

# Let's stay together – The mediating role of self-congruity and place attachment on residents' likelihood to stay

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## ARTICLE INFO

Handling Editor: W. Schultz

### Keywords:

Place image  
Self-congruity  
Self-congruence  
Place attachment  
Resident retention  
Likelihood to stay

## ABSTRACT

Residents are integral to the place image. They are a component of the place, and ambassadors of its brand, yet their perspectives have generally been overlooked when it comes to the role of person-place bonds in place branding. This study evaluates the mediating role of self-congruity and place attachment on the relationship between residents' positive place image and likelihood to stay among 350 Swedish residents. A conceptual model building on identity, congruity and attachment theories is tested using structural equation modelling. Findings, applicable across two cities of different size, show a positive relationship between place image and residents' likelihood to stay, mediated by place attachment. The relationship between place image and place attachment is mediated by resident self-congruity. Implications include that resident image may not offer a direct psychological bond influencing residents' likelihood to stay but is important to instill place attachment which in turn impacts resident retention. Implications highlight the multifaceted nature of place self-congruity, the importance of careful consideration of constructs when operationalizing identification with a place, and that place attachment should not be used to measure residents' likelihood to stay. Future research is encouraged to include images of both place and place users when studying residents' place self-congruity. Implications highlight the capacity for place branding policies supporting inclusive community practices to unify and retain residents.

## 1. Introduction

Resident retention is an important ongoing challenge to ensure tax revenues and skilled workers and to sustain an image of a vibrant, attractive place to live (Servillo, Atkinson, & Russo, 2012). In the quest to attract and retain residents and other place users place branding has become an integral part of urban governance (Tournois & Rollero, 2019; Zenker & Braun, 2017).

Place branding concerns the purposeful symbolic embodiment of information about a place aiming to create associations and expectations around it (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). Place branding practices comprise a set of tools and processes aiming to capture, build and strengthen a distinguishable and favorable place image by communicating its specific functional, symbolic, and experiential values that reflect the identities and interests of its stakeholders (Eshuis, Braun, & Klijn, 2013; Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2012). However, place branding has been criticized for overlooking the internal audiences by ignoring the taxpayers funding the initiatives (Stylidis, Sit, & Biran, 2016), thereby risking the benefits of stability and continuity that committed and engaged residents have to offer (Zenker, Braun, & Petersen, 2017).

The place image reflects the recipient, or outcome, perspective of the place branding; the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of the place, stemming from lived experiences and place branding activities (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). To design successful place branding it is vital to properly capture and reflect residents' perceived place image in place brand communication (Strandberg & Ek Styvén, 2021). A positive place image among residents is considered key to a range of place-related behavioral outcomes, such as satisfaction, commitment, and attachment to a place (Schroeder, 1996; Tournois & Rollero, 2019). Previous research on the effects of residents' place image has however primarily focused on resident recruitment and in-migration (Mellander, Florida, & Stolarick, 2011), pro-tourism and pro-environmental outcomes, such as host attitude, behavior toward visitors, and intentions to recommend a place (Ramkissoon & Nunkoo, 2011; Schroeder, 1996). Residents profess high expectations on strategic retention efforts in terms of positive place communication, and community practitioners rank it as potentially the second most important retention strategy (Nene et al., 2009). Still, there is a lack of focus on the place image perspective of residents (Stylidis, 2018), which has rendered communicated advertising images too often incongruent with

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.101989>

Received 10 September 2022; Received in revised form 15 February 2023; Accepted 22 February 2023

Available online 26 February 2023

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residents' perceptions (Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, & Jones, 2013).

Studies investigating the effects of place image on place-related behavioral outcomes have highlighted the mediating role of psychological and emotional person-place bonds (or attitudes). Two of the most prominent are a cognitive identification<sup>1</sup> component and an affective attachment component (Lewicka, 2008). Research on place image has however been criticized for lacking a focus on the interaction between identification and attachment in relation to residents' intention to stay in a place (Tournois & Rollero, 2019). This study, therefore, contributes to place branding literature by analyzing two such components, i.e., self-congruity and place attachment, as mediators between place image and resident retention, i.e., likelihood to stay in the place.

First, self-congruity, which is the perceived identity fit with a stereotype image, is fundamental to identification of any kind (Jenkins, 2014). While existing studies have found resident characteristics essential to identification with a place (Cuba & Hummon, 1993), studies on place image have mainly focused on the image of tourists or the image of the place itself as the reference point for comparison (Sirgy & Su, 2000; Wassler & Hung, 2015) and left a gap in research in terms of resident self-congruity. Although studies have shown that resident self-congruity can have positive place-related behavioral outcomes, such as word-of-mouth (Šegota, Chen, & Golja, 2022), research on resident self-congruity in relation to place image remains scarce.

Second, place attachment has been identified as a factor that delays residents' decision to move out (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). Studies also show that place attachment mediates the relationship between perceived place image and various pro-tourism and pro-environmental behaviors (Magnoni, Valette-Florence, & De Barnier, 2021; Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013; Schroeder, 1996; Shen, Geng, & Su, 2019; Styliadis, 2018). However, identifying antecedents and how they affect place attachment is needed to more accurately predict place users' behaviors toward the environment (Dang, Veglio, & Ramkissoon, 2022).

Although studies on the influence of place image and place attachment in relation to resident retention exist, they have approached resident retention either conceptually (Zenker & Petersen, 2014), or as commitment, expressed through emotive attitude descriptors (e.g., "... a lot of things that keep me in the place") (Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2003; Tournois & Rollero, 2019; Zenker et al., 2017). Previous research in the area highlights a need for empirical research incorporating more "concrete" measures of resident retention in relation to residents' place image and person-place bonds (Gilboa, Jaffe, Vianelli, Pastore, & Herstein, 2015; Tournois & Rollero, 2019).

