

# Identity processes in marketing: Relationship between image and personality of tourist destination, destination self congruity and behavioral responses\*

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## Abstract

There are few works in literature that study the relationship between tourist destination image and tourist destination personality. The present study starting from the relationship between image and personality tries to analyze how this relationship can strengthen the identification of tourists with the destination itself and consequently behavioral responses. The results will highlight a strong impact of image on some personality traits of the destination and how these personality traits have an effect on the the effective, ideal, social and social ideal destination self congruity and on the intentions of return and word of mouth. The work ends with a discussion on the theoretical and managerial implications in terms of destination branding strategies.

*Keyword:* Destination branding, destination personality, self congruity, destination self congruity, intention to return, word of mouth.

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## **Introduction**

The post-modern consumer dialogues with the brand using it as a means of self-expression (Belk, 1988). Therefore, the need arises for companies to place the consumer at the center of marketing processes (Schmitt, 1999) and to establish with him a “conversational relationship” (Stokes, 2000), attributing human personality traits to products and services in order to create a alignment or congruence between the identity of a consumer and the identity of a brand, starting from the paradigm of the self concept and the self congruity. The result is to strengthen differentiation with respect to competing brands and increase preferences accordingly.

The self concept is a universe of different potential identities (effective, ideal, social, and social ideal) that can guide behavior (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). The concept of self congruity is used by marketing literature to indicate the congruence between the image of oneself and the image of the brand or the user of the product/service or of the one who chooses a brand (Sirgy, 1985). This last concept can also be associated, above all, with the identity of a place and with the study of the brand destination (Boksberger et al., 2011).

A tourist destination can also be seen as a product or perceived as a brand as a synthesis of a set of tangible and intangible attributes (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk and Baloglu, 2007; Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal, 2007). Since destinations are becoming more and more highly substitutable due to the growing global competition (Pike and Ryan, 2004), we are trying to adopt branding strategies similar to those used by big brands in order to better differentiate their identities by highlighting their uniqueness (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2004). However, in order for the identity of a tourist destination (Cai, 2002; Govers and Go, 2004) to be better perceived by visitors it is necessary to develop an image (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999b); Kotler and Gertner, 2004) and, even better, a personality of the destination itself (Ekenci and Hosany, 2006; Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff, 2007) which could be closer to the consumer’s self-concept than the image. Previous studies show that the destination personality and destination image are related constructs, but little interest has been devoted to their causal relationships (Souiden, Ladhari and Chiadmi, 2017). Despite the many studies on destination image, understanding the relationships between destination image and personality and their effects on behavioural intentions still requires more research (Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff, 2007; Qu, Kim and Im, 2011). In particu-

lar, the casual relationships between destination image and destination personality have not been fully investigated and there is no general agreement on their causal relationship (Kim and Lee, 2015).

Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal (2006) studied the relationship between the image and the personality of a brand in the context of tourist destinations, showing that the destination image and the destination personality are two different but related concepts. While the destination image is an holistic concept that includes a cognitive and an affective component, the destination personality is more related to the affective component of the destination image (Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal 2006). However, few studies confirm that the destination image has an impact on the destination personality and that the latter mediates the relationship between image and behavioral variables (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk and Baloglu, 2007; Xie and Lee, 2013). Therefore, the cognitive image has a significant impact on the affective one because cognitive image precedes the affective one (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999b).

The application of the self congruity theory in the tourism sector or the correspondence between the visitor's image of the destination and the tourists' self-concept (effective, ideal, social and social ideal) would influence the behavior of the tourist (Sirgy and Su, 2000) leading the visitor to have an optimal attitude towards that destination and a strong impact on perceived experience and satisfaction (Pool, Khodadadi and Asadi, 2018).

Many studies have examined the effects of self-congruity on consumer behavior, but have largely focused on the correspondence between the self concept and the brand image, not on the correspondence between the self concept and brand's personality (Husakly and Baloglu, 2011).

Therefore the purpose of this study is to investigate the identification in a tourist destination, through the image and the perceived personality of the destination itself, and its impact on behavioral responses. Specifically, the study empirically analyzes the congruence between the self-concept of a tourist and the destination personality as well as the relationships between destination image, destination personality, destination self congruity and behavioral intentions of the tourist. The results of the study will highlight how tourists attribute characteristics of destination personality, through the image and how the personality traits can positively influence the intention to return and word of mouth through identification with the brand.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the theoretical background and research hypotheses are presented; the methodology and results are presented and discussed. A brief conclusion follows.

## **1. Theoretical background and research hypotheses**

### **1.1. Destination branding, destination image and destination personality**

The brand image is a critical success factor of increasing importance even in the competition between tourist destinations, since the processes of purchase and consumption are strongly influenced by the reputation and the value signals connected to the destination branding. The need to pursue the correct management of branding by tourism-oriented territories is therefore highlighted in order to maximize the value of the offer to consumers and potential users of the destination.

The brand literature (Kotler, 2002; Keller, Busacca and Ostillio, 2005; Pratesi and Mattia, 2006; Fiocca, Marino and Testori, 2007) emphasizes that, given the essential components of the brand, as brand identity (brand identity) and brand image (brand image), brand management (branding), implies the development of a set of activities aimed at minimizing the gap between brand identity and brand image, starting from brand positioning choices.

The brand management activities usually used for companies, with appropriate and necessary application measures, can also be used for the enhancement of tourist destinations through territorial tourism communication and destination branding (Anholth, 2006; Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2004).

