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# Why male and female shoppers do not see mall loyalty through the same lens? The mediating role of self-congruity

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## ABSTRACT

What factors drive mall loyalty of male and female shoppers? A literature-based model was tested in two North American shopping malls (regular and upscale) with 905 shoppers (476 women and 429 men). The findings reveal that atmosphere affects mall loyalty and shoppers' identification with the mall. In the case of male shoppers, the drivers of mall loyalty are mall atmosphere, prices, and identification with the mall. With female shoppers, the drivers are mall's atmosphere, its physical design, and the perceived quality of products and services. The findings should guide managers in the allocation of resources to enhance mall image and attract more male shoppers.

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## 1. Gender, environment and mall loyalty

Shopping malls embrace retail establishments as diverse as neighborhood and community centers (e.g., Cornelius, Oregon) catering to limited trade areas for convenience purposes; theme and festival centers (e.g., Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota) providing entertainment; and “manufacturers” outlet centers (e.g., Reading, Pennsylvania).

A common problem of malls of all types and sizes is their relative decline over the years (BloombergBusiness, 2015). Since 2009, the general press has been replete with stories about “dead malls”. The popular website [deadmalls.com](http://deadmalls.com) reported nearly 300 dead or dying shopping malls in the United States. How to avoid the death spiral becomes a key issue for mall managers.

Identification with the mall is one of the strategic levers that contribute to attracting shoppers and keeping them loyal. Shoppers enjoy shopping at malls they identify with, and that reflects their personal identity (El Hedhli, Chebat, & Sirgy, 2013). This study focuses on the factors that affect identification with the mall, which in turn affects mall loyalty.

Scholars have recognized that gender is an important individual difference variable especially in shopping contexts (Otnes & McGrath,

2001; Noble, Griffith, & Adjei, 2006; McCrory & Mitsis, 2013). This study contributes to the literature by an investigation of factors that influence male (vs. female) shoppers' identification with a mall.

Since malls traditionally have been designed for women (Underhill, 2004), it is no wonder that male shoppers account for only 33% of the shopping mall clientele (ICSC, 2012). To attract more men, mall managers need to understand which factors contribute to enhancing malls' loyalty for men in comparison with women. This question is especially relevant since malls represent 53.6% of the retail sector (ICSC, 2014), and research on retail venues has rarely examined shopping malls specifically (Evans, Christiansen, & Gill, 1996).

Based on the literature review, this study proposes that gender moderates the relations between mall environmental cues and the three major perceptual constructs (i.e., service quality, merchandise quality and price). In turn, these perceptual constructs affect mall loyalty. The proposed model also includes the mediating role identification with the mall captured by self-congruity.

The following sections provide the conceptual foundations for the research hypotheses and present the research data.

## 2. Conceptual framework: the drivers of mall loyalty

### 2.1. Model overview

The two basic tenets of the proposed model are the following. (1) The environmental cues of the shopping mall affect the three mall-related perceptual constructs (i.e., price, product, and service

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quality) through self-congruity, which in turn affects mall loyalty. (2) Shoppers gender moderates these relations.

Baker (Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002) considers three factors as environmental antecedents of shoppers' behavior: physical design, ambient factors or atmosphere, and social factors. Design represents the functional (layout, comfort) and esthetic dimensions (architecture, color, materials). The ambient factors are a combination of cues that affect the senses (e.g., scents, music, lighting, temperature). The social factors include all human interactions between shoppers and service personnel. Ambience and design have an impact on (1) the store image, (2) the emotional link with the store and (3) the amount of money spent (e.g., Turley & Milliman, 2000).

Baker et al. (2002) consider that these three environmental factors affect the three perceptual constructs (i.e., service quality, merchandise quality and price perception). In other words, environmental cues convey a meaning about prices and product or service quality, which affect mall loyalty. However, the extant research does not specify which environmental cues affect which perceptual constructs.

The model suggests that these perceptual constructs affect mall loyalty (Fig. 1). It hypothesizes that identification with the mall captured by self-congruity plays a key mediating role between the environmental factors and the three perceptual constructs (Fig. 2), as proposed by the retailing literature reviewed below. This research focuses on the moderating role of gender since males and females are likely to react in different ways to malls' environmental cues.

The next sections examine the mediating and moderating hypotheses on the relationship between the dependent construct (i.e., mall loyalty), the additional mediating construct (self-congruity with the mall) and the moderating effects of gender.

