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Assessing the UNESCO Brand: A Customer-Based Brand Equity Perspective on World Heritage Tourism

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of various dimensions of brand equity, namely brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and brand quality, on travel intentions and brand value of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Design/methodology/approach: The research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a survey to collect data from tourists who have visited at least one UNESCO World Heritage Site. The data was analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses.

Findings: The results indicate that destination brand quality and destination brand loyalty positively influence both destination brand value and travel intentions. However, destination brand awareness and destination brand image were found to have no significant impact on either brand value or travel intentions.

Practical implications: The findings suggest that destination managers should prioritize enhancing the quality of visitor experiences and fostering loyalty to attract more tourists to

World Heritage Sites. The study also highlights the importance of effective communication strategies to increase brand awareness and create a strong brand image for these sites.

Originality/value: The study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between different dimensions of brand equity and travel intentions in the specific context of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The findings offer valuable insights for destination managers and policymakers in their efforts to promote and preserve these culturally and historically significant sites.

Keywords: Customer-based brand equity; Destination brand equity; Travel intention; World Heritage.

1. Introduction

Tourism branding is vital for attracting visitors. To gain a competitive edge, destination managers focus on promoting local brands (Fyall & Rakic, 2006). One strategy is seeking World Heritage status for local attractions, a "quality brand" associated with increased tourism (Ryan & Silvanto, 2009, 2014; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2008).

The World Heritage (WH) brand has been the subject of many studies. Some authors describe the WH brand as a top brand, a strong brand, and a powerful marketing tool (Fyall & Rakic, 2006; Buckley, 2018). Other authors question the value of this brand (Poria et al., 2011; King & Halpenny, 2014). The impact of the inclusion of a site on the World Heritage List on international and domestic tourist flow has been studied by many authors. However, while some studies have found an increase in tourist flow to the site (Yang et al., 2010, Su & Lin, 2014), others have found no such effect (Huang et al., 2012). At the same time, some authors have found that the WH brand has a greater impact on tourism development in developing countries (Yang & Lin, 2014) compared to developed countries. Additionally, several researchers have covered the topic of WH brand awareness among tourists (Poria et al., 2011; King & Halpenny, 2014), noting the low level of brand awareness. Moreover, much of the existing research has primarily focused on what effects designation have on local destinations (Mariani & Guizzardi, 2020), where UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS) are located, rather than analyzing WHS as a destination.

Considering the opposite views on WH brand value and its influence on tourism behavior, it is necessary to propose a comprehensive framework for evaluating World Heritage brand equity from the tourist´s perspective. Many different Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) models have been developed and widely applied to commercial and destination contexts, but their application to the UNESCO World Heritage brand remains limited. Some studies have examined some dimensions of brand equity of World Heritage brand, particularly awareness; however, there is limited understanding of how all dimensions of brand equity interact within the specific context of UNESCO World Heritage sites and how they influence brand value and travel intentions. Addressing this gap is crucial, as it can provide valuable insights for destination managers and shareholders on how to enhance the attractiveness of World Heritage sites for tourists, ultimately contributing to the promotion and preservation of these unique and historically significant places.

This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing the destination brand equity of UNESCO World Heritage sites and investigating how the dimensions of destination brand equity and brand value affect travel intentions. The research questions guiding this study are: 1) What role do different dimensions of brand equity play in shaping the brand value of UNESCO World Heritage sites? How do different dimensions of brand equity, particularly brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand quality, and brand value of UNESCO World Heritage sites, influence travel intentions?

To address these questions, this research will employ the CBBE model, developed in the works of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) and applied to a destination by Konecnik and Garther (2007) and Boo et al. (2009). This model will be instrumental in examining the variables related to brand equity and brand value. Methodologically, this research will utilize surveys to gather data from tourists who have visited UNESCO World Heritage sites, capturing their perceptions of the brand. Then the gathered data will be analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The research findings will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on destination brand equity by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between different dimensions of brand equity and brand value and travel intentions. Moreover, they will contribute to the studies on World Heritage by providing data regarding how tourists value the World Heritage brand as a destination brand and how that view affects their plans to visit it. Additionally, this research will provide practical recommendations for enhancing the management and promotion of World Heritage as a travel destination.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1 Customer-based brand equity and destination brand equity

In both academic and marketing contexts, brand equity is regarded as an important concept since it can play a major role in determining a brand's strength and position in the market (Lassar et al., 1995). Generally, brand equity refers to "value added to a product by its brand name" (Yoo & Donthu, 2001, 1). This value can be evaluated from both financial and consumer-based perspectives (Lassar et al., 1995). Aaker (1991, p. 15) defines brand equity, commonly referred as Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol, which add to or subtract from the value provided by a producer, by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers". Moreover, Aaker (1991) identifies five dimensions of brand equity: brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and other proprietary brand assets.

Keller (1993) further developed the concept of brand equity by focusing on the consumer perspective. He defines CBBE as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Keller, 1993, p. 8). Keller's (1993) CBBE model is structured as a pyramid that illustrates four stages of brand development: brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand resonance.

