

The Relationship Marketing and Service Quality Link in the Travel and Hospitality Industries: A Review and Discussion

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1. Introduction

Due to the increasing competition in the market, globalization, and dramatic changes in the information technology, it is becoming increasingly difficult for service companies to advance in their products and services. The growing economic importance of service businesses including the hospitality and tourism industries has seen increases in quality-based initiatives. As customers are becoming increasingly critical of the quality of service they experience, many companies have invested in quality management by applying to ISO 9000 Series, Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in the U.S.A., or the European Foundation for Quality Management. The pivotal role of customer satisfaction to marketing arises because satisfying customers with the current service offering is generally a prerequisite to retention or repeat purchase (Gronroos, 1990). Recruiting new customers costs considerably more than retaining existing ones. Reichheld and Sasser (1990) demonstrated that a five percent decrease in customer retention could translate into a 25 to 85 percent increase in profits, depending on the service industry. The report provided by the World Travel Market (2001) addresses that over 80% of travel companies see customer relationship management as key to the future success of their business. It is thus important for service organizations to retain existing customers for the financial benefits that accrue. Consequently, developing and maintaining long-term customer relationship is the key to win in the fierce competition in the hospitality and tourism industries where service quality plays predominant role. Developing life-long customer relationship and building true loyalty are the emerging task for the management of the hospitality and tourism organizations.

A number of studies have measured the service quality by using SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985). The SERVQUAL model suggests that difference between customers' expectations about performance and assessment of the actual performance of a service provider's service quality. This global measurement of service quality is, however, not be appropriate to evaluate customers service relationships because service relationships rely on social and structural bonding mechanisms, which have increasing levels of customization and longitudinal dimension. Service quality has been described as a form of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction, that results from the comparison of expectations with performance (Bolton and Drew 1991). A close examination of this definition suggests ambiguity between the definition and the conceptualization of service quality.

Rosen and Surprenant (1998) argued that satisfaction and quality are important concepts in the evaluation of service relationships. Both are necessary but not sufficient to assess relationships. They suggested that additional dimensions should be included in attempt to assess the health of a service relationship. Some researchers have investigated the key dimensions that explain customer relationship to retain customers and to build long-term customer relationships by

creating customer value, trust, and commitment to the product and services. These studies to examine the relationships between service quality, consumer satisfaction, and purchase intentions have been discussed theoretically (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1988; Bitner, 1990; and Bolton and Drew 1991), but they have not been subjected to a thorough empirical test.

The objective of this article is to answer the following questions. Which variable will most strongly affect to the customers' repurchasing decision? If one of important service quality dimensions lacks, how does it affect to the overall customers' intention to stay loyal to the service organizations? By performing the context analysis of literatures, this paper aims to; 1) identify definitions of relationship marketing; 2) identify important dimensions to assess customers service relationship; and 3) analyze important components to link customer relationship marketing and service quality by formulating a conceptual framework.

2. Relationship Marketing

2-1 Background

Relationship marketing is not a newly emerged concept. The concept of *guanxi* meaning "relationship" in Chinese has been a key ingredient in building a buyer-seller relationship for many years. Buttery and Wong (1999) addressed four dimensions of *guanxi*, namely favor, trust, dependence, and adaptation as major key components. In the current discussions, however, Leung and Wong (2001) argued the differences between relationship marketing and *guanxi*. Relationship marketing refers to a particular way of doing business that includes not only the relationships, but also how the business is defined from a service perspective, and the management of the service delivery process, whereas *guanxi* implies more or less a personal relationship among individuals, and may not involve commitment. Guanxi may even become worthless or turn into a liability once the partner loses power, therefore, *guanxi* can become positive as well as negative relationship. Similar business practice in Japan has long been associated with the protectionism. A Japanese term of *keiretsu* or affiliate implies strong partnerships between a company and its suppliers. However, the recent academic argument about relationship marketing is more than *guanxi* or *keiretsu*.

