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# **THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY IN LUXURY HOTELS**

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### ***Abstract***

*The purpose of this paper is to determine the key dimensions of relationship marketing that influence customer satisfaction, as well as the impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty in a luxury hotel context. A survey was conducted on a convenience sample of 311 Croatian citizens who stayed in 5-star hotels in the year prior to the study. The research results show that not all dimensions of relationship marketing influence customer satisfaction. Competence, trust, and communication, as relationship marketing dimensions, have a statistically significant impact on customer satisfaction. The findings also suggest that customer satisfaction has a statistically significant influence on customer loyalty. This study contributes to the theory of relationship marketing. In addition, the obtained results have implications for hotel managers seeking to implement relationship marketing strategies to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty.*

***Keywords: relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, luxury hotels***

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Given today's business conditions and the rise of ever-fiercer competition, implementing the strategic principles of relationship marketing is becoming a fundamental factor of a hotel's business performance and a primary precondition to gaining a competitive advantage. As the hotel industry is a service industry, to be able to deliver top-quality services, it is crucial for hoteliers to recognize the importance of relationship marketing practices in maintaining long-term relationships with their customers.

Over the last two decades, the relationship marketing theory has gained considerable attention among scholars. Although relationship marketing has been studied either as a one-dimensional or multi-dimensional construct, there are many studies suggesting it should be explored as a composite of many different constructs (Salem, 2021). Despite numerous attempts to uncover what constitutes relationship marketing theory, to date there is still a lack of common conceptual understanding (Narteh, Agbemabiese, Kodua & Braimah, 2013; Grönroos, 2017; Gummesson, 2017; van Tonder & Petzer, 2018).

Also, researchers have established connections between relationship marketing, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions in different contexts, namely, financial services (Al-Hersh, Aburoub & Saaty, 2014; Kyei & Narteh, 2016; Nauroozi & Moghadam, 2015; Ndubisi, 2007; Ndubisi & Wah, 2005), hospitality (Amoako, Neequaye, Kutu-Adu, Caesar & Ofori, 2019; Kim, Han & Lee, 2001; Kim & Cha, 2002; Narteh et al., 2013; Salem, 2021), medical tourism (Sousa & Alves, 2019), and mobile telecommunications (Mahmoud, Hinson & Adika, 2018). Although relationship marketing is receiving more and more attention, there is a paucity of studies examining the relationship marketing concept and its relational components, highlighting the need to examine the connections among relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, and loyalty (Aka, Kehinde & Ogunnaike, 2016). Moreover, Narteh et al. (2013) have called for more studies on relationship marketing in the luxury hotel industry, especially in different geographical contexts.

In general, the hospitality industry accepts hotel star rating as determined by different organizations (Forbes Travel Guide, American Automobile Association, etc.), and four- or five-star hotels are generally considered as luxury hotels (Liu, Wong, Tseng, Chang & Phau, 2017; Chu, Tang & Luo, 2016). Globally, the hospitality industry plays a crucial role in many economies, as a primary support to economic growth over time. The luxury hotel industry is a fast-growing segment of the hospitality and tourism industry (Chu et al., 2016). Indeed, during the period 2021-2026, the growth rate of the global luxury hotel market is estimated to be more than 4% (Mordor Intelligence, 2020). Moreover, the third largest market share in the global luxury goods industry is accounted for by luxury hospitality (Pereira, Silva & Dias, 2021; Peng & Chen, 2019). In describing the term "luxury hotel", it should be noted that there is no universal definition of the same. According to Huh, Lee and Lee (2019, p. 1034) "luxury hotels and resorts generally have enhanced room features, superlative services, guest activities,

quality foods, and luxurious amenities and are more expensive than other hotels and resorts". Peng and Chen (2018, p. 1349) defined luxury hotels as "a hotel that is unique, superior in quality, provides excellent service and can symbolize the wealth and status of the owners". Compared to standard hotels, luxury hotels provide customers with superior value, primarily in terms of quality and reputation and, therefore, customers expect superior satisfaction from higher classified hotels (Lu, Berchoux, Marek & Chen, 2015). Through added, superior value of services and facilities, luxury hotels are attempting to build long-term relationships with customers (Lee & Kim, 2020), which is a fundamental determinant of relationship marketing.

The present paper has three main objectives. The first is to analyse relationship marketing as a multi-dimensional construct. The second is to explore the connection between the different dimensions of relationship marketing and customer satisfaction. The third is to examine the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The findings are expected to help marketing managers in luxury hotels to adequately implement the relationship marketing strategy and enhance guest satisfaction and loyalty.

This paper consists of five sections. After the introduction, a theoretical framework is provided, regarding relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Research methodology is explained in the third section. The fourth section presents and interprets the results of research. The last section, conclusion, synthesizes the entire paper, focusing on research limitations and recommendations for future research.

