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The Effect of Customer Engagement on Brand Loyalty with the Mediating Role of Brand Attachment and Customer Trust: An Approach to Branding Knowledge (Case Study: Tourists of Kojaro Tourism Website in Mashhad)

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, brands are known as the most important assets of companies thus, having loyal customers to the brand is the main goal of all companies. Because having a sense of loyalty to the brand indicates that the customer group has a positive view of a particular brand and willing to buy from the brand consecutively. Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate the effect of brand engagement on brand loyalty with the mediating role of brand attachment and brand trust among tourists of Kojaro tourism website. The statistical population of the study was tourists of Kojaro website in Iran and the sample size was determined 384 people, using Cochran's formula and the available method. The data collection tool was a standard questionnaire. To evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. The values obtained for Cronbach's alpha confirm reliability of the questionnaire. The validity of the questionnaire was also confirmed using confirmatory factor analysis. Data analysis was performed by structural equation method using SPSS and Smart PLS software. The results of the study indicate that brand engagement has an effect on brand loyalty and the mediating role of brand attachment and brand trust in the relationship between brand engagement and brand loyalty of tourists was confirmed.
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Introduction

Nowadays, the tourism industry is known as one of the basic foundations of the economy in all countries of the world, including Iran. The importance of this issue is such that many countries have turned to this industry and promoted it in order to get rid of the monopoly economy. Therefore, communities seek to increase the quality of services in their tourist area, to attract tourists and their attention (Su et al., 2022). Because satisfied tourists with the engagement and interest in visiting the tourist area try to repeat this visit and tend to travel again. Tourists' attachment and interest in visiting is a reflection of their loyalty. Having a sense of loyalty to the brand indicates that the consumer group has a positive view of a particular brand and tends to buy consecutive from the brand (Liu et al., 2020).

Li et al. (2020) in their research examined the effect of brand engagement on brand loyalty and considered brand attachment and trust as two important factors in this regard. Having brand loyalty is important for achieving the position, marketing plans and related research. Engagement and positive attitude that customers have about brand interest and attractiveness are effective drivers in creating deep attachment and increasing communication between customers and the brand.

Behboodnia and Baghaei (2020) in a study examined the relationship between the dimensions of brand experience, trust and loyalty with regard to the mediating role of passion for the brand and moderating role of the foundations of ethics and stated that there is a significant relationship between passion for the brand and trust and loyalty to it. Compared to customers with low loyalty rate, customers with strong loyalty and interaction with the brand are eager to display repetitive buying behaviors (Yoo & Bai, 2012). In today's world, brands are recognized as the most important assets of companies; therefore, having loyal customers to the brand is the main goal of many companies that work to provide it by creating a platform of customer attachment and trust in the brand (Nyamekye et al., 2021). But the important and influential issue in the recognition and interest of the brand is branding knowledge and sufficient information about the organization's brand, which plays a significant role in choosing customers. Managers should have sufficient skill in branding to share the required information and knowledge about the brand with full awareness in such a way that it plays a positive and effective role in promoting and improving the brand and attachment to it (Cheung et al., 2020).

Nowadays, the concept of brand attachment in the field of marketing, has been proposed to predict positive developments in the after- consumption behaviors of satisfied customers, which has a great impact on customer behaviors. Attachment to the brand is the deep emotional connection of customers with the brand, which is the love and emotional structures that are connected between customers and the brand (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021). Christianti BUDI et al. (2021) in a study examined the impact of customer experience of brand, brand loyalty, brand satisfaction, on brand loyalty among consumers of Philips lighting products in Jakarta, Indonesia, and stated that trust and brand satisfaction affect consumer loyalty. Esti Susanti (2020) also stated in her research results that trust in the brand increases customer loyalty to the brand and the profit of the organization.

However, in the digital world, gaining a targeted audience is the most important concern of internet business marketers because they lead to increased sales of products and services and generate higher revenue. However, Li et al. (2020), in a study titled "Unraveling the customer engagement-brand loyalty relationship in tourism social media: The roles of brand attachment and customer trust, concluded that engagement directly and indirectly, through brand attachment and brand trust, affects customer loyalty to the brand.

