What Makes Consumers Loyal to a Particular Online Travel Website? Case of booking.com

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Abstract

It is critical for an online travel website to not only attract new customers but only enhance existing customer loyalty to improve the website's image and generate revenue. This research aims to find out the factors that affect loyalty among consumers of online travel websites. The variables in this study were selected after profound research on the literature review and review of the customers' feedback who were using the Booking.com website. Models of antecedents were tested such as price, convenience, experience, and interaction in predicting consumer satisfaction and the impact on brand loyalty among online travel website customers. Data was collected from 420 users of an online travel website (Booking.com) and analysed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings show that all constructs influence consumer satisfaction toward online travel websites and consequently influence customer brand loyalty. The research results will create awareness for entrepreneurs, organisations, researchers, and the public to improve marketing strategies and enhance customer retention and brand loyalty. Websites need to consistently deliver high-quality packages and services to stay on top of trends and build trust with customers by providing good service. Live customer service is one of the most significant implications since interaction with the website significantly affects customer satisfaction. As such, websites need to be available in real-time for the customers to enhance brand loyalty. The research outcomes can be beneficial to enhance the reputation of the website and generate more revenue.

Keywords: *Customer Satisfaction; Brand Loyalty; Price; Convenience; Online Travel Websites; Interactions; Brand Experience*

Introduction

The global online travel booking service market size was valued at USD 519.1 billion in 2021 and is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 9.0% from 2022 to 2030 (Grand View Research, 2023). The growth in information technology has caused a major shift in how customers behave and has radically disrupted the travel and service industries, for example the ease of making payments, content searches, reservations, etc. , have become a norm. For many businesses it is paramount that they get it right when disseminating information thus enhancing the ease of transactions with customers, and most importantly interacting with customers which is mainly through their websites (Talwar et al., 2020). On the global market are many different online travel websites like Booking,com, Travelco, Trivago, Agoda, Expedia.com, Orbitz.com etcetera that offer different online services through

their websites for different target audiences. Booking.com, one of the world's leading digital travel companies reported substantial revenues of $10.9 billion dollars in 2021. The organisation also offers more than 28 million reported accommodation listings on its website, including over 6.6 million homes, apartments, and other unique places to stay. As part of its brand essence statement 'Booking.com makes it easy and supports you with 24/7 customer support' (Curry, 2023; Booking.com, 2023).

Due to the considerable amount of global competition between travel websites, the improvement reach, and the development of technology it is important to understand the impact of various factors of customer satisfaction on brand loyalty which has become one of the main priorities and focus for numerous mega travel companies. Moreover, companies which have a high volume of customers who are loyal to their brands create a sustainable competitive advantage for these firms thus enhancing the long-term success and survival of the company. These are through increased income for the business from the additional purchases of products and services (Chivandi, Samuel & Muchie, 2020). Furthermore, organisations also have fewer issues with dealing brand loyal customers as these consumers also have the tendency to market the organisation through word-of-mouth marketing to other individuals (Lee, Deale & Lee, 2020).

Despite the overwhelming evidence on the importance of brand loyalty, much of the research conducted on online travel websites has been focused on trust, customer satisfaction and single influences on brand loyalty. Several of these studies fail to consider the role the organisation's website plays or whether these websites contribute in any manner to the loyalty of the consumer to the brand. This research attempts to fill that void by investigating multi-dimensional influences on satisfaction for example, whether price, convenience, experience, and interaction are triggers or has any relationship with satisfaction and in turn how this satisfaction influences brand loyalty for travel website Booking.com. This research study could help Booking.com and other travel websites to improve websites and long-term relationships with their customers.

A deep overview of the existing literature, together with a review of the customer feedback (positive and negative) on the booking.com website highlights the variables for the current study. Consequently, researchers tried to develop a framework to include most of the important factors mentioned by actual customers. A framework has been developed to discuss the brand loyalty concept and how they can bring some attributes to strengthen the idea. The research results, which are mainly from the consumer point of view towards a particular online travel website, aim to give awareness to the group of entrepreneurs, organisations, researchers, and the public to improve the marketing strategies and enhance their customer retention and brand loyalty.