The power of the image as a relevant factor in the determination of consumers' behaviour has long been recognized by marketing scholars (Aiello, Donvito and Ewing, 2015; Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016) and its use is increasingly extended to geographical areas, in particular to destinations (Guido et al., 2012). Nowadays a destination competes mainly on the basis of its perceived image compared to its competitors' one. It therefore tries to improve promotion and marketing through the image it projects in an attempt to become more and more attractive to visitors. Therefore, with the aim of differentiating, the main challenge of each destination is to create a priority image that is captivating for the target of potential visitors, thus being perceived as unique and inimitable if compared to the others, and with the possibility of reaching a competitive advantage over time (Bové-Sans and Laguado-Ramirez, 2012).

The destination image can be considered as the set of perceptions or impressions that tourists have of a given destination with respect to expected benefits and consumption values (Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000). In any case, it is able to influence the tourists' behaviour (Bigné, Sánchez and Sánchez, 2001; Chen and Tsai, 2007). Therefore, the destination image also

affects the tourists' intention to return to the same destination and recommend it to other people (Alcañiz, García and Blas, 2005; Bigné, Sánchez and Sánchez, 2001). In fact, the intention to visit (Chon, 1990) and positive word of mouth (Chon, 1991; Jalilvand et al., 2012) are among the most studied behavioral responses by researchers in the tourism sector. In particular, Yoon and Uysal (2005) establish that word of mouth represents the most reliable source of information for tourists.

With reference to the components that determine how tourists perceive it, the belief that the behaviour related to the destination is influenced by both affective and cognitive factors is supported by numerous studies (Hosany, Ekinici and Uysal, 2006; Elliot and Papadopoulos, 2016) both in tourism (Hawkins, Best and Coney, 2003; Papadopoulos, Elliot and Szamosi, 2013) and in research fields related to the product.

Casalegno and Viassone (2012) identify and create a system of five dimensions at the base of the destination image to measure the perception of *individual functional attributes* (scenery, attractions, accommodation facilities, price levels), as well as *psychological attributes*. So, the psychological characteristics of attributes are indispensable, since human perception is known to be the most powerful force, capable of influencing consumers' decisions from within. What happens in the mind of tourists when they receive and experience a particular destination results in the final image of a certain identity. Among the psychological characteristics of a destination, the atmosphere and memory are fundamental and allow us to understand how and why that destination can build the foundation of its sense of uniqueness.

In addition, more holistic impressions would need to be measured. *Functional holistic images* are based on physical or measurable characteristics, such as a mental picture of physical characteristics (hills and plains). *Psychological holistic images* concern feelings about the overall impressions of the atmosphere (hospitality). The last dimension of the destination image measures unique features and auras. Therefore, the *level of uniqueness* is indicated, which characterizes the perception of the destination in the tourist's mind. In summary, the determination of the destination image is conceived as the combination of affective and cognitive components.

Therefore, as the destination image can be summarized in the set of individual perceptions concerning the attributes of the destinations and in the holistic impression given by the destination itself (experiences, beliefs, ideas, memories, impressions, prejudices, thoughts and emotional objectives), the visitor's behaviour is influenced by both cognitive and affective factors.

This leads us to consider the paradigm of the destination image as a dynamic and relativistic complex – in a constant state of flux – of individual

and stimulating factors which are capable of conditioning it, therefore at the centre of an analysis that leads to plunge into tourists' minds in order to fully understand all their perceptions linked to the attributes that characterize it (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Dioguardi, 2009).

Therefore, tourist destinations must understand which drivers have to be used in order to shape a territory image that can be the most capable of positively influencing, attracting and driving tourists' choices.

Other scholars have included again the destination personality among the image dimensions (d'Astous and Boujbel, 2007). It therefore represents a complex construct that results from the projected and perceived images of the destination (Marchiori and Onder, 2015). But there is much ambiguity surrounding the relationship between brand image and brand personality. Both concepts were used interchangeably in the literature (Graeff, 1997). For Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal (2006), brand personality and the affective component of brand image are interrelated. This opinion is further supported by Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal's (2006) and Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal's (2007) studies stipulating that the affective component of image can be associated with some dimensions of destination personality (i.e., sincerity, excitement, and conviviality). Moreover, the cognitive image has a significant impact on the affective one (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999b). In line with this view, Russell (1980) stipulates that individuals first rely on the information that they collect about the destination environment and then develop a state of emotion towards that destination. Thus, according to the author, the cognitive image precedes the affective one. Destination image could be, in fact, an antecedent of the destination personality, which in turn has a direct impact on the attitude towards a destination and an indirect effect on behavioral intentions (Souiden, Ladhari and Chiadmi, 2017).

