

# GAMIFIED CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN AMAZON ONLINE RETAILING COMPANY IN COVID-19 ERA

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to shed a new light on branding features in service industry by filling the existent gap between brand features (brand signature, brand awareness, brand reputation and brand performance) and hospitality industry. To examine our hypothesis, 210 respondents were randomly recruited in eight Iranian five-star hotels and data was analyzed via structural equation analysis. The conceptual model was tested using structural equation modeling by Smart PLS. The results showed the positive effect of brand signature on customer awareness of brand and brand reputation. Also, the effect of perceived brand relationship on brand performance is confirmed. Meanwhile, the impact of Brand Reputation on perceived brand relationship was not significant.*

**Keywords:** Brand Signature, Consumer Brand Awareness, Brand Reputation, Brand Performance, Business Relationship Orientation, Hospitality Industry.

## INTRODUCTION

Branding is one of the decisive parts of enterprises which has been researched and practiced vastly in recent decades as having a strong brand is viewed as an intangible assets of any organization by which companies represent themselves to customers (Kim et al., 2010); (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). In hotel industry specifically, branding and brand performance plays a crucial role (Ya, et al., 2020). Branding could be thought out in two main levels: external and internal. External branding implies to a set of actions are taken to influence consumers. Internal branding on the other hand refers to brand promotion by employees of service organizations (Shiri et al., 2015). In this regard, internal branding might be more determining as it reflects the attitudes and beliefs of employees in fulfilling the organizational commitments.

Brand signature in this regard, is a brand feature associated with brand personality and brand identity that comports specific communication, distinctiveness and enduring characteristics which reflects brand image and brand reputation (Henderson and Cote, 1998) (Melewar & Saunders, 1998); (Foroudi, 2019). Brand Signature is a kind of halo effect by which consumers evaluate products and services that are familiar with and it comprises resolute consumer attitude toward a brand (Foroudi, 2019).

Brand signature also may evoke emotional reactions which in turn may add value to a company and build image with stakeholders (Henderson & Cote, 1998) (Olins, 1989); (Van Riel, 1995). Additionally, Brand signature may result in significant brand awareness and brand appreciation (Foroudi, 2019).

Consumer brand awareness on the other hand, refers to “*strength of a brand’s presence in consumers’ minds*”. In other words, consumer brand awareness implies to the ability of consumers in recalling and discerning a brand among variety of brands (Pappu et al., 2005). Although brand awareness varies among customers, consumers with logo and name familiarity are more likely to trust the products and services (Forudi, 2019).

The extant literature aims to explore the branding in Iran’s hotel industry specific in Esfahan. Given the fact that Isfahan is one of the most famous tourist cities in the Middle East and there is fierce competition among hotels to attract tourists, hotels are looking for solutions to attract tourists. In this respect, this research aims to fill this theoretical gap through: (1) investigating the impact of brand signature, brand awareness and brand reputation on brand performance; (2) presenting managerial and practical implication and limitation of the study that which might be beneficial both for theorists and practitioners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Brand Signature and Brand Performance

Brand signature is based on brand personality and brand identity and includes: constant attitude of costumers toward a brand, continuation of a specific message and stability of communication with customers, implementation and support brand signature (Foroudi, 2019). The determining factors of brand signature are those which forecasts, improves or weaken perceived brand awareness, attitude, reputation, and performance (Foroudi, 2019). Moreover, brand name and logo are considered as basis of brand signature; however, they are taken interchangeably. In this regard, a brand name or logo should be based on the values, identity and personality of organization (Balmer, 2001); (Van Heerden & Puth, 1995). The reason is that a brand name or logo carries a motivational reaction by which customers evaluate the favorability of organizations.

### Customer Brand Awareness and Brand Performance

Brand awareness refers to ability of customers to recall a given brand (Romaniuk et al., 2017). It is considered a tool to provoke and manipulate customers’ attitudes by building certain beliefs and associations, thus, brand awareness influences attitudes and perception (Foroudi, 2019). Further, brand awareness provides long-term advantages for organizations by influencing the beliefs and perceptions of customers (Foroudi et al., 2014).

### Brand Reputation and Brand Performance

Brand reputation is an immediate image of an organization which is aggregated in customers’ minds over the time (Fombrun, 1996; Foroudi, 2019; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). Brand reputation is formed by two major components: brand reliability and brand benevolence (Foroudi, 2019).

Brand reliability refers to the ability of a brand to ensure customers about the products and services based on what has been promised and also decreasing the risk (DelVecchio, 2000). Brand benevolence also implies to a cognitive and affect-oriented aspect of brand in which cognitive aspect deals with functional capability of brand.

