The Power of Persona in Destination Marketing

Unlocking New Opportunities in U.S. Travel Preferences

Austin Canfield

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1. Abstract

In today's competitive travel market, how destinations present themselves can significantly influence traveler engagement. While traditional tourism marketing has relied heavily on place-based branding—emphasizing geographic identifiers—a growing movement explores the power of persona-based branding, which connects destinations to the values, emotions, and lifestyles of potential travelers. This whitepaper explores the effectiveness of both branding strategies through a comprehensive national survey of U.S. travelers, focusing on generational cohorts, travel habits, brand recognition, and destination preferences.

The study aims to evaluate how consumers interpret, prefer, and respond to different branding styles across a range of demographic and psychographic dimensions. Using both individual and comparative testing formats, the paper seeks to uncover behavioral patterns, branding biases, and situational nuances that influence travel decision-making. Through this analysis, the research offers insights for tourism marketers and destination managers seeking to build resonant, emotionally compelling brand narratives that stand out in a fragmented media environment.

2. At-a-Glance Takeaways

This study set out to understand whether U.S. travelers prefer destinations marketed through traditional geographic naming or through more creative, persona-based approaches. The findings reveal a nuanced and evolving landscape in destination brand preference.

2.1. Persona Brands Lead in Destination Test Markets

Across the six destination test markets, **persona-based branding was preferred by 54.34% of respondents**, compared to **45.66% for place-based branding**. The trend was even stronger among respondents who preferred **suburban (57.26%)** or **rural destinations (58.33%)**, highlighting a significant opportunity for these location types to break through the noise with emotionally evocative branding strategies.

2.2. Market-Level Performance Varies by Brand Fit

Persona-based brands won by wide margins in **Springfield, Roanoke, Rochester, Franklin, and Wilmington**, while **Athens was the only market where the place-based brand won decisively** (81.7% place vs. 18.3% persona). These differences show that the success of persona branding hinges on how well the emotional narrative aligns with a destination's actual tourism assets and expectations.

2.3. Forced Choice Reveals Preference Reversal

When presented with branding style comparisons outside the context of specific destinations, **59.98% of respondents preferred place-based branding**. This suggests that, in the abstract, geographic naming still carries a sense of trust, familiarity, or legitimacy that persona names must work harder to overcome.

2.4. Preference by Destination Type Suggests Opportunity for Suburban and Rural Areas

Among respondents who preferred **urban destinations**, **62.03% chose place-based branding**. However, this dominance wanes in suburban and rural categories, where **persona brands were selected 43.59% and 45.34% of the time**, respectively—up from the overall average of the forced choice responses. This highlights persona branding's strength in places without a dominant geographic identity.

2.5. Key Results from Forced Choice Questions

- **Interest in Visiting**: **55.90%** preferred place-based branding.
- **Credibility & Trustworthiness**: A commanding **79.16%** favored place-based branding.
- **Ease of Recall**: **56.56%** said place-based brands would be easier to remember.
- **Likelihood to Click an Ad**: **51.71%** favored persona branding—**the only instance where persona outperformed place-based**.

2.6. Tourism Campaign Awareness Remains Low

Despite being given detailed examples in the survey, only **22.16% of respondents recalled seeing a tourism campaign**, while **65.16% were unaware** and **12.68% were unsure**. This points to a serious visibility gap for destination marketing efforts.

2.7. Most Travelers Don't Recognize DMO Influence

When asked what influenced their travel decisions:

- **81.7%** cited **personal interests and hobbies**
- **67.14%** said **friends and family**
- **61.96%** pointed to **cost and promotions**
- Just **13.01%** reported being influenced by **DMO campaigns**

These results suggest that while DMOs do play a central role in tourism promotion, **their efforts often go unnoticed or uncredited by travelers**.

2.8. Destination Marketing Implications

Persona-based destination branding shows unique potential—not only to attract attention but to

convert interest into action, especially in **digital environments** where curiosity drives clicks. As traditional place branding maintains dominance in credibility and familiarity, persona branding offers a new frontier for destinations that want to differentiate and emotionally connect with niche audiences. DMOs, meanwhile, face a critical need to **educate the public** about their role and **adapt their messaging** to a market increasingly driven by emotional relevance rather than geographic literalism.

3. Profiling the Survey Respondents

Understanding the characteristics of survey respondents provides valuable insights into how different demographics engage with travel. This section explores key profiling metrics, including **age distribution, travel frequency, familiarity with travel marketing, destination style preferences,** and **decision-making influences**. By analyzing these factors, we can better assess how traveler behaviors vary across different audience segments and what shapes their travel choices.

3.1. Demographics

Understanding the demographic composition of survey respondents is critical to contextualizing branding preferences. This section provides an overview of age distribution among the 907 U.S. respondents who participated in the survey. Age is a key factor influencing travel behavior, destination brand perception, and marketing responsiveness.

Analyzing generational cohorts—Generation Z (GENZ), Millennials (GENY), Generation X (GENX), and Baby Boomers (BOOM)—helps uncover which traveler segments are most engaged with destination branding. Additionally, statistical validation using a Chi-Square Goodness-of-Fit Test ensures the observed distribution is statistically significant, reinforcing the reliability of subsequent findings.

3.1.1. Methodology: Demographic Analysis

The demographic composition of survey respondents was analyzed to provide a foundational understanding of participant characteristics. This section outlines the process used to classify age groups and calculate their proportional representation.

Age Group Classification

Survey respondents were segmented into four generational cohorts based on their reported age:

- **Generation Z (GENZ):** Ages 18-28
- **Millennials (GENY):** Ages 29-44
- **Generation X (GENX):** Ages 45-60
- **Baby Boomers (BOOM):** Ages 61 and above

Each respondent's age was extracted and assigned to the appropriate generational category, allowing for an aggregate count of participants in each cohort.

Population Distribution and Percentage Calculation

After classification, the total number of respondents in each generational cohort was computed. To better understand the relative distribution of age groups within the dataset, the proportion of respondents in each category was calculated by dividing the number of respondents in a given age group by the total number of survey respondents, then multiplying the result by 100 to express it as a percentage. This step ensured a clear representation of how different age segments contributed to the overall dataset.

3.1.2. Age Distribution of Respondents

The total number of respondents was 907, categorized into four generational groups:

Age Group	Respondent Count	Percentage of Total Sample
Generation Z (GENZ, Age 18-28)	192	21.17%
Millennials (GENY, Age 29-44)	427	47.08%
Generation X (GENX, Age 45-60)	221	24.37%
Baby Boomers (BOOM, Age 61+)	67	7.39%

The dominant respondent group is Millennials (GENY), comprising nearly half (47.08%) of all participants. Generation X follows at 24.37%, while Generation Z represents 21.17%. Baby Boomers are notably underrepresented (7.39%), suggesting lower participation in tourism-related survey research or lower engagement with digital travel marketing strategies.

Age Distribution of Survey Respondents
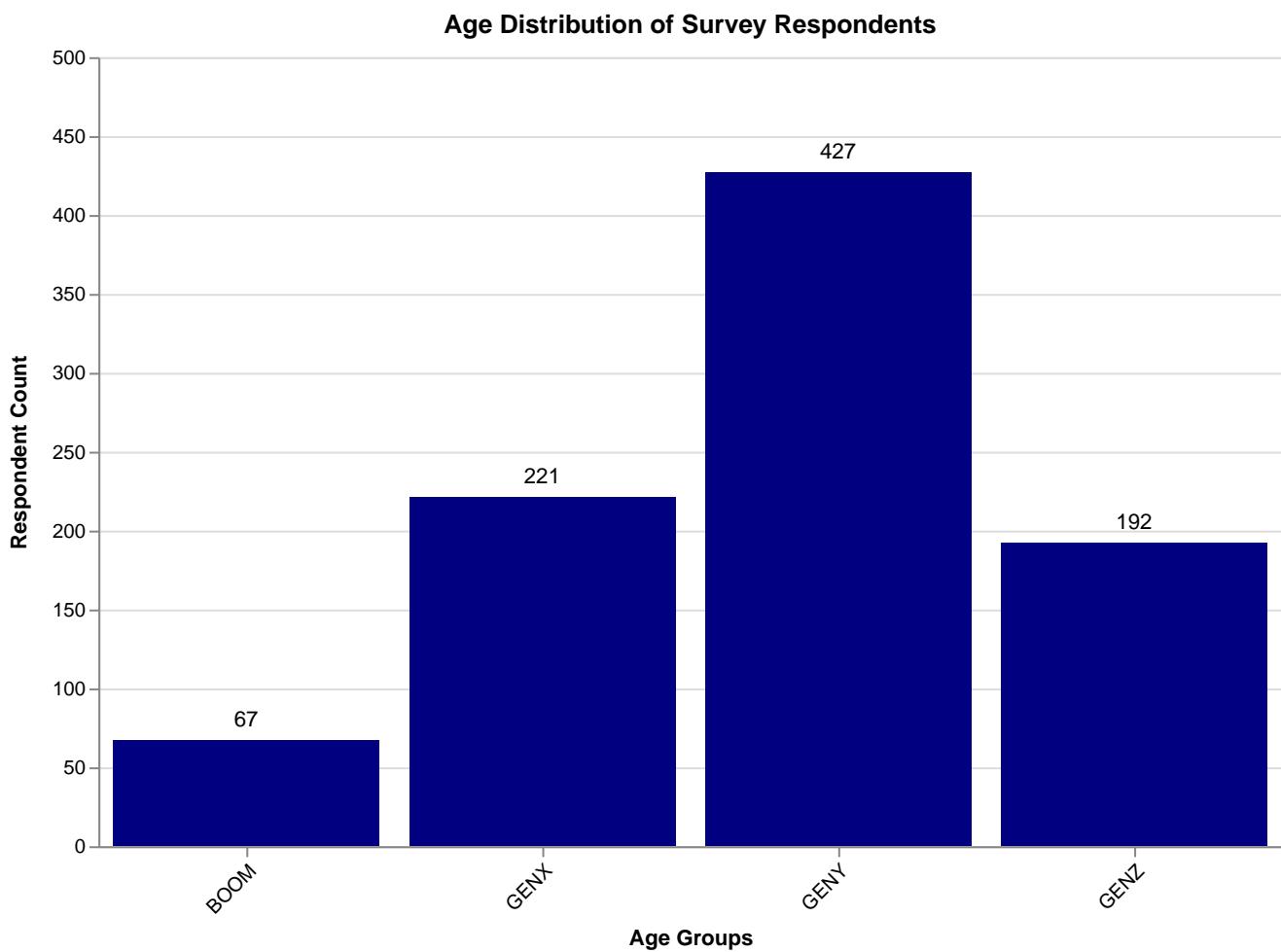
Figure 1. Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

3.1.3. Generational Insights Among Survey Respondents

- **Millennials (GENY) dominate the sample**, comprising nearly half (47.08%) of respondents.

- **Baby Boomers (BOOM) are underrepresented (7.39%)**, suggesting lower survey engagement or different travel marketing responsiveness.

- **Future sections will explore how branding preferences vary across these generational segments**, providing actionable insights for tourism marketers.

3.2. Travel Frequency Analysis

Understanding travel frequency is essential for identifying patterns in respondent behavior. This section presents an analysis of the number of trips taken per year, segmented by age group, and explores statistical measures such as the mean, median, and mode. Additionally, respondents are categorized into frequency segments, and a comparison across age groups is performed to determine significant differences.

3.2.1. Methodology: Travel Frequency Analysis

This section describes the methodology used to analyze respondents' travel frequency. The analysis aims to quantify how often individuals travel for leisure, segment the population into distinct frequency groups, and compare travel behaviors across different generational cohorts.

Overall Travel Frequency Metrics

The analysis computed three central tendency measures for travel frequency:

- **Mean Travel Frequency:** The average number of trips taken per respondent.
- **Median Travel Frequency:** The midpoint value in the ordered list of trips.
- **Mode Travel Frequency:** The most frequently reported number of trips.

These metrics provide a concise summary of typical travel behavior in the sample.

Frequency Segmentation

Respondents were classified into three segments based on their reported number of trips:

- **Low Frequency:** 1–3 trips per year.
- **Moderate Frequency:** 4–7 trips per year.
- **High Frequency:** 8–12 trips per year.

For each segment, the analysis determined the percentage of respondents, offering insights into how travel frequency is distributed within the overall sample.

Comparison Across Age Groups

To explore differences in travel behavior among various generational cohorts, respondents were grouped according to their age group codes (e.g., Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers). For each age group, the average number of trips per year was calculated. This step helps to identify whether travel frequency varies with demographic factors.

3.2.2. Overall Distribution of Travel Frequency

The bar chart below provides a visual representation of the distribution of travel frequency among all survey takers.
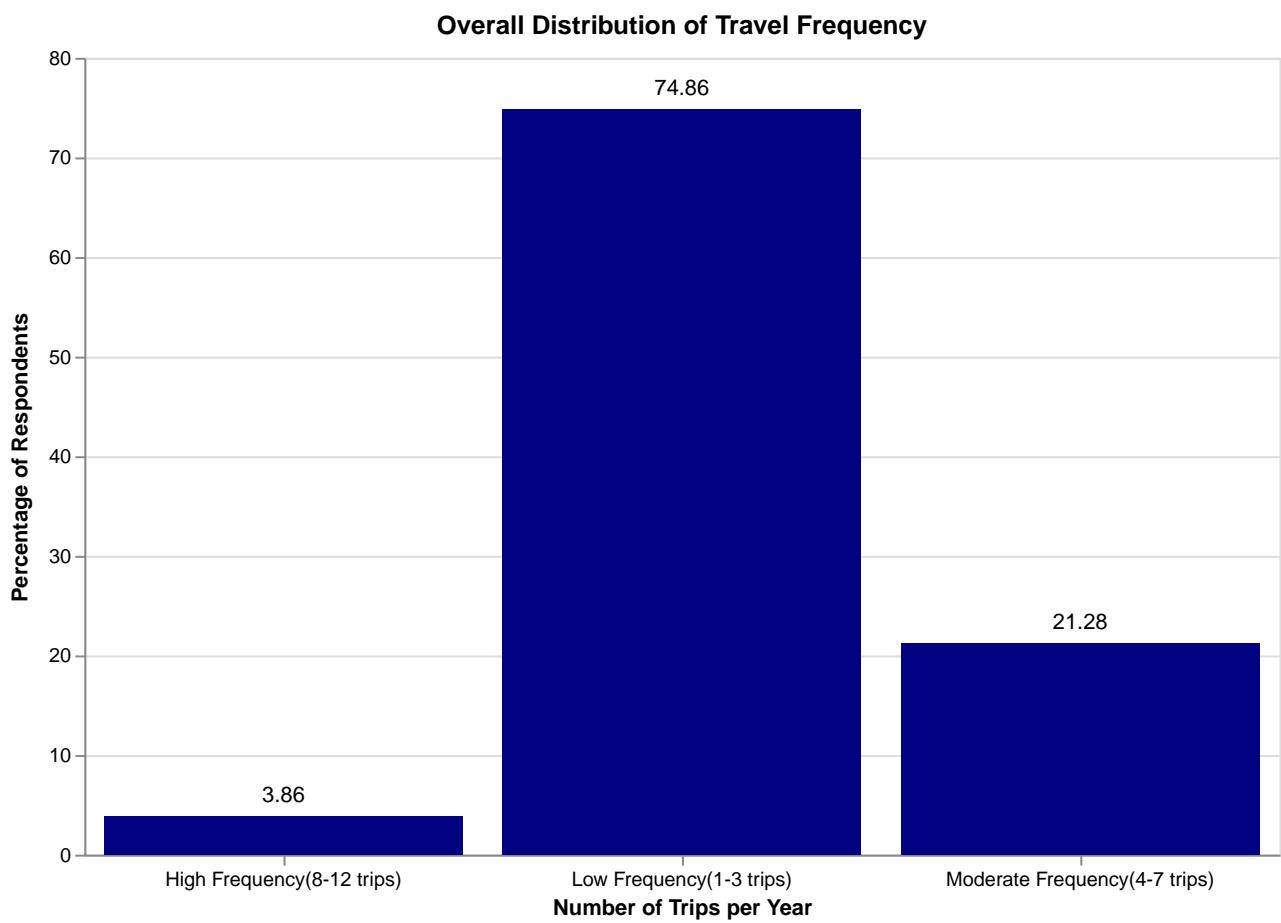
Figure 2. Overall Distribution of Travel Frequency

3.2.3. Travel Frequency Distribution Details

The analysis of travel frequency among survey respondents provides a comprehensive view of their leisure travel behavior. The following metrics summarize the key aspects of travel frequency, including measures of central tendency, frequency segmentation, and comparisons across generational cohorts.

Metric	Value
Total Respondents	907
Mean Travel Frequency	2.85
Median Travel Frequency	2
Mode Travel Frequency	2
Low Frequency (1–3 trips)	74.86%
Moderate Frequency (4–7 trips)	21.28%
High Frequency (8–12 trips)	3.86%
Average Trips – GENZ	2.67
Average Trips – GENY	2.74
Average Trips – GENX	3.22
Average Trips – BOOM	2.82

These figures indicate that, on average, respondents take approximately 2.85 trips per year, with the most common (median and mode) value being 2 trips. A significant majority of the sample (nearly 75%) falls into the low frequency segment (1–3 trips per year), while only a small fraction (about 4%) report high frequency travel (8–12 trips per year).

When the data is segmented by age group, slight differences emerge: Generation X reports the highest average travel frequency at 3.22 trips per year, whereas Generation Z reports the lowest at 2.67 trips per year.

3.2.4. Travel Frequency by Age Group

The box plot below provides a visual representation of the distribution of travel frequency among different age groups. This allows us to understand not just the typical number of trips per year but also the variation within each group.
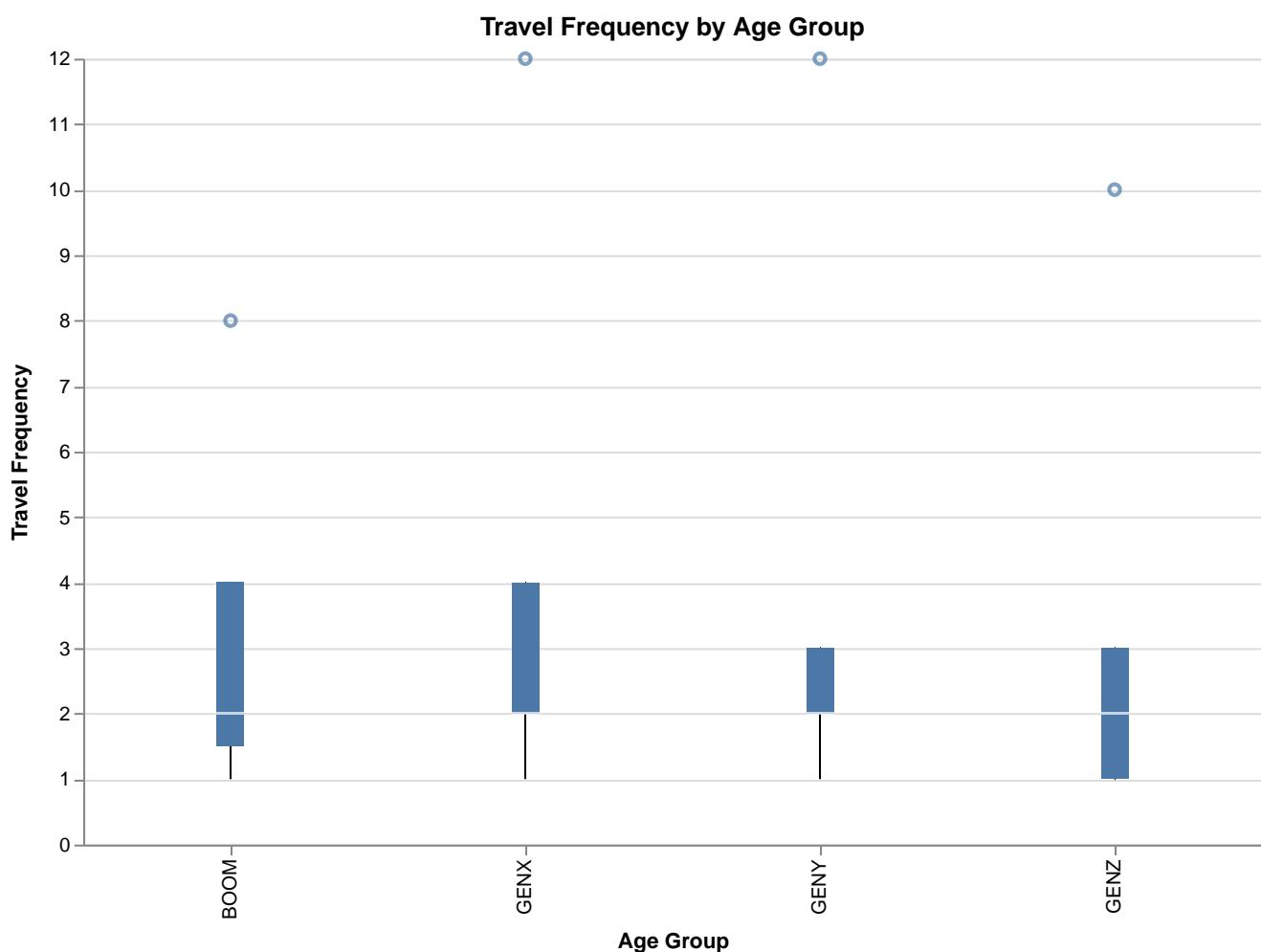

Figure 3. Travel Frequency by Age Group

How to Read the Box Plot

Each box plot consists of five key markers:

- **Minimum (Bottom Whisker)**: The lowest number of trips reported within 1.5 times the interquartile range (IQR).
- **Q1 (Bottom of the Box)**: The 25th percentile, where 25% of respondents travel less than this

value.

- **Median (Middle Line in the Box)**: The 50th percentile, meaning half of the respondents travel less and half travel more.

- **Q3 (Top of the Box)**: The 75th percentile, meaning 75% of respondents travel fewer times than this value.

- **Maximum (Top Whisker)**: The highest number of trips recorded within 1.5 times the IQR.

- **Outliers (Dots Above Whiskers)**: Unusually high travel frequencies beyond the typical range.

3.2.5. Travel Frequency Insights Across Age Groups

The results of this section offer valuable insights into the travel habits of different age groups, helping to identify key patterns and inform destination branding strategies.

- **Generation Z (GENZ)** exhibited the lowest travel frequency with an average of 2.67 trips per year, reflecting a more conservative travel behavior compared to other cohorts.

- **Millennials (GENY)** and **Baby Boomers (BOOM)** showed similar travel tendencies, averaging around 2.74 and 2.82 trips per year, respectively. Although these groups travel slightly more than GENZ, their travel frequency remains relatively modest.

- **Generation X (GENX)** stood out with a significantly higher average of 3.22 trips per year, indicating a greater propensity for leisure travel within this group.

The statistical analysis confirmed that generational differences in travel frequency are significant. Specifically, **GENX** travels more frequently than both **GENZ** and **GENY**, while the difference between **GENZ** and **BOOM** was less pronounced. These insights suggest that marketing strategies tailored to specific age groups should take into account the distinct travel frequencies of each cohort, ensuring that brands align with the travel behaviors of their target audiences.

3.3. Familiarity with Travel Marketing

In this section, we focus on profiling the survey respondents to better understand their awareness and familiarity with travel marketing. This analysis provides critical insights into how different demographic groups engage with travel campaigns, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of their preferences and behaviors.

The section begins with an exploration of the **Familiarity with Travel Marketing** among respondents, where we will analyze key aspects such as:

- **Awareness Levels**: This measure quantifies how many respondents are aware of and follow travel campaigns, with calculations of percentage familiarity.

- **Segmenting Familiarity by Age & Travel Frequency**: We explore how awareness of travel campaigns differs across various age groups and travel frequency segments, offering a closer look at generational differences.

Through this profiling, we aim to identify patterns in how respondents interact with travel marketing efforts and how these patterns might inform future destination branding strategies.

3.3.1. Methodology: Campaign Awareness Analysis

This study employs a structured approach to assess awareness of destination brand campaigns among survey respondents. The methodology involves **data aggregation, segmentation, and statistical testing** to provide insights into the factors influencing awareness levels.

Data Processing and Awareness Calculation

Survey responses are systematically processed to determine the number of individuals familiar with destination brand campaigns. The methodology follows these steps:

- **Data Standardization:** All responses are normalized to ensure consistency in format and categorization.
- **Total Respondent Count:** The total number of participants in the dataset is computed to serve as the basis for subsequent calculations.
- **Awareness Count and Percentage:** The proportion of respondents who indicated familiarity with destination brand campaigns is calculated, providing an overall awareness rate.
- **Response Categorization:** Each response is classified as either **"Yes" (aware), "No" (unaware), or "Unsure"** to ensure a full distribution of responses is available for analysis.

Awareness Segmentation

To examine awareness patterns, respondents are categorized based on key demographic and behavioral factors:

- **Awareness by Age Group:** The dataset is segmented into generational cohorts (**Generation Y, Generation Z, Generation X, and Boomers**) to determine how awareness varies across different age demographics.
- **Awareness by Travel Frequency:** Respondents are categorized based on the number of trips taken per year. Additionally, travel frequency is grouped into three broader segments:
- **Low Frequency (1-3 trips per year)**
- **Moderate Frequency (4-7 trips per year)**
- **High Frequency (8-12 trips per year)** This grouping allows for a more structured analysis of awareness across varying travel behaviors.

3.3.2. Overall Distribution of Campaign Awareness

A bar chart visualizing the distribution of responses regarding awareness of destination brand campaigns.
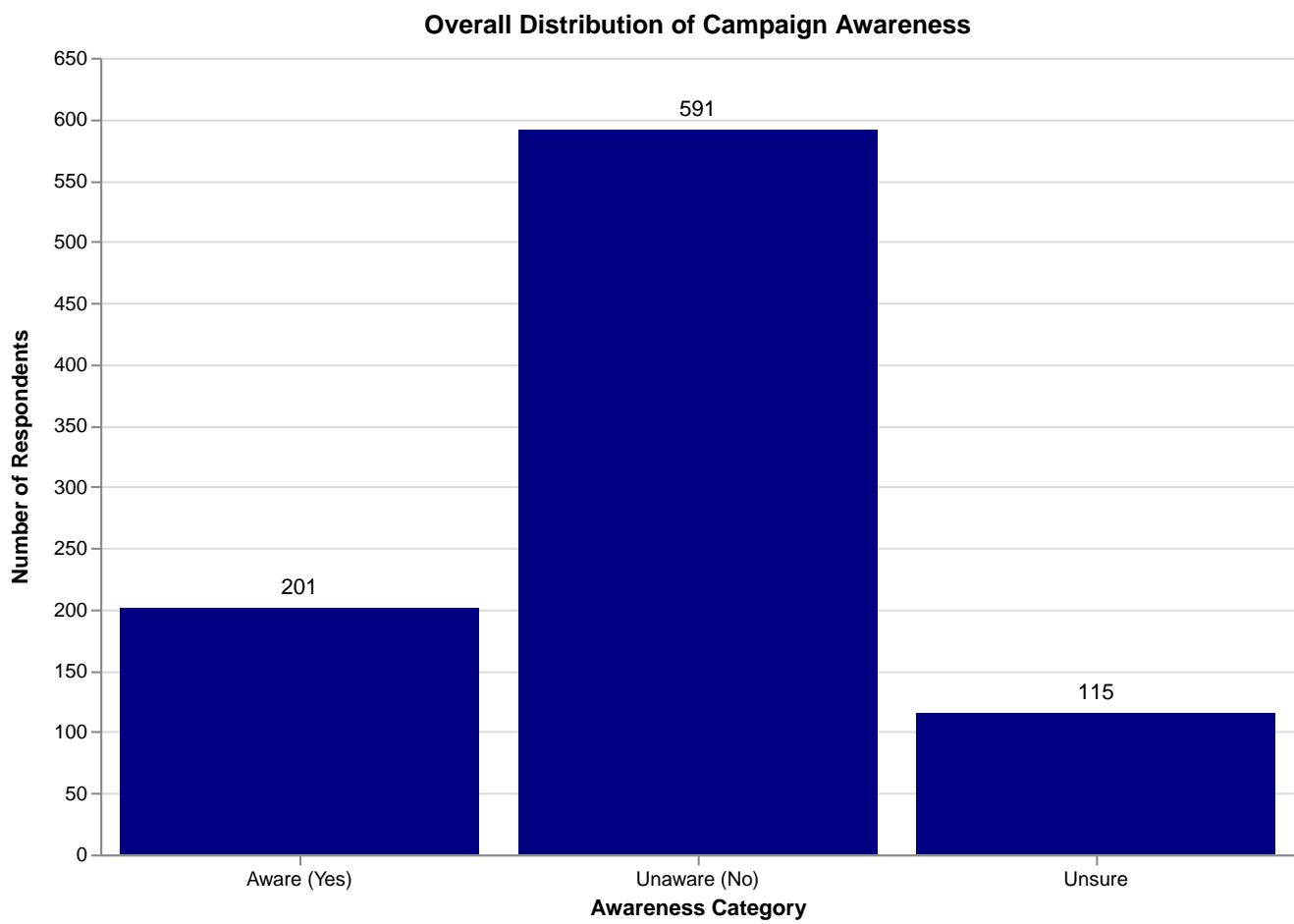
Figure 4. Overall Distribution of Campaign Awareness

3.3.3. Campaign Awareness Distribution Details

The following table summarizes the survey responses regarding awareness of destination brand campaigns. The data includes overall respondent counts, awareness levels, response distributions by age group, and travel frequency categories.

Metric	Value
Total Respondents	907
Aware Count (Yes)	201
Unaware Count (No)	591
Unsure Count	115
Aware Percentage	22.16%
Unware Percentage	65.16%
Unsure Percentage	12.68%

Group	Aware (Yes)	Unaware (No)	Unsure
Age Group - GENY	86 (20.14%)	285 (66.74%)	56 (13.11%)
Age Group - GENZ	36 (18.75%)	140 (72.92%)	16 (8.33%)
Age Group - GENX	62 (28.05%)	131 (59.28%)	28 (12.67%)

Group	Aware (Yes)	Unaware (No)	Unsure
Age Group - BOOM	17 (25.37%)	35 (52.24%)	15 (22.39%)
Low Frequency (1-3 trips)	117 (17.23%)	476 (70.10%)	86 (12.67%)
Moderate Frequency (4-7 trips)	67 (34.72%)	100 (51.81%)	26 (13.47%)
High Frequency (8-12 trips)	17 (48.57%)	15 (42.86%)	3 (8.57%)

The survey gathered responses from **907 individuals**, assessing their awareness of destination brand campaigns. Among them, **201 respondents indicated awareness ("Yes"), while 591 stated they were unaware ("No")**, and **115 were unsure** of their familiarity with such campaigns.

Responses were analyzed across **four age groups**: **Generation Y, Generation Z, Generation X, and Boomers**. The table presents the number of respondents in each group who reported being aware, unaware, or unsure. Generation Y had the highest number of aware respondents, followed by Generation X, while Boomers had the fewest respondents indicating awareness.

Survey participants were also categorized based on their **travel frequency**, with three distinct groups: **Low Frequency (1-3 trips per year), Moderate Frequency (4-7 trips per year), and High Frequency (8-12 trips per year)**. The table outlines the distribution of awareness responses within each of these travel frequency segments.

The data provides a structured view of how respondents answered regarding their awareness of travel campaigns, segmented by key demographics and travel behaviors.

3.3.4. Campaign Awareness by Age Group

The stacked bar chart below provides a visual representation of **awareness levels across different age groups**. Each bar represents a specific age group, with segments showing the proportion of respondents who are aware, unaware, or unsure about destination brand campaigns.
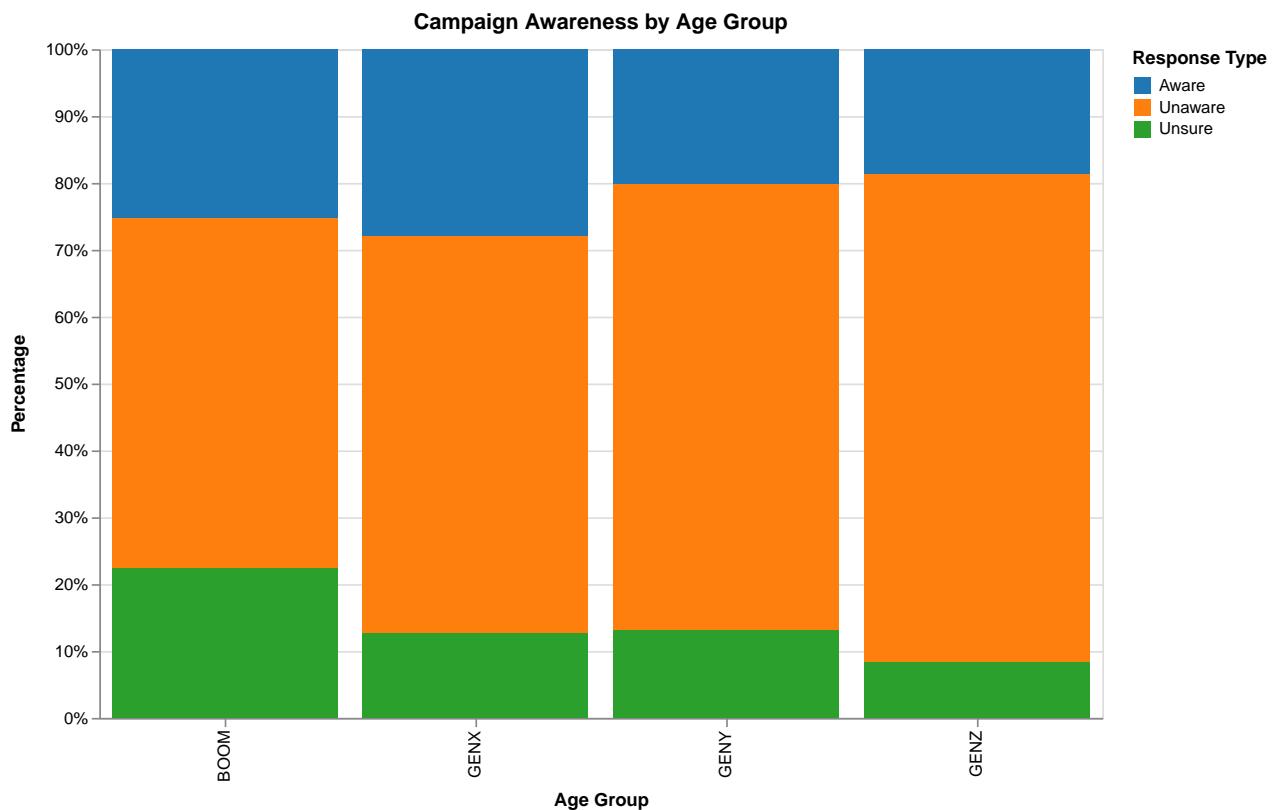
Figure 5. Campaign Awareness by Age Group

How to Read the Stacked Bar Chart

Each bar represents a different age group, showing the **distribution of responses** as follows:

- **Blue (Aware)**: The percentage of respondents in this age group who are aware of destination brand campaigns.

- **Orange (Unaware)**: The percentage of respondents in this age group who are unaware.

- **Green (Unsure)**: The percentage of respondents who were unsure.

The chart is **normalized to 100%**, making it easy to compare **relative proportions across age groups** rather than absolute counts. This allows for a **clear visual comparison of awareness levels** between generations.

3.3.5. Campaign Awareness by Travel Frequency Group

The stacked bar chart below provides a visual representation of **awareness levels across different travel frequency groups**. Each bar represents a travel frequency category, with segments showing the proportion of respondents who are aware, unaware, or unsure about destination brand campaigns.

Campaign Awareness by Travel Frequency Group
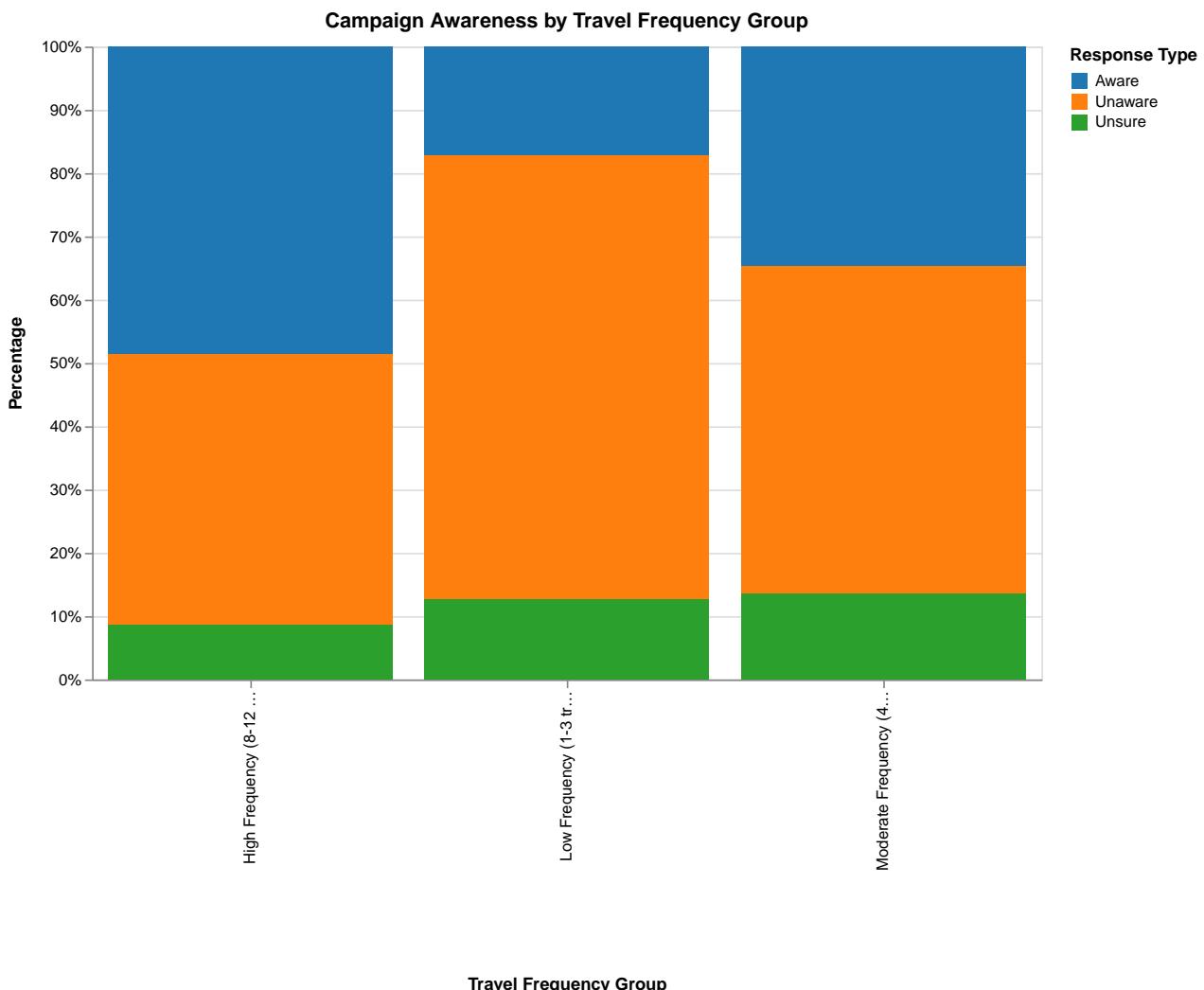
Figure 6. Campaign Awareness by Travel Frequency Group

How to Read the Stacked Bar Chart

Each bar represents a different **travel frequency group**, showing the **distribution of responses** as follows:

- **Blue (Aware)**: The percentage of respondents in this travel group who are aware of destination brand campaigns.

- **Orange (Unaware)**: The percentage of respondents in this travel group who are unaware.

- **Green (Unsure)**: The percentage of respondents in this travel group who were unsure.

The chart is **normalized to 100%,** making it easy to compare **relative proportions across travel frequency groups** rather than absolute counts. This allows for a **clear visual comparison of awareness levels** between people who travel more or less frequently.

Does Age Impact Campaign Awareness?

- The survey results indicate that there is **no statistically significant relationship** between age and campaign awareness.

- While differences exist in **awareness percentages across generations**, these variations are **not significant enough** to conclude that age plays a meaningful role in determining awareness

levels.

- This suggests that **awareness of destination brand campaigns is somewhat evenly distributed across age groups** and is likely influenced by other factors unrelated to generational differences.

Does Travel Frequency Impact Campaign Awareness?

- The survey results indicate **no statistically significant relationship** between travel frequency and awareness.

- Despite some observed differences in awareness levels across **low, moderate, and high frequency travelers**, these differences are **not strong enough to be considered statistically significant**.

- This result suggests that **travel frequency alone does not determine campaign awareness**, and travelers who take more trips per year are **not necessarily more or less likely** to be familiar with destination brand campaigns.

3.3.6. Campaign Awareness Insights Among Age and Travel Frequency Groups

Despite decades of marketing efforts by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), the existence of organized destination marketing campaigns remains **poorly understood by the general population**. The survey findings indicate that a **significant majority of respondents are either unaware of or unsure about these campaigns**, highlighting a major gap in public recognition. This suggests that DMOs could do much more to **connect with people on a personal level** and communicate the importance of their work.

Limited Awareness Across Age Groups

The analysis shows that **age does not play a significant role in determining awareness of destination marketing campaigns**. While there are slight variations in awareness percentages across generations, the statistical testing reveals that these differences are **not meaningful enough to suggest that any particular age group is more engaged with DMOs than others**.

- Awareness levels remain **consistently low** across **Generation Y, Generation Z, Generation X, and Boomers**, with no age group showing a strong connection to destination marketing efforts.

- This indicates that **traditional marketing methods may not be resonating with younger or older demographics alike**.

- The data suggests that DMOs may need to **rethink how they position their campaigns** to ensure that they are engaging audiences across all age segments.

Travel Frequency Does Not Equate to Awareness

One might assume that individuals who **travel more frequently** would have greater awareness of destination marketing campaigns, given their increased exposure to tourism-related content. However, the survey findings **contradict this assumption**.

- Travelers in the **low (1-3 trips), moderate (4-7 trips), and high (8-12 trips) frequency groups**

exhibit **no meaningful difference** in how aware they are of DMOs or their promotional efforts.

- This suggests that **even frequent travelers are not necessarily aware of the organized efforts behind tourism promotion**, underscoring a **disconnect between DMOs and their intended audiences**.

Rethinking Destination Marketing Strategies

Given that neither **age nor travel frequency significantly impacts awareness**, these findings raise important questions about **how DMOs communicate their value** to the public. If **decades of promotional work have not translated into widespread awareness**, it may indicate that **current marketing strategies are failing to effectively engage audiences**.

To improve public recognition and engagement, DMOs should consider the following:

- **Personalized and Direct Engagement:** Traditional mass marketing efforts may not be enough. **Interactive campaigns, influencer partnerships, and personalized digital content** could help bridge the awareness gap.

- **Stronger Storytelling About DMO Impact:** The public may not be aware of the **role DMOs play in shaping travel experiences**. More effort is needed to **highlight success stories, economic impact, and community benefits** in a relatable way.

- **Leveraging Social Media and Emerging Platforms:** The **rise of digital and social media-driven travel inspiration** suggests that **DMOs must meet travelers where they are**—on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

- **More Experiential and On-the-Ground Campaigns:** Instead of relying solely on digital campaigns, **interactive experiences, local partnerships, and in-destination activations** could help travelers connect with the work of DMOs in a tangible way.

The Future of Destination Marketing Awareness

The results of this portion of the study highlight a **critical gap in public understanding of destination marketing efforts**. If DMOs aim to **increase awareness and engagement**, they must go beyond traditional advertising and embrace **modern, consumer-driven marketing approaches**.

By shifting toward **personalized engagement, digital storytelling, and experiential campaigns**, DMOs have an opportunity to **reshape how travelers perceive and interact with destination branding**—transforming public perception from passive awareness to active participation.

3.4. Influence Factors in Travel Decision-Making

In this section, we examine the key factors that influence respondents' travel decisions. By analyzing how different demographic groups prioritize various travel influences, we can better understand the motivations behind destination selection and trip planning.

The section begins with an overview of the Influence Factors, where we will analyze key aspects such as:

- **Overall Influence Trends:** A breakdown of the most and least cited influences, highlighting

which factors drive travel decisions across all respondents.

- **Influence by Age Group:** Analyzing how generational differences shape travel preferences, particularly the role of social media, word-of-mouth, cost considerations, and past experiences.

- **Influence by Travel Frequency:** Examining how travel habits correlate with influence factors, distinguishing between low, medium, and high-frequency travelers.

- **Influence by Campaign Awareness:** Exploring whether respondents exposed to travel campaigns exhibit different decision-making influences compared to those unaware of such marketing efforts.

- **Statistical Testing:** To validate these findings, we apply a Chi-Square Test to determine whether influence factor selections vary significantly across demographic groups.

By mapping these patterns, we aim to provide actionable insights into how different audience segments make travel decisions, enabling more targeted and effective destination marketing strategies.

3.4.1. Methodology: Travel Influence Analysis

This section outlines the methodology used to analyze the key factors that influence respondents' travel decisions. The study aims to quantify the relationship between various demographic groups and travel influence factors through statistical analysis.

Measuring Influence Factors

Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether specific factors influenced their travel decisions. These factors included recommendations from friends, social media, destination marketing campaigns, online review platforms, cost considerations, personal interests, and past experiences. Each respondent could select multiple influence factors, allowing for an assessment of the most and least prominent decision drivers.

To evaluate the impact of demographic variables, responses were grouped into three primary segmentation categories:

- **Age Group:** Respondents were categorized into generational cohorts (Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z) to analyze how travel influence factors vary across age demographics.

- **Travel Frequency:** Respondents were classified based on the number of leisure trips taken annually. This was grouped into low (1-3 trips), medium (4-7 trips), and high (8-12 trips) travel frequencies.

- **Campaign Awareness:** Respondents were asked if they had seen a destination marketing campaign, with responses categorized as "Yes," "No," or "Unsure."

Rationale for Segmentation

The segmentation approach was chosen to capture key demographic differences in travel decision-making. By breaking down responses by **age, travel frequency, and campaign awareness**, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of which factors drive travel choices among different groups.

- **Age segmentation** helps determine whether generational differences impact reliance on digital platforms, word-of-mouth recommendations, or past experiences.

- **Travel frequency segmentation** examines whether those who travel more frequently rely on different influences compared to occasional travelers.

- **Campaign awareness segmentation** evaluates whether exposure to destination marketing efforts correlates with a greater reliance on specific influence factors.

This methodology ensures that the reported findings are not only descriptive but also supported by various factors that could potentially impact travel decision-making, offering a reliable foundation for interpreting the travel influence landscape.

3.4.2. Overall Distribution of Travel Influence Factors

The following list defines each of the influence factors analyzed in the study, representing different sources of inspiration or decision-making considerations when planning travel.

The influence question was presented as a multiple-choice selection, allowing respondents to choose all factors that influenced their travel decisions. As a result, the percentages shown for each influence factor represent the proportion of total respondents who selected that option, rather than summing to 100%.

- **FRIEND:** Influence from friends and family when making travel plans.

- **SOCIAL:** Influence from social media platforms, including posts, advertisements, and user-generated content.

- **DMO:** Influence from destination marketing campaigns, such as advertisements or promotional content from tourism boards.

- **YELP:** Influence from online review platforms, including user ratings and recommendations.

- **COST:** Influence from cost considerations, discounts, and promotional offers.

- **INTEREST:** Influence from personal interests, hobbies, or specific activities available at a destination.

- **PAST:** Influence from past experiences and familiarity with a destination when making travel plans.
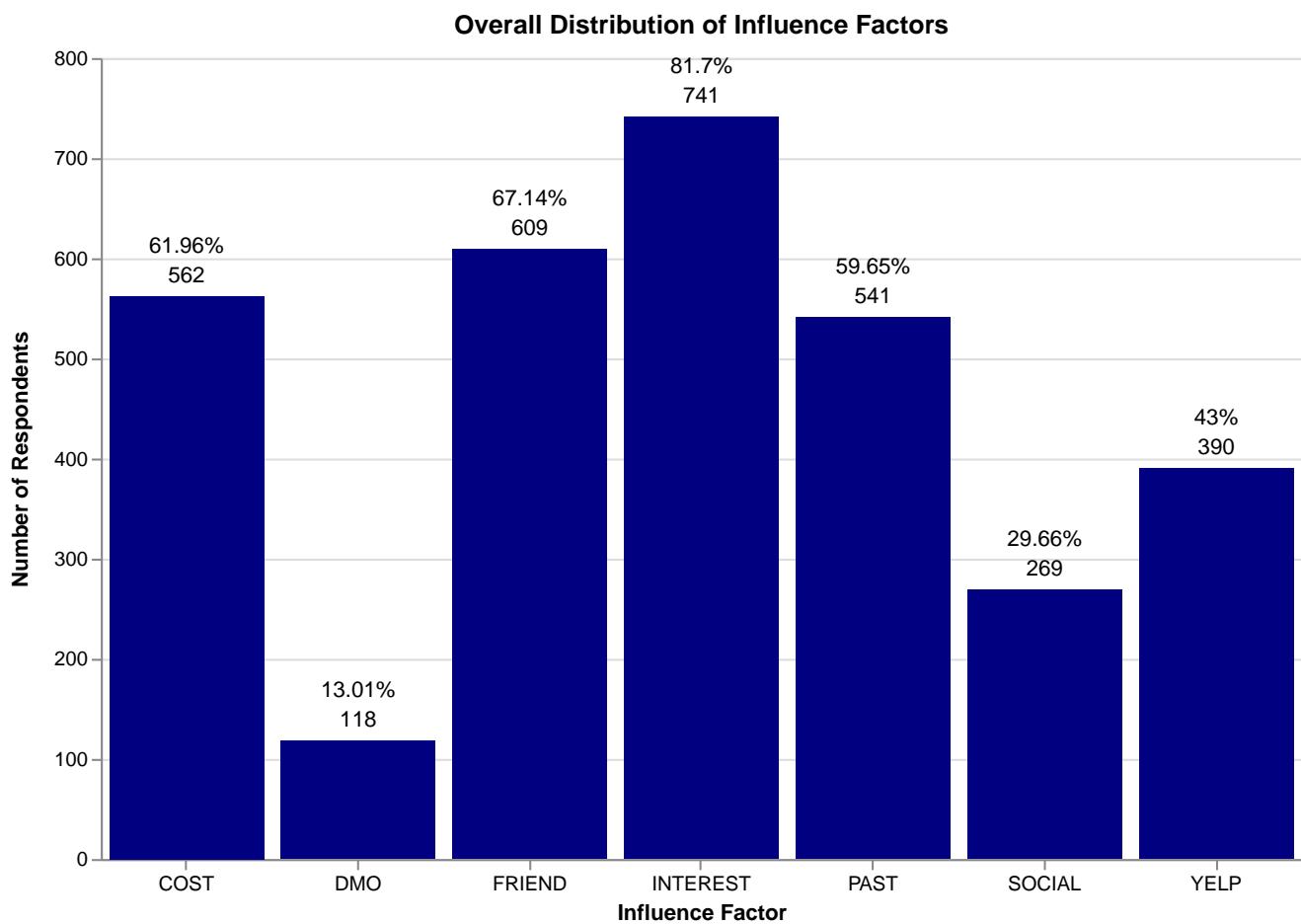
Figure 7. Overall Distribution of Influence Factors

3.4.3. Travel Influence Factors by Age Group

Influence Factor	GENY	GENZ	GENX	BOOM
FRIEND	296 (69.32%)	143 (74.48%)	138 (62.44%)	32 (47.76%)
SOCIAL	130 (30.44%)	84 (43.75%)	50 (22.62%)	5 (7.46%)
DMO	52 (12.18%)	18 (9.38%)	41 (18.55%)	7 (10.45%)
YELP	195 (45.67%)	60 (31.25%)	109 (49.32%)	26 (38.81%)
COST	262 (61.36%)	116 (60.42%)	149 (67.42%)	35 (52.24%)
INTEREST	344 (80.56%)	155 (80.73%)	189 (85.52%)	53 (79.1%)
PAST	247 (57.85%)	101 (52.6%)	145 (65.61%)	48 (71.64%)

The stacked bar chart below provides a visual representation of **how different age groups are influenced by various factors** when making travel decisions. Each bar represents an age group, with segments showing the number of respondents who selected a given influence factor.
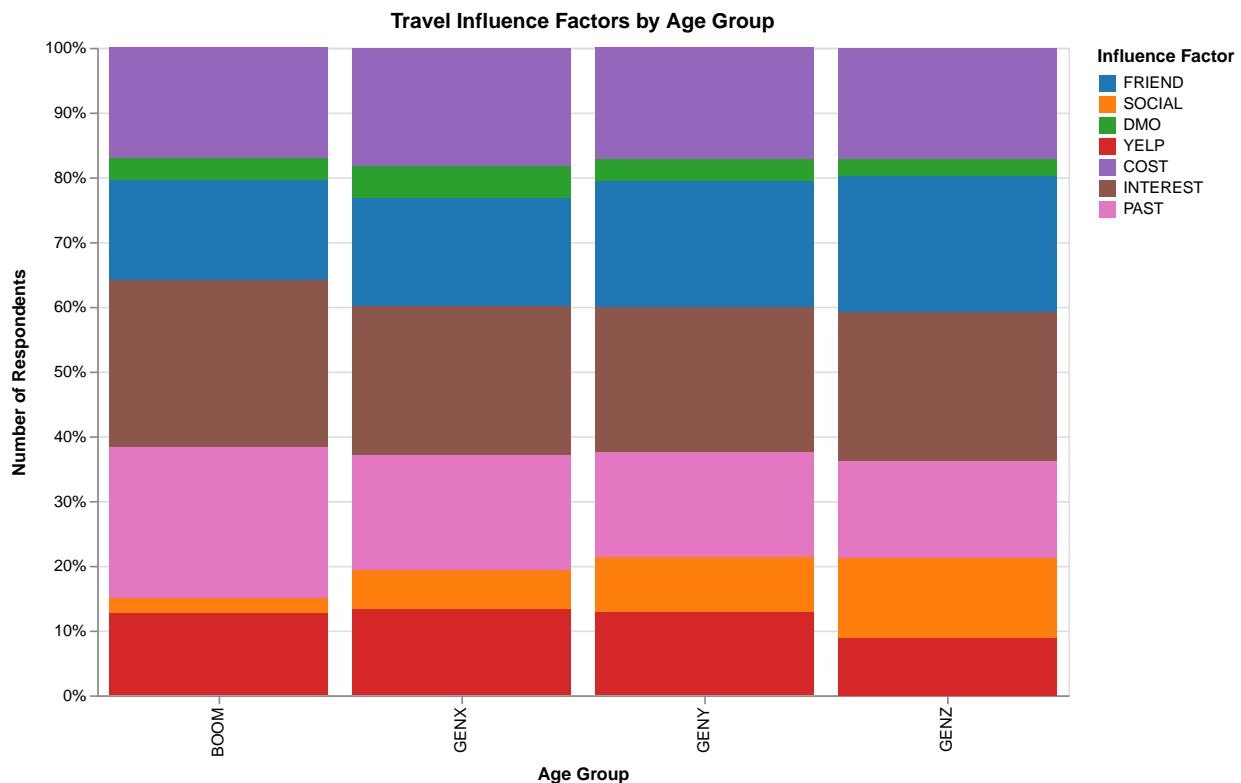
Figure 8. Travel Influence Factors by Age Group

How to Read the Stacked Bar Chart

Each bar represents a different **age group**, with segments showing the number of respondents who selected a particular **travel influence factor**:

- **Each color represents a unique influence factor** (e.g., Friend, Social Media, Cost, etc.).
- **Bars are stacked proportionally** to reflect the total number of selections within each age group.
- **Higher segments indicate stronger influence within an age group**.

