

Strategic Drivers of Sustainable Tourism Destination Brand Equity in Malaysia

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Abstract

Brand equity plays a crucial role in shaping the success of tourism destinations, influencing visitor perception, loyalty, and overall competitiveness. This study examines the factors affecting brand equity in the context of tourism destinations, focusing on four key independent variables: visitors' Perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty. The research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a Likert-scale questionnaire to collect data from respondents. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis assessed the relationship between these factors and brand equity. The findings indicate that all four independent variables significantly influence brand equity, with Food Quality and Brand Loyalty demonstrating the most substantial impact. The multiple regression results further validate these relationships, confirming that Visitor's Perception, Food Quality, and Cognitive Image positively contribute to brand equity, whereas Brand Loyalty shows a negative but significant influence. These insights provide valuable implications for tourism marketers and destination managers, emphasizing the need to enhance service quality, strengthen customer loyalty strategies, and create a positive cognitive image to build a sustainable competitive advantage. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on destination brand equity and offers strategic recommendations for improving the brand positioning of tourism destinations. Future research could explore additional moderating variables and examine cross-cultural perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour in tourism branding.

Keywords: *Brand Equity, Visitors' Perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, Brand Loyalty, Sustainable Tourism*

Introduction

Konecnik & Gartner (2007) developed brand equity (BE) as a marketing tool in the 1990s. According to Keller (1993), brand equity is the unique impact of brand knowledge on how customers react to the company's marketing initiatives. Other scholars, such as Morgan and Pritchard (1998), define brand equity as creating a unique and compelling identity for a place to differentiate it from competitors and emotionally connect with tourists. Other than that, Hankinson (2004) conceptualizes Brand equity as a relational network that focuses on the interactions between a brand and its stakeholders, emphasizing the brand's reputation and its ability to deliver value consistently. His approach highlights the importance of relationships and stakeholder engagement in building and maintaining Brand equity, especially in contexts like place branding, where multiple stakeholders are involved.

According to Ruzzier (2010), travel destinations are multifaceted and offer varying experiences to different travelers. Because branding a tourist destination can assist increase competitiveness and differentiation. Oliveira & Panyik (2014) has done a research on how the brand equity of various destinations predicted requirement for destination branding. See Figure 1 for a more detailed definition of brand equity. The first independent variable, visitors' perception plays a vital role, as it determines how tourists evaluate a destination based on personal experiences and shared opinions (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Mohammad, 2025). A positive perception fosters trust and encourages repeat visits, which are

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essential to building loyalty. Secondly, food quality as it influences tourists' satisfaction and it contributes to their overall experience (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Memorable dining experiences create a lasting impression, making food an integral part of destination branding. Lastly, the cognitive image of a destination reflects tourists' mental representations based on accumulated knowledge and beliefs (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). A strong cognitive image aligns expectations with reality, making it a key driver of destination choice and Brand equity.

The figure 1 below from Malaysia and Singapore Tourism Organisation (2024) shows that estimation of 20.14 million international arrivals to Malaysia in 2023, nearly 6 million lesser when compared to 2019. Data also shows that international tourists would rather choose to visit Thailand before Malaysia, followed by Singapore then Indonesia (The Edge, 2024; Mohammad et al., 2024). Hence, in this research, researcher would like to find out what makes Malaysia the second choice as tourism destination spot.

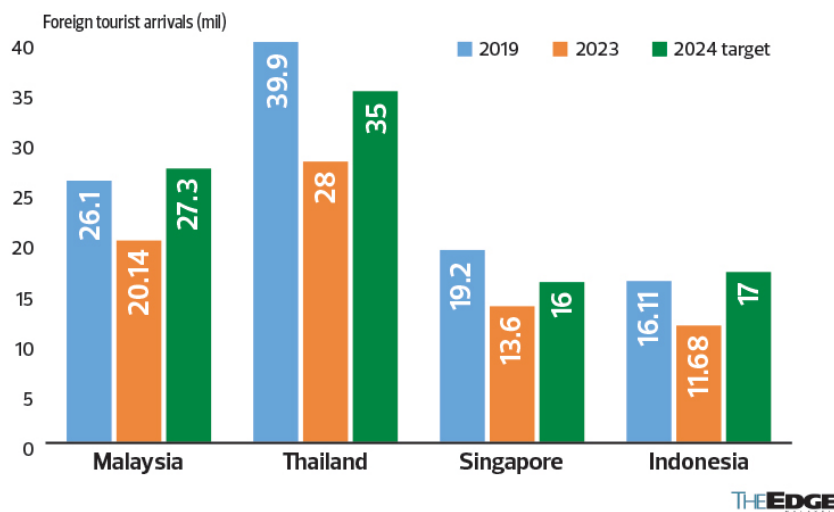


Figure 1: International Tourist Arrival by Country and Year | Malaysia and Singapore Tourism Organisation (Source: The Edge, Apr 2024)

Following the recovery from the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourist destinations need to strengthen their brand equity and position themselves as an attractive and safe holiday spot in the eyes of travellers, failing which can lead to multiple undesirable outcomes. Firstly, a weak or non-existent brand equity diminishes a destination's appeal, making it less competitive against well-branded locations (Kladou et al., 2016; Kour, 2021; Mohammad et al., 2025a). This results in reduced tourist arrivals and, consequently, lower economic benefits for the region (Chekalina et al., 2018; Mohammad et al., 2025b). Moreover, without substantial brand equity, there is often a lack of trust and loyalty among visitors, leading to fewer repeat visits and reduced word-of-mouth promotion (Srivastava et al., 2022).

