

Thai Tourist Commitment And Loyalty To Travel By Sea

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to study factors influencing Thai tourist loyalty concerning travel by sea to create a competitive advantage and value added to seaside attractions. This research employs quantitative analysis. The researcher collected data by interviewing 440 Thai tourists in three seaside locations: Pattaya, Hua-Hin and Samed. The results show that the majority of respondents are female, aged between 25 and 34 years old. They are a) single with bachelor degrees, b) employed in the private sector with monthly incomes over THB25,001 and c) resident in Bangkok. The results of testing the hypotheses are as follows:

- 1. The developed structural equation model of attitudinal loyalty towards seaside attractions in Pattaya was congruent with empirical data as the criterion as follows: ($\chi^2 = 486.091$, $df = 174$, $GFI = .909$, $AGFI = .879$, $RMSEA = .064$, $RMR = .063$ and $CFI = .960$). Factors influencing loyalty towards seaside attractions in Pattaya, include the following: a) affective commitment showed the highest level of direct influence = .688 and b) continuance commitment with direct influence = .328 with statistical significance at the .001 level. Satisfaction with seaside attractions has an indirect influence equal to .743 with statistical significance at the .001 level.*
- 2. The developed structural equation model of attitudinal loyalty towards seaside attractions in Hua-Hin, as developed by the researcher, includes goodness of fit with empirical data ($\chi^2 = 472.086$, $df = 173$, $GFI = .909$, $AGFI = .878$, $RMSEA = .063$, $RMR = .072$ and $CFI = .952$). Affective commitment has a direct influence on attitudinal loyalty = .724, followed by continuance commitment = .276 with statistical significance at the .001 level. Satisfaction with seaside attractions has an indirect influence equal to .570 with statistical significance at the .001 level.*
- 3. The developed structural equation model of attitudinal loyalty towards seaside attractions in Samed is congruent with empirical data ($\chi^2 = 503.853$, $df = 172$, $GFI = .900$, $AGFI = .866$, $RMSEA = .066$, $RMR = .080$ and $CFI = .953$). Affective commitment shows a level of direct influence = .646, followed by continuance commitment = .328 with statistical significance at the .001 level. Satisfaction with seaside attractions has an indirect influence = .547 with statistical significance at the .001 level.*

Keywords: Thai Tourist; Commitment; Loyalty; Travel by Sea

1. INTRODUCTION

 Since 2008, Thailand has faced political and economic instability which has affected the number of foreign tourists and the amount of revenue in the local tourism industry. Consequently, the government began a campaign to increase domestic tourists. Travel to seaside locations is a popular attraction for Thai tourists. The reason is that there are several categories of seaside attractions in Thailand. The most popular of these are Pattaya, Hua-Hin and Samed due to their proximity to Bangkok, the capital city. The revenue from seaside attractions in Pattaya in 2008 was THB 59,347.61 million, whereas Hua-Hin was THB 9,215.22 million and Rayong province was THB 13,113.36 million (www.tourism.go.th). The reason for tourist concentrations in these three seaside areas is because Bangkok is crowded; people from several regions in Thailand have migrated there. Commitment and loyalty are the most important issues in marketing research to create sustainable revenue and jobs

in the tourism industry (Brown, Koninets, and Sherry, 2003, Yi & La, 2004). Loyalty can be divided into attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973, Oliver, 1999). However, the tourism industry is quite different from other marketing areas. Tourists will not revisit the same places even if they are very satisfied and committed to their attractions. They will select new locations for upcoming trips (Woodside and MacDonald, 1994). In this study, the researcher will focus only on attitudinal loyalty to three seaside locations. Satisfaction, commitment, and attitudinal loyalty are the most important determinants to enhance revenue and jobs and create a competitive advantage in seaside attractions.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this research is to study the direct and indirect effects of Thai tourists on attitudinal loyalty to seaside attractions. Commitment is the mediating indicator between satisfaction and attitudinal loyalty. Thus, the proposed model is derived from many research papers, such as those of Fullerton, 2005, Marshall, 2010 and Mechinda, Serirat, and Gulid, 2008. The proposed model is shown in the following figure:

