An integrative model of retail environment, self-congruity, and retail patronage is described in this article. The model develops theoretical propositions for future research to further develop the research in the area of self-image congruence in retailing. In particular, the model postulates relationships among store environment (including store atmospherics), store patron image, shoppers’ self-concept, self-congruity, functional congruity, and retail patronage. The model describes the interrelationships among these constructs and proposes certain moderating and mediating effects. Finally, the article describes past and recent efforts in measuring self-congruity and how better measures of self-congruity can be developed and applied in retailing. J Bus Res 2000. 49:127–138. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

The self-concept literature in consumer research has increased significantly in the past 30 years. There are many definitions of the self in consumer research, many studies that examined certain marketplace effects on the formation and change of consumer self-concept, and many studies that examined the effects of self-concept on consumer behavior (see literature reviews by Sirgy, 1982a, 1985a; Clai-borne and Sirgy, 1990). In contrast, self-concept research in retailing has been quite limited (e.g., Dornoff and Tatham, 1972; Bellenger, Steinberg, and Stanton, 1976; Stern, Bush, and Hair, 1977; Sirgy and Samli, 1985, 1989b; Sirgy, Samli, Bahn, and Varvoglis, 1985a, 1985b, 1989).

The purpose of this article is to review research related to self-concept in retailing and to propose a research agenda to stimulate future inquiry in this area. Toward this end, we develop an integrative model involving the effects of the retail environment on self-image congruence (or “self-congruity”, for short) and the effects of self-congruity on retail patronage. And, because self-congruity involves a process of matching a shopper’s self-concept to a retail patron image, the model identifies factors that are likely to affect the development of retail patron images, such as retail atmospherics and other retail environment cues. In addition, factors that are likely to moderate and mediate the relationship between self-congruity and retail patronage are identified and explained. Retailing managers who appreciate how self-congruity works are likely to be in a position to develop effective positioning strategies that increase profitability.

An Integrative Model

Consumer research has shown that a consumer’s attitude toward a product (and product purchase) is influenced by the matching of the product user image with the consumer’s self-concept (Sirgy, 1982a). Indeed, consumer research has had a long tradition of addressing how self-concept is used as a cognitive referent in evaluating symbolic cues. Product symbolic cues refer to stereotypic images of users of a product or store (e.g. sexy, classy, fashionable, and young, to name a few). The same can be said in relation to a consumer’s attitude toward a store (and retail patronage). That is, shoppers perceive stores differently in terms of the store’s typical clientele or patrons. These stereotypic images of different stores are referred to here as “retail patron images.”

The greater the match between the store patron image and the consumer’s self-concept, the more likely that the consumer has a favorable attitude toward that store (and the more likely
that he would patronize that store). This matching process is referred to as "self-congruity."

Because self-congruity involves the match/mismatch between the retail patron image and a shopper’s self-image, a relevant question, then, is what factors contribute to the formation of a store’s patron image and how strong and accessible are these patron images in the minds of consumers? Various attributes of the store and its atmosphere (i.e., type and quality of merchandise, prices, store ambiance, and so on) are likely to have implications for the development and strength of retail patron images. Also, given that self-concept is multidimensional in nature (e.g., actual vs. ideal self), at issue is the particular aspect of the self-concept that is used when making determinations of "fit" or congruity with the retail patron image. For example, will consumers evaluate a store on the basis of how well the patron image fits with how the consumer sees him/herself in reality or how the consumer would like to see him/herself? Certain factors, such as consumers’ age and the visibility or conspicuousness of the store may serve to activate or accentuate specific dimensions of the self-concept.

In addition to evaluating stores in light of self-congruity, consumers also may evaluate stores with respect to specific store attributes. In particular, store attributes may be evaluated in light of consumers’ expected level of performance for a given attribute. For example, how does the store’s level of service relate to consumers’ expectation of store service? The match between the store’s level of a given attribute and the consumer’s expectation of that attribute is referred to as "functional congruity."

Although the focus of this article is self-congruity and its potential effects on patronage, functional congruity also may affect patronage and may be related to self-congruity. At issue, in particular, are the conditions under which consumers may use self-congruity and/or functional congruity, or some combination thereof, to evaluate retail establishments. In other words, various situational factors may moderate the extent to which consumers use self-congruity to evaluate stores. The relationship between self-congruity and retail patronage, then, is likely to be contingent on a number of situational and shopper characteristics. Factors such as the level of shopping experience, shopping involvement, time pressure, store knowledge, and the like may affect the nature of the relationship between self-congruity and retail patronage.

