Customer engagement in the service context: An empirical investigation of the construct, its antecedents and consequences

Jamid Ul Islam[a,*], Linda D. Hollebeek[b,c], Zillur Rahman[e], Imran Khan[a], Aaleya Rasool[d]

[a] College of Business Administration, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
[b] Montpellier Business School, France
[c] Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia
[d] Department of Management Studies, School of Business, Central University of Kashmir, India
[e] Department of Management Studies, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT

Scholars and practitioners have long acknowledged the importance of offering superior service quality in creating long-term bonds between customers and their brands. However, the importance of service quality as a tool to enhance customer engagement remains under-explored, as addressed in this study. Survey data collected from 395 luxury hotel guests were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results reveal a positive effect of service quality on customer engagement, which consequently exerts a favorable impact on brand experience and repatronage intent. Our moderation analysis results reveal a stronger effect of the proposed relationships for women than men, thereby suggesting gender's moderating role in the association between service quality, brand experience, and customer engagement. The paper concludes by outlining key theoretical and practical implications that arise from this research.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, a shift has occurred from transactional-to relationship marketing, with the latter stressing the importance of long-term, value-laden customer interactions and relationships (Boulding et al., 2005; Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Thakur, 2018). In line with this shifting perspective, new concepts have emerged, including customer engagement (Vivek et al., 2014 Islam and Rahman, 2016a). With its core centering on customers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investments in interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019), CE offers insight into the dynamics characterizing consumer/brand interactions that existing relational concepts, such as involvement or commitment, have failed to fully capture (Brodie et al., 2011). Consequently, CE has gained significant traction in the last decade, particularly in the service subsector given its centrality of customer/firm interactions that is also common to CE (Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Prentice and Loureiro, 2018). Correspondingly, leading firms such as Procter & Gamble, Starbucks, BMW, Louis Vuitton, Dell, and many others have incorporated CE in their strategic agenda (Manchanda et al., 2015; Islam et al., 2017).

Given its interactive nature, CE is conducive to developing customer-based outcomes, including brand trust, attachment, and loyalty, thereby helping to differentiate firms and enhance sales, competitive advantage, and profitability (Brodie et al., 2013; Islam et al., 2018), thereby offering significant benefit for (service) managers Islam and Rahman, 2019. Based on these benefits, several studies have investigated CE in the hospitality sector that is characterized by high customer/firm interactivity (Ahn and Back, 2018; Rather et al., 2019; Rather and Hollebeek, 2019). In line with these developments, we explore the effect of service quality (SQ) on CE, which remains nebulous to date. Thus, while SQ was popularized through SERVQUAL from the 1980s (e.g. Parasuraman et al., 1988), its connection to CE remains tenuous. Enhanced understanding in this area would however be valuable in highlighting those service facets that are of particular value in engaging customers.

SQ represents an influential driver of customer-firm relationships (Roy et al., 2018a). For example, SERVQUAL's *competence, communication, responsiveness,* and *courtesy* dimensions directly reflect the customer's perception of their service-related interactive dynamics, thereby complementing CE-based insight (Sureshchandar et al., 2002). Correspondingly, we empirically study the effect of SQ on CE and its subsequent effect on brand experience and repatronage intent in the

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* Corresponding author. E-356, Building-101, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh, P.O Box 66833, 11586, Saudi Arabia.
  E-mail addresses: jammicms.kmr@gmail.com (J.U. Islam), deseo79@gmail.com (L.D. Hollebeek), zrahman786@gmail.com (Z. Rahman), imrankaifi@gmail.com (I. Khan), aaleyarasool@ymail.com (A. Rasool).

hotel sector. We also offer an early empirical investigation of the association between CE and brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Hollebeek, 2011a; Chen et al., 2018) and address the moderating role of gender on the association between these concepts. That is, despite the role of gender in affecting marketing outcomes (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015), its effect on CE remains scant in the literature (Islam and Rahman, 2016b).

Based on this rationale, we address the following questions: (1) *Does SQ contribute to enhancing CE in the hospitality sector*?; (2) *Does CE facilitate the development of hospitality customers' brand experience and repatronage intent*?; and (3) *Do these dynamics vary by gender*? By seeking answers to these questions, we make important theoretical and managerial contributions. Theoretically, we present a pioneering attempt to explore the link between SQ and CE. Through this association, we uncover insight into those SQ facets that are most conducive to developing hospitality customer engagement. In addition, we examine the relationship between CE and brand experience, which despite being addressed conceptually (Hollebeek, 2011b), to the best of our knowledge lags behind in terms of empirical investigation. The development of enhanced understanding of CE's role in affecting customers' overall journey-related perceptions therefore represents a valuable addition to the literature (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Practically, our findings indicate that SQ makes a significant contribution to CE, thereby reflecting a high level of managerial relevance. We therefore deduce that not only SQ, but also CE should be considered as core, integrated strategic elements to foster enhanced service brand experience and repurchase intent. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We next review literature on CE in section 2, which we link to service quality and brand experience in our conceptual framework that is introduced in section 3. We proceed by outlining our research methodology in section 4 and present our research findings in section 5. We conclude by presenting a discussion and theoretical and managerial implications that arise from our analyses in section 6.

