Can internet celebrities' short videos shape the image of rural tourism destinations? Empirical insights from China

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Abstract

Grounded on the foundation of the SOR model and meaning transfer theory, this research intends to analyze how internet celebrities' short videos affect destination image and brand love in rural tourism. Survey data collection included responses from 401 individuals from China who had watched short videos of internet celebrity (i.e., Ding Zhen) but had not visited the endorsed destination. This research employed partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4 to evaluate the hypotheses. It was found that internet celebrity endorsement positively impacts destination image, which in turn promotes destination brand love. Moreover, social presence and spatial presence in short videos were found to mediate the influence of celebrity endorsement on destination image, with social presence having a greater impact. This study initially investigates the mechanisms by which internet celebrities' short videos influence the destination image and brand love in rural tourism, taking into account the mediation effects of social presence and spatial presence.

Introduction

Given the increasing significance of rural tourism to national economies, the competition among rural destinations has become a pressing concern. Consequently, rural tourism enterprises and destinations must differentiate themselves in the highly competitive market. One effective strategy employed to attract potential travellers is the cultivation and enhancement of a favourable destination image (Afshardoost et al., 2020), as the competition among destinations is essentially a competition of images. However, developing a destination image for rural tourism faces numerous challenges, including limited attractiveness (Chi and Han, 2021) and a lack of interactive communication (Fraccastoro et al., 2021), and reliance on traditional media channels like websites, television, newspapers, and magazines. Traditional media face challenges in shaping and disseminating the image of rural tourism destinations. While major television stations often feature rural attractions, cuisine, and specialities in dedicated programmes, these tend to lack depth and rarely explore the unique local culture in detail (Liao et al., 2023). Similarly, many rural tourism websites are static and rarely updated, offering only basic geographical or historical information. Although newspapers and magazines can provide thematic coverage, their content is often insufficient and fails to address individual interests. As a result, current tourism information sources offer limited and fragmented coverage, unable to convey the full and multidimensional appeal of rural destinations.

In this regard, short videos posted by Internet celebrities offer a unique opportunity to overcome the limitations of traditional media by enhancing and publicising the image of rural tourism destinations. Globally, the rise of short-video platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels) have transformed tourism marketing, enabling immersive and interactive destination promotion. Although cultural contexts differ across regions, the core mechanisms of influencer-driven short videos—such as enhancing sensory richness and cultivating perceived presence—remain broadly applicable across diverse markets. This study focuses on China, where platforms like Douyin exemplify these trends, yet the findings may offer insights for cross-cultural tourism dynamics, especially in emerging economies with growing short-video usage. Unlike film-induced tourism, which relies on narrative immersion within a predefined storyline, short videos leverage interactive and fragmented digital formats to create a more engaging and participatory virtual experience (Barbe and Neuburger, 2021). Similarly, while general influencer marketing may encompass a range of promotional activities, short videos— with their dynamic editing, real-time interaction, and sensory appeal—enable a more vivid and immersive depiction of rural spaces.

The effectiveness of this format is underpinned by the unique role of internet celebrities, who highlight a certain trait or behaviour in the network amplification effect with the help of a social media platform that attracts fans' extensive and continuous attention (Kim and Chakraborty, 2024). Leveraging their persuasive appeal and skills, combined with the implicit trust of their audiences, these individuals can swiftly capitalise on opportunities and seamlessly engage viewers through captivating portrayals of tourist destinations (Zhang et al., 2020). By disseminating short videos, they overcome spatial and temporal barriers, effectively showcasing the three-dimensional rural space (Wu and Lai, 2021) and creating a tangible perception of the destination's image. A pertinent example is the case of Ding Zhen, a Tibetan youth whose short videos brought unprecedented attention to Litang, a rural area in China. In November 2020, Ding Zhen

gained fame through a seven-second video titled "Ding Zhen's World", which showcased the natural and cultural richness of his hometown. His authenticity and the region's scenic backdrop—featuring plateaus, snow-capped mountains, and Tibetan traditions—resonated widely, leading to a sixfold increase in online searches for Litang and a 90% rise in hotel bookings (Yang et al., 2022). This case concretely illustrates how internet celebrities' short videos contribute to forming the rural destination image, providing a specific context for this study.

However, research on this topic is limited. There are three major research gaps. Firstly, there is a scarcity of studies concerning destination imagery in the context of celebrities' short videos. Social media platforms' widespread popularity and the emergence of these videos offer a fresh perspective for destination image research. Short videos integrate text, drawings, sounds, and images, providing a compelling channel to vividly express images (Jiang et al., 2022). Remote rural villages can leverage this approach to showcase their unique regions and traditional cultures. By presenting thoughtfully organised daily activities, heritage festivals, and idyllic scenery in panoramic views, rarely seen aspects of rural culture can be reintroduced to the public through short videos, forming an initial image of the tourist destination. However, as mentioned earlier, there is a dearth of destination image studies from the perspective of short video dissemination.

Secondly, it remains unexplored whether the destination image, based on celebrities' short videos, can lead to a profound emotional connection to the destination (i.e., brand love). According to the marketing funnel theory, tourists develop cognitive and emotional responses to a destination during the celebrity endorsement process, initially as a surface-level reaction to the destination's image, followed by a deeper emotional reaction to the destination's brand (Zhang and Xu, 2023). Destination brand love is defined as tourists' strong emotional connection with a destination brand (Aro et al., 2018). The emotional and cognitive benefits of brand love are manifold, including strong brand relationships, loyalty commitment, word-of-mouth, willingness to pay more, resistance to negative information, disclosure of personal information, active participation, and forgiveness (Amaro et al., 2020; Cham and Easvaralingam, 2012; Zhang and Xu, 2023). Nevertheless, further exploration of the impact of destination image on destination brand love is necessary, particularly in internet celebrities' short videos and rural tourism.

