

# Conceptualizing customer-company patronizing behavior: Nostalgia-charged experiences driving prosocial behavior and commitment

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### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine customer-company patronization i.e. the phenomenon in which customers decide to voluntarily patronize, support and promote companies. Currently the phenomenon of customer-company patronization is not well understood nor conceptualized in the marketing and consumer research disciplines. Our study aims to extend the current literature of extra-role behaviors by exploring this phenomenon from the perspectives of customers' experiences as well as identity-construction processes, outlining the main motivations for customers' patronizing behavior as well as explore how it occurs in their behavior and choices. In order to better understand the phenomenon, it is essential to explore the different underlying motivations that drive this kind of consumer behavior by analyzing the meanings that customers attach to their patronizing experiences.

### **Research Method**

The research was conducted using qualitative methods. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used as a data collection technique for studying consumers' underlying motivations and experiences relating to their patronizing behavior in attempting to understand the real meanings of this kind of committed behavior. Data was analysed through content analysis to gain deeper insights and describe the meanings that patrons hold regarding their patronizing experiences.

### **Findings**

Customer-company patronization can be conceptualized as being a constructive consumer behavior that contributes to patrons' senses of identities of who they are or who they aspire to be. As such, patronizing represents a behavior that functions as a mechanism to construct one's self-concept. More specifically, the patrons' pursuit for security was identified as the main underlying motivator for patronization behavior. Through various different mechanisms, such as through nostalgic consumption and routinizing visits, the patrons unconsciously strove to maintain stability and identity continuity, especially under the circumstances of dealing with the life changing events. In a broader sense, nostalgically charged patronizing experience can be seen as a way to cope with the insecurities of the modern world by creating a psychological shelter and meaningfulness into one's life.

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**Keywords** patronizing, nostalgic consumption, customer loyalty, prosocial behaviour, extra-role behaviour, identity, self-coherence, temporality, extended-self, consumer research,

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### **Tavoitteet**

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tutkia yritysten mesenaattina toimimista; ilmiötä, jossa kuluttajat päättävät vapaaehtoisesti suosia ja tukea jotakin tiettyä yritystä. Tällä hetkellä kuluttajien mesenaattina käyttäytyminen ilmiönä on huonosti ymmärretty eikä sitä ole käsitteellistetty markkinoinnin- tai kuluttajatutkimuksen alalla. Tutkimme mesenaattina ilmiönä kuluttajien näkökulmasta ja heidän identiteetin rakennusprosessin näkökulmasta, laajentamalla nykyistä teoriaa kuluttajien ekstarooli-käyttäytymisestä. Tavoitteena on hahmottaa mikä motivoi kuluttajia tällaiseen käyttäytymiseen ja miten se ilmenee heidän käytöksessään ja valinnoissaan. Ymmärtääksemme ilmiötä, on tärkeää tutkia motivaatioita niiden erilaisten merkitysten kautta, joita kuluttajat liittävät mesenaattina toimimiseen.

### **Tutkimusmetodi**

Tutkimusmetodinä käytettiin kvalitatiivista tutkimusmenetelmää. Tutkimus toteutettiin semi-strukturoiduilla syvähaastatteluilla haastateltavien motivaatioiden ja kokemusten tutkimiseksi. Aineisto analysoitiin kvalitatiivisella sisällönanalyysillä kuvaillaksemme kokemuksia ja merkityksiä, joita mesenaatit liittävät tällaiseen käytökseen.

### **Löydökset**

Yrityksen mesenaattina toimiminen voidaan käsitteellistää rakentavaksi kuluttajakäyttäytymiseksi, joka liittyy kuluttajien identiteetin rakennukseen. Nostalgisen kulutuksen sekä yrityksen mesenaattina toimimisen avulla kuluttajat pyrkivät ajallisesti yhtenäisen minäkuvan muodostamiseen sekä ylläpitämiseen, erityisesti identiteettikriisien tai muutosten aikana. Kuluttajien pyrkimys vakauteen sekä pysyvyyteen tunnistettiin tärkeimmäksi yritysten mesenaattina toimimisen motivaatiotekijäksi, mikä ilmeni käytännössä nostalgian sekä menneisyyden muistojen kuluttamisen suosimisena. Nostalgisten kokemusten kuluttaminen sekä yritysten tukeminen ja mesenaattina toimiminen voidaan käsittää ihmisten tapana selviytyä elämän muutostilanteista, luomalla itselleen turvapaikkoja sekä merkityksellisyyttä elämäänsä, jopa verrattain banaalien kulutustottumusten kautta.

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**Avainsanat** patronizing, nostalgic consumption, customer loyalty, prosocial behaviour, extra-role behaviour, identity, self-coherence, temporality, extended-self, consumer research,

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## 1.Introduction

*Imagine discovering a cool product prototype, an ostrich pillow, a soft padded tube that allows you to bury your entire head in it and take a power nap - anytime and anywhere. The ostrich pillow is not produced yet but you get excited about the edgy design and the idea of it. So, you decide to support the company behind this design and invest in their crowdfunding campaign to realize this product, without being sure that you will get anything in return.* The Ostrich Pillow, as described above started its life as an idea but with the help of the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, it became a real product, fully funded by the consumer enthusiasts. Moreover, the Kickstarter users evolved the Ostrich Pillow's design and contributed to the launch of Ostrich Pillow Light, a similarly functioning product as the original prototype but slightly less attention-grabbing.

The vignette above describes a relatively young but increasingly important phenomenon of crowdfunding, a method that helps entrepreneurs to fund their ventures by raising monetary contributions from a large audience. Ordianini et al. (2011) describe the concept of crowdfunding as a collective effort of different individuals who come together to pool the funds, to support the new potential ideas, projects, organizations and businesses. What is central to this phenomenon, is the idea of consumers proactively supporting the production and promotion of products instead of merely buying them, going as far as bearing the financial risks associated with this support. While the emerging phenomenon of publicly supporting and helping new ventures has received tremendous interest in the business press (Thorpe, 2014) the scientific research on crowdfunding or on the broader phenomenon of consumers willingly helping and patronizing companies in different contexts, is to date relatively scarce and very fragmented, covering only narrow facets and offering only limited insights of this multifaceted consumer phenomenon (Ordianini et al. 2011).

The purpose of this study is to research the phenomenon of proactive customer-company patronization i.e. the phenomenon in which customers decide to patronize, support, promote and advocate for certain selected companies they have special bonds with. Despite vast efforts undertaken in the field of customer loyalty, there remains a dearth of research that examines the dimensions of consumers' extra role behaviors in the commercial context by providing a more comprehensive understanding of proactive customer-company

patronization behavior.

Besides the fact that there are several different accepted definitions for the verb patronizing, there is a lack of common terminology and philosophy within the marketing and consumer research disciplines regarding the construct of customer patronage. For instance, in a retail context the concept of customer patronage may be referred to as retail stores' regular customers (E.g. Luceri & Latusi, 2012), whereas in some marketing contexts intents to patronize companies are associated with customers' intents to support and actively promote the patronized companies. Moreover, in some research papers customer patronage is used interchangeably with the concept of customer loyalty. For example, according to Neal (1999), from a behavioral view on the customer loyalty concept, repeat patronage defines customer loyalty.

To conclude the above, there is a clear lack of a conceptual framework relating to the phenomenon of customer-company patronization that would clarify and explain the aspects relating to customers' patronization behavior. Providing a clear conceptualization for the multifaceted concept of customer-company patronization is needed to fill the existing theoretical gap in the marketing and consumer research disciplines. The aim of the study is therefore to attempt to fill the above-mentioned theoretical knowledge gap by exploring and identifying the main characteristics of customer-company patronization behavior.

The research question that we want to address with this qualitative study relates to how this phenomenon occurs from the point of view of customers (E.g. how and under which circumstances customers decide to enter into these kinds of intensive, committed and meaningful relationships with certain companies), how it is perceived and understood by the customers, and what essentially drives consumers to patronize certain companies.

Specifically, our study addresses the research question, as follows:

**1. How do consumers experience patronizing and how does it appear in their behaviors and choices?**

Conducting the empirical research on customer-company patronization and how this actually occurs in practice, would fill an important methodological research gap, since the

concept of customer-company patronization has not been previously studied from the customer's perspective. Previously, the theory on extra-role behaviors has identified and exemplified some of the consumers' prosocial behaviors intending to help, support and advocate for the companies voluntarily, in some ways resembling the patronizing behavior, but the current theory is limited. More specifically, this theory does not address the underlying motivations of prosocial behavior but mostly assumes that this kind of behavior is merely altruistic in nature (Ross 2012). The literature of extra-role behaviors does not offer insights about why consumers' engage in prosocial behaviors and does not describe how they perceive these kinds of behaviors. Therefore, our study aims to extend the current literature on extra-role behaviors by exploring this phenomenon from the perspectives of customers' experiences as well as identity-construction processes, exploring and outlining the main reasons and motivations for customers' patronizing behavior, as they experience it. In order to better understand the phenomenon of customer-company patronization, it is essential to explore the different underlying motivations that drive this kind of behavior, that can be done by scrutinizing and analyzing the meanings that customers attach to their patronizing experiences.

To address the above-mentioned issues, we will use an explorative qualitative research approach and perform in-depth interviews on the consumers, identified as loyal patrons in the service context. For the research context we have selected studying the loyal and supportive customers that have patronized a café either on a daily basis or for an extensive period of time and who have demonstrated priorly mentioned positive and supportive customer behaviors. This kind of consumer context was selected as it represents a relevant and in a way an extreme and rich context for studying a customer patronization behavior, as some of the study participants have loyally patronized the cafe for many decades or have extensive and long-standing experiences with the café, backing all the way from their childhoods.

The conducted content analysis offers important insights into how the customers perceive their patronization behavior and what kind of meanings they attach to the patronized place. This in turn, contributes to the marketing and consumer research by offering a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations and mechanisms that drive patronizing behavior. Our findings shed light on the characterizing features of customers' patronizing behavior, underlining how this phenomenon closely relates to consumers' identity

construction processes and identity continuance needs, intricately linking consumers' past experiences and memories to their current experiences and patronizing behaviour to serve specific identity needs.

To conclude, there is a clear lack of a clarifying conceptual framework relating to the phenomenon of customer-company patronization that would enhance our understanding of the actual customers' patronization behavior. Providing a clear conceptualization for the multifaceted concept of customer-company patronization is needed to fill the existing theoretical gap in the marketing and consumer research disciplines. The aim of the study is therefore an attempt to fill the above-mentioned theoretical knowledge gap by exploring and identifying the main characteristics of customer-company patronization behavior from a customers' perspective.

We organize this paper into six sections. The first section introduces the research question, and the second section introduces the literature and research related to the patronizing behavior. The third section presents the research approach and methodology of our research, while the fourth section discusses the findings, identifying the main characterizing features of patronizing behavior, the motivations and experiences from the patrons' perspective. The fifth section synthesizes the findings and links them to a broader theme of searching meaningfulness in one's life. The last sixth section will conclude our study by discussing the theoretical and managerial contributions, limitations and future research suggestions.



## **2.Theoretical background**

### **2.1 Extra-role behaviors**

Extra-role behaviors can be described as not only self-interested tasks but also those that are carried out to benefit the whole organization (Ahearne, Bhattacharya and Gruen, 2005). This type of behavior is typically defined as behavior that goes beyond the contractually defined tasks that are not expected from employees or customers nor financially rewarded, yet promoting effective functioning of a company (Organ 1988, p.4). They might even involve a sacrifice on the employees' or customers' part in terms of time, effort, material possessions or even physical welfare (Staub, 1978). This is behavior that goes beyond loyalty or satisfaction and can lead to a competitive advantage for a company.

Extra-role behaviors have been mainly studied in the organizational theory in an employee context (Groth, 2005) occurring as behaviors such as prosocial behaviors (George, 1991), spontaneous behaviors (George and Brief, 1992), contextual behaviors (Borman and Motowidlo, 1993) and organizational citizenship behaviors (MacKenzie, Podaskoff and Ahearne, 1998). These include behaviors such as helping co-workers, protecting the organization, making constructive suggestions, proactively developing oneself and spreading goodwill (George and Brief, 1992), thus going beyond what is expected from you as an employee or as a consumer. Out of all these, the organizational citizenship behaviors have gained the most attention in the marketing literature (MacKenzie et al. 1998). Ahearne, Bhattacharya and Gruen (2005) demonstrate that consumers identify with certain companies, which might lead to these extra-role behaviors toward the companies they identify with, whereas Groth (2005) points out that extra-role behavior from the customers' side often occurs in service context in form of voluntary actions intended to enhance the company's performance.

#### **2.1.1 Extra-role behaviors in consumer context: Customer Citizenship Behavior**

Extra-role behaviors in consumer context are mostly referred to as customer citizenship behaviors (CCB) (Bettencourt, 1997). It is commonly agreed by scholars that CCB includes customers' voluntary, altruistic actions, such as helping the employees or other customers, that are not explicitly expected or rewarded but that can positively impact firm's interests and performance (Groth, 2005; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007). In other words this kind of behavior can be described as discretionary customer behavior that is typically not expected of customers and that promotes firm's effective functioning and enhances firm's performance. However, the literature does not specify what the standard expectations of a customer's role are. What becomes central to defining extra-role behavior in customer situations is then the voluntary nature of this kind of behavior as well as the lack of tangible rewards expected from engaging in this kind of behavior. Thus, it can be implied that the customer citizenship behaviors are characterized by the altruistic intentions and motives that according to the literature are underlying these kinds of prosocial customer behaviors.

