The effects of self-congruity and functional congruity on tourists' loyalty in theme parks

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Abstract: In this study,the structural equation model of the impact of self-congruity and functional congruity on tourism behavior was applied to the research of tourists' loyalty in theme parks for the first time.The purpose of the study is to construct and test a conceptual framework integrating self-congruity,functional congruity,tourists' loyalty in theme parks.A sample of 370 tourists was collected from the four major theme parks in Wuxi via questionnaires.SPSS 22 and AMOS 24 were employed to analyse the data.The findings indicate as follows: firstly, self-congruity positively influences functional congruity;secondly, functional congruity completely mediates the cause-effect relationship between self-congruity and tourists' loyalty in theme parks;thirdly, functional congruity positively impacts tourists' loyalty in theme parks;fourthly, self-congruity does not directly influence tourists' loyalty in theme parks.According to the findings,suggestions were made for theme park marketers and managers.This study provides a new perspective of increasing tourists'loyalty in theme parks by introducing self-congruity and functional congruity variables into the research field of tourists' loyalty in theme parks.

Keywords: Functional congruity, Self-congruity, Theme parks, Tourists' loyalty.

1. Introduction

Tourists who are loyal to a destination tend to exhibit place attachment, an increase in expenditure, an extension of stay, and word of mouth for the destination hence forming a stable source of customers,   offering a lower risk of profitability and contributing much to the competitive advantage of a destination [1, 2].

Destination loyalty has emerged as a crucial element in the studies of destination marketing and management, owing to the fierce competition among destinations and the acknowledgment of loyal tourists' value [3, 4].

The fundamental objective of tourism marketing is to cultivate tourists' loyalty [5].
Consumer loyalty has been identified as a significant determinant in the continuous expansion of theme parks [6]. Apart from evaluating a tourism destination based on its symbolic (person-like) features (as is done in self-congruity), tourists may also evaluate a destination based on its functional or utilitarian attributes (as is done in functional congruity) [7].

The importance of self-congruity and functional conguity in explaining travel behavior has become increasingly prominent [5, 8, 9]. Although the majority of earlier studies have confirmed how self-congruity affects tourists' actions [10] while several studies didn't consistently support the effects of self-congruity on tourists' intentions to visit [11] tourist satisfaction [12] intention to

recommendation [13] and attitude [14].In addition, previous research [2] has shown that, compared to self-congruity, functional congruity
is a more important construct in describing and forecasting tourists' purpose and satisfaction. Evidence, however, also suggests that self-congruity is now a more potent explanatory factor than functional congruity [2]. The reason may lie in the different tourism context. In addition, past research has focused mainly on the direct effects of self-congruity and functional congruity on tourist behavior [8, 9, 15-21] revealing that the mediating role of functional congruity has been largely ignored.

Although many earlier studies on tourism destinations have modeled the impacts of self-congruity and functional congruity with tourists' loyalty as the outcome variable [8, 16, 19, 22-24] theme parks are largely absent from this research trend. Although Fu, et al. [14] studied the indirect effect of self-congruity on loyalty towards a theme park brand. Research on the direct effect of self-congruity and the joint effects of self-congruity and functional congruity on tourists' loyalty in theme parks is presently little addressed. This study attempts to address these gaps by modeling the impacts of self-congruity and functional congruity on tourists' loyalty in theme parks, with the biasing effect of self-congruity on functional congruity.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Tourists' Loyalty

Loyalty has been discussed traditionally as consisting of three dimensions: behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty, and composite loyalty [combining attitudinal and behavioral loyalty] [11, 25, 26]. Attitudinal loyalty refers to a consumer's psychological commitment to a purchase action, such as willingness to recommend and intention to purchase, while behavioral loyalty refers to a consumer's frequency of repeat purchase. Gursoy and Joseph [27] pointed out that the attitudinal approach is more suitable for studying TL, for tourists can form a sense of loyalty to a destination even if they do not visit the place Schall [28] contended that the attitudinal component warrants increased research focus, as customer loyalty encompasses both attitudinal and emotional commitments within the hospitality sector. Behavioral loyalty emphasizes behavioral results, such as repeated patronage, which typically does not reveal the antecedents that influence customer loyalty [29]. Assessing attitudinal brand loyalty can pinpoint customers susceptible to fluctuations in their surrounding [7].Hence, attitudinal loyalty is widely adopted in tourism studies later [14]. Therefore, loyalty in this paper refers to attitude loyalty.