Thirdly, further investigation is warranted to understand how internet celebrity endorsement through short videos enhances the destination image. Prior research indicated that presence is a highly valued concept in technology-mediated virtual experiences. For instance, Fan et al. (2022) discovered that presence in virtual scenes facilitated by augmented reality technology has varying impacts on the tourism experience, affecting value perception and psychological responses. However, the majority of previous research has concentrated solely on consumer experience from a singular perspective of presence (Zhu et al., 2022), despite academics frequently differentiating between spatial presence and social presence (Barreda-Ángeles and Hartmann, 2022). The two dimensions have distinct functions: spatial presence is defined by the degree to which humans experience virtual environments as real, creating a sensation of actually being there; in contrast, social presence relies on the degree to which individuals engage and interact with each other through media communication tools, inducing a feeling of being in the company of others (Barreda-

Ángeles and Hartmann, 2022). The scarcity of research incorporating aspects of presence suggests that there must be further investigation.

This study aims to examine the impact of internet celebrity endorsements through short videos on destination image and destination brand love in rural tourism, thereby addressing current research gaps. It also investigates the mediating effects of spatial and social presence on celebrity attachment and destination image. This study enhances the understanding of rural tourism destination marketing and offers valuable theoretical insights for future research in this area. Additionally, the research results on the interrelationships among celebrity endorsements, social presence and spatial presence in short videos, destination image, and destination brand love in rural tourism can assist destination management organisations in rural tourism in leveraging new media to implement marketing strategies, thereby enhancing these destinations' tourism competitiveness.

Literature Review

The SOR Model

To address the research gaps and establish a robust theoretical grounding for understanding the human-technology interaction in short-video-based tourism marketing, this study adopts the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model as its overarching theoretical framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). The S-O-R model explicitly explains how environmental stimuli (S) influence an individual's internal states (O), which in turn drive behavioural responses (R). In this research, the stimuli (S) are conceptualised as the unique affordances of internet celebrities' short videos, specifically their ability to generate celebrity endorsement, social presence, and spatial presence. These stimuli are direct outcomes of the interactive and immersive qualities of the short-video medium. These external stimuli then affect the internal organism's (O) processes, which include the formation of destination images. Finally, these psychological changes lead to the response (R) of destination brand love. By employing the S-O-R model, this study moves beyond treating short videos as a mere channel for endorsement; instead, it provides a systematic framework to unveil how the technological features of the medium transform the psychological impact of endorsement.

Internet Celebrities' Short Videos within the Rural Tourism Setting

Presently, there is no widely accepted academic definition of an internet celebrity. Typically, these individuals are referred to by combining network and celebrity descriptors such as 'internet celebrity', 'social media influencer', and 'cyberspace star'. Among these, 'internet celebrity' is the most commonly used term. Internet celebrities are individuals who use social media to emphasise specific behaviours or traits, aiming to gain recognition from fans and ultimately leading to widespread popularity (Barbe and Neuburger, 2021). Scholars propose that short video platforms are now the primary space for internet celebrities to build a fan base (Wu and Lai, 2023), as these videos are highly interactive and effective in attracting a level of consumer attention and engagement that cannot be achieved by traditional celebrity-endorsed advertising.

Prior research has investigated the role of celebrities as a substantial marketing instrument (Chen et al., 2021), finding that celebrities' promotion of a tourist destination in a film or television programme influences tourists' motivation and intention to visit the destination (Wu and Lai, 2021). Compared to film and television, however, celebrities' short videos have a more pronounced impact on tourists' virtual experience because they enhance the experience through a different technological channel. Considering the benefits of short videos and the influence of celebrities, an increasing number of destination managers are enlisting celebrities to endorse their destinations on short video platforms, such as TikTok, to improve the market competitiveness and acquire a competitive advantage (Wu and Lai, 2023). For instance, Ding Zhen's short videos about his hometown, Litang, went viral, generating a significant impact and garnering widespread attention, which swiftly transformed it into a popular rural tourism destination. Nevertheless, there is limited research on how internet celebrities' short videos affect tourists' psychological and behavioural intentions.

Celebrity Endorsement and Destination Image

According to the S-O-R framework, internet celebrity endorsements in short videos (as the Stimulus) positively influence viewers' internal cognitive and affective states (the Organism), which manifests as the formation of a positive destination image. Meaning transfer theory shows that consumers transfer symbolic meanings associated with celebrities to the products they endorse (McCracken, 1989). When internet celebrities act as opinion leaders, their audiences often develop positive impressions of the products or destinations they endorse (Wu and Lai, 2021). Interaction with a celebrity further influences audiences' perceptions of the endorsed destination (Su et al., 2011). Consequently, Internet celebrity endorsements greatly influence consumers' perceptions of destinations. Likewise, brand signalling theory states that tourists' opinions of a destination can significantly change if they trust a reputable source (Veasna et al., 2013). Admirers of celebrities tend to trust their recommendations and view travelling to endorsed destinations as a symbolic journey (Lee et al., 2008). Moreover, a significant distinction between traditional and internet celebrities lies in the fact that the latter are primarily grassroots before they achieve fame. Consumers are more psychologically connected to the netroots group and can easily establish a connection with them, which generates a sense of identity. This admiration and identity contribute to creating a favourable image of the locations represented by celebrities, transferring a favourable image to the places they endorse (Yen and Croy, 2016). In summary, this study presents the following hypothesis:

H1   Internet celebrity endorsements in short videos positively impact destination image.

