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Article

Navigating the Digital Landscape: Evaluating the Impacts of Digital IMC on Building and Maintaining Destination Brand Equity

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Abstract: In the evolving realm of digital marketing, digital integrated marketing communication (IMC) has emerged as a critical factor in building and maintaining brand equity for sustainable tourism destinations. This research examines the impact of digital IMC consistency and interactivity on establishing destination brand equity, while exploring the interconnections among its various dimensions. Grounded in both empirical and theoretical frameworks, this study collected data via an online questionnaire administered to 435 users of online travel agencies, which was analyzed through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The results demonstrate that customer-perceived digital IMC (consistency and interactivity) exerts a significant positive influence on destination brand equity, uncovering the intricate dynamics among destination awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty. Notably, destination loyalty is influenced by destination awareness through destination image and perceived destination quality, with destination image having a more significant impact than perceived destination quality. This research is significant in constructing knowledge of IMC in the digital tourism marketing paradigm, shedding light on how the consistency and interactivity of online communication affect various consumer brand equity outcomes. Additionally, it provides valuable insights into digital tourism practices and sustainable development, enriching the discourse regarding how digital IMC enhances destination brand equity.

Keywords: digital integrated marketing communications; digital IMC; brand equity; tourism; destination brand



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1. Introduction

Understanding customer-based brand equity (CBBE) provides a structured approach to understand how differences in brand knowledge affect consumers' reaction to a brand's marketing efforts [1]; the enhancement of CBBE and the development of tourism's sustainability is facilitated by the strategic implementation of integrated marketing communication (IMC) [2]. IMC prioritizes disseminating a cohesive message to targeted consumer segments across various distribution channels [3]. Over time, the definition of IMC has evolved significantly rooted in the principle of maintaining consistent communication. It has evolved into a sophisticated and strategic discipline within marketing communication to establish robust and influential brands while fostering enduring customer relationships [4].

In generating smart visitors and destinations worldwide, digital media is not only an effective strategy to construct and enhance e-branding [5] but also a tremendous instrument for tourism growth and sustainability [6]. Leveraging digital innovations, particularly through social media platforms, has become an effective strategy for destination marketing, enabling destinations to showcase their attractions, engage with travelers in real-time, and utilize user-generated content (UGC) to enhance their brand presence [7]. Additionally, destination reputation has also benefited from digital destination marketing strategies [8]. An efficient strategy for e-branding building in the tourist business is the implementation of digital marketing tactics including search engine marketing, social advertising, influencer

marketing, and electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM), all of which are noted as effective strategies for e-branding building in the tourism industry [9]. From the tourists' perspective, digital media has significantly influenced how they plan their journeys and choose destinations [10]. Thus, implementing digital IMC can provide destinations with a competitive advantage by ensuring a cohesive and consistent message across various communication channels [11]. Analyzing the impact of digital integrated marketing communication strategies on destination brand equity serves as a competitive advantage and is essential for destinations aiming to differentiate themselves in a saturated digital environment. [12].

The correlation between IMC and brand equity is direct and robust, underscoring the significance of strategic IMC actions in boosting brand equity [13]. Kushwaha [2] verified that, compared with traditional IMC tools, social media as a new element of modern IMC tools demonstrates more efficiency in creating hospitality brand equity. Šerić and Mikulić [12] noted that information consistency as one of the IMC dimensions positively influences four facets of destination brand equity. However, there has been a notable lack of attention devoted to exploring the mechanism of how IMC dimensions impact the inter-relationships among destination brand equity dimensions in this digital age

However, with the fragmentation of tourism marketing information, visitors face challenges in grabbing an accurate picture of a destination within a complex marketing environment. To construct a solid brand with a unique character, destination organizations need to synchronize the utilization of various media platforms and government- and customer-generated resources to convey a consistent message across different customer segments. Additionally, the promotion of tourist destinations has been dramatically altered by the rise of digital media. Prior research has extensively explored the impact of digital media tools, including social media [14], e-WOM [15], live-streaming influencers [16], and other digital IMC tools on travel intention. However, there is a growing recognition of the necessity to adopt a holistic perspective on the use of these digital platforms, which emphasizes the importance of digital IMC and highlights the need for a thorough understanding of how information consistency and interactivity influence brand equity construction in destination marketing.

To address these gaps, this research aims to investigate how digital IMC affects destination brand equity; firstly, this research reviewed and analyzed the literature and evaluated the joint consideration of perceived information consistency and interactivity on destination brand equity dimensions (namely destination brand awareness, destination brand image, destination perceived quality, and destination brand loyalty). Secondly, this paper discusses the intrarelationship between each destination's brand equity dimensions.

The current study provides substantial contributions to the theoretical insight of digital IMC and its impact on destination branding through evaluating the combined effects of IMC consistency and interactivity on each dimension of destination brand equity. It addresses significant gaps in the existing research and provides a holistic framework elucidating the interplay between these elements. This study extends existing brand management theories and enriches the theoretical discourse on digital IMC by presenting a contemporary perspective that integrates these vital constructs. Through rigorous empirical analysis, it offers nuanced insights into optimizing digital marketing strategies to enhance brand equity in destination marketing. Practically, this research offers actionable insights for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to take full potential of the digital landscape in attracting and arousing travelers' interest, which enhances the comprehension of how IMC may be strategically used within a digitalized environment. It provides practical guidelines for optimizing digital marketing efforts to contribute to sustainable tourism development and maintaining long-term competitive advantage.

Figure 1 illustrates the research framework.

