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Investigating the antecedents of African fast food customers' loyalty: A self-congruity perspective

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ABSTRACT

Does customer self-congruity drive loyalty in fast-food restaurants? A literature-based model has been tested using Structural Equation Modeling, on a sample of 911 North African fast-food customers (Egypt and Morocco). The model estimates both the direct and indirect relationships between self-congruity and loyalty. The indirect relationships estimated in the model are mediated by some key restaurant cues derived from existing literature on fast-food restaurants. The analysis is carried out in a quite underexplored context (North African markets), that needs to be further explored by academic research. Results clearly show the dominant role of self-congruity as an antecedent of loyalty in fast-food restaurants, and the prominent role of food as a mediator in the relationship self-congruity/loyalty. Findings should suggest managers the need to consider self-congruity as a key determinant of customer positioning.

1. Introduction

This paper devotes its efforts to enrich fast-food restaurant loyalty literature by examining the impact of self-congruity on customer loyalty. Responding to the call for a more comprehensive discussion on the link between self-congruity and loyalty (e.g., Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, & Sirgy, 2012), the paper introduces some mediators related to customer perceptions of some key fast-food restaurant cues: environment, price, product, service. These mediators are considered as key determinants of customer perceptions in the specific service setting (e.g., Hyun, 2010; Soriano, 2002).

Self-congruity and loyalty are two key marketing concepts, believed to explain a great part of consumption preferences and choices. The two constructs have received a great deal of attention from academics.

Loyalty represents a key goal for marketers. The ability of a firm to generate loyalty allows the creation of a stable customer pool for brands, products, and services of a company (e.g., Oliver, 1999). In addition to the highly positive consequences in terms of sales and revenues, loyalty generates other relevant outcomes, such as: repeated purchases, positive word of mouth, willingness of customers to pay higher prices (e.g., Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Retaining existing customers is less expensive than looking for an entirely new customer base (Tepeci, 1999).

Marketing research has recognized since a long time the prominent role of symbolic meanings in customer behavior. With respect to symbolic consumption, self-congruity represents a key topic in marketing research, allowing to decipher and interpret different facets of customer behavior (Hosany & Martin, 2012). Self-congruity refers to the customer perceived match between his/her own self-image and the perceived image of a certain product, brand, or service (e.g., Hosany & Martin, 2012; Sirgy, 1986). Self-congruity theory has been applied to a variety of service contexts (e.g., Back, 2005; Ekinci, Dawes, & Massey, 2008; Hosany & Martin, 2012; Line & Hanks, 2016; Paharia, Keinan, Avery, & Schor, 2011; Sidali & Hemmerling, 2014). Several studies have suggested a significant, influencing role of self-congruity in determining loyalty (e.g., Jamal & Goode, 2001; Kang, Tang, Lee, & Bosselman, 2012; Kressmann et al., 2006; Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, et al., 1997). However, the relationship between self-congruity and loyalty appears quite under investigated. The distance between self-image and a product/brand/service image might appear particularly problematic for those non context-specific product categories (e.g., fast-food in the small African urban areas; vodka in Italy), and global brands (e.g., Coke in Africa and China). The fast food sector presents interesting characteristics from this point of view: it is in fact dominated by global brands that have developed strong localization processes (e.g., Watson, 1998).

It appears worth to explore the fast-food sector, in countries that highly differ from fast food companies' country of origin, to verify the relationship between self-congruity and loyalty. The fast-food industry presents at least three major features that make it valuable in terms of

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the discussion presented above. They are: a) adaptation of global brands to local contexts; b) localization processes already in place (e.g., Watson, 1998) and c) researches about the sector already exist, but none of them focused on the relationship between self-congruity and loyalty.

Fast food industry in African markets fit the three research agenda points above. Fast food is a multi-billion-dollar industry with undoubtful influences on dietary habits of people. Africa in particular has become a highly attractive market in recent years due to the growth of its economy (EPRS, 2016). African markets present some relevant peculiarities in terms of consumer behavior, worth to be examined. For example, in Africa, -like in some other countries-, individuals perceive that having the means to eat at restaurants like McDonald's is a sign of prosperity and higher social status (Park, 2004; Shi, Lien, Kumar, & Holmboe-Ottesen, 2005). In addition, in many countries, it is considered “hip” among younger people to consume food from U.S.-native restaurant chains (Park, 2004). More research is needed to better understand cross-cultural differences in perceptions of U.S. restaurant chain food consumption in African countries, allowing marketers to properly exploit the great business opportunities offered by these developing markets. More specifically, in the international food service firms (i.e., fast food global companies), different authors (Kara, Kaynak, & Kucukemiroglu, 1996; Lee & Ulgado, 1997) pointed out the need to understand customer perceptions related to service quality in different local contexts, as food consumption entails strong significance in terms of cultural and ethnic identification (Keillor & Fields, 1996). Food consumption behaviors are highly complex and result from the interaction of multiple influences across different context.

