



CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND VALUE AND ITS EFFECTS ON ENCHANCING DESTINATION EQUITY IN RURAL TOURISM

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• Introduction

Consumer-based brand equity is primarily based on what consumers feel and think about it. Although a brand is often identified by laypeople with its external tangible attributes, a brand is very often based on a whole series of intangible elements that marketing organizations develop with the aim of building a strong and positive association in the minds of consumers (Wang, 2021), which can lead to increased consumer loyalty, higher sales and higher profitability (Loureiro & González, 2008). In fact, the issue of whether consumers and brands represent an emotional connection that cannot always be interpreted rationally. Consumer-based destination brand equity shows the strength of consumers' attitudes towards the brand and how this can lead to the success or failure of the brand (Polo Peña et al., 2012). According to Keller and Swaminathan (2020), marketing organizations should develop four key components when building a brand, such as brand loyalty, brand recognition, perceived quality and brand associations. These components are interconnected and work together to create a strong brand that resonates with consumers. Also, a somewhat broader interpretation of the brand equity model for a tourist destination, in addition to the already mentioned elements of the destination brand, includes reputation and satisfaction with the brand, with a special note that brand loyalty is a key construct of brand equity (Ghafari et al., 2017).

• Material and method

Data were collected via a survey questionnaire, distributed to the general Croatian population online from May to July 2024. The scale consisted of three parts: a consumer-based destination brand value construct consisting of three components: quality perception (QP), brand satisfaction (BS), travel intention (TI), a destination equity construct consisting of the elements of prominence (PR), image (IM) and effectiveness (EF), and visitor demographics. For this purpose, a survey was conducted with 326 respondents in the area. The sample consisted of 400 domestic visitors. A total of 353 responses were collected from 400 distributed questionnaires. However, 27 of them were invalid due to too many unanswered questions. The final sample consisted of 326 usable questionnaires for factor analysis, which was sufficient for the analysis of structural models using partial least squares structural equation modelling analysis as followed by Hair et al. (2017). This study used personality and demographic characteristics consisting of age group, gender, and education level.

