

## Residents' power and trust: A road to brand ambassadorship?

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### Abstract:

As key stakeholders in successful destination branding campaigns, residents have the potential to act as destination brand ambassadors. Based on the literature on destination branding, this study examines residents' brand ambassador behavior (BAB) in relation to power and trust in relevant authorities. As such, this research considers destination residents as 'citizens', which frames their relationship with local authorities. Using survey data from 651 Hong Kong permanent residents, this study finds psychological empowerment and public trust to be closely related. Structural equation modeling revealed that both variables positively influenced residents' intentions to engage in BAB. Implications and future research directions are presented at the end of this study.

**Keywords:** destination residents, destination brand ambassador behavior (BAB), psychological empowerment, trust, Hong Kong

## **1. Introduction**

Destination branding constitutes a broad set of efforts undertaken by a country, industry group, or responsible government authority to market the places these entities represent (Papadopoulos, 2004). Similar to product and service branding, destination branding poses challenges for practitioners, and the number of successful destination brands on the market is low (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). These practical issues may be due to the relative newness of this topic: early work on destination branding primarily produced conceptual papers and case studies; scholars only recently began to adopt a more abstract notion of destination branding.

The status of this research stream has produced a nebulous definition of what constitutes a brand, with boundary researchers often equating the term with brand image and brand awareness. For example, Pike and Mason (2011) stated that a destination brand can be successful if the intended brand identity of a destination marketing organization (DMO) fits visitors' perceptions of that destination, ultimately leading to an increase in brand equity (S raphin, Zaman, Olver, Bourliataux-Lajoinie, & Dosquet, 2019). However, scholars continue to apply divergent definitions of the concept. Resultant confusion appears to have intimidated academics and practitioners when integrating theory and practice.

As a potential solution, researchers have drawn heavily from concepts related to corporate branding theory. The notion of corporate branding refers to branding an organization and its members rather than an individual product or service (Knox & Bickerton, 2003). Recognizing this distinction is especially important because corporate brands are of similar complexity to tourism destinations, especially in terms of stakeholder involvement (Fan, 2010; Roberts & Dowling, 2002).

Unfortunately, corporate branding theory has not always provided an efficient solution to problems related to destination branding. A particularly pressing issue remains difficult to solve: destination brands represent intangible goods and services as well as places, people, and ideologies (Hankinson, 2004). Also, contrary to destinations and places, companies usually have full control over production, distribution, and marketing (Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2018). A major obstacle in translating corporate branding into these complexities of destination branding is the role of residents (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013; Pike, 2009).

Although most scholars have acknowledged residents as destination brand stakeholders, locals' precise roles in the branding process have not been studied in detail (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). The reasons for this insufficiency are manifold. Different from corporate employees, who are paid to work and to behave in accordance with an established brand identity, residents are not compensated to conform to a DMO's mission. They also cannot search for a more suitable employer if they disagree with a brand's values (Hospers, 2010; Mitchell, 2002). Furthermore, residents' roles are complex in that locals may benefit from or threaten the creation and implementation of a destination brand (Kavaratzis, 2004).

Conversely, involved resident stakeholders have been found to encourage brand engagement (Kalandides, 2012; Merrilees, Miller, Herington, & Smith, 2007; Pike & Scott, 2009), brand rejuvenation (Wagner, Peters, & Schuckert, 2009), brand enhancement (Freire, 2009), and other positive brand-related behavior (Braun et al., 2013; Wassler, Wang, & Hung, 2019). This advantage can potentially transform residents into the most fruitful stakeholders for boosting destination brand equity through ambassadorship (Kavaratzis, 2004). It is therefore essential for destination managers to monitor brand perceptions from residents' points of view and to find ways to maximize locals' positive brand-related behavior (Sartori, Mottironi, & Corigliano, 2012). Such behavior is commonly referred to as destination brand ambassador behavior (BAB), defined as "planned or spontaneous destination brand promotion-related or development-related behaviour, which has the aim to enhance the equity of a destination brand" (Wassler & Hung, 2017, p. 10). Practitioners should further consider the triggers of ambassador behavior and determine whether its antecedents can be stimulated by internal branding efforts targeting residents or other factors (Uchinaka, Yoganathan, & Osburg, 2019).