The *purpose* of the present study is to address the gaps in place branding literature outlined above by evaluating the relationships throughout the process, from input (place image), through influencing mediations of person-place bonds (resident self-congruity and place attachment), to behavioral output (likelihood to stay). Thereby, the study contributes to place image theory by providing a better understanding of person-place bonds in relation to resident retention. To achieve this, a conceptual model is developed, tested, and validated across two samples, using empirical data collected through an online survey of residents in two cities of different size.

The study draws on identity, congruity, and attachment theory and contributes to research in several ways: (1) to the best of the author's knowledge, as the first study investigating the influence of person-place bonds on the relationship between residents' place image and likelihood to stay; (2) as one of the first studies to address resident self-congruity as one of those bonds; and (3) by incorporating a more concrete measure of resident retention, namely residents' *expressed* likelihood to stay, in the

current context. By doing so, potential drivers, differences, and commonalities in person-place bonds, and their influence on subsequent behavioral responses can be identified between resident groups, thereby answering calls for future research outlined above (e.g. Gilboa et al., 2015; Tournois & Rollero, 2019), and enabling practitioners to design more effective resident retention strategies.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Identity represents a set of meanings attached to the self, guiding attitudes and behavior (Stets & Biga, 2003). The identity process builds upon self-appraisals based on an identity standard, resulting in a discrepancy evaluation and positive or negative emotions, which influence behavioral actions to achieve identity congruence (Stets & Biga, 2003). Identities thus influence attitudes and behavior towards objects, the self, and its identities, aiming to maintain and verify identity-related self-meanings (Stets & Biga, 2003). As places are centers of meaning and felt value where we satisfy our social and biological needs (Tuan, 1977), they are subject to residents' place image evaluations and their subsequent behavior.

Place image (PI) represents a set of mental place-related associations that are formed organically based on lived experience and non-commercial sources (e.g., the general media, education, and others' opinions), as well as induced by commercial sources (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Measures of place image, place pull-factors, and place satisfaction tend to overlap as they all aim to capture evaluations of positive place features (cf. Guimarães, Nunes, Barreira, & Panagopoulos, 2016; Mellander et al., 2011). Place image associations may be categorized as attribute-based or holistic in nature and comprise both observable features, such as natural scenery, attractions, accommodations, and price levels, and intangible characteristics, such as atmosphere, friendliness, and safety (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Place image is often conceptualized as comprising a cognitive (knowledge and beliefs) and an affective (feelings and attitudes) component (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007). Both components are related to one another, as well as to the overall evaluation of place image, and to place-related behavioral outcomes (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Research in behavioral psychology on the role of place characteristics show that migration intentions depend on evaluations of places' characteristics and residents' perceived self-congruence between the place and the self (Mellander et al., 2011).

Social identity and self-categorization theory explain how identity, through the categorization of self into a group based on perceived congruence, functions as a cognitive and motivational mechanism behind identity-related behavior (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Self-congruity reflects a person's perceived congruence, or fit, based on a psychological comparison between the user image and the consumer's own self-concept (Sirgy et al., 1997). Self-congruity theory explains the utilitarian and symbolic value that people place on objects, and the preference of brands with an image matching one's own (Sirgy, 1982).

To be in place is to be part of its action, making the uniqueness of the place both personal and collective in character (Casey, 1993). A place determines where we are, how we are with others, who we become together, and has the power to identify us and tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are* (Casey, 1993, emphasis in original). Place images that fit a persons' desired self-image help reinforce the person's identity, thereby reducing cognitive dissonance and fulfilling needs for self- and social consistency, self-esteem, and social approval (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Theory on self-congruity has long been used to explain consumer attitudes, emotions and behavior (Sirgy et al., 1997) and is linked to increased satisfaction, loyalty, commitment and ambassadorship towards places (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011; Zenker et al., 2017).

A central tenet in identity theory is that the more similar an object is to the self, the stronger are the associated feelings of attachment (Sirgy, 1982). The fit between place image and the individual's self-concept

<sup>1</sup> Place identification may refer to a personal level, comprising those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to their environment (Proshansky (1978), and a social level in terms of a place-related social identity/category, e.g. urban/city resident (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983).

may thus help its users reinforce and express their self-identity, thereby generating place attachment (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010; Zenker et al., 2017). Place attachment encompasses the emotional bond, in the form of an enduring predisposition of a strong affective nature, that a person forms with a place where they tend to feel comfortable and safe and want to belong and remain (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). Social identity and self-categorization theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) conceptualizes place attachment as the expression of an affective link between individuals and places (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). According to identity theory (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Serpe, 1982) it is generated by the successful verification of one's identity meanings, behaviors and goals in a place (Kyle, Jun, & Absher, 2014). Different stakeholders have different place image perceptions based on their different needs, goals, and interests (Merrilees et al., 2012). Residents' place image reflects the meaning and value that they associate with the place attributes and influences their place attitudes (Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2009), such as place attachment (Stylidis, 2018).

Place attachment develops to specific places which contributes to individual, group, and cultural self-definition (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Lewicka, 2011; Low & Altman, 1992). It may develop independently of residence time and differ in reasons of attachment (Lewicka, 2011), although some kind of place attachment is more or less always considered present (Cuba & Hummon, 1993). Theory on place attachment has identified four elements of meaning attached to a place; place identity, comprising cognitive self-place associations, affective attachment, in the form of emotional bonds with the place; place dependence, reflecting functional aspects and behavioral associations (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001); and social bonding, stemming from interpersonal and communal bonds (Ramkissoon et al., 2013). Place attachment has been linked to both the social-people setting and the physical-environmental setting of a place (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Merrilees et al., 2012; Raymond, Brown, & Weber, 2010; Riger & Lavrakas, 1981). Though many definitions and measures of the concept exist, what they have in common is capturing a sense of rootedness or willingness to stay in a place (Theodori & Luloff, 2000).