Celebrity Endorsement and Presence

Spatial presence describes the perception of physical presence experienced by an individual in a given environment (Kim et al., 2022). Celebrity endorsement is a mutual agreement where the endorser gains public recognition, and the public uses the endorser to promote consumer products in advertising (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016). Celebrity endorsements are persuasive because the public readily accepts them for celebrities' attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016). These

aspects positively influence spatial presence. Research indicates that individuals tend to place more trust and favorability toward those perceived as more attractive, leading to a more immersive and aesthetically pleasing experience (Batres and Shiramizu, 2023). Celebrities can use their expertise to create innovative content and presentation styles while showcasing destinations. The trustworthiness of celebrities enhances their credibility and resources, helping them avert risks for their customers and boost trust levels (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016). This trustworthiness instills positive emotions and attitudes, fostering a sense of spatial presence. Some studies have validated the correlation between celebrity endorsement and spatial presence (Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). Celebrity endorsement of attractiveness, reliability, and popularity greatly enhances tourists' physical presence in short videos (Zhang et al., 2022). Additionally, Zhu et al. (2022) confirmed that internet celebrity endorsements generate a sense of spatial presence in the TikTok short video experience.

In addition to the above, social presence describes the degree to which an individual experiences the actual presence of another person during online communication (Kreijns et al., 2022). Through this medium, users create a feeling of intimacy or immediacy in interpersonal interactions, reflecting their perception and emotions of being present with others. According to interpersonal communication theory, source attraction theory, and source trustworthiness theory, a recipient is more likely to connect with a communicator who is regarded as attractive, knowledgeable, and credible (El Hedhli et al., 2021). This connection occurs within a mediated environment, resulting in the development of a sense of social presence. Internet celebrities, as typical sources of information, possessed characteristics such as trustworthiness, professionalism, and attractiveness, which could generate different levels of closeness among viewers and directly affect their emotions, attitudes, and behaviours. Some researchers have shown that the information source can influence social presence. For instance, Choi et al. (2019) discovered that competence, goodwill, and honesty are significant dimensions of interpersonal trust that develop a social presence among potential travellers. Jin et al. (2019) further observed that Instagram celebrities have a stronger effect on social presence compared with traditional celebrities. Consequently, the study proposes the subsequent hypotheses:

H2   Internet celebrity endorsements positively impact spatial presence in short videos.

H3   Internet celebrity endorsements positively impact social presence in short videos.

Presence and Destination Image

Studies indicate that spatial presence influences customers' cognition and emotions toward a destination. Fan et al. (2022) indicated that spatial presence effectively explains tourists' emotional attachment to destinations and hometowns. Similarly, Hudson et al. (2019) confirmed that spatial presence exerts a beneficial influence on tourists' attitudes and satisfaction. Furthermore, Hyun and O'Keefe (2012) emphasise that spatial presence significantly influences cognitive attitudes and contentment. Kim et al. (2022) found that the increased spatial presence would enhance the delight of exploring the virtual destination. As people investigate, they are likely to form favourable assessments of the destination, leading to a positive destination image.

Therefore, spatial presence enhances the destination image. Moreover, internet celebrity endorsements positively impact spatial presence. Spatial presence serves as a mediator between internet celebrity endorsements and destination image on short videos. Zhu et al. (2022) investigated celebrity attachment and found that it positively influenced telepresence and sense of presence, which in turn positively influenced visit intention in celebrities' short videos. Consequently, the study proposes the subsequent hypotheses:

H4   Spatial presence in short videos positively impacts destination image.

H5   Spatial presence in short videos has a mediating effect between internet celebrity endorsements and destination image.

Social presence refers to the extent to which individuals perceive others to be present during online communication (Kreijns et al., 2022). Destination image relates to awareness and what people believe they know about a location (Cham et al., 2022). Consumers not only acquire detailed information about the destination from the textual, pictorial, and video clues provided in the videos but also perceive it through internet celebrities' verbal and nonverbal cues, such as expressions, gestures, and intonation (Kim and Park, 2024; Zhu et al., 2022). This real-time commentary and response by internet celebrities contribute to shaping a more authentic image, enabling consumers to comprehensively understand destination information (Stever and Lawson, 2013). Additionally, users on short video platforms can engage with internet celebrities by liking or sharing, directly interacting with messages in the comments section. These interactions cultivate a feeling of social presence. This heightened feeling can greatly and favourably impact users' views and attitudes (Wang et al., 2025; Wu and Lai, 2023; Ying et al., 2022). Consequently, consumers are inclined to form favourable opinions, more robust perceptions, and distinct identities for endorsed destinations. Hence, social presence greatly influences the destination image. Since internet celebrity endorsements are hypothesised in H3 to positively influence social presence in short videos, it is plausible that social presence mediates the relationship between internet celebrity endorsements and the destination image. Liu et al. (2024) have confirmed the mediating role of social presence on social media platforms and the impact of social presence on the destination image of rural tourism. Consequently, the study proposes the subsequent hypotheses:

H6   Social presence in short videos positively impacts destination image.

