

Destination Curiosity Across Borders: How Geopolitical Outlook Shapes Travel Intentions

Abstract

This research examines how geopolitical outlook, destination confidence, destination perception, and destination curiosity shape the travel intentions of international non-visitors, with particular focus on geopolitically sensitive destinations. Drawing on cognitive dissonance, adaptation level, and optimum stimulation level theories, the study develops a comprehensive model to analyze these dynamics. The findings indicate that destination confidence significantly mediates the relationship between geopolitical outlook and travel intentions, while destination curiosity moderates the impact of destination perception. Moreover, intrinsic destination curiosity encourages travelers to overlook geopolitical tensions in pursuit of cultural and exploratory experiences. These results suggest that international travel is not necessarily constrained by geopolitical tensions and offer a comprehensive framework for scholars and practitioners seeking to leverage tourism as a means of fostering mutual understanding rather than division.

Keywords: destination curiosity, geopolitical outlook, destination confidence, travel behavior, tourism marketing.

Introduction

In today's highly interconnected yet politically fragmented world, international travel remains one of the few social arenas in which ordinary citizens can encounter "the other" directly and form independent judgments that transcend state-level narratives. Exposure to unfamiliar traditions, languages, and everyday practices of others fosters a deeper appreciation and empathy, promoting mutual respect, understanding, and tolerance among individuals of different nationalities (Davari & Jang, 2024; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). International travel can dispel myths and preconceptions, offering a more realistic and nuanced understanding of cultures, especially in the context of geopolitical crises (see review by Gillen, 2025) or negative stereotypes (Chen & Hsu, 2021; Ran et al., 2021). For destinations facing such tensions, understanding the factors shaping non-visitors' travel intentions is crucial for effective tourism development. Although there is extensive research on destination perception, a notable gap remains in understanding how non-visitors' geopolitical outlook influences their confidence and curiosity toward politically sensitive destinations.

While a rich stream of scholarship has examined destination perception and image formation, most studies focus on people who already intend to visit and how they evaluate competing destinations. Far less attention has been paid to the "cold start" problem of non-visitors: how individuals with no firsthand experience of a politically sensitive country form an initial willingness—or reluctance—to cross the border in the first place. The present study addresses this gap by building a theoretically grounded model that integrates three under-explored constructs in the tourism literature—geopolitical outlook, destination confidence, and destination curiosity—and evaluates how they jointly shape international travel intentions toward contentious destinations. Geopolitical outlook—advanced in this study—refers to the perceptions, beliefs, and stereotypes individuals hold about a country, shaped by media, cultural narratives, and global dynamics. For instance, news coverage emphasizing economic competition or political tensions can distort perceptions, reducing travelers' willingness to visit. Destination confidence—another concept advanced in this study—reflects travelers' trust in a destination's safety, reliability, and service quality, serving as a critical cognitive mediator in shaping travel intentions. While prior studies have explored trust in broader terms, this study advances the discussion by framing destination confidence as a nuanced determinant of travel decision-making in politically contentious contexts.

To illustrate, consider China—a country that captivates potential visitors with its rich cultural heritage and technological advancements, yet contends with negative stereotypes

stemming from geopolitical narratives. American travelers, for instance, might be drawn to China's unparalleled attractions such as the Great Wall or the Terracotta Army, but hesitate due to worries about political concerns, different societal norms, or media-driven stereotypes (Alaadini & Davari, 2018; Desforges, 2000; Li & Wang, 2011; Wang et al., 2014). This duality highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how perceptions, confidence, and curiosity interact to shape international travel intentions.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of American tourists visiting China was increasing annually, reflecting growing interest (NTTO, 2019). Many Americans are eager to learn about China, as evidenced by educational exchange programs, study abroad opportunities (Murphy et al., 2014), and sister-city relationships between American and Chinese cities (Cremer et al., 2001), which contribute to the desire for cultural exchange. Accordingly, the enthusiasm for travel and the desire to explore a destination to learn about it via travel experience—advanced by Davari and Jang (2025) as destination curiosity, are central to this study. Another critical contribution of this study lies in its examination of destination curiosity as a moderating factor. Unlike general travel motivations, destination curiosity describes an intrinsic desire to explore and learn about a destination through direct experience (Ibid). For example, a traveler with high destination curiosity might prioritize unique cultural experiences, such as exploring Beijing's historic hutongs or engaging with local artisans, even in the face of geopolitical concerns. This research highlights how destination curiosity can mitigate the negative effects of geopolitical tensions by fostering an intrinsic motivation to visit.

Anchored in three sociopsychology theories, the focus of this study is on American non-visitors' willingness to travel to China—a destination often associated with both cultural allure and geopolitical sensitivity. Festinger's (1962) cognitive dissonance theory explains how travelers reconcile the clash between appealing cultural offerings and anxiety-provoking political narratives. Helson's (1964) adaptation level theory posits that prior international exposure sets a perceptual baseline against which new travel information is judged. Leuba's (1955) optimum stimulation level theory accounts for individual differences regarding how varying levels of destination curiosity drive exploratory behavior.

The primary research question guiding this study is: How do geopolitical outlook, destination confidence, and destination curiosity interact to shape international non-visitors' travel intentions toward geopolitically sensitive destinations? By addressing this question, the contributions of this study are threefold. First, it introduces and operationalizes the concept of geopolitical outlook, expanding the understanding of how international relations influence travel behavior. For example, it examines how perceptions of China's technological

advancements and cultural heritage can counterbalance negative media representations. Second, it positions destination confidence as a mediating variable, emphasizing its role in bridging the gap between perception and intention. By analyzing trust-building efforts, such as transparent communication from destination marketing organizations, the study provides actionable insights. Third, it highlights the moderating role of destination curiosity, offering evidence that intrinsic motivations can shape travel decisions even amidst political tensions.

By addressing these dimensions, this study offers both theoretical and practical implications for destination marketing organizations. It underscores the importance of transparent communication, trust-building initiatives, and curiosity-driven marketing strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of geopolitical tensions. For instance, targeted campaigns that highlight China's unique experiences—from dining at authentic local restaurants to exploring cutting-edge technological innovations—can appeal to the complex motivations of international travelers. The findings aim to guide practitioners in designing more effective campaigns, enhancing the resilience and competitiveness of politically sensitive destinations, and fostering greater cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Ultimately, this study concludes that international travel, rather than being confined to political discourse and media representations, enables people from different countries to engage directly with others, their cultures, and their daily realities.

