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Assessing Customer-Based Brand Equity of Gilgit-Baltistan as an Emerging Mountainous Tourist Destination

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ABSTRACT

In this study customer-based destination brand equity (CBBE) model is examined in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, a mountain tourism destination having a unique natural landscapes, adventure tourism opportunities and cultural heritage. Causal effects of destination brand awareness, destination brand image, destination brand quality, and destination brand loyalty on overall destination brand equity are explored, based on the brand equity framework of Konicnic and Gartner and Aaker and using structural equation modelling (SEM). Tourists visiting Gilgit-Baltistan were contact to collect data. The results indicate that destination image and loyalty play a significant role in the formation of destination brand equity, while destination awareness and quality show a relatively weaker but significant influence. Destination loyalty emerges as a strong predictor of overall destination brand equity. Since this study is geographically limited to Gilgit-Baltistan, the results are not fully generalizable to other tourism contexts and further research in different destination settings is recommended. In real life the findings offer important understandings for destination managers and policymakers in Gilgit-Baltistan to strengthen destination image, enhance service quality, and enhance visitor loyalty to enhance destination brand equity.

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Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), Pakistan is among the most sought-after tourism destinations in Pakistan, offering exceptional opportunities for both international and domestic tourists because of its natural landscapes, adventure tourism, rich culture, and hospitality (Baloch, 2012). It possesses numerous unique tourism resources such as K2, five peaks above 8,000 meters, over fifty peaks above 7,000 meters, Karakoram Highway (known as the eighth wonder of the world), the ancient Silk Route, the Deosai Plateau, extensive glaciers, the junction of the Karakoram, Himalaya, and Hindukush mountain ranges, over one hundred lakes, four national parks, historical forts, archaeological sites, thousands of rock carvings, traditional festivals, and the highest polo ground in the world at Shandur (Baloch, 2012). GB also has rich biodiversity, including species of the snow leopard, Himalayan black and brown bears, ibex, markhor, blue sheep, Marco Polo sheep, lynx, and chikor, as well as 200-plus bird species, approximately 50 mammal species, diverse languages, ethnic communities, and various adventure activities (Saqib et al., 2019). With these outstanding tourism assets, however, Pakistan has not capitalized on its tourism potential, which brings up an interesting question: why has this resource-rich destination not developed a stronger tourism brand?

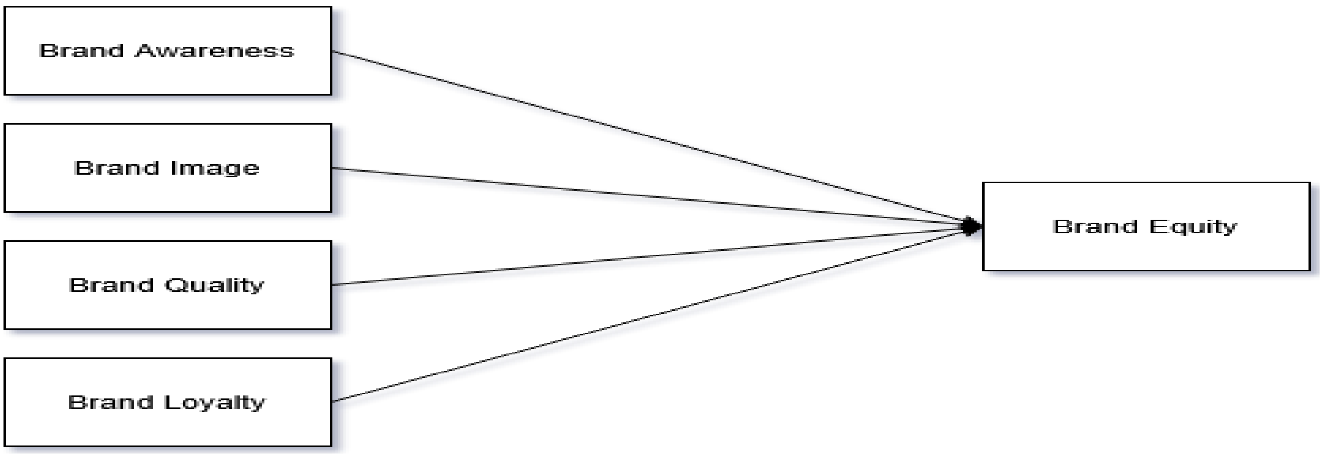
Because of the ability of tourists to select from among competing destinations, destination branding has become more crucial as a way to differentiate one destination from another to gain a competitive edge (Pike, 2005). The notion of branding is widely acknowledged as a tool to differentiate products and services in competitive markets (Keller, 2003; Aaker, 1991). Brand management as a field emerged in the 1940s (Guest, 1942), and destination branding as a distinct research area was recognized in late 1990s (Pike et al., 2010). After that, studies have explored various aspects of destination branding and concluded that destination brands are similar to other brands in that traditional branding theories are applicable (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). By understanding how visitors experience a destination brand, destination marketers can develop more competitive strategies and sustain their competitive position (Pike, 2009). The most important factor of a successful destination brand is to create memorable visitor experiences that reduce perceived risk and invite repeat visits (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005), and when a destination continues to deliver value to visitors and meets or exceeds their expectations, it reinforces its brand equity and fosters long-term relationships with tourists (Im, Kim, Elliot, & Han, 2012). Given these challenges, measuring destination brand performance has become increasingly important (Kim, Kim, & An, 2003).

The Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model is the most commonly used framework for assessing brand performance (Im et al., 2012; Pike et al., 2010) and was first introduced by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) to measure the strength of a brand from the viewpoint of customers and consists of four key components of brand equity (brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty), which were identified as key factors that contribute to brand equity (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011), therefore, destination managers should clearly understand how tourists perceive these dimensions in order to enhance the competitiveness of the destination and achieve sustainable tourism development.

Despite the abundance of scholarly works on destination branding, an important gap exists in the literature, as existing studies have concentrated on general tourism destinations and have not examined mountainous destinations in developing countries, and no theoretical framework has been proposed to evaluate brand equity in mountainous destination brands. The current study extends the Customer-Based Brand Equity model (see Figure 01) to evaluate the brand performance of Gilgit-Baltistan as a mountainous destination in a developing country. The outcomes of this investigation will suggest deep insight to policymakers, destination management organizations, and government agencies for developing branding strategies that increase the destination image, increase domestic and international tourism, and enhance its competitiveness among its international rivals.

To fill these contextual and theoretical gaps, this investigation intends to answer the research question: How do perceived quality, brand image, brand loyalty and brand awareness and influence the brand equity of Gilgit-Baltistan as a mountainous destination?

Figure 1: *Research Model*



Literature Review

Destination Brand Equity

In tourism, the CBBE model has been extensively used in destination branding (Boo et al., 2009; Pike et al., 2010) and it is defined "as a set of brand assets and liabilities that either enhance or diminish brand equity in the minds of consumers" (Aaker, 1996), which impacts intentions to purchase a brand (Keller, 1993). Based on these models, Cai (2002) argued that effective destination branding is a function of brand image, brand identity, and supporting marketing activities, while Konecnik and Gartner (2007) identified key brand dimensions that are useful in strengthening the relationship between destinations and tourists, including brand image (Boo et al., 2009), which enhances destination brand equity (Pike et al., 2010), and tourists' perceived image of a destination (Tasci and Kozak, 2006) influence their behavioural responses and need brand image and brand salience to strengthen their tourist destination relationships.

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is defined as consumers' capacity to recognize a brand in a category (Aaker, 1996) because before consumers have positive feelings about a brand, they need to be able to identify it (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011). Past research indicates that brand awareness is a major driver of destination choice (Chon, 1992), and tourists create an awareness set of destination brands before they make a travel decision, narrowing the alternatives to a consideration set and then a choice set for the final decision (Kotler, Haider, and Rein, 1993). As such, destination marketing managers should need to be in a position to enhance brand awareness and, in turn, increase the likelihood of destination selection (Boo et al., 2009). Brand knowledge, recall and recognition are the three key dimensions of brand awareness and it can be evaluated with these dimensions (Pike et al., 2010), and strong brand awareness, in general, tends to strengthen overall destination brand equity by increasing familiarity and confidence with the destination (Boo et al., 2009); however, a lack of investment in destination branding and promotional activities can weaken this relationship (Blain et al., 2005), while lack of marketing efforts, including lack of destination events and other branding initiatives, can reduce brand awareness and overall brand equity (Hudson and Ritchie, 2009). In general, destination marketing research confirms the idea that a high brand awareness causes more brand equity (Nikkhah-Farkhani & Zarenejad, 2025; BETTIGA, 2025). The discussion above leads to the following hypothesis.