Moradi (2020) according to his research stated that the existence of love and attachment to the brand and the trust that customers gain has an effect on brand

loyalty. Also Rahimi Chitgar and Moghadasi (2019) stated that brand attachment and brand trust have an effect on customers' loyalty to the brand. On the other hand, the trust is created when one of the parties has full confidence in the validity and correctness of the other's behavior. Trust has been described as one of the important components that play a fundamental role in permeability to a customer in order to expand and maintain relationships with the service provider, which plays a significant role in customer loyalty. In fact, customers' trust is achieved when they are motivated and eager to have a relationship with the brand (Laparojkit & Suttipun, 2022).

Yang Chan, (2009) classifies brand attachment into three groups: Emotional bonding, loyalty and self-affiliation with the brand. Emotional bonding shows customer's interest, empathy and positive thoughts about the brand when they have strong attachment to the brand. Therefore, the basis of attachment is the existence of customer engagement for the brand, which is the stimulus for influencing the brand (Cuong, 2020).

Kojaro tourism website is one of the largest tourism websites in Iran, which has officially started its activities in 2015. One of the goals of Kojaro website has been to improve the tourism situation and Iran tourism culture by introducing the tourist attractions of all provinces in Iran which has been successful in this regard. Kojaro website provides images of popular tourist areas in all provinces and it is truly the best guide for tourists in receiving information to decide to travel and visit tourist areas. This website is a complete and reliable reference in introducing all kind of tourist attractions, hotels and restaurants in Iran and in the world, which has made it possible for everyone to access the images and information of tourist destinations Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty, with the mediating role of brand attachment and customer trust.
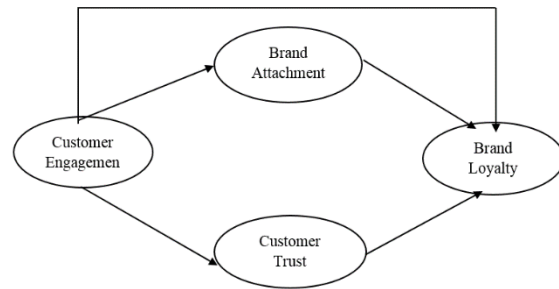

Fig. 1. Conceptual model of research

Research hypotheses

1. Customer engagement has a significant effect on brand attachment among tourists of Kojaro tourism website.

2. Brand attachment has a significant effect on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro tourism website.

3. Customer engagement has a significant effect on customer trust among tourists of Kojaro tourism website.

4. Customer trust has a significant effect on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro tourism website.

5. Customer engagement has a significant effect on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro tourism website.

6. Customer trust has a significant effect on the effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro tourism website.

7. Customer engagement has a significant effect on the effect of customer trust on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro tourism website.

Method

The present research is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-survey in terms of method. The statistical population of this study was tourists of Kojaro tourism website in Iran and the sample size was determined by the available method and based on Cochran's formula of 384 people. The standard questionnaire of Li et al. (2020) has been used as data collection tool of this research. This questionnaire has 29 questions that the first 11 questions are dedicated to examine customer engagement, 10 questions are used for brand attachment, 4 questions for brand trust and the last 4 questions for

brand loyalty variables. To evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used and the values obtained for Cronbach's alpha were, 0.91 for brand enthusiasm, 0.84 for brand trust, 0.88 for brand attachment and 0.86 for brand loyalty variables which indicates reliability confirmation of the questionnaire. The validity of the questionnaire was performed using confirmatory factor analysis and the obtained values indicated the validity of the questionnaire. In addition, divergent validity has also been confirmed. Data analysis was performed by structural equation method using SPSS and PLS software.

Findings

Of the 384 people who participated in the study, 193 (50.26%) were women and 191(49.74%) were men. The largest age group of respondents was 31 to 40 years old (about 33.33%). In terms of respondents' education, diplomas had highest frequency (42.71%) and post-diplomas (10.42%) had the lowest frequency. Likewise, people with a history of acquaintance of 1 to 3 years had the highest frequency (Equivalent to 80.99 %).

