

Article

# Towards a Creative MICE Tourism Destination Branding Model: Integrating Heritage Tourism in New Orleans, USA

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**Abstract:** MICE tourism had become a significant development tool for local economies before the COVID-19 outbreak. An effective destination brand is one way in which MICE stakeholders can work together to redesign and rebrand MICE tourism in the post-pandemic times. This study argues that heritage resources at a MICE destination add to the attractiveness of the business destination brand. This study proposes a Creative MICE Destination Branding Model (CMDBM) to examine co-created destination branding. The study shows that the core component of the CMDBM is based on MICE travelers' evaluations of the destination's potential to build brand equity by integrating its cultural/heritage resources as value-added attractions. The proposed CMDBM, amended based on the study results, indicates that the significance of the destination brand experience is enhanced because of cultural experiences and the support of local heritage institutions.

**Keywords:** MICE tourism; heritage tourism; destination branding; co-creation



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## 1. Introduction

Destinations are the primary focus of analysis in tourism research [1,2]. They are geographical areas that have political and legislative frameworks for tourism marketing and planning [3]. Tourism products and services comprise a large part of the destination brand or image. Morgan, Pritchard and Pride [4] indicate that destinations have emerged as the leading scale of branding in the travel industry. Destinations are also a concept "which can be interpreted subjectively by consumers, depending, amongst other things, on their travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit, educational level and past experience" [5] (p. 97). Because of increasing competition, there is a need for creative destination branding based on innovative tourism and competitive advantages.

Brands define the future potential of a destination [6]. In fact, in an increasingly competitive climate, branding can help identify, delineate and differentiate one destination from others [7]. Branding helps create a positive image that will influence consumers' destination choices [5] and build emotional links with visitors [4]. It is important for destinations to rebrand themselves periodically as their tourism offerings change. Rebranding means the process of changing an existing brand or building a new or updated brand, creating an opportunity for a destination to embrace a new message or position, enabling it to reach new markets and attract a growing clientele [8]. Jesca, Kumbirai and Brighton [9] describe destination rebranding as the creation of a new name, term, symbol, design or combination of them with the intention of developing a new position in the minds of visitors. Rebranding is not always needed because of a transition to the next life cycle stage. Destinations are impacted by several unpredictable or predictable macro-environmental factors, such as competition or natural, social, economic and political events. Although competitor analysis is part of a destination's strategic plan, crises, such as pandemics, are often not considered when developing a branding strategy. This is a shortcoming that can have disastrous effects

on all stakeholders in a region. This issue has become more evident at the time of writing, as worldwide destinations struggle to deal with the effects of COVID-19.

For the purpose of this study, key terms are defined as follows. MICE tourism is defined as tourism that is based on meetings, incentives, conventions (or conferences) and exhibitions. MICE travelers are people who undertake personal or employer funded trips to attend meeting, incentives, conventions and exhibitions in their home countries or overseas [10]. MICE organizations are associations, meeting planners, convention centers and other event venues. Heritage tourism is defined as people visiting, observing or experiencing heritage attractions, historical resources, living culture or contemporary arts [11]. Heritage institutions refer to museums, historic sites, tourist attractions and other organizations that operate or manage cultural resources. Host destination organizations refer to Destination Management/Marketing Organizations (DMOs), Convention and Visitor Bureaus (CVBs), cities and official tourism agencies. Destination marketing/branding refers to activities that identify and differentiate places from alternative destinations in the minds of the target market. It makes the destination more distinctive and attractive and can create a positive image that influences consumer destination choices and builds emotional links with visitors [4,6,12]. Creative tourism refers to “travel directed toward an engaged and authentic experience, with participative learning in the arts, heritage, or special character of a place, and it provides a connection with those who reside in this place and create this living culture” [13] (p. 3). Co-creation is “an interactive, creative and social process between stakeholders that is initiated by the firm” [14] (p. 4) in the value creation process.

MICE was a booming tourism sector in pre-pandemic times [15] and an extremely lucrative form of tourism in key urban destinations [16]. Many destinations have considered MICE events image-makers of modern tourism because they emphasize a locality’s most attractive recreational, natural and cultural features.

Creative tourism in the context of destination branding is associated with synergizing the self-image of a tourist with the creative manner with which a destination brands itself [17]. Stipanovic and Rudan [18] write that “creativity in tourism development can be interpreted through a whole integrated series of different elements of both the supply and the demand that encompasses the totality and complexity of the destination’s perception” [18] (p. 507). As creativity is essentially about adding something novel to current tourism products, it refers to innovativeness on the part of a destination to stay unique [17,19]. In other words, “a creative destination is able to generate profit from innovation, culture, research and artistic production, and thus strengthen its own identity capital” [18] (p. 507). Co-creative tourism, on the other hand, extends the notion of creative tourism by developing synergistic experiences between different stakeholders and tourists and simultaneously (or in a planned manner) between the tourists and the key attraction of interest. It is about facilitating added value experiences where the tourists, particularly, feel empowered. This view is supported by authors [20] who contend that “co-creation centralizes tourists’ role in the creation of value that results from the interaction with other destination stakeholders and the physical environment” [20] (p. 1). The intention is to jointly generate enriching and interactive experiences. In a nutshell, co-creative tourism differs from the notion of creative tourism.

Creative tourism suggests a level of co-creation, or co-makership between different stakeholders to offer highly valued experiences [21]. Synergies and co-creation among different destination attractions have worked to promote distinctiveness and reciprocal collaboration. This study proposes a co-created destination branding model to examine place branding in the context of MICE tourism. It is aimed specifically at synergizing cultural heritage offerings as an important ancillary attraction that adds appeal to a MICE destination and argues that the future of MICE tourism in a competitive environment will become reliant on co-created offerings between stakeholders by adding value to the MICE experience.

These efforts should focus on producing sustained benefits for the host destination, such as co-creation opportunities between stakeholders, economic benefits for residents, community empowerment and enhancement of local pride. In summary, the aim of this study is to address the following research question: how can a destination design co-created brands via collaboration between key stakeholders through a crossover strategy by integrating other forms of tourism into creative tourism products. This study focuses on co-creation through cultural heritage resources at a MICE tourism destination.

