

## SELF -EXPANSION WITH NATIVE ENDORSEMENT: FORMING DESTINATION IDENTIFICATION AND RECOMMENDATION INTENTION

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### ABSTRACT

The impact of social media endorsers on tourism has been extensively studied, with their significant role widely recognized. However, the distinct influence mechanism of native endorsers remains underexplored. To address this gap, this study introduces self-expansion theory as a novel theoretical framework to investigate how native endorsers shape tourists' destination identification and recommendation intentions. Utilizing a quantitative approach, 457 valid responses were collected from China (response rate: 76%), and structural equation modeling was employed to test the hypotheses. The findings highlight that tourists' perceived self-congruence with native endorsers fosters a para-social relationship, which is further enhanced by self-expansion with the endorser. This dynamic positively influences destination identification and recommendation intentions. By revealing how native endorsers' content contributes to tourists' destination connections, this study provides critical insights for destination managers in selecting endorsers and designing impactful marketing strategies, thus advancing theoretical and practical understanding of native endorsement in tourism contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

The influence of destination endorsers in promoting travel destinations has been widely recognized in the context of destination marketing. Prior studies have recognized that destination endorsers can create more favorable marketing effects than non-endorsed advertisements (McCartney & Pinto, 2014; van der Veen, 2008). Previous studies have found that destination endorsers' attributes such as image, credibility, or congruence with products/consumers could influence tourists' destination attitude (van der Veen & Song, 2013; Xu & Pratt, 2018), familiarity (Lee et al., 2008), image (Chen, 2018; Johns et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2008), brand love (Zhang et al., 2020), and visit intention (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Despite this significant marketing effect, previous studies have noted that destination managers should carefully choose appropriate destination endorsers whose attributes match up with the endorsed destination (McCartney & Pinto, 2014; van der Veen, 2008). Compared with non-native destination endorsers, some researchers prefer to select native endorsers as a stimulus (Kim et al., 2018; van der Veen & Song, 2013; Zhang et al., 2020), which is believed to induce a relatively higher positive attitudinal response (Zhang et al., 2020). Tourists tend to perceive higher believable and endorser-destination congruence with native endorsers because these are more associated with endorsed destination compared with nonnative endorsers (Praesri et al., 2022; van der Veen & Song, 2013). However, a recent study found that the advantage of native endorsers is not significant across different countries (Roy et al., 2021). Therefore, there is still a need to investigate the unique influence mechanism of native endorsers on tourists in specific locations.

Prior studies have proposed that an individual's identity originates from their daily life, and place attributes partially contribute to one's identity (Hull et al., 1994). Native destination endorsers as a result have a stronger association with endorsed destination (Pai et al., 2023; van der Veen & Song, 2013). From the perspective of self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1996), one's content-of-the-self has many domains including personal identity. Individuals tend to expand their self through inclusion of another's content-of-the-self, which in turn, has effects on their behavior related to the included others. Therefore, a native destination endorser's content-of-the-self related to a destination should be its unique attributes in terms of destination marketing compared with that of nonnative endorsers. This research seeks to examine how native endorsers affect tourists' destination attachment and their intention to recommend the destination, drawing on self-expansion theory as the underlying framework (Aron &

Aron, 1986). In the era of Web 2.0, social media has become a key marketing channel. This study incorporates the concept of para-social relationships from media psychology to investigate how native destination endorsers can foster users' self-expansion by cultivating these relationships on social media platforms (Kim & Hyun, 2024).

The significance of this study is manifold. First, it introduces self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986) to explore how social media users expand their content-of-the-self through social media endorsers and promote their identity to a destination they did not arrive at before. Secondly, this study emphasizes the distinct contribution of native endorsers in destination marketing by examining how they impact the development of tourists' destination attachment and their desire to advocate for the destination. And third, the influence mechanism of self-expansion provides destination managers with new perspectives and marketing strategies related to the selection of endorsers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Self-Expansion Theory

Self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986) postulates that one motivation behind various individual behaviors is development of the self or self-expansion (Aron et al., 2013). This motivation activates people not only seeking to expand their physical influence such as wealth possessions, territory, or powerful relationships, but also expands their cognitive abilities, identity, and self-awareness (Aron & Aron, 1996). This theory proposes that individuals can gain self-expansion through various ways, such as learning, work, sport, politics, or interpersonal relationships. The focus of this theory is to explain how an individual achieves their self-expansion through building a close relationship with significant others whether as romantic, family, or friendship (Aron & Aron, 1996). Aron et al. (2013) proposed that the relationships with important others can result in self-expansion by integrating the other person into one's sense of self. Thereafter, the others' physical or social resources, their perspectives, as well as their social identity could be incorporated by their individual partner. The self-expansion theory provides a unique perspective that can be used to explain the underlying reasons why people form close relationships. According to Aron and Aron (1996), there are two basic factors which determine whether an individual desires to form a close relationship with another: desirability and probability. The former factor is the extent to which an individual perceives that the significant other could

enhance a potential expansion of the individual's self. The latter refers to the possibility that this individual could form a close relationship with their significant others.

