**Studying the impact of food values, subjective norms and brand love on behavioral loyalty**

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*Abstract*

This research aims at contributing to the integration of other constructs that have not been traditionally used in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The paper’s goal is to render the TPB more relevant and effective in predicting consumer decisions in diverse service environments such as fast food restaurants. For this purpose, the paper proposes a conceptual model that analyzes both the direct and indirect impact of food values, subjective norms, and brand love on behavioral loyalty toward fast food restaurants. In order to test the proposed model, we designed a questionnaire and distributed it to fast food consumers in the city of Puebla (Mexico). Data from the sample of 3,565 respondents were collected and analyzed by using descriptive statistics and PLS regressions. The research makes several key contributions: First, it predicts behavioral loyalty rather than relies on more usual behaviors in the TPB, such as intention to purchase. Second, it analyzes the direct influence of food values on the constructs of subjective norms and brand love – in contrast to most previous research that has focused on measuring the relative importance of food values in food preference. Third, the study establishes the importance of including emotional variables in the TPB like the construct of brand love.

*Keywords*

Theory of planned behaviour (TPB); food values; subjective norm; brand love; behavioral loyalty; fast food industry.

1. *Introduction*

In recent years, consumers have exhibited more dynamic and heterogeneous demands for foods in terms of their sensory, health, process and convenience qualities (Grunert, 2006; Ajzen, 2015). As a result, consumers—especially in developed countries—are faced with a wide array of product decisions in everyday life: not only a vast selection of brands covering the same products, but also nutritional issues, environmental issues, origin issues, etc. (Enneking, Neumann and Heneberg, 2007; Ajzen, 2015). With consumers’ food choices being more complex than ever before, it has become all the more difficult to understand and predict such behavior (Grunert, 2006). Against this background, the food industry is keenly interested in understanding the consumer behavior of food choice (O’Connor and White, 2010), which has motivated several research efforts on this topic (Tuu et al., 2008).

One of the most widely used socio-psychological models for understanding, predicting and explaining human behavior is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 2015), which has been frequently and successfully applied to predict food-related behaviors (Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010; Stefan et al., 2013; Soorani and Ahmadvand, 2019). Many of these studies have focused on the motives for purchasing and consuming diverse food types—from organic foods (e.g., Voon, Ngui and Agrawal, 2011; Ham et al., 2015; Sadiq et al., 2021) and healthy foods in general (Ajzen, 2015), to less healthy foods such as processed foods (e.g., Seo, Kim and Shim, 2014; Aliaga-Ortega et al., 2019), and fast foods (Dunn et al., 2008; Ghoochani et al., 2018; Sapic, Filipovic and Dlacic, 2019).

Here, we focus specifically on the fast food industry, which has experienced some of the highest worldwide growth among food-related businesses in recent years, especially in larger cities (Kara, Kaynak and Kucukemiroglu, 1995; Sapic et al., 2019). In fact, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, estimates generally projected that the fast food industry would annually grow at an average of 4% through 2022. However, the short-term impact of the pandemic on fast food market growth is expected to be relatively high due to disruptive mitigation measures, such as social distancing policies and temporary store closures. As a result, the primary job possibilities for the sector are delivery, drive-through and take-away options (T4, 2020). Thus, there is a valuable opportunity to research this sector and understand the factors that will drive growth post-pandemic.

Beyond the traditional factors that comprise the TPB (attitude toward the behavior, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms), there are also background factors in the TPB—such as personality traits and life values, among others—that are expected to indirectly influence intentions and behaviors (Ajzen, 2015). In the context of food, for instance, we can leverage Lusk and Briggeman’s (2009) concept of food values.

However, despite the encouraging success of previous research that applies the TPB to the food choice decision-making process, there is still room for further research that addresses the theory’s shortcomings (Ham et al., 2015). Indeed, other study contexts, like the tourism industry (Abbasi et al., 2021), have already underscored the need to extend the TPB to other specific consumer-brand relationship contexts. Fast food restaurants comprise one such domain, where there is strong competition stemming from a small number of operators leading the industry (Zion Market Research, 2018).