Objectives

The general objective of this research is to find out about factors that affect brand loyalty among consumers of online travel websites. The specific objectives of the study are to find out the following:

- The impact of customer satisfaction on brand loyalty among online travel website customers

- The relationships between price, convenience, interaction, and experience with customer satisfaction.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Brand Loyalty

According to Hanaysha (2016), brand loyalty is the degree of the customer's psychological attachment to a specified brand through repeated purchasing behaviour and the willingness to attach to the brand in the long term. Brand loyalty is considered the most significant measurement for creating

marketing strategies and alludes to a consumer's behaviour of support and backing for a specific brand (Venter, Chinomona, & Chuchu, 2016). Prominent scholars like Mabkhot et al. (2016) observed that building brand loyalty has become progressively essential as it adds to an organisation's market share position, performance and it can help increase profit. It was found that a loyalty increases of 7% from consumers can help increase lifetime profits per consumer by as much as 85% (Autry, 2019). Consequently, consumers who are loyal to brands will readily refer to the brand (59%) to loved ones and are more likely to join the loyalty program provided by the brand (59%) and to spend more on the brand (35%)" (Autry, 2019). Given the Fact the fact that there is numerous alternative online travel websites (substitute) which are always available for consumers, it is fundamental for travel websites to understand the consumers and constantly improve brand loyalty.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer Satisfaction could be defined as a summary of the experience felt by the consumer with the total number of purchases and consumption experience throughout the time (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha & Bryant 1996) and not a solitary measurement estimation that may incorporate quality, item quality circumstance factor, individual factor and value factor (Ahmad & Zafar, 2018). A brand satisfaction is a form of satisfaction which aftereffect emotional assessment when the chosen elective brand coordinates or surpasses customer desires (Fianto, 2018)**.** Brand satisfaction is also characterised as the degree to which consumers' expectations regarding a brand's service or product are met (Venter et al., 2016) and influences brand loyalty. Additionally, it goes without saying that when consumers are satisfied with a certain brand, the eagerness to use the same brand thereafter increases. Similarly, satisfaction also dictates the future purchase of a consumer and enhances the desire for the service or products, as it is the precursor of brand loyalty. This is, when satisfaction increases, so will an increase in brand loyalty (Mabkhot et al., 2016). Nonetheless, as consumers feel optimistic about the connection between the service or product and value the brand and the product, it can help in a high level of brand loyalty (Kim et al., 2015). Therefore, the authors assume that:

H1: Customer satisfaction with the brand positively influence the brand loyalty.

Brand Price

Price can be classed as the complete value that the consumers trade for the advantages of having or using the provided service or products (Loo, 2015). The review of actual customer feedback on the Booking.com website showed that simply offering low prices on products does not determine whether it will produce excellent value and satisfaction for the customer. Although low prices are attractive, customers also investigate the services provided. Consumers have strong confidence in the value and price of their preferred brands to such an extent that they would compare, contrast, and assess the price of alternative brands (Jayarathne, 2019; Hameed & Kanwal, 2018). In addition, consumers who are loyal to a brand would pay a premium even if the price were to increases compared to the competitor's value and pricing because of the high perceived risk involved in changing brands (Hameed & Kanwal, 2018). Loo (2015) noted the higher the price consumers are willing to pay for a product or service from an organisation, the higher the perceived benefit. As a result, the company gets to gain premium price revenue as loyal consumers tend to be less sensitive towards the pricing (Loo, 2015). Continuous increases in these transactions without compromise to the product and service quality will enhance consumers loyalty towards the brand's name and would be less likely to buy from competitors even if they provide the same products and quality at a lower price than what is offered to consumers. The perceived price is closely associated with customer satisfaction (Štefko, Gburova, & Jurkova, 2011). Therefore, authors assume that:

H2: The brand price has a relation with consumer satisfaction towards online travel websites.

Convenience

Convenience is the ability to proceed with an activity with the minimum effort needed to achieve an objective (Bagdare & Rajnish, 2013). According to King and Liou (2004), the accessibility of websites is a critical factor in defining consumer-perceived online shopping convenience. Convenience in the online website is the ease of search for customers to provide tailored information and identify and select the desired products/ service to buy (Beauchamp & Ponder, 2010). Jiang et al. (2013) stated that online websites should be convenient and easy to navigate for customers to get a clear image of products/packages, rooms, and services and compare the price across the website to make the purchase process faster. Colwill et al. (2008) in their study found that convenience positively influences customer satisfaction. Koo et al. (2006) observed that customer satisfaction is affected by the improved convenience of online retailers. Therefore, the authors assume that:

H3: Convenience will have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction with online travel websites.