Aaker (1997) defines the personality of the brand as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" able to differentiate and allowing consumers to identify themselves (Sirgy, 1982; Belk, 1988). The brand's personality increases the preference and use of the brand (Aaker, 1999; Sirgy, 1982), improves brand equity (Freling and Forbes, 2005), creates a strong emotional relationship between consumers and brands that translates into greater trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1998). The personality of a brand allows consumers to express their own self (Belk, 1988). Aaker (1997) has developed a reliable, valid and generalizable scale that measures the personality of the brand (BPS) through five generic dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. This scale is based on human personality traits studied in psychology through the Five Factors or Big Five

model (Digman, 1990). The Big Five model highlights how human personality can be described through five main latent factors: Agreeableness, Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion/Introversion and Emotional Stability/Neuroticism. Agreeableness refers to the individual's level of empathy, compassion, warmth, and generosity (McCrae and John, 1992). Agreeable people are usually forgiving, softhearted, cooperative, trustful, sympathetic to others, and eager to help (McCrae and Costa, 1985). Openness describes the breadth, depth, and variability of one's longing for new ideas and refers to the extent to which a person is imaginative, broad-minded, intelligent, and artistically sensitive (McCrae and Costa, 1985). Conscientiousness is described as the tendency of an individual to be organized, responsible, thorough, show self-discipline, and adhere to rules and norms (McCrae and Costa, 1985). Conscientiousness has been also linked with higher future time perspective and with long-term orientation (Zimbardo and Boyd, 1999). Introversion/Extraversion is the preference for social interaction, and it refers to the extent to which a person is, or is not, social, talkative, assertive, energetic, and outgoing (McCrae and Costa, 1985). Emotional Stability/Neuroticism is the ability to cope effectively with negative emotions and it is associated with the tendency to experience negative affects such as anxiety, anger, irritability, fear, sadness, and insecurity (McCrae and Costa, 1985). Individuals who score high on Neuroticism are less emotional stability and are able to control impulses, hardly cope with stress, and respond emotionally to situations that would not influence most people (McCrae and John, 1992). The Aaker scale was then used by various researchers in various sectors, including that of tourist destinations (Ekinici and Hosany, 2006).

The destination personality, as a component of the image, in literature refers to the brand personality in the context of tourism. Although research on the personality of the product / brand in the consumer goods sector began in the early 1960s, personality research in tourism destinations is relatively new (Ekinici and Hosany, 2006; Hosany, Ekinici and Uysal, 2006, 2007; Tasci and Kozak, 2006). Bigné, Sánchez and Sánchez (2001) defines it as a subjective interpretation of reality by the tourist. Ekinici and Hosany (2006) define the destination personality as the set of human characteristics associated with a destination. These last scholars, using the Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale (BPS), have found that the personality of a tourist destination has a positive impact especially on tourists' intention to recommend. That is, the personality of a distinctive and attractive tourist destination can effectively exploit the perceived image of a destination and thus influence the behavior of the tourist's choice (Ekinici and Hosany, 2006). In particular, the destination personality has a positive effect not only on attitudes but also on

the loyalty of tourists expressed through the intention to visit, the intention to return and the intention to recommend the destination (Hultman et al., 2015; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011). The Big Five model has been used recently in the literature to measure tourists' personality traits and their effects on the environment and on eco-friendly behavior (Kvasova, 2015).

Hosany, Ekinici and Uysal (2006) studied the relationship between the brand image and brand personality in the context of tourist destinations, showing that the destination image and the destination personality are two different but related concepts. While the brand image refers to both functional and symbolic advantages of a brand (Low and Lamb, 2000). The brand's personality refers only to the symbolic function of a brand and therefore could be closer to the consumer's self-concept than the image. Personality traits can be associated with a destination in two different ways. In a direct way, personality traits can be associated with the destination through the image of a typical visitor to a destination, the image of the staff of a hotel or restaurant, the locals, the tourist attractions. In an indirect way personality traits can be associated with a destination through marketing policies such as cooperative advertising, logos, symbols or slogans (Ekinici and Hosany, 2006). Ekinici, Sirakaya-Turk and Baloglu (2007) studied the relationship between the destination image, the destination personality and the behavioral intentions. The results of the study revealed that the destination personality has a positive impact on the intention to return and on the intention to recommend.

Therefore:

H1: The destination image will have a positive impact on the intention to return (the greater the image, the greater the intention to return).

H2: The destination image will have a positive impact on word of mouth (the greater the image the greater the word of mouth).

H3: The destination image will have a positive impact on the destination personality.

### *1.2. Self concept, self congruity and destination self congruity*

The self concept is a construct useful to understand and explain the consumer behavior choice (Husakly and Baloglu, 2011). In the literature on consumer behavior, it was assumed that consumers have greater preference for products or brands that are more congruent with their self concept. Based on

this notion, several researchers have studied how the personality of a product or brand allows consumers to express their own self concept (Belk, 1988). Rosenberg (1979) defines the self concept (also known as self-image) as “the totality of individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (p.7). The self concept is not a one-dimensional construct associated only with perceptions of oneself, but is a multidimensional construct associated with a universe of different potential identities (effective, ideal, social, and social ideal) that can guide behavior (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). In particular, the effective self concept refers to how a person actually perceives himself, while the ideal self concept refers to how a person would like to perceive himself. Social self concept refers to the way in which an individual thinks that others perceive it, while the social ideal concept represents the way in which the individual wishes to be perceived by others (Sirgy, 1982).

Considering that consumers use brands as a means of self-expression (Belk, 1988) and that the brand attitude influences the brand’s consideration, purchase intent, buying behavior and therefore the brand choice, some scholars have analyzed how the idea of self influences the brand perceptions and the underlying decision-making processes (Mittal, 2006; Reed II, 2002; Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy et al., 2008; Sirgy et al., 1991).

