SELF-CONCEPT AND RETAILING STRATEGY

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Abstract

The concepts of self-congruity and ideal congruity are reviewed and discussed in the context of store patronage and store loyalty. A model is then presented that integrates these concepts and defines four market segments: positive self-congruity, positive self-incongruity, negative self-congruity, and negative self-incongruity. It is argued that the positive self-congruity market should be the retailer target market. Two retailing strategies are proposed to help the retailer position him/her store to the positive self-congruity market: the passive approach and the active approach.

Self-Concept and Retailing Strategy

Ever since the concept of market segmentation was first introduced (Smith 1956), marketers have continually searched for new methods of segmentation to give them a differential advantage in the market place. In retailing, marketers have traditionally, segmented the market on the basis of store image involving consumer perceptions of store attributes such as prices, quality of merchandise, store personnel, and store location (e.g., Jenkins and Forsythe 1980). Although it may be implied, none of these segmentation methods deal explicitly with symbolic store-image attributes. The role of symbolic (personality-related) store-image attributes has not yet been considered seriously in retail segmentation.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how self-concept models (involving the interaction of symbolic store image with consumer self-concept) may be used as means for segmenting retail markets and devising retail strategy.

Store Image and Self-Concept

The symbolic (value-expressive) store image as used here refers to the stereotypic personality image shoppers have of a specific retail store (Samli and Sirgy 1981; Sirgy 1982; Varvoglis and Sirgy 1984). Examples of stereotypic personality images people may have of a particular store include traditional versus modern, classy versus folksy, sexy versus plain, friendly versus formal, and high status versus low status (cf., Birdwell 1968; Dolich 1969; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Levy 1959; Ross 1971).

Traditionally in consumer behavior, self-concept has been considered to comprise of different self-perspectives such as, actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image, and ideal social self-image (Sirgy 1982). The actual self-image refers to how the individual sees himself/herself along a specific personality attribute; the ideal self-image refers to how the individual likes to see himself/herself, the social self-image is defined in terms of how the individual believes others see him/her; and the ideal social self-image is viewed as how the individual believes significant others like him/her to be (Sirgy 1982) (see Table 1).

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<thead>
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<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>VARIOUS SINGLE SELF-IMAGE/STORE-IMAGE CONGRUITY CONSTRUCTS</td>
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<td>MATCH BETWEEN SELF-CONCEPT AND STORE IMAGE</td>
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<td>ACTUAL SELF-IMAGE AND symbolic STORE IMAGE</td>
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Self-image/store-image congruity refers to the match or mismatch of one or more self-perspective (i.e., actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image, or ideal social self-image) with corresponding personality images of the designated store. The match between actual self-image and store image has been referred to as "self-congruity," between ideal self-image and store image as "ideal congruity," between social self-image and store image as "social congruity," and between ideal social self-image and store image as "ideal social congruity" (see Sirgy 1982, 1985a).

Single Congruity Versus Multiple Congruities

The issue whether store image interacts with one or more self-perspectives such as, the actual self-image, the ideal self-image, the social self-image, and the ideal social self-image has been addressed by Sirgy (1982, 1985a, 1985b). Many studies have treated self-image/store-image congruity only and exclusively in terms of a single congruity effect, namely self-congruity (i.e., involving only the actual self-image) (e.g., Belbinger, Steinberg, and Stanton 1976). These studies provided support for the relationship between self-congruity and patronage behavior. Other studies have been found to assess the independent effects of ideal self-image versus actual self-image (or ideal congruity versus self-congruity) on patronage behavior (Dornoff and Tatham 1972; Samli and Sirgy 1981; Stern, Bush, and Hair 1977).

In the following section, a self-image/store-image congruence model is developed based on the concepts of self-congruity and ideal congruity in a retail setting. Thus, it is posited that a model that can account for the effects of multiple congruities may be more normatively useful than the traditional models based on single congruity effects. These concepts have already been empirically supported by many studies in both product and retail settings (see Sirgy, 1982 and 1985a, for a literature review). Therefore the focus of this
The underlying assumption in the model as shown in Table 2 is that the effects of self-congruity and ideal congruity on store loyalty are additive, i.e., not interactive. A study conducted in the product sector testing this assumption (Sirgy 1985b) provided support for the additivity notion.

As shown in Table 2, the interrelationship of self-congruity and ideal congruity is argued to result in at least four discrete conditions, namely high self-congruity/high ideal congruity (labelled here as positive self-congruity), high self-congruity/low ideal congruity (negative self-congruity), low self-congruity/high ideal congruity (positive self-incongruity), and low self-congruity/low ideal congruity (negative self-incongruity).

It is argued that self-congruity affects store loyalty through the activation and operation of the self-consistency motive (Sirgy 1982, 1983, 1985a, 1985b). In contrast, ideal congruity affects store loyalty through the mediation of the self-esteem motive. The self-consistency motive refers to individuals' need to act in ways that are consistent with their self-perceptions. To do otherwise would cause dissonance, a psychological discomfort state, threatening to invalidate their beliefs about themselves. The self-esteem motive, on the other hand, refers to an individual's need to act in ways that are instrumental in achieving goals that maintain and/or increase positive self-regard.

As shown in Table 2, in the positive self-congruity condition, the consumer would be motivated to approach that store since the patronage of the store would satisfy both his/her self-esteem and self-consistency needs. For example, "this store seems to have an image of high social class" (store image) can match the consumer's image of himself/herself as "a classy person" (high self-congruity), knowing that these personality attributes are ideally valued by the individual (high ideal congruity). By patronizing that store this consumer would be able to maintain his/her ideal self-image (satisfaction of his/her self-esteem needs) and simultaneously reinforce his/her self-consistency needs (high level of store loyalty).

Under the negative self-congruity condition, the consumer would experience a conflict state toward the store since the patronage of the store in one way would frustrate his/her self-esteem need and in another way satisfy his/her self-consistency need. An example of the negative self-congruity condition is: "I believe that the people who typically patronize this store are "conservative" (store image) is matched with "I am conservative" (high self-congruity) but "I don't like being conservative" (low ideal congruity). Here the person would not be motivated to maintain a state that he/she views in a negative light, since by doing so his/her self-esteem would decrease; however, he/she would be acting consistently with his/her conservative actual self-image to satisfy his/her self-consistency need. The result is a motivational state reflective of conflict (moderate level of store loyalty).

Under a positive self-incongruity condition, the situation is reversed but the motivational outcome remains the same. Here, the consumer also experiences a conflict between the self-esteem motive and the self-consistency motive. On the one hand, patronage of that store would satisfy his/her self-esteem need but would also frustrate his/her self-consistency need. A store having an image of "preppy" (store image) may match the consumer's ideal self-image ("I like to be preppy") causing high ideal congruity; however, he/she might not presently see himself/herself that way ("I am not preppy") - low self-congruity. Patronizing that store would therefore help the consumer attain his/her ideal self-image of being "preppy" (satisfying the self-esteem motive), but by doing so he/she would threaten the way he/she sees himself/herself as "not the preppy type" (frustrate the self-consistency motive). Store loyalty reflects this conflict towards the store (moderate level of store loyalty).

Finally, under the negative self-incongruity condition, the consumer would be motivated optimally to avoid that store, since the patronage of the store would frustrate both his/her self-esteem and self-consistency needs. An example may be con-