

The Role of Multiple Reference Effects in Restaurant Evaluations: A Cross-cultural Comparison

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ABSTRACT

This study examines multiple reference effects in customers' service evaluation regarding dining experiences in restaurants. Specifically, the present study explores the antecedent role of three reference points: focal, other, self-based and satisfaction in the development of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Additional insight into the link between reference points and customer satisfaction is provided by examining the moderating effects of the cultural orientation of customers: South Korea (Eastern, collectivist, high uncertainty avoidance culture) versus America (Western, individualist, low uncertainty avoidance culture). Overall, the results indicated that U.S. customers' evaluations regarding restaurant consumption experiences are significantly different from those of Korean customers. Disconfirmation had a stronger effect on Korean customers than U.S. customers, whereas attractiveness of alternatives had a stronger effect on American customers than Korean customers. Finally, the authors will discuss potential theoretical and managerial implications of this study.

Keywords: *reference effect, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, cross-cultural studies.*

INTRODUCTION

As the number of meals eaten away from home continues to increase and eating-out has become an increasingly important part of everyday life, competition for loyal customers among restaurants becomes more challenging. In response, restaurant managers and academic researchers are striving to understand customers' concerns and motivations behind their dining out behavior, in particular, how customers evaluate their restaurant experience and how these perceptions translate into positive outcomes such as customer satisfaction and loyalty intention.

One stream of research investigating this issue is based on the notion that the consumers establish *reference points* for products or services. Researchers have recognized the influence of reference points in customer evaluations of products or services. Three broad types of reference points in consumer evaluation have been identified in the consumer behavior literature: focal-

object, other-object, and self-based. First, a focal object reference point refers to a customer’s existing expectations about the focal products or services of the evaluation (Oliver, 1980; Talyor, 1997). Second, consumers often compare the focal service with other alternative options (Taylor, 1997; Tsrios & Mittal, 2000), the reference point called attractiveness of alternatives. Lastly, consumers also use the self-based referent called self-image congruity in service evaluations (Sirgy, 1985). The reference points mentioned above are found to contribute to post-consumption evaluations such as customer satisfaction and commitment (Yim et al., 2007).

Another factor relevant to consumers’ post-purchase evaluations may be culture. In an increasingly globalized marketplace, understanding inherent differences in the behavior of consumers from a variety of cultural backgrounds have become key elements in the service industry. Despite the importance of culture in consumer behavior, relatively little research has focused on the role of culture in service evaluations. Moreover, no research has been conducted which investigates the impact of culture on three different types of reference points mentioned above. Therefore, the purpose of this study is threefold: (1) to examine the role of reference points (disconfirmation, attractiveness of alternatives, self-image congruity) in consumer evaluations of their dining out experiences, (2) to extend the range of previous research by proposing and testing the relationships that integrate reference points, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in the context of the restaurant industry, and (3) to further explore how customers’ use of reference points varies across collectivist and individualist cultures.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

We propose that consumers make comparisons with multiple reference points when they evaluate their satisfaction and subsequent outcome, customer loyalty. Additional insight into the link between three reference points and customer satisfaction is provided by examining the role of customers’ cultural orientations. A proposed model is depicted in Figure 1.