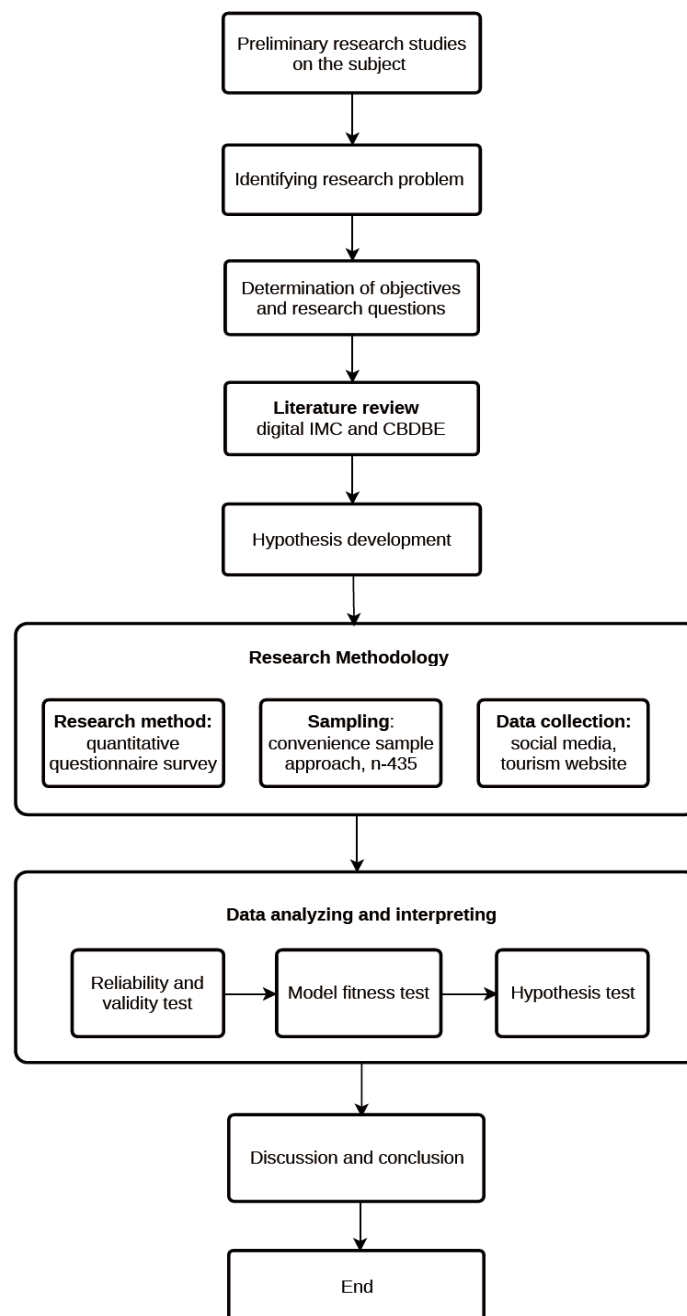


Figure 1. Flowchart of the research framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1. IMC Digitalization Revolution

The positive effect of IMC on various brand-related issues has been examined by plenty of research, including brand performance [17], brand equity [18], brand identity [19], brand familiarity [20], and brand image [21]. This strategic approach underscores the fundamental goal of IMC in achieving cohesive and consistent communication across diverse channels, which reinforces a brand's perceived value, fortifying its prominence within the market. The emergence of IMC marks a significant evolution in marketing, transitioning from a one-way, mass-oriented approach to a complex, multifaceted, and interactive form that epitomizes modern marketing communication in the era of digital co-creation [21]. This evolution highlights the necessity for brands to engage in dynamic

interactions with consumers, fostering a more personalized and engaging experience crucial in today's digital landscape.

The shift from conventional media to interactive multimedia is pivotal in the digitalization of IMC, as emphasized by Sawaftah [22]. The integration of digital technology into IMC enables effective consolidation of management across diverse media channels, holding the potential for achieving superior outcomes and fostering collaborative results in the context of business competence. This technological integration allows for more precise targeting and measurement of communication efforts, enhancing marketing strategies' overall effectiveness and efficiency. The evolution of IMC represents a significant shift in marketing strategies, adapting to technological advancements and the digital landscape [23]. This involves incorporating interpersonal communication within digital marketing strategies to strengthen customer relationships and enhance brand loyalty, as highlighted by Fauzi [24].

In the digital age, modern marketing necessitates the integration of digital technology to improve communication efficiency and effectiveness in conveying value to consumers [25]. Integrating influencer marketing and e-WOM has become crucial in developing comprehensive brand communication strategies in the digital era [26]. This convergence reflects the broader digital revolution that has transformed the functioning of digital marketing tools within the context of Industry 4.0, emphasizing the importance of IMC [27]. The advantage of digital media channels is that marketers can create personalized campaigns that reach specific segments more efficiently and create interactivity and long-term relationships with consumers compared to traditional media [28]. The shift from traditional to digital marketing communication approaches represents a significant transformation in the way information is disseminated to consumers [29].

The literature discussed above underscores the transformative impact of digital IMC on enhancing brand-related outcomes, demonstrating the need for brands to adapt to the multifaceted demands of the digital era. Despite these advancements, a significant gap remains in the strategic implementation of digital marketing communication, highlighting the necessity for more precise and insightful strategies. Within tourism marketing, numerous studies have validated the inclusion of various digital media in the digital IMC mix. However, there is a significant deficiency in the research with respect to assessing how digital IMC strategies influence destination brand performance through a comprehensive IMC perspective. This gap underscores the imperative for further investigation into how cohesive digital IMC strategies can enhance destination branding, ensuring long-term competitive advantage and sustainable development. Additionally, the implementation of digital IMC by organizations has become increasingly diverse, often lacking clear direction grounded in strategic insights [30], especially in the tourism industry. This integration is essential for navigating the complexities of the modern digital landscape, where consumer behavior and media consumption patterns are continually evolving.

