

1 **Exploring tourism-based social media communication, brand equity,**
2 **satisfaction, and loyalty: An empirical investigation using a multi-sequential**
3 **approach**
4

5 **Abstract**

6 Although social media-based brand equity has become a vital area of interest for brand
7 managers, insights into its destination-based dynamics and applications remain scarce,
8 specifically in the destination brand context. To address this gap, this study develops a
9 theoretical model to investigate the role of destination marketing organization-generated and
10 tourist-generated social media communication to determine the brand awareness and brand
11 image of the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which in turn influence customer-based brand equity
12 (CBBE) (i.e., perceived quality), satisfaction, and loyalty. Data come from well-known
13 tourist sites in Gilgit-Baltistan. Using the multi-sequential approach in WarpPLS 7.0, first the
14 study shows that the social media communication dimensions show differential impacts on
15 brand awareness as a metric of CBBE. Second, destination awareness demonstrates a
16 differential impact on perceived destination image dimensions. Third, the destination image
17 dimensions exert different effects on the perceived quality of the destination. Fourth,
18 perceived quality positively influences satisfaction, which in turn enhances loyalty. This
19 study probes important implications that emerged from the analyses and suggests directions
20 for future research.

21 **Keywords**

22 Social media communication, destination awareness, perceived quality, destination image,
23 customer-based brand equity, satisfaction, loyalty
24

25 **Introduction**

26 **Reputation in the** tourism context is essential for a well-developed tourism economy
27 (or market) (Rather et al., 2021). Social media content focusing on **destination marketing**
28 **organization–** (DMO-) generated and tourist-generated communication, tourism-based
29 destination awareness, and tourism-led destination image strategies have **enabled** tourism to
30 strengthen its competitiveness (Ebrahimi et al., 2020) **and** help **enhance** negative images of
31 **some** tourist destinations.

32 Although a **considerable** knowledge gap **exists** between **the effectiveness** of tourism
33 promotional campaigns (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020) and the relationship between social media and
34 destination brand equity (image, awareness, and quality), satisfaction, and loyalty, research
35 **on the latter factors** to understand the synergy **is lacking**. Place (destination) branding has
36 **become popular in the tourism marketing and destination field** (Hanna et al., 2021; Rather et
37 al., 2020). As globalization has made tourism a popular leisure activity, attempts to measure
38 brand (destination) value **are increasing** (Hanna et al., 2021). This value refers to *brand*
39 *equity*, a multi-dimensional construct originally **developed** by Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996)
40 **in the goods and service areas and now extended to places/destinations** (Huerta-Álvarez et al.,
41 2020; Hanna et al., 2021).

42 **This study adds three** contributions to **the research** in this field. First, **we break down**
43 destination image further by considering two measurements: affective (full of feeling) and
44 cognitive (intellectual) (San Martín et al., 2019). Most **current models consider only one**
45 dimension of the image—**either self-image or social image** (Agapito et al., 2013). We **argue**
46 that marketers must be aware of the diverse features of a destination image (Kim, 2018) **to**
47 **promote** appropriate marketing strategies and **enhance** loyalty. **Less focus on** cognitive image
48 dimensions **such as** natural attraction, cultural attraction, infrastructure & facilities, price
49 value **results in low tourists' satisfaction loyalty towards the destination** (San Martín et al.,

2019; Yap et al., 2018; Lee and Hsieh, 2021; Styliadis et al., 2021; Tasci et al., 2022). A tourism destination is important either because of its natural attraction, strong and diverse cultural heritage, beautiful/ancient/attractive infrastructure, and value-added services, including its pricing. These dimensions are adequately crucial as they generate a sense of affection and attachment among tourists for the specific place of visit. Tourism marketing literature has provided a generic overview of cognitive image dimensions, whereas a detailed dimensional-level examination to measure customer satisfaction is missing. We employ a multi-sequential approach to examine a destination image's contribution to building satisfaction and loyalty. In particular, a destination image brings about feelings, both positive and negative, among tourists (San Martín et al., 2019). Thus, examining the impacts of two components of image (e.g., psychological image and affective image) independently is essential. Furthermore, tourist firms have used social media to a limited extent to promote tourism in Pakistan (Hasni et al., 2021). This study intends to fill this gap by developing a theoretical model that sheds light on the impact of DMO- and tourist-generated social media interaction on destination brand equity in place/destination branding. This is because, in general, Pakistan suffers from a negative image around the world (Ahmed and Anwar, 2016), resulting in a dearth of tourists.

Second, the model contributes to customer satisfaction, which has a positive association with customer loyalty toward the tourism place/destination. According to Rather et al. (2019), satisfaction is a behavioral phenomenon, and it plays a significant role as it constitutes the primary goal of marketing practices and, in particular, is a cornerstone for individual prosperity. Beyond these conditions, various sources have verified the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty in marketing studies as well as in the tourism industry, but research has explored such a relationship only to a limited extent in tourist destinations, especially in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan.

75 Third, our proposed model provides guidance for different stakeholders, including
76 practitioners, academics and policy makers, on how to use social media-generated
77 communication to spark tourism growth and revitalize the negative image of Pakistan. As
78 the region of Gilgit-Baltistan has abundant natural attractions (e.g., mountains, lakes,
79 glaciers, valleys), well-known hospitality, and delicious foods and is a well-placed
80 geographic location, we address how DMO- and tourist-generated social media
81 communication would affect the overall brand equity (i.e., destination branding) of Gilgit-
82 Baltistan. In particular, DMOs should be attentive to how technological advancement can
83 drive social change, economic growth, and business performance in emerging economies.

