


## Article

# Examining the Antecedents of Brand Engagement of Tourists Based on the Theory of Value Co-Creation

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Received: 13 February 2020; Accepted: 3 March 2020; Published: 4 March 2020



**Abstract:** Tourist engagement in marketing activities for destinations has been seen as a new driving force for the sustainable development of such destinations and as an effective way to improve their brand equity. Based on the theory of value co-creation and the theory of consumer-based brand equity for destinations, this paper examines the antecedents of brand engagement and the causal paths among them and compares the estimated values of different paths with brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality as the independent variables; brand value and brand trust as the mediating variables; and brand engagement as the dependent variable, taking Shandong Province as an example. The final results show that brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality are all key antecedents of brand engagement; however, they play different roles. The total effect of brand quality is the largest, the total effect of brand awareness follows, and the total effect of brand image is the smallest. Furthermore, the mediating effect of brand value is larger than the mediating effect of brand trust. The results provide empirical support for promoting the management of brand equity for similar destinations and encouraging tourists to participate in value co-creation activities.

**Keywords:** value co-creation; brand equity; brand engagement; tourist destination

## 1. Introduction

The importance of consumers in the consumption value chain has been increasing and, consequently, the boundaries among customers, agencies, and suppliers have gradually become blurred with the improvement of personalized and diversified consumer needs [1]. The new way that service suppliers and recipients jointly create value has replaced the traditional way that value is only created by the suppliers [1,2]. The customers have become value co-creators and decision-makers of services or products [2], which requires their positive engagement in consumption activities. At present, the idea of value co-creation has become a research hotspot in the field of marketing, which has reshaped the value chain and helped enterprises or destinations to gain competitive advantages [3,4] by attracting customers to participate in personalized product design and to share their experiences [5,6]. Hence, the study of engagement behavior, the external manifestation of the idea of value co-creation, has become a research hotspot, which includes employee engagement, customer (tourist) engagement, actor engagement, and peer engagement [7–10]. In the field of tourism research, many studies verified the importance of engagement behavior of tourists [11]. However, it is not difficult to find that the existing research mostly takes human behavior as the research content of engagement. Seldom papers pay attention to the value of brand engagement, although tourist engagement for destinations has been seen as a new driving force for the sustainable development of such destinations and an effective way to improve their brand equity [12–14].

As a dimension of brand equity, brand engagement is essential for the sustainable development of tourist destinations. Brand engagement emphasizes the reciprocity between brand and users [10] and comprehensively considers the pre-purchase behavior [15,16] and the post-purchase behavior [17], which puts forward a more comprehensive way to realize the sustainable development of destination brand. Existing research mostly discusses the positive influence of brand engagement on marketing performance of destinations [18], seldom tracking the antecedents of brand engagement and the causal paths among them, which is still a black box.

This paper innovatively proposes the antecedents of brand engagement, including brand image, brand awareness, brand quality, brand value, and brand trust, based on the theory of value co-creation and the theory of consumer-based brand equity for destinations. This paper also examines the causal paths among them with brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality as the independent variables; brand value and brand trust as the mediating variables; and brand engagement as the dependent variable, taking Shandong Province as an example.

The contributions of this paper are as follows: this study examines the antecedents of brand engagement and the causal paths among them and compares the estimated values of different paths, which enriches the methodology of the theory of brand equity for destinations and provides a refined research paradigm for the theory of value co-creation. This paper puts forward a new perspective by combining the two theories mentioned above, broadening existing theories [19–22]. This paper introduces a new perspective on the value co-creation of tourists, which expands the theory of destination marketing. From the perspective of value co-creation, this paper provides new guidance for the construction of destination brand equity.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a review of relevant papers on the theory of value co-creation and the theory of consumer-based brand equity for destinations. Section 3 introduces the sampling and questionnaire design. Section 4 includes the analysis results. Section 5 is the discussion and the conclusions and implications are drawn in Section 6.

## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

### 2.1. Theory of Value Co-Creation

The idea of value co-creation originated from the concept of value co-production in the field of marketing, which negated the traditional view that customers are only value users and proposed that the interactions between customers and enterprises are at the core of value creation [23].

Subsequent scholars have subdivided the study of value co-creation into two directions, namely service-oriented and customer-oriented [24,25], both of which emphasize the value of customer engagement in the activities of other market actors, including organizations, agents, platforms, and other consumers [20,21]. The value of tourist engagement in tourism activities is more obvious in the tourism industry. Hence, discussions have emerged on the proposition of value co-creation. The focuses have included conceptual change, antecedents and consequences, tactics for destinations, scale development, and qualitative case analyses [26–33]. Numerous studies have qualitatively discussed specific tourism activities, such as adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and sports tourism. Quantitative empirical studies are still in the initial stage. Meanwhile, although some previous studies have paid attention to the significance of value co-creation for destination management [34], few studies have analyzed brand equity from the perspective of value co-creation.

## 2.2. Consumer-Based Brand Equity for Destinations

Brand equity is a series of assets and liabilities linked with brand, brand name, and logo that can increase or decrease the value of products or services sold by enterprises [35], which was originated in the field of marketing in the 1980s [36]. Brand equity is the key factor for products or services to acquire competitive advantages, which is one of the most critical issue in the field of marketing management [37]. With increasing attention being paid to the consumers, the theory of consumer-based brand equity for destinations has been proposed and, subsequently, widely used in the field of destination marketing [19,22]. Consumer-based brand equity for destinations involves tourist's attitudes and emotions about destination marketing activities, based on their brand knowledge [38]. Scholars have discussed the dimensions and relationships of consumer-based brand equity for destinations, following which brand image, brand awareness, brand quality, brand value, brand trust, brand engagement, and so on have been introduced in related studies [17,19,39,40], which have been divided into three levels: cognitive, affective, and conative [41]. The cognitive level includes brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality; the affective level includes brand value and brand trust; and the conative level includes brand engagement. However, seldom papers track the causal paths among them [18].

