyle can also be construed as a part of a tourist’s self-concept and reflect strong human symbolic values (Hultman et al., 2015). Tourists tend to identify themselves with specific places that manifest their identity. Therefore, tourists can see the meaning and characteristics of a place as part of their identity (Foroudi et al., 2018).

In this study, tourists’ identification with city brands is conceptualized in light of the tourist-destination identification literature. This is defined as the tourists’ psychological feelings of connectedness and belongingness with the destination (Japutra, 2022; Kumar and Kaushik, 2017). City brand identification is defined as the tourists’ psychological feelings of connectedness and belongingness to the city. City brand identification occurs when a tourist incorporates the attributes of a place into his or her personal identity (Zenker et al., 2017). These characteristics cover both the social and physical features of the city.

3. Hypotheses development

3.1 City brand attractiveness, city brand love, city brand identification and memorable city brand experience

Research has demonstrated that attractiveness can boost tourists’ positive evaluation of the destination (So et al., 2017; Wesselmann, 2018). Destination attractiveness can be construed as a competitive factor that seems to forge strong emotional ties and strengthen the identification of the tourist with the destination (Shafiee et al., 2021; Aro et al., 2018). The association between attractiveness and love for the destination brand has been explored in the literature. Accordingly, we assume:

\[ H1. \] City brand attractiveness is positively related to city brand love.
The association between attractiveness and brand identification has been further addressed in the consumer–brand literature. For example, Elbedweihy et al. (2016) and So et al. (2017) suggested that when consumers find a brand attractive, they are more likely to define their identity with it. In tourism, Shafiee et al. (2021) reported that the attractiveness of the destination can satisfy people’s self-defining needs, because attractive destinations bring many social benefits such as social prestige and positive social identity. Accordingly, we assume:

H2. City brand attractiveness is positively related to city brand identification.

A memorable experience is shaped when tourists perceive a desirable range of facilities while traveling to a city. In city branding, a number of features, such as infrastructure, local culture, accessibility, geography and climate, place attachment, entertainment, service quality, safety/security and hospitality, can develop a memorable tourism experience. The findings of a study by Ardyan and Susanti (2018) suggest that urban attractiveness can influence the tourists’ memorable experience of a city. Accordingly, we assume:

H3. City brand attractiveness is positively related to the memorable city brand experience.

3.2 City brand identification, memorable city brand experience and city brand love

In the tourism field, there is a predominant belief that the tourism experience is a way of engaging individuals to search for self-identity (Torres et al., 2017). Tourists’ interactions with each other and destination characteristics can have a bearing on tourist identity (White et al., 2020). Tourist destinations, even if visited only once, can influence the minds of tourists and leave a memorable experience (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Delicious food, the local environment and entertainment are some features of the destination that make a memorable experience (Lee, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). Studies have demonstrated the link between the memorable experience of a place and the tourist’s identification with that place (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2015; Shafiee et al., 2021). Accordingly, we assume:

H4. Memorable city brand experience is positively related to city brand identification.

Tourism literature has shown that a memorable tourism experience can form strong emotional bonds (Ardyan and Susanti, 2018). As reported in previous studies, tourists can express love for the city they have visited (Insch and Walters, 2018; Sadeque et al., 2022). Shafiee et al. (2021) underlined the positive effect of the cognitive and emotional dimensions and evaluated tourist-destination identification on love for the destination. They suggest that tourists seek to develop positive feelings and interests that are rooted in their identification with the cities they have visited and the semblance of the urban identity to that of their own. The results of a qualitative study in Dunedin, New Zealand, revealed that tourists tend to use the word “love” to express their attachment to a city they visited (Insch and Walters, 2018). This lends validity to the claim that tourists’ feeling of love for a city reflects their deep attachment and identification with the city. Finally, Sadeque et al.’s (2022) study showed that residents’ profound dependence on the city leads to their identification with the city’s brand. In the city branding context, this suggests that attaching the city’s identity to the residents’ identity can promote the city brand love. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5. Memorable city brand experience is positively related to city brand love.

H6. City brand identification is positively related to city brand love.