Affective aspect also is associated with emotional aspects and contains non-profit and motivational actions (Wang et al., 2014, Foroudi, 2019). So the first hypothesis is formed as the following:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *There is a positive relationship between brand signature and customer brand awareness.*

Brand reputation is also an immediate and snap image of a company which is reflected by perceptual representation and expectations from the past, present and future actions of a brand (Fombrun & Rindova, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Foroudi, 2019; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). As brand awareness, brand reputation deals with perceptions and attitudes of customers and is gained through brand reliability and brand benevolence (Fombrun & Rindova, 1996; Foroudi, 2019). Therefore, we expect that:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *There is a positive relationship between customer brand awareness and brand reputation*

Brand signature includes certain communication, distinctiveness and enduring characteristics which represents brand image and brand reputation (Henderson and Cote, 1998) (Melewar and Saunders, 1998) (Foroudi, 2019). Perceived brand relationship also increase the likelihood of customers loyalty in a way that consumers with a strong relationship are less probable to be provoked by other brands (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999) (Verhoef, 2003). So a strong relationship can positively impact brand performance (Casidy et al., 2018). Thus, the following hypothesis is put forward:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** *There is a positive relationship between brand signature and perceived brand relationship.*

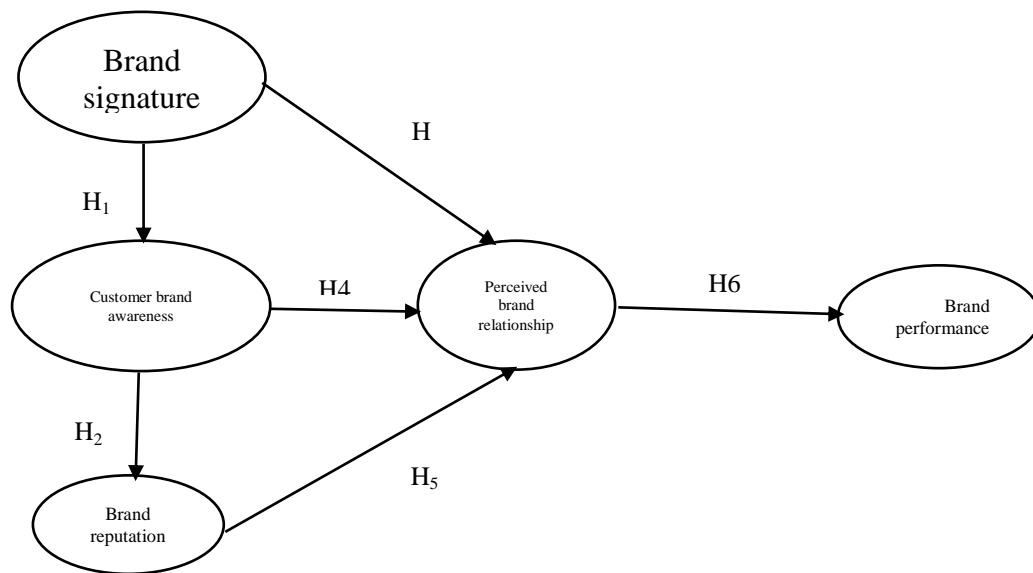
Customer attitudes and perceptions are crucial for enterprises. Customers' perception of the brand shapes their behavior in their relationship (Casidy et al., 2018). Also customer with higher level of relationships with a brand is less likely to prefer other brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) (Casidy et al., 2018). In this regard, perceived value of a brand is generated by emotional value of customers and the utility which is made by positive feelings (Sweeney & Soutar 2001). Also as noted earlier, brand signature implies to a specific pattern which is built on brand personality or brand identity which contains attitudes of customers to a brand (Foroudi, 2019). In this regard, the third hypothesis is put forward as the following:

**H<sub>4</sub>:** *There is a positive relationship between customer brand awareness and perceived brand relationship*

Customers, who view at a brand as a relationship partner, tend to improve attachments, commitment and be more satisfied (Nyffenegger, 2011) (Casidy et al., 2018). Further, when consumers realize an enterprise in committed in developing a relationship, they develop a strong relationship too (Casidy et al., 2018). Perceived value consists four main dimensions: emotional, social, financial and quality value (Sweeney & Soutar 2001). Although financial and quality values are related to money spent on a product by customers, emotional and social values are perception-based. That is, these values are more associated with positive feelings and social credibility (France et al., 2020). Therefore, the fifth hypothesis is formed as the following:

