

EFFECTS OF RELATIONSHIP BONDING ON BRAND ATTITUDES AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY IN TOURISM INDUSTRY

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The fiercely competitive markets in tourism industry have caused difficulty in developing new consumers. In addition to keep the quality of service, a tourism business has to change the marketing strategies and focus on the maintenance of relationship bonding with current consumers. In this study, the employees and customers of Chateau Beach Resort Kenting are distributed 300 copies of questionnaire. After deducting invalid and incomplete ones, total 162 valid copies are retrieved, with the retrieval rate 54%. The research results are summarized as follows. 1. Relationship bonding presents significantly positive correlations with brand attitudes. 2. Brand attitudes reveal remarkably positive correlations with customer loyalty. 3. Relationship bonding shows notably positive correlations with customer loyalty. 4. Brand attitudes have partial mediating effects on the correlations between relationship bonding and customer loyalty. Aiming at above results, suggestions are proposed to help tourism businesses create better operation performance.

Keywords: tourism industry, relationship bonding, brand attitudes, customer loyalty, brand trust

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of two-day weekends increases the leisure time of the citizens and stimulates the travel intention. Besides, the enhancing consumer capabilities result in the trend to have visit, recreation, and vacation in scenic spots. Tourism industry is a type of service industries, and the development of service industry is an important indicator of national economic development. Such a trend results in the research on service industry being broadly emphasized domestically. Successful service businesses should be able to provide highly stable quality of service and satisfactory consumption experiences so as to receive consumer

favor in the modern society with strong consumer awareness. When the expected quality of service is reached, it is important to maintain good relationship with consumers so that they are willing to continuously purchase the products and services, i.e. to continuously and stably maintain transactional relationship bonding with consumers. In other words, quality of service and relationship bonding with consumers are the key success factors in a business surviving in the fiercely competitive environments. Apparently, maintaining consumer relationship is undoubtedly a key issue for tourism businesses. Services present the features of intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability that a consumer cannot see or touch the product as consuming physical products. Such characteristics are likely to result in uncertainty and insecurity for a consumer (Aaker et al. 2010). In this case, maintaining favorable and quality relationship bonding with consumers could reduce uncertainties and enhance security for the consumers. It is regarded as the value acquired from the relationship between consumers and the business; and a tourism business could make profits from the maintenance of relationship bonding, i.e. the consumers willing to continuously use the services. It therefore becomes a key point to establish long-term relationship bonding with consumers in order to achieve mutual benefits and win-win.

2. LITERATURE AND ASSUMPTION

2.1. Relationship bonding

Abdul-Rahman and Kamarulzaman (2012) proposed that a company acquire the demands from new customers and repurchase customers, and marketing executives have to establish long-term relationship with valuable customers, suppliers, distributors, the government, and competitors. For this reason, the establishment and maintenance of relationship bonding have become the core competition (Bente et al. 2012). The stable relationship between an individual and a group depends on the tight bonds, which is the share of value in between. In other words, bonds are the economic, psychological, emotional, or physiological attachment through the associative and interactive relationship, under which the members are tightly bonded (Forgas et al. 2010). Past research indicated that structural and social bonds would tighten the interaction among members (Kim and Trail 2011). Vesel and Zabkar (2010) defined economic, work, or financial bonds as functional bonds, which could also tighten the interaction among members.

Lin and Chung (2013) divided the relationship marketing in service industry, according to the customer bonding degrees, into financial bonds, social bonds, and structure bonds.

- (1) Financial bonds. Marketing executives applied financial motives (price incentive) and client bonding to encourage the customers having more businesses with the enterprise so as to ensure the bond of customer loyalty. It was to rapidly tie customers in a short period.
- (2) Social bonds. A manufacturer stressed on the delivery of personalized services and kept close contact with consumers through the service staff, trying to transfer customers into clients.
- (3) Structural bonds. Raza et al. (2012) regarded structural bonds as an enterprise providing the partners or customers with complete or value-added services so as to tighten the relationship. It emphasized bonds with structure, management, or systematic rules.

2.2. Brand attitudes

Adjei and Clark (2010) indicated that brand attitudes contained a consumer rationally thinking of the functions and profits of a brand and emotionally favoring the brand styles and aesthetics to further take the purchase and use actions. Marketing executives often create some positive association, through transference, to have the consumers favor the brand. For example, ordinary people often desire to become sports stars that Nike appealing to “just do it” had Michael Jordan be the brand spokesman. In sum, brand attitudes would affect a consumer purchasing a product as a consumer’s brand attitudes is a key indicator for a business preceding various strategies. The attitudes of a purchase decision-maker towards a product or a brand are a key indicator to predict the purchase behaviors. Chen et al. (2012) also considered that a purchase decision-maker would normally maximize the perceived brand profit when making purchase decisions and follow the inner preference, i.e. brand attitudes, as the brand purchase guide. Research on attitudes is one of the major studies on consumer behaviors. For a business, research on brand attitudes presents the greatest importance.