## 2. Literature Review

MICE tourism is a lucrative business, which has stimulated stiff competition between destinations [22]. The MICE sector is an important contributor to destination image at regional and national levels [23]. Including MICE activities, business travel has long been a focus of growth by public agencies and the tourism industry [24], because business travelers are known to be higher spenders than leisure travelers [25]. MICE tourism is also desirable because it can extend the tourism season far beyond the traditional holiday peaks and tourism amenities can be expanded by developing exhibition and conference facilities. A co-created MICE branding strategy can support complimentary sectors to benefit local residents and expand a destination's tourism portfolio [24]. During times of crisis, innovation in the recovery phase is required to bring business tourism back [26].

The role of stakeholders in tourism has been well researched [27,28], with collaboration between stakeholders being emphasized as critical to tourism's success [29–33]. Many different stakeholders are involved in managing, planning and marketing MICE destinations [34]. One of the most salient challenges for MICE destinations is to bring stakeholders together in a spirit of cooperation rather than competition and to pool resources to develop an exclusive marketing mix [33,35]. Destination branding as a collaborative process is critical.

Stakeholder collaboration in creating a destination brand has been associated with promoting positive destination brand equity [36,37]. In applying stakeholder theory to MICE tourism, successful business events can only occur through good communication between key stakeholders and managing organizations [38]. Stakeholder theory requires managers to consider all relevant role players in their operational settings and ensure the involvement of these players in building ethical, reasonable and successful relationships [28,39–43]. For instance, successful synergies between MICE events and a destination's cultural heritage institutions have been reported by a handful of studies [44–46].

### 2.1. Destination Branding for MICE Tourism with Cultural Heritage Institutions

A brand builds on destination characteristics once a unique image emerges that is different from competitors [47]. Typically, positive destination images are related to features such as heritage and culture, the character of the local people, associations with famous people and capital city or international city status [48]. Campelo, Aitken, Thyne and Gnoth [49] stress three important aspects of a destination branding strategy: recognizing the cultural characteristics of the place, understanding the people who live in that place and appreciating how a shared sense of place is constituted and experienced. When creating a destination brand, it is important to understand the nature of place identity and to recognize the core attributes that can help define a destination's character [49]. Destination branding includes an amalgamation of services with local stakeholders [50,51], which meaningfully improves the quality of the experience [52].

By focusing on other tourism assets (e.g., heritage) as supporting attractions that lend added value to the destination, creative MICE tourism can enhance a business destination's portfolio and give it a competitive edge over other MICE destinations. This study focuses on co-created synergies between MICE tourism and heritage tourism in a popular business destination. Co-creation will continue to be an emerging trend and will stress synergies between key stakeholders of popular forms of tourism to enhance a destination's brand value. Recognizing the cultural characteristics of a place and understanding its core values and the people who live there are the principal parts of a destination branding strategy [49].

## 2.2. Frameworks for Destination Branding

Destination branding strategies typically adopt corporate branding techniques and models [53–55]. A few theoretical models and conceptualizations of destination branding have been developed to integrate the concepts of branding and destination image. Hankinson's [56] (pp. 110–111) framework is built around the concept of brand networks in which place branding performs four main functions: brands as communicators, where brands "represent a mark of ownership, and a means of product differentiation manifested in legally protected names, logos, and trademarks"; brands as perceptual entities that "appeal to the consumer senses, reasons, and emotions"; brands as value enhancers, which "has led to the concept of brand equity"; brands as relationships, where "the brand is construed as having a personality that enables it to form a relationship with the consumer." Hankinson's [56] model positions place as "relational brand networks" in which the place brand is represented by a core brand and four categories of brand relationships (consumer relationships, primary service relationships, brand infrastructure relationships and media relationships).

Cai [57] devised another model of place branding, which builds upon his earlier work, emphasizing place identity more. With his revised model, Cai emphasizes community-based tourism branding, underscoring the significance of stakeholder involvement and their long-term relationships and interdependences. Various stakeholders and their main roles in place branding are marked at all stages of brand development. Likewise, Konecnik [58] indicates that place branding—as a strategic platform for marketing—should derive from the ideas of destination stakeholders and a mutually supportive long-term relationship among all players is necessary [59]. Many place-branding studies address the place image and some argue for the need to adopt a broader perspective on place brands from public policy, commercial, cultural and historical perspectives, even beyond tourist attractions [55,60].

Another model worthy of note is presented by García et al. [7], who developed a destination-branding model based on stakeholders' interests. Their index measures the success of destination branding and is based on similarities and differences between stakeholders. It provides a practical evaluation of the destination brand's degree of success and confirms differences among stakeholders. They warn against the risks of a traditional strategy that focuses only on visitors, overlooking the objectives of local people and entrepreneurs. Cai's [57] work inspires the idea of co-creation in destination branding, especially with the local community and visitors as co-creators.

Berry's [61] service-branding model derives from the field of services marketing. García et al. [7] utilize Berry's [61] model in considering the destination's triple stakeholders (i.e., entrepreneurs, local people and visitors) concept to highlight the importance of working cooperatively on brand creation, brand awareness, brand meaning and brand equity with tourists and destination residents. In the case of destination brands, García et al. [7] claim that brand value based on stakeholder input is more appropriate than the typical practice of basing decisions only on the visitors' perceptions. The main challenge with place brands is coordinating the large number of influential stakeholders [5,54,62].

Numerous tourism studies employ customer-based approaches to understanding consumers' brand perceptions [63–66]. These studies employ Aaker's [67] and Keller's [68] customer-based brand equity (CBBE) concepts. A few studies consider CBBE measurements in the context of tourist destinations [69–73]. Yang, Liu and Li [73] examine the impact of customer experience on CBBE for tourist destinations and confirm the structure of destination brand equity. Dedeoğlu et al. [71] develop a more comprehensive customer-oriented destination brand equity model compared with those in previous studies. They confirm that destination brand awareness affects brand personality, and brand personality affects brand equity in a positive and significant way, respectively. In addition, Chekalina et al. [70] focus on destination brand equity, integrating destination resources, value in use and value for money into the CBBE theory.