Brand loyalty, as a critical component of brand equity, reflects the commitment of visitors to revisit a destination and recommend it to others, providing destinations with a competitive edge and sustainable economic benefits (Choi & Chu, 2001; Hosany et al., 2006; Mohammad et al., 2025c). The inability to communicate a clear, consistent image further exacerbates this, leaving the destination vulnerable to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need for strong branding to rebuild visitor confidence (Hao et al., 2020). Additionally, destinations lacking brand equity may fail to leverage emerging technologies like AI for personalized travel experiences, which are increasingly demanded by modern tourists (Yanzheng Tuo et al., 2024; Mohammad et al., 2025d). Lastly, inadequate attention to hygiene, safety, and sustainability further alienates potential visitors, particularly in the post-pandemic era, where such concerns are paramount (Kour, 2021).

Another influential factor is food quality, which has been recognized as an important determinant of travelers' satisfaction (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Mohammad et al., 2025e). Food experiences contribute substantially to tourists' overall enjoyment and satisfaction during their travels. Food quality can shape a visitor's immediate experience and influence long-term brand loyalty to a destination. While food plays a critical role in destination branding, the relationship between food quality and tourism destination BE remains underexplored in academic literature.

In addition to visitors' perception and food quality, the cognitive image of a destination also significantly contributes to the formation of its BE. According to Tasci and Gartner (2007), the cognitive image encompasses tourists' knowledge and beliefs about a destination, directly influencing their decision to visit. A strong cognitive image aligns the expectations of potential tourists with the destination's offerings, increasing the likelihood of attracting repeat visitors. This cognitive representation, however, has not been thoroughly studied in terms of its direct impact on tourist destinations.

Brand loyalty is also a crucial factor in enhancing the brand equity of Malaysian tourism destinations, as it fosters repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, both of which are essential for sustainable growth. Loyal visitors are more likely to perceive the destination positively, reinforcing its brand image and value in the eyes of other potential travellers (Bianchi et al., 2014; Mohammad et al., 2025f). Moreover, loyalty increases emotional attachment, encouraging tourists to revisit Malaysia despite competition from neighboring destinations like Thailand and Singapore (Miska Irani Tarigan et al., 2024; Mohammad et al., 2025g). This consistent flow of returning visitors stabilizes tourist numbers and amplifies the destination's competitive positioning in the global market. Consequently, building brand loyalty through exceptional visitor experiences and targeted marketing initiatives becomes a strategic imperative for strengthening Malaysian tourism brand equity (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Al Daboub et al., 2024; Husain et al., 2021).

Given these gaps in the literature, this study seeks to address how visitors' perception, food quality, and cognitive image influence tourism destination BE in Malaysia. By examining these factors, this research aims to clarify the mechanisms that enhance destination BE and its role in attracting tourists in a competitive market. This is crucial for destination marketers and policymakers who need to develop effective strategies to enhance their destination's appeal.

This study is significant as it addresses the critical factors contributing to tourism destinations' brand equity. By understanding these influencing factors, destination marketers and policymakers can develop strategies that enhance destination branding, leading to increased tourist arrivals and repeat visits. Furthermore, the findings will contribute to the growing body of research on tourism destination brand equity, helping to bridge gaps in current literature, particularly in the post-pandemic recovery phase. By highlighting these aspects, the study offers actionable insights into how destinations can differentiate and remain competitive in an increasingly saturated market. The outcomes of this research are expected to benefit not only academic discourse but also practical applications, providing a roadmap for creating resilient and adaptive tourism destinations in Malaysia.

Research Objectives

RO1: To examine the influence of visitors' perception towards the brand equity of tourism destination in Malaysia.

RO2: To examine the influence of food quality towards the brand equity of tourism destination in Malaysia.

RO3: To examine the influence of cognitive image towards the brand equity of tourism destination in Malaysia.

RO4: To examine the influence of brand loyalty towards the brand equity of tourism destination in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Tourism Destination Brand Equity

Brand equity has become critical in marketing strategies since the 1990s, shaping how brands create and maintain value in competitive markets. Aaker (1991) originally defined brand equity as a collection of assets and liabilities associated with a brand that can enhance or diminish the value of its products or services. Key components of these assets include brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand associations, all of which play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. Initially rooted in product marketing, brand equity was expanded to include services and broader entities, such as tourism destinations.

In tourism, brand equity began gaining traction in the late 1990s, with scholars adapting its components to assess the value and recognition of destinations as brands (Pike, 2008; Katsamba, 2024; Agnihotri, 2022). Like consumer products, tourism destinations rely heavily on creating positive associations and perceptions among visitors to differentiate themselves. Research during this period, such as by Kavartzis and Ashworth (2006), emphasized the importance of crafting a unique destination identity that aligns with the location's cultural, historical, and natural attributes. This identity is critical in building a destination's brand equity by shaping how tourists recognize, evaluate, and emotionally connect with the brand.

By the 2010s, a shift towards consumer-focused perspectives of brand equity became evident, particularly in tourism. Researchers like Konecnik and Gartner (2014) explored how brand awareness and perceived quality interact with emotional and cognitive associations to strengthen destination brands. Furthermore, studies such as those by Seo and Lim (2017) highlighted that brand equity is not only about recognition but also the perceived value and emotional connection destinations establish with their audience. These developments underscore the role of visitor perceptions and cognitive evaluations in forming a comprehensive measure of destination brand equity.

Recent advancements in the field emphasize that substantial destination brand equity provides a competitive advantage by fostering positive emotional and cognitive responses, encouraging repeat visits and favorable word-of-mouth recommendations. As Balakrishnan (2009) points out, brand equity is the perceived value of a destination's identity, shaped by the alignment between its unique offerings and consumer expectations. This alignment is essential in the post-pandemic era, where tourists increasingly prioritize safety, hygiene, and tailored experiences. Thus, brand equity is pivotal in ensuring destinations remain relevant and competitive in a dynamic tourism landscape.

