
Measuring city branding as innovation for tourism development

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Abstract: Transforming place, destination or city branding into an innovation process is a topical innovation management problem with ramifications on tourism development. Yet, there is a paucity in research on developing measurements for city branding as innovation. This study aims to develop and validate a scale for measuring city branding as innovation with a view to supporting tourism development. Based on a cross-sectional survey with place branding, media and tourism experts in Kuwait, the study finds support for event, marketing and product dimensions of city branding as innovation. The study also finds statistically significant and positive relationships between city branding innovativeness and the different dimensions. Theoretically, the study advances a multi-dimensional model of city branding innovation based on creating positive city images and perceptions for tourists, visitors, investors and citizens. Managerially, the study supports strategic planning for smart and sustainable city innovation by identifying branding priorities for reforming and orienting cities.

Keywords: City branding innovation; event innovation; marketing innovation; product innovation; city image; tourism development; brand innovativeness; place branding; destination branding; Kuwait.

1 Introduction

Transforming place, destination or city branding into an innovation process is a topical innovation management problem with ramifications on tourism development, urban planning, heritage management and regional growth. Tourism development uniquely benefits from city branding as innovation because innovation management for this

process improves the attractiveness of destinations, creates tourism and related sector jobs and enables cities outcompete their international rivals (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025). According to a brief by the World Bank (2025), activities by the tourism sector constituted 10 percent of the global economy in 2024, adding US\$10.9 trillion to global GDP and providing 357 million jobs worldwide, which is about one in every ten jobs. These figures reinforce the importance of city branding as innovation for creating destination awareness to support the tourism value chain, which spans multiple skill providing, goods supplying and services sectors.

For major countries, like Spain, UK and Singapore, city branding as innovation is central to initiatives that result in effective smart city transitions (Shayan, & Kim, 2025) and provision of essential services to citizens (Gower and Grodach, 2022). City branding as innovation entails creativity and implementation of novel activities during and for the creation of positive city images (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025), making this city branding orientation a desirable practice for attracting global investment, travel tourism and future residents. Accordingly, a pertinent innovation management problem is the development of measurements for city branding as innovation – a challenge confronted in this study.

The aim of the study is to develop and validate a scale for measuring city branding innovation with a view supporting tourism development. Specifically, the study captures the viewpoints and opinions of place branding, media and tourism experts (e.g., branding experts and consultants, urban planners, restaurant owners, hotels managers, tourism business executives, and architects) for this scale development. Accordingly, the research question confronted in this study is:

From the perspective of place branding, media and tourism experts, what are the main constructs for measuring city branding as innovation?

The study adds to the existing branding innovation theory in two specific ways. First, it presents new analytical insights into a measurement model of city branding innovation. Existing studies (e.g., Maziashvili et al. (2023) and AlShaalan & Durugbo (2025)) tend to focus on branding antecedents and operationalising concepts for city images but our study evolves the focus to encompass measurements of city branding innovation. Second, the study tests and discusses how city branding innovativeness relates to the proposed city branding innovation dimensions. Therefore, the study adds to current understanding of innovation capabilities in relation to the urban planning and development. For, urban planners and tourism experts with interests in innovation management, the study could aid in formulating strategic plans for smart and sustainable city innovation. The study also offer suggestions for place branding innovation managers to facilitate benchmarks and audits of city brands.

2 Literature review

Globally, tourism development is a process that remains a priority for cities due to the economic benefits of a thriving tourism industry (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025). Beyond the economic gains from visitors, tourism also influences aesthetic, natural, social, and cultural aspects of regions (Ramadania et al., 2025). For this reason, tourism development needs to be a continuous process for countries to keep step with emerging technologies and practices that maintain the attractiveness of cities and enhance tourist experiences. City branding enables tourism development by promoting cities and creating captivating

and unique images of cities that attract visitors and investors (Gönüllüoğlu & Selçuk, 2025; Sulaiman et al., 2026). Additionally, tourists are strongly impacted by the images of cities and perceptions that cities have distinctive identities (Casais & Poço, 2023). For this reason, delivering on the potential of urban tourism is a challenge for continuous city branding innovation to develop initiatives such as smart cities (Caragliu & Del Bo, 2019) and the 20-minute neighbourhood concept (Gower and Grodach, 2022).

