



How do restaurant atmospherics influence restaurant authenticity? An integrative framework and empirical evidence

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ABSTRACT

The study proposes an integrative conceptualization to capture the theoretical notion of perceived restaurant authenticity (PRA). It conceptualizes PRA as a multidimensional construct consisting of four dimensions. Furthermore, the study proposes a conceptual model that includes three main restaurant atmospheric aspects (i. e., design, ambiance, and social) as exogenous antecedents affecting the four restaurant authenticity dimensions. These PRA dimensions are hypothesized to positively influence restaurant attachment, which in turn, positively predicts restaurant patronage. To test the proposed model, structural equation modeling (SEM) is applied to data collected from patrons of two dining restaurants. The results are broadly supportive of the proposed model. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Authenticity is of paramount importance in dining experiences (Kovács et al., 2014a,b). No wonder that diners are concerned with the increasing commercialization and homogeneity of restaurants, and are longing for dining establishments that are meaningful and authentic (Le et al., 2019). From a scholarly standpoint, the restaurant authenticity construct has not been fully developed and still attracts debatable viewpoints concerning its conceptualizations (e.g., Belhassen et al., 2008). In fact, although there is a consensus that authenticity is a multifaceted phenomenon, scrutiny of the existing research¹ in relation to restaurants indicates that the majority of studies have examined authenticity based on one single authenticity perspective. Particularly, food-related concepts received more research attention and several other aspects of the dining experience have been overlooked (Le et al., 2019). It is critical to take into account the multidimensionality of the dining experience for a better understanding of the authenticity phenomenon (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016).

Furthermore, the authenticity measurements identified in the extant research are context-specific,² and very few studies attempted to establish a general comprehensive authenticity measurement irrespective of the dining context (Kovács et al., 2014a,b). Notably,

authenticity in the context of restaurants has been overwhelmingly tackled from an ethnic perspective, leading to the erroneous assumption that authenticity is only important in cultural and ethnic dining settings. This should not be the case inasmuch as diners equally appreciate the authenticity of a dining establishment as a whole through, for example, the authentic projections of the restaurant's values (Albrecht, 2011) and authentic service delivery (Matthews et al., 2020).

In a recent systematic review of research on restaurant authenticity, Le et al. (2019) pointedly called for research aiming at establishing an integrated multi-dimensional approach to investigating authenticity in restaurants. Particularly, research on the drivers of perceived authenticity in the restaurants sector is limited (Le et al., 2019). The current research aims to address these voids by proposing an integrative framework and a multidimensional measurement of authenticity in dining settings and by emphasizing the role of restaurant atmospherics in shaping consumers' perceptions of a restaurant authenticity. More precisely, this research will endeavor to address: (1) What is perceived restaurant authenticity (PRA hereafter)? (2) How do the restaurant atmospherics influence restaurant authenticity perceptions? (3) What are the consequences of restaurant authenticity to restaurant management?

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we offer a comprehensive conceptualization of PRA. Next, we will propose an

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¹ In appendix 1, we provide a summary review of key studies dealt with the concept of authenticity in dining settings.

² Various labels have been used to refer to authenticity such as food authenticity, employee authenticity, authentic menu offered, culture authenticity, general authenticity, etc. (Le et al., 2019).

integrative conceptual framework to address how the restaurant atmospherics influence PRA and what are the consequences of PRA to restaurant management. We then describe the methodology and report the study's findings. Finally, we close with a general discussion of the findings and its theoretical and managerial implications along with the study's limitations as well as directions for future research.

2. Conceptualizing PRA

2.1. An overview of the concept of authenticity

Authenticity signifies a panoply of things such as originality, heritage, credibility, consistency, and innocence (Wang, 1999). That is, authenticity is a complex concept lending itself to multi-interpretations and its scope can be better apprehended through different lenses. Notably, three main perspectives—objectivist, constructivist, and existentialist—have been considered in the extant literature to conceptualize authenticity. The objective view of authenticity is related to the characteristics depicting the originality and truthfulness of an object, and its ability to fulfill its claim or promise (MacCannell, 1973). The constructive view emphasizes the ethnographic nature of authenticity; authenticity perceptions stem from social bases—i.e., culture, social norms—as well as from philosophical foundations—i.e., beliefs, ideologies—(Leigh et al., 2006). Finally, the existential authenticity reflects the emotional connection between the consumer and the consumption entity/experience (Arnould and Price, 2000), and the ability of the consumption entity in enabling individuals to be true to themselves (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006). Unlike prior restaurant research, the current research will adopt these three perspectives altogether to dismantle the nature of authenticity in restaurants.

2.2. Different lenses in understanding PRA

Taking into consideration the three authenticity-related perspectives, the present study proposes that PRA is derived from a restaurant's genuine identity (objectivist), its conferred sense or meaning (constructivist), and its symbolic connectedness with its customers (existentialist). The following sections deconstruct this idea.

2.2.1. The restaurant's genuine identity

Offerings should feature a particular symbolic meaning in order to be perceived as authentic (e.g., Leigh et al., 2006). The symbolic character of a dining establishment is manifested by the restaurant's purpose and values (e.g., Siguaw et al., 1999). The current study embraces the notion that a genuine representation or communication of a restaurant's purpose and values is instrumental in shaping PRA (cf. Yang and Battocchio, 2020). Furthermore, the consistency and continuity in featuring the restaurant's symbolic character across all its offerings and channels are essential in the restaurant's authenticity formation and preservation (cf. Beverland, 2006). In fact, the objective view implies that the perceived authenticity of a given entity or offering is related to the extent to which it has not underwent significant changes since its inception or introduction (Wang, 1999). Thus, it corresponds to the restaurant's capacity in preserving its original character over time.