2.2. Perceived Consistency and Interactivity of IMC

Understanding customer responsiveness to marketing communications has increasingly become a focal point in contemporary research on IMC [31]. The increased focus on marketing communications from consumer perceptions is attributed to the heightened influence of contemporary consumers who actively participate in integrating communication processes [32]. Rather than passively accepting the messages companies attempt to disseminate, consumers now exert their power by selectively seeking out information that aligns with their interests and preferences [33].

Therefore, to verify the effect of IMC on the construction of customers' perceived brand equity, this research focused on consumers' understanding of two key IMC dimensions identified by Foroudi et al. [21], including IMC consistency relating to the message consistency across various platform, and IMC interactivity emphasizing reciprocity, speed, and responsiveness in the context of building long-term relationships [34,35].

2.2.1. Digital IMC Consistency and Destination Brand Equity

IMC consistency can be considered an initial stage in communication integration as pertains to establishing a coherent and lucid communication strategy across the various touchpoints of an organization. Researchers including Šerić et al. [18], Kang [36], and Putri et al. [37] highlighted the critical role of this dimension in branding construction in their investigation since the emergence of the concept. Anantachart [38] suggested that the implementation of IMC strategies, which prioritize the consistent alignment of messages and media, has the ability to impact CBBE by generating positive consumer evaluations and attitudes through two distinct mechanisms, including promptly influencing consumers' capacity to remember and connect the message with the brand, as well as providing favorable outcomes in terms of brand perceptions.

One of the IMC approach's fundamental concepts is maintaining a consistent message and image across various marketing communication channels [39]. The volume and frequency shape the attitude of customers and how frequently they are exposed to consistent messaging across different channels of dissemination, hence consolidating the connection with the brand [40]. Cultivating passionate and engaged consumer–brand bonds may be facilitated by a brand that maintains a consistent message and image over an extended period [41].

In the context of tourism, Šerić and Mikulić [42] have conducted a series of studies to verify that constant brand communications have an influential effect on all dimensions of customer equity, with perceptual variables (like brand association and perceived quality) having more influence than relational ones (like loyalty). Ensuring consistency in the messages received across various communication tools and platforms is considered a crucial prerequisite for establishing robust brand associations, which ultimately contribute to enhanced brand equity evaluations [35]. The association between positioning tactics and destination brand equity is mediated by message consistency [43]. Consistent with this perspective, Šerić and Mikulić [12] verified that in four brand equity dimensions, the impact is shown to be most significant on the awareness of the brand, while it is least pronounced on the loyalty towards the brand.

The literature reviewed above highlights the critical role of IMC consistency in shaping brand identity and its influence on CBBE. Maintaining consistent information across destinations not only improves brand recall and perception but also positively influences consumer attitudes, ultimately strengthening the bond between consumers and the brand. Based on findings from the tourism literature, testing of the effect on four destination brand equity dimensions is still lacking when considering the implications of digital IMC. As from the discussion above, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

- H1.** *Digital IMC consistency has a positive impact on destination brand awareness.*
- H2.** *Digital IMC consistency has a positive impact on destination brand image.*
- H3.** *Digital IMC consistency has a positive impact on destination perceived quality.*

2.2.2. Digital IMC Interactivity and Destination Brand Equity

The interactivity in IMC pertains to strategic initiatives to establish and foster connections with customers in relationship marketing [21]. Numerous studies have been undertaken to highlight the essential role of corporate communication within an organization [44]. The utilization of interactive marketing channels enhances organizations' ability to connect with customers by designing personalized branding messages [45]. This personalized strategy resonates with the evolving customer landscape, underscoring the necessity of adapting marketing approaches to meet changing customer needs for optimal results [46].

In the context of digitalization of IMC, the integration of marketing communications and database marketing is crucial in developing a highly efficient strategy to foster long-term relationships with customers [47]. The shift from traditional IMC to interactive IMC has underscored the importance of databases in facilitating personalized communication between firms and individuals, emphasizing the role of interactivity in enhancing market performance [48]. Schultz and Kitchen [49] emphasized the importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in complimenting IMC due to the ability to enhance the administration of databases, therefore transforming consumer data into valuable customer knowledge. Additionally, it enables consumer engagement across various touchpoints [50] and promotes ongoing conversations and significant relationship-building through efficient exchange of brand messaging [51]. Finne and Grönroos [52] introduced a “Relationship Communication Model” by pointing out the crucial role of consumers in the integration and interpretation of messages, taking into account various situational elements (both internal and external) as well as temporal considerations (both past and future).

Numerous recent studies have been dedicated to evaluating the impact of social media in constructing brand equity while highlighting the interactivity in marketing strategy. Schivinski et al. [53] found a positive correlation between CBBE and brand-related communications on social media within the fashion industry. The study conducted by Mansur [54] pointed out the substantial impact of marketing communication efforts on Instagram, which contributes to enhancing comprehensive brand value. This influence is mainly attributed to the significant effects of Instagram’s entertainment and engagement on tourists’ loyalty.

