

The Roles of Website Characteristics and Social Network Communities in Developing Customer E-loyalty in the Online Travel Industry

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Abstract

Internet and social network communities have become the essential channel for people looking for tourism information and online purchases or reservations. The academic community strive to better understand which factors influence online satisfaction and loyalty in the online travel industry. Many antecedents to e-satisfaction have been identified in the literature, namely functional and relational website characteristics.

While many studies have assessed the influence of functional characteristics on esatisfaction such as usability and security, few research focused on the influence of social and human dimensions of the interface, called relational characteristics, especially in the online travel context. In fact, the relational features have been studied as a part of the optimization of the website interface and not from the logic of loyalty and brand-customer relationships. Moreover, there is a call in the literature for more research on the impact of individual engagement on social networks sites on loyalty generation. Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate how online attributes under the control of the cyber-merchant (website functional and relational attributes) and social networking sites where the firm has far less control, foster e-satisfaction and e-loyalty in the online travel industry. A self-administered survey was used and data were collected from university students who had shopped from an online travel company in the past year. By using SEM modelling, results show that usability, quality of support, and security/privacy positively impact e-satisfaction while e-satisfaction influences both cognitive and affective loyalty. Further analyses showed that personalization and online social network communities significantly influence both cognitive and affective loyalty while perceived social presence has a negative impact on cognitive loyalty. By understanding website drivers of online satisfaction and loyalty, this study contribute to help online travel companies develop strategies positioned to build long-term relationships, and thereby gain a competitive advantage.

Keywords: E-loyalty; E-satisfaction; Website characteristics; Usefulness of social networking sites; Travel industry

Introduction

The development of the Internet and e-commerce has profoundly changed purchasing habits when it comes to tourism products. The Internet has become the essential channel for people looking for travel information and online purchases or reservations [1]. Toh, Dekay, and Raven [2] found that nearly 90% of travelers search for information using Web tools, and according to Ipsos Media [3], 42% of leisure travelers read reviews from other travelers when planning trips. Moreover, in the Canadian province of Quebec, 37% of Internet users said they were influenced by personal comments posted on social network sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, or blogs/forums (e.g. Tripadvisor), when planning their travel [4]. Since travel and tourism services are intangible and do not have the “try before you buy” or “return in case not satisfied” features [5,6], consumers turn to social network communities to get user-generated recommendations, drawn for the experiences of other members who share similar goals, interests, needs, or activities [7]. Social media serves as an important hub for traveler information and plays a critical role in the travel planning process [7,8].

Several researchers have shown interest in understanding which factors influence consumers’ website choice, satisfaction, and loyalty to commercial websites in the tourism industry [9,10]. Many determinants to e-satisfaction and e-loyalty have been identified in the literature, namely functional and relational website characteristics (i.e the technical features that govern the website architecture). While many studies have assessed the influence of functional characteristics such as usability and security on e-satisfaction [11] and e-loyalty [12], little research has focused on the influence of social and relational characteristics of the interface [13], such as social presence and personalization, especially in the e-tourism context.

Limited attention has been paid to the area of relational website quality in the travel industry and its relation to multidimensional loyalty. Studies have shown that website characteristics may differently influence various facets of e-loyalty. For example, [14] developed webQual and tested the correlations between its dimensions and the intention to reuse the website. Swaid and Wigand [15] tested the relationship between quality and loyalty, considering different types of service loyalty separately (preference loyalty, price tolerance, and complaining behavior). Thus, it is beneficial to look at the different determinants of cognitive and affective of loyalty to gain an understanding of their respective roles in achieving commitment to a brand. Moreover, Hawkins and Vel [16] indicates that: “a discussion on loyalty would not be complete without looking specifically at the influence of social media”. They proposed that social media has also the potential to differently influence various facets of loyalty. Therefore, unlike past research investigating the website quality-loyalty relationship on the aggregate level, this study aims to understand the relationships among the attributes of perceived website quality, social media usefulness, and cognitive and affective types of loyalty.

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Received May 04, 2016; **Accepted** June 07, 2016; **Published** June 15, 2016

Citation: Toufaily E, Arcand M, Legault J, Ricard L (2016) The Roles of Website Characteristics and Social Network Communities in Developing Customer E-loyalty in the Online Travel Industry. J Tourism Hospit 5: 222. doi:[10.4172/2167-0269.1000222](https://doi.org/10.4172/2167-0269.1000222)

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As such, this study answers directly the call voiced by Hawkins and Vel [16] for more research on the impact of individual engagement in social media on loyalty generation. It also investigates how online attributes under the control of the cyber-merchant (website functional and relational attributes) and social networking sites where the firm has far less control, foster e-satisfaction and e-loyalty in the travel industry. By understanding website drivers of online satisfaction and loyalty as well as the role played by social network sites, companies can develop online strategies positioned to build long-term relationships and gain a competitive advantage. In fact, understanding how customers evaluate website features and social media usefulness is important to interested parties, such as travel agencies and tourism marketing managers, in order to enable them to improve marketing strategies, which would, in turn, allow them to retain their customers. Herein, the research focuses on testing the impact of website features (functional and relational/social) and social media usefulness on customer satisfaction and loyalty to the online travel company.