## 2.3. Brand Image

Brand image involves a consumer's psychological perception of a specific brand [42], which has been seen as the key factor in decision-making and brand promotion activities for hotels, exhibitions, and destinations [43–48]. Destination image—the sum of a tourist's beliefs, thoughts, and impressions of a destination [49]—is the perception of a destination based a tourist's memory of and association with its features [50,51]. Destination image is often substantially assimilated as a destination brand image at a measurement level [52,53], which has been divided into two dimensions: cognitive image and affective image [54,55]. Cognitive image is the understanding of destination attributes, mainly including landscape, climate, accommodation facilities, restaurants, and historical and cultural attractions [56]. Affective image refers to tourist's affective feelings or reactions [55,57]. For convenience, some overall measurement indicators have been used in related studies [48], including self-perception value, the pursuit of consistent life expectations, and social advancement, because it is often too hard to measure all the dimensions of cognitive and affective image.

## 2.4. Brand Awareness

Brand awareness, as the antecedent of brand commitment and brand loyalty, reflects the weight of a brand in the minds of consumers [58]; as such, it plays an important role in brand equity building for destinations. Related studies have mostly deemed that brand recall and brand recognition are the two key elements of brand awareness, from the perspective of consumers [42,59]. Brand recall reflects a consumer's ability to retrieve brands from memory and the familiarity of the brand [60], including the ability to retrieve a brand from a similar class and to remember brand characteristics [61,62]. Brand recognition affects the probability of consumers buying products of a certain brand [63], which has often been measured by brand publicity and reputation [36,63,64].

## 2.5. Brand Quality

Brand quality for destinations consists of the special attributes of a location, such as attractions, facilities, services, and so on [65,66], which has an important influence on the revisit, word-of-mouth, and brand loyalty of tourists. Brand quality can be measured by some physical characteristics, such as infrastructure, human resources, the quality of the natural environment, and so on [67]. However, physical elements are only one aspect of brand quality [68]. Service quality and experience quality arise from the perspective of consumer perception [69,70], which are of great significance for building the competitiveness of destination brands.

## 2.6. Brand Value

Brand value originated in the field of marketing, includes monetary and non-monetary values [71–73], and involves consumer's general evaluation of the benefits and the cost of acquiring a product or service [74]. It can be difficult to measure brand value for destinations. Some studies have measured it from the perspective of tourism experience [75]. Different measurement dimensions, in terms of price value, quality value, social value, and affective value, have been developed for the brand value of destinations [76]. Furthermore, some scholars have put forward a multi-dimensional index to measure brand value, which improves the brand value system for destinations [77,78].

## 2.7. Brand Trust

Trust, first proposed by Deutsch [79], indicates that individuals make a specific choice, even though the ideal result may not happen. Subsequently, interpersonal trust, organizational trust, and brand trust have been put forward [80,81], which have received widespread attention [81,82]. Brand trust for destinations refers to a perceived state in which the tourists believe that visiting a destination is worth taking risks for [83]. Early scholars have measured brand trust by the single indicator of confidence degree [84]. However, brand trust is a combination of cognition, affection, and behavior. Measurement of brand trust should utilize a multidimensional method. With the refinement and depth of research, scholars have gradually proposed two-, three-, and multi-dimensional measurement models [85]. Three dimensions—brand honesty and goodness, brand ability, and overall brand trust—are widely recognized.

## 2.8. Brand Engagement

Brand engagement, derived from the idea of value co-creation, involves the interaction between customers or potential customers and brands and/or companies. Bolton [86] pointed that more attentions should be taken to brand engagement, which could optimize marketing performance [87,88]. Brand engagement usually involves the interactive behavior of customers after the purchase [89,90]. The value is often generated from interactive activities among various market actors, such as organizations, agents, platforms, and consumers [14]. Brand engagement has received extensive attention in the literature [91,92]. In terms of content, the related studies have mainly included pre-purchase behavior [15,16] and post-purchase behavior [17]. The pre-purchase engagement of tourists significantly affects their decision-making [93], such as making a customized route [29]. Post-purchase engagement could help destinations to improve their brand content, create added brand value, and attract potential tourists [90,94,95]. In terms of measurements, conscious concern, enthusiastic engagement, and social connections have been used [89,90,96]. On this basis, So et al. [97] summarized a five-dimensional indicator which has been widely recognized [98]. To avoid the difficulty in measurement and ensure the validity of measurement items, this study selected an indicator under each dimension to measure brand engagement combining the study of Keller [17].

