Assessing the mediating role of e-customer satisfaction on the relations between e-service quality and e-customer loyalty: Evidence from Uzbekistan Hotel Industry.

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Abstract: The aim of the present study is to examine the influence of e-service quality on consumer loyalty, noting the mediating role e-customer satisfaction. The research was conducted on customer Samarkand. Data were collected from a sample of 100 respondents. The PLS-SEM analysis applie measure the relationship of the constructs. The results of this study found positive effect of e-ser quality on e-loyalty, which was mediated partially through consumer e-satisfaction. The main finding this research provide some empirical implications for internet marketers and online retailers in Uzbekis E-vendors should understand the customers' expectations and e-loyalty regarding lodging industry in o to attract new customers as well as to retain their existing clients.

1. Introduction

Uzbekistan has an enormous potential in tourism. There are several supporting industries which play an important role in developing tourism industries itself which one of them is the hospitality industry. Based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics on the increasing number of star and non-star hotels in Uzbekistan during 2018-2019, there are three provinces have the largest number of star hotels namely Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. At the same time, the province of Samarkand and Bukhara are the highest number owned non-star hotels.

Based on the above information, it can be seen that the development of hotel business in Samarkand runs very rapidly. The courage of stakeholders and investors to run a hotel in

Samarkand has driven by representing the high demand for hotel at this time and the forecast where the Samarkand's level of mobility will grow in the future. By the growing number of hotels, it will also increase the competition in this industry. Therefore, hotels should build creative strategies to attract their future clients.

Originally, hotel is only used to accommodate people, but nowadays it has turned to have dual functions as a business tool. Hospitality industry nowadays has become one of the industries which develop both to search for online information and conduct online transactions, because it will provide the convenience and time efficiency to clients.

Three out of four billion users around the world access the internet on mobile devices to connect with social media monthly (McDonald, 2018). Internet has been adopted significantly in the travel and tourism market due to the integration of hotels (Collins, 2013), which leads practitioners and researchers to have forward works (Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010).

One of the most significant online contacts between clients and hoteliers is the hotel website. The information, interface, and trustworthy facts and details (Ahmad & Sun, 2018) showed on the hotel website and social media can influence online bookers (Ferguson, 2014) and direct customer decision making (Martín & Herrero, 2012). In the long run, the hotel website's interactivity could motivate users to reload the hotel website (Abdullah, Jayaraman, & Kamal, 2016). Therefore, hotel and travel suppliers could rely on this 'must-have' distribution channel to reach the customer and sell products without paying commission for third parties such as online travel agencies and travel companies (Ling, Dong, Guo, & Liang, 2015). In addition, the e-service quality strongly effects on customer satisfaction and loyalty as a capable predictor (Ho & Lee, 2007). Perceived value and customer satisfaction as the main antecedents for customer loyalty significantly influence customer's attitudinal and behavioral loyalty towards products or services (Kungumapriya & Malarmathi, 2018).

There are significant differences between the loyalty of customers purchasing on the Internet and in the traditional ways while the studies concerning the e-loyalty in Uzbekistan are still limited. It becomes crucial for online retailers to understand the main factors influencing the e-loyalty of Uzbekistan customers. Therefore, this research aimed to propose a model predicting customers' e-loyalty in the hotels in Uzbekistan. In particular, this study considers the impact of e-

service quality on customers' e-loyalty in hospitality industry. Besides, the author also studies the effect of the mediating role of e-customer satisfaction on consumers' e-loyalty.

II. Literature Review

E-Service Quality

E-service quality is the latest version of the service quality that is developed to evaluate the services provided by the internet network. E-service quality is built to renew the traditional model from service quality that will be used to measure electronic service quality in internet settings (V. Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and A. Malhotra, 2000). E-service quality is considered as the website to facilitate shopping, purchasing, and delivery of products and services efficiently and effectively (A. Parasuraman, V. A. Zeithaml, and A. Maholtra, 2005). E-service quality is an extension of the capability of a website to facilitate shopping, buying and distribution effectively and efficiently (R.B. Chase, F.R. Jacobs, and N.J. Aquilano, 2006). E-service quality is an important thing that determines success in e-commerce (P.Y. Chu, G.Y. Lee dan Y. Chao, 2012). There are three dimensions of e-service quality, namely: (i) Products and services, (ii) convenience, and (iii) interactive support.