Thus, interactivity is essential for fostering customer relationships, particularly through personalized messaging in digital channels, emphasizing the importance of databases and ICTs in enhancing consumer engagement and market performance. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted to investigate the influence of digital IMC interactivity in these elements of destination brand equity. Given the data reported in the available literature, the following hypotheses can be made:

H4. *Digital IMC interactivity positively influences destination brand awareness.*

H5. *Digital IMC interactivity positively influences destination brand image.*

H6. *Digital IMC interactivity positively influences destination perceived quality.*

2.3. Consumer-Based Destination Brand Equity (CBDBE)

Brand equity (BE) was first conceptualized by Farquhar [55] in 1989 as the extra value attributed to a product or service as a result of its brand identification. Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) provides an additional perspective through which brand equity can be examined, focusing on the viewpoint of consumers. The principal aim of DMOs is to secure and sustain the competitive viability of the destination, which demands the strategic development and management of resources capable of establishing a durable competitive advantage [56]. The destination brand building is considered to be one of the crucial resources [41]. The value of destination brands is directly correlated with their capacity to attract tourists and generate economic revenue [57]. Aligning with the principles of the CBBE framework, Konecnik and Gartner [58] introduced and validated the customer-based destination brand equity (CBDBE) model within the tourism sector. Table 1 illustrates several vital models’ evolution of the CBBE and CBDBE dimensions.

Table 1. Dimensions of CBBE and CBDBE models.

Aaker 1991 [59]	Keller 1993 [1]	Konecnik and Gartner 2007 [58]	Boo et al., 2009 [60]	San Martin et al., 2019 [61]
Brand Awareness	Salience/Awareness	Destination Awareness	Destination Awareness	Destination Awareness
Perceived Quality	Performance	Destination Quality	Destination Quality	Destination Image
Brand Association	Imagery	Destination Image	Destination Value	Perceived Quality
Brand Loyalty	Judgments	Destination Loyalty	Destination Image	Destination Satisfaction
	Feelings		Destination Loyalty	Destination Loyalty
	Resonance			

Source: Author.

On the other hand, plenty of studies established a favorable correlation between CBDBE level and many brand equity dimensions. One prevalent concern in the scholarly literature regarding the analysis of tourists' perceptions of destination brand equity is the proposal of hierarchical associations among different dimensions of destination brand equity, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. The literature regarding the analysis of CBDBE dimensions.

Author	Brand Equity Dimension
Bui et al. [62]	DBA-DPQ, DBA-DBI, DBI-DBL, DPQ-DBL, DBA-DBL
Latif [63]	BA-BI
Zhang et al. [64]	DBI-DBL, DBA-DBL
Huerta-Alvarez et al. [65]	DA-PQ, DI-PQ, PQ-DL
Tran et al. [66]	DBA-DBI, DBA-DPQ, DBI-DPQ, DPQ-DBL, DBI-DBL
Gómez et al. [67]	BA, BI, BL, BQ
Kotsi et al. [68]	DBA, DBI, DBQ, DBV
Stojanovic et al. [69]	BA-BI,
Kim and Lee [70]	DBA-DPQ, DBA-DBI, DPQ-DBI, DPQ-DBL, DBI-DBL
Kladou and Kehagias [71]	BA-BQ, BQ-BL, BA-BAS

BA = Brand Association; DBV = Destination Brand Value; BA= Brand Awareness; BI= Brand Image; BL= Brand Loyalty; BQ= Brand Quality; DA = Destination Awareness; DI = Destination Image; PQ= Perceived Quality; DL = Destination Loyalty; DBA= Destination Brand Awareness; DBI= Destination Brand Image; DBL= Destination Brand Loyalty; DPQ= Destination Perceived Quality. Source: Author.

- Destination Brand Awareness (DBA)

According to Aaker [59], "brand awareness" denotes the familiarity potential visitors possess with the brand of a specific travel destination, which emphasizes their capacity to recognize and recall a specific destination within plenty of similar destinations [72]. This awareness is evident in consumers' ability to remember particular brand features including logos, slogans, and colors [73]. The existing body of literature underscores the influence of destination brand awareness on destination image. The concept of brand awareness is known to influence clients in forming a mental representation of a brand [74]. According to Keller et al. [75], a robust association exists among brand awareness, brand recognition, and recall, which are significant in developing and maintaining a robust brand image. Solid brand awareness significantly impacts consumers' perceptions and discussions concerning a company's offerings [76]. The correlation between brand familiarity and the image was found to be statistically significant, as stated by Ghafari et al. [77]. Additionally, Dewindaru et al. [78] identified a significant correlation between brand awareness and brand image, indicating that these factors contribute to enhanced brand preference, a greater willingness to pay premium prices, and increased customer loyalty. Pike et al. [79] also verified the hierarchical structure that emphasizes the impact of destination brand awareness on destination brand loyalty.

- Destination Brand Image (DBI)

Brand image refers to the view that consumers have of a brand and determines the symbolic meaning behind purchasing from it [80], while the destination brand image is recognized as a crucial factor that shapes individuals' perceptions of destination quality and fosters loyalty [81]. In the destination research from Kim and Lee [70], brand image had been verified as being proportional to brand loyalty, and research shows that brand awareness and perceived quality positively impact this metric. Ghafari et al. [77] confirmed brand image's substantial influence on brand loyalty and value. The way consumers perceive a brand's image significantly impacts their loyalty towards the destination [82] and the degree of trust they have in the destination brand. Additionally, the conclusive evidence has established that perceived value and satisfaction significantly influence the relationship between destination image and intentions for destination loyalty [83].

- Perceived Destination Quality (PDQ)

Zeithaml [84] established the concept of perceived quality as the evaluation made by consumers concerning a product's overall superiority or excellence. Customer feedback encompasses the perspectives and evaluations expressed by individuals regarding product quality and service performance [70]. Keller [85] posited that destination brand quality is contingent upon an individual's subjective perceptions of quality, which serve as a basis for assessing the brand's superiority in comparison to its competitors. The perception of service quality is significant in shaping destination image and fostering brand loyalty [86,87]. Similarly, Zhao et al. [88] observed that the quality of a brand had a beneficial impact on the loyalty demonstrated by its customers. Dedeoğlu et al. [81] verified the correlation between high levels of brand awareness and customers' perceived brand quality. Perceived destination quality as a cognitive element has been verified as having a positive influence on destination loyalty, which is a conation feature mediated by tourist satisfaction [89].

