

The Fallout of the Pandemic: An Investigation of Oman Tourist Destination Brand Equity**

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Abstract

Oman is in the process of diversifying its economy by identifying other sectors to lessen dependency on petroleum products. Many such sectors are identified as tourism, manufacturing, fisheries, mining, transportation, and logistics. Coronavirus pandemic has a significant impact on the global economy. As countries around the globe begin to emerge from the pandemic, what will be the new normal for tourism? This new normal is already beginning to affect tourism sector in Sultanate of Oman. The present study explores how the fallout of the pandemic will affect destination brand equity from a tourist perspective. However, most of the previous studies that deal with the similar issues, do not include effective ways to develop Oman tourism destination as a brand. The results reveal that destination Oman significantly satisfies all dimensions of brand equity, i.e., brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty. The perceived risk dimension is also extracted in the study to recognize the impact of pandemic crises.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sultanate of Oman is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and has a stable and progressive economic growth, mostly centered on petroleum products. The biggest Middle East oil producer outside OPEC, Oman has planned its growth using the five-year plan model. However, the prospect of Oman's oil reserves running out in less than 20 years, has prompted the government to diversify its economy (Abouzzohour, 2021). Oman is one of the first GCC countries to focus emphasis on economic diversification to minimize its reliance on oil and gas.

With an average production of one million barrels per day (bpd), Sultanate of Oman has also suffered oil price declined from around \$100 to \$20 a barrel (Aljabri et al., 2022). The Omani economy, whose 80% revenue depends on oil, has recently recovered from deficit to surplus as the oil price again crossed \$100 level. In the long term, all the GCC governments, including Oman, are working to diversify their economies through a variety of initiatives and investments to safeguard their economy from the bump in oil revenues risks (Castelier, 2022). “The Government has recognized the need to train and educate more Omani nationals to prepare them for taking up employment in the tourism and hospitality sector” (Khan & Krishnamurthy, 2016). The Omanisation strategy of replacing foreign labour with qualified Omani personnel in the tourist sector is encouraging citizens to work in the tourism and hospitality industries (Al-Jahwari, 2021). As a result, tourism is becoming an important sector that can enhance and develop Omani economy to higher levels.

Tourism Sector

The general importance of tourism's involvement in a country's economic growth has become a global phenomenon (N. Khan et al., 2020). Consequently, several governments around the world have made tourism sector a key national priority.

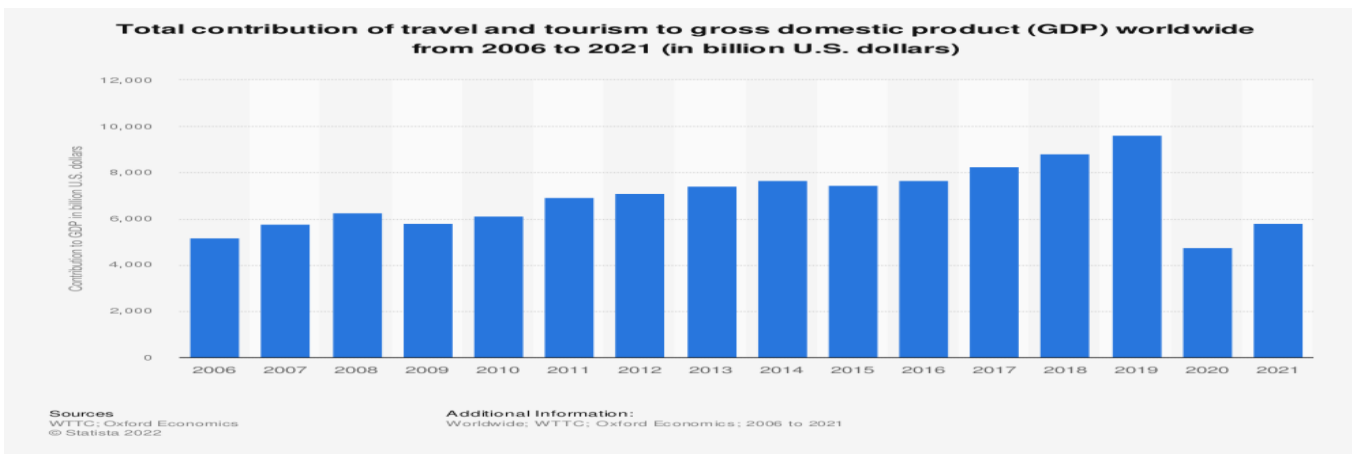


Figure 1. Total Contribution of Travel & Tourism to the Global GDP (Statista, 2022)