Studies investigating the effects of place image on place-related behavioral outcomes have highlighted the mediating role of cognitive identification and affective attachment components (Lewicka, 2008). Based on the theoretical underpinnings discussed above and previous studies below, four hypotheses are developed in the following section. These will be tested empirically to evaluate the relationships from the place image as input, through influencing mediations of person-place bonds, to behavioral output.

### 2.1. Place image and likelihood to stay

Places play several roles in the lives of people, as a place to live, raise a family, do business, and invest in, making place images highly subjective (Merrilees et al., 2012). Residents, with their intimate local place-knowledge are likely to have a complex and multifaceted image of a place, since it serves various purposes, as center for living, working, social, leisure and commercial activities to name a few (Stylidis et al., 2016). Dimensions of residents' place image characteristics may vary from place to place, but some common factors are for example municipal facilities, public services, business opportunities, leisure, nature, social bonding, cultural activities, security/safety, and environment cleanliness (Gilboa et al., 2015; Merrilees et al., 2012).

A positive image of a place's features has been found to influence residents' place-to-live-decisions, place commitment (Tournois & Rollero, 2019; Zenker, Eggers, & Farsky, 2013; Zenker & Petersen, 2014), and the intention to stay in a place (Mellander et al., 2011; Merrilees et al., 2009), more than economic conditions of the community or individual demographic factors (Mellander et al., 2011). This leads to the first hypothesis.

**H1.** Place image (PI) is positively related to likelihood to stay (LS).

### 2.2. Self-congruity

Objects in our proximity, such as the places we consume and people around us, may become part of the self, something upon which we may impose our identity and that may impose its identity on us (Belk, 1988). Self-congruity with places comprises the perceived match or mismatch between the self-image and the stereotypic images of a place or its users, such as its visitors (Sirgy & Su, 2000) or the human characteristics associated with a place (Wassler & Hung, 2015). Studies show that self-congruity with a place has favorable outcomes with regard to a range of behavioral intentions, such as to visit and return to a place (Litvin & Goh, 2002; Sirgy & Su, 2000; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011).

Residents are considered crucial in the place branding process as they, their characteristics, and their values, constitute a core part of the place brand in place consumers' minds (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013). Researchers investigating residents' likelihood to stay have highlighted a need for future research to investigate the influence of place image on the perceived congruence between individuals and their communities (Mellander et al., 2011). Therefore, this study focuses on self-congruity as the match/mismatch between an individual resident's self-image and the perceived image of place residents, sometimes called resident self-congruity. Based on the insights presented, the second hypothesis is.

**H2.** Self-congruity (SC) mediates the relationship between place image and likelihood to stay.

### 2.3. Place attachment

Research shows that place attachment is driven by both the cognitive and affective dimensions of place image (Stylidis, 2018; Tasci, Uslu, Stylidis, & Woosnam, 2020) and by self-congruity (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Feelings of place attachment is related to increased place commitment (Tournois & Rollero, 2020), and reduced intentions to leave (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Magnoni et al., 2021). Moreover, it is considered a mediator in the relationship between place image and place commitment (Tournois & Rollero, 2019). Studies further show that people who are dissatisfied with a place are more likely to remain due to place attachment rather than because of resource constraints (Adams, 2016). This has been found valid even for people in a socio-economically and environmentally marginal location, experiencing environmental degradation and vulnerable to future climate change (Adams, 2016), which suggests that place attachment is a strong predictor of behavioral intentions to stay. Based on the above discussion, it is hypothesized that.

**H3.** Self-congruity is positively related to place attachment (PA).

**H4.** Place attachment mediates the relationship between place image and likelihood to stay.

### 2.4. Age and length of residence as control variables

Previous studies on place attachment and place-related behavior have found factors outside the scope of the study contributing to the core concepts of this study. To account for the influence of these factors on the study results, they are treated as covariates and controlled for during analysis.

The first control variable included is length of residence. Studies have found a positive (both direct and indirect) relationship between length of residence and place attachment (Lewicka, 2008; Riger & Lavrakas, 1981; Zenker & Rütter, 2014), community attachment (Hunter, 1975; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974), and identification with residents as a social group (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). It has even been used as a temporal measure of place attachment (Taylor, Gottfredson, &

Brower, 1985). Meanwhile, contradictory results exist, showing no significant relationship between length of residence and migration intentions (Adams, 2016), place attachment, or personal place identity (Hernández, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007).

Another covariate controlled for in the study is age. Previous research shows that age is positively related to residence time, place attachment (Lewicka, 2005), and place commitment (Tournois & Rollero, 2020). It indirectly influences identification with residents, mediated by residence time (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010), and mediates the relationship between place image and place attachment (Tournois & Rollero, 2019). Other studies however show only a weak or no relationship between age and place attachment (Lewicka, 2008) and personal place resident identification (Tournois & Rollero, 2020). Age and length of residence are treated as covariates for the endogenous variables in the study.

The hypotheses formulated in the preceding sections are illustrated in Fig. 1 depicting the conceptual research model, including control variables marked with dashed lines.

### 3. Materials and methods

#### 3.1. Data collection and variables

A survey questionnaire was developed following prescribed best practices (Evans & Mathur, 2018). The survey was based on English language constructs that were translated into Swedish by the researchers. The translated version of the questionnaire was thereafter reviewed and back-translated to reduce the risk of response problems due to language differences (Bonn, Joseph, & Dai, 2005). The instrument was pre-tested on a small sample of consumers, researchers, and place branding practitioners to increase content and face validity, resulting in minor rewording of some items.

