

Branding through visitors: how cultural differences affect brand co-creation in independent hotels in Iran

Alireza Ranjbaran, Mohammadjavad Shabankareh, Alireza Nazarian and Nader Seyyedamiri

Abstract

Purpose – In most countries, independent hotels are a major contributor to both national economy and the hospitality sector, but to the best of the authors' knowledge, there is a lack of any study on brand co-creation (BCC) in independent hotels. This study aims to examine the interrelationship of moral judgement (MJ), self-brand connection, customer-brand engagement (CBE), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and how BCC occurs in independent hotels and contrasts visitors' perspectives between two different Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness clusters in independent hotels. Furthermore, this study also examines the moderating impact of privacy concern (PC) on the relationship between eWOM and brand co-creation.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from two groups of tourists, Iranian (290) and European (224), who visited and stayed in independent hotels in some major cities in Iran. The structural equation modelling using AMOS 22 was adopted to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The study's findings revealed that there are significant differences between two culturally different travellers in terms of selected variables, suggesting that MJ is a main antecedent of CBE, which leads to eWOM among Iranian travellers, which consequently leads to BCC. Moreover, the study's data indicates that European travellers show a high level of PCs while staying in independent hotels in Iran, which prevents them from sharing and getting engaged in the social media, which could delay the BCC process especially in international level.

Originality/value – This study contributes to literature by providing new insights on the differences in the concept of brand co-creation between two culturally different groups in the context of independent hotels, which require special attention of independent hotel managers.

Keywords Culture, Moral judgement, eWOM, Privacy concern, Brand co-creation, Independent hotel

Paper type Research paper

Alireza Ranjbaran and Mohammadjavad Shabankareh are both based at the Faculty of Management, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Alireza Nazarian is based at the Department of Management and Marketing, University of Westminster, London, UK. Nader Seyyedamiri is based at the Faculty of Entrepreneurship, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

1. Introduction

Brand co-creation (BCC) as distinct from value co-creation (VCC) is a continuous, dynamic and interactive process through engagement in specific experiences and activities related to a brand (González-Mansilla *et al.*, 2019). Despite the importance of VCC, research on this issue in the hospitality sector is still at an early stage (González-Mansilla *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, the branding creation process is more difficult and more time consuming in independent hotels due to both financial and non-financial restrictions imposed on them. Based on Nazarian *et al.* (2020), the hotel industry has a competitive environment, and creating superior value is vital for their customers. Interaction with customers in hotels is essential to occur BCC, and if customers perceive that they have participation and control over the hotel processes, this might enhance their engagement to the hotel.

Independent hotels are defined as those hotels that are not a chain (Nazarian *et al.*, 2020). Due to the nature of the independent hotels that normally are not following general

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standards such as those implemented in chain hotels and also they are administrated by different managers with different attitudes and tastes, as a result each of them have their own special features and standard that would lead to a special brand image perception for visitors. Therefore, in this study “independent hotels brand” is considered as the brand that has been created for travellers during their stay in those hotels and that uses those special features such as traditional environment and design.

Some of the previous studies indicated that chain-affiliated hotels perform better than independent hotels on international markets (Gao *et al.*, 2018). In addition, chain hotels benefit from some main advantages including brand affiliation, structured financial resources, which enable them to provide a consistent value proposition with guaranteed quality and access to different amenities plus standard services to satisfy customers' needs and wants from different cultural backgrounds (Gao *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, this could mean BCC process in the chain hotels especially among international travellers could be easier than independent ones due to the spread positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) by their customers that may originate from more aligned, standard and satisfying services. On the other hand, in independent hotels, BCC process and brand positioning are not as easy as in chain hotels (Nazarian *et al.*, 2020). As a result of providing different and sometimes non-standard services such as different levels of perceived privacy concerns (PCs) among international travellers with different cultural backgrounds (D'Acunto and Volo, 2021) negative eWOM might be spread and finally damage independent hotels' sales and reputation. Therefore, one of the ideal options for independent hotels, which generally suffer from non-economic motives, limited marketing, issues of quality assurance, pricing policies and lack of financial resources for advertising, is to make the best of their social media platforms and implement reliable and trustworthy online strategies to position and improve their brand image in the hospitality competitive market and experience a good BCC process specifically in the international market.

Social media platforms facilitate and support dynamic interactions within online communities among individuals, making it possible for customers to share brand stories with others, as well as facilitate the co-creation of value, and the hospitality sector is a pioneer in using online platforms. These types of interaction are known as “electronic word-of-mouth” (eWOM), which could be both positive or negative statements made by potential, actual or former consumers (Litvin and Goldsmith, 2017). Moreover, companies are attempting to co-create brand image in social media using their customers as a source information for other customers by providing comments (Hajli *et al.*, 2017). In addition, mobile- and internet-based technologies create interactive platforms for individuals and communities to share, co-create, discuss and simply extend contents and information (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Consumers voluntarily and intentionally engage in online relationships with brands through social media, which facilitate co-creation between brands and consumers. On the other hand, as Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) argue, customer–brand engagement (CBE) creates a psychological effect in the minds of consumers so that they interact with the focal brand. A self–brand connection (SBC) serves as an important element of the brand relationship as it refers to the way consumers establish a sense of oneness with a brand and involves a cognitive and emotional connection between the brand and the self (Park *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, SBC affects the behaviour of consumers including eWOM and post-purchase intention (Kwon and Mattila, 2015). On the other hand, according to Stanton *et al.* (2019), travellers' moral judgement (MJ) has a major impact on what is being said or posted online as visitors' comments as eWOM and, more importantly, they always have a concern about the information that is shared on social media or Online communities.