Literature Review

Geopolitical outlook

Individuals' impressions of a country are associated with multifaceted elements, including history, economy, traditions, technology, politics, culture, business, and society (Magnusson et al., 2022; Tasci et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2016). In tourism scholarship, these impressions are often labeled as "country image" and are described as the sum of one's descriptive, inferential, and informational views about a specific country (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). Nadeau et al. (2008) refer to country image as "mental maps or knowledge structures related to countries" (p. 87). Some studies highlight that country image can be seen as a stereotype about a nation, influencing people's overall evaluation of the country and their attitudes toward its specific products (e.g., Chen & Hsu, 2021). According to Hunt (1975), country image refers to people's impressions of countries they do not reside in, whether they have traveled to those countries or merely consider them as potential tourist destinations. However, country image is not always perceived from the traveler's viewpoint during the decision-making process for destination choice (Campo & Alvarez, 2019; Chaulagain et al., 2019). Factors such as stereotypes, safety, societal openness, and development level also impact these perceptions (Campo & Alvarez, 2019; Chaulagain et al., 2019; Hunt, 1975; Wang et al., 2024).

Geopolitics, as a field of study, examines the influence of geographic factors on international relations and political power dynamics (Agnew, 2013; Gillen, 2025). In the context of US-China relations, geopolitical tensions have been shaped by economic competition, military strategies, and ideological differences (Shambaugh, 2020). The rise of China as a global economic powerhouse has led to shifts in geopolitical strategies, with the US often viewing China's advancements in technology and military capabilities as potential threats (Ji, 2021). These geopolitical dynamics are reflected in media narratives and public perceptions, influencing how individuals perceive China as a travel destination (Huang & Liu, 2024; Perpiña, 2019). The relationship between geopolitical factors and tourism is complex, as tensions can both deter and intrigue potential travelers, depending on their personal beliefs and curiosity about the destination.

In this study, considering the existence of geopolitical tension, the concept of *geopolitical outlook* is advanced to refer to the overall perceptions, beliefs, and stereotypes that individuals hold about a particular country. *Geopolitical outlook conveys the broader view or stance individuals have regarding a country, influenced by geopolitical factors, cultural elements, and media narratives. It is shaped not only by positive elements, such as cultural heritage and technological advancements, but also by negative stereotypes and preconceived*

notions that may arise from geopolitical tensions and media representations. Thus, geopolitical outlook captures a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of a nation, reflecting both positive and negative elements influenced by global dynamics, and potentially impacting travel intentions.

For non-visitors interested in international travel, China's rich cultural heritage, historical sites (e.g., the Great Wall, Terracotta Army), and traditional practices (e.g., Chinese medicine, martial arts) (Chaulagain et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2016) contribute to a positive geopolitical outlook. Empirical studies demonstrate that China's rapid economic growth, level of development, and advancements in technology have portrayed it as a dynamic and modern destination (Campo & Alvarez, 2019; Magnusson et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2018). Such an outlook can attract American travelers intrigued by China's progress and eager to experience it first-hand.

Meanwhile, stereotypes and preconceived notions about Chinese culture or society can negatively influence China's geopolitical outlook (Chen & Hsu, 2021; Wang et al., 2016). Negative associations related to safety, societal openness (regarding religion and the LGBTQ community), political stability, pollution, overcrowding, or health risks make China's geopolitical outlook vulnerable (Chen et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2024; Xiao & Mair, 2006), subsequently impacting American travelers' willingness to visit. Media coverage in the US that portrays China as a country with limited societal openness inhibits traveler inflows (Demir and Gozgor, 2019; Li & Wang, 2011). Empirical evidence shows that news coverage of the recent COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the geopolitical outlook of China (Wang et al., 2024; Zenker et al., 2021).

Adaptation level theory suggests that individuals' responses and evaluations are influenced by their previous experiences and their perceived relative level of stimulation. People adapt to the constant level of stimuli they experience over time and use that level as a baseline for comparison (Helson, 1964). This theory suggests that individuals judge and interpret stimuli relative to their past perceptions, rather than as absolute values (Broadbent, 2013; Gorsuch, 2013; Helson, 1964; Rohlen, 1979). It explores how individuals perceive and evaluate stimuli based on their subjective reference point or adaptation level (Helson, 1964). In the context of geopolitical outlook, adaptation level theory implies that travelers' expectations and understanding of a country are shaped by their previous exposure to information and stereotypes associated with that country.

Sociopsychological research has demonstrated that adaptation level theory can explain how individuals adjust their perceptions in response to changing environments, emphasizing

the role of cognitive consistency in decision-making (Parducci, 1968; Helson, 1947). In tourism scholarship, adaptation level theory has been applied to understand how travelers' prior experiences influence their destination choices, highlighting the importance of perceived familiarity and novelty in shaping travel behavior (Um & Crompton, 1990; Zhi & Ha, 2024). By serving as a baseline for Americans' visit intentions to China, geopolitical outlook reflects the cumulative effect of past experiences and media narratives, guiding travelers' decisions based on their desire for cognitive coherence and consistency (Beeson & Li, 2015; Parducci, 1968; Helson, 1947). This alignment or conflict with their adaptation level can significantly impact their willingness to visit, as they seek to maintain a coherent understanding of the destination. Accordingly, *H1* is suggested:

H1: Geopolitical outlook positively impacts international visit intention of non-visitors.

Destination perception

Perceived destination is defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a tourist destination during the decision-making process to choose a destination (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Hunt, 1975; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Tasci et al., 2007). It plays a crucial role in the selection process of a tourist destination in the competitive tourism market (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Davari & Jang, 2021; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Echtner and Ritchie (1991) expanded on this concept by proposing a more comprehensive framework that includes both functional characteristics (tangible aspects that can be evaluated against standards) and psychological characteristics (intangible, subjective aspects), as well as common and unique components. This framework emphasizes the subjective and evaluative nature of how a destination is viewed, highlighting the importance of both shared and distinctive features in shaping travelers' decisions. The unique features, particularly relevant in this study, underscore the distinctive cultural attributes of China and their positive influence on visit intentions (Bi & Gu, 2019; Kim et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2007).