According to the (Statista, 2022; WTTC, 2022) reports, the direct contributions of travel and tourism sector in 2013 was USD 2,155 billion (2.9 percent of global GDP), whereas its total contribution to GDP in the same year was USD 6,990 billion (9.5 percent of global GDP). In the year 2019 the total travel and tourism contribution was USD 9,630 billion (10.3 percent of global GDP), in 2020 USD 4,775 billion (5.3 percent of global GDP), and in 2021 USD 5,812 billion (6.1 percent of global GDP). This industry was providing 333 million total jobs (1 in 10 jobs) in 2019, 271 million total jobs (1 in 12 jobs) in 2020, and 289 million total jobs (1 in 11 jobs) in 2021.

It is no surprise that most of the countries are looking to this industry as a viable and long-term way to power their economy and the Sultanate of Oman is no exception. Oman is one of the few remaining secure locations for tourists who wish to experience traditional Arab culture (Scholz, 2021). While considering the security difficulties in several MENA countries, Oman tourism enjoys numerous natural and historical features (Mishra & Jain, 2020).

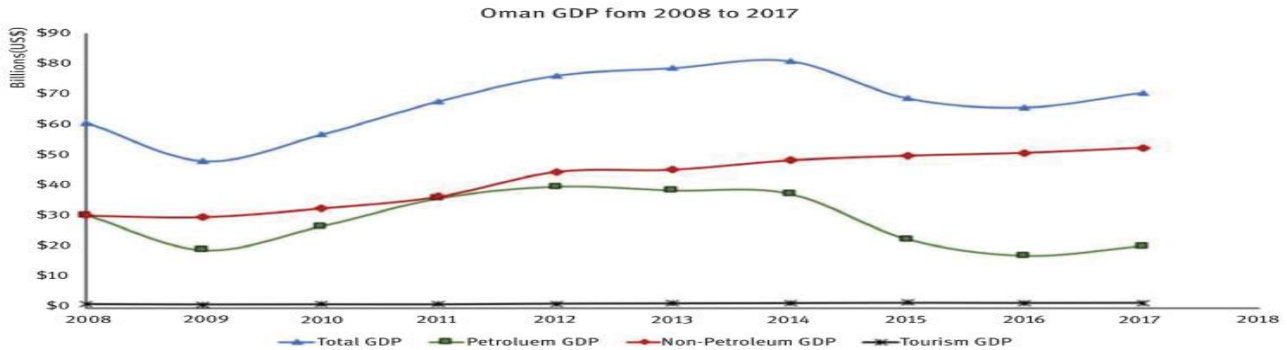


Figure 2. Contributions to the Oman GDP (Al-Ruhelli & Al-Hinai, 2022)

During previous decade (2010-2020), tourism's direct contribution of Oman's GDP was varying between 1.9 percent and 2.84 percent, below than the expected 3 percent (Al-Hinai & Jayasuriya, 2021; Samyuktha et al., 2022). Therefore, tourism is one of the apparent areas in which Oman could consider significant improvement supported by its diverged natural, historical, and cultural treasures. “For tourism to contribute meaningfully to Oman’s economy, making up at least 10-15 percent of the GDP, the country needs to significantly boost investment in the sector” (Mohseni-Cheraghrou, 2020). Further, around 33 countries that are comparable to the Oman in terms of economy, tourism accounted for 10 to 60% of the total GDP.

Oman’s Five-Year Plans and Vision 2040

The late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said reiterated the importance of making tourism a priority in the country's future development plans. "We should prepare a new strategy to develop this (tourism) sector so it can stand on its own feet in a severely competitive, flexible and diversified international market," he added on Oman’s national day (Baporikar, 2012).

Subsequently, the recently crowned His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq Al Said combined the Ministry of Heritage & Culture with the Ministry of Tourism and created the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) via Royal decree No. 75/2020 to boost the tourism activities in Oman (Naima, 2021).

