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SME Internationalization in Emerging Markets: Symbiotic vs. Commensal Pathways

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to develop, test, and validate the symbiotic networking concept of SMEs internationalization pathways.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Survey data were collected from managers/owners of SMEs operating in the textile industry in China and Russia. The applied data analysis technique employed is structural equation modeling. The survey was pretested to address reliability, validity, and cross-cultural stability issues.

Findings – The symbiotic networking relationships in SMEs were shown to be positively related to their degree of internationalization. The relationship between networking and internationalization is significantly stronger in the conditions of high rather than low environmental turbulence.

Research Limitations/Implications – Further research should validate the findings in other industries and other countries. Future research may also include in the model other cultural, attitudinal, environmental, and managerial variables, as well as other dependent variables, first of all from consumer behavior and marketing communications fields.

Practical Implications – The findings may assist in identifying networking clusters of SMEs in emerging economies that are more likely to enter foreign markets and develop more targeted support and educational programs aimed at facilitating the internationalization of small businesses. The research results also assist in the elaboration of managerial tools in multinational entrepreneurial businesses.

Originality/Value – The research contributes to the field by empirically investigating, testing, and putting into a unified framework the measurement tools required for identifying the symbiotic networking interactions of SMEs and the influence of these interactions on SME internationalization pathways.

JEL classification: C300, F230, M160, P200, O430

Keywords: international business, structural equation model, entrepreneurship, China, Russia

1. INTRODUCTION

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are playing an increasing role in the global marketplace, especially in emerging markets, and their internationalization pathways are the subject of increasing research interest. It is widely recognized that the networking of SMEs is one of the crucially important factors in their internationalization process (Coviello and Munro, 1997; Jones, 1999). With the widely accepted view of networking as one of the powerful institutional and environmental factors pushing SMEs towards global market, there is an increasing demand for research investigating specific networking pathways and their antecedents and outcomes in terms of SMEs' internationalization (Zhou et al., 2007; Mejri and Umemoto, 2010).

As a theoretical framework, social capital theory provides insight into networking as a process that increases SMEs' resources and enhances their competitiveness in the international market (Chetty and Agndal, 2007; Partanen et al., 2008). One of the characteristics of social capital is that it may be firm- and action-specific (Griffith and Harvey, 2004). Being a facilitator of certain activities, it may be useless or even harmful for others (Coleman, 1988). As pointed out by Tang (2011, p. 201), "There is still limited research on understanding networking behaviors that precede and precondition network outcomes."

In a broader sense, this study is a response to calls for studying the sources and outcomes of networking in SMEs' activities and internationalization, in particular, in emerging and transitional economies (Zhou and Xin, 2003; Senik et al., 2011). More specifically, the research question this study pursues to address is as follows: What factors are influencing the networking pathways of SMEs' internationalization and conditioning their outcomes?

In the current research we use the "input–pathway–output" chain framework. By input we understand the type of managerial style prevalent in a SME, by pathway the type of collaborative networking at the stage of internationalization in which a SME is involved, and by output we mean the different dimensions of the degree of internationalization of a firm (DOI).

In this current study we are making an attempt to advance the research in the direction of building an integrative and predictive framework of relationships between SMEs' networking and internationalization pathways. In earlier studies, research on this topic was generally qualitative in nature (Coviello and Munro, 1997; Zain and Ng, 2006; Amal and Filho, 2009; Chetty and Stangl, 2010), with some recent exceptions (Tang, 2011; Kamakura et al., 2012). This study employs quantitative analysis and is intended as a step towards a testable and operationalizable model of SME internationalization pathways.

In terms of geographic scope, SME internationalization literature is enriched by the substantial body of recent research investigating networking perspective of SME internationalization in developed countries such as the UK (Hutchinson et al., 2006), New Zealand (Chetty and Stangl, 2010), Finland (Kontinen and Ojala, 2011), Australia (Freeman et al., 2006), Sweden (Osarenkhoe, 2010), and Spain (Ramos et al., 2011) as well as emerging economies such as China (Tang, 2011), Malaysia (Zain and Ng, 2006), Singapore (Dana et al., 2009), Korea (Lee et al., 2012), and India (Javalgi et al., 2011).

The evident gap in SME internationalization research is the sector of transition economies such as Russia and CIS countries. Overall, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies in SME networking and internationalization fields that are based on a cross-cultural sample of firms from countries representing developed, emerging, and transition economies. In our study, we are attempting to fill the gap by including SMEs from China and Russia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW, THEORY DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Networking perspective of SME internationalization

The importance of networking perspective in SME internationalization research is widely recognized in the extant literature (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988; Malhotra et al., 2003). Social capital theory provides a view on networking as a factor compensating for the lack of resources that SMEs own or control (Coviello and Cox, 2006). Extant research demonstrates that major resources and capabilities provided by networks are information and market intelligence (Mejri and Umemoto, 2010), experiential knowledge and guidance to decision making (Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004), managerial expertise (Zain and Ng, 2006), innovation capability (Möller et al., 2005), and ability to overcome size inconveniences and reduce the risks (Coviello and McAuley, 1999).

In SMEs in which management is in much higher degree based on the subjective and relationship-based components than in large scale enterprises, networking becomes a powerful factor influencing strategic decisions, including the decision to internationalize (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988). This influence is exercised through the exchange of resources between network members and absorption of ideas generated due to network relationships (Wincent, 2005). The institutional relationships in the networks not only play a role of triggers and motivators of internationalization, but also influence the entry modes (Blomstermo et al., 2006), product development selections (Coviello and Munro, 1997), choice of markets and distribution channels (Hogg et al., 2003), and patterns and pathways of internationalization (Senik et al., 2011).

2.2. Networking typology

The literature on SME internationalization demonstrates that not only the degree of network involvement of firms, but also the type and nature of their networking relationships are crucial for understanding their internationalization process (Chetty and Campbell-Hunt, 2003). Different components of networking may have a different, sometimes opposite, impact on SMEs' various business activities, including internationalization (Witt, 2004); therefore productive research of SME internationalization pathways is hardly possible without having an insight into networks typology.

The recent literature offers several classification schemes, depending on the criteria serving as a base for the classification (Street and Cameron, 2007). Heracleous and Murray (2001) propose a taxonomy of five network types (edge of chaos, embedded, brokered, atomistic, and association networks) based on the dimensions of interdependence and durability. Xie and Johnston (2004) draw a distinction between operational cooperation networks and strategic alliances, based on dimensions of scope and intensity. Möller et al. (2005) identified different types of strategic business networks using the capability-based analysis. Johnston et al. (2006) propose a multi-dimensional networks classification framework including such criteria as reinforcement, complementarity, synergy, and reciprocity. Castells (2009) delineates between horizontal and vertical networks, depending on the type of prevailing intermarket linkages that they provide.

2.3. Symbiotic type of networking

In this study we use the network typology initially proposed by Astley and Formbrun (1983) that was integrated into the strategy literature by Dollinger (1990), Dollinger and Golden (1992), and Golden and Dollinger (1993) and then gave rise to a stream of studies in SME networking area (Alexander, 1998; Dana et al., 2000; Rao, 2002; Botti and Torres, 2008; Tsai and Lai, 2010). The major component of this typology is a distinction between symbiotic and non-symbiotic (commensal, commensalistic) networks.

The major criteria of networks classification along the non-symbiotic (commensal) vs. symbiotic continuum is whether network creation and development is based on pursuing direct economic or indirect economic (or sometimes completely non-economic) goals (Astley and Formbrun, 1983). According to Crenshaw et al. (2000, p. 376), “Symbiotic unions are defined by complementary exchange relationships ... Commensal unions, on the other hand, are based on the similarity of members.” The example of a symbiotic network in the textile industry may be a set of family-owned SMEs supporting each other by sharing costs and risks and specializing in different business processes, such as importing yarn from abroad, producing knitted fabrics, manufacturing ready-made garments, advertising, transportation, or sales. An example of a non-symbiotic (commensal) network may be a regional textile federation, including fabrics and textiles manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers.

Symbiotic network members do not compete with each other while internetwork competition is typical for non-symbiotic (commensal) ones. According to Etemad et al. (2001, p. 481), “In a truly symbiotic relationship, neither party can compete effectively without the continued contribution of the other.” Respectively, interfirm level joint activities (such as joint advertising, joint research, etc.) with suppliers or buyers are common in symbiotic and absent in non-symbiotic (commensal) networks (Golden and Dollinger, 1993). There are, however, some other, less evident delineation criteria. All of the criteria are summarized in Table 1, based on the characteristics presented by Astley and Formbrun (1983), Golden and Dollinger (1993), Crenshaw et al. (2000), and Etemad et al. (2001).

Table 1

Characteristics of Networks on a Symbiotic–Non-symbiotic (Commensal) Contin

Criteria	Symbiotic	Non-symbiotic (commensal, commensalistic)
Networking motivation	Mostly relationship-based	Primarily function-based
Membership formality	Often informal (“netizenship”)	Mostly formal, with articulated set of mutual obligations
Interdependence of network members	As a rule, strong; exit barriers are high	Not necessarily strong; relationships can often be easily terminated
Role of networks	Social & business	Purely business
Joint firm-level activities within network	Presence of joint advertising, joint research etc.	No firm-level joint activities, only network-level ones
Presence of competition between network members	Members do not compete with each other	Members often do compete with each other
Internal culture	Embeddedness is emphasized	Autonomy is emphasized
Knowledge & information flows	Implicit in high degree	Mostly explicit
Type of communication	Face-to-face communication prevails	Non-personal communication prevails

2.4 Symbiotic networking and SME internationalization pathways

Senik et al. (2011) reported three major sources of networking: personal contacts, business associates, and institutions. In SMEs in which networking activity is carried out predominantly by the owner-manager, the role of personal networks is extremely important (Gilmore et al., 2006). Personal contacts are the major component of symbiotic type relationships and a source of social capital for SMEs (Pinho, 2011).

In emerging and transition economies, symbiotic ties play an especially important role due to the fact that institutional mechanisms of supporting small businesses (such as government agencies, small and medium business supporting bodies, etc.) and business associates (chambers of commerce, industrial federations, etc.) are not well established or do not play a substantial role in small business everyday operations (Bruton et al., 2008). The corruption in state organizations and imperfect legal and judicial systems also facilitate development of symbiotic networking relationships. Not only in emerging and transitional economies, but also in mature developed economies, symbiotic networking may play an important role in groups of enterprises (e.g., ethnic family businesses) in which businesses help each other in many ways, such as with ideas, technology, competence, and capital (Gäre and Melin, 2011).

SMEs base their internationalization decision on limited external marketing information (Freeman et al., 2006). Therefore, this increases the role of such factors as positive word of mouth about foreign market opportunities and moral influence of other network members who are already internationalized (Street and Cameron, 2007). The symbiotic network in this case plays the role of a communication avenue for non-rational, subjective, and personal relationship based motives for internationalization, in addition to the calculative ones that are communicated both by symbiotic and non-symbiotic (commensal) networks (Etemad, 2004). This communication feature of symbiotic networks is conditioned by the prevailing non-formal relationship pattern and network members' mutual reliance on each other in a sustained, ongoing manner, in contrast to non-symbiotic (commensal) ones (Golden and Dollinger, 1993; Etemad et al., 2001).

Based on the above discussion, we hypothesize the following:

H₁: SMEs' involvement in symbiotic networks is positively related to their degree of internationalization.

2.5. Management styles and type of SME networking

As conceptualized by Purcell (1987), management style refers to the choices made and the underlying rationale for the way in which management treats its employees. It is defined as a “distinctive set of guiding principles, written or otherwise, which set parameters to and signposts for management action in the way employees are treated and particular events handled” (p. 535). The conceptually co-sounding definition of management style proposed by Rodriguez (2005) states that it “refers to the way traditional managerial functions of controlling, planning, communication, decision-making, motivation, and control are carried out in organizations” (p. 78). Management style is considered to be determined by a set of factors such as the strategic orientation of a firm (Merz et al., 1994), institutional forces (Lee et al., 2000), and cultural values (Poon et al., 2005).

Cross-cultural research in the field, as stated by Culpan and Kucukemiroglu (1993), requires clearly defined domains or properties of a management system to use as a basis of comparison. Culpan and Kucukemiroglu (1993) proposed a set of fundamental dimensions of management systems that include participative supervision (the degree of manager's participation in subordinate's routine work flow), paternalistic orientation (the extent to which the supervisor participates in employees' non-work related matters), and information sharing (the degree of key information accessibility to employees and the rate of information flow within the company).

The choice of the above mentioned dimensions for the current study is dictated first of all by their relevance for exploring the link between management style and networking (Redding, 1995; Haley, 1997; Griffith et al., 2006). The major theory providing the grounds for this link is the production, distribution, and rule-making systems model (hereafter, identified as the PDR systems model) (Lee, 1996). Based on this theory, the intra- and interorganizational relationships are connected to each other in a logical, real-world framework.