The remainder of the manuscript is organized as follows: The first section reviews the literature on each construct and presents the conceptual model and hypothesized relationships. The second section describes the methodology used to test the hypothesized relationships. Finally, the results are presented, followed by a discussion of the findings and the managerial implications.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Affective and cognitive e-loyalty

Customer e-loyalty is a central concept to marketing. Researchers have identified various facets of online loyalty and different impacts on business relationships [17,18]. The conceptualization of loyalty has evolved from a behavioral approach, defining and measuring loyalty by repeat purchase behaviors [19,20] to a cognitive approach, focusing primarily on the attitudinal dimensions of loyalty [21,22] to a composite approach, which shows that attitudinal preference and repeat purchase behaviors are two conditions essential to the concept of loyalty [23,24]. Some investigators adopted a process approach [23] to conceptualize loyalty. The basic principle of this conceptualization is that loyalty develops in a sequential manner through a process consisting of four phases: cognition, affection, conation, and action; that process occurs despite the influence of situational factors and marketing actions. Recently, Oliver's conceptualization has been empirically tested in other research [25-28].

In this study, a distinction is made between two types of e-loyalty: affective and cognitive. Cognitive loyalty is based on a positive rational assessment of a brand (or company) in comparison to others [26], especially when costs and benefits are assessed. In affective loyalty, the customer goes beyond positive beliefs regarding the brand and develops a preference or an attachment to the brand. Affective loyalty is much more difficult to change because it is encoded as a feeling in consumers' minds, not just a belief. It is stipulated that the separation of loyalty into cognitive and affective loyalty provides a better understanding of their roles in online tourism relationships. The distinction between the two forms of loyalty will help identify the determinants of each loyalty and facilitate the development of management strategies precisely tailored to each type of loyalty in the online travel industry.

In the e-tourism context, cognitive loyalty can be developed when companies increase consumers' perceived benefits of travel experiences, products and services, and improve product/service quality and prices. Companies can work at maintaining a positive and beneficial image in consumers' minds to build affective loyalty.

E-satisfaction

Satisfaction is the judgment of a post-consumption evaluation. It is considered an affective attitude according to Hunt [29], and as a complex emotional response following the consumption experience by Oliver [30]. Satisfaction has long been studied by researchers in marketing because it has significant positive implications, such as additional purchases, loyalty, repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth [30-32] for businesses. More specifically, in the tourism sector, satisfaction is seen as a major determinant of the intention to return [33].

In this paper, satisfaction is based on Oliver's definition by focusing on its emotional dimension. It is seen as an overall assessment of all previous experiences [34] and is defined as the contentment that customers feel as a result of their experiences with the online business. Satisfaction is the emotional response generated by customer online relationship with the company. Many authors agree that satisfaction is the result of an emotion felt when customers compare their experiences with previous experiences [35,36]. This conceptualization is also considered to the definition of satisfaction in the online environment, or E-satisfaction. According to Anderson and Srinivasan [37], "E-satisfaction is defined as the contentment of the customer with respect to his or her prior purchasing experience with a given electronic commerce firm."

In the tourism industry, studies have shown that overall satisfaction is greater among consumers who reserve a hotel room online rather than offline [38]. In fact, consumer e-satisfaction positively influences website loyalty [39]. Van Riel and Liljander Jurriëns found that e-loyalty is strongly influenced by customer satisfaction towards the portal or the website. Moreover, Wang, Lin and Luarn [12] argue that customer satisfaction significantly influences the intention to re-purchase as well as post-purchase behavior.

Based on this literature, we believe that the ability of an online travel company to retain its customers depends on the intensity of customers' satisfaction with the online performance of the company. The online travel company in this paper refers to any travel company that runs its own website through which it sells its travel products and services. Therefore, it is posited:

H1: E-satisfaction positively influences cognitive e-loyalty (H1a) and affective e-loyalty (H1b) to an online travel company.

Website attributes

Extensive research has found that high quality website attributes are essential to build long-term customer relationships and, specifically, online customer loyalty [12,40-42]. The literature generally supports a positive relationship between e-service quality and customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and positive word of mouth [43]. In this research, website attributes are divided into two categories: functional and relational. Functional characteristics are related to technical features that govern the website architecture. Relational characteristics correspond to the human and social aspects that emerge through the website interface. Their primary role is to transfer the human interaction and the social aspect of relationships from the real world to the virtual world [44].

This research focuses mainly on two functional characteristics, namely website usability and security/privacy, and three relational ones: personalization, support quality and social presence.

Functional features

Website usability: Usability refers to a website's ease of navigation and use [45]. Ease of use includes the time it takes for downloads, the ability to successfully find a page and the organization of information [46]. The ease of acquiring information positively affects customer satisfaction and trust in the online environment [23,47]. In the online tourism industry, Bai et al. (2008) have found a significant and positive effect of website usability on customer satisfaction. Research has found that website usability (design and ease of use) affects online consumer buying behaviors [48] and more precisely booking decisions [9]. Not surprisingly, tourists expect websites to provide accurate information and easy navigation [47]. Travelers planning trips also expect web page content to be engaging and well-designed [48,49]. Flavian, Guinaliu, and Gurrea carried out a study to determine the influence of perceived usability on user loyalty to websites. Their results confirmed that the trust and thereby loyalty of the user increases when the user perceives that the system is usable. In the same way, greater usability was found to have a positive influence on user satisfaction, and this also indirectly generated greater website loyalty. According to Anaza and Zhao [10,50], a major driver for e-store loyalty is the ability of the e-retailer to tailor services, products, and experiences to each customer's preference, thus facilitating easy navigation and ensuring that the customer will be able to easily locate something of interest for purchase. Based on this literature, it is posited:

H2: Perceived usability positively influences e-satisfaction with the online travel company.

