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# From Memorable City Experiences to Brand Love: Strengthening WOM and Destination Image of Cultural Cities

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**Abstract**

The present study examines the effect of memorable city brand experiences (MCBE) on city brand loyalty (CBL), word-of-mouth promotion (WOM), and destination image (DI) in the context of cultural cities. The data set, which comprised information from 257 tourists who had visited Yogyakarta, Indonesia, was analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM), a statistical technique that allows for the examination of complex relationships among variables. The results of the study indicate that MCBE significantly increases CBL and WOM but does not directly influence DI. Furthermore, CBL has been demonstrated to promote WOM, which serves as the primary mediator linking MCBE and CBL to DI. These findings contribute to the existing body of literature on city brand image and sustainable tourism by demonstrating the role of emotional engagement and experiences in shaping the perceived image of a city. This study emphasises the practical importance of designing meaningful tourism experiences that foster emotional attachment and advocacy behaviour. This, in turn, strengthens the competitiveness and sustainability of cultural destinations. The originality of this study lies in the proposal and validation of a comprehensive mediation framework linking MCBE, CBL, WOM, and DI.

**Keywords:** Memorable city brand experiences; city brand love; word-of-mouth; destination image; city branding

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## Introduction

The concept of city branding has garnered increased attention in marketing and tourism studies, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia (Ardyan & Susanti, 2018). In the contemporary context of escalating competition among cities, local governments are engaged in the strategic development of distinctive city images, with the aim of attracting tourists, investors, and new residents (Amini et al., 2024; Kladou et al., 2022). These efforts capitalise on the city's distinctive culture, history, infrastructure, and quality of life (Coelho et al., 2022; Wang & Feng, 2023). Furthermore, the practice of city branding has evolved into a strategic instrument for fortifying a city's economic, social, and political standing within the global landscape (Florek et al., 2021). A review of the extant literature reveals that a variety of cities worldwide have adopted city branding strategies. This phenomenon has been observed in a number of countries, including Australia (Sandbach, 2021), Africa (Tichaawa, 2017), China (Wang & Feng, 2023), Malaysia (Ghafar et al., 2022), and Europe (Ripoll Gonzalez & Gale, 2022). Furthermore, major cities in Indonesia have initiated the adoption of city branding strategies with the objective of attracting tourists and enhancing destination competitiveness. However, it should be noted that Yogyakarta constitutes a noteworthy exception to this generalisation. It is widely recognised as a cultural metropolis, boasting a rich tapestry of distinctive traditions, artistic expressions, and historical legacies. Moreover, it has gained prominence as a tourist destination, second only to Bali (Kusumawati et al., 2022). However, the majority of extant research in the domain of city branding continues to prioritise the assessment of destination image or the attractiveness of the city brand (Ahn, 2022), while the emotional dimensions and the experiences of tourists are frequently overlooked. As Makumbi & du Preez (2024) indicates, the domain of city branding remains to be investigated further, especially with regard to the role of WOM in the formation of destination images. Indeed, within the domain of tourism, memorable experiences have been shown to engender profound emotional connections with the city, thereby cultivating brand loyalty. This emotional bond is a critical factor in encouraging tourist loyalty and fostering voluntary communication behaviour, such as WOM. This form of communication is believed to be more effective than formal promotion (Ismagilova et al., 2021). Furthermore, WOM and CBL play a strategic role in strengthening the image of the destination. The propagation of positive experiences among tourists, accompanied by their articulation of affection for a city, has the capacity to engender a robust city image in the collective consciousness of the general public. Agyeman-Duah et al (2024)) provide confirmation of the hypothesis that perceptions of destination image are a crucial element in tourism marketing and development strategies. The study conducted in the Volta Region of Ghana demonstrates that the establishment of a favourable destination image has the dual effect of enhancing tourist appeal and fortifying the intention of visitors to return and advocate the destination to others. These findings serve to reinforce the view that destination image serves as the end result of various tourist experiences and interactions during their visit. In accordance with this comprehension, the present study establishes the destination image as the dependent variable, thereby serving as an indicator of the efficacy of cultural destination branding strategies. In essence, the concept of a destination image encompasses the notion of memorable city brand experiences, the emotional attachment of tourists to the city (termed 'city brand love'), and positive communication through word-of-mouth.

