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INFLUENCE OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY ON HOTEL GUESTS' LOYALTY: A CASE STUDY OF A MALAYSIAN BUDGET HOTEL

Raemah Abdullah Hashim*, Puti Maizan Mashudi*, Zainora Hayat Hudi @ Jahit*,
Safiah Rashid*, Nor Khalidah Abu*, Raja Hanaliza Raja Ahmad*

*Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Level 3, Block C,
Leisure Commerce Square, No.9, Jln PJS 08/09, 46150 Petaling Jaya, Malaysia
Email: raemahfas@yahoo.com./ raemahas@pintar.unirazak.edu.my

Abstract

Building up loyalty through relationship marketing as in the case for a budget hotel has been found to be a long term investment and loyal customer were more tolerance towards occasional inferior performances. The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship quality of trust, commitment and satisfaction perceived by the customer that can influence their loyalty towards a budget hotel. A cross sectional data collection approach was employed on a group of 85 hotel guests who were staying in a budget hotel. This study revealed that there was a direct relationship between relationship quality and loyalty with the exception to trust. Furthermore, this study confirmed that commitment and customer satisfaction acted as important factors in building customer loyalty. This study implies to service providers in enhancing loyalty is to reach the customer through a mean of communication, customized service and comfort to the customer. Future studies suggest such as replicated of the study in other service industries (e.g. banking, hospitals, insurance, food service, and hotels) and also to consider a bigger sampling frame that will have the ability to be generalize.

Keywords: relationship quality, loyalty, trust, commitment, satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in Malaysia is a fast growing one with a total of 23.65 million visitors in 2009 (Business Monitor International, 2010), an increase of 7.2 percent from the previous year. The Malaysian tourism sector's strong growth has been encouraged by rising income levels, economic and political stability, good infrastructure, growth of low-cost carriers and most importantly domestic and international promotional activities by the Ministry of Tourism of Malaysia. Despite the fluctuation of oil prices, world's economic crisis, security problems in the West and epidemics like SARS and H1N1, Malaysia was able to withstand this global crisis. Given that 46% of Malaysian hotels are budget hotels (Malaysia Association of Hotels), the contribution of these hotels to Malaysia tourism industry is imperative.

For an individual budget hotel service provider to build market niche and having competitive advantage over others that is not easily imitated, it is important to have an understanding about what really drives their customers' loyalty. Gronroos (1997) argued that hotel operators would have the advantage in commanding premium prices if they build up customer loyalty through the enhancement of quality relationships. In this sense, price would not be an issue to the customer. Supporting this view, Bowen and Shoemaker (2003) argued that the strategic approach to customer loyalty was significantly related to relationship marketing rather than other efforts related to tactic or episode marketing. No matter how the competitors try to lure

one's customer away, they would remain loyal to the hotel service provider as long as the engagement remains intact.

Having to face all the challenges internally and externally, hotel operators in Malaysia are definitely concerned about finding a matrix in customer retention and loyalty as a means of achieving high yields. Building up loyalty through relationship marketing has been found to satisfy the cause and is also considered as long term investment. It has become a necessity since loyal customers will more often than not have "more tolerance towards occasional inferior performances" (Rauyruen & Miller, 2005). In order to promote loyalty, hotels offer loyalty programs, membership cards, excellent environments, and alliances with other related parties to their customers. However, a typical reward or membership card is easily substituted or imitated by competitors and it was found that most consumers would only seek the best price deal. Mattila (2006) argued that such rewards program would not ensure or augment loyalty directly especially if there is no establishment of emotional bonding.

Despite the efforts of maintaining loyal customers by hoteliers, there are opportunist hoteliers who are mainly concerned with short term bottom lines. These hotels will have "no place in the hearts of the consumers" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) as long term gains and business sustainability is through customer retention and having repeated stay guests at one's particular hotel (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003). This can be created through a culture of trust, commitment and service quality that will ensure customer satisfaction.