Confirmatory factor analysis

Factor loads are measured by calculating the correlation value of the indices of a structure with the structure. If the value is equal to or greater than 0.4 (Holland, 1999), it confirms that the variance between the structure and its indices is greater than the variance of the measurement error of the structure and the reliability of the measurement model is acceptable. According to the results of factor analysis of the questionnaire items, since the factor load of all items is more than 0.4, likewise the value of t-statistic is more than 1.96, the questionnaire has a good validity.

Table 1. Examining the factor load of the questionnaire

Variables	Questions	Factor load	Standard deviation	t-Statistic
	q1	0.635	0.04	15.828
	q2	0.684	0.04	17.09
Customer engagement	q3	0.677	0.037	18.231
	q4	0.726	0.029	25.138
	q5	0.707	0.031	22.483
	q6	0.733	0.031	23.567
	q7	0.747	0.029	25.763
	q8	0.75	0.03	25.009
	q9	0.805	0.018	45.774
	q10	0.764	0.023	32.714
	q11	0.77	0.021	36.213
Customer trust	q12	0.843	0.015	55.577
	q13	0.845	0.019	45.101
	q14	0.86	0.015	56.401
	q15	0.728	0.029	25.157
Brand loyalty	q16	0.804	0.022	37.274
	q17	0.874	0.014	61.808
	q18	0.875	0.012	72.228
	q19	0.812	0.026	30.772
Brand attachment	q20	0.75	0.025	30.057
	q21	0.751	0.021	35.084
	q22	0.76	0.024	32.245
	q23	0.812	0.019	42.159
	q24	0.808	0.022	36.721
	q25	0.656	0.039	16.779
	q26	0.602	0.053	11.301
	q27	0.587	0.055	10.648
	q28	0.622	0.043	14.42

Convergent validity

Fornell and Larcker (1981) introduced the average variance extracted AVE criterion

to measure convergent validity and stated that the value of the criteria number is 0.5. In the table below, the value of this coefficient is presented for each of the structure.

Table 2. Mean variance extracted

Variables	AVE
Customer engagement	0.531
Customer trust	0.674
Customer attachment	0.505
Brand loyalty	0.709

Divergent validity
Divergent or differential validity is a relatively complementary concept, and two criteria have been proposed for it in modeling the PLS path: The Fornell-Larcker criterion and the factor load test.

Fornell-Larcker criterion

This criterion claims that a variable should have a greater dispersion among its own indicators than the indices of other latent variables. For this test, the AVE root can be compared with the correlation between latent variables, and the AVE root for each latent variable must be greater than the correlation value of that variable with other variables. The numbers on the original diameter show the square root of the AVE for each structure.

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker method

	Customer engagement	Customer trust	Customer attachment	Brand loyalty
Customer engagement	0.728			
Customer trust	0.495	0.821		
Customer attachment	0.581	0.701	0.710	
Brand loyalty	0.608	0.728	0.708	0.842

As can be seen in the table above, in examining all variables, the AVE root of each variable is greater than the correlation value of that variable with other variables, and it can be said that the divergent validity of the measurement model is confirmed.

Sobel test
In the Sobel test, a value of *Z-Value* is obtained through the following formula, and if this value exceeds 1.96, it can be confirmed that the mediating effect of a variable is significant at a 95% confidence level.

$$Z\text{-value} = \frac{a \times b}{\sqrt{(b^{\backprime} \times s_a{}^{\backprime}) + (a^{\backprime} \times s_b{}^{\backprime}) + (s_a{}^{\backprime} \times s_b{}^{\backprime})}}$$

a: The value of the path coefficient between the independent variable and the mediator

b: The value of the path coefficient between the mediator and dependent variable
s_a: The standard error of the path between the independent variable and the mediator
S_b: The standard error of the path between the mediator and the dependent variable