H7   Social presence in short videos mediates the relationship between internet celebrity endorsements and destination image.

**Destination Image and Destination Brand Love**

Destination brand love demonstrates a profound emotional connection between tourists and a destination brand (Aro et al., 2018). Love for destination brands can be classified as friendship, emotional, and romantic (Swanson, 2017). Friendship love, which is developed through familiarity, reflects a profound appreciation and admiration for the location. According to the S-O-R framework, a positive destination image (as a key Organism state) serves as a critical internal driver that directly elicits the destination brand love (as a Response). Some research provides evidence regarding the effect of

destination image on destination brand love. Zhang and Xu (2023) suggest that during the celebrity endorsement phase, travellers develop cognitive and emotional understanding, followed by a deeper emotional reaction that aligns with the marketing funnel model. Additionally, Amaro et al. (2020) investigated destination brand love's antecedents and indicated it relies heavily on the destination image. Indeed, several studies illustrate the indirect impact of destination image on destination brand love. Destination image significantly affects satisfaction (Chiu et al., 2016) and place attachment (Zhou et al., 2023). Brand love is a facet of satisfaction (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), as content consumers frequently exhibit brand love (Gumparthi and Patra, 2020). Place attachment involves an emotional response to the physical or social environment (Prayag and Ryan, 2012), fostering an emotional bond between individuals and destinations (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001). Thus, destination image is expected to influence destination brand love positively. Consequently, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H8   Destination image positively impacts destination brand love.

The research model for this study is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The research model
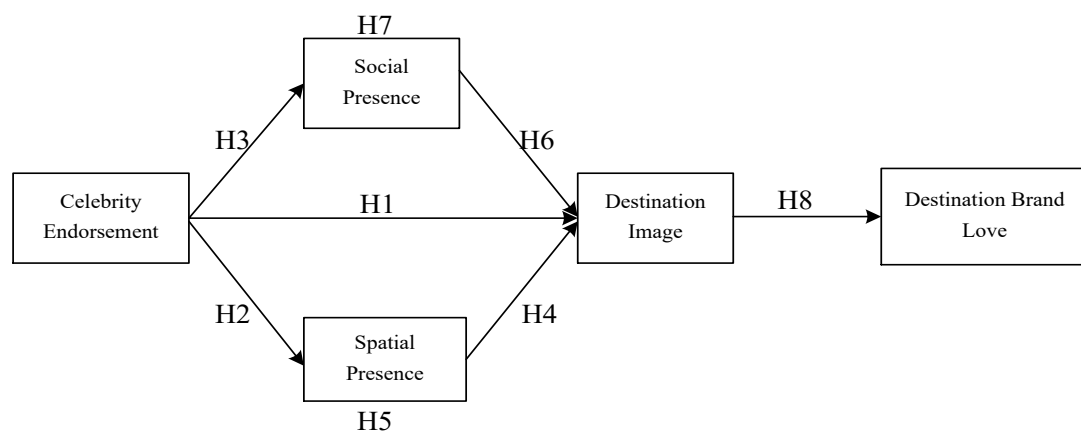
Methodology

Data Collection and Sampling

Purposive sampling, which is widely used in consumer behaviour research, was utilised to identify individuals who fulfilled the subsequent criterion (Cham et al., 2023a; Cheng et al., 2019). The participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) they had viewed Ding Zhen's short videos in the recent year; (2) they had not visited Litang before; and (3) they were aged 18 or above and were residents of mainland China. Surveys were distributed to the respondents via Sojump (https://www.wjx.cn/), the top online survey platform in China. The online questionnaire format was chosen due to the majority of short video viewers being internet users. Additionally, online surveys offered a more effective means of reaching users across various regions, ethnic backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses (Oliveri et al., 2021). The survey employed a public invitation

method, with the questionnaire randomly displayed on the platform. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the survey configuration ensured anonymity by omitting any identifying information about respondents. Prior to participation, all participants were presented with an informed consent form that detailed the research purpose, data confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Only those who provided electronic consent proceeded to the questionnaire. Each participant was given an identification number, and each number was allowed to complete the survey only once during this period to prevent duplication. 425 questionnaires were received. After excluding 24 invalid questionnaires due to straight-lining responses and completion time under 40 seconds, 401 valid questionnaires remained, yielding a validity rate of 85.87%.

Measurement and Questionnaire Design

There are three sections in the questionnaire. The first section included two screening questions. The second section comprised 15 questions aimed at evaluating the five research constructs. A detailed description of each scale is provided as follows. Celebrity endorsement (CE), adapted from Ohanian (1990) to assess endorser credibility and attractiveness (e.g., The internet celebrity is trustworthy), showed high internal consistency (rhoA = 0.892), with all loadings above 0.88 and an AVE of 0.821. Social presence (SOP), from Song et al. (2021), measured the sense of human interaction (e.g., It seemed like the celebrity and I were interacting), demonstrating strong reliability (rhoA = 0.880), loadings above 0.89, and an AVE of 0.807. Spatial presence (SPP), derived from Kim et al. (2022), gauged the feeling of being physically present (e.g., I felt like I was really at the destination), with excellent reliability (rhoA = 0.893), loadings between 0.890-0.920, and an AVE of 0.823. Destination image (DI), adapted from Amaro et al. (2020), evaluated cognitive and affective impressions (e.g., The destination is safe and secure), showing high reliability (rhoA = 0.897), loadings above 0.90, and an AVE of 0.826. Destination brand love (DBL), from Zhang et al. (2020), reflected a strong emotional bond (e.g., The destination makes me feel good), with high reliability (rhoA = 0.892), loadings above 0.89, and an AVE of 0.818. All measures confirmed satisfactory convergent validity. Consistent with prior research (McCoach et al., 2013), a 5-point Likert scale was utilised to rate all items, with values from one to five representing strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree, respectively. The third section of the questionnaire solicited participants' demographic details. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese for the understanding of the target respondents. Consistency was ensured through back-translation into English, and the Chinese version was meticulously proofread and adjusted by two experienced translators. Subsequently, 30 viewers who had watched Ding Zhen's short videos were chosen to partake in a pre-study, reporting no comprehension issues.

