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## Will you pick me again? International Hotel Chains Brand Loyalty Reflection from User Reviews

Online reviews had been used as the data source to examine customer satisfaction and dissatisfactions for more than a decade; however, limited studies examined brand. This study extracted 12 active online review contributors with 43 reviews, examined their brand loyalty behavior on international hotel chains. This study developed a method that utilizing online review data to identify the hotel customer attitudinal loyalty. The results indicated that repeat customers have stronger brand loyalty and their attitudinal behavior can be reflected from their reviews. Hotel managers should use review websites a new management tool to identify the potential loyal customers and understand the repurchasing intentions.

Keywords: brand loyalty, online reviews, international hotel chain, customer behavior

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**Research Background**

The competition among the hotel industry is fierce. In order to survive, the hotel manager needs to continuously improve financial performance and maintain or reduce the operational cost at the same time. The hotel revenue is mainly determined by the number of customers, and the cost of retaining a repeat customer actually is lower than attracting a new one. Thus, it is important for the hotel manager to understand how to attract repeat customer and build up customer loyalty. Customer loyalty defined as a customer who repurchases the same product or service from the same provider, no matter when and where it is available, and loyal customers are willing to recommend and maintain a positive attitude toward the product or service provider (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). Based on the definition, the concept of customer loyalty comprised of two dimensions, including behavioral customer loyalty and attitudinal customer loyalty (Rather & Hollebeek, 2019). Customer loyalty researches in hospitality and tourism discipline had been conducted for decades to identify the factors that influence loyalty behavior, such as satisfaction (Han & Hyun, 2017; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Yavas, Karatepe, Babakus & Avci, 2004; Yung & Chan, 2002); service quality (Choi & Chu, 2001; Han & Hyun, 2017; Yung & Chan, 2002); Value (Choi & Chu, 2001); hotel image (Han & Hyun, 2017; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000); Subjective norm (Han & Ryu, 2012); and organization response (Yavas et al., 2004). These researches contributed in the knowledge of customer brand loyalty intention in hospitality and tourism, but because the number of responses is limited and the answer was based on memories and perception, the level of data accuracy could be affected. Therefore, data collected by questionnaire may not be able to capture customer actual behavior (Kellar, Hawkey, Inkpen and Watter, 2008) to predict and analyze customer loyalty accurately. Several studies adopted the online reviewers' data collected from websites to analysis on customer satisfaction (Guo, Barnes

& Jia, 2017; Liu, Teichert, Roosi, Li & Hu, 2017) and customer loyalty intention (Xiang, Schwartz, Gerdes Jr., & Uysal, 2015). However, these studies were using single dimension to analysis the customer satisfaction and brand loyalty which could not fully understand and explain customer loyalty behavior, and can cause inappropriate planning when building up customer loyalty in hotels.

Customer behavior as a complex theory and influence by different dimension, using a single dimension to analyze customer satisfaction and loyalty may explain the partial relationship and influence the accuracy of the prediction. Online review data reflect existing or previous customers' past experiences. Those data not only are useful for other customers to support purchasing decision but also assists hotel managers to understand better and analyze their service quality and customer satisfaction. However, there is a lack of literature using online review comments to understand the dimensions that lead to different levels of customer attitudinal loyalty in the hotel chains. In order to fill this gap, the study aims to analyze the online reviewer comments from brand hotel in Asia and identify the common attributes that cause a different level of attitudinal loyalty's customer. Behavioral dimension measure customer loyalty by the behavioral outcome, such as repeat purchasing or higher re-purchasing intention (Baloglu, 2002); whereas for the attitudinal dimension, it measures the customer's strength of emotion and attachment of the brand (Baloglu, 2002; Petrick, 2004). The attitudinal loyalty's customer holds a commitment toward the specific brand and ignored other factors that cause switch behavior, such as situation influence or marketing efforts (Kandampully, Zhang & Bilgihan, 2015; Oilver, 1999), and able to better explain the underlie causative effect (Back & Parks, 2003; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Oilver (1999) first proposed brand attitudinal loyalty can be examined or explained by three phased of "cognitive", "affective", and "conative". Cognitive loyalty referred to the customer's thought and

belief of the brand; affective referred to the feeling, emotional or mood response to the brand; and conative referred to the customer behavioral intention or willingness to act (Back & Park, 2003). According to Mattila (2006), being a loyalty program member is also a kind of affective commitment. This study adopted these three phases to examine brand attitudinal loyalty behavior on social media.

