



RELATIONSHIP INVESTMENT AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY OF SELECTED HOTELS IN RIVERS STATE

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Article history:	Abstract:
<p>Received: 28th May 2021 Accepted: 26th June 2021 Published: 31th July 2021</p>	<p>Relationship in a normal life situation is very important in terms of the mutual benefits that participants obtain out of its practice; the same applies in businesses. Therefore, the paper focused on empirical evaluation of the effect of relationship investment on customer loyalty of selected star Hotels in Rivers State. The paper adopted the cross-sectional survey method in its approach. A five-point scale questionnaire was used to sample one hundred and twenty (140) employees of the Hotels. Upon retrieval and data clean-up, one hundred and seven (107) were found usable for the analysis. A multiple regression analytical tool was used for the analysis. The results showed a positive relationship among the variables respectively. The study concluded that relationship investment influences customer loyalty of selected Hotels in Rivers State. Among others, it was suggested that Hotel's managers should pay keen attention to factors that assists in building relationships.</p>

Keywords: Relationship Investment, customer loyalty, preferential treatment, tangible rewards, repeat purchase, referral.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, service industry has witnessed remarkable growth in recent times (Kotler, 2001). Several factors appeared to have influenced these notable changes from goods to service oriented businesses (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Hence, globalization, growing markets, privatizations and changes in government policies, technological advancement and innovations have aided in adding value to quality of services been delivered (Kotler, 2001). Hotel businesses have experienced a rapid growth however, given that relationships between marketers and customers have become global event. In recent times, patronizing hotels have become trendy, drifting into lifestyle rather than the traditional rationale of satisfying hunger and providing momentary accommodation since people now visit hotels for other transaction purposes. Relationship investment has been referred to as a tangible and intangible asset brought into a relationship by the companies concerned. It serves as a means to keep the relationship stronger and enduring. The concept has been categorized into two main areas of expositions namely extrinsic and intrinsic investments. Extrinsic investment is made when the preceding concern from outside is associated with current behaviours, while intrinsic investment is associated with the investment of resources; time, money, thereby creating investment outlay and leveraging on customer loyalty that ensues from the relationship.

Customer loyalty has been conceptualized as the commitment of existing customer with regard to a given brand or service provider amongst other alternatives that the customer can choose from (Shanker, Smith & Rangaswamy, 2003). It forms positive attitudes by producing recurring purchase behaviour from time to time. According to Zeithaml (2000) customer loyalty has been either discussed from the attitudinal or behavioural dimensions. Reicheld (2003) argued that the highest proof of the customer loyalty is the percentage of existing customers' with eagerness to recommend specific goods or service to their friends. Whereas, attitudinal loyalty deals with the current customers who have emotions for service offered and belonging to a particular commitment frame of

consumers. It is however vital to comprehend how investment in customer relationship would lead to customer loyalty. Research has shown glimpse of promise on relationship investment and customer loyalty, but little have long-established this inquiry. However, the dearth in literature so noticed applies prominently to the Nigerian context. However, some scholars have in their sections conducted studies on the relationship investments; for example, Tanti, Basu and Bernadinus (2015); Azize, Hakan, Aysun and Ersan (2016); Chidambaram and Kosh (1998); Nicole (2016), but none studied on relationship investment and loyalty of hotels in Rivers State. Thus, this forms the knowledge gap that this study seeks to fill. Pilot study conducted shows that a good number of hotels are experiencing passive customer loyalty whose outcome is captured in the low patronage, dwindling repeat purchase behavior and low referrals. Business managers need to focus on building quality relationships with customers to boost their chances for sustained survival. In addition, the aim of the paper is to determine the association between relationship investment and customer loyalty of selected hotels in Rivers State. The specific objectives are (1) ascertaining influence of preferential treatment on customer loyalty of selected hotels in Rivers State, (2) determining the impact of tangible rewards on customer loyalty of selected hotels in Rivers State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Investment

