SELF IMAGE, ATTITUDE FORMATION AND MALL REVISIT INTENTIONS: A PROPOSITIONAL MODEL AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

Modern shopping malls serve dual needs of shopping and entertainment. Modern shoppers are provided with choice, be it for shopping or entertainment. Mall visits are becoming more purpose driven than earlier times. Malls have to sustain their relevance and importance to induce shoppers to visit again and regularly. Novelty factors may not be adequate to sustain a competitive advantage.There is a need to understand the factors influencing mall revisit intentions,especially with respect to shoppers'self-image. This paper explores the need for such research and sets out a propositional agenda for research into the relationship between self-image and mall revisit intentions,especially in an emerging economy such as India where there has been a proliferation of shopping malls over the last two decades. Research a   genda herein proposed may lead to new knowledge for academicians and practitioners alike.

Keywords: Shopping mall,self-image,attitude formation ,revisit intention.

1.Introduction

Malls have become not only shopping centers, but also act as community centres for social and recreational activities (Ng, 2003).Modern Malls were termed significant institutions in modern Western Culture (Bloch, Ridgway and Dawson,1994).have since then transformed over the years with Modern shoppers having more choices and clearly looking for centers that are more entertainment-oriented, and places that blend with and reflect their own communities (Hazel, 2001). There is a continuing interest in the relationships between factors that the Mall managers can control , their Mall image and patronage to their malls.(Finn and Louviere,1996).). Bloch et al. (1994) called malls consumer "habitats" and places where varying patterns of behavior can be found. Terblenche (1999) opined that apart from shopping motive other features like entertainment, relaxation and spending good time with friends attract customers towards shopping malls. It is hence essential for mall managers to know the extent to which their malls are attractive to their shoppers (Wong et al., 2001).

Several scholars have reported that retail spaces are cultural resources through which consumers construct their identities.Yet, little research has gone into understanding consumer identities and transitioning retail servicescapes of the Third World(Varman & Belk,2012). Tiwari & Abraham (2010) underlined that the emergence of malls is an important and significant destination for shopping, recreation and socialization which has turned the face of the retail industry in India. Malls reflect the state of the society in many way (Singh,2018).. Before the COVID-19-catalysed lockdown in March, Indian cities were expected to see new supply of around 54 new malls in 2020 spread over nearly 22.2 million square feet area with the top 7 cities anticipated to see new supply of nearly 35 malls spread over around

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14.6 million square feet while tier 2 and 3 cities were to see new supply of 19 new malls over 7.6 million square feet(ET,2020)

Malls of India were expected to contribute nearly 35% of Modern Retail Sales(ASIPAC Study,2013).

Despite consistent efforts by most malls to be frequented by shoppers,, some malls are qualified as successful while most aren't. In the minds of the shoppers, there appears to be a **perceived image** created that gives a binary impression of success or failure of a mall in a competitive environment. According to McGoldrick (2002), the image of shopping mall is a multidimensional concept which consists of tangible or functional attributes, such as its physical features, and intangible attributes which includes its atmospheric qualities. Leo and Philippe (2002), posited that shopping mall image is a holistic entity constituting elements, such as retail mix, infrastructure and atmosphere. Kushwaha et al(2017) identified service experience, internal environment, convenience, utilitarian factors, acoustics, proximity and demonstration as important factors in helping consumers patronize a shopping mall.

This paper has three objectives. Firstly, to draw knowledge from extant literature on the factors influencing image formation in a mall context and the concept of Self Image, Secondly, to propose a research agenda in exploring the possible relationship and impact of Self image on Mall revisit intentions and finally, to suggest probable implications for mall managers and researchers in pursuing such agenda. In this study, the terms Mall and Shopping centre may be used interchangeably.

It is pertinent to explore literature pertaining to image formation, destination image and Self congruity to derive the second and third objectives. It is also equally logical to appreciate the importance of Self-congruity theory and Attitude formation theory in the current study.

2.Literature Review

It may be pertinent to begin this paper with the statement '**Image** is one of those terms that will not go away…a term with vague and shifting meanings (Pearce,1988).Equally it may be useful to refer to the definition of **destination** as defined by the Oxford Dictionary - a place that people will make a special trip to visit. Crompton(1979)defined destination image as a sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination while Phelps (1986) defined it as the **perceptions** or **impressions** of a place. Chon(1990) believed destination image to be a result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, expectations and impressions about a destination. Baloglu and Mccleary probably provided a much larger overarching definition, that of an individual's mental representations of knowledge, feelings and global impressions about a destination while Kim and Richardson(2003) felt that destination image was a **totality** of impressions, beliefs and ideas ,expectations and feelings accumulated over a period of time. Image has been considered as a concept formed by the consumer's reasoned and emotional interpretation as a consequence of two closely interrelated components , namely perceptive or cognitive and affective appraisals relating to individual's feelings towards an object.(Baloglu and Brinberg,1997,Baloglu and Mccleary,1999a,1999b,Beerli and Martin,2004).A combination of these two factors produces an overall image of the product or brand(Beerli and Martin,2004).