H3: Perceived usability positively influences (H3a) cognitive loyalty and (H3b) affective loyalty toward the online travel company.

Website security/privacy: Security is related to the ability of online retailers to protect their customers against the risk of fraud and financial losses [51,52]. Consumers consider security an important factor when purchasing goods or services on the Internet [53]. The perception of security has an influence on e-satisfaction and e-trust as demonstrated in several studies [54-56]. Privacy refers to a set of legal requirements and good practices for handling personal data [57-60] as well as Chen and Dibb (2010) show that security and consumer protection against fraud and invasion of privacy affect online customer trust and online satisfaction. However, its impact differs depending on the industry. Thus, Finn [61] found that for 20 Canadian online retailers, privacy did not have a significant effect on satisfaction. This result is similar to the study conducted by Ha and Stoel [62]. Their study found that privacy in a US clothing e-store has a significant effect on shopping intention (the conative dimension of loyalty) but not on e-satisfaction.

Security and privacy are highly correlated [63] and customers, companies and legislators perceive that the two concepts have a close relationship [58]. They form a single construct in this study. The impact of security/privacy on online satisfaction and online loyalty in the online travel sector is tested in this study. Therefore it is posited:

H4: Perceived security/privacy positively influences e-satisfaction with the online travel company.

H5: Perceived security/privacy positively influences (H5a) cognitive loyalty and (H5b) affective loyalty toward the online travel company.

Relational characteristics

Personalization: Personalization is defined by Srinivasan et al. as the extent to which a company's website can identify customers and subsequently offer products, services and purchase experiences

that meet their specific needs. In other words, personalization is the ability of a website to customize the interface, the range of products and services, links, emails, advertisements, recommendations and the transactional environment to each individual customer.

The ultimate goal of personalization is to stimulate a user's commitment, satisfaction and loyalty to a relationship with the online company [64,65]. Personalization is valued because it indicates a high quality of service, superior social interaction and it meets the needs of the customer, who feels "unique" [38].

Nusair and Kandampully explain that tourism websites must integrate personalization to better understand each customer and add value to the customer's service. Abbott et al. [66] argue that personalization influences the satisfaction of an online consumer. Although there are several studies that discuss customizing a website [67,68] the direct links between personalization and e-satisfaction, as well as with e-loyalty toward the online travel company will be tested in this study. Customers' perception of the unique attention and differentiated service on the website that are tailored to their needs and preferences will positively affect their satisfaction and loyalty toward the online travel company.

Therefore, it is posited:

H6: Perceived personalization of an online travel company's website positively influences e-satisfaction with the online travel company.

H7: Perceived personalization of an online travel company's website positively influences (H7a) cognitive loyalty and (H7b) affective loyalty toward this online travel company.

Social presence: Social presence is defined as the extent to which a medium allows users to experience others as being psychologically present [69]. It is manifested when the medium is perceived to be warm, or conveys a feeling of human contact, sociability and sensitivity [70]. An effective web platform should offer the same characteristics that a customer service representative would offer, allowing the customer to feel psychologically and socially present with the company's representative. Examples of website social presence include socially rich content, personalized attention, human audio [71] or human video. Hassanein and Head [71] showed that emotional texts and pictures of people result in a strong perception of social presence on the website. Gefen and Straub and Hassanein and Head showed significant indirect impact of social presence on online purchase intentions through trust. In addition, the presence of an avatar on a website (another form of social presence) positively influences satisfaction [72]. It is reasonable then to expect a direct relationship between perceived social presence and e-satisfaction and between perceived social presence and e-loyalty since e-loyalty partially overlaps with purchase intention and attitude [73].

Thus, the more social presence is perceived on online travel company's website, the more customers are satisfied and the more they are loyal. Therefore, it is posited:

H8: Perceived social presence on an online travel company's website positively influences e-satisfaction with the online travel company.

H9: Perceived social presence on an online travel company's website positively influences (H9a) cognitive loyalty and (H9b) affective loyalty toward this online travel company.

Support quality: Support quality represents the service provided to customers during and after the transaction on the website. It encompasses complaint follow-up, claim management and

online technical assistance, as well as the possibility to use other communication channels (e.g. call center). Support quality has been shown to influence website satisfaction in many studies [74,75]. Functionalities related to customer service and supports are critical for online customer satisfaction [61,76]. Nusair and Kandampully note that it is important for tourism companies to improve responsiveness on their websites to increase user satisfaction. Swaid and Wigand find that website responsiveness (i.e. customer perception of getting the help when needed by automated or human factors) does not affect preference loyalty, but affects cognitive loyalty.

According to Cheung and Lee as well as Nusair and Kandampully, website architecture that incorporates support options improves customers' online experience, therefore increasing their satisfaction and trust [61,77]. In this study support quality' impact in the online travel context is evaluated. Therefore, it is posited:

H10: Perceived support quality on an online travel company's website positively influences e-satisfaction with the online travel company.