This study aims to examine how BCC antecedents occur in independent hotels from the visitors' perspective and compare and contrast results from two groups of tourists who visited and stayed in independent hotels with clear cultural differences. Hence, our objective is to examine how BCC is created through different cultures in independent

hotels. As a result, data were collected from both Iranian and European travellers who were visiting and staying in independent hotels in Iran. The reason for choosing European travellers to contrast with Iranian travellers for this study is based on the fact that these two types of tourists belong to two culturally distinguishable clusters based on Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Project (House *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by examining how cultural differences among travellers lead to BCC in different ways. Furthermore, this study also provides further contributions to the literature; firstly, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to investigate the concept of BCC in independent hotels, and secondly, this study shows how cultural differences between home travellers (HT) and European travellers' (ET) perspectives bring about different BCC in independent hotels, and finally, this study explores the moderating impact of PCs. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, we propose an exploratory research question of "how the cultural differences among travellers could potentially create different patterns of BCC".

2. Theory and hypotheses development

2.1 Culture

House *et al.* (2004) introduced nine dimensions to measure national culture and six dimensions to measure cultural endorsed leadership values in their GLOBE Project. At the beginning, they collected data from around 62 cultures (House *et al.*, 2004), which was increased to 140 by 2020. The analysis grouped countries according to their similarities. For the purposes of this study, data were collected from two separate groups, Iranian and Latin European travellers. According to GLOBE, Iran is in the Southern Asian group alongside countries like India, Malaysia and Indonesia. Also, all European travellers, who were from France, Italy, Spain and Portugal, were in the Latin Europe group.

2.2 Moral judgement and self-brand connection

MJ provides guidance for individuals when they consider whether their actions or decisions as right or wrong, ethical or unethical. A moral or immoral act by a corporation is inherently linked to its overall reputation and evaluation. There are some moral principles which operate in the hospitality sector including trustworthiness, honesty and integrity (Nicolaidis, 2017). When hotels act morally, they are responding to their guests' needs and wants, which result in making a reputation and potentially increasing their market share (Zeithami *et al.*, 2018). One of the moral acts of the hospitality sector is to set effective and honest social marketing strategies so that their digital customers can have a satisfying social media experience (Leung *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, according to Stanton *et al.* (2019), sometimes, hoteliers seek to improve their digital presence by using alternative strategies such as providing financial rewards to individuals or existing employees to post reviews or offering free products or services in exchange for a positive review to increase the number of eWOM in their page (Stanton *et al.*, 2019). Based on the previous studies, the impact of these methods on consumers' perception on the resort's image, moral judgements regarding the methods and attitudes towards the resorts brand may significantly change (Stanton *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, when hotels collect, store and use their existing and prospective customers' personal information, they increase customers' feelings of vulnerability (Xie and Karan, 2019). As a result, they expect companies to be observant of their privacy data and set up efficient online strategies to keep their personal information safely and securely and not use or reveal them without their permission and consent in a cyber environment. Not being able to keep their promise would result in losing customers' trust in that company and eventually consider this acts as an unethical behaviour which will result in negative word-of-mouth and engage in switching behaviours.

SBC, on the other hand, as distinct from emotional attachment, consists of three items bonded, attached and connected, which has been defined as a connection between the customers' own identity and the brand (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). In fact, as such links between brands and customers become stronger so it does the likelihood of the purchase intention as compared with the brands that have no self-brand integration (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018). This could also result in the psychological intention of aligning customer expectations to those that are more established or have a better brand, and as a result, they have less tendency to switch. Moreover, assessment of moral and immoral behaviours in social media (moral judgement) of companies such as hotels by their customers can significantly enhance customers' brand connection or lessen this connectivity (Stanton *et al.*, 2019). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. MJ has a significant impact on SBC.

2.3 Moral judgement and customer-brand engagement

CBE could be defined as the level of an individual customers' motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activities in direct brand interactions (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, according to the importance of customer-brand engagement, hotels have broadly used different branding plans to differentiate their products and services from competitors to provide their customers a sense of identification to engage them more with their brand.

In other words, the moral judgement, is an evaluation of the relative level of unethically is a significant aspect in forming customer's behavioural intentions and making decisions in marketing. Emotions, which are the key factors of moral behaviours, are an important influencer of MJ, and brand engagement is a very strong emotion consumers may have for a brand that is exposed to their moral behaviours. Thus, we propose the following:

H2. MJ has a significant impact on CBE.

2.4 Self-brand connection with customer-brand engagement

According to Vallaster *et al.* (2018), when there is a strong tie between customers' identity and the brand, then the SBC is generated. Such relationships can be created by using different marketing tools such as brand narratives, which could potentially help consumers to connect with the brand, increasing the chances of customers' engagement. Moreover, marketing scholars believe that a psychological interaction and connection with the brand experiences post purchase could upgrade customer engagement and brand loyalty (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). Customers who make a relationship with a brand and have a sense of identification augment the engagement with the brand. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. SBC has a significant impact on CBE.

2.5 Customer-brand engagement with electronic word-of-mouth

The scholars identified the rapid growth of eWOM for hospitality customers, exploring that eWOM platforms significantly influence travel decisions, and an important issue must be tracked by tourism marketers (Litvin and Goldsmith, 2017). As a result, online community contents play a significant role in consumer decision-making and might lead to an improvement or collapse in relative sales at that platform.

As mentioned before, customer engagement is a process by which customers make a deeper relationship or connection with a brand or become a loyal customer to a brand which is certainly affected by the customers' experiences (Ahn and Back, 2018). Therefore,

positive customers' experiences with the brand could potentially lead to customer engagement (Harrigan *et al.*, 2018), and such engagements could result in the creation of positive eWOM in the form of either comments or recommendations posted online that help other customers strongly influence their behaviour and have a significant impact on the success of goods and services (Rossmann *et al.*, 2016). Thus, we propose the following:

H4. CBE is positively associated with eWOM.