Theoretical studies are aplenty on the nature and formation of destination image, especially in the context of Tourism and terms such as impression, perception, or mental representation have been used (San Martin and Del Bosque,2008).They proposed a second order factor structure of the destination image that included the atmosphere, infrastructure, natural and cultural environment and affective image as the factors influencing destination image formation. In their study on Mall image measurement, JC.Chebat,Sirgy and Grzeskowiak(2010) argued that the dimensions affecting store image formation (Ailawadi and Keller,2004) are applicable to capturing Mall image and successful positioning of the mall in the minds of its target shoppers.(JC Chebat et al,2010).These factors include Access,Atmospherics,Assortment-cross   and within category and Price/Promotion. A combined perspective of both these aforesaid approaches suggests that a shopper's perception of a mall is a combination of functional and psychological attributes. Functional attributes of a mall may include characteristics that are concrete, tangible and observable such as assortment, access in respect to location, drive time,physical facilities such as parking(Chebat et al,2009),while psychological attributes are abstract and intangible like the atmospherics and the shoppers image of the

typical people that patronize the store(Chebat et al,2009).These researchers further went on to conceptualize and operationalize a model that posits that mall image predicts mall attitude ,mall referrals and positive word of mouth communication.

Finn and Loviere(1996) posited that an individual's decision making in relation to shopping centre choice is a combination of psychophysical assessments and attribute evaluations that culminate in information integration. They suggest that mall patronage varies as a function of changes in the image of the mall and that choice models relying on objective centre characteristics as well as subjective attractiveness dimensions have been proposed by researchers over the years. Their study on consideration and choice among shopping centers implied direct impact of consumer's shopping center image perceptions which in turn was determined by physical characteristics. Mall image across seven physical dimensions has been proposed as influencing shopping center attractiveness,(Bogdan Micu,2013).In his work pertaining to an emerging economy such as Romania, he refers to Mall image affecting Consumer loyalty. He expresses concern that there is a possibility that all customers do not develop similar attitudes during a shopping activity. While his emphasis was on likely difference in gender attitude, we can logically extend that attitude formation is an individual process that varies from person to person. According to Fazio and Olson(2003)Attitudes are formed through three processes namely cognition, affect and behavior. Affective attitude formation is largely through a strong emotional component and Cognitive attitude formation is largely through reasoned and informational approaches(Hogg and Smith,2007).An overall attitude formed as a result of the sum of the expected values of all the attributes is postulated by the Expectancy-Value theory(Fishbein and Azjen,1975).Behavioral attitude formation is an outcome of reflection on behaviors towards a subject, especially when the situation presents itself unclearly. The Self-perception theory (Bem,1972) may be applied in such behavioral attitude formation.

The self concept literature with extensive roots in Consumer research(role of Self-concept originally highlighted by Landon,1974) has also found increasing interests in Retailing.The motivation to express their own self is often the driving force that prompts consumers to purchase goods and services(Sirgy,1986).Much research has been done on self image congruence where Self image congruence refers to the match between consumer's self concept and the user image (or personality)of a product ,brand, store etc(Sirgy et al,2007). Self congruity theory postulates that the more similar the two concepts, the higher the preference for that brand because its symbolic characterestics reinforce and validate the individual's self-perception.(Swann,Stein-Seroussi and Giesler,1992).Sirgy(1982) concluded after a study on the multi faceted personality of self-concept that consumers select products that are consistent with their real and ideal self-concept. Markus and Nurius (1986) further stress that there are differences between how one sees oneself and what one thinks others see. Self congruity is guided by self concept motives such as the need for self esteem and self consistency(Aaker,1997).Greater the match between the brand-user image with consumer's ideal self –image, greater the likelihood of adoption of the brand with self esteem need. Similarly, actual self-image, how one sees oneself, motivates the need for self consistency. Consumers need for self consistency motivates purchase behavior and brand loyalty,(Erikson and Sirgy,1989,1992).

