

# Destination brand gestalt and its effects on brand attachment and brand loyalty

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This present study proposes an integrated model of destination brand gestalt, and its effect on brand attachment and brand loyalty. Specifically, it aims to investigate the aggregate influence of brand gestalt on brand attachment and brand loyalty at the construct level and its four dimensions (i.e., story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholder). The proposed model has been tested using a structural equation model on survey-based data with 684 visitors of North Sulawesi, Indonesia. To obtain robust and convergent results, the survey has been done across three destination categories (beach and sea, mountain and nature, festival and culinary). Results have confirmed that brand gestalt is a significant predictor of tourists' attachment and loyalty to the destination. Destination brand attachment and loyalty are influenced by three dimensions of the brand gestalt – story, sensescape, and servicescape. This study also provides empirical evidence on the effect of brand attachment and brand loyalty on tourism destination context. These results can inform tourism practitioners on the critical role that brand gestalt plays in strengthening tourist-destination connection, as well as creating and sustaining brand loyalty among tourists.

*Keywords:* Brand gestalt, destination branding, brand attachment, brand loyalty, Indonesia

## 1 Introduction

The interaction between tourists and destinations is far more multidimensional and more complex than the interaction between the consumer and traditional products or services in general (Pike, 2005). The complexity of tourism branding lies, first, in its unique combination of various products, services, and activities that can be challenging to generalize. Unlike the general concept of the brand, which represents a set of offerings with similar characteristics, a tourism destination can comprise of heterogeneous material and non-material elements (Florek, 2005). Additionally, a tourism destination is highly experiential and uniquely associated with the destination (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). This experience gives a different meaning to different tourists (Gartner, 2014). Furthermore, tourism destinations have multiple stakeholders with diverse interests that may work with or against one another (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012). The destination branding process requires collaboration and partnerships between the public and private sectors (Hankinson, 2009; Warnaby, Bennison, Davies, & Hughes, 2002, p. 880). Thus, it is imperative to consider destination brands holistically as a multidimensional and complex system.

Despite the growing interest in destination branding in marketing and tourism literature, previous empirical works have mostly focused on symbolic elements of destination marketing, such as name, symbol, logo, tagline (e.g., Hayden & Sevin, 2012; Kladou, Kavaratzis, Rigopoulou, & Salonika, 2017), image (e.g., Sou, Vinnicombe, & Leung, 2016), or identity (Greenop & Darchen, 2016; Hayden & Sevin, 2012). Relatively little empirical work devoted to addressing the complexity and multidimensionality of a destination brand is available. Thus, the present study fills this theoretical gap by extending the brand gestalt concept into the tourism destination context, which provides a more comprehensive and holistic approach to the destination brand.

Brand gestalt is a multidimensional entity with parts that are interwoven resulting in a higher functional system, more than the sum of its parts (Diamond et al., 2009). The concept suggests that the brand as a whole system plays a different function than each element, and should be studied in its totality instead of individual parts (Diamond et al., 2009). Viewing a tourism destination from the lens

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of brand gestalt enables one to capture the brand's complexity and the dynamic synergy among its components. "Wonderful Indonesia" is an example of a destination brand that encompasses a diverse and multifaceted tourism package to actual and potential visitors. It is a combination of various elements, such as people, physical environment, heritage, and attractions embodied in its breathtaking natural beauty, vibrant culture, fascinating experience, and exhilarating adventures. Likewise, "It's more fun in the Philippines" is a destination brand that promises something beyond travel experience, representing a combination of exciting activities, beautiful islands, natural phenomenon, and vibrant stories encapsulated into a multidimensional brand or gestalt. Both examples illustrate destination brands that offer a synergistic combination of multidimensional destination brands.

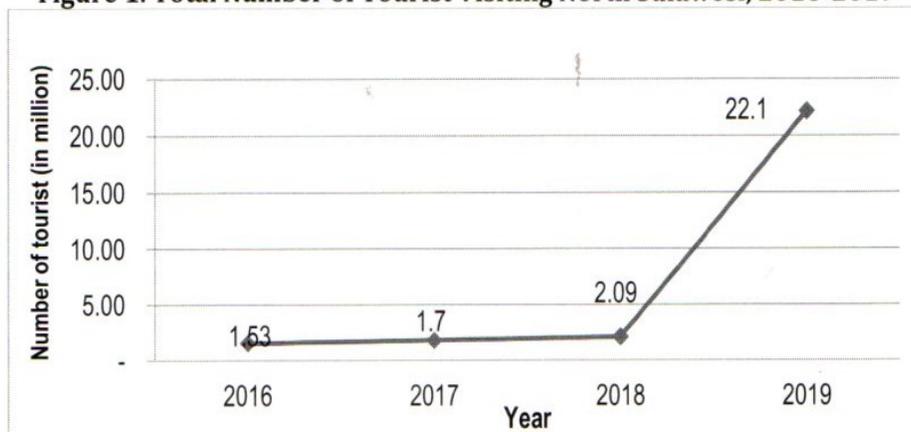
As one of the fastest-growing industries globally, tourism has become an essential driver of a global economy and a competitive industry. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, in 2018, the tourism sector contributed to more than 10% of global gross domestic product (GDP), 6.5% of total export, 4.3% of total investment, and supported more than 319 million jobs worldwide. Simultaneously, the significant expansion of the tourism industry has turned this sector into a highly competitive industry (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Tourism destination places are now involved in a constant battle to attract visitors (Pike & Ryan, 2004). With the growing penetration of digital technology, consumers have been able to easily switch brands, which in turn leads to more intense competition.

In today's highly competitive tourism environment, brand loyalty has emerged as a critical driving force for destination marketing strategy (Antón, Camarero, & Laguna-García, 2014; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Furthermore, brand loyalty is considered the core dimension of brand equity determined by brand strength (Aaker, 1996; Ferns & Walls, 2012; Kladou & Kehagias, 2014; Knox & Walker, 2001; Nam, Ekinci, & Whyatt, 2011). Similarly, brand attachment is also considered a key destination branding issue in today's competitive tourist market (Veasna, Wu, & Huang, 2013, p. 511). A destination can only benefit from the tourism sector if it can maintain a long-term tourist-destination attachment (Hassan, 2000). Thus, given the significant roles of brand loyalty and brand attachment, it is imperative to investigate the link between brand gestalt and these two crucial constructs.

Despite the significance of brand gestalt, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no empirical work has been devoted to explain the interplay of brand gestalt, except for a few related exploratory studies (e.g., Chernatony & Riley, 1998; Martin & Woodside 2011; Tierney, Karpen, & Westberg, 2016). Accordingly, the present study fills this gap by establishing a nomological network of brand gestalt by investigating its influence on brand attachment and brand loyalty. Specifically, this study explores the effect of destination brand gestalt on brand attachment and loyalty by looking at it from its multiple dimensions (i.e., story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholder). Looking at destination brands from different dimensions enables one to understand better the wholeness or the totality of a destination brand as perceived in the visitors' minds.

For this purpose, an empirical study was carried out in the province of North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Based on the recent data published by Badan Pusat Statistik (2020), this rising star tourism destination in the eastern part of Indonesia recorded significant increases in tourist visits in the past four years (see Figure 1). A thriving destination brand gestalt was critical for the province of North Sulawesi to maintain its significant growth in the tourism sector by creating and sustaining a destination-tourist attachment and loyalty.

