Modern Geográfia
Vol. 22, Issue 1, 2027: 37–62/ ISSN 2062-1655
https://doi.org/10.15170/MG.2027.22.01.03

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Living Nomadic Heritage in the Mongolian Steppe: Visitor Interpretations, Destination Image Formation, and Brand Meaning

ABSTRACT

This study examines how international visitors' perceptions of Mongolia's living nomadic heritage contribute to destination brand meaning, with particular attention to the mediating role of destination image. Drawing on on-site survey data from 200 international tourists visiting Mongolia, the study investigates whether ongoing nomadic cultural practices function as an interpretive resource shaping destination brand meaning, rather than merely serving as tourism attractions. Using regression-based mediation analysis, the findings indicate that perceived nomadic culture positively influences destination image, which in turn contributes to destination brand evaluations. When both predictors are entered simultaneously, destination image and perceived nomadic culture remain significant, indicating a partial mediation effect. The results suggest that, in living-heritage destinations, brand meaning is formed through both cognitive–affective image evaluations and the direct interpretation of everyday cultural encounters. By empirically specifying this mechanism in Mongolia's nomadic setting, the study contributes to geographical discussions of heritage-as-practice and interpretive place meaning in underexamined East Asian cultural landscapes.

Keywords: destination image, heritage-as-practice, interpretive place meaning, Mongolian steppe, nomadic culture

Research article / Received: 14 February 2026 / Revised: 1 June 2026 / Accepted: 13 June 2026
© Author(s) 2027
How to cite: Chang, H. H. (2027). Living nomadic heritage in the Mongolian steppe: Visitor interpretations, destination image formation, and brand meaning. *Modern Geográfia, 22*(1), 37–62. https://doi.org/10.15170/MG.2027.22.01.03

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism increasingly functions not only as an economic sector but also as a spatial and cultural practice through which visitors encounter, interpret, and assign meaning to places. Beyond infrastructure and service provision, destinations are evaluated through interpretive frameworks that link landscapes, everyday practices, and cultural distinctiveness to broader place-based understandings. In this sense, destination image and brand meaning can be conceptualized as structured outcomes of visitors' interpretive engagement with lived environments, rather than merely as promotional constructs (World Tourism Organization, 2019).

Mongolia represents a particularly salient case for examining these interpretive processes within a living cultural landscape. As the world's second-largest landlocked country, situated between Russia and China, Mongolia is characterized by vast steppe ecosystems and a long-standing nomadic pastoral tradition. A substantial proportion of the population continues to engage in mobility-based livestock herding and seasonal ecological adaptation. Unlike destinations where heritage is primarily monumental, curated, or staged for tourism consumption, Mongolia's nomadic culture remains an ongoing socio-spatial system embedded in everyday life. Visitors encounter nomadic practices directly through landscapes, seasonal festivals, and social interactions (Myagmarsuren & Chen, 2011). From a geographical perspective, such contexts can be understood as lived heritage environments in which cultural meaning is enacted rather than merely displayed.

Since the economic transition of the 1990s, tourism has been promoted as an important component of Mongolia's development strategy. International arrivals have grown over time, largely driven by interest in nature-based and cultural experiences. Recent recovery initiatives and national narratives continue to foreground nomadic heritage as a defining marker of Mongolia's global identity (Gantemur, 2020; UN Tourism, 2025). While policy discourse emphasizes heritage-based positioning, there remains limited empirical understanding of how visitors interpret living nomadic practices and how these interpretations structure higher-order place evaluations.

Existing research on destination image and destination branding frequently treats these constructs as parallel outcomes without clarifying the perceptual mechanisms through which everyday cultural practices inform evaluative meaning. Moreover, quantitative evidence from nomadic or pastoral heritage contexts remains comparatively scarce. In rural and mobility-based landscapes such as the Mongolian steppe, cultural practices may function as interpretive cues that shape how visitors cognitively organize and emotionally evaluate place. Destination image can be conceptualized as a structured cognitive–affective representation of place, while destination brand meaning reflects more integrated and symbolic judgments. However, it remains unclear whether living heritage influences brand meaning primarily through image formation or whether direct interpretive effects extend beyond image-based evaluation (Cai, 2002; Su et al., 2018).

Accordingly, this study examines how international visitors' perceptions of Mongolia's living nomadic heritage relate to destination image and destination brand meaning. Specifically, the study

tests a mechanism-oriented model in which perceived nomadic culture influences destination image, which in turn contributes to destination branding evaluations, while also assessing whether a direct association persists. Rather than estimating market performance or competitive positioning, the analysis focuses on clarifying how interpretive engagement with living cultural landscapes structures evaluative place meaning.

The study is based on on-site survey data collected from 200 international visitors in Khuvsgul Province and Ulaanbaatar. The visitor profile is composed largely of first-time travelers from geographically proximate East Asian markets, particularly Korea and Japan. This composition is analytically relevant in a geographical sense, as culturally proximate short-haul visitors may rely heavily on direct cultural encounters when constructing destination image and symbolic place meaning. In living-heritage contexts, destination image functions as a translation mechanism that organizes culturally specific experiential cues into evaluative structures that can be compared across places.

By empirically specifying how perceptions of nomadic cultural practices relate to destination image and brand meaning within a steppe landscape context, this study contributes to geographical discussions of living heritage, interpretive place-making, and the role of everyday cultural practices in shaping visitors' structured understandings of place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism encompasses travel motivated by engagement with a destination's cultural expressions, including traditions, values, practices, and symbolic meanings that reflect the identity of its people (Clarke, 2002). Rather than being confined to artistic or monumental forms, culture represents an integrated system of worldviews, social practices, and modes of livelihood through which communities interpret and reproduce meaning. From this perspective, cultural tourism is not merely the consumption of cultural assets but an experiential process through which visitors encounter, interpret, and assign meaning to place-based cultural systems. Within human geography, such encounters are understood as processes of place interpretation, whereby visitors construct meaning through engagement with cultural landscapes.

