

# Impact of Service Quality and Relationship Variables on Hotel Customer Loyalty: A Meta-Analysis

Track: Sectorial Marketing – Services (Services, Tourism, Culture, Healthcare, Media, Education, Non-profit)

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## ABSTRACT

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, customer loyalty stands as a crucial determinant of long-term success and profitability within the hotel industry. In the last few decades, many studies were conducted on this topic and showed divergent results. These different roles of antecedents on customer loyalty awakens the need for providing a robust and generalizable understanding of the determinants of customer loyalty in the hospitality sector. The purpose of this study is to provide a conceptual framework for classifying factors influencing customer loyalty using a meta-analysis. We collected more than 150 studies from the period between January 2000 and June 2024. Through synthesizing findings from a diverse range of studies, we identify the most salient influencing factors, assess the strength of their effects and explore the role of several moderators such as economic events as well as the COVID pandemic. Our findings will allow marketing and tourism researchers to analyse the influence of various moderators (e.g., inflation, happiness) and develop tailored recommendations for action and strategies. The meta-analysis approach enables practitioners to extract key insights relevant to their business from a unified source.

**Keywords:** customer loyalty; meta-analysis; hospitality; customer satisfaction; service quality

## INTRODUCTION

In view of a constantly intensifying competition and the degree of saturation in the international hotel industry, the firms' focus is on maintaining and expanding their existing customer base (Homburg, Koschate-Fischer & Becker, 2016). Understanding the variety of factors that influence customer loyalty has become essential for hoteliers to foster a competitive advantage in an ever-evolving market landscape (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000).

While numerous studies have investigated individual factors affecting customer loyalty in hotels, there remains a need to synthesize, to comprehensively analyse and to understand the impact of these factors across diverse contexts such as culture in different countries or economic developments such as inflation. A meta-analysis offers such systematic approach to address this need by aggregating findings from multiple empirical studies (Eisend, 2009). By summarizing empirical evidence, the meta-analysis enables researchers and practitioners to discern patterns, identify key predictors, and ascertain the magnitude and direction of their effects with greater precision providing insights, that can inform strategic decision-making and facilitate the development of effective loyalty-building strategies within the hotel sector (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins & Rothstein, 2009; Cooper, Hedges & Valentine 2009). More, a meta-analysis can help in clarifying differing results from prior studies and provide evidence for the main effect of variables.

With the help of a meta-analysis, the existing literary primary studies on the influencing variables of customer loyalty in the hotel industry will be summarized. For this purpose, we have updated Tanford's meta-analysis "*Antecedents and Outcomes of Hospitality Loyalty: A Meta-Analysis*" from 2016 to the current state of research. All available studies published after 2000 are systematically identified, selected and coded. In our statistical analysis, we consider **three different measurement periods** – January 2000 until the outbreak of the COVID Pandemic in March 2020, the period of the Pandemic itself, and the post-COVID period from January 2022 until June 2024. It is of particular importance to analyse the influence of the COVID pandemic and the associated economic and social restrictions on the formation of satisfaction and loyalty because insights into the differences will enhance knowledge about external shocks on consumer decisions. We also consider the period of the pandemic separately, as in many countries the provision of tourism services was restricted or regulated by governments. It can be assumed that due to the high losses in the hospitality industry (Liu, Cheng, Liao & Yang, 2023), many hoteliers had to conduct various cost-cutting measures and faced staff shortages, which presumably had a negative impact on customers satisfaction and respectively loyalty. We are investigating the extent to which levels of loyalty returned to pre-crisis levels and whether there has been a shift in the main factors influencing customer loyalty.

Following Eisend (2009), the results are extracted, listed descriptively (via correlations between variables), and summarized. More, in our meta-analysis, we add different external variables such as cultural dimensions from Hofstede such as individualism and economic situations (e.g., GDP growth, inflation) to identify differences across samples. Hence, our work significantly enhances findings from Tanford (2016). Thus, our study provides important implications for the hotel industry and relationship marketing in different European countries. To sum, our meta-analysis enables to analyse variables that have received little or even no attention in the individual studies. With such integration of moderators, we can provide generalizable insights.

## REVIEW OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Customer loyalty in the hotel industry is a multifaceted construct influenced by various determinants. The origins of the recording of customer loyalty go back to the 1920s. At that time, experimental tests were used to investigate purchase sequences of specific product groups (Pritchard, Howard, & Havitz, 1992). There is now a consensus in the scientific community that the definition of customer loyalty is not only about repeat purchases. A loyal customer is defined as one who, out of his or her own conviction, voluntarily, deliberately asks for, engages with a particular brand repeatedly, and intends to do so in the future (Homburg, Koschate-Fischer & Becker, 2016).

