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Innovative Framework for the analysis of the effects of Destination Personality on Behavioral Results: Self-Congruity's mediating role

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Abstract:	There is growing interest among academics and Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in leveraging destination personality as a differentiation strategy within an increasingly competitive tourism market. Identifying the most relevant personality dimensions that influence tourists' perceived image and their intention to visit is essential for effective strategic image projection. Although various methodologies have been employed to analyze these personality dimensions, no consensus has yet been reached—particularly concerning the mediating role of brand–self congruity. To address this gap, the present study proposes an innovative methodological framework that clarifies the relationship between destination personality and behavioral outcomes, irrespective of the moderating role of self-congruence. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed for the analysis. By integrating Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) and Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA), the framework offers deeper analytical insights, which represent the primary contribution of this research. To demonstrate the practicality and effectiveness of the proposed model, an empirical application is presented.

Innovative Framework for the analysis of the effects of Destination Personality on Behavioral Results: The mediating Role of Self-Congruity

Abstract.

Amid growing interest from both academia and Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), destination personality has emerged as a strategic lever for differentiation in a highly competitive tourism market. This study proposes a robust methodological framework to clarify the relationship between destination personality and behavioral outcomes, with a particular focus on visit intention. The empirical analysis is based on a sample of 480 Chinese respondents surveyed using a snowball sampling technique. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), supplemented by Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) and Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA). These combined methods offer nuanced insights into the relative importance and necessity of specific personality traits in influencing visit intention. The findings reveal that emotionality and activity are the most influential dimensions of destination personality, providing actionable guidance for DMOs seeking to enhance their destination branding strategies. This study's integrative methodological approach represents a novel contribution to destination marketing research, combining analytical depth with practical applicability.

Keywords

Destination brand personality, visit intention; self-congruity theory, PLS-SEM; destination marketing strategy; tourism behavior.

1. Introduction.

The intensifying competition in the global tourism industry has compelled destinations to differentiate themselves not merely through functional attributes such as climate, natural scenery, or infrastructure, but through intangible elements that foster emotional engagement and brand loyalty. Among these, destination brand personality—defined as the set of human-like traits associated with a destination—has become a central construct for creating emotional connections with tourists and enhancing perceived uniqueness (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Wu & Lai, 2023).

The increasing academic and managerial interest in this construct has led to a proliferation of empirical studies aiming to identify which destination personality dimensions most strongly influence tourist behavior. Notably, several studies have linked brand personality with revisit intention, satisfaction, and destination loyalty (Chi et al., 2018; Cifci, 2022; Cao & Lai, 2024). However, theoretical ambiguity persists regarding the mechanisms by which these effects occur. In particular, the role of self-congruity—the psychological alignment between a tourist's self-concept and the destination's perceived personality—remains contested. Some studies conceptualize self-congruity as a mediator (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Yang et al., 2021), others

as a moderator (Matzler et al., 2016), while a number of contributions exclude it altogether (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013; Nobre et al., 2020).

Moreover, there is a notable lack of consensus on the most appropriate methodological approaches to explore these relationships. The literature reveals a diverse use of tools ranging from multiple regression and traditional SEM to meta-analytical techniques. This heterogeneity hampers theoretical consolidation and limits comparability across studies (Sirgy et al., 2018). Recent research has begun integrating more advanced analytical techniques such as Necessary Condition Analysis (Dul, 2016) and Importance–Performance Map Analysis (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016), yet these remain underutilized in tourism behavior contexts.

To address these gaps, the present study aims to develop and empirically validate a comprehensive analytical framework that examines the relationship between destination personality and behavioral outcomes, with an emphasis on visit intention. Specifically, this research combines PLS-SEM with NCA and IPMA to provide both explanatory and prescriptive insights into how personality traits affect tourist decisions.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical background on destination personality and self-congruity theory. Section 3 introduces the proposed methodological framework and describes the empirical design. Section 4 presents the analysis and findings, including SEM, NCA, and IPMA results. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and managerial implications, followed by conclusions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Destination Brand Personality

Destination brand personality (DBP) refers to the set of human characteristics associated with a tourism destination (Aaker, 1997). Rooted in brand theory from consumer psychology, the construct has been increasingly applied to destinations as a way to evoke emotional bonds, influence attitudes, and create differentiation in highly competitive tourism markets (Aaker et al., 2001; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Scholars have shown that DBP enhances tourists' perceptions, loyalty, and behavioral intentions by making destinations more relatable and emotionally salient (Murphy et al., 2007a; Chi et al., 2018; Cifci, 2022).

