

## **Examining the relationship among E-SERVICEQUAL, relational benefits, and relationship quality in online tourism portals: The moderating role of personality traits**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to develop and test a model that will explain the potential influences of “eService quality,” “relational benefits,” and “relationship quality” on E-loyalty in the context of tourism websites. In addition, the study will investigate the potential moderating impact of personality differences (e.g., “variety-seeking” and “relationship-proneness”) on the relationship between relationship quality and E-loyalty.*

**Key words:** E-SERVICEQUALITY, relational benefit, relationship quality, E-loyalty

### **Literature review**

With the proliferation of e-commerce over the last few decades, internet use among travelers continues to increase. The Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) reported that about 64% of travelers search for information and plan their trips through travel websites (TIA, 2005). Accordingly, competition is fierce among online travel agencies as they seek to gain profit from this promising online travel market (Sanchez-Franco & Rondan-Cataluna, 2009). As the dollar value of online transactions and the number of Internet users continues to increase, the focus of online B2C (Business to Consumer) marketing has changed from customer acquisition to retention of customers (Liang, Chen, & Wang, 2008). To carry out the objective of increasing customer loyalty in such an environment, it is important for marketers to understand the characteristic of the electronic marketplace (Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2010). Compared to traditional offline businesses, online businesses have various competitive factors that offer convenience to consumers (such as greater flexibility), enhanced market outreach, lower cost structures, and faster transactions (Liang et al., 2008). However, online service also comes with its own set of challenges. For example, in online transactions, consumers are able to evaluate and compare competing products and easily change from one firm to another with only a few mouse clicks (Wood & Van Heerden, 2007). Thus, it is relatively difficult to build, “switching barriers” in online business operations as compared with conventional brick-and-mortar stores. Hence, the “customer loyalty” issue has become the main interest for online marketers (Liang et al., 2008).

In line with this view, “relationship marketing” can play an important role in creating a competitive advantage in online tourism services it has been shown to activate strong customer relationships that strengthen customer loyalty and raise firm profits (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Lai, Chen, & Lin, 2007; Liang et al., 2008). Srirojanant and Thirkell (1998) argued that the Internet is a core part of relationship building and that advances in online technologies facilitate relationship marketing by facilitating continuing interaction with a firm’s customer base.

Regarding the role between a service provider and its customers, two conceptual approaches have developed (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002): 1) relational benefits (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998) and, 2) relationship

quality (Crosby et al., 1990; Dorsch, Swanson, & Kelley, 1998). The “relational benefits” approach argues that consumers expect benefits (confidence benefits, social benefits, and special treatment benefits) in addition to core services as they establish a long-term relationship with a service provider (Gwinner et al., 1998).

In turn, the “relationship quality” approach refers to “a metaconstruct composed of several key components reflecting the overall nature of relationships between companies and consumers” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002, p. 234). Specifically, relationship quality focuses on the general nature of the relationship (e.g., trust, commitment, and satisfaction) to explain customer loyalty and word-of-mouth recommendation. In brief, the “relational benefits approach” concerns the customer’s perceived benefits originating from the relationship; whereas, the “relationship quality approach” focuses on the relationship itself (Kim & Ok, 2009).