2.2. Self-Congruity

The first theoretical foundation of SC was based on the theory of self-concept. Self-concept is one of the important concepts in personality psychology, defined as "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object [30].Mehta [31] defined this idea more briefly as a person's perception of himself or herself. Sirgy [32] and Sirgy [33] developed a four-dimensional approach to describe self-concept (or self-image) in consumer behavior: actual self-image (how consumers see themselves, ideal self-image (how consumers would like to see themselves), social self-image (how consumers believe they are seen by significant others) and ideal social self-image (how consumers would like to be seen by significant others. Sirgy [33] defined SC as the similarity between a consumer's self-image and the image of a brand or product, and then classified it under four dimensions according to his multi-dimensional self-concept approach: actual SC (the congruence between the actual self-image and the product or brand image), ideal SC (the congruence between the ideal self-image and the product or brand image), social SC(the congruence between the social self-image and the product or brand image) and ideal social SC (the congruence between the ideal social self-image and the product or brand image).

SC theory proposes that consumers tend to prefer the products/brands they see as having similar image to their self-concept namely consumers positively evaluate the products/brands when the typical products/brands-user images match their own self-image because they consider these things as expressions of who they are Graeff [34] and Sirgy [35] . Because of this, a consumer may be more likely to choose a product or brand that matches his/her self-image rather than one that does not [6, 35]. Chon [36] was the inaugural researcher to employ SC theory in the analysis of travel and tourism. Sirgy and Su [37] formally posited that travel behavior is positively affected by SC. The positive influence of SC on cruise ships' loyalty [15] Post-visit destination loyalty [8, 21, 38-41] and brand loyalty [16, 19, 42-44] have been verified in tourism contexts. But the effect of SC on TL in theme parks is under-researched in the previous literature. The following hypothesis is hereby proposed:

H_1: Self-congruity has a positive effect on tourists' loyalty in theme parks.

2.3. Functional Congruity

Chon and Olsen [45] defined FC as the degree of alignment between a tourist's expectations regarding the functional characteristics of a destination and their perceived performance outcomes. The concept of FC pertains to the anticipated and actual functional characteristics that tourists associate with a particular destination rather than its symbolic or value-expressive traits. Therefore, the functional representation of a destination encompasses various functional characteristics such as amenities, comfort, food quality, leisure activities, cultural heritage, and the quality of natural environment provided to tourists [10]. These attributes form essential components of a destination image influencing tourist behavior [46]. The formation of customer loyalty towards a destination is influenced by FC that results from the evaluation of these functional attributes [10, 37].

Scholars found FC positively affected consumers' post-evaluations and behaviors, including TL toward cruise tourism [22] cognitive loyalty in name-brand coffee shops in Korea [16] hotel brand loyalty [19] film tourists' destination loyalty [8] destination loyalty in Shaoshan city [23]. Regarding the comparison of the effect size of SC and FC on tourism behavior, several studies have shown that FC has a greater impact on consumer behavior than SC [19, 45, 46]. However, Usakli, et al. [5] found destination SC and destination FC are approximately equally important in predicting destination attachment; Wu and Lai [8] suggested that SC has a higher impact on film tourists' destination loyalty than FC in the context of film tourism; Zhou, et al. [23] contended SC shows greater influence on destination loyalty than FC in a red destination in China. These demonstrate that the relative weights of effects of FC and SC on consumer behavior may vary according to different contexts.

As for the relationship between SC and FC, SC has a biasing effect on FC. Hung and Petrick [15] are the first to provide empirical support for the SC bias in tourism. Subsequently, most research results supported the biasing effect [17-20, 47]. Due to the biasing effect of SC on FC and the effect of FC on consumer behavior [37] SC may have an indirect effect on consumer behavior through FC. However, this indirect effect of SC has not attracted the attention of tourism and hospitality researchers except for Su and Reynolds [48], Usakli, et al. [5] and Rao, et al. [47] who hypothesized FC as a partial mediator in the cause-effect relationship between SC and hotel brand attitude, between SC and destination attachment, and between SC and TPEBI (tourist' pro-environmental behavioral intentions), respectively. Usakli, et al. [5] and Rao, et al. [47] successfully verified the argument, but Su and Reynolds [48], failed. The following hypotheses are hereby proposed:

H_2: Functional congruity has a direct and positive effect on tourists' loyalty in theme parks.

H_3: Functional Congruity has a greater direct and positive effect on tourists' loyalty in theme parks than self-congruity.

H_4: Self-congruity has a direct and positive effect on functional congruity in theme parks.