Although Aaker's five-dimensional scale (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, ruggedness) has been widely applied, it has also faced criticism for its cultural limitations in non-Western contexts (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). To overcome this, Geuens et al. (2009) proposed an alternative five-dimensional structure—responsibility, activity, aggressiveness, simplicity, and emotionality—which has demonstrated greater cross-cultural validity, particularly in tourism settings (Matzler et al., 2016).

Recent studies have begun to explore how destination personality interacts with tourist personality traits (Tešin et al., 2024), emotional perceptions (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2024), and demographic variables such as gender and age (Kovačić et al., 2022). For instance, Bekk et al. (2016) found that similarity between tourist and destination personality enhances affective

commitment and behavioral intention. These findings reinforce the relevance of DBP as a dynamic construct linked to identity-based consumer behavior.

2.2 Self-Congruity Theory

Self-congruity theory posits that consumer preferences are influenced by the alignment between their self-concept and the perceived personality of a brand or product (Sirgy, 1985). Within the tourism domain, this alignment extends to destinations, influencing destination choice, satisfaction, and revisit intention (Chon, 1992; Sirgy & Su, 2000). Self-congruity is further conceptualized into four types: actual self-congruence, ideal self-congruence, social self-congruence, and ideal social self-congruence (Sirgy et al., 2000; Shamah et al., 2018). Actual self-congruence refers to tourists' current self-perception in relation to the destination image. Ideal self-congruence involves the alignment between tourists' aspirational self-image and the perceived destination image. Social self-congruence reflects the congruence between how tourists believe others perceive them and their perception of the destination, while ideal social self-congruence captures how tourists wish others to perceive them (Sirgy & Su, 2000).

These four dimensions can be categorized into private self-congruity and public self-congruity, representing two higher-order classifications. Within this framework, actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity correspond to private self-congruity, while social self-congruity and ideal social self-congruity are classified as public self-congruity (Sirgy et al., 2018). In academic research, the self-concept is typically divided into actual self (how one sees oneself) and ideal self (how one would like to be), both of which may shape consumer behavior differently depending on the context (Ekinci & Riley, 2003; Yang et al., 2021).

Tourists are more likely to choose destinations that resonate with their identity or aspirations. Usakli and Baloglu (2011) demonstrated that higher levels of self-congruity lead to stronger brand relationships and positive behavioral outcomes. Similarly, Kilic and Sop (2012) found that congruity significantly affects satisfaction and revisit intention, while Šegota et al. (2022) confirmed its mediating role between destination traits and affective loyalty.

However, the literature is not unanimous. Eisend and Stokburger-Sauer (2013) challenge the independent predictive power of self-congruity in some contexts, arguing that its explanatory strength may be overestimated without clear construct validation. These inconsistencies point to the need for more nuanced, culturally calibrated studies that explore when and how self-congruity exerts its influence on tourist behavior.

2.3 Self-Congruity as a Mediator

A central debate in the literature concerns whether self-congruity acts as a **mediator** between destination personality and tourist outcomes. Some authors argue that self-congruity explains how destination personality exerts its influence—translating perceptions into intentions or loyalty through a psychological identification process (Assaker et al., 2025; Chi et al., 2018; Li & Lai, 2024; Litvin and Sgro, 2025). Others, however, have found that brand personality can directly shape behavioral intentions, with or without mediation (Aaker et al., 2004; Hultman et al., 2015; Nobre et al., 2020).

Matzler et al. (2016) proposed a partial mediation model, suggesting that the mediating effect may be context-dependent, varying by culture, motivation, or tourism type. Frias et al. (2020) found that while self-congruity partially mediates the relationship, its effect size is modest

compared to direct paths from destination personality. These variations in empirical outcomes may stem from differences in conceptualization, measurement models, or cultural contexts (Yang et al., 2021).

This study contributes to this debate by empirically testing the discriminant validity between self-congruity and visit intention. Consistent with Sirgy et al. (2018), we contend that in some collectivist cultures, such as China, the psychological overlap between one's self-image and travel motivations may be so strong that separating these constructs statistically becomes difficult. By rigorously testing this relationship, our study aims to clarify the conceptual and empirical boundaries of self-congruity in destination branding research.

3. Methodological Framework.

This section outlines a comprehensive methodological framework developed to analyze the influence of destination brand personality on behavioral outcomes, particularly visit intention. Drawing upon recent advances in analytical techniques, the model combines Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA), and Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) to offer both explanatory and prescriptive insights. The proposed framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Framework

This framework serves as a working model comprising several steps. Following an in-depth review of the literature, the study presents a model aimed at developing a methodological approach to assess the influence of various dimensions of destination personality on distinct behavioral outcomes, as well as to identify the key and essential dimensions underlying this relationship.

