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Self-Congruence and Tourist Happiness: The Mediating Role of Positive Emotions and Meaning

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1. Introduction

The term *self-congruity* in the context of tourism has attracted wide attention due to its influence on perceived value (e.g. Jamilena, Castañeda and Del Barrio-García, 2019), tourist destination satisfaction (Šegota, Chen and Golja, 2021) and destination brand attachment (e.g. Huang, Zhang and Hu, 2017). Previous tourism literature further indicates that self-congruity significantly affects destination image (Litvin and Goh, 2002), tourist destination choice (Ahn, Ekinci and Li, 2013), and tourists' behavioural intention to revisit and recommend a particular destination (Kastenholz, 2004; Usakli, Baloglu and Vegas, 2011; Liu, Lin and Wang, 2012; Kim and Thapa, 2018; Yang, Isa and Ramayah, 2021). Although a considerable number of earlier studies have empirically investigated the effects of self-congruity on various constructs such as motivation, revisit intention, word-of-mouth, and evaluation of a destination (e.g. Usakli and Baloglu, 2011; Tassiello and Tillotson, 2020; Šegota, Chen and Golja, 2021), the direct and indirect relationship between self-congruity and tourist happiness remain under-investigated in tourism and hospitality settings (Sirgy, 2019). Indeed, self-congruity is regarded to be a prerequisite to happiness across myriad fields of study including vocational psychology and social psychology (e.g., Spokane, Meir and Catalano, 2000; Wilkins and Tracey, 2014). Besides, several studies in the mainstream marketing literature have highlighted the growing interest in examining the positive relationship between self-congruity and happiness (e.g.Grzeskowiak et al., 2016; Sirgy et al., 2016; El Hedhli et al., 2021). For instance, Sirgy et al. (2016) investigated how the retail environment affects shoppers' happiness via the mediating role of self-congruity. Similarly, Grzeskowiak et al. (2016) cited that self-congruity is positively linked to consumer happiness. However, little is known on how self-congruity affects tourist happiness (Sirgy, 2019). Therefore, to fill this gap in the literature, drawing on marketing, psychology, and tourism literatures, the present study investigates the relationship between self-congruity and tourist happiness. The study is grounded on two key theories (i) authentic happiness theory (Seligman, 2002), and (ii) self-congruity theory (Sirgy et al., 1997). In brief, the study hypothesises that the greater the match between tourists' actual and ideal self-image and their perceived image of a destination, the more likely tourists are to report happiness with their chosen destination via the influence of positive emotions (hedonia) and meaning (eudaimonia).

2. Literature Review

Self-congruity theory posits that by consuming a particular brand, consumers are able to express and symbolise their respective individual self-concepts (Fischer, Völckner and Sattler, 2010), which will further encourage them to form a favourable attitude toward brands of a similar status to uphold or enhance others' perceptions of their personal self-concept; this results from making a psychological comparison between the consumer's self-concept and the product-user image (e.g., actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image) (Kressmann et al., 2006). Of these four dimensions of self-concept, tourism researchers tend to highlight mostly two that are linked with tourist destinations: actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity (e.g., Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Jamilena, Castañeda and Del Barrio-García, 2019; Yang, Isa and Ramayah, 2021). This is because of the notion that social self-measures are closely linked to actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity (Ekinci and Riley, 2003; Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007). In an early study, Sirgy (1982) asserted that while multiple aspects of self-congruity have been investigated, the two that have received the most attention

in terms of their predictive power in various aspects of tourist responses are actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity. By adopting the approaches of key tourism researchers (e.g., Beerli, Meneses and Gil, 2007; Hosany and Martin, 2012), the present study operationalises self-concept by dividing it into (i) actual self-concept and (ii) ideal self-concept. In this study, self-congruity is regarded as the extent to which tourists' self-concept (actual and ideal) and tourists' perception of a destination are matched or mismatched (Sirgy, 1982).

