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# Self-congruity theory in volunteering

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# Self-congruity theory in volunteering

## **Abstract**

According to self-congruity theory, people prefer brands that they associate with a set of personality traits which are similar to their own. This notion is widely accepted by consumer researchers and has been empirically tested in a number of commercial product and service contexts. It has not, however, been tested in the context of the third sector, particularly in relation to volunteering organisations. This study finds preliminary support for two hypotheses: (1) volunteers who prefer a specific volunteering organisation over others differ significantly in their self-concept; and (2) the self-concept of volunteers who prefer a specific volunteering organisation most closely matches the perceived brand image of that volunteering organisation. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed and a future research agenda proposed.

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## **Self-Congruity Theory in Volunteering**

### **Abstract**

**According to self-congruity theory, people prefer brands that they associate with a set of personality traits which are similar to their own. This notion is widely accepted by consumer researchers and has been empirically tested in a number of commercial product and service contexts. It has not, however, been tested in the context of the third sector, particularly in relation to volunteering organisations. This study finds preliminary support for two hypotheses: (1) volunteers who prefer a specific volunteering organisation over others differ significantly in their self-concept; and (2) the self-concept of volunteers who prefer a specific volunteering organisation most closely matches the perceived brand image of that volunteering organisation. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed and a future research agenda proposed.**

Keywords – self congruity theory, volunteering, non-profit marketing

Track: Marketing of Public and Non-Profit Organisations

## 1. Introduction and Prior Work

For many years many researchers have investigated aspects of consumer behaviour – for example product preference, brand attitude and customer loyalty – in terms of the relationship between the image perception an individual has of the brand and their own self-concept (Landon, 1974). This has become commonly referred to as self-congruity theory, and postulates that the more similar the perceived brand image is to their own self concept, the more likely they are to prefer that brand (Kassarjian, 1971; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982a, 1982b). In this context, self-congruity is defined as the degree to which perceived brand image and an individual's self concept match (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Brand image is the set of image attributes associated with a brand, which are determined by not only the physical attributes of the brand but also intangible associations such as symbols and stereotypes perceived to be connected to the brand (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Levy, 1959); and self-concept is the “totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p.7).

A number of empirical investigations have tested self-congruity theory. This has been done in the context of consumer products ranging from key chains (Barone, Shimp & Spratt, 1999) to automobiles (Kressmann, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber & Lee, 2006) and service industries such as travel destinations (Beerli, Meneses & Gil, 2007; Litvin & Goh, 2002), retail outlets (Chebat, Sirgy & St-James, 2006) and sponsored events (Sirgy, Lee, Johar & Tidwell, 2007).

The overall conclusion from this field of research is that there is some evidence that self-congruity theory is a valuable predictor across a range of products and services. This finding is practically relevant because it enables marketing managers to develop customised marketing mixes targeting people with specific self-concepts. To date, however, little work has been done investigating whether or not self-congruity theory is relevant to the volunteering sector (Vaccaro, 2008). This means that this important sector – which contributes over US\$239 billion in the US (Independent Sector, 2001), £44 billion per annum in the UK (European Volunteer Centre, 2006) and tens of billions of dollars in Australia (Volunteering Australia, 2006) each year and provides services typically not provided by the private or government sector – is deprived of a potentially valuable tool in their efforts to attract new volunteers and retain current ones.

This is a particularly salient issue for volunteering organisations because (1) the competition for volunteers in the third sector is growing rapidly (Bussell & Forbes, 2002) and (2) volunteering organisations often have very limited budgets for marketing and recruitment (Peattie, 2003) and are therefore constantly looking for ways of making more efficient use of their limited marketing dollars. Increasingly, this is being done by adopting what have traditionally been regarded as “commercial” techniques and theories and applying them to the volunteering context to directly target those individuals most likely to become involved.