Collectively, these elements serve to enhance the competitiveness of sustainable tourism. Consequently, the relationship between MCBE, and WOM is a critical area of study, particularly in the context of cultural tourist cities such as Yogyakarta. Consequently, the present study aims to address this lacuna by examining the influence of MCBD on CBL, WOM, and their impact on destination image. Within this theoretical framework, this study also examines the mediating role of CBL and WOM in strengthening the relationship between variables. The present study focuses on Yogyakarta as a world cultural tourism destination, with the objective of contributing to the theoretical framework of city branding and providing practical implications for the development of destination marketing strategies in Indonesia.

## Literature review

### *Memorable city brand experience*

The concept of MCBE is a critical component in the field of city branding studies (Kladou et al., 2022). MCBE is distinct from conventional tourist visits in that it emphasises the emotional, cognitive, sensory, and behavioural interactions of tourists with the cities they visit (Ardyan & Susanti, 2018). In accordance with the seminal work of Ghorbanzadeh (2023), the concept of brand experience comprises four distinct dimensions: cognitive experience, sensory experience, affective experience, and behavioural experience. These dimensions are widely adopted to understand how tourists form perceptions of a city. In the domain of city branding, MCBE is delineated as tourists' perceptions and responses to diverse stimuli stemming from the urban milieu, encompassing tourist attractions, facilities, social interactions, and the prevailing atmosphere of the city that leaves an imprint on tourists' memories (Hurombo et al., 2024; Mohammad Shafiee et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated that experiences that resonate with tourists' emotional dimensions have a more profound impact than those that exclusively focus on functional aspects (Ghorbanzadeh, 2023; Guleria et al., 2023). As demonstrated in prior research, memorable experiences have been shown to encourage tourist satisfaction and to influence the decision to return, loyalty, and the spread of positive word-of-mouth (Lin et al., 2025). In this study, MCBE is conceptualised as the primary variable that initiates the formation of CBL and fosters positive WOM, thereby reinforcing the image of cultural city destinations.

### *City brand love*

The concept of brand love was initially developed from studies of love in consumption, which emphasised the emotional bond between consumers and objects or brands (Bae & Kim, 2023). Within the domain of brand management, brand love is defined as a profound emotional connection that fosters a sense of passion, fulfilment, and intimacy between consumers and a specific brand (Rahman et al., 2021). A substantial body of research has emerged to support the notion that brand love can emerge as a consequence of exceptional brand quality, relevance of identity, and inherent emotional meaning (Amaro et al., 2020). Consequently, consumers are inclined to establish long-term relationships with the brand. In the context of urban destinations, the concept of "city brand love" has been defined as the feelings of admiration, attachment, enjoyment, and passion that tourists have for a city brand after experiencing memorable moments in that destination (Ardyan & Susanti, 2018). Municipalities that can offer positive experiences through factors such as cleanliness, friendliness, and adequate facilities have the potential to cultivate tourists' affection for the city, which in turn encourages them to make return visits (Sadeque et al., 2021). In accordance with the foregoing explanation, the present study proposes the initial hypothesis:

*H1: Memorable city brand experience has a positive effect on city brand love.*

### *Word of mouth*

WOM can be defined as a form of informal communication between consumers regarding products, brands, or services (Nicolaides, 2014). It is believed to be more influential than advertising because it is considered more credible and comes from real experiences (Moliner-Tena et al., 2023). WOM frequently functions as a medium through which consumers can disseminate positive and negative experiences, thereby assisting others in making informed decisions (Roy & Chakraborty, 2024). In the context of brands, previous studies have demonstrated that brand love can motivate consumers to disseminate positive WOM due to emotional attachment and satisfaction with the brand (Song & Kim, 2022). This phenomenon also applies in the context of urban areas, where MCBE has the potential to stimulate WOM among tourists (Florek et al., 2021). Moreover, empirical evidence has demonstrated a positive correlation between the strength of CBL among tourists and their propensity to recommend the city to others (Hurombo et al., 2024; Moliner-Tena et al., 2023). In view of the foregoing, the following hypotheses are hereby proposed:

