

# INFLUENCE OF DESTINATION BRAND EQUITY ON INTENT TO VISIT: EXAMINING DESTINATION BRAND LOVE TOWARDS SRI LANKA IN A POST- CRISIS SCENARIO

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**Abstract:** *This research explores how the strength of Sri Lanka's brand as a travel destination, what's called Destination Brand Equity (DBE affects tourists' desire to visit, especially after the country has gone through some tough times. The study also looks at the role of tourists' love for the Destination Brand Love (DBL as a connecting factor). First, researchers surveyed 400 tourists using questionnaires, and then they had in-depth conversations with 30 key players in the tourism industry to get a more complete picture. They used a statistical technique called Structural Equation Modeling to analyze the survey data, and it showed that a strong destination brand made tourists love the place more and want to visit and that this love was a big reason why they wanted to go. The conversations revealed that tourists felt a strong connection to Sri Lanka because of the rich culture and real, authentic experiences they had. All of this points to the idea that focusing on the emotional side of things emotional branding is really important for winning back trust and getting tourists to return to Sri Lanka after difficult periods. The study suggests that Sri Lanka should run marketing campaigns that pull at the heartstrings and make sure visitors have unique, memorable experiences.*

**Keywords:** *Destination Brand Equity, Destination Brand Love, Intent to Visit, Sri Lanka, Post- Crisis Tourism, Emotional Branding.*

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## Introduction

Sri Lanka is famous for its deep-rooted culture, stunning landscapes, and incredibly friendly people. It's a place that brings in tourists from all over the world, eager to experience its beautiful beaches, historic landmarks, colorful celebrations, and the genuine warmth of its citizens. Whether you're exploring the hazy mountains of Nuwara Eliya or relaxing on the sunny shores of the south, Sri Lanka has built a reputation as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean," a truly unique and captivating destination.

But between 2019 and 2024, a whole bunch of bad things happened one after another, really messing up the country's tourism. In April 2019, the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks scared everyone, leading to travel warnings and a big drop in tourists. Then, just as things researchers starting to look up, the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, closing borders and stopping travel completely. And if that wasn't enough, the economic and political problems of 2022, with rising prices, fuel shortages, and protests, made things even worse. All of these events made people unsure about Sri Lanka and hurt its image as a safe and fun place to visit.

With these issues in mind, this study explores how both cognitive and emotional aspects of branding impact tourists' decisions to travel to Sri Lanka after a crisis. Researchers use the idea of Destination Brand Equity (DBE), which includes factors

like brand awareness, the quality people perceive, the associations they make with the brand, and their loyalty to it, as a way to understand how tourists think about a destination. On the flip side, Destination Brand Love (DBL) looks at the emotional bond and attachment tourists feel towards a place because of special and unforgettable experiences. Knowing how these two things together affect travel choices is vital for creating successful marketing and recovery plans.

This research takes a holistic view by blending branding ideas with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). This theory suggests that people's attitudes, what they think others expect of them, and how much control they feel they have over their actions all shape their intentions. By placing destination brand experience (DBE) and destination brand loyalty (DBL) within this framework, the study seeks to offer a richer, more detailed look at how tourists make choices when a crisis has impacted a location.

On top of that, this research tackles some really important gaps, both in terms of real-world data and practical application. Even though more and more are being written about how destinations brand themselves, not enough has been studied about how using emotional branding can affect people's desire to travel during a crisis, especially in developing nations such as Sri Lanka. A lot of the research out there looks at Destination Brand Equity

(DBE) and Destination Brand Loyalty (DBL) as separate things, not realizing how they might actually be connected. Plus, when it comes to marketing tourism in Sri Lanka after a crisis, the focus has mainly been on pushing things you can see and touch, like historical places and natural landscapes, instead of using stories that evoke feelings to bring back trust and encourage people to keep coming back.

This research takes a closer look at how Destination Brand Love (DBL) affects the relationship between Destination Brand Experience (DBE) and tourists' desire to visit. By exploring this connection, the study helps us get a more complete picture of how tourism bounces back after a crisis. It also gives destination marketers and policymakers some real-world advice on how to use emotional connections in their branding strategies. In the end, the goal is to help Sri Lanka's tourism industry move beyond just recovering from a crisis to building a strong, competitive presence in the worldwide tourism scene.

## Methodology

This research used a mixed-methods approach, specifically a sequential explanatory design, to get a complete picture of how Destination Brand Equity (DBE), Destination Brand Love (DBL), and Intent to Visit (IV) are connected. The idea was to first use numbers to figure out the strength and direction of these connections and then dig deeper with qualitative data to add context and a more nuanced understanding.

During the quantitative phase, researchers surveyed 400 international tourists who either visited or planned to visit Sri Lanka between 2022 and 2024 using a structured questionnaire. Researchers used established measurement scales for the survey: Destination Brand Equity (DBE) was measured using indicators from Boo et al. (2009), Destination Brand Loyalty (DBL) from Batra et al. (2012), and Intent to Visit (IV) from Ajzen (1991). Respondents rated each item on a five-point Likert scale. Researchers distributed the survey both online and through tourism service providers to get a wide range of nationalities, travel motivations, and demographic backgrounds.

The data researchers gathered researchers examined using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the help of SmartPLS 3.0 software. Researchers checked how well the model fit, along with its reliability and validity, by looking at crucial measures like Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. Researchers then tested our hypotheses to figure out how DBE and DBL, directly and indirectly, affect IV. To see if DBL acts as a mediator between DBE and IV, researchers used a Sobel test.