84

85 **Research context**

86 Gilgit-Baltistan, a famous tourist destination in Pakistan (Hussain et al., 2018; Blood,
87 2008), is the home of the world's three highest mountain ranges (i.e., the Hindu Kush,
88 Himalayas and Karakoram) (Ashraf et al., 2021). The British Backpacker Society ranks
89 Gilgit-Baltistan as one of the top four destinations in the South Asia region and declares it
90 among the “top-twenty adventure destinations” worth visiting (Baig and Hussain, 2020).

91 As Gilgit-Baltistan is still unexplored in terms of its potential as a tourism hotspot
92 (Baig and Hussain, 2020), DMO management is particularly relevant (Giuseppe et al., 2022).
93 Gilgit-Baltistan is known for its inimitable culture, handicrafts, unique music, mountain
94 sports, festivals, organic food and fruits, clean air, and natural beauty (Baig et al., 2022). In
95 2017, Pakistan’s travel and tourism contributed 2.7% of total gross domestic product (WTTC,
96 2018), and in 2019, it contributed 4.7%; the industry is worth PKR 116.2 billion and creates
97 3.8 million jobs (WTTC, 2020). Reports expect the travel and tourism contribution to gross
98 domestic product to reach 7.4% in 2028 (WTTC, 2018). In recent years, travel growth has
99 become more distinct in Pakistan's northern mountain regions (Gilgit-Baltistan, Chitral, Azad

100 Kashmir), with urban planners progressively turning to rural area tourism to increase
101 economic growth of the region (Ali, 2020).

102

103 **Study framework and hypotheses**

104 *Customer-based destination brand equity*

105 Literature has provided several definitions of and different multi-dimensional
106 structures for CBBE. In the past, studies have claimed that there is an unending need for
107 investigating CBBE intensity, given inconsistencies surrounding the construct (Huerta-
108 Álvarez et al., 2020; San Martín et al., 2019). Research has well documented that CBBE
109 includes four dimensions: brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and loyalty
110 (Barnes et al., 2014; Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). Our study includes another factor—
111 namely, satisfaction—which is also integrated in topical studies on destination brand equity
112 (San Martín et al., 2019). Similar to Boo et al. (2009) and Gomez et al. (2015), we limit our
113 study to destination brand image, or tourist-based self-image and social components
114 encompassing feelings (or emotions) and beliefs. San Martín et al. (2019) suggested to study
115 four additional dimensions to the cognitive image in the model of destination awareness:
116 natural image (e.g., landscape, weather), cultural image, infrastructure and facilities (e.g.,
117 transport, road safety, accommodations), and price value (comparison of actual cost and
118 benefits).

119 Brand awareness is a vital component broadly adopted as a global dimension of
120 CBBE within the hospitality context (Sürücü et al., 2019) and particularly in the tourism
121 destination setting. Brand awareness reflects tourists' knowledge and understanding of a
122 specific destination (brand) or the presence of a place/destination (brand) in their cognitions
123 in a certain traveling context (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). Destination brand loyalty, the
124 main measurement of brand equity (Keller, 2003; Aaker, 1996), refers to a tourist's intention

125 to revisit and disseminate word of mouth (WOM) to others (Dedeoğlu et al., 2019). Also with
126 regard to customer behavior, a crucial variable for tourist attractions' success is tourist
127 satisfaction (Liao et al., 2021).

128

129 *Hypotheses development*

130 *Effect of DMO-generated social media communication on destination awareness.*

131 Social media has rapidly changed the paradigms of consumer-centered modes of
132 communication. Online social platforms are now acting as active tools to communicate
133 different brands. Tourist service firms are engaging with their customers to communicate the
134 positive side of destination places. These communication channels play a prominent role in
135 heightening awareness of specific places among potential tourists. Previous studies have
136 focused on social media– (network–) generated communication content, showing the
137 significance of Web 2.0 (De Rosa et al., 2019; Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). Through social
138 media-generated communication, two-way interactive technologies facilitate new ways of
139 interacting, offering avenues for communicating services/products and disseminating
140 information virally through the internet (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021). Similarly, social media
141 platforms help customers (users) generate and share content (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020),
142 ultimately making this content a reliable form of communication.

143 Only a few studies have measured destination awareness as a metric of CBBE via
144 company-generated social media communications (Godey et al., 2016; Pike and Bianchi,
145 2016). Social media platforms offer countless opportunities for firms to develop relationships
146 with social networking communities (Ekici Cilkin and Cizel, 2021), resulting in an influence
147 of such platforms on CBBE. Godey et al. (2016) show that social media-led marketing
148 efforts of affluent brands have a positive impact on brand awareness as a metric for CBBE
149 (Godey et al., 2016). Dedeoğlu et al. (2020) examine the influence of social media sharing on

150 tourist destination brand awareness, advocating that firms can capitalize on social media–led
151 communications to increase customers’ knowledge. Given this discussion, we propose the
152 following:

153 **H1:** DMO-generated social media communication has a positive impact on tourists’
154 destination awareness.

155

156 *Effect of tourist-generated social media communication on destination awareness.*

157 From a business standpoint, the curation, dissemination, and interactions of tourists through
158 social media platforms are well documented (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020; Huerta-Álvarez et al.,
159 2020). A considerable amount of literature exists in the context of tourism marketing and
160 tourists’ perspectives, such as the effect of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and user-
161 generated content (UGC) (Mauri and Minazzi, 2013). However, studies have shown that the
162 effect of eWOM on tourist place decisions is limited (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). Such
163 eWOM helps other tourists develop perceptions of and make informed decisions about a
164 specific place. Prior research indicates that customer-to-customer interactions are important
165 tools of social media communication (Gallaughar and Ransbotham, 2010). In many instances,
166 with little interaction among tourists, consumer dissatisfaction and negative WOM can arise
167 from tourism’s image reputation (when customers articulate dissatisfaction) caused by the
168 absence of compliance with corporate policies or poor quality (Dixit et al., 2019). Complaints
169 in the form of eWOM can generate negative consequences and a higher magnitude of
170 reputational effect for CBBE.