*H2: Memorable city brand experience has a positive effect on WOM.*
*H3: City brand love has a positive effect on WOM.*

### *Destination image*

Destination Image is defined as a cognitive, affective, and conative representation formed in the minds of tourists towards a city or destination (Chu et al., 2022). This concept encompasses beliefs, perceptions, and emotional impressions that influence visiting behaviour (Kladou, 2021). This image is regarded as a pivotal factor in determining a city's appeal, exerting influence on tourists' destination preferences, intent to return, and the dissemination of recommendations (Matiza & Slabbert, 2020). A substantial body of prior research has corroborated the assertion that the perception of a destination is not exclusively determined by its functional attributes, such as the availability of amenities and points of interest (Hemmonsbey et al., 2018;

Liu et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2022). However, it is also influenced by the memorable experiences that tourists encounter while in the city (Hurombo et al., 2024). Consequently, the MCBE emerges as a significant predictor, capable of influencing positive perceptions of a destination's image. Furthermore, emotional attachment, characterised by a sense of affection for a city's brand identity, is purported to contribute significantly to the fortification of a destination's image. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that tourists who have an emotional attachment to a city brand are more likely to evaluate that city positively, thereby strengthening the perception of the destination in the long term (Jo et al., 2022). This finding is consistent with extant literature, which demonstrates that brand love contributes to the formation of a stronger brand image (Bradley & Hall, 2025). Furthermore, positive WOM, both directly and through digital media, is an important mechanism in shaping the image of a destination (Torabi et al., 2023). The reception of positive information and recommendations from fellow tourists serves as a form of social validation, thereby reinforcing the image of the city as an attractive and worthy destination (Weru, 2021), WOM can be viewed as a direct consequence of MCBE and CBL, as well as an important antecedent for destination image. This explanation establishes the foundation for the research hypotheses:

*H4: Memorable city brand experience has a positive effect on destination image*
*H5: City brand love has a positive effect on destination image*
*H6: WOM has a positive effect on destination image*

## Method

The research questionnaire was developed in an online format and disseminated to respondents who had visited the city of Yogyakarta. The decision to employ an online survey method was predicated on its recognised aptitude for the expeditious collection of voluminous data, a premise that has been underscored by Küfner et al. (2025). A total of 257 respondents were successfully sampled, and the collected data were then analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with the help of AMOS software version 20. The utilisation of AMOS was deemed appropriate due to its extensive (Byrne, 2001)application in research domains such as management, strategy, and marketing (Williams et al., 2004). This observation gave rise to the supposition that it would be pertinent to the objectives of the present study. The research instrument was developed by adapting the scale from previous studies, which consisted of 15 statements. The MCBE variable was adapted from Ardyan and Susanti (2018), CBL from Anggraeni (2015), WOM from Aro, Suomi, and Saraniemi (2018), and Destination Image from Kladou et al. (2022). The statements presented in the questionnaire were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

## Result and discussion

### *Respondent data*

The data obtained from the respondents of this study reflects the diversity of tourists visiting Yogyakarta. As demonstrated in Table 1, the majority of respondents hailed from Central Java Province, with nine other provinces in Indonesia accounting for the remainder. This distribution serves to confirm Yogyakarta's status as a cultural destination that is able to attract tourists from a variety of different regions.

**Tables 1. Respondent area by province**

| Province | Frequency | Percentages |
|---|---|---|
| Central Java | 86 | 33,46% |
| West Java | 32 | 12,45% |
| East Java | 25 | 9,73% |
| Jakarta | 45 | 17,51% |
| Banten | 19 | 7,39% |
| Riau | 15 | 5,84% |
| Lampung | 8 | 3,11% |
| Central Kalimantan | 8 | 3,11% |
| East Kalimantan | 11 | 4,28% |
| West Nusa Tenggara | 8 | 3,11% |
| **Total** | **257** | **100%** |

### *Testing the assumption of univariate normality*

The distribution of data in a normal form facilitates more precise estimation of parameters, calculation of standard error, and testing of significance, as well as accurate interpretation (Kline, 2012). In this study, normality testing was conducted by considering the critical ratio (C.R.) values of skewness and kurtosis for each variable indicator.

