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Chatzigeorgiou, Chryssoula and Christou, Evangelos

Alexander Technological Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece,  
Alexander Technological Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece

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# DESTINATION BRANDING AND VISITOR BRAND LOYALTY: EVIDENCE FROM MATURE TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN GREECE

**Chryssoula Chatzigeorgiou**

*Alexander Technological Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece*

**Evangelos Christou**

*Alexander Technological Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece*

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## **Abstract:**

*Destination brands provide the link between visitors and destination management organisations; tourists may or may not develop a degree of loyalty to destinations as brands. This study suggests that trust in a destination brand has high influence in developing loyalty towards the destination. Based on hypotheses developed, trust in a destination as a brand is influenced by brand characteristics, destination characteristics and visitor characteristics. The survey took place in Greece and examined attitudes of past visitors of mature destinations. Survey results demonstrate that destination brand characteristics appear more important in their impact on a visitor's trust in a brand. It was also found that trust in a destination brand is positively influencing brand loyalty and repeat visitation intentions.*

**Keywords:** *destination branding; visitor brand loyalty; destination marketing; mature destinations, Greece*

JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism destination marketers have long been interested in the concept of brand loyalty because brand loyalty is a measure of the attachment that a customer has to a brand (Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1996). Brand loyalty brings the tourism destinations many benefits (Pike et al, 2010), including repeat visits and recommendations of the destination brand to friends and relatives. Early research on brand loyalty focused on behaviour. Brand loyalty was construed to be a subset of repeat purchase (or visitation, in the case of tourism destinations) behaviour (Cunningham, 1956; Echtner, & Ritchie, 1993; Alford 1998) and intention to repurchase (or to revisit the destination in our case). Later, researchers like Jacoby (1971) and Keller (1993) argued that brand loyalty has two components: brand loyal behaviour and brand loyal attitudes.

The attitude behind the purchase or destination visit is important because it drives behaviour. While brand loyal behaviour is partly determined by situational factors such as availability (Qu et al, 2011; de Almeida Ramos & Fernandes, 2016), attitudes are more enduring. Unfortunately, despite its importance, brand attitudes have not attracted a corresponding degree of research interest. A compilation of definitions and studies on destination brand loyalty by Hankinson (2009) revealed that research on brand loyal behaviour outnumbered studies on brand attitudes three to one.

Konecnik and Gartner (2007) suggested that underlying loyalty is always trust, a willingness to act without calculating immediate costs and benefits. Hence, loyalty to a tourism destination brand involves trusting it. In tourism marketing, the concept of trust is developed on a limited basis, though much effort has been spent in finding ways to build and maintain it. In that context, trust is built on person-to-person relationships. Trust in a destination brand differs from interpersonal trust because a brand is a symbol (Marzano & Scot, 2009; Revilla Hernández et al., 2016). Unlike a salesperson, this symbol is unable to respond to the visitor-consumer.

To win loyalty in today's competitive tourism markets, destination marketers have to embrace what is becoming second nature to business marketers (Buhalis, 2000; AbuKhalifeh & AlBattat, 2015) and focus on building and maintaining trust in the visitor-brand relationship (Christou, 2003; Martins, 2016). Unfortunately, the concept of trust in destination marketing is largely unexplored. The focus of this study is to examine some factors affecting the development of trust in tourism destination brands, and to explore how that trust relates to brand loyalty. By applying current interpretations of trust to destination brand loyalty, this study seeks to approach brand loyalty differently and to provide insights into visitors' motivation for loyalty to destination brands.

## TOURISM DESTINATION LOYALTY & TRUST

Brand loyalty is repeated purchases prompted by strong internal dispositions, or in the case of destinations, repeat visitations. Pike (2005) viewed tourism destination brand loyalty as a multidimensional construct involving attitudinal components and as a subset of repeat purchasing. Opperman (2000) conceptualise destination loyalty as the strength of the relationship between the relative attitude towards a brand and patronage behaviour. Trust is the expectation of the parties in a transaction and the risks associated with assuming and acting on such expectations (Kim et al, 2009; Christou, 2011). Trust is the willingness to rely on another in the face of risk; this stems from an understanding of the other party. Trust is an expectation set within particular parameters and constraints; it involves confident positive expectation about another's motives with respect to oneself in risky situations and Aschauer, (2010) established that this is also valid in the case of tourism destinations.

