

Effect of Brand-Consumer Relationships on Brand Loyalty Mediated by Brand Value Creation and Moderated by Brand Community Characteristics in the Hospitality Industry

Hamid Alizadeh¹ 

Hamed Nazarpour Kashani¹ 

Abstract

Purpose – This study aimed to investigate the effect of brand-consumer relationships on brand loyalty mediated by brand value creation and moderated by brand community characteristics in the hospitality industry.

Theoretical framework – Based on brand-consumer theory, we sought to better understand consumer behavior in the hospitality industry to arrive at an explanatory framework that can differentiate key variables for hotel brands to remain in the market.

Design/methodology/approach – The data collected from 250 consumers of 4- and 5-star hotels in Tehran were analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) approach.

Findings – Based on the results, brand attitude and brand relationship quality significantly affected brand satisfaction. In addition, brand value creation had a significant effect on brand loyalty. Furthermore, brand community characteristics significantly moderated the relationships between brand satisfaction and brand value creation and between brand value creation and brand loyalty. Brand relationship quality positively affected brand value creation through the mediating role of brand satisfaction.

Practical & social implications of research – The results contribute to the development of the existing literature on the hospitality (hotel) industry and its practices, and they offer proper instructions for future studies. Also, this study can provide hotel marketers with a reference for marketing management.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the advancement of research involving brand-consumer relationships in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: Brand, brand-consumer, brand value creation, brand loyalty, hotel.

1. Islamic Azad University, Department of Business Management, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

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1. Introduction

The importance of the tourism and hospitality industry has grown substantially over the past few years (Akbari et al., 2021). The \$ 500 billion revenue of the hospitality industry has attracted the attention of many investors (Fatma et al., 2017). According to World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports, the industry generated total revenues of \$ 1.7 trillion (or about \$ 4.6 billion per day) in 2018 (World Tourism Organization, 2022). In addition, the retail value of the hotel industry was approximately \$ 600 billion in 2018 (Statista, 2020). These reports highlight the crucial role of the industry in the economic growth of countries. On the other hand, the hospitality industry plays an important role in sharing the cultural heritage of different countries and introducing the culture of various communities (Akbari et al., 2021). However, the COVID-19 crisis has had a catastrophic effect on the industry. For example, 150 Hilton hotels were closed in China following the pandemic (Alizadeh et al., 2020; Han, 2020). Some experts have referred to the situation as a crisis in the tourism industry (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019). The tourism industry has become one of the most controversial topics in the scientific community following the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is of great importance for scholars to examine variables influencing the financial performance of this industry. Brand loyalty is a critically important marketing indicator that affects financial performance.

In a study on the hospitality industry of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), T. Nuseir (2020) pointed out the effects of brand and its dimensions on customer purchase intention. Hollebeek et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of brand names for hotel consumers. Creating quality content in the digital marketing process provides marketing managers with major opportunities to establish greater relationships with consumers (Kim and Johnson, 2016).

Lee (2021) notes the importance of extending our knowledge of the gratifications derived from value creation in consumer-brand relationships. Some studies (e.g., Cheung et al., 2021; Ghosh and Jhamb, 2021) have shed light on the importance and dynamics of consumer-brand relationships, whereas others (e.g., Liu et al., 2021) highlight the need to further explore the socio-psychological process of consumer-brand relationships (Wang, 2021).

In the hospitality industry, marketing managers have changed the distribution and consumption of brand

content through expanding branding activities and creating brand love. Accordingly, they have contributed to the creation of brand value in hotels (Tsai and Men, 2013). Given the increasing attention paid to hotel services, the similarity of the services offered by different hotels, and their intense competition, marketing managers attempt to offer unique services. In this situation, marketing activities can strongly affect consumer decisions by developing brand-consumer relationships (Simon and Tossan, 2018). In the meantime, it is essential to understand characteristics that stimulate positive emotions of consumers and dramatically affect their decisions (Yen et al., 2020). Hotel consumers will feel deeply satisfied if they gain high value from the services they receive (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019; Yen et al., 2020).

However, there is disagreement about the nuanced interplay of brand love and brand loyalty and its resultant impact on the brand equity of mass brands with prestige appeal, with empirical research on the topic being in short supply (Das et al., 2022).

In this regard, hotel managers have tried to expand their businesses by attracting more guests and focusing their efforts on communication and branding activities (e.g. offering more economic or social benefits). Hotel marketing managers play a key role in developing brand-consumer relationships. In fact, these relationships are among the most important keys to success in today's competitive environment (Foroudi, 2020). Hotels must properly assess their relationships with their consumers in areas of value creation and brand characteristics in order to survive in this highly competitive environment (Khenfer and Cuny, 2020; Yen et al., 2020).

Brand names are among the most important strategic assets of businesses that have profound effects on consumer behavior (Albert et al., 2013). Brand-consumer relationships influence brand choice, because consumers choose brands based on functional and symbolic characteristics that enhance their self-concept (Haung et al, 2017 Heinrich et al., 2008). Brands are important communication tools in customer relationship management systems, which are valuable to customers for two reasons. First, brands reduce consumer risk, and second, they lower decision-making costs (Wider et al., 2018). Customer disappointment with a brand threatens a company's entire investments and future profits. Therefore, brands and their components are precious organizational assets that affect stakeholder perceptions and behaviors (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019).