Social exchange theory underpins workplace related behaviours and can be traced back to at least the 1920s (Malinowski, 1922). The concept emanates from disciplines like: anthropology (Firth, 1967), social psychology (Gouldner, 1960) and sociology (Blau, 1964). However, Emerson (1976) argued that different opinions of social exchanges have surfaced arriving at an accord that it involves sequence of exchanges that produce obligations. Fundamentally, the theory involves relationship that moves over time and gives a sense of loyalty, trust and commitment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The theory pays attention to the role of trust in relational exchanges; where, trust is regarded as dominant variable that relates relationship theory and social exchange theory (Wagne, Coley & Lindemann, 2011). Given that exchanges are core in service organizations, it become necessary that it be directed in a value driven way, so that strong relationships can be developed. Relationship investment had appeared prominently in determining customers' reactions to pleasing services (Sung & Choi, 2010). Relationship investment has been said to mean a perception of commitment by the marketers in terms of assets, labour, attention and in maintaining a rapport with regular guests (Smith, 1998). Fruchter and Sique (2004), remarks that it is performed by exchange partners to generate and preserve a relationship with them. Premised on the notion of reciprocity, relationship investment implies that when a company invest certain efforts or time in their customers, the customer have a propensity to add justifiably in return in some forms (Smith & Barclay, 1997).

Relationship investment includes the investments undertaken by both the customer and the hotel organizations in accord. Aurier and de Lanauze (2012); Choi, Moon, Kim & Lee (2008) held that hotel relationship investment is usually made with regard to the customer's overall perception as to the extent to which companies enthusiastically commit their resources and efforts to ensure that customers are retained.

Campbell and Sung (2009), asserted that relationship investment has been recognized to serve as the superior predictor to customer intention in developing closer association with the organization. Buvik and Anderson (2013) believed that relationship investment has the capacity to represent both the customer and the organization in a relationship. Fruchter and Sique (2004), stated that it is a marketing activity, efforts or investments undertaken by exchange partners to establish and maintain a relationship commitment with their partners, efforts that focuses on retaining current customers (Kim, Kim, Jolly & Fairhurst, 2008). Companies are said to have acquired relationship investment by involving series of investments which includes staff time spent on relationship building, advertising, promotion and sponsorship (Hung & Grunig, 2000).

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty has been regarded as the key determinant factor that aids survival and growth of service organization. It is found to be essential as any other thing that companies can imagine since its potentials can never be over deliberated. Thus, customer loyalty reflects the commitment existing between customers and service provider or brand in the midst of several reasonable options which customers may choose from (Shankar et al., 2003; Liu & Yang, 2009). Loyalty in organization appears prominent when the customer is certain that one service provider is capable of meeting his important needs. Yang and Peterson (2004) stated that loyalty can benon-random repurchase behaviour of the customers or group of customers. Singh and Khan (2012) opined that customer loyalty is the willingness and preference of a customer to purchase a company's product (goods or services) over the offerings of competing brands. Consensus exists among Scholars on the measurement of both behavioural and attitudinal aspects of customer loyalty (Han et al., 2011; Rao & Jain, 2009). Behavioural aspects of loyalty takes place when the repurchase happens not minding whether the organization has a negative image or not, while the attitudinal loyalty is related to active loyalty that results into positive word of mouth (Martinez & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2013).

Bose and Rao (2011) asserted that customer loyalty represents commitment to re-patronize the favourite product or service in the future instead of situational influences and marketing efforts that is capable of changing the behaviour. Reichheld (2003) averred that the strongest evidence of customer loyalty is the proportion of customers who are willing to recommend a friend or colleague to a given hotel. According to Rowley (2005), from a model known as 4C of customer loyalty; customer loyalty is categorized into: captive, convenience-seeker, contented, and committed. It is believed that loyalty develops through previous positive experiences with the customers, and having them return to the

company often time based on the unique experiences they have had. Customers will return to continue transactions with the company without minding whether the firm is having the best in terms of product, price or service delivery (Singh & Khan, 2012). Customer loyalty has been viewed as the most powerful form of connections between customer and the organization. This occurs when customers' continually patronize hotels and develop favourable attitudes towards quality of service (Ali & Arash, 2011)

