

Unpacking the role of self-congruence, attendee engagement and emotional attachment in cultural events

Unpacking the
role of self-
congruence

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between self-congruence and attendee engagement in explaining emotional attachment in the context of cultural events.

Design/methodology/approach – Structural equation modelling with partial least squares analysis has been applied. Data were collected from 421 respondents through an onsite survey during the Yi Peng and Loy Krathong festive week in Thailand.

Findings – The findings revealed that self-congruence (i.e. actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence) has a positive influence on attendee engagement. When attendees' actual self and ideal self-match with the event image, they are more likely to actively engage in the event activities.

Originality/value – The findings offer insights into one type of events, the cultural event, which is a common event in Thailand. This study is also one among a handful works that investigates the moderating role of perceived crowding on the relationship between attendees' actual and ideal self-congruence and engagement with the event. Although the findings do not suggest a significant moderating effect, this study provides preliminary insight into how perceived crowding shapes the perception of tourists in a cultural event context.

Keywords Self-congruence, Attendee engagement, Emotional attachment, Cultural event, Thailand

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The significance of the engagement phenomenon is increasingly represented in hospitality/tourism literature and continues to capture attention from both academics and industry professionals (So *et al.*, 2016a, b), mainly due to its potential to influence consumer behaviour (Dwivedi, 2015). According to So *et al.* (2020), investigating the role of engagement on tourist attitudes and experiences also contributes to a better understanding of tourist's post-purchase behaviours. Although the concept of engagement has gained much attention in the recent literature, much remains to be understood about the construct, which sometimes requires a context-specific approach (Chen and Rahman, 2018; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018). Previous tourism studies have been dedicated to providing insightful knowledge about the antecedents and consequences of tourist engagement (So *et al.*, 2014, 2016a, b). However, research that incorporates the concept of engagement to investigate issues in the event industry is still lacking. Engagement dimensions in existing studies also rely on a particular context, such as attractions (Taheri *et al.*, 2014), tourism organisations (Romero, 2018) and sporting events (Cordina *et al.*, 2019). Scholars demand further investigation that extends the understanding of engagement in an unexplored a context to examine the antecedents and predictive power of the construct (So *et al.*, 2014; Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). This also includes the



need for empirical investigation of attendee engagement and its antecedents as well as consequences in the context of a special event. Studies on attendee engagement when visiting special events remain scarce (Cordina *et al.*, 2019; Hao, 2020). This paucity is in contrast with the notion in tourism literature that engagement is a vital factor that contributes to the behaviour and attitude of individuals. Therefore, this study adopts the engagement construct to examine unexplored aspects to fill the existing gap in a special event literature.

According to Getz and Page (2016), the nature of special events is temporal and spatial liminality. Specifically, special events offer extraordinary time for friend and family bonding, people connection, unusual discovery and memorable experiences that stand in stark contrast to normal life (Brown and Sharpley, 2019). Attendees who actively interact with the special events are likely to have unique experiences based on the event offerings, such as cultural exhibition, lifestyle of people and local identity (Cetin and Walls, 2016; Yolal *et al.*, 2016). Particularly, when attendees actively engage with special event activities, they tend to form both psychological and behavioural attendee–event connection. As such, engagement in the special event context can be defined as an attendee’s active participation in a special event, including cultural event as manifested in the affective, cognitive and behavioural responses to the event (Meeprom, 2019).

Previous studies have generally emphasised the concept of engagement as a predictor of customer satisfaction, loyalty and value (Harrigan *et al.*, 2017; Romero, 2017; So *et al.*, 2016b). Although research has led to an increasingly developed understanding of engagement, examining and verifying the concept should be continued by presenting alternative variables to enhance their reliability and predictive validity in a variety of contexts, such as special events. In festivals and similar events, like in other study settings (e.g. Brodie *et al.* (2013) for brand study and Li *et al.* (2020) for tourism social media), engagement is a vital aspect that enhances emotional bonds between event attendees and the events. In short, an engaged attendee is more likely to have a strong emotional response toward an event, such as love or excitement.

Although emotional attachment has been proposed to have a significant relationship with engagement (Li *et al.*, 2020), the causal connections between the two concepts have rarely been corroborated in the context of special events. Research on special events mostly focuses on attendee motivation as a key predictor of emotional attachment, which in turn affects event loyalty (Kirkup and Sutherland, 2017; Meeprom and Dansiri, 2021). According to Trail *et al.* (2003), attendee motivation primarily considers needs and wants that can be satisfied through the actual consumption of a special event. However, attendee engagement with a special event can also be driven towards consumption of the special events (Kaplanidou *et al.*, 2012). In this sense, engagement reflects an attendee interaction with the event offerings, resulting in increasing strong attendees–event attachment (Kaplanidou *et al.*, 2012; Prayag *et al.*, 2020).

