# Examining the role of destination personality and self-congruity in predicting tourist behavior

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the relationships among destination personality, self-congruity, tourist-destination relationship and destination loyalty. Brand relationship theory and attitude theory were used to conceptualize the framework of this study. A survey with a convenience sample of 356 foreign tourists visiting Shimla and Dharamsala, India was conducted. The findings suggest that tourists attribute personality traits to tourism destinations. Furthermore, structural equation modeling reveals that both destination personality and self-congruity positively influence the tourist-destination relationship which further leads to destination loyalty. Arguably, this is the first study in tourism research which investigates the collective role of destination personality and self-congruity in influencing tourist behavior through the tourist-destination relationship. The study offers multiple theoretical and practical implications for both academicians and practitioners.

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## 1. Introduction

Although the application of branding in product and services can be traced back to 1960's, the concept of destination branding is comparatively new (Gnoth, 1998). The tourism destinations can be considered as a product or brand as these include both tangible and intangible attributes (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). In this era of globalization, destination marketing organizations (DMO's) are striving hard to attract tourists due to increasing substitutability in tourism destinations (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Thus, destination marketers are focusing on branding destinations in order to craft a unique identity which can motivate tourists to visit those destinations. Destination branding has emerged as an important and popular tool to differentiate destinations (Chen & Phou, 2013; Li & Kaplanidou, 2013; Kumar & Nayak, 2014a, 2014b). Many destinations are still focusing on functional attributes such as beaches, mountains, beautiful scenery in their promotional campaigns and advertisements (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007a). However, tourists can find these functional attributes present in many destinations and hence, functional attributes no longer are helpful in differentiating destinations (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Kumar & Nayak, 2014a). Therefore, the use of symbolic attributes may better assist destination marketers to build a unique identity for their destinations. Keller (1993) suggests that product related attributes tend to serve a utilitarian function and brand personality tends to serve a symbolic function for a product or service. Destination personality (DP) can act as a viable metaphor for building destination brands, crafting a distinctive identity for

tourism destinations and investigating visitor's perceptions of destinations (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). The examination of DP as a predictor of tourist-destination relationship (includes satisfaction, trust, and attachment) would add to the refining of the theoretical literature on brand personality in tourism.

In addition, self-congruity theory states that there must be a congruity between brand personality and a consumer's self-concept. In other words, self-congruity theory refers to the drive to buy the products and services of the personalities which match with consumers' own personality (Aaker, 1995). Similarly, applying the same notion in tourism, it can be argued that higher the similarity between a destination personality and tourist's self-concept, the greater the chances of favorable attitude development among tourists towards the destination. This favorable attitude may affect the intention to revisit or willingness to recommend that destination. The findings of this study would help in understanding how the concept of self-congruity predicts the tourist's complex behavior.

Destination loyalty has surfaced as a vital element of management research and destination branding due to growing competition and acknowledgment of the significance of loyal tourists. Although the role of satisfaction in predicting tourist loyalty has been thoroughly examined, the influence of other important variables such as attachment and trust is largely unexplored (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). Moreover, the literature review suggests that merely satisfying customers is not enough to retain them in this highly competitive marketplace (Mittal & Lasar, 1998). In this research, the concept of relationship theory is considered and it is proposed that the tourist-destination relationship that includes satisfaction, trust and attachment is a better and an appropriate construct than satisfaction to examine destination loyalty.

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Moreover, although destination personality and self-congruity are the two major elements of destination branding (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Murphy et al., 2007a, 2007b; Murphy, Benckendorff, & Moscardo, 2007b; Murphy et al., 2007b), the relationship between the two has been rarely investigated (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Thus, additional research focus is required to uncover the relationship between these two constructs, especially relating to the tourist-destination relationship that may further influence the tourist's loyalty. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill these above-mentioned gaps in the literature by making following contributions. First, this study investigates the role of destination personality and self-congruity in developing and maintaining tourist-destination relationship. Second, the study also investigates the influence of tourist-destination relationship in determining destination loyalty. Arguably, this study examines the role of self-congruity on trust for the first time in the tourism context. Third, in order to brand India as a favorable tourist destination among foreign potential and current tourists, only international tourists were included. The rationale behind this was to investigate foreign tourists' perceptions about unique DP traits of India, which can be used to foster congruence between their personalities and DP. Finally, the study provides a comprehensive model of tourist's post visit behavior by examining the relationships among destination personality, self-congruity, tourist-destination relationship and destination loyalty.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses development

The literature on consumer behavior reveals that the idea of branding has been thoroughly researched and followed in the general marketing field. However, the application of branding to tourism destinations is a recent development (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). A strong brand helps in differentiating a product from its competitors (Keller, 1993), minimizes perceived risks (O'Cass & Grace, 2003), reduces information search costs (Biswas, 1992) and satisfies both functional and symbolic needs of customers (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). The researchers and practitioners of destination branding consider destination as a product and assume that it can be branded just as products. However, building destination brands is a more complex and different process than building brands for unidimensional products and services (Hankinson, 2001). The process of destination branding includes capturing the different elements of the destination in the brand and communicating those to potential and current consumers through different components of a brand such as brand image or brand personality.