H11: Perceived support quality on an online travel company's website positively influences (H11a) cognitive loyalty and (H11b) affective loyalty toward the online travel company.

Social network community usefulness

Virtual communities and social networks represent a social space on the Internet that redefines friendship, power and social capital [78,79]. Recommendations found on these platforms are highly credible and influence the consumer decision process [79,80]. In the tourism industry, for example, Vermeulen and Seegers found that consumers' mere exposure to hotel online reviews increased the probability that they would include these hotels in their choice set for decision-making consideration. Similarly, Cantallops and Salvi [81] concluded that exposure to online reviews about a hotel positively affects the probability of purchase from that hotel. In fact, third-party evaluations and comments are most useful for experience products, comprised largely of attributes that cannot be known until the product is purchased and used (such as tourism products) and when the consumer has no previous experience with the online retailer, because no other objective basis for satisfaction and trust exists [82]. Consumers expect to be satisfied with businesses having a good reputation as expressed by previous consumer rating consensus scores [83]. These average scores are generally high, with 80% of comments posted on TripAdvisor, a very popular platform that are positive. Thus, it is postulated that customers' perception of the usefulness of online travel social network communities positively affects their e-satisfaction and their e-loyalty because of the interpersonal relationships they develop with other customers around common interests. The more useful customers find information on travel experiences posted by third parties on a social network, the more their satisfaction with the travel company increases. Dickinger and Mazanec [84] found that family recommendations and online reviews are the two factors that influence online hotel reservations the most. Travelers perceive information from social media as unbiased [85,86]. In fact, the vast majority of travelers use search engines and social networks when assessing a destination or tourist product [8]. Moreover, Ye, Law and Gu found a significant relationship between online consumer reviews and hotel business performance. Vermeulen and Seegers [87] found that recommendations and opinions influence attitudes towards trust and choices from online travel companies. Many online social networks facilitate consumers in posting and sharing their travel-related comments, opinions, and personal experiences, which

then serve as information for others [8]. Nusair et al. [88] showed that perceived utility of online social networking indirectly affects (through perceived social interactions), customers' loyalty. Hawkins and Vel found that social media has increased the likelihood of influencing attitudinal loyalty than behavioral loyalty. El-Haddadeh, Weerakkody and Peng [89] also showed a positive effect of social network usefulness on loyalty to product/services organizations in China. In accordance with previous literature, the influence of perceived usefulness of social network community on e-satisfaction and cognitive and affective e-loyalty is tested. The more useful customers find reviews and posts about travel experiences and their travel company in a social network community, the greater their e-satisfaction and e-loyalty toward the online travel company. For example, positive reviews about Air Canada on social networks enhance the satisfaction with the online performance of Air Canada, and consequently the loyalty to Air Canada. Thereby, it is posited:

H12: Perceived usefulness of an online community embedded in social network positively influences e-satisfaction with the online travel company.

H13: Perceived usefulness of an online community embedded in social network positively influences (H13a) cognitive loyalty and (H13b) affective loyalty toward the online travel company.

The conceptual model showing the hypotheses is presented in Figure 1.

Methodology

Sample and procedure

A self-administered survey was used to achieve the study's objectives. Data were collected from Francophone university students in Quebec who had shopped at online travel companies in the past year. The survey was administered in classes to 220 students, with 164 eligible to complete the survey because they had shopped from an online travel company in the past 12 months and they had used social media to get information on the online travel company. Four questionnaires were removed from the analysis due to incomplete or contradictory answers. A total of 160 valid questionnaires formed the final study sample. Respondents were asked to assess the last online travel company with which they had done business in the last 12 months. The term "online travel company" in this research refers to all types of companies' websites, whether they are online pure players or "brick and click" and includes Expedia or Booking.com, as well as airline companies such as Air Canada or US Air.

According to e-Marketer, students and millennials are heavy web users for buying purposes. In terms of demographics and online tourism habits, the sample consisted primarily of women (68%) with a gross family income of less than \$50,000 (63%). The average respondent was 26 year old (59% from 25 to 34 years old), and is a heavy user of the Internet, using it an average of 24 hours per week for professional or personal purposes. 55% of respondents reported to have used the Internet to shop online for travel purposes five times or less in the last year. Online travel companies that were most visited included Expedia (22.3%), Varvacations (18.5%), and Air Canada (5.1%). Many respondents browsed the online travel company's website for 30 to 50 minutes on their last visit, and 55% of respondents had known the online travel company for a year and an half or more. Interestingly, 63.9% of the respondents referred the company to their friends and family. In all, 30% of tourists referred their online travel company to two or more people. Finally, 80% of the respondents considered

themselves average to heavy users of social networks (4 or more on a scale of 7), and they connect to Facebook (the most consulted social network of the respondents) over 18 times per week, showing a high involvement. In fact, in the questionnaire, respondents were first asked to identify what social networks they use regularly to get information and/or reviews about their online travel company. After answering this question, respondents were asked to evaluate the usefulness of the online community embedded on social media. Therefore, consumers not using social networks were excluded from the study. No difference has been established in the questionnaire between social network community initiated by the consumers and social network community initiated and controlled by the company itself.

