

# The role of co-creation experience in engaging customers with service brands

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to investigate the outcomes of customers' co-creation experience in a realistic and routinely performed co-creation setting, a restaurant. To fulfill this purpose, the current study links the branding literature to hospitality research and offers a novel framework by incorporating customers' co-creation experience, customer brand engagement, emotional brand attachment and customer satisfaction in an integrated research model.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data were collected from 421 diners at Chinese hotpot restaurants via a self-administered questionnaire. The reliability and convergent and discriminant validities were established through confirmatory factor analysis, and then hypotheses were tested through structural equation modeling.

**Findings** – This study demonstrates that customers' co-creation experience with a restaurant brand positively impacts customer brand engagement, emotional brand attachment and customer satisfaction. In addition, current study examines these relational paths at the dimensional level by taking the co-creation experience and customer brand engagement as multidimensional constructs. The resulting in-depth investigation reveals that the hedonic, social and economic experience dimensions of co-creation experience positively influence customer satisfaction, emotional brand attachment and customer brand engagement's buying, referring, influencing and feedback dimensions.

**Practical implications** – This study helps relationship and brand managers better understand customer experience in co-creation settings and paves the way for managers to devise engagement strategies.

**Originality/value** – The current study marks an initial attempt to delineate the outcomes of customers' co-creation experience in a realistic co-creation setting. Furthermore, the study is first of its kind that investigates the relationship of co-creation experience and customer brand engagement at the dimensional level.

**Keywords** Value co-creation, Customer experience, Customer satisfaction, Emotional brand attachment, Customer brand engagement

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Brand managers are striving to engage customers with their brands (Junaid *et al.*, 2019; Kumar and Nayak, 2019). Specifically, service brands are struggling to achieve an engaging and emotionally sound relationship with their customers. In this regard, a recent longitudinal investigation has suggested that service brands can maintain an emotional

and satisfying relationship with customers by introducing co-creation as a key service offering (Hussain *et al.*, 2019). Kumar *et al.* (2019) asserted that brand managers wishing to achieve consumer brand engagement, emotional brand attachment and

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satisfaction may focus on the active participation of customers in the service co-creation process. The involvement of customers in the service co-creation process engenders a unique experience termed as *co-creation experience* (CCE). The CCE of customers is defined as their mental state that results from their participation in the value co-creation process (Chen, 2018; Zhang et al., 2015).

CCE received considerable research attention from academic community in recent years as an increasing number of companies opt for value co-creation (Jaakkola et al., 2015; Meng and Cui, 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). The extant literature primarily examines CCE in co-creation situations that pertain to the ideation, design and development of new products/services (Kohler et al., 2011; Verleye, 2015; Zhang et al., 2015). However, the development of new products/services is intermittent, and only small number of customers may have the opportunity to participate in their ideation, design and development. Conversely, services whose nature lends themselves to co-creation (e.g. cooking your own food at a restaurant or collaborating with the chef to cook your food) are routinely performed and thus are more pragmatic and realistic co-creation settings. These types of service offerings always involve a customer in value co-creation and offer a suitable platform from which to examine CCE.

Grönroos (2011) asserted that cooking meal at a restaurant represents a complete value creation process (p. 282), and recent research has also affirmed that the restaurant industry provides a dynamic platform to examine customer experience in co-creation settings (Hussain et al., 2019). Moreover, the participation of customers in the co-creation of restaurant experience provides competitive advantages to such restaurant brands. For instance, Inamo Restaurant, London has adopted a technology that enables customers to place orders through touchscreens embedded in their dining tables, view enlarged images of menu items, change the outlook of the background and play games (Chathoth et al., 2016). Similarly, Subway Restaurant offers a unique selection of ingredients, which becomes a key element of their brand proposition (Simi and Matusitz, 2017). The participation of customers in co-creation remains limited although Subway and Inamo restaurants provide customized service experience.

By contrast, a famous Chinese restaurant brand called HaiDiLao offers a complete CCE. This restaurant is popular for Chinese hotpot cuisines. At Chinese hotpot restaurants, diners cook their own food right at the table where the restaurants offer a value proposition by facilitating them with raw ingredients, a cooking facility and a dining table. Moreover, they can select ingredients, and then cook their food with the right mix of spices and edibles that suits their tastes and preferences. This whole process is analogous to what Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) described as the co-creation of service experience, where a firm allows their customers to co-create the experience that suits their context. It is also in line with customized offerings (Chathoth et al., 2013; Mathis et al., 2016), where actors invite other actors to assist in the production of service offerings (Vargo and Lusch, 2010).

The extant research has emphasized the need to invest heavy resources in improving the experience of customers to achieve favorable outcomes (Finsterwalder, 2018; Neuhofer et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2015). However, little is known about how

this investment would pay off as empirical research on the outcomes of CCE is still limited and requires attention from academic community (Chathoth et al., 2016; Jaakkola et al., 2015). Therefore, the current study investigates how CCE pays off in achieving customer brand engagement (CBE) through customer satisfaction (CS) and emotional brand attachment (EBA).

The theory of engagement (Pansari and Kumar, 2017) suggests that the focus of marketing has shifted from relationship marketing to customer engagement in recent years. This tenet is endorsed by a Gallup survey that indicates that engaged customers pay 56% more visits to a restaurant brand than actively disengaged customers (Sorenson and Adkins, 2014). The CBE theory further proposes that a satisfying and emotionally bonding relationship is necessary to achieve sustainable CBE. Therefore, the current study combines CBE, CS and EBA in an integrated model as the outcomes of CCE in the context of the restaurant industry. Kumar et al. (2019) argued that customer experience works as a driving mechanism to achieve these outcomes in co-creation settings. However, their framework takes customer experience as a general construct; hence, it does not encapsulate the nuances of the collaborative and interactive aspects of CCE (Jaakkola et al., 2015). To encompass these aspects of co-creation, the current study extends the model of Kumar et al. (2019) by examining CCE in a realistic co-creation setting at a restaurant. Additionally, this study uses CCE as a multidimensional construct (Verleye, 2015) consisting of hedonic, social, economic and cognitive dimensions to offer insights into how each of these four dimensions affects the outcome variables. Because without examining these relationships at dimensional level, the extant literature has failed to explain the phenomenon in any depth, settling for a generalized overall assessment.

Accordingly, the current study contributes to the field of branding and hospitality research, primarily the discussions on two emerging streams of research: CCE of customers and CBE. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first attempt in the realm of hospitality research to offer an integrated model of CCE by investigating its effect on behavioral outcomes that are critical to brand success, thereby addressing multiple research calls (Chathoth et al., 2016; Jaakkola et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2019; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Although the extant literature attempts to provide conceptual grounds on how co-creation fits with the hospitality sector (Buhalis and Sinarta, 2019; Chathoth et al., 2013; Rihova et al., 2015; Tu et al., 2018; Wong and Lai, 2018), the research on the outcomes of CCE in the hospitality sector remains nebulous (Im and Qu, 2017). For practice, this study makes it simpler for relationship and brand managers to understand the complex phenomenon of the CCE of customers and how the management of this experience can improve performance and relational outcomes.

