A model of destination branding: Integrating the concepts of the branding and destination image

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A B S T R A C T

Despite the significance of destination branding in both academia and industry, literature on its conceptual development is limited. The current study aims to develop and test a theoretical model of destination branding, which integrates the concepts of the branding and destination image. The study suggests unique image as a new component of destination brand associations. It is proposed that the overall image of the destination (i.e., brand image) is a mediator between its brand associations (i.e., cognitive, affective, and unique image components) and tourists’ future behaviors (i.e., intentions to revisit and recommend). The results confirmed that overall image is influenced by three types of brand associations and is a critical mediator between brand associations and tourists’ future behaviors. In addition, unique image had the second largest impact on the overall image formation, following the cognitive evaluations.

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1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that tourism destinations must be included in the consumers’ evoked set, from which an ultimate decision is made (Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004; Dana & McClearly, 1995; Leisen, 2001; Tasci & Kozak, 2006). However, consumers are generally offered various destination choices that provide similar features such as quality accommodations, beautiful scenic view, and/or friendly people. Therefore, it is not enough for a destination to be included in the evoked set; instead the destination needs to be unique and differential to be selected as a final decision. From this perspective, the concept of destination branding is critical for a destination to be identified and differentiated from alternatives in the minds of the target market.

Although not explicitly examined in the context of branding, destination image should be regarded as a pre-existing concept corresponding to destination branding (Pike, 2009). In fact, the core of destination branding is to build a positive destination image that identifies and differentiates the destination by selecting a consistent brand element mix (Cai, 2002). The image of a destination brand can be described as “perceptions about the place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory” (Cai, 2002, p. 723). From the definition an instant question rises: what are these associations? There is no doubt that many studies rooted from destination image were conducted to investigate the proposed destination branding (e.g., Cai, 2002). Unfortunately, however, there is still paucity in understanding brand associations and image of a destination brand. This study seeks to understand the nature of a relationship between these concepts.

Based on the knowledge that destination image is a total impression of cognitive and affective evaluations (Baloglu, 1996; Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Baloglu & McClearly, 1999; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007; Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000; Stern & Krakover, 1993; Uysal, Chen, & Williams, 2000), it is suggested that brand associations should include cognitive and affective image components (Pike, 2009). These two components are widely accepted as influential indicators of destination image (Baloglu, 1996; Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Baloglu & McClearly, 1999; Hosany et al., 2007; Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000; Stern & Krakover, 1993; Uysal et al., 2000).
This study argues that unique image of a destination needs to be regarded as an important brand association to influence the image of a destination brand. Creating a differentiated destination image has become a basis for survival within a globally competitive marketplace where various destinations compete intensely. A strong, unique image is the essence of destination positioning for its ability to differentiate a destination from competitors to get into the consumers’ minds, which simplify information continuously (Botha, Crompton, & Kim, 1999; Buhalir, 2000; Calantone, Benedetto, Hakam, & Bojanic, 1989; Chon, Weaver, & Kim, 1991; Crompton, Fakeye, & Lue, 1992; Fan, 2006; Go & Govrs, 2000; Mihalic, 2000; Myklelun, Crots, & Mykletun, 2001; Uysal et al., 2000). Consequently, this study proposes that destination branding should emphasize the unique image of a destination, which exercises a power to differentiate it from competitors. The current study proposes that unique image should be regarded as a brand association.

The purpose of this study is to develop and test a theoretical model of destination branding through adopting both destination image studies and traditional branding concepts and practices. Specifically, the current study examines the relationships among brand associations (i.e., cognitive, affective, and unique image components), brand image (i.e., overall image of a destination), and tourists’ future behaviors. For this purpose, an empirical test was conducted in the state of Oklahoma, in which successful destination branding is necessary to overcome its lack of clear destination image.

Oklahoma was once considered the land of opportunity because of the oil industry from the 1890s through the 1920s. People came from all parts of the world to seek their fortunes in Oklahoma’s teeming oil fields (Kurt, 1999). Several decades later, however, the perception of the state’s history became deteriorated and the tourism industry is still battling an image rooted in the State’s 100-year history. The basic perception of Oklahoma is that it is flat, dusty, and windblown (Kurt, 1999). The state’s tourism promoters have begun to recognize the important role of the image of Oklahoma in boosting the state’s tourism industry. This has driven the state to launch and implement the $4 million “Oklahoma Native America” advertising campaign to increase awareness of Oklahoma as a travel destination in the minds of visitors (Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department, 2003). However, Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department (OTRD, 2006) reported that only 47% of respondents were interested in the state of Oklahoma as a tourist destination. In addition, 39% of those who are uninterested in Oklahoma admitted that they do not know much about the state. These results clearly show that the state of Oklahoma is lacking a strong, positive, and unique destination image in the minds of potential tourists. Thus, it is critical to identify the image of the state of Oklahoma and propose the appropriate destination branding strategy.