Geographical analyses of contested heritage landscapes highlight how tourism facilitates the reinterpretation of cultural sites through visitor perceptions and historical narratives, offering parallels to nomadic steppe experiences in which everyday practices shape place meanings (Drummond, 2024; Rogerson, 2024). These studies emphasize that heritage landscapes are not fixed entities but socially negotiated spaces shaped by interactions between local practices and external perceptions. Recent scholarship underscores the role of cultural tourism in linking heritage preservation with sustainable development, particularly through stakeholder collaboration and community participation (Gantemur,

2020; UNESCO, 2024). Intangible cultural heritage, such as rituals, festivals, and everyday practices, plays a central role in this process by enabling visitors to engage with living cultural systems rather than static representations. In transitional urban and rural settings, heritage tourism planning reveals how cultural practices are mobilized for regeneration and interpretation, underscoring the role of visitors in constructing layered brand meanings within evolving geographical contexts (Alvarado-Sizzo, 2023; Buchanan, 2024).

Studies of emerging market tourists further show that perceptions of destination brand identity positively shape value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions, highlighting the importance of coherent cultural branding for Asian visitors (Yen et al., 2020). Chinese tourists' perceptions and consumption of cultural heritage also vary significantly across generations, with Post-80s and Post-90s cohorts showing stronger experience-oriented motivations compared with older generations' focus on historical and educational value (Gao et al., 2021). In China, Post-80s aligns approximately with Western Millennials, and Post-90s with Generation Z. Heritage festivals recognized by UNESCO, including Mongolia's Naadam Festival, exemplify how intangible heritage can simultaneously function as a mechanism of cultural transmission and as a tourism experience that reinforces destination identity (Mongke et al., 2024).

Narrative-based approaches further highlight how storytelling enhances cultural tourism experiences by fostering immersion, emotional engagement, and favorable destination attitudes (Sinha & Chinki, 2025). From a spatial perspective, narrative functions as a mediating layer that connects landscape, practice, and perception into coherent place meaning. Collectively, this body of literature suggests that cultural tourism contributes to destination branding not only through tangible attractions but also through interpretive, symbolic, and narrative processes that shape how visitors cognitively and emotionally make sense of destinations.

Mongolian Nomadic Culture

Mongolian nomadic culture has evolved through centuries of adaptation to extreme climatic and ecological conditions, characterized by seasonal mobility, pastoral livestock production, and a strong ethic of environmental stewardship. Nomadic practices emphasize harmony between humans, animals, and nature, prioritizing protection and balance over permanent modification of the landscape (Zhang et al., 2007). In geographical terms, nomadism constitutes a spatially organized socio-ecological system structured around mobility, relational land use, and environmental adaptation. This ecological orientation positions nomadic culture not only as a cultural system but also as an embedded socio-ecological logic shaping everyday spatial practices.

The Mongolian steppe remains one of the world's most intact nomadic landscapes, where cultural practices such as herding, seasonal migration, and communal rituals continue to structure everyday life. While urbanization and modernization have altered demographic patterns, nomadic traditions persist both in rural areas and in symbolic forms that are increasingly mobilized for cultural representation

and tourism. In contrast to destinations where heritage is primarily monumental or staged, nomadic culture in Mongolia operates as a living system of mobility, livelihood, and ecological adaptation. Such cultures generate destination meaning through direct social encounters and everyday practices, allowing visitors to experience heritage as an ongoing way of life rather than as a representational display (Stylos, 2016). Cultural geography perspectives on contested and transitional landscapes further illustrate how everyday practices in nomadic environments function as living interpretive elements, shaping visitor understandings of spatial heritage and place identity (Drummond, 2024).

Accordingly, nomadic culture functions not merely as a destination attribute but as a meaning-making context that frames how visitors interpret landscapes, hospitality, authenticity, and ethical value within the destination. Because nomadic life remains materially embedded within the steppe environment, visitor perception is inseparable from landscape experience, reinforcing the importance of image formation as a spatially grounded cognitive process. Recent tourism research also suggests that living cultural practices can be leveraged to support cultural continuity when tourism is managed responsibly (Gantemur, 2020). Asia-Pacific research on temporality and seasonal visitation demonstrates how mobility-linked and time-specific experiences shape tourism meaning-making, supporting the relevance of seasonal festivals and nomadic mobility narratives in Mongolia (Park et al., 2021). Together, these studies support the conceptualization of Mongolian nomadic culture as a living heritage resource with the capacity to shape visitors' destination evaluations.

Tourism in Mongolia

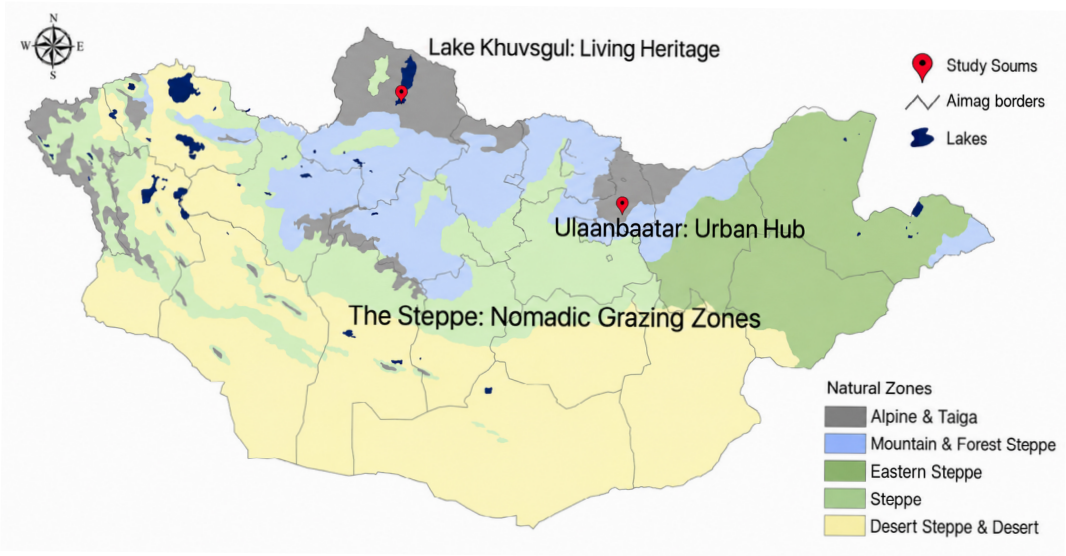
Mongolia's tourism sector is predominantly driven by demand for nature-based and cultural experiences, with nomadic heritage and unspoiled landscapes consistently identified as primary visitor motivations. Prior industry reports indicate that international tourists associate Mongolia with authenticity, remoteness, and cultural distinctiveness, rather than with mass tourism amenities (Juulchin Tourism Corporation, 2019). This positioning differentiates Mongolia within the Asia-Pacific tourism market while also constraining tourism development through seasonality, accessibility, and infrastructure limitations.