**Figure 1. Total Number of Tourist Visiting North Sulawesi, 2016-2019**



Source: Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Brand Gestalt

The concept of brand gestalt posits that a brand as a complex entity is the product of the continuous interplay among its elements and the environment where it resides (Diamond et al., 2009). Keller (2003) suggests that given the current highly competitive marketplace, it is imperative to take a broader and more holistic brand concept by considering the link between the brand and other environmental elements (i.e., stakeholders, things, and other brands). Brand gestalt thus provides a more holistic and comprehensive assessment of a brand as a complex entity. As Diamond et al. (2009) note, brand gestalt enables one to study the brand in its totality more than just the sum of its parts.

Brand gestalt is essential to long-term branding success because of its ability to capture a brand's complexity, especially in explaining the synergy between its various components (Mandagi, Centeno, & Indrajit, 2021). However, no empirical study has been devoted to examining the interplay of brand gestalt, particularly in the tourism context. The most notable empirical work on brand gestalt is the seminal paper of Diamond et al. (2009), which views brand gestalt as a multidimensional brand construct composed of stories or narratives, physical environment (i.e., store or space), and various stakeholders (e.g., marketer, buyer, and user). The multidimensionality of brand gestalt is confirmed by Mandagi et al. (2021) who show that brand gestalt comprises four interrelated but distinct dimensions – story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholders.

In line with the notion that a brand is a complex and multidimensional entity, Keller (2003) proposes that a brand consists of three dimensions – person, place, and thing – that form brand knowledge. Similarly, Mühlbacher et al. (2006, p. 1 & 4) argue that a brand is a complex social phenomenon that consists of three interconnected elements – brand interest groups, brand meaning, and brand manifestations.

Following Mandagi et al. (2021), the present study operationalizes brand gestalt into four interrelated dimensions – story, sense, servicescape, and stakeholder. The interplay of each dimension with other variables is discussed in more detail in Section 3, Hypotheses Development.

### 2.2 Brand Attachment

According to the consumer-brand relationship theory, the quality of relationships between consumers and brands mirrors human relationships (Fournier, 1998). Consumers develop a positive connection with a particular brand based on their perceptions or impressions of that brand, resulting from a positive experience. In particular, the consumer-brand relationship construct is the accumulation of a customer's knowledge and experiences that determines one's future intention or behavior (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). In this sense, consumers develop an attachment with a brand based on its ability to fulfill their needs (Yuksel et al., 2010). The possibility of an emotional connection between customers and a brand is well supported in the marketing literature (e.g., Albert & Merunka, 2013; Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014; Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013).

A good brand always establishes an emotional connection or attachment to the customer (Berry, 2000). Brand attachment refers to a cognitive and emotional connection between the consumer and the brand, characterized by feeling, connection, or passion (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010, p. 2). It symbolizes nostalgic experiences, events, persons, places, or memories (Holbrook, 2006; Schindler & Holbrook, 2003).

Brand attachment is recognized as a critical driving force for a branding strategy because of its ability to predict positive consumer behaviors, such as a purchase or revisits intention, willingness to recommend, resistance to negative news about a brand, and willingness to defend it (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2014). Furthermore, brand attachment is regarded as a critical determinant of brand equity and brand loyalty (Levy & Hino, 2016; Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis, 2016; Park et al., 2010; So, Parsons, & Yap, 2013).

Recent studies on tourism destinations provide evidence that brand attachment can be extended into a tourist-destination relationship. For instance, the attachment to a destination is found to be a

Chiappa, 2017; Prayag & Ryan, 2011). Furthermore, brand attachment is a critical construct in destination branding (Veasna et al., 2013).

### 2.3 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is one of the most frequently researched topics in marketing and tourism because of its critical role in sustainable competitive advantage and strategic financial outcome (Grönroos, 2009). Generally, brand loyalty is associated with repeat purchase intention (American Marketing Association, 2017; Brady, Croninjr, Fox, & Roehm, 2008). Jacoby and Kyner (1973, p. 2), meanwhile, argue that brand loyalty is more than repeat purchasing behavior. It is the product of the interaction between the consumers' attitudes towards a brand and their repurchase intention for that brand (Dick & Basu, 1994). Brand loyalty is defined as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver, 1999, p. 34).

Based on the definition, brand loyalty is viewed as a behavioral and attitudinal response (Jacoby & Kyner 1973; Oliver, 1999). The first aspect captures the repeated purchase behavior, while the latter involves "a degree of dispositional commitment in terms of some unique value associated with the brand" (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001 p. 82). Brand loyalty can be influenced by some determinants, such as switching cost (Blut, Frennea, Mittal & Mothersbaugh, 2015), service quality and customer satisfaction (Fullerton, 2005; Kasiri, Cheng, Sambasivan, & Sidin, 2017; Sivadas & Baker-Prewitt, 2000), price promotions (Campo & Yagüe, 2008; Empen, Loy, & Weiss, 2015), and individual collectivist values (Thompson, Newman, & Liu, 2014). However, knowledge concerning a holistic brand perception (i.e., brand gestalt) as a determinant of brand loyalty remains scarce, which this study intends to fill.

Existing literature in the field of tourism recognizes the significance of brand loyalty in today's highly competitive tourism industry (e.g., Antón et al., 2014; Lee & Shen, 2013; Llopis-Amoros et al., 2019; Prayag, Chen, & Del Chiappa, 2017; Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Destination loyalty is an essential determinant of a favorable financial condition, such as increased sales and market share, and return on investment (Kabiraj & Shanmugan, 2010). Furthermore, destination loyalty provides advantages from the consumer side, such as favorable word of mouth (Sirakaya-Turk, Ekinici, & Martin, 2015). Given this pivotal role of brand loyalty in tourism destinations, it is crucial to examine the interplay of brand loyalty in the tourism destination context, particularly the linear relation between brand loyalty and other under-researched brand concepts such as brand gestalt.

## 3 Hypotheses Development and Research Model

### 3.1 The Relationship Between Brand Gestalt and Brand Attachment

This study is built on the notion of brand gestalt, which postulates that the brand, as a complex system, is a synergy product among its components (Diamond et al., 2009). This gestalt represents synergy among brand components and determines brand power (Diamond et al., 2009). Brand gestalt allows a holistic and comprehensive assessment of the tourism destination brand by looking at the dynamic synergy and interconnection of its elements. It serves as a total cognitive representation of how a brand is constructed in consumers' perceptions. Oliver (1999) notes that the accumulation of unique, experience-based information tends to form a consumer's brand perception, which is the pre-stage of commitment or attachment to a brand. In this regard, consumers' favorable perception of a brand (i.e., brand gestalt) is the antecedent of consumer-brand attachment. As such, when brand gestalt is positive, tourists are more likely to establish an attachment to a brand. Consequently, the following hypothesis is introduced:

**H1:** Brand gestalt has a positive effect on brand attachment, such that the more robust tourist's perception of a destination brand, the stronger is the tourist-destination attachment.

In line with the brand gestalt conceptualization (Diamond et al., 2009; Mandagi et al., 2021), brand gestalt is operationalized into four interrelated dimensions – story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholder. A story is an essential tool in building a powerful brand because it helps consumers sense their brand experience and provides meaning to a brand (Huang, 2010). Furthermore, the story is the

core of brand gestalt as it reflects the memorable experience that consumers have with a particular brand. According to Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott (2001), the story represents events, myths, and narratives. Like literary works, brand stories include plots, characters, and outcomes (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). In line with this notion, Fog, Budtz, Munch, and Blanchette (2010) argue that in the branding process, a story is an essential tool that comprises various components, whether real or fictional, such as the brand's heritage, founder, highlights, crises, and core values. The destination brand story is viewed from the tourist's perspective. It can be actual or imaginary events about the brand-related object (Fog et al., 2010), shared by the locals, travel guides, or other tourists, and written or spoken. The destination brand story comprises everything about the destination place, which includes its physical elements, the local people, and their culture, tradition, and rituals, individually or collectively, that can influence and reflect distinct brand values and identity.