171 Therefore, organizations should use social media platforms to best identify the innate
172 dynamics of UGC and to uncover which information and data are crucial to consumers (Diga
173 and Kelleher, 2009). Overall, UGC’s capacity to communicate positive opinions significantly

174 influences equity/brand awareness and **therefore** should not be overlooked (Dedeoğlu et al.,
175 2020; Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). **Thus, we propose the following:**

176 **H2:** Tourist-generated social media communication **has a positive** impact **on** tourists'
177 destination awareness.

178

179 *Chain effect of destination awareness and image.* Huang et al. (2019) argue that **with**
180 awareness, brands become an integral factor in **consumers'** consideration sets and the
181 likelihood of purchasing **also** increases. **Moreover**, the associative network model suggests
182 that memory comprises information units or nodes that are interconnected. The strength of
183 these connections may vary, and this entire phenomenon is called "stored information"
184 (Keller, 1993). Pike and Bianchi (2016) **demonstrate** that a knowledge structure is formed
185 when a potential node is identified in a destination brand, eventually leading to associated
186 linkages. Brand association can be explained as a phenomenon in which a customer tenders a
187 meaning to the brand **upon identifying** it (San Martín et al., 2019). Brand-related associations
188 are influenced by brand awareness, and **thus** anticipating destination awareness **can** further
189 **enhance** the perception of its brand image (Al-Ansi and Han, 2019).

190 The set of expectations, ideas, beliefs, feelings, and impressions **about** a tourist
191 destination **represents** the destination image (i.e. brand image; Khan et al., 2019). Recent
192 **research** has **enriched** the understanding of destination image by considering affective and
193 cognitive associations (Al-Ansi and Han, 2019). Considering **this** theoretical notion, **we posit**
194 **that** different emotions are evoked by a tourist destination, among which excitement and
195 pleasure remain dominant. Consequently, the feelings of individuals toward a destination **are**
196 **based on the knowledge and beliefs they hold** of the destination (Stylidis, 2020). In **addition**,
197 **studies have examined** dimensions of cognitive image, **including** natural image, cultural
198 image, infrastructure and facilities, and price value. San Martín et al. (2019) explore the

199 antecedents of cognitive image to configure their multi-dimensional impact. Chekalina et al.
200 (2018) examine the role of destination awareness in developing tangible and intangible
201 destination resources (e.g., infrastructure, culture, atmosphere, accommodation, facilities) and
202 price value (value for money) in the Swedish mountain destination context. Grounded on the
203 aforementioned theoretical foundations, we offer the following hypotheses:

204 **H3:** Destination awareness has a positive impact on the destination's affective image.

205 **H4:** Destination awareness has a positive impact on the destination's natural image.

206 **H5:** Destination awareness has a positive impact on the destination's cultural image.

207 **H6:** Destination awareness has a positive impact on the destination's infrastructure
208 and facilities.

209 **H7:** Destination awareness has a positive impact on price value.

210

211 *Chain effect of image on perceived quality.* The configuration of both affective and
212 cognitive images on perceived quality may lead to concurring results. Prior studies examining
213 tourists' behaviors have argued that perceived destination image has a strong causal
214 relationship to perceived quality (San Martín et al., 2019). However, research has not
215 unpacked the cognitive image antecedents to configure the dimensional effects of destination
216 image on perceived quality. According to Liao et al. (2021), assessments of a particular
217 destination have an impact on the relationship between image and quality. In other words,
218 building a strong image of a destination can lead to perceived quality. Thus:

219 **H8:** Affective image has a positive impact on perceived quality.

220 **H9:** Natural image has a positive impact on perceived quality.

221 **H10:** Cultural image has a positive impact on perceived quality.

222 **H11:** Infrastructure and facilities have a positive impact on perceived quality.

223 **H12:** Price value has a positive impact on perceived quality.

224

225 *Impact of perceived quality on satisfaction.* CBBE entails a direct link between
226 perceived quality and loyalty. In accordance with customer behavior and marketing research
227 (Liao et al., 2021), if people have a direct experience with a brand (e.g., tourist destination),
228 their future behaviors will also be influenced by their satisfaction with the consumption
229 experience.

230 Customer-perceived quality acts as a key foundation for customer satisfaction in
231 tourism (destination) management (Hallak et al., 2018). Tourists can be attracted to a
232 destination that offers unique services and perceive high quality (Tasci et al., 2022).
233 Furthermore, according to theoretical underpinnings on the association between perceived
234 quality and satisfaction (Rather et al. (2019), customers can create a behavioral order
235 instigated by a cognitive phase (i.e., component that needs stronger relevance in quality
236 assessments) and an affective/emotional phase (i.e., component that indicates stronger
237 importance in satisfaction). Thus:

238 **H13:** Destination perceived quality has a positive influence on tourist satisfaction.