## 2.9. Brand Image, Brand Awareness, Brand Quality and Brand Value

The impacts of brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality on brand value have been verified in existing research [99–102]. Wu et al. [103] found that brand image has a significant positive impact on brand value; that is, the better a consumer's perception of brand image, the higher their perception of brand value. Lai and Xu [104] proposed that, in the era of new media, information implantation technology improves the effect of brand marketing through enhancing brand awareness and brand value; that is, the higher a consumer's perception of brand awareness, the higher their perception of brand value. Furthermore, some scholars have concluded that there is a causal relationship between brand quality and brand value [105]; that is, the higher the brand quality, the higher the brand value. Therefore, the following hypotheses were put forward:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *A tourist's perception of brand image has a significant positive effect on their perception of brand value.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *A tourist's perception of brand awareness has a significant positive effect on their perception of brand value.*

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *A tourist's perception of brand quality has a significant positive effect on their perception of brand value.*

#### 2.10. Brand Image, Brand Awareness, Brand Quality, and Brand Trust

The impacts of brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality on brand trust have been verified in existing studies [106–108]. Some scholars have suggested that brand image is an important antecedent of brand trust [106,107]. A distinctive brand logo and brand image are the source of brand differentiation. In a fiercely competitive market, a distinctive brand image may strengthen the connection between a brand and the customer. The higher is the perception of brand image, the higher is the perception of brand trust [109]. Fan and Lin [110] found that a consumer's familiarity with a brand can strengthen their attachment, significantly affecting their perception of brand trust. The relationship between brand quality and brand trust has also been verified [108]. Tourists will trust a brand if they speak highly of its quality. Therefore, the following hypotheses were put forward:

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *A tourist's perception of brand image has a significant positive effect on their perception of brand trust.*

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** *A tourist's perception of brand awareness has a significant positive effect on their perception of brand trust.*

**Hypothesis 6 (H6).** *A tourist's perception of brand quality has a significant positive effect on their perception of brand trust.*

#### 2.11. Brand Value, Brand Trust, and Brand Engagement

The relationship between brand value and brand engagement needs more attention [3,5,17]. Guo and Du [111] found that brand value could promote consumer interaction with a brand and co-create the value of a consumer's experience, taking WeChat official accounts as an example, verifying the causal relationship between brand value and brand engagement. Zhang and Li [112] deemed that high-level brand trust could strengthen word-of-mouth communication and value co-creation behaviors. Therefore, the following hypotheses were put forward:

**Hypothesis 7 (H7).** *A tourist's perception of brand value has a significant positive effect on their perception of brand engagement.*

**Hypothesis 8 (H8).** *A tourist's perception of brand trust has a significant positive effect on their perception of brand engagement.*

#### 2.12. The Mediating Effect of Brand Value and Brand Trust

In the aspect of the mediating brand value, from the perspective of national and local product brand equity, Kwon [113] empirically found that brand value depends on consumer brand cognition. On this basis, some scholars have indicated the positive impact of brand value on brand loyalty [114,115]. In the aspect of mediating brand trust, most studies have focused on the promotion of brand trust to

enhance brand loyalty [116–118]. Lassoued and Hobbs [119] found that brand trust plays a mediating role through empirical research. Therefore, the following hypotheses were put forward:

**Hypothesis 9 (H9).** *A tourist's perception of brand value significantly mediates the relationship between brand image and brand engagement.*

**Hypothesis 10 (H10).** *A tourist's perception of brand value significantly mediates the relationship between brand awareness and brand engagement.*

**Hypothesis 11 (H11).** *A tourist's perception of brand value significantly mediates the relationship between brand quality and brand engagement.*

**Hypothesis 12 (H12).** *A tourist's perception of brand trust significantly mediates the relationship between brand image and brand engagement.*

**Hypothesis 13 (H13).** *A tourist's perception of brand trust significantly mediates the relationship between brand awareness and brand engagement.*

**Hypothesis 14 (H14).** *A tourist's perception of brand trust significantly mediates the relationship between brand quality and brand engagement.*

In summary, the study framework is shown in Figure 1.

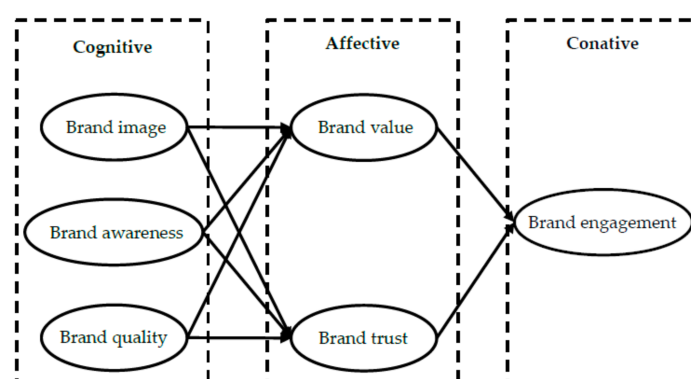


Figure 1. Study framework.

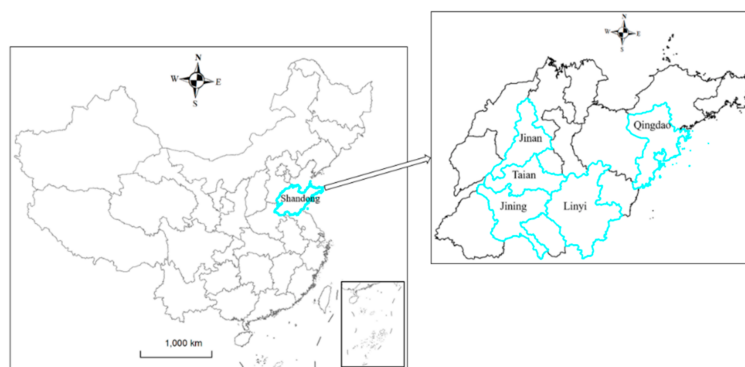
### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Sampling