The development of brand-consumer relationships has often been studied as a major task of brand managers (Hajibabaei et al., 2017). In this process, management researchers have increasingly focused their attention on brand value creation (Bange et al., 2019). In today's dynamic market, consumer satisfaction and customer welfare are primary goals of brand names in the discussion of brand-consumer relationships. In this discussion, brands sometimes employ "sensory imageries" at both national and international levels, and thereby promote brand equity in marketing innovations such as the design of new products and services and expansion of brand-consumer relationships (Loureiro and Sarmiento, 2019). Marketing campaigns are other effective tools in the marketing science. Marketers may design different campaigns based on various corporate goals (Khenfer and Cuny, 2020; Loureiro and Sarmiento, 2019). Given the nature of the services provided by hotels, the creation of competitive advantages in the hospitality industry requires the establishment of strong brand-consumer relationships (Wang et al., 2017). Positive brand-consumer relationships can boost consumer (guest) trust, and thereby contribute to the institutionalization of intangible features of hotels in the consumer's mind (Foroudi, 2020). In addition, brand equity helps hotels create distinctive competitive advantages while maintaining their market share (Khan et al., 2020; Kim and Johnson, 2016).

The present study provides a model for brand-consumer relationships, it offers hotel managers and marketers an invaluable insight into branding, and it emphasizes the need for the establishment of desirable brand-consumer relationships. It also recommends hotel managers tailor their brand names to the needs and lifestyle of consumers, and use their brands as a means of self-expression for consumers. The study contributes to the development of the existing literature on brand-consumer relationships by adding the variables of brand value creation and brand community characteristics. The results indicate that hotel managers need to pay more attention to brand communities while properly managing customer relationships. Finally, from a scientific point of view, the study prepares the ground for future studies by providing a model for brand-consumer relationships and examining the effects of these relationships on brand loyalty, brand community characteristics, and brand value creation.

2. Research literature

2.1 Brand-consumer relationships

Today, brand names play a major role in the daily lives of consumers. Recent studies on brand names have mainly focused on brand-consumer relationships (Chinomona, 2016). According to the studies, consumers sometimes attribute human characteristics to a brand and form their relationships with the brand based on these characteristics (Aggarwal, 2004). These relationships involve mutual interactions between the brand and consumers, which are accompanied by a number of repetitive activities that lead to many benefits for both parties.

Relational ties represent the social glue connecting different actors in interpersonal communication and relationships (Ozdemir et al., 2020). In a corporate branding context, brands are found to possess human characteristics and personality traits (i.e. anthropomorphization) (Balmer, 2008; Puzakova et al., 2013), and thus have relationships as social actors, such as with consumers (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015; Ozdemir et al., 2020). Various theories have been proposed in this field. Customer relationship marketing theory (Gronroos, 1996) as a relationship marketing approach is used to strengthen customer-company or customer-brand relationships so as to boost customer equity and increase the firm's profitability.

In hospitality contexts, relationship marketing aims to develop long-term relationships with valued customers (So et al., 2013; Su et al., 2016). Based on social identity theory, customer-brand identification helps to explain motivations and reasons which encourage individuals to relate to firms (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This theory advocates that people usually go beyond their personal identity to develop a social identity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In addition, social identity theory (SIT) is an important theoretical foundation for identification in marketing, as well as broader organizational studies (Elbedweihy et al., 2016; Lam et al., 2013). SIT advocates that people will expend significant effort to develop a social identity, in addition to their more private identity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). These arguments also fit with social exchange theory (SET), which centers on people's expected rewards from their social efforts, thereby exhibiting a link between these perspectives. Under SIT, identification helps explain actors' rationale that motivates

them to engage with brands or firms (Hollebeek et al., 2016; Turner et al., 1987).

Therefore, one can even use fundamental features of interpersonal relationships to describe consumer-brand relationships (Kang et al., 2014; Park et al., 2013). Empirical studies indicate that consumers expect brands to conform to typical norms of a relationship. They would also hold brands accountable in the case of breaking such norms (Aggarwal, 2004; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017).

2.2 Brand value creation

Researchers believe that brand value creation is an essential customer satisfaction tool in service-oriented organizations, and the hospitality industry is obviously no exception (Pedro et al., 2018), because the interaction between value and value creation leads to immense customer satisfaction. While hotels will lose their customers if they fail to create value for them, the establishment of a good relationship between consumers and brand values leads to brand loyalty and word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising (Zhou et al., 2012). While the extant tourism literature suggests that tourists contribute to the overall tourism experience, co-creation – and in particular brand value creation – refers to the “during-trip” stage (Assiouras et al., 2019; Kunja et al., 2018; Rihova et al., 2018). While traveling, tourists actively participate in experiences and interact with others, such as local businesses, visitor organizers, residents, and other travelers, as part of a range of on-site activities (Buhalis and Park, 2021; Garibaldi and Pozzi, 2018).

Brand value creation, defined as a customer’s “[...] perceived value arising from interactive, joint, collaborative, or personalized activities for or with [brand-related] stakeholders” (Hollebeek et al., 2019 p. 168), represents an important determinant of tourism customer satisfaction and loyalty (Chathoth et al., 2016). Given its highly interactive nature, co-creation has high tourism-based applicability (Prebensen and Xie, 2017; Rather et al., 2021).