H_5: Functional-congruity mediates the cause-and-effect relationship between self-congruity and tourists' loyalty in theme parks.
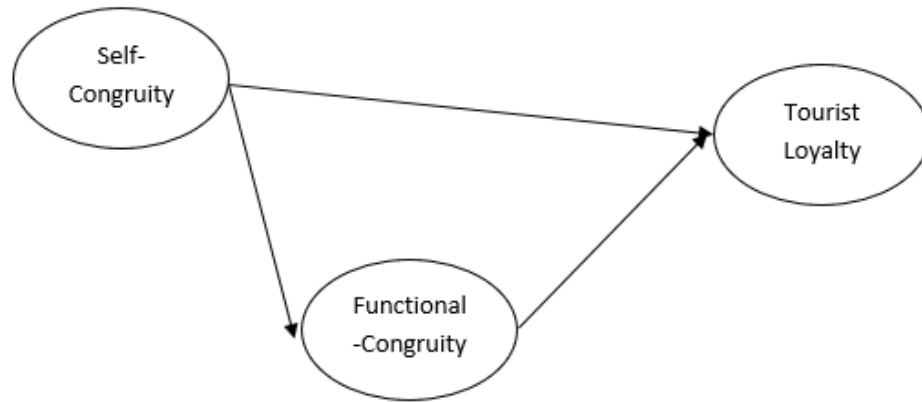
Figure 1.
The conceptual framework.

3. Research Methodology

Wuxi is one of the representative cities of theme parks in East China, which is a two-hour drive from the famous city of Shanghai in China. Due to its advantageous geographical location, Wuxi theme parks are relatively concentrated, including four principal theme parks: Wuxi Rong Chuang Park, CCTV Wuxi Location Base, Wuxi Liangshan Scenic Area, and Wuxi Niangua Bay. This study selected Wuxi theme parks as the survey context. A self-administered survey with three separate sections was used to measure the proposed conceptual framework. The first section comprises two "yes" or "no" screening questions: (1) Have you ever visited at least one of the four theme parks of Wuxi during the past twelve months? (2) Are you above 18 years of age? If the respondents answer "yes" to both questions, they will be allowed to continue with the questionnaire. Otherwise, the questionnaire would end after completion of the second question.

The second section comprises questions on three variables: SC, FC, and TL. Six measurement items (belonging to 2 sub-variables) regarding SC are derived from prior studies conducted by Boley, et al. [49] *see Table 1*. In contrast to SC, there isn't a well-established FC scale. Ten items of FC are derived in total by combining the studies of [17, 21, 50-53] and considering functional features of theme parks. Three items（intention to revisit, intention to recommend, positive evaluation）, adapted from Liu, et al. [54] are employed to measure TL in theme parks. The respondents rate using a Likert scale of 5 points. The third section focuses on the respondents' demographics (e.g., gender, age, education, and household income).

Table 1.
Measurement items of SC.

ASC Actual self-congruity
SC1 The typical visitors to this site are consistent with how I see myself.
SC2 The typical visitors reflect the type of person I am.
SC3 The typical visitors to this site are similar to me.
ISC Ideal self-congruity
SC4 The typical visitors to this site are consistent with how I would like to see myself.
SC5 The typical visitors reflect the type of person I want to be.
SC6 The typical visitor is similar to the type of person I want to be.

Source: Boley, et al. [49].

Convenience sampling techniques were applied for data collection. The online questionnaire made on the Wenjuanxing professional questionnaire collection website was distributed on WeChat and QQ, the top two popular social media platforms in China, from May 7, 2024, to August 6, 2024, with a total of 550

responses collected. After removing 180 invalid questionnaires, such as short response time (less than 100 seconds), identical answers to all questions, and inconsistent answers to similar questions, 370 valid questionnaires were used for data analysis, with an effective rate of 67.3%. The respondents' demographic profile is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Respondents' demographic profile.

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Gender	Male	135	36.49	36.49
	Female	235	63.51	100.00
Age	18~25	72	19.46	19.46
	26~30	73	19.73	39.19
	31~40	137	37.03	76.22
	41~50	67	18.11	94.32
	51~60	17	4.59	98.92
	More than 60	4	1.08	100.00
Education	Junior high school and below	11	2.97	2.97
	Senior high school/vocational school	28	7.57	10.54
	Junior college	122	32.97	43.51
	Undergraduate	175	47.30	90.81
	Graduate and above	34	9.19	100.00
Income	Below 100000 yuan	78	21.08	21.08
	100000 yuan~<200000 yuan	146	39.46	60.54
	200000 yuan~<300000 yuan	72	19.46	80.00
	300000 yuan~<500000 yuan	50	13.51	93.51
	500000 yuan~<1 million yuan	14	3.78	97.30
	1 million yuan or more	10	2.70	100.00

Table 2 indicates that the male sample represents 36.49%, while the female sample accounts for 63.51%. The age group of 31-40 years is 37.03%, then 26-30 19.73%,18-25 19.46%, 41-50 18.11%, 51-60 4.59%, 60 and above 1.08%. Undergraduate students are the largest group at 47.30%, followed by college diploma students at 32.97%, graduate students and above at 9.19%, high school/vocational school students at 7.57%, junior high school and below at 2.97%.The annual household income is mainly distributed among RMB100,000-200,000(39.46%), less than RMB100,000 (21.08%), RMB200,000-300,000(19.46%) and RMB300,000-500,000(13.51%).