We selected Shandong Province to conduct a continuous questionnaire survey from 1 September to 15 November 2015. Shandong Province started to build the tourism brand, “Friendly Shandong”, in 2008 spending billions of Chinese yuan. To ensure the interviewees were tourists visiting Shandong Province, the investigators firstly asked the question: “Are you a tourist to Shandong Province?” We only sent questionnaires to tourists. To ensure the respondents answered the questions properly, “Friendly Shandong” was introduced to them in the introduction of the questionnaires. In addition, the investigators were all trained to ensure the necessary explanation about “Friendly Shandong”. To ensure the randomness of sampling, we first randomly sent out paper questionnaires in five representative cities in Shandong Province, China: Jinan, Qingdao, Taian, Jining, and Linyi. All interviewees were tourists visiting Shandong Province (see Figure 2). Secondly, the emotional interference of the investigators was strictly prevented to ensure the objectivity of the data. Thirdly, unqualified questionnaires were excluded by setting reverse questions and examining the completeness of the questionnaires. In this study, 1000 questionnaires were distributed, and 782 questionnaires were



recovered. Finally, 665 valid questionnaires were obtained after eliminating the invalid questionnaires, with a recovery rate of 78.20% and an effective rate of 85.04%. The number of collected questionnaires was much greater than 10 times the number of indicators; thus, the minimum requirements for establishing an effective structural equation model were met [120–122]. Therefore, the number of samples obtained could well meet the needs of the study. The sample composition is shown in Table 1.



**Figure 2.** Sample locations.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Number (Percent%)				
Sex	Male 304 (45.71%)		Female 361 (54.29%)		
Education	High school or below 123 (18.50%)	Junior college 147 (22.11%)	Bachelor 244 (36.69%)	Master or above 151 (22.71%)	
Career	Student 182 (27.368%)	Civil servant 152 (22.857%)	Private employees 63 (9.474%)	Self-employed 102 (15.338%)	Others 166 (24.962%)
Monthly Income (yuan)	3000 or less 208 (31.278%)	3001–5000 329 (49.474%)	5001–8000 86 (12.932%)	8001–10,000 34 (5.113%)	10,000 or above 8 (1.203%)
Age	20 or below 26 (3.910%)	21–30 213 (32.030%)	31–40 288 (43.308%)	41–50 86 (12.932%)	51–60 52 (7.820%)
Annual trips	1 141 (21.203%)	2–3 184 (27.669%)	4–7 114 (17.143%)	8–10 72 (10.827%)	Above 10 154 (23.158%)

### 3.2. Questionnaire Design

In this study, the measurement items of each variable adopted a five-point Likert scale and were adapted according to the mature scale used by prior scholars. After consulting relevant experts in Shandong Province, the content of the questions was revised according to their suggestions. Furthermore, a small-scale pre-investigation was conducted in Jinan, which showed that the content validity of the questionnaire was reasonable. In the process of modeling, we only kept the questions with good fitting degree to ensure the accuracy of measurement. For example, there were five items to measure brand engagement, and only three of them were retained after factor rotation. Specific measurement indicators and the references are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The measurement indicators.

Dimension	Items	Reference
Brand image (DBI)	DBI1 This destination fits my personality	Boo and Busser [19] Lassar et al. [123] Sirgy et al. [124] Grace and O’Cass [125]
	DBI2 My friends would think highly of me if I visited this destination	
	DBI3 The image of this destination is consistent with my own self-image	
	DBI4 Visiting this destination reflects who I am	
Brand awareness ((DBA)	DBA1 This destination has a good name and reputation	Boo and Busser [19] Motameni and Shahrokhi [126] Oh [127]; Arnett et al. [128] Pappu and Quester [129] Yoo and Donthu [130] Kaplanidou and Vogt [131]
	DBA2 This destination is very famous	
	DBA3 The characteristics of this destination come to my mind quickly	
	DBA4 When I am thinking about touring, this destination comes to my mind immediately	
Brand quality (DBQ)	DBQ1 This destination provides tourism offerings of consistent quality	Boo and Busser [19] Aaker [132] Sweeney and Soutar [76] Dodds et al. [133];
	DBQ2 This destination provides quality experiences	
	DBQ3 From this destination’s offerings, I can expect superior performance	
	DBQ4 This destination performs better than other similar destinations	
Brand value (DBV)	DBV1 This destination has reasonable prices	Boo and Busser [19] Sweeney and Soutar [76] Lassar et al. [123] Dodds et al. [132] Ambler [134]
	DBV2 Considering what I would pay for a trip, I will get much more than my money’s worth by visiting this destination	
	DBV3 The costs of visiting this destination are a bargain, relative to the benefits I receive	
	DBV4 Visiting this destination is a good deal	
Brand trust (DBT)	DBT1 I can rely on this brand to solve service dissatisfaction	Delgadoballester [135] Han et al. [136]
	DBT2 This brand guarantees satisfaction	
	DBT3 I have confidence in this brand	
Brand engagement (DBE)	DBE1 I am proud to have others know I use this brand.	Keller [17] So et al. [97]
	DBE2 I like to visit the website for this brand	
	DBE3 Compared to other people, I closely follow news about this brand	

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Analysis of Normality and Common Method Bias

In this study, kurtosis and skewness tests were carried out to examine whether the data followed a normal distribution. The results showed that there was no deviation and the data were normally



distributed. Additionally, we used Harman's single factor test, the multitrait-multimethod model, the partial correlation method, and other methods to test the bias of the data [121]. The results showed that there was no common method bias in this study; thus, it was suitable for further analysis.