Though they both emphasize the importance of brand equity, Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) take distinct approaches to it. Aaker's model (1991) is commonly applied to measure and manage brand equity by focusing on tangible assets like brand loyalty and perceived quality (Dedeoğlu et al., 2019). Keller's model (1993), on the other hand, is more focused on brand knowledge, particularly how brand knowledge affects consumer behavior.

Despite the significant contributions by Aaker and Keller, the measurement of brand equity remains a topic of debate (Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Lassar et al., 1995). In order to address the lack of agreement on brand equity measurement, Yoo and Donthu (2001), recognizing the complexity of the concept, developed a multidimensional brand equity scale that integrates ideas from both Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993). Lassar et al. (1995) further expanded the understanding of brand equity and proposed alternative dimensions such as performance, social image, price/value, trustworthiness, and identification/attachment.

Since destination branding has become a significant focus within tourism research, scholars recognize the importance of brand equity in managing tourism destinations (Pike, 2010; Dias et al., 2021). The application of CBBE to destinations makes it possible to assess the

4

destination's brand performance, which is essential for influencing brand development and evaluating marketing effectiveness (Chekalina et al. 2018). Konecnik and Gartner (2007) were first in applying the CBBE model to tourism destinations. Their study demonstrated how brand dimensions may be used to assess destination brand equity from the tourist perspective (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Bianchi & Pike, 2011).

The CBBE model has been employed to a variety of tourism locations and destinations since it was first implemented, demonstrating its adaptability to a number of different tourism contexts. For example, studies have applied the CBBE model to hotels (Kim & Kim, 2005), restaurants (Kim & Kim, 2005), museums (Liu et al., 2015), cities (Boo et al., 2009; Kladou & Kehagias, 2014), regions (Kaushal et al., 2019), and countries (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Pike & Bianchi, 2016; Im et al., 2012).

Furthermore, a number of studies have attempted to determine the CBBE dimensions and the connections between them in the context of destination brands. (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Boo et al., 2009; Pike, 2009; Bianchi & Pike, 2011; Im et al., 2012; Bianchi et al., 2014; Chekalina et al., 2018).

2.2 The influence of destination brand equity on visitor behaviour

Like CBBE research, destination brand equity studies are greatly challenged by a lack of universally accepted measurement tools (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Dedeoğlu et al., 2019). Early studies, such as those by Konecnik and Gartner (2007**)** and Pike (2009)**,** primarily focused on core dimensions adopted from Aaker (1991) without incorporating any tourism-specific measurement scales. Most destination brand equity studies employed the same framework. Recent studies have tried to expand it by incorporating additional dimensions like brand value, brand experience, and trust (Boo et al., 2009; Chekalina et al., 2018; Dedeoğlu et al., 2019). San Martín et al. (2019) expanded the application of the CBBE model by exploring the relationships among brand equity dimensions, travel involvement, satisfaction, and visit intentions. Their studies highlighted the complex interplay between brand equity and tourist behaviors, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of these relationships. Highlighting the importance of cultural brand assets, Kladou and Kehagias (2014) expanded Aaker's brand equity model to cultural heritage sites. This study shows how the CBBE model may be modified and applied to specific destination contexts, indicating that it can be useful for analyzing UNESCO World Heritage brand.

Recent research advances reinforce that UNESCO-related brand equity should be interpreted beyond classical destination branding lenses. Trust in the World Heritage (WH) brand demonstrably shapes visitors' evaluations and behavioral responses, with perceived site quality emerging as a key determinant of perceived value (Sousa & Rodrigues, 2024). Concurrently, WHS brand formation and diffusion increasingly unfold through social media dynamics—user-generated content, opinion leaders, and event-driven spikes—revealing branding mechanisms that extend well past traditional communications (Wang et al., 2024). Studies also position WH as a prominent tourism brand while unpacking determinants of branding strategies for cultural assets and visitor engagement (Hassan, Zerva, & Aulet, 2025). At the system level, evidence shows accreditation and complementary labels can influence tourism attractiveness (De Simone, Giua, & Vaquero-Piñeiro, 2024), while comparative work on global heritage schemes (e.g., FAO-GIAHS) highlights how different heritage labels vary in their symbolic cues and tourism potential (Yotsumoto & Vafadari, 2021). Macro-level analyses further indicate that WH inscription can enhance regional tourism, with effects contingent on context and enabling public services (Zhang, Cheng, & Zhang, 2023). Finally, critical heritage scholarship situates UNESCO as a producer of "heritage brands," drawing attention to policy shifts and the politics of recognition that also shape how brand equity is perceived and mobilized (Santamarina, 2023).

Brand image is key in shaping consumer behavior (Keller, 1993). While destination branding is newer, destination image studies date back to the 1970s (Cai, 2002). Today, research takes a balanced approach examining all aspects of destination brand equity (Im et al., 2012). Destination image is the beliefs people have about a place (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). More positive images lead to stronger connections (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). It's a vital part of destination brand equity (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). However, a universally accepted definition and measurement scale for destination image is lacking (Gallarza et al., 2002). It has functional (tangible) and psychological (intangible) dimensions (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Others focus on social and self-image, linking image congruence to satisfaction (Lee & Back, 2010).