2.2.2. The restaurant as a place of "sense making"

The authenticity of a given place is inferred from the sense or meaning an individual ascribes to that place (Brocato et al., 2015). Authenticity and places are two intertwined constructs in the realm of social constructivism denoting the notions of identity and meaning (Belhassen et al., 2008). Particularly, the meaning or sense of a given place is related to the inherent values that people attach to it (Spielmann et al., 2018). It follows that when a given commercial setting is endowed with certain values, it becomes a place of "sense" whereby consumers express their sense of engagement and relatedness (Brocato et al., 2015).

Postrel (2003) points out that authentic offerings endowed by a sort

of "sense" or "meaning" are contextualized in temporal and spatial frameworks. This implies that in order to ascribe a particular "sense" to a place, it is vital to construe the restaurant's symbolic character by considering temporal and spatial specificities. The constructive view implies that the restaurant's authenticity can be derived from constructing a symbolic character to the restaurant by epitomizing a particular culture, historical feature or era, or other symbolic meanings that consumers can relate to—which inherently makes it a "place of sense" that consumers perceive as authentic (e.g., Ebster and Guist, 2005). Hence, the constructive perspective corresponds to the restaurant's ability to genuinely stimulate an individual's imagination and make him/her feel that s/he has been transported into time and space (Ebster and Guist, 2005). Experiencing such a transformation or transcendence in a consumption setting leads a customer to ultimately judge the place as authentic (Chhabra, 2005; Spielmann et al., 2018).

2.2.3. The restaurant's symbolic connectedness

Being in an authentic place and consuming authentic offerings are instrumental in fulfilling one's belonging, connection and self-authentication needs (Arnould and Price, 2000; Spielmann et al., 2018). In this sense, an authentic restaurant is a place that resonates with an individual's state of being (cf. Spielmann et al., 2018). In fact, consumers dine in restaurants not only to get satisfactory meals, but also to express themselves and validate their self-images or identities (e.g., Ekinci and Riley, 2003). The existential view of authenticity implies that an individual relates to a particular place and genuinely experiences a sense of harmony between her/his state of being and the place (Handler and Saxton, 1988). Genuine feelings that a consumer experiences as a result of self-identification within a given place infuse a sentiment of gratitude and invoke a sense of authenticity (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006).

2.3. Defining PRA

The foregoing discussion suggests that the three views of authenticity can forge solid theoretical underpinnings for defining the restaurant authenticity construct. We define PRA as *the restaurant's ability to create, maintain, and genuinely communicate a timeless identity, construe a place of sense and meaning, and enable customers to experience a sense of self-connectedness*. Particularly, paralleling Morhart et al.'s (2015) conceptualization of perceived brand authenticity (PBA), the three above-mentioned perspectives are translated into four dimensions to empirically measure the perceived authenticity of restaurants. PRA emerges as long as *a customer perceives that the restaurant is truthful toward itself through exerting efforts in preserving its identity (continuity), true to its customers (credibility), guided by ethics and motivated by genuine social responsibility (integrity), and able to support customers in being true to themselves (symbolism)*.

2.4. Dimensions of PRA

2.4.1. Continuity

Restaurant continuity has to do with the restaurant's ability to be true toward itself by preserving its identity over time (cf. Morhart et al., 2015). According to Siguaw et al. (1999), the restaurant's personality entails the consistency in conveying the restaurant identity over time across various channels. Restaurants excessively embracing new trends that contradict its original identity are likely to be perceived as fake and phony (Pine and Gilmore, 2008). Restaurants can maintain their continuity by being faithful toward themselves through preserving their heritage and originality (Pine and Gilmore, 2008).

2.4.2. Credibility

Restaurant credibility has to do with the reliability of the information communicated to consumers and the consumers' trust in the restaurant to deliver on its value promises (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002).

Particularly, the restaurant’s credibility can be mainly inferred from its retail mix and marketing communications activities (Morhart et al., 2015; Orth et al., 2012).

2.4.3. Integrity

Restaurant integrity has to do with the moral values and the social responsibilities that the restaurant holds toward employees, consumers, and other communities. The effects of various restaurant’s social responsibility activities in shaping consumers’ perceptions of the restaurant’s integrity are well-established in the extant literature (e.g., Jones et al., 2007). The restaurant’s responsible civic acts infuse integrity perceptions among its customers and other stakeholders, which inherently influence its perceived authenticity (e.g., Mazutis and Slawinski, 2015).

2.4.4. Symbolism

Restaurant symbolism is the restaurant’s ability to support consumers in being true to themselves (cf. Morhart et al., 2015). In fact, consumers dine in restaurants that match their self-images and enhance their self-identification (Ekinci and Riley, 2003), help them in recognizing or transforming their identities (Ahuvia, 2005), and give them a sense of belonging (Williams, 2006). This study suggests that restaurant symbolism has to do with the restaurant’s ability to provide self-referential (e.g., self-congruity) elements for its consumers.

3. How do the restaurant atmospherics influence PRA?

3.1. Conceptual model

As depicted in Fig. 1, the study proposes that consumers infer the restaurant’s authenticity from various restaurant’s environmental elements (cf. Baker et al., 2002; Chebat and Morrin, 2007). That is, consumers are likely to use available cues in the dining establishment (i.e., social, design, and ambient cues) to make an evaluative judgment as to whether the restaurant is authentic or not. When consumers perceive a restaurant as authentic, they are likely to ultimately develop a sense of attachment to it. The resulting restaurant attachment, in turn, positively influences restaurant patronage in terms of generating consumers’

loyalty and positive word-of-mouth communications. The next sections articulate research hypotheses regarding the relationships between specific restaurant atmospherics elements, PRA dimensions, restaurant attachment, and restaurant patronage variables.

