

Positive and negative switching barriers: Promoting hotel customer citizenship behaviour through brand attachment

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to develop and test a theoretical model postulating that a hotel customer’s brand attachment is reinforced by positive and negative switching barriers, which in turn determine customer citizenship behaviour (CCB) towards hotel brands.

Design/methodology/approach – Surveys were conducted and completed by 233 respondents in the U.S. who had favourite hotel brands and used these brands in the previous year. A framework was developed based on the literature, and eight hypotheses were tested using structural equation modelling (SEM).

Findings – The findings suggest that a customer’s brand attachment (brand-self connection and brand prominence) to a hotel is strengthened not only by relational benefits (positive switching barriers) but also by switching costs (negative switching barriers). Brand prominence can promote CCB, whereas the impact of brand-self connection on CCB is rather limited.

Implications – The study highlights the importance of affirmative and passive reasons for customers to remain in a relationship with the hotel brand and how sub-dimensions of switching barriers are interrelated to predict a customer’s attitude and behaviour to the brand. By emphasising the role of customers’ hotel brand attachment, this study also ascertains that cognitive and affective bonds toward a hotel brand can be significant antecedents to their extra-role behaviours.

Originality – This research contributes to the hospitality literature by expanding the realm of consumer behaviour research on switching barriers, brand attachment, and CCB.

Keywords Switching barriers; Brand attachment; Customer citizenship behaviour; Hotel marketing

1. Introduction

Customer switching behaviour, in which a customer leaves their current service provider, has become an important topic of research (Koo et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2011). Recognising customer switching behaviour is essential because attracting a new customer costs approximately sixteen times more than losing a customer with a comparable level of profitability (Han et al., 2009). In today's competitive marketplace, customer switching can have pernicious effects on a company's profitability, viability, market share, and future revenue stream (Moon et al., 2022). In the hotel industry in particular, competition is getting tougher due to the lack of distinctive products/services among the brands in the marketplace (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000), and thus guests have become more sophisticated and demanding when deciding what hotel products to consume (Mattila, 2001). Given that effectively maintaining their present market share and retaining their current customers has become the most important task for the hotel industry (Huang et al., 2021), hotels must understand customers' intention to switch and scrutinise the factors affecting customers' decisions to not switch from their first choice.

Two types of switching barriers affecting customers' retention of their current relationship have been delineated: 'positive' and 'negative' (Baloglu et al., 2017; Qiu et al., 2015). Positive switching barriers retain customers willingly based on the creation of value and benefits for the customer (Han and Hyun, 2012). By contrast, negative switching barriers are obstacles or penalties that retain customers against their will (Vázquez-Carrasco and Foxall, 2006). Switching barriers have been shown to have a major impact on relationship marketing outcomes, such as word-of-mouth behaviour, customer loyalty, and customer commitment (Chuang and Tai, 2016). Extending these relationships, a customer's affirmative and passive reasons for staying and their perception of the brand can be associated with the customer's emotional representation of the brand (Blut et al., 2014) and how they think and feel about their relationship with the brand; that is, their brand attachment.

Brand attachment refers to "the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self" (Park et al., 2010, p. 2). This bond is demonstrated by emotional representations that include what the consumer thinks and feels about the brand and the relationship between the brand and the self (Park et al., 2010). Brand-self connection and brand prominence have been considered as noticeable cognitive and affective concepts, reflecting the extent to which customers are attached to a brand (Li et al., 2019). Even if the current service provider has not met the customer's requirements, the customer may choose to maintain the relationship

with the brand due to potential psychological/social sources of comfort and satisfaction and the financial burden of switching (Porter, 1980). That is, a customer's attachment to a brand may derive either from the benefits and value provided by the brand or from the cost and difficulty of switching brands. Customers' attachments toward a particular service brand hugely influence their attitudes and behaviours, which result in favourable outcomes for the brand (Thomson et al., 2005), and customers' extra-role behaviours would be one of the promoted behaviours (Assiouras et al., 2019).

Given the increasing competition among hospitality and tourism service providers, creating customers' positive co-creation behaviour is critical (Ahn et al., 2019). In the service industry, because of their participation in the service creation process, customers are often considered "partial employees" (Bove et al., 2009) based on the application of their skills and knowledge. These extra-role behaviours of customers are commonly known as customer citizenship behaviour (CCB). CCB refers to "helpful, constructive gestures exhibited by customers that are valued or appreciated by the firm, but not related directly to enforceable or explicit requirements of the individual's role" (Gruen, 1995, p. 461). Due to the positive impact of CCB on attitude, loyalty, satisfaction, and brand equity (Bove et al., 2009), researchers have sought to better understand CCB to enable the development and implementation of strategies to handle such behaviours effectively.

Despite the importance of CCB, there remains a paucity of evidence both on the drivers and indicators of CCB and on its antecedent factors (Li and Wei, 2021). The drivers of CCB are likely to vary (Bove et al., 2009), and when customers perform citizenship behaviour it is still not clear what the precedent factors are to CCB. Although studies have suggested that the importance of the role of customers is greater in the service industry than in other fields (Liu and Mattila, 2015), research on citizenship behaviours has mostly focused on employees rather than on customers (Assiouras et al., 2019).

More developed studies on switching barriers in the context of the hotel industry are also required. Moreover, although identifying customers' switching behaviour is critical in the hotel industry (Han et al., 2011; Koo et al., 2020), the determining factors affecting hotel customers' intention to stay/switch are rarely explored. Only a few studies have investigated the effects of positive and negative switching barriers and their association with customer-brand relationship factors in a single framework (Moon et al., 2022; Qui et al., 2015), and the specific role of switching barriers in the relationship between the customers and the brand in the hotel industry remains unclear.

To fill these gaps, we examine the impact of customer-perceived switching barriers on brand attachment and the impact of brand attachment on CCB. This study builds on the literature on the customer-brand relationship in the service industry, in which CCB plays a critical role (Ahn et al., 2019; Yi et al., 2013). Thus, this research was guided by the following questions: (1) From the perspective of hotel customers, how do the perceived levels of positive and negative switching barriers impact the development of brand attachment, and which dimension of switching barriers is most significant for brand attachment? (2) Does the brand attachment of hotel customers influence their CCB?