3.1. Data Analysis and Hypothesis Testing Results

SPSS 22 was adopted to calculate Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients, normality, and conduct EFA.AMOS 24 was employed to conduct CFA and SEM. The preliminary reliability of quantitative variables was assessed using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The findings indicated that the alpha coefficients for SC, FC, and TL were 0.938, 0.901, and 0.880, respectively, all exceeding the critical threshold of 0.7 [44] thereby demonstrating high reliability for the three variables. Due to the value of Kurtosis and skewness of each scale item within the criteria of ± 4 and ± 2, respectively [55] the data can be accepted as a normal distribution, suitable for subsequent analysis.

3.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Due to the lack of an existing and unified standard for measuring FC, the measurement of FC in theme parks in this study combines the measurement indicators of theme park characteristic attributes from previous research, resulting in 10 measurement items. Therefore, in order to determine the core factors, identify the essential structure of FC, and reduce multicollinearity of variables, SPSS 22 EFA

method is employed for information compression and dimensionality reduction of FC [56, 57]. The computed ratio for FC in this investigation was 37 (370 samples/10 items), consistent with the para meters set out by Hair, et al. [56] for performing EFA. The KMO is 0.913, which is over the threshold of 0.6 [58] the Bartlett's sphericity test value being 0.000, which is less than the criteria of 0.05 [13] indicating that the data is suitable for factor analysis.

Table 3.
EFA results for FC.

Factors and items	Factor loading	Communality	Eigenvalues	Variance contribution rate	Cronbach's α
Factor 1（AFC）：Tourism Attraction Factor			5.304	39.782	0.897
fc2: environmental aesthetics	0.727	0.618			
fc3: project diversity	0.870	0.809			
fc4: project quality	0.813	0.812			
fc5: topicality	0.677	0.677			
fc6: service facilities	0.661	0.695			
Factor 2 (SFC)：Tourism Service Factor			0.805	36.579	0.901
fc7: service staff	0.827	0.787			
fc8: cleanliness and hygiene	0.868	0.870			
fc9: safety	0.847	0.841			

Further analysis was conducted by using the principal component extraction method, rotating with the maximum variance method (Varimax). Ultimately, two factors were extracted with two items, "Transportation (f1)" and "Price (f10)", being removed due to their low communalities. The variance explained by the two factors is 39.782% and 36.579%, cumulating 76.360%, with the items' factor loadings distributing from 0.661 to 0.870, surpassing the standard of 0.4 [59]. The commonality (variance of common factors) ranges from 0.618 to 0.870, all of which are greater than the standard of 0.4 [60]. The Cronbach's α is 0.897 and 0.901, respectively, more than 0.7. On the whole, the outcome of this factor analysis is good. In terms of the meaning represented by the two factors, the first factor includes attractions such as landscapes and amusement projects and is named Tourism Attraction Factor (AFC); the second factor involves service level and is named Tourism Service Factor (SFC) (see Table 3).