2.3 Brand community characteristics

High effectiveness of a brand community as a marketing tool adds to the advantages of partnership with a brand (Christian et al., 2014). Brand communities facilitate social interactions between users. In addition, these useful marketing tools provide companies with many benefits (Papagiannidis et al., 2017). Today, consumers

can create relationships with brands and with other consumers. This prepares the ground for knowledge acquisition and creation, which in turn lead to value creation (Chen et al., 2011; Di Maria and Finotto, 2008). Brand community identification is defined as a person’s perception of his/her actual or symbolic belonging to a group (Filipe et al., 2017). According to Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006), recognition of the identity of a brand community positively influences brand loyalty. They also conclude that identification of brand community characteristics often leads to value creation (Pedro et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2012).

2.4 Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has been at the heart of marketing for a relatively long time because of its central status for the survival of a business (Pizam and Ellis, 1999). It has been an indispensable marketing concept (Rather, 2018; Rather and Sharma, 2017). It is viewed as a customer’s overall evaluation of the performance of a product or service (Johnson and Fornell, 1991). It has been related to the overall performance of a company and is perceived as a prime objective for managers (Anderson et al., 1994). To explain further, customer satisfaction refers to the overall evaluation on the basis of the customer’s total purchase and consumption experience of the firm providing goods/services over time (Anderson et al., 1994; Oliver, 1980). Hence, by increasing the satisfaction level of customers, hotel brands can have a competitive edge over competitors (Mattila, 2006). Customer satisfaction acts as an important mediator in various loyalty studies in hospitality (Liat et al., 2014).

2.5 Customer attitude

Attitude generally refers to how much customers/people prefer/like or do not prefer/dislike a particular object (e.g., product or service) and it is usually demonstrated as a total assessment of objects. It has been studied extensively in terms of behavior (Priester et al., 2004; Spears and Singh, 2004). Bowden (2009) holds that the customer experience is a precursor of customer attitude. Other researchers contend that there are behavioral, emotional, and cognitive facets of consumer brand attitude (Harrigan et al., 2017; Rather and Camilleri, 2019; Vivek et al., 2014).

2.6 Brand relationship quality

Branding activities based on relationship quality need coordination. Govers (2013) suggests that “a good brand strategy not only builds a brand relationship with the outside world, but also among stakeholders and internal audiences.” Teams supporting brand relationship quality use branding principles with the aim of establishing favorable reputations. Sevel et al. (2018) investigated how a service firm (hotel) with a brand portfolio manages its corporate brand when compared with its portfolio of product brands. However, as tourism and hospitality services are often co-created between interdependent organizations that belong to global alliances (Munyaradzi et al., 2015), brand relationship quality is also complex (Buhalis and Park, 2021).

2.7 Brand loyalty

The concept of brand loyalty has been extensively studied in the marketing literature (Dick and Basu, 1994; Maheshwari et al., 2014). Research on customer brand identification and loyalty has offered a limited insight to date (Martinez e Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Although many definitions have been offered for the concept of brand loyalty, Oliver (1980) provided the best definition for this concept. According to him, loyalty reflects a persistent attitude in consumers and customers towards repurchasing a product or service in the future (Ismail, 2017).

Consumers’ loyalty is characterized by their degree of attachment toward particular brands (Kandampully et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2012). Therefore, it is in brands’ interest to nurture long-term relationships with their key customers (Kandampully et al., 2015). Consumers’ repeated purchases (and loyalty) are prompted by their internal dispositions (So et al., 2013). Previous literature has reported that brand loyalty rests largely on the consumers’ satisfaction as well as on their ongoing evaluations of the service quality and value for money. In a similar vein, hotel guests continuously assess these factors as they evaluate their service encounters (Rather et al, 2019; So et al., 2013, 2017).

3 Developing the research hypotheses and conceptual research model

Brands have the potential to create senses of trust and satisfaction; thus, these valuable tools should be used to create positive attitudes towards brands (Wang et al.,

2017). Recent studies show that attitude towards a behavior is an immediate determinant of displaying that behavior (Vera and Trujillo, 2017). Also, previous studies with an economic orientation have highlighted how the COVID-19 crisis has revised customer dynamic reactions and consumption attitudes (Ceylan et al., 2020). In this study, attitudes can be understood as the overall customer assessment of protective measures adopted by hotels against the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, according to Untaru and Han (2021), in a retail store survey, customer attitudes toward protection measures had a great mediating relationship with customer satisfaction and behavior intentions, increasing customer satisfaction and revisit rate (Lanji et al., 2022). The following hypothesis is proposed based on the above discussion:

Hypothesis 1: Brand attitude significantly affects brand satisfaction.

From the customer perspective, the concept of brand relationship quality is relatively different from other common concepts in the branding literature such as brand trust, internal branding, brand attitude, brand credibility, and relationship marketing (Severi and Ling, 2013). Brand relationship quality refers to consumers’ subjective, internal (e.g. feelings, emotions, and cognitions), and behavioral reactions to brand stimuli. These stimuli include several concepts such as design, packaging, brand identity, etc. Brand relationship quality can be either positive or negative, and more importantly, it can influence levels of consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010). In the hospitality industry, brand relationship quality is paramount to managers as an operational strategy (Anderson et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Therefore, this factor for achieving customer satisfaction is important to promote long-term relationships between businesses and customers (Darley and Luethge, 2019; Ji and Prentice, 2021). Given the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Brand relationship quality significantly affects brand satisfaction.

