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## DESTINATION BRAND EXPERIENCE IN TOURISM RESEARCH: A THEMATIC REVIEW AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

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### Abstract:

Destination brand experience (DBE) has become a central construct in tourism marketing, capturing tourists' sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to destination brands. Despite growing interest, no review has examined the conceptual development and empirical findings specific to DBE. This paper conducts a thematic review of 42 studies published between 1996 and 2025, synthesizing current knowledge across five themes: conceptualization and dimensional structure, theoretical foundations, antecedents, outcomes and consequences, and methodological approaches. The four-dimensional framework (sensory, affective, behavioral, intellectual) from Brakus et al. (2009) remains dominant, though relational and spiritual dimensions are gaining attention. The Stimulus-Organism-Response model and Social Exchange Theory are the most applied lenses, yet many studies lack explicit theoretical grounding. A clear gap exists between extensive outcome research and limited antecedent investigation. An integrative framework and seven-point future research agenda are proposed. This review provides the first dedicated synthesis of DBE research, offering guidance for scholars and destination marketers.

### Keyword:

Destination Brand Experience; Future Research Agenda; Thematic Review; Tourism Marketing



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## Introduction

The contemporary tourism landscape is fundamentally shaped by the experience economy paradigm. Since Pine and Gilmore (1998) articulated that economic value progressively shifts from commodities and services toward staged experiences, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) worldwide have recognized that competitive advantage lies not merely in physical attractions or service quality but in the overall experiences that destinations provide. This strategic shift has prompted scholars to examine how tourists perceive, process, and respond to the branded experiences that destinations offer, giving rise to the construct of destination brand experience (DBE).

The conceptual roots of DBE can be traced to Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello's (2009) influential work on brand experience in consumer marketing. They defined brand experience as the subjective internal responses and behavioral reactions evoked by brand-related stimuli. Early work by Hudson and Ritchie (2009) underscored the importance of branding memorable destination experiences, providing an experiential foundation that subsequent scholars would build upon. Barnes, Mattsson, and Sørensen (2014) subsequently adapted Brakus et al.'s framework to tourism destinations, recognizing that destinations represent complex amalgamations of attractions, services, cultures, and interpersonal encounters that collectively create branded experiences. Since then, DBE research has expanded rapidly: the present review identifies 42 dedicated studies, with over two-thirds published since 2020 alone, reflecting the growing recognition that experiential dimensions are central to destination competitiveness and tourist loyalty.

Despite this expanding body of research, the DBE literature currently lacks a dedicated review that systematically maps the construct's conceptual development. While several literature reviews have examined related topics—including destination branding (Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril, Gasparin, & de Pablo Valenciano, 2020), place branding (Swain et al., 2024), destination brand identity (Leal, Ribeiro, & Pinto, 2024), and social media in destination branding (Guerreiro, Mendes, & Pinto, 2022)—none has specifically focused on DBE as a standalone construct. This paper addresses this gap by conducting a thematic review of 42 studies published between 1996 and 2025. The review pursues five objectives: (1) to trace the conceptual evolution and dimensional structure of DBE; (2) to map the theoretical frameworks employed; (3) to identify the antecedents that shape DBE formation; (4) to synthesize the outcomes and mediating mechanisms; and (5) to assess the methodological approaches adopted.

This review makes several contributions. For scholars, it provides the first comprehensive mapping of the DBE research landscape. For practitioners and DMOs, it offers evidence-based

insights into how destination managers can strategically leverage experiential dimensions to enhance tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and pro-social behaviors.

## **Review Methodology**

This study adopts a thematic review approach, which is particularly suited for emerging research domains where the literature is consolidating and the primary objective is to identify, synthesize, and interpret thematic patterns (Paul & Criado, 2020). To ensure transparency and rigor in the literature search and selection process, this review incorporates the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). While PRISMA guided the systematic retrieval of literature, the subsequent data synthesis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for the interpretive flexibility required to map the conceptual evolution of DBE.

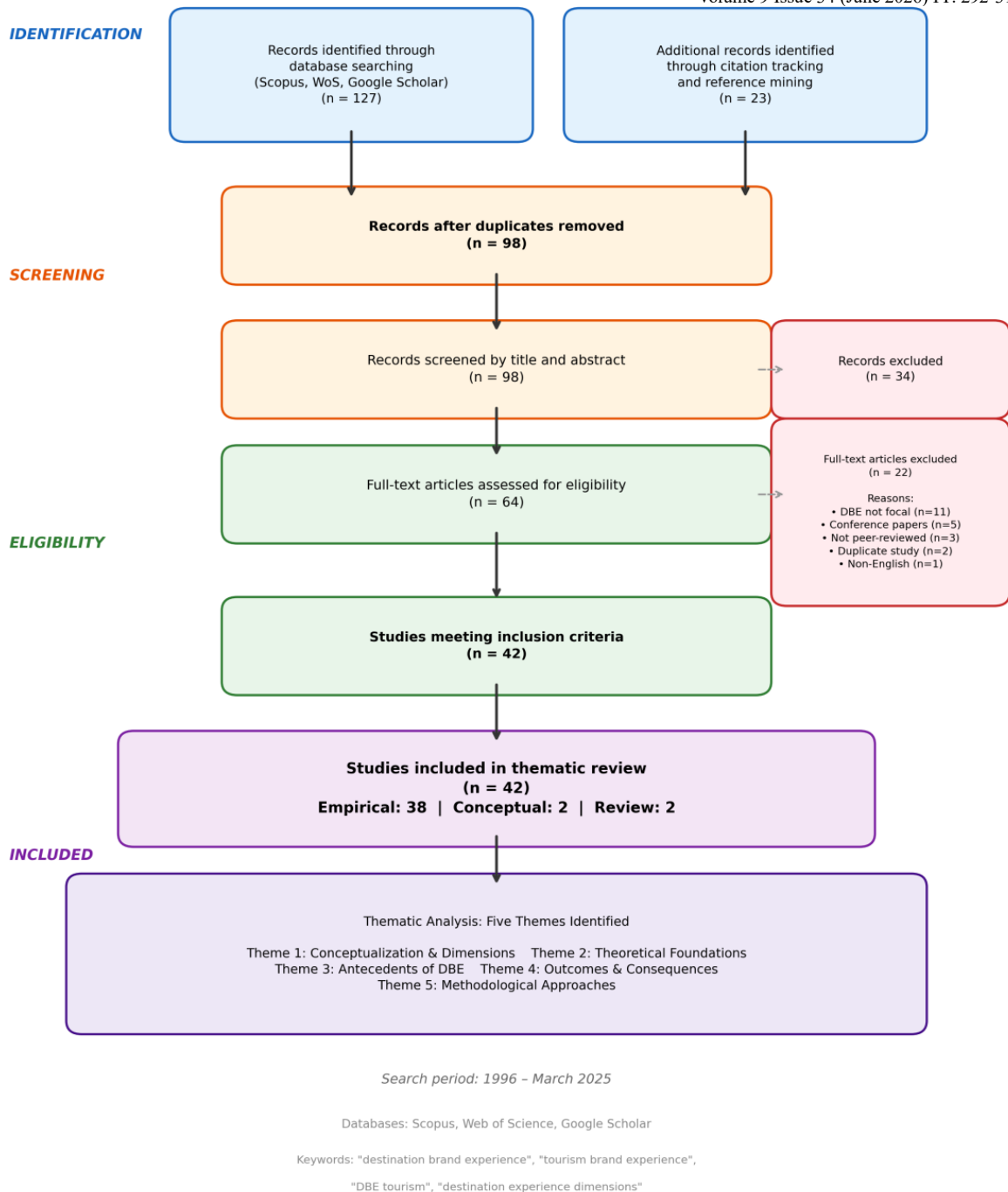
### ***Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria***

