

Customer satisfaction and loyalty in service: Two concepts, four constructs, several relationships

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Abstract

Although the literature on marketing has recognised customer satisfaction as a significant antecedent to customer loyalty, the relationships between both satisfaction constructs—transaction-specific and overall—with customer loyalty have mostly been studied separately. As customer loyalty has therefore been infrequently investigated with simultaneous consideration for its attitudinal and behavioural dimensions, this study aimed to explore the satisfaction–loyalty relationships according to a double view of the concepts. Empirical analysis in a sports-service context highlighted the role of overall satisfaction on attitudinal loyalty and minimised the role of transaction-specific satisfaction, and therefore found that neither customer satisfaction nor attitudinal loyalty predict customer repurchase behaviour.

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Keywords: Repurchase behaviour; Attitudinal loyalty; Transaction-specific and overall satisfaction; Service; Membership; Sport club

1. Introduction

Customer loyalty, a major theme in marketing research, has become an essential concern for managers, and a strategic obsession for many. This increasing concern has mainly been due to intense competition, particularly in service industries, and the current focus on the relationship between consumers and organisations, which is the core of the relational marketing approach.

Basically, marketing research now recognises that acquiring new customers costs more than retaining current ones (Reichheld, 1996). However, although customer loyalty has been recurrently studied, the psychological processes underlying its formation are still unknown, even if numerous antecedents have been identified. Among these antecedents, both researchers and practitioners have attributed a particular status to customer satisfaction, recognising it as the main antecedent of loyalty. However, they have not clearly established the nature of the relationship, which depends on whether researchers measure stated intentions or actual behaviour.

This study has therefore attempted to test the satisfaction–loyalty relationship based on four constructs which are usually investigated separately. These are transaction-specific satisfaction, overall satisfaction, attitudinal loyalty, and repurchase behaviour. This study aims to reinforce some existing research findings by replicating models adapted from Jones and Suh (2000) in the context of a different service industry, a type of exercise which is for Hunter (2001) still underestimated. The reinforcement of findings is enhanced by combining the satisfaction–loyalty relationships with a classical bi-dimensional view of customer loyalty. Indeed, this study relies on both customer intentions and repurchasing behaviour for the behavioural dimension of loyalty, which is still rare according to Chandon et al. (2005).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The satisfaction–loyalty relationship

According to Henning-Thurau and Klee (1997), studies dealing with the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty can be classified into three groups. The first comes from service management literature and studies the

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relationship at an aggregated, company-wide level. These studies consider satisfaction to be an antecedent of customer loyalty, which in turn influences firms' profitability (Anderson et al., 1994; Heskett et al., 1994; Rust and Zahorik, 1993). The second focuses on the individual level and has mainly studied customer retention by customer repurchase intentions. This constitutes an important shortcoming because of the gap between individual intentions and behaviours (Chandon et al., 2005). This second group perceives loyalty to be influenced by satisfaction, even if the structure of the relationship does not appear to be symmetric and linear (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Mittal et al., 1998; Oliva et al., 1995). The third group, which is the smallest (Bolton, 1998; Mittal and Kamakura, 2001), has focused on the satisfaction-loyalty link on a individual level with real purchasing data. Henning-Thurau and Klee (1997) found that studies of this group have tended to reveal a weak or insignificant relationship between satisfaction and repurchase behaviour. These views appear complementary, and, according to Henning-Thurau and Klee (1997), it is time for a fourth group of researchers to integrate this dual conceptualisation.

2.2. Attitudinal and behavioural loyalty

The first marketing studies perceived customer loyalty in a behavioural way, measuring the concept as behaviour involving the repeat purchase of a particular product or service, evaluated either by the sequence in which it is purchased, as a proportion of purchases, as an act of recommendation, as the scale of the relationship, its scope, or both, or as several of these criteria combined (Hallowell, 1996; Homburg and Giering, 2001; Yi, 1990). Since Day (1969) criticised this one-dimensional view as behaviourally centred and therefore unable to distinguish true loyalty from spurious loyalty, many researchers have recognised the need to add an attitudinal component to the behavioural one (Berné et al., 2001; Dick and Basu, 1994; Jacoby and Kyner, 1973; Oliver, 1997).

Indeed, as Bandyopadhyay and Martell (2007) found, the existence of such situational factors as stock being out or unavailable, such individual or intrinsic factors as resistance to change, or such social and cultural factors as social bonding reinforces the need to distinguish customer loyalty from repeat purchase behaviour. These factors also point to a need to add an attitudinal dimension for customer loyalty. This seems to be particularly contextual and therefore relevant in the services area (Bloemer et al., 1999; Ganesh et al., 2000; Zeithaml et al., 1996).

2.3. Transaction-specific satisfaction and overall satisfaction

Johnson (2001) found that two conceptualisations of customer satisfaction had emerged over the previous decade. Before the late 1990s, measurement of satisfaction essentially focused on particular product or service

transactions, defined as post-choice evaluative judgments concerning specific purchase decisions (Oliver, 1980). More recently, another conception emerged that is concerned with all of a consumer's previous experiences with a firm, product, or service cumulatively (Anderson et al., 1994; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Mittal et al., 1999). This perspective considers transaction-specific satisfaction mainly by focusing on consumers' emotional reactions to specific service attributes or service encounters and suggests that firms link the performance of precise service elements or variations of them to specific psychological responses (Olsen and Johnson, 2003).

However, overall satisfaction seems to be a better predictor of customer intentions and behaviours (Olsen and Johnson, 2003). Thus, according to Johnson (2001), these perspectives seem to be more complementary than competitive, and should therefore be investigated simultaneously, as they do not respond to the same managerial objective-based behaviour.

3. Causal models and hypotheses

Jones and Suh (2000) noted that both satisfaction constructs have mostly been studied separately. Little theoretical support exists for describing the relationships between these constructs themselves and the different construct of loyalty. This study therefore aims to test models adapted from Jones and Suh (2000), which were among the first to provide theoretical and empirical support in this area in service industries.

The different definitions for satisfaction constructs basically support the argument that transaction-specific satisfaction influences overall satisfaction, which in turn influences both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. In this case, overall satisfaction plays a mediating role between transaction-specific satisfaction and loyalty. Parasuraman et al. (1994) supported this assumption, which also corresponds to the full mediation model proposed by Jones and Suh (2000) (Fig. 1).

However, previous studies hypothesised that transaction-specific satisfaction could have a direct impact on repurchasing intentions, particularly when the specific transaction was the last experienced by the customer or was a special one, either for its status or its unusual performance (Oliver and Swan, 1989; Spreng et al., 1995). This view asserts that a direct relationship between transaction-specific satisfaction and attitudinal loyalty can be added to the previous model. Therefore, considering that some customers return to service providers even when they have been dissatisfied with a particular service experience, it seems likely that overall satisfaction could play a moderating role on the link between transaction-specific satisfaction and attitudinal

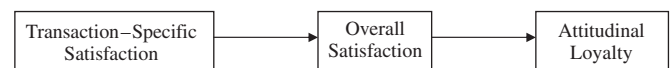


Fig. 1. Full mediation model adapted from Jones and Suh (2000).

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