People tend to develop attachments to objects that fulfill their needs, be it functional, emotional, or experiential (Park et al., 2006). Based on this concept, one can conjecture that a meaningful brand story that satisfies the tourist's emotional needs can facilitate the formulation of tourist-destination attachment. Ryu, Gordon, & Fu (2019) note that a brand story promotes consumer-brand connection by providing meaning to their brand experiences. The influence of the story on the consumer-brand relationship depends on the structure of the story. That is, a favorable structure of the story and the flow of the brand story can lead to strong tourist-destination attachment (Huang, 2010; Ryu et al., 2019). Therefore, the following hypothesis is postulated:

**H1a:** Story has a positive effect on brand attachment, such that a favorable brand story leads to stronger customer-brand attachment.

The second dimension of brand gestalt is sensescape. In this study, it is defined as how consumers perceive or interpret their previous brand encounters. It is how consumers derive meaning from their brand experience. In other words, sensescape is the sensory relation between tourists and destinations, mainly how the tourists think, feel, remember, disseminate their travel experiences, or encounter a destination-related object. Based on attachment theory's prediction, a hypothesis on the influence of sensescape on brand attachment is developed. Brand attachment theory posits that consumers develop a positive attachment to a particular brand based on their perception or impression of that brand (Park et al., 2006). This attachment symbolizes memorable experiences or memories that consumers have about a particular brand (Holbrook, 2006; Schindler & Holbrook, 2003). The same mechanism also applies in the context of a tourism destination. As noted by Yuksel et al. (2010), tourists tend to establish an attachment to a destination because of favorable experiences (i.e., fulfilling specific needs). Furthermore, recent studies reveal that memorable brand experiences can enhance consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Khan & Fatma, 2017; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). Therefore, based on the theoretical and empirical perspectives, the following hypothesis is developed:

**H1b:** Sensescape has a positive effect on brand attachment, such that a favorable consumers' evaluation of their brand experience leads to stronger customer-brand attachment.

Attachment theory postulates that people tend to develop an attachment to an object (people or things) that is responsive in fulfilling their needs (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Park et al., 2006). Similarly, in the tourist destination context, tourists are more likely to establish an attachment to a destination when it satisfies their specific needs (Yuksel et al., 2010, p. 274). The servicescape can be regarded as the physical environment where a marketplace exchange occurs (Bitner, 1992). In the tourism context, it refers to the setting or physical environment tourists encounter when they visit a destination. Servicescape can be the object of attachment when tourists visit the destination (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004), because of its ability to establish a distinct mental representation in the consumers' minds (Koshki, Esmaeilpour, & Ardestani, 2014). In this sense, when tourists evaluate the environment surrounding the destination as pleasing or satisfying, they are more likely to develop an emotional attachment with the destination. Applying this flow of thought in the tourism context, one can conjecture that a pleasant brand servicescape can satisfy consumers' emotional needs. The more favorable the brand servicescapes compared with alternative places, the higher tendency for the visitor to establish an attachment with a particular destination. Consequently, the following hypothesis is introduced:

**H1c:** Servicescape has a positive effect on brand attachment, such that a favorable brand environment leads to stronger customer-brand attachment.

In this study, the researchers also argue that brand stakeholders can affect tourist-destination attachment. These destinations' stakeholders consist of various groups, which include locals, government, business people, environmentalists, and tourists themselves. Line, Hanks, and McGinley (2018) note that tourists tend to establish a high level of attachment to a particular destination when they perceive a high similarity between themselves and the other stakeholders present at the destination. Tourists tend to prefer to engage with other stakeholders (e.g., locals or other tourists) when they feel they fit in, or they share similar interests or characteristics, which, in turn, leads to destination attachment. Thus, the following hypothesis is formed:

**H1d:** The presence of destination stakeholders has a positive effect on brand attachment, such that a higher degree of tourists' perceived similarity between themselves and the other stakeholders leads to stronger customer-brand attachment.

### 3.2 The Relationship Between Brand Gestalt and Brand Loyalty

By definition, brand loyalty refers to a favorable commitment or intention to repurchase the same brand repeatedly and recommend it to other people (Dick & Basu 1994; Oliver, 1999), which implies that for brand loyalty to occur, a combination of cognitive, affective, and conative brand preference must exist (Oliver, 1999). Supporting this idea, Oliver (1999) states that the cognitive aspect or consumer's judgment of the brand's performance is a critical pre-condition of brand loyalty. Given that brand gestalt represents a cognitive brand representation in the consumers' minds, it is reasonable to conjecture that brand gestalt is the prerequisite for creating brand loyalty. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

**H2:** Brand gestalt has a positive effect on brand loyalty, such that the higher the tourist's perception of a destination brand gestalt, the higher is destination brand loyalty.

The brand story has been regarded as a critical driver of brand attachment (Huang, 2010). Granitz and Forman (2015) note that a story allows consumers to interpret their brand experiences, allowing them to create an emotional bond with a brand. Hence, it can be conjectured that a memorable brand story can alter consumers' feelings or emotions, leading to brand loyalty via the emotional route. Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

**H2a:** The presence of a story has a positive effect on brand loyalty, such that a favorable brand story leads to higher-level brand loyalty.

Brand sensescape or brand experience is defined as the "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensation, feelings, and cognitions, and behavioral responses), evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009, p. 53). Numerous studies also demonstrate that a memorable brand experience triggers brand loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009; Dagger & O'Brien, 2010; Ding & Tseng, 2015; Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). In the tourism field, a memorable experience is also a significant predictor of loyalty, such as revisit and word-of-mouth communication (Barnes, Mattsson, & Sørensen, 2014; Hung, Lee, & Huang, 2016; Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2015). Therefore, the following hypothesis is introduced:

**H2b:** Sensescape has a positive effect on brand loyalty, such that a favorable brand experience leads to higher-level brand loyalty.

The third dimension of brand gestalt is the servicescape. The brand servicescape is the tangible or physical aspect surrounding a destination place (Bitner, 1992). This notion is like what Diamond et al. (2009) refer to as material environment, and what Keller (2003) views as places or space. The critical role of the physical environment on consumers' attitudes is documented in the marketing literature. For instance, Bitner (1992) finds that the servicescape has a significant impact on emotional responses that influence consumer behavior.

Similarly, Hoffman and Turley (2002) postulate that the physical environment has a powerful influence on consumer decision processes. Thus, it can be conjectured that when tourists have a positive impression of the physical environment in a tourism destination, it can influence their response and directly impact their behavior. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

**H2c:** Servicescape has a positive effect on brand loyalty, such that a favorable brand environment leads to a higher level of brand loyalty.

