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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bosnjak, M. (2010). Negative symbolic aspects in destination branding: exploring the role of the 'undesired self' on web-based vacation information search intentions among potential first-time visitors. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 16(4), 323-330. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766710380885>

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# Negative symbolic aspects in destination branding: Exploring the role of the 'undesired self' on web-based vacation information search intentions among potential first-time visitors

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Journal of Vacation Marketing  
16(4) 323–330  
© The Author(s) 2010  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1356766710380885  
jvm.sagepub.com



Tourist destination choices depend, among other factors, on the match between the destination's personality image and consumers' self-concept, in line with self-image congruence theory. Motives also mediate this relationship, yet tourism research largely neglects the influence of avoidance motives. This study applies the product-based construct of undesired congruity, or consumers' tendency to avoid undesired stereotypical images, to the context of web-based vacation destination information search intentions among potential first-time visitors. Undesired congruity relates negatively to willingness to search for destination-related information online and serves as an additional predictor, beyond established relevant factors for pre-visit choice contexts. Moreover, it overrides the influence of established, telic, approach motive constructs, which implies its principal role in early destination-related decision making. The findings have practical implications for market research in tourism, as well as for destination branding.

## Keywords

destination branding, pre-visit information search, self-congruity, telic self-concepts, undesired self

## Introduction

Just as they do commercial brands (e.g., Shavitt, 1990; Sirgy et al., 1991), consumers evaluate vacation destinations according to their expected functional attributes (e.g., availability of certain services, offers), as well as on the basis of their symbolic, value-expressive characteristics (e.g., images; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Considerable empirical research (e.g., Beerli et al., 2007; Chon, 1992; Kastenholtz, 2004) reveals that both pre- and post-visit constructs depend on the match between a tourist's self-concept (or personality) and the destination's image (or personality). According to the self-image congruence

hypothesis (Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy and Su, 2000), tourists should hold favorable attitudes toward, tend to choose, and revisit destinations they perceive as similar to certain aspects of their own self-concept.

Virtually all applications of the self-image congruence hypothesis stress positive, desirable,

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or telic self-concept facets. A particular emphasis addresses the implicit comparisons between the self, as currently experienced, and an imagined or desired end state. For example, Sirgy (1982, 1985, 1986) differentiates among four self-congruity types that affect consumption-related constructs: actual, ideal, social, and 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. The other congruity types involve the closeness of a typical brand user to consumers' view of themselves, whether their ideal vision, how they believe significant others regard them (i.e., social congruity), or how they prefer to be seen by significant others (ideal social congruity). All four congruity types result from specific, approach motives, such as the need for consistency, which influences actual congruity. Similarly, the need for self-esteem determines ideal congruity, social consistency motives drive social congruity, and the need for social approval influences ideal social congruity. Although self-image congruence theory explicitly is open to both approach and avoidance behaviors in principle (e.g., Sirgy, 1982, 1986), approach behaviors have been the primary focus of previous empirical research, which has largely ignored avoidance tendencies and deliberate anti-choice behaviors (see Hogg, 1998; Hogg and Banister, 2001).

Another example of a one-sided orientation to approach behaviors appears in Aaker's (1997) brand personality concept, which provides a scale for measuring both brands and people according to a set of personality attributes. The scale therefore offers a generic basis for operationalizing the self-image congruence hypothesis. Yet the procedure recommended by Aaker (1997) deliberately excludes negatively valenced attributes, which can contribute to the portrayal of negative brand-related images. To justify this exclusion, Aaker (1997: 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.' The first assertion, that brands are linked primarily to positive associations, lacks empirical grounding; the second reflects the intended use of the concept – namely, to influence consumer behaviour by stimulating and aligning approach motives – and ignores avoidance

tendencies. In other words, Aaker's concept focuses on (positive) aspects of brand personality associations, which are of interest to marketers, but disregards the negative brand-related associations that consumers likely hold. Because Aaker's scale and development also have served as a blueprint for developing tourism scales, the conceptual restriction of addressing only positive brand personality perceptions remains in destination-related measurement instruments (e.g., Ekinci and Hosany, 2006; Hosany et al., 2007; Murphy et al., 2007).