Since the mid-2010s, tourism development in Mongolia has increasingly emphasized heritage-based positioning, supported by national branding initiatives, visa facilitation, and international promotion. Following the global disruption caused by COVID-19, Mongolia has experienced a strong recovery in international tourism, with arrivals reaching approximately 850,000 in 2025 and tourism revenues exceeding USD 1.6 billion in 2024 ("Mongolia's foreign tourist", 2025; UN Tourism, 2025). A map of Mongolia (Figure 1), highlighting the study areas of Khuvsgul Province and Ulaanbaatar, is provided to furnish essential spatial context for the steppe landscape, nomadic mobility routes, and seasonal rhythms, as required for geographical analyses of this nature. This recovery trajectory aligns with broader regional and global tourism trends, while policy documents and branding discourse continue to foreground nomadic heritage as a central destination narrative. Cultural festivals, music

diplomacy, and creative heritage adaptations have further amplified Mongolia's international visibility by translating nomadic elements into contemporary branding expressions (Ihsanusyauqie & Alam, 2024; Mulyadi et al., 2024).

The "Go Mongolia" campaign, extended through 2028, explicitly leverages the "Always Moving" nomadic ethos to promote four-season tourism, including winter festivals and ethical community interactions. However, existing literature and market reports indicate that tourism demand remains concentrated in geographically and culturally proximate markets. This concentration suggests that Mongolia's destination meaning may be strongly anchored in short-haul markets, while long-haul markets rely more heavily on generalized destination image cues due to lower cultural familiarity.

Figure 1. Spatial contrast between the urban gateway and nomadic heritage zones



Pre- and Post-Pandemic Trends of International Tourists in Mongolia

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mongolia experienced a sustained period of tourism growth driven by rising international interest in authentic nomadic experiences, expansive landscapes, and cultural immersion. International arrivals increased steadily throughout the late 2010s, coinciding with growing global recognition of Mongolia as a distinctive cultural and nature-based destination (National Statistics Office of Mongolia, 2017). This pre-pandemic growth phase is frequently characterized in the literature as organic, low-density, and heritage-oriented, with a high perceived authenticity of everyday pastoral practices.

The pandemic period introduced a sharp but temporary disruption to international tourism flows, followed by a rapid rebound as global travel restrictions eased. Recent industry statistics indicate that Mongolia ranks among the fastest-recovering tourism destinations worldwide, with international arrivals in 2025 nearly 50 percent higher than pre-pandemic levels and substantially exceeding regional averages (Statbase, 2025; UN Tourism, 2025). Importantly, policy documents and branding

discourse during the recovery period continue to emphasize nomadic heritage, cultural festivals, and nature-based experiences as central identity markers. This continuity suggests that living nomadic culture remains a stable symbolic foundation of Mongolia's destination positioning, rather than a context-dependent or transient branding element. Table 1 summarizes publicly reported international arrival trends from 2016 to 2025, illustrating the volatility of tourism flows surrounding the pandemic and the subsequent recovery trajectory.

Table 1. International Tourist Arrivals in Mongolia (2016–2025)

Year	Arrivals (approx.)	Change from Previous	Notes
2016	404,000	-	Pre-study baseline
2017	469,000	+16 %	Data Collected (steady growth)
2018	529,000	+13 %	Continued upward trend
2019	577,000	+9 %	Peak pre-COVID
2020	59,000	-89 %	Sharp decline, COVID restrictions
2021	33,000	-44 %	Continued low due to restrictions
2022	286,000	+770 %	Recovery start
2023	594,000	+108 %	Strong rebound
2024	727,000	+22 %	Record high since 1995
2025	851,000	+17 %	Nearly 50 % above 2019

Taken together, the reviewed literature indicates that nomadic heritage has remained central to Mongolia's tourism discourse and destination positioning across both pre- and post-pandemic periods. While recovery dynamics are shaped by multiple structural and policy factors, the continued prominence of living nomadic culture in branding discourse underscores its relevance as a core symbolic resource in destination positioning. Market concentration persists in East Asia, particularly in Korea, Japan, and China, while recent research suggests that culturally resonant digital content can strengthen destination image formation among Chinese tourists by emphasizing authenticity and experiential contrast (Sun et al., 2026).

At the same time, the literature also identifies governance-related challenges, including illicit cultural heritage trafficking and risks of commodification, which may undermine destination authenticity and long-term brand credibility if left unaddressed (Al-Ansi & Loureiro, 2025). Comparative heritage tourism research, such as the Liangzhu case in China, demonstrates that effective cultural tourism development requires balancing economic objectives, stakeholder interests, and landscape integrity to sustain authentic visitor experiences (Dredge, 2013).

Destination Image

Destination image refers to the overall set of beliefs, impressions, and emotional evaluations that individuals hold about a place (Crompton et al., 1992). Classic models distinguish between organic images formed through indirect information and induced images shaped by marketing communications

(Gunn, 1972). Extensive empirical research demonstrates that destination image influences destination choice and behavioral outcomes (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993).

Destination image is inherently subjective and reflects tourists' interpretations of destination attributes, host interactions, and environmental cues (Bigné et al., 2001; Bosque & Martín, 2008). Within a geographical framework, image can be understood as a cognitive representation of spatial experience. Prior studies conceptualize image as multidimensional, encompassing cognitive and affective components (Chen & Tsai, 2007). In heritage contexts such as Mongolia, cultural encounters provide symbolic and experiential cues that structure image formation (Han et al., 2021). Destination image thus functions as a mediating interpretive structure through which landscape, practice, and cultural interaction are cognitively organized. However, the literature also suggests that some cultural meanings—particularly those associated with living heritage—extend beyond attribute-based image components, shaping symbolic interpretation and perceptions of authenticity. Accordingly, this study proposes:

H1: Perceived nomadic culture positively influences destination image.