Referring to Hossien (2011), attitudes are measured with the dimensions of cognition, affection, and behavior intention in this study.

- (1) Cognition. The content in an advertising attitude model would form the brand belief (King et al. 2012). Liu et al. (2011) divided brand trust into brand reliability and brand intention.
- (2) Affection. Sahin et al. (2011) pointed out the effects of positive affection on the prejudice in favor of a product. Such attitude prejudice would appear when a person (receiver) was induced the emotion by contacting with another person (sender).

- (3) Behavior intention. Walsh et al. (2010) indicated that attitudes could explain the intention of future purchase behaviors when a consumer presented the attitudes towards a specific brand.

2.3. Customer loyalty

Alejandro et al. (2011) regarded customer loyalty as the preference degree, and loyalty would affect the continuous and repeated purchase behaviors of a customer in a certain period. A business usually makes profits from customer purchase. When the source of customers is divided into existing customers and competitive customers, the repurchase costs (development costs and marketing expenses) for the former is relatively lower, while the latter might be acquired from the oral spreading of existing customers. In this case, maintaining or retaining existing customers is comparatively important. Chen (2012) pointed out customer loyalty as the diversified behaviors performed by intention; the motivation was to maintain the relationship with the company, including higher share of wallet, positive word-of-mouth, repeated purchase of specific service providers. From the above points of view, loyalty could be divided into attitude loyalty and behavior loyalty, according to Komunda and Osarenkhoe (2012).

- (1) Behavior loyalty. The measurement of customer loyalty could be divided into behavior emphasis and attitude emphasis. The former focuses on purchase behaviors and measures the loyalty with purchase. Hutchinson et al. (2011) considered that customer loyalty was the frequency of repeated purchase or the purchase quantity of a brand. McKercher et al. (2011) pointed out the relationship between customer loyalty and purchase behaviors.
- (2) Attitude loyalty. Attitude emphasis measures loyalty according to consumer preference for a brand. Segoro (2013) stated that loyalty was the repurchase intention of customer to specific products or services. Yunus et al. (2012) defined loyalty as a customer being extremely satisfied with the products or services of a company and willing to advertise for the company to produce positive word-of-mouth.

2.4. Hypothesis derivation. Relationship bonding towards brand attitudes and customer loyalty

Bazini et al. (2012) argued that financial bonds with price promotion allowed a customer acquiring practical profits that a customer would be willing to continuously maintain relationship bonding with the company after receiving such prefer-

ential treatment. Such price strategies could have general clients become frequent customers, and such clients agree with the brand attitudes and would pay more for the customer loyalty (David and Louis 2012). In this study, it is considered that customer revisit appears when a customer receives relative preferential treatment that the same brand attitudes with the customer would be enhanced (Katkalo et al. 2010). Relationship bonding stresses on establishing the affectionate relationship, as friendship, with clients, meaning the service staff of a business developing friendship or affectionate interpersonal relationship with clients or offering the clients with same brand attitudes and developing customer loyalty. Lin and Lu (2010) indicated that the application of relationship bonding would enhance the interaction and exchange with clients and further form the customer loyalty. Rashi and Indu (2013) mentioned that relationship bonding was the interpersonal friendship between buyers and sellers; strong interpersonal relationship revealed significant effects on brand attitudes and customer loyalty, which was similar to the research of Sharma and Narang (2011). Zhang et al. (2011) pointed out relationship bonding as the bonds between customers and brand attitudes to enhance customer loyalty. Chen et al. (2012) considered that relationship bonding was developed with the accumulation of investment and common techniques. When relationship bonding was completed, both parties would realize the irreversibility of the invested relationship resources that they would not easily stop the relationship. Lin and Chung (2013) mentioned that relationship bonding stressed on the continuous communication with partners; after a long period of communication, customer loyalty would be enhanced when a customer perceived the profits from the long-term relationship and presented the same brand attitudes. Relationship bonding positively affecting brand attitudes and customer loyalty (Kim and Trail 2011) conformed to relevant research.

Therefore the following hypotheses are proposed in this study.

H1: Relationship bonding shows significantly positive correlations with brand attitudes.

H2: Brand attitudes present remarkably positive correlations with customer loyalty.