Self-congruence is one of the vital concepts representing how individuals consider themselves and is highly beneficial for analysing tourist preference and behaviour (Sirgy and Su, 2000). In the tourism industry, self-congruence can be conceptualised as a key driver of destination engagement. For example, Chen *et al.* (2020) found a relationship between self-congruence and destination brand engagement. When a tourist’s self-concept is in line with the concept of a destination, they are more likely to engage in relational behaviours, resulting in favourable emotions and a sense of belonging to the destination. If an event attendee recognises that the event’s image matches their self-concept, the symbolic self is bound, thereby developing favourable attitudes towards the event. Also, the role of perceived crowding has been explored in previous event studies (see e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2016; Lee and Graefe, 2003). However, the impact of crowding on event attendee’s perception/attitude may vary significantly according to the type of event they attend (Zehrer and Raich, 2016). As such, whether event attendees who possess a different level of perceived crowding have similar or dissimilar attitudes towards special events, particularly with a cultural type, is unclear.

To address this gap in research, our study aims to develop an integrative model to examine the relationship between self-congruence and attendee engagement in explaining emotional attachment from the perspective of an attendee-centred driver. This study also examines the role of perceived crowding to gain a better understanding of how different levels can moderate the emotional response of attendees.

In summary, this research provides a theoretical insight, particularly into the area of the cultural event. By examining the relationship among attendees' actual and ideal self-congruence, engagement and emotional attachment using a partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) approach, this work ascertains that an attendee can form emotional attachment through their engagement with the event, thereby strengthening the theoretical foundation in the event study. In addition to the research implication, the results provide practical scope for event organisers and destination management organisations (DMO) to control the quality of the event services and to highlight the areas where the event image can be enhanced to drive attendee engagement with the event activities.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 *The role of self-congruence*

Self-congruence is defined as the degree of match or mismatch between a product/service image and a customer's self-image (Sirgy and Su, 2000) and has been broadly adopted in various areas of service marketing and tourism literature. According to Sirgy *et al.* (1997), the self-image congruence concept includes four different dimensions, namely, actual self-image, which refers to how a person actually sees himself/herself; ideal self-image, which refers to how people would like to be seen; social self-image, which refers to how a person presents himself/herself to others; and social ideal self-image, which refers to how a person would like others to perceive himself/herself (Kressmann *et al.*, 2006; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Prior studies generally examine self-congruence in two different streams: pre-consumption process and post-consumption evaluation (Hosany and Martin, 2012). While the first stream mostly adopts self-congruence to predict customers' purchase intentions (Coward *et al.*, 2008), product preferences (Jamal and Al-Marri, 2007) and product choice (Ahn *et al.*, 2013), the second focuses on the relationship between self-congruence and consumers' post-consumption evaluations, such as perceived quality, satisfaction and brand loyalty (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2020; Hosany and Martin, 2012; Kressmann *et al.*, 2006; Pratt and Sparks, 2014). The notion of self-congruence has also been investigated in the lodging industry; customers tend to be more satisfied with the hotel when they perceive greater levels of self-image congruence (Back, 2005). Similar findings were found in Jamal and Goode's (2001) study: consumers who perceived high levels of image congruence were likely to be more satisfied than those with low levels of image congruence.

Although previous research has demonstrated that self-image congruence is a useful approach in understanding pre- and post-consumption evaluation in hospitality and tourism, few post-consumption variables (i.e. satisfaction, perceived service quality and loyalty) have been examined. In particular, only a handful of studies have investigated the role of self-congruence in driving customer engagement in a special event context. The greater the match between the attendee's self-image and the presented image of a festival or similar special event, the greater the likelihood an attendee will have a positive emotional response or a sense of belonging. Typically, special events contain many leisure and recreational activities, such as performances and learning opportunities. Therefore, the event attendees can enhance their self-image congruence by engaging the event offering.

2.2 *The concept of engagement in a special event setting*

The concept of engagement has increasingly received attention from academics and practitioners in various areas, such as service marketing (e.g. So *et al.*, 2016a, b) and tourism

(e.g., [Romero, 2018](#)) in recent years. From a marketing point of view, engagement is embedded as consumers' interaction and co-creative experiences ([Brodie et al., 2013](#); [Van Doorn et al., 2010](#)). Scholars also view engagement as a psychological perspective, given that it can transfer post-decision to positive feelings about a chosen product ([Avnet and Higgins, 2006](#)). According to [Brodie et al. \(2013\)](#), engagement is recognised as a combination of psychological and behavioural aspects. [Brodie et al. \(2013\)](#) also claim that engagement with a brand or service can create a customer-brand connection, where customers are motivated to interact with the focal brand.

In the review of hospitality and tourism literature, the majority of engagement studies have employed a multidimensional approach, encompassing some form of affection, cognition and behaviour perspectives ([Dwivedi, 2015](#); [Hollebeek, 2013](#)). [So et al. \(2016a, b\)](#) developed and established a conceptualisation of customer engagement in the context of hospitality and tourism, which incorporates five components: identification, attention, enthusiasm, interaction and absorption ([Harrigan et al., 2017](#); [Romero, 2018](#); [So et al., 2016a, b](#)). Given the multifaceted construct of tourist engagement, scholars are increasingly investigating the role of engagement in the hospitality and tourism industries. For example, [So et al. \(2016a, b\)](#) adopted multidimensional constructs of engagement to predict brand evaluation, brand trust and brand loyalty of tourism firms. [Romero \(2018\)](#) examined the drivers of tourist engagement and how engagement is formed in the context of tourism organisations. [Taheri et al. \(2014\)](#) developed a measurement to assess tourists' level of engagement with attractions. Also, [Harrigan et al. \(2018\)](#) claim that engagement is a customer's personal connection to a brand as manifested in cognitive, affective and behavioural actions with tourism brands. Building upon [Harrigan et al.'s \(2018\)](#) idea of customer engagement, this study posits that engagement in a cultural event context can be created through attendee connection.