## 2.2. Mall image

While the retailing literature includes many studies related to store image (e.g., Chebat, Sirgy, & St-James, 2006; Darden & Babin, 1994; Kunkel & Berry, 1968), few researchers have dealt with the specific issue of mall image (e.g., Chebat et al., 2006; Downs & Haynes, 1984; El Hedhli & Chebat, 2009).

The extant literature shows that shoppers infer mall image from (1) the reputation and selection of retail tenants (Babin, Chebat, & Michon, 2004); (2) the quality of the offer (services, prices, opening

hours, products); (3) physical layout, including design, ease of circulating, visual appearance, and perceived crowding (Downs, 1970); and (4) ambient atmosphere (Howell & Rogers, 1980). Though mall image is a critical determinant of consumer patronage decisions (Finn & Louviere, 1996; Sit, Merrilees, & Birch, 2003), mall loyalty is a more relevant concept in the present research, as shown in the following paragraphs. However, the effects of mall image on mall loyalty are not direct; they are mediated by shoppers' identification with the mall.

## 3. The role of shoppers' identification with the mall

The current research posits that self-identification affects shoppers' attraction to a particular mall. Shoppers' identification with the mall is the degree to which shoppers see themselves as the kind of person for whom the mall is designed.

Self-identification with the store is a major element in the shopping literature. It affects brand preference, choice, satisfaction (e.g., El Hedhli et al., 2013; Sirgy et al., 1997; Sirgy & Johar, 1999); buying processes (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987); store preference (Stern, Bush, & Hair, 1977); attitude toward preferred stores (Sirgy et al., 1997; Sirgy & Johar, 1999); and the perceived quality of the stores located within the mall (Chebat et al., 2006).

Shoppers infer characteristics of the mall's typical shoppers (e.g., social class, gender, generation, and lifestyle) from retail environment cues and compare store image with their own self-image. Shoppers' identification with stores depends on certain environmental characteristics, such as promotions, location, service, price and atmosphere (Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg, 2000). The mediating role of self-congruity has been shown empirically in the stores' context (Chebat et al., 2006): "the higher the self-congruity the more likely the stores would be perceived as being high quality." The extant literature does not indicate which of the three mall environment components (design, employees, and atmosphere) affect shopper identification with the mall.

## 4. Gender as a moderating factor

Gender is a major element in the shopping literature: "Gender is the only successful demographic variable" explaining why women are more frequent shoppers than men (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006: 238). From the female lens, shopping is a social and pleasurable activity. Males are more achievement oriented and mostly see shopping as a task or

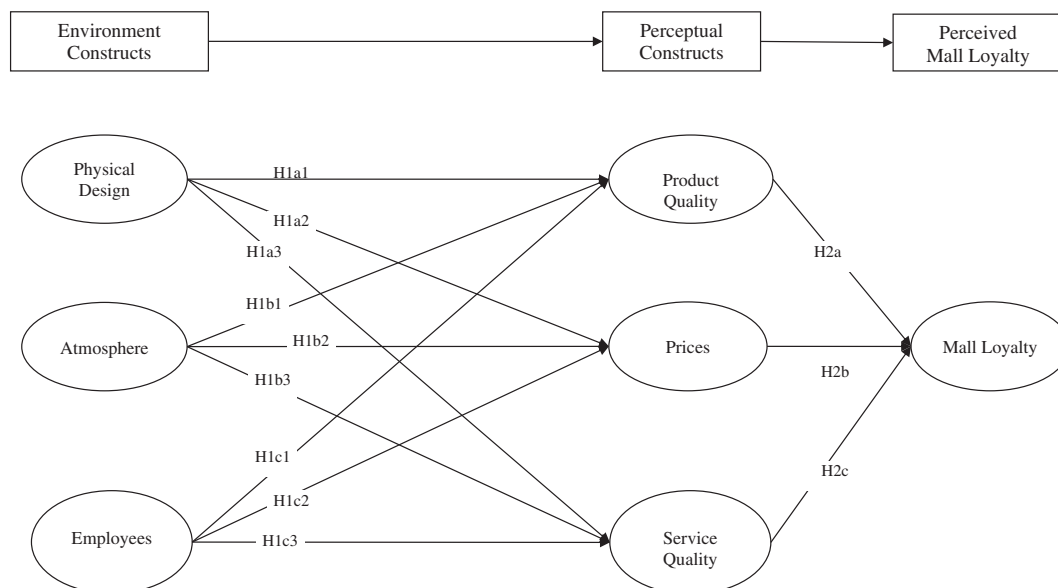


Fig. 1. Research hypotheses (basic model).

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