The current study focuses on developing and testing a theoretical model of destination branding, as well as exploring the potential of the State of Oklahoma as a preferred destination brand. Specifically, the study tries to fill the gap in the literature in three ways. First, the study aims to incorporate the existing concepts of branding with destination image studies. This study identifies the conceptual similarities between the components of destination image and brand association in the marketing literature, and suggests different types of destination image (i.e., cognitive, affective, and unique images) as three types of brand associations in destination branding. Second, the study brings new focus on unique image. It has been argued as an important dimension of destination image (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993), yet less recognized by destination branding scholars. This study theoretically includes unique image as one type of destination brand associations, and empirically tests its significance on destination branding. Last, the study provides a practical insight into Oklahoma as a destination brand.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination branding

Destination branding can be defined as a way to communicate a destination’s unique identity by differentiating a destination from its competitors (Morrison & Anderson, 2002). Similar to the general knowledge on brands, destination brands exert two important functions: identification and differentiation. In the branding literature, the meaning of “identification” involves the explication of the source of the product to consumers. While a product in general terms represents a physical offering, which can be easily modified, a place as a product is a large entity which contains various material and non-material elements to represent it (Florek, 2005). For example, a place includes tangible attributes such as historical sites or beaches as well as intangible characteristics such as culture, customs, and history. Because of the complex nature of a destination to be a brand, generalization of the identity is inevitable. Brand identity is critical for generalization of desirable characteristics projected by suppliers’ perspective. It explains the expectations of a supplier about how a brand should be perceived by its target market. Defining a target market is crucial because some aspects of a destination may seem positive to one segment while ineffective to another (Fan, 2006). Based on the projected brand identity, consumers should develop a relationship with a particular brand by generating a value proposition either involving benefits or giving credibility to a particular brand (Aaker, 1996; Konecnik & Go, 2008).

In addition to the function of identification, a destination brand differentiates itself from its competitors based on its special meaning and attachment given by consumers. Generally, tourism destinations emphasize points of parity associations such as high-quality accommodations, good restaurants, and/or well-designed public spaces (Baker, 2007, p. 101). It is more critical to understand what associations of a brand are advantageous over competitors (i.e., points of difference). Points of difference associations help consumers positively evaluate the brand and attach to the brand (Keller, 2008, p. 107). In fact, the key to branding is that consumers perceive a difference among brands in a product category (i.e., positioning); because a brand perceived distinctive and unique is hard to be replaced by other brands.

2.2. Brand identity and image

Previous studies argue that brand identity and brand image are critical ingredients for a successful destination brand (Cai, 2002; Florek, Insch, & Gnoth, 2006; Nandar, 2005). The confusion exists as to the difference between the two concepts. One of the significant points of differentiation is that they are generated based on two different perspectives: the sender’s and the receiver’s (Florke et al., 2006). In short, identity is created by the sender whereas image is perceived by the receiver (Kapferer, 1997, p. 32).

Brand identity reflects the contribution of all brand elements to awareness and image (Keller, 1998, p. 166). It provides a direction, purpose, and meaning for the brand and is central to a brand’s strategic vision and the driver of brand associations (Aaker, 1996). On the other hand, brand image can be defined as consumer perceptions of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer’s memory (Keller, 2008). To brand a destination, the sender (i.e., destination marketers) projects a destination brand identity through various features and activities that differentiate the destination from other competing destinations. All the while, the
receiver (i.e., a consumer) perceives the image of the place, which is formed and stored in their minds (Florek et al., 2006).

It should be noted that the relationship between destination brand identity and brand image is reciprocal. Brand image plays a significant role in building brand identity (Cai, 2002), whereas brand image is also a reflection of brand identity (Florek et al., 2006). That is, consumers build a destination image in their minds based on the brand identity projected by the destination marketers. Then, destination marketers establish and enhance brand identity based on their knowledge about consumer’s brand image on the particular destination. Thus, destination image is critical to create the positive and recognizable brand identity. Positive brand image is achievable through emphasizing strong, favorable, and unique brand associations. That is, consumers perceive positive brand image when brand associations are implemented to suggest benefits of purchasing from the specific brand. This then creates favorable feelings toward the brand, and differentiates it from alternatives with its unique image.

2.3. Brand associations

Brand associations influence consumer evaluations toward the brand and brand choice (i.e., intentions to visit or purchase) (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 1993, 1998; Low & Lamb, 2000; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Uml & Crompton, 1990). In the branding literature, brand associations are classified into three major categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes (Keller, 1993, 1998). According to Keller (1993, 1998), attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a brand. In other words, an attribute is what a consumer thinks the brand is or has to offer and what is involved with its purchase or consumption. The benefits that may occur are the personal value consumers associate with the brand attributes in the form of functional, symbolic, experiential attachments. That is, what consumers think the brand can do for them. Brand attitudes are consumers’ overall evaluations of the brand and are the basis for consumer behavior (e.g., brand choice).

The image of a place is also an important asset (Ryan & Gu, 2008). Ryan and Gu (2008) emphasize the image itself is the beginning point of tourist’s expectation, which is eventually a determinant of tourist behaviors. In addition, the authors explained that destination image exerts two important roles for both suppliers and tourists. The first role involves informing the supply systems of what to promote, how to promote, who to promote to and, for the actual product that is purchased, how to design that product. The second role involves informing the tourist as to what to purchase, to what extent that purchase is consistent with needs and self-image, and how to behave and consume (p. 399).

