

ARTICLE

The influence of symbolic consumption on experience value and the use of virtual social networks



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Symbolic consumption;
Perceived social value;
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Abstract This research examines how symbolic consumption can be extended to the consumption of experiences. As shown in the results, when customers think that one experience reinforces their identities, they perceive higher value. In addition, perceived value influences satisfaction and satisfaction influences revisit intention. Furthermore, the results indicate that, when consumers want to materialize their experience, they use the basic tool of virtual social networks. In connection with that, consumers use more of their digital social networks when they perceive congruence between their experience and identity. It is indicated as well that higher social value and satisfaction increases the intensity of the use of social sites. Based on the results, some managerial guidelines are included.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Consumo simbólico;
valor social percibido;
consumo experiencial;
redes sociales virtuales

Influencia del consumo simbólico en el valor de la experiencia y el uso de las redes sociales virtuales

Resumen Esta investigación analiza cómo el consumo simbólico puede ampliarse al consumo de experiencias. Como se muestra en los resultados, cuando el consumidor percibe que una experiencia refuerza su identidad, éste percibe un mayor valor de la experiencia, lo que crea mayor satisfacción e intención de revisita. Además, los resultados indican que, cuando un consumidor siente la necesidad de materializar la experiencia, para que otros puedan percibirla, utiliza una herramienta especial: las redes sociales virtuales. Así, los resultados de la investigación muestran que los consumidores utilizan más sus redes sociales digitales cuando perciben congruencia entre su experiencia e identidad. Del mismo modo, se observa que cuanto mayor es la satisfacción y el valor social percibido por el consumidor, mayor es el uso de las redes sociales virtuales. A tenor de los resultados, y como parte de las conclusiones, el trabajo incluye implicaciones para la gestión.

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Introduction

Symbolic consumption has been analyzed from different perspectives since the 1980s. However, most of the research examine two variables in order to analyze this construct: consumers' identity and the meaning of products in society (Belk, 1984; Clammer, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dittmar, 1992; Edson & Bettman, 2005; Fenollar & Ruiz, 2006; Ger & Belk, 1996; Landon, 1974; Lee, 2013; Lorenzi, 1991; McCracken, 1987; Park, Deborah, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Sun, Wang, Lepp, & Robertson, 2014).

On the one hand, the majority of these studies focus on the symbolic interaction between consumers and the products they buy. In other words, they focus on symbolic consumption of tangible objects (Belk, 1984; Clammer, 1992; Dittmar, 1992; Fenollar & Ruiz, 2006; Ger & Belk, 1996; Landon, 1974; Lorenzi, 1991). On the other hand, there is a line of study in the literature that has captured the attention of marketers since the end of the 1990s: the importance given by consumers to memorable experiences (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999).

In connection with that, it has been mentioned in the marketing literature that companies should not only satisfy customers' needs by offering quality products accompany with good services, since currently consumers demand emotions (Serra, 2013).

In this context, how is symbolic consumption connected with consumption of experiences? Is it possible that symbolic consumption is a concept only to be applied in the acquisition of tangible products? Or consumers, moved by their need to confer symbolism to the things they buy, do something in order to project the symbols they perceive after the consumption of experiences?

Nowadays, it is not rare to see tourists taking pictures during their holidays, with the intention of uploading them on their Facebook page in the near future. By doing so, the consumers' peer groups may be able to see the places they have visited, the activities they have enjoyed and the way they have consumed a memorable experience. Something similar may occur when users express their impressions on Twitter during a sport activity. These actions might be motivated by the users' intention to show others they are living an experience. Therefore, there seems to be a relationship between symbolic consumption of experiences and virtual social networks.

In fact, it can be observed in the literature that material goods and services are associated with our extended self. Thus, consumers need to show others the things they buy and the sensations they experience in order to reinforce their identities (Belk, 1988). In order to show their experiences, consumers may use the Internet (Belk, 2016; Stephen, 2016).

However, it is established in the literature that "*there is a need to examine the impact of virtual social networks in consumer behavior*" (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014, p. 34), also that "*the analysis of the impact of virtual social networks in marketing did not appear until 2008*" (Luo & Zhong, 2015, p. 275), and that "*the research on the analysis of virtual social networks in consumer behavior is now in its beginnings*" (Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015, p. 70). It is also observed in the literature that there is a lack of research regarding symbolic consumption in the field of consumption

of experiences (Ekinci, Sirakaya, & Preciado, 2013; Servidio, 2015).

In order to connect these topics of research, first of all, a literature review is carried out. Based on the literature review, a series of hypotheses are presented. The hypotheses are contrasted through a quantitative research method. Finally, the conclusions of this paper include a series of managerial guidelines, which can help companies to improve the perceived social value of the experience, the customer's satisfaction and the revisit intention.

Literature review

Symbolic consumption

The first historical references of symbolic consumption appeared in the literature at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the 20th century (Flügel, 1930; James, 1890; Simmel, 1903). These authors mentioned that customers reinforce their identities throughout the products they buy.