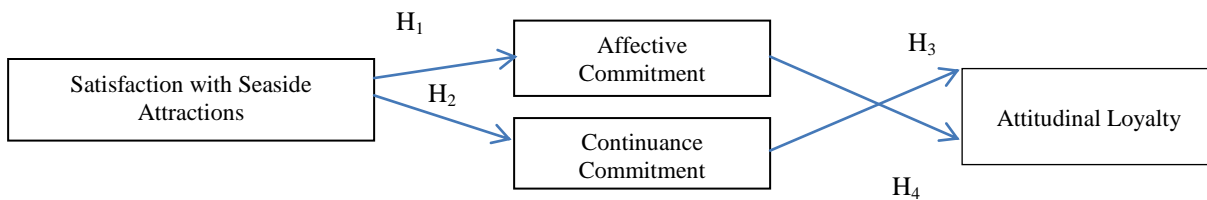


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2.1 Hypotheses

The following research questions will be addressed:

1. Satisfaction with seaside attractions has a direct influence on affective commitment.
2. Satisfaction with seaside attractions has a direct influence on continuance commitment.
3. Affective commitment has a direct influence on attitudinal loyalty.
4. Continuance commitment has a direct influence on attitudinal loyalty.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 The Antecedents Of Loyalty

In the tourism industry, satisfaction is the main determinant of loyalty (Alegre and Juaneda, 2006; Bodet, 2008). It influences the choice of destination and the decision to return (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000). If tourists are satisfied, they will be more likely to continue to purchase. However, the degree of satisfaction impact on loyalty is not the same for all industries or situations (Fornell, 1992; McCleary et al., 2003). Satisfaction is an overall evaluation of the experience of owning and/or consuming a product or service (Fournier and Mick, 1999).

Commitment is a central construct in the development and maintenance of marketing relationships because it is a key psychological force that links the consumer to service firms (Bansal et al., 2004). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2002) demonstrate that brand commitment is a key mediator of the relationship between consumer evaluations of the brand and customer intentions. Many scholars such as Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Gruen et al. (2000) have concluded that commitment is a complete mediator of relationship satisfaction and advocacy intentions. Commitment is viewed as an attachment between parties that leads to a desire to maintain a relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In this study, commitment includes two components: affective commitment and continuance commitment (Fullerton, 2003; Gilliland and Bello, 2002; Harrison-Walker, 2001). Affective commitment is rooted in shared values, identification, and attachment (Bansal et al., 2004; Fullerton, 2003; Gruen et al., 2000). Commitment takes time to develop relationships. Garbarino and Johnson (1999) found that evaluations of the

consumption experience are an antecedent of commitment in a marketing relationship. Consumers trust and enjoy doing business with a partner when they are affectively committed to that partner. Affective commitment leads to loyalty when consumers have a favorable attitude toward the destination. In consumer services, continuance commitment exists in a relationship when service agreement is in force. Continuance commitment is viewed as an economic and psychological switching of costs and scarcity of alternatives (Bansal et al., 2004; Fullerton, 2003; Harrison-Walker, 2001). It is a feature of consumer-brand relationships. Brands are rich with cultural meaning that becomes attached to the consumer through the acts of use and consumption (Holt, 2003). If the consumer switches brands, both the personality and cultural fit benefits disappear. The lost feeling that is valued by customers is a key feature of continuance commitment in marketing relationships (Fullerton, 2003). In many studies, scholars have found continuance commitment is the determinant of customer retention (Bansal et al., 2004; Fullerton, 2003; Gruen et al., 2000).

