



The effects of perceived service quality on repurchase intentions and subjective well-being of Chinese tourists: The mediating role of relationship quality



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We propose and test an integrated model with domestic Chinese hotel guests.
- Satisfaction fully mediates antecedent and outcome relationships.
- Identification partially mediates antecedent and outcome relationships.
- Hospitality firms can help satisfy self-definitional needs.
- Identification provides positive consequences.

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ABSTRACT

The current study provides and tests an integrated model that examines two relationship quality constructs (overall customer satisfaction, customer-company identification) as mediating variables between Chinese tourists' lodging service quality perceptions and two outcomes (repurchase intentions, subjective well-being). The results of a study with domestic Chinese hotel guests ($n = 451$) provide support for the proposed model. Specifically, the results indicate that overall customer satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and repurchase intentions and subjective well-being, respectively. Customer-company identification partially mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and repurchase intentions and subjective well-being, respectively. We provide empirical validation that customers do, indeed, identify with hospitality providers, and this, in-turn, provides positive consequences for both the service provider (i.e., repurchase intentions) and the customer (i.e., subjective well-being). Managerial implications are provided, limitations noted, and future research directions suggested.

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1. Introduction

Customer relationships, and relationship marketing in particular, have received considerable attention from both academicians and practitioners. Relationship marketing aims to build long-term, trusting, mutually beneficial relationships with valued customers (Kim & Cha, 2002). According to Reichheld and Sasser (1990), companies can increase profits by almost 100% by retaining just 5%

more of their defecting customer base. The improved financial rewards are accrued through reduced customer acquisition marketing costs, acquisition of new customers via positive word-of-mouth, and larger purchases over time by less price-sensitive loyal customers (Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). Building committed customer relationships "is increasingly emerging as a strategy for organizations that strive to retain loyal and satisfied customers in today's highly competitive environment" (Meng & Elliott, 2008, p. 509).

A social identity perspective can be useful to help establish the relationship between companies and customers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). As such, customer-company identification is a

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potentially useful construct for better understanding customer relationships, yet there have been few studies that examine it in this way (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005). In addition, few studies pay attention to social identification antecedents (e.g., identification) to customer behaviors and have not yet incorporated them into established frameworks (He, Li, & Harris, 2012; Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013). Ahearne et al. (2005) point out that customer-company identification may have a greater effect when the offering is intangible, as in the case of services. Thus, it may be worthwhile to examine customer-company identification in a hospitality services context.

Hotels can provide a wide range of tourist services such as accommodation, food service, entertainment, local transportation, site recommendations, and arrangements for local tours. Thus, the hotel service experience is an important component of the entire tourism experience that, in some circumstances, may be reflective of the overall tourism industry.

Leisure activities, including tourism, and their importance to life satisfaction and a sense of well-being have been previously noted in the tourism/leisure literature (e.g., Diener & Suh, 1997; Dolnicar, Yanamandram, & Cliff, 2012; Hobson & Dietrich, 1994; Karnitis, 2006; Neal, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2007, 2009). Milman (1998) points out that “an increasing number of tourism and travel promotional campaigns suggest that travel, vacation, or any tourism experience may have a positive impact on a traveler's psychological well-being” (p. 166). However, the majority of studies in this area focus on the relationship of quality of life or the subjective well-being of residents of tourism destinations, with few studies exploring the contribution of specific tourism activities to tourists' subjective well-being. Specially, it remains unclear whether tourism activities facilitated by hospitality organizations contribute to tourists' subjective well-being (Dolnicar et al., 2012).

With Asia predicted to be the world's largest tourist destination and tourist-generating region by 2020, it is surprising that there has been a general lack of empirical studies with Asian tourists. Notably, until China opened its doors to the outside world in 1978, tourism in the country was virtually non-existent. China has since become a major tourism market (Lee & Sparks, 2007; Qiu & Lam, 2004). With China's population of over 1.3 billion, tourism authorities have been focusing more attention on developing China's domestic tourism market (Wang & Qu, 2004). The domestic market now makes up more than 90% of the country's tourist traffic and has exhibited continuous growth of around 10% each year in the most recent decade (China Travel Guide, 2014). Thus, our theoretical model is tested with structural equation modeling (SEM) using a sample of Chinese tourists.

