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ABSTRACT

Self-image congruence is recognised as an important construct in explaining and predicting various aspects of consumer behaviour. However, empirical investigations on the application of self-congruence theories to understand tourists' post-consumption behaviours are still in its infancy. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of self-image congruence, cruisers' experiences and satisfaction on intention to recommend. Partial Least Square (PLS) path modelling was used to test the hypotheses. Results indicate that self-image congruence (actual and ideal) has significant direct effects on cruisers' experiences, which in turn influence tourists' satisfaction. In addition, satisfaction mediates the relationship between cruisers' experiences and intention to recommend. Overall, this research further establishes the validity of self-congruity theory in the context of cruising, an under-explored area in tourism literature and offers important managerial implications.

Keywords: *self-image congruence, cruisers' experiences, satisfaction, behavioral intention.*

INTRODUCTION

Self-concept, the sum total of an individual's ideas, thoughts and feelings about oneself, plays a significant role in consumer research. It is well accepted that the image individuals associate with themselves dictate specific purchase behaviour patterns (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). The process of buying or consuming products and brands consumers believe to possess symbolic images similar and/or complementary to the image they hold about themselves is referred to as image congruence (Heath and Scott, 1998). Self-image congruence has long been recognised as an important facet in explaining and predicting various aspects of consumer behaviour (He and Mukherjee, 2007). Self-concept studies in marketing can be traced back to the 1960s (e.g. Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Dolich, 1969) and mostly focus on the relationship between self-image congruence and consumer's purchase intention. However, some researchers (e.g. Sirgy et al., 1997) have highlighted the benefits of extending self-image congruence conceptualisations to study post-consumption behaviours. As a result, in recent years, a plethora of consumer studies investigate the role of self-image congruence on various post-consumption evaluations such as satisfaction (e.g. Sirgy et al., 1997; Jamal and Al-Marri, 2007), loyalty (e.g. He and Mukherjee, 2007), perceived quality (e.g. Kwak and Kang, 2009); and attitudes (e.g. Ibrahim and Najjar, 2008).

Similarly, tourism literatures recognize the relevance of self-image congruence construct in understanding tourist behaviours (Sirgy and Su, 2000; Todd, 2001; Litvin, Goh and Goldsmith, 2001; Litvin and Goh, 2002). Sirgy and Su (2000) propose an integrative model establishing the relationships among destination image, self-congruence and tourists' behaviors. Chon (1992) was the first to empirically apply self-image congruence theory to tourism. The author found that tourist satisfaction was significantly correlated with self-image/destination image congruity. Tourists who perceived a low discrepancy between a destination's user image and his/her actual or ideal self-image were more satisfied with the destination. Litvin and Goh (2002) extended Chon's (1992) post-trip conceptualisation to include pre-visit variables travel interest and intention to visit. More recently, Beerli,

Meneses and Gil (2007) investigate the role of self-image congruence in predicting destination choice. Findings revealed that, the greater the match between a destination's image and one's self-concept, the greater the tendency for tourist to visit that place.

Although prior research has provided important insights on the role of self-image congruence in the tourism sector, additional validation of the concept is needed (Litvin and Goh, 2002; Beerli et al., 2007). In particular, while it has been acknowledged that tourists increasingly consuming travel and tourism products (for e.g. a cruise vacation) as a means of self-expression (Gross and Brown, 2006), no studies could be identified that simultaneously investigate the relationship among self-image congruence, tourists' experiences, satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to explore the effects of self-image congruence, tourists' experiences and satisfaction on intention to recommend.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

In the literature, there is a consensus that people consume products/brands/services not only because of their functional (utilitarian) value but also because of their symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Leigh and Gabel, 1992). In his pioneering article "Symbols for Sale", Levy (1959) noted that people buy products not only for what they can *do*, but also for what they *mean*. Levy (1959) posits that people consume products as symbols of personal attributes, motivations and social patterns. Symbolic consumption reflects the personality and lifestyle of consumers and is often used to express social distinctions (e.g. Sirgy, 1982). For example, it is recognized that people *consume* luxury products (e.g. automobile) as a means to reinforce their status symbol in society (e.g. O'Cass and Frost, 2002). Consumption thus acts as a vehicle for self-expression and consumers tend to choose products/brands that are perceived to be similar to their own self-concept (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1982).