2. Literature review

2.1. Customer engagement in the service context

As stated, CE has attained rapidly growing attention in the last decade (Brodie et al., 2011; Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Verhoef et al., 2010). Within this emerging relational research stream (Vivek et al., 2014), CE's conceptualization and dimensionality are key topics of debate. Rooted in differing theoretical perspectives, some authors propose CE to comprise both in-role and extra-role customer cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Harrigan et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2019), while others limit its scope to those expressions that are *extra*-role in nature (e.g. customer citizenship/helping behaviors; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Here, we adopt the former view that offers a more inclusive, influential view of CE (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Groeger et al., 2016).

Reflecting this discord, differing CE conceptualizations and dimensionalities have been proposed. For example, Van Doorn et al. (2010, p. 254) describe CE as uni-dimensional and conceptualize it as "the customer's behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers." Similarly, Jaakkola and Alexander (2014, p. 248) consider CE as a uni-dimensional construct and define it as "behaviors through which customers make voluntary resource contributions that have a brand or firm focus but go beyond what is fundamental to transactions, occur in interactions between the focal object and/or other actors, and result from motivational drivers."

By contrast, most existing research has conceptualized CE as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011; Claffey and Brady, 2017; Dwivedi, 2015; Bowden et al., 2017; Dijkmans et al., 2015; Raouf et al. 2019). For instance, Hollebeek et al. (2019, p. 167) define CE as a consumer's "investment of cognitive, emotional,

behavioral, and social operant, and operand resources in their brand interactions," thereby exhibiting alignment with Kumar et al. (2019), Hollebeek and Chen (2014), Hollebeek et al. (2014) and Hollebeek (2011a/b). For example, customers may use their smart device (i.e. operand resource) coupled with their cognitive (e.g. reading) skills (i.e. operant resource) to look up train departure times, thereby investing in their brand interaction. Similarly, Brodie et al. (2013, p. 107) view CE as "a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions [that] plays a central role in the process of relational exchange." In line with this perspective, we adopt CE's widely-used three-dimensional (i.e. cognitive, emotional, behavioral) view.

Given its *interactive* nature, CE has particular relevance in the service context that is characterized by high customer/brand interactivity (Kumar et al., 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2017). For example, customers having a restaurant meal are expected to interact with staff upon arrival, with waiting staff during the consumption of their meal, and with check-out staff after the meal. Through these interactions, they will also form specific SQ perceptions, as discussed further below. Based on these characteristics, CE has been commonly viewed through a service-dominant (S-D) logic lens, which - like CE - stresses the development of perceived value by virtue of interactivity (see Hollebeek et al., 2019 and Brodie et al., 2011 for extensive reviews).

3. Conceptual model and hypothesis development

Following our review, we develop a conceptual model and an associated set of research hypotheses for empirical investigation, as outlined below.

3.1. Service quality as a CE antecedent

Since the mid-1980s, service quality (SQ) has been crucial in the advancement of service research. SQ is "a perceived judgment resulting from an evaluation process where customers compare their expectations with the service they perceive to have received" (Gronroos, 1984, p. 37). SQ is also suggested to reflect "the extent to which an organization meets customer expectations on a consistent basis" (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p. 42). However, consensus regarding SQ's definition and dimensionality is lacking. For example, the North American school proposes five SERVQUAL dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p. 23), including reliability (the capability to execute the services as promised), assurance (the ability to inspire confidence among customers), responsiveness (the willingness to promptly help customers), empathy (the compassionate consideration toward customers), and tangibles (the physical service environment, including the appearance of service personnel). The Nordic school by contrast suggests the SQ dimensions of technical quality (e.g. the competence of service staff) and functional quality (the extent to which the service performs the customer's requested function; Gronroos, 1984).

Incorporating elements of both perspectives, Ekinci et al. (2008) proffer the SQ dimensions physical quality (i.e. the service's physical environment, appearance, facilities, and materials), and staff behavior (i.e. service employee competence, responsiveness, and helpfulness). While both perspectives hold value, here we deploy the Nordic two-dimensional model of SQ that incorporates physical quality and staff behavior, given its successful application in our chosen context of hospitality research (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Ekinci et al., 2001, 2008; Nam et al., 2011). We draw on the hospitality context based on its inherent customer/firm interactions that are also common to our key concepts of CE, brand experience, and repurchase intent.

