

Direct and indirect effects of self-image congruence on brand loyalty

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to test a model dealing with direct and indirect effects of self-image congruence on brand loyalty. The model posits that self-image congruence positively affects brand loyalty directly and indirectly through functional congruity, product involvement, and brand relationship quality. The model was tested using cars as the product stimulus in a survey of 600 car owners. We chose automobiles because cars are high in conspicuousness (therefore are likely to be evaluated using symbolic criteria) and are used across a variety of situations. The model was mostly supported by the data. First, the results document the paramount importance of self-congruity in predicting brand loyalty. Second, our study integrated the emerging construct of brand relationship quality into self-congruity theory. Third, in regards to the hypothesized effect of self-congruity on functional congruity, the data were supportive. Additional managerial implications are discussed.

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Keywords: Self-image congruence; Self-congruity; Brand personality; Brand loyalty; Functional congruity; Product involvement

1. Introduction

The consumer behavior literature has increasingly shown that brand attitude or evaluation is not only determined by functional facets of the brand but also by symbolic criteria (Park et al., 1986; Sirgy, 1982). The motivation to express their own self is often the driving force that prompts consumers to purchase goods and services (Sirgy, 1986). Much research is available on self-image congruence (Sirgy et al., 2000; Sirgy and Su, 2000). *Self-image congruence* refers to the match between consumers' self-concept (actual self, ideal self, etc.) and the user image (or "personality") of a given product, brand, store, etc. "Self-image congruence", "self-congruence", "self-congruity", and "image congruence" are used interchangeably in the consumer behavior literature.

We conducted a study to focus on the effects of self-image congruence on brand loyalty. The study contributes to the lit-

erature on self-image congruence in several ways. First, much of the research in self-image congruence has predicted product preference (e.g., clothing style), brand preference, brand choice, consumer satisfaction, and store loyalty (Sirgy, 1982). No studies were found dealing with the effects of self-image congruence on brand loyalty related to consumer goods. Our study focuses on investigating the effects of self-image congruence on brand loyalty in the context of automobiles.

Second, past research has shown that self-image congruence influences consumer behavior directly and indirectly through functional congruity (Sirgy et al., 1991). Functional congruity refers to the match between consumers' ideal expectations of utilitarian product features and their perceptions of how the brand is perceived along the same features. Our study extends the research in this area by developing a model asserting that the self-congruity effect on functional congruity is moderated by product involvement. That is, self-congruity affects functional congruity under high than low product involvement conditions.

Third, the literature suggests that self-congruity plays a role in motivating consumers to process information (Mangleburg et al., 1998). That is, self-congruity heightens consumers'

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involvement with the product category. Our model incorporated the role of product involvement in the indirect effects of self-congruity on brand loyalty and tested those hypotheses.

Finally, recent research on brand relationship quality (Fournier, 1994, 1998; Aaker, 1996; Thorbjörnsen et al., 2002; Aaker et al., 2004) has shown that this construct can be useful in predicting a variety of consumer behavior constructs. We put this construct to the test by arguing that self-congruity plays a role in brand relationship quality, which in turn contributes to predictive variance in brand loyalty. Our model also posits that the self-congruity effect on brand relationship quality is moderated by product involvement. That is, self-congruity is likely to positively influence brand relationship quality under high than low involvement conditions.

2. Conceptual development, model, and hypotheses

Our conceptual model is graphically shown in Fig. 1 (upper model). The model posits that self-congruity positively affects brand loyalty directly and indirectly through functional congruity, product involvement, and brand relationship quality.

To explain the model fully, first we will establish the case that self-congruity plays an important role in brand loyalty. Next we will argue that self-congruity affects brand loyalty through functional congruity, brand relationship quality, and product involvement.

2.1. The effect of self-congruity on brand loyalty

Much research has uncovered the fact that consumers purchase goods that act as a vehicle to express their identity (Aaker, 1996). Specifically, brands are considered to have a “personality” that reflect the stereotypic image of the typical user of the brand—brand-user image. Consumers attempt to evaluate a brand by matching the brand-user image (sometimes referred to as “symbolic attributes”) with their self-concept (actual self-ideal self, social self, etc.). This matching process involving the brand-user image with consumers’ self-concept is referred to as *self-congruity* (Sirgy, 1982, 1986). Self-congruity plays an important role in purchase motivation and brand loyalty (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy and Samli, 1985).

Self-congruity is guided by self-concept motives such as the need for self-esteem and self-consistency (Aaker, 1997; Biel, 1997; Malhotra, 1981, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). That is, the greater the match between the brand-user image with the consumer’s ideal self-image, the more likely that consumers implicitly infer that the use of the brand should meet their *need for self-esteem*. This is because the behavior that allows people to reduce discrepancies between their actual and ideal self serve to boost self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). The *need for self-consistency* is another self-concept motive that motivates people to behave in ways consistent with how they see themselves—consistent with their actual self. People have beliefs about their own identities,

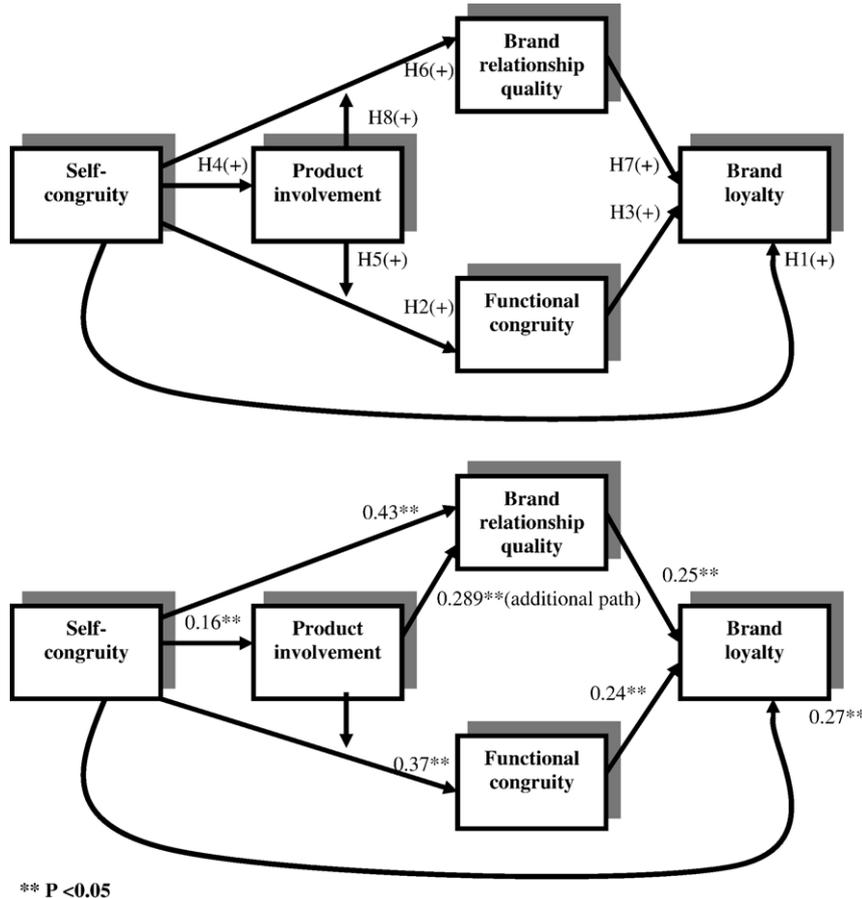


Fig. 1. The conceptual model versus the empirically derived model.

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