



# Brand personality and culture: The role of cultural differences on the impact of brand personality perceptions on tourists' visit intentions



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Brand personality is a useful concept to describe different perceptions of nations as tourism destinations.
- A consumer's brand self-congruity mediates the relationship between perceived brand personality and visit intentions.
- Individualism and uncertainty avoidance moderate the relationship between brand self-congruity and visit intentions.
- Personality characteristics make up for an effective market segmentation approach.
- Brand personification strategies might be more or less effective depending on cultural differences.

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism destinations increasingly use brand-personification strategies to evoke favorable consumer reactions. These reactions, however, may hinge on cultural differences. This paper investigates the relationships among nation brand personality perceptions, consumer brand-self congruity, and the visit intention of a country as a tourism destination. Brand-self congruity is examined as a mediator of the relationship between brand personality perception and visit intention. Of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, individualism and uncertainty avoidance are the most relevant dimensions for brand-self congruity. Based on representative samples of consumers from five countries (Italy, the UK, Czech Republic, Poland, and Russia) and using Slovakia as a sample tourism destination, the effect of individualism and uncertainty avoidance on the relationship between brand self-congruity and visit intention is studied. Individualism and uncertainty avoidance moderate the congruity – visit intention relationship – but in a negative way, contrary to our expectations. Important implications are derived for both tourism research and destination management.

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## 1. Introduction

Nation branding is gaining interest in both research and practice (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011), and the concept of brand personality has recently been applied to explain individual perceptions of nations (e.g., d'Astous & Boujbel,

2007) and destinations (e.g., Boksberger, Dolnicar, Laesser, & Randle, 2011; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Based on the theories of self-concept and self-congruity, consumer behavior research argues that consumers prefer brands they consider as being similar to themselves (Landon, 1974; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). Brand-self congruity (i.e., the match between a brand's image and an individual's self-concept (Sirgy & Su, 2000)) strongly affects brand-success variables such as consumer-brand identification (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012), customer satisfaction (e.g., Nam, Ekinci, & Whyatt, 2011), and customer loyalty (e.g., Kressmann et al., 2006).

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Research on the relationships between brand personality, brand-self congruity, and behavioral outcomes is, however, not fully clear on the mediating role of brand-self congruity. Several studies have found that brand personality has a direct impact on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (for a meta-analytic review, see [Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013a](#); for a review, see also [Usakli & Baloglu, 2011](#)). This literature argues that positive effects accrue when the brand personality is distinctive and thus contributes to differentiation ([Usakli & Baloglu, 2011](#)). Other studies argue that brand-self congruity fully mediates the relationship between brand personality and behavioral outcomes (e.g., [Usakli & Baloglu, 2011](#)). Finally, some studies look directly into the effect of brand-self congruity on attitudinal and behavioral brand success outcomes ([Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012](#)). To provide a better understanding of these relationships, we investigate brand personality perceptions and purchase intentions in the context of nation brand personality. In line with [Usakli and Baloglu \(2011\)](#), we suggest that these relationships are mediated through brand-self congruity; that is, the consumer's perception of the similarity between his or her personality and the nation brand personality.

Recent research shows that culture plays a role in brand personality perceptions. Studies find, for instance, that consumers in different cultural contexts identify with different culturally relevant brand personality traits ([Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014](#)). It has also been found that some brand personality dimensions have similar meanings in Japan and the United States (e.g., sincerity, excitement, competence, and sophistication) while others are culture-specific (e.g., peacefulness in Japan and ruggedness in the United States ([Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001](#))). Individuals in Japan and in Spain favor harmony-oriented value types to a greater extent than Americans do ([Schwartz, 1994](#)). Additionally, studies suggest that certain cultural orientations resonate with specific brand concepts, defined as “unique, abstract meanings associated with brands” ([Torelli, Özsomer, Carvalho, Keh, & Maehle, 2012](#), p. 92). The vertical individualist ([Triandis, 1995](#)), for example, likes brand concepts that represent self-enhancement but not those representing openness.

