Development and validation of a destination personality scale for mainland Chinese travelers

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A two-step mixed method approach is used to develop a destination personality scale for Chinese travelers.
- The destination personality scale has five dimensions.
- "Competence" and "Femininity" are principal predictive dimensions of self-congruity and destination loyalty.
- The development of a culture-specific destination personality scale is warranted.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop a destination personality scale utilizing a sample of mainland Chinese travelers and examine the impact of this new scale on tourists' travel attitudes and behaviors using a two-step mixed method approach. Results yield an 18-item five-dimensional destination personality scale (competence, sacredness, vibrancy, femininity, and excitement) with desirable reliability, construct validity, and predictive validity. Except for "vibrancy", the other four dimensions are found to be significant determinants of travelers' actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity, and destination loyalty. Results suggest that "competence" and "femininity" are the primary determinants of three criterion variables when all other dimensions are controlled for. This study provides empirical evidence for the necessity of developing a culture-specific destination personality scale under the Chinese cultural context. Destination managers could use this scale to evaluate and identify their primary destination personality characteristics, and adjust their current promotion strategies to target travelers from mainland China more effectively.

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1. Introduction

Human personality characteristics are often used to describe destinations such as Paris as a sophisticated and romantic destination or Africa as a rugged and wild destination. Similar approaches are also used to describe mainland Chinese destinations, to name a couple, "Vibrant Guangdong", and "Romantic and Fashionable Dalian". Tourism scholars have utilized the concept of "brand personality" in marketing to develop the concept of "destination personality" to specifically describe a destination using a set of human characteristics that tourists associate with the destination (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). Destination personality allows tourists to differentiate a destination from similar ones (Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007), build positive affective destination images, and therefore, make their decision making process easier (Hosany et al., 2006; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). Studies further argue that destination personality enables tourists to form strong emotional relationships with destinations, and thus increases their travel intentions, satisfaction, and destination loyalty (Chen & Phou, 2013; Murphy, Benckendorff, & Moscardo, 2007). A distinctive destination personality is likely to provide critical competitive advantages through

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effective positioning (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010).

A number of studies have examined brand personalities of tourism destinations. Most of them have utilized J. Aaker's traditional brand personality scale (BPS) (1997), which was originally developed based on the "Big Five" human personality structure. However, several tourism scholars argue that BPS may not be suitable to study destination personality characteristics. The reason is that BPS is mainly used to measure brand personality of tangible products, while tourism destinations offer both tangible goods and intangible services and experiences, which jointly highlight a collection of hedonic and symbolic characteristics associated with tourism consumption (Murphy, Benckendorff, et al., 2007; Xie & Lee, 2013). Hence, some of the dimensions of BPS are impertinent to describe a tourism destination (e.g., Kim & Lehto, 2012; Murphy, Moscardo, et al., 2007; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). A handful of studies have substantiated the inadequacy of Asker's BPS by proposing additional personality dimensions that are destination specific such as conviviality (Hosany et al., 2006), tranquility (Kumar & Nayak, 2014), and vibrancy (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Tourism scholars assert that rather than directly relying on the existing BPS, it may be necessary to develop a personality scale that is more applicable to tourism destinations (Murphy, Moscardo, et al., 2007; Pereira, Correia, & Schutz, 2014).

As a subjective perception, brand personality is subject to the influence of culture where people assimilate. Culture's influence has been widely acknowledged as one of the underlying factors that determine individuals' perceptions, intentions and behaviors (e.g., Hofstede, & McCrae, 2004; Huang, Gursoy, & Xu, 2014; Kirillova, Fu, Lehto, & Cai, 2014). Studies suggest that culture affects the dimensions of brand personality (Rojas-Méndez, Murphy, & Papadopoulos, 2013). Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera (2001) examine the variations in the dimensions of brand personality in three different countries: America, Japan and Spain. Their results suggest that besides universal dimensions of human personality among different cultures, there are culture-specific dimensions of personality (Berry, 1969), which is consistent with the etic/emic assumption in cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Cheung et al., 1996). Considering the current destination personality studies mainly rely on the brand personality scales developed in the western cultural context, findings of these studies may not be applicable to travelers from other cultures, such as China (Hsu & Huang, 2016; Matzler, Strobl, Stokburger-Sauer, Bobovnicky, & Bauer, 2016). Therefore, studies have emphasized the importance of identifying appropriate dimensions of a destination personality scale that is consistent with the cultural backgrounds of potential or existing markets to increase the external validity of destination brand personality scales in tourism contexts (Kumar & Nayak, 2014).

