

# A Study on Brand Personality Traits of Tourist Destinations and Tourist Self-Congruity

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**Abstract:** *The application of brand personality theory in the study of tourist destinations has received increasing attention. However, existing research mostly remains a simple transplantation of consumer goods frameworks and fails to fully address the uniqueness of tourism contexts and the complexity of tourists' self-concepts. This study constructs a systematic analytical framework for brand personality of tourist destinations and tourist self-congruity. It proposes that the dimensions of destination brand personality should be contextually reconstructed by incorporating trait factors deeply associated with tourism experiences. It also reveals the multiple levels of tourists' self-concepts in tourism contexts and the characteristics of selective activation. This study further extends congruity theory from static matching to a bidirectional interactive logic. The analysis further clarifies the mediating role of cognitive appraisal, the catalytic effect of emotional resonance, and the nonlinear influence of the dynamic evolution of self-congruity on behavioral intention. From three dimensions, namely differentiated positioning, contextual regulation, and experience co-creation, this study explores the shaping paths of destination brand personality. This research provides an integrated theoretical perspective for understanding the psychological connection between tourists and destinations.*

**Keywords:** *Tourist Destination Brand Personality; Tourist Self-Concept; Self-Congruity; Mechanism of Action; Contextual Adaptation*

## Introduction

As a composite consumption object, a tourist destination's brand image and its congruence with tourists' psychological needs profoundly influence the formation of destination competitiveness. Brand personality theory provides an important analytical tool for understanding consumer-brand relationships; however, when this theory is introduced into the study of tourist destinations, the existing framework faces applicability challenges. A destination not only carries the symbolic functions of general consumer goods but also embodies tourists' multiple expectations of heterogeneous spaces, emotional experiences, and self-exploration. Therefore, the composition and mechanism of its personality dimensions differ essentially from those of ordinary products. Meanwhile, tourists' self-concepts in tourism contexts exhibit multiple levels of individual self, social self, and ideal self, along with features of selective activation, thereby opening new analytical spaces for the application of self-congruity theory. This study aims to construct a theoretical analytical framework for brand personality of tourist destinations and tourist self-congruity, to analyze the mechanisms through which the congruity effect influences tourists' attitudes and behaviors via paths such as cognitive appraisal and emotional resonance, and to explore differentiated shaping and contextual adaptation strategies for destination brand personality, so as to expand the explanatory boundaries of brand personality theory.

## 1. Theoretical Construction of Tourist Destination Brand Personality and Self-Congruity

### 1.1 Dimensional Migration of Brand Personality and Contextual Adaptation of Destinations

Brand personality theory originates from personality psychology and has been introduced into the field of marketing, where it has developed into an important framework for explaining consumer-brand relationships. When this theory is transferred to the study of tourist destinations, its connotation and dimensional structure face the necessity of reconstruction. As a composite entity composed of multiple elements such as geographical space, social culture, and service facilities, a destination's personality traits cannot be fully covered by the five-dimensional structure of general consumer goods brands. The

particularity of the tourism context lies in the fact that a destination not only carries functional value but is also endowed with symbolic meaning, and its personality characteristics often present a complex pattern of multidimensional superposition and contextual dependence.

Based on this, the dimensional construction of destination brand personality should incorporate trait factors deeply associated with tourism experiences, such as "leisureliness," "authenticity," and "charm value." The proposal of these factors stems from an understanding of the essence of tourism consumption, namely that tourists' perception of a destination involves not only traditional dimensions such as brand competence and sincerity but also whether the destination can provide a psychological space and emotional atmosphere different from daily life. The adaptive adjustment of the dimensional structure aims to grant brand personality theory more precise explanatory power in the tourism context, thereby laying a conceptual foundation for subsequent explorations of its relationship with tourists' self-concepts.

### ***1.2 The Multiple Levels of Tourist Self-Concept and Its Activation in the Tourism Context***

Tourist self-concept is not a single and fixed psychological entity; instead, it is a dynamic system composed of multiple levels, including the individual self, the social self, and the ideal self. In daily life contexts, the degree of prominence of different self-levels is constrained by social role norms and habitual environments, and individuals often exhibit a relatively stable pattern of self-presentation. However, the particularity of the tourism context lies in its temporary detachment of individuals from their daily social identities and behavioral scripts, thereby providing an opportunity for the activation of different self-levels. This contextual shift allows previously latent self-aspects to emerge. During the tourism process, tourists may seek validation of their actual self or pursue approximation to their ideal self<sup>[1]</sup>.