3.2. The effects of the restaurant atmospherics on PRA

3.2.1. Restaurant atmospherics

This study adopts Baker’s (1987) framework to conceptualize the restaurant atmospherics as involving three dimensions: social, design, and ambient factors.

3.2.1.1. Social factors. The social factors of the restaurant represent the human variables. The restaurant’s employees, through their appearances, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors play an important role in conveying the restaurant’s identity to customers (Harris and Ezeh, 2008). In fact, they represent the establishment’s “living brand” inasmuch they are the ones who carry and communicate its value (Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005). Furthermore, restaurant managers are exerting tremendous efforts in order to hire employees who are likely to exemplify and reinforce the restaurant’s identity (Liu and Jang, 2009a, b). Hence, we hypothesize:

H1a. The restaurant’s employees play a significant role in ensuring the restaurant’s continuity.

The employees’ honesty and competency positively influence patrons’ trust in the restaurant (Edinger-Schons et al., 2018). Persuasion research shows that source credibility is associated with source expertise and trustworthiness (e.g., Grewal et al., 1994). It is reasonable to argue that the more the restaurants’ employees display honesty, competency, and responsiveness, the more consumers perceive the restaurant as credible. From this H1b flows:

H1b. The restaurant’s employees significantly influence the restaurant’s credibility.

The restaurant’s employees are potent indicators of the restaurant’s commitment to act according to ethics (Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005). In fact, consumers observe the employees’ behavior in order to judge to which extent a given organization behaves in a socially

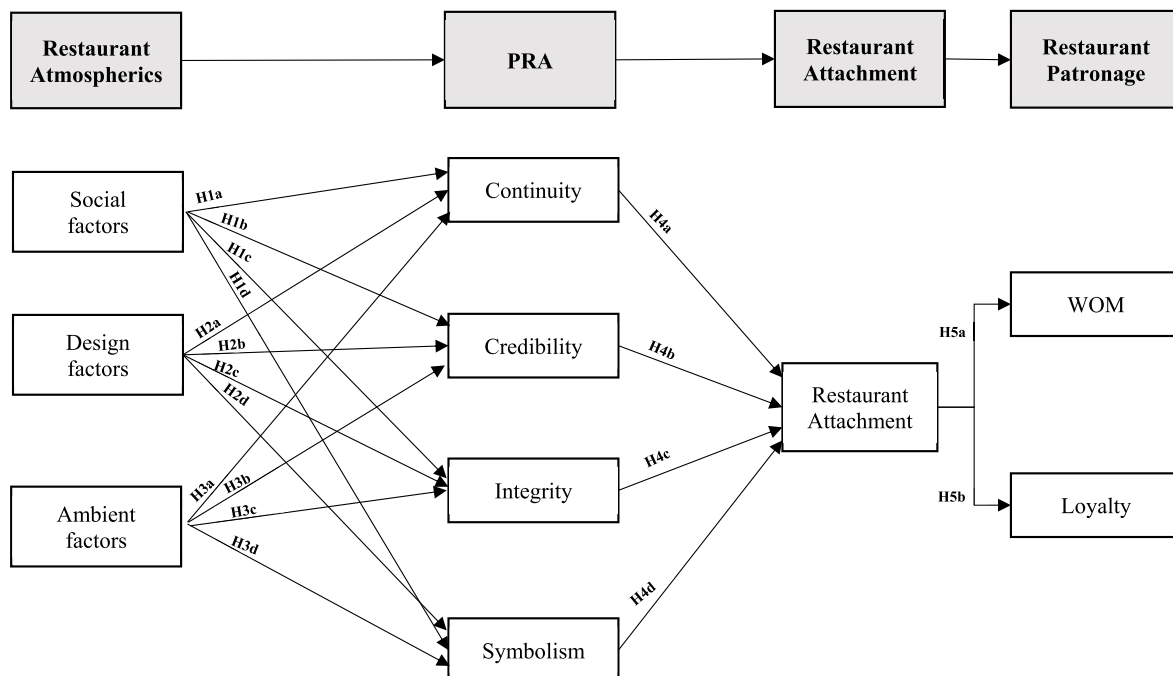


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

responsible manner (Edinger-Schons et al., 2018; Olk et al., 2021). It is also not uncommon that retailers portray their commitment to ethics and integrity to their consumers via their employees (Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1c. The restaurant's employees significantly influence the restaurant's integrity.

Employees' friendliness, empathy, and attentiveness toward customers foster customers' sense of belonging and relatedness to the restaurant, and boost consumers' self-esteem (Hanks and Line, 2018). Particularly, employees' actions and gestures are deemed instrumental in creating a sort of consumer-company identification manifested by meaningful relationships between the consumers and the company's employees (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Ultimately, the restaurant's employees serve as sources of identification and connectedness for consumers (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1d. The restaurant's employees significantly influence the restaurant's symbolism.

3.2.1.2. Design factors. The design factors represent the visual elements (e.g., style, décor, layout, and signage) of the service environment (Chebat et al., 2014). Pine and Gilmore (2008) point to the role of the tangible aspects of the service environment in preserving the establishment's heritage. Particularly, orchestrating the design factors of a given restaurant serves in creating its symbolic character and shaping consumers' impressions (Orth et al., 2012). In a related vein, Ryu et al. (2012) highlight that the restaurant's design elements are instrumental in consistently communicating and affirming the restaurant's distinct image. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2a. A restaurant's design (affirming its identity) enhances the perceived restaurant's continuity.

