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Can perceived coolness enhance memorable customer experience? The role of customer engagement

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Abstract

Purpose – Memorable customer experience (MCE) is a key factor affecting customer loyalty and revisit intention. Hospitality managers must identify factors that create MCEs. This study aims to investigate relationships among perceived coolness, customer engagement and MCE and examine the mediation effect of customer engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – Two samples of 434 restaurant customers and 372 hotel customers in Taiwan returned questionnaires. Hypotheses were examined by structural equation modeling.

Findings – The results demonstrated that perceived coolness positively affected customer engagement and MCE and that customer engagement positively affected MCE. Furthermore, customer engagement mediated the relationship between perceived coolness and MCE.

Research limitations/implications – This study is cross-sectional, which limits causal inference. Furthermore, this study only investigated customers of Taiwanese restaurants and hotels, and the findings may not be generalizable to other industries and countries.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the MCE knowledge in hospitality by elucidating the association among perceived coolness, customer engagement and MCE. The findings can aid hospitality managers in developing marketing strategies, fostering customer engagement and creating MCEs.

Keywords Coolness, Engagement, Memorable experience, Hospitality

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The creation of memorable customer experiences (MCEs) is essential in hospitality and tourism contexts (Rahimian *et al.*, 2021). Many organizations, such as Disney, Starbucks and Marriott, have been striving to create MCEs (McColl *et al.*, 2022). For example, Starbucks

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launched a luxury brand named "Starbucks Reserve" to deliver MCEs. MCEs are positive memories and associations generated after experiencing a product (Tsaur and Lo, 2020). Cao *et al.* (2019) noted that creating an MCE, which is an essential component of a customer's journey, can generate a competitive advantage in the market (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). MCEs positively affect subjective well-being (Badu-Baiden *et al.*, 2022), brand attachment (Hwang and Lee, 2018), loyalty (Kim *et al.*, 2023) and intention to revisit and recommend a product (Badu-Baiden *et al.*, 2022). Because MCEs are key to maintaining customer relationships, factors necessary for creating MCEs should be identified (Tsaur and Lo, 2020).

The antecedents of MCEs can be grouped into internal and external factors (Hosany *et al.*, 2022). Coolness constitutes one such external stimulus that shapes customer experiences. Scholars have investigated the effect of perceived coolness on brand experience (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Perceived coolness refers to an individual's feeling that a particular product or brand is useful, attractive and original and has subcultural appeal (Sundar *et al.*, 2014). Coolness is a crucial predictor of customer outcomes, such as loyalty (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2023), brand love (Khoi and Le, 2022) and positive word of mouth (Bagozzi and Khoshnevis, 2022). Coolness implies that customers have a strong interest in a product and believe that the product is of high quality and can creatively satisfy their needs and desires (Cha, 2020). Customers usually evaluate cool products positively and derive a more satisfying experience from them (Khoi and Le, 2022). Customers are likely to recognize and remember certain aspects of their experience if they are exposed to novel or unusual stimuli (Skavronskaya *et al.*, 2020). When customers perceive a hospitality firm to have a cool element, they tend to have a more satisfying experience (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Coolness is a vital but relatively understudied marketing phenomenon (Bagozzi and Khoshnevis, 2022). Among external factors that affect MCEs (Hosany *et al.*, 2022), few scholars have explored the importance of perceived coolness. Whether perceived coolness can lead to an MCE in the hospitality context remains unclear.

Customer engagement is a key aspect of creating a positive MCE (Melón *et al.*, 2021). Customer engagement is a psychological state experienced by customers while interacting with others and experiencing a service (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Based on the customer engagement ecosystem framework (Maslowska *et al.*, 2016), perceived coolness is a firm's brand action to satisfy customer needs, and an MCE is the outcome of customer engagement. The customer engagement framework proposed by Chen *et al.* (2021a) can be used to explain the relationships among perceived coolness (i.e. antecedent), customer engagement and MCE (i.e. consequences). Wang and Sundar (2018) noted that user engagement can be triggered when users think that a tech product is cool. Khoi and Le (2022) reported that brand coolness enhances brand engagement. In addition, Chen and Rahman (2018) demonstrated that a higher level of customer engagement can enhance MCEs. The findings indicate that customer engagement may mediate the association of perceived coolness with MCEs. Although scholars have discussed associations between brand coolness and brand engagement (Khoi and Le, 2022) and customer engagement and MCEs (Melón *et al.*, 2021), whether perceived coolness can enhance customer engagement and create MCEs in the hospitality industry remains unknown. MCEs are a powerful predictor of customer loyalty and revisit intention (Badu-Baiden *et al.*, 2022; Prentice *et al.*, 2022). In the context of the customer engagement ecosystem (Maslowska *et al.*, 2016), our research addresses the gap in the MCE knowledge and elucidates the mediator of customer engagement in the link between perceived coolness and MCEs.