Sirgy et al(2000) summarized at least four different self-concept dimensions –Actual, Ideal, Social and ideal social self-image implying that there are four corresponding self-congruity types. Actual self congruity refers to the degree of match between shopper's actual self image and a retail patron image or the fit between how shoppers actually see themselves in relation to the retail patron image. Actual self image is mediated by the self-consistency motive. Ideal self congruity refers to the degree of match between a shopper's ideal self image and the retail patron image or the fit between how shoppers like to see themselves in relation to the retail patron image and driven by the self esteem motive. Social self congruity refers to the fit between how shoppers believe they are seen by others in relation to the retail patron image and mediated by social consistency motive. People are motivated to maintain an image people have of them. Ideal social self congruity is about how shoppers would like to be seen by others in relation to the retail patron image. In essence ,the greater the degree of match between self concept and retail patron image ,the greater the likelihood of patronage.

Another aspect that is equally relevant is the concept of functional congruity which is based on the perceived utilitarian aspects of a store in reference to some ideal aspects(Sirgy and Johar,1985a,1985b,1999).In the current study, extending to Malls which are but an agglomeration of stores, functional congruity may include the tangible functional attributes such as physical access in terms of distance, location, width and depth of assortment, which can also be termed as the objective centre characteristics. As compared to the 'symbolic' nature of the retail patron image, functional congruity largely reflects the utilitarian and functional image of a centre. Both functional congruity and self congruity have been demonstrated to affect purchase motivation, (Johar and Sirgy,1989) and in the current context, mall patronage intentions may also be similarly influenced. Self congruity is posited as a relatively simpler construct compared to Functional congruity which may require greater cognitive elaboration and effort than self congruity. Sirgy and Samli(1985) demonstrated that self congruity biases functional congruity. In other words ,consumers who experience high self congruity tend to have higher functional congruity and vice versa. In proposing a model of antecedents and consequences of Self congruity,**Sirgy et al**() hypothesized that brand attitude is a function of brand self congruity mediated through

functional congruity. Thus, the extent and direction to which a customer can identify with a particular brand influences the favorability and strength of evaluation of functional attributes of the brand.

When studying the impact of congruity on motivation to visit a destination, Beerli ,Meneses and Gil,(2007)draw upon the works of Johar and Sirgy (1991),Malhotra(1988),Sirgy and Samly,1985) and Sirgy and Su(2000) pertaining to self-image and various variables such as satisfaction, loyalty, motivation and involvement. They hypothesize the four dimensions of self image and their influence on choice of destination. Their insights on the influence of prior experience and involvement as moderators serve as an important indicator in understanding the impact of self congruity and functional congruity developing a similitude towards a mall and intentions to revisit a mall. The level of involvement and intensity of experience are of paramount pertinence in a mall context. Mall developers are attempting to entice the customers by creating an exciting shopping experience (Cockerham,1995).Studies have been undertaken to find out the effects of excitement on mall re-patronage intentions(Wakefield and Baker,1998).They further restate that enduring involvement with shopping may heighten a consumer's excitement with the shopping experience. They suggest that involvement directly influences excitement which leads to re-patronage or the converse of out-shopping (patronizing other malls).

3.Need for Research

The review of literature elaborated in the preceding section has covered

(i) Malls and their evolution over the years, Mall image and factors influencing mall image

(ii) Self image and types of self image.

(iii) Self congruity and Functional congruity and their relationships with Brand attitude and purchase

(iv)Use of self image theory in destination image formation

(v)Retail store image and the factors influencing store image

(vi)Retail patron image and relationship with self image

While these are   illustrative of the extensive work carried out by scholars and academicians in the area of understanding customer behavior in relation to shopping, more specifically to a shopping centre or mall, yet most work has laid emphasis on the self-image concept on one hand and the self-congruity-functional congruity influence on brand attitude or patronage on the other. It may be quite interesting to understand the inter-relationships between self image, mall attitude formation and mall revisit intentions, taking into consideration the effects of Experience and Involvement of consumers . The congruence of self image and mall image (retail patron image) may lead to positive effects on the formation of favorable attitude and revisit intent. It may also be interesting to understand the nature and dynamics of both self-congruity and functional congruity, which may pave the way for some useful mall managerial strategies, especially in a competitive environment where more than a few malls vie for consumers 'attention by devising strategies that may impact the level of congruity. In other words, self congruity and functional congruity may undergo positive or negative movement depending on the influence or impact of experience and involvement levels with a particular mall among others.