**Methodology**

According to EuroMonitor International (2018), the top three Asia cities by tourists' arrivals were Hong Kong, Bangkok and Singapore. Brand loyalty is the research focus of this study; therefore, the hotel brand chosen must have high service quality hotels available in these three cities to attract repeat customers. After compared various hotel chains and their product lines, three international hotel chains were chosen for this study including InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG), Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts (Shangri-La) and Marriott Hotels & Resorts (Marriott) because these three hotel chains have five-star hotels in chosen cities. As IHG and Marriott have wide-range of product lines, InterContinental hotels and JW Marriott were chosen because these two brands provided the highest service quality within the group. Some hotel brand has multiple properties in the same city so this study picked the most luxury one (with highest room rate). For IHG, the Intercontinental Hong Kong, InterContinental Singapore and InterContinental Bangkok Hotel (hereafter IC) were picked. For Shangri-La, Island Shangri-La, Shangri-La Hotel Singapore, and Shangri-La Hotel Bangkok (hereafter SH) were selected. For Marriott, JW Marriott Hotel Hong Kong, JW Marriott Hotel Singapore South Beach and JW Marriott Hotel Bangkok (hereafter JW) were chosen. This study used the website scraping tool to collect hotel reviews' data. All reviews of these nine hotels that appeared in TripAdvisor were mined, and the review comments

date ranged from 2008 till October 2018 with a total of 26,962 review comments written by 21,401 reviewers. To examine the brand loyalty, active contributors who wrote reviews for at least three properties in two cities were extracted. Out from these 21,401 reviewers, only 12 of them were qualified with 43 reviews extracted for data analysis. Since there were only 43 review comments, all comments were analyzed and categorized by the two researchers and one hospitality expert manually using content analysis. To understand the customer online loyalty behavior, reviewers' comments were categorized into the three phases of customer loyalty attitudinal behavior (cognitive, affective and conative) according to Back and Park (2003). Table 1 displays the academic definition and the operational definition of each phrase for coders' reference. The three coders read and categorized individual sentence into three loyalty attitudinal behaviors on an excel spreadsheet, and then after the coding, each worksheet was reviewed and discussed among three coders. Any discrepancy found was fully discussed until agreement made.

**Table 1: Definition of the Three Phases of Customer Loyalty Attitudinal Behavior**

|  | Cognitive | Affective | Conative | Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Definition | the customer's thought and belief of the brand | the feeling, emotional or mood response to the brand; | the customer behavioral intention or willingness to act | Back & Brand (2003); Oliver (1999) |
| Operational Definition | superior service quality compared others brand | I love staying; being a loyalty program members | intent to continue staying | Back & Parks (2003); Mattila (2006) |
|  | no other hotel provides better service than the hotel | satisfied | consider the hotel as the first choice |  |
|  | I believe the hotel provides more benefit | involvement | recommend other |  |

**Finding and Discussions**

The demographics of the 12 reviewers are shown in Table 2. To maintain the anonymity of the reviewer's identity, only the first four characters of the reviewer user name plus a numeric ID that was assigned by the researchers (from one to twelve) are displayed. Except one of them

wrote reviews for four properties, the others wrote comments for at least three properties in two cities.

**Table 2. Demographics of the Reviewers and Hotels they stayed**

| Visit# | ReviewerID | Country | Year Visited | Hotel Location* Bangkok | Hong Kong | Singapore |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Brya1 | Australia | 2011 | SH | | |
| 2 | | | 2015 | | IC | |
| 3 | | | 2015 | | | SH |
| 1 | Davi2 | Indonesia | 2013 | JW | | |
| 2 | | | 2017 | | JW | |
| 3 | | | 2017 | | | JW |
| 1 | Fatc3 | Australia | 2009 | SH | | |
| 2 | | | 2010 | | JW | |
| 3 | | | 2015 | | IC | |
| 1 | Goal4 | UK | 2012 | SH | | |
| 2 | | | 2013 | SH | | |
| 3 | | | 2017 | | SH | |
| 4 | | | 2017 | | | SH |
| 1 | Hexa5 | Qatar | 2013 | JW | | |
| 2 | | | 2016 | | | IC |
| 3 | | | 2017 | IC | | |
| 1 | Mich6 | Hong Kong | 2013 | SH | | |
| 2 | | | 2014 | | IC | |
| 3 | | | 2016 | IC | | |
| 1 | Pete7 | UK | 2015 | | IC | |
| 2 | | | 2017 | IC | | |
| 3 | | | 2017 | JW | | |
| 4 | | | 2017 | | IC | |
| 1 | Roby8 | Australia | 2014 | SH | | |
| 2 | | | 2016 | | JW | |
| 3 | | | 2018 | | | JW |
| 1 | Stai9 | Indonesia | 2011 | SH | | |
| 2 | | | 2013 | | IC | |
| 3 | | | 2014 | | IC | |
| 4 | | | 2015 | SH | | |
| 5 | | | 2017 | | | IC |
| 6 | | | 2018 | | IC | |
| 1 | Tero10 | Finland | 2016 | SH | | |
| 2 | | | 2016 | | | SH |
| 3 | | | 2017 | JW | | |
| 1 | Trav11 | UK | 2016 | IC | | |
| 2 | | | 2017 | IC | | |
| 3 | | | 2017 | | IC | |
| 4 | | | 2017 | | | IC |
| 1 | True12 | Hong Kong | 2014 | JW | | |
| 2 | | | 2016 | | | IC |
| 3 | | | 2017 | IC | | |
| 4 | | | 2017 | SH | | |