Empirical evidence shows that the safety aspect of destination perception is critically important for American travelers considering a trip to China (He et al., 2013; Ran et al., 2021; Tseng et al., 2015). For example, Ran et al.'s (2021) study found that while China's destination perception does not significantly impact American travelers' visit intentions through electronic word-of-mouth, it does influence their general opinion about the country. Safety concerns, along with perceptions of political stability and societal openness, crucially shape these perceptions (Alaadini, 2021; Tseng et al., 2015).

Geopolitics, which involves international relations influenced by geographical factors, is crucial when studying perceptions of politically sensitive destinations (Perpiña, 2019). Geopolitical beliefs negatively affect destination perceptions (Jafari, 1989; Pizam et al., 1991). Travel constraints—such as visa restrictions, regulations, and customs—are also geopolitical determinants that impact destination perception and consequently travelers' visit intentions (Campo & Alvarez, 2019; Chaulagain et al., 2019). Although stereotypes can be positive or negative, related tourism studies often focus on negatively labeled countries amidst geopolitical tensions (Chaulagain et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016; Wattanacharoensil & La-ornual, 2019). For instance, Wattanacharoensil and La-ornual (2019) found that stereotypes, resulting from social bias, are common causes of imperfect tourism-related decisions.

Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals experience psychological discomfort or dissonance when they hold conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or values. This discomfort motivates them to reduce this dissonance through various cognitive or behavioral strategies (Fazio et al., 1977; Festinger, 1962). Individuals strive for consistency and experience discomfort when inconsistency arises, leading to cognitive dissonance (Petty & Cacioppo, 1990). Accordingly, individuals handle dissonance, focusing on processes like self-justification or attitude change (Festinger, 1962). When confronted by new information, most people seek to preserve their current understanding and convince themselves that no conflict exists (Festinger, 1962). Cognitive dissonance is the result of mental conflicts that occur when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information (Shultz & Lepper, 1996). This theory has been applied in tourism to understand how travelers reconcile conflicting information about destinations (Huang et al., 2025; Pearce & Packer, 2013), such as safety concerns versus cultural allure. In geopolitics, cognitive dissonance theory has been used to analyze how individuals adjust their perceptions of countries amidst conflicting media narratives and political rhetoric (Metzger et al., 2020).

China is undoubtedly an attractive tourist destination due to its unique attributes in history, culture, nature, vastness, and brand. This study focuses on the behavioral intentions of American travelers regarding China, who may experience cognitive dissonance between the desire to visit and concerns about fear of the unknown. Cognitive dissonance is an unpleasant state caused by people's awareness of inconsistency (Petty & Cacioppo, 1990; Fazio et al., 1977). As a result, cognitive dissonance can create a gap between the geopolitical outlook of China and its destination perception. This gap may prompt travelers to reassess their initial beliefs and become more willing to consider visiting the country, as they seek to resolve

dissonance by aligning their perceptions with their travel desires (Festinger, 1962; Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). Therefore, *H2*, *H3*, and *H4* are suggested:

H2: Geopolitical outlook positively impacts destination perception.

H3: Destination perception positively impacts international visit intention.

H4: The impact of geopolitical outlook on international visit intention is partially mediated by destination perception.

Destination confidence

A key determinant of international visit intention is the cognitive assessment and evaluation of a destination's attributes and characteristics. This evaluation is shaped by factors such as perceptions, safety expectations, and uniqueness. However, potential travelers may lack confidence in their assessments if they have not yet visited the country. Research indicates that trust significantly impacts international visit intentions by influencing tourists' perceptions and attitudes toward a destination (Artigas et al., 2017; Davari & Jang, 2021; Loureiro & González, 2008; Magnusson et al., 2022). Confidence is reinforced when accurate and comprehensive information is readily available (Artigas et al., 2017; Su et al., 2020). It is cultivated through effective communication and information channels. Reliable and transparent information from tourism boards, destination marketing organizations, online reviews, and other sources helps travelers build confidence in a destination.

Trust toward a destination is understood as a multidimensional construct, including evidence of local inhabitants and public and private institutions being honest, benevolent, and competent (Artigas et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2014). Trust has been extensively studied across various disciplines, with scholars such as Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) defining trust as the willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that they will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party. This foundational definition highlights the importance of perceived reliability and integrity in establishing trust (Mayer et al., 1995). In tourism, Chen and Myagmarsuren (2011) defined trust as tourists' sense of assured reliance on the destination's service providers. Su et al.'s (2020) study defines trust as the tourists' overall perception of the destination's competence (e.g., service quality), benevolence (e.g., positive intentions, that is, willingness to consider the interests and expectations of the stakeholders), and credibility (e.g., fulfills its promises). Such a perspective is supported by the work of Rotter (1967), who emphasized the role of trust in interpersonal and organizational relationships, suggesting that trust leads to greater cooperation and positive outcomes.

While trust forms the foundational basis for travelers' perceptions, confidence extends this concept by incorporating the assurance and reliability that travelers seek when choosing a destination. Confidence builds upon trust by emphasizing not only the integrity and competence of service providers but also the overall security and dependability of the destination itself (Hoff & Bashir, 2016; Mayer et al., 1995). This transition from trust to confidence reflects a deeper level of assurance that travelers require to feel secure in their decision to visit a destination. To address the evidence-based nature of trust, *destination confidence* is advanced in this study, conveying trustworthiness and credibility, aligning well with the multidimensional aspects of previous studies related to trust and confidence in tourism scholarship. *Destination confidence emphasizes the sense of security and reliability that travelers feel at a destination, while capturing the essence of tourists' assured reliance on a destination's service providers and public or private institutions as well as their personal freedom. It contributes to higher satisfaction and increased visit intentions.*

Aligned with cognitive dissonance, when a chosen option necessitates giving up desirable aspects of alternatives, individuals experience increased dissonance (Bohner & Dickel, 2011; Brehm, 1956; Higgins, 1997). They tend to enhance the value of the chosen alternative and downgrade the rejected ones to alleviate this dissonance. In the context of cognitive dissonance and the question of destination confidence regarding American travelers' visit intention to China, the following hypotheses are suggested to examine the relationships among the constructs. Therefore, *H5*, *H6*, *H7*, and *H8* are suggested:

H5: Geopolitical outlook positively impacts destination confidence.

H6: Destination confidence positively impacts destination perception.

H7: Destination confidence positively impacts international visit intention.

H8: The impact of geopolitical outlook on international visit intention is partially mediated by destination confidence.