To answer these research questions, we developed a theoretical model and tested hypotheses postulating that a hotel customer's brand attachment is reinforced not only by positive switching barriers but also by negative switching barriers and in turn leads customers to exhibit extra-role behaviour. The conceptual model proposed in the present study is displayed in Fig. 1. Data from a survey of 233 hotel customers in the United States were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM).

The study highlights the importance of affirmative and passive reasons for customers to remain in a relationship with the hotel brand and how sub-dimensions of switching barriers are interrelated to predict a customer's attitude and behaviour to the brand. To our knowledge, this study is one of the first providing empirical evidence investigating which dimension of switching barriers is more significant in enhancing hotel customers' attachment to a hotel brand. Hence, the findings contribute to the body of brand marketing and hospitality literature to understand the customer's switching behaviour/change of preferred service provider in the context of the hotel industry. Additionally, by emphasising the role of customers' hotel brand attachment, this study ascertains that cognitive and affective bonds toward a hotel brand can be significant antecedents to their extra-role behaviours (Cheng et al., 2016). Therefore, by applying the theoretical foundations of CCB and brand attachment in the hospitality industry context, this study extends them in the field of consumer behaviour literature.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Customer citizenship behaviour

As an outgrowth of research on organisation citizenship behaviour, CCB has received considerable attention from academia and practitioners as an emerging topic in service research (Wang and Huang, 2019). These actions by consumers comprise extra-role

behaviours towards the company and other customers that are helpful, voluntary, positive, and constructive (Bove et al., 2009). For instance, customers might voluntarily share their positive experiences with acquaintances, drive by their favourite stores, treat, and help service staff kindly, assist other customers throughout service delivery, report service problems to staff, and provide suggestions to improve the company's service, all of which are conducive to helping the company function effectively (Matzler et al., 2015). In addition, CCB disseminates information about the company and thus can affect its profits and, in turn, contribute to brand reputation and recognition (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Most importantly, CCB can enhance the competitiveness of a company (Matzler et al., 2015).

Since Bettencourt (1997) suggested CCB as a multi-faceted concept, a number of researchers have described various types of customer extra-role behaviour (Yi and Gong, 2013), which are commonly categorised as feedback, advocacy, and helping. Feedback refers to information that customers voluntarily provide to the service provider that helps the organisation to improve their quality of service (Groth, 2005). Sincere suggestions from customers about service encounters can help the company to provide better customer service (Matzler et al., 2015). Advocacy is associated with recommending a company or an employee to others, such as family members or friends (Groth, 2005). Advocacy through positive word-of-mouth contributes to improvement in the quality of the company's products and services, the positive reputation of the company, and increased market share among a wider range of the customer base (Groth, 2005). Helping describes the provision of voluntary assistance to other customers with service usage in a service co-creation process (Yi and Gong, 2013). In this process, customers usually direct their helping behaviour to other customers because other customers may need help in this co-creation process of behaving in a generally predictable role (Groth, 2005).

In the hospitality and tourism context, most research on CCB has been carried out on employee citizenship behaviour, particularly in relation to job satisfaction or turnover intention (e.g., Nadiri and Tanova, 2010). Given the increasing competition among tourism and hospitality service providers, creating customers' positive co-creation behaviour, which in turn drives CCB, is critical (Assiouras et al., 2019). Few studies have attempted to define its antecedents such as emotional experience (Zhang et al., 2018) and loyalty (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara et al., 2014), and some outcomes such as perceived value, loyalty, and guest satisfaction (Tung et al., 2017) in a different context such as destination marketing and package tours (Liu and Tsaur, 2014). However, some CCB dimensions have been examined separately in different studies. For example, advocacy has been investigated (Lam and So,

2013), and its findings proved the positive impact on increasing hotel occupancy rates (Viglia et al., 2016).

2.2 Customer switching barriers: positive and negative switching barriers

Positive switching barriers are characterised by the creation of value and benefits for customers, who in turn willingly stay with the current service provider (i.e., “want to stay in the relationship”). By contrast, negative switching barriers retain customers against their will to avoid penalties or obstacles (i.e., “have to stay in the relationship”) (Baloglu et al., 2017; Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2009). The former refers to value and benefits for customers that provide affirmative reasons to stay, while the latter is associated with the feeling of being “locked into” the relationship, which provides passive reasons for customers not to switch (Blut et al., 2014; Han et al., 2009). Based on the distinct natures of these two types of switching barriers, this study adopts the concepts that positive switching barriers include three dimension of relational benefits (social, confidence, and special treatment benefits) and negative switching barriers include three types of switching costs (procedural, financial, and relational switching costs) (Qiu et al., 2015; Vázquez-Carrasco and Foxall, 2006).

2.2.1 Relational benefits as a positive switching barrier

A customer’s relational benefits have been suggested to generate a substantial impact for relationship marketing and have been defined as “those benefits customers receive from long-term relationships above and beyond the core service performance” (Gwinner et al., 1998, p.102). From the customer’s viewpoint, they might profit from the positive relationship with the service provider when the company actively initiates relationship marketing (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Customers receiving relational benefits willingly remain in the current relationship, and thus these benefits act as a positive switching barrier (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2009). Especially in the hotel industry, interpersonal bonds between customers and hotels could be built up by relational investment (i.e., positive switching barriers), which is a more effective way to prevent switching (Han et al., 2009) in the long run. Relational benefits include (1) social benefits, (2) confidence benefits, and (3) special treatment benefits (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002).

Social benefits refer to the emotional relationships that customers develop in the form of friendships and familiarity with employees (Tsaur and Yen, 2011). Social benefits are

positively associated with the customer's satisfaction with the service provider (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000) and commitment to the relationship (Goodwin, 1996). Customers' perceived service encounter performances in terms of the personal interaction with employees in hotels (e.g., perceived sense of closeness in the interaction, extra attention provision) would be a better way to defend against customers switching to another hotel (Kim et al., 2014). Confidence benefits relate to the perceptions of expectations of the service encounter, which provide comfort in the form of knowledge and reduce anxiety (Tsauro and Yen, 2011). Confidence benefits are important because they reduce the level of anxiety associated with the provided service, reduce perceived risk, improve perceived trust, and enhance knowledge about the expected service (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). To meet the hotel customer's expectations and lessen the worry about unmet expectations from the hotel service, hotels provide reliable services and benefits that are associated with maintaining their core service levels, such as cleanliness of rooms and accommodation comfort; convenient check-in/out; reliable and user-friendly reservation system (Han et al., 2011). Special treatment benefits refer to the integration of personalised and economic benefits that lead customers to believe that they have a special relationship that provides unusual price discounts, faster service, or additional customised services (Tsauro and Yen, 2011). Special treatment is perceived by customers not only as part of the service performance itself but also as part of the anticipated service satisfaction (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Most hotels offer exclusive (special) benefits to their regular customers that can be redeemed only in the current hotel, which has a significant role in creating customer loyalty by increasing switching costs (Koo et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Switching costs as a negative switching barrier