Measures

Affective loyalty and cognitive loyalty are derived from Oliver's theory and were measured via three items each that were adapted from a scale developed by one of this paper's authors. Satisfaction was measured using three items inspired from Li, Browne, and Wetherbe [90] and Chiou [91]. The items used to measure usability and security/privacy were derived from the Netqua@l scale of Bressolles [92,93]. Three items based on the Cyr et al.'s scale were used to assess social presence. The three items for measuring personalization were adapted from Srinivasan, Anderson and Ponnnavolu's scale. The usefulness of a virtual community was measured by four items adopted from Teo et al.'s scale [94]. Finally, items for measuring support quality were developed by the researchers for this study. All items were rated using a seven-point Likert scale. The main variables measures correspond to items presented in Table 1.

Analysis and Results

Confirmatory factor analysis was first conducted to assess the adequacy of the model using EQS 6.1. The value of $S-B\chi^2$ was 615.06 ($p=0.0000$), with 370 degrees of freedom. The χ^2/df ratio is <3 , suggesting a good fit according to Bentler. The proposed model fits the data according to the two-index strategy recommended by Hu and Bentler using CFI (cut-off value of 0.95) and RMSEA (cut-off value

of 0.06) (NNFI=0.961, CFI=0.967, RMSEA=0.04). The items used for each construct, along with the reliability of the scale (Cronbach α) and factor loadings, are shown in Table 1. Convergent validity was assessed, following the approach proposed by Fornell and Larcker [95]. Factor loadings (λ) were above 0.70 (except for three items that were above 0.67 but below 0.70) and every construct's reliability was over the 0.70 minimum recommended by Nunnally [96].

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) index for all constructs was above 0.50, meeting Fornell and Larcker's recommendations [97]. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the squared correlations between each pair of constructs with the AVE indicator of either constructs. Results showed that the constructs are sufficiently discriminated. Details of convergent and discriminant validity are found in Table 2.

Regarding the online travel context, results show that usability ($\gamma=0.44$, $p<0.05$), support quality ($\gamma=0.31$, $p<0.05$) and security/privacy ($\gamma=0.19$, $p<0.10$) influenced online satisfaction positively, explaining 49% of the variance. However, personalization, social presence and the usefulness of online social network community did not impact e-satisfaction ($p>0.05$). Therefore, H2, H4 and H6 are supported, but no support was found for H8, H10 and H12. Moreover, the characteristics that do not influence online loyalty through online satisfaction were found to have a direct effect on online loyalty. The results show that personalization has a strong significant influence on both cognitive loyalty ($\gamma=0.69$, $p<0.05$) and affective loyalty ($\gamma=0.62$, $p<0.05$), and online social network community usefulness also influenced both types of loyalty ($\gamma=0.27$, $p<0.10$). These results confirm H9 (a&b) and H13 (a&b). Social presence had an impact on cognitive loyalty ($\gamma=-0.38$, $p<0.10$) (H11a) but this impact was not in the anticipated direction. As expected, e-satisfaction positively influenced cognitive and affective e-loyalty although the influence on the cognitive facet is more pronounced ($\gamma=0.40$ vs. 0.29 , $p<0.05$) than the influence on affective loyalty, supporting H1 (a&b). Overall, the model explained 44% of the affective loyalty and 37% of the variance in cognitive loyalty. The structural model fits the data well:

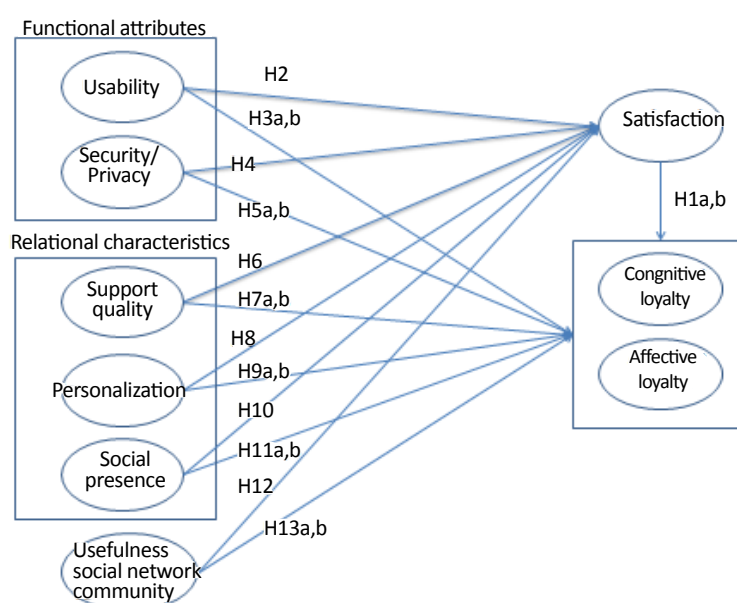


Figure 1: The conceptual model.

