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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bosnjak, M., & Rudolph, N. (2008). Undesired self-image congruence in a low-involvement product context. *European Journal of Marketing*, 42(5/6), 702-712. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560810862598>

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Undesired self-image congruence in a low-involvement product context

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper seeks to investigate the incremental value of a construct termed “undesired self-image congruence”, and capture consumers’ perceived closeness to negatively valenced brand-related attributes over and above established self-image congruence factors known to affect consumption-related attitudes and intentions.

Design/methodology/approach – A questionnaire-based study was used to assess consumers’ attitudes and intentions to consume a low-involvement product (Marlboro cigarettes; $n = 211$). Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were employed to determine the incremental predictive value of the newly introduced undesired congruity component over and above established self-image congruence facets.

Findings – Undesired congruity proved its substantial and incremental value in predicting consumption-related attitudes, but did not directly influence purchasing intentions.

Research limitations/implications – Avoidance motives related to undesired brand images appear to influence purchase decisions at early stages of the decision-making process, namely in attitude formation and evaluative responding. Controlled experimental approaches with a broader set of products should be used to corroborate this potential research implication.

Practical implications – Because negative stereotypical images appear to feed into purchase-related decision processes at early stages, due caution should be exerted in primary data collection and brand positioning. Primary data collection should capture both positive and negative brand-related meanings attributed by consumers. Because the results show that undesired congruity has an incremental explanatory effect, positive versus negative symbolic meanings are clearly not just “two sides of the same coin”. Consequently, brand positioning should define its strategy by simultaneously maximizing both the closeness to desired symbolic meanings and the distance to undesired symbolic associations.

Originality/value – The value of the paper lies in testing the operation of undesired congruity and in quantifying its incremental contribution in the symbolic consumption context.

Keywords Consumption, Brand image, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In addition to physical, utilitarian, and experiential attributes, commercial brands are significant consumption symbols, with the ability to provide symbolic or value-expressing functions to the individual (e.g. Shavitt, 1990; Sirgy *et al.*, 1991). A

The authors are grateful for the valuable comments given by two anonymous reviewers and Iris Haas, and thank Dr Brian Bloch for his comprehensive editing of the manuscript.



considerable body of empirical research has shown that by purchasing and using commercial brands, individuals are inclined to maintain, enhance, or approve (socially) certain aspects of their self-concept (Belk, 1988; Dolich, 1969; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Levy, 1959; Sirgy, 1985, 1986). In a nutshell, the self-image congruence hypothesis is that individuals hold favourable attitudes and intentions towards, and will most probably purchase, those brands that match particular aspects of their self-concept.

In almost all applications of the self-image congruence hypothesis, positive, desirable, or telic self-concept facets are stressed. In other words, implicit comparisons between the self as currently experienced and an imagined desired end state are emphasized.

For instance, in Sirgy's self-image congruence theory (Sirgy, 1982, 1985, 1986), a differentiation is made between four self-congruity types affecting consumption-related constructs:

- (1) actual;
- (2) ideal;
- (3) social; and
- (4) ideal social.

Actual congruity refers to the match between how consumers see themselves in terms of a set of attributes and how they see a stereotypical user of a brand with respect to the same set of descriptives. In terms of the other congruity types, the closeness of the typical brand user is compared to how consumers would like to see themselves (yielding ideal congruity), how consumers believe they are seen by significant others (resulting in social congruity), and how consumers would like to be seen by significant others (leading to ideal social congruity). These four congruity aspects are driven by motives, which can all be classified as "approach motives". The need for consistency affects actual congruity, the need for self-esteem determines ideal congruity, social consistency motives drive social congruity, and the need for social approval influences ideal social congruity. Despite the fact that self-image congruence theory is explicitly open to both approach as well as avoidance behaviours in principle (see, for example, Sirgy, 1982, pp. 289f, 1986, pp. 19f), primarily approach behaviours have been the empirical focus, ignoring avoidance tendencies and deliberate anti-choice behaviours (see Hogg, 1998; Hogg and Banister, 2001).

