

INTERFACE BETWEEN HOSPITALITY-BASED CUSTOMER BRAND ENGAGEMENT, SELF-BRAND CONGRUENCE, AND REVISIT INTENTION

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Abstract: Customer brand engagement (CBE) has been identified as an important determinant of brand co-creation (BCO) and brand loyalty. However, the cognitive and affective mechanism of CBE has hardly received a full assessment, particularly in the field of hospitality brand context. Thus, using service-dominant logic, this research develops a model that explores the relationships between self-brand congruence, social media involvement (SMI), BCO, CBE, and revisit intention towards hospitality brands during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, results suggest that SMI and self-brand congruence positively impact CBE. Secondly, results revealed that CBE's significant positive effect on BCO and customer's revisit intention. Third, findings showed the social media's and self-brand congruence's indirect impact on co-creation and revisit intent, as mediated via CBE. The model has been tested by adopting Partial least squares-structural equation modelling, and the empirical results can contribute to the advancement of SMI, CBE, co-creation, and revisit intention in the hospitality context. This study offers key implications for hotel brands to construct tactics in surviving during the pandemic.

Keywords: Customer Brand Engagement, Social Media Involvement, Self-Brand Congruence, Revisit Intention, Hospitality Brands

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly disturbed people and places on a global scale, with enormous psychological, social, economic, and business impacts (UNWTO, 2021). The consequences have been exemplified as 'catastrophic', and no industries have, perhaps, been as hard-hit as hospitality and tourism (Ntounis et al., 2021). Hospitality is one of the most affected industries, experiencing a worldwide collapse in occupancy rates, demand, and revenues (e.g. Dube et al., 2021; Gursoy & Chi, 2020). Hospitality-led services, particularly hotels, are working under strict restrictions and a 'new normal' needs to be defined. The distracting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic need hotel marketers to redesign the customer brand engagement (CBE) considered the core of the hospitality and tourism industry (Harrigan et al., 2018; So, Wei & Martin, 2021).

Technological advancements have changed the customer-brand relationship into a value co-creation process characterized by higher levels of collaboration, connectivity, or interaction, among customer and their preferred hotel brands (Harrigan et al., 2018). In the context of this relationship, CBE has received much interest from academics and practitioners (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek,

Glynn & Brodie, 2014; So et al., 2021). In recent years, CBE is defined as "the attitude, behaviour, the level of connectedness among customers and with the firm" (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 499). It is also defined as consumer's resource investment in their brand interactions (Hollebeek, Srivastava & Chen, 2019), which has developed an important brand management metric. As traditional metrics like customer satisfaction, involvement or commitment offer key insights, these variables fail to isolate the dynamics transpiring consumer-brand interactions, as CBE does (Ahn & Back, 2019; Brodie et al., 2011; Harrigan et al., 2018). Accordingly, CBE has been advocated as a critical factor in building consumer-led consequences including customer trust, attachment, and customer loyalty, thus facilitate to differentiate firms/brands in rising sales growth, referrals, competitive advantage, or stock returns (Kumar et al., 2019; Li, Teng & Chen, 2020), thus offers key benefits to service/brand managers. Drawing on these benefits, various studies have investigated CBE in the hospitality context, which is characterized by inseparability, heterogeneity, perishability, intangibility and higher consumer-brand interactivity (Ahn & Back, 2019; So et al., 2021).

Therefore, CBE research has obtained impetus in the past decade (e.g. Chen et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2014), as

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confirmed by its inclusion in Marketing Science Institutes' *research priorities* from 2010 to 2020 (MSI, 2020). Albeit, the escalating interest in CBE, a dearth of information maps the comprehensive body of empirical-based CBE-research thus far (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019; Rather & Sharma, 2016; So et al., 2021), revealing a critical need to investigate this subject. Second, past research has suggested the need to examine CBE across many other countries/contexts (e.g. Li et al., 2020; Sheth, 2011; Odoom et al., 2017). Third, irrespective of research in CBE; more studies examine CBE in regular and free market conditions to date (Harrigan et al., 2018; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Li et al., 2020; Pansari & Kumar, 2017) yielding a significant gap about its manifestation in least-regular conditions, encompassing pandemics. Hence, it is essential to explore self-brand congruence (SBC), social media's and CBE's role in brand co-creation (BCO) and revisit intentions towards hospitality brands in pandemics times (Dube et al., 2021; Ntounis et al., 2021).