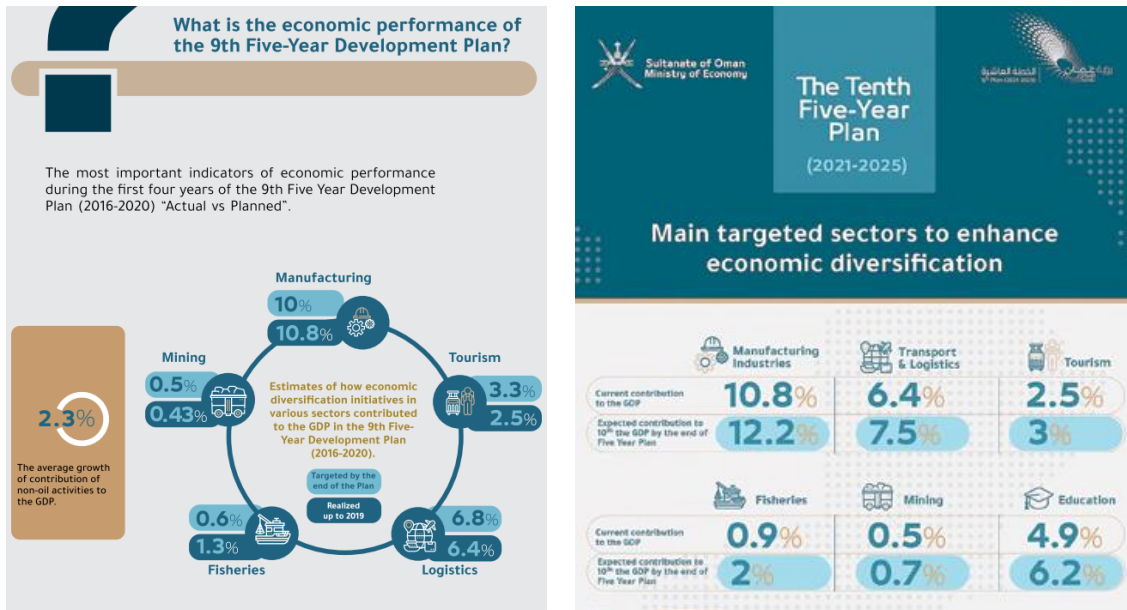


Figure 3. Oman Five-Year Plans (Ministry of Economy, 2020)

Tourism is one of the five priority sectors identified in the sultanate's Ninth Five-Year Development Plan (2016-2020), including manufacturing, fisheries, mining, transportation, and logistics (Hakro & Pandow, 2019). The Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021- 2025) is the first executive plan for Oman Vision 2040 that identified the national priorities and strategies over the period 2020-2040 (Ministry of Economy, 2020). The Sultanate of Oman has begun executing a program of shifting from an oil-based economy to a tourism-based one as part of Vision-2040 to rapidly diversify the economy and minimize the country's reliance on hydrocarbon exports. Tourism sector may improve Omani economy to reduce dependence on oil and gas and increase the revenue of country.

The primary goal of (Oman Vision 2040, 2020) is to create favorable conditions for economic diversification to reduce reliance on oil production. The country's tourism vision and mission statements are geared on making tourism a viable economic industry. The vision statement for tourist development aspires to make tourism a vital and long-term social and economic industry. Whereas the mission statement aims to facilitate economic diversification, cultural integrity preservation, and environmental protection (Yüksel, 2017). Emphasizing the relevance of Vision 2040, (Al-Hinai & Jayasuriya, 2021) argue, "Oman vision 2040 aims to develop the tourism sector and its participation in the economic diversification and financial sustainability of the country by increasing the contribution to the GDP from 6-10% by 2040."

Coronavirus Pandemic

The pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has wreaked havoc on economies around the world. Companies, large and small, have closed their doors, laid-off workers, and seen their shares fall (Pärson & Vancic, 2020). Companies are having a tough time finding workers, as many people are afraid to travel to work. The effects of pandemic could also spread to corporate earnings. Companies are forced to shift focus from developing new goods and services to addressing short-term needs such as disaster preparedness and cleaning up the environment (Maryati, 2020).