Destination image is widely accepted as crucial in travel decisions (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Im et al., 2012). Positive images influence travel intentions and satisfaction (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Baloglu et al., 2014). Brand image relates to destination brand value, but the connection between destination brand image and value needs more research (Boo et al., 2009). The

UNESCO World Heritage designation can boost brand image (Ryan & Silvanto, 2009; Fyall & Rakic, 2006). However, its impact on travel intentions needs further study. Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Destination brand image has a positive influence on destination brand value

H2. Destination brand image has a positive influence on travel intentions

Brand awareness is crucial in destination marketing (Aaker, 1991). It's how much customers know a brand and its influence on their choices (Aaker, 1991). It includes brand knowledge, recognition, and recall (Im et al., 2012).

Creating brand awareness is key in destination marketing, as it's the first step in building brand equity and influencing travel intentions (Yuan & Jang, 2008). Effective marketing aims to increase awareness through strategic advertising and branding (Bianchi & Pike, 2011). However, while essential, brand awareness doesn't always lead to travel decisions, sometimes only generating curiosity (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

Some suggest brand awareness contributes to brand value but lack empirical evidence (Buil et al., 2013). Others found no significant relationship between destination brand awareness and value (Boo et al., 2009). Research on WH brand awareness and its impact on travel decisions shows mixed results. Some found low awareness and little influence (Dewar et al., 2012; Marcotte & Bourdeau, 2006). Others found the WH status did impact travel decisions (Yan & Morrison, 2008). Given these contradictory findings, it's necessary to test these relationships in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage brand. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3. Destination brand awareness has a positive influence on destination brand value

H4. Destination brand awareness has a positive influence on travel intentions

Brand quality is a key part of brand equity (Keller, 2003; Aaker, 1996; Boo et al., 2009). It's often linked to perceived quality, which is how customers view the overall quality of a product or service (Aaker, 1991). Destination brand quality is multifaceted, encompassing both experiential and service aspects (Chen & Chen, 2010; Lewis & Chambers, 1989). It's also tied to the perceived quality of a destination's attributes, like accommodations and safety (Bianchi et al., 2014). Measuring destination brand quality is challenging but crucial (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Studies use various metrics like price fairness and service quality (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007). Brand quality should be assessed through brand

performance, focusing on how well a destination meets tourists' needs (Boo et al., 2009; Keller, 2003).

Brand quality is important as it influences consumer behavior, including travel intentions, and impacts perceived value, loyalty, and satisfaction (Low & Lamb, 2000). High-quality services enhance perceived functional value (Dedeoğlu et al., 2019). Satisfaction mediates the relationship between brand quality and behavioral intentions (Yuan & Jang, 2008), though this isn't universally accepted (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Research on brand quality's direct impact on brand value and travel intentions is limited. The complex nature of brand quality and lack of a unified approach to quality on WHS have hindered studies on its influence on brand value and travel intentions. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5. Destination brand quality has a positive influence on destination brand value
H6. Destination brand quality has a positive influence on travel intentions

Destination brand loyalty, similar to traditional brand loyalty, is the attachment a consumer has to a destination. It impacts engagement, perceived value, and brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Boo et al., 2009). Brand equity can enhance loyalty and justify premium pricing (Lassar et al., 1995).

In tourism, destination brand loyalty influences repeat visits and recommendations (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Research focuses on its relationship with other brand equity dimensions and influencing factors (Bianchi & Pike, 2011; Buil et al., 2013). However, a universally accepted definition and measurement scale is lacking (Baloglu, 2001; Boo et al., 2009).

Destination brand loyalty is often studied as behavioral (repeat visits) or attitudinal (positive feelings) loyalty (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Both approaches have limitations. This paper focuses on attitudinal loyalty towards UNESCO World Heritage Sites and its impact on travel intentions to other WHS. While visit intentions can indicate attitudinal loyalty (Baloglu, 2001), this study distinguishes them using willingness to recommend and positive feelings as indicators of destination brand loyalty. Furthermore, the influence of destination brand loyalty on brand value needs more research. Therefore, we propose two hypotheses:

H7. Destination brand loyalty has a positive influence on destination brand value
H8. Destination brand loyalty has a positive influence on travel intentions

It is important to distinguish between destination brand loyalty and travel intention, as these constructs, while related, capture different aspects of tourist behavior. Destination brand loyalty primarily reflects an attitudinal attachment or emotional commitment toward a brand or destination, often expressed through positive evaluations and word-of-mouth recommendations (Baloglu, 2001; Boo et al., 2009). In contrast, travel intention represents a future behavioral tendency to visit, which may or may not stem directly from loyalty (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Although loyal tourists are more likely to express strong travel intentions, the two constructs remain conceptually distinct. Loyalty emphasizes enduring affective ties, whereas travel intention focuses on future action or choice behavior.

