



Chinese consumers' brand personality perceptions of tourism real estate firms



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explored the salient brand personality factors as perceived by Chinese consumers towards tourism real estate.
- Five factors (humanity, excitement, status enhancement, professionalism and wellness) were identified.
- Three Chinese consumer segments (status/humanity consumers, wellness seekers and professionalism minders) were found.
- Differences of Chinese consumers' brand personality perceptions were not attributed to demographics.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Chinese consumers' perceptions of brand personality of tourism real estate firms, and classified Chinese consumers based on their brand personality perceptions towards tourism real estate as a new consumption good. The study identified five brand personality factors: *humanity*, *excitement*, *status enhancement*, *professionalism* and *wellness*. *K*-means cluster analysis further identified three distinct Chinese consumer segments with differentiated brand personality perceptions: *status/humanity consumers*, *wellness seekers* and *professionalism minders*. Discussions regarding culture-specific factors of brand personality in the study were provided with considerations of China's significant socio-cultural changes. Managerial implications and suggestions for future research were also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Competition among tourism brands is getting intensified (Chen & Phou, 2013); brand personality has emerged as a key component of an effective tourism brand and an effective tool of brand positioning and differentiation (Kim, Shim, & Dinnie, 2013; Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007). A strong positive brand personality that possesses distinctive and lasting traits will lead to relatively higher product evaluations (Freling & Forbes, 2005), tourist behavioural intention to return and loyalty (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Farhat & Khan, 2011; Xie & Lee, 2013), and sustainable competitive advantage (Freling & Forbes, 2005). However, in a highly competitive marketplace, merely informing utilitarian

attributes of tourism products is not enough to attract customers (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). When product and service attributes under one brand are similar with other competing brands, brand personality can create a basis for differentiation and increase the brand's appeal (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), as consumers often use brands as 'consumption symbols' to express themselves (Sirgy, 1982).

Brand personality reflects the values and beliefs of a culture, and there are significant differences among the meanings embedded in brands in different cultures (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001). Empirical evidence demonstrates that brand personality dimensions differ considerably in cross-cultural contexts and different settings (e.g. Aaker et al., 2001; Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Guido, 2001; Milas & Mlačić, 2007; Smit, Van den Berge, & Franzen, 2003). As Milas and Mlačić (2007) noted, there is value in applying a culture-specific measure of brand personality, especially if researchers seek to understand specific local brands. In recent years, growing academic interest has been witnessed in non-

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western societies in studying brand personality (e.g. [Chen & Phou, 2013](#); [Chu & Sung, 2011](#); [Sung & Tinkham, 2005](#)). China is emerging as a significant consumer market. As Chinese consumer psychology may be different from their western counterparts ([Bond, 2008](#)), it is important to investigate how Chinese consumers perceive brand personality and to what extent the understanding of brand personality can be applied in this context. However, there is little empirical research on Chinese consumer's perception on brand personality and its culture-specific factors in a service context.

The tourism industry has witnessed significant growth in China and generated US\$494.6 billion in 2014, a 15.4% increase over the previous year ([The National Economic and Social Development Statistics Bulletin, 2014](#)). Growing consumer demands in tourism, together with decreasing business confidence in investing in the traditional property market are believed to have boosted the development of “*tourism real estate*” as a distinctive type of tourism-related consumer good in China ([Yu & Zhao, 2003](#)). Tourism real estate is an emerging sector in China which sees a combination of both the tourism industry and the real estate sector. Although tourism real estate, as a new form of consumer good, may take some resemblance to timesharing products in western countries, its scope has gone far beyond timesharing products ([Pi & Du, 2007](#)). In this study, we adopted Shen's definition of tourism real estate as ‘the development and marketing mode of real estate products for the vacation purpose, which realize all or part of tourism function’ ([Shen, 2001](#), p.1). Tourism real estate, as a unique industry sector overlapping both tourism and real estate, provides a wide range of products and services for various consumer segments ([Shen, 2001](#); [Yu & Zhao, 2003](#)). These include residential projects relying on the superior natural environment and good geographical location (e.g. landscape resorts or villas), timeshare hotel, property hotel, pension hotel, sport resorts (e.g. golf, hiking, skiing), tourism/leisure training center, and resort hotel. An exemplar firm of tourism real estate in China is the Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) Group. Relying on theme park tourism resources and superior ecological surroundings, the OCT Group has developed products like vacation real estate (e.g. upscale residential projects, villas and apartments), themed hotels group, commercial real estate like spa and golf course. The Group takes mid and high-end consumers from large state-owned and multinational companies as the target market for its tourism real estate products, aiming to create a people-oriented vacation lifestyle for consumers and achieve the harmony between human and nature. Although in China there exist many other tourism real estate firms like the OCT Group, very little research has been done to examine consumers' perceptions of these distinctive firms and their products/services.