- **H1:** Destination brand awareness has a significant effect on destination brand equity.

Destination Image

Brand image is a fundamental element of CBBE for travel destinations, defined as the perception of consumers of a brand because of its strong associations (Keller, 2013b). It is how visitors evaluate a destination based on both rational and emotional judgments, which differ from product features. Unlike product features, brand image is constructed through marketing actions and visitor experiences, and what people think is real often matters more than what is essentially true (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). In tourism, destination image is important because it influences how visitors evaluate a place (Konecnik and Gartner, 2007), a favorable image attracts tourists, increases perceived value, encourages repeat visits (Phillips et al., 2013), and assists destinations to achieve a competitive position in the tourism market (Naidoo et al., 2012). Destination image is not something that can be imbedded in a product or service; rather, it is created through advertising, promotion, and visitor experience (Lin and Lin, 2007). Because of the importance of destination image in influencing travel decisions and post-visit evaluation, it has been widely studied (Chon, 1990). Some of these dimensions of brand image include cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions (Dann, 1996). This study constrains the destination brand image to two dimensions: brand association and brand personality (Davis, 2002). Brand associations are the benefit that the brand offers to the customer, while personality is characterized by human traits (Davis, 2002). Previous studies conceptualized the brand image as a one-dimensional construct and treated it as a real image, whereas this study analyses it with two dimensions: DBA and DBP as cognitive and affective components validated by (Hussain and Hussain, 2026).

Marketers emphasize the importance of the brand image to destination brands, since a positive brand image has the advantage of high brand loyalty (Cai, 2002). Previous studies found a positive and significant relationship between brand image and brand equity (Tran, 2023; BETTIGA, 2025). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- **H2:** A favorable and unique brand image causes a significant and positive effect on brand equity.

Destination Quality

Perceived quality is customers' overall assessment of the excellence and usefulness of a product or service (Aaker, 1991), which is arguably the most impactful brand association because it influences purchase decisions (Keller, 2013). Perceived quality differs from objective quality, which represents the actual technical excellence of a product (Zeithaml, 1988); perceived quality represents customer judgments. Perceived quality is a source of long-term sustainable competitive advantage and a basis for long-term business success (Aaker, 1991). Consumers often use perceived quality when they are unwilling or unable to compare competing brands in detail; positive quality perceptions enhance customers' willingness to pay higher prices, and can even transfer to other products in the same company's portfolio (Aaker, 1991). Perceived quality also enhances the effectiveness of advertising and other marketing activities by building consumer confidence in the brand (Aaker, 1991). Evidence from empirical studies consistently validates the significance of perceived quality; for example, using data from 260 basketball players, Kwak and Kang (2009) demonstrated that perceived quality had a positive effect on purchase intention, while a study of 2,400 customers in four consumer and business organizations showed that better service quality increased favorable behavioral intentions while decreasing negative responses (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Prior research for example Bianchi and Pike (2011) has also reported a significant association between perceived quality and perceived value

In addition, perceived quality directly increases brand loyalty and customer satisfaction and indirectly strengthens brand associations and trust (Saleem, Rahman, & Omar, 2015). Additional research supports that perceived quality has a significant positive effect on brand equity (BETTIGA, 2025; Oppong & Maama, 2026). Hence, this investigation posits the following hypothesis.

- **H3:** Destination brand quality has a significant effect on destination brand equity.