Two literature gaps were identified from our literature review. First, the relationship between perceived coolness and MCEs remains unclear. Second, whether customer engagement mediates the linkage between perceived coolness and MCEs remains to be determined. This study makes several contributions. First, although Zhang *et al.* (2021) examined the linkage between perceived coolness and brand experience, brand experience is

conceptually distinct from MCEs. Thus, this study expanded upon the findings of Hosany *et al.* (2022) to demonstrate that perceived coolness is a crucial external factor that creates MCEs. Second, Tsaur and Lo (2020) called for future studies to identify factors affecting MCEs in different contexts. This study followed the suggestions of Tsaur and Lo (2020) to investigate the influences of perceived coolness and customer engagement on MCEs in two hospitality contexts (i.e. restaurants and hotels). Third, although Khoi and Le (2022) investigated the relationship between brand coolness and customer brand engagement, the constructs of customer engagement and brand engagement are different. This study extended the results of Khoi and Le (2022) and observed that perceived coolness promotes customer engagement. Finally, whether perceived coolness affects MCEs through customer engagement is yet to be determined. This study addresses this gap in research (Khoi and Le, 2022; Melón *et al.*, 2021) and reveals that customer engagement is a crucial mechanism underlying the association between perceived coolness and MCEs. Our findings can help hospitality managers in formulating marketing strategies to enhance customer engagement and foster MCEs.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the literature on perceived coolness, customer engagement and MCEs is reviewed to develop the research hypotheses and a theoretical framework. Second, the methodology is described, including sample and data collection, measurement tools and data analysis. Third, research model validation, hypothesis testing and the study findings are examined. Finally, theoretical/practical implications, limitations and future research and conclusions are presented.

Literature review and research hypotheses

This study proposed and tested a theoretical framework (Figure 1). Perceived coolness was conceptualized as an antecedent of MCEs, and customer engagement was conceptualized as a mediator. Specifically, this model illustrates how perceived coolness affects MCEs. This section discusses the extant literature on perceived coolness, customer engagement and MCEs. Based on the literature review and related theories (i.e. identity theory, signaling theory, customer journey theory and customer engagement ecosystem), four research hypotheses are proposed. These hypotheses focus on interrelationships among perceived coolness, customer engagement and MCEs.

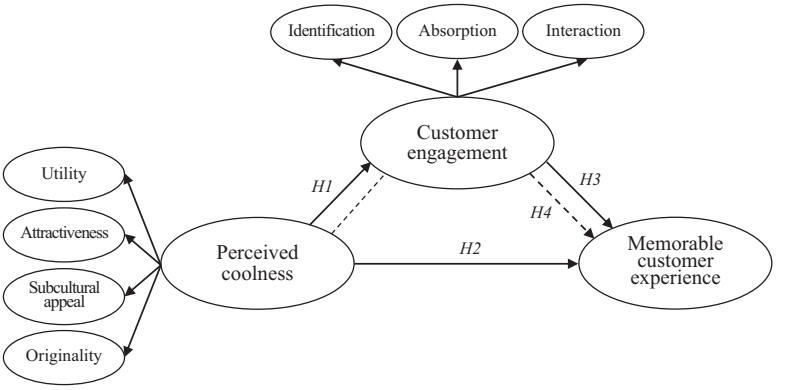

Figure 1.
The conceptual model

Notes: → = direct effects; → = indirect effect; *H4* represents mediation effect
Source: Authors' own creation

Perceived coolness

Coolness is a characteristic of individuals (specifically, of one's personality) or of products. Coolness connotes innovativeness, originality, uniqueness, social desirability and rebelliousness (Warren *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have explored coolness in the field of hospitality. Cha (2020) determined that perceived coolness positively affects motivated consumer innovativeness. Chen *et al.* (2021a) demonstrated that autonomy drives the perception of coolness, which, in turn, generates positive brand attitude. Bogicevic *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that perceived coolness mediates the influence of virtual reality on customers' self-brand connections. Khoi and Le (2022) reported that the coolness of luxury hotel brands positively affects brand satisfaction and love. Sharma *et al.* (2022) observed that restaurant coolness strengthens individuals' attitude toward domestic gastronomic tourism. With regard to travel, Jamshidi *et al.* (2023) reported that perceived coolness is positively associated with memorable tourism experiences. However, the linkage between perceived coolness and MCE in hospitality contexts remains unclear.

Scholars have posited that coolness is a multidimensional construct (Cha, 2020; Loureiro *et al.*, 2020). For example, Loureiro *et al.* (2020) argued that coolness in the context of luxury fashion brands comprises dimensions such as usefulness, high status, popularity and subcultural appeal. Cha (2020) used the coolness scale developed by Sundar *et al.* (2014) to explore customers' willingness to use robot services. The study revealed that customers perceived coolness to contain four dimensions: utility, attractiveness, subcultural appeal and originality. Utility refers to the degree to which the design or manufacture of a device can benefit customers. Attractiveness involves aesthetic appeal and socially accepted notions of style. Subcultural appeal refers to a perception that a product enables individuals to differentiate themselves from others and that a product being ahead of its time; and originality involves distinctiveness, novelty and freshness. The perceived coolness scale used by Cha (2020) is a multifaceted measurement tool applicable to the context of restaurants and is both valid and reliable. This study adopted the conceptual framework presented by Cha (2020) who considered perceived coolness as a multifaceted concept manifested in four dimensions (utility, attractiveness, subcultural appeal and originality). This involves the entire restaurant or hotel instead of some specific aspects such as the food, room, facilities or brand.