**H<sub>5</sub>:** *There is a positive relationship between brand reputation and perceived brand relationship.*

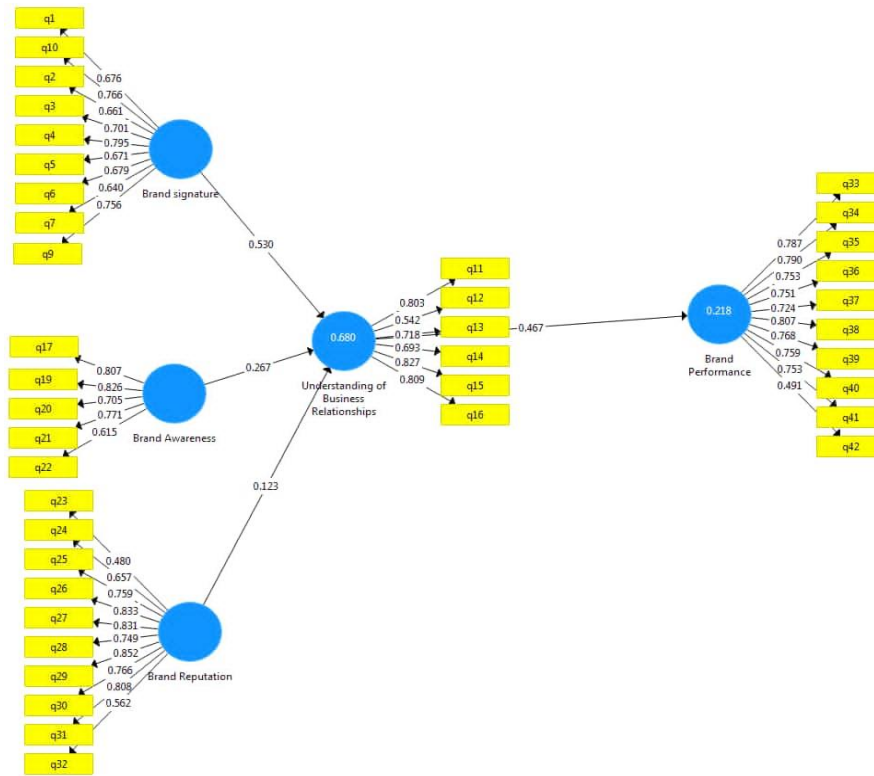
Brand awareness evokes attitudes and perceptions and costumers with higher level of brand awareness tend to be more loyal and have a long-term relationship with brand (Foroudi, 2019). Brand awareness positively impacts consumers' decision making, brand image and brand market outputs such as sales (Molinillo et al., 2017) (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012). Perceived brand relationship on the other hand, impacts attitudes and intentions of customers toward the brand (Casidy et al., 2018). Further, Nyffenegger et al. (2016) found that “*brand relationship creates an inhibitory effect on the recall of other brands*”. Perceived brand relationship is considered a crucial point of loyalty and also affects brand performance outcomes (Casidy et al., 2018). Ya et al. (2020) found that brand attitude, awareness, and reputation have a positive effect on brand performance so the remaining hypotheses are put forward.



**FIGURE 1**  
**CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

**H<sub>6</sub>:** *There is a positive relationship between perceived brand relationship and brand performance.*

According to the presented literature, the conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 2**  
**CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF RESEARCH**

**METHODOLOGY**

To explore the proposed research model comprising multiple hypotheses, the survey-based design is conducted. Also, structural equation analysis is used to assessing the overall fitness of the model and examining the significant of each hypothesis statistically. Due to the economic importance of the hospitality industry in Iran, Hotels are an ideal context for this research Figure 2.

**Data Collection**

In this study, sampling method was chosen based on the rule of thumb of the minimum required sample size which at least 5 cases per each statement related to latent variables in the questionnaire were gathered.

We had significantly five independent and dependent (latent) variables in the questionnaire (Bentler & Chou, 1987). So, at least we should have at least 100 data, and we distributed 252 questionnaires and gathered 210 valid sample data.

Thus, given the fact that Isfahan is one of the most famous tourist cities in Iran, initially 8 hotels were selected from all 4 and 5 star hotels in Isfahan, which included Abbasi and Kowsar hotels from 5 stars and Aseman, Safir, Zohreh, Piroozi, Avin and Khajoo hotels from 4 stars; In addition, for receiving more accurate result cluster sampling was used among customers of the mentioned 4 and 5 stars’ hotels in Isfahan.