The literature search was conducted across three major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search employed keyword combinations such as “destination brand experience,” “tourism brand experience,” and “destination experience dimensions.” The search covered the period from 1996 to March 2025. Studies were included if: (a) DBE constituted a focal construct; (b) the study was published in a peer-reviewed academic journal; (c) the study was available in English.

### ***Final Sample and Analysis Procedure***

The systematic search and screening process, detailed in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), yielded a final sample of 42 studies. While this sample size reflects the highly specialized nature of DBE as a standalone construct, it captures the most direct and influential empirical contributions to the field.

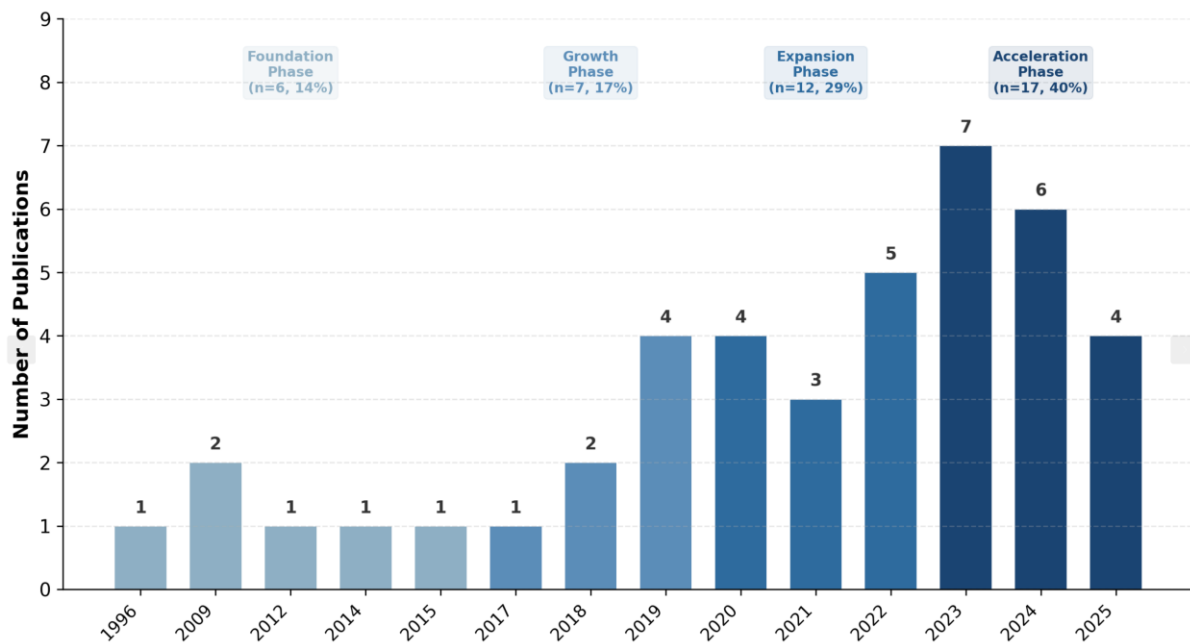
Two authors independently screened titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria and subsequently performed full-text eligibility assessment. Inter-rater disagreements during screening and thematic coding were resolved through iterative discussion until consensus was reached, and a third independent check was performed on a randomly selected 20% of the final sample to verify coding consistency. To enhance transparency, an audit trail of coding decisions and theme refinements was maintained throughout the synthesis process. The authors acknowledge that thematic analysis is inherently interpretive; the authors’ background in tourism marketing and consumer behavior research inevitably informed the coding lens, and this reflexive positioning is openly disclosed so that readers can appropriately situate the synthesized themes.



**Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Literature Search and Screening Process**

Source: Authors' Own Work

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) process. Through iterative analysis, five overarching themes emerged: (1) conceptualization and dimensions, (2) theoretical foundations, (3) antecedents, (4) outcomes and consequences, and (5) methodological approaches. Figure 2 illustrates the temporal distribution of the reviewed studies.



**Figure 2: Publication Trend of DBE Research (1996–2025), N = 42 Studies**

Source: Authors' Own Work

The publication pattern reveals four distinct phases: a foundation phase (1996–2015; 6 studies, 14%), during which seminal works established the conceptual and measurement groundwork; a growth phase (2016–2019; 7 studies, 17%), marked by initial empirical applications; an expansion phase (2020–2022; 12 studies, 29%), reflecting broadening theoretical and contextual scope; and an acceleration phase (2023–2025; 17 studies, 40%), indicating that DBE has entered a period of rapid scholarly development, with the majority of the existing literature published within the most recent three years.

