INFLUENCE OF CUSTOMER EMOTIONS ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY AMONG STAR-RATED HOTELS IN NORTH RIFT, KENYA

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ABSTRACT: *With business competition becoming more intense, the most important issues that sellers face are on providing excellent quality products or services and keeping loyal customers to ensure long-term profit to their organizations. As such, the development and sustainability of customer loyalty is important in creating and maintaining competitive advantage. One way that organizations can enhance customer loyalty is by cultivating positive emotional connection through enhanced service experiences. The study sought to determine the relationship between customer emotions and consumer loyalty among star-rated hotels in North Rift, Kenya. The research adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population for the study was made of 1416 loyal customers from the fifteen (15) star-rated hotels in North Rift region of Kenya. The sample size was 455 guests obtained using a stratified random sampling method. Data was collected using a questionnaire. Structural Equation Model (SEM) was applied with R-value being estimated to analyse and test hypotheses. The results of the study showed that customer emotions played a significant role in achieving customer loyalty among star-rated hotels in the study area (p < 0.05). Specifically, variables like felt comfortable, welcomed, contented, secure, important, entertained, relaxed, elegant, cool, excited, sophisticated and respected among others were found to enhance the loyalty of customers. On the other hand, negative emotions such as my request were nullified, felt displeased, ignored, angry, anxious, discontent, worried, sad, and ashamed among others were found to discourage customer loyalty. Therefore, the study recommends that hotels should pursue positive customer emotions in order to enhance the loyalty of their customers.*

KEYWORDS: Customer Emotions, Loyalty, Star-Rated Hotels, North Rift, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Global competition has forced companies to review their approaches to business. One way of doing this is through RM. Relationship marketing ensures that organizations attract and keep consumers loyal. Most studies on RM have been done in developed countries, and very little has been done in developing countries (Kumar, Sunder & Ramaseshan, 2011). Kumar *et al.* (2011) further posit that with global competition organizations are focusing more on customers and this is why global relationship management is vital. In Pakistan, Hassan, Lashari and Zafar (2015) found that RM

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leads to customer loyalty (CL), satisfaction, increase in market share, boost employee morale and improves in-depth customer loyalty.

In Africa, some studies have focused on relationship marketing and customer loyalty. For instance, research on Egyptian hotels showed that constructs of relationship marketing, such as hotel size, financial resources, business expertise and customer pressure, help in implementation of the relationship marketing (Essawy, 2012). Ngoma and Ntile (2019), in their study of telecommunication industry in Uganda, established that relationship marketing components (communication, commitment and encouraging word of mouth (WOM) influence CL. Therefore, they recommend that telecommunication companies should encourage positive chatter, establish encounters that focus on building commitment and targeted communication. A study in South African Insurance industry found that relationship quality, value constructs (commitment, trust, satisfaction and consumer value) influence stronger loyalty behaviour among customers (Petzer & van Tonder, 2019).

The hotel industry in Kenya is closely connected to the tourism industry due to their shared and mutual interests in their respective industries. Each of them depends on the other to maintain their activities. Recently, the Kenyan tourism sector recorded impressive growth results in terms of foreign exchange earnings and international arrivals to the country (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2012). In 2012 alone, the sector earned KSh97.9 billion, a 32.8% rise from the KSh73.7 billion of 2011. Equally, foreign visitors increased from 1.6 million in 2010 to 1.8m in 2011, a margin of 13.3%. More businesses have also mushroomed in different areas of Kenya to cater to both local and international visitors. Therefore, the hotels and restaurants recorded growth from 4.2% in 2010 to 5% in 2011 (KNBS, 2012). However, exogenous pressures, including the financial downturns and terrorists' attacks on both the Westgate Mall in 2013 and Garissa University in April 2015, have had a substantial impact on the country's tourism earnings, visitor numbers, booking rates and hotel stay unit nights (Kenya Association of Tour Operators, 2016).