Destination Choice

Destination choice is commonly understood as a multi-stage decision process involving need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and final selection (Kotler, 1997). Behavioral decision models emphasize the role of individual traits, social context, and destination-related attributes in shaping choice outcomes (Hsieh et al., 1997; Um & Crompton, 1990).

Within this framework, destination image and branding function as critical heuristics that simplify decision-making under conditions of limited information. Rather than modeling destination choice directly, many tourism studies conceptualize choice as the outcome of perceptual and attitudinal processes, particularly in exploratory or long-haul travel contexts (Prebensen et al., 2013). Consistent with this approach, the present study treats destination branding as a key evaluative outcome reflecting the cumulative influence of cultural perceptions and image formation.

Destination Branding

Destination branding extends beyond image formation by representing a deliberate strategic process through which destinations communicate differentiated meanings and emotional associations (Aaker, 1996; Blain et al., 2005). While destination image emerges from diverse information sources, branding involves coordinated efforts to shape expectat+ions, reduce perceived risk, and foster emotional attachment.

Events, festivals, and cultural narratives play a pivotal role in destination branding by providing experiential platforms through which brand meanings are enacted and reinforced (Allen et al., 2008).

Empirical research demonstrates that cultural, historical, and natural dimensions jointly contribute to destination brand identity, particularly in heritage-rich contexts (Iliachenko, 2005; Saarinen, 2004). Based on this literature, destination branding is expected to reflect visitors' integrated evaluations (image) while also capturing symbolic meanings that extend beyond attribute appraisal. Destination branding further extends beyond image creation by involving the selection of consistent elements (e.g., names, logos, slogans) to distinguish a place and build positive associations, particularly in rural settings where cooperative approaches can unify multiple communities and strengthen regional identity and favorability (Cai, 2002). Accordingly, this study proposes:

H2: Destination image positively influences destination branding.

Mediating Role of Destination Image

Prior tourism research consistently positions destination image as a central cognitive–affective filter through which tourists interpret diverse destination stimuli, including cultural heritage, experiences, and symbolic cues (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Gunn, 1972; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Cultural attributes rarely influence branding outcomes directly; instead, they are first organized into evaluative destination images that simplify complex place meanings. Heritage-based attributes, particularly intangible and living forms of culture, are inherently multifaceted and abstract. Tourists rarely translate such cultural encounters directly into brand judgments without an intermediate interpretive process. Destination image performs this intermediary function by integrating cultural impressions with perceptions of environment, hospitality, safety, and value into a coherent mental representation of the destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Chen & Tsai, 2007).

In living-heritage contexts, this mediating role becomes especially salient. Unlike monumental or staged heritage, nomadic culture is encountered through everyday practices and social interactions that require interpretation rather than passive consumption. Empirical studies indicate that such experiential encounters influence branding outcomes primarily when they are cognitively structured into destination image dimensions that visitors can evaluate and compare (Stylos, 2016; Su et al., 2018).

Recent branding research further supports this mechanism by demonstrating that brand meaning formation is driven by layered perceptual processes. Cultural cues shape image perceptions, which in turn inform higher-order brand evaluations related to credibility, distinctiveness, and emotional resonance (Blain et al., 2005; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Empirical evidence from emerging market tourists shows that perceptions of destination brand identity (including image, quality, personality, and awareness) positively influence perceived value and satisfaction, which in turn drive behavioral intentions, with satisfaction mediating the value–intention relationship (Yen et al., 2020). Studies on augmented reality in heritage sites show that vivid content fosters narrative transportation and a sense of presence, enhancing destination image and behavioral intentions and reinforcing the mediating role of image in translating experiential cultural cues into brand outcomes (Zhu et al., 2025). In heritage

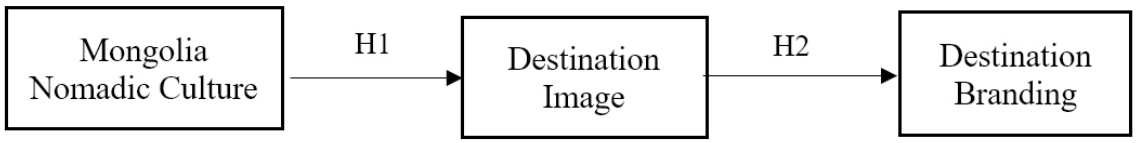
destinations, image thus operates as a necessary but not exclusive pathway linking cultural resources to brand meaning.

Accordingly, this study conceptualizes destination image as a mediating construct that translates perceptions of Mongolia's living nomadic culture into destination branding evaluations. However, given the symbolic power and emotional salience of nomadic heritage, it is theoretically plausible that cultural perceptions may also exert a direct influence on branding, independent of image-based evaluation.

H3: Destination image mediates the relationship between perceived nomadic culture and destination branding.

This study conceptualizes destination branding as an outcome of perceptual processes through which cultural meanings are translated into evaluative brand judgments (Figure 2). Cultural heritage influences branding both directly, by shaping symbolic associations, and indirectly, through destination image formation. Tourists' cultural backgrounds and novelty-seeking orientations further moderate how heritage cues are interpreted (Crouch, 1994; Um & Crompton, 1990). Accordingly, destination image is expected to mediate the relationship between perceived nomadic culture and destination branding. Recent methodological guidance emphasizes that mediation in branding research reflects explanatory mechanisms rather than causal proof, particularly in cross-sectional tourism studies where perceptual constructs evolve simultaneously (Hayes, 2018).

Figure 2. Research Model and Hypothesis



METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative survey design to examine the relationships among perceived nomadic culture, destination image, and destination branding from the perspective of international visitors to Mongolia. A cross-sectional design is appropriate for testing theoretically specified associative and indirect relationships among perceptual constructs at a single point in time, particularly in destination image and branding research, where visitor evaluations are formed during or immediately after travel experiences (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Chen & Tsai, 2007).

