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**Destination Brand Equity of Cultural Destination:  
The Case of Hue City, Vietnam**

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**Abstract**

*Along with the development of tourism, the competition between tourist destinations is growing. Therefore, destinations must compete fiercely in many forms to survive and develop. Fierce competition among tourist destinations requires them to create competitive advantages over others. At this time, the destination brand is essential to help the destination achieve its development goals and ensure its position. Previous research has acknowledged the added value that brands bring to tourism destinations. However, research on destination brand equity must continue, especially for destinations with outstanding characteristics, such as cultural and heritage destinations. This article explores the factors that make up the brand equity of a cultural destination. From there, we can have a more specific view of the differences in evaluating destination brand equity. The research was carried out based on a survey of 251 tourists in Hue City, Vietnam, the cultural city of ASEAN. The results show that the dimensions of cultural property of the destination brand equity positively influence the structure of destination brand equity. The equity aspects of the cultural destination brand include the equity of the cultural destination brand, Positive associations about the cultural destination, quality of the cultural destination brand, and loyalty. Through this research, destination managers can identify the advantages of the cultural destination brand in Hue City and then have solutions to improve the equity of the destination brand there. The paper ends with a discussion of the results and implications of the study.*

**Keywords:** brand equity, destination brand equity, cultural destination brand equity, Hue City, Vietnam.

**JEL Classification:** L80, L83, M10.

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## **1. Introduction**

Hue City, Vietnam, is a diverse destination of cultural tourism resources with many famous landmarks, great appeal, and the ability to attract international tourists and domestic people. Along with tourism development, competition between tourist destinations is increasingly fierce. Therefore, destinations must compete fiercely in many forms to survive and develop. While customers are increasingly smart and demanding, they need more time for choice. Furthermore, many tourist destinations have similar characteristics and types of services. Fierce competition among tourist destinations requires them to create competitive advantages over others (Pike and Page, 2014). Furthermore, brands are essential to help destination achieve its development goals and ensure their position in the market. Competitive advantage can be achieved by developing strong brands that deliver high value to customers. A powerful brand that is known by many customers is the quickest and the most efficient approach through which a destination can expand its profits with a minimal cost.

Tourism increasingly focusses on investing in facilities, landscapes, and environments that are genuinely convenient for tourists to visit, relax, or come on business. However, Hue City tourism faces many challenges due to the intrusion and fierce competition of current and potential competitors. Hue city currently attracts fewer tourists (3.2 million tourists in 2023) than other cultural tourism destinations in Vietnam such as Hanoi City (24 million tourists in 2023), Hoi An City (4 million tourists in 2023), etc., or South East Asia such as Chiang Mai in Thailand (3.9 million tourists in 2023), Bali in Indonesia (5.2 million tourists in 2023), etc. However, Hue has more historical and cultural relics and world cultural heritage than other destinations, with seven world heritages recognised by UNESCO.

Hue City needs to determine that creating a truly profound image in customers' minds is a factor that determines the survival and existence of the tourism industry. Along with the efforts to build and advance the brand, many tourists acquired knowledge about Hue's tourism brand through the upshifting number of international tourists. Contrasting to tangible goods, destinations reflect multidimensionality and are they able to supply tourists with distinct experiences. Destinations are perceived as intangible products hence they display subjectiveness and they rely on the travel itinerary, culture, purpose of the visit, level of education, and past tourist experiences.

For this reason, destination brands become riskier because much of what makes up a brand can sometimes be altered by human influences, natural events, or purposeful intervention, etc. Another factor is that the destinations are unique and not traded on the market. Therefore, other destinations cannot directly determine the equity of the destination brand equity. Instead, brand equity must be assumed based on spending, tourist return to renewal rates, and overall visitation rates (Chekalina et al., 2018).

Previous research has acknowledged the added value that brands bring to tourism destinations. Thus, it is crucial to understand and manage the determinants of brand equity for tourism destinations (San Martín et al., 2019). Therefore, research on Hue City's destination brand equity becomes even more

urgent. Provides characteristics of destination brand equity and then offers solutions to enhance, develop and protect destination brand equity and attract more and more tourists.