### **2.1.2 Describing extra-role behaviors**

MacKenzie et al. (1998) categorize organizational citizenship behaviors into sportsmanship, civic virtue and helping behaviors. Groth (2005) identified somewhat similar dimensions for OCB's: making recommendations to other people about the company, providing feedback to the organization and helping other customers. Sportsmanship behaviors include resilience to negative information and tolerating less-than ideal circumstances (Organ 1988, p.11). Customers are more tolerable and patient even in difficult situations and act more politely in such situations (Lengnick-Hall, Claycomb and Inks, 2000). They are also more adaptable to new situations (Bettencourt 1997), more tolerable to alterations in products and are more resilient to negative information (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Some have found this type of behavior going even further in that consumers are trying to protect the company and even defending the company to other consumers. For example Singh (1998) found that in case of a problem, customers might direct complaints to service providers instead of voicing those problems publicly and thus give the service providers an opportunity to fix these problems and retain their reputation. Consumers might answer to negative information about a company by spreading positive company information and encourage others to do so as well (Groth, 2005). Sportsmanship behaviors thus go beyond typical positive word of mouth. While positive WOM has been identified as one type of extra role behavior

(e.g. Groth, 2005; Gruen, 1995), MacKenzie et al.'s (1998) sportsmanship behavior shows that these extra-role behaviors stem from something that is beyond loyalty or satisfaction towards a company, making it closely related to patronizing behavior.

Civic virtue refers to behavior where consumers are concerned about a company; they care about the life of the company and the decisions of the company. Civic virtue is characterized by behaviors that indicate the customers' deep concerns and active interest in the life of the organization. This behavior is visible in consumer's suggesting improvement ideas for the company or attending functions that can help the company. (MacKenzie et al. 1998) These functions include participating in marketing research or filling out satisfaction surveys (Gruen, 1995; Groth, 2005). What is particular to this behavior is that it doesn't derive from dissatisfaction towards the company, but rather from customer's willingness to help the company and their belief that it will be beneficial for the company (Bettencourt, 1997). This can go as far as customers feeling that they are actually bearing some of the risk in the company's new decisions such as product introductions by supporting the company in these decisions (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Civic virtue can also be manifested by defending the company's policies and practices when they are challenged. We believe that in customer-company patronizing behavior the extra-role behaviors will appear in similar proactive and helpful ways.

Helping behaviors can include a variety of behaviors that support both other customers and employees (MacKenzie et al. 1998; Groth, 2005). Customers might for example help other customers in finding products or assist them in their shopping needs or in other ways (Groth, 2005). Bettencourt (1997) found that customers might even make sure that other customers' behavior is appropriate and discourage inappropriate behavior. Discretionary courtesy can be considered being one form of helping behavior and it includes being polite and considerate to others as well as intentionally preventing conflicts with others.

DeBenedetti, Oppewal and Arsel (2013) found that customers that are attached to a service place are often willing to participate and help in the backstage activities, blurring the boundaries between the staff and the customers.

### **2.1.3 Limitations of extra-role behavior theories**

The literature on customer citizenship behaviors addresses mainly the favorable effects of this phenomenon such as positive word-of-mouth, co-operation with employees, voluntary helping behaviors and other kinds of altruistic behaviors, from the company's point of view. In that way, the literature underlines how different types of customer citizenship behaviors improve a firm's performance. Additionally, the literature suggests that loyal customers who engage in prosocial behaviors represent a source of competitive advantage for a company. Yet, the literature does not offer any concrete examples, from the customers' points of view, of why customers engage in prosocial behaviors and how they perceive these kinds of behaviors. Whether they see them as altruistic actions or whether their behavior is driven by some self-motivated motives and what those motives would be is not discussed in the literature. Also, the negative effects of prosocial customer behaviors on a firm and on other customers have received less attention in the current research, and can be seen as a limitation.

The marketing and consumer research literature offers valuable insight and emphasizes the increasing meaning and implications of customer citizenship behaviors but it has also severe limitations. Firstly, the concept of prosocial behaviors has been fairly vaguely and mildly defined in the current literature (Fowler, 2013). A clear, common terminology is lacking as the conceptual definitions of these behaviors used by different researchers differ from one study to another. Secondly, the current theory lacks a proper and sufficient conceptualization about the true nature, motives and other important dimensions of customers' extra-role behaviors as currently the theory is limited to merely exemplifying and categorizing the various types of behaviors that occur in consumer context. Given that customers' citizenship behaviors have not received much empirical examination in the consumer research, the above-mentioned limitation is understandable.

Moreover, the customer citizenship behavior has been approached solely through the positive lens of altruism and most of the prior research on prosocial behaviors has been limited to philosophical discussion and experiments on altruism (Osterhus, 1997; Ross, 2012; Cialdini and Kenrick, 1976; Batson and Shaw, 1991), while the real reasons and motivations explaining why customer citizenship occurs, are not explored. For example, the relationship between egoistic motivations that benefit the self and the prosocial behaviors is currently overlooked. Finally, the literature lacks customer's perspective when describing this concept as the prosocial customer citizenship behaviors are mostly addressed from a

firm's perspective. Thus, a motive-based, customer view on customers' extra-role behaviors would be needed for providing a more holistic and accurate understanding of these behaviors.

## **2.2 Possessions & extended self: Using possessions and places in identity construction**

Drawing from the critique and limitations of the extra role behaviors -theory, we decided that it would be appropriate to address the patronization behavior from the consumer's identity's point of view. Rather than merely assuming the altruistic motivations we want to look at the relationship between consumers' consumption habits and their self-concept to explore the meanings and motivations that consumers have relating to their consumption activities.

The idea that consumers might be more influenced by the symbolic value of products i.e. the images the product is able to create and the interaction between one's self-image and the product image, rather than the functional properties of the product, has gained substantial attention in consumer behavior research throughout years (e.g. Belk, 1988; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Levy, 1959). Rather than providing functional utility, possessions and products have been found to represent important symbols for expressing personal values, qualities, attitudes, prestige and accomplishments and as such they help individuals build their identity as well as communicate it to others, aiming at achieving social recognition (Levy, 1959; Dittmar, 1992; Pierce et al., 2003). Furthermore, possessions have been shown to be psychologically meaningful in achieving a sense of continuity of the self across time and situation (Belk, 1988). A lot of the consumer research has now focused on exploring the relationship between the meanings consumer attach to their consumption habits and their self concepts.

### **2.2.1 Defining extended self**

Belk (1988) argues that possessions play a large role in creating our sense of self and in understanding who we are. According to his research, we build our identities and our sense

of who we are, with the possessions we have. These possessions are not necessarily something we legally own, but include intangible assets as well. Everything we can call ours, our body, internal processes, ideas and experiences, people, places and things we feel attached to, eventually become part of our extended self. Belk sees people as having a core self that is expanded with possessions that become part of our extended self. According to him, the body, internal processes, ideas and experiences are part of the core self which is expanded with people, places and things that one feels attached to. Thus, the extended self is the core self plus the possessions one feels he has.

James (1980) contends that the self is a sum total of all that one can call his own. We feel the same emotions towards our possessions, be it things or people, as we do for ourselves and thus when our possessions prosper, we also feel triumphant, but when they dwindle or die away, we feel cast down. Possessions become an extension of ourselves in a way that the self comprises not only on what is seen as “me” but also what is seen as “mine” (Belk, 1988; James, 1980). It is not thus only one’s body and psychic powers, but one’s clothes, house, living area, close others, reputation etc. that a person consists of and that according to Belk extends into an extended self (James, 1980; Belk, 1988). For example, by wearing a uniform or driving an expensive car, we can convince ourselves and others that we are a different person than we would be without them (Belk, 1988).

### **2.2.2 The functions of extended-self**

The possessed objects can either literally or symbolically extend the self and allow us to be different persons that we would be without those objects. Belk (1989) examines the extended self through three basic modes of living: having, being and doing. According to Belk, these are three interrelated things that influence each other and enable the existence of others. Having something allows one to do; engage with the possessions. By engaging with one’s possessions he/she can build one’s identity and increase the understanding of one’s self. Sartre (1943) suggests that the main reason for wanting to have something is to enlarge our sense of self and the only way one can know who one is, is by observing what one has. People search, express and confirm a sense of being through their possessions. Therefore, it can be concluded that we define our sense of being through what we have.

Possessions help us understand who we are, not only in the present but throughout time in creating, maintaining and eventually preserving our identity (Dittmar, 1992). We use possessions early in our life to distinct ourselves from the environment and later from others (Belk, 1988). During adolescence, we use possessions to seek our identity. At this stage the possessions represent what we want to be; our future plans and projections about ourselves (Olson, 1984). They are used to show others who we are or who we want to be (Gentry, Baker and Kraft, 1995). As we move on from young adulthood to older age, the possessions that represent our experiences from earlier life become more important. This is often the time that we go through many major life changes such as marriage or retirement. Possessions can serve as familiar transitional objects to the unknown future by reminding us of the pleasant memories from the past and offer support in confronting the uncertain future (Belk, 1988). One phenomenon that has been suggested is that when we get old, our sense of mortality heightens and we strive to preserve our identity beyond death as our possessions keep our identity alive in the memory of others. This is why the meaningful possessions are often passed through to our children for example. (Belk, 1988)

Even though the functions that possessions serve change in nature throughout our lifecycles, Belk suggests that creating a sense of past is something that our possessions provide us across the age continuum. In order to understand who we are now, we must know our past. Our possessions work as means to store our memories and feelings from the past. (Belk, 1988) Thus, our possessions remind us and help us to understand who we once were and contrast that to our present selves. As such, they can also help us maintain a sense of continuity in our lives and protect our identity from the threats that life's changes might bring to us.

### **2.2.3 The experiences through which possessions are incorporated into the extended self**

Pierce et al. (2003) and Belk (1988) suggest that the main experiences, i.e. mechanisms and routes, through which the possessions are incorporated into the extended self are: controlling, coming to know the target closely and investing the self into the target. For example, Furby (1978) argues that the more a person can control certain objects, the more likely these objects will be experienced as part of the self. In thinking and claiming that

something is "mine", we also come to believe that the object is part of "me". The sense of control has been suggested to be the critical determinant of feelings of possession (Furby, 1978; Tuan, 1984). The more we believe we possess control over an object, the more it becomes a part of the self.

The second mechanism relates to coming to know the target that relates to building and developing close relationships with objects or targets, which may lead to developing feelings of ownership for those objects. Active interaction and association with certain things strengthens the psychological ties with these things and thus reflects intimate relationship or owner's association with the "owned" things. Beaglehole (1932) for example, observed that it is our intimate knowledge of a community, store, or a book that makes it not only "ours" but also a part of the self.

Investment of person's self into something also facilitates the process of becoming one with these things. Rochberg-Halton (1984) explains this mechanism by suggesting that we invest "psychic energy" in an object or a target to which we have directed our labor, time, or attention. This energy can be incorporated into the extended self partly because it has grown or emerged from the self. One of the most obvious means by which an individual invests herself into an object is to create it. Creation involves investing time, energy, and even one's values and identity. Objects are attached to the person who created them because they are her product and they derive their being and form from her efforts (Durkheim, 1957). Purchasing objects offers another means for investing the self (in this case more symbolically) in possession. Lastly, having the responsibility for a target or an object can be assimilated to investing oneself into these things and leads to feelings of ownership. As the person is held or feels responsible for a target she starts investing her energy, care and concern to this target. By the same token, patronizing the place can be seen as either having control over or passionately investing oneself into this place and can be similarly interpreted as an experience through which the patronized place can be incorporated into one's extended self.

#### **2.2.4 Extended self and place attachment**



As described above the objects that serve people's identity construction motives, are not only the material possessions but they can be everything we own or feel such as ideas, experiences, people, places and things we feel attached to. Therefore, the important places to which people feel attached to, also play important role in self-definition and self-construction processes and can eventually become part of people's selves, creating their extended self. Studies have shown that people are willing to donate considerable amount of their time, money or effort to patronize, preserve and support the treasured places they are attached to (Halpenny, 2010; Kyle et al. 2005; Debendetti et al. 2013).

The concept of place attachment refers to individual's emotional bond with a "meaningful, specific location" that is developed through accumulating physical, social and cultural meanings associated with this place (Thomson, 2005; Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992; Lewicka, 2011; Scannell and Gifford 2010; Debendetti et al. 2013). The topic has been broadly studied in social sciences in the contexts of residential and recreational environments towards which, the literature suggests, people develop strong symbolic and emotional bonds and a sense of spatial identity (Fried, 2000). However, these bonds have been found to exist with commercial places as well, such as theme parks (O'Guinn and Belk, 1989), flagship stores (Kozinets, Sherry, DeBerry-Spence, Duhachek, Nuttavuthisit, Storm, 2002) and brandfests (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002), even shopping centers and malls (Sandikci and Holt 1998) To date, the literature on place attachment in commercial settings is, however, scarce and sufficient, unifying conceptualization is lacking (Debendetti et al. 2013).

### **2.2.5 Customer-company identification**

The theory on extended-self has mainly focused on material possessions and their role in identity formation. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) among others have taken the idea to the context of companies by suggesting that consumers can express themselves and build their identities through identifying with certain companies. The concept has been discussed in the theory of customer company-identification that suggests that consumers identify with certain companies and use the characteristics of those companies to build their self-identities (Ahearne et al. 2005).

