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Brand Co-Creation in Independent Hotels in Iran**

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Branding Through Visitors: How Cultural Differences Affect Brand Co-Creation in Independent Hotels in Iran

Abstract

Purpose - This study examines the interrelationship of moral judgment, self-brand connection, customer brand engagement, eWOM and how brand co-creation occur in independent hotels and contrasts visitors' perspectives between two different GLOBE clusters in independent hotels. Furthermore, this study also examines the moderating impact of Privacy Concern 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 modeling using AMOS 22 was adopted to test the hypotheses.

Findings - Our findings revealed that there are significant differences between two culturally different travellers in terms of selected variables, which suggesting that moral judgment is a main antecedent of customer brand engagement which lead to eWOM among Iranian travellers which consequently lead to brand co-creation. Moreover, our data indicates that European travellers show a high level privacy concerns while staying in independent hotels in Iran which prevent them from sharing and getting engaged in the social media which could delay the brand co-creation process especially in international level.

Originality - This study contributes 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 requires special attention of independent hotel managers.

Keywords: Brand Co-Creation, Independent Hotel, eWOM, Culture, Moral judgment, Privacy Concern

1. Introduction

Brand co-creation as distinct from value co-creation 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 value co-creation, 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 brand co-creation 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 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 have been created for travellers during their stay in those hotels and use 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 brand co-creation process in the chain hotels especially among international travelers could be easier than independent ones due to spreading positive eWOM by their customers that may originated from more aligned, standard, satisfying services. On the other hand, in independent hotels brand co-creation process and brand positioning is 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 among international travelers with different cultural backgrounds (D'Acunto & Volo, 2021) which might lead to negative eWOM and 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 in order to position and improve their brand image in the hospitality competitive market and experience a good brand co-creation process specifically in international market.

Social media platforms facilitate and support dynamic interactions within online communities between individuals, making it possible for customers to share brand stories with others, as well as facilitating 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 & 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 facilitates co-creation between brands and consumers. On the other hand, as Hollebeek et al (2014) argue, customer brand engagement creates a psychological effect in the minds of consumers so that they interact with the focal brand. A self-brand connection 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, the self-brand connection affects the behaviour of consumers including (e)WOM and post-purchase intention (Kwon & Mattila, 2015). On the other hand, according to (Stanton et al., 2019), travelers' moral judgment 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 in social media or in the online community.

This study aims to examine how brand co-creation antecedents occur in independent hotels from the visitors' perspective and compare and contrast results from two groups of tourists visited and stayed in independent hotels with clear cultural differences. Hence, our objective is to examine how brand co-creation is created through different cultures in independent hotels. As a result data were collected from both Iranian and European travellers visiting Iran and staying in independent hotels during their visit. 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 GLOBE Project (House et al., 2004). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by examining how cultural differences among travellers lead to brand co-creation in different ways. Furthermore, this study also provides further

contributions to the literature, firstly this study is the first of its kind that investigates the concept of brand co-creation in independent hotels and, secondly, this study shows how cultural differences between home travellers and European travellers' perspectives bring about different brand co-creation in independent hotels and, finally, this study explores the moderating impact of privacy concerns. 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 brand co-creation?"

2. Theory and hypotheses development

2.1. Culture

House et al (2004) introduced 9 dimensions to measure national culture and 6 dimensions to measure cultural endorsed leadership values in their Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (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 Asia 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 judgment and self-brand connection

Moral judgment 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 their guests' needs and wants, which result in making a reputation and potentially increasing their market share (Zeithaml 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 in order to improve their digital presence use 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 in order 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 judgments regarding the methods, and attitudes toward 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 & 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 WOM, and engage in switching behaviours (Martin et al., 2017).

Self-brand connection, 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 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 judgment) 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 hypothesis:

H1: Moral judgment has a significant impact on self-brand connection

2.3. *Moral judgment and customer brand engagement*

Customer brand engagement could be defined as the level of an individual customers' motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity 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 in order to provide their customers a sense of identification to engage them more with their brand.

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

H2: Moral judgment has a significant impact on customer-brand engagement

2.4. *Self-brand connection with Customer Brand Engagement (CBE)*

According to (Vallaster et al., 2018), when there is a strong tie between customers' identity and the brand then the self-brand connection is generated. Such relationships can be created through 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 hypothesis:

H3: Self-brand connection has a significant impact on Customer Brand Engagement (CBE)

2.5. *Customer-brand engagement with eWOM*

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 & 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 & 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:

H4: Customer-brand engagement is positively associated with eWOM

2.6. *Self-brand connection with eWOM*

According (Kwon & Mattila, 2015), the self-brand connection is the strong relationship which customers develop with a brand that they believe represents them most appropriately. So, customers who want to have strong relationships with brands and share their positive opinions about brands, such relationships assist them to identify who they are and interact about themselves to others. Moreover, having said that, a higher level of self-brand connection in consumers could help to increase the chance of them sharing positive experiences and comments about the brand with other customers (Kwon & 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:

H5: Self-brand connection has a significant impact on eWOM.