**Tables 2. Construct normality: Skewness and Kurtosis**

| Indicators | | Skew | Critical ratio | Kurtosis | Critical ratio |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I will visit this city in the future | DIM1 | ,093 | ,609 | -,477 | -1,560 |
| Way of life and customs are one of the city's attractions | DIM2 | ,442 | 2,393 | -,575 | -1,882 |
| This city has good opportunities for recreational activities | DIM3 | ,051 | ,334 | -,289 | -,945 |
| I would recommend this city to friends and family as a place to visit. | WOM1 | -,044 | -,285 | -,208 | -,680 |
| I often speak positively about it to others. | WOM2 | ,175 | 1,146 | -,587 | -1,921 |
| I enjoy sharing the pleasant experiences I have had here | WOM3 | ,010 | ,063 | -,569 | -1,861 |
| I encourage others to choose this city as their travel destination. | WOM4 | ,120 | ,786 | -,498 | -1,629 |
| This city has a certain appeal that makes me proud to have visited it. | CBL1 | -,104 | -,678 | -,108 | -,354 |
| I feel a strong emotional connection to this city. | CBL2 | ,348 | 2,280 | -,444 | -1,452 |
| This city gives a sense of happiness and joy when I visit. | CBL3 | -,047 | -,307 | -,095 | -,311 |

| Indicators | | Skew | Critical ratio | Kurtosis | Critical ratio |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I feel enthusiastic when talking about this city with other people. | CBL4 | -,028 | -,185 | ,124 | ,407 |
| Visiting this city provided me with new experiences that broadened my horizons. | MCE1 | -,016 | -,106 | -,225 | -,735 |
| This city evoked pleasant and memorable feelings for me. | MCE2 | ,256 | 1,674 | -,559 | -1,830 |
| I enjoy the atmosphere of this city through its sounds, smells, and tastes | MCE3 | ,306 | 2,004 | -,385 | -1,260 |
| I want to learn about the local culture and meet the people. | MCE4 | ,139 | ,912 | -,532 | -1,741 |

As demonstrated in Table 2, the C.R skewness and kurtosis values are indicative of univariate normal distribution, as asserted by Byrne (2001). The distribution is characterised by C.R skewness and kurtosis values falling within the range of ±2.58 at a significance level of 0.01. The majority of the indicators exhibit C.R skewness and kurtosis values that remain within the prescribed tolerance limits.

### *Validity and reliability testing*

Convergent validity is indicated by a standardized loading value that is ideally ≥ 0.60 (Kline, 2012). CR is a statistical measure of the internal consistency between indicators within a construct. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), a minimum value of 0.70 is considered to be the reliability threshold. Concurrently, AVE is employed to evaluate the proportion of indicator variance that can be attributed to the latent construct. A value greater than 0.50 indicates that more than half of the indicator variance can be adequately explained by the construct being measured. The results of the aforementioned test are presented in Table 3.

**Tables 3. Validity and reliability**

| Variable | Instrument | Std loading | *(Std loading)²* | Error | *Construct Reliability* | *Average Variance Extract* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Memorable city brand experience | MCE1 | 0,604 | 0,365 | 0,396 | 0,798 | 0,571 |
| | MCE2 | 0,614 | 0,377 | 0,386 | | |
| | MCE3 | 0,792 | 0,627 | 0,208 | | |
| | MCE4 | 0,648 | 0,420 | 0,352 | | |
| City Brand Love | CBL1 | 0,738 | 0,545 | 0,262 | 0,800 | 0,676 |
| | CBL2 | 0,699 | 0,489 | 0,301 | | |
| | CBL3 | 0,737 | 0,543 | 0,263 | | |
| | CBL4 | 0,779 | 0,607 | 0,221 | | |
| Word-of-mouth | WOM1 | 0,671 | 0,450 | 0,329 | 0,799 | 0,590 |
| | WOM2 | 0,780 | 0,608 | 0,220 | | |
| | WOM3 | 0,598 | 0,358 | 0,402 | | |
| | WOM4 | 0,662 | 0,438 | 0,338 | | |
| Destination Image | DIM1 | 0,692 | 0,396 | 0,371 | 0,750 | 0,506 |
| | DIM2 | 0,634 | 0,402 | 0,366 | | |
| | DIM3 | 0,603 | 0,364 | 0,397 | | |