Repeat Purchase: For organizations in the hospitality industry, providing superior and value-driven services to receivers are essential since it was argued that perceived value remains an imperative in determining repeat purchase behaviour of consumers (Chao-Min, Eric, Wang & Asin-Yi, 2014). Authors added that service value and strong relationships are fundamental and pivotal to successful transactions, and as well drives consumers' repeat purchase intentions (Lin, Sher, & Shih, 2005; Kim & Gupta, 2009). Supporting the above assertions on repeat purchase behaviour. Musasa (2014) stated that customers are now more sophisticated, and as a result, their demands, preferences and expectations are increasingly changing in same direction. Therefore, service providers should strive to provide top class services to customers in order to gain sustainable competitive advantage and to retain existing customers (Levy & Weitz, 2012). Repeat purchase intention according to Lin and Liang (2011), is defined as the degree to which customers are willing to purchase the same product or service; it is a simple, objective, and observable predictor of future buying behaviour. It implies that proving superior services assists firms in building strong ties with customers, thereby enhancing customers' intentions to re-buy the same brand of the organization. Customers' intention re-visit a hotel for further transaction serves as an indicator of loyalty, guest satisfaction from previous experience of a particular hotel brand is likely to influence loyalty to the same brand (Lam, Shankar, Erramilli & Murthy, 2004).

Referral: In the field of business, the idea of referral has served as bedrock through which organizations such as Hotels attract new customers (Ilan, Evan & Lav, 2016). This in a way has saved the hospitality business a whole lot of resources usually expended on traditional advertising. According to Ilan et al. (2016), referral is arranged in various forms: i.e., some organizations reward their customers for each referral made, while many customers are rewarded for as many referrals they were able to make.

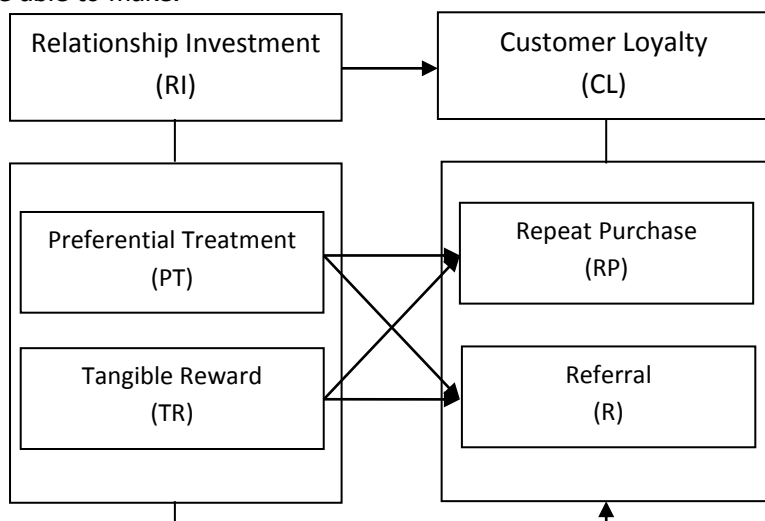


Figure 1: Conceptual/Operational framework of the Study
Source: Desk Research, 2018.

Relationship Investment and Customer Loyalty

The basic idea of relationship investment depends on the supposition that company- customer interaction and resources can produce and keep the loyalty of customers hence; hotel organizations can preserve profitable customers and increase their loyalty by adequately harmonizing their marketing tactics. Prior research found that service firms have received incredible profit from loyal customers being influenced by the esteemed relationships (Choi, Moon, Kim & Lee, 2008). Mimouni- Chaabane and Volle (2010) viewed customer loyalty to mean deep commitment to continue patronage in the future in spite of situational factors that would have influenced potential customer switching behaviour. Morais, Dorsch and Backman (2004), found that 'customer' consideration of investment made by the organization would result in reasonable investment made in reciprocation that ultimately leads to enhanced increase in customer loyalty.

Khavandkar, Theodorakopolous, Hart and Preston (2016), stated that relationship investment also known as relationship capital is seen as value inbuilt in company's links with its customers, vendors and other important constituencies; this bond involves knowledge, capabilities, procedures and systems established from relationships with external agent. Accordingly, the essence of relationship investment is to adequately manage customers who turn to be loyal to company's product and services.

Preferential Treatment and Customer Loyalty

According to Magnus, Johanna, Veronica and Pia (2014), marketers have for decades realized the achievements of attending to customers (guests) based on their unique needs. It does not make meaning for all guests to be served

with same pattern as a result of differences in taste and preferences. Rather, preferential treatment ensures that the needs of customers are tailored towards specified expectation. The term can be referred to as customization, and it has been conceptualized as the extent to which a company's offering is tailored towards customer's specification to satisfy his/her needs (Ana, Rari & Florian, 2008).