According to Berry (1995), relationship marketing is an old idea, but a new focus now at the forefront of services marketing practice and academic research. The phrase "relationship marketing" appeared in the services marketing literature for the first time in a 1983 paper by Berry. Berry (1983) defined relationship marketing as "attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships." The author emphasized that the attraction of new customers should be viewed only as an intermediate step in the marketing process. The author also discussed that solidifying the relationship, transforming indifferent customers into loyal

ones, and serving customers as clients also should be considered as marketing (Berry, 1983 in Berry, 1995). In today's environment of increasing global competition, firms must clearly understand what it takes to develop satisfying relationships. Strong partnerships provide organizations with a means of achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

Gronroos (1990) discussed the marketing paradigm shift from traditional Four-P marketing mix--product, price, place and promotion--to the customer relationship management perspective. Relationship marketing essentially represents a paradigm shift within marketing away from an acquisitions/transaction focus toward a retention/relationship focus. Furthermore, Gronroos (1994) explained that in traditional marketing models, value for customers is created by the firm, basically in a factory, or in the back office of a service firm, and embedded in a product, which is distributed to customers. The Four-P model of the marketing mix is based on this fundamental requirement of the exchange perspective. In the relationship marketing context, on the contrary, value for customers is created throughout the relationship by the customer, partly in interactions between the customer and the supplier or service provider. In sum, the focus of marketing is value creation rather than value distribution, and the facilitation and support of a value-creating process rather than simply distributing ready-made value to customers (Gronroos, 1994).

The difference of traditional marketing and relationship marketing focuses is delineated by Dwyer, and Oh (1988) as listed below:

A) Traditional Marketing Focus

- Orientation to single sale
- Episodic customer contact
- Focus on product features
- Short-term horizon
- Little emphasis on customer services
- Limited commitment to meeting customer expectations
- Quality is the concern of production staff.

B) Relationship Marketing Focus

- Orientation to customer retention
- Continuous customer contact
- Focus on customer value
- Long-term horizon
- High emphasis on customer services
- High commitment to meeting customer expectations
- Quality is the concern of all staff.

Nowhere is relationship marketing more applicable than in service industries in general, including hospitality as well as airline services in particular (Lewis and Chambers, 2000). Because service is not one time event and it is an on-going process, creating for the customer an environment of assurance, empathy, and reliability, and building true loyal customer relationship should bring the company long-term profit.

2-2 Definitions of Relationship Marketing

A number of academic researchers have identified the definitions of relationship marketing as shown in Table 1. The results presented in Table 1 suggest some level of consensus on the key conceptualization. The definitions most frequently cited in the related literature include:

1. Relationship marketing is building long-term relationship with customers and other stakeholders such as employees, intermediaries, and suppliers (Gronroos, 1990, Gummesson, 1994, and Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996).
2. Relationship marketing is attracting, maintaining and enhancing relationships with customers and other partners. This is achieved by a mutual exchange and fulfillment. (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Berry, 1983 and 1995; Christopher et al., 1991; Gronroos, 1994; and Gummesson, 1998).
3. Relationship marketing is to establish committed, trusting, and co-operative relationships with customers (Kumer et al., 1995; and Bennett, 1996)
4. Relationship marketing is to create customer value, share the value, and create mutual benefit and stable links in the supply chain (Gummesson, 1994; and Lewis and Chambers, 2000).

In the literature there is no agreement on a definition of relationship marketing, even if most definitions have many common denominators. A rather comprehensive definition states that:

"Relationship marketing is to identify and establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met"; and "that this is done by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises" (Gronroos, 1994).

Furthermore, Gronroos explained that key aspects of the relationship marketing approach are that:

- not only getting customers and creating transactions are important, but also maintaining and enhancing on-going relationships;
- not only giving promises is the responsibility of marketing, but also the task of fulfilling promises; and
- profitable business relationships rely on the capability of a firm to develop trust in itself and its performance among its customers and other stakeholders.

The research on relationship marketing has taken various forms. For example, some research focuses on philosophical constructs, such as trust and commitment (Bennett, 1996; and Kumer et al., 1995). Other studies have focused on specific strategies for retaining customers, such as building a competitive service quality scheme (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; and Gummesson, 1994), or building customer loyalty (Kandamampully, 1998; Bowen and Shoemaker, 1998; and Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999).