In early studies, self concept was conceived as a single variable - actual self-concept (e.g. Grubb and Stern, 1971) but recent conceptualisations construe self-concept as a multi-dimensional construct (e.g. Todd, 2001). Four dimensions of self-concept are common to explain and predict behaviour: i) actual (real) self concept, which refers to how consumers see themselves; ii) ideal-self concept, which refers to how they would like to see themselves; iii) social self-concept, or how they think others see them; iv) and ideal social self-concept, or how they would like to appear or be perceived by others (Sirgy, 1982). However, the majority consumer studies in marketing (e.g. Hong and Zinkhan, 1995; Ibrahim and Najjar, 2008) and tourism (e.g. Litvin and Kar, 2003; Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007) operationalise self-concept in terms of two components: actual and ideal. Accordingly, in this paper we focus on actual and ideal self-concepts, as these two dimensions have received most empirical support in predicting various aspects of consumer behaviour. Furthermore, self-image congruence refers to the cognitive match between consumers' self-concept (e.g. actual self, ideal self, social self and ideal social self) and a product/brand image, store image, destination image or user image of a given product/brand/service (Sirgy et al., 1997; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Sigy, Grewal and Mangleburg, 2000).

Effects of self-image congruence on satisfaction and cruisers' experiences

Past studies have shown that self-image congruence plays a significant role in influencing consumer behaviors. For instance, prior research indicates that self-image congruence affects advertising effectiveness (e.g. Bjerke and Polegato, 2006; Hong and Zinkhan, 1995), facilitates positive attitudes toward products/brands (e.g. Ekinci and Riley, 2003), influences consumers' choice (e.g. Quester, Karunaratna and Goh (2000), attitudes (e.g. Ibrahim and Najjar, 2008), perceived quality (e.g. Kwak and Kang, 2009), brand preferences (e.g. Jamal and Goode, 2001) and brand loyalty (e.g. Kressmann et al., 2006).

Extant research also reports a strong relationship between self-image congruence and satisfaction (e.g. Sirgy et al., 1997; He and Mukherjee, 2007; Jamal and Al-Marri, 2007). Similarly, tourism literatures recognise the influence of self-concept in modelling tourist behaviours. For instance, Chon (1992) studied the relationship between tourists' self-concept/destination image congruity and satisfaction. Chon's (1992) findings show that self-image congruence is a significant determinant of tourist satisfaction with destinations. Litvin and Kar (2003) replicated Chon's (1992) work and found that destination image/actual self-image and destination image/ideal self-image congruity were significantly correlated with visitor satisfaction.

Furthermore, amidst fierce competition, marketers have been under pressure to comprehend the distinguishing characteristics of tourist experiences (Gretzel et al., 2006). Nowadays, tourists are in search for unique, extraordinary and memorable experiences. Cruise vacations offer tourists a means to express their self-concept by allowing them to be in a different world (Yarnal and Kerstetter, 2005). The cruise experience is derived from the intrinsic benefits or psychological outcomes that tourists obtained as a result of taking a cruise vacation (Huang and Hsu, 2010). Thus, we can argue that the greater the congruity with one's self-concept, the more pleasant cruisers will perceive their experiences. Accordingly, based on above discussions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H_1: The greater the congruity between one's actual self-concept and his/her image of other tourists, the greater the level of satisfaction.

H_2: The greater the congruity between one's ideal self-concept and his/her image of other tourists, the greater the level of satisfaction.

H_3: The greater the congruity between one's actual self-concept and his/her image of other tourists, the more pleasant cruisers will perceive their experience.

H_4: The greater the congruity between one's ideal self-concept and his/her image of other tourists, the more pleasant cruisers will perceive their experience.

Relationship among cruisers experiences, satisfaction and intention to recommend

Cruise vacations are laden with experiential benefits and offer opportunities for tourists to engage in a socially unique and memorable experience (Kwortnik, 2006). As a result, understanding cruisers' experiences is fundamental for marketers because of its influence on post-consumption evaluations, such as satisfaction and intention to recommend. Duman and Mattila (2005) demonstrated that the affective experience of cruise travel have a positive influence on perceived overall satisfaction. More recently, Huang and Hsu (2010) findings further establish that cruise experience have a positive direct effect on vacation satisfaction. Other studies have also shown that consumer experiences are related to future behaviour. For example, Chang and Chieng (2006) postulate that, the ability to create consistent customer experience drives loyalty. In addition, several studies have established that satisfied tourists have a higher propensity to recommend a destination to other people (e.g. Hui, Wan and Ho, 2007). Based on the above empirical perspectives, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H_5: A pleasant cruise experience is positively related to overall satisfaction.