All constructs were measured using multiple items, except one single-item measure (see items in Appendix). As long as both the attribute and the variable can be seen as concrete singular, single-item measures may be considered sufficient in a marketing context (Rositer, 2002). All measures were based on existing scales, with some adapted to fit the context of place branding. The constructs comprise the following: *place image* (adapted from Hosany et al., 2007; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015), *place attachment* (adapted from Lewicka, 2008), *self-congruity* (adapted from Taylor, Strutton, & Thompson, 2012), and *likelihood to stay* (adapted from Mellander et al., 2011). The use of a common place image measurement instrument applied across different places may be criticized for not capturing the unique features of a place (Kock, Josiassen, & Assaf, 2016) but was necessary to allow for the comparison of residents' images across cities.

#### 3.2. Study design and sample

Identification and attachment to a place and its residents may be influenced and differ in degree by the community/population size and

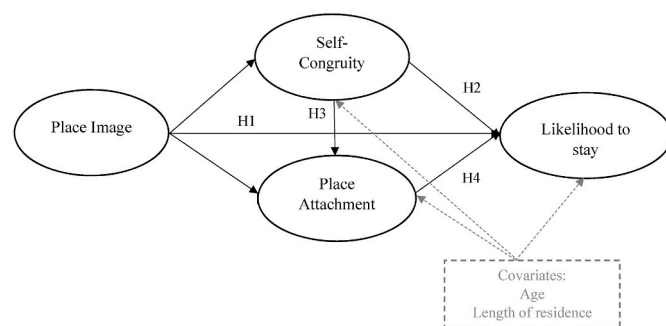


Fig. 1. Conceptual model (2 column fitting).

density of the place (Casakin, Hernández, & Ruiz, 2015; Jones, 1999; Lewicka, 2011). City size, in terms of population, is also considered to affect the place image (Braun, Eshuis, & Klijn, 2014). Based on a purposive sampling approach, data were collected from residents in two cities of different sizes (approximately 100 000 and 1 million respectively), situated in different parts of Sweden and with varying characteristics in terms of physical landscape and level of urbanism. Hence, one sample could be used for calibration and the other for validation of the model, which increases the applicability of the results.

The web-based surveys were distributed through the Facebook page of a local destination marketing organization (DMO) and to Swedish online consumer panels. After screening out unengaged respondents based on quality checks in terms of missing values exceeding 15% (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010), completing the survey in less than two times the median speed, and/or answering all grid questions with the same scale point, the remaining sample used in the subsequent analysis consisted of 350 responses (93% of the original sample). Power analysis was conducted using the G\*Power software (version 3.1) (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) suggesting that a minimum sample of 242 respondents was needed to achieve a power of 95% (effect size = 0.15;  $\alpha$  err prob = 0.05;  $df = 216$ ; critical  $F = 1.56$ ), so the obtained sample was deemed suitable for the study purposes.

#### 3.3. Sample characteristics

The sample distribution was fairly balanced with 58% of respondents living in the larger city and 42% in the smaller city. In total, 51% of the respondents were male, 48% were female and 1% identified as something else/did not want to disclose, with only smaller variations across cities. The median age category was 35–44 years, with only minor differences across the cities, which is in line with the median age of the Swedish population of 40.6 years in 2018 (Statistics Sweden, n.d.).

Three quarters of the residents (73%) had either lived in the city their whole life or lived some time elsewhere but considered the city their hometown (80% for the larger city and 64% for the smaller) and the median length of residence was 25 years (28.5 years for the larger city; 20 for the smaller). The sample thus consisted of respondents with extensive first-hand experience of the place brand.

#### 3.4. Common method bias remedies

Research relying on respondents' self-reports offers a richness of information, potential causal force, and evident practicality (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007), but also presents a risk of common method bias (CMB) (Islam, Rahman, & Hollebeek, 2018). Due to the inherently subjective nature of the constructs included in the study, self-reports of respondents' own perceptions was deemed the most appropriate approach. However, as recommended by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003; 2012), several procedural remedies were undertaken to limit the risk of CMB. These included re-phrasing and pre-testing of scales, the use of a cover letter providing the survey purpose, an estimated response time, instructions to answer truthfully, and assurance of the anonymity of respondents. CMB was also controlled for statistically as further explained under the section Measurement validation and psychometric assessment of measures.

#### 3.5. Data analysis

The conceptual model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) and maximum likelihood estimation by means of the software AMOS 26. A preliminary data analysis was conducted to test the adequacy of the data prior to conducting SEM. Tests of normality showed a fairly normal distribution, with skewness and kurtosis values within recommended ranges (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995). One missing value pertaining to the questions used to measure the latent variables and four missing values pertaining to the control variable length of residence



were imputed using the expectation–maximization approach, as it introduces the least amount of bias into structural equation models (Hair et al., 2010).

Prior to conducting SEM, the psychometric properties of the measures were examined by: (1) evaluating the data factoring adequacy, (2) testing for potential CMB, (3) assessing reliability and validity of scales and measurement model fit, and (4) assessing measurement and structural invariance to ensure measurement robustness and avoid influences on the hypothesis tests. The SEM was conducted in two steps, splitting the sample city-wise, using the sample from the larger more well-known city for calibration and the smaller city sample for validation (Sin et al., 2005).