In the tourism literature, most research has operationalised self-congruence based on two self-concept elements: actual and ideal self-congruence ([Ahn et al., 2013](#); [Chen et al., 2020](#); [Hosany and Martin, 2012](#)). Attendees are motivated to attend or engage in a special event (e.g. cultural event) if the event's image is consistent with their actual self-congruence. This is because each attendee possesses his/her own self-concept about value, preference and lifestyle. In the case of a cultural event, when the image of a certain event is congruent with the actual self-image of an attendee, he/she feels more secured and protected. Attendees prefer brands or events whose characteristics are close to their self-image because they feel comfortable when attending the event ([Sirgy and Su, 2000](#)). However, a special event whose characteristics tend to be contrary to the attendee's actual self tends to be ignored. In terms of ideal self-congruence, attendees tend to visit or attend a special event in which the event image can be integrated into their ideal self-image. When the ideal self and the image of the special event are harmonised, event attendees are likely to attain self-esteem. For this reason, the two components of self-congruence can thus be considered a favourable evaluation of engagement in collateral aspects of the service brand reputation.

Special events, including cultural ones, enable a varying degree of attendee engagement, ranging from passive visitors to active attendees. The nature of a special event is related to the attendee's interest in cognitive (e.g. increased knowledge), affective (e.g. enjoyment and enthusiasm) and behavioural reactions (tourist-to-tourist communication). Attendee engagement in a cultural event context may be realised when they have participated in event activities. Consistent with the work of [Chen and Rahman \(2018\)](#), tourists with high levels of engagement could create a higher level of tourism experience during their vacations. [Stokburger-Sauer \(2011\)](#) also found brand-self-congruity to be a significant driver of tourist behaviour. Building upon self-congruence theory, this study proposes that a cultural event contains a variety of leisure and recreational activities, such as light and sound performances and learning opportunities, as well as other forms of entertainment and relaxation in the

event's context. Attendees with higher perceptions of event congruence are more likely to have higher levels of interaction intensity and higher levels of attendee engagement with the cultural event. Based on the literature review, this study proposes:

- H1. Actual self-congruence has a positive effect on attendee engagement in a cultural event.
- H2. Ideal self-congruence has a positive effect on attendee engagement in a cultural event.

2.3 Emotional attachment

Emotion is considered one of the critical components that fosters people to connect to a focal product and service. More specifically, when the strength of customer attachment increases, customers are more likely to create favourable relationships with brands (Berry, 2000; Brocato *et al.*, 2015). Attachment is also recognised as an emotion-laden bond between a person and a specific object, which has been rooted in a psychological perspective (Bowlby, 1979). Therefore, emotional attachment reflects a mental state that connects people with a specific object and involves feelings towards the object (Berry, 2000).

The concept of emotional attachment was originally grounded in psychology literature (Bowlby, 1979); however, it has increasingly been used in service and destination marketing to investigate customers' love, affection, passion and connection (Ladhari *et al.*, 2020; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Park and MacInnis (2006) claim that the measurement of emotional attachment can provide a stronger construct of customer behaviours and may be explained as a proxy for customer-brand relationship strength. However, prior research on service marketing and tourism literature shows that a customer/attendee post-consumption evaluation, such as satisfaction, service quality and perceived value, may not be sufficient to build a long-term customer relationship with firms (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Vlachos Pavlos *et al.*, 2010; Yim *et al.*, 2008). Specifically, satisfaction and service quality may stem from merely a few consumption experiences, whereas emotional attachment needs a customer history between the customer and a certain object (e.g. brands, services and special events) (Belk, 1988; Vlachos Pavlos *et al.*, 2010).

Building upon attachment theory, personal engagement with a focal object, consumption related to absorption, familiarity, attention, identification and interaction would contribute to greater personalised symbolic meanings, which subsequently affect a customer's emotional bond with a product offering (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Riley *et al.*, 1998). Yet research capturing the role of engagement in driving emotional attachment remains limited, particularly regarding contexts such as cultural events. To this end, understanding the attendee's engagement with cultural event forces for emotional attachment is a critical issue that would be beneficial to the advancement of special event literature. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H3. Attendee engagement with the cultural event positively impacts emotional attachment to the event.

2.4 The moderating role of crowding perception

The concept of perceived crowding refers to a subjective evaluation that occurs when the demand from the number of people and objects within a given environment (Eroglu *et al.*, 2005). According to Machleit *et al.* (2000), perceived crowding could restrict and interfere with an individual's goals and activities, which in turn affects the customer's positive/negative evaluation of that space's atmosphere. On the basis of the crowding perception literature, density has been conceptualised from two perspectives: perceived human crowding and

perceived spatial crowding (Kim *et al.*, 2016; Machleit *et al.*, 1994). Perceived human crowding reflects the number of people as well as the social interaction in a given area, whereas spatial crowding refers to a restricted physical movement based on the amount of physical space available to an individual within a given environment (Eroglu *et al.*, 2005; Machleit *et al.*, 2000). In a special event setting, a primary goal of event organisers is to motivate the optimum number of attendees to attend the events. Thus, perceived crowding as a function of a special event offering can be a significant factor in attendee attitude, response to the event and the level of event interaction (Kim *et al.*, 2016; Mowen *et al.*, 2003).