The PDR model-based concept of “inward” and “outward” management (O’Toole et al., 2005) holds that managerial culture inside a firm (supervisory, decision-making, etc.) is tightly connected with its outward management (i.e., the way it builds networking relationships with other companies). Within this framework, management media (employees, subordinates, etc.) and outer media (partners, suppliers, etc.) are considered parts of one business network in which a firm is involved; thus, the norms and traditions of inward management media are transferred to outward management. As pointed out by Hakansson (2006), the within-company organization is a prerequisite for between-companies interorganizational relationships (IOR).

2.6. Management style dimensions and symbiotic networking

Participative supervision is a part of family-like managerial style in a company (Mavondo and Rodrigo, 2001). In SMEs, especially in emerging economies, very often it means absence of contractual employment regulations, and, as a consequence, adherence to non-contractual network in the relationship with networking business partners (Pheng and Leong, 2000). On the interorganizational relationship level, it leads to quasi-family interorganizational ties in which mutual obligations of network members are not documentarily articulated and legally fixed. These relationships are characterized by strong familiar ties that make replacement of network members difficult and create higher entrance and exit barriers (Moorhead and Griffin, 1995) that are attributes of symbiotic networks. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: A supervising manager’s participation in subordinates’ routine work flow in a SME is positively related to a predisposition to the symbiotic type of interorganizational networking.

A high degree of paternalism, from a human resources perspective, is a part of a company philosophy based on concern for employee needs and cooperation. The paternalistic approach is an attribute of relationship-motivated rather than task-motivated leadership (Lee, 2001). The same approach, applied to cross-organizational relationships, results in non-formalized, non-hierarchical IORs that are inherent in symbiotic networks (Culpan and Kucukemiroglu, 1993). Thus, based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is stated.

H₃: The paternalistic orientation of SME managers is positively related to a predisposition to symbiotic type of interorganizational networking.

The within-company information sharing style is also tightly linked to IOR strategies. The free information flow is the result of management strategy predisposed to intensive socialization (Ouchi, 1981). Unlike formal communication, the informal or grapevine form of communication occurs when information flows freely and rumors are allowed to flourish (Schermerhorn and Nyaw, 1992). In interorganizational relationships, this attitude results in the presence of non-written and non-verbal communication links, which play an important role in networks. This communication pattern also leads to non-business related links, relationships that are not dictated by immediate economic profit, and higher interdependence of network members (Robbins et al., 1994) (i.e., those relationships that are a characteristic feature of symbiotic rather than non-symbiotic (commensal) networks); therefore, the next hypothesis is as follows:

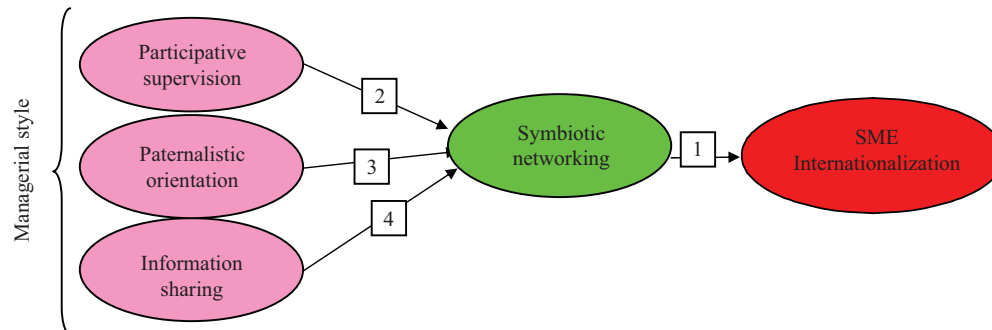
H₄: The higher within-SME information flow is positively related to a predisposition to symbiotic type of interorganizational networking.

3. RESEARCH MODEL

The proposed model is based on the integration of two research paths – the research on SME internationalization within the marketing discipline and the research on business networking

within the management discipline. It continues the emerging stream of cross-disciplinary research on small business globalization (e.g., Coviello and Munro, 1997; Coviello and McAuley, 1999; McDougall and Oviatt, 2000). The research model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Research model



Sampling. We chose compatible sample frames from the two countries participating in the research (China and Russia): for China – the national list of domestic manufacturers issued by the China Chamber of Commerce for Import and Export of Textiles (17565 firms), and for Russia – the list of RosTextile Concern Fair Members (1621 firms). Our choice of an industry-wide homogeneous sample was made based on the rationale of keeping control over the “industry” variable. A systematic random sample was drawn on an nth name basis from each of these databases to provide a stratified sample of the textile industry’s SMEs in China and Russia. We contacted the respondents with the web surveying tool. The translation and back translation of the questionnaire was employed for achieving conceptual equivalence (Douglas and Craig, 2007).

If no response rate improving techniques were applied, the expected response rate, based on results of the studies on industrial online surveys, should range from 25% to 45% (Bowling et al., 2006). Therefore, we used such techniques as the presence of an invitation postcard, Web design letting a respondent see only one page of a survey at a time, a guarantee of anonymity, a statement that respondents will not be contacted again with ads, and a follow-up letter or phone call. Because the research team included people fluent in three languages (English, Chinese, and Russian) the follow-up phone calls were found to be an effective tool, especially in the case of China. As a result, the total sample of 531 firms was obtained (287 and 244 for Russia and China, respectively). The final response rate was 40.5 percent. This level of response fits the indicators given in the literature related to online surveying (Porter and Whitcomb, 2007).

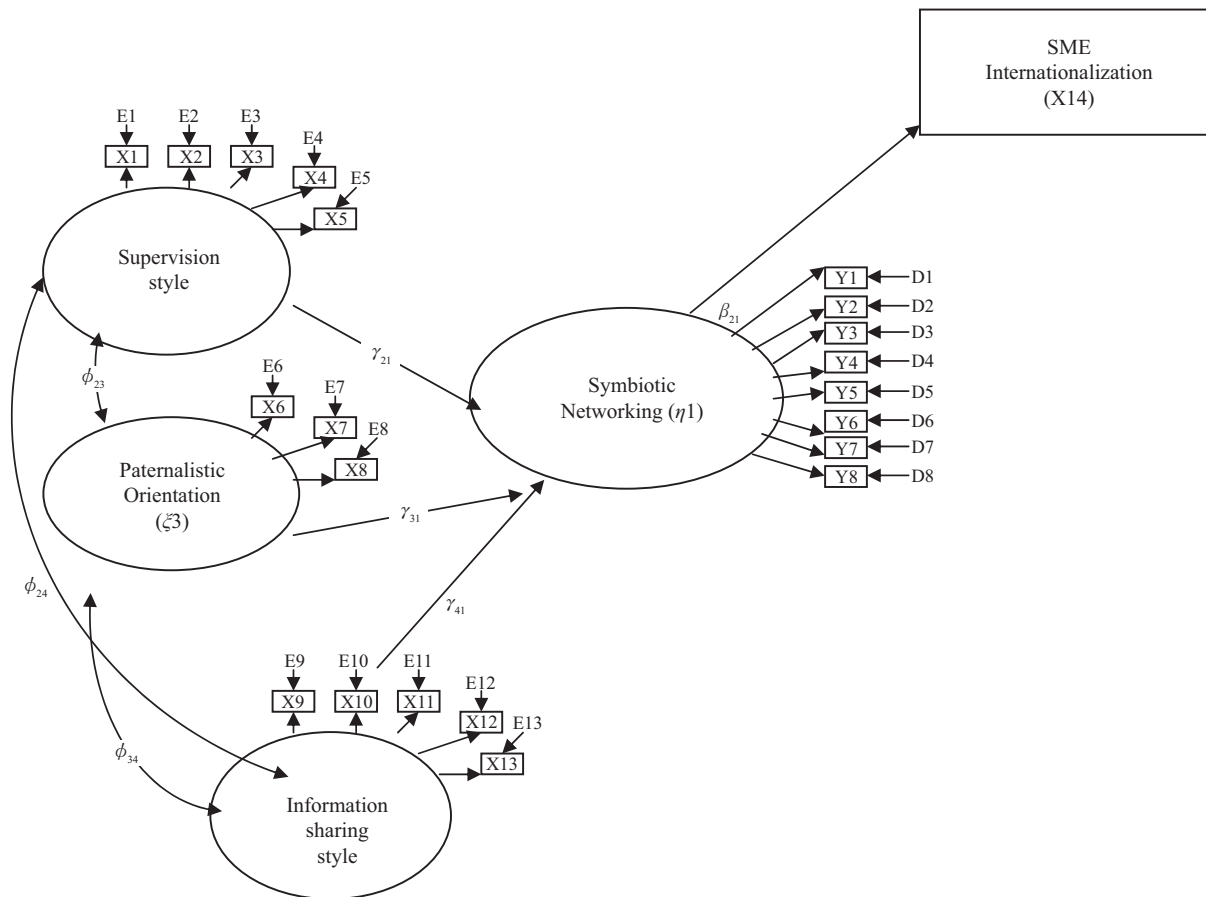
Measurement. The degree of internationalization (DOI) was measured with Sullivan’s (1994) methodology as a composite of five ratios related to different aspects of a firm’s international activities, such as (1) foreign sales and (2) foreign assets as a percentage of total sales and assets, respectively, (3) overseas partners percentage, (4) cumulative duration of firm managers’ international assignments weighted by their work experience, and (5) the dispersion of the firm’s operations among the ten psychic zones of the world. A scale for symbiotic networking introduced by Golden and Dollinger (1993) and employed in the networking literature (MacGregor, 2004; Gilmore et al., 2006) contains the list of interorganizational activities that reflects a company’s involvement in different types of symbiotic networking: joint research and advertising with partners, suppliers or customers; membership in community, social, political or religious organizations. The management style related constructs were measured based on the work of Albaum and Herche (1999), and Poon et al. (2005).

We initially pretested all scales on a smaller sample that included 42 firms from two countries and employed the EFA to determine whether the obtained scales fit the dimensionality of constructs. Based on the results of the pretest, those items that did not demonstrate satisfactory

loading patterns were eliminated. The cutoff for significant factor loadings was 0.4 and factors were kept based, first, on the dimensionality of the constructs and, second, on the explained variance (Deng and Dart, 1994). All factors were rotated using the varimax procedure.

Structural Equation Model. The collected data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM). The hypothesized model is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Structural equation model



Reliability, Validity, and Cross-Cultural Stability. In the main study, we assessed the stability of the final measures again. In addition to calculating the Cronbach alpha coefficient, we assessed Fornell and Larcker's (1981) composite reliabilities, which were all above the threshold value of 0.70. The factor loadings were all positive and significant, providing evidence of convergent validity (Table 2).

Table 2
Reliability and Validity Indicators in Cross-Cultural Setting

Scale	Chinese sample	Russian sample
Symbiotic Networking		
Cronbach's	.935	.935
Factor loadings of items:		
SYMBIOTIC_NETWORKING 1	.936	.873
SYMBIOTIC_NETWORKING 2	.917	.848
SYMBIOTIC_NETWORKING 3	.871	.854
SYMBIOTIC_NETWORKING 4	.931	.890
Participative Supervision		
Cronbach alpha	.727	.722
Factor loadings of items:		
SUPERVISION 1	.720	.669
SUPERVISION 2	.668	.666
SUPERVISION 3	.674	.612
SUPERVISION 4	.755	.727
SUPERVISION 5	.576	.641
Paternalistic Orientation		
Cronbach alpha	.558	.550
Factor loadings of items:		
PATERNALISM 1	.634	.590
PATERNALISM 2	.767	.767
PATERNALISM 3	.731	.753
Information Sharing		
Cronbach alpha	.879	.816
Factor loadings of items:		
INFORMATION_SHARING 1	.875	.741
INFORMATION_SHARING 2	.797	.707
INFORMATION_SHARING 3	.785	.633
INFORMATION_SHARING 4	.837	.744
INFORMATION_SHARING 5	.780	.656

We performed the initial assessment of cross-cultural stability by running the EFA on two datasets separately – the Chinese and Russian samples respectively. Then, the extent to which reliability and validity indicators were invariant across these three samples was examined.

Then, we followed Steenkamp and Baumgartner's (1998) procedure for assessing configural and metric invariance of measure. The multiple group analysis involved two groups of observations in the Chinese and Russian subsamples. The systematic model comparison included the chi-square difference test between the unconstrained model, configural invariance model (with one item per construct loading fixed to one, and its intercept fixed to zero for each group), and full metric invariance model (with all loadings constrained to be equal across groups).

Model Fit Indicators. To test the hypothesized model shown in Figure 2 we conducted maximum likelihood structural equation modeling with AMOS 18. The evaluation with the goodness of fit procedure was performed. The model fits well: $\chi^2_{(390)} = 527.66$ ($p < .01$), $\chi^2/df = 1.353$; the comparative fit index (CFI) = .984, recommended $\geq .90$ (Bentler, 1990); the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .021, recommended $\leq .05$ (Browne and Cudeck, 1993); Tucker and Lewis index (TLI) = .982, recommended $\geq .90$ (Tucker and Lewis, 1973); normalized fit index (NFI) = .942, recommended $\geq .90$ (Bentler and Bonnet, 1980); incremental fit index (IFI) = .98, recommended $\geq .90$ (Bentler, 1990).