### 3.6. Measurement validation and psychometric assessment of measures

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis (direct oblimin rotation) was performed to determine dimensionality of constructs and suitability of data. Results revealed two dimensions of place image and indicated support for factor analysis with a KMO of 0.925 and Bartlett’s test of 5509.541 (253 df),  $p < .001$  (Pallant, 2013). The subsequent confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS 26 to assess the constructs based on factor loadings, communalities, model fit indices and standardized residuals. For model estimation purposes, the single-item construct, likelihood to stay, was assumed to have a reliability of 0.95, with a factor loading of 0.90, and an error term of 0.10 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The CFA resulted in three items being dropped from the place attachment measure (PA2, PA4 and PA5).

To test for potential CMB, measures were statistically examined by comparing the model fit statistics to the fit of a single-factor model (Boyer & Hult, 2005). The one-factor model yielded a  $\chi^2_{(190\text{ df})} = 3590.221$  ( $p < .001$ ) and a considerably worse fit compared to the measurement model ( $\chi^2_{(182\text{ df})} = 522.558$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that common method bias is not a serious threat in the study. The final measurement model evidenced acceptable fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.871$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = 0.925, TLI = 0.913, RMSEA = 0.073, SRMR = 0.062) between the model and the data (Iacobucci, 2010). Construct Cronbach’s alphas ranged between 0.880 and 0.931 and all standardized factor loadings were larger than 0.50 ( $p < .001$ ), indicating convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). All average variances extracted (AVE) were above the desired cutoff value of 0.50, and the respective AVEs for all constructs were higher than the shared variance ( $\phi^2$ ) for all pairs of constructs, indicating discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The CFA results are presented in Table 1.

### 3.7. Measurement invariance

Invariance tests between the calibration and validation city samples was conducted using multi-group CFA, establishing full metric and structural invariance between the samples, indicating that the model applies to both samples although there may be differences at the path level (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998). Model fit differences were within cutoff criteria of 0.01 for  $\Delta CFI$  and 0.01 for  $\Delta RMSEA$  (Chen,

**Table 1**  
Reliability, composite reliability, AVE, squared correlations and correlation matrix.

	$\alpha$	CR	AVE	$\phi^2$	PI	SC	PA	LS
PI	.880	.751	.609	.288–.588	<b>.780</b>			
SC	.931	.932	.774	.145–.428	.654	<b>.880</b>		
PA	.890	.891	.672	.270–.588	.767	.630	<b>.820</b>	
LS	N/A	.964	.964	.145–.288	.537	.381	.520	<b>.982</b>

Note:  $\alpha$  = Cronbach’s alpha; CR = composite reliability; N/A = not applicable; diagonal values in bold = square root of AVE. All correlations are significant ( $p < .001$ ).

2007).

## 4. Results and discussion

To isolate and examine the contribution of self-congruity and place attachment on likelihood to stay, the effects of covariates age and length of residence are statistically controlled for in the model (Spector & Brannick, 2011). Table 2 presents the goodness-of-fit indices of the original and the revised structural model, both evidencing acceptable model fit.

With acceptable fit of the revised structural model the relationships between the constructs were tested using structural path coefficients. All but one of the relationships were found significant and in their hypothesized directions as shown in Fig. 2 which also presents the standardized path estimates.

Invariance across city samples was tested through a sequence of chi-square difference tests constraining the path estimates to be equal across groups and testing the fit of the constrained versus the baseline model. All paths between latent constructs except the path between self-congruity and likelihood to stay, were identified as significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) between the groups. Table 3 presents the results from the unconstrained model, which explains 46.3% of the variance in self-congruity for the sample of the bigger city and 36.5% for the sample of the smaller city. For place attachment, the model explains 63.0% of the variance in the bigger city group and 65.7% for the smaller city. Finally, it explains 34.4% of the variance in likelihood to stay for residents in the bigger city, compared to 43.1% for the smaller city.

The role of self-congruity and place attachment as mediators of the relationship between place image and likelihood to stay was tested using bias-corrected (BC) bootstrapping in AMOS 26 (with 500 bootstrap samples and 90% BC confidence intervals) (Hayes, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Table 4 presents the results that are further discussed in the next section.

Answering to calls for further research, this study evaluated the influence of perceived place image, self-congruity, and place attachment on residents’ likelihood to stay in their city. Data from residents of two cities of differing size was gathered and examined, while controlling for potential effects of residents’ age and length of residence. In line with H1 the results show a positive relationship between a positive place image and residents’ likelihood to stay that is similar across cities, highlighting the relevance of favorable place image evaluations.

In support of H4, approximately one third of the effect of the total effect of place image on likelihood to stay is mediated through place attachment for both cities, indicating that emotional place bonds play an important role in residents’ likelihood to stay. Although feelings of increased place attachment are positively related to a person’s increased likelihood to stay there, feeling attached to a place does not equate a likelihood to stay, highlighting the risk of using place attachment as a measure of residents’ likelihood to stay.

While the study does find a strong positive relationship between place image and self-congruity for both cities, the results cannot confirm H2 that self-congruity mediates the relationship between place image and likelihood to stay nor show any direct effect on likelihood to stay. This suggests that the image of residents may not offer sufficient symbolic value to influence residents’ likelihood to stay directly. Feelings of fitting in might not be a sufficiently important aspect of self-congruity to

**Table 2**  
Goodness-of-fit indices of structural models.

Model	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	$R^2$
Structural model (original)	2.871***	.925	.913	.073	.062	.317
Structural model (revised)	2.725***	.922	.909	.070	.057	.382

Note: \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

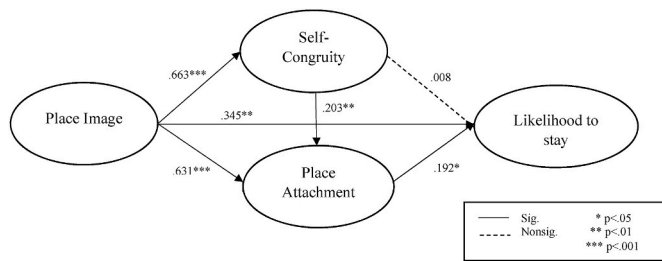


Fig. 2. Structural equation model (revised) (2 column fitting).