## **2. LITERATURE BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

The following section provides an overview of the literature, with focus on the concepts of relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

### **2.1. Framework of the relationship marketing concept**

In an attempt to define relationship marketing, authors have used different elements, variables or concepts as starting points; hence, the number of different definitions present in the literature. Within the service marketing domain, the relationship marketing theory has gained considerable attention. The term "relationship marketing" appeared for the first time in 1983 and most authors refer to this definition, which explains relationship marketing as "attracting, maintaining and, in multi-service organizations, enhancing customer relationships" (Berry, 1995, p. 236). Due to the specifics of service delivery, service providers can establish relationships with their customers (van Tonder & Petzer, 2018) when customers perceive that there is a common way of thinking between customers and service providers (Al-Hersh et al., 2014). Ward and Dagger (2007) emphasize that

relationships will develop in situations where the customer comes into contact with the service provider more often, when the service is provided continuously over a long period of time, and when the customer considers the relationship important. Kim and Cha (2002, p. 323) defined relationship marketing in the hotel industry "as a set of marketing activities that attract, maintain, and enhance customer relationships for the benefit of both sides, emphasizing on retaining existing customers". Thus, the basic objective of relationship marketing is to retain customers by improving relationships and increasing their satisfaction and loyalty (Amaoko et al., 2019). In addition, most relationship marketing definitions highlight the importance of developing long-term customer relationships. Kotler, Wong, Saunders and Armstrong (2005, p. 476) emphasize that "relationship marketing involves creating, maintaining and enhancing strong relationships with customers and other stakeholders. The goal is to deliver long-term value to customers and the measure of success is long-term customer satisfaction."

Over time, researchers have identified the key principles of relationship marketing. Most studies have investigated relationship marketing as a multifaceted construct consisting of several variables (Kyei & Narteh, 2016). Various studies have examined relationship marketing based on two fundamental dimensions: trust and commitment (Brown, Crosno & Tong, 2019; Amaoko et al, 2019), in the marketing literature known as commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing which was introduced by Morgan and Hunt (1994). Later studies generally extended the relationship marketing theory. For example, Ndubisi (2006, 2007) documented four key dimensions that constitute relationship marketing, such as trust, commitment, communication, and conflict handling. Similarly, Ndubisi and Wah (2005) conceptualized relationship marketing by adding the competence dimension. Anabila, Narteh, Tweneboah-Koduah and Box (2012) extended these five dimensions by adding social and financial bonds. Narteh et al. (2013) adopted six variables that constitute relationship marketing, such as trust, commitment, communication, conflict handling, bonding, and competence. Al-Hersh et al. (2014) also elaborated on a similar construct, namely, trust, commitment, communication, empathy, social bonding, and promise fulfilment. Kyei and Narteh (2016) proposed nine underpinnings of relationship marketing: trust, commitment, competence, communication, conflict handling, social connection, shared values, empathy, and reciprocity.

The current study focuses on trust, commitment, communication, conflict handling, bonding, and competence, as a group of variables, which constitute relationship marketing. These variables were previously validated and represent adequate measurement indicators of relationship marketing (Narteh et al., 2013). Each of the aforementioned variables is briefly discussed below.

Numerous studies have pointed out that trust is one of the most important underpinnings of relationship marketing (Ndubisi & Wah, 2005; Kyei & Narteh, 2016; Mahmoud et al., 2018). It is defined as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence" (Moorman, Deshpande & Zaltman, 1993, p. 82). The relationship has to be established on mutual trust (Brown et al., 2019).

Moreover, trust is described as absolute faith in a service provider (Amaoko et al., 2019). If the service provider betrays the trust, customers will be dissatisfied and will defect (Ndubisi & Wah, 2005). The results of Kyei and Narteh's study (2016) indicated that trust is the chief driver of customer satisfaction. In addition, researchers found that there is a positive relationship between trust and customer loyalty (Narteh et al., 2013; Ndubisi 2007). Similarly, Bowen and Shomaker (2003) noted that trust is the most important antecedent to luxury hotel guests' commitment.

Moorman et al. (1992, p. 316) consider commitment as "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship". In a committed relationship, both parties should make efforts to maintain the relationship and keep it valuable (Salem, 2021). Moreover, previous research found commitment to be higher among individuals who believe they gain more value from a relationship (Anabila et al., 2012; Mahmoud et al., 2018). According to Mattila (2006), there are two dimensions of commitment in the hospitality industry: (1) affective commitment, that refers to consumers' emotional attachment to the service provider, and (2) calculative commitment, which is based on rational and economic reasons (i.e., frequent guest programmes that allow them to achieve the desired reward). Mattila's study (2006) found that affective commitment is a crucial factor of hotel guest loyalty.