2.1 Authentic Happiness Theory

Psychology researchers have moved beyond early one-dimensional constructs of happiness that solely focused on hedonia (e.g., pleasure, enjoyment) by instead investigating happiness not only in terms of the pivotal dimensions of hedonia but also eudaimonia (e.g. meaning, personal growth, purpose) (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Waterman, 2008; Huta and Ryan, 2010). Seligman (2002) made an early and important attempt to combine and broaden the concepts of hedonia and eudaimonia to quantify happiness in his *authentic happiness* theory. Seligman (2002) posited that happiness is constituted of three aspects: (i) positive emotions, (ii) meaning, and (iii) engagement. Similarly, Peterson, Park and Seligman (2005) developed a positive-psychology-based conceptual framework that combined the effect of hedonic and eudaimonic factors on happiness to attempt to measure the impacts of positive emotions (hedonia), meaning (eudaimonia) and engagement (flow) on achieving individual happiness. It is noteworthy *that* flow as a mental state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) differs from hedonia and eudaimonia both in theory and practice as it offers a far smaller contribution to happiness than the first two factors. Given this, the researcher focused exclusively on Peterson et al.'s (2005) conceptions of happiness: positive emotions and meaning, which revealed that these aspects are both compatible and thus can be simultaneously pursued (Peterson, Park and Seligman, 2005).

In the psychology literature, happiness tends to be regarded as comprising both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Seligman et al., 2005; Delle Fave et al., 2011); however, most studies on tourist happiness define happiness in hedonic terms such as positive emotions and pleasure (e.g. Gilbert and Abdullah, 2004; Nawijn, 2010; Chen and Phou, 2013). Adopting such a perspective in tourism research would likely mean that eudaimonic-related factors would be neglected, which would consequently cause a misunderstanding of the relationship between tourist experience and tourist happiness (Nawijn and Filep, 2016). Further, Filep and Laing (2019) asserted that investigating tourist happiness via a hedonic-based research approach would fail to ensure that all relevant aspects contributing to tourist happiness were examined, which would produce a myopic and problematic conception of tourist happiness. In this sense, recent researchers have pointed out that implementing both hedonic and eudaimonic elements is crucial for comprehensively understanding the relationship between tourist experience and tourist happiness as tourism entails a complex mix of hedonic and eudaimonic elements and activities (Lee and Jeong, 2019; Cai, Ma and Lee, 2020).

There is a diverse array of conceptual and operational definitions and categories of analysis available for investigating hedonia and eudaimonia (Huta and Waterman, 2014). For example, Vitterso and Soholt (2011) were concerned with individuals' hedonic and eudaimonic well-being in terms of experiences and activities; meanwhile, Peterson, Park and Seligman (2005) were more concerned with the hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of happiness. The former apply hedonic and eudaimonic happiness in the form of 'outputs' such as understanding tourist eudaimonic and hedonic experiences (Waterman, 1993; Ryan and Deci, 2001; Lee and Jeong, 2019) while Huta and Ryan's (2010) and Peterson, Park and Seligman's (2005) happiness

frameworks operationalize symmetrical hedonic and eudaimonic paths to happiness. The study adopts the latter approach by seeking to gain a better understanding of tourists' hedonic and eudaimonic orientations towards happiness by investigating (i) positive emotions and (ii) meaning based on Seligman's (2002) authentic happiness theory.

2.2. Positive Emotions and Meaning

The destination emotion scale (Hosany and Gilbert, 2010) was used to capture the range and intensity of emotional experiences in tourists. The DES was selected as its dimensions are theoretically analogous with other popular measures of emotion used in tourism research (see, for example, Bigné, Andreu and Gnoth, 2005; Faullant, Matzler and Mooradian, 2011; Magnini, Crotts and Zehrer, 2011; Hosany and Prayag, 2013; Prayag, Hosany and Odeh, 2013). Hosany and Gilbert's (2010) study identified three dimensions of positive valence emotions: joy, love, and positive surprise. Negative emotions are absent from such conceptualizations as vacations overwhelmingly tend to be characterized by a collection of positive experiential elements (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). While many studies in this area measure both negative and positive emotions, most findings concerning the former are unnoteworthy (Mitas and Bastiaansen, 2018). For example, even when a holiday proceeds as planned, they are "not always uniformly happy experiences" (Kemp, Burt and Furneaux, 2008, p. 134). Here, it is noteworthy that experiencing negative emotions does not necessarily mean that a particular holiday was undesirable or not worth repeating (Nawijn and Fricke, 2015). Finally, the present research project concerns itself with positive emotions only as happiness tends to be associated with such positive emotions (Seligman, 2002)

Tourism researchers have noted how crucial the emotional dimensions of tourist experience are and explored how emotions influence tourists' behaviours and attitudes (e.g., (White and Scandale, 2005; Hosany and Gilbert, 2010; Lee, 2014). That said there is very little empirical data on the psychological elements of the tourist experience among studies on emotion-based tourist happiness studies (Sirgy et al., 2010) and comparative studies using pre- and post-trip appraisals (Gilbert and Abdullah, 2004; Besser and Priel, 2006; Nawijn, 2011). Further, Gao and Kerstetter (2018) pointed out that the intensity of tourists' positive emotions that arise due to their holiday experiences represents a key way to maximize tourists' perceptions of happiness towards a particular holiday episode.

