

Developing and testing a model of exhibition brand preference: The exhibitors' perspective

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1. INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have witnessed a substantial increase in infrastructure development for and the number of business events, including exhibitions *. According to the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (UFI), there are now 1,197 venues with more than 5,000 square meter (sqm) indoor exhibition space, with total indoor exhibition space amounting to 32.6 million sqm. Europe, North America and Asia account for the highest venue capacities, with 48%, 24% and 20% of the total indoor exhibition space respectively. In 2010, approximately 30,700 exhibitions were held around the world, welcoming around 260 million visitors (UFI, 2011). Concurrent with the increase in infrastructure and numbers, there has also been a much greater recognition of the contributions of the exhibition industry, both economic and non-economic, to destinations around the world (e.g., Jin, Bauer & Weber, 2010). However, relative to its critical importance to many destinations, research on exhibitions has been relatively sparse to date. The vast majority of previous studies focus on issues relating to exhibitors' and visitors' exhibition participation, such as exhibiting and visiting objectives (e.g., Hansen, 2004; Kijewski Yoon, & Young, 1993; Kozak, 2005), exhibition selection (e.g., Berne & Garcia-Uceda, 2008; Shoham, 1992), performance (e.g., Blythe, 1999;), effectiveness (e.g., Dekimpe, François, Gopalakrishna, Lilien, & Bulte, 1997), exhibitor and visitor behavior (e.g., Rosson & Seringhaurs, 1995), service quality and satisfaction (e.g., Bauer, Law, Tse, & Weber, 2008; Jung, 2005).

In contrast, the topic of branding and related concepts has received substantial interest in the past decades, with academics intensifying their efforts to understand the value of brands and the process of branding in general and in different contexts (e.g., Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993). For example, studies on service branding (e.g., de Chernatony & Riley, 1999), branding in B2B markets (e.g., Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; Davis, Golicic, & Marquardt, 2008), place brand/branding (e.g., Hankinson, 2007) and destination branding in the tourism context (e.g., Cai, 2002; Qu, Kim & Im, 2011; Tasci & Gartner, 2009) have been thriving.

* Note: Exhibitions, together with Conventions, Meetings, and Incentives, are part of the MICE industry. They are also considered business events, i.e., one segment of the broader events industry. Exhibitions include both trade and consumer exhibitions; the focus of the current paper is on trade exhibitions (B2B) for which the location is typically fixed.

Due to the relative recency of the development of events studies (Getz, 2008), research on branding events mainly focuses on sport events (e.g., Brown, Chalip, Jago, Mules, Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002; Merrilees, Getz & O'Brien, 2005). Sporadic research has been found on brand loyalty in conventions (e.g, Lee & Back, 2008) and integrating event branding with destination branding (e.g., Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, & Ali, 2003). In the exhibition context, only one study to date has raised the issue of brands (Sasserath, Wenhart & Daly, 2005), yet it presents an incomplete representation of an exhibition brand. Furthermore, these authors did not differentiate between a static exhibition brand and the dynamic exhibition branding process. Thus, while the value of a strong exhibition brand may be understood, the development of it, through the process of branding, has not received any research attention. The present research aims to address the various research gaps.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, we advance a model of exhibition brand preference by integrating various factors that contribute to the value of an exhibition brand. In order to do this, theories from branding, relationship marketing and destination marketing are drawn upon. It is proposed that, from the perspective of the exhibitors, the quality of their relationship with organizers, and the perceived attractiveness of the destination influence exhibition brand preference. Second, drawing on survey data of 600 exhibitors, we test the proposed model, using structural equation modeling (SEM), and determine the relative importance of relationship quality and destination attractiveness factors in the formation of exhibitors' brand preference.

The setting for the current research is Mainland China's exhibition industry that has experienced rapid growth in the past decades. In 2011, about 7,000 exhibitions of a diversified nature and scale were held in China, with machinery, building materials, food, and textile, fashion, and leather representing the most frequently exhibited industrial sectors (CCES, 2012). China has a total of 4.7 million sqm indoor exhibition space, accounting for 15% of the world total (2nd only to the U.S.A and ahead of Germany). Despite decreases in net space rented in Europe and North America, in 2010, net space rented in China reached 13 million, representing a 6% increase over the previous year (UFI, 2011). The exhibition sector is regarded as a valuable resource in showcasing the country's economic vision, has a tangible positive impact on local economic revenue, and

plays a significant role in promoting success for Chinese brands in a global economy in addition to the direct value of its own commercial success (Reed, 2007). While the study setting is Mainland China, findings have implications for exhibition destinations worldwide.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Evolution of Branding Research

In order to put the subsequent discussion of exhibition brands and exhibition branding into context, it is useful to briefly examine the evolution of the branding literature. Merz, He & Vargo (2009) examined the evolution of brands over the years and identified several distinct stages. In the earliest marketing literature, brands served primarily as a way for customers to identify and recognize goods and their manufacturer. The focus of brand value creation was on individual goods whereby firms used brands to show ownership and take responsibility for their goods. This in turn helped customers identify and recognize a firm's goods on sight (Strasser, 1989). From the 1930s onwards, brands were viewed as images that firms create to enable customers to both differentiate a brand from its competitors (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984) and identify the needs a brand promises to satisfy (Roth, 1995). The focus of brand value creation was on the creation of this brand image. Then, around the 1990s, scholars started to examine in greater detail customer-firm relationships and how customers internalize brand information. Concepts such as brand equity (Aaker, 1996), customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993), brand identity (Kapferer, 1992), and customer equity (Rust, Zeithaml, & Lemon, 2001) emphasized the active role of customers in the brand value creation process. Kelly (1993) defined brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer responses to the marketing of a brand. Yoo, Donthu and Lee (2000) proposed that brand equity is developed through enhanced perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand awareness/associations. Finally, Vargo and Lusch's (2004) call for a change from a goods-dominant to a service-dominant logic in marketing further shaped scholars' thinking on brands whereby the 'logic of a brand' has shifted from the conceptualization of a brand as a firm-provided good or service to a brand as a collaborative, value co-creation activity of firms and all their stakeholders (Merz et al, 2009). This shift in brand

logic brings with it a new understanding of brand value, which is defined in terms of the perceived use value determined collectively by all stakeholders, rendering the original concept of a “brand” as a logo only obsolete in today’s complex environment. Apart from noting the evolution of brand research over the past decades, it is also beneficial to discuss the various streams of branding literature of relevance to the discussion of exhibition brands and branding, particularly, service branding and destination branding.