Aaker's brand personality concept is another example of the one-sided orientation towards approach behaviours (Aaker, 1997), resulting in a scale for measuring both brands and people on a set of personality attributes. By doing so, her scale provides a generic basis for operationalizing the self-image congruence hypothesis. However, a closer examination of the procedure used by Aaker (1997) reveals that negatively valenced attributes, i.e. those which may contribute to portraying negative brand-related images, are deliberately excluded. To justify this selection, Aaker (1997, p. 350) states:

Primarily positively valenced traits were used, because brands are typically linked to positive (versus negative) associations and because the ultimate use of the scale is to determine the extent to which brand personality affects the probability that consumers approach (versus avoid) products.

While the first assertion (that brands are linked primarily to positive associations) is not at all grounded empirically, the second part reflects the intended use of the concept to influence consumer behaviour via stimulating and aligning approach motives, leaving avoidance tendencies aside.

What is questionable about this common practice of focusing primarily on approach behaviours and their motivational antecedents? Firstly, by focusing on approach motives, most applications of the self-image congruence hypothesis fail to provide the full range of actionable insights into the “mental model” of consumers who have a multitude of brand-related beliefs. These beliefs can be valenced positively, negatively, and ambivalently. Consequently, brand positioning strategies may fail to balance both the closeness of a brand to desirable symbolic meanings as well as the distance to negative ones, resulting in suboptimal brand strength. Secondly, psychological research has demonstrated that the perceived discrepancy between the self as currently experienced and imagined undesired end states is an additional and sometimes an even stronger predictor of satisfaction and well-being than closeness to desired end states (e.g. Ogilvie, 1987; Heppen and Ogilvie, 2003). Recent qualitative research suggests that a similar mechanism appears to affect consumer’s (anti-)choices (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Hogg and Banister, 2001). Therefore, there are both practical and theoretical reasons for exploring further what drives consumption-related avoidance tendencies from a symbolic consumption perspective. Consequently, the pertinent research issues for a component serving as a reference point for undesired self-related end states (the “undesired-self”) in consumer psychology and marketing will be outlined briefly below.

2. The undesired self: a useful extension to the understanding of symbolic consumption?

Ogilvie (1987) introduced the “undesired self”, which he characterized as a least-desired identity, comprising the sum of negatively valenced traits, memories of dreaded experiences, embarrassing situations, fearsome events, and unwanted emotions the individual is consistently motivated to avoid (Ogilvie, 1987, p. 380). The results of his study suggest that the dominant implicit standard that individuals use to assess their well-being is how distant they are from subjectively being like their most negative self-image, i.e. their “undesired-self”. Moreover, individuals tend to keep track of their everyday, actual/real self, by implicitly referring to their undesired self: “without a tangible undesired self, the real self would lose its navigational cues” (Ogilvie, 1987, p. 380).

Recent research confirms the important role of the undesired self in evaluating life satisfaction and regulating emotional experiences. For instance, Carver *et al.* (1999) describe the “feared self”, defined as the “set of qualities the person wants not to become, but is concerned about possibly becoming” (Carver *et al.*, 1999, p. 785). This is accompanied by ideal and ought-to-be selves used to predict both positive and negative dejection- and agitation-related emotions. While both actual-self/ideal-self and actual-self/feared-self discrepancies correlated with dejection-related emotions (i.e. depression and happiness), actual/feared discrepancy was the strongest predictor. Similar results based on the undesired self, according to Ogilvie (1987), were reported by Ogilvie and Clark (1992), Cheung (1997), and Heppen and Ogilvie (2003).