A research gap surrounds the understanding of how residents relate to their branding authorities and official branding efforts, particularly as 'citizens' of a destination. Citizens' political empowerment has been well studied with respect to poverty alleviation, inclusive democracy, and gender equality (Friedmann, 1992) but has not been widely integrated in the destination branding process. By empowering citizens politically to contribute to decision making, social consensus can emerge as a basis for government action and planned development. Public trust stems from the belief that public institutions work effectively and depends on one's evaluation of public institutions' performance in relation to the public's expectations (Nunkoo & Smith, 2013). In the case of this study, 'public trust'

refers to trust in relevant branding authorities. Past research has highlighted residents' outrage when they perceive their voices as going unheard in the branding process (Bennett & Savani, 2003; Braun et al., 2013; Fan, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2004; Zenker & Seigis, 2012). Scholars have also identified general concerns with democracy, legality, bottom-up participation, and transparency as duties of DMOs (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Riezebos, 2007). As power and trust are not well understood in the complex destination process, this study seeks to bridge this gap: it proposes and empirically tests a framework integrating residents' destination brand psychological empowerment and public trust in destination brand authorities to explain a potential relationship with residents' BAB. Specifically, this study tests a framework explaining the relationship between residents' perceived empowerment, public trust, and their intentions to express BAB based on a sample of 651 Hong Kong residents. Findings aim to fill the aforementioned theoretical gap and to help DMOs better understand destination residents – arguably DMOs' largest and most complex brand stakeholders.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Destination branding**

Since its introduction into the tourism domain, the 'brand' concept has been examined from multiple perspectives, such as product promotion and distinction (Konečnik & Gartner, 2007). However, a uniform definition has not been established in the literature (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). Scholars generally concur that branding is intended to build a unique image in the minds of target markets, corresponding to a 'supply-side' perspective on destination branding. Yet Del Chiappa and Bregoli (2012) stressed that destination branding must be understood from the prevailing demand-side perspective as well as the supply-side perspective. Ideally, branding should include local views on and favorable evaluations of the destination brand (e.g. from residents and local businesses). This study employs a DMO-centered conceptualization of the term, wherein "[a] brand is a symbolic construct that consists of a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, created deliberately to identify a phenomenon and differentiate it from similar phenomena by adding particular meaning to it" (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012, p. 19). This definition echoes roles of DMOs, which can – and should – leverage a destination brand as a core component of successful destination marketing (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009).

Central to this definition is the belief that a brand inherently differs from brand image. In other

words, a brand, as a culturally constructed concept, underpins all destination marketing efforts, enabling a creative and consistent representation of the tourism product (Anholt, 2002). Although this operationalization implies that a brand is controllable and able to be manipulated, little research has evaluated the concept from a DMO perspective (Min, Martin, & Jung, 2013). This oversight has led to a notable gap in the relevant literature and applications involving practical destination branding (Nyilasy & Reid, 2007).

As pointed out by Hankinson (2004), a key challenge for destination branding campaigns is relevant stakeholders: a large number of internal and external stakeholders, as well as the complexity of communication, can cause the branding process to become akin to a coordination exercise rather than a traditional management activity. The goal of interactive branding is to obtain stakeholders' approval and encourage adoption of a brand strategy. Similar to traditional product brands, destination brands are socially constructed, but they convey brand cultures, places, and people (Hankinson, 2004). As such, eliciting cooperative behavior and fostering shared values among divergent stakeholders is critical for DMOs, particularly because residents and interactions are pivotal to destination branding (Kirillova, Park, Zhu, Dioko, & Zeng, 2020).

## **2.2 Residents and brand ambassadorship**

As the “bread and butter of places” (Braun et al., 2013, p. 20), residents are at the heart of a destination brand's identity. The extant literature has underlined the need for DMOs to pay attention to how residents are presented and represented within a destination brand and the branding process. If this task is accomplished, residents can be transformed into destination brand ambassadors (Braun et al., 2013; Chen & Dwyer, 2018; Kavaratzis, 2004; Wassler et al., 2019), a destination's most valuable marketers.

Although the concept of residents as brand ambassadors has attracted attention, definitions of the notion vary. Konečnik, Ruzzier, and Petek (2012) offered a fairly direct conceptualization of BAB, namely that “residents can be treated as an internal stakeholder of the country, as this is the largest group that constitutes and lives the brand. Their active participation in the process of formation and especially in the process of brand implementation is precious. In this way, they act as ambassadors of the country brand” (p. 469). Essentially, this definition implies that residents can enhance a destination brand's equity through positive brand-related behavior in international

tourism. Borrowing from Konečnik, Ruzzier, and Petek (2012), Wassler and Hung (2017) framed BAB as “residents’ planned or spontaneous destination brand promotion-related or development-related behavior, which has the aim to enhance the equity of a destination brand” (p. 10).

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, BAB among destination residents is potentially cost-effective, offers more efficient targeting than traditional advertisements, and represents the least biased and most authentic forms of branding (Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, & Backman, 2010; Kalandies, Andersson, & Ekman, 2009; Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012). More importantly, scholars have emphasized residents as part of a destination, relative to both domestic and international tourists. As such, this study adopts Wassler and Hung’s (2017) definition of BAB, instead of that of Konečnik, Ruzzier, and Petek (2012) which emphasized the context of international tourism.