Results

The present study employed partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4.0.8 software to evaluate the hypotheses in the theoretical model. The evaluations of the external measurement model and the internal structural model were performed using the two-step PLS-SEM methodology. This study identifies three primary justifications for selecting PLS-SEM. Firstly, the primary goal of this

study is to explain the variance in the key endogenous construct—destination brand love—and to identify the salient factors (such as presence and destination image) that drive it, rather than to confirm an established theory. PLS-SEM is particularly suited for such prediction-orientated and explanatory research (Hair et al., 2019), which aligns with our objective of understanding the mechanisms of influence in a specific context (i.e., short-video-based endorsements). Second, the choice is consistent with methods used in prior studies investigating similar perceptual and psychological constructs in tourism and social media marketing. For instance, research on destination image formation (Amaro et al., 2020) and the effects of virtual presence on tourist behaviour (Dang Quan et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2022) has successfully utilised PLS-SEM, providing a methodological precedent for modelling the complex relationships between celebrity endorsement, presence, image, and emotional attachment. Third, the constructs in the model are conceptualised as composite formations, and the indicators are assumed to cause the latent variable. PLS-SEM is the preferred method for estimating such composite models (Sarstedt et al., 2020). Finally, PLS-SEM does not require strict assumptions of data normality and is robust with smaller sample sizes, making it a suitable and practical choice for this study (Gao et al., 2024; Hair et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2022; Low et al., 2022).

Respondent Profile

The sample population for the study consisted of 47.63% males and 52.37% females. The predominant age group, at 47.63%, was within the 18-25 range. Additionally, 48.38% of the participants held an undergraduate degree. The primary consumers of short videos are predominantly young individuals with a strong inclination toward cutting-edge technologies and leisure activities, particularly mobile short videos (Shriver-Rice et al., 2022). According to the 2020 Report on Chinese Online Travel Industry Post-95 User Data, individuals born after 1995 frequently engage with the internet and watch short videos (Fastdata, 2020). Hence, the sample analysed in this study accurately represents the characteristics of the tourism consumption market in the era of short video media. Concerning the viewing duration of short videos on rural tourism, the majority (44.14%) reported watching them for 30–60 minutes every day. Approximately 33.92% of individuals watched videos for over an hour a day, reflecting the fragmented consumption pattern commonly observed among short video viewers.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic characteristic		Counts	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	191	47.63%
	Female	210	52.37%
Age	Under 18 years old	60	14.96%
	18-25 years old	191	47.63%
	26-35 years old	85	21.20%
	36-60 years old	65	16.21%
Education level	High School and below	56	13.97%
	College	112	27.93%
	Undergraduate	194	48.38%
	Master and above	39	9.73%
Browse Time	Under 30 minutes	88	21.95%
	30-60 minutes	177	44.14%

Demographic characteristic	Counts	Percentage (%)
1-2 hours	98	24.44%
More than 2 hours	38	9.48%

Common Method Bias

Data on endogenous and exogenous variables were collected using a single tool, which could potentially lead to CMB. To address and evaluate this bias, this study utilised both procedural and statistical remedies (Tehseen et al., 2017). Procedurally, the questionnaire was designed with a cross-listing of different scale items to prevent respondents from subjectively guessing the research questions. This approach aims to minimise the likelihood of respondents filling out answers based on their own assumptions rather than their actual understanding of the questions. Additionally, emphasis was placed on ensuring respondent anonymity and providing clear explanations of the survey purpose and key concepts (Tehseen et al., 2017). Statistically, the full covariance test, a widely employed technique for identifying CMB in PLS-SEM, was performed. The findings indicated variance inflation factor (VIF) values between 1.00 and 3.02; since all values were below 3.3, it was established that common method bias (CMB) did not present a substantial concern in this study (Kock and Gaskins, 2014).

Measurement Model Assessment

Internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity are typically employed to evaluate the quality of the external measurement model (Cham et al., 2023b; Chin et al., 2023; Hair et al., 2021; Lacap et al., 2022). Initially, internal consistency assesses the level of consistency among questions evaluating a specific construct (Hair et al., 2022). Dijkstra-Henseler's rho (rhoA) is regarded as a superior indicator for assessing internal consistency relative to Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (Ting et al., 2017). Table 2 demonstrates that all rhoA values exceed 0.7 (Hair et al., 2022), signifying the strong reliability of both endogenous and exogenous variables in this research. Secondly, convergent validity evaluates the extent of connection among indicators of the identical construct. Factor loadings in Table 2 surpass 0.708, and the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs is above 0.5, demonstrating adequate convergent validity in the study (Hair et al., 2022; Ting et al., 2017).