Table 3  
Test of path estimates.

Relationship	Standardized path estimates (Unconstrained revised structural model)				Significance difference between path estimates under constraint	
	Bigger city (n = 204)	P	Smaller city (n = 146)	p	$\Delta\chi^2$	p
PI → LS	.278	*	.333	*	0.023	>.050
PI → PA	.569	***	.629	***	0.820	>.050
PA → LS	.216	*	.253	*	0.296	>.050
PI → SC	.681	***	.606	***	1.153	>.050
SC → LS	.044	>.05	.005	>.05	0.076	>.050
SC → PA	.232	**	.238	**	0.148	>.050
LR → SC	.110	>.05	.003	>.05	0.683	>.050
LR → PA <sup>≠</sup>	.321	***	.107	>.05	5.001	<.050
LR → LS	.165	*	.237	**	1.057	>.050
Age → SC	-.105	>.05	-.050	>.05	0.125	>.050
Age → PA	-.189	**	-.156	*	0.207	>.050
Age → LS	.073	>.05	.096	>.05	0.132	>.050

Note: Path significance \*\*\* = p < .001; \*\* = p < .01; \* = p < .05. Latent construct paths in black and control variable paths in grey. All paths are significant at p < .05 except for four paths which are not significant for both groups and one path which is not significant for the smaller city sample. All paths are equal between groups except for LR → PA marked by a not equal sign (≠).

influence staying decisions. Resident identity may not be a significantly salient identity or offer enough influence in terms of perceived self- and social consistency, self-esteem, or social approval, to instill identity-congruent behavior (Sirgy & Su, 2000). This could be related to the fact that neither of the cities in the study can be defined as particularly remote or rural, which could influence the perceived importance of other residents as a social group of reference. Thus, compared to other close social and physical bonds to the place formed by having lived in the city (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001), the resident image seems to offer little of value in the form of a psychological bond influencing likelihood to stay. This suggests that other factors are of higher importance or that the effect of self-congruity on likelihood to stay is fully mediated by additional factors, such as place attachment.

In support of H3, a significant relationship is found between self-congruity and place attachment. Approximately a fifth of the total effect of place image on place attachment is mediated by self-congruity across cities. The effect by self-congruity on likelihood to stay is hence

Table 4  
Mediation analysis results.

Relationship	Bigger city (n = 204)				Smaller city (n = 146)			
	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect	Indirect/Total	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect	Indirect/Total
PI → SC → LS	0.278	NS	0.278	0.0%	0.333	NS	0.333	0.0%
PI → PA → LS	0.278	0.123	0.401	30.7%	0.333	0.159	0.492	32.3%
PI → SC → PA	0.569	0.158	0.727	21.7%	0.629	0.144	0.773	18.7%
SC → PA → LS	NS	0.050	0.050	100.0%	NS	0.060	0.060	100.0%

Note: Standardized estimates. All values are significant at p < .05 except for the path SC → LS.

fully mediated through place attachment. This shows that strengthening residents' perceived fit with their community is of relevance and has a significant positive influence on their emotional bonds with the place, and an indirect influence on resident retention.

An aspect adding complexity to the place image is the size of the place, which may influence feelings of fitting in and belonging (Casakin et al., 2015; Jones, 1999; Pretty, Bramston, Patrick, & Pannach, 2006). Overall, validation of the conceptual research model across the two cities does not evidence any significant differences between the samples, indicating that the proposed model can be applied across both smaller and bigger cities.

Concerning covariates, length of residence had a small to moderate effect on likelihood to stay, and a positive effect on place attachment in the bigger city, but not the smaller one. Surprisingly the only effect that age had in the study was a small negative effect on place attachment for both cities. This may seem counterintuitive, however, previous literature show erratic patterns of age-place attachment effects, suggesting that the relationship may be moderated by additional factors (e.g., Lewicka, 2011). Implications of the results are presented in the following sections.

#### 4.1. Implications for theory

The current study contributes to place image literature, as well as the fields of resident retention, place self-congruity and place attachment. It provides empirical evidence to calls for research on the influence and interrelations of place image, and psychological and emotional person-place bonds on resident retention in terms of residents' expressly stated likelihood to stay (Gilboa et al., 2015; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015; Pretty et al., 2006; Tournois & Rollero, 2019).

The study supports previous research on the influence of a positive place image on likelihood to stay, and answers its call to investigate the influence of place image on the perceived congruence between individuals and their communities (Mellander et al., 2011). Findings show that self-congruity and place attachment are mediators that must be considered in explaining residents' likelihood to stay, as they strengthen the relationship between place image and resident retention. Thus, it sheds further light the on a major concern in existing literature; the relationship between place identity and place attachment (Casakin et al., 2015), by clarifying the influence of identification with place in terms of resident self-congruity on place attachment.

The findings support research on the relationship between place image and place attachment (Styliadis, 2018; Tasci et al., 2020) and the mediating role of place attachment on the related concept place commitment (Tournois & Rollero, 2020). The proposed direct influence of self-congruity on likelihood to stay did not manifest, but the study provides empirical support to hypotheses of a link between self-congruity and intention to stay, mediated by place attachment (Zenker & Petersen, 2014). This is in line with qualitative studies finding place attachment to be stronger among residents who evidence an identity congruent with their community and place of living (Ragusa, 2022; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). It also lends support to a stream of research on place attachment incorporating place belongingness (Hammit, Kyle, & Oh, 2009), and social bonding (Ramkissoon et al., 2013) as drivers of place attachment.