Destination Loyalty

A two-dimensional explanation of brand loyalty (Chaudhuri et al., 2001) is commonly used in tourism: attitudinal loyalty, which captures tourists' favorable attitudes toward a destination and their willingness to revisit it (Yoon & Uysal, 2005); and behavioral loyalty, which is reflected in repeat purchase or revisit behavior of consumers (Pappu et al., 2005). Despite extensive research on brand loyalty in marketing, research on destination branding is still relatively limited (Pike et al., 2010). Prior studies have found that brand loyalty is a significant determinant of destination selection (Chon, 1992) and is measured by the willingness to recommend and revisit intentions toward a destination (Baker & Crompton, 2000). But loyalty is only one dimension of destination brand equity, which also includes brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and brand attitude (Chen & Gursoy, 2001); brand equity represents the total response by consumers to a destination brand, and loyalty and purchase intentions are considered to be outcomes of brand equity (Oppermann, 2000). Perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand awareness have been found to be the most important dimensions of destination brand equity (Yoo et al., 2000), and they help enhance the overall value of a destination brand (Washburn & Plank, 2002); brand image and brand awareness also enhance the destination brand equity (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011; Boo et al., 2009). Some recent studies have also supported that brand loyalty contributes to brand equity (Tran, 2023; Zhang, 2025; BETTIGA, 2025; Washburn & Plank, 2002; Yoo et al., 2000; Pike et al., 2010). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- **H4:** Destination brand loyalty has a significant effect on destination brand equity.

Research Methodology

The study followed a quantitative, causal research design and tested an existing theoretical framework (deductive) since the research model was developed prior to data collection. The target population was international tourists who had traveled to Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, and 300 questionnaires were distributed, 161 were returned for a 53% response rate. After checking the completeness of the data and identifying multivariate outliers using Mahalanobis distance, two responses were deleted; the final sample had 159 valid responses (a 53.7% valid response rate, which is acceptable as per Ali et al. (2021). Items were taken and revised from Han et al. (2008), Oliver (1997), Yoo and Donthu (2001), Hussain and Hussain (2026), Back and Parks (2003) and Back (2005). Measurement items for brand awareness (4 items), brand image (7 items), brand quality (8 items), brand loyalty (5 items), and brand equity (4 items) were measured using a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to maintain the consistency of measurement across the constructs.

