

Customer Loyalty in Spa Tourism: A Case Study

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Abstract: In today's business world, acquiring and retaining customers in the tourism industry is becoming increasingly challenging. High competition, constantly changing markets, and growing customer demands require constant adaptation to new trends and marketing innovations. It is crucial to cultivate customer loyalty, as it leads to repeat business and positive word-of-mouth promotion. Achieving this goal is an increasingly difficult task that requires innovative approaches to service marketing. Tourism includes very specific sub-sectors that are significantly different from the mainstream of the industry and serve not only well-being but also other needs. An example of a sub-sector that combines well-being and health is spa tourism. Existing studies suggest that factors influencing the loyalty of health spa visitors may vary depending on the region and cultural factors and may also change over time. Further research is therefore needed to precisely identify which factors are currently most important for promoting the loyalty of spa customers. This article presents a case study of increasing customer loyalty, with a special focus on the Czech Republic. The study identifies the current needs, preferences, and requirements of customers in the selected tourism industry. The article aims to complement a model of visitor loyalty for the needs of spa tourism and introduce marketing tools that currently influence customer loyalty in spa tourism. The complementation of the model is based on the generally accepted model of customer satisfaction in tourism. The proposed suggestions can inspire tourism businesses to fulfil the needs of health, active living, and well-being by effectively acquiring and retaining customers in a highly competitive environment. The study provides theoretical and managerial recommendations for increasing customer loyalty. The study is based on a questionnaire survey conducted in 2022 among spa visitors throughout the Czech Republic. The motivation was to identify key factors that support customer loyalty. The results show that specific treatment effects and procedures, information and personal experience, a pleasant environment and ambience of the spa contribute more to loyalty than satisfaction with accommodation or the offer of complementary services. The paper also provides a set of practical recommendations for setting up marketing programs and improving marketing communication for owners and managers of spa tourism.

Keywords: Customer loyalty, Health, Spa, Tourism marketing, Well-being

1. Introduction

The spa is a place where services of a therapeutic nature are provided to offer prevention and treatment of human diseases, recovery of strength, and well-being. The activities offered in a spa are intended to help a person to be physically, socially, mentally, and spiritually fit (Adongo, Amuquandoh, and Amenumey, 2017). It is a set of therapeutic and relaxation activities, the architecture of spa complexes combined with the spa environment, as well as the history and rich social life. An important factor is the human resources that use natural healing resources (e.g., balneology) and the implementation of techniques and procedures to treat various somatic, psychosomatic, and psychological problems (balneotherapy) Becková and Kantorová (2021).

The spa industry in the Czech Republic has a long tradition. It uses natural healing resources. Spa care is provided by 93 registered entities. There are 231 spa complexes in 32 cities (Novák and Kozelský, 2018). Four of these cities have been included among the 11 spa cities in Europe that have been awarded the UNESCO World Heritage title. There are other unique specifics. For example, spa care here is part of the treatment process, recommended by the attending physician, confirmed by the reviewing physician, and covered (partially or fully) by the patient's respective health insurance company from public funds. This state support for the spa sector is not common compared to other countries. Despite this, the Czech spas also struggle with problems that often threaten their existence. Therefore, these spas also need to monitor the loyalty of their visitors in order to be able to offer their services and develop in the long term. In this way, this high-quality form of well-being activities can continue to be offered in the Czech Republic in a sustainable way.

Reichheld and Teal (1996) argue that customer loyalty in the service industry has an impact on the achievement of business objectives. Miguel-Dávila et al. (2010) examine loyalty mediated through customer satisfaction.

However, this approach has been revealed to have limitations. In contrast, Chua et al. (2015); Gallarza and Saura (2006), in their studies focusing on tourism, find that it is possible to examine some factors directly in relation to loyalty. Anaya-Aguilar, Gemar, and Anaya-Aguilar (2021); Ardani, Agung, and Prayoga (2021); Huang, Chen, and Gao (2019); Su, Cheng, and Huang (2011) conducted their studies on the impact of various factors directly on loyalty. Their research has only been conducted on a limited number of tourist resorts or examined a small number of selected factors. These studies also have limitations in time. They state that it is appropriate to further investigate the development of loyalty drivers in subsequent years, in other territories, and with a larger number of respondents. They recommend comparing the results afterwards and monitoring further developments.