3.3 City brand love, word of mouth and revisit intention

WoM is a well-established concept in tourism marketing literature, with significant theoretical development that draws upon cognitive, emotional and interactionist
perspectives (Gannon et al., 2019). The most widely accepted definition of WoM is “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261). Likewise, revisit intention is defined as the behavioral intention of a visitor to visit the destination again in the future. It is often called the strongest indicator of destination loyalty (Van Dyk et al., 2019).

WoM and revisit intention is among the ultimate goals of destination marketing and tourism (Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2019; Amaro et al., 2020). Amaro et al. (2020) reiterated the positive effect of destination brand love on WoM and revisit intention. They included 20 interviews with tourists who expressed their love for three cities in the USA. The most favorable outcome of their love was a strong positive attitude toward the place and revisit intention. Aro et al. (2018) reported similar findings, concluding that participants were enthusiastic to spend time and money to visit a destination for which they developed strong feelings of love. In light of the above discussions, it can be assumed:

\[ H7. \text{ City brand love is positively related to word of mouth.} \]
\[ H8. \text{ City brand love is positively related to the revisit intention.} \]

Based on a review of the theoretical background and the abovementioned hypotheses, our conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

4. Methodology

This study consists of survey research and a cross-sectional study, drawing upon a questionnaire used to collect data from a sample of tourists visiting Iran. This study selected the cities of Iran with the most popular destinations, namely, Isfahan, Shiraz, Tehran, Mashhad, Rasht and Mazandaran. Based on the Statistics Centre of Iran (2021), these six cities were visited by more than 45% of foreign tourists in 2021 (amar.org.ir, 2021). By adopting previous studies, the questionnaire was created that included items measured with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from extremely disagree (1) to extremely agree (7).

The city brand attractiveness scale was borrowed from Ardyan and Susanti (2018) and Snieska and Zykiene (2015). To measure city brand identification, we used the study of Sadeque et al. (2022). The memorable city brand experience was measured by the scales introduced by Shafiee et al. (2021), Ardyan and Susanti (2018) and Zhang et al. (2018). City brand love was measured by using scales from Aro et al. (2018), Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and...
and Sadeque et al. (2022). The study also used the research of Anggraeni (2015) and Shafiee et al. (2021), to measure WoM and Kumar and Kaushik (2018) and Zhang et al. (2018), for revisit intention.

A cluster sampling method was used with regard to selected tourism zones in the selected cities. Tourist attractions and several hotels in each city were chosen to approach potential respondents. The ideal size of the sample was considered as 300 tourists. Five research assistants collected data, and 360 self-administered questionnaires were distributed among tourists. Of these, 350 were usable (97.2%). Data was gathered from March until May 2022, as this period of time usually shows a more significant number of tourists. The demographic data analysis by SPSS showed that tourists from Europe, Turkey and the Persian Gulf countries have traveled to Iran. Other demographic features of the statistical sample are illustrated, for foreign and domestic tourists separately, in Table 1.

5. Data analysis and results

The partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for this study. The analysis was carried out by including three processes that are PLS algorithms, bootstrapping and blindfolding using smart PLS 3.3.3 (Hair et al., 2019).

5.1 The measurement model

The measurement model was estimated to ensure a good model fit (see Table 4). The measurement model indicated a good model fit for the study, and further reliability and validity were examined. Table 2 summarizes the results of Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability (CR) and convergent validity (average variance extracted [AVE]). The values of more than 0.70 (Cronbach’s alpha and CR) and 0.50 (AVE) are often cited as good fit (Hair et al., 2014). CR in the measurement model was between 0.868 and 0.946, Cronbach’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Demographic profile</th>
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<td>Variable</td>
<td>Category</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>Men</td>
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<td>Women</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>26–35</td>
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<td>36–45</td>
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<td>46 and above</td>
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<td>Education</td>
<td>High school</td>
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<td>Bachelor</td>
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<td>PhD</td>
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<td>Marital status</td>
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<td>Travel the main purpose</td>
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Source: Research findings
alpha values depicting internal consistency were between 0.798 and 0.931 and AVE values indicating convergent validity were between 0.624 and 0.836.