The preceding table indicates that all instruments possess standardized loading values greater than 0.60, thereby demonstrating the capacity of the indicators to adequately reflect the measured construct (Hair et al., 2019). The construct reliability values for each variable exceed the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating that the constructs in this study demonstrate adequate internal consistency. Furthermore, the AVE values for each variable exceed 0.50, thereby suggesting that the latent variables have the capacity to account for more than half of the variance in their indicators.

### *Discriminant validity*

The discriminant validity test can be performed using the Fornell-Larcker (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019). Criterion approach, and the test results are presented in Table 4.

**Tables 4. Discriminant validity**

| Variable | CBL | DIM | MCBE | WOM |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CBL | **0,747** | | | |
| DIM | 0,644 | **0.793** | | |
| MCBE | 0,498 | 0,427 | **0.726** | |
| WOM | 0,633 | 0.580 | 0,598 | **0.785** |

The data presented in the Table 4 indicate that the AVE square root values for each construct (diagonal numbers) exceed the inter-construct correlation values (non-diagonal numbers). This finding suggests that each latent variable in this study possesses adequate discriminant ability, enabling clear differentiation between them.

### *Structural equation modelling*

The utilisation of SEM in this study is predicated on the necessity to analyse intricate causal relationships between latent variables, both direct and indirect. SEM facilitates researchers in evaluating theoretical models that incorporate mediating variables concurrently, thereby offering a more comprehensive depiction of the interrelationships between research constructs (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, SEM has the capacity to integrate confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with structural equation models. This integration facilitates the assessment of the validity and reliability of constructs, as well as the strength of causal relationships between variables (Byrne, 2013). The utilisation of AMOS software is deemed appropriate for this study due to its capacity to graphically represent models, thereby facilitating interpretation and supporting the Maximum Likelihood estimation method, which is well-suited for the sample size of this study (Arbuckle, 2016).

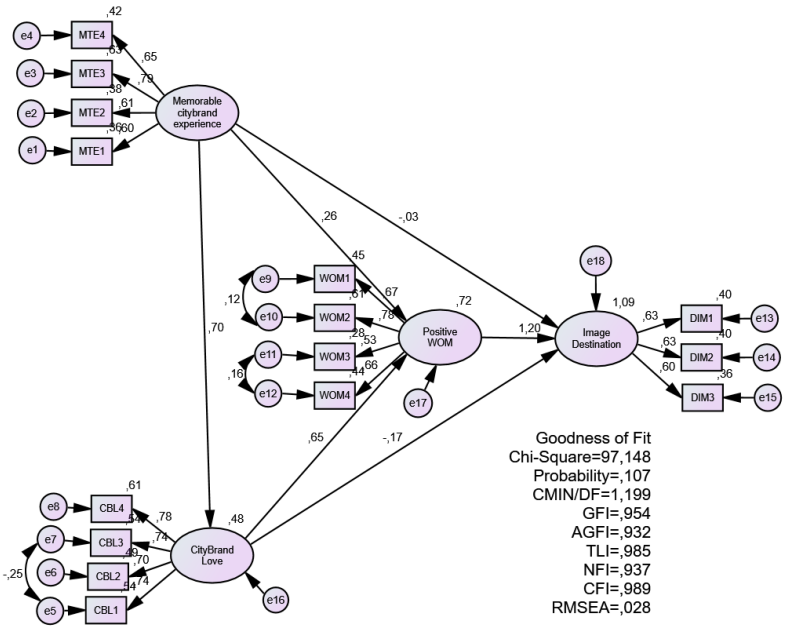


**Figure 1. Structural research model**

### *Goodness of fit model*

The initial phase in the assessment of structural equations is the evaluation of the model's goodness of fit, with the objective being the assurance that the constructed model exhibits concordance with the available empirical data. The assessment is conducted using a series of indices of feasibility, with each index possessing a distinct threshold value that serves as the acceptance criterion. In the event that the majority of these indices meet the good fit criteria, it can be concluded that the model has sufficient suitability to proceed to the stage of testing the causal relationship between latent variables.