239

240 *Impact of satisfaction on tourist loyalty.* Increasing travelers' satisfaction levels and
241 loyalty is pivotal in the travel industry (Hallak et al., 2018). Satisfaction assumes a basic role
242 in anticipating and understanding a person's responses to an experience. In this regard,
243 research has broadly investigated and affirmed the connection between satisfaction and
244 loyalty (Tasci et al., 2022; Hallak et al., 2018), though many studies have taken an attitudinal
245 approach to loyalty into consideration rather than a behavioral focus. With regard to the
246 attitudinal approach to loyalty, studies have shown that tourist satisfaction positively
247 influences revisiting intention toward a destination and recommending the destination to
248 others (San Martín et al., 2019). When visitors are satisfied with their tourist destination,

249 recommendation and re-purchase rates are likely to remain constant or increase over time
250 (Rather & Hollebeek, 2019). In accordance with these studies, we thus hypothesize the
251 following as shown in the study's model:

252 **H14:** Tourist satisfaction has a positive impact on destination loyalty.

253 <insert Figure 1>

254 **Research method**

255 *Measurement*

256 We employed a quantitative study through questionnaire surveys. We adapted
257 questionnaires on DMO-generated social media communication (Šerić and Gil-Saura, 2012)
258 and tourist-generated media communication (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020) of a tourism
259 destination from prior research,. We also adapted items to examine the natural image, cultural
260 image, and infrastructure and facilities (Lin et al., 2007; San Martín et al., 2019).
261 Furthermore, we adapted items to assess affective image, destination perceived quality,
262 awareness, loyalty, and satisfaction from Lassar et al. (1995) and San Martín et al. (2019) and
263 price value from Zeithaml (1988). The items were measured on 5-point Likert scales (1 =
264 strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), see Appendix A for the study's questionnaire.

265 To reduce the risk of methodological sampling prejudice, we deployed a purposive
266 sampling approach, as we had certain criteria for selecting respondents (Etikan et al., 2016).
267 This approach is feasible for assembling data from a restricted number of categories. When
268 approaching the respondents online, we specifically requested tourists who had joined social
269 media groups (e.g., Gilgit Baltistan Pakistan, a group that has been around for seven years)
270 and visited Gilgit-Baltistan for data collection. We also collected data from tourists located
271 around the Gilgit-Baltistan region. The respondents took approximately 10 minutes on
272 average to complete the survey. For the sample size, we used G*power 3.0, which claims a
273 lower bound sample size of 138 for studies given input parameters (effect size = 0.15, α err

274 prob = 0.05, power = 0.95, and no. of predictors = 5) (Faul et al., 2007). We used online and
275 offline self-administered data collection methods to collect data. First, we approached around
276 120 tourists who had joined online groups and visited Gilgit-Baltistan. After multiple
277 reminders, we managed to obtain 80 valid responses (for a 66.6% response rate). Second, we
278 disbursed 250 hardcopy survey questionnaires and collected 210 responses, for a response
279 rate of 84%. We removed 20 questionnaires with missing values and incomplete responses.
280 Thus, the final test was run on a data sample of 270 national and international tourists who
281 had visited Gilgit-Baltistan. Table 1 provides the demographic distribution.

282 <Insert Table 1>

283

284 *Data analysis methods*

285 Using WarpPLS software, we employed the partial least squares structural equation
286 modeling (PLS-SEM) approach to analyze the conceptual model. The software performs
287 analysis in two steps: first, the measurement model and, second, the structural model (Hair et
288 al., 2019). PLS-SEM is an expedient and insightful approach when different constructs are
289 investigated together, if the measuring objective is testing a novel relationship, or for theory
290 development and extension (Hair et al., 2020). Our study uses a multifaceted model that
291 contains different latent constructs, and therefore PLS-SEM is a viable approach for our
292 study.

293

294 **Results**

295 *Measurement model*

296 In the first stage measuring the reflective constructs, we checked the reliability and
297 validity through outer loadings, composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha, average
298 variance extracted (AVE), and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Hair et al., 2020). The

299 criteria for outer loadings are between 0.4 to 0.6 (Abbasi et al., 2019). Other threshold value
300 criteria of item loadings include Cronbach's alpha, CR greater than 0.7, AVE greater than
301 0.5, and full collinearity variance inflation factors (VIFs) less than 5 (Hair et al., 2019, 2020).
302 As Table 2 shows, internal consistency reliability, indicator reliability, and convergent
303 validity are achieved. All item loadings exceeded the threshold criteria of 0.7, except DNI1,
304 DNI2, DNI6, TIF1, and PQ1, which are between 0.5 and 0.7. According to Hair et al. (2016),
305 if loadings are between 0.5 and 0.7 and do not affect internal consistency reliability and
306 convergent validity, they can be retained. The CR and Cronbach's alpha values (>0.7), AVEs
307 (>0.5), and VIFs (<5) all met the threshold standard; thus, we retained all item loadings.

308 To quantify the discriminant validity of the variables, we employed the HTMT
309 method proposed by Henseler et al. (2015). The correlation threshold of the HTMT ratio is
310 less than 0.85 for dissimilar constructs (Hair et al. 2019, 2020). Table 3 shows that the
311 requisite criteria of discriminant validity are achieved, as the HTMT values are lower than
312 0.85.

313 <Insert Tables 2 and 3>

314

315 **Structural model**

316 To investigate the structural model and test the hypotheses, we used WarpPLS 7.0 to
317 gauge the relationships between variables. These relationships ranging from H1 to H14 can
318 be quantified by the path coefficient effect size, standard error, p-value, f^2 , R^2 , and Q^2 . Table
319 4 and Figure 2 show the results of the hypotheses and R^2 and Q^2 results.

320 <Insert Table 4 and Figure 2>

321

322 **Discussion**

323 *Theoretical Implications*

324 **First, our** research contributes to **tourism marketing** literature by exploring social
325 media, destination branding (brand equity management), and **their** inter-relationships. Our
326 findings extend prior research **on** brand equity management in the **marketing domain**. **In**
327 **response** to calls for more empirical investigation **into** social media and tourism destinations
328 (Lee and Hsieh, 2021; Dedeoğlu et al., 2020; Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020), we developed and
329 tested a comprehensive tourism destination-based model. We expect our findings to
330 generalize to other service contexts (e.g., hospitality, education, food tourism), **thus**
331 **generating future research opportunities**.