Results

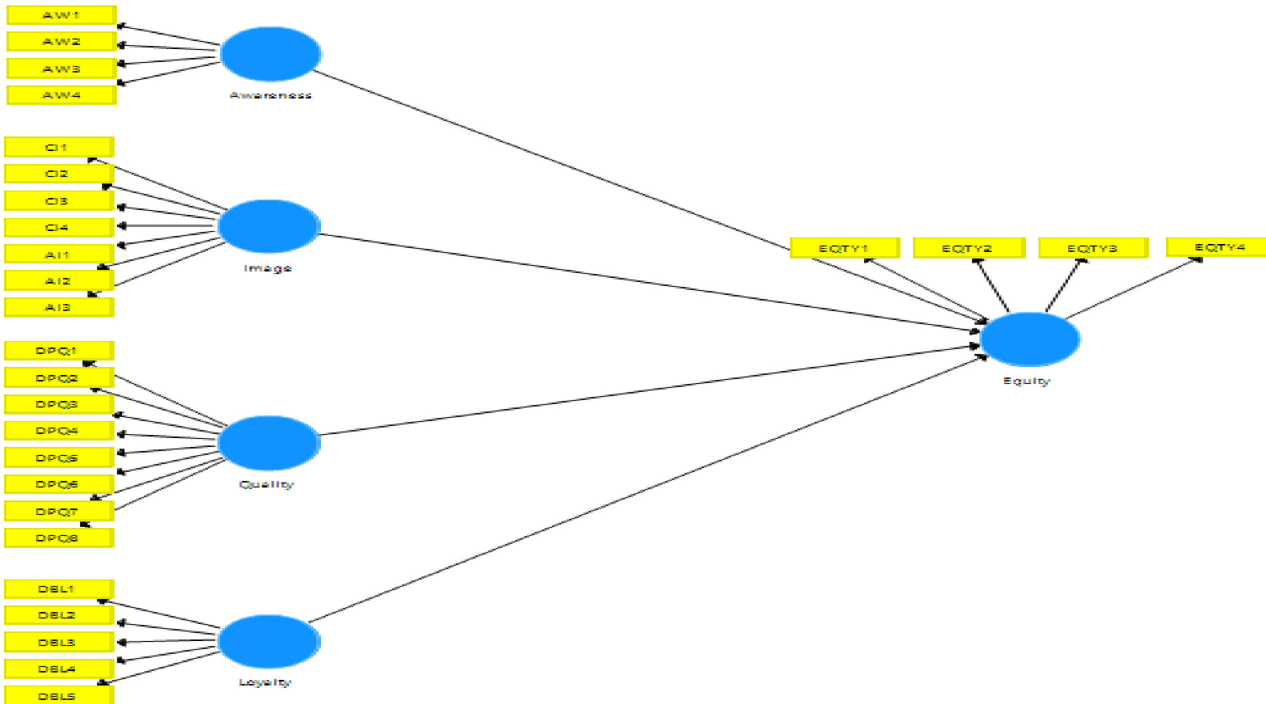
Descriptive Statistics

The final sample consisted of 159 valid responses, of which 64.2% were male, 51.5% were from Asia, 24.5% were from Europe, 38.4% were 26–35 years old, 26.4% were 36–45 years old, 44.7% had a master's degree, 39.6% had a bachelor's degree, 43.3% were professionals, 21.0% were business owners, 51.6% were married with children, 34.5% had a monthly income of over PKR 500,000, 44.6% stayed for more than 15 days, 45.9% obtained destination information from friends, and 41.5% visited once or twice and 51.0% travelled overseas once a year.

Assessment of Measurement Model

An inferential statistical analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 3.3.3 (Ringle et al., 2005). Figure 2 shows the proposed research model; included five latent constructs with 28 reflective indicators. The first and most important step of PLS-SEM is to measure the measurement model.

Figure 2: *Original Study Model in SmartPL*



The measurement model retained indicator loadings between 0.50 and 0.70; however, loadings of 0.50 or above are acceptable if they are statistically significant (Hair et al., 2019), and all loadings in this investigation were above 0.50, the reliability and validity values of all constructs were above the recommended cut-off levels, and no items were deleted from the measurement model. The convergent validity was evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and all the AVEs were above the recommended threshold of 0.50 (0.636 for brand awareness, 0.522 for brand image, 0.626 for brand quality, 0.733 for brand loyalty, and 0.838 for brand equity). Composite Reliability (CR) was used to evaluate the internal consistency of the constructs, and the CR values were all over 0.80 (Hair et al., 2014), demonstrating that indicators loadings are within the acceptable range. The results demonstrate that the AVE values were above 0.50 and the CR values were above 0.80, which shows that the measurement model was reliable and had adequate convergent validity (see Table 2).

Table 2: *Construct, items, Loadings, CR, AVE*

Constructs	**Items**	**Loadings**	**CR**	**AVE**
Brand Awareness	AW1	0.713	0.874	0.636
	AW2	0.803		
	AW3	0.853		
	AW4	0.815		
Brand Image	CI1	0.779	0.883	0.522
	CI2	0.774		
	CI3	0.748		

	CI4	0.680		
	AI1	0.668		
	AI2	0.790		
	AI3	0.596		
Brand Quality	DPQ1	0.833	0.930	0.626
	DPQ2	0.747		
	DPQ3	0.651		
	DPQ4	0.848		
	DPQ5	0.804		
	DPQ6	0.851		
	DPQ7	0.684		
	DPQ8	0.880		
Brand loyalty	DBL1	0.884	0.932	0.733
	DBL12	0.910		
	DBL13	0.898		
	DBL14	0.827		
	DBL5	0.753		
Brand Equity	EQTY1	0.880	0.954	0.838
	EQTY 2	0.930		
	EQTY 3	0.933		
	EQTY 4	0.918		

Discriminant validity refers to whether each construct in the structural model is empirically distinct from the other constructs, and the square root of the AVE for each construct should be greater than its correlations with other constructs (the criterion for discriminant validity, proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981)) to demonstrate adequate discriminant validity, which is the case as evidenced in the findings.

Table 3: *Fornell-Larcker Criterion*

	Awareness	Equity	Image	Loyalty	Quality
Awareness	0.798				
Equity	0.433	0.915			
Image	0.200	0.609	0.722		
Loyalty	0.328	0.751	0.487	0.856	
Quality	0.360	0.683	0.538	0.665	0.791

The heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations (Henseler et al., 2015; Voorhees et al., 2016) was also used to assess discriminant validity, which indicates that all of the HTMT values are below the recommended threshold of 0.90 (see Table 4), and the AVE and CR, all both exceeds their recommended cutoff levels (see Table 2), which indicates that the constructs demonstrate adequate discriminant validity and reliability.