**Tables 5. Structural fit model index evaluation**

| GoF | Cut of Value | Result | Information |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chi-square | Small | 97,148 | Good fit |
| Sig. Probability | ≥ 0,05 | 0,107 | Good fit |
| CMIN/DF | ≤ 2.0 | 1,199 | Good fit |
| GFI | ≥ 0.90 | 0,954 | Good fit |
| RMSEA | ≤ 0.08 | 0,028 | Good fit |
| SRMR | ≤ 0.08 | 0,017 | Good fit |
| TLI | ≥ 0.95 | 0,985 | Good fit |
| NFI | ≥ 0.90 | 0,937 | Good fit |
| CFI | ≥ 0.95 | 0,989 | Good fit |
| AGFI | ≥ 0.90 | 0,932 | Good fit |
| PNFI | ≥ 0,5 | 0,723 | Good fit |
| PCFI | ≥ 0,5 (0-1) | 0,763 | Good fit |

The results of the GoF index evaluation, as demonstrated in Table 5, indicate that all model suitability criteria have been met. The chi-square value (97.148 < 2*df) is statistically insignificant. The probability value of 0.107 meeting or exceeding the 0.05 threshold, in conjunction with the CMIN/DF ratio of 1.199 falling below 2.0, signifies that the model exhibits an adequate degree of fit. Furthermore, absolute fit indices such as GFI (0.954), AGFI (0.932), RMSEA (0.028), and SRMR (0.017) are all in the good fit category. Incremental fit indices, including the TLI (0.985), NFI (0.937), and CFI (0.989), further substantiate the model's validity. Indeed, parsimonious fit measures represented by PNFI (0.723) and PCFI (0.763) confirm that this model is not only suitable but also efficient.

### *Square multiple correlation (SMC)*

SMC is a statistical technique employed in SEM to ascertain the proportion of variance in endogenous variables that can be attributed to exogenous variables within the model. A high SMC value is indicative of a model with strong predictive power for endogenous variables. In contrast, a low value suggests that exogenous variables do not fully explain the variance of the target variables.

**Tables 6. Square multiple correlation**

| Multiple Correlation | Estimate |
|---|---|
| CBL | 0,320 |
| WOM | 0,803 |
| Image Destination | 0,652 |

The findings indicate that the model accounts for 32% of the variation in CBL, 65.2% in Image Destination, and 80.3% in WOM. The findings suggest that the variables in the model exert a more significant influence in shaping the image of the

destination and encouraging WOM than in fostering emotional bonds in the form of CBL. The findings of this study are consistent with the $R^2$ criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2019), thereby substantiating the model's substantial explanatory capacity, particularly in elucidating positive WOM.

**Hypothesis testing**

The analysis results demonstrate that MCBE exerts a significant positive effect on CBL ($\beta = 0.808$; $p < 0.001$) and WOM ($\beta = 0.290$; $p = 0.009$). However, MCBE does not have a significant effect on DI ($\beta = 0.027$; $p = 0.381$). This suggests that an MCBL has the potential to foster emotional bonds between tourists and CBL and to encourage positive communication. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to directly influence perceptions of DI. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that CBL exhibited a substantial impact on WOM ($\beta = 0.616$; $p < 0.001$), though it did not demonstrate a significant effect on DI ($\beta = 0.142$; $p = 0.388$). This finding suggests that tourists' emotional bonds are more effective in encouraging them to share positive experiences than in altering their perceptions of destination image. In contrast, WOM exerts the most substantial influence on DI ($\beta = 1.043$; $p < 0.001$), validating the notion that the propagation of positive experiences among tourists is a pivotal factor in fortifying the DI. Therefore, WOM functions as a pivotal conduit, facilitating the transfer of MCBL and emotional bonds into a more robust perception of the destination image.