This chart allows for a **clear comparison of influence factors** across generations, showing which factors are **more or less significant** to each age group.

3.4.4. Travel Influence Factors by Travel Frequency

Influence Factor	Low (1-3 trips)	Medium (4-7 trips)	High (8-12 trips)
FRIEND	435 (64.06%)	149 (77.2%)	25 (71.43%)
SOCIAL	176 (25.92%)	74 (38.34%)	19 (54.29%)
DMO	74 (10.9%)	37 (19.17%)	7 (20%)
YELP	278 (40.94%)	99 (51.3%)	13 (37.14%)
COST	418 (61.56%)	121 (62.69%)	23 (65.71%)
INTEREST	547 (80.56%)	164 (84.97%)	30 (85.71%)
PAST	394 (58.03%)	123 (63.73%)	24 (68.57%)

The stacked bar chart below visualizes **how travel frequency groups are influenced by different factors** when making travel decisions. Each bar represents a **travel frequency category**, with segments indicating the number of respondents who selected each influence factor.
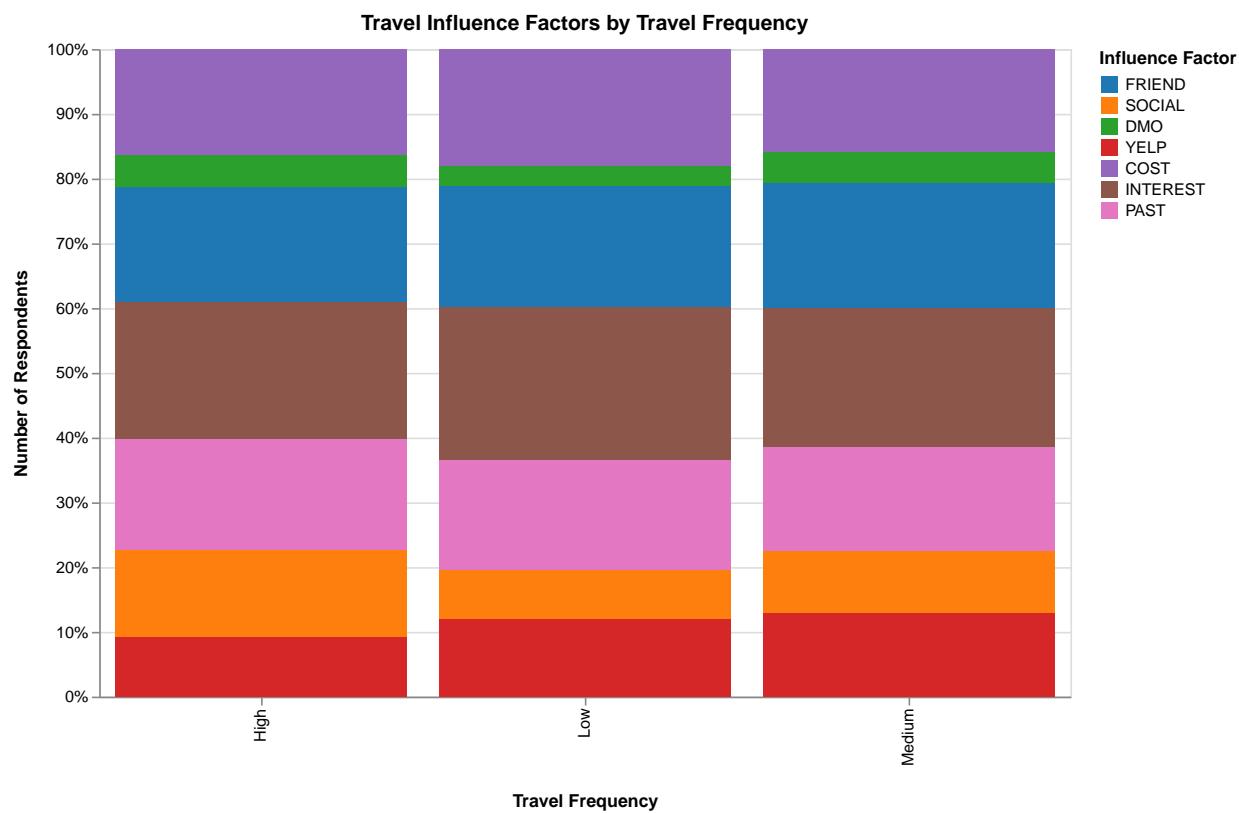

Figure 9. Travel Influence Factors by Travel Frequency

How to Read the Stacked Bar Chart

Each bar represents a different **travel frequency group**, with segments showing the number of respondents who selected a particular **travel influence factor**:

- **Each color represents a unique influence factor** (e.g., Friend, Social Media, Cost, etc.).
- **Bars are stacked proportionally** to reflect the total number of selections within each travel frequency group.
- **Higher segments indicate stronger influence within a travel frequency category**.

This visualization allows for a **clear comparison of influence factors** across **low, medium, and high-frequency travelers**, highlighting how **travel habits correlate with different decision-making influences**.

3.4.5. Travel Influence Factors by Campaign Awareness

Influence Factor	Aware (Yes)	Unaware (No)	Unsure
FRIEND	149 (74.13%)	372 (62.94%)	88 (76.52%)
SOCIAL	94 (46.77%)	142 (24.03%)	33 (28.7%)
DMO	65 (32.34%)	40 (6.77%)	13 (11.3%)
YELP	110 (54.73%)	222 (37.56%)	58 (50.43%)

Influence Factor	Aware (Yes)	Unaware (No)	Unsure
COST	121 (60.2%)	363 (61.42%)	78 (67.83%)
INTEREST	159 (79.1%)	486 (82.23%)	96 (83.48%)
PAST	123 (61.19%)	351 (59.39%)	67 (58.26%)

The stacked bar chart below visualizes **how different levels of campaign awareness correlate with travel influence factors**. Each bar represents a **campaign awareness category**, with segments indicating the number of respondents who selected each influence factor.
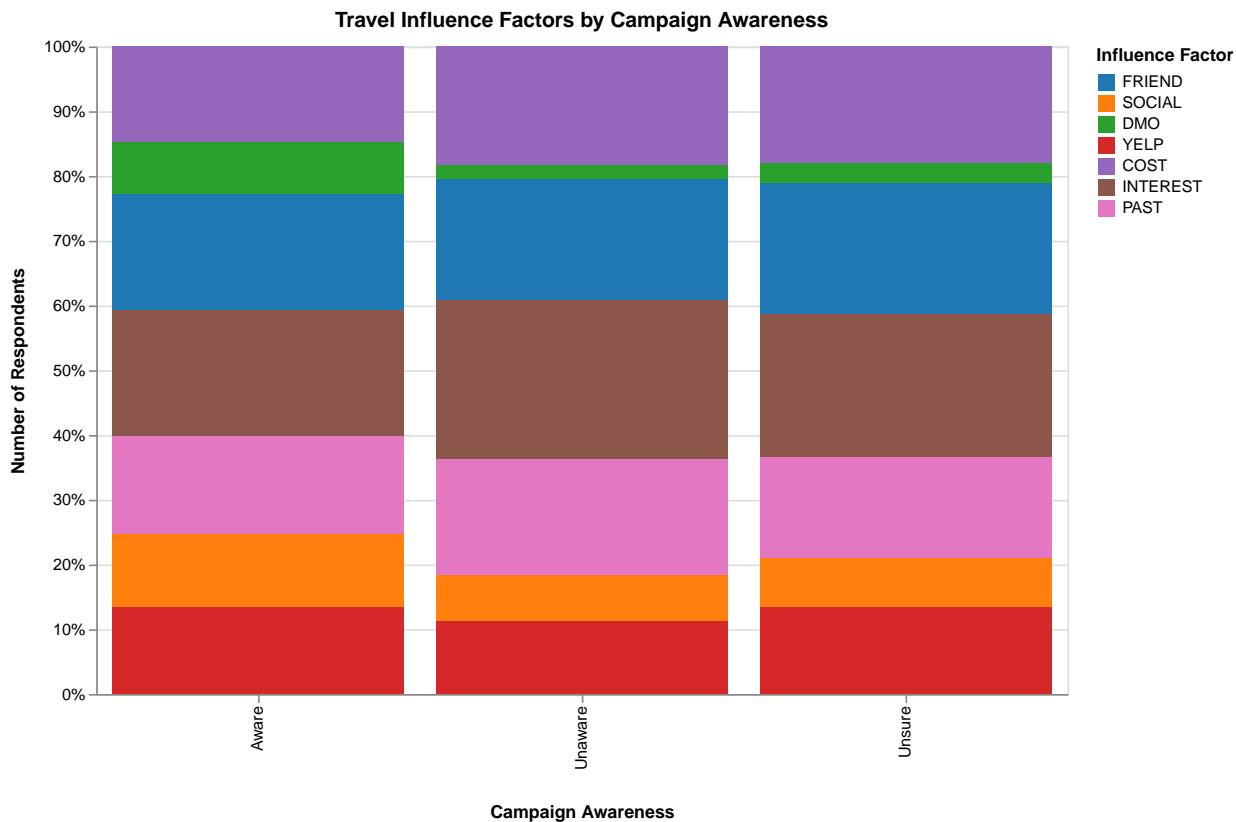
Figure 10. Travel Influence Factors by Campaign Awareness

How to Read the Stacked Bar Chart

Each bar represents a different **campaign awareness category**, with segments showing the number of respondents who selected a particular **travel influence factor**:

- **Each color represents a unique influence factor** (e.g., Friend, Social Media, Cost, etc.).
- **Bars are stacked proportionally** to reflect the total number of selections within each campaign awareness group.
- **Higher segments indicate stronger influence within an awareness category**.

This visualization allows for a **clear comparison of influence factors** across **those who are aware, unaware, or unsure of travel marketing campaigns**, highlighting how **marketing exposure impacts travel decisions**.

3.4.6. Travel Influence Insights Among Age, Travel Frequency and Campaign Awareness Groups

Overall Influence Trends

Across all respondents, personal interests (81.7%) and recommendations from friends and family (67.14%) were the most frequently cited factors influencing travel decisions. Cost considerations also played a significant role (61.96%), reinforcing the importance of financial constraints in trip planning. Online review platforms such as Yelp influenced 43% of respondents, while social media had a more limited effect (29.66%). Destination marketing campaigns (13.01%) were among the least selected factors, indicating that organic and peer-driven influences were more impactful than formal marketing efforts.

Influence by Age Group

Generational differences were evident in how respondents weighed various travel influences. Gen Y and Gen Z exhibited the strongest reliance on recommendations from friends (69.32% and 74.48%, respectively) and personal interests (80.56% and 80.73%). Social media was a major factor for Gen Z (43.75%) but had a reduced impact on older generations, particularly Baby Boomers (7.46%). Cost considerations were most influential for Gen X (67.42%), while Baby Boomers leaned more on past experiences (71.64%) rather than digital or peer-driven sources.

Influence by Travel Frequency

Frequent travelers exhibited distinct decision-making patterns. High-frequency travelers (8-12 trips annually) were the most likely to cite personal interests (85.71%) and cost (65.71%) as key influences. Medium-frequency travelers (4-7 trips) showed a similarly high reliance on personal interests (84.97%) but were more influenced by online reviews (51.3%) than their high-frequency counterparts (37.14%). Low-frequency travelers (1-3 trips) were more likely to rely on word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family (64.06%) and cost factors (61.56%), suggesting a greater hesitancy in independent trip planning.

Influence by Campaign Awareness

Exposure to destination marketing campaigns was correlated with increased influence from formal marketing channels and digital sources. Campaign-aware respondents were more likely to cite destination marketing organizations (DMOs) as an influence (32.34%) compared to unaware respondents (6.77%). Additionally, those aware of campaigns were more influenced by online review platforms such as Yelp (54.73%) and social media (46.77%), indicating that marketing exposure may amplify engagement with digital platforms. Conversely, campaign-unaware respondents relied more heavily on personal interests (82.23%) and past experiences (59.39%), suggesting a more self-directed approach to trip planning.

Implications for Travel Marketing Strategies

These findings emphasize the importance of **tailored marketing strategies** that align with demographic-specific preferences:

- **Capitalize on personal interests as the leading influence factor:** Since personal interests are

the primary driver of travel decisions, destination brands should **showcase their brand personality** in marketing materials. Clearly defined themes—such as adventure, relaxation, cultural immersion, or culinary experiences—can help travelers quickly determine alignment with their interests, leading to faster decision-making.

- **Targeting younger travelers through digital engagement:** Gen Z and Millennial travelers are highly influenced by social media and online reviews, making influencer partnerships, user-generated content, and digital ad placements crucial for engaging these audiences.

- **Emphasizing cost and past experiences for older travelers:** Baby Boomers and Gen X prioritize affordability and past experiences over social media, suggesting that loyalty programs, repeat visitor discounts, and nostalgic marketing campaigns may be more effective.

- **Leveraging campaign exposure to enhance digital reach:** Marketing campaigns appear to reinforce digital engagement, meaning that integrating campaigns with Yelp partnerships and targeted social media advertising can improve reach and influence.

- **Differentiating strategies by travel frequency:** High-frequency travelers respond strongly to personal interests and digital tools, whereas low-frequency travelers lean on peer recommendations. Personalized itineraries, tailored discounts, and travel advisory services could cater to these distinct needs.

By aligning travel marketing strategies with these insights, destination marketers can optimize their outreach efforts, ensuring that messaging resonates with the right audience segments and drives higher engagement.

3.5. Destination Types Preference Analysis

This section explores the role of **urban, suburban, and rural destinations** in shaping travel preferences. We analyze key trends across **age groups, travel frequency, and campaign awareness**, as well as the statistical significance of these relationships.

Key analyses in this section include:

- **Overall Destination Type Preference Trends** – An overview of how respondents distribute their preference among urban, suburban, and rural destinations.
- **Preference by Age Group** – Identifying generational differences in preferred destination types.
- **Preference by Travel Frequency** – Evaluating whether frequent travelers prefer different types of destinations compared to less frequent travelers.
- **Preference by Campaign Awareness** – Analyzing whether exposure to destination marketing influences travel type selection.

Through these analyses, we aim to offer actionable insights into **which travelers prefer which destinations**, helping travel marketers optimize their targeting strategies.

3.5.1. Methodology: Destination Preference Analysis

This section details the methodology used to analyze the dataset, including the processes for calculating destination type preferences, categorizing responses, and conducting statistical significance tests. The analysis focuses on understanding the relationship between demographic

factors and destination preferences while ensuring the results are statistically robust.

Data Processing and Categorization

To analyze destination type preferences, responses from the survey were structured and categorized systematically. The following steps outline how the data was processed:

- **Reading and Structuring Responses:** The survey data was imported and structured, ensuring that each response was correctly aligned with its respective demographic and preference categories.

- **Defining Destination Types:** The study categorized responses based on whether participants expressed a preference for Urban, Suburban, or Rural destinations.

- **Identifying Selected Responses:** Each response was checked to determine whether a participant had explicitly indicated a preference for a destination type.

- **Grouping by Demographics and Influencing Factors:** The responses were further classified into key demographic categories, including:

  ◦ Age Groups (Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z)

  ◦ Travel Frequency (Low: 1-3 trips, Medium: 4-7 trips, High: 8-12 trips)

  ◦ Campaign Awareness (Yes, No, Unsure)

  ◦ Travel Influence Factors (Friends, Social Media, Destination Marketing Campaigns, Online Reviews, Cost Considerations, Personal Interests, Past Experiences)

Each category was independently analyzed to determine how different respondent groups preferred specific destination types.

Calculating Destination Type Preferences

Once responses were categorized, calculations were performed to determine destination type preferences:

- **Total Preference Count:** The total number of respondents who preferred each destination type (Urban, Suburban, Rural) was calculated across all respondents.

- **Preference by Age Group:** Within each age group, the number of respondents selecting each destination type was counted, and the percentage was calculated relative to the total respondents in that age group.

- **Preference by Travel Frequency:** The total count and percentage of respondents who preferred each destination type were determined based on travel frequency (low, medium, high).

- **Preference by Campaign Awareness:** Respondents were categorized based on whether they had seen a destination marketing campaign, and preferences for destination types were analyzed within each awareness level.

- **Preference by Travel Influence Factors:** The number of respondents who selected each destination type was compared against key travel influence factors.

Each of these calculations was structured into tables with percentages reflecting how each

demographic segment or influencing factor correlated with destination preferences.

Summary of Methodology

Through the outlined methodology, the analysis provided a robust framework to quantify and validate destination type preferences. The combination of frequency analysis and statistical testing allowed for:

- A clear understanding of **which demographics prefer Urban, Suburban, or Rural destinations**.
- Identification of **the most influential factors driving travel decisions**.

These results provide actionable insights for travel marketers, allowing them to tailor promotional efforts toward different demographic groups with a data-driven approach.

3.5.2. Overall Destination Type Preference Trends

The following table provides an overview of respondents' preferences for urban, suburban, and rural destinations.

Destination Type	Count	Percentage
Urban	617	48.39%
Suburban	315	24.71%
Rural	343	26.90%

Key Observations:

- **Urban destinations are the most preferred**, capturing **48.39%** of responses. This suggests that **city-based travel remains dominant**, likely due to accessibility, entertainment options, and business-related travel.
- **Rural and suburban preferences are more balanced**, with **26.9%** and **24.71%**, respectively. This indicates that while nature and quieter settings appeal to a segment of travelers, they are secondary to urban environments.
- These trends emphasize the need for **differentiated marketing strategies**, as urban destinations attract nearly half of all respondents, whereas suburban and rural markets require more tailored approaches to appeal to their audience.
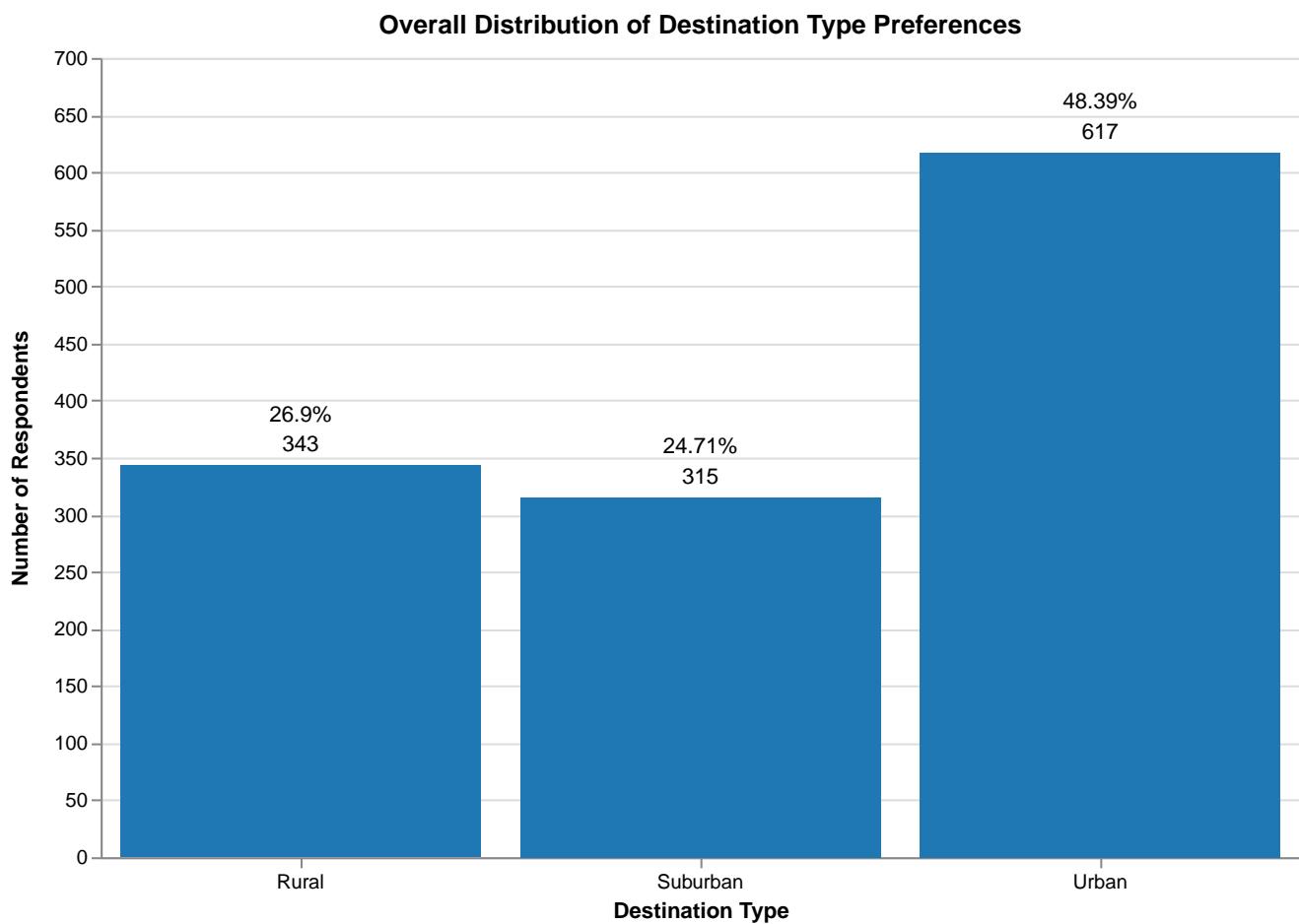
Figure 11. Overall Distribution of Destination Type Preferences

This visualization highlights the **distribution of travel destination preferences**, reinforcing the data from the table above. The dominance of urban preferences suggests that **city-based travel will likely continue to be the primary focus of travelers**, while suburban and rural destinations cater to more niche segments.

3.5.3. Destination Type Preference by Age Group

Age Group	Urban (%)	Suburban (%)	Rural (%)
GENZ	59.77%	22.66%	17.58%
GENY	49.31%	25.60%	25.09%
GENX	41.47%	26.18%	32.35%
BOOM	37.11%	19.59%	43.30%

Key Observations:

- **Gen Z overwhelmingly prefers urban destinations** (59.77%), likely driven by social engagement and digital connectivity.

- **Boomers are more likely to choose rural destinations** (43.30%), aligning with trends favoring peace and familiarity.

- **Gen X and Millennials show a balanced preference**, with Gen X leaning toward suburban

(26.18%) and rural (32.35%), while Gen Y favors urban settings (49.31%).
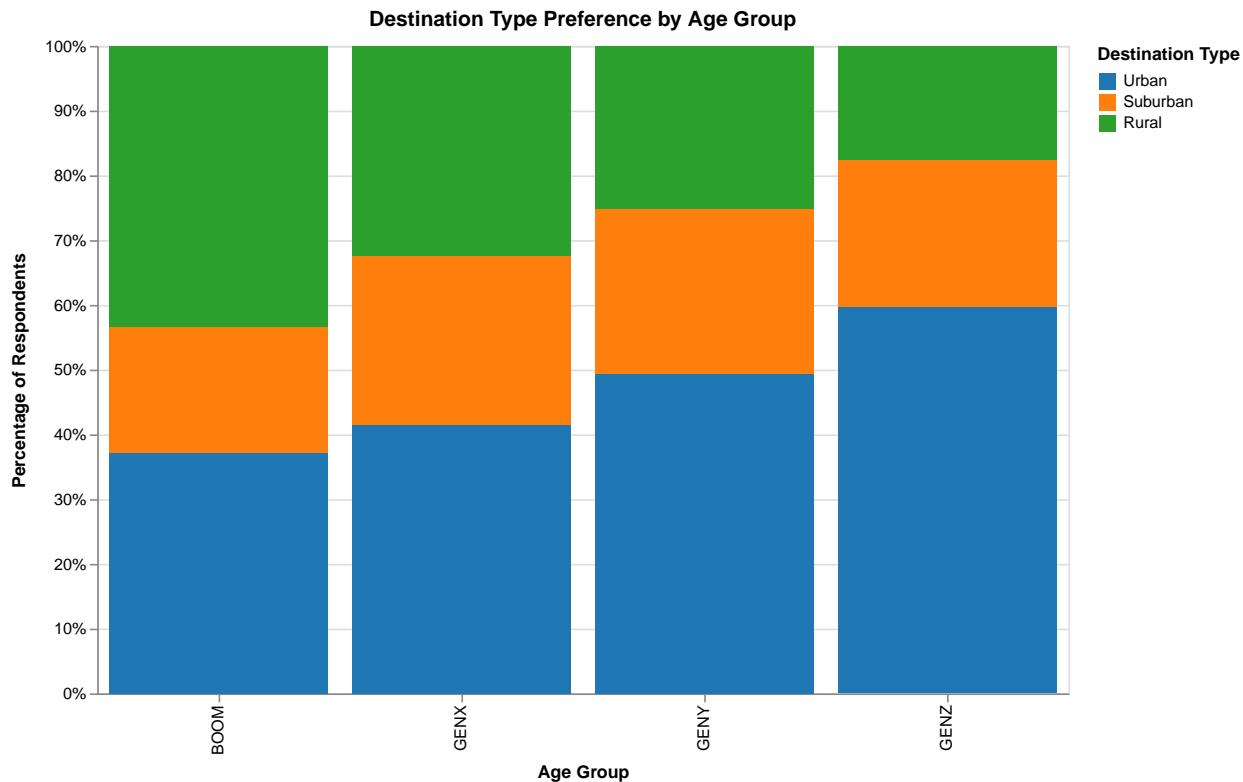
Figure 12. Destination Type Preference by Age Group

3.5.4. Destination Type Preference by Travel Frequency

Travel Frequency	Urban (%)	Suburban (%)	Rural (%)
Low (1-3 trips)	48.76%	24.92%	26.32%
Medium (4-7 trips)	48.08%	24.04%	27.87%
High (8-12 trips)	43.86%	24.56%	31.58%

Key Observations:

- **Frequent travelers (8-12 trips per year) show the highest preference for rural destinations** (31.58%), suggesting that they actively seek **quieter, nature-based travel experiences**.

- **Urban preference declines with travel frequency**, possibly indicating that **business travelers already engage with cities frequently** and seek non-urban destinations for leisure.

- **Low-frequency travelers (1-3 trips per year) exhibit a more even distribution**, indicating no strong biases for urban, suburban, or rural travel.

- **Suburban destinations remain stable across all travel frequencies**, reinforcing their role as **secondary travel options rather than primary ones**.
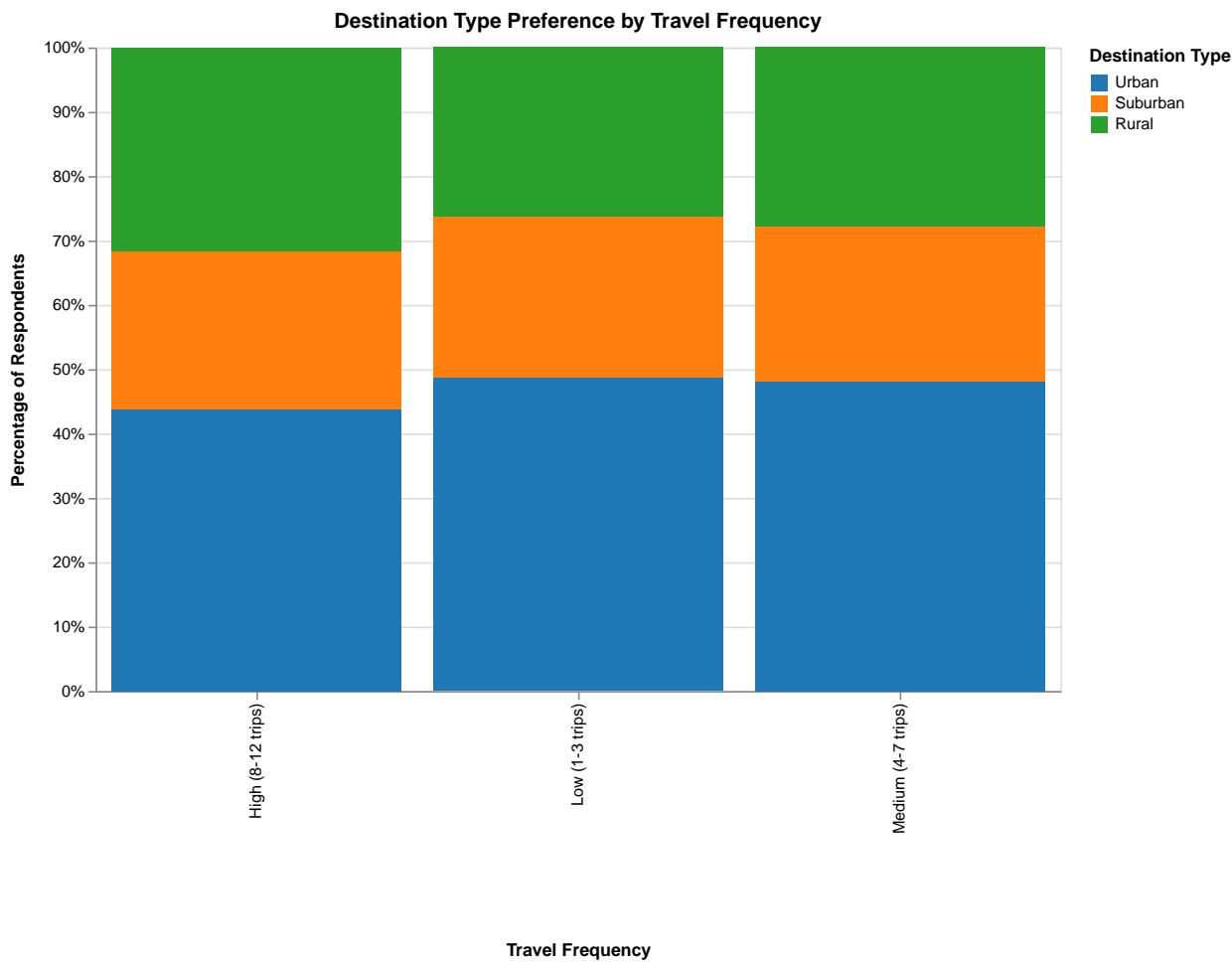
Figure 13. Destination Type Preference by Travel Frequency

Destination Type and Travel Frequency Insights

- **Rural travel preference grows with trip frequency**, showing that **frequent travelers are more likely to diversify their destinations**.

- **Urban travel remains dominant overall, but its share decreases among high-frequency travelers**, indicating they seek a balance between city and nature.

- **Suburban destinations act as a stable secondary choice** across all travel groups.

- **Statistical tests confirm strong and significant relationships**, reinforcing the idea that travel frequency plays a crucial role in destination selection.

3.5.5. Destination Type Preference by Campaign Awareness

Campaign Awareness	Urban (%)	Suburban (%)	Rural (%)
Yes	44.03%	26.96%	29.01%
No	48.79%	24.76%	26.46%
Unsure	54.43%	20.25%	25.32%

Key Observations:

- **Campaign-aware travelers are more inclined to visit urban destinations** (44.03%), suggesting that destination marketing efforts are more effective in **promoting city-based**

travel.

- **Travelers unaware of campaigns exhibit a more balanced preference**, with a slight **lean toward rural destinations** (26.46%).

- **Those unsure about marketing campaigns show the strongest urban preference** (54.43%), which may indicate **indirect exposure to marketing efforts via digital platforms or social influence**.

- **Suburban preference remains lower across all categories**, indicating that **urban and rural destinations capture most of the campaign-influenced market**.
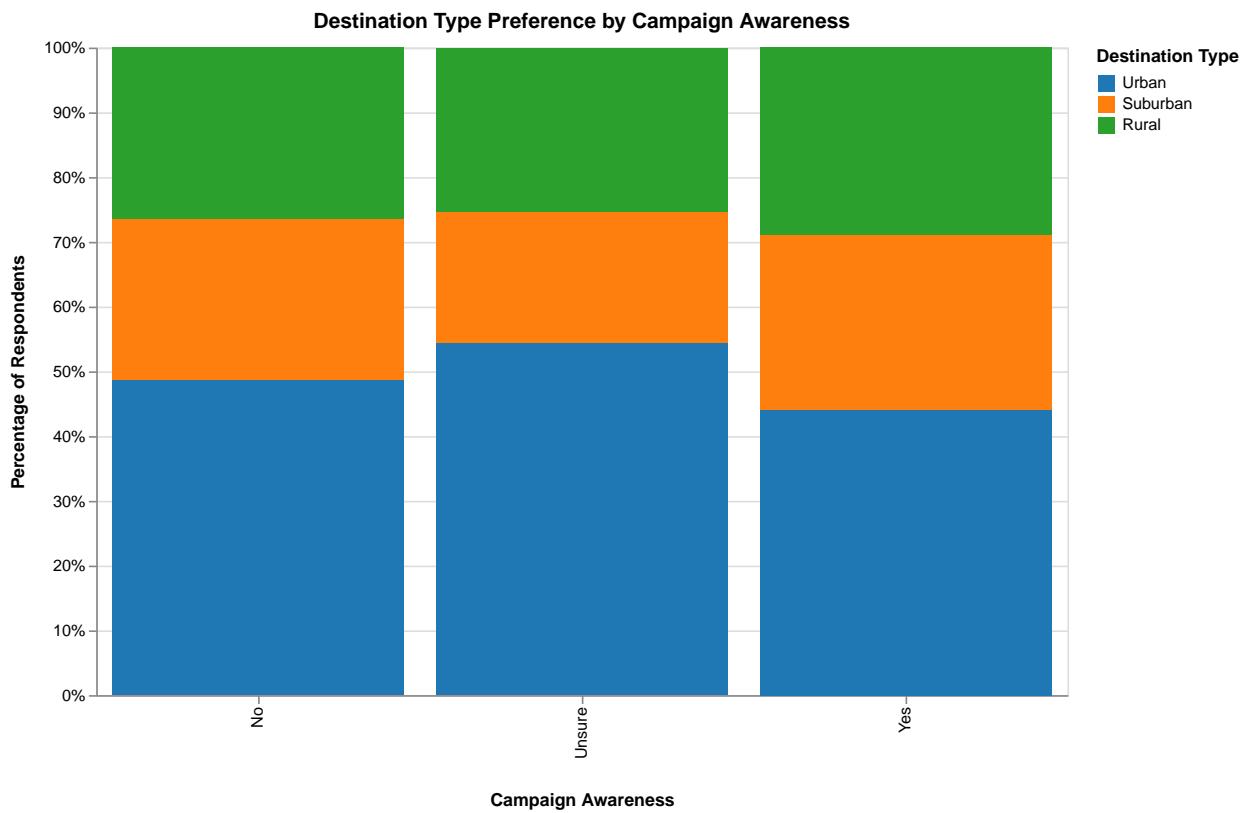
Figure 14. Destination Type Preference by Campaign Awareness

Destination Type Insights by Campaign Awareness

- **Campaigns appear to shift preferences away from urban destinations**, driving more interest in suburban and rural locations.

- **Statistical significance and strong effect sizes confirm that marketing efforts effectively influence destination decisions**.

- **Campaign-unaware travelers exhibit the most balanced preferences**, implying that **organic decision-making (without marketing) follows a more natural distribution**.

- **Destination marketing efforts should focus on showcasing rural and suburban attractions** to encourage further diversification of traveler preferences.

3.5.6. Key Insights on Destination Type Preferences

The analysis of destination type preferences—urban, suburban, and rural—reveals notable trends across **age groups, travel frequency, and campaign awareness**.

Key Findings:

- **Urban destinations remain the dominant choice**, capturing **48.39% of preferences**, but **this preference gradually declines across generations**.

- **Rural destinations show a steady increase in preference across older generations**, indicating a shift toward quieter, nature-focused travel as people age.

- **Suburban destinations remain stable across all groups**, consistently attracting around **25% of respondents**, suggesting that suburban travel is a **secondary, rather than primary, choice**.

- **Frequent travelers (8-12 trips per year) show the highest preference for rural destinations (31.58%)**, contradicting expectations that urban trips would dominate.

- **Campaign awareness significantly influences travel preferences**, with **campaign-aware travelers favoring suburban and rural areas**, while those unsure of campaign exposure show a **higher urban preference**.

Generational Shift Toward Rural Travel

The most striking trend is the **gradual shift from urban to rural travel across generations**:

- **Gen Z has the highest urban preference (59.77%)**, likely due to **social engagement, digital influence, and city-based entertainment.**

- **Gen Y shows a more balanced distribution**, with **urban preference dropping to 49.31%**, while rural and suburban choices increase.

- **Gen X continues this shift, with a noticeable 41.47% urban preference, 26.18% suburban, and 32.35% rural.**

- **Boomers favor rural travel the most (43.30%)**, possibly due to **retirement, nostalgia, and a preference for less crowded environments**.

This pattern suggests that **as travelers age, their preferences shift toward quieter, nature-focused destinations.** Marketing strategies should reflect this by targeting **younger travelers with city-based content** and **older travelers with rural and nature-driven experiences.**

Travel Frequency & Destination Preference

The analysis of **how often respondents travel** highlights an **unexpected shift toward rural destinations among high-frequency travelers**:

- **Low-frequency travelers (1-3 trips per year) show a balanced distribution**, aligning closely with the overall trend.

- **Medium-frequency travelers (4-7 trips) slightly favor rural destinations (27.87%)**, suggesting that increased travel allows for more exploration beyond cities.

- **High-frequency travelers (8-12 trips) prefer rural destinations the most (31.58%)**, contradicting the assumption that frequent travelers would focus on urban business travel.

This suggests that **frequent travelers actively seek varied experiences**, with many prioritizing **nature, adventure, or retreat-style travel options** over repeated urban visits.

Campaign Awareness & Marketing Influence

Marketing exposure plays a **strong role in destination choice**, but **not in the way one might expect**:

- **Campaign-aware travelers are less likely to choose urban destinations**, favoring **suburban and rural areas instead.**
- **Campaign-unaware travelers have a more even distribution**, reflecting **organic travel decision-making.**
- **Those uncertain about marketing exposure show the highest urban preference**, suggesting they may have been influenced indirectly (e.g., social media, peer recommendations, or digital ads).

This indicates that **marketing campaigns effectively promote alternative travel options**, encouraging travelers to consider **suburban and rural destinations over urban ones.**

Strategic Implications for Destination Marketing

Based on these findings, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and travel businesses should tailor their strategies as follows:

1. **Target younger travelers with urban-focused experiences** – Gen Z and Millennials respond well to **city-based entertainment, social engagement, and digital travel content.**
2. **Promote rural destinations to high-frequency and older travelers** – Frequent travelers and Boomers increasingly prefer **nature-based experiences, wellness retreats, and quieter getaways**.
3. **Use marketing campaigns to drive interest in suburban and rural destinations** – Campaign-aware travelers are more likely to **consider non-urban options, reinforcing the need for strong destination branding beyond major cities.**
4. **Recognize that suburban destinations remain secondary choices** – While suburban destinations maintain a stable **25% preference**, they are not the primary focus for most travelers. They should be positioned as **convenient alternatives** rather than main attractions.
5. **Leverage frequent travelers' openness to exploration** – Since **high-frequency travelers embrace rural destinations more than expected**, marketing should emphasize **unique, off-the-beaten-path experiences for experienced travelers.**

Final Thoughts

These insights reveal a **clear, generationally driven shift from urban to rural travel**, supported by **travel frequency and campaign awareness trends.** While **urban destinations remain dominant**, their preference **gradually declines across generations,** with **rural destinations steadily rising.**

This suggests that **the future of travel marketing will require a more balanced approach**, where **urban, suburban, and rural destinations are promoted based on traveler demographics and behaviors.** By understanding these shifts, **destinations can optimize their marketing strategies, ensuring they align with evolving traveler preferences.**

4. Examining Destination Brand Preferences

This section examines how survey respondents engage with different types of destination branding, focusing on two primary approaches: place-based and persona-based branding. Place-based brands emphasize the physical characteristics of a destination—its geography, landmarks, or regional identity—while persona-based brands highlight the experiences and lifestyle activities available, such as adventure, relaxation, or nightlife. The goal of this analysis is to determine which branding strategy resonates more strongly with travelers, offering valuable insight for tourism marketers seeking to position destinations in a way that aligns with audience preferences and motivations.

4.1. Survey Methodology: Measuring Destination Brand Preference

To accurately assess preferences between place-based and persona-based destination branding, respondents were randomly assigned to one of four experimental groups. Group assignment was independent of factors such as age, travel frequency, campaign awareness, preferred destination types, or travel influence motivations, ensuring an unbiased sample.

Each group received a different visual arrangement of brand comparisons: the position of place and persona brands was randomly swapped (left/right on desktop or top/bottom on mobile), and branding was shown either as an image logo or as plain text. This design controlled for potential biases related to visual hierarchy or brand presentation.

As part of the brand preference section, respondents were asked to indicate their place vs. persona preference using fictitious destination brands representing six U.S. cities: Roanoke, VA; Springfield, MO; Athens, GA; Rochester, NY; Franklin, TN; and Wilmington, NC. This approach allowed the study to examine how preferences shift based on the type of persona each destination evokes, while also testing the limitations of traditional place-based branding conventions that rely on verbs like Visit, Explore, and Discover.

After this randomized exposure, all respondents were asked a series of standardized, forced-choice questions—presented in the same format for every participant—about whether they generally preferred a destination brand that emphasized the location itself or one that emphasized experiential, persona-driven attributes. Preferences were measured across four key areas: personal interest, brand credibility, brand memorability, and likelihood of engaging with advertisements.

4.1.1. Testing for Bias in Brand Presentation

To analyze how brand preference varied based on visual presentation and positioning, responses were grouped according to four experimental conditions: whether the place-based brand appeared on the left or right (or top/bottom, depending on device), and whether it was shown as plain text or as a logo image.

Each group was independently tallied to determine how many respondents preferred the place-based brand versus the persona-based brand within that specific layout. For each condition, the total number of responses was calculated, along with the number and percentage that favored either brand type. This allowed for a comparison of preference patterns across different visual arrangements, helping to identify whether brand positioning or appearance had any measurable

influence on respondent choices.

Presentation Format	Text - Place Left
PLACE Responses	619
PLACE %	45.85%
PERSONA Responses	731
PERSONA %	54.15%
Total Responses	1350

Presentation Format	Text - Place Right
PLACE Responses	643
PLACE %	45.22%
PERSONA Responses	779
PERSONA %	54.78%
Total Responses	1422

Presentation Format	Image - Place Left
PLACE Responses	582
PLACE %	48.02%
PERSONA Responses	630
PERSONA %	51.98%
Total Responses	1212

Presentation Format	Image - Place Right
PLACE Responses	641
PLACE %	43.96%
PERSONA Responses	817
PERSONA %	56.04%
Total Responses	1458

Based on the results, we can observe that when destination brands are presented in a text-only format, the positioning of the brand—whether on the left or right—has little to no impact on respondent preferences. The percentages of place and persona selections remain nearly identical regardless of layout, suggesting that textual presentation does not introduce positional bias.

However, when the brands are displayed in an image logo format, a subtle but consistent pattern emerges: respondents show approximately a 5% increase in preference for place-based brands when they are positioned on the left. This trend suggests that visual hierarchy may play a role in how image-based branding is perceived, with respondents more likely to favor the brand shown first in a more visually prominent layout.

Even though there is an observable difference in brand positioning bias when respondents evaluated image logos, the effect was not strong enough to alter the overall outcome—persona-based brands still received the majority of preferences in both positioning scenarios. As such, this bias is considered insignificant for the purposes of this study, and subsequent metrics will not be segmented by brand presentation format or layout.

4.2. Destination Brand Preference Overview

To further analyze how different types of travelers engage with destination branding, this table summarizes brand preference across a variety of respondent segments. In addition to overall preferences, the data is broken down by generational cohort, travel frequency, influence factors, campaign awareness, and destination type preference.

For each group, the number and percentage of respondents who preferred a location-based brand (emphasizing the destination itself) versus a persona-based brand (emphasizing activities or experiences) are shown. This breakdown provides a more nuanced understanding of how demographic and behavioral factors may shape attitudes toward different branding strategies.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Results	2485	45.66%	2957	54.34%	5442
Baby Boomers (Age 61+)	155	38.56%	247	61.44%	402
Generation X (Age 45–60)	591	44.57%	735	55.43%	1326
Millennials (Age 29–44)	1205	47.03%	1357	52.97%	2562
Generation Z (Age 18–28)	534	46.35%	618	53.65%	1152
Low Travel Frequency (1–3 Trips Per Year)	1870	45.90%	2204	54.10%	4074
Medium Travel Frequency (4–7 Trips Per Year)	523	45.16%	635	54.84%	1158
High Travel Frequency (8–12 Trips Per Year)	92	43.81%	118	56.19%	210
Influenced by Friends and Family	1658	45.37%	1996	54.63%	3654

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Influenced by Social Media	758	46.96%	856	53.04%	1614
Influenced by Destination Marketing Campaigns	341	48.16%	367	51.84%	708
Influenced by Online Review Platforms	1079	46.11%	1261	53.89%	2340
Influenced by Cost and Promotions	1567	46.47%	1805	53.53%	3372
Influenced by Personal Interests and Hobbies	2044	45.97%	2402	54.03%	4446
Influenced by Past Travel Experiences	1479	45.56%	1767	54.44%	3246
Aware of Tourism Campaigns	532	44.11%	674	55.89%	1206
Not Aware of Tourism Campaigns	1634	46.08%	1912	53.92%	3546
Unsure About Tourism Campaigns	319	46.23%	371	53.77%	690
Prefer Urban Destinations	1750	47.27%	1952	52.73%	3702
Prefer Suburban Destinations	400	42.74%	536	57.26%	936
Prefer Rural Destinations	335	41.67%	469	58.33%	804

4.2.1. Overall Destination Brand Preference
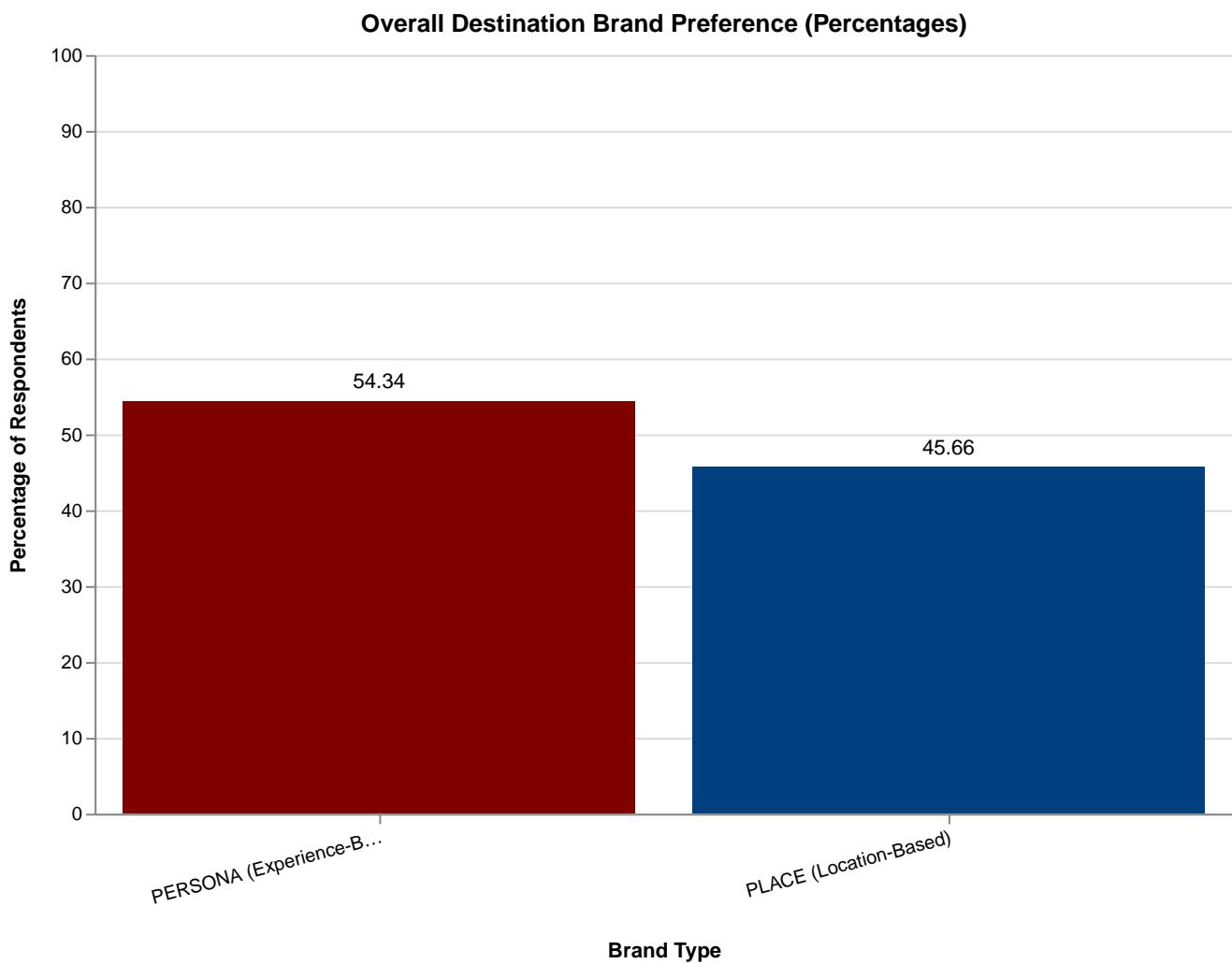
Figure 15. Overall Destination Brand Preference

The overall results show a slight majority of respondents preferred persona-based destination brands (54.34%) over place-based brands (45.66%), suggesting a general favorability toward experience-driven, emotionally evocative branding. However, this margin is narrow enough to warrant deeper exploration. Rather than indicating a universal preference, the near-even split raises important questions about how brand style preferences might shift across different demographic or psychographic groups, and whether certain destinations may naturally lend themselves more effectively to one branding approach over another. The remainder of this report examines those nuances, seeking to identify patterns, exceptions, and strategic opportunities hidden within the broader trend.

4.2.2. Overall Destination Brand Preferences by Age Group
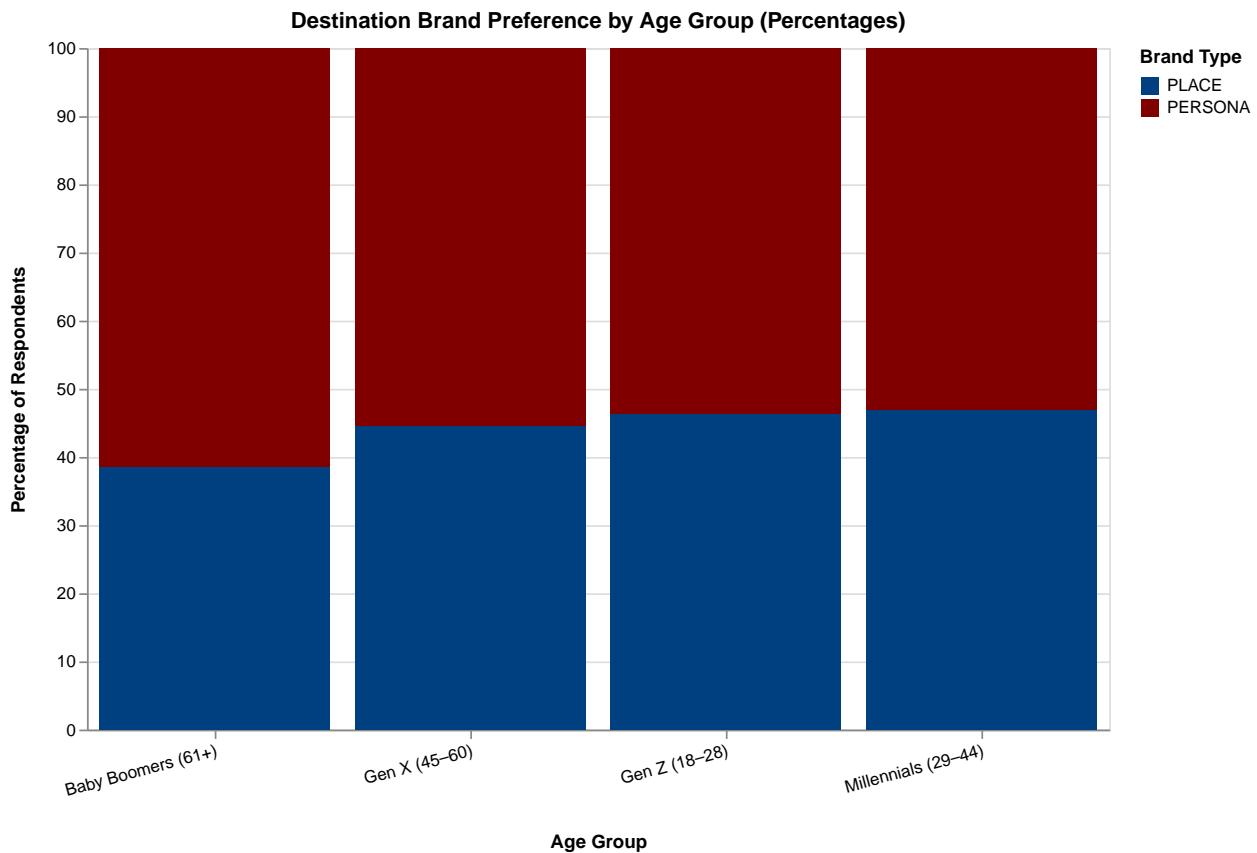
Figure 16. Destination Brand Preference by Age Group

Among Baby Boomers, there was a **modest preference for persona-based destination brands**, with 61.44% favoring persona over 38.56% for place-based branding. While this leans in favor of experience-driven messaging, the margin is not overwhelmingly strong. In fact, the relatively **narrow range of responses within this age group suggests a more nuanced or divided perspective**. This evenness raises important questions: Are certain types of persona brands more resonant than others? Do previous travel experiences, brand familiarity, or skepticism toward marketing play a role? The close split highlights the need for **further examination into what drives brand resonance for older travelers**, and whether this group may require more tailored messaging strategies to generate stronger alignment.