According to Li, Peng, Jiang, and Law (2017), the hotel website is defined such e-service quality by online lookers and investigated its factors; and is perhaps one of the important way to communicate with its customers in the online platform (Chen & Dhillon, 2003) especially at the pre-purchase phase. The overall performance of a website service is evaluated by online users, named hotel website quality (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002). Good quality is essential for the service standard of the hotel (Li, Ye, & Law, 2013). The concept of "e-service quality" is mentioned in different industries and positively influences the marketing performance and e-service (Liu, Arnett, & Litecky, 2000). In the e-commerce, customer satisfaction was inclined with e-service quality (Bai et al., 2008) such as information system (Liu et al., 2000) (Jeong et al., 2003) guest comments (Zhao, Xu, & Wang, 2018). Moreover, some studies have shown that the direct relationships between website quality and e-loyalty (e..g., Tandon et al., 2017), website quality and e-trust, e-trust and e-loyalty (e.g., Ghalandari, 2012; Tirtayani & Sukaatmadja, 2018), website quality and satisfaction (e.g., Tirtayani & Sukaatmadja, 2018), e-satisfaction and e-loyalty (e.g.,

Safa & Solms, 2016; Taheri & Akbari, 2016). Ahrholdt et al, 2017) has established the role of service quality as the antecedent for customer satisfaction and customer satisfaction as an antecedent to loyalty.

E-Satisfaction

Customer judgment of a product or service would lead to customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1999), and consequently directly affects behavioral intentions of repurchases (Yee et al., 2008). Satisfied customers have potential to become loyal customers, who not only repurchase service, but also spread positive word-of-mouth of the organization (Min, Min, & Chang, 2002). Chitty, Ward, and Chua (2007) viewed customer satisfaction as a comparison between the sacrifice experienced (cost) and the perceived rewards (benefit) during the purchase and consumption process. Qiu, Ye, Bai, and Wang (2015, p. 91) suggest that customer satisfaction in hospitality can be defined "as the extent of overall delight or contentment felt by the clients, resulting from the capability of the hotel experience to fulfill the customer's desires, expectations and needs in relation to their hotel stay." The pivotal role of accommodation service quality and related customer satisfaction have also been noted as crucial antecedents in traveler's decision- making processes, as well as in creating customer loyalty (Berezina et al, 2012; Liat, Mansori, & Huei, 2014; Yee, Yeung, & Cheng, 2010).

In the virtual environment, Anderson and Srinivasan (2003) defined e-satisfaction as ''the delight of the customer with respect to his or her prior purchasing experience with a given electronic commerce firm. E-satisfaction is the expanse of customer satisfaction with the service or quality that is supplied by the company to customers (R.E. Anderson and S.S. Srinivasan , 2003). E-satisfaction becomes the magnitude of customer satisfaction with the service or quality that the company provides to customers (R.E. Anderson and S.S. Srinivasan , 2003). Setting an e-satisfaction needs to provide the customers' fit while performing transactions through the website (D.M. Syzmanski and R.T. Hise , 2000). E-satisfaction keeps positive behaviors and responses through the experience (S. Muylle, R. Moenaert, and M. Despontin, 2004). E-satisfaction will be obtained when the attributes of the website and the services provided in accordance with customer expectations (H.S. Bansal., et. Al, 2004). The existence of e-satisfaction is capable to create a positive impact to customers to perform repeatable purchases and recommend the products or

services that are used by customers (N. Elkhani, S. Soltani dan M.H.M. Jamshidi, 2014). Therefore, e-customer satisfaction plays a pivotal role in leading e-loyalty (Tirtayani & Sukaatmadja, 2018). Several research has been done among academics and practitioners that customer satisfaction and service quality are prerequisites of loyalty (Ahrholdt, Gudergan, & Ringle, 2017; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Gremler & Brown, 1997). Yee et al (2010) found that service quality has a significant and direct impact on customer satisfaction and that the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty is also highly significant.

E-Loyalty

Loyalty is a crucial factor in achieving organizational sustainability and success (Bulut & Karabulut, 2018). Loyalty leads to profit and growth for an organization through increased purchases, willingness to pay higher premiums (by increasing profit margin), retention, reduction in marketing costs over time, and decreased vulnerability to competitive threats (Ittner & Larcker, 1998; Tirtayani & Sukaatmadja, 2018). In general, it is considered as a "commitment toward preferred products or services" (Liat et al, 2014, p. 318), while in the hospitality setting as "the chance of a customer's returning to a hotel and that person's willingness to behave as a partner to the organization" (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999, p. 349).