2.2 Services and Destination Branding

De Chernatony and Riley (1999) note that the concept of “a brand” is similar for both goods and services, in that it is defined as a blend of rational and emotional perceptions in consumers’ minds. The same processes are involved in building goods and services brands, commencing with an organization devising a product or service, and concluding with a brand that resides in consumers’ minds. However, there are also substantial differences, given the inherent characteristics of services versus goods (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985). Typically, consumers have a much better understanding of tangible product-based brands due to their physical nature and their consistency over time. Apart from their intangibility, services brands have more points of contact with consumers than goods brands, and the experience is more strongly influenced by the employees delivering the service, resulting in greater variability. Thus, successful service brands derive to a great extent from well-nurtured supplier/customer relationships, evolving through the quality of service and respect from staff and consumers for particular functional and emotional values. Berry (2000) further contends that branding a service assures customers of a consistent, uniform level of service quality, reduces decision-making complexity and provides a point of differentiation for the service provider that may lead to a position of competitive advantage.

The importance of the concept ‘company as a brand’ has been stressed in several studies on services branding (e.g., Berry, 2000; de Chernatony & Riley, 1999). Recognizing the company itself as part of a service brand, characterized by a distinct corporate identity, personality, and image, is considered a critical services-branding strategy (e.g., Onkvisit & Shaw, 1989), providing endorsement, recognition, and

acceptance, as well as making it more tangible (Diefenbach, 1992). The rationale is to provide relevant tangible clues to make the intangibility of service brands more easily understood (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1989). The strength of a service brand is primarily driven by attributes of the firm such as the quality of the service, the people standing behind the service, and supplier/customer relationships (Berry, 2000). In B2B markets, brand awareness and brand image are developed through personal contacts among boundary-spanning personnel engaged in buyer-seller relationships (Davis, Golicic, & Marquardt, 2008).

Yet, it is not only physical products, services, and companies that are branded but branding has also been adopted in the context of destinations. A plethora of studies have been conducted on place/destination branding, defined as a way to communicate a destination's unique identity by differentiating it from competitors (e.g., Cai, 2002; Tasci & Gartner, 2009). The two important functions of brands – identification and differentiation – have been stressed in destination brand literature (e.g., Florek, 2005). Differentiation is generated based on two different perspectives: the sender's and the receiver's (Florek, 2005). In the conceptualization of a destination brand, notions of image and identity are usually involved (e.g., Cai, 2002; Tasci & Gartner, 2009), where identity is created by the sender whereas image is perceived by the receiver (Kapferer, 1992). Destination brand identity and brand image are reciprocal. Consumers build a destination image in their minds based on the brand identity projected by destination marketers (Qu., Kim, & Im, 2011). Elements that comprise destination image and identity are distilled from characteristics including architecture, heritage, language, people, myths, legends, history, politics, culture, and values (Cai, 2002). Successfully drawing on these characteristics, in turn, leads to strong brand equity and value (e.g., Joppe, Martin & Waalen, 2001; Kotler, 2003). Consistent brand elements reinforce each other and serve to unify the entire process of image formation and building, which in turn contributes to the strength and uniqueness of brand identity. Therefore, destination branding can be defined as selecting a consistent element mix to identify and distinguish the destination through positive image building (Cai, 2009).

This brief review of some key branding research streams indicates that theoretical development in those reflects the evolution of branding research in general, i.e., branding of either a service, a company, or a destination is a collaborative and value creation process that necessitates contributions of various internal and external interest groups and stakeholders. It is also evident that in each of those streams there is typically one focal point – a product/service, a company, or a destination. This is in contrast to the exhibition brand that brings together a variety of elements – event, company, venue and destination – making exhibition branding unique and at the same time rather complex.

2.3 Exhibition Brand and Branding

The exhibition industry provides a suitable context to extend the understanding of brand value and the process of branding, given its inherent characteristics. It is 1) a service industry, 2) represents B2B and/or B2C markets, 3) has multiple distribution channels, and 4) involves multiple stakeholders (including organizers, exhibitors, visitors, venues and destination management parties) that contribute to the brand value and branding of an exhibition. Since brands not only differentiate products/services and represent a promise of value but also “incite beliefs, evoke emotions and prompt behaviors” (Kotler & Gertner, 2002, p. 249), successfully branding exhibitions is the desired goal of exhibition organizers. As previously mentioned, the issue of exhibition brands has only been raised by one study to date. Sasserath and colleagues (2005) proposed that exhibitions can be branded, with an exhibition brand consisting of three individual components: the event, the organizer, and the exhibition center.

The event (exhibition) itself is a dynamic and complicated process encompassing initiation, promotion, organization, sponsorship and support from related public and private sectors, and therefore, involves efforts from a wide range of players. The focal point of stakeholder relationships in the event itself is among exhibition organizers, exhibitors and visitors. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship triad among these three key players (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2005, p.790).

INSERT FIGURE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Exhibitors and visitors, as ‘buyers/customers’ of the ‘exhibition product’ that exhibition organizers ‘sell’ are clearly themselves the main components of the ‘product’. This constructs a complicated buying-selling relationship between the organizer, and exhibitors and visitors respectively, which is influenced by the relationship between the two customer segments. The duty of organizers is to facilitate the relationship-building between exhibitors and visitors at different stages of an event: pre-event, on-site and post-event. If done successfully, it will enhance their relationships with exhibitors and organizers respectively. Yet, it is also important to note that even though organizers are sales representatives of the exhibition event, they are not the exclusive supplier. The venue where the exhibition is staged also plays a critical role, as the quality of its facilities and services, together with the venue staff can directly influence exhibitors’ satisfaction with and behavioral intentions towards a particular exhibition (e.g., Breiter & Milman, 2006).