In terms of measuring self-expansion, there are two themes: the motivational principle and the inclusion-of-other-in-the-self (IOS) principle (Aron et al., 2013). The former refers to individual motivation to increase content-of-the-self. The corresponding scale, a self-expansion questionnaire (Lewandowski Jr & Aron, 2002), is widely adopted to measure the extent to which individual relationships with a significant other can provide new experiences, perspectives and identities (de Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019a, 2019b; Gorlier & Michel, 2020; Lee, Bai, & Busser, 2019). The latter focuses on the actual expansion of the self through this relationship, which refers to the extent to which individuals incorporate resources, perspectives, and identities of significant others into the self (Aron et al., 2013). This principle of self-expansion can be measured by IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992; Aron et al., 2013). As this study aims to explore enhancing tourists' destination identification and recommendation intentions through the process of actual self-expansion, we concentrate on the latter principle.

Self-expansion theory has recently been introduced to marketing studies. Kou and Powpaka (2017) explored the effect of consumer friendships with a restaurant's workers on their psychological ownership of restaurant and product knowledge. Other studies have identified brand experiences and specific marketing strategies as antecedents of consumer self-expansion, which subsequently shape brand identification, evaluation, and relationship quality (de Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019b; Gorlier & Michel, 2020). In addition, the self-expansion also provides researchers a new perspective toward brand attachment (Li & Han, 2021) or brand romance (Chen, Lee, & Hyun, 2022; Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011).

In tourism and leisure studies, Lee, Bai and Busser (2019) explored the effect of pop stars' fans' self-expansion on their travel satisfaction and destination loyalty. Authors found that fans' self-expansion influenced their commitment to pop stars, ultimately shaping their intentions for future activity participation. More recently, Lee and Jeong (2023) applied self-expansion theory to tourism research, demonstrating how the theory enhances individuals' sense of self through connections with destination experiences and acts as a crucial moderator between celebrity endorsements and the formation of affective destination images. However, limited study has examined the role of native destination endorser using self-expansion

theory before. And few studies extend this theory in the one-sided relationship context.

Thus, guided by the three factors provided by self-expansion theory in the context of one-sided relationships (Aron & Aron, 1996), this study integrates the concepts of self-congruence and para-social interaction theory to investigate the role of native endorsers in destination marketing.

### **Self-Congruence**

The self-congruence theory proposed by Sirgy (1982) originally referred to the alignment of personality attributes or image between a product or brand and the consumer. With the emergence of the celebrity brand concept (Kerrigan et al., 2011), numerous studies have extended this theory to include self-celebrity congruence (Choi & Rifon, 2012; von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021; Xu & Pratt, 2018; Zogaj et al., 2021). The two fundamental sub-dimensions of self-congruence are actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence. Actual self-congruence pertains to the congruence between the object's (e.g., product or celebrity) attributes and the consumer's actual personal identity, while ideal self-congruence relates to the alignment with who the consumer aspires to become (Sirgy, 1985, 2018). This distinction stems from different consumer motivations: the self-consistency motive and the self-esteem motive (Sirgy, 1985). The self-consistency motive emphasizes consumers' need to reinforce their current self-identity, whereas the self-esteem motive focuses on enhancing their sense of self-worth (Sirgy, 2018).

Previous studies have applied self-congruence theory to relationship marketing. For example, Ye et al. (2021) examined the relationship between self-spokesperson congruence and consumers' para-social relationships with brand spokespersons, finding that self-congruence fosters para-social relationships, which in turn influence brand identification and consumer citizenship behaviors. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2020) discovered that viewers' self-influencer congruence enhances their perceived friendship with social media influencers, subsequently affecting their purchase behaviors.

Traditionally, the link between self-congruence and relationship development has been explained through homophily theory and uncertainty reduction theory, emphasizing personality similarity's role in facilitating interpersonal interaction and relationship progression (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; McCroskey et al., 1975). However, self-expansion theory

offers a novel perspective by focusing on how the personality attributes of an object (e.g., a celebrity or native endorser) can lead to self-expansion for individuals. In the context of tourism marketing, integrating self-congruence theory with self-expansion theory provides deeper insights into how native endorsers influence tourists' destination identification. Native endorsers embody local cultural values, and when consumers perceive a high level of self-congruence with these endorsers, it enhances their connection to the destination. This alignment not only reinforces tourists' self-identity but also enriches their self-concept by incorporating new cultural experiences. Consequently, this relationship has practical implications for tourism marketing strategies. By selecting native endorsers who reflect the target audience's actual or ideal self-concepts, marketers can effectively strengthen destination identification and positively influence tourist perceptions.