The advancement of the internet and related technologies has extended the brand loyalty concept to the online environment and retitled it e-loyalty. Customer loyalty (e-loyalty) is the presence of customer's profitable attitude and commitment of online retailer to produce repeating customer's buying behavior (R.E. Anderson and S.S. Srinivasan ,2003). E-loyalty is a situation where existing customers remain loyal to use the services or products of the company (J. Gummerus, et.al, 2004). E-loyalty is the latest version of the customer loyalty that term is used in e-commerce. E-loyalty is defined as the intention to visit the website and there is a possibility to make transactions in the future (E.A.Ghani, F.H. Kenneth and M. Roger,2011). The dimensions of e-loyalty are divided into two (N. Elkhani, S. Soltani dan M.H.M. Jamshidi, 2014), namely: (i) intention to repurchase which means customers want to do next transaction in the future, and (ii) intention to recommend which means that customers want to recommend it to their friends and relatives to do the same transaction with what they have been experienced. The main goal of e-loyalty is to transform a behavioral intention into purchasing actions, namely a repeat buying

behavior (Cyr, Kindra, & Dash, 2008). Different researches confirm the relationship between website quality and e-loyalty (Tandon et al., 2017; Tirtayani & Sukaatmadja, 2018).

Conceptual model and hypotheses

Drawing on the theoretical background outlined previously, a conceptual model has been developed that demonstrates the influence of e-service quality on e-loyalty mediated by e-customer satisfaction (Figure 1). Therefore, the following 3 hypotheses will be examined:

Hypothesis I: There is a positive direct effect between e-service quality and e-customer satisfaction.

Hypothesis II: There is a positive direct effect between e-service quality and e-customer loyalty.

Hypothesis III: There is a positive direct effect between e-customer satisfaction and e-customer loyalty

Hypothesis IV: The relationship between e-service quality and e-customer loyalty is positively mediated by e-customer satisfaction.
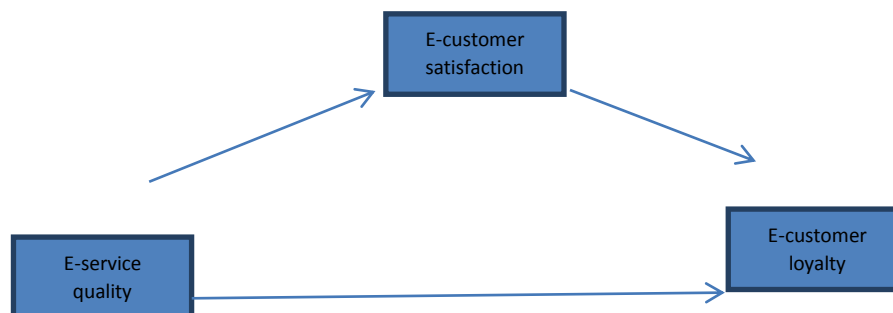

Figure 1. The research model and the proposed relationships

III. Methodology

The research was used a survey method, where a sample of 100 online clients was chosen to test the relationships between e-service quality, e-satisfaction, and e-loyalty. The population in this study was consumers in Samarkand, the ancient city of Uzbekistan. The unit of analysis in this research is the individual consumer who had bought online hotel services in the last six months.

Data were collected through a questionnaire consisting of two parts. In the first part of the questionnaire demographic questions were requested to obtain data about the outline of the respondents. In the second part there were twenty questions that related to the variables of e-service quality, e-satisfaction, and e-loyalty. All constructs in the conceptual model were measured with multiple items, which were developed by previous scientists. All units were rated on a five point agree-disagree Likert scale.

Partial least square-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used by the SmartPLS 3.0 software to evaluate the hypotheses in this study. PLS-SEM is a statistical analysis technique for data exploration within the quantitative research discipline used to measure the observed variables collected from instruments to identify their influence on latent or unobserved variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Hair et al. (2014) proposed the use of PLS-SEM because of its efficient use as an analysis tool used to support prediction models from empirical data. Vuong and Giao (2019) promoted that PLSSEM has the ability to calculate p-values through a bootstrapping technique if samples are independent and if the data is not required to be normally distributed.