As shown in Figure 1, the steps are as follows:

1. Data Collection
2. Model Selection
3. Model Measurement

3.1. Step 1: Self-administered questionnaire survey based on the literature review.

The in-depth review of the literature enables the use of previously validated scales to measure the variables of interest in the development of the questionnaire on brand personality, self-congruity, and behavioral intention. Several scales have been identified in the literature for measuring destination personality. Table 1 summarizes the most relevant measurement scales:

Table 1: Measurement for destination personality

Measurement Scale	Dimensions found	Reference
AaKer´s Brand Personality Scale (BPS)	Sincerity Excitement Competence	Baloglu et al. (2014); Ferrandi et al. (2014); Kim and Lehto (2013); Xie and Lee (2013)

	Sophistication Ruggedness	
Place Brand Personality	Excitement Malignancy Peacefulness Competence Conservatism Ruggedness	Demirbag Kaplan et al. (2010)
Perceived destination Personality (Las Vegas)	Vibrancy Sophistication Competence Comtemporary Sincerity	Usakli and Baloglu (2011)
Destination Personality Scale (DPS)	Conviviality Sincerity Excitement	Ekinci and Hosany (2006); Ekinci et al. (2007)
Country personality Scale	Agreeableness Wickedness Snobbism Assiduousness Conformity Unobtrusiveness	d'Astous and Boujbel (2007).
Destination Personality Scale	Courteousness, Vibrancy, Conformity, Liveliness, Viciousness, Tranquility	Kumar and Nayak (2018).
Place Personality Scale (PPS)	Sophistication and competence Sincerity Excitement Ruggedness	Murphy et al. (2007a); Murphy et al. (2007b).
Brand Personality Perception	Activity Aggresiveness Responsibility Emotionality Simplicity	Geuens t al. (2009); Matzler et al. (2016).

Similarly, various measurement scales have been proposed to assess self-congruity, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Measurement Scales for Self-Congruity

Measurement scale	Dimensions	References
Self-Congruity	"This [destination *x*] is consistent with how I see my- self" (actual self-image). "This [destination *x*] is consistent with how I like to see myself" (ideal self-image). "This [destination *x*] is consistent with how I believe others see me" (social self-image). "This [destination *x*] is consistent with how I would like others to see me" (ideal social self-image).	Sirgy et al. (1997); Sirgy and Su (2000)
	The evaluative congruity of the tourist's expectancy and performance outcome perceptions was measured using a series of	Chon (1990); Chon (1992)

	questions designed to measure the respondent's expectations and performance perceptions of 15 functional attributes of the destination area	
	[destination *x*] as a holiday destination suits my personality. My friends would be impressed when I visited [destination *x*]. My sense of who I am matches my sense of [destination *x*]A holiday in [destination *x*] reflects my personality.	Matzler et al. (2016).
	"[destination *x*] is consistent with how I would like to see myself" "I would like to be perceived as similar to the personality of [destination *x*]"; "The personality of [destination *x*] is congruent with how I would like to see myself".	Usakli and Baloglu (2011).
	The image of [destination *x*] is consistent with how I actually see myself. I am quite similar to the personality of [destination *x*] The personality of [destination *x*] is consistent with how I actully see myself The image of [destination *x*] is consistent with how I would like to see myself I would like to be perceived as similar to the personality of [destination *x*] The personality of [destination *x*] is consistent with how I would like to see myself	Yang et al. (2020).

Behavioral outcomes will be measured using previously validated scales from the existing literature, such as those proposed by Matzler et al. (2016).

3.2.Step 2: Model Selection

Analyzing discriminant validity among constructs is essential in academic research to ensure that each measured construct is conceptually distinct. This is particularly critical in studies involving complex variables, as discriminant validity ensures both accuracy and conceptual clarity. Without sufficient discriminant validation, research findings may become ambiguous, complicating the interpretation of relationships between variables. Therefore, assessing discriminant validity is fundamental to maintaining the scientific integrity of the research.

Two scenarios should be considered:

3.2.1. Existence of discriminant validity.

In this scenario, the proposed model includes self-congruity as a mediating variable in the relationship between destination personality and behavioral outcomes. The next steps should include estimating the model by establishing the hypotheses. Once the measurement model has been tested, the structural model should be assessed. This relationship must include self-congruity as a mediating variable. Subsequently, it is essential to confirm that the model fits adequately (R^2) and demonstrates predictive relevance (Stone–Geisser Q^2).