In maintaining long-term relationships between the service provider and customers, communication is considered a vital component in a hospitality setting (Kim et al., 2001). In the literature, communication is explained as "the process through which a communicator transmits stimuli to modify behaviour of other individuals" (Narteh et al., 2013, p. 415). In relationship marketing, communication implies (Ndubisi, 2007) the regular maintenance of contacts with valuable customers, timely and reliable provision of information about services, and constructive communication about disputes. This implies that effective communication increases satisfaction, trust in the service provider, and loyalty (Kyei & Narteh, 2016). The findings of Nauroozi and Moghadam (2015) and Kyei, and Narteh (2016) indicate that there is a positive and significant relationship between communication and customer satisfaction.

Conflict handling refers to the "supplier's ability to avoid potential conflicts, solve manifest conflicts before they create problems and the ability to discuss openly, solutions when problems arise" (Ndubisi & Wah, 2005, p. 546). In the hotel industry, customer feedback is very important to determine whether customers are (dis)satisfied with the provided service (Salem, 2021). As a form of feedback, complaints are inevitable in providing services and their proper and successful handling can influence customer satisfaction (Mahmoud et al., 2018; Cheng, Gan, Imrie, & Mansori, 2019). In addition, Homburg and Fürst (2005) and Salem (2021) noted that successful conflict handling has a significant impact on customer satisfaction and retention. Similarly, Mahmoud et al. (2018) examined the relationship between conflict handling and customer satisfaction. The results showed that conflict handling positively influences customer satisfaction in a telecommunication industry setting.

One of the fundamental goals of relationship marketing is to build strong bonds between the customer and the service provider (Narteh et al., 2013). Bonds have been described as "psychological, emotional, economic, or physical attachments in a relationship that are fostered by association and interaction, and that serve to bind parties together under a relational exchange" (Liang, Chen & Wang, 2008, p. 771). Berry (1995) categorized relational bonding into three levels: (1) financial bonding, which involves maintaining customer loyalty through price incentives; (2) social bonding, which implies a relationship that is personalized and customized; and (3) structural bonding, which refers to structural solutions that serve to solve complex customer problems. In a hospitality context, at the first level, hotels award points or various discounts to loyal customers to encourage them to use various additional services (Chiu, Hsieh, Li, & Lee, 2005). The second level (i.e., social bonding) includes a variety of dimensions, such as listening, caring, closeness, and friendship, which in turn increases satisfaction with the service provided (Alrubaiee & Al-Nazer, 2010). Al-Hersh et al. (2014) found that social bonding is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction. A higher level of bonding offers customized solutions with value added benefits that are not available elsewhere due to the high cost of creating such services (Liang et al., 2008).

Competence refers to "the buyer's (customer's) perception of the supplier's technological and commercial competence" (Anderson & Weitz, 1989, in Anabila et al., 2012, p. 54). According to Bataineh, Al-Abdallah, Salhab and Shoter (2015), the professional knowledge, skills, and expertise of employees reflect the competencies of the service provider. Within the hotel industry, it is of crucial importance that hotel staff have the following competence (Kim & Cha, 2002): (1) professional training and education; (2) appropriate knowledge and experience about providing services in order to identify guest needs; (3) high motivation to acquire new knowledge, i.e., self-development; and (4) ability to provide quality and professional service. Anabila et al. (2012) have proved that if customers perceive a service provider as competent, they are more likely to stay with them. Likewise, Ndubisi and Wah (2005) found that the competencies of financial institutions have a positive impact on customer satisfaction. Based on the above analysis, the following hypothesis is set:

H1: Relationship marketing is a multidimensional construct.

## **2.2. Customer satisfaction and loyalty**

As an essential marketing concept, customer satisfaction has gained much attention among scholars. It should be noted that there is no universally agreed definition of this concept; however, one common point among many definitions of satisfaction implies the mandatory presence of the goal that the customer wants to achieve (Molina, Martín-Consuegra & Esteban, 2007). According to Kyei and Narteh (2016, p. 77), customer satisfaction refers to "the focal organization's (a buyer's) overall evaluation based on the total purchase and consumption experience with a product or service of another party (a supplier)". As a result of

(previous) interactions with the service provider, a perception of customer satisfaction is developed (van Tonder & Petzer, 2019). Scholars describe overall customer satisfaction by focusing on the customer's overall assessment affected by the features of the services provided, employee competencies, or other significant factors (Han, Kim & Hyun, 2011). Consequently, within the service marketing literature, different dimensions of customer satisfaction (e.g., satisfaction with employees, the core service of the service provider, or the service provider in general) have been identified which may have different effects on overall consumer satisfaction (Anselmsson, 2006). In a service context, customer satisfaction is most often described as a unidimensional construct that measures overall customer satisfaction, and is considered as the result of an overall judgment of all interactions with the service provider (El-Adly, 2019).

