

## **Using self-congruity and symbolic utility to increase the efficiency of destination branding**

**This research investigates the role of symbolic needs as potential drivers for the destination choice. More precisely, two concepts are brought into play, the destination self-congruity - the perceived match between a destination's personality and the consumer's self-image - and the symbolic utility – the use of a destination as a means of self-expression. Their impact on future behavioral intentions is analyzed. Findings reveal that self-congruity has no direct impact on future intentions, whereas internal symbolic utility is highly helpful to predict them. Theoretical and managerial implications are offered with specific suggestions to deepen our understanding of symbolic consumption in tourism.**

Keywords:

*destination branding, tourism marketing, self-congruity, symbolic utility, structural equation modeling*

Track 20: Tourism Marketing

## 1. Theoretical Development

Scholars and practitioners generally agree that competition between destinations has increased with globalization in recent years. In this context, defining appropriate marketing strategies has become crucial for every destination. Understanding the drivers of a consumer's destination choice is a key issue in tourism marketing. Literature up-to-date has taken into account functional and emotional benefits sought by consumers (see e.g.: MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997; Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Hankinson, 2004; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Chi Gengqing & Qu, 2008) and the relationship of such benefits with satisfaction and destination image, defined as the "sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Crompton, 1979 : 18). However, what remains unclear and underrepresented in the tourism marketing literature is the role of symbolic needs in the consumer's decision process and their link with the destination image.

In this research, we investigate the role of symbolic needs as potential drivers for destination choice. We argue that the more a consumer is able to project his self onto a destination – i.e. the more common attributes he shares with the image of the destination - the more likely he will be to use this destination as a means of self-expressing and, in turn, visit it.

The symbolic approach, often conceptualized by two concepts, symbolic utility and self-congruity, has been already widely discussed in the marketing literature (Solomon, 1983; Belk, 1988; Sirgy & Johar, 1991; Shavitt, 1992; Aaker, 1999). It has demonstrated its relevance and usefulness. However, these two concepts have often been used in an interchangeable way (Wright, Claiborne, & Sirgy, 1992; Kamp & MacInnis, 1995; Sirgy et al., 1997). Contrary to those contributions, we propose to clearly differentiate these two concepts.

In our view, symbolic utility refers to the extent to which the consumption of a product/service is used by a consumer to satisfy his symbolic needs of self-expression. Researchers (Richins, 1994; Vazquez, Rio, & Iglesias, 2002; Kocak, Abimbola, & Ozer, 2007) usually recognize three components of symbolic utility. First, the *characterization* one, also called *internal*, which is directed to one self and usually used by consumers in order to increase their self-esteem. Second the *communication* one, or *external*, used by consumers to express something to others and third, the *status* used to represent a prestigious status of the brand's user. The symbolic utility concept has been tested in several areas (Kamp & MacInnis, 1995; Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Vazquez et al., 2002; Tsai, 2005) but is still rare in tourism marketing.

Self-congruity can be defined as the degree of fit between a consumer's self-perception and his/her perception he/she has of a brand or product (Sirgy, 1985). This concept has recently appeared in tourism marketing (Sirgy & Su, 2000) and only a few studies can be related to it (see e.g. Litvin & Goh, 2002; Kastenholtz, 2004). According to (Beerli, Meneses, & Gil, 2007), there still remains an important need for further empirical validation.

Therefore, this research proposes to differentiate these two concepts and to investigate how they are related to each other in the context of tourism marketing. This new approach might help to face a major potential limitation present in the literature, the one of confusing the impacts of each concept. It then offers the possibility to explore their respective influences on outcome variables such as intention to visit, to recommend or to pay a premium price.

In order to investigate the impact of self-congruity on symbolic utility and in turn on future behavioural intentions, three main hypotheses are tested. First, we hypothesize that:

*H1: Self-congruity has a positive effect on each of the three dimensions of symbolic utility, namely (a) internal, (b) status and (c) external symbolic utility.*

In other words, the higher the congruity between the consumer's self-perception and the perception of a destination, the more likely he will use the destination as mean of expression, in order to satisfy his symbolic needs (characterization/internal, status, communication/external). The rationale behind it is quite straightforward: It is easier for the consumer to express and satisfy his symbolic needs when he perceives the destination congruent with his proper self. However, as literature has never differentiated these two concepts, it has then never investigated their relations. Therefore, the first hypothesis is not supported yet by any literature. Within H1a, H1b and H1c, the effect of congruity on status (H1b) will probably be lower than the ones of internal (H1a) and external (H1c), as these two concepts seem to be less related.