Switching costs refer to “the perceived economic and psychological costs associated with changing from one alternative to another” (Jones et al., 2002, p. 441). Prior research on switching costs has examined in various areas, the fundamental idea inspiring these studies is similar: once a transactional relationship is established, one party becomes more dependent on the other party as the cost of switching transaction partners increases (Jones and Sasser, 1995). Three dimensions of switching costs are widely adopted in the literature: procedure, financial, and relational switching costs (Blut et al., 2014).

Procedural switching costs relate to the customer's perceived effort in evaluating the necessary steps and gathering information to consider switching (Burnham et al., 2003). Specifically, procedural switching costs include the expected costs associated with gathering

information beforehand (preswitching costs), evaluating a new service provider (uncertainty costs), forming a new relationship (setup costs), and learning new procedures and routines (postswitching and behavioural costs) (Blut et al., 2014). Financial switching costs involve the loss of financially quantifiable resources when a customer switches from the current service provider (Burnham et al., 2003). Financial switching costs are derived from the specific benefits (costs of lost performance) and previous investment (sunk costs) that may be lost when the customer switches from the current service provider (e.g., the cost of closing and opening a bank account or the cost of changing telephone service) (Colgate and Lang, 2001). Finally, relational switching costs relate to the loss of personal relationships with the brand (or employee) when the customer decides to switch. Relational loss causes emotional discomfort due to the breaking of bonds and loss of identity (Burnham et al., 2003). Therefore, relational investment in the hotel industry also acts as a significant switching barrier (Han et al., 2009). Whilst the negative switching barriers are effective in getting customers to stay, hotels need to be cautious with the use of negative switching barriers. By doing so, hotels may provide a passive reason to remain, as negative switching barriers easily generate feelings of entrapment (Qiu et al., 2015).

2.3 Brand attachment

Brand attachment is manifested as an emotional representation that includes what the consumer thinks and feels about the brand, which defines the brand's relationship to the self (Park et al., 2010). Brand attachment is widely conceptualised as a multi-faceted concept consisting of two dimensions: brand-self connection and brand prominence (Li et al., 2019). The concept of brand-self connection is based on the idea of the bond included in attachment and the cognitive connections between the self and the brand (Chaplin and John, 2005). Customers can identify themselves through the brands with which they are connected (Mittal, 2006). The customer develops a sense of oneness with the brand based on cognitive links between the brand and the self. These cognitive links cause the customer to establish an emotional bond with the brand that involves potentially complex feelings (e.g., happiness, pride, sadness and comfort from the brand) about the brand (Thomson et al., 2005). Brand prominence is defined as the extent to which the brand is salient or top of mind (Park et al., 2010). As the brand consumer's perceived resonance and relevance to their values, needs, goals, and identity increase, its meaning is more accessible in the memory and more deeply connected to one's personal experiences and autobiographical memories (Gill-Simmen et al.,

2018). It is suggested that the level of positive memories and feelings about the attachment object not only comes to mind first but can also function as an indicator of attachment (Park et al., 2010). In this paper, we view hotel brand attachment via hotel brand-self connection, i.e., how consumers relate themselves with the hotel brand, and hotel brand prominence, i.e., how easily consumers recall hotel brands (Li et al., 2019).

When consumers are attached to the brand, the customers feel a strong connection to the brand, and are motivated to maintain self-congruence through developing the emotional bond (Japutra et al., 2018). Thomson et al. (2005) suggested that customers' attitudes and behaviours are hugely influenced by their cognitive and affective attachments toward a particular brand, brand-self connection, and brand prominence, and thus these are considered to be a key factor in successful relationship marketing (Park and MacInnis, 2006). A number of studies have shown the favourable outcomes of promoting the role of brand attachment, such as willingness to pay a premium price (Li et al., 2019); higher brand loyalty (Hwang et al., 2019); intention to perform difficult behaviours (Park et al., 2010); and extra-role behaviours (Hur et al., 2020).

3. Conceptual model and hypotheses

3.1 Positive switching barriers (relational benefits) and brand attachment

The central idea of social benefit is that a customer who experiences a sense of familiarity with a brand tends to maintain the relationship with the service provider, and the service provider can easily recognise those customers who feel comfortable socialising with the service provider. This recognition contributes to the establishment of good social interactions between the customer and the service provider, which will provide more favourable benefits to the customer (Weng et al., 2010). Such social interactions and relationships not only foster closer relationships (Berry, 1995) but also encourage customers to maintain the relationship and even to feel a part of the organisation (Oliver, 1999). As a result, a "commercial friendship" can develop (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002).

Studies have suggested that a customer's social benefit is positively related to their satisfaction with the service provider and thus helps increase their commitment to the brand (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). Customers with a high level of social benefits have a higher-level relationship with the brand (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002), and thus a bond develops between the customer and the brand. Additionally, sense of familiarity and comfortable social

interaction with a service provider lead the customer to have positive feelings and memories toward a brand (Park et al., 2010).

H1. A customer's social benefit is positively related to the customer's brand attachment (H1-1: brand-self connection, H1-2: brand prominence) with the service provider.

The development of trust in the relationship is fundamental to the customer's confidence benefit (Gwinner et al., 1998). A customer with a high level of trust in the relationship with the service provider will be more confident in using the service because trust reduces the customer's level of anxiety associated with the transaction and use of the service, reduces the perception of risk, and increases knowledge of service expectations (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). The benefits that trust provides to the customer (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002) in turn increase their dependence on the relationship (Ganesan and Hess 1997). Therefore, the customer trusts that the brand will support their needs, which eventually leads to the creation of a cognitive and affective bond between the customer and the brand (Veloutsou, 2015). In this sense, the confidence benefit encourages the customer to continue their relationship with the service provider and fosters brand attachment (Wu et al., 2017).