2. Literature Review

Rest and vacation have been proven to positively influence stress reduction and can contribute to improving a country's economic situation (Tarumi et al., 1998). People in prosperous economies are already purposefully focused on healthy lifestyles and life satisfaction (Sirgy et al., 2011). Their life purpose becomes improving quality of life, which includes personal development and taking care of the body and the soul. They are willing to put in the effort and financial resources to improve their lifestyle. Along with this, the travel demand for recreation and health improvement is also increasing (Chen and Petrick, 2016). Research by Neal et al. (2007) found that travel, when associated with positive experiences, yields higher satisfaction in various life domains and contributes to higher overall life satisfaction. Rodrigues et al. (2010) found that specifically wellness tourism supports a balanced state of body, mind and soul, as well as intellectual development, which brings well-being to a person. And it is especially the spas (e.g., focused on water treatments, rehabilitation, or even climatic spas) that offer services aimed at recovering health, preventing diseases, and bringing well-being through their programmes (Dryglas and Salamaga, 2017; Adongo, Amuquandoh, and Amenumey, 2017).

The increase in demand for health tourism is also bringing new competitors into the industry. This increases pressure on service quality and the exploration of factors that lead to customer loyalty. Su, Cheng, and Huang (2011) state that due to the increasing competition in the leisure and tourism market, it is important to follow and build customer loyalty to keep the businesses providing these services prosperous.

2.1 Loyalty

Loyalty is demonstrated by repeated purchases of a product. Bloemer and Kasper (1995) elaborate on true brand loyalty, which is manifested by repeated purchases of the same brand based on a commitment to purchase that brand repeatedly despite some discomfort or disadvantage. Other authors state that true loyalty is broadly defined as an individual's attitude that has both a favourable attitude toward the brand and a consistent purchase pattern toward the brand over time (Heiens and Pleshko, 1996). In contrast, spurious loyalty also results in repeat purchases, but the consumer is not committed to the brand and may purchase a different brand next time. The reasons for repeat purchases in this case tend to be inertia, convenience and time saved by not deciding, feeling indifferent about choice, and familiarity with the brand. To understand what kind of loyalty is involved, it is necessary to examine the factors that lead to it. It is undoubtedly advisable to reinforce those factors that have a direct link to even spurious loyalty. Repeated purchases also bring in financial resources and thus enable the development of the brand, product, or business. It is advisable to pursue even spurious loyalty. However, spurious loyalty requires higher costs and marketing efforts to retain customers than true loyalty. On the contrary, with higher true loyalty, customer retention costs decrease (Nyadzayo and Khajehzadeh, 2016). Therefore, firms should analyse more dimensions of customer loyalty to increase its intensity (Sayani, 2015).

H1 – Most spa visitors show true loyalty.

2.2 Satisfaction-Loyalty Relationship

The relationship between satisfaction and loyalty has undergone a turbulent evolution. The most widely accepted model is one in which satisfaction is described as an antecedent of loyalty (Oliver, 1999). This is confirmed, for example, by Miguel-Dávila et al. (2010) who examined the influence of product quality on customer loyalty through satisfaction. Javed and Cheema (2017) found that customer satisfaction and customer perceived value are strong drivers of customer loyalty. Research by Bloemer and Kasper (1995) showed that the relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty even depends on the type of satisfaction. They distinguish between latent and manifest satisfaction. While in their research it was found that "the positive impact of manifest satisfaction on true brand loyalty is greater than the positive impact of latent satisfaction on true brand loyalty" Bloemer and Kasper (1995). It indicates that examining the relationship of sub-factors indirectly, through satisfaction, brings with it further complications.

Several studies investigating the factors influencing loyalty do not use the quality-satisfaction-loyalty model. These studies examine the direct influence of sub-factors on loyalty. For example, Ardani, Agung, and Prayoga (2021) found that service quality in the studied spas has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty. Makanyeza and Chikazhe (2017) observed a similar relationship in service. Some studies even suggest that customer satisfaction alone is not enough to ensure loyalty (Rahim, Ignatius, and Adeoti, 2012). This is because loyalty is more comprehensive, and demonstrating it (i.e., repurchasing a product or brand) is more challenging for customers than simply expressing a level of satisfaction. And other studies point out that firms should not rely on customer satisfaction as a key factor and an antecedent of loyalty (Kamakura et al., 2002).

2.3 Factors Influencing Satisfaction and Loyalty of spa Tourists

Academic research has investigated the factors involved in the satisfaction and loyalty of spa tourists. Service quality is the most frequently cited (Su, Cheng, and Huang, 2011; Han et al., 2017; Chua, et al., 2015). This may include the quality of accommodation and catering, as well as the quality of procedures or staff communication.