This paper is organised into the following sections: The first part provides a brief review of destination brand equity and cultural destination brand equity. In the second part, the research methods used by the authors are provided. The third part covers the research results. The last part is the conclusion and discussion of the research results, establishing future research directions and limitations of the study.

## **2. Problem Statement**

### ***2.1 Destination Brand Equity***

Research in destination brand equity is mainly based on research on corporate and product brand equity. Although there is still debate as to whether brand equity can be applied from a product to a tourism destination, as the concept becomes quite complex and challenging to grasp when connecting it to a destination (Konecnik and Gartner, 2007); however, there have been practical studies on brand equity that have been applied to tourist destinations (Kim et al., 2019; San Martín et al., 2019).

Conceptually, tourism destination-based branding includes both tangible and intangible elements (Boo et al., 2009). Tourists perceive these elements as a unique combination of the functional (physical, measurable) and psychological (abstract) components of the destination brand. The attractiveness and value of a tourist destination brand can vary depending on the product/service assets that tourists recognise. The elements of a destination brand and the measurement methods used are still relatively new and controversial. Thus, this issue has not been extensively researched to date (San Martín et al., 2019); in the first research on destination brand equity, Konecnik and Gartner (2007) used four dimensions: awareness, image, quality, and loyalty. Kim et al. (2019) used six dimensions: awareness, preference, value, uniqueness, popularity, and price. San Martín et al. (2019) used five dimensions: awareness, image, quality, loyalty, and tourist satisfaction.

According to research by Aaker (1991), brand equity measurement is divided into five aspects: awareness, association/image, perceived quality, loyalty, and brand equity. In destination brand equity, the first four dimensions are included in the respective models (San Martín et al., 2019). In this context, perception refers to the name and characteristics of the destination and the association/image with the perceived value and personality. Perceived quality is related to organisational aspects and loyalty to review and recommendation (Boo et al., 2009). However, Pike (2007) argued that the asset dimension, addressed mainly by the financial measure of the destination brand, has little practical value. Furthermore, Mansur et al. (2021) argued that the entertainment and interaction aspects strongly impact the loyalty aspect of the destination brand equity.

Despite its potential application to tourism destinations, research on brand equity has only recently attracted the attention of academic researchers (Kaushal et al., 2019), with very little experimental work on a destination-based brand equity model related to destination branding (Pike and Bianchi, 2013).

## **2.2 Cultural Destination Brand Equity**

Cultural heritage and public awareness of its importance are among the main factors contributing to socioeconomic and cultural development (Carbone, 2016). Cultural heritage assets constitute a resource for the area in question, offering the potential to act as a tourist attraction and thus contribute to the development of the territory (Carbone, 2016). In this regard, Carbone (2016) notes that cultural heritage is important for the development, attractiveness, and competitiveness of tourist destinations. As a result, countries, regions, and cities around the world are now competing for the attention of tourists to attract them to their heritage (Koufodontis & Gaki, 2022). Among heritage sites, those classified as World Heritage Sites by the Organisation for Educational, Scientific and Cultural Rights of the United Nations (UNESCO) are particularly interesting because of this recognizable label, making them authentic heritage brands (Kim et al., 2019).

Culturally attractive places provide great motivation to travel and creating culture. However, this connection has become even more profound in recent decades, encapsulated in cultural tourism (Richards, 2018). In the 1980s, the number of international tourists visiting the world's foremost cultural sites and attractions increased, so the label 'cultural tourism' created a new niche market. Today, cultural tourism is one of the fastest growing emerging products in the world's tourism industry. According to the UNTWO Report on the Synergy between Tourism and Culture (2018), cultural tourism is estimated to account for more than 39% of the total value of international tourism.

