



Influence of environmental stimuli on hotel customer emotional loyalty response: Testing the moderating effect of the big five personality factors

Dev Jani^{a,1}, Heesup Han^{b,*}

^a University of Dar-es-Salaam Business School, P.O. Box 35046, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania

^b College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Sejong University, 98 Gunja-Dong, Gwanjin-Gu, Seoul 143-747, Republic of Korea

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to test the moderation effects of the Big Five Factors (BFF) of personality on hotel ambience–guests' consumption emotions–loyalty relationship. This was an attempt to extend the Stimuli–Organism–Response (S–O–R) that has been widely used in consumer studies without integrating personality factors that may exert effects on the relationships. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to hotel guests; 563 responses were used in data analysis. The results of the structural model affirm the effect of hotel ambience on guests' consumption emotions, with those emotions having significant effects on loyalty. Among the personality factors, extraversion, openness to experience and agreeableness significantly moderated the relationships, with groups scoring high in traits having stronger relationships than those lower in traits. Overall, the study supports the extension of the S–O–R with the inclusion of personality. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The importance of loyalty in generating profit for the hospitality business has attracted many researchers into elucidating the factors that influence loyalty (Jani and Han, 2014a). The noted influential factors include Bitner (1992) three dimensions of servicescape (ambience, space, and sign/artifacts; Han and Ryu, 2009; Kim and Moon, 2009; Siu et al., 2012), personal factors like demographics (Han and Ryu, 2006) and personality variables (Hansen et al., 2013), and interactional factors like trust (Martinez and Bosque, 2013), perceived benefits (Chen and Hu, 2010) and other myriad of factors. These factors converge into the two broader factors of environmental and personal that influence consumer behavior (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2005). Few studies (e.g. Gountas and Gountas, 2007; Han and Ryu, 2009; Hansen et al., 2013) have considered either the environmental or personal factor to be an antecedent of loyalty through mediators like consumption emotions, cognition, and satisfaction. Such an approach appears to provide a limited understanding of consumer loyalty which have

been noted to be influenced by environmental factors (Han and Ryu, 2009) as well as personal factors (Bove and Mitzifiris, 2007; Lin, 2010).

This study attempted to fill in the knowledge gap by integrating environmental, specifically hotel ambience that is easily and cheaply manageable by managers (Heung and Gu, 2012) and personal factors to better understand hotel guest loyalty. In adapting the Stimuli–Organism–Response (S–O–R) model (Mehrabian and Russel, 1974) and Bitner's servicescape framework (1992), a model was developed and tested with hotel ambience as an antecedent to hotel guests' loyalty through the mediation effect of consumption emotions (positive and negative). Personality that refers to the stable, enduring individual characteristics pertaining to cognitive, emotion, and behavioral responses (Pervin and Cervone, 2010) was treated as a moderating variable in ambience–consumption emotion–loyalty relationships reflecting suggestions and findings from previous research (Hansen et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2008). The S–O–R implies that environmental stimuli may be used to elicit responses in an organism, including emotional reactions that lead to a particular behavior. Unlike Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework that borrows elements from the S–O–R, the latter did not include personal variables while the former incorporates personal variables as moderators.

Ambient factors perceived via the senses have been found to influence hospitality guests' consumption-related emotional

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +82 2 3408 4462; fax: +82 2 3408 4314.

E-mail addresses: yogi.dev@hotmail.com (D. Jani),

heesup.han@gmail.com (H. Han).

¹ Tel.: +255 22 2410006.

reactions (Jang and Namkung, 2009; Jani and Han, 2014b; Ryu and Jang, 2008; Walsh et al., 2011), with these emotions leading to loyalty or positive revisit intentions. Moreover, other researchers have tested the influence of ambience on behavioral intentions, including loyalty (Heung and Gu, 2012) with noted significance. In line with the S-O-R model, this study complements the work of those that have treated consumption emotions as mediators for the effect of hotel ambience on guests' loyalty or behavior intentions (Jang and Namkung, 2009; Lee et al., 2008).

The Big Five Factors (BFF) of personality, including openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, are believed to factor in most personality psychological variables and have been widely tested to affirm their universality (Mowen, 2000). With recent studies affirming the utility of the BFF within leisure context (e.g. Huang et al., 2014; Jani and Han, 2013, 2014b), this study used the BFF to test the moderation effects of personality on proposed relationships emanating from the S-O-R model. Recent conceptual (e.g., Fiore and Kim, 2007) and empirical studies (e.g., Skandran et al., 2011) have proposed and noted, respectively, the moderating influences of individual factors, including personality, on the S-O-R model. While these studies provide evidence of the moderation effects of personality on consumer behavior, little research has employed the BFF within the hotel context thus denying hotelier additional variable(s) that they can use in their marketing initiatives especially in the current competitive environment where service personalization is seen as the next competitive strategy (Ball et al., 2006).