In terms of classification of service relationships, Berry and Parasuraman (1991) group relationships on three different levels depending on the types of bonds used to develop customer loyalty. Level one employs financial bonds, level two utilizes social bonds, and level three relies on structural bonds. Service customization and

potential for sustained competitive advantage also differ on the three levels with the highest level of customization and sustainable competitive advantage occurring at level three. This classification system depicts some degree of customer loyalty as the benefit a service organization receives from a relationship.

Table 1 Literature Review of Relationship Marketing Definitions

Definitions of Relationship Marketing (RM)	Literatures
RM is long-term relationship Gummesson (1994) Zeithaml & Bitner (1996)	Gronroos (1990)
RM is attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships.	Berry and Parasuraman (1991) Christopher et al. (1991) Berry (1993)
RM is to stress loyalty and customer retention. Bowen & Shoemaker (1998)	Gummesson (1998)
RM is marketing seen as relationships, networks, and interaction.	Gummesson (1998)
RM is to establish committed, trusting, and co-operative relationships with customers.	Kumer et al. (1995) Bennett (1996 A)
RM is the organizational development and maintenance of mutually rewarding relationships with customers achieved via the total integration of information and quality management systems.	Bennett (1996 B)
RM is to create customer value, share the value, and create mutual benefit and stable links in the supply chain. Lewis & Chambers (2000)	Gummesson (1994) Ballantyne (1994)
RM is to recognize the key role of individual customers and to support individual customer's value.	Lewis & Chambers (2000)
RM is to support cooperative effort between buyer and seller. RM is to understand a two-way communication.	Lewis & Chambers (2000)
RM is the framework for creating, developing and sustaining exchanges of value between the parties involved.	Ballantyne (1997) Lewis & Chambers (2000)
RM involves the total fulfillment of all this promises given and the development of commitment and trust.	Gronroos (1990 & 1996) Bennett (1996 C)
RM is to identify, establish, maintain, and enhance, and when necessary terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit. This is done by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises.	Gronroos (1994)

3. Conceptual Framework

Relationship marketing is a broad concept including many players, such as target customers, other customers, internal customers, intermediaries, and suppliers. It is too broad to discuss all components of relationship marketing. Therefore, the conceptual framework only includes such key components that link service quality and customer service relationship excluding other stakeholders. The model shown in Exhibit 1 is based on the Model of Service Relationship (MSR) presented by Bowen and Shoemaker (1998) and the Total Perceived Quality Model developed by Gronroos (2000).

MSR proposes the existence of strong connection between commitment and trust to build and maintain customer relationship. Bowen and Shoemaker (1998) explained that two concepts at the heart of a relationship are trust and commitment. With trust as a precursor, a customer becomes loyal to a firm and forms a commitment to that firm. Other variables that would affect to the trust and commitment constructs are also presented in the conceptual framework of the Model of Service Relationship. These variables are natural and reactive opportunistic behavior, benefits, values, costs, product use and voluntary partnership.

The Total Perceived Quality Model (Gronroos, 1984) on the other hand illustrates how quality experiences are connected to traditional marketing activities resulting in a perceived service quality. Gronroos (1984) argued that the expected quality is a function of a number of factors, namely marketing communication, word of mouth, company image, price, and customer needs and values. He adds that the level of total perceived quality is determined by the gap between the expected and experienced quality (Gronroos, 2000)

By combining these studies, this conceptual model shows the link of customer relationship and service quality dimensions. The variables in the customer relationship include commitment, trust, value, benefits, and costs. Customers' perceived service quality includes service expectations and experienced quality.

3-1 Commitment

Commitment means that one party in a relationship feels motivated to some extent to do business with an other party (Gronroos, 2000). Commitment has also been defined as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman, 1993; and Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The relationship commitment exists only when the relationship is considered important. For example, a customer is committed to a hotel brand because the hotel company has proved to be trustworthy and has shown some solutions that successfully support the value-generating processes of the customer. If the hotel employee has taken

extra work for the customer in order to satisfy his demand, the sense of commitment gets deeper.

