

## Determinants of Positive Word of Mouth in the Tunisian Tourism Sector

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**Abstract.** *Our study aims to support a critical view on a large literature on relational fidelity. It seeks to demonstrate that, to understand the loyalty in the context of an experiential consumption, the analytical framework must be changed. It is beyond the simplistic view considering consumption as an instantaneous act and positions themselves within a more holistic approach with consumption as an experience for the consumer. We try to investigate to what extent the novelty, control and commitment help explain the strength of the relationship that could bind a consumer to the provider. We discuss and test the validity of a complex network of relationships breaking with the theoretical approaches. Then, we test, through an empirical study, the validity of the relationships identified in the literature in the context of a consumption experience of hotel services in North West Tunisia.*

**Keywords:** *novelty, control, word of mouth commitment, service and hospitality, Tunisia.*

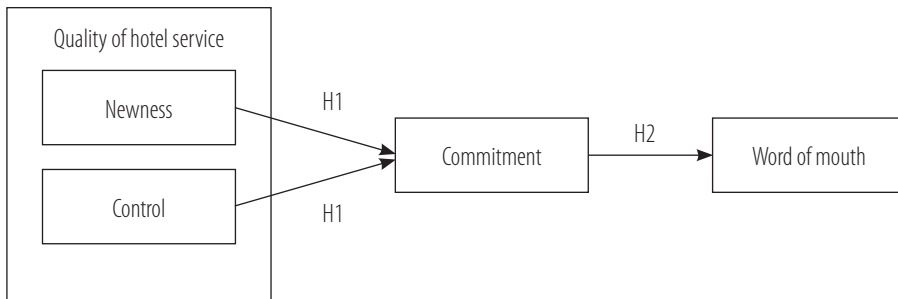
### Introduction

Consumer behavior in hotel industry seems to be a complex subject. Consumer expectations are changing, challenging traditional model of the hotels. The consumer comes a season and not the next, or s/he may be returning after many years. In addition, the nature of the service experience widely varies because it is related to motivations that are both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature. Faced with this situation, several questions emerge: how consumers perceive the hotel offer? How do they deal with their choice offers, with an abundance and variety of destinations and hotel properties in the North West Tunisia? What are they looking for?

The answer to these interrogations is a priority for any hotelier trying to survive. Our research is part of the concern of the hotel establishments seeking

to understand the behavior of consumers in order to maintain positive word of mouth. Integrating into this framework, our research attempts to trace the loyalty-variable in this relational approach. In addition, the managerial interest in the study of novelty, control and commitment in the tourism sector is related to a positive word of mouth and favorable opinion on the service offered by the hotel.

Our goal is to study the relationship between novelty and control in client engagement. Additionally, we try to test the influence of this commitment on the word of mouth. Thus, we treat the following problems. To what extent the novelty and control of hotel service lead the consumer to be engaged with the hotel? Similarly, the extent to which the word of mouth is influenced by his/her commitment? Figure 1 shows the conceptual model that we test.



*Figure 1. Conceptual model of the research*

In what follows, we present the concepts that form our model. We advance our research assumptions and justifications. Next, we describe the methodology. Finally, we show the control of the reliability and validity of the measurement scales adopted and the audit of our assumptions. The article concludes with a presentation of the research limitations and directions for future research.

## Framework of research

Our research examines the determinants of customer loyalty. Beyond cognitive factors well known in the literature, our approach attempts to highlight the role of affective factors. The market research practice is mainly influenced by the cognitive psychology and is oriented to study mainly cognitive elements to explain brand loyalty. We consider, it is nevertheless possible to extend this framework to integrating the emotional factors of consumer behavior.

## The word of mouth

The concept of loyalty is much discussed in the marketing research (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Dick & Basu, 1994; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Uncles & Laurent, 1997; Zeithaml et al., 1996; Oliver, 1999; Allagui & Temessek, 2005). The marketing literature reflects the richness of the subject. However, new research tends towards the adoption of a relational approach to loyalty, to overcome the limitations of behavioral and attitudinal approaches largely developed by the marketing literature (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Feng & Papatla, 2011).