A widely recognized framework to explain the formation of customer loyalty is the **Service Quality Theory (SQT)**, which suggests that customer perceptions of service quality directly influence their satisfaction and subsequent loyalty. SQT asserts that customers evaluate service quality based on both *tangible variables* such as cleanliness, amenities, and facilities, and *intangible variables*, such as responsiveness, empathy, and reliability of the service provided. In the context of hotel industry, maintaining a consistently high standard of service quality across all stages of the guest experience - from the initial booking and check-in process to room cleanliness and dining—is essential for fostering customer satisfaction and loyalty (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1996). The German Hotel Association (IHA) emphasises that in future it will be crucial for the success of hotels that the concept and market positioning, as well as the quality of the offer, are consistent (Luthe, 2023). Also, at the UNWTO Conference on Quality Management, Romania UNWTO Secretary-General, Taleb Rifai stated “We live in an increasingly competitive sector. Quality standards provide a framework to guide stakeholders to improve their operations and services along the whole tourism value chain so as to create a complete and positive tourism experience” (Gomez Sobino, 2016). In addition, several contextual factors – including brand image, word-of-mouth – influence customer loyalty within the hotel sector (Back & Parks, 2003; Han & Yoon, 2015; Rather, Hollebeek & Rasoolimanesh, 2022). Grasping the interaction between these theoretical perspectives and contextual elements is vital for constructing comprehensive models that adequately capture the intricate dynamics of customer loyalty in the hotel industry.

The figure 1 shows the antecedents of customer loyalty in the hotel industry according to our adapted version of Tanford's 2016 meta-analysis. Tanford's meta-analysis provides a conceptual framework for classifying indirect and direct loyalty factors and outcomes. The meta-analysis shows strong correlations between the direct loyalty components (satisfaction, emotional commitment, service quality, trust and switching costs) and overall loyalty (Tanford, 2016). However, Tanford did not evaluate moderators such as culture of the surveyed respondents. We therefore not only replicate and update her study but significantly enhance her conceptual model and empirical findings. We therefore answer on her statement “[...] there were not enough studies to analyze some of the conceptually important relationships“ (Tanford 2016, p. 134). The extensive expansion of her model enables us to draw research and management implications for different contexts.