The cohesiveness of design factors tends to raise certainty about the restaurant's offerings and eliminate consumers' confusion (cf. Garaus et al., 2015). Indeed, a restaurant's design lacking coherence and unity makes consumers perceive it as chaotic and confusing (cf. Demoulin and Willems, 2019). The consistency in displaying harmonious design factors in a restaurant eliminate consumers' uncertainty and ultimately enhances its perceived sincerity and credibility (Pine and Gilmore, 2008). Hence, we hypothesize:

H2b. The restaurant's design factors are positively related to the restaurant's credibility.

A restaurant's ethicality can be conveyed through incorporating social responsibility themes within the restaurant's design (Jones et al., 2007). This can be manifested through the use of banners, signs, and symbols to showcase the restaurant's ethicality and moral values; or by setting decorative corners dedicated to support social causes or offer free educational tools and sessions (Jones et al., 2005). These efforts are appreciated by consumers as they enhance their perceptions of the restaurant's ethicality (Jones et al., 2007). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2c. The restaurant's design factors are significantly related to the restaurant's integrity.

Consumers tend to use the restaurant's visual elements to inherently see to which extent the restaurant's image is congruent with their own self-images (cf. Sirgy et al., 2000). From a practical standpoint, retailers tend to craft the store's design elements in a way that resonates with the targeted consumers (Breazeale and Ponder, 2013). Therefore, the restaurant's design factors serve as symbolic platforms through which consumers experience sates of self-congruity or self-identification. From this H2d flows:

H2d. The restaurant's design factors are significantly related to the restaurant's symbolism.

3.2.1.3. Ambient factors. The ambient factors represent the background

conditions (e.g., music, light, scents) of the restaurant (e.g., Chebat and Michon, 2003; Chebat et al., 2001). A restaurant's overall ambiance leaves a distinct impression on consumers and impact their perceptual and affective responses (Baker et al., 2002; Michon and Chebat, 2004). Particularly, a congruent restaurant ambiance—i.e., congruence between different ambient elements—yields favorable consumers' responses (Crisinel et al., 2012). Furthermore, a congruent ambiance tends to form a particular identity to the restaurant in consumers' minds (Baek et al., 2018). From this H3a flows:

H3a. The restaurant's ambient factors are significantly related to the restaurant's continuity.

The match between the restaurant's ambient factors and its offerings generate favorable consumers' perceptions (Baker et al., 2002; Crisinel et al., 2012). For instance, a fit between a restaurant's offerings and a particular scent diffused or a music played in a restaurant is more effective in affecting consumers' perceptions as opposed to mismatch conditions (e.g., North et al., 2016; Petruzzellis et al., 2018). In fact, the congruence between different ambient elements enhances consumers' evaluation of the offering (Spangenberg et al., 2005) and its perceived credibility (Bone and Ellen, 1999). From this H3b flows:

H3b. The restaurant's ambient factors are significantly related the restaurant's credibility.

Research suggests that ambient factors can be also irritating, stressful, and harmful and require an emotional labor from the side of the consumers (Baker et al., 2002; Demoulin and Willems, 2019; Garaus et al., 2015). As such inappropriate ambient factors infused in a given place can be detrimental to consumers' well-being (El Hedhli et al., 2013); this is likely to have adverse effects in the perceived restaurant's ethicality (Lunardo, 2012). We propose that:

H3c. A favorable perception of the restaurant ambiance is positively related to the restaurant's integrity.

The ambient factors, in a mall shopping context, found to serve as self-referential bases for shoppers (Chebat et al., 2009). Extant research indicates that the ambiance of a consumption setting stimulate consumers' memories by evoking various associations and identification states (Orth and Bourrain, 2008). Moreover, the literature is replete with studies highlighting the role of ambient factors in helping consumers experiencing a sense of self-congruity and affirming their sense of identity (e.g., Chebat et al., 2006; El Hedhli et al., 2017). We hypothesize:

H3d. The ambient factors of the restaurant are significantly related to the restaurant symbolism.

3.3. The effects of the PRA on restaurant attachment

The symbolic connections that a person has toward a given place is referred to as "place attachment" (Williams and Vaske, 2003). Place attachment is associated to a place that allows an individual to fulfill his/her emotional or experiential needs (Yuksel et al., 2010) and express her/his self-identity (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). As such, place attachment is a natural outcome of the place's perceived authenticity (Spielmann et al., 2018).

3.3.1. Continuity and restaurant attachment

Continuity is associated with the originality of a given object and its ability to preserve its identity over time. Place identity confers the symbolic importance of a given place (Williams and Vaske, 2003), and has been shown to be a key driver of place attachment (Brocato et al., 2015). Hence, a restaurant's ability to preserve its identity or symbolic meaning over time will enhance consumers' attachment to it. In the same vein, the loss or dilution of the identity of a given place tends to weaken people's attachment to that place (Arefi, 1999). From this H4a flows:

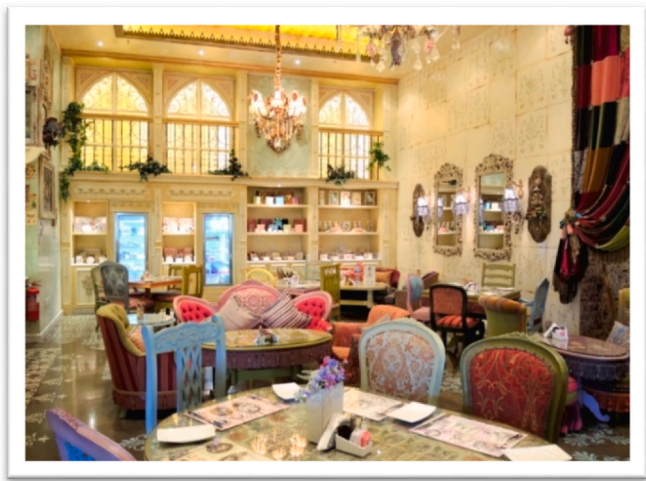


Fig. 2. Restaurants' pictures.