On the basis of these considerations, a conceptual model of self-congruity and retail patronage was developed (see Figure 1). The model posits that various aspects of the store and its atmosphere are related to the retail patron image. The retail patron image is then evaluated in light of specific dimensions of the consumer’s self-concept to determine the degree of self-congruity. Self-congruity is then systematically related to retail patronage; the relationship between these two constructs, however, is moderated by a number of situational and shopper characteristics. The components and posited relationships in the model are described in this article. Before turning to this discussion, however, it should be noted that retail patronage as used here reflects a number of related aspects, which may include store attitude, store preference, store selection, actual or intended patronage, satisfaction with a store, repeat patronage, and store loyalty.

### Retail Environment and Retail Patron Image

Shoppers have stereotypic images of different stores. For example, one department store may be perceived as typically patronized by upscale shoppers, while another may be perceived as frequently patronized by working class consumers. Some grocery stores are viewed as catering mostly to the
gourmet and food connoisseurs. Other grocery stores may be seen as catering mostly to senior citizens. Some clothing stores are perceived as being for the executive type, while others are perceived as a outlet for bargain hunters (Martineau, 1958; Samli, 1989; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1994, p. 142).

Retailers develop these store images to best position their store relative to the needs of the targeted customer. For example, chains like Sharper Image are targeted towards trendy upscale buyers and are perceived to attract such a clientele. Past research has already demonstrated that store image has a direct bearing on retail patronage and loyalty (Hirschman, 1981; Sirgy and Samli, 1985). The question becomes: do shoppers use store cues to figure out what kind of person typically shops at the store in question? And, if so, what are these cues? The retail environment provides a myriad of informational cues that consumers can use to form an impression of the typical patron of the store. Some of these cues include the store atmosphere, the merchandise (and brands), and the prices of the merchandise in the store. It is of tantamount importance for research to determine those cues that may be used by consumers in forming impressions about the typical store patron, that is, retail patron image.

Before we describe store cues that affect the formation and reinforcement of retail patron images, the reader should note that there may be a multitude of cues, some controllable by retailers and some uncontrollable. “Controllable” cues are directly related to the four Ps, that is, cues related to the retail merchandise (product), cues related to the prices of the retail merchandise (price), cues related to the location of the store and store atmospherics (place), and cues related to the promotion of the store (promotion). There are many other “uncontrollable” cues such as shoppers’ personal characteristics. For example, a shopper who had seen the movie “Cocoon” may react to a store with a name such as “Cocoon Electronics Store” by conjuring up an image of the typical science-fiction patron who is fascinated by space-like gadgets. That shopper is likely to believe that the typical patron of the Cocoon store is into science fiction. We have not addressed the effects of uncontrollable factors because they do not have direct managerial implications to retailers (see Figure 2).

**Retail Environment Cues Related to Place**

Store cues related to place can be grouped in terms of store atmospherics and store location. Store atmospheric cues, such as color, lighting, interior decoration, or music, form the overall context within which shoppers make patronage decisions and are likely to have a significant impact on store image (see research by Milliman, 1982; Bellizzi, Crowley, and Hasty, 1983; Baker, Grewal, and Parasuraman, 1994; Chebat, Gelinas-Chebat, and Vanisky, 1995; Dube, Chebat, and Morin, 1995). Retailers realize the importance of such cues and systematically try and develop their prototypes to avail of appropriate colors, music, and lighting that will attract their target customers and increase their profitability. Additionally, the role of other people in a store (i.e., the social dimension) is also critical—such as whether a store is crowded or not crowded and the number and behavior of the retail salespeople (e.g., Bateson and Hui, 1986, 1992; Hui and Bateson, 1991; Baker, Grewal, and Parasuraman, 1994). Thus, understanding the role of store environment cues on shopper perceptions and behavior is critical (Bitner, 1986, 1990a, 1991b; Ward, 1992).