A destination's selected brand (DB) refers to the brand message that indicates the name, logo and visual representation the destination desires to promote [61]. DB is considered a core element of communicating a destination's identity, which expands brand awareness and increases its appeal [61,67,68,74]. Destination Brand Awareness (DBA) measures the ability to recognize and recall a brand [61,74]. Brand awareness represents the strength of the brand's presence in the mind of the target audience [67]. In addition, destination marketing aims to raise DBA by creating a unique brand [75]. Destination Brand Experience (DBExp) is the primary driver of brand equity [61]. The concept of "brand" stresses the emotional benefits to consumers through purchase experiences [76–78]. Moreover, it has been suggested that the tourist experience, which was influenced by destination image and performance, can be the core structure for building destination brands [5,79–81]. Brand experiences involve sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioral responses as a result of particular brand stimuli [82]. Barnes et al. [3] capture these four dimensions of DBExp and suggest that DBExp affects future oriented decision making and is a significant determinant of visitor outcomes (specifically satisfaction), intention to revisit and intention to recommend. One brand can be differentiated from others by using traits that consumers associate with human personality characteristics [67]. This is referred to as brand meaning, which describes the stakeholder's perception, concept or impression of the brand [61,74]. Similar to Aaker, in the tourism sector, Ekinci and Hosany [83] define a Destination's Brand Personality (DBP) as a set of human characteristics associated with a destination. Personality traits may be associated with a destination through contact with local people or through the destination image and indirectly attribute to the destination through marketing strategies [36]. In tourism, brand image is considered a main dimension of brand equity [37,84]. Brand image is the perceptions and beliefs that consumers attach to specific brands [85–87]. Cai [36] similarly describes the image of DB as tourists' perceptions about the destination; this plays a prominent role in tourists' destination choices and future behavioral intentions [88]. Destination Brand Equity (DBE) is the real and perceived assets and liabilities associated with the brand [89]. It is the increased value added to a product by its brand name [90] and it is an important part of a destination's competitive advantage [89]. Brand loyalty is the core of brand equity and indicates the attachment a consumer has to a brand and his/her commitment to repurchase or recommend [89,91]. Brand quality, or the perception of overall quality of a product or service, is another dimension of a destination's brand equity [37,86] and entails people's perceptions of the quality of attributes of a destination brand [92]. All these components are crucial for branding/rebranding a MICE destination. Drawing from these principles, a modified version of the destination-branding model is presented below, focusing on promoting and developing a new version of a MICE tourism destination.

### 2.3. Proposed Model of Creative MICE Tourism Destination Branding

This study proposes a modified version of Garcia et al.'s [7] model to examine co-created destination branding in the context of MICE tourism, supplemented by heritage tourism adding appeal to the destination. In this study, a Destination's Brand (DB), Destination Brand Awareness (DBA), Destination Brand Experience (DBExp), Destination Brand Personality (DBP) and Destination Brand Equity (DBE) are considered.

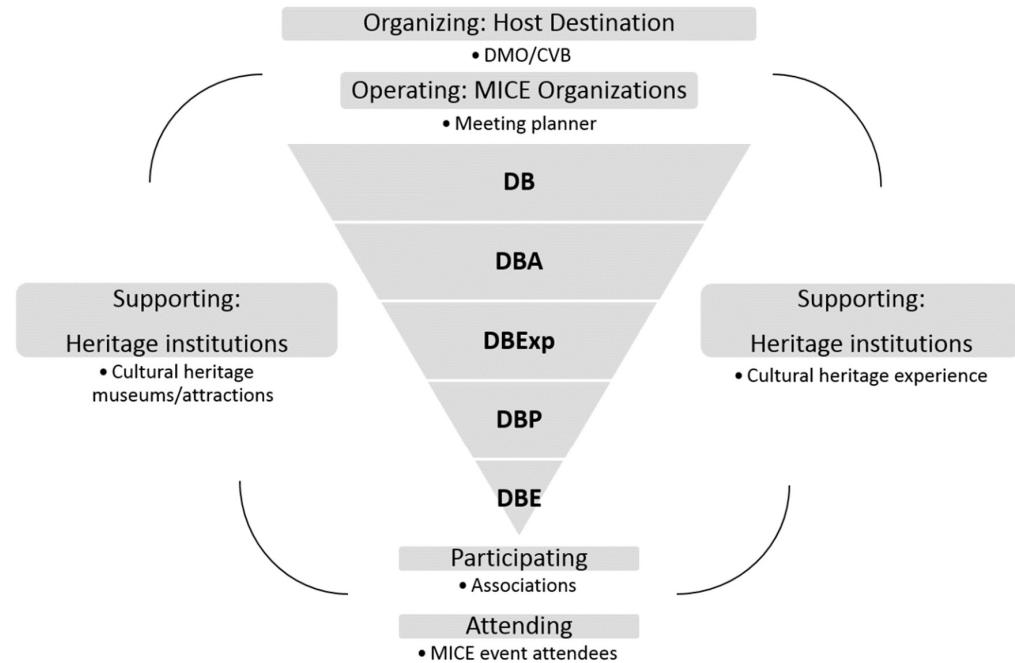
This study presents a typology of key stakeholders in creative MICE tourism to build a synergistic relationship with heritage tourism. Different forms of tourism, or types of tourism assets, can enhance a destination's appeal by offering a mixed and synergistic tourism product. Table 1 shows a general stakeholder typology that considers creative MICE tourism's strategic links with heritage or cultural tourism. As previously indicated, MICE travelers represent the main stakeholder group, with heritage institutions representing a supporting stakeholder group in support of the co-creation of creative MICE tourism.

**Table 1.** Stakeholder typology of creative MICE tourism (links with heritage tourism).

Stakeholder Categories	Stakeholder Roles within Categories
Organizing	DMOs, CVBs
Operating	Meeting planners
Facilitating	Convention center and venues
Participating	Associations
Attending	MICE travelers, MICE event attendees
Supporting	Heritage institution and host community
Sponsoring	Government, civic organizations, funders and sponsors

(Adapted from Todd, Leask and Ensor [93]).

Figure 1 presents the Creative MICE Tourism Destination Branding Model (CMDBM) used in this study. In the preliminary stage, the study uses a hypothetical example of a destination that has an established MICE tourism brand, together with heritage offerings, to discuss the application of this model. The proposed CMDBM model explains that a host destination represented by a DMO or CVB initiates the creative MICE tourism destination brand working with MICE organizations, such as meeting planners and convention centers. To build co-created synergies with heritage tourism, the new DB in each stage considers the cultural resources in the destination. This model is designed to provide value to MICE tourists and to enhance a destination's brand equity.

