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Sub-Dimensions of Destination Brand Love and Their Influences on Destination Brand Loyalty: A Study of First-timers and Repeat Visitors

1. Introduction

Some streams of destination branding research have tended to focus on emotions because positive emotions elicit memorable experiences and predict loyalty (Ma, Gao, Scott, & Ding, 2013). The feeling of love a visitor holds for a branded destination is undoubtedly an important aspect of the relationships between visitors and destinations. In Hosany and Gilbert's (2010, p. 513) three-dimension destination emotion scales, "love," "joy," and "positive surprise" represent three major tourist emotional responses towards hedonic destinations (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). Compared with other related consumer brand relationship (CBR) constructs, such as brand commitment (e.g., Albert & Merunka, 2013), emotional attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), brand romance (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011), brand passion (Bauer, Heinrich, & Martin, 2007), and brand trust (e.g., Javed, Roy, & Mansoor, 2015), brand love is more inclusive and has stronger power to predict brand loyalty (e.g., Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). However, despite the importance of the destination brand love construct and its influence on brand loyalty, little academic attention has been paid to identify the relative significance of destination brand love's sub-dimensions in constituting brand loyalty (cognitive, attitudinal, conative, and behavioral loyalty). Moreover, some studies have demonstrated that first-timers and repeat visitors tend to visit different attractions, hold different emotional connections with destinations, and show distinct destination loyalty (e.g., Caber, 2015). So far, the extent to which destination brand love's influences on destination brand loyalty differs between first-timers and repeat visitors remains unclear.

This research aims to address these issues. The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to examine the destination brand love construct and its sub-dimensions based on previous work on product-based brand love, and second, to explore if the significance of destination brand love's sub-dimensions in constituting destination brand loyalty differs between first-timers and repeat visitors. This study is exploratory in nature and represents the first endeavor to test the impacts of destination brand love's sub-dimensions on destination brand loyalty among both first-time and repeat visitors. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Destination Brand Love

Researchers have validated various CBR constructs to capture as many facets of consumer emotional connections with brands. These CBR constructs include brand love (Batra et al., 2012), emotional attachment (Thomson et al., 2005), brand romance (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011), brand passion (Bauer et al., 2007), brand trust (e.g., Javed et al., 2015), brand identification (Albert & Merunka, 2013), and brand commitment (Albert & Merunka, 2013), etc. Brand love's multi-dimensionality captures not only positive emotional connection, affection, pleasure, and passion, as an emotional attachment and brand passions do (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011; Thomson et al., 2005), but also a long-term relationship, attitude valence, and attitude strength (Batra et al., 2012). The distinction between brand love and other CBR constructs have been both theoretically discussed and empirically tested (e.g., Albert & Merunka, 2013). Given brand love's high inclusiveness and proved power to predict positive business outcomes (e.g., Batra et al., 2012), this study suggests the construct destination brand

love for capturing visitor-destination emotional relationships. We define destination brand love as the degree of intense affection a visitor holds for a particular branded destination (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). We suggest six sub-dimensions of destination brand love: self-brand integration, passion-driven behaviors, long-term relationship, positive emotional connection, attitude valence, and attitude strength (Batra et al., 2012).

2.2 Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love and Its Applications

Distinguishing brand love from interpersonal love is necessary. As social psychologists define, love means “the constellation of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions associated with the desire to enter or maintain a close relationship with a specific other person” (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991, p. 26). From the interpersonal relationship perspective, love can be manifested through such objective measures as sexuality, fertility rates (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008), and demonstration of affection. The triangular theory of love by Sternberg (1986; 1997) deconstructed love into three dimensions: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Subsequent researchers have supported Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory in branding research (e.g., Aron & Westbay, 1996; Fournier, 1998). In 1998, Shimp and Madden firstly introduced the concept of *brand love* drawing on Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) were the first to assess brand love and proposed ten items to measure this construct. Batra et al. (2012) further identified sub-dimensions of brand love in general marketing contexts.