However, considering the related convention literature, in particular literature on site selection (e.g., Baloglu & Love, 2005; Crouch & Louviere, 2004), we argue that the destination with its inherent characteristics is also a stakeholder that plays a vital role in the formation of an exhibition brand. Similar to a convention location, it can either encourage or prevent an organizer from choosing it as a site for a particular exhibition, and also influence exhibitors’ and visitors’ decision whether or not to participate in it. Therefore, we propose that an exhibition brand consists of four rather than three distinct but related elements, as shown in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE

An exhibition brand functions for the organizer and for target markets in several ways. On the one hand, it identifies the company organizing the exhibition which is responsible for its quality. On the other hand, it conveys information about the quality of the event, the venue and destination, and presents unique associations to participants and partners. It is all four components that shape the perceived quality of an exhibition brand and affect customers’ perceptions of and behavior towards it. However, the four

components of an exhibition brand – namely, the organizer, the event, the venue, and the destination – are not independent entities but rather interact with each other to continuously shape an exhibition brand. Thus, rather than considering an exhibition brand as ‘static’ it is essential to clearly differentiate between a ‘static’ exhibition brand and the ‘dynamic’ exhibition branding process. Such an approach would also be consistent with the more generic branding literature where a clear distinction has been made conceptually and empirically between a brand and branding. Therefore, having discussed individual components of a static exhibition brand, next we propose a model which conceptualizes how individual exhibition brand components interact and ultimately, may be managed to develop exhibition brand preference, with a focus on the exhibitor’s perspective.

3. A Model of Exhibition Brand Preference

The perceived quality and value of an exhibition brand is influenced by that of the event (exhibition), organizers’ performance, and venue and destination attractiveness. As it is difficult to clearly distinguish the quality of an exhibition from the performance of its organizer, this paper explores the collective impact of the perceived performance of organizers and the quality of the exhibition on exhibitors’ preference for exhibition brands, with a particular focus on the quality of the relationship between organizers and exhibitors. In a similar vein, this paper assesses the collective impact of both the venue and destination, termed destination attractiveness, on exhibitors’ brand preference.

Numerous studies confirmed that the quality of intangible aspects of a relationship not only increases customer retention but also provides a sustainable competitive advantage to organizations since they are not easily duplicated by competitors (Roberts, Varki & Brodie, 2003). Business-to-business relationships (B2B) assume more rational behavior and mutual acceptance of reciprocity than business-to-consumer relationships (B2C), given the contractual nature of the former (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987). There is empirical evidence that relationship quality has additional explanatory power than the commonly utilized service quality scale in explaining behavioral intentions (Roberts et al., 2003). It is presumably a major brand-building element for an exhibition brand. Thus, relationship quality with organizers from the perspective of exhibitors is used to predict exhibitors’ preference for exhibition brands. From the destination perspective, perceived attractiveness of destinations

has been regarded as one of the evaluation constructs of destination performance as well as one of the determinants that affects pleasure destination choice (Um, Chon & Ro, 2006). As exhibitions depend on repeat attendance for long-lasting success, and destination and venue environment constitute part of an exhibition brand, it is argued that destination attractiveness, as an important brand-building element for an exhibition brand, is essential to predict exhibitors' exhibition brand preference. In summary, it is argued that exhibition brand preference is impacted by both relationship quality and destination attractiveness. Next, the three constructs that constitute our proposed model are discussed.

3.1 Brand Preference

Brand preference is regarded as a key step in consumer decision-making, involving elements of choice (Bahn, 1986). In establishing brand preference, consumers compare and rank different brands by focusing on their uniqueness (Anselmsson, Johansson, & Persson, 2008). Hellier and colleagues (2003, p. 1765) defined brand preference as “the extent to which the customer favors the designed service provided by his or her present company, in comparison to the designated service provided by other companies in his or her consideration set,” with a consideration set referring to brands that a consumer would consider buying in the near future (Roberts & Lattin, 1991). Determinants that detract from or enhance brand preference have also been explored (Mathur, Moschis, & Lee, 2003), with ‘perceived value’ being particularly focused on.

3.2 Relationship Quality between Exhibitors and Organizers

The role organizers play in the exhibition industry has been evolving as a result of the gradual transformation of the function and operation of exhibitions. In recent decades, exhibitions are less a place for buyers and visitors to place orders on the basis of samples; instead, exhibitions perform an information and communication function (Stoeck & Schraudy, 2005). Organizers now need to spot industry trends, develop innovative exhibition concepts in line with market requirements, and help exhibitors establish lasting communication with their customers (Heckmann, 2005). Given the characteristics of the exhibition ‘product’, it is crucial for an exhibition organizer to build a strong relationship with its business customers to sustain subsequent exhibitions. Based on exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (EFA/CFA), Jin and colleagues (2012a) proposed that

exhibitors' relationship quality with organizers is a second-order construct composed of four factors: 1) service quality and relationship satisfaction, 2) trust and affective commitment, 3) calculative commitment, and 4) communication. Their results showed that both instrumental (communication and service quality) and interpersonal factors (trust and commitment) are significant determinants of relationship quality. They also found that relationship quality differs, depending on key characteristics of organizers and exhibitors. In general, exhibitors at fairs operated by international organizers (exhibition companies with international brand names) rated all relationship dimensions significantly higher than their counterparts at fairs by less well-known, domestic (Chinese) exhibition organizers.

3.3 Destination Attractiveness

Similar to attendees traveling to conferences, travel to an exhibition is of a promotable nature (Hedorfer & Todter, 2005). Both economic and leisure attributes of a destination, such as “market leadership,” “composition of the regional industry,” “industry fragmentation,” and “economic concentration,” venues and destination amenities impact on destinations being successful exhibition hosts (Hedorfer & Todter, 2005; Rubalcaba-Bermejo & Cuadrado-Roura, 1995). Jin and colleagues (2012b) discussed in detail the differences between convention and exhibition destination attractiveness. Utilizing EFA and CFA, they empirically tested dimensions of exhibition destination attractiveness in the Mainland China context from the perspective of exhibitors. Study findings confirmed that destination attractiveness is a higher order construct composed of six factors: (a) cluster effect 1 (host city leadership in the industry), (b) venue facilities, (c) cluster effect 2 (host city/region as a source of exhibitors), (d) destination leisure environment, (e) destination economic environment, and (f) accessibility.

Based on a comprehensive review of the literature on branding and prior studies on relationship quality between exhibitors and organizers (Jin et al., 2012a) and exhibition destination attractiveness (Jin et al., 2012b; 2012c), a conceptual model incorporating three constructs is advanced, together with the following hypotheses:

H₁: Relationship quality with organizers has a significant, positive effect on exhibitors' exhibition brand preference.

