Do personality and self-congruity matter for the willingness to pay more for ecotourism? An empirical study in Flanders, Belgium

DO PERSONALITY- AND SELF-CONGRUITY MATTER FOR THE WILLINGNESS TO PAY MORE FOR ECOTOURISM?

An empirical study in Flanders, Belgium

Ingrid Moons (University of Antwerp)
Patrick De Pelsmacker (University of Antwerp)
Camilla Barbarossa (Toulouse Business School)

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of self-ecotourism personality differences on consumer perceptions of actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity. Additionally, we study the effects of actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity on the willingness to pay more for ecotourism. Finally, our study explores to what extent demographic variables moderate the effect of self-ecotourism personality differences on consumer perceptions of self-ecotourism congruity and of self-ecotourism congruity on the willingness to pay more for ecotourism. This moderated mediation model is tested in a sample of 1041 adult consumers from the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders), and the data are analyzed with multi-group structural equation modelling. The results show that the more ecotourism is perceived to have a stronger responsible, emotional and, to a certain extent active, personality than a respondent's personality, the more ecotourism is considered by that person as congruent with the actual, ideal and/or social self. In turn, actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity increase the willingness to pay more for ecotourism. Demographic factors, particularly gender and level of income, significantly moderate this process. Contributions to self-congruity theory and the role of individual and brand personality are offered, as well as managerial implications for branding and promoting ecotourism.

Keywords

Ecotourism, self-ecotourism personality differences, self-ecotourism congruity, willingness to pay more for ecotourism

1. Introduction

Tourism is considered the largest global service industry and one of the top growing industries for developing countries. In 2018, there were 1.4 billion tourist arrivals, 6% more than the year before. The ecological footprint of tourism results from both the transportation of tourists and the negative consequences of tourism for local nature and environments. Recent studies suggest that the ecological footprint of tourism is four times as high as previously estimated (UNWTO, 2018).

People are hard to motivate to reduce their travel behavior. Therefore, providing them with more eco-friendly tourist activities is a relevant option to reduce the environmental impact of tourism. Ecotourism is gaining international recognition as a means to enhance sustainability and reduce the impact of tourism on the environment and on climate. Ecotourism is defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people (TIES, 2018). Over the years, its scope has broadened to incorporate environmental conservation, education, economic development of local communities, social inclusion, cultural preservation, human rights and ethical issues (Cobbinah, 2015). Examples of ecotourism are ecolodges that minimize the environmental impact of the accomodation. Other examples are ecological destinations, developed by tour operators and local governments. These destinations protect the environment and provide experiences embedded in local culture. Often ecotourism tours are organized that offer to small groups of people a well-planned interactive travel experience with new cultures and environments, with minimal environmental impact (UNEP, 2002).

Tourism organizations increasingly incorporate sustainability in their management process, and consider it an important marketing tool (Blanco-Cerradelo et al., 2018). Many of them now understand that a lot of modern tourists tend to escape from standardization looking for a high-quality experience without exploiting natural and socioeconomic resources (Goffi et al.,

2018). Environmentally-friendly practices of destinations increasingly matter to tourists (Falk and Hagsten, 2019). According to Sustainable Travel Report (Booking.com, 2019), 72% of travelers believe that people need to act now and make sustainable travel choices to save the planet for future generations, and 62% would feel better about staying in an accommodation if they knew it had an eco-label. Ecotourism now represents 5-10% of the global travel market (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016), and is expected to maintain a growth of nearly 7% by 2020 (Futuremarketinginsights, 2018), to account for almost a quarter of the global travel market, representing US$470.6 billion (Ties, 2018; Transparencymarketresearch, 2018). Although ecotourism potential (local people and resources) must be assessed before ecotourism can be developed (Tseng et al., 2019), the key variable to advance ecotourism and the adoption of sustainable ecotourism destinations is consumer pressure (Goffi et al., 2018). Hence, in order to support the ecotourism market and develop more persuasive promotion campaigns for ecotourism, it is important to gain insights into which arguments could convince an individual to choose for an ecotourism destination and pay a price premium for it, and these arguments do not have to be confined to environment-related motivations. Some argue that tourists should be willing to pay more for ecotourism since it is less directed towards mass consumption, bears higher costs motivated by fairness toward the local habitants (it is inappropriate for relatively poor local non-users to subsidize the visits of relatively wealthy users), and contributes to preserving the natural environment. However, the most important reason to study the drivers of willingness to pay more for tourism is that this variable measures the value tourists attach to ecotourism. In our study, we investigate potential motivational factors that drive this value perception and consequently makes people want to pay more for ecotourism.

Past research has identified various factors that are associated with eco-friendly tourism and ecotourism participation, such as socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., Bigerna et al., 2019; Falk and Hagsten, 2019; Hwang and Lee, 2018;), travel motivations (e.g., Falk and Hagsten,

2019; Hwang and Lee, 2018; Nowaczek and Smale, 2010), values (Hwang and Lee, 2018; Leonidou et al., 2015), destination meaning (e.g., Bekk et al., 2016; Unurlu and Uca, 2017), and self-identity factors (Bond and Falk, 2013).

In the current study, we focus upon self-identity considerations, using Congruity Theory (Sirgy, 1986) as a conceptual framework. Congruity Theory states that consumers often value consumption items for self-expression and appreciate or use items that are congruent with their actual self (self-consistency motive), ideal self (self-esteem motive) or social self (group norm motive). Building self-identity, based on self-brand congruity, has been identified as one of the major drivers of consumption behavior (Villarino and Font, 2015), also for tourism (Bond and Falk, 2013). We investigate to what extent self-congruity perceptions have an effect on the willingness to pay more for ecotourism. Furthermore, we investigate the role of self-ecotourism personality differences as antecedents of self-congruity perceptions.

Individuals have a certain personality, but, in the minds of consumers, so have consumption items (e.g., goods, services, brands, destinations). We propose that self-ecotourism personality differences are important antecedents of self-ecotourism congruity perceptions (Gazley and Watling, 2015). Studies that have investigated the influence of self-destination personality differences and self-identity considerations on travel decisions are scarce (Gazley and Watling, 2015; Hwang and Lee, 2018). To our knowledge, Bekk et al. (2016) is the only study that has jointly explored the role of self-destination personality differences and self-destination congruity on travel decisions.