2.3 First-timers versus repeat visitors

First-time visitors behave differently from repeat visitors in many aspects. First-timers are likely to visit more attractions, seek variety and excitement, spend more on lodging, and be more active. On the contrary, repeat visitors tend to visit fewer attractions, find familiarity and relaxation, spend more on entertainment and recreation, be more passive, and show stronger intention to recommend and re-purchase (Caber, 2015; Shani, Reichel, & Croes, 2012; Fallon & Schofield, 2003; Oppermann, 1997). In sum, repeat visitors represent a highly attractive market segment that is cost-effective and tends to require less destination knowledge and behave more favorably for destinations.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

2.4.1 destination brand loyalty.

Dick and Basu (1994) proposed that customer loyalty has cognitive, affective, conative, and behavioral determinants. Brand love predicts brand loyalty (Batra et al., 2012; Dick & Basu, 1994). Specifically, Albert and Merunka (2013) stressed that brand love leads to both attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. In this study, we hypothesized that each sub-dimension of destination brand love would positively influence destination brand loyalty (Figure 1). The theoretical framework for this study (Figure 1) contains both formative/composite (destination brand loyalty) and reflective constructs (all the exogenous constructs). Destination brand loyalty is reflected through four types of brand loyalty: cognitive, attitudinal, conative, and behavioral loyalty.

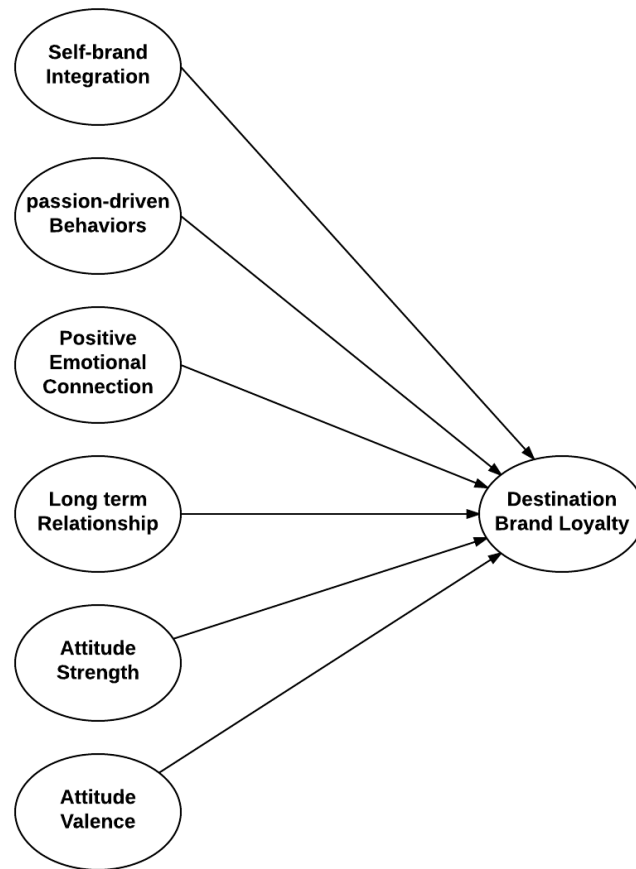


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

2.4.2 self-brand integration.

Consumers choose brands for both symbolic and utilitarian benefits. For this reason, favorite brands should be able to reflect consumers' current and desired self-identity and life meanings (Batra et al., 2012). Successful brands should relate to customers through "self-connection" (Fournier, 1998, p. 364). Known as a kind of brand identification (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010), self-brand integration denotes the degree to which a particular customer regards that his or her self-image overlaps a brand's image (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). Self-brand integration predicts brand love (e.g., Albert & Merunka, 2013). Since repeat visitors may

perceive a stronger overlap between their images and a destination's image, we hypothesized that:

H1: Self-brand integration has a positive impact on destination brand loyalty.

2.4.3 passion-driven behaviors.