H₂: Destination attractiveness has a significant, positive effect on exhibitors' exhibition brand preference.

4. METHODOLOGY

The research population is international and domestic exhibitors, representing their exhibiting firms, in exhibitions hosted in China. The sample frame was identified by obtaining a comprehensive list of exhibitions hosted in China in 2009 via portal exhibition websites (e.g., www.expo-china.com and www.topcce.com). Exhibition companies that organized events from September to December 2009 were contacted to obtain permission to survey exhibitors. Sampled exhibitions were selected based on availability, organizer and host destination category, geographical location and dates. Selected exhibitions were of diverse ownerships, staged in venues in both first and second-tier cities, and covering varied industry sectors. A face-to-face survey was deemed appropriate and had advantages over mail, email and online surveys (Baruch, 1999). No incentives were utilized. A pilot test of 214 respondents was conducted, followed by the main survey that collected 616 valid responses from exhibitors exhibiting at nine trade fairs hosted in four cities in Mainland China— Shanghai, Hangzhou, Wuhan and Nanjing. Considering the complexity of the model, normality of data distribution, and communalities of indicators, the sample size was deemed appropriate.

Instrument development followed Churchill's (1979) approach, namely to specify a domain of construct, generate a sample of items, collect data, purify the measure, collect data, assess reliability and validity, and develop norms. Scale development for relationship quality is detailed in Jin et al., (2012a) while that for destination attractiveness is discussed in Jin et al., (2012b; 2012c). Measurement items representing exhibition brand preference were adapted from Hellier et al. (2003). Items were tested using EFA and CFA for their adaptability into the exhibition context. A 7-point Likert scale indicating a level of agreement

ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7) was utilized for all measurements except those measuring ‘exhibition brand preference’ which were partly measured by a 7-level semantic differential scale with opposing adjectives at either end of the scale.

The questionnaire was first developed in English and then translated into Chinese, adopting a back-to-back translation procedure (Chapman & Carter, 1979). Both English and Chinese questionnaires were utilized. With the support of exhibition organizers, the first author and 24 trained survey helpers were able to approach exhibitors on-site to conduct the survey. After arriving at the exhibition center, helpers were assigned to different halls or areas at each exhibition center to ensure appropriate coverage of exhibiting booths. Each single exhibition booth (one exhibiting firm) was treated as one respondent. Helpers were instructed to approach exhibitors booth by booth, covering smaller booths as well as bigger ones. Questionnaire completion took around 20 minutes, with response rates ranging from 70% to 90% in different exhibitions.

Data was analyzed using SPSS 12.0 and AMOS Graphics 17.0, drawing on relevant statistical methods, such as descriptive analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structured equation modeling (SEM). Validity and reliability were tested. Prior to the analyses, data were screened for entry errors, missing values, multivariate normality, and outliers that may impair data analyses. The face-to-face survey method adopted in the pilot and main survey in this research enabled interviewers to supervise the completion of the questionnaire, resulting in few missing values overall: 4% for the pilot and 5% for the main survey. In dealing with missing values, cases that had more than 10% missing values were deleted from the dataset. This resulted in 217 valid cases for the pilot and 616 for the main survey. In conducting descriptive and EFA analysis, listwise deletion was utilized. In CFA and SEM analysis, series mean was adopted.

Univariate and multivariate normality was assessed for the main survey data prior to various statistical tests. Results showed that variables had either an approximately symmetric distribution or a moderately skewed distribution. Regarding kurtosis, all variables had a moderate platykurtic distribution. Chi-square for multivariate test is significant. With non-

normal data, the χ^2 value derived from maximum likelihood estimation (ML) becomes inflated; values of some fit indices such as Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and the comparative fit index (CFI) are modestly underestimated (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). Although ML method assumes multivariate normality, Allison (1987) stated that violations of multivariate normality will not seriously compromise the estimates. Given that 1) the absolute values of univariate skewness and kurtosis did not exceed the thresholds set by Bulmer (1965) and 2) in practice, most data cannot meet the assumption of multivariate normality (West, Finch & Curran, 1995), it is argued that the assumption of multivariate normality was not seriously violated. Moreover, although the large sample size and number of variables in this research may have inflated the chi-square values and underestimated some fit indices, results still indicate a satisfactory fit for the models tested.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Sample Characteristics

About half of the sample was from medium-sized enterprises with 50 to 300 employees. Smaller enterprises with less than 50 employees and larger enterprises with more than 300 employees accounted for approximately 25% each, although this differed slightly among the sampled exhibitions. This is consistent with the nature of the exhibition industry in China, which serves predominantly as a marketing platform for SMEs (e.g., Zitzewitz, 2005). About one-third of respondents were first-time exhibitors, yet again, this figure fluctuated among different exhibitions. In terms of annual exhibition attendance in China, more than 80% of firms attended more than two exhibitions per annum. About one-third exhibited more than 3 times per annum at overseas exhibitions. The frequency with which firms in China exhibit both domestically and internationally indicates that they are actively seeking exhibiting opportunities, which is not restricted to China's first-tier cities. Most respondents were in managerial positions, with about half being middle management staff, followed by one-third who were business owners or at senior management level. Approximately 55% of all sampled firms were located in Eastern China, followed by 17% in Northern China, and the remainder from other parts of the country.

5.2 EFA and CFA of Brand Preference

Since CFA results of relationship quality and destination attractiveness have been detailed in prior publications (Jin et al., 2012a; 2012b; 2012c), and due to space constraint for this paper, only EFA and CFA of brand preference is reported here. The survey data were randomly split into two subsets: one calibration sample for EFA and one validation sample for CFA, based on Hair and colleagues' (2009) argument that if sample size permits, the sample may be split into two subsets to estimate a factor model for each subset. EFA (Table 1) resulted in two factors, labeled as 'attitudes towards future attendance' and 'preference for different components of the exhibition brand' respectively. These two factors explain 75.5% of the total variance of the latent variable. Factor loadings are all higher than .7. Cronbach alpha for both factors exceeds .7, suggesting good internal consistency of the measures. The KMO value was 0.851 and Barlett's Test of Sphericity highly significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that this EFA result fits the data. The two factor solution recognized by EFA was then verified by CFA (Table 2), drawing on the validation sample. Results demonstrate good reliability of the measures for the two factors. Factor loadings for the 'attitude towards future attendance' construct exceed 0.86, SMC parameters exceed 0.7, and CR is as high as 0.96. Factor loadings for 'the preference for different components of the exhibition brand' construct exceed 0.6. SMC parameters exceed 0.36, and CR exceeds 0.70. Correlation between the two latent variables is 0.316; covariance between the two latent variables is 0.650 and significant. Overall, results demonstrate a good model fit for the data ($\chi^2 = 51.088$, $df = 19$, $p < 0.000$, $\chi^2/df = 2.689$, $GFI = 0.956$, $CFI = 0.981$, $RMSEA = 0.076$). Following the first order CFA, two dimensions of exhibition brand preference are identified as 1) attitude towards future attendance, and 2) preference of exhibition brand components.