We extend previous work on the role of (self-)destination personality for perceived self-destination congruity and the willingness to pay more in several ways. First, unlike in most previous studies, the context of our study is not one destination or venue (e.g., a hotel, as in Bekk et al. (2016)), but a travel category, namely ecotourism. Second, most previous studies only explore the role of actual self-destination congruity (Bekk et al., 2016) or actual and ideal self-destination congruity (Huang et al., 2017). We simultaneously investigate the

effects of actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity on the willingness to pay more for ecotourism (WTP). Individuals often take several types of self-congruity into account simultaneously when forming an opinion or making a judgment about a product (Sirgy and Johar, 1999; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Each of these types of self-congruity can thus drive the willingness to pay more for ecotourism. The willingness to pay more for ecotourism is highly relevant from an economic perspective (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016). Prior studies examining the role of self-destination congruity have focused on attitudes only (Bekk et al., 2016). We extend this prior research by focusing on WTP as the central dependent variable. Fourth, the only study that has explored the role of self-destination personality differences (Bekk et al., 2016) used a measure of absolute difference between an individual's and a destination's personality. However, previous research in the context of the adoption of electric vehicles (Moons and De Pelsmacker, 2015) has shown that, rather than absolute personality differences, non-absolute or directional differences (i.e., the direction of the differences between the perceived personality of a product and an individual's personality) are more relevant to predict buying behavior. In the current study, we investigate the role of both these absolute and directional difference between an individual's and ecotourism personality. Finally, following Goldberg et al.' (1998) suggestion and Leonidou et al.'s (2015) work, our study also explores the demographic boundary conditions of these effects of self-ecotourism personality differences, perceived self-ecotourism congruity and willingness to pay more for ecotourism, by investigating the moderating role of a number of demographic variables.

We answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity predict the willingness to pay more for ecotourism?
2. To what extent do self-ecotourism personality differences predict perceptions of actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity?
3. To what extent do these relationships vary across demographic consumer segments?

The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. Answering these questions also has managerial relevance. By exploring the role of self-identity congruity, its relationship with personality dimensions, and the effects of demographic factors, this study informs ecotourism marketers to better tailor their marketing and promotion efforts to specific demographic target groups with relevant and effective arguments and incentives.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Self-ecotourism congruity and willingness to pay more for it

Building self-identity is one of the major drivers of consumer behavior (Villarino and Font, 2015). According to Congruity Theory, consumers value consumption items and brands for self-expression and appreciate and use items and brands that are congruent with their self-identity. Congruity Theory defines self-brand congruity as the match between a consumer's self-concept (identity) and the perception of a given brand. In this context, a brand can be anything that an individual considers for consumption, from goods and services to product types, such as ecotourism. Consumers can consider consumption items that are congruent with their actual self (self-consistency motive), ideal self (self-esteem motive) and/or social self (social approval and social consistency motive) (Sirgy, 1986). Self-identity-related motivations are also fundamental to tourist decisions and experiences (Bond and Falk, 2013). First of all, individuals may have self-consistency motives and thus a preference for tourist destinations that are congruent with their actual self-identity. For instance, Gazley and Watling (2015) found that tourists form symbolic perceptions based on the likelihood that the product or experience will be congruent with their actual self. Similarly, Usakli and Bagolu

(2011) conclude that congruity between the actual self-image and destination image influences destination choice and loyalty to a destination brand.

Individuals may also develop attitudes toward a certain type of tourism for aspirational reasons and self-esteem motives. Hence, they may have a preference for a tourist destination that is congruent with an ideal image of their selves. For instance, Huang et al. (2017) found that, next to actual self-congruity, also ideal self-congruity has an effect on destination brand attachment. Finally, sustainable consumption may be positively related to status and reputation . Individuals may thus develop a preference for a destination or a type of travel for social approval and social consistency reasons, and take social self-congruity into account. In the context of ecotourism, people may behave in an environmentally responsible way if they perceive the pro-environmental act to be a social norm. Sirgy and Su (2000) indicate that, for conspicuous products, social self-images are strongly related to product preferences. Since tourism experiences are often shared with others, social identity congruity may be important. Wang et al. (2018) found that the social aspect of self-identity impacts attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control.

People can simultaneously take several types of self-congruity into account when forming an opinion or making a judgment about a product (Sirgy, 1986; Sirgy and Johar, 1999; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Each of these types of self-congruity can thus influence the willingness to pay more for ecotourism. Based on these lines of reasoning and the conclusions of previous studies, we expect the following:

H1: A higher perceived congruity between (a) actual self-identity and ecotourism, (b) ideal self-identity and ecotourism and (c) social self-identity and ecotourism has a positive effect on the willingness to pay more for ecotourism.

2.2. Self-ecotourism personality differences and self-ecotourism congruity

We propose that self-ecotourism personality differences are antecedents of self-congruity perceptions. Personality is a set of stable psychological characteristics that tend to remain consistent across contexts, such as time, geographical locations, and political situations (Nowaczek and Smale, 2010). An individual has a certain personality, but, in the minds of consumers, so have consumption items, such as products, services, and brands (Aaker, 1997; Geuens et al., 2009). Tourists take destination brand personalities into account when evaluating a destination. For instance, Tran et al. (2013) established that perceptions of hotel brand quality were significantly related to preferences on all five Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions. Unurlu and Uca (2017) found a positive effect of Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions of excitement, competence, and sincerity on consumer evaluations of hotel brands. Apostolopoulou and Papadimitriou (2015) found that excitement and sincerity personality dimensions of a destination influence overall destination image and predict tourists' intention to (re)visit the city or recommend it to others.

In Congruity Theory, brand personality is an important antecedent of perceived self-brand congruity (Gazley and Watling, 2015). Brand personality helps consumers match a brand with their self-concepts and humanlike features can provide consumers with clues they use to evaluate a brand (Malär et al, 2011; Su and Reynolds, 2017). Su and Reynolds (2017) analyzed eight U.S. hotel brands and concluded that brand personality dimensions such as excitement and sincerity determine self-image congruity. Huang et al. (2017) found that the destination brand personality dimensions 'exciting' and 'charming', significantly determine actual self-congruity. Both in Su and Reynolds' (2017) and Huang et al.'s (2017) study, aspects of self-congruity mediate the relationship between destination personality dimensions and destination brand outcomes (attitude or brand attachment toward the destination).