Relationship quality can be defined as a set of intangible brand values that reflect customers’ expectations, predictions, and desires throughout the relationship. Brand relationship quality consists of factors of association, awareness, and value, and reflects a company’s strategy to attract, retain, and increase value creation (Wang et al.,

2017). In the S-D logic, value can be co-created by any actor ensemble (Hollebeek and Rather, 2019; Vargo and Lusch, 2016), including tourists and brands (Assiouras et al., 2019). As CE develops, customers' proclivity to share their brand-related experience with other customers rises in parallel (Prebensen et al., 2015). Though brand and co-creation have been previously linked (e.g., Hollebeek and Rather., 2019), the understanding of this tourism-based nexus remains scant (Assiouras et al., 2019; Chathoth et al., 2016), warranting further investigation (Rather et al., 2019). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 3: Brand relationship quality significantly affects brand value creation.

Vargo and Lusch (2016) state that cooperation in production is different from cooperation in value creation, yet cooperation is an essential part of value creation. According to the customer participation theory, a customer is satisfied with the development of value creation if he/she is emotionally attached and completely satisfied with his/her relationship with the company (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Few studies have simultaneously combined customer brand value creation and satisfaction in a single empirical model (Martinez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013; Su et al., 2016). In hospitality contexts, more brand value creation with a (e.g. a hotel) brand will tend to result in consumers being more satisfied with the hotel through their psychological attachment to the brand (Rather et al, 2019). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 4: Brand satisfaction significantly affects brand value creation.

From the experiential marketing perspective, a number of factors, including multi-sensory marketing, brand experiences, and perceived value (Wiedmann et al., 2018), as well as value creation (Buhalis and Park, 2021; Manyiwa et al., 2018), directly and/or indirectly enhance brand loyalty. In this sense, building and maintaining effective relationships with consumers is crucial for gaining customer loyalty (Ji and Prentice, 2021). The following hypothesis is proposed based on the above discussion:

Hypothesis 5: Brand value creation significantly affects brand loyalty.

Pappu et al (2006) argue that past consumption experiences affect brand satisfaction through the moderating role of brand characteristics. On the other hand, according to some empirical studies, brand value creation is an outcome of brand satisfaction (Ozdemir et al., 2020; Cooil et al., 2007). Over repeated interactions, customer engagement's intra-interaction culminates, cumulatively, in a brand community (Hollebeek and Andreassen, 2018; Rather et al., 2021). Therefore, brand community has been shown to affect the association between customer behavior-related variables (Cooil et al., 2007). However, the role of tourism customers' brand community in their ensuing behavioral variables remains unclear (Ranjbaran et al., 2022; Schirmer et al., 2018), warranting further study. Therefore, the following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 6: Brand community characteristics moderate the effect of brand satisfaction on brand value creation.

Social users' motivations to use media positively affect participatory behaviors through desirable brand characteristics, and the outcome of participatory behaviors is brand loyalty (Kim and Ko, 2012). In addition, the use of social media for information communication, social exchange, and entertainment accelerates brand value creation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 7: Brand community characteristics moderate the effect of brand value creation on brand loyalty.

In recent years, consumers have been familiarized with the concept of brand value creation through good relationships (Alizadeh et al., 2020). They constantly look for better offers and if their expectations are not met, they will be tempted to break off relationships with the brands they are currently using (Filipe et al., 2017). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 8: Brand relationship quality affects brand value creation through brand satisfaction.

The development of attractive brands requires the planned collection and analysis of consumer market information (Alizadeh et al., 2020). This process helps companies make changes in their brands to increase customer satisfaction and create new brand values. Accordingly, the ultimate result is attracting more customers/consumers in this competitive market (Zhou et al., 2012).

The conceptual research model was designed based on the research literature (Figure 1).

4. Research method

4.1 Survey instrument

Brand attitude was gauged by employing Spears and Singh (2004) four-item scale. Brand satisfaction was measured by using Oliver’s (1980) three-item scale. Brand relationship quality was gauged by adopting the three-item scale of Munyaradzi et al. (2015). To measure brand community characteristics, the three-item scale of Pedro et al. (2018,) was used. Brand value creation was gauged by using the four-item scale suggested by Kunja et al (2018). Lastly, brand loyalty was measured by adopting the four-item instrument of Zeithaml et al. (1996). All the items were collected on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (please refer to Appendix A).

4.2 Sampling and data collection

The data collection was conducted using a survey method at different locations within six 5-star hotels in Tehran city, namely, Parsian, Espinas, Esteghlal, Wisteria,

Diamond, and Pariz. These hotels are in main tourist destinations in Tehran. The population for this research was limited to those respondents who had stayed at these hotels at least once. The hospitality context was selected for several reasons. Firstly, higher interaction levels between hospitality brands/providers and their guests can incentivize customer brand identification and/or engagement (Rather, 2017; Romero, 2017). Secondly, hospitality consumption involves some main characteristics of services such as variability, intangibility, and perishability. Consistently with previous studies (Parrey et al., 2018; Rather et al.,2018), a non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. Questionnaires were distributed among 300 customers through the Telegram and WhatsApp social networks, out of which 250 were returned and considered fit for examination, indicating an 83% response rate (please refer to Appendix A).

The demographic characteristics of the respondents indicate that 67.2% were males and 32.8% were females, respectively. The results are reported in Table 1.