Although, numerous researchers have studied brand personality, brand image, brand relationship and brand loyalty in the context of generic products and services (Aaker, 1997; Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006), the application of brand personality and brand relationship theory to tourism destinations is comparatively new. In this study, we employ attitude theory reformulated by Bagozzi (1992) to construct our conceptual model. Bagozzi's (1992) attitude theory states that the appraisal of an entity precipitates emotions which have an effect on the individual's behavior: and it illustrates cognitive, appraisal, and emotional response and behavior as taking place in a sequential process. The conceptual model for this study is shown in Fig. 1.
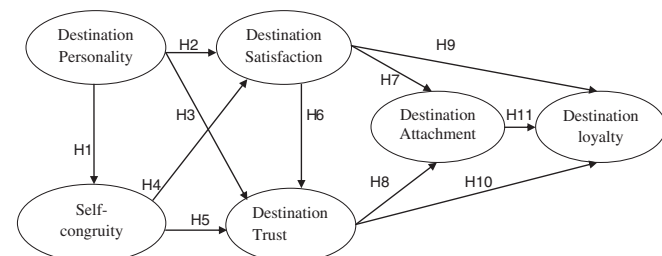


**Fig. 1.** Conceptual model.

### 2.1. Destination personality & self-congruity

Destination personality and self-congruity are the two important cognitive constructs in tourism marketing. Destination personality refers to the set of human characteristics associated with a destination (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006), while self-congruity is defined as the match between a tourist's self-concept and destination personality in the context of tourism destinations (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Self-congruity is classified into four types which include actual, ideal, social, and ideal social self-congruity (Sirgy et al., 1997). This study considers only actual and ideal self-congruity since these two types of self-congruity have been thoroughly examined empirically and most commonly employed (Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy et al., 1997). Thus, we consider destination personality and self-congruity to formulate the cognitive stage of our model. Consumer behavior research suggests that consumers prefer those products that tend to be similar to how they perceive themselves or how they would like to be perceived themselves by others (Aaker, 1997; Malhotra, 1988). Furthermore, Aaker (1999) states that consumers prefer those brands whose personalities have a match with their own personalities. Murphy et al. (2007a, 2007b) studied the role of brand personality in differentiating regional tourism destinations and revealed that higher self-congruity ratings were associated with higher destination personality ratings. Usakli and Baloglu (2011) further established that destination personality significantly influences self-congruity in the context of holiday destinations. Thus, based on the above discussion, it is hypothesized that:

**H1.** Destination personality has a significant influence on self-congruity.

### 2.2. Destination personality, self-congruity and tourist-destination relationship

Numerous researchers have examined the influence of cognitive images on affective responses (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Martin & Bosque, 2008), and the role of cognitive evaluations in affecting affective evaluations (Baloglu, 1999). In addition, affect theory posits that affective responses are the function of an individual's prior knowledge formation, for instance, goals, expectations and personality factors (Besser & Shackelford, 2007). Thus, the affective stage of this study has been conceptualized based on relationship theory by introducing the tourist-destination relationship concept similar to how it was used by Chen and Phou (2013). Comparable to consumers who develop relationships with products and services (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), brands (Esch et al., 2006), tourists are also expected to establish relationships or bonds with some destinations based on the personality characteristics of destinations (Chen & Phou, 2013; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Aaker, Susan, and Brasel (2004) classify the brand relationship as a multidimensional construct which includes commitment, immediacy, self-commitment, and satisfaction. On the other hand, Esch et al. (2006) measure brand relationship using three elements which include satisfaction, trust, and attachment. The present study also conceptualizes tourist-destination relationship as having three components, namely satisfaction, trust, and attachment.

Brand satisfaction refers to "an individual's cognitive evaluation of whether or not the exchange relationship with the brand is rewarding, and as an affective state occurring from an assessment of all the aspects that form a relationship" (Esch et al., 2006, p. 100). Place satisfaction has received the major attention of tourism researchers (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2014). Numerous scholars have defined place satisfaction in different ways. For instance, Stedman (2002) defines place satisfaction as a multi-dimensional construct that includes judgment of individual's need fulfillment for physical attributes of the place and perceived quality for settings. Chen and Chen (2010) define tourist satisfaction as a function of pre-travel expectations and post-travel experiences. For this study, destination satisfaction is