In fact, faced with limitations, the literature has seen the rise of a third approach that takes into account both the behavioral and attitudinal dimensions of loyalty. Proponents of this approach state that simple positive attitude seems insufficient to ensure resistance to competing offers and acceptance of dissatisfaction basis. The favorable attitude towards a brand does not seem sufficient to ensure repeat purchase of the brand. It also important to stress that purchase repeat is not synonymous with an actual brand loyalty. A composite approach encompassing attitude and behavior seems necessary to identify the true customer loyalty (Li, Lin & Lai, 2010).

However, some studies show that true loyalty translates into an exclusive purchasing (Dick & Basu, 1994). However, this traditional acceptance of fidelity gives a simplistic and fragmented reality. In fact, the customer is generally multi-faithful (O'Malley, 1988). So the notion of exclusive loyalty does not reflect the complexity of the relationship between the consumer and the product or brand (Fournier, 1998). It is therefore necessary to adopt a broader view of loyalty.

In relational approach "*fidelity cannot be explained only by a succession of discrete transactions (repeat purchases); it is the expression of deep and enduring relationship established between an individual and a brand that manifests itself in many forms (cooperation, word of mouth, etc.)*" (N'Goala, 2003). Relational fidelity should manifest itself in a relationship of long term cooperation. The consumer does not indicate a single purchaser of goods, rather a mark of the potential advocate, a partner for cooperation and which could understand short term sacrifices.

Our research is integrated into this approach, trying to develop the conceptualization of fidelity. It aims to learn relational behavior, favorable intentions

toward the brand (brand change, word of mouth advice, the resistance against persuasion, protest, etc.) or the results of customer fidelity. Loyalty to a hotel is usually associated with the intent to recommend a hotel or intend to return to that hotel (Taylor & Hunter, 2003).

Similarly, word of mouth is defined as customers talk formally or informally with someone about the goods and services of the company, including counseling and defending the company against attacks by other consumers (Hennig - Thurau et al., 2002). It indicates a communication that escapes the company and comes in a completely natural way of the external environment (Palmatier et al., 2007; Mills & Roux, 2008). In fact, word of mouth stands strong credibility (Gremler et al., 1994). When considering advertising, the consumer is usually suspicious about the sincerity and credibility of its message. S/he is convinced that a financial goals are behind all advertising, that supersedes any content design (Garcia-Bardidia, 2007). Word of mouth is considered a strong indication of loyalty (Zhang et al., 2010). In this sense, Gould (1995) argues that a loyal customer can be defined as one that not only uses the good or service, but has the satisfaction to talk about it to his/her entourage (Goyette, 2007). A loyal customer talks to others about good evaluations and encourages them to attend the same hotel or to buy the same brand. It is therefore free publicity for the company. (Zhang et al., 2010).

### **Perception of service quality**

Quality management is a major challenge and a key strategy for success, differentiation and creation of a lasting relationship between the service company and its customers (Wu & Wu, 2010). However, the intangibility of service and customer participation in its production makes the control of its quality difficult. Service quality is an abstract and diffuse construct whose conceptualization and measurement are not obvious (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In the absence of objective measurement, it seems appropriate to evaluate service quality by assessing consumer perceptions of the quality. In addition, and in order to present an overview of the concept of perceived quality, we will build on the contributions of the experiential approach to identify the process of perception during the consumption experience of a service. According to the experiential approach, the perceived quality is a general term evaluating affective aspects of experience (Dai, Haried & Salam, 2011). Unlike service quality, perceived quality of experience is measured based on affective dimensions. The affective components of service experience include subjective respons-

es, emotional and highly personal aspects of the service provided (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Tabbane & Hamouda, 2013).

Cosnidering the research on experiential quality and especially the studies of Otto (1997) and Duman (2002), we distinguish 3 dimensions which plays a key role in the formation and the perception of the quality of the experience: novelty, control, and commitment.

### Newness

Novelty can be defined as "*affective component of the service experience showing how the experience was different, original and unique*" (Otto, 1997). The level of innovation desired by consumers relates to their personal needs, such as:

- The need for stimulation: behavioral science theories generally assume that humans, by their behavior, search internal stimulation. It is perceived as satisfactory or good if it avoids boredom and anxiety and achieves an optimal level of comfort and well-being (Berlyne, 1960; Fiske & Maddi, 1961).
- The sensation-seeking: it is the tendency of individuals to seek out situations, activities and ideas that are new, changing or surprising.
- The search for variety: it is defined as "*a tool to obtain a purchase stimulation, alternating between different choices of objects (brands, stores), a willingness to change*" (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1992). Hence, the choice of a service is not motivated solely by the utility associated to services available, but also the value that can be created by the change of services or providers.