4. RESULTS

H_1 states that symbiotic network relationships are positively related to a SME's degree of internationalization. The SEM results ($\beta_{12} = .182$, $p < .000$) provide support for it. As an additional testing procedure we performed a multiple paired comparisons tests for differences across the groups. The whole sample was subdivided into 3 groups with high (DOI score 2.70 and higher), medium (DOI score between 2.3 and 2.6) and low (DOI score 2.2 and lower) degrees of internationalization. The ANOVA followed by Tukey's HSD and Scheffe's post-hoc tests demonstrated the significantly higher symbiotic networking score of SMEs on higher levels of internationalization. In all cases the difference of means was significant at the .01 level, providing the additional support for H_1 .

We found support for H_2 as well, which postulated a positive relationship between participative type of supervision in a company and the symbiotic networking pattern ($\gamma_{31} = .447$, $p < .000$). The higher degree of paternalism in managerial style (H_3) was shown to influence the predisposition to symbiotic rather than commensal relationships as well ($\gamma_{41} = .676$, $p < .000$). More free information flow within a company (H_4) is also a driver of symbiotic IORs ($\gamma_{51} = .440$, $p < .000$) (Table 3).

Table 3
SEM Regression Estimates

	SYMBIOTIC_NETWORKING ^x (η_1)	
SUPERVISION (ξ_2) →	.447 (.034)	$p < .000$
PATERNALISM (ξ_3) →	.676 (.121)	$p < .000$
INFORMATION_SHARING (ξ_4) →	.440 (.049)	$p < .000$
DOI ^z ←	.182 (.011)	$p < .000$

^x Latent endogenous variable

^y Latent exogenous variables

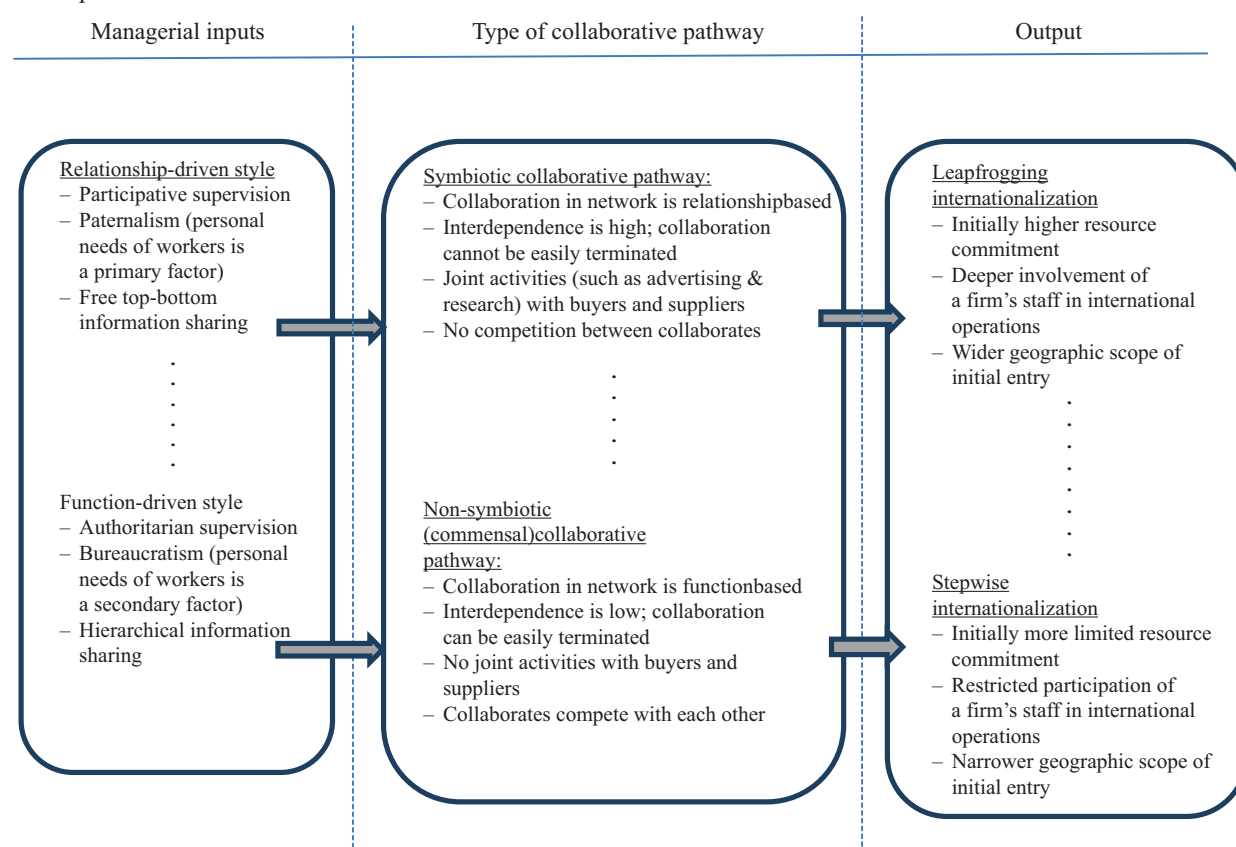
^a Numbers in parentheses are standard errors

^b Arrow denotes direction of causation

^z Manifest endogenous variable

To summarize, the results suggest that relationship-driven model of within-company managerial style results in symbiotic between-SMEs relationships which, in turn, lead to a “leapfrogging” internationalization pace characterized by higher resource commitment starting right from the initial stage. In contrast, function-based managerial style predisposes SMEs to non-symbiotic (commensal) IORs that facilitate more gradual and stepwise internationalization (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Conceptual Overview of Results



5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Contribution. The theoretical contribution of the study can be characterized as extending the frameworks of networking perspective of SME internationalization. The study is a step towards classification and conceptualization of factors underlying the typology of networking strategies and internationalization pathways of SMEs. It provides insight into how different types of IOR networking (symbiotic vs. commensal) influence SME internationalization.

The constructs reflecting the typology of SMEs' networking activities as well as its managerial and environmental antecedents were measured and operationalized. In this way, the study makes an advancement towards overcoming the traditional criticism of the networking theory, which is that it does not provide a predictive and testable framework that could explain SMEs' internationalization.

Another contribution of the study to the field is that it tested the proposed model on a diversified sample recruited from two emerging economies that are very distinct from each other in terms of culture, business, legal, political environment, history, and traditions: China and Russia. Employing this diversified sample contributed to supporting the credibility of the proposed model and allowed the stability of the constructs' measures in a cross-cultural setting to be tested.

Managerial/Practical Relevance of the Study. The research findings may be of interest to four major groups of stakeholders. First are governmental organizations that execute policies and regulations related to domestic small businesses. An understanding of the networking mechanisms of SME internationalization can assist governmental organizations to execute targeted programs of small business support.

Another group of stakeholders that could benefit from the results of this study comprises international organizations. The study findings provide them with knowledge needed for

elaborating and carrying out international networking programs for small and medium enterprises. It especially refers to those international organizations and multinational structures that act within the Asia-Pacific framework (which includes China and Russia), such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

The results of the study would be of interest to educational institutions, especially those business colleges and schools in emerging economies that have Executive MBA programs in entrepreneurship and international business areas. Understanding the networking factors leading to different types of interorganizational relationships and different SME internationalization pathways as well as their antecedents helps to develop educational and training programs designed for owners and managers of those enterprises that are entering world markets.

Finally, the findings may assist small and medium businesses themselves. The theoretical comprehension of a networking perspective of internationalization provides guidance in the area of building network relationships aimed at the fulfillment of an enterprise's business goals on global markets. SME executives may strategically plan the intended internationalization steps based on diagnosing their current position in terms of the type of network involvement and turbulence of their business environments.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions. Like any other international study, this one has certain limitations that must be recognized and discussed. The sample is homogeneous in terms of the industry (fabrics, garments, and accessories production and distribution). The research results can be considered generalizable only after performing studies that validate the findings in other industries. Two industrial cluster samples, which can be used for future research, are knowledge-based industries and service industries.

Future research agendas may also include the investigation of the influence of additional cultural, attitudinal, environmental, and managerial variables conditioning different types of networking and respectively pathways of SME's internationalization. The research should be expanded to include other dependent variables, first of all those that are related to consumer behavior and marketing communications fields. A broader array of countries representing emerging markets should be included in the scope of research as well.

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Cultural congruency and shocking buzz campaigns: contrasting the opinions of professionals and consumers

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ABSTRACT

Buzz marketing in social networks is often seen by announcers as an opportunity to reach the biggest audience. However, the risk of failure of buzz campaigns proves not to be negligible and its consequences may be serious for the company. In order to succeed in such buzz campaigns, this research study focuses on cultural aspects, and more particularly on the central role of cultural congruency. To explore these aspects, a qualitative study, based on 36 face-to-face interviews with marketing professionals/advertisers and consumers, has been carried out. The results highlight the importance of cultural values for consumers in Arab-Muslim countries, especially when buzz marketing campaigns touch the taboos. Terms used in the advertisement are also decisive in the success of a buzz campaign.

JEL classification: M30, M31, M37, M39

Keywords: buzz, cultural congruency, values, religion, taboo.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there is a stream of advertising that is nothing but a result of consumer society. This stream is increasingly perceived as a burden by consumers who are becoming either indifferent or hostile to messages that follow them everywhere they go. This is not really what advertisers expect, their objective being to capture consumers' attention and get them interested. Therefore, over time, with this relentless "hype", consumers are becoming disappointed, tired, uncaring, bored and even mistrustful toward advertising (Oosterwijk and Loeffen, 2005).

Overload is one of the reasons of the decrease of efficiency of the traditional media. Subsequently, companies are now required to innovate, find more creative and original solutions. Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube seem to offer an ideal ground to develop new ways of communicating with consumers (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Kozinets et al., 2011; Proulx et al., 2012). In the era of new technologies, this may lead buzz marketing to occupy

a prominent place in the communication strategies of companies (Fournout et al., 2012; Kimmel, 2014).

A marketing campaign can fail even when managers comply carefully with the different stages of the advertising process. Today, a company has several audiences that could be characterized by huge differences, especially on the cultural level (Ersig, 2001). What a consumer can tolerate and/or accept without any problem in a given setting may seem extremely shocking to another consumer in another country. Consequently, the old debate on the choice between adaptation, standardization and median strategy (Liessem, 2015) seems also valid for a company that wants to start a buzz marketing campaign.

Prima facie, it is important to define the concept of buzz. “*Buzz marketing consists of creating positive word of mouth around a product by turning selected consumers into spontaneous carriers of the message. This then spreads in concentric circles, from the trendsetters to the mainstream consumers. It is not a matter of shouting to everybody but whispering to the right people. The buzz marketing process illustrates the virus metaphor: inoculation (of a product), incubation (use of the product by the few primary inoculated consumers), spreading and infection (passing of the product). It is based on the valorization of the selected consumers, who feel proud to have a scoop*” (Salzman et al., 2003, p. 5).

Buzz marketing is therefore a technique that can affect brand image and reputation (Gastal et al., 2011; Rosen, 2001). Its main purpose is to let the social system speak about a product or a service, even before its introduction into the market. It does so by creating a word-of-mouth around it via opinion leaders whose sociability and expertise significantly contribute to the diffusion of information and the influence of other consumers, who take their turn and become brand ambassadors, and so on (Stambouli and Briones, 2002). However, these relays can alter the content of the message both positively and negatively. Buzz can indeed generate positive reactions towards the brand, increase brand awareness, and improve brand image as well. Unfortunately, this is not always the case since buzz can lead to negative reactions when the company loses control over the transmission of the information especially in social networks, where videos are sometimes shared with a breathtaking velocity among an impressively large audience.

Many buzz campaigns have gone wrong and left behind the legacy that can be recovered neither in branding nor in sales (Burcher, 2012). From this perspective, culture may be an interesting angle of attack to analyze these campaigns as it allows, in our opinion, for understanding better the extent to which buzz can degenerate and become a danger to the advertiser (Ben Yahia et al., 2012).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To ensure maximum success, a buzz campaign is supposed to arouse curiosity, surprise, desire, or delight (Oosterwijk and Loeffen, 2005; Sternthal and Craig, 1973) through effects sometimes inspired from shockvertising, which seems to be a new trend in the world of communication (Dahl et al., 2003). Therefore, an advertising campaign can be considered as shocking when it presents themes that have no objective relationship with the product or the company and when it is likely to cause violent reactions from consumers (Arn, 2001).