Although the BAB concept has appeared in earlier studies, empirical evidence of residents serving as destination brand ambassadors first emerged in work by Schroeder (1996). Accordingly, positive destination image and awareness of a destination can lead residents to support and promote marketing campaigns, which may then “[influence] both the organic and induced image that nonresidents have” (Schroeder, 1996, p. 73). Residents’ BAB has since been investigated from divergent perspectives, including residents’ online and offline word of mouth (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017; Scott & Clark, 2006; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008; Uchinaka et al., 2019); brand development (Kalandies et al., 2009; Konečnik, Ruzzier, & Petek, 2012); participation in ambassador programs (Choo, Park, & Petrick, 2011; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013); and even use of tourist facilities (Merrilees et al., 2007).

Among empirical studies on BAB, Wassler et al. (2019) adopted the planned/spontaneous and promotion/development dichotomy proposed by Wassler and Hung (2017) to develop relevant BAB measurement items. Potential antecedents of residents’ BAB have been commonly discussed, such as involvement (Braun et al., 2013; Eshuis & Klijn, 2012; Scott & Clark, 2006), identification (Choo et al., 2011; Simpson & Siguaw, 2008; Wassler et al., 2019; Zenker & Seigis, 2012), and benefit evaluation (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013; Scott & Clark, 2006) among others. Although the number of brand ambassador case studies in destination branding is small, related publications have appeared in the hospitality literature. For example, Xiong, So, Wu, and King (2019) offered empirical evidence that hotel employees who display ‘ownership of the brand’ are more likely to exhibit

positive brand-related behavior. Other factors, which are probable antecedents of BAB in a hospitality context, have also emerged: a respectful and trusting social environment (Xiong & King, 2019); understanding of the brand (Xiong, King, & Piehler, 2013); as well as organizational socialization, relationship orientation, and receptiveness (King & Grace, 2012) have been suggested to foster positive employee brand attitudes and behavior. However, exactly how corporate branding theory relates to destination branding remains unclear, as employees or an organization are paid to align to a brand identity whereas residents are not (Wassler et al., 2019).

### **2.3 Residents' perceived empowerment and public trust**

Perceived empowerment can influence residents' perceptions of their local brand along with their behavior (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012). Furthermore, residents' support is believed to be closely related to public trust (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). However, few empirical efforts have been devoted to clarifying the impacts of perceived empowerment and public trust upon BAB. Therefore, this study considers perceived empowerment and public trust as potential antecedents of residents' destination BAB.

Empowerment has been studied extensively and applied across numerous disciplines. Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) reported more than 14 million related hits from a Google search of the keyword 'empowerment', 6,226 of which were in the psychology field. Although academic research on empowerment has considered community participation more frequently than specific contexts, the popularity of empowerment in tourism settings has grown quickly; the concept has been tied to ecotourism (e.g. Koelble, 2011; Scheyvens, 1999), sustainable tourism development (e.g. Cole, 2006), employment (Timmerman & Lytle, 2007; Tohid Ardahaey & Nabiloo, 2012), gender, poverty reduction (Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012), and even topics such as tourist photography (Scarles, 2012).

As the "capacity of individuals or groups to determine their own affairs" (Cole, 2006. P631), empowerment is intrinsically linked with the social nature of tourism. Although communities are frequently framed as highly heterogeneous, the struggle for empowerment often compels communities to act in a homogeneous manner, which also manifests in a tourism context. Peterman (1996) substantiated this notion by highlighting that the empowerment of every individual is intrinsically linked to community empowerment. With respect to residents and destination branding,

it is reasonable to assume that perceived individual psychological empowerment can serve as a catalyst for community psychological empowerment, with each member of society contributing to overall brand perceptions.

Residents need to be considered in brand development and implementation, but they must also believe that branding authorities are acting properly and in the best interests of them and the destination. In other words, residents should display public trust towards local tourism authorities. Residents' public trust is critical for tourism development (Beritelli, 2011; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012), but research in this area remains scarce. Most studies have examined residents' trust related to support for tourism development in a general fashion; destination branding has not been addressed specifically. Several findings in tourism can nevertheless be directly linked to trust in government actors' destination branding activities. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) tied the concept of public trust to residents' perceived power/empowerment. Results revealed strong correlations among these constructs along with a direct link between public trust and residents' support for various tourism initiatives. Accordingly, DMOs could target residents through effective internal branding campaigns if public trust is lacking. Residents who trust in their DMO's sense of responsibility are more likely to demonstrate positive brand-related behavior, especially by cooperating with authorities (Hwang & Burgers, 1997). Residents, as 'citizens', should therefore feel sufficiently empowered to express public trust towards branding authorities.