Novelty reflects consumer motivations as: evasion, challenge, escape from a routine situation, stimulation, adventure or experience of something new and different (Duman, 2002). Through repetition and extension, individuals reduce the perceived environmental stimulation through habituation. The accommodation with services that can be determined by their complexity and novelty (breaking with the traditional codes). According to the theory, the high potential stimulus that hotel services have could create perplexity among some visitors. They may in turn develop behavior to reduce the stimulation (Dai, Haried & Salam, 2011). In the context of the consumption of hotel services, the novelty may be compatible with the commitment and therefore loyalty, because the supply will change experiences regularly (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012).

*H1: Newness exerts a positive and significant influence on customer commitment to the hotel establishment.*

## **Control**

The control corresponds to the sense of power, control and domination of the consumer in the process of production and consumption of services. According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974), the feeling of domination is based on the extent to which one feels free and able to proceed in several ways. In fact, consumers of services singularize an environment where they can have options to choose from and have a sense of control over everything around them. In this sense, Bateson (2000) expresses that giving more choices to consumers indicates an way of development of the consumers' perception of control. The concept of control is "*a component of emotional experience in this department that the measure reflects the experience of direct consumer participation in the process*" (Otto, 1997).

Consumer participation in the process of manufacturing and consuming services necessarily implies a reaction to the service environment and a strong desire to feel control over their environment (Kim & Son, 2009). Control refers to the direct involvement of consumer in generating service experience. A high level of involvement in the consumption process could create a perception of control. The perception of a high level of control can increase consumer engagement to the service provider. When the individual finds a relaxing environment (that is to say, more choices, cooperation with the supplier of goods or services), commitment after the experience may increase.

*H2: The control has a positive and significant influence on customer commitment to a hotel establishment.*

## **Commitment**

Generally, the engagement means "*action related to a promise or agreement*" (Robert Dictionary). In the field of marketing, this concept has been used very early by Cunningham (1956): commitment reduces consumer resistance to changes in purchasing situations. It is a guarantor of the continuance of the relationship between consumer and brand despite competing offers and occasional dissatisfaction (Chesbrough & Spohrer, 2006).

Several researchers have attempted to define this concept by presenting it as an *"built attitude"* (Gurviev & Korchia, 2002), that is to say, an intension or a desire to maintain a sustainable relationship perceived as important (Andaleeb, 1992). In this context, one of the broadest definitions is that formulated by Anderson and Weitz (1992): *"a desire to develop a stable relationship, to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the relationship and trust in the relationship"*.

In addition to these definitions, another trend seeks to assign an emotional dimension to the concept of commitment. We can cite the definition of Beatty and al. (1988) showing that of Lastovicka and Gardner (1979): *"The commitment is an emotional or psychological attachment to a brand in a product category data"*. Similarly, Amine (1998, 1999) presents it as *"the willingness of a person to maintain the relationship with an object to his/her emotional attachment and identification with it."* Beyond this affective dimension, other researchers have tried to dismantle the dual nature of the engagement. In this context, Henning-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremier (2002) present commitment as *"the long-term consumer relationships based on the belief that the relationship will continue to generate more net benefits than the fact based on the emotional ties"*.

In summary, it seems clear that brands and retailers are moving more and more towards relational strategies in order to retain customers and to maintain and develop trade relations and cooperation in the long term (Dai & Salam, 2010). However, the question that arises at this stage is to identify ways to achieve such a relationship of loyalty over the long term. It is thus to determine the motivational underpinnings of the relationship with the brand and the factors that cause the development of such a relationship.

The relational engagement in a hotel strengthens and stabilizes during multiple direct and positive experiences of the customer. Commitment should have a significant effect on the actions of the client (Carrillat, Jaramillo & Mulki, 2009). For a client engaged for many years to a brand (i.e. a hotel), word of mouth should be a totally logical reaction after a sum of positive experiences.