Customer-company identification draws on theories of organizational identification as well as self-categorization and social identity theories (Bhattacharya & Sen 2003). Organizational identification can be defined as the degree to which a member perceives him- or herself and the focal organization sharing the same defining attributes. Consequently, people adopt the defining characteristics of the organization and use those to define themselves and build their self-identity. (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994) Organizational identification has also been conceptualized as the person's perception of belongingness to an organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) and as the value congruence between an individual and an organization (Hall, Schneider and Nygren, 1970). What is evident in these definitions is that organizational identification creates a deep cognitive and emotional connection between the consumer and the company, which makes it closely related to the patronizing phenomenon. Ricketta (2005) actually referred to the term organizational identification as the link between one's self-concept and an organization.

Social identity theory as well as self-categorization theory explain the antecedent conditions that lead to identification. In creating one's sense of self, people go beyond personal identity to develop their social identity. They do so by identifying with or categorizing themselves as members of various social categories. (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) These categories can be related to one's ascribed identities that are based on one's gender, age, ethnicity, race or nationality or to other social categories a person feels she belongs to (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000). This is a way for people to define others as well as their own place in a society by knowing that they belong to certain groups or categories that have some emotional or value significance to them (Tajfel, 1972 p. 292-293). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) as well as Dutton et al. (1994) propose that companies can act as one of these categories leading employees or customers of these companies to develop deep and committed relationships with them while developing their social identities at the same time. According to Hogg and Terry (2000) people often find their professional or organizational identity as more pervasive than their ascribed identities. Thus, people derive part of their personal identities from these organizations they feel they belong to (Hogg and Terry 2000).

### **2.2.5.1 Assumptions behind C-C identification**

According to Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) customers can identify with a subset of company associations that constitute the company identity such as company core values and demographic characteristics. The core values are embodied in the company's operating principles, organizational mission and leadership whereas demographics refer to attributes such as age, location, country of origin or industry among other attributes (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). However, identity attractiveness of the company is a focal antecedent for identification. The more attractive consumers perceive the company identity to be, the stronger the identification will be (Dutton et al. 1994). Consumers assess the attractiveness of a company based on how well that company is able to help them in their identity constructions as well as identity protection i.e. satisfy the consumer's self-definitional needs (Dutton et al. 1994; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). These self-definitional needs are self-continuity, self-distinctiveness and self enhancement (Dutton et al.1994).

Self-continuity: People have a need to understand themselves; maintain a consistent sense of themselves and feel internally coherent (Steele, 1988). Therefore, people find a company more attractive when it matches their own senses of who they are (Dutton et al. 1994). This also provides consumers a chance to express themselves and show others who they are (Dutton et al. 1994; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Companies that allow consumers to create a sense of continuity into their identities and at the same time allow them to express who they are, work as mechanisms to protect their identities and are thus considered attractive.

Self-distinctiveness: People tend to accentuate their own uniqueness by distinguishing themselves from others in order to guarantee the integrity of their self (Tajfel and Turner, 1985; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Therefore people tend to find those organizations attractive that they perceive as distinct from other organizations while at the same time holding the attributes they value (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dutton et al. 1994). For example, Kim, Han and Park (2001) found that consumers find a brand more attractive when its identity is perceived as more distinctive relative to competing brands because the relationship with it allows them to increase the psychological difference with consumers of other competing brands.

Self-enhancement: People are motivated to evaluate themselves positively to enhance their self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Therefore individuals are motivated to identify with companies they find prestigious and attractive because this enables them to reflect these attractive qualities to themselves and thus enhance their self-esteem (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Dutton et al. 1994). Therefore the more the organization's image or the perceived identity enhances a person's self-esteem, the stronger the identification will be (Dutton et al. 1994). This might lead to evaluating the company more positively as people are motivated to evaluate groups they belong to more positively because it helps them to see themselves more positively (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

### **Identity Salience**

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) suggest that attractiveness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for identification to happen. Identification is also likely to depend on identity salience (Marin, Ruiz & Rubio, 2009) meaning the identity that dominates the person's working memory at that time (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). According to identity theory, people have several identities that stem from those categories or groups that a person feels she belongs to (Ashford and Mael, 1989). These different identities or categories can be accessible because they are somehow important and valued by the consumers or if the particular situation and context makes that identity salient. People draw on those categories or identities to see if they fit to a particular situation and the identity that has the best fit will become salient. (Hogg and Terry, 2000)

The importance of the salient identity stems from the fact that it affects how we make judgments and behave (Forehand, Deshpande and Reed, 2002). People should be more attracted to organizations that allow them to behave in ways that support their salient identities. If a person's organizational identity is salient and that identity is attractive, a person is more likely to evaluate the organization positively (Reed, 2004). Furthermore, it will be more likely that this person starts behaving in ways that are more appropriate to the organization's context and at the same time elaborating its implications on his/hers social identity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Kleine, Kleine and Allen (1995) suggest that if a brand can connect to a consumer's current identity, she might start to feel as if that brand is part of her, implying that it becomes a part of consumer's identity; similar to the idea of Belk's (1988) extended self. Dutton et al. (1994) showed that this applies to organizations as well,

in a way that consumers develop deep and meaningful relationships with them. This is consistent with the idea of Belk's (1988) extended self.

Consumers are more likely to identify with a company that they are more easily able to retrieve information about (Marin et al. 2009) and that is somehow relevant and important for them and their identities (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Marin et al. 2009). A particular social identity can be activated by different social, contextual, and individual difference factors (Forehand et al. 2002). Communication efforts such as advertising or public relation can educate consumers about the company's identity but also make it more salient in their minds (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). In addition to delivering an attractive view of a company's identity, all communication activities should provide cues on how the organization is related to the identity that is relevant for a consumer (Marin et al. 2009). As described before people want their salient identities to be meaningful and self-favoring for them, i.e. attractiveness must exist. If the social cognitive context doesn't provide this for them they will look for other identities that do so. (Hogg and Terry, 2000) So even if the cues and the particular situation are able to make the organizational identity salient, people won't accept it unless it is meaningful for them.

### **Need for Affiliation**

While identity attractiveness and satisfying one's self-definitional needs have been found to affect on identification by all the current studies, there are other factors that might also play a role in identification to happen. Marin et al. (2009) found that need for affiliation as well as connection with the sales people often affect identification.

Need for affiliation reflects an individual's desire for social contact or belongingness (Veroff and Veroff, 1980). Those having a high need for affiliation have a higher interest in developing relationships with others whereas people with lower need for affiliation have a lesser need for belongingness and creating relationships (Marin et al. 2009). Wiesenfeld, Raghuran and Garud (2001) found that organizational identification among organizational members will be greater with people that have higher need for affiliation. This stems from the need to belong to something and identification offers these people a way to satisfy this need whereas people with lower need for affiliation won't derive the same benefits from identification (Wiesenfeld et al. 2001) Marin et al. (2009) found that this applies in customer-

company context as well in a way that consumers who have a greater need for affiliation, will identify more strongly with a company.

Other factors such as consumer's perceived knowledge of the company's identity and consumer's trust towards the company's identity might also affect their willingness to assess the attractiveness of the company (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Ahearne et al. (2005) found that along with the company's identity, also the sales representative's identity can increase identification if it is perceived as attractive or favorable by the consumer. Sales representatives and other boundary-spanning agents signal the characteristics of the organization for example through their personality or appearances. Interacting with these agents help the consumers access meaningful, self-relevant information from their memory, making the organization more salient and attractive in the consumer's mind. Marin et al. (2009) actually found that consumers' who have greater personal connections with the sales people will identify more strongly with a company. This might be due to the fact that having many interactions with the company makes it more salient in these consumers' minds.

#### **2.2.5.2 C-C identification and extra-role behaviors**

Identification with a company will likely lead to the formation of meaningful relationships with that company and consequently to attachment to this company and to positive in-role and extra-role behaviors towards the company (Ahearne & al. 2005), making it closely related to and well fitted to the phenomenon of patronizing behavior.

Organizational identification has been associated with the degree to which employees are motivated to fulfill organizational needs and goals, their willingness to display organizational citizenship and other cooperative behaviors, and their tendency to remain with the organization (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1995). Customer-company Identification has also been found to lead to different kinds of in-role and extra-role behaviors from the customers' side (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn 1995; Ahearne et al. 2005). Ahearne et al. (2005) for example found that customers who identified more strongly with a company purchased more from it and recommended the company as well as its products to others. Also Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) suggest that identification will lead to higher company loyalty, promoting the company both socially and physically (i.e. bearing

markers of the company identity), resilience to negative information and having a stronger claim on the company. Overall the relationship between a customer and an organization that stems from identification should be very beneficial to the organization. Ahearne et al. (2005) showed that identification should lead to customer behavior that goes far beyond just product evaluations towards deeper relationships and commitment towards the company.

## **2.3 The role of time in consumer behavior: The self as a temporal being**

Belk (1988) emphasizes the importance of possessions in shaping our sense of selves. However, Belk (1990) acknowledges that we are also defined by our past as well as our future. Together with our present self, our memories from the past and our future as we imagine it, define who we are. The role of possessions is critical as they allow us to reflect on our past by showing where we have come from and help us define who we want to be in the future (Belk 1990).

In addition to our own past or future reflections, Bergadaa (1990) suggests that people are temporally oriented in a way that we can identify ourselves as living in the past, present or future. The way we identify ourselves in relation to time affects how we behave and make decisions (Bergadaa 1990). The temporal orientation that we identify with enables us to make sense of the reality and thus affects our decision-making and acting in the present. Temporal orientation is dependent on the person's past events i.e. one's past dictates how one behaves in the present and in the future. Bergadaa (1990) believes our past events as well as our background such as social class and education influences our temporal orientation.

### **2.3.1 Nostalgic consumption**

Past orientation is often referred to as nostalgia. Nostalgia has been defined as longing for the past; believing that things were better when one was younger (Holbrook, 1993; Davis, 1979). This often involves negative feelings towards the present resulting to romancing the past, often through biased or selective recalls of one's past, and thus believing things were

better than what they are now (Goulding, 2001; Holbrook and Schindler, 1991; Havlena and Holak, 1991). Havlena and Holak (1991) call nostalgia a “bittersweet” emotion referring to both the unpleasant and pleasant emotions of sadness and longing it usually contains. While there has been somewhat of a dispute of whether nostalgia is more of a negative or a positive feeling, many studies have recently found that it actually creates more positive than negative feelings (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge and Arndt, 2008). Another eminent aspect of nostalgia is the social aspect of it. Zhou et al. (2012) refer to nostalgia as a social emotion as it is often focused on significant others such as family members, friends and close others. As such it fosters a sense of social connectedness since it involves interactions between oneself and the significant others (Zhou et al. 2012).

Negative mood states such as loneliness have been found to be one of the most common sources of nostalgia and work as stimuli that evoke the feeling of nostalgia. Similarly family members and other significant people, objects and events, even smells and other sensory inputs often carry a large role in nostalgia. (Havlena and Holak, 1992; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge and Arndt, 2008) While these are all matters that often trigger nostalgia, people, events and places are often the subjects of nostalgic reminiscence (Havlena and Holak, 1992; Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, Routledge and Arndt, 2008; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003). Events that are the focus of nostalgia are often holidays from the past or past birthdays and other personal events that are somehow satisfying and positive (Havlena and Holak, 1992 ; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003). The objects people treasure as important links to their past can in fact be very mundane such an old pencil case, but they somehow preserve important and valued past experiences that a person wants to hold on to (Holbrook et al. 2003).

The findings presented refer strongly to personal self-experienced events, but many researchers argue that people can feel nostalgic about events or time periods that they have not experienced themselves but have learned from various sources. Havlena and Holak (1992) for example found that people can feel nostalgic about historical events, such as Woodstock, even though they’ve never been there themselves. These nostalgic reflections can be drawn from books, stories, movies or other external sources. Belk (1990) notes that as the nostalgic past is somewhat imaginary, we can appropriate part of our identity from objects, such as antiques, that we have not been personally connected to. Belk (1990)



suggests that these objects are seen as talismans that become more special and extraordinary than present objects due to their survival throughout time. Thus, these objects, that carry some nostalgic feelings and specialty, work as building blocks for our identities and become part of our extended selves.

### **2.3.2 Why our past is so important**

The current literature has found that the function of nostalgia is to create a feeling of safety by protecting one's self in one form or another. It has been found to be an enabler of self-continuity (Davis, 1979; Sedikides et al. 2008), strengthening one's need for interpersonal belongingness and feelings of closeness to the loved ones (Leary and Baumeister, 2000; Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt & Cordaro, 2010), increasing a positive affect and self-positivity (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006), and maintaining a psychological fortitude needed to manage existing threats (Wildschut et al. 2006). Additionally, it has been found that experiencing nostalgia increases the feelings of happiness and meaningfulness in life. On a physical level nostalgic feelings can literally make people feel warmer (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt & Routledge, 2006).