3.2.2. Non-existence of discriminant validity.

If discriminant validity is lacking, the model should be reformulated without incorporating self-congruity as a mediating variable. Following this adjustment, the same steps outlined in the previous scenario should be followed: model estimation, structural model assessment, evaluation of model fit, and verification of R^2 and Q^2 values.

3.3.Step 3: Data analysis of the Model.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among constructs, the following three-step analytical approach was adopted:

1. **PLS-SEM Analysis**: Structural Equation Modeling using the PLS approach is particularly suited for complex models involving latent constructs and does not require normal data distribution. It is widely used in tourism and marketing research for its robustness with medium-sized samples (Hair et al., 2017).
2. **Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA)**: NCA determines whether certain personality traits are necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for visit intention to occur. The logic of NCA is particularly valuable in tourism contexts, where specific attributes may represent minimum thresholds required for destination appeal (Dul, 2016).
3. **Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA)**: IPMA complements PLS-SEM by not only identifying significant predictors of visit intention but also examining their relative performance. This allows for managerial prioritization of high-impact traits (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2016).

The integration of these three analytical tools offers a nuanced, multi-angle perspective that enhances both the explanatory power and strategic relevance of the study. While PLS-SEM explains variance and relationships, NCA identifies critical thresholds, and IPMA translates findings into actionable insights for DMOs.

PLS-SEM is the most appropriate technique for analyzing complex models involving latent variables and simultaneous relationships. It is particularly suitable for predicting visit intention and understanding the factors that influence it. Moreover, it does not require large samples or strict assumptions of data normality, and it is essential for conducting both IPMA and NCA analyses, as the latent variables consistently retain the same scores throughout the process (Hair et al., 2017).

4. Application example.

The purpose of this example is to illustrate how the model operates. To empirically test the proposed research model, a quantitative study was conducted to investigate the brand personality of Spain as a tourist destination among Chinese citizens, specifically in relation to their intention to visit (behavioral outcome).

4.1. Step 1: **Data Collection and Measurement Design**.

Data were collected via a self-administered online questionnaire distributed among Chinese tourists between February and May 2022, yielding 480 valid responses. A snowball sampling technique was used, consistent with prior tourism studies targeting specific outbound markets (Yang et al., 2020). The questionnaire was first developed in English, translated into Mandarin, and then pilot-tested with 10 respondents to ensure linguistic and cultural clarity.

Measurement items were drawn from validated scales in the literature. Destination personality was operationalized using the five-dimension scale proposed by Geuens et al. (2009)—responsibility, activity, aggressiveness, simplicity, and emotionality—which has demonstrated robust cross-cultural applicability (Matzler et al., 2016). Self-congruity was measured primarily through actual self-concept alignment, based on Sirgy and Su (2000) and Usakli and Baloglu (2011). Visit intention was assessed using indicators from Matzler et al. (2016), ensuring construct reliability.

All items were measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree."

4.2.Step 2: **Model Selection Logic**

The study design includes a two-scenario model (see Figure 2) selection approach, based on the presence or absence of discriminant validity between constructs. This step is critical for establishing the distinctiveness of latent variables—particularly between self-congruity and visit intention.

- **If discriminant validity is confirmed**: self-congruity is tested as a mediating variable.
- **If discriminant validity is not confirmed: self-congruity is excluded as a mediator and the** model is tested as a direct-effect model.

Figure 2. Proposed model to test the moderating effect of the Self-Congruity variable.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, which compares the square root of AVE values to inter-construct correlations (Barclay et al., 1995). In this study, insufficient discriminant validity was found between self-congruity and visit intention, prompting the use of a simplified direct-effect model in subsequent analyses. For discriminant validity to be established, all correlations must be lower than the corresponding diagonal values in Table 3.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity of the constructs (Forner-Larcker Criterion)

	BC (Brand-Sef Congruity)	BP (Brand personality	VI (Visit intention)
BC			
BP	0,878		
VI	0,939	0,813	

The analysis indicated a lack of discriminant validity between self-congruity and visit intention, suggesting that these constructs may be measuring the same underlying concept. Consequently, based on these findings and the observed lack of discriminant validity, the model illustrated in **Figure 3** was proposed.