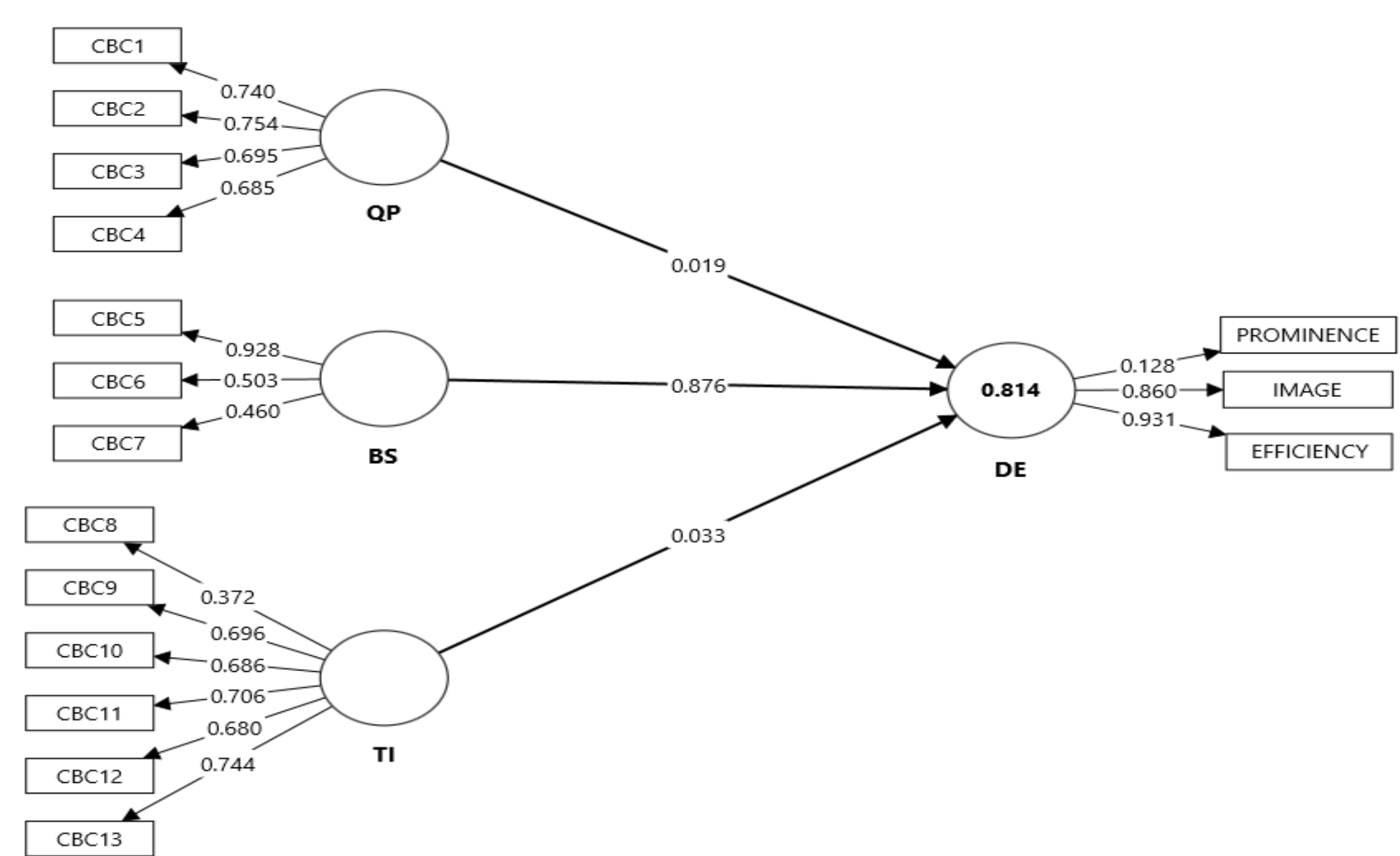
Acknowledgement:

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• Results and discussions

Figure 1 shows the structure of statistically significant relationships between the consumer-based construct of destination brand value consisting of quality perceptions (QP), brand satisfaction (BS) and travel intentions (TI), and its effect on the dependent construct of Destination Equity, which is manifested through the elements of prominence (PR), image (IM) and effectiveness (EF).

Figure: **Model of customer-based Brand Value and its Effects on Destination Equity in Rural Tourism**



Source: Author, 2025

It is clear that satisfaction with the brand is obviously the most important element that defines consumer expectations in terms of the realized perception of the rural tourism destination. Unfortunately, the research did not establish a significant contribution of elements such as quality perception to the value of the rural tourism brand, as well as the intention to travel.

Namely, it is obvious that brand satisfaction is the most important contributor to brand value in rural tourism. Through research questions, it is defined by the elements of the prominence of the brand, its image, as well as the effectiveness of the brand. The results of the research show that the most important elements of brand value are its image and effectiveness, while prominence has no greater importance.

Conclusions

The main findings of this study indicate that an attempt was made to explore a rural tourism destination brand equity model consisting of three dimensions such as brand salience, brand image and brand effectiveness.

Secondly, this study used a PLS SEM approach from the perspective of Croatian rural tourists, confirming the causal relationships between the proposed model elements.

The results of this study can provide local authorities with better ways to create brand equity for rural tourism destinations. First, brand satisfaction has been shown to be very effective in forming rural brand equity. Creating brand equity and improving tourists' willingness to revisit have become an inevitable strategic choice for rural tourism destinations.

Unfortunately, elements such as quality perception and travel intention as the elementary foundation of the Customer-based Brand Value construct, apparently in the studied case did not contribute to a greater extent to building brand equity in rural tourism in Croatia. Therefore, the local DMO should strive to improve tourists' awareness of quality perception and more effectively manage the strategy and through campaigns that more effectively stimulate travel intentions to rural destinations.