In the tourism literature, it is widely acknowledged that overall image of a destination is influenced by cognitive and affective evaluations (Baloglu, 1996; Baloglu & Mangalagoli, 2001; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hosany et al., 2007; Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000; Stern & Krakover, 1993; Uysal et al., 2000). Cognitive evaluation refers to beliefs and knowledge about an object whereas affective evaluation refers to feelings about the object (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Gartner, 1993; Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993; Ward & Russel, 1981). Unfortunately, the majority of image studies treated destination image as a cognitive evaluation. Only few studies employed both cognitive and affective components in understanding the overall image of a destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hosany et al., 2007; Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000; Uysal et al., 2000).

It is important to consider both cognitive and affective components of destination image to build a comprehensive destination branding model. Acclaiming Gartner’s (1993) Image Formation Process as the most comprehensive model toward a destination branding, Cai (2002) pointed out the compatibility of Gartner’s (1993) Image Formation Process and Keller’s (1998) types of brand association. The author argues that Gartner’s cognitive and affective image components are conceptually parallel with Keller’s attribute and benefit brand associations. Pike (2009) further supports the notion that brand associations in destination branding should include cognitive and affective image components. Thus, this study suggests that the brand image of a particular destination is influenced by the cognitive and affective associations stored in the consumers’ minds. This rationale is supported by two premises; (1) the acceptance of destination image as a result of cognitive and affective evaluations in the tourism literature, and (2) the conceptual similarities of cognitive and affective evaluations between destination image formation and types of brand association in the branding literature.

In terms of destination branding, Cai (2002) claims that attitudes may be one type of brand association for building destination image. However, there is still conceptual confusion between attitudes and destination image (Sussman and Ünel, 1999). Destination image is also viewed as an attitudinal construct consisted of cognitive and affective evaluations (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). For their conceptual closeness, this study takes the side of Baloglu and McCleary’s standpoint.

Although it is argued that cognitive and affective image components are hierarchically correlated to form a destination image (Cai, 2002, Gartner, 1993, Woodside & Lysonski, 1989), it is still possible that each cognitive and affective brand image component would have unique contributions to the overall image formation. That is, each association would have a different level of impact on the overall image formation because brand associations are not considered equally weighted in terms of performance to consumers (Keller, 2008, p. 59). The separate treatment of cognitive and affective components is necessary to examine their unique effects on consumers’ attitude structure and future behaviors (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Russel, 1980; Russel & Pratt, 1980; Russel & Snodgrass, 1987; Russel, Ward, & Pratt, 1981). Consequently, this study proposes that positive cognitive and affective components as separate and independent brand associations would be positively related to the overall image of a destination (i.e., brand image). Thus, hypothesis 1 and 2 are established as:

H1: Cognitive image will positively affect the visitor’s overall image of a destination.
H2: Affective image will positively affect the visitor’s overall image of a destination.

The current study examines the cognitive and affective image components of brand associations that influence brand image (i.e., destination image). It is proposed that there is an additional image component to be considered as a brand association: unique image. Contrary to common image, unique image is highlighted as a construct that envisages the overall image of a destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). According to Echtner and Ritchie (1993), the overall image of a destination should be viewed and measured based on three dimensions of attributes: holistic, functional-psychological, and unique-common characteristics. Uniqueness is particularly important due to its influence on differentiation among similar destinations in the target consumers’ minds (Cai, 2002; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Morrison & Anderson, 2002; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). One of the purposes of branding is to differentiate its product from those of competitors (Aaker, 1991, p. 7). Similarly, destination branding should emphasize a destination’s unique image to be differentiated from competing destinations by consumers. In fact, destination branding is partly defined as a way to communicate the expectations of a satisfactory travel experience.
that is uniquely associated with the particular destination (italics added) (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005; Pike, 2009). Uniqueness provides a compelling reason why travelers should select a particular destination over alternatives. Positive brand image is partly achieved through the uniqueness of brand associations to the brand in memory (Keller, 2008, p. 56). Thus, the unique image of a destination is critical to establish the overall image in the consumers’ minds. A strong, unique image would increase the favorability of the overall image toward the destination. Therefore, it is deduced that:

H3: Unique image will positively affect the visitor’s overall image of a destination.

2.4. Tourist behaviors

It has been supported that the overall image of the destination is influential not only on the destination selection process but also on tourist behaviors in general (Ashworth & Goodall, 1988; Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001; Cooper et al., 1993; Mansfeld, 1992). The intentions to revisit the destination and to spread a positive word-of-mouth have been the two most important behavioral consequences in destination image and post-consumption behavior studies.