Perceived crowding may depend on personal characteristics, motivation, expectations, preferences and experiences, which are perception of and tolerance towards desist situations. Specifically, perceived crowding tends to improve customer experience in a hedonic context, such as a special event or festival (Pons *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, perceived crowding may increase the level of pleasant experiences or trigger negative outcomes such as dissatisfaction (Pons *et al.*, 2006). Based on this logic, attendees may perceive an image of themselves and have a feeling of personal competence in high or low crowding situations. Therefore, higher perceived crowding may result in overloading and disengagement with event offerings and generate negative responses towards the event performance. Attendees searching for enjoyable festival activities might not appreciate a crowded event environment that could result in a reduced level of engagement. Building upon the concept of self-congruence, perceived crowding also leads to a loss of perceived control, such as self-concept. Furthermore, a high level of perceived crowding could result in an unwarranted invasion of privacy, while a decreased perceived crowding favours a person who seeks social interaction (Baker and Wakefield, 2012). Based on the aforementioned literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4a.* Attendees' perception of crowding moderates the relationship between actual self-congruence and attendee engagement with a cultural event.
- H4b.* Attendees' perception of crowding moderates the relationship between ideal self-congruence and attendee engagement with a cultural event.

3. Methods

3.1 Data collection and measures

This study aims to examine the antecedents and consequences of attendee engagement in a cultural event by considering the concepts of self-congruence and emotional attachment. Target respondents were international visitors attending one of two cultural events in Chiang Mai, Thailand: the Yi Peng Lantern Festival and the Loy Krathong Festival. These two cultural events are considered important events, attracting more than 100,000 visitors to Chiang Mai and contributing approximately US\$16.6 million to the local economy (Thansettakij, 2019). The events provide various cultural activities that can trace back into Thai ancient history, including worship rituals, decoration contests, bazaars, traditional Thai dance shows, live music and handicraft sessions. Fireworks, food vendors and local souvenirs can also be expected at the events. Given the popularity and important representation of the Yi Peng Lantern Festival and the Loy Krathong Festival to Thai culture, this study selected these two events as representatives for cultural events to study the effect of self-congruence and attendee engagement on emotional attachment.

A survey was carried out in November 2020 during the festival period. Given that the data collection was performed during the COVID-19 pandemic, most survey respondents were foreigners living and working in Thailand. According to TAT (2020), there are approximately 2.5 million expatriates in Thailand in 2020, and tourism campaigns such as "Expat Travel

Bonus” have been launched to attract this target to domestic destinations. Thus, data obtained in this study largely rely on this group of visitors as well as domestic tourists. Considering the unknown population of event attendees, a convenience sampling method was employed to identify the target respondents. Postgraduate students were employed to assist with the distribution of the questionnaire. A briefing session was provided for the field researchers to explain the research objective and background. To ensure that the attendees had time to completely experience the festival, the survey was conducted from late afternoon until night. Initially, potential respondents were gently approached and asked about their experience and engagement level with the events. Only attendees who actively interacted with the event activities (e.g. participated in main event ceremonies, floated Kratong and lanterns, wore local costumes, and joined the dancing parade) were requested to participate in the survey. A small incentive (an elephant key chain) was offered to participants in the study, resulting in a 70% response rate. A total of 438 responses were collected from the target sample, of which 17 were disregarded due to major missing values. Consequently, 421 responses were kept for statistical analysis.

Demographic information of the respondents was also gathered (Table 1). Most of the respondents (79.8%) were first-time visitors. The gender ratio was 58% female and 42% male. In terms of educational level, 31.4% of participants had attained a postgraduate degree, followed by those who had attained an undergraduate degree (30.2%), diploma (18.6%) and high school diploma (20%). For country of residence, 41.6% of the respondents were from Europe, followed by those from North America (15.4%), Australia (7.8%), China (4.8%) and local Thai residents (29.2%). Around half of the respondents (50.3%) spent two to three hours at Yi Peng and Loy Krathong Festivals.

For this study, self-congruence (actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence) was measured based on a subset of scales adapted from Sirgy *et al.* (1997) and Malär *et al.* (2011). The attendee engagement was operationalised as one common construct using the second-order of five formative dimensions (enthusiasm, interaction, absorption, attention and identification) adapted from (So *et al.*, 2016a, b). Perception of crowding was adapted from Kim *et al.* (2016). The items of emotional attachment were built on the studies by Park *et al.* (2010). All measures were modified to suit the context of special events. An expert panel

Profile category		Frequency	Percentage
Type of visitors	First visit	336	79.8
	Repeat visit	85	20.2
Gender	Male	178	42.3
	Female	243	57.7
Education	High school	84	20.0
	Associate degree	78	18.5
	Undergraduate degree	127	30.1
	Postgraduate or above	132	31.4
Visitor nationality	European countries	175	41.6
	North American	65	15.4
	Australian	33	7.8
	Chinese	20	4.8
	Russian	5	1.2
	Thai	123	29.2
Spending hours at the event	1 or below	37	8.3
	2–3	212	50.3
	4–5	126	29.9
	More than 5	46	10.9

Table 1.
Profile of the
respondents

consisting of destination marketing scholars and event organisers also evaluated the generated items. The experts were requested to provide feedback on the clarity and relevance of the items and to offer recommendations for improving the content validity of the measures (Fakfare and Lee, 2019; Fakfare *et al.*, 2020; Koh *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, five items of self-congruence, eighteen items of visitor engagement, three items of perception of crowding and three items of emotional attachment were included in the questionnaire. This study adopted a seven-point Likert-type rating scale, with 1 set as “completely disagree”, 4 set as “neutral”, and 7 set as “strongly agree”.