The fourth dimension of brand gestalt is stakeholder. According to Mühlbacher et al. (2006, p. 4), the brand stakeholder or brand interest group consists of people and organizations engaging in brand-related ideas, through various modes (e.g., physical or virtual), done directly or indirectly, and verbally or nonverbally. In the creation of brands, the active role of brand stakeholders has become a key focus of contemporary consumer research (Diamond et al., 2009). It is argued that while the brand owner actively creates the brands, stakeholders co-create them (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). The role of customers or stakeholders in the co-creation of brands is well documented in the marketing literature (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Centeno & Wang, 2017; Peñaloza, 2001; Solem, 2016). Stakeholder involvement practices or brand co-creation is reported to have a significant impact on brand loyalty (e.g., Solem, 2016). Bringing this notion into the tourism destination context, the stakeholders' involvement in destination brand creation can influence visitors' loyalty to the destination. When visitors are aware that brand stakeholders actively participate in brand creation, the visitor becomes more confident in the ability and integrity of the destination place in fulfilling his/her expectation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

**H2d:** Stakeholder participation in brand creation has a positive effect on brand loyalty, such that a higher degree of stakeholder participation in brand creation leads to higher-level brand loyalty.

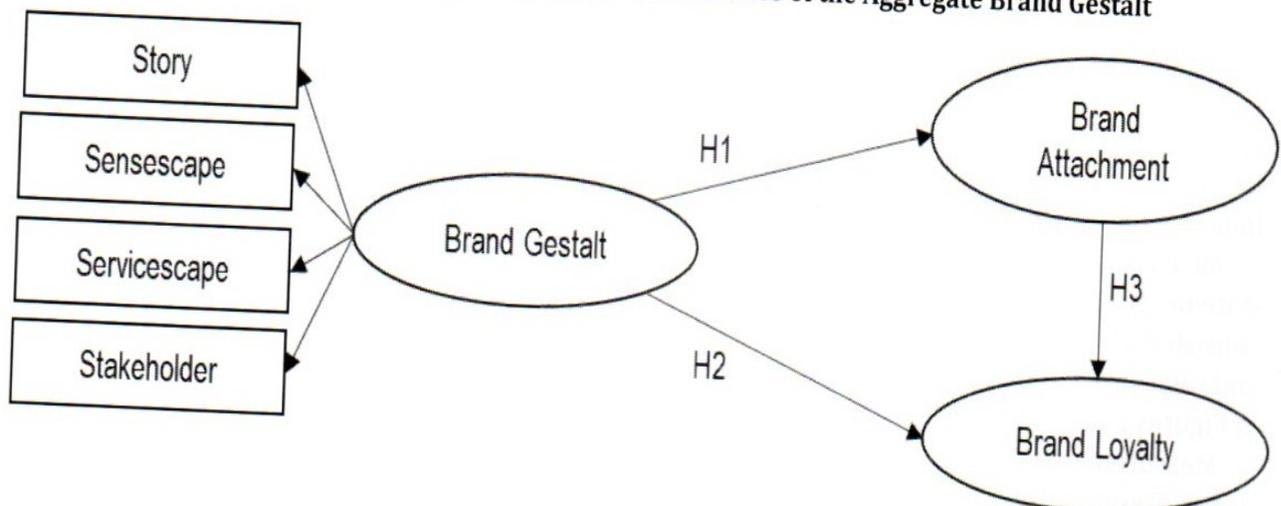
### 3.3 The Relationship Between Brand Attachment and Brand Loyalty

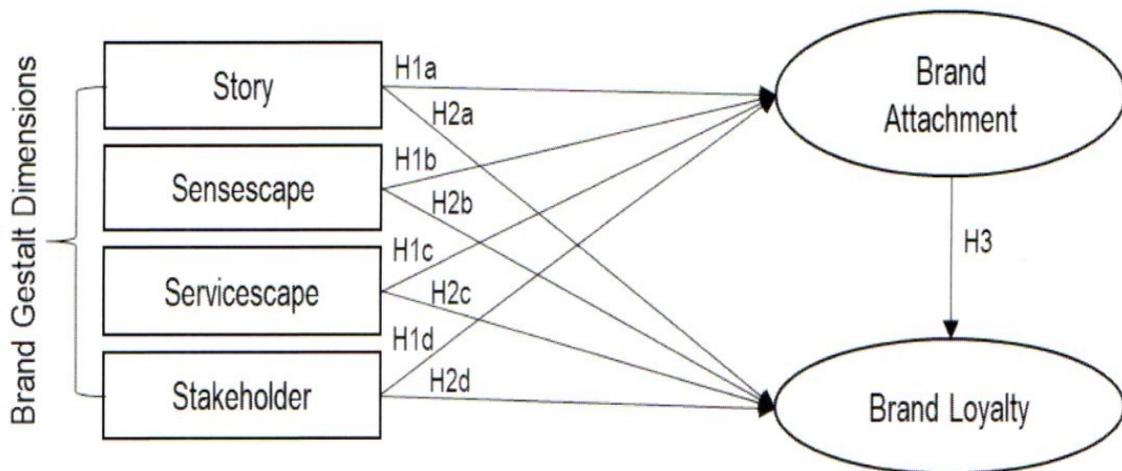
The present study also investigated the direct effect of brand attachment on brand loyalty. Brand attachment is an essential determinant of loyalty intention (e.g., Dennis et al., 2016; Levy & Hino, 2016; Park et al., 2010; So et al., 2013). When consumers have a favorable attachment (i.e., positive feelings, connection, or passion) to a brand because of their ability to satisfy their needs, they tend to develop loyalty. The same flow of thought applies in the tourism destination context. Tourists are more likely to develop an attachment to a destination because they assess the destination's ability to fulfill their specific goals, leading to the formation of their loyalty to the destination (Yuksel et al., 2010, p. 274). The positive effect of destination attachment on tourist's loyalty behavior is well explored in the tourism literature (e.g., Lee & Shen, 2013; Kim, Choe, & Petrick, 2018; Prayag, Chen, & Del Chiappa, 2017; Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Veasna et al., 2013; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). Consequently, the following hypothesis is formed:

**H3:** Brand attachment has a positive effect on brand loyalty, such that stronger brand attachment leads to stronger brand loyalty.

The relationships among variables are summarized in the proposed conceptual model presented in Figures 2 and 3. Model 1 shows the relationship among variables at the aggregate or construct level, while model 2 displays the effect of brand gestalt's dimension on brand attachment and brand loyalty.

Figure 2. Proposed Conceptual Model 1: The Influence of the Aggregate Brand Gestalt



**Figure 3. Proposed Conceptual Model 2: On the Influence of the Dimensions of Brand Gestalt**

## 4 Method

### 4.1 Data Collection and Sample

The target respondents of this study comprised both domestic and international tourists of North Sulawesi, Indonesia. The rapid increase in its tourism performance in the past four years affirmed this destination as one of Indonesia's five super-priority tourist destinations (see Figure 1). A pre-study survey was done on 128 tourists to generate the sampling area for data collection. Respondents of this pre-study survey were selected randomly and were asked to list their three favorite tourist sites in the North Sulawesi that they visited. The most frequently mentioned tourist sites in each category were Bunaken National Park (beach and sea), Linow Lake (mountain and nature), and Tomohon Extreme Market (festival and culinary). A field survey was then conducted in these three most popular sites to collect the main study data. Out of 800 questionnaires, 300 (38%) were distributed at Bunaken National Park and 250 each (31%) at Linow Lake and Tomohon Extreme Market. See Appendix for brief descriptions of these tourist sites.

This study utilized a convenience sampling method, a nonprobability sampling whereby members of the target population met specific practical criteria, such as those who were most conveniently available at a given time, easily accessible, geographically proximal, or willing to participate in the study (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 98-99). The surveyor intercepted the tourists randomly at each sampling area and requested them to fill out the questionnaire.