## Thematic Findings

### *Conceptualization and Dimensional Structure of DBE*

The conceptual development of destination brand experience has unfolded progressively, building upon foundational work in experiential marketing and brand management. Otto and Ritchie (1996) laid the groundwork by identifying four dimensions of service experience in tourism—hedonics, peace of mind, involvement, and recognition—establishing that experiential dimensions extend beyond functional service attributes. While this framework preceded the formal conceptualization of brand experience, it provided early groundwork for understanding how subjective, emotion-laden encounters shape tourist responses in destination contexts.

A key conceptual advance came with Brakus et al. (2009), who defined brand experience as subjective internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli. Their four-dimensional scale—sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral—was empirically validated across product brands and quickly became the dominant paradigm for operationalizing brand experience. Barnes et al. (2014) were among the first to adapt this framework to tourism, introducing the DBE construct and

demonstrating that all four dimensions positively influence visitor satisfaction. Kumar and Kaushik (2017) subsequently reinforced the integrative nature of DBE, arguing that it encompasses tourists' subjective responses to a destination's tangible and intangible elements, transcending mere satisfaction with service encounters.

The sensory dimension captures how destinations engage tourists' visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory senses through scenic landscapes, local music, historical architecture, distinctive cuisines, and ambient environments (Rini, Rombe, & Tarigan, 2024). Calderón-Fajardo, Anaya-Sánchez, and Molinillo (2024) applied data mining and machine learning techniques to analyze user-generated content, finding that DBE dimensions—particularly sensory experiences—can be reliably measured through computational methods, with gender and culture (Western versus Eastern) moderating the patterns. The affective dimension encompasses emotional responses such as joy, excitement, and emotional resonance evoked by destination encounters (Martins, Carvalho, & Almeida, 2023). Kong, Kwon, Girish, Lee, and Reisinger (2024), drawing on Appraisal Theory, found affective experience to be the strongest predictor of memorable tourism experiences in night tourism. The behavioral dimension pertains to physical actions and active participation in destination activities (Tarigan, Silalahi, & Tinambunan, 2024). Zhang, Ong, Lu, and Wang (2025) found behavioral experience to exert the strongest direct effect on destination brand love. The intellectual dimension involves cognitive stimulation, curiosity arousal, and learning triggered by the destination (Jiménez-Barreto & Rubio, 2019), though its relative importance appears context-dependent: Kong et al. (2024) found it non-significant in hedonic night tourism settings.

The relative importance of DBE dimensions varies considerably across tourism contexts, a pattern that emerges consistently from the reviewed literature. In nature-based and cultural heritage settings, sensory and affective dimensions tend to dominate tourist responses (Barnes et al., 2014; Martins et al., 2023), whereas in adventure and experiential tourism contexts, behavioral dimensions gain prominence (Tarigan et al., 2024). For online and pre-travel contexts, intellectual and interactive dimensions assume greater significance (Jiménez-Barreto & Rubio, 2019; Köchling & Lohmann, 2022). Given these differences, DMOs may need to emphasize different experiential dimensions depending on their destination's positioning and target market. In addition, the measurement of DBE dimensions has remained largely consistent across studies, with most researchers adapting Brakus et al.'s (2009) original 12-item scale. However, Ngwira et al. (2023) developed a 23-item instrument to capture their six-dimensional model, and Calderón-Fajardo et al. (2024) pioneered a computational approach using thesauri constructed from destination-specific vocabulary, representing a significant methodological departure from traditional self-report scales.

Although the four-dimensional framework dominates, several scholars have proposed extensions. Ngwira, Tung, and Tse (2023) developed a six-dimensional model incorporating relational (social bonding with local communities) and spiritual (transcendent, meaning-making) dimensions, particularly relevant for cultural heritage and nature-based destinations. Kazançoğlu and Dirsehan (2021) incorporated relational experience in thermal tourism, finding it influences perceived flow and loyalty. Köchling and Lohmann (2022) offered an alternative dual-dimensional framework of hedonic and utilitarian experiences for online destination engagement, while Jiménez-Barreto, Sthapit, Rubio, and Campo (2019) introduced interactive and social dimensions for online DBE. Table 1 summarizes the dimensional frameworks identified in the reviewed literature.

**Table 1: Summary of DBE Dimensional Frameworks in the Reviewed Literature**

Framework Author(s)	Dimensions	Context	Notes
Otto & Ritchie (1996)	Hedonics, Peace of Mind, Involvement, Recognition	Hotels, airlines, tours	Pre-Brakus service experience framework
Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello (2009)	Sensory, Affective, Intellectual, Behavioral	Product brands	Dominant paradigm; 12-item scale
Huang & Huang (2012)	Sensation, Feeling, Thinking, Acting, Relating	Destination hotels, China	Schmitt-based (5 strategic modules)
Barnes, Mattsson, & Sørensen (2014)	Sensory, Affective, Intellectual, Behavioral	European destinations	First DBE scale validation; adapted Brakus to tourism
Jiménez-Barreto, Sthapit, Rubio, & Campo (2019)	Sensory, Cognitive, Conative, Interactive, Social	Online DBE	Digital extension (5 dimensions)
Köchling & Lohmann (2022)	Hedonic, Utilitarian	Online destination websites	Dual-process theory framework
Ngwira, Tung, & Tse (2023)	Sensory, Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral, Relational, Spiritual	Heritage tourism, Malawi	6 dimensions; extended Brakus framework; 23-item scale

Source: Authors' Own Work

### ***Theoretical Foundations***

The theoretical landscape of DBE research is diverse yet fragmented. A notable observation from this review is that a considerable proportion of empirical studies have proceeded without explicit theoretical grounding, a gap that Matonya (2022) and Vlahovic-Mlakar and Ozretic-Dosen (2022) have identified as constraining cumulative knowledge development. Among the studies that do employ theoretical frameworks, five major perspectives emerge.

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) has emerged as the most frequently applied framework, positioning DBE as an environmental stimulus that triggers internal cognitive and affective states (organism), which subsequently drive behavioral responses. Kong et al. (2024) used SOR to trace how DBE dimensions influence arousal and memorable tourism experiences, ultimately shaping revisit intentions. Tang, Wang, Zhang, and Huang (2023) integrated SOR with Social Exchange Theory to explain how positive brand experiences create felt obligations manifesting as tourist citizenship behaviors.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) provides a relational lens for understanding tourist-destination reciprocity. Under this framework, positive brand experiences create perceived obligations for reciprocation, explaining tourists' loyalty, word-of-mouth, and citizenship behaviors that benefit destination communities. Tang et al. (2023) demonstrated that Brand

Relationship Quality mediates the DBE–tourist citizenship behavior relationship, connecting experiential marketing to sustainable tourism management.