## **2.4 Hypothesis development**

The literature has suggested that residents' empowerment positively shapes perceptions of their destination brand (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012). This idea stems from corporate branding, where psychological empowerment enhances employees' work behavior (Logan & Ganster, 2007). If psychologically empowered, employees (or, in the current case, residents) consider themselves 'co-owners' of the brand, which then shapes their sense of responsibility towards the brand. Furthermore, citizens' perceived respect, as gained through empowerment, is likely to arouse positive brand evaluations.

Psychological empowerment has also been found to be directly affiliated with behavioral intention. Among employees, psychological empowerment can lead to more effective workplace behavior (Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997) and organizational commitment (Boo et al., 2009). Rawat (2011)



added that psychological empowerment can inspire workers to “exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization” (p. 146). In terms of residents and destination branding, this supposition implies that psychologically empowered residents will see themselves as responsible owners of the brand and strive to help the brand succeed (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). Residents’ psychological empowerment is thus assumed to have a direct positive effect on residents’ BAB intentions.

H1: Residents’ psychological destination brand empowerment will likely positively affect their BAB intentions.

Similar to psychological empowerment, public trust is linked to residents’ direct support of and commitment to government acts or policies (Hetherington & Husser, 2012). The effort that residents devote as brand ambassadors for a destination brand, if sufficiently empowered, could be enhanced if residents trust their branding authorities. In other words, if the government actors who developed the brand are trusted to bring benefits to the destination and its inhabitants, then residents are likely to support the brand. Studies of residents as destination brand ambassadors have indicated that residents’ beliefs that a brand will benefit the locals can evoke destination BAB (Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). Residents’ public trust is therefore likely to inspire direct brand support in terms of destination BAB.

H2: Residents’ public trust in destination brand authorities will likely positively affect residents’ BAB intentions.

Evidence has also shown that power and trust are closely related. After assessing political institutions in 58 countries, Freitag and Bühlmann (2009) found that “institutions with a greater capacity for consensual and power-sharing [were] more likely to facilitate the development of social trust” (p. 557). Public institutions are thought to fairly represent a society based on negotiations of interest among various stakeholder groups, leading to consensus and greater public trust. Conversely, distrust in public institutions is often elicited by perceived power inequality (Cook, Hardin, & Levi, 2005). Power differentials are natural in a society, but a space for cooperative relations among network actors can encourage public trust. The less-empowered segments of society must believe in the leading forces, which can be realized by empowering these segments to contribute to policies within their capabilities.

Connections between psychological empowerment (i.e. perceived power) and public trust have been documented in political studies and in the tourism literature. In the case of Mauritius, residents’

power in tourism has been identified as a strong predictor of public trust (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). This finding suggests that responsible institutions should inform the public of their policies, respond to residents' priorities, and offer residents opportunities to contribute when seeking to make meaningful decisions. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) argued that "trust and power complement one another to predict social actors' behaviors across different contexts and situations" (p. 1000).

The same concept likely applies to destination branding. Because public trust and psychological empowerment are each sector-specific, destination brand psychological empowerment and public trust in destination brand authorities are assumed to be positively related; that is, residents who feel sufficiently empowered in the branding process are more likely to trust their respective DMOs and brands.

H3: Residents' psychological destination brand empowerment will likely positively affect their public trust in destination brand authorities.

### **3 Research Methods**

This study adopted a questionnaire survey, taking the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) and its destination brand as the research context. Permanent residents of Hong Kong SAR constituted the research sample. By taking 'Hong Kong – Asia's World City' as the study object (rather than Hong Kong's destination image), the relationship between BAB and a symbolic brand construct could be investigated to identify relevant antecedents. Local branding authorities have heavily involved the local community in the branding process by obtaining residents' current perceptions of Hong Kong via focus groups, surveys, and in-depth interviews. Additionally, an online brand-specific platform, myhk2020.com, was launched to engage the local community and to proactively solicit individuals' views (Fleishman-Hillard Hong Kong Ltd. & Taylor Nelson Sofres, 2010). Hence, Hong Kong residents were expected to be sufficiently aware of the brand.

For residents to demonstrate effective BAB, branding authorities should afford them opportunities to participate in the branding process. In the case of 'Hong Kong – Asia's World City', branding authorities have provided several platforms for residents' participation, encouraged BAB for future brand development, and offered a range of items for brand promotional use (Brand HK, 2012). The population surveyed for this study consisted of permanent residents of Hong Kong SAR (HKPRs). Hong Kong Basic Law stipulates that HKPRs must be born in Hong Kong or have lived there for at

least 7 years. Thus, to achieve the research objective of this study, HKPRs could be easily identified and were reasonably assumed to have assimilated into the local culture and to be familiar with the destination brand.