## Literature review

The meteoric shift in consumer culture from purchasing goods to paying for experiences (Jain et al., 2017; Neuhofer et al., 2015) and the emergence of S-D logic as the general theory of co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2017) have escalated the interest of academic community in understanding CCE. The

importance of S-D logic in studying CCE is imbedded in foundational premises (FPs) 6, 7 and 10 (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008). According to these FPs, value is jointly created by customers and brands, while value is determined primarily by customers based on their perceptions of experiential benefits. The contextual nature of value accentuates the importance of studying customer experience in the context of co-creation, where customers participate in the production and consumption of goods and services by investing operand resources (material resources such as money and goods) and operant resources (knowledge, skills and competencies). Furthermore, while addressing the experiential aspects of consumption, consumer culture theory (CCT) proposes that customers create experiences collectively through shared resources and market interactions (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). The confluence of both research streams (S-D logic and CCT) suggests that value is always co-created depending on the context and is principally determined through customers' evaluation of their CCE (Akaka et al., 2015; Grönroos and Voima, 2013).

Kumar et al. (2019) argued that S-D logic offers general guidelines to examine the outcomes of customer experience in different settings. The engagement theory (Pansari and Kumar, 2017) outlines a specific set of assumptions to ascertain the role of customer experience, satisfaction and emotional connectedness in driving customer engagement. The present study builds on engagement theory to delineate the outcomes of customers' co-creation experience under the broader guidelines of S-D logic. S-D logic and engagement theory propose that value is contextual in nature that emerges from the subjective evaluation of customers within a particular context. The context-dependent variation in customer experience may distinctly influence the engagement behaviors of customers (Chathoth et al., 2016; Hussain et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019). The context of co-creation of this study at Chinese hotpot restaurants perfectly aligns with the theory of engagement and FPs 6, 7 and 10 of S-D logic.

### Customers' co-creation experience

CCE refers to the mental state of a customer that results from his or her participation in the value co-creation process (Chen, 2018; Zhang et al., 2015). CCE is also multidimensional, both as a concept and a phenomenon (Jaakkola et al., 2015), and is determined by a multitude of person-specific factors (Füller, 2010). In a similar vein, Verleye (2015) developed a multidimensional measure of CCE by relying on social exchange theory and the earlier work of Etgar (2008), Füller (2010) and Nambisan and Baron (2009). Verleye identified four dimensions of CCE – hedonic, cognitive, social and economic – and an additional measure of the overall CCE. The current study adopts her conceptualization and these four dimensions to measure the multidimensional nature of CCE, along with the overall CCE as a higher order measure. The first dimension, hedonic experience (HE), refers to a mentally stimulating and pleasurable experience that results from an absolute absorption in co-creation tasks (Meng and Cui, 2020; Verleye, 2015). The HE stems from intrinsic motives, where consumers perform co-creation activities for their own sake to seek pleasure, fun and entrainment, regardless of any external

rewards (Chen, 2018; Etgar, 2008). Participation in co-creation activities helps consumers escape from their routine lives and fulfills their innate desire to seek pleasure, amusement and delight. Such experiences are appreciated more by consumers who place importance on intrinsic values and actively pursue co-creation activities to do something different, difficult and worthwhile.

The second dimension covers the social and personal benefits that a consumer draws by participating in co-creation activities. The social experience (SE) helps consumers connect with like-minded people and augments their sense of belonging (Hussain et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2019; Nambisan and Baron, 2009). This experience builds on the desire of an individual for social identity, recognition and development of skills that improve communication with the outside world (Füller, 2010; Zhang et al., 2015).

While some consumers engage in co-creation activities to strengthen their relationships and social connectedness, others participate to seek benefits that are more pragmatic and economic in nature. The economic experience (EE) refers to the material rewards a consumer receives by participating in co-creation activities or by avoiding risks that are related to the quality of products and services (Etgar, 2008; Verleye, 2015). Füller (2010) corroborated that this type of experience is particularly desirable for extrinsically motivated customers, who seek outcomes (e.g. compensation for participating in co-creation activities) that are independent of co-creation activities.

The fourth dimension, the cognitive experience (CoE), refers to the new knowledge and skills that a co-creation activity offers (Verleye, 2015; Zhang et al., 2015). Participation in co-creation helps consumers learn about products and services, such as their underlying principles and technologies (Nambisan and Baron, 2009). CoE also helps consumers explore new ways to use products and provides them opportunities to learn from the co-creation efforts of other participants. Those who seek CoE tend to be intrinsically motivated and stimulated by their desire to generate and implement creative ideas for their own sake (Füller, 2010).

The four dimensions of experience collectively contribute to the overall CCE of an individual. Verleye (2015) found that HE, SE, EE and CoE positively affect the overall CCE of customers. However, having measured this relationship using a scenario-based co-creation activity, Verleye suggested the need to validate these findings in diverse and more pragmatic co-creation settings. In addition, Im and Qu (2017) highlighted the limitations of scenario-based co-creation in the hospitality sector and recommended investigating CCE in real settings. The hospitality sector offers dynamic co-creation situations through which to examine CCE, but the extant research in this realm has relied primarily on scenario-based or online co-creation settings (Im and Qu, 2017; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2016). What's more, hospitality research takes CCE only as a higher order construct while overlooking its multidimensional nature (Im and Qu, 2017; Tu et al., 2018). Contrarily, the marketing literature has argued that CCE is person-specific and depends on the hedonic, social, cognitive and economic benefits that a person derives from participating in co-creation (Jaakkola et al., 2015; Verleye, 2015). Therefore, the current study bridges the gap between the service-marketing and the

hospitality literature by taking CCE both as a multidimensional construct and a higher order construct to investigate it at a restaurant that allows customers to cook their own food. Cooking food at a restaurant or collaborating with the chef to cook one's food is a mentally stimulating, pleasurable task that contributes to the HE of customers. Customers participate in cooking for their own sake to seek pleasure, fun and entrainment, regardless of any external rewards that could significantly enhance the overall CCE of customers.

People usually visit restaurants with family, friends, colleagues and clients to fulfill social needs and to exchange thoughts with the outside world (Hussain et al., 2018). The restaurant sector facilitates the ability of customers to achieve recognition and a sense of belonging and augments their desire for social identity by offering co-creation opportunities (Chen, 2018; Meng and Cui, 2020). Participation in co-creation (cooking together at a restaurant) helps customers to cherish time with family, friends or colleagues, which positively influences the overall CCE. This customer-to-customer interaction offers social and cultural benefits that further enrich CCE (Rihova et al., 2018, 2019). As for the economic dimension, customers have the opportunity to verify the authenticity and health of ingredients by inspecting them for freshness and hygiene while they prepare their food at a restaurant. This enables customers to avoid any risks related to food quality and nutrition. The economic value and avoidance of risks contribute to form an EE that is expected to have a positive impact on the overall CCE. Finally, participation in co-creation activities at a restaurant provides learning opportunities to customers, thereby enhancing their CoE. Co-creating with the chef enables customers to acquire or improve their cooking skills and learn about new ingredients and their nutrition value, thereby fostering their overall CCE. Therefore, we advance the following hypothesis:

*H1.* The (a) hedonic, (b) social, (c) economic and (d) cognitive experience dimensions of CCE positively influence customer's overall CCE at a restaurant.

Hospitality research has made attempts to conceptualize co-creation (Chathoth et al., 2013; Tu et al., 2018; Wong and Lai, 2018) and to identify the factors that positively affect customer co-creation in hospitality settings (Im and Qu, 2017). However, limited research attention has been paid to the performance and relational outcomes of customers' CCE for hospitality businesses. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) asserted that CCE enhances customer outcomes that contribute to firm success. Building on this tenet, the next sections of this study offer details on how the CCE augments the outcomes of CS, EBA and CBE.