However, the analysis of this concept as a marketing variable did not appear in the literature until the middle of the 20th century, mainly influenced by Levy (1959). This author pointed out that companies must be aware of the fact that they do not only offer physical products, since "*managers must attend to more than the relatively superficial facts with which they usually concern themselves when they do not think of their goods as having symbolic significance*" (Levy, 1959, p. 117).

There are clear examples of products charged with special symbolism in the market: crucifixes, trophies, college diplomas, wedding rings, etc. They represent devotion to a religion, success or compromise (Zang & Kim, 2013). The symbolism of these objects may be perceived differently by some members of the consumer's peer groups (Padrón & Barreto, 2011), in different cultures (Shrum et al., 2013), or by consumers with particular psychological characteristics (Fenollar & Ruiz, 2006; Lerman & Maxwell, 2006; Sangkhawasi & Johri, 2007).

When it comes to symbolic consumption as a marketing concept, different definitions obtained from the literature are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows definitions from 1974 to 2014. It can be observed that most of them include two variables in order to explain this concept: (1) the meaning of products in society and (2) the consumer's identity. Hence, these two variables appear to be essential in order to conceptualize, analyze and measure symbolic consumption.

It can also be observed that some authors define this concept from a sociological point of view, since they consider that consumers perceive the meaning of the products based on *other people's opinions* (Dittmar, 1992; Fenollar & Ruiz, 2006). Other authors focus on the capacity of some products to *communicate* aspects related to the consumer's identity (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Ger & Belk, 1996; Lee, 2013; McCracken, 1987). Finally, Sun et al. (2014) presented a complete definition of symbolic consumption, when considering its conceptualization as the consumer's perception of products and brands in order to *acquire, create, preserve and present* their identities.

Table 1 Definitions of "symbolic consumption".

| Authors | Date | Definition of "symbolic consumption" |
|--------------------------------------|------|---|
| Landon | 1974 | "Use of the symbolic content of brands in order to express one's identity" (p. 45). |
| Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton | 1981 | "Process of transaction between a consumer and an object, together with the communicative signs of that process" (p. 7). |
| Belk | 1984 | "Tendency of some buyers to add meaning to the products they acquire" (p. 266). |
| McCracken | 1987 | "Acquisition of products focused on qualities beyond functional attributes or commercial values, and based mainly on the ability of those products to transfer and communicate cultural meanings" (p. 140). |
| Lorenzi | 1991 | "Consumption action that takes part as a process of identity creation" (p. 405). |
| Clammer | 1992 | "Every act of consumption through which an individual pretends to project his or her identity, interests and social position" (p. 196). |
| Dittmar | 1992 | "Acquisition and use of products based on the meaning that they have, and derived from what the possessor feels those products communicate to himself/herself and also to other people" (p. 380). |
| Ger and Belk | 1996 | "Acquisition and possession of goods as a communicative act that is crucial to an individual identity construction" (p. 57). |
| Edson and Bettman | 2005 | "Use of products as a mechanism of creation, development and preservation of individuals' images" (p. 382). |
| Fenollar and Ruiz | 2006 | "Importance given by a consumer to others opinion about symbolic evaluation of products when those are conceived as social interaction tools" (p. 8). |
| Park et al. | 2010 | "Intention to project status, feeling of belonging or self-worth through the consumption of goods and services that transmit symbolic values" (p. 3). |
| Lee | 2013 | "It appears when individuals use consumption and its meaning in order to communicate something about themselves" (p. 175). |
| Sun et al. | 2014 | "Acquisition, creation, preservation and presentation of our existential identity through consumption" (p. 55). |

Source: Own elaboration.

Another important fact presented in Table 1 is that, in the majority of the definitions, the authors focused on the symbolic consumption of "products" or "brands" (Belk, 1984; Clammer, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dittmar, 1992; Fenollar & Ruiz, 2006; Ger & Belk, 1996; Landon, 1974; Lorenzi, 1991; McCracken, 1987). However, there are some studies that focus on consumption of services and experiences (Durvasula & Lysonsky, 2010; Lee, 2013; Sun et al., 2014). Research focus on symbolic consumption of experiences is limited in the literature, which opens an interesting line of research.

Finally, the discrepancy regarding the definition, examination and measurement of symbolic consumption is related to different perspectives of analysis in the literature. Based on the literature review, two major perspectives deserve special mention: (1) one centered on the object of consumption (materialism); and (2) another centered on the consumer (self-congruity). In other words, from the perspective of what is consumed and from the perspective of who is the consumer.

Table 2 presents the most important studies extracted from the literature review related to this topic of research. The table is divided into the two mentioned perspectives: materialism and self-congruity. In addition, during the

literature review, different areas of analysis were identified. Thus, the table shows different points of views in the examination of symbolic consumption as a marketing construct. The areas of analysis are based on the dimensions of the constructs examined by different authors in the literature. Furthermore, some authors measured these dimensions in their studies. Hence, the measurement methods of the constructs are specified. Finally, the table shows the main limitations regarding every area of analysis.

As it can be observed in Table 2, four areas of analysis related to materialism were identified. The studies of the first area of analysis (*extrinsic meaning of possessions*) explain how material goods reflect a characteristic of the owner inside a society. The second area (*Conspicuous consumption*) also examines this effect, but mainly focused on social status. These two areas of analysis are theoretical and established the basis of further studies of materialism.