Construct and items	Cronbach alpha (α)	Factor loading (CFA)
Cognitive Loyalty	0.857	
I believe that this online travel company has better offers than its competitors		0.792
I have repeatedly found that this online travel company is better than others		0.879
I believe that this online travel company is the best alternative		0.778
Affective Loyalty	0.853	
For me, being a customer for this online travel company is almost like being part of a large family		0.686
I prefer to always favour this online travel company over others		0.814
I prefer to always prioritize the new offers introduced by this online travel company		0.936
Satisfaction	0.915	
I feel satisfied with this online travel company		0.855
My experience with this online travel company is very pleasant		0.920
Overall, I am very satisfied of my relationship with this online travel company		0.898
Usability	0.932	
This online travel company's website is visually appealing		0.737
The online travel company's website is aesthetically pleasing		0.716
The tasks are simple and easy on this online travel company's website		0.895
It is easy to navigate and find what I'm looking for on this online travel company's website		0.956
This online travel company's website is very easy to use		0.942
Security/Privacy	0.963	
I am reassured by the payment security of this online travel company's website		0.955
I can safely buy on this online travel company's website		0.970
I believe that my personal and financial data are well-protected on this online travel company's website		0.933
Support Quality	0.924	
The call center for assistance in case of technical difficulties is very effective		0.818
The online travel company's website support in case of technical difficulties is very effective		0.993
The online travel company's customer service staff is usually very effective		0.860
Personalization	0.833	
Communication with this online travel company is always adapted to my specific needs		0.846
Overall, this online travel company's website is personalized to my needs		0.811
This online travel company makes me feel that I am a unique customer		0.696
Social Presence	0.943	
I have a sense of human contact on this online travel company's website		0.918
I have a sense of sociability on this online travel company's website		0.944
I have a sense of human warmth on this online travel company's website		0.889
Usefulness of Social Network Community	0.892	
My participation to a social network community, discussing this travel company has improved my understanding of the company's products/services		0.761
My participation to this social network community enabled me to share my experience on travel products and services with others customers		0.672
Using a social network community discussing my travel company improved my decisions when it comes to traveling.		0.943
Overall, I find that my participation to social networks is useful for my purchase of the company's products/services		0.922

Table 1: Scales, reliability and factor loadings.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Usability (1)	0.72								
Personalization (2)	0.23	0.61							
Support Quality (3)	0.13	0.43	0.79						
Security Privacy (4)	0.16	0.21	0.29	0.9					
Social Presence (5)	0.04	0.39	0.24	0.03	0.84				
Usefulness social Network community (6)	0	0.06	0.13	0.03	0.13	0.69			
Satisfaction (7)	0.35	0.19	0.27	0.23	0.08	0.01	0.79		
Loyalty Cognitive (8)	0.09	0.13	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.04	0.13	0.66	
Loyalty Affective (9)	0.05	0.27	0.21	0.06	0.15	0.13	0.14	0.32	0.67

Table 2: Convergent and discriminant validities of the measures (CFA, EQS 6.1)*.

* Average variance extracted appears on diagonal (bold) and the squared correlation out of diagonal.

(NNFI=0.96; CFI=0.97; RMSEA=0.043). Results are presented in Figure 2¹.

Discussion

The findings of this research show that usability, security/privacy and support quality perceptions directly contribute to e-satisfaction of users of travel websites and indirectly to their online cognitive and affective loyalty. Although the research did not find a direct relationship between these website features and any of the customer loyalty types, other studies have indicated indirect relationships mediated by satisfaction (e.g. Flavian, Guinaliu, and Gurrea 2006; Gummerus et al. 2004; Nusair and Kandampully 2008). Thus the greater is the usability, support quality and security/privacy perceptions are, the more they positively influence customer satisfaction and, consequently, customer loyalty.

Usability of the platform has the main impact on e-satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the literature. In fact, Bai et al. [48] have found a significant and positive effect of website usability on customer satisfaction. Website usability (design and ease of use) affects online consumer buying behavior and more precisely booking decisions [9]. The rapid technological development of different transactional, informational and interactive websites raises customer expectations vis-à-vis usability and visual signals. Customers' assessments of websites are based on design, site colors, ease of use and ease of navigation. Therefore, the online travel company should provide an aesthetic website, simple and easy to use, with visual impact and illustrations that make it very clear for the customer. Usability is a key customer expectation.

The findings of this study are also consistent with the studies of Bernardo et al. [98] and Kim, Steinfield and Lai [99], which showed that security and consumer protection from fraud and privacy invasion

affect e-satisfaction. This website aspect is still important from a customer's point of view and is a crucial determinant of customer satisfaction vis-à-vis commercial sites. In fact, the risks of electronic transactions, such as entering credit card numbers and personal information, are the main barriers to buying online. Online travel companies have to reassure their customers of the security/privacy of transactions on their websites, because this aspect is still important for customers, even after the development of security and privacy protocols. Because customers prefer to see certification for secure sites, online travel companies should provide clear and concise information of their commitment to security and privacy. They should ensure the visibility of security protocols on their websites. Customers need to feel safe when conducting transactions on the site, and travel companies should take steps to gain their trust and satisfaction. This entails unambiguous privacy policies, displayed visibly on the website, possibly in the form of explanatory videos. Online travel companies should also clearly specify that the navigation data and all personal information provided by customers on the site will remain completely confidential and will not be sold, leased, or provided to a third party. This privacy statement helps establish online customer satisfaction.

The findings of this research show that high quality support increases online customer satisfaction and indirectly cognitive and affective loyalty in the travel sector. These results corroborate with those of Floh and Treiblmaier and Harris and Goode [100], which showed that a high quality of service has a positive influence on online customer satisfaction. Indeed, the quality of support and follow-up with customers is essential to virtual strategy success and e-satisfaction enhancement. An online travel company should provide follow-up with customers during and after transactions using an effective and real-time call center for assistance, website support in case of technological difficulties. It should offer customers the possibility to monitor orders and track claims and complaints online and offline. Online company websites should be prescribing, i.e. state what the problem is and how to fix it, offer a sample of solutions, and prevent the maximum of technological limitations and cognitive errors.

