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How can perceived consistency in marketing communications influence customer-brand relationship outcomes?

Maja Šerić^{a, *}, Đurđana Ozretić-Došen^b, Vatroslav Škare^b

^a Department of Marketing, University of Valencia, Spain

^b Faculty of Economics & Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of perceived consistency in marketing communications on customer-brand relationship outcomes. The perception of consistent message and image through different marketing communication tools is one of the basic principles of the integrated marketing communications (IMC) approach. Although literature suggests that IMC might have an influence on customer-brand relationship outcomes, empirical evidence that supports this assumption is still weak and inconclusive. Three main brand relationship outcomes are established for the purpose of the study, i.e. trust, commitment, and loyalty. The relationships between perceived communication consistency and brand outcomes are examined in a hospitality context on a sample of 452 respondents who had to evaluate fast-food brands. Structural Equation Modelling was employed as the main technique for data analysis using Partial Least Squares (PLS). Results reveal that communication consistency has a strong direct impact on brand trust and brand loyalty. Although its influence on affective brand commitment is found to be positive, it is not statistically significant. The interrelationship between three brand relationship outcomes is also corroborated. The study contributes to our understanding of the role of IMC in the relationship marketing paradigm and provides deeper insights into the impact of communication consistency on different relationship outcomes with fast-food brands.

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1. Introduction

The concept of integrated marketing communications (IMC) has been an object of research among both academics and practitioners since the 1990s. IMC advocates agree on the fact that the consistency of marketing communication messages is one of the basic pillars of the integration approach (Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Ozretić-Došen, 2015). Kitchen and Proctor (2015) point out that modern marketing communications use many different media and messages, and consistency in communications in all customer encounters allows transition from transactions to potential relationships. There is an ongoing need to explore a broad range of issues that arise in coordinated online and offline communication campaigns (Kitchen, 2016). In this sense, and due to the information spillover effect between new and traditional media, the perception of consistency in IMC and its influence on customer-brand relationship outcomes has become even more

important.

In particular, the most recent literature on IMC suggests that communication consistency needs to be ensured when companies seek to create and maintain strong consumer-brand interactions (Foroudi, Dinnie, Kitchen, Melewar, & Foroudi, 2017). This is because consistency in marketing and media communications is an indicator of efficiency of communications, which in turn increases brand equity (Šerić, 2017) and encourages long-term brand relationships (Duncan, 2002). In this regard, brand loyalty has been traditionally considered a key element of brand equity in hotel firms (Kim & Kim, 2005) and a basis for the development of strong relationships with hotel guests (Tanford, Shoemaker, & Dinca, 2016). In addition, the concepts of brand trust and brand commitment are found to be critical in the hotel branding context and have started to be considered in brand equity operationalization in hospitality research (e.g., Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; Dioko & So, 2012; Hsu Oh, & Assaf, 2012). Therefore, as these three variables play an important role in the development of brand equity, it is likely that they will be influenced by the integrated marketing communication strategy of hospitality firms.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: maja.seric@uv.es (M. Šerić).

However, IMC has attracted only limited interest in hospitality literature (e.g., Šerić et al., 2015; Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina, 2014). For example, Šerić et al. (2014) showed that consumers' perception of high communication consistency has a positive influence on hotel brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty, exerting the weakest influence on the last one. In addition, Šerić et al. (2015) confirmed a positive and significant influence of communication consistency on customer satisfaction with Italian and Croatian hotels. However, as the same authors reported, IMC needs to be reexamined in other services and hospitality areas, and research on its impact needs to be broadened to include variables that are not merely perceptual. Hence, the challenge for IMC researchers is to corroborate the effect of marketing communications in general and of message and image consistency in particular on relationship outcomes, such as trust, commitment and loyalty, which are key concepts in the hospitality marketing literature (Wilkins, Merrilees, & Herington, 2010; Leeman & Reynolds, 2012; Cengiz & Cengiz, 2016; Tanford et al., 2016). In this vein, the role of communication in the context of brand relationship creation seems to be a major area of interest within the most recent business literature (Simon, 2017).

Furthermore, it is important to understand the existing differences between perceived communication consistency and brand outcomes across hospitality and other industry contexts. Therefore, the influence of customer perceptions of communication consistency on customer–brand relationship outcomes represents an interesting and timely research topic.

This study aims at helping to fill in these gaps and to contribute to the literature dedicated to communication consistency as a driver of desired customer relationships. Notably, the purpose is to investigate how consistency that customers perceive across different media and messages used in marketing communications influence their relationships with brands. The specific objectives are as follows:

- to explain the relationships between perceived communication consistency and brand outcomes: trust, commitment, and loyalty;
- to empirically validate the impact of perceived communication consistency on the customer–brand relationship in hospitality, more specifically in the fast-food context.