H2. A customer's confidence benefit is positively related to the customer's brand attachment (H2-1: brand-self connection, H2-2: brand prominence) with the service provider.

According to the social exchange theory, perceived value (e.g., costs and rewards) involved in social exchanges between the parties determines the relationship (Balaji, 2014). That is, the value enjoyed by the customer creates an obligation for the hotel to repay the customer (Liu and Mattila, 2015). Special treatment by a service firm is considered part of the performance of the service itself; accordingly, the benefit derived from such special treatment is positively related to the customer's satisfaction with the service provider (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). The special treatment benefit encompasses both economic and customised benefits. When the customer expects to receive a special treatment benefit from the service provider, they are more willing to maintain the current relationship with the service provider (Weng et al., 2010). For instance, the expectation by customers of special discounts and faster or customised service as part of the service provider's core business is a good motive

for maintaining the relationship with the service provider and developing their bond (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). A customer that has established such a relationship is more likely to receive special treatment in the form of special recognition and customised products and services (Lacey et al., 2007). Therefore, special treatment benefits positively influence customers' satisfaction (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002), enhance their commitment to the relationship (Bitner, 1995), and help the customer possess a feeling of attachment to maintain the relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998).

H3. A customer's special treatment benefit is positively related to the customer's brand attachment (H3-1: brand-self connection, H3-2: brand prominence) with the service provider.

3.2 Negative switching barrier (switching cost) and Brand attachment

High switching costs can cause a lock-in phenomenon by making it difficult for customers to switch to alternatives (Han et al., 2009). Although the customer must remain with the current service provider, this lock-in phenomenon may not necessarily ensure increased customer satisfaction with and attachment to the brand (Nagengast et al., 2014). However, an increase in switching costs due to the expansion of voluntary service-specific investment (procedural, financial, and relational) may reflect the customer's intention to use the current brand's service more actively (Park et al., 2013). Service-specific investment not only increases switching costs for leaving the current brand's service but also solidifies customers' affection towards the current brand attachment (Thatcher and George, 2004).

Specifically, procedural switching costs refer to the customer's costs associated with establishing a new relationship and learning the procedures and routines of a new service provider (Blut et al., 2014). In the situation where a customer is selecting a new hotel and they are not familiar with their services, the customer needs to spend time and effort evaluating a new hotel, gathering relevant information before making the reservation, and learning new procedures and routines so they can properly use the offered services of a new hotel. In relation to this effort, if the costs associated with these procedures are high, customers may be reluctant to change the hotel. In other words, if the customer has to expend significant expense and effort to find a new service provider, they will be hesitant to change and will be more likely to remain attached to the current service provider (Barroso and Picón,

2012). Thus, a high level of procedural switching costs helps customers to maintain the relationship and positively impacts customers' attachment to the brand (Park et al., 2013).

H4. A customer's procedural switching costs are positively related to the customer's brand attachment (H4-1: brand-self connection, H4-2: brand prominence) with the service provider.

The positive impact of financial switching costs on strengthening the relationship between the customer and the service provider has been widely confirmed (Tsai et al., 2006). Higher perceived financial switching costs make the customer more likely to stay with their current service provider to avoid losing their previous investment (sunk costs) (Colgate and Lang, 2001). In their study of hotel loyalty programs, Tanford et al. (2011) showed that customers who have a high-tier membership are more likely to be affectively committed to the brand and strengthen their emotional bond with the hotel brand. This is because they have already invested a high cost to acquire the membership and the benefits will not be secured if they switch hotels. Studies have shown that financial switching costs can be an antecedent to various relational outputs such as customer loyalty, customer retention, and customers' continuous intention to use (Park et al., 2013). When there financial switching costs are high, hence, customers are more likely to maintain their current relationship with the service provider due to concerns about the loss of benefits (such as loyalty points that can no longer be redeemed) (Balabanis et al., 2006), and subsequent repurchasing experiences can create and enhance cognitive and affective bonds.

H5. A customer's financial switching costs are positively related to the customer's brand attachment (H5-1: brand-self connection, H5-2: brand prominence) with the service provider.

Relational switching costs are associated with the strength of relational bonds that develop between the customer and the service provider (Berry and Parasuraman, 2004). Relational switching costs are considered important in the service industry due to the high degree of personal interaction, the heterogeneity of service outcomes, the intangible nature of services, and the prominent role of customers in service production (Bowen, 1986). Individuals tend to remain in their current groups when they feel a strong relationship with the group, which emphasises the importance of social/relational bond development between

customers and service providers (Price and Arnould, 1999). The development of social bonds (relational switching costs) increases the psychological cost to the customer of building a new relationship with an alternative provider, encourages the customer to remain in the current relationship, and increases the customer's satisfaction with their current interpersonal relationship (Jones et al., 2000), thereby contributing to their attachment to the current brand.

H6. A customer's relational switching costs are positively related to the customer's brand attachment (H6-1: brand-self connection, H6-2: brand prominence) with the service provider.

3.3 Brand attachment and CCB

Social exchange theory posits that a high level of customer-perceived value enhances and has a positive effect on CCB. To maintain their favourite brands, customers tend to exhibit proactive behaviour by investing and expanding their own resources rather than acting solely as recipients of the brand's resources (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). These behaviours reflect the customer's view of the brand's resources (i.e., time, social and financial resources) as their own in the process of self-expression (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Thomson et al., 2005). Favourable extra-role behaviours of brand-attached customers are voluntarily enacted towards a brand, other customers, or service provider, and are not required to deliver main services (Bove et al., 2009).

According to emotional attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979), consumers attached to a brand who perceive their experience with the brand as pleasurable would have positive feelings about the brand and give a favourable evaluation of the brand (Belaid and Behi, 2011). The greater the customer's attachment to the brand, the more willing they are to commit their effort and resources to maintaining the relationship (Park et al., 2010). When the consumer perceives a high level of brand-self connection, it promotes customers to create an ethos of caring that connects all other customers and employees (Tan et al., 2018). Consumers understand the values and goals of and are committed to a business, and can participate in the brand's offerings and adapt to the perceived benefits (Yi and Gong, 2008). This, in turn, is associated with a willingness to preserve their relationship with the brand (Thomson et al., 2005), and strong loyalty and advocacy behaviour toward the brands can be developed (Park et al., 2010), which initiates citizenship behaviour (Bove et al., 2009).

