An Interregional Extension of Destination Brand Equity: From Hong Kong to Europe

Abstract

Since the 1990s, the Asia-Pacific region's world market share of international travelers has increased, as America's and Europe's shares have fallen. China (P.R.) has become the world's biggest tourism source market with an overseas spend of $292 billion USD in 2015, fueling opportunities for the region and beyond. Now, Asia Pacific outbound travel is extending past short-haul intraregional travel, to long-haul destinations, specifically Europe. To realize this potential, European destinations need a better understanding of the Chinese traveler; their perceptions of destinations, awareness, and loyalty. This study measures the brand equity of Switzerland and Austria as perceived by Hong Kong Chinese tourists. Structural equation modeling results indicate that destination brand image and associations significantly impact brand loyalty, whereas destination awareness does not, contrary to past intraregional research findings. Understanding the influence of brand components on overall brand equity supports the efficacy of the brand equity model for interregional destinations.

Keywords: destination marketing, brand loyalty, China outbound, long-haul, secondary destinations, destination management

An Interregional Extension of Destination Brand Equity Research: From Hong Kong to Europe

For decades now, outbound Chinese tourists have attracted the attention of destinations looking to new source markets for growth, first from within the Asia-Pacific region, then increasingly from longer-haul markets, notably, Europe. In this East-West interregional travel context, relatively little is known about the differential effect of European destination brands on the Chinese consumer's response to those brands, or, the destination brand equity effect. As the economic situation of Hong Kong and China continues to improve the income and living standards for most Chinese, increased wealth and disposable income for international travel present a market opportunity, and a research challenge.

Outbound tourism from Mainland China and the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau took off during the 1990's (China Outbound Tourism Research Institute, 2015). The growth was so significant that by 2012, China overtook Germany and the US as the largest outbound tourism source market in the world (UNWTO, 2015). In 2015, 120 million Chinese traveled from the mainland spending $292 billion USD (UNWTO, 2016). As growth from other source markets such as Europe, Russia and North-America slow, it is not surprising that China's outbound tourism market is gaining attention. While China remains the most important source market for intraregional travel within Asia, interregionally, Europe has grown most significantly in popularity for Chinese long-haul trips (The Wall Street Journal, 2015).

Destinations like the UK, France, and Italy were early hot-spots for Chinese tourists, and now the Alpine destinations of Switzerland and Austria are attracting more Chinese, and are increasing their market share of Chinese outbound tourists. It took almost a decade of concentrating specifically on the Chinese market for Austria and Switzerland to see overnight stays start to grow. With a memorandum of understanding between European countries and

the National Tourism Administration of the People's Republic of China, Switzerland and Austria received approved destination status (ADS) in March 2004 and in the following months, Switzerland Tourism and the Swiss Hotel Association Hotelleriesuisse launched their initiative *"Hello China"* (Switzerland Tourism, 2004). Tourism Austria and the Austrian Hotel Association introduced a comparable campaign named *"China Meets Austria"* in 2005 (ÖHV, 2005).

For Switzerland, China (including Hong Kong) is now the biggest Asian source market.[1] From 2008 to 2014, the overnight stays jumped by double-digits, resulting in growth of 285 percent: from 214,000 in 2008 to 1,142,,000 in 2012 (BFS, 2015). The Swiss tourism board (Schweiz Tourismus) projects 2 million overnight stays from China by 2020. Incredibly, China will overtake the neighboring country Italy as a key source market for Switzerland (Schmid, 2012).

The development for Austria shows a similar pattern, though slightly less dynamic than for Switzerland. From 2008 to 2014, the number of overnight stays from China to Austria grew by 127 percent from 217,000 in 2008 to 683,000 in 2014 (Statistik Austria 2008-2016). Like Switzerland, China is the biggest Asian source market and ranks among Austria's top 20 origin markets.

Switzerland and Austria are both Alpine countries in the heart of Europe. The mainstream of their tourism products is more or less similar and mainly based on nature, landscape and culture: both offer outdoor, nature and/or activity-based tourism products consisting of hiking and/or mountain-biking during summer season, and snow sports during winter season. In addition, both countries offer special interest tourism with a leisure focus on cities, wine, and wellness. In terms of differentiation, Switzerland offers unique shopping

[1] Since the handover of Hong Kong from the UK to China in 1997, the Swiss government travel statistics do not differentiate between Pr. of China and Hong Kong visitors, and report a combined figure for Chinese visitation.

based on its luxury goods (e.g. watches and jewelry), niche railway based products such as the Glacier-Express, and UNESCO world heritage sites.

In contrast, Austria offers tourism products based on its rich cultural heritage such as classical music, concerts, operas, and movies (e.g. Sound of Music) as well as their Imperial heritage from the days of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire (Peters et al., 2011). Historically, both countries have depended heavily on neighboring markets like Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Italy and Eastern Europe including Russia. In terms of currency and buying power, the countries are unique. Austria, as part of the European Union (EU), is under the Euro currency system. Switzerland is not a member of the EU and kept its Swiss franc currency, which gained in value in recent years, pushing export industries into competitive disadvantage, including tourism and hospitality.