City branding as innovation: an overview

Current research on city branding as innovation concentrates on four main topics for tourism development (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025). First is city branding *strategies and practices* in investigations of plans for engaging diverse target groups with a view to understanding branding choices and engaging in co-creation processes. These studies unravel a branding process characterized by numerous social actions and change initiatives used by local governments and private organizations to develop unique city identities and shared values (Shayan & Kim, 2025). Second is *branding cultures and creativity* involving studies that tap into the rich history and heritage of regions for promoting aspects of fashion, local customs and industry. In this area of research, a key focus is on aligning goals of the branding process with policies and ensuring stakeholder engagement in central to the branding process (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025). The third area of research is *brand creation and identity* with studies of the process that develops and captures the city's philosophy and properties via artefacts for use in expressing and promoting the city. Evidence suggests this process to create an identity is a core initiative for supporting cities' quest for promoting smart and sustainable urbanization (De Jong et al., 2015; Ayfantopoulou et al., 2023). When the main purpose is to achieve smart, branded, competitive, and capable cities, then the role of brand creation and innovation must fundamentally strengthen value creation and be continuously adopted. The fourth area is brand quality and sustainability with research interests in studying variables that contribute to high standards and sustainable development of cities such as health, lifestyle and infrastructure. These studies introduce city branding considerations in debates on the preservation of optimal relationships between environmental protection, social equity, and economic growth (De Jong et al., 2015). In advancement of these debates, this study seeks to advance existing innovation, marketing and tourism management knowledge by offering a novel measurement scale and categorisation for city branding innovation.

City branding as innovation: a conceptual model

According to AlShaalan & Durugbo (2025; p.2177) city branding as innovation means “creativity and implementation of novel activities during and for the creation of positive city images that attract investment, tourism, and future residents, as well as enhance the experience and satisfaction of residents”. These images also serve both as the focal point and the spark for tourism development and involvement initiatives. Current literature suggests three key dimensions for city branding as an innovation: city event innovation, city marketing innovation and city product innovation.

City product innovation involves producing and sustaining the development of creative and effective products and offerings (e.g., goods, equipment and services) by cities (Kim et al., 2013; Zameer et al., 2019). This form of innovation strongly determines brand recognition (Keller et al., 2011), which in turn influences consumers'

buying decisions because innovative products offer distinctive performance advantages in contrast to alternatives (Andrews & Kim, 2007). Product innovation, which contributes to economic growth (Pauwels et al., 2004), is linked to brand image (Tidd et al. 1997), and evidence suggests that city brands are formed from firm-level recodification of local heritage within innovative images and new interpretations (Pasquinelli et al., 2024). Accordingly, product innovation is an organizational capability that helps build customer-based brand equity, making this capability useful for integration in city branding processes (Daspit & Zavattaro, 2014). Furthermore, there is a need to plan product quality in line with cultural experiences of cities because product experiences are increasingly a function of place experiences (Sepe & Pitt, 2017).

City marketing innovation entails novelty in selecting appropriate advertisement and promotion channels for cities (Im & Workman, 2004). Marketing processes and strategies are fundamental to organizational innovation (Frank et al., 2016) and innovation in marketing is pivotal for attracting potential customers and sales, via creative promotion methods (Halpern, 2010; Gupta et al., 2016) and using digital channels such as social media (Sulaiman et al., 2026). For cities, marketing innovation is a critical tool for internationalization that gains competitive advantage in the global arena (Christofi et al., 2021) and for promoting smart cities (Vijaygopal et al., 2023). Marketing for city branding represents a complex process that supports the public and private sectors, enhancing economic value for cities, and promoting a city's vision internally and externally (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). Literature also suggests that marketing operations are promotional tools that aid in achieving differentiation between cities and promoting services within cities (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011).

City event innovation applies to novelty in the planning and staging of city gatherings and occasions such as festivals, cultural celebrations, international conferences, sports competition and musical concerts (Yang & Tan, 2017). Aside from generating revenues for tourism and hospitality enterprises, these events encourage city engagement and create novel and special experiences for attendees, resulting in improved brand image and reputation (Deng & Li, 2014). Accordingly, the event industry is fundamental to tourism development and a positive city image from events is integral to corporate and city branding (Colombo & Richards, 2017; Unson et al., 2023). Additionally, research suggests that innovation in events play a key role in urban and regional development strategies (Dragin-Jensen et al., 2022) and eventful cities serve as catalysts for economic activity (Colombo & Richards, 2017). However, the long-term success of event innovation strategies depends on collaborations that build long-term relationships and government support for institutional structures and funding (Schofield et al., 2018; Jawahar et al., 2020).