H_6: A pleasant cruise experience is positively related to intention to recommend.

H_7: Cruiser's satisfaction is positively related to intention to recommend.

METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire consists of several rating scales to capture the study's main variables. Cruiser's self-concept (actual and ideal) and his/her image of other tourists (user image) were captured on a 7-point semantic differential scale. The measurement scale was

adapted from Beerli, Meneses and Gil (2007) and consists of six items: young/old, conservative/liberal, sophisticated/unsophisticated, modern/traditional, non-conformist/conformist, and like new experiences/dislikes new experiences. For each items, respondents were instructed to evaluate their actual self-concept by answering the question "Using the following list of adjectives, how do you see yourself?", and their ideal self-concept "How would you like to see yourself?" Similarly, respondents were asked to evaluate their mental representation of other tourists onboard: "Using the following list of attributes, what is the image you have of the tourists onboard this cruise? Four items, adapted from Oh, Fiore and Jeoung (1997) were used to measure cruisers' overall experience. Respondents evaluated the extent to which their experience was interesting, stimulating, exciting and enjoyable on a 7-point scale ranging from [1] not at all and [7] very much. Overall satisfaction was conceptualized as tourists' post-consumption evaluation of the totality of the cruise vacation and was assessed using two items: extremely dissatisfied/extremely satisfied; and terrible/delighted. Finally, behavioral intention were operationalised in terms of tourists' intention to recommend using the question "How likely is it that you would recommend this cruise to friends or family members" (extremely unlikely [-3] and extremely likely [+3]).

Data were collected from guests on a two-week cruise vacation onboard the megaship "Rhapsody of the Seas" cruise liner. In total, there were 1859 guests onboard representing three major nationalities namely: Americans (44%); British (22%); and Australians (19%). On the last day, whilst waiting for onward transportation (coach transfers), respondents were approached to participate in the survey. In using such a method to collect data, tourists' evaluations were captured within less than an hour after the "consumption" has taken place and thus minimise bias associated with retrospective recall (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff, 2003). A total of 169 questionnaires were collected and the sample was almost equally split between males (53%) and females (47%). In terms of age group, 8% of the respondents were between the age group 16 to 25 years of age; 21% between 26 and 35; 15% were between 36 and 45; 15% were in the 46-55 category; 17% were between 56-65; and 15% were above 65. Only a small proportion of respondents were on their first cruise (25%); the majority were repeaters with previous cruise vacation ranging from: 1-2 times (32%), 3-4 times (21%) and more than 4 times (22%). Respondents were mostly accompanied with either their family (46%) or their partner (42%). In terms of nationality, the sample was a good representation of the actual passenger profile with USA (38%) as the largest group, followed by UK (29%) and Australia (15%). The remaining 18% included countries such as China (5%), Norway and Russia.

RESULTS

Prior to testing the research hypothesis, three principal component factor analyses with Varimax rotation were employed to establish the stability of the self-concept (actual and ideal) and user (other tourists) image scales. Results indicate that four items, namely - sophisticated/unsophisticated, modern/traditional, non-conformist/conformist, like new experience/dislike new experiences - were common across the three scales and explained most variance in factor analyses. Self-congruity were then computed using absolute difference scores (Sirgy, 1985; Kressmann et al., 2006) between respondents' ratings on each of the four attributes describing the image of tourists onboard and the corresponding self-image ratings (actual and ideal). As a result, negative correlation coefficients (see Table 2 and Fig. 1) between self-image congruence (actual and ideal) indicators and the dependent measures (experiences, satisfaction and intention to recommend), should be interpreted as a positive relationship. Lower absolute discrepancy score indicates a closer match between self-image and perceived cruisers' image and hence higher congruity levels.