From a European perspective, the differences in culture and national identity between Austria and Switzerland are likely quite clear. However, whether these differences are perceived from afar, particularly from markets outside Europe, is less clear. Despite their differences, long-haul Chinese tourists may very well perceive the brand images of these two destinations to be similar.

The research objectives of this study are two-fold. First, it is to propose and test a destination brand equity model and investigate the characteristics of destination brand. Second, it is to understand destination brand equity from the perspective of an interregional traveler, Hong Kong Chinese tourists, concerning long-haul destinations in Europe, specifically Switzerland and Austria. This extension of destination brand equity research explores interregional traveler perceptions of long-haul destinations to better understand the components of overall brand equity in a new context.

Literature and Hypotheses

Over time, the marketing concept of brand equity has evolved from its product roots, to services, and corporate brands, and has most recently been expanded to measure city and nation brands (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Elliot et al., 2011). Among the resulting diversity of brand equity constructs, customer-based brand equity (CBBE) has been recognized for its applicability in the service industry. Keller (1993) defined it as "the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand" (p. 8). The CBBE model advocated by Aaker (1996a, 1996b), has been applied across academic disciplines. In the hospitality and tourism literature, the concept of CBBE has been used to assess the brand equity of several tourism destinations (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2014; Boo et al., 2009; Gomez et al., 2015; Horng et al., 2012; Im et al., 2012; Kladou and Kehagias, 2014; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Pike et al., 2010).

The CBBE model has also been applied to hotels (e.g., Dioko and So, 2012; Kayaman and Arasli, 2007; Kim and Kim, 2005; Oh and Hsu, 2014; Prasad and Dev, 2000; Xu and Chan, 2010), restaurants (Hyun, 2009; Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2010; Lu et al., 2015; Namkyung and Jang, 2013), conferences and exhibitions (Camarero et al., 2010; Lee and Back, 2008), and festivals (Manthiou et al., 2014). Specific to the application of CBBE in the context of a tourism destination, the concept of customer-based destination brand equity (CBDBE) has developed.

Understandably, there are disparities in the various conceptualizations of brand equity and its composition. A four-dimensional structure incorporating brand awareness, perceived quality, brand image, and brand loyalty has been most popular in specifying the dimensions of CBDBE (Horng et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2015; Malik and Naeem, 2011). Yet, some researchers exclude brand awareness (e.g., Camarero et al., 2010; Horng et al., 2012; Nam et al., 2011; Šerić et al., 2014), while others rule out brand image (Hsu et al., 2012; Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2010; Nam et al., 2011; Prasad and Dev, 2000). Some studies

include new dimensions such as trust (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2010; Oh and Hsu, 2014), performance (Dioko and So, 2012; Prasad and Dev, 2000), self and lifestyle congruence (Nam et al., 2011), quality of experience (Xu and Chan, 2010), or perceived value (Camarero et al., 2010; Manthiou et al., 2014).

, In addition, some studies include overall brand equity as a dimension along with the four common dimensions (Im et al., 2012; Manthiou et al., 2014; Washburn and Plank, 2002; Yoo et al., 2000; Yoo and Donthu, 2001) to identify a cause-effect relationship between the dimensions. In these studies, overall brand equity is considered as a measure of the sum of destination brand equity, which manifests strong willingness to revisit one specific place despite the existence of alternative destinations. Comparatively, brand loyalty captures a more passive intention to revisit or recommend to others.

The proposed model in this study follows previous studies (Im et al., 2012; Manthiou et al., 2014; Washburn and Plank, 2002; Yoo et al., 2000; Yoo and Donthu, 2001) by conceptualizing the dimensions of destination brand equity to be brand awareness, brand image, brand associations (perceived quality and attitude), brand loyalty, and overall brand equity. As Figure 1 shows, brand awareness, brand image, and brand associations influence brand loyalty, while all dimensions determine overall brand equity. Hypotheses are developed to explore the casual relationships between the components of destination brand equity. Figure 1 exhibits the proposed destination brand equity model.

FIGURE 1 HERE

Influence of Multidimensional Destination Brand Equity on Brand Loyalty

Among components consisting of brand equity, brand awareness is considered an important component, reflecting the salience of the brand in the customer's mind (Aaker, 1991). According to a study of Keller (1993), CBBE occurs when the consumer has a high level of

awareness and familiarity with the brand and holds some strong, favorable, and unique brand associations in memory. In a tourism setting, awareness has been frequently employed in models of the destination choice process (Chon, 1992; Um and Crompton, 1990). In addition, a traveler's awareness of a destination influences his/her destination preference which has been observed to be strongly associated with perceived likelihood of intention to visit (Woodside and Lysonskin, 1989). In line with this notion, various CBDBE studies have identified brand awareness as an essential component of destination brand equity (Chen and Myagmarsuren, 2010; Horng et al., 2012; Im et al., 2012; Yoo and Donthu, 2001).

Although some researchers express concern with the overridingly intense focus on image in the conceptualization of destination branding (Cai, 2002; Faullant et al., 2008; Hankinson, 2004), it is generally agreed that destination image is central to the formation of a CBDBE model (Ferns and Walls, 2012; Im et al., 2012; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007). In this study, both affective and cognitive components of destination brand image are combined in order to capture tangible and intangible features of a particular destination brand in the minds of customers.