The intention to revisit has been extensively studied in tourism research for its signal of customer loyalty. In the marketing discipline, the concept of customer retention has been widely emphasized because attracting new customers is more expensive than retaining existing customers (Rosenberg & Czepiel, 1984). Previous studies supported that overall image is one of the most important factors to elicit the intention to revisit the same destination (Alcaniz, Garcia, & Blas, 2005; Bigné et al., 2001).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is defined as “informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service” (Harrison-Walker, 2001, p. 63). Due to the intangible nature of a service product, a consumer’s purchase decision usually involves higher levels of perceived risk than purchasing manufactured products. Positive WOM is an excellent source to reduce perceived risk for its clarification and feedback opportunities (Murray, 1991). In addition, it is considered an important information source influencing consumer’s choice of destination (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Oppermann, 2000; Weaver & Lawton, 2002; Yvette & Turner, 2002). It is argued that a person with a perceived positive image is more likely to recommend the destination (Bigné et al., 2001). Thus, it is expected that a visitor with positive overall image, as a total impression of cognitive, affective, and unique images, would be more likely to revisit the destination and recommend it to others. That is, overall image would mediate the relationships between destination brand image and tourist behavior in destination selection. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H4: Visitor’s perception of overall image toward a destination will mediate the relationships between three destination brand images (cognitive, affective, and unique images) and the visitor’s intention to revisit the destination.

H5: Visitor’s perception of overall image toward a destination will mediate the relationships between three destination brand images (cognitive, affective, and unique images) and the visitor’s intention to recommend the destination to others.

Fig. 1 represents the conceptual framework of building destination branding.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling

The target population of this study was domestic visitors, who stopped at five selected welcome centers in Oklahoma during an eight-week period in July and August 2002. A confidence interval approach was used to determine the sample size, suggested by Burns and Bush (1995). With 50% of the estimated variability in the population (Burns & Bush, 1995), the sample size was set at 379 (n = 379) at the 95% confidence level. Assuming a response rate of 25% and unusable rate of 5%, a total of 1264 (379/0.30) people were approached to participate in the survey.

Two stages of sampling approach were used in this study: proportionate stratified sampling and systematic random sampling (SRS). The top five largest welcome centers (Thackerville, Sallisaw, Colbert, Erick, and Miami) were selected in terms of number of total attendance in July and August 2001 (OTRD, 2002). The subsample size of each welcome center was then stratified proportionately.
The next step was to select the interval of the samples (nth) by using a SRS. The interval of the sample (nth) was determined by dividing the previous total visitor number of the five welcome centers by the number of attendance at each of the five welcome centers. Every nth visitor who stopped at the five welcome centers was approached to participate in the survey. A random starting number for each day was created. A set of questionnaires along with an instruction letter was distributed to the five welcome centers according to a proportionate subsample size for each welcome center.

3.2. Instrument

The survey questionnaire consisted of four major sections. The first section included questions relating to the individual travel behavior of respondents and the information source used prior to planning a trip to Oklahoma. The travel behavior items included the number of times they visited Oklahoma, purpose for the trip, length of stay, and total trip spending.

The second section was developed to assess the respondent’s cognitive, affective, and perceptions of overall image toward Oklahoma as a travel destination. To generate a complete list of the respondent’s perceptions associated with cognitive images, a method used by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) was adapted. During the review of the literature on destination image measurement, all the attributes used in the previous studies were recorded and grouped by the researcher into a “master list” of attributes. In addition, two focus group sessions were held with twelve participants each developing multi-item scales capturing various aspects of Oklahoma’s image as a travel destination. For additional input, various travel literature and promotional brochures on Oklahoma’s tourism were also reviewed. The last step was to have a panel of expert judges, who are academics and practitioners in the areas of tourism, marketing, and consumer behavior, examine the complete list of attributes to eliminate redundancies and to add any missing attributes. Finally, 28 items relating to cognitive image were selected and respondents were asked to rate Oklahoma as a travel destination on each of 28 attributes on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD); 2 = Disagree (D); 3 = Neutral (N); 4 = Agree (A); and 5 = Strongly Agree (SA).

Affective image of destination was measured by using affective image scales developed by Russell et al. (1981). The scale included four bipolar scales: Arousing-Sleepy, Pleasant-Unpleasant, Exciting-Gloomy, and Relaxing-Distressing. A 7-point semantic-differential scale was used for all four bipolar scales where the positive poles were assigned to smaller values: 1 = arousing and 7 = sleepy, 1 = pleasant and 7 = unpleasant, 1 = exciting and 7 = gloomy, and 1 = relaxing and 7 = distressing. In addition, the scale of overall image measurement was modified from Stern and Krakover (1993). The respondents were asked to rate their perception of overall image of Oklahoma on a 7-point scale with 1 being very negative and with 7 being very positive.

The third section was to identify the attributes that make Oklahoma unique from neighboring states (Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Texas) as a travel destination. A total of 15 items were derived from the image study of Plog Research (1999a, 1999b) and various travel literature and promotional brochures on Oklahoma as well as neighboring states with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Although some of the similar measures were used for capturing cognitive and unique images of Oklahoma, they should be considered as different measures because cognitive image measures the perceptions of the general quality of tourist experiences in Oklahoma as a travel destination (without any comparison with other destinations) while unique image has more focus on comparison of measures between Oklahoma and neighboring states. It is possible that one image item perceived strong in cognitive image could be less strong when compared with neighboring states/competitors. For example, attributes such as beaches, oceans, and tropical climate are the general characteristics that represent Jamaica as a tourist destination, yet they are not perceived unique when the focus becomes uniqueness of the destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993).

Additional two questions were included to determine the respondent’s intention to revisit Oklahoma and the respondent’s intention to recommend Oklahoma as a favorable destination to others with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = most unlikely; 5 = most likely). The final section was devoted to collecting demographic information about the respondents.