The pandemic has a widespread impact on tourist behavior too (Kumar et al., 2020). People may no longer feel safe spending money frivolously, preferring instead to save and invest in things they know will last (Dali et al., 2020).

They may also become more worried about large public gatherings, or even travel altogether. Across the globe, people are limiting their travel to minimize their risk of exposure (Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2021).

Oman has been one of the nation's experiencing issues in the business operations in terms of satisfying consumer demands and meeting regular fixed expenditures (Du et al., 2022). The Omani tourism industry has been hit the hardest, with travel restrictions and lockdowns making it difficult for enterprises to accept guests who are paying clients for the services and products they offer (Al-Hasni, 2021). Furthermore, the deadly combination of coronavirus pandemic and low oil prices limit the government's economic flexibility, make an already challenging task even more vulnerable (Young, 2020).

Destination Branding

A brand is the identity of a particular product, service, or business. It is a name, term, design, symbol, or other feature that distinguishes one seller's good or service from those of other sellers (Kotler, 2000). A brand should satisfy both tangible and intangible needs (Caldwell & Freire, 2004). Hence, branding is one of the most powerful tools in marketing to understand the consumer perception towards a brand (Bariar & Jain, 2020).

In the tourism industry, a destination brand is the image or reputation of a particular tourist destination (Ghafari et al., 2017). Destination branding is the process of creating and promoting a destination brand. Destination branding is comparatively a recent topic that is gaining academic attention. The goal of destination branding is to increase the tourists' perceptions of the destination attributes, which in turn will lead to more visits and a higher level of spending.

There are many distinct factors that contribute to the development of a strong destination brand, such as history, culture, natural resources, and amenities (Qu et al., 2011). One of the most important aspects of destination branding is differentiating the destination from others to create a unique and memorable experience for visitors. This can be done using branding elements such as a logo, tagline, or mascots. Another important aspect of destination branding is creating consistent messaging across all marketing channels. This includes ensuring that the website, social media, and advertising all reflect the same brand identity.

The success of a destination brand depends on many factors, but two of the most important are its ability to attract new visitors and its ability to encourage repeat visits (Hanzaee & Saeedi, 2011). A strong brand will do both things by creating an emotional connection with visitors and providing them with an unforgettable experience.

Tourist Destination Brand Equity

Brand strength (worth, power, value) is a key factor for consumer purchase decision (Keller et al., 2011). Brand equity measures the strength of a brand that provides extended customer retention and improved firm's competitive advantages (Jain & Bariar, 2019). (Aaker, 1991) proposed four dimensions of brand equity that are brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty.

It is empirically evident that tourist destinations have their own brand equity like other goods and services (Chekalina et al., 2018). Tourist destination brand equity is the value of a destination's brand in the eyes of tourists (García et al., 2012). It is generated by the perceptions and experiences that tourists have of the destination, and it manifests in the form of loyalty, repeat visits, and word-of-mouth (Sainaghi, 2010). It is the sum of the value of all the attributes and benefits that a destination has to offer, minus any costs or negatives associated with the destination.

This value can be positive or negative, depending on the visitor's experience. A positive brand equity means that tourists perceive the destination to be worth more than the sum of its parts. A negative brand equity means that tourists perceive the destination to be worth less than the sum of its parts.

Destinations can be branded based on available attractions (Kasapi & Cela, 2017). There are many factors that contribute to a destination's brand equity, including its history, culture, infrastructure, and marketing. Each of these factors can impact a destination's brand equity. A destination's history and culture are the most crucial factors that contribute to its brand equity (Sangpikul, 2017). A destination with a long and rich history is more likely to have strong brand equity than one without a history. This is because tourists associate positive values with destinations that have a lot of history. For example, they may perceive these destinations as being more authentic, exotic, and romantic. Culture also plays a key role in shaping a destination's brand equity. Tourists are attracted to destinations that offer unique cultural experiences. This could be in the form of traditional food, music, art, architecture, or even a way of life. In addition to history and culture, infrastructure is another crucial factor that contributes to a destination's brand equity (Michael et al., 2018). A destination with a well-developed infrastructure is more likely to provide a positive experience for tourists, which in turn will generate positive word-of-mouth and repeat visits. Furthermore, strong infrastructure makes a destination more resistant to economic downturns and natural disasters. Finally, a destination's brand equity can also be improved by developing marketing policies and programs that are friendly to tourists (Ghafari et al., 2017). For example, a destination that is easy to navigate and has plenty of signage in different languages is likely to be more appealing to international visitors.