Memorable customer experiences

Creating an MCE is crucial to the success of a hospitality firm (Prentice *et al.*, 2022). Cao *et al.* (2019) defined a memorable experience as a customer's overall subjective evaluation of a restaurant after dining. Tsaur and Lo (2020) defined such an experience as a positive memory after the dining experience. In both definitions, restaurant service, food, atmosphere and novel components are characteristics that can create an MCE. MCEs are of importance to the hospitality industry, a highly experience-oriented and human-centric industry that requires and values intense human interactions (Davari *et al.*, 2022). Human interactions play a crucial role in creating MCEs in the hospitality context (Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013). An MCE can enhance a customer's positive emotions, satisfaction and loyalty (Guan *et al.*, 2021; Prentice *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, it can enhance the reputation and profitability of the business. Delivering MCEs can generate superior value for both customers and hospitality firms. Thus, creating MCEs is a priority for hospitality firms that wish to remain competitive (Cetin and Walls, 2016).

Scholars of the hospitality industry have used multidimensional scales to measure MCEs. Cao *et al.* (2019) constructed a formative index to evaluate memorable dining experiences in the food industry, which are constituted by sensory, affective, behavioral, intellectual and social components. Tsaur and Lo (2020) noted that a memorable dining experience consists of excellent service, exquisite cuisine, an impressive physical

environment and unique atmosphere and high perceived value. However, scholars in various fields have used unidimensional scales to evaluate MCEs (Hwang and Lee, 2018; Taheri *et al.*, 2020). In present study, MCEs referred to the overall positive recollection of a customer experience, and we did not focus on any single aspect of service experience. Therefore, this study measured MCEs on the basis of a single dimension.

Customer engagement

Customer engagement is crucial in the field of hospitality (So *et al.*, 2021). Engagement is a multidimensional construct that involves emotions, cognition and behavior (Siu *et al.*, 2022). From a service-dominant logic perspective, Hollebeek *et al.* (2019, p. 171) extended Brodie *et al.*'s (2011) study by defining customer engagement as "a customer's motivationally driven, volitional investment of specific operant and operand resources into brand interactions in service systems." Because the service-dominant logic holds that service is the basis of exchange in axiomatic terms (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), Hollebeek *et al.*'s (2019) definition serves as the foundation of our investigation of customer engagement in hospitality contexts. In the hospitality and tourism customer engagement framework constructed by Chen *et al.* (2021b), factors affecting customer engagement fall into one of three main categories: customer-related, firm-related and context-related factors. Consequences of customer engagement can be explored from both firm and customer perspectives. Customer engagement can enhance perceived value (Touni *et al.*, 2022), loyalty (Li *et al.*, 2020) and value cocreation behavior (Yen *et al.*, 2020). Thus, customer engagement is crucial for hospitality managers.

Scholars have examined the construct of brand engagement in the hospitality context (Khoi and Le, 2022). However, the construct of brand engagement differs from that of customer engagement. Brand engagement reflects customers' individual, context-specific engagement with a particular brand, whereas customer engagement encompasses a broader spectrum of engagement (Hollebeek, 2011; Vivek *et al.*, 2014). Customer engagement comprises three facets: identification, absorption and interaction (Harrigan *et al.*, 2017). Identification denotes the extent that customers perceive themselves to belong to a firm. Absorption denotes the extent of customer concentration and engrossment in a firm. Interaction denotes diverse sharing behaviors (online or offline) between customers and firms or other customers. In this study, high customer engagement demonstrates frequent interactions between customers and the firm that promote customers' cognitive (i.e. absorption), emotional (i.e. identification) and behavioral (i.e. interaction) investment in the firm. Harrigan *et al.*'s (2017) scale is relatively simple, and subsequent studies have reported this scale to have sufficient validity and reliability (Li *et al.*, 2020; Touni *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, this study adopted the three-dimension scale of Harrigan *et al.* (2017).

Perceived coolness and memorable customer experiences

Products or services that customers consider cool tend to creatively satisfy their needs and to be high quality (Cha, 2020). When customers perceive coolness in a hospitality setting, they derive a more satisfactory experience (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Sundar *et al.* (2014) claimed that products that customers perceive to be cool are often of premium quality, distinct and novel. Skavronskaya *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that novelty is a crucial factor in creating MCEs. Attractiveness is another key aspect of perceived coolness. Chen and Chou (2019) noted that destination attractiveness influences the creation of a memorable experience. Jamshidi *et al.* (2023) determined that tourists' perceived coolness of social media destination information exerts a positive effect on memorable experiences. For restaurants, attractive interior design and the use of decorations are factors that can create a memorable experience for customers (Cao *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, perceived coolness can create an MCE.

