Self-image congruence in consumer behavior

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ABSTRACT

Self-image congruence helps explain and predict different facets of consumer behavior. To date, application of self-congruence theories to tourist post-travel evaluations is limited. This study tests a model that includes self-image congruence, cruise ship passengers' experiences, satisfaction, and behavioral intention. Path modeling tests the hypotheses using a sample of 169 cruise ship travelers. Results indicate that self-image congruence (actual and ideal) affects passengers' experiences but indirectly influences satisfaction levels. Satisfaction positively relates to respondents' propensity to recommend. Overall, this research advances the understanding of cruise ship passengers' experiences and behaviors offering important managerial implications.

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1. Introduction

The consumer behavior literature supports the proposition that individuals' self images dictate specific purchase behavior patterns (e.g., Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). Consumers buy products and brands they believe to possess symbolic images similar and/or complementary to their self-image, that is, to achieve image congruence (Heath and Scott, 1998). Strong supporting evidence show self-image congruence explains and predicts different aspects of consumer behavior (He and Mukherjee, 2007).

A relatively small body of work examines the self-image congruence construct to explain tourist behaviors (Litvin et al., 2001; Litvin and Goh, 2002; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Todd, 2001). Chon (1992) first empirically applies self-image congruence theory to tourism. He finds tourist satisfaction significantly correlates with self-image/destination image congruity. Tourists perceiving a low discrepancy between a destination's image and self-image tend to be more satisfied with the trip experience.

Furthermore, Sirgy and Su (2000) propose an integrative model establishing the relationships among destination image, self-congruence, and tourists' behaviors. Beerli et al. (2007) investigate the self-image congruence role in predicting destination choice. Findings reveal a match between a destination's image and one's self-concept, associates with a greater tendency to visit the destination.

Other studies, however, fail to provide empirical support for the theory in tourism. For example, Litvin and Goh (2002) investigate the effect of self-image congruence on travel interest and intention to visit. Litvin and Goh (2002) report contradictory results and question whether self-congruity theory is an effective tool for tourism marketers. Several other scholars call for research to establish the relevance of self-congruity theory and to further extend the conceptualization in tourism (e.g., Beerli et al., 2007; Boksberger et al., forthcoming; Kastenholz, 2004; Murphy et al., 2007). Tourists increasingly consume travel and tourism products (e.g., a cruise vacation) as a means of self-expression (Gross and Brown, 2006; King, 2002). Still, no known studies exist to simultaneously investigate the relationship among self-image congruence and the evaluative variable experiences, satisfaction, and intention to recommend. This study further validates self-congruity theory in tourism with specific reference to cruise ship passengers.

Cruise vacations are the fastest growing segment in the tourism industry with an average annual passenger growth rate of 7.2% (Cruise Lines International Association, 2010). Cruising enables tourists to express their self-concepts (Yarnal and Kerstetter, 2005). The activity offers tourists experiential benefits and opportunities to engage in a memorable experience (Duman and Mattila, 2005; Huang and Hsu, 2010). Despite a cruise vacation's symbolic nature, the study of cruisers' experiences and post-travel behavior remains under-explored in tourism research (Petrick, 2004).

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses development

2.1. Symbolic consumption, self-concept and self-image congruence

The consumer behavior literature establishes that people consume products/brands/services for both functional value and symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Lee and Hyman, 2008; Leigh and Gabel, 1992; Solomon, 1983). Levy (1959) concludes people buy products not only for what they can *do*, but also for what they *mean*. Product

consumption symbolizes personal attributes, motivations and social patterns. Symbolic consumption reflects the personality and lifestyle of consumers, expressing social distinctions (e.g., Sirgy, 1982). For example, people *consume* luxury products (e.g., high-performance automobiles) to reinforce their status symbol in society (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996; Eastman et al., 1999; O'Cass and Frost, 2002). Consumption serves as a vehicle of self-expression (Aaker, 1996) and consumers choose products/brands perceptually consistent with their own self-concept (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1982). Purchasing and using products allow consumers to define, maintain, and enhance their self-concept.

Self-concept research originated in the 1960s (Birdwell, 1968; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Grubb and Hupp, 1968; Grubb and Stern, 1971; Hamm and Cundiff, 1969). In early studies, the self-concept's operationalization was a one-dimensional construct. Scholars challenge the traditional approach and posit a person might have multiple 'selves' (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). Recent conceptualizations construe self-concept as a multi-dimensional construct (Sirgy et al., 2000; Todd, 2001). The marketing literature identifies four dimensions of self-concept to explain and predict behavior: (1) actual self-concept ("me as I am"), how a person sees himself or herself; (2) ideal-self-concept ("the good me"), how a person would like to see himself or herself; (3) social self-concept, how consumers think others see them; (4) ideal social self-concept, how a person would like to be perceived by other people (Belch and Landon, 1977; Dolich, 1969; Hughes and Guerrero, 1971; Sirgy, 1982). Table 1 shows the majority of consumer studies in marketing and tourism operationalize self-concept in terms of two components: actual and ideal. Accordingly, this study's focuses on actual-self and ideal-self dimensions because they receive the most empirical support in research.

