Recognise me from outside to inside: Learning the influence chain of urban destination personalities

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop a personality scale specific to urban destinations and explore the antecedents and consequences of perceived urban destination personalities. Using a sample of 672 tourists, and an intelligent data analysis tool, machine learning, this study develops an urban destination personality scale with four components, i.e., temperament, competence, attitude and mood. Urban landscapes are found to be significant antecedents, with different influential importance in both components (modern space/ancient space/ecological/living/social landscapes) and elements. Besides, the impacts of urban destination personalities on overall destination image are identified, and the mediating effects of urban destination personalities on the relationship between urban landscapes and overall destination image are discovered. The findings contribute to revealing an influence chain of urban destination personalities and furtherly providing concrete practical insights into building or upgrading personalities of a particular urban destination so as to make it be more distinctive and attractive from outside to inside.

1. Introduction

As the tourism marketplace is becoming more highly competitive, destination marketers are eager to craft unique identities for their particular destinations so as to differentiate them from other competing ones and therefore attract more tourists. The identity of a destination includes both external and internal characteristics (Relph, 1976). The external ones refer to the characteristics that can either be seen, heard, or touched directly, such as buildings, roads, and residents. In contrast, the internal ones are more related to the intangible characteristics, such as the atmosphere or the aura of a destination, which can only be perceived in an indirect way. Due to their distinctiveness and non-substitutability, the internal characteristics have been gradually recognised as the real identifiers of destinations by both academics and practitioners (Kock, Josiassen, & Assaf, 2016; Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2018; Sainaghi & Baggio, 2017).

Though their importance is acknowledged, the internal characteristics of destinations had been rarely studied for quite a long time. The difficulty involved in their description and measurement would probably be one of the main obstacles. Fortunately, a breakthrough was made in 2006 with the introduction of the concept, brand personality,

from marketing research into tourism research (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). This concept is based on a brand-as-people perspective. That is, a brand or product can be treated as a person and endowed with human-like traits. For instance, from consumers' perspective, Coca Cola might be described as 'cool' (Aaker, 1997), Marlboro cigarettes might be 'masculine' (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006), or a BMW car might be 'sophisticated' (Phau & Lau, 2000). It has been indicated that human-like traits characterise a brand or product in a comprehensive way, including both tangible and intangible aspects (Aaker, 1996), such as its appearance, performance, credit, and service. Moreover, to treat a brand as a person can help consumers build a strong emotional tie between themselves and the brand (Aaker, Susan, & Brasel, 2004; Biel, 1993; Fournier, 1998), and furtherly establish great trust and loyalty to the brand (Keller, 1993; Phau & Lau, 2000; Siguaw, Mattila, & Austin, 1999). In the generic marketing field, brand personality has been widely accepted as an important construct with the significance of differentiating brands, as well as influencing consumers' purchase decision behaviours (Aaker, 1999; Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Graeff, 1996).

Ekinci and Hosany (2006) were the first to apply this concept to the tourism destination context, and evolve it into the concept of destination personality. Through empirical examination, the two scholars

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confirmed that tourists, as a particular type of consumers, do ascribe human-like traits to destinations. Moreover, they indicated that tourists' perceived destination personalities (hereinafter referred to as destination personality) have great impacts on their overall destination images and intentional behaviours. The proposition of destination personality makes it possible to describe the internal characteristics of destinations in a specific and comprehensible way and further conduct empirical measurement and analysis. After Ekinci and Hosany's work, destination personality research began to emerge constantly. Its great importance in crafting destinations' unique identities, as well as in predicting tourists' attitudes, affections, and behaviours has been widely acknowledged (Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou, 2015; Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014; Bekk, Spörrle, & Kruse, 2015; Chen & Phou, 2013; Hultman, Skarmeas, Oghazi, & Beheshti, 2015; Kim & Lehto, 2013; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2017; Kumar, 2016; Kvasova, 2015; Matzler, Strobl, Stokburger-Sauer, Bobovnicky, & Bauer, 2016; Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007; Pan, Zhang, Gursoy, & Lu, 2017; Pereira, Correia, & Schutz, 2015; Pitt, Opoku, Hultman, Abratt, & Spyropoulou, 2007; Pool, Khodadadi, & Asadi, 2016; Souiden, Ladhari, & Chiadmi, 2017; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Xie & Lee, 2013; Yuksel & Bilim, 2009).