As of theoretical contribution, the present research seeks to offer a better understanding of the effect of marketing communications consistency on relationship outcomes (trust, commitment, and loyalty). By examining the impact of perceived communication consistency on the customer–brand relationship in hospitality, more specifically in the fast-food context, the results provide implications for fast-food restaurant managers interested in driving customer–brand interactions through the effective management of IMC.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Marketing research on fast-food brands

Fast-food brands represent an ongoing hot topic of academic interest (Cao & Kim, 2015; Min & Min, 2011), relevant and appropriate for scientific research in marketing and hospitality fields. The literature analyzing fast-food brands and restaurant chains shows different streams of research. As one of the most competitive industries, fast-food brands are highly explored in customer satisfaction-oriented research (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Luke, 1997; Gilbert, Veloutsou, Goode, & Moutinho, 2004). Previous research has also focused on perceptions of fast-food restaurant brands

(Mohammad, Barker, & Kandampully, 2005; Simões & Dibb, 2001), impact of demographic differences on quality expectations (Yelkur & Chakrabarty, 2006) and consumer loyalty (Sirvastava, 2015), customer retention strategies (Roberts-Lombard, 2009), factors influencing the selection of fast-food restaurants (Ehsan, 2012), challenges of fast-food brand equity creation (Tan, Devinaga, & Hishamuddin, 2013), influence of consumer emotions on a decision to purchase fast-food brands (Kashif, Awang, Walsh, & Altaf, 2015) and alike. However, in spite of being numerous and diverse, extant research does not provide insights into the role of marketing communications in customer-fast-food brand relationships. It is therefore important to study how customer perceptions of communication consistency influence fast-food brand trust, commitment, and loyalty.

Current growth in the fast-food industry is largely driven by lifestyle changes; due to increasingly demanding customers and the need to meet their expectations, marketing managers pay close attention to service quality, relationship marketing, and loyalty in their marketing and communication strategies (Mohammad et al., 2005). Fast-food brands are focused on driving sales through positioning, and their advertising to the various target segments has been successful so far (Knutson, 2000). According to Dhar and Baylis (2011), fast-food advertising is a key factor in the household's decision-making related to fast-food consumption. New media provide additional opportunities for IMC to target audiences; therefore, the perceived consistency in IMC and its impact on different customer–brand relationship outcomes with fast-food represent an actual and relevant research topic both in IMC and hospitality fields.

Furthermore, due to the ever-increasing number of competitors in the rather saturated market, the success of fast-food brands is based on maintaining high quality service and meeting the changing customer needs. In this vein, it is important to consider the perceived consistency in IMC, as a factor contributing to the overall service quality level, and investigate its impact on different customer–brand relationship outcomes.

Customers use a holistic perspective to evaluate their experiences with restaurants (Lin & Mattila, 2010). Prompt service, relatively low levels of interaction, and low prices are the most distinctive elements for differentiation of fast-food restaurants from other kinds of restaurants (Cao & Kim, 2015). Since relationships are more profitable than individual transactions (Hess & Story, 2005), a good understanding of their outcomes and factors influencing these outcomes is necessary. As claimed by Ball, Simões, and Machás (2004, p. 1277), “good communication should affect all aspects of the relationship, but largely trust, satisfaction and loyalty.” This study examines communication consistency as an important aspect of both successful communication and attention which brands provide to their customers.

2.2. Consumer responsiveness to marketing communications

One of the greatest challenges in the IMC research area seems to be the consumer responsiveness to marketing communications (Pauwels, Erguncu, & Yildirim, 2013). Accordingly, the most recent perspectives on IMC focus on consumer insights. Thus, Christensen, Firat, and Cornelissen (2009) and Christensen, Firat, and Torp (2008) have raised the issue of “flexible integration” approach, which, unlike traditional IMC approaches, is not based on the interactivity and dialogue facilitated by consistency, clarity, and coherence, but rather on sensitivity to the complexity of the environment, which involves better understanding of the recipient of the communication process. Similarly, Finne and Grönroos (2009) proposed the “Relationship Communication Model” that considers the consumer to be responsible for the process of integration

and creation of the meaning of the message according to situational (internal and external) and time (historical and future) factors. Among the most recent definitions, Šerić et al. (2015) have stressed the importance of IMC in the creation of relationships with customers and strong brand equity. Therefore, we can conclude that the concept has evolved from a tactical to a strategic approach, based on consumers' insights and brand outcomes. Still, as outlined recently by *Batra and Keller (2016)*, the consumer perception of marketing communications requires further attention in IMC research.

Vernuccio and Ceccotti (2015) identified "consumer evolution" as a key innovation variable in the proposed IMC paradigm shift. In fact, the notion of integration was spurred on by fragmentation of the media and audiences (*Gurău, 2008; Kim, Han, & Schultz, 2004; Kitchen, 2005; Torp, 2009*), which prompted a decreased impact of advertising on the one hand (*Duncan & Everett, 1993; Torp, 2009*) and increased customer empowerment on the other (*Duncan & Everett, 1993; Kim et al., 2004*).