However, importantly, it is not so much the destination personality itself that matters for self-congruity perceptions, but the difference between destination personality dimensions and one's own personality. Tourists might evaluate a destination more positively when they perceive a small difference between their own and the destination's personality dimensions. Bekk et al. (2016) posit that tourist-destination personality similarity in terms of sincerity and excitement (i.e. a small difference between the two) positively affects perceived overall congruity between a tourist and the destination (in this case, a hotel) which, in turn, leads to satisfaction with and recommendation intention of a holiday resort. Bekk et al. (2016) consider the absolute difference between a person's perception of his/her own personality and the tourist destination personality as an antecedent of actual self-destination congruity, regardless of the direction of the difference. This makes sense for the perception of actual self-destination congruity, but not for ideal and social self-congruity. In a study in the context of the adoption of electric cars, Moons and De Pelsmacker (2015) found that the *direction* of the difference has much more explanatory power than its absolute size. One might indeed imagine that, for instance, in case a person wants to be or be seen as 'exciting', perceiving a tourist destination as more exciting than oneself, may positively affect perceived ideal and social self-congruity, while perceiving a tourist destination as less exciting than oneself may trigger lower perceptions of ideal and social self-congruity. By means of modeling the effect of directional differences between ecotourism and a person's actual personality on self-congruity perceptions, we also implicitly take ideal and social personality into account since the effect of social or ideal personality aspirations is (partly) captured by the effect of directional personality differences on self-congruity perceptions. The directional personality difference variables we use are expected to also have an effect on ideal and social self-congruency perceptions because they implicitly reflect these ideal and social personality considerations.

Which self-ecotourism personality differences could explain self-ecotourism congruity perceptions? In the current study we use Geuens et al.'s (2009) five dimensions approach to brand personality: Responsibility, Emotionality, Activity, Simplicity and Boldness.

It is generally assumed that eco-values are key concerns in the ecotourism context (Preziosi, 2019). Although these studies found that ecotourists have stronger environmental beliefs than other tourists (Leonidou et al., 2015), previous research also concludes that the majority of potential ecotourists do not exhibit particularly 'green' behavior (Hwang and Lee, 2018; Leonidou et al., 2015). Nowazcek and Smale (2010) found that tourists' perceptions of the negative impact of tourism positively affect their perceptions of responsibility to 'do the right thing' (not necessarily or exclusively in terms of environmental issues). We thus expect that the *responsibility* personality difference will exert a significant influence on self-ecotourism congruity.

For many people, other considerations than 'responsibility' are likely to be important as a tourist motivation, also for ecotourism. Emotionality is a relevant factor for how appealing a tourist destination is. Wehrli et al. (2017), Villarino and Font (2015) and Strzelecka et al. (2017) found a general preference for emotionally laden communication styles for sustainable tourism products. Malone et al. (2014) conclude that that ecotourism choices are influenced by the emotive aspects of the consumption experience. We thus also expect that *emotionality* personality differences will have a significant influence on self-ecotourism congruity. Given the nature of ecotourism and the focus on nature, learning, culture, and actively contributing to community building, we may also assume that the personality dimensions *activity* and *sophistication* (as opposed to simplicity) play a significant role in building self-ecotourism congruity (Müller, 2000). Finally, as to the effect of the personality dimension 'boldness/aggressiveness', on the one hand, ecotourism is often adventurous and therefore there could be a positive effect of this personality dimension. On the other hand, 'boldness' does not fit with the idealistic stance of ecotourists and their inclination to respect other

cultures and nature and, consequently, we could expect a negative effect of this personality dimension. Therefore we do not formulate a directional hypothesis for this personality dimension. Further, we expect that a more positive difference between perceptions of ecotourism personality and an individual's personality will enhance perceptions of ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity. Indeed, the perception of ecotourism as having a more aspirational personality than one's own can be expected to strengthen aspirational (ideal) congruity perceptions and, as a result of social approval and social consistency motives, also social congruity perceptions. Conversely, we expect that the smaller the absolute difference between ecotourism and individual personality perceptions, the higher perceived actual self-ecotourism congruity will be. We posit:

H2. A more positive (a) Responsibility ecotourism-self personality difference, (b) Emotionality ecotourism-self personality difference, (c) Activity ecotourism-self personality difference, and (d) Sophistication (as opposed to simple) ecotourism-self personality difference, has a positive effect on perceived ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity.

H3. A smaller absolute (a) Responsibility ecotourism-self personality difference, (b) Emotionality ecotourism-self personality difference, (c) Activity ecotourism-self personality difference, and (d) Sophistication (as opposed to simple) ecotourism-self personality difference, has a positive effect on perceived actual self-ecotourism congruity.

Combining H1 and H2-H3, we thus expect perceived actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity to mediate the relationship between self-ecotourism personality differences and the willingness to pay more for ecotourism.

2.3.Demographic boundary conditions

Goldberg et al. (1998) propose that demographics may moderate the relation between variables, in that a certain personality dimension may have a stronger impact on self-ecotourism congruity perceptions for some demographic segments than for other. The scarce previous research on the moderating role of demographic characteristics does not provide much guidance on how self-ecotourism personality differences and self-ecotourism congruity affect the willingness to pay more for ecotourism differently between demographic groups. The moderation analysis is thus exploratory in nature and its results will provide input for managerial implications: how to approach different demographic groups differently. We thus formulate the following research question:

RQ: What is the moderating effect of gender, age, level of education, income and place of residence on the relationship between self-ecotourism personality differences, actual, ideal, and social self-identity-ecotourism congruity, and the willingness to pay more for ecotourism?

3. Method

In May 2017, we conducted an online survey in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, by means of snowball sampling. We sent emails to a random sample of 200 members of an online panel of the department of marketing of the university. The email contained a link to the online survey. We asked them to complete the survey themselves and forward the link to 10 other people. We received 1041 fully completed questionnaires. The sample consists of 31% males. The age composition was: 52% between 18-29 years old, 21% between 30-45, 18% between 46-55 and 9% 56 or older. 71% were educated beyond high school. 44% considers their income ‘average’, 36% above average, and 20% below average.