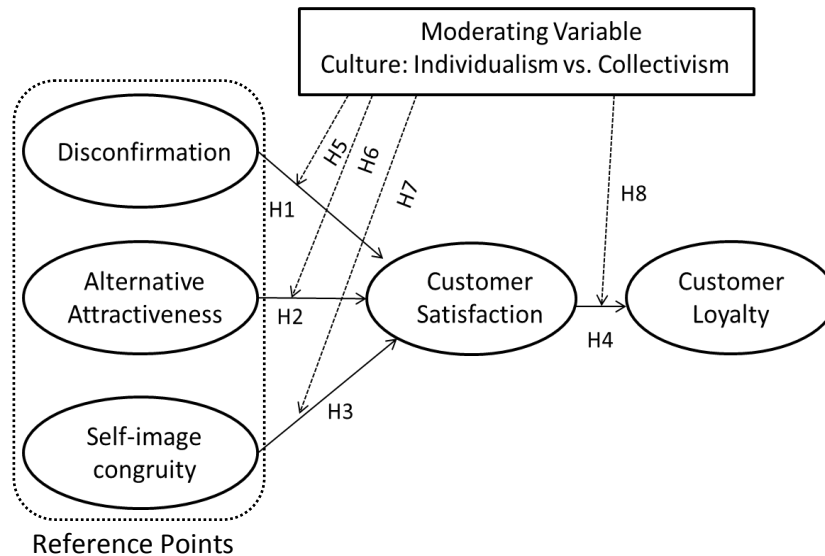


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Types of reference points

Focal-object referent: Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory

One of the most widely used theories to explain customer satisfaction with products or services is Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980). This theory proposes that expectation is a determinant of satisfaction because expectation provides the baseline or reference level for consumers to form evaluative judgments about focal products or services. When actual performance is higher than or equal to what was expected, consumers will be satisfied. On the other hand, if actual performance is lower than what was expected, consumers will be dissatisfied (Oliver, 1997). Likewise, restaurant customers' satisfaction is the evaluation of the perceived performance in terms of its adequacy in comparison to their expectation standards of a dining experience. Hence, the following hypothesis was suggested:

H1. Positive disconfirmation of expectation will have a positive effect on customer satisfaction with the focal service.

Other-object referent: Attractiveness of alternatives

Alternative attractiveness is conceptualized as the customers' estimate of the likely satisfaction available from an alternative relationship (Patterson & Smith, 2003). It is widely accepted that customers' perceptions of the attractiveness of other alternatives are central to their satisfaction judgments or related behavioral responses about the product or service (Patterson & Smith, 2003) in that they evaluate the target product or services by comparing them to other possible ones. When the chosen alternative was not the optimal choice, consumers are most likely to feel disappointment and regret. The unpleasant experience of finding out that a forgone alternative would have yielded a better outcome has led to a class of decision theories known as regret theory (Bell, 1982). While satisfaction decreases when the forgone alternative is known to be better than the chosen alternative (Oliver, 1997), satisfaction increases when the chosen alternative performed better than the forgone alternatives. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2. Attractiveness of alternatives will have a negative effect on customer satisfaction with the focal service.

Self-based referent: Self-image congruity

Self-image serves as a self-based reference point when consumers compare it with the image of a product or service. According to the self-image congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985), consumers tend to prefer the products or brands with images that are congruent with their own self-image, and this tendency can be described as a symbolic and self-expressive benefit of purchasing. In addition, prior literature shows that there is a positive relationship between self-image congruity and purchasing/repurchasing decisions, and post-purchase attitudes such as satisfaction and loyalty (Sirgy, 1982). Restaurant customers have various motivations for eating-out. A restaurant is a place where customers fulfill their basic need, hunger (utilitarian motivation), as well as experience excitement and pleasure (hedonic motivation) (Ha & Jang, 2009). At the same time, the motivation to express the customer's own identity may be the driving force that prompts the customers to choose to eat out. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H3. Self-image congruity with the focal service will have a positive effect on customer satisfaction with the focal service.

Customer satisfaction and loyalty

A wide variety of studies have been conducted to support the link between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Given that satisfaction is evaluative, it is likely to be an important and useful predictor of customer loyalty intention. Hence, this study considered customer satisfaction formed by comparing multiple referents as antecedent of customer loyalty in a restaurant setting. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis was suggested:

H4. Customer satisfaction will have a positive effect on customer loyalty.

The role of national culture

The current study employed two cultural dimensions: individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980; 1991) to explain how cultures moderate the relationships delineated in the core model. A review of culturally-influenced differences in reasoning processes between Koreans and Americans provides a theoretical basis to explore the proposed model with samples from two cultures. Hofstede (1980) found that South Korea is collectivist culture with high uncertainty avoidance whereas the U.S. is an individualist culture with low uncertainty avoidance.

In a collectivist culture, individuals are more affected by group norms rather than their own expectations; they have tendencies to put personal feelings aside and act in a socially appropriate manner (Trandis, 1995). Accordingly, the collectivists' evaluations related to satisfaction are likely to be influenced not only by one's expectations but by subjective norms (Spreng & Chiou, 2002) such as evaluations of others such as family members, friends, or relatives. Therefore, it has been found that attitude-intention relationship is weaker in collectivist than individualist cultures (Kacen & Lee, 2002). This may attenuate the relationship between disconfirmation and customer satisfaction.

H5. The relationship between positive disconfirmation and customer satisfaction will be stronger among customers from individualist cultures compared to customers from collectivist cultures.