When a heritage site is designated as a World Heritage Site, this recognition constitutes a powerful heritage brand (Koufodontis & Gaki, 2022) with important status, perceived quality, and authenticity (Lak et al., 2020). This heritage brand has a positive impact on demand patterns in the relevant territories (Halpenny et al., 2018), thus contributing to reducing the perceived risks of tourists associated with choosing a destination (Halpenny et al., 2018) and, ultimately, increasing tourists' trust in the destination in question (Hassan and Rahman, 2015). Regarding heritage destination branding research, Kladou and Kehagias (2014) found that the present study follows a customer-based approach to help destination managers recognise which assets are considered unique and thus constitute cultural brand equity of a cultural destination.

Camarero et al. (2012: 1533) introduced the concept of cultural brand equity (CBE) to cultural organisations and activities, defining it as *“the added value of a cultural brand, which is rewarded”*. The reason is the market's growing attachment to the brand and organisation. These authors found that cultural brand equity positively impacts satisfaction and revisited intention toward a cultural activity (Camarero et al., 2012). It can be seen that heritage sites classified as world heritage are considered to be of particular interest due to their globally recognisable mark (Koufodontis & Gaki, 2022). Therefore, one can expect that they are likely to enjoy high levels of cultural brand equity, contributing to increased: tourist preference for visiting a cultural heritage destination (Koufodontis & Gaki (2022); visitor flow (Ramires et al., 2018); and visitors' willingness to pay entrance fees (Wang & Yotsumoto, 2019), etc.

In short, as noted by Koufodontis & Gaki (2022), the World Heritage sign creates positive brand equity that will attract tourists to locations bearing that sign. Similarly, Rahman et al. (2021) argued that the experience of the heritage brand of tourists, cultural intelligence, and destination loyalty affect the formation of the equity of the heritage destination brand. This will result in high brand awareness, high perceived brand quality, solid mental associations, and other significant assets. However, very few studies have examined brand extensions related to cultural heritage (PradosPena and Del Barrio-Garca, 2018).

### **3. Research Questions**

Previous findings on destination brand equity have provided the foundation for four dimensions of brand equity: awareness, association (image), quality, and loyalty (San Martín et al., 2019). When discussing customer-based brand equity, Konecnik and Ruzzier (2008) argued that although many researchers have addressed the destination brand equity model in the literature, specific shortcomings still exist. In this study, we analyse the brand equity of the cultural destination of Hue City from the point of view of tourists with the following research questions:

1. How do tourists evaluate the brand equity of the cultural destination in Hue City?
2. How do tourists evaluate the characteristics of the Hue City cultural destination brand equity?
3. What are the differences in tourists' assessments of tourists about the characteristics of the Hue City cultural destination brand equity?

### **4. Research Methods**

The methodology includes a review of the literature on the equity of the destination brand, descriptive research, one-way ANOVA, an independent sample T-test, and research based on a questionnaire to identify the tourist's evaluation. Furthermore, Turkey analysis in post hoc multiple comparisons of the One-way ANOVA method will provide an in-depth analysis of each cultural destination brand factor to provide more robust conclusions.

The survey subjects are tourists who have visited Hue City. Data were collected using survey questionnaires. The survey questionnaire consists of three parts: the first part provides information on tourists' travelling, and the second part assesses the cultural destination brand equity of the respondents. The surveys were carried out in person in the cultural tourist areas of Hue city, such as the Hue monument complex, the Thien Mu Pagoda, and the Minh Mang tomb. These are tourist areas recognised as cultural heritage by UNESCO in Hue City. The sampling method is convenient, not probabilistic. The interviewees were randomly selected regardless of gender, age, etc. The survey was conducted in February and March 2024. Finally, 251 complete and valid observations were used to perform the analysis. To capture quantitative information from tourists on cultural destination brand equity, a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree) was used in most of the questionnaires.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Description of the Samples

The statistical results described in Table 1 present the demographic characteristics of tourists to Hue City, Vietnam. With respect to gender, the results show that the ratio between male and female tourists is quite balanced. Specifically, male tourists account for 43.4%, while female tourists account for 56.6%.

Regarding age, the most significant proportion of tourists were under 30 years of age (57.4%). This shows that the heritage destination still attracts many young tourists who want to visit and learn about the cultural history. Next is the group of tourists aged 30 to 60 (34.3%) and over 60 (8.4%).