Figure 3. Proposed model

4.3. Step 3: **Analytical Strategy**.

Several authors argue that the personality traits of a destination influence visit intention, either directly or indirectly through self-congruity (Matzler et al., 2016; Sirgy et al., 2018). Following these studies, the present research proposes that destination personality directly influences visit intention. Based on these theoretical arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The responsibility dimension of destination personality positively affects visit intention.
H2: The activity dimension of destination personality positively affects visit intention.
H3: The simplicity dimension of destination personality positively affects visit intention.
H4: The aggressiveness dimension of destination personality positively affects visit intention.
H5: The emotionality dimension of destination personality positively affects visit intention.

Once the data were collected, they were analyzed to ensure the validity and reliability of the measurement model prior to testing the hypotheses. Initially, all indicator loadings exceeded the minimum recommended threshold of 0.70 (Roldán & Sánchez-Franco, 2012a), as shown in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Individual reliability of measurement scales

	Activ	**Agress**	**Emotion**	**Resp**	**Simply**	**VI**
Active	0,919					
Aggresive		0,957				
Dynamic	0,903					
Emotional			0,937			
Innovative	0,915					
Ordinary					0,941	
Pretentious		0,942				
Romantic			0,937			
Simple					0,954	
Stable				0,927		

VI1						0,925
VI2						0,935
VI3						0,922
Responsible				0,929		

Subsequently, convergent validity was assessed using composite reliability and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All values exceeded the recommended thresholds (Cronbach's alpha > 0.7, composite reliability > 0.7, AVE > 0.5) as proposed by Nunnally (1978) and Straub et al. (2004), as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Composite reliability and convergent validity

	Cronbach's alpha	**Composite reliability (rho_a)**	**Composite reliability (rho_c)**	**Average variance extracted (AVE)**
Activ	0,899	0,902	0,937	0,832
Agress	0,892	0,906	0,948	0,902
Emotion	0,860	0,860	0,935	0,877
Resp	0,838	0,838	0,925	0,860
Simply	0,886	0,895	0,946	0,897
VI	0,919	0,921	0,949	0,860

Discriminant validity was evaluated following the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where the diagonal values (square roots of AVE) must exceed the inter-construct correlations (Barclay et al., 1995), presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Discriminant Validity (Forner-Larcker Criterion)

	Activ	**Agress**	**Emotion**	**Resp**	**Simply**	**VI**
Activ	0,912					
Agress	0,472	0,950				
Emotion	0,787	0,432	0,937			
Resp	0,793	0,452	0,656	0,928		
Simply	0,542	0,743	0,500	0,578	0,947	
VI	0,716	0,482	0,743	0,600	0,473	0,927

After validating the measurement model, the structural model was analyzed to determine the significance of relationships using bootstrapping (Streukens and Leroi-Werelds, 2016). Results are detailed in Table 7.

Table 7. Path coefficients and significance

	Path	**P values**
Activ -> VI	0,280	0,002 **
Agress -> VI	0,187	0,000 ***

Emotion -> VI	0,451	0,000 ***
Resp -> VI	0,034	0,599 n.s.
Simply -> VI	-0,063	0,186 n.s.

n.s.: not significant ***p<0,001, **p<0,01, *p<0,05. (1 tail test and Bootstrap 10000 samples)

The adjusted R^2 value was 0.612, clearly exceeding the 10% threshold recommended by Falk and Miller (1992). Predictive relevance (Stone-Geisser Q^2) was also confirmed, as values exceeded zero (Gefen et al., 2011) as shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Summary of latent variable prediction

	Q^2predict	**RMSE**	**MAE**
VI	0,602	0,635	0,399

Finally, model fit was assessed using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), where values less than 0.08 indicate good fit (Table 9).

Table 9. SRMR

	Saturated model	**Estimated model**
SRMR	0,046	0,046
d_ULS	0,219	0,219
d_G	0,351	0,351
Chi-square	1112,479	1112,479
NFI	0,814	0,814

It should be noted that an analysis of possible mediating variables such as educational level and generation was also carried out to evaluate possible differences between these groups and no significant differences were obtained.

NCA analysis

Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) evaluates whether a variable is a necessary condition by examining the necessity effect size (d) and its statistical significance. The effect size is determined by dividing the area lacking observations by the total area, resulting in a value between 0 and 1. Effect sizes are classified as small ($0 < d < 0.1$), medium ($0.1 \leq d < 0.3$), large ($0.3 \leq d < 0.5$), and very large ($d \geq 0.5$) (Dul, 2016). A commonly used threshold for necessity hypotheses is $d = 0.1$. NCA was conducted to determine whether specific personality traits are necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for high visit intention. The analysis revealed two significant necessary conditions: **emotionality** ($d = 0.184$, $p < 0.001$) and **activity** ($d = 0.168$, $p < 0.001$), both of which exceeded the conventional threshold for medium effect size ($d \geq 0.1$) (Dul, 2016). These findings imply that without a minimum level of emotional and dynamic attributes, high visit intention cannot be achieved.