The self congruity concept can be seen as a natural extension of the self concept. Self-image congruity, image congruity and self-congruity are concepts used interchangeably in marketing literature to indicate the congruence between the image of oneself and the image of the brand or the user of the product / service or the one who chooses a brand (Sirgy et al., 1997). This theory suggests that the greater the congruence between the consumer’s self concept and the image of a product or a brand, the greater the likelihood that the consumer has a favorable attitude towards that product or brand. According to Sirgy and Su (2000), since there are different dimensions of the self concept (actual, ideal, social, social ideal) it follows that we should have four corresponding variants of self congruity: real congruity (the degree of correspondence between the real image of buyer and brand image), ideal self congruity (the degree of correspondence between the ideal image of the buyer and the brand image), social self congruity (the degree of correspondence between the way in which customers are seen by others in relation to the brand), ideal and social self congruity (the degree of correspondence between how buyers would like to be seen by others in relation to the brand image). In fact, the value of a brand does not depend only on the interaction between the brand itself and the consumer, but also on the interaction of the same consumer with his peers, and the reciprocal influences that derive from it. Several studies provide evidence of the positive effect of self-congruity on

consumer attitudes, overall customer satisfaction, and their buying intentions (Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Ericksen and Sirgy, 1992; Ericksen, 1997; Hogg, Cox and Keeling, 2000; Jamal and Goode, 2001; Mehta, 1999). In particular, a recent study analyzed the effects of self congruity on decision-making processes for the purchase of typical products. Specifically, scholars have highlighted how the coherence between the image of himself and that of some typical food brands has an impact on both planned and spontaneous purchase of the same brands (Shin, Hancer and Song, 2016).

Although the self congruity theory is often ignored in the destination brand literature (Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Jenkins, 1999; Kastenholz, 2004), it is also true that the impact of self congruity has been studied by some scholars at the interior of the tourist context. Chon (1992) was the first scholar who applied the theory of self congruity in the tourist context, examining the effect of congruence between the destination image and the tourist's self image on his satisfaction. Kastenholz (2004) applied the theory of self congruity in the context of a rural destination. The results indicated that destination self congruity has an impact on the return intention. Also Sirgy and Su (2000) applied the self congruity theory to the tourism sector by explaining the relationships between the tourists' self idea, the destination image, self congruity, functional congruity and travel behavior. The authors have verified that the greater the correspondence between the visitor's destination image and the tourist's self idea, the more likely it is that the latter has a favorable attitude towards that destination. Furthermore, Sirgy and Su (2000) proposed that tourists not only evaluate a destination based on symbolic attributes but also on the basis of functional attributes such as price, quality of service, the aesthetics of the place (as attractor), variety of activities and accessibility. In line with this vision, the authors define functional congruity as the correspondence between the functional/utilitarian attributes of the destination and the tourists' expectations with reference to these attributes. The authors suggest that, like self congruity, functional congruence also affects travel behavior.

The application of the theory of self congruity in the tourism sector makes it possible to hypothesise the existence of a congruence between the tourist destination and the personality of the visitor. This congruence would lead the visitor to have an optimal attitude towards that destination and a strong impact on the client's perceived experience and satisfaction (Pool, Khodadadi and Asadi, 2018) as well as an effect on return intentions and word of mouth (Husakly and Baloglu, 2011). In particular, the relationship between the destination perceived personality, the self congruity, the behavioral intentions in terms of return intention and satisfaction (Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff, 2007) was studied.

Therefore:

H4: The destination personality will have a positive impact on the destination self congruity.

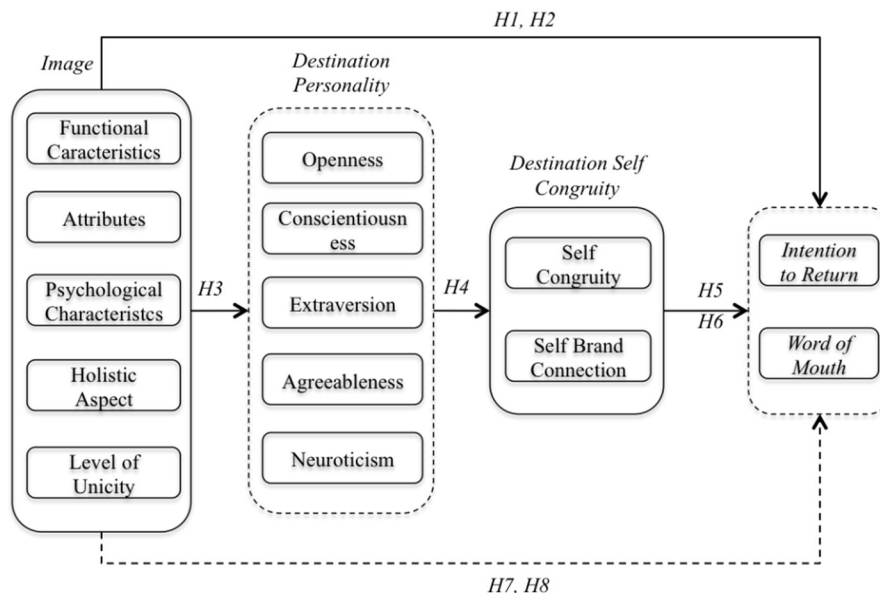
H5: The destination self congruity will have a positive impact on the intention to return (the greater the correspondence between the tourist destination image and the tourist's self concept, the greater the favorable attitude of the tourist towards that destination with consequent intention to return).

H6: The destination self congruity will have a positive impact on word of mouth (the greater the correspondence between the tourist destination image and the tourist's self concept, the greater the favorable attitude of the tourist towards that destination with consequent word of mouth).

H7: The destination self congruity, through the destination personality, will mediate the relationship between the image and the intention to return.