2.7. *eWOM with brand co-creation*

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

As Frassetto & 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 brand co-creation (Hajli et al., 2017) which could mean that these platforms are catalysts for brand co-creation (Park et al., 1996). In the hospitality industry, travelers are increasingly using online platforms to share their experiences and opinions, benefit from others' reviews, and they also communicate with other customers and hotel owners (Filiari & McLeay, 2016) which these online communications lead to a brand co-creation 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 brand co-creation would be generated. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H6: eWOM has a significant impact on brand co-creation.

2.8. *Customer brand engagement with brand co-creation*

Based on (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) study value can be defined as a phenomena which 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 brand co-creation (Merz et al., 2018). Therefore, this study proposes:

H7: Customer brand engagement is positively associated with brand co-creation.

2.9. *Self-brand connection with brand co-creation*

As Kennedy & 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 self-brand connection, which demonstrates a close connection between the customer's identity and the brands (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 brand co-creation (Kennedy & Guzmán., 2017). Thus, we propose that:

H8: Self-brand connection has a significant impact on the brand co-creation.

2.10. *Privacy concern with eWOM and Brand Co-Creation*

Privacy concern 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 and utilizing 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 preference are major antecedents of privacy concern, which could lead to the customers' level of privacy concerns change beyond national boundaries as a result of different regulations of privacy concerns being applied in different countries (Tussyadiah et al., 2019). For example, as mentioned before American tourists show the lowest privacy concern when staying in national resorts while their privacy concerns increase in non-American resorts (D'Acunto & Volo, 2021). So that, 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

privacy concerns 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 but also share their shopping experiences and knowledge, and provide peers with reviews and recommendation about services and products (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 on engaging with social sharing activities (Vijayarathy., 2004) . Such concerns result in negative impacts, such as less tendency to reveal personal information and share opinions, decreasing intentions to use online services, and lower levels of trust (Chen & Dibb., 2010) privacy concerns is used as moderator and therefore we propose a hypothesis as below:

H9: Privacy concern 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 (ICHHT), 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 customer brand engagement, self-brand connection, moral judgment, eWOM, brand co creation. Figure 1 indicates our conceptual model. The self-administered questionnaire 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 that had visited Iran and stayed at independent hotels during their visit.

... Insert figure 1 here...

The items that have been used in this study to measure the constructs were all adopted from existing literature in this area. In order to measure customer brand engagement (CBE) construct, questions from (France et al., 2018) were adopted which includes 6 items. Secondly, to measure the self-brand connection (SBC) construct, this study used items proposed by (Lin et al., 2017) that includes 3 items. The third construct used for this study was moral judgment (MJ) for which questions were adopted from Stanton et al. (2019) study that includes 3 items. To measure the electronic Word Of Mouth (eWOM) construct, we have adopted questions from (Hu & Kim, 2018) study that includes 3 items to measure eWOM. Moreover, to measure Privacy Concern (PC) construct, which in this study acts as a moderator, questions from (Tajvidi et al., 2018) were adopted that include 3 items. Finally, in order to measure brand co-creation (BCC) construct, we borrowed questions from Tajvidi et al (2018) which also includes 3 items.

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

... Insert table 1 here...

We have estimated that in both online and hardcopy 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).

4. Results

To examine our model and hypothesis testing a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) technique was employed. Amos (24) was used to analyse the data and to test the hypotheses. In order 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 set of data and last 50 set of data. Figure 2 indicates conceptual model in AMOS for both cases.

...Insert table 2 here...

... Insert figure 2 here...

5.1. 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 inter-relationships between the factors to uncover the underlying structure (Hair et al., 2006). Three items (home travellers: CBE3, CBE5 and CBE6; European travellers: CBE4, CBE5 and CBE6), which were cross-loaded were removed from the EFA technique. To acquire an appropriate

factor analysis result, the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test was employed to the data for EFA (Home travellers (HT): .755; European travellers (ET): .750>.6) and Bartlett's test of sphericity was employed to check that variances are equal and demonstrates significant values that was: 0.0. We evaluated the reliability, discriminant, and convergent validity for all of variables. As indicated in Table 3 all the scales from both samples demonstrate passable reliability through composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha (HT: .711 to .885; ET: .714 to .836>0.70).