In recent years, destination marketing organisations face greater pressures as more potential visitors become deal-loyal or incentive-prone (Blain et al, 2015; Engl, 2011; Gartner, 2015; Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). To win back loyalty tourism marketers began to embrace the idea of building relationships with visitors and winning their trust (Christou and Kassianidis, 2002; Govers et al, 2007; Chatzigeorgiou et al, 2009; Balakrishnan, 2009). However, conceptualisations of trust in the tourism marketing literature have generally been lacking. In the travel and tourism market, there are too many anonymous visitors, making it unlikely that the destination as a whole could develop personal relationships with each visitor. Thus, tourism destination marketers may have to rely more and more on a powerful symbol (the brand) to build the relationship.

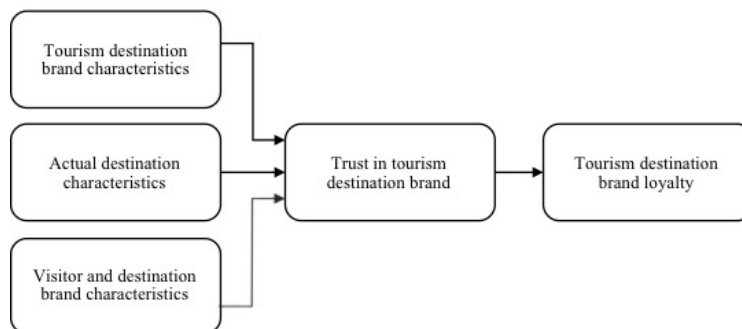
### Conceptual model and formulation of hypotheses

It is proposed in this paper that three sets of factors affect trust in tourism destination brands. These three sets of factors correspond with the three entities involved in the brand-visitor relationship: the destination brand itself, the actual tourism destination behind the brand, and the visitor interacting with the brand. It is also proposed that trust in a destination brand will lead to brand loyalty. Based on this approach, a conceptual model (Figure 1) is developed bellow. The destination brand's characteristics play a vital role in determining whether a visitor decides to trust it. Drawing from previous research, it is concluded that individuals, destinations or organisations are trusted based on their reputation (Back & Parks, 2003; Christou, 2013), predictability (Christou, 2002; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005), and competence (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Samy, 2016).

Destination brand reputation can be developed through marketing communication; it is also influenced by visitor interaction with the destination characteristics, quality and performance. Reputation of a destination can lead visitors to positive expectations, which leads to development of reciprocity between them (Ekinci et al, 2013). If a visitor perceives that other people think that a destination brand is good, he may trust the brand enough to visit it. Hence, it is hypothesised that: *A visitor's perception that a tourism destination brand has a good reputation is positively related to the visitor's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 1).*

Predictability is about a party's ability to forecast another party's behaviour (Singh & Jeet, 2013). A predictable destination brand allows its visitor to anticipate how it will perform at each visitation occasion. Brand predictability enhances confidence; the tourist knows that nothing unexpected may happen when he is visiting the destination (Kastenholz et al, 2013). As such, predictability enhances trust in a brand as predictability builds positive expectations. Hence is hypothesised that: *A visitor's perception that a tourism destination brand is predictable is positively related to the visitor's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 2).*

Figure 1. The conceptual model



Competent destination brands have the ability to solve visitors' problems and to meet their needs. Bosnjak (2010) considered ability as an essential element influencing trust; a person may find out about a brand's competence through direct usage or word-of-mouth communication – similar is the case of tourism destination visitors. Once convinced that a brand can solve his or her problem, a person may be willing to rely to that brand (Sartori et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2015). Therefore, it can be hypothesised that: *A visitor's perception that a tourism destination brand is competent is positively related to the visitor's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 3).*

The characteristics of the actual tourism destination behind a brand can also influence the extent to which the brand is trusted (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Christou & Kassianidis, 2008; Valeri, 2016). Destination characteristics that affect a visitor's trust in a brand are the trust in the destination, its reputation and the perceived destination motives and

integrity (Gomez et al, 2015). Hence it is hypothesised that: *A visitor's trust in an actual tourism destination is positively related to the visitor's trust in that destination's brand (Hypothesis 4).*

If a visitor perceives that other people think that the tourism destination behind a brand is known to be fair, just and safe, that person may feel secure in visiting the branded destination (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2011; Christou & Nella, 2014); this leads to greater trust in that brand. Gertner (2011) in the marketing channel context support this argument; it is thus hypothesised that: *A visitor's perception that a tourism destination has a reputation for fairness and safety is positively related to the visitor's trust in that destination's brand (Hypothesis 5).*

The extent to which a leader's behaviour is relevant to the followers' needs influences confidence and trust in the leader (Johnson et al, 2006); benevolence of motives is an important factor in a relationship. In the context of a tourism destination brand, when a visitor perceives the destination behind it to be benevolent, the visitor will trust that brand (Quintal et al, 2014). Therefore, it is hypothesised that: *A visitor's perception that a tourism destination has benevolent motives is positively related to the visitor's trust in that destination's brand (Hypothesis 6).*