Visitors' Perception

Visitors' perception is critical in shaping destination brand equity, as it directly influences their behavioural intentions, such as revisiting a destination or recommending it to others. According to Kavartzis and Ashworth (2006), a destination's image is primarily built through consumers' perceptions and experiences. When a destination succeeds in creating a favourable image in the minds of tourists, it fosters a sense of trust and loyalty that can have long-term benefits. According to Sönmez et al. (2017), how tourists perceive a destination's cultural authenticity and distinctive offerings plays a crucial role. These perceptions significantly influence the cognitive and affective aspects of destination brand equity.

Visitors often develop an image of a city or destination based on various factors, such as its culture, attractions, and hospitality, collectively forming cognitive associations with the place. These perceptions, in turn, affect their decision-making processes, leading to the development of brand loyalty and trust (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2010; Al-Adwan, 2024). Research by Gallarza et al. (2002) indicates that perceptions formed by visitors are strongly linked to their satisfaction, which in turn influences their decision to return or recommend the destination to others.

Additionally, Seo and Lim (2017) suggest that visitors' perceptions are dynamic, shaped by personal experiences and external influences such as marketing communications and social media, emphasizing the importance of consistent and positive messaging in enhancing a destination's image. Therefore, a destination's brand perception is influenced by physical attributes and visitors' emotional responses and social interactions during their stay. The more a visitor's perception aligns with the experience, the stronger the cognitive connection to the destination becomes, enhancing its brand equity. In addition, a positive image of a destination can also act as a competitive advantage in an increasingly crowded tourism market. Travelers' emotions, as influenced by their perceptions, enhance their loyalty and word-of-mouth, which are crucial to brand equity (Stavrianea & Kamenidou, 2021; Albelbisi et al., 2021).

Therefore, destination managers must consider the whole visitor journey, ensuring that the brand promise aligns with the delivered experience to maintain and enhance positive perceptions (Pike, 2008). Also, destination managers must be smart enough to collect favourable feedback with the increasing influence of digital platforms on perceptions, as online reviews and social media provide new venues for visitors to express their opinions, which can either bolster or harm a destination's reputation (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). This paragraph shows that visitors' perception has a positive relationship with the tourism destinations' brand equity.

H1: Visitors' perceptions and the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia significantly influence each other.

Food Quality

Food quality plays a significant role in the overall perception of a tourism destination. Research indicates that food is often one of the most memorable aspects of a visit, affecting both visitors' satisfaction and their intention to revisit or recommend a destination. According to Ryu and Jang (2006), food quality is closely linked to the perceived quality of the overall dining experience and can strongly influence a tourist's satisfaction. The sensory attributes of food, including taste, presentation, and freshness, contribute significantly to the image a destination projects to potential visitors (Campos et al., 2010).

In addition, as Kivela and Crotts (2006) suggested, food can be seen as an essential part of the destination's branding, representing its cultural identity and the overall quality of the visitor experience. Culinary tourism has grown, with many visitors choosing destinations based on their food offerings. Positive experiences with local cuisine can strengthen visitors' loyalty to a destination and boost its reputation. Kim et al. (2013) assert that food quality directly affects visitors' satisfaction, influencing the destination's brand equity. Destinations offering high-quality, authentic, and unique culinary experiences will likely build more substantial brand equity. Moreover, Seo and Lim (2017) highlight that food quality is increasingly seen as a component of a destination's broader brand, with food-related experiences contributing to visitors' cognitive image of a city. High-quality food offerings not only enhance the destination's appeal but also reinforce its cultural identity, creating a lasting impression in the minds of visitors and strengthening the destination's brand equity. Again, it shows that food quality positively relates to the tourism destinations' brand equity.

H2: Food quality significantly influences the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia.

Cognitive Image

Cognitive image refers to visitors' beliefs and knowledge about a destination, formed through various sources such as personal experiences, media, word-of-mouth, and marketing efforts (Baloglu, 2000). It is a crucial component of the overall destination brand equity as it influences how potential visitors perceive a place and its attributes. The more positive the cognitive image, the stronger the brand equity. A destination's cognitive image includes factual perceptions, such as the quality of services, attractions, and amenities, as well as more subjective elements like food quality as discussed previously. This image influences visitors' attitudes, satisfaction, and willingness to recommend the destination (Rodríguez et al., 2019).

The cognitive image is often shaped by its physical attributes, such as landmarks, food, and services, and the marketing strategies employed to communicate these features. Konecnik (2014) asserts that the cognitive image directly affects visitors' expectations, which can influence their satisfaction and future behavioural intentions. Additionally, in the study by Morgan & Pritchard (1998), destinations with a strong cognitive image that aligns with travelers' expectations tend to have better brand equity. Sönmez et al. (2017) highlight that a well-rounded cognitive image, which integrates perceptions of local food, culture, and infrastructure, can enhance the destination's emotional and rational appeal.

The alignment between a destination's actual attributes and the image projected through branding efforts plays a critical role in shaping the overall perception of the place (Pike, 2008). Thus, understanding and managing the cognitive image is essential for destinations seeking to differentiate themselves and create a unique identity in a competitive market. Based on the past study, cognitive image positively correlates with the tourism destinations' brand equity.

H3: Cognitive image significantly influences the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia.

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty has been widely studied in marketing and consumer behavior research, with many scholars emphasizing its role in sustaining long-term customer relationships and business success. Aaker (1991) defines brand loyalty as the tendency of consumers to repeatedly purchase a particular brand over time due to perceived value, trust, and satisfaction. In the tourism industry, brand loyalty is crucial in ensuring repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, as loyal tourists tend to revisit destinations and influence others to do the same (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Studies have also shown that emotional attachment to a destination, past experiences, and perceived uniqueness

significantly contribute to loyalty, making it an essential factor in destination branding (Pike & Bianchi, 2016; Prema et al., 2025).