Past researchers relate relationship quality to trust (Dorsch et al., 1998; Hennig-Tharau, 1997; Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Doney & Abratt, 2006; Rauyruen & Miller, 2005), satisfaction (Crosby et al., 1990; Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Rauyruen & Miller, 2005; Gronroos, 2007) and commitment (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Dorsch et al., 1998; Rauyruen & Miller, 2005; Gronroos, 2007). Others were also in agreement that relationship quality would bring about loyalty (e.g. Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Looy et al. 2003; Rauyruen & Miller, 2005). Building from these literatures, this study proposes to include satisfaction, commitment, and trust as the dimensions for the relational quality in building customers' loyalty to service providers in the context of budget hotel industry in Malaysia.

Relationship Quality and Loyalty: In today's service environment, the principle paradigm of marketing has become more relational in nature rather than static (Gronroos, 2007). Gronroos, 2007 posited that such relationship would be more beneficial if some kind of "a long-term quality formation" with their on-going customer is established. Relationship quality has been clearly defined by Gronroos, 2007 as "how the customer perceived quality during the service process episode" and usually the service employees are attentive and empathetic to customer's needs and wants that will produce favorable results. However, the nature of hotel services, which are described as intangible and very complex, would give rise to potential delivery problems that may cause anxiety and potential service failure (Zeithaml, 1981). From the perspective of the guest, relationship quality can only be achieved through the ability of the service provider to reduce perceived uncertainties (Gronroos, 2007). To be sustainable in the competitive hotel industry the ultimate goal of hotel service provider is to achieve and maintain strong relationships with their customers with the hope that they would be able to convert them to a loyal customer (Looy et al., 2003).

Crosby et al., (1990) in their study on relationship quality in the insurance industry, found that the antecedent of relationship quality as integrating relational variables that are conceived in two dimensions namely: customer satisfaction and trust. They also found that

potential in future sales growth for any service organization would be highly dependable on the quality of their relationship with their customers. Rauyruen and Miller (2005) on the other hand, posited that service quality should be significant in relationship to customers' satisfaction and strongly supports the notion that customer's loyalty is related to both behavioral and attitudinal aspects. To their agreement, Looy et al. (2003) had suggested that service quality is an important component in relationship quality. However, an overall evaluation of the service delivery can differ from what was perceived by customer. Bowen and Shoemaker (2003), on the other hand loyalty variables should only be considered as one dimension rather consisted of both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. Similarly, Skoglan, et al., (2004) define customer loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to re-buy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in future, thereby causing repetitive same brand-set purchases, despite situational influences and marketing efforts." Morgan and Hunt (1994) further supported this concept and argued that in corporate relationships marketing, loyalty together with commitment could act as the drivers in enhancing this relationship. It would further improve if both the service provider and customer have the same values and beliefs (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Trust: Past empirical studies have also indicated that trust had a direct effect or link to loyalty (eg. Rauyruen & Miller, 2005; Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Doney & Abratt, 2006). With this support, the study suggests that trust in the service providers by the hotel guest or customers are important in facilitating their loyalty. Customer's trust in the service provider is defined by Seyhmus (2002) as being "honest, fulfilling promises, competence, benevolence, reliable and customer oriented". Doney and Abratt (2007) define trust as "the perceived credibility and benevolence of a target of trust". Macintosh (2007) further argued that trust is one of the core drivers of relationship quality. Munoz et al (2002) supported the theory and found that in an inter- organizational relationship such as that exist between travel agents and hotel service provider, trust plays a significant role in creating integrity which will then lead to congenial relationships which may contribute to the establishment of successful long term relationships. In such situations, the reliability of service delivery by the service provider is not questionable and during the association between them, customers feel safe and secure.