Various recent studies have sought to link the different dimensions of relationship marketing and customer satisfaction and found that relationship marketing is an important antecedent of customer satisfaction (Mahmoud et al., 2018). In the banking industry, Al-Hersh et al. (2014) examined the influence of relationship marketing on customer satisfaction. Their findings revealed that trust, commitment, communication, empathy, social bonding, and fulfilling promises have a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Similarly, according to Nauroozi and Moghadam's study (2015), relationship marketing significantly affects bank customer satisfaction and loyalty. More precisely, relationship marketing dimensions like trust, commitment, communication, and conflict management had an effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Aka et al. (2016) developed a framework for relationship marketing, suggesting that trust, commitment, communication, and service quality are positively related to customer satisfaction. Kyei and Narteh (2016) also argued that relationship marketing practices have a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction. Namely, their findings revealed that among the nine factors of relationship marketing, trust is the major driver of customer satisfaction, followed by communication, shared value, competence, reciprocity, social connections, empathy, commitment, and conflict handling. In medical tourism services, Sousa and Alves (2019) proposed a conceptual model, indicating that cooperation, commitment, and trust have an impact on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Amaoko et al. (2019) examined the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing in the Ghanaian hospitality industry and its effect on customer satisfaction. In this study, findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between trust, commitment, and customer satisfaction. In a luxury hospitality setting, Narteh et al. (2013) studied the impact of relationship marketing dimensions on customer loyalty. They found that trust, commitment, communication, conflict handling, bonding, and competence have a significant and positive effect on customer loyalty. Based on the examination of previous research, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Dimensions of relationship marketing have significant impact on customer satisfaction.

Marketing researchers have reported that customer satisfaction is a precursor to customer loyalty (El-Adly, 2019; Hu, Kandampully & Juwaheer, 2009; Kim, Vogt & Knutson, 2015; Wilkins, Merrilees & Herington, 2009). Therefore, focusing efforts on customer satisfaction to achieve customer loyalty is a crucial factor of the customer relationship marketing strategy of a service provider (Al-Hersh et al., 2014). According to Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000, p. 346), customer loyalty to a service provider refers to the “customer who repurchases from the same service provider whenever possible and who continues to recommend or maintains a positive attitude towards the service provider”. In a hospitality context, customer loyalty is frequently conceptualized as attitudinal loyalty rather than behavioural loyalty (Kandampully & Suhartanto 2000; Yang & Lau, 2014; Narteh et al., 2013; El-Adly, 2019). Accordingly, in this study we have adopted attitudinal loyalty approach (El-Adly, 2019), which, in the hotel industry, “is frequently conceptualized as the willingness to revisit a hotel and to spread positive word-of-mouth” (Yang & Lau, 2014, p. 1688).

Many scholars have examined the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty in a tourism and hospitality context (Chen & Chen, 2010; da Costa Mendes, Oom do Valle, Guerreiro & Silva, 2010; El-Adly, 2019; Hui, Wan & Ho, 2007; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Gumusoy & Koseoglu 2016; Kim, Vogt & Knutson, 2015) and found positive connections between them. Kim, Vogt and Knutson (2015) examined the interrelationship between customer satisfaction, delight, and loyalty, and found that customer satisfaction is more strongly related to loyalty than delight. They concluded that customers who are satisfied with services provided would express an intention to repurchase or to recommend to others. Gumusoy and Koseoglu (2016) argued that customer satisfaction and perceived value are the significant predictors of customer loyalty in the Turkish hotel industry. Similar, El-Adly (2018) revealed that guests’ satisfaction directly affects their loyalty to a hotel. Moreover, he concluded that guests who are satisfied with the hotel would be more likely to decide to continue staying at the hotel, return to the hotel, and spread positive word of mouth. Keshavarz and Jamshidi (2018) investigated the connection between satisfaction and loyalty among guests who stayed at four- or five-star hotels in Malaysia. Their results confirmed the positive relationship of these two constructs. Based on the above, we propose that:

H3: Customer satisfaction has significant impact on customer loyalty.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To accomplish the research objectives and test the set hypotheses, empirical research was conducted using the survey method on a convenience sample of Croatian citizens who travelled and stayed in 5-star hotels in tourist destinations abroad or in 5-star hotels in Croatian tourist destinations, in the 12-month period prior to the study. The structured questionnaire was designed to collect data. The study used a measurement scale taken from the previous literature.