One reason why our past is so important to us, is that it creates a feeling of safety for us. People have a fundamental need to understand themselves; maintain a consistent sense of themselves and feel internally coherent (Steele, 1988). Therefore having a past becomes increasingly important when our current identity has been challenged (Belk, 1990). This may happen when a person goes through a life changing event such as an identity change from adolescence to adulthood, from single to married life or from spouse to parent (Davis, 1979). Nostalgia is a way to maintain a consistent sense of self during these changes because the memories link our past identity into our present identity (Davis, 1979). Belk (1990) suggests that in these major life changes, possessions from our past can help us in life transitions. According to him, material and possessions can serve as familiar transitional objects to the unknown future by reminding us of the pleasant memories from the past and offer support in confronting the uncertain future. This is very much in line with the findings of Holbrook et al. (2003) who found that objects that represent security and sense of continuity in their lives often carry nostalgic feelings. This would imply that there is some longing for lost stability that is preserved in these objects. It has been suggested that even in a communal level

nostalgia could provide us a sense of security in times of threats such as socio cultural or economic turbulence or otherwise in an unsafe world (Brown, Sherry & Kotzinez, 2003)

Many scholars relate nostalgia to its social aspect and argue that nostalgia is a way to satisfy and strengthen one's need for interpersonal belongingness (Leary and Baumeister, 2000; Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, Cordaro, 2010). This happens because nostalgia allows people to re-experience social connections or bonds from one's past (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). This feeling of interpersonal belongingness creates a sense of safety and security (Mikulincer, Florian, and Hirschberger, 2003, taken from Zhou et al. 2012). This is also related to the life transitions that Davies (1979) talked about. Often in these life transitions, social bonds deteriorate and people are left feeling lonely and adrift (Sedikides, Wildschut, Gaertner, et al. 2008). In these cases nostalgia helps to relive and revive these social connections and reduce the feeling of loneliness (Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, Cordaro, 2010)

Nostalgia has also been found to increase positive affect simply because nostalgic experiences tend to evoke positive affect. The memories that nostalgia evokes might not be happy or successful stories but rather they are often about losses and disappointments but they have still been found to evoke more positive than negative affect. (Wildschut et al. 2006) Davis (1979) also described nostalgia as a positive emotion and argued that nostalgic feelings usually include positive sentiments rather than negative ones. Furthermore, it has been found that nostalgia can increase one's self-esteem (Wildschut et al. 2006). Wildschut et al. (2008) also found that in cases of threat, people who perceive the past as positive find life more meaningful, making nostalgia an important "buffer" to cope with life's threats. Nostalgia works as a reservoir that holds important memories that help us cope with the past (Wildschut et al. 2006).

What is common to all of these findings, is that nostalgic consumption seems to be a way of looking for safety in one form or another; security and structure in one's life. The objects, people or places are preserving something important from one's past that help us move forward in our lives.

### 2.3.3 Nostalgia linked to extra-role behaviors

Nostalgic feelings have been found to affect consumer choices and increase pro-social behavior. For example Holbrook and Schindler (1989) found that consumer experiences in late adolescence and early adulthood can affect consumer preferences throughout their lives. More specifically, people tend to form lifelong attachment to things they experienced in their early adulthood and late adolescence and prefer things that were more common when they were younger (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989; Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). In fact, many have linked nostalgia to specific age claiming that childhood, adolescence and early adulthood are usually the periods that people feel most nostalgic about and it is usually in the middle ages or retirement years when people are feeling most nostalgic (Havlena and Holak, 1992). It might very well be that people are more prone to nostalgic feelings in certain ages or it might simply be that these are often the years when people go through the biggest changes in their lives, which according to Davis (1979), might arouse nostalgic feelings.

Some more recent studies have found a connection between nostalgia and pro-social behaviors. Gino and Desai (2012) found that recalling childhood memories increases one's sense of moral purity, i.e. feeling morally clean and innocent, which in turn leads to increased pro-social behavior. Thinking about one's past and especially yourself in the past affects how you perceive yourself in this moment. As mentioned previously, people tend to see their past in a more positive light than what it probably has been in reality. More specifically, the childhood memories are seen as innocent and morally pure. Therefore, when thinking about childhood memories, one's moral self-concept becomes more salient, one remembers being once a morally pure being. Because people want to maintain a continuous sense of their identities, they have a need to behave consistently with that morally pure identity and therefore increasing their pro-social behavior. Overall, because nostalgia evokes positive feelings and makes people perceive themselves in a positive light (Wildschut et al. 2006), it might encourage people to engage in pro-social behaviors in order to maintain that positive self-image. Also Zhou, Wildschut, Sedikides, Shi and Feng (2012) found that nostalgia could increase charitable actions and pro-social understanding and empathetic attitude toward the patronized place and its employees, further contributing to the emerging prosocial behaviors, that characterized patronization behavior. The demonstrated empathy and patrons' helping behaviors, partly motivated by the connectedness and belongingness to

the place, also represented one of our main findings explicating how consumers experience patronizing behavior and how it appears in their consumer behavior.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research approach – Interpretive paradigm**

The aim of our research is to explore how the phenomenon of customer-company patronization occur as well as what drives this kind of consumer behaviour. Since the research objective is initially about gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and the motives underlying patronizing behaviour as well as understanding the mechanisms by which this kind of consumer behaviour is practiced and not to predict or quantitatively test the phenomenon, the qualitative research method would be an appropriate method for addressing the above-mentioned research questions (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Qualitative research attempts to “discover new and to develop empirically grounded theories” (Flick, 1998, p.5). It’s primary aim is to seek understanding, discover new perspectives on what is known already and make individual case important in the context of larger theory. The particular interest is in the way in which the world is understood, experienced or produced by people’s lives, behaviors and interactions. Qualitative research seeks to explain, clarify, describe and illuminate behavior and to develop descriptions that analyze how certain events affect others, i.e. understanding cause-effect processes in a local and contextualized way. Understanding is considered a continuing process rather than an end-result, a full and all-encompassing understanding can never be attained but only a certain version of it can be gained. (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988)

Qualitative research includes several different orientations and approaches in different philosophical assumptions and orientations, that all generate different data-gathering and analysis strategies. Since we study the patronizing phenomenon within a specific context, we have selected the interpretive research approach to discover new consumer insights that

intend to expand and deepen the understanding of the chosen phenomenon. Next we will describe briefly the main philosophical assumptions behind the interpretive paradigm.

### **3.2 Ontological and epistemological assumptions**

Ontology serves as a subject matter of philosophical or theoretical reflection on the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality. It raises questions such as “What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it? (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.108). In interpretive approach, reality is contextual, holistic and multiple realities exist. By that it is meant, that reality is not composed of facts but it is socially constructed and mentally perceived by individuals that also shape reality through their actions. From interpretive point of view, realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible and experientially based constructions that are local and specific in nature. Their form and content depend on the individuals and groups that held the constructions and are in no absolute sense true. Temporality also affects the perceived view on reality and the perceptions on past, present and future all influence construction of our being. For example, in our research the concept of temporality represented an especially important aspect in terms of continuity of personal past, present and future. Our data suggest that our interviewees relied on this concept to integrate and harmonize different contradictory aspects of their identities into a coherent and overarching sense and view of themselves. For example, in our research it was observed that the past memories help our interviewees form an image of a continuous reality and to establish a coherent self-concept.

Epistemology relates to the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge, which is constrained by the ontological assumptions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Epistemology raises questions such as: “how reality can be known?”, “what is the relationship between the knower and what is known”, as well as “what are the characteristics, the principles, the assumptions that guide the process of knowing and the achievement of findings”.

The insights gained through the interpretive paradigm are subjective in nature, as the main goal of it is to understand the phenomenon. Interpretive paradigm assumes that knowledge

is personal and unique. The absolute or final version of an understanding cannot be reached, and grasping the knowledge before conduction of research is impossible (Shankar et al. 2001). According to interpretivism the knowledge and reality are closely entwined and inseparable, just as the understanding and interpretation are. Therefore, interpretive paradigm believes that there are no facts but only subjective interpretations (Bhattacharya, 2008). Thus, it strives to explore individuals' perceptions, reasons and experiences, share their meanings and to develop insights about the particular observed phenomena.

Interpretive research attempts to form detailed and rich descriptions of the phenomena that are being studied. These descriptions allow gaining in-depth understanding of the people, contexts and phenomena under study. The main aim of interpretive study can be thus named as carefully looking into details, complexities and situated meaning of individuals ordinary lives or particular social phenomena and "illuminating the general through the particular" (Ernest, 1994, p.26).

### **3.3 Methodological questions - hermeneutics**

The fundamental methodological question is: "How can the researcher go about finding out whatever she believes can be known?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Hermeneutics focuses on understanding a specific problem or a situation (Arnold & Fischer, 1994) making it a suitable approach for understanding the phenomenon of patronization. Hermeneutic research emphasizes subjective interpretations of meanings and therefore it does not seek to find one truth, but rather tries to understand subjective understanding itself (Gadamer, 1989).

Hermeneutics was originally developed in a context of religious studies being an approach to interpret biblical texts but in time it evolved to cover all interpretive acts in human sciences (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). In understanding and interpreting, subjectivity and prior knowledge play an important role. In interpreting we use our own preconceptions. We have a certain worldview; beliefs, codes, ideologies that always affect how we interpret things (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). In hermeneutics this prior knowledge or prejudgement is seen as a positive thing. According to Gadamer (1989), as prejudice or pre-knowledge forms part of our worldview, it gives us a reference point on what to base our interpretation on. As such, pre-knowledge, enables us to make sense of things and find meanings. Gadamer emphasizes

the importance of language in understanding as all understanding happens through language. Our worldview and prejudice is reflected in our language and thus language plays an important role in hermeneutics. It affects how we understand the world and express meanings with others. Objectivity is thus not an ideal in hermeneutics, as the interpretation is always influenced by the prejudices of the interpreter. As Gadamer put it, there does not exist any one correct interpretation of the phenomenon.

### **3.3.1. Features of hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics does not seek to offer a certain method of doing things, rather hermeneutics seeks to understand understanding (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). However, there are some consistent features in hermeneutics; the most important ones being the hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons.

One of the most fundamental tenets of hermeneutics is that understanding has a circular structure and is iterative in nature. This means that you have to understand the text as a whole to understand the individual parts and you have to understand the individual parts to understand the text as a whole. Understanding occurs by iterating between the whole and the individual parts. (Thompson, Pollio, Locander, 1994; Arnold & Fischer, 1994) The objective of this, which is called the hermeneutic circle, is to achieve a coherent interpretation of the text; an understanding that is free of contradictions (Arnold & Fischer, 1994).

The interpreter always approaches the subject of the research with a certain pre-understanding or prejudice (Gadamer, 1975). The pre-knowledge that the interpreter and the subject of the research have, is called their horizon (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Both have their own distinct knowledge and assumptions that form this horizon. The objective in hermeneutics is the fusion of the horizons which happens as the horizon of the interpreter integrates to that of the subject of the research. The text is thus seen as autonomous in hermeneutics as meaning can be understood in ways the author did not intend (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Understanding develops as the subject and the researcher interact and knowledge is co-created (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

### 3.4 Data collection

For the research context we chose two of Karl Fazer Cafés. The flagship café is known as being one of the most traditional and oldest cafés in Finland that was originally established already in 1891 as a French-Russian conдитory. This research setting was selected as a suitable context for exploring the phenomenon of customer-company patronization because the place is known for having a loyal and stable clientele base, some of the customers having loyally visited the cafés for many decades. As the research was conducted in cooperation with the company, the restaurant managers assisted us with selecting the right interviewees according to the set requirements for the most loyal patrons.

Thus, as a sampling technique, the purposeful (judgment) sampling was used. The restaurant managers identified 20 patrons fulfilling the set behavior-based criteria and they were asked to participate in this study for the in-depth interviews. The requirements for the participation were described as either having a long history of patronizing the place on a frequent manner, being particularly committed and helpful customer or having voluntarily demonstrated any other supportive behaviors intended to benefit the company such as participating in the operations development by offering development suggestions or helpful feedback. The restaurant managers recognized and hand-picked some of their most loyal and supportive customers who demonstrated the above-mentioned behaviors. Some of the patrons for instance visited the café on a daily basis, while others have been happy customers for more than 50 years. The identified patrons were asked for the interview, 18 of whom were interviewed, and 8 of whom were finally chosen for data analysis as they demonstrated the most committed patronizing behavior.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used as a data collection technique for studying consumers' underlying motivations and experiences relating to their patronizing behavior for attempting to understand the real meanings of this kind of committed behavior. The use of semi-structured interviews with the help of laddering technique and reflecting open-ended questions involving probes allowed us to discuss their patronizing behavior and the motivations that make them patronize cafés in their own words, also allowing us to enquire



for deeper responses when needed to generate insights about the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and values underlying their patronizing behavior.

### 3.5 Data analysis method

For the data analysis we chose inductive content analysis since, as a flexible method for analyzing data (Cavanagh, 1997) it fit our analysis purposes the best. Content analysis describes a group of analytic approaches ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic, strict textual analyses (Berelson, 1952; Rosengren, 1981). Research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with special attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; McTavish & Pirro, 1990). The main purpose for this kind of analysis method is to generate subjective interpretations and describe meanings of data's content with the help of systematic classification process of coding and identifying patterns or themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Establishing a theme can be understood as a way to link data's underlying meanings into categories. Theme can be interpreted as a description of meanings essential to research results, an identified recurring regularity within categories or as "*an expression of the latent content of the text*". (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004)

The data analysis of present study is based on the textual transcription data of each interview as well as on the field notes collected from observations of interviewees' during their normal café visits. Our roles as researchers interpreting the data is to explore the emerging themes that come out from the text rather than testing predetermined meanings into the data. Our aim is to discover what kind of meanings the interviewees attach to the patronized place and to find out what kind of meanings there were behind their patronizing experience. Our focus is therefore to form the interpretations from the emerged consumer data and not from the theoretical presumptions, following inductive analysis method that relies on inductive reasoning, in which themes emerge from the data through repeated examination and comparison. The inductive content analysis is well-suited for our research purposes as no prior studies of the customer-company patronization phenomenon exist.

