



## Full Length Article

## Actual and ideal self-congruity affecting consumers' emotional and behavioral responses toward an online store

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## ABSTRACT

Recognizing that a consumer's congruity judgment with a store image can be formed with both actual and ideal self-images, this study investigates the differential effects that these two congruity judgments might have on a consumer's evaluation of an online store. The results indicate that the closer the image of an online store is to the consumer's actual self, the more favorably the store is evaluated. Interestingly, however, the proximity between the image of an online store and a consumer's ideal self has a negative effect on consumer evaluation toward the store. The results also indicate that the positive visual cues of an online store generate consumer delight more significantly than information cues do. Consumer delight is found to significantly increase the intention to make an initial purchase from the store.

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## 1. Introduction

Online retailing has increased dramatically in the last couple of decades and continues to grow at a healthy pace. eMarketer, a global research and advisory institution, reported that U.S. online retail sales reached \$194.3 billion in 2011 recording a 16.1% rise in sales revenue from 2010 and will hit \$361.9 billion by 2016 (Fredricksen, 2012). The National Retail Federation predicts that the growth of online purchasing will be between 9% and 12% for 2014, far outperforming the 4% rate of growth of total retail sales. As the online market expanded, so did the number of online stores offering similar products for consumers to choose from (Belicove, 2013). To win consumer endorsement and loyalty in this competitive environment, it becomes crucial for the retailer to generate positive emotional responses from consumers in addition to delivering core retail functions competently (Zorfias, 2011).

A key factor affecting the consumer's emotional connection with a retail store is self-image (Sirgy, 1982). Consumers bring their self-images into the evaluation of a brand or a store and are more likely to pay attention to and choose the one with image characteristics similar to their own. In fact, the extant literature has shown that the degree to which the images of a brand/store

matches self-images of consumers (i.e., self-congruity) exerts a significant influence on consumer behavior in various contexts, such as when forming attitudes toward brick-and-mortar and online stores (Ha & Im, 2012; Sirgy, Johar, Samli, & Claiborne, 1991), evaluating the service quality (Ekinci & Riley, 2003; Han & Huyn, 2013), determining the effectiveness of advertisements (Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Taylor, Strutton, & Thompson, 2012) and so on. The effect of self-congruity is particularly evident where the need for self-expression plays an integral role in a consumption decision, such as for clothing (Liljander, Polsa, & van Riel, 2009).

To understand the mechanism of self-congruity affecting consumer behavior, it is important to recognize that self-image can be formed with different reference points about one's self. In particular, consumers can construct a self-image about who they actually are (i.e., actual self-image) as well as about who they aspire to be (i.e., ideal self-image) (Ekinci & Riley, 2003; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Malhotra, 1988; Munson, 1973). Much of the extant literature has focused on the congruity between brand/store image and the consumer's actual self-image. Yet little attention has been paid to understanding how congruity with the consumer's ideal self might influence consumer responses in conjunction with the congruity with the actual self. Investigating the latter is important, given that the images portrayed in marketing and branding are predominantly the idealized images of target consumers. Our study addresses this issue.

Specifically, we posit that consumers will judge the congruity between store image and their actual and ideal self-images immediately after visiting an online store. The results of congruity

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judgment will bias their evaluations about the store's atmospheric cues (e.g., specific design features of an online store). This will in turn determine the nature and the extent of the consumer's emotional response towards the store. We investigate consumer delight as a key emotional response mediating the effect of atmospheric cues on purchasing intention. We also examine which atmospheric cues of an online store would affect consumer delight the most. The results of our study will not only clarify the conflicting views regarding the effects of self-image but also provide practical information as to how online stores can be designed to generate positive emotional and behavioral endorsements from consumers.

The remainder of the study is organized as follows. First, we discuss the literature and conceptual framework used to build our model. We then describe the research method and the data analyses we employed, followed by a discussion of the results. Finally, we elucidate the theoretical and practical implications of the study results.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Atmospheric cues and store image

#### 2.1.1. Online store atmospheric cues

The term, atmospheric, was initially conceptualized by Kotler (1973), who argued that the ways in which retailers design specific shopping environments determine consumers' ultimate purchasing decisions. Kotler (1973) defined atmospheric as "the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability" (p. 50). Atmospheric cues refer to all elements in buying environments that can stimulate a consumer's senses. For brick-and-mortar stores, Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, and Voss's (2002) identified three categories of atmospheric cues, which include the design cues (e.g., layouts, colors, and equipment), ambient cues (e.g., scents, music, and temperature), and social cues (e.g., number, attire, and kindness of sales people).

