

Self-congruence, functional congruence, and destination choice

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Abstract

This study's purpose is to investigate the effects of self-congruence and functional congruence on tourists' destination choice. The present research contributes to the gap in the consumer behavior literature by examining the relationships among self-congruence, functional congruence, and destination choice. Based on a sample of 367 British residents, the three research hypotheses are tested using multinomial logistic regression analysis. The study results suggest that a tourist's destination choice is influenced strongly by functional congruence, but not by self-congruence. Theoretical and managerial implications as well as future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: self-congruence, functional congruence, destination choice, destination image.

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1. Introduction

An essential part of tourism studies is to understand why tourists visit a specific destination and why they choose a particular destination among the others (Khan, Olsen and Var, 1993; Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). Successful prediction of tourism destination choice provides strategic intelligence for destination marketers and destination management organizations (Oppermann, 1997). A consensus exists in the tourism literature that tourists' choice of a destination is influenced by psychological (e.g., attitudes, motivation, and self-concept) and functional (utilitarian) variables (Sirakaya, Sonmez and Choi, 2001). Sirgy and Su (2000) argue *self-congruence* and *functional congruence* are essential for understanding destination image and tourist decision making. Self-congruence refers to the match/mismatch between the perceived image of a destination and tourist self-image. Functional congruence refers to the match/mismatch between perceived performances of the destination's functional attributes and the tourist's ideal performances of the destination's functional attributes. Chon and Olsen (1991) demonstrate functional congruence affects the tourist's post-consumption evaluation (e.g., satisfaction and destination loyalty). Sirgy and Su (2000) suggest self-congruence and functional congruence influence travel behaviors.

While recent studies investigate tourist behavior in various settings, self-congruence and functional congruence research remains limited (Andersson, 2007; Grzeskowiak and Su, 2005; Sirgy, Grewal and Mangleburg, 2000; Sirgy, Oh, Fiore and Jeoung, 2007; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Yuan and Wu, 2008). This study aims to bridge this gap by assessing self and functional congruence theory's validity to predict tourists' holiday destination choices.

2. Conceptual development, model, and hypotheses

The consumer behavior literature establishes people consume products for their functional and symbolic values (Belk, 1988; Lee and Hyman, 2008; Sirgy *et al.*, 2005; Solomon, 1983). Sirgy, Grewal, and Mangleburg (1997) argue product value should be classified as being *functional* and *symbolic*. The product's functional image includes utilitarian benefits while the symbolic image includes consumption stereotyping based on user personality traits such as modern, classy, fashionable, and young (Sirgy and Su, 2000). Studies relating to tourism destinations provide evidence of consumption stereotyping (Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Chon and Olsen, 1991; Litvin and Goh, 2002; Todd, 2001). For example, tourists tend to think a tourist taking a Caribbean cruise is upper class or wealthy. Similarly, destination perceptions include romantic, friendly, or family oriented. Studies reveal that individuals stereotype themselves based on the destination they visit, or regard themselves as

similar to people who visit the same tourism destination (Chon, 1992; Sirgy and Su, 2000).

Previous research shows self-congruence plays a significant role in predicting various consumer behavior aspects such as advertising effectiveness, product attitude, brand choice, brand preference, brand loyalty, and satisfaction (Bjerke and Polegato, 2006; Ekinci and Riley, 2003; He and Mukherjee, 2007; Kressmann, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber and Lee, 2006).

Surprisingly, the simultaneous effect of the self-congruence and functional congruence on destination choice is left largely under-investigated. Sirgy and Su (2000) introduce an integrative model of destination image, self-congruence, and functional congruence to predict travel behaviors (see Figure 1). The model postulates self-congruence positively influences destination choice behavior (Hypotheses 1a-1b). Four self-congruence types based on the multidimensional nature of self concept—actual, ideal, social, and ideal social—commonly are regarded relevant to explain and predict consumers' purchasing behavior (Sirgy 1982). However, most tourism studies operationalize self-congruence based on two self-concept components—actual and ideal—because the social self measures highly correlate with actual and ideal self-concepts (Beerli et al., 2007; Chon, 1992; Ekinci and Riley, 2003).