Some researchers measure brand associations as perceived value, personality, and differentiation, while others classify brand associations into attributes, image, perceived quality, attitude, and benefits (Aaker, 1996b; Ekinci and Hosany, 2006; Pappu et al., 2005). Low and Lamb (2000) argue that these individual elements (i.e. brand image, perceived quality, and brand attitude) should be combined in one model in order to measure their interrelationships. They conclude that brand associations are multidimensional and that dimensionality of brand associations is influenced by brand familiarity. With a slight alteration of Low and Lamb's (2000) model, the present study incorporates perceived quality and brand attitude within the brand associations construct to explore the multidimensional aspect of brand associations.

Brand recognition and brand recall are frequently adopted in consumer behavior studies

(e.g., Atilgan et al., 2005; Pappu et al., 2005). In the context of an associative network memory model of brand knowledge, Keller (1993) defined brand image as the brand perceptions reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory. He posits that the more favorable, strong, and unique the brand image, the greater the likelihood of decision choice. Destination image has been of great interest in the tourism context for more than three decades now. Research has investigated various aspects of destination image such as the components/dimensions of image (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Kim and Yoon, 2003), the destination image formation process (Chon, 1992: Gartner, 1993; Kim et al., 2009), the destination choice process (Um and Crompton, 1990), and the measurement of destination image, to name a few.

Past research of CBDBE tends to highlight the composite approach to destination brand loyalty that integrates both attitudinal and behavioral aspects (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Pike, 2009). The brand loyalty measures commonly used by CBDBE studies are likelihood of revisit, recommendation to others, and willingness to pay a premium (Bianchi et al., 2014; Ferns and Walls, 2012; Kladou and Kehagias, 2014; Yuan and Jang, 2008). Hence, we conceptualize brand loyalty on the basis of an attitudinal perspective and customer perceptions.

The above-mentioned destination brand studies have investigated the interrelationship of these commonly used constructs of awareness, perceived quality, image, loyalty, and associations and brand loyalty (e.g., intention to visit and recommendation) (Bianchi et al., 2014; Boo et al., 2009; Ferns and Walls, 2012; Horng et al., 2012; Pike et al., 2010). It is concluded that high destination brand equity indicates customers' positive and strong associations and perceptions towards the destination brand, which results in customers' high loyalty to the brand. In line with this conclusion, hypotheses were proposed as follows:

H1-1: Destination brand awareness is positively related to destination brand loyalty.

H1-2: Destination brand image is positively related to destination brand loyalty.

H1-3: Destination brand associations are positively related to destination brand loyalty.

Influence of Multidimensional Destination Brand Equity on OBE

Overall brand equity (OBE) was not proposed by early scholars but it has been employed to evaluate the sum of brand equity to confirm outcome of brand equity components (Im et al., 2012; Manthiou et al., 2014; Washburn and Plank, 2002; Yoo et al., 2000; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). For example, the overall brand equity (OBE) comprising 4 items was originally developed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) in relation to the validity of the multidimensional brand equity scale; brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. The results of their study suggest that these four brand equity dimensions are positively related to the OBE.

A follow-up study of Washburn and Plank (2002) was supportive of most of Yoo and Donthu's (2001) findings in that the components influenced OBE. Likewise, Im et al.'s (2012) study conceptualized a model to identify the effects of four components of destination brand equity on the OBE. That is, a mediating role of brand loyalty between brand equity dimensions and the OBE was investigated on the grounds that brand equity dimensions such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations will directly influence the OBE. Results of Im's (2012) study reported that brand awareness and brand associations significantly influenced the OBE, whereas brand image was not significant.

This study adopts the OBE scale to empirically examine applicability of the measurement in the destination tourism context and to identify the significance of the OBE as a consequence of multidimensional brand equity. Thus, this study adds brand image to the conceptualization of CBDBE model. On this basis, we propose a positive relationship between

the destination brand equity measures of awareness, image, and associations (perceived quality and attitude) and the OBE as follows:

H2-1: Destination brand awareness is positively related to overall destination brand equity.

H2-2: Destination brand image is positively related to overall destination brand equity.

H2-3: Destination brand associations are positively related to overall destination brand equity.

Influence of Destination Brand Loyalty on OBE

In the brand equity literature, a definition of brand loyalty is arguably characterized by two different perspectives - attitudinal and behavioral (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). An attitudinal perspective focuses on a customer's favorable attitude towards a brand that is expressed by the customer's repurchase intentions and their commitment (Atilgan et al., 2005; Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). On the other hand, the behavioral perspective emphasizes the customer's actual loyalty to the brand as reflected in purchase choices (Pappu et al., 2005; Yoo et al., 2000). To overcome the limited definitions of both aspects of loyalty, some researchers suggest that measurement of brand loyalty include both attitudes and behavior (e.g. Javalgi and Moberg, 1997).