## Customer satisfaction

CS, a cornerstone of marketing research, has become key success factor for restaurant brands (Oh and Kim, 2017). Voss et al. (2010) defined CS as a cumulative, global evaluation based on customers' experience with brands. The role of CS becomes critical as consumption trends shift from goods to services and experiences. Because customer experience is highly unpredictable and involves various personal, cognitive and social responses of customers (Pralhad and

Ramaswamy, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2009), the restaurant brand managers are faced with a significant challenge in achieving CS. This challenge becomes even more complex in co-creation settings as CCE depends on how value emerges from the co-creation process and what kinds of benefits (e.g. hedonic, social, cognitive and economic) it delivers (Jaakkola et al., 2015; Verleye, 2015). Akaka et al. (2015) verified that value and CCE are heterogeneous in nature and that customers interpret value subjectively. The heterogeneous and unpredictable nature of CCE makes it necessary for those who manage customer experience to understand how CCE influences CS.

Earlier studies, such as Helkkula (2011) and Jain et al. (2017), have highlighted the role of positive experience in achieving CS. Specifically, Mathis et al. (2016) and Pansari and Kumar (2017) confirmed that customer experience in co-creation situations can be a determinant of CS and other behavioral outcomes. However, the extant literature lacks empirical evidence on the effects of CCE on CS. As the foregoing arguments suggest that customer experience is positively related to CS, the current study proposes the same for the multidimensional construct of CCE. Considering that CCE relies on a multitude of person-specific factors that comprise the HE, SE, EE and CoE of an individual in the value co-creation process, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H2.* The (a) hedonic, (b) social, (c) economic and (d) cognitive dimensions of CCE have positive impact on CS via the overall CCE.

## Emotional brand attachment

Consumer-brand relationship is becoming the mainstay of marketing research (Centeno et al., 2019; Coelho et al., 2019; Hussain et al., 2020), where EBA helps brands to maintain sustainable relational bonds with customers (Torres et al., 2020). EBA is conceptualized as the emotion-laden relationship of consumers with the brand that minimizes their switching behavior (Torres et al., 2020; Vlachos et al., 2010). Similarly, the extant research has indicated that emotionally bonded customers are easy to retain (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). This view highlights the central role of achieving EBA in the sustainable success of any brand. Attracting a new buyer costs six times higher than retaining a patron (Hussain and Waheed, 2016), and emotionally connected consumers are more valuable, as they can help service brands to attain new patrons by spreading favorable feedback (Vlachos et al., 2010; Vlachos, 2012). However, to achieve EBA, managers must understand the controllable antecedents of emotional bonding with their brands and service offerings (Grisaffe and Nguyen, 2011). Several studies (Jang et al., 2015; Khan and Rahman, 2017; Vlachos et al., 2010) have corroborated that store-evoked pleasure, shopping pleasure, interpersonal likeability, brand experience and environment-friendly practices foster EBA even though they offer no tangible outcomes to customers. Instead, customers derive experiential benefits from their experience of shopping, product/service use or sense of belonging.

Research on customer experience has revealed that experience is strictly personal and involves a customer at the emotional, spiritual and sensorial levels (Carù and Cova, 2015;

Helkkula, 2011; Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). This kind of emotional involvement in CCE strengthens the connection of an individual with the service provider (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015). Thomson *et al.* (2005) asserted that the emotional bonding of customers depends on the investment that they make in an object. In CCE, a customer invests operand and operant resources (e.g. applying cooking skills and knowledge to make Chinese hotpots at a restaurant) to co-create value with the service provider (Akaka *et al.*, 2015; Chathoth *et al.*, 2016). A customer yields experiential benefits like hedonic, social, cognitive and economic benefits by investing such resources. Furthermore, Grisaffe and Nguyen (2011) demonstrated that user-derived benefits like sensory pleasure and self-oriented and social-oriented goals positively influence EBA. These benefits are in line with the benefits a customer receives by participating in co-creation activities that affect EBA in co-creation settings. However, the extant literature provides no empirical evidence on the relationship between CCE and EBA; thus, the current study advances the following hypothesis:

- H3. The (a) hedonic, (b) social, (c) economic and (d) cognitive dimensions of CCE positively affect EBA via the overall CCE.

### Customer brand engagement

Globalization has aggravated competition among national and multinational brands. In this dynamic environment, CBE has become a pre-eminent challenge, and managers are seeking new ways to engage customers with their products and services (Junaid *et al.*, 2019; Loureiro *et al.*, 2019; Matute *et al.*, 2019). Considerable research has asserted that engaged customers contribute to the success of brands by influencing other customers with positive word of mouth and referrals (Fernandes and Moreira, 2019; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Engaged customers are less vulnerable to the actions of competitors and price changes than other customers are (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017), and they facilitate the sales growth, profitability and competitive advantage of brands (Finsterwalder, 2018; Hepola *et al.*, 2017; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019). These performance and relational gains demonstrate the key role of CBE in the success of any business.

The extant literature argues that CBE is context dependent and conceptualizes it as a psychological state that emerges from interactive and co-creative experiences with a brand in a service relationship that results in the direct and indirect contributions of customers toward brand success (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Junaid *et al.*, 2019; Kumar *et al.*, 2019). Van Doorn *et al.* (2010) envisioned the strategic importance of CBE and called for new insights into its antecedents and motivational drivers. Recently, Kumar *et al.* (2019) and Pansari and Kumar (2017) have developed CBE models that incorporate its antecedents and consequences. Both models take CBE as a multidimensional construct that encompasses the direct and indirect contributions of customers to brands. CBE consists of four dimensions, namely, buying, referring, influencing and feedback. The buying dimension covers purchase transactions that reflect the direct contributions a customer makes to brand value, whereas the referring, influencing and feedback dimensions of CBE are the indirect contributions that a

customer makes to long-term brand success. The referring dimension involves situations where a customer recommends a product or service to family and peers by advocating for the target brand. Influencing represents the attitudes of customers where they share a positive experience by word of mouth or on social media and other platforms. Customer feedback is a type of engagement where a customer provides inputs to service providers to improve the services of a brand (for a description, see Junaid *et al.*, 2019; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Therefore, the current study adopts the multidimensional construct of CBE from Kumar and Pansari (2016) and builds on the model of Kumar *et al.* (2019) to investigate its antecedents under the umbrella of S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2017). The engagement model of Kumar *et al.* (2019), which is built on the FPs of S-D logic, identifies customer experience, CS and EBA as the key drivers of CBE in co-creation settings.

Selecting these antecedents receives substantial support from the existing literature. The existing studies have affirmed that CS and EBA can positively influence CBE (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Simon and Tossan (2018) also found that CS significantly affects CBE with the Facebook page of a brand. Similarly, Choi and Kandampully (2019) reveal a positive association between CS and engagement in the hospitality sector. Su and Hsu (2013) show that CS positively influences word of mouth and revisit intentions. In a similar vein, while taking CBE as a multidimensional construct, Kumar *et al.* (2019) and Pansari and Kumar (2017) proposed that CS is the basic precursor of the spending patterns (direct contributions: buying) of customers, while EBA can motivate customers to influence the behavior of others by sharing their positive experiences and recommending a brand to others (indirect contributions: referring, influencing and feedback). Building on these propositions, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H4. CS positively impacts the (a) buying, (b) referring, (c) influencing and (d) feedback dimensions of CBE.
- H5. EBA positively affects the (a) referring, (b) influencing and (c) feedback dimensions of CBE.

