

Creating Customer-Based Brand Equity and Measuring Brand Perception of Tourists who Travel for Thermal Tourism: Balçova Survey

Melike GÜL

Balikesir University
Sındırgı Vocational School
Sındırgı, Balıkesir, Turkey
melikegul2011@mynet.com

Düriye BOZOK

Balikesir University
Tourism Faculty
Çağış Campus, Balıkesir, Turkey
duriye_bozok@yahoo.com

Extensive Summary

1. Introduction

Today, since the competition increases between firms and information technology changes rapidly, the successful businesses focus on product development and diversification. In order to obtain and keep competitive advantage, firms should build effective branding for their products and consistently create higher values for their customers.

There are many definitions related to brand concept in the literature. When these definitions are examined, it can be understood that brand; (1) allows to distinguish a product from the others, (2) generating and emerging based on business activities and customer perception, (3) evokes the desire to have a product in customers mind and consists of their perception, (4) it can be expressed in symbols, shapes, numbers and letters, (5) reveals the mission, goals, values and commitments of the creators, and (6) add value to the products (Kotler, 1997; Suzer, 2002; Keller, 2003; Ilguner, 2006; Ertugrul and Demirkol, 2007; Taskin and Akat, 2012; Jones and Bonevac, 2013).

Brand is a promise (Doganlı, 2006: p.71). The features of tourism product such as perishability, intangibility, unstored, labor intensive and heterogeneous (Icoz, 1996; Hacıoğlu, 1997; Usal and Oral, 2001), makes it necessary for branding and promising to customers. Moreover, buying tourism product without pre-test, increase the buying risk of the customers. Therefore, in order to give confidence to the customers, branding is becoming more important. Thus, branding is one of the best marketing tools for the tourism product.

Today, the extension of the human life in the worldwide, rapidly aging population and rising medical care costs increase for searching alternative treatments among the people. Thermal tourism is one of the most famous alternative treatments that meet these needs.

Thermal infrastructure capacity and facilities has been increasing in Turkey in recent years. Diversification of today's customer expectations and the need to ensure customer satisfaction increase the importance of branding in the thermal tourism in this period. In this regard, it is important to meet the expectations of the thermal tourists in the thermal tourism destination within the country and also inside in the accommodation facilities with quality services and effective promotional strategies. Thus, Turkey may have a chance to be a brand in the worldwide by using rich thermal springs and converting thermal resources into economic value.

In the study, it is aimed to measure customer-based brand equity perception of domestic and foreign tourists staying in the thermal accommodation facilities. For this purpose, Balçova Thermal Facilities in Izmir were selected as a research area. In the literature, there are many customer-based brand equity studies that applied for different sectors. Similarly, there are also a number of studies related to customer based brand equity for a variety of service sectors and tourism. But there are no study encountered in the literature that discussed the relationship between customer-based brand equity dimensions of the thermal tourism facilities. The study is expected to provide a significant contribution to the related literature in this regard.

2. Methodology

The aim of the study is to measure brand equity perception of tourists who staying in the Balçova Thermal Facilities and determine the relationships between customer-based brand equity dimensions. The research is applied on Turkish and foreign tourists who staying in Balçova Thermal Facilities located in Balçova Thermal Destination in Izmir in Turkey. 216 of the respondents is Turkish and 184 respondents is foreign tourists. Data were collected between May 2014 and October 2014.

Descriptive analysis is applied in order to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for testing the reliability of the scale used in this study, The validity of the study was tested in two ways. First, construct validity applied depending on expert opinion. Secondly, exploratory factor analysis was used. Finally, path analysis were used in order to determine the relationship between the customer-based brand equity dimensions.

Cronbach α coefficient of the scale used in this study is 0,95. KMO value of the scale is 0,86 and the result of Bartlett test of sphericity is $\chi^2 = 1489.36$, $df = 10$, $p = 0.001$. Eigen value of the scale is 3.79, which explains 76% of the total variance.

3. Finding and Discussion

The result of path analysis Chi-square is (χ^2) = 1.1, $df = 2$, $p = 0.58$; RMSEA= 0.0, %90 CI= 0.0-0.08; AGFI= 0.99; NNFI=1.0 and CFI= 1.0. The results of path analysis of the research model are shown in the Figure 1.