In order to understand both approach and avoidance tendencies and anti-choice behaviour, Hogg and Banister (2001) introduced the undesired self into the field of consumer behaviour. Hogg and Banister (2001) and Banister and Hogg (2004) presented the first empirical evidence demonstrating the relevance of consumers’

propensity to avoid undesired stereotypical images (the undesired self), leading to negative brand/product evaluation and rejection in the clothing sector. The evidence encompassed small-scale, exploratory qualitative studies based on focus and discussion groups. One key conclusion was that “the consumption activities of the majority of consumers in our study seemed to be predominantly informed by the motivation to avoid consuming (or being identified with) negative images, rather than reflecting attempts to achieve a positive image” (Banister and Hogg, 2004, p. 859). Following this important first step, which highlighted the largely neglected role of avoidance motives and provided initial evidence about its function in consumer decision making, three newly emerging areas deserve further elaboration.

First, to what extent does the undesired self contribute to explaining consumption-related antecedents over and above the established (positive) self-congruity facets? Is the undesired self just “the other side of the same coin” after all, and therefore the inverse of desirable self-concept facets already established in the symbolic consumption area? If this were so, the undesired self should not exert any incremental impact on consumer behaviour, beyond the factors already established in the symbolic consumption area. However, given the known role of the undesired self in subjects’ judgment of satisfaction and well-being which has been outlined above, we can expect an incremental contribution. The evidence available so far does not encompass stringent tests of this proposition, nor does it provide any quantitative effect size.

Second, the results presented to date are, in our opinion, far from conclusive with regard to the psychological constructs involved and their interrelations. What exactly is affected by the closeness of the undesired self to a brand image? Are primarily consumption-related attitudes, intentions, or both affected? Answers to these questions may contribute to a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved, and should therefore provide clues for deriving actionable recommendations useful to marketers.

Third, only one product-category (clothing) has been addressed so far, and this is characterized by high involvement (Ratchford, 1987), thus restricting the transferability of results to other product categories with a lower level of involvement.

In order to find empirical answers to these questions, we specify them further below, in the context of hypotheses.

3. Research questions and hypotheses

The basic research question is that of determining the incremental contribution and operation of the “undesired self-image congruence” (or “undesired congruity”) component beyond the established factors known to affect consumer behaviour. Undesired congruity is defined here as the closeness of: personality imagery associated with a brand/product to undesired personality imagery.

According to action-theory approaches to consumer behaviour as specified in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), attitudes towards consumption and intentions to consume are determinants of behaviour. By focusing on these two concepts, it is possible to determine whether undesired congruity directly feeds into attitude formation, or rather into the formation of consumption-related decisions and plans of action (i.e. intentions), or both:

- H1.* Undesired congruity is negatively related to (a) consumption-related attitudes and to (b) consumption-related intentions.
- H2₁.* Undesired congruity significantly contributes to the prediction of consumption-related attitudes over and above established congruity facets.
- H2₂.* Undesired congruity significantly contributes to the prediction of consumption-related intentions over and above attitudes and established congruity facets.

H1 tests the assumed negative effect of undesired congruity; *H2₁* and *H2₂* specify its expected incremental contribution. While *H2₁* focuses on established self-image congruence predictors only, *H2₂* contains attitudes as an additional determinant of intentions. The reasons for including attitudes are two-fold. First, a large body of empirical evidence suggests that behavioural intentions are influenced consistently by behavioural attitudes across various behavioural domains (e.g. Randall and Wolff, 1994; Sheppard *et al.*, 1988; Van den Putte, 1993), including consumer behaviour (e.g. Bagozzi *et al.*, 2002). Second, by including attitudes as an additional antecedent, together with established self-congruity facets, the incremental contribution of undesired self-congruity is tested more stringently (compared to a model without attitudes).

As discussed in the previous section, studies addressing the role of the undesired self in consumer behaviour have so far focused on high-involvement product categories only (e.g. fashion). In trying to fill the knowledge gap, we will limit our study to low-involvement products. Ratchford (1987) defines involvement operationally as comprising three aspects:

- (1) the degree of personal importance;
- (2) the amount of perceived risk if the wrong product is chosen; and
- (3) the amount of cognitive effort invested to make a purchase decision (Ratchford, 1987, p. 28, Table 1).