Other dimensions such as aggressiveness, responsibility, and simplicity did not meet the necessity criteria.

Table 10: NCA

	Original effect size	95.0%	Permutation p value
LV scores - Activ	0,168	0,020	0,000
LV scores - Agress	0,000	0,000	1,000
LV scores - Emotion	0,184	0,084	0,000
LV scores - Openess	0,000	0,021	0,921
LV scores - Resp	**0,030**	**0,040**	**0,212**
LV scores - Simply	0,000	0,000	1,000

IPMA analysis

To evaluate the results, an Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) was carried out, allowing for a detailed examination at both the variable and indicator levels based on the model outcomes (Ringle and Sarstedt, 2016). This analysis assesses the importance and performance of constructs and indicators that influence a specific construct. The target construct for this analysis was BI. The IPMA of the model revealed the outcomes shown in Figure 4. IPMA was used to identify which destination personality traits combine high importance with suboptimal performance, guiding managerial prioritization. Emotionality emerged as the most important driver of visit intention, followed by activity. However, both dimensions showed room for improvement in performance scores, suggesting high managerial leverage.

This dual importance–performance view reinforces the strategic value of enhancing emotionally resonant and dynamic aspects of destination branding, particularly in the context of Chinese outbound tourism.

Figure 4: IPMA

4.4.Conclusion

The framework proposed in this paper has been applied, and its applicability across different contexts has been confirmed. In relation to the example used to illustrate the framework's functioning, it was found that there is no discriminant validity between self-congruity and visit intention, which led to the consideration of a model in which self-congruity does not serve as a mediating variable. This finding contrasts with previous studies that support the positive influence of destination personality on tourist self-congruity and treat the latter as a mediator (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Matzler et al., 2016; Wu & Lai, 2023; Yang et al., 2021; Litvin and Sgro, 2025). On the other hand, it aligns with authors who have proposed a direct relationship (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013; Nobre et al., 2020; Hultman et al., 2015).

The empirical case study examining Chinese tourists' perceptions of Spain identified specific personality dimensions that significantly influence visit intentions, thereby demonstrating the model's practical applicability. The proposed theoretical model shows that intangible attributes—such as "emotionality" and "activity"—are fundamental components that surpass tangible features in terms of impact. This underscores the importance of adopting a psychological perspective in tourism behavior research.

According to the findings, the "activity" and "emotionality" dimensions exert the greatest influence on visit intention. Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) should design campaigns that highlight dynamic activities and emotional experiences, such as vibrant cultural events, traditional festivals, or outdoor activities that evoke positive emotions.

For instance, to attract Chinese tourists to Spain, visual narratives could focus on the excitement of exploring historic cities such as Toledo, combined with dynamic events like flamenco festivals. These campaigns could be disseminated through popular digital platforms in China, such as WeChat and TikTok.

Given the rise of technology and virtual reality, destinations can implement digital experiences that emphasize key personality dimensions. Augmented reality applications, for example, could allow Chinese tourists to virtually explore the Alhambra or participate in a flamenco festival prior to their visit, thereby strengthening their emotional connection with the destination.

Additionally, engaging Chinese influencers, international students, or cultural experts to co-create campaigns that highlight unique elements of the destination from their perspective can enhance authenticity. This approach also ensures a culturally resonant representation that reinforces self-congruence.

A recognized limitation of this study relates to the choice of measurement scales. The specific scales used for destination personality and self-congruence may have influenced the results. Therefore, future research should explore alternative scales to validate the findings more broadly. Another limitation concerns the exclusive use of the actual self-congruence dimension; future research is encouraged to incorporate all four dimensions (actual, ideal, social, and ideal social) to achieve a more comprehensive validation.

5. Conclusion and Implications.

Conclusion

This study developed and validated a multi-method analytical framework for examining the influence of destination brand personality on tourist visit intention. By integrating Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA), and Importance–Performance Map Analysis (IPMA), the research provides a robust and comprehensive approach to uncovering both the structural and conditional determinants of tourist behavior.