Second, as the symbolic utility has been demonstrated by an extensive body of literature (for example, see: Richins, 1994; Vazquez et al., 2002; Tsai, 2005; Kocak et al., 2007) to impact positively future behavioural intentions, we therefore formulate our second hypothesis as it follows:

*H2: The three dimensions of symbolic utility, namely (a) internal, (b) status and (c) external, have a positive effect on behavioural intentions.*

Between these three effects, we do not assume at this stage any differences. And finally, we make a third hypothesis about the strength of the direct versus indirect effect. As Kastenholz (2004) has failed to find a convincing direct effect, we suppose that :

*H3: The relationships between congruity and future behavioural intentions are fully mediated by the symbolic utility or at least the indirect effects will be stronger than the direct ones.*

Figure 1 below presents the proposed structural model and its hypothesized relationships.

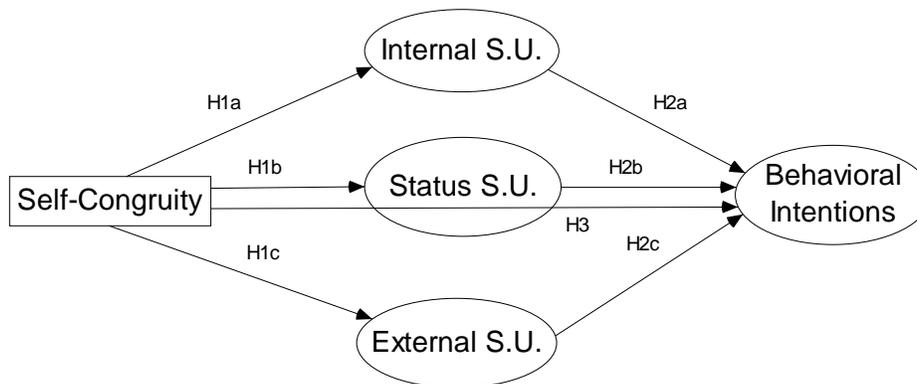


Figure 1: Structural Model of the study

## 2. Data and Methodology

A large-scale data collection (n= 813) was conducted in Switzerland. The sample is composed of 56% male and 44% of female respondents, most are Swiss citizens (76.5%). As most of the chosen destinations target a rather young population, our sample corresponds to that with the following age representation (18-25: 59%; 26-35: 14%; 36-45: 7%; 46-55: 12%; 56-65: 4.8%; 65 and more: 3.2%). We chose eleven tourist destinations to represent a large spectrum of different types of destinations ranging from urban destinations (New-York, Québec, Valence, Las Vegas, Dubaï, Istanbul, Sao Paulo) to countries (Colombia, Scotland, Israel, South Korea).

In order to measure the “destinations self-congruity” (DSC), we used the most common approach (Litvin & Goh, 2002; Kastenholz, 2004; Beerli et al., 2007) in tourism, namely a discrepancy score based on the Malhotra’s scale. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which each of 21 attributes was well describing themselves. Then, they had to evaluate the same items, but for the destination. The average absolute difference value was calculated as an indicator of the DSC.

As previously described, literature usually recognize three components of symbolic utility, internal, external and status. But as the concept of symbolic utility has almost never been tested in tourism, we have decided to perform an exploratory factor analysis based on different scales used in the literature (Chon, 1992; Kamp & MacInnis, 1995; Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Vazquez et al., 2002; Tsai, 2005), leading to a list of 18 items. These 18 items were subjected to a principle component analysis with varimax rotation, using SPSS 15. Some items were deleted as their communalities were under 0.5. For the remaining ones, three factors with eigenvalues greater than one were obtained. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.778, exceeding the recommended value of 0.6 and the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix (Field, 2000). The three factors were labelled internal (three items, Cronbach’s alpha: .835) status (four items, Cronbach’s alpha: .834), external (four items, Cronbach’s alpha: .707). The behavioural intentions have been estimated with the two items “intentions to visit” and “intentions to recommend” measured on a 7-point scale.

The hypothesized model was tested with a structural equation modelling approach, using AMOS 16. In order to check the reliability of the measurement model, we used a split-half approach (Singleton & Straits, 1998); the sample has been divided into two equal groups based on a random algorithm. The first group has been subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and served to develop the structural model. The second group has been used in order to test the stability of the model.

## 3. Results

Results indicate that the model is, according to commonly used criteria (Roussel, Durrieu, Campoy, & El-Akreimi, 2002) reasonably supported (Chi-square / df = 2.88; CFI = .94; GFI = .95; RMSEA = .069,  $p < 0.004$ ). As presented in the following table, four hypothesized paths were not significant, while three are significant and present some interesting values. Three of the hypothesized paths are significant and present some interesting values. In particular, the path from self-congruity to future behavioural intentions mediated by the internal symbolic utility is the strongest one, leading to the acceptance of two hypotheses H1a and H2a. Paths

mediated by the status and the external symbolic utility did not present so strong results and have to be rejected. Finally our last hypothesis (H3) was strongly supported as the direct effect from self-congruity is not significant.