Customer Emotions and Customer Loyalty
Emotions have been described as "a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events or thoughts; has a phenomenological tone; is accompanied by physiological processes; is often expressed physically; and may result in specific actions to affirm or cope with the emotion, depending on its nature and the person having it" (Shammout & Algharabat, 2013). In the business world, studies suggest that emotions are specific to a product (Holbrook, Chestnut & Oliva, 1984), service (Price, Arnould & Tierney, 1995, as cited in Shammout & Algharabat, 2013), consumption experience (Richins, 1997), advertisement (Batra & Holbrook, 1990), or the relationship between buyer and seller (Barnes, 1997; Ruth, Brunel & Otens, 2002).

A research by Shaw (2007) reveals that emotions are often seen as antecedents that can influence the outcomes of a customer experience (customer retention, customer loyalty, satisfaction). Both practitioners and academicians suggest that companies that want to deliver great experiences need to take into account the emotional component as well as functional component (Claeys & Roozen, 2012). Few studies have examined the role of emotions on customer loyalty (Claeys & Roozen, 2012). According to Ferreira and Teixeira (2013), companies do not know the experiences they

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want to provide or the influence of the different components of those experiences on their customers; neither do they know the exact type of resources needed to create the most effective positive experiences to achieve sustained financial success, satisfaction and customer retention. More research that is empirical is necessary to examine the relative contribution of emotional clues in a service encounter to (Ferreira & Teixeira, 2013). The study filled this gap by including customer emotions in the model. The rationale is that if companies want their customers to become true advocates, they need to offer both a positive emotional and a positive functional experience. Their joint presence leads to a high level of satisfaction, resulting in positive word-of-mouth (recommendation) and loyalty. Companies offering utilitarian services are more prone to elicit destructive emotions with their customers when they fail to deliver the expected (Claeys & Roozen, 2012).

According to Zorfas and Deemon (2016), emotionally connected customers are more than twice as valuable as highly satisfied customer. The emotionally connected customer buys more products and services, visits more often, exhibits less price sensitivity, pays more to the company's communications, follows the company's advice, and recommends the company more to other customers. Companies deploying emotional connection, strategies and metrics and measure customer experience increase customers' emotional connection which drives financial outcomes (Zorfar & Deemon, 2016). They further state that, the best way to maximize customer value is to delight by connecting with the customers emotions. This will helping in meeting their unknown needs.

A research by Lee, Comer, Dubinsky and Schafer (2011) explored the effect of feelings in the interplay between clients and automobile sales persons. The study found that customers were more satisfied with their relationship with the salesperson when they experience a higher level of positive emotion. Customers who feel negative emotions will be less satisfied and may even discontinue maintaining the relationship. Lee *et al.* used the recall method to assess customer emotions. They recommended future studies to be carried using face-to-face interviews to collect data about customers' emotion and satisfaction. The present study, however, bridged this gap by investigating the role of consumer emotions on their loyalty in star-rated hotels. The emotions of the customers were evaluated based on the interaction and the experience they had while consuming the service. Self-administered questionnaires were used as the research instrument instead of recall method.

Boxer and Rekettye (2010) looked into the impact of perceived emotional intelligence on the perceived service value and consumer Loyalty. The study revealed that service providers could influence customers' impression and emotional experience they get during the service provision interaction. Further, it revealed that if this impression is positive, customers perceive added value to the service interaction and tend to develop a long-lasting commitment to the organization which can develop into loyalty. The study offered a unique and important role that emotion plays in business; it shows that emotion is the basis through which organizations should interact with customers as leverage to creating customer loyalty.

Tronvoll (2011) conducted a study on negative emotions and their effects on customer complaint behaviour. The study utilized a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The results of the study revealed that the negative emotion of frustration is the best predictor of complaint behaviour towards the service provider. Further, strong negative emotions were generated by negative critical incidents and these influence future behaviours against the service provider. Finally, the study found that other-attributed negative emotions, such as frustration, were the main drivers of complaint behaviour to the service provider.