External model fit
After examining the fit of the measurement models, it is time to examine the fit of the structural model of the research.
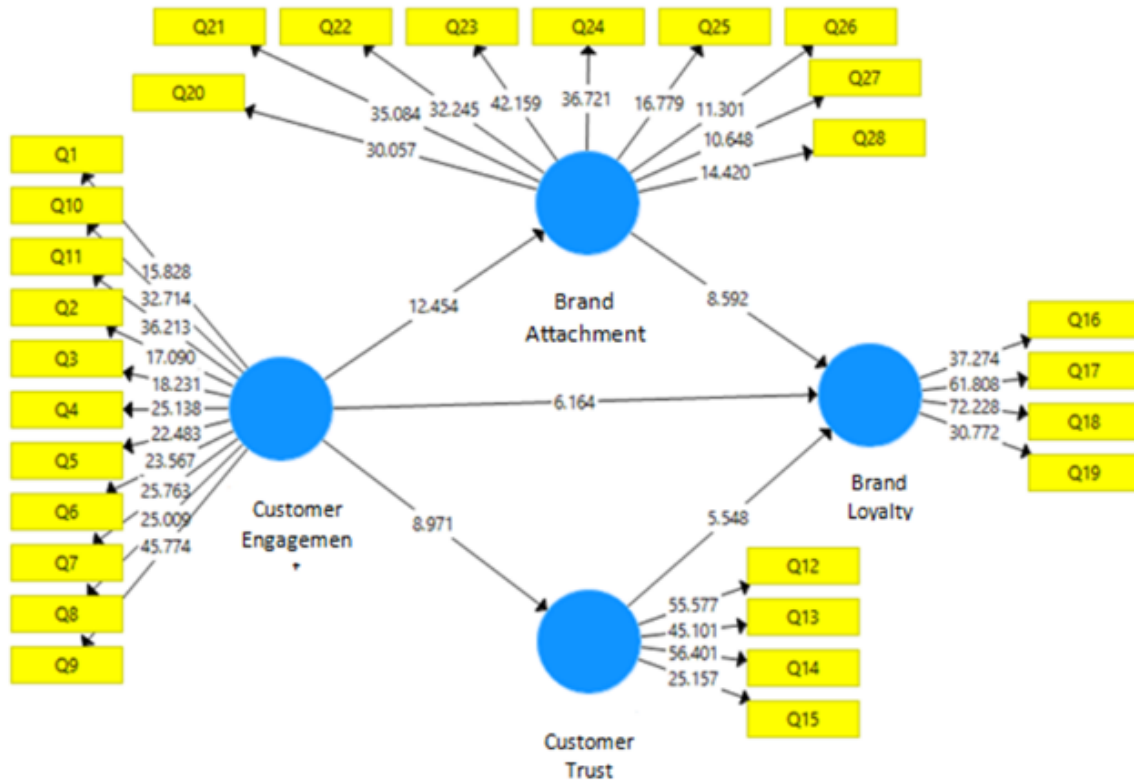
Figure 2. Significant coefficients of t-value for hypotheses

In the diagram below, although some values of the path coefficient are less than 0.4, the criterion for accepting or rejecting a hypothesis is the value of the t-statistic, which must be greater than 1.96 and they are all greater than 1.96.