Decreased effectiveness of advertising has led to a distribution of communication investments in a greater number of media, which required an intensification of integration initiatives (*Kitchen, 2005*). If different communication channels do not deliver consistent information and signals, the overall message that customers receive might be fuzzy and confusing (*Buchanan-Oliver & Fitzgerald, 2016*). Integration in marketing communications and the delivery of consistent messages are therefore critical, as unclear and fragmented messages might jeopardize the provided service, while a successful IMC implementation can enhance the value that consumers attach to a brand (*Šerić et al., 2014*).

Moreover, a diversification in consumers' lifestyles has brought about a change in communication practices, as consumers became more demanding and more informed about brands (*Kim et al., 2004*). Additionally empowered by technological advancements, consumers therefore assumed an active role in marketing communications processes and became an essential part of the integration paradigm (*Kliatchko, 2009*) by assigning their own meaning to marketing messages (*Finne & Grönroos, 2009*) and by "pulling" the information according to their own interests and needs (*Gurău, 2008; Kitchen & Schultz, 2009*).

2.3. Relationship between communication consistency and brand trust

Different authors agree that communication is positively related to trust and that it represents the first step in attracting new customers, as well as in maintaining the existing ones (e.g., *Adamson, Chan, & Handford, 2003; Wintoro, 2005; Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000*). Brand trust is seen as the willingness of the parties to rely on the other party in an exchange process (*Morgan & Hunt, 1994*). In this process, communication is highly relevant, as the companies that are able to communicate their message consistently are considered to be highly reliable (*Brownell & Reynolds, 2002*). Hospitality marketing literature suggests that the message received by consumers through different tools of marketing communications, such as advertising, sales promotions, or any type of promotional material, may affect their trust (*Baloglu, 2002*). If these messages are perceived to be consistent, it is expected that consumers' trust will be enhanced.

Brand trust, as one of the key elements of brand equity in hotel firms (*Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010*), is strongly influenced by communication consistency (*Melewar, Foroudi, Gupta, Kitchen, & Foroudi, 2017*) which is congruent with the desired brand identity (*De Chernatony & Cottam, 2006*) and reputation (*Foroudi et al., 2017*). Accordingly, *Alden, Basil, and Deshpande (2011)* argued that message consistency delivered through the brand's promotional

strategy creates communication synergy, which in turn enhances consumer trust, loyalty, and commitment. *Melewar et al. (2017)* examined the impact of corporate communication on these three variables in a retail context and found that consumers' favorable perceptions of the brand's controlled communication positively affected their trust, commitment, and loyalty towards the company. Therefore, as suggested by *Batra and Keller (2016)*, propensity to brand trust is one of possible effects of integration in marketing communications.

In hospitality, it has been suggested that communication is the element that probably plays the most important role in creating and maintaining relationships between consumers and a brand (*Kim, Han, & Lee, 2001*). *Leeman and Reynolds (2012)* claimed that these relationships involve a number of factors, with the quality of communication as one of the most important. Accordingly, *Kim et al. (2001)* showed that communication is crucial before, during, and after the service. Thus, in the first phase, through continuous communication through newsletters, direct mail, and telemarketing services, firms can understand customers' needs and offer appropriate service. In the second phase, employees can improve service through effective communication with consumers. Finally, thank you letters or birthday cards are communication tools that are frequently used in order to maintain relations with the guests after experiencing a service. On the basis of these observations, we posit that:

H1. Perceived communication consistency will have a positive impact on brand trust.

2.4. Relationship between communication consistency and affective brand commitment

In their Model of Service Relationships, *Bowen and Shoemaker (2003)* proposed communication as the starting point for the development of trust and commitment. Accordingly, *Zineldin and Jonsson (2000)* argued that trust and commitment are the results of an effective communication and a willingness to cooperate, while *Hausman (2001)* suggested that effective communication is translated into commitment, mutual trust, and a successful relationship. Similarly, *Morgan and Hunt (1994)*, *Hansen (2003)*, and *Bell, Oppenheimer, and Bastien (2002)* developed models in which benevolence, values, competence, and communication have a direct impact on consumer's commitment. On the basis of these arguments, *Leeman and Reynolds (2012)* examined the influence of communication in hospitality companies and found that the perception of effective and consistent communication encourages trust in a relationship, which subsequently promotes commitment and, finally, vendor retention. In the context of IMC, *Melewar et al. (2017)* argued that consumers' perceptions are shaped by the extent to which they receive brand messages through different communication tools, which can encourage loyalty and brand commitment.