¹Note that additional analyses showed that experience with online travel does not change the significance of the relationships studied in the model, except for the effect of support quality on satisfaction, which is significant for respondents with low experience ($p < 0.05$) but not significant for respondents with high experience ($p > 0.10$).

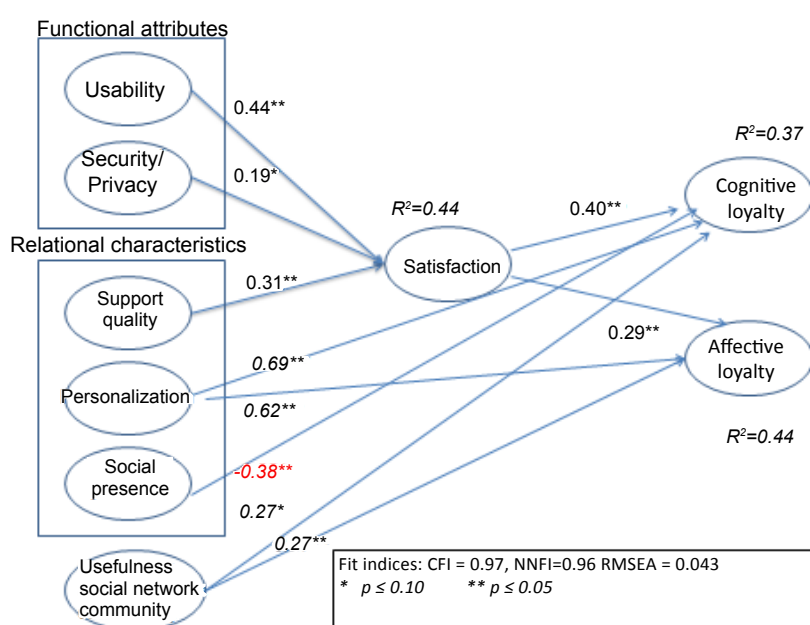


Figure 2: The results of the structural model including direct and indirect effects on e-loyalty.

The results of this study show that perceived usability, security/privacy and support quality do not have a significant direct impact on e-loyalty, but an indirect effect through satisfaction. In light of the findings, e-satisfaction plays a fully mediating role between usability, security/privacy, quality support, and e-loyalty. In other words, the more the online travel company offers a usable online experience, commitment to security/privacy on its website and a high quality of support, the stronger online customer loyalty will be, through the increase in online satisfaction. All the managerial strategies mentioned previously could improve online customer satisfaction and increase the likelihood of retention.

Moreover, the more satisfied customers are with the online travel company, the more they are likely to be loyal at the cognitive and affective levels, supporting Kim, Jin, and Swinney. Kim, Jin, and Swinney suggested that e-loyalty towards online shopping is influenced by e-satisfaction, e-trust, and multidimensional aspects of e-tail quality [9].

However, satisfying customers is not enough to convince travelers that a website is their best alternative and motivate them to develop an affective attachment to the company. The results of the research showed that the perception of personalization on the travel website is the most important direct driver of both types of loyalty. This agrees with Anaza and Zhao's findings showing that facilitating conditions in an e-store setting positively and significantly influenced an e-shopper's level of loyalty towards an e-retailer. For instance, a major factor in e-store loyalty is the ability of the e-retailer to fit services, products, and experiences to each customer's preference [50]. In fact, personalization is key for building durable online relationships with customers [101]. The more online relationships are personalized, the more customers are loyal. Personalized services reduce the complexity of customer choice, reduce frustration, and increase loyalty. Moreover, by understanding the preferences and needs of individual customers, travel companies can adapt and offer one-to-one experiences, tailored to each customer. Thus, the more online relationships are personalized, the more customers develop beliefs that the online travel company's offer is better than the alternatives, and the more customers develop an emotional preference for that company. Therefore, online travel companies should employ practices to help customers fulfill the e-shopping process successfully and efficiently. Online travel companies should provide each of their customers with relevant, real-time information; customize their website to customers' needs; offer an adapted assortment of products and services; and recommend relevant links to customers. Online travel companies should also offer targeted communications based on the interests and personal preferences of each customer. Personalization should be an integral part of the online marketing strategy.

The findings of this study showed that customers who perceive that a community embedded in a social network is useful to their travel planning are cognitively and affectively more loyal to their online travel company. Nusair et al. and Casalo, Flavian and Guinaliu [102] stressed that social interactions through virtual communities affect customer loyalty because of the shared interests and social connections that customers build in such communities. The results support the assertions of these researchers and demonstrate that customers who perceive the possibility of exchanging information and comparing experiences with other customers as useful are the most loyal. According to Gretzel, Yoo and Purifoy [103], the most popular customer activity is to review other tourists' experiences. In fact, travel is the number one topic of discussion on Facebook. Nusair et al. found that perceived utility of an online social network indirectly affects customers' loyalty through perceived social interactions. Thus, customers will use online social