H3: Relationship bonding reveals notably positive correlations with customer loyalty.

H4: Brand attitudes appear mediating effects on the correlations between relationship bonding and customer loyalty.

3. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY DESIGN

3.1. Research framework

Summing up the above literatures, the research framework (*Figure 1*) is drawn to discuss the relationship among relationship bonding, brand attitudes, and customer loyalty.

3.2. Research sample

With quality services and customer-oriented sincere attitudes, Chateau Beach Resort Kenting wins the agreement of consumers. Comfortable, diversified, and friendly high-quality services are provided to create high value-added travel and further build the brand image and word-of-mouth. In addition to develop the hotel towards the ocean theme resort, Chateau Beach Resort Kenting offers consumers with all round delicate recreational vacation, satisfies visitors with the travel items and value which used to be enjoyed abroad, and successfully creates characteristic management. It is considered as the pioneering to burst domestic travel. The employees and customers of Chateau Beach Resort Kenting are distributed 300 copies of questionnaire in this study. Having deducted invalid and incomplete ones, 162 valid copies are retrieved, with the retrieval rate 54%.

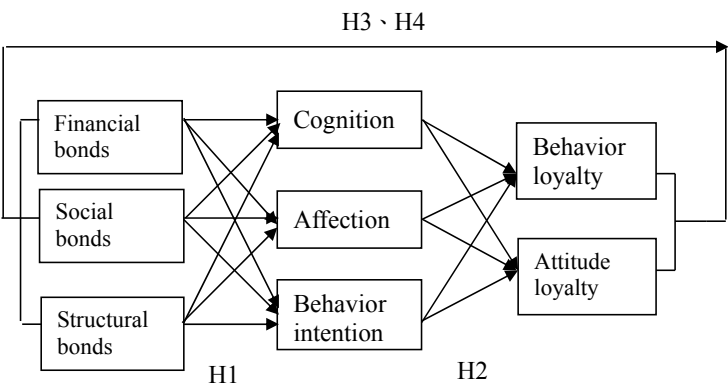


Figure 1. Research framework

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Factor Analysis of relationship bonding

With Factor Analysis, the relationship bonding scale is extracted three factors of Financial Bonds (eigenvalue = 3.162, $\alpha = 0.87$), Social Bonds (eigenvalue = 2.763, $\alpha = 0.81$), and Structure Bonds (eigenvalue = 2.231, $\alpha = 0.85$). The covariance explained achieves 80.372%.

With Factor Analysis, the brand attitudes scale is extracted three factors of Cognition (eigenvalue = 2.463, $\alpha = 0.88$), Affection (eigenvalue = 2.015, $\alpha = 0.83$), and Behavior Intention (eigenvalue = 1.794, $\alpha = 0.80$). The covariance explained reaches 75.239%.

With Factor Analysis, the customer loyalty scale is extracted two factors of Behavior Loyalty (eigenvalue = 3.631, $\alpha = 0.89$) and Attitude Loyalty (eigenvalue = 3.342, $\alpha = 0.91$). The covariance explained achieves 83.556%.

4.2. Correlation Analysis of relationship bonding and brand attitudes

Utilizing Multiple Regression Analysis for testing the hypotheses and the theoretical framework in this study, the analysis result of the first regression is shown in *Table 1*, where the regression equation reaches the significance ($F = 31.751$, $p < 0.001$). Relationship bonding presents remarkable effects on cognition, where Financial Bonds, Social Bonds, and Structure Bonds show notably positive effects on cognition, with the significance ($B = 1.638$, $p < 0.05$; $B = 1.712$, $p < 0.05$; $B = 2.257$, $p < 0.01$).

The analysis result of the second regression, see *Table 1*, reveals the regression equation achieving the significance ($F = 34.623$, $p < 0.001$). Relationship bonding appears to have significant effects on affection, where Financial Bonds, Social Bonds, and Structure Bonds present remarkably positive effects on affection, with the significance ($B = 1.571$, $p < 0.05$; $B = 2.162$, $p < 0.001$; $B = 1.753$, $p < 0.05$).

The analysis result of the third regression, see *Table 1*, shows the regression equation reaching the significance ($F = 41.275$, $p < 0.001$). Relationship bonding reveals notable effects on behavior intention, where Financial Bonds, Social Bonds, and Structure Bonds have significantly positive effects on behavior intention, with the significance ($B = 2.437$, $p < 0.001$; $B = 2.023$, $p < 0.01$; $B = 1.976$, $p < 0.05$). H1 is supported.