In this vein, some studies (e.g., Henger, Fesko and Teravest, 2017) have examined how the TPB could be applied to the context of brand management. Specifically, scholars have observed that subjective norms can facilitate brand love for certain kinds of consumers. Moreover, TPB can also be used to predict the extent to which an existing behavior would be repeated or reinforced in the future (in other words, the extent to which it would produce loyalty) in a customer-firm relationship context, which may prove even more valuable than traditional behavioral measures (Canniére et al., 2008).

In light of the above, our research seeks to advance the TPB literature by taking a different approach, and thereby make the theory more relevant and effective for predicting consumer decisions at fast food restaurants. Specifically, we consider constructs that have not been traditional foci, such as behavioral loyalty, as well as brand love as a predictor of that behavior. Our intention is to analyze the direct and indirect influence of food values, subjective norms, and brand love on behavioral loyalty toward fast food.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: In the next section, we will present the theoretical framework around the considered constructs, which will allow us to hypothesize the main relationships among said constructs. Afterward, we will describe the methodology (basically, descriptive statistics and PLS regression) and the main results of the empirical study. The paper will end by presenting the main conclusions, limitations and future research lines. We will also offer some practical suggestions for managers of fast food establishments.

1. *Theoretical framework*

This section will review the relevant literature around the TPB framework and the previously mentioned constructs, which will undergird a series of hypotheses that we will then test through the empirical study.

*2.1 The influence of food values*

Companies operating in the food industry need to offer products that really respond to consumers’ needs and desires, so that people really wish to pay for. This becomes especially challenging in saturated markets (a rather common situation in the current context) where companies have to compete intensely for market share and closely monitor consumers’ shifting preferences (Schifferstein, 2020). This situation captures the fast food industry, which is defined by strong competition among leading companies such as McDonalds and Burger King, which are constantly researching new ways to enhance their brands and attract consumer interest (Zion Market Research, 2018).

In short, companies are often researching ways to convince people to buy their foods, and one common method is by differentiating their foods from those of competitors. For example, a firm might try to optimize the sensory pleasure that people can derive from their foods. This strategy makes sense in situations where consumers consider food to be a source of temporary relief and comfort (Schifferstein, 2020), which is typically attributed to the fast food industry. Granted, this strategy may have the collateral effect of worsening the nutritional content of such foods by infusing them with high levels of salt or sugar (World Health Organization, 2014; Schifferstein, 2020). Another strategy could be focused on making foods more accessible—for example, by delivering them to people’s homes and/or facilitating different payment services (e.g., by using credit cards or smartphones) (Schifferstein, 2020). In addition, managers are increasingly pursuing customer service strategies as a means of driving growth (Kara et al., 1995). From the consumer point of view, one of the consequences of putting such differentiation at the consumer disposal, is that the decision to choose specific type of foods to consume becomes rather complex. No doubt that consumers, when confronting their purchase decisions, often find a wide variety of products at their disposal, which can have an ample range of attributes or characteristics that differentiate them (Lister et al., 2014).

Several studies have sought to identify consumer preferences for specific product attributes and their influence on other subsequent variables, such as the decision to consume a certain kind of food (e.g., Glanz et al., 1998; Liu and Jang, 2009; Pieniak et al., 2009). In this regard, Lusk and Briggeman (2009) synthesized the previous literature on human values and food preferences to derive a list of eleven food values that captured a stable set of beliefs about the relative importance of meta-attributes, consequences, and end states associated with food purchase and consumption. Subsequent research has found that Lusk and Briggeman’s (2009) proposed food values can explain consumer choices throughout the whole buying decision process (e.g., Lusk, 2011; Lister et al., 2014; Lyerly and Reeve, 2015; Pappalardo and Lusk, 2016; Bazzani et al., 2018; Onwezen et al., 2019; Izquierdo et al., 2020).