Because the first two aspects seem highly idiosyncratic, meaning that the personal importance and perceived risk varies considerably across consumers, we focused primarily on the remaining aspect, addressing the cognitive effort of making purchase decisions. Consequently, we will use a cigarette brand, because cigarette-brand purchase decisions typically involve minimal cognitive effort.

With reference to the relevant research on habitualized behaviours (Ouellette and Wood, 1998), one might argue that the consumption of low-involvement products as defined here, is almost exclusively controlled by habit. As a result, measures of past behaviour should diminish or even nullify the effects of attitudes and self-image congruence components. To address these concerns, *H2₁* and *H2₂* are extended to the low involvement product category case.

- H3₁.* Undesired self-congruity significantly contributes to the prediction of consumption-related attitudes over and above established self-congruity facets and past behaviour.
- H3₂.* Undesired self-congruity significantly contributes to the prediction of consumption-related intentions over and above attitudes, established self-congruity facets, and past behaviour.

4. Method

4.1 Subjects and procedure

The sample consisted of 211 regular smokers, selected from a large German volunteer opt-in panel (comprising 428 subjects overall) who participated in a two-wave web-based survey on topics related to “evaluating cigarette brands”. In conformity with Couper’s (2000) taxonomy, participants were recruited with the aid of non-probability methods such as announcements placed on thematically related web pages, in news forums, and mailing lists.

In the first wave of the survey, demographics, brand-consumption-related attitudes, consumption intentions, future behaviour related to smoking a certain cigarette brand in the following two weeks, past smoking habits, and brand-related/self-concept-related attributes were assessed (among other variables not reported here). The target brand to be evaluated by the sub-sample used was Marlboro.

In the second wave, which started two weeks later and aimed at measuring behaviour, participants from the first wave were contacted again to report their smoking intensity for a set of brands during the last two weeks. Marlboro was one of these brands for which data on actual consumption was collected.

Among the 211 subjects used in the analyses, 56.9 percent were female, on average 30.2 years old ($SD = 9.7$), 53.8 percent were employed, and 34.6 percent were students at German universities. The mean daily cigarette consumption amounted to 13.6 cigarettes ($SD = 9.8$), and participants had smoked for the last 12.5 years on average ($SD = 8.8$).

4.2 Measures

4.2.1 Congruity facets. In the first-wave survey on “evaluating cigarette brands”, the facets of actual congruity, ideal social congruity, and undesired congruity were assessed indirectly (Sirgy *et al.*, 1997), i.e. attribute-based.

In this study, attributes measuring the three self-concept facets as well as the brand’s image were taken from a German brand personality instrument developed by Bosnjak *et al.* (2007). The instrument comprises 20 traits applicable both to brands and people, and assesses the following four brand personality dimensions:

- (1) drive;
- (2) conscientiousness;
- (3) emotion; and
- (4) superficiality.

The instrument was adapted to the specific German cultural context and encompasses both positively and negatively valenced attributes.

Within the first wave of the study, the 20 attributes were randomly presented three times with different instructions, each time assessing a different self-concept facet (actual, ideal social, undesired). In order to measure the actual self-concept, participants had to rate on seven-point agree/disagree scales how accurately the 20 attributes describe the way they see themselves (“I see myself as being...”). Ideal social self-concept assessment requested the participants to describe how they would like to be perceived by others on each attribute (“I want to be perceived by other people as...”). For the undesired-self, participants had to rate themselves as “they never want to be or become” on each attribute.

Brand personality was measured with the same set of attributes on seven-point agree/disagree scales, using a translated version of Aaker's (1997, p. 350) original instruction.