Some earlier studies in psychology regarding regret may provide some meaningful explanations about why perceptions of foregone alternatives (captured through regret) appeared differently across collectivist and individualist cultures. Gilovich and Medvec (1994, 1995) argue that in more collectivist societies, people may have less reason to regret their inactions. The abundance of regrets for inactions may be attenuated in people from a less action-oriented culture who may be less troubled by the things they have failed to do (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994). On the other hand, as societies with an individualist culture put more emphasis on self, people in individualist cultures view the regret of not doing as their own fault, and thus respond more negatively (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994). Accordingly, it is expected that the negative relationship between attractiveness of alternatives and customer satisfaction will be stronger for customers with individualist cultural values.

H6. The relationship between attractiveness of alternative and customer satisfaction will be stronger among customers from individualist cultures compared to customers from collectivist cultures.

The effect of self-image congruity, the relationship between one's self-image and one's image of a product or service, differs across individualist and collectivist cultures. In individualistic societies where the value of freedom and individuality are core ideals, people emphasize the importance of asserting the self and are largely driven by self-serving motives. They are more concerned with their own personal needs, goals, and interests than people characterized as collectivistic (Triandis, 1994). In addition, people from individualist culture are viewed as more hedonic than people from collectivist cultures (Litvin & Goh, 2003). Hedonic customers have a tendency to seek products that reflect their self-images in attempts to increase emotional interaction with products (Solomon, 1996). Litvin and Goh (2003) examined the relationship between travelers' self-image congruity and satisfaction with the tourist destination, and how the relationship would vary across cultures. The results indicated that individualistic consumers reported greater satisfaction with a tourist destination they considered close to their self-image than those from collectivist cultures. In this light, one can argue that, self-image congruity seems particularly important in the service evaluation for customers in individualist cultures and the following hypotheses are offered:

H7. The relationship between self-image congruity and customer satisfaction will be stronger for customers in individualist cultures compared to customers from collectivist cultures.

Consumers tend to project their personal values onto products or services and they are even known to develop personal relationships with certain brands. Smith (2003) argued that people from high context, collectivist countries establish and maintain relationships between customers and service providers. Another cultural difference which potentially affects the link between satisfaction and loyalty is based on the level of uncertainty avoidance. In countries where uncertainty avoidance is high, customers are resistant to change from established patterns and will focus on risk avoidance and reduction. Liu et al. (2001) found that consumers in collectivist or higher uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to stick to the same service provider once they are satisfied. As such in a collectivist and a high uncertainty avoidance culture we may expect higher levels of loyalty to service providers. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H8. The positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty will be stronger for customers in collectivist and high uncertainty avoidance cultures compared to customers from individualist and low uncertainty cultures.

METHODOLOGY

Measurement

A self-administered questionnaire was developed for the study. All measures were adapted from the relevant literature and modified to fit the research setting (see Table 1). Originally developed and tested in English, the final survey instrument was then translated Korean and back-translated into English to ensure comparability across countries. The questionnaire document was peer reviewed and pretested on a student sample ($n = 50$). All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Importantly, we focused on mid-to-upper range restaurant experiences which offer more symbolic meanings to customers than fast-food types of restaurants.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of the measurement items

Construct	Items	Factor loadings	α
Disconfirmation	The experience with this restaurant was better than I expected.	.92	.87
	The service level provided by this restaurant was better than I expected.	.87	
	The food provided by this restaurant was better than I expected.	.90	
	The atmosphere of this restaurant was better than I expected	.83	
Alternative attractiveness	I should have chosen another restaurant.	.74	.92
	I do not regret choosing this restaurant.*	.83	
	Overall the other restaurants were much better compared to this one.	.84	
Self-image congruity	Eating out in this restaurant helps me to achieve and maintain my image.	.76	.85
	Eating out in this restaurant reflects who I am.	.86	
	Eating out in this restaurant does not fit well with my image.*	.90	
	Customers similar to me dine in this restaurant.	.70	
Satisfaction	I was happy with the dining experience in this restaurant.	.93	.97
	My choice of this restaurant was a wise one.	.96	
	Overall, I was satisfied with the dining experience in this restaurant.	.96	
Loyalty	I would recommend this restaurant to friends, neighbors, and relatives.	.96	.97
	I would come back to this restaurant in the future.	.95	
	I believe this is my favorite restaurant.	.95	

Note: SD = standard deviation. * Reverse-scored item.