Finally, previous research has focused more on social exchange theory (SET) (e.g. Harrigan et al., 2018; Li et al., 2020) or relationship marketing theory (e.g. Vivek et al., 2014), as a key theoretical foundation to investigate CBE. However, there exists a need to examine CBE from other different theoretical standpoints (Harrigan et al., 2018; So et al., 2021). Considering the above-mentioned gaps, following a service dominant logic (SDL)-informed perspective, this research develops and tests a theoretical model, which investigates the relationships between self-brand congruence, social media involvement (SMI), BCO, CBE, and revisit intention with hospitality brands during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research could satisfy these gaps in the field of consumer behaviour, branding, and hospitality literature. The present research provides managerial implications for hospitality social media practitioners. For instance, its examination into what drives customers to engage with the specific hotel social media brand (SMBs) can update a firm's social media marketing strategy. Since the majority of hotel SMBs intend to offer customers with opportunities to customize and collaborate on their usage experiences, this research underlines how to develop social media-based-CBE, co-creation, and revisit intents through the critical drivers of SMI and SBC.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

SMI and CBE

SMI implies the relevance and level of interest customers have with SMBs as a category rather than one brand (e.g. France et al., 2015). As a category, SMBs can become a

meaningful, essential part of customers' everyday lives. This involvement is usually long term, with customers inherently feeling motivated by utilizing these brands and the pleasure of thinking about them (e.g. Richins et al., 1992). In the identifying process (Schmitt, 2012), customers are tend to accrue information regarding many SMBs (Zaichkowsky, 1985; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Once customers become involved with SMBs, they could experience the *flow*-state characterized by full concentration and immersion in interactions with SMBs (Leckie et al., 2021), thus stimulating customer's engagement with a focal brand (e.g. hotel). Existing works revealed that customers with higher levels of involvement with a specific brand exhibit increased levels of engagement (Vivek et al., 2012). Research on CBE with tourism and hospitality SMBs (Harrigan et al., 2018; So et al., 2014) and brands (Hollebeek et al., 2014) uncovers that customer brand involvement is linked to CBE dimensions like cognitive processing, activation, and affection. Further, Leckie et al. (2021) verify that customer's brand/product involvement positively impacts CBE. Following these arguments, this study proposes (see Fig. 1):

H1. SMI has a direct positive effect on CBE.

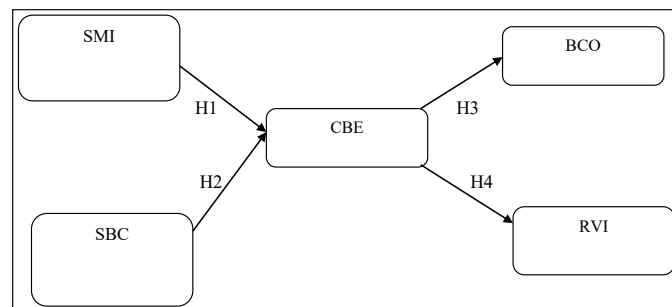


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

SBC and CBE

As per self-congruency theory, the association between a person's self-image and brand image affects an individual's behaviours with a specific brand (Sirgy, 1986). SBC refers to the degree to which a specific brand's image is coherent with one's self-identity (Sirgy et al., 1997). Consequently, SBC could be a significant contributor towards the consumer's perceived self-image (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Rather & Camilleri, 2018). The degree of customer-perceived congruence between brands and customers' self-image could yield a positive attitude and intent to continue the relationship with the particular brand (e.g. Hanks et al., 2017). In the signifying process, customers assess specific brands on the basis of their self-identify congruence (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Schmitt, 2012). According to *schema theory*, customers have specific knowledge structures or

self-schemas, which help in the processing of incoming self-linked information, guiding customers' perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes with brands (Markus, 1977). Sprott et al. (2009) suggested that more the level of SBC, more the likelihood that customers will engage towards the brand and involve it in self-schemas. Brodie et al. (2011) consider SBC as a CBE consequence that can build from consumers' particular interactive brand-based experiences. Self-brand congruent customers who use SMBs to articulate their identity and usually express pride while using them (e.g. France et al., 2015; Hanks et al., 2017; Rather et al., 2018). Once customers employ brands to articulate their social identity and inner-self, they are likely to have enhanced levels of cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement with the specific brands (Leckie et al., 2021). Based on these arguments, the following research posits:

H2. SBC has a direct positive effect on CBE.