### 4.2 Measurement

A self-administered questionnaire was designed to serve as the survey instrument measuring all variables of the proposed model. The questionnaire was presented in both English and Bahasa Indonesia. After a professional translator translated the questionnaire from English to Bahasa Indonesia, it was then double checked by the research team to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

Measurements of the three constructs were carried out by a multi-item seven-point Likert scale statement ranging from (1), not at all descriptive, to (7) extremely descriptive. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section dealt with the demographic characteristics of respondents and some instructions. The second section covered the measurement item for the six variables detailed in Figures 2 and 3.

Measurement items for all variables were adopted from the existing scale with slight rewording to fit the present study context. Brand gestalt, as proposed by Mandagi et al. (2021), consisted of four dimensions (i.e., story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholder). Measurement for brand attachment consisted of four-item scales extracted from previous studies (Park et al., 2010; Swaminathan, Stille, & Ahluwalia, 2009). Brand loyalty was measured using eight items adapted from previous studies (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Ha, John, Janda, & Muthaly, 2011). The first four items measured attitudinal loyalty, while the last four captured attitudinal brand loyalty.

### 4.3 Pilot Study

The questionnaire was pre-tested using a convenience sample of 120 respondents independent from the main study. Feedback from the respondents and inputs from the experts were incorporated to improve the reliability, validity, and clarity of the wordings. For the revised questionnaire, a pre-test was re-conducted using another 80 independent samples of tourists. There were no more concerns regarding the wording of the questions nor the format of the final version of the survey instrument.

### 4.4 Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) is utilized to test the hypothesized model. SEM is a system of linear equations among several hypothetical constructs (Rao, Miller, & Rao, 2011), which is widely used in social research in testing theoretical models. The reason for using SEM over traditional multivariate techniques is because of its ability to estimate the relationship among multiple constructs (latent variable) in the measurement model and to test the relationship among variables in the structural model (Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012, p. 414-415). Furthermore, SEM is better suited in testing complicated relationships among several constructs simultaneously (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Hence, SEM's ability to deal with a complex model is suitable in explaining the theoretical relationships among the variables of interest in this study.

Data analysis was performed using statistical package SPSS version 26.0 and AMOS version 25.0. The former was used for the demographic analysis, multivariate analysis of variance (one-way MANOVA), reliability and validity, and correlation, while the latter was used for testing the measurement and structural models. The practicality and flexibility properties of AMOS provided an advantage for the data analysis in this study.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Demographic

For the main study, the questionnaire was distributed to 800 respondents from November 2019 to February 2020. There were 684 usable questionnaires with a response rate of 96%. From the 684 collected responses, 380 respondents were males (55.6%). Most visitors were between 20 and 29 years old, 85% of the respondents were first-time visitors, and 58% were domestic tourists (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

Characteristic	Category	Sample	
		N	Percentage
Gender	Male	380	55.6
	Female	304	44.4
Age	Under 20	217	31.7
	20 – 29	263	38.5
	30 – 39	38	5.6
	40 – 49	85	12.4
	50 and above	81	11.8
Frequency	First time	579	84.6
	Repetitive	105	15.4
Country of domicile	Domestic	399	58.3
	International	285	41.7

### 5.2 Analysis of Variance

To evaluate the total brand gestalt of each of the three tourist sites used as the sampling area, a MANOVA test was performed. The analysis was conducted by comparing the destinations' mean score of total brand gestalt and each dimension. As summarized in Table 2, each dimension's brand gestalt mean score was within a range of 3.80 to 4.74. In terms of the total brand gestalt score, the three tourist sites' mean scores were within a small range (4.20 to 4.28). The Tomohon Extreme Market had the

highest brand gestalt score, while Linow Lake had the lowest among the three. Tourists perceived Bunaken National Park as a tourist destination with the highest average score in terms of story (4.30) and servicescape (4.01). Meanwhile, the Tomohon Extreme Market scored highest in the category of sensescape (4.74) and stakeholder (4.32).

**Table 2. One-factor MANOVA Test of Visitors' Perception of Brand Gestalt in the Three Data Collection Sites**

Variables	Group*	Descriptive Statistic		MANOVA Test	
		Mean	St. Dev	F Statistic	p
Story	1	4.301	0.757	0.183	0.833
	2	4.264	0.720		
	3	4.270	0.611		
Sensescape	1	4.010	1.042	2.860	0.058
	2	3.802	1.069		
	3	3.826	0.984		
Servicescape	1	4.561	0.869	2.773	0.063
	2	4.566	0.971		
	3	4.739	0.872		
Stakeholder	1	4.253	1.083	0.925	0.397
	2	4.175	1.066		
	3	4.316	1.115		
Total Brand Gestalt	1	4.281	0.589	1.601	0.202
	2	4.202	0.605		
	3	4.288	0.503		

\*Group: 1=Bunaken National Park, 2=Linow Lake, 3= Tomohon Market

One-way MANOVA was performed to further evaluate whether the differences in each mean score were statistically significant. The results in Table 2 showed no significant differences in the brand gestalt perception between the visitors of the three tourism sites. Hence, it was reasonable to treat them as a single data set for further analysis (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009).

### 5.3 Reliability and Validity

For each variable's reliability, Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) were estimated, setting the cut-off value of 0.7 for both (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 3 showed that all the CA and CR values were higher than the acceptable threshold of 0.7, indicating that reliability was achieved.

**Table 3. Reliability and Validity Results**

Variables/Constructs	CA	CR	AVE
Brand Gestalt	0.92	0.92	0.73
Story	0.93	0.94	0.76
Sensescape	0.94	0.94	0.76
Servicescape	0.95	0.95	0.81
Stakeholder	0.93	0.93	0.78
Brand Attachment	0.95	0.95	0.76
Brand Loyalty	0.94	0.94	0.68

Validity parameters of the multi-item scales were further estimated by performing confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The significance of the factor loading and average variance extracted (AVE) was examined for convergent validity. Convergent validity was satisfied if factor loading was greater than or equal to 0.5 (Hair et al., 2009) and AVE was greater than or equal to 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As summarized in Tables 3 and 4, all the convergent validity indicators were beyond the recommended value.

**Table 4. Measurement Items Factor Loading**

Scale items	Factor loading
<b>Story</b>	
The story of this destination is an essential part of its brand.	0.90
The story of this destination makes it more attractive.	0.84
This destination has authentic stories.	0.82
The story of this destination affects me emotionally.	0.85
The story of this destination makes me feel connected with it.	0.93
<b>Sensescape</b>	
This destination offers novel experiences.	0.86
This destination puts me in a good mood.	0.86
This destination gives me pleasure.	0.89
This destination satisfies my adventure needs.	0.84
This destination makes a strong impression.	0.91
<b>Servicescape</b>	
There are a warm ambiance and atmosphere.	0.90
The location is clean.	0.80
There is a comfortable overall temperature in the place.	0.91
The location of the destination is accessible.	0.93
I feel safe and secure in the place.	0.95
<b>Stakeholder</b>	
The local resident is an integral part of this destination brand.	0.97
The recommendation of other tourists is an integral part of this destination brand.	0.88
The involvement of the local government in promoting this place is an essential part of this destination brand.	0.86
The collaboration among destinations is an essential part of this brand.	0.81
<b>Brand attachment</b>	
I feel attached to this destination.	0.95
I feel connected with this destination.	0.90
I feel bonded with this destination.	0.92
The destination is part of me and who I am.	0.88
<b>Brand loyalty</b>	
I would be willing to pay a higher price for this destination over another place.	0.89
I intend to encourage other people to visit this destination.	0.73
I will recommend this destination to someone who seeks my advice.	0.79
I will speak positively about this destination.	0.88
This destination would be my first choice.	0.83
I usually visit this destination instead of another place that offers a similar attraction.	0.81
I intend to keep visiting this destination.	0.90
I will visit this destination for vacation in the future.	0.77

Finally, discriminant validity was examined by comparing AVE to the square of the correlation coefficient between the two variables. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity was satisfied if the AVE value of the constructs was greater than the inter-construct squared correlation. The results in Table 5 revealed that the square root of AVE in the diagonal matrix was greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlation coefficient, indicating that there was discriminant validity of all variables.