III. Results

Total number of respondents, with the exclusion of outliers, is 100. As a demographic results 72.8% of respondent under the age group of 21–30. 16.3% respondent lying under the age group of 31–40. Age group of 41–50 consist 8.4% of respondent and 2.5% were under the age group of above 50. We consist male and female, both respondent in which 43.2% were female and 56.8% were male. Education level: under graduate respondent was 36.4%, graduated respondent was 42.4% and 21.2% respondent were post graduates.

The results of the hypotheses were indicated as the following:

Hypothesis 1: The result showed that e-service quality had a positive and significant relationship with e-satisfaction (p-value = 0.000 and beta coefficient = 0.254) which means that consumers who had a good perception of service quality tended to show a higher level of e-satisfaction. This was carried by the previous study of Polites et al. (2012). Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2: the result showed that e-service quality had a positive and significant relationship with e-loyalty (p-value = 0.000 and beta coefficient = 0.230). This was supported by previous studies of Tirtayani and Sukaatmadja (2018), Tandon et al. (2017). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3: The result showed that e-satisfaction had a positive and significant relationship with e-loyalty (p-value = 0.000 and beta coefficient = 0.246) which means that consumers who had a high e-satisfaction showed a higher level of e-loyalty. This was conducted by previous researches of Taheri and Akbari (2016), Safa and Solms (2016). Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4: The result showed that e-satisfaction mediated the relationship between e-service quality and e-loyalty due to some following reasons: first, the results indicated that the p-value for the direct path SQ→EL was 0.000; SQ→ES was 0.000; ES→EL was 0.000 which were statistically significant (p<0.05). Second, the p-value of the indirect effect (SQ→ES→EL) was 0.000 which was statistically significant as well. Hence, the mediating role of e-satisfaction has found (Giao & Vuong, 2019). Therefore, hypothesis 4 was supported and this mediation was partial.

Conclusion

This research was aimed to examine the impact of e-service quality on customers' e-loyalty in lodging industry while it also surveyed the effect of the mediating role of e-customer satisfaction on consumers' e-loyalty. Even though many researchers were worked on the e-loyalty and e-satisfaction, very few researchers studied about the impact on the hospitality industry in Uzbekistan. This study discussed the important issues from the domain of e-service quality, e-satisfaction, and e-loyalty. There is an impact between e-service quality and e-satisfaction as well as e-satisfaction and e-loyalty with a positive contribution. Therefore, in order to maximize e-satisfaction, the management needs to intensify e-service quality while the success of providing e-satisfaction to the customer will increase the e-loyalty of the clients. The higher e-customer satisfaction, the higher positive engagements of customers toward e-service quality. On the other hand, the more understanding the customer' interest, demand, emotion and behaviors of the

targeted customers toward the hotel service' creativity, content and booking process, the more successful repurchase and repeated guests will be. Therefore, hotel managers need to ensure better website performance as it can entice more customers purchase. Moreover, its advantage is driven for higher yield and competitive positioning in the current and future markets.

This research confirmed the role of e-satisfaction in predicting customers' e-loyalty. Having satisfied customers is pivotal for online websites. Customers usually pay attention to websites that provide more information with highly reliable and accurate. Invest in reliability will increase the quality of the e-service and could attract more new customers in the competitive market. In order to retain an existing customer, managers should devote themselves to make customers feel satisfied with their provided products and services. They need to improve their performance to adjust to customer expectations, as well as increasing customer e-satisfaction and e-loyalty.

This study made essential contributions to lodging industry research. The results of this research offered some significant implications for marketers who prepared strategic plans and implemented tools to boost the performance of their e-business. This study helps owners and managers of accommodation institutions to undertake the strengths and weaknesses. It helps them treating and improving the e-service quality through understanding the crucial factors that determine the customers' behavioral intention which consequently will help e-sellers to update their managerial and IT strategies and increases profits and get the competitive advantage. In addition, it helps lodging industries enhance the e-service quality to meet customer expectations and perceptions and even increasing the total revenues by increasing the number of satisfied customers.

Limitations and further research

This research offered some valuable insights into hospitality research. However, there are several limitations of this study and recommendation to the future research. First, empirical research was conducted only in Uzbekistan. Therefore, data results mainly reflected in customer behaviors in Uzbekistan. The author recommended using the study in different nations to obtain an international sample. Second, there are only two dimensions of e-loyalty in this study,

nevertheless, there are more important factors related to customers e-loyalty (booking intention, room rate strategy, perceived value, perceived enjoyment, security and privacy, e-trust, etc.). Finally, limitations are inclined with timing, budget, data availability and accessibility and other practical concerns.

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