With the S-O-R paradigm (Mehrabian and Russel, 1974) having stimuli (hotel ambience), organism (emotions), and response (hotel loyalty) it can be speculated that the relationships vary depending on the personality of those experiencing the hotel. An insight into the effect of personality on the S-O-R model may reveal alternative strategies to hoteliers as they work on hotel design, marketing, and management for particular market segments with different personalities. In seeking to fill the knowledge gap this study was guided by the following research questions: What is the impact of hotel environmental stimuli on hotel guests' emotional responses while in the hotel? To what extent do guests' emotional responses influence their loyalty? Does the personality (Big Five Factors) of the hotel guest moderate the relationship between hotel environmental stimuli and emotional responses? Does the personality of the hotel guest have an effect on the emotional responses of the guest and their loyalty?

2. Conceptual foundation and hypotheses development

2.1. The S-O-R model

The S-O-R model (Mehrabian and Russel, 1974) offers an explanatory perspective on consumer behavior with regard to environmental effects. The model asserts that when an organism is exposed to an environmental stimulus, its internal processes, including its emotional state (Jang and Namkung, 2009), are altered, leading it to either approach or avoid the environment offering that stimulus. Thus, emotional responses mediate the effects of environmental stimuli on the behavior. Within the hotel setting the stimuli include ambience; the organism's internal responses include consumption emotions, among other internal responses (e.g. cognitive) that can influence guests' behavioral responses, including loyalty in the business context. The S-O-R model was adopted to test the relationship in this study. The S-O-R has enjoyed a wider attention by hospitality researchers (e.g. Heung and Gu, 2012; Jang and Namkung, 2009; Kim and Moon, 2009; Ryu and Jang, 2008); albeit being widely researched the S-O-R model has barely been subjected to the moderation effect of personality factors. The uptake of

personality into the S-O-R model in this study emanated from the fact that despite personality being conceptually related to organism responses (Bitner, 1992) as the moderator, few studies have empirically tested the relationships (Orth et al., 2010) thus the decision to include the BFF of personality into the S-O-R model thus avails possible use of personality factors in managing and marketing hotels.

2.2. Hotel ambience

Many service organizations have embraced the continual shift from a service to experiential economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and the acknowledged importance of the intangible aspects of service offerings in attracting and satisfying customers. In differentiating experiences from services, Pine and Gilmore (1999) indicated that experiences could be more differentiated compared to services as well as having those intangible elements that leave unforgettable memories in the minds of consumers. Experience occurs when a service organization intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props in delivering those 'unforgettable experiences' (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Hotels as providers of services not necessary to ordinary life can be considered as leisure facilities where guests look for an 'experience' rather than a service. Thus hotels, especially those catering to visitors and tourists, need to create experiences that utilize their hotel environments, among other factors. This study zeroed in on testing the influence of the hotel environment on hotel guests' emotional responses.

Bitner's (1992) classical work categorizes service environment into ambient conditions, space or function, and sign/symbols/artifacts as the three main dimensions. Ambient conditions include temperature, lighting, noise, music, and scent are those that have an effect on the five sense organs, while space refers to the arrangement of facilities in the service environment in a particular order for the attainment of a particular function (Bitner, 1992). Sign, symbols, and artifacts are those elements in the service environment that serve to direct the behavior of the customers in that environment. According to Turley and Milliman (2000), research on the effects of servicescape on consumer behavior abounds, with those done within the hospitality context including restaurant and hotel being on the increase side (Heung and Gu, 2012; Jang and Namkung, 2009; Ryu and Jang, 2008; Walsh et al., 2011). Among the three service environment or servicescape dimensions, ambience appears to be a cheaply, easily and quickly changeable component in a hospitality environment (Heung and Gu, 2012), thus offering hoteliers a lucrative management option. Moreover, ambience has been noted to be significantly important in hospitality services (Ryu and Jang, 2008) like upscale/luxury hotels where the guest are likely to consume the hotel for hedonic reasons. Thus this study focused on hotel ambience rather than the other servicescape dimensions. d'Astous (2000) defined ambience as those background conditions that exist in an environment that are below the level of immediate consciousness. These conditions include temperature, air quality, noise, music, and odor (Bitner, 1992). Other authors have included other conditions such as humidity and cleanliness (d'Astous, 2000); since cleanliness is an observable element within the space it does not fit in the definition of ambience (d'Astous, 2000) and thus was not considered in this study.

2.3. Customer emotional response

Despite examinations of emotions as influences on human behavior since time immemorial, this concept in consumer behavior, particularly customer satisfaction, began to receive researchers' attention in the 1990s (e.g. Liljander and Strandvik, 1997; Bagozzi et al., 1999). Research on consumer emotions or emotional

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