network communities only if they perceive a benefit in using these websites. Following friends, synchronizing contact information, and gathering information (such as destination images, hotel reviews, travel experience) are some examples of the perceived usefulness of travel-related online social community [103]. This study's results suggest that the greater the benefits that customers perceive from an online social network community, the more they become cognitively and affectively loyal to the travel company. Industry managers should act on these results. Actually, given this context and the highly competitive online environment, online travel companies would be well advised to participate into social networks because this will have a positive effect on their customers' e-loyalty. They should establish strong social ties with users to ensure e-loyalty. Travel retail websites featuring third-party feedback mechanisms retain more of their customers than those that do not. There is a sense of belonging to a family among the members of forums, chat rooms and discussion groups that is inspired by their shared tastes, values, interests and common goals [79,104]. Online companies should host virtual communities on their websites or in social media to help retain customer loyalty. Travel companies that respond to comments and are involved in social networks are seen favorably by users and even many customers follow them on social networks. Airlines are often active on Twitter in terms of customer service, which can also contribute to retention. Virtual communities embedded in social networks allow managers to effectively identify potential problems posted in the forums; respond to dissatisfaction; identify consumers' specific needs, views and interests; and develop appropriate marketing strategies. The strategic approach should be to use feedback and reviews to engage and retain customers in more long-term relationships. Managers should be better prepared with an online review response plan that works for them [80].

This study found that retention efforts are not dependent only on website features and customer service, but also on feedback, reviews, and posts that customers find useful. However, efforts to establish a social presence seem to be counter-productive in impacting cognitive loyalty, perhaps because social presence may be perceived as a less professional environment. In fact, the relationship between social presence and loyalty is in an opposite direction compared to what was expected, but it also supports previous findings in the literature. It supports Thota, Song and Larsen's study [105] demonstrating that exposure to animated banner ads on a website increases customer skepticism toward the site and adversely affects attitudes toward the site and its brand, as well as the intention to revisit the site. Marketing managers should make an effort to identify and avoid factors and contexts that create negative responses from customers. Equilibrium between hosting a useful virtual community and having a social presence perceived as too prominent should be established.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to test the direct and indirect effects (through online satisfaction) of functional and relational website features on cognitive and affective loyalty. Its purpose was also to see if perceived usefulness of a community embedded on social media directly or indirectly affects the traveler loyalty to the online travel company.

The findings of this study are of prime interest to marketing managers in the online travel industry and offer many insights to finetune their retention strategy. However, this study has some limitations that may affect generalizing the findings to a larger population. First, the use of student samples and convenience sampling does not allow broad generalizations. Even though students have the resemblance of online

shoppers population, future research should try to replicate this research using a larger, different segments and more probabilistic samples. In order to generalize the findings, future research should be carried out in different service contexts (e.g. banking, telecommunication), in different cultures, and with other shopper profiles. In fact, future research could expand on the current findings by using also experimental designs. For example, laboratory experiments should test the effect of social presence on e-satisfaction and e-loyalty. In this study, social presence was measured only by customers' perceptions (via a survey); future research might examine what the website is effectively providing for social presence (e.g. avatars) and tests its impact on cognitive and affective loyalty, via an experimental design. Moreover, additional research is needed to better understand the role of social network communities in building online tourist loyalty. This study did not distinguish between social communities initiated by consumers and those initiated by the travel company or embedded on the company's website. The impact of the community usefulness on e-loyalty could be different depending on the source of the information. Future research should consider this difference.

This research has also not dealt with trust, an important driver of loyalty. Growing research on e-commerce has noted the influence of web characteristics on trust and purchase decisions. Pavlou and Fygenon [106] revealed the role of trust as a predictor of online behavioral outcomes, such as loyalty. In this study, the focus was more primarily on satisfaction. However, future research with an objective to understand relationships between website features, social network usefulness, and e-loyalty should consider trust as a crucial dimension.

This study was limited to the study of two types of online loyalty that fall more into the attitudinal category, setting aside behavioral loyalty. In fact, the objective of this study was to better understand the drivers of two types of attitudinal loyalty, given that several studies have already analyzed those of online behavioral loyalty [100,107-113]. Future research should consider the various facets of both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty in the same study in order to more effectively distinguish the determinants of each. Additionally, the affective loyalty measure is primarily related to preference rather than to affection. Future studies should consider measuring emotions when examining the affective dimension of loyalty.

In conclusion, this study confirmed established direct and indirect relationships in the context of online travel industry, but also contributed to the research by testing the benefits which brands would gain by interacting, communicating, and sharing with consumers via communities embedded on social media; and how the perceived usefulness of these communities affects online loyalty to the brand. The study found that retention efforts are not only dependent on website features and customer service, but also on feedback, reviews and posts that customers find useful. Moreover, unlike past research studying the impact of website features on loyalty on the aggregate level, this study aimed to understand these relationships with two distinct types of customer loyalty, namely affective and cognitive. By understanding website drivers of online satisfaction and loyalty, online travel companies can develop strategies positioned to build long-term relationships, and thereby gain a competitive advantage.

As customer retention becomes a challenge in the online environment, and because today's travelers increasingly search for information online and buy tourism products and services via the internet [5], providing high-quality websites and enabling customers to have conversations with the brand and interacting with others on social media communities are essential factors for developing positive

customers experiences, and consequently e-satisfaction and e-loyalty [114-117].

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