Interaction

Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger (2020) define interaction as the extent to which social media platform offers two ways of communication: the customer's information exchange and opinion sharing on social media. A common feature of interaction, cognitive information-transfer interaction occurs when consumers use other consumers reviews and recommendations to get opinions about products and services offered by their brands of interest (Merrilees, 2016). For instance, electronic referrals related to tourism information. Kumar, Konar and Balasubramanian (2020) reported that online platforms have assisted in developing a strong relationship with brands thus facilitating interaction with online users regardless of geographical barriers. Langaro et al. (2018) asserted that interaction between customers on social media could increase brand awareness as customers can retrieve the brands in their minds during purchasing decision-making. Ba and Johansson (2008) noted a business website that delivers electronic service and interacts with customers improves customers' perception of the website, leading to increased service value and customer satisfaction. Therefore, authors assume that:

H4. The level of interaction with the customer on online travel websites significantly influences customer satisfaction.

Brand Experience

According to Pine & Gilmore (1999), brand experience involves consumers feelings, behaviour, excitement, awareness, and can be evoked by the brand design, service offered by the brand and the environment. This may influence consumers positively or negatively depending on how they behave towards the brand. Brand experience is also frequently related to a stimulus when consumers encounter a service or product that they feel satisfied with (De Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019). A common feature associated with brand experiences is that it creates distinguished competitive positions and excellent premium pricing (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016). In addition, consumers create bonds with brands from different perspectives, for example, enthusiastic, mental, profound, and physical (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016). Furthermore, experience arises from direct perceptions and participation regardless of the platform (virtual or not), considering improvements and making changes before and after a purchase transaction. When consumers have good brand experiences, it can help increase brand satisfaction. Therefore, the authors assume that:

H5. Brand Experience positively influences customer satisfaction towards online travel websites.

Based on the above literature review, the proposed framework of the study is depicted in figure 1. A framework discusses the brand loyalty concept and how various factors, namely: Interaction, Brand price, Convenience, brand experience, and customer satisfaction, can bring some attributes to strengthen

the idea. The results of the research, which is mainly from the consumer point of view towards a particular online travel website, aim to give awareness to the group of entrepreneurs, organisations, researchers, and the public to improve the marketing strategies and enhance their customer retention and improve brand loyalty.
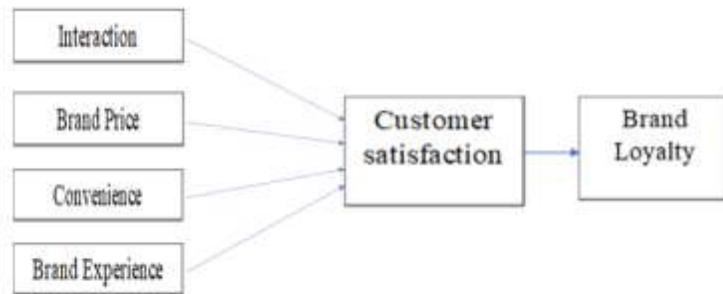

Figure 1: A proposed model for brand loyalty among online travel websites.

Research Methods

The present research adopted a quantitative research design to evaluate factors influencing customer brand loyalty in online travel websites. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2018), quantitative research is more likely to deal with numbers and statistics. Purposive sampling was implemented, and the first data, was collected from 32 respondents with purchasing experience on an online travel website (Booking.com). The main variables implemented in this study were identified from common themes from the Booking.com customer's feedback (positive and negative), which were analysed with NVivo 12 software. As a result,, researchers developed a framework to include most of the important factors mentioned by actual customers. A framework has been developed to discuss the brand loyalty concept and how they can bring some attributes to strengthen the idea. Given the quantitative nature and focus of the current research, a survey measurement instrument (questionnaire) was created after the main themes were identified. The questionnaires were distributed through the researchers' social network (Linked-in, Instagram, Twitter, etc. from which a total of 420 sample sizes were collected. According to Sekaran (2006), the acceptable rule of thumb, a sample size larger than 30 and less than 500 is appropriate for most research. Therefore, the sample size used of 420 respondents is applicable to the current study.