The first part of the questionnaire contained 23 statements, taken from the previous research of Narteh et al. (2013) concerning relationship marketing. The second part contained statements referring to the respondents' satisfaction with their stay in the hotel and loyalty to the hotel. Customer satisfaction was measured using following statements (Han, Kim & Hyun, 2011): "Overall, I am happy with my decision to stay at this hotel" and "I believe I did the right thing when I stayed at this hotel". Customer loyalty was explored using two statements: "I will revisit this hotel again" and "I will recommend this hotel to others". The statements were taken from the previous research of Yang and Lau (2014). Each statement was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, anchored at (1) strongly disagree and (5) strongly agree. The last part of the questionnaire investigated the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and their travel habits.

The survey was conducted from February to April 2020. A total of 311 fully completed questionnaires were collected. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS version 23. Research results are presented in the next section.

## **4. RESEARCH RESULTS**

In this section, the sample characteristics are analysed and the hypotheses, tested.

### **4.1. Sample characteristics**

The sample comprises 311 respondents who travelled and stayed in 5-star hotel in the year prior to the study. Table 1 presents the demographic structure of the sample.

Table 1

## Demographic profile of respondents (n=311)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Respondents</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	162	52.1
Male	149	47.9
<i>Age</i>		
18 – 25	120	38.6
26 – 35	91	29.3
36 – 45	28	9.0
46 – 55	49	15.8
56 – 65	16	5.1
65 and more	7	2.3
<i>Level of education</i>		
Elementary school	2	0.6
Secondary school	118	37.9
College degree	46	14.8
University degree	137	44.1
Postgraduate - master	8	2.6

Source: Research results

There are slightly more female respondents in the sample (52.1%) than male respondents (47.9%). The largest number of respondents (38.6%) belong to the 18 – 25 age group, followed in number by respondents in the 26 – 35 age group (29.3%). The over-65 age group accounts for the least number of respondents (2.3%). As to educational background, respondents with university degrees dominate the sample (44.1%), followed by respondents with secondary school qualifications (37.9%), while 0.6% of the respondents have only finished elementary school.

Of the 311 respondents, 52.1% stayed in hotels in tourist destinations abroad and 46.6%, in hotels in Croatian tourist destinations. For most of the respondents (75.9%), it was their first time staying at the hotel. The respondents reported the Internet (85.5%) and recommendations from friends and family (32.1%) as the most common sources of information about the hotel. The main travel motivation for most of the respondents was “rest and relaxation” (73.0%), followed by “new experiences” (41.2%), and “entertainment” (41.8%). The respondents mostly travelled with their partners (33.4%) or with friends and acquaintances (27.7%).

## 4.2. Hypotheses testing

Exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis were used to test the dimensionality and reliability of the marketing relationship scale, which was taken

from previous studies. The basic characteristics of the studied constructs are described using descriptive statistics indicators. The average scores for variables in the marketing relationship construct are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

## Average scores for variables in the marketing relationship construct

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Staff are very efficient	4.47	0.70
Staff are knowledgeable	4.47	0.65
Staff possess the right skills	4.42	0.70
Excellent service delivery	4.47	0,70
Employees show respect to customers	4.61	0.59
Hotel fulfils obligations	4.55	0.72
I have confidence in the hotel's services	4.42	0.83
Hotel fulfils its promises	4.33	0.87
Provides information on new products	4.00	0.98
Hotel provides accurate information	4.44	0.85
Hotel discusses new ways of improving services	4.15	0.88
Hotel staff are very approachable	4.57	0.69
Hotel provides timely and trustworthy information	4.38	0.76
Hotel tries to solve manifest conflicts	4.17	0.88
Hotel solves problems promptly	4.16	0.97
Hotel tries to avoid potential conflicts	4.36	0.89
Hotel listens well and understands my grievances	4.29	0.90
Hotel offers personalized services	4.04	0.94
Hotel tries to understand my needs	4.28	0.81
Hotel makes adjustments to suit my needs	4.14	0.88
Hotel treats me as a partner	3.23	1.28
Hotel regularly checks on me	2.90	1.39
Hotel sends me gifts on special occasions	2.51	1.49
Total	4.15	

*Source: Research results*

The average scores of the variables in the marketing relationship construct range from 2.51 to 4.61. The variable “Hotel sends me gifts on special occasions” has the lowest average score, and the variable “ Employees show respect to customers”, the highest. Most of the observed variables are positively perceived by the respondents and have an average score higher than 4, resulting in a high overall average score, suggesting that the respondents had positives experiences of their stays in high-category hotel facilities. Only three variables scored less than 4 (“Hotel sends me gifts on special occasions”, “Hotel regularly checks on me”, and “Hotel treats me as a partner”).