The degree to which a tourism destination is judged to have integrity depends on the consistency of its past actions, credible communications about it from others, belief that it has a strong sense of fairness, and the extent to which its actions are congruent with its words; integrity is an antecedent to trust (Chi & Qu, 2008; Pike, 2009). Hence, it is hypothesised that: *A visitor's perception that a tourism destination has integrity is positively related to the visitor's trust in that destination's brand (Hypothesis 7).*

Similar characteristics between two parties may lead to trust; as trust begets trust, common characteristics initiate a positive, reinforcing process of interaction (Boo et al, 2009; Hernández et al., 2016). By conforming to a visitor's opinions, values and standards a tourism destination can earn this person's trust (Gnoth, 2002). It is thus hypothesised that: *Similarity between a visitor's self-concept and a tourism destination brand personality is positively related to the visitor's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 8).*

Based on Sameer, Ekinici and Uysal (2006), to initiate a relationship, a party must be liked by the other. To form a relationship with a tourism destination brand, a visitor must like it first (Sirgi et al, 2008; Nella & Christou, 2014). Therefore: *A visitor's liking for a tourism destination brand is positively related to the visitor's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 9).*

Brand experience is about a person's past encounters with the brand. In the development of process-based trust, reciprocity (developed through recurring exchanges) is the key (McAlexander, Schouten & Keonig, 2002; Küçükaltan & Pinar, 2016). Experience is likely to increase trust in the partner; as a visitor gains more experience with a tourism destination brand, he/she understands it better and grows to trust it more (Christou, 2006; Tasci et al, 2007). This experience is not restricted to positive encounters during the visitation; any experience improves the visitor's ability to predict the destination brand performance. Hence, it is hypothesised that: *A visitor's experience with a tourism destination brand is positively related to the visitor's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 10).*

Brand satisfaction in the tourism sector is the outcome of the subjective evaluation that the chosen alternative brand meets or exceeds expectations (Hosany, Ekinici & Uysal, 2006; Zafiroopoulos et al., 2015). In a continuing relationship, satisfaction with past outcomes indicates equity in the exchange; this increases the perception of the exchange partner's benevolence and credibility (Hankinson, 2009). Therefore, it is hypothesised that: *A visitor's satisfaction with a tourism destination brand is positively related to the visitor's trust in the brand (Hypothesis 11).*

An important determinant of an individual's behaviour is other individuals' influence (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005); social influence is an important determinant of consumer behaviour in tourism. This is reflected in models of consumer decision-making that incorporate social norms (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) and interpersonal considerations (Cialdini, Kallgren & Reno, 1991; Christou & Nella, 2010) as antecedents of behavioural intentions. People may purchase products to conform with peer groups, in response to concerns of what others think of them or because others have provided credible information about a product (Schroeder, 1996; Christou, 2015). Thus, it is hypothesised that: *Peer support for a tourism destination brand is positively related to a visitor's trust in that brand (Hypothesis 12).*

In this study, destination brand loyalty is conceptualised as behavioural intention to adopt a brand of a tourism destination and to encourage others to adopt that brand. When a visitor trust a destination brand and is willing to rely on it, that person may form a positive visiting intention towards the brand. Hence, it is hypothesised that: *A visitor's trust in a tourism destination brand is positively related to the visitor's loyalty to that brand (Hypothesis 13).*

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The target population for the study was Greek tourists who have made a visitation decision for any one of the following mature tourism destinations in Greece during the last 5 years: Rhodes, Crete, Corfu and Chalkidiki. Quotas on gender and age, corresponding to the distribution of Greek residents, were used to ensure a representative distribution of participants in the sample. A shopping-mall intercept survey was used; the method has merits in speed, economy, and control of respondent type. Two shopping malls were selected in Athens and two in Thessaloniki in Greece. Two interviewers and 30 questionnaires were assigned to each mall – a total of 120 questionnaires. The interviewers were briefed on the quota sampling method and given instructions on the respondent interviewing process. Respondents were asked to identify a tourism destination brand among Rhodes, Crete, Corfu and Chalkidiki, for which they had often made a visitation decision during the last five years. They were then requested to think about that tourism destination as they completed the entire questionnaire.