Customers' attitudes and behaviours are influenced not only by the brand-self connection but also by their strong feelings and thoughts towards the service brand (Thomson

et al., 2005). Based on relational exchanges, a customer's favourable perceptions will lead to their higher willingness to engage in customer citizenship behaviour (Ahn et al., 2019). In the hospitality and tourism setting, customers' positive attitude (as derived from service excellence and experiential value) can enhance their behavioural intention; hence positive behavioural response can be expected (Bui et al., 2015). Thus, when consumers are in emotional sync with the brand, they act as productive carriers of brand-associated positivity in the form of personal endorsements, supportive claims, favourable advocacy, and resolute recommendations (Sharif and Lemine, 2021). Therefore, customers' positive feelings and pleasant memories (brand prominence) is likely to build an emotional bond with a brand. In turn, a strong interaction with the brand can be expected (Thomson et al., 2005).

H7. A customer's brand-self connection is positively related to customer citizenship behaviour (H7-1: feedback, H7-2: helping, H7-3: advocacy) towards the service provider.

H8. A customer's brand prominence is positively related to customer citizenship behaviour (H8-1: feedback, H8-2: helping, H8-3: advocacy) towards the service provider.

Figure 1 provides a schematisation of the positive and negative switching barriers, and their theoretical links with brand attachment and CCB.

Fig.1.
Theoretical model

4. Methodology

4.1 Sampling and data collection

The data were collected in August 2018 via an online survey method. The online survey was designed using the survey platform Qualtrics and automatically sorted into SPSS 20. The questionnaire was sent to U.S.-based hotel customers who were participants on the MTurk platform (Barreda et al., 2016). MTurk is a virtual labour market with a diverse pool of workers (Goodman et al., 2013) that is increasingly applied to marketing research because its extensive and diverse sample of potential respondents are available at reasonable cost (Mason

and Suri, 2012). The online questionnaire was completed by 250 respondents who had had a hotel experience in the last 12 months. An initial filter question was included for screening purposes to ensure that only those who had booked a hotel room were included. Due to failure of the inspection check and survey quality problems, 17 samples were excluded. As a result, 233 valid questionnaires were collected (Table 1).

Table 1.
Sample characteristics

4.2 Measures

All survey items were identified from the extant literatures and adapted to the research context when necessary. The respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Appendix A presents the questionnaire items used in the study. Relational benefits (positive switching barrier) were measured using a scale adopted from Gwinner et al. (1998), Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002), Tsaur and Yen (2011), and Vázquez-Carrasco and Foxall (2006) and comprising three dimensions: social benefit, confidence benefit, and special treatment benefit. The measurement items for switching costs (negative switching barriers) were adopted from Burnham et al. (2003), Liu et al. (2011), Matzler et al. (2015), and Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003), and comprised three dimensions: procedural switching costs, financial switching costs and relational switching costs. Brand attachment was measured using a scale developed by Park et al. (2010) comprising two dimensions: brand-self connection and brand prominence. The scale developed by Groth (2005) and Yi and Gong (2013) were used to measure CCB and comprised three dimensions: helping customers, advocacy and providing feedback.

4.3 Tests of reliability and validity, and common method bias

The constructs' reliability and validity were assessed using with the AMOS and SPSS. Cronbach's alpha exceeded 0.70 for all latent variables, thus indicating reliability (Nunnally, 1978). The results of indicated an acceptable model ($\chi^2=562.0$; $df=438$; CFI=0.979; RMSEA = 0.035; AGFI=0.837; GFI=0.880; NNFI=0.915) (Hair et al., 2010).

To ensure the constructs' convergent validity of, the factor loadings, composite reliabilities (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) estimates were examined (Table 2). All factor loadings were greater than 0.50 and ranged between 0.623 and 0.962. The CR

values were between 0.711 and 0.816 (Hair et al., 2010). Each construct's value of AVE exceeded the squared correlations of the remaining constructs, a sign that convergent validity was not a concern (Table 2).

To avoid potential common method bias, following several steps were used. First, we ensured that respondents are regular hotel customers who were frequently using the hotel, hence have high level of relevant knowledge (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). Second, we assured respondents that the anonymity would be maintained (Fugate et al., 2009). In order to further reduce the common method bias possibility, (1) Harman's one-factor test and (2) the marker variable technique was conducted. First, the un-rotated factor solution showed that the largest factor accounted for 32.47%, which suggested that common method bias was unlikely to be a problem (Malhotra et al., 2005). Next, the marker variable technique (Lindell and Whitney, 2001) was implemented by introducing the marker variable "types of trip", which has little theoretical relationship with the other variables used in the model. The test results indicated that the marker variable was not significantly correlated with any of the other constructs (-0.119 to 0.016 ; $p \leq 0.01$). Furthermore, the correlations between the constructs in the original model remained significant after controlling for the effect of the marker variable, supporting the findings of the first test.

Table 2.

Construct analysis and Construct level correlation analysis

4.4 Tests of hypotheses

SEM were used to test the hypothesised relationships among the variables and overall model fit was acceptable ($\chi^2=506.9$; $df=483$; NFI=0.921; CFI=0.996; RMSEA=0.015, GFI=0.901; AGFI=0.856). According to the hypothesis testing results (Table 3), social benefit as a positive switching barrier only supported brand-self connection (supporting H1-1, $\beta = 0.329^{***}$), and brand prominence was not affected by social benefit (not supporting H1-2, $\beta = -0.111$). The confidence benefit and special treatment benefit were all significant for brand attachment (supporting H2-1, $\beta = 0.309^*$; supporting H2-2, $\beta = 0.733^{***}$; supporting H3-1, $\beta = 0.137^*$; supporting H3-2, $\beta = 0.181^*$).

With respect to the relationships between negative switching barriers and customer's brand attachment, procedural switching costs were not significant for brand attachment (not supporting H4-1, $\beta = -0.228$; not supporting H4-2, $\beta = 0.014$), but financial switching costs

and relational switching costs were positively related to brand attachment (supporting H5-1, $\beta = 0.303^{**}$; supporting H5-2, $\beta = 0.172^*$; supporting H6-1, $\beta = 0.400^{**}$; supporting H6-2, $\beta = 0.245^{**}$).