Appraisal Theory of Emotion (Lazarus, 1991) explains the emotional processing mechanisms underlying DBE's affective dimension. Lin, Hussain, Ragavan, and Nisar (2025) integrated Appraisal Theory with Signaling Theory to show how DBE triggers discrete emotions (joy, love, positive surprise) that shape destination brand equity. Embodied Cognition Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) has been increasingly applied to explain why active physical engagement creates deeper cognitive processing and more enduring memories. Lv and Wu (2021) applied this theory to demonstrate how extraordinary sensory experiences foster destination brand love through happiness pathways.

Additional theoretical frameworks include the Theory of Planned Behavior for predicting visit intentions (Singh & Mehraj, 2018, 2019), Place Attachment Theory for understanding emotional bonds with destinations (Martins et al., 2023), Self-Expansion Theory for explaining how DBE contributes to personal growth (Zhang et al., 2025), Flow Theory for understanding immersive experiential states (Kazançoğlu & Dirsehan, 2021), and Experience Economy Theory (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) as a macro-level framing. Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and Transformative Service Research, despite their high relevance to value co-creation in experiential tourism, have received almost no attention in DBE research, even though they speak directly to how tourists and destinations co-create experiential value.

A quantitative assessment of theoretical adoption across the reviewed studies reveals an uneven distribution. Among the 42 studies, Brand Experience Theory (Brakus et al., 2009) serves as the most commonly referenced foundation, appearing in roughly 15 studies under various labels. The SOR model is explicitly adopted in three studies (Kong et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2023), while Social Exchange Theory, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and Experiential Marketing Theory each appear in two to three studies. A considerable number of empirical studies do not articulate an explicit theoretical framework, instead relying on the general experiential marketing literature as a conceptual backdrop. Such fragmentation hinders the accumulation of testable propositions and the development of a coherent theory of DBE. A productive next step would be studies that systematically test competing theoretical explanations for the same DBE phenomena—for instance, comparing SOR-based predictions against Social Exchange Theory predictions for the DBE–loyalty relationship—thereby advancing theoretical integration and refinement.

### *Antecedents of DBE*

A key finding from this review is the pronounced imbalance between outcome-focused and antecedent-focused research. The overwhelming majority of studies position DBE as an independent variable predicting various tourist responses, with remarkably few examining what factors drive or shape DBE formation. Without this knowledge, understanding antecedent conditions is essential for destination managers seeking to design and deliver compelling brand experiences.

Among the limited studies addressing antecedents, three categories emerge. First, destination-level attributes: Earlier studies such as Ding and Tseng (2015) examined brand awareness and associations as mediators linking brand experience to loyalty in service contexts, while Yao (2018) explored brand relationship as a mechanism connecting DBE to outcomes in Indonesian

tourism. Dahiya, Batra, and Kumar (2020) identified destination attractiveness and familiarity as factors shaping DBE, while Rini et al. (2024) demonstrated that tourist attraction quality influences loyalty through DBE mediation, effectively positioning attraction attributes as experiential antecedents. Srivastava, Madan, Dey, and Qadir (2022) examined DBE dimensions in Himalayan tourism, identifying trust and loyalty as important boundary conditions. Second, tourist-level characteristics serve as boundary conditions: Ahn and Back (2019) found service expertise moderates DBE–perceived value relationships in cruise tourism; Luu (2022) showed that visitors' country of origin and gender moderate DBE–brand equity relationships; and Calderón-Fajardo et al. (2024) identified gender and cultural orientation (Western versus Eastern) as moderating DBE dimensional patterns. Third, digital factors: Jiménez-Barreto and Rubio (2019) and Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2020) found that website design elements and online content quality shape online DBE formation; Cavdar Aksoy and Yazici (2025) examined how destination management practices interact with DBE in driving online advocacy.

Despite these contributions, the antecedent landscape remains severely underdeveloped. As Matonya (2022) explicitly noted, understanding what creates DBE would provide the most actionable managerial insights. Future research examining how specific destination design elements, marketing communication strategies, co-creation opportunities, and cultural programming drive DBE across its dimensions would substantially advance both theory and practice.

### ***Outcomes and Consequences of DBE***

In contrast to the limited antecedent research, the outcome landscape is well developed and varied. The review identifies eight major outcome categories, as summarized in Table 2.

Tourist satisfaction is the most extensively examined outcome. Barnes et al. (2014) established that all four DBE dimensions positively influence satisfaction, with sensory and behavioral experiences showing particularly strong effects. This finding holds across national parks (Martins et al., 2021), cultural heritage sites (Singh & Mehraj, 2018), cruise tourism (Ahn & Back, 2019), and urban destinations (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2024). Perceived value frequently mediates this relationship (Ahn & Back, 2019; Sukaris, Suyono, Ratnasahara, & Elisabeth, 2020).

Destination loyalty has received substantial attention as both a direct and indirect outcome. Kumar and Kaushik (2017) demonstrated DBE influences loyalty through destination brand identification. Tarigan et al. (2024) found serial mediation through brand authenticity and satisfaction. Maulina, Sukoco, Hermanto, and Kostini (2023) confirmed the direct DBE–loyalty link in Indonesian cultural tourism contexts. Revisit intention has been examined separately: Kong et al. (2024) found sequential mediation through arousal and memorable tourism experience, while Kumar and Kaushik (2020) demonstrated destination brand engagement as a mediator.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) and brand advocacy: Singh and Mehraj (2018) and Maulina et al. (2023) found that affective and sensory DBE dimensions drive recommendation willingness. Khan and Fatma (2021) showed online DBE influences WOM through destination brand authenticity, while Cavdar Aksoy and Yazici (2025) demonstrated the DBE–online brand advocacy pathway through satisfaction. Destination brand equity: Lin et al. (2025) found DBE

influences equity through emotions and brand credibility. Luu (2022) examined wine destination brand experience, finding that event marketing and brand clues serve as antecedents, with DBE influencing brand equity dimensions and with visitors' country and gender as moderators. Elalfy, Elgazzar, El-Ashry, and Elsharnouby (2025) found destination and local brand equity jointly shape loyalty.