Regarding jobs, tourists are mainly students (27.5%), office workers (24.3%) and businessmen (18.3%). These tourist groups represent a higher proportion than other tourist groups.

Regarding income, the research results show that tourists earn mainly between 5 and 10 million VND (41.8%), followed by tourists with incomes over 10 million VND (around 400 USD) (30.7%) and tourists with incomes under 5 million VND (around 200 USD) (27.5%).

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

	Criteria	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	109	43.4
	Female	142	56.6
Age	< 30 years old	144	57.4
	30 - 60 years old	86	34.3
	> 60 years old	21	8.4
Job	Student	69	27.5
	Office worker	61	24.3
	Entrepreneur	46	18.3
	Worker	22	8.8
	Retire	10	4.0
	Others	43	17.1
Income	< 5 million VND	69	27.5
	5 - 10 million VND	105	41.8
	> 10 million VND	77	30.7

Source: author's research result.

### 5.2 Assessment on Cultural Destination Brand Equity

To examine tourists' assessments of Hue City's cultural destination brand equity, the study analysed the differences in assessments of tourist groups using the Independent Sample T-test and One-way ANOVA for each characteristic of cultural destination brand equity.

- Cultural destination brand equity (see Table 2): The tourists give the highest rating to the criterion "What makes this city unique are the monuments/heritage" (mean 4.538). This is understandable because Hue City is a prominent city with seven sites of world cultural heritage recognised by UNESCO. The city's cuisine (mean=4.466) and traditional (mean = 4.327) factors are also highly appreciated. However, tourists do not rate the city's nightlife activities highly (mean=3.470). Regarding the difference in evaluation between tourist groups, tourists with differences in evaluation are mainly tourist groups with different income levels, age, and gender.

Regarding gender, the female tourist group rated the criteria "What makes this city unique are its cultural events" and "What makes this city unique are the monuments/heritage" higher than the male tourist group. This shows that female tourists have a higher awareness of cultural destinations than male tourists.

Regarding age, the older the age group of tourists, the higher the rating for the criteria of cultural destination brand equity. The reason is that these are subjects that require extensive research and knowledge of culture.

Regarding income levels, the results show that tourists with lower income levels rate the criteria of "cultural destination brand equity" higher. Low-income people have high ratings because they feel the cultural destination is suitable for their payment level.

**Table 2. Evaluation among tourist groups on Cultural destination brand equity**

Criteria	Mean <b>4.049</b>	Gender <sup>a</sup>	Age <sup>b</sup>	Job <sup>b</sup>	Income <sup>b</sup>
What makes this city unique is its entertainment/nightlife	3.470	0.563	0.329	0.499	0.397
What makes this city unique are its traditions	4.327	0.924	0.510	0.095	<b>0.018*</b>
What makes this city unique is its cultural events.	4.199	<b>0.014*</b>	0.390	0.211	<b>0.005*</b>
What makes this city unique is its street culture.	3.590	0.736	0.898	0.642	0.635
What makes this city unique are the monuments/heritage.	4.538	<b>0.033*</b>	0.242	0.836	<b>0.014*</b>
What makes this city unique is its cuisine.	4.466	0.204	0.683	0.178	<b>0.003*</b>
What makes this city unique are its art centres.	3.765	0.132	0.953	0.805	0.740
What makes this city unique is its contribution to the world of heritage.	4.299	0.273	<b>0.017*</b>	0.792	<b>0.011*</b>
What makes this city unique are its museums.	3.789	0.166	<b>0.037*</b>	0.266	0.748

Note: (a): Independent Sample Test; (b): Oneway ANOVA

P > 0.05: not statistically significant; (\*): P ≤ 0.05: statistically significant

Source: author's research result.

- Awareness of the cultural destination brand (see Table 3): Regarding the awareness of the brand of the cultural destination, the research results show that tourists assess the criteria quite well in the characteristics. Specifically, tourists appreciated that 'Hue is a famous cultural destination' (mean = 4.227) and that 'Hue has a good name and reputation' (mean = 4.183). Regarding the difference in evaluation between different tourist groups, the results do not show any difference in evaluation between tourist groups (Table 3).