Past research on retail environment suggests that atmospheric cues (e.g., music, lighting, decor) do affect the image of the store and the image of the patrons of the store. That is, certain types of music (e.g., classical music), lighting (soft lights), fixtures (modern or antique-like) are likely to engender an image of an upscale store with affluent patrons. Take the simple example of floor design of an upscale department store. Typically, an upscale store has cashiers and service personnel in different sections of the store. Downscale stores, on the other hand, have the cashiers up front, next to the entrance and exit doors (cf. Sirgy and Samli, 1989a). Thus, one would propose that:

**Proposition 1:** Shoppers are likely to make inferences about the patrons of a store as a direct function of store atmospheric cues, such as the interior decor, the music, the lighting, and floor design.

Furthermore, the store location serves as a cue to reflect the typical store patrons. For example, a store located in a poor neighborhood signals to shoppers that the typical store patrons may be poor or working class. Similarly, a store located in an upscale residential community may signify that its store patrons are upscale. A store located in a certain ethnic neighborhood may make a statement too—that it caters to that ethnic population. Thus, we propose the following:

**Proposition 2:** Shoppers are likely to make inferences about the patrons of a store as a direct function of the geographic location of the store.

**Retail Cues Related to Product**

The merchandise quality and the image associated with the store brands are likely to have a significant impact on the store image and the image of its patrons (Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal, 1991; Baker, Grewal, and Parasuraman, 1994). That is, well-known, top-of-the-line brands are likely to engender an image of an upscale store with affluent patrons. Thus, one would propose that:
Proposition 3: Shoppers are likely to make inferences about the patrons of a store as a direct function of the quality of the merchandise and name brands in the store.

Retail Cues Related to Price
The price levels of the merchandise also are likely to have an important role on shoppers patronage decisions (e.g., Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal, 1991). Higher prices are likely to be associated with higher quality merchandise, which is displayed and sold at upscale stores and bought by affluent or status-conscious consumers. The merchandise price and the pricing policies and practices of the store (e.g., heavy discounting, frequent promotions) are likely to have a significant impact on the image of the patrons of the store. Thus, one would propose that:

Proposition 4: Shoppers are likely to make inferences about the patrons of a store as a direct function of the price of the merchandise and brands in the store.

Retail Cues Related to Promotion
Advertising and other forms of marketing communications can be a significant source of information for shoppers. Shoppers may form impressions about the typical patron of a store by observing its advertising. For example, an upscale department store is likely to use people and artifacts in its advertising that are symbolic of economic status and class. Thus, these promotion cues are used by shoppers to form, reinforce, or change their perceptions of the typical patron of that store. Hence, we propose the following:

Proposition 5: Shoppers are likely to make inferences about the patrons of a store as a direct function of the advertising messages of the store.

Retail Patron Image, Shopper Self-Concept, Self-Congruity, and Retail Patronage
One of the problems in self-concept research in the social and behavioral sciences is the plethora of definitions of self-concept stemming from the variety of ways that the self is viewed in the psychological literature. For example, James (1890) defined the self-concept as all that we call our own and with whom or with which we share a bond of identity. Many other traditional definitions of the self-concept focus on a “unitary self” (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Allport, 1943; Lecky, 1945). However, the more recent psychological literature in self-concept points to the possibility of “multiple selves”. That is, the self is a collection of masks each tied to a particular set of social circumstances (Markus and Nurius, 1986). The self-concept is diverse and multifaceted. Each self-concept domain represents the individual’s persistent hopes and fears and indicates what can be realized in certain situations.

Consumer researchers have traditionally used four aspects of self-concept in explaining and predicting consumer behavior. These are the actual self-image, the ideal self-image, the social self-image, and the ideal social self-image (Sirgy, 1982a, 1985a). The “actual self-image” is defined as how consumers see themselves. The “ideal self-image” is defined as how consumers would like to see themselves. The “social self-image” is defined as how consumers believe they are seen by significant others. The “ideal social self-image” is defined as how consumers would like to be seen by significant others.

Self-congruity involves a process of matching (some dimension of) a consumer’s self-concept with the retail patron image. The greater the degree of match between self-concept and the retail patron image, the greater the likelihood that consumers will patronize a particular store. Thus,

Proposition 6: Retail patronage is affected by self-congruity. That is, the greater the match between the retail patron image of a store and the shopper’s self-concept (actual, ideal, social, and/or ideal social self-image) the more likely that this shopper will be motivated to patronize that store.

Self-Concept Motives Mediating Self-Congruity and Retail Patronage
Since there are at least four different self-concept dimensions (actual, ideal, social, and ideal social self-image), it follows that we should have four corresponding types of self-congruities: actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity, social self-congruity, and ideal social self-congruity (see Figure 3).