In the context of the online store, however, environmental cues tend to be confined to visual and audible dimensions, as the tactile, olfactory, and social aspects of retail experiences are difficult to be created (Koo & Ju, 2010). Eroglu, Machleit, and Davis (2001) further operationalized online store atmospheric cues into two categories: low task-relevant cues and high task-relevant cues. Low task-relevant cues are the design elements that are not directly related with helping consumers achieve their shopping goals but with making consumers' shopping experience more enjoyable and pleasurable (e.g., colors, aesthetics, ambiance, and other visual elements of online stores). High task-relevant cues refer to the features designed to facilitate achieving consumers' shopping goals (e.g., information about products, prices, and services offered by the site). In short, low task-relevant cues are related to a website's visuals and high task-relevant cues shape the way information is presented. We thus refer to the former as visual cues and the latter as information cues in this study.

#### 2.1.2. Online store image

A store can be perceived as having an image that can be expressed with human-like characteristics, known as store image (Sirgy & Samli, 1985). Specifically, this image is "the way in which the store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes" (Martineau, 1958, p. 47). Functional qualities indicate the physical and tangible qualities of store elements such as price and assortments of merchandise, store location, and store layout. Psychological attributes refer to emotions evoked by store atmosphere and

personal encounters, such as feeling pleasant, warm, and welcomed. The store image is the consumer's aggregate perception built on these characteristics (Cho & Kim, 2012; Hopkins & Alford, 2005; Kim, 2004).

Upon forming a store image, consumers make immediate assessments about how close store image is to their self-images (i.e., self-congruity judgment). The judgment of congruity is based on the degree to which a consumer perceives that the image of a store matches his or her own self-image (Mazursky & Jacoby, 1986; Mittal, 1994; Sirgy, 1982). This judgment can yield different outcomes depending upon which self-image a consumer uses as a point of reference. A different self-image can be evoked in terms of the role one has to play or the context in which such a role is played (Malhotra, 1988; Munson, 1973). Even when performing a specific role in a specific context, people can form self-images about who they actually are (i.e., actual self-image) and/or who they aspire to be (i.e., ideal self-image). We first investigate how congruity judgment with both the ideal self and the actual self come into play when consumers evaluate the way an online store is designed.

### 2.2. Differential effects of self and ideal self-congruity on consumer evaluation

The extant literature has indicated that consumers tend to grant special attachments to the products or services whose images are in line with the consumer's actual self-perception (Sirgy, 1982, 1985). This special attachment, in turn, affects their subsequent evaluation of specific attributes of the product or service. Indeed, many empirical studies have supported that actual self-congruity positively biased the evaluation of specific attributes of both brick-and-mortar and online stores (Chebat, Sirgy, & St-James, 2006; Cho & Kim, 2012; Ha & Im, 2012; Kang, Hong, & Lee, 2009). We thus expect that the actual-self congruity will have a significant and positive influence on the evaluation of both visual and informational cues of an online store.

The role of ideal self-congruity on consumer evaluation is not clear, however. While some argue that ideal self-congruity positively affects consumer evaluations, others argue that it elicits rather negative reactions. Studies supporting the former have based their logic on self-esteem motivation (Cohen, 1959; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995). This refers to an individual's desire to behave in the way that enhances his/her self-image. According to this view, individuals aim to achieve a higher standard by associating themselves with others who embody their desired images rather than with those who project the images they currently have. Therefore, a product or brand that projects the ideal self-image of a consumer is perceived more positively than one that projects the actual self (Ekinci & Riley, 2003; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Hosany & Martin, 2012; Malhotra, 1988).

The opposite direction has also been argued based on the self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) theory (Tesser, 1988). Since individuals attach great importance to maintaining their self-evaluations (i.e., the way an individual evaluates him/herself), they tend to respond unfavorably to others who threaten their own self-evaluations (Tesser, 1988). In particular, people tend to rigorously compare themselves with those who outperform them on specific attributes important and relevant to them. This discrepancy damages their self-esteem, which will generate negative emotions toward their betters. These negative emotions include jealousy, depression, sadness, and frustration that can be painful for people to deal with (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Higgins, 1987). For example, Gulas and McKeage (2000) and Gilbert, Giesler, and Morris (1995) made respondents compare between them and attractive models in advertisements and found that this comparison led to the feelings of inferiority, jealousy,

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