Finally, the discriminant validity for the measurement model was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criteria where it was verified that the square root of AVE for each variable is more than their correlation values; it can be seen in Table 3.

All indices indicated a good model fit for the measurement model analysis, so further testing of the structural model analysis was conducted.

5.2 The structural model

The model’s overall goodness of fit (GoF) achieved from the outlines specified by Alolah et al. (2014) using the equation $\sqrt{\text{AVE}} \times R^2$ is 0.574. Using the equation, the AVE scores of
one exogenous construct and the average $R^2$ of the five endogenous constructs were considered to examine overall GoF. Deliberating the measures of GoF values of small at 0.1, medium at 0.25 and large at 0.36 (Wetzels et al., 2009), it can be said that the structural model has a good fit with large values. As depicted in Table 4, the GoF indices highlighted a good fit with the standardized root mean square (SRMR) value of less than the cut-off value of 0.8 (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The normed fit index (NFI) and rms theta values also depicted a good overall model fit (Figure 2).

The hypotheses of this study were analyzed through the bootstrapping procedure at resample rate of 5,000. Furthermore, the $R^2$ values depicted in Table 5 indicate moderate to high $R^2$ values for memorable city brand experience, WOM, revisit intention and city brand love (Table 6).

6. Discussion

The findings on the positive effect of city brand attractiveness on brand love are consistent with those reported by Ardyan and Farida (2016) (H1). Based on H1, it is evident that when city branding takes place, a significant amount of attention is paid to the way of developing different features of the city (health care, social services, culture, safety, environment, and educational quality). As a result of this attraction, tourists form emotionally attached bonds with the city brand and form passionate emotional bonds with it. Seeing the city managers’ efforts to improve the various qualities is making tourists fall in love. Through the various innovations, the quality of services, programs, and activities will be improved. It is important for city managers to develop qualified and interesting qualities to make their cities more attractive to newcomers. Observations from this study indicate that persons’ “self-definition” needs might be satisfied by city attractiveness (H2). It is due to the fact that attractive destinations produce many social benefits, such as a sense of status and a positive sense of identity. This conclusion is also supported by studies conducted by So et al. (2017), Elbedweihy et al. (2016), and Shafiee et al. (2021).

In H3, tourists’ memorable experiences can be influenced by the attractiveness of a city’s brand. Attractive tourist destinations are usually adored by tourists. Tourists are more likely to create lasting memories in exotic and attractive tourist destinations. Tourists who visit from Iran cities usually find the destination, and its facilities and services attractive, which

### Table 3 Discriminant analysis using Fornell–Larcker criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fornell-Larcker criterion constructs</th>
<th>CBA</th>
<th>CBI</th>
<th>CBE</th>
<th>CBL</th>
<th>WOM</th>
<th>RI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBA</td>
<td>0.810</td>
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<td>CBI</td>
<td>0.358</td>
<td>0.790</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBE</td>
<td>0.213</td>
<td>0.370</td>
<td>0.854</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBL</td>
<td>0.502</td>
<td>0.434</td>
<td>0.699</td>
<td>0.863</td>
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<tr>
<td>WOM</td>
<td>0.410</td>
<td>0.338</td>
<td>0.750</td>
<td>0.761</td>
<td>0.889</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>RI</td>
<td>0.321</td>
<td>0.268</td>
<td>0.760</td>
<td>0.749</td>
<td>0.776</td>
<td>0.914</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** CBA = city brand attractiveness; CBI = city brand identification; CBE = memorable city brand experience; CBL = city brand love; WOM = word of mouth; RI = revisit intention; Italicized values = The square of $R^2$