Table 1. Regression Analysis of relationship bonding and brand attitudes

Dependent variable→	Brand attitudes					
Independent variable↓	Cognition		Affection		Behavior intention	
Relationship bonding	β	ρ	β	ρ	β	ρ
Financial bonds	1.638*	0.038	1.571*	0.046	2.437**	0.000
Social bonds	1.712*	0.025	2.162**	0.000	2.023**	0.008
Structure bonds	2.257**	0.000	1.753*	0.022	1.976*	0.013
F	31.751		34.623		41.275	
P	0.000***		0.000***		0.000***	
R2	0.287		0.305		0.387	
Adjusted R2	0.023		0.027		0.035	

Note: * stands for $p<0.05$, ** for $p<0.01$, *** for $p<0.001$.

4.3. Correlation Analysis of relationship bonding and brand attitudes towards customer loyalty

Applying Multiple Regression Analysis to test the hypotheses and the theoretical framework, the analysis of the first regression (*Table 2*) presents the regression equation reaching the significance ($F = 26.375, p < 0.001$). Relationship bonding shows remarkable effects on behavior loyalty, where Financial Bonds, Social Bonds, and Structure Bonds reveal notably positive effects on behavior loyalty, with the significance ($\beta = 1.976, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 2.096, p < 0.01$; $\beta = 1.838, p < 0.05$). The analysis of the second regression (*Table 2*) appears the regression equation achieving the significance ($F=28.431, p < 0.001$). Relationship bonding displays significant effects on attitude loyalty, where Financial Bonds, Social Bonds, and Structure Bonds present remarkably positive effects on attitude loyalty, with the significance ($\beta = 1.763, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 2.573, p < 0.001$; $\beta = 2.342, p < 0.001$). H2 is supported.

The analysis of the third regression, see *Table 2*, shows the regression equation reaching the significance ($F = 37.914, p < 0.001$). Brand attitudes reveal notable effects on behavior loyalty, where Cognition, Affection, and Behavior intention have significantly positive effects on behavior loyalty, with the significance ($\beta = 2.165, p < 0.001$; $\beta = 1.942, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 2.251, p < 0.001$). The analysis of the fourth regression, see *Table 2*, displays the regression equation achieving the significance ($F = 42.633, p < 0.001$). Brand attitudes present remarkable effects on attitude loyalty, where Cognition, Affection, and Behavior intention show notably positive effects on Attitude loyalty, with the significance ($\beta = 1.588, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 2.492, p < 0.001$; $\beta = 2.107, p < 0.01$). H3 is supported.

Table 2. Regression Analysis of relationship bonding and customer loyalty

Dependent variable→	Customer loyalty							
Independent variable↓	Behavior loyalty		Attitude loyalty		Behavior loyalty		Attitude loyalty	
Relationship bonding	β	ρ	β	ρ	β	ρ	β	ρ
Financial bonds	1.976*	0.014	1.763*	0.026				
Social bonds	2.096**	0.006	2.573**	0.000				
Structure bonds	1.838*	0.019	2.342**	0.000				
Brand attitudes								
Cognition					2.165**	0.000	1.588*	0.045
Affection					1.942*	0.016	2.492**	0.000
Behavior intention					2.251**	0.000	2.107**	0.000
F	26.375		28.431		37.914		42.633	
P	0.000***		0.000***		0.000***		0.000***	
R ²	0.215		0.236		0.322		0.341	
Adjusted R ²	0.021		0.024		0.029		0.033	

Note: * stands for $p < 0.05$, ** for $p < 0.01$, *** for $p < 0.001$.

4.4. Mediating effects of relationship bonding and brand attitudes on customer loyalty

The mediating effects of brand attitudes in this study are presented with Hierarchical Regression Analysis, see Table 3. Relationship bonding shows remarkable explanation on behavior loyalty ($F = 26.375$, $p < 0.001$). According to Model 2, the effects of relationship bonding and brand attitudes on behavior loyalty are taken into account to discuss the mediating effects of brand attitudes. It is found that β of financial bonds notably drops from 1.976 ($p < .05$) down to 1.704 ($p < .05$), revealing the direct effects of brand attitudes on the correlation between financial bonds and behavior loyalty. Second, β of social bonds significantly drops from 2.096 ($p < .01$) down to 1.911 ($p < .05$), presenting the direct effects of brand attitudes on the correlation between social bonds and behavior loyalty. Finally, β of structure bonds remarkably drops from 1.838 ($p < .05$) down to 1.653 ($p < .05$), showing the direct effects of brand attitudes on the correlation between structure bonds and behavior loyalty.