...Insert table 3 here...

For convergent validity, AVE (the average variance extracted) was more than .5. Based on our results presented in Table 4, the discriminant validity indicates that associations among the variables were below the value of .92 and the constructs are completely distinct.

...Insert table 4 here...

Additionally, we used the HTMT test to indicate discriminant validity. As shown in table 5 HTMT test in our study was acceptable (HT: .004 to .587; ET: -0.7 to .52 <.9) which means discriminant validity has been established between two reflective constructs. Table 5 indicates HTMT test results.

...Insert table 5 here...

5.2. Hypothesis testing

In the second phase, for insight into the various relationships between the constructs formulated in our hypotheses we employed SEM. The following results were obtained: HT - CMIN/DF: 1.922, RMSEA: .057; ET -CMIN/DF: 1.147, RMSEA: .026; comparative fit index (CFI) - HT: .947; ET: .987; incremental fit index (IFI) HT:.948; ET: .988); normed fit index (NFI) HT: .905; ET: .910; Tucker Lewis index (TLI) HT: .927; ET: .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 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.

...Insert table 6 here...

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 privacy concern.

...Insert table 7 here...

...Insert figure 3 here...

Figure 4 display our final model, structural path coefficients and p-values for each relationship.

...Insert figure 4 here...

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 Moral Judgment, Customer Brand Engagement, Self Brand Connection, and Electronic Word of Mouth play as antecedents of Brand Co-Creation. 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 privacy concern on the relationship between eWOM and Brand Co-Creation.

Generally speaking, our results show that moral judgment plays an important role in customer engagement with brands as well as with self-brand connection 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 & Good., 2013). Unlike our results with the Iranian traveller sample, in European travellers sample Moral Judgment was shown to have an insignificant relationship with Customer Brand Engagement. The relationship between Customer Brand Engagement and eWOM was also significant in Iranian which confirms previous studies in this area (Ahn & Back., 2018; Harrigan

et al., 2018). Furthermore, self-brand connection in both Iranian and European travellers shows a significant relationship with both eWOM and customer brand engagement in the context of independent hotels. This means that when travellers develop their relationship with a specific brand of independent hotel they would share their positive experience and comments with other customers about the brand which eventually results in brand co-creation (Kwon & Mattila., 2015). Moreover, the relationship between Self-Brand Connection and Brand Co-Creation was also found to be insignificant among European travellers which contradicts the findings of previous studies (Kennedy & 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 brand co-creation 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, customer brand engagement leads to brand co-creation only in European travellers which suggests that further investigation is needed in this area. On the other hand, self-brand connection shows a significant relationship with brand co-creation in Iranian sample, but not in European travellers which could be good indicators for future studies in this area.

Surprisingly, privacy concern shows significant impact on the relationship between eWOM and brand co-creation 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 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 organizations 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, moral judgment 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.

5.3. 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 prioritizing traditional values, such as personal loyalty to managers, whereas the Spanish trust organizational systems more than their leaders due to having higher individualism and prioritising modern values, such as impersonal rules and objective processes. Moreover, D'Acunto & Volo (2021) by analyzing 68000 hotel reviews found that American people's

cultural values had a significant effect on their privacy concerns level when staying at American or foreign resorts. Similarly, our study shows that brand co-creation 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 travelers lead to brand co-creation in online communities in the context of independent hotels setting. One of the main contributions of this study is related to the foreign travelers (European travelers) that show a high level of privacy concerns while staying in foreign countries independent hotels which is aligned with previous studies findings (D'Acunto & Volo., 2021). This can lead travelers to have less tendency in spreading eWOM and interacting with others, where for hotels such interactions are the essential fundamental of brand co-creation. Previous studies identified privacy issues as a main antecedent of participating in online activities such as online shopping, or sharing opinions (Chen & Dibb., 2010; Vijayasathy., 2004). Furthermore, our study also shows that moral judgment plays as a main antecedent of customer brand engagement and self-brand connection in Iranian travelers; however, among the European travelers the results show that there is no relationship between moral judgment and customer brand engagement. This difference could indicate that Iranian travelers put a high value on morality due to their cultural background. Also, data collected from both groups of travelers indicate that eWOM has a significant impact on brand co-creation process and is aligned with previous studies that found eWOM (Online networking) is an essential component of value co-creation 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 travelers in online communities when sharing their experiences and opinions and its relationship with brand co-

creation never tested and discussed which in this study we did so in the context of independent hotels setting.

5.4. 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.

6. Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Table1- The constructs and item references

Construct	Abbreviation	Item measurement	References
Customer brand engagement			
	CBE1	I-am-enthusiastic-toward-the-brand	Cassandra France, Debra Grace, Bill <u>Merrilees, Dale</u> 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	
Self-brand connection			
	SBC1	This-brand-embodies-what-I-believe-in	Jialing Lin, Antonio <u>Lobo,CivilaiLeckie,</u> 2016
	SBC2	This-brand-is-an-important-indication-of-who-I-am	
	SBC3	I feel-a-strong-sense-of-belonging-to-this-brand	
<u>eWOM</u>			
	EW1	I have-recommended-this-brand-in-online-pages-to-lots-of-people.	Carrol and <u>Ahuvia</u> (2006) and Park and Kim (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.	
Brand co creation			
	BCC1	I-am-willing-to-provide-my-experiences-and-suggestions-when-my-friends-on my-favorite-social-networking-site-want-my-advice-about-	(Developed from <u>Schau et al., 2009;</u>

		friends-on my-favorite-social-networking-site-want-my-advice-about-the-hotel I have stayed.	Schau et al., 2009; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016)
	BCC2	I-am-willing-to-stay-in-the-hotel-that-recommended-by-my-friends-on-my-favorite-social-networking-site.	
	BCC3	<u>when</u> -I want-to-reserve-a-hotel,-I will-consider-the-experiences-of-my-friends-about-staying-in-the-hotels-on-my-favorite-social-networking-site.	
Privacy concern			
	PC1	It usually-bothers-me-when-my-favorite-hotel-site-asks-me-for-personal-information.	(Hajli, Sims, et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2011) (Hajli, Sims, et al., 2017; Liang et al., 2011)
	PC2	When-my-favorite-hotel-site-asks-me-for-personal-information,-I-sometimes-think-twice-before-providing-it.	
	PC3	It-bothers-me-to-give-personal-information-to-my-favorite-hotel-employees.	
	PC4	I-am-concerned-that-my-favorite-hotel-site-is-collecting-too-much-personal-information-about-me.	
Moral judgement			
	MJ1	Do-you-think-the-social-media-strategy-of-this-hotel-is:	Steven J. Stantona,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- <u>unspoken</u> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 'does not violates <u>unspoken</u> Promise-to-their-consumer's promise' to-their- consumers'	

Table2- Demographics profile

characteristics	Relative frequency	Frequency (%)	Relative frequency	Frequency (%)
	Iranian		European	
Gender				
Male	137	47.2	155	69.2
female	153	52.8	69	30.8
Education				
A –level and below	17	5.9	68	30.4
Under graduate	105	36.2	59	26.3
Post graduate	148	51	58	25.9
PHD	20	6.9	39	17.4
Age				
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	.3	6	2.7
64- above	0	0	2	.75
Marital status				
Single	182	62.8	94	42
married	104	35.9	118	52.7

divorced	4	1.4	12	5.3
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Table3- Reliability measures and for each variable

Item	Factor loading	Mean	Std.D	Cronbach's alpha	Item	Factor loading	Mean	Std.D	Cronbach's alpha
Home traveler					European traveler				
Customer brand engagement									
CBE1	.73	5.419	1.1155	.711	CBE1	.74	5.286	1.2594	.757
CBE2	.77	5.661	1.6231		CBE2	.73	5.174	1.1329	
CBE4	.74	4.578	1.4222		CBE3	.87	5.031	1.1419	
Self- brand connection									
SBC1	.700	3.976	1.7005	.792	SBC1	.68	4.621	1.3670	.73
SBC2	.90	4.125	1.7495		SBC2	.73	4.643	1.2518	
SBC3	.72	3.910	1.8311		SBC3	.85	4.862	1.3735	
Moral judgement									
MJ1	.7	3.734	1.6013	.803	MJ1	.85	4.911	1.4521	.748
MJ2	.763	3.450	1.6046		MJ2	.73	5.027	1.3916	
MJ3	.821	3.419	1.6461		MJ3	.55	5.37	1.3861	
eWOM									
E1	.73	4.685	1.5096	.743	E1	.66	5.32	1.299	.781
E2	.56	4.720	1.4676		E2	.8	5.509	1.2705	
E3	.83	5.010	1.3398		E3	.77	5.580	1.2891	