Finally, in the relationship between customer brand attachment and CCB, brand-self connection only supported helping (supporting H7-2, $\beta = 0.519^{***}$) and had no positive effect on feedback (not supporting H7-1, $\beta = -0.085$) or advocacy (not supporting H7-3, $\beta = -0.102$). However, brand prominence was found to be significant for all dimensions of CCB (supporting H8-1, $\beta = 0.914^{***}$; supporting H8-2, $\beta = 0.279^{**}$; supporting H8-3, $\beta = 0.887^{***}$).

Table 3.

Results of the structural model.

5. Discussions

5.1 Conclusion

This paper developed and tested a theoretical model that investigated the impact of hotel customers perceived positive and negative switching barriers on their development of attachment to a hotel brand, and its impact on their CCB. The findings are discussed below.

First, regarding the relationship between customers' positive switching costs and brand attachment, the results show that a hotel customer's social benefit can lead to higher brand self-connection but not brand prominence. The benefits of such social interactions may not always be commensurate with the customer's expectations (Anderson, 1973); that is, the positive impact of social interactions may be lessened if what customers gain from the service provider through these interactions does not always meet their expectations. Such a limited advantage (due to unmet expectations) fails to help customers develop a stronger emotional bond, particularly in terms of positive feelings and memories about the hotel. The results also showed that a hotel customer's confidence benefit and special treatment benefits have a positive influence on both dimensions of brand attachment. Benefits derived from confidence and special treatment benefits lead customers to have a sense of connectedness with the hotel (brand self-connection) and have positive feelings and memories (brand prominence) about the hotel and its service.

Second, according to the results of the impact of negative switching barriers on customers' brand attachment, procedural switching costs have no significant impact. This indicates that hotel customers are not greatly concerned about the additional effort required to switch to a new service provider (e.g., other hotels). This lack of concern may reflect the absence of notable distinctions among hotel brands in terms of their services and their overall systems (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000). Customers may therefore perceive that the expected costs of learning the routines and procedures of a new provider are not a burden. Financial switching costs (sunk costs) are significant for both dimensions of brand attachment. A role for financial switching costs in strengthening relationships has been widely suggested (Pick and Eisend, 2014; Tsai et al., 2006). This cost-benefit rationale encourages customers to maintain the relationship with the hotel and remain longer with the current service provider, thus enabling the development of a stronger, special bond. Relational switching costs are also significant to the development of customers' brand attachment. Relational switching costs are especially important in the service industry, given the high degree of personal interaction involved (Bowen, 1986). These results suggest that customers who perceive a high level of psychological costs due to the social bonds they have developed (relational switching costs) and who anticipate higher costs of building similar relationships with alternatives will be more likely to remain in the current relationship, thus increasing attachment to the brand.

Third, with respect to the relationship between customer's brand attachment and CCB, customer's brand prominence impacts every dimension of CCB. Prominence of feelings and thoughts can affect behaviour by inhibiting recall of other thoughts and feelings (Alba and Chattopadhyay, 1986), and thus brand prominence impacts customer behaviours such as consumer purchase behaviour (Akçura et al., 2004), decision-making (Alba and Marmorstein, 1987), and relationship-sustaining activities and behavioural commitment in the form of positive word of mouth and greater input of time, money, and energy in relationship-sustaining behaviours (Park et al., 2010).

However, a customer's brand self-connection only impacts their helping behaviour intention towards other customers. Compared to tangible consumer goods, attentiveness towards service brands may be limited as the purchased service does not enduringly belong to the customer and is not tangible. For instance, possessing and using a certain brand's tangible products (e.g., cars, clothing, and IT products...etc.) may engender stronger awareness that the product is a part of the customer and who they are. Additionally, brand prominence can be an especially important indicator of brand attachment when the customer is connected to

the brand because of its instrumental value (e.g., a person's iMac is important not because it is part of him/her but because it contributes to fulfilling their goals) (Park et al., 2010). That is, customers may be attached to a hotel brand more due to its instrumental value (e.g., this hotel brand always helps me feel at home and to have successful meetings...etc.) than by how the hotel brand explains itself.

5.2 Theoretical implications

The present study contributes to the literature on hotel and hospitality brand management by examining the role of customers' perceived switching barriers in building an attachment to a hotel brand and their citizenship behaviour. Following are the key contributions of the study.

To the best of this study's knowledge, this study is one of the first hospitality studies to adopt the theoretical lens of switching cost and investigate both views of positive and negative switching barrier in the context of the hotel guest experience. By demonstrating that a customer's attachment to a hotel brand is strengthened not only by relational benefits (positive switching barrier) but also by switching costs (negative switching barrier), the study highlights the importance of affirmative and passive reasons for customers to remain in a relationship with a hotel brand and how sub-dimensions of switching barriers are interrelated to predict a customer's attitude and behaviour to the brand. These findings are important as the effects of different types of switching factors are rarely investigated (Blut et al., 2014) and the specific role of switching barriers in customers and hotel brand relationship is a largely unexplored area (Koo et al., 2020). By empirically demonstrating the different impacts of each sub-dimension of switching barriers on customers' attachment toward the hotel, the study can contribute to understanding the determining factors that affect customers' decisions to stay/switch in the hotel industry (Han et al., 2011), which is considered to be one of the most critical tasks for hotels to maintain present market share (Huang et al., 2021).

By emphasising the role of customers' attachment to the hotel brand, this study ascertains that cognitive and affective emotional bonds toward the brand can be significant antecedents to their extra-role behaviours (Park et al., 2010). The results suggest that brand prominence can be an especially important indicator of brand attachment in promoting customers' CCB in the hospitality context. As discussed, attentiveness towards service brands may be rather limited as the purchased service does not enduringly belong to the customer; hence, customers are likely to perform favourable behaviours such as CCB not because of a particular sense of connection and oneness with the brand, but because of a fulfilled instrumental value from the provided service that evokes affirmative emotions that contain

positive feelings and memories (Ahn et al., 2019). The findings are in line with the previous study that service excellence and experiential value from a service provider promotes customers to have positive attitudes and emotions toward the brand (Bui et al., 2015), and in return, based on the relational exchanges, such favourable perceptions will lead to higher willingness to engage in CCB (Ahn et al., 2019). This result is unique as the majority of studies have put more emphasis on the role of brand-self connection in exploring customers' brand attachment and their behaviour (Chaplin and John, 2005; Mittal, 2006). Only a few studies have emphasised the importance of customers' emotions and being in emotional sync with a brand in promoting citizenship behaviour (Sharif and Lemine, 2021). By emphasising the importance of brand prominence, this study extends the theoretical foundations of CCB and brand attachment in the consumer behaviour research, applying them in a service industry.