### **Para-social Relationships**

The para-social relationship refers to individual imagined intimacy or friendship with media persona (Perse & Rubin, 1989), which differs from normal social relationship by the characteristics of one-sided intimacy. This concept is derived from para-social interaction theory and tries to explain how viewer formed imagined intimacy through social cues is communicated by media personnel (Horton & Wohl, 1956). As explored by previous studies in the communication and media psychology fields, media people can communicate social cues through their appearance, gestures, facial expression, tones (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987), and even pictures or textual styles (Schumann & Thorson, 1999; Thorson & Rodgers, 2006), which can elicit the interpersonal involvement of the viewers (Rubin et al., 1985).

The role of para-social relationships in influencing tourist behavior and destination marketing has garnered increasing attention in recent years. For instance, Choi et al. (2019) found that social media users' para-social relationships with travel communities significantly impact their community and travel satisfaction. In the field of destination marketing, Su et al. (2011) as well as Zhang et al. (2020) explored how para-social relationships with celebrities influence tourists' attitudes toward destinations or their affection for a brand, using balance theory as the theoretical framework. Yilmazdoğan et al. (2021) as well as Bi et al. (2021) revealed that social media users' para-social relationships with media personas enhance their intention to visit related destinations. According to the self-expansion model, individuals may experience self-expansion even



within unreciprocated intimate relationships, such as para-social relationships (Aron & Aron, 1996). Li et al. (2023) examined the decision-making processes and behaviors of pop culture tourists through the lens of para-social relationships, highlighting celebrity-driven motivations to visit destinations associated with their favorite celebrities. Additionally, previous studies have proposed that para-social relationships could provide a safe condition for self-expansion (Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014). Building on these insights, we incorporate para-social relationships, characterized by one-sided intimacy, into the theoretical framework of self-expansion to better understand their role in influencing tourist behavior and destination marketing strategies.

### **Destination Identification**

The concept of destination identification is derived from social identity theory focusing on individual perceived connection/belongingness with a particular social group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This theory postulates that individuals tend to maintain or enhance the self-esteem which relates to evaluating their social identity. Therefore, individuals strive to join positive social groups to maintain or enhance their positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Destination identification can be defined as individuals forming a meaningful connection between the self and the destination, which is characterized by incorporating a destination's attributes into one's individual self-concept (Zenker et al., 2017). A destination encompasses various special attributes such as people, landscapes, and cultural values, therefore, tourists could satisfy their self-expression and self-esteem needs through destination identification (Chen, Hyun, & Lee, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2017). Previous studies have shown that destination organization managers should try to enhance the tourist's destination identification given its vital role on enhancing tourist's loyalty, satisfaction, recommendation, advocacy, and environmentally responsible behavior (Berrozpe et al., 2019; Japutra, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2017; Su & Swanson, 2017; Zenker et al., 2017). Regarding the factors influencing destination identification, prior studies have mainly focusing on destination attributes such as destination personality, trust (Kumar & Kaushik, 2017), autonomy, relatedness, competence (Japutra, 2022), destination social responsibility (Su & Swanson, 2017), and identity fit, distinctiveness, and attractiveness (Zenker et al., 2017). However, few studies have discussed the destination endorser's influence on destination identification.

## **Intention to Recommend**

Intention to recommend refers to consumers' tendency to recommend the destination toward others (Prayag et al., 2015). Previous studies recognized that consumers' positive word of mouth is more effective than traditional marketing activity because of its higher credibility and persuasiveness (Reimer & Benkenstein, 2016). Prior studies have mainly explored the factors eliciting recommendation intention from the post-visit perspective. It has been revealed that tourists' recommendation intention varies with travel satisfaction (Eid et al., 2019; Hosany & Prayag, 2013; Hosany et al., 2016; Hosany & Witham, 2009; Huang et al., 2014; Prayag et al., 2015), destination personality (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), image (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Akgün et al., 2020), attachment (Hosany et al., 2016), psychological ownership (Kumar & Nayak, 2019), and guide service (Huang et al., 2014; Li et al., 2024). Few studies have focused on factors facilitating pre-visitors' recommend intention. Loureiro (2015) found that pre-visitors' perceived destination websites' pleasure and attitude towards the website have a positive impact on their destination recommendation intentions. In this study, we focus on the related role of native destination endorser from the self-expansion theory perspective.