Data was collected through a questionnaire survey which was used as the instrument to collect data for this research paper. The first section, section A intended to understand the respondent's demographic information. Section B the second and main section contained five prominent constructs which were brand loyalty adopted by Babin et al. (2005), customer satisfaction adopted by Babin et al. (2005), brand experience adopted by Brakus et al. (2009), convenience adopted from Chebat et al. (2009), brand price adopted from Chebat et al. (2009), and interaction which was adopted from Cheunget al., (2020). The questionnaires applied a 5-point Likert Scale, which ranges from one end which relates to "1=strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree".

Data analysis was conducted with IBM SPSS Statistics (Statistical Software for Social Science) to manage and analyse the data variables. Data which did not meet specific criteria such as missing values or straight liners which affected or compromised the quality and consistency of data during the evaluation process were omitted. In presenting background information of the participants in this research the respondent's demographic profile is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Respondent Profile (N=420)

Respondent Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	180	42.9
Female	238	56.7
Other	2	0.5
Ethnicity		
Asian	140	33.3
Middle eastern	70	16.7
European	150	35.7
African	30	7.1
American	10	2.4
Oceania	20	4.8
Age		
18-28	98	23.3
28-38	82	19.5
38-48	120	28.6
48-58	100	23.8
58-68	18	4.3
68 or above	2	0.5
Education Level		
High School	20	4.8
Professional certificate	60	14.3
Diploma	70	16.7
Degree	120	28.6
Postgraduate	100	23.8
Other	50	11.9
Occupation		

Student	100	23.8
Full-time employee	120	28.6
Part-time employee	60	14.3
Business Owner	120	28.6
Unemployed	5	1.2
Retired	15	3.6

Reliability Testing

Reliability testing is an analysis to test the questionnaire's item consistency and data stability. Sekaran and Bougie (2018) justify that Cronbach Alpha can be used to measure the internal consistency of how the full set of instrument items are positively correlated. Cronbach's Alpha concept rule of thumb is the closer the value to 1, the higher the consistency reliability. Table 2 highlighted the reliability of the variables of the study, which showed all constructs met the qualifying criteria for internal consistency.

Table 2. Reliability Result

Variable	Cronbach Alpha
Brand Loyalty	0.797
Customer Satisfaction	0.776
Brand Price	0.760
Convenience	0.789
Interaction	0.790
Brand Experience	0.765

Hypothesis Testing

Correlation between a few sets of data is an evaluation of how well the data are connected or related (Glen, 2020). Pearson Correlation is the most common measurement of correlation in a statistic which indicates the linear connection between two groups of data (Glen, 2020). Pearson Correlation is used to test the data for this research and to validate the hypothesis and relationship between variables in the paper. Table 3 shows the R-value that explains the strengths of correlations in Pearson Correlation; Table 3 shows the results for the relationship between the variables of the current study.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Results Analysis

Variables Correlation	Pearson Correlation	P-Value (sig)
Customer Satisfaction → Brand Loyalty	0.624	0.000
Brand Price → Customer Satisfaction	0.633	0.001
Convenience → Customer Satisfaction	0.677	0.002
Interaction → Customer Satisfaction	0.693	0.001
Brand Experience → Customer Satisfaction	0.683	0.002

Table 3 shows the relationship and significant value of all the variables. The relationship between customer satisfaction towards brand loyalty correlates at the value of 0.624 with a significant value (P<0.05). The relationship between price and customer satisfaction has a correlation at the value of 0.633 with a significant value (P<0.05). Also, the relationship of convenience and customer satisfaction correlates at the value of 0.677 with a significant value (P<0.05). The relationship of interaction between customer satisfaction correlates at the value of 0.693 with a significant value (P<0.05). The relationship between brand experience and customer satisfaction has a correlation at the value of 0.683 with a significant value (P<0.05). Overall, all the variables are correlated to their corresponding variables and demonstrate significant relationships. The highest relationship noted in the data was between interaction and customer satisfaction. The results of the hypotheses are illustrated in table 5.