The importance of brand loyalty has been evidenced by its role as a determinant of measuring brand equity through most brand equity studies (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2014; Im et al., 2012; Oh and Hsu, 2014; Yuan and Jang, 2008). For example, Im et al.'s (2012) study conceptualizes brand loyalty between brand equity components (image, awareness, associations) and OBE. Thus, this study adopted conceptualization of previous studies which OBE has been employed to evaluate the sum of brand equity as consequence of its components (Im et al., 2012; Manthiou et al., 2014; Washburn and Plank, 2002; Yoo et al., 2000; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). In this study, we propose destination brand loyalty as a mediating construct between the three destination brand equity dimensions and OBE.

H3: Destination brand loyalty is positively related to overall destination brand equity.

Study Methods

To develop scales, the first stage was a thorough literature review of destination brand equity research. Second, a destination brand equity model was proposed based on this literature. Third, a sample of Hong Kong Chinese tourists who visited Switzerland and Austria as a package tour were surveyed. Data were collected by tour guides working for a travel agency specialized in Chinese inbound to these countries.

The English questionnaire was designed to measure the dimensions of destination brand equity and travel-related and demographic characteristics. To ascertain the clarity of the conceptualization of destination brand equity components, a series of in-depth interviews with ten Hong Kong tourists in Switzerland as pre-test survey was undertaken. A pilot test was then undertaken to confirm the measurement items of the destination brand equity model using 50 Hong Kong tourists visiting Switzerland. After confirming revisions based on the above-mentioned procedures, final version of the questionnaire was completed.

As proposed, destination brand equity consisted of brand awareness, brand image, brand associations, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity (OBE). The brand awareness items were designed to measure both knowledge and recognition of a destination (Horng et al., 2012; Kim and Kim, 2005; Lu et al., 2015; Malik and Naeem, 2011; Nel et al., 2009). Items to measure brand image were manifested to elucidate features of Switzerland and Austria as tourism destinations (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Ferns and Walls, 2012; Im et al., 2012; Kim and Yoon, 2003; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Manthiou et al., 2014; Pike et al., 2010). Items to explain brand associations comprised brand quality and brand attitude as proposed by previous studies (Im et al., 2012; Low and Lamb, 2000; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Items to measure brand loyalty were also similar to previous studies (Bianchi et al., 2014; Boo et al.,

2009; Horng et al., 2012; Im et al., 2012). Lastly, overall brand equity (OBE) was operationalized to capture the strength of intentions to travel (Im et al., 2012; Manthiou et al., 2014; Washburn and Plank, 2002; Yoo et al., 2000; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). All items were measured as 5-point Likert scales where "1"= "strongly disagree" and "5"= "strongly agree".

A pilot test was conducted in March 2014 with a sample of 50 respondents. The surveys took place in Switzerland at select tourism hotspot areas where tourists had time to fill in the four-page questionnaire. The locations were in Zürich and around the Lake Zürich area, Lucerne and around Lake Lucerne, Berne and the Bernese Oberland, including the Top of Europe Jungfraujoch attraction, as well as Western Switzerland near Zermatt (Matterhorn), Monteux and Lausanne (by Lake Geneva).

Since this study uses diverse constructs or dimensions to represent the destination brand equity concept, it is necessary to consider validity, or, the extent to which the concept was accurately measured. To ascertain accuracy of measurement, there are three major types of validity: content, construct, and concurrent? (Hair et al., 2009). Content validity was sought through a thorough literature review, pre-test and pilot test. In particular, face validity was checked using a pool of judges (teaching faculty and graduate students) to guarantee comprehensiveness and understanding of the constructs.

To identify concurrent validity correlation analysis was conducted among the constructs used in this study. If a high level of correlation is observed between similar constructs, concern for a lack of concurrent validity is lessened (Hair et al., 2009). Results of the correlation analysis between the five destination brand equity dimensions revealed that all construct items in both Switzerland and Austria data sets were significant at the .001 level, confirming concurrent validity. Later, confirmatory factor analyses of the main survey data set will assess construct validity and discriminant validity.

The main survey was based on a distribution of 500 questionnaires to Hong Kong Chinese tourists who had travelled to Austria and then to Switzerland. Data collection was administered in June and July 2014 by a group travel agency specialized in tours packaging Switzerland and Austria for Chinese tourists. A total of 464 completed questionnaires were used for further analysis (36 questionnaires were incomplete). After conducting factor analysis, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to assess whether the hypothesized theoretical model was consistent with the collected data for the two country destinations.