Consumer behaviour is driven by emotions in both the supermarkets and banking context. Therefore, in order to better predict customer loyalty intentions, the emotional component is crucial and should be included along with other cognitive components (Razzag, Yousaf & Hong, 2017). Razzag *et al.* used emotions as a moderating variable between customer equity drivers and loyalty intentions. The present study adopts the work of Razzag *et al.* by examining the direct impact of emotions using hotel features as the intervening force. While the study by Razzag *et al.* was done on supermarkets and banking industry, this study was done in hotel industry a key hospitality sector. An emotions construct has been included in the proposed theoretical model for the following two reasons. First, although emotions have previously been considered as an important component in relationship marketing, further empirical investigation into their effect within this context is needed (Andersen & Kumar, 2006; Bagozzi, 2006). Second, the importance of investigating the role of emotions has not been emphasized within the long-term relationship literature, but has also been strongly suggested within the hospitality literature as an issue that requires more exploration (Barsky & Nash, 2002; Pullman & Gross, 2004).

Researchers in relationship marketing have used different scales to investigate the role of emotions. For example, in an attempt to assess the closeness of relationships, Barnes (1997) acknowledges that these cannot exist without emotional content. He adopted ten different emotions (five positives and five negatives) to focus on the concept of emotional tone (which is the difference between total positive and total negative emotions, it is positive if positive emotions are stronger than negative emotions). Liljandar and Strandvik (1997) included seven emotions constructs (three positive and four negative) and argued that emotions could be presented in all interactions between the customer and service provider. As a result, past experiences may affect perceived emotions either positively or negatively. Similarly, Ruth *et al*. (2002) maintain that once positive or negative emotions are experienced, the overall preconceptions of the recipients to their relationship are also positive or negative. In their examination of other relational results, Guerrero, Anderson and Trost (1998) posit that recipients undergo numerous emotions that may gradually match with relationship outcomes.

Liang and Wang (2005, as cited in Shammout & Algharabat, 2013) posit a positive relationship between emotion and trust. However, the effect of experienced emotions in customer relationships, considered a factor of an affective and cognitive structure influencing outcome, has not been explored in-depth in marketing related research (Sanchez-Franco & Rondan-Catalun, 2010, as cited in Shammout & Algharabat, 2013). This study operationalized emotions as consciousness of the occurrence of some physiological arousal followed by a behavioural response along with

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appraised meaning of both (Sheth *et al.*, 1999). The customer emotions were measured by use of both positive and negative emotions constructs.

Statement of the Problem
With business competition becoming more intense, the most important issues that sellers face are on providing excellent quality products or services and keeping loyal customers to ensure long-term profit to their organizations (Omenye, 2013). As such, the development and sustainability of customer loyalty is important in creating and maintaining competitive advantage (Yap *et al*., 2012). The tourism and hospitality sector in North Rift Kenya has grown tremendously since 2013 due to several factors, and mainly the onset of devolved systems of Government, which brought national resources to the lower ranks (Tourism Regulatory Authority, 2015). However, this growth has also shown a mismatch with the quality of services offered; so that investors concentrate more on increasing bed capacity rather than improving service quality (TRA, 2016). This leads to low occupancy levels and hence investor frustrations. Further, hotels in North Rift are unable to attract visitors from outside the area due to tendency to recruit untrained staff and overpricing of their services, while others are located in noisy areas (TRA, 2015).