4.2.3. Overall Destination Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

Destination Brand Preference by Travel Frequency (Percentages)
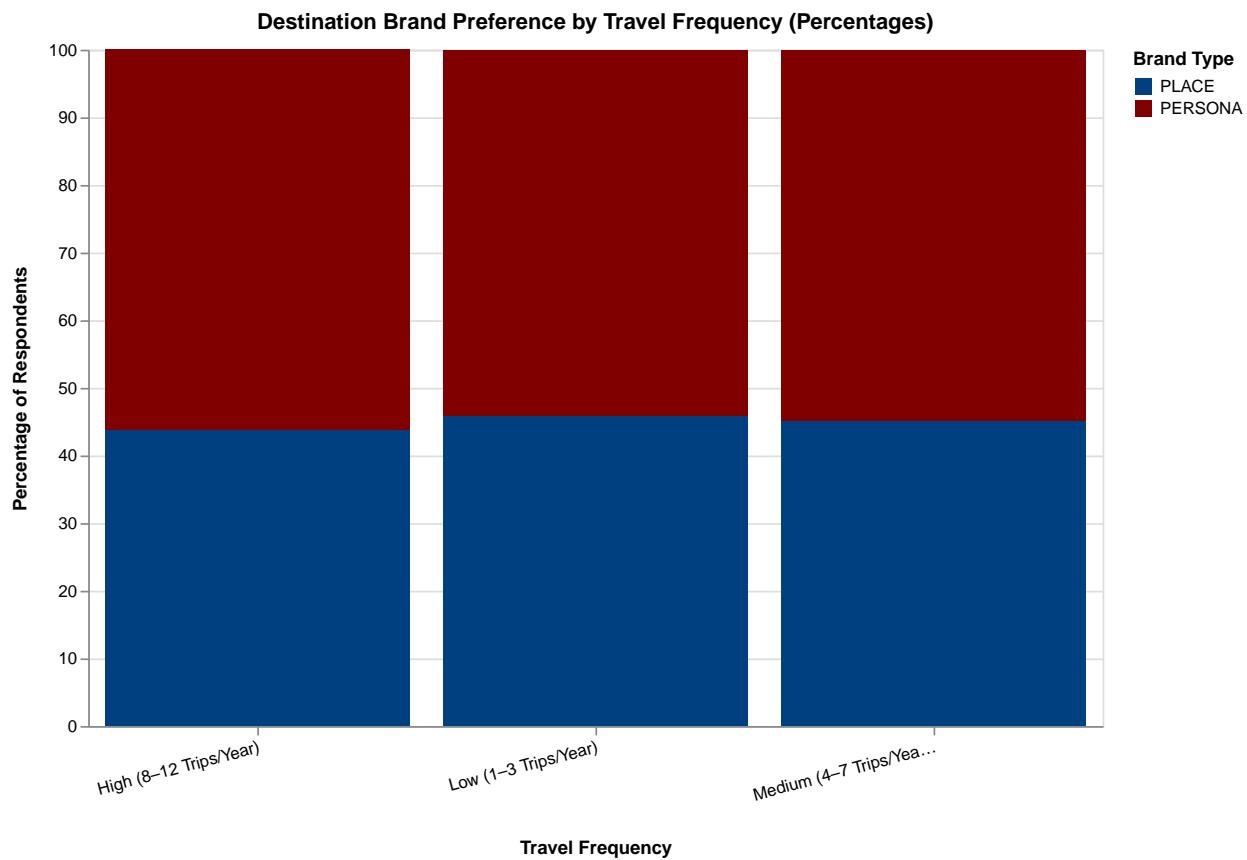
Figure 17. Destination Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

Across trip frequency cohorts, the data reveals a **remarkably narrow range of responses**, with only a **thin majority favoring persona-based destination brands** regardless of how often respondents traveled. Even among high-frequency travelers—those likely most familiar with a wide variety of destinations—the preference for persona brands only modestly surpassed place-based alternatives. This consistency suggests that **frequency of travel alone is not a strong predictor of brand preference style**. Familiarity with travel may influence expectations, but it doesn't automatically translate into a clear-cut inclination toward either experiential or location-focused branding. Instead, this points to **a more complex set of factors**—perhaps emotional resonance, destination fit, or message clarity—that ultimately shape brand preference, even for seasoned travelers.

4.2.4. Overall Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factors
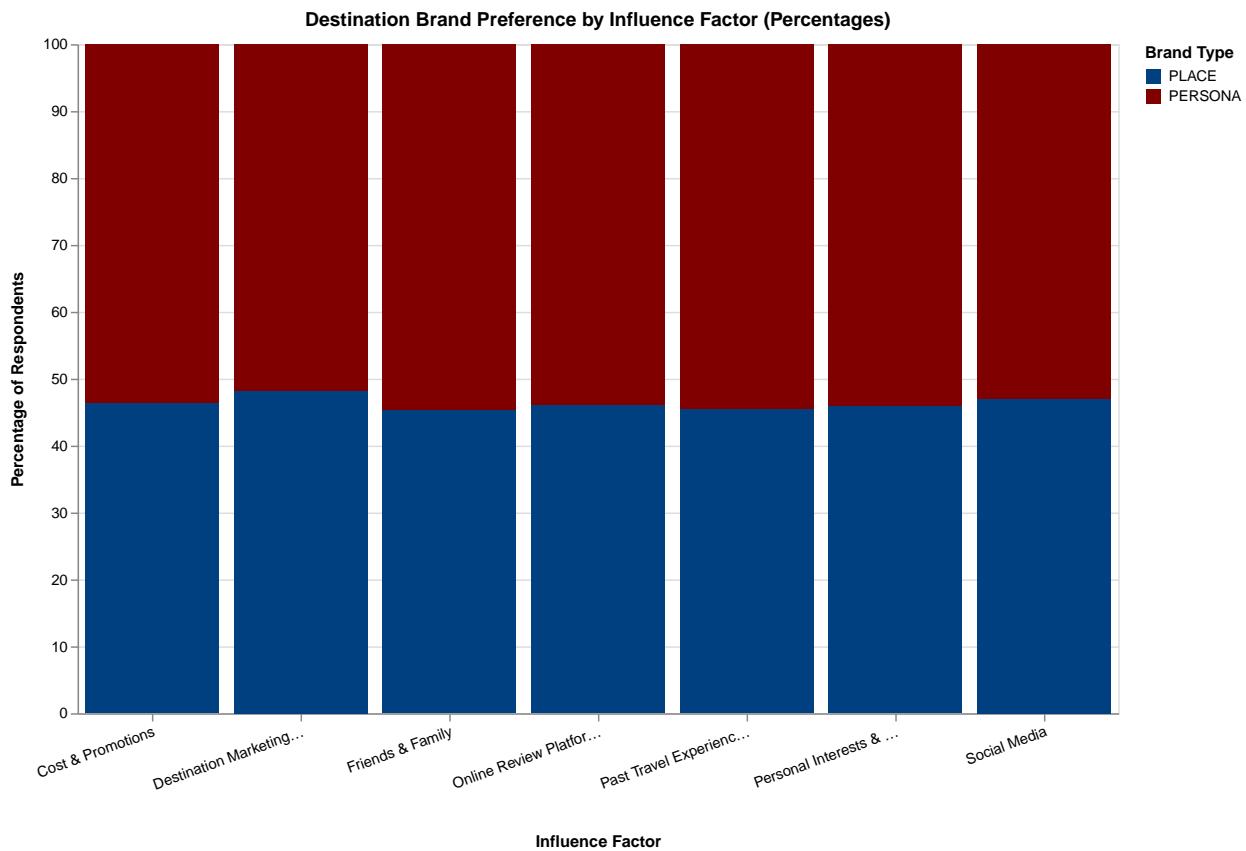
Figure 18. Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor

While it is impressive that the slight majority preference for persona-based destination brands holds consistently across all travel influence factors, one surprising finding stands out: **respondents who selected personal interests and hobbies as a primary influence** for why they travel did **not** show a significantly higher preference for persona branding. Given that persona brands are designed to evoke emotional and experiential connections—often aligned with one's interests—**one might expect this group to overwhelmingly favor that approach**.

Instead, their responses remained in line with the overall sample, suggesting that even among those most driven by personal passion, **additional factors—such as familiarity, credibility, or perceived authenticity—may play a decisive role** in determining what kind of branding resonates. This reinforces the idea that **no single factor alone** dictates a traveler's preference, and destination marketers must account for a broader matrix of emotional, cognitive, and contextual cues.

4.2.5. Overall Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness
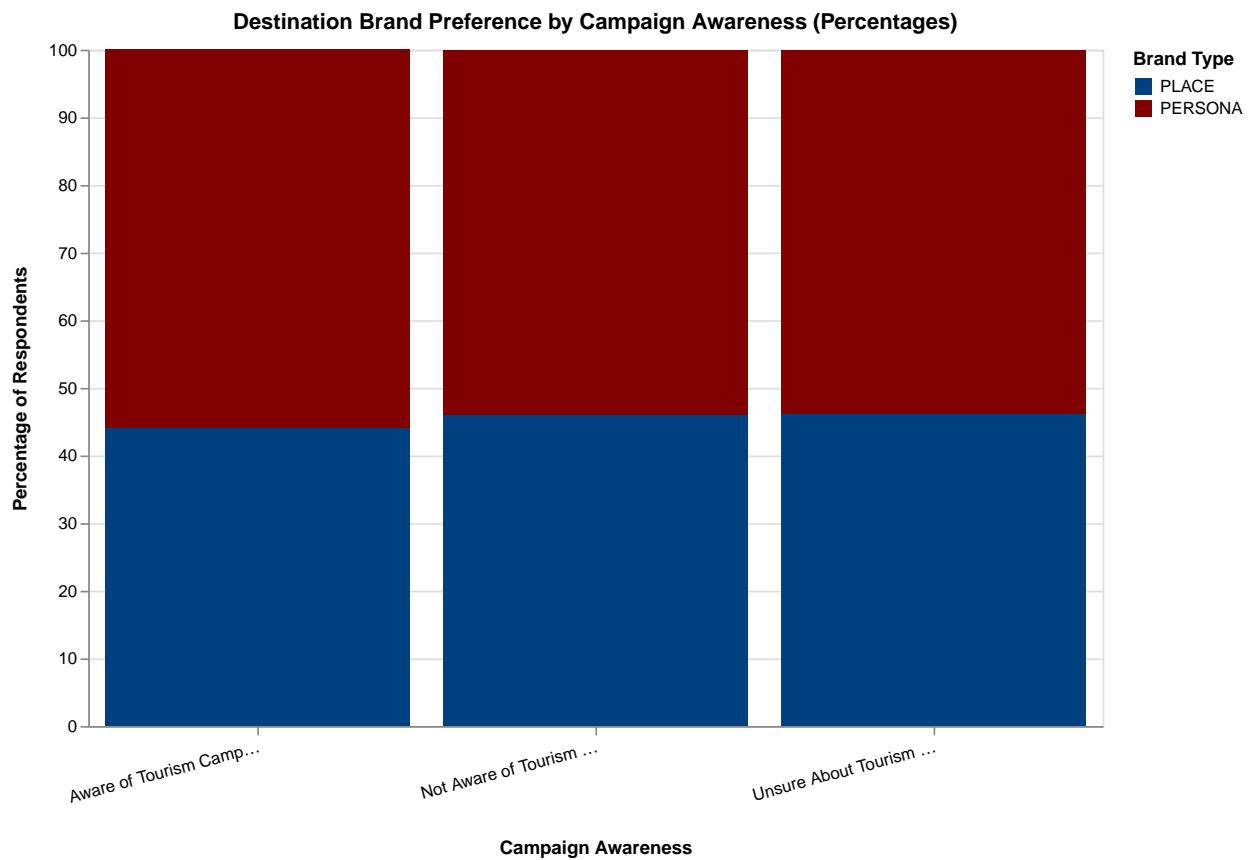
Figure 19. Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

Respondents who indicated that they were aware of tourism campaigns showed a slightly higher preference for persona-style destination brands compared to those who were unaware or unsure. However, the margin between persona and place brand preference remained narrow across all three groups. This consistency suggests that **awareness of tourism marketing alone is not a reliable predictor of branding preference**. Even when respondents are exposed to promotional campaigns, it doesn't necessarily sway them decisively toward either a place-based or persona-based brand. Instead, it reinforces the idea that **brand resonance depends on more than just exposure—it also relies on how well the brand narrative connects with the individual's expectations, imagination, or previous travel experiences**.

4.2.6. Overall Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type

Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Percentages)
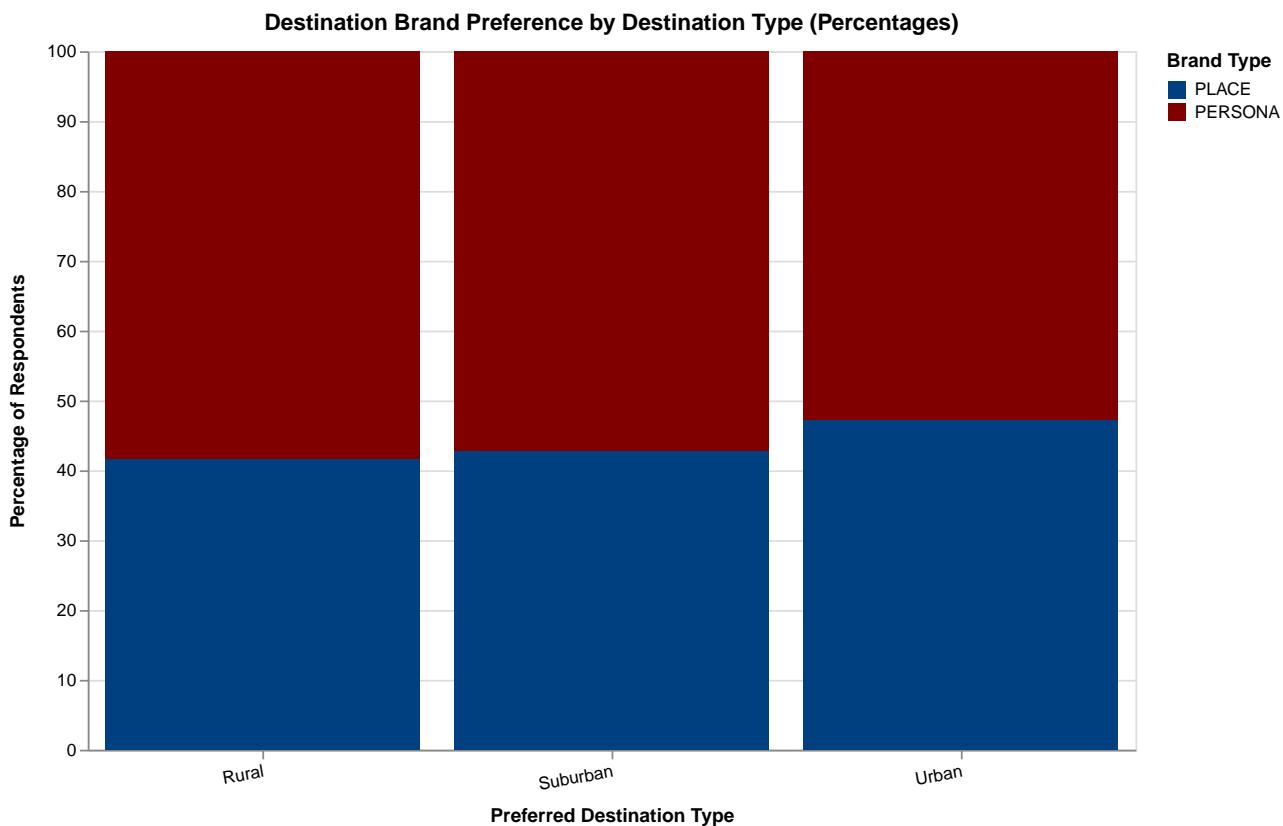
Figure 20. Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type

Respondents who preferred rural and suburban destinations demonstrated a modest increase in preference toward persona-based destination brands compared to those who favored urban destinations. While all three destination type segments showed relatively narrow margins between persona and place brand preferences, the slightly stronger lean toward persona branding among rural and suburban preference groups is telling. It suggests that **persona-style branding may offer a strategic advantage for destinations that don't have the instant recognition or built-in appeal of major cities**. By emphasizing the emotional experience or identity of a place—what it **feels** like to be there—rather than simply promoting the name of a town, persona branding can help rural and suburban destinations stand out in a crowded tourism market and attract visitors seeking a more specific kind of atmosphere or retreat.

4.2.7. Key Findings Based on Overall Destination Brand Preference Data

The overall data reveals a consistent, though narrow, margin of preference in favor of persona-based destination brands across nearly every segment analyzed. While the divide between persona and place branding is not dramatic, the slight majority leaning toward experience-driven branding suggests a meaningful—if modest—advantage over traditional "Visit [Place]"-style campaigns. These findings imply that **persona branding has the potential to more effectively capture traveler interest**, particularly when it evokes emotional resonance or paints a vivid image of the visitor experience.

Rural and suburban destinations, in particular, appear well-positioned to benefit from this approach. The data also highlights **targeted opportunities to optimize persona strategies** for specific segments, including Baby Boomers, high-frequency travelers, and those who are more actively engaged with destination branding—audiences that, while nuanced in their preferences, may be more responsive to compelling narrative and identity-driven messaging.

4.3. Destination Brand Preference Details by Location

To better understand how brand style interacts with the character of a destination, this section breaks down place vs. persona brand preference across a variety of specific location examples. Respondents were asked to compare two branding approaches for each destination: one using a traditional verb + place name format (e.g., Visit Springfield), representing place-based branding, and another using an adjective + noun format (e.g., Whispering Pines), representing persona-based branding. By using multiple locations as test subjects, the goal was to explore how the effectiveness of each branding strategy may shift depending on the unique features, familiarity, or emotional tone associated with the destination itself.

To balance potential perception bias in the value of each brand, every destination pairing included complementary taglines: the **place-based** brand (e.g., **Visit Springfield**) featured a tagline that highlighted persona-style interests, while the **persona-based** brand (e.g., **Whispering Pines**) included a tagline that clearly identified the geographic location it represented.

4.3.1. Springfield, Missouri

Springfield, Missouri was selected as a test subject in this study because of its symbolic ordinariness. With dozens of cities named Springfield across the United States, it represents the quintessential, unremarkable American town—making it an ideal candidate for testing how branding can help a destination stand out. The intent was to simulate the challenge faced by a perfectly average city attempting to launch a tourism campaign and pierce through the veil of public indifference. To reinforce this theme of familiarity and convention, the verb **"Visit"**—the most commonly used verb in tourism branding—was paired with Springfield to create the place-based option.

Respondents were shown two branding approaches for Springfield:

- The **place-based brand**: Visit Springfield – A Peaceful, Tree-Lined Escape
- The **persona-based brand**: Whispering Pines – A Retreat in the Heart of Missouri

Each pairing was designed to test not just brand style, but also how subtle emotional framing influences perception, even for a destination that might otherwise be overlooked.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Springfield, MO)	330	36.38%	577	63.62%	907
Generation: BOOM	22	32.84%	45	67.16%	67
Generation: GENX	70	31.67%	151	68.33%	221

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Generation: GENY	157	36.77%	270	63.23%	427
Generation: GENZ	81	42.19%	111	57.81%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	248	36.52%	431	63.48%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	67	34.72%	126	65.28%	193
Trip Frequency: High	15	42.86%	20	57.14%	35
Influenced by Friends and Family	216	35.47%	393	64.53%	609
Influenced by Social Media	108	40.15%	161	59.85%	269
Influenced by Destination Marketing Campaigns	48	40.68%	70	59.32%	118
Influenced by Online Review Platforms	143	36.67%	247	63.33%	390
Influenced by Cost and Promotions	224	39.86%	338	60.14%	562
Influenced by Personal Interests and Hobbies	278	37.52%	463	62.48%	741
Influenced by Past Travel Experiences	194	35.86%	347	64.14%	541
Campaign Awareness: YES	73	36.32%	128	63.68%	201

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Campaign Awareness: NO	218	36.89%	373	63.11%	591
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	39	33.91%	76	66.09%	115
Prefer Urban Destinations	238	38.57%	379	61.43%	617
Prefer Suburban Destinations	53	33.97%	103	66.03%	156
Prefer Rural Destinations	39	29.1%	95	70.9%	134

Overall Destination Brand Preference (Springfield, MO)
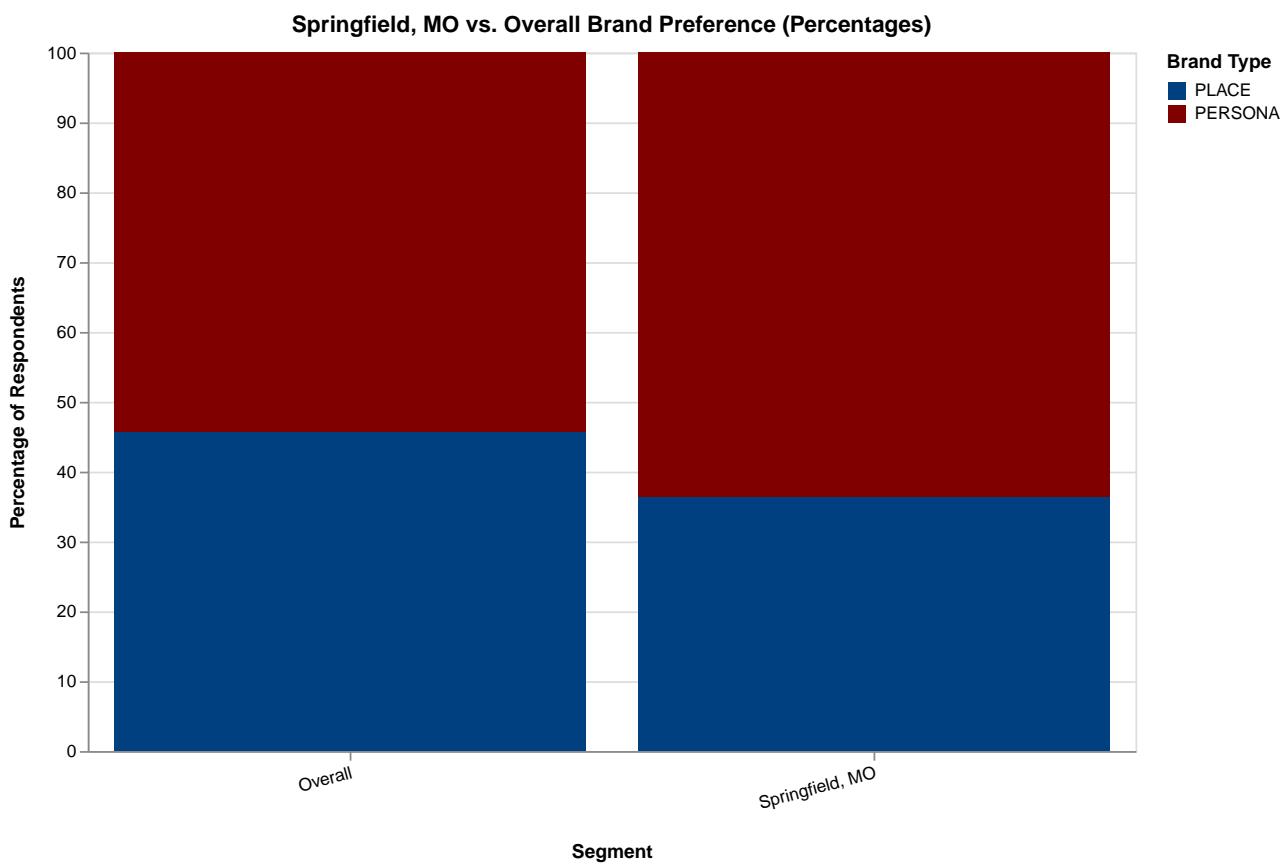
Figure 21. Springfield, MO vs. Overall Brand Preference

The Springfield, MO test market revealed nearly a 10% higher favorability toward the persona-based brand compared to the overall persona preference rate—63.62% in Springfield versus 54.34% overall. This striking increase reinforces the potential of persona-based destination branding, especially for communities with ordinary, generic, or less memorable names. By crafting a

compelling emotional narrative that focuses on the kind of experience a traveler might have rather than relying on name recognition alone, destinations like Springfield can more effectively capture interest and inspire visits despite lacking built-in name appeal.

Destination Brand Preferences by Age Group (Springfield, MO)
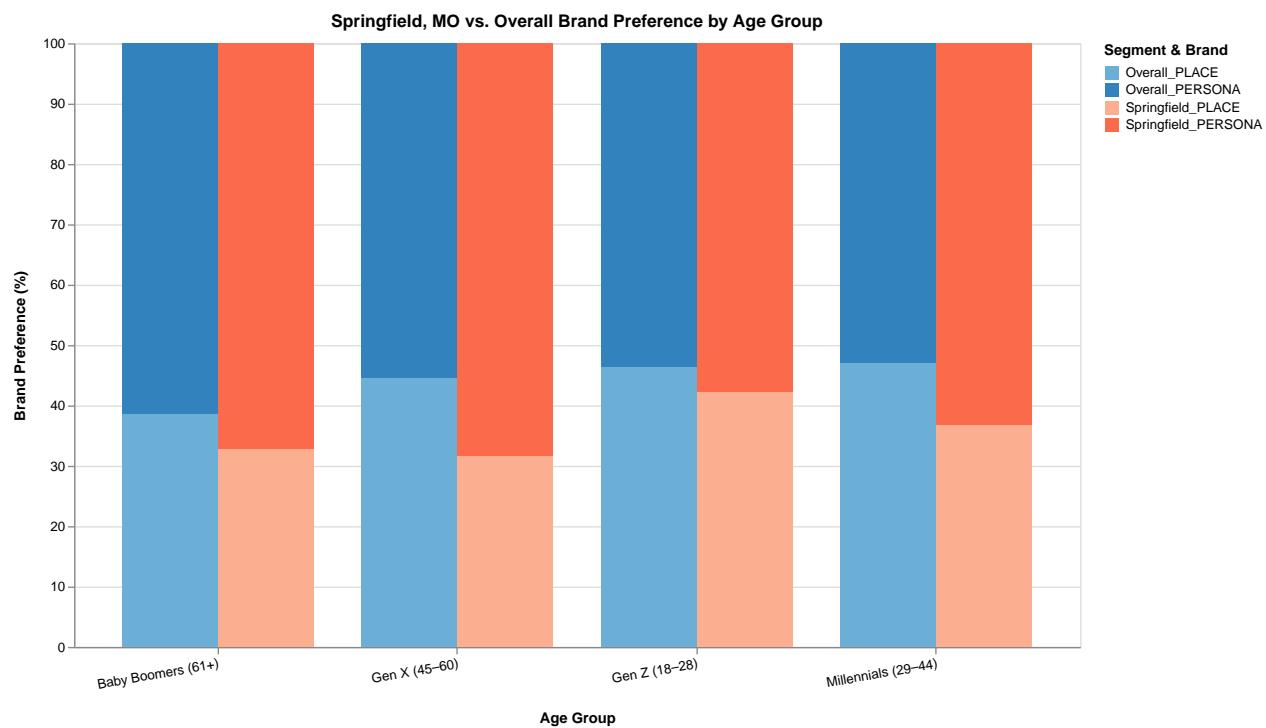
Figure 22. Springfield, MO vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

The across-the-board increase in persona brand preference within the Springfield, MO test market was both expected and consistent with the uplift observed in the overall Springfield results compared to the full dataset. Notably, Generation X respondents in the Springfield group showed a higher proportion favoring the persona brand over the place-based brand, while Baby Boomers responded with the highest share of persona preference when considering the entire study. Because Gen X had a significantly larger sample size than the Baby Boomer cohort, this helps dispel earlier assumptions that the strong Boomer preference for persona branding might have been a fluke of smaller sample representation. Instead, the pattern suggests that persona-based destination branding can resonate meaningfully across older demographics, especially when reinforced by a solid narrative fit.

Destination Brand Preferences by Travel Frequency (Springfield, MO)
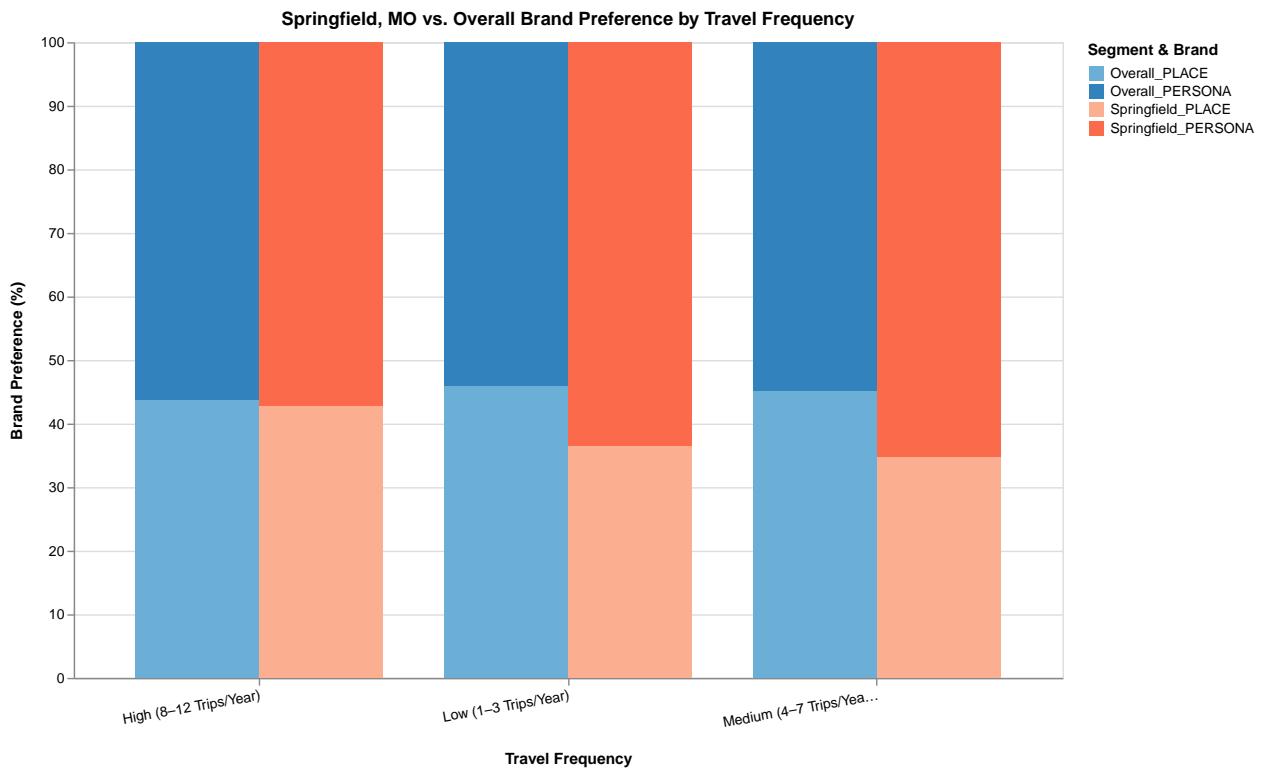
Figure 23. Springfield, MO vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

The trend of increased persona brand favorability in the Springfield, MO test market continues across all travel frequency cohorts, reinforcing the broader pattern seen in the overall results. However, one modest anomaly stands out: high-frequency travelers in the Springfield group reported nearly identical persona brand preference levels as those in the overall study, while both low- and medium-frequency travelers showed noticeably higher persona favorability in the Springfield example. This could be attributed to the significantly smaller sample size of high-frequency travelers, which may limit the representativeness of the data. Additionally, it's plausible that high-frequency travelers—due to their extensive destination knowledge and accumulated travel experiences—rely less on aspirational branding and more on tangible memories or expectations when evaluating destinations.

Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factors (Springfield, MO)
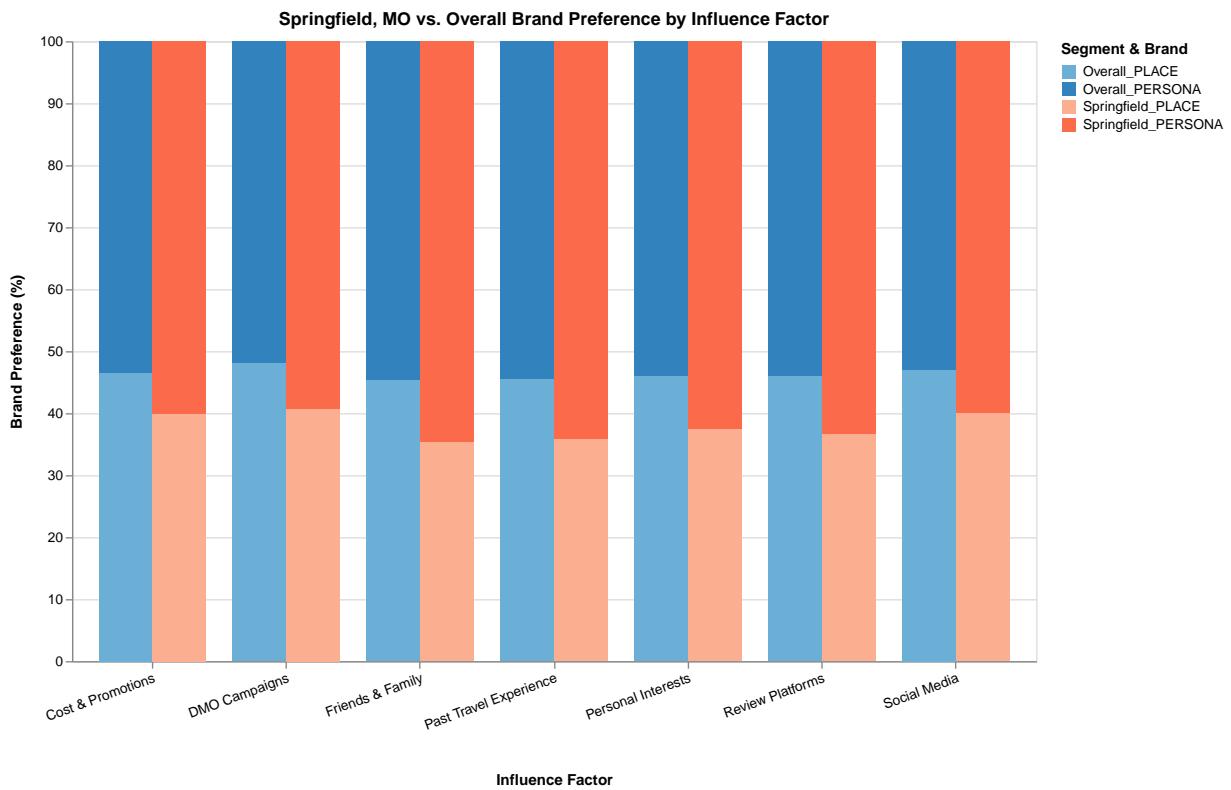
Figure 24. Springfield, MO vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

While the Springfield data continued to show across-the-board increases in persona brand preference across all travel influence factors, a similar trend persisted when compared to the overall study: the differences in persona preference between each influence factor group remained relatively narrow and consistent. This reinforces the idea that no single influence factor—whether it's personal interests, social media, cost, or past experiences—is a strong predictor of whether a traveler will ultimately favor a persona-style brand or a traditional place-based one. Instead, the consistency across these segments suggests that persona branding has broad, general appeal, but that the decision to prefer one brand type over another is likely shaped by a combination of personal context, destination resonance, and emotional response rather than any single influence channel.

Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Springfield, MO)
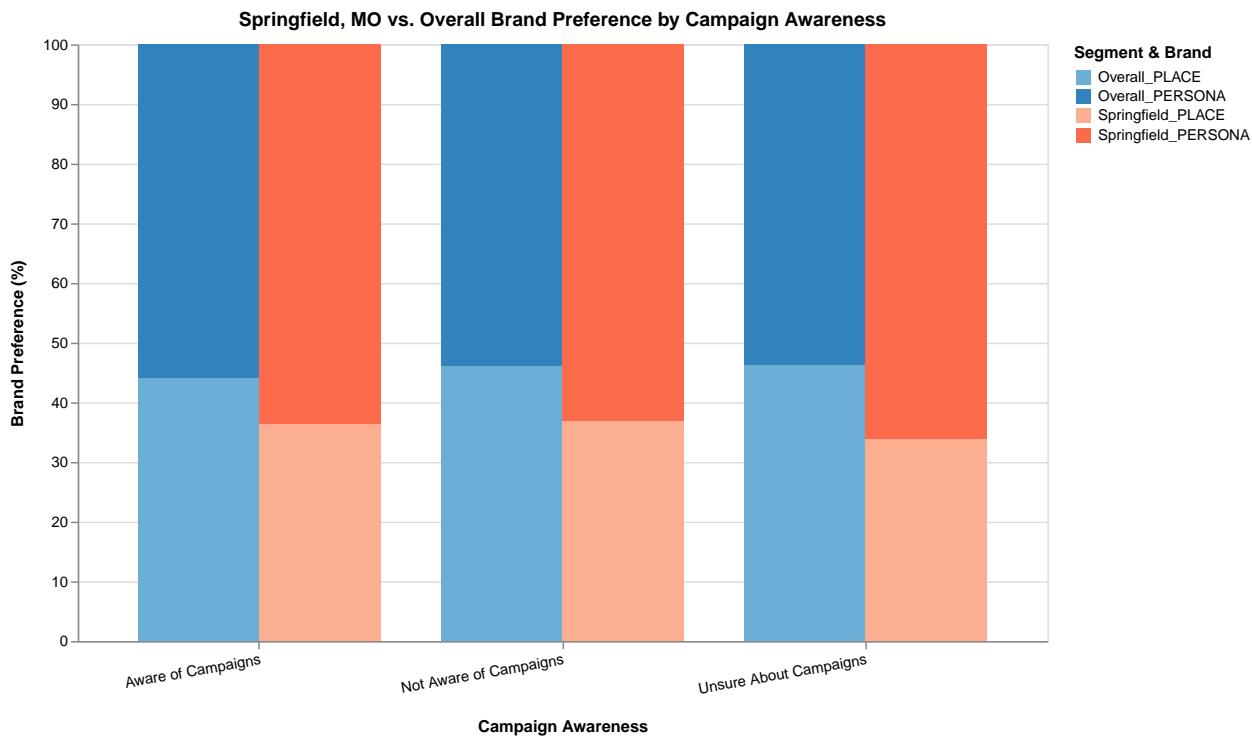
Figure 25. Springfield, MO vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

The increase in persona brand preference across all campaign awareness groups in the Springfield segment continues the overall trend of elevated persona favorability seen throughout the test market. Much like the broader study, the margins of difference between respondents who were aware, unaware, or unsure about tourism campaigns remained relatively narrow. This suggests that while campaign awareness may slightly enhance receptiveness to persona-based branding, it is not a strong standalone predictor of brand preference. The consistent uplift across all awareness levels reinforces the idea that the persona brand resonated broadly with Springfield respondents, regardless of their prior exposure to tourism marketing.

Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Springfield, MO)
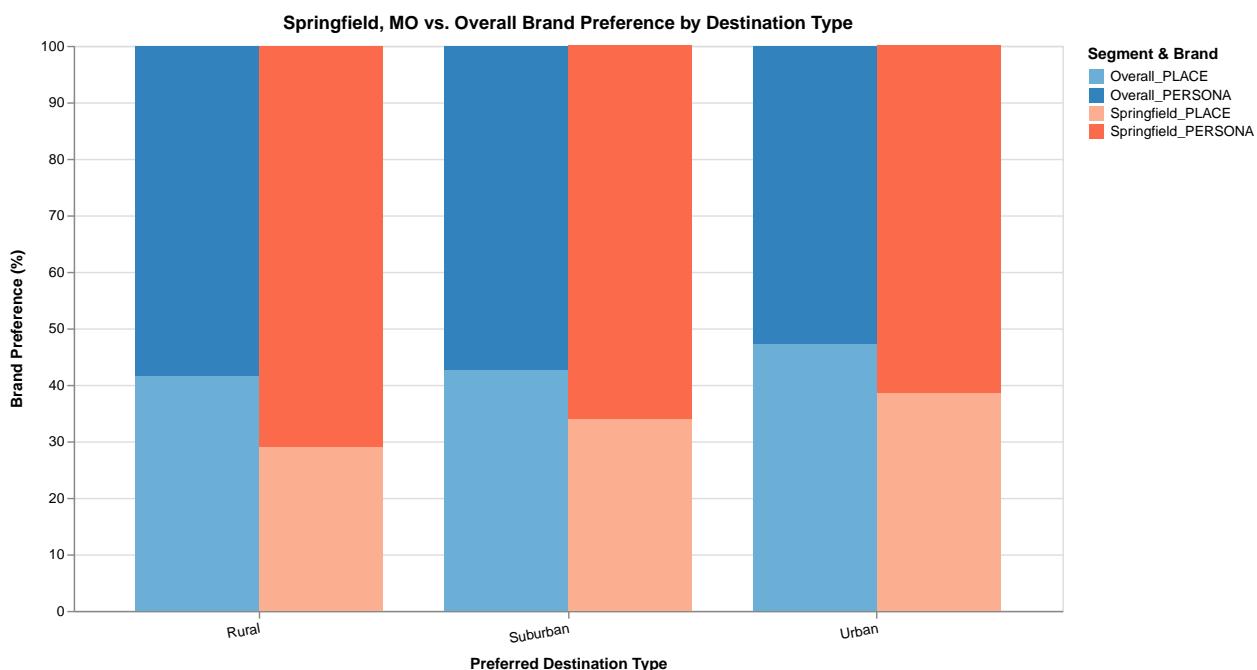
Figure 26. Springfield, MO vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

Persona brand preference for Springfield continued to show elevated levels across all destination type preference cohorts when compared to the overall study results. Consistent with the broader findings, Springfield respondents demonstrated a progressively increasing preference for the persona brand when moving from urban to suburban to rural destination types. This pattern further reinforces the idea that individuals who prefer rural and suburban destinations are more responsive to destination brands that evoke emotion, lifestyle, and activities rather than relying solely on the name or geographic identity of a place. The fact that this trend held true even in a test market like Springfield suggests that persona branding may be particularly effective for destinations aiming to attract travelers who seek a sense of belonging or imaginative experience.

Key Findings: Springfield, Missouri and the Power of Persona Branding

Here are several key takeaways from the Springfield, MO test market that offer new insights beyond those highlighted in the overall study results, especially for destinations with ordinary or generic place names:

Persona Branding Performs Especially Well for Generic Place Names

Springfield's nearly 10% higher favorability toward the persona-based brand compared to the overall study suggests that persona branding is particularly effective for destinations with common or forgettable names. For cities like Springfield—of which there are many across the U.S.—a name alone may not be sufficient to generate interest. However, a compelling persona-based identity like *Whispering Pines* helps reframe the destination in the mind of the traveler, transforming familiarity into intrigue.

High Persona Preference Across Demographics Validates Broad Appeal

The consistent uplift in persona brand preference across age groups in Springfield—especially among Gen X and Baby Boomers—shows that this branding strategy isn't just appealing to younger audiences. Despite Baby Boomers having the highest share of persona preference in the full study, Gen X respondents in Springfield showed the most significant shift in brand favorability, reinforcing that emotional or lifestyle-driven branding resonates strongly across generational lines.

Low and Medium Travel Frequency Groups Responded Most Strongly

While all travel frequency groups in Springfield leaned toward the persona brand, the most significant increases came from low and medium-frequency travelers. This may indicate that these groups are more receptive to aspirational branding when deciding where to travel, whereas high-frequency travelers, with more experience and destination familiarity, may rely on practical factors or existing knowledge when evaluating a place.

Emotional Framing Overrides Influence Channel Differences

In Springfield, persona brand preference rose across all travel influence factors—social media, word of mouth, cost, interests, and past travel experience—mirroring the overall study's pattern of narrow variation between these groups. This suggests that **how a destination is framed emotionally may matter more than how a person heard about it**, making persona branding a versatile strategy that transcends the influence channel.

Suburban and Rural Audiences Show Strongest Persona Alignment

Respondents who preferred rural or suburban destinations showed the highest gains in persona brand preference in the Springfield test. This supports the idea that persona branding—by focusing on emotional appeal, imagined lifestyle, or thematic identity—offers a competitive edge to places that lack iconic landmarks or global recognition. It helps them be remembered not for where they are, but for how they feel.

These insights offer actionable value for destination marketers working with average or under-the-radar towns: a strong persona-based brand can shift perception, engage wider audiences, and elevate even the most ordinary-sounding places into aspirational experiences.

4.3.2. Roanoke, Virginia

Roanoke, Virginia was selected as a test subject in this study because it typifies a vaguely southern or mid-Atlantic destination—geographically recognizable yet not overly distinct in national travel consciousness. Its selection allowed researchers to evaluate how persona-style destination branding performs against more traditional branding approaches in a region where tourism messaging often relies on commonly used travel verbs like **Explore**, **Discover**, or **Visit**. In Roanoke's case, **Explore Roanoke** represents a familiar, action-oriented naming convention used by many destination marketing organizations.

To test brand resonance in this context, respondents were presented with two different branding treatments:

- The **place-based brand**: Explore Roanoke – A Mountain Escape Surrounded by Adventure
- The **persona-based brand**: Timber Ridge – An Outdoor Haven in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains

This pairing was designed not only to evaluate the stylistic impact of branding but also to understand whether travelers connect more deeply with emotionally evocative, narrative-rich names (like **Timber Ridge**) versus straightforward geographic identifiers (like **Roanoke**), even when both highlight similar natural assets and outdoor experiences.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Roanoke, VA)	408	44.98%	499	55.02%	907
Generation: BOOM	16	23.88%	51	76.12%	67
Generation: GENX	101	45.70%	120	54.30%	221
Generation: GENY	208	48.71%	219	51.29%	427

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Generation: GENZ	83	43.23%	109	56.77%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	306	45.07%	373	54.93%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	91	47.15%	102	52.85%	193
Trip Frequency: High	11	31.43%	24	68.57%	35
Influenced by Friends and Family	268	44.01%	341	55.99%	609
Influenced by Social Media	126	46.84%	143	53.16%	269
Influenced by Destination Marketing Campaigns	57	48.31%	61	51.69%	118
Influenced by Online Review Platforms	191	48.97%	199	51.03%	390
Influenced by Cost and Promotions	262	46.62%	300	53.38%	562
Influenced by Personal Interests and Hobbies	333	44.94%	408	55.06%	741
Influenced by Past Travel Experiences	236	43.62%	305	56.38%	541
Campaign Awareness: YES	93	46.27%	108	53.73%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	264	44.67%	327	55.33%	591

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	51	44.35%	64	55.65%	115
Prefer Urban Destinations	292	47.33%	325	52.67%	617
Prefer Suburban Destinations	62	39.74%	94	60.26%	156
Prefer Rural Destinations	54	40.30%	80	59.70%	134

Overall Destination Brand Preference (Roanoke, VA)
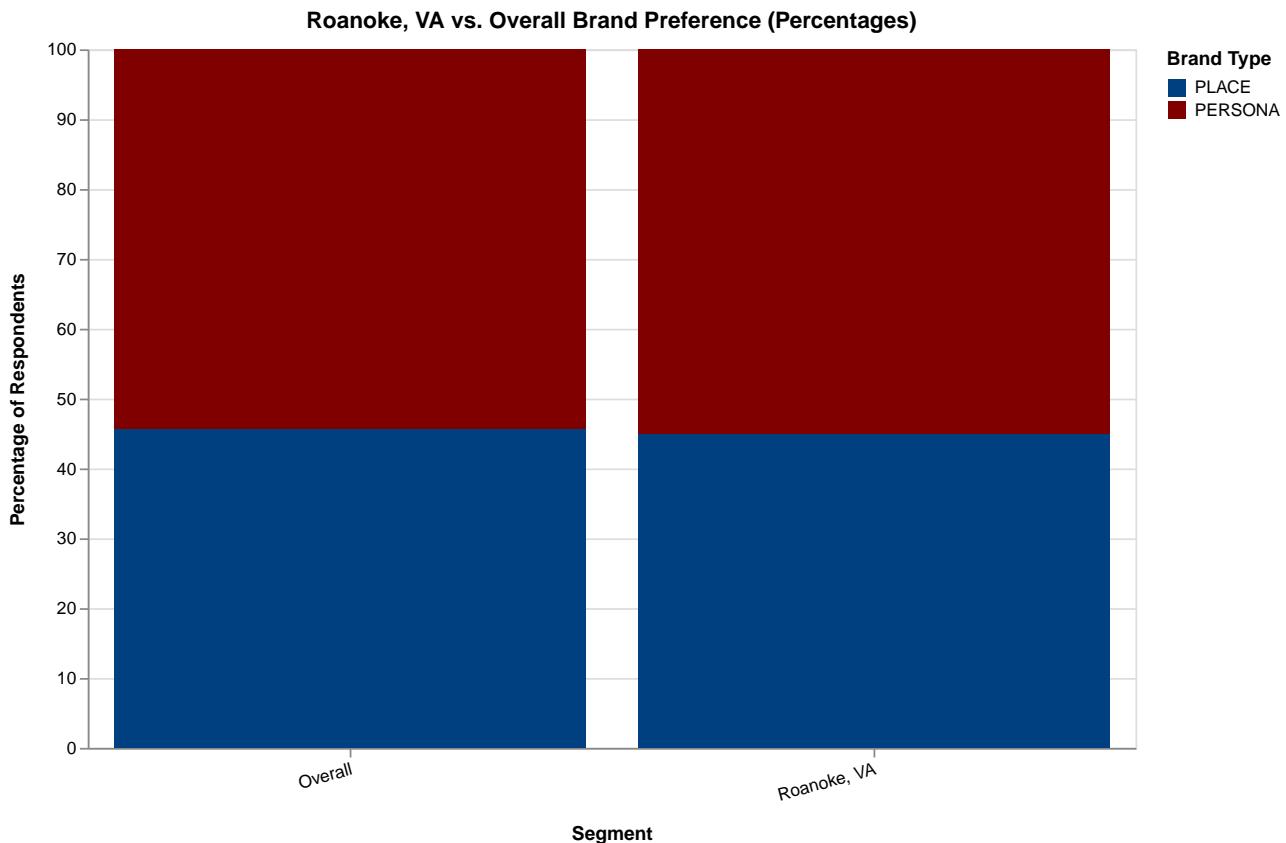
Figure 27. Roanoke, VA vs. Overall Brand Preference

The Roanoke, VA test market revealed a persona brand preference that was nearly identical to the overall study results, with less than a 1% difference between the two. In Roanoke, 55.02% of respondents favored the persona-based brand, compared to 54.34% in the overall sample. This minimal variance reinforces the consistency of persona-based brand appeal across diverse markets, while also continuing the trend of a modest but meaningful edge over place-based branding.

Despite Roanoke's stronger regional identity and more evocative geography than some other test markets, the persona-based approach still edged out the traditional place name, indicating that emotional resonance and thematic storytelling hold persuasive power even in locations that already benefit from recognizable natural assets.

**Destination Brand Preferences by Age Group (Roanoke, VA)**
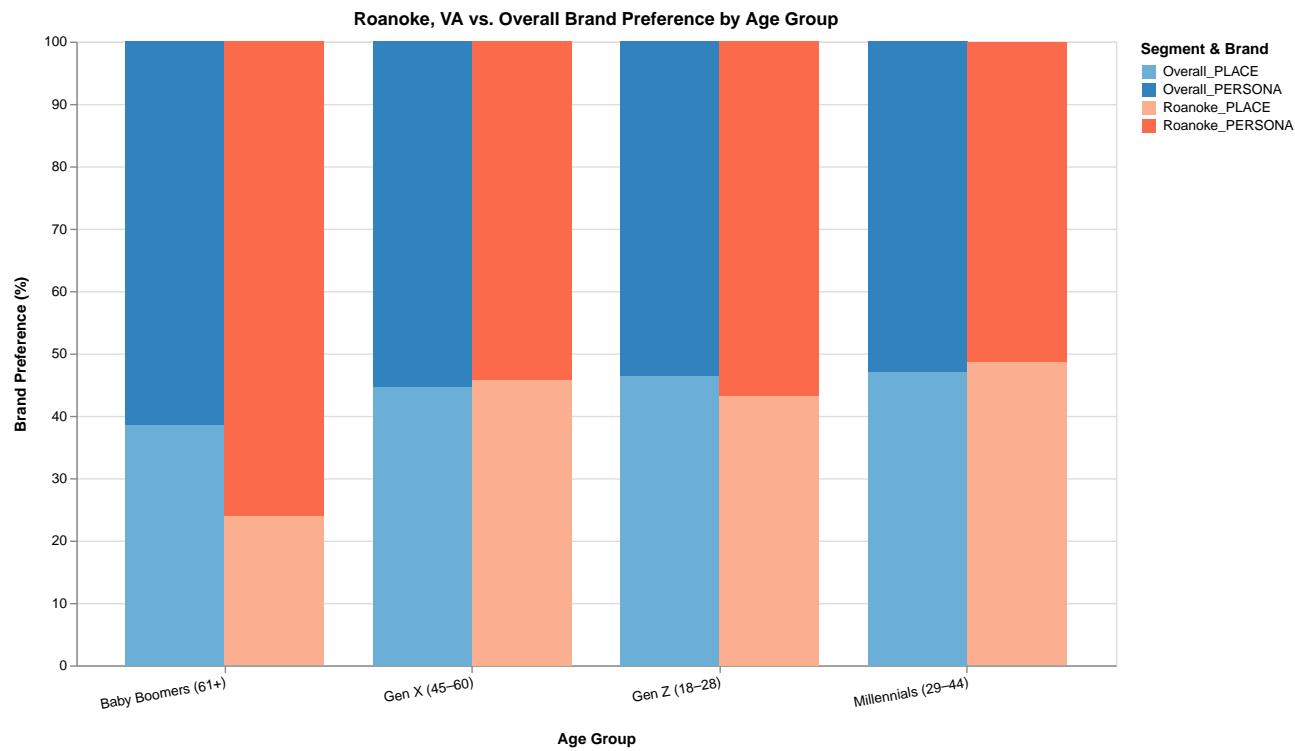
Figure 28. Roanoke, VA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

In the Roanoke, VA test market, Baby Boomers showed a significantly higher preference for the persona-based destination brand than in the overall study, with over three-quarters of respondents in that age group favoring the persona option. This stands in contrast to the Millennial and Gen X cohorts in Roanoke, who each reported slightly lower persona brand preference rates compared to the overall dataset.

This outcome is particularly interesting when compared to the Springfield, Missouri portion of the study, where Gen X exhibited the strongest lean toward persona branding. Together, these results suggest that generational responses to persona-based branding are not monolithic; instead, the effectiveness of a persona brand may vary depending on how well its emotional tone, lifestyle framing, or thematic identity aligns with the values and aspirations of each age group.