Scholars have noted that customers tend to integrate their identity with certain brands (Liu and Mattila, 2019). According to identity theory, self-identity refers to how individuals engage in decision-making on the basis of their self-perceptions. Individuals often develop standards on the basis of their self-perceptions (Stets and Burke, 2000). Cool products can help customers to express their identity, acquire a desirable new identity and create strong connections with a brand (Runyan *et al.*, 2013). Van der Westhuizen (2018) reported that the self-brand connection enhances brand experience, and that customer–brand connection is an essential factor in establishing a memorable experience. According to identity theory (Stets and Burke, 2000), cool products serve as symbolic devices that consumers use in their evolving thought procedures that develop a linkage between personal and desired identity. Customers self-identify with a hospitality firm when they perceive the firm to be cool. Such firms can create MCEs because they satisfy a customer's need for self-expression. Thus, perceived coolness is expected to create MCEs. This study proposed the following:

H1. Perceived coolness is positively associated with MCE.

Perceived coolness and customer engagement

Studies have examined the relationship between perceived coolness and customer engagement. Javornik and Mandelli (2012) noted that when a customer thinks that a particular brand is cool customer engagement increases. Stocchi *et al.* (2018) stated that customers often perceive paid applications to be unique and cool, which generates customer engagement motivation. In an examination of the theory of interactive media effects, Wang and Sundar (2018) argued that signals indicating that a product is cool function as a heuristic and that cool products or services create a halo effect that encourages user engagement. In summary, the literature indicates that perceived coolness positively affects customer engagement.

According to signaling theory, customers perceive coolness as a signal (Liu and Mattila, 2019). The credibility and meaning of a piece of information in the eyes of an individual affect how valuable that piece of information is perceived to be (Taj, 2016). Signals can be physically transmitted through various customer touch points (Bove and Benoit, 2020). Liu and Mattila (2019) noted that cool products or services can send a signal to a customer that consuming them imbues the customer with a cool identity, which leads customers to positively evaluate such products and experience satisfaction with these service encounters. Restaurants with cool dishes or services offer an innovative approach to satisfying customer needs (Sundar *et al.*, 2014) that increases customer engagement (Yen *et al.*, 2020). Building on signaling theory (Liu and Mattila, 2019), cool products or services act a signal that helps customers perceive a positive value in themselves. Therefore, this study predicted that perceived coolness would increase customer engagement. The following hypothesis was proposed:

H2. Perceived coolness is positively associated with customer engagement.

Customer engagement and memorable customer experiences

Studies have reported that customer engagement is a key effect on customer experience (Melón *et al.*, 2021; Rather *et al.*, 2022). Taheri *et al.* (2014) noted that tourists enjoy the best experience when they are more engaged in the context and content of a destination. Chen and Rahman (2018) observed that cultural tourists are more likely to seek immersive cultural experiences and that a higher level of tourist engagement can create more

memorable experiences. Melón *et al.* (2021) identified tourist engagement to be a necessary condition for the creation of memorable experiences. This study posited that customer engagement can facilitate the creation of MCEs in the context of hospitality.

According to the customer journey theory (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), the formation of an experience is a journey that unfolds over time through interactions with service providers at multiple touch points. The customer journey is affected by the interactions customers have with employees and other customers. The entire customer experience comprises the prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase stages. The level of customer engagement with companies and brands is crucial to creating MCEs in the postpurchase stage (Chen and Rahman, 2018). This study posited that customers create memorable experiences in the postpurchase stage by being highly engaged with a hospitality firm throughout the customer journey. Hence, we posited the following:

H3. Customer engagement is positively associated with MCE.

Mediating role of customer engagement

Researchers have explored customer engagement as a mediation mechanism in various contexts (Li and Wei, 2021). Cool products or services offered by restaurants convey innovativeness and originality to their customers (Sundar *et al.*, 2014), which can satisfy the psychological needs of the customers and thereby increase customer engagement (Yen *et al.*, 2020). Khoi and Le (2022) reported that hotel brand coolness can enhance customer brand engagement. Furthermore, customer engagement is an essential part of creating an MCE (Chen and Rahman, 2018). Melón *et al.* (2021) reported that customer engagement positively influences memorable experiences in the tourism context. Therefore, this study posited that perceived coolness can create MCEs through customer engagement.

Maslowska *et al.* (2016) theorized that, as part of a broader ecosystem, the customer engagement ecosystem is constituted by various actors, particularly a firm and its customers and their actions. Customer experience is created through interactions among firms, customers and other actors (Chen *et al.*, 2021b). The customer engagement ecosystem provides a useful framework for studies focusing on the hospitality context. This theory offers a means to link the concepts of perceived coolness (in relation to a hospitality firm and its actions), customer engagement (as a consequence of assessing how cool a hospitality firm is) and MCE (as a positive recollection of actively engaged customers about a service experience). According to the literature, perceived coolness can increase customer engagement and create MCEs. Therefore, the study posited as follows:

H4. Customer engagement mediates the linkage between perceived coolness and MCE.