3.2 Loyalty

Many researchers have concluded that there must be “attitudinal commitment” for true consumer loyalty (Day, 1969; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977; Jacoby, Chestnut et al., 1978; Mellens, Dekimpe, and Steenkampe, 1996). Oliver (1997, p.36) defines loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future despite situational influences or marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior.” This definition includes two aspects of behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. In the tourism industry, it is the rare purchase (Oppermann, 1999). It does not occur on a continuous basis, but rather infrequently (Jago and Shaw, 1998). In this study, loyalty only emphasizes attitudinal loyalty. Many tourism researchers employ tourist recommendations to others as a measure of attitudinal loyalty (Chen and Gursoy, 2001; Oppermann, 2000). Day (1969) pays more attention to attitudinal aspects relating to loyalty and the degree of expressed preferences. Baldinger and Rubinson (1996) find brand attitude to be a more certain predictor of brand loyalty than behavioral loyalty.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs quantitative methodology and uses survey techniques to collect data. The sample size from questionnaire distribution is 440 Thai tourists. Quota sampling was employed at three seaside locations; therefore, 147 Thai tourists were interviewed at each site. Purposive sampling was also employed to interview respondents at the most popular seaside attractions in Pattaya, including museums, temples, shopping centers, and beaches. In Hua-Hin, the most popular attractions are beaches, the flea market and a national park. The island itself and the pier are the most popular attractions of Samed. Finally, convenience sampling was used in selecting the respondents at each seaside attraction.

4.1 Measurements

All measurement items of each construct and its Cronbach alpha level are summarized in Table 1. The questionnaires were measured by using the five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” (5) to “Strongly Disagree” (1). All measures achieved the Cronbach alpha beyond the recommended level of 0.60, passing the minimum requirement (Hair, Bush and Oftinau, 2004: 397).

Table 1: Reliability Of Measurements Used In This Study

Scales Items	Cronbach’s Alpha
Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions: 5–item scale on a five-point Likert scale	
- Pattaya	.916
- Hua-Hin	.890
- Samed	.894
Affective Commitment: 5–item scale on a five-point Likert scale	
- Pattaya	.908
- Hua-Hin	.881
- Samed	.908
Continuance Commitment: 5–item scale on a five-point Likert scale	
- Pattaya	.905
- Hua-Hin	.893
- Samed	.906
Attitudinal Loyalty: 5–item scale on a five-point Likert scale	
- Pattaya	.926
- Hua-Hin	.904
- Samed	.914

4.2 Analysis And Results

4.2.1 Respondent Profile

The researcher collected data by interviewing 440 Thai tourists. The results show that the majority of respondents are female (65.9%), and 57.5% are between 25 and 34 years old. They are a) single (65%) with bachelor degrees (68.2%), b) employed in the private sector (64.8%) with monthly incomes over THB25,001 (27.5%) and c) resident in Bangkok (48.2%). The decision to travel alone was made by 38%.

4.2.2 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

The hypothesized model and the competing model consisting of four variables can be seen in Table 2. A competing model including all independent variables (satisfaction, affective commitment and continuance commitment) has a direct impact on the dependent variable (attitudinal loyalty). This competing model is derived from Chang, Chen, Hsu and Kuo (2010) along with Marshall (2010). The hypothesized model is derived from many research papers such as those of Fullerton, 2005; Marshall, 2010; Mechinda, Serirat, and Gulid, 2008, which suggest that commitment is a key mediator of the relationship between consumer evaluations of the brand and customer intentions. The results of the comparison between the hypothesized model and the competing model for seaside attractions in Pattaya are indicated in Table 2:

Table 2: Standardized Parameter Estimates And Model Fit Statistics Of The Hypothesized Model And The Competing Model In Pattaya

H:	From	To	Hypothesized Model		Competing Model	
			Standardized Estimate	t-value	Standardized Estimate	t-value
H ₁₁	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Affective Commitment	0.835***	18.141	-	-
H ₂₁	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Continuance Commitment	0.516***	10.509	-	-
H ₃₁	Affective Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	0.688***	14.577	-	-
H ₄₁	Continuance Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	0.328***	8.077	-	-
New Path	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.206***	3.756
	Affective Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.677***	10.345
	Continuance Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.381***	7.899
Model Goodness-of-fit Statistics						
			χ^2	486.091		981.359
			df	174		178
			χ^2/df	2.794		5.513
			p-value	0.00		0.00
			GFI	.909		.846
			AGFI	.879		.801
			RMR	.063		.293
			RMSEA	.064		.101
			AIC	600.091		1087.359
			CFI	.960		.935
			ECVI	1.367		2.477
			CAIC	890.038		1356.958
			PNFI	.779		.745

Note: * = 0.05, ** = 0.01, *** = .001 based one-tailed t-values: t-value > 1.65 for p < 0.05, t-value > 2.33 for p < 0.01, t-value > 3.09 for p < 0.001 (Malhotra, 2004).