332 **Second, our** study offers unique aspects (i.e., uncontrolled and controlled
333 communication) both jointly and separately from **a** tourist perspective in the tourism
334 destination brand equity context. In particular, uncontrolled communication **enables**
335 consumers to interact (communicate) **with** both negative and positive content outside **a** firm's
336 control (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). **The** findings reveal that DMO- and tourist-generated
337 communication are important factors to **raise** destination awareness, which is a key metric of
338 CBBE. Moreover, controlled communication exemplifies **the** traditional profile of the brand
339 equity marketing factor; firms establish a mixture of investments, channels, and platforms
340 **through** which **to** communicate **with the** market (Tarutė and Gatautis, 2014). Thus, **there is** a
341 positive **relationship between** tourists' perceptions of controlled communication and
342 destination awareness.

343 Both uncontrolled and controlled **communication** have a positive **and** significant
344 effect on destination awareness. **In particular**, our findings **show** that *organic* information
345 sources (solicited or unsolicited) created by tourists **have** a stronger effect on destination
346 brand awareness than information generated by DMOs **or tourism agencies**. Our findings
347 support **those of** Huerta-Álvarez et al. (2020), which reveal that **the** lesser control exercised

348 over communication produced by DMOs, the higher is its impact on destination brand
349 awareness. Thus, DMO-generated content is positively associated with tourists'
350 recommendations, leading to destination awareness and positive destination image.

351 Third, prior research has treated the destination brand image as a unidimensional
352 factor (i.e., self-image or social image) (Pike and Bianchi, 2016). By contrast, we measured
353 brand image as a multidimensional construct in our proposed destination brand equity model
354 that includes affective image, natural image, cultural image, infrastructure and facilities, and
355 price value (San Martín et al., 2019). This approach sheds more light on the effect of this
356 factor on the development of destination brand equity. In addition, our empirical findings
357 indicate that in the development of customer-perceived quality through destination
358 experience, affective and natural images are the strongest drivers. This may be due to the
359 tourist experience, which compared with other consumption environments, has more
360 emotional content, which in turn heightens customers' feelings in their destination
361 assessments.

362 Fourth, we also examined the role of customer satisfaction in the chain of associations
363 between destination brand equity dimensions. Although research has extensively investigated
364 satisfaction in the tourism area, it has largely ignored the impact of satisfaction in the brand
365 equity domain (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). From this perspective, our study corroborates
366 the impact of the tourist–satisfaction relationship on loyalty to the destination. That is, after
367 tourists have visited the destination, satisfaction emerges as an important factor for
368 destination brand equity and operates as a solid precursor of destination loyalty in terms of
369 the willingness to recommend the attraction to others and revisit it in the future.

370

371 *Practical implications*

372 This research has several key implications for destination/tourism managers and
373 marketers. First, in exploring the impact of DMO- and tourist-generated social media
374 communication on destination brand awareness, we show that awareness affects destination
375 image dimensions, including perceived quality, loyalty, and satisfaction. Pakistan is a rich
376 land with diverse places of attraction, and many social media vloggers have promoted the
377 beauty of the northern region of Gilgit-Baltistan. However, despite many attempts to promote
378 Pakistan's tourism areas, most of its tourist attractions remain unexplored. To attract tourists,
379 DMOs can adopt strategies for multi-channel transmission of traditional and/or controlled
380 communication. To do so, DMOs should view *social media networks* as a tool to reach out
381 the marketplace and assess tourists' views of their sites through their comments, stories,
382 photos, and advice about the destination (Lee and Hsieh, 2021).

383 Second, DMOs can encourage active tourists' participation in communicating
384 constructive messages about their experiences of the sites (Rather and Hollebeek, 2021).
385 Moreover, technological-led efforts or investments are important for developing markets to
386 efficiently link with visitors.

387 Third, information and communications technology (ICT) provides a means for
388 DMOs to communicate and interact with customers. Such an environment produces a wealth
389 of information (e.g., big data) on customer attitudes, profiles, tastes, and so on. ICT has also
390 become an important way to encourage tourist co-creation processes, obtain customer-to-
391 customer feedback, satisfy consumer needs, and develop customer-company relationships
392 (Lee and Hsieh, 2021). We show that DMOs can use social media as a core medium to
393 exchange information with customers and thus co-create value. Customer-to-customer
394 feedback is an important consideration, as many tourists seek such feedback before visiting a
395 specific place of attraction. Thus, tourist firms should initiate a platform that can enhance the

396 chances of co-creation paradigms with customers. Leveraging ICT as a co-create platform
397 would help providers glean more insights through the co-creation process.

398 Fourth, our study also has key implications for fostering tourist loyalty. According to
399 Pike (2007), brand awareness is “the ticket to enter the market.” Thus, we suggest that DMOs
400 expend efforts in strengthening the destination brand awareness. We show that social media
401 is a strong tool for highlighting tourist hotspots. However, a destination can suffer despite
402 attracting attraction if it is not well-known in the targeted marketplace. Therefore, the
403 destination should adopt strategies such as social communication and traditional campaigns
404 to make the destination/brand name more prominent and familiar to potential tourists
405 (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020; San Martín et al., 2019).