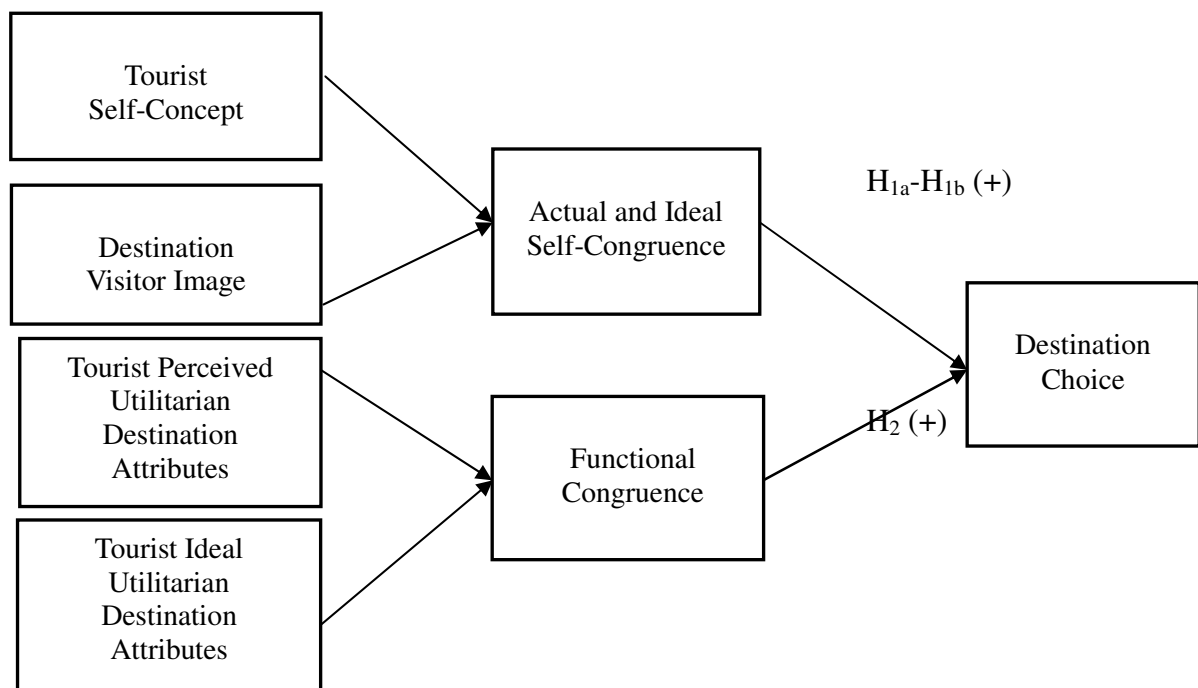


Fig. 1.

Conceptual model of self-congruence and functional congruence in predicting destination choice.

The model postulates that tourists evaluate destination image based their actual and ideal self image (self-congruence). In turn self-congruence positively influences destination choice (Hypotheses 1a-1b). Tourists also evaluate destination image based on their functional or utilitarian attributes such as service quality, price, location, and physical attractiveness (Sirgy and Su, 2000). The model suggests functional congruence results from matching the destination's utility based performance attributes and the tourist's desired performance attributes. A close match positively influences destination choice (Hypothesis 2).

2.1. Self-congruence's effect on destination choice

Previous tourism studies show that individuals form a *match* between their self image and destination image, or between their self image and the image of other people who visit the same destination. These studies suggest self-congruence plays a significant role in predicting tourist behavior. For example, destination self-congruence affects intention to visit, intention to recommend, positive attitudes towards a destination, higher tourist satisfaction, and tourist loyalty (Beerli et al., 2007; Chon, 1992; Chon and Olsen, 1991; Kastenholtz, 2004; Litvin and Goh, 2002; Sirgy and Su, 2000).

Self-congruence's influence on destination choice comes from the tourist's need to satisfy self-consistency and self-esteem (Sirgy, 1983; Sirgy and Su, 2000). A motivation to visit a particular destination exists if the destination's image is consistent with the tourist's actual self-image. For example, a European tourist tends to think a person taking a vacation to Spain or Turkey is either middle class or family oriented. A middle class person visiting Spain likely satisfies his/her need for self consistency. Similarly, upper-class and wealthy individuals may satisfy their self consistency by visiting Monaco, Mauritius, or Barbados. These destinations are perceived to be upscale, luxury holiday destinations. Similarly, a working class woman may feel uncomfortable visiting an upscale holiday destination (e.g., Monaco) because the typical visitor's image in an upscale holiday destination is perceived to be inconsistent with her actual self-image.