A pilot test was performed to assess how well the survey instrument captured the constructs it was supposed to measure, and to test the internal consistency and reliability of questionnaire items. The first draft of the survey instrument was distributed to 20 randomly selected visitors who stopped at Thackerville Welcome Center, the largest welcome center among the 12 Oklahoma welcome centers in terms of number of visitors. A total of 20 questionnaires were collected at the site.

The results of the reliability tests for each dimension showed that Cronbach’s alpha was 0.89 for cognitive items and 0.75 for uniqueness of Oklahoma, indicating above the minimum value of 0.70, which is considered acceptable as a good indication of reliability (Hair et al., 1998). Based on the results of the pilot test and feedback from OTRD, the final version was modified considering questionnaire design, wording, and measurement scale.

3.3. Data analysis

Principal component analyses were used to determine the underlying dimensions of the cognitive and unique image components of Oklahoma. Confirmatory factor analysis and SEM were utilized to test the conceptual model of destination branding. The data was processed with the statistical package SPSS 16.0 and LISREL 8.8.

4. Results

4.1. Underlying dimensions of cognitive image

The result of Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 3431.49, p = 0.00$), indicating that nonzero correlation existed. The overall value of MSA was 0.930, which was well above the recommended threshold of sampling adequacy at the minimum of 0.50 (Hair et al., 1998). These two tests suggested that the data was suitable for an exploratory factor analysis. A principal component analysis with orthogonal (VARIMAX) rotations was assessed to identify underlying dimensions of cognitive image.

Based on the eigenvalue greater than one, scree-plot criteria, and the percentage of variance criterion, five factors were chosen which captured 58.5% of the total variance. Among the 28 image attributes, four items had communalities less than .50 and factor loading less than .40. These variables are “lots of adventurous activities,” “reasonable cost of shopping centers,” “a wide choice of accommodations,” and “availability of facilities for golfing/tennis.” When there are variables that do not load on any factor or whose communalities are deemed too low, each can be evaluated for possible deletion (Hair et al., 1998). The dropping of these variables with low communalities and low factor loadings increases the total variance explained approximately 4% (from 58.5% to 62.1%). The results of the principle component analysis with orthogonal (VARIMAX) rotations are shown in Table 1. The scree plot indicated that four factors may be appropriate; however, based on
a combination of scree plot and eigenvalue greater than one approach, five factors were retained.

The scale reliability for each factor was tested for internal consistency by assessing the item-to-total correlation for each separate item and Cronbach’s alpha for the consistency of the entire scale. Rules of thumb suggest that the item-to-total correlations exceed .50 and lower limit for Cronbach’s alpha is .70 (Hair et al., 1998). The results of the item-to-total correlation indicated that each of the five factors exceeded the threshold of .50 ranging between .63 and .74. The results showed that the alpha coefficients for the five factors ranged from .71 to .86.

Factors were labeled based on highly loaded items and the common characteristics of items they included. The factors’ labels are “Quality of Experiences” (Factor 1), “Touristic Attractions” (Factor 2), “Environment and Infrastructure” (Factor 3), “Entertainment/Outdoor Activities” (Factor 4), and “Cultural Traditions” (Factor 5). These five factors were later used to construct summated scales as independent variables for structural equation modeling (SEM) for hypotheses testing.

4.2. Underlying dimensions of unique image of Oklahoma

The results of a measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity indicated that unique image set was appropriate for factor analysis. Based on the eigenvalue greater than one, scree-plot criteria, and the percentage of variance criterion, three factors were extracted through principal component analysis with oblique (PROMAX) rotations. The three-factor model captured 46.1% of the total. A total of three items had communalities less than .50 and factor loading less than .40. These variables are “value for money,” “a wide variety of state/theme parks,” and “moderate prices for hotel/restaurant/shopping.” The dropping of these variables with low communalities and low factor loadings increases the total variance explained approximately 6% (from 46.1% to 52.3%). Table 2 shows the results of the principle component analysis with oblique (PROMAX) rotations. The scree plot indicated that three factors may be appropriate. A combination of

### Table 1
Dimensions of cognitive destination image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Communality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy access to the area</td>
<td>.798</td>
<td>.719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restful and relaxing atmosphere</td>
<td>.723</td>
<td>.645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable cost of hotels/restaurants</td>
<td>.662</td>
<td>.641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenery/natural wonders</td>
<td>.651</td>
<td>.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of open space</td>
<td>.589</td>
<td>.641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly local people</td>
<td>.574</td>
<td>.591</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
Dimensions of unique destination image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Communality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native American/Western cultures</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly and helpful local people</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenery and natural wonders</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restful and relaxing atmosphere</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean environment</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appealing as a travel destination</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/nightlife</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A wide choice of outdoor activities</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe and secure environment</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of tourist attractions</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural/historical attractions</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American culture</td>
<td>0.591</td>
<td>0.628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A taste of cowboy life and culture</td>
<td>0.461</td>
<td>0.578</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The item-to-total correlation of each factor met the cutoff of .50, indicating the range between .62 and .75. The alpha coefficients for the three factors through the Cronbach’s alpha test range from .71 to .85.