4.3 Non-response bias

Following Armstrong and Overton’s (1977) method, this study evaluates non-response bias by comparing early respondents (top 10%) with late respondents

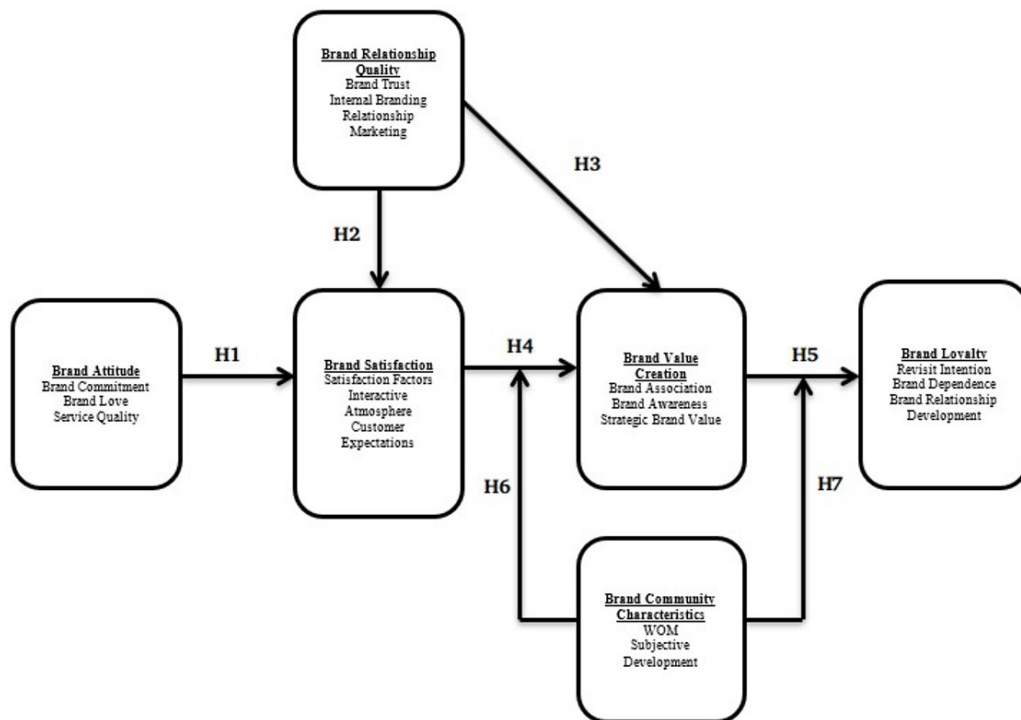


Figure 1. Conceptual research model

Table 1
Descriptive characteristics of the participants

	Gender		Age			Educational qualifications		
	Frequency	%	Years	Frequency	%	Degree	Frequency	%
Male	168	67.02	18-25	58	23.02	Associate degree and lower	32	12.08
Female	82	32.08	26-30	102	40.08	Bachelor's degree	133	53.02
Total	250	100	> 30	90	36.00	Master's degree and higher	85	34.00
			Total	250	100	Total	250	100

Table 2
Assessing the validity of the research variables

Variable	Factor loading	SMC**	Cronbach's α	VIF	AVE*	CR
Brand attitude	0.702	0.650	0.820	3.31	0.552	0.840
	0.693	0.494				
	0.777	0.473				
	0.770	0.474				
Brand satisfaction	0.679	0.621	0.802	3.21	0.578	0.745
	0.823	0.559				
	0.863	0.674				
Brand relationship quality	0.740	0.714	0.886	2.89	0.555	0.814
	0.771	0.701				
	0.733	0.599				
Brand community characteristics	0.807	0.690	0.896	2.85	0.572	0.842
	0.666	0.625				
	0.652	0.636				
Brand value creation	0.639	0.639	0.886	3.01	0.538	0.832
	0.804	0.628				
	0.825	0.613				
	0.815	0.619				
Brand loyalty	0.869	0.617	0.870	3.255	0.510	0.805
	0.710	0.666				
	0.810	0.670				
	0.801	0.605				
	0.719	0.608				

Note: C.R. = Composite Reliability, SMC** = Square Multiple Correlations, AVE* = Average Variance Extracted. AVE* calculated as $\sum SMC / (\sum SMC + \sum \text{standard measurement error})$.

(bottom 10%) on demographic variables (age, gender) and measurement items. Chi-square tests showed no significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) between early and late participants with respect to their characteristics. Further, the results of t tests confirm that all the measurement items were not significantly different ($\alpha = 0.05$) between early and late respondents. Thus, non-response bias was not evident in this research.

4.4 Common method variance (CMV)

Next, CMV was evaluated based on two methods. First of all, Harman's single factor method was used. The results indicated that the total variance explained by one factor was 33.2 (below 50%), which implies that CMV is not an issue for this research (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, CMV was also assessed based on variance

inflation factors (VIFs). Table 2 indicates that the VIF values were below 5, hence also verifying the lack of CMV and/or multi-collinearity in this research (Han and Hyun, 2017; Rather et al., 2018).

5 Findings

The data were analyzed using the partial least squares (PLS) method. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. The obtained Cronbach's alpha and CR values are all greater than 0.7; hence, the overall reliability of the research tool is acceptable (Table 1). Convergent and discriminant validity were used to assess the overall validity of the scale. As shown in Table 2, the convergent validity of all latent variables was greater than 0.5; therefore, the measurement model has a desirable convergent validity.

Table 3 presents the discriminant validity of the research constructs. The discriminant validity of the model is acceptable, because the square root of the AVE of each construct is greater than the correlation between that construct and other research constructs.