These two models are compared in terms of model parsimony and fit. Four measures (AIC, ECVI, CAIC, and PNFI) are used to compare the data. The criteria of the better fitted model and greater parsimony are decided by the lower values of AIC, ECVI, CAIC along with the higher value of PNFI. The results from Table 2 indicate that all three values of AIC, ECVI, CAIC in the hypothesized model (AIC = 600.091, ECVI = 1.367, CAIC = 890.038) are lower than those in the competing model (AIC = 1087.359, ECVI = 2.477, CAIC = 1356.958). The PNFI value of the hypothesized model (PNFI = .779) is higher than the PNFI value of the competing model (PNFI = .745). Hence, the hypothesized model performs better fit and greater parsimony than the competing model.

The model can explain 69.7% of the variance in affective commitment and the predictor variable is satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .835$), which has a significant positive direct effect on affective commitment. The model explains 26.7% of the variance in continuance commitment and the predictor variable is satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .516$), which has a significant positive direct effect on continuance commitment. The model explains a high percentage (77.5%) of the variation in attitudinal loyalty. Affective commitment performs the most important predictor ($\beta = .688$), followed by continuance commitment ($\beta = .328$), which has a significant positive direct effect on attitudinal loyalty. Satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .743$) has an indirect effect on attitudinal loyalty.

The results of the comparison between the hypothesized model and the competing model for seaside attractions in Hua-Hin are indicated in Table 3:

Table 3: Standardized Parameter Estimates And Model Fit Statistics Of The Hypothesized Model And The Competing Model In Hua-Hin

H:	From	To	Hypothesized Model		Competing Model	
			Standardized Estimate	t-value	Standardized Estimate	t-value
H ₁₂	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Affective Commitment	0.678***	11.436	-	-
H ₂₂	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Continuance Commitment	0.286***	5.396	-	-
H ₃₂	Affective Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	0.724***	12.519	-	-
H ₄₂	Continuance Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	0.276***	5.936	-	-
New Path	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.300***	5.658
	Affective Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.603***	9.185
	Continuance Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.330***	6.388
Model Goodness-of-fit Statistics						
χ^2			472.086		652.452	
df			173		175	
χ^2/df			2.279		3.728	
p-value			0.00		0.00	
GFI			.909		.883	
AGFI			.878		.845	
RMR			.072		.161	
RMSEA			.063		.079	
AIC			588.086		764.452	
CFI			.952		.923	
ECVI			1.340		1.741	
CAIC			883.119		1049.311	
PNFI			.763		.749	

Note: * = 0.05, ** = 0.01, *** = .001 based one-tailed t-values: t-value > 1.65 for p < 0.05, t-value > 2.33 for p < 0.01, t-value > 3.09 for p < 0.001 (Malhotra, 2004).

These two models are compared in terms of model parsimony and fit. Four measures (AIC, ECVI, CAIC, and PNFI) are used to compare the data. The criteria of the better fitted model and greater parsimony are decided by the lower values of AIC, ECVI, CAIC along with the higher value of PNFI. The results from Table 3 indicate that all three values of AIC, ECVI and CAIC in the hypothesized model (AIC = 588.086, ECVI = 1.340, CAIC = 883.119) are lower than those of the competing model (AIC = 764.452, ECVI = 1.741, CAIC = 1049.311). The PNFI value of the hypothesized model (PNFI = .763) is higher than the PNFI value of the competing model (PNFI = .749). Hence, the hypothesized model performs better fit and greater parsimony than the competing model.

The model can explain 45.9% of the variance in affective commitment and the predictor variable is satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .678$), which has a significant positive direct effect on affective commitment. The model explains 8.2% of the variance in continuance commitment and the predictor variable is satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .286$), which has a significant positive direct effect on continuance commitment. The model explains a high percentage (67.8%) of the variation in attitudinal loyalty. Affective commitment performs the most important predictor ($\beta = .724$) followed by continuance commitment ($\beta = .276$), which has a significant positive direct effect on attitudinal loyalty. Satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .570$) has an indirect effect on attitudinal loyalty.