Table 4: *Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)*

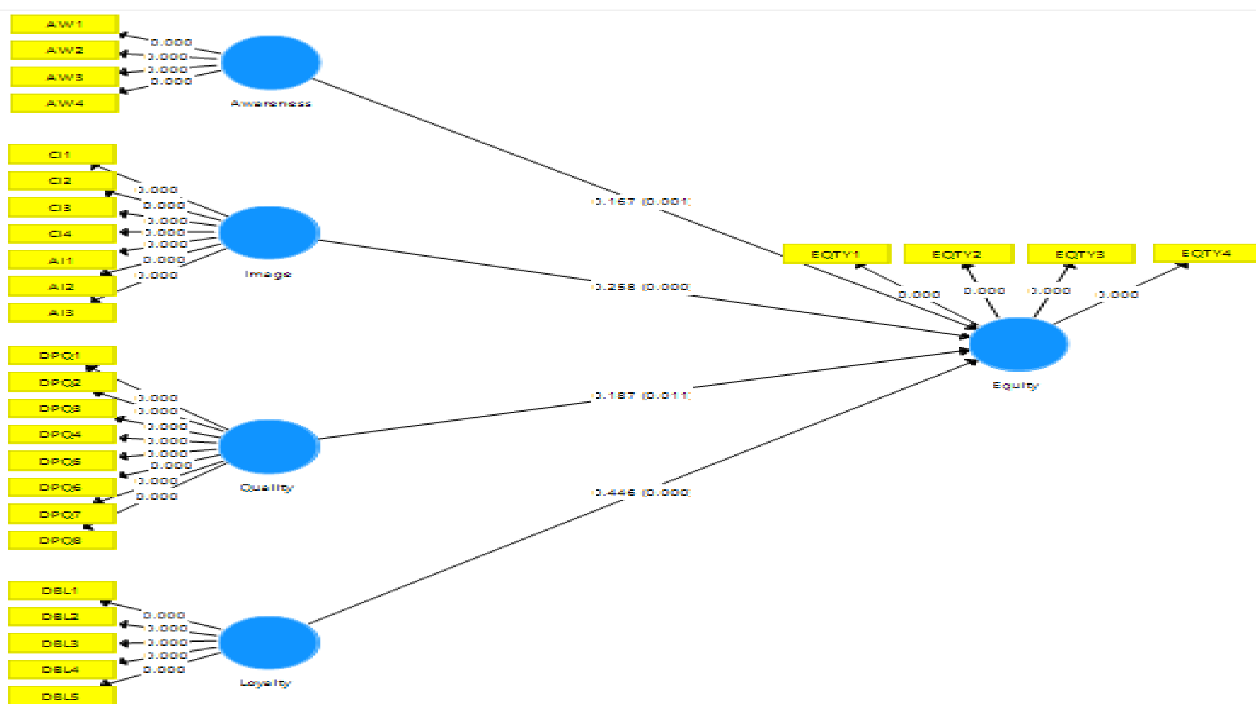
	Awareness	Equity	Image	Loyalty	Quality
Awareness					
Equity	0.498				
Image	0.242	0.679			
Loyalty	0.391	0.805	0.540		
Quality	0.430	0.739	0.600	0.730	

The measurement model met the recommended evaluation criteria by Hair et al. (2019), indicating adequate validity and reliability of the variables, and therefore, the investigation continued to the evaluation of the structural model.

Assessment of Structural Model

To test the hypotheses above, a path analysis using the structural equation modelling (SEM) framework was conducted. The path coefficients (β) were employed to assess the orientation and intensity of the hypothesized association among the study constructs, and the statistical significance was evaluated by bootstrapping procedures and corresponding t-values (Efron & Tibshirani, 1994; Bakshi & Krishna, 2009; Chin, 2010). In SEM, the β coefficient and the t-value are evidence of the strength of the proposed relationships, and higher t-values support the causal associaton between the variables (Huang et al., 2007). Figure 3 demonstrates the structural model created for this study.

Figure 3: *Structural Model*



To assess the structural model, multicollinearity of the independent constructs was first evaluated by examining the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for each construct, which indicates the influence of multicollinearity on the accuracy and stability of the estimated relationships among the constructs (Hair et al., 2011). All VIF values (see Table 5) were below the conservative threshold of 3.3 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006), demonstrating that multicollinearity was not a concern for this study and that the predictor constructs were sufficiently independent of each other, as were the estimated regression coefficients, allowing for the structural model to be deemed appropriate for hypothesis testing and interpretation.