In comparison to the population in Flanders, the sample overrepresents young, female and more highly educated people. This is not problematic per se, because in the last part of our analysis we assess the differences between demographic segments based on, amongst others, gender, age and level of education.

The questionnaire started with a welcome screen in which the purpose of the study was explained and anonymity was guaranteed. Next, a question about travel frequency was asked. Then, the concept of 'ecotourism' was defined as follows: "Ecotourism is responsible and ethical travel to natural areas that conserves culture and the environment and improves the economic development, human rights, and well-being of local people" (Cobbinah, 2015). Additionally, examples of ecotourism practices were given, such as sustainable hotels or lodges made of eco-friendly and natural materials, or the commitment that the money you pay to be allowed to snorkel goes to research and conservation of coral reefs.

Subsequently, the willingness to pay a price premium for ecotourism (WTP) was measured by means of a 5-item 7-point Likert scale, based on Lu et al. (2016). Next, ecotourism personality (i.e., the five personality dimensions of ecotourism) was measured by Geuens et al.'s (2009) 5-point 12-item Likert scale. This scale corresponds with Costa and McCrae's (1999) Big Five scale that was developed to measure human personality (Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness and Agreeableness). This makes this Geuens et al.'s (2009) scale suitable to measure both human and product personalities. Subsequently, actual, ideal, and social self-ecotourism congruity (SEC) was measured by means of three 5-item 7-point Likert scales, based on Sirgy and Johar (1999). Then, individual personality (i.e., personality dimensions of the respondent) was measured with the same scale as ecotourism personality. The constructs and their items are reported in Table 1. The constructs' means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations, and Cronbach's alphas are reported in Table 2. Finally, demographics were measured: gender, age (four categories: 18-29, 30-45, 46-55, and 56 or older), level of education (two categories: up to high school, beyond high school),

income (three categories: lower than average, about average, higher than average), and residence (three categories: city center, suburbs, and countryside).

4. Data analysis and results

4.1. Measurement assessment

First, we tested the measurement model for the multi-item measurement constructs by means of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using LISREL 8.80 and the maximum likelihood technique (Jöreskog and Sörbom 2006). The items 'aggressiveness' and 'bold' in the ecotourism personality scale show factor loadings lower than .50 and cross loadings higher than .30. (They were therefore removed because of low reliability measures. Consequently both the individual and ecotourism personality characteristic 'bold' were not considered in further analyses(i.e., structural equation modeling and multi-group analysis were based on the purified scales), since measurement validity and reliability are a prerequisite for further structural analysis (Levine et al., 2006). Results of the CFA on the purified scales show satisfactory global fit indices: RMSEA=.06, SRMR=.05, NFI=.93, NNFI=.94 and CFI=.95. The composite reliability (CR) threshold of .60 is observed for every construct (Table 2). Cronbach's alphas for all constructs are greater than .60 (George and Mallery, 2013). Discriminant validity is met ($\Delta\chi^2(1)= 141.20$ $p< .01$) (Zaiţ & Bertea, 2011). Finally, we assessed common method variance (CMV). We applied the marker variable technique ("Listening to music promotes learning"; 7-point Likert scale item) (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff 2003). Results show that significant correlations do not vary after we controlled for the marker variable, indicating that common method variance does not represent a threat in our data (correlation tables for the CMV can be provided by the authors up on request).

Second, following Moons and De Pelsmacker's (2015) approach, for the four remaining personality dimensions, we calculated the difference between each item of the ecotourism personality dimension and the corresponding item of the individual personality dimension. That is, we subtracted the individual personality score from the ecotourism personality score for each item. Then, we calculated the mean of this difference for each personality dimension. This resulted in four self-ecotourism personality difference (SEPD) scores: SEPD responsibility, SEPD activity, SEPD simplicity, SEPD emotionality. A positive score means that, in the perception of an individual, eco-tourism is associated with a specific personality characteristic more than the person him/herself. Conversely, a negative score means that an individual possesses more of this personality trait than the eco-tourism does. Finally, we calculated four absolute self-ecotourism personality difference scores by taking the absolute value of the mean difference between the individual personality score and the ecotourism personality score for each personality dimension (ASEPD responsibility, ASEPD activity, ASEPD simplicity, ASEPD emotionality).

4.2. Structural Analysis

We tested two structural equation models using LISREL. We first tested a model in which both the four absolute and the four directional self-ecotourism personality differences were included as independent variables. This model did not converge after 150 iterations. Therefore, H3 is not supported.

Next, we tested a model in which only the directional self-ecotourism personality differences (SEPD responsibility, SEPD activity, SEPD simplicity, SEPD emotionality) were included as independent variables. The results of this analysis show that the model fit is acceptable: RMSEA=.10, NFI=.91, NNFI=.91, and CFI=.92.The model explains 63% of the total variance. All standardized item loadings significantly load on their constructs (p<.01), and the

factor loadings range from .59 to .96. Results of the structural paths are reported in Table 3 (overall model). Actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity significantly influence consumers' willingness to pay more for eco-tourism, supporting H1a-c. Responsible and emotional SEPD significantly positively influence perceptions of actual, ideal, and social SEC. H2a and H2b are supported. However, contrary to expectations, responsible and emotional SEPD have a positive (instead of no) effect on actual SEC. Active and simple SEPD do not affect SEC, with the exception of the significant effect of active SEPD on ideal SEC. H2c is partially supported, while H2d is not. Results also indicate that both responsible and emotional SEPD have significant indirect effects on WTP. The effects of responsible and emotional SEPD on WTP are thus partially mediated by perceptions of SEC. Conversely, active and simple SEPD do not have significant indirect effects on WTP.

4.3. Conditional effects

Finally, we tested the moderating effects of gender, age, education, income and residence on the causal paths in the base model. All moderators were dichotomized: Gender: 1= men, 2= women; Age: 1= younger consumers (<30 years old), 2= older consumers (≥ 30 years old); Education: 1= lower education (lower than high-school), 2= higher education (higher than or equal to high school); Income: 1= lower income (lower than or equal to the perceived average income), 2= higher income (higher than the perceived average income); Residence: 1= city center and suburbs, 2=countryside. Multi-group analysis was then performed using LISREL. Results of the multi-group comparisons are reported in Table 3.