Based on social exchange theory, individuals undertake comparative cost-reward analyses to assess their anticipated value extracted from an exchange (Blau, 1964; Priporas et al., 2017). In so doing, they are predicted to reciprocate by offering value back to the organization (e.g. by exhibiting customer citizenship behaviors, such as helping

other customers) when they receive perceived value from the firm, thereby balancing the relationship (Sierra and McQuitty, 2005; Lee et al., 2014) and stimulating CE (Hollebeek, 2011b; Bove et al., 2009). Based on this rationale, we posit:

H1. SQ has a positive impact on CE.

3.2. Brand experience as a CE consequence

Ever-increasing competition necessitates service firms to look for unique means to discern their offerings from those of competitors (Khan and Rahman, 2015). To do so, not only the customer's functional brand experience needs to reach a threshold, but the individual's hedonic and symbolic brand experience also need to be up to par. Brakus et al. (2009, p. 53) define *brand experience* as a customer's "sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments." That is, while CE's scope is limited to focal within or *intra*-interaction dynamics (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 163), brand experience extends to incorporate the customer's entire journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). That is, the customer's *pre*-brand usage experience occurs prior to CE's onset, followed by the customer's *intra*-brand usage experience that is characterized by CE, and the *post*-brand usage experience that occurs after CE in focal customer/brand interactions (Hollebeek and Andreassen, 2019). As such, CE occurs as a micro-experience within the customer's broader or macro-experience, thereby implying CE as a component sub-part of the customer's overall experience (see Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Brakus et al. (2009, p. 54) also posit that "brand experience … differs from motivational concepts, such as involvement," thereby further differentiating brand experience from CE's motivational nature (Hollebeek et al., 2019, p. 163; Kumar et al., 2010). Despite these differences, CE and brand experience both fit within a relational paradigm that centers on optimizing customer/brand interactions from customer and firm perspectives (Boulding et al., 2005). Over time, CE's *intra*-interaction focus culminates in a specific brand experience (Hollebeek and Andreassen, 2019, 2018; Islam et al., 2018). Moreover, CE's effect on brand experience is discussed in the online branding literature (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2016). Thus, despite conceptual claims of CE's effect on brand experience, to the best of our knowledge this association is yet to be examined empirically. In response to this gap, we explore CE's effect on brand experience, as consistent with Nysveen and Pedersen's (2014, p. 184) articulation that "*to create positive sensory brand experiences*, [customers need to be] *engaged in the brand.*" Correspondingly, we hypothesize:

H2. CE has a positive impact on brand experience.

3.3. Repatronage intent as a CE consequence

In today's increasingly competitive marketplace characterized by fickle consumers, repatronage intent is of particular importance. That is, many service firms are focusing on customer retention as an important strategic priority (Khan and Rahman, 2017; Petrick et al., 2001; Reza and Samiei, 2012), thereby highlighting the key role of understanding customers' intent to repurchase an offering. Repatronage intent, which denotes a customer's expectation to repurchase from a focal firm, is an oft-used predictor of actual future customer behavior (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Mahrous and Abdelmaaboud, 2017). Echoing the concept's importance, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975, p. 368) posit: "If one wants to know whether or not an individual will perform a given behavior, the simplest and probably most efficient thing one can do is to ask the individual whether he intends to perform that behavior." Consequently, repatronage intent is a widely-adopted (dependent) variable in (service) marketing research (Huang and Hsu, 2009). Measuring intent is however imperfect, as actual customer behaviors do

not always match intentions (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

Appealing customers towards repeat behavior is supposed to be a powerful marketing approach to curtail costs and drive long-term relationships (Jung et al., 2014; Um et al., 2006). While links between CE and other key consumer behavioral outcomes (e.g., trust and loyalty) have been established in conceptual research to date (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013), little remains known regarding the effect of CE on repatronage intent as derived in empirical research (Ahn and Back, 2018). As the affiliates of different social networks, people interact with other fellow participants (Kim et al., 2018). Literature holds that customer-based brand reviews (an expression of customer engagement) tend to influence other customers' repatronage intent by minimizing their perceived purchase risks (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Zhang and Tran, 2009; Zhu and Zhang, 2010). Studies further unveil that customer purchase and repatronage intentions are affected by the ideas of other customers as well as by social interactions (Festinger, 1950, 1954; Islam et al., 2018; Um et al., 2006). Additionally, entertaining CE activities offered by a hotel brand serves as an influential driver of ensuing customers' revisit intent (Adjei et al., 2010; Bone et al., 2015; Khan and Rahman, 2017). The proposed relationship between CE and repatronage intent is further strengthened by social exchange theory, which propounds that the resources (tangible and intangible) accrued by customers by engaging with a focal object (tourism destination) will lead them to revisit further that object (Harrigan et al., 2018). We thus posit:

H3. CE has a positive impact on customer repatronage intent.