5.1 Testing the research hypotheses

After confirming the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the structural research model was assessed. This model helps the authors test the research hypotheses. Figure 2 shows the structural model designed based on the path coefficients obtained from SmartPLS 2.

Based on the findings, the variables brand attitude (H1: $\gamma = 0.552$, $\tau = 3.333$) and brand relationship quality (H2: $\gamma = 0.632$, $\tau = 3.060$) had significant positive effects on brand satisfaction. Accordingly, Johansson and Ronkainen (2005) found that committed customers with a sense of belonging to a particular brand are less likely

to choose other brands. They are more likely to resist competitive offers, and are even willing to accept short-term satisfaction. Therefore, desirable brand relationships are strongly associated with customer satisfaction.

The variables brand relationship quality (H3: $\gamma = 0.714$, $\tau = 2.850$) and brand satisfaction (H4: $\gamma = 0.492$, $\tau = 6.211$) had significant positive effects on brand value creation. This implies that only a one unit increase in brand relationship quality and brand satisfaction scores results in a 71.4% and 49.2% improvement in brand value creation, respectively. Consistently with these findings, Aurier and N'Goala (2010) observed that consumers tend to be committed to a brand that continuously creates value for them and meets their expectations without causing any damage.

Brand value creation had a significant positive effect on brand loyalty (H5: $\gamma = 0.501$, $\tau = 6.129$), indicating that only a one unit increase in brand value creation results in a 50.1% increase in strategic brand value. Accordingly, in a study on online businesses, Sashi (2012) concluded that brand value creation can serve as a decisive factor in the development of strategic brand value. In line with the present results, Simon and Tossan (2018) showed that service providers can easily encourage brand loyalty by providing customers with satisfactory experiences and new value. These measures help customers precisely assess the risks of future business relationships. Islam and Rahman (2017) found that brand communities can create a link between brand value creation and loyalty by facilitating the customer relationship and customer retention on social platforms. Moreover, some researchers such as Alizadeh et al. (2020) and Nikunj et al. (2017) have found a direct relationship between brand equity and brand loyalty. Das et al. (2022) argued that brand value creation is a vital prerequisite for brand loyalty.

Table 3
Average variance extracted and correlation matrix

Variable	Brand attitude	Brand satisfaction	Brand relationship quality	Brand community characteristics	Brand value creation	Brand loyalty
Brand attitude	0.825					
Brand satisfaction	0.260	0.802				
Brand relationship quality	0.549	0.378	0.900			
Brand community characteristics	0.575	0.259	0.528	0.811		
Brand value creation	0.511	0.449	0.563	0.497	0.729	
Brand loyalty	0.634	0.302	0.560	0.577	0.632	0.795

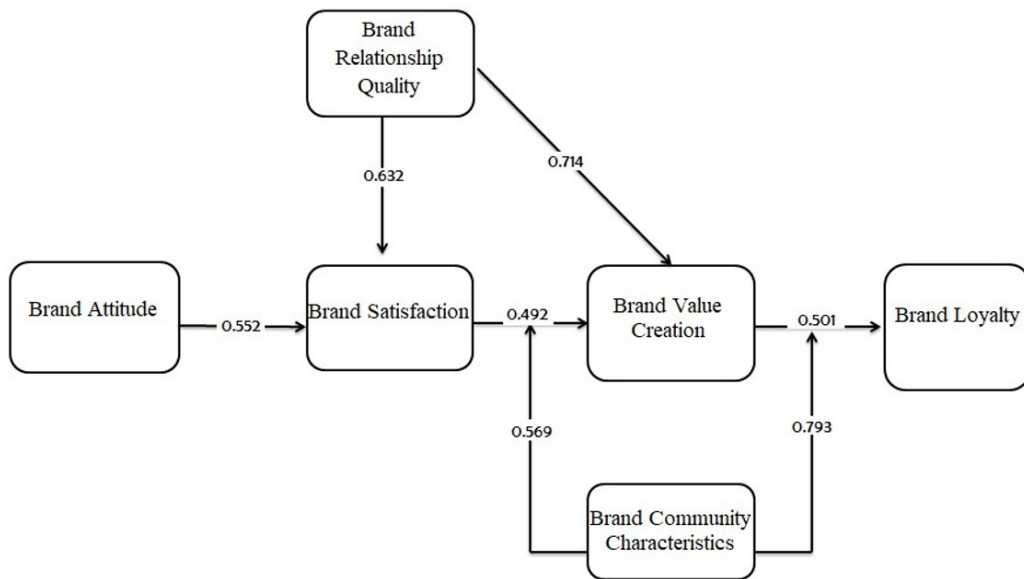


Figure 2. Structural model with standardized coefficients

In addition, Punjaisri et al. (2009) stated that strategic brand value positively influences brand loyalty through the mediating role of commitment. Finally, Stokburger-Sauer (2011) observed that strategic brand value improves both purchase intention and brand loyalty.

5.2 Moderation testing results

In the structural model, the moderating effect of brand community characteristics in the proposed causal relationships between brand satisfaction and brand value creation, and between brand value creation and brand loyalty, was evaluated using the Fassott et al. (2016) PLS approach.

Hypothesis 6 concerns the moderating role of brand community characteristics in the relationship between brand satisfaction and brand value creation. Based on the results, brand community characteristics significantly moderated the effect of brand satisfaction on brand value creation (H6: $\gamma = 0.569$, $t = 5.977$). Kau and Wan Yiun Loh (2006) concluded that brand community characteristics significantly influence consumer decisions. Many researchers have extensively studied the relationship between brand community characteristics and consumer behavior. In this regard, Stokburger-Sauer (2011) found that desirable brand characteristics improve brand satisfaction.