INSERT TABLE 1 AND 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE

5.3 Overall Measurement Model

On the basis of established measurement models for each construct, in the overall measurement model, relationship quality was defined as a second-order construct composed of four dimensions: a) service quality & satisfaction, b) trust & affective

commitment, c) communication and d) calculative commitment. Destination attractiveness was defined as a second-order construct composed of six dimensions: a) cluster effect 1 (host city leadership in the industry), b) venue facilities, c) cluster effect 2 (host city as a source of exhibitors), d) destination economic environment, e) destination leisure environment, and f) accessibility. Exhibition brand preference was designated as a second-order construct composed of two dimensions: a) attitude towards future attendance and b) preference for different components of the exhibition brand. The overall CFA measurement model allowed for correlation among all three key constructs and presented a baseline to assess the fit of the structural model (Hair et al., 2009). Table 3 presents results of the overall measurement model. Among the 12 standard regression weight parameters at the construct level, 11 had a factor loading higher than 0.70, and are significant, providing evidence of convergent validity at the construct level. The standard multiple correlation values of the 11 dimensions exceed 0.40, indicating a good proportion of the variances of the constructs explained by latent constructs. Only the ‘preference for different components of the exhibition brand’ dimension had an estimate of 0.457 and a SMC value of 0.208. Comparisons of the overall measurement model with individual first and second-order measurement models revealed that t-values in the overall measurement model were higher than the corresponding values in individual measurement models. The model exhibits good fit of the data, ($\chi^2=3160.042$, $df=1357$, $\chi^2/df=2.329$. GFI=0.836, CFI=0.910, TLI=0.905, RMSEA=0.046 with 90% CI between 0.044 and 0.049). Therefore, results indicate a satisfactory fit for the overall measurement model.

INSERT TABLE 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Table 4 presents the correlations among the three second-order latent constructs, together with their composite reliability and AVE, indicating that both exogenous constructs (relationship quality and destination attractiveness) are correlated with the endogenous construct (exhibition brand preference), with correlation coefficients being 0.82 and 0.55 respectively. Furthermore, the two exogenous constructs are correlated (coefficient 0.75). Substantial collinearity was not identified as the correlation between the two independent variables did not exceed the cut-off point for high correlations,

which is generally 0.90 or higher (Hair et al., 2009). Results show that the relationship quality and destination attractiveness constructs have good composite reliability (0.92 and 0.89 respectively). These AVE values exceed 0.50, indicating good convergent validity, and are higher than the squared correlation estimates between each pair of construct, which is evidence of good discriminant validity.

INSERT TABLE 4 APPROXIMATELY HERE

However, the construct of exhibition brand preference exhibits poorer CR and AVE estimates, with the CR value just meeting the cut-off point of acceptance for convergent validity. The AVE value is 0.42, higher than the squared correlation between exhibition brand preference and destination attractiveness, but lower than the squared correlation between exhibition brand preference and relationship quality. This reveals that the two first-order factors that were specified as reflective factors for the exhibition brand preference lack convergent validity. Considering that the two factors measure basically different orientations, lower convergent validity was considered acceptable. In addition, AVE is also sensitive to a lack of convergent validity and can be better used to assess discriminant validity. Although the AVE value is preferably greater than 0.50, it often stays below 0.50 due to the conservative nature of the AVE test (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Since the exhibition brand preference construct reflects 62.9% and 20.8% of variances of the two first-order constructs respectively, and both the first-order constructs have good CR values (0.96 and 0.75 respectively), the second-order factor was retained for the structural model. Thus, parameters and model fit indices supported the viability of the overall measurement model composed of three higher-order constructs. Next, the testing of the hypothesized relationships between the exogenous variables and the endogenous variable is reported.

5.4 Structural Equation Modeling – Model Testing

Given an acceptable model fit each for the second-order measurement models and the overall measurement model, a structural model was assessed based on the proposed hypotheses. The proposed structural model shows the two exogenous variables

(relationship quality with organizers and destination attractiveness), and the endogenous variable (exhibition brand preference). The two exogenous variables were specified to allow correlation with each other. The proposed paths were: a) from relationship quality to exhibition brand preference; and b) from destination attractiveness to exhibition brand preference. Table 5 denotes the path coefficients of the structural model.

INSERT TABLE 5 APPROXIMATELY HERE

The model fit indices suggest that the hypothesized model fits the data (χ^2 is 3160.042, $df=1357$, $n=0.000$, $\chi^2/df= 2.329$, $RMR=0.138$, $GFI=0.836$, $CFI=0.910$, $RMSEA=0.046$). The expected cross-validation index (ECVI) detects the overall error of the model, denoting if a model is likely to cross-validate across samples of the same size from the same population. ECVI of the default model is 4.885, marginally higher than ECVI of the saturated model (4.146), and substantially lower than ECVI of the independence model (33.063), suggesting that the discrepancy between the fitted covariance matrix in the analyzed sample and the expected covariance matrix in a cross-validated sample of equivalent size is low.

It is apparent that ‘relationship quality’ is a strong predictor of ‘exhibition brand preference’. Given its dominant power, the effect of ‘destination attractiveness’ might be suppressed, evidenced in the negative value of the coefficient estimate (-0.167). According to Hair et al., (2009), this reversal of sign might be expected and desirable, as it might suggest that the relationship between ‘destination attractiveness’ and ‘exhibition brand preference’ is hidden in the bivariate correlations, which in this case is the correlation between relationship quality and destination attractiveness. A visual diagram depicting the structural model is shown in Figure 3, displaying three second-order constructs, 12 first-order latent constructs and 54 measured indicators.