Methodology

Sample and data collection

The sample comprised customers of Taiwanese restaurants. To construct clear, robust and comprehensive survey questions, a pilot test was conducted with 50 customers. Cronbach's alpha of the scales were higher than 0.7 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), demonstrating that internal consistency of the items. Because the larger and more well-known restaurants in Taiwan are mainly located in three cities (i.e. Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung), this study focused on the top 10 restaurants recommended by TripAdvisor (2021) in those three cities. On the basis of customer reviews, we selected restaurants that had elements or attributes of coolness. In total, 30 restaurants were selected. The researchers contacted the managers of

the 30 restaurants by phone to request their assistance in the data collection. A total of 22 restaurants agreed to help with the questionnaire distribution, and a written explanation was mailed to the managers of the 22 restaurants. These restaurants included casual and fine dining restaurants, steakhouses, teppanyaki restaurants, Japanese restaurants and hot pot restaurants. Announcements in the restaurants were used to recruit participants, and the customers were informed that participation was voluntary.

Questionnaire packages (containing 30 questionnaires, instructions and a return envelope) were sent to managers. The restaurant manager was asked to describe the contents of the questionnaire and place it on the dining table and to openly solicit participation in the survey. For customers who were willing to take part in our survey, the manager was requested to inform customers who had finished their meal to complete the questionnaire. One respondent was invited per table, and the participants aged 18 years and older were eligible to participate in the survey. The questionnaire first asked respondents whether, on average, they had dined at the restaurant once every six months during the previous two years and had memorable experiences? The participants then answered the follow-up questions. After each questionnaire was completed, the participants mailed it directly to the researcher. Based on a 95% confidence level ($p = 0.5$ maximum variability and $\pm$ 5% precision), the sample size should have been 385 (Cochran, 2007). The questionnaires were distributed between January and March 2021. In total, 450 questionnaires were returned. A total of 15 restaurants returned at least 20 questionnaires. After 16 incomplete questionnaires were eliminated, a total of 434 valid questionnaires remained.

A chi-square test was used to compare differences in the demographic characteristics of the respondents at the three locations in Taipei, Taichung and Kaohsiung. The findings showed no significant differences in gender ($\chi^2 = 1.54$, $p = 0.21$, $p > 0.05$) and age ($\chi^2 = 3.19$, $p = 0.15$, $p > 0.05$) among the three samples, which indicated that the samples collected in this study from the three locations have similar sociodemographic profiles. Moreover, this study examined nonresponse bias by comparing the mean values of early responders (top 25%) and late responders (later 25%) for each variable in this study. The *t*-test results showed no significant difference between these two groups ($p > 0.05$), indicating a low probability of nonresponse bias (Armstrong and Overton, 1977).

Measurement

The research used the perceived coolness scale used by Cha (2020), which comprises 16 items. The scale comprises four dimensions: utility (four items), attractiveness (four items), subcultural appeal (four items) and originality (four items). We modified it in accordance with the context of the research. Furthermore, the MCE scale used by Hwang and Lee (2018) to measure the customer perceptions of memorable experiences was adopted, which comprises three items. To measure customer engagement, this study used the scale of Harrigan *et al.* (2017), which comprises 11 items. Specifically, customer engagement in this scale comprises three dimensions: absorption (five questions), identification (three questions) and interaction (three questions).

Demographic data were collected (i.e. gender, age, education level, marital status and monthly salary). A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1 point) to *strongly agree* (5 points). The questionnaires were translated from English into Chinese by the present author and three of the restaurant managers. Back-translation technique (van de Vijver and Hambleton, 1996) was used to validate adequate quality.

Data analysis

First, the descriptive statistics of all constructs were calculated, and SPSS (version 25.0) and AMOS (version 25.0) were used to perform confirmatory factor analysis to assess the

validity of the items. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the paths. SEM is particularly useful when multiple variables are included in a structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Thus, covariance-based SEM was chosen for this analysis. Subsequently, SEM and bootstrapping were conducted to assess our hypotheses.

Results

Sample characteristics

Among the 434 respondents, 278 (64.1%) were female and 156 (35.9%) were male, 324 (74.7%) were unmarried and 368 (84.8%) had received a college degree or above. A majority of participants were 21–33 years old (62.2%), and the most well-represented income group earned a monthly salary of US$1,001–1,334 (24.9%).

Measurement properties

The normality hypothesis was tested using skewness–kurtosis tests. The skewness (−0.71 to 1.12) and kurtosis (−1.29 to 1.43) absolute value of all items were all lower than 2, indicating that the assumption had not been violated (Kline, 2015). Multicollinearity was tested for according to variance inflation factors. The values were between 1.28 and 3.25, indicating that there was no problem with multicollinearity (Agresti, 2002).

Table 1 shows the reliability test for each scale. The composite reliability of the variables ranged between 0.80 and 0.96, and these values were greater than 0.6, indicating that this questionnaire was reliable (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The second-order confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to validate the measurement models. The fit indices were described below: $\chi^2 = 1024.27$, df = 369, $\chi^2/df = 2.78$, GFI = 0.92, AGFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.95, NFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.06 and SRMR = 0.05. All values were within their requisite minimum or maximum (Hair *et al.*, 2010), demonstrating that the data can be appropriately adapted into the models. The average variance extracted (AVE) of the variables ranged from 0.51 to 0.79 (Table 2), which was greater than 0.50, demonstrating that the variables had acceptable convergent validity (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The correlation coefficient between the paired dimensions was lower than the square root of the AVE of each dimension (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Furthermore, the heterotrait–monotrait ratios of correlation ranged from 0.47 to 0.73, with all values being less than the critical value of 0.85 (Kline, 2015). Thus, the results indicated the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