This study assesses the value of self-congruity theory for volunteering organisations by conducting a preliminary investigation of whether the theory holds in the volunteering sector. If this is the case, it can be expected that support will be found for the following two hypotheses:

***H1: Volunteers who prefer a specific volunteering organisation over others will significantly differ in their self-concept; and***

***H2: The self-concept of volunteers who prefer a specific volunteering organisation will most closely match the perceived brand image of that volunteering organisation***

Should evidence be found that self-congruity theory is a potentially valuable tool for use in the third sector, the present study also aims to propose a research agenda for further extending this line of investigation in the context of volunteering.

## **2. Methodology**

Data was collected using an online research panel which is representative of the Australian population. Participants completed a survey which included questions relating to past volunteering behaviour, organisation preference, self-concept and organisation image.

The sample was structured to include individuals who had volunteered in the past 12 months and who have a stated preference for a particular volunteering organisation. To measure their preferred volunteering organisation, participants were presented with a list and asked to indicate which their preferred one was (they could tick only one). For the purposes of hypothesis testing, two volunteering organisations which are expected to elicit very different brand image perceptions were chosen for inclusion in this study: the Red Cross and the State Emergency Service (SES). The Red Cross crosses the boundaries of humanitarian and disaster-related work and is arguably the most well known volunteering organisation globally; and the SES operates within Australia and helps local communities cope with emergencies such as flood, storms and other emergency situations. The sample size of volunteers who indicated that the Red Cross was their most preferred organisation was 242, and the sample size of those who indicated that the SES was their most preferred organisation was 172.

Respondents were asked to evaluate themselves and volunteering organisations along a set of 18 personality attributes. The battery of attributes was derived following (1) a review of the literature relating to brand personality, particularly in the context of the third sector (most notably Venable, Rose, Bush & Gilbert, 2005); and (2) an exploratory study to assess the relevance of different attributes in the context of volunteering, which included managers of volunteer programs, active volunteers and non-volunteers. Participants were asked to tick all the traits that they felt applied to them, and then later asked to tick the attributes that they felt described each of the volunteering organisations. In both cases, a “pick any” answer format was used, meaning that respondents only indicated if they felt that the attribute applied.

## **3. Analysis and Results**

***H1: Volunteers who prefer a specific volunteering organisation over others will significantly differ in their self-concept***

Because the self-concept attributes were all nominal (binary) variables, Chi-square tests were used to test for significant differences between the two groups. Results are graphically depicted in Figure 1 below. Significant differences (at the 95% level) were found for six of the 18 attributes, as indicated by the \* next to each attribute.