**Table 5. Correlation Matrix with Square Root of AVE in the Diagonal**

	Attachment	Loyalty	Brand Gestalt	Story	Sensescape	Servicescape	Stakeholder
Attachment	<b>0.79</b>						
Loyalty	0.09**	<b>0.88</b>					
Brand Gestalt	0.47**	0.52**	<b>0.86</b>				
Story	0.12**	0.16**	0.65**	<b>0.83</b>			
Sensescape	0.12**	0.22**	0.62**	0.67**	<b>0.88</b>		
Servicescape	0.02	0.07**	0.57**	0.67**	0.25*	<b>0.93</b>	
Stakeholder	0.04	0.11**	0.61**	0.26**	0.29*	0.04*	<b>0.89</b>

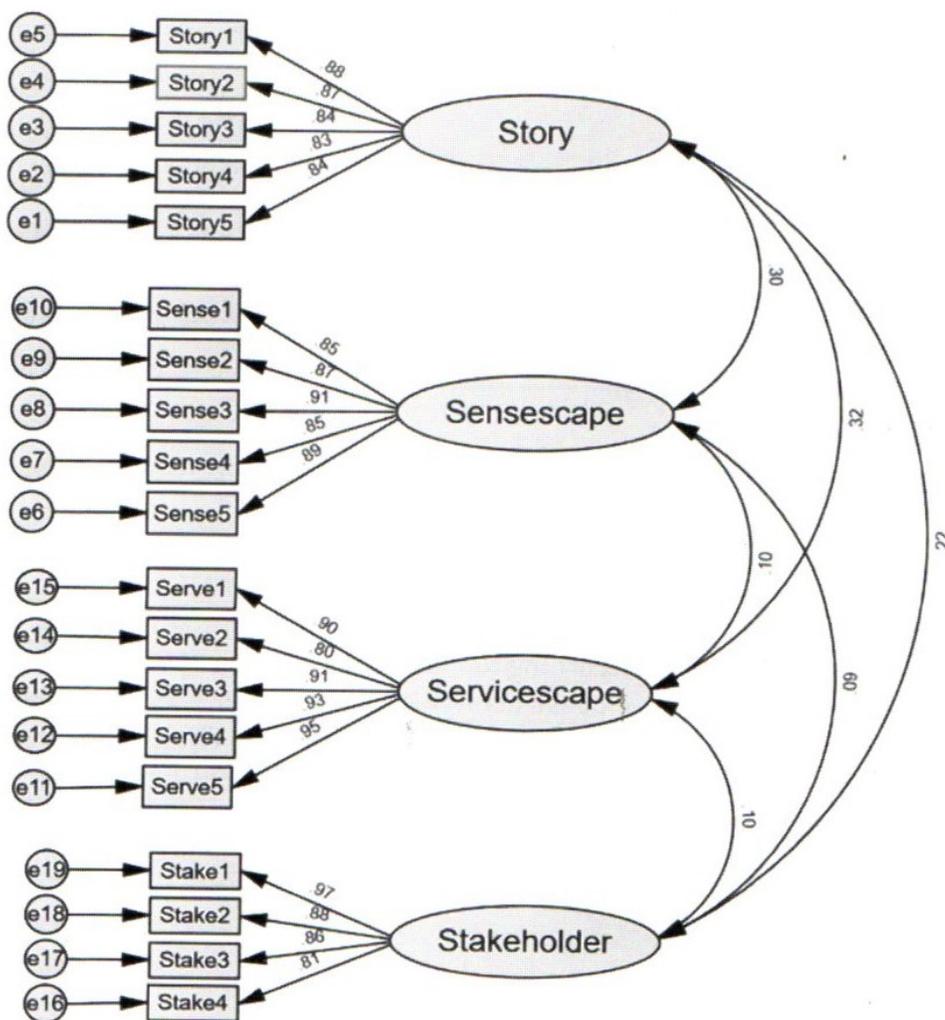
\*\* significant at p < 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* p < 0.05 level (2-tailed)

### 5.4 CFA Brand Gestalt Construct

Brand gestalt theory posited that the brand gestalt is a multidimensional construct whose dimensions are continuously interconnected to function as a system or gestalt (Diamond et al., 2009). A separate CFA was performed to validate the connectivity among the 4S dimensions (i.e., story, sensescape, servicescape, stakeholder). Hair et al. (2009) noted that CFA allowed for assessing how well the latent variables measure the constructs. Additionally, covariances and correlation analyses were carried out to validate the interplay and interrelation among the brand gestalt dimensions.

Figure 4 and Table 6 showed the covariance and correlation among brand gestalt dimensions were significant and positive, indicating a high degree of connectivity and relationship among brand gestalt's dimensions.

**Figure 4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Brand Gestalt Construct**



**Table 6. Correlation Matrix Brand Gestalt's Dimension**

	Story	Sensescape	Servicescape	Stakeholder
Story	1	0.67**	0.24**	0.26**
Sensescape	0.67**	1	0.25**	0.29**
Servicescape	0.24**	.25**	1	0.04*
Stakeholder	0.26**	.083*	0.04*	1

\* significance level is at  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

## 5.5 Measurement Model

Before performing the SEM, the goodness-of-fit of the proposed model was assessed with the following indicator as recommended by Bentler (1990) and Hair et al. (2009): chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and root mean square residual (RMR). The recommended values were CFI  $> .95$ , GFI  $> 0.90$ , RMSEA  $< .06$ , and RMR  $< .08$  (Hair et al., 2009; Hu & Bentler, 1999;). Table 7 showed the results; and the measurement model's results indicated an acceptable model fit when compared to the recommended cut-off values.