**Source:** Research findings

### Table 4 Model fit indices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model fit indices</th>
<th>Cut-off values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SRMR</td>
<td>$&lt;0.10$ (Hu and Bentler, 1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NFI</td>
<td>$&gt;0.90$ (Lohmöller, 1989)</td>
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<tr>
<td>rms Theta</td>
<td>$&lt;0.12$ (Henseler et al., 2015)</td>
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**Source:** Research findings
would carve a memorable experience in the mind of tourists. The results of Ardyan and Susanti (2018) are aligned with H3. The results are consistent with Kumar and Kaushik (2018) and Sthapit and Jimenez-Barreto (2018) that tourists experience the city brand memorable and want to identify with their surroundings (H4). According to SIT theory, one
of the aspects of tourist behavior is identification. A memorable experience can be created when tourists are able to interact positively and create pleasant moments to satisfy their need to define themselves. Tourism can be influenced by tourists’ memorable experiences (H5). Iran’s tourist destinations will not only make tourists happy, but they will also love them. Tourists feel connected to the cities they visit if they love them. After visiting cities that have left them with unforgettable experiences, they tend to feel fascinated and happy. City brand love may be explained by tourists’ identification with a city brand, which suggests they are interested in developing positive feelings and interests in cities similar to their self-identities. H6 is supported by the studies of Swanson (2017) and Aro et al. (2018).

City brand love has a positive effect on WoM and revisit intention. Tourists who develop a relationship emotionally and effectively with cities will not only desire to visit the city again but also offer useful recommendations about the city and share their experiences with others in a variety of ways. The city can enhance its visibility to a greater extent, more than through any other marketing mechanism. Carroll and Ahuvia’s (2006) research findings corroborate this statement in a nontourism-related setting.

6.1 Theoretical contribution

This research shows several theoretical contributions. First, this study represents a response to the gap in research on brand love in other consumer categories and the need to identify the antecedents and consequences of city brand love (Amaro et al., 2020). Therefore, informed by the consumer–brand relationship literature, the present study outlines a valid framework for city brand love, its main antecedents and consequences to explain what factors cause tourists’ love for a city brand and the behavioral outcomes associated with this love. A city’s memorable experience and attractiveness are among the key factors that enable tourists to join groups in these cities, maintain communication with them and therefore feel a sense of belonging to the city. Cities with a strong identity can forge strong bonds with tourists, and many tourists travel to different cities every year to define their identity in relation to these tourist cities (Ardyan and Susanti, 2018; Sadeque et al., 2022). Second, this study shed light on the mediating role of memorable experiences and identification with the city brand. City brand attractiveness and experience, in addition to being a direct antecedent to city brand love, can arouse love for the city brand by stimulating a person’s identification with the city brand (Shafiee et al., 2021).

Third, this research is also of great significance for those who study Iran as a tourist destination because Iran up to now has been an underresearched destination that is rarely investigated. The research provides an understanding of the most influential factors relating to city brand love, WoM and revisit intention. For the purpose of generalization, we tested our model by collecting data from foreign tourists, who visited Iran’s most popular tourism destinations. Fourth, this study shows that to develop city brand love amongst tourists, the city authorities must pay special attention to the physical attributes and services provided in the city. Prior research in city branding has not investigated the nonmarketer-controlled city elements that contribute to city branding (Green et al., 2018). This study empirically investigates the effects of these city elements on city brand love.

Fifth, brand love can lead to several benefits including positive WoM, revisit intention and more significant brand loyalty. In the context of city branding, this implies that tourists who show greater city brand love are more likely to remain in the city and engage in positive behaviors. Findings indicate that the antecedents of city brand love formation are city attractiveness, which, in turn, is influenced by city identification and city experience. This is consistent with the finding that city-related attributes influence city identification (Shafiee et al., 2021). Finally, these results also clarify inconsistent conclusions in the literature about whether satisfied or dissatisfied tourists are more likely to engage in WOM (Sadeque et al., 2022). In fact, the scope of WoM is a major consequence of city brand love, espousing the
view that discontented tourists actively engaged in negative WoM. Highly satisfied ones can also generate significantly higher levels of positive WOM as opposed to disgruntled tourists.

