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### ARTICLE

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

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#### KEYWORDS

Symbolic consumption;  
Perceived social value;  
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#### PALABRAS CLAVE

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

**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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#### 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.

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