However, as an emerging field of tourism research, destination personality research is still in its infancy, with some major questions that are greatly needed to be answered:

Question One: What are the personality traits specific to destinations? Though scholars have researched a consensus that destination personality refers to the human-like traits of a destination, they have some divergence in the concrete description of these traits. Most researchers have borrowed Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale (BPS), which has been developed and widely applied in generic marketing research to describe and measure destination personality traits. Some scholars argue that BPS has been developed for manufactured products, such as cars or mobile phones, while tourism destinations, as the experiential products, which are associated with both tangible goods and intangible services, would not be suitable for this scale (Smith, 1994). Besides, BPS has been criticised in marketing research for its poor generalisability to a specific brand/product category. As Austin, Siguaw, and Mattila (2003) argued, Aaker tested the reliability and validity of BPS by aggregating data across diverse brand or product categories, without taking into account the discrepancy of brand personality across categories. In view of this, a personality scale with a set of traits specific to destinations, especially to a specific category of destinations, is greatly needed in destination personality research.

Question Two: What are the antecedents of destination personality? Previous research on destination personality has mostly focused on its consequences, i.e., the impacts of destination personality on tourists' attitudes, affections, and behaviours. However, the antecedents, i.e., the formation processes of destination personality, have been largely neglected. It has been indicated that perceptions of human traits are inferred on the basis of a person's behaviours, physical characteristics, attitudes, and demographic characteristics (Pervin, 1996), while perceptions of personality traits specific to a destination could be formed and influenced by the direct and indirect contact that a tourist may have had with the destination (Plummer, 1985). For a certain destination, what facts would be important on forming or influencing destination personality? How important would they be? How do these factors interact with each other to make the final impact? An investigation of these issues would not only have great significance on understanding the formation processes of destination personality, but also providing practical insights into building or upgrading personality traits for a specific destination so as to make it be more distinctive and attractive.

Question Three: What are the relationships between destination personality and destination image? To date, much ambiguity surrounds the relationship between destination personality and destination image in related literature. It appears that there are three major viewpoints on

the relationship between these two constructs. One is that they have no differences in nature and can be used interchangeably to gauge tourists' perceptions of destinations (Graeff, 1997; Smothers, 1993). In contrast, some scholars have argued that destination personality and destination image should be viewed as two closely related but essentially different concepts (Baloglu et al., 2014; Chen & Phou, 2013; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). Besides, a growing group of scholars have attempted to provide the explanations of the inclusive relationship between these two concepts. That is, destination image is an encapsulating concept, while destination personality can be considered as one component of it (Murphy et al, 2007; Xie & Lee, 2013). This notion is also supported in this study. Since destination image has been widely accepted as a combination of cognitive, affective, and overall image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), the issues on the relationship between these two constructs should be: Which one could destination personality be ascribed to, cognitive image or affective image? Do destination personality have impact on overall destination image? If so, how would it take effect? The answers to these questions would contribute to understanding the personality-image relationship and furtherly identifying the role of perceived destination personality in the tourist decision-making process related to destinations.

In view of this, the aim of this study is to answer the questions mentioned above. To answer the first question, a personality scale that is specific to destinations is designed. A certain category of destinations, urban destinations, is targeted in this study, mainly due to its noticeability of personality as well as convenience in acquiring large sample size. Based on this scale, the components of urban destination personalities (UDP) are explored. Referring to the second question, the formation process of urban destination personalities through tourists' direct contact with the destination is focused on in this study. Urban landscapes, as the carriers of urban culture that permeate everywhere in a city, with both tangible and intangible forms (Steiner, 2011) are taken into account in this study. Specifically, the influential relationships between urban landscapes and urban destination personalities in the form of both components and elements are investigated. With respect to the last question, after identifying the structural relationship between destination personality and destination image, the impacts of urban destination personalities on overall destination image are examined, and the mediating effects of urban destination personalities on the relationship between urban landscapes and overall destination image are examined. The findings would contribute to revealing a chain of influence among landscapes, personalities and overall image of urban destinations, and further providing practical insights into building or upgrading personality traits for a specific destination so as to make it be more distinctive and attractive from outside to inside. Note that, machine learning (Mitchell, 1997), as an intelligent data analysis tool, is employed in this research for constructing models that are capable of gracefully approaching the ground-truth relationships in the real world.

2. Literature review

2.1. Concept of destination personality

Destination personality is incubated from the concept of brand personality in the marketing literature. Brand personality is defined as 'the set of human characteristics associated with a brand' (Aaker, 1997). The proposition of this concept is based on the theory of anthropomorphism which embraces the view that people are inclined to endow nonhuman things with human-like traits (Boyer, 1996). For example, it is common for a person to characterise a dog as naughty, a tree as charming, or a car as fashionable. This phenomenon can be explained from two theoretical perspectives (Guthrie, 1997). From the cognitive perspective, people tend to acquire new knowledge based on their familiar sources. Since self-schema can be viewed as the most familiar source for people, it is often used by them as the model to either interpret the outside world or establish a relationship with it.