After finishing the number-focused part of the study, researchers added a qualitative piece to dive deeper into the feelings and experiences behind the data. Researchers did this by having semi-structured interviews with 30 key people, such as international tourists, hotel managers, tour operators, and officials from the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. Researchers chose these interviews on purpose and also used snowball sampling to get a variety of viewpoints.

Researchers used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, supported by NVivo software, to make sense of the qualitative data. Researchers transcribed the data, then did some initial coding, developed themes, and compared findings across different cases. Researchers discovered themes like emotional

attachment, cultural connection, how people felt about safety, and brand loyalty. These themes helped us understand the quantitative results better.

Researchers wove together different research methods using a step-by-step, explanatory approach. This meant researchers used our qualitative findings to shed more light on what the numbers from our statistical analysis researchers telling us. By looking at things from multiple angles, researchers not only strengthened the reliability of our study but also gained a richer, more complete picture of how tourists think and feel about a destination's branding after it has gone through a crisis.

## Results

The numbers really backed up what researchers thought was true about how the different parts of our study connected. It turns out that Destination Brand Equity (DBE) has a big, positive effect on Destination Brand Love (DBL). The strength of this connection was measured at  $\beta =$

0.65 ( $p < 0.001$ ), meaning that when people have good feelings about Sri Lanka's brand image, awareness, and quality, it really boosts their emotional connection and fondness for the brand. Similarly, DBE also directly and positively influenced the Intent to Visit (IV) with a coefficient of  $\beta = 0.42$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), showing that a strong brand, based on how people think about it, makes them more likely to actually visit.

Upon closer examination, it became clear that DBL (destination brand love) had a notable impact on IV (visit intentions) ( $\beta = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that the emotional connections tourists have with a destination play a major role in predicting whether they'll actually visit. This result confirms the idea that tourists' love for a brand, feeling connected to it, and their commitment over time are strong factors influencing their choices when a destination is recovering from a crisis.

The Sobel test ( $Z = 3.24$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) confirmed that DBL plays a significant role as a mediator between DBE and IV. This means that the effect of DBE on IV isn't just direct; it also works through the emotional channel of DBL. DBL's mediating role strengthens the proposed model's ability to explain the relationships involved, emphasizing that destination marketing strategies should consider both thinking and feeling aspects.

During the qualitative phase, researchers conducted a thematic analysis on interviews with 30 stakeholders. This process uncovered several important emotional and experiential themes that supported the results from our quantitative research. A strong emotional connection to Sri Lanka was a recurring theme, stemming from tourists' deep immersion in the culture, their interactions with local people, and the genuine nature of the destination. Participants often spoke about the kindness they encountered in Sri Lankan hospitality, the peacefulness found at spiritual and natural sites, and the personal growth they experienced through research tourism as key elements that created an emotional bond with the destination.

What's really important is that the stories people shared also shared how much a sense of crisis can change whether someone decides to visit a place. A lot of people mentioned being worried about safety and stability, especially after what happened in 2019 and with all the money problems going on. But, for many, these worries just acknowledged as strong as the deep connection and loyalty they felt. People who had been to Sri Lanka before

researchers even more vocal about how much they supported it and how tough the researchers were, often saying they "loved Sri Lanka too much to just give up on it." These kinds of stories showed how much a deep connection to a place can help keep tourism alive, even when things are rough.

To sum it up, combining the numerical data with more descriptive research clearly shows that both logical assessments and feelings play a big role in figuring out if tourists will travel to Sri Lanka after the crisis. This highlights how important it is to build a strong emotional connection to the destination's brand, by offering experiences that are deeply rooted in culture and really resonate with people on an emotional level.

## Conclusion

When researchers combine the ideas of Destination Brand Equity (DBE) and Destination Brand Love (DBL), researchers get a really strong and complete way to understand why tourists behave the way they do after a crisis. This research shows that DBE doesn't just directly make tourists want to visit a place, it also has a big indirect effect by making them feel a strong emotional connection (DBL). The fact that DBL acts as a middleman highlights how important emotional branding is becoming as a strategy for influencing travel decisions. This is especially true in situations where people feel unsure or worried about risks.

The research really drives home the point that effective destination branding needs to go beyond just logical benefits. It's not just about things like safety, good infrastructure, and quality services – although those are important. Tourists also care deeply about how a place makes them feel. Their emotional connection, whether they see the destination as genuine, and the overall emotional impact all play a huge role. This is especially important for Sri Lanka. They need to stand out in a very competitive tourism market, and they can only do that if they connect with people on an emotional level, as well as offer good value.

For those promoting destinations and shaping travel policies, the takeaway is pretty straightforward. Putting money into things like genuine cultural experiences, trips that are personalized and immersive, and stories that really tug at the heartstrings can boost how much visitors love a destination and keep them coming back. Marketing efforts should make the brand feel more relatable by sharing real stories of how places change people and bring them together, and by getting past visitors to spread the word as brand ambassadors.

On top of that, the research suggests a unified approach to branding, one that brings together consistent messaging, well-crafted experiences, and active involvement from everyone involved. This means equipping those in the hospitality industry with the skills to create meaningful moments for guests, putting together travel packages that highlight culture and wellbeing and forge stronger bonds, and using online tools to share Sri Lanka's inspiring story of overcoming adversity and finding new life.

To wrap things up, reviving Sri Lanka's tourism industry after this crisis is about more than just sprucing up the image; it's about rekindling a genuine connection with travelers worldwide. By making sure the brand's strength is matched by genuine affection for it, Sri Lanka can create a visitor base that's not only loyal and deeply invested, but also more resilient. This approach will help build a more sustainable tourism sector and aid the nation's overall recovery.

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