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The effect of culture in forming e-loyalty intentions: A cross-cultural analysis between Argentina and Spain



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Abstract In order to increase their markets, many companies are starting e-commerce internationalization processes that involve dealing with cultural differences among countries. Although most firms start internationalization strategies to similar countries, previous research has mainly focused on understanding expansion to countries with a great cultural distance. This study analyzes the relevance of culture in the formation of e-loyalty intentions in Argentina and Spain, two countries with slight cultural differences. Specifically, culture is proposed as a moderator of e-service quality and satisfaction effects on e-loyalty intentions. Results confirm that the influence of e-service quality on e-loyalty intentions is greater for Argentinian consumers (a little more individualistic, masculine, and less pragmatic culture compared to Spain). Besides, a greater influence of satisfaction on e-loyalty is found for Spanish consumers (a more pragmatic, collectivistic, and feminine culture compared to Argentina). The introduction of socio-demographic control variables, i.e. gender, age and education level, support the moderation effect of culture. According to these results, marketers should note that e-loyalty formation process differs across cultures, even between similar cultures. Further implications for international marketing strategies are widely discussed.

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Introduction

In addition to the increasing globalization (Martín Armario et al., 2009), the current economic depression in many countries is favoring business' internationalization. There are more and more companies that find external markets as a solution to compensate the failing of internal demand. For instance, around 40% of Spanish SME (Small and Medium Enterprises) expect a revenue increase in their exports in the next three years, so that exports will represent up to 40% of SME total revenues (Oxford Economics, 2013). Using online channels constitutes a suitable internationalization strategy due to e-commerce related benefits and its unavoidable growth year by year (transactions' value of \$1 trillion for first time in 2012, eMarketer, 2013). However, internationalization of commercial activities is not an easy task, given the considerable uncertainties and barriers associated with operating internationally (Clark and Pugh, 2001; Jiménez Castillo et al., 2013).

The analysis of the determinants of consumer intentions in a service internationalization context is quite novel. Indeed, researchers started to dedicate great efforts to this topic (e.g. Brady et al., 2001), especially after the appearance of e-commerce (Knight, 1999). Focusing on internationalization by online channels, previous research has confirmed that e-commerce adaptation to markets with high cultural differences is crucial to achieve success (e.g. De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002). Previous literature also suggests that the influence of cultural aspects is greater in the service industry (Riddle, 1992) and that the factors that determine consumer choices in a service environment are context specific (Pucik and Katz, 1986). Nevertheless, it should be noted that companies, especially SME, initiate their internationalization processes by exporting to culturally more proximal markets (Clark and Pugh, 2001). Trade with consumers from similar cultures could involve many advantages such as relying on well-established culture-based trade areas (e.g. Commonwealth, Latin America, South-west Asia), sharing the same language, better understanding consumers' habits and values, or reducing uncertainty (Clark and Pugh, 2001). Despite the interest of analyzing exchange between markets with similar cultures, research studying internationalization has mostly focused just on commercial exchange between culturally distant countries (e.g. Puja and Yukti, 2011). Our study aims to fill this gap of extant literature by analyzing to what extent the differences in the e-loyalty formation process between similar cultures may affect to internationalization success. Specifically, a company initiating exportation to a culturally near country may use its already existing system (e.g. using the same website design, offering the same products), but the perceptions and reactions to this commercial strategy may differ between national and international consumers. Our research proposes that consumers' response and behaviors toward the same commercial strategy may differ between cultures, even when cultural differences between markets are small. To expand knowledge on this insight, our research focuses on e-commerce development between Spain and Argentina; that is, Spanish online firms expanding their activities to Argentina or vice versa. The selection of these two countries is based on their cultural

similarities (e.g. Hofstede, 2001) and their close commercial bonds. For example, Argentina ranks third in sales to and fourth in purchases from Spain among Latin-American countries (ICEX, 2014), many companies have investments and operate online in both countries (e.g. Santander Bank), and new collaborative institution such as the CEAES (Cámara Empresarial Argentina en España) has been created to promote commerce between Argentinian and Spain in both ways.

With the aim of providing practical implications for management, our research focuses on e-commerce loyalty determinants, and analyzes to what extent their influence may be moderated by culture. Nevertheless, it should be considered an exploratory research given the lack of theoretical or empirical works devoted to investigate the effect of culture in e-commerce companies operating in countries with slight cultural differences, as it is the case of Spain and Argentina. Specifically, we propose that cultural differences between these countries affect the relationships between three key variables in consumer behavior in the online context: e-service quality, satisfaction and loyalty intentions (e.g. Harris and Goode, 2004). Previous literature (e.g. Bloemer et al., 1998; Cronin et al., 2000; Harris and Goode, 2004; Lai et al., 2009) offers contradictory results with respect to the relationship between these constructs, suggesting that the relevance of the antecedents of loyalty may depend on differences between markets (Oliver, 1999). To clarify this aspect, some authors have analyzed the relationships between these variables conducting cross-cultural studies in the offline context (e.g. Puja and Yukti, 2011). In the online context, previous studies already suggest that either cultural differences as a whole (e.g. Jin et al., 2008; Kassim and Abdullah, 2010), either specific cultural dimensions such as individualism (Steenkamp and Geyskens, 2006), uncertainty avoidance, or long-term orientation (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002) affect e-loyalty formation process. However, the vast majority of these works are theoretical (e.g. De Mooij and Hofstede, 2002) or focus on highly distant countries in terms of culture dimensions like the United States and South Korea (e.g. Jin et al., 2008), or the United States and India (Puja and Yukti, 2011).

In sum, our research contributes to the emerging body of literature on online internationalization by investigating to what extent slight cultural differences between two Spanish speaking countries with close commercial bonds (Spain and Argentina) may affect online consumer behavior. Specifically, we propose that cultural differences moderate the effects of e-service quality and satisfaction on loyalty intentions. Thus, this research aims to help e-marketers in their decisions to whether invest in e-service quality or in consumers' satisfaction to increase e-loyalty depending on markets' culture. This may be of great interest since the empirical evidence indicates that companies use to expand their businesses in the Latin American market by introducing just minor adaptation of their services to the different cultures (Brenes et al., 2013).

The remaining of this article is structured as follows. First, we review literature examining the relationships between service quality, satisfaction and loyalty, in order to better understand the role of culture in this framework. Then, the hypotheses formulation section describes the

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