From a product-brand perspective, passion-driven behaviors include willingness to invest time, money, energy, and other resources, passionate desire to use the brand, and things done in past (involvement), for example, previous interactions with the brand or the company that makes the brand (Batra et al., 2012). In the context of branded destinations, visitors' passion-driven behaviors could mean willingness to spend money and time visiting it, passion for purchasing brand-related products, and previous passionate interactions with the destination. Considering that repeat visitors tend to pursue more familiarity and relaxation instead of excitement and passion, It is posited that:

H2: Passion-driven behaviors have positive impacts on destination brand loyalty.

2.4.4 positive emotional connection.

Positive emotional connection, as another sub-dimension of brand love, is also multi-faceted. It informs the Intuitive fit between customers and brands (Batra et al., 2012). It indicates not only the emotional attachment piece of the visitor-destination relationships, but also multiple positive affect, such as content, relaxation, fun, excitement, calm, and pleasure (Batra et al., 2012). In this study, it is hypothesized that:

H3: Positive emotional connection has a positive impact on destination brand loyalty.

2.4.5 long-term relationship.

The long-term relationship represents customers' sense of long-term commitment towards a particular brand (Batra et al., 2012). In this study, the long-term relationship between visitors and branded destinations means that the resort may be in visitors' memory for a long time and visitors feel a sense of commitment to it. We hypothesized that:

H4: Long-term relationship has a positive impact on destination brand loyalty.

2.4.6 attitude strength.

Brand attitude strength and brand attachment are two distinct brand equity drivers (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Attitude strength refers to "positivity or negativity of an attitude weighted by the confidence or certainty with which it is held" (Park et al., 2010, p. 1). It reflects frequent thoughts of a particular brand and the certainty and confidence of feelings towards the brand (Batra et al., 2012). Visitors' attitude strength towards a branded destination conceptually means the frequency they think of the destination and their certainty and confidence of their feelings towards this brand. In this study, we hypothesize that:

H5: Attitude strength has a positive impact on destination brand loyalty.

2.4.7 Attitude valence.

Attitude valence functions as a significant predictor of brand love (Batra et al., 2012). It can be tested using indicators such as satisfaction, feelings of like/dislike, positive/negative evaluations, or met or unmet expectations (Batra et al., 2012). In this study, we posit that:

H6: Attitude valence has a positive impact on destination brand loyalty.

To address the second objective of this study, the researcher tested each of the above-mentioned six hypotheses among first-timers and repeat visitors to explore whether these six hypotheses hold in both two groups.

3. Methods

3.1 Data

The survey data were collected via a face-to-face administered questionnaire. The researcher approached respondents randomly in Shanghai Disneytown during January 2017 to invite them to participate in the study. A total of 550 questionnaires were distributed, and finally, 526 valid questionnaires were found to be valid and therefore retained for subsequent analyses.

3.2 Variables and Measurement

Measures of each latent construct are 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) that were revised after well-established items from existing literature. The researcher adapted Batra et al.'s (2012) brand love scales which comprehensively cover six important sub-dimensions of brand love (Batra et al., 2012). Destination brand loyalty is composed of four sub-dimensions: cognitive, attitudinal, conative, and behavioral loyalty (Oliver, 1999). The destination brand loyalty items were revised from Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, (2010). In the measurement item development stage, the researcher paid particular attention to make the measures reflect the case of a branded destination. The researcher adopted Brislin's (1970) back-translation approach to ensure the language equivalence between the original English indicators and their translated Chinese versions.

3.3 Data Analysis

The researcher conducted Partial Least Square Structure Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 3.0 to test the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model). SPSS 22.0 was used to perform descriptive statistics analysis (e.g., frequencies).

4. Results

4.1 Demographics

The sample of 526 respondents comprised of 404 (76.8%) first-time visitors and 122 (23.2%) repeat visitors. Considering that Shanghai Disney Resort was opened to the public on June 16, 2016, it is no surprise that around 80% of the visitors were first-timers. Female respondents (n=280, 53.2%) outnumbered their male counterparts (n=245, 46.6%). Approximately 40% (42.6%) of the respondents aged 18-38. Almost 60% (56.8%) of the respondents hold a university Bachelor's degree. The overwhelming majority (94.5%) are from mainland China. Moreover, over 70% (72.3%) of the respondents reported an after-tax monthly income of 1,800 USD or lower, which is approximately equivalent to 12,000 RMB or lower.

