The Impact of Self-Concept/Product-Image Congruity and Functional Congruity on Brand Preference: Three Product Categories

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Bhat and Reedy (1998) explain that consumers’ essential needs may be categorized as either symbolic or functional. In relation to symbolic needs, the self-concept/product-image congruity theory is based on the premise that consumers choose products that are consistent with their self-concept in an attempt to satisfy symbolic needs. Alternatively, functional congruity theory has been introduced to explain a consumer’s decision to choose a product based on its perceived functional or utilitarian aspects. Functional congruity is defined as the match between the product or brand’s utilitarian attribute(s) and the consumer’s expectation of that attribute (Sirgy, Johar, & Samli, 1991). Previous research has examined the two models individually, and through integrated work, in an effort to explain and predict various consumer behavior outcome variables (Kang, 2002; Samli & Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy, Johar, Samli, & Claiborne, 1991). A limitation of previous work is that different interrelationships among variables have been examined in isolation.

Kang (2002) proposed that self-image congruity and attitude (functional congruity) each have a direct and independent relationship with intention to initiate participant sport consumption. Sirgy et al. (1991) suggested that self-concept/product-image congruity have both a direct effect on a variety of consumer behaviors and an indirect effect through functional congruity. Samli and Sirgy (1985) hypothesized that there are no direct effects of self-concept/product-image congruity on store loyalty, only an indirect effect through functional congruity. The results of previous research have not presented a convincing argument for the primary use of any of the three models. Considering the importance of the models, additional work is needed to ascertain the viability of the proposed models.

Assessing the utility of the three models in predicting consumer behavior is also likely to be influenced by product categories. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2001), consumers exhibit different perception and buying behaviors based on product categories. They divided consumer products into three categories: convenience, shopping, and specialty products. Convenience products as relatively inexpensive, and frequently purchased items that buyers want to exert minimal effort to obtain. Shopping products are items which buyers are willing to put forth considerable effort in planning and making the purchase. Specialty products are goods or services for which the buyer has a strong conviction as to brand, style, or type. The utility of the self-concept/product image congruity model and the functional model may be different by product category. For example, shopping products which are purchased after deliberate research and planning may be influenced more by a functional congruity model. The purpose of the current study was to compare the three models and identify which model best predicts consumers brand preference across the three product categories.

In the first phase of the study a focus group was conducted to identify a product for each of the categories in the ski equipment market based on Kotler and Armstrong (2001) classification. To assess brand preference, a pretest was conducted to elicit the most familiar brand of convenience and shopping products. Following Ajzen and Fishbein’s procedure (1980), the five most frequently mentioned evaluative criteria were selected from the list of all criteria for each of three product categories to generate items measuring functional congruity. The initial set of sample items were generated based on the results of Phase 1 by modifying existing scales used to assess self-concept/product image congruity and functional congruity. In Phase 2 a pilot test was completed with a convenience sample (N=50) to evaluate the initial set of items and assess the quality of the instrument across all three product categories. 19 items were retained to assess self-concept/product-image congruity, functional congruity, and brand preference for the convenience and shopping categories, and 17 items were retained for the specialty category.

Data for the main study were collected from collegiate skiers who are currently members of the Korean University Ski Team Association (KUSTA). A total of 299 usable questionnaires were conveniently collected. Confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the measurement model fit the sample data fairly well for all three product categories. All model fit indices, except the PNFI for both shopping and specialty products, of the hypothesized measurement model sufficiently exceeded their recommended thresholds. The results also supported convergent and discriminant validity of the hypothesized measurement model across all three product categories. A structural equation model was tested to compare and select the best fitting model across the three product categories. For convenience products, the results indicated the indirect effect of self-concept/product image congruity through functional congruity accounted for the most variance in brand preference. For shopping and specialty products, the model with self-concept/product image congruity having a direct effect and an indirect effect through functional congruity,
accounted for the most variance in brand preference.

The results provide insights for marketers when developing marketing strategies relative to product category and consumers’ functional and symbolic needs. For example, for a specialty product, the results suggest that marketers focus more on matching consumers’ self-concept and typical user image of the brand. Additional implications and directions for future research will be discussed.