**Trust and brand credibility:** Kumar and Kaushik (2017) found DBE influences destination trust affecting loyalty. Torres-Moraga and Barra (2023) demonstrated DBE builds trust through perceived trustworthiness. Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2020) introduced online destination brand credibility as a mediator. Emotional outcomes and brand love: Lv and Wu (2021) showed extraordinary sensory experiences influence brand love through happiness. Zhang et al. (2025) found DBE shapes brand love through both hedonic and eudaimonic happiness pathways. Šagovčnović and Kovačić (2024) demonstrated DBE influences destination attachment and conspicuousness.

**Tourist citizenship behavior (TCB)** represents an emerging and theoretically significant outcome. Tang et al. (2023) provided the first empirical evidence that DBE influences both organization-directed citizenship behaviors (helping organizations, providing feedback) and customer-directed citizenship behaviors (assisting fellow tourists, promoting positive atmosphere). Their finding of full mediation through Brand Relationship Quality suggests experiences must build relational bonds before tourists engage in discretionary pro-social behaviors—connecting experiential marketing to sustainable destination management.

Beyond the primary outcome categories, the review reveals a complex set of mediating pathways through which DBE translates into tourist responses. At least 32 of the 42 reviewed studies examine one or more mediating variables, reflecting scholars' recognition that DBE's effects are predominantly indirect rather than direct. The most frequently examined mediators include tourist satisfaction (Barnes et al., 2014; Martins et al., 2021; Cavdar Aksoy & Yazici, 2025), brand identification (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017, 2020), perceived value (Ahn & Back, 2019; Sukaris et al., 2020), brand authenticity (Khan & Fatma, 2021; Tarigan et al., 2024), happiness (Lv & Wu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2025), and brand relationship quality (Tang et al., 2023). The variety of mediators points to DBE activating multiple psychological pathways simultaneously, with the specific pathway depending on the DBE dimension activated, the tourist's characteristics, and the contextual conditions. For instance, sensory and affective experiences appear to operate primarily through emotional mediators (happiness, satisfaction), while behavioral and intellectual experiences may work more through cognitive pathways (perceived value, brand identification). Understanding this dimensional–mediator alignment represents an important direction for future research.

**Table 2: Outcomes, Mediators, and Moderators in DBE Research**

Outcome Category	Key Studies	Mediators	Moderators
Satisfaction	Barnes et al. (2014); Martins et al. (2021, 2023); Singh & Mehraj (2018); Ahn & Back (2019); Sukaris et al. (2020); Calderón-Fajardo et al. (2024)	Perceived value	Service expertise; Tourism context
Loyalty	Kumar & Kaushik (2017); Tarigan et al. (2024); Maulina et al. (2023); Luu (2022)	Brand identification; Brand authenticity; Satisfaction	Country of origin; Gender; Visit frequency
Revisit intention	Kong et al. (2024); Kumar & Kaushik (2020)	Arousal; Memorable tourism experience; Brand engagement	Gender; Age; Education; Income
WOM / Advocacy	Singh & Mehraj (2018); Khan & Fatma (2021); Cavdar Aksoy & Yazici (2025); Maulina et al. (2023)	Brand authenticity; Destination satisfaction	Individualism / Collectivism
Brand equity	Lin et al. (2025); Luu (2022); Elalfy et al. (2025)	Emotions; credibility	Brand Visitors' country of origin; Gender; Age; Number of visits
Trust / Credibility	Kumar & Kaushik (2017); Torres-Moraga & Barra (2023); Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2020)	Perceived trustworthiness; Online brand credibility	Propensity to trust; Past experience
Brand love / Emotional outcomes	Lv & Wu (2021); Zhang et al. (2025); Šagovčnović & Kovačić (2024)	Momentary happiness; Hedonic / eudaimonic happiness; Destination attachment	—
Tourist citizenship behavior (TCB)	Tang et al. (2023)	Brand Relationship Quality (full mediation)	Commitment to provider