H4a. The restaurant's continuity is positively related to restaurant attachment.

3.3.2. Credibility and restaurant attachment

Social psychology suggests that, in an attachment relationship, the attachment figure should be trustworthy and inspires confidence in the eyes of subject of the attachment (Wieselquist et al., 1999). In consumption settings, consumers are attached to places that provide them with reliable and trustful experiences (Veasna et al., 2013). From this H4b flows:

H4b. The restaurant's perceived credibility is positively related to restaurant attachment.

3.3.3. Integrity and restaurant attachment

The integrity dimension of PRA includes values such as fairness, social responsibility, and commitment to others. Companies adhering to ethical and social responsible principles are successful in establishing and maintaining meaningful bonds with consumers and earning their respect (Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012). The link between a company's ethical-related activities and consumers' attachment is well-established in the literature (e.g., Stanaland et al., 2011; Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012). Hence, we posit:

H4c. The restaurant's integrity is positively related to a consumer's

attachment to the restaurant.

3.3.4. Symbolism and restaurant attachment

The state of attachment is, in general, marked by a set of emotions and cognitive schemas (e.g., Baldwin et al., 1996), which are fundamental in creating deep connections between a customer and a restaurant (Arnould and Price, 2000). For instance, the self-congruity theory suggests that customers patronize commercial establishments that they think and feel are in line with their own actual or ideal self-images (Sirgy et al., 2000). That is, a given consumption place can be looked up as a means of self-identification and a form of personal expression by a consumer (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Sirgy et al., 2000). Ultimately, in the occurrence of high level of congruence between a consumer's image and a restaurant image, the customer develops a sense of attachment to the restaurant. From this H4d flows:

H4d. The restaurant's symbolism is positively related to a customer's attachment to the restaurant.

3.4. Consequences of restaurant attachment

This study proposes that consumers' sense of attachment to a restaurant entices supportive behavior in terms of positive word-of-mouth communications and restaurant loyalty. Positive word-of-mouth communications refer to what extent consumers praise the restaurant and how often (i.e., the frequency) they do so (Harrison-Walker, 2001). Research demonstrates the positive influence of restaurant attachment on consumers' propensity to spread positive word-of-mouth about the restaurant (e.g., Vlachos et al., 2009). Our study treats restaurant loyalty as a customer's favorable attitude toward the restaurant and willingness to continually patronize a restaurant. The literature is replete with studies establishing the positive link between restaurant attachment and restaurant loyalty (e.g., Pritchard et al., 1999). That is, consumers become truly loyal to a given restaurant as long as they are emotionally attached to it (Yuksel et al., 2010). From this H5a and H5b flow:

H5a. Restaurant attachment generates positive word-of-mouth communications about the restaurant.

H5b. Consumers' attachment to a restaurant positively influences their loyalty to the restaurant.

4. Method

4.1. Data collection and sample

The proposed model was tested based on data collected from two casual dining restaurants. The two chosen restaurants do not communicate any ethnic-related aspects in their offered food, services, and atmosphere. Both restaurants did not hold promotions/special events during the data collection period, and are located in a same upscale area in Doha—a major city in Qatar.³ Two restaurants were selected in order to ensure variance in the data. More specifically, a pilot study has been preliminary conducted to select two among four casual dining restaurants with varying scores in relation to the four dimensions of PRA (the restaurants with the relatively highest and lowest scores on the four PRA dimensions were retained in the main study).

College students within Qatar University were solicited to participate

³ The total revenue generated by the food and beverage services sector in Qatar is expected to grow to QAR 14,261 million by 2026 (Qatar Development Bank report: https://www.qdb.qa/en/Documents/Food_and_Beverages_Sector.pdf, Accessed on July 20th 2021).

Table 1
LISREL results for the measurement model (N = 475).