2.6 Self-brand connection with electronic word-of-mouth

According to Kwon and Mattila (2015), the SBC is the strong relationship that customers develop with a brand that they believe represents them most appropriately. So, such relationships assist customers who want to have strong relationships with brands and share their positive opinions about brands to identify who they are and interact with others about themselves. Moreover, having said that, a higher level of SBC in consumers could help to increase the chance of them sharing positive experiences and comments about the brand with other customers (Kwon and Mattila, 2015). Therefore, customers who feel more connected with brands tend to engage with the brand more than those who do not, and this may potentially lead to positive eWOM. Thus, we propose the following:

H5. SBC has a significant impact on eWOM.

2.7 Electronic word-of-mouth with brand co-creation

Scholars who have explored VCC also developed the brand co-creation concept (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004) and defined it as the integration of the firm's ability to enhance brand value through customers' engagement (Hsieh and Chang, 2016). Emergence of the Web 2.0 contributes to create more comprehensive communication between companies and their customers, enhances and facilitates the process of VCC with customers, which has become a significant topic for firms in various industries, especially in the hospitality industry (González-Mansilla *et al.*, 2019).

As Frasquet-deltoro and Lorenzo-romero (2018) argue, based on social exchange theory, individuals only develop and maintain a sustainable connection with others if they believe there will be a mutual benefit that helps them to achieve a reward. These customers' involvement and their participation in social networking platforms is an essential aspect of BCC (Hajli *et al.*, 2017), which could mean that these platforms are catalysts for BCC (Park *et al.*, 1996). In the hospitality industry, travellers are increasingly using online platforms to share their experiences and opinions, benefit from others' reviews and also communicate with other customers and hotel owners (Filieri and McLeay, 2016). These online communications lead to a BCC in tourism platforms. Hence, customers' engagement with online reviews and comments is based on the fact that the eWOM may possibly help them make a better decision, and as a result, BCC would be generated. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that:

H6. eWOM has a significant impact on BCC.

2.8 Customer-brand engagement with brand co-creation

Based on Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) study, value can be defined as a phenomena that appears in communication between the firms and customers through integrated resources. This means companies and engaged customers share, enhance and combine each other's abilities and resources to build a common value through new forms of relationship, learning mechanism and services (Piligrimiene *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, when active customers become more engaged with brands, they are more likely to give feedback, sharing ideas and opinions with companies, which could result in the

involvement of passionate and perceptive customers that could lead to BCC (Merz *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, this study proposes the following:

H7. CBE is positively associated with BCC.

2.9 Self-brand connection with brand co-creation

As Kennedy and Guzmán (2017) show, co-creation occurs when different parties become involved in the process of the value creation of the brand. Such mutually beneficial relationships for creating shared values can be gained through SBC, which demonstrates a close connection between the customer's identity and the brand (Vallaster *et al.*, 2018). More importantly, and specifically in the context of hotel industry and tourism, firms need to understand how consumer behaviour, as a prominent component of value creation for the brand, can lead to BCC (Kennedy and Guzmán, 2017). Thus, we propose that:

H8. SBC has a significant impact on the BCC.

2.10 Privacy concern with electronic word-of-mouth and brand co-creation

PC is considered as subjective views of fairness for information privacy among customers. Hospitality sector, if not as the pioneer but certainly as one the first industry that is using online platforms to gather information or to communicate with their customers, is always in the front line of dealing with unlawful activities such as hacking. As a result, travellers have always had this concern of their shared information being compromised or being exposed to criminals (Ip *et al.*, 2011). Previous studies have indicated that both culture and cross-cultural preferences are major antecedents of PC, which could lead to the customers' level of PCs change beyond national boundaries as a result of different regulations of PCs being applied in different countries (Tussyadiah *et al.*, 2019). For example, as mentioned before, American tourists show the lowest PC when staying in national resorts, while their PCs increase in non-American resorts (D'Acunto and Volo, 2021). So that the level of privacy provided by the hospitality sector should meet the needs of travellers according to their nationalities and culture, and if not, it would increase the level of PCs that could have a negative impact on the level of tourists' satisfaction (D'Acunto *et al.*, 2021).

For several reasons, online users normally share their personal information including register as a member of particular website, such as hospitality platform for booking flights and accommodation, or to interact and gain insight of other consumers about a product or service (Liang *et al.*, 2011). As a result, customers who share their personal information with online platforms or companies are generally more concerned and anxious about information being shared as they may have doubts on how companies will handle their data in commercial transactions or communications or even their personal information being exposed or used for unwanted purposes such as third-party product advertising, which could lead them to be more reluctant in engaging with social sharing activities (Vijayasathy, 2004). Such concerns result in negative impacts, such as less tendency to reveal personal information and share opinions, decrease in the intentions to use online services and lower levels of trust (Chen and Dibb, 2010); PC is used as moderator, and therefore, we propose a hypothesis as given below:

H9. PC moderates the relationship between eWOM and brand co-creation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

Using information from Iranian Cultural, Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Agency, 125 independent hotels in major cities including Shiraz, Isfahan and Tehran were chosen based on the convenient sampling. Out of these, 30 of them agreed to grant access to their guests

to collect data. The target respondents were the tourists who were staying at those independent hotels during the data collection. For the purpose of this study, we have collected data from Iranian and European travellers.

3.2 Instrument and measures

A survey questionnaire was designed based on the existing literature using the constructs of CBE, SBC, moral judgement, eWOM and BCC. Figure 1 indicates our conceptual model. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed among travellers visiting major cities of Iran and staying at one of the independent hotels operating in those cities during their visit. The questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents who had visited Iran and stayed at independent hotels during their visit.

The items that have been used in this study to measure the constructs were all adopted from existing literature in this area. To measure CBE construct, questions from France *et al.* (2018) were adopted, which includes six items. Secondly, to measure the SBC construct, this study used items proposed by Lin *et al.* (2017), which include three items. The third construct used for this study was MJ for which questions were adopted from Stanton *et al.*'s (2019) study, which includes three items. To measure the eWOM construct, we have adopted questions from Hu and Kim's (2018) study, which includes three items to measure eWOM. Moreover, to measure PC construct, which in this study acts as a moderator, questions from Tajvidi *et al.* (2018) were adopted, which include three items. Finally, to measure BCC construct, we borrowed questions from Tajvidi *et al.* (2018), which also includes three items.