The most compelling antecedent of CBE documented in the extant literature is a positive customer experience. Particularly, research on customer management and value co-creation has suggested that an excellent customer experience is compulsory to engage customers (Akaka *et al.*, 2015; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016; Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015; Pine and Gilmore, 1998). In the hospitality sector, customer experience in value co-creation can touch people more deeply than it can with products and other services and hence generates greater CBE as well (Chathoth *et al.*, 2016; Tu *et al.*, 2018). An experience can touch customers in five ways – through sensing, feeling, thinking, acting and relating – to garner a high level of CBE (Jain *et al.*, 2017). Basically, a customer derives value from experience (Grönroos, 2011), and customer-derived experiential benefits (hedonic, social, economic and cognitive) stimulate engagement behaviors (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Verleye, 2015). However, Pansari and Kumar (2017) argued that customer experience does not influence CBE directly but affects CS and EBA, which then transfer to CBE. Earlier

studies have corroborated this tenet, as Van Doorn et al. (2010) argued that dissatisfaction happens when an unpleasant experience leads to negative CBE. Jang et al. (2015) claimed that emotional bonds developed through experiences positively influence the behavioral intentions (e.g. referrals and word of mouth) of customers, and Zhang et al. (2018) complemented this assertion, contending that companies can achieve financial and relational gains through CBE by creating emotional bonding with CCE. Despite the wide acknowledgment of the role of customer experience in generating engagement behaviors, the existing literature does not offer empirical evidence on how CCE drives CBE in realistic co-creation situations. Therefore, on the basis of these arguments, the current study posits that CCE positively affects CBE via CS and EBA and examines this relationship at the dimensional level to offer insights into the relationship between CCE and CBE. This examination helps delineate the roles of individual dimensions in explaining the direct and indirect contributions customers make to firm value. Therefore, this study hypothesizes the following:

- H6. Customers' (a) hedonic, (b) social, (c) economic and (d) cognitive experiences and their (e) overall CCE positively influence the buying dimension of CBE via CS.
- H7. Customers' (a) hedonic, (b) social, (c) economic and (d) cognitive experiences and their (e) overall CCE positively impact the referring, influencing and feedback dimensions of CBE via EBA (Figure 1).

## Methodology

### Measuring instruments

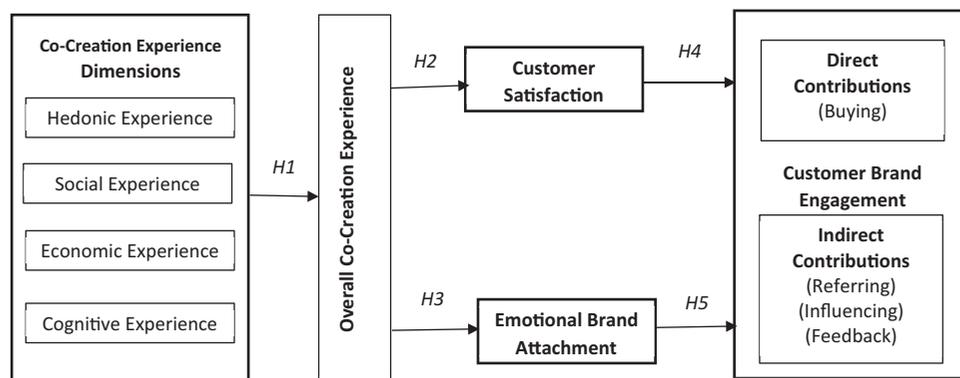
All the measures for this study were taken from existing literature and were slightly modified to fit the study context. This study used 23 items to measure CCE from Verleye (2015): three items for HE, five items for SE, six items for EE, five items for CoE and four items for the overall CCE. CS with a recent experience was measured with four items from Mattila (2003), whereas the four items that measure EBA were adapted

from Vlachos (2012). The current study also used 16 items to measure the direct and indirect contributions of CBE from Kumar and Pansari (2016), four items for each of the four dimensions of buying, referring, influencing and feedback. Furthermore, we slightly modified the existing measures to suit with context of hotpot experience; for example, the first item of CCE reads as it was a nice experience (i.e. the selection of ingredients, cooking and eating hotpot) where we added the characteristics of hotpot experience in parenthesis. Similarly, the second question of customer engagement was modified from "My purchases with this brand make me content" to "My experience of eating hotpots at restaurants makes me content." The core theme of questions remained the same, although we slightly changed the wording. As all of the original measures were in English, we translated them into Chinese by following the procedure outlined by Van de Vijver and Leung (1997) to translate a measuring instrument. In this procedure, a native Chinese researcher with experience in scale development in English and Chinese translated the original questions into Chinese. Thereafter, two bilingual experts from the language school of a public sector university validated the translation and suggested minor changes. We also incorporated those changes and distributed the final questionnaire to potential respondents. The responses for all 47 items were collected on a five-point Likert-type scale, where responses were quantified as 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. We then used the five-point Likert-type scale because the literature has suggested that a five-point scale increases response rates and the quality of responses as it makes the completion of a questionnaire easier for respondents (Nauman et al., 2019). Moreover, the data collected on five-point, seven-point and ten-point Likert-type scales do not make much difference, and the data collected on a five-point scale are suitable for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (Dawes, 2008).

### Procedure and selection of the co-creation setting

The present study used a restaurant setting and customer experience with cooking and consuming Chinese hotpots to examine CCE and its impact on the outcome variables. At Chinese hotpot restaurants, diners cook their own food right at the table where the restaurants offer a value proposition by

Figure 1 Theoretical model: outcomes of customer's co-creation experience



Notes: 1. Theoretical model; outcomes of customer's co-creation experience. 2. Structural model; outcomes of customer's co-creation experience

facilitating the diners with raw ingredients, a cooking facility and a dining table. Moreover, they can select ingredients, such as spices, vegetables, meat, rice, noodles and other flavorings, and then cook their food with the right mix of spices and edibles that suits their tastes and preferences. Customers can inspect their ingredients for freshness and cleanliness and their nutritional value and combine them to suit their individual tastes. It offers an assortment of options for vegetarians and non-vegetarians, spice lovers and non-lovers, foodies and diet-conscious customers. Additionally, it is available for groups to eat together in one pot and single pots for individual customers. This process is analogous to what [Pralhad and Ramaswamy \(2004\)](#) described as the co-creation of service experience, where a firm allows their customers to co-create the experience that suits their context. It is also in line with customized offerings ([Chathoth et al., 2013](#); [Mathis et al., 2016](#)), where “actors invite other actors to assist in the production of service offerings” ([Vargo and Lusch, 2010](#), p. 176).

This study's selection of a dining experience as an object of co-creation is in line with the suggestions of [Akaka et al. \(2015\)](#) for investigating the CCE of customers using S-D logic. In addition, the hotpot experience resembles the scenario [Stokburger-Sauer et al. \(2016\)](#) used in the co-creation of value, where they examine the co-production of a pasta dish with various levels of customer involvement. Participation in hotpot cooking requires a high level of customer involvement; hence, it represents the basic form of co-creation. Contrary to sponsored co-creation, where a co-creating customer receives financial compensation for participating, the hotpot experience is an example of autonomous co-creation, where a customer participates in co-creating a meal without expectation of financial gain.