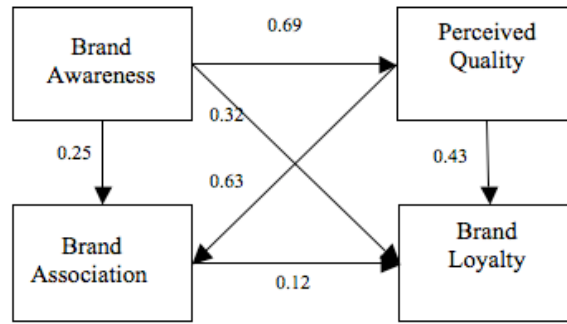


Figure 1. Research Model and The Result of Path Analysis

The affect of brand awareness on brand loyalty is ($\beta = 0.32$, $t = 7.12$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, the relationship between two dimensions are statistically significant. This result is consistent with the research findings that mentioned in the literature (Aktepe and Bas, 2008; Aktepe and Sahbaz, 2010; Balaji, 2011; Ural and Perk, 2012; Shabbir and Rehman, 2013; Torlak, Dogan and Ozkara, 2014; Ishaq et al., 2014; Krystallis and Chrysochou, 2014).

The affect of brand association on brand loyalty is ($\beta=0.12$, $t=2.27$, $p<0.05$) and the relationship between these two dimensions are statistically significant. This result is consistent with the research findings that mentioned in the literature (Kotler, 1996; Atılgan, Aksoy and Akinci, 2005; Gil, Andres and Salinas, 2007; Toksari, 2010; Taskin and Akat, 2010; Torlak, Dogan ve Ozkara, 2014). But it is not consistent with the research findings (Yapraklı and Can, 2009; Ural and Perk, 2012).

The lowest path coefficients have emerged between brand associations and brand loyalty in the model used in the study. These results are consistent with research findings of Vieceleli (2011) about services have less positive brand associations compared with durable goods. According to Bilgili et al. (2008) there should be long time for an extensive evaluation process of a service brand. Thus, thermal facilities need long time to be perceived as good brand for possitive evaluation by comparing variety of treatments, the expertise of the staff, the cleanliness of the rooms, the taste of foods, environment quality and quality of the other services.

The affect of perceived quality on brand loyalty is ($\beta=0.43$, $t=7.91$, $p<0.05$) and the relationship between these two dimensions are statistically significant too. This result is consistent with the research findings that mentioned in the literature (Gil, Andres and Salinas, 2007; Marangoz, 2007; Yapraklı and Can, 2009; Erdil and Uzun, 2009; Balaji, 2011; Ural and Perk, 2012; Shabbir and Rehman, 2013; Yıldız, 2013; Saydan, 2013). But Taskin and Akat (2010) was rejected the hypothesis that affect of perceived quality on brand loyalty in their study.

The affect of brand awareness on brand association is ($\beta=0.25$, $t=6.26$, $p<0.05$) and the relationship between these two dimensions are statistically significant. This result is also consistent with the research findings that mentioned in the literature (Pitta and Katsanis, 1995; Aaker, 1991; Yildiz, Ay and Ozbey, 2012).

In addition, the affect of perceived quality on brand association is ($\beta=0.63$, $t=15.78$, $p<0.05$) and the relationship between these two dimensions are statistically

significant. This result is also consistent with the research findings that mentioned in the literature (Marangoz, 2007; Taskin and Akat, 2010; Kumar, Dash and Purwar, 2013).

Finally, the affect of brand awareness on perceived quality is ($\beta=0.69$, $t=19.13$, $p<0.05$) and the relationship between these two dimensions are statistically significant too. This result is consistent with the research findings that mentioned in the literature (Moisescu, 2005; Balaji, 2011; Shabbir and Rehman, 2013; Saydan, 2013). This result shows that the most powerfull affect of the brand awareness is on perceived quality.

As a result, the research findings show that the brand awareness has moderate influence on brand loyalty, brand associations has weak degree of influence on brand loyalty, perceived quality has moderate degree of influence on brand loyalty, moderately connotations between brand awareness and brand association, perceived quality has a strong affect on brand awareness and brand awareness has the most influence on perceived quality.