According to the hedonic perspective of happiness, individuals generate their subjective experience of happiness via their positive emotions; however, this perspective has been criticised for offering only a partial explanation of happiness (Fredrickson, 2001). For example, Ryan and Deci (2001) pointed out that the meanings individuals attach to experiences are also a crucial component of happiness, which is known as the eudaimonic perspective of happiness. In an attempt to explain the significance of meaning in the context of tourism experience in the form of *experiential consumption,* Schmitt, Brakus and Zarantonello (2015) suggested that material consumption is a better predictor of hedonic (pleasure-based) happiness while experiential consumption such as holidays is a better predictor of eudaimonic (meaning-based) happiness. Under the latter perspective, tourism represents a means of deriving happiness from meaningful experiences in which the qualities of the chosen destination has a critical role in tourist happiness by providing purpose and meaning. Therefore, any accurate account of tourists happiness is required to encompass an assessment of meaning as a critical part of the tourist experience (Gross and Brown, 2006; Filep and Deery, 2010; Voigt, Howat and Brown, 2010; Yuksel, Yuksel and Bilim, 2010). In the present study, the researcher defines meaning within the context of tourist happiness as experiencing a sense of meaning linked with the

holiday destination, feeling that the experience is valuable and worthwhile and that the experience is imbibed with a sense of purpose, as modified by Steger's (2012) definition.

In line with the above discussion, more recent studies have started to incorporate the notions of eudaimonia and hedonia within their research approach to investigate tourist happiness (e.g. Chen, Lehto and Cai, 2013; de Bloom et al., 2017; Kay Smith and Diekmann, 2017; Lengieza, Hunt and Swim, 2019; Su, Tang and Nawijn, 2020). However, further research is required to gain a fuller understanding of the hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of tourist happiness (Filep and Laing, 2019; Lee and Jeong, 2019). Specifically, there is a need for quantitative studies on eudaimonia within the context of the tourist experience. (e.g. Nawijn and Filep, 2016). Further, Sirgy (2019) underlined the current research gaps in the tourism literature and has urged researchers to investigate tourist happiness via the lens of self-congruity theory. Therefore, to answer this call, the researcher in the current study adopted a quantitative research methodology to assess the mediating impact of positive emotions and meaning on the linkages between self-congruence and tourist happiness.

3. Methodology

The primary constructs of this study were measured using multi-item scales. The self-congruity dimension was measured using four items adapted from a previous research study by Sirgy and Su (2000). To operationalise tourist happiness, the scale was adopted from a study on happiness derived from experiential events vs material purchases (Van Boven and Gilovich, 2003),; it was developed by aggregating items from a scale developed by happiness researchers (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014). As for the mediators of the present study, the positive emotions of the respondents towards London as a tourist destination were measured using six items inspired by Hosany and Gilbert's (2010) Destination Emotion Scale (DES). To operationalise meaning in tourism experience, the researcher used three items developed by Butler and Kern (2016).

Cross-sectional data were collected via a self-administered online survey on a professional online data-collection platform (Qualtrics). The target population was narrowed to American tourists who have visited London and have clear tourist experiences of London. The focus on American tourists is because the US and the UK are culturally similar countries (Hofstede, 2001). Individuals with a similar culture are more likely to be perceived as in-group and those from a different culture as out-group (Ma, Wang and Hao, 2012).Hence, the researchers believed it is important to understand how American tourists experience a culturally similar tourist destination. The sample consists of 460 tourists.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model

In the data distribution, the levels of skewness and kurtosis for the scale items was below the acceptable scores for (skewness < |3|, and kurtosis < |10|) recommended by Kline (2010), suggesting no violation of the normality assumption (Kline, 2011). The measurement model results indicate a considerable satisfactory level of fit ($\chi2$ = 232.40, $\chi2/df$ = 2.13, CFI= 0.98, NFI= 0.96; RMSEA= 0.05). All the standardised factor loadings exceeded the critical value of 0.60 (Awang, 2014). All the constructs investigated in this study indicate a high level of internal consistency: the reported composite reliability values all exceed the acceptable cut-off value of 0.70 (Hair et al.,2014). All constructs achieved adequate AVE values: all were greater

than 0.50, as per Hair et al.'s (2010) recommendations, establishing the scale's convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). For evidence of adequate discriminant validity, the square root of the average variance for each construct should exceed its correlation with any other constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The square root AVE for each construct was compared with the inter-construct correlations and results supported discriminant validity.