### 4.3. Measurement model

Through principal component analyses, the five underlying dimensions of cognitive image and the three dimensions of unique image were identified. In addition, one of the constructs in the hypothesized model, affective image, has four measures including pleasing (X6), arousing (X10), relaxing (X11), and exciting (X12). Combined, all these twelve constructs were operationalized in the measurement model (Table 3). There is no reason to expect uncorrelated perceptions; thus the factors are allowed to correlate as well (Hair et al., 1998).

For purposes of CFA in this study, a covariance matrix was employed (Table 4). LISREL program (version 8.8) was chosen to estimate the measurement model and the construct covariances.

### 4.4. Offending estimates

Before evaluating the measurement model, offending estimates were examined. The common examples are: (1) negative error variances or nonsignificant error variances for any construct; (2) standardized coefficients exceeding or very close to 1.0; (3) very large standard errors associated with any estimated coefficients (Reisinger & Turner, 1998). In the case of negative error variances (Heywood case), no offending error variances were found in the estimates for the measurement model. If correlations in the standardized solution exceed 1.0 or two estimates are highly correlated, one of the constructs should be removed (Hair et al., 1998). Based on this, two indicators for exogenous variables, which were greater than 1.0 was deleted. The deleted variables were “cultural traditions” (cognitive image) and “arousing” (affective image). The modified measurement model was then re-estimated for assessing overall model fit. The overall model fit statistics for the CFA were good ($\chi^2, 61.02 \text{ df} = 49, p < .05$, GFI = .97, AGFI = .94, TLI = .90), indicating that the individual indicators are behaving as expected.

With the overall model being accepted, each of the constructs can be evaluated separately by (1) examining the indicator loadings for statistical significance and (2) assessing the construct’s reliability and variance extracted. First, for each variable, the t values associated with each of the loadings exceed the critical values at the 0.05 significance level (Hair et al., 1998). These results indicated that all variables were significantly related to their specified constructs, verifying the posited relationships among indicators and constructs.

Next, estimates of the reliability and variance extracted measures for each construct were assessed to determine whether the specified indicators were sufficient in their representation of the constructs. The results of loadings with t values and computations for each measurement are shown in Table 5. In terms of reliability, two exogenous constructs, cognitive image (0.88) and unique image (0.76), exceed the suggested level of 0.70. Affective image (0.65), however, is close to the threshold of 0.70; thus marginal acceptance can be given on this measure. The results of estimates of the reliability measure for three constructs with all significant t values support the convergent validity of the items in

### Table 3
Three-construct measurement model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables/indicators</th>
<th>Perceptual/cognitive image</th>
<th>Unique image</th>
<th>Affective image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$x_1$ Quality of experiences</td>
<td>L1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_2$ Tourist attractions</td>
<td>L2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_3$ Environment and infrastructure</td>
<td>L3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_4$ Entertainment/outdoor activities</td>
<td>L4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_5$ Cultural traditions</td>
<td>L5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_6$ Native American/natural environment</td>
<td>L6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_7$ Appealing destination</td>
<td>L7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_8$ Local attractions</td>
<td>L8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_9$ Pleasing</td>
<td>L9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_{10}$ Arousing</td>
<td>L10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_{11}$ Relaxing</td>
<td>L11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_{12}$ Exciting</td>
<td>L12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4
Covariance matrix for CFA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>$x_1$</th>
<th>$x_2$</th>
<th>$x_3$</th>
<th>$x_4$</th>
<th>$x_5$</th>
<th>$x_6$</th>
<th>$x_7$</th>
<th>$x_8$</th>
<th>$x_9$</th>
<th>$x_{10}$</th>
<th>$x_{11}$</th>
<th>$x_{12}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$x_1$ Quality of experiences</td>
<td>15.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_2$ Tourist attractions</td>
<td>13.44</td>
<td>19.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_3$ Environment and infrastructure</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>7.61</td>
<td>9.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_4$ Entertainment/outdoor activities</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_5$ Cultural traditions</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_6$ Native American/natural environment</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_7$ Appealing destination</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_8$ Local attractions</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_9$ Pleasing</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_{10}$ Arousing</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_{11}$ Relaxing</td>
<td>-1.60</td>
<td>-1.28</td>
<td>-0.77</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
<td>-0.56</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_{12}$ Exciting</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>-0.56</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
each scale. In terms of variance extracted, all three constructs, cognitive image (0.69), unique image (0.59), and affective image (0.50), exceed or just meet the threshold value of 0.50.

4.5. Structural model

Based on the results of CFA, the structural model was tested. The overall model fit statistics show that the model is acceptable to represent the hypothesized constructs ($\chi^2, 57.49, df = 49, p < .05$, CFI = .98, GFI = .97, AGFI = .95, RMSEA = .03, RMSR = .074). All the paths proposed in the structural model were statistically significant and of the expected positive direction (Table 6). Thus, all five hypotheses failed to be rejected.