In general, values are extremely stable constructs and can thus serve as better predictors of behavior over extended periods of time (Honkanen and Verplanken, 2004; Aerstesens et al., 2009). In the TPB, values are acknowledged as background factors and, consequently, are expected to influence behavior indirectly (Ajzen, 2015). The reason for this indirect pathway is that values exert their influence on behavior through more concrete and domain-specific constructs such as subjective norms (Follows and Jobber 2000; Honkanen, Verplanken and Olsen 2006). Hence, the present research particularly focused on subjective norms, given that various social relationships can constrain (in tandem with other factors) food choices and/or setting selection (Dragone and Savorelli, 2012).

On this point, we want to emphasize that people often follow social norms not only because they fear social pressure, but because the norms offer information on what behaviors are considered the most appropriate or beneficial (Jager, 2000; Bamberg et al., 2007). This helps to explain why, in certain situations, consumers admit to choosing certain types of food (e.g., organic foods) due to social pressure: such choices allow them to be perceived in a more positive way (Lusk and Briggeman, 2009). In addition, most eating occurs around other people, which entails that food choices are often negotiated and managed by a group rather than an individual (Sobal and Bisogni, 2009). Given these ideas, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1: Food values exert a positive and significant influence on subjective norms.*

Another important construct in our study is brand love—often perceived as one of the main objectives in brand management. The relevant literature has evidenced how consumers can experience feelings ranging from love to hate toward brands (Khan and Lee, 2014), and this is no less true for the fast food industry (Hashim and Kasana, 2019). Surprisingly, however, there remains scarce research on the factors that influence brand love (Hegner et al., 2017). As a result, scholars have called for research that extends the TPB to the context of brand love—and more generally, highlights the importance of applying the TPB to a consumer-brand relationship context (Hegner et al., 2017). Inspired by these valuable studies, and considering the importance of variables such as values to the TPB (Ajzen, 2015), we propose the following hypothesis:

*H2: Food values exert a positive and significant influence on brand love.*

*2.2 The influence of subjective norm*

Traditionally, subjective norms has referred to the belief that an important person or group of people will approve and support a particular behavior. Thus, subjective norms reference both the perceived social pressure from others for an individual to behave in a certain manner, as well as her motivation to comply with those people's views (Ajzen, 1991; Yang and Jolly, 2009; Jin et al., 2012; Ham et al., 2015). Hence, we assume that subjective norms are determined by the total set of accessible normative beliefs concerning the expectations of important reference people (e.g., family or friends) (Ajzen, 2006).

This construct has been widely used in the TPB, including specific contexts where normative influences have been widely held to have an impact on behaviors, such as predicting food choices (Povey et al., 2000). As a matter of fact, abundant research (e.g., Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006; Chen, 2016; Arvola et al., 2008; Ruiz de Maya, López- López, and Munuera, 2011; Nurse; Onozaka and McFadden, 2012; Zagata, 2012; Al-Swidi et al., 2014; Ham et al., 2015) has observed how subjective norms are positively correlated with stated intentions to buy certain kinds of foods, such as sustainable, green and/or organic foods. These results make sense when considering that such foods might be associated with positive qualities such as being healthier and more environmentally friendly (c.f., Chen, 2016; Van Loo, Hoefkens and Verbeke, 2017).

However, the use of subjective norms in the TPB has not been exempt from criticism (Povey et al., 2000; Ham et al., 2015). One of the most frequently levelled criticisms is the weak relationship between subjective norms and intentions (Goding and Kok, 1996), which has proved to be less influential than other variables (Ham et al., 2015). This may be due to the TPB employing a narrower conception of normative influences (Conner and Sparks, 1996). Consequently, some authors (e.g., Krueger, Reilly and Carsrud, 2000) have called for further research on the used variables. With this idea in mind, the work of Ham et al. (2015) has bifurcated subjective norms into descriptive and social norms in order to analyze each type’s specific role in forming the intention to purchase a particular kind of food (in their specific research, green food).