Table 1 shows the constructs and item measurements used in this study.

We have estimated that in both online and hard copy versions, we contacted around 855 travellers in total, out of which a total of 514 fully completed and usable surveys were received. The data collection period was between September 2019 and January 2020. The Iranian sample was balanced in terms of gender (Female = 52.8%; Male = 47.2%), whereas the majority of the European respondents were male (69.2%). In both groups, most participants have academic degrees (Table 2).

Figure 1 Conceptual model

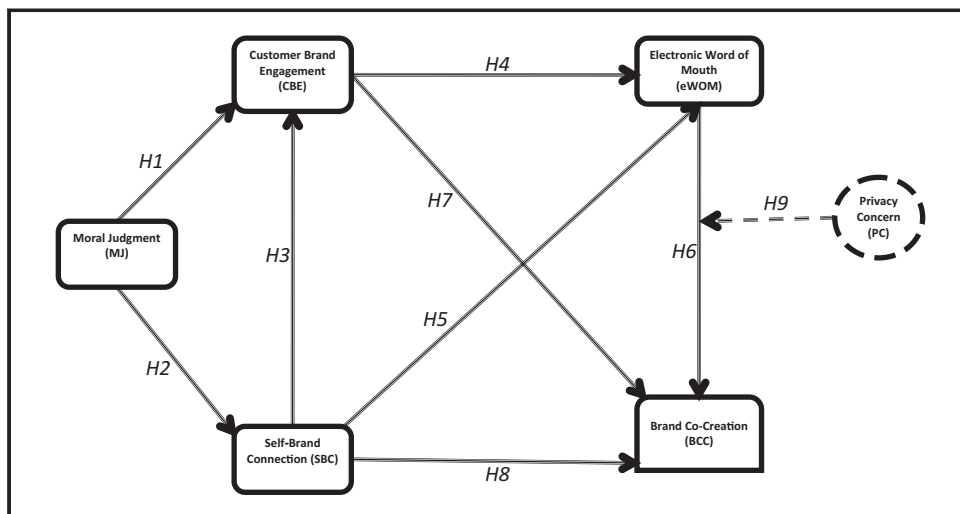


Table 1 Constructs and item references

Construct	Abbreviation	Item measurement	References
<i>Customer-brand engagement</i>			
	CBE1	I-am-enthusiastic-towards-the-brand	Cassandra France, Debra Grace, Bill Merrilees, Dale Miller, 2018
	CBE2	I-am-passionate-about-the-brand	
	CBE3	I-have-a-sense-of-belonging-to-the-brand	
	CBE4	When-dealing-with-the-brand,-I-am-deeply-engrossed	
	CBE5	When-interacting-with-the-brand,-I-concentrate-entirely-on-the-brand	
	CBE6	When-involved-with-the-brand,-my-mind-is-focused-on-what-is-happening	
<i>Self-brand connection</i>			
	SBC1	This-brand-embodies-what-I-believe-in	Jialing Lin, Antonio Lobo and CivilaiLeckie, 2016
	SBC2	This-brand-is-an-important-indication-of-who-I-am	
	SBC3	I-feel-a-strong-sense-of-belonging-to-this-brand	
<i>eWOM</i>			
	EW1	I-have-recommended-this-brand-in-online-pages-to-lots-of-people	Carrol and Ahuvia (2006) and Kim and Park (2014)
	EW2	I-"talk-up"-the-brand-in-online-pages-to-my-friends	
	EW3	I-give-this-brand-in-online-pages-lots-of-positive-word-of-mouth-advertising	
<i>Brand co-creation</i>			
	BCC1	I-am-willing-to-provide-my-experiences-and-suggestions-when-my-friends-on-my-favourite-social-networking-site-want-my-advice-about-the-hotel I have stayed	(Developed from Schau <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016)
	BCC2	I-am-willing-to-stay-in-the-hotel-that-recommended-by-my-friends-on-my-favourite-social-networking-site	
	BCC3	When-I want-to-reserve-a-hotel,-I will-consider-the-experiences-of-my-friends-about-staying-in-the-hotels-on-my-favourite-social-networking-site	
<i>Privacy concern</i>			
	PC1	It-usually-bothers-me-when-my-favourite-hotel-site-asks-me-for-personal-information	(Hajli, Sims, <i>et al.</i> (2017); Liang <i>et al.</i> 2011) (Hajli, Sims, <i>et al.</i> (2017); Liang <i>et al.</i> , 2011)
	PC2	When-my-favourite-hotel-site-asks-me-for-personal-information,-I-sometimes-think-twice-before-providing-it	
	PC3	It-bothers-me-to-give-personal-information-to-my-favourite-hotel-employees	
	PC4	I-am-concerned-that-my-favourite-hotel-site-is-collecting-too-much-personal-information-about-me	
<i>Moral judgement</i>			
	MJ1	Do-you-think-the-social-media-strategy-of-this-hotel-is:	Steven J. Stanton, JohnKimb, Jennifer C. Thorc, Xiaodong Dengd, 2018
	MJ2	Unjust 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 just	
	MJ3	Morally-wrong 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 morally-right "Violates-unspoken 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 "does not violates unspoken Promise-to-their-consumer's promise" to-their- consumers"	

4. Results

To examine our model and hypothesis testing, a structural equation modelling (SEM) technique was used. Amos (24) was used to analyse the data and to test the hypotheses. To test non-response bias, we have extracted the first 50 and the last 50 surveys, and the results show that the significance value of all those variables used in this study were not in the acceptance level range. Hence, it can be concluded that there are no differences between the first 50 sets of data and last 50 sets of data. Figure 2 indicates conceptual model in AMOS for both cases.