CBE, BCO, and Revisit Intention

CBE is defined as "a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions" (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). Like CBE, BCO is defined as "joint creation of value by the company and the customer, allowing the customer to co-construct the service experience to suit her context" (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 8). Prebensen et al. (2013, pp. 240–241) refer co-creation as "the tourist as a participant in the value creation process by bringing various types of customer resources and efforts into the experience value scene". According to SDL (Harrigan et al., 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2016), value is not merely (co)-created by brands, although (co)-created by consumers as well (Grissmann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019). As customers become engaged with time, they are likely to share their individual experience (or information) with others (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2021; Hollebeek & Rather, 2019; Rather & Sharma, 2017, 2019). In the field of social media-based destination perspective, brand engagement assists the development of emotional ties with customers, escalating their BCO and revisit intention towards hotel brand (Ranjan & Read, 2016). Hence, subsequent hypotheses are anticipated as

H3: CBE has a direct positive effect on BCO.

H4: CBE has a direct positive effect on revisit intention.

CBE as a Mediating Factor

Extant studies have claimed that in consumer–brand relationships, CBE plays a mediating role between customer perceptions and customer value co-creation behaviours/

behavioural intents (Harrigan et al., 2018; Yen et al., 2020). As, CBE acts as a psychological state, which occurs due to interactive, co-creative consumer experiences with a focal brand in particular service relationships (Brodie et al., 2011). Adopting an SDL-informed perspective, while Shawky et al. (2019) suggest SMI's direct impact on CBE Leckie et al. (2021), explored the direct effect of SBC on CBE towards brands. Yen et al. (2020) investigated that CBE mediates the relationship between innovativeness and customer citizenship/customer participation behaviours in hospitality brand contexts. Similarly, customer engagement's influence on BCO and revisit intent has also been recognized (Shawky et al., 2019; Yen et al., 2020). Regardless of such advancements, scarce remains identified regarding CBE's possible in-direct effect on co-creation and revisit intent towards hotel brand during the pandemic. When customers visit hotel brands and having high interactions, the more the willingness of consumers to engage, the more the revisit-intention, recommendation, and repeat-purchase in *post-purchase/consumption* stages. Hence, the next hypotheses are proposed as

H5: CBE mediates the relationship between SMI and BCO (H5a); SBC and BCO (H5b).

H6: CBE mediates the relationship between SMI and revisit intention (H6a); SBC and revisit intention (H6a).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection and Research Design

Only respondents (visitors) who had used hotel social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram) and websites to pursue travel-/hotel-related information were allowed, and also visited previously to key luxury hotel brands in Jammu and Kashmir, India (i.e. Gulmarg, Kokernag, Pahalgam), which are well-known tourism destinations. Hospitality literature has extensively acknowledged CBE benefits (e.g. Ahn & Back, 2019; Rather & Hollebeek, 2018; Rather, 2017; So et al., 2014). Second, hospitality consumption shares several key characteristics of services including intangibility, variability, and perishability (Ahn & Back, 2019; Rather, 2018a/b; So et al., 2021).

A convenience-based sample was attained (Ahn & Back, 2019), and in May, 2021 data were collected for empirical investigation via self-reported survey questionnaires. Out of 400 distributed surveys, we received 318 legitimate responses, signifying an 80 per cent of the response rate. The descriptive examination indicated that 57 per cent of tourists were male. In addition, 31 per cent were 20–30 years, 29 per cent were 31–40 years, 26 per cent were aged 41–50, and 14 per cent were 51 years or above.

Variables and Measurement

CB was measured by employing So et al.'s (2014) multi-dimensional scale including absorption, enthusiasm, attention, interaction, and identification (see also Harrigan et al., 2018). BCO was measured through Grisseman and Stokburger-Sauer (2012), SMI using Yoo and Donthu (2001), SBC via Sirgy et al. (1997), and finally revisit intention – Gohary et al. (2018). Pre-established scales adopting a seven-point Likert scale were utilized (1 – strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree, see Table 1).