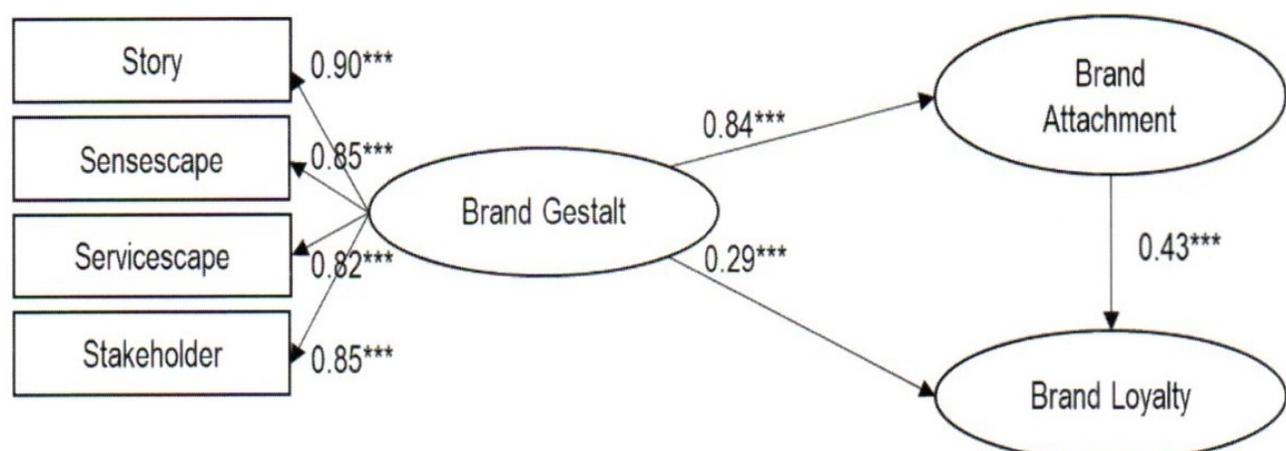
**Table 7. Goodness-of-fit Model**

Indicator	Measurement model		Structural model	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ )	758.38***	269.089***	758.38***	269.089***
CFI	0.98	0.98	0.98	0.98
GFI	0.93	0.95	0.93	0.95
RMSEA	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05
RMR	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$

## 5.6 Structural Model

The structural model was estimated using the maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS. Figure 5 and Table 8 showed the result for the structural model 1 with each path's significance. The final model confirmed the positive and significant effect of brand gestalt on brand attachment ( $\beta = 0.84$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). A significant and positive impact was also detected for the effect of brand attachment on brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results confirmed all the hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3) stipulated in conceptual model 1 (see Figure 2).

**Figure 5. Structural Model with Aggregate Brand Gestalt Coefficients**

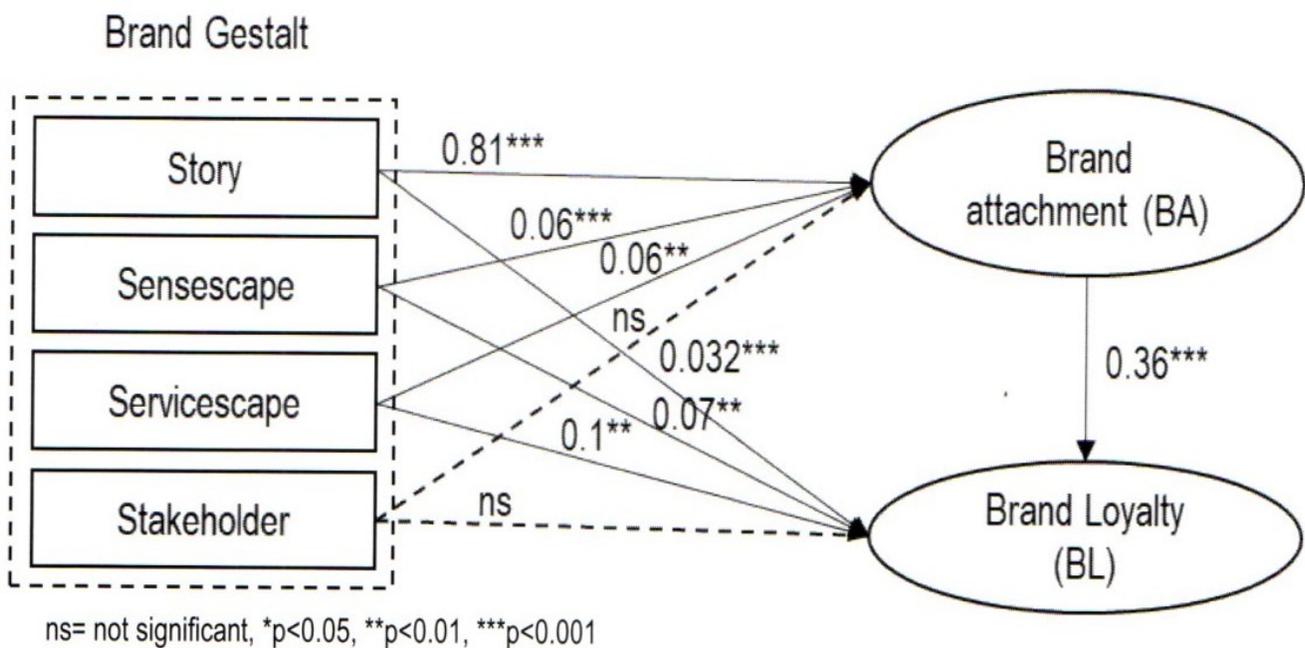
\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table 8. Result of SEM (1)**

Path relationship			Estimate	S.E.	p-value
Brand Gestalt	→	Brand Attachment	0.84***	0.04	000
Brand Gestalt	→	Brand Loyalty	0.29***	0.07	000
Attachment	→	Brand Loyalty	0.43***	0.06	000

Further analysis was conducted to investigate the effect of each dimension of brand gestalt on brand attachment and loyalty (conceptual model 2) (see Figure 3). As shown in Figure 6 and Table 9, the results confirmed most of the hypotheses of this study, except for hypotheses 1d and 2d. Three dimensions of brand gestalt were found to affect both brand attachment and brand loyalty. The brand story had a positive and significant effect on both brand attachment ( $\beta=0.81, p<0.01$ ) and brand loyalty ( $\beta=0.32, p<0.05$ ). A significant and positive effect was also detected for the effect of brand experience on brand attachment ( $\beta=0.06, p<0.05$ ) and brand loyalty ( $\beta=0.07, p<0.05$ ). Brand environment, on the other hand, had a significant and positive effect on brand attachment ( $\beta=0.06, p<0.05$ ) and brand loyalty ( $\beta=0.1, p<0.05$ ). Results also validated the positive and significant effect of brand attachment on brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.36, p < 0.01$ ).

**Figure 6. Structural Model with Dimensional Coefficients**



**Table 9. Result of SEM (2)**

Path relationship			Estimate	S.E.	P
Story	→	Brand Attachment	0.81***	0.03	000
Sensescape	→	Brand Attachment	0.06**	0.02	0.01
Servicescape	→	Brand Attachment	0.06**	0.02	0.01
Stakeholder	→	Brand Attachment	0.03	0.02	0.19
Story	→	Brand Loyalty	0.32***	0.05	0.00
Sensescape	→	Brand Loyalty	0.07**	0.02	0.02
Servicescape	→	Brand Loyalty	0.1**	0.02	0.01
Stakeholder	→	Brand Loyalty	-0.01	0.02	0.70
Attachment	→	Brand Loyalty	0.36***	0.05	0,00

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

## 6 Discussion

This study contributes to the growing literature on destination branding by proposing a model that integrates brand gestalt, brand attachment, and brand loyalty. The results of the SEM reveal that the brand gestalt positively affects brand attachment and brand loyalty. This result provides the first empirical evidence on the interplay of brand gestalt in the tourism context. Brand gestalt – a total cognitive representation of how a brand is constructed in consumers' perceptions (Mandagi et al., 2021, p. 2) – is the pre-condition of tourist-destination attachment. In this sense, consumers' positive perception of the brand's components' synergy is the antecedent of consumer-brand attachment and loyalty. This result implies that for brand loyalty to occur, cognitive components or the perception of the synergy among the brand's components in the minds of customers must exist.