Actual self-congruity refers to the degree of match between a shopper’s actual self-image and a retail patron image, or the fit between how shoppers actually see themselves in relation to the retail patron image. Actual self-image is part of what psychologists refer to as the private self. The private self involves those images that one has of oneself about which one feels protective. “This is who I am,” the person may say. Thus, the actual self-image is defined as how consumers see themselves, their personal identity. A discount store, for example, has a specific patron image. Shoppers tend to think of the person who patronizes a discount store as “a working class person.” Do shoppers see themselves in this light? If so, that is their actual self-image.

Shoppers are motivated to protect their personal identities. They may feel uncomfortable if they see themselves patronizing a store that is not reflective of their true selves. For example, a working class shopper is likely to feel uncomfortable in an upscale department store. This is because this behavior is perceived as inconsistent with her perception of who she truly is. This motivational tendency to drive people to act in ways consistent with their personal identities (actual self-image) is referred to in the personality and social psychology literature as the “self-consistency motive” (Lecky, 1945; Sirgy, 1986) and the marketing literature too (Sirgy, 1990; Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy, Johar, and Claiborne, 1992) (Figure 3).
The effect of actual self-congruity on consumer behavior has been documented through many studies conducted in the context of both consumer goods and retail stores. In the context of consumer goods, a handful of studies sought to demonstrate the existence of a relationship between a product user image and actual self-image, given a preferred product or ownership (e.g., Sirgy, 1982a, 1985a; Claiborne and Sirgy, 1990 for reviews of this literature). In retailing, studies by Dornoff and Tatham (1972), Bellenger, Steinberg, and Stanton (1976), and Stern, Bush, and Hair (1977) have clearly demonstrated the existence of a relationship between a retail patron image and actual self-image, given a preferred store.

Proposition 7: Actual self-congruity affects retail patronage. That is, shoppers who experience a match between the patron image of a store and their actual self-image will be motivated to patronize that store.

Proposition 7a: Actual self-congruity affects retail patronage through the mediating effects of the need for self-consistency. That is, shoppers who experience a match between the patron image of a store and their actual self-image will be motivated to patronize that store because doing so satisfies their need for self-consistency.

Ideal self-congruity refers to the degree of match between a shopper’s ideal self-image and a retail patron image or the fit between how shoppers like to see themselves in relation to the retail patron image. Ideal self-image is also part of the private self. A person may see himself as timid and lacking in confidence (actual self-image) yet may not like this self-perception. He may want to become sensitive but self-assured (ideal self-image). As you may imagine, there is often a discrepancy between actual and ideal self. The ideal self motivates behavior through the need for self-esteem (Evans, 1968; Green, Maheshwan, and Rao, 1969; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1986; Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy, Johar, and Claiborne, 1992). People have ideal images of themselves, and realizing these images (through patronizing stores and retail outlets that are associated with them) boosts their self-esteem. That is, patronizing a store that has an image consistent with shoppers’ ideal self-image helps them feel good about themselves. Have you ever run into a working class person who likes to patronize upscale department stores? Perhaps this person has an ideal self-image of becoming upscale. Patronizing an upscale store serves to help the working class person approach her ideal self-image of becoming upscale (Figure 3).

The effect of ideal self-congruity on consumer behavior has been documented through several studies done in the context of both consumer goods and retail stores. In the context of consumer goods, several studies were able to demonstrate the existence of a relationship between a product user image and ideal self-image, given a preferred product or ownership (e.g., Malhotra, 1981, 1988; Sirgy, 1985b; Ericksen and Sirgy, 1989, 1992). In retailing, evidence for this relationship has been provided by Dornoff and Tatham (1972) and Samli and Sirgy (1981).

Proposition 8: Ideal self-congruity affects retail patronage. That is, shoppers who experience a match between the patron image of a store and their ideal self-image will be motivated to patronize that store.

Proposition 8a: Ideal self-congruity affects retail patronage through the mediating effects of the need for self-esteem. That is, shoppers who experience a match between the patron image of a store and their ideal self-image will be motivated to patronize that store because doing so satisfies their need for self-esteem.