Destination curiosity

Empirical evidence reveals the influence of personality traits on tourists' behavioral intentions (see meta-analysis by Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Destination curiosity reflects a travel enthusiasm characterized by a desire to explore and gain knowledge through firsthand experiences at a destination (Davari & Jang, 2024). The willingness to explore different cultures serves as an intrinsic motivation, driving individuals to seek travel experiences (Alaedini & Davari, 2018; Davari & Jang, 2025; Desforges, 2000).

Exploratory behavior is crucial for perception, as it involves gathering information about the world over time (Greeno, 1998). Human exploratory behavior is innate and is defined as the urge to learn about and interact with the external world (Gibson, 1988). The primary form of learning that supports knowledge accumulation involves intuitive, self-initiated behaviors through deliberate practices (Murtonen et al., 2017). Curiosity and exploration are linked to various motivational factors, including drives, motives, and the desire for stimulus change (Davari & Kim, 2025; Loewenstein, 1994).

Curiosity, as a personality trait, is defined by Daniel Berlyne (1957) as the need to obtain new knowledge and experiences, intrinsically energizing exploratory behavior. It represents the desire or drive to pursue novelties, complexities, and challenges (Litman & Silvia, 2006). Scholars debate the fundamental principles of curiosity; some argue it addresses unresolved issues (e.g., Gibson, 1988; Loewenstein, 1994), while others view it as a naturally joyful experience (e.g., Berlyne, 1957; Davari & Kim, 2025; Litman & Silvia, 2006). Curiosity is seen as a means of understanding the world and a desire to learn for various reasons (Szumowska & Kruglanski, 2020), with travel being one such means.

Destination curiosity recognizes the diverse travel experiences of individuals with varying levels of curiosity, using a mix-and-match model to tailor travel packages (Davari & Jang, 2024). Indicators of destination curiosity include, but are not limited to, ‘exploring one’s surroundings during travel,’ ‘visiting specific places unique to a destination,’ ‘having new or unusual experiences,’ ‘traveling to a new destination,’ ‘wishing that something unexpected would happen during trip,’ ‘enjoying thoughtful activities during travel,’ ‘learning new ways to think during travel,’ and ‘dining at authentic restaurants’ (Ibid.).

According to the optimum stimulation level theory, individuals are motivated to engage in activities that help them achieve their preferred level of stimulation based on their personality traits (Eysenck, 1966; Robinson et al., 2019). This theory posits that people seek to maintain an optimal level of arousal, influenced by internal attributes (Leuba, 1955). Because visit intentions vary among individuals, this theory suggests that each person has an optimal stimulation level they aim to sustain (Dickman, 1990; Eysenck, 1966). Berlyne expanded on this theory, emphasizing curiosity and exploration in seeking optimal stimulation, proposing that individuals engage with novel and complex stimuli to maintain optimal arousal (1970). This theory serves as a basis for research on novelty seeking, sensory-seeking, and variety-seeking behaviors, indicating that individuals with high optimum stimulation levels are more likely to seek new experiences, take risks, and engage in adventurous activities (Berlyne, 1957; Mittal, 1994). Empirical studies show that cognitive-processing tendencies moderate how

personality traits function (Marino et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2019). Individuals differ in their preference for complexity and novelty in various domains when cognitive assessment plays a major role (Martindale, 1984).

Considering China's globally recognized tourist attractions, different levels of destination curiosity among potential American travelers influence their optimum stimulation levels and international visit intentions. Given the heterogeneity of visit intention, personality traits significantly impact outcomes when it comes to subjective adjustments (Dickman, 1990) and cognitive assessments (Martindale, 1984). Destination curiosity, the focal personality trait in this study, is expected to stimulate international visit intentions.

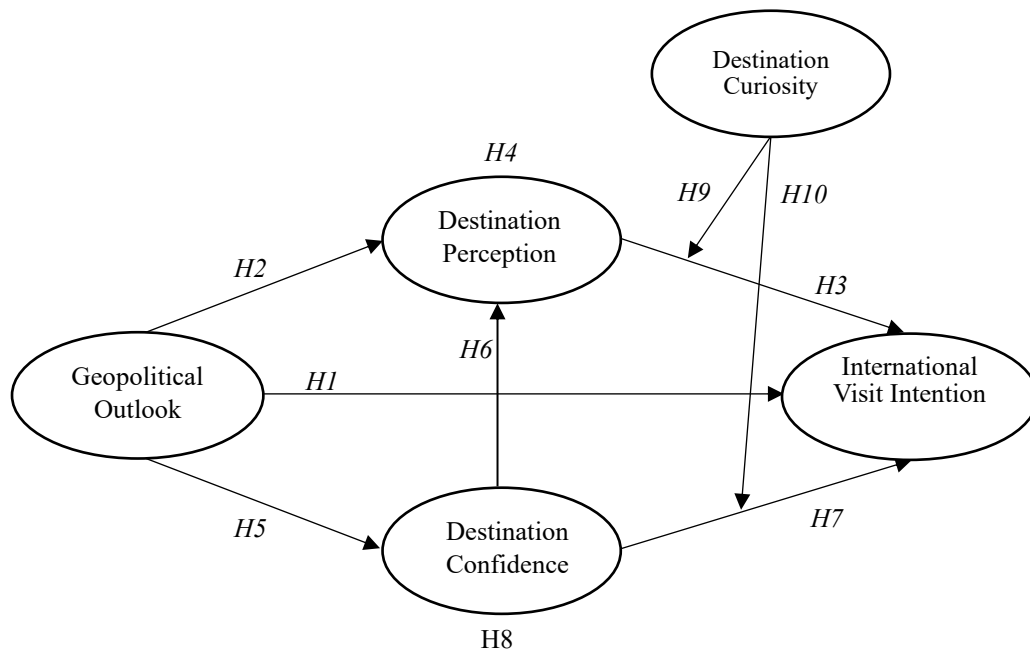
Furthermore, adaptation level theory suggests that people judge and interpret stimuli relative to their past perceptions (Helson, 1964; Rohlen, 1979). Cognitive factors play a crucial role in the adaptation process, indicating that individuals not only adapt to stimuli but also actively alter cognitive judgments based on adaptation levels (Guion, 2011; LePine, 2003). In the presence of cognitive control and subjective adaptation levels, personality traits are major predictors of outcomes (Bruner, 1951; Robinson et al., 2019). Simultaneously, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that individuals experience psychological discomfort when holding conflicting beliefs or attitudes. In the context of China's geopolitical outlook and unique tourist attractions, cognitive dissonance may arise between stereotypes and personal assessments. This conflict can lead to a reassessment of initial beliefs and an increased willingness to consider visiting the country, positively impacting visit intentions.