Commitment can be classified into three conceptualizations: affective, calculative, and normative (*Allen & Meyer, 1996*). Among them, affective commitment, described as an emotional attachment that creates a sense of belonging and personal identification, as well as a desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the provider (*Fullerton, 2005*), is considered to have the most significant impact (*Bergman, 2006*) in hospitality (*Mattila, 2001; 2006; Tanford, Raab, & Kim, 2011*). From the beginning of the concept use until the most recent contributions, a number of authors pointed out that the development of meaningful and long-lasting relationships is the main goal of IMC activities (*Duncan & Caywood, 1996; Kliatchko, 2005; Šerić et al., 2015*). *Mulder (2007)* argued that consumers create a bond with the company

through its brand, emphasizing that it is only consumers who are capable of creating this type of attachment. Consumers tend to develop this emotional attachment towards strong brands (Keller, 2009), and IMC is a powerful means of creating these brands, by “eliciting positive brand judgments or feelings; and/or facilitating a stronger consumer–brand connection” (Keller, 2009, p. 146). Therefore, in the current paper we focus on this specific dimension of commitment, i.e., affective commitment, and on the extent to which it can be influenced by perceived consistency in marketing communications as a basic principle of IMC. We therefore propose the following research hypothesis:

H2. Perceived communication consistency will have a positive impact on affective brand commitment.

2.5. Relationship between communication consistency and brand loyalty

The marketing literature suggests that the main goal of marketing actions is to build and maintain long-lasting and profitable relationships with customers and to increase their loyalty. In particular, marketing communications and database marketing are crucial for loyalty enhancement (Reid, 2005; Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999) in the hospitality industry (Ekinci, Dawes, & Massey, 2008). Firstly, marketing communication synergies seek to create brand awareness and provide an understanding of the key attributes and benefits of products and services. Secondly, they attempt to bring the consumer to purchase. Thirdly, they aim at encouraging regular use of products or services, that is, obtaining a loyal customer. Accordingly, Keller (2009) argued that a consistent message and image of a brand could stimulate intense and active loyalty relationships.

Some studies conducted in hotel firms revealed that an effective communication mix could ensure retention and loyalty among hotel guests (Imrie & Fyall, 2000; Šerić et al., 2014). In this vein, Hennessey, Yun, MacDonald, and MacEachern (2010) have pointed out that the objective of hotels' marketing communication campaigns is to form or change consumer perceptions in order to increase purchase intentions. However, although some studies conducted in the context of hospitality services did reveal a positive and significant impact of consistency of brand messages on brand loyalty, this influence was not as strong as in the case of other brand outcomes, such as brand image and perceived quality (Šerić et al., 2014). These findings suggest that communication consistency influences to greater extent perceptual variables, such as image and perceived quality, than relational variables, such as loyalty. In addition, the impact of communication consistency on brand loyalty is found to be mediated by brand image and perceived quality (Šerić et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Melewar et al. (2017) have recently provided empirical evidence of a positive impact of IMC on consumer loyalty. The authors concluded that synergies between controlled communication (i.e., brand's visual identity/design, website, and promotion) and uncontrolled communication (considered in terms of word of mouth, public relations, media relations, and social media marketing) lead to superior brand loyalty in a retail setting. Similarly, Zhang, Shabbir, Pitsaphol, and Hassan (2015) discussed the relevance of IMC in the development of consumer-brand relationships, where consumers are strongly engaged with different marketing communications activities. The IMC approach can, therefore, produce positive effects on customer loyalty (Šerić et al., 2014). Communication consistency, in particular, strengthens such effects as it easily induces positive consumer attitudes (Foroudi et al., 2017) and behaviors (Batra & Keller, 2016), which are a basis for brand loyalty-building in hospitality (Cengiz & Cengiz, 2016).

However, empirically tested data is still insufficient to confirm the potential of integrated marketing communication pillars in brand loyalty building. Recent studies have strengthened the need for additional empirical research on the effects of IMC on customer loyalty (Batra & Keller, 2016), which is why we propose to test the following research hypothesis:

H3. Perceived communication consistency will have a positive impact on brand loyalty.

2.6. Relationships between brand trust, affective brand commitment, and brand loyalty

The hospitality literature clearly indicates that trust drives commitment (e.g., Kim et al., 2001; Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Leeman & Reynolds, 2012) and that both concepts contribute to the success of relationships between the parties and to the creation of strong loyalty (e.g., Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Hsu, Oh, & Assaf, 2012; Kim et al., 2001; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; Leeman & Reynolds, 2012; Mattila, 2006; Wilkins et al., 2010).

Thus, for example, Kim et al. (2001) found that, together with satisfaction, trust is an important component of relationship quality, which positively affects commitment, repeat purchase, and word-of-mouth. Similarly, Bowen and Shoemaker (2003) found that benefits and trust are the most important drivers of commitment of luxury hotel guests. Leeman and Reynolds (2012) concluded that the trust perceived by hotel executives about their suppliers positively affects commitment to a relationship, which in turn affects the retention of outsourcing service providers. Thereby, the evidence reviewed here seems to suggest that trust is an important predictor of commitment, which is why we hypothesize that:

H4. Brand trust will have a positive impact on affective brand commitment.