Data collection

The data was collected through a survey conducted from July to August 2010. The authors selected four mid-to-upper range restaurants in the U.S. and Korea, respectively and asked to distribute the survey to their customers. A total of 723 demographically similar respondents in the two countries participated in the study. Of those respondents, 250 were in Korea and 473 in the United States. The U.S. sample included 335 females and 118 males with a mean age of 35 years. The Korean sample included 181 females and 69 males with a mean age of 23 years. In order to test the proposed model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed using AMOS 17.0.

RESULTS

Measurement model

We adopted a two-step approach to model construction and testing suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988): a measurement model and subsequent structural model. Firstly, this study performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to estimate the measurement model by verifying the underlying structure of constructs for the pooled sample. Although the chi-square statistic is significant ($\chi^2=397.489$, $df=109$, $p < .01$), it was concluded that the model fit the data reasonably well (GFI = .938, NFI = .969, CFI =.977, RMSEA = .061). A two-group CFA model was then performed separately for the American and the Korean sample. Satisfactory

fit indices were achieved for both models (American model: $\chi^2 = 298.415$, $df = 109$, GFI = .929, NFI = .969, CFI = .975, RMSEA = .061; Korean model: $\chi^2 = 276.038$, $df = 109$, GFI = .911, NFI = .936, CFI = .980, RMSEA = .062).

This study also checked reliabilities and validities of the five-factor measurement model to examine the adequacy of each multi-item scale in capturing its respective construct. The standardized loadings for all items were significant (see Table 1), suggesting convergent validity. The construct reliability ranged from .85 to .96, which indicates that the reliabilities for the constructs were in the acceptable range suggested by the literature. All of the composite reliability values above .70 were within the lowest average variance extracted (AVE) at the threshold of .50 (Hier et al., 1998). In addition, discriminant validity was achieved by comparing the AVE with the squared correlation between the two constructs (Haier et al., 1998). Thus, we concluded that the measurement model adequately fit the data, and the testing of the structural model was appropriate.

Structural model

Although the measurement model fits the data, goodness-of-fit for the structural model was not good. Examination of modification indices (MIs) can help improve the model by lowering the chi-square statistic, which allows for a better fit. MIs revealed that the possible reasons for this lack of fit were because of the potential simplicity of the relationship paths among disconfirmation, self-image congruity, and alternative attractiveness. Based on conceptual considerations, the proposed model has been modified by adding two paths from self-image congruity to disconfirmation and from disconfirmation to alternative attractiveness. The final model yielded a better fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 410.30$, $df = 113$, GFI = .934, NFI = .967, CFI = .976, RMSEA = .061).

Given the satisfactory fit of the final model, the estimated structural coefficients were then examined to evaluate the hypotheses. The model with path coefficients is shown in Table 2. All path coefficients were significant, supporting H1 to H4. H1, which predicted a positive relationship between disconfirmation and customer satisfaction, was supported (path = .29, $t = 6.90$, $p < .001$). Likewise, H2, which hypothesized a negative relationship between attractiveness of alternatives and customer satisfaction, was also supported (path = -.53, $t = -12.91$, $p < .001$). H3, which proposed a positive link between self-image congruity and satisfaction, was supported (path = .07, $t = 2.02$, $p < .05$). This significant causality indicated that restaurant customers' satisfaction about their dining experiences is influenced by the evaluation process using reference points. Notably, there are differential effects of reference points on satisfaction. Customers' perceptions about alternative restaurants were found to be the most significant. As predicted in H4, customer satisfaction had a significant impact on customer loyalty (path = .95, $t = 44.25$, $p < .001$).

Test of the moderating effect of culture

Once support for the main effects was found, the next step was to turn to the suggested moderating effects in order to gain deeper insights into the relationships between multiple reference points, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The dataset was divided into two culture groups (Korean and American) and the statistics from one were used to constrain models from unconstrained models. To determine whether the structural paths for the two samples were

Table 2
Estimated path coefficients for the pooled sample

Hypothesized path	Standardized path coefficients	<i>t</i> -value	Results
H1: Disconfirmation → Satisfaction	.29***	6.903	Supported
H2: Alternative attractiveness → Satisfaction	-.53***	-12.910	Supported
H3: Self-image congruity → Satisfaction	.07*	2.020	Supported
H4: Satisfaction → Loyalty	.95***	44.251	Supported

Note: ****p* < 0.001, ***p* < 0.01, **p* < 0.05.

invariant, we conducted a series of multiple group analyses comparing the unconstrained models to the constrained models in which each individual path was constrained to be equal across the two samples. When the path coefficients are constrained to be equal across each group there is a significant difference in chi-square, indicating that the paths are statistically significantly different. Table 2 illustrates the chi-square differences and the comparison of path coefficients of the two samples.