## **Hypothesis Development**

According to the self-expansion model, individuals are driven to form close relationships with significant others due to three factors: desirability, probability of self-expansion, and opportunities to integrate others into their sense of self (Aron & Aron, 1996; Sirgy, 2018). In this study, we argue that ideal and actual self-congruence align with the first two factors. Specifically, ideal self-congruence reflects the desirability of a potential relationship by highlighting the endorser's ability to enhance an individual's sense of self, while actual self-congruence indicates the perceived probability of forming a meaningful connection with the endorser (Sirgy, 2018). This theoretical alignment supports the integration of self-congruence theory into the broader self-expansion framework. Consequently, the higher the perception of ideal or actual self-congruence with a native destination endorser, the greater the likelihood of forming an intimate connection, conceptualized here as a para-social relationship. Existing empirical research supports this perspective, demonstrating that self-congruence positively influences para-social relationships in various contexts, such as influencer marketing and brand engagement (Kim & Kim, 2020; Ladhari et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2021). Within the context of destination marketing, this dynamic highlight how native



endorsers representing cultural values can foster strong, one-sided connections with tourists. Based on this theoretical and empirical foundation, we propose that:

*H1: Ideal self-congruence with the endorser positively influences para-social relationships with the native destination endorser.*

*H2: Actual self-congruence with the endorser positively affects the para-social relationship with native destination endorsers.*

Building on the self-expansion model, the formation of strong intimacy with significant others, such as native destination endorsers, facilitates the integration of others into the self (IOS), resulting in self-expansion (Aron et al., 2013). Prior studies have shown that para-social relationships provide a safe psychological environment for self-expansion. For instance, in the context of narrative transportation, Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al. (2014) revealed that para-social interactions with fictional characters allowed readers to experience unique characteristics and gain new perspectives, thereby facilitating self-expansion. Applying this concept to tourism marketing, para-social relationships with native endorsers create opportunities for tourists to incorporate the endorsers' cultural and personal values into their self-concept, enhancing destination identification. Therefore, we propose that:

*H3: The stronger an individual para-social relationship toward the destination endorser is, the higher the IOS.*

According to Aron et al. (2013), the concept of including others into the self reflects treating the resources, perspectives, and identities of a significant other as extensions of one's own. In the context of tourism, a native destination endorser embodies social identities tied to the local community and cultural values. We argue that when individuals include the endorser into their self-concept, they adopt the identities associated with the destination as their own. In other words, as the degree of inclusion of the endorser into the self (IOS) increases, the individual's connection with the destination becomes stronger.

Furthermore, Aron and Aron (1996) proposed that self-expansion through including other into the self merges each other's self, therefore, some initial self-centered motivations turn altruistic. Previous studies have revealed that consumers recommendation intentions are driven by this altruism or helping company motivations (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Liu et al., 2020; Reimer & Benkenstein, 2016; Sundaram et al., 1998). Therefore, we

argue that the higher IOS, the stronger the recommendation destination intention the individual possesses.

Empirical studies support this theoretical framework. For example, de Kerviler and Rodriguez (2019a) as well as Gorlier and Michel (2020) demonstrated that self-expansion through inclusion branding positively influences brand identification and recommendation intentions. Similarly, previous research has consistently shown the significant role of destination identification in driving recommendation intentions (Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008; Rather et al., 2019; Yeh et al., 2016). Drawing from the theoretical and empirical evidence presented above, we suggest that:

*H4: Individuals who include the endorser into the self, have higher destination identification;*

*H5: Individuals who include the endorser into the self, have higher intention to recommend;*

*H6: Individuals' destination identification positively influences their intention to recommend.*

In summary, based on self-expansion theory as theoretical framework, we introduced the self-congruence concept and para-social interaction theory into the theoretical model to explore how an individual's self-expansion processes with native destination endorsers influences their destination identification and recommendation intentions (See Figure 1).