3.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

As shown in Figure 2, the CFA focuses on 5 first-order factors (ASC, ISC, AFC, SFC, TL), 2 second-order factors (SC, FC), and 17 analysis items (SC1-6, fc2-9, TL1~3), with e1~15 being residual standard load coefficients. The effective sample size for this analysis is 370, which is 10 times more than the number of analysis items, indicating a moderate sample size [61].
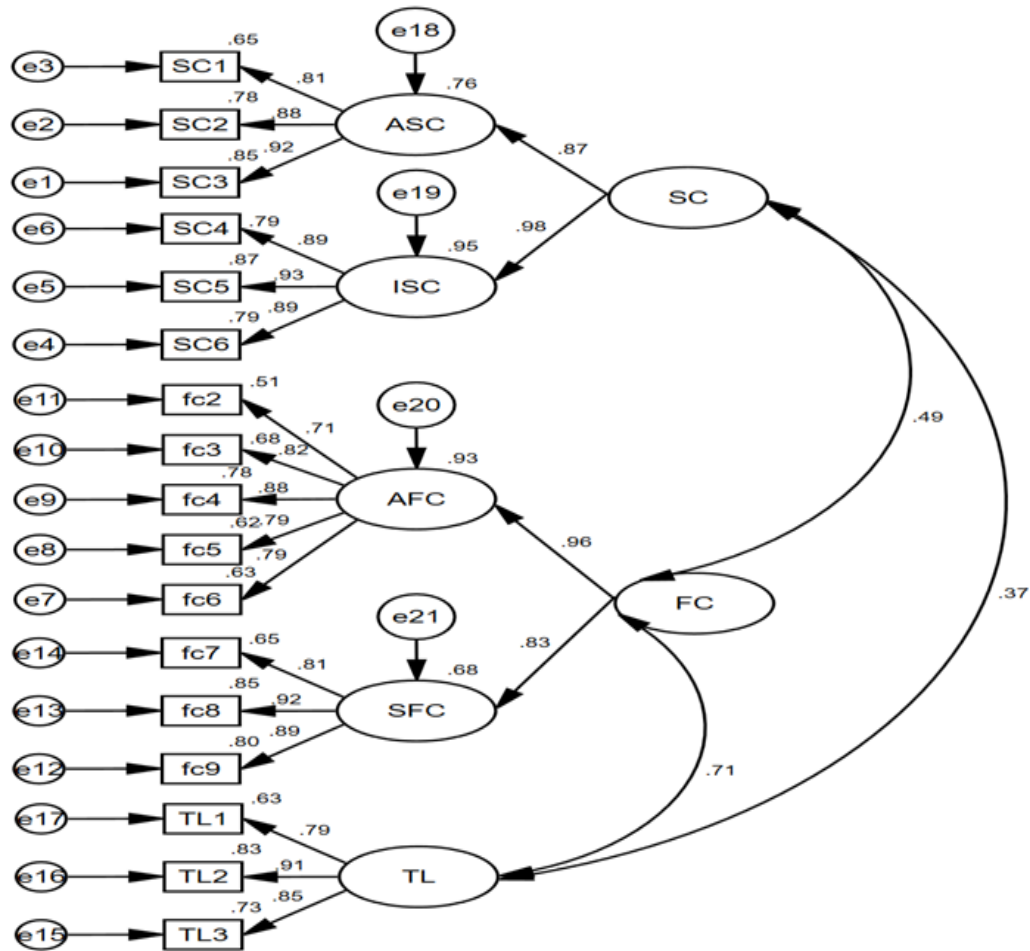
Figure 2.
Measurement Model.

Table 4.
Convergent Validity.

Path			Standardized Regression Weights	S.E.	P	CR	AVE
ASC	<---	SC	0.869			0.9209	0.8539
ISC	<---	SC	0.976	0.099	***		
AFC	<---	FC	0.963			0.8913	0.8048
SFC	<---	FC	0.826	0.068	***		
SC3	<---	ASC	0.922			0.9052	0.7615
SC2	<---	ASC	0.884	0.041	***		
SC1	<---	ASC	0.808	0.042	***		
SC6	<---	ISC	0.89			0.9313	0.8189
SC5	<---	ISC	0.934	0.039	***		
SC4	<---	ISC	0.89	0.038	***		
fc6	<---	AFC	0.793			0.8991	0.6418
fc5	<---	AFC	0.786	0.054	***		
fc4	<---	AFC	0.882	0.062	***		
fc3	<---	AFC	0.823	0.063	***		
fc2	<---	AFC	0.712	0.059	***		
fc9	<---	SFC	0.893			0.9074	0.7663
fc8	<---	SFC	0.922	0.04	***		
fc7	<---	SFC	0.807	0.051	***		
TL3	<---	TL	0.853			0.8899	0.7299
TL2	<---	TL	0.912	0.056	***		
TL1	<---	TL	0.794	0.067	***		

Note: ***P<0.001.

From Table 4, it can be seen that from the perspective of measurement relationship, the calculation of composite reliability (CR) demonstrated sufficient internal consistency of the items, the reliability of each construct exceeding 0.70. The absolute values of standardized regression weights are all greater than the threshold 0.6 [62] the p-value is significant (less than 0.001), the AVE values corresponding to the 7 factors (first-order and second-order) all exceed the 0.5 guideline [63] the CR values are all greater than the standard of 0.7 [64] hence indicating that the data analyzed in this study has good convergent validity.

Table 5.
Discriminant Validity.

Variable	FC	SC	TL
FC	0.897		
SC	0.491**	0.924	
TL	0.71**	0.37**	0.854
AVE	0.8048	0.8539	0.7299

Note: **P<0.01.

Table 5 indicates that the AVE square root value for FCV, SC, TL is 0.897,0.924,0.854 respectively, exceeding the maximum absolute value of the inter-factor correlation coefficient 0.71,0.491,0.71 correspondingly, hence demonstrating their robust discriminant validity [65].

Table 6.
Model Fit Indicators.