Self-congruence applications in decision making also may vary depending on the consumption situation because a destination image matches a tourist's ideal self-image. This visit fulfills the need for self-esteem. A Swiss ski resort's image may be youthful, adventurous, and upper class. If this image matches with the tourist's ideal self concept, visiting this destination elevates the tourist's self-esteem. Thus the following hypotheses are developed from this discussion.

H_{1a}: Actual self-congruence positively influences a tourists' destination choice.

H_{1b}: Ideal self-congruence positively influences a tourists' destination choice.

2.2. Functional congruence's effect on destination choice

Functional congruence is based on the product's perceived functional attributes related to the consumer's desired performance attributes. A tourist destination's functional congruence is defined by how well the destination meets the tourist's aspiration level regarding the destination's performance (Sirgy and Su, 2000). In other words, the destination's expected utilitarian or performance-related attributes affect functional congruence, not symbolic or value expressive attributes. Utilitarian based performance destination attributes aim to satisfy the tourist's most essential holiday needs such as relaxation, comfort, safety, security, convenience and accessibility. The destination's utilitarian attributes can be related to *attractiveness of the destination atmospherics* (e.g., natural landscape, historic places, monuments, hotels, restaurants, building designs, and transportation facilities), *availability and quality of the destination services* (e.g., food quality, service quality, accommodations, entertainment facilities, organized social, and cultural events), *suitability of the destination price, convenience and accessibility of the destination location, the attractiveness of the destination advertising messages, and media* (Sirgy and Su, 2000). These attributes form essential components of a destination image influencing tourist behavior (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). A destination evaluated strictly on desired performance is motivated to satisfy the tourist's utilitarian needs (e.g., accommodation quality) at the lowest cost (e.g., price or time). This study seeks to determine whether or the greater functional congruence leads to the tourist choosing the particular destination. Hence, the following hypothesis is developed based on these discussions.

H₂: Functional congruence positively influences tourists' destination choices.

Some evidence suggests, functional congruence explains tourist satisfaction and travel intentions better than self-congruence (Chon and Olsen, 1991; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Sirgy, Johar, Samli and Claiborne (1991) hypothesize travel behavior is influenced by both self-congruence and functional congruence, and the latter shows a stronger relationship with consumer behavior than self-congruence. Sirgy et al. (1991) demonstrate functional congruence better predicts consumer behavior than self-congruence. In other words, tourists use functional congruence over self-congruence to choose a destination based on previous experiences, involvement, and more conscious needs (e.g., relaxation, enjoyment, accessibility, distance, and saving). These studies inform the following hypothesis.

H₃: A tourist's destination choice is more strongly predicted by functional congruence than by self-congruence.

3. Method

3.1. Measurements

Key constructs' measurements in this study come from previous research. Tourism studies tend to use one of two primary methods to measuring self-congruence (Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, Chon and Claiborne, 1997). The first method uses a gap scoring formula to compute the self-congruence. Gap scoring subtracts the difference between the self-concept and the perceived product image measure (Sirgy, 1982; 1985). The second method captures the self-congruence measure directly. This method tends to be more valid and predictive in assessing consumer behavior (Sirgy *et al.*, 1997). Thus this study adopts the second method to measure the actual and ideal self-congruence. Self-congruity is measured using a scenario type direction and eight self-congruence statements. These variables are measured by a seven-point rating scale, ranging from (-3) as being strongly disagree to (+3) as strongly agree (Sirgy and Su, 2000, p.350). Respondents are instructed to respond to the self-congruence statement after the following directions.

Take a moment to think about the kind of person who typically visits the destination you chose to visit for holiday. Imagine this person in your mind and then describe them using one or more personal adjectives such as organized, classy, poor, stylish, friendly, modern, traditional, and popular or whatever other personal adjectives you can think of to describe the typical visitor to the destination you choose.

The ideal and actual self-congruence statements are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Measurement items of self-congruence

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- (1) The image of the typical visitor is similar to how I am
 - (2) The image of the typical visitor is similar to how I see myself
 - (3) The image of the typical visitor is similar to how I would like to be
 - (4) The image of the typical visitor is similar to how I would like to see myself
 - (5) The image of the typical visitor is similar to how others believe that I am
 - (6) The image of the typical visitor is similar to how others see me
 - (7) The image of the typical visitor is similar to how I would like others to see me
 - (8) The image of the typical visitor is similar to how I ideally like to be seen by others
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Source: Adapted from Sirgy and Su (2000).