- Destination Brand Loyalty (DBL)

The construct denoting the degree of emotional connection between a tourist and a destination brand is commonly known as brand loyalty, as defined by Aaker [90]. It is essential for marketers to consider the perceived value attributed by customers to a product or service while developing marketing strategies [91]. This information will provide marketing professionals with enhanced insights into the specific elements of a product or service that can influence customers and yield favorable reactions [92]. The utilization of an effective communication mix was also mentioned by Huerta-Álvarez et al. [65] as having the potential to improve visitor retention and loyalty within the hotel industry. Furthermore, Šerić et al. [93] discovered that both the brand image and the perceived quality of the product or service mediate the relationship between communication consistency and brand loyalty. This discovery is significant as it provides insight into the factors contributing to consumer brand loyalty.

From what has been reviewed above, it can be seen that to achieve a notable degree of brand identity and awareness, it is imperative to enhance the probability of consumers recalling and connecting with said identity during the purchasing process [94]. It can be seen that brand awareness is antecedent to capturing consumer attention as well as constructing long-term loyalty. Although research on destination brand equity has gained substantial attention and undergone tremendous development, there is still no commonly agreed scale for measuring this construct [95]. Based on the challenges posted in the recent literature, this research examines the relationships amongst four main CBDBE dimensions, with digital IMC consistency and interactivity as antecedents to these factors. Thus, the following research hypotheses need to be proposed:

H7. *Destination brand awareness has a positive effect on destination loyalty mediated by destination brand image.*

H8. *Destination brand awareness has a positive effect on destination loyalty mediated by destination perceived quality.*

Thus, the conceptual framework can be constructed as shown in Figure 2.

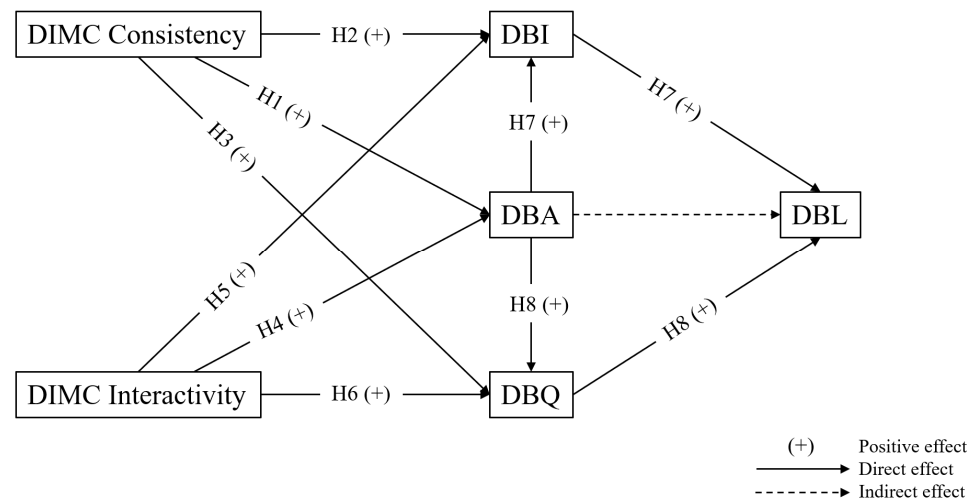


Figure 2. Conceptual framework.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

In order to comprehensively investigate the mechanism and efficacy of IMC in influencing destination brand equity, the proposed research hypotheses will be empirically tested by gathering online survey data. This study employs robust empirical methods and was conducted in China, a prominent participant in the global tourism industry.

This research employed a convenience sampling method, a non-probability sampling strategy, given the vast number of tourism destinations available in China. The demographic under consideration comprises travelers who have visited renowned tourist destinations located across several provinces in China. Participants for the online survey were recruited through multiple digital channels, encompassing social media platforms, websites associated with tourism, and electronic newsletters. Prior to participation, all respondents provided informed consent. Measures were implemented to protect the participant's privacy and confidentiality, and their participation in this study was exclusively voluntary. Statistical analysis was conducted on a total of 435 collected responses, and their distribution is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Respondents profiles.

Features	Variables	N = 435	%
Gender	Male	192	44.1
	Female	243	55.9
Age	18–29	105	24.1
	30–39	171	39.3
	40–49	94	21.6
	≥50	65	14.9
Education	High School	28	6.4
	Diplomat	99	22.8
	Undergraduate	230	52.9
	Postgraduate	78	17.9
Employment Status	Employed	246	56.6
	Self-Employed	147	33.8
	Retired	42	9.7
Annual Income	Under USD 7000	21	4.8
	USD 7000–USD 14,000	157	36.1
	USD 14,000–USD 70,000	225	51.7
	Over USD 70,000	32	7.4

3.2. Measurement Scales

This study utilized scales derived from the previous investigation's findings. There is a comprehensive set of six factors under measurement, each comprising multiple items. The five-item scale of Šerić and Mikulić [12] was employed to measure "digital IMC Consistency" (DIMC C), while the "digital IMC Interactivity" (DIMC I) scale was adopted by Šerić and Vernuccio's [32] research. Consumer-based destination brand equity was measured with four dimensions, which were the four items of "Destination Brand Awareness" (DBA) adopted by Boo et al. [60], three items of "Destination Brand Image" (DBI) borrowed from Pike et al. [96] and Boo et al. [60], four items from the "Destination Perceived Quality" (DPQ) scales adopted by Tran et al. [66], and four items on "Destination Brand Loyalty" (DBL) borrowed from Konecnik and Gartner [58]. The questionnaire's scales were adjusted to accommodate the specific circumstances of the respondents' previous travel experiences. These questions were intended to assess the correlation between their assessment of digital IMC and destination brand equity. The data of each item were collected as ordinal data, from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree".