But what is so wrong with this common practice of focusing primarily on approach behaviors and their motivational antecedents? First, by focusing on approach motives, most applications of the self-image congruence hypothesis fail to provide a full range of actionable insights into the 'mental models' of consumers, who may hold a multitude of destination-related beliefs, including positively, negatively, and ambivalently valenced ones. A positioning strategy developed on the basis of such limited models thus may fail to balance the closeness of a destination to desirable symbolic meanings with its distance from negative ones and thereby result in suboptimal destination brand strength. Second, psychological research demonstrates that the perceived discrepancy between the self as currently experienced and imagined but undesired end states offers an additional and sometimes even stronger predictor of satisfaction and well-being than does closeness to desired end states (e.g., Heppen and Ogilvie, 2003; Ogilvie, 1987). Recent qualitative (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Hogg and Banister, 2001) and quantitative (Bosnjak and Brand, 2008; Bosnjak and Rudolph, 2008) research suggests that a similar mechanism affects consumer's (anti-)choices. Therefore, there are both practical and theoretical reasons to explore what drives destination-related (anti-)choice tendencies from a symbolic consumption perspective. We outline pertinent research issues pertaining to undesired self-related end states in tourism research next.

### **Theoretical background and previous research**

Ogilvie (1987) introduced the 'undesired self' as a least desired identity that represented the sum of negatively valenced traits, memories of dreaded experiences, embarrassing situations, fearsome events, and unwanted emotions a person is consistently motivated to avoid. He further

suggested that the dominant implicit standard people use to assess their well-being is their distance from a subjective similarity to their most negative self-image, that is, the undesired self. People thus tend to keep track of their everyday, actual self by implicitly referring to their undesired self, because ‘without a tangible undesired self, the real self would lose its navigational cues’ (Ogilvie, 1987: 380).

Recent research confirms the important role of the undesired self in evaluations of life satisfaction and the regulation of emotional experiences. For example, Carver et al. (1999: 785) describe the ‘feared self’ as the ‘set of qualities the person wants not to become, but is concerned about possibly becoming’. The accompanying ideal and ought selves reveal positive and negative dejection- and agitation-related emotions. Specifically, the actual/ideal self and actual/feared self discrepancies correlate with dejection-related emotions (i.e., depression and happiness), though the latter provides the strongest predictor of emotion. Similar results involving the undesired self have been reported as well (Cheung, 1997; Heppen and Ogilvie, 2003; Ogilvie and Clark, 1992).

In turn, to understand both approach and avoidance tendencies and anti-choice behavior, Hogg and Banister (2001; Banister and Hogg, 2004) introduced the undesired self into the field of consumer behavior. They presented the first empirical evidence of the relevance of consumers’ propensity to avoid undesired stereotypical images, which can lead to negative brand/product evaluations and rejection. Their evidence, from the clothing sector, encompassed small-scale, exploratory qualitative studies with focus and discussion groups and revealed that ‘the consumption activities of the majority of consumers . . . 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: 859). Since this important first step, incremental contributions regarding consumers’ tendency to avoid undesired stereotypical images have corroborated and quantified the findings in both high- (cars; Bosnjak and Brand, 2008) and low- (cigarettes; Bosnjak and Rudolph, 2008) involvement product categories. These quantitative studies indicate a substantial and incremental effect on consumption-related attitudes (though not directly on purchase intentions), beyond those of established functional and telic self-congruity constructs. These studies

highlight the largely neglected role of avoidance motives in consumer behavior contexts and provide initial evidence about their operation and value in consumer decision making.

## Knowledge gap, basic research question, and hypotheses

Previous research in the product sector thus has shown that consumers tend to avoid undesired stereotypical images in general, which can even lead to negative evaluations and rejection (Bosnjak and Brand, 2008; Bosnjak and Rudolph, 2008). We draw on this research to offer two extensions. First, we focus on an early stage in the vacation destination choice process, namely, willingness to search for more information about a specific destination. We seek evidence about whether undesired congruity operates during early decision-making stages. Second, we investigate how undesired congruity functions in the service sector and specifically tourism, an area that prior research has not covered, to the best of our knowledge. Thus, we explore the range of applicability of the undesired self construct.