Han et al. (2017) mention customer perceived value as the second most important factor. Similarly, Wisitnorapatt and Sirirat (2023) show a significant influence on the perceived value of the spa experience and, moreover, interrelations among satisfaction, desire, and loyalty towards a given service. Javed and Cheema (2017) report customer relationship management (CRM) as another key factor of loyalty. Distinct experiences and emotional well-being (social-psychological interaction within a group, enjoyment of nature, or escape from daily routine) are also among the important factors (Burns et al., 2003; Baloglu, Busser, and Cain, 2019). Tourist attractions and activities are additional, separately studied factors in relation to loyalty (Anaya-Aguilar, Gemar, and Anaya-Aguilar, 2021).

Su, Cheng, and Huang (2011) also mention other influences, such as the importance and uniqueness of the place. But research by Anaya-Aguilar, Gemar, and Anaya-Aguilar (2021) as well as research by Soler, Gemar, and Correia (2020) point out that most studies only measure controllable factors that spa locations can more easily control. In contrast, landscape or climate cannot be easily changed and are therefore not as often the subject of research.

Based on this background, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H2 - The procedures bound to natural resources are positively related to loyalty.

H3 - The procedures not bound to natural resources are positively related to loyalty.

H4 - The environment and additional services are positively related to loyalty.

H5 - The promotion is positively related to loyalty.

3. Methods

To investigate the stated objectives and follow-up hypotheses in this study, data needed to be collected, analysed and interpreted. The main motive of the study was to conduct explanatory research on customer preferences, as the Czech spa industry differs significantly from this type of business in some other countries. A quantitative research design was used, specifically a questionnaire survey was conducted. The questionnaire design was verified by in-person pilot testing. The aim of the pilot testing was to improve the format, instructions, appropriateness of language and avoid ambiguity in the questions to increase the overall content validity and internal consistency of the questionnaire (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Leavy 2023). The main research was conducted between February and March 2022 using the CAWI method. This was followed by data processing. A total of 203 respondents were obtained.

The themes and individual questions (along with close-ended responses) were based on previous research reported in the literature review and the specifics of the spa environment. The questionnaire included one filter question regarding whether the respondent had visited a spa in the last 5 years and four identification questions. Questions related to the main part of the research were set as closed (in some cases semi-closed) and always as forced-choice questions. It included two-choice, multiple choice, checklist, and Likert-scale-type questions. The entire survey was based on a deductive design to achieve ease of quantification and a high degree of generalizability (Leavy, 2023).

The logistic regression model (1) is used to model the categorical dependent variable. In the case of binary logistic regression, the odds of probability p for the desired event to occur ($y_i = 1$; the event under examination) are transformed logarithmically to the likelihood $1 - p$ of the unwanted event occurring ($y_i = 0$). As opposed to

probability p , the natural logarithm of the chances is known as logit, and it can be modelled by a linear regression model (Linoff & Berry, 2011):

$$\text{logit}(p_i) = \ln \frac{p_i}{1-p_i} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_{i1} + \beta_2 x_{i2} + \dots + \beta_k x_{ik} \quad (1)$$

where p_i is the probability, causing $y_i = 1$ ($i = 1, 2, \dots, n$), then $\beta_0, \beta_1, \dots, \beta_k$ are the parameters of the logit model and $x_{i1}, x_{i2}, \dots, x_{ik}$ are the values of the explanatory variables $X_1, X_2, \dots, X_k$, where i -th are observed for the i -th statistical unit (Linoff & Berry, 2011).

We use the following formulas to calculate the Chi-Square test statistic χ^2 (Linoff & Berry, 2011):

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^k \frac{(n_{ij} - e_{ij})^2}{e_{ij}}, \text{ where } n_{ij} \text{ are observed counts, } e_{ij} \text{ are expected counts (see formula below), } i, j \text{ means } i\text{-th (j-th) observation, } k \text{ means number of cells in contingency table.}$$

4. Results

In terms of the balance of the sample of respondents (see Table 1), it can be stated that 78% respondents visited the spa at least once in 5 years and also the research sample is quite balanced in terms of the proportion of loyal and disloyal respondents (59% loyal, 41% disloyal).