*H3: Commitment to the hotel has a significant positive influence on the propensity of tourists to generate positive word of mouth.*

## Research methodology

After presenting the conceptual framework of our research and based on assumptions from our literature review, the methodology adopted is devoted to the presentation of the method of data collection, sampling method and finally the justification choice of scales measuring concepts of our model.

### Survey

Data collection was conducted through a questionnaire. The sample consisted of 312 tourists. Our research measures the quality of service (novelty, control), commitment and word of mouth. This data collection occurred during the month of November 2012.

### Sampling

The sampling of respondents is that of convenience. The sample is composed of tourists. It consists of 312 respondents (52.1% are women). The average age is between 20 and 39 years, 42% are single and 17% are Tunisians.

### Measurement concepts

Based on the scales of perceived quality of experience, developed by Otto (1997), Otto and Ritchie (1996) and adopted by Duman (2002), we were able to develop a scale appropriate to the hotel sector taking into account dimensions of perceived quality of experience, namely novelty and control. Inspired by the trend in literature to represent commitment as a multidimensional construct and following N'Goala (2000) we propose a scale that takes into account three dimensions of engagement, namely: an affective dimension, an instrumental dimension, and a normative dimension. Finally, the definition of fidelity in the theoretical part has led us to adopt a single dimension: word of mouth with 4 items.

The scales are Likert type. In order to facilitate the task of the respondents we generally limit the use of 5-point scale ranging from (1) totally disagree to (5) strongly agree with a point neutral situated in the middle.



## Dimensionality and reliability of the scales

The role of principal component analysis (PCA) is to study the structure of latent variables and to verify the unidimensionality characteristic or multidimensionality characteristic of the scales from items to retain those who are strongly correlated with the factorial axes. In addition, the calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficients is needed to measure the internal reliability of the constructs. Confirmatory model is used to verify the reliability (Jöreskog with Rho) and internal validity of (convergent and discriminate) constructs. In addition, causal model is used to check the fit and to validate the research hypotheses. We have adopted the method of structural equations that can handle all linear relationships between the dependent variables in a unidirectional sense (Roussel et al., 2002). In addition, we estimated the parameters of our model by the method of maximum likelihood. The choice of this method is justified by a sample size of less than 500 observations (Roussel et al., 2002). In the context of exploratory analyzes, data processing is performed using SPSS, while tests of causality or direct effects are performed with the AMOS software.

## Presentation of results

As a first step, we present the causal links between key concepts of this research about the quality of service, commitment and word of mouth, in order to check the validity of the constructs.

The results of the principal component analysis (PCA) aiming to detect variables and purify the measurement scales of the concepts are presented in Table 1:

*Table 1. Results of the exploratory analysis*

|               | Variance explained | Cronbach's alpha |
|---------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Newness       | 1.134              | 0.765            |
| Control       | 1.672              | 0.784            |
| Commitment    | 2.361              | 0.832            |
| Word of mouth | 3.213              | 0.861            |

Note that the explained variance allows us to have four main components with a value greater than 1 at the component matrix. The use of Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) chosen to complement the exploratory factor analysis (PCA) allows the evaluation of the reliability of components. The results of the Cronbach's alpha yielded a value greater than 0.7 considered satisfactory levels exploratory, which justifies the reliability of measurements.

### Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis allows us to verify the reliability of the constructed, the convergent validity, as well as the discriminate validity of the measurement model. Table 2 presents the results of internal validity:

*Table 2. Results of reliability and construct validity*

|               | Jöreskog Rho | Rho Convergent Validity (AVE) | Discriminant Validity |
|---------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Newness       | 0.776        | 0.534                         | AVE > 0,38            |
| Control       | 0.745        | 0.523                         | AVE > 0,39            |
| Commitment    | 0.723        | 0.514                         | AVE > 0,34            |
| Word of mouth | 0.778        | 0.556                         | AVE > 0,37            |

We note that the reliability calculated by the Rho Jöreskog has a value greater than 0.72 for novelty, control, commitment and word of mouth. See also Fornell and Larcker (1981) on the internal validity of the constructs. In our case, the convergent validity indicates a satisfactory value. In addition, discriminant validity is checked because it has lower values than those of convergent validity. Therefore, the conditions of internal validity (convergent validity and discriminant validity) are verified and measurement scales used in our empirical study are reliable and valid.