3.4. Moderating role of gender

Previous research suggests gender as an important demographic variable affecting customer behavior (Bem, 1974; Grewal et al., 2003). Though gender as a moderator has been investigated in prior research, only few studies have focused on the effect of gender on CE, thereby warranting further research (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015; Islam et al., 2018). As proposed by gender schema theory, men and women develop distinctive value sets that yield different decision-making styles (Bem, 1974; Mason and Mudrack, 1996).

Literature reveals that males grow up developing instrumental and task goal-oriented traits, whereas females tend to develop social relationship-oriented traits and see themselves as attached to others (Sharma et al., 2012). In service settings, female customers are therefore expected to be more influenced by sales staff and service employee interactions. Males, by contrast, will tend to focus more on comfort and utilitarian values drawn in terms of money, time, and effort (Danaher, 1998; Sharma et al., 2012). Women also have a higher ability to decode non-verbal cues (Ganesan-Lim et al., 2008; Mason and Mudrack, 1996), and process information more comprehensively than males, who tend to be more selective in their approach (Darley and Smith, 1995). To evaluate service brands, females are inclined more towards tangible cues (Anderson et al., 2008; Laroche et al., 2000). We hence posit:

H4a. The relationship between SQ and CE is stronger for women than men.

H4b. The relationship between CE and brand experience is stronger for women than men.

H4c. The relationship between CE and repatronage intent is stronger for women than men.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research setting

Given CE's context-specific nature, we draw on the context of luxury hotel brands, which reflect a highly experiential nature and high associated service quality expectations (Chu et al., 2016; Xu and Chan,

2010; So and King, 2010). Within this context, we add to previous research by exploring the association between CE, SQ, brand experience, and repurchase intent. A key reason for choosing the luxury hotel context lies in its inherently interactive, relational nature (Fernandes and Fabia, 2016; Khan and Rahman, 2017).

Another reason for our choice of sector lies in the rapid developments characterizing the luxury hotel sector, rendering the development of insight into its customer dynamics necessary. These trends include swiftly growing competition, increasingly fickle consumers, the rise of new brands, and sharing economy-based accommodation offerings, which has led many (luxury) hotels to adopt price discounts. However, as such strategies are unsustainable in the long-run, hotels need to identify ways to foster customer commitment and loyalty, which we posit can be achieved through heightened CE (So et al., 2016; Ahn and Back, 2018; Hollebeek, 2017). Correspondingly, many hospitality businesses are actively focusing on CE to build and maintain enduring customer relationships in their highly competitive markets (Li and Hsu., 2018; Romero, 2017).

4.2. Sample and data collection

Our data were collected from luxury hotel guests in New Delhi, India by means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire's clarity was pretested by drawing on the insights provided by an expert panel comprising of three academic experts, which was used to refine the questionnaire wording as needed. Next, a sample of 70 Master's students was used as a further pre-test of our survey instrument, which revealed no issues (e.g. pertaining to lack of questionnaire clarity). To conduct our main study, the lead author approached people around luxury hotels in New Delhi and probed if they were at a luxury hotel during that time. Those who answered affirmatively were requested to participate in our survey. We next briefed those our participants about the survey purpose and asked them to state the specific luxury (i.e. four or five-star) hotel they were staying at. Of the 500 distributed questionnaires, 395 completed surveys were returned, yielding a 79% response rate. Table 1 presents an overview of the respondents' demographic profile.

Table 1
Respondents' demographic profile.

Characteristic	Frequency	
	N (395)	%
Gender		
Male	205	51.8
Female	190	48.2
Age		
20–25	43	10.8
26–35	148	37.5
36–50	166	42.1
51 and above	38	9.6
Education		
High school and below	11	2.7
10 + 2/Intermediate	26	6.6
Some college degree	179	45.3
Some post-graduation degree	167	42.3
Doctorate	12	3.1
Approximate monthly income (₹)		
30,000 or less	7	1.7
30001–45000	18	4.5
45001–60000	123	31.1
60001–75000	152	38.7
Above 75000	95	24.0
Visiting frequency (in last 12 months)		
Two or less visits	127	32.2
Two to three visits	158	40.0
Three to four visits	65	16.4
More than four visits	45	11.4

4.3. Measures

Our constructs were gauged by drawing on well-established scales that were administered on seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 ("*totally disagree*") to 7 ("*totally agree*"; see Appendix 1). Minor modifications (as relevant) were made to ensure the scales' fit in our chosen study context. To measure *service quality*, 3 *physical quality* and 4 *staff behavior* items were sourced from Ekinci (2001) and Ekinci et al. (2008). A sample item includes "*Hotel brand) provides a comfortable room."* We measured *CE* by using Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) 10-item scale, with a sample item including "*Using (Hotel brand) gets me to think about the brand."* In addition, *brand experience* was measured by drawing on Brakus et al.'s (2009) 12-item scale, with a sample item reading "*(Hotel brand) makes a strong impression on my senses.*" To measure *repatronage intent*, we adopted three items from Kivela et al. (1999), with a sample item including "*To what degree would you rate your intent of return to (Hotel brand)?*"

5. Data analysis and results

5.1. Confirmatory factor analysis, reliability and validity analyses

""To examine the hypothesized effects, a two-step approach including confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and "structural equation modeling" (SEM) was adopted. AMOS 20.0 SEM software was used to test the proposed relationships. CFA was first run to verify the scales' validity and measurement quality" (Anderson and Gerbing, 1982; Hair et al., 2010).