Notably, research applying the TPB has found that subjective norms do facilitate brand love, especially for highly involved consumers. In general, scholars have suggested that self-expressive brands signal personal information to significant others (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). By adopting a certain brand and demonstrating love toward it, consumers express themselves to others (Wallace et al., 2014; Karjaluoto, 2016). In this vein, consumers select brands that they believe members of their reference or aspiration group would choose (Karjauloto et al., 2016), and they may feel greater brand love when these social needs are satisfied (Vernuccio et al., 2015). In other words, subjective norms reflect consumers’ perceptions that their feeling of love for a brand is accepted, encouraged and implemented by their circle of influence (Henger et al., 2017). Similarly, some scholars have suggested that consumers’ brand love depends partially on their identification with other clients, such as opinion leaders and other influential consumers, which may represent a form of social pressure (Albert and Merunka, 2013). These ideas allow us to propose the following hypothesis:

*H3: Subjective norms exert a positive and significant influence on brand love.*

Finally, we want to emphasize the significant relationship between subjective norms and loyalty in different contexts. For example, Olsen (2007) found that social norms exerted direct influence on repurchase loyalty (a kind of behavioral loyalty), using a sample of Norwegian parents responsible for buying and preparing home meals for middle and high school students. Hyllegard et al. (2010), exploring Gen Y´s responses to cause-related marketing (CRM) in apparel advertising, found that subjective norms helped to predict loyalty intention toward a particular brand. De Rooij and En Ferla (2012) observed that social influences had an impact on behavioral loyalty in the performing arts context, and that the effect of current social influences on customer loyalty was even stronger than the effect of other relevant variables, such as past cultural socialization. Henry et al. (2018) observed how subjective norms played a remarkable role in shaping key stakeholders’ attitude about remaining loyal to an organization in the face of significant changes, such as merging with another organization. Meanwhile, the study by Purani et al. (2019) found that social influence played a crucial role in the e-loyalty intentions of millennials. Based on these previous findings, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H4: Subjective norms exert a positive and significant influence on behavioral loyalty.*

*2.3 The influence of brand love*

As companies aspire to establish relationships with their customers, it becomes essential to understand the nature of consumer-brand relationships (Sung and Kim, 2010), which is reflected in constructs such as brand love. Brand love is defined as *“*the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). A consumer experiencing brand love expresses passion for and attachment to the brand, as well as forms and shares positive evaluations of the brand.Customers who are loyal to the brand will generally avoid alternative brands and promote the brand via word-of-mouth communication (Kumar and Sahah, 2004; Whang et al., 2004; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Unal and Aydin, 2013). Consequently, brand love is an important predictor of key constructs such as repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth and resistance to negative information. Given the intense competition between a small number of operators that defines the fast food industry, there is a heightened need to move beyond mere satisfaction and establish an emotional bond with customers that leads to brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012; Roy et al. 2013; Aro et al., 2018).

In this regard, it is important to distinguish brand love from other different, but related concepts, such as interpersonal love and satisfaction. According to dimensional emotional theories, there are enough differences between brand love and interpersonal love to merit prudence before transferring the latter’s theories and scales directly to research on brand love (Langner et al., 2015). Meanwhile, according to Carrol and Ahuvia (2006), brand love differs from satisfaction in four key ways: (i) while satisfaction is generally conceptualized as a cognitive judgment, brand love has a much stronger affective focus; (ii) whereas satisfaction is typically regarded as a transaction-specific outcome, brand love is often the result of a consumer’s long-term relationship with the brand; (iii) while satisfaction is frequently linked to the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm, brand love requires neither expectancy nor disconfirmation; and (iv) brand love includes a willingness to declare love, involving an integration of the brand into the consumer’s identity, neither of which is requisite in satisfaction.