4.2 Measurement Models

Both the first-time visitor model (Figure 2) and the repeat visitor model (Figure 3) showed satisfactory reliability and validity. In the first-time visitor model (Figure 2), PLS algorithm and bootstrapping results suggested that all sub-dimensions of destination brand love and destination brand loyalty demonstrated satisfactory composite reliability (ranging from 0.892 to 0.956) and Cronbach's alpha (ranging from 0.758 to 0.966). Factor loadings in the first-time visitor model ranged from 0.771 ($p < 0.001$) to 0.951 ($p < 0.001$) and average variances extracted (AVEs) ranged from 0.725 to 0.869; thus, convergent validity was confirmed (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The congeneric measurement model did not contain any cross-loadings among variables or error terms. AVE estimates for each latent construct surpassed the corresponding inter-construct squared correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), thereby supporting discriminant validity.

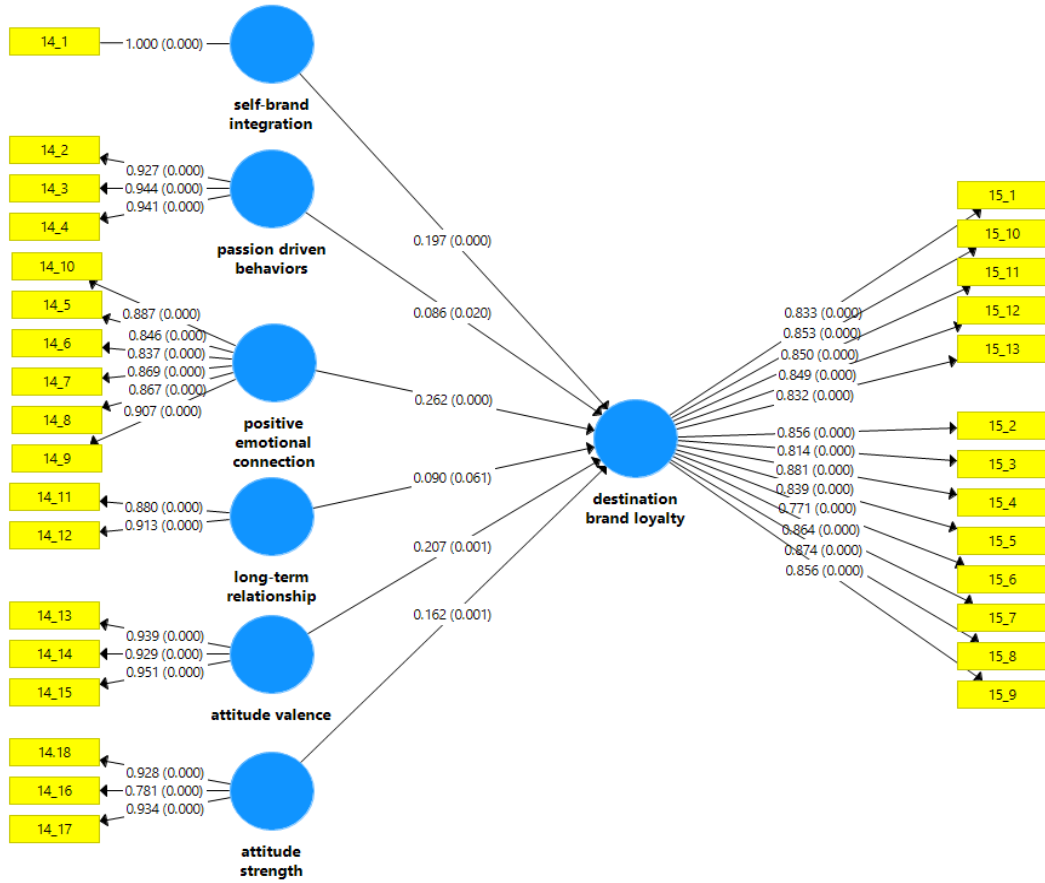


Figure 2: First-Time Visitor Model

Notes: 1. P-values are in the parenthesis.