We used a self-report method, implying the possibility of common method variance (CMV). First, this study used two procedural methods. One method was implemented to ensure the participants' anonymity. The other was used for dividing the perceived coolness, customer engagement and MCE items on different pages of the questionnaire, thereby causing respondents to psychologically differentiate these sections (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Second, we used two statistical methods. Harman's one-factor analysis was employed to assess CMV. The unrotated factor analysis extracted eight eigenvalues greater than 1; the cumulative proportion of variance explained by the analysis was 63.67%, with only 24.32% of the variance of the first factor explained (Lin, 2007). In addition, we controlled the effect of single unmeasured latent method factor and compared the models without and with the CMV factor. The fit indices of the included CMV factor were shown below: $\chi^2/df = 2.75$, GFI = 0.92, AGFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.95, NFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.07 and SRMR = 0.05. The difference in the two models' fit was nonsignificant. Thus, CMV did not pose a problem (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

Constructs	Factor loadings	*t*-value	CR
Perceived coolness			0.95
Utility			0.80
This restaurant provides practical service	0.68	14.49	
This restaurant provides helpful service to customers	0.69	15.19	
This restaurant provides valuable service to customers	0.74	16.57	
This restaurant provides efficient service to customers	0.73	16.07	
Attractiveness			0.82
This restaurant is attractive	0.70	16.24	
This restaurant is popular	0.70	16.47	
This restaurant is stylish	0.74	17.93	
This restaurant is the industry leader	0.78	18.90	
Subcultural appeal			0.84
This restaurant makes customers feel unique.	0.77	18.69	
The consumption experience in this restaurant is special	0.78	19.02	
Customers who patronize this restaurant are pioneers in trendiness	0.75	17.91	
Customers feel good when patronizing this restaurant	0.76	18.22	
Originality			0.83
This restaurant has originality	0.73	17.28	
This restaurant is unique	0.74	17.63	
This restaurant is different from other restaurants	0.70	16.35	
This restaurant is a pioneer in setting future trends	0.78	19.18	
Customer engagement			0.96
Identification			0.85
I feel uncomfortable when others criticize this restaurant	0.83	19.82	
I usually refer to this restaurant as "our restaurant" with my peers	0.79	18.66	
I feel happy when others praise this restaurant	0.81	19.37	
Absorption			0.93
I am passionate about this restaurant	0.81	19.46	
The mention of this restaurant makes me excited	0.85	20.80	
Anything related to this restaurant will attract my attention	0.89	22.14	
I am fully engaged when interacting with the service personnel of the restaurant	0.84	20.14	
I am immersed in my interactions with the service personnel of the restaurant	0.85	20.35	
Interaction			0.87
In general, I like to participate in discussions in the community about this restaurant	0.83	19.76	
I like interacting with the members of this restaurant's community	0.82	19.47	
I often participate in the activities of this restaurant's community	0.85	20.43	
Memorable customer experience			0.92
I have had numerous memorable experiences in this restaurant	0.87	19.04	
This restaurant evokes good memories	0.93	20.34	
I have fond memories of this restaurant	0.86	19.70	

Notes: CR refers to composite reliability; AVE refers to average variance extracted
Source: Author's own creation

Table 1.
Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Hypothesis testing

SEM with maximum likelihood estimation was applied to examine our hypotheses. The path coefficients in the structural model were shown in Table 3. The fit indices (χ^2 = 1031.42, df = 370, χ^2/df = 2.79, GFI = 0.92, AGFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.95, NFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.06 and SRMR = 0.05) supported our structural model. The coefficients from

perceived coolness to MCE ($\beta = 0.38$) and perceived coolness to customer engagement ($\beta = 0.61$) demonstrated a significant positive relationship ($p < 0.01$). Thus, *H1* and *H2* were supported. Additionally, the path coefficient from customer engagement to MCE ($\beta = 0.49$) revealed a significant and positive relationship ($p < 0.01$), which supported *H3*.

This study used bootstrapping to assess the mediation effect of customer engagement (Preacher *et al.*, 2007). The result showed that the confidence interval (CI) with bootstrapping for the indirect effect of customer engagement on the perceived coolness – MCE (95% CI = 0.11, 0.34) relationship excluded 0. Therefore, *H4* was supported. Perceived coolness has an indirect effect on MCE through customer engagement.