The current study makes a number of contributions to the tourism/hospitality literature. First, it tests and demonstrates that perceived service quality plays a significant indirect role in the development of improved repurchase intentions, as well as greater customer subjective well-being in a lodging context. Previous literature focused on service quality (e.g., Babin, Lee, Kim, & Griffin, 2005; Hutchinson, Lai, & Wang, 2009; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Petrick, 2004) has examined the relationship between service quality and customer behaviors, but has failed to examine customer subjective well-being as a consequence.

Second, this study incorporates customer-company identification as a relationship quality construct and tests its mediating role in the effects of service quality on customer repurchase intentions and subjective well-being. This study, thus, extends our understanding of relationship quality by adding customer-company identification as a relational construct. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) suggest that customer-company identification represents a deep, committed, and meaningful relationship between company and customer. To the best of our knowledge, previous empirical

research in tourism/hospitality has not examined the potential mediating role of customer-company identification as a relational construct.

Third, this study not only examines customer repurchase intentions as an economic outcome, it also proposes and investigates customer subjective well-being as a social outcome of service evaluation perceptions. This study extends previous service-based relationship marketing studies by broadening the traditional research perspective that focuses only on economic outcomes. Although the study of subjective well-being has received increased attention among tourism researchers (e.g., Dolnicar et al., 2012; Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004; Neal, Sirgy, & Uysal, 1999; Neal et al., 2007; Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, & Yu, 2011), few studies have yet to explore the antecedents and mechanism of tourists' subjective well-being. This study proposes perceived service quality, as an antecedent of customer subjective well-being, and relational quality (i.e., overall customer satisfaction, customer-company identification) as both antecedents to customer subjective well-being and mediators of perceived service quality.

In the following sections, we first utilize prior literature to construct a conceptual model that examines two relationship quality constructs (customer satisfaction, customer-company identification) as mediating variables between the lodging service quality perceptions of Chinese tourists and two outcomes (repurchase intentions, subjective well-being). In the course of the literature review, we also develop the hypotheses. The results follow, and the paper concludes with a discussion of the managerial implications of the findings, as well as study limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Service quality

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) define service quality as the difference between customer expectations of the service to be received and perceptions of the actual service received. Based on this conceptualization, Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed a service measurement scale (i.e., SERVQUAL) which includes five quality dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles). SERVQUAL has been widely accepted by scholars, but also criticized for its weaknesses and practical application (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). In the tourism/hospitality literature, scholars have developed several domain-specific service quality scales such as LODGSERV (Knutson, Stevens, Wullaert, Patton, & Yokoyama, 1990; Patton, Stevens, & Knutson, 1994), HOLSERV (Mei, Dean, & White, 1999), Lodging Quality Index (Getty & Getty, 2003), and others (e.g., Akbaba, 2006; Albacete-Sáez, Fuentes-Fuentes, & Lloréns-Montes, 2007; Ekinci & Riley, 1998; Tsang & Qu, 2000; Wilkins, Merrilees, & Herington, 2007).

2.2. Relationship quality

Some authors suggest that relationship quality lacks both a formal definition as well as agreement on what dimensions it consists of (e.g., Athanasopoulou, 2009; Huntley, 2006; Woo & Ennew, 2004), although it is recognized as a higher order construct consisting of several distinct constructs (Dwyer & Oh, 1987; Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995; Lages, Lages, & Lages, 2005). Relationship quality is widely recognized as both a key to developing loyal customers (Walsh, Hennig-Thurau, Sassenberg, & Bornemann, 2010) and an important predictor of customer post-purchase behavior (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Kim & Cha, 2002; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Whereas service quality is an overall evaluation of a firm's performance, relationship quality is a

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