As to gender (N_{men}=323, N_{women}=718), the effects of SEPD responsibility on actual SEC is significant and positive only for women. The effect of SEPD emotionality on actual SEC is stronger for women than for men. Conversely, the effect of SEPD simplicity is negative for men and not significant for women. The effect of SEPD responsibility on ideal SEC is

stronger for women than for men. The effect of SEPD activity on ideal SEC is significant and positive for men but not for women, while the opposite is observed for the effects of SEPD emotionality. The effect of SEPD responsibility on social SEC is significant and positive for women, but not for men. There is a significant and negative effect of SEPD activity on social SEC for women, but not for men. Finally, the effect of ideal SEC on WTP is stronger for men than for women.

With respect to age ($N_{younger}$= 545, N_{older}= 496), the effect of SEPD activity on ideal SEC is significantly positive for younger consumers, but not for older ones. As to education ($N_{lower\ education}$= 303, $N_{higher\ education}$= 738), the effect of SEPD responsibility on social SEC is stronger for higher educated consumers than for lower educated ones. With respect to income ($N_{below\ the\ average}$= 661; $N_{above\ the\ average}$= 380), the effects of SEPD simplicity on both actual and social SEC are negatively significant for higher income individuals, but not for lower income ones. As to residence ($N_{city\ center\ and\ suburbs}$= 781, $N_{countryside}$= 260), the effects of SEPD activity on actual, ideal, and social SEC are not significant for people living in the city center or the suburbs, while these effects are positive and significant for people living in the countryside. Similarly, the effect of SEPD simplicity on social SEC is significant and positive only for people living in the countryside.

5. Discussion, implications, further research and conclusion

5.1. Discussion

The more ecotourism is perceived to have a more responsible and emotional personality than that of the respondent, the more the respondent perceives ecotourism as congruent with his or her actual, ideal, and social self. Conversely, the less ecotourism is perceived to have a responsible and emotional personality than that of the respondent, the less the respondent

perceives ecotourism as congruent with his or her actual, ideal, and social self. Additionally, the perception that ecotourism has a more active personality than the respondent's personality increases the perception of ideal self-ecotourism congruity These results confirm previous research (e.g., Nowazcek and Smale, 2010) in that ecotourists hold the perception that they have a responsibility to do the right thing. This personality difference exerts the strongest influence on all three dimensions of self-ecotourism congruity. The results also support earlier research that shows that emotionality is an important factor for ecotourism (Malone et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017; Villarino and Font, 2015; Wehrli et al., 2017). Emotional personality differences have the second strongest effect on self-ecotourism congruity perceptions. Finally, also the personality dimension 'activity' plays a role in building ideal self-ecotourism congruity (Müller, 2000). The personality dimension 'simplicity' does not have any effect on perceptions of self-ecotourism congruity. Apparently, people do not see the connection between sophistication/simplicity and the extent to which they perceive congruity between themselves and ecotourism. The fact that a more positive difference between the personality perceptions of ecotourism and the perception of the respondent's own personality has a positive effect on ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity is intuitively logic and as expected. However, the fact that the same positive effect is found on actual congruity is unexpected and counter-intuitive, and requires further investigation.

A higher perceived actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity increases the willingness to pay more for ecotourism. Actual self-ecotourism congruity is more important than ideal self-congruity which, in turn, is more important than social self-congruity, confirming Huang et al.'s (2017) findings. Also social self-congruity has a positive effect on the willingness to pay more for ecotourism, be it a smaller effect than that of actual and ideal self-congruity. This result supports Wang et al.'s (2018) findings, but not Sirgy and Su's (2000) and Dolnicar et al.'s (2017) proposition that for conspicuous products such as travel, social self-images are more important than actual and ideal self-images. Consistent with the findings of

Su and Reynolds (2017), Huang et al. (2017) and Bekk et al. (2016), self-congruity perceptions mediate the relationship between self-ecotourism personality dimensions and the willingness to pay more for ecotourism.

There are remarkable differences in this mechanism between demographic segments (Tables 3 and 4). Women's perceptions of actual, ideal, and social self-congruity are significantly driven by responsible and emotional personality considerations, while men seem to be more sensitive to active and sophistication (not simplicity) personality factors. The fact that women attach more importance to the responsibility factor has been found in previous research (Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017). Not surprisingly, younger travelers take active personality considerations into account, while this is not the case for older ones. In a study about conservation volunteer travel, Strzelecka et al. (2017) found that, for young adults, the hedonic experience is more important than the feeling to do an environmental act that 'saves the world'. One would thus expect that, for this age group, the emotional personality dimension is more important than the responsible one. Younger people are also supposed to be more preoccupied by impression management than older people (Gazley and Watling, 2015; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Hence, one would expect that social self-congruity is more important for them than for older people. Neither of these findings and propositions is supported by the results of the current study.

More highly educated travelers take responsible personality considerations more into account for social self-identity building than lower educated ones. This is consistent with the general observation that more highly educated individuals are more environmentally concerned (Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017). Contrary to lower income travelers, higher income travelers take sophistication personality considerations into account when developing actual and social self-identity congruity. As opposed to individuals living in a city or in suburbs, people living on the countryside report a higher actual, ideal and social self-ecotourism congruity when they perceive ecotourism personality as more active than themselves.

5.2. Managerial implications

When promoting ecotourism, practitioners should emphasize that an ecotourism destination reflects the actual, ideal and – to a lesser extent - social self-identity of potential tourist segments. Personality dimensions can serve as tools for positioning a destination brand image in the marketplace, helping to differentiate it from its competitors at the symbolic level. Product personality profiles provide marketing managers with operational insights that will allow a more fine-grained market approach and more focused marketing and advertising. In general, ecotourism marketers should point out that ecotourism will boost the responsible, emotional, and partly the active side of their personality.

Emphasizing how responsible choices have a positive impact on the natural environment and local communities is especially relevant when promoting ecotourism to highly educated or female target groups (e.g., https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/poster-eco-tourism-cute-landscape-can-225173134). Young people and men are more triggered by activity-related considerations. Promoting ecotourism to these target groups should therefore appeal to their sense of adventure (e.g., https://divermag.com/destination-diving-meets-ecotourism/). Men and people with a higher income value the sophistication argument (e.g., https://greenglobaltravel.com/eco-lodge-green-accommodations/), and women are more driven by the emotionality factor (e.g., https://issuu.com/ecotourism-kenya/docs/newsletter-no23). Emphasizing ideal self-congruity is a more important driver for men than for women.