406 Fifth, destination communication can also develop a consistent and positive image
407 based on both affective- and cognitive-related issues. As our findings show, affective image
408 plays a more important role in the “quality–satisfaction–loyalty” sequence than cognitive
409 image; thus, DMOs can also work to reinforce or create an affective image of the site in their
410 positioning strategies (Rather and Hollebeek, 2021). Relatedly, positioning mostly derives
411 from the combination of emotions and feelings (e.g., excitement, fun, pleasure), which the
412 site can evoke among visitors by considering their motivations for visiting. Cognitive
413 associations generally derive from major attractions and resources of sites interested by target
414 markets. Therefore, for Gilgit-Baltistan, tourism managers should work to communicate its
415 attractive drivers, which would help customers recognize the hidden beauty of the region.

416 Sixth, as perceived quality and tourist satisfaction are important drivers of destination
417 loyalty, DMOs should take long-standing proactive management approaches to both factors.
418 Furthermore, DMOs should continually evaluate the destination’s perceived quality and
419 visitor satisfaction to monitor both factors. To manage both customer–company and
420 company–customer communication flows, care should be taken to identify more important

421 events/trends in consumer-to-consumer communication to identify tourists' satisfaction level,
422 tastes, expectations, and needs; DMOs should also carefully watch rival destinations/firms.
423 Moreover, tourism firms and DMOs can develop suitable channels (e.g., customer service,
424 physical offices, online brand communities, web pages) to handle tourists' complaints and
425 offer a speedy reply to resolve or improve quality issues and other sources of customer
426 dissatisfaction.

427 Finally, destination marketers should reward customers for their loyalty and for
428 recommending the attraction to others. On one side, direct marketing strategies or campaigns
429 could encourage revisits of satisfied visitors, by reminding them about their past experiences
430 and highlighting other novel sites, attractions, and resources. Promotional-incentives (e.g.,
431 discounts, coupons) could be offered to encourage revisits (Rather et al., 2019; San Martín et
432 al., 2019). On the other side, loyal customers can serve as a source of positive WOM of
433 destinations to others. ICT can facilitate eWOM, and these recommendations have a global
434 impact (Rather, 2021). As such, DMOs and tourism agencies should take the lead in
435 technologies to encourage loyal tourists to upload content on specialized networks (e.g.,
436 Instagram, YouTube) and social media sites (e.g., Facebook) and to post ratings on
437 destination sites (e.g., Tripadvisor, Booking.com). To do so, DMOs and tourism agencies
438 could have their own profiles on recommendation websites and social media platforms and
439 use them to promote and share eWOM from loyal customers.

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441 *Limitations and future research direction*

442 This study has some limitations that may present opportunities for future research.
443 First, we carried out the research in a single marketplace (Gilgit-Baltistan), and thus our
444 findings may not generalize to other cultures or destination sites (Hollebeek and Rather,
445 2019). Future research could investigate the link among social media, brand equity, and

446 loyalty in other cultures and markets. Second, the data came from a specific tourist
447 destination. Thus, future studies should test our findings in other countries/regions, to
448 increase the validity of our findings. Third, our study relies on cross-sectional data; thus, we
449 suggest conducting longitudinal research on the relationship between the modeled variables.

450 Fourth, future research might investigate brand equity of alternative nomological
451 networks, incorporating constructs such as WOM, customer engagement, co-creation, or
452 commitment (Rather and Hollebeck, 2021). Fifth, future research might examine our
453 proposed conceptual model in other (tourism- or hospitality-based) contexts, such as tourism
454 bookings, restaurants, or hotels. Sixth, given the global COVID-19 outbreak, scholars might
455 want to replicate our research design in crisis or disaster contexts (Rather, 2021). Sixth, while
456 we examined three aspects of CBBE, we ignored other elements that help predict overall
457 CBBE, including destination association and trust. Future studies might incorporate other
458 factors and financial-based brand equity to examine destination performance.

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647 **Table 1.** Respondent details.

Variable	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	170	63.0
	Female	100	37.0
Education level	Without studies	2	0.7
	Primary	12	4.4
	Secondary	36	13.3
	University	220	81.5
Nationality	National (Pakistani tourists)	161	59.6
	International tourists	109	40.4
Age	16–24	127	47.0
	25–44	129	47.8
	45–64	11	4.1
	65+	3	1.1
Occupation	Employed	140	51.9
	Student	107	39.6
	Housewife	10	3.7
	Unemployed	12	4.4
	Retired	1	0.4
Monthly income (PKR)	0-30,000	123	45.6
	31,000-50,000	57	21.1
	51,000-100,000	43	15.9
	101,000 and above	45	16.7
	Don't know/no answer	2	0.7

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Table 2. Construct reliability and validity.

Constructs	Indicators	Indicator loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE	Full Collinearity VIFs
DMO-generated social media communication	DMO1	0.91	0.88	0.92	0.80	1.08
	DMO2	0.91				
	DMO3	0.87				
Tourist-generated social media communication	T-Gen1	0.87	0.85	0.91	0.77	1.10
	T-Gen2	0.89				
	T-Gen3	0.87				
Destination awareness	DA1	0.91	0.80	0.91	0.83	1.26
	DA2	0.91				
Destination affective image	DAFI1	0.81	0.79	0.88	0.70	2.12
	DAFI2	0.83				
	DAFI3	0.87				
Destination natural image	DNI1	0.67	0.81	0.86	0.52	1.97
	DNI2	0.62				
	DNI3	0.85				
	DNI4	0.75				
	DNI5	0.84				
	DNI6	0.55				
Destination cultural image	DCI1	0.89	0.75	0.89	0.80	1.46
	DCI2	0.89				
Infrastructure and facilities	TIF1	0.54	0.70	0.82	0.53	1.22
	TIF2	0.80				
	TIF3	0.80				
	TIF4	0.74				
Price value	PV1	0.88	0.72	0.88	0.78	1.24
	PV2	0.88				
Perceived quality	PQ1	0.66	0.73	0.83	0.55	2.02
	PQ2	0.79				
	PQ3	0.79				
	PQ4	0.72				
Tourist satisfaction	TS1	0.85	0.81	0.89	0.72	1.92
	TS2	0.87				
	TS3	0.84				
Destination loyalty	DL1	0.75	0.74	0.86	0.66	1.90
	DL2	0.87				
	DL3	0.81				

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669 **Table 3.** Discriminant validity (HTMT).