Several studies have examined the determinants of brand loyalty in tourism, highlighting factors such as service quality, visitor satisfaction, and destination image. For example, research by (Tâm et al., 2024) found that tourists with a strong cognitive and affective connection to a destination are more likely to return. Similarly, Foroudi et al. (2016) suggest that a well-established destination identity, shaped by consistent branding efforts, influences tourists' trust and commitment, leading to higher loyalty. Additionally, food quality and local culture have been identified as significant contributors to brand loyalty, as visitors often associate their travel experience with unique gastronomic elements that enhance their overall satisfaction (Chen et al., 2023; Newby et al., 2025).

Furthermore, loyalty in tourism is also influenced by external factors such as competition, promotional strategies, and social media engagement. Research by Rather and Sharma (2019) highlights the growing impact of digital platforms in shaping tourists' perceptions and loyalty toward destinations. Positive online reviews, influencer endorsements, and personalized marketing campaigns help create stronger emotional bonds between tourists and brands. As brand loyalty plays a pivotal role in a destination's long-term sustainability, understanding its drivers and leveraging them effectively can give tourism marketers a competitive edge.

H4: There is a significant influence between brand loyalty and the brand equity of tourism destination in Malaysia.

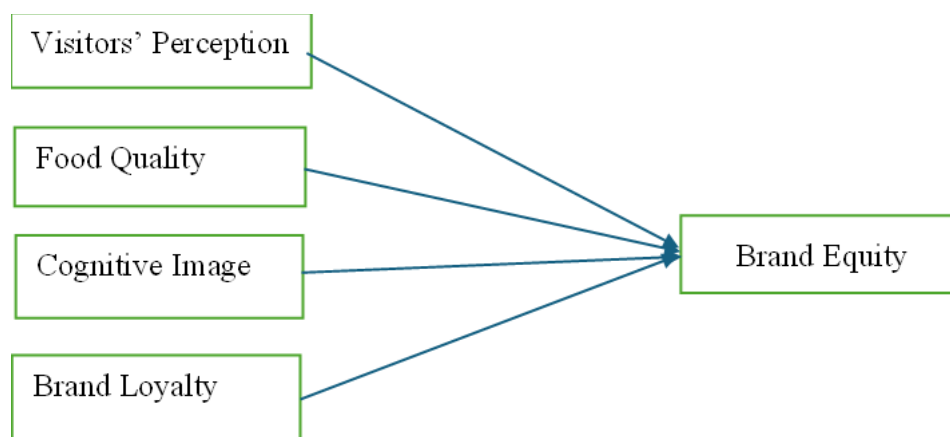


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between four independent variables—Visitors' Perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty—and the dependent variable, Tourism Destination Brand Equity in Malaysia. The quantitative approach facilitates the collection of numerical data, enabling statistical analysis to test hypotheses and derive generalizable insights. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire, which was distributed electronically via platforms such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and other e-communication tools. Respondents were allowed to complete the questionnaire at their convenience, thereby improving response rates and reducing potential biases. To ensure the relevance of the data, purposive (non-probability) sampling was employed. Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria, particularly whether they were residents or tourists in Semenanjung Malaysia. A cross-sectional research design was implemented, where data were gathered at a single point in time. The targeted age group for the study ranged from 18 to 64 years, representing a broad demographic spectrum relevant to the tourism sector. The minimum sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, which recommended a sample of 384 respondents for a population exceeding one million. To account for potential non-responses, 400 questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaire was carefully designed to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. To verify the instrument's reliability and validity, a pilot test was conducted with

approximately 10% of the target sample (around 42 respondents), as Creswell & Creswell (2018) recommended. All data were analyzed using the PLS SEM. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, with no personally identifiable information collected, ensuring confidentiality and adherence to ethical research standards.

Results

Pilot Test

According to Bougie and Sekaran (2016), a Cronbach's Alpha value between 0.6 and 0.7 reflects fair reliability, while values from 0.7 to 0.8 indicate good reliability. A range of 0.8 to 0.9 signifies very good reliability, whereas a value exceeding 0.9 is regarded as excellent reliability. As shown in Table 1, the pilot study results reveal a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.961, indicating excellent reliability. Therefore, the questionnaire is suitable for distribution to a larger sample for further data collection.

Table 1: Reliability Test (Cronbach's Alpha) (n=40)

Variables	Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Dependent Variable	Brand Equity	0.919	11
Independent Variable	Visitors' Perception	0.912	4
	Food Quality	0.814	7
	Cognitive Image	0.898	4
	Brand Loyalty	0.841	3
Overall Variables		0.961	29

Demographic Profile

Section A of the questionnaire pertains to inquiries involving measurable characteristics. This part of the survey gathers data from respondents on various aspects, including gender, age, educational history, occupation, and income range. Table 4 below presents the demographic composition of the study's 385 respondents. The table reveals that 265 of the respondents are female, constituting 68.83% of the total sample, while 120 respondents are male, making up the remaining 31.17%. This distribution showcases more representation of females than males in the study. The data clearly depict the age groupings in the sample. With 176 responders, or 45.71% of the sample, those between the ages of 26 and 35 make up the largest age group. Respondents under the age of 25 (23.64%), those between the ages of 36 and 45 (16.88%), those 56 and over (10.65%), and finally those between the ages of 46 and 55 (3.12%) come next. The respondents' educational background varies. A significant proportion of the sample holds a bachelor's degree or an equivalent qualification (38.84%). Further, 30.65% of respondents hold a master's degree, 15.85% have a secondary school certificate, and 15.32% possess a diploma or technical school certificate. Only a smaller percentage (2.34%) holds a doctoral degree. More than half of the respondents are employed, accounting for 55.58% of the sample. A similar percentage of respondents are self-employed (21.82%), and 22.60% of them are still studying. The income distribution of the respondents is presented in four categories (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Respondent's Demographic Profile