Few scholars have looked into the moderating variables of antecedent factors of relationship marketing but instead most of the studies solely focused on direct and isolated relationships of consumer Loyalty and other outcomes (Auka, 2012; Tayyab & Rajput, 2014; Srivastava & Rai, 2014; Al-Jader & Sentosa, 2015; Al-Azzam, 2015; Susanty & Kenny, 2015). Therefore, this study was based on researchers' construct of relationship marketing practices (RMP) antecedents for creating, developing and sustaining customer loyalty with moderating power of hotel characteristics. Based on the research, this paper explores the link between customer emotions and customer loyalty, drawing evidence from experiences the of star-rated hotels in North Rift Kenya.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research used descriptive survey research design. The investigation was done in North Rift region of Kenya. The region was selected because it was the first to seek classification of hotels after more than a decade (thirteen years) according to the Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA, 2016). The population for the study were the loyal customers from all the star rated hotels in Uasin Gishu County. The target population was based on bed capacity, and this consisted of 1416 beds from the fifteen star-rated hotels. These hotels comprised: Boma Inn Eldoret, The Noble Conference Centre, Cicada Hotel, Hotel Sirikwa, Hotel Comfy, Kenmosa Resort, Hotel Winstar, Poa Place Resort, Starburcks Hotel and Restaurant, Hotel Horizon, The Pearl Tourist Hotel Ltd, Wagon Wheel Hotel and Asis Hotel. According to the Kenya Gazette (2015), thirteen (13) of these firms were categorised in September 2015, in addition to the two (Sirikwa and Asis Hotel) that had been ranked earlier coming up to a sum of fifteen hotels.

The researchers adopted stratified random sampling method. Each hotel was treated as a stratum. To pick out the elements from the strata the researchers used random sampling. The study considered loyal guests as those who would have visited and stayed for three times or more in a

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year in a particular hotel. The loyal consumers were marked out with the assistance of hotel staff. The sample composed of 455 loyal users of the participating firms. This sample size formed 32% of the target population. It was calculated based on Yamane's (1967) formula.

The data collation tool was a questionnaire. To manage data collected in this study, two statistical techniques were adopted. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was deployed to manage the preliminary data and provide descriptive analyses about study sample. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using R 3.3.4) using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was adopted to examine the measurement model. The first stage was the evaluation of the measurement model while the second stage involved the evaluation of the structural one. Structural equation modelling software (R-SEM) was used to explore statistical relationships among the items of each factor and between the factors of independent (provision quality) and dependent variable (loyalty).

RESULTS

The research sought to find out how well the hotels treated their customers emotionally. If the customers (respondents) felt that the hotel treated them much worse than expected they were to select 1 (Strongly disagree). If they felt, they were treated excellently they were to select 5 (Strongly-Agree). Moreover, if their feelings about how well the hotels treated customers were not so strong they were to select one of three moderate options, namely 4 (Agree), 3 (Neither agree nor disagree) and 2 (Strongly-disagree). There were several constructs used to measure customers' emotions. There were positive and negative emotions. Positive emotions included *comfortable, welcomed, contented, inspired, secure, treated as an important quest, entertained, extravagant, relaxed at the hotel, treated elegantly, pampered , felt cool at the hotel, hotel facilities made me sophisticated, respected*. Negative emotions included *some of my request were nullified by the hotel employees, displeased/discontent with the hotel employees, ignored by the hotel employees, angry because of the poor services, worried of poor security at the hotel, sad on the way I was treated, feared the way the employees were reacting to my enquiries, was ashamed of the facilities at the hotel, I was lonely at the hotel*.

Analysis of Positive Emotions
Positive Emotions was measured using fifteen items which were coded as POS1, POS2, POS3, POS4, POS5, POS6, POS7, POS8, POS9, POS10, POS11, POS12, POS13, POS14 and POS15. Table 1 below shows that most of the respondents agreed that the hotel treated them positively (as shown by mean =3.714692, approximately 4 in the scale). It was also evident that they disagreed (mean = 1.855339) with the notion that there were negative emotions concerning the hotel treatment of its customers, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 1: Descriptive Results of Positive Emotions

Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
POS1	308	4.19	.714	2	5
POS2	308	4.19	.704	2	5
POS3	308	4.10	.714	2	5
POS4	308	4.06	.744	2	5
POS5	308	4.28	.699	1	5
POS6	308	4.06	.805	1	5
POS7	308	3.89	.936	1	5
POS8	308	3.61	.987	1	5
POS9	308	4.04	.808	2	5
POS10	308	3.76	.921	1	5
POS11	308	3.78	.878	1	5
POS12	308	3.88	.914	2	5
POS13	308	3.96	.828	1	5
POS14	308	3.72	.983	1	5
POS15	308	3.90	1.063	1	5
AVERAGE		3.96			