Table 5: *Inner VIF Values*

	Awareness	Equity	Image	Loyalty	Quality
Awareness		1.169			
Equity					
Image		1.469			
Loyalty		1.902			
Quality		2.090			

Because collinearity was not a concern, the coefficient of determination (R^2) for the endogenous construct was reviewed; R^2 shows the proportion of variance of the endogenous variable that is explained by the model and is an indicator of overall model power with a higher number of predicting constrcuts producing a higher R^2 (Shmueli & Koppius, 2011; Sharma et al., 2021). The R^2 for brand equity is 0.693 (see Table 6), which means that brand awareness, brand image, brand quality, and brand loyalty account for 69.3% of the variance in brand equity. The R^2 value is considered acceptable according to the suggested thresholds of Hair et al. (2011) and Henseler et al. (2009).

Table 6*: R-square Value*

	R Square
Equity	0.693

The effect size (f^2) was calculated to assess the impact of each exogenous construct on the explained variance of the dependent variable (i.e., change in R^2 when a specific independent variable is excluded from the structural model). The findings in Table 7 indicate that brand image has a moderate impact on the dependent variable, whereas brand awareness and brand quality have small to moderate effect sizes and that brand loyalty has a large effect size, which means that destination brand loyalty is the greatest influential antecedent of the dependent variable, followed by the brand quality, brand image and brand awareness.

Table 7*: f-square*

	Equity
Awareness	0.078
Image	0.148
Loyalty	0.340
Quality	0.055

The four proposed hypotheses representing the direct association between the variables of this investigation were evaluated using the PLS algorithm and bootstrapping procedures, and the results of the structural model are showed in Table 8. As can be seen, brand awareness has a positive and significant impact on brand equity ($\beta = 0.167$, $t = 3.438$), and brand image shows a positive and significant relationship with brand equity ($\beta = 0.258$, $t = 4.517$). Furthermore, brand loyalty has a statistically significant relationship with behavioral loyalty ($\beta = 0.446$, $t = 6.388$). Brand quality also has a statistically significant effect on brand equity ($\beta = 0.187$, $t = 3.552$). All hypothesized direct relationships are positive and statistically significant, and thus, all four proposed hypotheses are confirmed.

Table 8: *Result of Relationships*

Hypotheses	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values*	Decision
Awareness -> Equity	0.167	3.438	0.001	*Accepted*
Image -> Equity	0.258	4.517	0.000	*Accepted*
Loyalty -> Equity	0.446	6.388	0.000	*Accepted*
Quality -> Equity	0.187	2.552	0.011	*Accepted*

*Significant at $p<0.05$

Discussion

This investigation aimed to explore the effect of brand loyalty, brand quality, brand image and brand awareness on destination brand equity. The structural model demonstrated a strong robust explanatory capacity with $R^2 = 0.693$, accounting for 69.3% of the change in destination brand equity and is acceptable (Henseler et al., 2009; Hair et al., 2011) and confirms the suggestion by Shmueli and Koppius (2011) that higher R^2 values indicate better predictive capability of the structural model. The findings indicate that brand awareness is positively significant to destination brand equity ($\beta = 0.167$, $t = 3.438$), suggesting that tourists who are more aware of a destination, such that they can easily recognize or recall it, tend to have higher levels of destination brand equity; this is in line with Aaker (1991) who identified brand awareness as one of the underlying dimensions of brand equity as it enhances familiarity, reduces perceived risk, and enhances confidence during buyer choice. Keller (1993), who asserted that brand awareness reinforces brand knowledge and eventually results in positive consumer responses. In the context of the tourism industry, higher destination brand awareness allows potential tourists to consider the destination in their travel decision-making process, thereby increasing its competitiveness.