**Tables 7. Causality test results**

| Relationship | | Estimate | C.R | P | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1 | MCBE ➔ CBL | 0,808 | 7,102 | 0,000 | Supported |
| H2 | MCBE ➔ WOM | 0,290 | 2,613 | 0,009 | Supported |
| H3 | CBL ➔ WOM | 0,027 | 0,214 | 0,381 | Supported |
| H4 | MCBE ➔ DI | 0,616 | 5,778 | 0,000 | Unsupported |
| H5 | CBL ➔ DI | 0,142 | 0,863 | 0,388 | Unsupported |
| H6 | WOM ➔ DI | 1,043 | 4,354 | 0,000 | Supported |

***Mediation test***

In addition to testing the hypothesis of causality between variables, this study identified the significant mediating role of CBL and WOM in strengthening the connection between constructs in the research model. The findings pertaining to the mediating role are presented in Table 8.

**Tables 8. Mediation test result**

| Jalur | Direct Effect | Indirect Effect | Total Effect | Mediation Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MCBE➔CBL➔WOM | **β** = 0,262 (p = 0,030) | **β** = 0,450 (p = 0,001) | **β** = 0,712 (p < 0,003) | ***Partial Mediation*** |
| MCBE➔WOM➔DI | **β** = 0,028 (p = 0,489) | **β** = 0,735 (p = 0,002) | **β** = 0,707 (p < 0,003) | ***Full Mediation*** |
| CBL➔WOM➔DI | **β** = 0,172 (p = 0,380) | **β** = 0,777 (p = 0,003) | **β** = 0,605 (p < 0,002) | ***Full Mediation*** |

The findings of the mediation test with bootstrapping indicate that MCBE exerts an influence on WOM through CBL with a partial mediation pattern, as both direct and indirect effects are found to be significant. Conversely, in the path from MCBE to Image Destination through WOM and from CBL to Image Destination through WOM, both show complete mediation because the direct effect is not significant, while the indirect effect is significant. These findings corroborate the notion that WOM serves as the primary mediator, thereby reinforcing the relationship between variables within the research model.

**Discussion**

The findings of the study demonstrate that MCBE exerts a substantial influence on CBL. It indicates that memorable city experiences, encompassing cognitive, emotional, sensory, and behavioural domains, have the capacity to engender profound emotional attachment to a city. It has been demonstrated that consumers who have positive experiences will more readily develop a sense of affection for the city brand, as these experiences establish psychological bonds that supersede the functional aspects of the destination. This finding is consistent with the perspectives of Ardyan and Susanti (2018) and Ghorbanzadeh (2023), who argue that brand experiences engaging emotional and sensory dimensions can facilitate the development of brand affection. Consequently, these findings serve to bolster the existing body of empirical evidence that suggests the management of distinctive and memorable urban experiences constitutes a pivotal strategy in fostering the development of profound affection for a given city. The study also found that MCBE has a significant influence on WOM. Consequently, tourists who have a remarkable city experience are inclined to disseminate positive narratives and recommendations to others. The generation of WOM through MCBE is not only informative but also possesses a high degree of credibility due to its origin in consumer spontaneity rather than commercial incentives. This finding is consistent with previous research in this field (Lin et al., 2025; Torabi et al., 2023), substantiates the notion that WOM is an inherent by product of fulfilling and emotional encounters. This finding suggests that strategies designed to enhance urban experiences engender not only emotional loyalty among residents but also expand the reach of city promotion through personal recommendations, which have been shown to have a stronger impact than formal advertising. Moreover, extant research has demonstrated the substantial impact of CBL on WOM. This finding serves to emphasise the notion that a profound sense of affection for one's place of origin can motivate individuals to promote its attributes within their respective communities voluntarily. A profound emotional connection with the city fosters a sense of pride and motivates consumers to articulate their affection through positive means. This lends further credence to the proposition advanced by (Anggraeni and Rachmanita (2015) that brand love exerts an influence on both loyalty and the fortification of WOM as a medium for social expression of emotional attachment. The results of this study demonstrate that

WOM can be regarded as a primary conduit for transmitting the impact of brand love into actual consumer behaviour, particularly in the context of tourist destinations and city branding.

