Key antecedents of brand equity in heritage brand extensions: The moderating role of tourist heritage experience

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the degree of fit between the brand extension and the parent brand, in the case of heritage sites, affects the extension's brand equity-formation, considering the mediating role of brand attitude and brand credibility and the moderating role of the tourist's level of experience of the parent heritage brand. An experimental design is applied, in which two different levels of fit between the parent heritage brand and the brand extension are controlled between subjects. Suggestions are provided for effective ways of enhancing heritage brand equity and therefore contributing to destination promotion and competitiveness.

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1. Introduction

Cultural heritage is considered a key factor in the socioeconomic development of territories in general (neighborhoods, cities, regions, and countries) (Bowitz & Ibenholt, 2008; Henche & Salvaj, 2017) and in that of tourist destinations, in particular (Carbone, 2016; Halpenny et al., 2018; Henche, 2018). When a heritage site is designated a World Heritage Site (WHS), this high-profile recognition constitutes a powerful heritage brand (Timothy, 2011) that enjoys significant status, perceived quality, and authenticity (Ryan & Silvanto, 2009). This heritage brand exerts a positive effect on demand patterns in the territories concerned (Halpenny et al., 2018; Poria et al., 2011), reducing tourist perceived risk associated with choosing a destination (Halpenny et al., 2018) and, ultimately, increasing tourist confidence in the destination in question (Hassan & Rahman, 2015). Therefore, heritage sites that carry the WHS hallmark are a focus of significant appeal for tourists and drivers of wealth-creation for the territories in which they are located. They also constitute an enormous source of potential for destinations' on-going economic

development through the creation of brand extensions—a topic of particular interest to marketing scholars (Aaker, 1990; Kim et al., 2019; Reast, 2005).

As bringing new brands to market is a costly endeavor, many firms opt instead for the brand extension strategy, which has been critical for business growth in recent decades (Aaker, 1990; Buil et al., 2009). While several factors are known to influence brand extension success, the perceived fit between the parent brand and the extension plays a particularly significant role (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Buil et al., 2009; Miniard et al., 2018; Reast, 2005). Perceived fit is derived from consumers' perceptions of the extent to which the parent brand and its extension share a likeness or similarity.

Most of the extant literature on brand extensions has focused on the industrial sector, and less so on the service sector (Lahiri & Gupta, 2005; Van Riel et al., 2001). Very few studies to date have examined brand extensions in relation to cultural heritage (d'Astous et al., 2007; Prados-Peña & Del Barrio-García, 2018).

Therefore, heritage sites—and in particular, those designated WHS—generate high brand equity, stimulating positive associations, such as quality, authenticity, artistic weight, and cultural and historical importance among their target groups. Brands carrying this distinctive hallmark are distinguished by their ability to evoke certain

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beliefs and trigger emotions, future behaviors, and values (Ryan & Silvanto, 2009). It is for this reason that destination marketers endeavor to build strong customer-based brand equity (CBBE) for their destination (Lim & Weaver, 2014).

Brand equity is considered a major business asset (Broyles et al., 2009; Lim & Weaver, 2014). Numerous studies have examined the antecedents of brand equity (Kocak, Abimbola, & Özer, 2007), including brand credibility and brand attitude. As both brand credibility (Erdem & Swait, 1998) and brand attitude (Buil & Montaner, 2008) are fundamental for the success of any brand extension, the present study takes them to be major mediators of the effect of fit on extension brand equity. The literature has also identified several moderating factors that may affect the process of brand equity-formation. According to Erdem and Swait (1998) and Kumar, Dash, and Purwar (2013), this process may be affected by the consumer's previous experience of the parent brand. There is relatively little literature addressing the moderating effect of consumer experiences of the parent brand on brand extensions, and the scholarship on this question is particularly scant in the context of heritage brand extensions.

The present research therefore seeks to make several contributions to the literature on heritage-brand management by broadening the current knowledge-base regarding the determinants of brand equity in heritage sites. It scrutinizes the effect of the degree of fit between parent brand and brand extension on heritage brand-equity-formation and examines the moderating role of the degree of experience of the tourist with the parent heritage brand in the antecedent relationships of brand equity.

2. Literature review

2.1. Heritage brands and cultural tourism

Cultural Heritage came to be regarded as an 'asset' that could be 'consumed' by the public when cultural tourism developed in the second half of the 20th Century. It was then that heritage sites began contributing significantly to the economic growth and dynamism of the territories where they were located. The major appeal of cultural heritage sites and the tourist consumption they generated led cultural tourism to flourish in the 1980s (Camarero & Garrido, 2004). The International Council on Monuments and Sites provided the first formal definition of this form of tourism that was based on the knowledge, protection, and conservation of such heritage but with a specific focus on monuments and heritage sites: "Cultural tourism is that form of tourism whose object is, among other aims, the discovery of monuments and sites" (ICOMOS, 1976).

According to Timothy (2018), heritage tourism is the oldest and most widespread form of tourism and is of great interest both for today's travel industry and academia. It is based on the use of historical resources and constitutes the backbone of the tourist economies of many destinations (Timothy, 2018). In this regard, the effective management of the destination brand in those territories with historical heritage resources can help improve their positioning and differentiation (Henche & Salvaj, 2017), enabling them to become destinations with a significant capacity to attract tourists and generate wealth (Henche, 2018). This latter author highlights the importance of correctly identifying heritage destinations by means of powerful brands—one primary example being the WHS hallmark. WHS status is a sign of distinction that identifies the best cultural and nature sites in the world (King, 2011), conferring a powerful brand image on them (Poria et al., 2011; Ryan & Silvanto, 2009; Timothy, 2011). Heritage sites that carry the WH hallmark guarantee visitors unique experiences and reduce the risks associated with choosing a heritage destination (Halpenny et al., 2018), as it is also a mark of quality and authenticity (Ryan & Silvanto, 2009).