In addition, in their study of determinants of behavioral loyalty in hotels, Wilkins et al. (2010) found that trust influences loyalty through guests' attitudes towards the brand. Likewise, Hsu et al. (2012) found a positive and significant relationship between trust and brand loyalty in hospitality firms. Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2010) showed that trust in luxury hospitality brands is positively related with brand relationships, considered in terms of customer' intentions to buy the brand as a first choice (Aaker, 2002), their attitudinal attachment to the brand (Keller, 2003), and their willingness to recommend the brand. Further, Hyun (2010) corroborated a positive impact of trust on loyalty in the chain restaurant industry. Collectively, these studies outline a critical role of brand trust in the creation of brand loyalty, which led us to the following hypothesis:

H5. Brand trust will have a positive impact on brand loyalty.

Finally, a number of studies concluded that affective commitment is the key element in the development and maintenance of brand loyalty in hotel firms (Mattila, 2006; Tanford et al., 2011) and restaurants (Lai, 2015; Mattila, 2001). These findings suggest that higher degrees of affective commitment enhanced positive loyalty behavior in hotels (Mattila, 2006) and casual-dining restaurants (Mattila, 2001). Lai (2015) extended these findings in the context of Hong Kong–style tea restaurants. Tanford et al. (2011) showed that a high level of affective commitment was positively related with unwillingness to switch, willingness to pay more for the service, and willingness to recommend, which have been frequently used as indicators of loyalty in the hospitality industry (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2004, 2005; Ladhari, 2012; Mattila, 2006). All the studies reviewed here support the hypothesis that:

H6. Affective brand commitment will have a positive impact on brand loyalty.

3. Method

Data were collected among students of marketing courses at the Faculty of Economics of University of Zagreb in Croatia through the convenience sampling method. This method has been frequently used to test theory in marketing research among university students (Peterson, 2001; Peterson & Merunka, 2014; Yavas, 1994). As reported by Peterson and Merunka (2014), “college students may be appropriate research subjects in certain situations, especially if they represent a population of interest” (p. 1036). Our study matches this supposition as university students are frequent customers at fast-food restaurants and therefore an important target for fast-food managers. Moreover, previous research (Qin and Prybutok, 2008; 2009) points to the importance of the student population as the growing market segment of fast-food restaurants; frequent visits to such restaurants and a good understanding of the service quality represent arguments in favor of choosing students as suitable research subjects.

Students were asked to complete a self-administered structured questionnaire during their classes. After passing a screening question regarding students’ experiences with fast-food brands, questionnaires were distributed to those students who were users of fast-food restaurants. For assessment, they could select freely one of several fast-food brands suggested by the authors or any other they were familiar with. In the latter case, they were asked to write the fast-food brand name. Overall, students evaluated 12 different fast-food brands. The questionnaire was initially pretested among 10 respondents. A total of 452 valid questionnaires were obtained for data analysis.

The examined constructs were measured through validated scales, which were already tested in the hospitality marketing literature. For instance, communication consistency was measured through the adapted scale of Lee and Park (2007) by examining two core items: message consistency and image consistency. In particular, respondents were asked to what extent they perceived brand message to be consistently delivered through different communications tools and channels (such as advertising, promotions, web page, social media) and to what extent they perceived that the fast-food brand ensured a consistent brand image. Brand loyalty was assessed through the scale proposed by Kim and Kim (2004) and measured aspects like visit frequency, intention to return, first choice, satisfaction, intention to recommend, and non-intention to change. The adapted scales of Hsu et al. (2012) and Mattila (2006) were employed to evaluate brand trust and affective brand commitment, respectively. Thus, brand trust was assessed through the level of customer confidence in the brand’s management and perception of the extent to which the fast-food brand knows how to do business. Affective brand commitment was operationalized through the following three items: 1) the strength of commitment to the relationship with the fast-food brand; 2) the level of emotional attachment to the fast-food brand; 3) and the extent to which the relationship with the fast-food brand enhances personal meaning. All the items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, scoring from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

4. Data analysis and findings

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Data were analysed through the SPSS for descriptive statistics analysis and the partial least squares (PLS) software for evaluating

the measurement tool and hypotheses testing. The first part of the analysis consisted of examination of the sample profile and descriptive analysis of the examined variables. As shown in Table 1, the sample consisted of 28.3% male and 71.7% female respondents. In terms of age, the majority of them were between 18 and 23 years old (86.9%), while 13.1% were 24 or older. Regarding the level of study, most participants in this research studied for an undergraduate degree (84.1%), while 12.8% and 3.1%, respectively, were the students of graduate and postgraduate degree programs.

The descriptive statistics analysis revealed a relatively moderate degree of perception of communication consistency, obtaining a higher mean value for brand image consistency ($M = 3.35$) than for communications tools and channels consistency ($M = 3.19$). Brand trust was the highest assessed variable ($M = 3.74$), while affective brand commitment was assessed the lowest ($M = 2.30$). With respect to brand loyalty, the respondents scored highly on the “first choice” item ($M = 4.02$) and intention to return ($M = 3.96$). They were generally satisfied ($M = 3.85$) and willing to recommend the fast-food brand ($M = 3.75$). However, their visit frequency ($M = 2.77$) was rather low.