Table 1: Proportion of Respondents According to their Experience With spa

Respondents	Frequency	%	Respondents	Frequency	%
Visited the spa at least once in 5 years	158	78	Loyal to the same spa	93	59
Haven't visited spa in five years	45	22	Disloyal to the same spa	65	41
In total	203	100	In total of visitors	158	100

Source: Own

Table 2 shows the frequency of respondents according to reported points of the Likert scale for the importance of specific therapeutic effects and loyalty. The result of chi-square test is significant at $p < 0.05$ (p -value is 0.0016). The effect of strength of the healing effects on loyalty is proven. It was found that 11 respondents (12% of all loyal customers) are loyal even though the therapeutic effects are moderately or less important to them (0 - 3 points on the Likert scale). 82 of respondents who are loyal (88% of all loyal customers) indicated that the therapeutic effects of the spa are important to very important to them (4 to 5 points on the Likert scale). Hypothesis H1 can therefore be confirmed, as the majority of respondents who reported repeated visits to the same spa placed more than moderate importance on the therapeutic effects. Hypothesis H2 can be seen as proven because specific therapeutic effects are often bound to natural resources (i.e., mineral water spring for drinking cure).

Table 2: Frequency – Importance of Therapeutic Effects and Customer Loyalty

Frequency	Therapeutic effects (points of Likert scale)		In total
Loyal	0 - 3	4 - 5	
Yes	11	82	93
No	21	44	65
In total	32	126	158

Source: Own

Table 3 shows the frequency of respondents according to reported need of concert and loyalty. The result of chi-square test is significant at $p < 0.05$ (p -value < 0.009). Respondents requesting a celebrity concert are more likely to be loyal to the same spa. Hypothesis H4 can therefore be considered proven.

Table 3: Frequency – Expectation of a Famous Person's Concert in the spa and Customer Loyalty

Frequency	Concert		
Loyal	No	Yes	In total
Yes	42	51	93
No	43	21	65
In total	85	73	158

Source: Own

Hypothesis H5 is also confirmed by chi-square test: respondents reported “Own experience with spa” are often loyal to the same spa. Own experience with the spa can be seen as part of the Promotion factor thanks to possible short stays under discount incentives, which can increase customer experience with the spa. Table 4 shows factors, resp. variables used in logistic regression and their codes. Hypothesis H3 wasn't proven by chi-square test.

Table 4: Variables Used in Logistic Regression

Code	Description of variable	Factor
PL11	Specific therapeutic effects	Treatments linked to a natural resource
PU11	Drinking cure	Treatments linked to a natural resource
PU13	Rehabilitation	Other procedures
PU21	Chinese medicine	Other procedures
PU12	Peeling	Other procedures
NU3	Concert	Environment and additional services
NS2	Entrance to the swimming pool	Environment and additional services
NU5	Educational lecture	Environment and additional services
US5	Internet connection	Environment and additional services
US7	Refrigerator	Environment and additional services
PI8	Own experience with spa	Promotion
PL16	Availability of information of spa	Promotion

Source: Own

Specifically, the therapeutic effects tied to the location of the spa proved to be one of the most significant in terms of positively influencing respondent loyalty. The drinking requirement and sufficient information about the spa had a positive influence on loyalty. Table 5 shows all the results of the logistic regression (the variables are ordered by the magnitude of the beta coefficient estimates from the largest with a positive sign). The model is statistically significant at the 0.5 alpha level. The accuracy of the model's loyalty prediction is 81%.

Table 5: Estimates – Logistic Regression – Determinants of Customers Loyalty

Parameter	Effects			Wald Test	
	Estimates	Standardized estimates	Odds ration	Wald Statistics	p-value
(Intercept)	- 6.771	-0.794	872.196	14.134	< 0.001
PI8	3.281	1.644	0.038	23.178	< 0.001
PL11	1.088	1.081	0.337	9.214	0.002
US5	1.971	0.956	0.139	9.088	0.003
PU11	3.166	0.873	0.042	4.502	0.034
PL16	0.561	0.77	0.571	6.913	0.009

Effects				Wald Test	
Parameter	Estimates	Standardized estimates	Odds ration	Wald Statistics	p-value
NU3	1.46	0.73	0.232	6.838	0.009
NS2	-1.22	-0.612	3.387	5.279	0.022
NU5	-1.426	-0.65	4.163	6.123	0.013
PU13	-1.519	-0.735	4.569	6.954	0.008
PU21	-2.242	-0.779	9.413	7.463	0.006
PU12	-5.089	-0.894	162.202	6.435	0.011
US7	-2.596	-1.287	13.413	13.638	< 0.001