Data were gathered using a quota sampling design via an online panel to conduct the survey. Quota sampling, which establishes a quota of respondent segments prior to data collection, is a common and effective approach in online surveys. In the case of this study, HKPRs were sampled according to age and gender as proportionate to Hong Kong's total population. This approach was taken for several reasons. First, age (18–24, 25–44, 45–64, 65 or more) and gender are among the most commonly and efficiently used strata in quota sampling (Sedgwick, 2012). Second, this information was readily available from Hong Kong authorities. Respondents were first stratified by sex and then within sex-based groups by age (Sedgwick, 2012). The authors of the current study believed that, by using quota sampling and adopting sex and age as strata, they would obtain a relatively reliable overall picture of HKPRs. Respondents were also sampled according to their geographical distribution within Hong Kong (i.e. area of residency). Respondent profiles appear in Table 1.

\*\*\*\*\*Please insert Table 1 here\*\*\*\*\*

Measurement items were identified through a literature review, qualitative pre-study, and expert panel. In particular, the list of BAB measurements was drawn from the literature (Kemp et al., 2012; Konečnik & Gartner, 2007) and based on a scale developed and tested by Wassler et al. (2019). The 12-item scale from Spreitzer et al. (1997) is the most popular instrument for measuring psychological empowerment. Because the current study targeted destination residents instead of paid employees, the Sociopolitical Control Scale proposed by Props and Jeong (2012) was deemed most appropriate (Cronbach's alpha in previous study: 0.770). Spreitzer et al.'s (1997) scale encompasses attitude (Gazzoli, Hancer, & Park, 2010), a dimension not considered in the present study.

Public trust has frequently been measured by type, such as economic trust and trust in government sectors (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013). As this study did not examine the behavioral component of public trust, but rather took the concept as an antecedent of residents' destination BAB, Nunkoo and Ramkissoon's (2012) scale was considered appropriate.

All measurement items were adapted to suit the context of this research. This study followed

Churchill's (1979) recommendation to refine scales on variables of interest in terms of validation and application. The current authors thus carried out a qualitative pre-study followed by an expert panel and a pilot test. Specifically, a qualitative pre-study with HKPRs was performed using convenience sampling to confirm the applicability of the proposed model until data saturation was achieved. In total, 15 interviews were held. The phrasing of items to evaluate residents' destination brand BAB intentions and empowerment was revised slightly. Measurement items related to residents' public trust in destination brand authorities were modified accordingly. Although previously proposed items were retained, interviewees expressed concerns about the types of tourists the brand might attract and whether the brand would generally benefit Hong Kong locals. Two survey items were added, namely (1) "Institutions responsible for the Hong Kong – Asia's World City brand are attracting the most beneficial category of tourists to Hong Kong" and (2) "Institutions responsible for the Hong Kong – Asia's World City have launched the brand to benefit the people of Hong Kong". To further assess the face validity of proposed measurement items, an expert panel consisting of seven research experts in destination branding, marketing, and community involvement was held during a three-week period. In addition to altering items' wording, the panel's feedback led the study authors to clarify measurement items on public trust by specifying "Institutions responsible for the Hong Kong - Asia's World City with The Hong Kong Tourism Board".

After the questionnaire was finalized, pilot data were collected with the help of Toluna, an online survey agency ( $N = 199$ ). The pilot study focused on pre-testing the research measures to verify that the chosen instruments and methods fit the overall study and to identify major shortcomings in questionnaire design. Exploratory factor analysis was used to identify the underlying structure of variables; item loadings lower than 0.5, or items loading on more than one factor with a score equal to or greater than 0.5, were eliminated (Wong & Lau, 2001). The KMO estimate was 0.964; according to Hutcheson and Sofroniou (1999), values above 0.9 indicate a strong fit. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant in this case ( $\chi^2 = 5720, p < 0.001$ ), showing an appropriate level of correlation among the variables. Finally, 17 items, grouped into 3 factors, were retained (Table 2).

\*\*\*\*\*Please insert Table 2 here\*\*\*\*\*

For the main survey, 651 additional data items were gathered through the same online survey agency (Toluna), extracted randomly from the Hong Kong database based on the above-mentioned quotas.

Pilot-test respondents were excluded from data collection for the main survey. Prior to providing consent to complete the survey, respondents were briefly introduced in English and Chinese to the researchers' background and the nature of the study. At that point, respondents could decide whether they wished to take part in the study.

## **4. Results of Data Analysis**

### **4.1 Descriptive statistics and normality**

After screening for outliers and missing data, the authors checked the main survey data for normality, which is an important prerequisite to structural equation modeling. All items were negatively correlated and moderately skewed, with standardized skewness statistics ranging from -0.756 to -0.232. Items' standard deviation was also fairly consistent (a minimum of 1.101 and a maximum of 1.532), implying that the data had no major kurtosis problems.