The empirical application to Chinese tourists considering travel to Spain revealed that emotionality and activity are the most influential personality traits in shaping visit intention. Moreover, the lack of discriminant validity between self-congruity and visit intention led to a simplified model structure, challenging traditional assumptions about the mediating role of self-congruity.

These findings have theoretical significance for refining destination personality theory and advancing methodological rigor in tourism research. Practically, the study offers destination marketing organizations clear guidance on prioritizing emotional and dynamic brand elements to attract culturally specific tourist segments.

Theoretical implications

This study offers several theoretical contributions to the literature on destination marketing and consumer–brand congruity. First, it addresses a persistent gap regarding the mediating role of self-congruity. Our empirical results—showing a lack of discriminant validity between self-congruity and visit intention—suggest that these constructs may overlap substantially in certain cultural contexts. This challenges prior assumptions about their independence and supports calls for re-evaluating self-congruity's function in tourism models (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013; Nobre et al., 2020).

Second, the integration of PLS-SEM, NCA, and IPMA in a single analytical framework provides a novel methodological contribution. This hybrid approach allows not only for testing causal pathways (via SEM), but also for identifying essential conditions (via NCA) and optimizing managerial decision-making (via IPMA). While each method has been used in isolation in tourism research, their joint application offers richer, multidimensional insights, enhancing model robustness and interpretability (Hair et al., 2017; Dul, 2016).

Third, the empirical finding that emotionality and activity are the most influential personality traits in driving visit intention aligns with recent theories emphasizing the emotional-symbolic functions of destination brands (Li & Zhang, 2023; Cao & Lai, 2024). These results extend the theoretical understanding of how intangible brand dimensions interact with identity-based consumer behavior, particularly in the context of Chinese outbound tourism.

Finally, the study reinforces the importance of cultural calibration in applying self-congruity theory. The strong correlation between actual self-congruity and behavioral intention among Chinese respondents highlights the need for culturally sensitive constructs and measurement tools in cross-national tourism research (Yang et al., 2021; Sirgy et al., 2018).

Practical implications

The findings yield actionable insights for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) seeking to enhance the emotional appeal and differentiation of their brand. First, the identification of emotionality and activity as both impactful and necessary traits indicates that branding efforts should emphasize dynamic experiences and emotional storytelling. Campaigns that highlight vibrant cultural events, artistic expressions, and opportunities for self-expression are likely to resonate strongly with target audiences, particularly Chinese travelers.

Second, the use of IPMA offers a strategic tool for prioritizing branding elements with high importance but suboptimal performance. By focusing resources on enhancing emotional and active brand signals—such as excitement, innovation, and sentimentality—DMOs can significantly increase behavioral intentions among potential tourists.

Third, the integration of NCA highlights that certain personality traits function as non-negotiable prerequisites. For instance, if a destination fails to convey a minimum level of emotionality, even high performance in other areas may not compensate. This insight allows destination managers to identify and monitor "threshold traits" that must be preserved or reinforced in all communication strategies.

Additionally, digital marketing strategies can benefit from these findings. Personalized content driven by AI—such as recommender systems on tourism platforms or tailored virtual experiences—can amplify emotional resonance and reinforce brand–self alignment. For example, VR previews of cultural landmarks or interactive festival simulations may strengthen pre-travel emotional connections and boost intent to visit.

Lastly, this study supports a segmentation strategy based on self-congruity principles. DMOs can design differentiated campaigns for diverse tourist profiles, emphasizing different facets of the destination personality that align with actual or aspirational self-concepts. In culturally specific markets, such as China, appealing to values like harmony, modernity, or sophistication could enhance brand relevance and emotional appeal.

Limitations and future research.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the analysis focused solely on actual self-congruity, excluding ideal, social, and ideal social dimensions. Although this choice was methodologically justified based on multicollinearity concerns, it limits the scope of psychological nuance captured. Future studies should explore all four self-congruity dimensions to provide a more holistic understanding of identity–destination alignment.

Second, the research employed a cross-sectional design, which constrains causal inference and does not account for temporal changes in tourist perceptions or intentions. Longitudinal studies are encouraged to explore how destination personality perceptions evolve across the pre-travel, travel, and post-travel phases.

Third, the use of a non-probabilistic sampling technique (snowball sampling) may limit the generalizability of the results. Although effective for accessing targeted subpopulations, future studies should consider stratified or random sampling to enhance external validity.

Lastly, cultural context remains a critical boundary condition. The findings are grounded in the perceptions of Chinese tourists, whose values and motivational structures may differ from those of other outbound markets. Comparative studies across national cultures could further clarify how destination personality traits interact with culturally shaped identity constructs.