Commitment: Although past study by Munoz et al., (2002) instituted that commitment was found to have a varying degrees on the part of suppliers, Bowen and Shoemaker (2003) posited that commitment is an important facet in continuing relationships between partners, where short term sacrifices were made to realize long term benefits. Commitment can be calculative or affective; which ever plays an important role in strengthening loyalty in service relationship management especially among hotel customers (Mittila, 2006). According to the researcher, calculative commitment refers to customers who are engaged to the supplier due to economic motivation. Most of the hotel programs such as frequent guest program were created with economic intension to ensure that customers would face a high switching cost if they leave. Affective commitments on the other hand, echo the emotional attachments towards the supplier. If they carefully plan and the customers, needs were taken into consideration, it will definitely link to the creation of a long lasting quality relationship (Mittila, 2006). However, both types of commitments are equally important as drivers in the relationship between the service providers in the hotel setting and the hotel guests in maintaining and nurturing loyalty (Mittila, 2006).

Satisfaction: The declaration of "satisfaction" coined by Oliver (1993) comes from the Latin term *saris* (enough) and *facere* (to do or to make). Satisfaction entails "fulfillment" and consumer satisfaction refers to consumers' fulfillment response (Rust and Oliver, 1994).

Bowen and Shoemaker (2003) view satisfaction as a situation when customer's experiences surpass what he had expected during his stay at the hotel. If the experience exceeded the expectation, the customer will be delighted. Even though customer satisfaction is an essential ingredient for loyalty, somehow satisfied customer may not necessarily become a loyal customer (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003). A study by Skogland et al., (2004) conducted in two comparable big city hotels in the United States supported Bowen and Shoemaker's (2003) study and implied that satisfied guests will necessary make repeated purchases. The inconsistencies in findings indicate a possible tenuous or weak relationship between the overall satisfaction relationship and loyalty. The possible reason may be the result of low switching cost that may cause the customer to switch to other suppliers or be lured by extrinsic attractions such as coupons or discounts (Skogland et al., 2004).

In ensuring customer satisfaction, providing service quality is far more important (Parasuraman et al., 1998). Service quality as suggested by Parasuraman et al., (1998) includes the salient dimensions of tangibility, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and reliability in the determining the overall customer satisfaction which will also have an effect on loyalty. In support of this fact, Britner (1990) and Rauyrueen and Miller (2005) have reiterated that customer loyalty is influenced by customer satisfaction.

Despite the phenomenal growth of Malaysia as a traveler's destination, research to date that conducted in the Malaysia context pertaining to service relationship marketing especially in the budget hotel sector has not been very encouraging. Most empirical studies were done in the United States of America or United Kingdom and were based on luxury or chain hotels (Bowen & Shoemaker 2003; Skogland, et al., 2004). Therefore, the objective of this research was to examine the relationship quality of trust, commitment and customer satisfaction as perceived by the customer which may influence their loyalty towards a budget hotel. Based on the findings of this research, it is hope that it would assist the budget hotel operators to employ the best relational strategy in conducting businesses to achieve or to build loyalty where the concept of cost would not be an issue to the customer.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

Due to limited resources (physical and time), a cross sectional data collection approach was employed over a period of three months. A group of hotel guests who were staying in a budget hotel were identified; it was parallel to the study conducted by Hartline and Ferrell (1996) in the management of customer-contact service employees in the hospitality industry. This hotel, offered medium price range accommodation and had agreed to participate in the survey.

The probability sampling technique was used in this study. Questionnaires were placed in the guest rooms every evening from about 7.00 pm to 8.30 pm with the assistance of the housekeeper and under the supervision of the research team. After completion the questionnaire, housekeeping staff would collect the questionnaires on behalf of the researchers during the check-out. In order to get a good respond rate, the respondents were given a gift upon completion of the questionnaires. A total of 200 questionnaire forms were distributed and a sample of 85 completed questionnaires was collected.

Measurement

All the constructs used a five point Likert scale which was anchored by “Strongly Disagree” (1) and “Strongly Agree” (5). All measures were adapted from previous studies in relationship quality and loyalty (Seyhmus, 2002; Skoglan et al., 2004).