The target group was distributed according to quotas of age, gender, and area of residence. Respondents in the pilot test were found to reasonably reflect the HKPR population overall, and the same criteria were verified in the main data. Respondents were fairly distributed according to gender, with slightly more women (51%) than men (49%). Just over a third (37.8%) of respondents were between 45–55 years of age, whereas 53.5% were aged between 25 and 44. This distribution implies that the working group of HKPRs accounted for most respondents, although individuals aged 24 or younger were still fairly represented at 8.8%. As most participants were of working age, their self-reported monthly earnings corroborated this sampling structure. Nearly 60% of respondents declared monthly earnings between 10,000 and 30,000 (HK\$), implying they belonged to Hong Kong's middle class. Finally, the geographical distribution was examined according to area of residence. Per the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2013), about 18% of Hong Kong residents live in Hong Kong Island, 31% in Kowloon, and 51% in the New Territories and Outlying Islands. The data distribution aligned roughly with this trend, with 16.7% of respondents residing in Hong Kong Island, 35% in Kowloon, and 48.2% in the New Territories and Outlying Islands. Considering sample size limitations, the study data generally corresponded to HKPRs based on the aforementioned indicators; thus, the sample was deemed adequate for investigating the focal phenomenon.

\*\*\*\*\*Please insert Table 3 here\*\*\*\*\*

## 4.2 Reliability and validity

A split sample or cross-validation refers to a preventive method to avoid overfitting the discriminant function by allowing validation on a separate sample (Hair, Anderson, Babin, & Black, 2010). Sample data must be divided into two parts: an analysis sample and a holdout sample. The analysis sample is used to estimate the model, whereas the holdout sample estimates parameter stability (i.e. via principal component analysis [PCA]) to evaluate how an independent dataset corresponds to the analysis results. An effective way of splitting sufficiently large datasets is to do so randomly (Hair et al., 2010). Accordingly, data in this study were randomly split into two groups in SPSS 20.0, resulting in two datasets containing 300 observations (holdout sample) and 351 observations (analysis sample), respectively. The initial split (i.e. the holdout sample) was used for PCA, and the second (i.e. analysis sample) was used for model validation. The original sample was considered large enough for splitting, as the recommended ratio of respondents to predictor variables should be 5:1 (Hair et al., 2010) or at least 20 cases per variable (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004).

PCA and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were performed on the holdout sample and analysis sample, respectively, with results presented in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 shows that items retained in the pilot test loaded accurately on their conceptualized constructs, maintaining a stable number of factors (three). All factor loadings exceeded the 0.60 threshold suggested by Kaiser (1974), and no cross-loadings were observed, suggesting convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha was adopted to assess reliability (i.e. internal consistency between multiple items constituting a single variable) (Hair et al., 2010). Cronbach's alpha values for all variables surpassed the threshold of 0.80, demonstrating sufficient reliability. To re-verify discriminant validity using an alternative method, the average variance extracted (AVE) for any construct was compared with the squared correlation estimates among the two constructs. As listed in Table 4, the square roots of AVE values were the highest among all correlations, showing that constructs of interest met the criteria for discriminant validity (i.e. they were sufficiently distinct from each other).

\*\*\*\*\*Please insert Table 4 here\*\*\*\*\*

Following successful cross-validation of the data, the next step was to test the measurement model with the entire dataset ( $N = 651$ ). To assess the data fit of the proposed model with the full sample, another CFA was run, following the same criteria as for the analysis sample. Goodness-of-fit criteria were examined for the resulting model; the indices again exhibited a good model fit, matching the

thresholds discussed earlier ( $\chi^2/df = 2.587$ , RMSEA = 0.049, CFI = 0.974, TLI = 0.970). Reliability and validity analyses were also conducted on the main dataset, and findings again met the aforementioned criteria for reliability and validity.

### 4.3 Structural model

Whereas the measurement model depicts relationships among latent variables and their measures, the structural model assesses links among latent variables (i.e. how certain latent variables cause changes in other variables in the model) (Byrne, 2010). The entire sample ( $N = 650$ ) was subjected to this analysis. The overall fit of the structural model was evaluated, and results were satisfactory ( $\chi^2/df = 2.958$ , RMSEA = 0.055, CFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.962). As the fit indicators of the structural model implied that the hypothesized model had a satisfactory fit to the data and approximated the population reasonably, the study hypotheses could be tested among latent variables (Figure 1).

\*\*\*\*\*Please insert Figure 1 here \*\*\*\*\*

Hypothesis 1 (H1) stated that residents' destination psychological empowerment would likely influence their destination BAB intentions positively. This supposition was tested by investigating the path coefficient between brand psychological empowerment and BAB intentions ( $bab \leftarrow emp$ ). The path coefficient was positive, confirming H1 ( $p < .05$ ). Hypothesis 2 (H2) stated that residents' public trust in destination brand authorities would likely influence residents' destination BAB intentions positively. This assumption was tested by investigating the path coefficient between public trust in destination brand authorities and BAB intentions ( $bab \leftarrow tru$ ). The path coefficient was positive, supporting H2 ( $p < .05$ ). Hypothesis 3 (H3) stated that residents' destination brand psychological empowerment would likely influence their public trust in destination brand authorities positively; this proposition was tested by investigating the path coefficient between brand psychological empowerment and public trust in destination brand authorities ( $tru \leftarrow emp$ ). The path coefficient was again positive, lending support to H3 ( $p < .05$ ). The results of hypothesis testing appear in Table 5.