*\* IC – Intercontinental; SH – Shangri-La, JW – JW Marriott*

*Reviewers who stayed with the same brand among three cities*

Among these 12 active contributors, three reviewers (Davi2, Goal4 and Trav11) stayed in the same hotel chain for all their prior visits in the three cities. They stayed in JW, SH and IC respectively. Davi2's reviews expressed the beliefs in Marriott and trusted the brand can guarantee the service quality provided. Moreover, at the end of the second and the third reviews, Davi2 *recommended* the readers to stay in these hotels. Goal4 had kept mentioning about how much love he/she with Shangri-La in all three phases including the prior experiences, being a fan, being a loyalty program member, and the repeat purchase intention. Trav11 is very proud of being the IHG loyalty program member. Among all four reviews, the term "IC Ambassador" had appeared eight times. Besides, Trav11 is very kin on sharing his love of IHG by emphasising the revisit intention twice in the reviews. The first half of Table 3 displayed the review comments from these three loyal members.

*Reviewers with at least one repeat stay with the hotel chain*

Stad9 had posted six reviews in total, two for SH and four for IC, however, comments were mainly focused on products and services, but branding related information was not mentioned. The cognitive behavior indicated Stai9 was more positive towards SH but also proud of being an IHG loyalty member. However, even Stai9 had written six reviews, he/she did not recommend any hotel. Pete7 wrote three reviews for IC and one for SH, but his comment on SH was just "comparable with Intercontinental" which indicated he like IC more. However, this reviewer did not show strong bonding to the brand because there was no affective or conative behavior found from the review comments. Hexa5 was very positive with IC, all three phases of loyalty behavior were shown in the reviews including choose the right hotel, proud to be the member of the loyalty

program, and highly recommend it to friends. Even Tero10 had a review on JW, but all the loyalty behaviors were only related to SH including showing prior stay experience with SH and SH is the favorite one (cognitive), SH is "for me" (affective), and stayed in SH more than 15 times and "always come back" (conative). In Brya1's three reviews, only those two on SH show loyalty behavior in both cognitive and conative. Fatc3 had three reviews with three different hotel chains, the only cognitive behavior was about the IHG loyalty membership. For Roby8, the only comment was "Recommended". Mich6 and True12 had written three and four reviews, but none of them shows brand loyalty behavior. Table 2 listed out the categorized results from the reviews extracted by each reviewer.

*Online Brand Loyalty Attritional Behavior*

For the brand manager, the most direct way to measure the success factor of the brand is the number of active loyalty program members, and how they help to promote the brand. Social media platform is an ideal information source to obtain these details. From those three reviewers who only stay in single hotel chain, their loyalty behaviors were quite strong. Their reviews keep showing the positive attitudinal behavior toward the hotel chains. These behaviors also appeared in other reviewers who stayed with different brands. When reviewers have repetitive visits, their reviews start showing attitudinal loyalty behavior. For example, Hexa5 were connected with IHG and proud of being a loyalty program member. Another example was Tero10 who mentioned he/she had visited SH more than 15 times and recommended SH in both of the reviews. Based on the observation on these 12 active contributors, majority of them have a certain level of attachment with the hotel chain and would mention about the benefits being a member of the loyalty program, and recommend the brand to the readers. By comparing the performance among the three hotel

chain, JW was not so successful because, among all 12 reviewers, only Davi2 who only stay with JW mentioned about this brand in the review, but did not mention anything about the loyalty program. Shangri-La was the most successful one among three because half of the reviewers had mentioned and recommended the brand. Nevertheless, by looking at the loyalty program successfulness, IHG outperforms the other two because all four IC customers mentioned they are the loyalty program members and named the benefits and status of being a member.

**Conclusions, Contributions and Limitations**

This study attempted to examine brand loyalty from online reviews and has proven many customers who have repetitive stay pattern in the same hotel chain would start writing contexts not only related to the hotel experience but also about the hotel chain. In addition, they also mentioned about the loyalty program and the benefits they received. Among all three hotel chains, Marriott seems to underperformed than other two hotel chains. It is not a good sign for Marriott as those who had stayed in Shangri-La and IHG group shows a positive attitude towards the loyalty program and some of them were proud to be the member.