When measuring functional congruence, many studies traditionally employ the multi-attribute attitude models. Common multi-attribute models include the belief-

evaluation model, the belief-importance model, the belief-only model, the extended belief-evaluation model, and the ideal point model (Kressmann *et al.*, 2006; Sirgy *et al.*, 1991). The belief-only model appears most frequently in literature seems most appropriate for this study. Functional congruence measures include 23 tourism destination functional attributes rated using seven point scales ranging from (1) *much worse* to (7) *much better* (Chon and Olsen, 1991; Sirgy *et al.*, 1991).

Based on the statistics of the UK outbound tourism, eight most popular international holiday destinations in five continents are selected for this study. These destinations are Australia, Brazil, China, Egypt, France, Italy, Spain, and the USA. Respondents were asked to choose one of the eight destinations for holiday and to complete the self-congruence and functional congruence questions.

3.2. Sample and data collection

The data were collected from areas surrounding London and the Southeast of the UK using personally administered questionnaire. This region of the country includes the most demographically diverse residents of the UK population. A reasonable attempt was made to achieve probability sampling by selecting random days, random respondents and a variety of locations for data collection such as high streets, shopping centres and train stations. A total of 344 usable questionnaires were collected from the British residents. The sample is 44 percent male and 56 percent female. Age groups are balanced, between 16 and 24 years old (25%), between 25 and 34 years old (24%), between 35 and 44 years old (25%), and above 44 years old (26%). Respondents were asked to choose one of the eight holiday destinations. About 56 percent of participants chose destinations outside the European Community (EU), suggesting a need for different holiday experiences. Australia (14%), Brazil (14%) and the United States (12%) are three most preferred holiday destinations.

4. Findings

The first step of data analysis involved testing validity of the self-congruence and the functional congruence scales. Two separate exploratory factor analyses were conducted using the two sets of congruence measure. Exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation was applied to the eight-item self-congruence scale. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value is 0.84 and Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant ($p < 0.001$). These results confirm the factorability of data matrices (Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black, 1998). The selection criterion for factor loadings was set at 0.30 based on the sample size of 350 (Hair *et al.*, 1998, p. 112). The two factor solution accounts for approximately 80 percent of the total variance and all communalities ranging from 0.74 to 0.84. These factors are labeled as the actual and ideal self-

congruence and explain 12.50 percent and 67.54 percent of the data's total variance, respectively. These findings provide evidence for construct validity of the scale. Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients range from 0.90 to 0.93 suggesting scale reliability (Churchill, 1979).

Applying the same exploratory factor analysis procedure, the 23-item functional congruence scale produced a five-factor model. The retained factors are supported by using the following criteria: (i) clean factor structure and meaningfulness of each factor retained, (ii) sufficient amount of variance explained by the five factors (68.22%), and (iii) high communality scores (ranging from 0.52 to 0.78). Items with low factor loadings ($r < 0.30$), high cross loading ($r < 0.40$), or low communalities were eliminated from the scale to obtain a rigid and clean factor structure. As a result, one item was removed from the functional congruence scale. The five factors are labeled as (1) *tourist facilities and comfort*, (2) *quality of food*, (3) *cultural heritage*, (4) *tourist leisure activities*, and (5) *quality of natural resources*, explaining 38.07 percent, 11.00 percent, 7.01 percent, 6.11 percent, and 5.03 percent of the total variance in the data, respectively. All the factors have adequate reliability coefficients, ranging from 0.61 to 0.93 (Churchill, 1979).

To test the research hypotheses, multinomial logistic regression (MLR) analysis was employed (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Destination choice is the dependent variable. The two self-congruence variables (actual and ideal) and the five functional congruence variables are independent variables. The MLR model indicates a reasonably good model fit ($\chi^2_{(49)} = 246, p < 0.001$).