The results of the comparison between the hypothesized model and the competing model for seaside attractions in Samed are indicated in Table 4:

Table 4: Standardized Parameter Estimates And Model Fit Statistics Of The Hypothesized Model And The Competing Model In Samed

H:	From	To	Hypothesized Model		Competing Model	
			Standardized Estimate	t-value	Standardized Estimate	t-value
H ₁₃	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Affective Commitment	0.689***	13.735	-	-
H ₂₃	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Continuance Commitment	0.313***	6.157	-	-
H ₃₃	Affective Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	0.646***	12.270	-	-
H ₄₃	Continuance Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	0.325***	7.019	-	-
New Path	Satisfaction with Seaside Attractions	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.246***	4.830
	Affective Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.562***	9.008
	Continuance Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	-	-	0.360***	6.964
Model Goodness-of-fit Statistics						
			χ^2	503.853		754.572
			df	172		174
			χ^2/df	2.929		4.337
			p-value	0.00		0.00
			GFI	.900		.872
			AGFI	.866		.830
			RMR	.080		.195
			RMSEA	.066		.087
			AIC	621.853		868.572
			CFI	.953		.919
			ECVI	1.417		1.979
			CAIC	921.973		1158.519
			PNFI	.763		.743

Note: * = 0.05, ** = 0.01, *** = .001 based one-tailed t-values: t-value > 1.65 for p < 0.05, t-value > 2.33 for p < 0.01, t-value > 3.09 for p < 0.001 (Malhotra, 2004).

These two models are compared in terms of model parsimony and fit. Four measures (AIC, ECVI, CAIC, and PNFI) are used to compare the data. The criteria of the better fitted model and greater parsimony are decided by the lower values of AIC, ECVI, CAIC along with the higher value of PNFI. The results from Table 4 indicate that all three values of AIC, ECVI, CAIC in the hypothesized model (AIC = 621.853, ECVI = 1.417, CAIC = 921.973) are lower than those of the competing model (AIC = 868.572, ECVI = 1.979, CAIC = 1158.973). The PNFI value of the hypothesized model (PNFI = .763) is higher than the PNFI value of the competing model (PNFI = .743). Hence, the hypothesized model performs better fit and greater parsimony than the competing model.

The model can explain 47.5% of the variance in affective commitment and the predictor variable is satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .689$), which has a significant positive direct effect on affective commitment. The model explains 9.8% of the variance in continuance commitment and the predictor variable is satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .313$), which has a significant positive direct effect on continuance commitment. The model explains a high percentage (61.4%) of the variation in attitudinal loyalty. Affective commitment performs the most important predictor ($\beta = .646$) followed by continuance commitment ($\beta = .325$), both of which have a significant positive direct effect on attitudinal loyalty. Satisfaction with seaside attractions ($\beta = .547$) has an indirect effect on attitudinal loyalty.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The two components of commitment (affective and continuance) perspective that are applied to consumer brand relationships can also be applied to the tourism industry. The findings of this study show that affective and continuance commitment have a positive direct impact on attitudinal loyalty at all three seaside attractions, which is consistent with Marshall (2010). Commitment is also the mediator of the relationship between satisfaction and

loyalty (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This finding supports the reason why satisfaction is not a good determinant of customer retention (Jones and Sasser, 1995). Tourists may not repurchase the same destination, even if they are satisfied, if they are not committed to the destination. Moreover, satisfaction with seaside attractions has a direct impact on affective commitment and continuance commitment in all three locations. This finding is consistent with Fullerton (2005). Therefore, satisfaction and commitment play important roles in driving attitudinal loyalty. To create competitive advantage in the tourism industry in Thailand, stakeholders should emphasize satisfaction and commitment in driving customer retention. In this study, the researcher does not examine behavioral loyalty because tourism products are unique and rare purchases. Tourists do not want to come back or repurchase the same product even if they are satisfied due to their desire for novelty. Some tourists perform continuous switches (Woodside and MacDonald, 1994). In Mechinda, Serirat, and Gulid's study (2008) of tourist attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, it was noted that satisfaction and perceived value did not have a direct impact on behavioral loyalty, but they did have a positive impact on attitudinal loyalty. In this study, the researcher defines loyalty only as attitudinal loyalty, which is a limitation.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

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NOTES