Constructs and measurement items	λ^a	CA	CR	AVE
Social Factors (Baker et al., 2002)		0.914	0.922	0.798
The employees were:				
- enough in the restaurant to serve customers	Removed item			
- well dressed and appeared neat	0.78			
- friendly	0.96			
- helpful	0.93			
Design Factors (Harris and Ezeh, 2008)		0.884	0.899	0.697
The restaurant's interior was:				
- appealing	0.93			
- gave it an appealing character	0.92			
- attractive	0.58			
- decorated in an appealing fashion	0.86			
- painted in colors that did not appeal to you	Removed item			
Ambient factors (Fisher, 1974)		0.934	0.936	0.645
The ambiance of this restaurant is:				
- un-lively/lively	0.80			
- dull/bright	0.79			
- uncomfortable/comfortable	0.75			
- depressing/cheerful	0.91			
- tensed/relaxed	0.72			
- boring/stimulating	0.86			
- uninteresting/interesting	0.81			
- drab/colorful	0.77			
Continuity (Morhart et al., 2015)		0.790	0.80	0.617
This restaurant:				
- is timeless	0.76			
- has history.	0.66			
- will not be affected by trends.	0.69			
- does not change over time	0.73			
Credibility (Morhart et al., 2015)		0.830	0.830	0.620
This restaurant:				
- is honest.	0.82			
- will not betray me.	0.78			
- delivers its value promise.	0.76			
Integrity (Morhart et al., 2015; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001)		0.877	0.90	0.590
This restaurant:				
- has moral values.	0.74			
- gives back to consumers.	0.80			
- gives back to its employees.	0.75			
- has moral principles.	0.76			
- cares about its customers	0.79			
Symbolism (Morhart et al., 2015)		0.871	0.880	0.641
This restaurant:				
- adds meaning to my life	0.86			
- connects me with my real self	0.81			
- reflects important values people care about.	0.68			
- connects me with what is really important.	0.84			
Store attachment (Brocato et al., 2015)		0.877	0.895	0.682
- I can't imagine living without this restaurant	0.80			
- I really miss this restaurant when I am away too long	0.89			
- I am very attached to this restaurant	0.92			
- This restaurant reminds me of memories and experiences	0.67			
WOM (Harrison-Walker, 2001)		0.899	0.912	0.633
- I mention this restaurant to others quite frequently	0.83			
- I seldom miss an opportunity to tell others about this restaurant	0.81			
- I've told more people about this restaurant than I've told about most other restaurants	0.81			
- When I tell others about this restaurant, I tend to talk about it in great detail	0.77			
- I have only good things to say about this restaurant	0.76			
- I'm proud to tell others that I dine in this restaurant	0.79			
- In general, I do not speak favorably about this restaurant	Removed item			
- Although I dine in this restaurant, I tell others I do not recommend it	Removed item			
Loyalty (De Wulf et al., 2001)		0.881	0.881	0.712
- I feel loyal toward this restaurant	0.88			
- I'm willing to go the extra mile to remain a customer of this restaurant	0.84			
- Even if this restaurant would be more difficult to reach, I will continue to dine in it	0.81			

^aAll factor loadings were significant at $p < .001$

CA stands for Cronbach's Alpha; CR stands for Composite Reliability; AVE stands for Average Variance Extracted.

Table 2
Summary of Statistics and Discriminant validity matrix.

Construct	SOC	DES	AMB	CON	CRD	INT	SYM	RAT	WOM	LOY
SOC	.798	.417	.257	.142	.292	.324	.145	.156	.221	.246
DES	.646	.697	.373	.165	.271	.311	.132	.148	.195	.171
AMB	.507	.611	.645	.190	.258	.280	.236	.169	.239	.228
CON	.378	.407	.437	.617	.393	.297	.282	.206	.223	.234
CRD	.541	.521	.508	.380	.620	.604	.445	.335	.446	.404
INT	.570	.558	.530	.545	.777	.590	.504	.318	.417	.375
SYM	.393	.364	.486	.531	.667	.710	.641	.462	.413	.490
RAT	.395	.385	.412	.454	.579	.564	.680	.682	.570	.607
WOM	.471	.442	.489	.472	.668	.646	.643	.755	.633	.581
LOY	.469	.414	.478	.484	.636	.612	.700	.779	.762	.712
Mean	5.71	5.78	5.39	2.88	3.99	3.09	3.98	5.01	4.85	4.26
S.D.	1.24	1.27	1.36	1.01	1.49	1.58	1.43	1.19	1.33	1.25

SOC: Social factors; DES: Design factors; AMB: Ambient factors; CON: Continuity; CRD: Credibility; INT: Integrity; SYM: Symbolism; RAT: Restaurant attachment; WOM: Word-of-mouth; LOY: Loyalty.

S.D.: Standard Deviation.

All correlations below the diagonal are significant at $p < .001$. Values below the diagonal represent the correlations among the constructs, diagonal elements (in bold) represent the average variance extracted of each construct, and values above the diagonal are the squared correlations.

in the study and asked to complete an online questionnaire. They were randomly intercepted at the college hall.⁴

The respondents who agreed to participate in the study were directed to a designated area equipped with laptops where they filled in the online questionnaire. They were randomly assigned to one of the two retained restaurants. The online questionnaire included up-front a picture of one of two selected restaurants depicting the restaurant's interior design (see Fig. 2). Upon seeing the restaurant picture, the respondents were asked to indicate their levels of familiarity with the restaurant. Only the respondents who are familiar with the assigned restaurant were invited to complete the questionnaire. A total of 475 useable questionnaires were collected (244 for the first restaurant and 231 for the second one). Female respondents represent 64% of the sample. The majority of respondents were between the age of 18 and 25 years.

4.2. Measures

The online questionnaire was self-administered. The restaurant familiarity was measured by using Kent and Allen's (1994) scale. The respondents reported that they are familiar with the restaurant to which they have been assigned ($M_{Rst.A} = 5.44$ vs. Midpoint (4.00) : $t(243) = 13.65$; $p < 0.05$; $M_{Rst.B} = 4.86$ vs. Midpoint (4.00) : $t(230) = 7.69$; $p < 0.05$). To measure restaurant attachment, four items from Brocato et al. (2015) were adopted. Eight items were adopted from Harrison-Walker (2001) to measure word-of-mouth communications. Three items were adopted from De Wulf et al. (2001) to measure restaurant loyalty. Sixteen items adapted from Morhart et al. (2015) were used to measure the PRA dimensions. Also, another item from Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) has been added to the integrity dimension to capture the restaurant's commitment to its employees. Four items were used from Baker et al. (2002) to measure consumers' perceptions of the employees (social factors). Five items were adopted from Harris and Ezeh (2008) to measure the design factors. The overall ambiance of the restaurant was measured using eight items adopted from Fisher (1974). Finally, demographic questions were included in the questionnaire.