Source: Own

In addition to the therapeutic effects, respondents who showed genuine loyalty most often cited the following reasons for returning to the same spa: Pleasant environment and atmosphere of the spa (80%), satisfaction with the accommodation (34%), convenient prices of other services (cafes, shops, culture) (21%). Affordable prices of other services (cafes, shops, culture) were least frequently cited (7%). False loyalty (this was only 12% of repeat spa visitors, 11 respondents) was shown by those who said that the therapeutic effects were of at most moderate importance to them. Each of these customers reported at least 3 Likert points for either: the importance of experiential activities (average 2.8 points) or ease of transport (average 2.8 points), affordability (average 2.6 points), and choice of spa by friends (average 1.5 points).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The spa industry is specific to the functional product value offered in the form of solutions to acute and chronic health problems. This is complemented by the improvement of mental health and well-being. Thus, the first factor investigated was treatments linked to unique natural resources as well as treatments that any spa or some wellness centers can include in their product portfolio. A similar approach was taken by Ardani, Agung, and Prayoga (2021) who reported that the perceived quality of treatments has a significant positive effect on customer loyalty. Similarly, Ryglová, Rašovská, and Králíková (2017) cite specialized spa services and treatments as one of the key drivers of loyalty. Our research also demonstrates that specific spa treatments and mineral water drinking cures are the most important factors supporting customer loyalty. However, the relationship between spa treatments that are not based on unique natural resources and customer loyalty was found to be negative.

We also examined a group of factors related to the environment and complementary services. In this area, Anaya-Aguilar, Gemar, and Anaya-Aguilar (2021) report satisfaction related to accommodation as the most important. Su, Cheng, and Huang (2011) point to the high importance of complementary services and events. Our results on this dimension are ambivalent, as we find concerts and in-room Internet access to be factors that positively affect customer loyalty. However, for example, free access to the swimming pool or the presence of a mini-fridge in the hotel room are factors with a negative influence. It can be assumed that these services are not considered essential by spa visitors or are perceived as commonly available anywhere, and therefore, they do not need to visit a particular spa for them. Conversely, the significant positive impact of in-room Wi-Fi may be Czech-specific, as mobile internet services in this region are among the most expensive in the EU (European Commission, 2022).

The last area examined was promotion and sufficient information about the site. Promotion is also used as one of the research dimensions by Su, Cheng, and Huang (2011), who demonstrate a significant positive effect on loyalty. Han et al. (2017) take a more comprehensive view of communication and customer care and demonstrate the positive influence of CRM. Our research demonstrates a clear positive effect of promotion on customer loyalty, especially in the form of information availability and self-experience. Taking own experience as a highly significant determinant of loyalty was demonstrated by Anaya-Aguilar, Gemar, and Anaya-Aguilar (2021).

The findings presented in this study have important theoretical implications since the study is one of the few examining the true and spurious loyalty of spa visitors. It was found that the majority of spa customers exhibit genuine loyalty to spas that they visit repeatedly. In addition, this study included not only factors that can be

potentially modified by the spa but also those that are closely related to the specific spa location. Factors associated with a specific location are not as often researched (Su, Cheng, and Huang, 2011).

For spa managers, several recommendations emerge from the above research. It has been confirmed that most loyal spa visitors choose spas primarily on the basis of their treatment effects. Therefore, content promoting the treatment effects via location-specific characteristics (peat, healing springs, climate) needs to be strongly communicated along with evidence of an effect. This gives spas an advantage over wellness destinations. Another factor that influences loyalty is personal experience. It is important to offer potential customers the opportunity to try a spa stay for a shorter period of time and motivate them to stay again for a longer stay. The pleasant environment and atmosphere and satisfaction with the treatments were found to be important reasons for repeated visits. Satisfaction with the accommodation and the offer of additional services (cafés) are followed. The quality of the accommodation is directly influenced by the spa, while the range of services in the surrounding area can be realised through business partners. If their offer is insufficient, the spa should also include this service among its own complementary services.

6. Limitations

The research was limited only to citizens of Czechia. Therefore, foreign visitors are not included in this study. Thus, adding the perspective of foreign clients would help broaden the view of customer segments and their needs and preferences. The research could be supplemented with qualitative research involving personal interviews with both spa customers and spa managers. This would provide a more detailed insight and explanation of some studied phenomena and their causes.

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