Source: Authors' Own Work

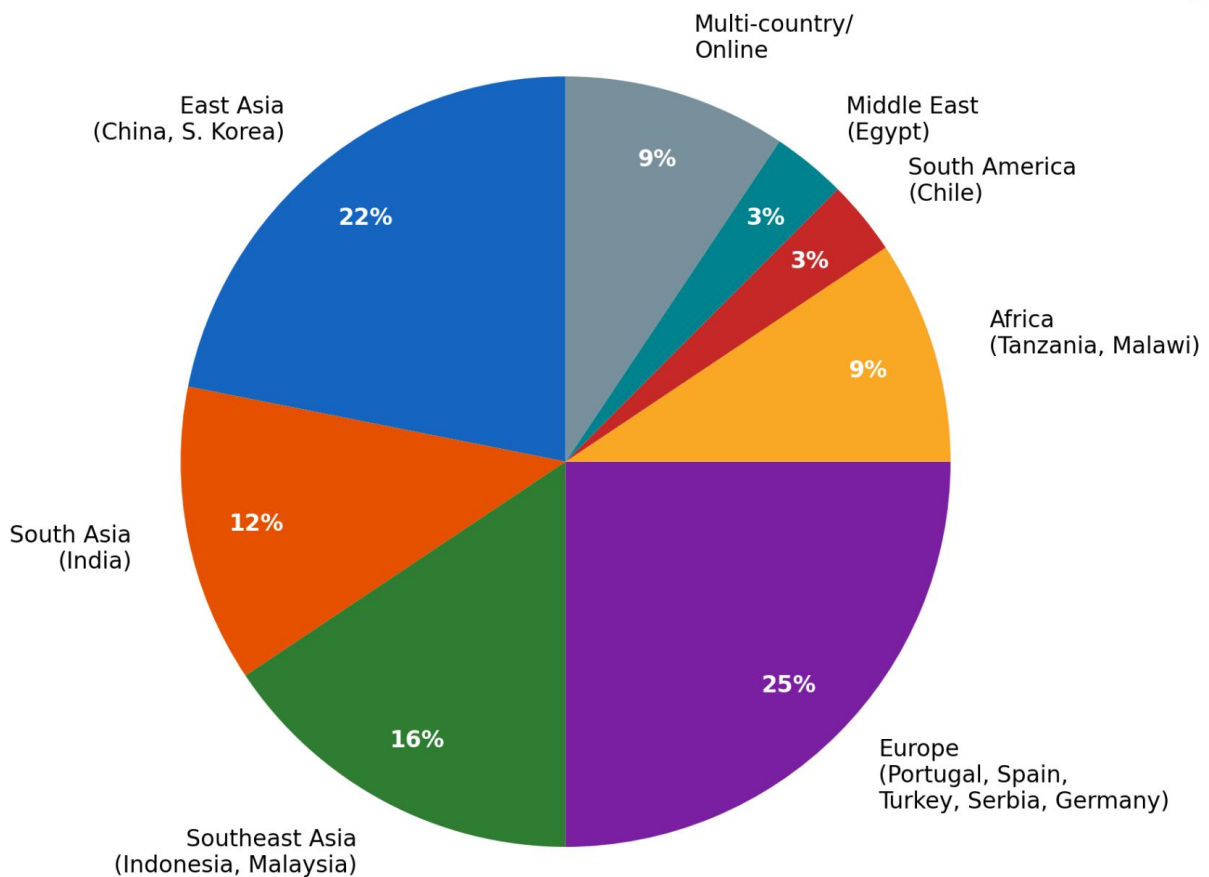
### Methodological Approaches

The methodological profile of DBE research reveals a field that is predominantly quantitative, cross-sectional, and survey driven. Among the 42 reviewed studies, the overwhelming majority employed quantitative survey approaches, with only a handful of conceptual, qualitative, or review-oriented contributions. Structural equation modeling (SEM) constitutes the dominant analytical technique: both covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) and partial least squares SEM (PLS-SEM; see Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2022) are well-represented, with PLS-SEM

gaining increasing prominence in recent publications. Regression analysis, factor analysis, and cluster analysis appear as complementary methods.

Sample sizes range from approximately 200 to over 700 respondents, with most studies employing convenience or purposive sampling through on-site questionnaire surveys using Likert-scale instruments adapted from Brakus et al.'s (2009) brand experience scale. Several studies have employed online survey distribution for digital DBE contexts (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2019, 2020; Köchling & Lohmann, 2022). A notable methodological innovation is Calderón-Fajardo et al.'s (2024) application of data mining, sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and machine learning classification to measure DBE dimensions from online reviews, demonstrating the potential of computational approaches for capturing experiential responses at scale.

Geographically, the reviewed studies span multiple continents but show notable concentrations. Figure 3 illustrates the geographic distribution. East Asia (primarily China) and Europe contribute the largest shares, followed by South and Southeast Asia (India, Indonesia). African contexts (Tanzania, Malawi) and Multi-country/Online contexts each account for 9% of studies, while South America (Chile) and the Middle East (Egypt) are represented by individual studies



**Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of DBE Research Contexts**

Source: Authors' own work

Despite the methodological consistency that has facilitated cross-study comparison, four interrelated weaknesses constrain the current evidence base for destination brand experience research.

First, the near-exclusive reliance on cross-sectional survey designs fundamentally limits the field's capacity for causal inference. Within a single time point, the antecedents, mediators, and outcomes are necessarily measured simultaneously, which conflates temporal precedence with statistical association and renders the directionality of the modeled paths essentially assumed rather than empirically established (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010). Of the 42 studies reviewed, no longitudinal panel study was identified, and the field therefore lacks evidence on how destination brand experience accumulates, decays, or transforms across the pre-trip, on-site, and post-trip phases of the tourist journey.

Second, the predominant use of single-source self-report instruments raises substantive concerns regarding common method bias (CMB). When the predictor and criterion variables are obtained from the same respondent at the same point in time using the same Likert-scaled response format, the observed correlations are systematically inflated by shared method variance, response set tendencies, and consistency motifs (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Compounding this concern, retrospective self-reports of experiential phenomena are vulnerable to recall bias, social desirability effects, mood-congruent memory distortion, and post-hoc rationalization, all of which can compromise the construct validity of DBE measurement. Only a small minority of the reviewed studies reported procedural or statistical remedies for CMB, such as temporal separation of measurements, marker-variable techniques, or the common latent factor approach.

Third, the field's overwhelming dependence on Brakus et al.'s (2009) four-dimensional scale, originally developed in product-brand contexts, creates a methodological tension between cross-study comparability and contextual richness. While standardized measurement facilitates meta-analytic synthesis and theoretical accumulation, it simultaneously risks forcing heterogeneous destination experiences—spiritual encounters at sacred sites, relational immersion in community-based tourism, transformative episodes in wellness travel, and embodied adventure in nature-based settings—into a measurement framework that was not designed to capture them. The extended six-dimensional model proposed by Ngwira et al. (2023) and the computational thesaurus-based approach of Calderón-Fajardo et al. (2024) signal a growing recognition that destination-tailored measurement is needed.

Fourth, qualitative, mixed-methods, and longitudinal approaches remain markedly underutilized. Phenomenological inquiry, netnography, photo-elicitation, ethnographic fieldwork, and diary-based experience sampling—all well-established in the broader tourism experience literature—are virtually absent in dedicated DBE research. This methodological narrowness restricts the field's capacity to access the meaning-making, narrative construction, and embodied dimensions through which tourists actually live and articulate their destination brand experiences.