Destination brand value is the visitor's assessment of the trip's worth, considering benefits and costs (Lassar et al., 1995; Chen & Tsai, 2007). It's multifaceted, but lacks universally accepted dimensions and measurements. Common value dimensions include functional, monetary, emotional, social, and epistemic value (Williams & Soutar, 2009). Destination brand value is also measured through value for money and pricing perceptions (Boo et al., 2009). Aaker (1996) suggests comparing a brand's value to its competitors. Some incorporate destination brand value into a CBBE model (Boo et al., 2009). This research adopts a similar approach.

Brand value positively influences brand loyalty, directly or through satisfaction (Boo et al., 2009). It also mediates the relationship between brand experience/quality and loyalty (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Liu et al., 2015). Moreover, brand value impacts future travel intentions, sometimes bypassing satisfaction (Williams & Soutar, 2009). Based on these findings, we propose the following hypothesis regarding the World Heritage brand:

H9. Destination brand value has a positive influence on travel intentions

In order to build a solid and reliable model for evaluating how tourists perceive the UNESCO World Heritage brand and how it impacts their travel intentions, first, a literature review was conducted to identify the dimensions of the destination brand equity. Then, nine hypotheses were proposed once the most suitable dimensions and variables had been determined.

Despite the valuable insights from previous studies, the literature reveals inconsistencies and gaps regarding the role and value of heritage-related brands. For instance, while several authors emphasize the positive marketing power of the UNESCO designation (Fyall & Rakic, 2006; Ryan & Silvanto, 2009), others question its tangible benefits for tourism development (Poria et al., 2011; King & Halpenny, 2014). Furthermore, compared with other heritage or quality

certifications—such as national heritage labels or eco-certifications, the UNESCO brand represents a distinctive form of global cultural recognition grounded in notions of authenticity, stewardship, and outstanding universal value (Buckley, 2018; Mariani & Guizzardi, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1 Measures

Measures we adapted from existing scales. The measurement of destination brand awareness is composed of four items, adapted from the studies of Boo et al. (2009), Yoo and Donthu (2001), and Konecnik and Gartner (2007). Five destination brand image items derived from studies of Boo et al. (2009) and Lassar et al. (1995). Destination brand quality was calculated using five items formulated from Boo et al. (2009), Konecnik and Gartner (2007), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), and Lassar et al. (1995). Three destination brand loyalty items were adapted from Boo et al. (2009) and Konecnik and Gartner (2007). Three travel intention items were based on Lam and Hsu (2006). Five items of destination brand value were derived from Boo et al. (2009), Oh (2000), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), and Lassar et al. (1995). All of the items used in the survey were measured using 5-point Likert-type scales, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 - strongly agree. The questionnaire items are in the appendix.

After initial selection of items for each dimension, the pre-testing was conducted to ensure clarity of the questions and their appropriateness for the research. A group of fifty respondents, who have previously visited at least one WHS, completed an initial draft of the survey and gave feedback regarding chosen items. A total of 25 items were used in the pretest survey. No issues were found regarding wording, clarity of questions, or layout of the survey.

3.2 Data Collection

The survey was conducted between April and June 2024 and distributed online via various channels. It was designed using Google Forms—a well-known platform with a user-friendly interface. This platform was chosen because of its connection to a popular and widely-used search engine, which helped increase the response rate from the email distribution of the survey, as people assumed it was legitimate. Respondents were encouraged to share the survey through their personal connections and social media pages to help increase the number of responses.

10

Additionally, the survey link was shared in groups related to travel and education, as well as in relevant discussion threads on social media sites like Facebook and Reddit. A small number of responses was collected in person and later manually introduced into an online survey form for further analysis.

The survey was voluntary, anonymous, and was submitted upon its full completion. Survey respondents had to be over 18 years old and had to visit at least one UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, in the survey, respondents were also asked questions related to their age and a number of visits to the WHS to ensure validity of their responses. In total, 195 questionnaires were distributed, and after eliminating incomplete or useless questionnaires, the final sample comprised of 152 valid responses. Thus, the response rate was 78%.

3.3. Data Analysis

Table 1 shows the sample descriptives and its distribution on gender, age, nationality, education and occupation. While the sample presented a predominance of female and highly educated respondents, such characteristics are not unusual in online survey-based studies exploring perceptions of brand equity and cultural tourism (Boo et al., 2009; Bianchi & Pike, 2011). Moreover, previous research indicates that individuals with higher educational attainment often display greater awareness of heritage values and stronger engagement with UNESCO-related issues (Sousa & Rodrigues, 2024). Therefore, although the present sample may not fully represent the global tourist population visiting World Heritage Sites, it remains appropriate for exploratory analysis of perceptual constructs such as brand image, loyalty, and perceived quality. Future research could complement this quantitative approach with qualitative methods, such as open-ended questionnaires or interviews, to deepen contextual understanding.