Tourism activities thus become a special field in which the levels of self-concept are reordered and highlighted. When tourists leave their habitual environment, the pressure of social evaluation decreases, and the individual's tendency to pursue the ideal self significantly strengthens. At the same time, the presentation of the social self also undergoes a transformation. This activation mechanism requires that the study of self-congruity in the tourism context must move beyond a static matching perspective and instead focus on the multiple potential correspondences between different levels of self and destination brand personality. The hierarchical nature of self-concept determines that the congruity between tourists and destinations is not a unidimensional fit but rather a selective resonance of multi-level psychological structures within a specific context.

### ***1.3 Extension of the Congruity Theory Framework and the Bidirectional Interactive Logic***

Traditional self-congruity theory focuses on the degree of match between consumers' perceived brand personality and their self-concepts, using this match as a key variable for predicting consumer attitudes and behaviors. However, in the context of tourist destinations, this unidirectional matching model faces the problem of insufficient explanatory power. Tourism consumption possesses the dual attributes of functional satisfaction and symbolic expression, and the congruity relationship between tourists and destinations presents a more complex bidirectional interactive characteristic. On the one hand, tourists select destination brand personalities that match their own self-concepts, a process that reflects the psychological motivation of self-verification. On the other hand, tourists may also use destination brand personalities to construct or approach their ideal selves, demonstrating a self-enhancement orientation.

The proposal of this bidirectional interactive logic marks an extension of the congruity theory framework from static matching to dynamic construction. During the tourism process, the congruity between tourists and destinations is not a pre-existing static fact but rather a dynamic relationship that is continuously generated and adjusted in the course of the experience. Through consumption behaviors, social interactions, and meaning interpretation, tourists actively shape the psychological connection between themselves and the destination. Meanwhile, the brand personality characteristics presented by the destination are constantly confirmed, reinforced, or even redefined in this interactive process. This bidirectionality and dynamism enable the study of self-congruity in the tourism context to transcend the existing paradigm of traditional consumer behavior, thereby presenting richer theoretical tension and explanatory space.

## **2. Analysis of the Mechanism of Action Between Brand Personality and Self-Congruity**

### ***2.1 The Mediating Path of Cognitive Appraisal and the Formation of Brand Attitude***

Tourists' perception of destination brand personality is not directly transformed into brand attitude; instead, it undergoes psychological translation through the mediating path of cognitive appraisal. When tourists compare the perceived destination personality traits with their own self-concepts, individuals initiate an internal cognitive evaluation mechanism, the core of which lies in judging the degree of fit between the two. This evaluation process involves an item-by-item comparison of personality traits, the activation and retrieval of self-concepts, and a comprehensive judgment of the degree of match, ultimately producing "congruity perception" as a key cognitive outcome. This cognitive product serves as an independent mediating variable, carrying the function of information transmission from external stimuli to internal attitudes.

The operation of the cognitive appraisal path is profoundly influenced by the individual's mode of information processing. When tourists are in a high-involvement state, they tend to adopt the central route for systematic cognitive processing, carefully comparing each dimension of brand personality and self-concept to form a congruity judgment based on sufficient information. When the level of involvement is low, individuals rely more on the peripheral route, quickly completing the matching evaluation with the help of heuristic cues or overall impressions. These two processing methods lead to differences in the formation mechanism of congruity perception, thereby exerting different effects on the stability and durability of brand attitude. The revelation of this path allows the psychological process between destinations and tourists to be transformed from a "black box" state into an analyzable cognitive chain<sup>[2]</sup>.

### ***2.2 The Catalytic Effect of Emotional Resonance and the Construction of Psychological Connection***

The congruity perception formed through cognitive appraisal requires the catalytic effect of emotional resonance to be transformed into lasting brand attitudes and behavioral intentions. Emotional resonance is different from general satisfaction or pleasure; it is a psychological resonance phenomenon that occurs when an individual perceives a deep fit between the self and the destination. This resonance manifests as tourists' strong psychological sense of belonging to the destination, as if the destination has become an extension or projection of their self-concept. When emotional resonance is activated, the relationship between tourists and the destination transcends the functional transaction dimension and enters the symbolic level of shared meaning.

The construction of psychological connection based on emotional resonance constitutes the core source of relationship stickiness between tourists and destinations. This connection manifests as the psychological representation of self-brand linkage, in which tourists incorporate the destination into their self-concept system, making the destination a component of their individual identity. Once the psychological connection is formed, tourists' attitudes toward the destination acquire the dual attributes of self-defense and self-enhancement, and the emotional attachment generated toward the destination also gains greater resistance to interference and durability. In this mechanism, emotional resonance plays the role of a catalyst: it transforms the congruity judgment at the cognitive level into a deep connection at the emotional level, thereby infusing attitudes that might have remained at the rational evaluation stage with emotional energy.