\*\*\*\*\*Please insert Table 5 here\*\*\*\*\*

## 4 Discussion and Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to propose and empirically test the influences of residents'

perceived empowerment and public trust upon their destination BAB. All constructs were drawn from the literature with minor adaptations. Scale validation in the pilot test confirmed the stability and robustness of constructs in this research setting. Cross-validation of the main dataset revealed that the chosen measurements held across populations. The overall model demonstrated excellent results in terms of validity, reliability, and generalizability.

Residents' destination brand psychological empowerment exerted a significant impact on their BAB intentions. In the context of corporate branding, psychological empowerment has been found to be positively related to employees' work behavior (Logan & Ganster, 2007); this association held in a destination branding context as well. Residents have often been compared with company employees, as residents are individuals who fulfill a destination's brand promises (Hospers, 2010). The results of the present study suggest that, similar to conventional employees, residents react positively to psychological empowerment in destination branding. Retained items reflecting this construct further imply that, in this case, a sense of being able to participate in public brand decisions (e.g. through elections) is essential in empowering residents.

This study also found that residents' psychological empowerment and public trust are closely related (Cook et al., 2005; Freitag & Bühlmann, 2009). In the structural model, empowerment was found to predict 26% of the variance in public trust, suggesting the importance of psychological empowerment in establishing public trust in power-distant cultures. Several scholars have posited that residents can be influenced to demonstrate supportive behavior through public trust (Hetherington & Husser, 2012). Hence, the key role of residents' trust in destination brand authorities was validated as an important antecedent of BAB intention in the proposed model.

Based on the findings, this study contributes two main insights to the literature on destination branding. First, this study shows that residents of tourism destinations do indeed wish to feel empowered in the branding process. Although psychological empowerment has often been alluded to as a possible antecedent of residents' positive destination branding behavior (Props & Jeong, 2012; Zenker & Seigis, 2012), this study offers empirical evidence in this regard. These findings are reinforced by the fact that the study took place in a power-distant destination (Hong Kong), where the notion of empowerment is traditionally assumed not to be of major concern. As the results have established the clear importance of psychological empowerment in relation to brand attitude and BAB intention, future studies on this topic should take this empowerment construct into account.



Second, the relationship between residents' trust and ambassadorial behavior has been confirmed. On the contrary, distrust in public institutions often follows from perceived power inequality (Cook et al., 2005). In a society featuring such inequality, the space for cooperative relations among various network actors can promote public trust; that is, the less empowered segments of society must have faith in leading forces. This trust can be bolstered by empowering these strata to contribute to policies to the extent that they are able. This association also manifested in a destination branding context: if residents trust brand developers and believe that the brand is personally beneficial, they are more likely to express positive brand attitudes and, by extension, BAB intentions. This study therefore makes a key contribution by introducing the concept of public trust into the field of destination branding, highlighting that subsequent work should consider the relationship among residents and branding entities similarly to traditional citizen–authority interactions in which trust plays a major role.

In terms of practical contributions, the results of this study offer meaningful insight for DMOs, who could stimulate psychological empowerment by making residents aware of the potential to participate in the branding process. Competitions and advertisements in local newspapers were identified as effective tools in the qualitative pre-study. Trust can also be improved through greater transparency, such as by outlining the local brand identity and brand purpose via public platforms. Hong Kong branding authorities have already shown how residents can become involved as citizens in this process, and other DMOs could learn from this example.

According to Fleishman-Hillard Hong Kong Ltd. and Taylor Nelson Sofres (2010), Hong Kong's local government has focused extensively on aligning the destination brand with residents' vision, identifying locals as key brand stakeholders. Accordingly, the authorities carried out three phases of research involving the general public. In 2008, a qualitative focus group was held with Hong Kong residents (3 groups with 24 participants). A survey was next conducted with 300 respondents, followed by 10 in-depth interviews and two ethnographic studies. Findings showed that respondents considered the most applicable attributes for Hong Kong today to be 'well-connected', 'cosmopolitan', 'fair and just legal system', 'materialistic', 'people work hard', 'stable and secure', 'people enjoy freedom', 'efficient', and 'full of energy'.