Similarly to other forms of qualitative analysis, the inductive content analysis conducted for this study was time-consuming, requiring in-depth reading and rereading and reviewing of the interview transcriptions and our notes to get a grasp of the whole. Through open coding we aimed at identifying the emerged themes addressing interviewees' motivations, meanings and common feelings attached to the patronized place, similarities and differences, explicating their patronization experiences by reading each transcript word by word, line by line. After completion of the open coding, the data was coded into the preliminary themes. When encountering data not fitting to those codes, new codes were added. Grouping of data followed the first stage of coding, aiming at reducing number of categories by revising and refining the codes to combine similar motivational themes and behavioral patterns into broader categories. Reorganizing the categories into broader, higher order categories is meant to generate deeper understanding of the data. The emergent themes were further analyzed by examining the intertextuality between them i.e. the similarities and differences between the themes were sought and special attention was put on analyzing interconnections between them. The common features of patronization behavior across different respondents emerged from the data.

After recognizing from our data how the experienced patronization behavior was connected to interviewees self-expression and identity construction processes, we analyzed the themes from a perspective of how the patronization behavior and different aspects of it contribute and reflect to interviewees' senses of who they are (Belk, 1988; Holbrook, 1993). Therefore, the concept of the extended self according to which "*our possessions are a major contributor and reflection of our identities*" (Belk, 1988, p.139), possessions including things, people, places and body parts, provided us a lense through which we reviewed our findings.

## 4. Findings

*Experience is the core of consumption, and at the same time the core of marketing for one simple reason: experience is the decomposition of the individual's life (Addis and Podesta, 2005, p. 404).*

Consumer research suggests that to truly grasp and understand consumers' behaviour, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of consumers' lived and remembered experiences (Lanier and Hampton, 2009; Carù and Cova, 2003). Experiences are by nature specific to an individual, meaning they are personal and subjective often involving emotional aspects and specific symbolic meanings (Carù and Cova, 2008). Exploring and analyzing those meanings, objectives and emotions underlying consumption is at core of gaining a deeper understanding of multifaceted, ambiguous consumption-related issues that may not be immediately implicit in surface responses.

Analyzing the lived and remembered experiences relating to our interviewees' patronization behaviour, both from past and the present, played a great role in our data analysis. Seemingly ordinary consumption behaviour such as patronizing a café and habitually consuming as mundane beverage as coffee evoked strong feelings and emotions in our interviewees. Our study participants associated the patronized place with much deeper meanings than a mere place serving coffee. The way the patrons talked about the cafe was filled with excitement; the coffee served at the patronized place was seen as unquestionably superior to the coffee offered at café the next door. The place itself was even called a phenomenon. The vignette below exemplifies how the atmosphere of the patronized place is described as memorable, warm, joyful and melodious in contrast to the ordinary café, where according to our interviewee "everybody is in a bad mood":

*“Ja sit ku puhuttii näist kassalla niin on jääny mielee et tääl on tällaisia Helsinki soi laulaa tai tämmösiä baarijuttuja niitä ne on tullu, tääl on esimerkiks kuoroja ollu, Helsingin yliopiston kuoro ollu laulamassa täällä. Nyt siel on pianisti. Siis Fasu tekee yhteistyötä Sibeliuksen akatemiin kanssa, Sibis käy täällä laulamassa ja tämmösiä heittäms keikkoja, kuorot on täällä. Nää jää mieleen. Jos sä meet Riihimäellä tietsä kahvilaan siellä kaikki on pahalla päällä ei siellä oo kuoroja.”*

Consumer research has established the significance of understanding the effect and the role of past experiences; for instance, experiences from one's childhood that can explain current behaviour and the symbolic meanings relating to it. Events that have become experiential and memorable can greatly affect consumer behavior (Holak and Havlena, 1992). That is why in our analysis we aim to focus on studying the relationship between the patronization behavior and our interviewees past experiences, to understand the role of

nostalgic consumption in patronizing behavior. Moreover, explicating lived experiences and the meanings that are produced through them are pointed out throughout our findings.

#### **4.1 Patronization behavior as self-expression**

The customer-company patronizing behavior can be interpreted as a constructive consumer behavior that contributes to and reflects on the patrons' senses of identities of who and what they are or aspire to be (Belk, 1988; Holbrook, 1992; Kleine, Schultz Kleine & Kernan, 1992; Kernan & Sommers, 1967; Solomon, 1983). One of the main reasons the interviewees considered Fazer so meaningful for them was that Fazer enables the patrons to express and reinforce their self-identities. For some it is about connecting them to their past, for others it is about relating the aspired characteristics to themselves to enhance and validate their self-esteem.

For some of the patrons, the place symbolized something meaningful that derived from their past experiences. For Tapio, it was the "Central European feeling", with which he described Fazer's cafes that played a particularly important role in his patronizing habit. He used to work and live for several years in Central Europe and used to spend his free time in the local cafes while living there. For him, Fazer was a rare place in Finland that had this kind of Central European feeling that he missed from his past. Accordingly, patronizing Fazer enabled him to revive his past experiences and pleasant memories from his expatriate times. He felt that Fazer resembled the cafes that he used to patronize before, and that is why Fazer represented such a meaningful place for him. Seemingly, Fazer enables Tapio to bring out the part in himself that connects him to his past.

Some of the participants felt they shared similar attributes with the place and that Fazer hold characteristics they aspired to be associated with. The patrons identified themselves particularly with the cultural and historical heritage they felt the place had. The place was described as luxurious and exceptional due to its long traditional background. It has been found that consumers are motivated to form deeper connections with companies they find prestigious and attractive because this enables them to reflect these attractive qualities to themselves and thus enhance their self-esteem (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Dutton et al.

1994). This was recognized as a deeper connection with the company where the patrons build and enhance their self-identities with the help of these valued characteristics.

## **4.2. Nostalgic experiences characterizing patronizing behavior**

Nostalgic experiences appear to be important elements characterizing and driving customer-company patronization behaviors. Patrons' past experiences with the patronized place evoked fond memories of peaceful and happy times from the past. The nostalgic memories, raised by the interviewees, mostly entail personal, cherished moments from their childhood and young adulthood such as those special occasions spent at the cafe together with dear ones. The pleasant self-experienced memories or fictional images from the past inspired positive feelings of today and played a central role in driving the patronizing behavior, as it appeared in our study.

Fazer offered a suitable environment to inspire nostalgic feelings and by treasuring the patronized place, the interviewees who had spent time at Fazer as children could also reconnect with and relive their happy memories. Nostalgic reminiscing at a patronized place was used as both a conscious and unconscious attempt to reconstruct the idealized past, having functioned as an underlying motivation for patronizing behavior. And at certain points when there are major life changes, that threaten one's identity, that being anything from retirement to getting married, nostalgia can help people to keep them grounded in the sense of who they are and to cope with those threatening life changes (Davis, 1979).

For many of the interviewees, reliving their childhood memories at the cafe, whether deliberately or unconsciously, created a sense of stability into their lives. These memories seemed to be what brought the patrons to Fazer of all the places. Many of the interviewees recalled how they used to visit Fazer during their childhood with their parents or grandparents. These visits were described with exceptionally positive tones; the interviewees remember them without exception as happy childhood memories, some even mentioned them being the very top moments of the week or a year. The concrete memories of what had been done were less frequent; rather it was the peaceful feelings and warm emotions that were remembered; the joyful atmosphere, the pleasant feelings created by

the people around you, the taste of homemade ice cream. This finding is in line with the studies of nostalgia and nostalgic consumption. People tend to romanticize the past and remember certain events as much happier than what they were in reality. This sort of biased or distorted image of the past is common for nostalgic reminiscence. Especially childhood memories are often remembered in merely positive ways, as people tend to consider the childhood period as morally pure and innocent.

Although most of the patrons had actual memories of visiting the place as children, for some the place itself aroused nostalgic feelings despite not having self-experienced memories of the place. Appreciation towards Fazer's traditions and history were often present in their stories. For them the felt nostalgia stem particularly from the history and partly imaginary traditions of the place. Some of the participants identified themselves with these traditional aspects while some simply cherished them as meaningful characteristics to be associated with. In their stories Fazer's historical background made the place seem as prestigious and special.

For Johan, Fazer enables him to bring out some of the aspects in him that he feels are important in defining who he is. He strongly identified himself with the cultural and historical heritage of the patronized company because he found these characteristics both attractive and well-suited with his own backgrounds. He also described the traditions of the place as something he can relate to because of his preference for old-fashioned traditions. Veera's nostalgic experience with Fazer derives from reading about the place in her favorite historical novels, in which the main characters used to patronize Fazer. Tuomas similarly based his nostalgic experiences with Fazer on the images of Fazer as the main historical and distinguished place in Helsinki. As the nostalgic past is somewhat imaginary we can feel nostalgic about objects and places that we have not been personally connected to. These objects are seen as special or extraordinary due to their survival of time (Belk, 1990). In our case, the history that Fazer had made people see the place as something extraordinary and as such people could use in building their identities.

#### **4.2.1 Nostalgic links to the past: People, food, and special events**

Our data show that the loved ones i.e. family and close friends play a great role in characterizing nostalgic experiences. Family was often present in the patrons' stories about the childhood visits at Fazer. For example, Liisa remembers visiting the café as a child specifically with her grandmother and brothers every year to celebrate the last day of her school year:

*”Mä oon ensimmäisen kerran käynyt täällä Fazerilla joskus isoäitini kanssa. Hänellä oli tapana tuoda meidät aina tänne jäätelöannokselle sit ku tietsä keväällä koulu päättyi et oli koulunpäätjäiset. Ja sit se aina toi mut ja mun kaks veljee jäätelöannokselle.”*

The visits and events were experienced and remembered in terms of connections to the important family members. As people define themselves in terms of their relationships and how connected they are with other people, nostalgic experiences play an important role in maintaining those connections throughout times even to the lost family members and in that way contribute to social identity construction work. Patronizing Fazer and consuming the past times enables the interviewees to connect with the loved ones and to promote their social identity construction.

Nostalgia establishes a symbolic connection with people and events from the past and consumption objects are significant evidence of the past (Belk, 1991). In Fazer's case the important consumption objects that evoked nostalgic emotions and memories were specific food products, food practices and Fazer's café as a space, appreciated as traditional and authentic. Johan's story below encapsulates well how the memories of important family members, specific food objects and food practices are intertwined and all characterize the nostalgic experiences relating to patronizing Fazer:

*“Mä oon ite vähän vanhanaikainen, en nyt vanhanaikainen mut konservatiivinen näis asiois. Mä oon aina tykänny tämmöistä traditioista, et se oli mulle itsestäänselvyys, et jatkan lapsuudesta tämmöstä hyvää fiilistä. Ja sit totta kai nää kaikki uskomattomat esim. nää jätskit, mistä mä muistan ku mä sain mutsilta lounareita, lounasseteleitä, niin että pysty hankkimaan just ja just semmosen banana splitin, mikä oli sellanen klassinen megajätski, kolme mega pallo. Näit vedettii ihan simona, sumeesti sillon tota noin aikanaan ja se on vaa jatkunu. Nyt ei vedetä yhtä paljon jätskii enää mutta*

*tämmönenki asia ku Fasun jätski on ollu ilmiö. Mä oon ymmärtäny mun vanhemmilta ja niitten isovanhemmilta, et se on aina ollu, et Fasun jätski on iso juttu Fazerilla että.. Et se on ilmiö se jätski juttu jo. Et se on ollu semmonen kuuluu vaa siihe ateriaan jess.“*

Similarly Tapio described his visits to Fazer as being memorable and positive family events that involved special food rituals. He used to visit Fazer occasionally with his parents as a young boy and received ice cream as a reward for accompanying parents to their grocery shopping:

*“Se oli lähinnä niitten jäätelöt, täällä oli sitä kotitehtyä, itse tehtyä jäätelöä ja sitten tietenkin oli näitä, näitä tota pullia ja niin edespäin ja se oli aina se kohokohta kun ensin piti käydä siellä ostoksilla pitkään niin sit kun pääsi tänne niin oli niinkun palkkio tavallaan, että sit sai jotakin tällasta.”*

Fazer, as a place, functioned for some patrons as a nostalgic link to the past and contributed to shaping and strengthening their self-identities, social identities and senses of cultural heritage as well. Patronizing Fazer enabled patrons firstly to maintain and secondly to transmit important rituals to other family members. The food and food practices appeared to help the patrons in transmitting those rituals and family values from one generation to another. Interviewees' favorite food products at Fazer reminded them of happy and intense childhood memories and the time spent with the family. Food practices from the childhood, such as visiting Fazer to enjoy ice-cream or other sweets as a reward after ending a school year or accompanying family on a shopping trip have meaningful sentimental value for the interviewees and also contribute to making Fazer such a meaningful and patronizable place for them.

Our data shows that these nostalgia-evoking foods are mostly associated with rituals performed on special and significant events such as family celebrations, the last day of school, the first of May, graduation day or other personal events that were memorable. Therefore, another recurrent theme that emerged from the nostalgic experiences relating to patronizing, concerns celebrations and special personal events.