5.3. Further research

Our model can also be tested for different types of ecotourism or ecotourism destinations or venues, other (sustainability-oriented) industries or brands, and in other countries to corroborate and/or nuance our findings.

Studies on ecotourism found that ecotourists have stronger environmental beliefs than other tourists. However, previous research also concludes that the majority of potential ecotourists do not exhibit particularly 'green' behavior. Our individual and ecotourism destination personality approach picks up the 'responsibility' concern of many ecotourists, as well as other motivations via the other personality dimensions we included. However, further research could also include other potential antecedents of the willingness to pay more for ecotourism to assess the relative importance and relevance of various explanatory variables of WTP.

In the current study, we measured actual personality dimensions and their absolute and directional differences with perceived ecotourism personality. However, we could also have used differences between the latter and ideal and/or social personality. We used actual personality because we build on previous research that took the same approach, and we extend this approach by not only looking at absolute differences between actual and ecotourism personality, but also at directional differences. Including additional ideal and social personality measures would have resulted in an unduly complicated model and analysis. However, future research should further explore the relevance of different personality types as drivers of self-ecotourism perceptions and willingness to pay more for ecotourism. Further research is also needed to investigate the role of the personality dimensions 'simplicity' and 'boldness' and the positive effect of ecotourism-self personality differences on actual ecotourism-self congruity. Experimental studies could also be set up to test promotional messages that incorporate the findings of the current study.

Previous empirical evidence shows that consumers' self-reported eco-friendly awareness and willingness to engage in eco-friendly behaviors do not always reflect consumers' real behaviors. As is the case for many pro-environmental behaviors, they often fail to walk their talk (Carrington et al., 2010). Future research should investigate this intention-behavior gap and the barriers that prevent tourists from actually choosing eco- friendly destinations.

The ecotourism concept does not take into account that emissions caused by flying to a destination are also a contributor to environmental damage. Falk and Hagner (2019) found that only 16%of European holiday makers found it important to consider a mode of transportation with limited impact on the environment. Further research should explore the perceptions of tourists about the role of the 'responsibility' personality dimension when taking this travel mode effect into account.

One of the biggest issues with respect to providing ecologically sound tourism will be that governments and local authorities should implement smart growth strategies, to avoid the destination to become quickly overcrowded with hotels, restaurants and services for travelers. Educational campaigns will also play a fundamental roles in educating citizens in positive pro-environmental behavior change when traveling. Future research should focus upon these marketing and public policy challenges.

5.4. Conclusions

The current ecological footprint of tourism is unsustainable. Ecotourism represents a valuable alternative for people, local communities and the planet. A key challenge is to promote consumer adoption of sustainable ecotoursim destinations. The current study offers valuable insigths in this regard. It delves into the motivational factors that may motivate different consumer segments to attach more value to ecotourism. Across demographic segments, actual self-ecotourism congruity is more important than ideal self-congruity which, in turn, is more

important than social self-congruity to increase the willingness to pay more for ecotourism. In general, the perceptions that the ecotourism personality is more responsible and emotional than one's own are the most important drivers of self-ecotourism, while personality considerations related to simplicity/sophistication are irrelevant. There are remarkable differences between demographic segments, especially with respect to gender and income. Women's perceptions of self-congruity are significantly driven by responsible and emotional personality considerations, while men are more sensitive to active and sophistication personality factors. Contrary to lower income travelers, higher income travelers take sophistication personality considerations into account when developing self-identity congruity perceptions.

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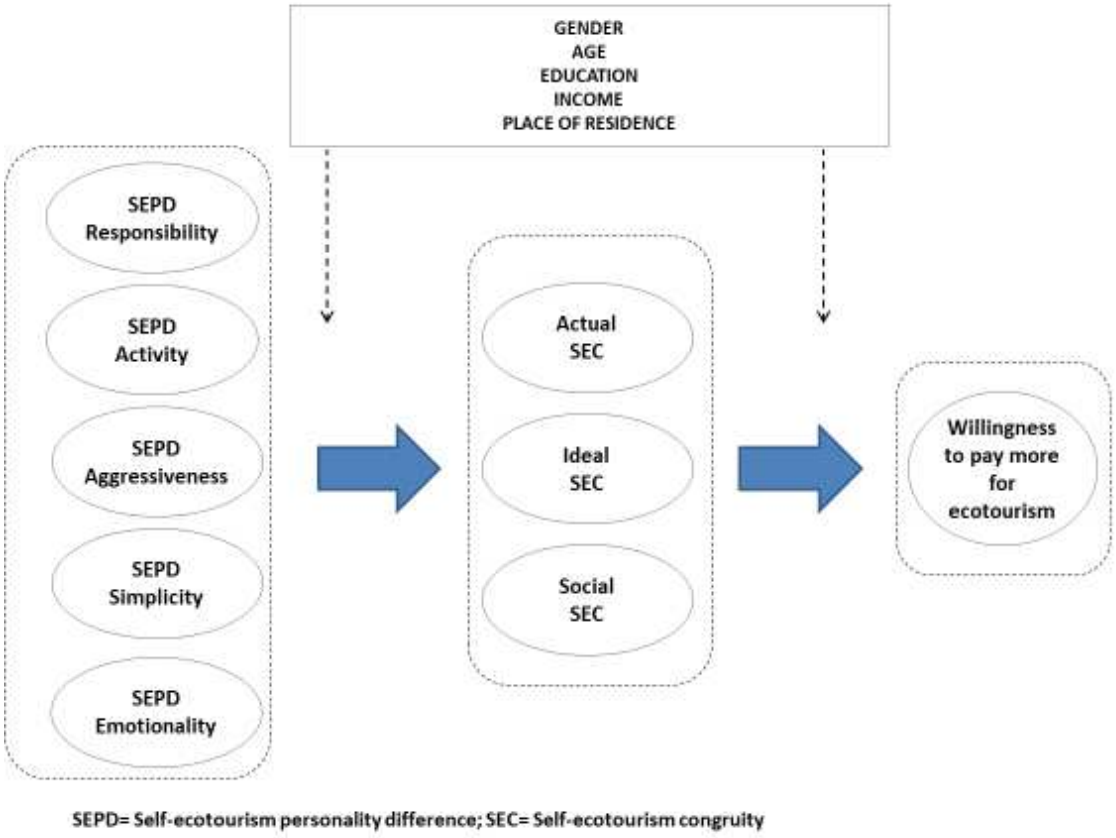
Figure 1. Conceptual model



Note: In the first structural analysis, both directional and absolute self-ecotourism personality differences were included as independent variables. In the second structural analysis we only included the four directional self-ecotourism personality difference variables. The latter model is shown in this figure.