Strong brands—those with high brand equity—are more likely to be successful when a brand extension strategy is applied than weak brands with low brand equity (Aaker & Keller, 1990). However, few studies have evaluated the brand extensions pertaining to a WHS brand. Among the exceptions, Kim et al. (2019) evaluated the effect of extending a parent destination-brand associated with a World Heritage-branded site to another destination. They noted that, when evaluating the brand extension, it is essential to investigate whether the brand equity of the parent brand is transferred to the extension.

2.2. Conceptual scope of brand equity in heritage brands

Destination branding is an essential factor in successful tourist-destination management (Henche, 2018). According to Poria et al. (2011) and Halpenny et al. (2018), destinations associated with one or more World Heritage-branded sites enjoy the positive effect of the WH hallmark on demand patterns, visit intention, and tourist behavior (recommendation and revisit intention). Indeed, Halpenny et al. (2018) recommend that destination managers, in their promotional efforts, prioritize messages related to the WHS brand associated with the destination. The generation of powerful brand equity for this type of heritage brand is deemed to be a strategy of enormous importance for destination managers (Del Barrio-García & Prados-Peña, 2019).

Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers". This definition considers brand equity to be an "added value" that the brand provides to the product. Likewise, Keller (1993) defined customer-based brand equity (CBBE) as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand".

There is consensus in the literature that CBBE, proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), constitutes a valid means by which marketers, in general, and destination marketers, in particular, can gage consumers' perceptions of brands and destinations (Pike & Bianchi, 2013), including WHS-branded destinations (Halpenny et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2019).

Following these findings, most authors consider CBBE to be a multidimensional concept comprising several dimensions (Bianchi et al., 2014; Boo et al., 2009; Camarero et al., 2012). In line with this perspective, the present research proposes the measurement of CBBE by means of the three key dimensions highlighted by the originators of the concept: perceived quality, brand image, and brand loyalty.

Perceived quality refers to the consumer's assessment of the overall excellence or superiority of a product (Zeithaml, 1988). Keller (1993) defines brand associations (that is, brand image) as those brand perceptions that are reflected as associations in the consumer's memory. In the case of destinations, Bigné, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001 note that perceptions of a destination brand are a key factor in the success of that brand. Aaker (1991) defines brand loyalty as the degree of attachment (or commitment) a customer feels toward a brand.

Ryan and Silvanto (2009), among others, argue that heritage sites branded WHS are particularly sought-after and tend to enjoy strong brand equity and positive associations among past and potential publics. Apart from their cultural, artistic, and historical importance, they are also associated with quality and authenticity. King (2011) introduced the notion of visitor-based brand equity, which comprises all of the thoughts a visitor has about a protected area, based on everything they know, feel, hear, or have experienced in relation to the brand or a specific place.

Similarly, according to Poria et al. (2011), "WHS designation, *per se*, constitutes effective brand equity" (p.199) and generates a differential effect on consumer responses (King, 2011), as well as a positive effect on patterns of demand. The latter include greater willingness to pay an entrance fee and pay for a guided tour, and extra motivation to invest time in the visit (Poria et al., 2011). The WHS brand also

helps increase the level of confidence felt by tourists (Hassan & Rahman, 2015). More recently, Halpenny et al. (2018) found that WH brand equity exerts a positive effect on intention to visit a WH site.

2.3. Brand extensions in the case of heritage brands

Kim et al. (2019) note that the WHS brand is extremely well-known the world over, and they enjoy a high value, which makes them good candidates for extension to other areas or sectors that can act as a springboard to wealth-creation. These authors conclude that the brand equity of a parent brand with the WHS hallmark is easily transferred to brand extensions. Lim *et al.* (2014) examined how certain elements that form part of the brand equity of a tourist destination, such as its image, are transferred to other products extended out of that destination.

Drawing on the classical literature on brand extensions, Aaker and Keller (1990) define brand extension as the "use of established brand names to launch new products" (p. 27). The success of brand extensions depends on how they are evaluated by consumers (Buil & Montaner, 2008; Völckner & Sattler, 2006), which will be determined by the extent to which the firm has succeeded in seamlessly and congruently integrating what the parent brand conveys (from its tangible claims and visual elements to subliminal signals) with what the new product conveys (Anderson, 1981). Academic research has identified differences between the brand extensions of goods vs. services in terms of their success, although in the latter case there is relatively little literature (Sichtmann et al., 2017).

In the arts and culture sphere, the unique nature of cultural products—such as cultural heritage sites—needs to be taken into account when assessing brand extensions because attempting to associate a heritage destination "with a mass-produced, utilitarian product may appear as incongruent" (d'Astous et al., 2007: 233).