Table 2 also shows how, as a marketing construct, materialism has been mostly examined from two points of view: as a part of the personality (Belk, 1984) and as a value (Richins & Dawson, 1990). Since then, different authors have measured materialism in their studies. However, these

Table 2 Perspectives and variables analyzed in the study of symbolic consumption.

| Perspectives of analysis of symbolic consumption | Area of analysis inside every perspective | Studies | Measurement methods of the construct | Main limitations |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| 1. Materialism | Analysis of the extrinsic meaning of possessions | Cueto (1981), Naredo (1981), Martín (1982), Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) | Theoretical research | Lack of empirical research to contrast the affirmations. |
| | Conspicuous consumption | Bagwell and Bernheim (1996), Corneo and Olivier (1997), Amaldoss and Jain (2005), Chaudhuri and Majumdar (2006), Kim and Jang (2014) | Theoretical research | Lack of empirical research to contrast the affirmations. |
| | Materialism as a part of the personality of consumers | Belk (1984), Lipscomb (1988), Dawson (1988), Dawson and Bamossy (1991), Schroeder and Dugal (1995), La Barbera and Gurhan (1997), Shrum et al. (2013) | Belk's scale (1984): materialism as a part of personality (three dimensions: envy, lack of generosity and need of possession). | Negative connotation of the concept, where it is considered that those who give importance to possession are basically worse people. |
| | Materialism as a value | Richins and Dawson (1990, 1992), Richins, McKeage, and Najjar (1992), Richins (1994a, 1994b), Lerman and Maxwell (2006), Fenollar and Ruíz (2006), Sanghawasi and Johri (2007), Hartman (2012) | Richins and Dawson's scale (1992): materialism as a value (three dimensions: personal success, possession centrality and happiness based on the possession of goods) | Studies basically focused on tangible objects. There is a lack of examples of intangible symbolic consumption charged with special value. |
| 2. Self-congruency | Self-image in consumer behavior | Newman (1957), Birdwell (1968), Shimp and Sharma (1987), Johansson (1989), Giddens (1991), Fournier (1998) | Theoretical research | Lack of empirical research to contrast the affirmations. |
| | Self-concept and identity in consumer behavior. | Giddens (1991), Sirgy et al. (1995), Sirgy et al. (1998), Fournier (1998), Grier and Deshpande (2001), Edson and Bettman (2005), Park et al. (2010), Lee (2013), Sun et al. (2014) | Most of the studies include the scale developed by Sirgy et al. (1995) or versions of it. | Main limitation focused on the nature of the construct itself. The difficulties to conceptualize the construct make even more difficult to practices its measurement. |
| | Social influence in consumption | Steele (1988), Tesser (1988), Pelham and Swann (1989), Andersen, Reznik, and Chen (1997), Cleveland et al., 2013 | Most of the studies include the scale developed by Sirgy et al. (1995) or versions of it combined with self-worth scales and need of belonging scales | The difficulties to conceptualize the construct make even more difficult to practices its measurement, added to the need to combine this construct with others no less difficult to conceptualize. |
| | Social approval in consumer behavior | Edwards (1957), Baumeister (1982), Baumeister (1987), Leary and Kowalski (1990), Lindbeck (1997), Rege and Telle (2004), Hoek et al. (2012) | The majority of the studies use versions of Edwards' scales (1957), renovated in 1985 (Edwards & Edwards, 1991). It is a complex scale formed by 15 dimensions. | In many occasions the adaptation of the scale to different environment create problems of reliability and validity, what make authors to practically change the scale, or simple use one dimension of it. |
| | Social support and its influence in consumption | Steinberg and Silverberg (1986), Wigfield and Eccles (1992), Sedikides and Skowronski (1991), Higgins (1990), North and Fiske (2013) | Theoretical research | Lack of empirical research to contrast the affirmations. |

Source: Own elaboration.

studies have main limitations. The limitations are explained in the table and give insights of research needs. Also, they identify possible future lines of research in order to continue improving the knowledge of materialism in consumer behavior.

When it comes to self-congruency, different areas of analysis are also identified and indicated in Table 2. The first area of analysis focuses on self-image in consumer behavior. The studies inside this area are theoretical and their main limitation is the lack of empirical evidence in order to contrast the affirmations given by the authors.

The studies of the second area of analysis focus on the measurement of self-congruity. Most of these studies are based on the research by Sirgy et al. (1995). The other three areas of analysis focus on social influence in consumption. These are psico-sociological research, which explain how family and peer groups affect consumers' perception and behavior.

From all these areas of analysis, the present research focuses on self-congruency as a marketing construct inside the theory of symbolic consumption. Thus, the next section of the literature review examines self-congruity in consumer behavior.

Self-congruency in consumer behavior

Newman introduced the concept of self-image in 1957. Along with other important findings, the author pointed out that the act of consuming products can be motivated by the congruency between the individual's image and the product.

In 1968, Birdwell performed the first empirical analysis on the influence of self-image in consumer behavior. This way of visualizing how consumers use material goods in order to construct their self-concept initiated an important change in the study of identity in consumer behavior (Zang & Kim, 2013).