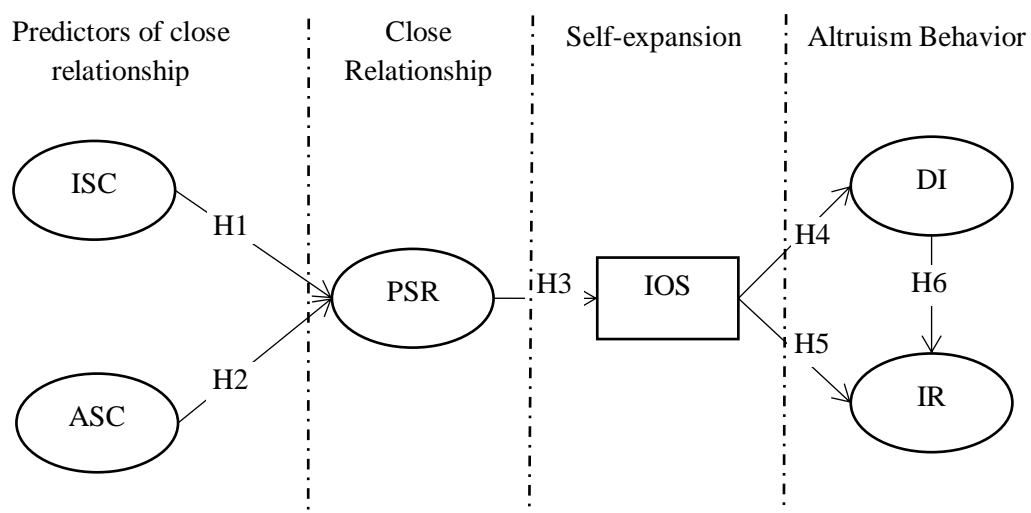


Figure 1. Research model of the study

Note: ISC = ideal self-congruence, ASC = actual self-congruence, PSR = para-social relationship, IOS = inclusion-of-other-in-the-self, DI = destination identification, IR = intention to recommend.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Measurement Scale and Questionnaire Design

The survey questionnaire is divided into three parts: screening questions, measurement scales, and demographic information of the respondents. The measurement scales used are based on items developed in previous studies. The constructs of ideal and actual self-congruence were measured using two items respectively adopted from (Malär et al., 2011; Sirgy et al., 1997; Zogaj et al., 2021). Six items adopted from Reinikainen et al. (2020) as well as Zhang et al. (2020) that measured para-social relationship. The inclusion of other-in-the-self was measured using one item (Aron et al., 1992; Aron et al., 2013). Destination identification was assessed through three items (Homburg et al., 2009; Kumar & Nayak, 2019), and to measure recommend intention, three items were adapted from (Kumar & Nayak, 2019; Prayag et al., 2015). All items were translated into Chinese followed by a back-to-back process and measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale. In addition, four demographic variables (i.e., gender, education, age, monthly income) were collected to include in the structural model as control variables.

### Data Collection and Respondents' Profile

In line with the purpose of this study, a native endorser who resides in the endorsed destination and embodies a strong connection to its identity was selected. Tenzin, a Tibetan resident of Litang County—one of the Tibetan cultural zones in China—was chosen as the case for this study. Tenzin actively uses a combination of popular Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin, which resonate strongly with the target demographic. His content introducing his hometown gained significant popularity on these platforms in 2020 (Zhang, 2020; Zhao, 2020) with the resulting “Tenzin effect” playing a key role in the recovery of local tourism. Currently serving as Litang's tourism ambassador, employed by a state-owned corporation and enjoying a favorable public reputation (Zhao, 2020), Tenzin represents an ideal native endorser for this research.

As an influencer primarily sharing content on social media, Tenzin's audience consists of social media users, making them the focus of this study. To minimize the influence of past destination experience, only potential tourists were selected as respondents (van der Veen & Song, 2013). Additionally, given that some constructs measured in this study, such as self-congruence, are linked to personal beliefs, the sampling process considered the potential for social desirability bias (Gittelman et al., 2015).

To address this, and to ensure inclusivity among the target respondents, an online survey method was deemed appropriate (Duffy et al., 2005).

To ensure that the respondents fit the requirements of this study, five screen questions were set. Only respondents who: (1) followed Tenzin's social media accounts (a picture of Tenzin was used to recall their memory); (2) knew that Tenzin is a resident of Litang; and (3) was an endorser of Litang; as well as (4) were not a Litang resident himself/herself; and (5) had not travelled to Litang before were confirmed as valid samples. Questionnaires were posted on the Tencent questionnaire platform (<https://wj.qq.com/>) and 1 CNY bonus per respondent was paid in order to enhance the response rate. Data were collected from April 30 to June 10, 2021, in total 457 with a response rate of 76%, which satisfied the 1:20 item-to-response ratios (Kline, 2011). Among the respondents, 55.4% were female, and 44.6% were male. The majority were from Generations Y and Z, who have grown up immersed in information and communication technologies and are highly interconnected and digitally active. This aligns with their predominant use of social media platforms (Bolton et al., 2013; Turner, 2015). Detailed demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Profile of respondents (n=457)*

Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	204	44.6
	Female	253	55.4
Age	18-30	259	56.7
	31-40	111	24.3
	41 or above	87	19.0
Education	High school or below	29	6.3
	Diploma	116	25.4
	Bachelor's degree	273	59.7
	Master or above	39	8.5
Monthly income (CNY=\$0.15)	Up to 2,000	78	17.1
	2,001-4,000	129	28.2
	4,001-6,000	102	22.3
	6,001-8,000	92	20.1
	Over 8,000	56	12.3

## Analysis methods

To test the hypotheses postulated in this study, structural equation model analysis (SEM) was adopted (Hoyle, 1995). Since our study aims to verify a theoretical model based on self-expansion theory, the covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) method was adopted (Hair et al., 2017). The data do not have a multivariate normality distribution, thus a MLR (maximum likelihood estimation, which is robust to non-normality data) estimation

method was adopted. The software, SPSS25 and Mplus 8.2, were used to conduct related analysis. Following the process provided by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), SEM was conducted through two steps including an assessment of measurement model and structural model.