### Results and validation of hypotheses of the research model

The model of our research shows the direct causal links between innovation, control and commitment and between commitment and word of mouth. In addition, we use the bootstrap procedure (600 replications) to ensure the robustness of the estimated coefficients of the method of maximum likelihood (ML) and deal with the violation of the multinormality data (Mardia = 34.321).

**Table 3. The fit indices of the causal model**

| Indices | CMIN/DF | GFI   | AGFI  | RMR  | RMSEA | CFI  | NFI  |
|---------|---------|-------|-------|------|-------|------|------|
| Values  | 2,632   | 0,923 | 0,909 | 0,05 | 0,07  | 0,07 | 0,93 |

Table 3 shows that the adjusted values in our model are satisfactory. Indeed, the indices (GFI, AGFI, CFI, NFI) are close to the value of 1, whereas residues (CMA RMSEA) are close to zero.

Table 4 gives us a general idea of estimating each of our causal models, and the significance of its relationship to validate the assumptions.

**Table 4. Validation of model assumptions causal**

| Hypothesis   | Causal relationship            | Regression* | t    | P     | Hypothesis validation |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------|------|-------|-----------------------|
| H1   | Commitment <---- Newness       | 0.44        | 4.43 | 0.000 | confirmed             |
| H2   | Commitment <---- Control       | 0.58        | 5.74 | 0.000 | confirmed             |
| H3   | Word Of Mouth <---- Commitment | 0.41        | 4.17 | 0.000 | confirmed             |
| * Regression coefficients after bootstrap (N = 600) are respectively 0.446, 0.589 and 0.413. |                                |             |      |       |                       |

Since all Student tests are significant at 5%, our model shows that the hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 are confirmed. Indeed, it is noticeable from the new structural model that control acts positively on the commitment in the hotel service and the impact of this engagement on the word of mouth is positive and significant. These empirical results coincided with those already developed in previous research.

## Conclusion

We argue for a greater use of emotional and psychological dimensions related to the consumption of a service. However, these dimensions are limited in research consumer behavior and empirical validations are rare, particularly in the field of consumer services in a hotel. The study of the experiential approach to perceived quality has enabled us to take into account new variables still little exploited in marketing research. Unlike the hedonistic dimension which is currently a subject of increasing interest in the literature, research on control and novelty as components of perceived quality are still rare. In addition, this experiential dimension of perceived quality is rarely addressed in relation to the quality of the report and the relational approach to loyalty. The study suggests that tourists usually manifest their willingness to continue a relationship and talk positively about a hotel.

We managed to introduce a number of determinants promoting loyalty and tourists to the establishment of relations of long-term cooperation between the latter and their hotels. These determinants include, beyond the tangible, other variables related to perceptions of emotions, pleasure, excitement, control, etc. The advantage of this perspective is the ability to offer industry professionals new segmentation criteria additional to the classical criteria (socio-professional categories, age). In this way they could develop a proper and effective communication strategy taking into account explanatory variables in our model. Thus, the communication approach of the hotel would be more on the dimensions of pleasure, escape, romance, usability, interpersonal relationships, control, etc.

Differentiation through the production of an inimitable offer seems to be the foundation for customer loyalty. Thus, to retain its customers, the company (hotel) must prove that it is different from its competitors. In this context, the control has demonstrated its strong predictive power in terms of loyalty in the tourism sector. Consequently, to create lasting relationships with its customers, a hotel must demonstrate its uniqueness by adjusting its marketing policy and creating programs taking into account the experiential dimension of consumption.

Our research has a number of limitations. Despite the theoretical interest of our approach, the lack of customer history has led us to adopt a simultaneous and not longitudinal study of loyalty. Moreover, loyalty is a complex concept that can be treated in different ways. We chose, as part of this research, the facet of word of mouth that we consider most relevant to our scope. This type of relational loyalty must be thorough in order to better explain and identify relationships that may link different dimensions. Relational loyalty can be better understood by studying the responses of consumers to counter persuasion, interpersonal conflict or crisis. In addition, it seems important to note that none of the explanatory model of fidelity is exhaustive. The determinants of loyalty are many and varied, given the complexity of this concept. Loyalty remains a complex concept that still animates the debates in marketing research. We hope that this research will contribute to further clarify some aspects.

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