Model replication

To evaluate the generalizability of the research model, cross-validation was used. Hotel customers were resampled to validate the proposed model. According to the Taiwan Tourism Bureau's report in Taiwan Tourism Bureau (2021), Taiwan has a total of 79 four-star and five-star hotels. The researcher contacted the managers of the 79 hotels, and 25 agreed to participate in a questionnaire survey. The data collection procedures were the same as for the first batch of samples. The questionnaire first asked respondents whether, on average, they had stayed at the hotel once every year for the past three years and had memorable experiences? The second sampling period was between September and October 2021, during which 500 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and 408 were retrieved. After removing 36 samples with incomplete responses, we retained 372 valid samples, yielding a valid response rate of 74.4%. Among the valid samples, 222 (59.7%) and 150 (40.3%) were collected from male and female, respectively, 290 (78%) of the respondents were single, and 280 (75.3%) of the participants had a junior college degree or above. Most of

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Utility	*0.51*	0.69	0.61	0.57	0.49	0.58	0.47	0.62
2. Attractiveness	0.62**	*0.53*	0.73	0.66	0.57	0.63	0.51	0.67
3. Subcultural appeal	0.56**	0.68**	*0.59*	0.71	0.69	0.71	0.67	0.70
4. Originality	0.49**	0.61**	0.67**	*0.54*	0.65	0.70	0.59	0.68
5. Identification	0.44**	0.50**	0.60**	0.58**	*0.66*	0.72	0.70	0.69
6. Absorption	0.53**	0.56**	0.66**	0.63**	0.66**	*0.72*	0.73	0.66
7. Identification	0.43**	0.45**	0.59**	0.53**	0.65**	0.68**	*0.69*	0.71
8. Memorable customer experience	0.57**	0.59**	0.65**	0.64**	0.64**	0.62**	0.65**	*0.79*

Notes: The square root of AVE is shown on the diagonal of the matrix; Values below the diagonal represent correlations between variables; values above the diagonal are the heterotrait–monotrait ratios; **$p < 0.01$

Source: Author's own creation

Table 2.
Discriminant validity

Path relationships	β	*t*-value	Results
H1. Perceived coolness → Customer engagement	0.61**	13.314	Supported
H2. Perceived coolness → Memorable customer experience	0.38**	7.162	Supported
H3. Customer engagement → Memorable customer experience	0.49**	8.645	Supported

Note: **$p < 0.01$

Source: Author's own creation

Table 3.
Structural model and hypotheses test

the participants were aged 21–33 years (57.5%) and had a monthly income of US$1,001–1,334 (37.6%).

The results revealed that the model exhibited acceptable fit (χ^2 = 1133.32, df = 370; χ^2/df = 3.06, GFI = 0.93, AGFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.95, NFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.07 and SRMR = 0.05). The coefficients between perceived coolness and customer engagement (β = 0.63, $p < 0.01$), perceived coolness and MCE (β = 0.46, $p < 0.01$) and customer engagement and MCE (β = 0.41, $p < 0.01$) were all significant. Moreover, the CI of the indirect effect of customer engagement on the linkage of perceived coolness with MCE did not include 0, verifying the mediating effect. The findings obtained from the two samples were consistent. Therefore, our model exhibited cross validity and robustness.

Discussion, implications and conclusions

Discussion

This study demonstrated that perceived coolness positively affects MCE. Customers who perceive a restaurant or hotel to be cool feel a greater connection with the company (Runyan *et al.*, 2013). They have a greater self-identification with the restaurant or hotel and can satisfy their needs for self-expression through patronizing that firm; these conditions create an MCE. Thus, perceived coolness may be an essential antecedent to MCE in the context of hospitality. The result is consistent with that of Jamshidi *et al.* (2023). The research extended the results of Hosany *et al.* (2022), who reported that perceived coolness is a key external factor in the creation of MCEs.

This study also demonstrated that perceived coolness positively affects customer engagement. Coolness is a signal to patrons that a restaurant or hotel is innovative and original (Sundar *et al.*, 2014); this encourages the belief that a restaurant or hotel has high value and can satisfy their needs, which facilitates customer engagement. Therefore, this study demonstrates perceived coolness to be a crucial antecedent to customer engagement in the context of hospitality. The result is consistent with the findings of Khoi and Le (2022), who contended that brand coolness can act as an effective brand strategy to enhance customer brand engagement.

The finding also indicated the positive influence of customer engagement on MCE. A higher level of engagement in a restaurant or hotel throughout the customer journey creates multiple service interactions between the customer and the restaurant or hotel staff, which may lead to an MCE in the postpurchase stage. This finding is consistent with those reported by Chen and Rahman (2018) and Melón *et al.* (2021), who claimed that customer engagement is a crucial determinant of MCE.

Furthermore, customer engagement was observed to mediate the relationship between perceived coolness and MCE. A cool restaurant or hotel is perceived by customers to be innovative and original, and this strengthens their level of engagement. The process of customer engagement creates more service interactions, which provide customers with memorable experiences. According to the customer engagement ecosystem, MCE is formed through interactions between the restaurant or hotel and the customer. Therefore, perceived coolness encourages customer engagement and creates MCEs.

Theoretical implications

The findings expand the literature in several respects. First, although Zhang *et al.* (2021) explored the linkage between perceived coolness and brand experience, brand experience is conceptually distinct from MCE. This study's findings support identity theory (Stets and Burke, 2000). In the internal process of self-verification, perceived coolness provides meaning and a sense of identity to customers, which can lead to MCE. On the basis of identity theory

(Stets and Burke, 2000), the present findings demonstrate that perceived coolness can positively influence MCE. This expands on the studies of Hosany *et al.* (2022) and Zhang *et al.* (2021).