Table 1. Constructs and items

Constructs	Items	Categories
Willingness to pay more for ecotourism	To what extent are you willing to… • Make a more expensive trip to reduce pollution • Pay more for your vacation if the extra money goes to the preservation of nature and improving the well-being of the local population • Pay more for ecotourism than for an ordinary vacation	7 categories: 1: very unwilling – 7: very willing
Ecotourism brand personality	To what extent do the following characteristics apply to ecotourism: • Down to earth • Stable • Responsible • Active • Dynamic • Innovative • Aggressive* • Bold* • Ordinary • Simple • Romantic • Sentimental	5 categories: 1:does not at all apply – 5: applies very well
Actual self-identity-ecotourism congruity	To what extent do you agree with the following statements: • The image of people who participate in ecotourism is very consistent with how I see myself • I cannot associate myself with people who prefer ecotourism above ordinary tourism • People who are very different from me prefer ecotourism above ordinary tourism • I am a typical person who prefers ecotourism above ordinary tourism • Participating in ecotourism is very much like me	7 categories: 1: completely disagree – 7: completely agree
Ideal self-identity-ecotourism congruity	To what extent do you agree with the following statements: • I would find myself a better person if I would opt for an ecotourism trip • I would feel myself special if I would participate in ecotourism • I like the image of people who participate in ecotourism • I would not feel great about myself when I would participate in ecotourism* • I really like people who participate in ecotourism	7 categories: 1: completely disagree – 7: completely agree
Social self-identity ecotourism congruity	To what extent do you agree with the following statements: • People who know me well would find it difficult to see me as a person who participates in ecotourism • People who know me well think that I am totally different from people who participate in ecotourism • My family and friends see me as the typical person who prefers ecotourism above ordinary tourism	7 categories: 1: completely disagree –

	• The image of people who participate in ecotourism is very consistent with how I am perceived by people who know me well • People who know me well, think of me as a person that would like to participate in ecotourism	7: completely agree
Respondent's personality	To what extent do the following characteristics apply to yourself: • Down to earth • Stable • Responsible • Active • Dynamic • Innovative • Aggressive* • Bold* • Ordinary • Simple • Romantic • Sentimental	5 categories: 1:does not at all apply – 5: applies very well

Table 2. Mean scores, standard deviations per construct and correlations between constructs

	ECOT RESP M=3.89 SD=.59 α= .61 CR= .63	ECOT ACTIV M= 3.91 SD=.66 α= .71 CR= .74	ECOT SIMPL M= 2.48 SD= .84 α= .65 CR= .67	ECOT EMOT M= 2.82 SD= .87 α= .67 CR= .72	IND RESP M= 3.89 SD= .56 α= .65 CR= .66	IND ACTIV M= 3.60 SD=.69 α= .71 CR= .75	IND SIMPL M= 2.73 SD=.86 α= .70 CR=	IND EMOT M= 3.35 SD=085 α= .68 CR= .73	ACTUAL SEC M= 4.52 SD= 1.03 α= .82 CR= .82	IDEAL SEC M= 4.41 SD=1.00 α= .80 CR= .81	SOCIAL SEC M= 4.09 SD= 1.06 α= .86 CR= .86	WTP M= 4.53 SD=1.12 α= .91 CR= .91
ECOT RESP	1											
ECOT ACTIV	.40**	1										
ECOT SIMPL	.09**	-.04(ns)	1									
ECOT EMOT	.13**	.20**	.12**	1								
IND RESP	.20**	.13**	.01(ns)	.09**	1							
IND ACTIV	.13**	.18**	-.02(ns)	.12**	.25**	1						
IND SIMPL	.03(ns)	-.01(ns)	.18**	.05(ns)	-.02(ns)	-.26**	1					
IND EMOT	.06(ns)	.04(ns)	.03(ns)	.15**	-.05(ns)	-.01(ns)	.01(ns)	1				
ACTUAL SEC	.30**	.30**	.01(ns)	.21**	.11**	.18**	.02(ns)	-.01(ns)	1			
IDEAL SEC	.31**	.33**	-.06*	.19**	.01(ns)	.10**	-.01(ns)	.10**	.512**	1		
SOCIAL SEC	.24**	.25**	.01(ns)	.16**	.03(ns)	.18**	.01(ns)	-.01(ns)	.70**	.53**	1	
WTP	.23**	.27**	-.02(ns)	.19**	.14**	.14**	-.01(ns)	-.02(ns)	.50**	.42**	.46**	1

Notes: ECOT RESP= Ecotourism responsible; ECOT ACTIV= Ecotourism active; ECOT SIMPL= Ecotourism simple; ECOT EMOT= Ecotourism emotional; IND RESP= Individual responsible; IND ACTIV= Individual active; IND SIMPL= Individual simple; IND EMOT= Individual emotional; SEC= Self-ecotourism congruity; WTP= Willingness to pay extra for ecotourism.
M= Mean, SD= Standard deviation, CR= Composite reliability, ** = Correlation is significant at p=.01, * = Correlation is significant at p=.05, (ns)= Correlation is not significant. This matrix is diagonal.