	DNI	PV	INF	DCI	DAFI	TSA	PQL	DLY	DA	DMO	T-Gen
DNI											
PV	0.383										
INF	0.244	0.427									
DCI	0.506	0.222	0.322								
DAFI	0.710	0.376	0.332	0.687							
TSA	0.620	0.349	0.245	0.457	0.734						
PQL	0.708	0.369	0.385	0.504	0.667	0.748					
DLY	0.744	0.354	0.233	0.496	0.647	0.686	0.802				
DA	0.494	0.143	0.130	0.233	0.292	0.326	0.441	0.385			
DMO	0.101	0.145	0.165	0.075	0.067	0.051	0.038	0.063	0.110		
T-Gen	0.203	0.068	0.078	0.125	0.215	0.102	0.198	0.101	0.267	0.047	

670 Note: Destination natural image (DNI), price value (PV), infrastructure and facilities (INF), destination cultural image
671 (DCI), destination affective image (DAFI), tourist satisfaction (TSA), perceived quality (PQL), destination loyalty (DLY),
672 destination awareness (DA), DMO-generated social media communication (DMO), and tourist-generated social media
673 communication (T-Gen)
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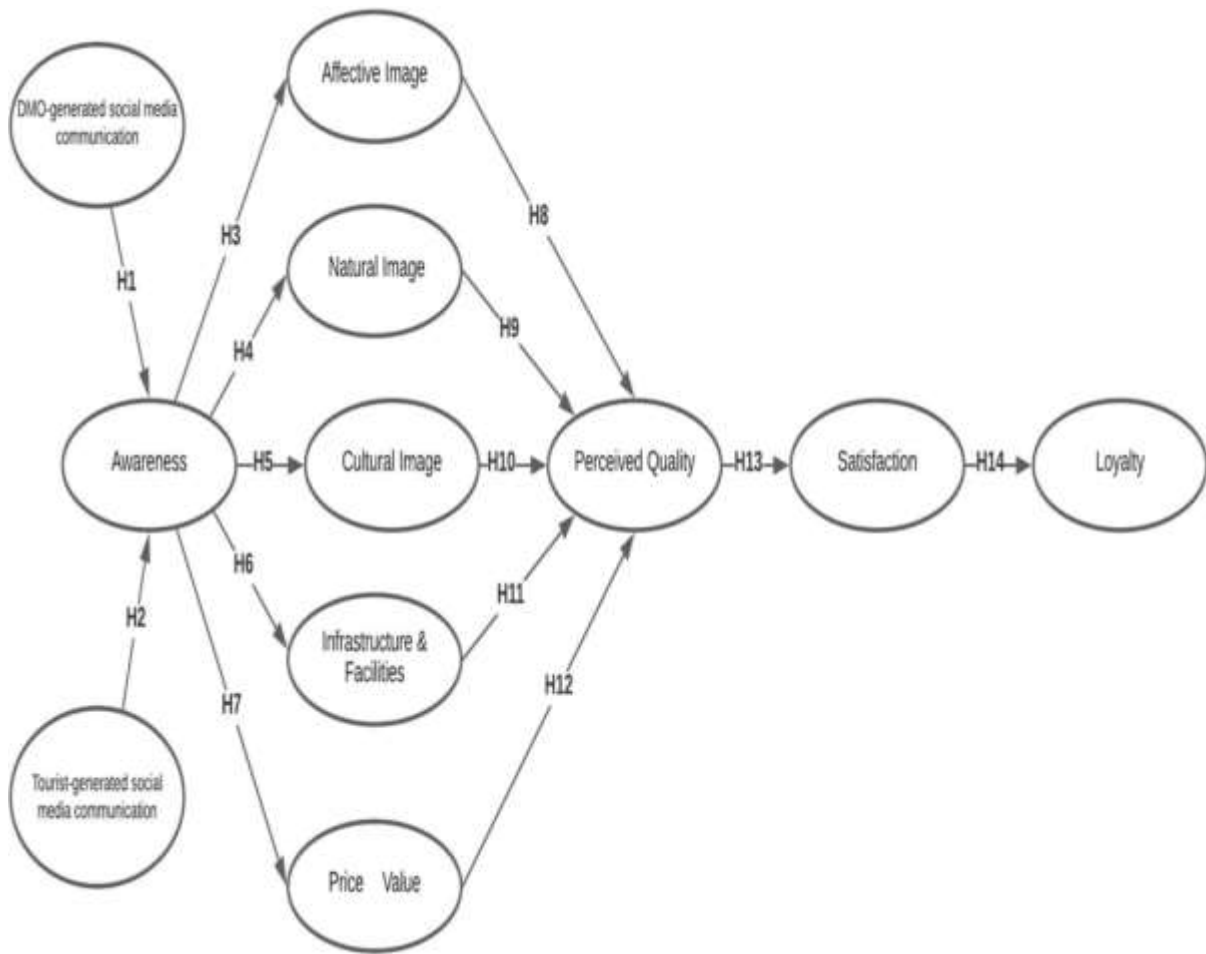
Table 4. Structural model assessment: hypotheses testing.