Chinese hotpot has a long history – more than a thousand years – and is the most popular meal in China. It has many varieties but an identical method of cooking. It used to be a winter favorite, but recently, hotpot tables have been occupied throughout the year. Considering the popularity of hotpots in winter season, we collected data in January 2018 to ensure that we had the most recent dining experience during winter season. We prepared a structured questionnaire that was divided into three sections. In the first section, we explained the purpose of the study and asked the respondents to complete the survey by recalling their recent hotpot experience at their favorite restaurant brand. The respondents were also briefed that their data and personal information would be kept confidential. The second section consisted of items that measured the variables of interest. In the third part, we collected data about the demographic profiles of the respondents and ended the questionnaire with an appreciation statement for their time and response. We invited 700 respondents from Shanghai, China, using convenience sampling to complete the personally administered structured questionnaire. The researchers personally accessed the respondents and distributed the questionnaires to those who had dined at Chinese hotpot restaurants. As Chinese hotpot is very common among native Chinese, people also prepare it at home. Nonetheless, the current study required that respondents obtain dining experience at a restaurant to ascertain their experience and engagement behaviors. To encapsulate the most recent experience, we asked the respondents to fill out the

questionnaire only if they had participated in preparing hotpots at a restaurant within the last three months. We received 459 responses and screened out 38 responses with invalid or incomplete information. Finally, we had 421 responses for data analysis and a net response rate of 60%. Of these 421 respondents, 52% ( $N = 219$ ) were female, and 43% were 18–25 years old, whereas 36% were 26–35 years old, 19% were 36–45 years old and only 2% were older than 45. The highest percentage of respondents (44%) held an undergraduate university degree, whereas 42% held masters' degrees, 13% held doctorates or other post-graduate degrees and only 1% had only a high school diploma. Professionally, 29% were public sector employees, 23% were private sector employees, 39% were students, 8% were business owners and 1% were unemployed.

## Results

The present study performed analysis in two steps by initially measuring psychometric properties with CFA and then analyzing the hypotheses using the covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) technique. The current study used CB-SEM with maximum likelihood estimation that, according to recent literature, was found to be more powerful than partial least square path modeling (PLS-PM) when the sample size is greater than 100 responses ([Hair et al., 2014](#)). As current study collected data from 421 restaurant consumers, it is reasonably a large sample in the context of social sciences ([Hair et al., 2010](#)). The statistical analyses were performed using MPlus Version 8.1.

## Common method bias

The current study addressed the issue of common method bias (CMB) at two levels. First, before collecting the data, the respondents were briefed about the confidentiality of their responses, and that there were no right or wrong answers. The respondents were also requested to remain neutral and honest while completing the survey. Second, we performed the Harman single-factor test to establish the statistical evidence that indicates that it explains only 33.57% of the variance ([Podsakoff et al., 2003](#)). This value meets the cut-off criterion, i.e. less than 50%. Therefore, CMB does not affect the results of this study.

## Confirmatory factor analysis

The results of CFA are reported in [Tables 1 and 2](#), indicating that the observed data fit well with the proposed theoretical model. This study followed the guidelines of [Fornell and Larcker \(1981\)](#) and [Hair et al. \(2010\)](#) to assess the model fitness, convergent and discriminant validity and the reliability of constructs. The model fit indices indicate a good model fit as the values of chi-square ( $\chi^2/df = 1.746$ ), comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.948, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.942, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.042 and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.047 meet the cutoff criteria. The reliability of all the measurement instruments was established as the values for the composite reliability (CR) of each construct are higher than 0.70. Similarly, the convergent validity was also supported as the

Table 1 Confirmatory factor analysis

Construct	Items	Factor loading	CR
Hedonic Experience	It was a nice experience (i.e. selection of ingredients, cooking and eating hotpot)	0.675	0.858
	It was fun	0.883	
	I enjoyed it	0.882	
Social experience	I am able to connect with other people	0.747	0.852
	I meet others with whom I share similar interests	0.775	
	The interaction is pleasant	0.807	
	I can make others aware of my knowledge and ideas	0.740	
	I can make a good impression on other people	0.576	
Economic experience	I got an excellent experience according to the efforts made	0.705	0.861
	I got a fair return in terms of food, taste and fun	0.725	
	I got an appropriate amount of food in return for price paid	0.737	
	I had control over the quality	0.739	
	The quality was in my hands	0.705	
Cognitive experience	I had an impact on the degree to which my preferences were met	0.671	0.916
	I can improve my skills	0.781	
	I gain new knowledge/expertise	0.867	
	I can test my capabilities	0.850	
	It allows me to keep up with new ideas and innovations	0.837	
Overall co-creation experience	It enables me to come up with new ideas	0.807	0.927
	My overall hotpot experience was satisfactory	0.769	
	My overall hotpot experience was delightful	0.893	
	My overall hotpot experience was excellent	0.928	
	My overall hotpot experience was positive	0.897	
Emotional brand attachment	I love hotpot	0.802	0.858
	I am passionate about eating hotpot	0.791	
	Hotpot experience makes me very happy	0.871	
	Hotpot is my favorite cuisine	0.631	
Customer satisfaction	My recent hotpot experience was delightful	0.925	0.886
	I am happy with my recent hotpot experience	0.894	
	I am satisfied with my most hotpot experiences	0.811	
	I am dissatisfied with my most hotpot experiences (reverse)	0.598	
Customer brand engagement-buying	I will continue eating hotpot in the near future	0.740	0.805
	My experience of eating hotpot at restaurants makes me content	0.824	
	Eating hotpot at restaurants makes me happy	0.718	
CBE-referring	The value derived from the hotpot experience encourages me to refer this cuisine to my friends and relatives	0.800	0.840
	I promote hotpot because of its self-cooking experience	0.667	
	I enjoy referring hotpot to my friends and relatives	0.814	
	Given that I eat hotpot, I refer my friends and relatives to hotpot because of self-cooking style	0.727	
	I do not actively discuss my hotpot experience on any media (reverse)	0.704	
CBE-influencing	I love talking about hotpot experience	0.820	0.885
	I discuss the benefits that I get from hotpot experience with others	0.858	
	I like hotpot experience and mention it in my conversations	0.859	
	I provide feedback about my hotpot experience to the restaurant operators	0.851	
CBE-feedback	I provide suggestions/feedbacks about any new additions to hotpot cuisine	0.890	0.930
	I provide suggestions to improve hotpot experience	0.899	
	I provide feedback/suggestions for developing new kind of hotpot cuisines	0.871	

factor loadings of each item and the average variance extracted (AVE) of all the constructs is greater than 0.50. The authors dropped only one item from the buying dimension of CBE on the basis of a low factor loading (0.44) and performed additional analysis with buying as a three-item measure.