Social self-congruity refers to the degree of match between a shopper’s social self-image and a retail patron image or the fit between how shoppers believe they are seen by others in relation to the retail patron image. A person may believe others see him or her as introverted and plain. This social self-image may be consistent or inconsistent with the actual and ideal self. Social self-image is part of the public self, not the private

---

**Figure 3.** The mediating effects of self-concept motives on the relationship between self-congruity and retail patronage.
self. Social self-image influences behavior through the “social consistency motive” (Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy, Johar, and Claiborne, 1992). People are motivated to maintain an image of themselves. They feel uncomfortable if they act in ways inconsistent with how they believe others see them. For example, a person may feel very uncomfortable visiting a video store that rents out X-rated videos. This is because they fear they may run into people they know. They believe that others see them as “not the sexual type and quite reserved.” Violating others’ perception of him as “not being the sexual type and being quite reserved” is likely to make him feel very uncomfortable. He feels the need to maintain social consistency (Figure 3).

The effect of social self-congruity on consumer behavior has been documented through several studies done in the context of both consumer goods and retail stores. In the context of consumer goods, several studies have demonstrated the existence of a relationship between a product user image and social self-image, given a preferred product or ownership (Sirgy, 1979, 1980, 1982b; Malhotra, 1981, 1988; Sirgy and Danes, 1982; Ericksen and Sirgy, 1989, 1992). In retailing, Samli and Sirgy (1981) and Sirgy and Samli (1985, 1989b) provided some evidence to substantiate the effects of social self-congruity on retail patronage.

Proposition 10: Ideal social self-congruity affects retail patronage. That is, shoppers who experience a match between the patron image of a store and their ideal social self-image will be motivated to patronize that store.

Proposition 10a: Ideal social self-congruity affects retail patronage through the mediating effects of the need for social approval. That is, shoppers who experience a match between the patron image of a store and their ideal social self-image will be motivated to patronize that store because doing so satisfies their need for social approval.

Factors Affecting the Activation of Self-Concept Dimensions

Because self-congruity is essentially based on the match/mismatch between shoppers’ self-images and retail patron images, factors that enhance the activation of a particular dimension of self-concept are likely to have important implications for retail patronage. Indeed, identifying these factors may help to increase the predictiveness of the various subconstructs of self-congruity, namely actual, ideal, social, and ideal social self-congruity. With respect to the shoppers’ self-image (actual, ideal, social, and ideal social self-image), the question becomes: under what conditions do private self constructs such as actual and ideal self-congruity predict retail patronage better than public self constructs—social and ideal social self-congruity? Generally speaking, those factors that serve to highlight or enhance a particular motive (self-consistency, self-esteem, etc.) are likely to activate a particular dimension of the self-concept. Four factors likely to be of particular relevance here are characteristics related to store visibility (or store conspicuousness), shopping with others (or co-shopping), and characteristics related to the individual shopper, such as age and response mode (see Figure 4).

Store Conspicuousness

Ross (1971) hypothesized that the predictiveness of public versus private self-congruity constructs is a function of “product conspicuousness”. More specifically, “private self” (actual and ideal) should predict brand preferences for less conspicuous.
ous brands better than for more conspicuous brands. Conversely, “public self” (social and ideal social) should predict preference better for conspicuous rather than inconspicuous brands. The results have not been highly supportive of these hypotheses, however.

Although the results have not been supportive of the hypothesis in the consumers goods area (Dolich, 1969; Ross, 1971; Sirgy, 1979; Martin and Bellizi, 1982; Hong and Zinkhan, 1995), we believe that this hypothesis has logical appeal and could easily apply to explain and predict retail patronage. Here, we want to develop a construct we refer to as “store conspicuousness”. A store that is conspicuous is a store in which shoppers believe that they can be readily seen and judged by their significant others. Significant others are friends, relatives, neighbors, associates, co-workers, and others that shoppers care to impress—or at least not disimpress (Johar and Sirgy, 1991). For example, many shoppers may feel that stores located in shopping malls tend to be a lot more conspicuous than stores that are buried from the visible eye in a back road someplace. Therefore, consumers are more likely to be seen and judged by relatives, neighbors, friends, etc., while shopping in stores located in a shopping mall than in stores located less visibly. Out-shopping can be less conspicuous than in-shopping. Many housewives travel to neighboring towns to hunt for brand name products at bargain prices. They don’t publicize the fact that they bought these products at bargain prices. Out-shopping helps to do this “secretively,” that is, inconspicuously. Therefore, based on the preceding discussion and reasoning, it is proposed that:

Proposition 12: Retail preference/patronage is likely to be affected by public self-type self-congruity (social and ideal social self-congruity), more so than private self-type congruence when consumers shop with significant others. Conversely, retail preference/patronage is likely to be affected by private self-type self-congruity (actual and ideal self-congruity), more so than public self-type congruence when consumers shop alone.