H8: The destination self congruity, through the destination personality, will mediate the relationship between image and word of mouth.

Figure 1 – The figure shows the conceptual scheme previously described



## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Survey**

In order to test the hypotheses, a structured questionnaire was constructed using sequentially the measurement scales summarized in Table 1.

The Image (I) was measured by adding the five dimensions considered in Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 2003) and Casalegno and Viassone (2012): Functional Characteristics (FC), Attributes (ATT), Psychological Characteristics (PC), Holistic Aspect (HA), and Level of Unicity (LU). The Destination Personality (DP) has calculated by appropriately adapting the scale of Donnellan et al. (2006) for tourist destination, considering: Openness (O), Conscientiousness (C), Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A), and Neuroticism (N). The Destination Congruity (DSCY) was measured combining the seven items scale developed by Sirgy and Su (2000) for Self Congruity (SCY) and the four items scale developed by Escalas and Bettman (2003) for Self Brand Connection (SBCN) adapted for a tourist destination. To measure the Intention to Return (IR), subjects were asked to rate their intention to return by indicating, on a 10-point Likert scale, the strength of their intention to return in Puglia and their likelihood of return in the near future (Teller and Reutterer, 2008). Both scores were multiplied to derive the behavioral intention, in accordance with a consolidated procedure in expectancy-value models. Hence, an index ranging from +1 to +100 has been calculated. The Word of Mouth (WOM) has been calculated using the three item scale developed by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). The scales show a high reliability because Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients are all higher than the recommended level of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978).

At the end of the questionnaire, socio-demographic data were collected.

Table 1 – Description of Scales and Cronbach's  $\alpha$

#	Code	Scales		Author (year)	$\alpha$	Type
		Principal	Secondary			
1	I	Image		Echtner and Ritchie, 1991, 2003; Casalegno and Viassone, 2012	.959	
1a	FC		Functional Characteristics		.741	Likert, 5
1b	ATT		Attributes		.908	Likert, 5
1c	PC		Psychological Characteristics		.926	Likert, 5
1d	HA		Holistic Aspect		.842	Likert, 5
1e	LU		Level of Unicity		.812	Likert, 5
2	DP	Destination Personality		Donnellan et al., 2006	.873	
2a	O		Openness		.832	Likert, 5
2b	C		Conscientiousness		.875	Likert, 5
2c	E		Extraversion		.943	Likert, 5
2d	A		Agreeableness		.861	Likert, 5
2e	N		Neuroticism		.786	Likert, 5
3	DSCY	Destination Self Congruity		Sirgy and Su, 2000; Escalas and Bettman, 2003	.916	
3a	SCY		Self Congruity		.923	Likert, 5
3b	SBCN		Self Brand Connection		.874	Likert, 5
4	IR	Intention to Return		Teller and Reutterer, 2008	.909	Likert, 10
5	WOM	Word of Mouth		Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006	.912	Likert, 10

## 2.2. Sample

The potential participants were involved through the Google Forms platform, aimed at specific virtual communities of tourists in Puglia, and through direct administration. Respondents were intercepted by interviewers at the port of Bari, the historical center of the city and Petruzzelli Theater, for two weeks, from Monday to Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 18 p.m.

The questionnaire was administered both in English and in Italian, in accordance with the origin of the participant and the spoken language.

A total of 274 subjects were involved in the study: 126 men (46.2%) and 147 women (53.8%), of different age groups: 18-24 years 20.8%, 25-34 years 15%, 35-44 years 15.7 %, 45-54 years 14.6%, 55-64 years 11.7%, greater than or equal to 65 years 22.2%. 56.4% had a university degree or higher, while 43.6% had a lower educational qualification than the university degree. Finally, 63.6% were Italians citizens and 36.4% were foreign citizens.

### **2.3. Data analysis**

To test the model described in Figure 1, the following analyzes were conducted.

It was initially assessed whether the level of image could have effects on the dependent variables intention to return and word of mouth. The average Image level provided by respondents to the questionnaire was assessed. The answers were divided into two groups. Those who had given an average response lower than the average level of all respondents were assigned the value zero, corresponding to a low level of image. The value one was assigned, instead, to those who had achieved an average level of image above the average of all respondents. Than, in order to verify HP1 and HP2, an ANOVA was performed.

The second type of analysis performed, in order to evaluate direct and indirect effects between variables, was a mediation analysis. Using Model 6 and Model 4 of Process for SPSS, direct and indirect effects have been calculated, considering image as independent variable, destination personality as first mediator, destination self congruity as second mediator and intention to return and word of mouth as dependent variables. In particular, for each dimension of the destination personality an analysis was conducted.

Morover, the possible interaction effects of Age and Gender were considered.

### **2.4. Results**

Table 2 shows the results of the ANOVA. It can be seen how the effect of the image is significant for both dependent variables. In particular, it can be stated that, with the increase in the level of image, the intention to return increases (passing from  $M = 7.92$  to  $M = 9.28$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the word of mouth (passing from  $M = 8.27$  to  $M = 9.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ). So H1 and H2 are demonstrated.