Common Indicators	χ^2/df	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	CFI	NFI	TLI
Threshold	<3	>0.9	<0.08	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Value	2.266	0.927	0.059	0.028	0.972	0.952	0.966

The threshold for χ^2/df was established at 3 [66]. Values for TLI, CFI, NFI, and GFI exceeding 0.90 signify an acceptable model fit [64, 67, 68]. An RMSEA value below 0.08 is advised [69, 70] .RMR was acceptable when less than 0.08 [55, 71, 72]. Table 6 shows that all fitting indicators of the overall model have reached the threshold, indicating that the model fits well with the data.

3.4. Hypothesis Testing
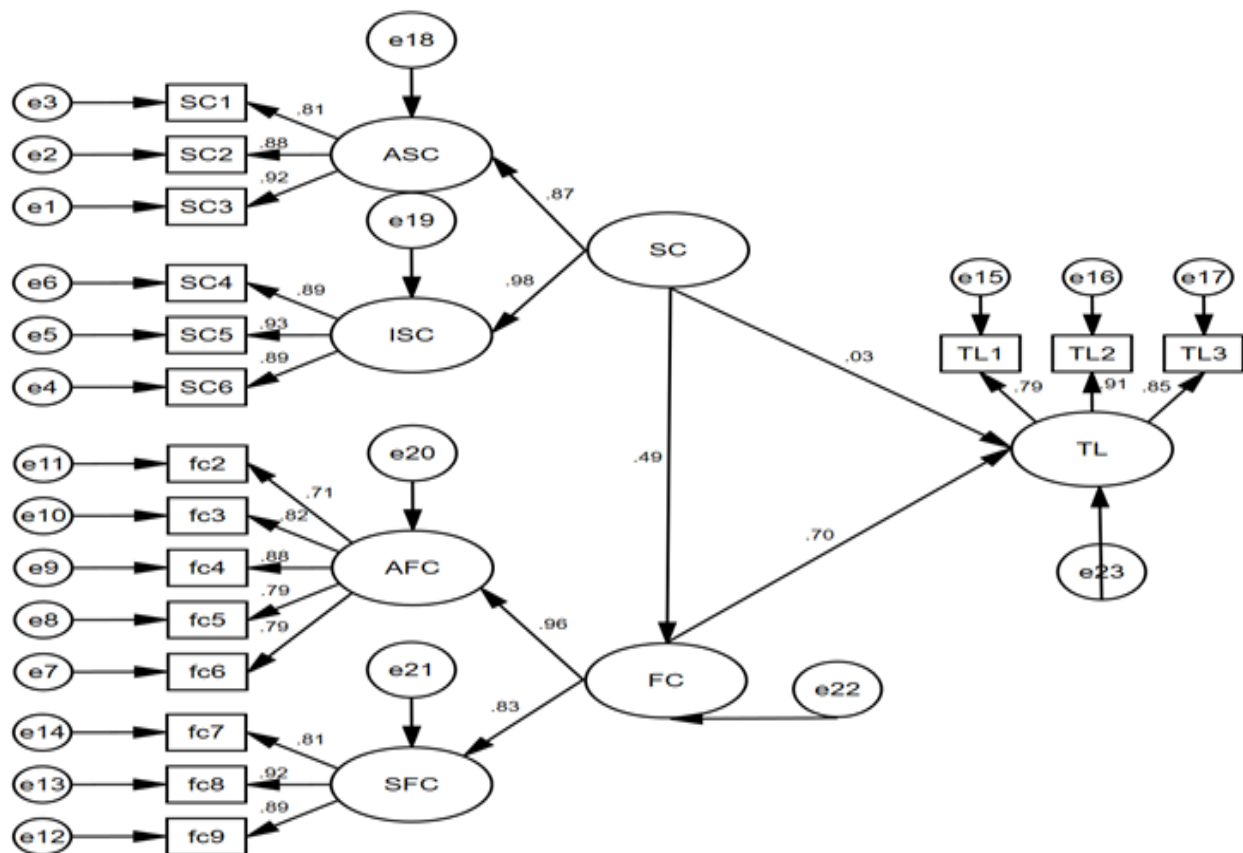
Figure 3.
SEM Model Diagram.

Using AMOS 24, the maximum likelihood method was employed to estimate the standardized path coefficients and squared multiple correlations. The path relationship graph is shown in Figure 3, where the fitting indicators are shown in Table 7. χ^2/df is 2.266, GFI is 0.927, RMSEA is 0.059, RMR is 0.028, CFI is 0.972, NFI is 0.952, and TLI is 0.966. All fitting indices fall inside the acceptable range, indicating that the structural equation model has good fitting results.

Table 7.
Model Fit Indicators.

Common Indicators	χ2/df	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	CFI	NFI	TLI
Threshold	<3	>0.9	<0.08	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Value	2.266	0.927	0.059	0.028	0.972	0.952	0.966

Table 8.
Path Hypotheses Test Results.