INSERT FIGURE 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE

6. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Hypothesis 1 proposed that relationship quality has a significant, positive impact on exhibition brand preference. This hypothesis is supported (H_1 : estimate = .946, $t=10.407$). Hypothesis 2 proposed that destination attractiveness has a significant, positive impact on exhibition brand preference. Contrary to expectations, the effect of destination attractiveness on exhibition brand preference was found to be suppressed by the impact of relationship quality; it was non-significant at the 0.01 level (H_2 : estimate = -0.167, $t=-2.114$). Following Hair and colleagues' (2009) recommendation that uses only highly correlated independent variables for prediction in case of a suppression effect, hypothesis 2 is rejected.

The reason why hypothesis 2 is not supported might partially be explained by the relative homogeneity of the five destinations surveyed. Jin et al., (2012b) compared exhibitors' perceptions of the attractiveness of these five destinations using independent sample t-tests. Except that exhibitors rated cluster effect 1 (leadership of the host city in the industry) differently for these destinations, there were no significant differences in terms of venue facilities, destination as a source of exhibitors, and accessibility. In contrast, Jin et al., (2012a) revealed that exhibitors' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with organizers differ significantly, depending on key characteristics of organizers. As previously mentioned, a brand is viewed as a differentiator to distinguish it from its competitors (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). Results of this study suggest that when the provision of facilities/amenities becomes more and more homogenous among competitive exhibitions/destinations, it is the quality of the supplier-customer relationship, not destination attractiveness factors, that serve as a 'differentiator' in exhibition brand building.

In addition, a brand is viewed as a promise that a firm identifies in its customers to satisfy their functional and symbolic needs (Roth, 1995). In the exhibition context, functional needs are sales-oriented needs of exhibitors, whereas symbolic needs relate to non-selling objectives such as image-building and strategic-benefit related needs (Kozak, 2005; Hansen, 2004). Exhibitors seek a congruity between their firm and an exhibition so

that they can enhance the position of their firm in the industry and their participation in a prominent event. Satisfying functional and especially symbolic needs of exhibitors is reliant on the performance of organizers to be the hub for the market they serve and information-brokers of the industry (Stoeck & Schraudy, 2005) rather than venue and destination attractiveness, especially when venues/destinations are increasingly homogenous.

This research has implications for the concept of ‘company as a brand’ (e.g., Berry, 2000; de Chernatony & Riley, 1999) in the service branding sector where the strength of a service brand is primarily driven by the quality of the service and supplier/customer relationships (e.g., Berry, 2000). A critical services-branding strategy is to let customers recognize the company itself as part of a service brand by creating a distinct corporate identity and image (e.g., Onkvisit & Shaw, 1989). An exhibition brand is primarily a service brand in a B2B context where both employees from the organizing company and the venue provide points of contact and deliver the services. An organizer usually holds the ownership of an exhibition brand. In China’s trade fair context, however, the operational models are complex, often involving multi-partnerships. Even though a particular exhibition may be prestigious its main organizer who operates it might not be well-known among participants (Jin et al., 2010). The event could continue to thrive even if ownership changes. Thus, there is a danger for some exhibition organizers if removed from ownership when conflicts occur among organizing partners. From the perspective of organizers, establishment of a long-term quality relationship with exhibitors can enhance the exhibition company as a brand, in addition to the exhibition brand. Organizers need to not only develop and market the exhibition brand but also their own company brand as to establish customer loyalty to their company, thereby reducing potential risks. In short, cultivating a long-term relationship orientation with exhibitors is critical for an exhibition organizer for the success and sustainable development of its exhibitions.

It is also apparent that destination attractiveness factors constitute a necessary, but insufficient condition for exhibitors’ exhibition brand preference. Rather, it is determined

by whether organizers can meet exhibitors' needs and objectives, and are able to build trust and commitment. If that is the case, then it may also be relatively easy for organizers with a renowned exhibition brand to relocate an exhibition to an alternative setting (venue and/or destination). This might explain/justify some successful exhibitions being held in/moved to venues with few frills but strong market demand in emerging markets.

Finally, study results indicate that exhibitors' perceptions of the importance of a destination are different from those of conference/convention attendees. Consequently, results of this research are different from Lee and Back's (2008) finding that convention site selection has a significant, positive impact on convention brand satisfaction from the attendees' perspective. In future research on site selection a clear distinction has to be made between exhibitions and conventions rather than approaching this issue from a more general MICE segment perspective.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In line with the broader branding literature that conceptualizes a brand increasingly as a collaborative, value co-creation activity of a firm and its stakeholders, this study developed and empirically tested a model that incorporates brand-building elements of both an exhibition organizer and key stakeholders to explore their impact on exhibition brand preference. Research findings suggested that in the exhibition context in Mainland China, an exhibition brand built upon a quality supplier-buyer relationship is the primary reason for exhibitors' exhibition brand preference. Findings support arguments by several commentators (e.g., Alles, 1989; Heckmann, 2005; Ulrich, 2005) that a good marketing concept, good management and an understanding of the exhibiting needs and objectives generate exhibition success. To a certain extent, these factors are controlled by organizers. It is imperative for organizers to recognize and implement relationship-building measures as to give exhibitors reasons to stay with their exhibitions. Furthermore, establishing a long-term quality relationship with exhibitors can assist in developing the brand of the exhibition company, not just a particular exhibition. This research also suggests that, in order to attract new exhibitions to a destination or retain existing exhibitions, destinations need to mobilize all their resources to support

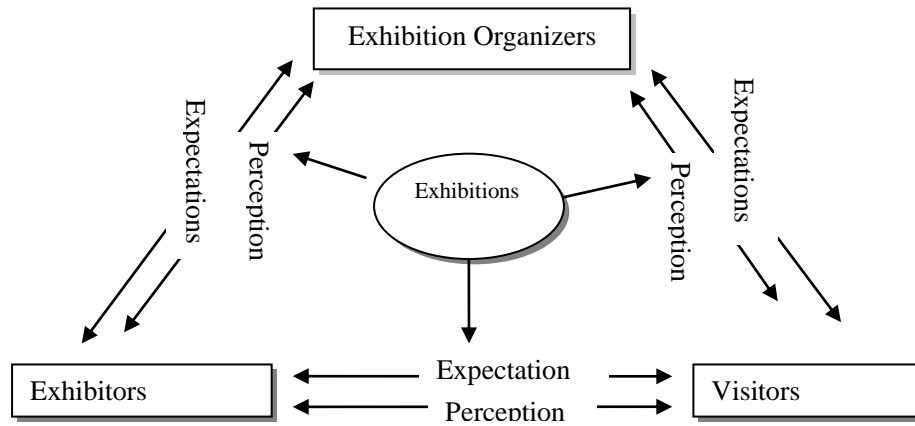
organizers' efforts to build long-term relations with exhibitors. Given the complexity of the buyer-seller relationship in the exhibition context, with multiple service suppliers and points of contact, this study also points to the need to further explore the role of individual stakeholders in the collaborative process of branding, particularly for more complex brands.