In 1982, Sirgy defined self-congruency as "*the matching of the product's image with the consumer's self-concept*" (Sirgy, 1982, p. 350). Some authors focused on this definition in their research when analysing self-congruency (Cleveland, Laroche, & Hallab, 2013; Fournier, 1998; Giddens, 1991).

In these studies, identity is visualized as a series of attributes perceived by a consumer, which leads to the connection between the past and the present, and even the future that the consumer imagines. Through these images, consumers perceive the feeling of belonging to some social groups (North & Fiske, 2013). Thus, according to these affirmations, material possessions are used by individuals in connection with their personal history, reflecting the identity of the character played in society (Belk, 1988; Martín & Torres, 2013).

There are many studies that analyze self-congruity in consumer behavior in the last few years (Anaya & Palafox, 2010; Arévalo-Silva, 2010; Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013; Ekinci et al., 2013; Martín & Torres, 2013; Padrón & Barreto, 2011; Park et al., 2010; Serra, 2013; Shrum et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2014; Zang & Kim, 2013). However, our research focuses on symbolic consumption of experiences; therefore, the next section presents a review of consumption of experiences and its connection with symbolic consumption.

Symbolic consumption of experiences

The notion of *experience* in marketing was introduced by Holbrook and Hirschman in 1982, in a pioneering research studying the *experiential aspects of consumption*. In this research, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) pointed out the importance of the symbolic, hedonic and esthetic nature of consumption. As a result, the authors visualized consumption as a phenomenon driven by the search of emotions, fantasies and joy.

Various authors followed this line of research, building a concept difficult to define in the beginning (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Arnould & Price, 1993; Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999).

In fact, the concept of experience in marketing was not clearly conceptualized years after these studies. For instance, in 2003, Carú and Cová affirmed that the concept of experience "*is still ill-defined in the marketing literature*" (p. 267).

There are terms related to *experience* in consumer behavior with different meanings in the literature (Arnould & Price, 1993). For example, *experiential consumption* and *consumption of experiences* are differently defined in the consumer behavior literature. Hence, it is important to clearly separate these terms.

On the one hand, the sensation perceived by a consumer during the process of acquiring a product or service is known as experiential consumption. On the other hand, the consumption of something intangible that is offered by companies, which aim is to create memorable sensations, is known as consumption of experiences (p. e. Disneyland, a music concert, etc.) (Arnould & Price, 1993; Carú & Cova, 2003).

The present study focuses on consumption of experiences, which can be defined as the consumption of sensations and memories in an environment able to create them (Gazley & Waitling, 2015).

For Servidio (2015) current consumers' motivations and needs become complex, and they demand feeling, symbolic meanings and memories to be shared between the experience and themselves.

In this context, one of the key factors in understanding consumption of experiences lies in the fact that experiences lived by individuals are part of their identities, and so, they need to communicate them to other people immediately. In other words, individuals need to demonstrate to others who they are based on their own experiences and personal history (Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013).

Hence, consumers' identities are formed by the experiences that they have lived, the ones they are living and those they are going to live. Furthermore, the behavior of consumers is connected to their identities, and so, future experience consumption will be, somehow, based on what individuals expect of themselves and what they think others expect of them (Serra, 2013).

Moreover, Holbrook (1997) stated that there is a relationship between identity and experience consumption, since consumers see themselves as heroes of a tale, and the story of that tale is formed by the experiences lived by the hero.

In 2003, Carú and Cova pointed out that the actions performed by individuals in society are guided by a purpose, which is not following a social role, but the construction of

personal experiences, something that today defines better a person's identity. For that reason, the authors explained that *"the role is replaced by the experience"* and that *"the postmodern idea of personality construction through experiences can be considered a new form of individuals differentiation"* (Carú & Cova, 2003, p. 270).

There is a lack of literature in order to affirm that customers perceive more value from those experiences that reinforce their identities. However, it has been theoretically mentioned in the marketing literature that consumers acquire products and services paying attention to how their brands and attributes reinforce their identities (Sun et al., 2014). Also, the congruity between a product and the consumer's identity influences perceived value and satisfaction (Ekinci et al., 2013; Kim & Jun, 2016). At the same time, it has been mentioned that customer's satisfaction influences revisit intention (Zang & Kim, 2013). Based on these affirmations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. Experience self-congruency directly and positively influences the perceived value of the experience.
- H2. Experience perceived value directly and positively influences satisfaction.
- H3. Satisfaction directly and positively influences revisit intention.

Furthermore, this research intends to demonstrate that digital social networks are tools used by consumers in order to show their experience consumption to members of their peer groups. Especially for consumers who feel that the experience may reinforce their identities. Thus, the next section presents a review on symbolic consumption and its relationship with digital social networks.

Symbolic consumption and digital social networks

It has been affirmed in the literature that consumers use digital social networks in order to express personal aspects about themselves that are in other ways difficult to express (Maldonado, 2012; Stephen, 2016).

It has also been mentioned that experience consumption is an important part of people's life (Arocena & Buffa, 2012). In fact, consumers want others to be aware of what they saw and felt (Carú & Cova, 2003). In this context, Internet and digital social networks present an ideal opportunity for consumers to show the experiences that reinforce their identities.