**Age**

One may also argue that there may be many personal characteristics about shoppers that may help explain and predict the extent to which consumers engage in public-self versus private-self information processing (see Figure 4). One personal characteristic may be age. One can easily observe the fact that children and younger people are much more preoccupied with impression management than older people. This is because children and young people are in the process of forming their private conceptions of themselves (private self-concept). Because we are social animals, our private self-concept is shaped mostly from social encounters. Therefore, developmentally speaking, children and young people in general have a stronger sense of public self than a private self. Mature people, on the other hand, are likely to have a consolidated sense of private self. Using this reasoning, one may surmise that children’s decisions and actions are more likely to influenced by public than private-self-type of congruence, whereas

---

**Figure 4.** Factors affecting the activation of self-concept dimensions.
adults’ decisions and actions are more likely to be influenced by the private self. Retail patronage is no exception. We would expect the same principle to apply here. Therefore, we put forth the following theoretical proposition:

Proposition 13: Young shoppers’ retail preference/patronage decisions are likely to be affected by public self-type self-congruity (social and ideal social self-congruity), more so than private self-type congruence. Conversely, mature shoppers’ retail preference/patronage decisions are likely to be affected by private self-type self-congruity (actual and ideal self-congruity), more so than public self-type congruence.

Response Mode

Sirgy (1987) conducted two studies that supported the hypothesis that the activation of actual versus ideal self-images in self-congruity processing is dependent on consumers’ response mode. Response mode refers to whether the decision is a preference judgment type or a brand choice. It was argued that self-esteem is more likely to be activated in judgment type decisions (e.g., preference decisions) than choice decisions. Conversely, self-consistency is more likely to be activated in choice-type decisions. Since the need for self-esteem is the underlying motivational state involved in ideal self-congruity, one can logically infer that ideal congruity would play a significant role in consumer behavior when the decision is a brand preference one. The same can be said for the need for self-consistency. That is, since self-consistency motivation is involved in actual self-congruity, then one can expect that actual self-congruity is likely to be more evident in choice type decisions (cf., Varvoglis, 1987; Hong and Zinkhan, 1995).

For example, a working class consumer who sees an ad about Macy’s Department Store may judge the store as positive and may develop a positive attitude toward the store. This may be due to the notion that this consumer may feel that Macy’s is an upscale store and she would like to see herself as upscale (match between the retail patron image and her ideal self-image as being upscale). The guiding source of motivation is the need for self-esteem. Imagining herself shopping at Macy’s gives her a boost in self-esteem. But then, how would she feel if she actually decides to visit the store? She is likely to feel uncomfortable because finding herself in such a place would be inconsistent with her own personal identity. In other words, the driving force of her decision NOT to patronize the store is the self-consistency motive. Therefore, we put forth the following theoretical proposition:

Proposition 14: Shoppers’ retail preference decisions are likely to be affected by enhancement-type self-congruity (ideal and ideal social self-congruity), more so than consistency-type congruence. Conversely, shoppers retail patronage decisions are likely to be affected by consistency-type self-congruity (actual and social self-congruity), more so than enhancement-type congruence.

The Interrelationship between Self-Congruity and Functional Congruity

As described in this article so far, self-congruity is shoppers’ comparison between their retail patron image and their own self-image. Functional congruity, on the other hand, is based on the perceived utilitarian aspects of the store in reference to some ideal aspects (Sirgy and Johar, 1985a, 1985b). For example, in store selection, a shopper may consider the proximity of the store from his residence, the price range of many store items, the quality of the products the store carries, the variety or assortment of merchandise, or the possible use of credit cards or other financing arrangements. These evaluative criteria are utilitarian or “functional” in nature, compared with symbolic criteria such as retail patron image. Functional congruity has been traditionally captured (operationally speaking) using multiattribute attitude-types of indices (e.g., Sirgy and Samli, 1985).