**Table 3. Evaluation among tourist groups on Awareness of cultural destination brand**

Criteria	Mean <b>4.112</b>	Gender <sup>a</sup>	Age <sup>b</sup>	Job <sup>b</sup>	Income <sup>b</sup>
Hue is a famous cultural destination	4.227	0.213	0.207	0.520	0.156
When thinking about culture, Hue comes to mind immediately	4.044	0.210	0.731	0.285	0.057
The characteristics of this city appeared in my mind immediately	3.992	0.080	0.900	0.673	0.056
Hue has a good name and reputation	4.183	0.562	0.053	0.436	0.117

Note: (a): Independent Sample Test; (b): Oneway ANOVA

P > 0.05: not statistically significant; (\*): P ≤ 0.05: statistically significant

Source: author's research result.

- Positive associations (see Table 4): Tourists highly appreciate the criteria "The people here are very hospitable" (mean=4.406) and "This city has a rich history" (mean=4.386). This shows that tourists have a very high appreciation for the local people and history. Therefore, tourists have an excellent impression of these features. However, the rating for this city with personality is low (mean=3.558) compared to other criteria.

Regarding the differences in the evaluation between tourist groups for some of these criteria, it shows differences between tourist groups with different incomes. In detail, the results of the Turkey analysis show that tourists with lower income levels rate the criteria of "Positive associations" of cultural destinations higher. The reason may be that low-income people do not have many opportunities to explore the culture and travel to cultural destinations in detail. Therefore, they rate highly compared to those with higher income levels. From there, cultural destination managers must pay more attention to the positive experiences of high-income tourists.

**Table 4. Evaluation among tourist groups on Positive associations**

Criteria	Mean <b>4.085</b>	Gender <sup>a</sup>	Age <sup>b</sup>	Job <sup>b</sup>	Income <sup>b</sup>
The culture here is interesting.	4.175	0.554	0.211	0.525	0.051
I can trust Hue for a complete cultural experience	4.175	0.640	0.725	0.751	<b>0.016*</b>
In Hue, I can get an authentic cultural experience	4.155	0.370	0.595	0.968	0.618
This city has personality	3.558	0.434	0.936	0.415	0.837
My friends will appreciate me if I visit	3.940	0.244	0.429	0.783	0.100



Criteria	Mean <b>4.085</b>	Gender <sup>a</sup>	Age <sup>b</sup>	Job <sup>b</sup>	Income <sup>b</sup>
Hue					
This cultural destination suits my personality	3.976	0.173	0.193	0.663	<b>0.039*</b>
This city has a rich history	4.386	0.321	0.258	0.628	0.075
Hue has a strange atmosphere	3.996	0.113	0.457	0.326	<b>0.026*</b>
The people here are very hospitable	4.406	0.321	0.216	0.521	0.237

Note: (a): Independent Samples Test; (b): Oneway ANOVA

P > 0.05: not statistically significant; (\*): P ≤ 0.05: statistically significant

Source: author’s research result.

- Cultural destination brand quality (see Table 5): The results show that tourists highly appreciate the criteria for quality characteristics of the cultural destination brand. Other travellers gave the highest ratings to 'This experience improved my cultural knowledge' (mean=4.195) and 'Hue offers quality cultural experiences' (mean=4.179). The difference in the evaluation between the tourist groups for this expenditure shows differences between the tourist groups with different incomes.

In detail, the results of the Turkey analysis show that tourists with lower income levels rate the criteria of “Cultural destination brand quality” of cultural destinations higher. The reason is that low-income tourists do not have high requirements for destination quality compared to high-income tourists.