Although some research has theorized about the role of culture in consumer-brand relationships, empirical research is still very limited ([Lam, Ahearne, & Schillewaert, 2012](#)). Initial empirical evidence suggests a positive relationship between brand-self congruity and consumer-brand relationships across cultures, but the strength of these relationships is moderated by cultural orientations (e.g., [Lam et al., 2012](#); [Litvin & Kar, 2004](#); [Sung & Choi, 2012](#)). The aim of this study is, therefore, to examine the moderating impact of individualism and uncertainty avoidance on the relationship between brand-self congruity and visit intention in tourism destinations.

This paper contributes to a better understanding of the mediating role of brand-self congruity in the relationship between brand personality and behavioral intentions. Second, it contributes to the brand personality literature by exploring cultural influences on brand-personification strategies ([Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014](#)).

Using data from 2116 consumers from five countries (Czech Republic, Italy, Poland, Russia, and the UK) and their perceptions of Slovakia as a tourism destination, we empirically test the mediating effect of brand-self congruity on visit intention and the moderating role of culture on the relationship between brand-self congruity and visit intention. Specifically, the role of nation brand personality perception, brand-self congruity, and the cultural dimensions of individualism and uncertainty avoidance, as the most important cultural dimensions in the context of personification ([Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014](#)) and brand self-congruity ([Lam et al., 2012](#)), are investigated.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly

review the literature on brand personality, brand-self congruity, and culture in order to develop our conceptual model and hypotheses. We then describe our empirical study, including the sample, method, and results. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings.

## 2. Theory development

### 2.1. The mediating effect of brand-self congruity

In the following section, we develop hypotheses for the relationships among brand personality perceptions, brand self-congruity, and visit intentions as well as for the role of individualism and uncertainty avoidance (see [Fig. 1](#) for the conceptual model).

Brand personality, as the “set of human characteristics associated with a brand” ([Aaker, 1997](#), p. 347), is crucial for understanding a consumer's brand choices ([Plummer, 2000](#)). The most prominent understanding of this construct is derived from the Big Five human personality inventory ([Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013b](#)). This theory asserts that individual differences in neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are stable traits throughout most of the adult life span ([McCrae & Costa, 2003](#); [McCrae & John, 1992](#)). Furthermore, these personality traits are found in a wide variety of cultures ([Hofstede & McCrae, 2004](#)). Extensive research exists regarding the use of these basic personality traits to describe brands ([Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013b](#)), and numerous adapted scales have been developed to measure brands as personalities (for a review, see [Geuens, Weijters, & De Wulf, 2009](#)). The concepts of brand personality have been applied to a wide spectrum of contexts (e.g., product and destination brands) and have generally been found to be cross-culturally generalizable (e.g., [Aaker et al., 2001](#); [d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007](#); [Geuens et al., 2009](#)).

The effectiveness of brand-personification strategies, however, depends on whether the brand personality is congruent with the consumer's self-image ([Sirgy, 1982](#)). The consumer's self-image or self-concept has been conceptualized in multiple dimensions, consisting of an actual and ideal self-concept, a social self-concept, and an ideal social self-concept. The ideal self-concept refers to how a consumer would like to perceive himself or herself, whereas the social self-concept refers to how an individual would like others to perceive him or her ([Sirgy, 1982](#)). The self-congruity hypothesis is rooted in the assumption that individuals strive to maintain cognitive consistency in their beliefs and behaviors ([Sung & Choi, 2012](#)). Thus, consumers prefer those products or brands whose image is congruent with their own self-image ([Sirgy, 1982](#)). This reasoning also applies to brand personality. The stronger the congruence between the perceived personality of the brand and the consumer's own personality, the more likely the consumer is to buy this brand ([Usakli & Baloglu, 2011](#)). This implies that brand-self congruity mediates the influence of brand personality on purchase intentions (see, for example, [Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013a](#); [Sirgy & Su, 2000](#); [Usakli & Baloglu, 2011](#)). In a tourism context, [Stokburger-Sauer \(2011\)](#) demonstrates the importance of brand-self congruity as a driver of visit intention. Hence, building on these theoretical arguments and empirical findings, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1.** *Brand-self congruity mediates the relationship between brand-personality perceptions and visit intention.*

### 2.2. The moderating effect of culture

Extant research has established and tested the relationship between consumer brand-self congruity and favorable outcomes (e.g.,

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