The dominance of quantitative survey methods raises important questions about construct validity in DBE research. Self-report measures, while practical for large-sample studies, may not accurately capture the richness and complexity of experiential phenomena. Tourists' retrospective accounts of their brand experiences may be subject to recall bias, social desirability effects, and post-hoc rationalization. The field's almost exclusive reliance on the

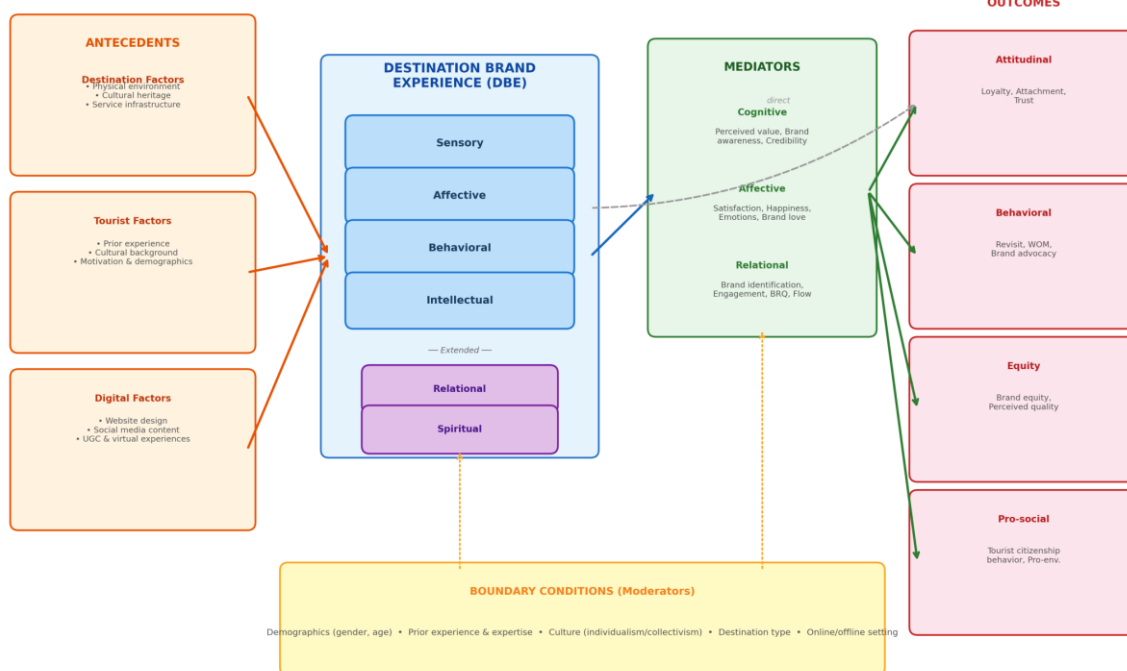
Brakus et al. (2009) scale, adapted to destination contexts, creates both consistency and limitation: consistency in enabling cross-study comparison, but limitation in potentially forcing destination-specific experiential nuances into a framework originally designed for product brands. The development of destination-tailored DBE measurement instruments—perhaps incorporating the relational and spiritual dimensions proposed by Ngwira et al. (2023) or the hedonic-utilitarian framework of Köchling and Lohmann (2022)—remains an important methodological priority.

### ***Integrative Conceptual Framework***

Based on the thematic synthesis, this paper proposes an integrative conceptual framework (Figure 4) that organizes the reviewed evidence into a coherent antecedent–DBE–mediator–outcome structure.

The framework identifies three categories of antecedents: destination-level factors (physical environment, cultural heritage, service infrastructure, marketing communication), tourist-level factors (prior experience, cultural background, motivation, demographics), and digital factors (website design, social media content, user-generated content, virtual experiences). These antecedent categories influence DBE formation across its dimensional structure. The dominant four-dimensional model (sensory, affective, behavioral, intellectual) is positioned at the core, with extended dimensions (relational, spiritual) as contextually activated components.

DBE influences outcomes through multiple mediating pathways, organized into three categories: cognitive mediators (perceived value, brand awareness, brand credibility), affective mediators (satisfaction, happiness, emotions, brand love), and relational mediators (brand identification, brand engagement, brand relationship quality, flow experience). These mechanisms channel effects toward four outcome categories: attitudinal (loyalty, attachment, trust), behavioral (revisit intention, WOM, advocacy), equity (brand equity, perceived quality), and pro-social outcomes (tourist citizenship behavior, pro-environmental behavior). Boundary conditions including demographic, experiential, cultural, and contextual moderators shape both the antecedent–DBE and DBE–outcome relationships.



**Figure 4: Integrative Conceptual Framework of Destination Brand Experience Research**

Source: Authors owns work

This framework advances the literature in three ways. First, it provides a consolidated visualization of the DBE research landscape, revealing both well-established pathways and underexplored connections. Second, it highlights the antecedent–outcome asymmetry that characterizes the current literature, making visible the critical gap in understanding what creates DBE. Third, it maps the mediating architecture through which DBE translates into tourist behaviors, offering a theoretically grounded guide for future hypothesis development. The framework also reveals several underexplored pathways that warrant empirical investigation. First, the direct antecedent–DBE links remain largely untested: while destination attributes are theoretically positioned as drivers of DBE, very few studies have empirically measured specific design elements and their impact on individual DBE dimensions. Second, the interaction between online (pre-trip) and offline (on-site) DBE formation is not represented in existing studies, despite its theoretical significance in the contemporary digital tourism ecosystem. Third, the framework highlights that pro-social outcomes such as tourist citizenship behavior and pro-environmental behavior represent an emerging but theoretically promising outcome area that could position DBE research within the broader sustainability discourse in tourism.

### Future Research Agenda

Building upon the thematic synthesis and integrative framework, this section proposes a structured research agenda organized around seven priority directions.

#### *Strengthening Theoretical Foundations*

The review reveals that a substantial proportion of DBE studies lack explicit theoretical grounding. Two particularly promising but underutilized perspectives are Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which would position DBE as co-created value between tourists

and destinations rather than a firm-delivered stimulus, and Transformative Service Research, which would examine how DBE contributes to tourist well-being beyond hedonic satisfaction. Additionally, cognitive psychology theories—such as Construal Level Theory and Processing Fluency Theory—could illuminate cognitive mechanisms through which different DBE dimensions operate at various journey stages.

### ***Investigating DBE Antecedents***

The largest empirical gap is the limited understanding of what drives DBE formation. Future research should systematically examine how destination design elements (architectural aesthetics, soundscapes, gastronomy programs), marketing communication strategies (brand storytelling, social media content, influencer partnerships), co-creation opportunities (interactive experiences, community engagement), and tourist characteristics (personality, motivation, cultural values) independently and jointly shape DBE dimensions. Experimental designs would be particularly valuable for establishing causal antecedent–DBE relationships.