This study developed a method that utilized online review data to identify hotel customer attitudinal loyalty. Hotel chain marketing managers should make use of these reviewer's comments to further understand the brand image perceived from loyal customers and make review websites a new management tool to identify the potential loyal customers and to understand the repurchasing intentions. This study has several limitations. First, even this study collected all the reviews of the selected hotels, qualifying reviewers were limited, that makes the sample size of this study very small. Second, reviewers might be repeat customers of the hotel chain, but if they did not write reviews, their status cannot be identified. Tero10 had more than 15 visits with SH

but only two reviews were posted. Finally, only English reviews were extracted so those non-English opinions were overlooked. Future study could extend to extracting review comments from all hotels that belong to the same hotel chains to evaluate individual hotel chains' brand loyalty behavior differences.

**Table 3. Content Analysis on Reviewer's Loyalty Behavior**

| Reviewer | Cognitive* | Affective* | Conative* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Reviewers who stayed in the same hotel chain | | | |
| Davi2 | • It's an old hotel but bearing a JW Marriott name, the hotel is well maintained (1)<br>• Unlike the regular JW Marriott which is classy, this hotel is very modern and more like a "W" (3) | | • overall it is recommended and will return (2)<br>• Recommended (3) |
| Goal4 | • This was definitely yet again a fabulous Shangri-La experience (3) | • Being a Shangri-La fan (4)<br>• As we are diamond member of their Golden Circle (4) | • We stayed here before and we will return (2)<br>• We will be back... As soon as possible (2)<br>• This is their first ever property and it just felt like we had to stay there! (4)<br>• On a next staycation in Singapore we will definitely be staying at Shangri-La again (4) |
| Trav11 | • I stayed here twice during my time in Bangkok and was very impressed (1)<br>• I have stayed at a number of IC Hotels, but this is definitely the best experience I had using this brand. (2)<br>• They can rival any Lounge staff from other IC Hotels I have stayed at (4) | • As an IC Ambassador, I was greeted by the staff (1)<br>• I was upgraded … because of the IC Ambassador status (2)<br>• All the ICs I stayed at, I have benefited due to this programme (3)<br>• As I am on the Ambassador program, … for the extra benefits it provides (3)<br>• I was very impressed with the service and how I was treated. (4) | • I was looking forward to returning. (1)<br>• I will definitely use this hotel again (1)<br>• I would recommend that if you have access to the Club Lounge (2)<br>• When I next go to Bangkok, I will definitely be staying here again (2)<br>• I am happy to stay here again and will be returning soon! (4) |

**Table 3 (continued). Content Analysis on Reviewer's Loyalty Behavior**

| Reviewer | Cognitive | Affective | Conative |
|---|---|---|---|
| Reviewers with at least one repeat stay with the hotel chain | | | |
| Stai9 | • They really take good care of you at the Shangri-la (4)<br>• Platinum members no longer receive complimentary breakfasts but the room upgrade is most welcome (5) | • We enjoyed our previous stay so much that we stayed for two nights at the Intercontinental Hong Kong as Ambassador Gold members (3) | |
| Pete7 | • Breakfast is worth paying for, they usually will offer a special rate if you're an IHG card holder (2).<br>• One of my favorite hotels in Bangkok comparable with the Intercontinental (3) | | |
| Brya1 | • As with any Shangri-La property, one's expectations are high, and this flagship does not disappoint (3) | | • I would gladly return (2)<br>• Would certainly return (3) |
| Hexa5 | • Intercontinental hotel was selected by a companion friend and it was a really good selection (3) | • I have good experience with the Intercontinental Hotels in different countries …. brilliant and wise decision (2)<br>• I am very proud being a member of the IHG rewards Club (2) | • This is my second time in here during my six previous visits to Bangkok, definitely I will come back if nearby again (1)<br>• highly recommend this hotel (2)<br>• I do recommend it for families, friends or businessmen (3). |
| Tero10 | • I've stayed in more or less all of the 5 star 'big name' chain hotels in Bangkok (and Asia) … Shangri-La Bangkok hotel is my favorite hotel in all of Asia (1) | • This may not be the perfect hotel for everyone. But it is for me (1) | • I've stayed in Shangri-La Bangkok roughly 15 times over a period of several years (1)<br>• I've stayed in Shangri-La Singapore many times. And I always come back whenever in Singapore (2) |
| Roby8 | | | • We recommend the Shangri-la (1) |
| Fatc3 | • Got a drink voucher thanks to IHG status (3) | | |
| Mich6 | No hotel chain related information found in reviews | | |
| True12 | | | |

*\* Numbers in the bracket indicate the visit number of that reviewer*

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