The objective of factor analysis was to extract the main factors (dimensions) of the marketing relationship construct. Exploratory factor analysis was performed using 23

variables, that is, marketing relationship elements. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test were used to determine the adequacy for conducting factor analysis. The KMO measure is 0.899. This is well above the cut off value of 0.5 and meets the criteria recommended by Stewart (1981). This value indicates that enough items (variables) are predicted by each factor. In addition, Bartlett's test is significant at the 0.01 level ( $\chi^2 = 4012,956$ ,  $df = 253$ ,  $Sig. = 0.000$ ), meaning that variables are correlated highly enough to provide reasonable basis for factor analysis. Thus, collected data are adequate for performing factor analysis and for determining the factor structure of the marketing relationship construct. The results presented in Table 3 were obtained for the relationship marketing construct.

Table 3

Results of factor analysis and reliability analysis for relationship marketing construct

Item	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cronbach alpha
<b>Factor 1 - COMPETENCE</b>		<b>4.350</b>	<b>18.912</b>	<b>0.880</b>
Staff are knowledgeable	0.774			
Staff are very efficient	0.745			
Staff possess the right skills	0.735			
Excellent service delivery	0.727			
Employees show respect to customers	0.723			
Hotel fulfils obligations	0.611			
Hotel provides timely and trustworthy information	0.578			
<b>Factor 2 - CONFLICT HANDLING</b>		<b>3.277</b>	<b>14.246</b>	<b>0.898</b>
Hotel tries to avoid potential conflicts	0.889			
Hotel solves problems promptly	0.823			
Hotel listens well and understands my grievances	0.798			
Hotel tries to solve manifest conflicts	0.784			
<b>Factor 3 - TRUST AND COMMUNICATION</b>		<b>3.179</b>	<b>13.824</b>	<b>0.833</b>
Provides information on new products	0.739			
Hotel fulfils its promises	0.689			
Hotel provides accurate information	0.685			
Hotel discusses new ways of improving services	0.632			
I have confidence in the hotel's services	0.622			
Hotel staff are very approachable	0.571			
<b>Factor 4 - BONDING</b>		<b>2.412</b>	<b>10.486</b>	<b>0.840</b>
Hotel regularly checks on me	0.884			
Hotel sends me gifts on special occasions	0.860			
Hotel treats me as a partner	0.801			
<b>Factor 5 - COMMITMENT</b>		<b>2.328</b>	<b>10.121</b>	<b>0.858</b>
Hotel tries to understand my needs	0.792			
Hotel offers personalized services	0.765			
Hotel makes adjustments to suit my needs	0.724			
<b>Total</b>			<b>67.589</b>	<b>0.898</b>

Source: Research results

Factor analysis extracted 5 factors, which explain 67.59% of the total variance of all initial variables. All factor loadings are higher than 0.50. Most factor loadings are above 0.60, indicating a strong correlation between the extracted factors and their related variables. The extracted factors comprise from 3 to 7 variables. These results are in line with the cut off values proposed by Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson (2010) and suggest that the factor structure is satisfactory. Based on the description of variables included in the individual factors, the factors were named as follows: “Competence”, “Conflict handling”, “Trust and communication”, “Bonding” and “Commitment”.

Table 3 also shows the results of reliability analysis. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of the factors extracted in the marketing relationship construct range from 0.833 to 0.898, pointing to the strong internal consistency and stability of the factors. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the overall scale is 0.898. The obtained results are consistent with the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010) and indicate that the scale has a high reliability. Accordingly, hypothesis H1, stating that relationship marketing is a multi-dimensional construct can be accepted.

The objective of the multiple regression analysis was to assess the relationship between the extracted factors (dimensions) of the relationship marketing construct and customer satisfaction. For this purpose, simultaneous regression method was used. The independent variables in the regression model are “Competence”, “Conflict handling”, “Trust and communication”, “Bonding”, and “Commitment”, and the dependent variable is the construct “Customer satisfaction”.

Correlation analysis was conducted to detect any multicollinearity among the observed variables. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

## Correlation matrix

Variables	Competence	Conflict handling	Trust and communication	Bonding	Commitment	Customer satisfaction
COMPETENCE	1					
CONFLICT HANDLING	0.431*	1				
TRUST AND COMMUNICATION	0.636*	0.416*	1			
BONDING	0.008**	0.249*	0.145*	1		
COMMITMENT	0.523*	0.483*	0.552*	0.306*	1	
Customer satisfaction	0.587*	0.337*	0.509*	0.157*	0.461*	1

Note: \* - correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; \*\* - correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Source: *Research results*

The computed correlation coefficients indicate there is a positive, weak to moderate, statistically significant correlation among the observed variables in the regression model. The correlation coefficient values are less than 0.80, which

according to Bryman and Cramer (2009) indicates that multicollinearity is not a problem in the observed model. The results of the multiple regression analysis for variables predicting customer satisfaction are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