The three congruity components used in all further analyses were computed with the aid of reversely scored mean average deviation metrics. That is, difference scores for each corresponding self-image attribute pair were computed, averaged across the 20 attributes, and the resulting mean average deviation score was then reversely scored to reflect self-image similarity (instead of discrepancy). The higher the congruity score, the closer the overall match between the respective self-concept facet and the brand's personality imagery.

4.2.2 Attitude towards consuming Marlboro. Over the coming two weeks, this was assessed with the aid of the following seven-point polarity profile set (all pairs were arranged within one block in random order, and the endpoints were randomly flipped): good-bad, attractive-unattractive, positive-negative, pleasant-unpleasant, interesting-uninteresting, exciting-boring, charming-charmless. Cronbach's α for these seven items was 0.91. The attitude scale values were obtained by averaging responses for this item set (mean score). The higher the attitude score, the more positively the behaviour "smoking Marlboro in the following two weeks" was evaluated.

4.2.3 Intentions to consume Marlboro. This was assessed on seven-point agree/disagree scales by means of the following two items, which were randomly distributed on different pages of the web survey:

- (1) "I intend to smoke Marlboro in the following two weeks".
- (2) "If I am going to smoke in the next two weeks, I will choose Marlboro".

Cronbach's α amounted to 0.95 for these items; mean scores were computed to obtain scale values. The higher the intention score, the greater the willingness to smoke Marlboro in the next two weeks.

4.2.4 Past behaviour. A composite score measuring past smoking habits was constructed, encompassing the following components:

- smoking intensity of Marlboro and other brands, measured both as the average number of cigarettes per day; and
- past duration of smoking Marlboro and other brands, both measured in terms of the number of month.

The composite score for past behaviour was then computed as $1 - (\text{"smoking intensity for Marlboro"} \times \text{"smoking duration for Marlboro"}) / (\text{"smoking intensity for all other brands"} \times \text{"smoking duration for all other brands"})$. The resulting composite score ranges from 0 (Marlboro was consumed for less than one month) to 1 (Marlboro was the exclusive cigarette brand in the past).

4.2.5 Actual behaviour. Self-reported smoking behaviour (assessed in the second wave of the survey) was captured with the aid of an index reflecting the number of Marlboro cigarettes smoked during the last two weeks in relation to the overall number of cigarettes smoked during the same time frame, including all other cigarette brands. Furthermore, this index was standardized to a 0-1 range, with 1 indicating that only Marlboro was consumed, and 0 that only other cigarette brands were smoked.

5. Results

Table I summarizes two sets of hierarchical regression analysis. In the upper part of Table I, behavioural attitudes are regressed on the two established congruity facets (actual and ideal social; Model 1), plus undesired self-congruity (Model 2), plus past behaviour (Model 3). In the lower part of Table I, behavioural intentions are regressed on behavioural attitudes and the two established congruity facets (Model 1), plus undesired congruity (Model 2), plus past behaviour (Model 3).

For the prediction of purchase-related attitudes (upper hierarchical regression set in Table I), a medium predictive effect ($R^2 = 0.24$) is achieved for Model 1 with actual congruity and ideal social congruity as predictors. In the second step, undesired congruity is added and can significantly increase the predictive power of Model 2 by 4 percent compared to Model 1. Therefore, $H2_I$ is supported, namely that undesired self-congruity will significantly contribute to the prediction of consumption-related attitudes over and above established self-congruity facets. Model 3 tests $H3_I$, namely whether the predictive effect of undesired congruity still persists if past behaviour is introduced into the regression equation. It is evident that, despite the established congruity facets becoming insignificant in predicting attitudes, undesired congruity remains a substantial predictor. Therefore, the data support $H3_I$.

In view of the direction of influence, the standardized regression coefficients for undesired congruity are negative ($\beta = -0.22$ for model 2; $\beta = -0.16$ for model 3) as expected, supporting $H1a$.