Therefore, documentation of personal experiences is one of the main reasons for the consumers' use of digital social networks. The act of self-presentation through virtual social networks is motivated by the consumers' need of belonging and their need for establishing statuses (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

Accordingly, some authors have mentioned that users build a digital identity through virtual social networks by projecting similarities or digital associations with other users, since they wish to perceive the feeling of belonging on the internet (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Schau and Gilly (2003) suggested that the projection of identities in the digital world has a strong relationship

with consumption. Users tend to show on the internet the things they buy. Thus, consumers go beyond the frontiers of the physical world when they reinforce their self-concept through consumption. Also, they project their living experiences as a part of their identity, which characterizes them in relation to their possessions (Stephen, 2016).

In addition, it is shown in the literature how symbolic meanings of experiences influence consumers' evaluation before their final decision. For instance, a consumer's choice of a tourism destination can be perceived as a symbol of status. It can also be perceived as a reinforcement of an identity. For example: *"I have an educated mind since I like to discover and understand different cultures; I saw what most people wish to see, but they cannot, etc."* (Martín & Torres, 2013, p. 4). As mentioned above, this drives consumers to evaluate their experience consumption alternatives based on their symbolic meanings (Sun et al., 2014).

Also, some consumers use technology to reinforce their identities, by projecting their experiences through posting pictures, comments on social networks, etc., in order to satisfy their need of self-expression and self-presentation (Ahuvia, 2005). Some authors have mentioned that consumers perceive the need to show their experiences through digital social networks with a social goal in mind (Belk, 2016; Stephen, 2016).

Thus, consumers will desire to show the experience if it is congruent with the image they want to show to their peer groups (Martín & Torres, 2013). In other words, they will probably show more of the experience when it is congruent with their self-concept (Belk, 2016; Kim, Lee, & Bonn, 2015). Based on these affirmations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H4. Experience self-congruency directly and positively influences the intensity of the use of digital social networks.

Finally, consumers may want to keep in touch with other people with whom they shared a bond during their experience and, in order to do so, they may use their social networks (Nusair, Bilgihan, & Okumus, 2013). Therefore, the social value created by the interaction during the experience with other consumers may influence the use of social media (Rihova, Buhalis, Moital, & Gouthro, 2015). Also, when consumers perceived that an experience provided them social value, they will probably use social media to talk about a topic of interest with other geographically dispersed friends (Nusair et al., 2013). Hence, it can be proposed that a higher rate of perceived value and satisfaction leads to an increase in the intensity of the use of digital social networks, since the consumer will want to talk more about it (Barber, 2015; Riper, Riper, Kyle, & Lee, 2013). Based on these affirmations, the next hypotheses are proposed:

- H5. The perceived value of the experience directly and positively influences the intensity of the use of digital social networks.
- H6. Satisfaction directly and positively influences the intensity of the use of digital social networks.

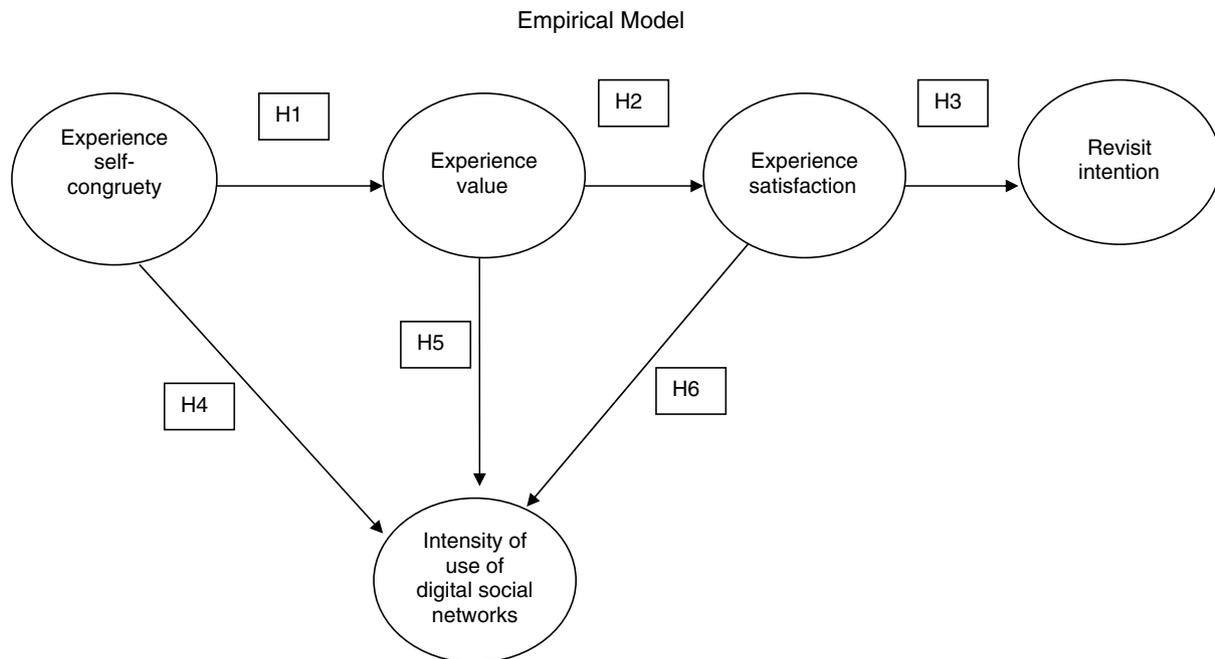


Figure 1 Empirical model.