3.2 Data analysis

This work adopted PLS-SEM, with assistance from ADANCO 2.2 (Dijkstra and Henseler, 2015) to evaluate the measurement and the structural models. PLS-SEM has many advantages, including an ability to handle formative and reflective models at the same time (Hair *et al.*, 2017) and manipulate the non-normal distribution of data (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). As stated by do Valle and Assaker (2016, p. 701), the relationship for reflective constructs “progresses from the construct to the indicators, suggesting that indicators are correlated”, whereas the “relationship for formative models progresses from the indicators to the construct, suggesting that indicators used to measure the construct are not correlated and thus contribute differently to forming their underlying construct”. In this research, two reflective constructs (actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence) – one second-order formative construct (attendee engagement) and one formative model (emotional attachment) – were incorporated into a research framework to corroborate a structural model. As such, PLS-SEM was selected over the common covariance-based approach (maximum likelihood) to simultaneously manipulate reflective and formative models.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement model

This study employed PLS-SEM to manipulate both reflective and formative constructs. According to Coltman *et al.* (2008), a formative model is the accumulation of indicators that forms the construct. A formative model assumes that the items used for measurement are distinct and not interchangeable with one another. The formative measures are likely to influence the latent construct rather than being affected by it. Thus, the inclusion or exclusion of an indicator influences the meaning and content validity of the model. By contrast, the reflective model assumes that the indicators used for measurement are interchangeable and share a similar meaning (Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2016). This study employed two formative constructs (i.e. attendee engagement and emotional attachment) and assessed the models using collinearity and construct validity (Halpenny *et al.*, 2018).

Attendee engagement was operationalised as a second-order formative model, given that causality tends to progress from the engagement indicators to attendee engagement, and that visitors generally engage in an event when the holistic event experience is fulfilled. As also exhibited in Table A1, not all identified engagement indicators are strongly correlated; therefore, they are not truly reflecting the engagement construct (Mikulić and Ryan, 2018). Thus, the second-order formative engagement model is applied in this study. The second-order formative model was developed based on the steps suggested by van Riel *et al.* (2017). Table A2 illustrates the validity and reliability of the first- and second-order engagement construct. We also conducted an analysis to evaluate whether the formative construct was a suitable measure for this model (Table 2). The results verified the significance of the first-order construct to the second-order formative model with five underlying factors

(enthusiasm, identification, absorption, attention and interaction), considering that all the path coefficients were significant ($p < 0.05$). One domain (enjoyment), which was identified as important in prior research, was removed due to its nonsignificant effect.

Two reflective constructs were evaluated according to their convergent and discriminant validities (Hair *et al.*, 2017). As shown in Table 2, actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence displayed satisfactory convergent validity, considering that AVE is above the minimum point (0.5) (Hair *et al.*, 2012). Composite reliability values were discovered to be greater than the minimum threshold of 0.7 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), suggesting that the models are reliable. The discriminant validity was achieved considering that each AVE was larger than a squared correlation of the investigated constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). This

Factor	Weight	Loading	AVE	Reliability	VIF
<i>Actual self-congruence (ASC)</i> ²	N/A		0.86	0.92	N/A
1. The personality of this event is consistent with how I see myself		<i>0.91</i>			
2. The personality of this event is a mirror image of me		<i>0.94</i>			
3. The personality of this event is close to my own personality		<i>0.93</i>			
<i>Ideal self-congruence (ISC)</i> ²	N/A		0.92	0.91	N/A
1. The personality of this event is consistent with how I would like to see myself		<i>0.96</i>			
2. The personality of this event is a mirror image of the person I would like to be		<i>0.96</i>			
<i>Attendee engagement</i> ¹	<i>0.19</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A	2.21
<i>Enthusiasm (EN)</i>					
1. I am interested in anything about this event (EN1)					
2. I find this event interesting (EN2)					
3. I feel enthusiastic about this event (EN3)					
<i>Absorption (AB)</i>	<i>0.26</i>				2.46
1. When attending this event, I forget everything else around me (AB1)					
2. Time flies when I am attending this event (AB2)					
3. When attending this event, I do not want to leave (AB3)					
<i>Attention (AT)</i>	<i>0.15</i>				2.26
1. I like to learn about this event (AT1)					
2. I pay a lot of attention to anything about this event (AT2)					
3. Anything related to this event grabs my attention (AT3)					
<i>Identification (ID)</i>	<i>0.50</i>				1.76
1. I feel a strong sense of belonging to this event (ID1)					
2. I identify strongly with this event (ID2)					
3. This event embodies what I believe in (ID3)					
<i>Interaction (IN)</i>	<i>0.10</i>				1.34
1. I like to get involved in discussions with other people at this event (IN1)					
2. I enjoy exchanging ideas with other people at this event (IN2)					
3. I enjoy interacting with like-minded people (IN3)					
<i>Emotional attachment (EA)</i> ¹		N/A	N/A	N/A	
1. I enjoy the event activities and atmosphere	<i>0.83</i>				1.08
2. I am very fond of this event	<i>0.36</i>				1.07
3. I feel emotionally attached to this event	<i>0.16</i>				1.01

