



# Enhancing hotel brand performance through fostering brand relationship orientation in the minds of consumers

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We investigate the effects of perceived brand relationship orientation (PBRO) on hotel brand performance.
- Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI) and anticipated emotions mediate the effects of PBRO on hotel brand performance.
- The mediating effects of CBI are only significant when consumers have high product category involvement.

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## ABSTRACT

Hotels are becoming increasingly oriented towards developing relationships with their consumers (patrons/guests), giving rise to a heavy focus on consumer-brand relationships in tourism and hospitality research. This study examines the extent to which consumers' perceived relationship orientations of hotel brands (i.e., PBRO) influences their identification with and anticipated emotions towards hotel brands, which in turn drives desirable performance outcomes for hotels such as the share of wallet, consideration set size, and revisit intention. To test our hypotheses, we recruited 376 respondents via Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk). We found that consumer-brand identification and anticipated emotions mediate the relationship between perceived brand relationship orientation and all performance outcome variables. These mediating effects are moderated by consumer involvement with hotel choice. Specifically, consumer involvement positively moderates the link between PBRO and consumer-brand identification and negatively moderates the effects of PBRO on anticipated emotions.

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## 1. Introduction

The growing role of branding is well documented in the tourism and hospitality sector, particularly in the highly competitive hotel industry. According to a recent report, the most valuable hotel brands in 2016 were Hilton, with a brand value of US\$8.4 billion, followed by Marriott, in second place with a brand value of over US\$5 billion, and Hyatt in third place, at over US\$4 billion (BrandFinance, 2017). Managing a hotel brand effectively presents numerous benefits for managers in terms of the ability to obtain a premium price for rooms, grow market share, increase consumer loyalty, and stimulate positive word-of-mouth patron referrals

(Kayaman & Arasli, 2007; Sangster, Wolton, & McKenney, 2001). Premised on these benefits and others, hotels have become increasingly interested in developing relationships between their brands and their customers. Indeed, over the past decade, the topic of consumer-brand relationships has attracted increasing interests in the tourism and hospitality literature (Chen & Phou, 2013; Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015; Xie & Heung, 2012).

The choice of hotel accommodation is a significant decision for most travelers (hereafter referred to as consumers). For many, it is also a complex decision-making process (Li, Law, Vu, & Rong, 2013; Sohrabi, Vanani, Tahmasebipur, & Fazli, 2012). A strong brand helps to simplify consumers' decision-making process by reducing perceived risks and increasing expectations (Keller, 2008). Moreover, many consumers choose a particular hotel because of their strong relationship with the hotel brand (Mattila, 2007; Scanlan & McPhail, 2000). Indeed, developing a strong relationship with

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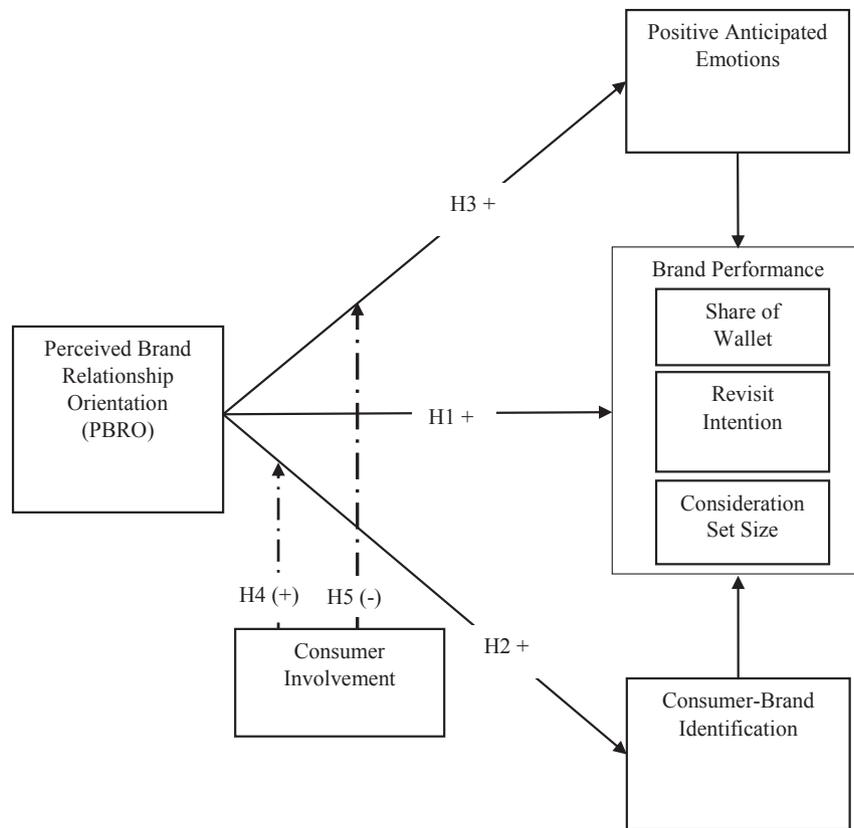