Brand co creation									
BCC1	.78	5.270	1.2788	.719	BCC1	.76	5.563	1.1812	.714
BCC2	.78	5.211	1.1639		BCC2	.59	5.500	1.1560	
BCC3	.60	5.249	1.1668		BCC3	.87	5.536	1.0666	
Privacy concern									
PC1	.67	3.602	1.6468	.885	PC1	.77	5.580	1.2321	.836
PC2	.77	3.592	1.6157		PC2	.93	5.549	1.1818	
PC3	.78	3.567	1.6718		PC3	.83	5.674	1.2550	
PC4	.77	3.945	1.7981		PC4	.73	5.714	1.1554	

Table4- 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	.558	.749	0.20	.746						.606	.751	0.271	.778					
SBC	.603	.744	0.17	.439	.776					.573	.749	0.272	.521	.757				
MJ	.583	.750	0.066	.333	.186	.763				.516	.745	0.118	.055	.230	.718			
eWOM	.513	.745	0.067	.504	.342	.301	.72			.553	.764	0.195	.240	.442	.112	.744		
BCC	.526	.749	0.006	-.01	.203	.190	.227	.725		.563	.732	0.108	.257	.195	.116	.328	.750	
PC	.67	.81	0.067	.140	.130	.257	.259	.076	.818	.561	.75	0.118	.257	.195	.330	-.093	.223	.749

Table5- HTMT test results

	Home					European				
HTMT	PC	BCC	<u>eWOM</u>	MJ	SBC	PC	BCC	<u>eWOM</u>	MJ	SBC
BCC	.071					.208				
<u>eWOM</u>	.286	.226				-.07	.354			
MJ	.262	.2	.286			.381	.131	.118		
SBC	.087	.168	.394	.171		.182	.184	.453	.235	
CBE	.162	.004	.587	.348	.526	.258	.287	.258	.096	.52

Table6- Results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis				Home traveler					European traveler				
				Estimate	S.E	C.R	P		Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	
H1	Moral judgement	→	Customer brand engagement	.226	.055	3.334	***	Significant	-.033	.057	-.442	.659	Not Significant
H2	Moral judgement	→	Self- brand connection	.182	.084	2.581	.01	Significant	.210	.076	2.616	.009	Significant
H3	Self- brand connection	→	Customer brand engagement	.398	.047	5.257	***	Significant	.429	.107	3.187	.001	Significant
H4	Customer brand engagement	→	<u>eWOM</u>	.411	.143	3.871	***	Significant	.065	.082	.729	.466	Not Significant
H5	Self- brand connection	→	<u>eWOM</u>	.174	.065	2.233	.026	Significant	.388	.091	3.124	.002	Significant

H6	<u>eWOM</u>	→	Brand Co creation	.233	.089	2.350	.019	Significant	.289	.095	3.332	***	Significant
H7	Customer brand engagement	→	Brand Co creation	-.225	.0161	-1.696	.09	Not Significant	.189	.082	2.306	.021	Significant
H8	Self- brand connection	→	Brand Co creation	.193	.072	2.013	.044	Significant	-.027	.068	-3.11	.756	Not Significant

Table7- Results of hypothesis testing (Moderator impact of Privacy Concern)

H9	Hypothesis (Moderator of privacy concern)			Home					European				
				Estimate	S.E	C.R	P		Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	
	<u>eWOM</u>	→	Brand Co creation	.097	.060	1.62	.106	Not Significant	-.125	.056	-2.231	.031	Significant