In many of the studies dealing with how consumers evaluate brand extensions (e.g. Aaker & Keller, 1990; Völckner & Sattler, 2006), the fit between the parent brand and its extension is one of the key factors in the success of the extension in question. Indeed, according to the latter authors, perceived fit is the most critical issue in consumers' assessment of brand extensions. As noted earlier, the extent of perceived fit or likeness between the parent brand and its extension equates to the degree of congruence that consumers perceive between the two (Buil et al., 2009). In short, perceived fit can be defined as the perceived similarity (i.e. attributes, product category, or benefit-related associations) between the parent brand and its brand extension, together with the congruence between the respective sets of brand associations (Bouch & Loken, 1991; Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994).

2.4. Brand-extension attitude and brand-extension credibility as antecedents of brand equity

Attitudes are a collection of judgments and general assessments made on the basis of any information related to the brand (Keller, 2003). Various studies have concluded that brand attitude is an important driver of brand equity (Ansary & Hashim, 2018; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). Furthermore, the study carried out by Chang and Liu (2009) on service brands found that brand attitude is an antecedent of brand equity-formation. Christodoulides and Chernatony (2010) found that a positive attitude toward the brand translates into greater product utility and enables the brand to achieve higher margins than it otherwise would without the brand name.

In the case of WH sites, King (2011) notes that attitude toward the protected site is among the most fundamental elements of brand equity for the visitor.

Based on the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. *The more favorable the visitor's brand-extension attitude, the greater the brand equity of that extension.*

Another factor considered by the literature to be a key antecedent of brand equity-formation is brand credibility (Broyles et al., 2009; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2018). Brand credibility has been defined as a brand's transparency and its honesty vis-à-vis the consumer, coupled with its willing attitude toward dealing with any complaints and its capacity to resolve them effectively (Morhart et al., 2015). Credibility improves consumers' subjective evaluations of the brand and their perceptions of its quality (Baek et al., 2010; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2018).

According to Dwivedi *et al.* (2018), "brand credibility is critical to creating a long-term relationship with a consumer" (p. 1183). Therefore, "credibility, built through trust and clarity of purpose, leads to brand loyalty" (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2018: 1183) and, in turn, to brand equity. More recently, Del Barrio-García & Prados-Peña (2019) demonstrated that, in the case of heritage sites bearing the WH hallmark, the greater the credibility of the heritage brand extension, the greater its brand equity.

In light of the above findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. *The more credible the visitor perceives the heritage brand extension to be, the greater the brand equity of that extension.*

2.5. The antecedent role of extension fit in heritage brand extension equity-formation

As previously noted, among all the various success factors of brand extensions, of particular importance is the extent to which the extension is perceived by consumers to be congruent with the parent brand (Lane & Fastoso, 2016). This congruence or fit is defined as the perceived similarity and relevance of the associations between the parent brand (attributes or benefits) and the brand extension (Boush & Loken, 1991; Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994).

It has been demonstrated by several studies (e.g. Dwivedi et al., 2010; Völckner & Sattler, 2006) that brand extensions presenting a high level of fit with the parent brand, in terms of brand associations, are preferred by consumers. For example, Dwivedi et al. (2010) demonstrated that the more congruent the parent-brand–extension fit, the more positive consumer attitudes toward the brand extension in question. More specifically, in the case of luxury brands, Eren-Erdogmus et al., and Arda (2018) also found parent-brand–extension fit to be a prerequisite for positive attitudes toward the extensions. Therefore, the degree of fit appears to be the most significant determinant for brand extensions pertaining to highly desirable and reputable brands such as luxury brands.

Following on from this finding, heritage brands carrying the WH hallmark can be considered the most desirable in their field, on a worldwide level. The same effects may therefore be expected. On this point, Kim et al. (2019) show that, in the case of heritage brands carrying the WH mark, there is a very marked transfer of affect from the parent brand to the extension.

On this premise, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. *The greater the degree of fit between the heritage site brand and its extension, the more favorable brand-extension attitude will be.*

The academic literature has also demonstrated that a greater perceived fit brings with it a more favorable consumer evaluation of the brand extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Boush & Loken, 1991; Dwivedi et al., 2010), as the new (extended) product acquires credibility among consumers (Buil et al., 2009). If the firm launches a product that presents a high level of fit with the parent brand, consumers will perceive a good adaptation of the original, and this will result in its positive qualities being transferred to the extension. Among such qualities, credibility is of particular importance, leading to a more positive evaluation of the extension (Reast, 2005). In line with these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. *The greater the degree of fit between the heritage site brand and its extension, the more credible that extension will be.*

2.6. Consumer experience of the parent brand: Its moderating role in behavior

The extent of the consumer's experience of the product category is a construct that has been found to be a primary moderator of consumer behavior (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000). Many studies have identified that previous consumer experience of the brand exerts an effect on other variables of consumer behavior. On the one hand, Chang and Chieng (2006) concluded that brand experience had a positive influence on brand associations, and hence on brand attitude. Brakus et al., and Zarantonello (2009) and Keller (2003) note that brand-related experiences play a significant role in brand preference, brand credibility, and satisfaction. According to Keller (2001) and Roberts (2005), brand image is shaped by brand experience.

In the service realm more specifically, O'Cass and Grace (2004), and Sirapracha and Tocquer (2012) showed how consumers' brand experience plays an important part in the clarity of their image of the brand in question. Likewise, Ding and Tseng (2015) found that the experience of the brand affected its perceived quality.

Scholars have also associated brand experience with brand equity. Brand experience is a determining factor in brand equity-formation (Delgado & Fernandez, 2011; Kumar et al., 2013). According to Kumar et al. (2013), the behavioral, intellectual, sensory, and affective dimensions of brand experience exert a positive effect on the various dimensions of brand equity.