4.2. Evaluation of the measurement tool

During the second phase of the analysis, validation of the employed measurement tool was assessed through the PLS technique, beginning with an examination of individual item validity. All the loadings were above the accepted threshold of 0.7 (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). The cross-loading analysis showed that each item loaded higher with its own than with any other variable (Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995). In addition, all variables achieved convergent validity, as their average variance extracted (AVE) rates were above the 0.5 level (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Further, composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s alpha coefficient were used to assess construct reliability. All the variables showed values greater than 0.7 for both CR (Nunnally, 1978) and Cronbach’s alpha (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), thus confirming reliability of the measures (Table 2). To corroborate discriminant validity, we compared the square root of AVE with the correlations between variables. The scores reported in Table 3 show that each variable related more strongly to its own measures than to others.

4.3. Hypotheses testing

The third and final part of the analysis served for hypotheses testing. We first estimated the R^2 and Q^2 values to determine the predictive relevance of the posited hypotheses. The scores for R^2 were greater than the recommended level of 0.10 (Falk & Miller, 1992) for all predicted variables. In addition, an examination of the cross-validated redundancy indices (Q^2), using the omission distance of seven, confirmed that the proposed model has

Table 1
Sample profile.

STUDENTS	N = 452	%
GENDER		
Men	128	28.3
Women	324	71.7
AGE		
18–23 years old	393	86.9
24–29 years old	52	11.5
≥ 30 years old	7	1.6
LEVEL OF STUDY		
Undergraduate	380	84.1
Graduate	58	12.8
Postgraduate	14	3.1

Table 2
Descriptive statistics analysis, validity and reliability of the measurement tool.

VARIABLE/ITEM	Mean	SD	Loading	T value	Cron. α	CR	AVE
COMMUNICATION CONSISTENCY	3.27	1.00			0.84	0.92	0.86
Consistency of communication tools and channels	3.19	1.08	0.91*	56.38			
Consistency of brand image	3.35	1.08	0.95*	144.68			
BRAND TRUST	3.74	0.90			0.75	0.89	0.79
Confidence	3.52	1.10	0.92*	145.89			
Knows how to do the business	3.97	0.92	0.86*	38.93			
AFFECTIVE BRAND COMMITMENT	2.30	1.05			0.86	0.91	0.77
Strong affective commitment	2.98	1.26	0.88*	106.80			
Emotional attachment	2.00	1.18	0.89*	65.47			
Relationship with personal meaning	1.90	1.13	0.85*	46.23			
BRAND LOYALTY	3.63	0.96			0.90	0.92	0.67
Visit frequency	2.77	1.22	0.72*	29.97			
Intention to return	3.96	1.17	0.84*	44.17			
First choice	4.02	1.18	0.83*	46.31			
Satisfaction	3.85	1.03	0.90*	80.38			
Intention to recommend	3.75	1.16	0.88*	60.90			
Non-intention to change	3.44	1.27	0.74*	28.27			

Notes: Cron. α = Cronbach's Alpha; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; *p < 0.01.

Table 3
Discriminant validity of the measurement tool.

VARIABLE	V1	V2	V3	V4
V1: AFFECTIVE BRAND COMMITMENT	0.87			
V2: BRAND LOYALTY	0.60	0.82		
V3: COMMUNICATION CONSISTENCY	0.26	0.38	0.93	
V4: BRAND TRUST	0.52	0.71	0.49	0.89

Notes: Diagonal bolded data represent the square root of AVE = Average variance extracted; values under the diagonal represent estimated correlations.

satisfactory predictive relevance (Chin, 1998).

Once the predictive power of all the hypotheses was assured, we tested the path coefficients and their significance via 5000 bootstrapping runs. All the paths, with the exception of one, i.e. the communication consistency-affective brand commitment path (H2), exceeded the criterion of greater than 1.96 (Chin, 1998). Thus, five out of six hypotheses were supported. In particular, perceived communication consistency was found to have a positive and significant influence on brand trust ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$; H1) and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$; H3). Moreover, positive and statistically significant relationships were found between brand trust and affective brand commitment ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$; H4), brand trust and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$; H5), and affective brand commitment and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$; H6).

Regarding the impact of perceived consistency in marketing communications on affective brand commitment, although found to be positive, according to the bootstrap critical ratio of 1.47, it was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.07$; H2). However, although a direct effect could not be found, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution. Following Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2014), one construct's direct effect on another is not sufficient to understand the total effect of that specific variable, and the indirect effect via a mediating construct also needs to be considered. The total effect is given by the sum of direct and indirect effects. Thus, in the proposed research model, communication consistency, and affective brand commitment are linked by a direct effect, which was found to be insignificant, as well as by an indirect effect. In particular, there is an indirect relationship between the two constructs via the mediating construct – brand trust. This indirect effect can be calculated as the product of the two effects: β communication consistency-brand trust and β brand trust-affective brand commitment, i.e. $0.40 \times 0.49 = 0.19$. The total effect was calculated as: β communication consistency-affective brand commitment + (β communication consistency-brand trust \times β brand trust-affective brand

commitment), i.e. $0.07 + 0.19 = 0.26$, as also obtained by the PLS report on total effects. This result suggests that the direct relationship from perceived communication consistency to affective brand commitment is mediated by brand trust. Moreover, indirect positive and significant impact of IMC on affective brand commitment can be confirmed. This path has a significant value with the respective t-statistics score of 5.86 and therefore shows a high level of significance (99%). Fig. 1.