5.3 Managerial implications

As retaining current customers effectively is essential for the hotel industry, hotels must understand customers' intention to switch and define the factors affecting customers' decision not to switch. First, the results of this study reveal that stronger switching barriers are required to ensure that current customers want to maintain their relationship with the hotel or cannot leave the current relationship. Hotel managers need to know that customers are more likely to be attached to the hotel when they develop commercial friendships with hotel staff (social benefit), trust the hotel and its service and thus feel confident in their use (confidence benefit), and receive customised special benefits (special treatment benefit). Therefore, service providers should pay more attention to customers to provide consistent and reliable service that builds trust, offer more customised benefits, and encourage interactions between customers and hotel staff.

In addition, barriers that prevent customers from choosing other hotels easily (negative switching barriers) are important determinants of the choice to continue their relationship with the current hotel. Service providers should make an effort to increase customers' perceptions of such barriers. For instance, hotels need to have distinctive membership benefits for loyal customers that cannot be easily replaced by other hotel brands, and greater efforts on closer relationships between customers and hotel staff can increase customers' perceptions of a stronger relational bond.

Finally, hotel managers need to know that customers who are attached to the hotel brand are more likely to voluntarily help other customers, recommend the hotel to others, and provide feedback to the hotel. Specifically, as a customer's positive memories and feelings regarding the hotel and its service (brand prominence) are stronger determinants of CCB than their sense of oneness with the hotel brand (brand self-connection), hotel managers need to train employees to better serve their customers to ensure customer satisfaction with the hotel and positive feelings and memories of customers towards the hotel and the provided service.

5.4 Limitation

This study has several limitations that provide opportunities for future research. First, the results of this study are limited to the sector selected for empirical study. It would be interesting to apply this framework to other service areas (e.g., airline industry, etc.) to determine the roles of each construct and relationship. Second, the analysis of cross-sectional data may be limited in its ability to explain how such relationship and switching cost barriers are developed. It would be desirable to conduct a longitudinal analysis using the same customers as the unit of study. Third, the geographical area in which the study was performed is narrow, as the sample was collected only in the United States. Because the results obtained may vary depending on where the survey was carried out, collecting samples in other countries will provide meaningful implications.

Appendix A. Questionnaire items

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Fig.1.

Theoretical model

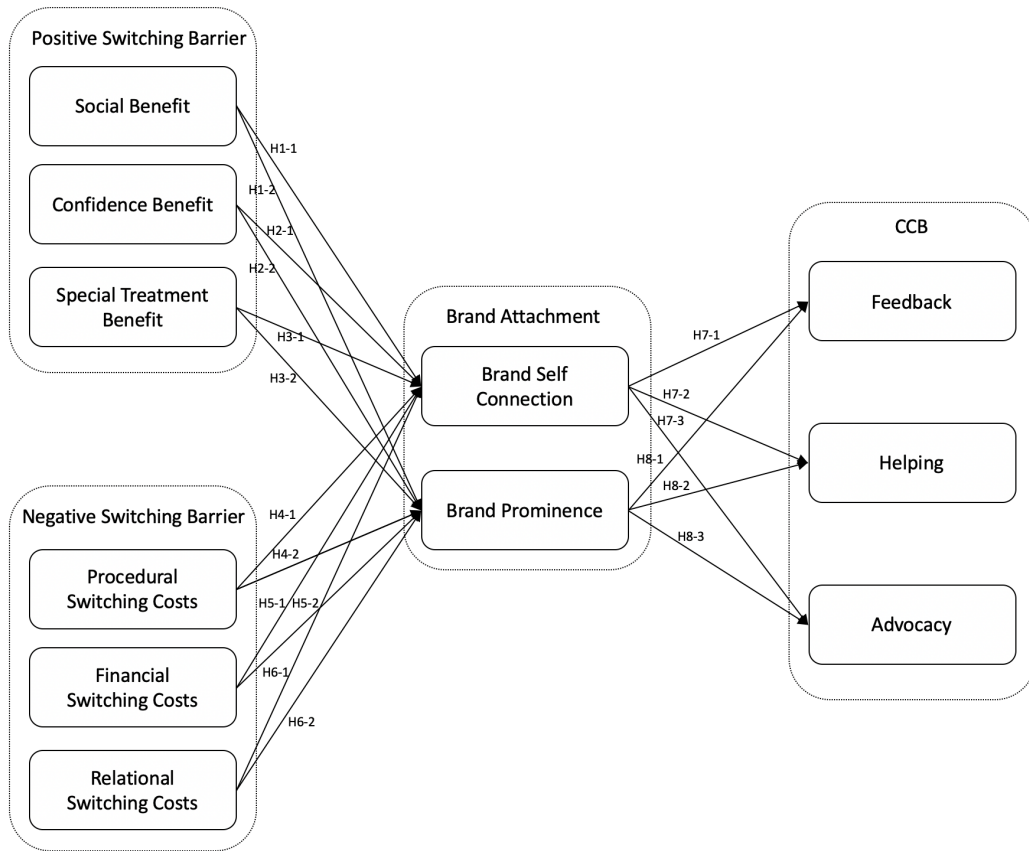


Table 1.
Sample characteristics

		N (233)	%
Gender	Male	98	42.1
	Female	135	57.9
Age in Year	18-24 years	31	13.3
	25-34 years	110	47.2
	35-44 years	50	21.5
	45-54 years	26	11.2
	55-64 years	11	4.7
	65 years or older	5	2.1
Level of Education	Less than High School	2	0.9
	High School / Technical School	56	24.0
	Undergraduate / Associate Degree	134	57.5
	Postgraduate Degree	41	17.6
House Monthly Income	Less than \$19,999	31	13.3
	\$20,000-39,999	57	24.5
	\$40,000-59,999	57	24.5
	\$60,000-79,999	34	14.6
	\$80,000-99,999	26	11.2
	\$100,000-129,999	11	4.7
	\$130,000-159,999	8	3.4
	\$160,000 or more	9	3.9