Table 1: Reliability and Validity of Construct and Measurement Items

Constructs and Indicators Loadings	Factor
Social Media Involvement (SMI) (AVE = 0.751, CR = 0.884, α = 0.903, VIF = 3.025)	
Social media is very important to me during the current situation	0.892
I am very involved with social media during the current situation	0.825
I use social media very often during the current situation	0.815
I consider myself a social media expert during the current situation	0.858
Self-brand congruence (SBC) (AVE = 0.745, CR = 0.832, α = 0.924, VIF = 3.055, SD = 1.43, M = 4.56)	
The personality of [hotel brand] is a mirror image of me (my actual self)	0.872
The personality of [hotel brand] is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self)	0.843
Absorption (ABS) (AVE = 0.743, CR = 0.907, α = 0.926, VIF = 2.346)	
When I am interacting with this hotel brand, I forget everything else around me	0.902
When I am interacting with hotel brand, I get carried away	0.853
Time flies when I am interacting with the hotel brand	0.915
In my interaction with this hotel brand, I am immersed	0.893
When interacting with the hotel brand intensely, I feel happy	0.863
Enthusiasm (ENT) (AVE = 0.707, CR = 0.927, α = 0.935, VIF = 2.153)	
I am passionate about this hotel brand	0.914
I feel excited about this hotel brand	0.891
I am enthusiastic about this hotel brand	0.883
I love this hotel brand	0.871
I am heavily into this hotel brand	0.864
Attention (ATT) (AVE = 0.720, CR = 0.915, α = 0.915, VIF = 2.842)	
Anything related to this hotel brand grabs my attention	0.872

Constructs and Indicators Loadings	Factor
I pay a lot of attention to anything about this hotel brand	0.851
I like to learn more about this hotel brand	0.902
I concentrate a lot on this hotel brand	0.832
I like learning more about this hotel brand	0.926
Interaction (INT) (AVE = 0.751, CR = 0.921, α = 0.903, VIF = 2.634)	
In general, I thoroughly enjoy exchanging ideas with other people in the hotel brand	0.848
I often participate in activities of this hotel brand	0.813
In general, I like to get involved in hotel brand discussions	0.907
I am someone who enjoys interacting with like-minded others in the hotel brand	0.895
Identification (IDN) (AVE = 0.741, CR = 0.903, α = 0.894, VIF = 2.392)	
When someone criticizes this hotel brand, it feels like a personal insult	0.924
When I talk about this hotel brand, I usually say "we" rather than "they"	0.856
This hotel brand's successes are my successes	0.817
When someone praises this hotel brand, it feels like a personal compliment	0.907
Brand Co-creation (BCO) (AVE = 0.694, CR = 0.897, α = 0.908, VIF = 3.137, SD = 1.66, M = 3.67)	
I have the intention to discuss this co-creation experience with this hotel brand	0.793
I am interested in participating in this co-creation experience	0.905
I intend to actively involved (participated) in this co-creation experience	0.891
I have used my experience from past visits so as to arrange this trip	0.915
Revisit intention (RVI) (AVE = 0.736, CR = 0.884, S α = 0.928, VIF = 2.946, D = 1.54, M = 4.65)	
I likely to visit this hotel brand again	0.923
I think I will come back to this hotel brand in nearby future	0.918
I will love to come to this hotel brand again	0.894

Note: α = Cronbach's alpha, AVE = Average variance extracted, CR = Composite reliability.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was utilized to examine the study model, as PLS-SEM deals best towards complex models, smaller sample-size, non-normally data, and predictive/exploratory studies (e.g. Hair et al., 2017; Raza et al., 2020).

Measurement Model Evaluation

Table 1/2 indicates the psychometric properties (reliability and validity) of the factors employed in the model. The factor loadings, Cronbach’s α values, composite reliability values, and constructs’ average variance extracted (AVEs) were all exceeding the threshold standards suggesting satisfactory reliability and validity (Hair et al., 2017; Parrey et al., 2019; Rather & Shakir, 2018).

As suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the square roots of the AVE values of each factor were more than the consequent latent-variable correlations, confirming discriminant validity. Further, all HTMT-ratio were under the cut-off value of 0.9 (Henseler et al., 2016), which supports discriminant validity, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Fornell-Larcker Criterion and HTMT Ratios

Construct	SMI	CBE	SBC	BCO	RVI
Social media Involvement (SMI)	0.85	0.50	0.51	0.50	0.56
Customer brand engagement (CBE)	0.56	0.84	0.56	0.51	0.57
Self-brand congruence (SBC)	0.55	0.53	0.86	0.56	0.50
Brand Co-creation (BCO)	0.54	0.58	0.57	0.82	0.56
Revisit Intention (RVI)	0.51	0.57	0.55	0.57	0.83

Note: Bold font = square-root of the AVE. The above bold diagonal factors are the HTMT ratios. Under the bold diagonal are estimated correlations.

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was tested by adopting several standards. The “standardized root mean square residual” or SRMR was assessed as a model-fitness standard (Henseler

et al., 2016). They suggest that an SRMR value less than 0.08 is considered an excellent model-fit. The result of the present paper (SRMR = 0.069) thereby verifies a satisfactory model-fit.