In the relationship marketing literature the concept of commitment plays a central role, as it is a major characteristic of relationship marketing models (Scanzoni, 1979).

According to Wetzels et al. (1998), commitment refers to an implicit or explicit pledge of the continuity of a relationship between exchange partners. Service quality and satisfaction is treated as antecedents of commitment in addition to the concepts of trust and dependence. Commitment is seen as a sentiment that is critically important in the development of long-term relationships (Kumar, Scheer, and Steenkamp, 1995).

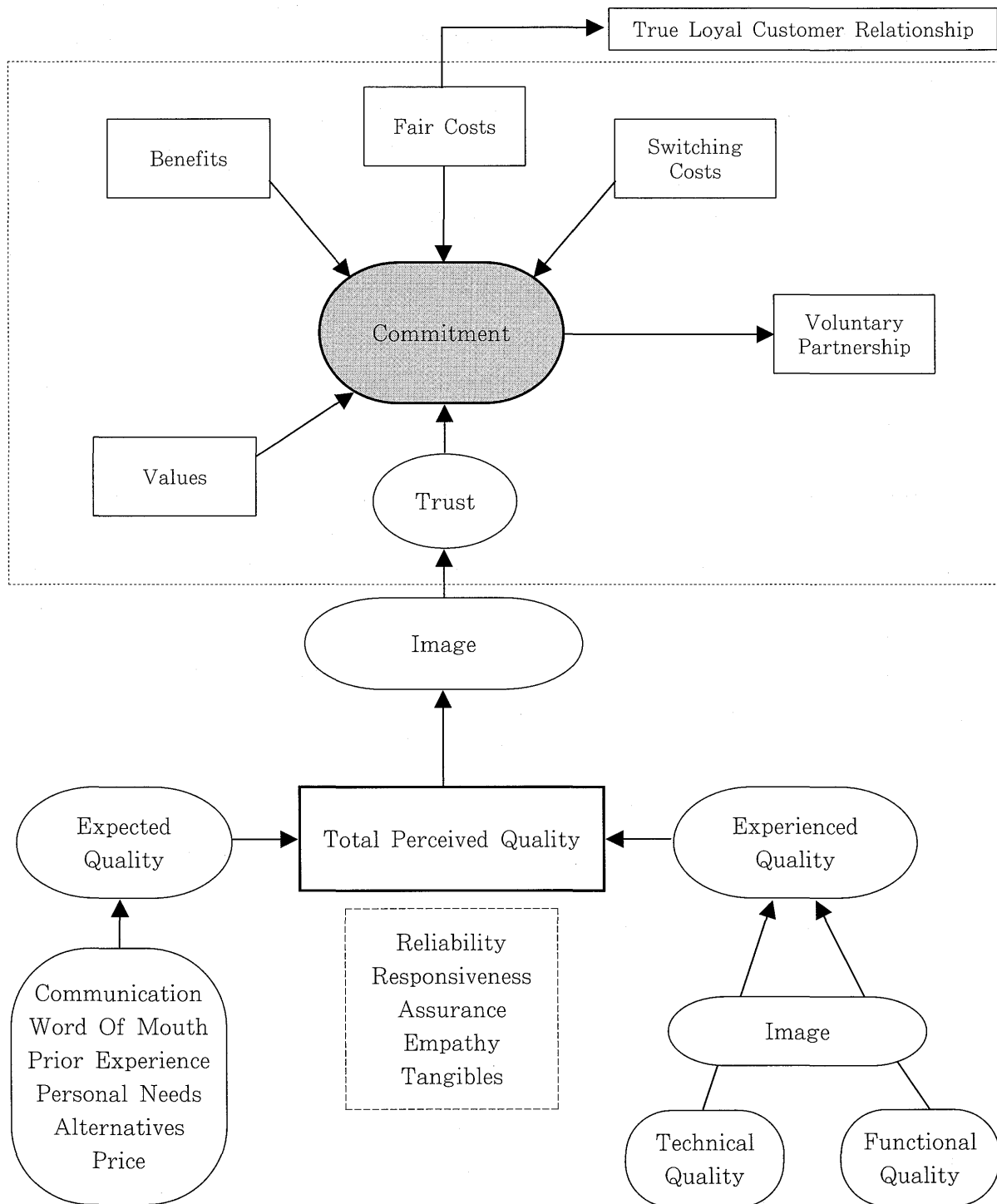
In the study of Bowen and Shoemaker (1998), authors defined commitment as the belief that an ongoing relationship is so important that the partners are willing to work at maintaining the relationship and are willing to make short-term sacrifices to realize long-term benefits. As an example, a hotel would make the short-term sacrifice of holding a block of rooms at a reduced corporate rate for a regular customer.