#### 4.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Although the indicators in this study were all from the scales of other studies, the applicability should be further tested, to be scientific [137,138]. Through exploratory factor analysis, we tested the validity of the data. Based on this, the principal component method was adopted for all the data, in order to perform factor rotation (see Table 3). The final results showed that KMO = 0.950 and  $p = 0.000$ , meaning the data were suitable for factor analysis. Factor rotation results showed that the measurement indicators of all variables were gathered. Hence, the data had good structural validity.

**Table 3.** Exploratory factor analysis matrix.

Indicators	Brand Image	Brand Awareness	Brand Quality	Brand Value	Brand Trust	Brand Engagement
DBI1	0.799	0.206	0.190	0.133	0.138	0.156
DBI2	0.788	0.271	0.234	0.147	0.153	0.135
DBI3	0.714	0.183	0.226	0.214	0.184	0.145
DBI4	0.858	0.182	0.166	0.210	0.149	0.138
DBA1	0.167	0.737	0.245	0.175	0.194	0.162
DBA2	0.276	0.708	0.220	0.277	0.126	0.114
DBA3	0.248	0.769	0.184	0.192	0.145	0.153
DBA4	0.196	0.714	0.215	0.211	0.080	0.234
DBQ1	0.213	0.268	0.767	0.212	0.116	0.184
DBQ2	0.279	0.216	0.718	0.222	0.230	0.152
DBQ3	0.252	0.279	0.714	0.237	0.242	0.127
DBQ4	0.181	0.177	0.784	0.198	0.249	0.079
DBV1	0.197	0.201	0.186	0.760	0.153	0.260
DBV2	0.227	0.278	0.256	0.740	0.118	0.250
DBV3	0.217	0.243	0.231	0.771	0.192	0.175
DBV4	0.128	0.164	0.174	0.852	0.145	0.122
DBT1	0.196	0.185	0.186	0.182	0.808	0.229
DBT2	0.204	0.182	0.204	0.164	0.806	0.224
DBT3	0.137	0.085	0.245	0.140	0.829	0.148
DBE1	0.219	0.296	0.212	0.379	0.185	0.693
DBE2	0.177	0.242	0.176	0.271	0.344	0.694
DBE3	0.238	0.203	0.142	0.239	0.293	0.773

#### 4.3. Reliability and Validity Analysis

In the reliability analysis, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was adopted as the indicator. The results showed that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of all variables were all greater than 0.8 (see Table 4), indicating the data had a good level of data consistency.

In the validity analysis, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to test the convergent and discrimination validity. In the test of convergent validity, the results showed that the standardized factor loading values were all greater than 0.7, the composite reliability values were all greater than 0.8, and the average variance extracted values were all greater than 0.6. Hence, the convergent validity of the data was good enough [139]. The root mean square of the average variance extracted value of every variable was greater than its correlation coefficients with other variables (see Table 5), meaning the discrimination validity of the data was good enough for further study [139].

**Table 4.** Reliability and Convergent Validity.

Variable	Indicators	SFL	SE	Cronbach's $\alpha$	C.R.	AVE
Brand Image	DBI1	0.832		0.909	0.913	0.725
	DBI2	0.872	0.036			
	DBI3	0.775	0.038			
	DBI4	0.920	0.033			
Brand Awareness	DBA1	0.782		0.873	0.874	0.634
	DBA2	0.812	0.046			
	DBA3	0.820	0.043			
	DBA4	0.771	0.045			
Brand Quality	DBQ1	0.833		0.903	0.903	0.700
	DBQ2	0.841	0.037			
	DBQ3	0.865	0.036			
	DBQ4	0.807	0.039			
Brand Value	DBV1	0.836		0.918	0.919	0.740
	DBV2	0.891	0.033			
	DBV3	0.882	0.033			
	DBV4	0.830	0.037			
Brand Trust	DBT1	0.898		0.899	0.900	0.751
	DBT2	0.893	0.030			
	DBT3	0.806	0.033			
Brand Engagement	DBE1	0.876		0.892	0.892	0.733
	DBE2	0.836	0.035			
	DBE3	0.856	0.035			

Note: SLF, standard factor loading; SE, standard error.

**Table 5.** Discrimination Validity.

Variable	Brand Image	Brand Awareness	Brand Quality	Brand Value	Brand Trust	Brand Engagement
Brand image	0.851					
Brand awareness	0.661 ***	0.796				
Brand quality	0.651 ***	0.725 ***	0.837			
Brand value	0.588 ***	0.694 ***	0.679 ***	0.860		
Brand Trust	0.535 ***	0.550 ***	0.641 ***	0.547 ***	0.867	
Brand Engagement	0.611 ***	0.713 ***	0.643 ***	0.752 ***	0.709 ***	0.856

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , the value on the diagonal represents the root mean square of AVE, and the correlation coefficients between variables are below the diagonal.

#### 4.4. Model Fit Analysis

AMOS22.0 software (International Business Machines Corporation, New York, NY, USA) was used to test the model fit (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** Model Fit Analysis.