As our basic research effort, we attempt to determine the contribution of undesired self-image congruence (in short, undesired congruity), beyond the effects of established functional and symbolic factors, to pre-visit destination choice behaviors. Undesired congruity in this context refers to the closeness of the personality imagery associated with a specific destination to an undesired personality image. We test the following two hypotheses:

*H1:* Undesired congruity relates negatively to the intention to search for information about a travel destination. Greater undesired congruity related to a specific destination makes consumers less likely to search for further information about it. Conversely, lower undesired congruity makes consumers more likely to search for further information about the specific destination.

*H2:* Undesired congruity significantly contributes to predictions of intentions to search for information about a specific travel destination, beyond the effect of established congruity facets (i.e., functional, actual, ideal, and social congruity).

Whereas *H1* specifies the existence and direction of the influence from a bivariate perspective, *H2* expresses our expectation that the undesired

congruity facet has an incremental contribution in a multivariate context, such as when we take the influences of factors that are known to affect pre-visit constructs into account. Because functional, actual, ideal, and social congruity have proven influential in prior tourism applications (Beerli et al., 2007; Chon, 1992; Chon and Olsen, 1991; Kastenholz, 2004), we focus on these four factors.

To test both hypotheses and increase the practical value of the results, we explore pre-visit search intentions among potential first-time visitors who have never visited the destination in question before. We acknowledge that assessing functional aspects *ex ante*, before the visit to the destination, may seem paradoxical. How can someone who has never visited a destination assess its functional value (e.g., quality, reliability, service level)? However, past research on the factors that influence first-time visitors' destination decisions indicates that these consumers actually express beliefs and expectations about functional and utilitarian features (e.g., Li et al., 2008; Snepenger et al., 1990; Vogt et al., 1998), apparently based on second-hand information, word-of-mouth effects, and media reports. Therefore, regardless of the accuracy and trustworthiness of these functional expectations, they should exert an influence on pre-visit constructs.

## Method

### *Subjects and procedure*

The sample came from a larger German access panel and consisted of subjects who were considering a vacation destination for the upcoming summer season, with the aid of information gathered over the internet. Because our focus is on potential first-time visitors, we used only the data gathered from prospective summer vacationers who had never visited the target destination (in our case, Croatia). These three selection criteria (planning summer vacation for the upcoming season, intention to search online, never visited Croatia) yielded an overall sample of 280 subjects.

The data collection took place in February 2005, with the aid of a web-based survey instrument that was part of a more comprehensive omnibus survey pertaining to web-based advertising, the use of pharmaceuticals, and tourism. In the tourism portion of the omnibus survey, respondents were asked about their (a) past travel

behaviors and habits, (b) intention to search for information on the internet about a set of 12 summer holiday destinations typically favored by German tourists, (c) expected functional congruity related to a summer vacation spent in Croatia, (d) self-image congruity (actual, ideal, social), and (e) undesired congruity related to Croatia as a travel destination.

### *Measures*

We measured *information search intentions* with a 7-point likely/unlikely response scale regarding the likelihood of searching for destination-related information on the internet for the upcoming summer vacation. The set of 12 destinations presented provided the likelihood assessment for Croatia.

For the measure of *expected functional/service congruity*, we used one 7-point agree/disagree item, pertaining to the overall expectation that a summer holiday in Croatia would meet all the tourist's needs ('Croatia will fulfill all my needs and expectations I have towards a summer holiday destination').

*Self-image congruity facets* were assessed directly, capturing the overall, gestalt-like impression of self-congruity in single items (Sirgy et al., 1997). We used a personification technique, as recommended by Aaker (1997: 350), that asked respondents to 'think of the human characteristics associated with Croatia as a travel destination', to introduce the self-destination congruity assessment. The four items that measured actual, ideal, social, and undesired self-congruity then used 7-point agree/disagree response scales: 'The personality of the holiday destination Croatia matches ...' 'my own personality' (actual congruity), 'the person I would like to be' (ideal congruity), 'how my friends and family see myself' (social congruity), and 'the person I definitely do not want to be' (undesired congruity). Table 1 summarizes the intercorrelations of these six constructs.