Table 2 – ANOVA for image (I)

	Low I		High I		Anova	
	Mean	St Dev	Mean	St Dev	F	p
IR	7.92	2.26	9.28	1.26	40.7	.000
WOM	8.27	2.28	9.55	1.22	36.4	.000

$\eta^2 = .732$   
 $\eta^2 = .656$

Table 3 shows the effect that image has on each personality trait (X) and the effect of each personality trait on destination self congruity. In particular, in the first column, it results that the image has a significant positive effect on personality traits of openness ( $b = .423$ ,  $p < .01$ ), conscientiousness ( $b = .530$ ,  $p < .01$ ), extraversion ( $b = .489$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and agreeableness ( $b = .504$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The effect is negative on neuroticism ( $b = -.398$ ) but is significantly borderline ( $p = .057$ ). So H3 is partially demonstrated. The second column, instead, indicates the effect that each trait of personality X has on the destination self congruity. In this case, only two trait has a significant positive effect on destination self congruity: conscientiousness ( $b = .150$ ,  $p = .016$ ) and agreeableness ( $b = .146$ ,  $p = .038$ ). It can be noted that the effect of the image is more incisive ( $b = .504$ ) on the agreeableness trait, while it has a mild effect ( $b = .173$ ) on the neuroticism. Also H4 is partially demonstrated.

Table 3 – Mediation between variables: direct effects of image (I) on each personality trait (X) and each personality trait (X) on the destination self congruity (DSCY)

X	I→X			X→DSCY		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
O	.423	.076	.000	.051	.062	.410
C	.530	.075	.000	.150	.062	.016
E	.489	.067	.000	.093	.080	.245
A	.504	.073	.000	.146	.070	.038
N	-.398	.077	.000	-.072	.055	.195

$R = .319$ ;  $R^2 = .102$ ;  $R = .390$ ;  $R^2 = .152$ ;  $R = .634$ ;  $R^2 = .401$   
 $R = .404$ ;  $R^2 = .163$   $R = .387$ ;  $R^2 = .140$ ;  
 $R = .287$ ;  $R^2 = .089$

Table 4 shows the effects of the destination self congruity on the two final dependent variables: intention to return and word of mouth. It is possible to state that there is a significant positive effect on both dependent variables:

$b = .839$ ,  $p < .01$  for intention to return and  $b = .865$ ,  $p < .01$  for word of mouth. So H5 and H6 are demonstrated.

Table 4 – Mediation between the variables: direct effects of the destination self congruity (DSCY) on the dependent variables intention to return (IR) and word of mouth (WOM)

DSCY→IR			DSCY→WOM		
<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
.839	.140	.000	.865	.135	.000
$R=.376$ ; $R^2=.142$			$R=.433$ ; $R^2=.188$		

Regarding the indirect effects between independent variables and final dependent variables, in Table 5, the first column describes the mediating effect of image on each personality trait (X) and the destination self congruity on the final variable intention to return, while the second column is the effect of each personality trait (X) and the destination self congruity on the final variable word of mouth. In both cases, when the personality trait changes, there are significant effects ( $p < .01$ ). It should be noted that the mediating coefficient is positive ( $b > 0$ ) for all personality traits (X) towards intention to return and towards word of mouth, confirming H7 and H8.

Table 5 – Mediation between variables: indirect effects when the personality trait (X) changes on the final dependent variables intention to return (IR) and word of mouth (WOM)

	I→X→DSCY→IR			I→X→DSCY→WOM		
X	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
O	.051	.021	.000	.051	.198	.000
C	.071	.024	.000	.069	.024	.000
E	.057	.024	.001	.055	.023	.000
A	.058	.024	.001	.056	.023	.000
N	.043	.017	.000	.042	.016	.000

The effect of possible moderators such as age and gender was evaluated, but no significant results were found ( $p > .05$ ).

### 3. Discussion

The analysis conducted on the sample of tourists interviewed allowed to analyze the image and personality of a tourist destination brand and, above

all, the relationship between these two constructs with the destination brand congruity and behavioral intentions.

The examination of the previously exposed literature allowed to identify the main dimensions characterizing the destination image. It was therefore proceeded, first of all, to test the following dimensions: the functional characteristics, the attributes, the psychological characteristics, the holistic characteristics and the level of uniqueness of the destination. This with the aim to build an image of the tourist destination deriving from the fusion of individual perceptions of the attributes and the holistic impression that it emanates. In general, it is possible to state that the tourist destination is assessed overall in a very positive way considering all the attributes submitted to the evaluation of the sample of tourists interviewed. Specifically, the image of Puglia is positively evaluated especially for the high variety and quality of accommodation and catering facilities (functional characteristics), for the degree of safety, cleanliness, hospitality of residents and in general for gastronomy, culture, traditions, nature, climate, archaeological and monumental sites (attributes). Moreover, Puglia is perceived as a destination able to offer a positive holiday experience and an atmosphere identified as unique and inimitable (psychological characteristics), as well as a destination able to generate an experience that develops a high involvement of tourists (holistic aspect) thanks above all to its level of uniqueness in terms of gastronomic, climatic and cultural peculiarities (level of uniqueness).

The study showed that the destination image has a positive effect on the tourist's behavioral responses. The higher the level of perceived image, the greater the intention to return and the word of mouth (Alcañiz, García and Blas, 2005; Bigné, Sánchez and Sánchez, 2001). In this context, it should be recognized that Puglia has implemented a policy of using new digital tools to communicate and make its cultural, environmental and enogastronomic resources known, thus adapting itself to the innovations that increasingly overwhelm our lives and this may have improved the destination image.