Note(s): 1 = Formative; 2 = Reflective; italic values were significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 2.
Measurement with
validity and reliability
of formative and
reflective models

study also found the standardised root mean squared residual (SRMR) to be 0.04 (below 0.08), thereby representing an acceptable model fit (Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

4.2 Structural model

Following a step in conducting PLS-SEM (van Riel *et al.*, 2017), construct scores for the first-order factors (i.e. attendee engagement) were acquired in the first step. In the next step, the measurement of the first-order factors was reduced to single items, and their construct scores were considered indicators of the second-order model. After that, the structural model, including actual self-congruence, ideal self-congruence, attendee engagement and emotional attachment, was scrutinised to substantiate the causal relationships among the variables. The structural model was assessed based on two main findings: (1) the path coefficients and their significance and (2) *r*-square values.

Figure 1 illustrates the causal relationships among the examined variables, including structural paths in this study. The results of the structural model showed that the path coefficient standards between actual self-congruence, ideal self-congruence and attendee engagement were 0.55 (*t* = 6.88) and 0.18 (*t* = 2.11), respectively. Therefore, H1 and H2 were supported. Similarly, attendee engagement has a direct effect on emotional attachment, with path coefficient standard 0.44 (*t* = 8.67). The results showed that as visitors engage with a cultural event rises, the likelihood they become emotionally attached to the event also increases. Thus, H3 is supported. The coefficient of determination (*R*² value) was also examined. The investigated model indicated acceptable *R*² values given that 51% of the variance of attendee engagement and 20% of emotional attachment were explained by the model (Cohen, 1988).

4.3 Moderating role of crowding perception

This research followed the procedures of multi-group moderation suggested by Lowry and Gaskin (2014) for performing a PLS analysis. Similar to other tourism research (e.g. Fakfare and Wattanacharoensil, 2020), respondents were divided into low (*N* = 197) and high (*N* = 191) perceived crowding groups, based on a median value. Thirty-three respondents on the median value were not included in the moderation analysis. A bootstrapping procedure was employed to examine whether there was a difference between the effects, considering the beta coefficients and the standard errors for the paths being inspected, and the sample size of

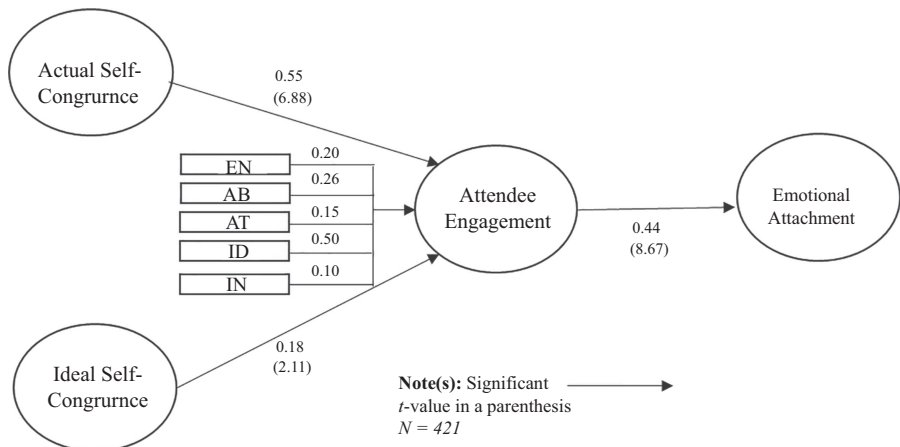


Figure 1. Results of structural model

each group (Table 3). The findings revealed that the influence between the attendee’s ideal self-congruence and event engagement was stronger for the high perceived crowding group, whereas the effect between the attendee’s ideal self-congruence and engagement was stronger for the low group. However, all path coefficients showed nonsignificant effects. Thus, H4a and H4b were not supported (see Table 3).

5. Discussion and implications

This study aimed to examine the relationship between self-congruence and attendee engagement in explaining visitors’ emotional attachment to a cultural event and how the consequences of visitors experiencing low or high crowding perception differ. The current study is among the pioneers in examining the impacts of self-congruence and attendee engagement on emotional attachment. Previous studies have addressed the relationships among self-congruence, engagement, satisfaction, quality and behavioural intentions in understanding tourists’ behaviour. Gaining a favourable experience is a major reason why people visit events, and it is important to understand whether and how self-congruence drives attendee engagement associated with a cultural event experience, and how engagement influences visitor emotional value. However, the notion of engagement is not widely examined in event literature (Meeprom and Dansiri, 2021), although it is investigated to a certain degree in tourism studies. This work provides an extended view of the event consumption experience from the perspective of attendee engagement, therefore contributing to the unexplored area in event literature. The results of this research provide insights into underlying antecedents (i.e. actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence) and consequence (i.e. emotional attachment) of event attendee engagement, particularly in the context of cultural events and the different impacts of perceived crowding on the relationship between self-congruence and attendee engagement when visitors perceived varying degrees of spatial crowding. The results allow event organisers to design a cultural event in a way that fosters visitor engagement and hence their sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the event.