The study context is Mongolia as a "living heritage" destination, where nomadic practices remain an ongoing way of life rather than a staged cultural product—a characteristic that has been shown to shape authenticity judgments and brand meaning formation in cultural tourism settings (Clarke, 2002; Stylos, 2016; Konečnik Ruzzier & Gartner, 2007). The quantitative approach was chosen for its ability to test hypotheses statistically and provide theory-driven, generalizable insights into the relationships

between nomadic culture, destination image, and branding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Although causal inferences cannot be definitively established using cross-sectional data, this design allows for the statistical examination of mediation-consistent patterns derived from theory, which is common practice in tourism and hospitality branding studies.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised international (non-resident) leisure tourists visiting Mongolia during the data collection period. According to official statistics, Mongolia received approximately 404,163 international visitors in 2016 (Mongolian Statistical Information Service, 2016). A non-probability convenience intercept sampling approach was adopted due to the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame for international tourists and the practical constraints of on-site data collection. Intercept sampling is widely used and methodologically accepted in destination image and branding research when the primary objective is to capture experiential evaluations at the destination (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Etikan et al., 2016).

Data were collected between January and March 2017 at two primary locations: (1) the Khuvsgul Lake Ice Festival in Khuvsgul Province, and (2) major tourist sites and public visitor areas in Ulaanbaatar. Khuvsgul Province is distinguished by its northern location bordering Russia, featuring the country's largest freshwater lake and expansive steppe terrain that supports year-round nomadic herding and seasonal mobility. This context enables distinctive four-season tourism (especially winter ice festivals and pastoral encounters), unlike more arid southern provinces, thereby directly supporting the "Go Mongolia" campaign's emphasis on winter experiences. Surveyors approached visitors in public spaces, confirmed their international visitor status, and invited voluntary participation. All respondents were aged 18 or above. A total of 200 usable questionnaires (N = 200) were obtained. Questionnaires were checked on-site for completeness. Responses coded as 0 were treated as missing values and excluded listwise from the relevant analyses.

The sample size exceeds minimum thresholds recommended for regression-based mediation analysis and provides adequate statistical power to detect medium-sized effects (Faul et al., 2009). While convenience sampling limits statistical generalizability, it is appropriate for theory-driven exploratory studies in under-researched destinations such as Mongolia, where the primary objective is to test relational and perceptual mechanisms rather than estimate population parameters. Accordingly, the study's contribution is explanatory (mechanism-focused) rather than descriptive of market size or demand conditions.

The data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although collected in 2017, these data offer unique baseline insights into perceptual mechanisms of living-heritage branding that remain relevant today, as nomadic cultural landscapes and mobility practices have persisted materially. This is evidenced by 2025 arrivals exceeding pre-pandemic levels (Table 1), confirming the stability of the studied relationships amid post-pandemic shifts. However, the analysis focuses on perceptual

mechanisms that are expected to be comparatively stable over time. Namely, it examines how living heritage shapes destination image and destination brand meaning, rather than estimating post-pandemic market levels or recovery dynamics. This positioning clarifies the analytical scope of the study while preserving the relevance of its theoretical contribution.

Measurement Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of three sections corresponding to the conceptual framework: perceived nomadic culture, destination image, and destination branding. All measurement items were adapted from established scales in tourism and destination branding literature to ensure content validity.

Perceived nomadic culture was measured using four items adapted from cultural contact and heritage perception scales, focusing on visitors' evaluations of Mongolia's living nomadic practices, including lifestyle continuity, cultural authenticity, and everyday nomadic customs. These items were informed by Han et al. (2021), who developed a concise cultural contact scale to capture tourists' engagement with local culture and perceived authenticity. The four-item structure was retained to preserve conceptual clarity and measurement stability, consistent with concise cultural-contact operationalizations used in prior rural and heritage settings (Han et al., 2021). Respondents rated items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Destination image was measured using 28 items capturing tourists' cognitive and affective evaluations of Mongolia, including the natural environment, cultural and historical attractions, infrastructure, safety, hygiene, hospitality, and value for money (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Stylos, 2016). Items used a 7-point scale with an additional "0 = I cannot answer" option, included to reduce forced responses when respondents lacked sufficient information about a specific attribute.

Destination branding was measured using 32 items adapted from Tsaur et al.'s (2016) destination brand identity scale, comprising five dimensions: comparative image, destination quality, destination personality, destination awareness, and destination culture. All branding items required comparative evaluation relative to other destinations previously visited, strengthening discriminant judgment and higher-order brand meaning assessment (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Consistent with prior branding research, destination image and destination branding were operationalized as composite constructs, representing integrated perceptual evaluations rather than isolated attributes (Blain et al., 2005).

Destination choice indicators were included for descriptive and contextual purposes but were not modelled as direct dependent variables. These indicators consisted of items assessing basic travel decision factors (e.g., planning stages and information sources) to provide supplementary visitor-profile context without integration into the mediation model, aligning with prior studies that conceptualize destination choice as an outcome of perceptual evaluation processes (Chen & Tsai, 2007). To address potential common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted post-data collection, with

the first unrotated factor explaining less than 50% of the total variance, indicating no substantial common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed on-site. Surveyors provided a brief explanation of the study's purpose and emphasized voluntary participation and anonymity. No personally identifiable information was collected, and respondents could decline participation at any time without consequence. Completion of the questionnaire was treated as informed consent. The study followed standard ethical principles for minimal-risk social science research, including confidentiality, non-deception, and the secure handling of anonymized data, and adheres to internationally recognized ethical guidelines for human-subject research in tourism and the social sciences (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Data Analysis

To align the design with the paper's framing and avoid temporal misinterpretation, the analysis is explicitly positioned as a mechanism test using a pre-pandemic baseline sample. The study does not estimate post-pandemic demand or recovery effects; instead, it tests whether perceived nomadic heritage cues are associated with destination image and destination branding evaluations in ways consistent with the proposed image-mediated mechanism.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent characteristics. Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.70 indicating acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). Sampling adequacy for factor analysis was evaluated using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity.