The above arguments lead us to propose as under:

4. Research Propositions

Proposition 1: Shoppers are likely to form favorable attitude to revisit a mall if there is a stronger alignment of self image with Mall image (retail patron image).

Proposition 2: Shoppers are likely to form favorable attitude to revisit a mall if there is functional congruity with the mall image.

Proposition 3:Self-congruity and Functional congruity are dynamic in relation to the experience and involvement levels with the mall. In other words, the richer (stronger) the experience or higher the degree of involvement of a consumer at/with a mall, better the self congruity and functional congruity.

Mediating and Moderating effects may be propositioned as under

Proposition 4: Mall image affects mall revisit intentions as a mediating influence on Mall attitude **Proposition 5**: Intensity of Experience and Involvement are moderators of Mall image formation. In other words, self congruity and functional congruity are moderated by experience and involvement levels while forming attitude towards a mall.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL
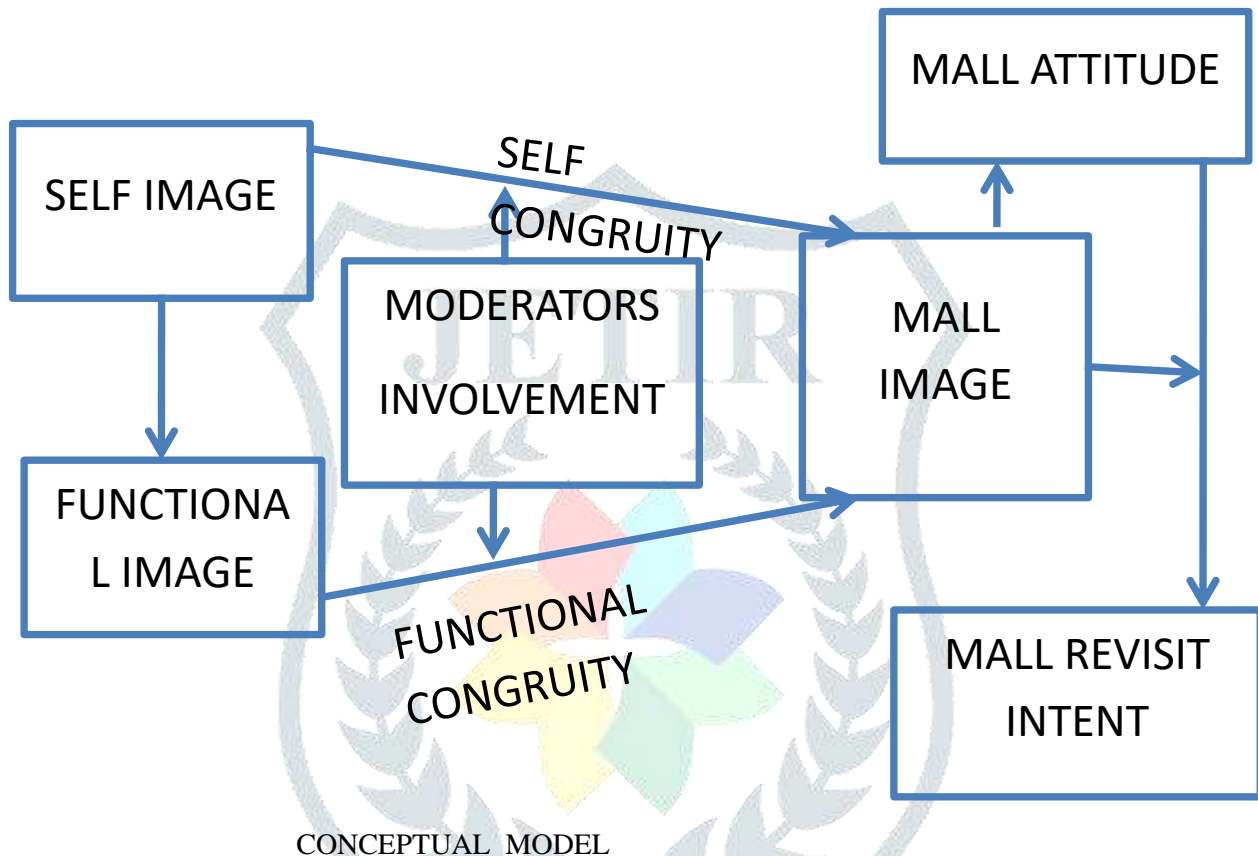
All the above propositions pertain specifically to the intent ***to revisit a mall*** or shopping centre, which is one of the key aspects of *long term sustainability* of a mall and its ability to *remain relevant* to its target group. Intent to revisit a mall can be implied to be behavioral intentions which may then translate into actual behavior of visiting the mall. While first time visits may be facilitated by a series of factors including novelty and curiosity, inducing revisits by consumers becomes a *paramount objective* of most mall managers and therefore understanding the influencing relationships proposed above becomes equally important for mall managers.