Figure 1 – Conceptual Model

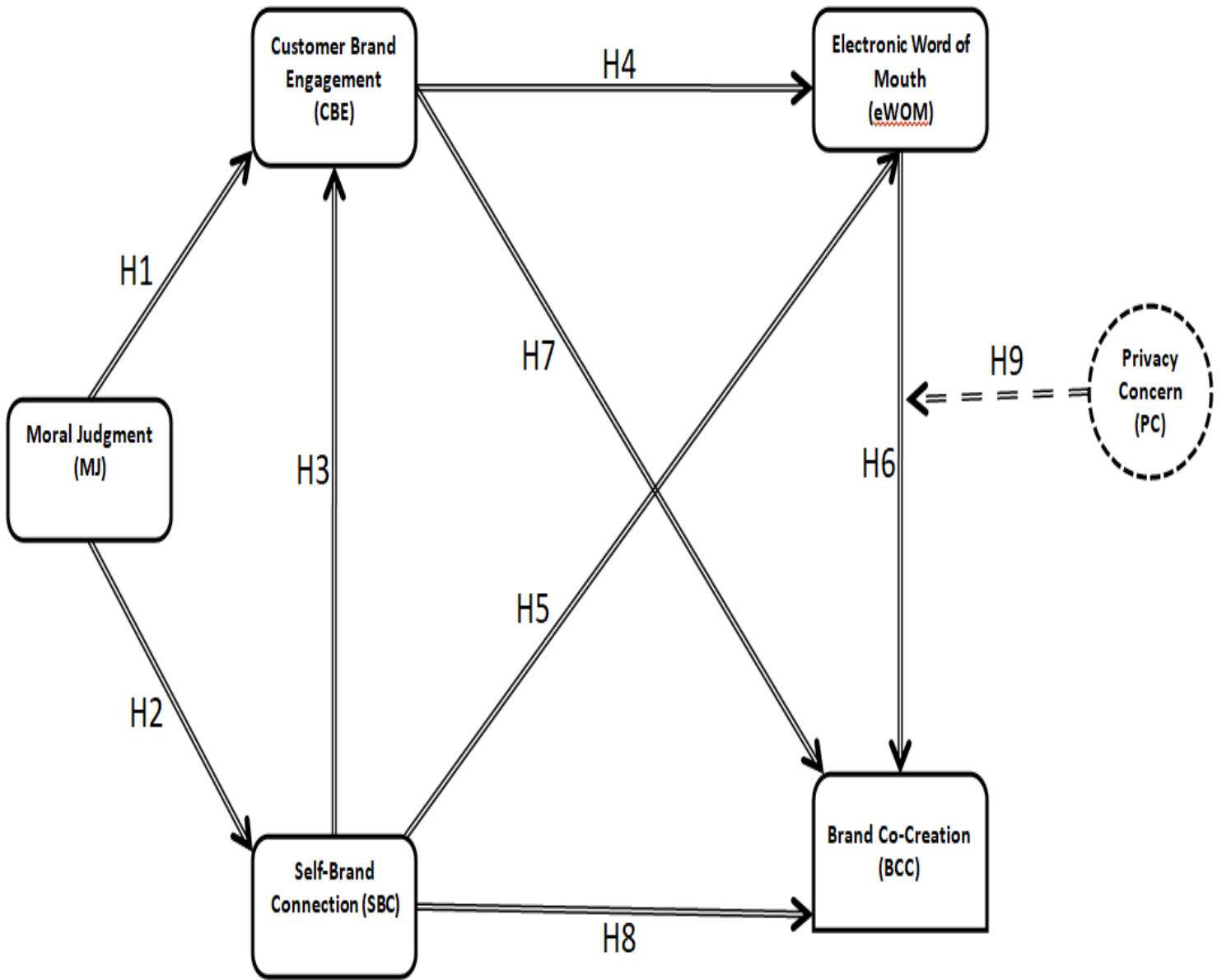