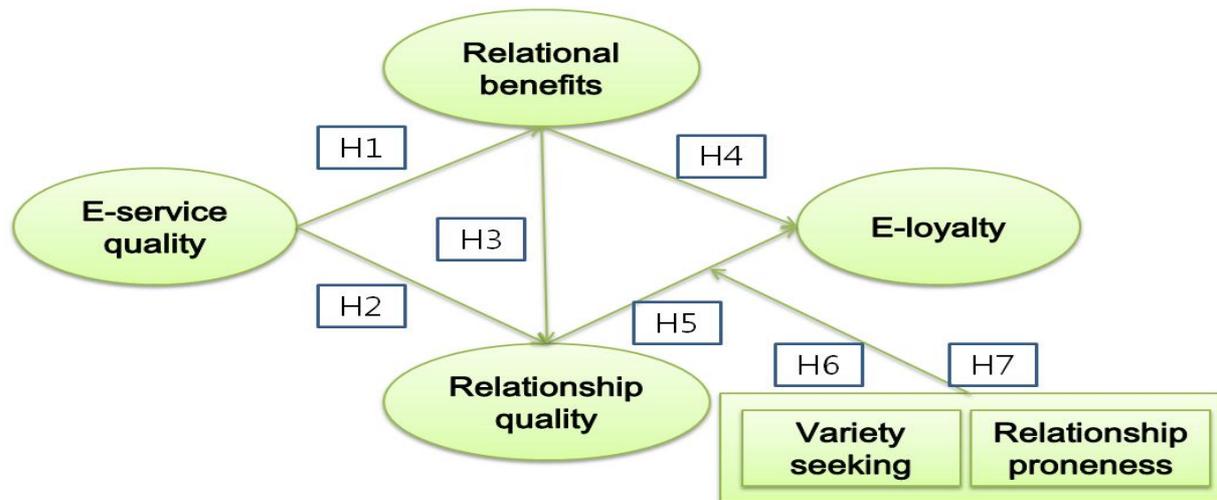
Recently, the increase in the number of websites has allowed consumers to enjoy a variety of online services, and online service quality has become an important component of relational marketing. Zeithaml (2002) posits that companies should shift the focus of their eBusiness from eCommerce to eService in order to increase repeat purchasers and establish long-term relationships with customers. To date, however, little research has focused on eService quality at tourism websites. Moreover, few studies have examined, comprehensively, the impact of eService quality, relational benefits, and relationship quality on customer loyalty in the online tourism setting. Therefore, it has become important to define the relationship between eService quality and relational benefits in order to understand online relationship marketing.

Lastly, although tourism marketers are striving to provide better service to consumers by strengthening relational benefit strategies, consumer satisfaction does not always lead to consumer loyalty because the responses to relationship marketing efforts are different depending on individual personalities (Adjei & Clark, 2009). Additionally, empirical studies on the effect of personality on relationship marketing remain scarce.

To fill the gap left in previous research—and to understand the holistic framework of relationship marketing in the context of tourism websites the current study seeks to develop a comprehensive model (see figure 1) to explain the role of a consumer’s perceived relational benefits and relationship quality on his or her loyalty decisions. The overarching hypothesis is that eService quality will be antecedent to both relational benefits and relationship quality, and it is expected that when looking at the relationship between relational benefits and relationship quality, relational benefits will impact directly both relational quality and customer loyalty, whereas relationship quality will work to mediate between relationship benefits and customer loyalty.

Finally, as research is needed to examine the potential impact of personality differences (e.g., variety-seeking and relationship-proneness) on the relationship between relational quality and we will test the moderating effect of the model across personality traits as well.

*Figure 1 - Conceptual Model*



## **Methodology**

### **Sample and procedures**

A self-reporting questionnaire will be distributed to a randomly-selected group of undergraduate and graduate students, as well as faculty members at a large public university located in the southwestern United States. Using the university's listservs, an email survey will be sent to potential participants. When answering the survey questions, respondents will be asked to consider their experiences with any tourism websites they are currently using.

### **Research Design**

The questionnaire will consist of four sections. Section One is comprised of questions to measure E-service qualities. Section Two will gather the information about relational benefits and relationship qualities. Section Three will consist of questions to identify customer personality (e.g., variety-seeking and relationship-proneness), and loyalty. Lastly, Section Four will be comprised of questions designed to gather respondents' demographic profiles.

### **Measurement of variables**

E-service qualities will be measured with items developed by Ho & Lee (2007), which are comprised of 18 items. Items on relational benefits will be based on the work of Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, (1998b). The items on relationship quality were developed by Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, (2002). Items that measure variety-seeking (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1995), relationship-proneness (Bloemer, Odekerken-Schröder, & Kestens, 2003), and loyalty (Henning-Thuran et al, 2002) will be used to find the relationship among those variables.

### **Analytical method**

The PASW 18.0 statistical package will be used to analyze the results. The

researchers will use Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the relationship among variables by using Amos 5.0.

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