4. Results

4.1. Profiles of Respondents

The questionnaire in this survey was designed to evaluate the heritage site participants visited most recently. Table 3 provides a comprehensive insight into the demographic and socioeconomic features of the respondents, as observed among the survey participants. It consists of four major characteristics, namely gender, age, education level, work status, and annual income, to accurately depict income distribution among the participants.

4.2. Measurement Model

Validity and reliability analysis are essential to assessing the quality of research measurements. A measure's validity is its ability to reflect the concept under evaluation, whereas its reliability is its consistency and stability throughout time or in multiple circumstances [97].

4.2.1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

In the current research, the reliability of the measurement model was evaluated by partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SPSS 27 and AMOS 26, which included composite reliability (CR) scores with a threshold of 0.70, Cronbach's Alpha (α) coefficient values with a threshold of 0.70, and the average variance extracted (AVE) with a threshold of 0.50 [98]. As Table 4 illustrates, the α of each variable is greater than 0.865, with the minimum CR value being 0.882 and the minimum AVE value also 0.882. Additionally, all factor loadings for each variable were statistically significant, as determined with bootstrap t-values, with a value between 0.740 and 0.802 and greater than the traditional threshold of 0.60. It can be seen that all results met the minimum requirements, respectively, and showed great reliability and strong convergent validity [99].

4.2.2. Discriminant Validity

To determine the relative strength of correlations between items inside a specific construct compared to their correlations with items from other constructs, a discriminant validity analysis was performed. This involved comparing the square root of the AVE of each construct with the factor correlations between each pair of constructs [100]. As the results demonstrate in Table 5, the data in a diagonal line with bold are the square root of AVE, while the data below are the inter-correlations, which showed that the variance extracted was, respectively, higher than the inter-correlation and exhibited a good level of discriminant validity.

Table 4. Validity and reliability of the measurement.

Items	Mean	SD	Loadings	CA (α)	AVE	CR
DIMC C				0.884	0.600	0.983
DIMC C1	3.320	1.134	0.772			
DIMC C2	3.270	1.148	0.756			
DIMC C3	3.280	1.189	0.786			
DIMC C4	3.360	1.167	0.791			
DIMC C5	3.380	1.172	0.767			
DIMC I				0.884	0.587	0.982
DIMC I1	3.330	1.160	0.747			
DIMC I2	3.290	1.137	0.757			
DIMC I3	3.370	1.168	0.781			
DIMC I4	3.360	1.140	0.783			
DIMC I5	3.350	1.203	0.763			
DBA				0.872	0.619	0.893
DBA1	3.360	1.157	0.772			
DBA2	3.420	1.129	0.786			
DBA3	3.440	1.198	0.774			
DBA4	3.460	1.180	0.814			
DBI				0.865	0.605	0.889
DBI1	3.360	1.131	0.802			
DBI2	3.340	1.160	0.773			
DBI3	3.310	1.163	0.794			
DBI4	3.390	1.183	0.74			
DPQ				0.865	0.577	0.882
DPQ1	3.320	1.250	0.751			
DPQ2	3.280	1.193	0.78			
DPQ3	3.350	1.212	0.749			
DPQ4	3.290	1.169	0.758			
DBL				0.877	0.609	0.891
DBL1	3.300	1.217	0.777			
DBL2	3.360	1.202	0.78			
DBL3	3.410	1.204	0.773			
DBL4	3.290	1.200	0.792			

SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 5. Discriminant validity of the measurement tool.

	DIMC_C	DIMC_I	DBA	DBI	DPQ	DBL
DIMC_C	0.775					
DIMC_I	0.346	0.766				
DBA	0.329	0.343	0.787			
DBI	0.343	0.354	0.347	0.778		
DPQ	0.390	0.339	0.401	0.386	0.760	
DBL	0.362	0.387	0.361	0.354	0.400	0.781

The diagonal and bold values indicate the square root of AVE.

4.3. Model Fitness

Model fitness allows researchers to determine whether the hypothesized relationships and assumptions within the model adequately explain the patterns and variations observed in the data. It helps in assessing the validity of the theoretical framework. In this research, the latent factor structure was analyzed via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 26 to assess the Chi-square (χ^2) index, df (degree of freedom), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Residual (RMR), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Goodness of Fit Index (GFI). As Table 6 shows, all of the indices met the minimum threshold. This suggests

that the model effectively captures the relationships among the variables in question, with these indexes all pointing to a reasonable representation of the data.

Table 6. Model fitness test.

Index	Value	Recommended Value	Acceptable Value	Result
χ^2	347.765			
d.f.	287			
χ^2 /d.f.	1.212	<2	2–3	Supported
GFI	0.929	>0.95	0.90–0.95	Acceptable
RMSEA	0.025	<0.006	0.06–0.08	Supported
RMR	0.058	<0.05	0.05–0.08	Acceptable
CFI	0.988	>0.95	0.90–0.95	Supported
TLI	0.986	>0.95	0.90–0.95	Supported

Supported: met the recommended thresholds; Acceptable: did not meet the recommended thresholds but met the acceptable thresholds.