Characteristics		n	%
Gender	Female	125	82,2
	Male	23	15,1
	Prefer not so say	4	2,6
Age	18 - 27 years	73	48,0
	28 - 44 years	57	37,5
	45 - 64 years	22	14,5
Nationality	Asia	17	11,2
	Europe	133	87,5
	North/South America	2	1,3
Education	Complete school education (High school)	30	19,7

	Postgraduate degree	72	47,3
	Undergraduate degree	50	32,9
Occupation	Employed	110	72,3
	Student	35	23,0
	Unemployed/retired	7	4,6
Did you visit any WHS in the past year?	No	47	30,9
	Yes	105	69,1
How many WHS have you visited?	1-2	57	37,5
	3-5	52	34,2
	6-10	20	13,2
	More than 10	23	15,1

Table 1 Sample characteristics

The survey's raw data was analyzed in SmartPLS 4.0 using PLS-SEM, suitable for complex models and prediction-oriented research (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Evaluation occurred in two stages. First, the measurement model's validity and reliability were assessed using composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, AVE, and discriminant validity criteria (Henseler, 2017). Second, the structural model was evaluated. The endogenous constructs' R^2 values indicated predictive accuracy. Path coefficients and their significance determined hypothesis acceptance or rejection (Henseler, 2017).

Additionally, IPMA was conducted to gain further insights. It allows simultaneous analysis of construct performance and significance (Hauff et al., 2024). The IPMA identifies underperforming yet highly relevant constructs, highlighting areas needing improvement (Schloderer et al., 2014).

4. Results

4.1 Measurement model

First, Harman's single-factor test was employed to assess common method bias. The results indicated that a single factor explained only 35.727% of the variance, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to significantly impact the study's findings (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

All items demonstrated strong standardized factor loadings exceeding 0.6, with the lowest being 0.66, and all were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This supports the reliability of the individual indicators (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). All variables exhibited Cronbach's alpha values above 0.64, indicating adequate reliability, though the ideal value is 0.70 (Taber, 2018). Composite reliability results further confirmed internal consistency, with most constructs exceeding 0.7. The exception was destination brand image (DBI) at 0.66, which is still

acceptable (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The model demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency reliability across all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values surpassing 0.64 and CR values generally exceeding 0.7.

Furthermore, the measurement model has good convergent validity since the average variance extracted (AVE) of each variable ranges from 0,518 to 0,794, all of which are above the acceptable threshold of 0,5 (Henseler, 2017).

Discriminant validity was assessed using two established approaches: the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). The square root of each AVE is greater than the highest correlation with any other construct, fulfilling the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity. Additionally, all HTMT values remain below the predefined threshold of 0.85, further confirming discriminant validity.

4.3. Structural model analysis

First, the structural model was assessed for collinearity issues. All variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 3, indicating no collinearity (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Bootstrapping with 5000 samples was employed to test the significance of path coefficients (Hair et al., 2024). Table 2. presents the results, showing significant structural correlations. The R^2 values of endogenous variables, ranging from 0.390 to 0.519, indicated moderate predictive accuracy for the structural model (Sarstedt et al., 2022).

Hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, and H9 were rejected due to p-values exceeding 0.05. However, H7 and H8 were supported, demonstrating a significant positive impact of destination brand loyalty on destination brand value and travel intentions. Similarly, H5 and H6 were supported, showing a positive effect of destination brand quality on both value and intentions.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient	Standard deviation (STDEV)	t-statistic	P values	Result
H1. DBI -> DBV	0,047	0,085	0,560	0,576	Rejected
H2. DBI -> TI	0,167	0,100	1,669	0,095	Rejected
H3. DBA -> DBV	0,148	0,083	1,796	0,073	Rejected
H4. DBA -> TI	0,077	0,080	0,968	0,333	Rejected

H5. DBQ -> DBV	0,382	0,089	4,283	**0,000**	**Accepted**
H6. DBQ -> TI	0,196	0,100	1,966	**0,049**	**Accepted**
H7. DBL -> DBV	0,316	0,078	4,052	**0,000**	**Accepted**
H8. DBL -> TI	0,415	0,090	4,609	**0,000**	**Accepted**
H9. DBV -> TI	-0,103	0,102	1,003	0,316	Rejected

Significant at p < 0,05

Table 2. Results of structural model and hypotheses test.

4.2 Importance–performance matrix analysis

The IPMA was also employed in this research to extend the PLS-SEM results by taking into account each construct's performance, which was measured on a scale from 0 to 100 (Schloderer et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2024; Hauff et al., 2024). Then the average values of the latent variable scores (performance) and the total effect (importance) for a particular criterion construct were evaluated in order to identify important areas where management actions need to be improved (Schloderer et al., 2014). The two target constructs chosen for an importance-performance matrix analysis are travel intentions and destination brand value. Table 3, show the IPMA results of these two target constructs.