In summary, optimum stimulation level, adaptation level, and cognitive dissonance theories are all applicable to the situation in which a potential American traveler has an optimal level of destination curiosity toward China that they seek to sustain (Leuba, 1955) while, as a non-visitor, judging and interpreting stimuli based on their destination perception (Helson, 1964), in the presence of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). Defined as the intrinsic desire to learn about a place through direct, sensory experience (Davari & Jang, 2025), destination curiosity can prompt individuals to seek novel stimuli even when external signals advise caution. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed, and Figure 1 provides the proposed model.

H9: Destination curiosity moderates the impact of destination perception on international visit intention.

H10: Destination curiosity moderates the impact of destination confidence on international visit intention.

Figure 1—Proposed model



Methodology and results

Sample and data collection

The survey was administered to American passport holders interested in traveling abroad but who have not visited China, aligning with the study's focus on non-visitors to China. Data were collected through Prolific, an online platform known for its representative samples, transparency, and functionality (Eyal et al., 2021). Eligibility criteria on Prolific included American citizenship, an equal proportion of gender, passport possession (indicative of enthusiasm for international travel), and interest in traveling. The survey cover letter informed participants that their involvement was voluntary and anonymous, they could opt out at any time, and all responses would remain confidential and used solely for research purposes.

The target population was American passport holders, verified anonymously through participants' Prolific profiles. Additional screening questions ensured the sample fit the scope of the study. For instance, one question confirmed that participants had traveled to countries other than Canada or Mexico, as Americans living in neighboring states often visit these countries briefly for dining (primarily in Mexico) or leisure (primarily in Canada). To ensure the international travel enthusiasm of the participants, purposive sampling was employed to select participants based on specific criteria, including a 98 percent approval rate on Prolific, fluency in English, and international travel experiences within the past year to countries other than Mexico or Canada (Mize & Manago, 2022). After applying pre-screening options on Prolific and meeting the screening criteria, twenty responses were excluded from the data analysis due to exceptionally fast responses or failure in attention check questions (Berinsky et al., 2014). Consequently, this study retained 412 observations for further analysis. The sample size exceeded ten times the minimum required by the indicators (Kyriazos, 2018).

To test the proposed model, SPSS 24.0 and SmartPLS 4.0 were used. The majority of the respondents were between 21 and 40 years old (64.3%). The gender distribution was 49.5% female. More than 70.4% held a bachelor's degree or above, and 81.1% had a yearly income between 10,000 and 99,000 USD. Two-thirds of the respondents were white, 12.4 % were African American, 10% Asian, and 9% Hispanic. Due to the international travel experiences of the respondents in this study, the income distribution of the sample was elevated (see Table 1 for more details). Notably, the socio-demographic structure of the sample aligns with US census data.

Table 1. Socio-demographics information of the sample (N=412)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	203	49.3
Female	204	49.5
Other	5	1.2
<u>Age</u>		
Less than 20	6	1.5
21-30	121	31.8
31-40	134	32.5
41-50	76	18.4
51-60	48	11.7
61 and above	17	4.1
<u>Education</u>		
Less than high school	0	0.0
High school	36	8.7
Some college, but no degree	86	20.9
Bachelor's degree	199	48.3
Graduate degree (MS, PhD, MD, JD)	91	22.1
<u>Ethnicity</u>		
White	262	63.6
Asian	41	10
Africa American	51	12.4
Hispanic	37	9
Native American	1	.2
Other	20	4.9
<u>Annual income</u>		
less than \$10,000	6	1.5
\$10,000 ~ \$19,999	80	19.4
\$20,000 ~ \$39,999	48	11.7
\$40,000 ~ \$59,000	68	16.5
\$60,000 ~ \$79,000	73	17.7
\$80,000 ~ \$99,999	65	15.8
\$100,000 ~ \$149,999	20	4.9
\$150,000 or above	52	12.6
<u>Living in</u>		
Urban	135	32.8
Rural	53	12.9
Suburban	224	54.4

Data diagnostics and measurement

The study utilized standardized measurement instruments previously employed by existing literature to assess the variables. All items used a seven-point scale, ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “7 = strongly agree.” Before data collection, a pretest survey evaluated the content validity of the questionnaire. This involved 12 experts across disciplines including psychology,

sociology, and tourism reviewing and refining the measurements to ensure appropriateness for the empirical study. The diverse expert team comprised individuals of different ages, genders, educational backgrounds, and positions. Through discussion and revision, the measurement items were refined into the final survey. Additionally, the experts carefully assessed expected respondent completion times to mitigate potential issues like common method bias and ensure smooth data collection. After multiple rounds of revision, the final questionnaire was distributed via Prolific.

Within the context of the study, six measurement items were used for geopolitical outlook in the presence of stereotypes (adopted from Chaulagain et al., 2019; Chen & Hsu, 2021; Fiske et al., 2002); five items for destination perception (adopted from Chaulagain et al., 2019; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993); five items for destination confidence (adopted from Artigas et al., 2017; Su et al., 2020); and three items for international visit intention (adopted from Lee et al., 2012; Zenker et al., 2021). Finally, the items of Davari and Jang's (2024) scale were used to measure destination curiosity within a higher order factor model, consisting of four items for destination exploration, three items for destination adventure, five items for thought expansion, and three items for authentic experience.

Initially, the reliability and validity of the scales of interest were evaluated (Table 2). All α values fell between the range of .84 and .93, while CR values fell between .89 and .95. Results warranted internal consistency. The standardized factor loading for each item was over .61, and the AVE values of each scale were higher than .57. The square root of AVE exceeded all the paired correlations of the constructs of interest, and all heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations are no greater than .83, less than the cutoff value .85, suggesting discriminant validity is intact. In sum, results indicated scale reliability and validity, and the proposed model fit the data acceptable (Table 3). In terms of multicollinearity, the VIF values were less than 4.73, suggesting that multicollinearity was not a concern.