Shock advertising pushes forward to consumers a message that they do not want and/or do not intend to be exposed to, bearing in mind that what is considered offensive to one person may not be for the other. The ultimate goal of this type of advertising is to let the audience speak about the product. But daring to challenge the values and go against what is supposed to be acceptable and tolerated by all does not come without risk (Chatterjee and Tata, 1998). Actually, shockvertising appeals to topics such as violence, drugs, death, racism, sex or religion (Severn et al., 1990; Kilicbay and Binark, 2002) in order to bring out strong feelings such as anger, revolt or grief in

the viewer (Garcia, 2010). These feelings are supposed to ease the access to consumers' memory. However, as we mentioned earlier, agreeing to discuss shocking topics is relative and depends on the receiver of the advertisement; the same reasoning is also valid for the country or geographical area. Indeed, what is tolerated in one society is not elsewhere, because cultures differ. It is therefore necessary, especially for companies looking to target several markets, not to forget the cultural factor when developing their communication strategies (McCracken, 1986; Moriarty et al., 2014; Snyder et al., 1991). Indeed, most of the research dealing with cross-cultural advertising admits that culture is a basis for the content of advertising and other forms of communications (Al-Olayan and Karande, 2000; Galissot, 1994; Hong et al., 1987; Mueller, 1987; Tansey et al., 1990).

By analogy with advertising, buzz marketing should not turn to neglecting cultural aspects. This is the main objective of the present research since, in our knowledge, no studies have explained the contents of buzz marketing taking into consideration culture as an important feature which can guarantee the success or cause the failure of a buzz campaign. It is therefore imperative to explain the importance of culture in the development of communication strategies designed specifically to be broadcast on social networks. For that, we consider three important cultural components: values, taboos and religion.

Cultural differences can first be explained through a comparison between the value systems (Feather, 1975; Rokeach, 1973). Values can be viewed as beliefs, attitudes and activities approved in a community and reinforced by a set of rewards/punishments for those who meet/deviate from the guideline (Rokeach, 1973). Durgee et al. (1996) argue that a better understanding of consumers comes by knowing their values. On a personal level, values inspire all types of consumer behaviour (Connor and Becker, 2003; Cai and Shannon, 2012), and in particular motivations and choice (Durvasula et al., 2011), purchasing decisions (Koubaa et al., 2011) and media selection (Odin et al., 1996). Since communication messages convey values, it is often reminded that these messages should be in harmony with the prevailing beliefs of the target and operate as a "*mirror that only reflects and exposes existing cultural values and behaviours*" (Pollay, 1986, p. 910). However, the reality is much more complex since values are numerous, varied, inter-related, not of equal importance, and sometimes difficult to operationalize in a communication campaign, and *a fortiori*, in a buzz campaign. Values play indeed an important role in the case of buzz marketing and may influence the perception of websites and their content (Li et al., 2009), as well as individuals' willingness to engage in an interpersonal communication process (Kropp et al., 2005). The impact may also become thorny in the case of a buzz campaign going against the target's values.

Taboos may also be an interesting window through which cultural values may be analyzed. Shocking and provocative (Lambek, 1992; Sabri, 2015; Skorupa, 2014), they are based on the social norms and the prohibitions assimilated by the group members (Freud, 1912; Durkheim, 1915; Webster, 1942; Cazeneuve, 1971). Taboos are cultural productions that use a set of stimuli liable to "*shock or offend by transgressing internalised norms or by triggering emotionally ambivalent responses, such as simultaneous excitement and guilt*" (Sabri, 2010). Breaking taboos may lead to internal and/or social sanctions. Accordingly, internal sanctions occur through emotions such as shame, guilt and embarrassment (Heywood, 2002).

Social sanctions consist of categorizing some individuals as marginal people, nonconformists and may cause negative social reactions resulting in their exclusion (Schachter, 1961; Schur, 1971; Earle, 1986; Marques and Paez, 1994). Taboos can appear in conversations as they deal with subjects that can hardly be addressed (Walter, 1991). They can also reveal themselves through behaviours when acts are against social norms. What is interesting for us is that the taboo may be perceived in different ways from one culture to another (Sabri and Obermillerb, 2012), which should be considered by promotion managers implementing a buzz campaign in order to avoid offending people and giving rise to negative reactions.

It is also imperative for a company targeting an Arab-Muslim culture to take into account religion and respect for the holy (Cleveland et al., 2011; Delner, 1994; Luqmani et al., 1989). Early writings in marketing recommended advertisers to never mix religion and business (Van Dyke, 1980). Even though everywhere around the globe, people are progressively accepting the way modern advertising communicates, not all countries accept the change with the same speed and some contents may still shock some consumers (Fam et al., 2004). Multinational companies are now used to adapt their content according to the religious background of the target. For instance, people are significantly less depicted when advertising to the Arabic world (Al-Olayan and Karande, 2000) and when women appear, their bodies are more covered than in Western countries (Al-Makati et al., 1996; Luqmani et al., 1987).

Usually, advertisers and promotion managers try not to transgress values, taboos, and religious beliefs and practices. However, advertisers may sometimes adopt another strategy: try to go beyond the threshold of acceptability and reach censorship as a result but with a greater visibility. Indeed, consumers will hear about this ad through the buzz and try their best to see it by all means either in the newspapers or on the net (Garcia, 2010). In other words, scandal creates buzz; that makes it increasingly used by advertisers in recent years, especially since it is a way to increase awareness and differentiation, or to rejuvenate a brand by giving it the opportunity to speak to younger targets.

In conclusion, consumers may react differently to an advertisement according to their culture (Harris and Attour, 2003; Zhang and Gelb, 1996; Buzzell, 1986; Harris, 1984), which underlines the need to conduct prior studies to emphasize the socio-cultural specifics of the target market (Abernethy and Franke, 1996; Al-Olayan and Karande, 2000) in order to ensure the success of a buzz campaign.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to explore the way culture may interfere with buzz marketing practices and how marketing professionals may integrate cultural components when planning and implementing a buzz campaign. To meet this objective, a qualitative inductive research was conducted. This choice is justified by the paucity of research dealing with the perceptions of cultural elements present in advertising on social networks. Indeed, a qualitative approach is recommended when little research has been carried out concerning a topic or a setting (Morrow and Smith, 2000).

Our basic assumption is that a cultural reading of buzz campaigns would allow us to better understand how they can succeed or, on the contrary, become a danger to promotion managers. This research is an attempt to analyze, from a cultural perspective, buzz campaigns that have been massively viewed on social networks, whether they scored positively or negatively in consumers' minds. These campaigns are meant to evoke in the target audience surprise, desire, curiosity or amusement through effects sometimes inspired from shockvertising. These campaigns may respect or infringe the cultural background of the audience. Face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews with communication and promotion managers confronted with such situations have been carried out. This technique seems to be appropriate as it brings out latent elements in the mind of interviewees as well as information difficult to disclose given their "taboo" or annoying character (Flick, 2009; Alston and Bowles, 2003).

The qualitative sample of this study consists of two groups: – 16 interviews with professionals working in the marketing communication agencies or digital agencies and announcers, including brand managers and marketing managers and – 20 interviews with consumers who were exposed to buzz campaigns on social networks. This "*triangulation of data sources*" contributes to gathering different perspectives and opinions about buzz: the idea was not to gain a unique

consistent picture of the reality, but rather to have access to varied and sometimes different perspectives (Patton, 2002). We considered it interesting to identify some points of convergence and divergence in the views of our target.

For professionals (designated by P in Table 1), a snowball sampling procedure was adopted where each interviewee recommended one or several other individuals from their portfolio of acquaintances. All of the selected respondents were either advertising managers operating in communication/digital agencies or professional announcers who had at least one experience of buzz. As for consumers (designated by C in Table 2), we selected respondents who were exposed to buzz marketing campaigns on social networks and who were ready to share with us their opinions, perceptions and attitudes about those campaigns. To avoid duplication of gathered information, we decided to put an end to the interviews when the sample size allowed us to achieve theoretical saturation (Longhofer et al., 2012; Holton, 2010; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Table 1

Professionals: Description of the interviewees' profile

Informant	Company's name	Interviewee's profession	Category of the activity	Nature of the activity	Years of experience
P1	Coca Cola Company	North Africa Marketing Manager	Soft and energy drinks	Announcer	14 years
P2	Unik Advertising	Marketing Manager	Advertising	Advertiser	3 years
P3	Médiacom	General Manager	Advertising	Advertiser	7 years
P4	Confidentiality desired*	Multimedia Responsible	Phone operator	Announcer	4 years
P5	Indexiweb	Manager	Web marketing	Advertiser	3 years
P6	Samsung Electronics	Digital Manager	Electronic	Announcer	3 years
P7	Orascom Telecom Tunisie Tunisiana	Web and E-Commerce Manager	Phone operator	Announcer	4 years
P8	Confidentiality desired*	Digital Manager in a multinational communication agency	Advertising	Advertiser	2 years
P9	Havas Tunisie	Media Managing Director	Advertising	Advertiser	8 years
P10	Industries Alimentaires de Tunisie (IAT)	Brand Manager	Cheese industry	Announcer	6 years
P11	Memac Ogilvy Label	Digital Strategist	Advertising	Advertiser	10 years
P12	Infochallenge	Manager	Web marketing	Advertiser	5 years
P13	Samsung Electronics	HHP Marketing Manager	Electronic	Announcer	7 years
P14	Topnet	Marketing Manager	Internet service provider	Announcer	7 years
P15	Mindshare	Digital Manager	Advertising	Advertiser	5 years
P16	Confidentiality desired*	Brand Manager	Food products	Announcer	13 years

Confidentiality desired* for informants 4, 8 and 16, who preferred not to disclose information about the name of the company in which they worked.

Source: Authors' research.

Table 2

Consumers: Description of the interviewees' profile

Informant	Job description	Gender	Age	Region
C1	Optician	Female	28 years	Capital city
C2	Employee in a company	Female	40 years	Capital city
C3	Agronomist	Female	27 years	Centre
C4	Biologist	Male	37 years	South
C5	Dentist	Male	34 years	South
C6	Secretary	Female	42 years	Capital city
C7	Student	Male	20 years	North
C8	Housewife	Female	49 years	Capital city
C9	Accountant	Male	51 years	Capital city
C10	Physiotherapist	Female	31 years	Capital city
C11	Restaurant owner	Male	45 years	South
C12	Financial officer	Male	38 years	North
C13	Nurse	Female	33 years	Capital city
C14	Student	Male	24 years	South
C15	Banker	Female	30 years	North
C16	Retired man	Male	61 years	Centre
C17	Employee in a company	Male	35 years	North
C18	Primary school teacher	Female	46 years	South
C19	Pharmacist	Female	39 years	Capital city
C20	Engineer	Male	53 years	Centre

Source: Authors' research.

Two interview scenarios were developed to achieve our research objectives. The interview scenario for professionals focused on (1) the place of social networks in the promotion-mix and buzz campaigns, (2) audiences' perceptions of and reactions to buzz campaigns (exposure to selected stimuli), (3) buzz campaigns and cultural congruency, and (4) alternatives for a successful buzz campaign on social networks. When elaborating the interview scenario for consumers, for the sake of comparability, we tried to keep a certain symmetry, leading to the following themes: (1) consumers' perception of buzz marketing campaigns in Tunisia and elsewhere, (2) perceptions of and reactions to some specific campaigns (exposure to selected stimuli), (3) buzz campaigns and cultural congruency, and (4) suggestions for improved buzz campaign on social networks and practices to avoid.

We selected two stimuli to contrast the opinions of marketing professionals and consumers. The first one is a buzz marketing campaign initiated by a famous national internet service provider. It did not last long as it was removed from the website barely thirty minutes after its publication. It sparked strong reactions and created a bad buzz in the Tunisian society. It represents two men looking at each other in a way that may suggest they are homosexual. This topic has been deemed all the more shocking that homosexuality remains a strong taboo in the traditional Arab-Muslim Tunisian society. The second stimulus is an image exposed on the front page of a national newspaper. It shows a soccer player touching the bare chest of his *fiancée*. It created a huge buzz on Facebook after which the journalists and the manager of the newspaper were arrested.

The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 2 hours, depending on respondents' availability. The interviews took place in the form of conversations, with a choice of language given to the respondents (colloquial Arabic, French or a mix of both), to allow them to feel at ease and be more interactive. Interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. We conducted a thematic content analysis. Two major themes are developed below: the central role of cultural congruency in a buzz campaign and success factors of such campaigns on social networks. The excerpts of verbatim drawn from the interviews will be presented in what follows in italics and quotation marks.

4. CULTURAL CONGRUENCY: A CENTRAL ROLE IN BUZZ CAMPAIGNS

All our respondents, professionals as well as consumers, declared dedicating an important amount of time to connecting with people through the internet. They described, in different terms, their feeling of belonging to one or several online communities. For this sake, all of them used Facebook, which remains on the top of social networks. Some professionals, to follow this “wave”, were also Twitter and LinkedIn members.