	Destination brand value (DBV)		Travel intentions (TI)	
	Total effect	**Performance**	**Total effect**	**Performance**
DBA	0,148	52,151	0,062	52,151
DBI	0,047	54,913	0,162	54,913
DBL	0,047	81,263	0,382	81,263
DBQ	0,382	70,852	0,157	70,852
DBV			-0,103	67,149

Table 3. The IPMA results for travel intentions and destination brand value

The results highlight destination brand loyalty as the top performer, scoring 81.263 for both travel intentions and destination brand value. In contrast, destination brand awareness and image show the weakest performance. Total effect results further emphasize the importance of destination brand loyalty, with the highest impact on travel intentions (0.382). Destination brand awareness has a notably low effect, and destination brand value shows a negative effect, confirming its lack of influence on travel intentions.

14

For destination brand value, the IPMA reveals the strongest total effect from destination brand quality (0.382), followed by destination brand loyalty (0.316). In contrast, destination brand image has the smallest effect on travel intentions. Overall, the IPMA indicates that all four dimensions of destination brand equity influence both travel intentions and destination brand value. While destination brand loyalty performs well, there's room for improvement in brand quality, image, and awareness. Management efforts should prioritize enhancing these three variables to boost UNESCO World Heritage brand value and encourage visits to WHS.

5. Discussion

This study sought to investigate the influence of various dimensions of brand equity—specifically brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and brand quality—on travel intentions and perceived brand value of the UNESCO World Heritage brand, as well as in what ways the destination brand value affects tourists' travel intentions.

Firstly, the findings reveal that destination brand quality positively impacts both destination brand value and travel intentions. The positive influence of destination brand quality on both destination brand value and travel intentions aligns with existing theories in the field of tourism and brand management (Low & Lamb, 2000; Dedeoğlu et al., 2019). High-quality brands are often perceived as more reliable and desirable, which enhances their overall value and attracts potential visitors (Aaker, 1991; Dedeoğlu et al., 2019) and entrepreneurs (Dias et al., 2025). The positive influence of brand quality on brand value and travel intentions underscores the importance of maintaining high standards for the amenities, experiences, and services offered at UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Secondly, destination brand loyalty was found to positively influence both destination brand value and travel intentions. This finding expands the work of Yoon and Uysal (2005) and Bianchi et al. (2014), who emphasized the importance of loyalty in destination marketing by demonstrating that brand loyalty not only enhances brand value but also translates into travel intentions. These findings seem to indicate that positive attitudes can lead tourists to visit other WHS and potentially advocate for their protection. However, because brand loyalty and visit intentions are sometimes closely associated (Baloglu, 2001), the links between the two concepts need to be examined further across different contexts.

Thirdly, the study found no significant influence of destination brand awareness and destination brand image on brand value and travel intentions. This finding indicates that while awareness and a positive image are necessary for initial recognition, they do not necessarily translate into tangible outcomes such as increased travel intentions without the reinforcement of high quality and loyalty. These findings contradict Chen and Tsai's (2007) and Im's et al. (2012) statements about the key role of brand image in tourists' travel intentions. However, in the case of brand awareness, both in the context of UNESCO World Heritage brand and general destination brand equity studies (Milman & Pizam, 1995), this result aligns with Poria et al. (2011), Marcotte and Bourdeau (2006), and Dewar et al. (2012) finding that argue that there is little evidence that the awareness of designation has had a major impact on the motivation to visit WHS. Research findings also support Boo et al.'s (2009) claim that there is no statistically

significant correlation between destination brand awareness and destination brand value. These findings may be interpreted through the symbolic nature of the UNESCO brand. Unlike commercial or destination brands that rely on strong marketing visibility, the UNESCO label functions as a certification of authenticity and heritage value (Fyall & Rakic, 2006; Buckley, 2018). As such, tourists may perceive it as a universal trust mark rather than an actively promoted tourism brand. This can weaken the direct effect of brand image and awareness on behavioral intentions, as visitors often associate UNESCO sites with cultural importance rather than personal consumption choice (Poria et al., 2011; King & Halpenny, 2014). Moreover, the global ubiquity of the UNESCO label may lead to a certain degree of brand dilution, its meaning becomes taken for granted rather than distinctive.

From a critical perspective, these findings also invite reflection on the limits of managerial and institutional approaches to heritage branding. The *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO, 2025) emphasize sustainable management, authenticity, and participatory governance as the foundation for preserving Outstanding Universal Value (§§96–119, 211–216). However, recent studies reveal that the translation of these principles into practice remains uneven, as marketing imperatives often overshadow long-term conservation goals (Santamarina, 2023; Hassan et al., 2025). The weak influence of brand image and awareness observed in this study may thus reflect a broader disconnect between formal UNESCO communication strategies and the lived experiences of visitors, highlighting the need for more adaptive, site-specific management approaches that reconcile the symbolic prestige of the UNESCO label with authentic, locally grounded visitor engagement.

Lastly, destination brand value shows no influence on travel intentions, which contradicts the findings of Williams and Soutar (2009) and Kaushal et al. (2019). It can possibly be explained by a one-dimensional approach to brand value, which was measured primarily in monetary terms, and other value dimensions like functional and emotional value can have a different relationship with travel intentions; thus, further research to test this relationship is needed.