According to Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimension theory, there are radical cultural differences between mainland China and western countries. Mainland China, being one of the most representative Confucian countries, is a typical collectivist country, and shows high power distance and low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Consequently, mainland Chinese and western travelers are different in such aspects as thinking style, attitude toward nature and the world around them (Bao, Chen, & Ma, 2014; Li & Kaplanidou, 2013; Su, Hsu, & Swanson, 2014; Sun, Cárdenas, & Harrill, 2016; Tsang & Ap, 2007; Tseng, Wu, Morrison, Zhang, & Chen, 2015). In this regard, destination personality dimensions developed based on western cultural norms and values may not be applicable to mainland Chinese context. This study attempts to develop a destination personality scale that particularly applies to a Chinese context.

Another reason to select Chinese tourism context for this study is the fact that China has become a major economic power in recent decades with a large middle class population who can afford international travel. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2013), China is the world's largest tourism source market and is likely to continue to grow significantly in the future. In 2014, over 100 million mainland Chinese chose to travel abroad, constituting the biggest market share in the worldwide outbound tourism market. The overseas expenditure by mainland Chinese travelers grew by 28% in a year to 164.8 billion dollars. Despite the growing number of overseas destinations targeting Chinese outbound travelers as one of their primary market segments, the underlying dimensions of destination personality perceptions of mainland Chinese travelers remain unclear. Thus, the purpose of this study is to develop a destination personality scale utilizing mainland Chinese travelers' perspectives and examine the impact of those underlying dimensions of this scale on mainland Chinese travelers' travel attitudes and behaviors.

This study contributes to the knowledge in the field by developing and testing a scale that measures destination personality characteristics from mainland Chinese travelers' perspective, which can be utilized for cross-cultural comparison of destination personality perceptions. Furthermore, findings of this study provides a critical tool for destination managers and marketers, both in China and abroad, to better understand the personality characteristics used by Chinese travelers to describe destination personalities since the formation of a strong destination brand personality in travelers' mind can provide a competitive edge to a destination over similar destinations (Murphy, Moscardo, et al., 2007) and increase tourists' travel intentions, satisfaction, and destination loyalty (Chen & Phou, 2013; Murphy, Benckendorff, et al., 2007).

2. Literature review

2.1. Personality, brand personality and destination personality

In psychology literature, personality systematically describes individuals' relatively enduring styles of thinking, feeling as well as acting (McCrae & Costa, 1997). "Big Five" personality is by far one of the most widely used personality theories, which includes five distinctive dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness (John & Srivastava, 1999). Based on the lexical assumption, personality trait theory assumes that all relevant and important personality characteristics could be described verbally and found in the dictionary. Although products/brands are nonhuman agents, marketing researchers, based on the theory of anthropomorphism premise, argue that consumers tend to humanize or personalize nonhuman agents through using humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007; Fournier, 1998). In this sense, consumers personalize products/brands by associating them with a set of human characteristics (Aaker, 1997), which result in the formation of a brand personality perception in consumers' mind. Brand personality is comprised of a set of emotional and associative humanlike characteristics that represent a company or a brand name in consumers' mind (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009). These emotional and associative humanlike characteristics determine how individuals feel about and interact with a brand. Sociality (i.e. dispositional loneliness) and effecting needs (i.e. a stable need for control) (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008) are identified as the two main motives for consumers to attribute humanlike characteristics to nonhuman entities, so that they can proactively view products and brands as critical contributors and vital partners in a relationship (Fournier, 1998).

In the context of destination marketing, the term "personality" does not literally reflect a person's appearance, traits, nor behavior as in psychology, but is a metaphor that personifies destination attributes, benefits, price, and users' imagery (Aaker & Fournier,