“The young communications professionals, bloggers and geeks, working in IT, web development, communication, web marketing, use Twitter but not as much as Facebook social networking. LinkedIn is also sometimes used for professional networking but mostly by geeks and nerds” (P5).

More and more aware of the importance of virtual communities and the emergence of new technologies related to mobile marketing (Wi-Fi, tablets), marketing professionals are attempting to seize this opportunity by getting closer to their members via the social networks.

4.1. A threatened social compromise?

All the exposed stimuli and advertisements were perceived as shocking by the interviewees. Indeed, when the line of the campaign was based on taboos, most of consumers and some of the professionals declared to be shocked and to be animated by negative emotions such as irritation, anger or shame.

“I think this is an offensive and provocative campaign that disgusts me to the highest level!!!” (C2).

This echoes previous findings since shockvertising focuses on and seeks to make use of some sensitive issues that concern all or part of the population. Topics may include either issues such as war, pollution, contagious diseases or politics and religion (Arn, 2001).

Our interesting finding is the contrast between professionals and consumers' opinions. Indeed, consumers tend to express several forms of resistance to and rejection of the buzz campaign stimuli, while professionals are more liable to use them and are more at ease with this new marketing trend. This may be explained by the fact that marketers and professionals operating in communication and technology are more westernized, and more undergoing the phenomenon of “acculturation in situ” (Hirschman and Touzani, 2011). This may be explained by their continuous contact with Western stimuli: not only those related to promotion and advertising, but also all the artefacts related to the marketing universe in general. This state of fact transforms them into active acculturation agents introducing and sustaining western representations and mental imagery in a traditional and rather conservative market.

Creating the buzz on social networks by infringing the limits of what is considered as morally correct and socially acceptable brings the question of the boundaries defined by religion and society. The few dissident advertisements in the Tunisian market tried to spark off consumers' reactions by using taboos that could lead to immediate feedback, but that was generally not

in favour of the promoted brand. Indeed, the use of sex or other taboo topics in advertising is considered as an abuse by the large public. This phenomenon can be explained by companies' will to distinguish themselves from competitors by using nudity and sex oriented lines to provoke by creating shock among the audience. However, they sometimes give rise to a controversy that goes far beyond the mere promotional campaign.

When analyzing the reactions generated by the first stimulus, it is important to underline the significant negative affective states that emerged. This was reflected by the informants' non-verbal micro-expressions revealing shame, embarrassment and discomfort: grimace, frowning, looking down to the ground, body agitation, etc. Beyond these subconscious reactions, our informants clearly stated their uneasiness:

“Two men hugging with a slogan ‘It’s what I love about you’! I am deeply offended and shaken. They just exhibit this image like this ... it disgusts me!” (C8).

It also appears difficult to distinguish between what originates in values, taboos or religion. The three cultural components seem to blend in a subtle *mélange* materialized by the prevalent cultural background of the society. As shown, in the following testimony, values, taboos and religious beliefs constitute different materials for a single and unified mould.

“This picture reflecting homosexuality annoys me and touches the sacred principles among which I was raised. This poster inspires a form of deviance and it is completely against our social and religious beliefs” (C9).

This study may offer the premise to draw a social statement revealing the presence of a certain cultural hegemony through a dominant ideology that draws its essence from Islam that retains its exegetical value of the social system. Actually, religion is the cornerstone on which the whole social structure is based. So what is considered as a “sin” by religion is considered as not socially acceptable. From a sociological point of view, the social compromise seems threatened as through advertising campaigns in social networks, messages can encourage the receiver to deviate from the right path which is in fact the winding road of the morality. Therefore, religiosity contributes to creating a hierarchy of values and thus generates negative reactions if they are violated.

However, a social compromise seems to emerge against the publication of messages or stimuli that may go against these values. Returning to the first visual, homosexuality is firmly denied by the participants. This shows that, in spite of all the exterior signs of westernization, Islam remains an essential anchored reference. Since it strongly condemns this practice, it is considered as a sin and against the established divine order.

“In our society, there are some things we wouldn’t accept; an inappropriate message can generate a negative reaction going up to boycotting the product. Homosexuality is a practice against nature and diffusing it among the general public is against our traditions, values and it is especially a sin” (P12).

Publishing this kind of visuals would brandish the spectre of a loss of personal and cultural identity. The receiver of such “intrusive” messages on social networks would be compelled to comply with a pseudo-modern westernized model where freedom sometimes becomes outrageous and offensive and definitely goes against tradition.

“Personally, I am not comfortable with this poster because it is not compatible with our traditions. I would rather see it as an advertising campaign for Benetton which suits most European countries” (C6).

4.2. The eternal dilemma of nudity

After exposure to the image (stimulus 2), consumers demonstrated strong reactions of discomfort or even shame. Some of them tried to hide the image; others turned it over, while the others looked away.

“This nudity and this posture! Honestly, I’m ashamed to see this picture... and confused as well... I would feel uncomfortable and afraid if someone watched me looking at this kind of image...” (C12).

The way the audience receives and manages such campaigns should also be analyzed within the framework contrasting between individualistic and collectivistic societies. As a matter of fact, our participants’ testimonies reveal that the other members of the social system’s judgements and opinions prevail over individual considerations. Consumers’ image as perceived by others is to be considered even if the stimulus does not seem to intrinsically bother the receiver of the message.

“Even if I was alone, this image wouldn’t bother me in absolute terms but it could be embarrassing if I was with my colleagues” (C4).

Therefore, decency and reserve prove to be common values inculcated since the early stages of socialization. For this, the dominant rule remains the respect of morality. Consequently, all elements liable to undermine decency and cross its bounds appear as a threat.

“It is true that we have the freedom of expression, but there are limits not to cross. These limits are materialized by our social principles. Infringing them may affect the person’s privacy and private life. Nudity is not tolerated in our context and can but create controversy” (P6).

Making inroads in a forbidden domain resulted in a feeling of aversion among interviewees. This feeling reveals the “mandatory” aspect of social relationships, as individuals seek conformity, often not by conviction but rather in order to warrant the adherence to the social system and to avoid being rejected by the diverse groups of belonging.

“Personally, it doesn’t shock me to see these pictures but I have to argue that it is shocking because I belong to a society and I must submit myself to the rules of morality and obey the values setting the socially acceptable” (C7).

4.3. The sore words

After exposure to the buzz stimuli, some participants from Southern Tunisia highlighted regional differences materialized through dissimilarities in the way slogans and marketing materials may be perceived. Some respondents have reported that during this campaign of a telephone operator, an actor’s line was “Harda” (hole in the budget). An innocent word for the citizens from the North, Central Tunisia and the capital, but containing obscene and vulgar meaning with sexual connotations in Southern Tunisia! Consequence: many felt offended.

“I do not understand how they could diffuse that. It’s totally disrespectful ... It sounds insulting to me. I thought to change the telephone operator. I called the Customer Service to complain and show my disappointment and indignation at this unfortunate offence” (C11).

Returning to this point of view with the professional working for this company, he said that the number of claims due to this advertising had reached more than 3,500 calls. This inadvertent error in the choice of words and the ignorance of their meaning varying from one region to another confirm the importance of considering each term and using it in accordance with the morals and traditions of each region.

Accordingly, the words used in commercials must be decent and the choice of words must avoid misinterpretations and innuendos. The weight of words is of crucial importance not to hit people or subcultures.

“We must also pay attention to the words used with different meanings between the regions and adopt a more refined language in slogans, avoiding teen jargon that seems vulgar to adults” (P2).

5. DARING, YES ... BUT...

It should be noted that some participants tend to set themselves up as censors of “unconventional” advertising. *“I don’t think it can be published. Me I go for less naked with a touch of humour” (C5).*

However, it is possible to detect a certain idiosyncrasy among respondents, which clearly denotes an obvious change of mentality due to the cultural integration with young fans of social networks, tolerating stimuli that can create a controversy among adults.

“I’m used to seeing this kind of advertising on social networks that I check daily for hours and must be open-minded to accept different messages. Compared to my father, who is against the use of the internet, he would never accept this kind of message” (C14).

In this environment, a red line is crucial. However, advertisers do not hesitate to engage in sensitive and offensive messages just to be pioneers in the market.

One of the main goals of advertisers is making the ad discernible, but the famous idea saying “sex sells” does not apply in all societies for ethical considerations.

“Advertisers are not stupid. There is no magic method for a successful buzz campaign on social networks. On the other hand, everything considered as offensive and outrageous is to be avoided. We have to keep in mind that our target is sensitive about the traditions, rituals, symbols and cultural values, and crossing the limits of the socially acceptable could be inconvenient for the brand or for the advertiser. For us, as a multinational we have rules to follow up and a marketing guideline to respect in order to preserve our image worldwide. No deviation is permitted” (P1).

Concerning the professionals, we feel an aspiration to engage in “daring” advertising but there are some obstacles posed by the head office for multinationals following the rules, or by advertisers censoring themselves by repressing flooding ideas. This adds to the limits set by the hearing and underlying socio-religious system in which the advertiser belongs.

“We all would like to be able to let our imagination run without reins and let the inspiration guide us without any constraint. At the present time, the announcers do not dare go on a slippery slope by attacking the cultural side as they may be scared by the potential backlash against their product/service. The advertisers get in a process of self-censorship sometimes even before the presentation of the idea or the customer insight. The solution is to avoid any excess and to proceed in several stages. At present, we cannot shock directly. Time should be taken to let mentalities evolve: when they are ready to accept provocation, it will be possible to move to the next stage.” (P9)

“As an advertiser, I’d like to line up with the limits of what is allowed and accepted. But I think we must dare... but finding the right mix. It’s like an equation which should, before being fixed, make certain conditions and limitations that would give creativity a different scale. Creativity is the preferred solution because it would draw unusual and original ideas without falling into profane or shockvertising” (P8).

Although social networks are a means of interpersonal communication, an escalation of provocative advertising is to be considered carefully since these ads can spread very quickly through viral marketing and the internet can serve as a pre-test for the TV part of the campaign.

On the other hand, consumers tend to reject this kind of advertising claiming that there was no antecedent before (only a few failed attempts) and there would be no reason to change the principles of this medium even though the channel is social networks. They propose to use other levers like humour and creativity. Congruency between the cultural values in advertising and those of the target audience is recommended.

By following this principle, it is possible to tackle taboo subjects such as homosexuality and nudity without offending the receiver of the advertisement. Innovation in advertising makes all

topics reachable. In doing so, a wise use of imagination without falling into the excess represents a loophole for the pitfalls that may be encountered by the advertisers in the post-buzz campaign on social networks.

“For an advertiser, there is a code of ethics to follow, but it may not necessarily express creativity defying the rules of morality and what to do about the product. In Tunisia, it remains very special and very dangerous for a brand to tackle the sacred values of the message receiver. We must dare yes but everything is relative. We must find the right formula not to fall into the irreverent” (P9).

6. DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Many advertisers are committed to buzz marketing campaigns, trying to increase their visibility and improve their brand image. This approach is ambitious but still quite dangerous because of the restrictions related to the congruency of the advertising messages with the audience's values. It is a must to identify the central role of this congruency in the assimilation of messages even in their acceptance or rejection.

We conducted a qualitative survey through 36 individual interviews with 16 professionals and 20 consumers. This study aims at pointing to both teaching and research purposes. Indeed, at the end of this work, two main results arise and are discussed below.

First of all, in a buzz campaign, it is wise to seek a balance between emotions aroused among the target, its cultural values and the “*socially acceptable*”. Tact and care are needed when using sexuality and nudity, especially in an Arab-Muslim setting strongly influenced by religion present every day in its social system. These controversial issues can affect the values and touch the taboos. A fair balance between “*daring*” and conventional seems to be a necessity.

Secondly, the weight of words and the level of decency of the terms used in the advertisement are of great importance and could be decisive in the success of a buzz campaign. For this purpose, predicting the risks of misinterpretation in advance can help avoiding a bad buzz.

These two results provide a first insight into the success factors of a buzz marketing campaign focusing on the cultural aspect through highlighting congruency between the advertising message and the local culture of its receiver. Moreover, combining both professionals' and consumers' points of view has helped to better understand the role of this congruency under two directions: the one of the advertiser and the other of the receiver. Because of the scarcity of publications about buzz and the consideration of the cultural component, this research provides some preliminary answers on the factors of a successful buzz campaign generated by a business.

However, this research paper does not include factors that can affect companies' intention to choose buzz marketing campaigns' thematics. The use of shocking buzz campaigns is sometimes justified by the importance of brand awareness, even when the buzz campaign is a negative one. Brand awareness can be a factor to include in future research papers. To assure a better sample heterogeneity, stimuli may be selected for companies with various levels of brand awareness. We also have asked Tunisian consumers about buzz campaigns to better know about cultural factors that can affect their perceptions. It can be promising to focus on two different cultures by asking consumers about common buzz marketing campaigns, such as those of global companies, and try, via a cross-cultural study, to explore cultural factors that can affect consumers' perceptions of shocking buzz campaigns. A research model may be proposed and tested in different cultural environments.