Subsequently, discriminant validity refers to the ability to distinguish constructs when different methods are used to measure them. Discriminant validity pertains to the capacity to differentiate between observed values when several methodologies are employed to assess distinct constructs. Although certain research has employed Fornell and Larcker's 1981 criterion, it has faced criticism for its deficiency in discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). This study utilised the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations to evaluate discriminant validity. The findings in Table 3 demonstrate that discriminant validity is not an issue in the study, as all HTMT values are below 0.90. To strengthen the validity of the results, HTMT inference was assessed using 5000 bootstrapping samples with the no sign change option and the bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) approach. Table 4 indicates that none of the 95% bootstrap confidence intervals for HTMT encompass the number 1 (Franke and Sarstedt, 2019).

Consequently, all constructs in Table 4 are empirically distinct, thereby affirming the discriminant validity of the assessments.

Table 2: Convergent validity and construct reliability results

Latent Construct		Loadings	Mean	Standard Deviation	rhoA (ρA)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CE	CE1	0.889				
	CE2	0.921	3.510	1.129	0.892	0.821
	CE2	0.908				
SOP	SOP1	0.899				
	SOP2	0.903	3.618	1.072	0.880	0.807
	SOP3	0.892				
SPP	SPP1	0.920				
	SPP2	0.911	3.573	1.091	0.893	0.823
	SPP3	0.890				
DI	DI1	0.909				
	DI2	0.907	3.436	1.116	0.897	0.826
	DI3	0.911				
DBL	DBL1	0.903				
	DBL2	0.913	3.491	1.114	0.892	0.818
	DBL3	0.898				

Note: CE=Celebrity Endorsement; SOP=Social Presence; SPP=Spatial Presence; DI=Destination Image; DBL=Destination Brand Love

Table 3: HTMT results

	CE	DBL	DI	SOP	SPP
CE					
DBL	0.718				
DI	0.706	0.671			
SOP	0.805	0.820	0.810		
SPP	0.688	0.729	0.687	0.851	

Table 4: HTMT BCa inference results

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Bias	2.50%	97.50%
DBL <-> CE	0.718	0.718	-0.001	0.648	0.784
DI <-> CE	0.706	0.705	-0.001	0.633	0.771
DI <-> DBL	0.671	0.670	-0.001	0.590	0.739
SOP <-> CE	0.805	0.804	-0.001	0.751	0.854
SOP <-> DBL	0.820	0.820	0.000	0.766	0.864
SOP <-> DI	0.810	0.809	0.000	0.753	0.858
SPP <-> CE	0.688	0.687	-0.001	0.615	0.753
SPP <-> DBL	0.729	0.728	0.000	0.654	0.790
SPP <-> DI	0.687	0.685	-0.001	0.607	0.754
SPP <-> SOP	0.851	0.850	-0.001	0.799	0.893

Structural Model Assessment

We employed the bootstrapping technique with 5000 subsamples and a 95% confidence interval to test the direct hypotheses (Aguirre-Urreta and Rönkkö, 2018; Hair et al., 2022). The t-value for each path coefficient was used to verify the hypotheses, with t-values of 1.96, 2.56, and 3.29, indicating significance levels of 0.05, 0.01, and 0.001, respectively. Recently, some scholars have also begun incorporating bias-corrected confidence intervals alongside t-values in their reports. Hair et al. (2022) posited that a route coefficient is deemed significant if the confidence interval excludes zero. The outcomes of the direct hypothesis testing are displayed in Table 5 and Figure 2.

The findings demonstrate that celebrity endorsement in short videos significantly enhances destination image (H1: β=0.219, p<0.001). Celebrity endorsement was also shown to positively predict both spatial presence (H2: β=0.614, p<0.001) and social presence (H3: β=0.713, p<0.001). Additionally, the outcomes demonstrate that spatial presence (H4: β=0.129, p<0.05) and social presence (H6: β=0.466, p<0.001) positively influence destination image. Finally, destination image was shown to positively and significantly predict destination brand love (H8: β=0.601, p<0.001). Therefore, all direct hypotheses were supported. Moreover, the coefficient of determination (R^2) results show that the variance explained by the predictor variables of social presence, spatial presence, destination image, and destination brand love was 50.86%, 37.70%, 55.33%, and 36.15%, respectively, signifying a favourable model prediction (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 5: Hypothesis testing results

Hypo-thesis	PLS Path	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T-value	p-value	Bias-corrected Confidence Interval	Remarks
H1	CE -> DI	0.219	0.218	0.055	4.001	0.000	[0.107,0.325]	Supported
H2	CE -> SPP	0.614	0.614	0.033	18.861	0.000	[0.546,0.674]	Supported
H3	CE -> SOP	0.713	0.714	0.026	27.837	0.000	[0.659,0.762]	Supported
H4	SPP -> DI	0.129	0.130	0.056	2.305	0.021	[0.021,0.245]	Supported
H6	SOP -> DI	0.466	0.467	0.064	7.310	0.000	[0.340,0.592]	Supported
H8	DI -> DBL	0.601	0.602	0.034	17.435	0.000	[0.531,0.667]	Supported