Figure 1: Self-concept of Volunteers who prefer the Red Cross and the SES

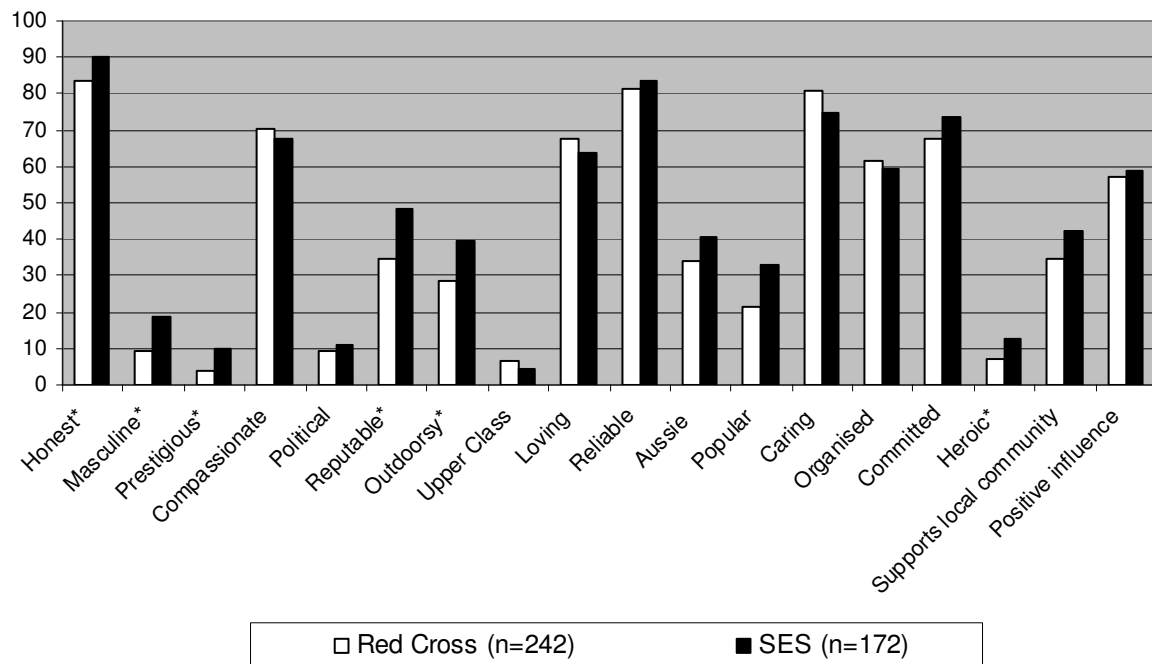


Figure 1 shows that individuals who prefer the Red Cross and the SES do differ significantly in their self image. Volunteers who prefer the SES are more likely to describe themselves as honest, masculine, prestigious, reputable, outdoors and heroic than those who prefer the Red Cross. That significant differences were found indicates that Hypothesis 1 cannot be rejected.

***H2: the self-concept of volunteers who prefer a specific volunteering organisation will most closely match the perceived brand image of that volunteering organisation***

SPSS was used to calculate for each participant how many times they ticked an image attribute as applying to them, and also selected the same attribute as describing the volunteering organisation being rated. For each attribute and each organisation the following scenarios applied: no tick for self-concept and no tick for organisation image resulted in a score of zero (indicating a neutral answer); a tick for self image and no tick for the organisation (or vice versa) resulted in a score of zero (indicating a mismatch); and a tick for self-concept and a tick for the organisation image resulted in a score of 1 (indicating a match). All matched attributes were then summed to produce a count of the number of matches between the individual and that particular organisation, which in theory could range from 0 to 18. The average level of match was computed for the two groups, and paired samples t-tests were used to test for significant differences.

Firstly, a t-test was calculated for the sample which preferred the Red Cross. Results showed that the average number of matches with the Red Cross organisation ( $\bar{X} = 5.46, SD = 3.32$ ) was significantly higher than the average number of matches with the SES ( $\bar{X} = 4.74, SD = 3.42$ ),  $t(225) = 5.25, p = 0.000$ . A second t-test was then calculated for the sample which preferred the SES. Again, the average number of matches with the SES organisation ( $\bar{X} = 6.04, SD = 3.78$ ) was significantly higher than the average number of matches with the Red Cross ( $\bar{X} = 5.38, SD = 3.78$ ),  $t(163) = -3.64, p = 0.000$ .

In both cases the results of the t-tests tests indicated a higher level of average match for the preferred volunteering organisation when compared to the non-preferred one. Therefore Hypothesis 2 cannot be rejected.

### ***Proposing a Future Research Agenda***

The preliminary results presented above indicate that self-congruity theory applies to the volunteering sector and could consequently be used by managers of volunteering organisations to both attract more volunteers and retain current ones by representing the kind of organisation potential and current volunteers identify with. Our investigation brought to light a number of aspects of studying self-congruity theory in the context of volunteering which we believe represent important directions of future work in the area.

Firstly, the present study considered only two brands, or volunteering organisations. The two brands chosen represent extreme positions in the volunteering marketplace. While this selection is a good choice for a “proof of principle” study, these two organisations do not reflect the real market situation very well. The competitive third sector includes a myriad of volunteering organisations which range in the distinctiveness of their image and the level to which they are known in the marketplace. Future work should include more, and a broader range of, volunteering organisations to test whether these results can be found when other (and possibly more closely aligned in terms of their image) organisations are considered.