Self-image congruence refers to the cognitive match between consumers' self-concept (e.g., actual self, ideal self, social self and ideal social self) and a product/brand image, store image, destination image or user image of a given product/brand/service (Sirgy et al., 1997, 2000; Sirgy and Su, 2000). User image is a stereotyped perception of a generalized user of a particular product/brand (Sirgy, 1986). Self-congruence, self-image congruence, self-congruity, and image congruence interchangeably describe this phenomenon. Following the tourism literature (e.g., Beerli et al., 2007), the study here uses the term self-image congruence to denote the match between tourists' (cruisers') self-concept (actual and ideal) and the image of other tourists (cruisers).

Table 1 identifies two broad research streams on self-image congruence. Earlier research mostly focuses on the relationship between self-image congruence and consumer's pre-purchase evaluations, such as purchase intentions (Landon, 1974), product preferences (Dolich, 1969) and product choice (Malhotra, 1988). However, some researchers highlight the benefits of extending self-image congruence conceptualizations to model post-consumption evaluations (e.g., Sirgy et al., 1997). Recent consumer behavior studies investigate the role of self-image congruence on various post-consumption variables such as satisfaction (Ekinci et al., 2008; Jamal and Goode, 2001; Jamal and Al-Marri, 2007; Sirgy et al., 1997), loyalty (He and Mukherjee, 2007; Kressmann et al., 2006), perceived quality (Kwak and Kang, 2009); and attitudes (Ibrahim and Najjar, 2008).

Few tourism studies examine self-image congruence theories. Among the studies identified, three address post-consumption variables (satisfaction, intention to return and intention to recommend) (Chon, 1992; Kastenholz, 2004; Litvin and Kar, 2003) and two examine the relationship between self-image congruence and pre-travel variables (motivation to visit and destination choice) (Beerli et al., 2007; Litvin and Goh, 2002). To date, no studies exist that simultaneously investigate the relationships among self-image congruence, experiences, tourist satisfaction, and intention to recommend.

The common method of measuring self-image congruence employs semantic differential scales (Birdwell, 1968; Dolich, 1969; Malhotra,

Table 1
Summary of selected studies on self-concept/self-image congruence.

Authors	Study settings	Dimensions of self concept	Type of scale	Dependent variables
Studies in marketing				
Birdwell (1968)	Automobile	Actual self	Semantic differential	Brand ownership
Dolich (1969)	Various Products	Actual self; ideal self	Semantic differential	Product preference
Landon (1974)	Various products	Actual self; ideal self	Likert scale	Purchase intention
Belch and Landon (1977)	Various products	Actual self; ideal self;	Likert scale	Purchase intention
Malhotra (1988)	Houses	Actual self; ideal self; social self	Semantic differential	Product choice
Hong and Zinkhan (1995)	Automobile and shampoos	Actual self; ideal self	Likert scale	Product preference; purchase intention; memory
Ericksen (1996)	Automobile	Actual; ideal self	Semantic differential	Product preference; purchase intention
Sirgy et al. (1997)	Various: products and services	Actual self	Likert scale	Brand preference; consumer satisfaction; brand attitude; choice
Quester et al. (2000)	Functional and status related products	Actual self; ideal self	Likert-type scale	Product evaluation
Ekinci and Riley (2003)	Hospitality services	Actual self; ideal self	Semantic differential	Satisfaction; attitude; service quality; and purchase intention
Back (2005)	Hospitality services	Social self; ideal self	Likert scale	Satisfaction
Kressmann et al. (2006)	Automobile	Actual self; ideal self	Likert scale	Brand loyalty;
He and Mukherjee (2007)	Retailing	Actual self; ideal self; social self; ideal social self	Likert scale	Satisfaction; perceived value; loyalty
Jamal and Al-Marri (2007)	Automobile	Actual self	Likert scale	Satisfaction; brand preference
Ekinci et al. (2008)	Hospitality services	Actual self; ideal self	Likert scale	Satisfaction; attitudes; intention to return
Han and Back (2008)	Hospitality services	Social self; ideal social self	Likert scale	Consumption emotion; loyalty
Ibrahim and Najjar (2008)	Retailing	Actual self; ideal self	Likert scale	Attitudes
Kwak and Kang (2009)	Sports merchandise	Actual self; ideal self	Likert scale	Perceived quality; purchase intention
Studies in tourism				
Chon (1992)	Tourism	Actual self; ideal self	Likert scale	Satisfaction
Litvin and Goh (2002)	Tourism	Actual self; ideal self	Semantic differential; Likert scale	Interest to visit; likelihood of visitation
Litvin and Kar (2003)	Tourism	Actual self; ideal self	Likert scale	Satisfaction
Kastenholz (2004)	Tourism	Actual self	Semantic differential	Intention to recommend; intention to return
Beerli et al. (2007)	Tourism	Actual self; ideal self	Semantic differential	Choice