2. The numbers outside parentheses are standardized regression weights and factor loadings.

The reliability and validity of the repeat visitor model (Figure 3) were also found to be sound. The composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha of latent constructs all surpassed the threshold of 0.9. Factor loadings ranged from 0.727 ($p < 0.001$) to 0.973 ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, AVEs ranged from 0.762 to 0.909, confirming discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

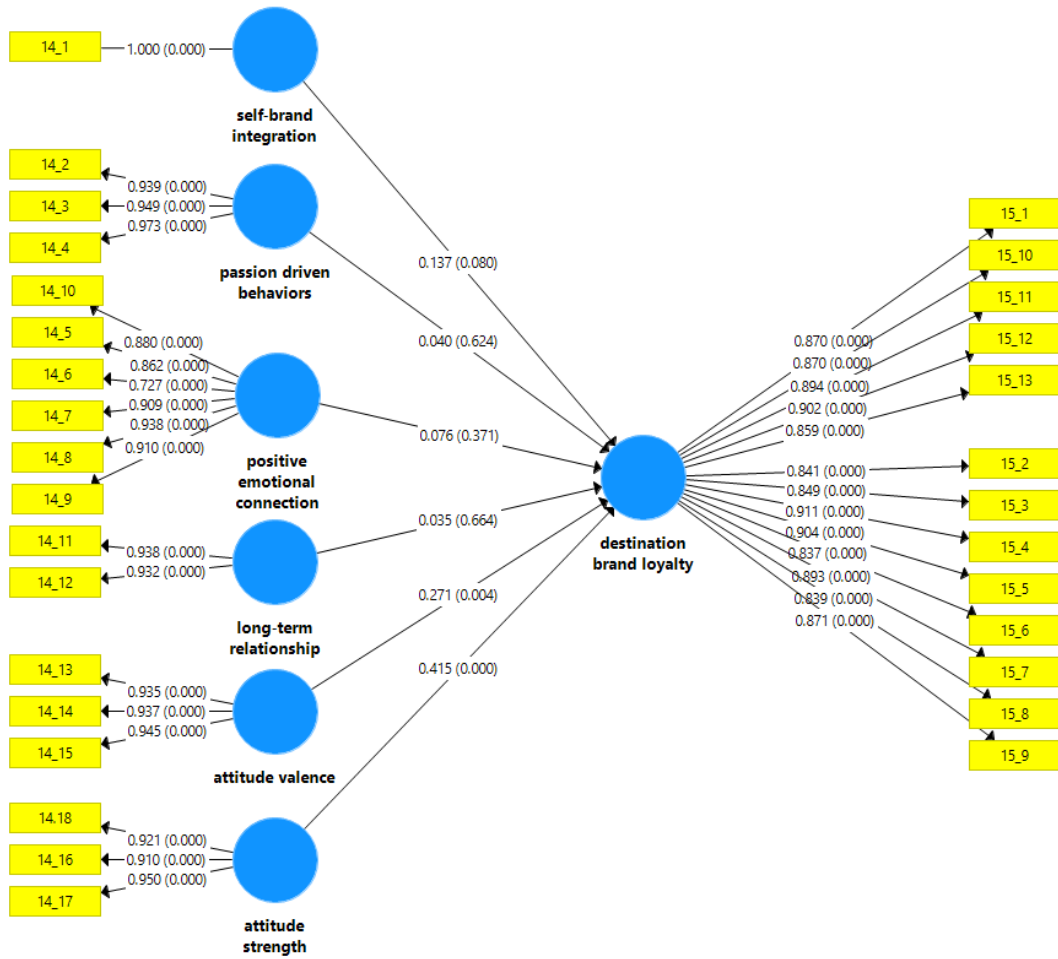


Figure 3: Repeat Visitor Model

Notes: 1. P-values are in the parenthesis.

2. The numbers outside parentheses are standardized regression weights and factor loadings.

4.3 Structural Models

The researcher carried out the PLS bootstrapping analysis (5000 resamples, two-tailed, (n-1) degrees of freedom) to generate results such as standardized regression weights, factor loadings, standardized errors, and t-statistics for the sample of both first-time and repeat visitors.