Considering the correlations among the traditional congruity measures, which range from as low as .40 (social congruity and expected functional congruity) to as high as .80 (ideal congruity and actual congruity), we find considerable convergence among the traditional measures. As expected, undesired congruity is far less correlated with traditional congruity measures (non-significant, -.06 to -.26) than are the traditional measures among themselves. Therefore, Table 1 provides strong evidence that the newly

**Table 1.** Intercorrelations of the six constructs

	Information search intentions	Expected functional congruity	Actual congruity	Ideal congruity	Social congruity
Expected functional congruity	.44				
Actual congruity	.35	.63			
Ideal congruity	.29	.49	.80		
Social congruity	.24	.40	.58	.61	
Undesired congruity	-.22	-.21	-.26	-.24	-.06 <sup>n.s.</sup>

Notes: All correlation coefficients are significant at  $p < .01$ , except the one denoted n.s. (not significant).

introduced undesired congruity construct is separate from traditional self-congruity measures.

## Results

Table 2 summarizes the results of a two-step hierarchical regression analysis. The first step includes expected functional congruity. In terms of Cohen's (1992) classification, the predictive effect of functional congruity on the intention to search for more information about a specific destination is medium to large ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the second step, we add the classical self-congruity facets (actual, ideal, social), along with undesired congruity.

The zero-order correlation of  $r = -.22$  ( $p < .01$ ) between undesired congruity and the intention to search for destination-related information (see Table 2, step 2) offers support for our first hypothesis: Undesired congruity is negatively related to the intention to search for information about a travel destination. In Cohen's (1992) taxonomy, the statistical relationship is small to medium.

The results also corroborate *H2*, in that undesired congruity significantly contributes to predictions of the intention to search for information about a specific travel destination, over and above predictions based on established congruity facets. The standardized regression weight for undesired congruity ( $\beta$ ) is  $-.14$  ( $p < .05$ ), and the incremental share of variance explained in the criterion equals 6%.

Moreover, in a result that we did not hypothesize, we find from Table 2 that actual, ideal, and social congruity substantially correlate with pre-visit destination search intentions ( $r = .24$  for social congruity to  $r = .35$  for actual congruity), but their influence in a multivariate regression model disappears when we include undesired congruity, as the non-significant standardized regression weights estimated for the three classical congruity facets indicate.

## Summary, conclusions, and implications

Recent research into the predictive value and operation of undesired congruity has introduced a new construct to reflect consumers' tendency to avoid undesired stereotypical images. We have sought to investigate its role in the context of vacation destination information search intentions among potential first-time visitors. We expected undesired congruity to relate negatively to willingness to search for destination-related information on the web and to help predict intentions to search beyond the level offered by established congruity facets (functional, actual, ideal, and social congruity). The results corroborate both our expectations. Moreover, undesired congruity appears to override the influence of established self-congruity factors and play a principal role in early destination-related decision-making phases.

Negative stereotypical images appear to have significant impacts on early decision-making stages (i.e., information search intentions), which recommends due caution among marketers who need to assess potential first-time visitors' destination image perceptions, as well as choose and implement their destinations' (re-)branding strategies.

First, to assess potential first-time visitors' image perceptions and self-congruity impressions, tourism marketing managers must take negative destination-related associations into account. If they do so, they can gain more comprehensive insights into the full set of reasons that consumers do or do not gather information about their destination. These managers also need to select the consumer data they use to assess potential visitors' mindsets carefully. Each step of any primary data collection should be scrutinized for possible bias toward approach motives and behaviors.