Consumers identify with brands depending on the extent to which the brand delivers on relevant identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of the self (Fournier, 1998). Dick and Basu (1994) argue that brand loyalty should be accentuated when consumers experience a more positive mood and affect. Brands that make consumers “happy” or “joyful” or “affectionate” elicit more purchase and attitudinal loyalty. In the retailing industry, Vlachos and Vrechopoulos (2012) observed that consumer-retail love positively influences re-patronage intentions, which means that investing in emotionally charged relationships with customers will likely pay off in terms of loyalty. In this vein, marketers have already adopted the idea of beloved brands and are using emotionally laden advertising messages to foster consumers’ love for brands. This trend can be easily recognized in certain fast food restaurant slogans, like McDonalds’ “i’m lovin’ it” (Bauer, Albrecht and Heinrich, 2009).

In short, creating emotional bonds—and by extension, loyalty—with consumers is an important strategic issue for companies, especially in the fast food industry (Zion Market Research, 2018). However, it is important to highlight the distinction between behavioral and attitudinal loyalty that appears in the relevant literature (e.g., Dick and Basu, 1994). Because the TPB focuses on the behavioral component, we restricted our interest to consumers’ intention to engage in loyalty-relevant behaviors. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H5: Brand love exerts a positive and significant influence on behavioral loyalty.*

Figure 1 below describes the main hypotheses proposed in this research.

**Figure 1 about here**

1. *Methodology*

In this section, we describe the empirical methodology used to test the model proposed in Figure 1.

*3.1 Methodology description*

We first designed a questionnaire to gather the necessary information to test our proposed model. The questions sought to obtain information related to both participants’ socio-demographic profile and the study contructs (food values, subjective norms, brand love and behavioral loyalty). For the food values scales, the questions focused on how appreciated the food values were on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 was the least appreciated and 5 the most appreciated). To assess subjective norms, brand love and loyalty, we used 5-point Likert scales to assess individual opinions, where 1 was the lowest degree of agreement and 5 was the highest. With regard to the subjective norms scales in particular, we followed the traditional approach and included items referring to social pressure. This decision was taking into account considering, among other reasons, that the behavior that this model aims at predicting is behavioral loyalty. On this note, we want to reiterate that other scholars have recently begun incorporating descriptive norms into the subjective norms construct as a way to potentially enhance the weak relationship between subjective norms and intentions. Table 1 features the complete details about the variables and the relevant literature that substantiated them.

**Table 1 about here**

*3.2 Results*

Information was collected from January 2019 to May 2019 in Puebla, Mexico. We chose the Mexican market because of its strategic importance for US fast-food retailers. Indeed, Mexico is a key market for US companies for various reasons, one of which is that the country’s population skews young, which means there is a growing customer base for global companies in the future (Lee, Knight and Kim, 2008). On this point, there is already some research (e.g., Lee et al., 2008) on how US apparel brands strive to appeal to young Mexican consumers. However, this stream has not yet been extended to US fast-food retailers—a gap that we seek to address.

We presented the questionnaire to consumers at different fast food restaurants as they prepared to leave. We collected a total of 3,565 valid surveys. Table 2 describes the technical data.

**Table 2 about here**

Regarding the respondents’ gender, 52.3% were female and 47.8% were male. Regarding income, 40.6% had monthly income equal to or less than 300 euros; 21.8% had an income between 301-600 euros and 14.8% had an income between 601-900 euros. A total of 63.6% were single, while 13.5% were married and had children under 15 years of age. A total of 68.5% were in the age range of 18-33 years, while 18.8% were between 34-50 years. Regarding educational attainment, 51.9% with completed university studies and 33.1% had completed high school (see Table in the Annex).

Table 3 shows some interesting results. First, most of the items achieved scores above the average, except for the items measuring subjective norms. The items that make up the food values construct are the best valued, followed by the loyalty construct items; and finally, the brand love construct items. Through a deeper analysis, we could verify that the best valued items were naturalness, taste and price. The rest of the highest-rated items were associated with loyalty.