## RESULTS

### Common Method Bias Assessment and Measurement Model

Since this study conducted investigation through a self-report questionnaire, the common method bias (CMB) could be used as an assessment method (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012). A common CMB assessment is single factor exploratory factor analysis. In this study, the cumulative percentage of variance extracted from the first factor is 38.959%, below 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, this study doesn't have a serious problem of CMB.

Table 2. *Reliability and convergence validity*

Items	Factor Loadings	AVE	CR	Skewness	Kurtosis
<b>Ideal self-congruence</b>					
The personality of Tenzin is consistent with how I would like to be	0.747	0.567	0.724	-0.297	-0.227
Tenzin is a mirror image of the person whom I would like to be	0.759			-0.419	0.270
<b>Actual self-congruence</b>					
The personality of Tenzin is consistent with how I see myself	0.747	0.613	0.760	-0.628	0.794
Tenzin is a mirror image of me	0.818			-0.428	0.248
<b>Para-social relationship</b>					
If Tenzin were featured on another program, I would watch it.	0.828	0.711	0.937	-0.340	0.325
When watching Tenzin, I feel like I am part of his group.	0.834			-0.503	0.385
I perceive Tenzin as someone similar to an old friend.	0.853			-0.437	0.365
I would enjoy meeting Tenzin in person.	0.862			-0.661	0.795
If a newspaper or magazine published a story about Tenzin, I would read it.	0.848			-0.349	-0.008
Tenzin gives me a sense of comfort, as if I were among friends.	0.833			-0.444	0.106
<b>Inclusion of the other-in-the-self</b>					
Please the picture below that best describe your relationship with Tenzin (see Figure 2)				-0.313	0.595
<b>Destination identification</b>					
The destination (i.e., Litang) fits well to me	0.753	0.606	0.822	-0.496	0.370
I strongly identify with this destination	0.775			-0.648	1.711
I feel attached to this destination	0.807			-0.450	0.554
<b>Intention to Recommend</b>					
I will recommend this destination (i.e., Litang) to other people	0.849	0.705	0.878	-0.394	0.542
I will say positive things about this destination to other people	0.816			-0.095	0.279
I will encourage friends and relatives to visit this destination	0.854			-0.200	-0.060

Confirmatory factor analysis is required to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measurement scales. In this study, the goodness-of-fit

indices of measurement model are accepted ( $\chi^2/df = 2.126 < 3$ , TLI = 0.949 > 0.8, CFI = 0.956 > 0.8, RMSEA = 0.050 < 0.080, SRMR=0.033< 0.080). As illustrated in Table 2, the factor loadings of items as well as the values of Cronbach's Alpha, AVE (Average Extracted Variance), and CR (Composite Reliability) of each construct could be accepted, which indicated acceptable reliability and convergent validity (Hair Jr et al., 2021). The discriminant validity of constructs (see Table 3 and Table 4) were well accepted based on the assessment of Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015).

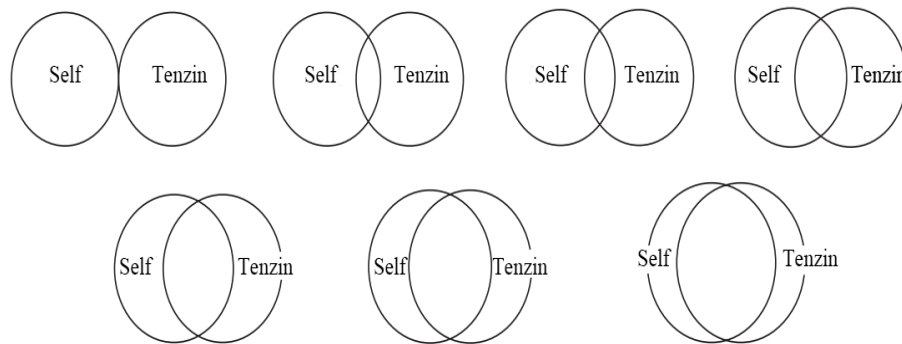


Figure 2. *Inclusion of the other-in-the-self*

Table 3. *Fornell-Larcker criterion*

	ISC	ASC	PSR	DI	IR
ISC	0.753				
ASC	0.240***	0.783			
PSR	0.466***	0.336***	0.843		
DI	0.296***	0.190**	0.339***	0.779	
IR	0.277***	0.129*	0.364***	0.514***	0.84