The mediating role of destination image was evaluated using a regression-based approach consistent with contemporary mediation logic, rather than relying solely on the original causal-step framework proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). The analysis follows the indirect-effect testing approach of Hayes (2018), in which mediation is supported by the significance of regression paths and the explanatory contribution of the mediator, rather than requiring the direct effect to become non-significant, as in earlier causal-step logic. Consistent with contemporary mediation analysis standards, the indirect role of destination image was interpreted based on the significance and explanatory contribution of regression paths rather than strict causal-step criteria.

All assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity (VIF < 5.0) were checked and met. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine bivariate relationships. Regression models were used to test hypotheses H1 to H3. Exploratory group comparisons (t-tests/ANOVA) were conducted but are not reported, as they were not theoretically central and did not alter interpretation

(including Chinese generational cohorts, for which observed differences were not statistically significant at $p < 0.05$).

RESULTS

The sample comprised 200 international leisure visitors. The gender distribution was relatively balanced (53.5% female; 46.5% male), and respondents were predominantly young to middle-aged adults (26–35 years: 43.0%; 36–45 years: 28.5%; 18–25 years: 13.5%). In terms of region of origin, visitors were primarily from East Asia (Korea: 21.5%; Japan: 15.0%; China: 9.0%), followed by Western Europe (Germany: 11.0%; France: 10.5%; Spain: 8.5%; England: 6.0%). Most respondents were first-time visitors (86.5%) and traveled with friends (46.5%) or tour groups (32.0%). Primary travel motivations were concentrated on nomadic culture and unspoiled nature (each 32.0%), which is consistent with Mongolia's heritage-based destination positioning described in prior studies. The winter data collection at the Khuvsgul Ice Festival provides concrete evidence of visitor engagement with nomadic practices during colder seasons, supporting the four-season tourism model promoted nationally.

Ensuring Accurate Assessment of Nomadic Cultural Perceptions

The initial questionnaire pool comprised 64 items across the measured constructs. Reliability screening identified seven items with weak item–total correlations and/or adverse contributions to internal consistency; these items were removed prior to hypothesis testing. The final instrument used in the analysis therefore comprised 57 items. The overall scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .716$).

Subscale reliabilities were strong for perceived nomadic culture (4 items; $\alpha = .891$), destination image ($\alpha = .733$), destination awareness ($\alpha = .753$), and destination quality ($\alpha = .722$). Reliability estimates for destination branding (overall; $\alpha = .680$) and destination culture ($\alpha = .692$) were slightly below the conventional .70 threshold but are considered acceptable for exploratory research using composite perceptual constructs (Nunnally, 1978). Responses marked "I cannot answer" were treated as missing values and excluded listwise from the relevant analyses.

Sampling adequacy and construct suitability were assessed prior to regression analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.770, exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1970). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4146.558$, $p < .001$), indicating that the correlation matrix was suitable for multivariate analysis (Bartlett, 1954).

Correlations Among Nomadic Perceptions, Destination Image, and Branding

Pearson's correlation analysis (two-tailed; N = 200) revealed positive and statistically significant associations among perceived nomadic culture (NC), destination image (DI), and destination branding (DB). Specifically, NC was moderately and positively correlated with DI ($r = .515$, $p < .01$), and DI was positively correlated with DB ($r = .254$, $p < .01$). NC also showed a small but statistically significant positive correlation with DB ($r = .169$, $p < .05$). These correlation patterns provide preliminary empirical support for the hypothesized relationships and are consistent with the proposed mediating role of destination image, which is examined in the subsequent regression analyses.

Testing Hypotheses Linking Perception, Image, and Branding

To test the proposed hypotheses, a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses were conducted following a mediation-consistent regression logic (Hayes, 2018). Three models were estimated to assess (a) the effect of perceived nomadic culture on destination image, (b) the effect of destination image on destination branding, and (c) whether nomadic culture retains a direct association with branding when destination image is included (Table 2). Linking these 2017 patterns to current trends, the relationships align with 2025 arrival growth (Table 1), confirming the enduring relevance of nomadic heritage branding despite global tourism shifts.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Results for the Relationships Among Nomadic Culture, Destination Image, and Destination Branding (N = 200)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	DV: DI	DV: DB	DV: DB
Perceived Nomadic Culture (NC)	.419*** (.042)	-	.167* (.051)
Destination Image (DI)	-	.217** (.056)	.202** (.055)
R^2	.176	.065	.078
ΔR^2	-	-	.013
F	42.194***	8.814**	8.327***
Durbin-Watson	-	-	1.81

Notes: ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. DI = destination image; DB = destination branding. Values in parentheses represent standard errors.

Model 1 examined the effect of perceived nomadic culture on destination image. The results indicate that perceived nomadic culture significantly and positively predicts destination image ($\beta = .419$, $p < .001$), explaining 17.6% of the variance in destination image ($R^2 = .176$). Thus, H1 is supported. Model 2 tested the direct effect of destination image on destination branding. Destination image was found to be a significant positive predictor of destination branding ($\beta = .217$, $p = .003$), explaining 6.5% of the

variance in destination branding ($R^2 = .065$). Accordingly, H2 is supported. Model 3 simultaneously included perceived nomadic culture and destination image as predictors of destination branding to examine the proposed mediating relationship. The inclusion of perceived nomadic culture resulted in an increase in explained variance ($R^2 = .078$; $\Delta R^2 = .013$). In this combined model, destination image remained a significant predictor of destination branding ($\beta = .202$, $p < .01$), while perceived nomadic culture also retained a significant direct effect ($\beta = .167$, $p < .05$).

The retention of both effects indicates that destination image accounts for part—but not all—of the association between perceptions of living nomadic heritage and destination brand meaning. This pattern is consistent with partial mediation and supports H3 in a mediation-consistent sense (Hayes, 2018), while acknowledging that the cross-sectional design does not establish causal ordering.