We also assessed construct reliability by using Cronbach's alpha, as displayed in Table 2. As shown, each of the values exceeded the critical threshold of > 0.7, thereby indicating adequate scale reliability. Each of the item loadings exceeded 0.5, illustrating adequate convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). The average variance extracted (AVE) also exceeded 0.5 for each of the factors, thereby further demonstrating adequate level of convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Discriminant validity was assessed by relating the squared root of each construct's AVE with its parallel correlations" (Hair et al., 2010). As illustrated in Table 3, the squared root of each construct's AVE surpassed its respective inter-construct correlations, thereby suggesting the existence of discriminant validity between our constructs (Hair et al., 2010).

5.2. Common method bias

Given our use of self-report measures, we checked for common method bias (CMB) in the data by deploying Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003)". Applying this test, the existence of CMB is suggested if a single factor explains most (> 50%) of the covariance. To do so, all the 32 items were incorporated in an un-rotated principal-component exploratory factor analysis (extracting only one factor). Our results revealed that the first factor accounted for 39.70% (i.e. ⁻ 50%) of the variance, confirming that CMB is not a threat to our study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, CMB is improbable if correlations are not extremely high (e.g. under 0.9; Pavlou et al., 2007). As the correlation matrix (Table 3) shows the absence of excessively high correlation values in our data, CMB is not an issue here.

5.3. Structural model

The model's fit to the data was assessed by drawing on the χ^2 statistic, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI; Hu and Bentler, 1999)". Model fit is deemed acceptable if RMSEA < 0.07, CFI > 0.95, NFI > 0.90, GFI > 0.90, and TLI > 0.90 (Hair et al., 2010). The proposed model (without gender) presented an adequate overall fit: $\chi2 = 233$,

Table 2
Reliability and validity of the constructs.

Items	Item loadings	Cronbach α	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Service Quality		0.92	0.89	0.69
PhyQ1	0.83			
PhyQ2	0.88			
PhyQ3	0.85			
StBh1	0.80			
StBh2	0.85			
StBh3	0.84			
StBh4	0.80			
Customer		0.90	0.89	0.82
Engagement				
CgP1	0.81			
CgP2	0.79			
CgP3	0.86			
Afn1	0.81	0.97	0.98	0.80
Afn2	0.79			
Afn3	0.82			
Afn4	0.89			
Act 1	0.93			
Act 2	0.89			
Act 3	0.88			
Brand Experience				
Sen 1	0.89	0.91	0.84	0.65
Sen 2	0.91			
Sen 3	0.89			
Aff 1	0.93			
Aff 2	0.89			
Aff 3	0.87			
Cog 1	0.88			
Cog 2	0.92			
Cog 3	0.88			
Beh 1	0.91			
Beh 2	0.87			
Beh 3	0.90			
Repatronaget Intent				
RpIn1	0.81			
RpIn2	0.79			
RpIn3	0.80			

(Note: PhyQ = Physical quality; StBh = Staff behavior; CgP = Cognitive processing; Afn = Affection; Act = Activation; Sen = Sensory; Aff = Affective; Cog = Cognitive; Beh = Behavioral; RpIn = Repatronage intent).

Table 3
Descriptive statistic, Inter-construct correlations, and Square root of AVE.

Variable	Mean	S.D.	SQ	CE	BE	RI
Service quality (SQ)	4.37	0.89	**0.830**			
Customer engagement (CE)	4.10	1.10	0.51*	**0.894**		
Brand experience (BE)	3.92	1.13	0.49*	0.46*	**0.905**	
Repatronage intent (RI)	4.26	0.96	0.53*	0.50*	0.52*	**0.806**

Note: The figures in bold depict the square root of AVE; *Correlation is significant at 0.05 level; N = 395.

$p = 0.05$, $df = 79$, $\chi2/df = 2.949$, CFI = 0.948, NFI = 0.939, GFI = 0.929, TLI = 0.938, and RMSEA = 0.057.

"The results show that H1-H3 are supported by the data (see Table 4 and Fig. 1). H1 explored service quality's effect on customer engagement. SQ ($\beta = 0.39$; $t = 4.12$, $p = 0.05$) positively affects CE in hospitality services, thus supporting H1, and suggesting CE's ($\beta = 0.49$;

Table 4
Hypotheses testing results.