This study's results should also be interpreted through the lens of UNESCO's current management framework. The *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO, 2025) emphasize that heritage branding and visitation must respect the principles of authenticity, integrity, and sustainable use. Moreover, the Guidelines advocate for inclusive management, integrating local communities and fostering awareness. These principles help explain why the symbolic strength of the UNESCO brand may not

directly translate into conventional marketing effects, as its primary aim is the conservation of Outstanding Universal Value rather than visitor maximization.

Overall, findings of this research advance existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence to the relationship between various dimensions of brand equity, specifically brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand quality and travel intentions, and brand value in the specific context of UNESCO World Heritage sites. Furthermore, in light of conflicting findings or a lack of the literature examining the relationships between the variables used, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which these dimensions interact, thereby contributing to the development of destination brand equity knowledge.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The present research makes several notable contributions to the theoretical understanding of destination brand equity, particularly within the context of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. By addressing the specified research questions, this study contributes to the literature in several ways.

Firstly, this research contributes to the literature by applying the destination brand equity model to examine the UNESCO World Heritage brand. Although previous studies have primarily examined destination brand equity in a wider tourism context, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of UNESCO World Heritage brand by examining factors like brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand quality, and brand value specifically for UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Additionally, it provides a more complex picture of how these elements interact within this particular destination, emphasizing the significance of destination brand quality and brand loyalty for this brand.

Secondly, the study advances the theoretical framework by linking destination brand equity to travel intentions. Particularly, by examining how different dimensions of brand equity—namely brand image, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand quality, and brand value—influence travelers' intentions to visit WHS, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of brand equity in shaping travel behavior and decision-making.

Thirdly, the study provides evidence of the influence of brand equity dimensions on the brand value. The findings also help to fill a gap in the literature by identifying which brand equity aspects contribute to a perceived value of the UNESCO World Heritage brand.

In conclusion, this study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that the UNESCO brand's influence on visitor behavior is more complex than traditional brand models suggest. While the findings align with UNESCO's principles of promoting sustainable and culturally sensitive visitation, they also reveal a gap between institutional recommendations and tourists' perceptual realities. The results suggest that heritage management should not assume that the UNESCO designation automatically strengthens visitor loyalty or perceived value; instead, it must be actively translated into meaningful, place-based experiences that communicate authenticity and stewardship. As such, the research contributes a critical perspective to the heritage branding literature and offers a foundation for aligning theoretical models of brand equity with UNESCO's evolving management framework.

6.2 Practical Implications

This research has a number of practical implications. First, the stakeholders and managers should not expect a significant influx of tourists to the World Heritage site just because it was added to the List. As the findings suggest, factors such as brand quality and loyalty play a more crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions of the site's value and their willingness to visit. Therefore, it is essential to prioritize improving the quality of the visitor experience and fostering loyalty to attract visitors.

Second, considering the importance of brand quality for both brand value and travel intentions, it is necessary to ensure that the sites are well preserved, accessible, and provide high-quality educational and cultural experiences. To safeguard these sites for future generations, developing high-quality educational programs is especially important in order to raise awareness about heritage preservation and promote sustainable tourism. To improve visitors' overall experience, attention must also be given in regard to the quality of the facilities, their cleanliness, and the availability of straightforward guidance and information. Improving the sites' accessibility for all types of visitors will also further enhance the quality of the experience. Furthermore, effective heritage management requires understanding whether tourists visit World Heritage Sites primarily because of the UNESCO designation or due to other experiential, educational, or recreational motivations. Recent studies highlight that perceived site quality and experiential authenticity often drive visitor satisfaction more strongly than awareness of inscription alone (Chen & Chen, 2010; Sousa & Rodrigues, 2024; Hassan et al., 2025). The integration of on-site visitor feedback into management strategies, destination managers provides the opportunity for a better branding and preservation objectives alignment,

ensuring that the UNESCO label complements, rather than substitutes, the quality and authenticity of the experience. Such an approach can also enhance the interpretive and educational value of heritage visits, reinforcing the sustainability goals promoted by UNESCO.

Third, developing programs that will positively influence visitor loyalty, such as personalized experiences and targeted communications, can strengthen the emotional connection between visitors and the UNESCO brand. This can include storytelling that highlights the historical and cultural significance of the sites, thereby, in addition to helping create a connection, also enhancing perceived brand value.

Fourth, another direction for future research would be to collect data directly from visitors at World Heritage Sites. On-site surveys or mixed-method approaches could provide deeper insights into visitors' motivations and their awareness of the UNESCO designation at the time of experience (Chen & Chen, 2010; Zhang et al., 2023). This contextualized evidence would clarify whether brand perceptions genuinely influence visitation decisions or emerge as a post-visit rationalization. It would also enable a more precise assessment of how World Heritage branding interacts with experiential quality and management practices, thereby strengthening the theoretical and practical relevance of brand equity models for heritage management.