While MBCE has been demonstrated to be a substantial factor in fostering brand affection and promoting WOM dissemination, the findings of this study indicate that the direct impact of MBCE on destination image is not significant. This finding suggests that tourists' experiences do not directly influence their perceptions of a destination; rather, these perceptions are shaped by emotional factors and post-visit behaviours. These results contradict the findings of several previous studies that identified a positive correlation between travel experiences and destination image (Barnes et al., 2016; Kutlu & Ayyıldız, 2021). However, this discrepancy can be explained by the fact that destination image is a more complex construct, shaped by various factors such as promotion, city reputation, and collective public perception (Kladou et al., 2022). Consequently, the findings of this study offer a novel perspective, positing that the mere presence of memorable experiences is insufficient to fortify destination image, particularly in the absence of emotional reinforcement or further dissemination of information through WOM channels. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that CBL exerted no substantial influence on destination image. In principle, affection for a city brand should be capable of reinforcing the image of the destination through the positive perceptions of tourists (Amaro et al., 2020). However, the findings reveal a limitation: the affection that tourists hold for a particular city does not inherently translate into an improvement in the broader image of the destination. The destination image is formed from a broader collective representation than personal experience; therefore, individual emotional attachments do not always influence the general image of the city. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of numerous studies (Chu et al., 2022; Kutlu & Ayyıldız, 2021) that emphasise the role of destination promotion, facility quality, and market communication in shaping destination images, superseding emotional factors in this process. The findings of this study suggest that brand love is a more effective motivator of individual promotional behaviour (WOM) than directly enhancing destination image.

The present study contradicts the conclusions of previous research in this field. It demonstrates that WOM exerts a substantial influence on destination image. This finding emphasises the pivotal role of informal communication among tourists in consolidating the perception and image of a destination. The credibility, personal nature, and trustworthiness of information disseminated through WOM have been found to exceed those of commercial advertisements (Nguyen & Romaniuk, 2014). Therefore, WOM functions as a reinforcing medium between travel experiences, brand love, and destination image. These findings serve to reinforce the perspective posited by Rai and Tripathi (2020), which asserts that WOM exerts a more significant influence on consumer perceptions in comparison to formal promotional strategies. Therefore, it can be concluded that the most effective way to transfer the impact of MCBE and CBL into a positive destination image is to strengthen WOM. This finding carries significant practical implications for urban branding strategies. The findings of the study demonstrate that WOM exerts a substantial mediating effect in fortifying the association between MCBE and CBL on DI. The findings of this study indicate that MCBE a sense of affection for the CBL do not directly influence destination image, but rather, this occurs through the process of communication between consumers. WOM is the primary conduit for the dissemination of tourist experiences and emotions, which in turn influence collective perceptions of the city. Consequently, the concept of a destination image is formed from a shared narrative that emerges from consumer interactions. This perspective is consistent with those of Chu et al (2022)and Rai and Tripathi (2020), who assert that WOM not only reinforces individual decisions but also contributes to the social legitimacy of destination image, while transforming personal experiences into broader public perceptions.

## Conclusion and implications

The present study aims to examine the relationship between MCBE, CBL, WOM, and destination image in the context of cultural city tourism. The findings of the analysis demonstrate that MCBE exerts a substantial influence on CBL and WOM, while CBL has also been demonstrated to have a positive effect on WOM. However, it should be noted that neither MCBE nor CBL has a direct influence on destination image. In contrast, WOM has been demonstrated to play a pivotal role in shaping destination image, while concurrently mediating the relationship between MCBE and CBL on destination image. Furthermore, CBL has been demonstrated to mediate the relationship between MCBE and WOM, thereby substantiating the strategic role of tourists' emotional attachment to the city in fostering positive communication among consumers. In conclusion, these findings contribute to the extant body of literature on city branding by emphasising that memorable experiences and affection for the city can strengthen destination image when supported by WOM as a transformative mechanism. Theoretically, this study contributes by expanding the city branding model through the integration of MCBE, CBL, and consumer-to-consumer communication. In practice, these findings encourage destination managers to prioritise the creation of memorable urban experiences and the facilitation of positive WOM, both through direct interaction and digital media. From a social perspective, this study emphasises that a city's image is not solely shaped by government policies but also by tourists, who act as communication agents disseminating their experiences. Consequently, the active involvement of the local community is identified as a pivotal factor in sustaining a destination's positive image.

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