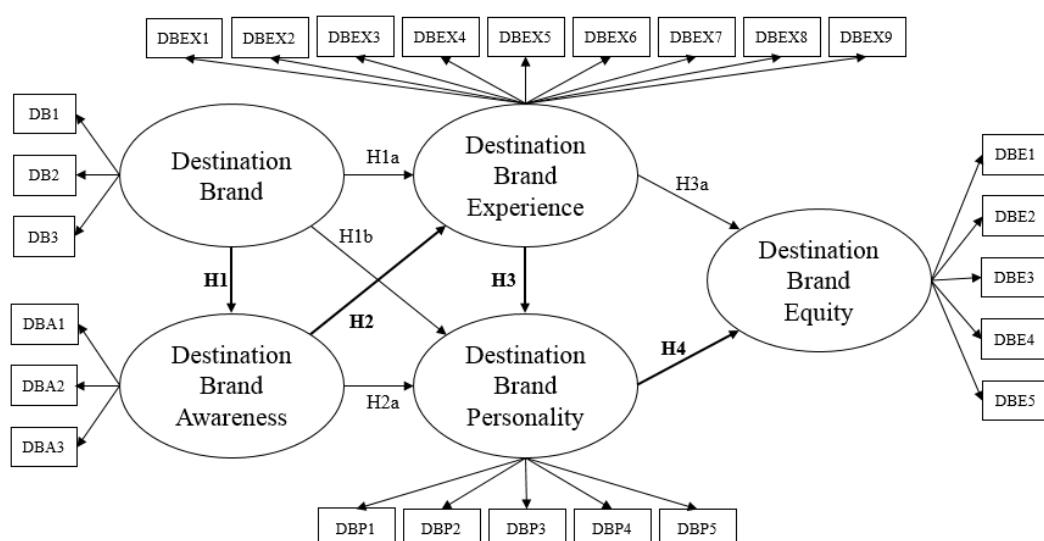
**Figure 1.** Creative MICE Tourism Destination Branding Model (CMDBM).

A few studies have focused on designing value-added MICE tourism experiences using a co-creation strategy with local resources. Although potential research questions have significant implications for both MICE and heritage tourism in terms of their relationship and co-role in destination marketing, they have not been seriously addressed or discussed in the academic literature. This research examines how a destination can design a co-created brand through a collaborative crossover strategy by integrating other forms of tourism (e.g., heritage) into the creative tourism product instead of focusing on MICE resources only. The value and effectiveness of destination branding and MICE tourism experiences are examined below through MICE travelers' perspectives.

The point of reference here is a modified version of García et al.'s [7] destination branding model. Based on a review of the literature, this study proposes a modified conceptualization of destination branding to enhance a destination's brand value and equity.

Selected concepts will be addressed to explore stakeholders' co-creations of destination branding in investigating the symbiosis between MICE tourism and heritage tourism. A destination brand's main job is to communicate an identity and to enhance brand awareness [7,61,67,68,73,74]. Yang et al.'s [73] study on Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) for tourism destinations verifies that Destination Brand Awareness (DBA), Destination Brand Image (DBI, considered DB in this research) and Destination Brand Quality (DBQ, considered DBP in this research) have significant effects on Destination Brand Liability (DBL, considered DBE in this research). The results of Dedeoğlu et al.'s [71] comprehensive customer-based destination brand equity model, the DBA affects DBP, and DBP affects DBE in positive and significant ways. Additionally, Veasna, Wu and Huang [94] indicate that a direct relationship between destination source credibility (considered to be DBP in this research) and destination satisfaction (considered to be DBE in this research) are partially significant, but the relationship between destination image (considered DB in this research) and destination satisfaction (considered to be DBE in this study) is not significant. Barnes et al. [3] indicate that destination brands are complex experiential brands. They suggest that destination brand experience is a significant determinant of visitor outcomes, specifically satisfaction, intention to revisit and intention to recommend, and that satisfaction plays a key role in further processing visitor experiences. They test the relationships between Destination Brand Experience (DBExp in this research) and satisfaction, intention to revisit and intention to recommend (all are considered DBE in this research), respectively, and find partial support (sensory and/or affective experience to satisfaction, intention to revisit and/or intention to recommend) from their results. In addition, Kumar and Kaushik's [95] research examines the role of Destination Brand Experience (DBExp), a new conceptualization, in assessing the holistic and unified view of tourism destinations. Based on the literature related to destination brand, the hypotheses of CMDBC are created. The study will explore how MICE tourism can engage with other forms of tourism, in this case heritage tourism, and how stakeholders can develop strategies for destination branding using other tourism resources beyond the MICE product.

To undertake a structural equation model test, eight hypotheses were developed. The model is proposed in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The proposed model.

**H1.** Destination Brand has a significant influence on Destination Brand Awareness.

**H1a.** Destination Brand has a significant influence on Destination Brand Experience.

**H1b.** Destination Brand has a significant influence on Destination Brand Personality.

**H2.** *Destination Brand Awareness has a significant influence on Destination Brand Experience.* H2a. *Destination Brand Awareness has a significant influence on Destination Brand Personality.*

**H3.** *Destination Brand Experience has a significant influence on Destination Brand Personality.*

**H3a.** *Destination Brand Experience has a significant influence on Destination Brand Equity.*

**H4.** *Destination Brand Personality has a significant influence on Destination Brand Equity.*

### 3. Method

The study examines a destination branding strategy to gauge its effectiveness and extent of collaboration and to elaborate on the link between stakeholders. It aims to develop a conceptual model of destination branding that integrates MICE and heritage tourism. An altered conceptual model of destination branding will explain how a destination can effectively make use of both MICE and heritage offerings to better meet visitors' needs and to eventually better perform destination branding equity.

Data collection took place in 2017 in New Orleans, Louisiana. New Orleans is one of the most popular MICE destinations in the USA, while simultaneously being recognized for its rich cultural heritage assets, yet it is meagerly studied from a creative destination branding perspective. The study focused on the 2017 NRPA (National Recreation and Parks Association) annual conference (representing MICE tourism) held at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in September of that year. The study population was the conference attendees, which numbered more than 7000, from other states and countries.

The survey was developed in English for both domestic and international participants. A pilot study was conducted offsite, recruiting people who had participated in MICE tourism before through the researchers' personal networks. A total of fifteen participants, including university students and faculty/staff members, government officials, private business owners and retirees participated in the pilot study. Based on pilot responses and comments, some wording and survey contents were adjusted to be more appropriate. Following the pilot study, the survey was sent to three tourism scholars for further scrutiny to strengthen the veracity of the survey.