PLS-SEM was used to test the hypothesis (see Table 3). Proposed in H1, social media promotes CBE, exercising a strong effect ($\beta = 0.624, p = 0.000$). However, H2 offers a significant positive support for the association of SBC with CBE ($\beta = 0.613, p > 0.000$). Hypothesized in H3 and H4, CBE advances enhanced co-creation; ($\beta = 0.635, p = 0.000$), and customer’s re-visit intent; ($\beta = 0.647, p = 0.000$), thereby producing powerful impacts equally (see Table 3).

Table 3: Structural Model Results

Hypotheses Paths	β	T-Value	F ²	Remarks
H1: Social media involvement → CBE	0.624	7.53	0.27	Supported
H2: Self-brand congruence → CBE	0.613	7.14	0.19	Supported
H3: CBE → brand co-creation	0.635	8.73	0.29	Supported
H4: CBE → revisit intention	0.647	9.36	0.33	Supported

Note: * represents non-significance. Other effects are significant at 0.001 level.

Customer brand engagement: $R^2 = 0.446; Q^2 = 0.143$; brand co-creation: $R^2 = 0.678; Q^2 = 0.176$; revisit intention: $R^2 = 0.694, Q^2 = 0.195$.

Mediation Analysis

Based on Hayes (2013) approach, mediation was evaluated by employing the product-of-coefficients approach via bootstrapping-based re-sampling. The confidence intervals (CIs) for in-direct effect did not incorporate zero, suggesting mediation supporting for H5a, H5b, H6a, and H6b (see Table 4).

Table 4: Mediation Effects

IV	Mediator	DV(s)	β	S.E	LLCI	ULCI	Conclusion
H5a:	SMI → CBE	→ brand co-creation	0.325	0.038	0.127	0.253	Supported
H5b:	SBC → CBE	→ brand co-creation	0.318	0.043	0.139	0.245	Supported
H6a:	SMI → CBE	→ revisit intention	0.357	0.041	0.285	0.387	Supported
H6b:	SBC → CBE	→ revisit intention	0.349	0.045	0.371	0.375	Supported

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to existing hospitality literature by building our insights about the effects of SBC and SMI

on CBE towards hospitality brands during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, this research contributes to the role of CBE in increasing BCO and revisit intention. Finally, this research contributes to mediating effect of CBE on proposed

relationships in hospitality brand contexts. This study offers key theoretical and practical implications for hotel brands as outlined below.

Theoretically, this study has contributed to CBE-literature (e.g. Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014; So et al., 2014, 2021) by proposing and empirically testing the drivers and consequences of CBE. In addition, this research responds to Leckie et al. (2021) and Li et al. (2021) studies by contributing to contemporary marketing (hospitality) knowledge in social media contexts. This study offers insight into the role of hospitality-based SBC, and SMI-based CBE and its impact on BCO and revisit intention during the pandemic.

Second, our study also provides extensive understating in the mediating effect of CBE into the proposed links in an outbreak situation. As existing research has recognized a positive or direct effect of SMI on CBE, co-creation, or revisiting intentions (Shawky et al., 2019; Harrigan et al., 2018); empirical examination in the relationships of our proposed modelled constructs remains meager (Narangajavana et al., 2017; MSI, 2020), specifically in hospitality-based social media context during the pandemic situations.

Third, and managerially, our results suggest that hospitality marketers need to build marketing practices/strategies, which emphasize the role of SMI-based CBE/BCO during epidemic times. For instance, to sustain existing/potential customers during epidemic, marketers are advised to extend different service interaction platforms and technology-led efforts (Li et al., 2020; Bahri-Ammari et al., 2021; Narangajavana et al., 2017), such as E-Commerce websites-, mobile apps-, brand communities, hotel/marketing efforts, like augmented-reality hospitality/marketing activities, virtual-reality hotel/marketing touch points, and location-based marketing activities (Hollebeek et al., 2020; Leckie et al., 2021), which are effective in engaging such customers. Finally, managerial tracking in the customer initiatives could be employed to revise service/product development, innovative promotional campaigns or formal market-research during/post-outbreak (Hollebeek et al., 2020).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

First, this study is cross-sectional in nature, signifying that survey data were gathered at one specific time. Therefore, longitudinal research design would provide new generalisable results-post outbreak. Second, the future investigation would explore other predictors of CBE involving brand image, service recovery, tourist involvement, satisfaction, and consumer emotions and joy to provide extra understanding (Bowden, 2009; Harrigan

et al., 2018; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Third, this paper explores two important consequences of CBE, i.e. revisit intention and BCO. Hence, new factors may be employed like brand trust, perceived value, brand love, identification, or attachment (Li et al., 2020) can produce additional insight after COVID-19.

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