#### 4.2.2 Nostalgia as identity protection

What is interesting in our findings is that all the interviewees who had lasting childhood memories of the patronized place, returned to Fazer only during their adulthood. They had years in between when they haven't visited the café. The returning happened during some kind of a turning point in their lives and then triggered continuous visits. Liisa returned to Fazer with her own son after his elementary school's entrance exam. After that, Liisa has started to spend considerable amount of time at Fazer both by herself and with her children. Tapio returned in his late twenties when he was about to marry his wife. A few of the interviewees started their patronization particularly after their retirement. Hectic and challenging times at work in turn triggered Johan's return to Fazer to seek a safe haven in his life. This is in line with the current studies that show how people tend to experience nostalgic feelings during times of life changing events.

The need for nostalgia in these life-changing events occurs because people have a need to maintain a continuous sense of themselves and their identities, which these events are challenging. People consider the transformational changes in life as threats to their current identities and therefore memories and nostalgic feelings help them preserve the "old" identity and protect it. It allows people to create a sense of continuity in their identities and brings certain stability to their lives. For Tapio, a marriage represented that kind of transformational change in his life and in himself. Similarly for Liisa, the event of her first son starting school is a certain kind of turning point in her life. Fazer offers them a link to the past, a way to reconnect with the past in this event of change. Although the interviewees went through changes in their lives, Fazer has remained the same in their minds, reminding them of the good old days. For the patrons, Fazer has been familiar to them throughout their lives and thus offers support when they move on to something unfamiliar that the changes bring into their lives. Fazer provides them a link to their past and connects their past into their present lives and in that way patronizing Fazer supports the conception that they as persons and their identities can be maintained as the same.

To synthesize and conclude, our data suggest that nostalgic experiences characterize patronizing behavior. According to our data, the patronized place is tightly intertwined with

patrons' sentiments, nostalgic memories and sensations that mark their lives. In some sense, the felt nostalgia and patronizing behavior characterized by nostalgic consumption connect people, objects, and events across time and place. By patronizing the place, the interviewees were able to nostalgize and link their past experiences to their present lives and bring more meaning to life as well as to ensure identity continuance when facing life-changing events. The experienced nostalgia could be evoked by different aspects of the patronized place such as favorite holiday pastries, rewarding ice-cream portions or the famous architectural dome reminding of special moments spent at the café. Through the experienced nostalgia, the patronized place became part of the interviewees' cultural and personal heritage and eventually part of their extended selves. Furthermore, we found that nostalgic feelings are able to contribute to the perceived feelings of social belongingness and connectedness to others that can be seen as underlying motivators for customers' patronizing behavior.

Nostalgic feelings relating to reminiscence of happy times from the past, due to their pleasant nature, bring positive emotional value to customers' current patronizing behavior, bringing that special, undefined positive feeling that Johan is talking about, as follows:

*I: "Kuvaile sitä hyvää fiilistä, kun mainitsit että kun kävitte täällä ja nytkin kun jatkat täällä käymistä hyvän fiillisen takia."*

*J: "Täällä joo. Joo siis se on niinku.. Mä en oo ikin miettiny sitä tunnetta, koska se on aika mielenkiintoinen asia et jos sul on joku tietty semmonen, jos joku paikka herättää mielihyvää taustansa, historiansa, traditiottensa vuoksi, niin se tulee semmonen hyvä fiilis että, et mee paikkaa nii ei se oo vaa se paikka vaan se on se tausta on niinku, et on vähän hienompaa mennä, et sillon ku oli muksu niin oli iso asia se Fazer, ei sinne vaa menty tietsä niinku nykyää mennää vaa sisää ja näin. "*

Possibly due to the positive feelings and emotions deriving from nostalgic experiences, it was detected that the patronized place and patronizing experiences were linked to positive things in one's life. Many of the patrons connected their favorite hobbies or things they like to do to patronizing Fazer. Minna for example organizes her weekly book club meetings particularly at Fazer. Johan saves the weekly newspapers and the magazines he loves to read, to read them at Fazer. Veera relaxes at Fazer after her long day at work by writing and

observing other people, described as her favorite things to do to relax. Liisa brings her children to Fazer to celebrate their achievements as well as to spend mutual freetime by accustoming them to the café culture. None of the interviewees described bringing work to Fazer nor doing any other stressful tasks there. By only associating positive things with Fazer the patrons create a safe haven out of the patronized place, a comforting place to relax and dwell in. The positive associations and warm feelings that nostalgic experiences reinforce, clearly play an important role in characterizing patronizing experience and directing it to a certain, positive direction.

### **4.3 The pursuit of security: creation of safe haven**

One of the main reasons the participants liked to visit Fazer often and continuously was that the place had become a safe haven for them where they could go and shelter themselves from the hectic and changing world around them. Gradually by habitual patronizing the place has become inseparable part of their lives. The place provided them therapeutic value and security that stem from the psychological stability and peacefulness that it offered them, closely intertwined with the warm feelings elicited from nostalgic experiences. While creating a safe haven was not perceived as a conscious experience, the descriptions of patrons' experiences refer to subconsciously making the patronized café a homey place where they could dwell and enjoy the comforting and relaxing atmosphere. For some it felt like a joyful place that is detached from the stressfulness and pressure of everyday activities while for others it offered a nostalgic place where time stops, offering the needed sense of stability into their lives.

The patrons felt that part of the appeal in Fazer is that it has certain continuity in it; it has always been there and it has always managed to stay more or less the same. This was not about reducing the risks of going to a new place and not knowing what is waiting for you but rather about having a place that stays the same in an otherwise changing environment. For example for Tapio, who visits the café many times per week, the sense of stability was a big factor in creating the atmosphere of the café. He felt that there was continuity in the atmosphere that was created by knowing that the café will always stay as it is:

*“...sellanen tietty jatkuvuus on myös tietysti etu, että ei tääl ainakaan liian kovia muutoksia tehdä usein, että.. ei sen takia, että niitä ei sais tehdä, mutta että siin on kuitenkin se, että se on osa sitä tunnelmaa se, että tietää että se on aina suurinpiirteinen sellanen kun se on”*

The pursuit of stability was visible in the participants' resistance and negativity towards changes in the cafés. Munkkivuori for example went through a larger renovation where the interiors were completely changed. Kluuvi also went through smaller changes over the years. A lot of the participants described the changes as unpleasant and unwanted for them as it threatened the felt stability the place provided them with. Even though they admitted that the cafés became more convenient and functional in terms of space and moving around, they thought they had lost something essential in the renovations. The discreet complaints were related to the changed atmosphere of the place and the ambiance of the place rather than on specific functionalities. For example, many of the participants described the Munkkivuori café as less homey after the renovation. Tapio described how Kluuvi lost some of its traditions that had been part of many generations' experience when they changed part of the interior. According to him, it lost the essential part of the place because the essence is that it has to stay the same authentic self. Erkki perceived the renovation at Munkkivuori as part of the modern changing world that he no longer belongs to:

*“Jotkut tärkeät muutokset ovat joillekin vanhuksille, niinkuin me, niin ehkä hiukan vähemmän viihtyisiä, mutta erittäin hyvin ymmärrettäviä tietenkin. Tämä eteenpäin menevä maailma ei ole meidän maailmamme.. yli kaheksankymppiset taitavat olla poistuva osa.” – Erkki*

*... Ja se ei ollu sellanen uudistus niinku siellä keskustan Fazerissa, joka on toimiva, mutta siitä jotain hävis uudistuksessa, jotain oleellista perinteitä mikä kuului jo monen sukupolven niinkun kokemukseen et se oli sellainen ja sen täytyy olla sellanen. – Tapio*

For some of the interviewees the cafe provided a place to detach themselves from the stressfulness of everyday life. The time spent at the cafe was described by the interviewees as relaxing and peaceful time. It was often described as a place where they could go to have a moment of peace in the middle of an otherwise hectic or busy day. Some described it as

a time to spend with themselves, concentrate on their own wellbeing and some as a way to calm down and relax in the middle of a busy day. Tuomas for example goes to Fazer every morning to have breakfast. He describes it as the moment of peace and relaxation before a hectic workday. Similarly Veera visits Fazer after she's had a stressful day at work.

#### **4.3.1 Daily routines that create the sense of stability**

The search for stability was most evident in the way that many of the patrons included Fazer as part of their daily or weekly routines. These routines were a way for the patrons to create a place that stays the same. For example, Erkki's visits started during his retirement that followed, how he had described, a long and very busy career. Now he has a habit of visiting the cafe many times per week with his wife. Being over 80 years old, he explains, that their lives and days consist of certain routines that are important for them. The weekly visits to Fazer have become an essential part of these routines. Similarly, Antti started continuously going to Fazer after retiring. For him, it was also important to create some social routines in his life after retiring. He told us how his wife is still working and instead of staying at home every morning alone, he goes to Fazer to socialize. The routine of going to Fazer helps him overcome the change in his life of not going to work every morning.

The visits themselves had become rather routinized based on the patrons' stories. For example, Antti goes to the café every morning to meet with the same group of people, always sitting at exact the same table. Tuomas likes to start his day by going to Fazer for breakfast every day early in the morning. He always picks up the daily paper first and then sits down to enjoy his breakfast. When he notices the place starts to fill up with people and get more crowded, he knows it is time for him to head off to work. It seems to be important for them that they can always behave in a similar way. For example, many of the participants often visited the café alone and described the visits as very different when they visited the place with someone else. Antti, who goes to Fazer with the same group of people every morning also described the occasions as different whenever he went to Fazer with someone who did not belong to the group. This could be caused by the perceptions of other people breaking their routines and in that way threaten their feelings of safety and stability.

It was evident in many of the patrons' stories that these routines made them feel safe; it was one way to create a place that feels safe and familiar for them and that doesn't change. Having these sorts of routines helps them create predictability into their lives. It is a way to make the world feel as if it is not changing and thus creates the feeling of safety for them.

The search for meaningfulness as well as the pursuit for stability overall or in terms of identity continuance as driving motivators for patronizing behavior were mostly subconscious and not necessarily acknowledged by the interviewees. When talking about the main reasons why they go to Fazer, patrons mainly listed mundane things such as quality products or exceptional service. However, what came up repeatedly in their narratives was the overall well-being and warm feelings they experienced at the place. They described the place with words such as secure, warm, comfortable, calming. Antti repeatedly explained how well he is being taken care of at Fazer. Johan also constantly brought up the vague experiences of feeling good when patronizing Fazer. Even though fulfilling the need for stability or identity enhancement were subconscious experiences, feeling good, safe and secure, were the feelings that the patrons could grasp on to and describe. Thus, the fulfilled needs were eventually experienced as overall well-being.

#### **4.4 Inducing familiarity and the feeling of belongingness**

Frequently visiting a commercial, branded café represents a rather common and mundane consumption habit. Nevertheless, as we have described in our previous chapter, these kind of commercial places can still gradually become important and meaningful places for consumers, functioning as sources for their identity construction. The acquired emotional bonds and social interactions with the staff and other visitors play vital roles in patronization behavior, whereas the induced familiarity and sense of belongingness represent important links between patronization behavior and patrons' extended selves.

By emotional bonds we refer to individual's emotional attachment with a meaningful specific place that is developed through accumulating physical, social and cultural meanings associated with this specific location (Lewicka, 2011; Scannell and Gifford, 2010; Debendetti et al. 2013). Forming friendships with the employees that go beyond the commercial context,

lead to a sense of belongingness with the place and to a feeling that the place is an important part of the interviewees' identities and eventually was considered their "own place". The existing nostalgic memories associated with the place as well as the developed social attachments and feelings of ownership (perceiving the place as its own) lead to the feeling of belongingness, which again made it easier for the patrons to use the place as a way to express and reinforce their self identities. In a way this process could be understood as actively promoting familiarity between yourself and the patronized place, to endow the place with self-relevant value and in that way strengthening the meaningfulness related to the place.

This was recognized as a proactive way where the patrons were actively inducing familiarity between themselves and other central members of the patronized place, rather than being totally unconscious mechanism. This kind of mechanism related to the feelings of safety and security. The induced sense of belongingness, feeling as being fully integrated to the place, brought feelings of safety and emotional shelter for the patrons, strengthening their bond to the place and making it even more special for them. Next we will elaborate on this thought by portraying in more detail how the senses of familiarity and belongingness were actually evoked according to our data.

The participants commonly described the patronized place as a safe and familiar place to go to. The felt familiarity towards the place was strongly linked to other people at Fazer, especially to the staff, as well as knowing the place more or less intimately. Thus, the familiarity stems from the knowledge of both the place itself and its people. The patrons described how they often have brief discussions and positive interactions with the staff and with other customers, whom they've become familiar with. These discussions were usually related to the their personal lives rather than the café. They have come to know these people outside the borders of the commercial place; they often know employees' names and other personal things about their lives. Tapio for example likes to chat with the staff whenever they have a break from their busy schedules. Johan also described how he often goes to talk with staff and jokes with them. For him and for the others, this creates the warm feeling of a familiar place that he feels safe and welcome to go into.

This familiarity is mutual and is created and recreated by both the employees and the patrons; the staff also recognizes the patrons and knows personal things about them. Even

the small acknowledgements from the staff made the patrons feel special and increased the feelings of familiarity and belongingness. This was especially visible in Minna's stories. She knows many of the employees and even their pets by names as she often talks to them while visiting the café. The staff seemed to have a special meaning for her because she shared several stories about them with us. Similarly to the other interviewees, she told us stories where staff's recognition and amicable treatment had made her feel special - and as such reinforced her attachment with the place.