In conclusion, this study offers a theoretically grounded and methodologically advanced framework for understanding how destination personality shapes tourist behavior, with substantial implications for both academic inquiry and destination branding strategy.

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Figure 1. Framework

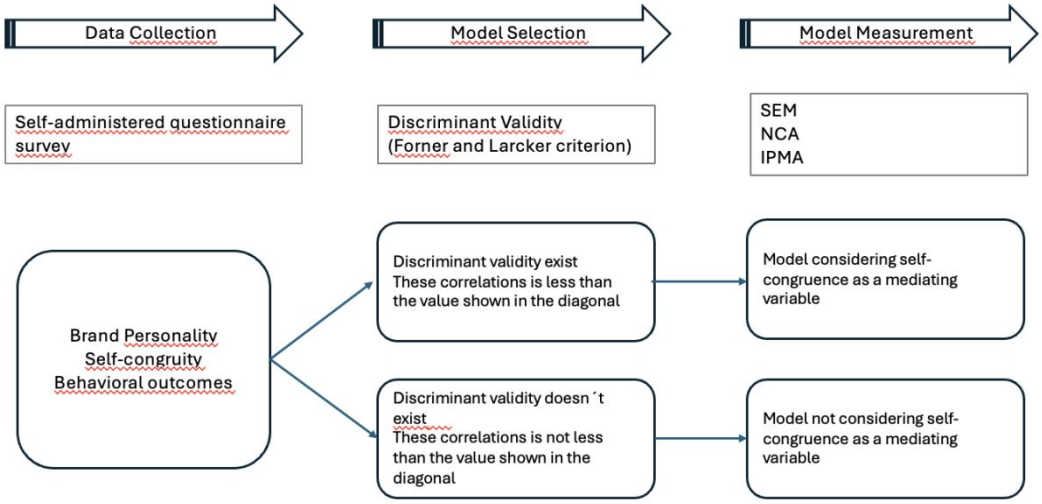

Figure 2. Proposed model to test the moderating effect of the Self-Congruity variable.

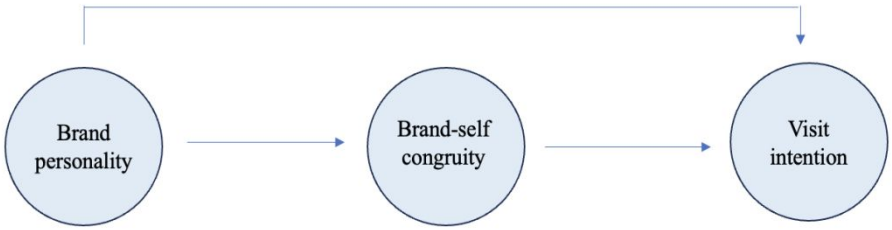

Figure 3. Proposed Model

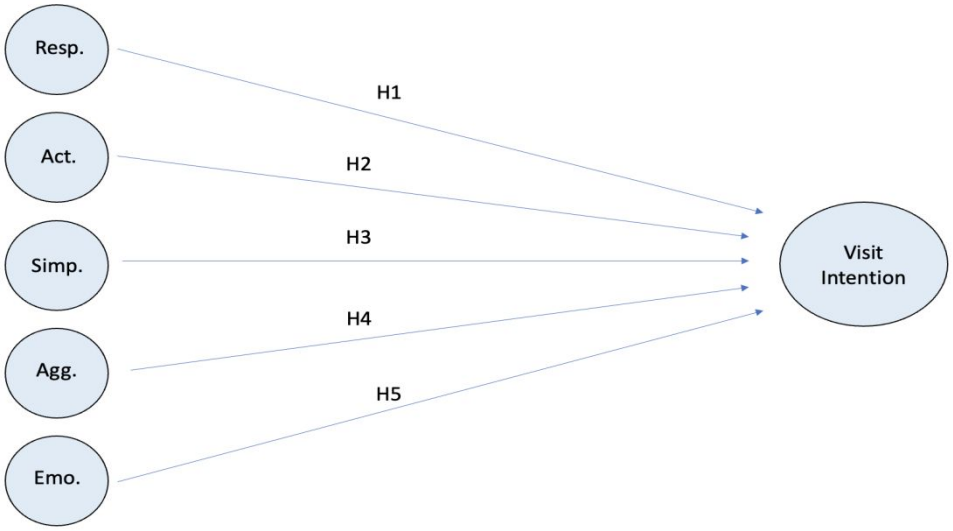

Figure 4. IPMA