	Path coefficients	SE	f ²	p-Value	Support	R ²	Q ²
H1: DMO-generated social media communication → Destination awareness	0.113	0.06	0.019	0.029	Supported	0.121	0.135
H2: Tourist-generated social media communication → Destination awareness	0.310	0.058	0.102	<0.001	Supported		
H3: Destination awareness → Destination affective image	0.264	0.058	0.07	<0.001	Supported	0.07	0.07
H4: Destination awareness → Destination natural image	0.418	0.057	0.175	<0.001	Supported	0.175	0.173
H5: Destination awareness → Destination cultural image	0.195	0.059	0.038	<0.001	Supported	0.038	0.041
H6: Destination awareness → Infrastructure and facilities	0.090	0.06	0.008	0.068	Rejected	0.008	0.011
H7: Destination awareness → Price value	0.132	0.06	0.017	0.014	Supported	0.017	0.02
H8: Destination affective image → Perceived quality	0.204	0.059	0.102	<0.001	Supported	0.407	0.417
H9: Destination natural image → Perceived quality	0.371	0.057	0.208	<0.001	Supported		
H10: Destination cultural image → Perceived quality	0.109	0.06	0.041	0.035	Supported		
H11: Infrastructure and facilities → Perceived quality	0.146	0.059	0.044	0.007	Supported		
H12: Price value → Perceived quality	0.044	0.06	0.012	0.235	Rejected		
H13: Perceived quality → Tourist satisfaction	0.592	0.055	0.351	< 0.001	Supported	0.351	0.355
H14: Tourist satisfaction → Destination loyalty	0.535	0.056	0.286	<0.001	Supported	0.286	0.284

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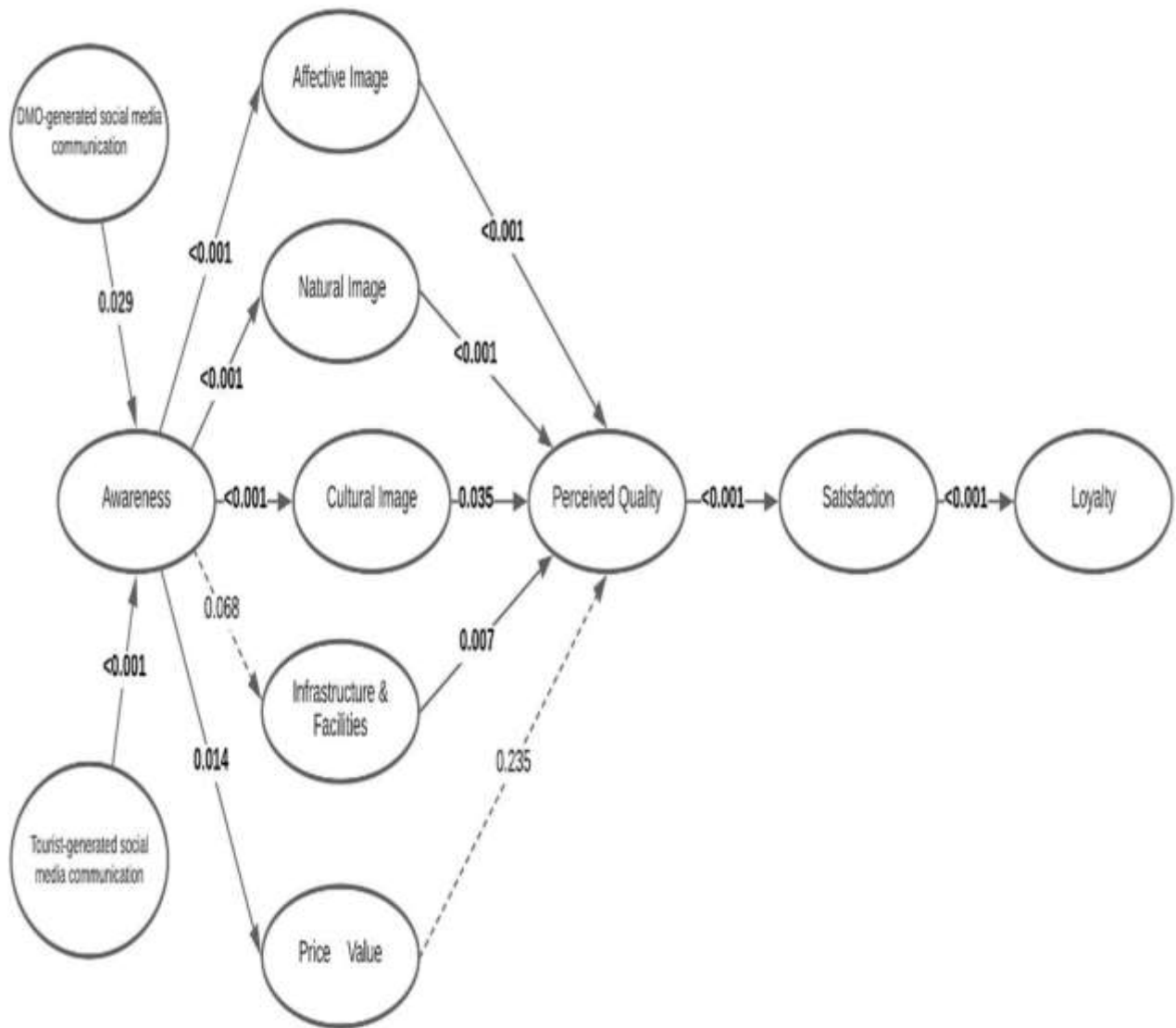
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Figure 1. Theoretical framework.



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Figure 2: Empirical Testing of the Study's Model