4.3. Common method bias

In order to control for potential common method bias, the questionnaire included different scale formats and endpoints (e.g., Podsakoff

⁴ The questionnaire was administered before the first lockdown in Qatar (March, 2020) due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

et al., 2003) and designed to include the dependent variables prior to their predictors ones (e.g., Murray et al., 2005). Furthermore, a single confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed on the model's constructs using LISREL 8.71. The results suggested an ill-fitting model ($\chi^2_{(902)} = 13393.61$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 14.85$; RMSEA = .17).

In contrast, the study's measurement model exhibited adequate fit ($\chi^2_{(857)} = 1979.13$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.3$; RMSEA = .055). Hence, the likelihood of a common method bias is minimized since the single factor model is significantly worse than the study's measurement model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 11, 414.48$, $\Delta df = 45$, $p < .001$).

5. Findings

5.1. Measurement model: psychometric properties

LISREL 8.71 was used to perform a CFA on the 44-item measurement model. The resulting measurement model displays acceptable goodness-of-fit statistics for the data, as indicated by $\chi^2_{(857)} = 1979.13$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.3$; CFI = .99; IFI = .99; RFI = .97; NFI = .98; RMSEA = .055; RMSEA confidence interval [.052;.058]. Table 1 summarizes the results of the measurement model.

The results support the internal consistency of all used scales as the alpha of Cronbach and the composite reliability are greater than 0.70 for all scales. Each of the 44 indicators loads significantly on its respective construct with factor loadings ranging 0.58 to 0.96, supporting the convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The variance extracted for all the constructs is more than the generally accepted value of 0.50. Furthermore, the variance extracted of each construct is greater than the squared inter-factor correlations, supporting the discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The discriminant validity matrix results along with the descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

5.2. Structural model: Hypothesis testing

A structural equation model was estimated using LISREL 8.71. The results of the estimated model are presented in Table 3. The results indicate an acceptable fit model:

($\chi^2_{(881)} = 2932.01$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.33$; CFI = .98; NFI = .97; RFI = .97; IFI = .98; RMSEA = .07 confidence interval [.067;.073]). The model explains 66% of the variance in continuity, 50% in credibility, 48% in integrity, 66% in symbolism, 35% in restaurant attachment, 26% in WOM, and 17% in loyalty.

The results show that the restaurant's design factors positively

Table 3
LISREL SEM results for the hypothesized model.

Effects of (exogenous)	On (endogenous)	(γ/β) ^a	t-value ^b	R ²
Social factors	Continuity	0.19	2.87	0.66
Design factors	Continuity	0.15	2.01	
Ambient factors	Continuity	0.34	5.30	
Social factors	Credibility	0.37	6.31	0.50
Design factors	Credibility	0.74	2.18	
Ambient factors	Credibility	0.31	5.49	
Social factors	Integrity	0.36	6.44	0.48
Design factors	Integrity	0.17	2.71	
Ambient factors	Integrity	0.30	5.64	
Social factors	Symbolism	0.24	4.17	0.66
Design factors	Symbolism	-0.04	-0.65 (ns)	
Ambient factors	Symbolism	0.46	7.64	
Continuity	Restaurant attachment	0.03	0.71 (ns)	0.35
Credibility	Restaurant attachment	0.29	6.05	
Integrity	Restaurant attachment	0.05	1.13 (ns)	
Symbolism	Restaurant attachment	0.61	12.52	
Restaurant attachment	WOM	0.86	16.60	0.26
Restaurant attachment	Loyalty	0.91	18.44	0.17
Goodness-of-fit statistics:				
$\chi^2_{(881)} = 2932.01, P < .001; \chi^2/df = 3.33;$				
$CFI = .98; NFI = .97; RFI = .97; IFI = .98;$				
$RMSEA = .07; RMSEA \text{ confidence interval is } [.067; .073]$				

^a LISREL coefficient path estimates.

^b at $p < .001$

influence the continuity ($\gamma_{1,2} = .15, t = 2.01, p < .001$), credibility ($\gamma_{2,2} = .74, t = 2.18, p < .001$), and integrity ($\gamma_{3,2} = .17, t = 2.71, p < .001$) dimensions of PRA. Nevertheless, the design factors have no significant impact on the symbolism dimension ($\gamma_{4,2} = -.04, t = -0.65, ns$). The social factors of the restaurant positively influence continuity ($\gamma_{1,1} = .19, t = 2.87, p < .001$), credibility ($\gamma_{2,1} = .37, t = 6.31, p < .001$), integrity ($\gamma_{3,1} = .36, t = 6.44, p < .001$), and symbolism ($\gamma_{4,1} = .24, t = 3.95, p < .001$). The ambient factors positively influence continuity ($\gamma_{1,3} = .34, t = 5.30, p < .001$), credibility ($\gamma_{2,3} = .31, t = 5.49, p < .001$), integrity ($\gamma_{3,3} = .30, t = 5.64, p < .001$), and symbolism ($\gamma_{4,3} = .46, t = 7.64, p < .001$).