The questionnaire has three parts. The first part includes the purpose of travel and information source, as well as travel patterns, such as length of stay and travel party. Travel motivations and preferred activities/attractions were also included in this part. The survey instrument was designed based on related studies in the literature. MICE participants' perceptions were measured by quantifying how the heritage element of the destination and tour activities influenced their MICE experience as a means of understanding the symbiotic relationship between heritage tourism and MICE tourism.

The second part regards the destination branding strategy based on the modified branding model. These elements were derived from the destination branding literature. This part of the survey introduced a destination's presented brand (DB), Destination Brand Awareness (DBA), Destination Brand Experience (DBExp), Destination Brand Personality (DBP) and Destination Brand Equity (DBE). A five-point Likert scale (strongly agree (5)–strongly disagree (1), extremely satisfied (5)–extremely dissatisfied (1)) was used to measure conference attendees' perceptions about destination branding and the marketing activities that make the destination more distinctive and attractive. With New Orleans as an empirical case, the research adopted the city's most recent destination branding campaign "One Time in New Orleans". This branding campaign was launched only two weeks before the conference, so presumably not many attendees were aware of the new campaign. However, instead of using a destination branding phrase created only for this study, the actual campaign name as an example of the destination brand of New Orleans was used.

The last part of the questionnaire dealt with participants' socio-demographics. These data are key in examining the potential relationships between attendees' characteristics

and their perceptions of heritage tourism and experience with MICE tourism. Information on gender, age, hometown, residence and level of income and education were sought.

MacKenzie and Podsakoff [96] identify factors that are likely to cause methodological biases due to specific conditions such as diminished motivation to respond accurately and/or decreased difficulty with satisficing. In this research, some techniques were applied to address possible methodological bias. It was assumed that respondents may not be fully motivated to respond to the survey accurately because of perceived low personal relevance, which may be attributed to the fact that not all NRPA conference attendees were familiar with the marketing and branding perspectives of New Orleans. As MacKenzie and Podsakoff [96] suggest, the respondents were fully informed before they participated as to why the questions are important and how their accurate responses would have useful implications for understanding their experiences and to help advise their organizations. To motivate them to respond more accurately and sincerely, participants were promised feedback from the survey results if they were interested and willing to share their contact details [96]. Furthermore, the survey process was meticulously managed by using similar types of scales and keeping branding labels consistent and in separate boxes with their relevant set of items. The respondents were informed about the uniqueness and significance of each question during the intercept and encouraged to read each survey question, including the branding constructs and items, carefully [96].

A reliability test was performed to ensure the internal consistency and validity of each scale. The Cronbach's alpha for all branding variables is 0.969; a value of 0.7 or larger indicates a good internal [97,98]. In this study, a principal component factor analysis was used to classify the dimensions of destination branding. The calculation of Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin statistics was 0.961, which suggests that the data are suitable for factor analysis.

According to Fuller and her colleagues [99], at the typical level of reported scale reliabilities (at a range of  $\alpha = 0.97\text{--}0.99$ ) correlations do not exhibit inflating common method bias (CMB) until a high amount of common method variance (CMV) is noted, for instance, at least 60% common variance depending on the measurement scale. In terms of reliability, CMV appears unlikely to inflate correlation [99]. It is important to note that CMV apparently can exist at relatively high levels before CMB occurs. As pointed out by Fuller et al., [99], lower to moderate levels of CMV are less likely to inflate correlations, and in some cases they may deflate correlations. CMV presents substantial potential for upward bias in relationships only when CMV is high (approaching 70% or more). The most commonly used post hoc approach to managing CMV is the Harman's one-factor test, which can detect bias levels of CMV in conditions commonly found in survey-based marketing research [99]. In this study, Harman's one-factor test was applied to the dataset. The total number of dimensions extracted based on the initial eigenvalues and the amount of variance associated with the first eigenvalue are shared (57.5%). For typical reliabilities ( $\alpha = 0.97\text{--}0.99$ ), CMV would need to be in the order of 70% or more to draw substantial concern about inflated relationships. Harman's one-factor test indicates bias when CMV levels reach problematic levels, 70% or greater [99].

The data were collected using a systematic random sampling method, surveying every fifth conference attendee in three fixed locations in the venue: (1) in the lobby where all meeting rooms for smaller sessions were located, (2) in the exhibition hall and (3) in the lobby area in front of the main conference hall. Potential respondents were initially asked whether or not they were local residents, which was necessary to identify appropriate participants (i.e., "tourists"). Those deemed to be out-of-town participants were given a self-administered questionnaire, either on paper or online (produced in Qualtrics on six tablet PCs at the site or using QR code) to complete in 15–20 min. In total, 516 usable surveys were received, which represents an 86.4% response rate. Invalid questionnaires, including those with too many missing values, were excluded from the analysis.

#### 4. Findings

The sample of respondents was represented by more males (57%) than females (43%). In terms of age, 75% of respondents were between 30 and 59 years old, 12.3% were between 18 and 29 years old and 12.5% were 60 years or older. Most respondents were well-educated (89.1% had completed a college degree or beyond) and affluent (85% had indicated over \$50,000 household income; about 50% of total respondents had indicated over \$100,000 household income). In terms of employment type, approximately 92% of respondents were full-time/part-time employees, 3.3% were retired, 2.6% were students and only 0.8% were unemployed or full-time homemakers. For detailed information on MICE traveler profiles, please see Table 2.

**Table 2.** Conference attendee profile (n = 516).

Variable	n	%
Gender (n = 509)		
Female	220	43.2%
Male	289	56.8%
Age (n = 513)		
18–29	63	12.3%
30–39	124	24.2%
40–49	148	28.8%
50–59	114	22.2%
60–69	58	11.3%
70 and over	6	1.2%
Education (n = 513)		
Some high school	0	0%
High school graduate	7	1.4%
Some college	49	9.6%
Technical school or associate's degree	14	2.7%
Bachelor's degree	244	47.6%
Master's degree	172	33.5%
Doctorate or equivalent	27	5.3%
Income (n = 511)		
Under \$24,999	12	2.3%
\$25,000–49,999	64	12.5%
\$50,000–74,999	83	16.2%
\$75,000–99,999	95	18.6%
\$100,000–149,999	142	27.8%
\$150,000 and over	115	22.5%
Employment (n = 512)		
Employed	468	91.9%
Unemployed	2	0.4%
Retired	17	3.3%
Student	13	2.6%
Full-time homemaker	2	0.4%
Others	7	1.4%

Table 3 presents descriptions of the factors and their items regarding MICE destination branding. The composite reliability was computed to assess the internal consistency reliability. The composite reliability values of all the constructs exceeded the minimum of 0.70, as suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein [100], which confirms that the indicators for all five constructs should be sufficient to represent the underlying factors.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics.