Indicators	CMIN/DF	GFI	RMR	RMSEA	TLI
Value	2.752	0.934	0.026	0.051	0.966
Criterion	<3	>0.9	<0.08	<0.08	>0.9

Note: CMIN/DF is the minimum discrepancy divided by its degrees of freedom; GFI is goodness of fit index; RMR is root mean square residual; RMSEA is root mean square error of approximation; TLI is Tucker-Lewis coefficient.

The results demonstrated that all indicators met the criterion, indicating the model fit was good enough to accept the established model.

#### 4.5. Path Analysis

The results of the path analysis are shown in Table 7. The standardized path coefficient between brand image and brand value was 0.133 ( $p = 0.003$ ), which indicated that, in Shandong, a tourist's perception of brand image had a significant positive effect on their perception of brand value. Hence, the result supports H1. The standardized path coefficient between brand awareness and brand value was 0.393 ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicated that, in Shandong, a tourist's perception of brand awareness had a significant positive effect on their perception of brand value. Hence, the result supports H2. The standardized path coefficient between brand quality and brand value was 0.313 ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicated that, in Shandong, a tourist's perception of brand quality had a significant positive effect on their perception of brand value. Hence, the result supports H3. The standardized path coefficient between brand image and brand trust was 0.166 ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicated that, in Shandong, a tourist's perception of brand image had a significant positive effect on their perception of brand trust. Hence, the result supports H4. The standardized path coefficient between brand awareness and brand trust was 0.140 ( $p = 0.019$ ), which indicated that, in Shandong, a tourist's perception of brand awareness had a significant positive effect on their perception of brand trust. Hence, the result supports H5. The standardized path coefficient between brand quality and brand trust was 0.436 ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicated that, in Shandong, a tourist's perception of brand quality had a significant positive effect on their perception of brand trust. Hence, the result supports H6. The standardized path coefficient between brand value and brand engagement was 0.534 ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicated that, in Shandong, a tourist's perception of brand value had a significant positive effect on their perception of brand engagement. Hence, the result supports H7. The standardized path coefficient between brand trust and brand engagement was 0.433 ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicated that, in Shandong, a tourist's perception of brand trust had a significant positive effect on their perception of brand engagement. Hence, the result supports H8. The final results are shown in Figure 3.

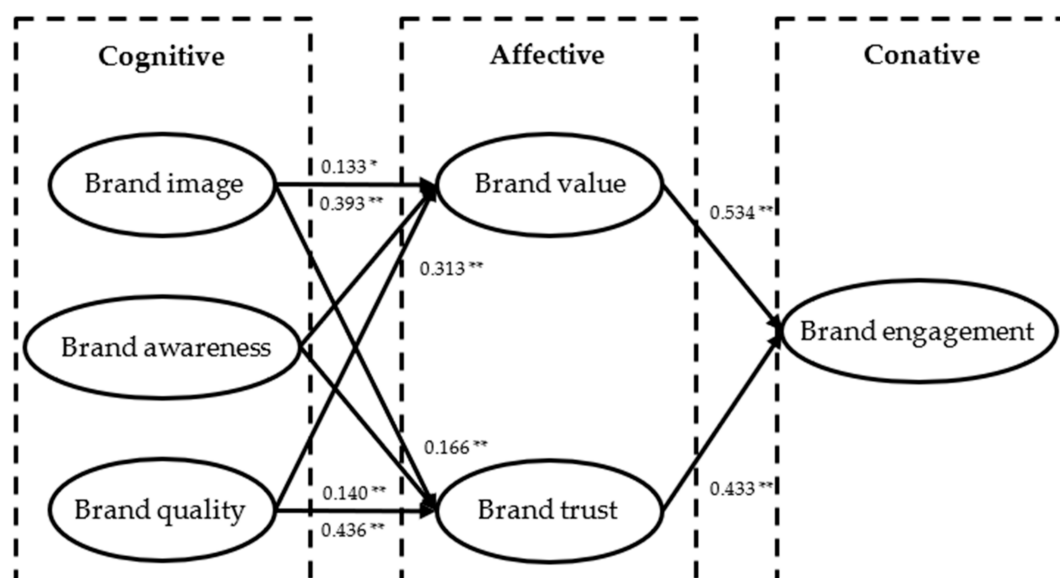


Figure 3. Analysis Results. Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 7. Path Analysis.

Path	Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error	T value	p
Brand value←Brand image (H1)	0.125	0.133	0.043	2.951	0.003 **
Brand value←Brand awareness(H2)	0.400	0.393	0.057	7.065	***
Brand value←Brand quality (H3)	0.314	0.313	0.053	5.958	***
Brand trust←Brand image (H4)	0.177	0.166	0.053	3.317	***
Brand trust←Brand awareness (H5)	0.161	0.140	0.068	2.350	0.019 *
Brand trust←Brand quality (H6)	0.496	0.436	0.067	7.435	***
Brand engagement←Brand value (H7)	0.420	0.534	0.029	14.630	***
Brand engagement←Brand trust (H8)	0.302	0.433	0.024	12.483	***

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

#### 4.6. Mediating Effect Analysis

MPLUS7.4 software (Muthén and Muthén, Los Angeles, CA, USA) was used to test the mediating effects of brand value and brand trust. This study adopted the bias-corrected method and percentile method in bootstrapping to jointly test the significance of the mediating effect. MPLUS7.4 software also provides the function that every specific path can be estimated (i.e., brand image → brand value → brand engagement). Hence, we could figure out which estimated path value was larger or smaller. The specific estimated path values are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Mediating Effect.