In designing this study, considerable efforts were made to minimize its limitations, and particularly ensure its representativeness by sampling altogether 10 exhibitions in two first-tier and four second-tier cities in two regions where exhibitions are most developed, and thereby, covering exhibitions of diverse ownerships and varied industry sectors. Exhibitors surveyed reflected a variety of characteristics of the exhibiting firms in terms of size, frequency of participation in the exhibition, and country/region of origin. Research results may be extrapolated to international and Chinese exhibitors exhibiting in exhibitions held in first and second-tier cities in China. In addition, China is presently considered the largest emerging exhibition market globally (UFI, 2011). Considering the decentralization of exhibitions and destinations worldwide, findings of this research may be applicable in other countries, especially emerging markets with similar market and destination conditions to those of the first and second-tier cities sampled in this research.

This research presents a first attempt to develop and test a model of exhibition brand preference from the exhibitors' perspective. It does so by integrating various factors that contribute to the value of an exhibition brand and assessing important points of contacts in the formation process of brand preference. While one construct developed in this study, 'preference for exhibition brand components' had low estimates on the 'exhibition brand preference' construct, resulting in marginal convergent validity of the second-order construct, we nevertheless retained it in this study for two reasons, as detailed on p. 16. Furthermore, retaining this construct also serves as a basis for future researchers to examine and further develop this construct so that its actual contribution to exhibition brand preference can be more accurately established.

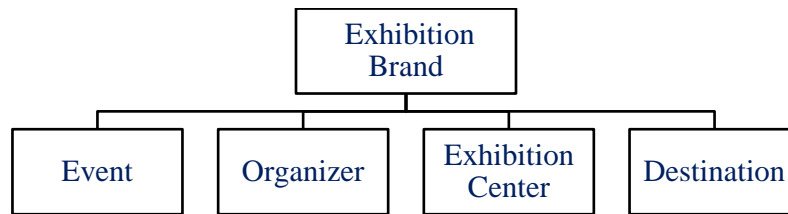
This study also opens several other avenues for future research. For a comprehensive treatment of the topic, perceptions of international and domestic buyers/visitors on relationship quality with organizers and destination attractiveness, and their impact on exhibition brand preference should be examined and compared with those of exhibitors. In addition, further studies may be conducted in different regions and/or countries, covering a greater variety of industry sectors to test the brand preference model and explore the relationship between the three key constructs. Since industry associations and professional societies are likely to play an increasing role as exhibition organizers (Khoo, 2005), the way these stakeholders influence exhibitor-organizer relationship building, and hence exhibition brand preference, may also be explored. Due to the dominating role relationship quality plays in the exhibition branding process, antecedents of relationship quality dimensions may be included in a potential model to assess their relative influence. Future research may also assess the influence of government and other related parties on exhibition brand preference in Mainland China, given the transitional nature of its economy.