3 Research methodology

Rooted in a framing of city branding as innovation for tourism development (AlShaalan & Durugbo, 2025), this study applies a cross-sectional survey-based approach that builds, tests, and validates constructs for city branding innovation. Samples for the study are based on a purposive approach, particularly expert sampling, and entails public and private sector place branding, media and tourism experts, from the State of Kuwait. The adoption of an expert sampling approach aids the study in intentionally drawing samples from experts in the complementary fields for city branding with in-depth knowledge and

insights on tourism development. Accordingly, the study focuses on an individual level of investigation, and the unit of analysis is the place branding, media and tourism experts.

Data collection

Data collection involves a web-based questionnaire distributed using the Google Forms platform with two waves of reminders (via direct email (Gmail) and instant messaging (WhatsApp)) to minimise common method bias. In line with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki, the questionnaire begins with a consent statement along with assurances on the confidentiality of respondents' data. Making the questionnaire available in English and Arabic aims to improve comprehension of content, and a three-stage translation (English-to-Arabic-to-English) process supports functional equivalence in both languages. Support for this equivalence is provided by 14 innovation management researchers and Arabic translators who reviewed the wording for both versions of the questionnaire. The survey applies a seven-point Likert scale to evaluate respondents' levels of agreement to 21 questionnaire items, as summarised by Table 1. From 800 purposively sampled experts, the survey generated 596 valid responses.

Table 1 Scale dimensions and item sources

<i>Construct</i>		<i>No. of items</i>	<i>Source</i>
City branding innovation dimensions	City product innovation	6	Stock (2011)
	City marketing innovation	5	Zameer et al. (2019)
	City event innovation	5	Yang & Tan (2017)
City branding innovativeness		5	Pappu & Quester (2016); Shams et al. (2015)

Data analysis

Data analysis entails two schemes. Initially, the study applies exploratory factor analysis to evaluate the dimensions within the variable set. The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) method helps in extracting and evaluating the dimensions for city branding as innovation and varimax serves as the rotation method. PCA assessments are based on factor loadings, cross-loadings, and commonalities and there are additional tests using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy score and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

Subsequently, the study applies the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique to assess the study's measurement model for city branding innovation and the relationship between city branding innovativeness and the determined dimensions for city branding innovation. IBM SPSS statistics and SmartPLS tools aid in assessing internal consistency reliability (using Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (CR) scores), convergent validity (using the average variance extracted (AVE)), and discriminant validity (using cross loadings). Standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) values assess model fit while R² measures aid in assessing the proportion of endogenous variable explained by exogenous variables. Additionally, beta values of path coefficients for constructs and t-values aid in assessing the city branding innovativeness-innovation relationship.

4 Findings

This section presents the survey findings. Figure 1 shows demographic information of the respondents, indicating 54.5% male and 45.5% female participants. In this study, 74.3% of the participants are over 40 years, 78.4% are degree holders, and 69.4% have over 10 years' working experience.

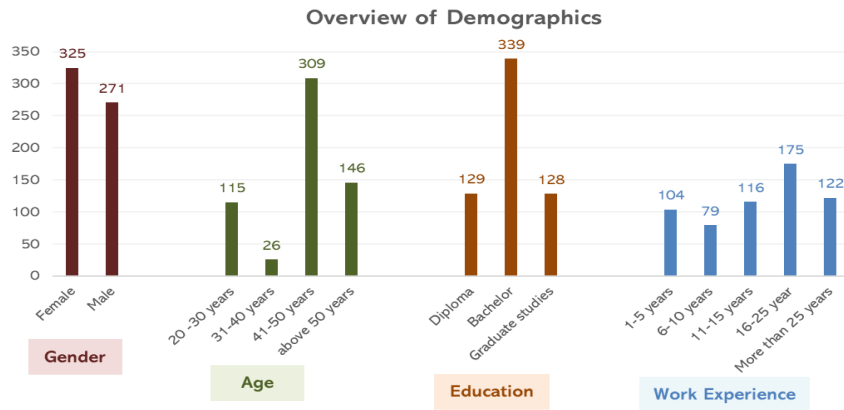


Figure 1 Demographic information of survey respondents.