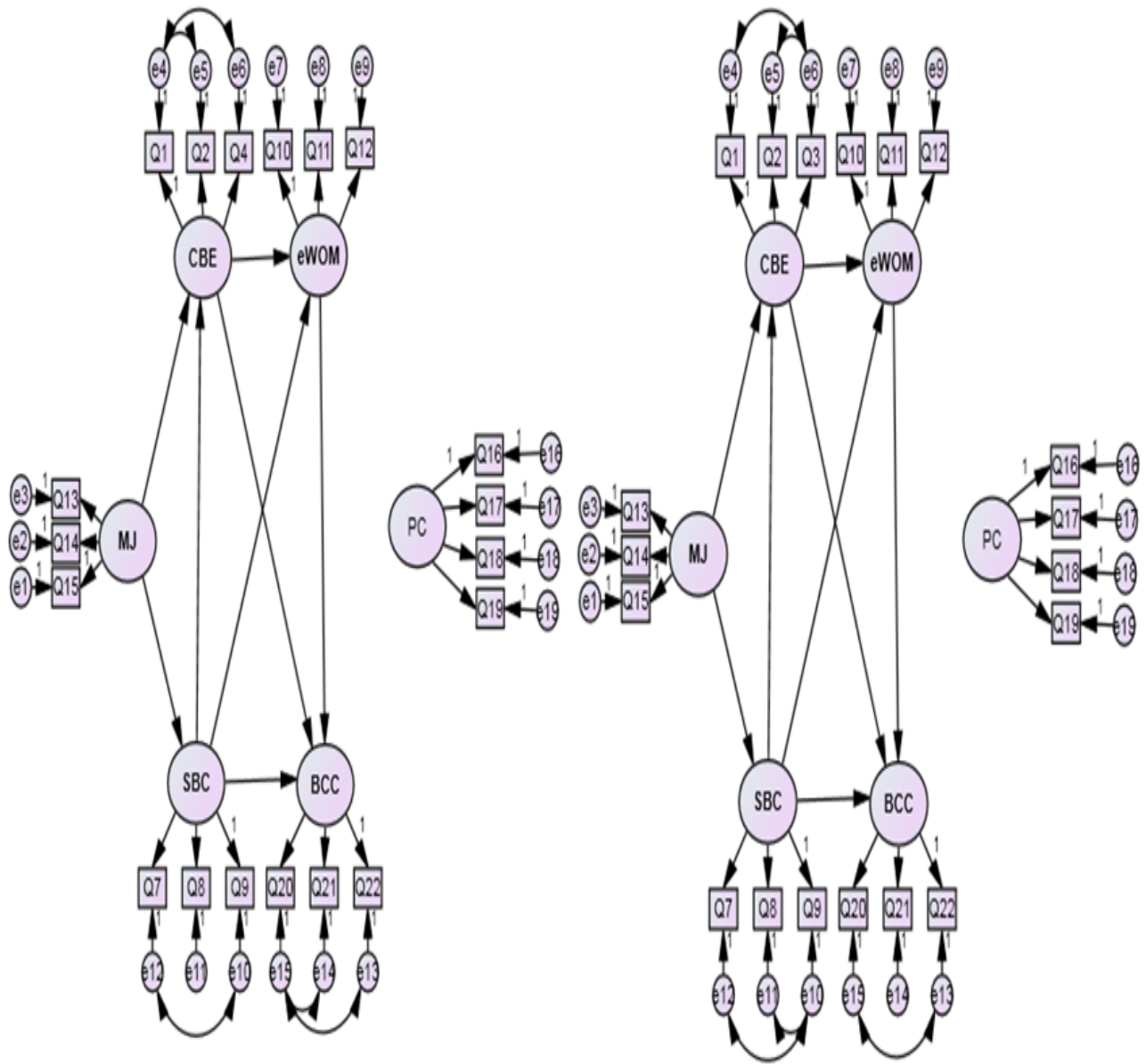