### ***2.3 The Dynamic Evolution of Self-Congruity and the Nonlinear Relationship with Behavioral Intention***

The self-congruity between tourists and destinations is not a static psychological state; instead, it exhibits dynamic evolutionary characteristics across different stages of the tourism experience. In the pre-trip stage, congruity is mainly based on the comparison between tourists' expected perceptions of destination brand personality and their own self-concepts, and the congruity perception at this stage is characterized by speculation and idealization. Upon entering the on-site experience stage, tourists obtain richer brand information through direct contact, and the initial congruity judgment may be revised, strengthened, or weakened. After the experience ends, as time passes and memory reconstruction occurs, the congruity perception adjusts again, forming a retrospective overall evaluation. This dynamic evolution process causes the influence of congruity on behavioral intention to exhibit temporal differences.

The effect of self-congruity on tourists' behavioral intention does not follow a simple linear increasing pattern. When the degree of congruity is at a relatively low level, tourists' behavioral intentions such as revisit intention and recommendation intention show a positive increase as congruity improves. However, when congruity reaches a certain critical value, further enhancement of congruity may instead lead to diminishing marginal returns or even negative changes in behavioral intention. The emergence of this nonlinear relationship stems from the fact that excessively high congruity may trigger tourists' psychological responses to "over-familiarity" or "lack of novelty." For tourists who pursue self-expansion and novel experiences, in particular, a completely congruent destination may actually weaken its attractiveness. The proposal of the dynamic evolution perspective and the nonlinear relationship revises the linear assumption about the congruity effect in traditional research, thereby providing a more refined theoretical explanatory framework for understanding the complexity of tourists' behavioral intentions.

### **3. Differentiated Shaping and Contextual Adaptation of Tourist Destination Brand Personality**

#### ***3.1 Differentiated Positioning of Destination Brand Personality and Target Market Anchoring***

The differentiated positioning of destination brand personality is rooted in the principle of uniqueness within brand personality theory, and its strategic logic lies in constructing brand identity barriers through the deliberate highlighting of personality traits. Against the background of increasing homogenization in tourism destination competition, the pursuit of comprehensive balance across personality dimensions often leads to brand image ambiguity and increased substitutability. Differentiated positioning, by contrast, focuses on a single dominant personality trait, enabling the destination to form a distinctive psychological image imprint. The theoretical basis of this positioning strategy lies in the selective nature of human cognitive processing: when faced with information about numerous destinations, tourists tend to remember those brands with distinct personality traits rather than those with balanced traits but lacking recognizability. The effectiveness of differentiated positioning depends on whether the destination can extract authentic personality factors from its resource endowments, cultural genes, and spatial forms, and transform these into brand symbols perceptible to tourists.

The anchoring relationship between differentiated positioning and the self-concept levels of the target market constitutes the psychological foundation of brand personality shaping. Different tourist groups exhibit systematic differences in their self-concept structures. Some tourists are dominated by their actual self and tend to choose a destination personality that matches their current self-cognition to obtain the psychological satisfaction of self-verification; other tourists are dominated by their ideal self and prefer to choose a destination personality that carries the traits they aspire to, in order to achieve the psychological pursuit of self-enhancement. The anchoring mechanism requires that the positioning of destination brand personality corresponds precisely with the dominant self-level of the target customer group, making the brand personality a psychological projection carrier of tourists' self-concepts. Compared with traditional market segmentation based on demographic or geographic variables, the anchoring strategy based on self-concept levels possesses stronger psychological explanatory power and can more accurately predict tourists' choice preferences and behavioral tendencies, thus providing more refined theoretical guidance for destination branding strategies<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### ***3.2 The Moderating Mechanism of Tourism Contextual Factors on the Congruity Effect***

The congruity effect between brand personality and tourists' self-concepts does not function with constant intensity; instead, it is systematically moderated by multiple factors within the tourism context. Physical contextual factors constitute the primary dimension of this moderating effect, and their influence mechanism lies in the shaping role of environmental characteristics on individuals' information processing modes and emotional arousal levels. When tourists are in an environment with a large cultural distance or high landscape authenticity, their cognitive resources are more concentrated on the perception and evaluation of the destination's core attributes. In this case, the salience of brand personality increases, and the intensity of the congruity effect subsequently strengthens. Conversely, in contexts with a strong commercial atmosphere or highly artificial environments, tourists' attention is dispersed across various environmental stimuli, and the weight of brand personality information in overall perception decreases relatively, thereby weakening the influence of congruity on attitudes and behaviors. Physical contextual variables such as the degree of cultural distance, differences in landscape types, and the level of privacy in the spatial environment together constitute the background

framework within which the congruity effect operates.