Demographic	Categories	Count	Column N %
Gender	Male	120	31.17%
	Female	265	68.83%
Age	18-25 years old	91	23.64%
	26-35 years old	176	45.71%
	36-45 years old	65	16.88%
	46-55 years old	12	3.12%
	56 and above	41	10.65%

Education Background	Secondary school certificate	61	15.85%
	Diploma/ technical school certificate	59	15.32%
	Bachelor Degree or equivalent	138	35.84%
	Master Degree	118	30.65%
	Doctoral Degree	9	2.34%
Occupation	Student	87	22.60%
	Employed	214	55.58%
	Self-Employed	84	21.82%
Income Range	Below RM25, 000	118	30.65%
	RM25,001 – RM50,000	127	32.99%
	RM50,001 – RM100,000	114	29.61%
	RM100,001 and above	26	6.75%

Outer Loadings

Table 3 of outer loadings reveals strong overall reliability and convergent validity across the five latent constructs: Brand Equity (BE), Brand Loyalty (BL), Cognitive Image (CI), Food Quality (FQ), and Visitor's Perception (VP). All constructs feature item loadings predominantly above the recommended threshold of 0.70, reflecting good measurement quality. Particularly, Brand Loyalty (BL3: 0.944), Brand Equity (BE6: 0.899; BE10: 0.892), and Visitor's Perception (VP3: 0.897) exhibit robust item correlations, indicating high internal consistency. Cognitive Image and Food Quality also demonstrate acceptable-to-high loadings, reinforcing reliability. Thus, the measurement model effectively captures the constructs, supporting its validity and suitability for further analysis (see figure 3 below).

Table 3: Outer Loadings

Constructs	BE	BL	CI	FQ	VP
BE10	0.892				
BE11	0.862				
BE3	0.709				
BE4	0.795				
BE5	0.749				
BE6	0.899				
BE8	0.750				
BE9	0.864				
BL1		0.911			
BL2		0.763			
BL3		0.944			
CI1			0.871		
CI2			0.759		
CI3			0.772		
CI4			0.920		
FQ3				0.756	
FQ4				0.848	
FQ5				0.762	
FQ6				0.857	
VP1					0.872
VP2					0.849
VP3					0.897
VP4					0.893

Note: BE (Brand Equity), BL (Brand loyalty), CI (Cognitive Image), FQ (Food Quality), VP (Visitor's Perception)

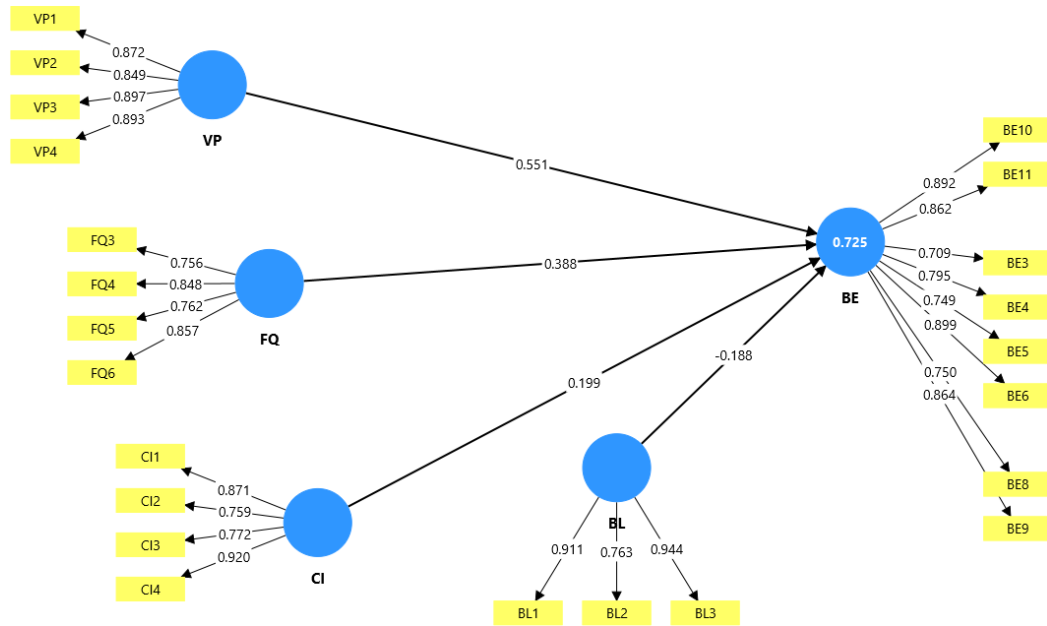


Figure 3: Measurement Model Graphic

Construct Reliability and Validity

Table 4 outlines the construct reliability and validity indicators for five latent constructs: Brand Equity (BE), Brand Loyalty (BL), Cognitive Image (CI), Food Quality (FQ), and Visitor's Perception (VP). The reported Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.822 (FQ) to 0.928 (BE), surpassing the generally acceptable threshold of 0.70, confirming strong internal consistency across all constructs. The composite reliability measures, rho_a (0.830–0.937) and rho_c (0.881–0.941), also reflect high reliability, indicating that the constructs are consistently measured. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct ranges from 0.651 (FQ) to 0.770 (VP), all exceeding the recommended value of 0.50, thus establishing convergent validity. Overall, the analysis suggests that the measurement model demonstrates robust reliability and validity, effectively capturing the essence of each latent construct and supporting the instrument's adequacy for subsequent statistical analyses.