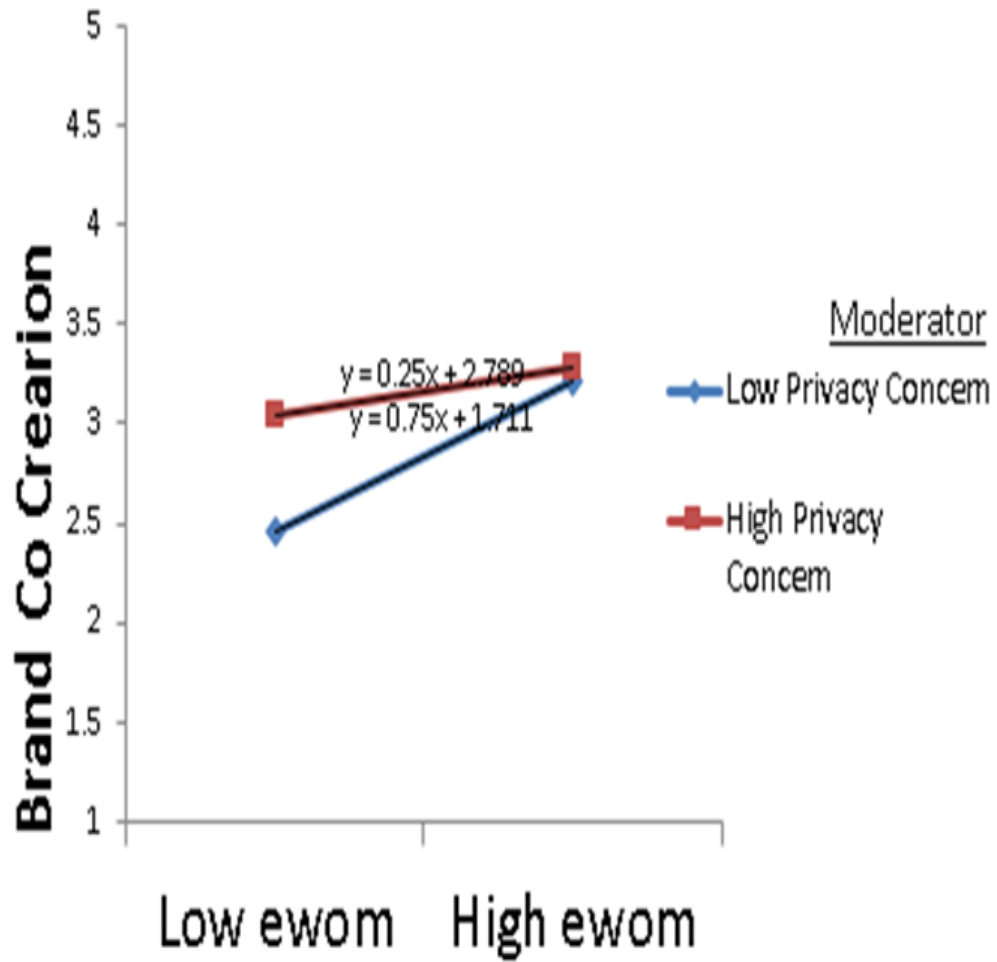
Figure 2- Conceptual model in AMOS



Home travelers

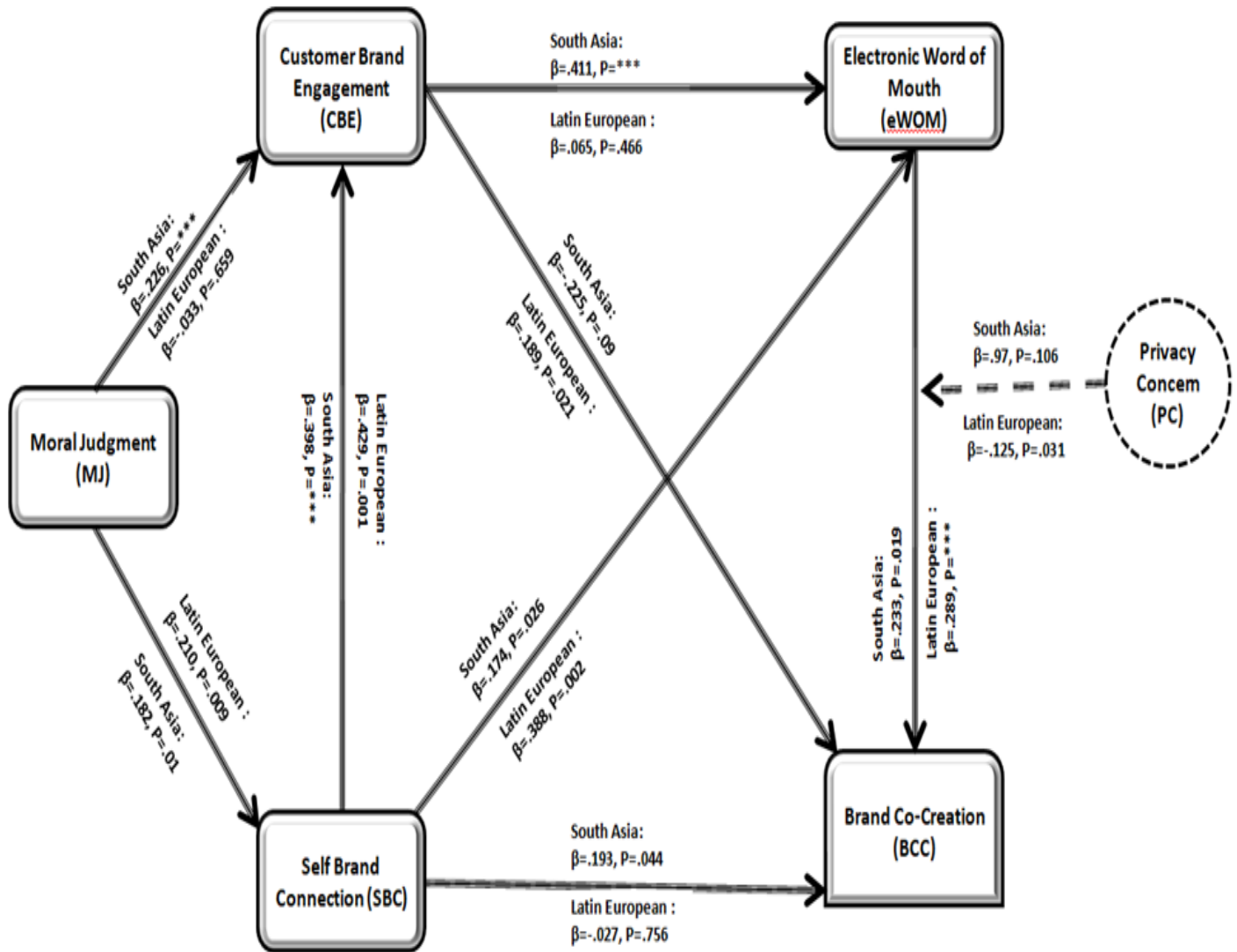
European travelers

Figure 3 – Role of Privacy Concern as a moderator



Privacy concern dampens positive relationship between eWOM and brand co creation

Figure 4 – Validated model



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