## Multiple regression analysis for variables predicting customer satisfaction

<b>Indicators</b>					
Multiple correlation coefficient R		0.632			
Coefficient of determination R <sup>2</sup>		0.399			
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.390			
Standard error		0.516			
F ratio		40.575			
Significance		0.000			
<b>Independent variables</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	
Constant	0.790		2.968	0.003*	
COMPETENCE	0.523	0.417	6.711	0.000*	
CONFLICT HANDLING	0.008	0.009	0.175	0.861	
TRUST AND COMMUNICATION	0.167	0.159	2.632	0.008*	
BONDING	0.050	0.091	1.891	0.060	
COMMITMENT	0.104	0.123	2.049	0.041**	

Note: dependent variable – customer satisfaction; B – unstandardized coefficient; Beta – standardised coefficient; \* - significant at the 0.01 level; \*\* - significant at the 0.05 level.

Source: *Research results*

The statistically significant F-ratio indicates that the combination of independent variables in the model statistically significantly predicts the dependent variable, that is, the combination of “Competence”, “Conflict handling”, “Trust and communication”, “Bonding”, and “Commitment”, successfully explains “Customer satisfaction”. The strength of the relationship between the extracted dimensions of relationship marketing and “Customer satisfaction” is moderate ( $R = 0.632$ ). Furthermore, the five independent variables (dimensions) in the model explain about 40% ( $R^2 = 0.399$ ) of the variance of the dependent variable (“Customer satisfaction”).

In the observed regression model, the following significant relationships can be noted between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The independent variable "Competence" ( $\beta = 0.417$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) has the highest, individual, significant relationship with the dependent variable, meaning that it is the most important independent variable in the model and has the greatest effect on “Customer satisfaction”. The influence of the variable “Trust and communication” ( $\beta = 0.159$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) on “Customer satisfaction” is also significant. The variable showing the lowest, individual, significant effect on the dependent variable is

"Commitment" ( $\beta = 0.123$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In addition, the individual effects that the variables "Conflict handling" and "Bonding" have on "Customer satisfaction" are very low and are not statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.009$ ;  $p > 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.091$ ;  $p > 0.05$ , respectively). It can be concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between relationship marketing and customer satisfaction, thus confirming hypothesis H2.

Simple regression analysis was conducted to investigate how well customer satisfaction predicts customer loyalty (Table 6).

Table 6

Simple regression analysis for variable predicting customer loyalty

<b>Indicators</b>				
Correlation coefficient R	0.713			
Coefficient of determination R <sup>2</sup>	0.508			
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.507			
Standard error	0.624			
F ratio	319.590			
Significance	0.000			
<b>Independent variables</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Constant	-0.036		-0.147	0.883
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	0.959	0.713	17.877	0.000 *

Note: dependent variable – customer loyalty; B – unstandardized coefficient; Beta – standardised coefficient;

\* - significant at the 0.01 level.

Source: Research results

The results were statistically significant. Customer satisfaction strongly and positively affects customer loyalty ( $R = 0.713$ ). In addition, customer satisfaction explains about 50% of variance in customer loyalty ( $R^2 = 0.508$ ). Thus, hypothesis H3 is accepted.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research presented provides useful insights into understanding the connection between relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. This study contributes to the theory of relationship marketing by exploring the effect of different relationship marketing dimensions on customer satisfaction and by identifying the importance of competence, communication, and trust in a luxury hotel context.

In our study, five dimensions of relationship marketing were obtained, differing slightly from the dimensions proposed by Narteh et al. (2013). To prove the validity and reliability of the relationship marketing dimensions, it would be

necessary to test them further in different geographical contexts, as suggested by these authors. Further, "Competence" was found to be the most important variable influencing customer satisfaction. This implies that customer satisfaction could be significantly enhanced provided the hotel staff are well educated, possess superior skills, and provide excellent service. This is consistent with the findings of Ndubisi and Wah (2005) and Anabila (2012), who identified competence as a major driver of customer satisfaction and loyalty in service offerings. Furthermore, the study's results are consistent with those of Narteh et al. (2013), who found that the most important factor for luxury hotel guests, in deciding whether to be loyal or not, is the competence level of a hotel. The study also found that customer satisfaction is influenced and enhanced by trust and communication. This points to the conclusion that the satisfaction of hotel guests will increase if hotels show care for guests, fulfil their promises and obligations, and communicate effectively with guests. The findings support the earlier work of Kyei and Narteh (2016), who concluded that customer satisfaction with financial institutions primarily depends on trustworthiness and timely communication with customers. "Commitment" was also found to be an important factor affecting customer satisfaction. This observation is consistent with a previous study by Amaoko et al. (2019), who revealed that improving a service provider's commitment would result in significant improvements in customer satisfaction. In addition, the findings of this study show that customer satisfaction significantly affects customer loyalty. This implies that if guests are satisfied with their stay at the hotel, they will revisit the hotel and will recommend it to others. The study's results are consistent with several different studies (El-Adly, 2019; Kim et al., 2015; Yang & Lau, 2014) that prove the positive relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty in luxury hotels.