The current study measured the discriminant validity by comparing the AVE of each construct with corresponding

squared inter-scale correlations. The statistics presented in Table 2 indicate that discriminant validity is supported, as the AVEs of all individual constructs are greater than their respective inter-scale correlations, except for EBA and the buying dimension of CBE. Therefore, for this pair of constructs, the authors conducted a chi-square difference test by comparing unconstrained and constrained (constraining

Table 2 Squared inter-scale correlations and average variance extracted

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
HE	4.16	0.68	<i>0.67</i>										
SE	3.97	0.61	0.33	<i>0.53</i>									
EE	3.60	0.61	0.24	0.28	<i>0.51</i>								
CoE	3.26	0.86	0.12	0.18	0.26	<i>0.68</i>							
Overall CCE	4.18	0.66	0.51	0.31	0.23	0.08	<i>0.76</i>						
EBA	3.89	0.69	0.50	0.29	0.24	0.07	0.53	<i>0.60</i>					
CS	4.19	0.62	0.45	0.27	0.15	0.03	0.61	0.56	<i>0.66</i>				
CBE-buying	3.83	0.67	0.51	0.30	0.28	0.09	0.50	0.78	0.51	<i>0.58</i>			
CBE-referring	3.44	0.69	0.20	0.21	0.23	0.14	0.17	0.30	0.17	0.44	<i>0.56</i>		
CBE-influencing	3.30	0.77	0.13	0.18	0.20	0.11	0.14	0.28	0.11	0.27	0.45	<i>0.66</i>	
CBE-feedback	2.93	0.89	0.02	0.05	0.13	0.12	0.02	0.06	0.02	0.08	0.22	0.41	<i>0.77</i>

Note: Italic values at the diagonal represent average variance extracted

their correlation to be one) models to verify the discriminant validity. The chi-square difference test ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 40.779, p = 0.000$ ) is significant, showing that the unconstrained model is better than the constrained model and that the both the constructs cannot be combined into a single measure. Similarly, one question item Q1 of variable CS seems to be overlapping with question number Q2 of the overall CCE; therefore, the authors also performed the chi-square difference test for this pair of variables. The chi-square difference test ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 381.90, p = 0.000$ ) is significant, indicating that both the variables are entirely different and measure distinct concepts. In addition, the factor loading value of the Q1 (0.925) of CS is different from the factor loading of the Q2 (0.893) of the overall CCE.

**Structural model**

The model fit indices of the structural model (i.e. chi-square ( $\chi^2/df = 1.723$ ), CFI = 0.940, TLI = 0.935, RMSEA = 0.041, SRMR = 0.089) indicate an acceptable fit, as all the values meet their standard cutoffs (Hair et al., 2010). Tables 3 and 4 present the estimated paths and statistics of the structural model. The estimated paths are also shown in Figure 2. The results indicate that the HE, SE and EE dimensions positively affect the overall CCE of customers, supporting our hypotheses H1a, b and c. The coefficients suggest that HE ( $\beta = 0.568$ ) has the strongest impact, followed by SE ( $\beta = 0.212$ ) and EE ( $\beta = 0.155$ ). However, the current study rejected H1d because CoE does not contribute to the overall CCE. In addition, the HE, SE, EE and overall CCE significantly enhance CS, which extends support to H2a, b, c and e. Given that the overall CCE ( $\beta = 0.870$ ) strongly effects CS, other dimensions complement its influence as the impacts of the HE ( $\beta = 0.494$ ), SE ( $\beta = 0.185$ ) and EE ( $\beta = 0.135$ ) dimensions are significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Similarly, H3a, b, c and e are accepted as EBA also depends on the HE ( $\beta = 0.425$ ), SE ( $\beta = 0.1159$ ), EE ( $\beta = 0.116$ ) and overall CCE ( $\beta = 0.749$ ).

The current study accepted H4a because CS ( $\beta = 0.742$ ) significantly impacts the buying dimension of CBE and increases the direct contributions that a customer makes to brand value. However, H4b, c and d are rejected because CS does not significantly influence the referring, influencing and feedback dimensions of CBE. EBA positively impacts indirect

Table 3 Statistics of structural model: direct effects

Hypothesized path	$\beta$	SE	CR
HE → Overall CCE (OCCE)	0.568***	0.048	11.93
SE → OCCE	0.212***	0.053	3.970
EE → OCCE	0.155**	0.055	2.835
CoE → OCCE	-0.081	0.045	-1.811
OCCE → CS	0.870***	0.019	46.92
OCCE → EBA	0.749***	0.029	26.03
CS → CBE-buying	0.742***	0.035	21.19
CS → CBE-referring	0.135	0.083	1.625
CS → CBE-influencing	-0.045	0.082	-0.553
CS → CBE-feedback	-0.070	0.087	-0.809
EBA → CBE-referring	0.394***	0.082	4.830
EBA → CBE-influencing	0.541***	0.076	7.115
EBA → CBE-feedback	0.295***	0.084	3.501

**Control variables**

Gender	
Age	
Education	
Profession	
R <sup>2</sup> CS	0.757
R <sup>2</sup> EBA	0.560
R <sup>2</sup> CBE-buying	0.556
R <sup>2</sup> CBE-referring	0.251
R <sup>2</sup> CBE-influencing	0.267
R <sup>2</sup> CBE-feedback	0.076

Notes: \*\*\* $p < 0.000$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

contributions – that is, referring ( $\beta = 0.394$ ), influencing ( $\beta = 0.541$ ) and feedback ( $\beta = 0.295$ ) – and extends support to H5a, b and c. The statistics of structural model also lend support to H6 and H7. The coefficient values (Table 4: indirect effects) indicate that the HE ( $\beta = 0.366$ ), SE ( $\beta = 0.137$ ), EE ( $\beta = 0.100$ ) and overall CCE ( $\beta = 0.646$ ) mark significant impact on CBE’s buying dimension via CS. Similarly, the HE ( $\beta$  for: referring = 0.167, influencing = 0.230, feedback = 0.125), SE ( $\beta$  for: referring = 0.063, influencing = 0.086, feedback = 0.047), EE ( $\beta$  for: referring = 0.046, influencing = 0.063, feedback = 0.034) and overall CCE ( $\beta$  for: referring = 0.295, influencing = 0.405, feedback = 0.221) positively

Table 4 Statistics of structural model: indirect effects

Hypothesized path	$\beta$	S.E	C.R
HE → OCCE → CS	0.494***	0.044	11.33
SE → OCCE → CS	0.185***	0.047	3.949
EE → OCCE → CS	0.135**	0.048	2.831
CoE → OCCE → CS	-0.071	0.039	-1.80
HE → OCCE → EBA	0.425***	0.040	10.54
SE → OCCE → EBA	0.159***	0.041	3.917
EE → OCCE → EBA	0.116**	0.041	2.815
CoE → OCCE → EBA	-0.061	0.034	-1.80
OCCE → CS → CBE-buying	0.646***	0.037	17.39
OCCE → EBA → CBE-referring	0.295***	0.062	4.721
OCCE → EBA → CBE-influencing	0.405***	0.061	6.640
OCCE → EBA → CBE-feedback	0.221**	0.064	3.441
HE → OCCE → CS → CBE-buying	0.366***	0.038	9.527
HE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-referring	0.167***	0.038	4.353
HE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-influencing	0.230***	0.040	5.712
HE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-feedback	0.125**	0.038	3.287
SE → OCCE → CS → CBE-buying	0.137***	0.035	3.861
SE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-referring	0.063**	0.021	3.029
SE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-influencing	0.086**	0.025	3.398
SE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-feedback	0.047**	0.018	2.594
EE → OCCE → CS → CBE-buying	0.100**	0.036	2.796
EE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-referring	0.046*	0.019	2.432
EE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-influencing	0.063*	0.024	2.606
EE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-feedback	0.034*	0.016	2.189
CoE → OCCE → CS → CBE-buying	-0.052	0.029	-1.79
CoE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-referring	-0.024	0.014	-1.68
CoE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-influencing	-0.033	0.019	-1.74
CoE → OCCE → EBA → CBE-feedback	-0.018	0.011	-1.11

Notes: \*\*\* $p < 0.000$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

impact the referring, influencing and feedback dimensions of CBE through EBA. In addition to all these significant effects, CCE explains a reasonable amount of the variance in each of the outcome variables – 75.7% of the variance in CS, 56.0% of the variance in EBA, 55.6% of the variance in buying, 25.1% of the variance in referring, 26.7% of the variance in influencing and 7.6% of the variance in feedback. The explanatory power of CCE indicates that it affects the performance outcomes (i.e. CS and the buying dimension of CBE) more strongly than it does the relational outcomes of EBA, referring, influencing and feedback.