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Postmodernism and customer centricity

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ABSTRACT

There are many different explanations of customer centricity, and many people are in support of that concept whereas many others are against it. Different meanings can be found for customer centricity in literature. Which one could be the proper and most reliable one? Most of the views on customer centricity are based on foundational philosophical approaches and many different patterns are set as a guideline for the organizations which are willing to be customer-centric. In this paper, the aim is to look at the customer centricity phenomenon from the postmodernist point of view. The question of this study is linked to an anti-foundational philosophical approach (postmodernism) and it is shown how different the answers could be based on the philosophy approach that we choose. To collect the data, 10 in-depth interviews were done with senior business managers of customer-centric organizations in Iran. The results showed completely different answers from the postmodernist point of view.

JEL classification: M10, L10

Keywords: postmodernism, positivism, customer centricity, phenomenology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, most of the companies claim that they are customer-centric but actually they are not. If we check the structures and processes of these companies, we will find them so far away from being customer-centric. Many people believe that customer centricity is just a myth and it is something just for the books and journals while in the real world of business the practices of customer centricity are not implemented by companies because they seem to be against profitability. The proposed question of the paper is as follows: What is a customer-centric organization? In this paper, it has been decided to analyse the above research question from the postmodernist point of view. First, an explanation of the epistemology is mentioned and then the research question is analysed using epistemology, and finally a conclusion of the discussion of customer centricity from the postmodernist perspective is outlined.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, in order to make a link between philosophical approaches and management topics, most business and management schools tend to develop their curricula based on positivism rather than postmodernism and most of the major theories and patterns taught in business schools are based on the positivist assumptions. Positivism does not have any works dealing with values, feelings, emotions or spiritual things and its base is just numbers, statistics and figures. It sees the truth in this way and positivists do not believe that the truth can be subjective (the point that postmodernists believe) (Stark et al., 2008).

In positivism, uncertainties are reduced so the situation in this approach is more controlled. It involves more points like structures, standards and systems in comparison with postmodernism. Positivism is related to quantitative models and issues. In contrast, postmodernism represents qualitative models and concepts. Positivists try to generalize the knowledge whereas postmodernism does not follow this pattern. While making decisions, positivists try to decrease the uncertainty and ambiguity in order to reach a precise truth mostly in numbers and figures whilst postmodernism pays more attention to emotions and feelings and it does not search for evidence in numbers for establishing the reality and truth (Stark et al., 2008). In the positivist view, the world is understood in an absolute way. This should be a full understanding and there is no room for any scepticism or doubts in this approach and everything should be clear and direct. In the positivist view, all stages are predesigned and by following them, the other stages become predictable. They refer to the structures, models and general ideas you acquire, so you are able to predict the situation. Measurement is the key factor of positivism and determined measurement is applied by positivists every time and, as already mentioned, everything should be completely clear and exact for positivists (Social research method website, 2012). Positivism is based on rational thought and it believes that through rational thinking the human can make progress. The base of postmodernism, on the other hand, is questioning and rejecting things. Positivism sees the interaction between an organization and social life in an objective and rational way. In the positivist view, the organization by itself logically works with less connection with the society. Postmodernism looks more at discourses and from the postmodernist view, an organization is not completely separated from the social life and society (Cooper & Burrell, 1988). Change and ambiguity are 2 concepts related to postmodernism. Actually, postmodernism puts us in a strange and completely different world than the other philosophical approaches. In postmodernism, nothing stays fixed and we cannot have something for a long time in order to name and recognize it. According to postmodernism, there is nothing stable and actually the world is seen from different perspectives and the truth is made based on people's thoughts. Boundaries and limitations are removed and the truth and the world are based on our thinking (Benton & Craib, 2011).

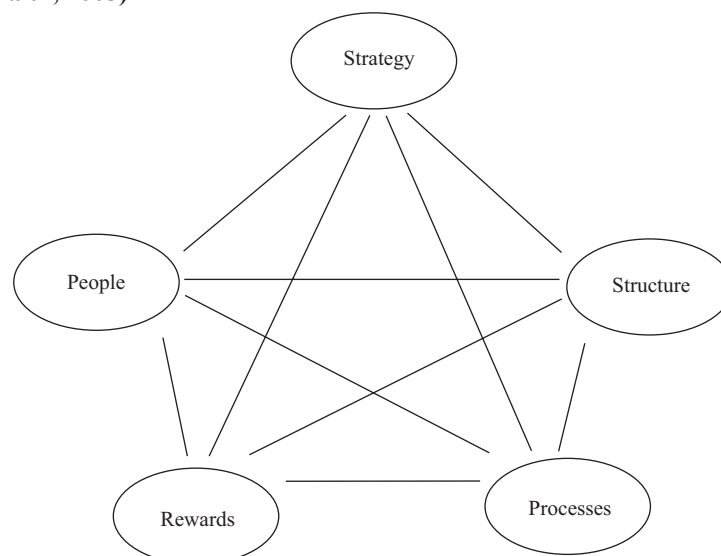
In the postmodernist view, there is not any definite truth and the truth is made differently by different people. So it is not believed that there is only one reality and truth (Stark et al., 2008). Today, the postmodernism in business and management is against any generalizations and constant points. Actually, it cannot accept any fixed and general points and believes that every time there is an alternative view which is completely different from a general rule, so we cannot generalize. It relies on subjectivity rather than objectivity (Johnson & Duberley, 2011). A difficult part of postmodernism is the issue that general rules and ideas and basic conceptions can be rejected and this somehow makes jobs very difficult, because it is likely to get confused or face ambiguities that cannot be handled (Berg, 1989). In postmodernism, there is no universal rule. It is not possible to reach to a verdict about something and ambiguity is the base. Another important point of postmodernism is the issue that the world is seen differently, each person has a different interpretation of the world, there is no single explanation of the world and there are many different ideas around the world. Postmodernism is based on variety rather than similarity (Williams & May, 1996). Postmodernism questions the truth and reality. From the postmodernist

point of view, there is no way to define some structures and pattern for reality. No truth or reality is found in postmodernism because its base is scepticism. In fact, definite values or realities that are believed by a majority of people are questioned by postmodernism. Actually, it rejects any kind of truth. Spiritual and moral issues related to people are given more attention in postmodernism and issues like social activities and interactions among them are the key points that are covered by postmodernism. The world uncertainty is a symbol of postmodernism. In fact, postmodernists believe we live in an uncertain time and we should be ready for new changes. They believe that a precise definition or explanation of a dream future for all the people is not possible and we cannot specify a dream pattern that will apply to everybody in the future. They consider variety as something valuable and believe in change and variety rather than any fixed or constant thing. Postmodernism pays more attention to individuals and focuses on the perceptions, opinions and values of individuals more because it believes that different people understand the world differently, so we should listen to different opinions of different ones in order to get more details (Kilduf & Mehra, 1997).

In postmodernism, the processes or structures of organizations do not make sense or are not the purpose as humans cannot control them in a way they like. Postmodernism claims that we should not think that the world is made just for us and that we can have its full attention and control it by ourselves or that we are in the centre of control. There is no logical definition of the world and only some interpretations can be made about it. Therefore, there is no fixed rule about the world. One of the criticisms against postmodernism is that we do not have any certain knowledge; there is not any foundation or any certain base so sometimes this uncertainty can be confusing and difficult. Postmodernism cannot accept any reason or truth. In postmodernism, there is no predesigned pattern or presumption (Cooper & Burell, 1988). Galbraith (2005) remarked on the star model of companies and he mentioned that each company is surrounded with 5 different dimensions. The strategy dimension is at the top of this model and the other 4 dimensions including people, rewards, processes and structures should be in complete accordance with the strategy. When a company wants to be customer-centric, actual changes should be applied to all these five dimensions. So just paying more attention to the customers does not mean that the company is customer-centric (Galbraith, 2005).

Figure 1

The star model (Galbraith, 2005)



Referring to the strategy dimension, in a product-centric organization the most important goal is to offer the best product to the customer. According to the structure dimension, it is important

for them to consider customer segments and specific customer teams in their company charts. Referring to the process dimension, in a customer-centric company the most important thought is about finding a new solution for the customers. According to the rewards and people dimensions, in a customer-centric company the reward system is based on customer opinions and the people who are in the relationship segment with the customers are the strongest people in the company (Galbraith, 2005). Actually, the definition mentioned by Galbraith is exactly a definite explanation of customer centricity from the positivist point of view that believes that an organization, to be customer-centric, needs to follow certain rules.

On the other hand, postmodernism believes that when a general rule or a very concentrated topic is mentioned in an organization, many other factors will be eliminated and forgotten. For instance, when in an organization all dimensions including strategies, processes and structures are set based on the customer-centric approach and the customer is on the main radar of the company, everything revolves around customers and many other opportunities or factors would be skipped because all attention and focus is just around the customers. That is why postmodernism questions the identity of the customer centricity approach and asks why it should be adopted by organizations and why organizations think that they need to be customer-centric in order to be more successful. Postmodernism asks why companies do feel that they have to have a customer-centric culture in their organizations and why the customer centricity expression has been getting so popular in these days. Today, many companies are very successful so why do we feel that we need to be customer-centric in order to be a successful company? Consequently, when it comes to the postmodernist view, all the questions mentioned above can be considered as sub-questions the answers to which can be related to the main question of this research, revealing a new side of customer centricity.

Many people with postmodern views believe that giving too much attention to customers and sacrificing everything for their sake can be counterproductive and the experiences show that providing too much service to customers is not a guarantee of their loyalty. However, the experiences have shown that customers react to bad services very soon and punish the companies that are bad at providing them. So they punish bad service very quickly but do not reward very good service very quickly, which means that companies keeping their services in a moderate range rather than providing too bad or too good service are more logical. They should not be absolutely customer-centric and the structures, processes and strategies should not be set entirely based on the customers' needs and opinions. Other important factors except the customers should be paid attention to as well. (Dixon et al., 2010).

Dixon (et al., 2010) undertook a study to find the link between loyalty and customer service. There were around 75000 B2B and B2C customers in that research and finally the result showed that delighting the customers did not lead to loyalty and companies should not think that they could be very successful just through customer centricity. At the moment, we have many companies that are not customer-centric but they are very successful. Unfortunately, many companies accept very high costs of transforming themselves into customer-centric ones and they pay this major cost with a dream of improving and reaching the top in the market but the result becomes inverse and they cannot get the result they have expected. So, literally, is just wasting their financial resources without getting whatever they have dreamed of (Dixon et al., 2010)

3. METHODOLOGY

Under the postmodernist approach, 10 in-depth unstructured interviews were done with senior managers in Iran whose companies are very successful in the Iranian market and whose approaches were different from the traditional approach of customer centricity. Each interview took about 30 minutes and during the interview the ultimate effort was made to gather as many details and as much information from the interviewees as possible.

For analysing the interviews, the phenomenological approach was used. “The aim of phenomenological data analysis is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 36).

The attempt is to analyse the main research question: “What is a customer-centric organization?” The question is analysed based on the postmodernist approach. When we look at the postmodernist approach from this point of view, we come across some other sub-questions as follows:

Why do organizations think that in order to be more successful, they need to be customer-centric and is a customer-centric capability necessary in the real world?

Why do companies feel that they have to have customer-centric culture in their organizations?

By means of phenomenology, it was tried to define the themes and we can consider the themes gained through phenomenology as the structure of experience. This analysis methodology is used in research related to the interpretivism approach rather than positivism (Van Manen, 1997).

Postmodernism believes that the knowledge is built based on the experiences that a person gains throughout his/her life. So the best analysis methodology for the postmodernist view of customer centricity can be phenomenology. The process of the analysis through phenomenology was as follows. First, the written transcripts were reviewed many times to understand them generally. In each transcript, significant sentences were highlighted and then their key meanings were extracted. Subsequently, those were grouped under themes in order to get the precise understanding of the concept. As a next step, a relationship was established between the literature and themes of the interview and at last, the themes were reviewed critically and a final report was made on the research findings.

In terms of data management, one code was allocated to each participant. The participants were coded as P 1, P 2, ..., P 10. This type of coding allowed me to distinguish the transcripts of participants very easily. The research participants’ characteristics including their age, gender, job position and their economic sector are mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants’ characteristics

Codes	Age	Gender	Job position	Economic sector
P 1	42	Male	Managing Director	Dentistry
P 2	57	Male	Customer Relationship Manager	Banking
P 3	36	Female	Sales Manager	Tourism
P 4	40	Male	Account Manager	Pharmaceutical
P 5	47	Male	Managing Director	Education
P 6	34	Female	Head of Marketing	Dentistry
P 7	49	Male	Branch Manager	Banking
P 8	52	Female	Export Manager	Agriculture
P 9	55	Male	Customer Relationship Manager	Banking
P 10	41	Male	Managing Director	Education

4. RESULTS

Finally, three themes were gained from the interviews with senior managers that were connected to the main research question and the other sub-questions through the postmodernist approach.