Partial Least Square (PLS) path modelling (Lohmöller, 1989) was used to test the

hypothesized conceptual framework. Unlike covariance-bases SEM, PLS procedure imposes less restrictive assumptions about normality and has the ability to handle small samples (Chin and Newsted, 1999). Over the years, PLS has emerged as a popular method for empirical research in consumer research (Henseler, Ringle and Sinkovics, 2009). Evaluation of PLS models are based on multiple fit indices, including R^2 values, average variance explained (AVE), regression weights and path loadings (Lohmöller, 1989; Fornell and Cha, 1994). The hypothesized model was estimated using SmartPLS 2.0 (Ringle, Wende and Will, 2005). In addition, the model stability was tested via a bootstrap re-sampling procedure.

Measurement model

Following Anderson and Gerbing (1988) recommended two-step procedure, we first establish reliability, convergent and discriminant validity of the study's main constructs (Tables 1 and 2) before testing the structural model. Reliability was assessed using the composite reliability estimates. From Table 1, composite reliabilities were above the recommended 0.70 cut-off value (range from .79 to .92), suggesting that the scales were reliable (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 1 Reliability and Convergent Validity

Variables	Loading	t-statistic	Composite Reliability	AVE
Actual Self-Image Congruence			.79	.50
Sophisticated/Unsophisticated	.63	3.56[**]		
Modern/Traditional	.58	3.67[**]		
Non-conformist/Conformist	.74	5.88[**]		
Like new experiences/dislike new experiences	.85	7.78[**]		
Ideal Self-Image Congruence			.85	.59
Sophisticated/Unsophisticated	.76	6.59[**]		
Modern/Traditional	.73	5.74[**]		
Non-conformist/Conformist	.70	5.89[**]		
Like new experiences/dislike new experiences	.87	13.59[**]		
Cruisers' Experiences			.90	.71
Experience was stimulating	.83	19.51[**]		
Experience was exciting	.85	28.09[**]		
Experience was enjoyable	.87	27.92[**]		
Experience was interesting	.82	20.23[**]		
Satisfaction			.92	.86
Extremely dissatisfied/ extremely satisfied	.92	24.68[**]		
Terrible/delighted	.94	79.42[**]		

Note: intention to recommend, is a single item measure and is not included; [**] significant at the 0.05 level

Convergent validity was assessed by looking at the significance of factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). From Table 1, factor loadings were higher than .57 and significant at .01 level, with *t* values ranging from 3.56 to 79.42. Average variance extracted

were 0.50 and above, thus establishing the convergent validity of the measures (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 2 Inter-construct Correlations: Discriminant Validity

|	ASIC	ISIC	CExp	Satis
ASIC	**.70**			
ISIC	.49	**.77**		
CExp	-.29	-.41	**.84**	
Satis	-.25	-.32	.65	**.93**
IntRec[a]	-.28	-.33	.61	.80

Note: [a] single item measure; ASIC=Actual Self-Image Congruence; ISIC=Ideal Self-Image Congruence; CExp: Cruisers' Experiences; Satis=Satisfaction; IntRec=Intention to Recommend
Square root of average variance extracted (AVE) is shown on the diagonal of the matrix; inter-construct correlation is shown off the diagonal

Discriminant validity is established by comparing the square root of AVE for each individual construct with the correlations among the latent variables. For adequate discriminant validity, the diagonal elements in Table 2 should be greater than the off-diagonal elements (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Comparing all correlation coefficients with square roots of AVEs in Table 2, the results suggest strong evidence of discriminant validity.

Structural model

The structural model (Fig. 1) was evaluated using R^2 estimates, standardized path coefficients (β) and significance level (t statistic). R^2 values measure the predictive power of the structural model, while path loadings indicate the strength between independent and dependent variables. R^2 coefficients were greater than the recommended .10 value (Falk and Miller, 1992) and indicate that the structural model exhibits adequate explanatory power. More specifically, the model explained 22% in "cruisers' experiences", 43% in "satisfaction" and 66% in "intention to recommend". Using a bootstrapping procedure, we calculated path loadings and t-statistics for the hypothesized relationships as shown in Fig.1.