The findings show that brand image has a significant impact on destination brand equity ($\beta = 0.258$, $t = 4.517$), consistent with Keller (1993) and Echtner and Ritchie (1993), and suggests that destination image is an essential mechanism by which tourists differentiate one destination from competing destinations, especially in competitive tourism markets (medium effect). The results also show that perceived brand quality has a significant impact on destination brand equity ($\beta = 0.187$, $t = 3.552$), a relatively small to moderate effect size, which is consistent with Aaker (1991), who proposed that perceived quality is a critical dimension of brand equity because consumers often use perceived quality as an indicator of overall value, and Zeithaml (1988), who noted that perceived quality refers to the extent to which consumers judge the overall excellence of a product or service. Service quality has a positive and significant effect on destination brand equity ($\beta = 0.217$, $t = 3.963$), in that the greater the service quality, the higher the confidence, satisfaction, and perceived value of tourists in tourism destinations, which enhances destination brand equity.

Destination brand equity was most strongly predicted by brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.446$, $t = 6.388$), which had the largest effect size (f^2), indicating that loyal tourists are more important contributors to destination brand equity than awareness, image, or perceived quality alone. The finding aligns with the proposition by Aaker (1991) that brand loyalty is the fundamental dimension of brand equity, since loyal customers provide repeat purchases, word-of-mouth, and long-term competitive advantage, which means that loyal tourists would return to the destination, recommend it to others, and establish an emotional connection, all of which contribute to destination competitiveness in the tourism context (Tran, 2023; Zhang, 2025; BETTIGA, 2025).

Conclusion

The results together indicate that destination brand equity is a multi-dimensional construct, and that while destination awareness enables tourists to identify the destination, destination image affects perceptions, perceived quality impacts tourism experience evaluations, and destination loyalty offers the strongest contribution to long-term destination value. The larger magnitude of the standardized path coefficients and effect sizes further suggests that behavioral attachment represented by loyalty explains more variance than purely cognitive evaluations like awareness, which also supports the multidimensional view of customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991). This implies that destination branding strategies should seek to enhance destination loyalty strengthen perceived quality, destination awareness, enhance destination image and build in order to maximize destination brand equity.

Implications

This study offers many theoretical contributions: (1) the extension of the CBBE framework by Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991) to a mountainous tourism destination context; (2) empirical evidence that destination brand equity is a multi-dimensional construct, in which cognitive (brand awareness), affective (brand image), evaluative (perceived quality), and behavioral (brand loyalty) dimensions jointly explain destination brand equity; (3) empirical evidence that behavioral attachment is a powerful antecedent of destination brand equity than cognitive familiarity, supporting relationship marketing theory; and (4) relatively high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.693$) that demonstrates that the proposed framework provides a robust theoretical model for destination branding and can be used as a basis for further destination branding research.

These results have several practical implications for DMOs, tourism policymakers, and tourism businesses: 1) destination managers should put more effort into strategies that strengthen tourist loyalty through memorable tourism experiences, quality service delivery, relationship marketing, and post-visit engagement, as loyalty makes the strongest contribution to destination brand equity; 2) destination marketing campaigns should be designed to strengthen brand awareness of a destination and create an exclusive and positive destination image that emphasizes unique natural, cultural, and heritage attractions; 3) enhancement of tourism infrastructure, service quality, accessibility, safety, and hospitality standards will strengthen quality perceptions and further enhance destination brand equity; and 4) destination branding should be conducted using an integrated approach where awareness-building, image development, quality improvement, and loyalty enhancement are executed concurrently rather than sequentially to maximize sustainable competitive advantage.

Limitations and Future research direction

While this investigation contributes in comprehending of destination brand equity, some limitations are also there: First, this investigation used a cross-sectional research design, which does not allow for causal over time to be determined, so future investigations might employ longitudinal designs to see how destination brand equity and tourist loyalty change as destinations develop. Second, the study was conducted in a single destination and single geographical context, so replication across different destinations, countries, and cultural settings would increase the generalizability of the study findings. Third, only four antecedents of destination brand equity were examined, so future research might include other constructs such as perceived value, destination attachment, destination trust, destination authenticity, destination engagement, destination satisfaction, social media engagement, tourist experience, electronic word of mouth and destination competitiveness to develop a more comprehensive model. Lastly, future studies could apply multi-group analysis to see if demographic characteristics, travel purpose, previous visitation experience, or cultural differences moderate the relationships among destination branding constructs, which would further advance the theoretical insight of destination branding and provide more comprehensive guidance for tourism practitioners in enhancing destination brand equity in ever more competitive tourism markets.

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