All the indirect effects are analyzed using the Mplus' delta method. The delta method is an alternative to the Sobel test, which has similar robustness and statistical rigor (Junaid et al., 2019; MacKinnon, 2012); thus, the results of our analysis (indirect effects) do not need further validation through an additional Sobel test.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to delineate the brand-related outcomes of customers' CCE in the context of service business. The branding literature regarded co-creation as the driving mechanism to achieve brand-related outcomes (Kennedy and Guzmán, 2020). Similarly, outcome variables such as CS, EBA and CBE have been considered as the key success factors for a

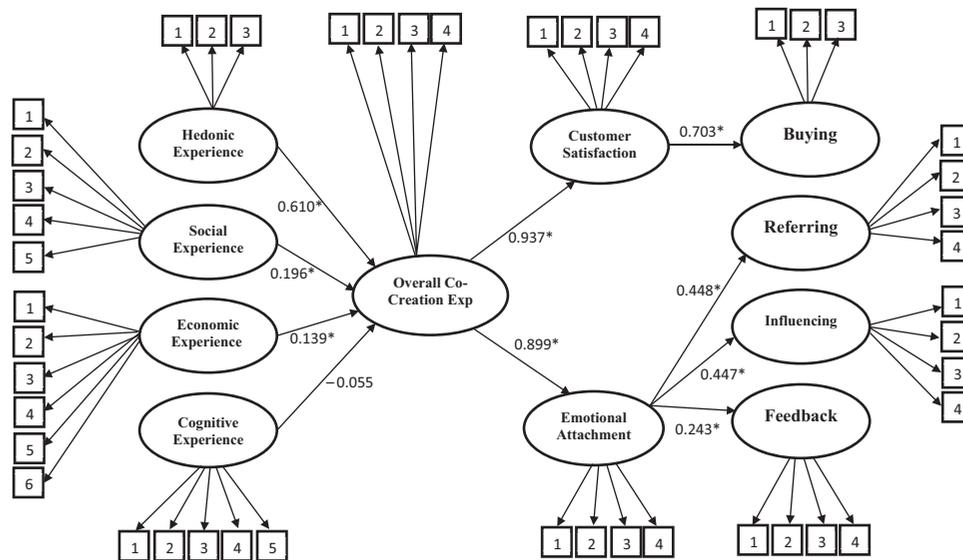
brand (Junaid et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2019). The current study presents a detailed investigation on the role of CCE in driving CS, EBA and CBE in the context of service brands and marks valuable contributions to the branding literature.

This research extends the branding literature by investigating CCE in the context of restaurant brands. In the restaurant service context, the results of this study validate the findings of Verleye (2015) that HE and SE are the core parts of CCE that strongly influence the overall CCE. Unlike the findings of Verleye, the CoE does not contribute to the overall CCE in hospitality services. A plausible reason for this nonsignificant relationship is that participation in hotpot cooking at a restaurant is a routine activity for native Chinese diners that, unlike ideation and new product development, does not offer new knowledge to the participants. However, for Western or non-Chinese consumers, participation in preparing hotpots may offer a significant challenge and novel information. As the cognitive dimension does not affect the overall CCE of customers, its influence remains insignificant for all other hypothesized indirect paths. Conversely, the EE also appears to be a significant contributor. This result suggests that customers look for economic benefits when they participate in the co-creation activities of a routine and general nature, such as preparing Chinese hotpots at a restaurant. By contrast, customers seek cognitive benefits when it comes to new product development or ideation (Verleye, 2015). These results also affirm that the overall CCE of customers hinges on the hedonic, social and economic benefits that arise from routinely performed co-creation activities, which, in turn, leads to the kind of consumer behavior that yields performance and relational gains for a service brand.

This study demonstrates with empirical evidence that the CCE of customers with a restaurant brand can augment CS, EBA and CBE, and these findings corroborate earlier theorized relationships (Kumar et al., 2019; Pansari and Kumar, 2017). In addition to this empirical validation, the current study reveals these relational paths at the dimensional level, thereby showing that the HE is central to performance and relational outcomes. The impact of the HE on CS, EBA and CBE (buying, referring, influencing and feedback) is stronger than that of the social and economic dimensions. More precisely, the effects of the HE are stronger on CS and also transfer strongly to the buying dimension of CBE via CS. The HE is also shown to be a solid precursor of EBA and the subsequent indirect contributions of CBE (influencing, referring and feedback) that help create long-term customer relationships with service brands. Current study's findings from the hospitality service brands are consistent with those from the extant service-marketing literature (Carù and Cova, 2015; Zhang et al., 2015), which assert that mentally stimulating and pleasurable co-creation activities provide hedonic benefits (Füller, 2010; Jaakkola et al., 2015) that encourage intrinsically motivated customers to engage with a brand.

The SE is also found to be a significant predictor of CS, EBA and CBE. These findings confirm that customers participate in co-creation activities not only for intrinsic benefits but also to express themselves with like-minded people and fulfill their desires to attain social status. It is likely that customers visit restaurants not only to eat but also for the social benefits and participation in co-creation activities that provide them a

Figure 2 Structural model



platform from which to connect with like-minded people and to show their skills and competencies to others. The user-derived benefits of socialization motivate consumers to participate repeatedly in co-creation activities, which enhances satisfaction, attachment and engagement with restaurant brands. These findings also complement the existing literature on the role the SE plays in enhancing behavioral outcomes (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). The present study's finding that the EE positively impacts CS, EBA and CBE contradicts with those of Füller (2010) and Verleye (2015). Both studies argued that economic benefits do not really matter for consumers when they participate in co-creation activities, but these studies examined CCE for product design and virtual co-creation, where the frequency of participation in co-creation activities may be lower and customers do not pay heed to material rewards. Based on these findings, the current study argues that customers seek economic benefits when they participate in co-creation activities that are performed more frequently and this study provides evidence from the hospitality sector that the EE significantly influences CS, EBA and CBE (buying, referring, influencing and feedback). Hence, the EE should not be ignored. In summary, the current study contends that the influence of CCE on performance and relational outcomes differs considerably; hence, brand managers can prioritize the outcomes they seek and manipulate the customer experience accordingly.