Table 2. Validity and Reliability of measurement items

Constructs and measurements	SFL	Alpha	CR	AVE
Geopolitical outlook				
US is an ally of China.	0.62	0.84	0.89	0.57
Surveillance cameras create tension and disturb privacy.	0.84			
China is an enemy of the US.	0.64			
China is a safe and secure country.	0.77			
The internal environment of China is stable and peaceful.	0.79			
China is a technologically developed country.	0.84			
Destination perception				
I can find convenient accommodation.	0.78	0.93	0.95	0.78
Local Chinese foods are appealing.	0.71			
I can go to plentiful local markets or local festivals.	0.83			
China has a beautiful landscape and many natural attractions.	0.73			
I can enjoy a wide variety of outdoor activities (e.g., national parks and wilderness areas).	0.84			
Destination confidence				
Chinese local are trustworthy while dealing with tourists.	0.97	0.84	0.89	0.61
Chinese public institutions are reliable.	0.92			
Chinese local care about tourists' well-being.	0.86			
Chinse private institutions are reliable.	0.89			
Chinese private institutions provide good service when dealing with tourists.	0.86			
International visit intention				
As soon as I get a chance, I will travel to China.	0.95	0.91	0.94	0.85
I will try my best to visit China.	0.92			
I will keep on gathering travel-related information about traveling to China.	0.90			
Destination curiosity				
<u>Destination exploration</u>				
I like to visit specific places unique to a destination (e.g., museums).	0.8	0.91	0.93	0.78
I like to have new/unusual experiences (e.g., looking at unfamiliar scenes).	0.72			
When I hear something unusual while traveling, I like to see what it is.	0.83			

I like to explore my surroundings during international travel. 0.87

Destination adventure

I wish I would have a new and different travel experience on my next trip. 0.78

I wish something new and exciting would happen during my trip. 0.87

I want to travel to a country I have never been to. 0.88

Thought expansion

I enjoy thinking about new and unfamiliar situations. 0.79

I would rather understand the reasons for the answer to a problem and simply knowing the answer is not fine with me. 0.79

I enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems. 0.86

Learning new ways to think excites me. 0.58

I enjoy thoughtful activities during my trips. 0.83

Authentic experience

I like to have local food at authentic restaurants. 0.77

I like to try new foods that I have never tasted before. 0.58

When I travel, I like to have special experiences unique to the destination. 0.87

Notes: SFL (standardized factor loadings); AVE (average variance extracted); CR (composite reliability)

Table 3. Means, standard deviation, and correlations

	Mean	S.D.	Destination perception	Geopolitical outlook	Destination confidence	International visit intention	Destination curiosity
Destination perception	5.65	0.90	.78 ^a				
Geopolitical outlook	3.78	1.06	.435**	.75 ^a			
Destination confidence	4.46	1.20	.561**	.734**	.88 ^a		
International visit intention	3.92	1.62	.505**	.593**	.589**	.92 ^a	
Destination curiosity	5.82	0.75	.457**	.171**	.322**	.347**	.88 ^a

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

^a Square root of the average variance extracted.

This study utilized partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) due to the complex structure of the model, specifically, the higher-order components related to the moderating variables of destination curiosity (Usakli & Kucukergin, 2018). As shown in Table 4, geopolitical outlook has a statistically positive impact on destination confidence ($\beta=.75$, $p<.001$, $f^2=1.25$) and international visit intention ($\beta=.34$, $p<.001$, $f^2=.09$), but not for destination perception and international visit intention ($\beta=.06$, $p>.05$, $f^2=.00$), supporting *H1* and *H5*, rejecting *H2*. Destination confidence significantly impacts on destination perception ($\beta=.52$, $p<.001$, $f^2=.18$) and international visit intention ($\beta=.20$, $p<.001$, $f^2=.03$), supporting *H6* and *H7*. Destination perception significantly impacts on international visit intention ($\beta=.23$, $p<.001$, $f^2=.07$), supporting *H3*.

The rejection of *H2* may reflect that, in the presence of geopolitical tensions, pre-existing destination perceptions do not directly shape how non-visitors perceive a destination. This is likely due to the purposive sample of this study, which includes American passport holders who have previously traveled to other countries. Their prior international travel experiences may have shaped their mindsets differently.

The study examined the importance of indirect effects by employing bootstrapping with 5000 samples (Hayes, 2017). The findings indicated that destination confidence and image acted as important mediators between the geopolitical outlook and international visit intention (Table 5). Two direct effects are significant, as geopolitical outlook→destination confidence→international visit intention (indirect effect: .15, $p<.01$) and geopolitical outlook→destination confidence→destination perception→international visit intention (indirect effect: .09, $p<.001$). However, geopolitical outlook→destination perception→international visit intention (indirect effect: .01, $p>.05$) was insignificant. The results supported *H8*, but partially supported *H4*.

These findings indicate that destination confidence is significantly associated with the relationship between geopolitical outlook, destination perception, and international visit intention. While destination perception may not directly strengthen tourists' international visit intention alongside geopolitical outlook, it still serves an important mediating role in the relationship between geopolitical outlook and international visit intention through the mediation of destination confidence. Geopolitical outlook explains 55% of the variance in destination confidence ($R^2_{\text{destination confidence}}=.27$). The combination of geopolitical outlook and destination confidence accounts for 32% of the variance in destination perception ($R^2_{\text{destination perception}}=.32$). The entire-factor model explains 44% of the variance in international visit intention ($R^2_{\text{international visit intention}}=.44$), indicating a substantial model (Cohen, 2013).

Accordingly, f^2 of all significant paths are between .02 and 1.25, indicating good effect sizes (Ibid.). The model fit indices fall into the recommended values (Hair et al., 2021; Hu & Bentler, 1999): $NFI=.81$ and $SRMR=.10$.