Table 4: Construct Reliability and Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
BE	0.928	0.933	0.941	0.669
BL	0.848	0.898	0.908	0.767
CI	0.859	0.937	0.900	0.694
FQ	0.822	0.830	0.881	0.651
VP	0.901	0.902	0.931	0.770

Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity table (Table 5) presents the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) values among five constructs: Brand Equity (BE), Brand Loyalty (BL), Cognitive Image (CI), Food Quality (FQ), and Visitor's Perception (VP). HTMT is a robust method to assess discriminant validity, with a commonly accepted threshold of 0.90; values above this indicate potential problems with discriminant validity,

suggesting that constructs may not be truly distinct. In this matrix, most values fall below the threshold, indicating acceptable discriminant validity. However, two pairs—BE–VP (0.849) and mainly BL–VP (0.910)—approach or slightly exceed the 0.90 threshold, raising concerns about their discriminant distinctiveness. The high correlation between brand loyalty and visitor perception (0.910) suggests possible conceptual overlap or measurement issues, implying that these constructs may not be sufficiently unique. Meanwhile, the lowest HTMT value is between Food Quality and Cognitive Image (0.567), suggesting strong discriminant validity between these two constructs. The table suggests that while most construct pairs demonstrate satisfactory discriminant validity, further investigation may be warranted for the relationships involving Visitor's Perception, especially with Brand Loyalty.

Table 5: Discriminant validity (Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) – Matrix)

	BE	BL	CI	FQ	VP
BE					
BL	0.694				
CI	0.638	0.645			
FQ	0.820	0.826	0.567		
VP	0.849	0.910	0.667	0.781	

Path Coefficients

Table 6 presents the path coefficients resulting from the structural model, illustrating the relationships between four independent variables—Brand Loyalty (BL), Cognitive Image (CI), Food Quality (FQ), and Visitor's Perception (VP)—and the dependent variable, Brand Equity (BE). All paths exhibit statistically significant relationships, with p-values of 0.000, indicating strong evidence against the null hypothesis and suggesting that each predictor significantly influences brand equity. Visitors' Perception (VP → BE) demonstrates the strongest positive effect, with a path coefficient of 0.551 and a high t-statistic of 10.485, implying it is the most influential factor shaping brand equity. Food Quality (FQ → BE) also shows a substantial impact ($\beta = 0.388$), followed by Cognitive Image (CI → BE) with a moderate effect ($\beta = 0.199$). Interestingly, Brand Loyalty (BL → BE) reveals a negative path coefficient (-0.188), which is statistically significant ($t = 3.524$), suggesting an inverse relationship with brand equity in this model. This finding is counterintuitive, as brand loyalty is generally expected to enhance brand equity, thereby warranting further investigation into contextual or measurement factors that may explain this negative association. The model highlights that perceived value-related constructs like visitors' perception and food quality exert the most substantial positive influence on brand equity.

Table 6: Path Coefficients

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
BL -> BE	-0.188	-0.187	0.053	3.524	0.000
CI -> BE	0.199	0.201	0.032	6.236	0.000
FQ -> BE	0.388	0.387	0.044	8.795	0.000
VP -> BE	0.551	0.550	0.053	10.485	0.000

R-Square

The R-squared value of 0.725 demonstrates that the independent variables included in the model explain 72.5% of the variance in Brand Equity (BE). This finding suggests that predictors such as Visitors' Perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty account for a substantial

proportion of the variation observed in Brand Equity. An R-squared value exceeding 0.70 in social science research typically indicates a strong model fit. The adjusted R-squared value, recorded at 0.722, accounts for the number of predictors and provides a more conservative and accurate estimate of the model's explanatory power. The minimal difference between the R-square and adjusted R-square values implies that the model is not overfitted and that the predictors included contribute meaningfully to explaining Brand Equity. Overall, the model demonstrates considerable explanatory strength, with only 27.5% of the variance in Brand Equity attributable to factors not captured by the model. These results suggest that the proposed model offers a robust and reliable framework for understanding the determinants of Brand Equity in the given context.

Table 7: R-square

	R-square	R-square adjusted
BE	0.725	0.722

Discussion

Addressing Research Question 1 – Does visitor's perception have an influence towards the brand equity of tourism destination in Malaysia?

The first hypothesis's research findings showed a strong correlation between Malaysian tourism destinations' brand equity and visitors' perceptions. As seen in Table 14 in Chapter 4, the study produced a p-value of less than 0.002, a t-value of 3.154, and a β coefficient of 0.215, demonstrating that visitor perception positively influences brand equity. This result is consistent with earlier research by Sönmez et al. (2017) and Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006), which showed how important visitor perception is in building brand equity because tourists frequently form opinions about a city based on a variety of factors, including its culture, attractions, and hospitality, which can draw more tourists to Malaysia. These perceptions help clarify how visitors evaluate and experience destinations. Overall, the results suggest that investing in marketing initiatives that help shape visitors' perception can significantly contribute to improving the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia.

Addressing Research Question 2: Does food quality influence the brand equity of tourism destination in Malaysia?

The study results for the second hypothesis showed a strong correlation between Malaysian tourist destinations' brand equity and food quality. With a p-value of less than 0.001, a t-value of 4.921, and a β coefficient of 0.361, the analysis confirmed that food quality substantially impacted brand equity. This result is in line with earlier studies by Ryu and Jang (2006) and Seo and Lim (2017), who found that food quality has a significant impact on a visitor's satisfaction with Malaysia as a travel destination and is directly related to the perceived quality of the entire dining experience. High-quality food offerings not only enhance the destination's appeal but also reinforce its cultural identity, creating a lasting impression in the minds of visitors and strengthening the destination's brand equity. Thus, the results underscore the importance of investing in digital marketing in sharing the food culinary experience and varieties of choices to attract more visitors and ultimately, improve the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia.