Figure 1 - Relationship Triad in the Exhibition Context



Source: Bruhn & Hadwich, 2005

Figure 2 - Components of an Exhibition Brand



Source: Adapted from Sasserath, Wenhart and Daly, 2005

Figure 3 - Structural Model

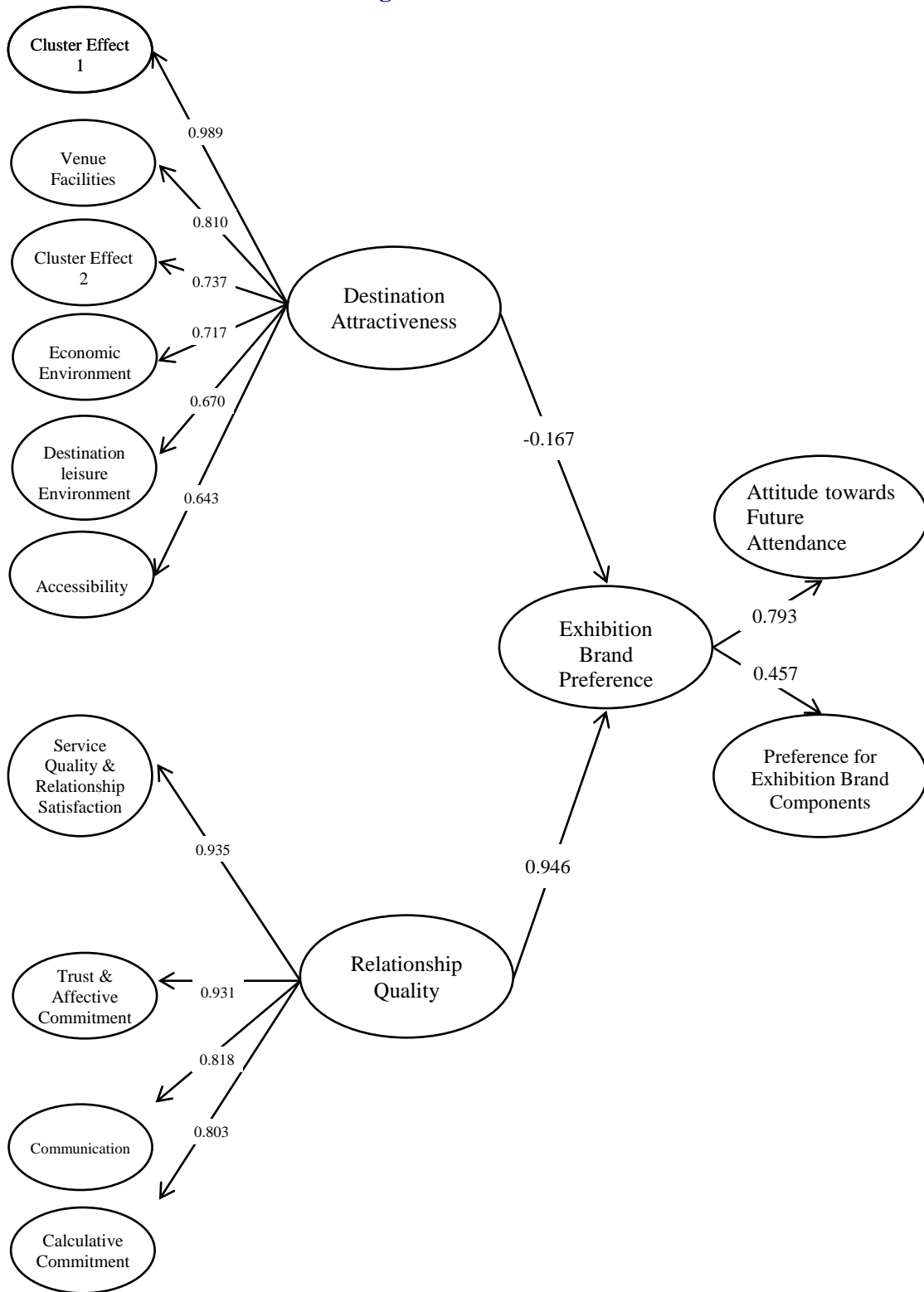


Table 1 - EFA Results of Exhibition Brand Preference

Factor/Item	Loading	Eigen-value	Variance Explained	Reliability Alpha
Attitude towards future attendance		4.061	50.768	.967
Future exhibiting in this exhibition would be good.	.940			
Future exhibiting in this exhibition would be favorable.	.957			
Future exhibiting in this exhibition would be positive.	.955			
Future exhibiting in this exhibition would be likely.	.924			
Preference of Exhibition Brand Components		1.977	24.710	.771
Our company prefers this exhibition to other exhibitions of its type.	.724			
Our company prefers this organizer to other organizers operating similar events in this field.	.780			
Our company prefers this exhibition center to other centers within this city.	.800			
Our company prefers this city to other cities for exhibitions.	.743			
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. KMO=.851, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: Chi-Square=1825.464, df=28, Sig=0.000, n=294				

Table 2 - Measurement Model of Exhibition Brand Preference – First-Order

Factor/Item	Std. Factor Loading	t-value	SMC	Composite Reliability
Attitude towards future attendance				0.96
Future exhibiting in this exhibition would be good...bad.	0.939		0.882	
Future exhibiting in this exhibition would be favorable... unfavorable.	0.955	34.137	0.913	
Future exhibiting in this exhibition would be positive... negative.	0.935	31.276	0.875	
Future exhibiting in this exhibition would be likely ... unlikely.	0.86	23.789	0.739	
Preference for exhibition brand components				0.75
Our company prefers this exhibition to other exhibitions of its type.	0.751		0.563	
Our company prefers this organizer to other organizers operating similar events in this field.	0.654	9.559	0.428	
Our company prefers this exhibition center to other centers within this city.	0.62	7.437	0.385	
Our company prefers this city to other cities for exhibitions.	0.6	7.158	0.36	
$\chi^2 = 51.088$, $df=19$ ($p<0.000$), $\chi^2/df = 2.689$, $GFI=0.956$, $CFI=0.981$, $RMSEA=0.076$				

Table 3 - Overall Measurement Model

Factor/Item	Std. Factor Loading	t-value	SMC	CR
Service Quality & Relationship Satisfaction <--- Relationship Quality	0.935	15.567	0.874	0.94
Trust & Affective Commitment <--- Relationship Quality	0.931	15.326	0.867	0.91
Calculative Commitment <--- Relationship Quality	0.803	11.090	0.644	0.60
Communication <--- Relationship Quality	0.818		0.669	0.80
Economic Environment <--- Destination Attractiveness	0.717	9.836	0.515	0.73
Host city Leadership in the Industry <--- Destination Attractiveness	0.989	10.704	0.978	0.74
Venue <--- Destination Attractiveness	0.810	9.249	0.656	0.80
Destination Leisure Environment <--- Destination Attractiveness	0.670	9.230	0.448	0.82
Accessibility <--- Destination Attractiveness	0.643		0.414	0.75
Host city as a Source of Exhibitors <--- Destination Attractiveness	0.723	9.184	0.523	0.73
Attitude towards Future Attendance Preference <--- Exhibition Brand Preference	0.793		0.629	0.96
Preference for Exhibition Brand Components <--- Exhibition Brand Preference	0.457	7.485	0.208	0.75

$\chi^2 = 3160.042$, $df=1357$, $\chi^2/df=2.329$. GFI=0.836, CFI=0.910, TLI=0.905, RMSEA=0.046, n=616

Table 4 -Inter-Correlations, CR and AVE of the Second Order Constructs

	Exhibition Brand Preference	Destination Attractiveness	Relationship Quality
Exhibition Brand Preference	1		
Destination Attractiveness	0.546 (0.298)	1	
Relationship Quality	0.82 (0.672)	0.754 (0.569)	1
AVE	0.42	0.59	0.76
CR	0.60	0.89	0.92

Note: Values in each column are correlation estimates. Values in parentheses are squared correlations.

Table 5 - Path Coefficients in the Structural Model

Path		Standardized Coefficient	t-Value
Exhibition Brand Preference	< Destination Attractiveness	-0.167	-2.114
Exhibition Brand Preference	< Relationship Quality	0.946	10.407***
Service Quality & Relationship Satisfaction	< Relationship Quality	0.935	15.567***
Trust & Affective Commitment	< Relationship Quality	0.931	15.326***
Calculative Commitment	< Relationship Quality	0.803	11.09***
Communication	< Relationship Quality	0.818	n/a
Economic Environment	< Destination Attractiveness	0.717	9.836***
Host City Leadership in Industry	< Destination Attractiveness	0.989	10.704***
Venue Facilities	< Destination Attractiveness	0.810	9.249***
City Leisure Environment	< Destination Attractiveness	0.670	9.23***
Accessibility	< Destination Attractiveness	0.643	n/a
Host city as a Sources of Exhibitors	< Destination Attractiveness	0.723	9.184***
Attitude towards Future Attendance	< Exhibition Brand Preference	0.793	n/a
Preference for Exhibition Brand Components	< Exhibition Brand Preference	0.457	7.485***

***significant at the 0.01 level, n=616

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