While previous place image research has focused on self-

categorization with a place-related social identity (e.g., Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Tournois & Rollero, 2019), self-congruence with the place itself (e.g., Zenker et al., 2017), its personality (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), or its branding campaigns (Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012), this study sheds light on the role played by self-congruity with the perceived resident image. In doing so the study contributes to the body of place self-congruity literature by focusing on a new facet of self-congruity and a primary but previously neglected category of place users, its residents.

Although a fair amount of the variance in self-congruity is explained in the study, the results suggest that residents' image does not offer sufficient symbolic value to influence residents' likelihood to stay (cf. Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, & Sirgy, 2012). This is contrary to previous research, which has identified self-congruity, in terms of being or seeming like others in the community thereby fitting in with a shared socio-spatial identity, to be a factor influencing staying decisions (Jones, 1999). It contrasts somewhat with previous findings of self-congruity with place users' image (of tourists) tending to be stronger than self-congruity with the place image of the human characteristics associated with a place (Wassler & Hung, 2015). However, it resonates with findings in consumer behavior of brand personality producing stronger self-congruity effects than brand-user personality (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012).

Aguirre-Rodriguez et al. (2012) argue that the public social roles that consumers assume in life could leverage the impact of public (versus private) self-motives on the effect of self-congruity. This could explain why previous research found a link between identifying as a resident of a city and place commitment (Tournois & Rollero, 2019), while the current study shows no direct effect of self-congruity on likelihood to stay. This finding emphasizes the difference between personal and social identification with a place (Strandberg & Ek Styvén, 2021) and highlights the importance of careful consideration of which construct to apply when operationalizing identification with a place. The current findings suggest that different facets of self-congruity are not interchangeable, that focusing on only a specific facet of congruity may bias the results, and that self-congruity with both the place image/itself (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010), its brand personality (Wassler & Hung, 2015), and its users (Sirgy & Su, 2000) may well be antecedents of an overall place self-congruity construct.

#### 4.2. Implications for management practice

This study finds that an improvement in residents' perceived place image increases their likelihood to stay. This relationship is positively influenced by residents' place attachment, which in turn is strengthened by the perceived fit between the self-image and the image of residents. The study offers several implications for practitioners.

First, the study confirms the importance of understanding the complex place image of residents to capture positive and negative place attributes, to identify strong selling points and actions needed to retain residents (Ragusa, 2022; Strandberg & Ek Styvén, 2021; Styliadis, Belhassen, & Shani, 2015). Failure to take into account the perspective of residents leads to a practitioner-stakeholder perception gap (Peighambari, Sattari, Foster, & Wallström, 2016), image communication incongruent with residents' perceptions (Palmer et al., 2013), and serious negative implications for sustainable place development (Styliadis et al., 2015).

Capturing negative perceptions and unmet place needs provides a basis for relevant investment priorities and corrective actions, which can reduce negative perceptions, enable residents to feel heard, and enhance the place image (Braun et al., 2013; Hereźniak & Anders-Morawska, 2021). Actively collecting data on residents' place image perceptions, for example digitally through crowdsourcing (Hereźniak, 2017), can better capture their place image perceptions (Strandberg & Ek Styvén, 2021). Thereby, place managers can achieve better targeting, content, and wording of communication campaigns (Rozhkov & Skriabina, 2015) and enhance the positive place image when designing communication

campaigns aimed towards resident retention (Hankinson, 2004; Nene et al., 2009).

Second, as place attachment influences residents' likelihood to stay, inspiring emotions of place attachment among residents is essential. Coordinating place development projects promoting inclusivity and resident participation, engaging them in pro-social and pro-environmental community activities (e.g., helping behavior and environmental sustainability), provides a platform for social interactions that may not only improve the place image, but also mental health, feelings of place attachment, and resident retention (Bergström-Wuol, Dahlström, Hertting, & Kostenius, 2018; Hereźniak, 2017; Hereźniak & Anders-Morawska, 2021; Ragusa, 2022; Ramkissoon, 2020). Furthermore, community events can help develop a local identity through storytelling about "who 'we' are [...] to ourselves [...] and to the media" (Karlsen, 2007, p. 186). Activities undertaken and resulting place improvements should therefore be communicated to enhance residents' place image (Schroeder, 1996), its self-expressive symbolic value (Hereźniak & Anders-Morawska, 2021), and residents' likelihood to stay.

Third, capturing residents' perceptions of shared commonalities between the self and social identity characteristics, is equally important to design communication campaigns successfully reflecting residents' self-concept in communication messages (Palmer et al., 2013), thereby strengthening both psychological and emotional person-place bonds and ultimately residents' likelihood to stay. By incorporating community narratives of what it entails to be a resident, highlighting traits and values underlying social identification in place communication, a mutual resident identity may be reinforced, strengthening not only self-congruity, but also social cohesion, sense of community (Hereźniak & Anders-Morawska, 2021; Jenkins, 2014; Nene et al., 2009; Ragusa, 2022), place attachment (Hammit et al., 2009), and likelihood to stay.