5. Discussion and implications

This study intended to investigate how consistency that customers perceive across different media and messages used in marketing communications influence their relationships with brands. By doing so, the aim was to explain the relationships between perceived communication consistency and brand outcomes. For that purpose, three main pillars of the relationship marketing literature, that is, brand trust, brand commitment, and brand loyalty were considered. Also, the objective was to empirically validate the impact of perceived communication consistency on customer-brand relationship outcomes in hospitality (more

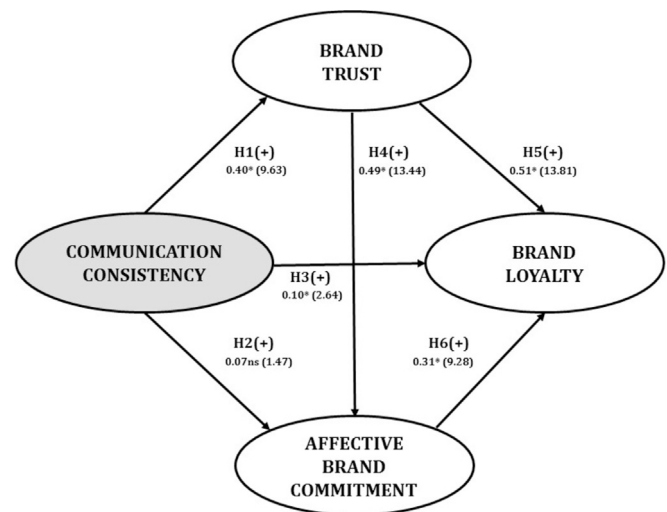


Fig. 1. Results of hypotheses testing. Notes: Brand trust: $R^2 = 0.16$, $Q^2 = 0.10$; Affective brand commitment: $R^2 = 0.27$, $Q^2 = 0.18$; Brand loyalty: $R^2 = 0.59$; $Q^2 = 0.39$; *p < 0.01; ns = not significant.

specifically, the fast-food) context.

Our findings suggest the existence of strong direct relationships between communication consistency and brand trust and loyalty. Regarding hypothesis H2, which posited the existence of a positive impact of perceived consistency in marketing communications on affective brand commitment, a direct relationship was found to be positive, but not significant. An indirect positive and significant impact of IMC on affective brand commitment can be confirmed, and this particular result is due to the mediating role of brand trust, meaning that this variable has a key role in our model.

Moreover, as we have proposed, brand trust and affective brand commitment influence brand loyalty. Thus, positive relationships are confirmed between brand trust and brand loyalty and between affective brand commitment and brand loyalty. More specifically, brand trust affects loyalty directly and indirectly, i.e., through affective brand commitment. Both direct and indirect impacts of trust on loyalty show the strongest relationships of the model. Therefore, we conclude that brand trust can be considered to be a primary basis for brand relationship building in hospitality firms.

The findings of our study show that both behavioral measures – comprising actual brand purchasing, and attitudinal measure of loyalty – concerning customers' subjective disposition and appraisal of a brand, are strongly influenced by perceived consistency in marketing communications.

Furthermore, as in many other studies conducted in the hospitality industry, we examined satisfaction as a loyalty item. Although satisfaction does not guarantee loyalty, it is true that loyal customers are satisfied (Jones & Sasser, 1995). Our results confirm satisfaction as an indicator of loyalty, meaning that IMC was also found to have a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Academic researchers have paid little attention to gaining a better understanding of the impact of perceived communication consistency on different customer–brand relationships outcomes. Specifically, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there has been no research on the impact of perceived communication consistency on different relationships outcomes with fast-food brands as a growing hospitality segment. The present paper attempted to address this issue by examining how consistency that consumers perceive through marketing communications messages can influence their relationships with brands, with a specific focus on fast-food brands.

Overall, this work explored the basic principle of the IMC approach from a relational and strategic perspective, oriented on the client and focusing on the generation of trust, loyalty, and affective commitment among consumers. Although there seems to be a consensus about the meaning of communication coherence and its implications for the consumer, contributions that provide empirical evidence regarding its impact on brand relationship outcomes were missing. The current study addressed this issue and affirmed a positive and significant impact of communication consistency on the creation of relationships between consumers and brands, thus corroborating the potential of IMC use in the creation of positive consumer responses (Batra & Keller, 2016; Šerić et al., 2015). Theoretically, these findings are significant because they point to the importance of capturing a holistic approach to the consistency in marketing communications when researching their influence on customer–brand relationships outcomes.