Note: ISC = ideal self-congruence, ASC = actual self-congruence, PSR = para-social relationship, IOS = inclusion-of-other-in-the-self, DI = destination identification, IR = Intention to recommend. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

Table 4. *Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)*

	ISC	ASC	PSR	DI	IR
ISC					
ASC	0.239				
PSR	0.464	0.338			
DI	0.293	0.190	0.338		
IR	0.276	0.138	0.362	0.517	

## Structural Model

The hypotheses were tested by assessing the structural model. In terms of control variables, only gender significantly influenced individuals' para-



social relationship ( $\beta = 0.105$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), which means females are more likely to generate para-social relationship with destination endorser. Four control variables do not significantly influence other endogenous variables (i.e., IOS, DI, RI). The theoretical model showed an accepted model fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.341 < 3$ ,  $TLI = 0.941 > 0.9$ ,  $CFI = 0.952 > 0.9$ ,  $IFI = 0.956 > 0.9$ ,  $NFI = 0.943 > 0.9$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.054 < 0.080$ ,  $SRMR = 0.038 < 0.080$ ). As illustrated in Table 5, the H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6 were verified and reflected significantly positive relationships ( $p < 0.001$  and  $t$  value  $> 1.96$ ). The predictive power was tested through  $R^2$ . All the  $R^2$  of endogenous variables are above 0.2. We further tested the mediating effect among constructs using the bootstrap method (5000 samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence level) (Hair Jr et al., 2021). Table 6 showed that all the mediation paths were significant.

Table 5. *Path analysis*

Path			Standardized coefficient	$R^2$	p
ISC	→	PSR	0.421	0.297	<0.001
ASC	→	PSR	0.238		<0.001
PSR	→	IOS	0.661	0.444	<0.001
IOS	→	DI	0.510	0.264	<0.001
IOS	→	RI	0.594	0.531	<0.001
DI	→	RI	0.213		<0.001

Note: ISC = ideal self-congruence, ASC = actual self-congruence, PSR = para-social relationship, IOS = inclusion-of-other-in-the-self, DI = destination identification, RI = recommend intention.

Table 6. *Indirect effect*

Path	Standardized Coefficient	Two tailed significant
ISC → PSR → IOS	0.278	< 0.001
ASC → PSR → IOS	0.157	< 0.001
PSR→IOS→DI	0.337	< 0.001
PSR→IOS→RI	0.393	< 0.001
IOS→DI→RI	0.109	< 0.001

Note: ISC = ideal self-congruence, ASC = actual self-congruence, PSR = para-social relationship, IOS = inclusion-of-other-in-the-self, DI = destination identification, RI = recommend intention.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### Discussion

This study examines the consequences of para-social relationships with native destination endorsers under the self-expansion theory perspective. The results indicate that both ideal and actual self-congruence significantly positively impact para-social relationships (H1, H2), aligning with previous research findings (Kim & Kim, 2020; Ladhari et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2015;

Ye et al., 2021). Moreover, this study proposed that stronger para-social relationships result in greater inclusion of the endorser into the self (IOS), consequently increasing individuals' identification with the destination (H3). This result highlights what the viewers or followers would achieve through those para-social relationships. Previous research has explored para-social relationships through the lens of balance theory or social exchange theory (Li et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020), while the results here support the self-expansion perspective. According to Aron and Aron (1996), the consequences of self-expansion through inclusion of others' resources, perspectives and identity are content-off-the-self expansion and altruistic behavior. In this study, consistent with prior findings (Coffey et al., 2024; de Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019a; Gorlier & Michel, 2020), we verified that inclusion-of-other-in-the-self has significant positive influence on potential tourists' destination identification and recommend intention (H4, H5 and H6). These results revealed the unique roles of native destination endorser by focusing on their social identities related to an endorsed destination.

Overall, this study enriches our understanding of how individuals' interactions with native destination endorsers shape their destination identification and recommendation intentions. By integrating self-expansion theory with concepts of self-congruence and para-social interaction, the study sheds light on the underlying mechanisms of these relationships in the realm of destination marketing.