Then, referring to these hotels, 252 questionnaires were randomly distributed among the customers of these hotels during the January till September of 2020. Finally 210 questionnaires were given back and considered in this research.

The response rate is approximately is 83%. From the respondents 51% were male and 49% were female. The median age is 36 years old. The average income that they earned is more than or around 15 million Toman. Also, 68% of respondent have a university degree; however, 13% have a higher degree and others do not have a university degree.

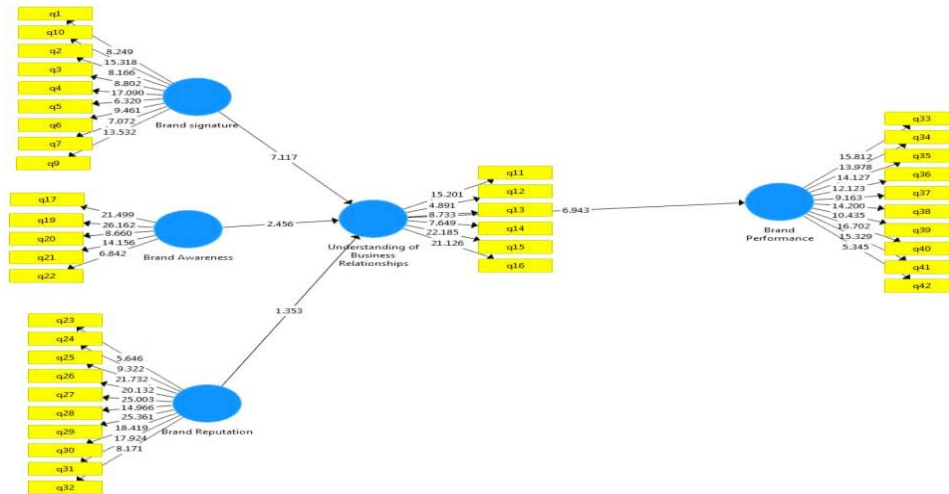
### Measures of Constructs

This study employs 5 scale adapted from existing measures which presented in Table 1. The scales used for each of the 5 constructs are presented in the Table 1. All measure employs five point Likert (1=strongly disagree) to “(5=strongly agree).

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was tested through reliability analysis using Cronbach’s alpha. Reliability estimates for all construct-variables exceeded 0.70 revealing a high degree of reliability. For the Cronbach Alpha indicator, a minimum value of 0.7 was considered.

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Cronbach Alpha</b>	<b>Number of items</b>	<b>construct</b>
Brand signature	0.777		
Perceived brand relationship	0.734	10	Foroudi (2019)
Brand awareness	0.719	6	Lombart and Louis (2016)
Brand reputation	0.805	6	Low and Ang (2013)
Brand performance	0.888	10	Zhao and Roper (2011)
Total	0.839	10	Melewar et al. (2017)

PLS-SEM was applied for statistical analysis regarding general model; in order to assess path coefficients, PLS path modeling analysis was adopted Figure 3.



**FIGURE 3**  
**PLS PATH MODELING ANALYSIS**

**Findings**

The analysis of the research results contains the assessment of measurement and structural models as well as statistical testing of research hypotheses. The values of composite reliability and Cronbach alpha Table 1 are higher than 0.7, revealing that internal consistency reliability of the reflective measurement model is satisfactory. Moreover, each indicator’s standardized loadings are above 0.7, thus the measurement model is assessed as reliable. The values of average variance extracted (AVE) measure are above 0.5, substantiating that the degree of convergent validity is sufficient in Table 2.

	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>	<b>AVE</b>	<b>Composite reliability</b>
Customer brand awareness	0.806	0.562	0.864
Brand signature	0.876	0.501	0.9
Perceived brand relationship	0.828	0.545	0.876
Brand reputation	0.903	0.549	0.922
Brand performance	0.908	0.553	0.924

Coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) values of variables brand awareness, brand reputation and perceived brand relationship are moderate, implying that the proportion of variance explained by the fit regarding these variables is sufficient. The  $R^2$  value of variable brand performance is somehow weak in comparison to the rest of values Table 3; nevertheless, it implies that the latter variable may be influenced by other factors that are not analyzed in the model such as brand value, brand image, brand identity. Moreover, the results of redundancy value are the same as  $R^2$  value.

The goodness of fit (GoF) has been developed as an overall measure of model fit for PLS-SEM. Table 3 illustrates the behavior of the goodness-of-fit index for each variable. Also, the GOF value of 0.493 showed a strong fit of the overall model because the calculated GOF value is greater than 0.36.