**Table 3 about here**

We first tested the multivariate statistical assumption and confirmed that the model had no multicollinearity problems: The variance-inflation factor (VIF) test obtained values from 1.398 to 3.885, well within the recommended range of 0.1–10 (Sim et al., 2014; Leong et al., 2020). Thus, we used PLS-SEM since it is more robust with non-normal distributions than CB-SEM (Leong et al., 2019). The data also presented no violations of multivariate assumptions. In addition, we employed Tehseen et al.’s (2017) process for addressing potential common-method bias (CMB). This is based on Podsakoff et al.’s (2003) method of adding a marker variable as a predictor of the model’s endogenous construct (in our case, perceived risk). Consequently, the R2 values of the endogenous constructs before the marker variable was added (Loyalty = 0.441; Subjective Norms = 0.144; Brand Love = 0.487), and after the marker variable was added (Loyalty = 0.454; Subjective Norms = 0.156; Brand Love = 0.494) showed no variations. This result confirms there is no substantial CMB.

To validate the model proposed in Figure 1, we applied PLS using the SmartPLS 3.2.8 software. To establish the significance of the parameters, we performed bootstrapping with 10,000 resamples. To ensure construct reliability and validity, we first examined the indicator loadings for the reflective constructs. Those items with a loading of less than .7 were omitted (Hair et al., 2018). Because the food values construct was considered a formative construct, we based its assessment on: (1) convergent validity; (2) collinearity; and (3) the weight of each indicator (Hair et al., 2017). Convergent validity was assessed through the construct’s correlation with an alternative measure of the same concept (Hair et al., 2017). With regard to the weights of each indicator, some items had a low score. Unlike reflective indicators, formative indicators are not interchangeable; therefore, omitting a single indicator can reduce the validity of the measurement model’s content (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001).

The next step was to evaluate construct reliability and validity. We adopted Jöreskog’s (1971) commonly used criterion whereby values over .7 are considered good, and over .9 are considered very good (see Table 3). Other indicators are Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was acceptable, as all constructs were greater than .7 (Hair, 2010). The AVE of each individual construct was above the acceptability value of .5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In fact, the composite reliability (CR) values below .6 indicate a lack of internal consistency reliability (Hair et al., 2017).

To determine discriminant validity, we used the sole criterion offered by PLS: namely, whether the AVE of each factor is greater than the square of the correlation between each pair of factors (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4 about here**

Before we could validate the structural model, we needed to first test for collinearity. We performed this process for both formative and reflective constructs. Since all the indicators had values lower than 3, we concluded that there is no collinearity (Becker et al., 2013; Hair et al., 2018). To evaluate the structural model’s predictive power, we used the criterion proposed by Falk and Miller (1992): namely, the R2 of each dependent construct must be greater than .1. The obtained values reflect that the model has a good explanatory capacity and a good fit, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5 about here**

After evaluating all the measurement instruments’ psychometric properties, we estimated the model proposed in Figure 2, while the estimated final model is shown in Figure 3. The model estimation results are shown in Table 6.

**Figure 2 about here**

**Table 6 about here**

Based on the results, we were able to accept all the hypotheses with a value of \*\*\* p < .001. The most intense effect was that of brand love on loyalty, H5 (β = .642; p = .000), which reflects the importance of consumers’ emotional bond with the fast food restaurant in terms of creating loyalty. This result accords with previous research showing that brand love is an antecedent of loyalty. The second-most intense effect was the influence of subjective norms on brand love, H3 (β = .422; p = .000), which indicates that eating at certain fast food restaurants may represent a way for people to identify with a reference group. The third-strongest influence was that of food values on brand love, H2 (β = .418; p = .000), which suggests that food values contribute significantly and positively to consumers’ emotional bonds toward a particular fast food restaurant. Fourth, the influence of food values on subjective norms, H1 (β = .379; p = .000), signals that food values exert a positive influence over the social pressure that certain individuals (family or friend members) can exert over others with regard to eating fast food from certain restaurants. The relationship between the subjective norm and loyalty, although significant, is the one that obtains the smallest value, H4 (β = .036; p = .027). Finally, the proposed model allowed us to assess the mediating effect of the brand love construct in the relationship between subjective norms and behavioral loyalty. Following the approach of Hair et al. (2014), we obtained a VAF> 80%, which suggests that individuals who are more impacted by subjective norms feel more attached to the brand (that is, experience greater brand love) and thereby express greater loyalty.