Purifying the measurement items

Initial analysis supports the city branding as innovation dimensions derived *a priori* from literature. The evaluation based on PCA with varimax rotation eliminated items with factor loadings below 0.50, high cross-loadings above 0.40, and low commonalities below 0.30. Rotation converged in 6 iterations and the process maintained the dimensions as three components with eigenvalues exceeding 1. The resulting factors explain 75.5% of the total variance, as summarised by Table 2. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy score is 0.94 (an acceptable range) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2 = 9138.906$; $p < 0.001$) indicate appropriateness of the data.

Table 2 Summary of exploratory factor analysis findings

<i>City branding as innovation depends on</i>	<i>Factor 1 (City event innovation)</i>	<i>Factor 2 (City marketing innovation)</i>	<i>Factor 3 (City product innovation)</i>
EV 1	0.718	0.464	0.261
EV 2	0.822	0.262	0.196
EV 3	0.783	0.369	0.254
EV 4	0.829	0.354	0.240
EV 5	0.820	0.343	0.307
MI 2	0.443	0.755	0.157
MI 3	0.514	0.678	0.210
MI 4	0.441	0.797	0.127

MI 5	0.467	0.748	0.199
PI 1	0.240	0.109	0.865
PI 2	0.154	0.242	0.819
PI 3	0.236	0.599	0.568
PI 4	0.224	0.646	0.529
PI 5	0.271	0.561	0.528
PI 6	0.214	0.111	0.665
Explained variance	28.6%	26.5%	20.4%

Assessing the measurement model

Statistics on quality criteria for the measurement model are summarised by Table 3. The table shows mean values from 5.652 to 6.652 and factor loading values that range from 0.763 (PI1) to 0.939 (EV5), meeting the suggested tolerance of ≥ 0.7 . Regarding internal consistency reliability, the values of Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.890 to 0.949, while CR values are between 0.918 and 0.961 – both sets of values fulfil the general guidelines on ≥ 0.7 as acceptable. Likewise, the AVE values range from 0.691 to 0.839 and are compliant with the recommended threshold of ≥ 0.5 .

Table 3 Assessment of internal consistency reliability and convergent validity

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Factor loading</i>	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>
<i>City branding innovativeness</i>	CBI 1	5.894	0.939	0.935	0.951	0.796
	CBI 2	5.652	0.888			
	CBI 3	5.864	0.920			
	CBI 4	5.664	0.778			
	CBI 5	6.076	0.928			
<i>City event innovation</i>	EV 1	6.640	0.907	0.949	0.961	0.832
	EV 2	6.613	0.868			
	EV 3	6.652	0.911			
	EV 4	6.637	0.934			
	EV 5	6.645	0.939			
<i>City marketing innovation</i>	MI 2	6.563	0.914	0.936	0.954	0.839
	MI 3	6.587	0.901			
	MI 4	6.551	0.935			
	MI 5	6.571	0.913			
<i>City product innovation</i>	PI 1	6.203	0.763	0.890	0.918	0.691
	PI 2	6.230	0.784			
	PI 3	6.524	0.874			
	PI 4	6.617	0.888			
	PI 5	6.528	0.840			

Regarding the assessment for discriminant validity, values based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion are presented in Table 4. The values range from 0.278 to 0.916 and the table shows that all the diagonal values were higher than the inter-correlation variables, indicating no common method bias in the data.

Table 4 Assessment of discriminant validity

	<i>City branding innovativeness</i>	<i>City event innovation</i>	<i>City marketing innovation</i>	<i>City product innovation</i>
<i>City branding innovativeness</i>	0.892			
<i>City event innovation</i>	0.428	0.912		
<i>City marketing innovation</i>	0.360	0.804	0.916	
<i>City product innovation</i>	0.278	0.684	0.707	0.831

Assessment of structural model

Concerning assessments of the structural model, the SRMR value is 0.059, which is below 0.1, indicating a good fit for the measurement model. R² values are 0.183, 0.130, and 0.077 for city event innovation, city marketing innovation, and city product innovation, respectively. As proposed by Cohen (1988), these values indicate that the model explains 18.3%, 13.0% and 7.7% (all moderate) of the variance in city event innovation, city marketing innovation, and city product innovation, respectively.

Data on the coefficients and significance levels based on estimates using t statistics are presented in Table 5. The table shows that city branding innovativeness has a statistically significant and strong relationship with city event, marketing and product forms of innovation ($\beta = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.360$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.001$). Figure 2 shows path co-efficient, Cronbach's Alpha and t values for constructs in the structural model from SmartPLS.