Second, this study included people who were active volunteers only. This is useful for agencies who wish to attract more of the same types of volunteers, but has limited use for organisations who are trying to broaden the types of people they attract by targeting new and currently untapped markets. For this reason future studies should consider not only currently active volunteers but individuals who are not currently volunteering but could be potential volunteers (either because they have favourable attitudes towards volunteering or because they say they are likely to volunteer in future even though they don't at the moment). By doing this, and by utilising larger sample sizes, detailed analysis could be conducted of the market for growth which will allow them to more effectively be sustained into the future.

Finally, the conclusions drawn from self-congruity studies heavily depend on how self-congruity is being measured. As was done in this study, most investigations of self-congruity have traditionally measured self-concept and brand image separately using a predetermined battery of attributes, and then summed the differences to arrive at an overall score of congruity (for example Kressmann, *et al.*, 2006; Sirgy & Samli, 1985). More recently, however, Sirgy and associates (Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, Chon, Claiborne, Johar & Berkman, 1997; Sirgy, *et al.*, 2007) have advocated the use of direct measures of congruity, for example, asking respondents to indicate their agreement with statements like “Wearing Reebok shoes in casual situations is consistent with how I see myself”. (Sirgy, *et al.*, 1997, p.235). They argue that this measurement approach results in greater predictive validity and overcomes the problems associated with many studies of self-congruity – such as the use of possibly irrelevant attributes – and enables the self-congruity experience to be captured in a holistic manner. We believe that it is therefore critical to conduct sensitivity analyses to assess whether self-congruity holds only in cases where specific ways of measuring self-congruity have been applied or whether it holds relatively independent of the methodology used for computing self-congruity. The latter outcome would increase confidence in the findings.

#### **4. Conclusions and Limitations**

The results of Hypothesis 1 revealed that volunteers who have a preference for a specific volunteering organisation differ significantly in their self-concept. Adding to this, Hypothesis 2 revealed that those who prefer each organisation also see themselves as being more similar to that organisation in terms of the match between their own self-concept and their image perception of the organisation. This has a number of important implications for the marketing mixes developed by each organisation in terms of the messages they use to promote their organisation and the channels through which they communicate.

For example, the SES knows that volunteers who prefer their organisation see themselves as being more masculine, heroic, reputable and outdoorsy than their Red Cross counterparts. This suggests that in their marketing and recruitment campaigns the SES should target individuals with this type of self-concept by emphasising the manly and physically active aspects of their volunteering, and the responsible reputation the SES has within the community. Messages along these lines are likely to resonate with this group and reinforce the self-concept of those who prefer their organisation. This information also gives insights as to where these types of people might be found. It could reasonably be expected, for instance, that people who see themselves in this way are likely to be found at men's sporting competitions or participating in other outdoor activities such as being at the beach. Distributing flyers or other promotional material at these venues is more likely to reach individuals with this type of self-concept.

While not statistically significant, the image attributes for which the Red Cross is stronger tend to be those softer in nature – i.e. compassionate, loving and caring. This indicates that the messages included in marketing campaigns should be more humanitarian and focus on the difference the Red Cross makes in peoples lives. Messages about showing compassion for others less fortunate and helping the disadvantaged are likely to reinforce the individual's self-concept. People who consider themselves in this way are probably also found within other agencies or institutions which support disadvantaged groups. This may include, for example, hospitals or social/support services designed to help people with disabilities. If the Red Cross were to leave information pamphlets in waiting areas of these types of organisations, is likely to be more effective in reaching people with this type of self-concept than, say, leaving the same material in the men's sporting competitions described above.

Theoretically, this study is important because it provides initial evidence of the value of applying self-congruity theory to an entirely different sector of the market. This opens up an enormous array of opportunities to investigate the theory in relation to other philanthropic behaviours in the third sector, which include but are not limited to giving blood and other body parts and making charitable donations.

The current study is limited by its small sample size, the use of current volunteers only, the use of only two (distinctly different) volunteering organisations and the fact that self-congruity was computed using a traditional computation approach. Future work should aim at overcoming these limitations and assess whether the conclusions that self-congruity theory holds in the volunteering sector is independent of the way in which self-congruity is computed.



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