Second, Tsaur and Lo (2020) suggested that future research should explore the antecedents of MCE. The present study followed this suggestion and observed that customer engagement is another crucial driver of MCEs in hospitality contexts. This result supports customer journey theory (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). We claim that customer engagement in interactions is a crucial touchpoint in the customer journey and enables hospitality firms to maximize customers' perceived value, leading to MCEs. Therefore, we contribute to the literature on MCEs and customer experience frameworks by identifying perceived coolness and customer engagement as two crucial factors that create MCEs (Bonfanti *et al.*, 2023; Rahimian *et al.*, 2021).

Third, this study expanded on the results of Khoi and Le (2022). In addition to a specific brand, this study observed that perceived coolness is also effective in promoting customer engagement for an entire restaurant or hotel. The findings of this study support signaling theory (Liu and Mattila, 2019). This study considers coolness as a signal that customers can transfer to their self-identity and into their behaviors and interactions with service providers or other customers. Fourth, few scholars have explored the psychological mechanisms underlying the linkage between perceived coolness and MCEs. According to the customer engagement ecosystem (Maslowska *et al.*, 2016), we propose that customer engagement is a psychological mechanism between perceived coolness and MCEs in the hospitality context. Thus, the present study contributes to the customer engagement model by classifying perceived coolness as a critical firm-based antecedent and MCEs as an outcome for customers (Chen *et al.*, 2021b).

Practical implications

First, managers should prioritize the incorporation of cool design elements in their meals, rooms, services and environments and develop unique products. For example, managers can adopt uniquely shaped tableware, creative food presentation, themed rooms, unconventional décor, innovative physical design and ordering, booking and delivery services that use the tech products (e.g. virtual reality devices). Managers should consider leveraging the elements of utility, attractiveness, subcultural appeal and originality to increase customer engagement. Because of the COVID-19 epidemic, many companies have adopted contactless services (Hao and Chon, 2022), such as digital menus, self-ordering kiosks, service robots and contactless or digital payments. Managers should incorporate cool elements or attributes (i.e. attractiveness, subculture and uniqueness) into these innovative designs to provide interactive and engaging service experiences for customers and to promote customer engagement.

Second, hospitality companies should consider integrating coolness features in their services and in customer interactions to create MCEs. Through experiential innovation, restaurant managers can create an interactive environment for customers and service personnel, encourage customers to participate in cocreation and jointly create an MCE. Hotel managers are advised to introduce innovative technologies with cool features into service. For example, service robots (Li *et al.*, 2022) or virtual reality applications (Bogicevic *et al.*, 2021) can be used during the service delivery to encourage customer engagement, and thereby to create MCEs. In the design of contactless services, the core concept of human-centric should be emphasized. Managers require a comprehensive understanding of customers, and cool elements (i.e. attractiveness, subculture and uniqueness) must be translated into the actual services or experiences. In this manner, customers can experience different forms of consumption, thereby creating cool MCEs.

Third, the results indicated that perceived coolness can create MCEs through customer engagement. In the design of services, managers should consider the effect of customer

engagement on MCE. A customer who understands their role in the hospitality industry ecosystem may feel have a greater appreciation of the resources and effort invested in the service. For example, a customized menu can be created that includes an explanation of the flavors to allow the customers to pair flavors during the meal. Hotel managers can also plan innovative events and activities (e.g. creative experiential parties, online brand community members activities and interactive games) to create an opportunity for customers to interact with service personnel, to encourage customer engagement and the cocreation and to create MCEs.

Limitations and future research

First, our research was cross-sectional, which limits causal inference. Thus, future research should adopt a longitudinal design for causal inference. Second, this study only investigated customers of Taiwanese restaurants and hotels, and the findings may not be generalized to other industries and countries. Studies should investigate other sectors of the tourism industry, such as the airline and service industries. Customer's evaluation of hospitality experiences may be affected by cross-cultural differences (Torres *et al.*, 2014). For instance, Laroche *et al.* (2004) reported that Japanese customers were more conservative in their evaluations of superior service. They were also more forgiving of inferior service performance than their American counterparts were. Future scholars can validate this research model for other countries (e.g. the USA or Japan).

Third, this study only investigated the influences of perceived coolness and customer engagement on positive MCEs. Whether these factors cause negative MCEs is worthy of future research (Hosany *et al.*, 2022). Fourth, this study did not consider situational factors, such as age group and food or room quality (Cha, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Future research should investigate whether perceived coolness, customer engagement and MCE are affected by these contingent factors. Other outcome variables of MCE such as brand fidelity (Grace *et al.*, 2020) and advocacy intention (Zhang *et al.*, 2022) should also be integrated in future research to enrich the model.

Conclusions

This research examined the link between perceived coolness and MCE and evaluated the mediator of customer engagement. This study provides the following conclusion based on signaling theory, identity theory, customer journey theory and the customer engagement ecosystem. First, perceived coolness positively influences customer engagement and MCE. Second, customer engagement positively affects MCE. Third, customer engagement mediates the association of perceived coolness with MCE. The present study contributes to the knowledge of customer engagement and MCEs. Hospitality managers can develop effective marketing and management measures to create MCEs for their customers by implementing cool features and encouraging customer engagement.

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