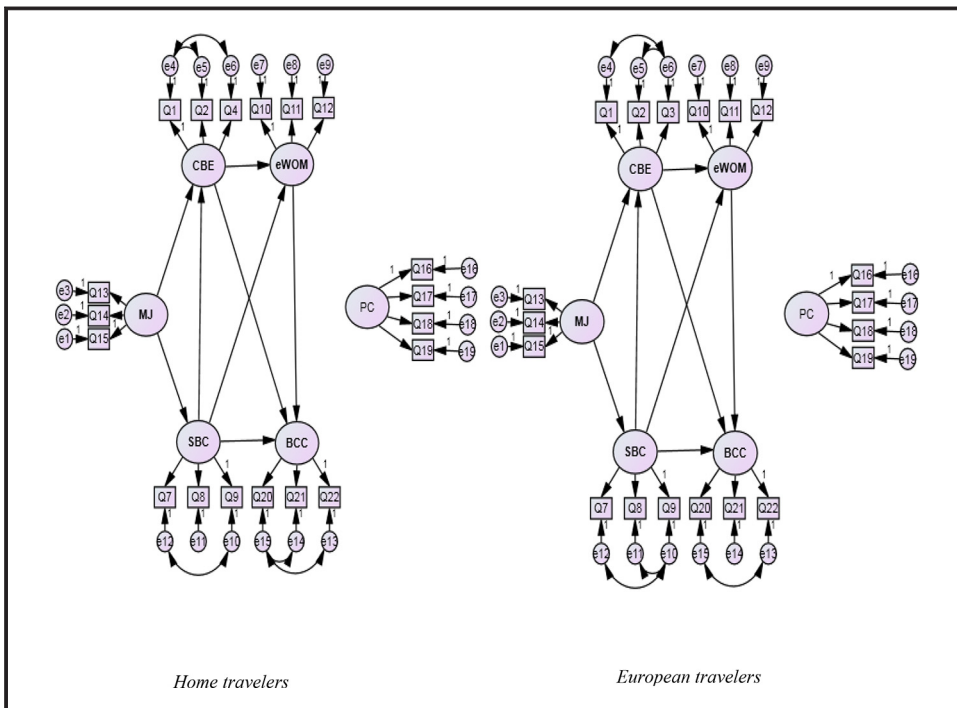
4.1 Measurement model

For the purpose of this study, we have followed two-phase approach suggested by Hair *et al.* (2006). In the first phase, we used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to examine interrelationships between the factors to uncover the underlying structure (Hair *et al.*, 2006).

Table 2 Demographics profile

Characteristics	Relative frequency Iranian	Frequency (%) Iranian	Relative frequency European	Frequency (%) European
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	137	47.2	155	69.2
Female	153	52.8	69	30.8
<i>Education</i>				
A-level and below	17	5.9	68	30.4
Undergraduate	105	36.2	59	26.3
Postgraduate	148	51	58	25.9
PHD	20	6.9	39	17.4
<i>Age</i>				
18–24	32	11	60	26.8
25–34	132	45.5	102	45.5
35–44	120	41.4	40	18
45–54	5	1.7	14	6.25
55–64	1	0.3	6	2.7
64 and above	0	0	2	0.75
<i>Marital status</i>				
Single	182	62.8	94	42
Married	104	35.9	118	52.7
Divorced	4	1.4	12	5.3

Figure 2 Conceptual model in AMOS



Three items (HT: CBE3, CBE5 and CBE6; ET: CBE4, CBE5 and CBE6), which were cross-loaded, were removed from the EFA technique. To acquire an appropriate factor analysis result, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test was used for the data for EFA (HT: 0.755; ET: 0.750 > 0.6), and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was used to check that variances are equal and demonstrate significant values that was 0.0. We evaluated the reliability, discriminant and

Table 3 Reliability measures and for each variable									
<i>Home traveller</i>				<i>European traveller</i>					
Item	Factor loading	Mean	Std. D	Cronbach's alpha	Item	Factor loading	Mean	Std. D	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Customer-brand engagement</i>									
CBE1	0.73	5.419	1.1155	0.711	CBE1	0.74	5.286	1.2594	0.757
CBE2	0.77	5.661	1.6231		CBE2	0.73	5.174	1.1329	
CBE4	0.74	4.578	1.4222		CBE3	0.87	5.031	1.1419	
<i>Self-brand connection</i>									
SBC1	0.700	3.976	1.7005	0.792	SBC1	0.68	4.621	1.3670	0.73
SBC2	0.90	4.125	1.7495		SBC2	0.73	4.643	1.2518	
SBC3	0.72	3.910	1.8311		SBC3	0.85	4.862	1.3735	
<i>Moral judgement</i>									
MJ1	0.7	3.734	1.6013	0.803	MJ1	0.85	4.911	1.4521	0.748
MJ2	0.763	3.450	1.6046		MJ2	0.73	5.027	1.3916	
MJ3	0.821	3.419	1.6461		MJ3	0.55	5.37	1.3861	
<i>eWOM</i>									
E1	0.73	4.685	1.5096	0.743	E1	0.66	5.32	1.299	0.781
E2	0.56	4.720	1.4676		E2	0.8	5.509	1.2705	
E3	0.83	5.010	1.3398		E3	0.77	5.580	1.2891	
<i>Brand co-creation</i>									
BCC1	0.78	5.270	1.2788	0.719	BCC1	0.76	5.563	1.1812	0.714
BCC2	0.78	5.211	1.1639		BCC2	0.59	5.500	1.1560	
BCC3	0.60	5.249	1.1668		BCC3	0.87	5.536	1.0666	
<i>Privacy concern</i>									
PC1	0.67	3.602	1.6468	0.885	PC1	0.77	5.580	1.2321	0.836
PC2	0.77	3.592	1.6157		PC2	0.93	5.549	1.1818	
PC3	0.78	3.567	1.6718		PC3	0.83	5.674	1.2550	
PC4	0.77	3.945	1.7981		PC4	0.73	5.714	1.1554	

convergent validity for all of variables. As indicated in Table 3, all the scales from both samples demonstrate passable reliability through composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha (HT: 0.711 to 0.885; ET: 0.714 to 0.836 > 0.70).