Theoretical Contributions: Image-Mediated Brand Meaning in Living-Heritage Contexts

This study contributes to destination branding and cultural geography research by empirically specifying how living heritage functions as an input to destination brand meaning formation in an under-researched nomadic context. Building on nomadic socio-ecological perspectives (Qingwu, 2001; Zhang et al., 2006) and destination image theory (Gunn, 1972; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993), the findings demonstrate that perceived nomadic culture is not merely an attraction attribute but a structured interpretive cue that shapes visitors' holistic destination evaluations. Empirically, perceived nomadic culture showed a moderate association with destination image and significantly predicted destination image. These findings support the view that cultural encounter cues are organized into cognitive–affective image structures that inform subsequent evaluative outcomes (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Chen & Tsai, 2007). This mechanism can be framed as a place-meaning process: visitors' interpretations emerge through encounters with cultural landscapes in which everyday practice and spatial experience are inseparable.

Second, the study clarifies the image-to-brand linkage in a living-heritage setting. Destination image predicted destination branding, supporting the view that brand meaning is partially constructed through integrated destination evaluations rather than isolated attribute perceptions (Blain et al., 2005; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Geographically, this relationship suggests that "brand meaning" functions as a communicable condensation of place-based perceptions—an interpretive outcome rooted in landscape experience rather than solely in promotional discourse. This extends prior destination branding research, which has been dominated by contexts characterized by constructed attractions or monumental heritage, by demonstrating that ongoing cultural practices also generate measurable branding consequences.

The results also resonate with recent studies highlighting the growing importance of intangible heritage, storytelling, and ethical cultural representation in hospitality and tourism branding (Al-Ansi & Loureiro, 2025; Mandagi et al., 2025). In Mongolia's case, nomadic culture functions not merely

as a tourism product but as a living social system that shapes how visitors perceive authenticity, sustainability, and cultural credibility. By empirically linking living heritage, destination image, and destination branding within a single explanatory framework, this study contributes to a more nuanced and mechanism-oriented understanding of brand meaning formation in emerging and culturally distinctive destinations. Importantly, in the context of steppe geographies, nomadic cultural practice is not simply "performed" in space; it is spatially produced through mobility, seasonal rhythms, and socio-ecological adaptation, which visitors encounter as a distinctive cultural landscape.

Partial Mediating Role of Destination Image

This study demonstrates that living nomadic culture functions as a foundational source of destination brand meaning in Mongolia, shaping branding outcomes both through destination image and through direct, culturally embedded interpretations that extend beyond image-based evaluation. The primary contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that destination image partially mediates the relationship between perceived living nomadic heritage and destination branding. This finding advances destination branding theory by clarifying how cultural meanings are translated into brand evaluations, while recognizing that image-based mechanisms alone do not fully account for branding outcomes. For geographical scholarship, the partial mediation pattern suggests that place meaning is structured through both (a) generalized evaluative image dimensions and (b) direct interpretation of lived cultural landscapes.

Consistent with cultural branding and destination image theory, perceptions of Mongolia's nomadic culture significantly shape tourists' destination image, which in turn contributes to more favorable brand evaluations (Gunn, 1972; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Blain et al., 2005). Destination image functions as a cognitive–affective filter through which visitors organize and evaluate destination attributes, allowing culturally grounded cues to be interpreted as coherent brand meaning (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). In other words, image formation provides a "translation layer" that reworks situated encounters (mobility, pastoral practice, hospitality norms, and landscape aesthetics) into a comparative representation of place.

However, the mediation effect is partial rather than full, indicating that living nomadic heritage also exerts a direct influence on destination branding beyond image-based perceptions. This suggests that some cultural meanings operate at a symbolic and interpretive level that is not fully captured by conventional destination image measures. Living heritage, unlike staged or monumental heritage, conveys authenticity, moral value, and identity continuity through direct encounters with everyday practices (Stylos, 2016; Mandagi et al., 2025). These elements shape brand meaning through narrative resonance, emotional engagement, and perceived cultural integrity, independent of aggregated image evaluations. Spatially, this direct pathway is consistent with the idea that certain place meanings arise from immediate landscape practice (e.g., observing herding routines, experiencing mobility infrastructures, and encountering ger-based hospitality), rather than from attribute-based checklists.

When destination image and perceived nomadic culture were considered together, each continued to contribute meaningfully to destination branding evaluations. This confirms that destination image is a key pathway through which living nomadic heritage shapes brand meaning, but it does not fully absorb the influence of cultural perceptions. In other words, visitors appear to form Mongolia's destination brand meaning partly through image-based evaluations and partly through the direct interpretation of living heritage encounters, which is consistent with a partial mediation pattern (Hayes, 2018). This pattern aligns with recent heritage and storytelling research showing that culturally embedded narratives influence destination branding by generating meaning-based associations rather than attribute-based evaluations alone (Sinha & Chinki, 2025). In this sense, destination image explains how cultural perceptions are cognitively organized, while living nomadic heritage explains why the place is experienced as distinctive and meaningful within a specific steppe landscape setting. The findings suggest that these nomadic heritage interpretations are broadly consistent across the steppe, although spatial variation (e.g., by proximity to urban centers versus remote landscapes) merits further examination.

Implications for Place-Based Governance and Planning

The findings have implications for place-based governance, spatial planning, and heritage management in living-heritage landscapes. Because visitors' evaluations are shaped through both image-based assessment and the direct interpretation of everyday cultural practice, policy approaches that treat nomadic heritage as a "display asset" risk weakening the very interpretive conditions that generate place meaning. For steppe regions, safeguarding cultural landscape integrity—including mobility routes, pasture access, seasonal rhythms, and community-based hospitality practices—should be understood as part of destination meaning-making rather than as a separate preservation agenda.

Strategic Recommendations

(1) Cultural landscape protection and mobility-sensitive planning. Planning instruments should recognize nomadic mobility as a spatial practice rather than as a cultural performance. This implies prioritizing pasture connectivity, seasonal access routes, and low-impact visitor infrastructure that does not fragment movement patterns.

(2) Interpretation as spatial mediation. Visitor-facing interpretation should foreground how steppe landscapes are lived—through seasonal rhythms, herding practices, and socio-ecological adaptation—so that "image" is anchored in geographic understanding rather than simplified branding cues.

(3) Governance for authenticity and risk reduction. Because authenticity operates partly outside conventional image dimensions, governance should address commodification risks by supporting

community-led guidelines on culturally appropriate forms of engagement and by strengthening local capacity to define the terms of representation.