For the prediction of purchase-related intentions (lower hierarchical regression set in Table I), the large predictive effect observed in Model 1 ($R^2 = 0.44$) is caused by attitudes ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$) and actual congruity ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$), but not by

Criterion variables	Predictor variables	Bivariate predictor-criterion r	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
			β	R^2	β	R^2	β	R^2
Attitude towards smoking Marlboro	Actual congruity	0.48**	0.29**	0.24**	0.30**	0.28**	0.17 ^a	0.36**
	Ideal social congruity	0.47**	0.22**		0.12 ^a		0.17 ^a	
	Undesired congruity	-0.39 ^a	—		-0.22**		-0.16*	
	Past behavior	0.45**	—		—		0.31**	
Intention to smoke Marlboro	Attitudes	0.65**	0.55**	0.44**	0.53**	0.44**	0.33**	0.63**
	Actual congruity	0.46**	0.20*		0.21*		0.03 ^a	
	Ideal social congruity	0.42**	0.01 ^a		0.05 ^a		0.08 ^a	
	Undesired congruity	-0.37**	—		-0.10 ^a		-0.04 ^a	
	Past behavior	0.75**	—		—		0.56**	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; ^anot significant

Table I.

Summary of two hierarchical multiple regression analyses for predicting attitudes towards smoking Marlboro and the intention to smoke Marlboro ($n = 211$ regular smokers)

ideal social congruity ($\beta = 0.01$, NS). After adding undesired congruity to the regression equation, the amount of explained variance in Model 2 does not increase. Therefore, both $H2_2$ and $H3_2$ are not supported, namely that undesired congruity significantly increases the prediction of consumption-related intentions over and above attitudes, established congruity facets, and past behaviour.

As a result of the non-detectable effect on intentions, and despite the significant zero-order correlations between undesired congruity and intentions ($r = -0.37$, $p < 0.01$), $H1b$ has to be rejected.

Despite not being part of the hypotheses, the data collected provide some insight into the relationship between intentions measured within the first wave of the survey and self-reported actual behaviour assessed two weeks later. This correlation amounts to an impressive $r = 0.83$ ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that behavioural intentions can really predict (self-reported) behaviour accurately, as claimed in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

6. Conclusions and implications

Using a product associated with a low degree of purchaser involvement, defined here as the level of cognitive effort invested in making consumption-related decisions, the two studies demonstrate that the perceived closeness of personality imagery associated with a brand to an undesired personality imagery affects consumption-related attitudes over and above established self-image congruence facets. Moreover, it was shown that this effect appears to be robust, because it still persists when a measure of habitual strength, i.e. past behavioural preference, is taken into account. Overall, undesired self-image congruence seems to feed primarily into attitude formation, and then translates into behaviour via a fully mediated causal path which can be summarized as follows: undesired congruity affects attitudes (among other factors), attitudes affect intentions, and intentions affect behaviour. Given this causal path, undesired congruity apparently operates at early stages of brand-related impression formation and decision-making.

In order to explore further the validity of this initial evidence on the operation of undesired congruity as presented in this paper, controlled experimental approaches which systematically vary undesired congruity should be conducted. Furthermore, the processes involved in the formation of undesired stereotypical brand-images, the reconstruction of mechanisms relating negative brand-images and certain aspects of the self-concept, and the integration of these findings into an overall theory of consumption, emerge as important topics on the research agenda.

From an applied perspective, the findings indicate the relevance of taking negative brand-related associations and stereotypical images into account when trying to understand the reasons of both choice as well as anti-choice behaviour. Marketing managers should exercise due caution in selecting consumer research data assessing consumers mind sets. Each and every step of primary data collection should be scrutinized for a possible bias towards focusing on approach motives and behaviours.

In terms of (re)positioning a brand, the results stress the need to find an optimal strategy which simultaneously maximizes the closeness to desired symbolic meanings and the distance to undesired symbolic associations. That both aspects are clearly *not* just “two sides of the same coin” has been demonstrated in this research.

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