This was present in Antti's story as well. He was very friendly with many of the staff, many of whom he had personally known for many years, and sometimes their interactions went beyond casual discussions. He started to care for them and for instance made effort to make their days better by bringing them small gifts, like flowers. He told us that he once even started worrying about a waitress when she was absent for some time. After discovering that she had been ill, Antti visited the café outside his normal morning routine to bring the waitress flowers and welcome her back. He also came up with nicknames for the members of the personnel, which shows his pursuit to develop deeper connection with them.

Johan also accentuated familiarity and connectedness to the employees of the patronized place when talking about why the patronized place had such a special meaning for him and why he felt genuinely belonging to this place. Johan's take on forming friendships with the employees, as follows:

*“Että sä ystävystyt myös tiettyjen näitten kanssa ku sä puhut näitten kanssa ja se on kiva ku ne juttelee takasin. Se ei kuitenkaa oo mikää itsestänselvyys, et se on kiva tulla tietsä höpöttää ventovieraille, et sä oot niinku daiju. Se on niinku kivaa et sä oot siellä tiskillä juttelemas näin. Et se tulee niinku luonnostaa ku juttelee, et mä uskon et niitten kanssa joiden kanssa ystävystyy tai ystävystyi täällä nii se on sydämellistä, et ne on sen luonteisii, eivät välttämättä helsinkiläisiä, mutta Oulusta ja tälläisiä hauskoja.”*

This kind of felt genuine companionship with the employees of the patronized place was perceived by our interviewees as going beyond the traditional boundaries of commercial service situations and was appreciated as such. The genuineness regarding familiarity also evoked more unusual experiences of acceptance and homeyness in the context of regular,



mundane service situations. It is the ease and friendliness of various social interactions that had made the patrons feel as if they genuinely belonged to the place. Antti for example described the experience by saying that *it is because the staff is treating him and his friends as their own people*. He has also come to know some of the other regular customers and often greeted and chatted with them. The other people, he doesn't know, he calls outsiders, which states that he believes he is part of the place together with the staff and the other regulars he knows.

To summarize the above, we have discovered that the interviewees patronizing experiences are being characterized by the induced sense of familiarity with the patronized place and its employees. The patronizing experience is enhanced by genuine sense of familiarity, which can also translate into feelings of belongingness. The customers' patronization behavior that actively induces the feelings of familiarity and belongingness made it easier for the patrons to use the patronized place as a source to express and reinforce their self identities. Just as material possessions play significant role in influencing people's identity construction process and become part of individual's extended selves, patronizing behavior in which loyal customers patronize a place they feel belonging to, does too in a similar way. As the patrons interact with the patronized place and its staff in search of self-understanding and meaning, the patronized place becomes part of patrons' extended selves.

#### **4.5 Empathetic and defensive customer perspective**

Empathy – the ability to understand and share the feelings of others – is widely recognized in marketing literature as essential in offering improved customer experiences and building strong customer relationships. Empathy has been mostly discussed in relation to customer service and relationship management where connecting with and understanding customers' emotions are recognized as central skills needed to provide better customer service. In the disciplines of marketing and consumer research, experiencing empathy is traditionally limited to service personnel's recognition of customers' feelings to provide better service – not the other way around. The data of our empirical research however suggests that customers are also able to feel and do feel the empathy towards the service personnel as well as the company being a subject to their patronization.

According to the findings of our research, putting oneself into the company's shoes is actually surprisingly common when reflecting on the customer experience in patronizing behavior. Our data shows that the interviewees demonstrated great deal of empathy towards both the personnel of the place as well as the patronized place as a commercial place itself when it comes to facing the possible negative experiences such as adapting to the less desirable changes or dealing with challenging customer situations. When asked about adjusting to the unwanted changes, the interviewees often reflected on them from the company's point of view – although the changes were regarded as personally negative and unwelcomed, they were accepted as necessary for the company, facilitating adaptation to them.

For example, when the café went through a complete makeover to modernize its space many of the loyal patrons found the renovation unpleasant and opposed the modifications at first. Before the radical change in interior design, the place that they patronized for several years or decades had stayed more or less untouched in terms of decoration and interiors. During those years the patrons had learned to love the place as it was and appreciated the fact that it kept looking the same, old, traditional self. Understandably some of the patrons did struggle with the transformations that had altered the status quo in the café and described the changes as unwelcomed. Nevertheless, they tried to look at this situation from the company's point of view and acknowledged that the changes were inevitable and thus reasonable for the cafe to keep up with the changing world. The patrons showed great amount of understanding relating to targeting the renovated café for a larger audience than just for the loyal customers similar to themselves. They acknowledged that in order to survive in the increasingly competitive market, the cafe need to reinvent itself and attract younger visitors as well, in terms of café's physical, environment and product offering. The rationalization and empathetic view described above characterize the interviewees' narratives when asked about the renovation and changes, despite prior admitting that the renovation did not particularly please them.

Furthermore, when asked about the negative experiences and any negative feelings toward the patronized place, the interviewees had tendencies to downplay the negative aspects. They talked about them in a very careful manner and took a defensive, understanding and forgiving stance defending the company. The talk about negative issues was also always

accompanied by mentioning positive things to compensate the perceived deficiencies such as experienced crowdedness during the rushhours. The empathetic take on the patronized company helped the interviewees to deal with resistance to change and increased their adaptability to new situations. As a matter of fact, it was pointed out throughout the data how the adjustment to the renewal of the cafe went eventually effortlessly and much more easily than originally expected.

To better understand patrons' empathetic perspective towards the patronized place, we need to ponder on the motivations that drive the experienced empathy. One aspect explaining the expressed sense of compassion could be using it as a means to improve self-image and social appreciation. The other aspect that could explain the felt empathy is affiliation with the patronized company that is explained by the perceived sense of belongingness. The experienced nostalgic feelings that brought in positive affect enable patrons to be empathetic towards the company and its employees. Empathy also allows them to approach the need for affiliation by strengthening the social bonds they have established with the patronized place. One possibility for empathy and resistance to negative aspects could also relate to the fact that the patrons' identities are strongly linked to Fazer. Any perceived negativity towards Fazer would therefore be linked to one's identity as well, making it a threat to one's well being as the place is supposed to bring support and enhance the patrons' identities. The link has become so strong that even the changes made to the place that break the illusion of Fazer as the happy childhood place that is not affected by the changing world outside, are not enough to drive them somewhere else. Rather they force themselves to adapt to the new place to protect their identities.

Therefore, we state that the patrons are motivated to empathize with the patronized company and its employees when and because they feel socially and personally connected to the patronized company and have established a sense of belongingness to this place. Patrons may also experience empathy towards the patronized place and its employees as a side effect when pursuing the connectedness with the place, rather than deliberately empathizing the patronized target.

## 4.6 The multifaceted nature of helping behaviors

As can be drawn from the customer extra-role behavior literature, the customer-company patronization presumably promotes customers' selfless activities that are not expected from them and that are carried out in order to benefit an organizations. Examples of those kinds of activities are for example tasks that promote effective functioning of a company by proactively offering constructive feedback and suggesting development ideas to improve company's operations. The findings from our research regarding that kind of proactive, voluntary helping behaviors that are not deriving from customers' dissatisfaction but rather from their willingness to help, are vaguely contradictory with the current literature. The findings from present study are somewhat counter-intuitive, demonstrating the multifaceted and complex nature of customers' seemingly altruistic helping behaviors toward the patronized companies.

The patrons did demonstrate having insights relating to the cafés' operations and service design. As the patrons have been loyal customers of the cafes for an extended time visiting them frequently, they were quite familiar with many of the details relating to the service, changes in product offering and interior design to name a few. They also had their opinions about how things could be done in an even better way. However, when it comes to expressing their views and helpful suggestions, the patrons appeared to be shyer, more reserved and preferred to act overly politely and modestly in such situations rather than make an obstreperous scene about their wishes or suggestions. Throughout the data, the study participants demonstrated considerateness and carefulness in their discussions about addressing any negative aspects of the cafe operations and often had a defensive attitude toward the identified weaknesses. The interviewees had a protective take on the employees and the way they conducted their work. Due to having established positive and familiar relationships with the employees, they hardly discussed the development suggestions openly with the staff.

The manifested difficulties in giving constructive feedback and highlighting the discretion and sensitivity of these issues can be interpreted as a "face saving" –behavior intended to preserve patrons' reputation, improve their self-image and avoid possible embarrassment

and discomfort relating to feedback situations, no matter how constructive or helpful those would be. The need for social appreciation and tendencies for pleasing were also detected from the narratives as the patrons rationalized their reluctance to interfere by pointing out their good manners or being in good terms with the employees. The interviewees found constructive criticizing, regarding operational problems, unnecessary and undesirable. The patrons wanted above all to maintain friendly relationships with the employees of the patronized place. They also wished to maintain a certain reputation about being well behaving, polite and appreciative customers. Our data suggest that the idea of having a critical view, needed for the ability to contribute to the development processes, and offering helpful development suggestions were not in alignment with this kind of desired reputation.

The reason why our findings are not supporting the common understanding of customer citizenship behaviors (customers' prosocial behaviors) regarding proactive participation in development actions might be explained by the inaccurate assumptions of the literature of customer citizenship behaviors. Customer citizenship theory is based on the organizational extra-role behavior theory and thus those assumptions from the employee-context are directly applied into the customer context. For example, Bettencourt (1997) defines customer citizenship as the voluntary behaviors of customers who proactively act as partial employees and cooperate with employees in various ways that help a firm. As partial employees, customers supposedly should contribute to the firm's development and promote its interests through actions that are similar to those of a company's employees (Bowen, 1986; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007). We state however, that the underlying dynamics and incentives of customers' and employees' helping behaviors differ to a great extent, which is why a direct application of a theory is not appropriate in extra-role behaviors. For example, the same helping actions promoting effective functioning of a company might be highly encouraged in employee-context, whereas in customer context similar actions may be seen as intrusive, socially inappropriate and undesirable. Our data suggest that voluntary help involving suggesting development ideas was experienced as troublesome and reputation-harming.

Furthermore, the extra-role theory, both in customer as well as employee-context is limited to the assumptions of proactive behavior going beyond contractually defined tasks, not expected or required from employees or customers, yet promoting effective functioning of the company. There are couple of shortcomings in this definition. Firstly, contractually

defined tasks do not offer very precise image of expectations set to customers. The customer citizenship theory does not specify what those tasks might be and it does not shed light into customers' own perceptions of their roles as customers and what they consider being in-role or extra-role behaviors. Secondly, this points to another shortcoming relating to customer citizenship theory, as it excludes the motivations driving customers' extra-role behaviors and merely assumes them to stem from customers' benevolence and altruism. As we found out, customers' proactive patronizing behavior relates to their identity construction processes and the patronized place is gradually linked to their extended selves. Through accumulating personal experiences, associations and social bonds with the place, taking a critical stance toward it becomes difficult for the patrons, as if by criticizing elements relating to their cherished place, they would criticize part of themselves, which was not perceived as something worth doing. Guarding the established positive ambiance, good relationships with the personnel and a positive image about themselves was seen as more important than being able to contribute to the firm's operations to make the place better or more effective, a point that is not properly taken into account in the current theory on customer citizenship behaviors.

Patronizing behavior did however elicit some other kinds of responsible behaviors that were not necessarily related to the development of the company. Despite the detected lack of desire to confront the employees in constructive feedback situations, the interviewees did demonstrate spontaneously some other proactive helping behaviors characterizing their patronizing behavior. For example, one interviewee used to assist the staff by taking a bouncer's role voluntarily to help to maintain order in the café during the encountered problem situations. The other interviewee had a habit of cleaning and organizing the tables, chairs and the mess caused by him and his group of friends, just to be friendly to the staff and to maintain an appropriate image of both himself and of the patronized café.

Based on our data, it can be concluded that the customer-company patronization does involve some kind of proactive helping, known from the theory of extra-role behaviors. However, the altruistic helping behaviors intended to support company's operational development did not occur in as simplistic way as they are described in the extra-role behaviors' theory. Helping behaviors seem to be closely intertwined with the different kinds of identity objectives that patrons have. If helping activities support the wanted images that patrons want to project about themselves, then they can willingly carry those activities and

also pride themselves on those helpful actions. On the contrary, if the intended helpful actions and tasks do not necessarily support the immediate social appreciation, patrons can become resistant in involving in that kinds of helping behaviors. That in turn, suggests that customer citizenship behaviors such as customer-company patronizing are not altruistic by nature but are more likely driven by various identity-related motives.

## **4.7 Summary of the main findings**

Firstly, one of the main findings from the present research, is that customer-company patronization can be conceptualized as being a constructive consumer behaviour that contributes to patrons' senses of identities of who they are or who they aspire to be. As our data suggest, patronizing certain companies and places enables patrons to reinforce and express their self-identities. For some this may represent connecting themselves with their past by patronizing certain company, for others patronization behaviour can be about relating themselves with the aspired characteristics of the patronized place. Therefore, one of our main findings is that customers' patronization behaviour is intertwined with Belk's (1998) notion of extended-self, representing a behaviour that can function as a mechanism to construct one's self-concept while the patronized place can be seen as a source serving patrons' self-definitional needs.