Table 4. Hypotheses results

Hypotheses	Result
H1: Customer satisfaction with the brand significantly influence the brand loyalty	Accepted
H2: The brand price has a relation with consumer satisfaction towards online travel websites.	Accepted
H3: Convenience will have a relationship with customer satisfaction with online travel website	Accepted
H4. The interaction with the customer on online travel website significantly influence customer satisfaction	Accepted
H5. Brand Experience significantly influences customer satisfaction towards online travel website	Accepted

Discussion of Findings

The relationship between interaction and customer satisfaction showed a positive correlation, interaction had the highest correlation with customer satisfaction. Based on Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger (2020), interaction is one of the key drivers in reinforcing brand awareness and brand loyalty. The finding was in line with the research by Froehle (2006) which indicated that interaction through online platforms significantly influences customer satisfaction. In addition, the results also revealed that the brand price showed a significant influence towards customer satisfaction. This result is in line with the results of (Han &)Ryu, 2009), which suggested that price has the most significant relationship on customer satisfaction due to complex price structure depending on the business itself. On the other hand, some studies found that manipulating the price by altering (lowering) does not guarantee customer satisfaction as consumers tend to seek other products/service attributes before deciding to purchase a product (Al-Msallam, 2015). The current research found that the pricing experience will bring satisfaction among customers of online travel websites.

Another finding of the study was the relationship between convenience and customer satisfaction. The results are in line with the study by Srivastava & Kaul (2014) which found that convenience and social interaction affect both customer experience and customer satisfaction. Brand experience, another variable investigated, is also found to significantly influence customer satisfaction using online travel websites. According to Mathew & Thomas (2018), brand experience derives from the involvement of consumers with the products provided by the brand which can be a better predictor towards brand loyalty compared to brand satisfaction. These results are supported by previous papers that there is a strong

positive relationship between brand experience and customer satisfaction (Yunpeng & Khan, 2021). Lastly, customer satisfaction showed a significant influence on brand loyalty. Customer satisfaction has always been an important element of making every business successful. These findings among customers on online travel websites coincides with various academic research that found the relationship between customer satisfaction and brand loyalty in different industries (e.g., Al-Msallam, 2015; Javed et al., 2021).

Implication of Findings

From the results of the research study there are a few recommendations and implications. Firstly, it is very important for online travel companies to have a very effective operation system, and to ensure that the digital delivery of the business runs smoothly. For instance, using more user-friendly and easy-to-remember URLs, having tools for automatic bookmarking, and placing ads strategically on social media websites to increase convenience. A second consideration is regarding the technical elements of the customer journey (for instance, data protection, searching, payment, booking, complaining etcetera) of any website which should be considered as an important part of customer satisfaction and ultimately lead to customer returns. Consequently, travel websites must provide and deliver high-quality services and stay on top of trends to enhance customer experience. This means offering the right information and images that will reflect customers' expectations when they visit various destinations. Another important function and component of any website is building trust in offers and information thus maintaining customer loyalty. This is attributed to a positive experience of customers on the website which in turn can lead to security and ultimately translate to increased purchases, increased customer retention, and repeat business.

Reliable customer service is another factor that is fundamental to delivering outstanding services over time. As a result, it is paramount that customer queries should be addressed immediately and with individual consideration. Moreover, the improvement of live chat through social media channels and the official website and simply being there for your customer is essential. Such a feature will enhance the interaction and communication channels with the customers which may increase both customer interactions, transactions, is very efficient, provides support, boost sales, enhance the brand image, enhance customer loyalty and is very cost effective.

In this study interaction was the most important factor. The website needs to ensure to be available for 24 hours responses through social media channels, the official website, etcetera, to exceed the customer expectation and to improve their loyalty. Also, it is important for businesses to maintain good relations with customers by providing some personalized information and offering a discount on the package based on their interest. Follow up with customers regularly and look at their feedback carefully to prevent issues in future.

Conclusion

This research paper has sought to identify the attributes influencing customer satisfaction and consequently impacting brand loyalty among customers of online travel websites. The results from the study indicated that customer satisfaction significantly impacts brand loyalty while other attributes such as brand price, convenience of website, interaction between website and customer and brand experience significantly influence customer satisfaction. Among the factors identified, price had the most significant impact among the variables tested in the study. The factors identified in the study further shed light on the importance of customer satisfaction and its essentiality to brand loyalty. The implications provided in this study has highlighted the need for business managers or entrepreneurs to understand the importance of customer expectation and how they can improve customer satisfaction and loyalty towards online travel websites. It is also equally important for these main stakeholders to ensure that their websites are responsive 24 hours a day, seven days a week to enhance consistency, efficiency, and reliability of these websites to meet the customer needs. While all these areas merit further research a specific suggestion should draw on the theory of customer satisfaction to explore brand price further.

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