According to Herbig and Milewicz (1993), the level of credibility also depends on the previous and current experiences the consumer has of the brand. Therefore, brand experience will have a hand in shaping brand equity (Delgado & Fernandez, 2011; Kumar et al., 2013).

In the service context, Beerli and Martín (2004) assert that repeat visitors are likely to know more about the tourist destination than first-timers, which suggests that the former will already have developed an impression of the service quality it offers. Consequently, destination image and perceived value among repeat visitors will differ significantly from those of first-time visitors, whose information about the destination derives solely from external sources (Frías-Jamilena *et al.*, 2012).

According to research by Schlegelmilch (2016) and Swaminathan (2003) on brand extensions, the consumer's previous experience of the parent brand (or lack thereof) also positively influences how they respond to its extension. Del Barrio-García & Prados-Peña (2019) also demonstrated the moderating effect of tourist previous experience of destinations with World Heritage-branded sites on the relationship between heritage brand authenticity and credibility (respectively) and brand equity.

In light of the above findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7. *Previous experience of the parent brand moderates the antecedent relationships of extension brand equity.*

Based on the proposed hypotheses, in Fig. 1 a theoretical model of brand equity-formation for heritage sites is proposed.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data-collection

The Monumental Complex of the Alhambra and the Generalife (MCAG) in Granada, Spain—a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984—was selected as the parent heritage brand for this study. The MCAG attracted over 2.7 million visitors in 2019 and is among the European attractions with the greatest tourist demand. It constitutes a perfect case on which to base the present research aims, as the
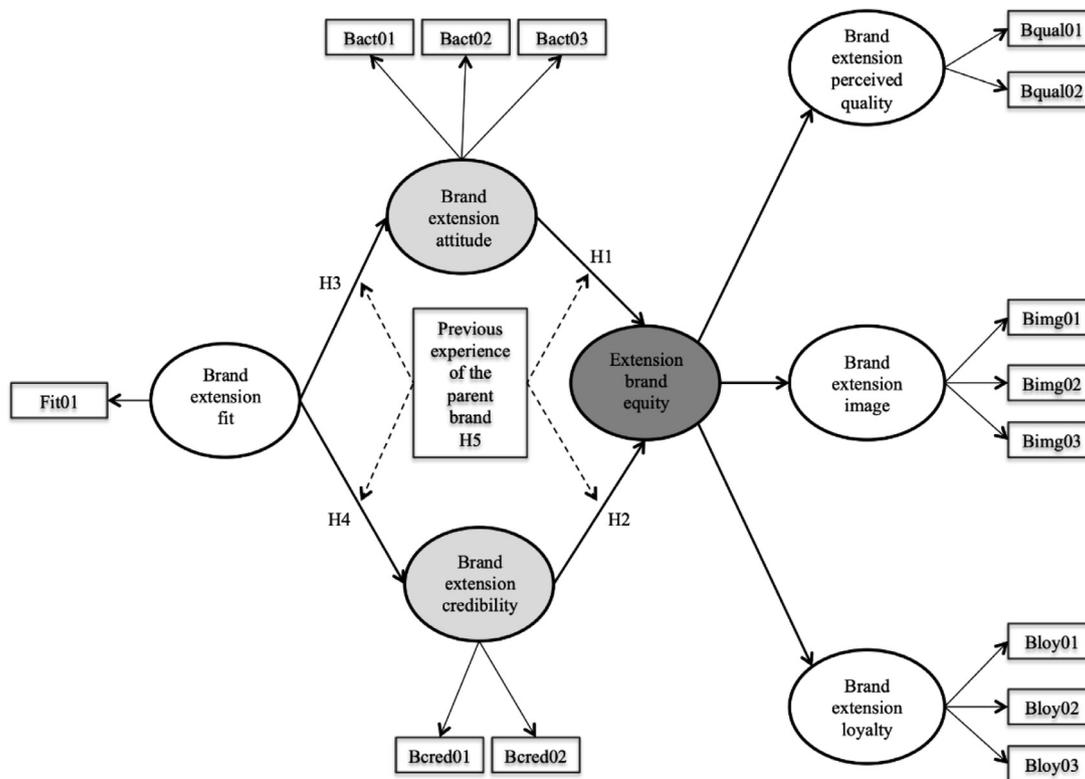

Fig. 1. Theoretical model: Brand equity-formation among heritage brand extensions.

symbols and icons associated with the MCAG have long been used by firms for commercial purposes.

The sample was created by random selection among tourist visitors to the MCAG site during the spring of 2018. The interviewers, who had been thoroughly briefed on the study beforehand, informed the tourists about the purpose of the research and invited them to participate in the study. Those who accepted were asked to respond to a series of preliminary questions and then invited to read one version of the flyer or the other (depending on the treatment to which they had been assigned). After studying the flyer carefully for up to one minute, they responded to a questionnaire covering the dependent measures.

The sample of 328 tourists was fairly well balanced between the two treatments. It also presented a reasonable gender balance (male: 145; female: 183) but slightly less balance in terms of age profile (<25 years: 90; 25−40 years: 117; 41−55 years: 71; >55 years: 50) and marital status (single: 158; married: 130; other status: 40).

3.2. Independent variable and experimental stimuli

A between-subjects experimental design was used to test the proposed hypotheses, in which the independent variable was the degree of fit between the parent heritage brand and the brand extension, with two levels: high vs. low degree of fit.