Hypothesis 1, the more positive cognitive image of a destination, the more likely visitors would have the positive overall image of the destination, was failed to reject (standardized coefficient = 0.62; $t$ value = 4.58; Sig. < 0.01). Hypothesis 2 also failed to be rejected (standardized coefficient = 0.21; $t$ value = 1.96; Sig. < 0.05), supporting that the visitor’s perception of overall image is positively influenced by affective image. Hypothesis 3 tested the positive relationship between unique image and overall image. It also failed to be rejected (standardized coefficient = 0.35; $t$ value = 2.49; Sig. < 0.05), suggesting that the unique image of a destination has a positive influence on overall image. The results confirmed that cognitive image has the strongest effect on overall image, followed by unique and affective images, respectively. Hypotheses 4 and 5 tested the mediating role of overall image on the relationships between the three destination brand images and tourist behaviors (i.e., intention to revisit and intention to recommend). The results supported the mediating role of overall image.

As a final approach to model assessment, we compared the proposed model with a competing model. A nested model approach was adopted as the competing models strategy. The first model (MODEL 1) positions overall image in a fully mediating role between three types of brand associations (i.e., cognitive, unique, and affective images) and the intentions to revisit and recommend (see Fig. 2). The second model (MODEL 2) allows for both direct and indirect effects (mediated through overall image) of the brand associations on intentions to revisit and recommend. The results of a $\chi^2$ difference test suggested that there is no significant difference

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEM results: standardized parameter estimates for SEM model construct loadings ($t$ value in parentheses) — structural model.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Endogenous</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommend</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Significant at 0.05 level (critical value = 1.96). **Significant at 0.01 level (critical value = 2.576).

Fig. 2. Path diagrams of estimated full model (MODEL 1) and competing partial model (MODEL 2).
Intention to revisit (\(\eta_2\)) = 0.43; Intention to recommend (\(\eta_3\)) = 0.21.

This study aimed to test a theoretical model of destination branding. It was proposed that destination image (i.e., brand image) is a multi-dimensional construct, influenced by the cognitive, unique, and affective images that collectively affect tourist behaviors. Overall, the results showed that destination image exerts a mediating role between the three image components as the brand associations and the behavioral intentions. Strong and distinctive destination image should not only be a goal of branding practices in capturing consumers’ minds but also as a mediator to influence consumer behaviors, directly related to the success of the tourist destination. Therefore, in the competitive tourism market, tourist destinations need to provide favorable experiences to tourists, in which they will create a positive image and recommend the place to others in turn helping potential tourists develop a favorable image that affects the destination choice.

It is interesting to note that through comparing the competing model to the proposed full mediating model, the more conservative mediating model is supported. It means that rather than being impacted by the distinct image components, tourist behaviors are influenced by the total impressions of the destination, which is the combination of the cognitive, unique, and affective image components. It supports the argument by Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) that image components are closely intertwined and may not be isolated unless the subjects are inquired in that way. In other words, it is the overall image, as a total impression based on the three image components, which influences tourists’ future behaviors.

As expected, cognitive image positively influences overall image. This result confirms the results of other studies (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Stern & Krakover, 1993), arguing for the positive effect of cognitive image on overall image. The results show that a cognitive image (i.e., the belief s and knowledge of attributes of the destination) is the most influential brand association to form overall image.

The significance of unique image on overall image warrants a need for more attention on this construct from destination branding scholars. Interestingly, its effect was even larger than the affective image component, which has received more consideration than unique image in the destination image literature. The results also show that uniqueness of a destination has the second largest influence on overall image. The importance of unique image also lies in its usefulness in positioning the destination brand. Because unique image is an excellent source for differentiation (Echtner &
Ritchie, 1993), it needs to be identified and emphasized to improve overall image and increase the points of difference among various alternatives. Thus, little attention has focused on the construct in the literature, unique image should be considered as a critical brand association to expand our knowledge of destination image to the next level of destination branding.

This work supports the results of Baloglu and McCleary’s (1999) study that affective image is significantly influential on overall image. However, contrary to Baloglu and McCleary’s findings, which found the stronger impact of affective evaluation on overall image than that of cognitive evaluation, this study found that cognitive image is more influential on the overall image. The difference between the two results may be due to (1) the different treatment on the cognitive construct, (2) investigation of the different stages of destination image formation, and/or (3) inclusion of unique image in this study. First, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) used three separate variables to understand the cognitive evaluation of a destination while the current study adopted one variable to measure the cognitive image construct. This procedure might produce different results. In addition, while Baloglu and McCleary’s study examined the image prior to the actual visitation to the destination, this study explored the complex image to understand the phenomenon. That is, affective image may have more impact on overall image before actual visitation whereas cognitive image may exert more influence on overall image when actual visitation is realized. Furthermore, the inclusion of unique image should influence the weaker impact of affective image on overall image. It is argued that affective image can be diverse among different destinations and used for positioning strategy (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997). It is possible that the differentiating contribution of affective image on overall image is explained partly by unique image, leading to much weaker contribution of affective image on overall image than those of cognitive and unique image components. Future research should examine the relationship among the three image components for a more clear understanding on destination branding.