Recently, the Sultanate of Oman is emerged as an entirely unique tourist destination in the Middle East. Oman has achieved the seventh best tourist destination by Lonely Planet (ONA, 2022). An increase of over 200 percent in hotel revenue, and 105 percent in guest visitors are recorded in May 2022 compared to the same month previous year (Times News Service, 2022). It is due the contribution of country's status as many key characteristics of a premier tourist destination, including a diverse environment, unpolluted beaches, breathtaking mountains, landscape, wildlife, and a wealth of historical (including UNESCO World Heritage) sites (Jain & Mishra, 2020).

Several attempts have been made to apply the brand equity concept and its dimensions to destination from the tourist's perspective (Kaushal et al., 2019). (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007) identified, measured, and tested awareness, image, quality, and loyalty as four brand equity dimensions for destination. Therefore, destination brand equity serves as a critical indicator for marketing performance and brand building of a tourist destination (Shen & Ma, 2022).

Research Purpose and Objectives

This research is conducted with a purpose to understand the post-pandemic positive changes in Omani economy. These changes could be happened through putting focus on developing Oman tourism sector. Further, it studies the participation of tourism sector in national economy of Oman with an aim to develop ways that can make Oman as a tourism destination brand. For this purpose, the concept of brand equity is applied for tourism destination by examining its four dimensions (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007), that are Destination Awareness (DA), Destination Image (DI), Destination Perceived Quality (DPQ), and Destination Loyalty (DL). An additional dimension Destination Perceived Risk (DPR) (Manci, 2022) is added for better understanding of the COVID-19 condition. As a result, this research includes four main objectives:

- To identify the participation of tourism sector in the economy of Oman.
- To recognise the role of Oman’s Five-Year Plans and Vision 2040 in prioritising tourism.
- To evaluate the impact of Coronavirus on tourism sector of Oman.
- To explore the several dimensions of tourist destination brand equity in the context of Oman.

Research Methodology

The present study incorporates both descriptive and analytical research designs. The descriptive approach describes the research objectives and demography through collected data. Further, the analytical approach utilises the method of Factor Analysis for extracting the latent variables under study. Several reliability and validity indices are also obtained from measurement model.

A survey is conducted among residents to examine the tourist brand equity of Sultanate of Oman. The convenience sampling method is applied for governing the information from target population. A sample of 197 respondents is evaluated for the research.

This study is based on both secondary and primary data. Primary data is collected through an adapted questionnaire (Bariar & Jain, 2020; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Mancini, 2022; Shen & Ma, 2022), which contains a variety of questions related to demography and destination brand equity. This questionnaire is developed using Google Forms and distributed by e-mail.

Respondents are given complete flexibility to participate in the survey based on their voluntary and honest participation. Furthermore, their personal data is safeguarded to protect their privacy.

Data Analysis and Results

The collected data are analysed employing IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Statistics 26 and presented in several tables.

Table 1. Demographic Profile (n = 197)

Gender	Male	Female			
	93	104			
Nationality	Expat	Omani			
	110	87			
Marital Status	Married	Single	Other		
	73	117	7		
Age	1-25	26-50	51-75	75+	
	49	125	21	2	
Education Level	Undergraduate	Diploma	Bachelor	Master	PhD
	52	41	78	21	5

The Table 1 shows the demographic profile of 197 respondents. It shows that 93 of the respondents are male, while 104 of them are female. The table depicts that 110 respondents are expat, and 87 of them are Omani. It shows that 73 respondents are married, 117 are married, while 7 respondents do not disclose their marital status. A total of 49 respondents are under 25 years old, 125 are between 25-50 years old, 21 are between 50-75 years old, while 2 of them are above 75 years. Also, table shows that 52 respondents are undergraduates, 41 have diploma, 78 have bachelor's degree, 21 of them have master's degree, and 5 of them have PhD educational level.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Rotated Component Matrix