Second, to (re-)brand a destination, marketers need to find an optimal strategy that maximizes

**Table 2.** Hierarchical multiple regression analysis: Expected functional (step 1) and self-image congruence (step 2) → Intention to search for information

Step	Predictor Variables	r	beta	R <sup>2</sup>
1	Expected functional congruity	.44**	.44**	.19**
2	Expected functional congruity	.44**	.38**	.25**
	Actual congruity	.35**	.06 <sup>n.s.</sup>	
	Ideal congruity	.29**	.01 <sup>n.s.</sup>	
	Social congruity	.24**	.07 <sup>n.s.</sup>	
	Undesired congruity	-.22**	-.14*	

Notes: N = 280.

\*\*p < .01, \*p < .05, <sup>n.s.</sup> = not significant.

simultaneously its closeness to desired symbolic meanings and its distance from undesired symbolic associations. These aspects are not just two sides of the same coin, as our research clearly has demonstrated.

For destinations with negative attributes that could hinder first-time visitors' early destination-related decision making, tourism marketing managers should adapt effective strategies from the product sector that can overcome negative country-of-origin effects. Such strategies essentially aim to dilute these negative effects through decomposition approaches (e.g., 'assembled in' and 'with parts from' rather than 'Made in', such as 'Designed in California, assembled in China'; Tse and Lee, 1993) or the mere exposure of target groups to disconfirming information (Lotz and Hu, 2001). Applied to tourism and using the example of Croatia, a decomposition strategy would attempt to attract potential first-time visitors with unknown or more positively valenced sub-regions and their amenities (e.g., Istria or Dalmatia instead of Croatia). Well-known cities and regions thus would serve as the initial appeal in advertising communications (e.g., Dubrovnik, Plitvice National Park). The mere exposure to disconfirming information method would flood the target market with diverse advertising communications that convey the positive attributes of Croatia (Lotz and Hu, 2001).

For tourism researchers, the first step should be the development and application of generic instruments that measure destination images and destination personality comprehensively, encompassing both positive and negative attributes. At least three recent brand personality measurement instruments for branded products (Bosnjak et al., 2007; Geuens et al., 2009; Smit et al., 2002) show that the inclusion of negative brand attributes prompts corresponding latent factors with negative meaning to emerge, which corroborates the independent operation of

negative and positive image dimensions. If they borrow the instrument development rationales employed to design these product-based scales, new instruments tailored to tourism may offer fruitful additions to the field and would not suffer from a 'blind spot' when it came to negative destination aspects.

In addition, tourism researchers should shed more light on the relative effectiveness of the two re-branding strategies, perhaps with the aid of experimental comparisons.

Furthermore, additional research should address some of the limitations that mark this research. First, the single-item measures we use are not necessarily associated with lower reliability than multi-item measures (Rossiter, 2002), though we could not assess their psychometric properties or reliability in our non-longitudinal, single-shot research design. Further studies could employ multiple indicators for each self-congruity facet to test these properties.

Second, and partly related to the first limitation, we used a direct measure of self-congruity, because it proved the most parsimonious and predictive with regard to self-image congruity effects (Sirgy et al., 1997). However, this direct method cannot provide sufficient insight into the determinants that underlie a self-congruity experience. In contrast, indirect measures of self-congruity typically tap respondents' perceptions of a brand's image or personality and their own self-image, then mathematically compute a discrepancy or similarity score that can be summed (or averaged) across all image dimensions. Such indirect measures may be more informative, because they can be decomposed into congruity and discrepancy facets at the level of individual image attributes. Additional research could exploit the newly designed brand personality measurement instruments we have described as a resource determining attributes to measure self-congruity indirectly.

Third, the scope and population of this research is limited to potential first-time visitors and their information search intentions. The effect of undesired congruity that we find therefore cannot be generalized to groups with firsthand, prior experience with a destination. Mounting evidence suggests that consumers' destination images change with personal experience, both qualitatively and in their predictive power (e.g., Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Woodside and Dubelaar, 2002). Replications of these longitudinal studies that encompass both pre- and post-visit constructs under the umbrella of self-image congruity theory, as extended by the undesired congruity concept, would be a fruitful addition to the field. Moreover, such longitudinal designs might enable undesired congruity to become embedded into or absorbed by traditional congruity facets as the amount of direct experience increases, such that it may reflect a malleable construct that is restricted to early vacation destination decision-making phases among potential first-time visitors.

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