– *Theme 1*: customized production is one of the main aspects of the customer-centric organization and many companies have become customer-centric due to reaching this point.

They believe that customization is a vital point of current business around the world and customers in these days like to have customized products instead of any mass production. It means flexibility and being able to adapt to change. As P 2 mentions:

Some customers prefer to use our on-line internet banking and some of the other prefer to get service physically in our branches and some other use our telephone banking and they are asking us to provide the service based on their personal preferences and all these points are a clear sign for us to understand that customers like to receive a customized product and service based on their personal preferences.

Another manager (P 8) who works in the agriculture sector stated:

We have different customers who have different preferences and if we want to be a customer-centric one we have to keep all of them satisfied and it means we have to be ready to change our services and products based on their needs and this customization is something that can bring us a very good competitive advantage in comparison to our competitors.

The postmodernist approach includes customization and change and from the postmodernist perspective, this customization can be considered as the main aim that leads to companies becoming customer-centric. Other managers (P 3, P 5, P 10) also emphasized the importance of customization for a customer-centric company.

– *Theme 2*: Respect plays a pivotal role in attracting the customers' attention and this is their preference. This is what makes them ready to make a long-term commitment and keeps them loyal.

The respondents believe that if the customers notice that they are on the main radar of the company and the company attempts to adapt to the customers' needs, customers will definitely think of themselves as an inseparable part of that company and they will look at it as their close-knit family. They will appreciate the company's desperate effort and see that it is doing its best to retain their customers and change its structures and strategies in line with their desires. Therefore, these attempts would give the customers credit and they would feel important. In fact, they usually want to be treated as individuals rather than to be seen as a business target. So in this way, the company would show its great appreciation to its customers for being so faithful and on the other hand, the customers would keep this company as their first choice of shopping. As a result, every individual would live in peace. One of the managers (P 4) mentions:

Every month I meet various different customers and they behave differently but towards all of them I have to be respectful because I know if I lose my temper or I am not respectful enough towards them, it can destroy the image of our company and they will prefer not to work with us even though our products are of a higher quality than the others.

All in all, customer-centric companies do not think about anything just in business and profit terms and they believe that customer centricity is valuable for society as well. This is because people are more satisfied when their preferences are paid attention to and when they are treated without any negative feeling of being haunted by the companies, which results in a society of happier people who interact with each other with more respect. In a world where changes are happening so fast and technologies are adverting to the people's life, it is assumed that some moral issues are faded away and rarely can we find the ethical issues in the current business around the world. But by considering the customer-centric approach, new methods of interaction between the customers and companies can probably be developed.

– *Theme 3*: complex and negotiated relationships also tempt companies to adopt a customer-centric culture in their organizations.

The postmodernist view on customer centricity puts emphasis on the point that the atmosphere and culture of open communication and relationships within an organization can be very useful and helpful for customer-centric companies. This point is exactly against any constant rules or structures or any standards. In line with this idea, one of the managers (P 10) believes as below:

The customer-centric companies can show their best performance when they have an open communication inside themselves and there should be a quick communication channel available for all employees at different levels of the organization. This kind of open relationships inside an organization makes the company powerful and capable of undertaking customer centricity activities.

The respondents believe that a customer-centric organization should have negotiated relationships inside instead of conforming to rules or rigid standards. Generally, those approaches that postmodernists use to analyse customer centricity are based on subjectivity and interpretations. Normally, under the postmodernist approach, a customer-centric organization has fewer limitations and standards than in the positivist view. The definitions of a customer-centric organization are completely different for a positivist and a postmodernist because the bases of these 2 approaches are really different.

5. CONCLUSION

The results showed that customer centricity is viewed completely differently by postmodernists. They question customer centricity and seek to find out about the reason why companies should become customer-centric or about the effects that customer centricity can have on society. They are more concerned about detailed reasons for customer centricity rather than any other factors like proper structures, processes or strategies. Based on the analysis of the interviews, it was found that customer centricity involves arousing a good feeling of respect for customers and this makes them happier. In this way, we can have a better society as well as more satisfied customers because they would feel that they are part of the company, not just a target, so they would feel more involved with companies and show more commitment to them. Also, customized production and negotiable relationships inside an organization are other factors that, from the postmodernist point of view, are the main reasons for companies to be customer-centric.

Customized production, improvised strategies, complex and negotiated relationships, democratic processes and strategies, diversity, creativity and selection are the main features of the postmodernist approach and finding these key features in customer centric organizations is more important for postmodernists than finding a proper structure or process for becoming customer-centric. Actually, positivism is a deductive approach and moves from general ideas to specific details in order to draw a conclusion. Postmodernism does not work like this: it is based on interpretation and does not necessarily look for a definite conclusion or result. It believes that organizations probably become customer-centric because of customization or respect they have for their customers and they can operate in any structure or have any strategies. In contrary, positivism argues that if a company wants to be customer-centric, it should be involved in certain structures and follow some strategies. Such is the correct way and there is no other possibility for them to be customer-centric whereas the exact way or absolute truth for customer centricity does not make any sense for postmodernists. Actually, positivism limits customer-centric organizations in some ways whilst postmodernism is against definite rules or absolute truth. Therefore, postmodernism focuses more on discourses of customer centricity and its own interaction with the society and does not think about any structured rules. Besides, the postmodernist approach questions the extreme customer centricity and believes that customer centricity should be achieved in a logical way. Companies should not think that by following the customer centricity path, they can reach all of their dream goals and their expectations should be logical. Customer centricity should not

let companies forget about other important factors and they should not sacrifice everything just in order to be customer-centric. We should consider that it is likely to see different opinions about postmodernism and positivism among managers in other countries with different cultures and also different political and economic situations. These philosophical approaches, and especially postmodernism, are so much reliant on culture and situation, and managers in Iran, which is an emerging country and expects to see more international business in coming years, think more about intangible aspects like respect or relationship rather than physical elements that were dominant in the Iranian market for many years. In developed countries, managers are more concerned about co-creation of value in customer centric organizations and considering this new concept and connecting it to philosophical approaches can be a very good topic for any future research.

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Evaluating Gaps in Consumer Behavior Research on Organic Foods: A Critical Literature Review under Bangladesh Context

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ABSTRACT

The global demand for organic foods has inspired the academicians and practicing professionals to explore consumer purchase behavior in this sector. The multiple promises that organic foods hold for the future – like sustainable food production, food safety, food security, nutrition and reduction of green-house gases – all might have influenced the recent rise of behavioral research in the organic food sector. Interestingly, Bangladesh has been a producer of organic foods since the early '80s; however, only a handful of studies could be traced that actually studied consumer behavior in this sector. The current paper explored the important roles that organic foods might play in Bangladesh, synthesized findings of past studies under Bangladesh context, and justified probable areas that might be investigated in future. Therefore, plausible gaps were explored in the existing literature pertaining to Bangladesh context and a tentative research agenda for future researchers was proposed.

JEL classification: M30, M31, M39

Keywords: organic food purchase behavior; organic foods in Bangladesh; roles of organic foods in a developing country; behavior of organic foods consumer; green marketing and organic foods.

1. INTRODUCTION

Organic foods refer to foods grown by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and conservation of soil and water to preserve health and environmental quality for future generations. Conventional pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or sewage sludge, bioengineering, or ionizing radiation cannot be used in producing foods; meat, eggs, and dairy items must come from animals that are not given antibiotics or growth hormones in the process as well (USDA, 1995). The current global scenario of rising eco-awareness of consumers and market trends for organic foods exhibit a global rise of eco-consumerism focusing on organic foods.

In fact, the overall increase in demand for organic foods is encouraging. A report revealed that the global organic food and beverage market was worth nearly \$71.2 billion in 2012 and is expected to reach \$161.5 billion by 2018, with a five-year compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15% (BCC Research, 2014). Asia, Latin America and South Africa are likely to have rising demand due to expanding domestic production, growing governmental support and developing organic food standards.

However, despite this growing trend, the market has not been without challenges. It is reported that conventional food still constitutes the biggest portion of the global food consumption basket. In the USA, where the organic food sector has been growing fast, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) revealed that in 2012, organic foods constituted about 3.5% of total foods sales (Osteen, Gottlieb, & Vasavada, 2012). While many Asian countries have been producers and exporters of organic foods, their internal consumption has been very low as compared to the global trend. For example, it was estimated that the percentage of organic foods in Asia would not be over 1% of total food consumption (Kim, 2013). No statistics could be traced regarding organic food to total food consumption ratio in Bangladesh; however, it is commonly thought to be even lower than the Asian average.

It appears that despite the growth of consumption in developed countries, expanding the domestic demand in developing countries has been a challenge for the organic food sector. The same inference may be applicable to the domestic organic food market in Bangladesh, since producers have not been able to serve a viable local market (Sarker & Itohara, 2008). Many factors were proposed that prevented the domestic growth of organic foods in Bangladesh. Some of them were price, availability, confidence in the producer and retailers, awareness about organic foods, reliability of certification process, etc. (Ali, 2013; Mukul, Afrin, & Hassan, 2013). However, only a few studies could be traced that systematically addressed these issues from an organized research perspective. It appears that future researchers would find it valuable if a consolidated piece of work were available so that a direction might be beckoned towards future research agenda. Therefore, it is evident that a consolidated scrutiny of past literature pertaining to Bangladesh is immensely needed.

In line with its objectives as already stated, the paper followed an exploratory approach to set the groundwork for further research by (i) offering insight into why promoting organic food consumption would be beneficial for consumers in Bangladesh, and (ii) evaluating the past studies done under Bangladesh context and identifying whether it is necessary to conduct further studies to explore inhibiting and facilitating factors underlying the organic food consumption.

Thus the outcome would be a critical literature review aimed at identifying further research areas in this sector. In doing so, the literature review is extended beyond studies done under Bangladesh context in order to offer insight into why promoting organic foods would be beneficial for consumers in Bangladesh. The later part consists of a critical analysis of existing research papers conducted under Bangladesh context. Combining these two bodies of studies, it would be easier to focus on explaining why the organic food sector needs to be studied and what areas of this sector require examination under Bangladesh context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to achieve the objectives as outlined above, two broad types of studies were reviewed. The first type of papers included those studies that elaborated on the question of why such investigation would be beneficial to a developing country like Bangladesh. For example, the health and environmental issues are in focus in this regard. Studies done beyond Bangladesh context were included in this group. The second type of papers included those studies that were done under Bangladesh context only, focusing on behavioral aspects of consumers. Therefore, geographical scope should be noted while assessing the research gaps. Since this is a literature review with specific objectives in mind, causal approach is not followed, and this may limit the paper's ability to offer conclusive results through quantitative information. However, the paper may be viewed as a consolidated piece of work that is expected to provide future researchers with a quick start in formulating a tentative research agenda.

2.1. Green Marketing Context

Before stepping further into the literature review, a brief deliberation may be needed to put the organic food scenario in the broad landscape of eco-consumerism and green marketing. Eco-consumerism revolves around the environment-friendly products and services, including the production process and disposal of final products in a way that must not harm the natural environment, leading to a sustainable production and consumption cycle (Satimanon, 2013). Such environmental consciousness of consumers has resulted in marketers' adoption of green marketing practices, although some researchers opined that the principles of green marketing might not have been practiced properly as seen in the recent marketing history (Peattie & Crane, 2005). Despite the debate on how effectively green marketing was adopted or not, the theoretical definition of green marketing views it as a set of all activities intended to generate and enable any exchange(s) in order to meet human needs or wants, such that the fulfillment of these needs and wants would concur with a minimal harmful impact on the natural environment (Polonsky, 1994). Further research reveals that the consumers' motivation for and interests in eco-consumerism may go beyond environmental conservation, since these products are usually more expensive than conventional non-green products and consumers are willing to pay more for green products (Peattie & Crane, 2005). Interestingly, such willingness to pay more is not only confined to consumers in high-income countries, but is also present among consumers in developing and emerging economies (Loo, Caputo, & Nayga, 2015; Rahman & Haque, 2011). It follows that consumers may act based on altruism (i.e., benefits for others) rather than only self-serving interests (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010).

Therefore, from marketers' point of view, green marketing appears to be profitable while appealing to ethical consumer behavior that calls for environmental sustainability and promotion of collective benefits (Honkanen, Verplanken, & Olsen, 2006). For the success of sustainability initiatives, companies should have confidence that green marketing would work, and therefore make deliberate efforts to integrate necessary product modifications which not only ensure performance, but also ensure marketability (Trivedi, 2015). Such empathetic green behavior of corporations may also have a long-run effect on consumer loyalty as research showed that the communication to consumers by green marketers had a positive impact on the corporate image (Davis, 1994).