The model proposed in this study can be used to examine how different brand relationship outcomes can be affected by integration in marketing communications. Our findings suggest that the basic principle of IMC transcends to the field of relationship marketing. More specifically, consistency in marketing

communications is capable of encouraging profitable and long-lasting relationships with customers, as it is found to exert a positive direct impact on brand loyalty and brand trust, and an indirect impact on affective brand commitment. We therefore conclude that communication consistency plays a crucial role in the development of customer–brand relationships, as suggested by Finne and Grönroos (2009) in their theoretical Relationship Communication Model (RCM).

The affirmation of the antecedent role of marketing communication consistency in the fast-food brand-customer relationship contributes to the wider knowledge and theoretical understanding of marketing communications potential in hospitality in general, and especially in the context of fast-food restaurant chains. This research adds to the existing knowledge with insights and results from a new context, where companies from the fast-food industry often use marketing communications to shape consumer perceptions about their brands.

5.2. Managerial implications

Marketing managers need to ensure message and image consistency not only to shape consumer perceptions about a brand, but to establish relationships and encourage brand trust and loyalty. They should do their best to encourage loyalty through brand trust and affective commitment, as both constructs were found to influence loyalty in restaurant settings (Hyun, 2010; Lai, 2015; Mattila, 2001). To accomplish that, confidence in the hospitality brand and a strong emotional attachment among customers need to be enhanced.

Furthermore, our results show that brand trust is highly influenced by communication consistency, meaning that marketing and brand managers need to use different marketing communication tools to deliver a consistent message and a strong brand image to their customers. This implies ensuring that the consumer receives a clear and coherent message since the lack of coordination between marketing communication tools causes consumers to encounter fragmented images in a confusing marketing environment, as previously suggested by Buchanan-Oliver and Fitzgerald (2016). The perception of this message and image consistency will have a positive impact on their consumers' trust, as they will perceive the company to be highly reliable and professional. Moreover, it will also affect positively their loyalty, through both its behavioral and attitudinal components.

Because of the strong influence of perceived consistency in marketing communications on behavioral measures – comprising actual brand purchasing, and attitudinal measure of loyalty, managers should consider using integrated marketing communications not only as a process capable of generating competitive advantages but also as a strategic activity in the context of relationship marketing. This idea has been recently supported by Simon (2017) when examining underlying processes of brand communications on relational outcomes.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Several limitations need to be acknowledged in order to establish the boundaries of this work and propose future research possibilities. Firstly, some restrictions related to the measurement scales should be mentioned. Although we have employed the scales which were frequently used in hospitality marketing, the evaluation of some variables should be reviewed. In particular, a more rigorous measurement of communication consistency needs to be employed by assessing the concept through more than two items. Following Šerić (2017), who adopted the same tool to measure IMC in hotel firms, we considered the employed items as highly relevant

and easily evaluated by consumers. In addition, we considered satisfaction as one of the six loyalty items. However, it should not be forgotten that satisfaction and loyalty are two different concepts. A satisfied customer does not necessarily need to be loyal, which is why satisfaction might be reexamined separately, and not as an indicator of brand loyalty.

Secondly, the role of communication consistency in affective commitment building needs to be reconsidered. In this study, we could not accept the hypothesis that posited the existence of a positive direct relationship between these two variables. However, as affective commitment is considered to be a key driver of loyalty in hospitality, this relationship needs to be retested in future studies.

Finally, our study adopted a convenience method in the sampling process. Thereby, as respondents who participated in this research do not truly represent all populations of customers in fast-food restaurants, the impact of communication constancy on brand relationship outcomes needs to be studied among other students and among other consumers, preferably using a random sampling methodology. A replication of the study is therefore necessary to generalize its results in hospitality or other industry.

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- Maja Šerić** is an associate professor in the Department of Marketing at the University of Valencia, Spain. Her investigation is focused on integrated marketing communications and branding. Her papers have been published in number of journals, such as, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, *Tourism Management*, *Current Issues in Tourism*, *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Marketing Communications*, *European Journal of Marketing* etc.
- Đurdana Ozretić-Došen** is a full professor in marketing in the Department of Marketing of the Faculty of Economics & Business at the University of Zagreb, Croatia. Her research interests include services marketing, brand management, and international marketing. She has published books, contributions to books, numerous articles in national and international journals (e.g. *Journal of Business Research*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management Educational Studies*) and papers in conference proceedings (e.g. European Marketing Academy - EMAC, EMAC Regional, etc.).
- Vatroslav Škare** is an associate professor at the Department of Marketing of the Faculty of Economics & Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia. His research interests include digital marketing, consumer empowerment, and country image. He has published contribution to books and articles in national and international journals (e.g. *Journal of Business Research*).