Preferential treatment means offering something extra and special to the loyal customer in terms of quality and unique service that is not usually offered to the non-loyal customer. Preferential treatment serves as the exercise of generously allowing customers' prominent social respect with improved product or service beyond benchmarked firm's value proposition and customer service practices. Preferential treatment boasts customer's emotional connections to the firm and thus, influences customer repeat purchase behaviour (Ahsan, Akmal & Muhammad, 2013). The paper adds that tailoring services based on individual basis gives the customer a sense of belonging, satisfaction, stronger attachment to service and the desire to sustain the relationship.

According to De Wulf et al. (2001), preferential treatment is an inequitable handling that hotels accord to regular customer against non-regular customer. Apparently services tend to deviate a bit by stating that even to the regular customers, there still appear discriminatory services based on class of the individual guest. Preferential treatment is an un-prescribed act that any hotels can give to its regular and loyal guests' (Kotler, 2001). Study has shown positive connections between providing preferential treatment on customer satisfaction and its antecedents, customer commitment, purchase behaviour, positive word-of-mouth and customer share (Magnus et al., 2014; Lacey, 2007). It is argued strongly that preferential treatment would create benefits to the customer, the receiver of the treatment, and to the firm, the provider of the treatment through enhanced patronage. However, there is still negative side of preferential treatment. When certain customers are over treated specially, excellent services to the other set of customers are likely to be undermined.

It can thus be hypothesised that.

H1: Preferential treatment has positive significant effect on repeat visit.

H2: Preferential treatment has positive significant effect on referral

Tangible Reward and Customer Loyalty

Basically, customers who have established quality relationships with a firm or retailer in return are expecting to obtain certain benefit associated with such relationship (Arbore & Estes, 2013; Keh & Lee, 2006). Accordingly, Intangible, and tangible rewards provide mental, relational, exciting feelings of customers to the company. Several organizations have designed different programs to serve as customer's business deals that promises tangible and intangible reward. Interpersonal relationship marketing theory supports the thought that customers feel satisfied when hotel have added to, and responded adequately by gratification (Drèze & Nunes, 2009).

Shahnawaz, Hazoor, Muhammad and Sajjad (2015), believe that tangible rewards are preferred by customers and other stakeholders' than intangible rewards which help in creating higher levels of loyalty in customers. Organizations have compensated preferred customers by improved services; reduce service charges and providing alternative service benefits. In recent times, loyalty rewards have turned to be applicable in several sectors of the Nigerian economy. Organizations have at some point rewarded and encouraged loyal buying behaviour which they see as potentially beneficial to the company (Singh & Khan, 2012). As a result, guest will be left with no option than being committed to the activities and services of a firm that rewards her customers favourably. Therefore, marketers and retailers have leveraged on the benefits of rewards to regularly provide tangible rewards to customers as result, this aspect of company's investment is perceived to enhance relationships and maintained behavioural loyalty as well (Singh & Khan, 2012). Despite the huge benefits of tangible rewards to loyal customer, it is also imperative that non-loyal customers should be located and rewarded with tangibles to better enhance their perceptions towards the organization. Therefore, we state the following hypotheses:

H3: Tangible reward has positive significant effect on repeat visit.

H4: Tangible reward has positive significant effect on referral.

METHODOLOGY

The study investigated nexus between Relationship Investment and Customer Loyalty of selected hotels in Rivers State. A cross-sectional survey of the quasi-experimental research design was adopted for the study. This study was focused on star Hotels in Rivers State. According to PHCCIMA business records (2018), Twenty (20) hotels were identified for this study; they constituted the accessible population of the study. The study adopted a non-probabilistic sampling technique which gave the researcher the discretion to select a controllable number of samples. Hence, ten (10) copies of a five-point scaled questionnaire were administered to each of the twenty selected hotels amounting one hundred and twenty (120) elements as the sample size. During data retrieval and clean-up, one hundred and seven copies (107) were used for the analysis, and multiple regression analytical tools was used for the analysis through the aid of a statistical package for social Sciences (SPSS Version 21.0).