Hypothesis	Paths			Estimate	P
H1a	Self-Congruity	--->	Internal S.U	.24	.000
H1b	Self-Congruity	--->	Status S.U.	.00	.957
H1c	Self-Congruity	--->	External S.U.	.12	.059
H2a	Internal S.U	--->	Behavioral Intentions	.73	.000
H2b	Status S.U.	--->	Behavioral Intentions	.20	.000
H2c	External S.U.	--->	Behavioral Intentions	-.01	.854
H3	Self-Congruity	--->	Behavioral Intentions	.00	.970

Table 1: Structural model paths values

A reasonable amount of the variance of future behavioural intentions is explained in our model (Squared Multiple Correlation: 0.570). However, the variance explained for the three intermediate constructs (internal, external and status symbolic utility) by the self-congruity is extremely low, each of them scoring at 5% (of the total variance explained) or under.

#### 4. General Discussion

The goal of this research was to clarify the relationships between self-congruity, symbolic utility and behavioral intentions. By differentiating self-congruity and symbolic utility, interesting results appear and allow the emphasis of each construct's role on future intentions.

With the exception of the internal dimension, self-congruity is not related to symbolic utility. It means that individuals do not need a potential self-congruity as a pre-condition to express them through the destination they choose. More precisely, the existence of a self-congruity does not render easier the satisfaction of symbolic needs of status and external communication. On the contrary, self-congruity has an important effect on the internal dimension. However, this does not mean that consumers do use – and are conscious of it – the self-congruity to express something to themselves. Only that it might be easier for them to do so when self-congruity is high.

Previous literature has emphasized the need “to investigate the effects of self-congruity on other marketing outcomes, such as destination loyalty and word of mouth” (Beerli et al., 2007). In her study, Kastenholz (2004) has failed to find a significant impact of self-congruity on intentions to recommend. Our results are consistent with her findings, as the direct path from self-congruity to future intentions was neither significant. However, it is interesting to see that the impact of self-congruity is fully mediated by the internal dimension of symbolic utility. This last finding has never been pointed out in the literature until now and our model brings here an interesting element that will require further investigations.

Moreover, the total variance explained by the self-congruity concept for the three dimensions is very low (self-congruity only explains 5% at the maximum for the internal). In other words, based on our sample, self-congruity might not add something to the understanding of the symbolic need of self-expression. The operationalization of the self-congruity might be regarded as one of the plausible explanations for the low usefulness of self-congruity and has been already recognized as problematic (Sirgy et al., 1997).

Concerning the second set of hypotheses, two hypotheses of three are supported. When comparing the different values of the paths from the symbolic utility to the output variables, it appears that the internal dimension is the highest then the status and finally the external dimension. External dimension (H2c) is rejected as a valid predictor for future intentions, i.e. respondents do not feel the need to express something to others by their destination choice. Rather, what really guides the destination choice is the extent to which it can satisfy the internal symbolic need, the one of *characterization*. How to explain that the external dimension is so low and that the status dimension is quite poor too? Concerning the external dimension, it might be explained by an inappropriate operationalization. One might wonder if some of the used items do represent correctly the intended construct. Moreover, it is possible that respondents have a strong social desirability bias affecting precisely these results. Future research will have to verify what the impact of this bias on this relationship is. Finally, regarding the status dimension, one should notice that in the eleven destinations chosen for the study, only a few can be regarded as highly prestigious. People may not see the prestige in these destinations and therefore not use them to express a certain status to others.

By showing that symbolic utility (at least its status and internal dimensions) is a valid predictor of purchase intention, our research provides a significant improvement for the symbolic consumption literature. Indeed previous literature on symbolic consumption (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2000; Kocak et al., 2007; Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006) was generally more focused on the nature of this consumption rather than on its capacity to predict future purchase intentions.

Differentiating the concepts of self-congruity and symbolic utility has allowed to point out what might be the key issue in the symbolic consumption, namely the extent to which a destination renders possible an internal symbolic need, the one of *characterization*. If the destination's choice is made because it embodies aspects of consumer's values, there is an urgent need of knowing who the consumer is and what he is looking for. A typology of internal needs could be helpful for destination managers in order to better target their potential consumers, regarding the destination's characteristics.

To conclude with, our findings provide a significant contribution to the current literature in three ways. First, it has answered the need of operationalization and replication for concepts that are only emerging in the field of tourism marketing. Second, by differentiating self-congruity and symbolic utility, it has allowed answering how they were related and their respective impact on future intentions. Three, the study highlights a topic of uttermost importance, the value created for the consumer. In the authors' view, destination marketing literature has been too often concerned only with the value created for the destination. We do believe that focusing on the consumer's perspective will help destination managers creating a more efficient and more original value creation process.

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