**Destination Brand Preferences by Travel Frequency (Roanoke, VA)**
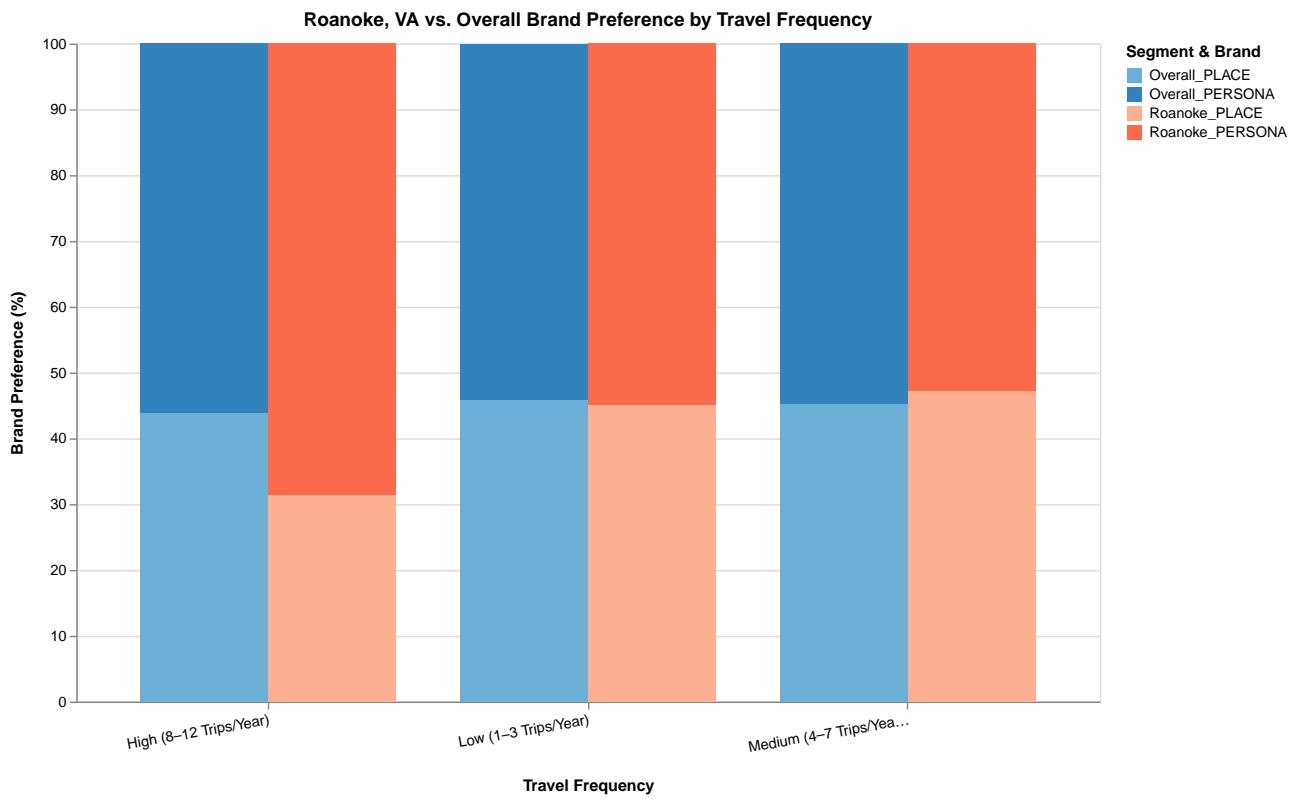
Figure 29. Roanoke, VA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

The Roanoke test market revealed a noticeably higher preference for the persona-based destination brand among high-frequency travelers, while medium- and low-frequency travelers showed virtually identical levels of persona preference to those in the overall study. This reinforces a pattern observed across the broader dataset, where high-frequency travelers exhibited a slightly stronger inclination toward persona branding.

However, as also seen in the Springfield, MO test, the degree of this preference shift isn't always substantial. These fluctuations suggest that while frequent travelers may be more responsive to emotionally framed, experience-driven branding, the impact can vary depending on how well the specific persona narrative resonates. In Roanoke's case, the "Timber Ridge" persona likely struck a stronger chord with high-frequency travelers by tapping into their familiarity with outdoor adventure and regional nuance.

Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factors (Roanoke, VA)
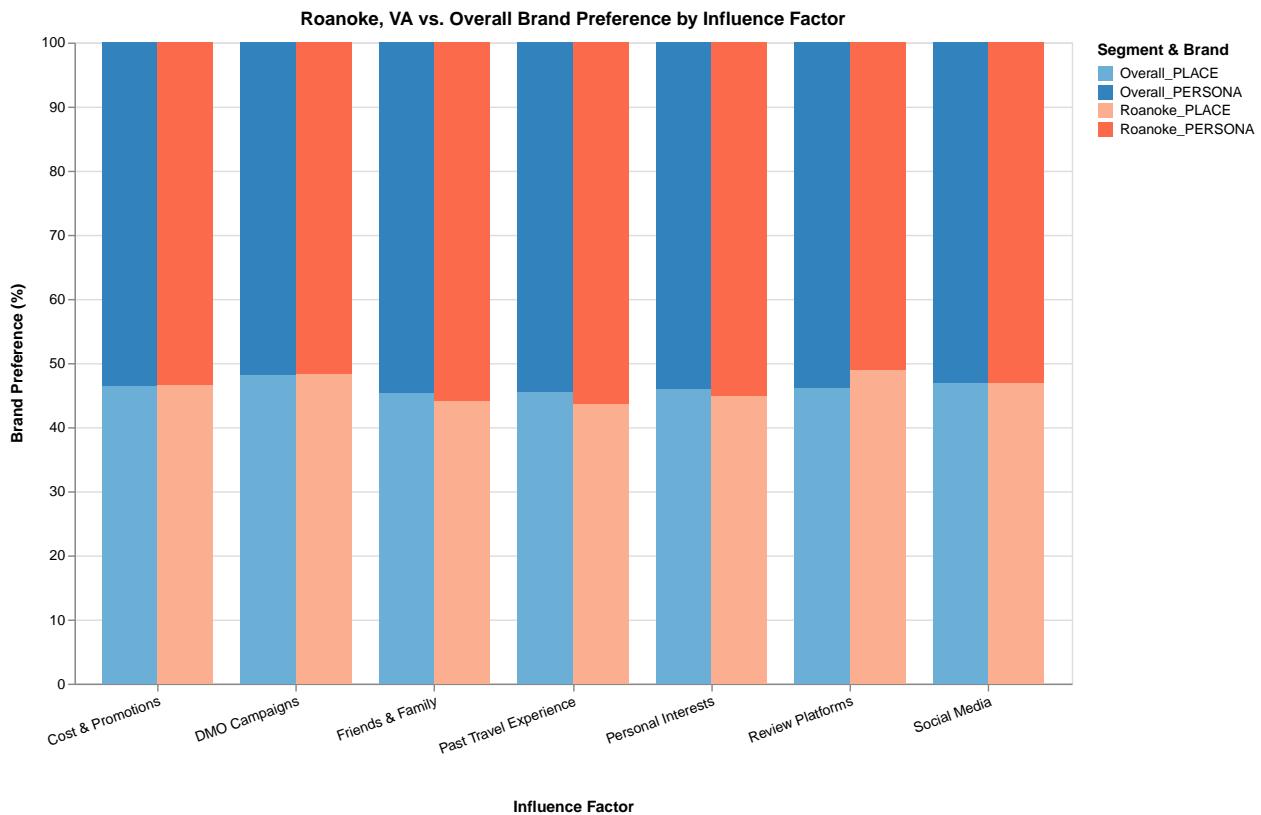
Figure 30. Roanoke, VA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

As with the overall study results and the Springfield, MO example, the Roanoke, VA test market further confirms that individual influence factors—such as friends and family, social media, destination marketing campaigns, or online reviews—do not appear to correlate meaningfully with a respondent's preference for persona versus place-based destination brands.

Across all influence categories, the Roanoke data showed only minimal variation in brand preference, mirroring the consistent distribution seen elsewhere in the study. This reinforces the conclusion that the source of travel inspiration does not significantly predict whether a person will gravitate toward a traditional geographic brand or an emotionally framed persona brand. Instead, the appeal of persona branding appears to operate independently of how or where a traveler first encounters a destination.

Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Roanoke, VA)
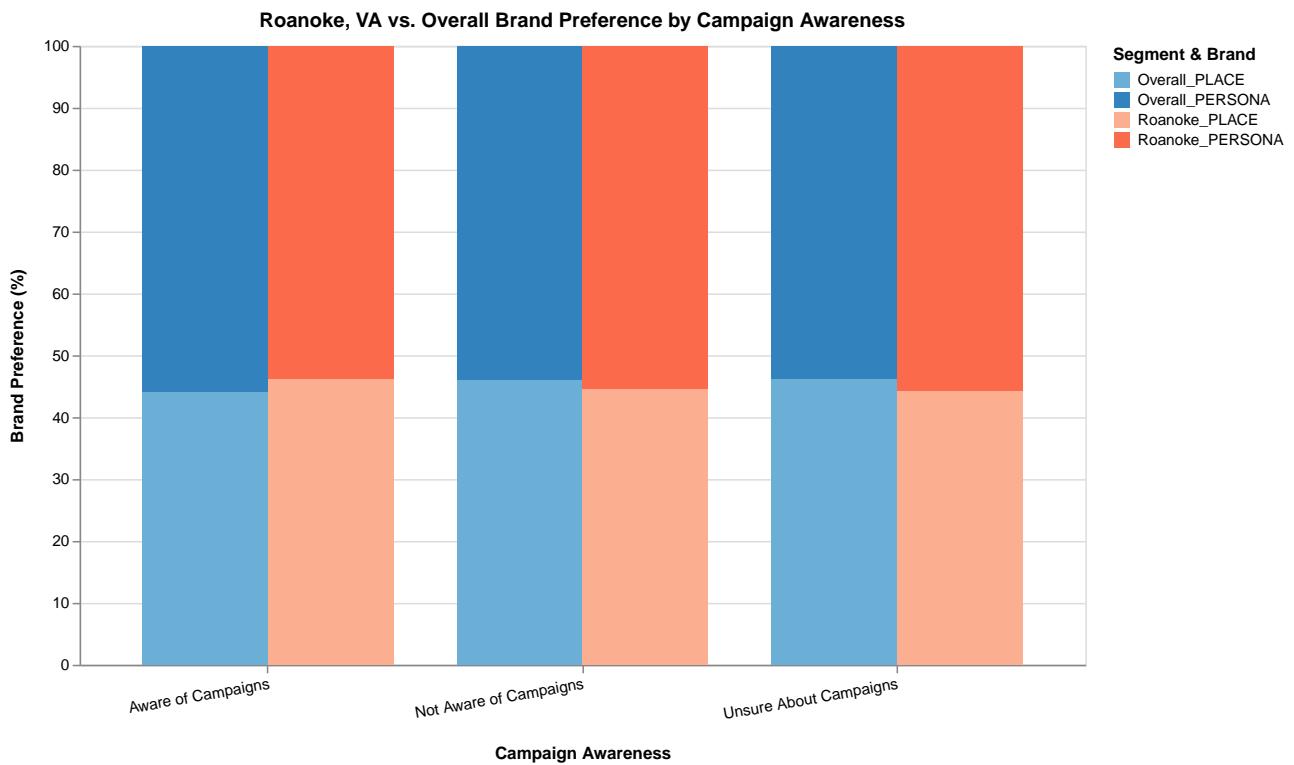
Figure 31. Roanoke, VA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

In the Roanoke, VA test market, destination brand preference remained nearly identical across all levels of campaign awareness, aligning closely with the results of the overall study. However, a unique aspect of the Roanoke responses was that individuals who indicated they were either unfamiliar with or unsure about tourism marketing campaigns showed a slightly higher preference for persona-based destination brands compared to those who reported being aware of such campaigns.

This finding is particularly noteworthy because it suggests that awareness of tourism marketing alone does not strongly influence the type of brand a person prefers. In fact, those outside the reach of conventional campaign messaging may be even more receptive to emotionally resonant persona brands, highlighting the importance of brand content and tone over exposure alone.

**Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Roanoke, VA)**
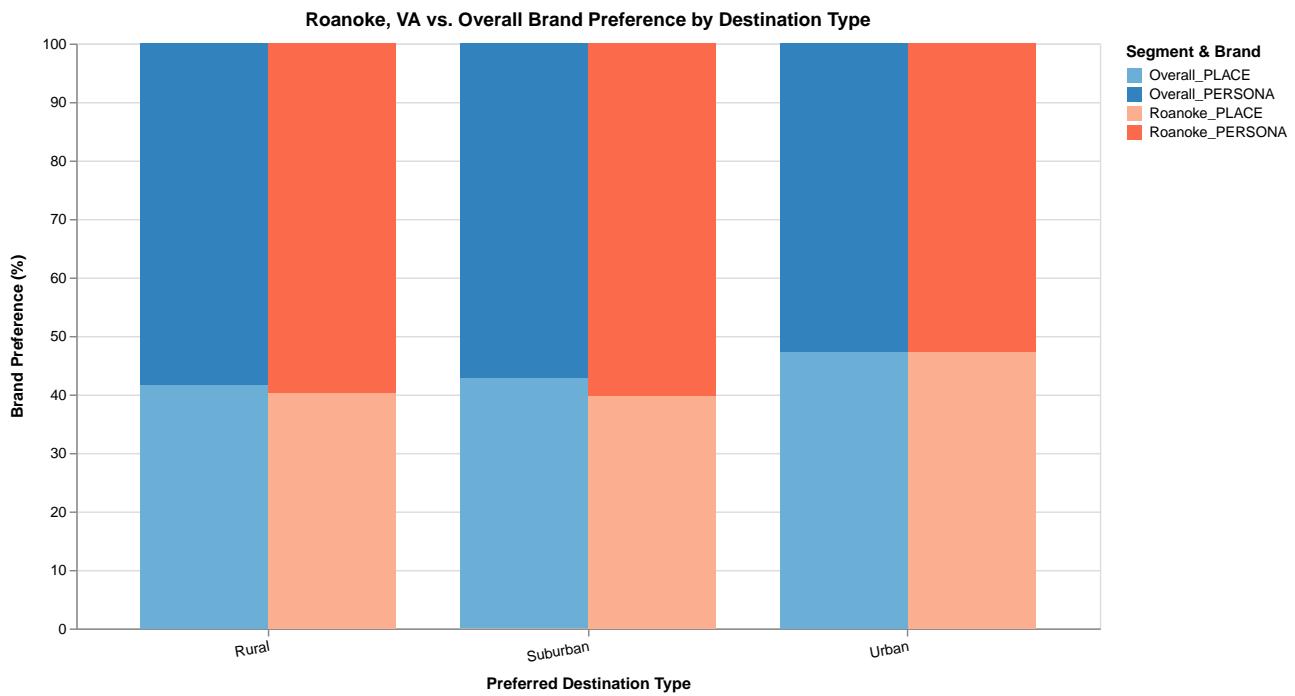
Figure 32. Roanoke, VA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

While respondents who preferred urban destinations showed identical persona vs. place brand preferences for Roanoke, VA as they did in the overall study, those who favored rural and suburban destinations leaned slightly more toward the persona brand in the Roanoke test market. This is particularly compelling given that Roanoke is a relatively urban destination.

The data suggests that travelers who typically gravitate toward rural and suburban settings have more finely tuned preferences when it comes to destination branding, showing stronger alignment with emotionally resonant, lifestyle-oriented persona brands. This insight presents an opportunity for urban destinations: by adopting persona-based branding strategies, they can more effectively appeal to traveler segments that traditionally prefer quieter, more bucolic settings—bridging the gap between setting and sentiment.

Key Findings: Roanoke, Virginia and Persona Brand Resonance

Here are key takeaways from the **Roanoke, VA** test market that offer distinct insights beyond those revealed in the overall study or the Springfield, MO example:

Strong Persona Preference Among Baby Boomers

Roanoke saw a strikingly high level of persona brand preference among Baby Boomers (76.12%), significantly above the overall average for this generation (61.44%). This contrasts with Millennials and Gen X, who actually showed slightly *lower* persona preference in Roanoke compared to the overall study. This suggests that different persona brand styles resonate differently with each generation—*Timber Ridge* may have evoked nostalgic or lifestyle imagery that connected more deeply with older travelers.

High-Frequency Travelers Responded More Strongly to Persona Branding

Unlike in Springfield, where low and medium-frequency travelers showed the biggest jumps, Roanoke's most frequent travelers had the *highest* relative boost in persona brand preference (68.57%). This reinforces a trend from the overall study suggesting that seasoned travelers may

gravitate more toward emotional, experience-driven branding—but only when the specific persona theme aligns well with their travel values.

Suburban and Rural Travelers Showed Increased Persona Preference for an Urban Destination

Although Roanoke is inherently more urban, respondents who preferred *suburban and rural* travel experiences leaned more heavily toward the persona brand in this test market. This suggests that persona branding can help urban destinations tap into emotional or lifestyle narratives that appeal to travelers who typically avoid cities—*reframing the destination in terms of atmosphere and activity rather than geography alone.*

Unfamiliarity with Campaigns May Actually Boost Persona Preference

In Roanoke, those who said they were *unaware or unsure* about tourism campaigns reported slightly higher persona brand preference than those who were aware. This implies that a lack of marketing exposure doesn't hinder receptiveness to persona branding—and may even enhance it. For marketers, this is a reminder that *brand style and narrative matter more than campaign awareness alone.*

Influence Channels Still Not Predictive of Brand Type Preference

As with the overall study and Springfield test, Roanoke's data confirms that a person's primary source of travel inspiration—whether social media, friends and family, or cost—does *not* predict whether they'll favor a place-based or persona-based brand. This reinforces the robustness of persona branding as a broadly resonant tool, effective *regardless of how people find destinations.*

Persona Branding Maintains a Slight but Consistent Edge in Regions with Familiar Natural Assets

Roanoke's persona brand preference was almost identical to the overall study average (55.02% vs. 54.34%), indicating that even in destinations with strong natural appeal and name recognition, persona branding can hold its own or slightly outperform traditional branding. This supports the broader notion that persona strategies aren't just useful for obscure towns—they're equally valuable in regions with well-known features that need emotional reframing.

These findings reinforce the adaptability and strategic versatility of persona-based branding—capable of engaging diverse audiences, even in places that aren't anonymous or geographically vague. For destinations looking to transcend literal geography and resonate with emotional desire, Roanoke's test results offer compelling evidence of success.

4.3.3. Athens, Georgia

Athens, Georgia was selected as a test subject in this study because it represents a quintessential college town—well known regionally but not necessarily distinguished on a national scale. With cities named Athens in multiple states, and with its strong identity tied to academia and culture, it serves as an ideal test case for evaluating how place-based versus persona-based branding performs when the core assets of a destination are intellectual, artistic, and institutional rather than natural or geographic. Like many tourism campaigns targeting similar towns, Athens's place-based brand used a common travel verb (**Discover Athens**) to highlight cultural richness and

academic life.

To assess brand resonance in this context, survey respondents were presented with two branding treatments:

- The **place-based brand**: Discover Athens – An Inspiring Town of Scholars and Culture
- The **persona-based brand**: Scholar Haven – A Thriving University Town in Georgia

This pairing was designed to evaluate not only the stylistic and emotional appeal of persona-based branding but also to explore how well narrative-driven identities—like **Scholar Haven**—connect with travelers when compared to more literal geographic labels like **Athens**, especially in destinations defined by education, creativity, and cultural vibrancy.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Athens, GA)	741	81.70%	166	18.30%	907
Generation: BOOM	53	79.10%	14	20.90%	67
Generation: GENX	174	78.73%	47	21.27%	221
Generation: GENY	358	83.84%	69	16.16%	427
Generation: GENZ	156	81.25%	36	18.75%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	559	82.33%	120	17.67%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	154	79.79%	39	20.21%	193
Trip Frequency: High	28	80.00%	7	20.00%	35
Influenced by Friends and Family	501	82.27%	108	17.73%	609
Influenced by Social Media	222	82.53%	47	17.47%	269

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Influenced by Destination Marketing Campaigns	98	83.05%	20	16.95%	118
Influenced by Online Review Platforms	327	83.85%	63	16.15%	390
Influenced by Cost and Promotions	468	83.27%	94	16.73%	562
Influenced by Personal Interests and Hobbies	619	83.54%	122	16.46%	741
Influenced by Past Travel Experiences	452	83.55%	89	16.45%	541
Campaign Awareness: YES	156	77.61%	45	22.39%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	485	82.06%	106	17.94%	591
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	100	86.96%	15	13.04%	115
Prefer Urban Destinations	518	83.95%	99	16.05%	617
Prefer Suburban Destinations	121	77.56%	35	22.44%	156
Prefer Rural Destinations	102	76.12%	32	23.88%	134

Overall Destination Brand Preference (Athens, GA)
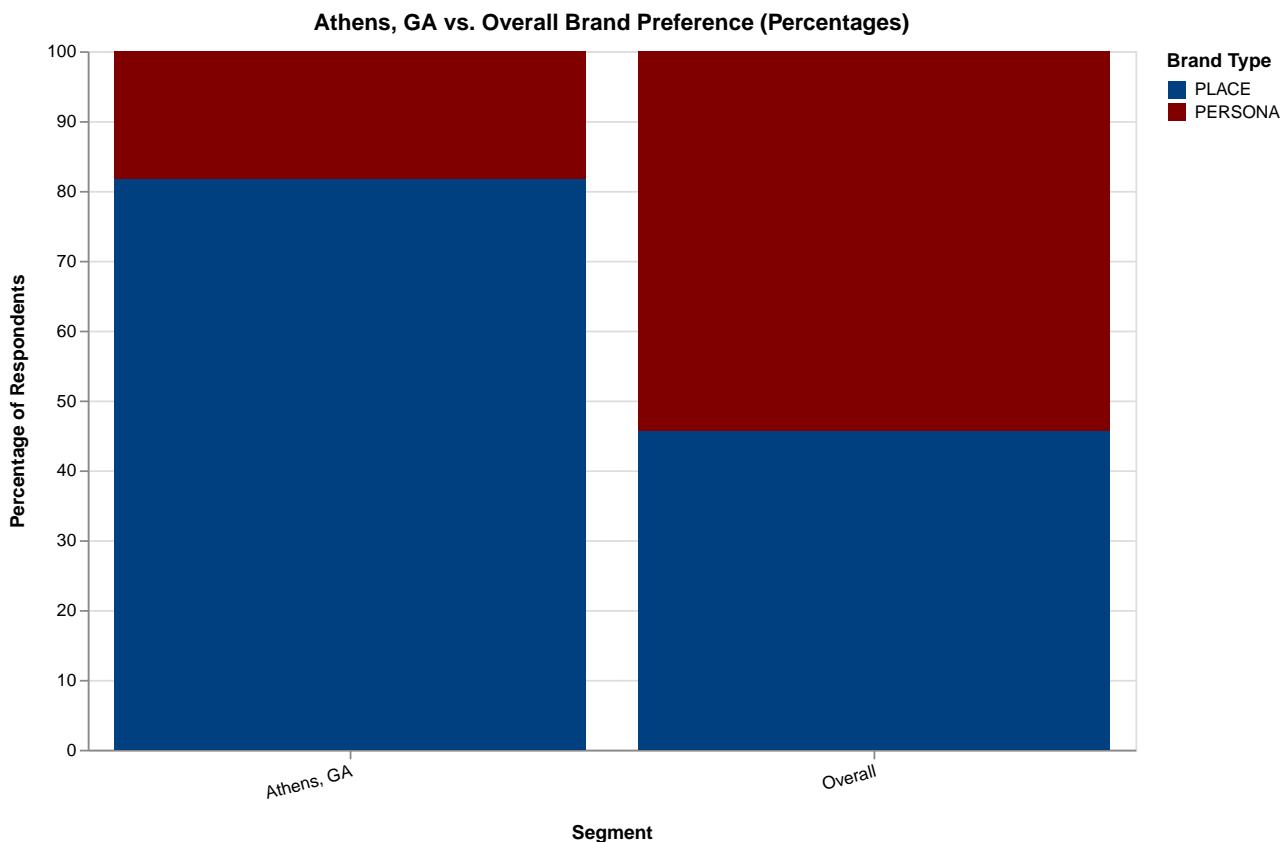
Figure 33. Athens, GA vs. Overall Brand Preference

In the Athens, GA test market, the place-based brand **Discover Athens** outperformed the persona-based alternative **Scholar Haven** by a wide margin. This result underscores that consumers do not prefer persona branding universally; rather, their preferences depend significantly on the **type** of persona being presented in comparison to the place brand. At face value, **Scholar Haven** may seem like a natural fit for a college town such as Athens, GA, evoking themes of intellectual vibrancy and academic charm. However, the data reveals that this approach may be too narrowly targeted for the broader travel audience.

While such branding could resonate with prospective students or academic affiliates, it fails to generate strong interest among general leisure travelers who are unlikely to be seeking a collegiate experience—especially at a university they do not personally identify with. The key takeaway from this test is that persona branding, while often effective, is not inherently superior. When the persona concept is too niche or exclusive, as it appears to be in this case, traditional place-based branding may offer broader appeal and stronger performance.

**Destination Brand Preferences by Age Group (Athens, GA)**
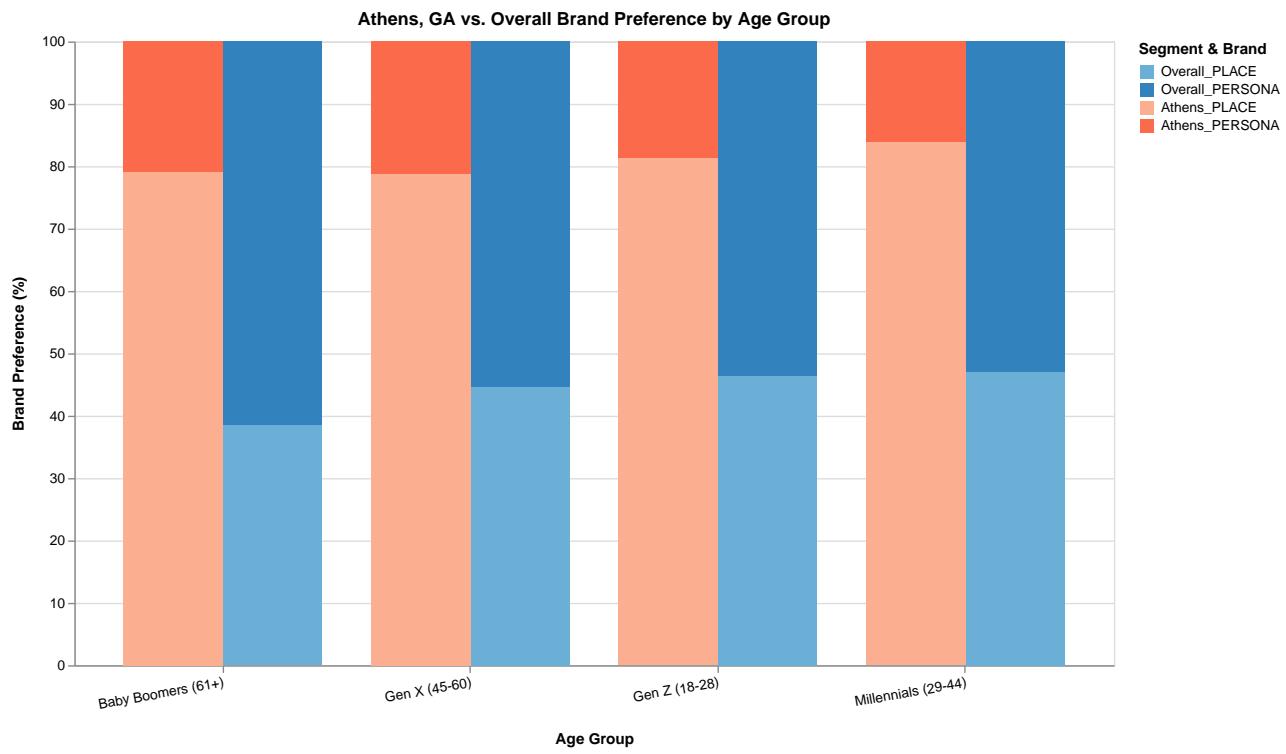
Figure 34. Athens, GA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

The notably low performance of the **Scholar Haven** persona brand among all age groups in Athens, GA—especially among Gen Z and Millennials, its presumed target audience—reveals a critical insight: not all personas resonate, even with the demographic they aim to attract. In fact, younger generations responded less favorably to this college-themed branding than older ones like Gen X and Baby Boomers, despite the brand's clear focus on an academic lifestyle.

This suggests that a persona centered around the idea of being a college student visiting another college town lacks broad relevance for leisure travelers. Most young adults aren't seeking a campus-centric travel experience unless they have a personal connection, such as attending or considering that specific school. Therefore, when destinations like Athens market themselves primarily through a collegiate lens, they risk limiting appeal. This test highlights the importance of ensuring that persona branding goes beyond demographic alignment and speaks to broader experiential desires—especially when other tourism assets in the area could offer more universal resonance.

**Destination Brand Preferences by Travel Frequency (Athens, GA)**
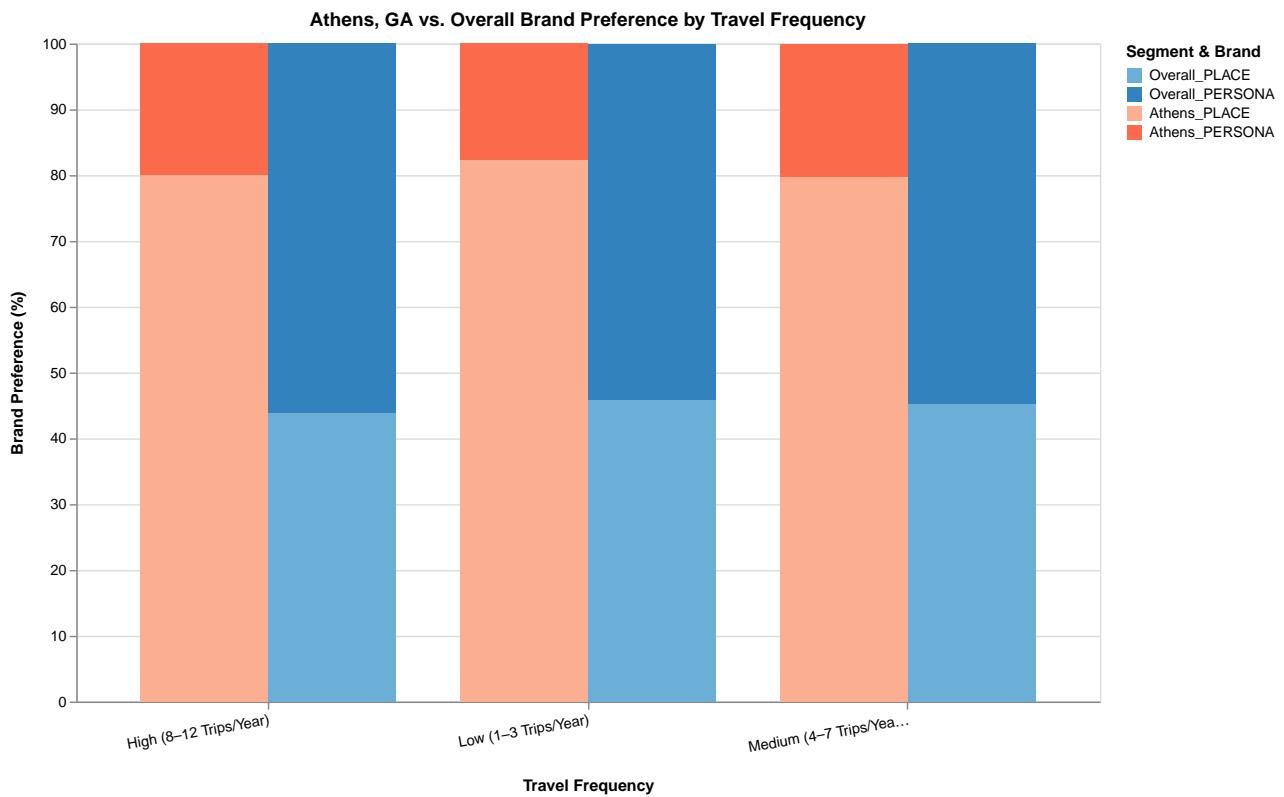
Figure 35. Athens, GA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

The dramatically low preference for the **Scholar Haven** persona brand across all travel frequency cohorts in the Athens, GA test market—despite a modestly higher uptake among medium and high-frequency travelers—reinforces the notion that travel frequency alone has limited influence on destination brand preference. While earlier studies hinted at a possible connection between frequent travel and increased receptiveness to persona branding, the Athens results suggest otherwise.

Instead, the decisive factor appears to be the emotional or aspirational alignment between the traveler and the persona being portrayed. If potential visitors do not see the brand's persona as a reflection of their ideal self, even frequent travelers are unlikely to connect with the messaging. In this case, the collegiate narrative of **Scholar Haven** failed to resonate broadly, indicating that persona success hinges more on identity relevance than on how often someone travels.

**Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor (Athens, GA)**
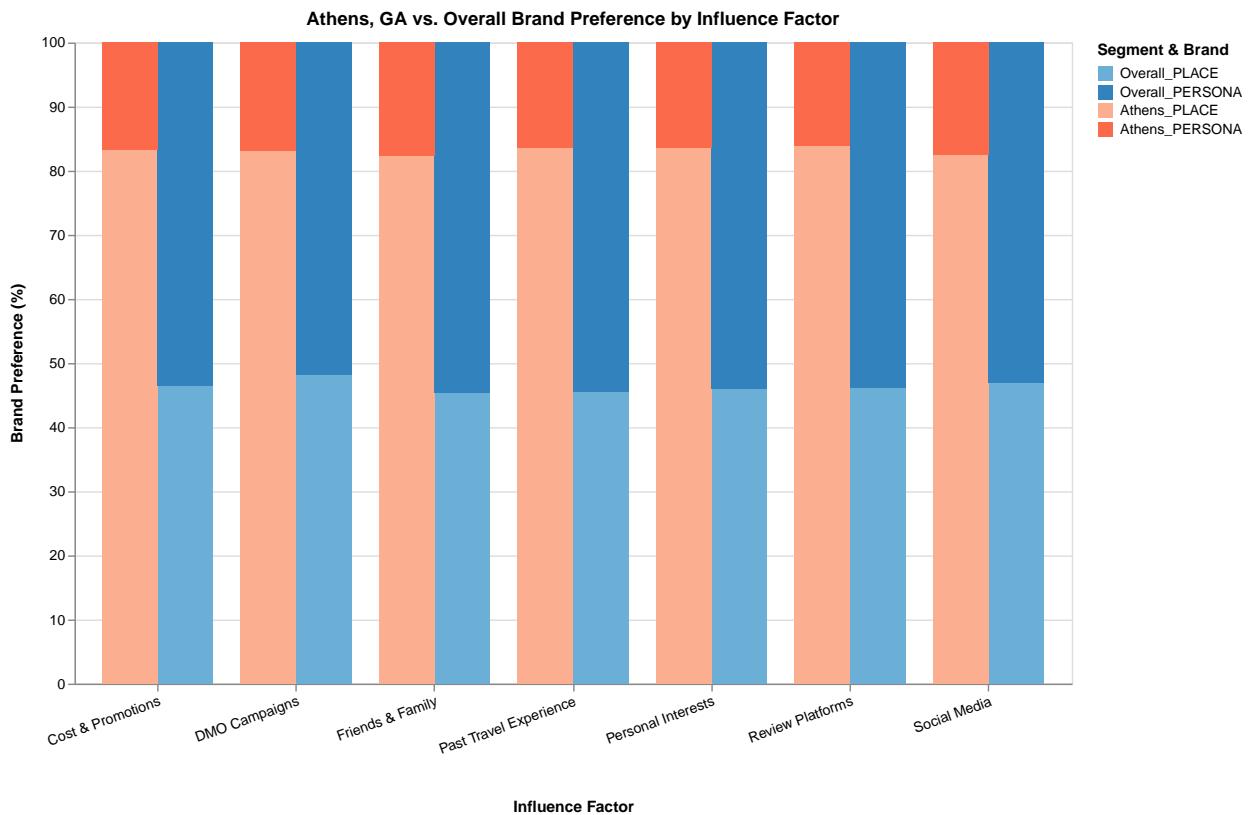
Figure 36. Athens, GA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

The low yet consistent preference for the **Scholar Haven** persona brand across all travel influence factors in the Athens, GA test market builds on earlier findings that suggest influence sources alone—such as social media, friends and family, or marketing campaigns—are not strong predictors of destination brand preference. This outcome highlights a broader consumer insight: regardless of how travelers report being influenced, they ultimately maintain agency in their travel decisions.

The uniformity of brand preference across diverse influence channels suggests that travelers are less swayed by the medium of inspiration and more by whether the brand itself aligns with their values, aspirations, and sense of self. In other words, people may be inspired to explore, but they still instinctively gravitate toward destination brands that feel universally appealing—while niche, persona-driven brands risk alienating wider audiences if they miss that emotional resonance.

**Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Athens, GA)**
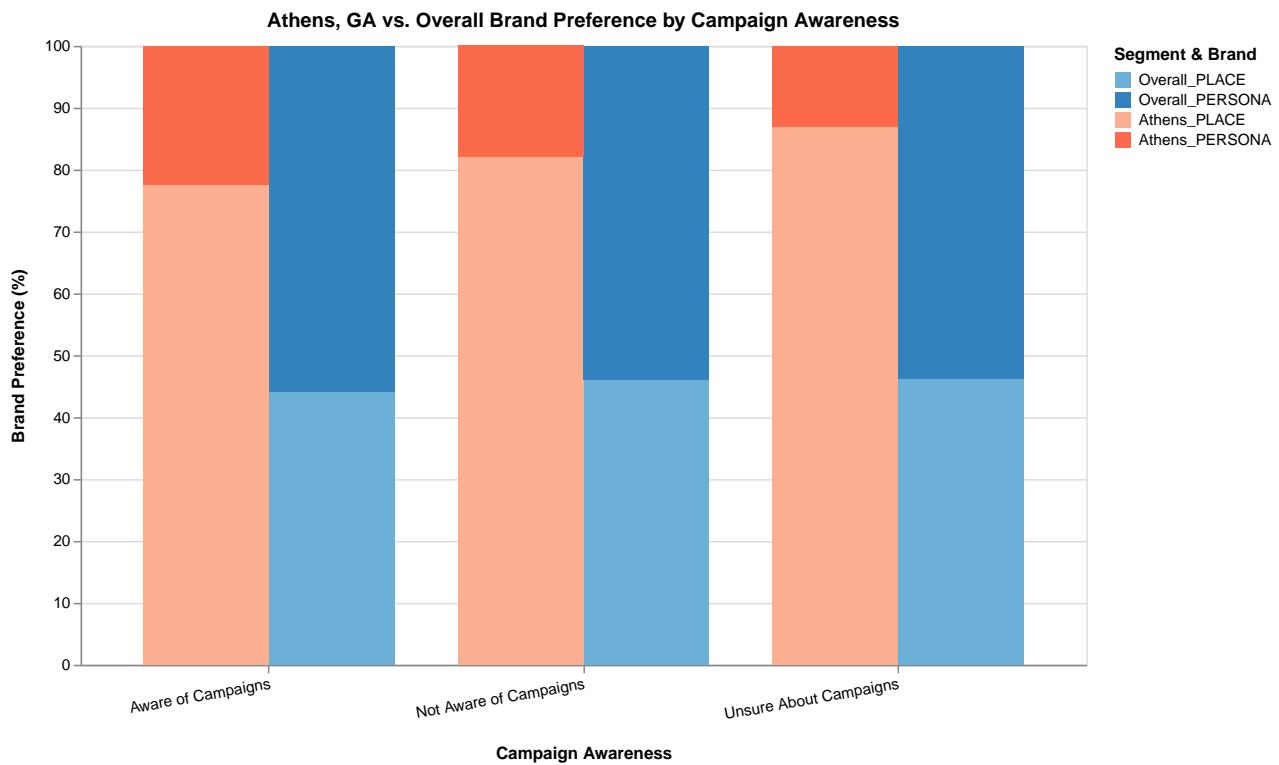
Figure 37. Athens, GA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

While respondents in Athens, GA who reported being aware of tourism marketing campaigns showed a marginally higher preference for the **Scholar Haven** persona brand compared to those who were unaware or unsure, the overall performance of this brand remained dramatically lower than the averages observed in the broader study. This suggests that while campaign awareness can slightly improve receptiveness to a destination brand, it is not enough to overcome limitations in the brand's conceptual appeal. In the case of **Scholar Haven**, even those who had been exposed to tourism messaging did not express strong preference, reinforcing that awareness alone cannot compensate for a persona brand that lacks broad relatability or emotional pull.

Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Athens, GA)
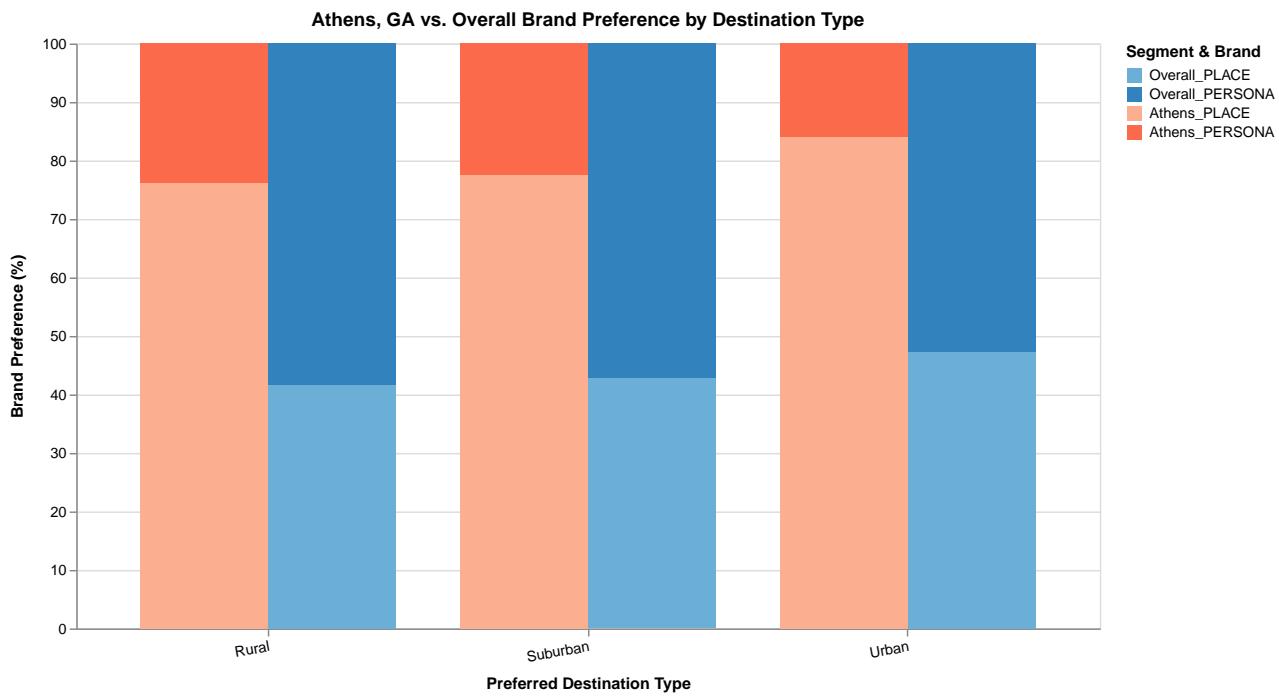
Figure 38. Athens, GA vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

Despite the consistently low performance of the **Scholar Haven** persona brand across all destination type cohorts in the Athens, GA test market, respondents who preferred rural or suburban destinations did report slightly higher preference levels for the persona brand compared to their urban-preferring counterparts. This marginal uptick reinforces earlier findings that travelers drawn to rural or suburban environments may be more psychologically open to alternative or narrative-driven branding, even when the specific implementation—like **Scholar Haven**—fails to resonate broadly. It suggests a level of conceptual flexibility among these travelers, though the overall results also underscore that open-mindedness alone cannot salvage a persona brand that fundamentally misses the mark.

Key Findings: Athens, GA as a Contrarian Case Study

Athens, Georgia provides a powerful counterexample to the assumption that persona-based destination branding is always superior to traditional place-based approaches. Despite its strong academic identity and cultural reputation, the persona brand **Scholar Haven**—which emphasized Athens as a university-centered travel experience—performed dramatically worse than the place-based **Discover Athens** brand across all tested audience segments.

Several key insights emerged from this test that were either absent or less pronounced in other study markets:

- **Even a relevant persona can fail**: The **Scholar Haven** persona was well-aligned with Athens's identity as a college town, yet failed to connect emotionally with most travelers. This reinforces that alignment alone is insufficient—success depends on how universally relatable and aspirational the persona is to outsiders.

- **Target audience rejection**: Despite being tailored for a younger demographic, **Scholar Haven** received its lowest marks from Millennials and Gen Z—those most expected to resonate with a collegiate identity. This suggests that travelers may not want to engage with a destination through a persona that reminds them of a phase of life they are currently living or have recently left behind.

- **Travel frequency is not a strong predictor**: While medium and high-frequency travelers showed slightly more openness to the persona brand, preference was still overwhelmingly in favor of the place-based brand. This indicates that the emotional compatibility of the brand message matters more than how often someone travels.

- **Influence channels don't determine preference**: Whether respondents were influenced by social media, friends, cost, or official campaigns, the overwhelming preference remained for the place-based identity. This supports a growing trend in the study: travelers maintain decision-making agency regardless of external influence.

- **Marketing exposure can't save weak branding**: Even respondents who were aware of tourism marketing campaigns showed only a slight uptick in preference for **Scholar Haven**. Awareness didn't translate into persuasion, illustrating the limits of exposure when the underlying brand narrative lacks resonance.

- **Open-minded travelers still prefer grounded branding**: Rural and suburban-preferring travelers—often more receptive to persona narratives—showed slightly higher preference for **Scholar Haven**, but not enough to shift the broader trend. This hints at a willingness to engage with alternative branding but also reaffirms that flexibility doesn't equal enthusiasm.

In sum, Athens demonstrates that persona branding is not inherently superior. When the concept feels too narrow, overly academic, or excludes broader lifestyle appeal, it can alienate the very audiences it aims to attract. This test market serves as a reminder that place-based branding—when executed well—often provides a more inclusive and emotionally resonant starting point for tourism promotion.

4.3.4. Rochester, NY

Rochester, New York was selected as a test subject in this study because of its unique position among similarly named cities across the country, such as Rochester, Minnesota. These mid-sized destinations often fly under the radar despite having defined urban centers and vibrant cultural scenes. The goal was to explore how branding centered on nightlife and experiential themes could elevate perceptions of such cities. To reinforce this focus, the verb **"Experience"**—a more energetic and immersive alternative to traditional tourism language—was paired with Rochester to create the place-based option.

Respondents were shown two branding approaches for Rochester:

- The **place-based brand**: Experience Rochester – Where the City Comes Alive at Night
- The **persona-based brand**: Nightlife Quarter – A Vibrant City Escape in Upstate New York

Each pairing was designed to examine the impact of narrative energy and theme-driven branding on audience perception, particularly in destinations with modest national visibility but strong local character.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Rochester, NY)	425	46.86%	482	53.14%	907
Generation: BOOM	29	43.28%	38	56.72%	67
Generation: GENX	112	50.68%	109	49.32%	221
Generation: GENY	200	46.84%	227	53.16%	427
Generation: GENZ	84	43.75%	108	56.25%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	333	49.04%	346	50.96%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	78	40.41%	115	59.59%	193
Trip Frequency: High	14	40.00%	21	60.00%	35
Influence Factor: FRIEND	285	46.80%	324	53.20%	609
Influence Factor: SOCIAL	126	46.84%	143	53.16%	269
Influence Factor: DMO	57	48.31%	61	51.69%	118
Influence Factor: YELP	185	47.44%	205	52.56%	390
Influence Factor: COST	262	46.62%	300	53.38%	562
Influence Factor: INTEREST	346	46.69%	395	53.31%	741
Influence Factor: PAST	246	45.47%	295	54.53%	541

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Campaign Awareness: YES	87	43.28%	114	56.72%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	277	46.87%	314	53.13%	591
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	61	53.04%	54	46.96%	115
Destination Type: URBAN	285	46.19%	332	53.81%	617
Destination Type: SUBURB	71	45.51%	85	54.49%	156
Destination Type: RURAL	69	51.49%	65	48.51%	134

Overall Destination Brand Preference (Rochester, NY)
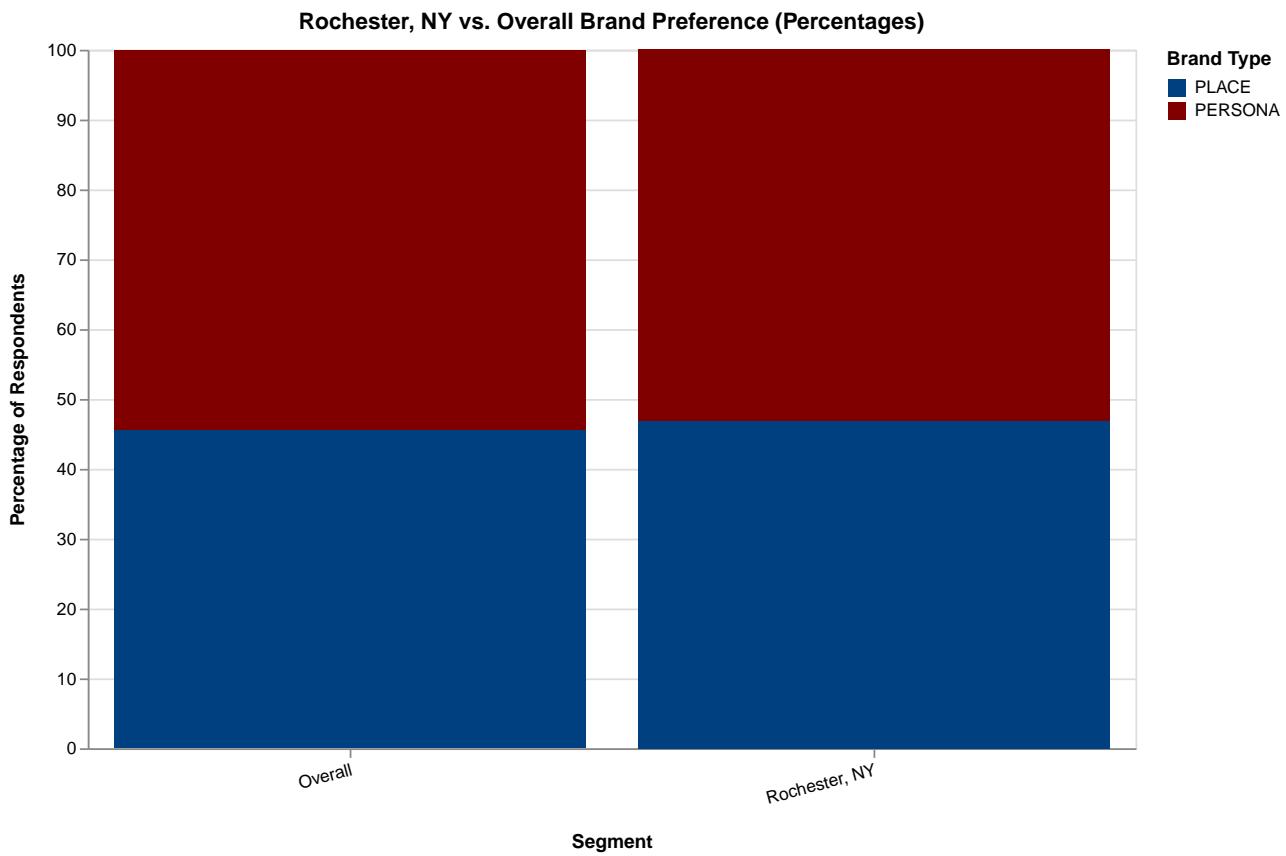
Figure 39. Rochester, NY vs. Overall Brand Preference

The persona brand for Rochester, NY performed nearly identically to the study-wide average, with only about 1% fewer respondents preferring the persona brand compared to the overall dataset.

This minimal difference suggests that the **Nightlife Quarter** branding resonated with audiences at a rate consistent with broader consumer patterns, particularly when tested in mid-sized cities that share their name with other places across the country. These results align with findings from other similarly scaled test markets where persona-based branding concepts were kept relatively broad and relatable. It reinforces the idea that persona branding can be effective—as long as the persona is neither too niche nor too disconnected from the wider public's sense of travel identity.

Destination Brand Preferences by Age Group (Rochester, NY)
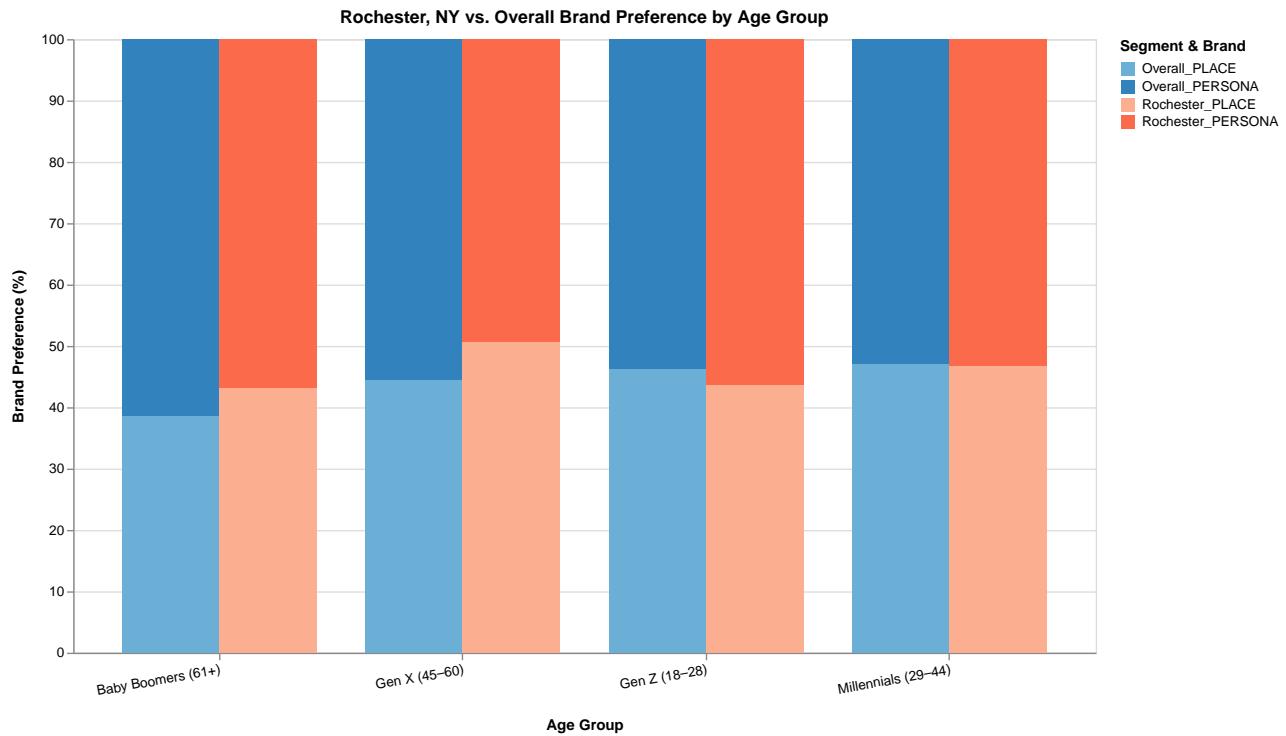
Figure 40. Rochester, NY vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

It is particularly interesting that in the Rochester, NY test market, Baby Boomers and Gen X preferred the persona brand at rates lower than the overall study average—with Gen X even showing a slight preference for the place-based brand. In contrast, Millennials and Gen Z rated the persona brand at or slightly above the study average, indicating a generational divide in how the **Nightlife Quarter** identity was received. This divergence suggests that while older cohorts may have responded more favorably to nature-oriented or heritage-themed personas in other test markets, the urban nightlife-focused persona did not resonate as well. These generations may be seeking destinations that feel quieter, more peaceful, and easier to access—values that clash with the energetic, bustling imagery of a nightlife-themed destination.