Findings

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Respondents of this study are closely balanced in terms of gender (51.5% female), and most often are married (62.6%). The highest categories for average monthly household income are HKD 40,000 to 49,999 (29.9%) and HKD 50,000 to 59,999 (21.3%). About 90% of respondents reside in Hong Kong, while 9.7% reside in Mainland China (with Hong Kong citizenship). The highest level of education is typically college (74.0%). Concerning age, they are primarily in their 30s (28.1%), their 40s (27.0%) and their 20s (23.2%). With regard to occupation, they are company workers (26.5%), students (18.1%), and retired (9.3%). The most preferred information sources in planning their overseas trip include travel agent/tour operator/airline (30.4%), word-of-mouth from acquaintances (24.9%), and the Internet (23.9%). The information is reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1 HERE

Factor Analyses and Reliability Tests

Table 2 shows the results of exploratory factor analyses for brand image, brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity. The principal

components method using varimax rotation was adopted to extract the underlying factors. Results of the analysis using the 17 brand image items reveal a four-factor solution where eigen values (6.86, 1.79, 1.51, 1.05) are greater than 1.0 on the scree plot. The factor model explains 65.93% of the variance. Barlett's test of sphericity confirms that one or more factors exist (p=.000), and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy (.84) validates the factor structure. Factor loadings are mostly greater than .60, except for a few items that fall as low as .365. The reliability alphas within the four domains exceed .70, meeting the criterion recommended by Nunnally (1978) for internal consistency. The mean values on the 17 items range from 3.64 to 4.60, while the grand means on the four domains are 4.48, 3.68, 4.22, and 4.01, respectively. The domain factors are labeled "quality tourism facilities," "cultural resources," "hospitality and amusement" and "opportunities and accessibility".

Results of the factor analysis using three brand awareness items generate a single underlying domain with an eigen value of 2.83 on the scree plot. The factor explains 94.16% of the variance. The reliability alpha is .79, showing high internal consistency of items. The mean values of the three items are 4.30, 4.27, and 4.31, while the grand mean is 4.29.

Similarly, the factor analysis for the three items of brand associations results in a one-factor solution. The factor's eigen value is 2.83 and the factor explains 94.48% of the variance. Factor loadings on the three items are greater than .93. Since the reliability alpha is .97, the one-factor model is considered to have internal consistency of items on the one factor. The mean scores on the three items are 4.22, 4.23 and 4.26 respectively, and the grand mean is 4.24.

Factor analysis for the five items of brand loyalty produces a one-factor structure. The eigen value of the factor is 4.35 and the factor model explains 87.05% of the variance. Factor loadings on all three items range from .83 to .94. Since the reliability alpha is .69, the one-factor structure is regarded as having internal consistency. The mean scores of the three items span from 3.97 to 4.02 and the grand mean is 3.99.

Results of the factor analysis for the three items of overall brand equity also reveal a single factor. The eigen value of the factor is 2.85 and the factor solution accounts for 94.85% of the variance. Factor loadings on all three items are greater than .95. Since the reliability alpha is .69, the one-factor structure proves high internal consistency. The mean scores of the three items are 3.95, 3.93 and 3.92 respectively, and the grand mean is 3.93.

TABLE 2 HERE

Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Prior to the SEM procedures, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to produce the proposed measurement model that was in turn used to certify if a latent variable influences an observed variable (Hair et al., 2009). A correlation matrix employed for confirmatory factor analysis for the Switzerland data set is exhibited in Table 3. As Table 4 presents, results of CFA analysis are acceptable because fit indices are satisfactory with the exception of the Chi-square value (χ^2(86.8), p=.000). However, since the Chi-square is sensitive to the sample size, interpretation of other fit indices is substantially more meaningful (Kline, 1998). Other goodness-of-fit indices support the fit: Goodness-of-fit (GFI)=.96; Adjusted Goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)=.89; Comparative fix index (CFI)=.95; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)=.90; Root mean residual (RMR)=.01; and, Root mean square of approximation (RMSEA)=.11.

TABLES 3 & 4 HERE

Similarly, the correlation matrix employed to conduct confirmatory factor analysis for the Austria data set is shown in Table 5. The goodness-of-fit indices for the 'Austria' data set, shown in Table 6, support the measurement model except for the Chi-square value (χ^2(14)=84.8,

p=.000). Like the interpretation of the Switzerland data set, other acceptable goodness-of-fit indices are Goodness-of-fit (GFI) =.96, Adjusted Goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)=.90, Comparative fix index (CFI)=.96, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)=.93, Root mean residual (RMR)=.11, and Root mean square of approximation (RMSEA)=.11.

TABLES 5 & 6 HERE

The CFA reliability, evaluated through assessing composite construct reliability (CCR), is deemed reliable when the CCR value exceeds .70 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2009). The construct validity of the two data sets meet the criterion because the CCR values are .93 (Table 4) and .95 (Table 6) respectively. In addition, it is possible that validity can be evaluated by the magnitude of *t*-values between each construct and the average variance extracted (AVE) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Significant *t*-values on their latent constructs are observed for all items of the four domains in both data sets. These results evidenced that high convergent and construct validity guarantee the measurement scales for each construct. Additionally, the convergent validity is acceptable, with AVE values of .76 (Table 4) and .82 (Table 6) for the two data sets.

Discriminant validity refers to the extent to which a given construct differs from other constructs. As a method to identify the discriminant validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct should be greater than the squared correlations between the construct and all other constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In Tables 4 and 6, the lowest AVE value is .76 for the Switzerland data set, whereas the lowest AVE value is .82 for the Austria data set. The highest squared correlation between each pair of constructs is .62 for the Switzerland data set (Table 3), while the highest squared correlation between each pair of constructs is .72 for

the Austrian data set (Table 5). Conclusively, this measurement model confirms discriminant validity because the lowest AVE values exceed the highest squared correlation for all data.