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

consumers “is increasingly emerging as a strategy for organizations that strive to retain loyal and satisfied consumers in today’s highly competitive environment” (Meng & Elliott, 2008, p. 509). Despite the importance of consumer-brand relationships in improving a company’s brand performance, there are notable research gaps in this area. As Papista and Dimitriadis (2012, p. 34) noted, “the literature on brand management and relationship development has so far emerged as two separate streams, despite the possibilities for complementarity between the two fields.” Drawing on relationship marketing and brand management literature, this study examines the role of consumer-perceived brand relationship orientation (hereafter referred to as PBRO) in affecting brand performance.

Relationship marketing theory postulates that consumers’ perceptions of the strength and quality of their relationship with the brand shape their behavior in the relationship (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Verhoef, 2003). Indeed, consumers who believe that they have a strong relationship with a brand are less likely to patronize other brands (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Grounded in relationship marketing theory, we posit that PBRO, defined as consumers’ perceptions of a brand’s genuine interest in developing relationships with them (Aurier and Séré de Lanauze, 2012), have positive implications for important hotel performance outcomes such as share of wallet, consideration set size, and revisit intention.

However, the assumption that relationship orientation is relevant to all consumers may not be completely true. For instance, the relationship orientation of a hotel brand such as Hilton or Sheraton may not necessarily lead directly to stronger revisit intention for all hotel consumers, as this intention may vary between consumers

depending on their level of involvement (Hochgraeffe, Faulk, & Vieregge, 2012). Indeed, consumer involvement has been found to influence the consumer decision-making process in the tourism sector (Chen & Tsai, 2008; Hochgraeffe et al., 2012). We rely on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM - Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983) to guide our understanding of these relationships, such as the role of consumer involvement as a moderator of the relationship between PBRO and its outcomes.

The existing literature has recognized that consumers’ emotions and cognitions have distinct effects on behavior (Millar & Tesser, 1986). Therefore, for a hotel brand to attain strong performance outcomes, it needs to connect with customers through emotional and cognitive routes (Nyffenegger, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Malaer, 2015). The emotional route relates to how consumers feel in relation to consuming or experiencing the brand (i.e., anticipated emotions) (Bagozzi, Dholakia, & Basuroy, 2003), whereas the cognitive route relates to how consumers *think* about themselves in relation to a brand (i.e., consumer-brand identification) (Wolter, Brach, Cronin, & Bonn, 2016). We believe that examining the specific emotional and cognitive mechanisms of how PBRO affects brand performance outcomes has important theoretical and practical implications. Moreover, while prior studies have examined involvement as a moderator of consumer-brand identification and its drivers (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012; Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013), no research has explored the role of involvement as a moderator within the PBRO–brand performance setting, especially in tourism and hospitality services. Identification of both the mechanisms and the boundary conditions of such a relationship helps theorists and practitioners to better understand the

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