



Using online consumer loyalty to gain competitive advantage in travel agencies[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Most tourism consumers who book tourism services online are likely to be selective and technologically literate. Online travel agencies must therefore evolve if they want to compete. This study tests the following hypothesis: perceived e-service quality is a multidimensional construct that directly and positively affects perceived e-service value. Furthermore, perceived e-service value directly and significantly affects consumer loyalty toward online travel agencies. Results provide evidence of a causal relationship between these three constructs: perceived e-service quality, perceived e-service value, and consumer loyalty.

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1. Introduction

The tourism sectors dynamism owes to two main causes. First, ICT is evolving constantly and rapidly. Second, consumers are becoming increasingly technology literate, and are therefore becoming more selective and knowledgeable about purchasing tourism services online. Ensuring tourism service quality and online consumers' loyalty is fundamental for online travel agencies to compete. New technologies modify companies' service processes. By providing new user interactions, new technologies let companies position themselves better (Padgett & Mulvey, 2007).

This article shows that understanding causal relationships between perceived e-service quality, perceived value, and loyalty in tourism service online bookings is fundamental for business development (Bauer, Falk, & Hammerschmidt, 2006). Shankar, Smith, and Rangaswamy (2003) show that, in virtual environments, consumer retention is crucial for business success and survival (Flavian, Guinalú, & Gurrea, 2006; Harris & Goode, 2004). Awareness of these causal relationships helps online travel agencies retain customers. ICTs yield essential information on customers, which means online travel agencies can provide a better service to consumers.

Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and hypotheses. Section 3 describes the methodology and presents results. Finally,

Section 4 discusses conclusions, managerial implications, research opportunities, and limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Quality

Online travel agencies are increasing their competitiveness. To do so, they are using quality as a strategic element. Several studies develop scales to measure perceived e-service quality (Fuentes, Gil, Berenguer, & Moliner, 2011). According to Bauer, Hammerschmidt, and Falk (2005), perceived e-service quality cannot be a unidimensional construct because of peculiarities in the online environment. Scholars must therefore adapt traditional scales to measure service quality.

Online services are impersonal, so defining indicators that measure service quality is difficult. To compensate, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005) build a multidimensional measure of online quality, basing this measure on that of Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2002). The measure uses two scales to evaluate e-service quality.

The first scale, E-S-QUAL, measures aspects relating to basic or core services. E-S-QUAL has four dimensions: efficiency, reliability, system availability, and privacy. The second multidimensional scale to measure service recovery is E-RecS-QUAL, whose dimensions are responsiveness, compensation, and contact. Considering E-S-QUAL to measure online service quality leads to the following hypothesis.

H1. Online travel agencies' service quality is a multidimensional construct.

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Table 1
 Technical datasheet for the study sample.
 The authors' own work, 2013.

Universe	Online travel consumers in the last 18 months
Geographic area	Portugal, Spain, and the USA
Data collection method	Personal survey with a structured questionnaire
Sampling design	Non-probabilistic method for convenience
Data collection period	June–July 2013
Sample size	334 valid answers
Statistical techniques	Descriptive analysis Confirmatory factor analysis Structural equations Variance analysis
Statistical program	SPSS version 19 Lisrel

2.2. Perceived value

Scarce tourism research focuses on measuring overall consumer-perceived value of purchases, whereby consumers evaluate not only tourism but also their shopping experience. Studies analyze perceived value in the product or service post-purchase phase (Moliner, Sánchez, Rodríguez, & Callarisa, 2007).

Perceived value is a highly subjective concept. Perceived value depends on consumer judgments, which in turn depend on factors like consumers' pre-purchase information, the context in which consumers make these judgments, and the moment at which consumers purchase. However, various studies that adopt a perceived value model fail to reach a consensus (Boksberger & Melsen, 2011) (Table 1).