Effect size (f^2) delineates the contribution of each endogenous latent variable to the R^2 of the exogenous variables (Cohen, 2013). Table 6 showcases the f^2 of each endogenous variable. Values ranging from 0.02 to 0.15, 0.15 to 0.35, and 0.35 or higher signify weak, medium, and large effects, respectively. If the value is 0.02 or below, the endogenous construct exerts no significant influence (Cohen, 2013). As illustrated in Table 6, celebrity endorsement and social presence exhibit f^2 values of 0.051 and 0.161, respectively, indicating weak and medium effects on destination image. However,

spatial presence demonstrates no effect on destination image (f^2=0.016). Celebrity endorsement, on the other hand, exhibits large effects on social presence (f^2=1.035) and spatial presence (f^2=0.605), as does destination image on destination brand love (f^2=0.566). The predictive capability of the structural model was evaluated by the assessment of Stone-Geisser's Q^2 value, which determines the model's adequacy in explaining the endogenous variables (Hair et al., 2022). Hair's criteria indicate that a Q^2 value beyond zero denotes predictive importance, whereas a value below zero implies its absence. In Table 7, the final Q^2 depicts a value exceeding zero, thus validating the predictive relevance of the model.

Table 6: Effect size results

Predictor Construct / Dependent Construct	DBL	CE	DI	SOP	SPP
DBL					
CE			0.051	1.035	0.605
DI	0.566				
SOP			0.161		
SPP			0.016		

Table 7: Predictive relevance results

Endogenous Construct	SSO	SSE	Q^2 (=1−SSE/SSO)	Predictive Relevance
SOP	1203.000	712.470	0.408	Q2 >0
SPP	1203.000	833.650	0.307	Q2 >0
DI	1203.000	661.554	0.450	Q2 >0
DBL	1203.000	851.678	0.292	Q2 >0

Figure 2: Structural model
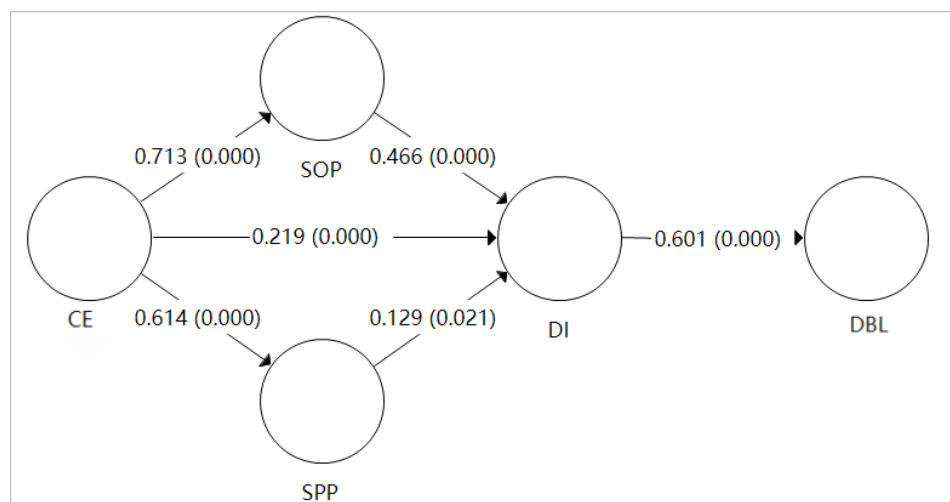
Mediation Analysis

The bootstrap method was iterated 5000 times to establish confidence intervals for standardised mediation effects (see Table 8). The findings reveal the significant

mediating effects of spatial presence and social presence between celebrity endorsement and destination image, with their 95% confidence intervals excluding zero. Supporting the mediation hypotheses H5 and H7, these findings suggest that celebrity endorsements indirectly shape viewers' destination image through social presence and spatial presence in short videos.

Table 8: Mediating effects of social presence and spatial presence

Hypo-thesis	Indirect Effect path	IE point estimate	Bootstrap 5000 times			Percentile 95%		Remarks
			SE	T	P	Low	Upper	
H5	CE -> SPP-> DI	0.079	0.035	2.278	0.023	0.013	0.151	Supported
H7	CE -> SOP-> DI	0.332	0.048	6.933	0.000	0.241	0.428	Supported

Discussion

The findings reveal that celebrity endorsements in short videos enhance tourists' perceptions of both social and spatial presence. This dual effect distinguishes short-video endorsements from traditional media formats. Unlike film-induced tourism, which relies on narrative immersion within a predefined storyline, short videos leverage real-time, interactive, and fragmented formats to create a sense of both social connection and spatial immersion simultaneously (Barbe and Neuburger, 2021). Similarly, while traditional celebrity endorsements (e.g., in print or television) can build trust, they often lack the interactive and immersive qualities that foster a strong sense of presence. The interactive interface of short videos adeptly addresses audience enquiries in real time. This interaction, combined with the celebrities' use of verbal and non-verbal cues (Kim and Park, 2024), fosters a warm, emotive, and immersive atmosphere. For the predominantly young, digitally native audience—a characteristic of our sample and short-video platforms globally—this interactive and authentic style of engagement is particularly effective. This augments consumer awareness and emotional attachment, thereby enhancing social presence, which in turn positively influences the destination image. Furthermore, the three-dimensional portrayal of rural spaces in short videos, with vivid imagery and background music, provides an immersive visual experience that enhances spatial presence. This finding aligns with prior research on immersive media in tourism (Zhu et al., 2022). The effectiveness of these visual narratives may be amplified in the context of rural tourism, where the appeal often lies in escaping urban environments and experiencing natural beauty—a desire that resonates across Asian cultures and globally.