Hypothesis 7 involves the moderating role of brand community characteristics in the relationship between brand value creation and brand loyalty. According to the

results, brand community characteristics significantly moderated the effect of brand value creation on brand loyalty (H7: $\gamma = 0.793$, $t = 6.007$). Consistently with the findings, Ismail (2017) observed that value creation has been widely studied as a predictor of brand loyalty.

According to Loureiro and Sarmento (2019), consumers are only influenced by other users in social networks when they receive messages from a valuable source, which is not necessarily an expert, friend, or relative. Researchers such as Nikunj et al. (2017) and Marist et al. (2014) argue that eWOM advertising, which is a desirable brand feature, has a great impact on people's loyalty, if the source of information is reliable.

5.3 Mediation testing results

Following Zhao et al. (2010), we also carried out a full analysis of the structural covariance model by using bootstrapping. Similarly, to test for mediation effects, we adopted Brown and Dacin (1997) method to establish direct, indirect, and total effects (see also Hapsari et al., 2017; Rather et al., 2019; So et al., 2013). As shown in Table 4, each of the indirect effects is significant.

Hypothesis 8 addressed the mediating role of brand satisfaction in the relationship between brand relationship quality and brand value creation. Strategic brand value was found to strengthen the relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty. In line with these findings, Zhou et al. (2012) concluded that brand loyalty is among the major achievements of online

Table 4
Hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Path coefficient (β)	Critical value (t)	Result
Brand attitude -> Brand satisfaction	0.552	3.333	Confirmed
Brand relationship quality -> Brand satisfaction	0.632	3.060	Confirmed
Brand relationship quality -> Brand value creation	0.714	2.850	Confirmed
Brand satisfaction -> Brand value creation	0.492	6.211	Confirmed
Brand value creation -> Brand loyalty	0.501	6.169	Confirmed
Brand satisfaction * Brand community characteristics -> Brand value creation	0.569	5.977	Confirmed
Brand value creation * Brand community characteristics -> Brand loyalty	0.793	6.007	Confirmed
Brand relationship quality -> Brand satisfaction -> Brand value creation	0.574	3.335	Confirmed

brand communities. In addition, McAlexander et al. (2002) stated that brand value creation can prepare the ground for the development of brand loyalty. Satisfied customers better understand the strategic value of a brand and, therefore, they are more loyal to the brand. According to Rizan et al. (2014) satisfaction is key to customer loyalty. In studies on the hospitality industry, So et al. (2013) and Mattila (2006) found that creating a positive mental image in the customer's mind increases his/her satisfaction with the services received, and thereby improves his/her brand loyalty. In addition, Chiou and Droge (2006) stated that consumers gradually trust a brand according to their evaluation of brand value creation and based on explicit and implicit indicators such as performance, service features, and perceived service quality. Customers who have a positive evaluation of the services they have received are less concerned about opportunistic behaviors, and are therefore more loyal to the service provider.

Table 4 presents the path coefficients and t-values along with the hypothesis testing results.

6 Discussion and implications

The conceptual model presented in this study examined the effect of brand-consumer relationships on brand loyalty mediated by brand value creation and moderated by brand community characteristics in the hospitality industry. The results demonstrate the importance of brand-consumer relationships as a key strategic tool in the hospitality industry and an appropriate approach for hotel managers to integrate marketing policies and brand-oriented strategies. From the results obtained here, various academic and practical implications can be drawn.

6.1 Theoretical implications

By integrating brand-consumer relationships, brand loyalty, brand value creation, and brand community characteristics in a theoretical model, this research contributes to the literature on brand-consumer relationships and tourism. First, this research provides an insight into the role of brand-consumer relationships and their effect on brand loyalty in the hospitality industry. Second, this research extends the understanding of the moderating roles of brand community characteristics and the mediating effect of brand satisfaction on the proposed relationships. While extant research establishes a direct/positive effect of brand-consumer relationships on brand loyalty (Hollebeek and Rather, 2019; Rather et al., 2018, 2021), empirical insights into the association of the concepts of the proposed model remain sparse, particularly in the tourism and hospitality context in crises/pandemic times.

Finally, while brand-consumer relationships have been examined in the literature in several contexts (e.g. business management, marketing, tourism), very few studies have explored the key roles of these factors (i.e. brand attitude, brand relationship quality, and brand value creation) relating to hospitality issues during pandemics. The empirical findings reveal the interaction role of brand community characteristics. In contrast to past research, the present study explored the moderating roles of brand community characteristics, providing empirical evidence on how brand community characteristics positively impacted the direct positive association between the brand satisfaction, brand value creation, and brand loyalty of tourists.

6.2 Practical implications

With the growing importance of tourism and hospitality, it is increasingly important for managers to

understand the nature and dynamics characterizing brand-consumer relationships, which remains limited to date. This research also offers insights for tourism (marketing) practitioners in crises/pandemic times. Here, we explored the driving roles of brand value creation, brand attitude, and brand community characteristics in the development of brand satisfaction, which in turn was shown to affect brand loyalty, thereby advancing the insights of the literature. Specifically, better understanding brand-consumer relationships is expected to be conducive to tourism firms' developing desirable offerings that in turn stimulate hotels' performance (Hollebeek and Rather, 2019; Rather et al, 2021). Achieving and maintaining customer loyalty is crucial in the hospitality (including hotel) sector. Given that the cost of attracting new customers is significantly higher than that of retaining current ones (Huang et al., 2017; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990), managers are forever looking to identify ways to stimulate customer retention and increase their lifetime value (Rust et al., 2004). To do so, many hotels have successfully implemented customer satisfaction surveys, reward or loyalty programs, and other customer incentives to help develop customer identification and bonding with their brand and increase customer willingness to make brand-related investments through social exchange (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014).