Source: Own elaboration.

Fig. 1 shows the empirical model, based on the hypotheses of this research.

Methodology

Data collection

An exploratory research was performed in order to achieve the proposed goals and to contrast the hypotheses. More precisely, a quantitative research was carried out by using a structured survey and personal interviews. The universe of the study was based on students of the University of Valencia (Spain) who came back recently from their vacations. The selection of the sample was performed by non-probability sampling trials.

The students were interviewed in different places around the university (the cafeteria of the campus, places where they relax near the library and other resting spots in the campus of the university). The interviewer explained them that the survey was a part of a project conducted by the University of Seville, and they were invited to participate in the study. As a result, 380 valid surveys were collected during October of 2013, near the longest vacation time in Spain for students: summer vacation (months of July, August and September).

Questionnaire design

In order to introduce the respondents, the questionnaire explained them that the survey was a part of a project

conducted by the University of Seville, and invited them to participate in the study. Subsequently, two filter questions were asked to know: (1) if they traveled for holidays at least one time in the last two months (in case the answer was "no" respondents were asked to stop completing the survey); and (2) if during or after their vacations they posted pictures, videos or comments about the trip on their social network sites (100% of the respondents used some digital social network in order to show their experiences during and after their vacations).

After that, respondents were asked to remember their trip and to answer the questions of the questionnaire, formed by scales related to the constructs of this study. These scales were selected from the literature review.

Table 3 presents the items of the scales used to measure every construct:

As shown in Table 3, the scale by Sirgy et al. (1995) was adapted to this study in order to measure experience self-congruity. As it can be observed, the scale is formed by five items that measure the perceived congruency between the experience and the consumer's self-concept.

The social dimension of the scale by Sweeney and Soutar (2001) was adapted to measure perceived social value. As it is shown in Table 3, the scale is formed by four items that measure the value that the consumer perceives of the experience from the social perspective (social acceptance, others' perception of the experience, impression created and social approval).

Subsequently, the three items of the scale by McCollough, Berry, and Yadav (2000) was used to measure consumers' satisfaction with the experience.

Table 3 Items of the scales.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Self-congruence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I completely identify myself with the tourism experience I lived during my last trip • This tourism experience is a lot like me • This tourism experience reflects what I am • Living this kind of tourism experience is consistent with how I like to see myself • The experience I lived corresponds to how I like to see myself |
| Perceived social value | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This tourism experience helps me to feel acceptable • This tourism experience improves the way I am perceived • This tourism experience makes a good impression on other people • This tourism experience gives me social approval |
| Satisfaction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, I am satisfied with the experience • This experience met my vacation needs very well • This experience made me feel very satisfied |
| Intensity of used of social networks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uploading information about the tourism experience I lived in my social network was an important part of my daily routine during and after my trip • I was proud of people reading and watching the information I uploaded in my social network about the tourism experience I lived • During my trip and after it, using my social network to talk about my trip was an important activity for me, every day • I felt out of touch when I couldn't log onto my social network during and after my trip in order to give information about it • During and after my trip I felt I was giving information to a social community that we have created in our social network • I would be sorry if my social network shut down and I couldn't give information about my trips |
| Intention to revisit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I intent to revisit the destination of my last trip in order to live this tourism experience again |

The scale by [Ellison et al. \(2007\)](#) was used to measure the intensity of the use of digital social networks. This scale is formed by six items that measure the intensity of the use of social media during and after the tourism experience, in order to share information and to create virtual content.

Finally, the scale by [Jones, Mothersbaugh, and Beatty \(2000\)](#) was used to measure revisit intention. As it can be observed in [Table 3](#), one item was used to measure consumers' intention to return to the same destination and to live the tourism experience one more time.

Respondent answered to each item in a Likert scale of seven points (from 1 – totally disagree to 7 – totally agree).

Finally, the respondents were asked to answer the questions related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample. These questions were presented in the last part of the questionnaire. Here, the respondents gave information about their gender, age, study level and job situation.

According to this information, 57% of the respondents were women and 43% were men. The age of the respondents varied considerably, but more than 90% of the sample was between 20 and 35 years old. More than 75% of the respondents were studying at under degree level and less than 30% had a job.

Methodology used for data analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, the reliability and the validity of the scales were verified by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using EQS 6.1. The methodology of the structural equation models (SEM) was used with EQS 6.1, in order to

evaluate the structural model and to estimate the set of coefficients for the causal relations between variables.

Results

Measurement instrument validation

This section presents an analysis of the reliability, the convergent validity and the discriminant validity of the scales used in the study.

[Table 4](#) shows the reliability and the convergent validity of the scales. The factor loads and *t*-values of every item are indicated in the table. The three last columns of [Table 4](#) show the Cronbach's alpha, the composed reliability index and the average variance extracted regarding every scale.