The measures of each construct were from a variety of sources; some were established measures while others were modified or developed for this study. A new scale was developed to measure perceived *destination brand reputation*;

it was measured by tapping the respondent's perception of how the tourism destination brand is known to be and what other individuals have said about the destination. *Brand predictability* involved items measuring the destination brand's consistency in quality and the extent the respondent perceived the destination visitation experience to perform as expected (Remple *et al.*, 1985). *Brand competence* involved items to measure the destination brand's perceived *relative* competence. *Trust in the tourism destination* was measured by tapping the respondent's faith in the destination's offering (Larzelere and Huston, 1992; Christou, 2010). *Destination reputation* was measured by asking respondents to rate the destination in terms of its reputation for fairness, safety and honesty (Anderson and Weitz, 1996; Nella & Christou, 2016). *Perceived motives of the destination* were operationalised by creating a new scale. The perceived *integrity of the destination* was operationalised by tapping perceptions of the destination's values in areas such as ethics, honesty, and consistency of its tourism offerings with its promises.

For measuring the extent of *similarity between the visitor's self-concept and the brand's personality*, respondents rated themselves and the tourism destination brand along two identical scales adopted from Malhotra (1991). The difference in scores for each item in the scale indicates the difference between the respondent's self-concept and destination brand's perceived personality. *Brand liking* involved measuring visitor's preference for the destination over others, and by asking directly if he/she liked the destination. *Brand experience* examined respondents' visitation of the destination, from the first time they recalled visiting it. *Brand satisfaction* involved adapting Westbrook and Oliver's (1996) relevant twelve-item scale. *Peer support* was measured by asking the respondent if friends supported/recommended the destination visit. *Trust in the brand* involved asking respondents if the destination is doing what it is supposed to do and if they are willing to rely on it – scales were adapted from Remple *et al.*'s (1985) study. All constructs' items were ordered randomly. 7-point Likert scales were used where possible; the remaining questions were either open-ended or required the ticking of relevant boxes. The questionnaire was administered to 27 individuals for pre-testing.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

There were 117 usable questionnaires, and the general profile of the respondents was comparable to the distribution of gender, age, race, income and education of Greek residents. There were an almost equal proportion of male (49%) and female (51%) respondents, and they were aged 18 to 67 years. The gross household median monthly income was €1,400-1,800. Examination of Pearson's correlation matrix for all the items revealed no problems with convergent and discriminant validity. Scale items belonging to the same construct had higher correlations (coefficients ranged from 0.52 to 0.94), while those relating to different constructs had lower correlations (coefficients ranged from 0.34 to 0.47). Construct validity of the measures was examined through factor analysis; a factor loading of at least 0.3 was used to identify whether a variable is part of a factor (Nunnally, 1978). Items meant to measure the same construct clustered together, suggesting that they measured the same conceptual space. Factor loadings for the variables ranged from 0.409 to 0.781, satisfying Nunnally's (1978) 0.3 threshold. Cronbach coefficient alpha was calculated in order to examine internal consistency and the reliability of the scales; a Cronbach alpha of 0.70 or higher is sufficient (Nunnally, 1978). All scales used exceeded the reliability threshold of 0.70 Cronbach alpha.

Pearson's correlation coefficients for the corresponding variables specified in the hypotheses are presented in Table 1. The results support all the hypotheses, *Hypothesis 1* to *Hypothesis 13*. Hence, it has been established that all the proposed brand, destination, and visitor-brand characteristics influence trust in tourism destination brand. It was also established that trust in destination brand lead to brand loyalty. The correlation coefficient between the two variables is 0.88 and the percentage of variation shared by the two variables or the coefficient of determination is 0.791.

**Table 1.** Hypothesis testing results

No.	Hypothesised relationship	Outcome	Pearson correlation
H1	Brand reputation and trust in a tourism destination brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:80^*$
H2	Brand predictability and trust in a tourism destination brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:86^*$
H3	Destination brand competence and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:84^*$
H4	Trust in an actual destination and trust in tourism destination brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:84^*$
H5	Destination reputation and trust in a tourism destination brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:83^*$
H6	Destination benevolent motives and trust in brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:72^*$
H7	Tourism destination integrity and trust in a destination brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:77^*$
H8	Similarity between visitors' self-concept and destination brand personality and trust in destination brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:79^*$
H9	Tourism destination brand liking and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:84^*$
H10	Tourism destination brand experience and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:87^*$
H11	Satisfaction with a destination brand and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:91^*$
H12	Peer support for a destination brand and trust in a brand	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:82^*$
H13	Trust in a tourism destination brand and brand loyalty	<i>supported</i>	$r = 0:88^*$