Relationship bonding appears notable explanation on attitude loyalty ($F = 28.431$, $p < 0.001$). According to Model 2, the effects of relationship bonding and brand attitudes on attitude loyalty are taken into consideration to investigate the mediating effects of brand attitudes. It is found that β of financial bonds remarkably drops from 1.763 ($p < .05$) down to 1.527 ($p < .05$), revealing the direct

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression of relationship bonding and brand attitudes towards customer loyalty

Dependent variable→	Customer loyalty							
	Model 1				Model 2			
Independent variable↓	Behavior loyalty		Attitude loyalty		Behavior loyalty		Attitude loyalty	
Relationship bonding	β	ρ	β	ρ	β	ρ	β	ρ
Financial bonds	1.976*	0.014	1.763*	0.026	1.704*	0.031	1.527*	0.046
Social bonds	2.096**	0.006	2.573**	0.000	1.911*	0.017	2.248**	0.000
Structure bonds	1.838*	0.019	2.342**	0.000	1.653*	0.038	2.165**	0.000
Brand attitudes								
Cognition					2.243**	0.000	1.844*	0.021
Affection					2.016**	0.008	2.612**	0.000
Behavior intention					2.327**	0.000	2.196**	0.000
F	26.375		28.431		40.591		47.416	
P	0.000***		0.000***		0.000***		0.000***	
R2	0.215		0.236		0.382		0.407	
Adjusted R2	0.021		0.024		0.034		0.038	

Note: * stands for p<0.05, ** for p<0.01, *** for p<0.001.

effects of brand attitudes on the correlation between financial bonds and attitude loyalty. Second, β of social bonds notably drops from 2.573 ($p < .001$) down to 2.248($p < .001$), presenting the direct effects of brand attitudes on the correlation between social bonds and attitude loyalty. Finally, β of structure bonds significantly drops from 2.342 ($p < .001$) down to 2.165 ($p < .001$), showing the direct effects of brand attitudes on the correlation between structure bonds and attitude loyalty.

From the research findings, brand attitudes reveals mediating effects on the correlation between relationship bonding and customer loyalty that H4 is supported.

5. CONCLUSION

From the research results, relationship bonding presents obvious effects on brand attitudes and customer loyalty. That is, the better relationship bonding would result in higher customer loyalty; the better brand attitudes would enhance customer loyalty; and, the higher relationship bonding would cause higher brand attitudes. Apparently, relationship bonding shows remarkable effects on brand trust in tour-

ism industry. In other words, when price promotion is utilized as the incentive in tourism industry to establish the affectionate relationship as friendship with the consumers, to provide the consumers for mutual communication and developing social relationship, or to offer diversified and customized value-added services and tailored products, the customers would trust and satisfy with the tourism business. Although a brand is just the symbol of a product, the brand would leave favorable impression in a consumer's mind when the consumer satisfies with the highly practical value of a product provided by a brand. The consumer would believe in the products provided by the brand being reliable and even generate preference brand attitudes. That is, good impression on the brand would assist in enhancing the evaluation of a consumer that the generation of customer loyalty would have the consumer continuously transact with the tourism business.

6. SUGGESTION

Aiming at the research results on the effects of relationship bonding and brand attitudes on customer loyalty, the following suggestions are proposed.

1. Paying attention to satisfaction and customer perception. Since relationship bonding and brand attitudes would have customer loyalty present better predictability and reduce customer churn rate as well as create higher value for tourism businesses, the promotion of customer loyalty could be preceded as below. (1) Reducing customer dissatisfaction: When a customer dissatisfies with a tourism business and the trust complement is insufficient, the customer would immediately leave. (2) In addition to satisfaction, a tourism business cannot ignore a customer's perceived professional capabilities of service staff. Promoting the professional capabilities of service staff in tourism industry not only could enhance customer loyalty, but could increase new customers because of the positive word-of-mouth about the brand from customers.

2. Providing customers with personalized services. In the fiercely competitive markets, a tourism business should provide favorable quality of service from intangible services, practical services, equipment, Internet, and customized services as well as actively offer personalized services for customers, through customer relationship management, to enhance the relationship bonding, such as actively concerning and celebrating a customer's birthday. Especially, when a new product is promoted, the update development should be actively informed so as to enhance the customer loyalty by having the customer perceive the concern and emphasis as well as the responsible attitude of the tourism business.

3. Application of emerging information and communication technologies and Internet technologies. In addition to applying traditional relationship bonding,

a tourism business needs to apply emerging information and communication technologies (I.C.T.) and Internet technologies as a brand-new strategy. It is suggested that real-time information could be utilized for all consumers searching the latest activities and preferential treatment offered by the tourism business through Internet and various terminals (e.g. telephones, mobile phones, and GPS).

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