As it can be observed in [Table 4](#), convergent validity is demonstrated since all items were found to have significant factor loads over 0.60 ([Bagozzi & Yi, 1988](#)) and the Lagrange multipliers test did not suggest significant relations for a factor other than those for which they were indicators ([Hatcher, 1994](#)). However this test suggested the elimination of item 3 of the self-congruency scale, in order to improve the model fit. After this change, as it can be seen in the final part of [Table 4](#), the measurement model showed good fit.

Reliability was measured by Cronbach's alpha. The threshold value for this coefficient is 0.70, what guarantees internal consistency of the scales ([Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994](#)). As [Table 4](#) shows, all Cronbach's alpha were above the recommended 0.70 ([Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994](#)).

Table 4 Reliability and convergent validity.

| Factor | Indicator | Load | Robust t | Cronbach's α | CR | AVE |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|---------|----------|---------------------|-------|-------|
| Satisfaction | SAT1 | 0.775** | 7011 | 0.725 | 0.701 | 0.655 |
| | SAT2 | 0.897** | 7072 | | | |
| | SAT3 | 0.750** | 6077 | | | |
| Self-congruity | CON1 | 0.762** | 8.885 | 0.707 | 0.706 | 0.662 |
| | CON2 | 0.779** | 17,101 | | | |
| | CON4 | 0.913** | 10,146 | | | |
| | CON5 | 0.792** | 13,554 | | | |
| | RED1 | 0.796** | 5659 | | | |
| Intensity of use of social networks | RED2 | 0.717** | 7790 | 0.715 | 0.759 | 0.731 |
| | RED3 | 0.985** | 9408 | | | |
| | RED4 | 0.853** | 6457 | | | |
| | RED5 | 0.765** | 9356 | | | |
| | RED6 | 0.979** | 10,275 | | | |
| Revisit intention | INREC | 0.907** | 9208 | - | 0.836 | 0.822 |
| | VALS1 | 0.768** | 9017 | | | |
| Experience value | VALS2 | 0.779** | 12,609 | 0.920 | 0.722 | 0.682 |
| | VALS3 | 0.905** | 10,380 | | | |
| | VALS4 | 0.846** | 18,817 | | | |

Source: Own elaboration.

N = 380; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; N/A = not computed; $\chi^2 = 2956.707$; NNFI = 0.957; CFI = 0.968; IFI = 0.969; RMSEA = 0.073.

Table 5 Discriminant validity.

| | Satisfaction | Congruency | Intensity | Revisit | Exp. value |
|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Satisfaction | 0.655 | (0.067–0.203) | (0.153–0.253) | (0.608–0.840) | (0.11–0.33) |
| Congruency | 0.018 | 0.662 | (0.192–0.301) | (0.085–0.161) | (0.091–0.387) |
| Intensity | 0.041 | 0.060 | 0.731 | (0.061–0.277) | (0.139–0.219) |
| Revisit | 0.541 | 0.015 | 0.028 | 0.822 | (0.352–0.788) |
| Exp. value | 0.048 | 0.571 | 0.032 | 0.324 | 0.682 |

Source: Own elaboration.

The diagonal represents the average variance extracted AVE. Above the diagonal is the 95% confidence interval for the inter-factor correlations. Below the diagonal is the variance shared by each pair of factors (squared correlation).

The composed reliability index was also calculated. As it can be observed in Table 4, for all values, this index was over the recommended 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Finally, Table 4 shows how average variance extracted (AVE) values were over 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This information indicates the reliability and the convergent validity of the scales.

Subsequently, Table 5 shows two methods in order to measure the discriminant validity of the scales: (1) confidence interval for the inter-factor correlations, which is presented above the diagonal in the table; and (2) the variance shared by each pair of factors, in this case presented below the diagonal in the table. The diagonal shows the average variance extracted (AVE).

As it can be observed in Table 5, none of the 95% confidence intervals for correlation estimations between the pairs of factors contained the value 1 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Secondly, the table shows how the variance shared between each pair of constructs (squared correlation) was below the corresponding variance extracted indexes (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This means discriminant validity can be accepted.

Estimation of the conceptual model

Table 6 shows verification of the hypotheses for the whole sample. The table presents three columns. The first column indicates the relation between constructs. The second column presents the standardized coefficients. And the last column of the table indicates the t-value regarding every

Table 6 Hypotheses testing.

| Relation | β | (t) |
|--|---------|-------|
| H1: Self-congruity \rightarrow Exp. value | 0.330** | 5.728 |
| H2: Exp. value \rightarrow Satisfaction | 0.358** | 5.542 |
| H3: Satisfaction \rightarrow Revisit Intention | 0.888** | 7.672 |
| H4: Self-congruity \rightarrow Social Net. Use | 0.422** | 4.196 |
| H5: Exp. value \rightarrow Social Net. Use | 0.262** | 2.665 |
| H6: Satisfaction \rightarrow Social Net. Use | 0.314** | 3.122 |

Source: Own elaboration.