However, the discrepancy as pointed out by Peattie and Crane (2005) in adopting green marketing practices is most likely to go away in the long-run as these green practices are increasingly being monitored by regulatory bodies and government policies across the globe (Morgan & Murdoch, 2000). Specifically to organic foods, legislative and certification issues appear to be strictly monitored since the authenticity and consumer credibility seem to be the

key determining factors for growth (Kemp & Bui, 2011). The positive effects of such legislative assurance regarding green marketing of foods, along with several motivating factors behind consumers' interests, are already evident as organic food sector is showing impressive growth across the globe. It seems that the success of marketing organic foods may contribute to the confidence of green marketing organizations in future.

2.2. Significance of Promoting Organic Foods

Benefits of adopting organic foods may contribute in multiple fronts. Three major areas could be environmental friendliness, nutrition values and healthiness of organic foods. They are elaborated below.

Organic foods were found to be environment-friendly in many ways. Organic foods might reduce carbon footprint of conventional agriculture. Although the major share of global warming (through green-house gas emissions) was caused by industrialization and the use of fossil fuels, conventional agriculture had its own share of liability which should not be ignored. One study reported that the household consumption contributed about thirty to forty percent to the current environmental degradation (Grunert & Grunert, 1993). Some scholars recommended that the agriculture's share of carbon footprint might be lowered by organic farming, thereby igniting enough interest on the part of policy makers (Baroni, Cenci, Tettamanti, & Berati, 2007).

Organic foods also contribute to soil fertility and prevent soil pollution. Pimentel et. al (2005) posited that organic agriculture facilitates soil quality, bio-diversity and helps in lowering energy input. Soil pollution is much less in organic farming since no pesticide and synthetic fertilizer is allowed in the process. In addition, despite the common perception that organic agriculture would have lower yield than that of conventional agriculture, a good number of past studies have found otherwise. For example, Badgley et al. (2007) analyzed past studies on yields of both types of farming and found that the average yield of organic agriculture is 92.2% of conventional agriculture in the developed world, whereas it is 180.2% of conventional agriculture in the developing countries. The reasons behind a lower yield in developed countries were cited as a longer period of conventional or intensive agriculture as practiced in those countries compared to the length of such practices in developing countries. Such an intensive and continued practice actually deteriorated the soil quality in developed countries more than in developing countries. It appears that the sooner a developing country adopts organic farming, the better situation it will be in. Therefore, specifically for a developing country like Bangladesh, organic farming holds environmental promises.

Many previous studies found organic foods to be more nutritious than genetically modified (GM) foods (Palupi, Jayanegara, Ploeger, & Kahl, 2012). Some authors specifically confirmed the nutritional superiority of plant-based organic foods when compared with genetically modified plant-based foods (Benbrook et al., 2008). Although some studies questioned the general superiority of organic foods in terms of nutritional contents (Rosen, 2010), it appears that they did not mention the residual pesticide content in genetically modified foods (Holzman, 2012). Therefore, organic foods may be considered more nutritious and safer than genetically modified foods.

As a consequence of being nutritious and safe, organic foods are considered beneficial to health. Though studies on humans are still inconclusive, some authors suspected a link between cancer and low level of pesticide residue in genetically modified foods. For example, some studies suspected that continued exposure of low level of pesticide contamination for a long time may lead to certain health risks like pre-mature greying of hair, pre-mature ageing and cancer (Halder, 2007; Hayes, 2004). In contrast, some authors found that organic fruits contain higher levels of nutrients and anti-oxidants (Maciel, Oliveira, Bispo, & Miranda, 2011). Anti-oxidants are believed to prevent various illnesses, like ageing-related illnesses and cancers.

Currently, health concern is a burning issue in Bangladesh since food adulteration has been reported to be widespread in the country (Parveen, 2008). In addition to the unregulated use of pesticides, it was reported that a number of harmful chemicals were used in various processed foods in Bangladesh (Huda, Muzaffar, & Ahmed, 2009). Illegal preservatives that are highly carcinogenic in nature were often used in fishes and vegetables (Mamoon & Haque, 2013). Therefore, availability and adoption of certified organic food could be a possible solution to this problem.

It appears that organic foods have multiple benefits that may warrant mass promotion and adoption at the consumer level. Although Bangladesh has been producing organic foods since the '80s, and over 100 national retail stores are already selling organic foods locally, the consumer response appears to be limited to cities only. Despite all the benefits that may accrue out of organic food adoption, it was observed that the domestic market for organic food is limited in Bangladesh (Sarker & Itohara, 2008). This leads to a puzzle as to what is preventing consumers from adopting organic food in their daily diets. Why are consumers not buying enough organic foods that may have multiple benefits when compared with conventionally grown GM foods? Evidently, answering these questions requires understanding consumers' food purchase behavior and systematic studies that would look into the bottlenecks in consumers' adoption of organic foods.

2.3. Review of Past Studies under Bangladesh Context

It was found that the studies on organic food purchase behavior under Bangladesh context were scant. Twelve studies on the organic food sector in Bangladesh could be traced either in journals or in other online resources through extensive searching. Out of these twelve studies, only five studies could be traced to the consumer-end, five could be traced to the farmer-end, and the rest were institutional status reports. The following authors conducted consumer-end studies under Bangladesh context – Iqbal (2015), Mamoon & Haque (2013), Mukul, Afrin, & Hassan (2013), Sarker & Itohara (2008) and Rahman, Omar, & Ullah (2007). The following analysis critically reviews these studies and explores the potential gap in studies under Bangladesh context.

The study conducted by Iqbal (2015) followed an exploratory approach in identifying salient features of consumer behavior in the organic food market in Bangladesh. The author identified the strengths that the country has in this sector, as well as the bottlenecks in consumers' adoption of organic foods. In line with other studies under Bangladesh context, the author mentioned that availability, price and lack of knowledge could act as barriers to widespread adoption of organic foods. Although convenience sampling was conducted, the large sample size ($n = 900$) might yield the possibility of having some representative information. The author attempted to identify the underlying factors in purchase intention, and derived a three-factor model through a principal component analysis. However, due to low internal consistency, only one factor appears to be relevant. It appears that the questionnaire design needed rigorous modification based on the data reported in the article. It was found that gender, education and income were significant in explaining variability in the data. However, the article did not follow a causal model as only an exploratory factor analysis was reported, thus leaving a scope for future studies with correlational design.

Another study conducted by Mamoon & Haque (2013) followed a development theme of cultivating organic food under Bangladesh context by proposing a worry-free food system for consumers in an otherwise chaotic political and economic environment. The authors rightfully pointed towards the increasing use of fertilizers due to the increase in cultivation of high-yield crop varieties. An increase in the use of fertilizers may ultimately lead to the degradation of soil and water pollution. The city-based and limited organic food culture has also been noted.

As an evidence of lack of policy support, the authors pointed towards the cheaper hybrid seeds and synthetic fertilizers provided by the government to farmers. Poverty among farmers

made them prefer cheaper sources for their agricultural inputs. Fortunately, higher market prices of organic foods were having a pull effect on farmers to adopt organic farming. A number of non-government organizations were contributing to the growth of organic farming since the government did not have any such program in this sector. The study rightfully identified the need for government support in this sector in order to make farmers quickly adopt organic farming, so that the chain of benefits might flow to consumers as well.

However, the study is exploratory and qualitative in nature. No formal theoretical model has been taken to frame the research. It looked into the background, current organic farming situation and consumer adoption preference. Therefore, only some descriptive measurements were reported without any conclusive interpretation on consumers' purchase behavior. Another limitation of the study was its urban-based sample. Only faculty members of a university were selected through a convenience sampling method that might have the issue of representativeness of actual customers. However, a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis of organic consumers' community was conducted, the process of which might be of immense value to future researchers.

The study conducted by Mukul, Afrin, & Hassan (2013) also pointed towards the city-based organic food culture like the foregoing study, and discussed similar issues like food safety and availability. This is the only study that adopted a formal research framework. In fact, this causal study looked into the predictors of organic food perception among consumers. In doing so, five predictors of consumer perception were identified. They were: food safety, price, nutrition, sensory attributes and environmental friendliness. The study found that the nutrition content and low pesticide level were significant predictors of organic food perceptions among consumers. The study suspected that the high price of organic foods could be a reason for a low adoption rate among general public; however, findings did not support this hypothesis. It could be an important finding which might be tested further by future researchers.

The study proposed a random sampling method but ultimately the research was conducted through selective sampling process. Thus the representativeness of the sample was compromised on practical grounds as already mentioned by the authors. It may be highlighted that the research looked into only the perception factors, and not attitude towards organic foods or purchase behavior of consumers. However, future studies may take the result into account and advance such investigation further into measuring the attitude and behavior towards organic foods in Bangladesh.

Another research conducted by Sarker & Itohara (2008) highlighted both the demand and supply side profiles of organic food sector in Bangladesh. The study comprised a field survey on both farmers and consumers conducted through random sampling; therefore, the generalizability of findings would likely be superior to other studies. Although the study followed a quantitative approach, descriptive design was followed rather than causal design. Evidently, no particular underpinning theory was followed as a research framework. This leads to some descriptive results like consumers' demographic profiles, without any inferential analysis.

Despite these shortcomings, the paper consistently found that upper-income consumers had a higher level of awareness about organic foods. Organic food consumers were mostly clustered among middle and upper-income groups where those groups were also high on health and environmental awareness. A majority of organic food consumers were willing to pay a price premium, although no inferential analysis was done because of the descriptive nature of the survey. However, the paper consistently reported a high proportion of consumers who lack confidence in the organic claims by the sellers. Future researchers may consider this a common trend among most papers that consistently direct attention to the lack of trust under Bangladesh context. In addition, it was also found that a high proportion of consumers thought that organic foods were not widely available. These two bottlenecks (trust and availability) might be studied further to explain a low adoption rate of organic foods in Bangladesh.

The study by Rahman et al. (2007) is a short review paper, exploring a general scenario of both the production and consumption patterns of organic foods in Bangladesh. The paper followed a development approach and discussed how organic foods could contribute in various ways to our society and economy. The authors quoted past survey results by the government agencies and reported a high level of awareness among middle or upper-income class consumers. This finding was consistent with previous findings by other authors as already discussed. It was also reported that a sizable portion of consumers had doubts whether the organic foods sold in the domestic market were genuinely organic. Therefore, lack of confidence in the organic food producers or marketers can be suspected to be a bottleneck in consumers' adoption. However, since the study is of exploratory type, no conclusive analysis was done with quantifiable data. Despite this shortcoming, the paper fairly identified four bottlenecks in this sector that could be open to further studies. Those were: farmers' poverty leading to lack of motivation, lack of knowledge and awareness about organic farming, insufficiency of organic inputs and poor marketing by national retailers.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the studies published so far, the following gaps can be identified that may be addressed in future research under Bangladesh context.

It was found that a majority of studies were of exploratory nature, resulting in descriptive results without any inferential analysis. Therefore, a causal study design may be adopted in future research to identify factors facilitating and inhibiting consumers' adoption of organic foods. This would primarily address a methodological gap.

It is evident that except for one study by Mukul et al. (2013), other studies did not organize the research within any theoretical framework. Therefore, further systematic studies are warranted to either test the validity of previously tested models in organic food market research or identify a viable model that would suit the organic food consumers' behavior under Bangladesh context.

It may be noted that where the high price of organic foods has been mentioned as a barrier to consumers' adoption by some studies, this is contradicted by other authors as well. Therefore, this contradiction can be tested further under Bangladesh context. In addition, availability has been mentioned by most authors as a barrier to consumers' adoption of organic foods; however, these studies are not of causal type. Therefore, further investigation is warranted to infer on this relationship. The issue of availability may also be investigated from the supply side perspective. There is an indication that lack of the government role at the supply side may inhibit the adoption at the farmers' level, thereby leaving customers short of organic food supply. This potential role of the government may be studied further to find the impact of the government role on raising the adoption rate among consumers. The government role may also be explored in terms of tentative capability and credibility of organic food certification since consumers have reported their lack of confidence in organic claims by the sellers. Therefore, trust factors need to be included in the future research framework.

In summary, it may be concluded that a causal research design is necessary in conducting future investigations on organic food purchase behavior in Bangladesh. The future research framework may examine the influence of price, availability, trust, health concern, environmental concern, sensory attributes of organic foods and other demographic factors on consumer behavior related to organic foods. A clearer scenario of consumer behavior is important for both practicing managers and policy makers at the government level. Such investigations may not only explore the demand side scenario by clearly reflecting on the determinants of purchase behavior, but also reflect on the supply side issues that may interfere with the consumer-adoption process of organic foods.

It may be evident that organic foods hold bright promises for Bangladesh, just like for any other country. Organic foods are generally known for their environmental friendliness, safety, nutrition content and healthiness. However, the low adoption rate in developing countries, including Bangladesh, has been a common phenomenon. Therefore, investigating the behavioral aspect of organic food would provide immense insight to practitioners and policy makers in this sector. Considering the multiple social and economic benefits of organic foods, researchers may immediately address the future research agenda and immensely contribute to the society and economy.

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