Source: Researchers (2018)

From Table 1 above, positive emotions had an average mean of 3.98. Construct POS 5, "*the hotel was secure"*, had the highest mean of 4.28. This meant that most customers value security. It was followed by Construct POS 2, "*I felt comfortable in the hotel*", and construct POS 2, "*I was welcomed by the hotel employees*", with a mean of 4.19. Construct POS 3, "*I was contented with the hotel facility*", had a mean of 4.10, and construct POS 4, "I *was inspired by the employees of the hote*l", and POS 6, "*was treated as an important quest*", had a mean of 4.06. The other constructs had means ranging from 3.61 to 4.04. This meant that positive emotions were important in customer loyalty. Security, comfort, feeling welcomed by hotel employees, being contented, inspiration from hotels employees and good treatment generated the highest means. These findings were in agreement with those of Shaw (2007) that emotions are often seen as antecedents, which can influence the outcome of a customer experience (customer retention, customer loyalty, satisfaction). A study by Lee *et al*. (2011) also found that customers were more satisfied with their relationship with the salesperson when they experience a higher level of positive emotion.

Analysis of Negative Emotions
Negative Emotions was measured using nine items which were coded as NEG16, NEG17, NEG18, NEG19, NEG20, NEG21, NEG22, NEG23 and NEG24

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Table 2: Descriptive Results of Negative Emotions

Item	Observation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
NEG16	308	2.27	1.116	1	5
NEG17	308	1.87	.958	1	5
NEG18	308	1.79	.916	1	5
NEG19	308	1.81	.928	1	5
NEG20	308	1.82	.927	1	5
NEG21	308	1.73	.863	1	5
NEG22	308	1.79	.862	1	5
NEG23	308	1.76	.863	1	5
NEG24	308	1.88	.914	1	5
AVERAGE		1.86			

Source: Researchers (2018)

From Table 2 above, the negative emotions had an average mean of 1.86. It was also evident that they disagreed (mean = 1.855339) with the notion that there were negative emotions concerning the hotel treatment on its customers. This meant that most customers did not experience any negative emotions and this explains why they frequent these hotels. These findings concurred with those of Ruth *et al.* (2002) who found that whenever positive or negative emotions are experienced, the overall preconceptions of the receivers to their relationship are as well positive or negative.

Hypothesis Test Results
The study hypothesized that there is no significant role of customer emotions on customer loyalty among star-rated hotels in North Rift, Kenya. The test of this hypothesis was carried out using the Structural Equation Model. The test results were as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Results of Structural Equation Modelling for Customer Emotions and Loyalty

	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z	P > |Z|
Behavioural Loyalty				
Positive	4.1949	0.0406	103.34	0.0000
Negative	2.2695	0.0635	35.73	0.0000
Attitudinal Loyalty				
Positive	4.1948	0.0405	103.34	0.0000
Negative	2.2695	0.0635	35.73	0.0000

DISCUSSION

The results of SEM model regression show that there was positive and significant connection between customer emotions and customer allegiance among star-rated hotels in North Rift, Kenya. Therefore, it was postulated that there is a significant role of customer emotions on customer loyalty among star-rated hotels in North Rift, Kenya. In the case of customer emotions results

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indicated positive and significant effect on customer loyalty (p – value 0.0000 < 0.050) and further, it was established that when positive customer emotions change by one-unit, customer loyalty was expected to increase by 4.1948 units. However, a puzzling result was reported on negative emotions. This was on the account that when negative emotions were experienced by the customer, customer loyalty was expected to increase by 2.2695. This effect was also positive and significant (p – value 0.0000 < 0.050).