The rooms could be released for sale at a higher rate, but the company might hold these rooms for maintaining good relationship with regular corporate customers.

3-2 Trust

Trust is defined as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence" (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman, 1993). The literature on trust suggests that confidence on the part of the trusting party results from the firm belief that the trustworthy party is reliable and has high integrity, which are associated with such qualities as consistent, competent, honest, fair, responsible, helpful, and benevolent (Larzelere and Huston, 1980; Dwyer and LaGace, 1986; and Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Central to all of these definitions of trust are reliability and working for the interests of the partner. Trust is a major determinant of relationship commitment. In fact, customers' service expectations are built upon their trust on the service products.

Exhibit 1 Conceptual Model of Service Relationships and Service Quality



3-3 Benefits

Gwinner, and Bitner (1998) classified customer benefits in maintaining a relationship with a firm into three types, namely confidence, social benefits, and special treatment. In the hospitality industry, the social benefits can be enhanced to develop personalized relationship with customers. For example, inter-personal contacts with guests would provide enhancement so that customers have a sense of "my hotel" or "my own contact employee."

Bowen and Shoemaker (1998) applied Service Relationship Model on the study of business travelers' frequenting luxury hotel attribution. In the context of luxury hotels and their relationship with business guests, they found that benefits and trust are the most important antecedents to customers' commitment. Some of the benefits include upgrades, convenient check-ins/check-outs, service customization based on information from prior visits, and employees' empathy to the business traveler's problems.

3-4 Value

Zeithaml (1988) suggests that value is a consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given. Value presents a trade-off for the consumer between the "give" and "get" components. When firms can consistently deliver value from customer's point of view, clearly the customer benefits from it and has an intention to stay in the relationship (Zeithaml, 1988). Customers will remain loyal to a service organization if the value of what they receive is determined to be relatively greater than that expected from competitors (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). The variables that impact on the customers' perceived value are service quality, perceived risk, and image (Bolton and Drew, 1991).

Shoemaker and Lewis (1999) explained that value creation is indispensable element to build long-term customer loyalty. Value creation is subdivided into value-added and value-recovery strategies. Value-added strategy increases the long-term value of the relationship with the service organization, offering greater benefits, on both current and future transactions, to repeat customers than to occasional customers. Value-recovery strategy, on the other hand, is primarily designed to rectify a lapse in service delivery occurring in specific transactions by providing amendments and compensations to alleviate the costs associated with failure. It is the process that insures that the guest's needs are taken care of without further inconveniences (Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999). The value-added strategy includes the service customization.

Hotels create each customers preference database that allows them to customize the service, adding as much value as possible to each transaction as well as to the long-term relationship. Gronroos (2000) argued that building and maintaining relationships with customers does create benefits on top of the value of the core

solution offered to those customers. This means that the relationship itself adds to the total value perceived by customers.

3-5 Costs

The cost variable is divided into two elements-fair cost and switching cost. Fair cost is the customers' perceived cost to purchase the service. In Bowen and Shoemaker's study (1998) it is termed as day-to-day cost which is translated to the perceived value of the room rate of a hotel and the fairness of the costs. The other cost is the switching cost. Switching costs are the costs that will be anticipated to incur in the future. According to Lee and Cunningham (2001), service loyalty is formed based on future anticipations as well as past experience. Thus, switching costs should be an important determinant of customers continuous re-purchase decision. The cost of switching service providers should depend on the level of information search cost, perceived risk, geographical proximity to the service provider and substitutability of other choices (Lee and Cunningham, 2001).