In this research, attendee engagement, which was operationalised as a formative second-order factor of five dimensions (i.e. enthusiasm, identification, absorption, attention and interaction), was confirmed as a significant construct. This study captures relevant and multi-aspects of attendee engagement, underscores attendee engagement as a second-order construct of a formative type and demonstrates the reliability and validity of the model. The empirical validation of the construct supports its adequateness toward measuring engagement as a formative second-order factor (Halpenny et al., 2018; van Riel et al., 2017). In line with previous studies (Romero, 2018; So et al., 2016a, b; Verhoef Pavlos et al., 2010), visitors are keen to engage with tourism organisations, including events, if their holistic impressions and experiences are fulfilled. This study also found identification ($b = 0.50$) to

Path	Group 1: Low (<i>n</i> = 197)		Group 2: High (<i>n</i> = 191)		Difference between groups		
	β_1	Std error	β_2	Std error	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> -value	Sig. level
Actual self-congruence → Engagement	<i>0.39*</i>	0.12	<i>0.67*</i>	0.09	1.81	0.07	NS
Ideal self-congruence → Engagement	<i>0.30*</i>	0.13	0.15	0.25	1.07	0.28	NS

Note(s): NS = not significant, significant value in italic*

Table 3.
Results of multigroup analysis

contribute to engagement more strongly than other elements. The plausible reason for the prevailing role of this factor is that cultural events generally comprise unique local activities (e.g. entertainment and performance). Thus, when attending a cultural event, it is plausible for event attendees to see their expected self-images overlapping the perceived events' image, thereby developing a sense of belonging to the event.

In examining the influence of self-congruence on attendee engagement, two dimensions – actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence – were found to positively drive visitor engagement with path coefficient values of 0.55 ($t = 6.88$) and 0.18 ($t = 2.11$), respectively. These results are consistent with previous research, albeit in different consumption contexts (Bosnjak and Rudolph, 2008; Chen *et al.*, 2020; Hollebeek, 2013), given that self-congruence is a significant driver of individual engagement in a product or service encounter. In a cultural event context, people may choose to participate in a particular event with appealing personalities to enhance their sense of belonging and illustrate the substantial role of self-congruity in symbolic consumption (Mazodier and Merunka, 2014; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009). When attendees' self-concepts are tied to the event image, they are likely to actively engage with activities offered at a cultural event. The current study advances the knowledge of self-congruence and customer engagement in the context of cultural events.

Furthermore, the present study demonstrates that engagement is a pivotal mediator in the relationship between self-congruence and emotional attachment. When attendees feel engaged, they are motivated to display emotional attachment with an event. Previous studies have indicated that engagement is conducive to developing customer attachment and enriching the feeling of engagement with product offerings (Bowden *et al.*, 2015; Loureiro and Sarmiento, 2019; Suntikul and Jachna, 2016). When customers perceive superior service quality, they are likely to have pleasurable interactions with the service providers, thereby contributing to positive emotional value (So *et al.*, 2014). However, previous studies have neglected the mediating role of attendee engagement in special event studies. This study found that attendee engagement is an important mediator linking self-congruence with emotional attachment, thus indicating the importance of attendee engagement in event studies.

The moderating role of perceived crowding with respect to actual self-congruence, ideal self-congruence and attendee engagement was also investigated. Although previous research has examined perceived crowding and its relation to event attendee experience, few studies have recognised its moderating role on attendee engagement and emotional attachment to a cultural event (Lee and Graefe, 2003). The findings of this study revealed that despite the insignificant effect for the moderating variable, the event attendees in the high-perceived crowding group are likely to be engaged by relying on actual self-congruence only; ideal self-congruence was not linked to the engagement of high-perceived crowding visitors. By contrast, both congruence variables (i.e. self-congruence only and ideal self-congruence) contribute to the engagement of visitors when they experience a low degree of perceived crowding. However, the perception of crowding in the two groups was not significantly different. A possible reason for the insignificant moderating role of perceived crowding could be that visitors in both groups anticipated the cultural event to be full of people, and they may also expect that crowding could create a sense of an exciting environment, thereby supporting the previous work of Machleit *et al.* (2000).

For the practical implication, the results of this study provide a guideline to the event organisers and destinations to improve the event image and drive attendee engagement with event activities. Because actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence were found to positively influence attendee engagement and attendee engagement subsequently shows a positive effect on emotional attachment, event organisers must consider different aspects in developing an event image that can foster a sense of oneness by manipulating a variety of event offerings (i.e. performances, event contents, activities and environmental

surroundings). For an authentic or unique event, the overall concept and image representing and fitting its targeted attendee should be created based on the market research (e.g. using a potential attendee survey). Specifically, the event managers must design and develop their event performance and service as well as property design to align with the overarching event concept, thereby creating feelings of interconnection. Moreover, advertising campaigns that reflect the self-concepts of the potential attendees could be developed. As event attendees may prefer a cultural event that contains compatible images with their self-congruence and expectation, the event managers could attempt to tailor an advertising message that conveys unique values of the events, such as “experiencing Thai festival of lights” and “exploring incredible Thai cultures”.