In terms of cultural differences, three paths out of four were significantly different between the U.S. and Korea. Contrary to our expectation, H5 which predicted that the relationship between disconfirmation and satisfaction would be stronger for the American versus Korean customers was not supported. For Korean customers disconfirmation serves as a stronger standard of comparison than the American customers. As predicted in H6, the negative relationship between alternative attractiveness and satisfaction was stronger for the American customers than Korean customers. With regard to the different influence of self-image congruity on satisfaction across two cultures, H7 was not supported. This result suggests that self-image congruity is an important determinant regardless of cultural background. H8 was also supported, indicating that satisfaction was stronger determinant in provoking customer loyalty for Korean customers than American customers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the effect of reference points on customers' post-consumption evaluation formation in a restaurant setting. The first objective of this study was to examine the relationship among the major three types of reference points (disconfirmation, attractiveness of alternatives, and self-image congruity), customer satisfaction and subsequent loyalty. As hypothesized, the results indicate that disconfirmation, self-image congruity, and alternative attractiveness were significant variables in the prediction of customer satisfaction, confirming that customers form their evaluations by making comparisons with multiple reference points.

Table 3
Comparison of path coefficients in the two cultures

Hypothesized path	Standardized path coefficients		$\Delta\chi^2$	Results
	USA	Korea		
H5: Disconfirmation → Satisfaction	.14**	.51***	Significant	Not supported
H6: Alternative attractiveness → Satisfaction	-.64***	-.36***	Significant	Supported
H7: Self-image congruity → Satisfaction	NA	NA	Not significant	Not supported
H8: Satisfaction → Loyalty	.94***	.96***	Significant	Supported

Note: ****p* < 0.001, ***p* < 0.01, **p* < 0.05

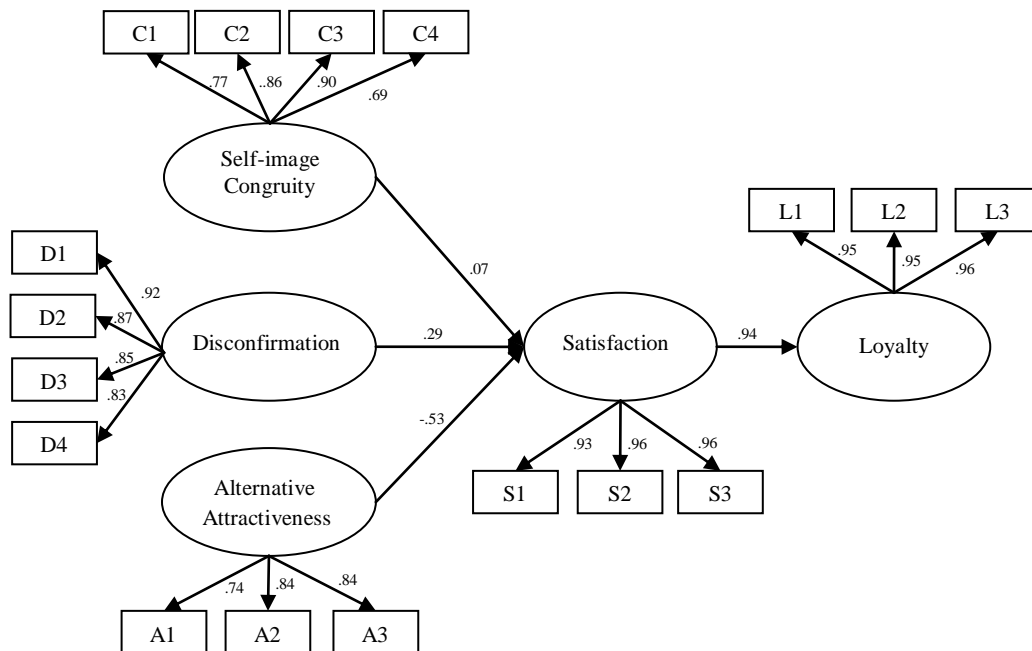


Figure 2. Structural model with path coefficients

The second objective was to see how the use of reference points differs from American to Korean customers. Overall, this cross-cultural comparison indicates that culture does affect the ways in which American and Korean restaurant customers use the reference points in their evaluations regarding dining experiences at restaurants as a key moderating variable. Surprisingly, the predicted cultural difference in self-image congruity and satisfaction link was not significant, indicating that self-image congruity is equally important in both cultures. The following may be a possible explanation for this finding. Typically, self-concept has been regarded as a multidimensional concept incorporating more than one type of self-perspective (actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image, and ideal social self-image) (Sirgy, 1982). Actual self-image congruity, which was employed in this study, may not be enough to capture more salient cultural differences. In collectivist societies where maintaining social harmony and interdependence is considered to be important customers may pursue social self-image congruity more often than actual self-image congruity.