As Cai (2002) claimed, destination image cannot expand to destination branding without the consideration of brand identity. This study argued that brand identity needs to be created and/or enhanced based on a clear understanding of the destination image that consumers have formed. Based on the results, the current study claims that cognitive, unique, and affective evaluations on destination must be identified to understand the brand image of a destination for its significant effects on overall image. Moreover, the perceived image (i.e., brand image or overall image of a destination) should be assessed with the projected image (i.e., brand identity) by the destination. The assessment offers information to build the desired image that is consistent with the brand identity of the destination (Cai, 2002). If the perceived image is not consistent with brand identity, the source(s) of the problem must be identified and corrected (Kotler & Gertner, 2004). Promoting brand identity without fixing the current problems would cause negative word-of-mouth communications due to the discrepancy between the expectations and the actual performance. Positioning strategy must be implemented to create the desired brand image in the minds of the target market. In addition, tourism destinations should monitor the destination image regularly to examine if the projected image is well adopted by tourists. This is because consistency of core identity is critical for the success of long-term oriented destination branding practices.

In addition to the theoretical contribution on destination branding, this study provides practical implications especially salient for the state of Oklahoma. Based on the results of the study, a positioning strategy of the State of Oklahoma as a destination brand is proposed (Table 7). It reflects all the key components of a destination brand including its positioning, its rational (head) and emotional (heart) benefits and associations, together with its brand personality (Morgan & Pritchard, 2004).

Positioning strategy should start with identifying the strong elements that uniquely differentiate a destination from competitors (Crompton et al., 1992). The current study identified several differentiating attributes of the State of Oklahoma such as “Native American/western heritage,” “restful atmosphere,” “clean environment,” and “natural beauty.” As Aaker and Shansby (1982) suggested, only one or at the most two attributes should be used for brand positioning. Emphasizing too many attributes simultaneously may deteriorate the maximum level of implementation of core identity. Consequently, “Land of Native American and western heritage” is recommended as a positioning proposition for the state of Oklahoma.

The positioning of Oklahoma as a land of Native American and western heritage is translated into the rational benefit of encountering unspoiled wilderness, western heritage, and natural and dramatic beauty. Further, these benefits offer visitors the emotional benefits of feeling uplifted by the spirituality of the natural environment, relaxed by the unspoiled and clean countryside, and fulfilled by experiencing the western heritage and history of Oklahoma. Finally, the culmination of these brand attributes is a destination personified by relaxed, down to earth, pleasant, and traditional yet open-minded traits. This should become the essence of Oklahoma. In summary, the findings of the overall study provide a clear brand position for Oklahoma’s destination brand. Brand Oklahoma emerged as a clear, focused strategy with a defined purpose and personality. Oklahoma’s pristine environment and Native American heritage make it well suited to marketing a clean, nature-based tourism destination with friendly, spirited people and the freedom and space to travel. Once the brand identity with strong and distinctive attributes and brand personality are proposed, it is critical to provide an integrated and consistent marketing communications to the target market. It is possible through partnerships and collaborations between the government and the industry.

5.1. Limitations and recommendations for future study

One limitation of this study is that the data collection was conducted in the summer. A traveler’s characteristics and images of the state of Oklahoma as a travel destination may vary by season (e.g., summer, winter, etc.). For example, a traveler who has visited Oklahoma in the summer season may vary from a different image and perception toward Oklahoma as a travel destination as opposed to that who has traveled in the winter. Thus, the findings of this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positioning</th>
<th>Rational benefit</th>
<th>Emotional benefit</th>
<th>Personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land of Native American and western heritage</td>
<td>• Unspoiled wilderness</td>
<td>• I feel uplifted by the spirituality of the natural environment.</td>
<td>• Relaxed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tradition</td>
<td>• I feel relaxed by the unspoiled and clean countryside.</td>
<td>• Down to earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Western heritage</td>
<td>• I feel fulfilled by experiencing the western heritage and history of Oklahoma.</td>
<td>• Pleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Natural and dramatic beauty</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Hearty and friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Friendly local people</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Traditional yet open-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Adopted from the brand architecture of Britain (source: Morgan &amp; Pritchard, 2002, pp. 34–35).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
study are limited to images of Oklahoma for summer pleasure travelers. To overcome this limitation, a survey can be conducted in different seasons. Then, the results of the survey should be analyzed if there are any differences in image and perceptions of Oklahoma between travelers in different seasons.

Second, the population of this study was limited to visitors who stopped at the selected five welcome centers out of twelve in Oklahoma. Although these five welcome centers were selected based on the total number of visitors, the results may be only applicable for the travelers from these welcome centers. It may not be generalizable for those who did not stop by any of the welcome centers during their trip to Oklahoma. In addition, the total response rate was low (24.5%), suggesting that this study was limited to generalizing the large portion of visitors who did not participate in the survey.

Third, there may be other factors influencing the development of destination image. This study was limited to the included variables, which are consistently and repeatedly mentioned and partially supported by empirical results in the literature. Therefore, the results of this study may have excluded additional destination brand associations that might have helped better explain tourist destination choice behavior. For example, socio-psychological travel motivations of an individual were suggested by numerous tourism scholars as a crucial construct to form tourism destination images. Future research should investigate additional destination brand associations that may influence overall image and tourist behaviors.

Fourth, the number of questions measuring certain constructs in the model is constrained by the practical need to develop a parsimonious questionnaire. The findings are limited to the selected items measuring the related constructs. We suggest that future research utilize more items to measure designated constructs.

References