**Destination Brand Preferences by Travel Frequency (Rochester, NY)**
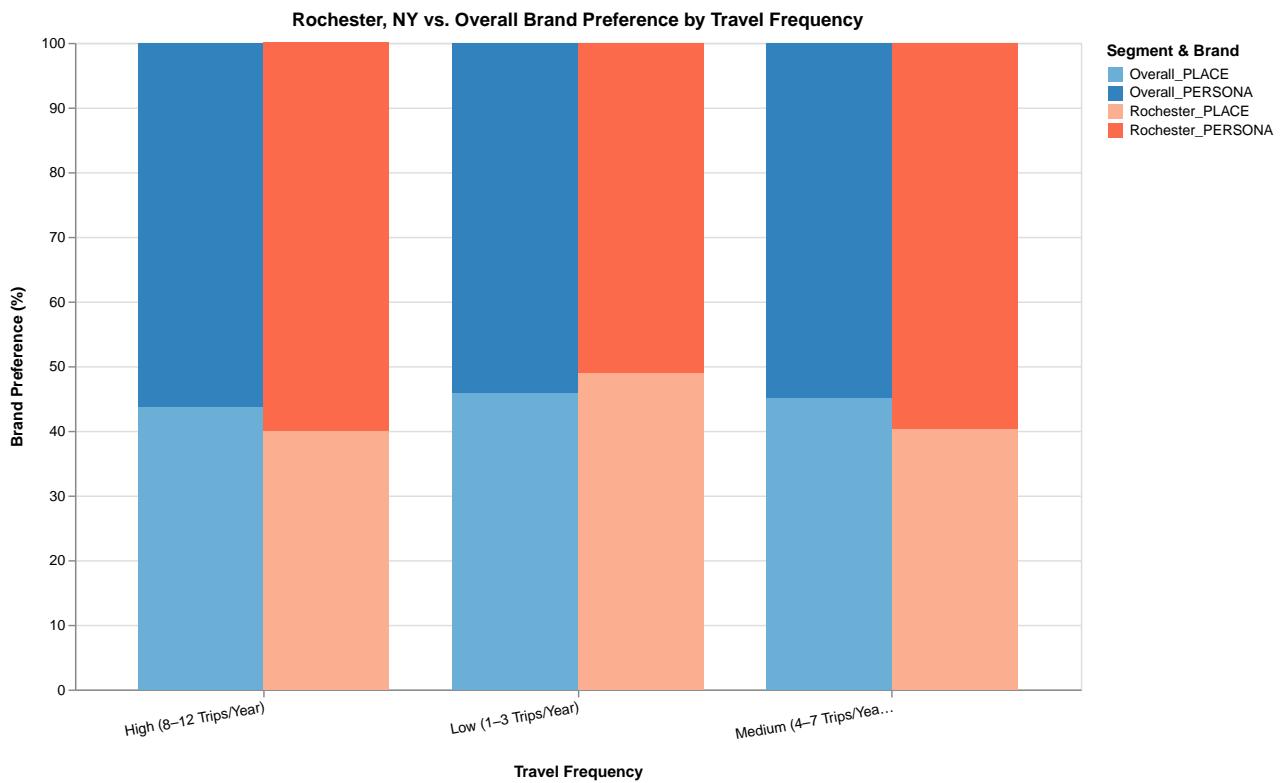
Figure 41. Rochester, NY vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

In the Rochester, NY test market, medium and high-frequency travelers showed a slightly higher preference for the persona brand compared to low-frequency travelers. This modest increase suggests that those who travel more often may seek greater variety in their experiences and are therefore more open to destinations with an energetic downtown core and vibrant nightlife—like the one portrayed in the **Nightlife Quarter** persona brand.

Conversely, low-frequency travelers, who take fewer trips and may view each one as more significant, are more likely to prioritize destinations that offer broader daytime attractions or cultural landmarks rather than nightlife-focused experiences. This subtle behavioral distinction highlights how travel frequency can influence the appeal of certain brand narratives, particularly those centered around evening entertainment.

Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor (Rochester, NY)
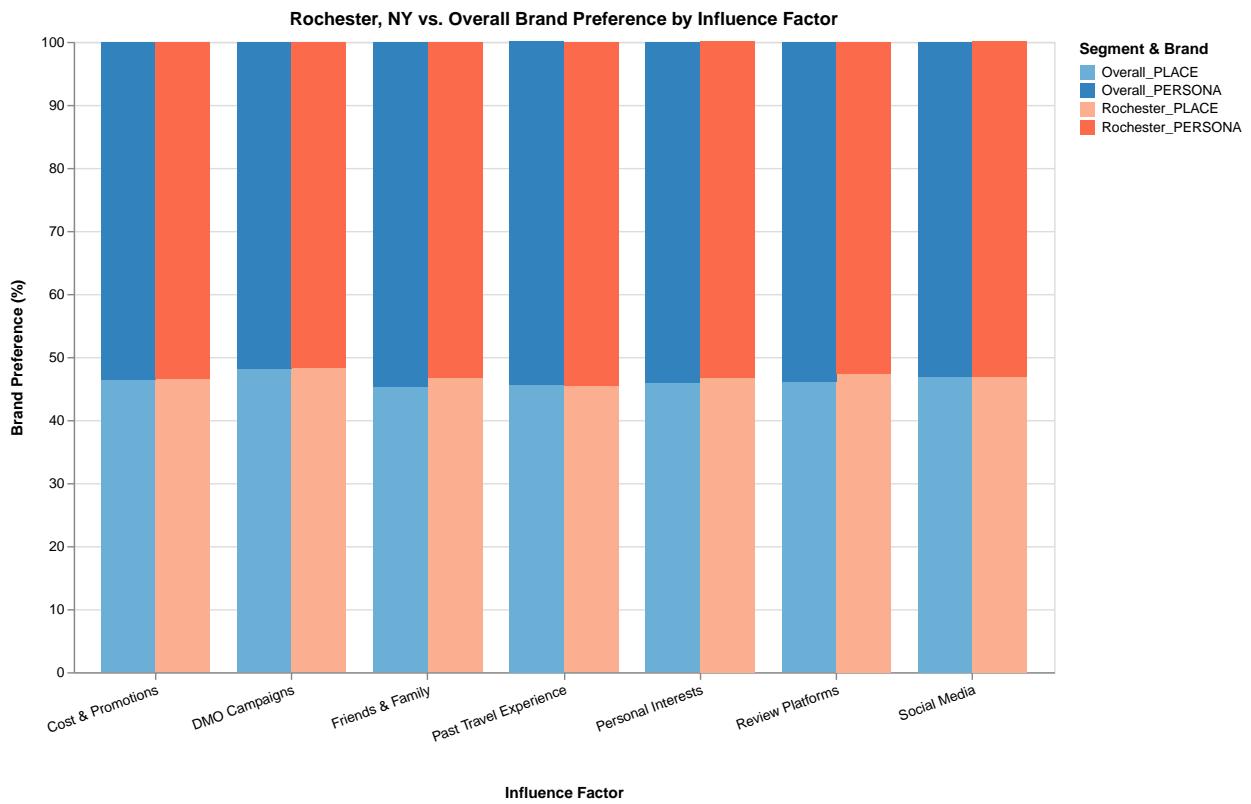
Figure 42. Rochester, NY vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

The Rochester, NY test market reinforces a pattern observed throughout the broader study: influence factor—whether travelers report being influenced by friends and family, social media, destination marketing campaigns, review platforms, cost, or personal interests—shows nearly zero correlation with whether they prefer a place-based or persona-based destination brand. Despite variations in how respondents report being inspired to travel, their ultimate brand preference remains relatively consistent across all influence categories. This finding further supports the conclusion that the communication channel itself has limited impact; it is the content and resonance of the brand messaging that ultimately drives consumer preference.

**Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Rochester, NY)**
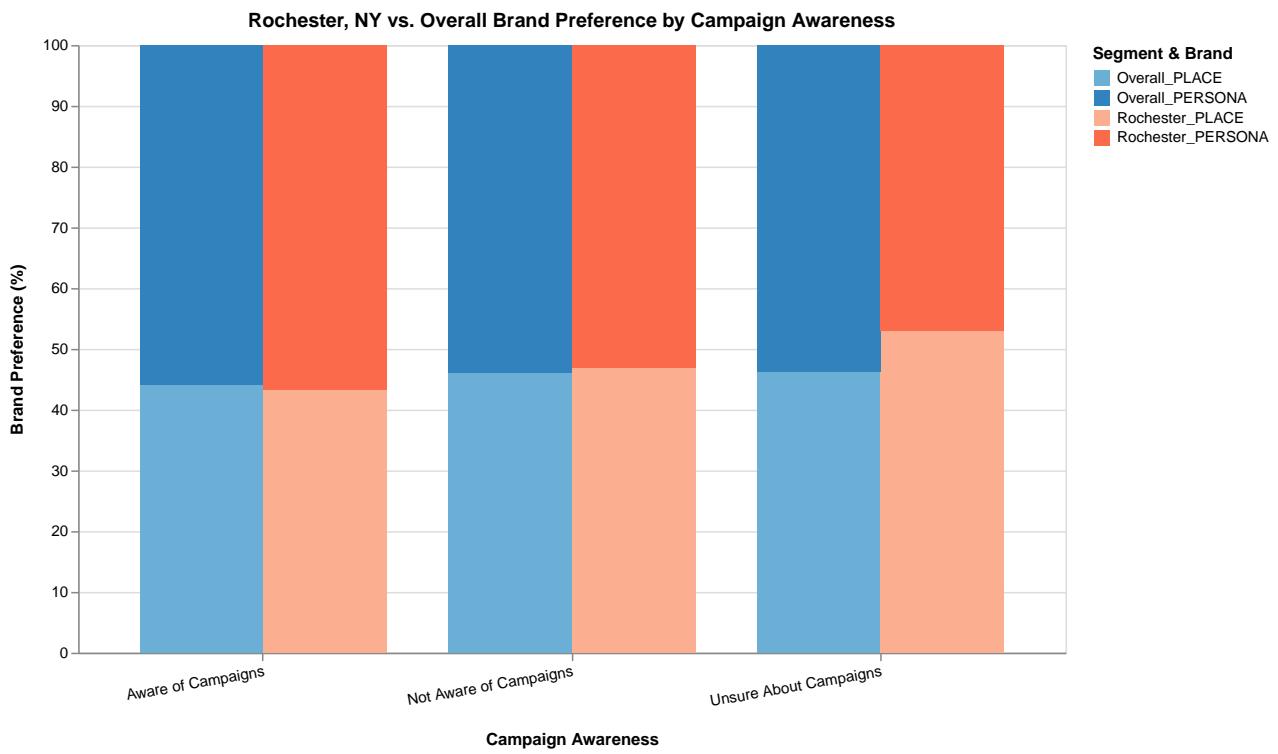
Figure 43. Rochester, NY vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

In the Rochester, NY test market, responses from participants who indicated they were either aware or unaware of tourism marketing campaigns closely mirrored the overall study averages in terms of brand preference—showing a slight leaning toward the persona brand, consistent with general trends. However, a notable anomaly emerged among those who selected "unsure" regarding campaign awareness: this group showed a **lower preference for the persona brand** and even demonstrated a **slight favorability toward the place-based brand**.

This deviation suggests a more reflective evaluation process by respondents in the "unsure" group, who may have been more thoughtful in questioning what the persona brand **Nightlife Quarter** actually signified. If nightlife were perceived as the sole feature of the destination, it could raise concerns about daytime activities or broader appeal—ultimately leading these respondents to default to the more balanced and familiar narrative offered by the place-based brand.

Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Rochester, NY)
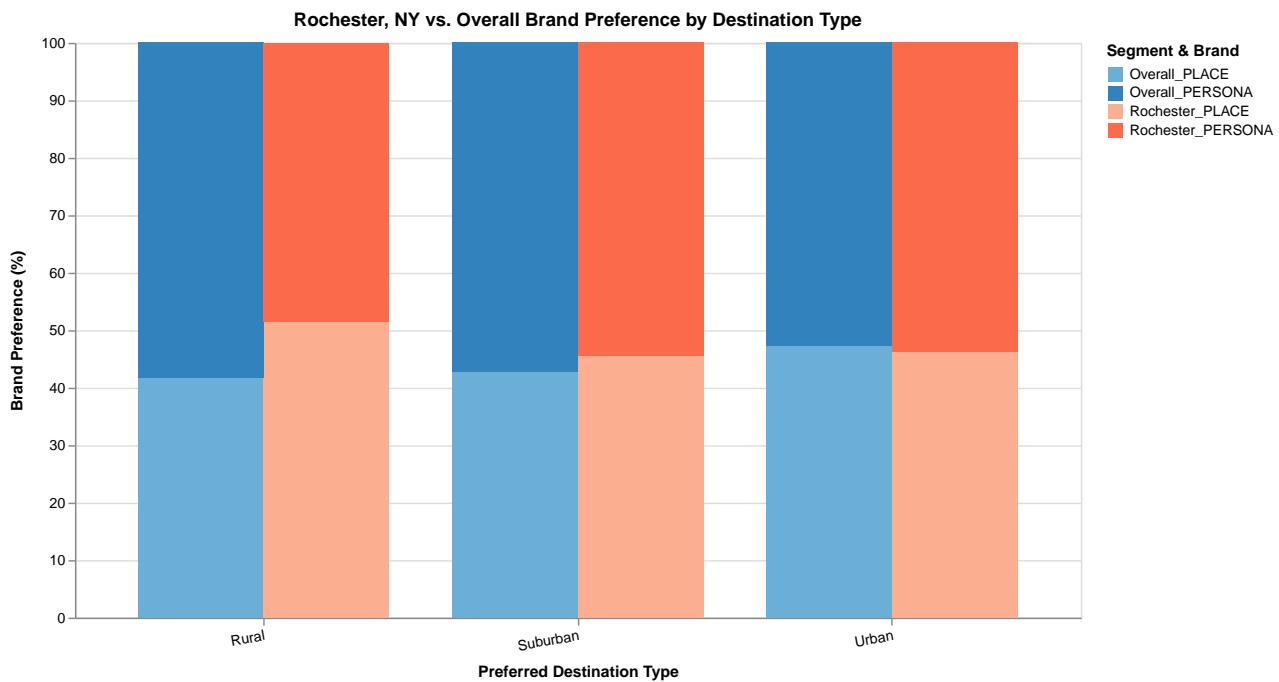
Figure 44. Rochester, NY vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

In the Rochester, NY test market, respondents who indicated a preference for urban destinations showed a **marginally higher preference for the persona brand "Nightlife Quarter"** than the overall study average, affirming that the branding successfully appealed to its intended audience. However, respondents who preferred **rural or suburban destinations** scored the Rochester persona brand **lower than the study average**, demonstrating that the appeal of persona branding is not universal—even among groups who, in other test markets, showed more openness to persona-based approaches.

This contrast underscores that **brand messaging itself carries more weight than assumptions about a traveler's destination preference**. In this case, emphasizing urban nightlife resonated well with those seeking an energetic, metropolitan experience but was a turn-off for those who prefer quieter, more spacious, or nature-driven environments. This finding is particularly relevant for Rochester, where much of the region beyond the downtown core offers tranquil, scenic, and daytime-oriented attractions. It raises an important strategic question: **can a single persona brand that focuses narrowly on one lifestyle or experience truly represent a destination with broader offerings—and should it?**

Key Findings: Rochester, NY as a Cautionary Case for Micro-Market Alignment

The Rochester, NY test market illustrates how a broadly appealing persona brand can still underperform among key demographic groups—not due to poor execution, but because of **how narrowly its focus frames the destination's identity**. While **Nightlife Quarter** earned favor from a slim majority of respondents, certain segments—namely older travelers and those preferring suburban or rural destinations—responded less favorably than expected. This divergence demonstrates the importance of looking beyond overall preference rates and evaluating whether a brand is unintentionally excluding market segments who may still enjoy the destination but don't connect with how it's being portrayed.

Several findings highlight how **small details in branding emphasis can significantly affect resonance**:

- **Subtle disconnects reduce impact**: Even with an overall persona win, Baby Boomers and Gen X rated the **Nightlife Quarter** brand below average, with Gen X marginally favoring the place-based identity. This suggests that the nightlife focus may unintentionally alienate those looking for relaxation, cultural heritage, or daytime activities.

- **Frequent travelers desire novelty**: Medium and high-frequency travelers showed slightly greater support for the persona brand than low-frequency travelers, implying that repeat travelers may seek more vibrant or unconventional narratives—while infrequent travelers want "sure bets" that offer balanced experiences.

- **Campaign exposure ≠ persuasion**: Among those unsure about tourism campaigns, the place-based brand actually performed better—a reversal of the study's overall pattern. This suggests that these respondents paused to consider the brand on its own merits, questioning whether nightlife alone would fulfill their expectations.

- **Influence channels don't drive outcomes**: In line with other markets, influence factor had negligible impact on brand preference. Whether influenced by social media, friends, or official campaigns, respondents chose based on messaging—not delivery medium.

- **Urban appeal isn't universal**: Although the urban-themed persona resonated with those who preferred city destinations, it performed notably worse among rural and suburban-preferring travelers. Unlike in other markets, this cohort did not favor the persona brand, reinforcing that lifestyle match—not branding style—determines appeal.

Together, these insights show that **destination marketers must evaluate not only what a brand says, but whom it speaks to—and whom it leaves out**. The Rochester test suggests a critical need to **map out "micro-markets" within a destination**—both geographically and psychographically—and examine how well a brand narrative addresses each. For cities like Rochester that contain urban cores but also vast suburban and rural zones, **a single brand may not suffice unless it's flexible, inclusive, or supported by sub-brands or thematic layers**. Effective persona branding in such cases must avoid overcommitting to one facet of the destination if the goal is to attract a wider base of travelers.

4.3.5. Franklin, TN

Franklin, Tennessee was selected as a test subject in this study due to its name's ability to evoke a sense of familiarity without conjuring a strong visual identity. Like many towns named after historical figures, "Franklin" suggests a place you've heard of—even if you're not exactly sure where it is. This made it an ideal setting to explore how creative verbs can enhance a place-based brand by adding emotional and thematic depth. Instead of defaulting to generic verbs like **"Visit,"** **"Explore,"** or **"Discover,"** the brand used **"Savor"**—a verb more commonly associated with culinary or lifestyle-focused destinations. This allowed the place-based option to emulate some of the narrative richness typically found in persona-based branding.

Respondents were shown two branding approaches for Franklin:

- The **place-based brand**: Savor Franklin – A Small Town Retreat Filled with Charm
- The **persona-based brand**: Magnolia Hollow – A Charming Town in the Heart of Tennessee

This test offered a compelling look at how subtle shifts in language—particularly action verbs—can shape traveler expectations and influence appeal, even when the destination itself remains

grounded in a traditional small-town identity.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Franklin, TN)	273	30.10%	634	69.90%	907
Generation: BOOM	23	34.33%	44	65.67%	67
Generation: GENX	71	32.13%	150	67.87%	221
Generation: GENY	125	29.27%	302	70.73%	427
Generation: GENZ	54	28.13%	138	71.88%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	205	30.19%	474	69.81%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	56	29.02%	137	70.98%	193
Trip Frequency: High	12	34.29%	23	65.71%	35
Influence Factor: FRIEND	180	29.56%	429	70.44%	609
Influence Factor: SOCIAL	82	30.48%	187	69.52%	269
Influence Factor: DMO	39	33.05%	79	66.95%	118
Influence Factor: YELP	105	26.92%	285	73.08%	390
Influence Factor: COST	163	29.00%	399	71.00%	562
Influence Factor: INTEREST	214	28.88%	527	71.12%	741
Influence Factor: PAST	163	30.13%	378	69.87%	541

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Campaign Awareness: YES	62	30.85%	139	69.15%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	176	29.78%	415	70.22%	591
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	35	30.43%	80	69.57%	115
Destination Type: URBAN	183	29.66%	434	70.34%	617
Destination Type: SUBURB	52	33.33%	104	66.67%	156
Destination Type: RURAL	38	28.36%	96	71.64%	134

Overall Destination Brand Preference (Franklin, TN)
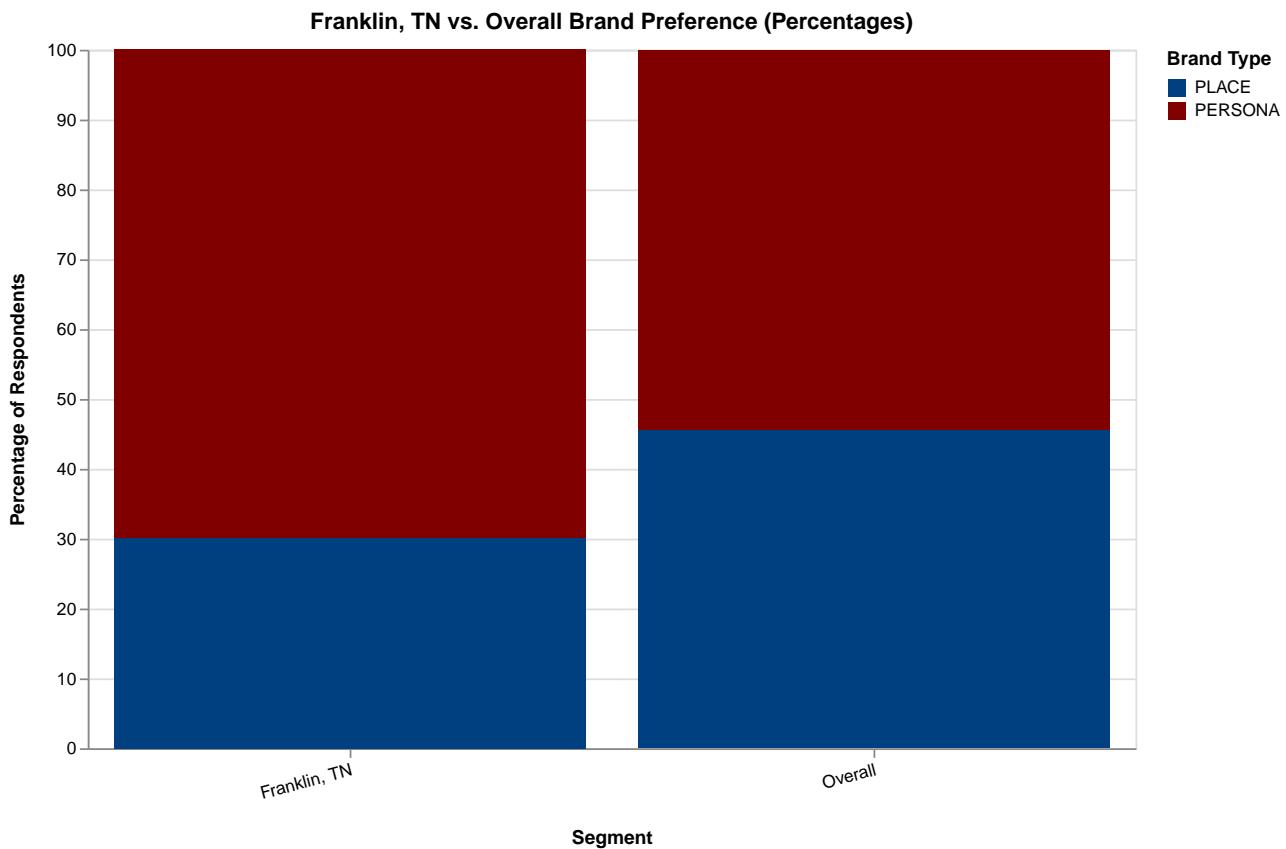
Figure 45. Franklin, TN vs. Overall Brand Preference

The Franklin test market provides an important counterpart to the Athens test market, highlighting how brand preferences can vary significantly depending on the destination and its presentation.

While Athens showed a clear majority favoring the **place-based** brand, Franklin demonstrated the opposite—a strong majority favoring the **persona-based** identity.

This contrast reinforces that survey respondents are not simply answering at random or defaulting to a single style of branding. Instead, their responses reflect distinct and thoughtful gut reactions to each destination's brand framing. The variation across test markets—some yielding nearly even splits while others lean strongly in one direction—suggests that brand effectiveness is highly context-dependent and that travelers are discerning in how they interpret different types of brand narratives.

Destination Brand Preferences by Age Group (Franklin, TN)
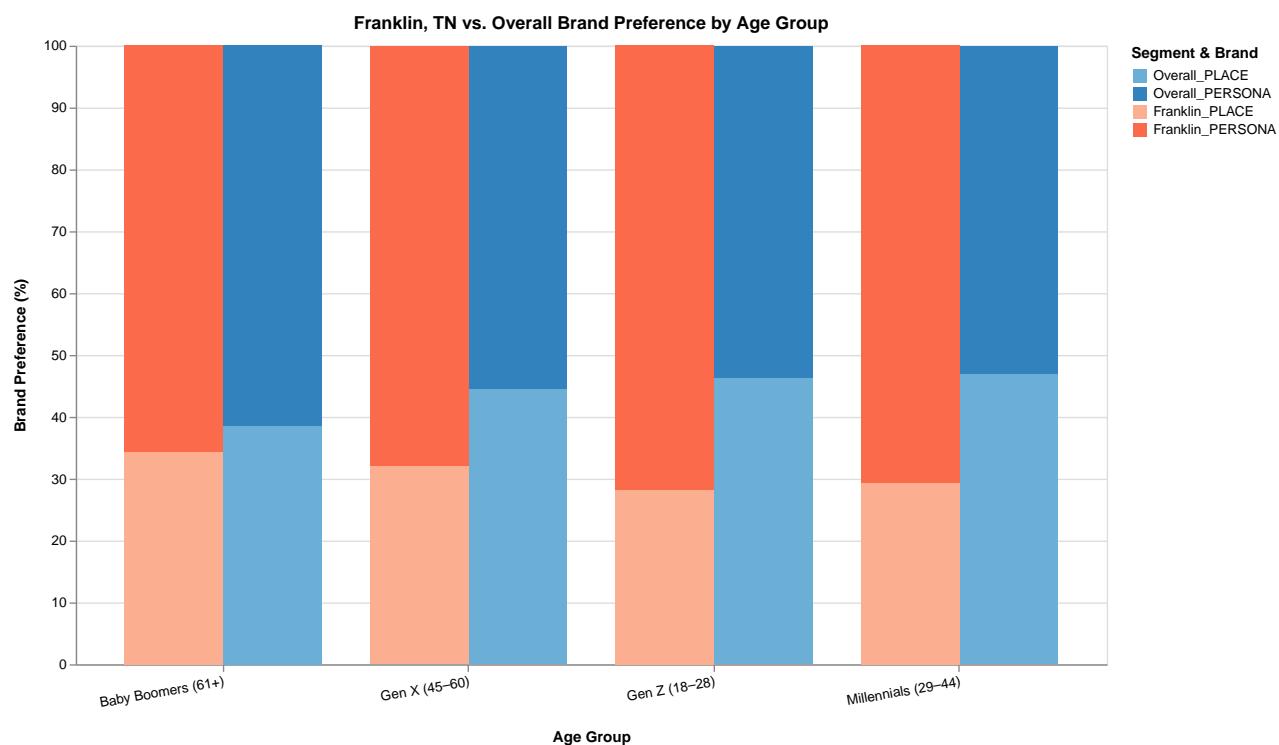
Figure 46. Franklin, TN vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

For the Franklin test market, the age demographic breakdown reveals an especially compelling shift in generational patterns. Throughout the broader survey, Boomers and Gen X have generally shown a slight preference for **persona-based** branding over Millennials and Gen Z. However, the Franklin persona brand—**Magnolia Hollow**—flipped that trend entirely. In this case, younger generations exhibited a stronger affinity for the persona brand, with preference increasing steadily from Boomers to Gen Z.

Boomers showed the lowest level of support for the persona brand, while Gen Z expressed the highest, even though a clear majority in **every** generation still favored the persona-based identity. This reversal underscores how the emotional tone, aesthetics, and implied experiences of a given brand can resonate differently depending on age group, offering valuable insights into how specific narratives connect with different segments of the traveling public.

**Destination Brand Preferences by Travel Frequency (Franklin, TN)**
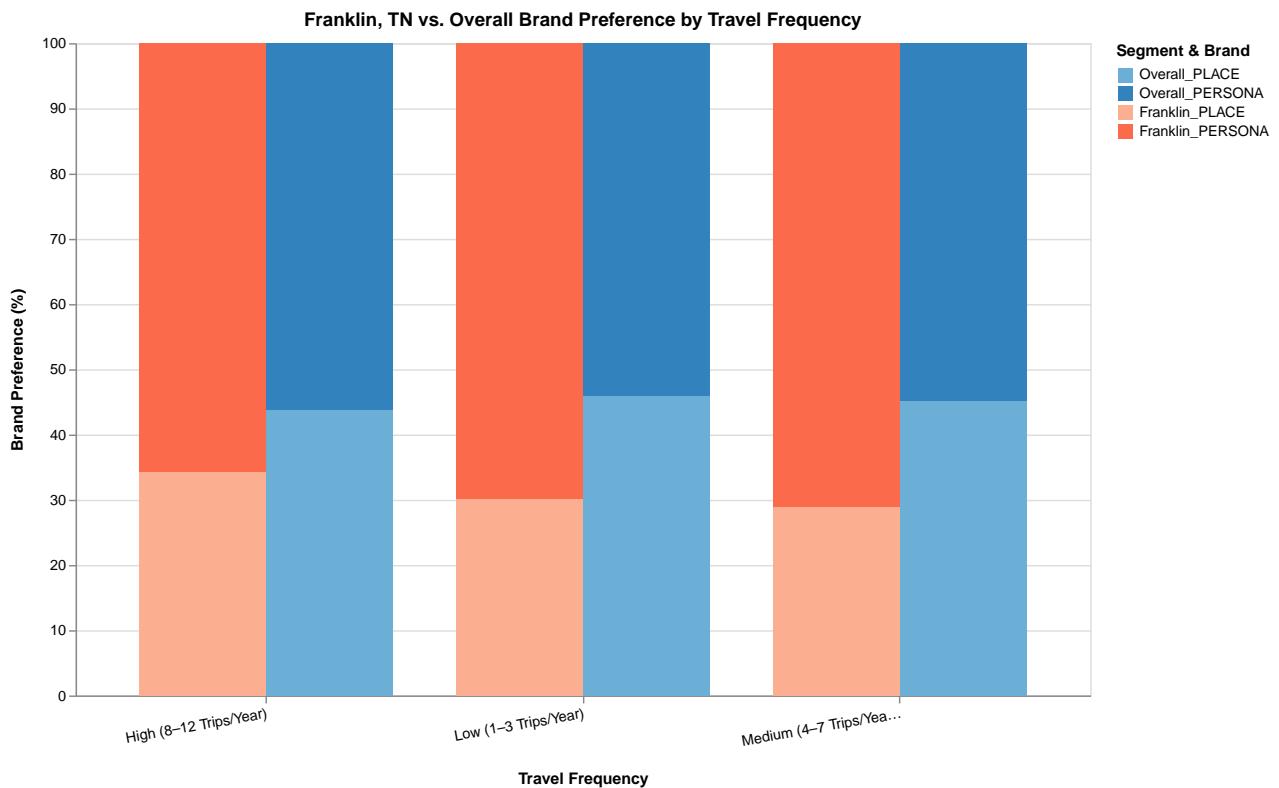
Figure 47. Franklin, TN vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

While all three travel frequency cohorts in the Franklin test market strongly preferred the **persona-based** brand, an interesting nuance emerges when comparing their levels of favorability. Low and medium frequency travelers showed a slightly higher preference for **Magnolia Hollow** than high frequency travelers did. Although the difference is modest and not likely to be statistically significant on its own, it does raise an intriguing possibility: that high frequency travelers—those who travel often and may be more experienced at identifying specific value in a destination—could be slightly more drawn to niche, concrete experiences like **Savor Franklin**. Unlike the more abstract and southern-coded persona brand, **Savor Franklin** suggests a tangible, food-focused visit, which may appeal more directly to seasoned travelers who prioritize clarity and specificity in their decision-making.

**Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor (Franklin, TN)**
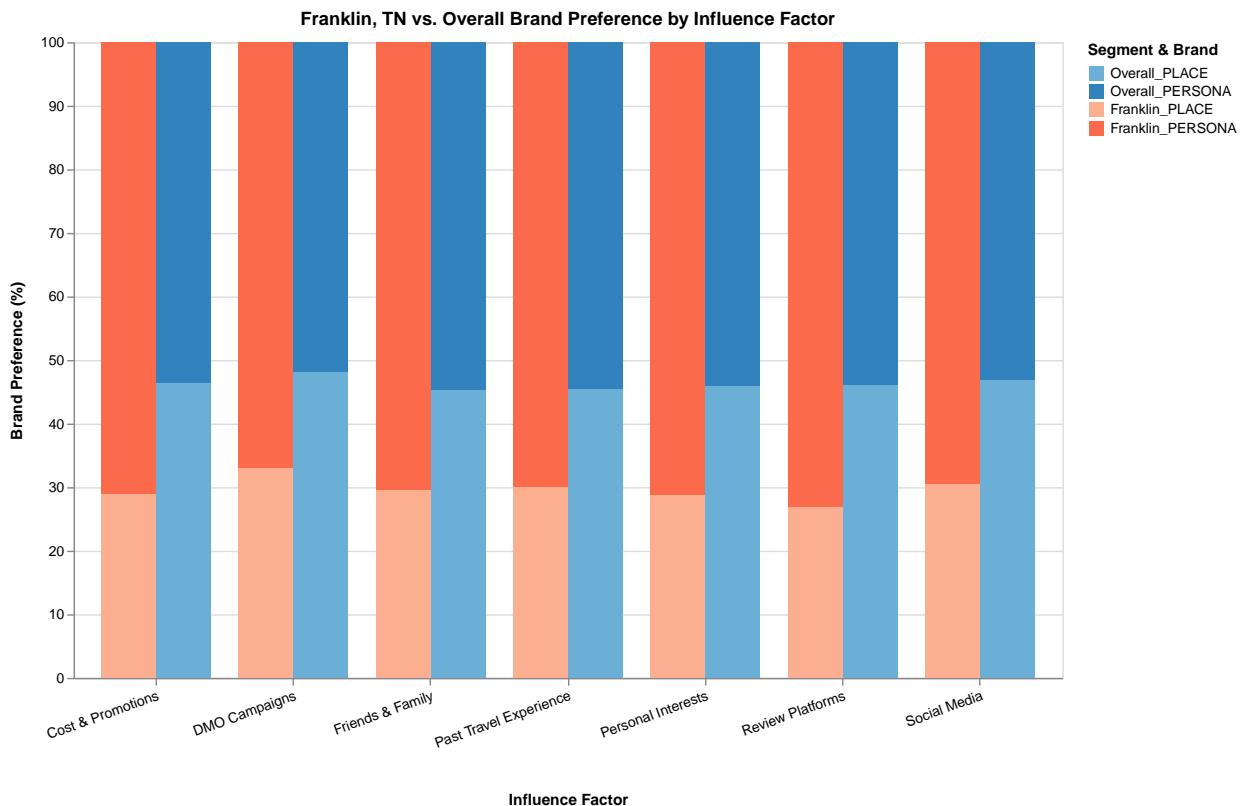
Figure 48. Franklin, TN vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

Persona brand preference remained strong in the Franklin test market, with a clear majority across all travel influence factors—mirroring the pattern observed in other destinations included in the study. Interestingly, the differences in persona brand favorability between influence factors were relatively narrow, reinforcing that preference for persona-based branding is a consistent trend regardless of how travelers are inspired to choose destinations.

However, one slight anomaly stands out: respondents influenced by DMO campaigns showed the **lowest** level of persona brand preference among all influence groups, though it was still a clear majority. This raises an important question—do consumers who are more conditioned to the familiar "Visit Place"-style destination branding of the 2010s believe they prefer place brands simply because that is the branding style they are accustomed to?

Adding further context, most respondents indicated they were **not** familiar with existing tourism promotion campaigns to begin with. This suggests that, for the majority of consumers, destination brands are still essentially being introduced from scratch. As such, concerns about consumer resistance to persona-based branding due to legacy expectations may be overstated. The tourism industry should recognize that it has more freedom than assumed to innovate with narrative-rich, emotionally resonant branding strategies without being constrained by outdated consumer assumptions.

**Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Franklin, TN)**
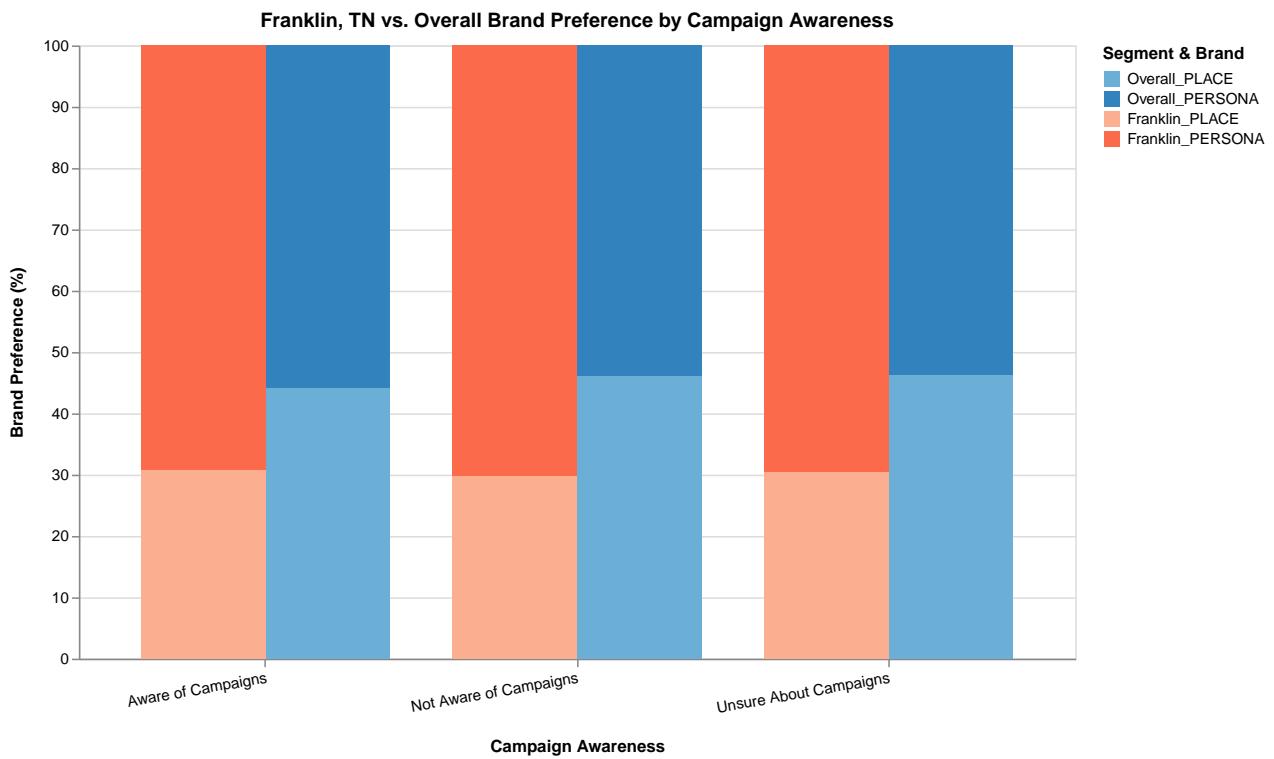
Figure 49. Franklin, TN vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

In the Franklin test market, persona brand preference remained virtually identical across all campaign awareness cohorts. Whether respondents were aware of existing tourism campaigns, unaware, or unsure, the favorability toward the **Magnolia Hollow** persona brand was consistently strong and showed no meaningful variation. This uniformity offers valuable insight into the role of existing DMO campaigns in shaping consumer brand preference—or rather, the lack thereof.

The data suggests that awareness of traditional destination marketing efforts does not significantly influence whether a consumer prefers a place-based or persona-based brand. In other words, prior exposure to tourism branding does not appear to sway respondents toward favoring the more conventional, place-oriented naming strategies. This finding challenges assumptions that long-standing DMO campaigns create entrenched consumer expectations and supports the idea that travelers are highly receptive to fresh, imaginative branding—regardless of their familiarity with what came before.

**Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Franklin, TN)**
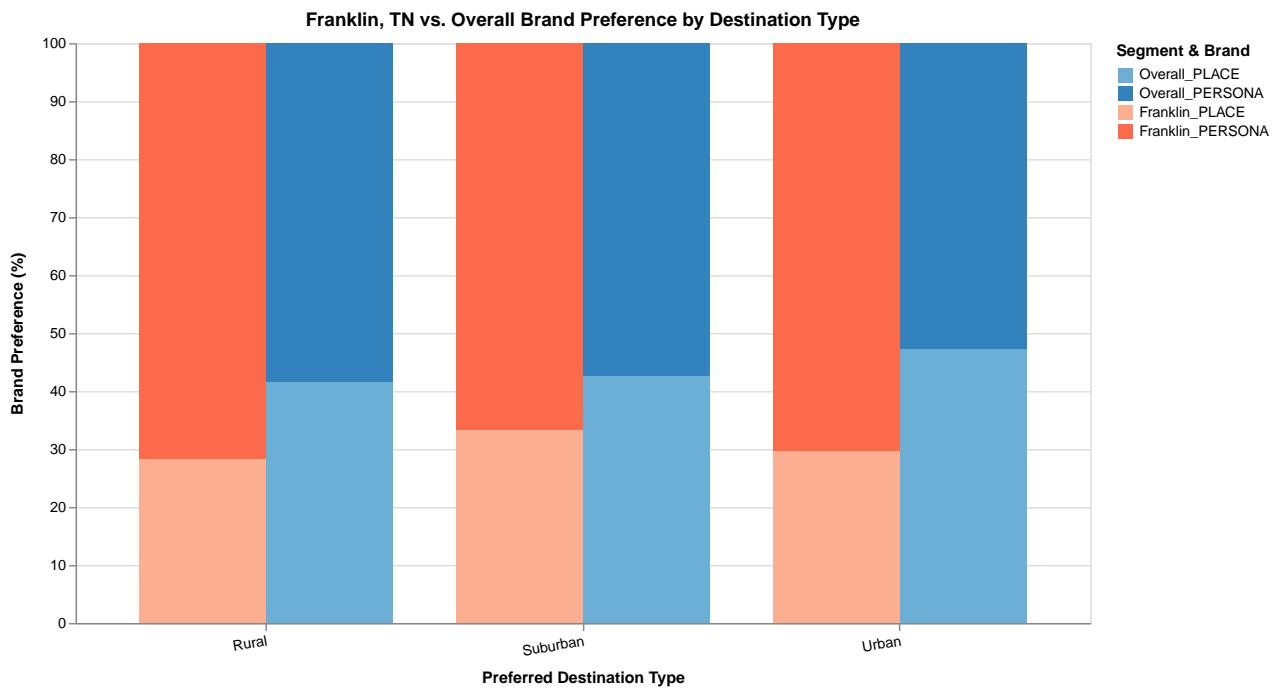
Figure 50. Franklin, TN vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

While preference for persona branding was consistently strong across all three destination type cohorts in the Franklin test market, the distribution revealed a few subtle but noteworthy deviations from patterns seen in other case studies. Typically, respondents who prefer rural destinations have shown a **higher** preference for persona-based branding compared to those who favor urban settings. However, in Franklin's case, the difference between rural and urban respondents was virtually identical. More interestingly, those who preferred **suburban** destinations reported the **lowest** persona brand preference of the three groups.

This stands out given that Franklin, TN is itself largely considered a suburb of Nashville, albeit one with a distinct central business district and a surrounding landscape that includes rural-style nature attractions. In many ways, Franklin sits at the intersection of urban charm, suburban accessibility, and rural escape—potentially blending traits from all three destination types. This convergence may have influenced respondent perceptions and brand preferences, offering a rare look at how nuanced geographic identities can subtly shape consumer response to both place and persona-based destination branding.

Key Findings: Franklin, TN as a Persona-Brand Favoring Counterpart

Franklin, Tennessee stands as a compelling counterpart to Athens, Georgia in this study. Where Athens revealed a clear majority favoring place-based branding, Franklin delivered the opposite result: a striking majority across every demographic preferred the persona-based identity **Magnolia Hollow**. This outcome underscores the importance of context in brand performance and shows that there is no universal formula—some destinations evoke stronger emotional appeal when cast through persona narratives.

Several findings emerged in the Franklin test that either deviated from or advanced insights in the broader study:

- **Persona appeal was strongest among younger generations**: Contrary to patterns in other markets where older generations slightly favored persona branding, Franklin saw the highest

persona preference among Gen Z and Millennials. This generational flip suggests that persona brand resonance can vary dramatically depending on tone, name, and implied experience.

- **Travel frequency slightly modulates brand appeal**: Although all frequency cohorts strongly preferred the persona brand, high-frequency travelers were marginally more favorable toward the place-based option. This hints at a nuanced insight: seasoned travelers may be more attracted to clearly themed or niche experiences like **Savor Franklin**, even if abstract persona names are more emotionally engaging overall.

- **Influence channels yielded uniform persona preference**: Respondents across all influence factors—from friends to review platforms—overwhelmingly chose the persona brand. However, the lowest persona preference was observed among those influenced by DMO campaigns. This could suggest a lingering attachment to traditional "Visit Place"-style branding among those familiar with conventional tourism messaging.

- **Campaign awareness had no measurable effect**: Whether respondents were aware of existing tourism marketing campaigns, unaware, or unsure, their preference for the persona brand remained essentially identical. This finding strengthens the case that prior exposure to destination branding does not significantly shape consumer perception of new brand formats.

- **Geographic identity convergence may influence brand perception**: Franklin's unique blend of suburban accessibility, rural attractions, and urban charm likely shaped how respondents engaged with the brand options. Notably, those who preferred suburban destinations reported the **lowest** persona preference of the three destination types—an unexpected result given Franklin's suburban context. This highlights the role of geographic ambiguity in how travelers interpret brand narratives.

In total, the Franklin test market not only supports the efficacy of persona-based destination branding but also expands the study's understanding of how age, influence, geography, and thematic clarity interact to shape traveler perception. It reinforces that brand framing—especially when tied to emotionally resonant names and verbs—can meaningfully sway traveler preference, even in destinations without strong preexisting identity cues.

4.3.6. Wilmington, NC

Wilmington, North Carolina was selected as a test subject in this study due to the commonality of its name and its mid-sized city profile—similar to places like Wilmington, Delaware. While widely recognized, "Wilmington" isn't strongly associated with a specific set of visuals or expectations, making it a valuable location for testing how brand narratives shape perception. This setting was ideal for exploring how action verbs in place-based branding can introduce experiential meaning while preserving geographic clarity. Instead of defaulting to common tourism commands like **"Visit"** or **"Explore,"** the Wilmington brand used the verb **"Meet"**, adding a conversational tone and sense of discovery.

Respondents were shown two branding approaches for Wilmington:

- The **place-based brand**: **Meet Wilmington – Where the Ocean Breeze Meets the City**
- The **persona-based brand**: **Ocean Breeze – A Waterfront Escape in North Carolina**

This test offered insight into how the personality of a destination brand can be influenced not only by naming conventions, but by the rhythm and intention behind the words chosen to present

it—especially in coastal markets where both geographic and experiential identities can overlap.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Wilmington, NC)	308	33.96%	599	66.04%	907
Generation: BOOM	12	17.91%	55	82.09%	67
Generation: GENX	63	28.51%	158	71.49%	221
Generation: GENY	157	36.77%	270	63.23%	427
Generation: GENZ	76	39.58%	116	60.42%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	219	32.25%	460	67.75%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	77	39.90%	116	60.10%	193
Trip Frequency: High	12	34.29%	23	65.71%	35
Influence Factor: FRIEND	208	34.15%	401	65.85%	609
Influence Factor: SOCIAL	94	34.94%	175	65.06%	269
Influence Factor: DMO	42	35.59%	76	64.41%	118
Influence Factor: YELP	128	32.82%	262	67.18%	390
Influence Factor: COST	188	33.45%	374	66.55%	562
Influence Factor: INTEREST	254	34.28%	487	65.72%	741
Influence Factor: PAST	188	34.75%	353	65.25%	541

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Campaign Awareness: YES	61	30.35%	140	69.65%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	214	36.21%	377	63.79%	591
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	33	28.70%	82	71.30%	115
Destination Type: URBAN	234	37.93%	383	62.07%	617
Destination Type: SUBURB	41	26.28%	115	73.72%	156
Destination Type: RURAL	33	24.63%	101	75.37%	134

Overall Destination Brand Preference (Wilmington, NC)
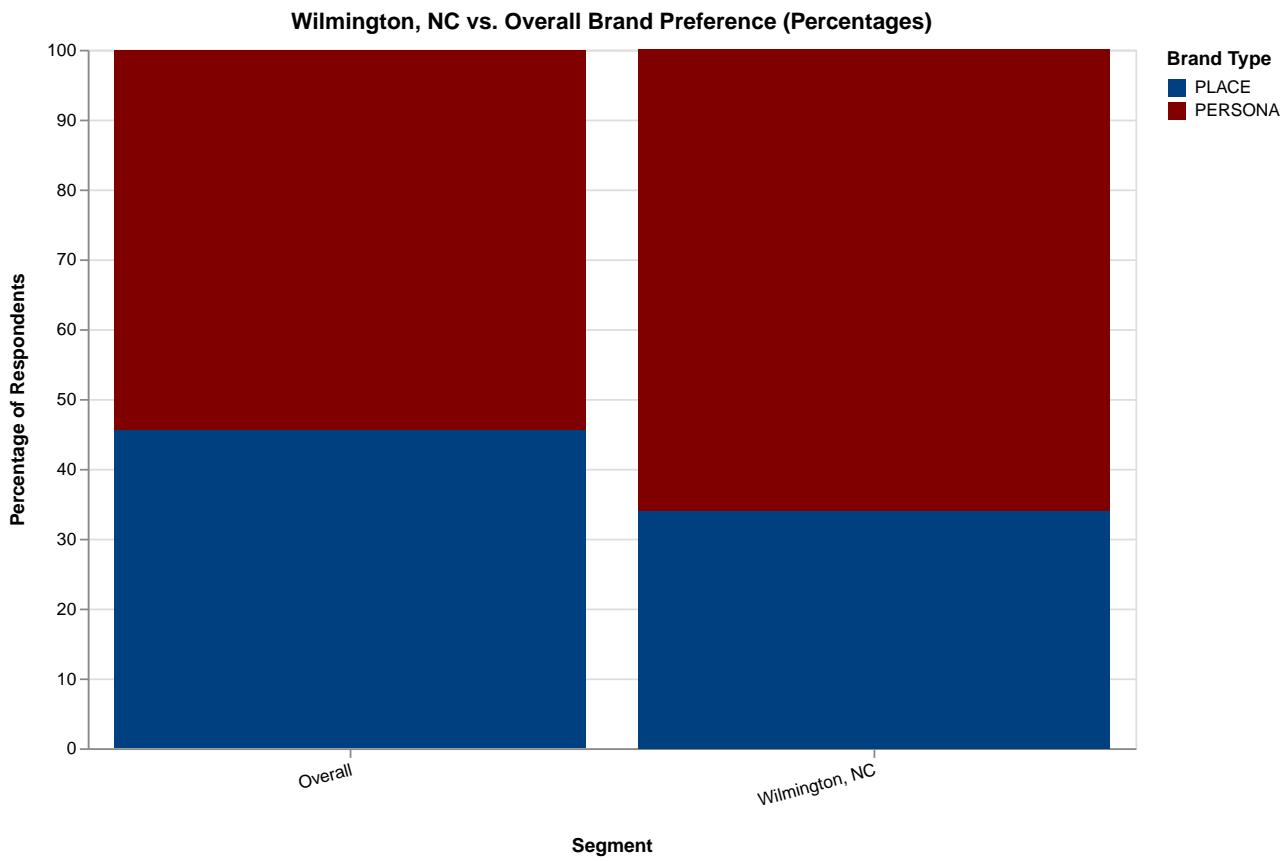
Figure 51. Wilmington, NC vs. Overall Brand Preference

Wilmington, North Carolina yielded one of the strongest responses in favor of the persona-based brand, coming in a close second only to Franklin in terms of overall preference for evocative over

geographic naming. This result is perhaps unsurprising given the widespread popularity of beach destinations and the universally familiar imagery associated with coastal experiences.

The persona brand "Ocean Breeze" taps into a sensory motif that resonates deeply across demographics—nearly everyone has encountered a gentle seaside wind and associates it with calm, escape, or renewal. In contrast, "Meet Wilmington," while pleasant, lacks the same immediate emotional hook. Among all the destinations tested, Wilmington may best illustrate the core insight of the study: that travelers often connect more strongly with branding that evokes a feeling they already understand, rather than one that simply points to a place on the map.

Destination Brand Preferences by Age Group (Wilmington, NC)
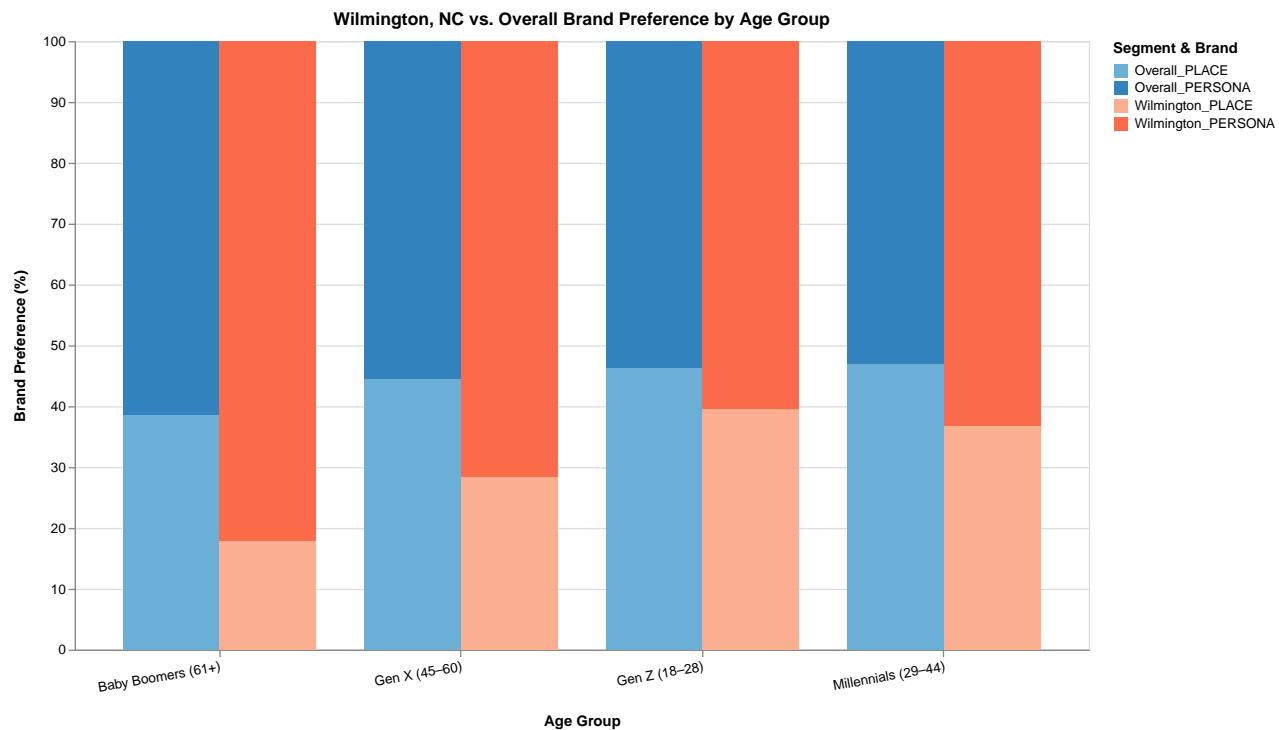

Figure 52. Wilmington, NC vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

What's particularly fascinating about the contrast between the Franklin and Wilmington test markets is the reversal in generational response patterns. In Franklin, favorability toward the persona brand followed a predictable stair-step progression—Baby Boomers showed the least preference, with each younger generation expressing progressively more favorability, culminating with Gen Z. Wilmington, on the other hand, flipped that pattern entirely. In this coastal test market, Gen Z exhibited the **least** preference for the persona brand, while Baby Boomers expressed the **strongest** favorability—aligning more closely with the overall trends observed across the full study.