The results obtained by this research have implications for managers in luxury hotels, and can help them implement a relationship marketing strategy and ensure long-term relationships with their customers. The results of this study can also be useful for the academic community in developing a variety of specialised life-long learning programmes in the field of luxury tourism and hospitality. The study's findings indicate that focus should be placed on developing and improving the competencies of the hotel staff, building trust, and ensuring effective communication with guests. With regard to hotel staff competencies, luxury hotels need to implement an effective personnel training and development policy that could include various types of training, such as job instruction training to teach workers how to do a job correctly and refresher training to help workers refresh and update their knowledge to new standards and news business methods. In luxury hotels, managers should in particular focus on continuous education and continuous improvement systems to ensure the provision of superior quality service, which would lead to satisfied and loyal guests.

Furthermore, managers need to set up relevant indicators to measure the guests' trust. When focused on improving their service quality, hotels should seek to measure guest satisfaction, which is the best indicator that they are delivering what they promised to their guests. Communicating with guests is a vital



component of relationship marketing. Hotels should ensure that communication is supported by sophisticated information technologies and should focus on achieving customer satisfaction and building customer loyalty by implementing the latest forms of digital advertising (i.e., mobile marketing, e-marketing, social media marketing, etc.) to develop personalised and two-way communication with customers. By providing convenience, loyalty programmes, etc., hotels should seek to develop long-term relationships with their customers.

This study has some limitations that need to be taken into consideration when reviewing the results. Although the results of the study provide insight into the impact of relationship marketing on customer satisfaction and loyalty in luxury hotels, the research was conducted on a convenience sample, therefore the results of this study can be considered indicative. As the research focuses exclusively on Croatian citizens who stayed in 5-star hotels, this might affect the obtained results, given the specific characteristics of the Croatian people. Hence, the results cannot be generalised. Accordingly, future studies should seek to include international respondents as well. Moreover, convenience sample also affected the results regarding the age of respondents. Most refer to the age group of 18-25, which is a result of the fact that the younger people were more willing to participate in the survey. It does not lead to the conclusion that they are the main clients of luxury services, but are simply reflecting their attitudes regarding relationship marketing, customer satisfaction and loyalty. For this reason, in future studies, the age structure of the respondents that are using luxury hotel services should be distributed more evenly. Furthermore, this study examines the effect of six different dimensions of relationship marketing (trust, commitment, communication, conflict handling, bonding, and competence) on customer satisfaction. Future studies could explore the effect of other dimensions (e.g., service quality, shared values, reciprocity, etc.) on customer satisfaction and loyalty. The survey method using a structured questionnaire was applied in this study. Although this method has its advantages, to gain more in-depth insight into the cause-and-effect relationship among the studied variables, other methods (the interview method, focus-group method) could be used in future research.

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## **UTJECAJ MARKETINGA ODNOSA NA ZADOVOLJSTVO I LOJALNOST KLIJENATA U LUKSUZNIM HOTELIMA**

***Sažetak***

*Svrha ovog rada je utvrditi ključne dimenzije marketinga odnosa koje utječu na zadovoljstvo klijenata, kao i utjecaj zadovoljstva klijenata na njihovu lojalnost u kontekstu luksuznih hotela. Istraživanje je provedeno na prigodnom uzorku od 311 hrvatskih građana koji su boravili u hotelima s pet zvjezdica u godini prije provođenja istraživanja. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da sve dimenzije marketinga odnosa ne utječu na zadovoljstvo klijenata. Kompetencije, povjerenje i komunikacija, kao dimenzije marketinga odnosa, imaju statistički značajan utjecaj na zadovoljstvo klijenata. Rezultati istraživanja također sugeriraju da zadovoljstvo klijenata ima statistički značajan utjecaj na lojalnost klijenata. Ova studija pridonosi teoriji marketinga odnosa. Osim toga, dobiveni rezultati imaju implikacije za hotelski menadžment, koji želi implementirati strategije marketinga odnosa, a s ciljem postizanja zadovoljstva i lojalnosti klijenata.*

***Ključne riječi: marketing odnosa, zadovoljstvo klijenata, lojalnost klijenata, luksuzni hoteli.***

***JEL klasifikacija: M31, M37, L83, Z33.***