### ***Refining Extended Dimensions***

The extended dimensions proposed by Ngwira et al. (2023)—relational and spiritual experiences—require further validation across diverse destination types and cultural settings. Research is needed to determine whether these dimensions are universally applicable or contextually specific. Cross-cultural studies comparing dimensional structures across Eastern and Western tourist populations would be particularly informative.

### ***Exploring Under-Examined Outcomes***

Tourist citizenship behavior, examined only by Tang et al. (2023), warrants further investigation. No research has yet examined whether Relationship Value—emphasizing functional, symbolic, and experiential benefits of tourist-destination relational exchanges—might provide an alternative mediating pathway from DBE to TCB distinct from Brand Relationship Quality. Similarly, pro-environmental behaviors, destination co-creation, and transformative outcomes (personal growth, well-being) represent promising directions connecting DBE to sustainability and responsible tourism agendas.

### ***Advancing Methodological Diversity***

The current methodological homogeneity is, in our view, the single most consequential limitation of the DBE evidence base and constrains both the depth and the external validity of accumulated findings. We propose six concrete methodological priorities for the next wave of DBE research.

First, longitudinal panel designs should track the same tourists across pre-trip anticipation, on-site engagement, and post-trip reflection phases, allowing researchers to model how DBE forms, intensifies, decays, and influences downstream behaviors over realistic temporal horizons. Cohort-sequential designs would additionally permit separation of within-person change from between-person heterogeneity.

Second, experience sampling methods (ESM) and ecological momentary assessment delivered through mobile applications can capture experiential fluctuations in real time during the visit, mitigating the retrospective recall bias that plagues post-visit surveys and revealing micro-temporal dynamics of sensory, affective, and behavioral engagement at the level of individual destination touchpoints.

Third, experimental and quasi-experimental designs—including scenario-based experiments, virtual reality manipulations of destination stimuli, and natural experiments leveraging destination policy changes—can establish the causal antecedent–DBE relationships that cross-sectional surveys cannot. Such designs would directly address the antecedent–outcome asymmetry documented in this review.

Fourth, qualitative and interpretivist approaches deserve substantially greater representation. Phenomenological interviews can access the lived structure of destination experience; netnography of online tourist communities can capture naturally occurring experiential narratives free from researcher elicitation; photo-elicitation and visual methods can surface sensory and affective dimensions that verbal Likert items systematically miss; and ethnographic fieldwork at destinations can illuminate the situated, embodied, and relational textures of brand experience as they unfold. Mixed methods designs combining the breadth of survey research with the depth of qualitative inquiry would be particularly valuable for theory development.

Fifth, computational approaches—including natural language processing, sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and machine learning classification of user-generated content—offer scalable and unobtrusive alternatives to self-report scales. Building on Calderón-Fajardo et al.'s (2024) pioneering application, future studies could construct destination-specific experiential thesauri and trace the evolution of experiential vocabulary across review platforms, reaching experiential phenomena that closed-ended scales cannot capture.

Finally, future researchers employing self-report survey designs should systematically adopt procedural and statistical remedies for common method bias, including temporal separation of independent and dependent variable measurement, multi-source data collection (combining tourist self-reports with destination-side behavioral metrics such as repeat-visit records, social-media engagement, and on-site sensor data), and the routine reporting of Harman's single-factor test, marker-variable analyses, and the common latent factor approach.

### ***Expanding Geographic and Contextual Boundaries***

DBE research remains concentrated in Asia and Europe, with limited representation from the Americas, Middle East, Africa, and Oceania. Systematic comparative studies examining how DBE operates across destination types—cultural heritage, nature-based, urban, dark tourism, wellness, event tourism—would establish important boundary conditions for theoretical models.

### ***Integrating Digital and Physical DBE***

The growing separation between online and offline DBE research streams requires theoretical integration. With the proliferation of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and immersive digital experiences, understanding how digital DBE shapes pre-trip expectations

and interacts with on-site physical experiences is an area that deserves sustained attention. The concept of “omnichannel destination brand experience”—capturing seamless integration of digital and physical touchpoints—offers a promising integrative framework.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

### ***Summary***

This paper has presented the first dedicated thematic review of destination brand experience research, synthesizing 42 studies published between 1996 and 2025 across five thematic domains. The review documents rapid growth—over 40% of studies published in the last three years—and maps the conceptual evolution from Otto and Ritchie’s (1996) service experience work through Brakus et al.’s (2009) four-dimensional framework to recent extensions incorporating relational and spiritual dimensions. It reveals a diversifying but fragmented theoretical landscape, a clear antecedent–outcome imbalance, and methodological homogeneity constraining the field’s maturity.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The review contributes to tourism marketing theory by providing a comprehensive mapping of DBE’s evolution, establishing a shared conceptual reference point. The integrative framework identifies well-established pathways (DBE → satisfaction → loyalty) alongside underexplored connections (antecedent conditions, pro-social outcomes). The identification of theoretical gaps—particularly the absence of Service-Dominant Logic and Transformative Service Research perspectives—provides specific entry points for advancement. The need for dimensional refinement and contextual validation pushes toward more nuanced theorizing about when and why specific DBE dimensions matter.

### ***Practical Implications***

For destination marketing organizations, behavioral and sensory dimensions consistently drive satisfaction and loyalty, suggesting priorities in designing participatory activities and multi-sensory environments. Growing evidence on affective experience as a driver of brand love points to the importance of emotional design. The identification of tourist citizenship behavior as a DBE outcome suggests positive brand experiences can foster responsible tourist conduct. The digital DBE stream indicates destination websites and social media should deliver experiential value, not merely informational content.

### ***Limitations***

This review has limitations. Although the literature retrieval was guided by PRISMA, the subsequent synthesis was conducted as a qualitative thematic review rather than a quantitative meta-analysis, which means the search process may not capture every relevant publication. The restriction to English-language publications excludes potentially valuable research in other languages. The focus on DBE as a focal construct means studies examining general brand experience with partial destination applications may have been excluded. Future reviews may adopt biometric approaches as the literature base expands.

In addition, because the synthesized evidence base is overwhelmingly drawn from cross-sectional, single-source survey designs, the antecedent–DBE–mediator–outcome pathways summarised in this review should be interpreted as theoretically motivated rather than causally established. The integrative framework proposed here is intended to organize existing associations and guide future inquiry, not to assert causal effects that the underlying primary studies were not designed to demonstrate.

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