The results of this study found that attendee engagement plays an important role in linking attendee-event self-congruence. The event organisers must consider the critical issue of attendee engagement and communicate with event attendees on how they can bolster their achievement of attending the cultural event (e.g. increasing knowledge, seeking for excitement and activities and having attendee-to-attendee and event-to-attendee interactions). For example, the organisers can develop event activities, such as local food demonstrations and traditional crafting activities, to motivate people to engage in the event offering. This can reflect and embed attendee self-congruence and understand the match or mismatch of attendee with the types of event. Moreover, the use of technological platforms, such as social media, event blogs and online communities to engage in the event, could enhance attendee experiences. When attendees are engaged in the special event offerings (e.g. activities, performances and meeting locals), they feel more emotionally identified and attached to the special event, thus matching their self-concept and satisfying their needs. This is not only beneficial for the destinations or event organisers when attendees spread favourable word of mouth but also encourages visitors to come to the events again in the future. Thus, the importance of engagement is worth noting by destination marketing organisations to sustain the attractiveness of cultural events.

While previous event studies generally showed the importance of traditional service-oriented constructs, such as satisfaction, perceived value and perceived quality, as antecedents of the behavioural outcomes of event visitors (Getz, 2008), this research suggests that attendee engagement beyond the aforementioned traditional concepts can also enhance psychological response in terms of emotional attachment, which subsequently will affect future behaviours of tourists. Therefore, the findings of this research extend practical knowledge of engagement by verifying the significance of establishing strong engagement with the event offerings. DMOs and event organisers should continue developing the event’s attractiveness and touching activities and interact with event attendees during and after the events. Considering the powerful impact of digital marketing, event marketers should also attempt to promote cultural events through digital platforms, as some engaged visitors enjoy sharing their experiences and communicating with others online. In particular, event organisers are suggested to develop a location-based intelligence tool, which offers more convenience and options for visitors to explore the events.

This study also has certain limitations. First, this study verified the crucial role of self-congruence in examining the engagement of cultural event visitors and found five engagement dimensions as a formative second-order construct. However, the results of this study may not be generalised to other types of events (e.g. business events, sports and entertainment) since engagement components differ between each type of event. Future research is encouraged to investigate the different roles of engagement in different event contexts. Second, given that this study concentrates on two particular cultural events in Thailand, namely, the Yi Peng and Loy Krathong Festivals, the measurement scale employed in this research may display distinctive characteristics in determining attendee engagement and other examined variables in a specific event setting. Further studies should explore

cultural events in different settings by applying the measurement scales developed in this study, thus enhancing its generalisability. Lastly, alternative concepts, such as excitement, happiness and memorable experience, should be employed to add understanding to cultural event studies. Such employment will provide better insight, which can explain the broader perspective of event attendees.

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Appendix

	ASC	ISC	EA	IN	ET	AB	At	ID
ASC	–							
ISC	0.86	–						
EA	0.11	0.06	–					
IN	0.38	0.38	0.01	–				
ET	0.51	0.47	0.10	0.41	–			
AB	0.59	0.58	0.01	0.46	0.65	–		
AT	0.50	0.47	0.09	0.40	0.68	0.66	–	
ID	0.65	0.59	0.10	0.39	0.52	0.62	0.53	–

Table A1.
Correlation coefficients
among constructs

First-order factor	Loading	<i>t</i> -value	Reliability	VIF	
<i>Enthusiasm (EN)</i>					
1. EN1	0.88	53.32	0.77	2.06	
2. EN2	0.91	73.18	0.82	2.94	
3. EN3	0.90	69.88	0.81	2.63	
<i>Absorption (AB)</i>					
1. AB1	0.89	59.61	0.79	2.49	
2. AB2	0.92	97.07	0.85	3.13	
3. AB3	0.91	67.85	0.82	2.53	
<i>Attention (AT)</i>					
1. AT1	0.85	36.33	0.73	2.17	
2. AT2	0.92	83.55	0.85	2.82	
3. AT3	0.90	67.87	0.81	2.26	
<i>Identification (ID)</i>					
1. ID1	0.91	76.36	0.83	3.63	
2. ID2	0.96	221.63	0.92	5.58	
3. ID3	0.92	104.45	0.84	3.13	
<i>Interaction (IN)</i>					
1. IN1	0.91	54.07	0.82	3.27	
2. IN2	0.94	129.63	0.89	3.93	
3. IN3	0.86	42.83	0.74	2.04	
Second-order factor	Loading	<i>t</i> -value	Weight	<i>t</i> -value	VIF
EN → Engagement	0.78	19.47	0.19	2.96	2.21
AB → Engagement	0.85	28.29	0.25	3.09	2.46
AT → Engagement	0.77	18.24	0.15	2.07	2.26
ID → Engagement	0.89	30.85	0.50	7.08	1.76
IN → Engagement	0.57	10.16	0.10	1.54	1.34

Table A2.
The measurement
validity and reliability
of attendee
engagement construct

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