Two out of the four PRA dimensions positively influence restaurant attachment: credibility ($\beta_{5,2} = .29, t = 6.05, p < .001$), and symbolism ($\beta_{5,4} = .61, t = 12.52, p < .001$). However, the continuity ($\beta_{5,1} = .03, t = 0.71, ns$) and integrity ($\beta_{5,3} = .05, t = 1.13, ns$) dimensions of PRA have no significant effects on restaurant attachment. Restaurant attachment, in turn, positively influence restaurant patronage in terms of both word-of-mouth communications ($\beta_{6,5} = .86, t = 16.60, p < .001$), and loyalty intentions ($\beta_{7,5} = .91, t = 18.44, p < .001$).

Out of the 18-hypothesized relationships, 15-hypotheses were supported. Only three hypotheses regarding the effects of the design factors on the symbolism dimension of PRA (H2d), and the effects of continuity and integrity dimensions on restaurant attachment (H4a and H4c) were rejected.

6. General discussion

6.1. Summary

Based on three prevalent authenticity-related perspectives, this research offers an integrative multidimensional conceptualization (and measurement) of restaurant authenticity. It is defined as *the restaurant's ability to create, maintain, and genuinely communicate a timeless identity, construe a place of sense and meaning, and enable customers to experience a sense of self-connectedness*. It is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct consisting of four dimensions, namely continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. The continuity dimension has to do with the restaurant's originality and its ability to preserve its identity. The credibility dimension represents the restaurant's ability to be true to its consumers by delivering on its promises. The integrity dimension reflects the sense of ethicality and social responsibility that the restaurant embraces. Finally, the symbolism dimension captures to which extent the restaurant serves as a self-referential basis for its customers.

Moreover, this research demonstrates that consumers infer from the restaurant atmospherics whether (or not) the restaurant is authentic. The study also establishes the linkages between the PRA dimensions and restaurant attachment. The results reveal that credibility and symbolism positively influence restaurant attachment, while the continuity and integrity were insignificant. The insignificant linkage between continuity and restaurant attachment may be due to the fact that continuity is the least self-referential dimension in comparison to the other PRA dimensions (cf. Morhart et al., 2015). One possible explanation of the insignificant effect of integrity on restaurant attachment is that being ethical and socially responsible becomes a basic customer requirement from the restaurant (e.g., Chaney et al., 2016). That is, restaurant integrity is a necessary condition taken for granted, but insufficient in building deep-rooted emotional bonds with consumers. The results

indicate that restaurant attachment, in turn, fosters consumers' supportive behaviors in terms of positive word-of-mouth communications and loyalty intentions.

6.2. Implications

This research offers a comprehensive conceptualization of the notion of restaurant authenticity. Furthermore, it re-validates the PBA scale of Morhart et al. (2015) and extends it to a restaurant context. Particularly, it provides restaurant researchers and practitioners with a valid and succinct measure of restaurant authenticity. Restaurant managers can use the PRA measure to monitor and benchmark the perceived authenticity levels of their restaurants, and to consequently gauge the impact of their marketing efforts in building and managing restaurant authenticity. The study's results clearly indicate that the restaurant atmospherics play an important role in conferring a sense of authenticity to restaurants. For instance, restaurant managers can preserve the restaurant's identity and ensure its continuity through hiring employees who best match the restaurant's identity, and through leveraging the design that showcase the restaurant's roots and unique traits. Furthermore, the results clearly indicate that the restaurant's friendly and knowledgeable personnel play a key role in conveying a message about the restaurant's integrity, enhancing its credibility, and serving as self-referential elements for consumers. In fact, restaurant managers can rely on design elements to highlight the restaurant's ethicality. Moreover, the restaurant's harmonious design features and congruent ambient factors are instrumental in generating credibility perceptions.

As for the outcomes of PRA, the results indicate that the restaurant attachment is significantly associated with the credibility and symbolism dimensions. In particular, the symbolism dimension has the strongest effect on restaurant attachment. This suggests straightforwardly that embedding self-referential elements within the restaurant is a key approach for building deep emotional bonds with the restaurant's patrons which, in turn, entice them to manifest supportive behaviors toward the restaurant in terms of positive word-of-mouth communications and loyalty.

6.3. Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that can offer opportunities for future research. Additional studies are needed to further enhance the generalizability and explanatory power of the study's model. Only one type of restaurants was considered in the current study. Additional research is needed to validate the proposed model in the context of other restaurant types. This study adopts Baker et al.'s (2002) scale to capture the social factors of the restaurant environment. Since this scale takes into account only employees' aspects, future research might consider examining the role of the "other customers" in authenticity perceptions within a restaurant setting. The study's respondents are between 18 and 25 years old. This sample choice may explain, in part, the insignificant effects of continuity and integrity on restaurant attachment. In fact, it is unlikely that a young individual is in a good position to pronounce on a restaurant's ability to preserve its identity over time since this requires that s/he should be familiar with the restaurant over a long time span. Also, young people are less likely to be concerned with integrity and ethical issues (Sihombing, 2018). Nevertheless, additional studies with more representative samples may yield different results. In this vein, examining potential moderators such as socio-demographic and cultural factors in the linkages between PRA and restaurant attachment could

present another worthy research line to pursue. In another vein, it is likely that consumers' motivational orientations (task-vs. recreational-oriented) moderate the effects of the restaurant atmospherics on the PRA dimensions (cf. Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006). Another possible line is to hypothesize that consumer skepticism toward marketing activities, in general, is likely to weaken the relationship between the restaurant atmospherics and the PRA dimensions (cf. Morhart et al., 2015). In fact, consumers who are skeptical toward marketing activities are likely to consider the restaurant atmospherics as manipulative.

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Appendix 1. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102729>.

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