This reversal underscores a key insight: while persona-based branding performs well across all age cohorts, the degree of appeal is not static. Instead, it appears highly sensitive to the type of destination being marketed and the specific emotional framing used. Both test markets demonstrated a clear overall preference for persona-based brands, but the contrasting generational dynamics reveal how nuanced that preference can be depending on the narrative context.

Destination Brand Preferences by Travel Frequency (Wilmington, NC)
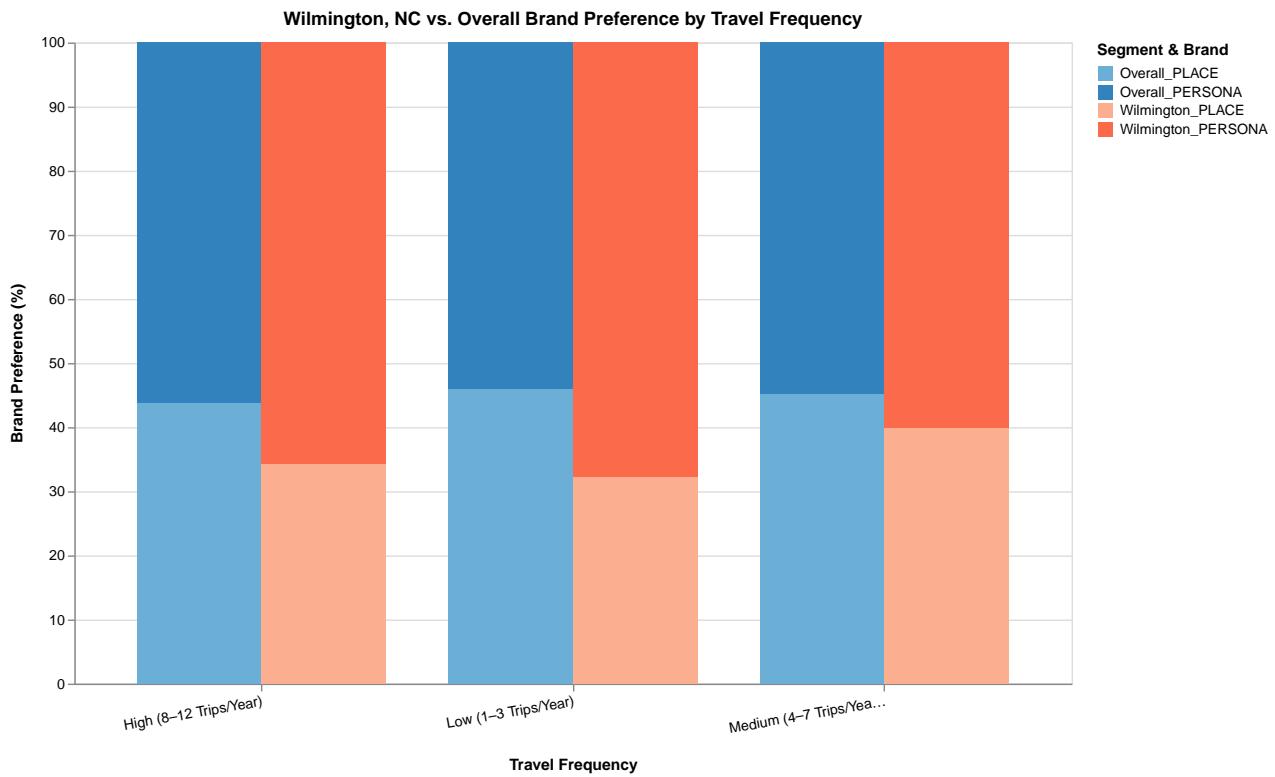
Figure 53. Wilmington, NC vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

In the Wilmington test market, all travel frequency cohorts—low, medium, and high—exhibited a consistent and clear preference for the persona-based brand, reinforcing the broader pattern observed throughout the study. Interestingly, the medium frequency group, typically considered a balanced and reliable audience segment, demonstrated the **lowest** favorability toward the persona brand among the three cohorts. This counterintuitive result suggests that travel frequency alone is not a strong predictor of how individuals will respond to a destination brand campaign. Instead, it highlights the importance of considering emotional resonance, thematic framing, and personal relevance over purely behavioral metrics when evaluating brand appeal.

**Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor (Wilmington, NC)**
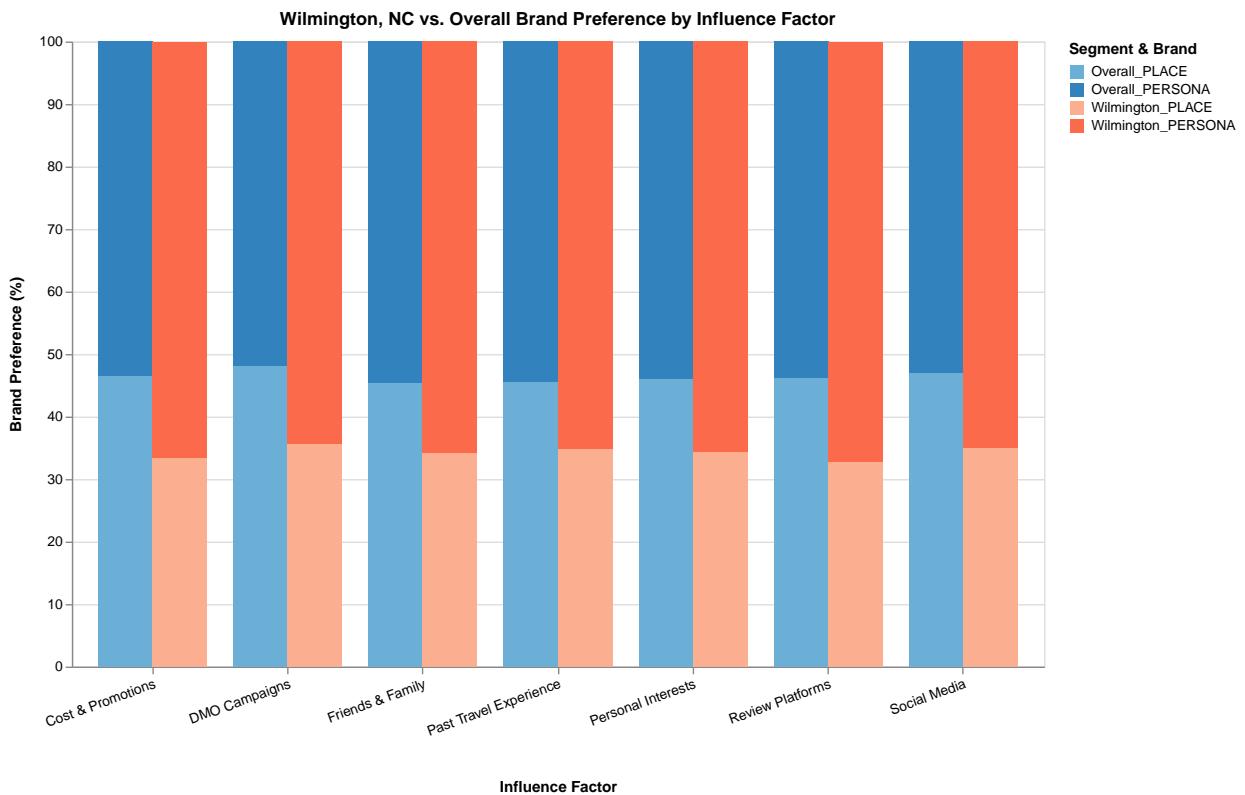
Figure 54. Wilmington, NC vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

In the Wilmington test market, the persona brand outperformed the place brand across every travel influence factor, including friends and family, social media, destination marketing campaigns, review platforms, cost considerations, personal interests, and past experiences. What's particularly noteworthy is how narrow the differences were between each influence group—regardless of what initially motivated respondents to consider travel, their ultimate brand preference leaned consistently toward the persona approach.

This uniformity reinforces a key insight from the study: the factors that influence a consumer to begin planning a trip do not appear to have any measurable effect on whether they will prefer a place-based or persona-based branding style. Branding resonance operates independently of planning triggers, suggesting that emotional tone and conceptual appeal carry more weight than the source of influence itself.

**Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Wilmington, NC)**
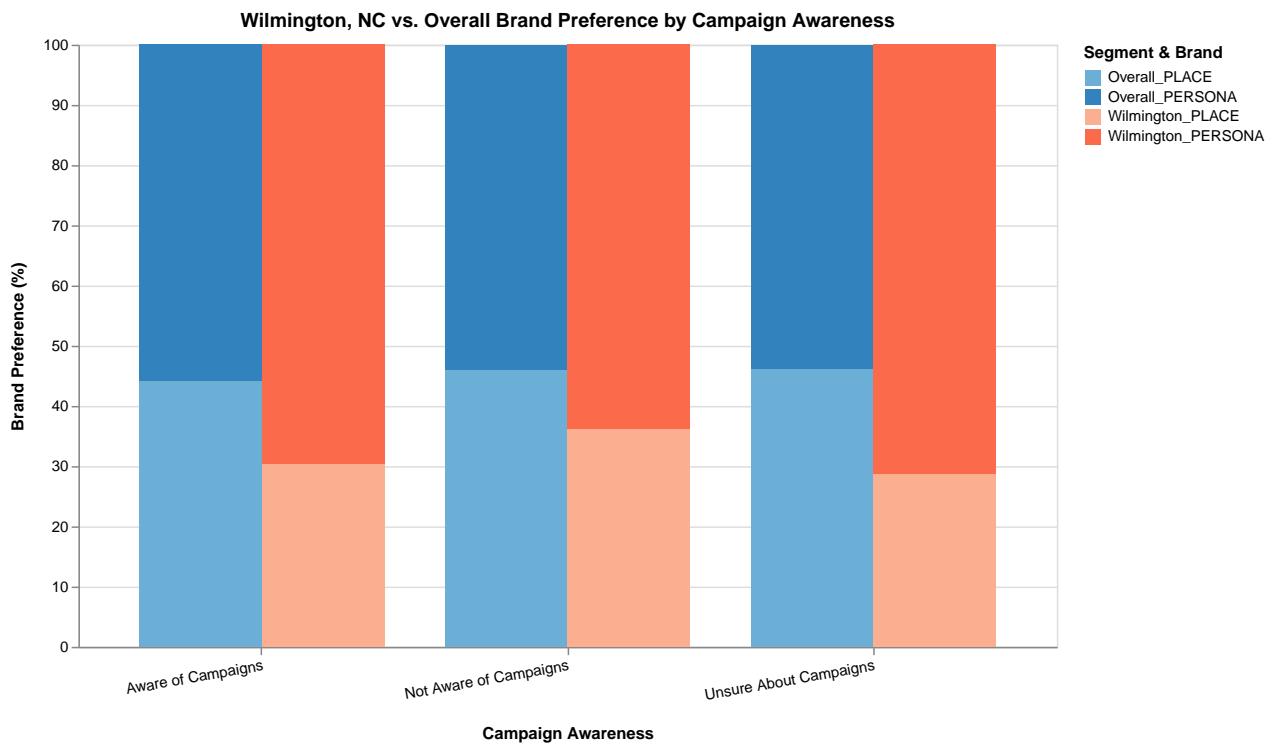
Figure 55. Wilmington, NC vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

In the Wilmington test market, the persona brand was rated favorably by respondents across all levels of campaign awareness—those who reported being aware, unaware, or unsure about existing DMO tourism branding efforts. Interestingly, respondents who were **aware** of existing campaigns rated the persona brand the highest of the three cohorts. This finding mirrors earlier test market results where the relative ranking of campaign awareness groups varied, yet never enough to shift the overall preference away from the persona brand.

Taken together, this pattern suggests that familiarity with existing tourism campaigns does not significantly influence whether a respondent will favor a place-based or persona-based brand in the future. Furthermore, it weakens the assumption that those more engaged with tourism campaigns are inherently more supportive of traditional, location-centered branding strategies.

**Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Wilmington, NC)**
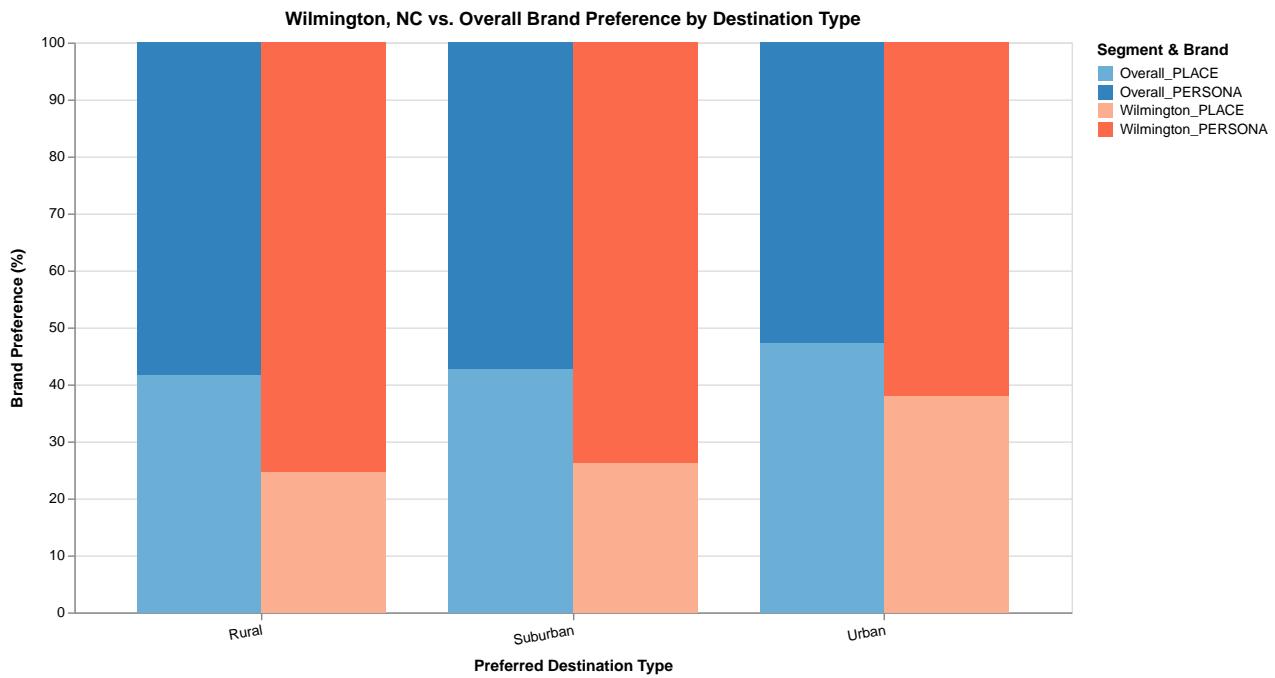
Figure 56. Wilmington, NC vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

In the Wilmington test market, the persona brand was favored regardless of whether respondents preferred urban, suburban, or rural destinations. However, consistent with patterns observed in other test markets, there was a modest increase in favorability toward the persona brand among those who identified suburban or rural destinations as their preferred travel setting.

This is particularly noteworthy given that most respondents likely envisioned Wilmington as an urban environment—even if on the smaller city scale—yet still responded more positively to the imaginative, lifestyle-oriented branding approach. These results reinforce a measurable link between a traveler's preferred destination type and the kind of brand narrative they are more likely to resonate with, suggesting that those who gravitate toward less urbanized travel experiences may also be more receptive to destination brands that emphasize atmosphere and emotional tone over geographic specificity.

Key Findings: Wilmington, NC as a Universally Resonant Persona Brand

Wilmington, North Carolina emerged as one of the most persuasive cases in favor of persona-based destination branding, coming in a close second only to Franklin in overall respondent preference. The persona brand **Ocean Breeze**—a name rich with sensory familiarity and emotional warmth—outperformed the place-based **Meet Wilmington** identity across every measured segment. These results suggest that a well-chosen persona brand can outperform a literal place name, even in mid-sized destinations with broad name recognition but no dominant visual association.

Several insights from Wilmington help validate and refine core themes from the broader study:

- **Persona preference was strongest among older generations**: In stark contrast to Franklin, Wilmington saw a reversal in the age-based stair-step trend. Baby Boomers demonstrated the **strongest** favorability toward the persona brand, while Gen Z—though still majority favorable—showed the **least**. This reversal mirrors the broader dataset's age-related trend and supports the notion that generational dynamics in brand preference are shaped by how the brand aligns with the destination's character.

- **Travel frequency showed consistent persona appeal**: All travel frequency cohorts—low, medium, and high—clearly preferred the persona brand, with very little variation between them. Interestingly, the medium-frequency cohort had the **lowest** persona favorability of the three, challenging assumptions that travel experience alone influences branding receptivity. Emotional storytelling appears to cut across frequency segments more reliably than behavioral metrics.

- **Influence factors had no measurable impact on brand preference**: Whether respondents were influenced by friends, social media, DMOs, or cost, all influence cohorts showed a strong and nearly identical preference for the persona brand. This reinforces a key insight: while motivations for travel may vary, emotional resonance in branding appears universally persuasive.

- **Campaign awareness did not shift brand preference**: Wilmington respondents who were aware of existing tourism campaigns rated the persona brand **even higher** than those who were not. While earlier test markets showed variable ordering of campaign awareness cohorts, Wilmington confirms that prior exposure to tourism marketing does not bias respondents toward place-based branding. Awareness does not equal attachment.

- **Suburban and rural travelers showed the highest persona preference**: Although Wilmington was likely perceived as an urban destination, respondents who preferred suburban and rural travel settings were **most** favorable toward the persona brand. This echoes findings across other test markets, where travelers preferring less urban destinations also responded more strongly to emotional, lifestyle-driven brand narratives.

Together, the Wilmington results crystallize the study's central insight: branding that evokes a universal emotional experience—like a calming ocean breeze—can surpass literal place identifiers in persuasive power. Wilmington's success in this format highlights how tone, imagery, and narrative can matter more than geographic specificity in shaping travel desire.

5. Examining Branding Strategy Preferences

This section explores how travelers respond to two fundamentally different destination branding strategies: one that emphasizes the destination's **real-world identity** (place-based branding), and one that highlights an **evocative experience or feeling** (persona-based branding). Rather than evaluating specific destination examples, this analysis presents forced-choice questions that isolate the branding strategy itself.

Respondents were asked to indicate which type of brand name—geographic or imaginative—makes them more interested in visiting, feels more credible, is easier to remember, and would be more likely to prompt an ad click. The resulting data offers key insight into how travelers perceive brand effectiveness across multiple psychological and behavioral touchpoints, helping tourism marketers understand which approach may hold greater persuasive power across different contexts.

5.1. Methodology: Measuring Preferences Between Branding Strategies

To explore public sentiment toward different destination branding approaches, respondents were presented with a series of four forced-choice questions. Each question offered the same two

branding strategy options—**place-based** or **persona-based**—described in neutral, text-only formats. The order of questions and the wording of answer choices were consistent across all participants, ensuring that responses were not influenced by presentation order or visual cues.

The four questions were designed to assess which branding strategy respondents found:

- more interesting
- more credible
- more memorable
- more likely to influence ad-click behavior

In each case, the answer options were: - **(PLCE)** A destination branded by its actual location name, focusing on the town/city's unique identity - **(PSNA)** A destination branded with a creative name that evokes a feeling or experience, rather than its location

Each response was recorded across four separate fields, allowing researchers to isolate responses to each of the four evaluative dimensions while using consistent answer structures.

To interpret the results, a custom script processed the full set of survey responses and tallied them in several ways:

- First, it calculated overall preference totals for each of the four branding questions independently—breaking down how many times respondents selected place-based (PLCE) or persona-based (PSNA) branding for each question.
- Then, it segmented those same responses across key demographic and psychographic groups:
  - Generation (e.g., Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z)
  - Travel frequency (low, medium, high trips per year)
  - Influence factors (e.g., friends, social media, tourism campaigns)
  - Campaign awareness levels (aware, not aware, unsure)
  - Preferred destination types (urban, suburban, rural)

For each subgroup, the script outputs counts and percentages of respondents who preferred either the place-based or persona-based brand strategy.

Finally, to understand patterns beyond individual questions, the tool aggregates all four questions into a combined total. This fifth summary section shows how often respondents chose PLCE or PSNA overall, regardless of question type—providing a holistic view of branding strategy preference trends across the study.

This layered tabulation method allows for precise comparative analysis and ensures that the data reflects true tendencies rather than anomalies within a single question. It also empowers marketers to explore which branding strategies resonate best with specific segments of their audience across multiple psychological dimensions.

5.2. Destination Brand Strategy Overview

The table below further examines the results from the **forced-choice** section of the survey, where respondents were asked to choose between a geographic (place-based) and imaginative (persona-based) destination brand format without being anchored to a specific location. This approach isolates the branding strategy itself—removing the influence of place familiarity—and offers a clearer view of which naming conventions resonate more deeply across different audience segments. The data highlights consistent trends in favorability toward location-based brands, particularly among older generations and those who travel less frequently.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference	2176	59.98%	1452	40.02%	3628
Generation: BOOM	168	62.69%	100	37.31%	268
Generation: GENX	502	56.79%	382	43.21%	884
Generation: GENY	1062	62.18%	646	37.82%	1708
Generation: GENZ	444	57.81%	324	42.19%	768
Trip Frequency: Low	1657	61.01%	1059	38.99%	2716
Trip Frequency: Medium	437	56.61%	335	43.39%	772
Trip Frequency: High	82	58.57%	58	41.43%	140
Influence Factor: FRIEND	1452	59.61%	984	40.39%	2436
Influence Factor: SOCIAL	634	58.92%	442	41.08%	1076
Influence Factor: DMO	290	61.44%	182	38.56%	472
Influence Factor: YELP	932	59.74%	628	40.26%	1560

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Influence Factor: COST	1388	61.74%	860	38.26%	2248
Influence Factor: INTEREST	1796	60.59%	1168	39.41%	2964
Influence Factor: PAST	1289	59.57%	875	40.43%	2164
Campaign Awareness: YES	449	55.85%	355	44.15%	804
Campaign Awareness: NO	1452	61.42%	912	38.58%	2364
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	275	59.78%	185	40.22%	460
Destination Type: URBAN	1531	62.03%	937	37.97%	2468
Destination Type: SUBURB	352	56.41%	272	43.59%	624
Destination Type: RURAL	293	54.66%	243	45.34%	536

## 5.2.1. Overall Destination Brand Strategy Preference
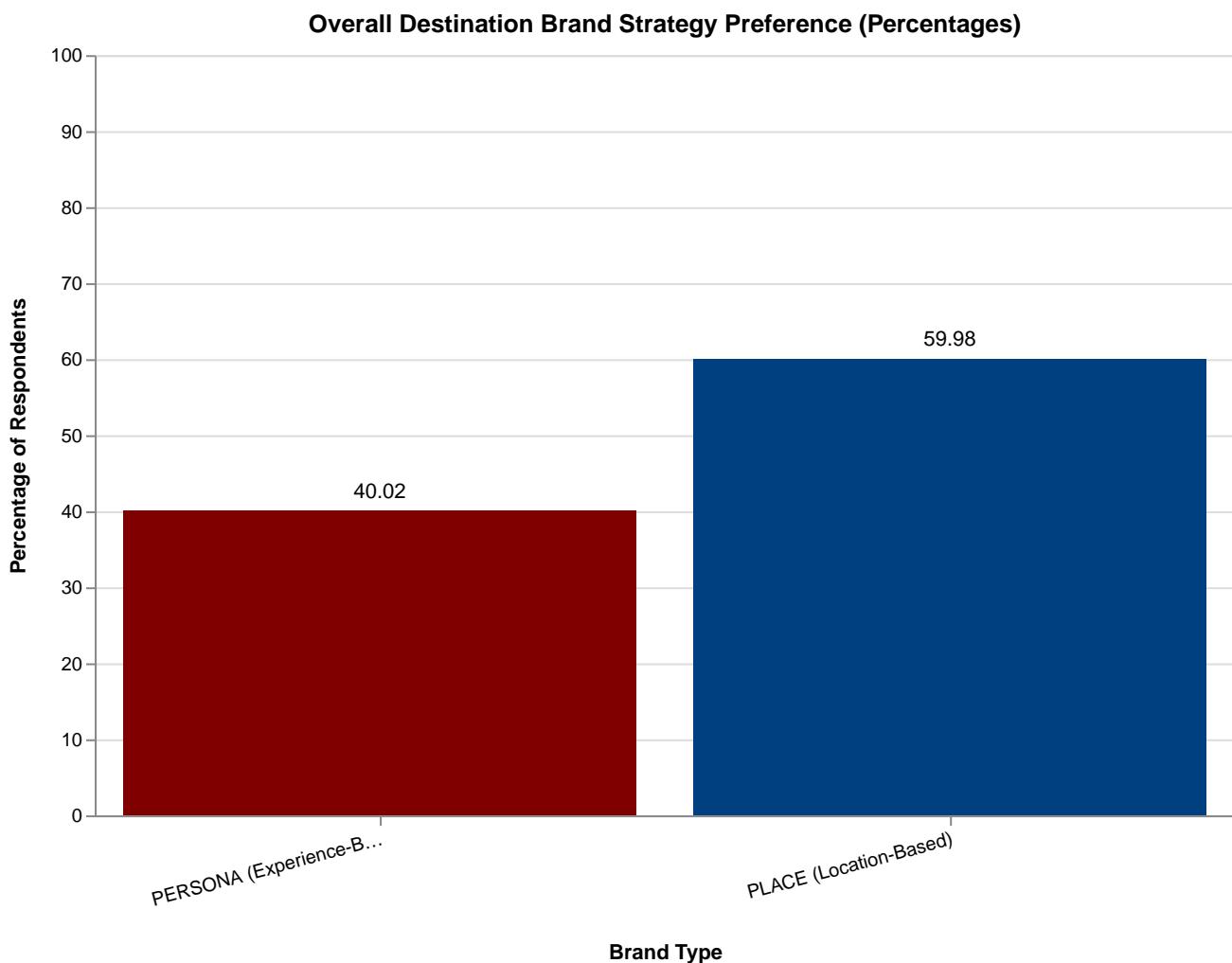
Figure 57. Overall Destination Brand Strategy Preference

When respondents were asked in a forced-choice format whether they would prefer a destination branded using its actual location name—emphasizing the town or city's unique identity—or a destination branded with a creative name that evokes a feeling or experience, nearly 60% indicated a preference for the location-based approach.

This result directly contradicts the test market performance of persona-based brands, which outperformed location-based brands by roughly 15 percentage points on average. The discrepancy highlights a common phenomenon in consumer behavior: what people **say** they want doesn't always align with what they actually choose. While the idea of naming a place after itself may feel logical or familiar in theory, real-world examples show that emotionally driven, experience-focused branding often resonates more strongly when the moment of decision arrives.

5.2.2. Overall Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Age Group
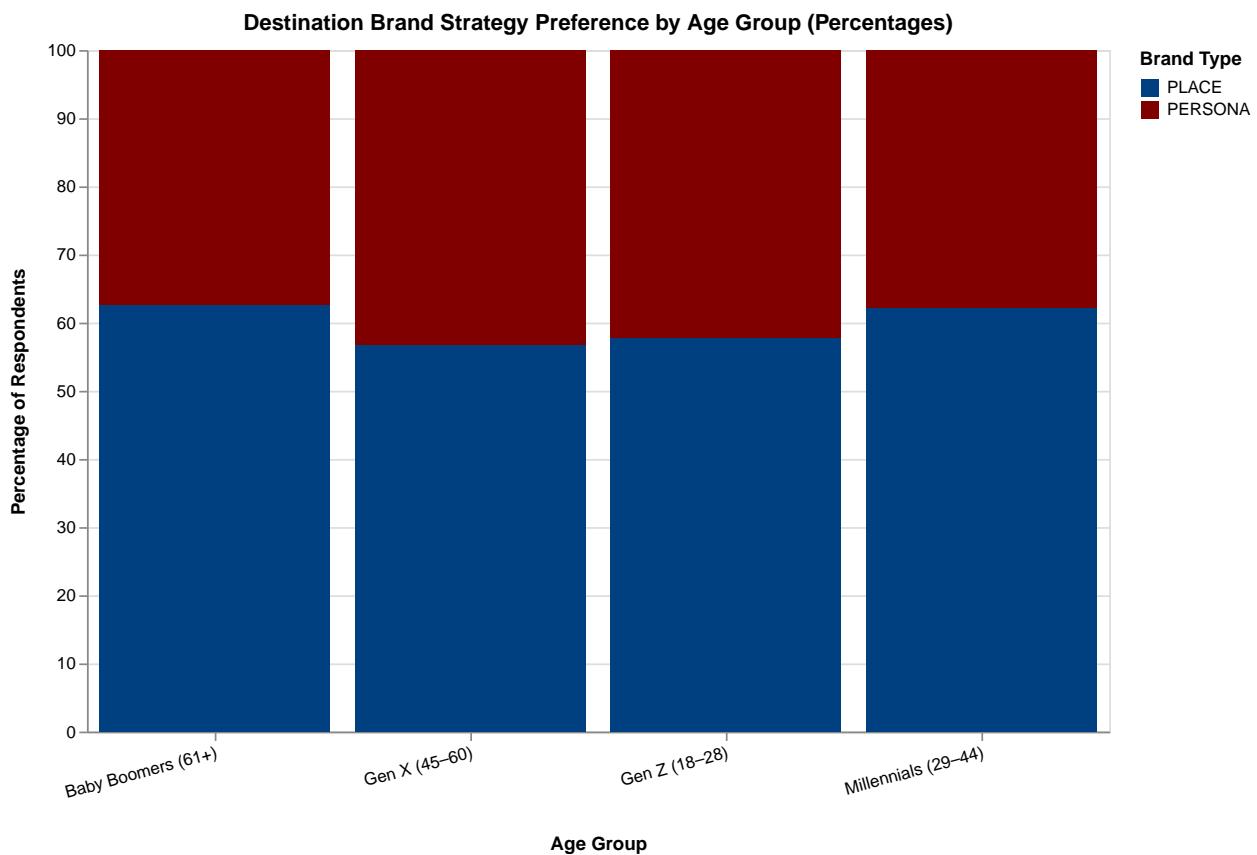
Figure 58. Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Age Group

In the forced choice section of the survey, there was little variation across age groups, with each generation showing roughly a 20% margin favoring the place-based brand strategy over the persona-based alternative. Interestingly, Gen X and Gen Z were the only cohorts to lean slightly toward the persona strategy—yet even their margins were slim.

This finding contrasts sharply with the test market portion of the study, where all age groups consistently expressed a stronger preference for persona-based branding when evaluating actual destination examples. Together, these results highlight a common theme in consumer behavior: even when people say they want something abstract or emotionally driven, they may revert to more familiar or literal options when pressed to make a hypothetical decision—suggesting that brand preference is often shaped more by context than by stated belief.

## 5.2.3. Overall Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Travel Frequency
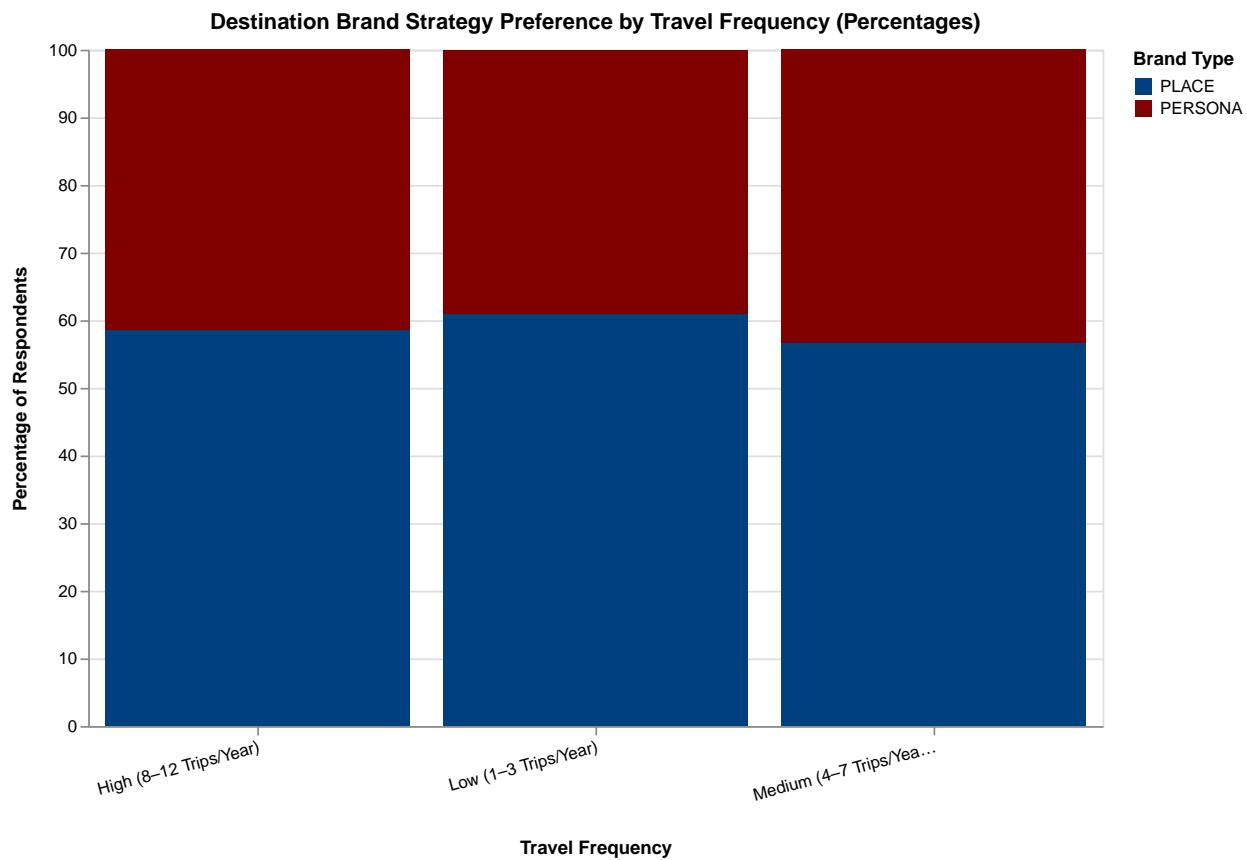
Figure 59. Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Travel Frequency

Travel frequency had little to no impact on consumer preferences in the forced choice portion of the study. Whether respondents traveled a few times a year or more frequently, all three cohorts—low, medium, and high travel frequency—showed remarkably similar levels of favorability toward the place-based branding strategy that emphasized the actual name of the destination. This uniformity suggests that how often someone travels does not significantly influence their stated preference for how a destination should be branded, reinforcing the idea that branding perceptions are more closely tied to emotional resonance and presentation than to travel behavior patterns.

## 5.2.4. Overall Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Influence Factors
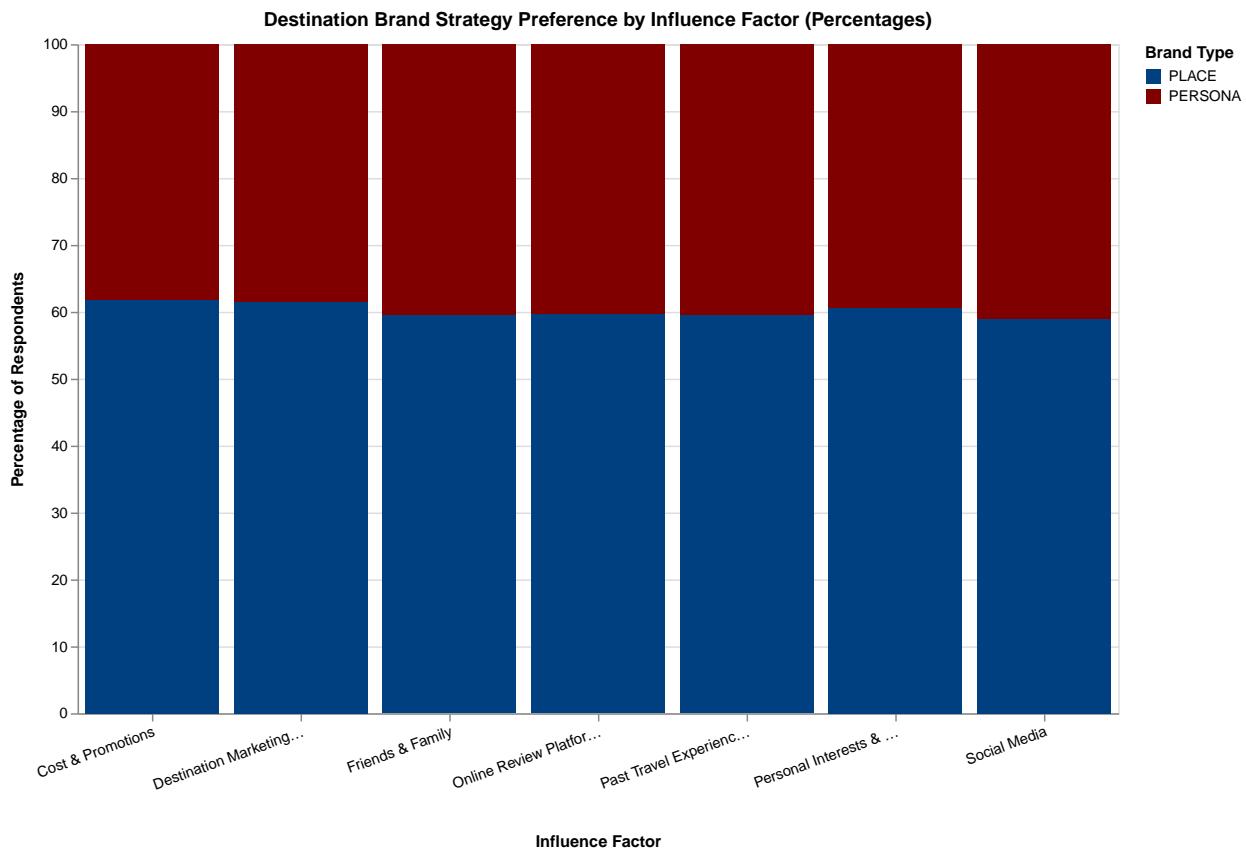
Figure 60. Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Influence Factor

Travel influence factors also had a minimal impact on how respondents viewed the two branding strategies in the forced choice section of the study. Across all influence categories—whether respondents were primarily inspired by friends and family, social media, online reviews, or promotional campaigns—approximately 60% favored the place-first branding approach. This consistency is especially notable when compared to the test market section, where similar uniformity across influence groups was observed despite the different framing of the question. Together, these findings suggest that the medium of influence not only fails to predict which type of brand a consumer will ultimately choose, but also has little bearing on what kind of brand they **believe** they would prefer when asked directly.

5.2.5. Overall Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Campaign Awareness

**Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Campaign Awareness (Percentages)**
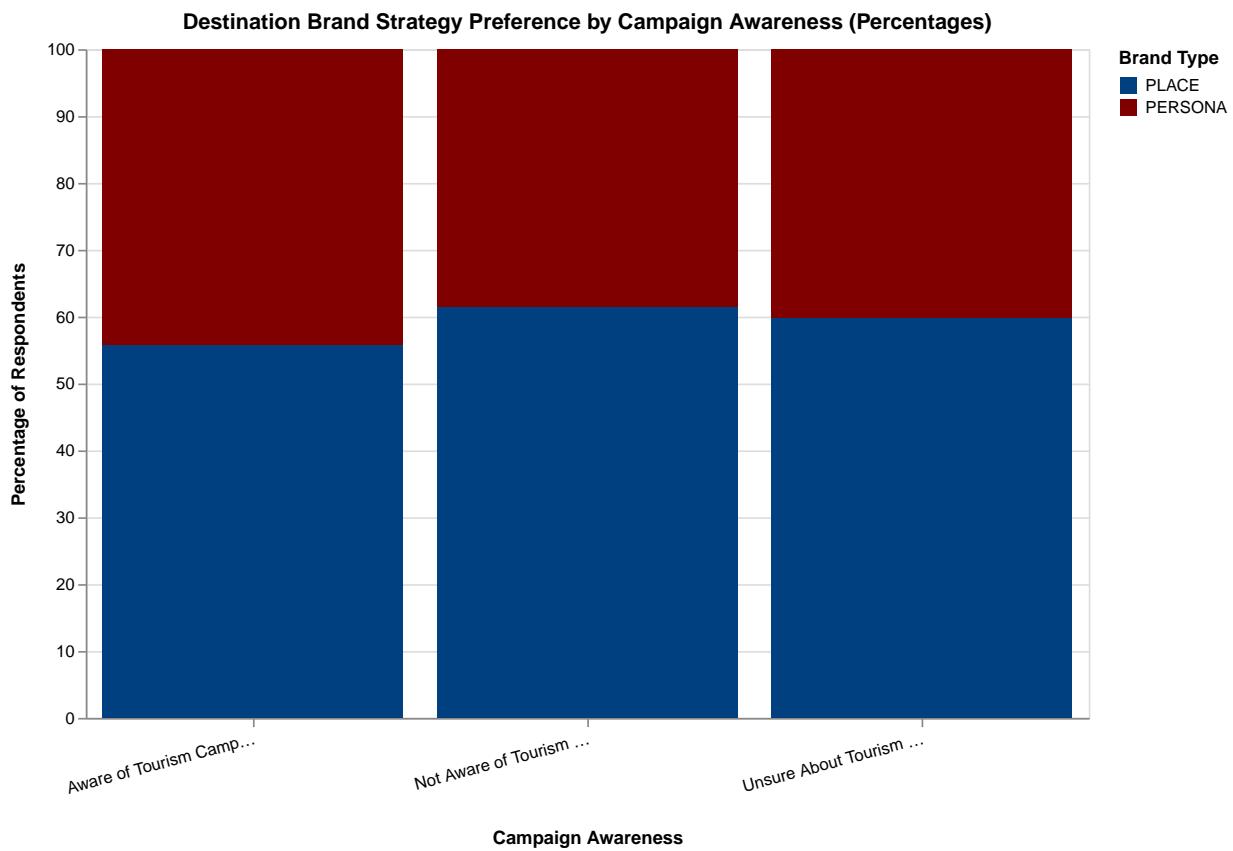
Figure 61. Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Campaign Awareness

Awareness of existing DMO tourism campaigns also did not significantly affect how respondents perceived the two branding strategies in the forced choice section. Although those who reported being aware of destination marketing campaigns showed a slight preference toward the persona-based strategy, all three awareness cohorts—including those who were unaware or unsure—ultimately favored the place-first branding approach. This reinforces the broader finding that even when consumers are exposed to professional marketing efforts, their stated preferences still lean toward more traditional geographic branding—despite often favoring experiential persona brands in practice.

## 5.2.6. Overall Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Destination Type
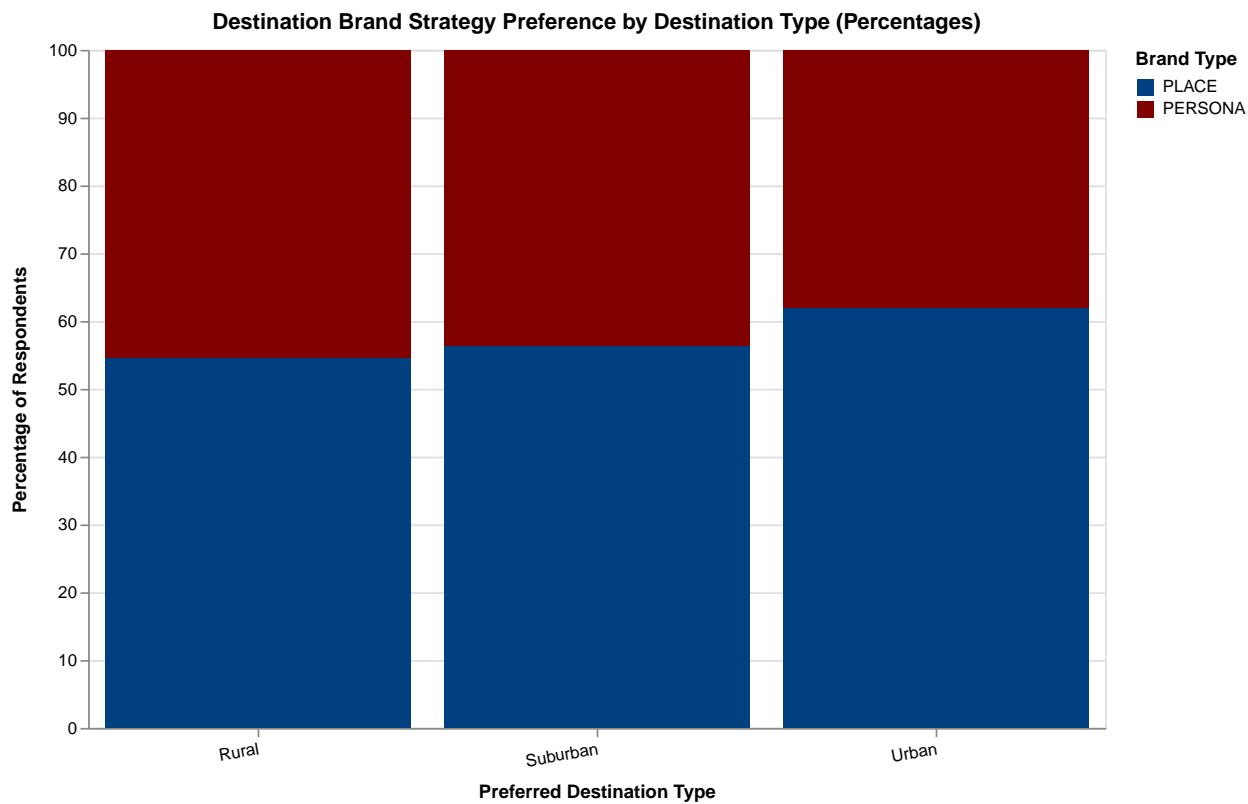
Figure 62. Destination Brand Strategy Preference by Destination Type

While all destination type preference groups—urban, suburban, and rural—expressed an overall preference for place-based branding in the forced choice section, it's noteworthy that respondents who favored rural and suburban destinations still showed a subtle but consistent lean toward the persona-style branding strategy. This recurring pattern, even when the question is framed in a direct comparison format, offers further evidence that a core segment of travelers who prefer less urbanized environments are more likely to resonate with emotionally driven, experience-based branding. It suggests that this consumer group may seek deeper narrative or atmospheric cues that go beyond the geographic identity of a destination.

5.2.7. Key Findings Based on Overall Destination Brand Strategy Preference Data

The forced choice section of the study produced a striking contrast to earlier test market results, with nearly 60% of respondents stating they would prefer a destination brand that emphasizes the actual name of the place over a creative persona-style brand. This represents a ~15-point reversal from how participants responded when evaluating actual branded destinations like **Visit Springfield**. While the forced choice question isolated brand structure from place familiarity, it revealed a gap between consumer **expectation** and **action**—highlighting how hypothetical preferences often diverge from real-world decision-making.

Several key findings emerged from the forced choice data that help contextualize this contrast:

- **Every age group favored place-based branding—despite earlier persona preference**: Each generational cohort exhibited a ~20-point margin favoring location-based naming in theory, even though they had all shown a clear preference for persona brands in the test market section. This contradiction underscores how stated preferences don't always align with emotionally driven behavior in practice.

- **Travel frequency was not a predictive factor**: Respondents who traveled frequently were no more or less likely to favor one branding strategy over another. All travel frequency groups leaned toward geographic naming in nearly equal measure, reinforcing that behavior-based segmentation alone cannot explain brand appeal.

- **Influence factors did not impact stated preferences**: Whether influenced by friends, social media, reviews, or destination campaigns, respondents across all influence categories expressed near-identical preferences in the forced choice section. This consistency matches patterns seen in the test market section and suggests that the source of travel inspiration does not shape the **type** of brand that resonates most.

- **Campaign awareness produced only minor variation**: While respondents who said they were aware of existing tourism campaigns were slightly more favorable toward persona-based branding than other groups, the majority still preferred the place-based strategy—indicating that familiarity with destination marketing does not create attachment to one style of branding over another.

- **Suburban and rural-preferring travelers continue to show a slight persona tilt**: Even when asked to choose between abstract brand formats, respondents who preferred rural and suburban destinations were marginally more open to experience-based branding. This builds on earlier findings and further validates that a meaningful subset of less-urban travelers gravitates toward brands that emphasize emotional tone over geographic anchoring.

- **Consumers may say they want clarity, but choose emotion in practice**: The divergence between the forced choice results and test market behaviors suggests that consumers believe they want literal clarity in a brand name—but when emotionally engaged with a brand narrative or visual, they often make decisions based on **feeling**. This reinforces that preference is not just about form—it's about context, framing, and connection.

- **Branding is rarely a binary decision**: Most importantly, real-world destination branding is not a forced choice. Brands communicate far more than just a name—logos, taglines, ad copy, and contextual imagery all shape perception. One interpretation of the test market vs. forced choice mismatch is that persona-based brands can capture attention and emotional interest, but unless consumers can **quickly determine where the destination is**, they may hesitate to commit. This points to the value of **blended branding strategies** that use persona-style naming while still clearly signaling geographic identity.

Ultimately, these findings remind marketers that destination brand strategy is not about choosing between clarity and creativity—it's about striking the right balance between place and feeling, and ensuring the traveler sees **both** when it matters most.

5.3. Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Aspect

As part of this study's forced choice segment, survey respondents were presented with a structured series of questions designed to evaluate how different branding strategies influence key stages in the consumer psychological journey. Rather than relying on a single measure of preference, the study intentionally separated the evaluation across four distinct psychological touchpoints. Each question asked respondents to choose between two branding approaches:

- **(A) Place-based branding:** A destination branded by its actual location name, focusing on the town or city's unique identity

- **(B) Persona-based branding:** A destination branded with a creative name that evokes a feeling or experience, rather than its geographic location

Each participant was asked the following four questions:

1. **Which branding approach makes you more interested in visiting?**
2. **Which branding approach feels more credible and trustworthy?**
3. **Which branding approach is easier to remember a week after seeing it?**
4. **Which branding approach would make you more likely to click on an ad?**

These questions allowed the study to isolate and compare how place-based versus persona-based branding performs at different points in the marketing funnel, from initial interest to final action.

5.3.1. Interested in Visiting

Respondents were asked, **"Which branding approach makes you more interested in visiting?"** as a way to measure the surface-level appeal of each branding strategy. This question was designed to capture gut-level interest and initial emotional resonance with the brand concept, without requiring deep reflection or comparison to specific destinations.

Its purpose was to establish a baseline preference and to see, at face value, which approach—place-based or persona-based—felt more broadly inviting to potential travelers. This measure also served as a useful benchmark to compare against the more detailed destination test market portion of the study, helping to determine whether general appeal translates into preference when applied to real-world locations.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Interested)	507	55.90%	400	44.10%	907
Generation: BOOM	35	52.24%	32	47.76%	67
Generation: GENX	111	50.23%	110	49.77%	221
Generation: GENY	256	59.95%	171	40.05%	427
Generation: GENZ	105	54.69%	87	45.31%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	380	55.96%	299	44.04%	679

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Trip Frequency: Medium	106	54.92%	87	45.08%	193
Trip Frequency: High	21	60.00%	14	40.00%	35
Influenced by Friends and Family	339	55.67%	270	44.33%	609
Influenced by Social Media	152	56.51%	117	43.49%	269
Influenced by Destination Marketing Campaigns	73	61.86%	45	38.14%	118
Influenced by Online Review Platforms	217	55.64%	173	44.36%	390
Influenced by Cost and Promotions	320	56.94%	242	43.06%	562
Influenced by Personal Interests and Hobbies	412	55.60%	329	44.40%	741
Influenced by Past Travel Experiences	303	56.01%	238	43.99%	541
Campaign Awareness: YES	109	54.23%	92	45.77%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	336	56.85%	255	43.15%	591
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	62	53.91%	53	46.09%	115
Prefer Urban Destinations	355	57.54%	262	42.46%	617

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Prefer Suburban Destinations	86	55.13%	70	44.87%	156
Prefer Rural Destinations	66	49.25%	68	50.75%	134

Destination Brand Strategy Preference (Interested)
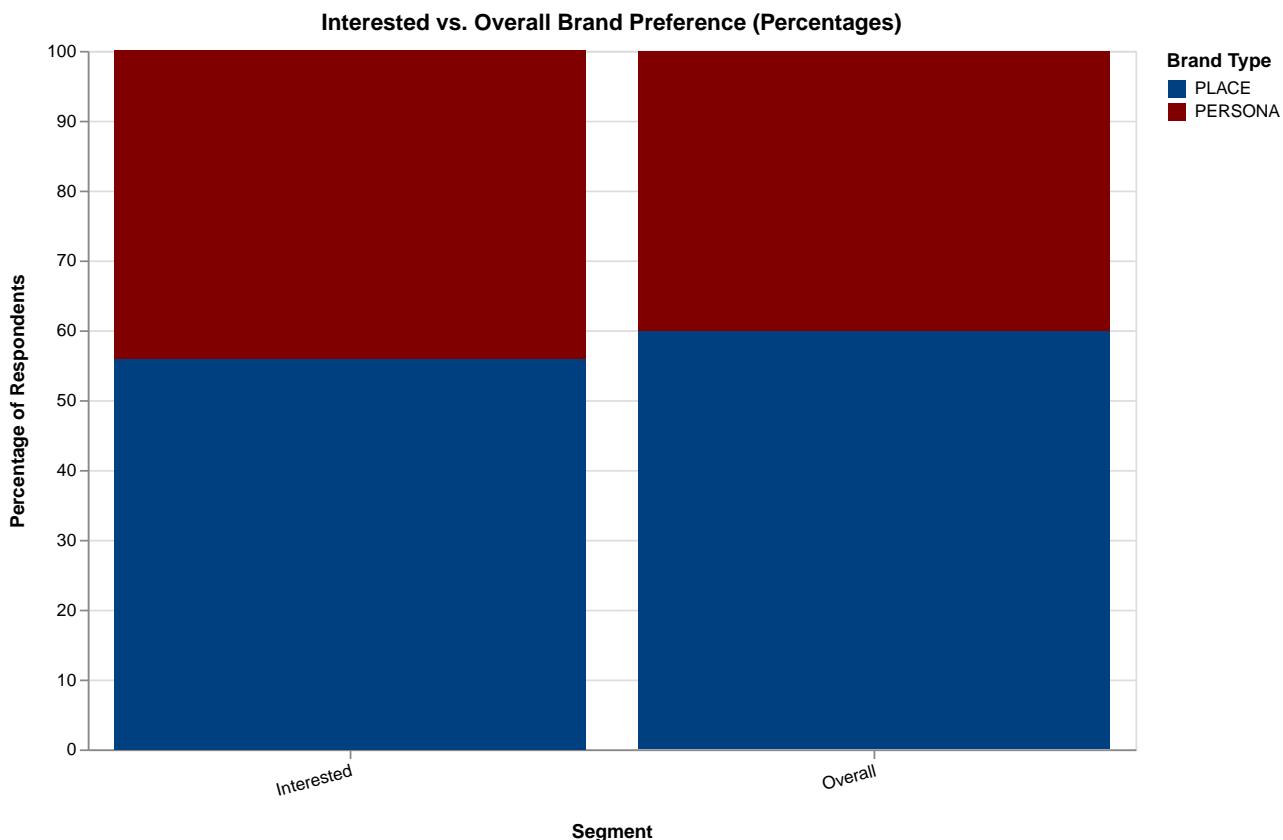
Figure 63. Interested vs. Overall Brand Preference

Respondents' preferences regarding which branding approach made them more **interested in visiting** closely mirrored the overall scoring across the study. A majority still favored the **place-based** approach, reinforcing its broad appeal and intuitive connection to real-world geography. However, this segment also revealed a **slight nudge toward the persona-based** strategy, suggesting that while traditional geographic branding holds strong, the emotional and experiential pull of creative, persona-driven names can resonate just enough to shift perceptions. This nuance highlights the emerging potential of persona branding to complement, rather than replace, location-based strategies.

Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Age Group (Interested)

**Interested vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group**
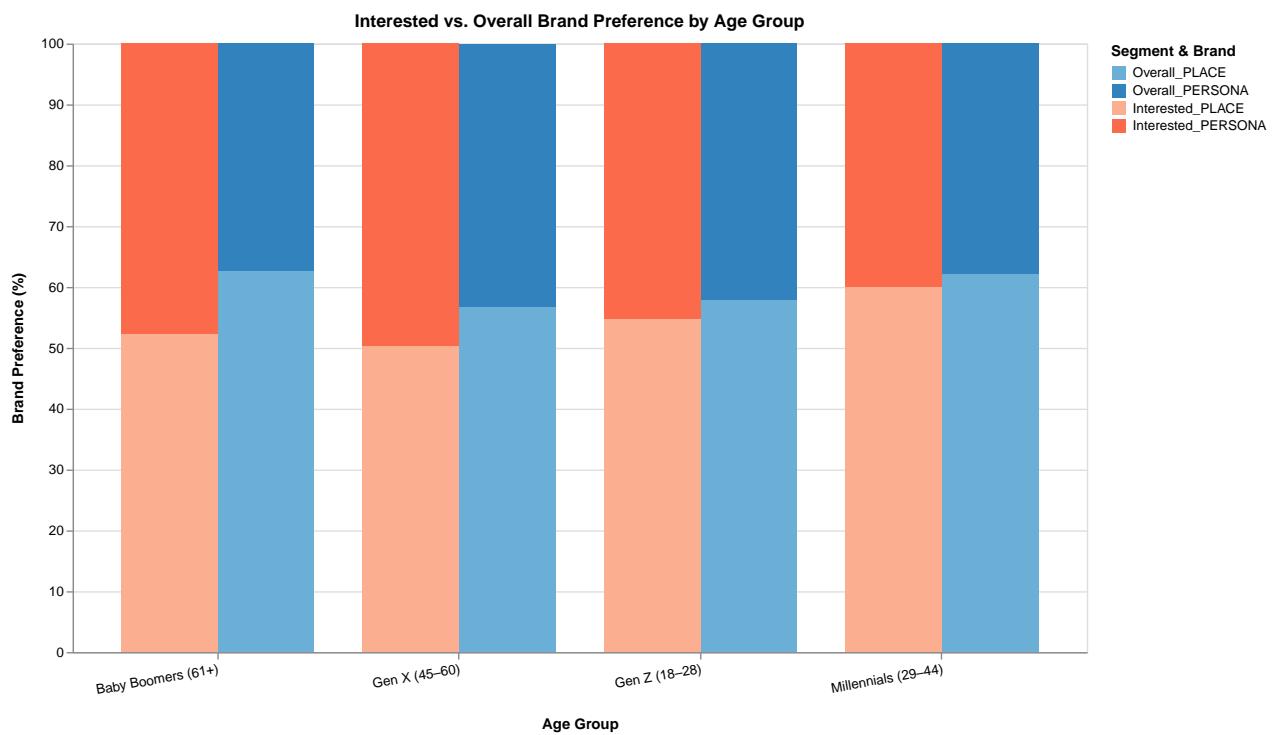
Figure 64. Interested vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

While all age groups in the forced choice segment of the study generally mirrored the overall trend in favoring the **place-based** branding approach, **Generation X stood out** with an almost even 49/51 split—nearly tipping into a **persona-based majority**. This subtle divergence suggests a unique openness among Gen X travelers to more abstract or emotionally resonant branding.

Interestingly, this pattern also appeared in some sections of the destination test market portion of the study, where Gen X respondents showed a **higher-than-average preference for persona-style destination brands** compared to other generational cohorts. This generational nuance indicates that while place-based branding remains broadly effective, persona-based strategies may hold particular promise for engaging middle-aged audiences seeking more meaning-driven or differentiated travel experiences.

**Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Travel Frequency (Interested)**
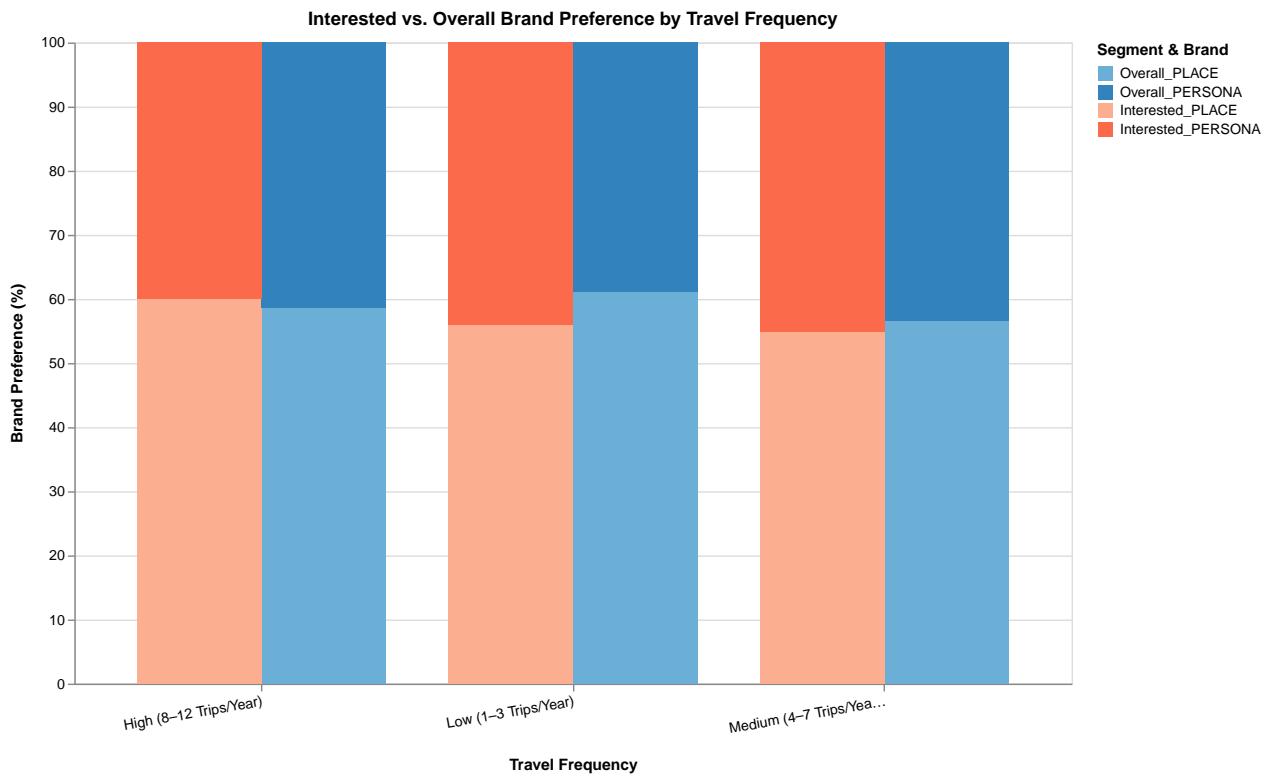
Figure 65. Interested vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

Among the travel frequency cohorts, the **high-frequency travelers**—those taking 8–12 trips per year—demonstrated the **strongest preference for the place-based branding approach**. While all frequency groups favored place-based branding overall, both the **low- and medium-frequency cohorts** showed a **slight nudge toward persona-based branding**, suggesting a more balanced appeal across branding styles. This distribution indicates that **travel frequency alone is not a strong predictor** of which branding strategy a consumer will ultimately prefer.

However, it does hint at a possible trend: in several destination test market examples, **high-frequency travelers consistently showed the lowest levels of persona brand preference** among the three cohorts. This could suggest a **subtle bias among frequent travelers toward traditional place-based branding**, potentially driven by **greater familiarity with conventional destination campaigns** and **past positive experiences** with well-established place identities.

**Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor (Interested)**
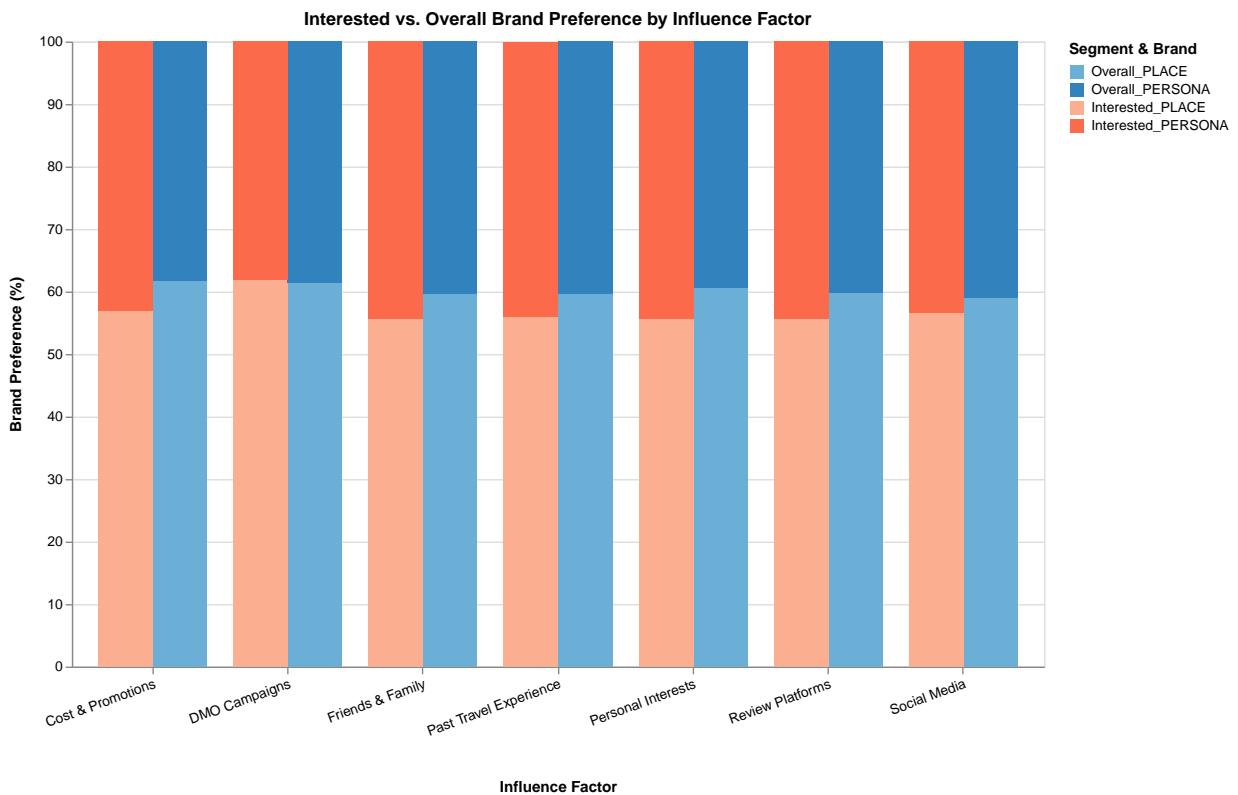
Figure 66. Interested vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

Across all travel influence factors, a consistent pattern emerged throughout the study—**respondents tended to favor the same branding strategy regardless of what primarily influenced their travel decisions**. This trend held true in the forced choice segment as well, including when respondents were asked which branding approach made them more interested in visiting a destination.

Even among those who identified **personal interests** as their primary travel motivator—a group one might expect to lean toward more emotionally driven, persona-based branding—**preferences aligned closely with the other influence cohorts**, showing no meaningful deviation from other influence cohorts. However, **one subtle anomaly did stand out**: respondents who cited **DMO campaigns** as a primary influence showed a **slightly higher preference for the place-based strategy**, even exceeding the overall preference level observed across all four forced choice questions.

This raises an interesting possibility that individuals who are **not only aware of tourism campaigns but also influenced by them in their travel planning** may carry a **mild bias toward traditional, location-based destination branding**, possibly due to greater exposure or comfort with how those campaigns are typically framed.

**Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Interested)**
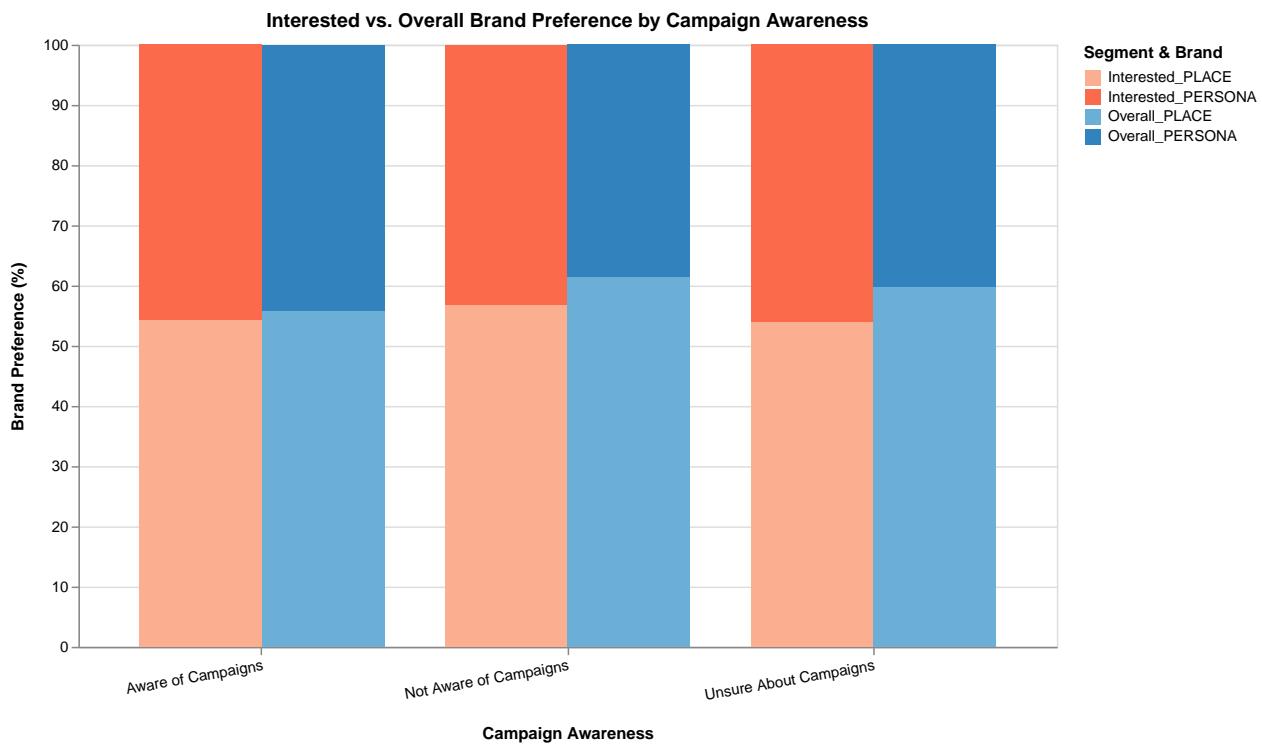
Figure 67. Interested vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

Among the campaign awareness cohorts, there was very little variance in which branding strategy respondents said would make them more interested in visiting a place. Although each group—whether aware of tourism campaigns, unaware, or unsure—expressed a slight preference for the place-based branding approach, all three nudged their preferred strategy closer to the persona-based option. This suggests that simply being aware of tourism campaigns is not a reliable predictor of how people will ultimately feel about a destination's branding style or which type of identity they believe will resonate most with their interests and travel motivations.

## Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Interested)
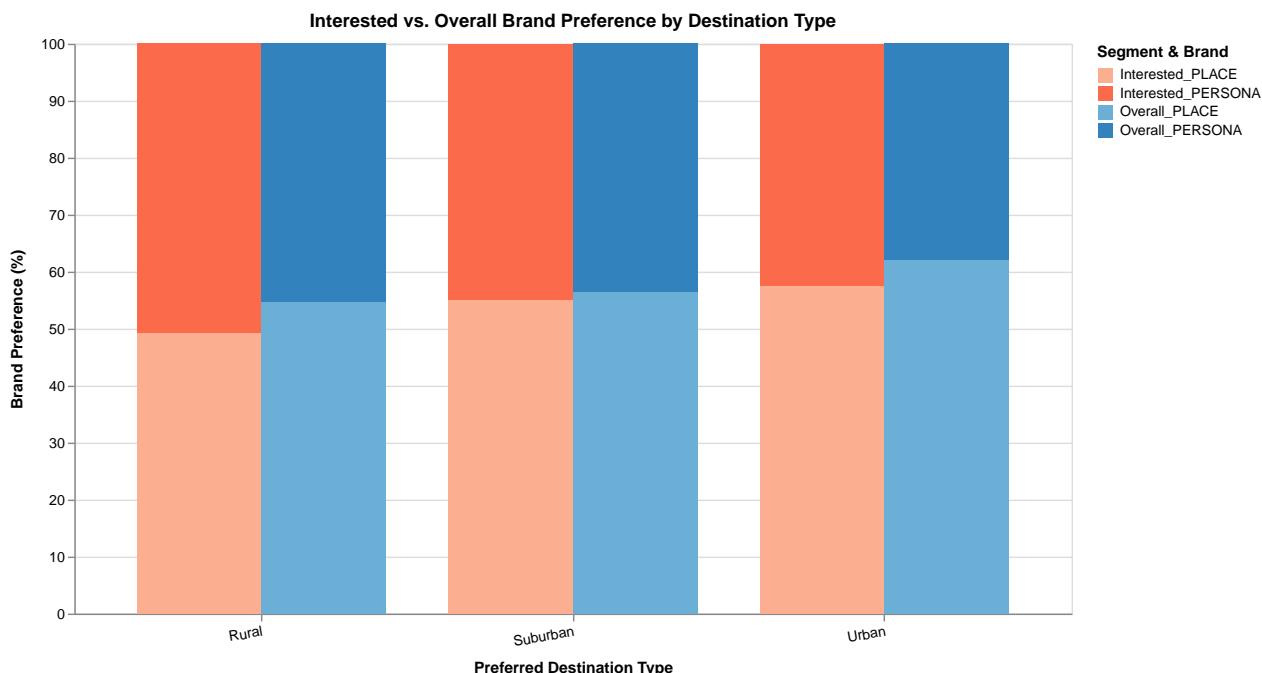
Figure 68. Interested vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

The familiar stairstep pattern toward persona branding observed throughout the study continues across destination type preference cohorts when respondents were asked which branding approach would make them most interested in traveling. Persona brand favorability increased progressively from urban to suburban to rural respondents, with rural-preferring travelers showing a slight majority—50.75%—in favor of the persona-based approach, a standout result for this specific question.

Notably, every destination type cohort leaned more toward persona branding than the overall forced choice results, suggesting that when consumers are evaluating branding in the context of their own interests and preferences, there is a consistent and measurable pull toward the emotional and experiential appeal of persona-style destination brands.

Key Findings: "Interested in Visiting" Segment Shows Subtle Persona Shift

This segment of the study asked respondents, **"Which branding approach makes you more interested in visiting?"** to understand the immediate emotional appeal of a branding strategy, divorced from any specific destination. The results surfaced several important nuances not evident in the overall analysis alone:

Place-Based Branding Still Leads, But Persona Branding Gains Ground A slim majority of respondents (55.9%) said that a traditional, location-based brand made them more interested in visiting, but the persona-based strategy wasn't far behind at 44.1%. This marks a noticeable narrowing of the gap compared to the overall forced choice results, suggesting that when travel interest is measured at a gut level, persona branding gains additional traction.

Gen X Nearly Splits Even, Indicating Unique Sensitivity to Brand Style Among generational cohorts, Gen X was nearly evenly divided in its preference—50.23% favored place-based branding, while 49.77% leaned persona. This balance was more tightly contested than in any other age group and aligns with destination test market results that revealed Gen X respondents to be slightly more receptive to persona-style brands than Boomers, Millennials, or Gen Z.

Frequent Travelers Show Slightly Higher Place Preference The high-frequency traveler cohort was the only group to show a **higher** preference for place-based branding in this segment (60%) compared to overall, reinforcing a possible trend from destination-level analysis that frequent travelers may develop a loyalty or comfort with traditional branding due to broader exposure. In contrast, both low and medium-frequency travelers nudged slightly more toward persona branding than they did in other segments.

Influence Channels Do Not Shift Brand Preference—Except Slightly for DMO Campaign Fans As seen throughout the study, respondents' primary source of travel inspiration—friends, social media, costs, or past experiences—had little impact on branding preference. However, those who said DMO campaigns influence them most showed a slightly **higher** preference for place-based branding than any other group. This may suggest that those familiar (but not just necessarily aware) with conventional tourism ads have a learned affinity for traditional geographic naming conventions.

Campaign Awareness Doesn't Predict Brand Preference Whether respondents were aware of tourism campaigns or not, their branding preference remained consistent. All three awareness groups preferred place-based branding overall, but **each group also leaned more toward persona**

branding than in other segments. This reinforces the idea that brand structure and storytelling matter more than mere campaign visibility.

Rural Travelers Show Slight Persona Majority—The Only Group to Do So One of the most striking data points emerged from those who prefer rural destinations: this group slightly favored persona branding (50.75%). In contrast, urban and suburban-preferring respondents still leaned place-based but by smaller margins than in the overall results. This pattern suggests that persona branding may be especially powerful for **reframing rural destinations** in emotionally resonant terms—turning perceived remoteness into mystique.

Taken together, these findings reinforce that **persona branding has a measurable edge when respondents are asked what makes them curious, intrigued, or emotionally pulled toward a destination.** While traditional branding still leads, its margin is thinner when interest is isolated as the key metric—pointing to persona-based strategies as powerful tools to **spark desire** and invite exploration.

5.3.2. Credibility and Trustworthiness

The purpose of asking respondents **"Which branding approach feels more credible and trustworthy?"** was to explore how **trust dynamics differ between place-based and persona-based destination branding strategies**. By isolating this attribute, the study aimed to determine whether geographic transparency (as seen in place-based names) or emotional storytelling (as seen in persona brands) more effectively builds consumer confidence.

Comparing these responses against other forced-choice questions—such as interest, recall, and likelihood to click—allowed for a clearer understanding of how **credibility interacts with curiosity and engagement**, and whether trust aligns or conflicts with initial emotional appeal in destination brand decision-making.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Credible)	718	79.16%	189	20.84%	907
Generation: BOOM	50	74.63%	17	25.37%	67
Generation: GENX	166	75.11%	55	24.89%	221
Generation: GENY	351	82.20%	76	17.80%	427
Generation: GENZ	151	78.65%	41	21.35%	192

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Trip Frequency: Low	552	81.30%	127	18.70%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	141	73.06%	52	26.94%	193
Trip Frequency: High	25	71.43%	10	28.57%	35
Influenced by Friends and Family	481	78.98%	128	21.02%	609
Influenced by Social Media	207	76.95%	62	23.05%	269
Influenced by Destination Marketing Campaigns	91	77.12%	27	22.88%	118
Influenced by Online Review Platforms	310	79.49%	80	20.51%	390
Influenced by Cost and Promotions	455	80.96%	107	19.04%	562
Influenced by Personal Interests and Hobbies	601	81.11%	140	18.89%	741
Influenced by Past Travel Experiences	434	80.22%	107	19.78%	541
Campaign Awareness: YES	151	75.12%	50	24.88%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	473	80.03%	118	19.97%	591

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	94	81.74%	21	18.26%	115
Prefer Urban Destinations	501	81.20%	116	18.80%	617
Prefer Suburban Destinations	120	76.92%	36	23.08%	156
Prefer Rural Destinations	97	72.39%	37	27.61%	134

Destination Brand Strategy Preference (Credible)
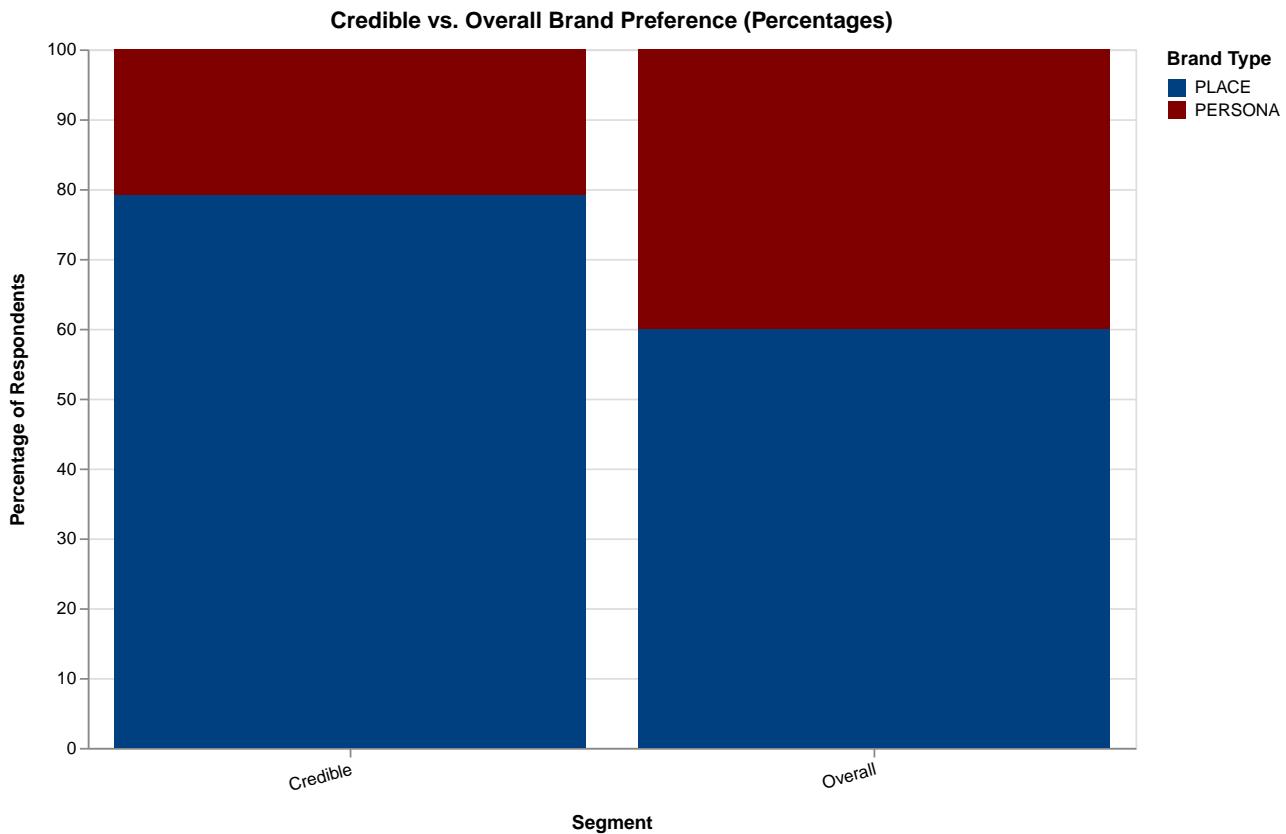
Figure 69. Credible vs. Overall Brand Preference

When respondents were asked which branding approach they would consider more **credible and trustworthy**, a strong majority—**nearly 79%**—favored the **place-based strategy**. This overwhelming preference likely reflects a deeply ingrained association between geographic names and institutional authority. For many travelers, a tourism campaign that features the name of a city, county, or state feels more official, and therefore more reliable—especially when people assume these campaigns originate from government or civic sources.

It makes intuitive sense: if you're promoting a real place, the campaign should say who it's from. But this also highlights a major **disconnect in consumer understanding**. In reality, most destination marketing efforts are funded not directly by governments, but by the **hospitality and tourism industry itself**—through local business participation and **taxes and fees collected from hotel stays, attractions, and visitor spending**.

In this light, a destination functions more like a **curated mega-resort**, where the branding is less about civic pride and more about aligning with the experiences that local stakeholders are trying to sell. As destination branding evolves, it's crucial to educate the public that they're not choosing between a city and a fantasy—but between two styles of storytelling about the same network of businesses and experiences.

**Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Age Group (Credible)**
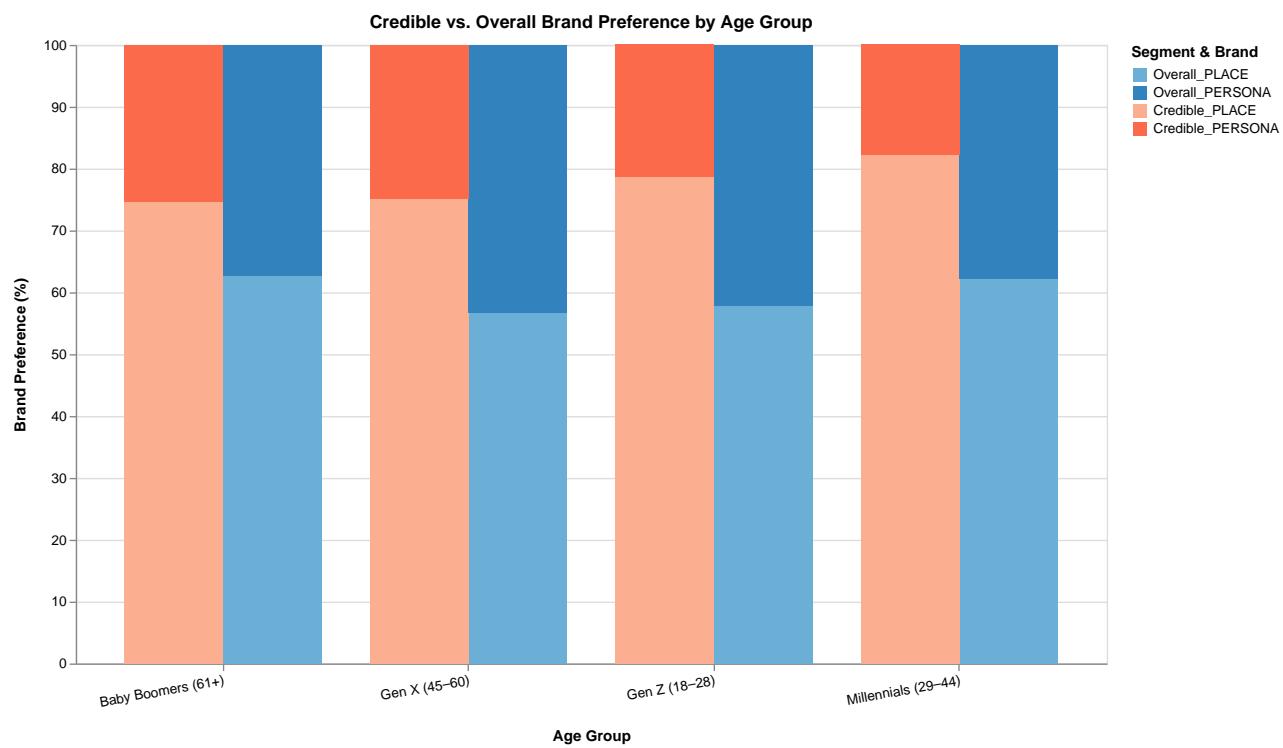
Figure 70. Credible vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

While every age group showed a strong preference for the **place-based branding strategy** when asked which approach felt more **credible and trustworthy**, there were subtle generational differences worth noting. **Baby Boomers and Gen X** displayed a **slight nudge toward persona branding**, signaling a bit more openness to trusting destination campaigns that don't explicitly reference the place name. In contrast, **Millennials showed the lowest favorability toward persona branding** in this context, suggesting they are more likely to equate credibility with geographic transparency.

This divergence may stem from **greater travel experience among older cohorts**, who have likely encountered a wider range of destination marketing styles over time and are therefore more comfortable with non-traditional messaging—especially when it conveys a compelling emotional or experiential narrative. Boomers and Gen X appear more willing to trust a destination brand on the strength of its **story and tone**, not just its alignment with an official place name.

**Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Travel Frequency (Credible)**
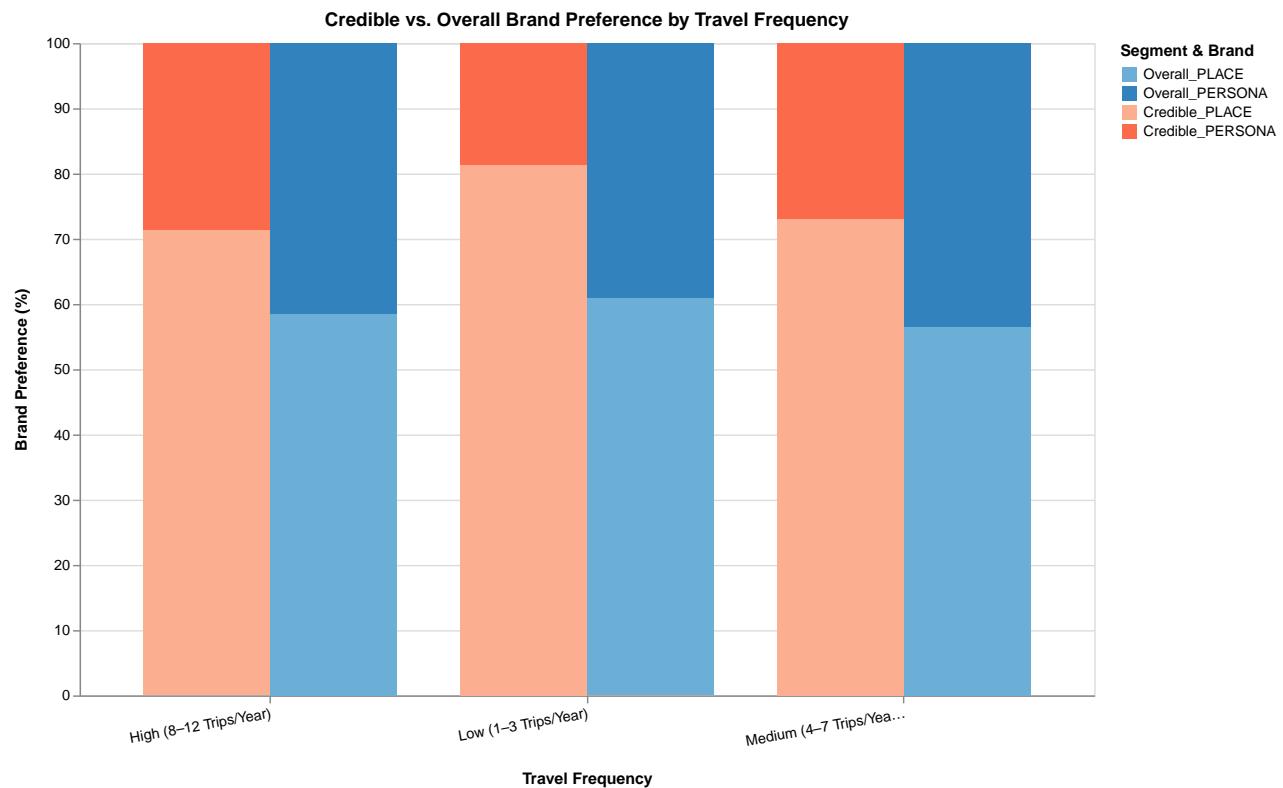
Figure 71. Credible vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

Across all travel frequency cohorts, respondents favored the **place-based branding approach** as more **credible and trustworthy**, but an interesting gap emerged between **low-frequency travelers** and their **medium- and high-frequency** counterparts. Low-frequency travelers showed a **markedly stronger preference** for place-based branding, suggesting they may rely more heavily on traditional geographic cues to evaluate legitimacy.

In contrast, medium- and high-frequency travelers—while still favoring place-based strategies—demonstrated a **slightly more open-minded stance** toward persona-based branding in this context. While earlier findings in the study indicated that travel frequency alone isn't a definitive predictor of brand preference, this specific pattern suggests that more frequent travelers may be **better able to recognize and trust a tourism campaign even when the place name isn't explicitly stated**—possibly due to greater exposure to varied destination marketing formats over time.

**Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor (Credible)**
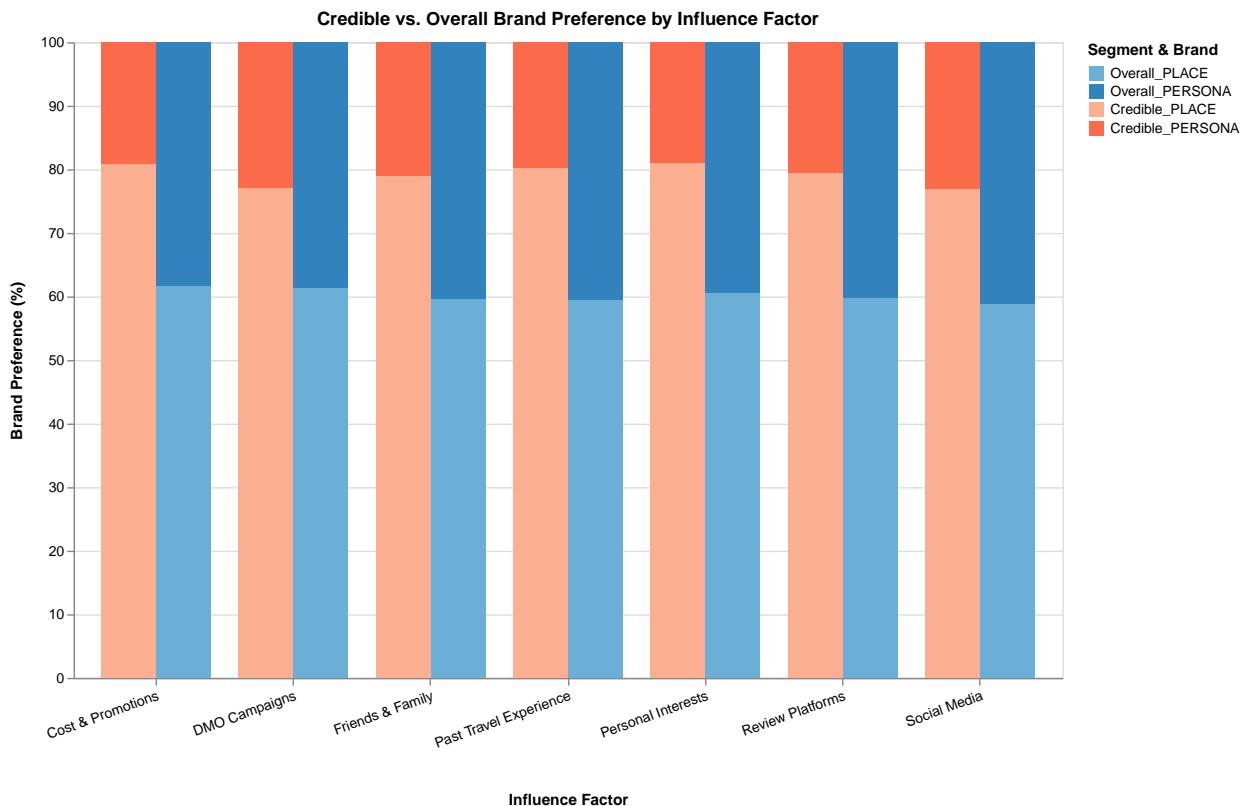
Figure 72. Credible vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

Among the travel influence factor cohorts, a familiar pattern emerged—there was only a **slim margin of variance** between the individual influence factors when respondents were asked which branding approach they found **more credible and trustworthy**. All influence groups expressed a **clear preference for the place-based strategy**, yet two cohorts—those influenced by **DMO campaigns** and **social media**—showed a **slight nudge toward the persona-based approach** compared to the others.

This outcome complicates earlier interpretations from other segments of the study, which suggested that people influenced by DMO campaigns might lean more toward place-based branding due to a preexisting bias or exposure to traditional formats. In the context of credibility, however, this hypothesis doesn't hold; the responses instead indicate that **perceived credibility is not significantly shaped by the type of influence factor**, and that **brand style can resonate across the board**, regardless of how respondents are typically inspired to travel.

**Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Credible)**
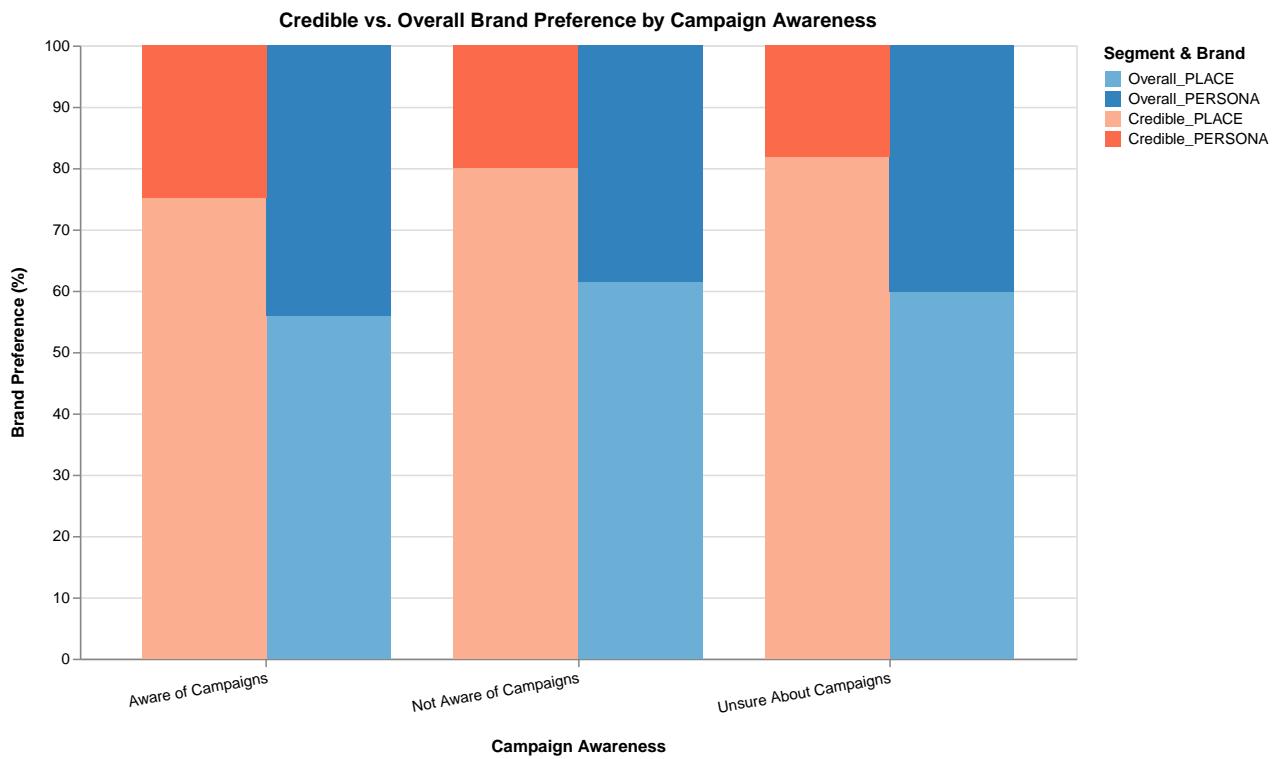
Figure 73. Credible vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

Across all campaign awareness cohorts, respondents showed a **clear majority preference for the place-based approach** when asked which branding strategy felt more **credible and trustworthy**. However, it is particularly notable that those who indicated they were **aware of existing tourism campaigns** showed a **slight nudge toward the persona-based approach**, contrasting with earlier segments of the study where this same cohort leaned more toward place-based branding.

This alignment with trends seen among travel influence factors reinforces a key finding: **campaign awareness alone is not a reliable predictor** of branding strategy preference. Rather than indicating a consistent bias toward traditional geographic branding, the data suggests that even respondents familiar with DMO marketing are open to evaluating each brand on its own terms—highlighting the complexity of consumer perception and the importance of emotional and narrative resonance in determining final brand preference.

**Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Credible)**
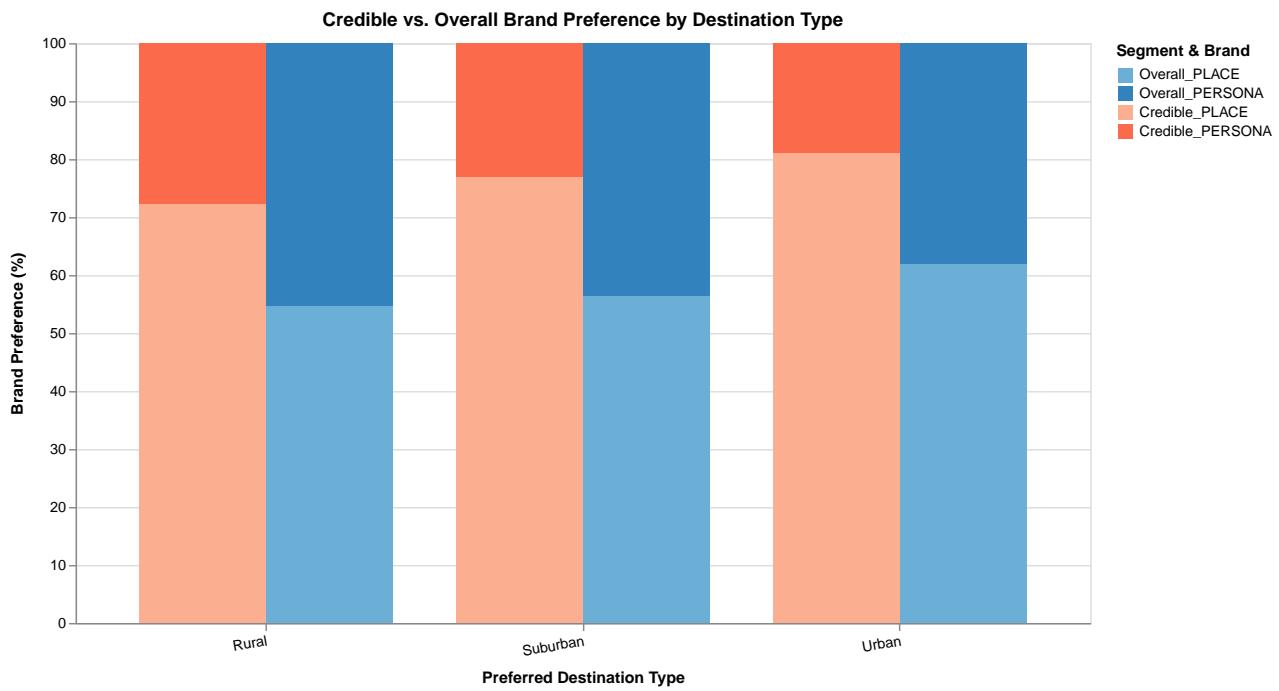
Figure 74. Credible vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

Among destination type cohorts, when respondents were asked which branding approach felt more **credible and trustworthy**, a familiar **stair-step pattern** emerged: persona brand preference increased gradually from urban to suburban to rural audiences. While all three cohorts still favored the place-based approach overall, those who preferred **rural destinations showed a noticeably higher level of trust** toward persona-based branding compared to their urban and suburban counterparts.

This finding suggests that not only are rural-preferring consumers **more emotionally drawn to persona-style destination brands**, but they also **assign greater legitimacy and credibility** to these brands. In effect, these respondents may be **more likely to recognize a persona-style brand as authentically representing a real destination**, reinforcing the idea that **contextual alignment between brand tone and traveler values enhances brand trust**.

Key Findings: "Credibility and Trust" Segment Confirms Institutional Bias Toward Place Names

This segment of the study asked respondents, **"Which branding approach feels more credible and trustworthy?"** to measure the degree to which consumers associate legitimacy, authority, and authenticity with different types of destination brands. The responses revealed powerful associations with traditional geographic branding, while also uncovering subtle layers of openness among key cohorts:

Place-Based Branding Dominates in Perceived Credibility Nearly 80% of respondents favored the **place-based strategy** when asked which branding approach they found more credible and trustworthy—by far the strongest margin in any of the four forced-choice segments. This overwhelming preference likely reflects longstanding associations between place names and institutional legitimacy, with many respondents viewing geographic names as a signal of government or civic authority.

Older Generations Show Slight Openness to Persona Trust Although all generations leaned

strongly toward the place-based strategy, **Baby Boomers and Gen X** showed **slightly higher persona trust** than Millennials, who demonstrated the **lowest persona favorability** in this context. This suggests that older travelers, perhaps due to greater travel exposure, may be more flexible in recognizing destination branding as credible even when it breaks from conventional naming formats.

Low-Frequency Travelers Rely More Heavily on Place Names While all travel frequency cohorts trusted place-based branding more, **low-frequency travelers showed a significantly stronger preference** than medium- or high-frequency groups. This gap suggests that less frequent travelers are more reliant on traditional cues like city names to evaluate a destination's legitimacy, while those with more travel experience may better recognize and accept alternative branding styles as credible.

DMO Campaign Fans Show Mixed Signals on Credibility In earlier segments of the study, respondents influenced by DMO campaigns leaned slightly toward place-based branding, reinforcing assumptions about their exposure to traditional messaging. But in the credibility segment, that pattern **did not hold**. In fact, this cohort nudged **more** toward persona branding than expected—alongside the social media-influenced cohort—casting doubt on the assumption that exposure to official campaigns breeds place-brand bias.

Campaign Awareness Doesn't Reinforce Traditional Bias All three campaign awareness cohorts—aware, unaware, and unsure—favored place-based branding in terms of credibility. However, those **aware of tourism campaigns** were **more open to persona branding** than those unaware or unsure, further emphasizing that **campaign exposure doesn't equate to place-name loyalty**. Instead, it underscores the idea that branding style can transcend institutional familiarity.

Rural Destination Fans Are More Willing to Trust Persona Brands Once again, the **stair-step pattern across destination type cohorts** appeared, with trust in persona branding increasing from urban to suburban to rural respondents. Those who prefer rural destinations were not only more emotionally drawn to persona brands in other segments—they also assigned them **greater legitimacy**, indicating that for these travelers, **persona branding doesn't feel like fiction—it feels like a story they trust**.

Together, these findings reaffirm that **place-based branding remains the gold standard for perceived legitimacy**, but they also reveal that **persona branding is not inherently less trustworthy**—especially among seasoned travelers and those open to experiential storytelling. As destinations seek to strike a balance between familiarity and emotional resonance, they must consider not just what sounds official, but what feels **authentically compelling**.

5.3.3. Likely to Remember

The question **"Which branding approach is easier to remember a week after seeing it?"** was included to measure **brand recall over time**, helping determine whether place-based or persona-based destination branding is more likely to **stick in the minds of consumers**. This aspect of the study was designed to assess not just immediate appeal, but **lasting mental imprint**, a critical factor in campaign effectiveness. By comparing recall responses to those for interest, trust, and click likelihood, the study could explore **how memorability aligns—or diverges—from emotional engagement and credibility**, offering a more holistic view of what makes a destination brand truly resonate with travelers.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Remember)	513	56.56%	394	43.44%	907
Generation: BOOM	49	73.13%	18	26.87%	67
Generation: GENX	129	58.37%	92	41.63%	221
Generation: GENY	235	55.04%	192	44.96%	427
Generation: GENZ	100	52.08%	92	47.92%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	385	56.70%	294	43.30%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	109	56.48%	84	43.52%	193
Trip Frequency: High	19	54.29%	16	45.71%	35
Influenced by Friends and Family	345	56.65%	264	43.35%	609
Influenced by Social Media	148	55.02%	121	44.98%	269
Influenced by Destination Marketing Campaigns	69	58.47%	49	41.53%	118
Influenced by Online Review Platforms	224	57.44%	166	42.56%	390
Influenced by Cost and Promotions	331	58.90%	231	41.10%	562

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Influenced by Personal Interests and Hobbies	425	57.35%	316	42.65%	741
Influenced by Past Travel Experiences	302	55.82%	239	44.18%	541
Campaign Awareness: YES	105	52.24%	96	47.76%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	338	57.19%	253	42.81%	591
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	70	60.87%	45	39.13%	115
Prefer Urban Destinations	362	58.67%	255	41.33%	617
Prefer Suburban Destinations	76	48.72%	80	51.28%	156
Prefer Rural Destinations	75	55.97%	59	44.03%	134

**Destination Brand Strategy Preference (Remember)**
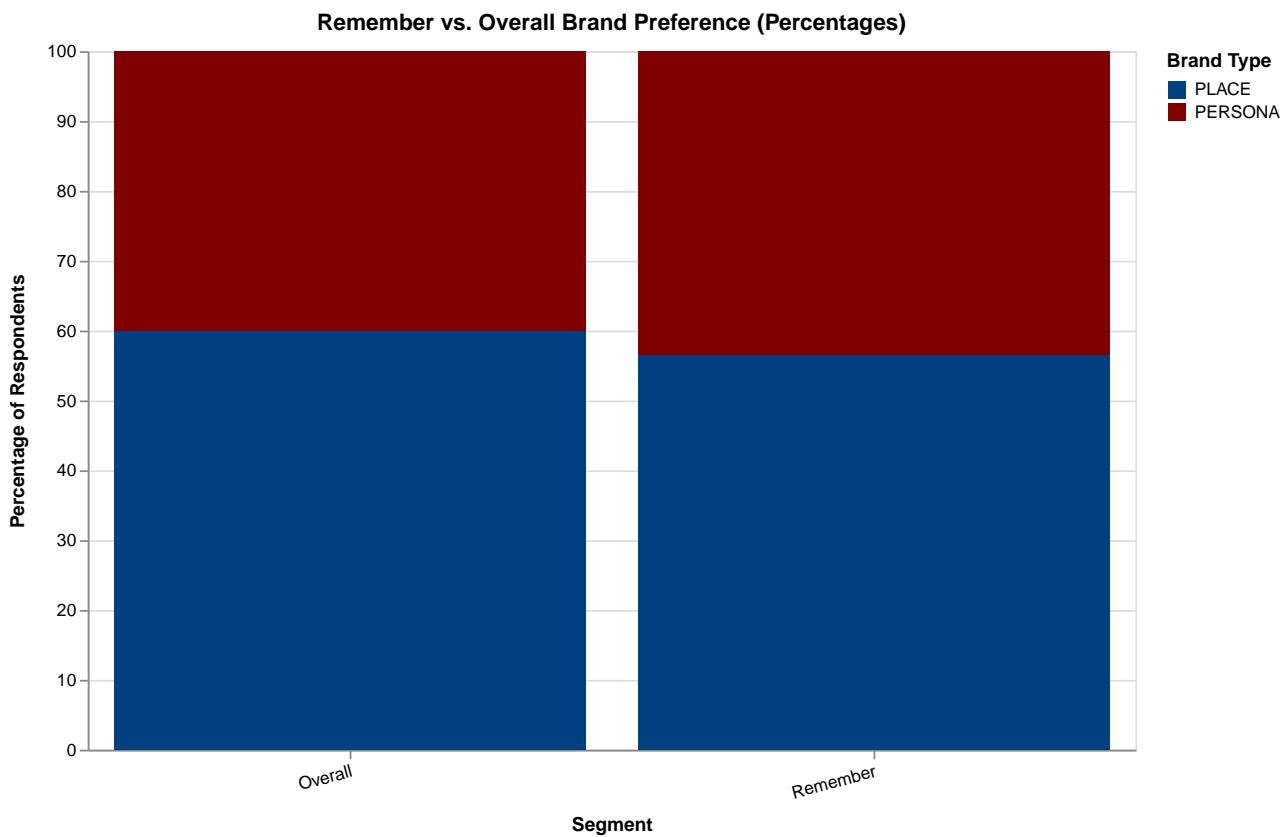
Figure 75. Remember vs. Overall Brand Preference

When respondents were asked which type of branding strategy they would be more likely to remember, the results leaned slightly in favor of the **place-based approach**, continuing the broader pattern seen throughout the study. However, this particular question revealed a **slightly higher nudge toward the persona brand strategy** compared to the overall forced choice results. This suggests that while traditional geographic names still benefit from familiarity and institutional reinforcement, **persona-style brands may offer a distinctive emotional or conceptual hook** that makes them more memorable for some consumers—especially when evaluated outside of a specific destination context.

**Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Age Group (Remember)**
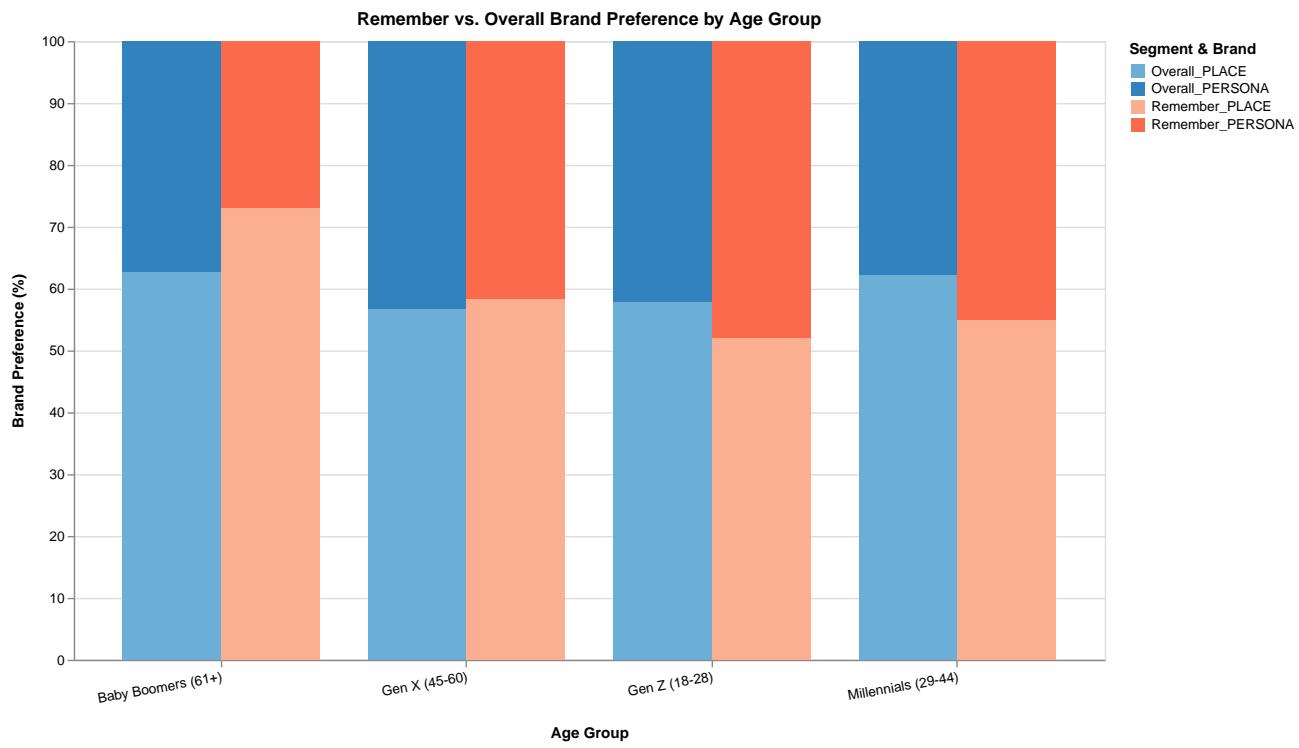
Figure 76. Remember vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

Among generational cohorts, all age groups continued to show a preference for the **place-based approach** when asked which branding strategy they would be more likely to remember. However, notable variations emerged: **Baby Boomers and Gen X** displayed a **stronger preference for place-based branding** compared to the overall forced choice results, while **Millennials and Gen Z** exhibited a **higher preference for the persona-based approach**.

This generational divide suggests that older respondents may find it more difficult to recall creative or abstract destination names, favoring instead the familiarity of actual place names. It also implies that **the success of a persona-based brand may hinge on its simplicity and memorability**—especially if destinations want to ensure resonance with older audiences. Short, clear, emotionally intuitive persona names are likely to perform better across the board, but particularly so among travelers who grew up associating destination credibility with place names.

Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Travel Frequency (Remember)
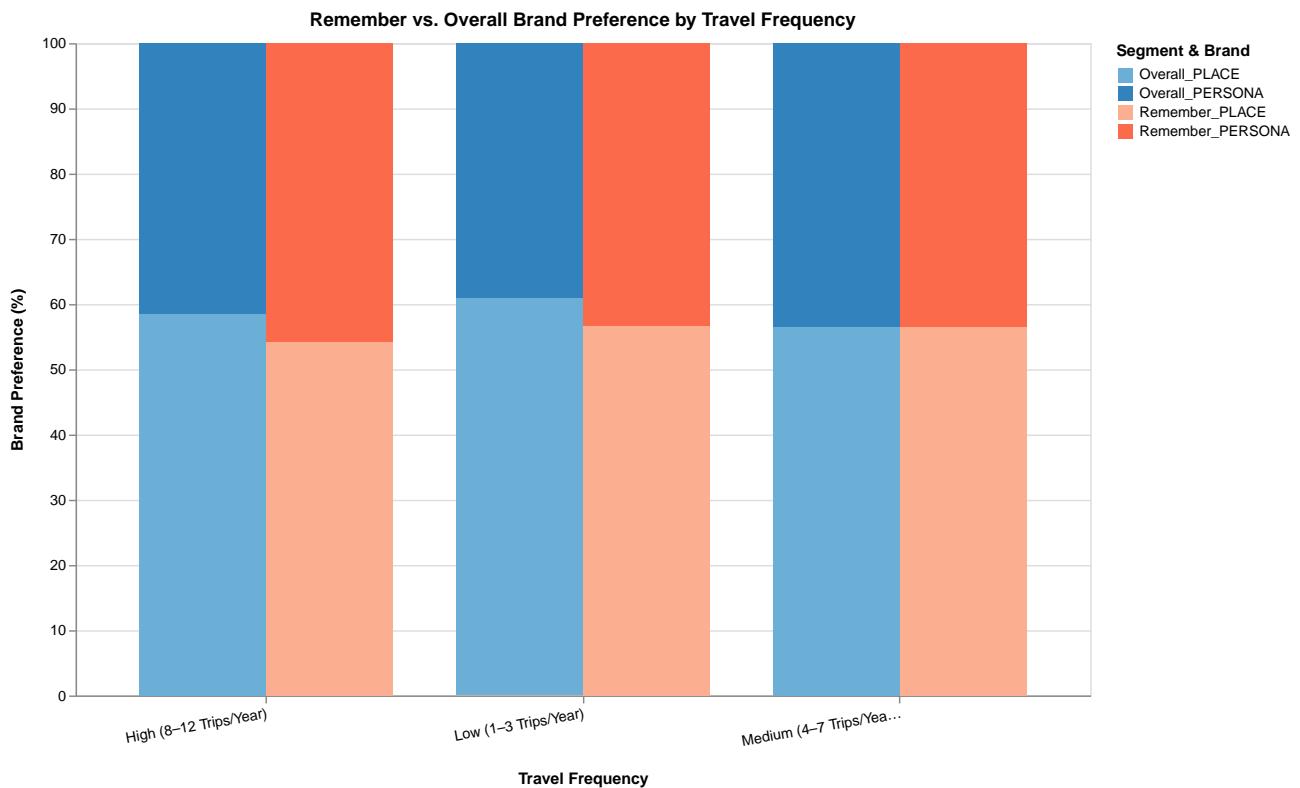
Figure 77. Remember vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

Among the travel frequency cohorts, the results for **likeliness to remember a brand** showed only a **small margin of difference** when compared to the overall forced choice results. Each group—whether low, medium, or high frequency travelers—maintained a similar balance between favoring the place-based and persona-based branding approaches. This consistency suggests that **brand recall is less influenced by travel frequency**—and therefore, less dependent on repeated exposure to destination brands—than it is by **individual cognitive traits** such as memory style or neurotype. In other words, the ability to remember a destination brand likely varies more based on **how people encode and retrieve information** than on how many destinations they've encountered.

**Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor (Remember)**
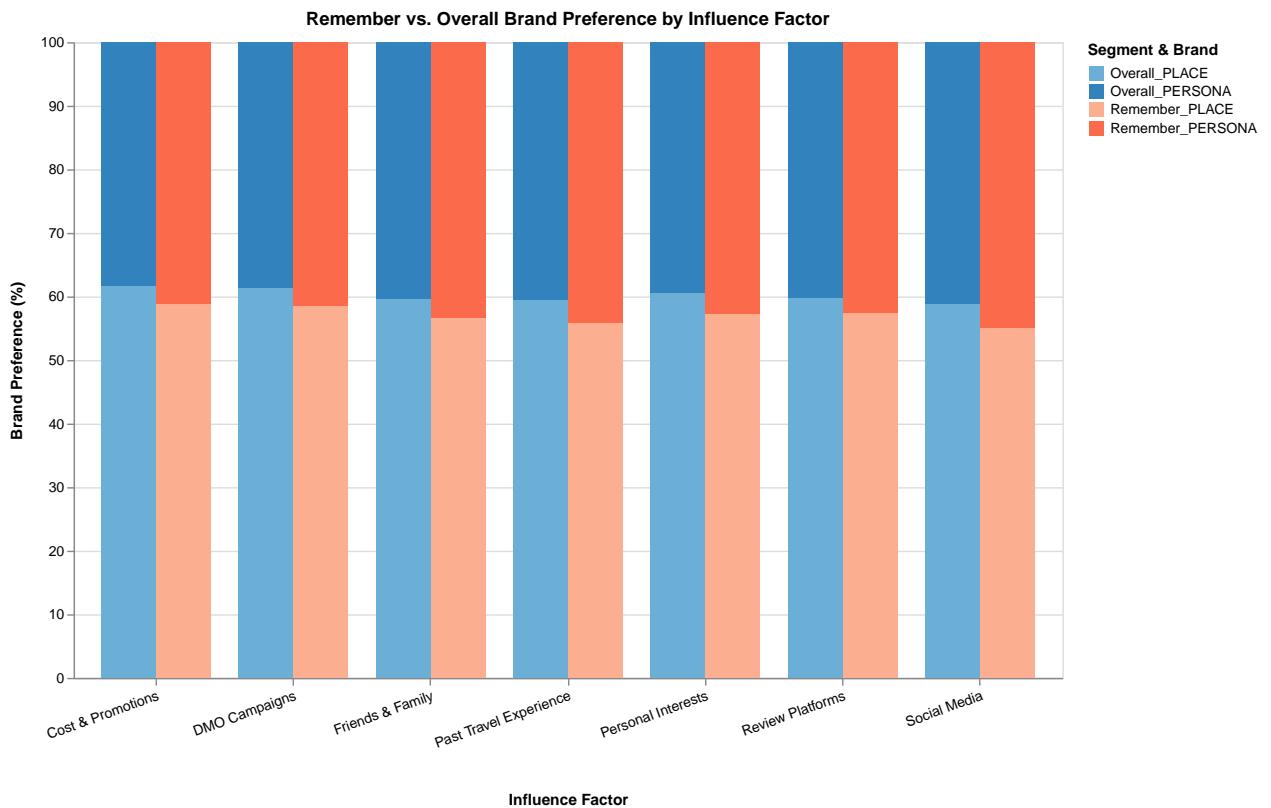
Figure 78. Remember vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

Across influence factor cohorts, a familiar trend emerges in the context of **brand memorability**—there is only a **narrow margin of difference** between the individual influence groups, with all showing a **slight preference for the place-based branding approach**. However, what's noteworthy is that **every single influence cohort** demonstrated a **modest uptick in persona brand preference** compared to the overall forced choice results.

This suggests that while the **familiarity and geographic anchoring of place-based brands** still provides a slight advantage in recall, **persona-based branding may contribute more meaningfully to brand memorability** than expected. The creative and emotionally evocative nature of persona brands seems to **aid recall to a certain extent**, even if not enough to fully outcompete the more traditional and cognitively ingrained place-based destination names.

**Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Remember)**
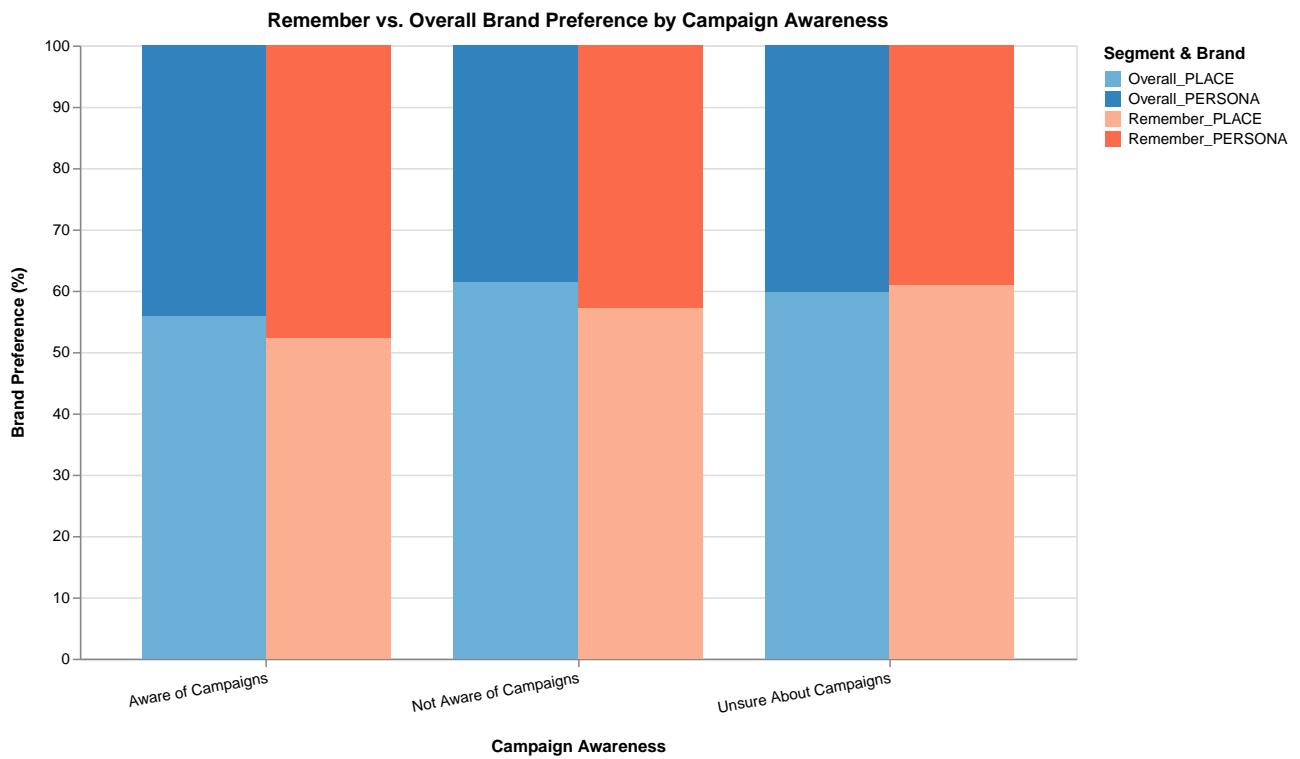
Figure 79. Remember vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

While all campaign awareness cohorts expressed a slight preference for **place-based branding** when asked which type of destination brand they would be more likely to remember, those who said they were **aware of existing tourism campaigns** showed a **slightly higher nudge toward persona-based branding** than those who were unaware or unsure. This subtle shift suggests that **familiarity with tourism marketing may actually prime consumers to notice and remember more creative or unconventional branding**. For these respondents, persona-style destination names may stand out precisely because they **break from the traditional naming conventions** they've grown accustomed to—making them more likely to **pause, engage, or do a mental double take**, which in turn enhances memorability.

**Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Remember)**
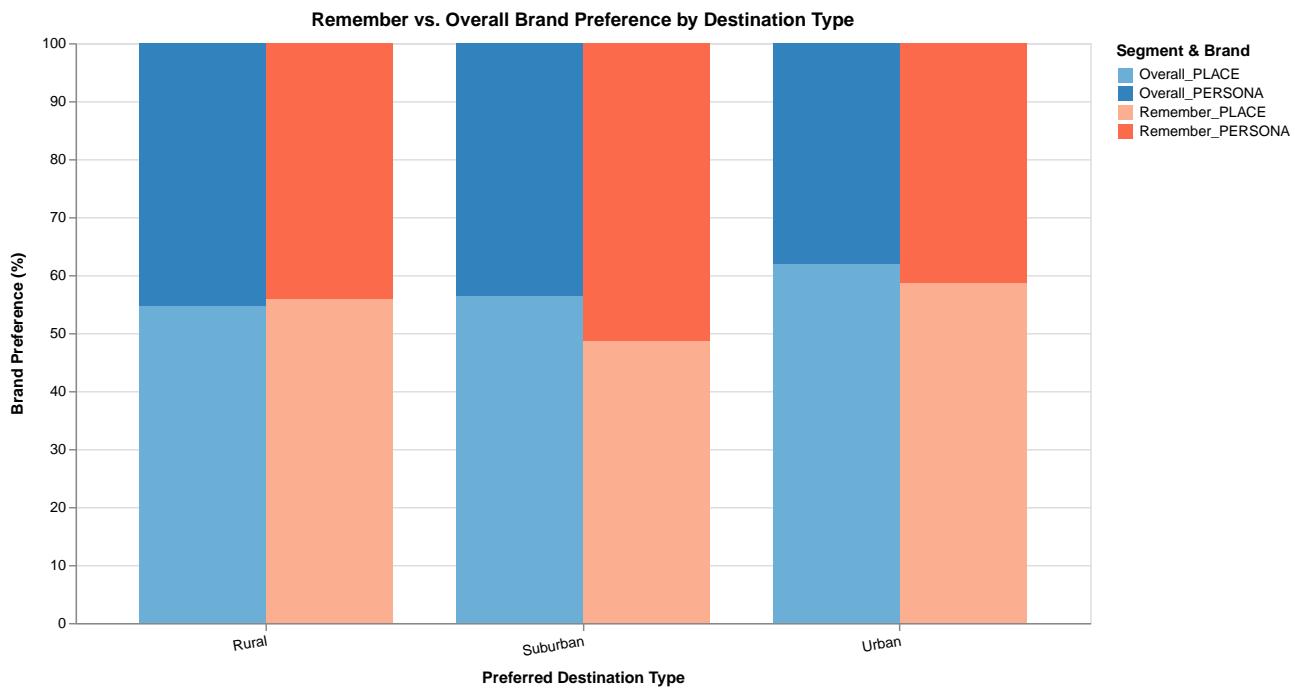
Figure 80. Remember vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

When respondents were asked which branding approach they would be more likely to remember, a surprising insight emerged: those who preferred **suburban destinations** actually showed a **slim majority (51%) in favor of persona-based branding**. This stands in contrast to the overall trend favoring place-based branding and suggests that **suburban destinations—often lacking the strong identity markers of urban landmarks or rural charm—may be inherently more forgettable** in the consumer's mental map. As a result, adopting a **persona-based branding strategy** may offer a crucial advantage for suburban locales, helping them stand out and stay memorable by **evoking emotion, mood, or story rather than relying on geographic familiarity alone**.

Key Findings: "Likeliness to Remember" Reveals a Tighter Branding Competition

This segment of the study asked respondents, **"Which branding approach are you more likely to remember?"** in order to isolate the cognitive stickiness of each brand style. While place-based branding retained a slight edge overall, this question brought forward one of the closest splits observed in the forced choice portion—revealing new insights into how familiarity and creativity interact in brand recall.

Place-Based Branding Still Leads, But Persona Branding Closes the Gap A narrow majority (56.56%) said they'd be more likely to remember a place-based destination brand, but persona-based branding wasn't far behind at 43.44%—a closer margin than seen in the other forced choice questions. This tightening suggests that **persona branding may offer a distinct mnemonic advantage**, especially when paired with emotionally resonant or conceptually vivid naming strategies.

Younger Generations Remember Persona Brands More Easily Millennials and Gen Z respondents showed a higher likelihood of remembering persona-based destination brands compared to their responses in other forced choice segments. In contrast, Baby Boomers and Gen X were **more reliant on traditional naming**, with Boomers strongly favoring place-based brand recall. This suggests that **the success of persona branding among older demographics may**

depend on using shorter, clearer, and more intuitive names that require less abstract processing to remember.

Suburban Travelers Show a Unique Memorability Advantage for Persona Brands One of the most unexpected findings was that suburban-preferring respondents were the **only cohort to show a majority preference for persona-based brands (51.28%)** in this segment. This implies that suburban destinations may be **more forgettable by default**, lacking the strong contextual associations of urban or rural locales. Persona branding may therefore serve as a valuable **memory-enhancing strategy** in suburban markets.

Travel Frequency Not Predictive of Memorability All travel frequency cohorts—low, medium, and high—tracked very closely with the overall trend in brand memorability. This indicates that **brand recall is less a function of how often people travel**, and more related to **individual differences in cognitive processing or how intuitively a brand concept aligns with their memory system**.

Persona Branding Enhances Recall Slightly Across Influence Factors Across all travel influence factor cohorts, there was a **modest increase in persona brand preference for memorability** compared to overall forced choice results. This suggests that **persona branding may activate different mental pathways** that enhance recall, even if the place name still holds a slight overall advantage.

Campaign-Aware Respondents More Likely to Remember Persona Brands Respondents who were **already aware of tourism campaigns** showed a **notably higher preference for persona-based brand recall** than those who were unaware or unsure. This finding reinforces the idea that **novelty plays a role in memorability**—those accustomed to traditional campaign formats may be **more likely to remember a persona-style brand** because it stands out from the norm.

Taken together, these findings suggest that **brand memorability may be one of the most promising areas for persona-based strategies to compete with traditional geographic naming conventions**. While place-based branding still has the edge, **persona brands that are emotionally intuitive and easy to say may offer a powerful cognitive advantage**, especially among younger audiences and under-branded destination types.

5.3.4. Likely to Click Ad

The question **"Which branding approach would make you more likely to click on an ad?"** was designed to uncover whether **place-based or persona-based destination brands are more effective at driving engagement and conversion** in real-world digital environments. Unlike questions centered on interest or trust, this one focused specifically on **behavioral intent**—whether a brand style can actually prompt action from a casually browsing consumer. By asking this, the study aimed to see if **consumer behavior diverges from self-reported sentiment**, revealing which branding approach is more likely to **capture attention and spark curiosity in the moment**, ultimately leading travelers to learn more and possibly book a trip.

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Overall Preference (Adclick)	438	48.29%	469	51.71%	907
Generation: BOOM	34	50.75%	33	49.25%	67
Generation: GENX	96	43.44%	125	56.56%	221
Generation: GENY	220	51.52%	207	48.48%	427
Generation: GENZ	88	45.83%	104	54.17%	192
Trip Frequency: Low	340	50.07%	339	49.93%	679
Trip Frequency: Medium	81	41.97%	112	58.03%	193
Trip Frequency: High	17	48.57%	18	51.43%	35
Influenced by Friends and Family	287	47.13%	322	52.87%	609
Influenced by Social Media	127	47.21%	142	52.79%	269
Influenced by Destination Marketing Campaigns	57	48.31%	61	51.69%	118
Influenced by Online Review Platforms	181	46.41%	209	53.59%	390
Influenced by Cost and Promotions	282	50.18%	280	49.82%	562

Group	Preferred Location-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Location-Based Brand (%)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (Count)	Preferred Persona-Based Brand (%)	Total Responses
Influenced by Personal Interests and Hobbies	358	48.31%	383	51.69%	741
Influenced by Past Travel Experiences	250	46.21%	291	53.79%	541
Campaign Awareness: YES	84	41.79%	117	58.21%	201
Campaign Awareness: NO	305	51.61%	286	48.39%	591
Campaign Awareness: UNSUR	49	42.61%	66	57.39%	115
Prefer Urban Destinations	313	50.73%	304	49.27%	617
Prefer Suburban Destinations	70	44.87%	86	55.13%	156
Prefer Rural Destinations	55	41.04%	79	58.96%	134

Destination Brand Strategy Preference (Adclick)

**Adclick vs. Overall Brand Preference (Percentages)**
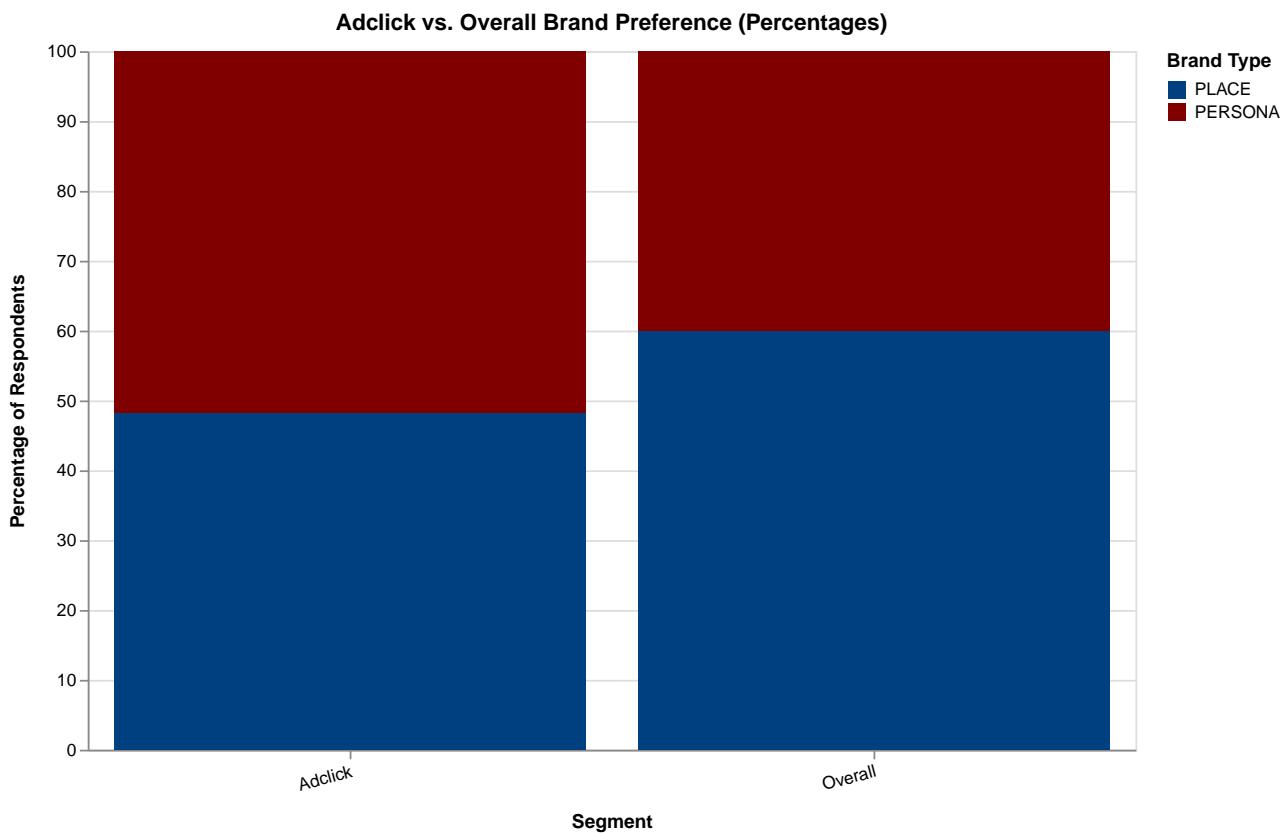
Figure 81. Adclick vs. Overall Brand Preference

When respondents were asked which branding approach would make them more likely to **click on an ad**, a surprising—but narrow—**majority of 51.7%** indicated they'd be more inclined to engage with a **persona-based brand**. This result stands in stark contrast to earlier questions where the same respondents consistently showed stronger preference for **place-based brands** in terms of **interest, credibility, and memorability**.

Yet despite those reservations, persona branding appears to spark a deeper **baseline curiosity**—enough to motivate users to **learn more**, even if they aren't initially as trusting or familiar with the brand. This suggests that **creative, experience-driven branding styles may be especially effective in digital advertising environments**, where the primary goal is not immediate trust or recall, but simply **getting a click** and beginning the consumer journey toward conversion.

**Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Age Group (Adclick)**
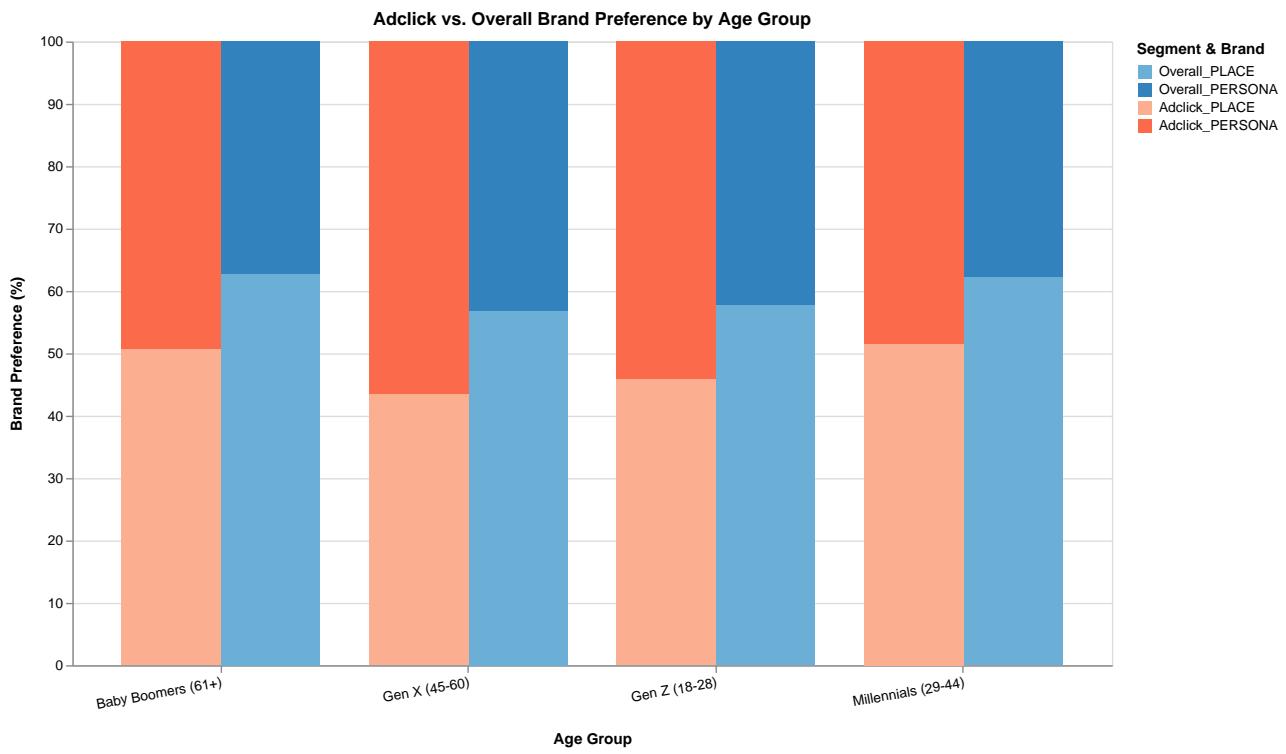
Figure 82. Adclick vs. Overall Brand Preference by Age Group

When likelihood to click an ad was examined by age group, an unexpected pattern emerged: **Gen Z and Gen X were even more likely to click** on ads featuring the **persona-based branding approach**, while **Baby Boomers and Millennials showed slight reservations**, indicating a **1–2% preference** for clicking on ads with **place-based branding**. This nuance suggests that **Gen Z and Gen X may be the core drivers of conversion and influence** when it comes to adopting and spreading novel, emotionally resonant destination brands. Their willingness to engage with unfamiliar or creatively branded campaigns hints at a **broader openness to exploratory behavior**, potentially making them key audiences for **early adoption and viral traction** in persona-based destination marketing.

Destination Brand Strategy Preferences by Travel Frequency (Adclick)
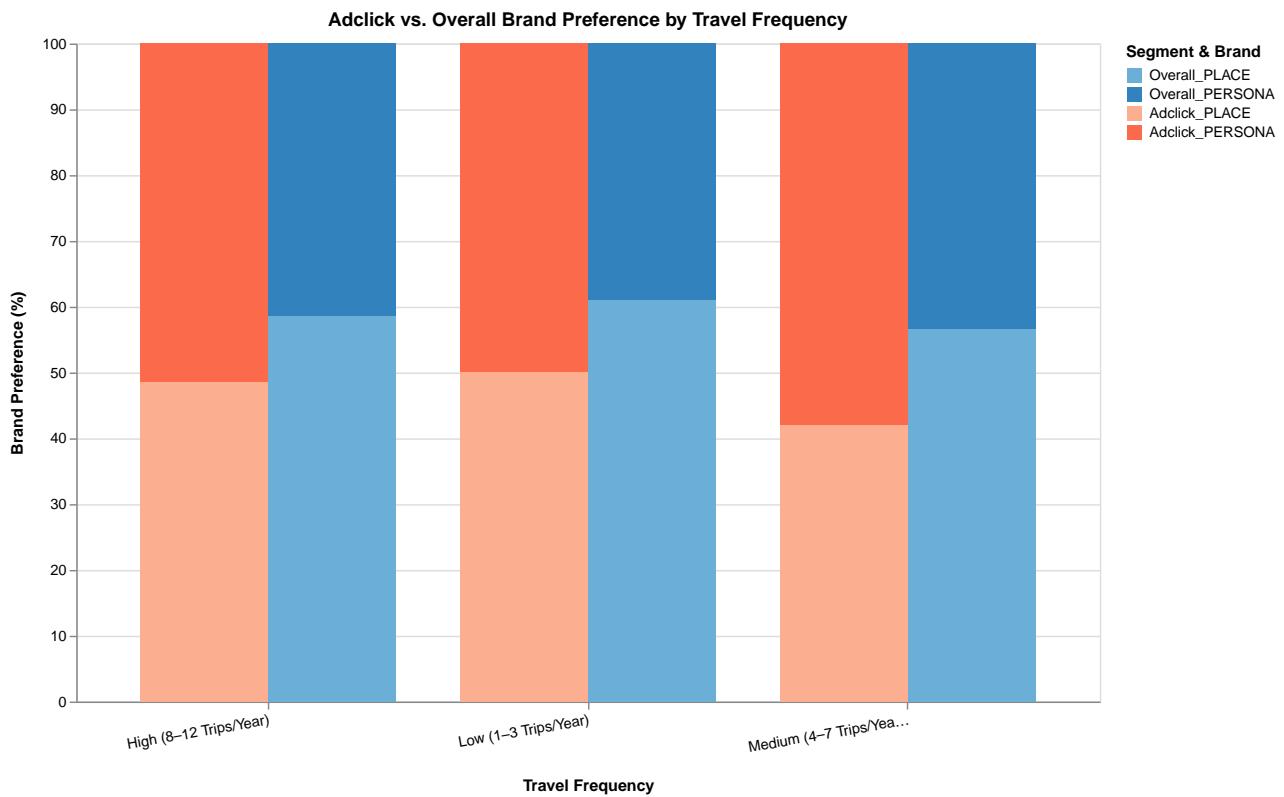
Figure 83. Adclick vs. Overall Brand Preference by Travel Frequency

When likelihood to click an ad was analyzed by travel frequency cohort, both the **low- and high-frequency travel groups showed an almost even 50/50 split** between branding strategies—indicating little distinction in what type of brand would motivate them to click. What stands out, however, is the **medium-frequency travel group**, which showed a **noticeably higher preference for persona-based branding**.

This suggests that travelers in this middle range may represent a **sweet spot of curiosity and value-seeking behavior**—they travel often enough to seek fresh experiences, but not so often that routine dominates their decision-making. Unlike low-frequency travelers who may default to the familiar, or high-frequency travelers who may lean on habitual patterns, **medium-frequency travelers appear more open to novel, emotionally engaging branding** and may be the most receptive to campaigns designed to reframe destination appeal in unexpected ways.

Destination Brand Preference by Influence Factor (Adclick)
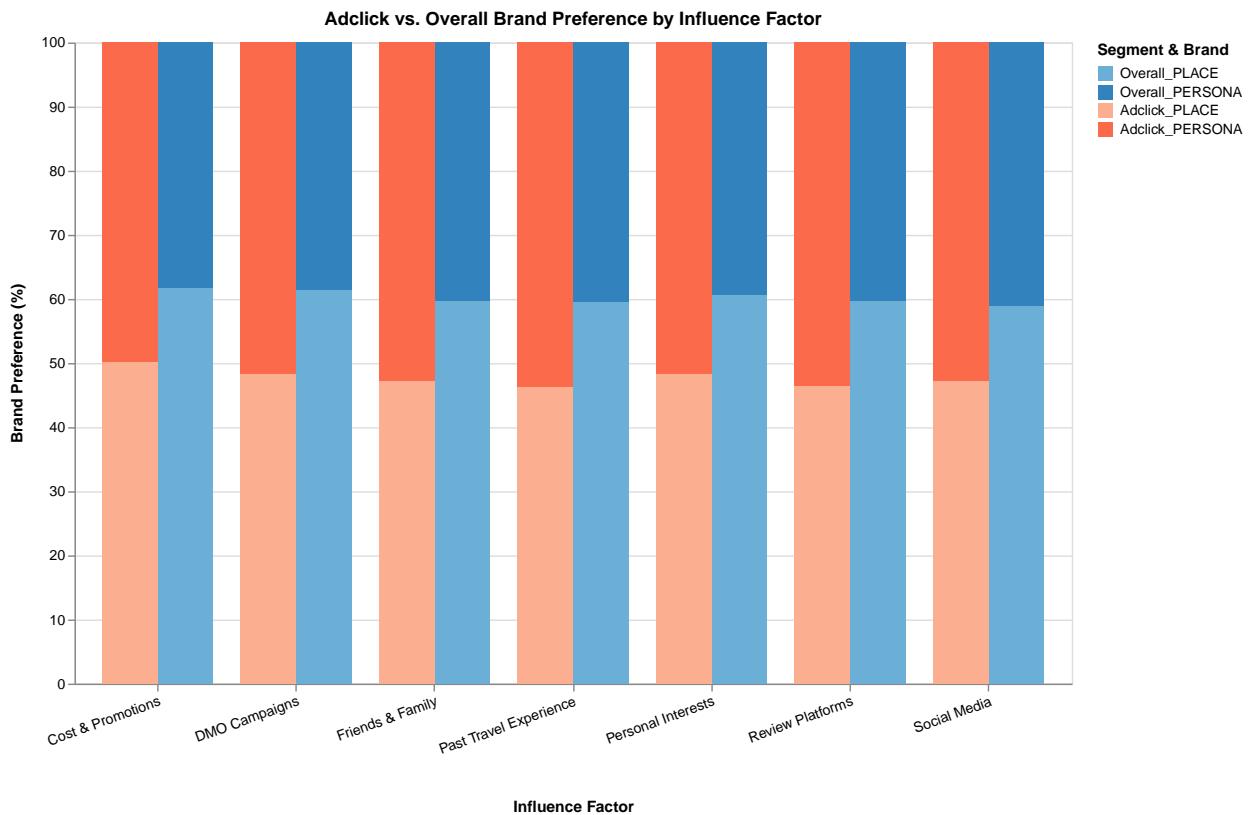
Figure 84. Adclick vs. Overall Brand Preference by Influence Factor

When ad click likelihood was examined across travel influence cohorts, a familiar trend re-emerged: **influence factor alone was not a strong predictor** of branding strategy preference. Most groups showed a fairly even split between place-based and persona-based branding when deciding which type of ad they'd be more likely to click. However, **one subtle but noteworthy exception** was found among those influenced primarily by **cost and promotions**, where **only 49% favored the persona brand**—the lowest among all influence cohorts. While this difference is slight, it hints at a **perceived association between persona-based brands and higher cost or exclusivity**.

This opens up a compelling interpretation: as branding becomes more emotionally nuanced and experience-driven, **persona-based destination brands may increasingly align with premium or luxury travel markets**, while **place-based branding may remain the default for destinations competing primarily on affordability**. The data suggests a future divergence, where **personalized branding signals curated, upscale experiences**, and **literal place names remain tethered to value-conscious offerings**.

**Destination Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness (Adclick)**
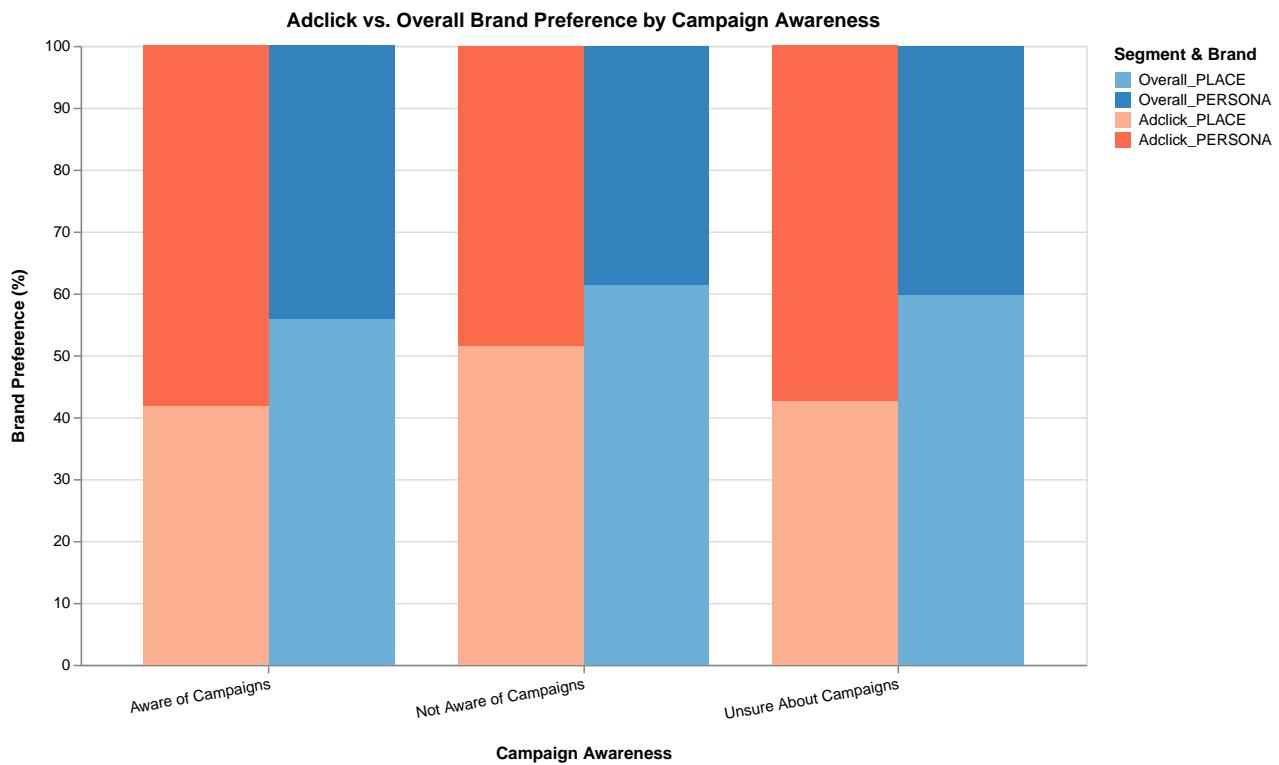
Figure 85. Adclick vs. Overall Brand Preference by Campaign Awareness

Within the responses for likelihood to click an ad, an interesting pattern emerged across campaign awareness cohorts. **Respondents who said they were either aware of tourism campaigns or were unsure** showed a **noticeable uptick in preference for the persona-based branding approach**, while those who said they were **not aware of campaigns** leaned slightly toward the place-based strategy. This builds on earlier observations that **familiarity with the tourism marketing landscape** may prime consumers to **notice and engage more with nontraditional branding formats**.

For these respondents, a **persona-style brand may stand out as fresh or unexpected**, prompting curiosity and a stronger impulse to learn more—**even if they don't initially trust it more or remember it better**. It reinforces the idea that **novelty in presentation can be a conversion driver**, especially among consumers who are already attuned to the conventional patterns of destination marketing.

**Destination Brand Preference by Destination Type (Adclick)**
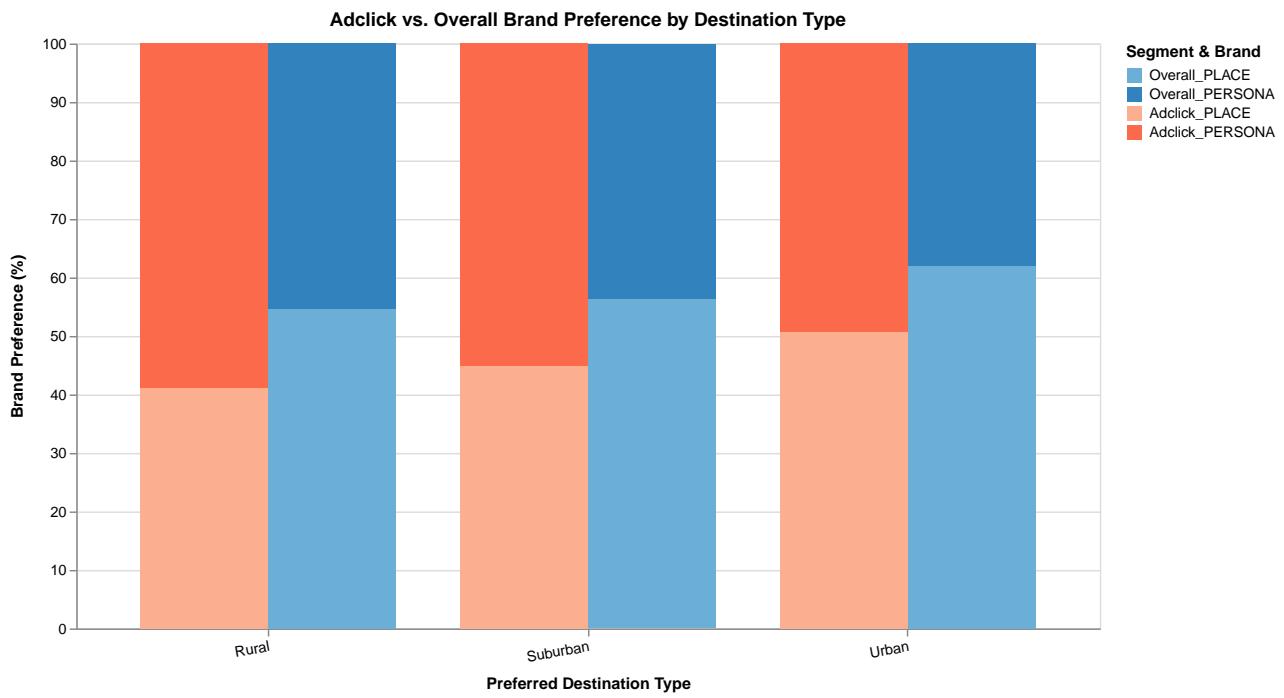
Figure 86. Adclick vs. Overall Brand Preference by Destination Type

Across destination type preference cohorts, a familiar **stair-step pattern** emerges once again: the likelihood of clicking an ad representing a **persona-based branding strategy** increased incrementally from **urban** to **suburban** to **rural** destination preferences. Respondents who preferred **urban destinations** showed the **lowest likelihood** of clicking on a persona-branded tourism ad (49%), while those who preferred **suburban and rural destinations** demonstrated a **notably higher likelihood** of engagement.

This finding aligns closely with earlier observations throughout the study, which revealed a **strong correlation between rural and suburban travel preferences and higher favorability toward persona-based destination brands**. It reinforces the idea that **persona branding may be especially effective at resonating with travelers seeking non-urban, experience-driven escapes**—where emotional tone and storytelling carry more weight than geographic familiarity.

Key Findings: Persona Branding Drives Curiosity in Ad Engagement

This portion of the study asked respondents, **"Which branding approach would make you more likely to click on an ad?"**—an important behavioral indicator for digital campaign performance and early-stage conversion potential. The results revealed several unexpected insights:

Persona Branding Wins the Click—Despite Lower Scores Elsewhere In a surprising turn, **51.7% of respondents** said they'd be more likely to click on an ad for a **persona-branded destination**, narrowly outperforming the place-based approach. This stands in contrast to other segments of the study where persona brands were perceived as **less credible, less memorable, and less inherently interesting**. The takeaway? **Curiosity trumps familiarity** in click-based environments—suggesting that creative, emotionally charged brand identities have a unique edge in stopping the scroll and earning a second look.

Gen Z and Gen X Lead the Shift Toward Persona Engagement While all age groups were relatively split, **Gen Z and Gen X emerged as the most likely to click** on persona-branded ads—at **54.17% and 56.56%**, respectively. This suggests that these two generations may be **critical**

conversion drivers for persona-style campaigns. Millennials and Boomers, by contrast, leaned slightly more toward traditional place-based branding, possibly reflecting more caution or habitual trust in geographic labels.

Medium-Frequency Travelers Are Most Receptive to Persona Ads Across travel frequency cohorts, **medium-frequency travelers** stood out as the group most likely to engage with persona-branded ads, at **58.03%**. Both low and high-frequency travelers hovered around an even 50/50 split. This supports the idea that **medium-frequency travelers occupy a "Goldilocks zone"**: they travel often enough to seek novelty, but not so frequently that routine dominates their choices—making them a valuable audience for non-traditional branding experiments.

Perceived Cost May Be Tied to Brand Style Among influence factor cohorts, all showed relatively even splits—except one. Respondents influenced by **cost and promotions** showed the **lowest persona-brand click preference** at just under 50%. This suggests that some consumers may perceive **persona-based branding as signaling a more expensive or luxury-oriented product**, whereas **place-based branding may imply affordability or familiarity**. This opens up opportunities for **differentiated brand positioning** in price-sensitive versus premium travel markets.

Campaign Awareness Increases Persona Brand Engagement Respondents who were **aware of tourism campaigns** or said they were **unsure** showed a stronger tendency to click persona-branded ads than those who were unaware. This reinforces earlier findings that **familiarity with traditional tourism ads primes consumers to notice and respond to brands that break the mold**, adding nuance to the value of campaign exposure—not just for trust or recall, but for click-through behavior.

Rural and Suburban Travelers Are Most Drawn to Persona-Based Ads A clear pattern emerged once again across destination type preferences: **persona-based ad click likelihood rose steadily** from urban (49.27%) to suburban (55.13%) to rural (58.96%) cohorts. This reflects a **continued alignment between non-urban travel interests and higher receptiveness to creative branding**, confirming that **persona strategies may be particularly powerful for destinations that lack name recognition but can offer immersive or identity-driven experiences**.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while place-based branding still carries trust and recall benefits, **persona-based branding wins the attention game**. In a digital landscape where clicks often precede conversions, destination marketers may want to invest more boldly in **novel, emotionally resonant brand identities** to drive engagement and open the door to longer-term persuasion.

6. Conclusion: Key Findings and Actionable Insights

This whitepaper offers critical insights into the evolving preferences of American travelers, highlighting both opportunities and blind spots in current destination branding practices.

6.1. Key Findings

- **Slight Overall Preference for Persona Branding** When measured as a total average, respondents showed a modest but consistent preference for persona brands (27% of forced choice selections vs. 23% for place-based) across several segments, suggesting growing openness

to lifestyle and experience-based narratives.

- **Persona Brands Create Productive Tension** While many respondents initially view persona-style destination names with hesitation, that hesitation often converts into curiosity. This curiosity can drive engagement—especially in digital ad environments—where persona branding showed a higher likelihood of generating ad clicks than place names.

- **Tourism Assets Matter: Persona Success Depends on Fit** A persona brand's success depends on how well its story aligns with the destination's actual tourism assets. Poor alignment—whether too abstract or misrepresentative—can harm performance, while the right match may outperform traditional place branding.

- **Targeted Messaging Opportunities by Age Group** Persona branding is particularly resonant among Gen Z and Gen X, suggesting that destinations can finely tune branding themes and names to speak to the values, aesthetics, and media habits of specific generations.

- **Influence Factors Don't Predict Brand Resonance** Factors like being influenced by friends, social media, cost, or past experience had almost no bearing on whether a person preferred persona or place branding. This indicates that marketers cannot rely on inspiration channels to infer brand preference style.

- **Travel Frequency Also Not Predictive** Across low, medium, and high-frequency travelers, brand style preference varied only slightly depending on the framing of the question, showing that exposure alone does not shape perception.

- **Campaign Awareness Has Limited Predictive Power** Only 22% of respondents said they were aware of tourism campaigns, and this awareness had minimal impact on brand preference. However, persona brands saw a slight advantage in ad click likelihood among campaign-aware respondents—suggesting that familiarity with traditional campaigns may prime interest in nontraditional ones.

- **Rural and Suburban Preferences Correlate with Persona Affinity** Travelers who prefer rural or suburban destinations consistently showed a stronger preference for persona-style branding. These regions, often seen as less distinct or less competitive, may benefit most from emotionally evocative branding that elevates atmosphere over geography.

- **DMOs Face an Awareness Gap** Only 13% of respondents claimed to be influenced by destination marketing organizations (DMOs), and 78% could not recall any tourism campaign when prompted. This signals a critical visibility issue for DMOs, one that requires a radical rethinking of outreach strategy and message delivery.

6.2. Actionable Insights for DMOs and Marketers

- Leverage persona brands as curiosity catalysts—particularly in digital ad environments, where a click matters more than immediate trust or clarity.

- Invest in demographic segmentation when crafting brand narratives. Gen X and Gen Z offer strong footholds for persona brand experimentation.

- Use persona branding to elevate overlooked destinations like suburban corridors or rural regions—especially when those places lack a dominant geographic identity.

- Rethink campaign goals: Rather than just promoting awareness, campaigns should strive to create emotional resonance and spark discovery.

- Educate the public about what DMOs do and who funds them—most consumers don't realize that local businesses, not governments, drive tourism marketing.

- Stop over-relying on traditional influence mapping: knowing how people find trip ideas is not the same as knowing what kind of branding they'll trust or remember.

- Test multiple brand styles early in the planning process. Forced choice framing reveals that stated preferences may not predict behavior under real-world conditions.

- Focus on simplicity in persona naming: short, emotionally evocative names are more likely to stick, especially with older consumers who may struggle with abstract naming.