\*  $p < 0:01, n = 117$

To examine the significance of the model formed by the hypotheses (Figure 1), regression analysis was performed; trust in a tourism destination brand was the dependent variable while the destination brand, the actual destination and visitor-brand factors were independent variables. The model was significant at  $p < 0.01$  level and the adjusted  $R^2$  was 0.917. In addition, the independent variables were checked for multicollinearity (where two or more independent variables used in the regression are correlated). All correlations among the independent variables did not exceed the threshold of 0.90 which is indication of collinearity (Hair *et al.*, 1995). Also, pairwise and multiple variable collinearity was assessed by calculating the variance inflation factor (VIF), which tells the degree to which each independent variable is explained by the others; large VIF values (over the threshold of 10) denote high multicollinearity (Hair *et al.*, 1995). All VIF values found were below 10 hence, did not exceed the acceptable threshold. Five constructs were significant (at  $p < 0.05$  level) in explaining trust in a tourism destination brand. These constructs, found to be important (as their respective beta coefficients indicated), are destination brand predictability, destination brand liking, destination brand competence, destination brand reputation and trust in a destination.

### **Further discussion and managerial implications**

Through this study it has been established that a tourism destination brand contributes to behavioural intention of brand loyalty. Hence, it is worthwhile for destination marketing organisations to build visitor trust in their destination brand. Destination brand characteristics, particularly brand predictability, brand competence and brand reputation, are relatively more important in establishing and maintaining visitor trust in a destination brand. Destination brand liking and trust in the actual destination were also important factors.

The achievement of tourism destination brand predictability requires consistency; this asks for ensuring the consistent quality of every tourism product and service offered at the tourism destination. It also requires stringent operating and quality control procedures among tourism firms at the destination. To achieve brand predictability, destination marketers should try not to make too many drastic changes to the destination's offerings and attractions too frequently; if major changes are necessary, destination marketers should communicate to visitors carefully regarding the changes, so that they know what to expect from the modified offerings. Brand predictability can also come from repeated interactions between the visitor and the destination brand. Destination marketing organisations should try to provide as many opportunities for visitors to interact with the destination brand as possible. In addition, brand predictability can be developed through consistent communications with visitors; destination marketers should ensure that they are saying similar things about the destination to visitors through all different marketing communication channels used. Marketers should also be careful about making promises regarding their destination brand because if these promises are broken then visitors may perceive the destination brand as being unpredictable.

Trust in destination brand competence is usually perceived as domain-specific (Christou, 2013); hence, destination marketing organisations should try to establish their competence in a few key areas, and manage their brands within these. Marketers should carry out research to find out visitors' needs and concerns related to each key area, so they can develop competence which is relevant to them. In addition, destination marketers should make judicious use of key opinion leaders, who are viewed as authorities in specific areas, to speak on behalf of the destination's brand. For developing and maintaining a good reputation for a destination brand, it is essential that the brand please its visitors; this calls for genuine quality of offerings and attractions at the tourism destination and delivering on its promises. Other efforts include all marketing communications and promotion, and visitors should be encouraged to spread positive word-of-mouth. Complaint handling is also important, to avoid negative word-of-mouth. There should be a publicised channel through which feedback can be easily directed, so unhappy visitors can easily contact the destination marketing organisation or the competent destination authorities.

The aesthetic and functional aspects of the destination brand cannot be overlooked. Tourism marketers should make sure that the destination infrastructure do not just focus on its technical aspects alone, but should also consider its appearance and aesthetic aspects as well. Marketers can also develop brand liking by associating the destination brand with situations in which visitors have positive feelings.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The research results reported in this paper show that trust in a tourism destination brand and trust in the actual destination behind the brand are two issues strongly interconnected; one cannot be achieved without the other. Destination marketing organizations can develop trust in the destination by using marketing communications to strengthen the destination's image. The link between the destination and the brand can also be strengthened since the two can reinforce each other. The performance of various tourism attractions, offerings and product brands within the tourism destination can affect trust in the destination, and thus, trust in another brand belonging to the destination. Therefore, destination marketing organisations should adopt an integrated approach regarding the management of different tourism-related brands offered at the same destination.

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**Chryssoula Chatzigeorgiou** ([chrxtatz@farm.teithe.gr](mailto:chrxtatz@farm.teithe.gr)) is Lecturer of Tourism at the MSc Program in Tourism Management at Alexander Technological Institute of Thessaloniki, Department of Agricultural Development & Agribusiness Management, P.O. Box 141, Thessaloniki 57400, Greece).

**Evangelos Christou** ([e.christou@tour.teithe.gr](mailto:e.christou@tour.teithe.gr)) is Professor of Tourism Marketing at Alexander Technological Institute of Thessaloniki, Department of Business Administration, P.O. Box 141, Thessaloniki 57400, Greece).