Factors	Items*	Mean	SD	DPR	DPQ	DL	DA	DE	DI
Destination Perceived Risk	DPR1	1.77	.810	.917					
	DPR2	1.79	.790	.914					
	DPR3	1.83	.850	.905					
	DPR4	1.86	.814	.848					
	DPR5	1.97	.836	.739					
Destination Perceived Quality	DPQ1	3.89	.973		.817				
	DPQ2	4.05	.838		.771				
	DPQ3	3.99	.860		.762				
	DPQ4	4.12	.940		.740				
	DPQ5	3.96	.919		.695				
Destination Loyalty	DL1	3.50	1.109			.793			
	DL2	3.66	1.084			.778			
	DL3	3.19	1.005			.766			
	DL4	3.59	1.128			.743			
	DL5	3.56	1.196			.725			
Destination Awareness	DA1	4.11	.745				.824		
	DA2	4.18	.642				.810		
	DA3	4.07	.789				.807		
	DA4	4.14	.800				.786		
	DA5	4.06	.879				.605		
Destination Equity	DE1	4.05	.649					.821	
	DE2	3.89	.894					.779	
	DE3	3.93	.854					.756	
Destination Image	DI1	4.06	.712						.736
	DI2	3.92	.892						.725
	DI3	3.50	1.091						.668
	DI4	4.17	.783						.654

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) = .813 (.000)
 *Survey questionnaire is attached in the appendix.

The factor analysis extracted a total of six factors (Table 2). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of sampling adequacy is .813 at .000 level of significance. The factor loading indices are above .6, that are sufficiently high for all items.

Table 3. Total Variance Explained

Component	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
DPR	4.173	15.454	15.454
DPQ	4.166	15.430	30.884
DL	3.810	14.112	44.996
DA	3.715	13.761	58.757
DE	2.632	9.749	68.506
DI	2.573	9.530	78.037

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

After applying Principal Component Analysis and Varimax rotation method (Table 3), a total of 78.037% of variance is explained by six factors. Destination Perceived Risk (DPR) with 5 items resulted in 4.173 eigenvalues and 15.454% of variance. Destination Perceived Quality (DPQ) with 5 items resulted in 4.166 eigenvalues and 15.430% of variance. Destination Loyalty (DL) with 5 items resulted in 3.810 eigenvalues and 14.112% of variance. Destination Awareness (DA) with 5 items resulted in 3.715 eigenvalues and 13.761% of variance. Destination Equity

(DE) with 3 items resulted in 2.632 eigenvalues and 9.749% of variance. Destination Image (DI) with 4 items resulted in 2.573 eigenvalues and 9.530% of variance.

Table 4. Reliability and Validity Measures

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	DPR	DPQ	DL	DA	DE	DI
DPR	0.936	0.746	0.203	0.962	0.864					
DPQ	0.910	0.669	0.544	0.912	-0.450***	0.818				
DL	0.903	0.653	0.401	0.918	-0.198*	0.596***	0.808			
DA	0.913	0.680	0.401	0.929	-0.254**	0.592***	0.633***	0.825		
DE	0.877	0.708	0.368	0.931	-0.313***	0.466***	0.522***	0.501***	0.841	
DI	0.856	0.605	0.544	0.907	-0.284***	0.737***	0.550***	0.523***	0.607***	0.778
Significance of Correlations * p < 0.050, ** p < 0.010, *** p < 0.001										

Several measures in Table 4 show that there are no reliability and (discriminant/ convergent) validity concerns here (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The factor Critical Ratios (CR) are above 0.8, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are more than 0.6, Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) are less than AVE, Maximal Reliability (MaxR(H)) are more than 0.9. The correlations between the factors are less than square roots of AVE (diagonal bold values).

Discussion and Conclusion

Tourist destination brand equity is currently an essential concept for researchers. It refers to the associations and perceptions that consumers have about a tourist destination. There are several factors that contribute to tourist destination brand equity. These include the quality of the destination's attractions, its reputation, and the strength of its marketing campaigns. Measurement of brand equity can help destination marketers by identifying areas to improve.