(4) Regional coordination across communities. Consistent with cooperative branding logic (Cai, 2002), coordination across aimags and communities can be reframed as regional place-making: aligning narratives and visitor flows while maintaining spatial diversity and local control.

(5) Market expansion framed as spatial accessibility. Rather than positioning market broadening primarily as promotion, geographic barriers (connectivity, cost, and seasonal accessibility) should be treated as spatial constraints shaping who can encounter the steppe and how meaning is formed.

Practical and Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that destination branding strategies should move beyond visual imagery and slogan-based promotion to foreground interpretive cultural meaning. For destinations characterized by living heritage, branding effectiveness depends not only on projecting favorable images but also on enabling meaningful encounters with everyday cultural practices. From a geographical perspective, this means treating branding outcomes as downstream effects of cultural landscape conditions: when landscape practices are disrupted or over-staged, brand meaning becomes thinner and less credible.

Destination marketing organizations and tourism planners should therefore integrate living nomadic heritage into branding through festivals, community-based experiences, storytelling formats, and ethical representation frameworks. Such approaches allow visitors to construct brand meaning through participation and narrative engagement rather than passive consumption (Sinha & Chinki, 2025; Polo-Peña et al., 2025). These strategies are best interpreted as place-making tools: they organize how outsiders understand and move through cultural landscapes, shaping the spatial production of meaning.

The partial mediation finding further implies that over-reliance on image-based branding may underutilize the full branding potential of living heritage. Planning for living nomadic heritage sites, as in the Liangzhu case, shows that successful outcomes depend on reconciling local economic priorities with authentic cultural presentation and stakeholder collaboration (Dredge, 2013). Policies that support community participation, heritage safeguarding, and ethical tourism governance can strengthen brand credibility while reducing risks associated with cultural commodification and heritage exploitation (Al-Ansi & Loureiro, 2025).

Recognizing nomadic culture as a living social system rather than a consumable attraction enables branding strategies that emphasize authenticity, ethical representation, and long-term cultural sustainability. These implications are explicitly contextualized within the post-pandemic landscape, where 2025 arrival surges demonstrate continued demand for living-heritage experiences. The post-pandemic increase in arrivals further underscores the need to focus on emerging markets—such as

increased Chinese visitation through cultural contrast positioning and long-haul adventure seekers—using coordinated, heritage-focused campaigns.

Research Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The primary concern is that the data were collected in 2017 using convenience intercept sampling at two locations, which limits statistical generalizability and temporal representativeness. While the sample captures pre-COVID perceptions of nomadic heritage branding, the age of the data raises questions about its relevance in the context of post-pandemic shifts in travel behavior and marketing. However, the perceptual mechanisms examined—namely, how living heritage shapes destination image and brand meaning—are expected to be comparatively stable over time, particularly where cultural landscapes remain materially continuous (e.g., where pasture-based livelihoods and mobility practices persist), even as tourism volumes fluctuate. This stability is reinforced by the 2025 trends in Table 1, which exceed pre-pandemic levels and support the continued applicability of the findings.

Second, the study relies on self-reported, cross-sectional perceptual measures; therefore, the mediation-consistent pattern should be interpreted as an explanatory mechanism rather than evidence of causal ordering (Hayes, 2018). Third, the analysis focuses on visitors and does not incorporate supply-side stakeholders such as destination marketing organizations (DMOs) or tour operators.

For a geographical extension, future research could (a) integrate qualitative landscape-based methods (e.g., mobile interviews, visitor mapping, or ethnographic observation of encounter settings) to connect perception to specific spatial practices, and (b) compare multiple steppe or pastoral regions to examine how variations in mobility infrastructure and governance shape meaning formation. Future research could also replicate the model using post-COVID samples, employ longitudinal designs to test temporal ordering, and compare Mongolia with other nomadic or living-heritage destinations (e.g., Inner Mongolia) to strengthen external validity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study clarifies how living nomadic heritage contributes to destination brand meaning in Mongolia by distinguishing the complementary roles of destination image and direct cultural interpretation. The key conclusions are as follows:

Living nomadic heritage is a core source of destination brand meaning. Mongolia's nomadic culture functions not merely as a tourism attraction but as a foundational interpretive resource through which visitors understand, evaluate, and emotionally connect with the destination. Destination image plays an important, but not exclusive, role in translating cultural meaning into branding evaluations. Destination image structures visitors' cultural impressions into coherent cognitive and affective judgments.

The relationship between nomadic culture and destination branding follows a partial mediation pattern. While destination image explains part of how living heritage shapes brand meaning, cultural perceptions also exert a direct influence through symbolic, emotional, and moral interpretation. Living heritage operates through both structured and unmediated pathways. Brand meaning emerges not only from aggregated image attributes but also from direct encounters with everyday cultural practices embedded in landscapes, festivals, and social interactions.

The study advances destination branding theory by empirically specifying how living heritage contributes to brand meaning without assuming full mediation. Recognizing partial mediation enables a more nuanced understanding of heritage-based branding processes. Managerially, effective branding of living-heritage destinations requires a dual strategy. Destination marketers should combine image-building with policies and practices that preserve and communicate the immediacy of living nomadic culture, particularly for first-time visitors.

Nomadic culture and unspoiled nature remain Mongolia's most salient competitive assets. Cooperative branding approaches across rural and nomadic communities can generate consistent destination meanings, strengthen regional brand identity, and enhance long-term sustainability. Overall, the findings show that living heritage operates as cultural landscape practice: visitors' "brand meaning" is not detached from geography but is produced through spatial encounter, mobility, and socio-ecological continuity in the steppe.

Declarations

Funding
This research and the preparation of the manuscript received no specific external funding.

Competing interests
The author(s) declare that they have no financial or non-financial competing interests relevant to the content of this article.

Author contributions
The author performed all stages of the work.

Data availability
The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical approval
Not applicable: this study did not involve human participants, animal experiments, or sensitive personal data requiring ethical approval..

Informed consent
Data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the processing of their data and provided their consent by completing the questionnaire.

Use of AI tools
The author(s) did not use generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the preparation of this manuscript.

Publisher/editorial disclaimer
The statements and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the publisher or the editorial board.

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