N = 150; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; N/A = not computed; $\chi^2 = 329.241$; NNFI = 0.908; CFI = 0.921; IFI = 0.920; RMSEA = 0.092.

relation of constructs. Finally, the last part of the table includes the model fit after the relation of the constructs.

It can be observed in [Table 6](#) that the six hypotheses are supported, since the *t*-values are in all cases superior than 2.56, in connection with significantly high standardized coefficients.

Thus, higher congruency between experience and identity leads to a higher experience value (H1 supported); higher experience value leads to a higher satisfaction (H2 supported); higher satisfaction leads to revisit intention (H3 supported); higher congruency between experience and identity leads to a higher intensity of use of digital social networks (H4 supported); and both higher experience value and higher satisfaction leads to an increase in the intensity of the use of social networks (H5 and H6 supported).

Discussion

Observing the results, it can be indicated that, when there is congruency between the consumer's image and the experience, this congruency leads to a higher perceived value of the experience (Hypothesis 1). Thus, assuming that the majority of research in the marketing literature focuses on material objects when analysing symbolic consumption ([Zang & Kim, 2013](#)), results related to Hypothesis 1 strengthen affirmations by [Serra \(2013\)](#), [Ekinci et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Sun et al. \(2014\)](#). They pointed out that the relationship between self-congruity and perceived value could be applied in the analysis of the consumption of experiences.

Similarly, it was indicated in the literature that higher perceived value leads to a higher consumer's satisfaction and a higher satisfaction leads to revisit intention ([Sun et al., 2014](#); [Zang & Kim, 2013](#)). Results related to Hypotheses 2 and 3 strengthen these affirmations in the context of the present research.

Also, a question arose during the review of the construct "symbolic consumption": how can consumers reinforce their identities through the consumption of experiences? Based on the affirmations in some studies of the literature, an answer emerged: digital social networks seem to be the tools through which consumers try to materialize their experiences.

As it was observed during the literature review, some authors affirmed that the act of self-presentation on digital social networks is based on consumers' need for belonging to peer groups. They also use social media in order to reinforce their identities ([Maldonado, 2012](#); [Martín & Torres, 2013](#)). Therefore, the congruency between an experience and the consumer's self-image influences the intensity of the use of digital social networks. In addition, it can be observed that a high perceived value and satisfaction can lead to an increase in the intensity of the use of digital social networks. These affirmations align with Hypotheses 4, 5 and 6.

Conclusions and managerial implications

This research focuses on the analysis of symbolic consumption of experiences and the use of digital social networks. Results show that the decisions made by customers in order to reinforce their identities can be extended to the consumption of memorable experiences.

In this context, some consumers feel the need to show their consumption of experiences, and they may do it currently using a tool that permits them to materialize something as intangible as an experience. As mentioned above, during the analysis of the results, many consumers use digital social networks to create digital content when they feel congruency between their identities and the experience. Also, the use of social media might increase due to the value and satisfaction the consumer perceives from the experience.

When it comes to the managerial implications of these findings, it is important to indicate that companies need to present their offer in an environment which enables multiple emotions for the client. This means, memorable experiences, including the sensations associated with the identity of the company- as well as the products and services they provide.

In this context, it is especially important to take into consideration the consumers' identities. Companies can offer their clients experiences in an environment where they can reinforce their self-image (by showing their consumption to others). This might lead to consumers perceiving higher value and satisfaction, which positively influences the revisit intention.

Also, companies that offer memorable experiences could facilitate the access to resources that help their customers in materializing the experience. For example, in some theaters or museums in which taking pictures is not permitted, it might be possible that consumers desire to show what they saw, but they will not be able to do it if they do not have the resources to recreate the experience on the internet, and then, they may feel less satisfied.

Also, it seems very important to improve the relationship between clients who consume the same experience, especially when they live the experience at the same time. Thus, the consumers will probably share ideas, interests, a lifestyle and even an identity. If the company achieves to create an environment where clients share emotions with each other, this could improve the existing use of social networks.

In addition, companies could make use of the consumers' social networks as tools to interact with their clients. Companies need to improve their relationship through the internet with clients who lived a memorable experience, in order to obtain a greater revisit intention.

Limitations and future lines of research

This research has some limitations mainly related with the selected group, since a convenience sampling was performed and it was circumscribed to students in the city of Valencia.

This limitation makes it difficult to extrapolate the results to every experience or every type of consumer. Therefore, it would be interesting to observe the results obtained from the approach of this research applied to different profiles of people surveyed, and in different situations. For example, tourists surveyed during their holidays.

Another limitation refers to the fact that the respondents of this survey were students. This is a limitation regarding the analysis of the results based on socio-demographic

characteristics. The respondents share country of origin, age and level of education. It would be interesting to perform this kind of research including differences between consumers based on their socio-demographic characteristics.

In addition, tourism is just one type of experience offered in the market. It would be interesting to examine these variables in other environments. For example: in a sport event or a music concert.

Finally, this research took into consideration a series of constructs in order to connect self-congruity and digital social networks with perceived value, consumer's satisfaction and the revisit intention. However, it would be interesting to include variables such as perceived quality, word of mouth or consumer's loyalty. This would increase the knowledge of symbolic consumption in the area of consumption of experiences.

Conflict of interest

None.

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