Both functional and self-congruity have been demonstrated to affect purchase motivation (Johar and Sirgy, 1989, 1991; Sirgy, Johar, Samli, and Claiborne, 1991) and retail patronage (Sirgy and Samli, 1985; Sirgy, Johar, Samli, and Claiborne, 1991), but the relative weights given to each may depend on a number of situational and consumer-related characteristics. This is because functional congruity, as a psychological evaluation process, may require greater cognitive elaboration and effort than self-congruity. For example, experienced shoppers may evaluate an electronics store on the basis of its merchandise assortment, service after sale, knowledgeability of salespeople, and the like. This is because experienced shoppers are likely to be more motivated and able to evaluate these utilitarian store attributes. In contrast, shoppers who have little experience may evaluate electronics stores on the basis of simple decision cues, such as self-congruity (i.e., would people like themselves shop here?), because they may not be motivated or able to evaluate the more utilitarian store attributes.

Consistent with this logic, a number of models in the social psychological and consumer behavior literature point to the contingent nature of consumers’ information processing (see, e.g., Sujan, 1985; Cohen and Basu, 1987). Petty and Cacioppo’s (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and Chaiken’s (Chaiken, 1980) heuristic-systematic model (HSM) distinguish between persuasion that results from careful consideration of message content (“central” or “systematic” processing) and persuasion based on an assessment of more superficial cues (“peripheral” or “heuristic” processing). Central or systematic processing generally is seen to require greater cognitive effort than peripheral or heuristic processing. Therefore, such processing is likely to require greater ability and motivation to process information. Because functional congruity is likely to require more cognitive effort than self-congruity, utilitarian cues are likely to be centrally...
processed whereas symbolic cues, like retail patron image, are likely to be processed peripherally. Based on this argument, we propose that self-congruity influences functional congruity, and the predictive effects of self-congruity versus functional congruity are moderated by shoppers' knowledge, prior experience, and involvement (see Figure 5).

**Self-Congruity Bias**
Sirgy, Johar, Samli, and Claiborne (1991) have shown that functional congruity is a stronger predictor of consumer behavior than self-congruity. However, the evidence also suggested that self-congruity "biases" functional congruity. That is, consumers who experience high self-congruity tend to favorably process the utilitarian product attributes, and vice versa. Sirgy and Samli (1985) have demonstrated the same phenomenon in relation to retail patronage. It stands to reason that shoppers who perceive a store to match their actual, ideal, social, and/or ideal social self-image may form an initial favorable attitude toward the store. This is essentially what social psychologists refer to as "first impression." This first impression biases further information processing. Thus, if the first impression is positive, then it is likely that further information processing may be biased in the positive direction (cf., Varvoglis and Sirgy, 1984). The converse is also true.

Proposition 15: Self-congruity biases functional congruity. That is, shoppers who experience a match between the retail patron image and their self-concept are likely to process the utilitarian attributes in a favorable light, thus increasing the likelihood of forming an overall favorable attitude toward the retail establishment. Those who experience a mismatch are likely to process the utilitarian attributes in an unfavorable light, thus increasing the likelihood of forming an unfavorable attitude.

**Knowledge**
A number of factors, such as ability and motivation to process information, are seen to affect the likelihood that consumers will engage in central/systematic versus peripheral/heuristic processing, or, in this case, the extent to which shoppers will engage in functional versus self-congruity processing in evaluating stores. One factor likely to affect consumers' use of functional versus self-congruity in evaluating stores is shoppers' level of knowledge about stores and shopping. Research in consumer behavior suggests that knowledgeable or expert consumers are likely to process information differently than novice consumers (Brucks, 1985; Sujan, 1985; Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). For example, Brucks (1985) found that consumers with high prior knowledge tended to exert more effort in acquiring new information. Because the information used in this study concerned utilitarian attributes, this finding suggests that prior knowledge may facilitate the processing of utilitarian attributes. Similarly, Sujan (1985) suggested that novices are likely to base evaluations on rather simplistic criteria, whereas experts are likely to exhibit more product-related thoughts. Because shoppers with low prior knowledge of stores may not be able to evaluate utilitarian store attributes, they may rely on evaluations of more "simplistic" cues, such as store patron image. And, because knowledge is likely to facilitate processing of utilitarian attributes, shoppers with more prior knowledge are likely to engage in functional congruity processing to evaluate stores (Johar and Sirgy, 1991).