For convergent validity, the average variance extracted was more than 0.5. Based on our results presented in Table 4, the discriminant validity indicates that associations among the variables were below the value of 0.92, and the constructs are completely distinct.

Additionally, we used the HTMT test to indicate discriminant validity. As shown in Table 5, HTMT test in our study was acceptable (HT: 0.004 to 0.587; ET: -0.7 to 0.52 < 0.9), which means discriminant validity has been established between two reflective constructs. Table 5 indicates HTMT test results.

4.2 Hypothesis testing

In the second phase, for insight into the various relationships between the constructs formulated in our hypotheses we used SEM. The following results were obtained: HT – CMIN/DF: 1.922, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA): 0.057; ET – CMIN/DF: 1.147, RMSEA: 0.026; comparative fit index – HT: 0.947; ET: 0.987; incremental fit index HT: 0.948; ET: 0.988; normed fit index HT: 0.905; ET: 0.910; and Tucker–Lewis index HT: 0.927; ET: 0.982. All were more than 0.9, which demonstrated an appropriate fit for the data used in this study.

H1 addresses the impact of MJ on CBE, giving sharply different results between the two cases. The results from the European travellers' data were not accepted because of not being statistically significant. H2 addresses the impact of MJ on SBC, and the results show significant impacts from both cases' perception. H3 addresses the impact of SBC on CBE,

Table 4 Discriminant validity, CR and AVE

Item	Home							European										
	AVE	CR	MSV	CBE	SBC	MJ	eWOM	BCC	PC	AVE	CR	MSV	CBE	SBC	MJ	eWOM	BCC	PC
CBE	0.558	0.749	0.20	0.746	-	-	-	-	-	0.606	0.751	0.271	0.778	-	-	-	-	-
SBC	0.603	0.744	0.17	0.439	0.776	-	-	-	-	0.573	0.749	0.272	0.521	0.757	-	-	-	-
MJ	0.583	0.750	0.066	0.333	0.186	0.763	-	-	-	0.516	0.745	0.118	0.055	0.230	0.718	-	-	-
eWOM	0.513	0.745	0.067	0.504	0.342	0.301	0.72	-	-	0.553	0.764	0.195	0.240	0.442	0.112	0.744	-	-
BCC	0.526	0.749	0.006	-0.01	0.203	0.190	0.227	0.725	-	0.563	0.732	0.108	0.257	0.195	0.116	0.328	0.750	-
PC	0.67	0.81	0.067	0.140	0.130	0.257	0.259	0.076	0.818	0.561	0.75	0.118	0.257	0.195	0.330	-0.093	0.223	0.749

Table 5 HTMT test results

	Home					European				
HTMT	PC	BCC	eWOM	MJ	SBC	PC	BCC	eWOM	MJ	SBC
BCC	0.071	–	–	–	–	0.208	–	–	–	–
eWOM	0.286	0.226	–	–	–	–0.07	0.354	–	–	–
MJ	0.262	0.2	0.286	–	–	0.381	0.131	0.118	–	–
SBC	0.087	0.168	0.394	0.171	–	0.182	0.184	0.453	0.235	–
CBE	0.162	0.004	0.587	0.348	0.526	0.258	0.287	0.258	0.096	0.52

and the results show significant impacts from both cases' perception. *H4* addresses the impact of CBE on eWOM, giving sharply different results between the two cases. The results from the European travellers' data were not acceptable. *H5* addresses the impact of SBC on eWOM, and the results show significant impacts from both cases' perception. *H6* addresses the impact of eWOM on BCC, and the results show significant impacts from both cases' perception. *H7* addresses the impact of CBE on BCC giving sharply different results between the two cases. The results from the European travellers' data were not accepted. *H8* addresses the impact of SBC on BCC giving sharply different results between the two cases. The results from the European travellers' data were not accepted. [Table 6](#) indicates the relationships between the tested hypotheses (*H1–H8*) with *t*-values.

H9 addresses the moderation role of PC between eWOM and BCC that gives sharply different results between the two cases. The results from the home travellers' data were not acceptable. [Table 7](#) and [Figure 3](#) indicate the results of moderator role of PC.

[Figure 4](#) display our final model, structural path coefficients and *p*-values for each relationship.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The main research issue presented in this study was how brands may be co-created in independent hotels by considering travellers' cultural differences. As a result, it was crucial to consider the perceptions of travellers of their visiting experience. Therefore, this study challenges the general assumption in the vast majority of previous studies that travellers constitute a homogenous population. As a result, this study provides a fresh perspective that allows for the possibility of the heterogeneity of the travellers based on cultural differences between local and European visitors.

Secondly, this study also aimed to examine if variables including MJ, CBE, SBC and eWOM play as antecedents of BCC. Moreover, this study also aimed to discover if the relationships between these variables differ when there are cultural differences between Iranian travellers and other travellers' samples and, if so, what can be learned from these differences. Furthermore, this study investigated the moderating impact of PC on the relationship between eWOM and BCC.