Another result of the study, is a direct and positive relationship between the image of the tourist destination and the individual personality traits except neuroticism. Than the image of the tourist destination has a positive impact on the following personality traits: agreeableness, openness, extraversion and conscientiousness. The results highlight that the greater the perceived image of the destination, the greater is the perceived presence of destination personality whose most evident traits are more in line with a friendly and cordial tourist, open to new travel/visit experiences, able to interact with others and coherent with the activities planned for the journey or with the objectives that he aims to achieve. In contrast, the destination image has a

negative impact on neuroticism. This means that the greater the destination image the less is the perceived presence of the destination personality in line with a tourist who tends to be prone to psychological stress. In the tourist context neuroticism is linked to the inability to manage feelings of anxiety and stress and to the inability to effectively cope with negative emotions resulting from disservices. As previously mentioned, neuroticism is the opposite of emotional stability, therefore the destination image appears to have a positive effect on a destination personality consistent with a tourist capable of controlling negative emotions resulting from disservices.

Therefore, the image has a positive effect on the personality of the destination, congruent with the self-concept of the tourist as the result of symbolic and emotional benefits. This is confirmed by the impact of the destination personality on the destination self congruity, which considers two important constructs, the self brand connection and the self congruity. The self brand connection analyzes the identification of the tourist with the destination. The sample of tourists interviewed showed a strong connection with the destination Puglia as it reflects their self concept, allows identifying and creating a personal link with the destination itself. Moreover, the destination can be used to communicate to others their own way of being. The self congruity confirms the data of the self brand connection, highlighting the coherence of the destination with the image of an effective, ideal, social and ideal-social self. There is therefore a high degree of correspondence between the effective image of the tourist and the destination image, as Puglia is consistent with the tourist's way of being, and between the ideal image of the tourist and the destination image, as Puglia is consistent with the way in which tourists would like to see each other. Furthermore, there is a correspondence between the social image of the tourist and the destination image, as Puglia is consistent with the way in which the tourist is seen by others, as well as a correspondence between the ideal-social image of the tourist and the destination itself, as Puglia is consistent with the way in which tourists would like to be seen by others. The overall result is that the tourist is fully satisfied with the destination as it coincides with his own self concept and this leads him to perceive a positive experience (Pool, Khodadadi and Asadi, 2018). Everything increases the value of the brand, which does not depend only on the dyadic interaction between the brand itself and the consumer, but also on the interaction of the consumer with his peers, and on the mutual influences deriving from it (Sirgy et al., 2001).

However the results show that personality traits that have an impact on destination self congruity are only the agreeableness and the conscientiousness. So the study shows that the greater the personality of the destination in

line with a friendly and cordial tourist and with an organized tourist who aims to achieve goals, the greater is the congruence between the image of the tourist and the destination image. These results should be used in the construction of an appropriate positioning of the tourist destination brand through communication policies that aim to establish friendly, dynamic and interactive relationships with tourists.

Finally, the study confirms that all personality traits mediate the relationship between image, destination self congruity and behavioral responses. That is, the destination personality, which is more evident as the image is higher, has a positive effect both on the identification of the tourist with the destination and with the other tourists of the destination, on the intention to return and on the word of mouth. In the current competitive context between tourist destinations, the identification of the tourist with the Puglia destination has a strong impact on behavioral responses in terms of return and word of mouth provided that the destination has not only a good image but also a strong personality capable of create a particularly emotional bond with the tourist and therefore able to defend it from the competition.

## **Conclusions**

The objective of the present study was to demonstrate the congruence between the self-concept of a tourist and the personality of the tourist destination as well as the relationships between image, destination personality, destination self congruity and behavioral intentions of the tourist. The results have highlighted how tourists attribute personality characteristics to the tourist destination, through the image and how the personality traits can positively influence the attention to return and the word of mouth through identification with the brand.

The results suggest interesting managerial implications, but also possible limits. The observation of the behavioral intentions of tourists in the prospect of a positive return and word of mouth, confirms the performance of Puglia obtained in recent years, therefore the greater attention paid to the tourism sector by administrations and operators.

The data emerged from the study can be useful for professionals in the sector to define the positioning of the brand in relation to competitors. This allows to identify or confirm the levers on which to start or change managerial strategies. In particular, the results could be used for the formulation of a communication plan in the context of the hospitality of the tourist destination. Such formulations are usually defined by marketing managers of hotels

and attraction sites, tour operators, tourist agencies, destination marketing organizations (DMO), public authorities, non-governmental organizations, tourism-related associations, etc. Everyone should coordinate their efforts and share communication strategies for the promotion of a destination. Competition with other tourist destinations requires the creation and management of an appropriate destination personality for effective placement and differentiation. More specifically, destination marketing professionals should focus on developing effective methods of communication for the launch of a distinctive and attractive personality of a place.

The use of various promotional tools, such as media advertising and event organization, are therefore key tools available to target actors to create and maintain a destination with a distinctive personality in the consumer's mind (Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal, 2007) and the analysis of personality traits of a destination helps the tourist destination players to build and maintain this personality.

To develop a greater identification in the tourist destination brand and therefore a greater behavioral response, in terms of return and word of mouth, it would be appropriate to invest even more in digital marketing through an institutional website that allows better interaction with the target audience and investing in strategies market development through, for example, Search Engine Marketing and Affiliate Marketing programs (for affiliation to third-party sites and partnerships with portals specialized in tourism). In particular, we could invest in the creation and maintenance of virtual communities that reinforce the personality of the destination and consequently the destination self congruity.

Among the limitations of this study, necessary to formulate the objectives of future research, there is the small sample size of tourists interviewed is the non-random sampling technique.