Path Relationship			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
FC	<---	SC	0.491	0.042	8.221	***
TL	<---	SC	0.028	0.063	0.514	0.607
TL	<---	FC	0.696	0.121	9.374	***

Note: ***P<0.001.

The path relationship results of the structural equation are presented in Table 8. Among them, SC has a significant positive impact on FC, with an impact coefficient of 0.491 and a P value less than 0.001. Therefore, *H4* is supported. R2 (Squared Multiple Relationships) equals 0.241, indicating that SC can explain 24.1% of the variation in FC. FC has a significant positive impact on TL in theme parks, with an impact coefficient of 0.696 and a P-value less than 0.001, thus supporting hypothesis *H2*. SC has no significant effect on TL in theme parks; therefore, *H1* is rejected, and *H3* is accepted.SC and FC can explain a 50.4% decrease in TL in theme parks.

3.5. Mediation Effect Test

The bootstrapping approach of AMOS 24 was employed to investigate the mediating effect, using 2000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval [73-75]. Table 9 shows that the 95% confidence interval calculated by Bootstrap sampling for the indirect effect of SC on TL in theme parks is [0.254, 0.484], excluding 0, indicating a significant indirect effect with a value of 0.342. The 95% confidence interval calculated by Bootstrap sampling for the direct effect of SC on TL in theme parks is [-0.133, 0.174], including 0, indicating that the direct effect is not significant and that the direct effect of SC on TL in theme parks is completely mediated by FC, supporting hypothesis H5 [73].

Table 9.
Bootstrapping Analysis.

Path	Effects	Effect Value	Bias-corrected 95% CI		Result
			Lower	Upper	
SC→FC→TL	Total Effects	0.370	0.236	0.489	Complete Mediation
	Direct Effects	0.028	-0.133	0.174	
	Indirect Effects	0.342	0.254	0.484	

4. Conclusions and Implications

Firstly, SC has a direct positive impact on FC. This confirms the conclusions drawn by relevant scholars in some tourism contexts regarding the relationship between the two variables [5, 16-20]. The SC of theme parks can have a biased effect on FC. The representation of symbolic value in theme parks can affect tourists' perception of the functional attributes of theme parks. The higher the degree of SC, the greater the positive impact on the perception of functional attributes, and the higher the degree of congruity with the ideal functional attributes. Conversely, the lower the degree of SC, the lower the degree of congruity with the ideal functional attributes. In addition, SC in this study explains a 24.1% variation in FC, which is higher than the study by Hung and Petrick [15] on cruise tourism scenarios (only 2.4%) and Zhou, et al. [23] study on the red tourism destination (21.6%). The reason may be related to the fact that the effect of SC on TL in theme parks is completely mediated by FC, which provides a new reference for subsequent research.

Secondly, FC plays a mediating role in the relationship between SC and TL in theme parks. This type of mediation research, apart from Usakli, et al. [5] and Rao, et al. [47] has been rarely mentioned in previous literature. The conclusion of this study indicates that SC has an indirect effect on TL in theme parks through FC. Its mechanism of action is that the congruity between self-concept and theme park image will prompt visitors to form an initial positive attitude, which in turn positively affects their evaluation of the theme park's functional image and ultimately has a positive impact on loyalty.SC and FC can jointly explain a 50.4% variation in TL in theme parks, which is also higher than the study by Hung and Petrick [15] (13.3%), demonstrating the effectiveness of SC and FC in explaining TL in theme parks.

Thirdly, FC has a direct positive impact on TL in theme parks. The closer the functional attributes of theme park products and service quality are to the ideal level of tourists, the higher the loyalty of tourists. For theme parks, the functional components that affect TL are divided into tourism attraction factors and tourism service factors. The tourism attraction factor includes elements such as environmental aesthetics, amusement project diversity, amusement project quality, thematic relevance, and service amenities. The tourism service factor includes elements such as service personnel, cleanliness and hygiene, and safety. Transportation and price elements do not have a significant impact on TL. The loyalty of theme park tourists mainly depends on the inherent attraction and service level of the theme park itself. Convenient transportation, proximity, and discounted prices may stimulate tourists to visit again. Nevertheless, they do not inherently reflect the appeal and quality of service of the theme park, nor do they affect TL.

Fourthly, FC has a greater direct and positive effect on TL in theme parks than SC, which confirms the empirical results of Ahn, et al. [46] and Sop and Kozak [19]. This indicates that although the concept of SC may be related to consumption in the context of theme parks, a traditional important factor in explaining TL, is still the most valued factor by visitors. This may be because theme parks are tourism products dominated by functional attributes, unlike highly symbolic landscapes such as movie tourism destinations and red tourism destinations that the impact of SC in movie tourism destinations and red tourism destinations is greater than that of FC [8, 21].