In the first-time visitor model (Figure 2), five out of the six hypothesized paths were significant

at the 95% confidence interval level, except for the path between long-term relationship and destination brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.090$, $p > 0.05$). Accordingly, for first-time visitors, the long-term relationship with a branded destination was not an important factor in strengthening destination brand loyalty. However, in the first-time visitor model (Figure 2), self-brand integration ($\beta = 0.197$, $p < 0.001$), passion-driven behaviors ($\beta = 0.086$, $p < 0.05$), positive emotional connection ($\beta = 0.262$, $p < 0.001$), attitude valence ($\beta = 0.207$, $p < 0.05$), and attitude strength ($\beta = 0.162$, $p < 0.001$) all positively impacted destination brand loyalty in a significant way.

The results of the repeat visitor model (Figure 3) differed greatly from those of the first-time visitor model (Figure 2). In the repeat visitor model, only two sub-dimensions of destination brand love—attitude valence ($\beta = 0.271$, $p < 0.05$), and attitude strength ($\beta = 0.415$, $p < 0.01$)—impacted destination brand loyalty significantly. The other four sub-dimensions, self-brand integration ($\beta = 0.137$, $p > 0.05$), passion-driven behaviors ($\beta = 0.040$, $p > 0.05$), positive emotional connection, ($\beta = 0.076$, $p > 0.05$) and long-term relationship ($\beta = 0.035$, $p > 0.05$), did not exert significant influence on destination brand loyalty.

PLS-SEM uses R-square (R^2) and Stone-Geisser's test (Q^2) (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974) to evaluate the path model's variance explained by the SEM model and the predictive relevance of the exogenous variables in the SEM model respectively (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Chin, 1998; Hair, Hult, Ringl, & Sarstedt, 2013). Chin (1998, p. 323) used three cut-off points to determine the degree of variance (R^2) explained by the model: 0.19 (weak), 0.33 (moderate), and 0.67 (substantial). The R^2 of the endogenous variable — destination brand loyalty— were 0.783 and 0.798 in the first-time and repeat visitor models respectively. Both models explained over 70% of the variance in destination brand loyalty. Therefore, both models can be assumed to

substantially reflect destination brand love's influences on destination brand loyalty (Chin, 1998). Furthermore, the endogenous variable's Q^2 values of both models surpassed 0 considerably, hence providing evidence that both models are predictively relevant because the endogenous variables are valid (Hair et al., 2013).

PLS path modeling's model fit criteria is still undergoing development. So far, only a limited number of model fit indices in the software of SmartPLS have been available, such as the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and normed fit index (NFI) (Henseler, Hubona, & Ray, 2016). The SRMR and NFI of the first-time visitor model were 0.045 and 0.825 respectively; the SRMR and NFI of the repeat visitor model were 0.055 and 0.754, all surpassing their suggested threshold (Henseler et al., 2016; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

5. Discussion and Implications

Brand love precedes loyalty, price premium, and resistance to negative comments. Identifying the relative importance of destination brand love's sub-dimensions in constituting destination brand loyalty will help destination marketing/management organizations (DMOs) identify the constituents of customer loyalty and ultimately create sustained brand equity. This study illuminates destination-visitor relationship research by comparing the significance of destination brand love's sub-dimensions in constituting destination brand loyalty among first-time and repeat visitors. This study identified that long-term relationship with a branded destination was not an important factor in strengthening destination brand loyalty among first-time visitors. Repeat visitors' attitude valence and attitude strength turned out to be significant contributors to their destination brand loyalty. Therefore, destination brand managers and DMOs are suggested market destinations to first-time and repeat visitors with difference focuses.

Specifically, resources should be channeled to improve the positive emotional connection between first-time visitors and destinations through making a destination as relaxed, funny, exciting, and pleasurable as possible. Improving repeat visitors' overall feelings/evaluations of a branded destination and increasing the frequency that a branded destination will pop into a visitor's mind can strengthen destination brand love, which ultimately promotes sustained loyalty.

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