Table 4. Results of PLS-SEM path estimations

Path	Model 1_Mediating Effect			Model 2_Moderating Effect		
	Destination confidence	Destination perception	International visit intention	Destination confidence	Destination perception	International visit intention
<u>Main effect</u>						
Geopolitical outlook	.75***	.06	.34***	.75***	.06	.37***
Destination confidence		.52***	.20***		.52***	.16**
Destination perception			.23***			.18***
<u>Moderating effect</u>						
Destination curiosity						.19***
Destination perception × Destination curiosity						.10**
Destination confidence × Destination curiosity						-.02
R^2	.55	.32	.44	.56	.41	.47
Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)		.10			.10	
Normed Fit Index (NFI)		.86			.84	

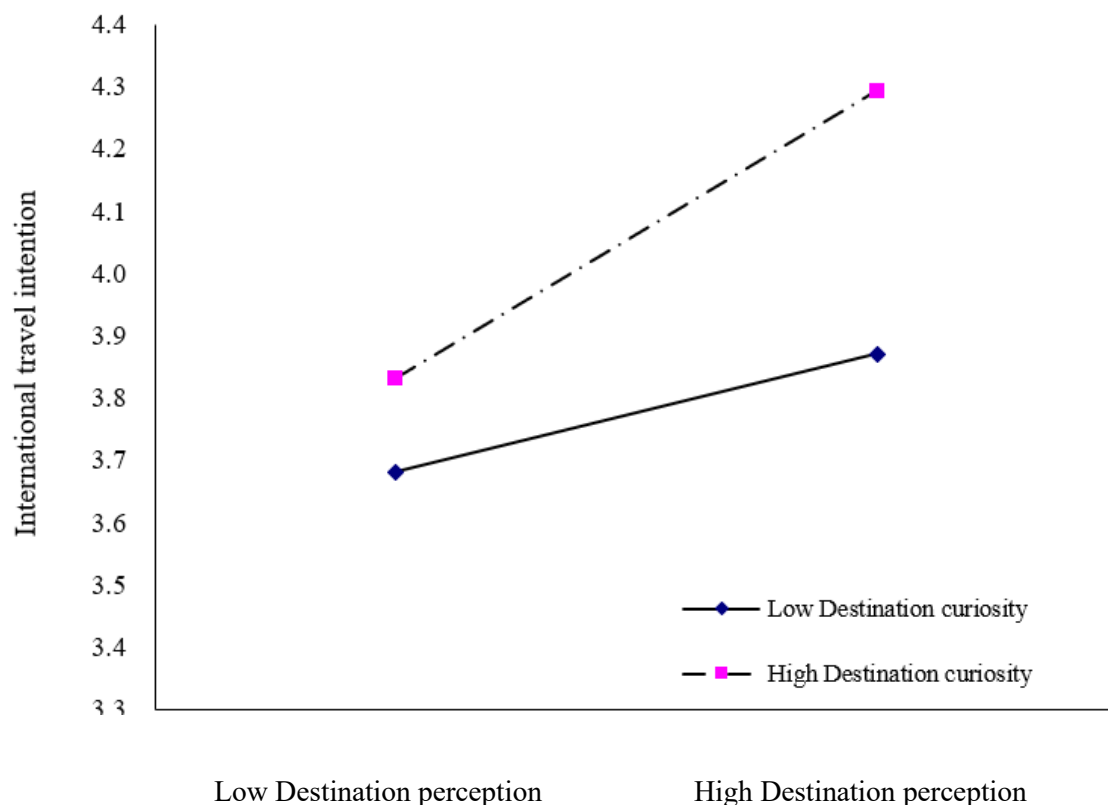
Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 5. Specific indirect effects

Indirect effects	Specific indirect effects	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Geopolitical outlook→Destination confidence→International visit intention	0.151	3.421	0.001
Geopolitical outlook→Destination perception→International visit intention	0.013	0.801	0.423
Geopolitical outlook→Destination confidence→Destination perception→International visit intention	0.091	4.313	0.000

For the moderating effect test, the destination perception $\times$ destination curiosity interaction on international visit intention ($\beta = .10, p < .01$) was significant, supporting *H9*. However, the interaction between destination confidence $\times$ destination curiosity interaction on international visit intention ($\beta = -.02, p > .05$) was not significant, rejecting *H10*. This may be because trust is constituted over the long run, and geopolitical tensions do not pave the way for destination confidence to develop. We then delineated the proposed interactions by redefining the moderating variable as high and low destination curiosity, using plus or minus one standard deviation from the mean. As destination curiosity increases, both destination perception and international visit intentions increase significantly (Figure 2). However, at lower levels of destination curiosity, the impact of destination perception on international visit intention only marginally increases.

Figure 2—The interaction of Destination perception $\times$ Destination curiosity on international visit intention



Conclusion

Drawing on cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962), adaptation level (Helson, 1964), and optimum stimulation level (Leuba, 1955) theories, this study examined the complex relationships among geopolitical outlook, destination confidence, and destination curiosity in shaping international travel behavior toward geopolitically sensitive destinations such as China.

Discussion

Findings reveal that geopolitical outlook significantly impacts both destination confidence and international visit intention. Specifically, a positive geopolitical outlook enhances travelers' confidence in a destination, which in turn increases their intention to visit. Destination confidence can mitigate the negative effects of geopolitical tensions, thereby increasing travelers' willingness to visit. Moreover, the role of destination confidence as a mediator highlights its critical function in bridging the gap between geopolitical outlook and travel intentions. This underscores the importance of geopolitics in international travel behavior, particularly in the context of destinations like China, where cultural allure coexists with geopolitical tensions.

Meanwhile, the direct impact of destination perception on visit intention is not significant. This suggests that while travelers may hold preconceived notions about a destination, their confidence in its safety and reliability plays a more crucial role in their decision-making process. The significant interaction effect of destination curiosity on the impact of destination perception on international visit intention further emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivations in shaping travel decisions. Travelers with high destination curiosity are more likely to overcome geopolitical concerns and pursue unique authentic travel experiences. This underscores destination curiosity's potential to drive exploratory behavior and foster interest in politically sensitive destinations, even in the face of negative stereotypes.

Overall, this study suggests that international travel need not be undermined by geopolitical tensions. By unpacking how geopolitical outlook, destination confidence, and destination curiosity interact in the minds of non-visitors, it offers a comprehensive blueprint for scholars and practitioners seeking to harness tourism as a vehicle for mutual understanding rather than division. Ultimately, when travelers engage directly with people, places, and everyday realities on the ground, they acquire a perspective that transcends headline politics—thereby reaffirming the irreplaceable value of crossing borders in person.

Theoretical contributions

The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of international travel behavior in the context of geopolitical sensitivity by integrating cognitive dissonance, adaptation level, and optimum stimulation level theories. The findings emphasize the importance of destination confidence as a mediating construct, offering a novel perspective on how travelers reconcile conflicting perceptions and motivations. The moderating effect of destination curiosity on the impact of destination perception and international visit intentions underscores the importance of intrinsic motivation in travel behavior. This finding supports the theories of cognitive dissonance and optimum stimulation level, suggesting that curiosity-driven exploration can enhance the attractiveness of destinations, even amidst geopolitical challenges. Meanwhile, the non-significant moderation effect of destination curiosity on destination confidence may be attributed to several underlying factors. One is that confidence may develop over time and may not be immediately influenced by destination curiosity (Dearmon & Grier, 2009). Another possibility is the dominant influence of geopolitical factors (Shambaugh, 2020), which can overshadow other considerations such as destination curiosity.