As a burgeoning industry sector valued and supported by the Chinese government, tourism real estate presents utilitarian traits and symbolic values to consumers. This study investigates Chinese consumer's brand personality perceptions of tourism real estate firms in China. Specifically, the study has two objectives:

- (1) To identify the salient brand personality factors as perceived by Chinese consumers with regards to tourism real estate as a new consumption good; and,
- (2) To understand the current tourism real estate consumer market by segmenting Chinese consumers based on their brand personality perceptions towards tourism real estate consumption.

In this emerging tourism related sector, creating and managing a positive and distinctive brand personality is of great importance to the survival and success of tourism real estate firms. Thus, this research has both theoretical and practical implications. First, investigating the cultural specific dimensions of brand personality

as perceived by Chinese consumers expands on the existing brand personality literature which is often limited to Western context. Second, research on consumer market segmentation based on Chinese consumers' brand personality perceptions towards such a novel and distinctive type of tourism-related consumer good enriches the tourism and marketing research. Thirdly, by achieving the above two research objectives, very useful industry implications can be derived. Tourism real estate industry practitioners can be informed to develop effective marketing programs and brand positioning strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand personality

Brand personality is defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” ([Aaker, 1997](#), p.347). This definition assumes that a wide range of human traits can be applied to describe a brand. Aaker's conceptualisation of brand personality has been widely accepted by researchers (e.g. [Ekinci & Hosany, 2006](#); [Murphy et al., 2007](#); [Sung & Tinkham, 2005](#)). However, this definition has also been criticized for being too broad and unspecific ([Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003](#)). [Azoulay and Kapferer \(2003\)](#) argued that brand personality should include “the set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brands” (p.151). The perception of a brand personality can be formed by any direct or indirect experiences that customers have with the brand ([Plummer, 1985](#)). Direct sources of brand personality formation are person-based ([Helgeson & Supphellen, 2004](#)), which include all the individuals associated with the brand, such as users, company employees and chief executive officers (CEOs). Demographic characteristics such as age, gender and social class are also regarded as contributing to the formation of brand personality ([Aaker, 1997](#)). Indirect sources of brand personality formation involve all the product-related attributes, such as product category associations, brand name and symbol, price, distribution, and advertising style.

Brand personality plays an important role in the “for me” choice, or “I see myself in that brand” choice ([Plummer, 2000](#), p.81). It reflects how consumer sees the brand and thereby indicates the relationship between the brand and the consumer. Considering the interpersonal relationship between the customer and the brand, [Sweeney and Brandon \(2006\)](#) emphasized the interpersonal features that might characterize the brand, by advancing a model in understanding the brand personality concept; The model depicts brand personality on two prime axes (dominant and friendly) and two alternative orthogonal dimensions (extraversion and agreeableness). Brand personality can be incarnated from the relationship between the brand and the customer. The customer plays an active role in forming brand personality through evaluating what is received from a brand. On the other hand, the brand is also believed to have an active response toward its customers through marketing actions, which in turn affect customer's perception ([Dall'Omo Riley & de Chernatony, 2000](#)). In other words, the customer and the brand are active partners in the customer-brand relationship. Therefore, in this study we follow the definition specified by [Sweeney and Brandon \(2006\)](#) where brand personality is regarded as “the set of human personality traits that correspond to the interpersonal domain of human personality and are relevant to describing the brand as a relationship partner” (p.645).

2.2. Brand personality measurement and cross-cultural studies

[Aaker \(1997\)](#) developed the Brand Personality Scale (BPS) to measure the extent to which a brand possesses any of the personality traits, identifying five core dimensions that are believed to

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