4.4. Test of Hypotheses

The path coefficients were tested after the assurance of the predictive power of all the hypotheses through 5000 bootstrapping runs. Regression analysis is a commonly employed statistical technique in research to evaluate the effect of independent factors on dependent factors, to measure the corresponding relationship, and to provide evidence for a study's hypotheses. In this research, the structural model evaluated the connections among the variables and their corresponding beta (β) and t-values (t). As presented in Table 7, the digital IMC consistency was verified to have a positive impact on destination brand awareness ($\beta = 0.376$, $p < 0.001$), destination brand image ($\beta = 0.371$, $p < 0.005$), and destination brand perceived quality ($\beta = 0.464$, $p < 0.001$), which supported the hypotheses H1, H2, and H3. Additionally, the results verified that digital IMC interactivity was positively affecting destination brand awareness ($\beta = 0.415$, $p < 0.001$), destination brand image ($\beta = 0.427$, $p < 0.001$), and destination brand perceived quality ($\beta = 0.422$, $p < 0.005$). Thus, the hypotheses H4, H5, and H6 were supported.

Table 7. Hypothesis results.

Hypotheses	β	t	p	Result
H1. DIMC C \rightarrow DBA	0.376	7.57	***	supported
H2. DIMC C \rightarrow DBI	0.371	7.454	0.004	supported
H3. DIMC C \rightarrow DPQ	0.464	9.781	***	supported
H4. DIMC I \rightarrow DBA	0.415	8.517	***	supported
H5. DIMC I \rightarrow DBI	0.427	8.824	***	supported
H6. DIMC I \rightarrow DPQ	0.422	8.699	0.002	supported

*** $p < 0.001$.

The mediating effect analysis was conducted using SEM path regression to examine the impact of destination brand awareness on loyalty via image and perceived quality, respectively. While there was a positive impact on destination brand loyalty from marketing communications highlighting the brand, it was not large enough to be statistically significant ($\beta = 0.183$, $p < 0.01$). According to Hair et al. [101], understanding the complete impact of a variable requires going beyond a simple direct effect analysis of its constituent parts. It is imperative to also take into account the indirect effect, which occurs through a mediating construct. Specifically, an indirect association exists between destination brand awareness and destination brand loyalty, which is mediated by two intermediary constructs: destination brand image and destination brand perceived quality. The path coefficients in these relationships are shown in Table 8. Regarding the mediated path of destination brand image, the indirect effect was 0.084, while the total effect was 0.267. For the mediation path coefficient of destination brand perceived quality, the indirect impact is 0.057, while the total effect is 0.240. The results indicate that the link between destination

brand awareness and destination brand loyalty is influenced by the mediating factors of destination brand image and destination brand perceived quality, respectively. With a high significance level of $p < 0.001$, each of these routes has significant value, and hypotheses H7 and H8 are supported.

Table 8. Path coefficients.

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
DBA → DBI	0.313 ***	-	0.313 ***
DBI → DBL	0.269 ***	-	0.269 ***
DBA → DPQ	0.395 ***	-	0.395 ***
DPQ → DBL	0.313 ***	-	0.313 ***
DBA → DBL	0.183 *	-	0.183 *
H7. DBA → DBI → DBL	-	0.084	0.267 ***
H8. DBA → DPQ → DBL	-	0.057	0.240 ***

*** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.1$.

A bootstrap analysis through Amos 26 was also performed to test the mediating effect further. Table 9 illustrates that a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) based on a 5000-resample bootstrap was tested. The result shows that the CI of the indirect effect via destination brand image is between 0.105 and 0.259, while the indirect effect via destination perceived quality is from 0.132 to 0.308. These results provide more robust evidence for hypotheses H7 and H8.

Table 9. Bootstrap test.

Relationship	Lower Bounds	Upper Bounds
H7. DBA → DBI → DBL		
Total Effect	0.363	0.582
Direct Effect	0.182	0.427
Indirect Effect	0.105	0.259
H8. DBA → DPQ → DBL		
Total Effect	0.361	0.576
Direct Effect	0.122	0.382
Indirect Effect	0.132	0.308

5. Discussion

This research's primary objective has been to examine how digital IMC strategies affect several aspects of brand equity and verify the interconnectedness among each of the destination brand equity dimensions. This study offered valuable insights on how to enhance destination brand equity by using a digital IMC approach. Moreover, this discovery offers significant insights into the intricacies of place branding and travelers' loyalty. The findings above possess significance from both theoretical and practical standpoints.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Typically, tourists are more likely to visit destinations they are familiar with and perceive as reliable. The recognition of branding's importance as an effective strategy for attracting visitors has emerged in response to increasing competition resulting from the lack of distinctiveness and differentiation among tourism products [102]. This research indicates that implementing digital IMC strategies across multiple online marketing platforms contributes to building and reinforcing brand equity among potential tourists through specific factors: awareness, image, perceived quality, and loyalty.

Firstly, the favorable impact of message consistency across internet platforms on destination brand equity in all dimensions is evident. Notably, the effect of consistency on brand awareness is more pronounced than on brand image. This suggests that while maintaining a unified message is critical for making the brand recognizable and memorable,

other elements may be necessary to shape a positive brand image effectively. Fostering positive impressions by linking multiple brand associations in customers' minds, ultimately aligns tourists with the destination brand. Tourist loyalty is built on perceived quality and brand image resulting from consistent messages about destination offerings and overall experiences, leading to positive attitudes toward the destination. The consistent delivery of messages across various digital platforms is theorized to reinforce brand perceptions and build a coherent brand narrative, thus supporting cognitive and affective brand dimensions. This finding extends existing brand management theories by integrating them with digital communication strategies, providing a contemporary lens through which brand consistency can be viewed.