Addressing Research Question 3: Does cognitive image influence the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia?

According to the results extracted from the analysis, cognitive image significantly influenced the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia. As indicated in Table 14, the analysis produced a p-value of less than 0.005, a t-value of 2.899, and a β coefficient of 0.716. This indicates a positive relationship between cognitive image and brand equity. Previous studies have been done by Konecnik (2014) and Rodríguez et al. (2019), where the research shows that the more positive the cognitive image, the stronger the brand equity, which influences how potential visitors perceive a place and its attributes. Hence, the results suggest that branding Malaysia based on its tangible attributes like natural scenery, cultural offerings, and infrastructure plays a fundamental role in shaping how tourists perceive and assess a location, can stimulate tourists' emotional connection and behavioural intentions, which significantly contribute to improving the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia.

Addressing Research Question 4: Does brand loyalty have an influence on the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia?

The fourth hypothesis's research findings showed a strong correlation between Malaysian tourism destinations' brand equity and loyalty. The analysis results showed that brand loyalty positively impacted the brand equity of Malaysian tourist destinations, with a p-value of less than 0.001, a t-value of 5.342, and a β coefficient of 0.398. This finding aligns with previous studies by Aaker (1991), which also demonstrated the importance of brand loyalty in enhancing brand equity. The moment visitors have branded Malaysia as their top list to visit due to its branding, visitors will always tend to prioritize and visit Malaysia repeatedly. Overall, the results suggest that investing in brand loyalty can significantly improve the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia.

Contribution

Contribution to Literature/ Academia

This research contributes significantly to the existing body of literature by offering empirical insights into the factors shaping consumer decisions on destination brand equity. By examining key elements such as Visitor Perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty, this study enhances the understanding of how these variables influence consumer perceptions and decision-making in the context of brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia.

While prior studies have explored brand equity in various industries, limited research has specifically addressed the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia and its determinants in a structured, quantitative manner. This study fills that gap by providing empirical evidence on the relative importance of Visitor Perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty in influencing consumer preferences and loyalty toward a destination.

Furthermore, this research advances the academic discourse by integrating Aaker's Brand Equity Model and Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model to explain consumer behaviour in destination branding. By analysing these factors individually and collectively, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between brand perception, loyalty, and decision-making in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Overall, the findings provide a solid foundation for future research on the brand equity of tourism destinations in Malaysia. They offer valuable implications for scholars interested in further exploring the psychological, cultural, and marketing-related aspects of branding in the tourism industry. This study also serves as a reference point for comparative research across different geographic regions, enabling a more global perspective on destination branding strategies.

Contribution to Conceptual Framework

The R-squared value of 0.725, which explains about 72.5% of the variation, demonstrates the significant influence of visitor perception, food quality, cognitive image, and brand loyalty on the brand equity of Malaysian tourist destinations. This conclusion highlights the significance of these independent variables in influencing brand equity results within the study's framework.

Drawing from prior studies that have examined the individual influences of these factors on branding and consumer behaviour, this study further validates their significance within the tourism destination brand equity conceptual framework. Visitors' Perception reflects the overall impression and expectations formed by travellers, while Food Quality contributes to a destination's sensory and experiential appeal. Cognitive Image shapes how consumers mentally associate a destination with specific attributes, and Brand Loyalty reflects visitors' long-term emotional and behavioural commitment. Together, these elements form a holistic framework for understanding how consumers develop brand equity perceptions toward a destination.

The strong explanatory power of these variables underscores their integral role in shaping destination brand equity, offering theoretical and practical contributions. This study refines the existing conceptual framework by integrating these variables into a comprehensive model that can be applied to tourism destination branding strategies across different tourism markets.

Contribution to Destination Brand Equity: The Role of Brand Loyalty

The findings of this study reveal that Brand Loyalty is the most significant factor influencing the brand equity of Malaysian tourism destinations, as evidenced by its highest standardized Beta value of

0.398. This result highlights the critical role of brand loyalty in shaping a destination's long-term success and competitiveness in the Malaysian tourism industry.

Contribution to the Tourism and Hospitality Industry

This study provides valuable insights into destination brand equity by examining the roles of visitors' perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty. Understanding these factors helps tourism stakeholders, including policymakers and hospitality businesses, enhance Malaysia's brand positioning. By focusing on what influences visitor perceptions, this research supports more effective marketing and service strategies to improve overall tourist satisfaction.

The findings highlight the significance of Visitor's Perception in shaping Malaysia's tourism appeal. Ensuring high service quality and meeting visitor expectations can foster positive experiences and encourage repeat visits. Tourism authorities and businesses should continuously assess and enhance visitor touchpoints to strengthen Malaysia's reputation as a premier destination.

Food Quality is also a critical element in building brand equity. With the rise of culinary tourism, maintaining high food standards and promoting Malaysia's diverse cuisine can serve as a unique competitive advantage. Stakeholders in the hospitality industry should capitalize on local food culture to enhance visitor experiences and drive destination loyalty.

This study also emphasizes the importance of Cognitive Image, which reflects tourists' perceptions of Malaysia's attractions, culture, and infrastructure. Strengthening Malaysia's destination image through branding, storytelling, and social media engagement can differentiate it from competitors. A well-crafted cognitive image can positively influence tourist decision-making and enhance brand recognition.

Finally, Brand Loyalty plays a crucial role in sustaining Malaysia's long-term tourism growth. Encouraging repeat visits through loyalty programs, personalized experiences, and exceptional service can build lasting connections with tourists. By leveraging these insights, the tourism and hospitality industry can implement targeted strategies to strengthen Malaysia's global tourism appeal.