The study uncovers the crucial role of brand attitude and brand relationship quality in brand satisfaction, thus confirming the strategic significance of brand satisfaction in developing consumer-brand relationships in pandemic times (Rather et al, 2021). Managers are advised to avoid reducing consumer commitment by giving false promises, because such promises heavily reduce consumers' current and future satisfaction levels, and jeopardize their interests in the long run. To increase levels of brand satisfaction, hotel websites must quickly provide customers with a good understanding of the benefits of the hotels as well as their special services. Hotel managers are recommended to use extensive advertising programs, offer non-cash gifts, and provide customers with sufficient information in order to raise their awareness and build a positive brand association in their minds, and thereby improve their perception of the quality of the hotel services. All of these interactions will ultimately lead to stronger brand loyalty and higher levels of brand value creation. The findings confirm the moderating role and show that brand community characteristics positively impact the relationships between brand satisfaction and brand value creation, and between brand value creation and brand loyalty. Therefore, marketers

and tourism managers should consider their marketing practices/strategies and advertising to strengthen brand satisfaction and increase brand co-creation and brand loyalty, specifically during pandemics/crises. The hospitality industry should be proactive and obtain the benefits of technology (such as implementing touch-less operations in all possible touch-points; World Tourism Barometer, 2020) to protect tourists against pandemic/health-related risks in key tourism destinations, underlining such commitments in communication strategies.

Finally, the results also revealed that brand satisfaction plays an important mediating role in the proposed associations during pandemic times. Thus, marketers should consider the significance of brand satisfaction (Abou-Shouk and Soliman, 2021; Rather et al, 2021). For instance, managers can use social networks, such as in communication strategies or brand communities, which not only develops brand co-creation, but also increases brand relationship quality/recommendations in pandemic situations.

6.3 Limitations and future research

This research also has various limitations, which need further attention. First, this study is cross-sectional, suggesting that the data were collected at one particular point in time. Customers were surveyed in times of proactive measures of coronavirus travel restrictions, isolation, and quarantine. Thus, longitudinal research would offer more generalizable results after the pandemic. Second, this research examined the moderating effects of brand community characteristics; thus, future researchers are suggested to explore extra-interaction factors such as psychological-perceived safety and behavioral control or socio-demographic moderating variables, including gender and age (Rather et al., 2019, 2021). Third, further research could also explore the mediating roles of some other factors such as brand commitment and brand engagement. Fourth, future research may investigate other antecedents of brand-consumer relationships, including perceived value, brand image, and visitors' emotions, to offer additional insights (Abou-Shouk and Soliman, 2021; Rather, 2017; Rather et al, 2019). Fifth, this research was carried out in a single country, namely Iran, and so generalizations of the findings have to be made with care. Thus, further study is suggested to perform the analysis in other nations with divergent cultural contexts (Rather et al, 2018).

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APPENDIX A. Measurement items

Brand attitude (Spears and Singh, 2004)

I like this hotel better than any other hotel

I would consume this hotel more than any other hotel

This is my preferred hotel overall

Brand satisfaction (Oliver, 1980)

I am satisfied with my decision to customize the service from this hotel

I am happy that I customized the service from this hotel

I am disappointed with this brand

Brand relationship quality (Munyaradzi et al., 2015)

I am proud to tell others that this is a great hotel to be part of

For me this is the best of all possible hotels to be part of

I regret choosing to work for this hotel over others I was considering

Brand community characteristics (Pedro et al., 2018)

I feel very positive when I use this hotel

I feel good when I use this hotel

I am proud to use this hotel

Brand value creation (Kunja et al., 2018)

Interaction with the hotel has provided me with appropriate information about brand choices

Interaction with the hotel has provided me with an efficient way to manage my time while choosing the brand

Interaction with the hotel has enabled me to undertake appropriate transactions securely

Interaction with the hotel has enabled me to generate value for an adequate price

Brand loyalty (Zeithaml et al., 1996)

1. I would say positive things about this hotel to other people

2. I would recommend this hotel to someone who seeks my advice

3. I would encourage friends and relatives to do business with this hotel

4. I will do more business with this hotel in the next few years

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Authors:

1. Hamid Alizadeh, Doctoral degree, Islamic Azad University, Department of Business Management, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran.

E-mail: ham.alizadeh.mng@iauctb.ac.ir

2. Hamed Nazarpour Kashani, Doctoral degree, Islamic Azad University, Department of Business Management, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran.

E-mail: h.nazarpour@iauctb.ac.ir

Authors' Contributions:

1st author: Definition of research problem; development of hypotheses or research questions (empirical studies); development of theoretical propositions (theoretical work); definition of methodological procedures; data collection; literature review; analysis and interpretation of data; critical revision of the manuscript; manuscript writing.

2nd author: Definition of research problem; development of hypotheses or research questions (empirical studies); development of theoretical propositions (theoretical work); data collection; literature review; statistical analysis.