Table 3. Structural Equation Model: Standardized direct and indirect effects and Multi-group Analysis

Paths and indicators	Overall Model	Men	Women	$\Delta\chi^2(1)$	Younger	Older	$\Delta\chi^2(1)$	Lower Education	Higher Education	$\Delta\chi^2(1)$	Lower Income	Higher Income	$\Delta\chi^2(1)$	City center and suburbs	Country side	$\Delta\chi^2(1)$
Direct effects																
SEPD RESP→ ACTUAL SEC	.28**	**.15(ns)**	**37****	**5.07**	.18**	.37**	3.70	.18**	.34**	.08	.26**	.29**	.20	.26**	.26**	.27
SEPD ACT→ ACTUAL SEC	.02(ns)	.06(ns)	-.05(ns)	.02	-.02(ns)	.02(ns)	3.60	.14(ns)	-.03(ns)	.20	.01(ns)	.09(ns)	3.70	**-.04(ns)**	**.20****	**10.69**
SEPD AGGR→ ACTUAL SEC	NA															
SEPD SIMPL→ ACTUAL SEC	-.05(ns)	**-.14***	**-.01(ns)**	**10.33**	-.06(ns)	-.05(ns)	0.48	.01(ns)	-.09(ns)	.90	**.03(ns)**	**-.21****	**16.57**	-.07(ns)	.01(ns)	.40
SEPD EMOT→ ACTUAL SEC	.23**	**.15***	**.30****	**5.85**	.26**	.18**	3.08	.26*	.23**	1.12	.26**	.17*	2.12	.27**	.11*	2.02
SEPD RESP→ IDEAL SEC	.34**	**.19***	**.43****	**5.09**	.24**	.42**	3.18	.33**	.35**	.16	.28**	.39**	.42	.34**	.25**	1.06
SEPD ACT→ IDEAL SEC	.10*	**.19***	**.01(ns)**	**5.20**	**.11***	**.06(ns)**	**4.25**	.12*	.09*	1.25	.08*	.16**	2.37	**.05(ns)**	**.28****	**6.53**
SEPD AGGR→ IDEAL SEC	NA															
SEPD SIMPL→ IDEAL SEC	-.04(ns)	-.12(ns)	.04(ns)	3.22	-.04(ns)	-.02(ns)	.57	-.02(ns)	-.04(ns)	.17	.03(ns)	-.06(ns)	1.51	-.07(ns)	.07(ns)	1.25
SEPD EMOT→ IDEAL SEC	.12**	**.12(ns)**	**.17****	**4.71**	.11*	.12*	.02	.12*	.12**	.02	.13**	.08**	1.47	.11**	.11*	1.57
SEPD RESP→ SOCIAL SEC	.31**	**.13(ns)**	**.42****	**4.64**	.20**	.41**	3.67	**.24****	**.36****	**4.30**	.31**	.28**	.56	.30**	.27**	2.06
SEPD ACT→ SOCIAL SEC	-.03(ns)	**.07(ns)**	**-.12****	**4.29**	-.06(ns)	-.05(ns)	2.28	.02(ns)	-.06(ns)	.75	.-07(ns)	.09(ns)	1.06	**-.08(ns)**	**.15***	**7.63**
SEPD AGGR→ SOCIAL SEC	NA															
SEPD SIMPL→ SOCIAL SEC	-.02(ns)	-.09(ns)	.03(ns)	3.11	-.02(ns)	-.03(ns)	.10	-.04(ns)	-.02(ns)	1.17	**.07(ns)**	**-.20****	**7.63**	**-.05(ns)**	**.10***	**4.24**
SEPD EMOT→ SOCIAL SEC	.21**	.19**	.25**	.85	.20**	.22**	1.37	.17**	.22**	1.41	.22**	.18**	2.26	.22**	.17**	1.51
ACTUAL SEC→ WTP	.37**	.31**	.39**	1.35	.41**	.30**	.54	.45**	.34**	.95	.34**	.42**	.58	.40**	.25**	1.03
IDEAL SEC→ WTP	.23**	**.35****	**.18****	**4.37**	.25**	.23**	.61	.22**	.24**	1.28	.26**	.22**	1.50	.18**	.37**	1.32
SOCIAL SEC→ WTP	.17**	.12**	.18**	.04	.15*	.20**	1.86	.18**	.15**	.09	.20**	.10**	.02	.15**	.25**	.73
Indirect effects																
SEPS RESP→ WTP	.23**															
SEPS ACT→ WTP	.02(ns)															
SEPS AGGR→ WTP	NA															
SEPS SIMPL→ WTP	-.03(ns)															
SEPS EMOT→ WTP	.15**															

Notes: The direct and indirect effects of aggressiveness self-ecotourism personality difference are not assessed (NA). These items were indeed removed in the confirmatory factor analysis (see section 4.1 Measurement Assessment for more details). Stand. b=Standardized beta coefficient; ** = significant at $p<.01$, * = significant at $p<.05$, (ns)= not significant because $p>.10$. Bolded results indicate that structural paths are significantly different between the two groups ($\Delta\chi^2(1) \rightarrow p< .05$)

Table 4. Means and standard deviations for the model variables between sub-samples of Flemish respondents

Model variables	*Gender*			*Age*			*Education*			*Income*			*Place of living*		
	Men *M (SD)*	*Women* *M (SD)*	*p-value*	*<30* *M (SD)*	*≥ 30* *M (SD)*	*p-value*	*<high school* *M (SD)*	*≥ high school* *M (SD)*	*p-value*	*lower income* *M (SD)*	*higher income* *M (SD)*	*p-value*	*City and suburbs* *M (SD)*	*Countryside* *M (SD)*	*p-value*
Actual SEC	**4.41(1.00)**	**4.57(1.04)**	***p*<.05**	4.51(1.03)	4.54(1.04)	*p*>.05	4.40(1.05)	*4.57*(1.03)	*p*>.05	4.50(1.03)	4.56(1.04)	*p*>.05	4.55(1.04)	4.44(1.01)	*p*>.05
Ideal SEC	**4.13(1.03)**	**4.54(.97)**	***p*<.05**	**4.53(.97)**	**4.28(1.02)**	***p*<.05**	**4.45(1.08)**	**4.39(.96)**	***p*<.05**	4.44(.98)	4.36(1.03)	*p*>.05	4.43(1.01)	4.34(.99)	*p*>.05
Social SEC	**3.94(1.03)**	**4.16(1.07)**	***p*<.05**	4.13(1.06)	4.05(1.07)	*p*>.05	4.06(1.05)	4.10(1.07)	*p*>.05	4.07(1.06)	4.12(1.07)	*p*>.05	4.11(1.07)	4.02(1.05)	*p*>.05
WTP	4.47(1.16)	4.57(1.09)	*p*>.05	4.51(1.12)	4.56(1.11)	*p*>.05	4.49(1.09)	4.55(1.12)	*p*>.05	**4.42(1.11)**	**4.73(1.09)**	***p*<.05**	4.57(1.12)	4.43(1.09)	*p*>.05