Finally, establishing a solid brand image and increasing brand awareness are still extremely important. Dedeoğlu et al. (2019) highlight the positive relationship between destination brand awareness and destination brand quality perceptions. This relationship is explained by the fact that increased awareness provides consumers with more information, leading to higher expectations about the brand's quality. Given the significant impact of brand quality on both brand value and travel intentions, site managers should focus their marketing efforts not only on promoting UNESCO World Heritage status but also on highlighting the high-quality services and experiences available at these sites. This approach can help establish strong associations between the World Heritage brand and a quality tourist experience. The issue of low brand awareness must also be addressed. Since many experts believe that the inconsistent way that brand information is presented at different sites significantly contributes to this problem (Poria et al., 2011; King & Halpenny, 2014), the World Heritage Committee needs to create unified rules for the placement of the World Heritage sign and information about the Convection.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations and consider opportunities for future research to address these gaps and expand on the findings.

One limitation concerns the demographic profile of the sample, which was predominantly female and highly educated. While this may partially reflect the characteristics of survey respondents interested in cultural and heritage tourism (Bianchi & Pike, 2011; Sousa & Rodrigues, 2024), it also constrains the generalizability of the results. Future studies should seek more balanced and diversified samples, including domestic and international visitors with varying educational backgrounds, to validate the robustness of the model. In addition, adopting a mixed-methods design combining structured and open-ended questions would allow for richer contextual insights into how tourists interpret and experience the UNESCO World Heritage brand, complementing the quantitative findings presented here.

Not differentiating between domestic and foreign tourists could be another potential limitation in this study. Since all tourists are treated as one cohesive entity in this research, major differences in the perceptions of World Heritage brand equity between these two groups might go undetected. When visiting WHS, domestic and international visitors frequently have different motivations, experiences, and expectations. Domestic tourists might have a deeper emotional connection and greater familiarity with the site, which could influence their perception of brand equity in unique ways compared to international tourists. Future research could address this gap by analyzing the attitudes of each visitor group to better understand how each group perceives the UNESCO World Heritage brand in one specific country.

Although brand awareness and image have been found to positively correlate with travel intentions and brand value in the context of other destinations, this study did not investigate why these factors do not have the same effect on travel intentions and brand value in the context of World Heritage Sites. Future studies can examine the reasons behind these dimensions' lack of significant relevance in the case of the World Heritage brand and identify potential elements that might strengthen their influence. Moreover, future research could extend the model and investigate the potential mediating effects of factors like personal interest in heritage or prior travel experience on brand equity and travel intentions.

Finally, this study was focused on a developed country. Although, there is some evidence that UNESCO World Heritage brand may have a stronger impact in developing countries as suggested by Yang and Lin (2014). As such, future research could conduct comparative case studies or multigroup analysis to explore the differences between both type of countries.

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22

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Appendix

Dimension	Code	Item
Destination Brand Awareness (DBA)	DBA1	When I am thinking about cultural and natural heritage, UNESCO World Heritage sites come to my mind immediately
	DBA2	UNESCO World Heritage sites are very famous
	DBA3	UNESCO World Heritage sites have good name and reputation
	DBA4	The unique characteristics of UNESCO World Heritage sites come to my mind quickly
Destination Brand Image (DBI)	DBI1	My friends would think highly of me if I visited any UNESCO World Heritage site
	DBI2	When I hear about a UNESCO World Heritage site, I immediately think of unique and authentic place
	DBI3	The image of UNESCO World Heritage sites is consistent with my own selfimage
	DBI4	Visiting UNESCO World Heritage sites corresponds to my interests
	DBI5	Visiting UNESCO World Heritage sites reflects who I am
Destination Brand Quality (DBQ)	DBQ1	UNESCO World Heritage sites provide tourism offerings and facilities of consistent quality
	DBQ2	When visiting UNESCO World Heritage site, I expect superior quality services
	DBQ3	UNESCO World Heritage sites provide high-quality experiences
	DBQ4	From UNESCO World Heritage sites' offerings, I can expect superior performance
	DBQ5	UNESCO World Heritage sites perform better than other similar places
Destination Brand Loyalty (DBL)	DBL1	I enjoy visiting UNESCO World Heritage sites
	DBL2	I would advise other people to visit UNESCO World Heritage sites
	DBL3	UNESCO World Heritage sites would be my preferred choice for a vacation
Destination Brand value (DBV)	DBV1	Visiting UNESCO World Heritage sites worth the price
	DBV2	UNESCO World Heritage sites have reasonable prices
	DBV3	Considering what I would pay for the trip, I will get much more than my money's worth by visiting UNESCO World Heritage sites
	DBV4	Visiting UNESCO World Heritage sites is a good deal
	DBV5	The costs of visiting UNESCO World Heritage sites are a bargain relative to the benefits I receive
Travel intentions (TI)	TI1	I wish to visit any UNESCO World Heritage site
	TI2	In the following year, I plan to visit any UNESCO World Heritage site
	TI3	In the following year, I may visit any UNESCO World Heritage site

Table A1 The items included in the survey.