**Table 5. Evaluation among tourist groups on Cultural destination brand quality**

Criteria	Mean <b>4.144</b>	Gender <sup>a</sup>	Age <sup>b</sup>	Job <sup>b</sup>	Income <sup>b</sup>
I can count on having a good atmosphere	4.159	0.214	0.138	0.402	<b>0.025*</b>
Hue offers quality cultural experiences	4.179	0.202	0.290	0.302	<b>0.004*</b>
I admire the way the city's cultural aspects are organized.	4.044	0.094	0.342	0.199	<b>0.004*</b>
This experience increased my cultural knowledge	4.195	0.434	0.395	0.181	<b>0.016*</b>

Note: (a): Independent Samples Test; (b): Oneway ANOVA

P > 0.05: not statistically significant; (\*): P ≤ 0.05: statistically significant

Source: author’s research result.

- Destination brand loyalty (see Table 6): The tourists all said that they liked to visit Hue (mean = 4.263) and that they wanted to introduce friends/relatives to visit Hue (mean = 4.283). However, Hue's response to tourist expectations is also an issue that still needs attention (mean=3.948). Regarding differences in the evaluation of tourist groups on the characteristics of destination brand loyalty, the results show differences between tourists of different genders.

About the income, the results of the Turkey analysis show that tourists with lower income levels rate the criteria of “Destination brand loyalty” of cultural destinations higher. About gender, female tourists have higher ratings than male tourists.

**Table 6. Evaluation among tourist groups on Destination brand loyalty**

Criteria	Mean <b>4.151</b>	Gender <sup>a</sup>	Age <sup>b</sup>	Job <sup>b</sup>	Income <sup>b</sup>
I love visiting Hue.	4.263	<b>0.006*</b>	0.559	0.534	0.199
Hue would be my favourite choice for a cultural vacation	4.108	<b>0.021*</b>	0.155	0.792	0.420
Hue met my expectations	3.948	0.089	0.559	0.406	0.136
I would recommend friends/relatives to visit Hue	4.283	<b>0.039*</b>	0.360	0.543	<b>0.024*</b>

Note: (a): Independent Samples Test; (b): One-way ANOVA

P > 0.05: not statistically significant; (\*): P ≤ 0.05: statistically significant

Source: author's research result.

## 6. Conclusions

For a tourist destination, the attraction of tourists plays an essential role in the development of tourism, especially for cultural destinations, specifically cultural destinations in Vietnam. Places with cultural appeal provide great motivation to travel and to create culture. However, in Vietnam, cultural destinations attract fewer tourists than other destinations. The reason is that cultural destinations still need to be more exciting, attracting tourists to experience, relax, enjoy, etc., at those destinations. Therefore, evaluating the brand assets of cultural destinations is necessary in the current context. Cultural tourism and destination branding documents lead to recognising specific cultural assets that tourists can value as significant cultural brand equity.

The results show that building and promoting brand development is essential for destinations, mainly the cultural destination of Hue City, a cultural city of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). Furthermore, the research results show that tourists evaluate Hue and its cultural characteristics well. This is an essential basis for destination managers to develop solutions to attract tourists to Hue City. In particular, they must focus on the property's assets, including monuments/heritage, events, street culture, cuisine, traditions, contribution to world heritage, entertainment, nightlife, cultural festivals, museums, and art centres (Konecnik and Gartner, 2007). However, the results still show that there are differences in assessments between different tourist groups in terms of gender, age, and income. Therefore, destination managers need to focus on overcoming these differences to enhance the cultural destination brand equity of Hue city.

In addition, this study still has some limitations. The first limitation of the study is the application of convenience sampling, which is often criticised for the representativeness of the data. In addition, the number of collected research samples still needs to be increased with 251 observations. The third limitation pertains to the analysis method. Further research should conduct the comparison between various cultural destinations. In addition, the number of investigated samples can be improved in order to assure the generalisability and the representativeness of the study. Moreover, more in-depth analysis methods need to be put in place for every

factor of destination brand equity. Furthermore, research can be carried out on specific scales and combined with other subjects in tourism development, such as local people and destination managers.

The research results analysed above show that destination brand equity contributes to attracting tourists and enhancing the destination's competitiveness. Therefore, when understanding the factors affecting tourism development at cultural destinations, destination brand equity is one factor that needs to be paid attention to and considered. This paper is a reference document that provides a practical outcome of the cultural destination brand equity of a destination in a developing country with outstanding cultural characteristics.

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