Considering the destination branding it is opportune to recognize that Puglia is characterized by different morphological, geographical and attractive conditions (for example, the Province of Bari is different from Salento, Gargano, Valle d'Itria and Murgia). Probably the values in reference to the personality traits of the tourist destination, would be an input to recognize the destination Puglia as the result of different local destinations. In this regard, it would be interesting and useful for managerial purposes to extend the study and analysis of data to other territories of Puglia. Moreover, our research, for the measurement of the personality of the destination Puglia, took into consideration a scale of measurement of personality traits that, although broadly generalizable, may not fully highlight the peculiarities of the destination itself. The need therefore arises to carry out further qualitative research which,

through focus groups or projective techniques, can better identify aspects of a more specific personality of the Puglia destination.

The work carried out could also be included in the perspective of the new approach oriented to experiential marketing. If the modern tourist is looking for experiences it is also true that he is willing to travel in different periods because he is looking for different reasons. Schenk and Holman (1980) have studied the concept of situational self. In other words, an individual can perceive himself differently in different situations and therefore the choice of the type of self concept and, consequently, also his behavior may differ depending on the situation. The theory of destination self congruity could therefore detect different personality values if applied in different periods. As a consequence, the results referring to the personality of the tourist destination and to the destination self congruity could change if analyzed in different periods of the year. It would therefore be appropriate to replicate the study for the purpose of longitudinal research. This aspect could initially appear to be a limitation of the current work, but from the managerial point of view it opens the opportunity to support with new data the reflection on strategies for the deseasonalization and differentiation of the tourism product. All with the aim of increasing tourist flows and greater satisfaction, always in the perspective of the positive word of mouth and the intention to return.

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## Appendix

### List of Items for Each Scale

	Image (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991, 2003; Casalegno and Viassone, 2012)
	<i>Functional Characteristics</i>
I1	Prices (food/wine, accommodation, transport, etc.) are generally affordable
I2	Public transport is efficient
I3	In Puglia there is a wide variety of accommodation and catering facilities (hotels, B & B, hostels, alberghi diffusi, country houses, restaurants, etc.)
I4	Accommodation and catering facilities are of high quality
	<i>Attributes</i>
I5	Puglia is a safe place
I6	It is a clean and unpolluted place
I7	Residents are hospitable
I8	My expectations have been satisfied regarding products of local gastronomy
I9	My expectations have been satisfied regarding local culture and traditions (events)
I10	My expectations have been satisfied regarding natural and climatic resources (beaches, landscape, flora and fauna, proximity to lakes, rivers, sea, etc.; temperatures, precipitation, etc.
I11	My expectations have been satisfied regarding historical-archaeological sites and monuments

	<i>Psychological Characteristics</i>
I12	Puglia is easy to live in and experience
I13	The atmosphere is unique and inimitable
I14	I have a good memory of Puglia: that is, the previous experiences were positive
I15	This holiday has been positive
	<i>Holistic Aspect</i>
I16	The experience involves all senses
I17	In general, the experience develops a high involvement of the tourist
I18	The communication concerning Puglia is complete (wide)
I19	The image of Puglia is successful, up to date
	<i>Level of Unicity</i>
I20	Puglia offers unique attractions
I21	The image of Puglia is clearly distinct from that of other regions

	<b>Destination Personality (Donnellan et al., 2006)</b>
	<i>Openness</i>
DP1	It has a vivid imagination
DP2	Is not interested in abstract ideas (R)
DP3	It has difficulty understanding abstract ideas (R)
DP4	It does not have a good imagination (R)
	<i>Conscientiousness</i>
DP5	Get chores done right away
DP6	Often forget to put things back in their proper place (R)
DP7	Like order
DP8	Make a mess of things (R)
	<i>Extraversion</i>
DP9	It is the life of the party
DP10	It does not talk a lot (R)
DP11	It talk to a lot of different people at parties.
DP12	It keep in the background (R)
	<i>Agreeableness</i>
DP13	Sympathize with others' feelings
DP14	Is not interested in other people's problems (R)
DP15	Feel others' emotions.

DP16	It is not really interested in others (R)
	<i>Neuroticism</i>
DP17	It has frequent mood swings
DP18	It is relaxed most of the time (R)
DP19	Get upset easily
DP20	Seldom feel blue (R)

	<b>Destination Self Congruity (Sirgy and Su, 2000, Escalas and Bettman, 2003)</b>
	<i>Self Congruity</i>
SCY1	Puglia is consistent with how I see myself
SCY2	Puglia is consistent with how I like to see myself
SCY3	Puglia is consistent with how I believe others see me
SCY4	Puglia is consistent with how I would like others to see me
	<i>Self Brand Connection</i>
SBCN1	Puglia reflects who I am
SBCN2	I can identify with Puglia
SBCN3	I feel a personal connection with Puglia
SBCN4	I (can) use Puglia to communicate who I am to other people
SBCN5	I think Puglia helps me become the type of person I want to be
SBCN6	I consider Puglia to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others)
SBCN7	Puglia suits me well

	<b>Intention to Return (Teller and Reutterer, 2008)</b>
IR1	How strong is your intention to choose Puglia as tourist destination in the future?
IR 2	How likely will you choose Puglia as tourist destination in the future?

	<b>Word of Mouth (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006)</b>
WOM1	I would recommend Puglia as tourist destination to my friends
WOM2	I would talk positively of Puglia as tourist destination to others
WOM3	I would try to spread the good-word about Puglia as tourist destination