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
The Brand			
The Brand, appealing	3.33	1.046	
The Brand, attractive	3.28	1.034	0.958
The Brand, interesting	3.36	1.089	
Brand Awareness			
Awareness, my mind	3.20	1.112	0.913
Awareness, recognize	3.38	1.111	
Awareness, identify	3.31	1.132	
Brand Experience			
Sensory experience: visual	3.44	0.969	0.922
Sensory experience: aural	3.46	1.043	
Sensory experience: olfactory	2.81	1.063	
Sensory experience: gustatory	3.59	1.069	
Sensory experience: tactile	3.01	0.944	
Affective experience: feeling	3.69	0.982	
Affective experience: sentiment/emotion	3.62	0.967	
Behavioral experience	3.39	0.950	
Intellectual experience	3.43	0.952	
Brand Personality			
Personality, credible	3.23	1.005	0.936
Personality, reliable	3.18	0.991	
Personality, pleasant sensations	3.36	1.038	
Personality, good value	2.99	1.030	
Personality, reasons to experience	3.21	1.051	
Brand Equity			
Equity, encourage	3.38	1.133	0.936
Equity, better quality	3.22	1.057	
Equity, satisfied	3.58	1.061	
Equity, experience again	3.61	1.123	
Equity, recommend	3.68	1.113	

(5 = strongly agree/extremely satisfied and 1 = strongly disagree/extremely dissatisfied).

Next, to determine the robustness of the constructs of the destination branding model, an explanatory factor analysis was conducted to determine if the selected items loaded significantly and confirmed the explanatory power (above 0.70) of the five factors: brand, brand awareness, brand experience, brand personality and brand equity. Items for each dimension were identified from a review of the literature.

The model was tested for convergent and discriminant validity [101]. For discriminant validity, the square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was computed and matched. Standardized loading, Construct Reliability (CR) and AVE scores are presented in Table 4. The high value of AVE scores confirmed the robust discriminant validity of each construct. CFA (Confirmatory Factor Analysis) tested for convergent validity. Mplus was used to conduct CFA. Items were noted with factor loadings above 0.7, with the exception of the olfactory experience (0.551), which exceeds the commonly accepted benchmark of 0.5 for each factor [100]. In addition, the t-values exceed the threshold of 1.96 and therefore confirm convergent validity [102].

**Table 4.** Validity and reliability of measurement model.

Item	Factor Loading	S.E.	Est./S.E.	Construct Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
The Brand					
The Brand, appealing	0.954 ***	0.006	162.005		
The Brand, attractive	0.952 ***	0.006	158.290	0.954	0.873
The Brand, interesting	0.918 ***	0.008	112.303		
Brand Awareness					
Awareness, my mind	0.843 ***	0.015	55.261		
Awareness, recognize	0.900 ***	0.012	77.781	0.895	0.739
Awareness, identify	0.903 ***	0.011	79.018		
Brand Experience					
Sensory experience: visual	0.801 ***	0.017	45.951		
Sensory experience: aural	0.782 ***	0.019	41.688		
Sensory experience: olfactory	0.551 ***	0.032	17.187		
Sensory experience: gustatory	0.773 ***	0.019	39.875		
Sensory experience: tactile	0.707 ***	0.023	30.084	0.924	0.578
Affective experience: feeling	0.837 ***	0.015	55.894		
Affective experience: sentiment/emotion	0.815 ***	0.017	49.206		
Behavioral experience	0.776 ***	0.019	40.817		
Intellectual experience	0.755 ***	0.020	36.894		
Brand Personality					
Personality, credible	0.918 ***	0.009	102.540		
Personality, reliable	0.906 ***	0.010	91.753		
Personality, pleasant sensations	0.882 ***	0.011	78.799	0.934	0.740
Personality, good value	0.774 ***	0.019	40.832		
Personality, reasons to experience	0.841 ***	0.015	57.801		
Brand Equity					
Equity, encourage	0.842 ***	0.015	57.591		
Equity, better quality	0.849 ***	0.014	60.364		
Equity, satisfied	0.868 ***	0.012	69.468	0.925	0.725
Equity, experience again	0.873 ***	0.012	70.530		
Equity, recommend	0.891 ***	0.011	80.011		

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

The hypotheses proposed in this study were tested with an SEM. Table 5 presents goodness of fit statistic. A structural model with five constructs (DB, DBA, DBExp, DBP and DBE) was developed using Maximum Likelihood (ML). The results of the model indicate that the overall fit indices demonstrate a good model fit to the data with strong significant paths. In other words, the regression coefficient is all positive and significant as shown in Table 6, which indicates that all hypothesized relationships between constructs are supported in the study.

**Table 5.** Goodness of fit statistic.

Indicator	Statistic Value	Threshold Value
Normed chi-square ( $\chi^2/df$ )	3.624 ***	<5
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.071	<0.08
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	0.035	<0.05
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.943	>0.90
Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI)	0.936	>0.90
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	0.944	>0.90
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.924	>0.90

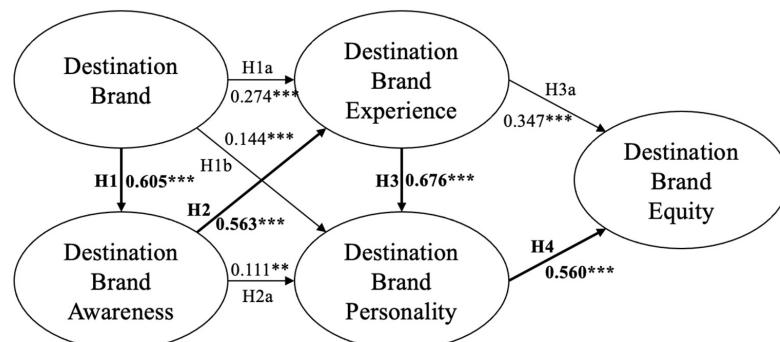
\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 6.** Standardized path coefficient of structural model.