### **Theoretical contributions**

This study addresses the unique influence of native destination endorser from a self-expansion theory perspective (Aron & Aron, 1986). Firstly, the new perspectives provided in this study are that self-congruence not only plays a role in facilitating communication interaction among individuals from a homophily or uncertainty reduction perspective (Ye et al., 2021) but also indicates the potential and possibility of self-expansion for an individual (Aron & Aron, 1996) based on its significant mediating effect on self-expansion. In this study, the findings revealed that ideal and actual self-congruence serve as potential self-expansion provided by native destination endorsers, which may attract individuals to form an imagined intimacy toward the endorser. This perspective sheds light on the transformative power of self-congruence in fostering imagined intimacy with native destination endorsers, thereby enriching our understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying consumer behaviors in the field of destination endorsement.

Secondly, the significant relationship observed between para-social relationships and inclusion-of-other-in-the-self underscores the role of one-sided relationships in facilitating self-expansion. This finding aligns with prior research in brand management contexts and highlights the profound impact that para-social relationships can have on individuals' self-expansion processes (Chu, 2024; Fu, 2024; Lee, Bai, & Busser, 2019; Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., 2014). By elucidating the link between para-social relationships and self-expansion, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate and derive value from one-sided relationships in the digital age.

Furthermore, this study underscores the unique role of native destination endorsers by focusing on their social identities to the endorsed destination. Compared with previous studies investigated balance theory, social exchange theory or self-concept perspectives (Guo & Hsu, 2023; Ye et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020), self-expansion theory (Aron et al., 2013) suggests that potential tourists could include native endorsers' social identity into self, which, in turn, forming destination identification and altruistic behavior such as recommend intention in this study. This process fosters destination identification and altruistic behaviors, such as recommendation intentions. By emphasizing the social identities of native endorsers, the study highlights their potential to evoke destination identification and altruistic behaviors among potential tourists, offering a novel perspective that extends beyond traditional theoretical frameworks.

Overall, by integrating self-expansion theory with concepts of self-congruence and para-social interaction, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals' self-expansion processes with native destination endorsers shape their destination identification and recommendation intentions.

### **Practical implications**

The theoretical implications drawn from this study provide new perspectives for destination endorsing strategy. First, self-expansion theory highlights the unique role of native destination endorsers because they possess more social identities related to the destination, which would be forming their viewer destination identification. Given this underlying mechanism, destination managers should focus on leveraging their diverse social identities to enhance viewers' identification with the destination. This could involve showcasing not only the natural beauty or attractions of the destination but also highlighting its cultural heritage, local traditions, and

community values that resonate with the audience. By aligning the endorsement with the authentic essence of the destination, native endorsers can effectively foster a stronger emotional connection and sense of belonging among potential tourists.

Second, as investigated by prior studies, consumers' positive word of mouth or recommend behavior is more effective than traditional marketing strategies (Hameed et al., 2024; Reimer & Benkenstein, 2016). This study revealed that potential tourists could form recommend intentions through the inclusion of native endorsers in the self. Therefore, destination managers could organize some support programs or campaigns to induce this recommend intention for destination marketing. This could be achieved through organizing interactive events, community engagement initiatives, or digital campaigns that enable direct communication and interaction with native endorsers. By providing platforms for genuine interactions and testimonials, destination managers can amplify the impact of native endorsements and stimulate positive recommendations from satisfied viewers.

Thirdly, this theory provides new perspectives for destination managers on the role of self-congruence. Instead of viewing self-congruence between viewer and destination endorser as a way of enhancing viewers' interaction, destination manager should also consider what the destination endorsers can provide to viewers related to endorsers' resources, identities, or perspectives. By analyzing the target markets' desires and what desired attributes the native endorsers should manifest, the potential of self-expansion could draw attention of tourists and form an intimate relationship with them.

In conclusion, by adopting a strategic approach that leverages the unique identities of native endorsers, encourages positive word-of-mouth, and aligns with viewers' self-congruence, destination managers can effectively harness the power of endorsements to attract and engage potential tourists, ultimately driving destination awareness and visitation.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

There are some limitations we should consider in interpreting these research findings. Firstly, since the endorser in this study is a male resident, the findings may not be as applicable to cases involving female endorsers. Future research should explore whether gender plays a significant role in influencing the effectiveness of endorsements, particularly in relation to the

self-expansion process. Studies could investigate how female endorsers are perceived differently and how this may impact consumer-brand relationships. Secondly, although we highlighted the native endorsers' role from self-expansion perspective, future studies should further compare the native endorsers' effect with global or foreign endorsers to manifest this self-expansion process (e.g., identities). Third, since we conducted a cross-sectional survey, causal inference may be influenced in this process. Fourth, Generation Z and Y are the primary respondents in this study, as their familiarity with social media and influencers may affect their development of parasocial relationships and the self-expansion process. Further studies could include older generations to examine whether their familiarity with social media and influencers influences their parasocial relationships and self-expansion processes differently.

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