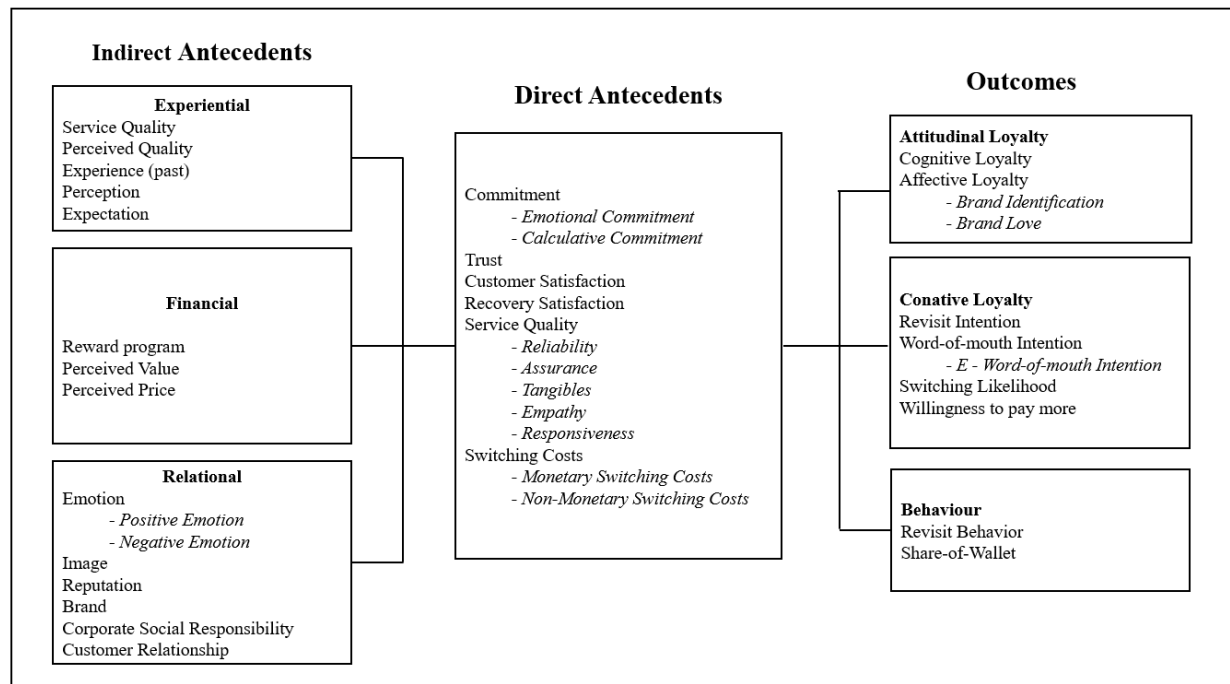


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Loyalty Relationships adapted from Tanford (2016)

## METHODS

### Collection of Studies

For a comprehensive meta-analysis, a profound compilation of literature is essential (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins & Rothstein, 2021). As our study aims to investigate the variables influencing customer loyalty, the literature search follows a systematic five-step procedure to aggregate and synthesize empirical evidence from existing literature on customer loyalty in the hotel industry (Rothstein, 2012).

First, a recreation of the studies Tanford used in her meta-analysis from 2016 has been carried out. The author was contacted. As the data set was no longer available, we identified the studies and coded the samples for our data set manually. Second, Google Scholar was used to identify more recent articles, using the search terms ‘hospitality’ and ‘hotel industry’ and ‘customer loyalty’. We carried out further extensive searches and used the databases Elsevier, Emerald Library, Science Direct, Scopus and Taylor & Francis for this, using the same keywords. Moreover, we hand-searched the journals *Journal of Travel Research*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* and *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, which published the most found papers since 2016. Finally, the references of the most recent papers were checked for further relevant studies. Following the initial search, a Google Scholar alert was set up to capture any new articles not identified in previous searches. This search yielded to a total of 150 studies, which were collected and examined for their relative fit for the purpose of this study. Original articles that are not available in English are excluded for this purpose.

We hypothesise the following for the further procedure. Regarding service quality, we analyse the individual sub-variables in accordance with the SERVQUAL approach. The influence of negative and positive emotions is also considered individually and not as an overall influence. This enables us to provide insights into variables that have been less investigated, thereby expanding knowledge and providing indications for future research. In addition, we examine how economic factors (such as the inflation rate or the gross domestic product), cultural dimensions and the satisfaction score influence the relationship of antecedents on customer loyalty. This is based on the assumption that if there is a high level of general dissatisfaction in a country, guests' expectations are higher and loyalty is more difficult to achieve. To bring the research up to date, we replicate the hypotheses by Tanford as follows:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Service quality is positively related to loyalty.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Satisfaction is positively related to loyalty.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Emotional Commitment is positively related to loyalty.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** Trust is positively committed to loyalty.

**Hypothesis 5 (H5):** Switching costs are positively related to loyalty.

**Hypothesis 6 (H6):** The effect size of the link between service quality and satisfaction is larger than the effect size of the link between service quality and loyalty.

**Hypothesis 7 (H7):** The magnitude of relationships between loyalty antecedents and outcomes will be largest for attitudinal loyalty, followed by behavioural intentions, followed by behaviour.

## SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

At the conference, we will present the final results of our meta-analysis. In particular, our study enhances findings from Tanford by integrating moderators such as the cultural dimensions of Hofstede. Such moderator variables may influence the relationships between antecedents and customer loyalty are examined through subgroup analyses.

For example, we assume that in countries with a high happiness score and in countries with a low inflation rate the effect of antecedents on loyalty will be stronger. In addition, we assume that higher demands in individualistic countries lead to weaker effects on positive relationships with loyalty. We assume a similar effect for long-term orientated cultures. Related to the time-related moderator, we expect that in studies conducted during the COVID pandemic, due to an overall low service level, the influence of satisfaction on loyalty during the pandemic is greater than in studies before and after the pandemic.

The results of the meta-analysis will be interpreted considering the synthesized evidence, identifying key determinants of customer loyalty in the hotel industry, assessing the strength and direction of their effects, and exploring potential moderators that influence these relationships. The implications of the meta-analysis findings for theory, practice, and future research will be discussed, highlighting actionable insights that can support strategic decision-making and enhance customer loyalty initiatives within the hotel sector.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with the respect to the research.

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