Factor load values should not be less than 0.4, and none of the factor load values is less than 0.4.
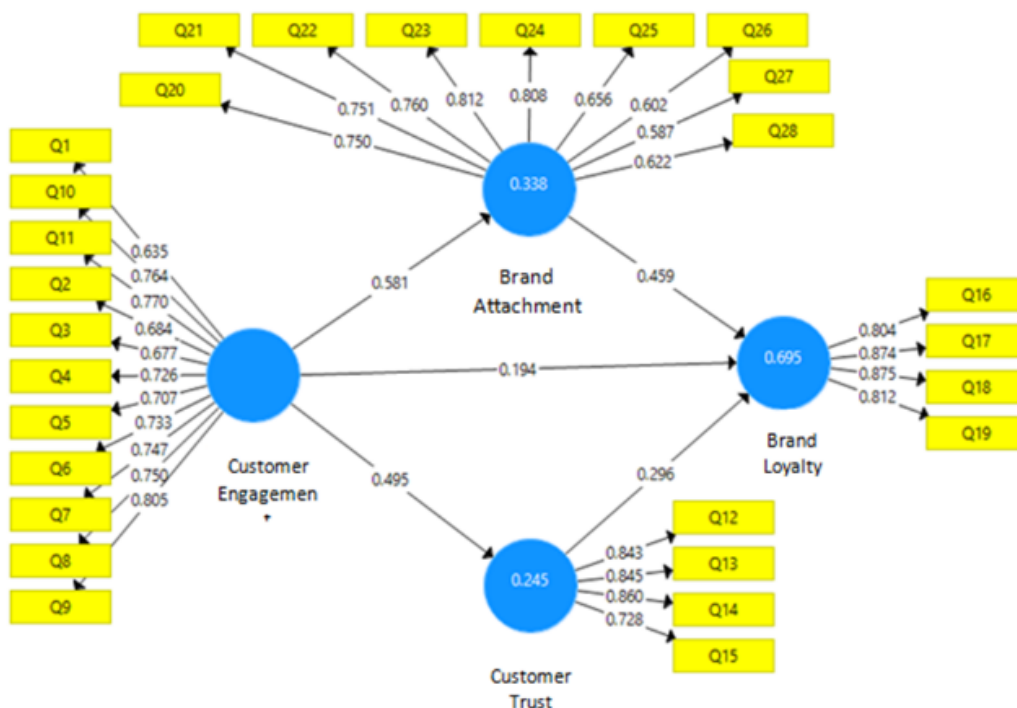

Figure 3. Path coefficients for hypotheses

The coefficient of determination (R Square) R^2

Criterion R^2 determines the impact of an exogenous variable on an endogenous variable.

It is necessary to say that the value of R^2 is calculated only for dependent (endogenous) structures of the model and in the case of exogenous structures, the value of this criterion is zero. The higher the value of R^2 related to the endogenous structures of a model, the better the fit of the model. Chein (1998) considers three values of 0.19, 0.33 and 0.67as criteria values for weak, medium and strong fit of the structural part of the model by criteria R^2.

Table 4. The coefficient of determination

Dependent variable	R^2	Intensity
Customer trust	0.245	Medium
Customer attachment	0.338	Medium-Strong
Brand loyalty	0.695	Medium-Strong

Predictive quality (Q^2):

This criterion determines the predictive power of the model. Models that have an acceptable structural part fit should be able to predict the indicators related to the endogenous structures of the model (Estone & Griz, 1975). Hensler et al. (2009) have defined the three values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 to indicate the weak, medium and strong predictive power of the structure or its associated exogenous structures.

Table 5. Predictive quality (Q^2)

Dependent variable	Q^2	Intensity
Customer trust	0.163	Medium-Strong
Customer attachment	0.161	Medium-Strong
Brand loyalty	0.489	Strong

Cohen's effect size (Cohen f²)

This criterion determines the intensity of the relationship between the model structures, with values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 it indicates the small, medium and large impact of one structure on another structure. (Cohen, J.1988) is used in models that have an endogenous variable that affects more than one exogenous variable.

The goodness of fit of the model

The only index of model fit in partial least squares technique is index **GOF**. Values 0.01, 0.25 and 0.36 have been introduced as weak, medium and strong values for this index. This index can be calculated using the geometric mean of index R^2 and the average of communality indices. The calculation of this index is done with the help of the following equation.

$$GOF = \sqrt{\overline{Communality} \times \overline{R^2}} = \sqrt{0.604 \times 0.426} = 0.507$$

Therefore, the value of the goodness of fit in this study is equal to 0.507, which means that this model has a good fit.

Discussion

The results of the first hypothesis show that customer engagement has a significant effect on brand attachment among tourists of Kojaro website. According to the results, as the t-statistic is equal to 12.454 and is greater than 1.96, the path is significant. Given that the path coefficient is equal to 0.581 and positive we can say that the customer engagement has a positive and significant effect on brand attachment among tourists of the Kojaro tourism website. Therefore, these results are consistent with the research of Li et al. (2020).

The analysis of the first hypothesis indicates that the engagement that customers experience when facing the brand, can be caused by the attractiveness of the brand, the brand's characteristics etc., play a significant role in feelings and attachment that occurs to the brand.