Traditionally, community practitioners have focused their efforts on resident recruitment, while resident retention strategies have received limited attention, potentially nullifying successful recruitment (Nene et al., 2009). The present study offers several strategies to enhance the place image and strengthen resident retention. The participatory, value-creating processes and community activities proposed could also increase residents' place ambassadorship, home tourism, integration of new residents, and a range of pro-tourism and pro-environmental behavior (Magnoni et al., 2021; Ragusa, 2022; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Schroeder, 1996; Shen et al., 2019; Styliadis et al., 2015). Although the results hold across cities of varying size, the findings are of particular interest to places with a large influx of residents who have not yet developed a place attachment and who may affect existing residents' perceived community-fit, or where resident retention is vital, such as smaller, rural places facing challenges related to urbanization and centralization (Hedström & Littke, 2011), since place attachment can increase newcomer retention (Ragusa, 2022) and is an important reason why rural populations persist, even in the face of difficult conditions (Adams, 2016).

#### 4.3. Limitations and future research

Results from the study suggest that there might be some unexplained mechanisms in place not accounted for by the current model. This calls for future research to incorporate other relationships influencing residents' person-place bonds and likelihood to stay in a place image context. The role of resident self-congruity in relation to other place attachment drivers, such as place identity (Prayag & Ryan, 2012), place belongingness (Hammit et al., 2009) and social bonding (Ramkissoon et al., 2013), deserves further attention.

The conflicting nature of current and previous findings on self-congruity calls for future research to identify and include all facets of place relevant to gain a better understanding of the dimensionality and effect of resident self-congruity, as well as overall place self-congruity, on place-related behavioral outcomes such as likelihood to stay.

Incorporating different levels of self-congruity in the analyses may provide further insights (e.g., Šegota et al., 2022).

Like any empirical research, this study features limitations related to measurement and sampling. The study is based on a semantic differential multi-attribute measure of place image, which may not incorporate all relevant characteristics of place image, e.g., social bonding (Merri-lee, Miller, Ge, & Tam, 2018). The study applies a dependent variable measuring likelihood rather than actual behavior, something that could be addressed by future research using factual observations and a longitudinal design.

Gender was initially included as a demographic control variable, however, as it showed no influence it was excluded from the analysis. Meanwhile, this study does not cover other socio-demographic variables such as social status, life-cycle stage, participation in local activities, education, economic status, being born in the city, generation in the city, home ownership and living standard (e.g., Lewicka, 2008, 2011; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). Other place-related factors than city or community size, such as differences in social and racial heterogeneity, population density, service accessibility, type of landscape (Lewicka, 2011), feelings of social inclusion and belonging (Pretty et al., 2006; Ramkissoon et al., 2013) could potentially be included in the model.

Finally, non-probability sampling is cost- and time effective and helpful when the sample frame is unknown, however, it entails a reduced generalizability of the findings. The study captures responses on aspects related to the individual and social self from two cities in the same country, and values of self-expression have been found to differ between cultures (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). This suggests a need for future research to expand the scope to other contexts and to investigate the model's viability in a cross-cultural context.

## Funding

This work was supported by the R&D Fund of the Swedish Tourism & Hospitality Industry [grant number 2015–163]. The sponsors had no involvement in study design; in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data; in the writing of or the decision to submit the article for publication.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor Maria Ek Styvén for having provided helpful feedback from the initial ideas to the final content of this paper. Sincere thanks are also directed to the anonymous reviewers who provided useful questions, comments, and suggestions that helped improve the quality of the paper.

## Appendix

**PI - Place Image** (Adapted from: a) Hosany et al. (2007); b) Kim and Stepchenkova (2015); c) own item based on interviews and pre-study).

*Measure:* Seven-point semantic differential scale.

How would you describe [the place]? Please mark the position in each row that best corresponds to your opinion.

[The place] is ...

1. Ugly/Beautiful<sup>a</sup>
2. Boring/Interesting<sup>a</sup>
3. Superficial/Authentic<sup>b</sup>
4. Unpleasant/Pleasant<sup>a, b</sup>
5. Inhospitable/Hospitable<sup>a, b</sup>
6. Inaccessible/Easily accessible<sup>a</sup>
7. Underdeveloped/Well developed<sup>a, b</sup>

8. Stagnant/Thriving<sup>a</sup>
9. Stressful/Relaxed<sup>a, b</sup>
10. Overcrowded/Sparsely populated<sup>a, b</sup>
11. Expensive/Inexpensive<sup>c</sup>
12. Unsafe/Safe<sup>a, b</sup>

**SC - Self-Congruity** (Adapted from Taylor et al., 2012).

*Measure:* Seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by “Strongly Disagree” - “Strongly Agree”.

1. The image I have of [the place] residents matches how I see myself
2. People who live in [the place] are like me
3. I am very much like the typical person who lives in [the place]
4. I can identify with people who live in [the place]

**PA - Place Attachment** (Adapted from Lewicka, 2008).

*Measure:* Seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by “Strongly Disagree” - “Strongly Agree”.

1. I miss [the place] when I am not there
2. I know [the place] very well<sup>\*</sup>
3. I defend [the place] when somebody criticizes it
4. I feel secure in [the place]<sup>\*</sup>
5. I am proud of [the place]<sup>\*</sup>
6. [The place] is a part of myself
7. I want to be involved in what is going on in [the place]

Likelihood to stay (Adapted from Mellander et al., 2011).

*Measure:* Seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored by “Not at all likely” - “Very likely”.

1. How likely are you to continue to live in [the place]?

**Demographics.**

**Finally, we kindly ask you to fill in some background information. This information is very important to us when we analyze the results. Your answers are strictly confidential and there is no way to identify you as an individual.**

1. Please indicate your age.
  - Under 20 years old
  - 20–24 years
  - 25–34 years
  - 35–44 years
  - 45–54 years
  - 55–64 years
  - 65–74 years
  - 75 years or above
2. Please indicate your gender.
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other/do not want to disclose
3. Please indicate your main occupation.
  - Student
  - Working
  - Unemployed
  - Retired
  - Other

<sup>\*</sup> Items omitted during scale purification process.



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