The degree of fit was manipulated on the basis of the conceptual definition proposed by the academic literature, according to which this construct refers to perceived similarity in terms of product category or, where this is lacking, benefit-related associations (Bouch & Loken, 1991; Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994). The notion of similarity derives from the transfer of the associations of the parent-brand category to the brand-extension category. This refers to the features, benefits, attributes, or characteristics they may have in common, based on images specific to the brand, for example (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994) or applied to other products in the same category (Herr et al., 1996).

To assess the degree of fit, a pretest was performed among 250 marketing undergraduates from a university in southern Europe. The pretest participants were invited to a lecture dealing with the topic of brand extension, where the 'extension fit' concept was explained. After the lecture, they were invited to discuss the MCAG and its role in tourism. Each of the participants was then required to generate a list of product categories presenting a high vs. low degree of congruence with the MCAG's main area of activity, based on their own opinion. The results of the pretest showed that the category 'hotels' was perceived as the one that most closely matched the MCAG, while 'clothing and accessories' was the product category deemed least congruent with the MCAG. On this basis, two fictitious brands were professionally developed for the study: a hotel and a clothing and accessories shop. A flyer was produced for each brand, both versions of which featured virtually identical content and design, including a short description of the brand, the name of the brand itself, and a logo, together with a series of images.

3.3. Dependent measures

The measurement instrument used in the present analysis was derived from scales tested and validated in other contexts by different authors and adapted to the specific research context (see Table 1). Following the concepts most commonly used in the literature (Yoo et al., 2000), brand equity was measured using three primary constructs (as a second-order construct): perceived quality, image, and loyalty. A 2-item, 5-point Likert scale adapted from the seminal work of Agarwal and Rao (1996) was used to measure *brand extension perceived quality*. A 3-item, 5-point Likert scale adapted from that of Netemeyer et al. (2004) was used to measure *brand extension image*. Finally, the third dimension, *brand extension loyalty*, was measured

TABLE 1
Analysis of the psychometric properties of the multi-item scales.

	Standardized loadings	R^2	CR	AVE
BRAND EXTENSION ATTITUDE				
It strikes me as a good brand.	0.86 (***)	0.73	0.87	0.71
I think it's a pleasant brand.	0.86 (***)	0.74		
I like this brand.	0.80 (***)	0.65		
BRAND EXTENSION CREDIBILITY				
The brand seems credible.	0.87 (***)	0.75	0.88	0.78
The brand seems convincing.	0.90 (***)	0.80		
BRAND EXTENSION PERCEIVED QUALITY				
It strikes me as a quality brand.	0.84 (***)	0.71	0.81	0.68
I think it's a valuable brand.	0.81 (***)	0.66		
BRAND EXTENSION IMAGE				
The image I have of that brand is good.	0.84 (***)	0.71	0.90	0.75
The image I have of that brand is positive.	0.91 (***)	0.82		
The image I have of that brand is favorable	0.84 (***)	0.72		
BRAND EXTENSION LOYALTY				
I would be prepared to stay in a hotel like this. [I would be prepared to buy a clothing brand like this.]	0.84 (***)	0.71	0.87	0.70
The probability that I would stay in a hotel like this one is very high. [The probability that I would buy clothes in a shop like this one is very high.]	0.87 (***)	0.76		
I would be prepared to recommend this hotel to a friend or family member. [I would be prepared to recommend this shop to a friend or family member.]	0.79 (***)	0.63		

* p<0.10; ** p<0.05;
*** p<0.01.

on a 3-item scale adapted from that of Zeithaml et al., and Gremler (1996).

Turning to the antecedents of brand equity, *brand-extension attitude* was measured on a 3-item, 5-point Likert scale adapted from the previous works of Mittal (1990) and Keller (1987). To measure *brand-extension credibility*, a 2-item, 5-point Likert scale adapted from other previous works (Ohanian & Cunningham, 1987; Swinyard, 1981) was used. To measure the *level of tourist experience of the MCAG*, a dichotomous variable was used; the tourists had to indicate whether it was their first visit to the MCAG or they had had prior experience of it.

The questionnaire also included a measure of *perceived similarity* (based on the work of Spiggle et al., 2012) to be used as a manipulation check for the experimental factor, comprising a 2-item, 5-point Likert scale of similarity (perceived congruence) between the parent brand and the brand extension. This measure was worded as follows: "Please indicate the degree to which you agree (5) or disagree (1) with the following statements: (1) *The image I have of the brand (hotel or clothing and accessories shop) is congruent with the image of the MCAG*; (2) *The image I have of the brand (hotel or clothing and accessories shop) is similar to the image of the MCAG*.

Finally, the questionnaire included a measure of *tourist attitude toward the flyer*. This was designed to check that there was no excessive variation in attitudes between the two treatments. It is important, in all experimental research in which promotional material is shown to the subjects, to control *a posteriori* that they do not perceive some treatments as more appealing or persuasive than others. To this end, a 5-point, 4-item Likert scale adapted from other previous studies (Donthu, 1992; Neese & Taylor, 1994) was used. This item was worded: "Please indicate the degree to which you agree (5) or

Table 2
Discriminant validity (Forner & Larcker criterion, 1981).