Social and temporal contextual factors also exert non-negligible moderating effects on the congruity effect. From the social dimension, the composition type of travel companions and their interaction patterns significantly influence tourists' perception of destination brand personality and their evaluation criteria. Solo travelers rely more on the individual-level self-concept in their congruity judgment, whereas group travelers may introduce the referential framework of the social self, making the congruity evaluation exhibit characteristics of group negotiation. From the temporal dimension, the progression of stages in a tourism itinerary endows the congruity effect with differentiated psychological salience. During the initial arrival stage, tourists are in a period of high information sensitivity, and the formation of congruity perception is driven by the motivation for expectation verification. During the immersion stage, tourists interact deeply with the destination, and congruity is more manifested as emotional fit at the experiential level. During the farewell stage and the post-experience recall period, congruity transforms into an overall retrospective evaluation and is influenced by memory reconstruction mechanisms. The moderating mechanisms of these three types of contextual factors indicate that without considering the specific context, any discussion of the influence of congruity on tourists' attitudes and behaviors can hardly accurately reveal its complex patterns of operation.

### ***3.3 Dynamic Maintenance of Brand Personality Congruity and the Path of Experience Co-Creation***

The congruity relationship between destination brand personality and tourists' self-concepts should be understood as a dynamic psychological asset that requires continuous maintenance over time, rather than a static matching state achieved at a single point. The theoretical implication of dynamic maintenance lies in the fact that congruity perception exhibits differentiated formation mechanisms and stability characteristics at different stages of the tourism experience. During the pre-trip stage, the congruity judgment is based on secondary information and expectation construction, which carries speculative and idealized tendencies and is easily influenced by marketing communications. During the on-site experience stage, the congruity perception is verified and revised through direct contact and real interaction, and actual information may strengthen, weaken, or change the initial congruity judgment. During the post-experience recall stage, the congruity perception undergoes memory reconstruction and overall integration, forming a final attitudinal evaluation. A deviation of congruity at any stage may lead to a decline in the overall evaluation. Therefore, the maintenance of congruity should run through the entire process of tourist-destination contact. This understanding breaks through the limitation of traditional research that treats congruity as a given state.

Experience co-creation constitutes the core path for achieving dynamic maintenance of congruity, and its essence lies in transforming the formation of congruity from one-way matching to two-way construction. From the perspective of co-creation, tourists are no longer passive recipients of congruity but active meaning constructors and congruity creators. Through behaviors such as posting and interacting on social media, making personalized choices during on-site consumption, and deeply engaging in participatory tourism activities, tourists continuously project their own self-concept levels and personality preferences onto the destination and adjust their congruity perception according to the destination's responses and feedback. Destination management plays a dual role of guide and responder in this process. By designing experience touchpoints with symbolic meaning, creating spatial fields that allow tourists to express themselves, and providing flexible service combinations, destination managers provide conditions for the construction of congruity between tourists and destinations. This dynamic maintenance path based on experience co-creation shifts the logic of congruity formation from "perceived matching" to "meaning generation." The congruity relationship between tourists and destinations is deepened and consolidated in this continuous interactive process, thereby forming a psychological connection mechanism that transcends static matching.

## **Conclusion**

This study constructs an integrated analytical framework encompassing theoretical construction, mechanisms of action, and application strategies. At the theoretical level, this study proposes that the dimensions of destination brand personality should be contextually reconstructed, reveals the multiple levels and selective activation characteristics of tourists' self-concepts, and extends congruity theory from static matching to a bidirectional interactive logic. At the mechanism level, this study clarifies the mediating path of cognitive appraisal and the catalytic effect of emotional resonance, and it proposes

the dynamic evolution of self-congruity across different stages of the tourism experience and its nonlinear influence on behavioral intention. At the application level, this study explores the anchoring strategy between differentiated positioning and the self-concept levels of the target market, identifies the moderating mechanisms of multiple contextual factors, and proposes a dynamic maintenance path of congruity based on experience co-creation. Future research can further examine the personality structure differences among different types of destinations, the critical turning points in the dynamic evolution, and the interactive effects among contextual factors, so as to further refine the theoretical landscape.

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