Table 2
Results of the destination choice model

Independent Variable	Visitor to Australia vs. Italy		Visitor to Brazil vs. Italy		Visitor to China vs. Italy		Visitor to France vs. Italy		Visitor to Egypt vs. Italy		Visitor to Spain vs. Italy		Visitor to the US vs. Italy	
	Exp(B)	Sig	Exp(B)	Sig	Exp(B)	Sig	Exp(B)	Sig	Exp(B)	Sig	Exp(B)	Sig	Exp(B)	Sig
Actual self	1.295	0.258	1.223	0.372	1.060	0.813	1.197	0.381	1.018	0.946	1.138	0.526	1.471	0.112
Ideal self	0.767	0.260	0.773	0.240	1.000	0.999	0.781	0.241	0.792	0.365	0.767	0.198	0.723	0.187
Tourist facilities and comfort	3.569	0.000	0.751	0.229	0.698	0.179	1.498	0.091	0.489	0.011	1.326	0.224	3.528	0.000
Quality of food	0.862	0.558	0.780	0.272	0.654	0.061	1.003	0.990	0.482	0.001	0.911	0.667	1.160	0.591
Cultural heritage	0.195	0.000	0.290	0.000	1.001	0.998	0.776	0.284	1.869	0.032	0.473	0.001	0.226	0.000
Tourist leisure activities	1.005	0.984	2.593	0.000	1.048	0.853	0.871	0.516	0.902	0.685	1.345	0.167	2.355	0.001
Quality of natural resources	2.958	0.000	1.782	0.014	1.677	0.048	0.983	0.939	1.135	0.625	1.240	0.333	0.725	0.207

Note: The reference category is Italy. $N = 367$; model $\chi^2(49) = 272.53$, significant at $p = 0.000$; $-2 \log \text{likelihood} = 1240.04$. Values in bold indicate that the coefficients are statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

H_{1a} and H_{1b} state destination choice would be influenced by actual and ideal self-congruence. MLR analysis results show the actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence exerts no significant influence on destination choice. The two self-congruence factors are not related significantly to destination choice ($p > 0.05$). Meanwhile, the functional congruence factors are found to be the most significant destination choice predictors (H₂). As shown in Table 1, the functional congruence factors explain the destination choice well, according to the maximum likelihood parameter estimates and corresponding tests of significance ($p < 0.05$). With respect to H₃, the results reveal that functional congruence more strongly predicts destination choice than by self-congruence. Hence, the results confirm H₂ and H₃.

5. Discussion

This study sheds new lights on understanding the relationships between self-congruence, functional congruence, and destination choice. The study findings confirm Chon and Olsen (1991), Sirgy, Grewal and Mangleburg (2001) and Sirgy and Su (2000) showing that functional congruence directly influences destination choice. In line with Chon and Olsen (1991) and Sirgy and Su (2000), this study suggests destination image is an encompassing concept. While Sirgy and Su (2000) take a conceptual approach, this study builds upon empirical investigation by delineating the relationships between self-congruence, functional congruence, and destination choice. Consistent with the tourist behavior literature, the study results suggest that the functional congruence dimensions exert a stronger influence on destination choice than the self-congruence inherent to individual travelers (Chon and Olsen, 1991). In concordance with this theory, different functional congruencies evidently are tied to different destination images and destination choice behavior. Interestingly, this study suggests the cultural heritage is a significant predictor of destination choice across the most destinations.

This study provides empirical evidence that perceived functional image plays important role in the tourist's destination choice. Tourism managers who understand how functional congruence works can develop target marketing and market positioning strategies to influence destination attractiveness and destination choice behavior. Thus, tourism marketers should pay attention to developing promotional campaigns that emphasize a destination's unique functional attributes. In other words, tourism marketing managers should identify the most competitive and desirable functional attributes of the destination to reinforce destination choice.

The study finds self-congruence is not related to destination choice contrary to previous study results (e.g., Sirgy, 1983). This finding could be due to several reasons. First, travelers are more likely to evaluate attractiveness of a destination using functional attributes because they are more tangible. Modern society expects instant gratification of their utilitarian needs. Therefore the destination's functional attributes speak volumes to travelers. Second information processing of the destination's functional attributes may be easier because it is compared against the more conscious needs (e.g., relaxation, escaping) as opposed to more abstract needs that are stored at sub-conscious memory (e.g., self-esteem, self-actualization, self-consistency) that are more difficult to express. Third, the countries used in this study do not contain enough information, images to evoke symbolic meaning of the country as a holiday destination. A follow-up study examining data from other countries likely will provide richer insights on the relationship between the variables examined. Future research may use more specific places such as cities or towns as holiday destinations to assess external validity of this study. Finally, purchase involvement may have contributed to

this negative finding.

This study has some limitations. The small sample size and culture specific samples pose problems when results need to be generalized to other cultures and populations. The study is based on correlational research using a direct scoring method to assess the country's symbolic images as a holiday destination. Other image based research methods can be employed to understand symbolic meaning of the destination's image (Heffner, 2007; Sirgy *et al.*, 1997). Using alternative study methods of self-congruence, functional congruence and experimental research design can help better understanding the predictive power of the congruence measures and the relationship between self-congruence and destination choice.

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