Tourist destination brand equity is a significant aspect of the travel and tourism industry because it can attract or repel tourists. It can have a positive or negative impact on tourism, depending on how it is managed. A destination with a positive brand equity will be more likely to attract tourists than a destination with a negative brand equity. A positive destination brand equity is one that visitors remember momentarily and are likely to visit again. A destination with negative brand equity, on the other hand, is one that visitors do not want to remember and are unlikely to visit again.

The major sources of revenue for the economy of Sultanate of Oman are petroleum-based products. Several other sectors are prioritized for economic diversification drives, such as tourism, manufacturing, fisheries, mining, transportation, and logistics. Tourism sector is one of the most potential sectors to enhance Omani economy. Oman's tourism sector could be a significant alternative rather than the oil and gas sectors. Tourism in the Sultanate of Oman can be a viable alternative to some industries because it is a renewable resource and a source of revenue for the country. Unfortunately, Oman's tourism sector faces some challenges that obstruct it to grow during the pandemic. However, Oman offers several tourist potentials that may help to boosting and improving the local economy's efficiency. Sultanate of Oman has many key characteristics of a leading tourist destination. Promotion of these characteristics of Oman's tourism sector will help on raise the revenue of country.

The main significance of the present study is investigating the brand equity dimensions of Oman as a tourism destination. The destination Oman significantly satisfies all dimensions of brand equity, i.e., brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty. The perceived risk dimension is also extracted in the study to recognize the impact of pandemic crises. This research demonstrates that Oman has an incredible capability to build its brand as a tourism destination aftermath pandemic. Developing Oman tourism brand equity can make a positive change in Omani economy. This change could be happening by focusing on promoting and marketing Oman tourism sector continually, through advertisements, social media, and supporters such as celebrities and dealing with famous tourist companies.

In conclusion, a strong brand equity can be built by creating a distinctive identity for the destination and promoting it effectively. A destination with strong brand equity is more likely to be successful in attracting and retaining visitors. A strong brand equity can attract more visitors to a destination, while a weak brand equity can dissuade potential visitors. A destination with strong brand equity can charge a premium for its products and services and is less vulnerable to economic downturns. Furthermore, destinations with high brand equity are better able to weather crises and natural disasters. Therefore, it is important for destinations to carefully manage their brand equity to maximize the number of tourists they attract.

Declaration

All authors of the article contributed equally to the article process. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Appendix 1. Survey Questionnaire

Factors	Items	1	2	3	4	5
Destination Perceived Risk	DPR1	Visiting Oman involves financial risks.				
	DPR2	Visiting Oman involves physical risks.				
	DPR3	Visiting Oman involves performance risks.				
	DPR4	Visiting Oman involves psychological risks.				
	DPR5	Visiting Oman involves social risks.				
Destination Perceived Quality	DPQ1	Oman provides tourism offerings of consistent quality.				
	DPQ2	Oman provides quality experiences.				
	DPQ3	Oman provides high level of cleanliness and personal safety.				
	DPQ4	Oman performs better than other similar destinations.				
	DPQ5	From Oman's offerings, I can expect superior performance.				
Destination Loyalty	DL1	Oman would be my preferred choice for a vacation.				
	DL2	I would advise other people to visit Oman.				
	DL3	I enjoy visiting Oman.				
	DL4	Oman provides more benefit as tourist destination.				
	DL5	Overall, I am loyal to this destination, Oman.				
Destination Awareness	DA1	Oman has a good name and reputation.				
	DA2	The characteristics of Oman come to my mind quickly.				
	DA3	When I am thinking of a modern destination, Oman comes to my mind immediately.				
	DA4	When I am thinking about nature (mountains, lake, beaches), Oman comes to my mind immediately.				
	DA5	When I am thinking about entertainment and recreation activities, Oman comes to my mind immediately.				
Destination Equity	DE1	It makes sense to travel Oman instead of any other countries, even if they are the same.				
	DE2	Even if any other country has the same features as Oman, I would prefer to travel Oman.				
	DE3	Even though there is another country as good as Oman, I prefer to travel Oman.				
Destination Image	DI1	The image of Oman is consistent with my self-image.				
	DI2	My friends think highly of me if I visit Oman.				
	DI3	Oman is known for interesting historical and cultural attractions.				
	DI4	Oman is known for lovely cities and and friendly people				

1 Strongly disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Neutral, 4 Agree, 5 Strongly agree