	Attitude	Quality	Credibility	Image	Loyalty
Attitude	**0.84**				
Quality	0.79	**0.82**			
Credibility	0.55	0.38	**0.88**		
Image	0.56	0.58	0.27	**0.87**	
Loyalty	0.53	0.54	0.25	0.39	**0.84**

Note: Values in bold on the diagonal represent the square root of the AVE; values beneath the diagonal represent the correlations between constructs.

disagree (1) with the following statements concerning the promotional material you have just read: *(1) I like it; (2) It is interesting; (3) It is appealing; (4) It is persuasive.*

3.4. Measurement invariance analysis and psychometric properties of the scales

Ensuring measurement invariance is a prerequisite for subsequently being able to interpret the existence of differences at the level of the latent constructs—in this case, according to the tourist's brand experience. Examining the measurement invariance of the scales demands, in turn, that at least two types of invariance be analyzed (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), namely configural and metric. First, a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to compare different nested models, starting with the most restricted model (M0), in which only the form or pattern of the model was invariant between-groups and all parameters were different between groups (configural invariance). This baseline model must present an acceptable degree of fit, as it provides the basis for comparison for the subsequent models in the hierarchy. The CFA, performed with Lisrel 8.8 software, showed that the baseline model presented adequate goodness-of-fit indicators (SB Chi-square: 157.71; p<0.01; df: 110; RMSEA: 0.04; CFI: 1.00), confirming the first level of invariance. Next, the metric invariance was examined. To this end, a second model (M1) was proposed, on which the restriction that factor loadings should be equal in both groups was imposed. The metric invariance was also confirmed, as although this more restricted model presented a lower Chi-square statistic and adequate goodness-of-fit indicators (SB Chi-square: 166.62; p<0.05; df: 131; RMSEA: 0.03; CFI: 1.00), the Satorra-Bentler scaled difference Chi-square test for M0 vs. M1 showed no significant differences ($\Delta \chi 2 = 8.83$; p>0.10).

Next, the psychometric properties of the scales were examined (see Table 1 for the results of the CFA). All the factor loadings were significant (t-value >2.56; p<0.01) and greater than 0.70, and all the R^2 of the first-order constructs were above the threshold of 0.50. The composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) indicators were also above the recommended thresholds (Del Barrio & Luque, 2012; Hair *et al.*, 1999). Together, these results confirmed the existence of convergent validity in the measurement scales used.

Furthermore, discriminant validity between-constructs was confirmed, as in no case did the correlations exceed the square root of the AVE (under the Fornell–Larcker criterion, 1981) (see Table 2).

4. Data analysis

4.1. Manipulation check

To verify the correct manipulation of the independent variable (the perceived degree of fit between the parent heritage brand and the brand extension), an ANOVA was carried out. Extension fit was the independent factor, on two levels (high vs. low), while the dependent variable was an indicator variable resulting from calculating the mean of the two items on the scale for perceived similarity between the brand extension and the MCAG. These two items presented a Cronbach's alpha of 0.8820, indicating good internal consistency.

The results confirmed there were significant differences (F-test: 13.57; p-value <0.01) in the mean values for perceived similarity. The mean in the case of a high level of fit of the category (hotel) was higher (M_{High_fit}: 3.70) than in the case of a low level of fit (clothing and accessories) (M_{Low_fit}: 3.29). Therefore, these results show that this between-subjects experimental factor was correctly manipulated.

4.2. Confounding bias

Before the model hypotheses could be tested, it was important to check that the subjects' overall attitudes toward both flyers were the same, to avoid a possible confounding effect caused by different perceptions. As the 'attitude toward the flyer' scale was found to have a good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha: 0.8707), a summary variable was calculated as the mean of the 4 items. Subsequently, an ANOVA was performed, in which the independent variable was the experimental factor and the dependent variable was the measure of overall attitude toward the flyer. The results of the test showed there were no significant differences in overall attitude between the two treatments (F-test: 0.31; p-value: 0.58).

4.3. Model estimation and hypotheses testing

To test the proposed hypotheses, a multigroup SEM analysis was conducted to estimate the proposed theoretical model (Fig. 1). The estimated model (Table 3 and Fig. 2) presented adequate overall goodness-of-fit indices (SB Chi-square = 272.33; df: 172; p-value <0.01; normed Chi-square = 1.58; RMSEA = 0.06; CFI = 0.99).

H1 proposes that brand-extension attitude will exert a direct and positive effect on brand equity-formation. The results confirmed this hypothesis, as the structural coefficient for both groups (first-time vs. repeat visitors) was found to be of a high and significant magnitude ($\beta_{BrandAttitude \rightarrow BrandEquity\_First}$: 0.89; p<0.01; $\beta_{BrandAttitude \rightarrow BrandEquity\_Repeat}$: 0.60; p<0.01). H2 proposes that brand-extension credibility exerts a direct effect on brand equity-formation. The results again confirm this

TABLE 3
Parameter difference test.

Relationships	Standardized parameters First-time visitors	Standardized parameters Repeat visitors	Δ SB scaled difference Chi-square test p-value
Fit → Attitude	0.21 (***)	0.14 (**)	0.40
Fit → Credibility	0.02	0.17 (**)	0.18
Attitude → Brand equity	0.89 (***)	0.60 (***)	0.03 (**)
Credibility → Brand equity	0.43 (***)	0.71 (***)	0.05 (**)

*p<0.10;
** p<0.05;
*** p<0.01.