Table 5 Findings of PLS path analysis

<i>Path description</i>	<i>Path coefficients</i>	<i>T Statistics</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
<i>City branding innovativeness</i> → <i>City event innovation</i>	0.428	8.689	Supported
<i>City branding innovativeness</i> → <i>City marketing innovation</i>	0.360	7.348	Supported
<i>City branding innovativeness</i> → <i>City product innovation</i>	0.278	5.852	Supported

Path significance: * $p < 0.001$; two-tailed test applied.

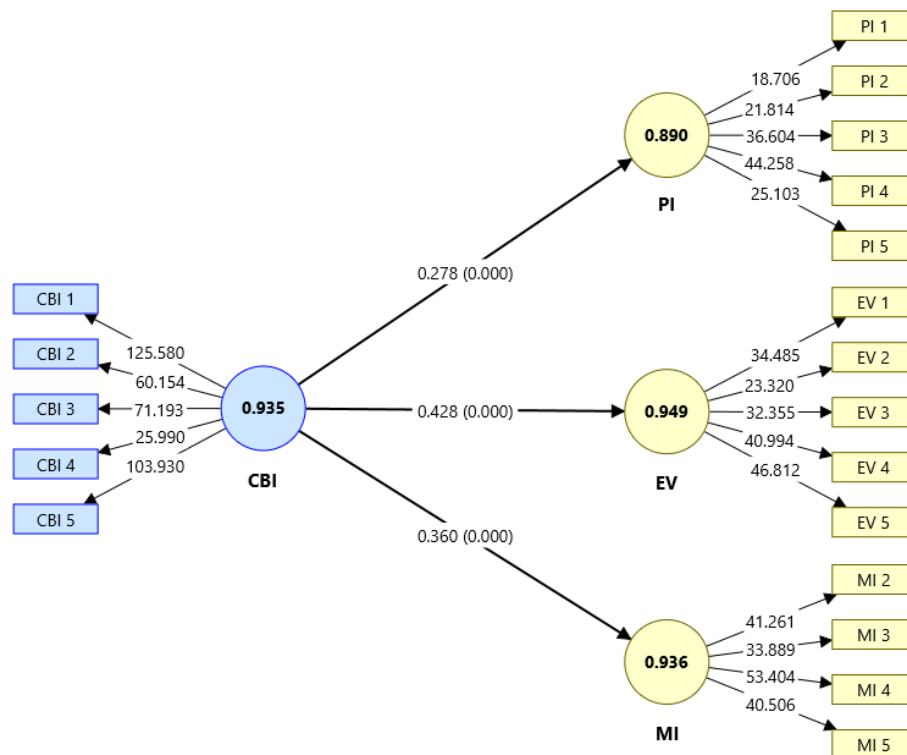


Figure 2 Structural model from SmartPLS showing Cronbach's Alpha and T values for constructs and path co-efficient (with p-values) between constructs.

4 Conclusions

This study develops and validates a scale for measuring city branding as innovation and investigates the relationship between city branding innovativeness and the dimensions within the scale. Based on a cross-sectional survey with place branding, media and tourism experts in Kuwait, the study finds support for three dimensions of city branding as innovation: (i) city event innovation, (ii) city marketing innovation and (iii) city product innovation. The study finds statistically significant and positive relationships between city branding innovativeness and these different dimensions.

From a theoretical perspective, the study advances a multi-dimensional model of city branding innovation based on creating positive city images and perceptions for tourists, visitors, investors and citizens. These images are based on creative city products and offerings developed to promote cultural experiences, targeted city advertisement and promotion channels that build brand recognition, and city gatherings and occasions that foster engagement and memorable experiences. From a managerial perspective, the study supports strategic planning for smart and sustainable city innovation by identifying branding priorities for reforming and orienting cities. The proposed scale also supports branding benchmarks and audits to guide cities in comparing and continuously improving their existing practices.

From a methodological standpoint, the study is limited to the perspectives of place branding, media and tourism experts from the State of Kuwait, which potentially limits the generalisation of the survey findings to similar Middle Eastern and emerging market contexts. The study is also limited in capturing the prioritisation of the measurement items and the single survey focus further limits the scale validity.

Future research will focus on further construct and nomological validity for the proposed scale and evaluating the measurement items. Further studies could also centre on exploring the urban systems and innovation ecosystems that determine city branding as innovation and the range of innovation capabilities that enable branding-based reform and orientation of cities.

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