For the final step, we analyzed the impact of each food value ​​on the subjective norms and brand love constructs (see Table 7). The food values that exerted the greatest influence on the subjective norms were nutrition, tradition and fairness (in that order). Meanwhile, taste, safety, convenience and appearance seemed to have no influence on subjective norms. In turn, those that exerted the greatest influence on brand love were taste, tradition and fairness, while naturalness, price and safety had no influence on this construct.

**Table 7 about here**

1. *Discussion*

This research contributes to the advancement of the TPB by seeking to make it more relevant and effective for predicting consumer decisions at fast food restaurants, namely by accounting for variables that have not been traditionally considered. In particular, we analyzed both the direct and indirect impact of food values, subjective norms, and brand love on customer loyalty toward fast food restaurants. Therefore, one of the novelties of this research is its emphasis on predicting behavioral loyalty rather than more common behaviors, such as purchase intention.

Given the obtained results, we were able to accept all the proposed hypotheses with a high confidence level and low sampling error. In general, we found that consumers most appreciated the food values of naturalness, taste and price. However, we also considered the direct influence of food values on the constructs of subjective norms and brand love. In this regard, we observed that the most influential values on subjective norms were nutrition, tradition and fairness (in that order), while for brand love, those values were taste, tradition and fairness. Therefore, taste remains one of the most appreciated values on a general level, while still influencing the brand love construct. Meanwhile, the values of tradition and fairness both exert a positive and significant influence on the constructs of subjective norms and brand love.

Another key finding is the importance of including emotional variables in the TPB in the form of the brand love construct. While research on the TPB has not traditionally included this construct, we found that it had the highest direct influence on behavioral loyalty. This finding reflects the great relevance of establishing emotional ties with fast food consumers when seeking long-term customer loyalty. However, our research also underscores the important relationship between subjective norms and brand love, followed by the influence of food values on brand love, whose influence represents the third-most intense relationship of the model. Notably, the influence of food values on subjective norms—while positive and significant—represents the least intense relationship detected in the model. However, despite this lower intensity, food values still exert a meaningful influence on the subjective norms expressed by relatives and friends.

In addition, it is also important to consider the mediating effect of the brand love construct. Thus, the greater the influence of subjective norms on the consumer, the greater the possibility that the consumer feels love for the brands (and consequently, the greater the loyalty towards the brand). This finding reinforces the importance of family and friends in decision-making, since they are what the consumer uses as references.

This research offers several interesting contributions for managers in the fast food industry. First, we confirmed that operators need to continue working to differentiate their products by emphasizing those values that are most appreciated by consumers. To this end, managers need to emphasize generally appreciated values (naturalness, taste and price), as well as those that enhance the constructs of subjective norms and brand love (tradition and fairness). Additionally, industry operators should focus on creating close emotional ties with their customers through the brand love construct, either by exerting direct influence on this construct (e.g., through communication campaigns that highlight brand love variables), or indirectly by influencing subjective norms and (to a lesser extend) food values.

Finally, we want to acknowledge the limitations of this research. First, we focused solely on a specific food category (fast food), which limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, it would be interesting to apply the model to healthier foods and compare the results. Second, the sample reflects a predominance of young individuals with low income levels, and particularly from Mexico. While young people are a common audience for fast food restaurants, it would be worthwhile to see if the results hold when considering other age groups from other countries in Europe or North America.

Furthermore, future research should analyze consumers’ motive(s) for purchasing and/or consuming fast food from a specific establishment (e.g., birthday celebration, friend meeting, convenience, etc.); this would allow us to more deeply evaluate the relationship between subjective norms and brand love. Scholars might also assess the degree to which certain socio-demographic variables, such as age or income level, influence consumer behavior toward this type of food. For instance, do these variables play a moderating role between subjective norms and brand love, or between brand love and behavioral loyalty? Finally, there would be scientific and practical value in running the model for individual fast food brands and including additional variables as moderators (for example, satisfaction).

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