In addition to investigating residents' contemporary perceptions of Hong Kong, authorities decided to launch myhk2020.com, a brand-specific platform "specially designed and created to engage the

local community, particularly youths, and proactively solicit their views” (Fleishman-Hillard Hong Kong Ltd. & Taylor Nelson Sofres, 2010, p. 3). In the site’s most basic form, residents were encouraged to share their visions of Hong Kong in 2020. The online platform provided various means for users to do so, including multimedia submission options and weekly polls and competitions. Residents have participated broadly in these initiatives: myhk2020.com received 31,400 visits in its 10 weeks of operation along with 1,300 multimedia submissions and responses. These research processes ultimately uncovered several values thought to reflect residents’ beliefs and values about the brand; the core values of the ‘Hong Kong – Asia’s World City’ brand have since been restructured accordingly. In particular, ‘innovative’ and ‘quality living’ have been added to the existing values of ‘excellence’, ‘free’, and ‘enterprising’. Psychological empowerment can thus be enhanced by campaigns that raise residents’ awareness of being able to participate rather than encouraging active participation directly.

Enhancing residents’ trust is of paramount importance for government institutions because any public policy must exceed a minimum level of trust in order to be functional (Kim, 2005). Through public trust alone, authorities can use their skills flexibly and autonomously while ensuring they are responsive and effective in their actions (Gordon, 2000). As such, public trust can be considered one of the most valuable forms of social capital, given its tremendous influence on the quality of public administration (Fard & Rostamy, 2007). Significant positive effects were also identified for the carriers of public trust, namely residents. Public trust is believed to foster cooperation, reduce risk, enhance satisfaction, increase commitment to partners and the will to uphold these relationships, and ultimately decrease personal fear and greed (Hwang & Burgers, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The relationship discovered relative to empowerment in this study suggests that trust can be improved by psychologically empowering residents. In other words, the aforementioned branding initiatives by DMOs can also influence trust in local branding authorities. This approach seems feasible for enhancing public trust, as the concept is generally interlinked with contextual factors that are difficult to manipulate, such as cultural norms and interpersonal trust (Nunkoo & Smith, 2013), democratic deficits, and identity issues (Cheung, 2013). Public trust is particularly important today, as recent phenomena such as fake news have generally lowered trust among the population and social representations are often prevalent over rational thinking (Fedeli, 2019; Wassler, Nguyen, Mai, & Schuckert, 2019).

Finally, taking these steps may promote residents' buy-in – a desired goal for most DMOs in destination branding – while inspiring residents to treat tourists in ways that reflect brand values (Anholt, 2002). The results of this study can therefore shape guidelines and practical initiatives related to residents and destination branding in Hong Kong and around the world, with an overarching goal of enhancing destination competitiveness (Benedetti, Çakmak, & Dinnie, 2011). No research is without limitations, and this study has several. First, BAB was measured as BAB intention. Because residents' perceptions of the 'Hong Kong – Asia's World City' brand constituted the focus of this study and of residents' subsequent behavioral intentions, research evaluating past effective behavior would not have been appropriate. Second, the study was conducted exclusively in Hong Kong; thus, respondents were largely monocultural. Although residents of a specific place are heterogeneous, they often have more in common than expected. This point is especially relevant as related variables (e.g. trust and empowerment) were used in the research model. The number of resident stakeholders and their complexity necessitated a focus on one destination, and comparative studies might have been infeasible in this context. This limitation raises another issue concerning resident stakeholders: the limited number of related studies may be due to residents' heterogeneity, rendering realistic sampling difficult. This study opted to conduct quota sampling by considering residents' age, gender, and area of residence based on actual HKPR proportions. Although these quotas are frequently used to represent larger populations and a qualitative phase sought to minimize this limitation in the present study, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge. Furthermore, studies have shown that resident apathy (i.e. lack of interest, lack of initiative, alienation, and environmental-based apathy) is common (Ghasemi, Del Chiappa, & Correia, 2019). While active participation is an implicit form of residents' BAB, individuals' intentions expressed in this study may not always lead to effective behavior.

This study is expected to open doors to future investigations on underexplored associations among residents and destination branding. As such, this research can be considered a stepping stone to a clearer understanding of this topic. First, scholars may explore the notion of BAB more intensively. This study employed measurement items for BAB based largely on existing literature; future work can examine this concept more deeply and aim to identify other indicators of effective BAB. Subsequent research could also pinpoint contextual factors to better elucidate residents' BAB. Second, the present study only explored residents' perspectives on BAB. Future research could

evaluate other stakeholders, particularly DMOs, and the kinds of BAB they expect from residents. Third, demographic information was collected in this study but not used for further data analysis, as secondary data regarding the potential influences of demographics on BAB remain scarce. Also, destination marketers should not take empowerment and trust as the sole possible antecedents of brand ambassadorship for residents; recent studies have confirmed additional key factors, such as self-image and place attachment/commitment (Zenker & Seigis, 2012). Therefore, other potential antecedents should be explored.

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