6.2 Practical contribution

City tourism practitioners can implement the findings to gain a more comprehensive understanding of city branding through the study. Developing strong bonds with tourists is a major challenge for the tourism industry. In order for such bonds to develop, a love for the city brand is critical. Every year a host of tourists travel to various cities, share their experiences and evaluate their attractiveness so that they can find their identity in those cities. To ensure that the selected tourist cities are being evaluated periodically both from the perspective of tourist perceptions and from the perspective of physical characteristics, managers and policymakers of tourism cities should commit to doing so. The image of a city can greatly influence tourists’ behavior, such as love for the city brand (Jawahar et al., 2020).

The importance of love and its antecedents and consequences should be at the center of any city tourism plan. Tourism managers should take into account the emotional bond tourists have with their destinations if they want to develop long-term relationships. It is important to recognize the role destination management organizations (DMOs) can play in addressing this issue in light of the competitive nature of tourist cities.

Destination studies in emerging nations, like Iran, can help tourism-related businesses achieve sizable financial advances. Iranian tourism cities have marvelous historical characteristics, cultural wealth and a great ability to draw tourists throughout the year. Therefore, it becomes more important to promote a sense of love in tourists and powerful emotional bonds. DMOs must invest in these cities’ tourism draws, such as the museums, national parks, gardens and events that highlight their cultural legacy. Making an engaging video that can be shared on social media is the first stage in producing an engrossing piece about a city or tourism destination. To ensure tourists identify with these cities and share their love for them, a DMO should take into account a number of initiatives, such as scheduling social events on particular days; running joint marketing campaigns to draw tourists to these events; showcasing local products, handicrafts, souvenirs and customs; and using branding strategies to elevate their cities into destination brands.

Tourism cities rely on tourists for identification with their brands, which is why policymakers should ensure that they do not lose sight of the importance of their brands for tourists. Different campaigns, local-national festivals and events, like Nowruz (Iranian New Year), Yalda (the longest night of the year), and other holidays could be used to give them a unique identity. Handicraft gifts (e.g. bookmarks featuring the shrine of Hafez or coins featuring prominent city landmarks) and rewards (e.g. vouchers to restaurants and hotels) should be offered. As memorable experiences contribute to the creation of a city brand, social networks appear to be an effective tool for enhancing tourists’ experiences of tourist cities and promoting their identification with the city. It may be possible to launch a similar campaign in Iran’s tourist cities and places with memorable and attractive content and motivate tourists to share their experiences on social networks. To improve tourist identification and experience with tourist cities, it is helpful to establish long-term friendships with tourists who have already visited these cities. Providing a wealth of information about tourism destinations by describing their backgrounds and collecting feedback from tourists (especially celebrities) who have already visited can be used in advertisements. Joint brand advertising with partners can also amplify the brand love (Can et al., 2020).

When choosing a city to visit, tourists have sophisticated criteria. So, to strengthen the relationship between tourists and tourism destinations, planners should use tools that measure emotional bonds and boost emotional bonds such as love. As a result, tourists can develop long-term relationships with their cities by developing a love for them, which
encourages positive behavior such as WoM and revisit intentions. Finally, improving the attractiveness of city brands, such as transportation facilities and infrastructure, providing diverse accommodation services and improving services in tourist cities should be on the agenda of managers’ plans to delineate destination policies for the long term. In addition to providing economic returns, investing in the infrastructure of a city, such as accommodations and transportation, can help develop the urban tourism industry. In particular, technological advancements and the growth of tourism industries have a direct correlation, particularly in developing countries.

6.3 Limitations and future recommendations

The present study has limitations. Because this research was conducted in Iran, it is possible that the results of this study will be different if it is implemented in other countries. As one of the ancient countries, Iran has well-known historical civilizations and is an internationally recognized tourism destination. To compare the findings and develop the model, this study should be repeated in other tourism cities, especially in developing countries. Further studies can be conducted in developed countries (such as the UK, France, Germany or Italy) to generalize results. The results of this study should be compared with those of other tourist cities. The data collected for this study were cross-sectional and nonexperimental. Although SEM allows us to postulate cause-and-effect relationships, these should be reported cautiously. Future research will benefit from collecting longitudinal and experimental data to measure the direction of causality among the relationships more precisely.

References


Further reading


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