The findings are in conformity with the findings of Tranvoll (2011) who established that negative emotions influence future behaviour against the service provider. Similarly, Lee *et al*. (2011) found positive emotions to lead to customer contentment and loyalty and that negative emotions lead to dissatisfaction. Shaw (2007) also found out that emotions influence outcomes of customer experience such as customer retention, loyalty and satisfaction. The results of the study also support those of Sipe (2018) who established that emotional value to have an emotional connection with customers hence customer loyalty. Therefore, hotels in North Rift Kenya should train their staff to cultivate positive emotions and reduce the negative emotions.

The following constructs were significant determiners of customer loyalty: 'I felt comfortable in the hotel'; 'I was welcomed by the hotel employees'; 'I was satisfied with the hotel facility'; 'I was inspired by the employees of the hotel'; 'The hotel was secure'; 'I was treated as an important quest'; 'I was entertained'; 'I was Extravagant'; 'I was relaxed at the hotel'; 'I was treated elegantly'; 'I was pampered by the employees of the hotel'; 'I felt cool at the hotel'; 'I was inspired by the hotel employees'; 'The hotel facilities made me sophisticated,' and 'I was respected by the hotel employees.' On the other hand, the following were significant determiners of customer loyalty in this context and, if minimized, had a positive direct effect on customer loyalty: 'Some of my requests got nullified by the hotel employees'; 'I was displeased/discontented with the hotel employees'; 'I was ignored by the hotel employees'; 'I got angry because of the poor services'; 'I was worried of poor security at the hotel'; 'I was sad on the way I was treated,' 'I feared the way the employees were reacting to my enquiries'; 'I was ashamed of the facilities at the hotel,' and 'I was lonely in the hotel.'

Sarwari (2017) developed a model of relationship marketing to empirically investigate: the effect of relational bonds (financial, social and structural) on customer emotions; the ultimate effect of both relationship quality and emotions on customer loyalty, and emotions on relationship quality. In the data were collected from 284 loyal guests at five-star hotels in Bangladesh to examine their perspectives as final users using structural equation modelling (AMOS 21). The emotion, which is an important construct, has never been used before to look into the loyalty of the customers in five star hotels in Bangladesh. The findings imply the necessity of relational bonds in service firms, particularly in hotels business, to increase the positive emotions of customers which in turn amplify the relationship quality between the customers and the hoteliers so that more loyal customers are introduce in the five star hotels in Bangladesh and make the hotels pursuit more competitive advantage and lasting profit.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that customer emotions have a role in creating customer loyalty. Positive emotions have the highest marginal effects on customer loyalty. This means that variables like *felt comfortable, welcomed, contented, secure, important, entertained*, *relaxed, elegant, cool, excited*, *sophisticated* and *respected* among others influence the loyalty of customers. The study further concludes that negative emotions such as my *request were nullified*, *felt displeased*, *ignored*, *angry*, *anxious*, *discontent*, *worried*, *sad*, and *ashamed* among others discourage customer loyalty. An interesting result was that negative emotions recorded the lowest marginal effect. Therefore, hotel managers should enhance positive emotions and discourage negative emotions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that managers of the hotels should offer trainings to their employees to cultivate positive emotions in their customers and try much as possible to reduce the negative emotions. Moreover, from the findings the research, the study recommends that hotels should provide facilities that are secure, elegant, sophisticated and employ personnel that are well-mannered, attentive, reverential and welcoming to their customers. Since it is not always that positive emotions will be maintained, in the event that the negative emotions will be experienced by the customer, the managers need to come with policies on how to address the negative emotions with the aim of motivating customers to always come back. The study also recommends that star-rated hotels should concentrate on factors that generate positive emotions, improve their perceived image and provide services that exceed customer expectations.

A key policy message is for the framers of the classification measures of hotels in Kenya to consider service quality variables that impact on customer loyalty. They, for instance, should not focus on just the tangibles because that variable can be taken for granted by hotel clients who are characterized generally as looking for different environments all the time. This is because classification of the hotels had no significant effect on customer loyalty.

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