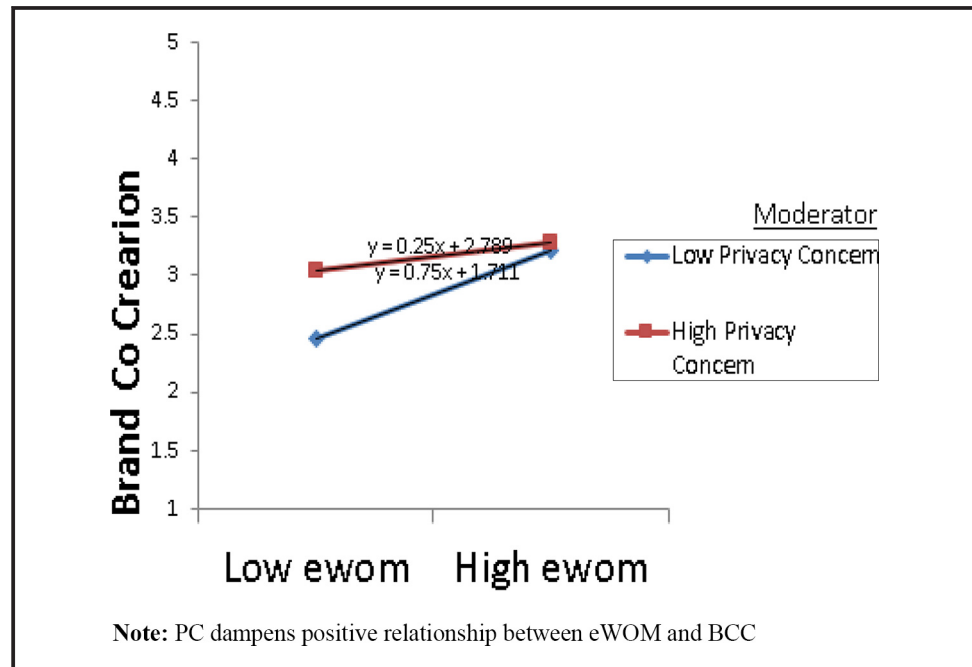
Generally speaking, our results show that MJ plays an important role in customer engagement with brands as well as with SBC, which eventually could have a major influence on making a decision about choosing a specific hotel among Iranian travellers, which is consistent with previous studies in this area ([Lin et al., 2017](#); [Schwepker and Good, 2013](#)). Unlike our results with the Iranian traveller sample, in European travellers' sample, MJ was shown to have an insignificant relationship with CBE. The relationship between CBE and eWOM was also significant in Iranian, which confirms previous studies in this area ([Ahn and Back, 2018](#); [Harrigan et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, SBC in both Iranian and European travellers shows a significant relationship with both eWOM and CBE in the context of independent hotels. This means that when travellers develop their relationship with a

Table 6 Results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Home traveller				European traveller					
	Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	Estimate	S.E	C.R	P		
H1 Moral judgement	→	0.226	0.055	3.334	***	-0.033	0.057	-0.442	0.659	Not significant
H2 Moral judgement	→	0.182	0.084	2.581	0.01	0.210	0.076	2.616	0.009	Significant
H3 Self-brand connection	→	0.398	0.047	5.257	***	0.429	0.107	3.187	0.001	Significant
H4 Customer-brand engagement	→	0.411	0.143	3.871	***	0.065	0.082	0.729	0.466	Not significant
H5 Self-brand connection	→	0.174	0.065	2.233	0.026	0.388	0.091	3.124	0.002	Significant
H6 eWOM	→	0.233	0.089	2.350	0.019	0.289	0.095	3.332	***	Significant
H7 Customer-brand engagement	→	-0.225	0.0161	-1.696	0.09	0.189	0.082	2.306	0.021	Significant
H8 Self-brand connection	→	0.193	0.072	2.013	0.044	-0.027	0.068	-0.311	0.756	Not significant

Table 7 Results of hypothesis testing (moderator impact of PC)

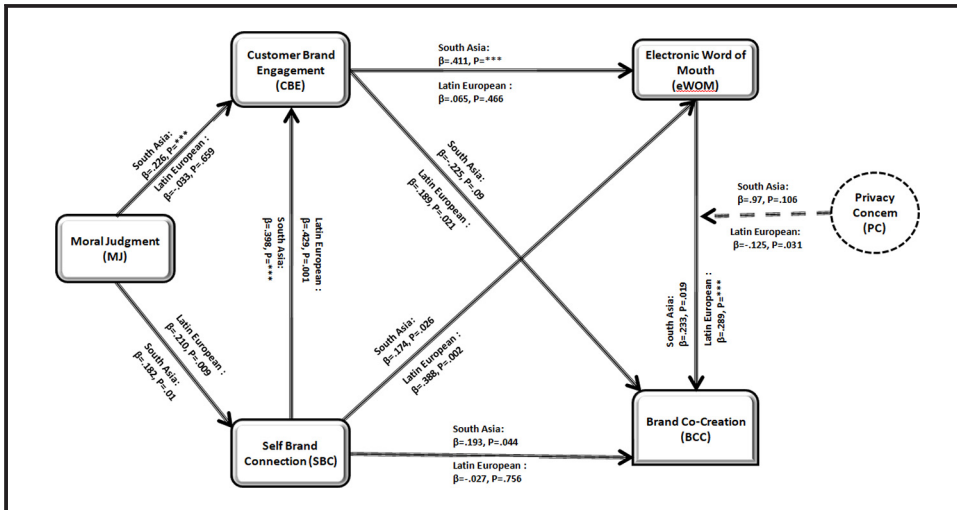
Hypothesis (moderator of PC)	Home				Estimate	S.E	European			
	Estimate	S.E	C.R	P			C.R	P		
H9 eWOM → Brand co-creation	0.097	0.060	1.62	0.106	Not significant	-0.125	0.056	-2.231	0.031	Significant

Figure 3 Role of PC as a moderator

specific brand of independent hotel, they would share their positive experience and comments with other customers about the brand, which eventually results in BCC (Kwon and Mattila, 2015). Moreover, the relationship between SBC and BCC was also found to be insignificant among European travellers, which contradicts the findings of previous studies (Kennedy and Guzmán, 2017). This could be interpreted in terms of Western culture having a relationship between customers and brand that is impersonal where facts play an important role, whereas in the Iranian traveller sample, the relationship between customers and brand could be very personal and based on personal feeling and attachment rather than facts and figures. Additionally, eWOM plays an important role in BCC in both cases, which means customers involvement and their participation on social networking platforms are essential for branding co-creation among independent hotels (Hajli *et al.*, 2017). According to our results, CBE leads to BCC only in European travellers, which suggests that further investigation is needed in this area. On the other hand, SBC shows a significant relationship with BCC in Iranian sample but not in European travellers, which could be good indicators for future studies in this area.