This study extends the existing literature on two emerging streams of research: the CCE of customers and brand engagement. In the realm of CCE, recent literature has suggested that positive customer experiences are required to achieve performance and relational gains. However, such experiences cannot be guaranteed until they are comprehended at the dimensional level, along with how each dimension influences consumer behavior. In this regard, the service-marketing literature in general and the brand management literature in particular have paid scant attention to scrutinizing empirically how the dimensions of CCE affect outcome variables. As for the restaurant branding research, little is

known about CCE, and it too overlooks the multidimensional nature of CCE. Therefore, the present study is the first attempt to address CCE as a multidimensional construct in the context of restaurant brands. More importantly, in examining CCE in the restaurant industry, this study takes a frequently performed and realistic co-creation activity in which a customer cooks his or her own food at a restaurant. Using this kind of activity enables this study to offer new insights because the extant literature on CCE generally focuses on ideation, new product development and virtual co-creation. Using this kind of activity also offers the opportunity to address the recent research calls to validate the multidimensional scale of CCE (Verleye, 2015) in a new environment. In doing so, the current study enriches the existing literature on customer experience management and consumer brand engagement and argues that customer experience is highly subjective in nature and that it depends on the benefits a person perceives to be valuable in co-creation situations.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this research is the first of its kind to investigate the performance and relational outcomes of CCE in the context of restaurant brands. For this purpose, this study examines the relationship between CCE (both as a higher order construct and as a multidimensional construct) and CS, EBA and CBE, thereby making significant contributions to the restaurant branding literature. The findings affirm that the HE, SE and EE are the key dimensions that drive CS, EBA and CBE in restaurant services, whereas the CoE does not influence these outcome variables. These findings substantiate the view that the CCEs of customers vary depending on the nature of the co-creation in which the customers are taking part, which may range from ideation to design to collaboration in service creation. In addition, the findings of this study validate that the impact of CCE on performance outcomes is stronger than that on relational outcomes in the context of restaurant brands.

This study also extends the recently framed CBE model of Kumar *et al.* (2019) to the dominion of CCE in the realm of hospitality service brands. In taking the CBE as a

multidimensional construct, we provide empirical evidence for the relationship between CCE and the direct (buying) and indirect (referring, influencing and feedback) contributions an engaged customer makes to brand value. This study demonstrates that the HE is the strongest dimension of CCE in terms of its effects on the buying, referring, influencing and feedback dimensions of CBE. The social and economic dimensions also add value in pursuit of brand success by positively influencing the indirect and direct contributions. This in-depth investigation helps advance the scholarly discourse in branding research.

### Managerial implications

Currently, brand managers are seeking new ways to engage customers in pursuit of efficiency gains and the long-term survival of their brands. In response, the recent literature has highlighted the overarching role of customer experience and value co-creation in engaging customers with brands and achieving competitive advantages. The importance of understanding and managing customer experience is evident from the shift in the corporate sector, where companies are replacing brand managers with “customer experience managers” (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015). Considering the rise in the experience economy and the structural shift in corporate positions, the current study makes valuable contributions to the efforts of brand managers to understand and manage customer experience in service co-creation situations. This study deepens the extant insights into how CCE affects the performance and relational outcomes that predominately add value to the pursuit of brand success.

This study provides empirical evidence from the hospitality sector that demonstrates that the HE is the most compelling antecedent of CS, EBA and CBE. From a managerial perspective, this finding suggests that customers prefer an experience in which they encounter something challenging and worthwhile, accompanied by an element of fun. Therefore, restaurant brand managers can benefit by integrating co-creation into their usual services, which would stimulate the mental processes of customers and involve them in service co-creation, as most restaurant services do not require active participation from customers. Resultantly, the CCE engendered from mentally stimulating and challenging tasks will fulfill the needs of customers for accomplishment, amusement and delight that ultimately will be reflected in their engagement behaviors with brands.

Similarly, the SE positively influences the behavioral outcomes of customers, which suggests that brand managers should offer co-creation platforms in which customers can meet with like-minded people and use those platforms to build social status and a sense of belonging. If co-creation tasks, such as Chinese hotpots, are designed in groups with high levels of connectivity, then the outcomes will be more positive than if these experiences are not designed in this way.

This study also finds that the EE is a significant predictor of CS, EBA and CBE in the context of restaurant brands, and this finding indicates that customers seek material value in return for investments they make in the form of time and money. Therefore, the present study suggests that brand managers may focus on the material outcomes they offer to customers and that

they ensure that their customers receive fair value. This study examined the co-creation of a general nature at a restaurant, where customers participate frequently, and it is appropriate to attract customers with something they can measure in economic terms. With these insights, the current study simplifies the complex phenomenon of CCE for practitioners and brand managers and helps them yield performance and relational gains through better management.

CCE offers a unique set of integrated benefits (i.e. hedonic, social, economic and cognitive) that increase buying while extending a satisfying and emotionally bonding relationship that directly contributes to brand value. The role of CCE in enhancing the referring behavior of consumers indirectly augments brand value as referring increases restaurants’ base of loyal customers. Similarly, a well-staged CCE also motivates customers to share their experience on social media that substantially influences the behavior of other customers. Finally, CCE also positively enhances the interaction of customers with service providers and encourages their feedback to improve the service experience. In addition to directly/indirectly enhancing brand value, CCE also shapes the brand recall pattern of customers. As customers associate CCE with challenging, worthwhile, social, economic and amusing experience. All these perceived benefits will pop up on their mind whenever they would think of dining at a restaurant. Hence, CCE could become a core element of customers’ memory of brands that would interweave a pathway of the concept mapping of restaurant brands.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggested that brand managers must design experiences to engage customers with brands. The current study empirically demonstrates that CCEs staged at restaurant brands significantly enhance direct and indirect contributions made by consumers toward brand success in the form of buying, referrals, influencing and feedback. Brand managers can benefit from these findings by making co-creation as a key element of their services. The inclusion of co-creation in hospitality services can convert a service into an immersing experience. Because today’s customers do not want services instead, they want a complete experience that can offer hedonic, social and economic benefits. Chinese hotpot restaurants blend all these benefits in the form of customer participation in co-creation that will ultimately be reflected in the perceived brand value of restaurants. Currently, restaurant and hotel brands are facing intense competition that has marginalized the differentiation among these brands. Restaurant brand managers may also follow the business model of the HaiDiLao restaurant of China to offer CCE to create differentiation and to achieve higher brand value in the form of customers’ engagement behaviors.

### Limitations of the study

The current study examined CCE at restaurants, which is an integral part of the hospitality sector, but the CCE offered at restaurants may differ from co-creation activities at travel service firms, beauty salons, training centers, online shopping platforms and the like. Considering the highly subjective nature of CCE, the findings may not be generalizable to all services; thus, future research may study customer experience using other platforms. In addition, the current study could not find the significant impact of CoE on outcome variables for Chinese

hotpot diners. The same may not be true for non-Chinese diners as Chinese hotpot is ingrained in Chinese culinary culture and hotpot restaurants can be found in locations all around the world. However, when Western and other non-Chinese consumers visit such restaurants, they can find themselves at a loss as to what they do. For them, it is certainly not a routine dining occasion, and it does require a great deal of cognitive input. Therefore, future research may also examine the CCE of non-Chinese customers at hotpot restaurants to enrich the findings. Although this study investigates the relational and performance outcomes of CCE, incorporating all expected outcomes into one model is impractical. Therefore, future research may examine other outcomes, such as consumer well-being, customer value and loyalty. In addition, the present study examines only high-involvement CCE; hence, future studies may investigate the moderating role of customer involvement using other levels of customer involvement in co-creation. In the context of hospitality and restaurant services, it would be interesting to test the outcomes of CCE according to low and high brand value restaurants. Similarly, respondent-specific characteristics, such as novel and expert diners and tourists and non-tourists, may moderate the effects of CCE on engagement behaviors.

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### Further reading

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