Hypothesis	Variable	Path Coefficient	t Value
H1	Brand > Brand Awareness	0.605	15.854 ***
H1a	Brand > Brand Experience	0.274	5.293 ***
H1b	Brand > Brand Personality	0.144	2.997 ***
H2	Brand Awareness > Brand Experience	0.563	12.427 ***
H2a	Brand Awareness > Brand Personality	0.111	2.129 **
H3	Brand Experience > Brand Personality	0.676	13.503 ***
H3a	Brand Experience > Brand Equity	0.347	4.854 ***
H4	Brand Personality > Brand Equity	0.560	7.914 ***

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

The SEM results show that the brand has a significant influence on brand awareness, brand experience and brand personality. Brand awareness has a positive impact on brand experience and brand personality. Results also show that brand experience directly influences both brand personality and brand equity, and brand personality is significantly related to brand equity (see Figure 3). As several scholars indicate [7,61,67,68,74], this study also confirms that DB is considered to have a significant influence on DBA (Hypothesis 1). Similar to Yang et al.'s [73] study, DB has a significant impact on DBE (Hypothesis 1b), and DBP has a significant influence on DBE (Hypothesis 4). In common with Dedeoğlu et al.'s [71] study, this study confirms that DBA has a significant influence on DBP (Hypothesis 2a), and DBP has a significant impact on DBE (Hypothesis 4), which shows the relationship to be partially significant as in Veasna et al.'s [94] study. In addition, the findings of Barnes et al., [3] and Kumar and Kaushik [95] suggest that various dimensions of DBExp have a varied influence on destination brand identification, which subsequently affects both tourists' trust (DBP in this research) and loyalty (DBE in this research) toward tourism destinations. The findings from New Orleans, Louisiana (USA) confirm significant relationships between other DB items and DBExp (Hypothesis 1a, 2, 3 and 3a).

**Figure 3.** Parameters for the proposed research model (\*\*\*)  $p < 0.001$ . \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

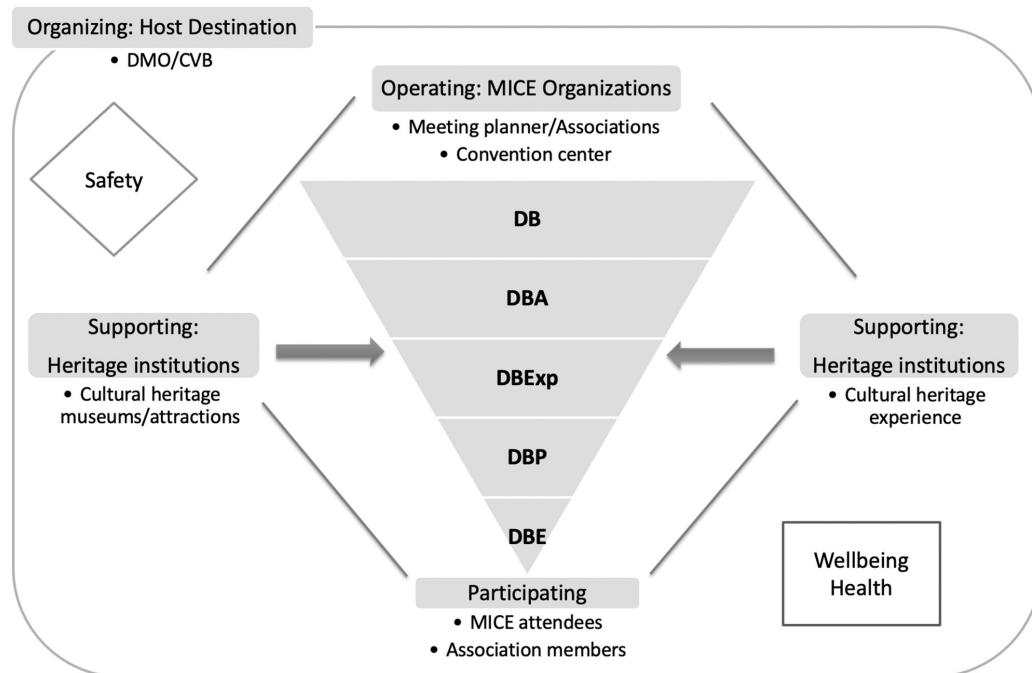
## 5. Discussion

As destination branding is not a fixed process but an evolving process [103], rebranding has become a necessity [104], especially in the COVID-19 pandemic and post-COVID era. Many destinations are formulating recovery strategies to improve their brands and to differentiate themselves from their competitors in terms of value-added offerings [6,71,72]. This study has argued that the core component of the CMDBM is based on MICE travelers' evaluations of the destination's potential to build brand equity by integrating its cultural/heritage resources as additional attractions. Brand experience is stressed in the model. Results of our structural model confirm the robustness of the proposed CMDBM. The influence of destination brand and brand awareness on the evaluation of the destination brand experience was found to influence destination brand personality and equity. The explanatory power of the CMDBM model is high and correlations for five destination branding dimensions exceed the value of 0.50.

The findings of this research are aligned with those from previous studies and reiterate the multidimensional nature of destinations, especially in accordance with the MICE destination brand model, which integrates other dimensions of destination branding. Furthermore, the results are in line with studies demonstrating that the DB and DBA positively influence DBP and DBE. DBExp has a positive association with other destination brand dimensions, which is a key finding that has not been reported elsewhere.

This study argues that heritage resources at a MICE destination add to the attractiveness of the business destination brand. Destination brand experience items [3,82] may be adapted to promote cultural heritage tourism simultaneously among MICE visitors. A differentiated destination branding framework was proposed, tested and found to be robust. As Barnes et al., [3] indicate, the destination brand is complex and is likely to vary according to the specifics of individual destinations. Thus, careful management is needed to provide different types of brand experiences. By incorporating a mix of destination branding experiences within the theoretical MICE tourism framework, centered on cultural heritage (or other) assets, the potential of synergistic destination branding relationships is immense.