Another interesting finding is that the focal-object (disconfirmation) referent was found to be a more important factor affecting collectivist customers' post-consumption evaluations regarding dining experiences at restaurants. This finding is somewhat different from what was originally proposed. One plausible explanation could be higher expectations that Korean customers have about restaurant experiences. Koreans have much higher expectations than Americans because their primary reason for dining out is to celebrate social occasions rather than just attending out of habit. As Spreng & Chiou (2000) mentioned, lower expectations will be easier to exceed and thus will produce positive disconfirmation, therefore yielding higher satisfaction. Another reason might that the Korean sample was relatively younger than their American counterparts, and the younger generations in Korea are becoming more westernized

and individualized given the wide spread use of the Internet and the infusion of Western culture. Thus, the proposed moderating effect of culture on the relationship between positive disconfirmation and satisfaction would be attenuated.

CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical and managerial implications

The present study has both theoretical and managerial implications. First, this research offers theoretical contributions to the hospitality literature concerning the role that reference points have on the subsequent customer evaluations. The results show that multiple reference points including disconfirmation, self-image congruity, and attractive alternatives directly affect customer satisfaction as well as customer loyalty. Therefore, restaurant marketers should recognize that customers' evaluations depend not only on focal services or products that a restaurant offers, but also on the comparison to other restaurants and their self-image. Failure to consider a variety of the effects of these multiple reference points may lead the managers to underestimate the possibility of defection among satisfied customers, or overestimate defection rates among dissatisfied customers. This failure could result in misallocations of customer retention resources.

The present study also adds to a growing body of literature on the effect of national culture on a variety of marketing phenomena in a variety of contexts. In particular, the results indicated that customers from individualist cultures use reference points differently from those from collectivist cultures, and the relative impact of each reference point on the related evaluative outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty differed between the two consumer samples. Hence, Researchers and practitioners need to take the interaction of cultures and customers into account in order to better understand customer perceptions and evaluations about their dining experiences. This understanding will enable the restaurants to more effectively communicate with their target markets and allow them to tailor advertising to different segments of their customer base contingent upon their cultural orientations. Also, understanding that different cultures use reference points differently will help restaurants in the design of promotional (e.g. advertising) appeals. For instance, advertisements emphasizing the benefits lost by not using the restaurant and benefits gained through using the restaurant would be effective in individualist cultures in which alternativeness of attractiveness have more negative influence on customer satisfaction.

Limitations and directions for future research

As with all empirical research, the study and results presented have limitations, which provide interesting avenues for future research in three specific areas: (1) methodological issues in a cross-cultural study, (2) multi-faceted nature of self-image congruity, (3) the possible relationships among reference points, and (4) the effect of restaurant type on restaurant evaluations.

First, in this study, the authors recruited a random nonprobability sample, while attempting to ensure some demographic equivalence of the American and Korean samples. Nonetheless, future research might seek to more systematically match sampling frames. Second,

measurement of self-image congruity has been narrow. As mentioned earlier, self-image congruence is rather complex concept incorporating not only actual self-congruity but ideal or social self-congruity. This multi-dimensional approach would be more useful to capture cultural differences in different influence of self-image congruity and satisfaction. Customers from individualist cultures may be concerned more about social self-congruity because they tend to be more dependent on the approval of others and emphasize harmony with people. Further studies may explore cultural differences in the role of each type of self-image congruity on evaluations.

Third, although we did not hypothesize about the relationships among these reference points, the structural model shows that they are in fact much related. One further study would be to investigate any possible interrelationship of disconfirmation, self-image congruity, and alternative attractiveness in determining customers' post-consumption evaluations. Finally, this study only included dining experiences in the mid-to-upper level restaurants. Previous studies suggested that customers often hold different expectations and that would affect their evaluations according to the type of restaurant they visit. Therefore, further studies should consider reference points in more specific sub-sectors of the restaurant industry and examine the relative influence of reference points on customer responses.

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