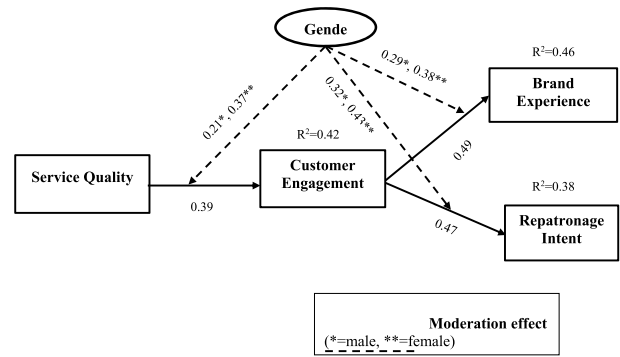| Hypotheses	B	t-values	Result
H1: service quality customer engagement	0.39	4.12	Supported
H2: customer engagement brand experience	0.49	5.31	Supported
H3: customer engagement repatronage intent	0.47	4.81	Supported

Fig. 1.

$t = 5.31$, $p = 0.05$) positive effect on brand experience, thereby also supporting H2." Moreover, our results reveal that CE has a significant, positive effect on hotel guests' repatronage intent ($\beta = 0.47$, $t = 4.81$, $p = 0.05$), thereby supporting H3.

5.4. Moderating effect of gender

To test H4a, H4b and H4c (i.e. gender's moderating effect), we split the sample into two groups: Male (205) and female (190). "We employed multi-group causal analysis in SEM and matched variances in path coefficients of the structural paths for the two sample groups (Islam et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2014). The model (with gender) unveiled a reasonable overall fit: $\chi2 = 438$, $p = 0.05$, $df = 134$, $\chi2/df = 3.268$, CFI = 0.911, NFI = 0.920, GFI = 0.919, TLI = 0.942, and RMSEA = 0.060. As presented in Table 5, the substantial impact of SQ on CE differs for males ($\beta = 0.21$; $t = 2.97$, $p = 0.05$) and females ($\beta = 0.37$; $t = 4.12$, $p = 0.05$), accepting H4a. Similarly, the effect of CE on brand experience is greater for females ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 4.33$, $p = 0.05$) compared to males ($\beta = 0.29$, $t = 3.74$, p = 0.05), supporting H4b; and the effect of CE on repatronage intent is higher for females ($\beta = 0.43$, $t = 5.79$, $p = 0.05$) than males ($\beta = 0.32$, $t = 3.69$, $p = 0.05$), thereby supporting H4c. We also examined the Chi-square distribution ($df = 1$; Das, 2014), which revealed that the difference between the path coefficients for our male/female sub-samples is significant ($\chi2 = 3.873$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$; $\chi2 = 4.669$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$).

6. Discussion and implications

This study has investigated the relationship between SQ, CE, brand experience, and repatronage intent in the context of luxury hotel services, which exhibit several interesting implications. First, our findings empirically validate the proposition made by prior researchers that enhanced service quality is crucial for enhancing customers' future engagement with the brand (Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011a). Our findings suggest that in hospitality, CE - an important determinant of brand experience and revisit intention - is nurtured by offering superior service quality. The results thus suggest hospitality marketers to focus on providing superior service quality and pleasurable interactions (e.g. by fostering emotional engagement), rather than concentrating on the functional service attributes (Hollebeek, 2013). Specifically, pleasurable interactions strengthen customers' attachment to a brand and facilitate more favorable brand experiences (Bowden et al., 2015; So et al., 2014).

Our results" also reveal gender's moderating role in the proposed associations in our model. That is, they support our basic contention that customers differ in the way they observe, appraise, and respond to the SQ and brand experiences. It is therefore vital for both academia and firms to consider the gender differences while investigating and opting for effective experience and engagement strategies.

Table 5
Path comparison results across gender.

Hypotheses	Male (N = 205)			Female (N = 190)			Result
	$\beta\ t$		values	$\beta\ t$		values	
H4a: service quality customer engagement	0.21		3.57	0.37		4.12	supported
H4b: customer engagement brand experience	0.29		3.74	0.38		4.33	supported
H4c: customer engagement repatronage intent	0.32		3.69	0.43		5.79	supported

6.1. Theoretical implications

Our study adds to the literature by exploring CE in the hospitality context, thereby responding to calls for the concept's context-specific investigation (Fernandes and Fabia, 2016; Kumar et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2018a). Second, through our theoretical model, we advance insight into the role of SQ as a CE driver, and CE's effect of CE on brand experience and repatronage intent (Bryce et al., 2015; Raouf et al., 2019). Third, while existing research has often adopted an S-D logic perspective of CE (Vargo and Lusch, 2017), our social exchange perspective helps extend scholarly understanding of the proposed conceptual associations (Hollebeek, 2011b). Fourth, though gender is an extensively-used variable in the literature, only few studies have examined CE-related gender effects (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015; Islam et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2014). Thus by examining the moderating role of gender, this study adds to the engagement literature. That is, while gender has been identified to exert a potential effect on CE (Van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 257), empirical investigation of this association has remained scarce in the literature to date (Islam and Rahman, 2017), as examined in this paper. We expect our findings to hold across service contexts, including tourism, professional services, or education.