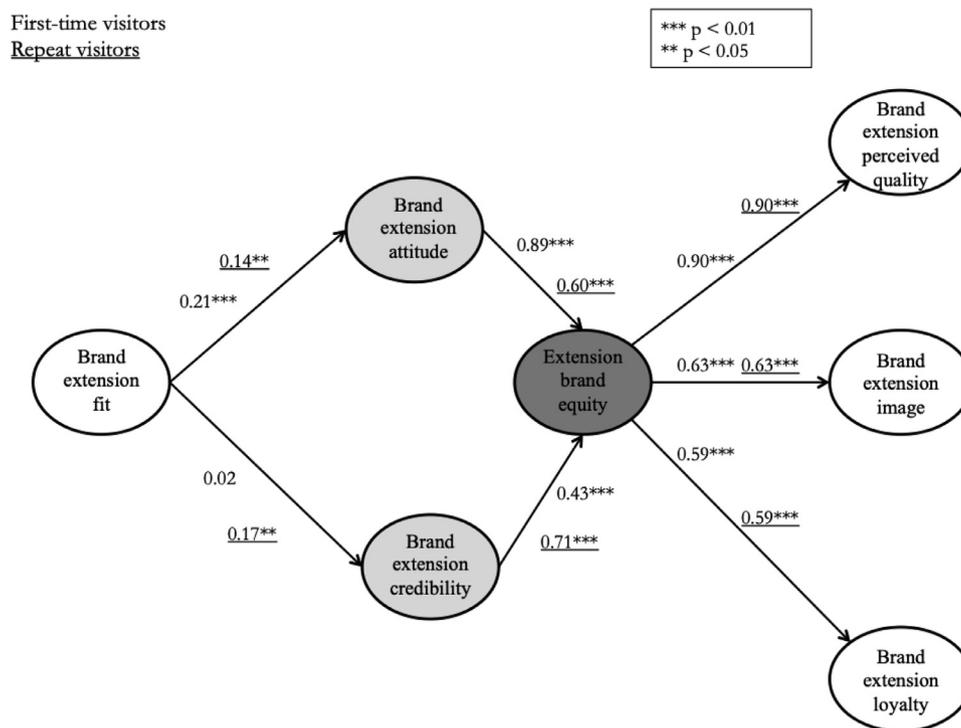First-time visitors
Repeat visitors

*** p < 0.01
** p < 0.05

Fig. 2. Results of multigroup SEM.

hypothesis for both groups ($\beta_{\text{BrandCredibility} \rightarrow \text{Brand Equity\_First}}$: 0.43; p<0.01; $\beta_{\text{BrandCredibility} \rightarrow \text{Brand Equity\_Repeat}}$: 0.71; p<0.01).

Turning to H3 and H4, these state that brand-extension attitude and credibility will be greater, the better the fit between the extension and its parent brand. The effect of fit on tourist attitude was indeed found to be significant, albeit with a moderate-to-low magnitude among both first-time and repeat visitors ($\beta_{\text{BrandFit} \rightarrow \text{BrandAttitude\_First}}$: 0.21; p<0.01; $\beta_{\text{BrandFit} \rightarrow \text{BrandAttitude\_Repeat}}$: 0.14; p<0.05). The effect of fit on credibility was found to be not significant in the case of tourists with no prior experience of the MCAG ($\beta_{\text{BrandFit} \rightarrow \text{BrandCredibility\_First}}$: 0.02; p>0.10); by contrast, the effect was significant among those who had visited the MCAG in the past ($\beta_{\text{BrandFit} \rightarrow \text{BrandCredibility\_Repeat}}$: 0.17; p< 0.05). These results therefore confirm H3, while H4 is partially confirmed.

Finally, H5 proposes that the degree of prior experience the subject has of the parent brand—in the present case, their previous experience of visiting the MCAG—will moderate the proposed antecedent relationships of brand equity-formation. To test this hypothesis, it was necessary to establish whether the differences in the parameters between both groups were significant. For this purpose, different Satorra-Bentler scaled difference Chi-square tests were conducted (Satorra & Bentler, 2010). Regarding the effect of fit on brand-extension attitude and credibility, the tests showed that there were no such significant differences between first-time and repeat tourists (p = 0.40 and p = 0.18, respectively). By contrast, in the case of the direct antecedents of brand equity-formation, there were significant differences. More specifically, among tourists visiting the MCAG for the first time, attitude was found to be a much more significant antecedent of brand equity-formation than for repeat visitors (p = 0.03). And in the case of credibility, the opposite effect was observed—that is, credibility contributed more to the formation of brand equity among repeat visitors than among first-timers (p = 0.05). These results lead us to conclude that H5 can be partially confirmed.

5. Conclusions

Strong brands—those that enjoy high brand equity—are an essential means for firms to secure competitive advantages (Lim &

Weaver, 2014). The factors that contribute to brand equity-formation have been studied for several decades in extremely varied contexts (goods, services, destinations, and so on). Most of the studies are based on the classic models of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), and very few works have been addressed the brand equity formation in the context of WH sites. The present study seeks to contribute to the extant knowledge regarding the determining factors of heritage brand equity-formation and specifically the role played by the degree of fit between the parent brand and the extension in the formation of brand equity for this type of prestigious worldwide heritage brand.