Path	Coefficient	Standard Error	T Value	p Value	Bootstrapping			
					Bias-Corrected 95% CI		Percentile 95% CI	
					Minimum	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum
E1	0.053	0.018	2.887	0.004 **	0.018	0.094	0.015	0.090
E2	0.053	0.017	3.202	0.001 **	0.013	0.099	0.010	0.097
E3	0.168	0.026	6.380	***	0.106	0.252	0.097	0.240
E4	0.048	0.021	2.294	0.022 *	0.004	0.099	0.001	0.096
E5	0.132	0.024	5.593	***	0.085	0.190	0.081	0.184
E6	0.150	0.023	6.481	***	0.101	0.203	0.099	0.200
E7	0.106	0.025	4.230	***	0.044	0.172	0.043	0.169
E8	0.217	0.034	6.350	***	0.134	0.307	0.131	0.302
E9	0.282	0.033	8.605	***	0.210	0.360	0.207	0.356
E10	0.353	0.042	8.492	***	0.277	0.441	0.532	0.677
E11	0.251	0.030	8.320	***	0.193	0.311	0.015	0.090
E12	0.604	0.030	20.047	***	0.535	0.679	0.010	0.097

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; E1 = DBI → DBV → DBE; E2 = DBI → DBT → DBE; E3 = DBA → DBV → DBE; E4 = DBA → DBT → DBE; E5 = DBQ → DBV → DBE; E6 = DBQ → DBT → DBE; E7 (the total effect of DBI) = E1 + E2; E8 (the total effect of DBA) = E3 + E4; E9 (the total effect of DBQ) = E5 + E6; E10 (the mediating effect of DBV) = E1 + E3 + E5; E11 (the mediating effect of DBT) = E2 + E4 + E6; E12 (total effect) = E7 + E8 + E9.

According to Table 8, the confidence intervals of all paths, by the test of both methods in bootstrapping, do not contain 0, which indicated that all the mediating effects are significant. Hence, the results support hypotheses H9–H14. Comparing the mediating effects of brand value and brand trust, the overall mediating effect was 0.604 ( $p < 0.001$ ), and the mediating effect of brand value (0.353,  $p < 0.001$ ) was larger than the mediating effect of brand trust (0.251,  $p < 0.001$ ). Comparing the estimated path values of brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality, the total effect of brand quality was the largest (0.282,  $p < 0.001$ ), the total effect of brand awareness was the next largest (0.251,  $p < 0.001$ ), and the total effect of brand image was the smallest (0.106,  $p < 0.001$ ). From the composition of the total effect of brand image, the estimated path value of brand image → brand value → brand engagement was 0.053 (50.00%) and the estimated path value of brand image → brand trust → brand engagement was 0.053 (50.00%); that is, brand value and brand trust played an equally important role. From the composition of the total effect of brand awareness, the estimated path value of brand awareness → brand value → brand engagement was 0.168 (77.42%) and the estimated path value of

brand awareness → brand trust → brand engagement was 0.048 (22.12%); that is, brand value played a more important role than brand trust. From the composition of the total effect of brand quality, the estimated path value of brand quality → brand value → brand engagement was 0.132 (46.81%) and the estimated path value of brand quality → brand trust → brand engagement was 0.150 (53.19%); that is, brand trust played a slightly more important role than brand value.

## 5. Discussion

In this study, we detailed and examined the antecedents of brand engagement and the causal paths among them. Although brand engagement is the key element of brand equity, few papers have focused on the relationships between brand engagement and other variables, which needs much more attention [17]. The previous studies have only roughly discussed brand engagement for destinations [53]. The model in this study includes three independent variables: brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality; two mediating variables: brand value and brand trust; and one dependent variable: brand engagement. Based on the theory of value co-creation and the theory of consumer-based brand equity for destinations [19–22], this study examined the antecedents of brand engagement and verified the associated mechanisms. The new perspective, obtained by combining the two theories above, has shed light on building brand equity for destinations from the perspective of value co-creation, which broadens the existing theories [19–22], and points out the directions for the next steps. Exploring how to encourage tourists to participate in destination management activities through a quantitative method is an effective way to improve brand equity for destinations.

The three independent variables all had significant, but different, effects on brand engagement. The paths of brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality on brand engagement were all significant, which is consistent with previous studies [17,100,105]. The effect of brand quality was the largest and the effect of brand image is the smallest; that is, for Shandong Province, improving the quality of tourism services is the best method to attract tourists to participate in value co-creation activities for destinations. “Friendly Shandong”, as the most valuable destination brand in China, needs to pay more attention to comprehensively improving its service quality to enhance the level of tourist participation in value co-creation. Brand awareness also plays an important role in attracting tourists to participate in value co-creation activities. Tourists may want to share their travel experiences with others, due to the popularity of “Friendly Shandong”. Hence, adopting marketing strategies to maintain the popularity of a destination is essential in improving brand equity for destinations. Brand images play the smallest role, which means that, although image matters, its contribution to value co-creation for destinations is limited. Overall, the results provide empirical support for promoting the management of brand equity for similar destinations and encouraging tourists to participate in value co-creation activities, such as sharing travel experiences and recommending travel routes.