Proposition 16: The relationship between self-congruity and patronage is moderated by shoppers' level of knowledge. Specifically, the effects of self-congruity on patronage are likely to be greater for shoppers with less knowledge than for shoppers with more knowledge.

**Prior Experience**
With respect to prior experience, one recent study examined how prior experience moderated the relationships between value-expressive and utilitarian criteria and brand attitudes. Mangleburg et al. (1998) found that user-image based cues had a greater effect on brand attitude for less experienced
versus more experienced consumers, but that utilitarian cues generally had a greater effect on brand attitude for more experienced versus less experienced consumers. Similarly, Wood and Kallgren (1988) reasoned that more experienced subjects would have more attitude-relevant information accessible in memory than would less experienced subjects. Therefore, less experienced subjects would be more persuaded by nonmessage cues (e.g., source likability and expertise), and more experienced subjects would be more persuaded by message content. Results generally supported this line of reasoning. A similar process is likely to occur with respect to store attitude and patronage. That is, shoppers who are more experienced may focus on more utilitarian-based criteria in evaluating stores (e.g., functional congruity), whereas those shoppers who lack experience may focus on more holistic, image-based cues, such as self-congruity (Johar and Sirgy, 1991).

Proposition 17: The relationship between self-congruity and patronage is moderated by consumers’ level of shopping experience. Specifically, the effects of self-congruity on patronage are likely to be greater for shoppers with less experience than for shoppers with more experience.

Involvement
Research also suggests that consumers’ level of involvement affects information processing. For example, Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) found that, under conditions of high product involvement, argument quality had a greater effect on brand attitude. Manipulations of product endorser, however, had a greater effect on brand attitude under conditions of low product involvement. Involvement is likely to perform a similar moderating role in a retailing context. Because functional congruity is a more cognitively taxing, piecemeal-oriented process, it is likely to require a greater level of motivation, or involvement, on the part of shoppers. Shoppers who have little involvement with shopping are likely to lack the motivation to engage in this sort of processing and, therefore, may base preferences and retail patronage decisions on evaluations of less cognitively taxing, more holistic and simplistic criteria, such as self-congruity (Johar and Sirgy, 1991).

Proposition 18: The relationship between self-congruity and patronage is moderated by shoppers’ involvement with stores and shopping. The effects of self-congruity on patronage are likely to be greater for shoppers who are not very involved with shopping than for those who are very involved.

Time Pressure
Time pressure also may moderate the extent to which consumers focus on utilitarian versus value-expressive criteria in patronage decisions. Shoppers who experience greater time pressure may not be able to engage in the in-depth processing required of functional congruity, that is, to evaluate a store on a number of utilitarian attributes. Instead, time-pressured shoppers may focus on more holistic criteria, such as whether people similar to them shop in that store, and whether they feel comfortable shopping there. For example, a person shopping for a gift at the last minute may select a store based on its image. The shopper may say to herself, “People like my friend and myself usually shop here; this is our kind of store” rather than evaluating the store’s individual utilitarian attributes.

Proposition 19: The relationship between self-congruity and patronage is moderated by shoppers’ time pressure. The effects of self-congruity are likely to be greater for shoppers who experience greater time pressure than for those who experience little time pressure.

Managerial Implications
The managerial implications of self-congruity in consumer goods marketing have been widely recognized and discussed (e.g., Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987; Johar and Sirgy, 1989). In retailing the importance of the store image concept has been recognized since the early work of Pierre Martineau (Martineau, 1958). The managerial relevance of self-congruity has been discussed and debated ever since (e.g., Sirgy, Samli, Bahn, and Varvoglis, 1985b, 1989; Samli and Sirgy, 1988; Samli, 1989). This article has sought to identify some of the potentially fruitful aspects that retailing managers can use to construct desirable store patron images (i.e., price, advertising). The managerial implications of self-congruity research in retailing are clear. If retailers can position their stores to enhance the likelihood of self-congruity with target shoppers, they are likely to succeed in attracting these shoppers to their stores. Doing so, of course, would enhance profitability.

References
Allport, G. W.: Becoming: Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. 1943.
Bellizzi, Joseph A., Crowley, Ayn E., and Hasty, Ronald W.: The
Retail Environment, Self-Congruity, and Retail Patronage


Pett, Richard, Cacioppo, John T., and Schumann, David: Central and Peripheral Routes to Advertising Effectiveness: The Moderat-