4.2. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was applied to analyse the hypothesised relationships. Overall, the structural model achieved an acceptable fit: $\chi2 = 292.14$, $\chi2/df = 2.66$, $CFI = 0.97$, $NFI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.06$. Results for each hypothesis are summarised below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Path Coefficients and Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesized path		Path Coefficient	t- Value	Significance	Supported?
H1.	Actual self-congruence -> Tourist happiness	.292	4.52	***	Yes
H2.	Ideal self-congruence -> Tourist happiness	.209	4.14	***	Yes
H3a.	Actual self-congruence -> Positive emotions	.468	8.07	***	Yes
H3b.	Actual self-congruence -> Meaning	.473	7.28	***	Yes
H4a.	Ideal self-congruence -> Positive emotions	.205	3.75	***	Yes
H4b.	Ideal self-congruence -> Meaning	.173	2.90	***	Yes

Note: *** significant at the level 0.001 ($p < 0.01$).

4.3 Mediating Role of Positive Emotions and Meaning

The current research follows the three required steps as per Hair et al. (2017) to analyse the mediating role of positive emotions and meaning on the relationship between self-congruence and tourist happiness by following Baron and Kenny's (1986) guidelines. The results support the conditions that are considered necessary for mediation between positive emotions and meaning to occur. Further, the results also suggest that, aside from the mediators, the direct effects underline that *actual self-congruity* and *ideal self-congruity* are positively related to tourist happiness (see Table 2). Upon inclusion of the mediators into the model, the findings indicated that meaning and emotions play a partially mediating influence on the linkage between actual-ideal self-congruity and tourist happiness. To examine the statistical significance of the mediating effects, the recommendations of Zhao, Lynch and Chen (2010) were followed. The researcher applied Preacher and Hayes's (2008) bootstrapping method with bias-correction, 95% confidence intervals, and 5,000 iterations to assess the indirect effects' significance. Specifically, (i) if the indirect effect was found to be significant, and (ii) the confidence interval did not feature a value of zero (0), then mediation can be considered to be valid (Zhao, Lynch and Chen, 2010). The results of the bootstrap testing indicated that tourist emotions and the meaning tourists attached to their holiday experiences were significant mediators of the actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity paths in overall tourist happiness (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mediation Analysis of Positive Emotions and Meaning

Relationships	Direct Effects without Mediator	Direct Effect with Mediator (CI)	Indirect Effects (CI)	Mediation Hypotheses
AS ->PE> TH	.367*	.244*(.191 to.296)	.124* (.081 to.176)	Partial mediation
IS -> PE> TH	.343*	.215*(.159 to .271)	.128*(.082 to.183)	Partial mediation
AS ->MN>TH	.367*	.275*(.221 to .328)	.093*(.059 to .130)	Partial mediation
IS ->MN> TH	.343*	.247*(.190 to .304)	.096*(.062 to .135)	Partial mediation

Notes: AS= Actual self-congruity, ID=Ideal self-congruity, PE= Positive Emotions, MN= Meaning, TH=Tourist happiness, $*p < .001$; bootstrap confidence in parentheses, CI = confidence interval. Source: Developed for the current study

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Our study responds to Sirgy's (2019) call for researchers to investigate tourist happiness via the lens of self-congruity theory by seeking to determine the relationship between self-congruity and tourist happiness. Specifically, the results suggest that the greater the congruity between tourists' actual self-image and their image of a particular holiday destination, the more likely it is that tourists will report greater levels of happiness in their tourism experience. Overall, the researcher hopes that the present study will offer a useful contribution to the current literature on tourist happiness by offering a detailed examination of actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity as the antecedents of tourist happiness, mediated by the two main components of happiness: positive emotions and meaning. The results suggest that there are positive correlations between actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity, and tourist happiness and that the conditions necessary for mediation are supported. The findings of the present study concur with previous theoretical conceptualisations of the relationships between self-congruity and happiness in the marketing literature (e.g. Grzeskowiak et al., 2016; Sirgy et al., 2016; El Hedhli et al., 2021). Since the tourism literature has largely fallen short of investigating the role of psychological factors in determining tourist happiness (Chen et al., 2021), the present study raise awareness of the importance of quantifying and managing actual self-congruity vs ideal self-congruity in relation to specific tourist destinations to enhance overall tourist happiness.

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