In Africa, food consumer behavior is likely to present unique features due to the fact that, it has (is being) reshaped by strong global-local interactions, occurring as a result of the increasing globalization of local markets (e.g., Wilhelmina, Joost, George, & Guido, 2010; Rischke, Kimenju, Klasen, & Qaim, 2015), which have deep implications in terms of individual identity (i.e. self congruity) and cultural alterations (e.g., Popkin, 2004; Mergenthaler, Weinberger, & Qaim, 2009; Reardon & Timmer, 2012; Rischke et al., 2015) Moreover, it is worth to note that, in African markets like in other many low- and middle-income countries, fast food is becoming increasingly relevant in food consumption choices, as part of the globalization process that has triggered rapid changes in local diet and food habits (e.g., Popkin, 2004; Mergenthaler et al., 2009; Reardon & Timmer, 2012; Rischke et al., 2015). Global fast food operators are aware of the need to properly adapt their offerings to the religious and cultural prescriptions imposed by local contexts (e.g., the need to guarantee that food respects the halal rules for Muslim North Africans). McDonald's is an emblematic example in this sense: it provides -more or less- standardized menus in terms of basic structure (e.g., burger, fries, soft drinks); customizations are introduced for each country, in order to account for local specificities (Vignali, 2001).

Marketing and consumer research has analyzed the efforts of fast-food chains, and its consumer behavior implications in several emerging and developing countries (e.g., Watson, 1998; Park, 2004; Baek, Ham, & Yang, 2006; Goyal & Singh, 2007; Srivastava, 2015); however, little attention, so far, has been devoted to the African continent, except for a -relative- attention dedicated to South Africa (e.g. Maumbe, 2012). The scarce attention devoted to the fast-food consumption in Africa reflects a general tendency of marketing research, which has, so far, devoted very few contributions to the study of African contexts (Lages, Pfajfar, & Shoham, 2015).

However, as suggested by several authors (e.g., Peng, Wang, & Jiang, 2008; Rivera-Santos, Holt, Littlewood, & Kolk, 2015; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2016), there is a need to fill the gap regarding management and marketing research for African contexts: this need urges both scholars (i.e., examining these context-specific settings to advance marketing/consumer behavior studies), and market practitioners. Empirical investigations with African primary data allows to overcome a limiting perspective based on the mere transferring of established theories and theoretical frameworks developed in Western cultural settings to developing countries like Africa, ignoring de facto country-specific peculiarities (e.g., Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002; Keller & Moorthi, 2003).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Self-congruity

Customers buy products, brands, and services basing not just on functional needs or attributes, but also because products carry a specific, symbolic meaning (e.g., Lee & Hyman, 2008). Customers choose products, brands and services, that are perceived to be in line with the self-image they held of themselves (Sirgy, 1986). Broadly speaking, products, brands, and services are vehicles of self-expression (Aaker, 1999). Self-image congruity is referred to as the cognitive match between a customer self-concept, and a product, service, or brand image (e.g., Sirgy et al., 1997; Sirgy & Su, 2000). Customers develop their perceptions basing on the stereotypical image of a typical user of a specific product, brand or service (Sirgy, 1986).

Self-concept theory is deeply grounded in social psychology, that primarily suggests how customers' personalities can be derived from the products, brands, and services they select (e.g., Ross, 1971). It is believed that, perceptions that individuals have of themselves (i.e., self-perceptions) influence customer behavior in terms of products, brands, and services people choose, in the same way in which such perceptions influence how people choose friends (e.g., De Chernatony, 2010).

Research has introduced multiple dimensions of self-concept (e.g., Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg, 2000). In general, marketing and consumer research have identified four different dimensions of self-concept: a) actual self-concept (i.e., how customers see themselves); b) ideal-self-concept (i.e., how customers would like to see themselves); c) social self-concept (i.e., how customers think others see them); d) ideal social self-concept (i.e., how customers would like to be perceived by other people, Sirgy, 1982). Self-concept dimensions mostly explored by research appear to be the individual actual and ideal dimensions (e.g., Abel, Buff, & O'Neill, 2013). Following this major research stream, in this paper self-congruity only concerns the actual and the ideal dimension (e.g., Hosany & Martin, 2012). As noted by Ekinci and Riley (2003), focusing principally on ideal and actual self-image (both belonging to the *personal* dimension of self-image) can be equally relevant, given that it is believed that the social dimensions of self-image (i.e., social self) are strongly correlated with the actual and ideal self-image dimensions (i.e., personal dimensions, Ekinci & Riley, 2003). Much of the research on customer self-congruity has focused on customers' pre-purchase perceptions and decisions (Hosany & Martin, 2012). Conversely, this paper joins the more recent debate on self-congruity research regarding post-consumption behavior, investigating the impact on self-congruity perceptions on key customer outcomes such as satisfaction (e.g., Ekinci et al., 2008), and loyalty (e.g., He & Mukherjee, 2007).

2.2. Key fast-food cues

Theoretical and empirical evidence affirms that customer choices tend to be strongly driven by tangible and intangible attributes of service contexts. For example, several authors (e.g., Bitner, 1992; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002) have emphasized the prominent role of physical design, and, more in general, of ambient/atmospheric cues in influencing shoppers' behavior. Sensorial and psychological stimulation also comes from the interaction with other people in a service setting, especially with respect to the service personnel (e.g., Turley & Milliman, 2000). An important attribute of service settings in the restaurant sector is physical environment. The importance of environment in shaping customer decisions has been recognized since a long time in marketing literature. Accordingly,

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