3-6 Voluntary Partnership

Voluntary partnership comprises the variety of activities that one member of the relationship is likely to undertake on behalf of the other member (Bowen and Shoemaker, 1998). Guests in voluntary partnership may give favorable word of mouth, make business referrals, provide references and publicity, and serve on advisory board.

3-7 Customers' Total Perceived Quality

A number of literatures have recognized service quality as crucial element to compete in the services industries. By classifying into two categories, technical and functional, Gronroos (1990) determined service quality as whatever the customer perceives it to be. What customers receive in their interactions with a firm is clearly important to them and their quality evaluation. In addition to what customers receive as an outcome of the service, Gronroos (1990) emphasized how the serviced is delivered to the customers. The technical quality of outcome of a service process is normally a prerequisite for good quality. Good technical quality alone does not mean that customers perceive that the service quality is good. If customers are to consider total service quality good, functional quality has to be good as well. It is the functional quality that impacts to the service process. It is the quality dimension, which is closely related to how the moment of truth of the service encounters themselves are taken care of and how the

service provider functions.

Because of the importance of service encounters in building quality perception which ultimately influence customer satisfaction, researchers have extensively analyzed service encounters in many contexts to determine the sources of customers' favorable and unfavorable perceptions (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault, 1990). Service delivery process as well as service recovery strategy is also integral part to affect customers' perceived service quality.

Customer satisfaction is a broad perception influenced by features and attributes of the product as well as by customers' emotional responses, their attributions, and their perceptions of fairness. Shoemaker and Lewis (1999) argued that customer loyalty is not the same as customer satisfaction. "Customer satisfaction measures how well a customer's expectations are met by a given transaction, while customer loyalty measures how likely a customer is to repurchase and engage in partnership activities. Satisfaction is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for loyalty. In other words, we can have satisfaction without loyalty, but it is hard to have loyalty without satisfaction" (Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999).

Lee and Cunningham (2001) tested customers' intention to patronize their service provider with the perceived quality of services. Their study identified that service loyalty is determined not only by perceived service quality, but also by cost considerations that arise from present transactions and future switching possibilities. Their study results have shown some important implications for service marketers. First, the research showed that the service provider's specific knowledge about customers has a significant positive impact on customer loyalty. This finding implies the importance of service customization. Second, the results showed that the cost involved in finding a new service provider and the geographic proximity to the current service provider have significant positive influences on customer loyalty. Some customers who have satisfied with the service quality might become loyal simply because they do not want to go through the inconvenience of switching or they might prefer the convenient location. Third, the authors revealed that the substitutability of the current service provider has a significant negative impact on customer loyalty, suggesting that customers may switch if offered a more convenient alternative service. Their findings suggest that those service providers, whose service quality is easily copied, difficult to differentiate from competitors, or to customize the service, may need to work hard to maintain service quality level.

Having classified and analyzed previous literature of customer relationship marketing and customer loyalty studies, the author has identified that a cost/benefit approach would be a meaningful avenue to understand the customers' intention to build and maintain long-term relationship with a service organization. The basic assumption underlying the argument is that customers' intention to patronize their current service provider is determined by costs and benefits analysis associated with the customer and service provider relationship.

However, as mentioned earlier, one of the critical determinants of service

loyalty would be the overall quality of services as perceived by customers. Thus, the central argument of this paper was placed on identifying critical variables to support customers' repurchase intention. To test this proposition, an empirical test should be implemented by having independent variable is commitment, and dependent variables are customers perceived quality which is divided into technical and functional qualities in addition to values, benefits, fair costs and switching costs variables.

4. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the relationship marketing background, the various definitions, the important dimensions to assess customers' service relationship, and analyzed important components to link customer relationship marketing and service quality by formulating a theoretical framework. In the relationship marketing literature the concept of commitment plays a central role, as it is a major characteristic of relationship marketing models. Customer relationship is a vital element for survival and growth for many services. Developing customer loyalty and maintaining a long-term relationship with customers should continually improve and differentiate service quality.

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