Theoretically, this study demonstrates that adaptation level theory has the potential to be used to analyze how historical and cultural narratives impact public perceptions of international relations, affecting attitudes toward foreign policy and international engagement. The findings also show that the geopolitical outlook reflects the cumulative effect of past experiences and media narratives and guided travelers' decisions as they seek to maintain a coherent understanding of the destination, based on adaptation level theory. This is one of the first studies incorporating the adaptation level theory in a geopolitical context. The theory has mainly been utilized in behavioral sciences within happiness, well-being, and satisfaction contexts (Edwards, 2018).

Two new concepts are advanced in this study. First, by introducing the concept of geopolitical outlook, this study expands the understanding of how international relations and media representations influence travel intentions. It advances and operationalizes geopolitical outlook as a distinct cognitive construct, thereby extending tourism scholarship into the domain of international relations. This aligns with previous research by Chaulagain et al. (2019) and Chen et al. (2016), which emphasized the impact of stereotypes and geopolitical tensions on country image. The findings suggest that geopolitical outlook significantly affects destination confidence and international visit intentions, providing a nuanced perspective on the role of global dynamics in travel decision-making. Second, the study highlights destination

confidence, emphasizing the sense of security and reliability that travelers feel at a destination, while capturing the essence of tourists' assured reliance on a destination's service providers and public or private institutions. The results demonstrate that destination confidence can mitigate the negative effects of geopolitical tensions, offering a new dimension to the understanding of previously studied trust in tourism contexts (Artigas et al., 2017; Su et al., 2020). In short, it identifies destination confidence as the pivotal mediator that converts geopolitical outlooks into concrete behavioral intentions, offering actionable levers for different tourism stakeholders.

Furthermore, the study extends the literature on destination curiosity by demonstrating its interaction role in the relationship between destination perception and international visit intention. This highlights the significance of personality traits in influencing travel behavior, aligning with previous research on the role of curiosity in exploratory behavior (Loewenstein, 1994; Berlyne, 1957). It demonstrates that destination curiosity can buffer the detrimental impact of negative destination perceptions, suggesting that marketing efforts which stimulate intellectual intrigue or cultural fascination encourage visit intentions even amid political tensions. By integrating curiosity into the broader framework of travel behavior, the study aligns with theories of cognitive dissonance and optimum stimulation level, emphasizing the relationship between intrinsic motivation and external perceptions in shaping travel intentions.

Practical implications

The study provides several practical implications for destination marketing organizations (DMOs), especially those promoting geopolitically sensitive destinations. It highlights the importance of open communication, sharing local stories, and building trust—practices that align with empirical evidence from Artigas et al. (2017) on addressing travelers' concerns about safety, societal openness, and political stability. Additionally, DMOs can use virtual reality to demonstrate safety measures, share visitor testimonials that showcase positive cultural experiences, and design realistic and attractive travel itineraries.

Destination curiosity emerges as another powerful motivator that can drive travel intentions despite geopolitical challenges. Marketing campaigns should emphasize immersive and unique experiences that align with travelers' interests and curiosity levels. Highlighting opportunities for cultural exploration, such as visiting traditional villages or engaging with local artisans, can attract travelers with high destination curiosity, encouraging them to explore the destination despite geopolitical concerns (Davari & Jang, 2025; Magnusson et al., 2022).

Personalized marketing strategies tailored to different destination curiosity levels can further enhance engagement and attract a diverse range of travelers.

Promoting the dual appeal of destinations like China, which offer both rich cultural heritage and technological advancements, can help counteract negative stereotypes. For instance, showcasing authentic local experiences alongside opportunities to explore modern innovations, can create a balanced narrative that appeals to diverse interests. This duality allows travelers to connect with both the past and the future of the destination, creating a deeper, more memorable experience. This strategic approach can also help mitigate the impact of negative stereotypes and geopolitical tensions, fostering a more positive perception of the destination (Chaulagain et al., 2019; Chen & Hsu, 2021; Li & Wang, 2011).

Finally, fostering international travel to geopolitically sensitive destinations can serve as a form of soft diplomacy, promoting mutual understanding and reducing tensions. By encouraging cultural exchange and highlighting the unique aspects of a destination, tourism can play a pivotal role in bridging nations, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious global community.

Limitations and future research

By implementing several measures during data gathering and refining the data, this study aimed to minimize potential biases and enhance the robustness of the findings. However, limitations are always acknowledged in academic research. The use of Prolific as the data collection platform is advantageous due to its reputation for providing high-quality, diverse, and representative samples (Eyal et al., 2021; Palan & Schitter, 2018). Prolific's rigorous participant vetting process and the ability to pre-screen participants based on specific criteria help ensure that the sample aligns closely with the study's scope and purpose (Kyriazos, 2018; Mize & Manago, 2022). Attention check questions were also employed to improve data quality by reducing noise from inattentive respondents (Berinsky et al., 2014). Meanwhile, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, such as social desirability bias, which could affect the accuracy of the findings (Rosenman et al., 2011). Although measures such as anonymity and confidentiality were emphasized to mitigate these biases, they cannot be entirely eliminated (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Future investigation into the role of destination curiosity in shaping travel intentions across diverse cultural and geopolitical contexts could bring new perspectives. In the context of US-China relations, where strong political narratives exist, geopolitical dynamics may exert a powerful influence on American travelers' perceptions, potentially limiting the impact of

destination curiosity on their confidence in the destination. Additionally, cultural differences in travel behavior and destination curiosity may play a role. If the sample had included European travelers, the moderation effect of destination curiosity might have been more pronounced, since Americans sometimes exhibit less interest in exploring unfamiliar cultures compared to Europeans (Hofstede, 2001). This cultural context may explain why destination curiosity did not significantly moderate the relationship between destination confidence and international visit intention in the American sample.

As travelers increasingly rely on online sources for information, understanding the role of digital platforms in shaping perceptions and intentions is crucial (Dedeoglu et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). Therefore, examining the role of digital media in shaping geopolitical outlooks and travel intentions could provide further insights into the evolving landscape of destination marketing.

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