Table 2.
Construct analysis and Construct level correlation analysis

Construct analysis			
Construct	Average variance extracted	Composite reliability	Range of factor loadings
Positive Switching Barrier (Relational Benefit)			
Social Benefit (F1)	0.756	0.720	0.864-0.873
Confidence Benefit (F2)	0.781	0.741	0.623-0.919
Special treatment Benefit (F3)	0.822	0.771	0.824-0.962
Negative Switching Barrier (Switching Costs)			
Procedural Switching Costs (F4)	0.825	0.724	0.766-0.887
Financial Switching Costs (F5)	0.876	0.730	0.851-0.892
Relational Switching Costs (F6)	0.675	0.773	0.788-0.849
Brand Attachment			
Brand Self Connection (F7)	0.794	0.815	0.808-0.944
Brand Prominence (F8)	0.843	0.816	0.814-0.868
CCB			
Feedback (F9)	0.783	0.711	0.709-0.821
Helping (F10)	0.874	0.755	0.842-0.894
Advocacy (F11)	0.685	0.774	0.798-0.874

$\chi^2=562.0$ ($df=438$), CFI=0.979, RMSEA=0.035, AGFI=0.837, GFI=0.880, NNFI=0.915

Construct level correlation analysis											
Construct	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11
F1	.756	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
F2	.188	.781	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
F3	.256	.063	.822	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
F4	.394	.304	.286	.825	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
F5	.267	.474	.600	.186	.876	-	-	-	-	-	-
F6	.296	.527	.196	.013	.266	.675	-	-	-	-	-
F7	.350	.395	.630	.137	-.050	.112	.794	-	-	-	-
F8	.422	.430	.459	.319	.016	.201	.360	.843	-	-	-
F9	.226	.601	.252	-.087	.536	.153	.263	.301	.783	-	-
F10	.502	.355	.226	.324	-.053	.359	.473	-.015	.048	.874	-
F11	.819	.774	.585	.268	.759	.281	.054	.583	.545	.690	.685

Note: n = 210 observations; all correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

Table 3.

Results of the structural model.

	Hypothesis		Estimate	STD Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	Results
H1-1	Social Benefit	→ Brand Self Connection	0.329***	0.361	0.091	3.632	supported
H1-2	Social Benefit	→ Brand Prominence	-0.111	-0.203	0.166	-0.670	not supported
H2-1	Confidence Benefit	→ Brand Self Connection	0.309*	0.112	0.180	1.719	supported
H2-2	Confidence Benefit	→ Brand Prominence	0.733***	0.442	0.215	3.402	supported
H3-1	Special Treatment Benefit	→ Brand Self Connection	0.137*	0.183	0.074	1.866	supported
H3-2	Special Treatment Benefit	→ Brand Prominence	0.181*	0.402	0.099	1.836	supported
H4-1	Procedural Switching Costs	→ Brand Self Connection	-0.228	-0.158	0.151	-1.514	not supported
H4-2	Procedural Switching Costs	→ Brand Prominence	0.014	0.016	0.142	0.099	not supported
H5-1	Financial Switching Costs	→ Brand Self Connection	0.303**	0.318	0.106	2.868	supported
H5-2	Financial Switching Costs	→ Brand Prominence	0.172*	0.301	0.099	1.731	supported
H6-1	Relational Switching Costs	→ Brand Self Connection	0.400**	0.280	0.163	2.447	supported
H6-2	Relational Switching Costs	→ Brand Prominence	0.245**	0.287	0.122	2.011	supported
H7-1	Brand Self Connection	→ Feedback	-0.085	-0.116	0.080	-1.056	not supported
H7-2	Brand Self Connection	→ Helping	0.519***	0.497	0.080	6.519	supported
H7-3	Brand Self Connection	→ Advocacy	-0.102	-0.145	0.068	-1.512	not supported
H8-1	Brand Prominence	→ Feedback	0.914***	0.748	0.167	5.467	supported
H8-2	Brand Prominence	→ Helping	0.279**	0.160	0.133	2.093	supported
H8-3	Brand Prominence	→ Advocacy	0.887**	0.752	0.147	6.039	supported

NFI=0.921; CFI=0.996; RMSEA=0.015, GFI=0.901; AGFI=0.856 and $\chi^2=506.9$ with $df=483$

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Appendix A. Questionnaire items

Constructs and Question items (1: Strongly disagree – 7: Strongly agree)	Source
<p>Positive switching barrier</p> <p>Social benefit</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Recognised by the staff 2) Familiar with the staff * 3) Developed a friendship with the staff 4) Enjoy social relationship with the staff <p>Confidence benefit</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Trust the service* 2) Less worry with the service 3) Know what to expect from the service 4) Receive the highest level of service <p>Special treatment benefit</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Get discounts or special deals* 2) Get better prices 3) Placed higher on the priority list 4) Get faster services <p>Negative switching barrier</p> <p>Procedural switching costs (<i>If I were to switch to another hotel,</i>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Learn how things work 2) Unfamiliar with the policies 3) Starting up process is not quick / easy 4) Learn about the policies <p>Financial switching costs (<i>If I were to switch to another hotel,</i>)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Take a lot of cost to have the same level of membership services and benefits 2) Cause hidden, unpredictable costs 3) Result in some unexpected hassle <p>Relational switching costs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Like the public image 2) Support the hotel as a firm. 3) Care about the brand/company name <p>Brand attachment</p> <p>Brand-Self connection</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The hotel is part of me 2) Feel personally connected 3) Feel emotionally bonded to the hotel 4) The hotel represents who I am <p>Brand prominence</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Thoughts and feelings toward the hotel are often automatic, coming to mind* 2) Thoughts and feelings toward the hotel come to mind naturally and instantly 3) Automatically evokes many good thoughts about the past, present, and future 4) Have many thoughts about the hotel[‡] <p>Customer citizenship behaviour</p> <p>Feedback</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Share a useful idea* 2) Give comment about good service I received 3) Inform experienced problem* 4) Fill out a customer satisfaction survey 5) Provide the information requested <p>Helping</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Assist other customers* 2) Help other customers 3) Teach other customers 4) Give advice to other customers <p>Advocacy</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Say positive things 2) Recommend the hotel 3) Encourage friends and relatives to visit 	<p>Vázquez-Carrasco and Foxall, 2006; Tsaour and Yen, 2011; Gwinner et al., 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002</p> <p>Burnham et al. (2003); Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003); Liu et al. (2011); Matzler et al. (2015)</p> <p>Park et al., 2010</p> <p>Groth, 2005; Yi and Gong, 2013</p>

* Removed due to low loadings