First, the findings show that heritage brand-extension attitude exerts a direct and positive effect (of major magnitude) on extension brand equity-formation and is a major antecedent of heritage brand equity (in line with the findings of Keller, 2003). The present study also shows that credibility has a direct and positive effect on brand equity-formation, again in line with other authors' results (Erdem & Swait, 1998). One pertinent conclusion in light of these results is that tourists will form the brand equity of possible extensions of a heritage site brand in different ways, depending on whether they have previous experience of visiting that site or not. Hence, in the case of first-time visitors, their favorable attitudes toward the experimental extensions appear to be more influential in brand extension equity-formation than their perceptions of credibility. In contrast, tourists who have previously visited the heritage site seem to attach more importance to the extension's credibility than its being attractive or appealing to them. In the terms of the classical Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), when the individual has no previous experience of the heritage site, the peripheral cues relating to the images and general design of the promotional information provided carry much greater weight in brand extension equity-formation than its perceived credibility in terms of how well the brand extension represents the heritage site. On the other hand, tourists who already know the site well and recognize its unique, differential symbols process the information they receive about the extension via a more central route, in a bid to verify that there is a good fit between the parent heritage brand and the extension.

Second, the study verified that the degree of perceived fit between the parent brand and the extension also seems to affect the tourist's evaluation of the extension, in line with the previous academic literature (Buil et al., 2009). The results show that the greater the fit, the more positive the brand-extension attitude, and the greater its contribution to brand extension equity-formation. The study also finds that this same effect is corroborated in the case of credibility, but only among subjects who have previous visit experience. These results are also in line with those of Kim et al. (2019), who also analyzed a WH brand and found that brand equity is transferred from the parent brand to the extension, depending on the degree of fit between the two.

6. Managerial implications

According to the present findings, managers of heritage sites and tourist destinations should be mindful that the heritage site brands may also be extended to different products and services. This would be one way to contribute to socioeconomic development in the territories concerned. However, the success of such extensions will depend on the degree of perceived fit between the parent heritage brand and the brand extension, and, in particular, on the degree of tourist experience of the heritage brand. It is important, therefore, that heritage brand managers have a good grasp of the benefits of potential extensions and endeavor to sustain high brand equity among such extensions.

The use of a brand extension strategy based on a known heritage brand will generate major benefits and advantages derived from the transfer of beliefs and affect from the parent brand to the extension. Such benefits include cost savings in communication activities, an increase in purchase intention and probability, premium prices, and a reduction in the level of risk associated with the launch of new products, among many others. In the specific case of a parent heritage brand associated with a WH site, the high brand equity associated with the parent brand will be transferred to its extensions, enabling strong, credible, and valuable brands to be created. King et al., and Halpenny (2012) noted that the WH hallmark is a special example of a world-renowned umbrella brand of great value for those familiar with it. They also contended, however, that most managers of such heritage destinations do not leverage the full potential of WH branding, meaning that it can sometimes go unnoticed and that the strong brand equity it could generate is not harnessed for the benefit of economic development. An effective communication strategy that fosters associations between the WH brand and cultural heritage could enhance the brand equity of the heritage itself.

It is clear that, while WH brands have certainly had some success in promoting the image of the exceptional locations with which they are associated, they have not yet taken full advantage of the potential to extend this success to other product lines and categories and, in turn, contribute to developing the territory economically or generating wealth and employment beyond the tourist activity they create.

It is also important to note that, as well as the scope to extend the heritage brand to goods and services (merchandise, service companies, etc.), it may be of interest to extend to lesser-known destinations with a high level of fit with the well-known WH brand—in line with the proposition of Kim et al. (2019). These authors demonstrate the viability of the 'destination extension' as an alternative marketing strategy aimed at tourists. They point out that the practical relevance of extending a heritage brand may perhaps be more evident in the case of tourist destinations associated with little-known heritage sites.

The present work verifies that the visitor's previous experience of the heritage site plays an important role in the success of a heritage brand extension, because past experience of the destination increases its brand equity, thereby influencing preferences for the extended products and their differentiation. Heritage site managers are therefore responsible for strengthening the heritage brand and increasing its brand equity, and should consider a brand extension strategy as an interesting option for achieving this.

7. Limitations and potential future research directions

As is the case with any academic study, this work presents a series of limitations. First, all experimental designs involve a certain degree of artifice. That said, in the research design itself and throughout the fieldwork, every effort was made to ensure that the experimental conditions were as real as possible for the subjects, to generate realistic responses. Second, this study's use of fictitious brands to some degree restricted the full measure of brand equity, as the dimensions 'brand knowledge' and 'perceived value' could not be measured. Other future studies should replicate this work with real heritage site brand extensions, to establish whether the results are maintained.

Another possible limitation relates to the high profile of the heritage brand selected for the study. The MCAG not only enjoys an extremely high profile, both nationally and internationally, but it is one of the very first monumental complexes to be awarded the WH hallmark, which could have influenced the results regarding brand equity-formation. In the future, it would thus be interesting to analyze brand equity-formation in heritage sites with a lower profile. It would also be useful for future studies to propose experimental designs that included another independent variable between subjects, such as type of heritage site, so as to compare various heritage sites with different characteristics (archeological remains, cathedrals, palaces, monasteries, and so on).

Finally, while this research examined the moderating role of tourist experience of the parent heritage brand, there are many other possible moderating variables of consumer responses to marketing initiatives. Future studies could analyze the extent to which other variables—such as tourist involvement with the promotional messages about the brand extension (flyers)—may affect tourist responses to this type of extension. On this point, Laczniak and Muehling (1993) indeed demonstrated the moderating power of this variable in attitude formation and change.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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