A key finding of this study is the mediating role of both social and spatial presence. Notably, social presence exerted a stronger mediating effect than spatial presence. This suggests that for tourists engaging with short videos, the sense of human connection and interaction with the celebrity may be more influential than the feeling of 'being there' in the destination. This contrasts with some studies on virtual reality tourism, where spatial presence often dominates, and highlights the unique social nature of the short-video platform. Tourists are drawn to the celebrities' strong appeal and seek to establish parasocial relationships, transferring their fondness for the celebrity to the endorsed destinations (El Hedhli et al., 2021). The content creation pattern—where celebrities often speak directly to the camera, share personal experiences, and respond

to comments—fosters this perceived intimacy. Therefore, our findings extend beyond the Chinese context, offering insights for tourism marketing across Asia and other regions where short-video platforms are prevalent. The mechanisms of fostering presence through interactive and sensory-rich content are universally applicable, though the specific cultural appeal of celebrities and destinations would need localisation. These findings provide destination managers with a thorough understanding of how to strategically create a destination's image and cultivate brand loyalty through short videos, emphasising interactive social engagement over mere scenic depiction.

This study makes several key theoretical contributions by framing the phenomenon within the overarching Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, thereby providing a cohesive theoretical explanation for the impact of internet celebrities' short videos on rural tourism marketing. First, it extends beyond the isolated application of meaning transfer theory by integrating it into the comprehensive S-O-R framework. This study conceptualises internet celebrity endorsements—comprising credibility, social presence, and spatial presence—as a composite Stimulus (S). This integration clarifies how the meaning transfer process is technologically mediated and amplified by the unique affordances of the short-video platform, offering a more systematic understanding than previous studies that treated celebrity endorsement as a standalone factor.

Second, the study elucidates the critical internal psychological pathway within the S-O-R model. It posits destination image as a central Organism (O) state and demonstrates its sequential effect on fostering destination brand love—a key emotional Response (R). This specifies the underexplored cognitive-affective mechanism (O→R) in rural tourism, revealing how initial perceptions formed through short videos evolve into deeper emotional commitments, thereby advancing the theoretical precision of the S-O-R model in digital tourism contexts. Finally, by comparing the mediating roles of social and spatial presence, the study theorises the distinct nature of the short-video Stimulus (S). The finding that social presence exerts a stronger mediating effect than spatial presence underscores that the transformative power of this medium lies not merely in its immersive visuality but fundamentally in its capacity to simulate social interaction and parasocial relationships. This insight critically distinguishes the influence mechanism of short videos from those of other immersive technologies like VR, significantly refining the application of presence theory.

Practical Implications for Asian Business

This study offers practical insights into how rural tourism destination managers can enhance the competitiveness and marketing strategies of their destinations through short videos in China. Firstly, the study suggests that incorporating Internet celebrities into short video marketing can enhance tourists' image of destinations and elevate their emotional experiences. This finding resonates with previous research on the impact of celebrities in movie tourism marketing and advertising, highlighting the significant role that Internet celebrities can play in the short video experience. Therefore, in the future, destination managers may consider leveraging online celebrities to promote destination marketing. For example, in promotional short videos, managers could collaborate with celebrities who have local roots, such as those originating from rural locations.

Secondly, this research reveals that celebrity endorsement significantly influences two forms of presence. Spatial presence refers to a sense of 'being there', while social presence pertains to a feeling of 'being with others' (Hyun and O'Keefe, 2012; Short et al., 1976). Hence, destination managers should not only consider integrating celebrity features into short videos to create social presence but also focus on enhancing the quality of video content and technical proficiency of video presentations to sustain spatial presence. Collaborating with professional video production companies specialising in tourism can aid destination managers in improving the presentation of short videos, thereby enhancing tourists' presence experiences.

The most critical implication arises from the key insight that social presence exerts a more significant mediating effect than spatial presence. This highlights the need for destination marketers to go beyond simply highlighting visual attractions and instead prioritise cultivating a sense of interpersonal connection and active audience engagement. For businesses in Asia, this suggests that marketing initiatives should aim to foster parasocial relationships between celebrities and audiences. Rather than merely showcasing a location, celebrities should be encouraged to convey genuine emotions, share personal experiences, address the audience directly in a conversational tone, and engage with viewer feedback through live streams or subsequent video content. This method redefines the video content from a static promotional tool into an engaging social interaction, which plays a vital role in fostering emotional connections within the short-video environment (Zhu et al., 2022).

Lastly, given the rapid growth of short videos in Asia, especially in China, rural tourism destination managers can effectively utilise celebrity short videos on the Internet as a pivotal tourism marketing tool. These videos not only enhance tourists' recognition of rural tourism destinations but also strengthen consumers' emotional connection to such destinations. Therefore, for destination managers, Internet celebrities' short videos represent not only a novel tourism platform but also a powerful destination marketing tool.

However, despite its contributions, this research has drawbacks as well. Firstly, the data collection was restricted to Chinese participants, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings for travellers from varied cultural backgrounds. To mitigate this, future research could consider expanding the sample (Zhu et al., 2022). Secondly, the research relied on an online survey method, which limits the establishment of causal relationships. Subsequent studies may opt for alternative methodologies, such as experimental designs, to address this limitation. Lastly, this study assessed the individual influence of each variable on the destination image. Future research could explore combined impacts and interaction effects among different factors.

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