Based on the study results, a modified CMDBM (Figure 4) is proposed. Compared with the earlier CMDBM, as the two arrows indicate, the significance of the destination brand experience is reinforced with the support of local heritage institutions and the cultural experiences available to MICE visitors in this New Orleans case study. The revised model indicates that the host destination's MICE organizers should initiate and organize marketing/branding strategies that will position the destination more inclusively of ancillary attractions, such as heritage. The four straight lines between different stakeholder groups suggest that sustainable relationships and collaboration are necessary to support co-creation and synergies between stakeholders to strengthen the MICE tourism brand.



**Figure 4.** Modified CMDBM.

As Murphy, Pritchard and Smith [105] (p. 44) note, a tourism destination is “an amalgam of individual products and experience opportunities that combine to form a total experience of the area visited.” Gnoth [106] also insists that destinations co-create tourism experiences by offering the functional, emotional and symbolic value of tourists’ visit. Tourism experiences are co-created and explored; thus, it is significant to follow the experiential path of visitors and to provide the experiential materials needed for them to

co-create the destination brand experience [107–109]. By including the destination brand experiences supported by stakeholder groups representing the local community in the destination-branding model, the results of this study significantly support the concept of co-created experiences.

Apostolakis, Jaffry, Sizeland and Cox [110] examine the role of unique local resources (e.g., cultural attractions) that create a competitive advantage in destination branding. Yet, local communities are often sidelined in destination branding processes, even though they are an imperative stakeholder group. In this regard, community participation in designing and providing tourism activities to create memorable experiences should be included in creative tourism planning. This study confirms that local heritage institutions can take part as they represent the community's cultural assets.

As Morgan et al., [4] observed, the long-term sustainability of a destination brand helps appeal successfully to the target market and to efficiently deliver brand values. Brand success refers to the ability of a destination brand to integrate different interests of diverse stakeholders during the branding process [4]. As this study illustrates, destination branding strategies must recognize the cultural characteristics of the place and connect with the local community and resources [49,111]. As such, the sustainability of heritage resources (and other tourism assets) is considered an important function of tourism marketing [5].

In MICE destinations, cultural resources are essential assets and, according to tourism suppliers, by including heritage institutions in branding, heritage assets can be key tools in convincing MICE event attendees to extend their stays or even to participate in the first place. How a destination secures the trust of future travelers remains to be seen. Rather than focusing only on attracting more tourists to the city, developing and implementing safe and sustainable branding strategies is required. These should advocate healthy and co-created practices, especially with local cultural heritage institutions, to enrich the destination experience and to enhance overall satisfaction among business travelers.

Although this study took place prior to the current pandemic, its results have important implications for post-pandemic recovery. Similar to other tourism sectors, MICE has been strongly and directly affected by the disruptive consequences of COVID-19 [112]. Most worldwide events originally scheduled for 2020 were cancelled or postponed indefinitely due to travel restrictions and event managers' inability to win the trust of MICE attendees and to guarantee their safety [112]. The safety of visitors and destination residents has become the foremost concern of tourism and hospitality providers.

The recent literature views COVID-19 as an opportunity to change the path of tourism. There is a need to plan and develop win-win value-added solutions to enable sustainable healthy travel in the future. Tourism destinations need cooperation and innovations from related stakeholders to recover from COVID-19 by planning and implementing health, economic and destination recovery solutions [113]. Destination rebranding is one way that MICE stakeholders can work together to recover, redesign and remarket MICE tourism.

To increase the generalizability of the findings for CMDBM and to be employed in post-pandemic times, this study suggests that safety and wellbeing concerns should be incorporated into the model. These issues are receiving cursory attention in the revival discourses across the globe. To prepare for the post-pandemic era, destinations will need to pay more attention to the long-term wellbeing and resilience of travelers, local communities and the tourism system as a whole [114]. As health and safety issues become intertwined with economics, future tourism plans and destination branding will need to embrace concepts such as economics of health, safety, wellbeing and happiness [114]. New stakeholders, including health and safety-related fields, are needed in the portfolio. To build co-created synergies between MICE and heritage tourism while taking into consideration the health and wellbeing aspects of travel, the new destination branding paradigm at each stage will need to integrate local heritage assets. In the post-pandemic era, the suggested new version of the model will be employed while providing wellness and safety value to the MICE attendees to suggest a destination's brand equity. Giannopoulos, Piha and Skourtis [115] confirm the importance of stakeholders' efforts to co-create sustainable brands in the global

tourism by exploring the value-creating mechanisms of branding in the destination context. Paradigms and strategies for enhancing public health and wellbeing will add to resilient and sustainable rebranding efforts [116].

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

Tourism in the post pandemic times should be more responsible and destinations need to work to rebuild destination image and rebrand the destinations towards safe, sustainable and transformed tourism experiences to regain travelers' trust [117]. The COVID-19 crisis offers an exceptional and invaluable opportunity to rethink and reset tourism to become better for the future [118]. MICE tourism had become a significant development tool for local economies before the COVID-19 outbreak. An effective destination brand is one way that MICE stakeholders can work together to redesign and rebrand MICE tourism in the post-pandemic times. The efforts need to focus on producing sustainable benefits for the destination such as co-creation opportunities between stakeholders, including cultural heritage stewards as well as visitors, economic benefits for local people, community empowerment and enhancement of local pride while keeping safety and health protocols in check.

It is important to understand the limitations of the research and the applicability of the results. One limitation is that this study took place at a single major event/conference at a single location rather than surveying a wider range of events in a wider range of destinations. In addition, in terms of this case study with its new branding campaign highlighted earlier, participants' perceptions of a destination brand may be biased since they are not familiar with the new promotional activities of the destination.

The model can be tested to other destinations that are recognized for diverse tourism portfolios. Caution should be used in generalizing the results of this study, because the data were collected during the pre-pandemic time. The destinations are likely to further modify tourism portfolios in the post-COVID times. Nevertheless, this study presents a conceptual model that can be used in destinations exhibiting a broad spectrum of tourism assets. Furthermore, the results of the study offer useful information for developing co-created destination branding initiatives.

This study focuses on cultural heritage resources at a MICE destination as a tool for co-creating a destination brand. To increase the generalizability of the proposed CMDBM, it is suggested retesting the model with safety, health and wellbeing issues at different MICE destinations in different heritage contexts. Future research should also consider different tourism assets beyond cultural heritage for advancing CMDBM or different markets for designing distinctive co-created destination branding models to enrich and diversify the destination product.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Data available on request due to privacy or ethical restrictions. The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy considerations.

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