The mediating effects of brand value (0.353, 58.44%) were larger than the mediating effects of brand trust (0.251, 41.56%), which is similar to the results of a previous study [140]. Overall, tourists pay more attention to brand value when participating in activities of value co-creation for destinations; that is, the managers and operators of tourist destinations should emphasize the importance of enhancing the internal brand value. The effects of brand image on brand engagement (from the specific segmentation path of brand image on brand engagement) brand value, and brand trust are equally important. From the specific segmentation path of brand awareness on brand engagement, brand value (0.168, 77.42%) played a leading role; thus, destinations should stress their value when attempting to expand their popularity through marketing activities, especially for famous destinations such as Shandong, which will enhance the effectiveness of their marketing activities. From the specific segmentation path of brand quality on brand quality, brand trust (0.150, 53.19%) was a little more important than brand value (0.132, 46.81%). This result shows that the role of building a trust mechanism for tourists by improving the tourism service level cannot be ignored, and that not only the value of destinations is important; that is, the destinations should try to enhance tourist trust in them, which will attract tourists to participate in value co-creation activities.

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

### 6.1. Conclusions

Based on the theory of value co-creation and the theory of consumer-based brand equity for destinations, this study examined the antecedents of brand engagement and the causal paths among them, with brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality as the independent variables; brand value and brand trust as the mediating variables; and brand engagement as the dependent variable. The conclusions are as follows:

Brand image, brand awareness, and brand quality were all found to be key antecedents of brand engagement but played different roles. The total effect of brand quality was the largest, the total effect of brand awareness was next, and the total effect of brand image was the smallest ( $0.106, p < 0.001$ ). The mediating effect of brand value was larger than the mediating effects of brand trust; however, both were essential in different specific segmentation paths. The results shed light on the theory of value co-creation [20,21] and the theory of consumer-based brand equity for destinations [19,22]. Furthermore, the results provide empirical support for promoting the management of brand equity for similar destinations and encouraging tourists to participate in value co-creation activities.

### 6.2. Theoretical Implications

Firstly, the study initially examined the antecedents of brand engagement and the casual paths among them. At present, the theory of brand equity for destinations has presented a generalization trend [141]. Most scholars have discussed the causal relationship between relevant variables in different situations, but few have paid attention to their specific internal mechanisms and estimated values [142].

Secondly, the study put forward a new research perspective, combining the two theories of brand equity and value co-creation above through taking brand engagement variable as the bridge, which broadens the existing theories [19–22] and points out directions for the next steps.

Thirdly, the study established a clear hierarchical relationship for brand image, brand awareness, brand quality, brand value, brand trust, and brand engagement, through the framework of cognitive–affective–conative. In this study, we discussed the variables above and the causal paths among them, and compared the estimated value of different paths, which enriches the methodology of the theory of brand equity for destinations and provides a refined research paradigm.

Fourthly, this study introduced a new perspective of value co-creation of tourists, which expands the theory of destination marketing: tourists are not only buyers of value, but also creators of value.

### 6.3. Practical Implications

The study proposes comprehensive practical paths for destinations to promote tourists to participate in brand value co-creation activities. The destinations should stress the importance of brand quality, brand awareness and brand image, especially brand quality, which is the most important factor to determine the level of tourists' brand engagement. Hence, the destinations need to adopt comprehensive quality improvement strategies through the cooperation among the native government, scenic spots, and agencies. The native government should build a convenient tourism transportation network, optimize tourism traffic service management, and promote the full coverage of smart tourism. The scenic spots should comprehensively improve the convenience and comfort of tourists, strengthen the communication with tourists, and pay attention to the unsatisfied behaviors in time. The agencies should provide comprehensive and accurate tourism information for the tourists.

The study provides a practical path for the destinations that expect to improve brand value. Both brand quality and brand awareness are essential. In addition to the above brand quality improvement strategies, the destinations could enhance their brand value via various brand marketing activities, especially new media marketing activities, which will improve the brand awareness. Meanwhile, the study also verified that the above brand quality improvement strategies are helpful to enhance tourists' trust in the destinations.



From the perspective of brand equity, this study provides new guidance for the construction of dominant destination brand equity. Traditional destination-oriented marketing methods focus on what kind of resources or services the tourist destination can provide. However, in the era of mobile Internet, the relationship between market demand and product design has become closer and tourists are becoming the necessary elements of value co-creation activities. Hence, managers and operators should adopt proper empowerment tactics to encourage more tourists to participate in value co-creation activities, such as designing routes, creative solicitation for destination brand activities, etc.

Moreover, from the perspective of building trust, the destination should establish an ecological chain of interests with destinations and tourists, constructing a “pulling force” mechanism dominated by brand equity components, such as image, quality, and awareness, and supporting by a “pushing force” represented by tourist’s own interests and active participation in value co-creation.

#### 6.4. Limitations and Further Research

There were some limitations in this study. The results of this study need further verification in other provinces in China to test its robustness. Furthermore, the convenient sampling method was adopted in this study because Shandong Province covers an area of more than 158,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the findings need further verification. This study needs to be further deepened. Firstly, we will further study brand engagement from different segmentation dimensions. Brand engagement is a complex concept with multiple dimensions. The mechanism of different dimensions may be different. We will study the antecedents and consequences of each subdivision dimension. Secondly, we will combine some new marketing channels to study the brand engagement behavior of tourists. For example, we will further study the value co-creation behavior of tourists based on Tik Tok, a very popular short video APP.

**Author Contributions:** F.X. and S.L. designed the research, analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript; S.L. and Y.B. modified the manuscript; and F.X., S.L., and Y.B. carried out the fieldwork and collected the data. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by NSSFC (grant number 15BMZ052) and Shandong University Multidisciplinary Research and Innovation Team of Young Scholars (grant number 2020QNQT019).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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