Fifthly, SC has not had a direct effect on TL in theme parks, which is similar to the research conclusion of Ahn, et al. [46]. There are mainly two reasons for this: firstly, tourists tend to evaluate tourist destinations based on functional attributes, because functional attributes are specific and visible from which tourists expect immediate satisfaction of their practically functional and basically psychological needs (such as sensation seeking, appreciation of the beauty, relaxation, escapism, etc.) while SC is a kind of abstract need that is difficult to express [46]. Secondly, according to Ahn, et al. [46] Wuxi theme parks used in this study may not contain sufficient information to evoke the symbolic meaning of the theme park.

4.1. Managerial Implications

Based on the above research results, it can be concluded that SC has a direct positive effect on FC and has an indirect effect on TL in theme parks through FC. Therefore, it can be started from the perspective of improving tourists' SC to strengthen the management and marketing of theme parks and enhance the loyalty of theme park tourists. In terms of market positioning, theme park marketers should understand the self-image and personality of the tourism target market, and maintain, strengthen, or enhance the self-image and personality of tourists by shaping a symbolic image (emotional image, brand personality, or typical tourist image) of the theme park that is consistent with them.

With respect to tourism product design, it is necessary to create themed products that focus on overall and systematic aspects, covering experiential elements such as organizational culture, service atmosphere, employees, and interactive activities. This approach aims to enrich tourists' experiences, establish connections between theme parks and tourists' self-concepts, and enhance SC. With regard to marketing communication, it is necessary to continuously convey the symbolic image of the theme park through different combinations of promotional elements (TV commercials, events, spokespersons, social

media, etc.). It is necessary to evaluate tourist feedback and comments on online and offline platforms, understand the image and personality of the theme park in the eyes of tourists, collect adjectives related to image and personality, and identify strengths or weaknesses related to the theme park. For example, if a theme park is associated with positive adjectives, marketers should ensure that these positive adjectives are presented in marketing materials. If negative adjectives appear, marketers can break these negative stereotypes in tourists' minds by providing marketing information that deconstructs these stereotypes. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), SC is expected to initially occur as a result of peripheral route persuasion and affect central route persuasion that is FC (Kang et al., 2013). According to Vinson, Scott, et al. [76] persuasion through a peripheral route of SC is short-lived and requires constant reminders to visitors about the connection between theme park brand image and self-image. Continuous reminders may be enough to temporarily change tourists' attitudes.

The satisfaction of functional attributes is an important prerequisite and carrier for the loyalty of theme park tourists. Theme parks should continuously promote quality improvement and innovation to meet the functional image expectations of tourists. Based on the concept of theme park FC, the focus is on the greening and beautification of the environment, the quality, diversity and continuous innovation of entertainment and participation activities, the creation of theme atmosphere, the improvement of facilities, the enhancement of employee image and service quality, thereby continuously improving the reception level and quality of the theme park.

4.2. Research Contributions

This study conducted an empirical analysis on the relationship among SC, FC, and TL in theme parks. The main contributions are as follows: Firstly, for the first time, the structural equation model of the impact of SC and FC on tourism behavior was applied to the study of tourists' loyalty in theme parks. The research determines that SC positively influences FC, while SC does not directly affect TL in theme parks. FC has a direct positive effect on TL in theme parks. The research has expanded the application field of SC and FC theories and has certain reference significance for theme park management and marketing. Secondly, the complete mediating effect of FC on the relationship between SC and TL in theme parks was discovered. The indirect effect of SC and the mediating effect of FC have not caught the attention of tourism and hotel researchers. Only Su and Reynolds [48], Usakli, et al. [5] and Rao, et al. [47] proposed research hypotheses, but Su and Reynolds [48] could not find evidence to support this argument. Usakli, et al. [5] and Rao, et al. [47] confirmed the partial mediating effect of FC. But this study concludes that FC completely mediates the effect of SC on TL in theme parks. This suggests that the specific relationships among SC, FC, and TL may vary according to different tourism contexts.

4.3. Research Limitations and Prospects

The data for this study were collected through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. Therefore, the current sample may not represent all visitors to the four principal theme parks in Wuxi. The present research results exhibit restricted generalizability, necessitating future investigations to employ random sampling techniques to establish a larger sample size. In addition, the present research results are only applicable to the four principal theme parks in Wuxi, and future research can be expanded to other theme parks to obtain more generalized conclusions. The questionnaire question options use the Likert 5-point scale method, which may not sensitively reflect the true feelings of tourists. In the future, it may be modified to a 7-point Likert scale.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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