The results also validate the previous studies which found that a brand story can design a systematic and sequential network of perceptions and feelings about a brand (Huang, 2010) and strengthen self-brand connections (Escalas, 2004, p. 168), which then leads to loyalty. In the tourism destination context, the brand story is a crucial element. People often have an idea about a particular destination place through the stories they come across, which in turn build their positive attitude towards a destination. A series of positive experiences tourists encounter when visiting a tourist destination can be stored in their memories as positive brand stories, which in turn promote building their trust in a destination.

Furthermore, the study's findings provide empirical evidence on brand sensescape on brand attachment and loyalty. These findings highlight the critical role of brand sensescape in enhancing tourism-destination attachment, which contributes to destination loyalty. These can inform tourism practitioners to focus on providing a remarkable and memorable brand experience in their service package.

The results also provide supporting evidence for the positive influence of brand servicescape on brand loyalty, which is in line with the previous studies on the critical role of the physical environment on consumer attachment and attitude (Bitner, 1992; Grönroos, 2009; Hoffman & Turley, 2002). Natural components, such as fresh air, vast land, pristine water, verdant trees, and the like, have increasingly become an extraordinary experience for consumers (Arnould & Price, 1993). Furthermore, the artificial environment also plays a critical role in the tourist-destination relationship. These artificial components are, for instance, layout, ambiance, design, decoration, and aesthetics (Lee & Jeong, 2012), lighting, color, and music (Bitner, 1992; Grönroos, 2009; Hoffman & Turley, 2002).

However, this study does not find support for brand stakeholders' influence on brand attachment and brand loyalty. Although the literature in marketing and branding documents stakeholders' role in brand co-creation (Arnould & Price, 1993; Centeno & Wang, 2017; Peñaloza, 2001), brand stakeholders in tourism destinations differ significantly from commercial products or services. Apart from visitors and tourism service providers, a wide range of tourism stakeholders, which include local residents, local government, local entrepreneur, destination community, environmentalist, mainstream media, social media influencer, tourism and hospitality worker, and other related parties, maintain a spectrum of interests that may work with or against one another (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012). The effect of this broad range of brand stakeholders on a brand relationship is more complicated than commercial products or services. Furthermore, the non-significant result for brand stakeholders' effect is due to the aggregating effect of stakeholders that confound the results. Depending on the tourism destination, the effect of each stakeholder varies from place to place. The insignificant result may also indicate that the measurement scale for stakeholders may need further refinement.

The study also corroborates previous findings that brand attachment is the antecedent of brand loyalty (e.g., Lee & Shen, 2013; Levy & Hino, 2016; Park et al., 2010; So, Parsons, & Yap, 2013; Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Yuksel et al., 2010;). In this sense, an emotional connection formed between the tourist and a particular destination can lead to loyalty to the brand.

## 7 Managerial Implication

Brand loyalty and brand attachment are widely believed to be critical in creating a sustainable tourist destination. This study demonstrates that brand gestalt strengthens the tourism-destination attachment, which in turn leads to loyalty. These findings provide some necessary implications for destination management organizations (DMOs), tourism practitioners, and policymakers. First, in the interest of stimulating tourist-destination attachment and loyalty-strengthening actions, a constant and regular evaluation of a destination's brand gestalt is critical. The evaluation of destination brand gestalt can provide a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the tourists' overall perception of the destination (Diamond et al., 2009). In this sense, brand gestalt informs the brand manager of a destination's prominence in the tourists' minds, and the salience of each dimension (i.e., story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholder) in view of destination brand construction. For instance, in the case of Bunaken National Park, the assessment of destination brand gestalt can help the DMO understand how strong the destination is perceived as a diving or marine park destination in the current or potential tourists' minds.

Secondly, tourism destination managers must devote more resources and engage in relevant initiatives that foster a tourism destination's brand gestalt. DMOs need to focus their efforts on creating and offering salient and unique service bundles that combine memorable stories, experiences, and physical environments to enhance tourist-destination attachment, leading to destination loyalty. In this regard, the tourism destination manager must focus on a more holistic offer by integrating brand gestalt's elements, namely story, sensescape, and servicescape, to add value to tourists' experiences. In the case of Bunaken National Park, the DMO must focus the engagement efforts on creating and communicating a compelling brand story that reflects tourists' memorable experiences when visiting the destination, and unique features of the location that can bond the destination and its visitors. The themes for the story can include, for example, "diving in crystal-clear water while enjoying breathtaking underwater natural wonders," "snorkeling in most diverse tropical water ecosystems," and "close encounter with exotic marine species."

Furthermore, DMOs need to enhance story-related stimuli, such as the destination's local culture, myth, heritage, history, and culinary expertise. The findings also suggest that the strategic integration of storytelling in the promotional efforts is beneficial. By utilizing and embracing technology and digital platforms, such as social media, destination managers may be able to reach out to potential visitors to discover appealing and engaging destination-related stories.

On servicescape, destination managers need to focus on preserving the natural environment, rather than on the artificial environment, as this is important in stimulating tourist-place attachment and destination loyalty. For instance, in the case of Bunaken National Park, continuous effort needs to be devoted towards improving and maintaining a wide range of natural environmental elements, such as its incredible marine life and rich underwater ecosystem, crystal clear water, mangroves, and white fine sand coastline. Any human-made structures must be consistent with and supportive of the natural environment. These artificial environment elements can include accommodations, restaurants, amenities, and other public spaces (Baker, 2007); lighting, color, and music (Bitner, 1992; Hoffman & Turley, 2002); layout, ambiance, design, decoration, and aesthetics (Lee & Jeong, 2012); and while these may draw tourists, they pale in comparison with the beauty of natural resources.

## 8 Limitation and Future Research

Despite its valuable contribution to literature, this study has several limitations. The first limitation is related to this study's conceptual model, which focuses only on brand gestalt, brand attachment, and brand loyalty variables. Other variables can be considered in the model. It is worthwhile to analyze the association between brand gestalt and other brand constructs, such as brand image, brand equity, and the brand attitude of mere intention to purchase (Mandagi et al, 2021, p. 9). Likewise, future studies may investigate the antecedents and consequences of brand gestalt, as well as the possible mediating role of those variables on the link between brand gestalt and brand loyalty (Mandagi et al, 2021, p. 9). Secondly, the study only tests for the model and the proposed relationship using data collected in a

single period. Further research with longitudinal data may be considered in the investigation of brand gestalt's evolution over time.

Also, the measurement scale for brand gestalt only captures the four dimensions that compose a brand gestalt (i.e., story, sensescape, servicescape, and stakeholder). It does not consider an interaction among these elements. Future studies can address this limitation by including the interaction among variables in the measurement scale for brand gestalt. A comparative study that analyzes each tourist site's total brand gestalt is also valuable in further explaining the interplay of destination stakeholders as their role varies depending on the destination type and characteristics. In addition to addressing the limitation mentioned earlier, future researchers can further validate the proposed models in this study in different contexts.

Finally, the nature of the evaluation of brand gestalt can be further scrutinized on a granular level. Evaluation aspects, such as perceptive evaluation (e.g., "has authentic stories"), importance judgment (e.g., "story is an essential part of the destination"), personal experience (e.g., "makes me feel connected with it"), and others are potential important aspects of measuring brand gestalt. Future research can expound further on the value of these evaluative aspects to the weight of brand gestalt as an entire concept. Future research can either do a ranking of the dimensions as to their importance vis-à-vis these evaluative aspects.

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