Structural Equation Modeling

Successful assessment of the proposed measurement model in multi-facets of goodness-of-fit, reliability and validity is a prerequisite for conducting SEM analysis. After acceptable assessment of the tests, a SEM with the maximum likelihood (ML) method of estimation is adopted to assess if the hypothesized theoretical model indicates consistency with the data. Table 7 reports an inputted covariance matrix. Results of testing SEM models show the goodness-of-fit indices for the hypothesized structural model on two different data sets.

TABLE 7 HERE

First, the Switzerland model shows that because the Chi-square value is statistically significant ($\chi^2(14)=86.83$, $p=.000$), the model is not adequate. However, the other overall fit indices are acceptable, demonstrating GFI=.96, AGFI=.89, CFI=.95, TLI=.93, RMR=.01, RMSEA=.11. Among the seven estimated path coefficients, six are statistically significant at the .05, .01 or .001 level. The significant relationships are found for hypothesis 1-2 ($\Upsilon_{12}=0.10$, t=2.13, $p<.05$), hypothesis 1-3 ($\Upsilon_{13}=0.49$, t=8.23, $p<.001$), hypothesis 2-1 ($\Upsilon_{21}=-.13$, t=-3.21, $p<.01$), hypothesis 2-2 ($\Upsilon_{22}=0.08$, t=2.55, $p<.05$), hypothesis 2-3 ($\Upsilon_{23}=0.10$, t=2.31, $p<.05$), and hypothesis 3 ($\beta_{21}=0.76$, t=23.83, $p<.001$). Hypothesis 1-1, that destination brand awareness is positively related to destination brand loyalty, is not supported because the path was not significant ($p=.233$). In addition, the path to test hypothesis 2-1 was significant at the .01 level but the sign value was negative. Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported.

Second, the examination of the Austrian model indicates that except for the Chi-square

value ($\chi^2(14)=84.75$, $p=.000$), the overall fit indices are acceptable, showing GFI=.96, AGFI=.90, CFI=.96, TLI=.91, RMR=.01, RMSEA=.11. All seven estimated path coefficients show statistical significance at the .05, .01 or .001 level. significant relationships are found for hypothesis 1-1 ($\Upsilon_{11}=-.16$, t=-2.82, $p<.05$), hypothesis 1-2 ($\Upsilon_{12}=0.27$, t=5.91, $p<.001$), hypothesis 1-3 ($\Upsilon_{13}=0.54$, t=9.64, $p<.001$), hypothesis 2-1 ($\Upsilon_{21}=-.13$, t=-3.70, $p<.001$), hypothesis 2-2 ($\Upsilon_{22}=0.07$, t=2.36, $p<.05$), hypothesis 2-3 ($\Upsilon_{23}=.13$, t=3.45, $p<.001$), and hypothesis 3 ($\beta_{21}=0.79$, t=26.13, $p<.001$). Though the path to identify hypothesis 1-1 was significant at the .01 level, the sign was negative. Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported. The results are illustrated in Table 8.

TABLE 8 HERE

Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research

Conclusion and Discussion

This study tests the applicability of the consumer-based destination brand equity (CBDBE) framework presented by previous studies (e.g., Boo et al., 2009; Im et al., 2012; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Yoo and Donthu, 2001), by measuring the OBE scale and its relationship with four dimensions for two visited countries. The two countries, Austria and Switzerland, were chosen to validate the robustness of the destination brand equity model with the OBE scale. Several significant observations can be made about differences in findings between the present study and previous studies.

First, two constructs (brand image and brand associations) have significant impact on brand loyalty. The results correspond to those of previous studies (Boo et al., 2009; Faullant et al., 2008; Im et al., 2012; Pike et al., 2010; Qu et al., 2011; Yoo et al., 2000) in that the results

show that a favorable and strong destination image is an important influencer of visitor loyalty in terms of intention to revisit, price premium, and willingness to recommend the destination. The importance of brand associations is its foundation for visitor loyalty, providing travelers with a specific reason to visit and encouraging positive word-of-mouth.

Second, and in contrast to the first finding, no significant relationship was found between brand awareness and brand loyalty for either destination. Abundant evidence indicates that brand awareness is considered a key element of brand equity in marketing and tourism disciplines (Boo et al., 2009; Chen and Myagmarsuren, 2010; Keller, 2003; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Yoo et al., 2000). However, given that the results of this study are the same as that of Im et al.'s (2012) research, more evidence is needed to support the notion that a visitor's awareness of a destination is not necessarily linked to one's behavioral loyalty in the destination brand equity model.