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Decision rule: Hypothesis is supported (H) if $PV < 0.05$ and $R^2 > 0$. But not supported if otherwise and above = Positive relationship, -0.1 and above = Negative relationship

Table 2: Regression Analysis showing the effects of tangible reward and preferential treatment on repeat visit

Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Tangible Reward, Preferential Treatment ^b	.	Enter

a. Dependent Variable: Repeat Visit
 b. All requested variables entered.

Table3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.823 ^a	.677	.670	.62640

a. Predictors: (Constant), Tangible Reward, Preferential Treatment

Table 4: ANOVA^a

Model		Sum Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	85.361	2	42.680	108.773	.000 ^b
	Residual	40.808	105	.392		
	Total	126.168	107			

a. Dependent Variable: Repeat Visit
 b. Predictors: (Constant), Tangible Reward, Preferential Treatment

Table 5: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.294	.446		2.899	.000
	Preferential Treatment	1.144	.090	.755	12.742	.000
	Tangible Reward	.262	.098	.245	-2.687	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Repeat Visit

Decision; the result of the multiple regression of the above variables indicated $R = 0.823$, $R^2 = 0.677$ which is equal to 67.7% and this is the explanatory power of the model used for the study. It means that only 67.7% variation can be explained by factors within the model used for the study and the remaining 32.3% can only be explained by other external quantitative and qualitative factors of the model used for the study. It also shows a strong positive correlation.

The beta value (i.e. 0.755 and 0.245) shows the strength or contributions of dimensions of the predictor variable. However, among the dimensions, preferential treatment has highest strength of contribution with 0.677 while tangible reward had lower strength of contribution with 0.245 values.

However, $R^2 = 0.677$ and $PV < 0.05$. Therefore **H1** and **H3** were all supported.

Table 6: Regression Analysis showing the effects of tangible reward and preferential treatment on referral

Variables Entered/Removed^a

Model	Variables Entered	Variables Removed	Method
1	Tangible Reward, Preferential Treatment ^b	.	Enter

- a. Dependent Variable: Referral
- b. All requested variables entered.

Table 7: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.791 ^a	.0626	0.621	.87278

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Tangible Reward, Preferential Treatment

Table 8: ANOVA^a

Model		Sum Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.667	2	.334	.438	.000 ^b
	Residual	79.221	105	.762		
	Total	79.888	107			

- a. Dependent Variable: Referral
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Tangible Reward, Preferential Treatment

Table 9: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.578	.622		5.754	.000
	Preferential Treatment	.110	.125	.592	-.883	.000
	Tangible Reward	.549	.136	.408	-.005	.000

- a. Dependent Variable: Referral

The result of the multiple regression of the above variables indicated $R = 0.791$, $R^2=0.626$ which is equal to 62.6% and this is the explanatory power of the model used for the study. It means that only 62.6% variation can be explained by factors within the model used for the study and the remaining 37.4% can only be explained by other external quantitative and qualitative factors of the model used for the study. It also shows a strong positive correlation. The beta value (i.e. 0.592 and 0.408) shows the strength or contributions of dimensions of the predictor variable. However, among the dimensions, preferential treatment has highest strength of contribution with 0.592 while tangible reward had lower strength of contribution with 0.408 values. However, with $R^2 = 0.626$ and $PV < 0.05$, therefore H_2 and H_4 are supported. By implication, it means that relationship is a major area that organizations in the hospitality industry can invest in; hence, it has the ability and influence on loyalty of hotel guests. Therefore, huge capital must be budgeted to factors that can aid relationship building so as to always create positive impressions in the minds of customers.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of the analysis appeared to be positive; it means that organization investment to relationship building is paramount to organizational success. Therefore, we conclude that relationship investment plays significant influence on customer satisfaction of selected hotels in Rivers State hence the results are 0823 and 0.791 respectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From literature and the analysis, we therefore recommend the following:

- i. Hotels managers should pay keen attention to factors that assists in building relationships.
- ii. Hotel managers should ensure sustenance of the established relationships to ensure continued loyalty of customers.
- iii. We also recommend that managers' of hotels should create enabling environments for their employees to continue enhancing themselves to better serve their guests.

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