Finally, we augment the engagement literature by conducting an empirical study in a developing economy. According to the Ministry of Tourism (Government of India), the number of foreign tourists in India is anticipated to reach 15.3 million by the year 2025 (FHRAI, 2014). Correspondingly, the growing number of tourists in India will see substantial growth in the hotel industry, thereby highlighting the practical significance of our work. While emerging economies offer a substantial growth prospect for multi-national businesses (Islam et al., 2018), scant CE research in such growth markets has been conducted (Hollebeek, 2018; Islam and Rahman, 2016; Roy et al., 2018b), as undertaken in this study. Overall, this study offers empirical evidence for CE's contextual nature (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Dwivedi, 2015; Islam and Rahman, 2016b), thereby highlighting the importance of developing tailored firm solutions. We also delineate the importance of focusing on service quality in conjunction with CE to enhance the customer brand experience and revisit intention (Hollebeek et al., 2011a; Roy et al., 2018a; Vivek et al., 2012).

6.2. Managerial implications

With hospitality's ever-increasing competition and growth, it has become imperative for managers to identify how to build and maintain CE with their offerings (Raouf et al., 2019). CE therefore holds the utmost importance on the managerial agenda. Nothing foresees organizational growth like the development of CE, as articulated by Gallup (2016): "Simply satisfying customers doesn't have the same effect as engaging them." While marketing academia and practice have acknowledged CE's positive effects, CE acceleration is expected to yield optimal outcomes, though insight in this area is limited (Fernandes and Fabia, 2016; Roy et al., 2018a). We show the importance of stimulating hospitality-based CE as its development is expected to enhance customers' brand experience and revisit intent. Luxury hotel marketers are therefore advised to develop CE as part of an experiential marketing approach. Given that other customers' engagement also impacts that of the focal customer, hoteliers must think further than relationship management alone and aim to enhance customer-to-customer interactions and ties to stimulate and maintain value-laden CE (Hollebeek and Solem, 2017).

Online services (including platform companies), including Airbnb and TripAdvisor, have institutionalized online review processes as a principal practice of facilitating customer interactions. Therefore, creating and sharing brand narratives and service-quality related experiences (e.g. firm-based narrations, exterior/interior elements, employee/customer encounters, color, or music) via YouTube or other (e.g. virtual reality) platforms represents another influential program to enhance customer interaction and visual experience (Hollebeek and Andreassen, 2018; Hollebeek et al., 2016a,b). Hoteliers are therefore advised to incorporate offline or online sensory inputs to help foster CE and brand experience (Ahn and Back, 2018).

In this sense, developing online brand communities can prompt customers to share their experiences and initiate their brand engagement (Hollebeek and Solem, 2017; Calder et al., 2018). Using big data, hoteliers can analyze customers' behavioral patterns, thereby creating an opportunity to offer customized services, promotions, settings, or offerings (e.g. travel packages) to best suit their target customers' needs and grow their engagement. In the hospitality sector, service employees play an important role in delivering the brand promise due to high interactivity with customers. Therefore, service firms are advised to develop appropriate recruitment and training programs that stimulate empathetic, responsive staff behavior. Employee engagement and retention are also crucial to achieve and maintain customer satisfaction and engagement (Kumar and Pansari, 2016), similar to the service profit chain's key postulation (Sasser et al., 1997; Ekinci et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2014).

7. Limitations and future research

Though this study adds to the CE literature, it also comes with some limitations that provide opportunities for further research. First, this study is specific to a single culture (Indian) and service context (hospitality). Therefore, to generalize this study's results, further investigation (e.g. through the replication of our research design) across different cultures and service settings (e.g. banking, retailing) to further validate the model is suggested.

Second, while we considered gender's role, further study may choose to more explicitly consider the different engagement-related needs of different audiences, whether demographically or psychographically. For example, domestic vs. foreign travelers may engage with hotel brands in different ways, reflecting potentially different preference structures (Hollebeek, 2018). Third, based on the notion that service employees play an influential role in service delivery and the development of customer satisfaction, studying the employee engagement/CE interface could also be a fruitful area of research (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). Fourth, while this study explored the relationship between SQ, CE, brand experience and repatronage intent, a number of related constructs exist that may be deployed in further research. Researchers are therefore encouraged to consider the inclusion of other such constructs in their models, including perceived value, brand love, customer satisfaction, or co-creation, as these may exert potential moderating or mediating effects. Finally, future study may wish to compare CE levels for hedonic and utilitarian services, which are

expected to yield differing results (Hollebeek, 2013).