Loyalty: The hotel guest loyalty was measured using the adapted four-item Loyalty Scale (Skoglan et al., 2004). This scale was developed to measure the level of loyalty of the hotel guest. An example item is as follows: “I consider myself to be a loyal guest of the hotel”

Trust: The seven-item Trust Scale (Seyhmus, 2002) was used to assess the hotel guests trust in the service provider. It is related to the attitudinal aspects of the guests. The measurement was adapted from a previous study by Bowen and Shoemaker (1998). They found significant linkages of trust to customer’s loyalty in luxury hotels. Participant responded to items such as “management is trustworthy, and services are consistent in all the visits”.

Commitment: To measure the hotel guest perception of the hotel’s commitment to their guests, a five-item Commitment Scale was adapted (Seyhmus, 2002). The author had adapted their measuring scales from a previous study by Bowen and Shoemaker (1998) which provided the construct validity evidence. An example of the item is as follows: “makes me “emotional attached” to the hotel”.

Satisfaction: To assess the hotel guest satisfaction, they were asked to rate their satisfaction based on an eleven-item Satisfaction Scale adapted from Skoglan et al. (2004). The satisfaction items intended to capture the level of the guest satisfaction based on services and facilities of the hotel that the guests were staying in. The hotel guests were assessed on items such as, “staff will respond immediately for request for service even during peak times, amenities offered in the guest room were satisfactory”.

Relationship quality: Relationship quality is an aggregate of variables measuring trust, satisfaction and commitment (Bowen & Shoemaker, 1998). To ensure representativeness of the aggregate measures, the mean was calculated before further test were conducted (Liao & Chuang, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All measures were adapted from previous studies in relationship quality and loyalty (Seyhmus, 2002; Skoglan et al., 2004; Bowen & Shoemaker, 1998). These scales were previously validated and exhibited high internal consistencies. However, exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis for each instrument were conducted as proposed by Mahmood (2005). The construct of the study was assessed using the exploratory factor analysis to verify the factor structure and to identify items for deletion. Varimax rotation was employed to derive a simple structure, and factors with eigen-values of less than 1 were screened out (Hair, 2007). Cronbach’s Alpha, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity were used in confirming the factorability and appropriateness of the data set. All the variables had achieved Cronbach’s Alpha which ranged from 0.656 to 0.892. Therefore this scale is said to be reliable as the range of 0.6 to below 0.7 is the minimum acceptable level of reliability as suggested by Sekaran (2005). For the test of factorability appropriateness, Bartlett’s test of sphericity is

significant at $p < 0.001$ and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure revealed values that were greater than 0.6, which exceeds the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1970, 1974). Two (2) factors, relationship quality and loyalty were revealed explaining 69.06 percent and 63.09 percent of the total variance respectively. The loading factor for this scale was recorded at being between 0.672 and 0.889. Given all of the items extracted were recorded above 0.3, no items were deleted.

Respondents' Profile

Table 1 below summarizes the demographic background of the respondents. The gender distribution of the respondents were predominantly female (56%) and the remaining were male (44%). 46 percent were in private organizations, 32 percent were government servants while 7 % had their own businesses. The majority of the respondents were at the executive level (58%) while the rest were made up of non executive (27%). About 58 percent travel less than three times a year, 17 percent travel between three to six times and the rest comprising of about 10 percent travel more than six times a year. Only about 13 percent were loyalty card holders. Most of the respondents travel for meetings and conferences (34%), 14 percent pleasure, 18 % for business and 19 % for other purposes such as shopping and visiting friends and relatives.

Table 1 : Respondents' Background

Particulars	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	37	43.529
	Female	48	56.471
Occupation	Government	32	37.647
	Private Organization	46	54.118
	Own Business	7	8.2350
Job Level	Executive and above	58	68.235
	Non Executive	27	31.765
No. of Times stayed in the last 6 months	Less than 3	58	68.235
	3-6 times	17	20.000
	More than 6 times	10	11.765
Loyalty Card	Yes	13	15.294
	No	72	84.706
Reasons for Travel	Business	18	21.176
	Pleasure	14	16.471
	Meeting/Convention	34	40.000
	Others (Visiting Friends & Relatives (VFR)/Shopping etc)	19	22.353