	<b>The amount of R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>The amount of Redundancy</b>	<b>GOF</b>
brand awareness	0.433	0.221	0.47
Perceived brand relationship	0.67	0.344	0.586
Brand reputation	0.595	0.303	0.55
Brand performance	0.218	0.104	0.322
Average	0.482	0.243	0.493

As Table 3 presented, the result shows statistical support for H1, H2, H3, H4 and H6. But H5 is not supported.

As Table 3 presented, H1 proposes a positive association between brand signature ( $\beta=0.658$ ,  $t=10.369$ ) and customer brand awareness. In addition, H2 demonstrates positive association of customer brand awareness and brand reputation ( $\beta=0.771$ ,  $t=23.769$ ). H3 also confirms the positive impacts of brand signature on perceived brand relationship ( $\beta=0.527$ ,  $t=7.263$ ). H4 explains the positive relationship of customer brand awareness and perceived brand relationship too ( $\beta=0.271$ ,  $t=2.543$ ). On the contrary to mentioned hypothesis, H5 is not supported and the association between brand reputation and perceived brand relationship is not significantly important ( $\beta=0.116$ ,  $t=1.276$ ). Finally, H6 which predicts a positive relationship between perceived brand relationship and brand performance is statistically supported ( $\beta=0.467$ ,  $t=6.653$ ) in Table 4.

<b>Hypothesis</b>	<b>coefficient</b>	<b>t-test</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Average values</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>	<b>Result</b>
H1.Brand signature -> Customer awareness of the brand	0	10.369	0.063	0.659	0.658	confirmed
H2.Customer brand awareness -> brand reputation	0	23.769	0.032	0.777	0.771	confirmed
H3.Brand Signature -> perceived brand relationship	0	7.263	0.073	0.531	0.527	confirmed
H4.Customer brand awareness -> perceived brand relationship	0.011	2.543	0.107	0.264	0.271	confirmed



H5.Brand Reputation - > perceived brand relationship	0.203	1.276	0.091	0.119	0.116	Rejected
H6.perceived brand relationship - > Brand Performance	0	6.653	0.07	0.486	0.467	confirmed

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main contribution of this study is highlighting the relationship of brand signature on hotels which has been less attention in previous studies. This study confirms the positive impacts of brand signature on customer brand awareness ( $H_1$ ). The second contribution of this study derives from the development of previous antecedents of branding literature and confirms the positive association of brand awareness and brand reputation ( $H_2$ ). Brand awareness positively impacts consumers' decision making, brand image and brand market outputs such as sales (Molinillo et al., 2017) (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012) which influence on brand reputation relationships.

Also, this study supports the positive association between brand signature and perceived brand relationship ( $H_3$ ). Further, brand awareness has a positive effect on perceived brand relationship and by improving the brand awareness among customers; the perceived brand relationship fosters as well ( $H_4$ ). In addition, the results indicated that brand signature has a stronger positive effect on perceived brand relationship than the other branding features. Perceived brand relationship also has a strong positive effect on brand performance and could be a crucial factor in increasing brand performance ( $H_6$ ). Although the impacts of brand signature and brand awareness were confirmed, the results of study did not support the positive association between brand reputation and perceived brand relationship and it was rejected ( $H_5$ ).

The third empirical contribution of this research pertains to the finding of aforementioned not statistically significant factor ( $H_5$ : brand reputation on perceived brand relationship), which stresses in past literature. It is well noted to explain that brand reputation also is an immediate image of an organization which is aggregated in customers' minds over the time and is formed by brand reliability and brand benevolence (Fombrun, 1996; Foroudi, 2019; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001).

### Managerial Implications and Limitations

This research generates the relevant insight to global hotels managers which improves their brand awareness and reputation to understand the whole situation of the relationship between the brand signature and consumer's perspective toward brand (customer brand awareness) and its effect on brand reputation and brand performance. Finally, aligned with previous studies, this paper also uncovers the fact that it is essential to understand that brand reputation as a consequence of improved current or future hotel brand performance which can improve brand loyalty Foroudi (2019); Razak et al. (2020); Ya et al. (2020).

This study has several limitations, which offer avenues for future research. First, our research is limited to hospitality industry. Future research with service industries and other contexts with larger sample sizes are needed. Second, future research would benefit to

investigating the complex relationship of future brand identity and brand personality. This relationship must be considered which may affect the managerial procedures for increasing brand performance. Third, it would be worthwhile for future research to study this issue in different culture as the cultural values differ in different places. Finally, investigating other effective variables such as brand equity and brand value along with the aforementioned variables is recommended is useful.

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