Figure 1 Results for the Hypothesized Model
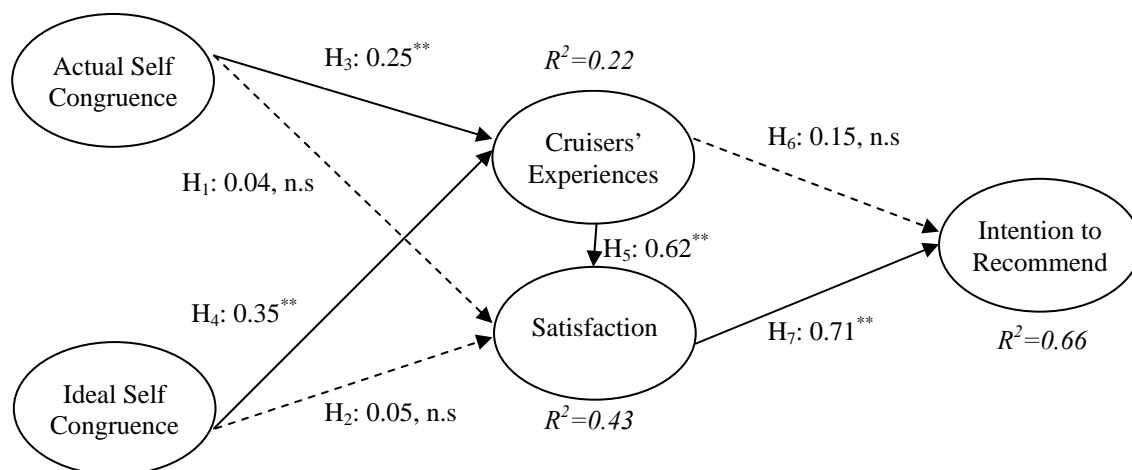
Note: [**] $p<0.01$; n.s: not significant

From Fig.1, for H_1 and H_2, PLS parameter estimates (β=0.04 and β=0.05) were not significant (p>0.05), and thus leading to the rejection of H_1 and H_2. However, the path loadings from actual self-image congruence to cruisers' experiences (β=0.25) and from ideal self-image congruence (β=0.35) were significant (p<0.01), providing support for H_3 and H_4. For H_5 we hypothesized that that a pleasant cruise experience is positively related to overall satisfaction and was fully supported (β=0.62; p<0.01). Furthermore, contrary to our theoretical expectations, the path between cruisers' experiences and intention to recommend was not significant (β=0.15; p>0.01) and therefore H_6 is rejected. Finally, H_7 state that cruiser's satisfaction is positively related to intention to recommend. The significant coefficient (β=0.71; p<0.01) between satisfaction and intention to recommend provide support for H_7.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Self-image – user image congruence has been a major focus of consumer research. Despite some recent applications (e.g. Kastenholz, 2004; Beerli et al., 2007), the effects of self-image congruence on tourist post-consumption behaviours remain an under-studied topic. The present study is the first known attempt to utilize self-congruity in the context of cruising. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by further establishing the validity of self-congruity theory in tourism. Our findings also confirm the experiential nature of cruise vacation (Duman and Mattila, 2005; Huang and Hsu, 2010). Cruising is a consumption experience that enables tourists to express and reinforce their self-concepts in society (Yarnal and Kerstetter, 2005). In addition, findings reveal that ideal-image congruity is more important than actual-image congruity in determining cruisers' experiences. Such results are in line with previous consumer research (e.g. Hong and Zinkhan, 1995; Graeff, 1996) that identifies ideal-self image congruence as the main determinant of behavior. Graeff (1996) notes that conspicuous products consumed publicly (such as cruise vacation) are more influenced by ideal-image congruity than actual-image congruity.

Furthermore, contrary to our predictions, in the path analysis, self-image congruence was not significantly related to satisfaction. Such findings are inconsistent with the two studies in tourism (Chon, 1992; Litvin and Kar, 2003) that investigate the direct relationship between self-image congruity and tourist satisfaction. Both Chon (1992) and Litvin and Kar (2003) found that actual-self image and ideal-image congruence were significantly related to tourist satisfaction. Several plausible explanations could be put forward, in terms of differences in methods, to explain the discrepancies between our results and other studies in tourism. First, in our study self-image congruence measure was adapted from Beerli et al., (2007) which used a variant of Malhotra's (1981) self-concept scale. Respondents had to rate their perceptions of other tourists as well as their actual and ideal self-concepts. Then, congruence is estimated by computing discrepancy scores. In contrast, both Chon (1992) and Litvin and Kar (2003) directly asked tourists to rate their actual and ideal self-image congruence using five statements.