Hypotheses (Direct path)	Standardized path coefficient	Standard deviation	t-Statistic	Cohen f²	Result
Customer engagement→ Customer trust	0.495	0.055	8.971	----	Significant
Customer engagement→ Customer attachment	0.581	0.047	12.454	-----	Significant
Customer engagement→ Brand loyalty	0.194	0.032	6.164	0.060	Significant
Customer trust→ Brand loyalty	0.296	0.053	5.548	0.141	Significant
Customer attachment→ Brand loyalty	0.459	0.053	8.592	0.248	Significant

Table 6. The results of hypotheses testing

Therefore, if the officials of the Kojaro website can increase the engagement and interest in the website among the website tourists, the attachment to the website will increase among the visitors in the future. In fact, the attractiveness and special content of tourism in the website of Kojaro makes tourists excited and enthusiastic and creates their attachment.

The results of the second hypothesis state that brand attachment has a significant effect on brand loyalty among visitors to the kojaro tourism website. According to the results, the t-statistic is equal to 8.592 and more than 1.96. Therefore, the path is significant. Considering that the path coefficient is equal

to 0.459 and positive, it can be said that brand attachment has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro tourism website. These results are consistent with the research results of Li et al. (2020) research. The analysis of this hypothesis shows that what has of special importance and an important place in the continuity and connection of a relationship is the unity of interest and attachment. In fact, the foundation of continuous communication is the presence of interest and attachment to the brand, which provides the basis for constant communication and unconscious choice of customers. So that the interest and attachment that is formed due to the internal link between customers and the brand contributes to the choice of customers and their first priority and brings the effort to keep customers loyal to the brand. Therefore, it can be stated that with the

increase in the attachment and interest of the tourists of Kojaro website, they will visit the website and use its services in the future. Based on this, it can be said that with the increase of tourists' attachment to the Kojaro website, their loyalty and support will also increase by referring and visiting the tourism website again.

The results of the third hypothesis state that customer engagement has a significant effect on customer trust in the brand among tourists of Kojaro tourism website. According to the results, as the t-statistic is 8.971 and more than 1.96 therefore, the path is significant. Considering that the path coefficient is equal to 0.495 and positive it can be said that customer engagement has a positive and significant effect on customer trust in the brand among visitors to the Kojaro tourism website. These results are consistent with the research results of Li et al. (2020) research. The analysis of this hypothesis shows the engagement and internal motivation for the brand, which is full of the desire and internal desires of customers to use and buy a particular brand because it affects the positive feelings and attitude of the person and includes the person's desire and tension and increases the trust and confidence of customers. In fact, customers rate the reliability and validity of a brand according to their engagement and desire and their inner feelings, which affects their decisions. It can be stated that the owners of the Kojaro website should do their best in organizing and focusing on increasing the engagement of tourists on the Kojaro website by providing interesting and valuable content with a special design for tourists, so that by creating popularity and

interest of tourists in the website, they can increase their trust.

The results of the fourth hypothesis state that the customer's trust in the brand has a significant effect on brand loyalty among the tourists of the Kojaro tourism website. Considering that the criterion for accepting a hypothesis is the value of the t-statistic, which must be greater than1.96, and because the result of the t-statistic is equal to 5.548 and greater than 1.96, therefore, the path is significant. Considering that the coefficient of the path is equal to 0.296 and positive, it can be said that the customer's trust in the brand has a positive and significant effect on the loyalty to the brand among the tourists of Kojaro tourism website. These results are consistent with the results of Moradi (2019), Rahimi Chitgar and Moghadasi (2018), Konek (2020) and Li et al. (2020) research. The trust and confidence that customers have in the brand and has an impact on the formation of belief in the brand dominates the thoughts and emotions of customers and drives the behaviors and actions of customers towards more communication and interactions based on their trust. It can be stated that increasing the trust and confidence of the tourists of Kojaro website is provided through deep communication, quality and continuous services between the tourist and the website, and it is possible to increase loyalty and support towards the website among the tourists of Kojaro tourism website in the future.