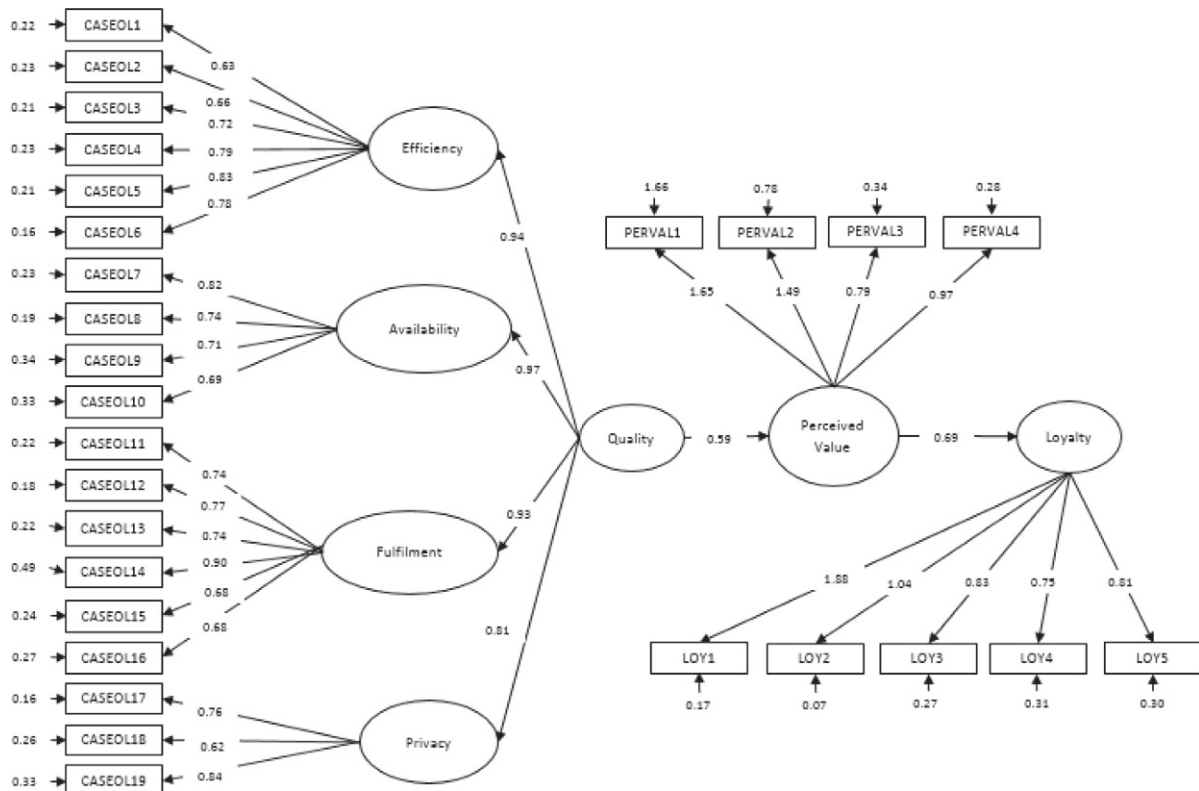
By analyzing several studies including that of Parasuraman et al. (2005), Fuentes et al. (2011) demonstrate the necessity to measure quality as a determinant of perceived value. In addition, applied e-services research such as that of Forsythe, Liu, Shannon, and Gardner (2006) emphasizes perceived value's positive effect on willingness to repeat purchases or recommend websites. The literature review leads to the following hypothesis.

H2. Consumer-perceived quality directly and positively affects consumer-perceived value when consumers book tourism services through online travel agencies.

2.3. Loyalty

The literature shows that perceived service quality and perceived value affect consumer purchase intention, and therefore affect consumer loyalty (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Service quality and consumer satisfaction should reduce complaints and increase loyalty (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007).

Extensive loyalty literature reveals increasing awareness of loyalty in the services sector, especially from the attitudinal viewpoint. Oliver (1999) points out that the attitudinal viewpoint refers to how individuals fulfill their attitudes or intentions to purchase in the future. Zeithaml et al. (1996) discuss the intention to recommend service providers to third parties. In online environments, loyalty means consumers' favorable attitudes toward the Internet as a shopping channel through which consumers purchase repeatedly (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003). Hence, this research tests the following hypothesis.



CASEOL: Quality of Online Service Recovery PERVAL: Perceived Value LOY: Loyalty

Source: Authors' own work, 2013

Fig. 1. Causal relationships.
 The authors' own work, 2013.

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