More specifically, the results are understandable because loyalty to a tourism destination can vary according to its distance to the origin of tourists (McKercher, Chan, and Lam, 2008). Unlike readily available commodities, when travel is involved tourists may build more loyalty for short-haul destinations because they can assess nearby places relatively easily, investing less time and budget to do so. However, long haul travel is different, typically requiring greater investment than short haul travel. From Hong Kong to Austria and Switzerland requires relatively more travel cost, travel time, and possibly overcoming other travel constraints such as language and cultural differences, than is the case for intraregional travel. Hong Kong Chinese tourists may consider a trip to the Alps to be a once-in-lifetime event. In addition, long-haul travelers have stronger intention to seek novelty than short haul tourists (Crouch, 1994; McKercher et al., 2008; Pike, 2009). Therefore, building awareness of long-haul destinations through actual travel may decrease loyalty, in the traditional sense, in that it may actually encourage visitors to choose other destinations for future travel.

Another interpretation of this finding is that unlike other brand components such as brand image or associations, the concept of awareness is not directly or obviously predictive of the traveler experience. For example, "I recognize ___ as a travel destination among other countries", "I know what ___ looks like", and "I am aware of ___", in our information-flooded era when online social media and the Internet are prevalent, are not necessarily strong measures of brand loyalty to tourism destinations. Moreover, the power of awareness may change during travel. As a result, awareness needs more discussion to determine its role in the conceptualization of tourism destination brand equity.

Third, brand associations (brand quality and brand attitude) had a greater effect than brand image on brand loyalty for both Austria (brand image: Υ_{12}=0.27, *t*-value=5.91; brand associations: Υ_{13}=0.54, *t*-value=9.64) and Switzerland (brand image: Υ_{12}=0.10, *t*-value=2.13; brand associations: Υ_{13}=0.49, *t*-value=8.23). Given that the factor analyses produced the same labels for underlying dimensions of destination images for both countries, such a difference may be a result of some overlapping between images of the two as travel destinations perceived by Hong Kong Chinese travelers. Further research is needed to identify the efficacy of the effects of brand associations and brand image on brand loyalty.

Fourth, the results of the study show that brand image is positively related to OBE in both countries (Austria: Υ_{22}=0.07, *t*-value=2.36; Switzerland: Υ_{22}=0.08, *t*-value=2.55). The effect of the three dimensions on OBE is somewhat different from that of previous studies that show that the relationship is not significant (Im et al., 2012). Such a difference may be a result of destination image differences between the target samples. In this study, Hong Kong Chinese tourists perceive a favorable destination image for both Austria and Switzerland, which positively affects OBE. This confirms that destination image is a core dimension of brand equity, as suggested in previous studies.

Fifth, brand awareness negatively affects OBE for both Austria (Υ_{21}=-.13, *t*-value=-3.70) and Switzerland (Υ_{21}=-.13, *t*-value=-3.21). The results are different from previous studies that suggest brand awareness positively influences brand equity (Chen and Myagmarsuren, 2010; Im et al., 2012; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Washburn and Plank, 2002). For example, the relationship between brand awareness and brand equity is positive in the case of industrial business purchasing because of brand loyalty. That is, customers choose well-recognized brands and it strengthens future intention to repurchase those brands (e.g., Dioko and So, 2012; Hyun, 2009; Lu et al., 2015; Prasad and Dev, 2000). Likewise, short-haul travel facilitates return to the same place because it requires less effort, less information search, and fewer constraints (e.g., travel cost, time, schedule conflict, accompanied persons to travel together, poor health, and safety).

However, potential long-haul tourists appear to want to choose other destinations, perhaps because of a desire for novelty-seeking in untraveled interregional destinations. In the study context of a long-haul trip from Hong Kong to Europe, many constraints may exist, from cost to safety concerns. Moreover, since long-haul overseas travel is still uncommon for most Chinese, potential tourists may prefer to choose new, untraveled destinations if there is opportunity to make a long-haul overseas trip.

Sixth, both studies show positive results in examining the impact of brand associations on OBE. As consistent with numerous studies that document brand associations as frequently cited dimensions of brand equity, this study also supports that tourists with strong brand associations related to the destination tend to act accordingly in destination choice.

Seventh, it is revealed that brand loyalty is the most important brand equity dimension for both countries (Austria: β_{21}=0.79, *t*-value=26.13; Switzerland: β_{21}=0.76, *t*-value=23.83) supporting past destination brand studies. The results indicate that except for brand

awareness, brand loyalty has the greatest impact on OBE. In this study, a tourist with strong brand loyalty is more likely to showcase unconditional preference for both countries by indicating that they prefer to travel to Austria and Switzerland even if they are different countries. In addition, this study partially ascertained a much stronger relationship between brand loyalty and brand equity than that between brand awareness and brand equity or between brand associations and brand equity as suggested by previous studies (e.g., Boo et al., 2009; Im et al., 2012; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Yoo et al., 2000).

Implications

With tourism becoming a major source of income in most regions of the world, hundreds of destinations now compete with one another in a global marketplace. The importance of destination brand equity lies in its vital role to offer a unique selling proposition so that consumers can differentiate a brand from many other destination brands in the international travel market (Morgan and Pritchard, 2001). In order to differentiate a destination from competitors, destination marketers should know vital components of what makes up brand equity to develop effective destination marketing strategies.