The results of the fifth hypothesis state that customer engagement has a significant effect on brand loyalty among tourists of the Kojaro tourism website. Considering that the criterion for accepting a hypothesis is the value of the t-statistic, which must be greater than1.96, and because the result of t-statistic is equal to 6.164 and greater than 1.96, therefore, the path is significant. Considering that the path coefficient is equal to 0.194 and positive therefore, it can be said that customer engagement has a positive and significant effect on brand loyalty among visitors to Kojaro tourism website. These results are consistent with the results of Moradi (2019), Behboudinia and Baghaie (2019), Rahimi Chitgar and Moghadasei

(2018) and Li et al. (2020), research. The analysis of the present hypothesis shows the importance of the inner desire and engagement of customers for brand loyalty, in fact, the engagement and desire of people at different stages of life are the beginning of all the paths and behaviors adopted by people. So that customers with the desire to buy and use the brand according to conditions, features or other influencing factors, seek to increase communication and make more efforts to be loyal to the brand. It can be stated that the engagement of the customer is the motivation and the beginning for the popularity and interest of tourists to the website of Kojaro, so that by increasing their engagement for the website, it is possible to increase the loyalty towards Kojaro website among its visitors in order that the customers visit the website in the future.

The results of the sixth hypothesis state that customer trust mediates the effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro website. According to the results, the t-statistic for examining the mediating role of customer trust on the path of customer engagement on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro website is equal to 4.718 and more than 1.96 therefore, the path is significant. Likewise, the path coefficient of the mediating role of customer trust is equal to 0.147 and positive. These results are consistent with the results of Li et al. research (2020). The analysis of this hypothesis shows that the existence of trust and confidence of customers in a brand in terms of quality and features and in terms of other things causes the inner engagement of people to be implemented and acted upon. In a way that the internal desire and engagement integrates with the formed trust and creates loyal and committed behaviors of customers to the brand. It can be stated that the more customer's trust in Kojaro website increases, the tourists of this website are more interested and enthusiastic to visit it, and these two factors make the tourists of Kojaro website loyal to it and they continue to visit the website in the future.

The results of the seventh hypothesis state that customer attachment mediates the

effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro website. According to the results, as the t-statistic for examining the mediating role of the customer attachment on the path of customer engagement on brand loyalty among tourists of the Kojaro website is equal to 7.072 and more than 1.96 therefore, the path is significant. Likewise, the path coefficient of the mediating role of customer attachment is equal to 0.267 and positive, therefore, it can be said that customer attachment positively mediates the effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty among tourists of Kojaro website. These results are consistent with the results of Li et al. (2020) research. The analysis of this hypothesis shows the place and importance of customers' interest and attachment to the brand, these feelings and emotions that customers have for the brand transform the inner and potential engagement of people into actual behaviors and continuous performance in communication and buying the desired brand. In fact, attachment and feelings have opened a deep place for the brand in the mind and heart of a person so that the first priority of buying and choosing for customers will be the brand. It can be stated that if the tourists of the Kojaro website get attached to the website, their love and interest towards visiting the website will increase because the attachment to the brand has a great impact on the feelings of the individuals and the behavior of the visitors. As a result, they will visit the website in the future and remain loyal to it in a way that they consider themselves a member of Kojaro website and advertise it.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty with the mediating role of brand attachment and customer trust in customers of Kojaro tourism website in Iran. The analysis of the research findings shows that the customer's engagement has direct and indirect effect on the loyalty of tourists to the tourism website of Kojaro. In the general explanation of the results, it can be stated that the motivation and engagement of customers is an important factor in increasing the attachment and trust of tourists. This factor, through special content, attractive design and valuable information from the tourist areas that they place on the website for tourists to view has a direct effect on the loyalty of tourists. Moreover, the Kojaro tourism website, with its proper functioning and the services that provides to tourists, plays a significant role in creating the trust and confidence of tourists and their interest, which has a special effect on the loyalty and support of tourists by visiting the website in the future. In fact, in order to convert the potential feelings and engagement of customers into their actual actions and actions towards buying and loyalty, they must apply the required strategy and plan and for successful implementation, they need the necessary knowledge and awareness in the field of brand introduction and branding.

Declaration of Competing Interest
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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