The propositions suggested above may be transformed into hypotheses and the different variables of the proposed model operationalised through suitable data collection and analysis methods Researchers could take up the above propositions in the context of Indian shopping malls and shoppers and by carrying out interviews with mall managers on their assessment and comparing with survey findings (administered to mall shoppers),using statistical tools,good insights are likely for both managers and researchers alike.

5.Academic Implications

In general, Self image-Mall image congruity is a topic that has been under-studied in the field of retail. Understanding customers' attitude formation towards competing malls in a target market through the influence of self and functional congruity can help researchers to bring out a different typology of customers, beyond their direct utilitarian or hedonic intentions , probably something newer ,more so in the wake of radically emerging channels supported by high levels of technological dynamics. The dynamic nature of self-image proposed in the article may be an area of interest for

researchers working on consumer behavior specifically within the retail domain. Additional facets influencing self-congruity and functional congruity may be studied to deconstruct experience and involvement levels. These facets may include the influence of the social and ideal-social self in the image agreement mechanism (Beerli et al,2007) especially in a comparative and competitive environment. Empirical studies building on the foundations of such studies may further enlighten and trigger deeper research on the aspects of experience and involvement at an emotional level which may help in acquiring newer knowledge beyond the predominant cognitive nature of these variables. It may be worthwhile to also extend the concept of self-congruity to others' self congruity (Sirgy et al,2007)and study the influence on attitude formation leading to mall revisit intent.

6. Managerial Implications

The managerial relevance of Self Congruity and Functional congruity have been discussed and debated since long by several researchers like Sirgy, Samly, Beerli, Meneses and Johar. This paper has sought to look at the influence of self congruity and functional congruity in a mall or shopping centre context from the important aspect of mall revisit. Most malls have the ominous task of staying relevant and exciting to its target shoppers in an era where convenience, comfort and price benefits offered by alternate channels such as web-shopping are far more compelling. Despite significant monetary investments, Malls have the challenge of being ignored at large, if they do not offer an experience or excitement, both of which play an important moderating role in formation of self image. It is proposed that Self image ,where a mall is perceived to match their actual ,ideal and ideal/social self may not only help form an initial favorable attitude or first impression as posited by Sirgy and Samly(1985) ,but is dynamic depending on the experience and involvement offered by the mall. Combined with Functional congruity, Self congruity acts as a mediating influence on mall revisit intent through favorable attitude towards mall.

Mall managers may utilize the findings from such a relationship to work on several fronts. Firstly, they may build a Mall positioning akin brand positioning which will project a compelling image and induce a favorable attitude. This exercise may include establishing a Mall personality tailored to the actual or ideal self of the target customers. Secondly, attractiveness to their malls can be induced through effective orchestration of the moderators such as experience and involvement. This may call for an in-depth understanding of the several factors that facilitate creation of the preferred level and intensity of experience and involvement. Functional aspects of Product(Assortment of stores and merchandise),Price(depending on the assortment and target customers, Promotion(including but not limited to constant tactical promotions and price offers) and the Process(of Service) may need to be tuned dynamically to influence the self and functional congruity. While this is a complex process and sometimes hard to be completed, monitoring different customers' differing perceptions and expectations is a must do for any shopping centre strategy(Bogdan Micu,2013).Finally, mall managers can generate a strong and favorable impact from their customers and tenants alike, which in turn will cyclically influence sustainability among competing malls. Appendix at the end of the paper reproduces some of the key research areas which have attempted to study similar relationships pertaining to Image, Congruity and related factors which may help suitably in reinforcing some of the propositions laid herein.

7.Conclusion

The findings that result as an outcome of such a study may enable new insights into the relationship between customers and their revisit intentions to a mall in a competing environment. Significant addition to the body of knowledge may occur upon a deeper study of the proposed dynamic nature of self congruity and functional congruity. Improved measures may be developed to capture the relative attractiveness of a mall/shopping centre which may serve as an important tool to Mall managers to devise their operating strategies including segmentation, positioning and communication. Additional knowledge on antecedents and consequences of Self congruity may help researchers and practitioners alike in understanding the robustness of self-congruity as a theory in consumer behavior and brand loyalty/patronage specific to retail at shopping centres.

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