Furthermore, the revelation that digital IMC interactivity significantly impacts destination brand equity in all dimensions introduces a nuanced understanding of the role of engagement in digital marketing. By enabling interactive communication and immersive experiences, digital IMC implementation enhances tourists' emotional attachment to a destination, positively impacting the destination's brand image and visitor expenditure. As stated by Keller [1], integrating interactive elements into IMC strategies effectively cultivates brand recognition, ensuring a destination remains highly visible in the minds of prospective tourists. Interactive IMC strategies enhance visitors' evaluations of a destination brand's quality, providing a competitive edge in the tourism industry. Theoretical frameworks that emphasize consumer engagement and interactive communication are validated, providing empirical backing to the proposition that interactivity is a cornerstone of effective digital marketing. Moreover, the effect of interactivity on brand awareness and brand image is more pronounced than on perceived quality, suggesting that while interactive communications significantly enhance recognition and positive perceptions of the brand, other factors may have a more significant impact on shaping the destination's perceived quality. The relatively higher coefficients for brand image and perceived quality suggest that interactivity is essential in influencing deeper consumer perceptions and evaluations of the brand.

Moreover, this study proposes and empirically examines an integrated model that explores the inter-relationships among various dimensions of destination brand equity, along with their comprehensive antecedents. The findings support the notion that enhancing brand image and perceived quality can magnify the loyalty benefits derived from brand awareness. Specifically, the mediating role of the brand image suggests that creating a robust and positive image of the destination can effectively convert awareness into loyal behavior. Similarly, perceived quality underscores consumers' perceptions of quality and is crucial in building loyalty. The results demonstrate a strong alignment between the proposed structural model and the collected data. Both mediating pathways are statistically significant, reinforcing the necessity of a comprehensive marketing communications approach that addresses multiple facets of the brand experience.

This research validates the theoretical premise that while impactful, brand awareness alone is insufficient to significantly enhance destination brand loyalty without the mediating effects of brand image and perceived quality. Previous research has pointed to a hierarchical structure regarding the significance of components associated with destination brand equity and their possible linkages to causality. Even though several empirical studies have been conducted to study the inter-relationships among various factors of brand equity, the cumulative influence of destination brand equity dimensions is relatively small. The finding of this research highlights the cognitive processes that visitors engage in to construct a favorable attitude towards the destination brand, ultimately resulting in enhancing loyalty. The present study contributes to expanding scholarly understanding by providing in-depth insights regarding the concept of destination brand equity through a comprehensive analysis of several dimensions.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings have a variety of significant consequences for destination organizations regarding their marketing strategies and public policies. On account of the positive effect of consistency on the associations, images, and perceived quality of the destination, in the progress of promoting destinations, organizations should take care to ensure that the promotional messages are disseminated across various media platforms and that the alignment and characterization of the destination are congruent with the specific marketing segmentation. It is essential to manage and integrate tourists' contact points with destination brands to provide a positive experience. Introducing interactive components into IMC approaches is the second stage with imperative necessity. Increasing the awareness of a destination, its image, and the perceived quality can be accomplished by developing immersive experiences, including tourists in dialogues, and utilizing digital platforms for interactive advertising.

Finally, to develop customer loyalty, destination marketers should primarily emphasize raising brand awareness of the destination. This is an essential component of efforts to generate customer loyalty. Variables such as forming a favorable brand image and improving perceived quality should be addressed in parallel with strategies aimed at growing brand awareness which act as the mediators among correlations between brand awareness and brand loyalty.

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions

The result verified the high influence of both digital IMC consistency and interactivity on destination brand equity, while interactivity is identified as playing a more significant impact in enhancing CBDDE than consistency. Consistent messaging aims to transition from a narrow focus on marketing communications to a comprehensive, organization-wide approach that encompasses all stakeholders and tourists, intending to foster engagement and cultivate relationships. By analyzing the current state of the digital media industry and forecasting its future development concerning tourists and marketing strategies, this study concludes that the digital IMC strategy is an actual stimulation provider to build and maintain destination brand equity through the lens of tourists' perspective. A deficiency in online platforms and customer engagement would result in some deficiencies within contemporary IMC, particularly given the crucial role that customers play in amplifying brand visibility.

The present study advances theoretical comprehension of the potential IMC within the tourism industry by emphasizing the mechanism involved in destination brand–customer relationship construction. Firstly, this research provides theoretical insights that illustrate the potent synergy between consistent brand messaging and interactive engagement, the antecedent roles of brand performance, and their pivotal impact on nurturing enduring relationships and bolstering destination brand outcomes. Additionally, by focusing on the tourist's perspective, this work provides empirical evidence regarding the significance of aligning digital IMC strategies with tourist preferences and behaviors. It is a trend that is crucial for destinations nurturing brand equity through understanding and catering to tourist expectations regarding consistent messaging and interactive experiences. Furthermore, this work provides a theoretical framework for assessing and understanding the influence of digital IMC on destination brand equity from tourists' perspective, which facilitates further empirical studies and practical applications in assessing and enhancing destination branding strategies in the digital media area.

However, this study also faced some limitations. Firstly, this research focuses on Chinese tourists, which leads to the lack of generalization of the result to other countries. Hence, replicating this research across a range of geographic regions and industries is imperative to bolster the internal validity of the findings and to establish a robust conceptual foundation for IMC across the entire organization. Moreover, this research offers initial insights into the interconnections between digital IMC and each dimension of CBDDE, which neglects other behavioral variables from tourists' perspectives. Thus, further research could

take into account consumer trust, satisfaction, or ICTs used as moderating variables that may affect how IMC strategy constructs tourists' perspective of destination brand equity.

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