Second, in Chon (1992) and Litvin and Kar (2003) studies, satisfaction was operationalised as a dependent variable, whereas, in this research satisfaction acts a mediating variable between self-image congruence and intention to recommend. Additionally, in Chon (1992) and Litvin and Kar (2003) studies, satisfaction was measured using three questions: a 7-point facial scale (smiling to angry face); a 7-point delighted-terrible scale; and a non-verbal graphic scale. Conversely, in this study, satisfaction was conceptualized as an overall evaluation of the cruise vacation and was assessed using two on a 7-point scale: extremely dissatisfied/extremely satisfied; and terrible/delighted. Moreover, the study settings are different. Both Chon (1992) and Litvin and Kar (2003) investigated satisfaction with a tourist

destination (Virgina and Singapore respectively). However, in this study we measured satisfaction with a cruise vacation as opposed to a specific destination. In order to advance our knowledge of the role of self-image congruity in tourism, further research is needed that take into consideration recent studies (e.g. Beerli et al., 2007) and compares the direct approach (e.g. Chon, 1992) with the traditional method (e.g. Malhotra, 1981) in various tourism settings (e.g. cruise vacation, tour holidays).

Findings also indicate that tourists' experiences were positively related to satisfaction which in turn is a strong determinant of tourists' intention to recommend. Our results support previous studies on cruise vacation (Duman and Mattila, 2005; Huang and Hsu, 2010) that identify affective experience of cruise travel to have a positive influence on perceived overall satisfaction. In addition, as predicted, the relationship between satisfaction and intention to recommend was confirmed. Findings support other studies (e.g. Hui, Wan and Ho, 2007) establishing that satisfied tourists have a higher propensity to recommend a destination to other people. Moreover, modelling tourists' future behaviours have been an important area of research (Hui, Wan and Ho, 2007). Results of this study provide insights into a model that includes self-image congruence, experiences and satisfaction in explaining behavioral intentions. However, these findings are still exploratory and further validation is required.

In pragmatic terms, results of this study offer important implications for cruise marketing. Our findings have shown that both actual and ideal self-image congruence play an important role in determining tourists' experiences. More specifically, the higher the congruity between cruisers self-concept and his/her image of other tourists, the more stimulating, exciting, enjoyable and interesting cruisers perceive their experiences. In turn, experiences were positively related to satisfaction. Consequently, such findings have important implications for developing positioning and promotional strategies. Cruise liners should develop distinctive brand positions that reinforce the perceived image/personality of the typical cruise tourist. It is important to develop an image close to that of the self-perception of potential tourists. In addition, cruise marketers can manipulate their advertising messages in order to appeal to the self-concept of their target customers. Previous research (e.g. Graeff, 1996), has established that advertising appeals that are congruent with one's self-concept are more superior to incongruent appeals in enhancing advertising effectiveness. Moreover, managers need to understand the role of actual self-image congruity, ideal self-image congruity, experiences and satisfaction in explaining tourists' behavioral intention. Cruise marketers should create pleasant and memorable experiences to generate higher satisfaction levels and to positively influence passengers' behavioral intentions.

Our results, due to its underlying limitations, need to be interpreted with caution. In this study, we only investigate the effects of self-congruity on tourists' experiences and behaviours. However, past research has established that consumer behaviours are not solely driven by self-congruity but also by functional congruity (e.g. Sirgy et al., 2000; Kressmann et al., 2006). Future studies should incorporate both self-congruity and functional congruity in modeling tourists' experiences, satisfaction and intention to recommend. Additionally, this study did not take into account the moderating effects of customer (tourist) involvement on the relationship among self-image congruence, overall experiences, satisfaction, and intention to recommend. Accordingly, an area for future research would be to assess the extent to which tourist involvement influences the relationship between self-congruity, experiences, satisfaction, and intention to recommend. In addition, the study findings are limited to one cruise ship (*Rhapsody of the Seas*) and data were collected at a specific time of the year. Finally, while respondents were representative in terms of the demographic profile of onboard passengers, the sample size was relatively small.

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