Acknowledgements

Appendix-1

Measures	Source
Service Quality:	Ekinci (2001); Ekinci et al. (2008)
Physical quality	
1. The décor of (*Hotel brand*) is beautifully coordinated with great attention to detail.	
2. (*Hotel brand*) is tidy.	
3. (*Hotel brand*) provides a comfortable room.	
Staff behavior	
1. Staff of (*Hotel brand*) is helpful and friendly.	
2. Staff of (*Hotel brand*) seems to anticipate what I want.	
3. Staff of (*Hotel brand*) listens to me.	
4. Staff of (*Hotel brand*) is talented and displays a natural expertise.	
Customer Engagement	Hollebeek et al. (2014)
Cognitive processing	
1. Using (*Hotel brand*) gets me to think about it.	
2. I think about (*Hotel brand*) a lot when I'm using it.	
3. Using (*Hotel brand)* stimulates my interest to learn more about the brand.	
Affection	
1. I feel very positive when I use (*Hotel brand*).	
2. Using (*Hotel brand*) makes me happy.	
3. I feel good when I use (*Hotel brand*).	
4. I'm proud to use (*Hotel brand*).	
Activation	
1. I spend a lot of time using (*Hotel brand*) compared to other hotel brands.	
2. Whenever I'm staying in hotel, I usually stay in (*Hotel brand*).	
3. (*Hotel brand*) is one of the hotel brands I usually stay in when I stay in a hotel.	
Brand Experience:	
Sensory	
1. (*Hotel brand*) makes a strong impression on my senses	
2. Being a customer of (*Hotel brand*) gives me interesting sensory experiences	
3. (*Hotel brand*) appeals strongly to my senses	Brakus et al. (2009)
Affective	
1. (*Hotel brand*) induces my feelings.	
2. I have strong emotions for (*Hotel brand*).	
3. (*Hotel brand*) often strongly engages me emotionally.	
Cognitive	
1. I engage in a lot of thinking as a customer of (*Hotel brand*).	
2. Being a customer of (*Hotel brand*) stimulates my thinking and problem solving	
3. (*Hotel brand*) often challenges my way of thinking.	
Behavioral	
1. I often engage in action and behavior when I use (*Hotel brand*) services.	
2. As a customer of (*Hotel brand*), I am rarely passive.	
3. (*Hotel brand*) activates me.	
Repatronage Intention	
1. To what degree would you rate your intent of return to (*Hotel brand*)?	
2. To what degree would you rate your intentions to visit (*Hotel brand*)?	
3. To what degree would you rate your definite return intention to (*Hotel brand*?	
	Kivela et al. (1999)

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.05.018.

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Jamid Ul Islam, Ph.D is an Assistant Professor (Marketing) at College of Business Administration, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. His work to-date, which has centered on customer/consumer engagement, is published in journals, including *Service Industries Journal*, *Management Decision*, *Internet Research*, *Telematics and Informatics*, and *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, among others. His areas of interest are customer engagement, online brand communities, social networks, and consumer behavior. Dr. Jamid is the recipient of *Emerald Literati Network Awards (2018)*, for *Outstanding Paper* and *Highly Commended paper, 2018*.

Linda D. Hollebeek, Ph.D is Senior Associate Professor at Montpellier Business School and Full Professor (Adj.) at Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia. She also serves as Senior Associate Professor at NHH Norwegian School of Economics. Her research to date, which has centered on customer/consumer engagement, has published in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Service Research*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Business Research*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Industrial Marketing Management* and *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, among others. She is currently guest-editing Special Issues/Sections in the *Journal of Service Research*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, and *European Journal of Marketing* and has been appointed Associate Editor of the *European Journal of Marketing*.

Imran Khan, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at College of Business Administration, Prince Sultan University, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He received his PhD in the area of marketing from the Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India. He has published several papers in well-established international journals such as *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, *Journal of Brand Management*, *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, *Service Science*, among others. His main research interest areas are brand experience, corporate social responsibility, brand attachment and customer engagement.

Aaleya Rasool, M.B.A is an integrated M.Phil- Ph.D research scholar in the Department of Management Studies, School of Business, Central University of Kashmir in India. She has obtained her MBA degree from University of Kashmir, India. She has qualified University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test and Jammu & Kashmir State Eligibility Test in Management. Her areas of interest are customer experience, customer engagement, and services marketing.

Zillur Rahman, PhD is Professor in the Department of Management Studies, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India. Dr. Rahman has more than 20 years of experience in academia. His publications have appeared in reputed international journals, including the *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Telematics and Informatics*, *International Journal of Information Management*, *Management Decision*, among others. He was the recipient of the *Emerald Literati Club Highly Commended Award* in 2004, *Emerald/AIMA research fund award* in 2009, and *Highly Commended Paper in Emerald Literati Network Awards for* Excellence, 2016, 2018.