Table 2 : Regression Analysis of Relationship Quality, Trust, Commitment and Satisfaction

	R	R-Square Change	Beta	t	Sig.
Trust	0.206	0.042	0.206	1.914	0.059
Commitment	0.294	0.086	0.294	2.799	0.006*
Satisfaction	0.249	0.062	0.249	2.345	0.021*
Relationship Quality	0.239	0.057	0.239	2.252	0.027*

P<0.05, Dependent Variable: Loyalty

After examining the normality, linearity and homoscedascity for each variables, and there were assumed of non violation, regression analysis were conducted. Table 2 above indicates the regression analysis of the results.

Regression analysis depicts positive relationship between the relationship between relationship quality to loyalty ($t=2.255$, $p<0.05$). Relationship quality was found to explain only 6 % of the variance in the respondents' loyalty towards the budget hotel. This study supports past findings by Looy, et al., 2003; Rauyruen and Miller (2005) and Mancintosh (2007). It also reiterates the importance of the aspect of relationship quality in fostering customer loyalty.

The result of the regression analysis that examined the relationship between the customer trust on and their loyalty to the service provider was found not significant ($t=1.914$, $p=0.059$). This study is in contrast with past studies (Rauyuen & Miller 2005; Munoz et al. ; 2002; Doney & Abratt ,2007). This may be due to the influence of context and cultural backgrounds of the respondents.

The regression analysis result indicated that the relationship between perceived commitment of service providers and their satisfaction were significantly related to customer loyalty (commitment: $t=2.799$, $p<0.05$) and (satisfaction: $t=2.345$, $p<0.05$). It was found that commitment and satisfaction helped to explain only 9 percent and 6 percent of the respective variance in respondents' scores. The slightly higher score in the variance of the perceived commitment suggested that the respondents were affected by the value of the service provider and were perceived as being more commitment than satisfied. This study supports Mancintosh (2007), Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Bowen and Shoemaker (1998) studies of the hospitality industry which suggests that customers' satisfaction and budget hotel service provider's commitment as perceived would inherit loyalty. Satisfied customers will not only make recommendations to others but will also repeat their visits (Hui et al, 2006; Macintosh, 2007; Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003).

CONCLUSION

With the advancement in internet applications, budget hotel owners and management teams should consider reaching the customers through a systematic management channel of customer data base. Data base such as the customers' profiles, preferences and needs for future references were kept so as to create more personalized relationships with the customers. Another useful suggestion is finding ways of building trust between the service provider and customer as suggested by Doney and Adratt (2005), is to invest more resources.

For example, consistency in service and latest information on the hotel pricing may be useful in building trust even though past study by Gronroos (2007) had indicated that once a customer chooses to remain loyal and maintain a relationship with the said hotel, pricing is of no concern. The advantage of this kind of relationship is that it will result more cost reduction and will be profitable to the organization through customized service and comfort rendered to the customer. However, as customers, they need information as to the latest developments pertaining to the hotel. The element of surprise should not appear especially when the guest arrives.

The inherent limitation of this study is the sample frame. This study could be replicated to other services (e.g. banking, hospitals, insurance, food service, and hotels) and also into larger sample groups covering other hotel tiers such as the four star, five star, boutique hotel or even a chain hotel in Malaysia. Future studies may also have to be considered on a bigger sampling frame that has the ability to be more generalized.

Future research should also look into other predictive variables as the present results have yielded low R-squared. The other variables that could be explored are interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, socialization, benefits and information dissemination. The presence of these perceived different variables may have different effects on the customer's loyalty.

Perhaps, by extending this research further instead of just incorporating self reporting from one typical respondent group, which may result in the possibility of common source bias, typical in organizational micro research (Crampton & Wagner, 1994). Future studies should consider a different approach. A methodology working towards dyadic or two sample research design perspective having response groups namely, the hotel managers' or management level executive perceptions on their perceived relationship quality issues and hotel guest sample that could be used to measure their attitudes towards their loyalty to the hotel.

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