Findings from this study suggest several practical implications for destination marketers in Austria and Switzerland. The results demonstrate vital components of what makes up brand equity, that is, brand image, brand associations, and brand loyalty. These are important brand assets of the Hong Kong Chinese traveler's holistic perception of the extra value derived from the destination brand names, which indicates that increased destination branding efforts by a DMO have the potential to pay off in the long run. In particular, the mediating role of brand loyalty is confirmed in relation to brand equity for both countries. It implies that Hong Kong travelers have a lot of positive and strong brand images related to

Austria and Switzerland as destination brands, perceive the brands as high quality, and hold positive attitudes (brand associations) toward the destinations, and are loyal to them.

Therefore, in order to attract more Hong Kong travelers to their countries, destination marketers should capitalize on the current strength of the dimensions with an emphasis on enhancement of brand loyalty. Since there is a positive effect of the brand image on OBE and the image seems to overlap for long-haul markets such as China, destinations with overlapping images may think of joining marketforces and budgets instead of costly competition against each other (e.g., Bieger, Beritelli, and Laesser, 2009; Blaine et al., 2005; Buhalis, 2000; Jamal and Getz, 1995; Ness et al., 2014). Here, Switzerland and Austria could maintain separate marketing strategies in short-haul markets and combine marketing activities in far markets. From a theoretical point of view this is understandable, and practiced in other sectors (e.g. aviation, hospitality), but requires a difficult change of the thinking and structures of NTOs and related government bodies to implement (Garnes and Mathisen, 2014).

In comparing the overall brand equity of the two countries perceived by Hong Kong Chinese tourists as long-distance travel destinations, Austria was found to be better evaluated by Hong Kong travelers than Switzerland. It may require caution for immediate marketing implications due to possible substitutability of the two destinations from the perspective of Hong Kong Chinese travelers. As shown by results of data analyses, it was confirmed that the travelers perceived similar destination images of Austria and Switzerland as neighboring countries in terms of various tourism facilities, cleanliness, cultural resources, hospitality, amusement, and sightseeing opportunities. Further research, however, is called for to clarify whether the difference in perception of brand equity, through its dimensions, really exists in the minds of Hong Kong Chinese travelers. An interesting result of this study is that a negative impact of brand awareness on overall brand equity has been observed in both countries, in

contrast to previous studies in intraregional contexts. Again, it is closely related to a long-haul tourist's motivation to travel to unexperienced destinations.

According to Aaker's (1991) definition, brand awareness is the ability of the potential buyer to recognize and recall a brand. In an early consumer choice stage, brand awareness may have strong impact on brand preferences which is strongly associated with brand equity. When the consumer in the travel industry has a fairly high degree of awareness and familiarity with the brand, however, the linkage between brand awareness and brand equity becomes weak. It implies a concern when the concept of brand equity is introduced from consumer behavior to the tourism destination setting because of existence of differences in characteristics of products between general consumer commodities and travel.

In this regard, destination marketers should understand the brand equity creation process in the target market to capitalize their marketing resources on brand awareness to generate brand equity. In addition, a cross-cultural validation of the brand equity formation process may be taken into account to formulate a marketing plan in international tourism markets. This leads again to the conclusion presented earlier, that a partial or marketwise collaboration of the competing destinations, Austria and Switzerland, could be an effective strategy, or, both destinations need to work on sharpening and clarifying their image against each other to remain differentiated (Garnes and Mathisen, 2014; Ness et al., 2014).

Study Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study provides theoretical and practical insights, several limitations should be noted. First, there may be other dimensions that influence brand equity formation. The antecedent variables used in the study were limited to those repeatedly mentioned and partially supported by empirical results in past research. Therefore, the results of this study may have excluded additional dimensions of brand equity that might have helped better explain tourist destination choice behavior. Future research should investigate additional destination

brand dimensions that may influence overall brand equity. Second, the population of this study was limited to Hong Kong Chinese tourists who visited Switzerland and Austria. Thus, the results may not be generalizable to visitors with different cultural backgrounds or to other far markets. More research dealing with cross-cultural elements may reveal different processes of brand equity formation in different cultures and/or other long-haul markets with similar cultures.

The findings of the study offer thought for future research in several aspects. First, additional research needs to further investigate the role of brand awareness in the brand equity creation process as the present study identified a negative impact of brand awareness on brand equity in contrast to previous studies. More insights are required to determine if the negative relationship between these variables is related to distance (geographically and/or culturally), that is, the further the destination, the weaker the relationship between brand awareness and brand equity. Such a negative relationship can be revealed by comparing the model among groups of different brand awareness levels of short-haul/intraregional versus long-haul/interregional destinations.

Second, replications of the CBDBE model in this study are strongly encouraged to improve validity and reliability of the model by reevaluating the items selected here, selecting more discriminating indicators for brand equity, and extending those dimensions to subdimensions. For example, brand image can be further divided into cognitive, affective, and conative as suggested by Konecnik and Gartner (2007). In particular, a cross-cultural approach is recommended for more generalizable measurement of brand equity. A cross-cultural validation of the brand equity formation process is important to formulate a marketing strategy in international markets (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2014; Im et al., 2012; Yoo, 2002). Thus, it is hoped that the CBDBE model developed and tested here helps to advance our understanding of destination brand equity in an ever-expanding travel marketplace.

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