Surprisingly, PC shows significant impact on the relationship between eWOM and BCC mainly in the European travellers sample and not in the Iranian travellers sample, which signifies that hotel owners should be carefully observant about the private information of

Figure 4 Validated model



European travellers. These results could be explained using uncertainty avoidance dimension (Hofstede, 1980) where Latin European scores much higher as compared to Iranian sample. This indicates that European travellers may feel more uncomfortable or curious by sharing their personal information either on an online community or with hotel staff as opposed to Iranian sample. In general, the pattern of relationships shown in the Iranian travellers sample might be expected and possibly could be explained by the cultural context. Iran as a part of the South Asian cluster shows a slightly higher than average score on in-group collectivism, but humane orientation is low, which could result in the relationship between organisations and their customers being impersonal and partly bureaucratic (House *et al.*, 2004). This could be also a result of the strictly controlled and limited Iranian economy brought about by severe sanctions imposed by the West, which has created a situation where there is limited competition, and therefore, Iranian customers generally have low expectations from product or service providers (Nazarian *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, MJ appears to be a significant factor in Iranian travellers engaging with brand and having a sense of oneness, which could be related to Iranian scores high on humane orientation dimension of GLOBE where people are encouraged to be fair, generous, caring and kind.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

This study provides new understanding to be added to the existing literature that are dealing with the need for adaption of theories and practice originated in the West for use in other parts of the world (Hofstede, 1980). For example, Nazarian *et al.* (2020) in their research on independent hotels found that Iranians trust their leaders more than the organisational systems because of prioritising traditional values, such as personal loyalty to managers, whereas the Spanish trust organisational systems more than their leaders due to having higher individualism and prioritising modern values, such as impersonal rules and objective processes. Moreover, D'Acunto and Volo (2021) by analysing 68,000 hotel reviews found that American people's cultural values had a significant effect on their PCs level when staying at American or foreign resorts. Similarly, our study shows that BCC process in online communities occurs differently between two contrasting cultures including Latin European and Southern Asia clusters. Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature by showing how cultural differences among travellers lead to BCC in online communities in the context of independent hotels setting. One of the main contributions of this study is related to

the foreign travellers (ET) that show a high level of PCs while staying in foreign countries' independent hotels, which is aligned with previous studies' findings (D'Acunto and Volo, 2021). This can lead travellers to have less tendency in spreading eWOM and interacting with others, where for hotels such interactions are the essential fundamental of BCC. Previous studies identified privacy issues as a main antecedent of participating in online activities such as online shopping or sharing opinions (Chen and Dibb, 2010; Vijayasathy, 2004). Furthermore, our study also shows that MJ plays as a main antecedent of CBE and SBC in Iranian travellers; however, among the European travellers, the results show that there is no relationship between MJ and CBE. This difference could indicate that Iranian travellers put a high value on morality due to their cultural background. Also, data collected from both groups of travellers indicate that eWOM has a significant impact on BCC process and is aligned with previous studies that found it (online networking) an essential component of VCC, and the construction of brands is through reaching the collective consensus on a brand's meaning among the members of social brand communities (Hajli et al., 2017). In previous studies, the role of cultural background of travellers in online communities when sharing their experiences and opinions and its relationship with BCC were never tested and discussed, which in this study we did so in the context of independent hotels setting.

5.2 Limitations and further research

As we have collected data from one developing country for the purpose of this study, we suggest scholars who are interested in this area should consider cross-cultural examination by including other countries. Another suggestion for future research is that this model could be used for other types of hotels such as chain or branded hotels, and results could be compared with independent hotels. Additionally, scholars could test the impact of different demographic variables with this model, for example, to examine if education level, or ages could potentially provide different results and potentially explore which relations in which groups are more significant and why.

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Further reading

Whan Park, C., MacInnis, D.J., Priester, J., Eisingerich, A.B. and Lacobucci, D. (2010), "Brand attachment and brand attitude strength: conceptual and empirical differentiation of two critical brand equity drivers", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 74 No. 6, pp. 1-17, doi: [10.1509/jmkg.74.6.1](https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.74.6.1).

About the authors

Mr Alireza Ranjbaran studied marketing in the University of Tehran. His current research aims at identifying influential factors of loyalty and disloyalty of travellers towards traditional resorts using text mining, and he is interested in tourism, hospitality, branding, data science and digital marketing. He is also interested in SEM and statistics analytics. He is working as a Marketing Manager in Bistatech, which is a company working in information and communication technology sector.

Mr Mohammadjavad Shabankareh studied international marketing in the University of Tehran. His current research aims at identifying influential factors of loyalty and disloyalty of travellers towards traditional resorts using text mining, and he is interested in data science, consumer behaviour, hospitality, branding, digital marketing and internet of thing. He is also interested text mining, artificial intelligence. He is launching a medical tourism company in Iran and is active in stock market.

Alireza Nazarian, (PhD, FHEA, CMgrMCMI, MSc, BSC) is a Senior Lecturer in Management at the University of Westminster. His research interests include organisational theory, leadership, national and organisational culture, organisational performance and organisational effectiveness. He has published in a number of journals including *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*. He is acting as the Editor in chief of *Organisational Studies and Innovation* as well as Senior Editor of *European Journal of International Management*.

Nader Seyyedamiri is a Faculty Member of the Faculty of Entrepreneurship in the University of Tehran. He has PhD of Marketing from the University of Tehran and works as a Guest Researcher in Aalborg University of Denmark, Campus of Copenhagen. Nader's research area is Entrepreneurial and Digital Marketing in Tourism and Small and Medium E-Businesses. As a Member of the International Communication Society and the Asian Marketing Association, he is a Consultant and Author of some academic articles and book in these fields. Nader Seyyedamiri is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: nadersa@ut.ac.ir

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