Secondly, our research has identified the emotional and social bonds, such as formed friendships with the employees, with which the patrons induce the senses of familiarity, connectedness and belongingness, playing essential roles in linking the patronized place to patrons' extended selves. Therefore, the formed bonds and the perceived feelings of belongingness represent essential aspects that enable patrons to use the patronized place and the meanings attached to it to construct and express their self identities. The recognized feelings of belongingness to the place also positively affected patrons' understanding and empathetic attitude toward the patronized place and its employees, further contributing to the emerging prosocial behaviors that characterized patronization behavior. The demonstrated empathy and patrons' helping behaviors, partly motivated by the connectedness and belongingness to the place, also represented one of our main findings explicating how consumers experience patronizing behavior and how it appears in their consumer behavior.

Lastly, the patrons' pursuit for security in form of stability and identity continuance were identified as the main underlying motivator for patronization behavior, explaining why consumers decided to patronize Fazer in particular. Through various different mechanisms, such as through nostalgic consumption, through creating a safe haven of the patronized place and through routinizing the daily or weekly visits, the patrons unconsciously strove to maintain stability and identity continuity in their changing lives. Our findings revealed that nostalgia's role in the consumption experience was increased especially during the times of transformational changes, during which Fazer was able to offer the patrons an important link to reconnect with their past and maintain a coherent sense of themselves. Therefore, the emphasized importance of nostalgia in explaining the customer-company patronization behavior also supports the main finding of our study, according to which this kind of consumer behavior is strongly linked with consumers' identity construction and self-expression motives rather than mere altruistic intentions.

## 5. Discussion

This part will further discuss the key findings of our study, explicating how the current study contributes to previous literature of consumer research. We will expand our findings by linking them to a broader theme of meaning in life. We will address how the nature, needs and myths of life's meaning relate to our findings regarding nostalgic consumption and identity construction needs that are identified as the key defining features of patronizing behavior. This discussion attempts to expand insights into how the customer-company patronizing behavior can be seen as a constructive consumer behavior that reflects on and contributes to the patrons' senses of identities and how this relates to the broader need for defining and negotiating a life meaning.

**In a broader sense, the phenomenon of patronizing behavior can be seen as a way to cope with the insecurities of the modern world by creating meaningfulness into one's life.**



Temporal coherence i.e. striving for continuity in human experience seems to be one of the main themes of our findings. The findings demonstrate that interviewees contextualize patronizing events in a temporally coherent context. Our data suggest that patronizing experiences integrate past life events, circumstances and selves with the interviewees' present selves, making the patronizing place an important source supporting their sense-making of a world and themselves. McAdams et al. (1996) argue that temporal and thematic coherences provide life with meaning. Patronizing a place based on nostalgic reasons can be interpreted as a meaning producing behavior tackling the myth of higher meaning regarding the facets of stability and false permanence. Patronizing the same place for an extensive period of time serves as striving to create a stable conception and meaningful anchor to rely on, in order to deal with the relentless process of change that virtually characterizes life. Thus, our findings suggest that nostalgia-charged patronizing behavior functions as a broader meaning-making and maintaining resource for our interviewees.

### **The need for meaningful self in a meaningful world**

The world we are living in is saturated with meanings. Finding a meaning in life is considered to be of crucial importance to human beings and the sense of self is closely intertwined with this meaning (McAdams, 1985). Throughout life people expect things to make sense and therefore seek to interpret their activities and experiences in terms of an existentially meaningful life story. The life story can be described as an understandable, coherent pattern that contains one's entire life. To derive a meaning in life one needs to superimpose broader interpretation onto the series of events a life consists of. Essentially, the needs for meaning and a coherent life story reflect people's desire to construct interpretation of one's life that makes sense beyond the daily banalities. People want their lives to make an inspiring or fascinating story, to exemplify a higher subject or simply be part of something bigger than themselves. (Baumeister, 1991)

The life stories portray actions, behaviors and decisions as resulting from meaningful personal values as well as contributing to the fulfillment of important life goals. Life meaning is generally associated with such positive outcomes as greater satisfaction in life (Chamberlain and Zika, 1988) and increased feelings of happiness and hope (Debats, 1999; Mascaro and Rosen, 2005). Believing that one's life has meaning is also related to general well-being and better physical health (Ryff and Singer, 1998; Wong and Fry, 1998; Zika and Chamberlain, 1992).

In today's fragmented and insecure world, the feeling of security i.e. the feeling of coherent and meaningful self has become more important and difficult to achieve. Baumeister (1991) suggests that the feeling of insecurity stems from the fragmentation of modern values. There is no agreed-on set of values in the modern world to grasp onto to find meaning in one's life. In the past, religion has been considered as one of the most effective ways to satisfy most of the above-mentioned meaning needs as it provides values and rules to live on. Throughout history religion has been able to provide its followers with an overarching purpose of life based on the will of God. Religion offers the standards of right and wrong and compliance with the religion provides an individual with a moral basis by which to justify one's actions. As religion's role in fulfilling people's needs for life meaning has substantially waned, secular society attempts to fill that gap.

McAdams et al. (1996) argue that temporal and thematic coherences is an important way to provide life with meaning. Patronizing a place based on nostalgic reasons can be interpreted as a meaning producing behavior tackling the myth of higher meaning regarding the facets of stability and false permanence. Patronizing the same place for an extensive period of time serves as attempting to create a stable conception and meaningful anchor to rely on, in order to deal with the fragmented world and the relentless process of change that virtually characterizes life. Thus, our findings suggest that nostalgia-charged patronizing behavior functions as a broader meaning-making and -maintaining resource helping our interviewees to cope with the demands of today's world.

### **The myths of higher meaning driving defensive behaviors**

Drawing from the previous chapter it can be summarized that people are deeply motivated to overcome banality in their lives and expect their lives to be meaningful. The myth of higher meaning can be described as the anticipation that different life projects and independent events can ultimately be comprehended in the context of broader, unifying high-level meanings and patterns (Baumeister, 1991 p. 62). This kind of assumption can be seen as a common tendency in human thinking; people may not be consciously searching for these higher meanings but they expect them to be there. There are several implications that follow the myth of higher meaning.

One of the assumptions people make is that everything should make sense. People expect there to be right answers to everything and that all of the answers relating to the world and

self, will be consistent and won't contradict each other. These are the myths of completeness and consistency. The third facet of higher meaning myth, and the most relevant one regarding our research, is stability. That relates to people's expectations that the learned patterns, rules and values will remain stable and constant, which in fact is inherently contradictory to the nature of life, that as a process represents a continual sequence of changes at the biological, social and environmental levels.

While the real life encompasses constant changes and disruptions, people crave for feelings of security, permanence and constancy. The quest for stability, both internal and external, seems to be one of the most pervasive occupations in life. Meaning imposes unchanging ideas and notions onto these relentlessly changing phenomena and is thus used as a tool to impose and create stability into life's events. For example, self and identity are seen as being the same person across time, in spite of the fact that a person, both socially and biologically, keeps constantly changing. Meaning of life is thus one of the main sources and tools for attaining stability in one's life.

According to MacKenzie and Baumeister (2014) people tend to use whatever resources they have in the struggle for stability and coherent continuity. According to the authors, smart use of meanings, i.e. finding, generalizing and communicating the patterns of life, is one of strongest sources for controlling their environment and in that way creating a sense of false permanence. We suggest that the meanings derived from nostalgic consumption and more specifically patronizing behavior, represent this kind of meaning-imposing behavior in which human beings take part in order to satisfy their unlimited desire for stability.

As shown by the findings of our research, nostalgically charged patronizing behavior is closely linked with patrons' increased perceptions of life's meaningfulness. Nostalgic feelings help people to navigate in situations, such as big life changes and disruptive events, which threaten their set, coherent life meaning. A place where patrons can immerse themselves in nostalgic memories becomes a safe haven for them, not only supporting the temporal coherence of one's identity but also fostering the sense of meaningfulness in one's life. The patronization experiences were characterized by positive emotions, feelings of social connectedness and also by the strengthened feelings of stability and continuity in one's life and identity. Therefore, customer-company patronization behavior can ultimately be interpreted as consumer behavior intended to produce, maintain and reinforce meaningfulness in one's life.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this section we will present the theoretical and managerial implications as well as discuss the limitations of this study and possible future research areas.

### **6.1 Theoretical implications**

The current study aims to fill the existing theoretical gap in consumer and marketing research and conceptualize the multifaceted construct of customer-company patronization. Providing a clear and detailed conceptualization of this construct is needed as it has not been previously conceptualized in marketing literature although the patronizing behavior is manifested in practice. Our empirical research broadens and rethinks the existing understanding of customers' patronizing behavior that has been traditionally linked with mere repeat purchasing, by providing a rich description of how this multifaceted phenomenon occurs in practice and of what kind of self-definitional and identity-related meanings consumers attach to their patronizing experiences.

The current research extends the existing research on customers' extra-role behaviors and the theory of extended self by offering valuable insights drawn from the results of our explorative study. First of all, up to this date the extra role behavior research has been mainly limited to organisational context and employer-employee settings. Applying the extra-role behavior theory in the domain of customer research with regard to customer-company patronization, we extend the current understanding of prosocial citizenship -and extra-role behaviors.

As the concept of prosocial behaviors has been previously insufficiently defined, lacking a sufficient conceptualization about the true nature, motives and other dimensions of customers' extra-role behaviors from the customers' viewpoints, the present findings enlarge the prior understanding by shedding lights into customers' experiential perspectives of this concept. Our study introduces the self-definitional and nostalgia-charged identity-construction motives that are present in the customer-company patronization behavior and at the same time challenges the altruistic-assumptions that are underlying the current theory

of extra-role behaviors. Therefore, the present research can be considered as offering a critical lens to addressing the extra-role behavior theory, by pointing out the customer's experiences and meanings associated with prosocial behaviors instead of approaching this concept merely from the company's point of view, which has been the case in previous research. Explicating the self-motivated reasons for engaging in prosocial behaviors in the form of company patronization behavior, extends the previous research by suggesting that altruism is not necessarily the main motivator for customer-citizenship behavior.

Furthermore, our research broadens existing theories of nostalgic consumption and customer loyalty. Nostalgic experiences eliciting senses of belongingness and identity continuance are identified as the main features characterizing patronizing behaviour. This supports the notion that people are more inclined to form lifelong attachment to the things they used to experience in the past. Our research elaborates further on the place attachment's links to past experiences and explicates how meaningful these past experiences are in driving present's consumption behaviors such as deep consumer commitment towards commercial places.

## **6.2. Managerial implications**

The study provided insight into the customer loyalty experiences and behaviours by conceptualizing the customer company patronizing behavior. The findings of the study are valuable for companies as customers engaging in this type of behavior will likely have higher empathy and understanding towards you, they will defend you and engage in various other pro-social behaviors diminishing the threat of competing companies. Furthermore the findings provide insight into how companies could attract new patrons, recognize the existing ones and better retain them by tapping into the nostalgia and identity-continuance related needs of the customers.

What is important for companies is to understand that customer-company patronizing behavior is not altruistic in nature but stems from people's deeper identity construction and protection motives. The patrons' pursuit for security in forms of stability and identity continuance, that were identified as the main underlying motives for driving patronizing behaviour, support temporal coherence in people's experiences and ultimately perceived

meaningfulness in one's life. Thus companies need to research and understand their customers and their life experiences, including past, present and future-oriented goals, and their underlying consumption needs to connect their product and service offering to something that is truly meaningful for customers. Companies should understand the deeper values that are meaningful for consumers and current life situations that may drive them to seek a psychological safe haven and continuity into their life experiences. Allowing consumers to satisfy their self-definitional needs, with the help of the company by engaging in patronizing behaviors will create a deep connection between the company and the consumer. This in turn enables the company to create a very loyal and profitable customer base.

Sense of belongingness was essential in enabling the patrons to use the patronized place and the meanings attached to it to construct and express their self-identities. Recognizing customers and making them feel that they are part of the place is thus essential in retaining as well as attracting new patrons. Lastly, it is important to understand that even though the patronizing behavior is mainly positive for a company, it is always driven by the identity objectives that patrons have. Thus, it might not always lead to the most desired behaviors from the company's point of view such as reluctance to engage in the constructive consumer behaviors e.g. offering operational improvement ideas.

### **6.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research**

The present study represents a conceptualization of consumer patronization behavior and broadens the current understanding of the dimensions, dynamics and motivations of such behavior grounded in consumers' experiences. However, the key limitations of the study rely in generalizability as the research context was limited to one company with its unique characteristics and the research subjects were also limited to certain age groups. Most of the interviewees were middle aged and above, leaving the younger generations out of the research scope. Studying how the phenomenon occurs among different demographics and how different characteristics influence the behavior and motivations would be relevant to understand the phenomenon more profoundly and to provide practical implications for different companies on how to approach and utilize the patronizing phenomenon to their advantage.

Due to the unique characteristics of the company, the subjects had had personal experience with the company for a long time. The self-experienced nostalgia was very prominent in our study and patronizing occurred throughout a long period of time. However, many of the supporting acts are very different in nature. Patronizing can occur without any prior contact with a company with a very short period of time such as in crowdfunding. Thus, studying the phenomenon in other contexts and including these more rapidly developed and aggressive patronizing behaviors, would help us understand the phenomenon in more depth. The current study also emphasized the customer's point of view and the motivations of this phenomenon. How patronizing occurs from the behavioral point of view and from the company's point of view offers one area for future research. Finally, using different approaches to studying the phenomenon such as ethnography and phenomenology should provide us with more in-depth views into the subject and reveal new aspects of it.

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