Overall, this study provides practical insights that can assist tourism stakeholders in enhancing Malaysia's brand equity, improving visitor experiences, and fostering long-term loyalty. By leveraging the findings of this research, the tourism and hospitality industry can implement more effective branding, marketing, and service strategies to maintain Malaysia's position as a leading travel destination in the global market.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing destination brand equity in Malaysia, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research focuses on four key independent variables—Visitor's Perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty—to assess their impact on brand equity towards the Malaysian tourism destination. Although these factors are significant, other elements such as destination accessibility, service quality, price competitiveness, and cultural heritage may also play crucial roles in shaping brand equity, but were not included in this study. Future research could broaden the scope by incorporating additional variables for a more comprehensive understanding of destination brand dynamics.

Secondly, the key limitation arises from using non-probability sampling, which affects the generalizability of the findings. Since respondents were selected based on convenience rather than random sampling, the sample may not fully represent the broader population of Malaysian tourists in Peninsular Malaysia. As a result, the study's conclusions may be limited in their applicability to different demographic groups or regions.

Additionally, this study relies on self-reported survey responses to measure the independent variables, which introduces the possibility of biases such as social desirability bias, recall bias, and subjective interpretation of survey questions. Respondents may have answered based on what they perceive to be expected rather than their actual experiences, potentially affecting the accuracy of the results. To mitigate this, future research could incorporate qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, to gain deeper insights and validate the findings through multiple data sources.

Lastly, this study does not account for external factors influencing brand equity, such as economic conditions, political stability, global travel restrictions, and crises like pandemics or natural disasters. These external influences can significantly shape visitor perceptions and brand loyalty, yet they remain outside the study's scope. Future research could explore the resilience of destination brand equity in response to external shocks to provide more practical insights for tourism stakeholders.

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology was deemed the most time-efficient and feasible given the study's constraints. It does provide a meaningful contribution by highlighting the importance of Visitor Perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty in shaping Malaysia's destination brand equity. Addressing these limitations in future research can provide a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing brand equity, ultimately assisting tourism policymakers and marketers in strategic decision-making.

Recommendations to Imply for Destination Branding Strategies

These insights highlight that brand loyalty is a key driver of destination brand equity, emphasizing the need for tourism stakeholders to cultivate strong visitor relationships. To enhance brand loyalty, destination marketers should focus on creating memorable and personalized experiences that establish emotional connections with visitors, developing consistent branding strategies that differentiate the destination from competitors, encouraging word-of-mouth promotion through digital marketing, influencer collaborations, and loyalty programs and ensuring high service quality and visitor satisfaction, which directly impacts tourists' willingness to return. By implementing these strategies, destination managers can strengthen brand loyalty, leading to sustainable growth and a more resilient tourism brand.

Future Research Directions

Building on the results of this study, some avenues for further investigation might be explored to improve knowledge of Malaysian destination brand equity (BE). First, by adding more factors such as destination accessibility, service quality, cultural heritage, price competitiveness, and the impact of digital marketing, future research could broaden the conceptual framework. These elements might offer a more comprehensive explanation of how brand equity is developed in the travel and tourism.

Second, because this study is restricted to Malaysia, its conclusions cannot apply entirely to other travel destinations. Future research could compare Malaysia with other nations to investigate how various cultural, economic, and policy-driven elements impact Visitor Perception (VP), Food Quality (FQ), Cognitive Image (CI), and Brand Loyalty (BL) in forming brand equity. The results of the study will be validated in a variety of tourism markets using cross-country analysis.

Third, given the cross-sectional nature of this study, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to track how visitor perceptions, brand loyalty, and brand equity evolve. Such an approach would provide deeper insights into the long-term effectiveness of destination branding strategies and visitor retention.

Fourth, this study relies on quantitative survey data, which, while useful for statistical analysis, may not fully capture the depth of visitor experiences and perceptions. Future studies could incorporate qualitative research methods such as interviews, focus groups, and sentiment analysis from online travel reviews to gain richer, more nuanced insights into visitors' motivations and emotional connections with a destination. Finally, future research could explore the impact of external factors such as global economic fluctuations, political stability, environmental sustainability, and crises like pandemics or natural disasters on destination brand equity. Understanding how these external influences shape visitor perceptions and brand loyalty would help tourism policymakers and industry stakeholders develop more resilient and adaptive branding strategies. Future research can address these areas, contributing to a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of destination brand equity, ultimately supporting sustainable growth in the tourism industry.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the factors influencing destination brand equity in Malaysia, specifically examining visitors' perception, Food Quality, Cognitive Image, and Brand Loyalty. The findings highlight the significance of these factors in shaping visitors' overall perception of Malaysia as a tourism destination. Among them, Brand Loyalty plays a crucial role, as visitors prioritizing Malaysia over other destinations contribute to long-term brand equity. By understanding these key determinants,

tourism stakeholders can develop more effective branding strategies to enhance Malaysia's competitive position in the global tourism market.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations, including its focus on only four independent variables, the cross-sectional nature of the research, and the reliance on self-reported survey data. These limitations suggest further research incorporating additional variables, adopting longitudinal approaches, and employing qualitative methods to better understand visitor behavior and perceptions. Furthermore, this study did not consider external factors such as economic fluctuations, global travel restrictions, and political stability, but could significantly impact brand equity over time. Addressing these aspects in future research will provide a more comprehensive perspective on destination branding.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by filling a gap in destination brand equity research, particularly in the Malaysian context. The findings serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, tourism marketers, and industry practitioners to develop targeted strategies that enhance visitor experiences, improve brand perception, and strengthen long-term loyalty. Malaysia can sustain its position as a preferred destination by continuously refining branding efforts and adapting to changing tourism trends, ultimately fostering sustainable tourism growth and economic development.

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